

I-Pop: International Journal of Indonesian Popular Culture and Communication



Vol. 1(2) pp. 75-83, (2020)
DOI: 10.36782/i-pop.v%vi%i.67

Mute Meaning and Unspoken Struggle Discourse in '27 Steps of May'

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ABSTRACT

A film has a distinctive language in voicing protest. This article discusses how the film '27 Steps of May' speaks in silent scenes and unspoken discourses through a visual narrative covered in meaningful symbols. Using Barthesian semiotic analysis, we capture hidden messages of pain, trauma, suffering, struggle, rebellion, and speechless protests from a victim of sexual violence against patriarchal culture and an unjust social environment. Silence represents sadness as well as futile anger. The emptiness in the victim's expression signifies despair at the stigma and unchanging blame. The gloomy nuance that dominates the narrative in almost every scene is a form of endless bitterness. The minimalist sound effects not only reflect the emptiness of the victim's life, but also the cinematic effort to invite the audience (and society at large, of course) to contemplate together. Victims of sexual violence in Indonesia always experience multiple and lasting repressions: physical, psychological, social, cultural, structural, and even political. This film, with its empathetic spirit towards victims, uses a 'minimalist' visual narrative weapon to fatally shoot our human conscience.

Keywords

Silence, sexual violence, visual narrative, victim, hidden struggle

To cite this article (7th APA style):

Dedeas, A. R. & Permata, R. (2020). Mute Meaning and Unspoken Struggle Discourse in '27 Steps of May'. *I-Pop: International Journal of Indonesian Popular Culture and Communication* 1(2), 75-83. <https://doi.org/10.36782/i-pop.v%vi%i.67>

INTRODUCTION

In April 2019, a film was launched about trauma after sexual violence experienced by a girl named May. The film is 27 Steps of May is a film that tells about the pain, pain, trauma, fear, and

guilt experienced by a girl who is a victim of sexual violence, namely rape. For eight years after that dark incident happened, May is a girl who was only 14 years old had to live her life without connection, emotion, and words.

Sexual violence is a global problem that occurs in all countries. Annual notes of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan) show that within 12 years, violence against women has increased by 79%, which means that violence against women in Indonesia has increased almost eight times

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(Komnas Perempuan, 2019). In 2012, for example, there were 4,336 cases include 2920 cases which happened in the public/ community areas and most of them (1620 cases) in the form of rape and sexual abuse (Komnas Perempuan, n.d.). Indonesian women experiencing a life that is far from safe and which is more dangerous has become omission. This phenomenon means that violence against women has become a strong culture in society.

Jauhariyah (2016) in the *Jurnal Perempuan* explains that the form of sexual violence committed by men against women is a form of gender-based violence or a form of expression of masculinity in their interactions with the opposite sex, women. Some men consider that power and violence are a form of ability to dominate and control others. However, femininity itself is ignored and considered something weak.

Patriarchy is a concept that explains the structure or position of a man or a man's point of view is valued higher, more dominant than women's point of view. This way of thinking is deeply rooted in almost all lines of people's lives. Men are considered to have power, more control rights to regulate everything, including women (Cassandra, 2016). Michael Kaufman, an activist in Canada, said that there are at least three related factors that are ammunition for men in showing their power and authority, namely a) patriarchal power, b) privileges, c) permissiveness.

This ideological domination is firmly entrenched across countries and nations. The practice of sexual violence is also an issue that is never dimly discussed and solutions are sought. Not only in Indonesia, but countries in South Asia such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan, the issue of sexual violence against women and children has also become an issue that has received a lot of attention. The South Asia Development Forum (2021) report states that this violent practice has increased. The victims range from childhood to the elderly.

Meanwhile, the WHO report (2021) states that one in three women in the world has experienced or has experienced sexual violence and violence – the highest risk is in younger women (15-24 years). Perpetrators can be from their spouse or other people close to the victim. This figure has not experienced a downward trend for almost a decade. Violence against women is endemic to every country and culture in the world. This condition got worse when the COVID-19 pandemic hit (Nduru & Dedees, 2020). Unlike COVID-19, violence against women is something that cannot be stopped by a vaccine.

Various efforts were made to elevate the status of women to be equal to men to reduce the gaps that harm women a lot. Most of its activities are carried out through the feminism movement in the institutional environment, both formal and informal.

Tursilarini (2017) on the Impact of Domestic Sexual Violence on Child Survival states that acts of sexual violence do cause various kinds of trauma for the victims, both physically, psychologically, and socially. It is a crime against humanity with lasting effects throughout the life of a child. Victim traumatization is not easy to heal. It requires intensive action both professionally and with support from the family.

