



Framing the Faithful: Islam, Gender, and National Identity on the Indonesian Screen

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Abstract

The study of masculinities in the context of film is currently attracting global attention from researchers. However, there are still a few

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researchers who study Muslim men as heroes in the context of Indonesian films. In this regard, this research aims to explore Muslim male heroes in Indonesian horror and silat films through the perspective of masculinity. This research employs qualitative methods, with data collection techniques conducted through a literature review. The data used were Indonesian horror and silat films from 1970 to 2020. The results of this study reveal the following key findings. The results of this study show the following findings. First, in Indonesian horror films, there is a type of male Muslim hero who performs exorcism of demons that possess human bodies; performs exorcism of demons that disturb and cause terror to families/citizens; and fights against black magic shamans. Second, in Indonesian silat films, the type of Muslim male hero is often depicted as a tough, strong, and mighty figure, fighting against the Dutch colonizers. Third, Muslim male heroes who appear in Indonesian films, both horror and silat, are not fully the main hero character. Globally, this research is expected to contribute to Islamic studies on male heroes in films from the perspective of masculinity, a topic that has been rarely explored in Islamic studies.

[Studi mengenai maskulinitas dalam konteks film saat ini menjadi perhatian peneliti skala global. Namun, belum banyak peneliti yang mengkaji laki-laki muslim sebagai pahlawan dalam konteks perfilman di Indonesia. Berkait dengan itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pahlawan laki-laki Muslim dalam film horor dan silat Indonesia melalui perspektif maskulinitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif, teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui studi pustaka dan skrip film. Data yang digunakan adalah film horor dan silat Indonesia tahun 1970-2020. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan temuan utama berikut. Pertama, dalam film horor Indonesia, terdapat tipe pahlawan laki-laki Muslim yang melakukan pengusiran setan yang merasuki tubuh manusia; melakukan pengusiran setan yang mengganggu dan menimbulkan teror kepada keluarga/warga; dan melawan dukun ilmu hitam. Kedua, dalam film Silat Indonesia, tipe pahlawan laki-laki Muslim muncul dalam segmentasi laki-laki yang tangguh, kuat, dan perkasa; berperang melawan penjajah Belanda. Ketiga, pahlawan laki-laki Muslim yang muncul dalam film-film Indonesia, baik horor maupun silat, tidak sepenuhnya sebagai tokoh pahlawan utama. Secara global, penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi bagi studi Islam tentang pahlawan laki-laki dalam film melalui perspektif maskulinitas, yang selama ini jarang dilakukan dalam studi Islam.]

Keywords: muslim; representation; identity; masculinities; hero

Introduction

In recent years, the study of masculinity has become increasingly popular, accompanied by a growing awareness among men

of themselves, encompassing philosophical, psychological, sociological, gender, and/or health aspects. On a global scale, in Europe, the study of masculinity is marked by research on racism against transgender people, discourses on European vs. non-European men, white vs. black, men and women, and the strengthening of the culture of masculinity and femininity in Europe.¹ in America, masculinity studies is characterized by research on masculinities in queer contexts,² masculinity is associated with skin color stereotypes; in Asia, masculinity studies are characterized by research related to masculinity in the context of multi-migrant worker problems³, masculinity in religious contexts⁴ for Arabs, recent studies of masculinity, among others, are concerned with gender struggles in the context of discourses between femininity and masculinity⁵ and masculinity in relation to terror.⁶ Research on masculinity is a broad field that encompasses various aspects of scientific disciplines, ranging from politics and social culture to queer issues.

Masculinity, a field of study that is categorized as new and expansive, is also included in the area of film studies. The study of masculinity in the film can appear in relation to the context of the

¹ Aleksandra Gaweł, Katarzyna Mroczek-Dąbrowska, and Małgorzata Bartosik-Purgat, “Female Empowerment and Masculinity—a Cultural Trait? Evidence from the CEE Countries,” *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 39, no. 4 (2024): 534–51, <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-06-2022-0194>.

² Canton Winer, “‘The Queers Hate Me Because I’m Too Butch’: Goldilocks Masculinity among Non-Heterosexual Men,” *Sexualities* 27, no. 4 (2024): 1053–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607221097332>.

³ Marzana Kamal, “Multiple Masculinities of Labour Migrants: How Bangladeshi Migrant Men Rationalize Gender Norms in Their Home Country,” *NORMA* 19, no. 1 (2024): 39–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2023.2247923>.

⁴ Murichandy Noorunnida, “Making of the Hindu Nation, Masculinity and the Citizen—Critical Reading of Children’s Magazines in South Asia and the Place of Muslims,” *Hawwa* 22, no. 1 (2024): 68–90, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15692086-12341413>.

⁵ Nuzha Allassad Alhuzail, Ibrahim Mahajne, and Anan Abo Saleh Khawaled, “The Meaning of Power for Female Arab Social Workers under the Youth Law,” *The British Journal of Social Work* 54, no. 5 (2024): 1790–1808, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad257>.

⁶ Salih Can Aciksoz, “Queer Terrorists, Terrorist Queers: The Sexual Politics of Turkey’s War on Terror,” *Men and Masculinities* 27, no. 4 (2024): 332–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X241276103>.

country/region, Asia, Europe, America,⁷ ambivalence of sexuality in modern men,⁸ development of the global film industry,⁹ and fashion trends among teenagers.¹⁰ Not only that, but the study of masculinity in film is also related to crimes committed by men (as perpetrators) or against men (as victims).¹¹ At the global level, this study is gaining popularity with the emergence of films featuring hero characters and literature that also features hero characters.

