



Symbolism in Malaysian Horror Films: A Netflix Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian horror films on Netflix have become an increasingly popular medium through which local fears, beliefs, and politics are visualized, yet the symbolism embedded in these films is underexplored. This study investigated how symbolism operated in Malaysian horror films streaming on the global platform, Netflix, with a focus on the types of symbolism used and audience interpretations of gender, religion, and culture. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study involved semi-structured interviews with 10 Netflix subscribers aged between 20 and 50 who had experience watching Malaysian horror films on the platform. The findings revealed that most of the symbolisms are represented through female ghosts, such as the *pontianak*, religious figures like the *ustaz*, objects, and colour palettes to represent themes of morality and spirituality. This research is conducted in the hope that a deeper understanding of symbolism in Malaysian horror films would encourage more critical appreciation of the genre, positioning it as intellectually significant rather than merely entertaining.

Keywords: Malaysian Horror Films, Netflix, Symbolism, Religious Symbolism, Gender Representation

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Netflix is a subscription-based streaming service that has become the de facto standard source for entertainment due to its access to a boundless range of content. Among the content that has won the hearts of its Malaysian subscribers are horror films. Per contra, while these films are widely enjoyed, the deeper meanings behind these films are academically underexplored. Symbolism, specifically, is an area of study with barely any research conducted on it.

Symbolism is a term in art and literature that defines the use of symbols to represent ideas. Symbolism is a crucial tool in storytelling, as it uses abstract ideas to insinuate social commentary. In film, there are six known types of symbolism exercised to articulate deeper meanings, including but not limited to: color symbolism, character symbolism, religious symbolism, nature symbolism, animal symbolism, and object symbolism (DeGuzman, 2023).

Horror is a popular genre in storytelling that often evokes fear, disgust, and terror in the audience (Scott, 2025). In Malaysia, there have been more than 400 horror films produced in Malaysia since the 1940s. Within this broader history, female ghosts such as the *pontianak* have been repeatedly used to symbolize anxieties regarding women's bodies and patriarchal order (Phillips, 2025). *Roh* (2019) is one of the only Malaysian horror films to be recognized internationally, with critics praising it for its rich symbolism. Still, despite being submitted for the Best International Feature Film at the 93rd Academy Awards, there has been minimal research conducted on the use of symbolism in the film or any other Malaysian horror films.

Limited studies have been conducted on symbolism in horror films. Past studies by Muhammad Athari Basir (2022) and Muhamad Farid bin Abdul Rahman (2021) analyzed the main characters and underlying themes of *Munafik 2* (2018), *Makmum* (2019), and the *Hantu Kak Limah* trilogy, but there exists a gap in what typical symbolism is represented in these films. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze symbolism in Malaysian horror films on Netflix, as well as to evaluate the similarities and differences in the use of symbolism.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolism in Malaysian Horror Films

Symbolism has long been used in Malaysian cinema to reflect morality and cultural identity. It is used to create commentary on societal and political issues in Malaysia by connecting local folklore, religious beliefs, and cultural norms with a story's setting, characters, and plot. According to Suria Hani A. Rahman et al. (2025), Malaysian horror films such as *Al-Hijab* (2011) and *Khurafat* (2011) construct Islamic meanings through their narrative structure by organizing plot, characters, and mise-en-scène around moral dichotomies of "good" versus "bad" and "helper" versus "villain." Their narrative analysis shows that both films follow a male quest for fame, fortune, and women, during which the protagonists drift from the moral path and confront monstrous forces. This suggests that religious symbolism in Malaysian horror articulates the politics of the Malay-Muslim community. Socially controversial women are demonized while the men make moral choices.

The symbolism represented using characters extends beyond figures like spirits or religious leaders, as it also applies to visual elements such as color. Şeyma Pehlivan's (2023) analysis of *Funny Games* (1997) discusses the way color symbolism is applied to demonstrate more profound meanings. Although Pehlivan focuses on a Western setting, her insights on color symbolism are relevant when analyzing Malaysian horror films available on Netflix. This implies that color symbolism is also used in the visual design of Malaysian horror films. Color symbolism, as seen in *Roh* (2019) and *Tiger Stripes* (2023), may be similarly used to signal mood, spiritual corruption, or innocence. In *Roh* (2019), muted earth tones and shadowy palettes are used to mirror the moral ambiguity of the film, while in *Tiger Stripes* (2023), vibrant colors are used to represent the protagonist's rebellion against social norms and also reflect her age as a young teenager.

Religions have existed for centuries, and horror films do not shy from using religious symbolism. According to Ratih Dwi Pratiwi and Handrini Ardiyanti (2025), the film *Longlegs* (2024) uses religious symbols such as the number 666, inverted triangles, and Baphomet imagery to evoke Satanic influence and psychological manipulation. While this film is not Malaysian, its Satanic symbolisms contrast with *Munafik 2*'s Islamic symbolism, which uses Quranic verses and ustaz figures to criticize society (Muhammad Athari Basir, 2022). This comparison highlights the ways different cultures use horror symbolism to reflect their own values and fears.