Quoted from *Vice Indonesia*, there is 93% of victims of sexual harassment are reluctant to report their cases to the authorities. The main reasons for victims not reporting include fear of being blamed, fear of not being supported by their families until intimidation occurs. In this case, women are blamed, starting from the way they dress and behave to justifications that finally consider the behavior of men to be 'normal' who harass women because they have high lust. This situation ultimately demands 'morality' on the part of women because they cannot take care of themselves properly or with respect.

Gender inequality against women is designed by the social structure of the

patriarchal system. Women are discriminated against, double burden, underestimated, and so on (Oktavianus, 2018). This injustice is perpetuated through a lot of mass media content that is displayed. It is not easy for women to express opinions in the mass media. These film scenes showing violence by men against women, advertisements showing the beauty of women's body, and other content that creates stereotypes on women. On the other hand, gender equality can also be achieved through mass media by voicing the issue in various media lines. This step was chosen because the mass media has the power which can quickly disseminate messages, influence and construct people's mindsets. The mass media can move public opinion smoothly and quickly.

According to Pratista (in Akhsyin, 2018), film as part of the media is a product of human culture considered to have major implications for society. The film is also a reflection medium of life that helps represent the reality of people's lives. The film is one form of art in the form of entertainment, which is effective in educating and indoctrinating the audience. Through their personal experience, mentality, and culture, the audience plays an active role, both consciously and unconsciously, to understand and interpret a film.

In compiling this research, we chose several previous studies as a reference in forming a frame of mind and choosing the point of view of the problem. Of the five types of previous research entitled: Representation of Violence against Women in Dating in Possessive Films (Septianak et. al, 2019), Representation of Violence against women on the Tirto.id News Site (Rahayu, et. al 2018), Depictions of Women and Violence in Dara Films (Prabowo, 2012), Representation of Sexual Violence Occurring in Deaf Children in Silenced Films (Magfiroh, 2017), to the Journal of Communication Studies on Representation of Women in the Book Cover of Sex and The City Jakarta Undercover (Lestari, 2017), there were no types of research that explored about the meaning of the symbols

behind the silence that many victims of sexual violence do. This study discusses the connotation and denotation behind sexual violence and the impact experienced by victims to uncover the meaning of silence.



Figure 1. 27 Steps of May (source: Green Glow Pictures)

Ravi Bharwani, the director and producer behind the film 27 Steps of May builds a picture, the phenomenon of a girl who has to survive the pain and trauma she has endured for years. Ravi manages to present uniqueness where the plot is depicted almost entirely in the form of a symbolic depiction of the traumatic life of the victim which is signaled by thousands of signs and silence. About how May locked herself and her social life for eight years, May who could only eat white food, non-verbal communication between herself and others even with her father, the background color of her house and room which tended to be blurry, May's color choice always pale, and so on.

According to Chris Kramarae's theory of silence, women or subordinate groups cannot

freely speak or express their feelings due to ingrained norms. It strengthens men and weakens women. Meanwhile, the various signs that are seen and even implied in the film seem to contain various meanings and messages that May wants to convey to the audience. For this reason, we use Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to help solve the sign through denotation and connotation analysis and the myths in it.

The explanation above is the basic reason for us to examine the issue of representation of sexual violence depicted in the film *27 Steps of May*, considering how painful it is to live as a survivor with various kinds of trauma and injustice that she has experienced. Starting from the patriarchal culture which is the main reason, to the media that participates in strengthening and representing existing values.

METHOD

This research is qualitative research with the semiotic analysis method of Roland Barthes. Creswell (2016) explains qualitative research is a type of research to explore and understand the meaning of several symbols or groups that originate from social problems. This type of research can also find and understand hidden phenomena that are sometimes difficult to understand.

We also analyze the phenomenon of silence that occurs and is shown explicitly in this film. The phenomenon of silence, a culture in Indonesia, is an important and unique element to be discussed. This discussion does not only concern the psychological aspect but the cultural aspect which is also one of the factors causing this to happen. Data collection techniques were carried out through textual observations, documentation, and document searches on literature related to issues of sexual violence, semiotics, and the theory of silence.

In analyzing the symbols or signs, we make observations on objects and sort out the scenes to be studied using the semiotic method. This followed by elaborating the meaning of denotation and connotation hidden behind the

symbol, then analyzing myths to reveal the truth about the values that live and are embraced by the community. At the end of the study, we conclude from the data that has been studied previously. Not only that, but we also make comparisons with other studies that have similar themes to this study.

