



# Moral Message Analysis of Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts as a Form of Anti-Violence Against Women Campaign

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## Abstract

Communication is a form of interaction that allows individuals to convey meaning through symbols, signs, and narratives. In film media, communication does not only occur through dialogue between characters, but is also realized through visual symbols that build moral messages. This research aims to analyze the representation of violence against women in the film Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts with the Roland Barthes semiotic approach. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with semiotic analysis to reveal the denotative, connotative, and social myth meanings contained in Marlina the Killer in Four Acts. The results show that this film not only represents the reality of violence against women, but also a form of criticism of patriarchal culture. Through the character of Marlina, the film builds a narrative of women's resistance to masculine domination and shows how media can play a role in shaping social awareness. Thus, this film can be understood as a form of anti-violence against women campaign that aims to increase public understanding of the importance of gender equality and the protection of women.

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## 1. Introduction

Film is one of the most effective communication media in delivering messages to audiences (Tan, 2018). As a form of visual and audiovisual communication, films are able to convey ideas, emotions, and social values through various elements, such as narration, dialog, images, sounds, and symbols (Long, 2023; Xiong & Li, 2021). Films have the power to shape public opinion and influence social behavior. On the other hand, movies are often used in social campaigns, education, and advocacy. For example, films about violence against women, such as Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts, serve not only as entertainment but also as a tool to criticize patriarchal culture and campaign for women's rights (Narti & Syaputra, 2024; Rachmadhani et al., 2022; Winston, 2017).

The phenomenon of violence against women has become a global issue that continues to be discussed in various contexts, including in Indonesia. Gender-based violence does not only occur in real life, but is also often represented in the media, including movies. Movies as cultural products not only provide entertainment, but also have great potential in building social awareness and conveying

moral messages to audiences (Jones & Walton, 2018). One movie that highlights the issue of violence against women is *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, a movie that depicts the struggle of women in the face of injustice and violence.

*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* is a movie that not only shows the story of women's struggle against injustice, but also a medium of criticism of patriarchal culture and gender inequality. As Powers (2018) explains, movies have the power to represent social reality and build meaning through certain symbols. By using a semiotic approach, the audience can understand the moral message about resistance to violence against women constructed in this film (Haygarth, 2018). In semiotic studies, films have the power to represent social reality and construct meaning through symbols in the narrative. Mouly Surya's *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* is a form of visual communication that criticizes patriarchal culture and women's powerlessness in facing violence. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, various signs and meanings in this film can be analyzed to understand the moral message about women's struggle against injustice.

The moral message in this film is not only visible from the storyline, but also through visual symbolism and dialog that illustrates women's experiences in facing oppression. As a mass communication medium, this film is an effective tool in building public awareness about the importance of protecting women from various forms of violence (Green et al., 2020). The film's narrative shows that violence against women is often ignored by society and the existing legal system, thus encouraging victims to take matters into their own hands to get justice. The movie *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* depicts the story of Marlina, a woman who experiences physical and psychological violence in an environment that does not provide her with protection. The rape incident shown in this movie is a sign of the lack of education and awareness of the importance of protecting women. As stated by Tan, Ed S (2018), the audience's interpretation of movies is strongly influenced by their social and cultural experiences. Thus, this film can serve as an effective communication tool in raising public awareness about the importance of respecting women's rights.

In the context of anti-violence against women campaigns, this film can be understood as a form of changing people's perspectives on gender issues. The audience's interpretation of movies is strongly influenced by their social and cultural experiences. Therefore, films that explicitly show women's struggle against violence have great potential in building public awareness and empathy for victims of gender-based violence. Apart from that, this movie is a form of communication that is able to convey moral messages emotionally to the audience. The message in this film is expected to be understood by readers easily, aiming to prevent violent behavior against women in society. This representation is a social criticism of the reality that many women still face in real life (Bourdieu, 2018).

