

UNVEILING GENDER OPPRESSION THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL OF WOMEN IN *IMMACULATE*

MENGUNGKAP PENINDASAN GENDER MELALUI KONTROL INSTITUSIONAL TERHADAP PEREMPUAN DALAM FILM *IMMACULATE*

I Putu Sananda Krisna Artawan ¹, I Gusti Ayu Mahatma Agung ² & Gek Wulan Novi Utami ³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Udayana

Jl. Pulau Nias No.13 Denpasar, Bali, 80113, Indonesia

Email: artawan.2201541162@student.unud.ac.id ¹, ayu.mahatma@unud.ac.id ²,
gekwulannoviutami@unud.ac.id ³

Abstract

This study aims to analyze gender oppression in the horror film Immaculate directed by Michael Mohan. The study seeks to understand how gender oppression is shown through the main female character's experiences inside a religious institution. Using a qualitative method, the study relied on repeated viewing of the film and examined selected scenes, dialogues, and character interactions that highlight the main character's experiences of oppression. The data was then analyzed through Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression theory, which provides a useful framework for identifying how oppression works against marginalized individuals. The findings show that all five forms of oppression appear in the film, namely exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. The main character's body was used by the institution without her knowledge or consent for religious purposes. She was excluded from meaningful participation within the convent community, and she had no power to make decisions about her own body and health. She was also forced to accept the institution's dominant belief system and suffered physical violence as a deliberate means of institutional control. These findings show how Immaculate criticizes gender-based oppression within religious and institutional settings.

Keywords: gender oppression; horror genre; oppression mechanism

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penindasan gender dalam film horor Immaculate yang disutradarai oleh Michael Mohan. Penelitian ini berupaya memahami bagaimana penindasan gender ditunjukkan melalui pengalaman tokoh utama perempuan di dalam sebuah institusi keagamaan. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, film ini ditonton berulang kali untuk mengkaji adegan, dialog, serta interaksi karakter yang relevan untuk menyoroti pengalaman penindasan yang dialami tokoh utama. Data kemudian dianalisis menggunakan teori Five Faces of Oppression dari Iris Marion Young untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana penindasan terjadi pada individu yang termarginalkan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kelima bentuk penindasan muncul dalam film ini, yaitu eksploitasi, marginalisasi, ketidakberdayaan, imperialisme budaya, dan kekerasan. Tubuh tokoh utama digunakan oleh institusi tanpa sepengetahuan atau persetujuannya untuk kepentingan keagamaan. Ia dikucilkan dari partisipasi dalam komunitas, dan ia tidak memiliki kekuatan untuk mengambil

keputusan mengenai tubuh dan kesehatannya sendiri. Ia juga dipaksa untuk menerima sistem kepercayaan dominan dan mengalami kekerasan fisik sebagai bentuk pengendalian institusional. Temuan-temuan ini menunjukkan bagaimana Immaculate mengkritisi penindasan berbasis gender dalam lingkungan keagamaan dan institusional.

Kata kunci: *genre horor; penindasan berbasis gender; mekanisme penindasan*

Introduction

Gender oppression remains a problem in modern society. This form of discrimination involves the unfair treatment and control of individuals based on their gender. It often limits their rights, opportunities, and freedom to make choices about their own lives (Ingrey, 2016). Herd & Moynihan (2025) explained that women bear the heaviest burden of this oppression, as they face challenges in nearly every aspect of their daily lives. In the workplace, women earn lower wages and have fewer job opportunities than men, partly because society still expects them to be the primary caregivers for children and families (Cameron, 2023). In politics and government, women's voices are often ignored or pushed aside, even when laws exist to include them in decision-making (Lestari et al., 2025). The media also reinforces these problems by presenting news stories in ways that favor those in power while dismissing or blaming women who speak up about violence and mistreatment (Musyafak et al., 2025). These conditions show that gender oppression does not only occur through direct violence or

personal discrimination. It can also operate through institutions, social norms, and systems of authority that regulate women's bodies, voices, and choices. This issue becomes especially important when institutions that claim to protect women instead become spaces of control.

Literature and film have long served as powerful tools for exposing gender oppression by bringing women's experiences to wider audiences. Anjana et al. (2020) explained that literature often acts as a mirror that reflects social issues in ways that make abstract concepts more personal and relatable. When stories portray women's struggles with discrimination, limited freedom, and unfair treatment, they help audiences recognize these patterns in real life (Murray, 2017). Several studies have explored this theme across different texts and media. Kristami, Surya, & Lubis (2022) studied the novel *Sold* by Patricia McCormick and found that the main character experienced all five forms of oppression identified by Iris Marion Young, including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Agung