We determine the conceptual definition and operationalization of the concept as a reference and guide in analyzing certain scenes that represent sexual violence, the impact of sexual violence, and the myths contained in it. For this reason, we set out several key concepts, such as Roland Barthes' semiotics help represent the meaning of a sign or symbol. The gender inequality concept is used to see the reasons for gender inequality between women and men. Meanwhile, muted group theory is used to analyze the causes of marginalized groups' responses when oppressed by the dominant one.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion on the analysis of Roland Barthes' semiotic model will be divided into two parts. The first discussion of the semiotic analysis study consists of the meaning of denotation, connotation, and myth on verbal and non-verbal signs of sexual violence in the film *27 Steps of May*. Second, semiotic analysis of the impact of sexual violence in *27 Steps of May*. In addition to analyzing the representation of violence and the impact of sexual violence from Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective, the researcher also analyzes the scenes and symbols of silence that are explicitly shown by May throughout the film.

The results of the analysis will be described in the results of the research findings. Furthermore, the findings will be related to the theories used by researchers, namely the theory of gender and patriarchy, the theory of sexual violence, films and women in the mass media, and the theory of silence (muted group theory). Through three stages of Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the researcher looks at how

the domination of men over women is in every scene of sexual violence that is shown. This film contains more non-verbal signs than verbal signs.

Forms of Sexual Violence Scenes in 27 Steps of May

As in the case of underwear, items that should be used to protect the genitals are pulled and removed and then put into the victim's mouth. Underwear that should be hidden and used to cover things that we consider private, is shown and even stuffed into the victim's mouth. Not enough there, the perpetrator also force-



Figure 2. Gloomy tones with blurry and flat colours in the '27 Steps of May' movie scenes (source: Green Glow Pictures)

Based on the analysis of the non-verbal symbols of scenes of sexual violence against women, it can be seen in terms of facial expressions, behavior, background colors, and background sounds used when the scenes of sexual violence are shown in this film. The use of blurred color background and a silent background is intended to give a more eerie feeling. The black and white color in the film can speak more honestly and is stronger in conveying its message, not only dialogue between characters.

In the gesture symbol, several brutal scenes are seen, such as stuffing underwear into the victim's mouth, feeding rotten food to the victim while the victim's body is tied with ropes and surrounded by unknown men, to mass rape. This scene shows the power of a group of men over a young woman and hurts her physically and psychologically.

fed May (victim) with thick brown rotten food into May's mouth together. May's arms and legs were tied with rope, May's body was tightly restrained by the perpetrator so as not to rebel, and May's mouth was stuffed with the food. The degree of the victim seems to have no value and is equivalent to the underwear and rotten food they provide.

Rape scenes tend to show women being in a subordinate position, under pressure that is difficult to resist, difficult to be free from a power much stronger than her. In this film, there is no reason why the victim was raped and received other violence. In the patriarchal paradigm of society, women's bodies are seen as a threat to justify acts of sexual violence against women. Women's bodies are considered a target object that is very easy to exploit and monetize (Fujiati, 2016). This could also be what

makes the victim experience sexual violence and other violence.

The myth of patriarchal ideology is the main reason for this sexual violence to continue or even increase every year. Women live under the protection of men. Women view men as strong, scary, and powerful, while men view women as weak, easy, and powerless.

One of the interesting things in this film is May as a victim who lives surrounded by men. May lives with her father without a mother. May is physically and psychologically hurt by a group of men. She is indirectly helped to recover from her attraction to a man (the magician). This film seems to convey the message that the male figure for a woman is a shadow. Women live under the control of men, both for good and for the bad that will happen.

Forms of the Impact of Sexual Violence Scene in 27 Steps of May



dimly lit room atmosphere, tense and boring, not communicating, verbally with anyone, including the father, until the side dishes on the menu are all white and look bland. May's body and body seemed to be separated at that time.

This pattern of behavior that May did consciously was the result of the tragedy of the rape she experienced. The scenes in the film are rich in symbolic implied meanings. Starting from May waking up, activities filling the day, meeting new people, responding to unstable emotions, and other small things.

May's father works part-time at home repairing the broken, broken, torn parts of the Barbie doll's body, and May dresses them uniformly (model clothes, make-up, and hairstyles). He displayed the dolls before being picked up by the courier to be transported back. May counted the dolls every day, making sure they were the same number and making sure they were in the same style. Barbie dolls are



Figure 3. The 'tail' of pain that the victim of sexual violence feels throughout her life (source: Green Glow Pictures)

In the scene of the impact of sexual violence, various non-verbal symbols are full of meaning. Starting from May's decision to cut off her communication and social life from the outside world, doing the same activities every day, not being passionate about doing any activities, choosing and using blurry color tones,

often played by small children, they become friends to play with, friends to sleep with. Dolls are friends who can help May communicate. She invited the dolls to talk. She felt as if she had a friend who could accompany her. The model of the clothes worn by the doll also depicts May's figure at that time. The princess dress with the

crowns adorning the doll's hair seemed to show the figure of May, who at that time was still a child who did not know pain. There is one scene in this film that shows the change in the doll's clothes and at the same time describes May's condition, which at that time was chaotic because her security boundaries were disturbed and damaged by others.

