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license**REALISM, REPRESENTATION, AND IDEOLOGY: A
FISKEAN SEMIOTICS OF TOXIC MASCULINITY IN
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Indonesia*Correspondence E-Mail: angeliramadhani1@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.30598/baileofisipvol1iss1pp67-82>**ABSTRACT**

This article aims to describe the representation of toxic masculinity in the Indonesian film Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash through a semiotic analysis of the main character and selected scenes, employing John Fiske's three-level coding model: the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. The analysis focuses on visual and narrative elements such as costume, behavior, cinematography, lighting, dialogue, and the actions of the protagonist, Ajo Kawir. The findings reveal that toxic masculinity is portrayed through 1980s-style modest clothing that symbolizes a duality of toughness and vulnerability, acts of violence as dominance over other men, and the refusal to fight women as a sign of patriarchal superiority. At the representation level, cinematographic techniques such as medium shots, close-ups, two-shots, and over-the-shoulder shots emphasize the emotional and violent dimensions of the character. Ideologically, the film articulates values of individualism, male dominance, and superiority, shaped by past trauma and patriarchal social structures. This study demonstrates that film serves not only as entertainment but also as a site for the production and reproduction of problematic gender ideologies. Its novelty lies in the application of Fiske's semiotic approach to deconstruct toxic masculinity in contemporary Indonesian cinema.

Keywords: Film Representation, Gender Ideology, Male Identity, Patriarchy, Toxic Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on masculinity, particularly in its toxic form, is becoming increasingly relevant in societies that still bear strong traces of patriarchy (Lahiri-Dutt, 2022; Song, 2022). Toxic masculinity—characterized by dominance, aggressiveness, and emotional repression—is not merely an individual behavior, but a social construction that continues to be reproduced, one of which is through popular media such as film (De Boise, 2019; Harrington, 2021). As a cultural product, film not only reflects social reality but also plays an active role in shaping public perceptions of gender roles (Pearson, 2019). In the Indonesian context, the film *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash) is a compelling visual text for analysis, as it explicitly presents a male protagonist with psychological complexity and problematic performances of masculinity. This is where the central issue of this study lies: how toxic masculinity is represented and interpreted through narrative, symbols, and visual codes in

the film.

The relevance of this issue cannot be separated from the fact that gender-based violence, emotional repression in men, and the glorification of physical power remain social realities in Indonesia. Mas'udah (2023) and Yusuf (2023) found that most perpetrators of violence against women are men with masculine characteristics that tend to be repressive and dominant. This condition is reinforced by research from Afifulloh & Wijayanti (2023), Fatmawaty et al. (2022), and Wahyuni & Mohd Adnan (2022), which show that the media—including film—significantly shape public perceptions of gender and power relations. Therefore, it is important to examine how the media construct the meaning of masculinity, not merely as artistic representation, but also as an ideology that subtly works in the minds of viewers.

Studies on masculinity in Indonesian cinema have indeed been conducted by several researchers. For instance, research by Adhyanggono (2021), Hanan (2021), and Tas'an & Rosnani (2023) analyzed how masculinity is constructed in post-New Order cinema as part of national identity formation. Meanwhile, Carlsen (2019), Hernawati (2021), and Rosida et al. (2022) discussed the representation of male violence in action films as an excess of the masculine identity crisis. Another study by De Vido (2021) examined how men are represented in youth films as emotional figures, yet still trapped in rigid masculine norms. Theoretically, the works of Messerschmidt (2019), Yang (2020), and Reddy et al. (2019) on hegemonic masculinity are essential references for understanding how forms of masculinity are socially and culturally constructed.

Furthermore, the semiotic approach has been used by several researchers to unpack layers of meaning in visual texts. For example, studies by Ananda et al. (2022) and Lawes (2019) employed Barthes' semiotics to analyze symbols of violence in commercial advertisements. Meanwhile, Briandana (2019), Goharipour & Gibson (2023), and Sarah (2021) adopted Peirce's semiotic approach to examine representations of women in television soap operas. The semiotic framework of John Fiske, which combines the dimensions of reality, representation, and ideology, has been relatively underutilized in the context of Indonesian films, particularly in reading gender representation. Studies by Dharma (2022), Febryningrum & Hariyanto (2022), and Rachman (2023) come closest, by dissecting social class discourse in Indonesian cinema using Fiske's coding levels. However, specific studies on toxic masculinity using this approach are still very limited.