(2025) analyzed the short story *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston and found that the female protagonist experienced exploitation through unrecognized domestic labor, marginalization through social isolation, powerlessness in controlling her own life, and physical as well as emotional violence from her husband. Safitri et al. (2023) examined the film *The Assistant* (2019) and revealed that the main character faced cultural imperialism through being assigned household-type tasks that her male colleagues never had to do. These norms then led to broader forms of oppression, including exploitation, marginalization, and psychological violence. Gogoi (2023) analyzed Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and showed that the protagonist's mental breakdown was a direct result of gender oppression, as her husband used patriarchal power to erase her identity and isolate her from support. Riobelle M. et al. (2023) examined Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and found that symbols such as the wallpaper represented the psychological imprisonment that women experienced in male-dominated society. These studies provide valuable insights into how literature and film expose women's oppression. However, many of them focus on oppression as a social, domestic, or psychological condition. They have not fully

explained how horror cinema can represent gender oppression through the combined use of institutional space, religious authority, reproductive control, bodily imagery, silence, fear, and visual violence.

This study extends the discussion by analyzing a horror film as an object of gender oppression studies. In many horror films, women are often shown as victims who experience violence and fear. This representation can reinforce the idea that women are weak and in need of protection (Lara, 2020). However, horror films can also become critical spaces for questioning the systems that produce fear, violence, and control. Therefore, studying horror films can encourage critical thinking and deeper understanding of social issues. They allow audiences to engage with complex theories about gender and society and to challenge narratives that have long been accepted as normal (Siodmak & Scannell, 2022). Unlike literary texts, where oppression is mainly conveyed through narration and dialogue, horror films represent oppression through additional cinematic elements. These include disturbing imagery, visual framing, sound, silence, confined spaces, religious symbols, and physical performance. These elements create a more immediate emotional effect and make the experience of oppression visible through the female body.

The 2024 horror film *Immaculate*, directed by Michael Mohan, is a relevant object for this discussion because it connects gender oppression with religion, institutional authority, and reproductive control. The film does not only portray a woman as an individual victim of violence. It shows how a religious institution uses spiritual authority, secrecy, surveillance, and confinement to control a woman's body and limit her freedom. This makes the film significant for feminist film criticism because it presents bodily autonomy not only as a personal issue, but also as an institutional and ideological struggle. The oppression experienced by Cecilia is not produced by one person alone. It is created through a larger system that presents control as faith, obedience, protection, and sacrifice. In this way, *Immaculate* offers an important case for examining how contemporary horror cinema visualizes the overlap between patriarchal power, religious ideology, institutional violence, and women's reproductive autonomy.

Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression is suitable for analyzing *Immaculate* because the film presents oppression as structural rather than merely personal. Young's framework helps explain how exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence can work together within one institutional setting.

Cecilia's pregnancy, for example, is not only a form of exploitation because her body is used for the institution's purpose. It also reveals powerlessness because she loses control over her own choices, cultural imperialism because religious ideology defines her body according to institutional values, marginalization because she is isolated from support, and violence because her resistance is met with physical and psychological force. Therefore, this framework allows the analysis to move beyond identifying separate acts of oppression. It helps explain how different forms of oppression overlap and reinforce one another.

To address this gap, this study examines the forms of gender oppression represented through the female protagonist in *Immaculate* (2024). This study aims to identify how oppression is constructed through Cecilia's experiences and how the film represents institutional control over women's bodies. By analyzing *Immaculate* through Young's Five Faces of Oppression, this study contributes to feminist film criticism and gender studies. It shows that contemporary horror cinema can expose gender-based injustice not only through scenes of violence, but also through religious symbolism, institutional space, bodily imagery, silence, and the loss of bodily autonomy.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research method to examine how gender oppression is represented in the 2024 horror film *Immaculate*, directed by Michael Mohan. A qualitative method was appropriate because the study focused on meaning, symbolism, ideology, character experience, and cinematic representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The primary data source was the film *Immaculate* (2024), accessed through the Apple TV+ streaming platform. The film follows Sister Cecilia, a young American nun played by Sydney Sweeney, who moves to a remote convent in the Italian countryside and becomes subjected to physical, psychological, and institutional forms of control within the religious institution. This storyline made the film a suitable object for examining how gender oppression operates within institutional and religious contexts through the horror genre.

The theoretical framework used in this study was Iris Marion Young's (1988) Five Faces of Oppression. This theory identifies exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence as interconnected forms of systemic oppression. Young's framework was used because it allows the study to examine oppression not only as individual mistreatment, but also as a structural condition produced through

institutional authority, ideology, social exclusion, and violence. In this study, the theory functioned as the main analytical lens for interpreting how Cecilia's body, choices, movement, voice, and resistance are controlled throughout the film.

The data were collected through repeated viewing of the film. During the first viewing, the researchers observed the general plot, character development, setting, and main conflicts. During the following viewings, the researchers focused on scenes that represented gender-based control, bodily autonomy, institutional authority, religious ideology, confinement, fear, and violence. The unit of analysis was the scene or sequence. Scenes were selected when they showed Cecilia being controlled, silenced, isolated, exploited, threatened, or physically harmed by individuals or by the religious institution. Relevant dialogues, actions, character interactions, visual framing, setting, sound, and bodily imagery were recorded as data. Scenes that did not contribute to the representation of gender oppression were excluded from the analysis.