May also makes changes in appearance. The monotonous form of the dress without a model and the color pattern that can make a person appear more cheerful, the length of the dress that almost covers all parts of her body, the socks she wears, to the shape of her tight and neat hair bun, seems to mean that she is closing and locking herself tightly. -meeting and hoping that everyone will understand and not disturb the boundaries of calm that she has made.

Another very unusual change in behavior pattern is the type of food May has consumed for nearly eight years. So far, May has only eaten white food without tasting any other colored foods. Every day, May eats white rice plus white bean sprouts, white cabbage, white meatballs, boiled eggs, and white tofu. All of it was cooked tasteless, without chili. She also only consumes water.

The use of white gives a clean and holy impression. This color is also believed to have a healing effect and reduce pain. While the white color in food has the meaning of freshness and cleanliness. May's somewhat unusual behavior hints at something. May is obsessed with cleanliness and chastity. May felt tainted and dirty. She is on duty and is responsible for cleaning herself. Therefore, May continues to convince herself through the type of food she eats that she is still a girl who is clean, pure, innocent, and has not been tainted by anything. May seemed to be fasting from the pleasures of the world, distancing herself from bad things that might harm her.

May seemed to be torturing herself by eating all-white food as well because of the dark events she had experienced. This form of

trauma is channeled through the pattern and type of food he consumes. The bland taste was seen in this type of food also illustrates how bland her life was at that time. She did not speak or complain about the situation that happened to her, but the behavior, how May acted, the things that May was wearing seemed to speak what happened to May.

The white color which also contains the meaning of freshness in food seems to remind the past incident when May was fed rotten food that was no longer fit for consumption. To survive, May must think and fight her fears and traumas by eating healthy foods, one of which is white rice and vegetables to avoid bad memories that might make her unstable. The use of opaque colors, white, and food that looks bland seems to be a complex message and has great meaning to convey the meaning and pain that May has been suffering all this time.

The practice of silence that he carries out for most of the film is motivated by the dominance of masculinity that occurs in public communication and also its implementation in everyday life (Kramarae, 2017). Furthermore, according to Wall & Gannon-Leary (1999), there is a process behind the practice of silence. One of them is seen in the analysis of this film which describes the sexual violence experienced by May by a group of men.

This dominance is one of the many reasons why women are reluctant to express their thoughts and feelings in front of men and choose to remain silent or remain silent. In May's case, she has been abused by a group of men and has to live with deep traumatization. She faced it with her father with less and less interaction. She not only had the thought that her father, as a male figure, would not understand what she was going through and felt but at the same time she was afraid of the masculinity of her father who might be the same as a group of men who had done something vile to her.

In addition to the dominance of masculinity, the occurrence of victim-blaming on

the victim, namely an attitude that blames the victim as someone who must be responsible for the occurrence of a crime, also makes someone choose to remain silent. Coates (in Wiyasih, 2015) states, the impact of victim-blaming is that the victim chooses to avoid secondary victimization that can occur in the future and chooses to remain silent and does not report what happened, she is even suspicious of various parties. This is in line with what May did at the beginning of this film. May's fear of the thoughts, responses, and possibly accusations that will come out of her neighbors, friends, and even relatives made May decide to lock herself up tightly and disappear from those around her.

The practice of silence that happened to May was motivated by psychological factors such as fear, worry as well as the dominance of the masculinity that shackled her, victim-blaming, as a result of the tragic incidents of sexual violence that she had experienced. The dominance of the strong combination of patriarchy and the tendency to blame victims in cases of sexual violence is reflected in the figure of May who is increasingly closing herself to avoid things that will provoke traumatization to self-harm. May chose silence, created distance, and made boundaries during the eight years of her life.

CONCLUSION

Traumatization in the form of silence which is a common choice by victims of sexual violence is part of the still deeply rooted patriarchal ideology, both in society and in the victims themselves. This study also found the existence of a male figure as a shadow for a woman's life. Wherever he is always there, both as a helper and as a source of calamity. Women live under the control and power of men both in terms of good and evil, as well as in terms of pain relievers and antidotes.

Sexual violence behavior is also followed by various kinds of trauma that haunt the victim. This form of trauma is almost permanent. The trauma will last indefinitely and the only party

who can heal it is the victim herself. In this film, the form of trauma is depicted through the form of entirely white side dishes. This behavior turned out to carry a message that she experienced a very deep emptiness as a result of the tragic incident. In addition, this also means about the victim's efforts to convince herself that he is holy, has not, and does not want to be stained by color or anything.

She is obsessed with whiteness, on purity, on cleanliness, because she feels dirty, sinful, and not holy anymore. This guilt and filth, at least can be reduced, if there is no social and cultural, structural, even political repression in the environment in which the victim survives.

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