In the past year, research on masculinity in film has focused on the following areas. Men as non-hegemonic masculinity figures in popular films;¹² the existence of men in the context of expressing emotions, challenging gender norms in traditional corridors, creating a just/gender-equal society;¹³ Trans masculinity in the struggle against psychological and sociological problems;¹⁴ masculinity context of the film related to racism against Afro-Asian men.¹⁵ All studies on masculinity in film discuss queer men, psychology, sociology, and the intersection of racism. There is also a study conducted by Afaqi,

⁷ Joanne Leal, “American Cinema and the Construction of Masculinity in Film in the Federal Republic after 1945,” *German Life and Letters* 65, no. 1 (2012): 59–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0483.2011.01559.x>.

⁸ Clara Bradbury-Rance, “Ambivalent Masculinities in Contemporary Film and Tv: On Lesbian and Trans Representability,” *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2024): 35–43, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2024.77.3.35>.

⁹ Nathaniel B Burke, “Hegemonic Masculinity at Work in the Gay Adult Film Industry,” *Sexualities* 19, no. 5–6 (2016): 587–607, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716629333>.

¹⁰ Ylenia Caputo, Sara Martin, and Roy Menarini, “Fashioning Masculinities. The Art of Cinematic Menswear,” *ZoneModa Journal* 14, no. 1 (2024): iii–vi, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/19895>.

¹¹ Michael Salter and Stephen Tomsen, “Violence and Carceral Masculinities in Felony Fights,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 52, no. 2 (2012): 309–23.

¹² Julie Estlick, “Ken’s Best Friend: Masculinities in Barbie,” *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 4 (2024): 557–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291448>.

¹³ Raheleh Akhavi Zadegan, “Film Review: Beyond Men and Masculinity—Exploring the Detrimental Effects of Masculinity and Envisioning a New Paradigm,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 26, no. 1 (2024): 20, <https://vc.bridge.edu/jiws/vol26/iss1/20>.

¹⁴ Anas Ahmadi, “Masculinities to Trans-Femininities: Evidence through the ‘Girl’ Film,” *Masculinidades y Cambio Social* 13, no. 1 (2024): 63–82, <https://doi.org/10.17583/mcs.11837>.

¹⁵ Shun Man Emily Chow-Quesada, “Racialized Masculinities: The ‘Flawed’ AfroAsian Brothers in Rush Hour Series,” in *Queer and Femme Gazes in AfroAsian American Visual Culture* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 63–85.

specifically on hero masculinity in Bollywood films, which reveals that men are often portrayed as heroes who fight for their race, gender, society, or religion.¹⁶ This study shows that Muslim figures can also be heroes in Bollywood films and tries to show that, so far, Islamic hero figures have not been popularly portrayed. This is inseparable from the propaganda of the global community.

Research on heroes in films is exciting; unfortunately, there are still few who study Muslim heroes in films, especially those from Eastern/Asian films. The hero characters in films are more dominated by Western and European characters,¹⁷ starting from the theme of cowboy heroes, war, and queer heroes. Not only that, Hollywood, through Marvel Entertainment, has brought Marvel comic characters to life in hero films. At least in 2024, several films are scheduled for release, including Aquaman, Deadpool 2, Venom 3, and Spiderman: Beyond the Spider-Verse. All the heroes in the film are Western men. Not only that, but cartoon film heroes are also dominated by Western films.¹⁸

Cartoon films that promote heroism, including Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Supermario, which are adapted from Western comics. It is indeed inseparable from the construction of colonialism (Western and European), which creates a boundary line between the West and the East. The West is a symbol of progress, stability, civilization, and scientificity. The East is often perceived as a symbol of backwardness, uncivilization, and mysticism.¹⁹

The claim that the West is progressive and the East is backward has caused friction between the West and the East. In fact, if related to the context of Islam, Western films tend to represent Islam through extremist and terrorist propaganda²⁰ which is actually a western

¹⁶ Shaheer Afaqi, "From Heroes to Villains: Muslim Men in Bollywood," *Contemporary Islam* 19, no. 1 (2025): 65–99, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-024-00561-0>.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Abele, "Assuming a True Identity: Re-/De-Constructing Hollywood Heroes," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 25, no. 3–4 (2002): 447–54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1542-734X.00065>

¹⁸ David McGowan, *Animated Personalities: Cartoon Characters and Stardom in American Theatrical Shorts* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Edward W Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1 (1977): 162–206, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41397448>.

²⁰ Abida Noureen, Shabana Nazar, and Nayyer Mustafa, "Historical Misrepresentation of Islam and Muslim: A Descriptive Review of Hollywood," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 4, no. 2 (2020): 680–90, [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020\(4-II\)55](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020(4-II)55).

construction of the Islamic religion. In fact, Renard claims that until now, there are still few who write about Islam, especially those related to the context of heroes.²¹ This indicates that studies on heroes in Islamic studies are still relatively rare.

In Indonesia, the film industry emerged in the 1920s, although it was not yet popular at that time. Films were still categorized as black and white. In the following years, Hanan tried to show that Indonesian films began to bring out the breath of Islam in national films. At that time, the film *Wali Sanga* (1985) began to appear, the spreader of Islam in the Java Island region.²² In the 1980s-1990s, Islam began to appear as a hero in Indonesian films. From the 2000s until now, Islam has become increasingly popular in Indonesian films. However, several facts show that Islam, which is increasingly popular in national films, is only a 'commodification' of the market²³ and has not touched on a more substantive stage. It is because the majority of Indonesian people are Muslim, so themes that have an Islamic element are more popular with Indonesian people.

Related to this phenomenon, research on Muslim male heroes, until now, has not been conducted (if any) research that discusses Muslim male heroes in Indonesian films from the perspective of masculinity. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by raising research on Muslim male heroes in Indonesian films. This study aims to make scientific contributions to the field of masculinity studies by examining Muslim male heroes, a topic that researchers have not widely explored. This study is also expected to provide contributions to Islamic studies related to Muslim heroes in Indonesian films. In addition, this study is expected to be able to map Muslim men in Indonesia who become heroes in Indonesian films (horror films and martial arts films) and strengthen the existence that the East can also be a hero in films, especially Muslim male heroes who are reviewed from the perspective of masculinity.