The selected data were then coded based on Young's five categories of oppression. Exploitation was used to code scenes in which Cecilia's body or labor was used for the benefit of the institution. Marginalization was used to code scenes that

showed her isolation from support, freedom, or social participation. Powerlessness was used to code scenes in which Cecilia was denied the ability to make decisions about her own body and life. Cultural imperialism was used to code scenes in which religious values and institutional beliefs were imposed on Cecilia as the dominant truth. Violence was used to code scenes involving physical harm, psychological intimidation, forced confinement, and threats against her body.

The data analysis was conducted through close reading of the selected scenes. Each coded scene was examined by connecting dialogue, narrative events, character actions, and cinematic elements to Young's theoretical concepts. The analysis did not only identify which form of oppression appeared in each scene, but also interpreted how the film constructed oppression through religious symbolism, institutional space, silence, visual framing, sound, and bodily imagery. To ensure the reliability of interpretation, the selected scenes and coding results were rechecked through repeated viewing. The interpretations were also compared with the film evidence and Young's theoretical framework to ensure that each finding was supported by relevant data. The findings were then synthesized to explain how

Immaculate represents gender oppression as an overlapping system of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Result and Discussion

This study finds that all five forms of oppression in Young's (1988) framework are represented in the 2024 horror film *Immaculate*. Young's framework defines oppression not as a single act of discrimination, but as a structural condition that operates through five interconnected forms: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Exploitation refers to a process in which one group benefits from the labor, body, or effort of another group without fair recognition or compensation. Marginalization refers to the exclusion of certain groups from meaningful participation in social, economic, and political life. Powerlessness refers to the lack of authority and control that prevents individuals from making meaningful decisions about their own lives. Cultural imperialism refers to the process by which the dominant group's values, beliefs, and experiences are treated as universal norms, while other perspectives are ignored or made inferior. Violence refers to systematic attacks, intimidation, or threats directed at certain

groups because of their social position, creating fear and vulnerability as part of everyday life.

These five forms of oppression are

structural because they are embedded in social systems, institutions, and cultural practices. They do not only result from individual prejudice or personal cruelty.

Table 1. Types of Oppression in *Immaculate* Based on Young's Five Faces of Oppression

Types of Oppression	Description
Exploitation	Cecilia's body is exploited as a reproductive vessel for the institution's goal, without her consent or autonomy.
Marginalization	Marginalization is shown through Gwen's background as a woman who enters the convent after experiencing domestic violence and limited support. It is also reflected in Cecilia's condition, as her identity is reduced to pregnancy rather than recognized as a complete individual.
Powerlessness	Cecilia becomes powerless because her request for medical help is rejected, even when her body shows serious signs of danger. The institution controls the decision over her body and denies her ability to protect herself.
Cultural Imperialism	Sister Isabelle internalizes the institution's ideology by believing that becoming its reproductive vessel is an honor. She sees Cecilia's pregnancy as a privileged position rather than a form of oppression.
Violence	Violence is shown when Cecilia is physically punished after trying to resist and escape. The institution uses pain and fear to control her body and force her obedience.

This framework is therefore useful for analyzing *Immaculate*, which presents gender oppression as a system maintained through religious authority, institutional control, bodily regulation, and violence. In the film, Cecilia's oppression is not caused by one individual alone. It is produced by a religious institution that controls her movement, silences her voice, uses her body, and justifies its actions through spiritual ideology. The following discussion explains

how each form of oppression is represented in the film and how these forms overlap in Cecilia's experience.

Exploitation

Exploitation is one of the forms of oppression identified in the movie. According to Young (1988), exploitation occurs when the labor, energy, and efforts of one group are continuously transferred to serve the interests and maintain the power of another

group. The fundamental injustice of this process lies in the fact that the exploited group receives no recognition or compensation in return, while the dominant group continues to accumulate power and social status Young (1988).

deliver unto us the knowledge and the perfect fertile vessel."

Cecilia : "Is this what's inside me?"

Father Tedeschi : No. These are all our failures. What's inside you is our success.

Data 1

(Mohan, 2024, 00.57.04 - 00.59.46)

Cecilia : "What did you do to me?"

Father Tedeschi: "When you look at this, what do you see? Some people might see just an old piece of iron, a rusty nail. For those of us who know, we see proof of Jesus' sacrifice, a symbol of his suffering. And for 2,000 years, that's all it was. But we looked close, and we found blood, tissue, little fragments of bone, a genetic code. All we had to do was crack it... the key to resurrection."

Cecilia : "You're insane."