Similarities and Differences in the Use of Symbolism Across Malaysian Horror Films on Netflix

Research on the symbolism of global horror films has been gaining traction, especially the Western ones. However, there are still very few studies that have specifically looked at Malaysian horror films. Most of the previous studies on the topic of Malaysian horror films have addressed general themes as well as religion. Very few, however, have explored the use of symbolism in visual storytelling.

Southeast Asian horror films usually share overlapping themes on gender and societal norms, though they interpret these differently through different lenses. Anton Sutandio's (2023) study on contemporary Indonesian horror films offers a striking example. He applies the concept of the "final girl," which was first introduced by Carol J. Clover after studying American slasher, occult, and rape-revenge films released in the 1970s and 1980s, to Indonesian cinema, showing how female survivors in horror films reclaim agency in a patriarchal society. The

"final girls" are female protagonists who go through traumatic experiences but survive in the end (Media Studies, 2025). They symbolize purity culture, as most "final girls" are portrayed as being less promiscuous and different from other girls who engage in drugs and sex.

In Malaysian horror films, as studied by Muhamad Farid bin Abdul Rahman (2021), women are portrayed as weak supernatural figures, and only the *Hantu Kak Limah* trilogy has tried to subvert gender expectations. Anton Sutandio and Muhamad Farid bin Abdul Rahman's studies are connected to this study because similarities and differences in the way women are portrayed through Malaysian horror films are important to find out what these female characters truly symbolize. Together, these studies are important to the current research because they highlight regional similarities in gender symbolism while drawing attention to Malaysia's slower movement toward feminist reinterpretations in horror.



According to Liem Bui Quoc's study on cultural symbolism in Vietnamese horror films (2024), Vietnamese horror films also use cultural symbols like traditional rituals, cursed objects, and ancestor spirits to reflect deeper meanings. For example, the film *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh* (2019) utilizes amulets and sleep paralysis to show the impact of ignoring cultural traditions and past trauma, while *Lời Nguyễn Huyét Ngải* (2012) portrays characters resorting to forbidden practices as a commentary on societal inequality. The research acknowledges that the symbolism in these films shares similarities as well as differences. Such a comparison is relevant to the present study, which focused on the use of symbolism in Malaysian horror films on Netflix, exploring the themes, representation, and possible messages about local fears and culture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using interviews as the primary data collection method. The aim is to explore the use of symbolism in Malaysian horror films available on Netflix and to examine the similarities and differences in how symbolic elements are represented across various film titles. A total of ten informants were interviewed for this study. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure that all informants had experience watching Malaysian horror films on Netflix and were able to provide knowledgeable perspectives on the symbolic representations in those films.

The selected informants consist of Netflix Malaysia subscribers aged between 20 and 50 years from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The participation of informants from various age ranges aims to capture a broader spectrum of interpretations and perspectives of viewers regarding the symbolic elements in Malaysian horror cinema. The sample size is determined based on qualitative research guidelines regarding data saturation.

Hennink and Bonnie N. Kaiser (2022) suggest that between 9 and 17 interviews are usually sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in qualitative research. In line with this recommendation, ten informants are considered sufficient to generate meaningful insights while maintaining depth in the collected data. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and followed a set of six guiding questions designed to explore participants' interpretations of symbolism in selected Malaysian horror films.

With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. After the data collection process is complete, the recordings are transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data is then analyzed using thematic analysis. This method allows researchers to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring patterns in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through this analytical approach, themes related to cultural, religious, and gender symbolism in Malaysian horror films have been systematically identified and interpreted based on participants' perspectives.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Symbolism In Malaysian Horror Films on Netflix

Symbolisms through Female Ghosts and the *Pontianak* Archetype

Several informants stated that such films include female spirits who exemplify revenge, justice, and trauma. Informant 1 asserts that the *pontianak* in *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (2004) symbolizes a woman whom a man harmed and who returns to life to avenge her suffering and reclaim her past. It reflects how women in real life are often mistreated.

While Informant 6 claimed that the *pontianak* had committed a wrongdoing that led to the character's rise and resurrection as a ghost, Informant 5 asserted that the *pontianak* portrays pain, revenge, and injustice. Informant 7 also concurred and shared the same opinion with Informant 1, asserting that the *pontianak* in these films is usually mistreated by men, hence why it wants revenge. This links the films to real-world expectations placed upon women. Per contra, Informant 8 saw the *pontianak* as a symbol of fear, while Informant 9 thought of the character as just a cultural mascot.

