



LAW AND IDENTITY:

Cinematic Depictions of Muslim Women in Indonesia

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Abstract: Many studies have been conducted on Muslim women. However, little research has been carried out about Muslim women in legal-themed films by global researchers. In this regard, this study aims to fill the research gap by exploring Muslim women in Indonesian films with legal content. The study employed a qualitative-interpretive approach, utilizing data collected from the films *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa*. The results of the study showed three categories of Muslim women's portrayals in the films: first, Muslim women oppressed by the law that is dominated by male perspectives; second, Muslim women who challenge the law; and third, Muslim women who become agents of change in the law. These findings suggest that Muslim women's roles in responding to conservative interpretations of Islamic law include accepting, challenging, and transforming them. This study contributes to the discourse on Islamic law by examining how conservative interpretations of Islamic legal authority—particularly in the domain of family law—are represented, contested, and renegotiated through cinematic portrayals of Muslim women in Indonesian films.

Keywords: Muslim women, Islam, law, cinematic, film, identity, conservative

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v29i2.1579>

Introduction

CURRENTLY, in the midst of legal pluralism that includes national law, customary law¹, and Islamic law², the position of Muslim

¹ D. Lev, *Legal Evolution and Political Authority in Indonesia: Selected Essays*, London-Leiden Series on Law, Administration and Development (Brill, 2021).

women is a continuously debated topic³ both in the public and private spheres.⁴ Muslim women are often faced with complex identity dynamics, namely as citizens whose rights are guaranteed by the constitution⁵, as individuals who are bound by social and religious norms⁶, and as symbols of morality and honor in patriarchal cultural constructions.⁷ However, Muslim women are also faced with injustice in the law, oppression in the name of law, and resistance to the law. This phenomenon indicates that Muslim women in law on a global scale are very interesting to study, both from monodisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, in the public or private sphere. Rather than positioning Muslim women solely as victims of legal oppression or as social actors, this study approaches them as legal subjects who actively negotiate, challenge, and reinterpret conservative interpretations of Islamic law. One of the media that represent Muslim women in the context of law is film. Films portray how society understands and responds to the law either as a tool of order used by individuals or collectives, or as an instrument of inequality present in certain societies. In many cases, films as products of creative processes serve as aesthetic media to criticize discriminatory legal norms and practices affecting vulnerable groups, such as Muslim women. Thus, films in this context play a role as a discursive space that allows for renegotiation of the meaning of justice in society, authority, and legal legitimacy within dynamic socio-cultural settings.⁸

²John R. Bowen, *Islam, Law, and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴Baehaqi, Baehaqi. "Posisi Perempuan Perspektif Ulama Klasik". *Ulumuna* 12, no. 1 (November 5, 2017): 129-142. Accessed May 23, 2025.

⁵E. Ann Black and Gary F. Bell, eds., *Law and Legal Institutions of Asia: Traditions, Adaptations and Innovations*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

⁶Irzum Farihah, "Religious Behavior of Ngorek Women on the Coast of Lamongan," *Sawwa: Journal of Gender Studies* 14, no. 2 (October 21, 2019): 191–206.

⁷SA Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*, ACLS Humanities E-Book (Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁸Putri Rahayu Lestari and Zaky Mubarok, "Representation of Politics and Religion in the Film *Joseon Attorney: A Morality*," *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 1 (2023): 123–130.

In recent years, Islamic-themed films, both globally and in Indonesia, have become important platforms for representation that reflect and critique Islamic legal norms, especially those affecting women. Films such as *Persepolis* (Iran) and *Wadjda* (Saudi Arabia) highlight how women grapple with patriarchal laws and cultures that limit their mobility. In Saudi Arabia, *Wadjda* depicts a young girl's struggle to claim her right to cycle, reflecting cultural and legal restrictions on women's mobility. Framing analysis shows that the film illustrates the process of domestication of women in patriarchal Arab culture, with social and legal pressures that limit women's roles in the public sphere.^{9,10} Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the films *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *Khalifah* raise issues of family law, conservative religious interpretations, and resistance to restrictive gender norms.^{11,12} Through narratives and visual symbols, these films form a discursive space that questions the authority of Islamic law and creates opportunities for a more just reinterpretation of women.¹³ Through visual representation, these films provide a room for a deeper understanding of the challenges and struggles of Muslim women in addressing patriarchal interpretations of law and social norms. Scholarship on Islamic law and gender demonstrates that fiqh, particularly in the area of family law, is not a fixed legal system but an interpretive tradition shaped by historical, social, and patriarchal contexts, which continues to be contested by Muslim women in contemporary settings.