This condition indicates a significant gap in Indonesian film studies, particularly in the representation of toxic masculinity within the framework of Fiskean semiotics. Many previous studies emphasized either narrative or ideological aspects in general but have not systematically connected the levels of reality codes, visual representation, and ideology in an integrative manner. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how toxic masculinity manifests not only in the actions of the main character but also in visual elements such as costume, lighting, camera angles, and dialogue choices that form a complex sign system.

Thus, this research offers a deeper and more contextual reading of the film *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*, not merely to identify elements of toxic masculinity, but to unravel how such ideology operates through systems of representation often unnoticed by the audience. John Fiske's semiotic framework provides an analytical tool that goes beyond surface-level signs to reveal how those signs are linked to social practices and ideological values. The novelty of this approach lies in its ability to bridge textual and social analysis within one cohesive framework.

The main objective of this study is to describe and interpret how toxic masculinity is constructed and represented in the film *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* through John Fiske's three levels of semiotic coding. Through this approach, the research contributes not only to the body of media and gender studies but also expands the interpretive space of Indonesian cinema as a site for the production of ideological discourse.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section begins with an explanation of why Fiske's semiotic approach was chosen as the main analytical path and why *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* was selected as the object of study. The semiotic approach, as developed by John Fiske, offers a framework capable of examining the layers of meaning behind visual texts—from the construction of reality to the ideological discourse embedded in the viewing experience (Fiske, 2017). Since the objective of this research is to map how toxic masculinity is produced and reproduced through filmic elements, Fiske's semiotics is highly relevant: it provides three levels of coding—realism, representation, and ideology—that complement and reinforce cross-dimensional analysis of cinematic texts.

The selection of *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* is based on the film's rich narrative and visual portrayal of the character Ajo Kawir, who not only displays physical aggression but also emotional tension and complex patterns of domination. This film, which received widespread acclaim from both critics and audiences, serves as an ideal case study to examine how cinematic elements—costume, framing, lighting, camera movement, and dialogue—synergize to form a problematic construction of masculinity. Thus, this semiotic study does not merely read symbols but traces the practice of meaning production that shapes social perceptions of gender.

The research process began with repeated viewings of the film in high-definition digital format to ensure all visual and narrative details were clearly captured. Every scene that depicted violence, male-female interaction, and emotional moments of the main character was identified and transcribed, complete with screencaps as annotation material. These transcripts were then categorized based on Fiske's levels of coding: the reality level (what appears as factual in the image), the representation level (how cinematic elements articulate meaning), and the ideology level (the values and discourses implied). This stage follows the qualitative textual analysis

procedure as outlined by Letak (2022), in which the researcher systematically organizes and labels units of analysis before conducting an in-depth interpretation.

Data collection also involved semi-structured interviews with two informants: a film critic with a background in media studies and a gender sociologist. These interviews aimed to gain external perspectives on the representation of masculinity in Indonesian cinema in general and the film specifically. The questions focused on visual meaning-making, gender stereotypes, and audience ideological perceptions. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic coding techniques to identify narrative alignment or divergence between semiotic findings and critical audience experiences.