Interestingly, Informant 6 offered an alternative viewpoint through *Pontianak 100kg* (2023). The plus-sized *pontianak* character in the film is claimed to be questioning conventional beauty standards. Informants 4 and 10



found that most ghosts in Malaysian horror are female, demonstrating that femininity itself is symbolically connected to fear and suppression.

This relates to the theory of significant form; viewers can pay more attention to the form and details of the film while watching it to enhance the aesthetic experience. For example, in some emotional films, by paying attention to the details of the actors' performances, camera usage, and background music selection, viewers can feel the emotions conveyed by the film more deeply, as claimed by Shiping (2025).

Symbolisms through Religious Elements

Informant 9 declared that these films typically employ themes of good versus evil. Evil spirits are habitually defeated through prayers, emphasizing the importance of morality. Informant 10 stated that these films have educational purposes, hence the angles on religiosity.

Informants 5 and 8 view the *pontianak* and *ustaz* characters as spiritual concepts like *yin* and *yang*. Their viewpoints illustrate that the *ustaz* is seen as an authority that safeguards the community from black magic. This emphasizes that faith serves as a guiding light, especially in the worst of times. Meanwhile, Informant 5 said that the *ustaz* shows the influence of religion. Informant 8 added to the same viewpoint, saying that the *ustaz* symbolizes whiteness and purity.

Based on *Tiger Stripes* (2023), where the *ustaz* character turned out to be a con artist who sold snake oil, Informant 7 offered a fresh perspective. She stated that this opposes the typical religious symbolism used, as the film concerns itself with our community's blind faith and heavy reliance on spirituality.

Symbolisms through Objects, Scenes, and Visual Elements

Informant 2 highlighted how items like the tuberose flower in *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (2004) are used to symbolize melancholy and death. The tuberose appears together with the *pontianak*. The pairing of the flower and the ghost describes the intricate way beauty is often intertwined with suffering.

Informant 1 exemplified a scene in *Tiger Stripes* (2023) as a scene disguised as symbolism. In the scene, the protagonist scratches her body after menstruating for the first time. This scene depicts that something as natural as menstruation can be seen as grotesque and nasty by society, especially by men. On the other hand, Informant 9 shared that in the film *Rahsia* (2023), the sound design was intentionally edited for symbolism. The footsteps of the protagonist were edited by the sound design team to mimic the heartbeats of humans.

Another element of symbolism that the informants discuss is the obscure lighting in these films. The dark lighting raises the suspense in the films. Informants 2, 4, and 8 say that most Malaysian horror films hide the background and apply low lighting to concentrate on the silhouette of a character. Informant 8 also says that most regional films are shot in the dark because nighttime scenes stand for danger. Informant 8 believes that dark lighting and muted colour palettes add terror and tension. According to Informant 3, abandoned buildings in the horror documentary *Highland Tower* (2013) symbolize disasters, loss, and purgatory.

Symbolism as Social Commentary on Gender and Society

Informant 7 remarked that female characters in Malaysian horror films are often portrayed as dangerous and frightening figures if they challenge social norms. By speaking up or behaving outside of what is expected of them, the female characters will be portrayed as monstrous. This means that symbolism in horror films can serve as a commentary on society's judgment and double standards against women. Informant 6 further supported this view through his interpretation of *Pontianak 100kg* (2023). According to Informant 6, the portrayal of a plus sized *pontianak* in the film symbolizes the subversion of social stereotypes regarding women's bodies.

Cultural and Traditional Symbolisms

Informant 2 pointed out that Malaysian horror movies sound quite different from international ones because these films are very much connected to the culture, folklore, and superstitions passed down from ancestors. According



to Informant 10, a lot of movies have educational messages about Islam and Malay culture, for example, curses, *ruqyah*, and the consequences of the sins committed. Informant 5 shared that black magic themes figuratively illustrate the political, cultural and social problems of the Malay-Muslim community. Informant 9 observed that local horror often depicts a good versus evil showdown that is usually settled through prayer, thus showing the significant role of religion in their narrative. Informant 3 related abandoned buildings in local horror films to our history of neglected spaces and tragedies, while Informant 8 emphasized that traditions and beliefs are consistently reflected in Malaysian horror narratives.

Similarities And Differences in the Use of Symbolism Across Malaysian Horror Films on Netflix

Similarities in the Use of Symbolism Across Malaysian Horror Films on Netflix

Feminine Hauntings and Narrative Power

Informants 1, 4, 6, 7, and 10 all noted that there haven't seen supernatural entities that are male. Informant 1 shared her idea that the *pontianak* is a woman who regains her strength only after being dead, while Informant 7 agreed with the view, pointing out that women who claim their own power or resist the norm are usually depicted as dangerous or monstrous. In the same vein, Informant 5 regarded the *pontianak* as the symbol of the woman's avengement and the injustice, which at the core is the historical abuse of women.