²¹ John Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (US: Mercer University Press, 1999).

²² David Hanan, "Approaches to Islam in the Indonesian Cinema 1970s--1990s," in *Moments in Indonesian Film History: Film and Popular Culture in a Developing Society 1950--2020* (New York: Springer, 2021), 109--64.

²³ Eric Sasono, "Islamic-Themed Films in Contemporary Indonesia: Commodified Religion or Islamization?" *Asian Cinema* 21, no. 2 (2010): 48--68, https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.21.2.48_1.

Masculinity is a relatively new area of study in popular culture/cultural studies that examines men and their understanding of masculinity.²⁴ This study emerged along with men's awareness of themselves as men in relation to themselves, others, and society. In the context of masculinity, men are represented as figures who are brave, manly, mighty, and responsible. This symbol represents the notion that men are leaders, so the image of being strong, brave, and mighty is integral to the concept of masculinity.²⁵ Therefore, figures such as Hercules, the Hulk, Superman, and Aquaman are iconic representations of masculinity. Aspects studied in masculinity include (but are not limited to) philosophy, the male psyche, health, gender, and queer studies.²⁶ Masculinity initially developed in the West, but its current development has also extended to research studies in the East.

If we look at it historically, masculinity began to be widely discussed in the 1990s²⁷ As one of the reactions to femininity that fights for women, if femininity is something related to women and feminism as a movement of women's awareness, men have also given birth to masculinity and masculinism as a movement of men's awareness. So far, men have ignored things related to masculinity. However, on the one hand, men also go beyond things related to masculinity, for example, crimes against women, murder, or rape. In addition, men who are not allowed to cook, do health checks, and are considered taboo when dancing, crying, or being sad are part of toxic masculinities.²⁸ currently experienced by several men in the world.

The concept of a hero originally came from folklore studies related to the mythology of heroism in facing tough and strong enemies (monsters, giants, criminals, or tricksters)²⁹ which among them, appear in the figure of Hercules who fights monsters and Oedipus who fights

²⁴ Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill, *Men and Masculinities* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2003).

²⁵ Joshua C Davies, "Classical Masculinity and the Spectacular Body in Film: The Mighty Sons of Hercules," *Italian Americana* 35, no. 1 (2017): 86–9, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9781137384713>

²⁶ Anas Ahmadi, "The Images of Man in Indonesian Literature," *Masculinities & Social Change* 11, no. 1 (2022): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.17583/mcs.9446>.

²⁷ Robert William Connell, *Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 2020).

²⁸ Mark McGlashan and John Mercer, *Toxic Masculinity: Men, Meaning, and Digital Media* (London: Routledge, 2023).

²⁹ Lord Raglan, "The Hero of Tradition," *Folklore* 45, no. 3 (1934): 212–31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1256167>.

the Sphinx. Heroes in the past often focused on the construction of the child/descendant of a god, emphasizing masculinity, bravery, the role of the protagonist, strength, and possessing supernatural powers. In fact, heroes in folklore have morphological formulas that are included in linguistic studies, allowing for the identification of the hero's forms.³⁰ The birth of a hero is highly anticipated and glorified by his supporters because a hero is a figure who possesses extraordinary abilities and can defend his people in the context of race, religion, and culture.³¹ In a contemporary perspective, the concept of hero has experienced rapid development. Heroes not only appear in mythology and indigenous traditions, which are often glorified by their supporting communities, but they also appear in literature, film, and modern art. Heroes in the contemporary era are often portrayed as tough and strong protagonists who can fight and defeat their enemies.³² Not only that, a hero is a figure who embodies someone who defends truth and justice.

Specifically, this research focuses on the concept of a hero that refers to the contemporary meaning, namely (1) a person who defends truth and justice; (2) a person who fights for his nation and country, for example against the colonizers; (3) a person who fights against enemies (antagonists) who cause destruction and suffering for humanity in the context of a region or country; and (4) a person who has supernatural powers (protagonist) which are used to fight and defeat enemies (antagonists). In relation to Islam, the concept of a hero is associated with a person's struggle to defend truth and justice, uphold the Islamic religion, and fight for independence against colonizers.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative method that involves more data narration³³ based on an in-depth interpretation conducted by the researcher. The data collection technique involved a literature study and

³⁰ Vladimir Propp, "Study of the Folktale: Structure and History," *Dispositio* 1, no. 3 (1976): 277–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41491090..>

³¹ Otto Rank, "Myth of the Birth of the Hero," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 41, no. 2 (1914): 110–7.

³² Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2013).

³³ Anas Ahmadi, "The Traces of Oppression and Trauma to Ethnic Minorities in Indonesia Who Experienced Rape on the 12 May 1998 Tragedy: A Review of Literature," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2021): 126–44, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/744>.

scripts. The films used in this study were Indonesian silat films and horror films from 1970-2020. Horror films and silat films were chosen by the researcher because both film genres are more dominant in presenting muslim men as heroes. Films with other topics, such as romance, drama, murder, education, and history, are less dominant in presenting Muslim male heroes.

