



Screening Islam in Malaysian horror films: A tale of the lost and found

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Malaysian horror films and how the films represent Islam in the realm of darkness and in various monstrous manifestations. Deemed as a popular genre, two (2) Malay films titled *Al-Hijab* (*Partition*, 2011) and *Khurafat* (*The Superstition*, 2011) were selected to identify the emergence of social and political ideology in Malaysian horror films and how these meanings are associated with the representation of Islam/religion. Although religion and horror perhaps seem antithetical, their connection can be observed through mysticism and certain traditional pre-Islamic beliefs that can be found in Malaysia. A narrative analysis was employed to facilitate in identifying the structure of the film narrative and how the horror genre signifies religion in the narrative. More specifically, the analysis identified the films' plot structure which includes the presentation of plot and characters, time, and space (*mise-en-scène*) on screen. Results show that *Al-Hijab* and *Khurafat* exemplify a straightforward structure of the male quest for desires (fame, fortune, or women) that sway them away from the morality path. Throughout this quest, the ideological discussion that occurs in the narrative focuses on the dichotomies of "good" and "bad" as well as "villains" and "helpers," which overall highlight the politics of the film. From the analysis, it is worth noting that Malaysian horror films are similar to other Asian horror films, in the sense that they can also be understood from the local and cultural contexts because they deal with the basic emotional reactions of fear and anxiety. Discussions of genre structures and several key events that occur in both horror films (i.e., pre-Islamic and Islamic beliefs; the monstrous "other" invading/attacking mainstream society) demonstrate a specific condition of the Malaysian, Malay-Muslim society.

Keywords: **Horror, Malaysian films, Islam, representations, narrative analysis, gender**

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the portrayal of Islam in Malaysian horror films, focusing on how these films navigate and represent Islamic themes within the genre's inherently terrifying and supernatural narrative. The central research objective is to uncover how Malaysian horror films like *Al-Hijab (Partition, 2011)* and *Khurafat (The Superstition, 2011)* depict Islamic principles, and why these portrayals are significant. Although religion and horror often appear antithetical, their intersection can be observed through mysticism and certain traditional pre-Islamic beliefs that can be found in Malaysia. This study highlights the importance of exploring how Islamic values and moralities shape narratives in a genre traditionally associated with fear, mysticism, and monstrosity.

These characteristics may be observed as being in relation to, and derived from, Western horror films. On one hand, they can function as general characteristics of the classical and contemporary horror texts but on the other hand, Malaysian horror films also challenge and modify these established horror conventions within its specific cultural and national context. Specifically, the modification emerges in the emphasis on the significant role of religion and its morality to challenge a corrupt and decadent "idea" in life (A. Rahman, 2019). The next section will explore the development of horror conventions in a specific context, for these conventions not only provide a similar dimension of genre across different cultures, but also challenge, re-negotiate, and re-represent the distinctive convention where films are set.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dimensions of horror films: A brief development from the West to the East

This section examines the dynamic and evolving nature of the horror genre as a set of conceptual categories in constant flux (Cherry, 2009), shaped by the temporal and cultural contexts in which it is situated. Western horror cinema, for instance, has its roots in early literary and theatrical traditions such as folktales, fairy tales, and gothic romances (Jancovich, 2002; Wells, 2000). Cherry (2009) emphasised the importance of analysing how horror films adapt to the cultural, social, and historical anxieties of their time and place, reflecting a broader engagement with the social setting.

The supernatural aspect of horror gained significant traction with films like *The Exorcist* (1973), which redefined the genre by portraying demonic possession as both a personal and cultural fear. Similarly, contemporary Western horror franchises like *The Conjuring* and *Annabelle* (2013–2021) frame supernatural narratives as events grounded in reality, furthering the genre's engagement with belief systems and faith (Walsh-Pasulka, 2005). Tudor (1989) categorised these films into supernatural threats (ghosts, witches, zombies) and secular threats (aliens, mad scientists, psychotics), demonstrating the genre's adaptability over time.