Father Tedeschi : "Let me show you. It's taken us 20 years of trial and error, 20 years for God to

Data 1 shows exploitation because Cecilia's body is used by the institution for its religious project without her knowledge or consent. Father Tedeschi's explanation reveals that the institution has spent twenty years conducting experiments to find what he calls "the perfect fertile vessel." This phrase reduces Cecilia from a person into a reproductive instrument. She is not treated as a woman with bodily autonomy, feelings, and rights. Instead, her body is valued only because it can successfully carry the pregnancy that the institution wants. The preserved failed fetuses shown by Father Tedeschi also strengthen the exploitation in this scene. They reveal that Cecilia is not the first woman used in the institution's experiment.



Picture 1. Failed Fetuses Shown by Father Tedeschi

She is part of a longer system of reproductive control. When Father Tedeschi says that the previous fetuses are “failures” and that what is inside Cecilia is their “success,” he frames women’s bodies as experimental sites. The institution does not recognize the women’s suffering, fear, or consent. It only measures them based on whether their bodies can produce the desired result. This confirms that Cecilia’s exploitation is not accidental. It is organized, repeated, and justified by institutional power.

This finding is in line with Herd & Moynihan (2025), who argue that gendered control often works through the regulation of bodies, labor, and identity, especially in relation to reproductive bodies. In *Immaculate*, Cecilia’s pregnancy is controlled by the institution in the name of faith and resurrection. Her body becomes a site where religious authority and reproductive control meet. This makes the exploitation more disturbing because it is presented as sacred duty rather than as violence. The institution

hides its abuse behind religious language, making the use of Cecilia’s body appear meaningful and holy.

This representation also extends previous findings on gender oppression in film. The study conducted by Safitri et al. (2023) show that *The Assistant* represents exploitation through gendered labor in a male-dominated workplace, where women’s tasks are normalized and undervalued. *Immaculate* presents a different but related form of exploitation. Cecilia is not exploited for office work or domestic labor. She is exploited for her reproductive capacity. Both films show that institutions can normalize women’s exploitation, but *Immaculate* makes the issue more bodily and visceral by showing how institutional power can turn a woman’s pregnancy into a tool for its own agenda.

Therefore, Cecilia’s question, “*What did you do to me?*” becomes an important moment of resistance. It shows her attempt to understand and reclaim what has been

done to her body. However, the fact that she has to ask this question also shows how completely the institution has removed her autonomy. She is forced to discover the truth only after her body has already been used. This scene reveals exploitation as a structural practice in which Cecilia's reproductive capacity is appropriated, controlled, and celebrated as the institution's achievement rather than recognized as her own bodily experience.

Marginalization

Marginalization occurs when a group of people is systematically excluded from participating in social life in ways that matter (Young, 1988).

This form of oppression leaves those who are marginalized without access to basic needs and cuts them off from opportunities that other groups are able to enjoy freely.

Data 2

Gwen : "There is a boy. There was a boy, I mean."

Cecilia : "What happened with this boy?"

Gwen : "He hit me. I hit him back. Once I left him, I went to those support groups, you know? There were these nuns there. And I thought, these women have a very good life. They have a place to live, a job,

where they can keep their clothes on, nothing to worry about. So I signed up."

Cecilia : "Wait, so you don't even believe in God?"

Gwen : "Of course I do. Life is so cruel. Only a man can be responsible."

(Mohan, 2024, 00:43:40-00:44:00)

Data 2 shows that Gwen's decision to become a nun is shaped by social exclusion rather than purely by religious devotion. She explains that she once had a relationship with a man who physically abused her. After leaving him, she joined support groups and encountered nuns who appeared to have a more stable life. Her description of the convent as a place where women "have a place to live" and "a job" shows that she sees the institution as a possible escape from insecurity. This suggests that Gwen lacks access to the basic conditions needed for a safe and dignified life outside the convent.

Gwen's statement also reveals how marginalization limits women's choices. She does not enter the convent from a position of full freedom. Rather, she enters it because other social spaces have failed to protect her. Her past experience of domestic violence, unstable work, and lack of support pushes her toward the religious institution as one of the few available spaces for survival. In this

sense, the convent appears to offer shelter, but it also becomes a space that absorbs women who have already been made vulnerable by gendered violence and social neglect.

This finding is in line with Murray (2017), who argues that gender violence should not be understood only as physical abuse because it is connected to broader structural conditions that silence and endanger women. Gwen's experience reflects this idea because her vulnerability does not come from one violent man alone. It also comes from the absence of social protection after that violence. Her marginalization is therefore both personal and structural. She is harmed by domestic violence, but she is also pushed into dependency because society offers her few safe alternatives.

A similar pattern is also found in Agung (2025), which shows that the female protagonist in *Sweat* experiences marginalization through social isolation and lack of emotional support. Gwen's condition is different because she is not trapped in marriage, but both figures experience marginalization through the absence of a reliable support system. While Delia's

marginalization occurs within the domestic sphere, Gwen's marginalization occurs before she enters the convent. Both cases show that women's oppression becomes stronger when violence is combined with isolation and limited access to help.

