

# Monstrous Feminine in Indonesian Folklore: Female Ghosts as Agents of Gendered Resistance

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**Abstract** We explore how Indonesian female ghosts—Kuntilanak, Sundel Bolong, Wewe Gombel, and Si Manis Jembatan Ancol—embody something far more complex than simple horror. These spectral women transform from victims of patriarchal violence into vengeful agents of justice. Their stories reveal deep cultural anxieties about women's place in Indonesian society. Our descriptive-qualitative analysis connects these folkloric figures to contemporary realities. We examine how ghost narratives reflect ongoing struggles with gender-based violence and inadequate policy responses. Statistical data on violence against women and limited healthcare access illuminate the gaps these stories expose. These female spirits don't just haunt—they critique. They challenge patriarchal structures while demanding recognition of systemic failures. We find that Indonesian folklore anticipates what policy-makers have been slow to address: the urgent need for comprehensive gender equality reforms. The ghosts speak where living women's voices are silenced. We argue their enduring power lies in making visible the violence that society prefers to ignore. This research demonstrates how traditional narratives can illuminate paths

toward more equitable legal frameworks and social structures.

**Keywords** female ghosts; government policies; Indonesian public policies; Indonesian urban legend

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## Introduction

Female ghost figures have become central to Indonesian popular culture, evolving from oral folklore into multimedia phenomena that span horror cinema, television,

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<sup>1</sup> This research is on the name of The Special Program of Zhejiang University “Comparative Studies of Languages and Cultures of BRICS Countries: A Perspective of the Global Civilization Initiative” supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities of China.

literature, and digital platforms. Films featuring Kuntilanak have generated over 50 million viewers since the 1980s, while recent adaptations continue to break box office records (Khan and Afzal 90). These narratives have successfully adapted to new media formats, from traditional wayang performances to viral TikTok content, demonstrating remarkable cultural staying power (Adiprasetio 80). The commercial success of female ghost narratives in Indonesian entertainment reflects their deep cultural roots and ongoing relevance to contemporary audiences. Unlike imported horror content that often fails to achieve similar longevity, these indigenous supernatural figures maintain their appeal by addressing cultural specificities and social concerns that resonate with local experiences (Herlinawati 160).

The historical trajectory of Indonesian ghost narratives reveals their transformation from oral folklore into mass media phenomena. In 1933, the magazine *Penjebar Semangat* began featuring ghost stories as public interest in political content declined, marking an early shift toward supernatural entertainment (Ras 210; Halimah 47). Publications like *Djaka Lodang* and *Jaya Baya* subsequently popularized these tales through dedicated supernatural sections. By the 1980s, Indonesian cinema had adapted these stories into films, cementing figures like Kuntilanak and Sundel Bolong as cultural icons (Khan and Afzal 92; Herlinawati 165). Significantly, female ghosts received greater emphasis than their male counterparts, consistently portrayed as beautiful women who transform into vengeful, monstrous beings. This pattern suggests a complex cultural preoccupation with female agency and the perceived threat of women who transgress traditional social boundaries. While these narratives appear to reinforce patriarchal control by depicting dangerous femininity, they may simultaneously function as allegories of resistance against gender-based oppression.

Despite extensive scholarship on Indonesian folklore and growing attention to gender-based violence, limited research has examined how supernatural narratives function as cultural responses to patriarchal oppression. This study analyzes four prominent female ghost figures—Kuntilanak, Sundel Bolong, Wewe Gombel, and Si Manis Jembatan Ancol—as allegorical texts that reflect and resist gendered violence in Indonesia. Drawing on Jameson's concept of allegory, this research positions these ghost narratives as cultural sites where anxieties about women's roles are expressed and contested (Jameson 134). The study argues that these figures operate beyond folkloric entertainment to critique inadequate legal protections for women and persistent gender-based violence. By examining how these ghosts transform from victims into agents of supernatural revenge, this research demonstrates how Indonesian folklore creates spaces for marginalized voices to challenge gender

norms. The analysis reveals that while these narratives appear to reinforce fears about dangerous femininity, they simultaneously offer critiques of social systems that perpetuate women's vulnerability to violence.