Data triangulation was applied by integrating findings from film analysis (visual and narrative codes), expert interviews, and literature reviews related to masculinity in film. This triangulation approach aligns with best practices in qualitative research, which emphasize the importance of enhancing the validity of findings through multiple data sources (O'Donnell, 2020). The semiotic analysis results were then confronted with the views of informants and findings from previous studies, such as Adhyanggono (2021) on hegemonic masculinity in post-New Order films, to affirm whether the representation patterns found were consistent or offered new perspectives. Throughout the process, the researcher maintained a stance of reflective openness—acknowledging the subjective position as a female researcher with gender reading experience—and ensured that each interpretation was grounded in carefully selected visual and narrative evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Masculinity on Screen: Reading Social Reality Through Film

The film *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* is not merely an entertaining cinematic work, but a cultural text that both reflects and shapes society's understanding of gender—especially masculinity. Through the main character Ajo Kawir, the film reveals that masculinity does not arise naturally as an inherent trait of men, but is the result of complex social constructions. In this sense, film operates as a site of ideological articulation: it is not neutral, but loaded with social values and norms that underlie how men are expected to act, feel, and respond to the world around them. Ajo Kawir's portrayal as stubborn, angry, resistant to criticism, and always resolving issues with violence represents a depiction of toxic masculinity—a form of masculine expression born from patriarchal cultural pressures that demand men to always be dominant, strong, and emotionally impenetrable.

The semiotic approach used to read this film demonstrates how visual codes, dialogue, body gestures, and cinematic techniques such as lighting and camera angles serve as representational devices that convey hegemonic narratives about gender. In this context, *Vengeance Is Mine* becomes a reflection of power dynamics and unequal gender relations. Ajo is not just carrying a personal story of physical impotence; he also reveals a cultural anxiety toward

masculine identities that do not conform to normative standards. In other words, the toxic masculinity in this film is not an essential quality of the individual, but a historical product of social structures that position men as centers of power and control.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by Messerschmidt (2019) and Reddy et al. (2019), becomes a crucial framework for understanding how dominant forms of masculinity are maintained and reproduced through various social institutions—including popular media such as film. Hegemonic masculinity is not representative of the majority of men, but rather an idealized form of masculinity that is promoted as worthy of emulation. In this film, Ajo Kawir is portrayed as struggling desperately to meet that expectation, albeit in destructive ways. The violence he displays is not merely an emotional outburst, but also a performative act internalized within patriarchal culture—where men are expected to demonstrate superiority in every conflict.



Figure 1 Scene of Ajo Kawir being mocked for impotence
Source: Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash, 2022

However, the reading of masculinity in this film does not stop at a single dimension. Through the lens of intersectionality proposed by Connor et al. (2021), we can understand that masculinity is produced within diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. Ajo Kawir does not exist in a vacuum; he is a product of a specific social background, in which violence, power, and fear of weakness are integral to a masculine identity that is constantly being negotiated. In this sense, masculinity is neither singular nor uniform, but always in the process of becoming—shaped by interactions among social class, traumatic experience, power structures, and societal expectations imposed upon the male body.

This film not only exposes toxic masculinity, but also offers a space for reflection on the crisis of masculinity itself. In the final scenes, as Ajo begins to acknowledge his limitations and opens himself up to more egalitarian relationships, a hope emerges for the possibility of a masculinity that is no longer hegemonic. At this point, the film becomes more than a cultural mirror—it transforms into a site of negotiated meaning, where gender constructions can be critiqued, challenged, and reimagined. Through this understanding, we are invited to see that being a man does not have to mean being dominant or aggressive, but being fully human—capable of feeling, listening, and acknowledging vulnerability.

Reality Level: Costume, Gesture, and Violence as Markers of Masculinity

In *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, representations of toxic masculinity at the level of reality are prominently constructed through visual elements such as costume, body gestures, and the violent expressions of the main character, Ajo Kawir. Ajo's fashion style—dominated by a worn-out gray jacket, occasionally paired with pink tones reminiscent of the 1980s—is not merely an aesthetic choice, but carries symbolic meaning. The gray signifies toughness and emotional coldness, while the flashes of pink disrupt masculine conventions, introducing ambivalence between strength and softness, between dominance and vulnerability. In one early scene, Ajo sits alone on a motorbike, wearing his shabby jacket, his mouth shut and eyes empty. One research informant, Mr. R, remarked that Ajo's clothing reminded him of “the local street heroes of the past who bore all of life's burdens through silence and a tough demeanor.” This statement reinforces that visual elements such as costume, in practice, represent the cultural legacy of the rigid, emotionally restrained ideal male figure.