In addition, this movie also features women who have the power to fight injustice. Sutandio (2023) explained that the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* reverses the stereotype of women as weak and passive by presenting Marlina as a character who dares to fight for her rights. This shows that the media has an important role in shaping the representation of women and changing people's perceptions of women's position in the social structure. The construction of masculinity in this film is also an important aspect that needs to be analyzed. Highlighting how women in thriller films are often placed in submissive positions or become victims of violence. However, *Marlina the Killer in Four Acts* reverses this stereotype by presenting the main character as a strong woman who is able to fight injustice. This shows that the representation of women in the media has increasingly shifted from a passive figure to an active figure in fighting for their rights.

From the perspective of existential feminism, Marlina is portrayed as a woman who is not only a victim but also takes control of her own destiny. Shepherd (2018) explain that existential feminism emphasizes women's freedom in determining their own path without having to submit to an oppressive system. This is shown in the movie through Marlina's struggle to seek justice, both in public and private spaces. Based on this, it represents that the existential feminism approach can also be used to understand Marlina's character. Existential feminism emphasizes the importance of women's freedom in determining their own destiny. In this movie, Marlina is portrayed as a woman who faces the reality of violence with courage and takes control of her life. This shows that women are

not just passive objects in social structures, but have the capacity to act and fight against the injustices they experience.

Furthermore, Myisha (Myisha et al., 2024) highlighted this movie using a critical discourse approach to display women's resistance to patriarchal culture. In this movie, Marlina not only faces physical abusers, but also deals with a social system that often ignores her rights as a woman. Thus, this film can be understood as a form of resistance to norms that have long placed women in a subordinate position. Another perspective in analyzing this film is to reflect the social structure that is still full of gender inequality. In this film, Marlina not only fights against the individuals who commit violence against her, but also against social norms that have ignored or even justified violence against women.

The film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* provides lessons for society to value women more like a mother who should be respected and protected. As Aslichat, Prasetyo, and Irawan (2019) explain, the media has an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing how people view social issues. By presenting a strong narrative about women's struggle against violence, this film becomes part of a broader social campaign to promote gender equality and action to protect women. In the context of communication research, this film can be considered an effective social campaign medium in delivering moral messages related to women's issues. Anti-violence against women campaigns require an approach that can reach a wide audience and build awareness emotionally. As explained earlier, the media has a strategic role in shaping public opinion and influencing the way people understand certain social issues. As such, this movie serves not only as entertainment, but also as an educational and advocacy tool against violence against women.

More specifically, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* is a movie that is full of social criticism of the injustices experienced by women, especially in the context of patriarchal culture. The film is a representation of the experiences of many women who face violence and injustice in real life. By analyzing the moral messages in this film, it is hoped to understand how visual media can be part of a broader social campaign to raise awareness and encourage social change related to protecting women from violence. Through this analysis, the author tries to raise issues related to moral messages in the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*. By doing so, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of how media can be an effective tool in delivering social criticism and promoting change in society can be found.

## 2. Research Methodology

This research uses descriptive qualitative method with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to analyze the moral message in *Marlina the Killer in Four Acts*. Semiotics allows the study of signs and symbols in films to reveal hidden meanings (Eriyanto, 2019). The descriptive qualitative method with Roland Barthes' semiotic approach was chosen because *Marlina the Killer in Four Acts* is full of symbols and signs that represent social criticism of violence against women.

The interpretive approach in this research is also relevant because it allows in-depth interpretation of existing symbols, especially in describing the construction of female masculinity in the face of violence (Pratiwi, Nurjuman, & Yusanto, 2021). By considering the socio-cultural context, this method helps to understand how the moral messages of films reflect social reality and shape public awareness.

Barthes (in Sobur, 2009) explains that semiotics not only analyzes the relationship between signifier and signified, but also includes denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the explicit meaning in scenes of violence against women, while connotation represents women's resistance to patriarchy.