As the horror genre transitioned to the East, it underwent significant reinterpretation within distinct cultural and religious frameworks. In Malaysia, the horror narrative incorporates a "generic ghost" shaped by local traditions and Islamic beliefs (Lim, 2007). Abdullah and Hassan (2019) noted that the Malay-Muslim worldview perceives an interplay between the visible and unseen worlds, with the constant struggle between good and evil integrated into daily life. This perspective is mirrored in

Indonesian horror, which shares thematic similarities with Malaysian films. Indonesian horror draws heavily on folklore, featuring conflicts between humans and supernatural entities, such as *Ratu Ular* (*Snake Queen*, 1972) and *Ratu Buaya Putih* (*The White Alligator*, 1988). These narratives often include religious figures and Islamic knowledge as central forces combating evil (Heider, 1991; Van Heeren, 2012). Gibraltar et al. (2023) further asserted that Islamic teachings, which emphasise family values, serve as the dominant paradigm, while animism, witchcraft, and other practices act as counter-myths challenging these values.

Fear, as the core of the horror genre, reflects broader social anxieties—be they related to natural disasters, wars, violence, or moral corruption (Cherry, 2009). Films like *Al-Hijab* and *Khurafat* exemplify how horror can serve as a lens through which to examine the intersection of societal fears, cultural identity, and religious values. Mohammed (2022) asserted that the growth of horror film production from Muslim-majority nations raises questions about the evolution of film in that culture and its articulation with dominant mainstream tropes and conventions. By analysing the portrayal of Islam and Islamic morality within Malaysian horror, this study underscores the genre's role as both a cultural artifact and a medium for exploring pressing social and political concerns.

Malaysian horror films

During the golden period of the local film industry, that is from the 1950s to the 1960s, a multiplicity of films from melodrama and comedy to horror was produced. Horror became popular following the enormous commercial success of *pontianak* (Malay female vampire) films, particularly B. N. Rao's first two *pontianak* films in 1957: *Pontianak* and *Dendam Pontianak* (*Revenge of the Pontianak*) (Yusoff, 2013). These *pontianak* films, which were produced by Cathay-Keris Film (the then prominent film studio), not only launched the genre, and made its female lead, Maria Menado an overnight success, but also unprecedentedly managed to attract many different audiences, including non-Malay audiences (Abdul Rahim & Yusop, 2012; Hussain, 1998 as cited in Yusoff, 2013).

As the story of *pontianak* travels through time and space, “her” monstrous figure also represents a recurring issue of Islamic beliefs about life and death. Lee and Sarata (2016) argued that the ambiguity of the *pontianak* presents a challenge, as her existence as an undead being contradicts Islamic beliefs about life after death (2016, p.164). The portrayal of the *pontianak* and other ghosts (*hantu*) in local horror films interacts in complex ways with societal belief systems. Horror films are a popular genre in Malaysia—for instance, *Khurafat* (*The Superstition*, 2008) earned over RM 8 million. According to Amin et al. (2014), horror films, with their depictions of terrifying figures and ghosts, can, in some ways, revive older beliefs in spirits. While created for artistic purposes, these films confuse audiences by incorporating elements of Islamic practices like *zikr* (remembrance of God), prayers (*du'a*), Quranic verses, and entities such as *jinn*, *shaitan*, and *Iblis* (devils) (Amin et al., 2014). The way these films blend horror, Malay beliefs, and Islamic practices has and continues to spark debates between religious authorities and local filmmakers.

The various analysis of *pontianak* also extends the discourse of women representation in the symbolic order. Mulvey (1975) argued that this representation mainly speaks about castration. Using the psychoanalytic approach, Mulvey added that women in the narrative film are in their exhibitionist role, being looked at and displayed for their strong visual and erotic impact to connote ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (p.19) which

may cause oppression. Creed (1986) extended this oppression to the concept of the monstrous-feminine in the horror film, which is drawn from Julia Kristeva's work (1982) on the maternal figure and abjection, as a source of horror, and how it works within the patriarchal society (Creed, 1986).