This study treats Indonesian female ghost narratives as more than entertainment or cultural artifacts—they function as embedded social criticism. Following scholarship by Elliott Oring and Simon Bronner, we approach these stories as “vernacular criticism” where communities encode their dissatisfactions with existing power structures. When a Kuntilanak story circulates through kampungs or appears in horror films, it carries implicit critiques of how society handles violence against women. These narratives persist because they address real frustrations that formal institutions fail to acknowledge or resolve.

Indonesian ghost stories operate as what James Scott calls “hidden transcripts”—spaces where marginalized groups can voice critiques of power without confrontation (Scott 136). Unlike academic papers or political speeches, folklore allows communities to discuss systemic problems through metaphor and symbol. A woman who becomes Sundel Bolong after sexual violence speaks to audiences about institutional failures without requiring them to engage in explicit political discourse. The methodology combines close reading of traditional folklore collections—particularly those documented by Zaenuddin and contemporary ethnographers—with analysis of how these stories adapt across different media. Rather than searching for simple allegorical meanings, we examine the complex ways these narratives both challenge and accommodate dominant ideologies, recognizing that folklore rarely offers straightforward resistance or acceptance of social conditions.

Indonesian folklore features four prominent female ghost figures whose narratives center on violence, injustice, and gendered suffering (Khairunnisa and Wardhaningsih 45). These spectral entities share common origins in traumatic death and transformation into vengeful spirits, yet each embodies distinct cultural anxieties about women's roles and experiences in patriarchal society (Hardi 150). Suster Ngesot appears as a crawling figure due to her mutilated legs, marking her tragic origin as a hospital nurse who suffered sexual violence from her employer and colleagues. After enduring brutal abuse, she was murdered and buried at her workplace. Her distinctive crawling movement serves as a physical manifestation of her trauma, while her haunting presence targets those who abuse positions of power over vulnerable women (Sembiring 85).

Si Manis Jembatan Ancol, also known as Mariam or Siti Ariaah, represents resistance against forced marriage and male dominance. Zaenuddin records her

story as a young woman who fled an unwanted marriage but was murdered after being sexually assaulted by criminals (Zaenuddin 33). Her spirit haunts the Ancol Bridge, specifically targeting men with questionable morals. Her selective haunting suggests a moral judgment system that punishes male exploitation while protecting potential victims.

Kuntilanak stands as the most recognizable figure in Indonesian supernatural folklore. Depicted as a vengeful spirit in a white dress with long hair concealing her face, she originated from women who died in childbirth. Her chilling laugh signals her presence as she seeks revenge on those who wronged her in life. The Kuntilanak's association with maternal death taps into cultural anxieties about motherhood and female reproductive roles. Her popularity spans regional variations—known as Pontianak in Malaysia and Singapore—and has generated extensive media adaptations, including Rizal Mantovani's film trilogy (2006-2008) and numerous literary works (Handoyo 112; Wisanggenti 67). On the other hand, Sundel Bolong embodies the trauma of sexual violence through her distinctive physical characteristic: a gaping hole in her back. She represents women who died shortly after childbirth following sexual assault. Unlike Kuntilanak's maternal focus, Sundel Bolong directly confronts sexual violence and its consequences. Her nocturnal haunting of solitary men serves as both a warning and a punishment for potential perpetrators.

These four figures share three critical characteristics that distinguish them within Indonesian folklore. First, their origins invariably involve sexual violence or gender-based oppression, connecting supernatural horror to real-world women's experiences. Second, their transformation from victim to vengeful spirit represents a shift from powerlessness to agency, albeit through supernatural means. Third, their selective targeting suggests moral judgment systems that challenge rather than reinforce patriarchal authority. As Adiprasetyo observes, the continued reproduction of these figures reflects “increasingly repressive situations against women,” indicating their function as cultural responses to persistent gender-based violence (Adiprasetyo 11). Their enduring presence in contemporary media demonstrates how traditional folklore adapts to address ongoing social concerns while maintaining its symbolic power to critique societal failures in protecting women.

This study draws primarily on Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstrous feminine" to analyze how Indonesian female ghosts challenge patriarchal structures. Creed's framework proves particularly relevant because it addresses the specific ways female horror figures embody contradictory roles as both victims and threats within patriarchal systems. Rather than simply reinforcing fears about dangerous

women, these monstrous feminine figures expose deep anxieties about female agency that patriarchal societies struggle to contain (Creed 56).