Films often stimulate debates about women, Islam, and law. As cultural products, films not only reflect social realities, but also

⁹Gita Murniasih, "The Process of Domestication of Women in Arab Culture (Analysis of Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki's Framing Model in Film)" (January 30, 2018).

¹⁰Ulin Nida, "Gender Bias in Haifan Al-Mansour's Film *Wadjda* (2012) (Feminist Literary Criticism)" (2020).

¹¹Intan Nur Handayani, Karina Chairunnisa, and Trisna Kumala Satya Dewi, "Islamic Feminism in the Film *Woman with a Turban Necklace*" 20 (2023).

¹²Kurniawati, "Representation of Women in the Film *Khalifah* (A Semiotic Study of Roland Barthes)," Thesis, UIN Sunan Kalijaga" (2017)

¹³Dimas Permadi, "Cinema and the Space for Negotiating Muslim Women's Identity in Contemporary Indonesian Films," *Albab: Journal of Islamic and Cultural Studies*, 9, 1 (2020).

enable social reflection on different views about legal, religious, and gender issues.¹⁴ In these works, Muslim women are often depicted through legal issues, such as marriage, divorce, polygamy, inheritance, bodily autonomy, and the right to education,¹⁵ demonstrating the complexity of their legal position in Indonesian society today. In addition, women are also depicted as figures who are oppressed by the law. This is due to the dominance of men in law. The oppression and intimidation of women in the name of law in the context of Islam stem from women's powerlessness before the law that predominantly defends men.¹⁶

A study examining the representation of Muslim women in legal-themed films would be interesting because such films allow people to understand how the law is formed, interpreted, and questioned by society. In fact, it is reinterpreted to give rise to new interpretations that sometimes deconstruct old interpretations considered irrelevant to the development of the times. Films as products of creative processes can serve as a tool for reflection of the legal conditions that apply in a particular society and for criticism of gender inequality legitimized by the legal system.¹⁷ In several contemporary Indonesian films, Muslim women are often portrayed in a low bargaining position before family law, or appear as agents of resistance to restrictive norms.¹⁸ Undoubtedly, the representation of Muslim women in films with legal content cannot be separated from the conception that film is an imitation of reality presented in a more aesthetic form.

¹⁴ Wierma Intan Putri, *Representation of Indonesian Muslim Women: Analysis of Representation in Three Religious Films* (Yogyakarta, 2013).

¹⁵ L. Ahmed and K. Ali, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 2021),

¹⁶ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015),

¹⁷ Faye Ginsburs, "Embedded Aesthetics: Creating a Discursive Space for Indigenous Media," in *Critical Cultural Policy Studies*, ed. Justin Lewis and Toby Miller, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2003), 88–99.

¹⁸ Handayani, Chairunnisa, and Dewi, "Islamic Feminism in the Film Perempuan Berkalung Sorban." 20, no. 2 (December 30, 2023): 93–102.

In a global context, research on women and law has been conducted by the following researchers.¹⁹ Macpherson (2007) conducted an in-depth and aesthetic study on the resistance of a woman named Graham to the law. She was suspected of murder and was found guilty by law. In fact, there was no strong evidence indicating that she was responsible for the murder. This research shows that law is unfair towards women.²⁰ Research conducted by Benton et al. (1993) shows that in films in the global context, women often resist the law because it is more biased towards men. Likewise, Carroll (1990) tried to claim that women's fight against the law is a form of defense against male oppression.²¹ In addition, several other studies examining films, women, and the law found that women experience defeat by the law, both court law and customary law.²² Women portrayed as lawyers in films are also defeated when trying to enforce the law.²³ This phenomenon shows that women are often depicted as suffering defeat by a legal system that is largely in favor of male power.

In Indonesia, research on women and law is not new. Several researchers have conducted studies on this subject, including the following. Kusumawati (2013) explored Islamic feminism in the work of Abidah El Khalieqy, which is considered successful in presenting the voices of Muslim women in confronting the dominance of patriarchal culture and unfair laws.²⁴ Lestari (2013) examined how films such as *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* shape and change the

¹⁹ Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl. "Spectacular Expectations: Women, Law and Film." *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 3 (2007): 641–58.