This research uses an interpretative approach to understand the analysis of moral messages in the film. Through this method, the analysis not only focuses on the film text but also considers the socio-cultural context. Through semiotics, the analysis is conducted on two main aspects: (1) Denotative meaning, which is the explicit depiction of violence. (2) Connotative meaning, which reflects a critique of patriarchal domination and an anti-violence against women campaign. The movie

is not only an entertainment medium, but also a communication tool to convey social reality. Therefore, this research seeks to uncover the meanings contained in the movie

### 3. Results and Discussion

The media has a strategic role in delivering social criticism and promoting change in society. Through news, opinions, and audiovisual works, the media can expose social inequality, voice public aspirations, and highlight policies that need to be reviewed. With its wide reach and opinion-shaping capabilities, the media serves as a watchdog of power that can pressure authorities to act more transparently and responsibly. In addition, digital media and social media platforms enable active participation in public discussions, strengthen social movements, and accelerate the dissemination of information that promotes awareness and collective action.

The movie *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* is a form of representation of violence against women that is constructed through various visual and narrative elements. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, this research explores the denotative, connotative, and social myths inherent in the film. This approach helps reveal that the moral messages contained in the film can be interpreted as a form of anti-violence against women campaign, and the film reflects the social reality in a patriarchal society.

#### - Denotative Meaning: Violence against Women as Social Reality

Denotatively, the movie shows physical and psychological violence experienced by women in a patriarchal society. Marlina, as the main character, experiences rape, robbery, and verbal abuse that signify the vulnerable position of women in a social system that does not favor them (Sumakud & Septyana, 2020). In the initial scene of the movie, Marlina is confronted by a group of men who enter her house without permission and plan to rape her. Explicitly, this scene illustrates that women are often victims of arbitrary masculine power, without any real legal protection (Manogu, Andrew & Lestari 2019).

In addition, the character of Marlina represents a woman who fights to defend her rights, a phenomenon that is rarely found in societies that still uphold patriarchal values. Through the act of killing her rapist, Marlina not only defends herself but also creates a narrative of resistance to gender-based violence (Pratiwi, Nurjuman, & Yusanto, 2021). This event illustrates that the act of resistance is not just an act of revenge, but also a symbol of social injustice experienced by women in everyday life.

#### - Connotative Meaning: Women's Resistance to Masculine Domination

At the connotative level, this movie not only shows the story of a woman who kills her attacker, but also reconstructs the meaning of masculinity and femininity. Marlina, in this movie, is not a passive woman who takes her fate for granted, but an active subject who determines her own path. In this context, the film provides a representation that women are not always weak and subject to the patriarchal system, but can build their own strength to survive (Ramli Ahnsari, Juanda 2021).

Another interesting connotation in this movie is that the role of women can change the narrative of violence into strength and liberation. Marlina, after killing Markus, still faces various challenges, including social stigma and other threats. However, Marlina's actions illustrate that women have the right to fight back when treated unfairly, a phenomenon that is rarely depicted in films about violence against women (Sari et al., 2021).

In this context, Barthes (in Sobur, 2009) mentions that connotative meanings in the media often describe the ideological narrative implied in a text. The movie shows that violence against women is not just an individual incident, but part of a wider system that limits women's freedom and rights. Thus, Marlina symbolizes a woman who dares to fight against the system that oppresses her, which is a form of message to be conveyed to the audience.

#### - Social Myths: Violence against Women and Cultural Representation

At the level of myth, this film represents the larger social reality of violence against women, which is often considered part of the culture and social norms that are difficult to change. Barthes (in

Cobley & Jansz, 1997) states that myth in the media is the way a society builds an understanding of reality through symbols and signs used in the narrative. In this film, there are locations that become settings that not only provide visual uniqueness but also reflect on a society that still strongly adheres to the patriarchal system creating a social structure that is less favorable to women (Aslichat, Prasetyo, & Irawan, 2019).

The film also dissects the narrative of women as weak and dependent on men. In contrast, Marlina is portrayed as a woman who is able to survive in a harsh world, despite facing various social pressures. This representation shows that women have agency to determine their own destiny, even though they live in an environment that suppresses and limits their freedom (Seto, 2019).