The monstrous feminine operates through what Creed identifies as boundary disruption—these figures refuse neat categorization as either pure victims or evil perpetrators. Indonesian ghosts like *Kuntilanak* and *Sundel Bolong* exemplify this boundary-crossing power. They transform from women who suffered extreme violence into supernatural agents who enact their own forms of justice. This transformation reveals the inadequacy of patriarchal systems that create the very conditions they claim to prevent. When formal institutions fail to protect women or provide justice, these ghost narratives imagine alternative forms of accountability that operate outside official channels.

What makes these figures particularly subversive is their selective targeting. Unlike random monsters, Indonesian female ghosts demonstrate moral judgment by focusing their vengeance on corrupt authority figures and men who abuse power. This pattern suggests that their monstrosity stems not from inherent evil but from systemic failures that force women into supernatural resistance. The ghosts' beauty-to-horror transformation functions as a critique of how patriarchal systems reduce women to visual objects while remaining blind to the violence that creates these vengeful spirits.

The transformation from beauty to horror in figures like *Kuntilanak* and *Sundel Bolong* reflects the male gaze's anxiety about female agency. These ghosts embody patriarchal fears that attractive women might possess hidden power. Their seductive appearance serves as a trap, luring victims before enacting revenge. This pattern suggests that female beauty, when combined with independence, threatens patriarchal order. However, these narratives also subvert the male gaze by granting agency to female figures. While the stories appear to reinforce fears about dangerous femininity, they simultaneously critique systems that create such dangers. The ghosts' monstrosity emerges from their victimization, suggesting that patriarchal violence produces the very threats it claims to prevent.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection explains the horror associated with female ghosts, particularly those connected to reproduction. Kristeva defines the abject as that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" and "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). Female ghosts embody this boundary-disrupting quality through their association with bodily fluids, death, and reproductive trauma.

*Kuntilanak* exemplifies maternal horror through her connection to childbirth and death. Her origin story—death during childbirth—links her to what Kristeva identifies as the abject realm of bodily fluids and reproductive failure (Kristeva 8).

The maternal body represents the ultimate abject because it challenges boundaries between self and other, life and death. The ghost's association with blood reinforces her abject status. Indonesian folklore often depicts Kuntilanak accompanied by decay or dripping blood. These elements trigger fundamental revulsion toward bodily reminders of mortality. Yet this abjection also grants power, as the ghosts use their disturbing presence to challenge those who wronged them. Kristeva's framework reveals how these figures transgress social boundaries through their very existence. They refuse categorization as either living or dead, pure or corrupt. This boundary-crossing enables resistance to patriarchal systems that depend on clear categories to control women's roles.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity illuminates how female ghosts challenge normative gender roles. Butler argues that gender emerges through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (Butler 33). This perspective reveals how ghost narratives critique the constructed nature of feminine passivity. In life, the women who become ghosts performed traditional gender roles as mothers, wives, or victims. Their transformation into vengeful spirits represents a radical departure from these prescribed performances. Death liberates them from social constraints, allowing them to perform a different femininity characterized by agency and power.

The ghosts' posthumous actions demonstrate what Butler describes as subversive repetition within gender performance. While they initially conformed to traditional feminine roles, their spectral return reveals the instability of these performances. The transformation from victim to avenger suggests that patriarchal gender scripts contain contradictions that can be exploited for resistance. The timing of their rebellion—occurring after death—highlights extreme constraints on living women. Only through supernatural transformation can these figures access the agency denied in life. This structure critiques a social system so oppressive that resistance requires transcending human limitations (Butler 75).

These theoretical frameworks converge to reveal Indonesian female ghosts as complex figures that simultaneously reflect and resist patriarchal oppression. Mulvey's male gaze explains their initial construction as objects of desire and fear (Mulvey 12). Kristeva's abjection illuminates their power to disturb social boundaries (Kristeva 8). Butler's performativity demonstrates their challenge to gender norms (Butler 33). Together, these theories show how folklore creates spaces where marginalized voices can critique dominant power structures. Female ghosts represent responses to systems that fail to protect women or provide justice. Their supernatural agency compensates for inadequate human institutions, offering

alternative forms of resistance within patriarchal frameworks.