In John Fiske's semiotic analysis of reality-level codes, gestures and acts of violence are inseparable from the film's construction of masculinity. Ajo Kawir, though biologically impotent, persistently channels his power and rage through physical violence. Every insult or challenge to his masculinity is answered with punches, kicks, or brutal fights. Field observations at a local youth community in the former Pelita terminal area of Ambon—where this film was screened and discussed—revealed that Ajo's expressions resonated with the audience's lived reality. One discussion participant said, “Sometimes we feel like we have to fight just so people don't call us sissies or cowards.” This statement illustrates the internalization of hegemonic masculine values in which violence is not merely a plot device but a concrete expression of social pressure on male identity.



Figure 2 Scene of Ajo Kawir fighting Iteung
Source: *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, 2022

Thus, violence in this film is not just a narrative tool but a visual marker that articulates the notion that masculinity in patriarchal societies is often linked to the ability to inflict harm,

dominate, and assert physical control. This aligns with Yang's (2020) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which argues that dominant forms of masculinity are socially reproduced to ensure that men remain in positions of power. Ajo Kawir, as the central character, embodies a form of resistance to his masculine crisis through repeated acts of brutality. In one observed scene, Ajo violently assaults a bystander at a pool table simply for mocking him. This response is not merely a spontaneous reaction but part of an ongoing attempt to maintain a masculine identity under the constant pressure to suppress male vulnerability.

Furthermore, the violence Ajo commits is also portrayed as an effort to affirm an identity that is no longer validated through sexual performance—a trait conventionally considered central to masculinity. An intersectional approach to masculinity, as described by Lawes (2019), helps us understand that masculinity is never singular, but shaped through intersecting social relations such as class, history, and cultural context. In Ajo Kawir's case, his impotent body does not erase his masculine image; rather, it intensifies the urge to assert manhood through other means: violence, arrogance, and disregard for normative advice.

The reality level in this film's semiotic reading does not merely present a visualization of masculinity, but also uncovers the social background in which those values are formed and reproduced. Through costume, gesture, and violence, the film voices the idea that toxic masculinity is not the result of an individual's inherent evil, but a cultural product that permeates everyday life—even when a character like Ajo Kawir lacks the sexual potency conventionally associated with dominant male images. Masculinity in this film becomes a "performance," as Lawes (2019) describes—something that is always constructed, negotiated, and enacted through bodily acts and visual symbols.

Level of Representation: The Camera as a Medium for Affirming Power

In *Seperti Dendam*, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas (*Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*), cinematographic techniques serve not merely as aesthetic devices but function as representational instruments that actively frame Ajo Kawir's body and psyche as a male subject in crisis. Through the use of medium shots, close-ups, two-shots, and over-the-shoulder shots, the film consistently directs how the audience perceives and emotionally responds to the protagonist—not only through what he says, but primarily through what he displays in his expressions, body language, and visual tension. In this context, the camera is not a neutral eye; it is an affirmer of power, a director of affect, and a producer of ideology.

One of the most frequently used techniques is the close-up of Ajo Kawir's face, particularly in scenes of intense conflict or after violent outbursts. His face often appears in dim lighting, revealing vacant, anxious, or restrained expressions of anger. The camera seemingly forces the audience to delve into Ajo's inner world—which, although masculine and tough on the surface, is revealed to be fragile and emotionally isolated. One informant, Y.T., stated in an interview that these close-up shots made him feel "as if I were being forced to feel the rage of a man who can't explain his own emotions." This statement illustrates how the film's visual

techniques are not merely aesthetic choices, but affective mechanisms guiding viewers into a controlled and directed emotional experience.