Therefore, Gwen's background shows that marginalization in *Immaculate* is not limited to Cecilia's experience. The film suggests that the convent is filled with women who may have entered the institution because society has already failed them. Gwen's story helps reveal how the religious institution gains power over vulnerable women by presenting itself as a place of protection. However, this protection is unstable because it depends on women's obedience to the institution. Through Gwen, the film shows that marginalization can make women seek safety in institutions that may later control them.

Data 3

Sister Superior: "No working. Remember, your only job is baby."

Sister Gwen: "How long before they start calling you Mary?"

(Mohan, 2024, 00.38.02 - 00.38.35)



Picture 2. Cecilia's Marginalization in the Convent Dining Room

Data 3 shows another form of marginalization experienced by Cecilia inside the convent. In this scene, Cecilia enters the dining area and receives unusual attention from the other sisters. They stand up when she arrives and only sit down after she takes her seat. On the surface, this gesture may seem like respect. However, it actually separates Cecilia from the rest of the community. She is no longer treated as an ordinary member of the convent, but as someone marked by her pregnancy.

This separation becomes clearer when Sister Superior tells Cecilia that her "only job is baby." The statement reduces Cecilia's identity to her reproductive function. She is no longer recognized as a nun, a woman, or a person with her own needs and choices. Her role in the institution is narrowed to carrying the child. In Young's (1988) terms, this reflects marginalization because Cecilia is excluded from meaningful participation in the community. Although she remains

physically present among the sisters, her social position has changed. She is visible, but only as a pregnant body. Her individuality is ignored.

This scene also recalls the condition discussed by Riobelle et al. (2023) in their study of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where women's oppression is represented through confinement and the denial of full personhood. Cecilia's condition is different because she is confined within a religious institution rather than a marital household. However, both texts show how women can be surrounded by people and still be denied autonomy. Cecilia is not abandoned in a literal sense, but she is socially isolated because the convent no longer sees her as a complete individual. Her pregnancy becomes the only part of her identity that matters to the institution.

Therefore, Data 3 strengthens the representation of marginalization in *Immaculate*. The scene shows that Cecilia's

oppression is not only produced through physical control, but also through symbolic exclusion. The convent appears to honor her, but this honor is actually another form of control. By treating her pregnancy as her only purpose, the institution removes her from ordinary social participation and reduces her existence to a reproductive role.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness refers to a condition where a person has no authority, status, or control over their own life. According to Young (1988), those who are powerless are people who are expected to follow the decisions of others and are rarely given the right to make decisions themselves. This means that powerless individuals are constantly subject to the demands and choices of those above them, with little to no freedom to say no or push back. The injustice of powerlessness does not only come from being forced to obey, but also from the way it takes away a person's basic right to be treated with dignity and respect (Young, 1988).

Data 4

Cecilia : "I want to see another doctor."

Father Tedeschi : "Why? Dr. Gallo..."

Cecilia : "Takes care of old women. I want to go to a real hospital, please."

Father Tedeschi : "He's a licensed obstetrician."

Dr. Gallo : "Thursday through Saturdays I deliver babies at Cosentino."

Father Tedeschi : "A hospital is not what you need right now. You're perfectly healthy."

Cecilia : "I just puked up one of my teeth."

Father Tedeschi : "Hospitals aren't the safest of places."

(Mohan, 2024, 00.41.12 - 00.43.15)

Data 4 shows Cecilia's powerlessness through her inability to make decisions about her own medical care. In this scene, Cecilia asks to see another doctor and to be taken to a hospital because she knows that something is wrong with her body. Her concern is serious because she has just vomited one of her teeth. However, Father Tedeschi dismisses her request and insists that she is healthy. His response shows that Cecilia's bodily experience is not treated as valid. Although she is the one who feels the pain and physical changes, the authority to define her condition is taken away from her.

The scene also shows how institutional

authority overrides Cecilia's personal agency. Father Tedeschi speaks as if he knows what Cecilia needs better than Cecilia herself. Dr.

Gallo also supports this authority by defending his professional status rather than responding to Cecilia's fear.



Picture 3. Cecilia's Powerlessness in Requesting Medical Care

As a result, Cecilia is placed in a powerless position. She is physically affected by the pregnancy, but she cannot decide where to seek treatment, which doctor to trust, or whether her condition requires emergency care. This reflects Young's (1988) view that powerless people are placed under the decisions of others, even when those decisions directly affect their own lives.

This finding is related to Gogoi (2023), who shows that Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* loses control over her identity and life because of patriarchal domination. Antoinette's suffering is intensified because her husband defines her condition and controls the meaning of her behavior. Cecilia experiences a similar loss of authority. Her fear and pain are not accepted as valid expressions of her condition. Instead, Father Tedeschi defines her body from the position of institutional power. However, *Immaculate* presents this powerlessness in a more

medical and reproductive context, as Cecilia is denied the right to decide what kind of care her body needs.