²⁰ Benton, Robin, Barbara Czechanski, Holley Pavy, and Marly L. Sweeney. "Breaking the Law," A Metaphor for Female Empowerment Through Aggression: Women in Film." *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 21, no. 1 (1993): 133-147.

²¹ Carroll, Noël. "The image of women in film: A defense of a paradigm." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 4 (1990): 349-360.

²² Kamir, Orit. *Framed: Women in Law and Film*. Duke University Press, 2006.

²³ Caplow, Stacy. "Still in the dark: disappointing images of women lawyers in the movies." *Women's Rts. L. Rep.* 20 (1998): 55.

²⁴ Aning Ayu Kusumawati, "Islamic Feminism in the Novel Abidah El Khalieqy," *Thaqafiyat: Journal of Islamic Language, Civilization and Information* 14, no. 2 (2013): 115–137.

representation of Muslim women in Indonesia over time.²⁵ Research by Hadi (2021) specifically examined the discourse of Islamic family law in Indonesian films and found a conservative tendency in interpreting issues such as polygamy and divorce.²⁶ In addition, Sari (2018) investigated the identity formation of women wearing the niqab in the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. The results of her study showed that the figure of Muslim women in the film is heavily influenced by patriarchal values or a culture that places men as the dominant party.²⁷ Research by Anggraini Jamilatun, Triska Candra Sari, and Mhd Lailan Arqam (2021) explored the existence and struggle of Muslim women in history through the film *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan*, which reflects the struggle for women's educational rights in a patriarchal society.²⁸ These studies showed that films have an important role as a discursive space in shaping, reproducing, or even challenging the legal views and identities of Muslim women. In the context of the representation of Muslim women in the media, several main scopes of Islamic law are frequently featured in film narratives, such as the laws of marriage, divorce, inheritance, polygamy, and testimony. The laws of marriage and divorce are dominant themes because in practice, women often encounter difficulties in accessing justice, especially due to economic dependence, limited legal knowledge, and interpretations of sharia that often favors men.²⁹ Putra and Anwar (2023) proposed reinterpretations to adapt to today's modern social reality where women also bear the economic burden of the

²⁵Novi Erlita, "Representation of Women in Indonesian Films," *Journal of Visi Komunikasi* (2010): 123–152.

²⁶ Mukhammad Nur Hadi, "Representation of Islamic Family Law in Indonesian Films," *Abwal: Journal of Islamic Family Law* 14, no. 1 (2021): 1–23, 14, 1 (2021),

²⁷ Sulhizah Wulan Sari, "Constructed Islamic Identities in Veiled Woman Represented in *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* Film (2008)," *Al-Turas Bulletin* 24, no. 2 (October 30, 2018): 381–397.

²⁸English: The Existence of Women in Islam Studying the Film *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan*.

²⁹Putri Ayu Lestari, "Gender Equity in Islamic Marriage and Divorce: A Narrative Review," *Sinergi International Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 4 (2024): 203–214.

family.³⁰ Therefore, polygamy in films is often the subject of criticism due to the less-than-ideal implementation of the legal system.³¹ Another issue frequently featured in films is the testimony of women in the legal realm and the iddah period only imposed on women. In some film representations, Muslim women do not appear to have an equal bargaining position in legal decision-making, including in religious courts. A study conducted by Isla, Kurniawan, and Amelia (2023) even boldly proposed that men also undergo the *iddah period* after divorce or the death of their wife. This proposal is an intentional effort to promote emotional and social justice between husband and wife.³² This shows that women often have limited power or a weak position to advocate for legal justice for themselves.

Previous studies have shown that women are often at a disadvantage in religious-based legal systems. In Islamic family law, women repeatedly experience injustice in matters of divorce, child custody, and inheritance.³³ Such inequality is also reflected in films and literature, demonstrating how Muslim women must struggle to address normative boundaries formed by religious interpretations and legal systems that do not always favor them.³⁴ This trend gives urgency to re-reflect on the interpretation of Islamic law to make it more contextual, fair, and responsive to the life experiences of Muslim women today. Although studies on women, Islamic law, and their representations in the media have been widely conducted, most of the research still focuses on normative legal analysis or sociological reading of women's position in the Islamic legal systems. Research gap is still found in

³⁰Herianto Putra and Desi Anwar, "Muhammad Shahrur's Perspective on Gender Equality in Inheritance Distribution," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Law* 6, no. 2 (2023): 56–72.