Table 1. Selected Data Sources

No.	Film	Year	Category	Publisher/Production House
1.	<i>Si Pitung</i>	1970	<i>Silat</i> (Martial Arts)	Dewi Films
2.	<i>Si Jampang</i>	1989	<i>Silat</i> (Martial Arts)	Kanta Indah Films
3.	<i>Jaka Sembung dan Dewi Samudra</i>	1990	<i>Silat</i> (Martial Arts)	Andalas Films
4.	<i>Malam Satu Suro</i>	1988	Horror	Soraya Intercine Films
5.	<i>Roh Fasik</i>	2019	Horror	RA Pictures
6.	<i>Makmum</i>	2019	Horror	MD Pictures
7.	<i>Hidayah</i>	2023	Horror	MD Pictures

The data analysis technique was carried out by adapting the flow model, which involves the process of identifying, classifying, reducing, and presenting data, all of which are carried out repeatedly. In the identification stage, the researcher identified films relevant to the research topic. The films were identified by year, namely from 1970 (as the beginning of the emergence of Indonesian national cinema) to 2020. Identification of films related to Muslim men was carried out through Netflix and YouTube. In the classification stage, the researcher grouped them based on the theme of Muslim men. In the reducing stage, the researcher sorted the data that was considered selected and discarded the data that was not selected. Thus, the researcher obtained selected data and used it as the main data in the research. Next, the researcher presented the data based on theories and methodologies that were

appropriate and relevant to the research context. This stage is carried out repeatedly to obtain comprehensive results.

For the validity of the qualitative data used in this study, the researcher conducted a 'peer discussion' with people who are experts in the fields of popular culture and film in order to obtain constructive input from theoretical and methodological aspects.³⁴ In the final stage, researchers conduct theoretical, methodological, and analytical rechecks so that the research results are more holistic, especially in the segment of constructing research results.

Results

Muslim Male Hero in Indonesian Horror Films

Horror films in a global context have universal themes from the past to the present, namely, themes related to murder, revenge, rape, and terror against people or groups.³⁵ Horror genre films are popular among children, teenagers, adults, and parents. Horror films are also categorized as low-budget films, but they sometimes generate significant profits. Related to horror films, in Indonesia, horror films began to become popular around the 1980s and were popularized by film star Suzana³⁶ which has won many awards. The Indonesian horror film is more oriented towards local Indonesian cultural identity,³⁷ for example, *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (1981),³⁸ *Sundel Bolong* (1981), *Telaga Angker* (1984)³⁹ which is rooted in local Indonesian culture. The horror film features a hero figure. The hero figure is inseparable from a Muslim man.

Related to the Muslim male hero, in Indonesian horror films, three main things emerge. First, the Muslim male hero exorcises

³⁴ Sharan B Merriam and Robin S Grenier, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

³⁵ Brian Jarvis, "Universal Horror," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic* (Springer, 2020), 679–94.

³⁶ Ediantes et al., "Viralization of Mystic Stories and Lore in Horror Films Produced by Indonesia," *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 11 (June 15, 2024): 1192–1202, <https://doi.org/10.61707/c70kq287>.

³⁷ Karl G Heider, *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

³⁸ Imam Tantowi, director, *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (Jakarta: Rapi Films, 1982).

³⁹ Sisworo Gautama Putra, director, *Telaga Angker* (Jakarta: Soraya Intercine Films, 1984).

demons. Exorcism is part of the heavenly religions or earthly religions that are included in the study of the sociology of religion. Religious people claim that demons are evil entities that disturb humans.⁴⁰ In this case, the term ‘devil’ (possessing humans) is used, which leads to the term ‘possessed by evil spirits or ghosts,’ referring to supernatural entities that scare/disturb humans. There are also demons who are considered part of the devil. For that, an exorcist is needed who disturbs humans. Likewise, with demons who enter the human body. Long before pre-Islam, exorcism practices were carried out.⁴¹ In Islam, there are terms such as Satan, the devil, and the jinn. All three are supernatural/invisible creatures that sometimes appear in the real world. In fact, some even disturb humans. Exorcism is also included in the context of psychological studies, in the view of psychoanalysis, entities in the world have archaic (ancient) archetypes that appear repeatedly in forms that transform along with the evolution of time.⁴² Satan, as an invisible entity, has existed since prehistoric times and will always reappear in present and future life. The invisible entity appears in different forms in each region. However, the differences in these types have the same archetype of Satan.

In Islam, exorcism is done by using the Quran, prayers, or spells. The exorcism is a complicated process because demons are categorized as dangerous and powerful creatures that can harm humans.⁴³ The exorcism is done individually or in groups. In addition to using prayers, exorcism also uses other mediums, such as oil, perfume, and magical weapons. In Islam, there is also the term ruqyah, a technique for treating/healing demonic possession based on the Quran, Hadith, the names/attributes of Allah, or prayers/mantras.⁴⁴ The prayer/spell is

⁴⁰ Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai, *Sociology of Exorcism in Late Modernity* (New York: Springer, 2017).

⁴¹ Hanifa Touag, “Guérir Par l’islam: L’adoption Du Rite Prophetique-Roqya-Par Les Salafistes En France et En Belgique,” *Islam Belge Au Pluriel*, 2012, 201–18.

⁴² Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969).

⁴³ Christian Suhr, *Descending with Angels: Islamic Exorcism and Psychiatry: A Film Monograph*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

⁴⁴ Khadher Ahmad, Mohd Anuar Ramli, and Nor Azian Ab Rahman, “Understanding the Use of Ruqyah (Healing Method Based on The Quran and Hadith) in the Treatment of Disease: Analysis Based on Fiqh al-Hadith al-Imam al-Bukhari (Pemahaman Terhadap Aspek Penggunaan Ruqyah dalam Rawatan Penyakit:

uttered by an exorcist by performing a certain ritual so that it can expel invisible demons that enter the human body or demons that show themselves through certain entities, for example, scary creatures.