A similar issue is also found in Barui et al. (2023), which discusses how the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is trapped under her husband's authority and denied freedom within marriage. In that text, the woman's opinion about her own condition is ignored because male authority claims to know what is best for her. Cecilia's situation reflects a similar pattern. Her request for medical help is dismissed by men who claim authority over her body. The difference is that Cecilia's powerlessness occurs within a religious institution rather than a domestic household. This shift shows that women's loss of control can happen in different spaces, including marriage, medicine, and religion.

Therefore, Data 4 shows that Cecilia's oppression is not only emotional or psychological. It is also medical and bodily.

Her pain is dismissed, her request is rejected, and her judgment about her own body is treated as irrelevant. Through this scene, *Immaculate* represents powerlessness as the loss of bodily authority, where a woman is forced to depend on an institution that claims to care for her while denying her the right to protect herself.

Data 5

Mother Superior: "God in Heaven."

Father Tedeschi: "Call Doctor Gallo."

Mother Superior: "It's not possible, it's Saturday."

Father Tedeschi: "Call him!"

Mother Superior: "I won't get a hold of him, it's Saturday. We need to get her to the hospital."

Father Tedeschi: "No."

Mother Superior: "You must go. Now."

Father Tedeschi: "No."

Mother Superior: "That's it, I'm calling an ambulance."

Father Tedeschi: "STOP!"

Cecilia: "Something's wrong. I don't want to die. I don't want to die."

(Mohan, 2024, 00.52.18 - 00.55.38)



Picture 4. Cecilia's Failed Escape from Institutional Control

Data 5 presents another example of powerlessness because Cecilia is no longer only denied medical care, but also denied the possibility of escape. In this scene, Cecilia creates a fake medical emergency by using fake blood. This act shows that she has no legitimate way to ask for help or leave the convent openly. Her deception is not presented as simple dishonesty. Rather, it becomes a survival strategy in a situation

where honest requests have already been ignored. The need to create an emergency shows how completely the institution has closed all normal routes of resistance.

Cecilia's powerlessness becomes clearer when Mother Superior recognizes the urgency of the situation and suggests taking her to the hospital. However, Father Tedeschi refuses the request repeatedly. His repeated answer, "No," shows that

institutional authority is centered in his hands. Cecilia's condition, fear, and voice do not determine the decision. Even when Cecilia says, *"Something's wrong. I don't want to die,"* her words fail to change the situation. This reflects Young's (1988) concept of powerlessness, in which oppression can operate through hidden power structures that restrict women's meaningful participation and decision-making. Cecilia's situation reflects this condition because the convent presents itself as a place of religious care, but its internal structure prevents her from acting as a person with rights and agency. The decision about whether she may receive help is made by the institution, not by Cecilia herself.

The visual action in this scene further strengthens the representation of powerlessness. After the fake blood is discovered, Cecilia runs from the car, but she is chased, grabbed, and forced back. Her body becomes the site where institutional control is physically enforced. This moment shows that Cecilia's resistance is possible, but it is not allowed to succeed. The institution has the power to override her voice, her fear, and even her movement. Musyafak et al. (2025) argue that women's agency can be weakened when institutional voices are prioritized over women's own perspectives. In this scene, Cecilia's own account of fear

powerless individuals are denied the authority to make decisions, even when those decisions directly concern their own bodies and lives. This scene also shows how institutional power can silence women by controlling access to protection. Lestari et al. (2025) explain that gendered and danger is ignored, while Father Tedeschi's command becomes the only voice that matters.

Therefore, Data 5 shows powerlessness as the loss of voice, choice, and physical freedom. Cecilia tries to survive through several forms of resistance: she creates a crisis, asks for help, and finally runs away. However, each attempt is blocked by the institution. The scene reveals that Cecilia is trapped in a system where her body is controlled, her fear is dismissed, and her freedom is treated as less important than the institution's goal.

Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism, as one of Young's (1988) five faces of oppression, refers to the process where the values, norms, and ways of thinking of a dominant group are forced onto those who are less powerful, with those dominant standards being treated as normal and universal while the experiences and perspectives of others are made to feel invisible or unimportant. In this form of

oppression, the dominant group does not only hold power over resources and decisions, but also over meaning itself, determining what is considered normal, what is acceptable, and what is right (Young, 1988). Those who do not fit within these standards

are often treated as strange, deviant, or inferior, not because of anything they have actually done wrong, but simply because who they are or how they live does not match what the dominant group has decided is the norm.