In addition, the film shows that patriarchal culture not only excludes women, but also shapes men's perceptions of dominance over women. The characters of Markus and Frans, for example, represent how men in a patriarchal culture see women as objects that can be controlled and dominated. However, the movie provides a different perspective that women also have the power to resist even in a male-dominated system (Prasetya, 2019).

#### - Film as an Anti-Violence against Women Social Campaign

As a media product, *Marlina the Killer in Four Acts* does not only function as entertainment, but also as a social campaign tool that raises the issue of violence against women and the importance of resistance to patriarchal culture. The movie, with its strong narrative, conveys the moral message that women have the right to defend themselves and should not be treated as objects of violence.

According to Barthes' semiotic theory, signs in movies have the ability to shape social consciousness and influence the way people understand an issue. In this context, the film can be considered as part of an anti-violence against women campaign that aims to raise awareness about the dangers of gender-based violence. By portraying women as individuals who have the power to fight back, the film also contributes to redefining the role of women in a society that is still trapped in patriarchal norms (Pratiwi, Nurjuman, & Yusanto, 2021).

Thus, this research shows that movies are not just entertainment media, but also have the power to convey important social messages. In the case of *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, the film successfully presents violence against women as a social issue that must be considered and resisted, and illustrates that women have the power to overcome the dominating patriarchal system. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, this analysis confirms that moral messages in films can be used as an effective social campaign tool in changing society's way of not committing acts of violence against women.

Based on the results of the next analysis of moral messages in the film "*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*" through the Roland Barthes semiotic approach. This research analyzes denotative and connotative meanings with an interpretative approach that focuses on signs and texts as the object of study. The codes behind the signs and texts are also part of this analysis.

The movie "*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*" depicts the life of a widow named Marlina who lives in a remote area. After the death of her husband, Marlina lives alone with her husband's mummified body in her living room. Marlina is abused and raped by a thug named Markus, who then brings his friends to rape Marlina. Attempts to seek justice at the police station ended in rejection due to lack of evidence. Marlina finally takes matters into her own hands by killing Markus and Frans. The movie carries the Satay Western genre packed with distinctive cinematography. Director Mouly Surya collaborated with Garin Nugroho and several actors and actresses such as Marsha Timothy, Egi Fedly, Yoga Pratama, and Dea Panendra. Sumba's arid natural beauty provides a strong backdrop for the film's narrative. Zeke Khaseli and Yudhi Arfani created the background music that combines western elements with the distinctive nuances of Sumba, strengthening the emotions in each scene. Kelvin Nugroho's picture styling supports the technicality of the movie with a solid storyline. The movie is a collaboration of four countries, namely Singapore, France, Thailand and Malaysia, and has the support of Cinemas du Monde, a French-based foundation.

The film premiered internationally and was nominated for the Cannes Film Festival in 2017. Marsha Timothy was also nominated for Best Actress at the Asian Film Award. The lack of dialog in this film is an attraction in itself. The actors use Sumbanese accents to add authenticity. The movie received a positive response with a score of 92% on Rotten Tomatoes and a rating of 8.7/10 on IMDB. Marsha Timothy is outstanding with her emotional and natural acting. Yoga Pratama as Frans brings out the nuances of Sumba culture through dialect and traditional songs. Dea Panendra and Egi Fedly also give strong performances in their roles. The movie consists of four acts that have a rhythmic structure. The first act, "Robbery", features seven robbers who come to Marlina's house. Marlina uses her ingenuity to kill four of them with poison, while the other two escape with their cattle. Markus, the leader of the robbers, rapes Marlina before being beheaded by Marlina. The second act, "The Journey", features Marlina meeting Novi, a woman ten months pregnant. Marlina carries Markus' head on her journey. In the third act, "Confession of Sin", Marlina and Novi face threats from the two remaining robbers. Marlina is haunted by the shadow of Markus, while the police do not provide the expected help.