In Indonesian horror films, the figure of a Muslim male hero who exorcises demons is represented as follows. In the film *Sundel Bolong* (1981),⁴⁵ narrated the figure of a kiai reciting prayers taken from the holy verses of the Quran. He did this to expel the ghost of the sundel bolong so that it would return to the realm of death. When reciting the prayer, the ghost of the Sundel Bolong slowly disappeared and returned to the realm of death. In the film *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (1981), It is narrated that the figure of a cleric who tries to fight against a black magic sorcerer. He uses prayers from the holy verses of the Quran to defeat the black magic sorcerer. In fighting against the sorcerer, the cleric not only relies on prayers, but he also fights physically with the sorcerer. In the end, the sorcerer loses and dies.

In the film *Telaga Angker* (1984), narrated by a religious figure who recites verses from the Koran, a female character named Anita, who has become a ghost, can return to the realm of the dead. In the film *Malam Satu Suro* (1988),⁴⁶ narrated a religious man who used prayers from the Quran to exorcise a demon that entered the body of a woman named Suketi. The reading of the prayers was successful, and it caused the demon that possessed Suketi's body to come out.

Indonesian horror films from the 2000s to the 2010s were dominated by those categorized as carrying more sexist themes. This was marked by the emergence of hot star figures from Japan, for example Miyabi in horror films *Hantu Tanah Kusir* (2010)⁴⁷ or Rin Sakuragi in horror films, *Suster Keramas* (2009).⁴⁸ The emergence of Indonesian horror films that are sexist and emphasize pornographic elements has become controversial and has received criticism from various parties, especially the Indonesian Ulema Council.⁴⁹ The

Analisis Berasaskan Fiqh al-Hadith al-Imam al-Bukhari,” *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 14, no. 2 (2016): 168–205, 10.1163/22321969-12340038.

⁴⁵ Sisworo Gautama Putra, director, *Sundel Bolong* (Jakarta: Rapi Films, 1981).

⁴⁶ Sisworo Gautama Putra, director, *Malam Satu Suro* (Jakarta: Soraya Intercine Films, 1988).

⁴⁷ Findo Purwono, director, *Hantu Tanah Kusir* (Jakarta: Maxima Pictures, 2010).

⁴⁸ Helfi Kardit, director, *Suster Keramas* (Jakarta: Maxima Pictures, 2009).

⁴⁹ Jennifer Lindsay, “Media and Morality: Pornography Post Suharto,” in *Politics and the Media in Twenty-First Century Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2010), 186–209.

Indonesian Ulema Council criticized Indonesian horror films for seeming to exploit women and for lacking Islamic elements in them. The emergence of Indonesian horror films that carried more sexism resulted in Indonesian horror films being categorized as secular films, so that the existence of Islam did not appear, either explicitly or implicitly, in these horror films.

In further developments, the Islamic trend has begun to gain popularity again in Indonesian horror films. This is marked by the emergence of horror films with Islamic themes and using Islamic diction. In the film *Roh Fasik* (2019)⁵⁰ narrated a man named Hasan who tried to exorcise a demon that entered the body of a woman named Renata (his friend's wife). He tried to exorcise the demon spirit in Renata, but her husband misunderstood and assumed that the two were having an affair. The exorcism carried out by Hasan was complicated and difficult, but in the end, the demon that possessed Renata's body was able to come out. In the film *Makmum* (2019),⁵¹ represented by a cleric who tries to fight a devil that disturbs the daily lives of the residents. The devil becomes a congregation when people perform prayers. Not only that, but the devil also appears in the form of voices and creaking doors, causing terror for the residents. In his fight against the devil, the cleric can defeat him by reciting prayers that come from the holy verses of the Quran.

In the film *Hidayah* (2023),⁵² narrated a man named Bahri, who is a recidivist (victim of slander). However, he wants to be a good man. He returned to the village and became a cleric there. There, he tried to cure a woman named Ratna (who had a strange disease). Bahri also performed an exorcism ritual so that the demon that possessed Ratna's body disappeared. It turned out Ratna did not recover and died. After Ratna's death, the villagers experienced strange events, so they accused Bahri of being the cause. It turned out that the cause of the strange events in the village was a black magic shaman. Bahri fought against the shaman, and the fight was won by Bahri. The villagers finally believed that Bahri was a good person, not as they had accused him. If visualized, the Muslim male heroes in Indonesian horror films are shown in the following table.

⁵⁰ Ubay Fox, director, *Roh Fasik* (Jakarta: RA Pictures, 2019).

⁵¹ Riza Pahlevi, director, *Makmum* (Jakarta: MD Pictures, 2019).

⁵² Monty Tiwa, director, *Hidayah* (Jakarta: MD Pictures, 2023).

Table 2. The Muslim Male Heroes in Indonesian Horror Films

No.	Film	Scene	Hero concept
1.	<i>Sundel Bolong</i> (1981)	Religious man who uses prayers to make ghosts (sundel bolong) go away	Exorcising demons that disturb humans
2.	<i>Ratu Ilmu Hitam</i> (1981)	Religious man who uses prayers to defeat shamans	A man who fights a shaman who causes chaos in the village
3.	<i>Telaga Angker</i> (1984)	Religious man who reads holy verses from the Quran so that Anita, who becomes a ghost, can return to the afterlife	A man exorcist who enters the body of a deceased person
4.	<i>Malam Satu Suro</i> (1988)	Religious man who reads prayers so that Suketi (possessed by demons) slowly disappears and returns to the afterlife	A man exorcist who enters the body of a deceased person
5.	<i>Roh Fasik</i> (2019)	Ustadz who exorcises evil spirits that enter his wife's friend's body	A Muslim man heroically exorcising evil spirits that possess women's bodies
6.	<i>Maknum</i> (2019)	Ustadz who exorcises ghosts that disturb residents.	A Muslim man heroically exorcising evil spirits
7.	<i>Hidayah</i> (2023)	Ustadz who exorcises demons that disturb villagers	A Muslim man hero exorcising demons

Based on the above explanation, it appears that Muslim male heroes in Indonesian horror films are narrated in the segmentation of (a) men who exorcise ghosts who possess other people's bodies; (b) men who fight shamans and defeat shamans who disturb villagers by using prayers; and (c) men who physically resist black magic shamans

by using silat skills. For exorcism, which in Islam is also known as Rukyah, has indeed been carried out by a kiai/ustaz in order to expel demons that possess someone or demons that disturb someone's life. It is the same as what is done by Catholics, which is known as an exorcism.⁵³ The exorcism can be carried out in a holy place (a place of worship). However, it can also be carried out in other places that are considered representative for carrying out exorcism rituals.