These theoretical frameworks intersect with Indonesian cultural beliefs about gender and spirituality to create complex representations of female agency (Dewi and Indriyanto 681). Traditional Javanese and Malay concepts of *Rasa* (intuitive knowledge) and *Sakralitas* (sacredness) emphasize women's spiritual purity, particularly in maternal and domestic roles. Female ghosts violate these ideals through their transformation from victims to vengeful spirits. Kuntilanak's association with childbirth reflects Javanese beliefs about *Darah Ketuban* (amniotic blood), which is considered both sacred and dangerous. Similarly, Sundel Bolong's narrative parallels the stigmatization of sexual assault victims, who are often blamed rather than supported.

Contemporary media representations reveal evolving interpretations of these figures. Indonesian horror films initially reinforced the male gaze by hypersexualizing these ghosts as both desirable and deadly. However, recent adaptations reinterpret female ghosts as resistance figures rather than mere objects of fear. These newer narratives challenge passive victimhood by allowing women to reclaim their stories. The ghosts now function as agents of subversion, embodying patriarchal fears while simultaneously critiquing the systems that created their suffering. This evolution reflects broader changes in Indonesian gender discourse and women's increasing agency in contemporary society.

### **Indonesian Female Ghosts as Symbols of Gendered Subversion**

This analysis examines how Indonesian female ghosts function as sites of gendered resistance within patriarchal folklore. Through applying feminist theoretical frameworks to four prominent ghost figures—Kuntilanak, Suster Ngesot, Si Manis Jembatan Ancol, and Sundel Bolong—this study reveals how these narratives simultaneously reflect and challenge societal anxieties about female agency. The analysis demonstrates that these supernatural figures embody a fundamental contradiction: they emerge from victimization yet transform into powerful agents of resistance.

Indonesian female ghosts occupy a liminal space between victim and perpetrator, disrupting traditional gender boundaries through their posthumous agency. These figures challenge patriarchal expectations by refusing to remain passive after death. Kristeva's concept of abjection illuminates this boundary-crossing power, as these ghosts "disturb identity, system, order" by embodying both life and death, purity and corruption (Kristeva 4). Kuntilanak exemplifies this disruption through her connection to maternal death and childbirth trauma. Her

transformation from victim to vengeful spirit reflects societal fears about women who transgress prescribed roles, particularly those related to motherhood and domesticity. Rather than accepting their fate, these ghosts reclaim agency through supernatural means, creating alternative spaces where marginalized female voices can finally be heard.

Suster Ngesot and Si Manis Jembatan Ancol exemplify the monstrous feminine's subversive potential through their weaponization of female sexuality. These figures operate within what Mulvey identifies as the male gaze framework, initially presenting themselves as objects of desire before revealing their deadly intentions (Mulvey 12). However, their seduction-punishment pattern fundamentally disrupts the passive role typically assigned to women within patriarchal visual economies. Suster Ngesot's transformation from beautiful nurse to crawling predator demonstrates Butler's concept of gender performativity in reverse—she abandons the nurturing feminine performance expected of medical professionals to enact violent retribution against her abusers (Butler 75).

Si Manis Jembatan Ancol's selective targeting reveals the ghost's function as moral arbiter rather than indiscriminate monster. Her haunting of men with "questionable morals" establishes an alternative justice system that operates outside patriarchal legal frameworks. This selective violence aligns with Kristeva's theory of abjection, as these ghosts embody the return of repressed feminine rage that patriarchal society attempts to suppress (Kristeva 8). Their monstrous sexuality becomes a form of resistance that challenges the virgin-whore dichotomy by refusing categorization within either role. Instead, they create a third space where female sexuality serves as an instrument of justice rather than male pleasure, fundamentally disrupting the power dynamics that originally victimized them.

Indonesian female ghosts systematically subvert Mulvey's male gaze by weaponizing their visual appeal to enact revenge. Traditional folklore descriptions emphasize these spirits' initial beauty before revealing their deadly nature. Suster Ngesot appears as an attractive nurse whose beauty masks her vengeful intentions. Her crawling movement, caused by severed legs, transforms her from object of desire into agent of terror. This physical transformation disrupts the male gaze's assumption of female passivity, as her disability becomes a source of supernatural power rather than vulnerability (Mulvey 14).