Meanwhile, the use of two-shots in scenes between Ajo and his lover, Iteung, becomes a significant space to observe power dynamics within intimate relationships. The camera frequently positions Ajo in a dominant visual and spatial perspective, shaping an asymmetric construction of relational dynamics. Simultaneously, the use of over-the-shoulder shots—especially during arguments or emotional negotiations—demonstrates how the camera selects from whose side the narrative is situated. In most instances, this viewpoint supports the audience in understanding the world from Ajo’s perspective, rather than from others’, including Iteung. This reveals that visual representation in the film subtly affirms a male-centric worldview at the narrative core.

Within contemporary visual analysis, this reading may be linked to Mincheva & Hooman’s (2020) theory of the male gaze, which describes how the camera often operates from a heteronormative male viewpoint, rendering women as objects and men as subjects. However, *Seperti Dendam* both expands and renegotiates this idea. On one hand, Ajo is indeed the visual and narrative center; yet on the other hand, the film portrays men in a state of crisis, no longer able to fulfill hegemonic masculine roles. The camera, in this context, does not merely perpetuate dominant masculinity but also reveals its fractures. The use of dim lighting, close focus on bodily wounds, and extended takes of Ajo walking alone through empty spaces underscore his alienation—from society and from himself.

Field observations in a film enthusiast community in Hative Kecil, Ambon, revealed how audiences interpreted these visual representations as depictions of masculinity as “burdened and lonely.” The discussion took place in an open-air coffee stall with twelve young men aged 19–30. The setting was modest: a long wooden table, plastic chairs, and a small projector used to replay selected scenes. During a replayed close-up shot—where Ajo lies bruised after a fight—one participant, F.S., remarked that “behind that gaze, he just wants to be heard, but the world doesn’t allow men to cry.” This comment underscores how the film’s camera techniques effectively foster empathy toward men experiencing inner turmoil, albeit within a visual framework that still preserves male narrative dominance.

The film’s cinematographic techniques also operate as ideological symbols that both reproduce and challenge gender norms. The visualization of the male body as wounded, sexually dysfunctional, yet still at the center of the frame, indicates that the film does not entirely deconstruct hegemonic masculinity but reframes its crisis. The camera creates an aesthetic tension between strength and fragility, between power and alienation. In other words, the camera not only records the masculine body but also reproduces questions about what it means to be a man in a world that constantly demands strength—even when one is broken inside.

Ideological Level: Patriarchy, Trauma, and Masculine Superiority

At the ideological level, *Seperti Dendam*, *Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* vividly illustrates

how masculinity is not merely a personal expression but a patriarchal value system embedded in how the protagonist, Ajo Kawir, thinks, acts, and feels. Patriarchy emerges as a dominant structure that normalizes male dominance over bodies, spaces, and narratives. Despite his impotence, Ajo Kawir continues to assert superiority over women and other men based on his male gender identity. This is particularly evident in his refusal to fight women—specifically Iteung—because he deems such confrontation “unworthy.” In one key scene, Ajo solemnly states that he doesn’t want to hurt women—not out of respect, but because he sees women as unfit opponents. This exemplifies how patriarchal values function: not solely through physical violence but through a worldview that positions men as the standard of strength, rationality, and dignity.

The ideological rejection of vulnerability forms another critical layer of Ajo Kawir’s representation. His impotence stems from past trauma—witnessing a woman’s rape that he was powerless to stop—yet rather than acknowledging his wounds, he chooses silence and aggression. According to Harrington (2021), this form of masculinity is termed “masculinity in pain”, in which men suppress their traumatic experiences and express them through violence, isolation, or other socially sanctioned forms of dominance. Ajo Kawir is a living representation of this narrative: a wounded man with no social space to heal, except through actions that further reinforce destructive masculine constructs.

Furthermore, the ideology of masculinity is internalized through Ajo’s mode of forming social relationships. He is solitary, rejects help, and views emotional expression as a weakness. This aligns with field observations conducted among young men in the former Pelita Terminal and coffee stalls in Hative Kecil, Ambon, where similar masculine narratives were found: participants admitted that expressing sadness or weakness was often considered “unmanly.” Thus, masculine ideology operates not only at the individual level but is distributed through social environments that continuously reproduce these narratives.