Muslim Male Hero in Silat Films

Indonesian films are known for their strong portrayal of elements from the country's collective culture and traditions.⁵⁴ One of them is the silat tradition, a local tradition in Indonesia. The term silat is related to silat, a combat art, and also a sports art.⁵⁵ The tradition of silat has similarities with other silat, such as kung fu from China or karate from Japan. Therefore, Indonesian films that promote silat emerged. Silat films were popular in Indonesia from the 1990s to the 2000s. Silat films in Indonesia are often starred by famous silat practitioners, such as Ratno Timor, Barry Prima, George Rudy, Advent Bangun, and Wily Dozan.

In Indonesian silat films, the breath of Islam appears, although not so strong. The emergence of Islam and Islamic symbols in silat films cannot be separated from the culture of Indonesian society, which is predominantly Muslim. It has led to the emergence of Islam as a commodity in the film market in Indonesia. In Indonesian silat films, Muslim male heroes are represented as follows. In the film *Si Pitung* (1970),⁵⁶ narrated the figure of a Muslim hero named Si Pitung. He is a man who has a muscular body. He possesses extraordinary silat skills, thanks to the teachings of his silat arts teacher, Haji Naipin. As a native man, he is a figure who strongly dislikes the Dutch colonialists. Therefore, he fought against the Dutch colonialists, who at that time

⁵³ Francis Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* (London: Springer, 2016).

⁵⁴ David Hanan, "Cultural Specificity in Indonesian Film," *Cultural Specificity in Indonesian Film: Diversity in Unity*, 2017.

⁵⁵ Paul H Mason and Uwe U. Pätzold, "Pencak Silat Seni in West Java, Indonesia," *The Fighting Art of Pencak Silat and Its Music*, 2016, 235–63, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004308756_009.

⁵⁶ Nawi Ismail, director, *Si Pitung* (Jakarta: Dewi Film PT, 1970).

controlled Betawi. In the film *Si Jampang* (1989),⁵⁷ narrated a man named Jampang (the son of Haji Raigun), a tough, strong, and mighty man. He also has silat skills. He came to his village to build the village. At that time, the Dutch colonial period. As a man, he fought against the Dutch. In this context, Jampang fought the Dutch because he fought for his dignity as a colonized native. In addition, the Dutch had killed native people. In his fight against the Dutch army, Jampang was able to kill the Dutch inspector, Frans, and his men.

In the film *Jaka Sembung dan Dewi Samudra* (1990),⁵⁸ narrated by a Muslim hero, an old cleric who tried to protect one of his citizens from being captured by the Dutch colonial army, which at that time controlled Indonesia. Not only that, the cleric, as a figure who had a spirit of patriotism and nationalism, also invited the citizens to unite with all the students in the Islamic boarding school to attack and destroy the Dutch colonial fortress. A fierce war was inevitable between the natives and the Dutch colonialists. Finally, the Dutch colonial fortress was destroyed, the Dutch colonial army was in disarray, and many were killed in the incident. If visualized, the narrative of the hero man appears in the following table.

Table 3. The Narrative of the Muslim Male Hero

No.	Film	Scene	Hero concept
1.	<i>Si Pitung</i> (1970)	Si Pitung who resists the Dutch colonialists	A tough and strong man in fighting against the invaders
2.	<i>Si Jampang</i> (1989)	Si Jampang, who resists the Dutch colonialists	A tough and strong man in fighting against the invaders
3.	<i>Jaka Sembung dan Dewi Samudra</i> , (1990)	Kiai, who resists the Dutch colonialists	A man who fights against the invaders

Based on the explanation, it appears that Muslim male heroes in Indonesian silat films are narrated in the segmentation of (a) figures

⁵⁷ M. Abnar Romli, director, *Jampang* (Jakarta: PT Kanta Indah Film, 1989).

⁵⁸ Atok Suharto, director, *Jaka Sembung dan Dewi Samudra* (Jakarta: Andalas Kencana Films, 1990).

who are muscular, strong, and mighty; (b) have good/extraordinary silat skills; (c) fight enemies who harm citizens/society; (d) fight the Dutch colonizers who colonized Indonesia; and (e) have a spirit of nationalism to fight against the Dutch colonizers who had trampled on Indonesian soil. These Muslim male heroes not only fought for themselves, but also had a high spirit of nationalism to fight the Dutch colonizers who were colonizing Indonesia at that time. For this reason, the Dutch colonizers used various ways to defeat the rebels (especially the Muslim male heroes) who did not want to obey and submit to them. The Dutch colonizers (through their 'minions') also invited the Muslim male heroes to join as Dutch allies. The Muslim male heroes were promised wealth and position if they were willing to join the Dutch colonizers. However, the Muslim men did not want to do this because they had a spirit of patriotism and nationalism. For that, they, as Muslim male heroes, do not want to betray their country and nation. They uphold the Indonesian country and nation until the 'last drop of blood.' Several studies, for example, those conducted by Jafar, show that Islam played a role in the struggle against the Dutch colonialists through the concept of jihad. In addition, Royali emphasized that Muslim youth also became the 'driving force' of the struggle with the people to fight the Dutch colonialists⁵⁹ in Indonesia.