³¹Dewi Ulfa Lailatul Fitria and Rona Merita, "Islamic Law Review on Polygamy: Gender Justice and Human Rights," *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHESS)* 5, no. 2 (2023): 169-175

³²Ruby Isla, Asep Kurniawan, and Lita Amelia, "Islamic Family Law Reform: Iddah for Husbands as an Effort for Gender Equality," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Law* 6, no. 1 (2023): 1–16.

³³Lestari, "Gender Equity in Islamic Marriage and Divorce: A Narrative Review."

³⁴Alicia Izharuddin, *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema* (Springer, 2016).

understanding the roles of popular media, particularly widely consumed films, in forming, strengthening, or even challenging patriarchal legal narratives against Muslim women. Relatively little research has been carried out on the relationship between Islamic law and readings of women's representation in both local and global films, especially from an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges law, gender studies, and media. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine: 1) how representations of Muslim women in Islamic-themed films reflect or critique Islamic law on issues such as marriage, divorce, education, body rights, and inheritance, and 2) how these representations can contribute to the formulation of a more just and contextual legal interpretation for women. Unlike previous studies, this study specifically focuses on Indonesian films with Islamic themes and demonstrates that until now, there have been no studies that comprehensively examine the relationship between Muslim women, Islamic law, and its representations in contemporary Indonesian films. This study attempts to fill the gaps in literature that has not comprehensively discussed Muslim women in films and their associations with Islamic law. Despite extensive studies on gender and Islam, limited attention has been given to how popular films function as discursive spaces where Islamic legal norms—such as marriage, obedience, and moral authority—are represented, questioned, and reinterpreted.

Method

This study used a qualitative-interpretative method because the data are presented narratively.³⁵ In this study, Islamic law is examined through cinematic representations of religious norms, family law practices, authoritative religious figures, and dialogic references to halal-haram, sin, obedience, and moral legitimacy, which collectively function as expressions of Islamic legal reasoning in popular culture. The researchers analyzed,

³⁵ Silverman David. "Introducing qualitative research." *Qualitative research* 3, no. 3 (2016): 14-25; Anas Ahmadi et al., "Framing the Faithful: Islam, Gender, and National Identity on the Indonesian Screen." *KARSA Journal of Social and Islamic Culture* 33, no. 2 (2025): 690-717.

interpreted, and constructed the research findings. The data were collected through literature studies, namely through film media that have relevance to the topic of Muslim women in the legal context, especially conservative Islamic law.

The data were collected from the film *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (2009)³⁶ and *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* (2024).³⁷ These films dominantly represent Muslim women in the legal context. The data were analyzed using the flow-sequential method with the following steps: data identification, data classification, data reduction, and data presentation.³⁸ An intersubjectivity model was adopted to enhance data analysis and construction of the findings by conducting peer debriefing sessions and consultations with experts in women's studies and film analysis.

Muslim Women Oppressed in the Name of Law

In Indonesia, Muslim women tend to have complex relationships with the conservative Islamic legal system. Although rooted in religious teachings, the practical application of this law is largely influenced by patriarchal interpretations that restrict women's freedom of movement, especially in areas of family law, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. These conservative interpretations of Islamic law are often used to legitimize male dominance and restrictions on women's rights in the name of piety, honor, or social stability.³⁹ Films such as *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (2009) and *Tuhan Izinkan Aku Berdosa* (2024) exemplify how popular media critiques these conservative interpretations.

Muslim women in Indonesia frequently face restrictions and oppression due to such conservative interpretations of patriarchal Islamic law, especially in family law such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Literal interpretations of verses such as Q.S. An-

³⁶Servia Parves, "Perempuan Berkalung Sorban" (Starvision, 2009).

³⁷Punjabi Raam, "Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa" (MPV Film, 2024).

³⁸Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications, 2016.

³⁹Saifuddin Zubaidi, "Cigarette Fatwas, Contestation of Religious Authority and Politics in Indonesia," *Ijtihad: Journal of Islamic Law and Humanitarian Discourse* 20, no. 1 (June 10, 2020): 61–78.