However, the signifying symbols of horror have shifted across time in Malaysian films, from the *pontianak* or vampiric and blood-related representations to the battle between tradition and modernity in subsequent horror films (Ng, 2009; Yusoff, 2013). A classic example is the critically acclaimed film entitled *Rahsia (The Secret, 1987*, by Othman Hafsham) made along the lines of the American "family horror" with its focus on the "haunted house", popular in the 1970s and 1980s. In the film, a middle-class couple, whose daughter has recently died, moves into an old bungalow where the spirit of a murdered child haunts them. The ghost is the orphaned nephew of the bungalow's former owner who swapped his identity with that of his son so that he could inherit the nephew's property.

In his analysis of this film, Yusoff (2013) identified its strident critique and exposé of white-collar criminality and capitalist greed that some see as the distinguishing disposition of nouveau-riche Muslim-Malays. This award-winning film got its 'reboot' when the new *Rahsia (The Secret, 2023*, by Shamyil Othman) was produced by Astro Shaw as an appreciation towards one of the best local horror films in Malaysia (Zikri, 2023). The various developments of Malaysian horror films indicate the multiple features of the horror narrative that transform over time, which can also be referred to as the working features for Malaysian horror films.

METHOD

This research employed a narrative analysis to investigate the ideological and cultural messages embedded within the selected films' narratives. Narrative analysis was particularly effective for this study as it allows an exploration of how plot structures, character arcs, and visual elements convey religious and cultural values. This methodology focuses on analysing elements such as exposition, disruption, climax, and resolution (Gillespie, 2006) to uncover how these narratives articulate the moral and cultural tensions specific to the Malaysian society. Table 1 shows the proposed narrative structure as adapted from the plot schema (Gillespie, 2006, expanded from Todorov's narrative pattern).

Table 1. Plot structure

Exposition	The initial equilibrium, a state of normality, stability, social order (the introduction/beginning of the story).
Disruption	A causal event by an agent of change, creates a de-equilibrium, creating a problem or a quest.
Complication	A series of obstacles occur.
Climax	Dramatic high-point of the conflict, excitement or tension followed by release.
Resolution and closure	The main protagonist resolves the problem, obtains his/her goal and fulfils his/her desire; this instigates a revised equilibrium as the story ends.

The selection of *Al-Hijab* and *Khurafat* is deliberate, as both films are representative of the contemporary Malaysian horror genre and its negotiation of Islamic and Malay cultural themes. *Al-Hijab* explores the concept of the *hijab* as a veil between the visible and unseen worlds, while *Khurafat* delves into the consequences of superstitious practices in the Islamic context. These films are symbolic of how Malaysian cinema integrates religious discourse with horror tropes, making them ideal for examining the interplay between genre conventions and Islamic values. The intention is to explore the reworking of the genre of Malaysian horror films by illuminating the representations of Islam based on the narrative, filmic styles, the multiplicity of characters including the depiction of gender discourse in the films.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Al-Hijab (The Partition, 2011): The plot structure

The narrative of *Al-Hijab* revolves around Rafael, an actor who seeks to lift the “veil” (*hijab*) to access the supernatural realm, driven by his quest for authenticity in a horror film role. The film’s climax unfolds as Rafael’s obsession with the unseen world leads to a series of harrowing encounters with monstrous figures. The film critiques the moral dangers of curiosity and ambition that stray from Islamic principles, presenting the lifting of the *hijab* as both a literal and metaphorical transgression.

As Rafael begins to learn about *hijab*, a series of complications occur in the narrative. Rafael meets the mysterious Mak (Aunty) Tam, a lady (a Malay traditional healer) who senses his intention. Mak Tam warns Rafael about the risk of his request, but Rafael insists that it is for his character in the new film. After some deliberations, Mak Tam agrees to fulfil the request. As they arrive at the specific location, Mak Tam begins the ritual by reciting a special prayer to lift the *hijab*. Rafael begins to see creatures around him: visually frightening expressions on some disfigured faces of women, but he feels excited about the revelation. Mak Tam pleads to lock the *hijab*, but Rafael refuses; he asks for another day to observe the unseen world. Mak Tam agrees but cautions him that only she can lock it up again.