The identity of the Muslim male hero in Indonesian films (horror and silat) is actually one of the big narratives in order to refute western propaganda related to Islamophobia.⁶⁰ Western propaganda related to Islamophobia portrays Islam as a frightening religion and a cause of terror. For that reason, Muslim male heroes in Indonesian films (horror and silat) appear as a form of concretization that Islam is a religion that has a spirit of heroism, loves peace, has a high spirit of patriotism and nationalism, fights against the Dutch colonialists, and does not like to be lackeys of the Dutch colonialists.

⁵⁹ Ahmad Royani, "Pesantren dalam Bingkai Sejarah Perjuangan Kemerdekaan Indonesia," *Jurnal Islam Nusantara* 2, no. 1 (2020): 121–28, <https://doi.org/10.33852/jurnalin.v2i1.75>.

⁶⁰ Kastolani Kastolani, "Understanding the Delivery of Islamophobic Hate Speech via Social Media in Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 2 (2020): 247–70, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i2.247-270>.

Discussion

This study highlights Muslim male heroes in horror and martial arts films in Indonesia, a topic that has not been widely explored by previous researchers. This study explores prominent Indonesian films that tend to feature Muslim men as heroes. Historically, from the early emergence/revival of Indonesian national films in the 1970s to the present, there have been relatively few films in Indonesia featuring Muslim heroes. This is done because Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country, which means that national film consumption is likely to be dominated by Muslim audiences.

The results of this study indicate that Indonesian horror films portray male Muslim heroes as exorcists and men who repel invaders. It demonstrates that Islamic identity is positively represented in Indonesian cinema. These findings are relevant and support previous research conducted by Hariyadi,⁶¹ Sasono,⁶² Ahmadi et al⁶³ which demonstrated that Islamic identity in film is portrayed positively. In the context of Indonesian cinema, Islam is portrayed in non-stereotypical narratives, thereby strengthening its presence in Indonesia as a religion of peace, nationalism, and heroism. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate that film is a powerful medium for conveying Islamic messages through televisual and digital channels, offering faster, easier, more practical, and more accessible means on a global scale. However, several descriptions from relevant research have not optimally depicted the positive side of Islam in philosophical, psychological, sociological, and anthropological contexts.

Studies on Muslim men as heroes in the context of global cinema, or in Indonesian cinema, have been suboptimal due to two main factors. First, film production factors, with the lack of global and Indonesian films that depict Muslim men as heroes. Second, researchers

⁶¹ Hariyadi Hariyadi, "Finding Islam in Cinema: Islamic Films and the Identity of Indonesian Muslim Youths," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2013): 443–73, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2013.512.443-473>.

⁶² Eric Sasono, "Islamic-Themed Films in Contemporary Indonesia: Commodified Religion or Islamization?" *Asian Cinema* 21, no. 2 (2010): 48–68, https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.21.2.48_1.

⁶³ Anas Ahmadi et al., "The Transformation of Islamic Identity Behind the Screen: Indonesian Horror Films: Indonesian Horror Films, 1980-2020," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 19, no. 1 (2025): 188–213, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2025.19.1.188-213>.

have not yet addressed Muslim male masculinity in the context of cinema, as it is still not a global trend to date. Furthermore, Muslim researchers have not yet significantly increased their awareness of Muslim men in the context of cinema. This case becomes the reason why research on Muslim men as heroes in the context of cinema remains suboptimal.

The results of this study challenge and critique research that shows that Islam in film is portrayed negatively, globally, as terrorism, a brutal culture, and as a troublemaker⁶⁴ which has sparked fear on a global scale. This research aims to demonstrate that Islam emerges as a heroic figure, possessing a fighting spirit for the community and a love for local culture and traditions. Islam refuses to be colonized by capitalists, thus waging a struggle against them. It represents the portrait of Muslim men in Indonesian films: strong, resilient, responsible, and fighters. As Muslim men, they are willing to make sacrifices for their country and nation. To that end, they are also willing to die to defend Indonesia's independence from colonialism. They do not want Indonesia to be colonized by the Dutch. Therefore, the struggle against the colonialists is ongoing. It shows the Western world that Muslim men in Indonesia are anti-colonial Muslims. Islam demonstrates the ethical side of society in a realistic manner, as well as the ethical side in films within a national and global context.

This research aims to challenge previous studies in a global context that have primarily focused on Western hero figures as a form of Western hegemony and propaganda. Heroic figures like Superman, Batman, the Hulk, and Captain America demonstrate the West's immense power. However, Indonesian films, like those from the East, also feature male heroes in relation to Islam. In the Western theory of masculinity, Western films often emphasize Western superiority through their portrayal of male heroes. It suggests that the West is superior and the East is inferior. However, in the context of postcolonial theory, the world is currently experiencing a civilizational turning point, marked by masculinity theories not only orienting towards the West but also beginning to shift towards theories of masculinity in the East.

This suggests that the dominance of heroism is not limited to Western films, but also appears in Eastern cinema, particularly in films featuring Muslim male heroes in Indonesia. This research presents

⁶⁴ Mark A Gabriel, *Islam and Terrorism* (Florida: Charisma Media, 2002).

findings that can be used as a strategy to break down the Western stereotype that Islam is a religion of rebellion and terrorism, thus lacking in realizing nationalism.⁶⁵ This research clearly demonstrates that Islam also played a significant role in Indonesia's fight for independence and in preserving its local culture. Therefore, global communication media, including Indonesian horror films and silat films, can be used as a vehicle to demonstrate the existence of Muslim men globally as heroic figures. Furthermore, this research is also expected to eliminate the normalization that Islam is associated with anti-nationalism. In Indonesia, the study of masculinity in Muslim male heroes is a breakthrough in highlighting masculinity within the Indonesian context through the medium of film.