The final act, "Birth", sees Novi meeting her husband, Umbu. Frans accuses Novi of having an affair, causing Novi to be beaten by her husband. Frans then tries to rape Marlina, but Novi kills him in the same way Marlina killed Markus. Novi gives birth with Marlina's help, ending the story on a hopeful note. The moral message in this movie is reflected through the characters of Marlina and Novi who are victims of male violence. Resilience and endurance in the face of injustice are central to the film's narrative. Friendship and support between women are shown as strength in the face of injustice, making this movie not only entertainment but also a strong social critique.

The patriarchal culture that is still deeply rooted in society often creates unequal gender power relations, where women are seen as second-class individuals (in Nasution, L. A., & Sahira, N. 2021). This has an impact on women's limited rights in determining their own lives. Gender injustice that occurs includes various forms, such as marginalization, subordination, violence, stereotypes, and double workload. One of the media that often reproduces gender injustice is film, which in many cases presents women in a weak position, as sexual objects, or simply as companions for male characters. Representations of women in the film industry are often gender-biased, placing women in roles such as secretaries, receptionists, or victims of violence without providing space for more empowering narratives.

The movie *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017) is a form of resistance to the dominance of patriarchal culture and carries a strong message of feminism. The movie carries a narrative that challenges the stereotype of women as weak and powerless individuals. Through the character of Marlina, played by Marsha Timothy, the movie depicts a woman who is independent, brave, and able to fight for justice for herself. Marlina's courage in facing a group of robbers who threatened her safety and honor reflects the resistance to gender-based violence that still occurs in society.

As a form of anti-violence against women campaign, this film highlights that the legal and social systems are still not fully in favor of victims of sexual violence. Marlina must face various obstacles in her quest for justice, which reflects the reality of many women in the real world. Through this film, the public is invited to be more sensitive to gender injustice and the importance of supporting women in fighting all forms of violence.

*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* also illustrates that women are not individuals who are always weak and dependent on men. Marlina is a symbol of resistance to a system that oppresses women. Women not only survive, but also take decisive action to protect themselves. This shows that women have the power to fight injustice.

The most essential message in *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* in this case conveys various strong moral messages, especially related to women's resistance to injustice and gender violence. Marlina is portrayed as a brave figure who stands up against oppression, showing that women have the power to take control of their lives, even in difficult situations. In addition, the film highlights the social impact of violence against women, showing how society often ignores the suffering of victims and lacks adequate support. In her quest for justice, Marlina faces a legal system that is not entirely in

her favor, reflecting the reality that women often have to face extra challenges to obtain their rights. However, in the midst of this struggle, solidarity between women becomes an important element, as shown through Novi's character who provides support to Marlina. This emphasizes that togetherness can be a strength in fighting gender inequality. With a strong narrative approach and meaningful visuals, this movie not only presents an evocative story, but also invites the audience to reflect on the social realities faced by women in real life.

Thus, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* is not just a movie, but also a form of anti-violence against women campaign. Through a strong narrative, visuals, and symbols, the film invites the audience to reflect on the realities that many women still face, as well as inspire efforts to protect and empower women in society.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research confirms that film is an effective medium of communication in delivering social messages, as shown in *Marlina the Killer in Four Acts*, which cinematically represents women's struggle against gender injustice through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The main findings reveal that the denotative and connotative meanings in this film not only build public awareness of the issue of violence against women, but also reinforce the importance of women's solidarity in the face of a patriarchal social system. The implications of these findings lead to the urgency of utilizing film as a broader campaign tool in encouraging social change and public policies related to women's protection. However, the limitation of this study lies in the scope of analysis that still focuses on semiotic aspects without considering the impact of films on a more demographically diverse audience. Therefore, future research can expand the approach with mixed-method methods, such as audience reception analysis or quantitative studies on the effectiveness of films as social advocacy tools, so as to provide a more comprehensive picture of the role of films in shaping public opinion and social change.

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