The uplifting of the *hijab* leads the narrative to its climax. On the way home, Rafael’s car breaks down. He decides to leave the car and catch a lift, but all the passing vehicles are reluctant to offer him a lift as they notice a (woman) spirit alongside Rafael. He continues to walk home but stops at an abandoned flat to search for a ghost. He experiences a terrifying encounter when a spirit begins to appear in the form of a female figure with sinister and devilish features. Rafael escapes from the flat and finally arrives home, only to encounter more disturbances from monstrous entities including young and old women in long, muddy dresses with long hair and disfigured faces.

Next, Qiss (Rafael’s girlfriend) appears in front of his house, crying so he invites her in. Later in the scene, Rafael realises that the “Qiss” who appeared was a ghost’s impersonation. In the end, Rafael returns the script to the producer and tells him that he will not be involved in the film production. He rushes to see Mak Tam with the hope of locking up the *hijab*. Unfortunately, when he arrives at Mak Tam’s place, he finds many people reciting the Quran beside a dead body in the house — Mak Tam has passed away. A flashback of Mak Tam’s warning reminds him that “no one can perform the ritual,

except me”. Rafael turns away in panic; the film ends with a close-up shot of Rafael’s anxious expression.

Al-Hijab: Imagining the “unseen”

The horror film is amongst the favourite genres of Malaysian producers/directors for its promotional appeal in the local film market. *Al-Hijab* (2011, dir. Pierre Andre) introduces an interesting but different Islamic concept of *hijab* in a horror narrative. To understand the Islamic element of *hijab* in this film, it is worth mentioning that the concept of *hijab* is connected to the Islamic notion of knowledge (Mas’od, 2013). It is important to understand that the grace of *hijab* is only bestowed on whom He (Allah) wishes. It is also regarded as a sacred search for knowledge in Islam, provided that the pursuit of knowledge is in accordance with the fundamental teachings of Islam. However, the uplifting of *hijab* may also jeopardise one’s religious conviction if it is conducted in a manner conflicting with the teachings of Islam, particularly if it is done without referring to the Quran and Hadith (the teachings of the prophet).

Despite the Islamic allusions to *hijab*, this film was criticised in the Malay media for promoting “superstition”, on the basis it can possibly provoke others to find ways to uplift their *hijab* for illegitimate purposes (i.e., searching for supernatural beings). Table 2 represents scenes reflecting the meaning of *hijab* in the film. The uplifting of the *hijab* brings the film to its climax (in Scene 1). Rafael’s quest to uplift the *hijab* appears to contradict the principle of Islam, which prescribes humbleness and modesty within and among humans and the idea that humans should not seek to attain the special and superior powers reserved for God. The dim and mysterious setting for this film also enhances the suspense by limiting the viewer’s access to the scenes, and thus, withholds the fear. Rafael’s quest and his obsession about revealing his *hijab* also reflect an individual’s quest for power to rule over a certain space, but the possession of this power derived from an obsession could result in self-destruction.

Table 2. Scenes reflecting the meaning of the *hijab* in *Al-Hijab*



No.	Scene	Scene detail
1		The ritual to lift the <i>hijab</i> conducted by Mak Tam (accompanied by a special <i>du’a</i>).
		Rafael and Mak Tam (after the <i>hijab</i> uplifting ritual)

Table 1. (con't)

No.	Scene	Scene detail
2		Rafael is being “observed” by a spirit at an abandoned flat.
3	 	<p>Qiss suddenly appears in front of Rafael’s house, crying.</p> <p>The ‘Qiss’ who appeared is a ghost’s impersonation.</p>

Al-Hijab illustrates a straightforward plot structure as the order of events creates a causal effect in the narrative, which revolves around the quest to uplift the *hijab* to enter the unseen world. The opening scene of the film reveals the causality of events that connects the narrative with Rafael, the main character of this film and “the main agent of change” (Gillespie, 2006, p.91) in the narrative. The structure of this film exposes a male quest for fame and fortune, which then leads to an obsession. By accepting the leading role in a horror film, Rafael begins his exploration for the assigned character, but his approach of “not being afraid of ghosts” makes him obsessed with hunting for spirits to become familiarised with horror. Rafael becomes engrossed after he is able to see ghosts and is reluctant to lock the *hijab* immediately; instead, he asks for another day. Although Mak Tam does not agree with the request, she finally approves it but continuously reminds Rafael about her responsibility to cover back the *hijab*.