In terms of representation, Indonesian cinema has experienced the following shifts: first, a shift in themes. In the 1970s and 1980s, Indonesian films, particularly those related to Muslim men, were more dominant in their portrayal of resistance against colonialism. It was evidenced by the many films that depicted resistance against the Dutch and Japanese (Indonesia's colonial masters). The spirit of nationalism and national identity was very strong in the 1970s and 1990s. Second, in the 2000s, Indonesian cinema underwent a shift from martial arts films to horror films. In the 2000s, martial arts films began to decline and were even discontinued because the trend of martial arts and resistance against colonialism had disappeared. However, horror films experienced a shift from the theme of Muslim male heroes fighting ghosts towards a more humanistic and socially critical context. However, on the other hand, horror films in Indonesia today are also inseparable from marketing. In a marketing context, Indonesian society is predominantly Muslim, so Islamic-themed films are more popular with audiences. Specifically, the male Muslim hero in martial arts films falls into the category of physical masculinity because he predominantly displays strength and prowess in fighting colonial invaders. In horror films, the male Muslim hero appears in the context of spiritual masculinity, as he exorcises ghosts and recites prayers to combat them.

⁶⁵ Ahmadi, Anas. "New Aesthetics: Narrating Muslim Female Heroes in Hollywood Films". *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15, no 2 (2025), 216–35. <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/JITC/article/view/7144>.

This research has limitations in terms of data sources. The researcher focused only on horror films and martial arts films. Other films with themes of romance, family, or war were not discussed in this study due to time constraints and the limited ability of these films to portray Muslim male heroes. Therefore, future researchers could focus on studying Muslim male heroes in films with themes of romance, family, or war. They could also conduct a comparative study of Muslim male heroes in Indonesian and foreign films.

Research on films related to Islam, whether from a philosophical, psychological, socio-cultural, or religious perspective, is expected to be more objective in its view of Islam. Thus, the lens used in this research enables a clean, clear, and transparent examination of Islam, a religion of peace. As a religion of mercy for all the world, Islam teaches ethics and goodness in social life⁶⁶ on a global scale. Furthermore, the researcher challenges filmmakers to portray Islam not only as a supporting character but also as a main character, presenting a strong and positive image to the audience. Thus, film can be used as a digital medium for da'wah (Islamic outreach) in a global context.

Conclusion

Currently popular Indonesian films include horror films and silat films. Some of these Indonesian films, 1980-2020, feature Muslim male heroes, either as the main character or not as the main character. The results of this study indicate that Muslim male heroes in Indonesian films are narrated as follows. First, Muslim male heroes in Indonesian horror films appear in the segmentation as male exorcists who possess human bodies; as exorcists who disturb villagers; as men who fight black magic shamans. Second, Muslim male heroes in Indonesia appear in the segmentation as figures who are sturdy, muscular, strong, and tough. In addition, Muslim male heroes are figures who fight against the Dutch colonialists. The facts in Indonesian films, 1980-2020, show that Islam, through the perspective of masculinity, has a role in films. Muslim male heroes in Indonesian films are shown as figures who contribute to themselves, others, and Indonesian society. It

⁶⁶ Adnan Adnan et al., "Cultural Da'wah and Islamic Education Values in Antar Ajong Tradition of People in Melayu Sambas West Kalimantan," *KARSA Journal of Social and Islamic Culture* 27, no. 1 (2019): 1-30, <https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v27i1.1537>.

demonstrates that Islam plays a significant role in Indonesian films. In a broader context, Islam in Indonesian films is not only a 'market commodity,' but also has a beneficial function for Indonesian film lovers. It is hoped that the results of this study will also strengthen the notion that Islam can be a hero in Indonesian national films, which has so far been rarely explored by Indonesian researchers or foreign researchers with concerns about Indonesian films. The results of this study are expected to contribute significantly to global research on masculinity within the context of Islam. Furthermore, the results of this study are also expected to provide new insights into the stigma surrounding research on heroes in films, particularly in the context of Islam. Indonesian films can show something different, that Islam also appears and exists in Indonesian horror films and silat films, which are represented as male hero figures. The results of this study are also expected to be an embryo for other researchers who want to research global-scale masculinity heroes. Further research can also be conducted to compare Muslim male heroes in Eastern and Western countries.

The emergence of research on masculinity in Eastern countries is actually a massive resistance to masculinity in Western countries. Until now, masculinity and masculinity theory have tended to be dominated by Western writers and heroic male figures, often emerging from Western countries (as a form of propaganda and hegemony of power). Indeed, research on masculinity in Eastern countries needs to be further strengthened so that its resonance extends not only to the eastern region, which is considered backward, but also to the global context. In this way, masculinity in the Eastern region is not merely a "tail" of Western masculinity, but is indeed capable of standing alongside and being equal to it. In terms of representation, Indonesian cinema, from the 1970s to the 2020s, underwent a shift in themes, from the struggle against colonialism to the emergence of national spirit and identity, and then to a focus on humanism and social criticism in the 2020s. Furthermore, Indonesian cinema also shifted toward marketable themes that appeal to the Muslim community in Indonesia. Muslims constitute the majority in Indonesia, and therefore, films produced also adapt to themes that promote Islamization.

This article is relevant to previous research related to the study of men in the context of the humanities, namely literature, art, and film. This study aims to demonstrate that, to date, more heroes have emerged in non-Islamic contexts. For this reason, researchers raise Islamic male

heroes in films to show Islamic identity on an international scale. In relation to limitations, this study is limited to Indonesian films that feature Muslim male characters as heroes. For recommendations, further researchers can conduct studies relevant to this one in the context of comparative film studies, aiming to identify differences and similarities in Islamic heroes across a wider global scale.

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