These three dimensions indicate that masculinity in the film is not merely a personal trait but part of a patriarchal ideological system that places men in an internal battle between pain and social expectations. Patriarchy functions not only to regulate gender relations structurally but also to limit men’s experiences: silencing weakness, demanding dominance, and alienating emotion. In this context, the film does not merely narrate Ajo Kawir’s individual journey but portrays how toxic masculinity becomes an accepted ideology—even when it harms men themselves. As Pearson (2019) observes, masculinity—like gender—is not inherent but is performed and repeated within specific social structures. Ajo Kawir is not just a violent man; he is a man compelled to become a masculine symbol in a world that leaves no space for male vulnerability. The film, through its visual and narrative idioms, demonstrates that masculinity is a wound on display, yet one that must never be acknowledged as a wound.

Table 1 Dimensions of Patriarchal Ideology Operating in the Film

Ideological Dimension	Representation in the Film	Sociological Explanation
Masculine Domination	Ajo refuses to fight women; resorts to violence to resolve conflict	Men are regarded as superior entities, expected to exert control over bodies and situations without regard for equality.
Rejection of Emotion	Ajo hides his trauma, denies his sexual impotence	Heasley defines this as “masculinity in pain,” where emotional suppression leads to extreme masculine behavior.
Solitude as Identity	Ajo isolates himself, speaks rarely, lives independently	The image of a strong man is often linked to independence, framing social relations as burdens or signs of dependency.

Source: Research Analysis, 2022

Film as an Arena for the Production of Gender Ideology: A Critical Perspective in Popular Culture Analysis

Film has never merely functioned as a passive reflection of social reality; rather, it is an active arena where the production and reproduction of ideological discourses take place. In this context, popular cinema plays a significant role in disseminating values, norms, and power relations that—both subtly and explicitly—shape how society understands gender identity. As Fiske (2017) emphasizes, texts of popular culture, including film, serve as contested terrains in which various social forces struggle, including resistance and the hegemonization of dominant values. Film thus becomes a medium where ideology operates not through coercion, but by constructing meanings that appear “natural” and “true” to its audience.

This study positions the film *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash) as a concrete example of how cinema not only represents masculinity but also reproduces complex gender ideologies. Field findings show that masculinity in the film does not emerge as a stable category but rather as a form marked by tension, wounds, and internal contradictions. These tensions, however, are managed through visual and narrative mechanisms that ultimately preserve male dominance as the center of the story. The film’s aesthetic choices—from camera techniques and framing to sound design and bodily arrangements—become integral to the production of meaning, embedding gendered power structures into the viewing experience.

Within the semiotic approach developed by Fiske, visual texts must be read in relation to the social and political contexts in which they are produced and consumed. For example, in scenes involving combat or the protagonist’s emotional expressions, specific visual symbols—such as physical wounds, vacant stares, or a motionless body in a dark space—construct a particular understanding of what it means to be a man. These representations are not merely aesthetic but ideological. They frame masculinity in crisis as a form of heroic suffering, rather than as a systemic failure of rigid gender norms. In other words, the film does not fully deconstruct hegemonic masculinity but consolidates it through an aesthetic of empathy and solitude.

This observation is supported by interviews with several informants. One male viewer,

27-year-old F.L., shared that he felt connected to the character Ajo Kawir because “he struggles alone but still wants to look strong.” This expression illustrates how audiences do not merely observe but also internalize narratives of masculinity as something natural and admirable—even if painful. Other informants from a film community in Tulehu even described Ajo as the embodiment of a “real man” because “he never gives up, even though he’s broken inside.” Such attitudes highlight the powerful ideological work of popular culture: instead of encouraging critique of gender norms, film becomes a new space for legitimizing masculinity in crisis.