The role of helper can be seen in the character of Mak Tam, who is willing to help Rafael in his quest to see the unseen world (Table 2, Scene 1), and she responsibly enlightens him about the risks of this decision (Gillespie, 2006). Thus, conflicts in *Al-Hijab* occur as soon as the monstrous figures emerge and disturb Rafael (in Scenes 2 & 3). This disruption triggers a terrifying experience for Rafael, which in the end causes him to reject the script given to him, and admit that the *hijab* must be locked up again.

The final scene whereby Rafael learns about Mak Tam's death, ends with the fearful expression of Rafael, which hints at his tormented life as well as the hopeless quest of locking up his *hijab* again. The finale suggests an open-ended plot for *Al-Hijab*, as the death of Mak Tam indicates the possibility of a continuous threat for Rafael from the monstrous creatures, leaving the audience in suspense about what will happen next.

Through its narrative structure, *Al-Hijab* juxtaposes modernity and traditional beliefs, emphasising the perils of prioritising worldly desires over spiritual humility. The character of Mak Tam, a traditional healer, serves as a moral anchor, warning Rafael of the consequences of his actions. Her death signifies the loss of spiritual guidance, leaving Rafael in a state of unresolved fear and vulnerability. The characterisation of Qiss, her parents/family, and Rafael reflect their modern and urban lifestyle. However, the fact that Qiss and her mother are the ones who reveal the concept of *hijab* to Rafael exemplifies their traditional beliefs and knowledge about this special gift.

Qiss' mother shares a story from her childhood about a lady becoming possessed as a result of the lifting of the *hijab*. These contradictory values appear significant in the interpretation of the purpose of uplifting the *hijab* and Rafael's interest in mystical belief, rather than reflecting its legitimate purpose for Islamic knowledge seeking. Ng (2014) observed that the intersection of modernity and animistic belief system exemplifies the persistence of a pre-modern past within the modern reality, and as a popular media, films provide a powerful avenue to represent this intersection of pre-modern beliefs and the modern deployment of horror storytelling.

Khurafat (The Superstition, 2011): The plot structure

Another horror film selected for this study is *Khurafat* (literally meaning superstition), which was also released in 2011 (dir. Shamsul Yusof). *Khurafat* tells the story of Johan who indulges in black magic to win his desired woman (named Ana) and ends up suffering the consequences. The narrative begins with a group of men escorting a casket for a funeral. Amid the crowd, focus is given to a man (Johan) who is in tears as he accompanies the body. The story concerns Johan (a mortuary keeper at a hospital) who is a responsible child to his family and is now married to Aishah. Chaos start when a woman named Ana keeps bothering Johan and asks him to accept her back. They were in a relationship before, but Johan left her because of her wayward lifestyle of drinking and partying in nightclubs. Since then, Johan and Aishah begin to experience frightening episodes involving spirits almost every day.

Johan believes that Ana has cast spells to disturb the couple, as she keeps begging for Johan to take her back. Makcik (Aunty) Ros, the hospital cleaner, approaches him and claims that she knows what has happened to him. The plot deepens as Ana's obsession with winning back Johan leads to various terrifying experiences for both Johan and Aishah. A ghost that appears as a disfigured woman constantly haunts them, and Aishah pleads to Johan to resolve this problem. The next day, at the hospital with his mother, Johan experiences some terrifying moments of being "observed" by spirits (a disfigured feminine monster in a blood-drenched white dress) (as visualised in Table 3, scene 2). Johan seeks out Makcik Ros to obtain some answers to his predicament; she asks Johan to seek for forgiveness from those he has hurt before.