Picture 5. Sister Isabelle's Attack on Cecilia

Data 6

*Sister Isabelle: "It was supposed to be me!
Bitch!"*

*Another sister: "Isabelle! Isabelle! Sisters!
Stop it! Leave her alone!
Stop! No! No, no!"*

*Sister Isabelle: "We have to try again! They
have to try again with me!
They have to try again with
me!"*

(Mohan, 2024, 00.23.00 - 00.24.06)

Data 6 reveals cultural imperialism through Sister Isabelle's reaction to Cecilia's pregnancy. Her anger is not directed at the institution that has used women's bodies for its reproductive project. Instead, she directs her anger at Cecilia, whom she sees as taking the role that should have belonged to her.

Her statement, *"It was supposed to be me,"* suggests that she has accepted the institution's ideology as part of her own identity. She does not see the reproductive project as a violation of women's autonomy. She sees it as a sacred privilege from which she has been excluded.

This scene shows cultural imperialism does not only work through direct command. It also works by shaping how oppressed individuals understand their own worth. Sister Isabelle has internalized the institution's religious values so deeply that being used as a reproductive vessel seems meaningful to her. The institution has successfully made its goal appear holy, and this allows its violence to be disguised as devotion. In this way, Sister Isabelle's desire

to be chosen reveals how the institution controls not only women's bodies, but also their beliefs, desires, and sense of purpose.

The scene also reveals how cultural imperialism can divide women within the same oppressed group. Sister Isabelle attacks Cecilia because she believes Cecilia has received an honor that should have been hers. This reflects the idea that oppression against women can also be maintained by women when they have internalized the values of a dominant system. Kristami et al. (2022) explain that oppression toward women is not only caused by male superiority, but can also occur through domination and power relations. Sister Isabelle's action reflects this condition because she becomes a participant in the institution's oppressive logic, even though she is also one of the women shaped by that system.

As a horror film, *Immaculate* makes this form of cultural imperialism visible through fear, violence, and bodily threat. Sister Isabelle's attack on Cecilia turns internalized ideology into physical danger. The horror genre strengthens this meaning because it makes hidden social and cultural anxieties appear through disturbing images and violent actions. Siodmak & Scannell (2022) argue that horror films can reflect, reproduce, and challenge cultural narratives by making social scripts and norms visible. In

this scene, the horror comes not only from Sister Isabelle's attempt to harm Cecilia, but also from the realization that the institution's ideology has become part of how the women understand themselves.

Therefore, Data 6 represents cultural imperialism as an internalized form of oppression. Sister Isabelle's reaction reveals that the institution does not need to control women only through physical force. It also controls them by shaping their beliefs about sacrifice, holiness, and female purpose. Her desire to be used by the institution proves how dominant ideology can make oppression appear like honor and turn women against one another in the service of institutional power.

Violence

Violence is one of the most visible and direct forms of oppression. It occurs when members of a particular group live under the threat of physical attack, intimidation, humiliation, or harm because of their social position (Suyudi, 2015). In Young's (1988) framework, violence is not only an individual act of cruelty. It is also a social practice that creates fear and keeps oppressed individuals under control. In *Immaculate*, violence is shown through the institution's direct punishment of Cecilia after her attempt to escape.

Data 7

Cecilia: "What are you doing? What's...
what's going on? What is that? What
are you... what are you doing? Please

stop. Stop, stop, stop, stop. Please,
please, stop. Stop!"

Father: "May you never stray again."

Cecilia: "No. No, no! Stop!"

(Mohan, 2024, 01.00.25 - 01.00.48)



Picture 6. Cecilia's Foot Branding as Institutional Punishment

Data 7 presents violence through the physical punishment on Cecilia. At the beginning of the scene, Cecilia is confused and terrified. Her repeated questions show that she does not understand what is about to happen to her and does not consent to it. She repeatedly says, "please stop" and "stop," but her fear is ignored. This makes the scene a clear act of violence because harm is done to her body against her will, despite her direct resistance.

Father Tedeschi's statement, "May you never stray again," is central to the meaning of the scene. The statement frames the violence as religious discipline, as if Cecilia's attempt to escape is a moral failure that must be corrected. However, the act is not a form of care or correction. It is a calculated punishment designed to prevent Cecilia from running away again. By injuring her foot, the

institution attacks the part of her body that enables movement and escape. The violence is therefore functional. It is used to restrict her mobility and force her obedience.

This scene shows that the institution does not only control Cecilia through ideology, surveillance, or medical authority. It also uses physical pain when other forms of control are no longer enough. Cecilia's body becomes the direct target of punishment because her body is also the site of resistance. She tries to run, so the institution harms her ability to move. This reflects Young's (1988) view that violence works by producing fear and vulnerability among those who are already in a weaker social position.

The representation of violence in this scene supports Anjana et al. (2020), who explain that literary works can expose atrocities against women and show how

violence remains part of gender discrimination in society. In *Immaculate*, horror cinema makes this oppression visible through bodily pain and visual brutality. The scene is disturbing not only because Cecilia is physically harmed, but also because the violence is carried out by a religious authority that claims to protect her. This contradiction strengthens the film's criticism of institutional power.