Nisa (4):34 are often used to legitimize male dominance, although Islamic feminists such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Fatima Mernissi show that these interpretations are historical and contextual, not absolute.

Feminist approaches and gender analysis open space to understand that Islamic law should be dynamic and prioritize justice and gender equality. The films *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* depict oppression due to patriarchal interpretations and at the same time show women's resistance to this injustice. Thus, oppression of women is not solely a consequence of religious teachings but is significantly shaped by gender-biased interpretations and legal practices, highlighting the urgent need for more just and contextual reinterpretations.

In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, the main character Anissa is depicted as a female Islamic student who questions the Islamic law interpretation that prohibits women from pursuing higher education and compels them to accept arranged marriages. Her rejection of this legal system represents a form of resistance to narrow interpretations of Islamic law that are perceived as gender-biased. She voices that Islam does not prohibit women from thinking or studying; rather, it is the narrow interpretations that limit them. Likewise, *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* portrays the character of Farah, a young woman who is forced to marry at a young age and must endure domestic violence. Kiran ultimately rises and rejects the religious interpretation that justifies her suffering. She emphasizes that Islam never condones violence against women, and that religious pretexts should not be used to legitimize oppression.

The films *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa*, represent how women are often victims of a social system framed by a patriarchal religious interpretation. In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Annisa encounters various forms of oppression embedded in narratives of "honor", "slander", and "obedience" attached to women's bodies and identities. The prohibition of horse riding, rejection of leadership positions, educational restrictions, and forced marriages are real examples of *symbolic restraint* frequently observed in conservative Islamic boarding school communities. Domestic violence is also portrayed as

something justified by religious teachings, showing how religion can serve as a tool to legitimize a husband's power over his wife, as depicted at the following figure.



Figure 1: Annisa questions women's rights to higher education and (Perempuan Berkalung Sorban, 2009)

Meanwhile, *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* illustrates Kiran's suffering, who is treated unfairly after becoming a victim of slander and sexual exploitation. She is shunned, insulted, and distrusted because of her status as a woman and a former sex worker. Interestingly, the men in this film are still accepted by the community and exempted from similar social stigma. Gender inequality in beliefs, morals, and social laws in the name of religion can be clearly observed. This shows that oppression of women in the context of Islam occurs not only in the family room or Islamic boarding school, but also in urban Muslim communities in contemporary settings.

The oppression of Muslim women in the name of law portrayed in the films is illustrated in the table below.

Table 1. Representation of Gendered Religious Authority and Patriarchal Control in Selected Indonesian Films

Film	Scene/Dialogue	Meaning and Representation
<i>Perempuan Berkalung Sorban</i>	Annisa protested by comparing female Islamic figures who were skilled at fighting and leading troops and asked, "So what if I am the daughter of a kyai??"	Cultural-religious interpretations are used to control the bodies and activities of women, especially the children of religious figures.

	Annisa's husband committed violence against Annisa because Annisa chose to pray midday prayers first instead of serving her husband. And her husband argued, "A Muslim wife is obliged to serve her husband, if you delay, you will burn in hell, even if you want to pray a thousand times, Allah will not hear you, your sin is the same as your husband's."	These scenes illustrate how patriarchal interpretations of Islamic family law and religious authority are mobilized to legitimize women's subordination, demonstrating the misuse of Islamic legal norms to justify control and violence
<i>Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa</i>	After the slander, Kiran is shunned, cursed, and distrusted.	Religious law is used to justify men's actions and discredit women. Kiran becomes a victim of slander and social judgment embedded in a religious narrative.
	Kiran is considered unholy and unworthy of marriage after becoming a prostitute.	This shows that women are confined by double moral standards. Social laws that are considered to root from religion are used to deprive women of opportunities for repentance and reconciliation.

Muslim Women Who Challenge the Law

In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, symbolic and verbal forms of resistance to a system that limits women are featured. Annisa firmly challenges the injustice that occurs in both families and educational institutions. She questions the narratives of "slander", "obedience", and "appropriateness" that are often used to silence women. Annisa's challenge is not merely driven by emotion but also grounded in logic and knowledge of Islamic history. She courageously demands equal rights to education and the freedom to choose her partner.