The film reaches its climax as Johan immediately looks for Ana, but discovers that she is dead, having committed suicide in her bedroom. The film cuts to a night scene

where a van driver and Johan are transporting Ana's body back to her hometown in an ambulance. En route, the van driver (Johan's colleague) advises Johan to accept this fate (the passing of Ana). At this point, the ambulance meets with an accident. Flashback scenes appear, depicting sequences involving Johan seeking help from a *shaman* (witchdoctor) to win Ana's love, revealing Johan's mistake of committing *khurafat* (a Malay superstitious belief).

This pre-Islamic belief relies on a supernatural power to achieve an individual's desires but is contrary to the teachings of Islam. Johan disregards warnings given that he will encounter supernatural disturbances as a result of his black magic ritual and ends up marrying Aishah. The intercut scene of Johan coming home after the accident and seeing his own body lying amid a crowd sets a closure that he died in the incident. As he escorts his own body for the funeral, his soul continues to search for forgiveness from Allah (Johan is portrayed as highly emotional — in tears and regrets). The film ends with Johan simultaneously looking up to the sky and the camera shot intercuts with scenes of the family members that he leaves behind.

Khurafat: A representation of "the fallacious life"





The plot structure of *Khurafat* portrays a similar structure to *Al-Hijab*—the plot exhibits a linear order of events that creates a causal effect in the narrative. The opening scenes reveal the setting of the causal events that connect the narrative to Johan, the main character of this film. The initial still shot of Quranic verses about superstitious belief illuminates the main theme of this film. The structure of *Khurafat* portrays a man's (Johan's) quest for love but simultaneously establishes Johan as a villain who allowed desire and lust to rule his life. Prior to marrying Aishah, Johan was obsessed with Ana, whom he met in a nightclub, but was rejected. This rejection upsets him, and he decides to seek black magic to fulfil his wishes. A flashback scene in the climax reveals how Johan seeks help from a witchdoctor, who provides Johan with a liquid/oil charm to help him achieve his desire. As the narrative progresses, this film represents an intersection between the Muslim-Malay characters and references to Islamic beliefs, i.e., the moral narratives against the superstitious and/or other pre-Islamic practices, as well as the existence of supernatural evil and the social significance of religion in Malaysia.

The analysis on the recurring terrifying scenes between Johan, Aishah and the spirit establishes the causal effect of using black magic. As Johan starts to comprehend the supernatural disturbances that haunt his family, the narrative reveals that they are the consequences of him using black magic before. This film represents social taboos within the Malay culture, specifically in obtaining power to gratify needs and desires. Apart from the utilisation of traditional features of a character's appearance (physical and emotional) and the film's setting, this narrative represents an essential contradiction between affirming traditional Malay beliefs in sorcery and witch hood, spiritual (Islamic) healing, and verses of the Quran.

As the supernatural hauntings torment both Johan and Aishah, a character of Makcik Ros appears in the form of a good Samaritan to help them identify the cause of these hauntings. In her meeting with Johan, Makcik Ros advises him, "*Jika kamu ada sakitkan hati sesiapa, lekaslah minta maaf dengan orang itu kerana benda ini makin hampir dengan Johan.*" (Trans.: If you have hurt anyone before, please ask for forgiveness, as this

thing is getting closer to you). The meeting with Makcik Ros leads Johan to unravel the truth behind the disturbances, and he seeks forgiveness from Ana (in Table 3, scene 3).

Table 3. Scenes reflecting the moral narrative against superstitious belief

No.	Scene	Scene detail
1		A witch doctor executing the ritual to fulfil Johan's requests for a love potion (to win Ana's love)
2		A disfigured feminine monster in a blood-drenched white dress is stalking Johan.
3		Johan meets Makcik Ros at her house and seeks her advice.
4		Johan confesses his mistake to Ana (beside him is the spirit of Ana).