Si Manis Jembatan Ancol employs a similar strategy of visual deception. Folklore narratives describe her as exceptionally beautiful, using this appearance to lure unsuspecting men to the Ancol Bridge. However, her selective targeting reveals moral judgment rather than indiscriminate violence. She specifically haunts men

with “questionable morals,” suggesting an alternative justice system that operates outside patriarchal legal frameworks. This selective approach challenges the male gaze’s reduction of women to visual objects by demonstrating that female beauty can serve purposes beyond male pleasure. The seduction-punishment pattern in these narratives fundamentally disrupts patriarchal visual economies. Rather than remaining passive objects of observation, these ghosts actively manipulate their appearance to achieve specific goals. Their beauty becomes a tool of resistance that inverts traditional power dynamics, transforming the male gaze from a source of female objectification into a trap that enables feminine revenge.

Kuntilanak and Sundel Bolong embody Kristeva’s concept of abjection through their association with reproductive trauma and bodily boundaries. Kuntilanak’s origin in childbirth death connects her to what Kristeva identifies as the ultimate abject—the maternal body that challenges distinctions between self and other, life and death (Kristeva 8). Indonesian folklore emphasizes her blood connection, particularly the *darah ketuban* (amniotic blood) that accompanies birth. This blood symbolism positions her at the boundary between sacred creation and dangerous pollution.

Sundel Bolong’s physical manifestation more explicitly demonstrates abjection through the gaping hole in her back. This wound, result of sexual violence, makes visible the trauma typically hidden within patriarchal systems. Her physical deformity serves as permanent testimony to the violence she endured, refusing society’s tendency to silence or forget such experiences. The hole functions as what Kristeva describes as a boundary disruption—it breaks the integrity of the body while simultaneously marking the violence that created it (Kristeva 12). Both figures use their abject status to challenge social boundaries and expose patriarchal failures. Their disturbing presence forces recognition of injustices that were previously ignored or minimized. By embodying the return of repressed trauma, they create spaces where suppressed truths about gender-based violence can finally be acknowledged. Their abjection becomes a form of resistance that refuses to allow society to forget or normalize the violence they experienced.

These ghost figures demonstrate Butler’s concept of gender performativity by abandoning traditional feminine roles in favor of active resistance. In life, these women performed expected gender scripts—as nurses, mothers, or victims of male violence. Their posthumous transformation represents what Butler describes as the potential for subversive repetition within gender performance (Butler 112).

Kuntilanak’s case illustrates this transformation most clearly. Her death during childbirth should have reinforced her maternal identity, yet she returns as a figure

who threatens rather than nurtures children. This inversion of maternal expectations demonstrates the instability of gender roles that Butler identifies as central to performativity theory (Butler 33). Her spectral performance of vengeance replaces the nurturing performance expected of mothers, revealing the constructed nature of feminine passivity. Suster Ngesot's transformation from caregiver to killer similarly subverts professional gender expectations. As a nurse, she was expected to embody feminine qualities of care and service. Her posthumous violence against men who abuse power inverts this caring role, using her medical knowledge for destruction rather than healing. Her crawling movement, initially a sign of victimization, becomes a distinctive feature that enhances her threatening presence.

These alternative performances create what Butler describes as spaces for resistance within gender norms. By refusing to remain victims, these ghosts demonstrate that feminine passivity is not natural but constructed. Their posthumous agency suggests that women's apparent acceptance of subordination may mask deeper forms of resistance that emerge when traditional constraints are removed.

The convergence of these three theoretical frameworks reveals Indonesian female ghosts as complex sites of cultural resistance. They simultaneously reflect patriarchal anxieties about female autonomy while providing spaces for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives. Their transformation from victims to agents demonstrates the productive potential of resistance within oppressive systems. These ghost narratives function as cultural critiques that expose the inadequacies of existing legal and social protections for women. By creating supernatural spaces where justice can be achieved, they highlight the failures of human institutions to address gender-based violence. Their continued presence in contemporary Indonesian culture suggests ongoing relevance to current struggles for gender equality and women's rights.

This analysis demonstrates that Indonesian female ghosts function as sophisticated sites of gendered resistance through three interconnected mechanisms. First, these figures subvert Mulvey's male gaze by weaponizing their beauty to enact revenge rather than serving as passive objects of desire (Mulvey 14). Second, they embody Kristeva's concept of abjection by transgressing social boundaries through their association with reproductive trauma and bodily violation (Kristeva 12). Third, they exemplify Butler's gender performativity by abandoning traditional feminine roles in favor of active agency and moral arbitration (Butler 75). The convergence of these theoretical frameworks reveals that these ghost narratives serve as cultural critiques of inadequate institutional responses to gender-based violence. Their supernatural agency compensates for the failures of legal and social systems to

protect women or provide justice for crimes against them. This folkloric resistance becomes particularly significant when examined against Indonesia's contemporary policy landscape, where legal frameworks continue to inadequately address the systemic violence that these ghost stories have long criticized.