Informants 1 and 7 pointed out that *Tiger Stripes* (2023) takes the female ghost archetype and twists it by substituting it with a young girl's horrifying transformation into a tiger. Even though the girl in question is not a ghost, the symbolism works in the same way because, once again, fear is associated with the female body changing. Meanwhile, Informants 8 and 9 considered female ghosts more as the main symbols of fear and folklore rather than being the representations of gendered trauma.

Religious Resolutions

One more major similarity featured by Malaysian horror movies on Netflix is a moralistic and religious symbolism that is both educational and very talkative, according to informants. Informant 9 stated that preachiness is a main style of Malaysian horror movies. Moreover, ghosts are very often shown in the movies in the same way, and they are almost always defeated through religious intervention. Many informants connected this moral symbolism with a good versus evil narrative structure. Informant 10 viewed this positively, describing Malaysian horror films as educational and culturally informative.

Tradition and Cultural Expression

Malaysian horror films, as per the comments of Informants 2, 5, and 10, regularly show elements of culture such as folklore, traditional ghosts, black magic, and religious rituals, which serve as metaphors for the local people's fears. Informant 2 considered that Malaysian horror films do not share much in common with international horror. Local horror is very much tied to local culture and traditions, whereas Informant 5 said that the narration in Malaysian horror is a mix of the supernatural with local folklore. This finding depicts that Malaysian horror films invariably embed local culture in their symbolism and not just use it as scenery.

Differences in the Use of Symbolism Across Malaysian Horror Films on Netflix

Implicit and Explicit Modes of Symbolism

Informants 1 and 7 declared that *Tiger Stripes* (2023) is a Malaysian horror movie that utilized implicit symbolism. Informant 1 thought of the film as an allegory of puberty and the stigmas around menstruation. She described the film as relatable to Malaysian girls, no matter their age. Informant 7 argued that the main character, a 12-year-old girl turning into a tiger, is a metaphor for how society is afraid of girls going through natural bodily changes.

Many Malaysian horror films were described as relying on literal approaches, where meanings are stated clearly and conflicts are resolved in repetitive manners. Informant 9 was critical of this approach, arguing that most local horror films use the same *pontianak* imagery and resolve supernatural occurrences through prayer or divine



religious interpretation. Informant 10 noted that Malaysian horror films carry educational purposes, teaching viewers about religion and culture through symbolism rather than subtle suggestion.

Commercial Restriction and Artistic Agency

Informant 1 states that Malaysian horror films and local productions are heavily censored. Hence, they are not allowed to freely use symbolism, metaphors, and allegories in their works. In other words, according to Informant 1, the filmmakers are being restricted and restrained from discovering and implying more controversial and ambiguous themes.

Informant 9, a sound engineer who worked on *Rahsia* (2023), stated that the film originally had a more “mellow” first draft but was later altered to include louder jump scares, which simplified the symbolism, such as the heartbeat-like footsteps in the kitchen scenes, proving that commercial pressure can dilute symbolism. This demonstrates that independent productions are allowed to implement bolder symbolism in their films.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the use of symbolism in Malaysian horror films available on Netflix and explores how viewers interpret these symbolic elements within contemporary cinematic narratives. These findings reveal that symbolic figures such as the *pontianak*, along with religious imagery and representations of women's suffering, play a crucial role in shaping both the narrative structure and thematic meaning of Malaysian horror films. These symbols function not only as supernatural elements but also as cultural markers that reflect broader societal concerns related to morality, gender dynamics, and spiritual beliefs in Malaysian society.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of research on Southeast Asian horror cinema by demonstrating how traditional folklore and cultural symbolism continue to influence modern film narratives. Supernatural characters rooted in local folklore remain culturally significant to audiences and often symbolize deeper social concerns, injustices, and moral transgressions. By examining viewers' interpretations of these symbolic elements, this study expands the existing discussion in film studies and cultural studies regarding the relationship between folklore, symbolism, and contemporary cinematic storytelling.

In terms of industry implications, this finding offers valuable insights for filmmakers and creative practitioners involved in the Malaysian film industry. Considering that Malaysian films are gaining greater international exposure through streaming platforms like Netflix, culturally rooted symbolism can serve as a distinctive storytelling element that differentiates local content in the global entertainment market. The incorporation of folklore, religious values, and culturally recognized narratives may enhance the authenticity and international appeal of Malaysian horror films.

From a cultural perspective, Malaysian horror cinema also serves as a medium through which social values, moral concerns, and gender-related tensions are expressed and negotiated. Through the symbolic portrayal of supernatural figures and religious elements, these films reflect the cultural beliefs and moral framework that shape contemporary Malaysian society while maintaining the importance of folklore in modern cinematic narratives.

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