Field observations were conducted in two settings: an open community space in Tulehu and a student coffee shop in the Karang Panjang area of Ambon. The Tulehu community space, a semi-permanent structure with tin roofing and plywood walls surrounded by nutmeg and clove plantations, serves as a gathering place for youth engaged in art and film discussions. The film was screened using a simple projector and a white cloth screen. The discussion that followed was informal and intimate, with participants sitting on the floor under dim lighting. When discussing gender representation in the film, many participants related it to their personal experiences—especially the pressure to appear strong amid family or economic difficulties. At the Karang Panjang coffee shop, with a more urban ambiance and a predominantly student clientele, the discussion was more reflective, with many expressing that they felt “trapped” in the ideal image of masculinity that demands dominance and forbids failure.

The visual culture approach in this article also aligns with Rosalind Gill’s (2019) analysis of postfeminist media cultures. Gill highlights how gender representations in media often appear progressive—featuring strong female characters or emotionally expressive men—yet still reinforce patriarchal structures in subtler forms. In this film, Ajo Kawir’s masculinity crisis is not portrayed as the result of unequal social structures but rather as a personal trial to be overcome through masculine means: violence, silence, and the courage to endure pain. Rather than liberating men from gender constraints, the film reinforces them through an aesthetic of admired suffering.

Rethinking Masculinity in Indonesian Cinema

In this concluding subsection, it is important to reflect on how Indonesian cinema—as exemplified by *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*—functions not only as a narrative medium but also as an ideological space that helps shape social discourses around masculinity. The article’s central findings clearly show that the toxic masculinity portrayed by the character Ajo Kawir is not a depiction of an autonomous and whole individual identity, but a construct shaped by the visual, narrative, and ideological complexities of a broader cultural context. The character is a product of representational systems that combine social and symbolic codes—consciously or unconsciously reinforcing deeply rooted patriarchal systems.

This point was underscored during an interview with T.A., a young filmmaker and film critic, who remarked that masculinity in the film “cannot be understood merely through the character’s behavior but must be seen within the cultural and historical landscape of Indonesian

cinema, which often positions men as dominant figures, conflict solvers, and even as legitimized sources of violence.” This assertion affirms that masculinity in local cinema is not just an artistic expression but an extension of systemic value structures.

Furthermore, John Fiske’s semiotic approach proves valuable for reading cinema not merely as text but as a cultural practice imbued with meaning. Fiske (2017) divides media encoding into three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. The reality level involves how physical elements such as clothing, dialogue, and gestures are represented to convey specific meanings. The representation level refers to narrative and cinematic techniques such as framing, camera angles, and editing, while the ideological level deals with the cultural values conveyed implicitly through narrative and imagery.

In the case of this film, the use of close-ups on Ajo Kawir’s face as he grapples with trauma and sexual dysfunction is not merely a cinematic technique—it serves as a way to embed messages about a fragile yet still dominance-oriented masculinity. This observation is reinforced by fieldwork conducted at an independent film community in Yogyakarta, where a post-screening discussion revealed that many young male viewers felt triggered by Ajo Kawir’s character—not because they wanted to emulate him, but because they felt represented by his inability to express emotions in a healthy way. This indicates that toxic masculinity has become embedded in social practices as the default mode of “manhood.”

The warm yet intense atmosphere of the discussion space illustrated how cinema can evoke emotional and intellectual awareness while also exposing hidden social wounds. One participant, who wished to remain anonymous, stated, “This film made me realize that I’ve also always felt pressured to be strong, to never lose.” This is not merely a sentiment—it is evidence that gender ideology in film operates not just as narrative, but as an affective structure that internalizes social expectations within male bodies and minds.

This study affirms that representations of masculinity in contemporary Indonesian cinema must be read in a more reflective and interdisciplinary manner. Fiske’s semiotics opens pathways for unraveling the intertwined threads of meaning between a film’s technical elements and the ideological values of its society. In this context, the method not only aids in film analysis but also contributes to our understanding of how cinema reflects, reinforces, or even challenges prevailing social norms. This aligns with Afifulloh & Wijayanti’s (2023) assertion that meaning in media is not unidirectional but the result of negotiations between producers, texts, and audiences. Critique of masculinity in film must move beyond character identification toward a re-reading of how cinematic structures reorganize the boundaries between power, trauma, and male emotional expression. Therefore, reexamining masculinity in Indonesian cinema is a crucial step in dismantling the hidden power relations behind the screen, while offering space for more egalitarian and human-centered narratives.