Therefore, Data 7 shows violence as a tool of institutional control. Cecilia is punished not because she has harmed anyone, but because she tries to reclaim her freedom. Her injured foot becomes a sign that the institution is willing to damage her body in order to keep her under control. Through this scene, *Immaculate* represents violence as both physical punishment and a warning against further resistance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2024 horror film *Immaculate* presents gender oppression through the institutional control experienced by Sister Cecilia within a religious convent. Using Iris Marion Young's (1988) Five Faces of Oppression, this study finds that all five forms of oppression, namely exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, are represented in the film. These forms of oppression are

shown through dialogue, narrative development, character interaction, religious symbolism, bodily imagery, and institutional space. The analysis reveals that Cecilia's oppression does not occur as an isolated act of cruelty. It is produced through a larger institutional system that controls her body, restricts her choices, silences her voice, and justifies violence through religious authority.

This study contributes to feminist film criticism by showing that horror cinema can be a productive medium for examining gender oppression, bodily autonomy, and women's rights. *Immaculate* demonstrates how a space that appears sacred and protective can become a site of control and violence against women. However, this study is limited to one film and one theoretical framework. Therefore, the findings cannot represent all forms of gender oppression in contemporary horror cinema. Future researchers may compare *Immaculate* with other horror films featuring female protagonists in institutional or religious settings. They may also apply other feminist theories to gain a broader understanding of how contemporary cinema reflects and critiques systemic gender oppression.

References

Agung, I. G. A. M. (2025). Exploring gender oppression in *Sweat* by Zora Neale

- Hurston: Feminist literary criticism. *Saree: Research in Gender Studies*, 7(1), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.47766/saree.v7i1.6018>
- Anjana, S., Sivani Sai, A. S., Rithwick, B. R., & Aich, S. C. (2020). Witness the night: A profound insight into gender discrimination. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, 7(2), 530–533. <https://doi.org/10.31838/jcr.07.02.99>
- Cameron, L. (2023). Gender Equality and Development: Indonesia in a Global Context. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 59(2), 179–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2023.2229476>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (Fifth edition). Los Angeles London New Delhi Singapore Washington DC Melbourne: SAGE.
- Gogoi, I. (2023). Gender Oppression and the Consequent Madness in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 8(2), 284–290. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.82.41>
- Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. (2025). Gendered administrative burden: regulating gendered bodies, labor, and identity. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 35(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muae021>
- Ingrey, J. C. (2016). Gender Oppression. In *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (pp. 1–3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss324>
- Kristami, O., Surya, S., & Lubis, I. S. (2022). Oppression on Woman as Reflected in Lakshmi's Character of Sold Novel by Patricia McCormick. *Ilmu Budaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, Dan Budaya*, 6(1), 274–285. <https://doi.org/10.30872/jbssb.v6i1.5487>
- Lara, A. A. (2020). Social criticism in Night of the Living Dead and its remake: Contributions to the role of women in horror films. *Ars Longa*, (29), 257–270. <https://doi.org/10.7203/ARSLONGA.29.15273>
- Lestari, P., Niravita, A., Arditama, E., Ningsih, A. S., Munandar, M. A., & Osman, Z. B. J. (2025). Beyond Legal Frameworks: Uncovering the Hidden Impact of Gender Violence in Indonesia's 2024 Political Recruitment. *Jurnal Suara Hukum*, 7(2), 350–378.

- <https://doi.org/10.26740/jsh.v7n2.p350-378>
Murray, J. (2017). 'And They Never Spoke to Each Other of It': Contemporary Southern African Representations of Silence, Shame and Gender Violence. *English Academy Review*, 34(1), 23–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2017.1333216>
- Musyafak, N., Khasanah, N. L., & Marfu'ah, U. (2025). Unveiling Biases in Indonesia's Online Media: Analyzing Sexual Violence Reporting in the Modern Era Through a Feminist Lens. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 33(1), 249–274. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.33.1.12>
- Riobelle M., B., Famila N., J., Ana Rutchell D., S., & Lito L., D. (2023). Gender oppression: The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 3(5), 211–218.
- <https://doi.org/10.47760/cognizance.2023.v03i05.019>
Safitri, D. A., Februansyah, R. , & Aeni, E. N. (2023). Gender Oppression in the Workplace Depicted in Film The Assistant (2019). *Alphabet*, 65–80. <https://doi.org/doi:10.21776/ub.alphabet.2023.06.02.01>
- Siodmak, E., & Scannell, R. J. (2022). What's Blood Got to Do with It? A Culture of Cinema Horrors at the Precipice of an Abyss. *Teaching Sociology*, 50(4), 399–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X221120870>
- Suyudi, I. (2015). *Violence Towards Sayuri in Arthur Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha: A Socialist Feminism Approach*. A Socialist Feminism Approach.
- Young, I. M. (1988). Five Faces of Oppression. *Philosophical Forum*, 19(4), 270