The analysis also discovers the use of present scenes and flashbacks, which according to Yusoff (2013), serves as a form of contemplation of one time through another. Flashback scenes represent what Bordwell (1985) suggests as "...a sequence to some degree as representing character memory" (p. 78). As Johan recalls his past behaviour towards Ana, this can be read as the pain of remembering what is gone and irredeemable. As a result of the supernatural haunting from the past, this nostalgia constitutes the desire to return to a lost time to rectify past mistakes. As the character of Johan dies in the climax, the film suggests that the quest for forgiveness from Ana dies with him.

The narrative unravels as Johan's actions invite supernatural retribution, leading to his demise. By framing Johan's demise within the context of Islamic morality, the film critiques pre-Islamic superstitions and the misuse of spiritual practices for personal gain.

The critique can also be linked to Walsh-Pasulka's argument (2005) that horror films interact in complex ways with their viewers' systems of beliefs. These findings align with the importance of incorporating the narrative's philosophical and religious values into any creative content and to convey the message of goodness within *da'wah* endeavours (Mohamad Rasit, 2020).

Stylistically, *Khurafat* shares a similar approach with other horror films, with close-up shots functioning as an allegory of Johan's terrifying experiences and reflecting the character's paradigm in confronting conflict. Since Johan believes that the hauntings are the work of black magic from Ana, those terrifying events reveal the consequences of forbidden practices. The use of multiple camera shots and sound effects enhances the appearance of ghosts/spirits in both films, enabling the viewer to viscerally sense the horrifying atmosphere.

Both horror films also utilise a dark setting in most of their visual interplay, which according to Neale's (1980, p.43) argument, is at the edge between presence (that which conceals) and absence (that which is it) (as cited in Cherry, 2009). This setting enhances fears and anxieties, as the close-up shots of characters as well as the spatial interplays are able to establish the point-of-view shot and the fear-provoking setting of the film.

In several scenes of hauntings and disturbances caused by the monstrous feminine entity, paralysing fear can be seen on the facial expressions of the male characters as they seek to understand why the entities are threatening them. The answers emerge in the climax scene (as shown in Figure 4 below), which portrays a close-up shot of Johan who confesses his mistake of casting a black magic spell to win over Ana (the female monster next to him is the spirit of Ana). This corroborates with Creed (1986) who attested that although the human subject must exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life.

The intersections of horror and religious themes

Several academic discussions have explored the intricate relationship between the horror genre and religious themes, emphasising how horror narratives function as a medium for examining theological concepts, cultural anxieties, and moral dilemmas. This study positions Malaysian horror as a cultural artifact that reflects the antagonism between modernity and traditional Islamic values. By integrating horror tropes with religious themes, *Al-Hijab* and *Khurafat* present a critique of societal anxieties related to morality, gender, and the unseen. Both *Al-Hijab* and *Khurafat* depict women as ghosts or monstrous figures, haunting the central male characters (Ng, 2014). These films employ conventional horror aesthetics to portray female monstrosity, including long, flowing hair, bloodstained garments, facial scars, menacing expressions (Nicholas & Kline, 2010), and unsettling vocalisations such as wailing or crying. However, the dual representation of women—as both supernatural antagonists and moral guides (e.g., Mak Tam and Makcik Ros)—reveals the complexity of gender dynamics in Malaysian horror cinema. While these female characters often conform to traditional roles, they also serve as crucial narrative drivers, reinforcing the films' moral undertones and broader social commentaries.

These films illustrate the horror genre's ability to convey moral lessons and encourage reflection within an Islamic framework. This finding aligns with Beavis (2024), who examined how horror fiction reflects and critiques religious beliefs, suggesting that