### **Folkloric Resistance and Contemporary Policy Failures: Indonesian Gender-Based Violence in Cultural and Legal Context**

Indonesian female ghost narratives reveal cultural patterns that persist in contemporary gender-based violence and institutional responses. These folkloric representations illuminate structural continuities between traditional patriarchal oppression and modern policy failures. The ghosts' origins in institutional abandonment, incomplete justice, and victim silencing mirror current deficiencies in Indonesia's legal and healthcare systems. This analysis demonstrates how folkloric insights provide a critical lens for understanding persistent policy inadequacies despite legislative reforms. The following examination traces how folkloric themes manifest in current violence patterns, revealing deep structural issues that legalistic approaches fail to address.

Contemporary Indonesian gender-based violence statistics reveal disturbing parallels to institutional failures depicted in ghost narratives. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection reported 14,157 cases of violence against women in 2023. Significantly, 70% of victims knew their perpetrators, including family members, educators, and state officials (Triwidiyanti). This pattern mirrors the folklore theme of betrayal by trusted authority figures. Suster Ngesot's victimization by medical colleagues exemplifies this dynamic. The folkloric emphasis on workplace and institutional violence reflects ongoing realities where women remain vulnerable to abuse by authority figures.

Indonesia's maternal mortality crisis demonstrates the healthcare dimension of folkloric violence. The Ministry of Health reports 183 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2022. This rate significantly exceeds Malaysia's 20 per 100,000 (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia 87). This reality echoes Kuntilanak's origin in childbirth trauma, where inadequate medical care results in preventable deaths. The folklore's emphasis on reproductive trauma parallels how contemporary maternal mortality reflects institutional neglect of women's healthcare needs.

Ghost narratives' selective targeting patterns also mirror contemporary violence statistics. Si Manis Jembatan Ancol's focus on morally questionable men reflects evidence that perpetrators often abuse multiple victims. The *Lembaga Perlindungan Saksi dan Korban* data shows repeat offenses and systematic abuse patterns. These

parallels suggest that ghost narratives encode cultural knowledge about violence patterns that persist across generations.

The folkloric theme of victim silencing finds expression in contemporary reporting challenges. Many cases remain unreported due to social stigma, institutional barriers, and fear of retaliation. The ghosts' posthumous voice-claiming represents what living women often cannot achieve within existing systems. This continuity between traditional silencing mechanisms and contemporary institutional failures reveals structural issues that legislative reforms alone cannot address.

Traditional beliefs about women's spiritual purity continue to influence contemporary victim-blaming attitudes, creating direct continuities between folkloric themes and institutional responses to gender-based violence. Indonesian cultural concepts of *kesucian perempuan* (female purity) position women's moral worth as dependent on sexual innocence and submission to patriarchal authority (Blackburn 78). The transformation of pure women into vengeful spirits in ghost narratives directly parallels how sexual violence victims face social stigmatization in contemporary Indonesia. Research by Komnas Perempuan demonstrates that 60% of sexual assault victims report experiencing victim-blaming from family members, with common responses including accusations that the woman "invited" the attack through improper behavior or dress (Komnas Perempuan 23). This stigmatization mirrors folkloric patterns where women's spiritual corruption following violence makes them dangerous to society.

Recent documented cases reveal how these folkloric themes of corrupted purity directly influence institutional responses to sexual violence. In 2019, police in Central Java advised a teenage rape victim to marry her attacker, treating marriage as a mechanism to restore her "damaged" honor (Tempo Magazine). This response demonstrates the persistence of traditional beliefs that position sexual violence as contamination rather than crime. Similarly, the Indonesian Council of Ulema's controversial 2021 fatwa suggesting that rape victims bear partial responsibility for their assault echoes folkloric narratives where women's transformation into vengeful spirits results from their own moral failings (Jakarta Post). These institutional responses reveal how cultural beliefs about female purity function as mechanisms for transferring blame from perpetrators to victims, effectively protecting patriarchal authority structures.