This study has sought to demonstrate that *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* functions not merely as a site of narrative entertainment but as a complex ideological apparatus through which dominant conceptions of masculinity are constructed, circulated, and potentially

contested. Employing John Fiske's three-level model of semiotic analysis—reality, representation, and ideology—this research identifies how visual, narrative, and symbolic elements in the film articulate a multilayered portrayal of toxic masculinity that is embedded within Indonesia's broader socio-cultural and cinematic landscape. At the level of reality, the material signifiers—such as Ajo Kawir's modest 1980s-style attire, his restrained verbal expressions, and the repeated depiction of physical violence—serve as coded expressions of both hypermasculinity and vulnerability. These signifiers are not arbitrary; rather, they constitute a culturally contingent lexicon of masculinity that reflects and reinforces hegemonic gender norms. The paradoxical embodiment of stoicism and emotional repression in the protagonist signals a broader cultural imperative for men to enact dominance while concealing psychological trauma.

At the representational level, the employment of cinematographic techniques—including close-ups, two-shots, over-the-shoulder perspectives, and deliberate framing—works to foreground the affective tensions inherent in Ajo Kawir's masculinity. Such techniques facilitate a visual discourse that simultaneously exposes the fragility of the male subject and reinforces his narrative centrality. This visual strategy contributes to what Fiske conceptualizes as the encoding of meaning within representational systems, whereby cinematic form becomes a vehicle for ideological transmission. The ideological dimension is perhaps the most consequential. The film operates as a discursive mechanism through which patriarchal values—such as male superiority, emotional containment, and legitimized violence—are naturalized. Ajo Kawir's refusal to engage in combat with women, for instance, may initially appear as a gesture of moral integrity; however, when read ideologically, it reveals a deeper patriarchal logic in which female agency is acknowledged only within the constraints of male self-definition. In this regard, the film articulates a continuity of masculinist ideology under the guise of individual psychological struggle.

Empirical data derived from field observations at a Yogyakarta-based independent film community further corroborates the affective efficacy of such representations. During post-screening discussions, male viewers articulated feelings of discomfort and resonance with Ajo Kawir's emotional paralysis. This reception analysis affirms that cinematic representations of masculinity extend beyond the screen, functioning as affective structures that shape male subjectivity in everyday life. The viewers' responses indicate an internalization of toxic gender ideals and a recognition of their sociopsychological consequences—thus reinforcing the notion that film operates not only as a representational medium but also as a site of ideological negotiation and identity formation. In light of these findings, this article argues that any critical engagement with masculinity in contemporary Indonesian cinema must adopt an interdisciplinary framework that synthesizes semiotic analysis, gender theory, and audience reception studies. Such an approach enables scholars to disentangle the intricate relationship between cinematic form and sociocultural ideology, while also illuminating the role of film as an active participant in the reproduction—or subversion—of gendered power relations.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this article emphasizes that the representation of toxic masculinity in the film *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* is not merely an individual portrayal of a character, but rather a manifestation of patriarchal ideology that is internalized and maintained through the visual and narrative mechanisms of cinema. By employing John Fiske's semiotic approach, the analysis at three levels—reality, representation, and ideology—reveals how the film simultaneously constructs and reproduces problematic norms of masculinity, in which dominance, violence, and the rejection of vulnerability become central elements in the formation of male identity. The film serves as a site of meaning production that normalizes patriarchal discourse through its aesthetics and narrative structure, thereby reinforcing hegemonic male positions while closing off space for healthier, alternative expressions of masculinity. Therefore, this study underscores the importance of critical readings of popular cultural texts as a reflective strategy to understand and challenge the gender ideologies embedded within mass media, particularly in the context of contemporary Indonesian cinema. In doing so, the article offers both conceptual and methodological contributions to gender and media studies by highlighting how film functions not merely as entertainment, but as a significant tool of social reproduction that shapes public perceptions and practices of masculinity.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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