the genre provides a space to confront and understand the darker aspects of human psychology and spirituality. Furthermore, this study highlights the horror genre's capacity to engage with complex religious and moral issues, offering deeper insights into the human condition and societal fears (Beavis, 2024). As the analysis has shown, it is possible to identify key elements of continuity between Malaysian horror and Western, or between Malaysian horror and Indonesia, where supernatural themes are deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions. At the same time, however, the genre also functions as a mould that can be shaped in different forms within the cultural, social, and political context in which it is based. In fact, the films examined re-elaborate key aspects of the horror genre to address issues that are relevant to representations of Islam in Malaysia, corroborating Cherry's (2009) point that the horror genre should not be conceptualised in a fixed state, but rather in a state of flux. In summary, the findings contribute to a broader understanding of Malaysian cinema as a space for examining the intersections of religion, culture, and media.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed two Malaysian horror films, *Al-Hijab* (2011) and *Khurafat* (2011), and examined the representation of Islam in horror films. A discussion of horror as a form of discursive representation of social reality also reflects the fluidity of the genre itself (Baca, 2009), because the genre is also shaped and moulded by the context in which a horror film is made. In light of this analysis, it is worth noting that Malaysian horror is similar to other Asian horror in the sense that they "can also be understood in a variety of national contexts because they deal with the basic emotional responses of fear and anxiety" (Boey, 2012, p. 3).

As the analysis has shown, it is possible to identify key elements of continuity between Malaysian horror and Western horror, or between Malaysian horror and Asian horror. At the same time, in this case, the genre also functions as a mould that can be shaped in different forms within the particular cultural, social, and political context in which it is based. In fact, the films examined re-elaborate key aspects of the horror genre to address issue that are relevant to representations of Islam and gender in Malaysia, corroborating Cherry's point that the horror genre should not be conceptualised in a fixed state, but rather in a state of flux (Cherry, 2009).

These contemporary horror films are also structured around gendered binaries (Creed, 1986; Mulvey, 1975) representing monsters or evil spirits as female, but also centring on the male quest for fame, fortune or sexual desire, which reflects stereotypical representations of gender in the film industry, both internationally (Creed, 1986; Freeland, 1996; Mulvey, 1975) and in Malaysia (for example, Mohd. Mokhtar-Ritchie, 2015; Khoo, 2006; Ng, 2009; Nicholas & Kline, 2010; Yusoff, 2013). The male characters appear to be active protagonists, constantly facing trials and tribulations as well as making moral decisions. The films reinforce the "passive (suffering)" (terms by Freeland, 1996, p.744) female character that is hardly transformed into an active role in the narrative. Both *Al-Hijab* and *Khurafat* centre on the representation of female characters as monstrous creatures, which demonises socially marginal women. However, the character of Mak Tam (*Al-Hijab*) and Makcik Ros (*Khurafat*) tends to glorify women's strength and ability in being rationale in society.

The analysis of the Malay-Muslim characters of Johan (*Khurafat*) and Rafael (*Al-Hijab*), and references to Islamic beliefs render the films “Islamic” in some sense, appealing to moral narratives over superstition and/or other pre-Islamic practices as well as behaviours deemed to be immoral, such as the use of witchcraft to seduce a woman in *Khurafat*. The films, thus, underline the dominant issue of morality in the Malaysian context. The binary characters of the villain and his confrontations with the monsters require the central male figure either to succumb to the supernatural power and temptations (as in *Khurafat*) or to acknowledge the presence of supernatural beings (as in *Al-Hijab*) (also emphasised in Basir, 2023).

This study represents the purpose of film in communication, among others as a tool for projection of ideas regarding a certain topic or subject (Sim, 2022). Broadly speaking, the local media industry has been putting much effort to portray and promote Islam in the media favourably since Islam is the major and official religion of Malaysia. Thus, various forms of entertainment content have been produced to represent the Islamic identity positively (Abd Ghani & A. Rahman, 2023).

For this analysis, the films’ relations to Islam are constructed in an apparently contradictory way: Islamic allusions to *hijab* and verses of the Quran are framed together with traditional Malay beliefs in sorcery, witch hood, and *hijab* (which are usually refused and criticised by the religion). As a result, the narratives articulate moral stories, affirming Islamic principles condemning egotism, immodesty, greed, illicit sexual desire, and Western, secular materialism. Therefore, how the monstrous threat and the mainstream society are represented is contextually determined; in this case by the specific history of Malaysia and its sociocultural background, and not by a particular pure, pious, and “correct” version of Islam.

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