The ghost narratives anticipate and critique these victim-blaming patterns through their emphasis on institutional betrayal. Suster Ngesot's victimization by medical colleagues, Si Manis Jembatan Ancol's murder following attempted escape from forced marriage, and Kuntulanak's death during childbirth all involve

failures by authority figures who should have provided protection. These folkloric patterns of institutional abandonment directly correlate with contemporary evidence of systemic bias in sexual violence cases. A 2022 study by the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation found that 40% of sexual assault cases were dismissed by police due to "insufficient evidence," with investigators frequently questioning victims' credibility rather than pursuing perpetrators (YLBHI 156). The folklore's emphasis on supernatural revenge emerges precisely because human institutions consistently fail to provide justice or protection for women.

Indonesia's Sexual Violence Crime Law (UU No. 12/2022) reveals why communities might turn to supernatural narratives for justice. The law caps sexual violence sentences at four years with fines of IDR 50,000,000—penalties that hardly match the lifelong trauma victims endure. More problematic is the law's implementation. Adimaja found that investigations drag on for months, with many cases simply abandoned by authorities (Adimaja 44). Police departments lack clear protocols, leaving officers unprepared to handle sensitive cases appropriately.

The gap between legal promises and reality becomes stark in specific incidents. In one documented case, police told a sexual assault victim to marry her attacker—treating marriage as a solution that would eliminate the need for prosecution. This response exposes how the new law fails to challenge deep-rooted attitudes that position women's honor as more important than their safety. When formal justice systems consistently disappoint, it's hardly surprising that ghost stories featuring supernatural revenge maintain their cultural power. These narratives don't just reflect frustration with inadequate legal protections—they imagine alternative forms of accountability that actually work.

When legal systems consistently fail women, ghost stories offer imagined alternatives. *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol* doesn't hunt randomly—she targets men with questionable morals, creating the kind of moral accountability that human courts struggle to provide. *Suster Ngesot* focuses her rage on supervisors who abuse their positions, addressing workplace harassment that employment laws barely acknowledge. These selective patterns suggest communities use supernatural narratives to work through their frustrations with institutions that protect powerful men rather than vulnerable women.

The ghost stories point toward three persistent problems that legal reforms haven't solved: corrupt authority figures face minimal consequences, justice processes favor perpetrators over victims, and healthcare systems neglect women's needs during medical crises. Individual prosecutions won't fix these structural issues. Real change would require mandatory reporting for institutional abuse,

specialized courts trained in gender-based violence, and judicial education that challenges victim-blaming assumptions. But current policy discussions rarely acknowledge how deeply these problems run.

Contemporary feminist theory helps explain why these folkloric critiques remain relevant. When legal proceedings treat women primarily as evidence rather than people, they replicate the same objectification that creates conditions for violence in the first place. When healthcare policies ignore how reproductive trauma connects to broader patterns of gender-based violence, they miss opportunities for prevention. When institutions refuse to recognize that gender roles are learned rather than natural, they perpetuate the very attitudes that justify abuse. Indonesian ghost stories have been making these connections for generations, suggesting that policy makers might benefit from taking folklore more seriously as social commentary.

### **Conclusion**

Our analysis reveals that Indonesian female ghost narratives operate as sophisticated forms of cultural critique, transforming victims of patriarchal violence into agents of alternative justice systems. *Kuntilanak*, *Suster Ngesot*, *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol*, and *Sundel Bolong* demonstrate how traditional folklore encodes community knowledge about violence patterns and institutional failures. These spectral figures subvert conventional gender expectations by weaponizing feminine attributes—beauty, vulnerability, and bodily disruption—to challenge corrupt authority figures and morally compromised men. Through their selective targeting and posthumous agency, these ghosts create parallel systems of accountability where formal legal structures prove inadequate. We find that their persistent presence in contemporary Indonesian popular culture directly correlates with ongoing institutional failures to address gender-based violence, as evidenced by current statistics on violence against women and insufficient policy protections.

The theoretical framework combining feminist film theory, abjection studies, and performativity analysis illuminates how these narratives function as sites of resistance within patriarchal constraints. We argue that these ghost stories serve as cultural barometers, measuring the gap between social expectations and institutional realities regarding women's protection and justice. Their enduring relevance suggests that supernatural resistance emerges precisely where legal and social systems fail to provide adequate recourse for gendered violence. This research contributes to feminist folklore studies by demonstrating how traditional narratives anticipate contemporary policy needs and encode critical insights about systemic violence.

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