In contrast, the film *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* features a more spiritual and existential form of lawsuit. Kiran not only questions social norms but also challenges God's justice in her life. The sentences "*Gua patah hati sama Tuhan*" (I'm heartbroken with God) and "*Yang yang dosa, yang yang kalah?*" (Who is the sinner, who is

the loser?) describe the sadness of a woman who feels abandoned and betrayed by the moral system she has believed in. The challenges articulated by Annisa and Kiran are directed not at Islam as a faith, but at conservative interpretations of Islamic law that deny women access to education, justice, and moral recognition. The depiction of Muslim women who challenge the law in the films is illustrated in the table below.

Table 2. Cinematic Representations of Female Resistance to Patriarchal Religious Authority

Film	Scene	Meaning and Representation
<i>Perempuan Berkalung Sorban</i>	Anissa questions women's right to college: <i>"Why are men allowed to go to college but not women? Abi even sold his land so that Mas Wildan could go to college, but why not Annisa?"</i>	Anissa directly challenges the social and religious structures that oppress women. She demands justice in education, freedom of choice, and conservative Islamic law.
	Annisa challenges her father's prohibition against her riding a horse on the grounds, as a cleric's daughter, she is deemed unfit. She compares herself to female Islamic figures skilled at fighting and leading troops, questioning, <i>"So what if she's the daughter of a cleric?"</i>	Demonstrating the courage to challenge religious interpretations and norms that restrict women, and affirming that women can also be active and empowered.
<i>Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa</i>	Kiran is disappointed because she has always been religious, but her life is ruined.	Symbolic lawsuit against the patriarchal interpretation and practice of Islamic law that does not favor women.
	Kiran said: <i>"Whose sin is it, whose punishment, is it?"</i> (An implicit sentence when she feels all the blame is placed on her)	This constitutes a form of resistance to social and patriarchal interpretations of <i>fiqh</i> that does not give justice to women. Kiran voices the concerns of many Muslim women who do not receive protection even though they are victims.

Women as Agents of Change in Conservative Islamic Law

Ultimately, both films provide space for women to triumph over the imperfect interpretations of Islamic law or even become agents of change. *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* depicts Anisa's transformation from a silenced Islamic boarding school child to a critical and independent intellectual woman. By pursuing divorce, education, and public exposure of religious hypocrisy, the female characters enact forms of legal agency that challenge and destabilize conservative Islamic legal authority. In the context of Islamic law, women have equal standing in various matters, including education. Women also contribute to improving the nation's education, not just men.⁴⁰

In *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa*, Kiran is depicted as a woman who has the audacity to record and expose the hypocrisy of Pak Alim, a religious figure who commits sexual violence. This action is a form of not only self-defense, but also resistance to *pseudo-religious power* the authority of those who misuse Islamic symbols and teachings to oppress women. The film resolves with Kiran using digital evidence and public space as tools of resistance, reflecting that modern women can voice the truth in a strong and strategic way.

The depiction of Muslim women as agents of change for conservative Islamic law in the films is illustrated in the following table.

Table 3. Cinematic Representations of Women's Transformative Agency and Reclaiming Religious Authority

Film	Scene	Meaning and Representation
<i>Perempuan Berkalung Sorban</i>	Anissa decides to divorce and continue her studies at university and marry a pious man whom she loves.	Women are depicted as active subjects who choose their own paths towards rights, dignity and knowledge.
	Scene of Anissa discussing with students	Anissa's transformation and victory are not the results of leaving Islam,

⁴⁰ Wardiana, Wina, Adi Fadli, and Masnun Masnun. "Contribution of Women in the Education Management of Islamic Boarding School". *Ulumuna* 28, no. 1 (September 30, 2024): 398-423.

	abroad about Islam and women.	but of reclaiming a fair space of interpretation and education for women.
<i>Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa</i>	Kiran secretly records Mr. Alim's misconducts.	Kiran becomes a symbol of courage and justice. She is no longer silent but uses evidence to fight hypocrisy disguised as piety. This shows the transformation from a victim to an agent of change who challenges the illegitimate religious authority and patriarchy.
	She uses evidence as a weapon to seek justice	This indicates that modern women are not only objects of suffering but are also able to use the media and public space to defend themselves and expose the flaws of the oppressive system. This representation reflects symbolic resistance to <i>pseudo-religious power</i> .

Conservative interpretations of Islamic law offer distinct perspectives on how men and women should play their roles. According to Bahardin (2012) and Mubarokah (2021), in conservative interpretations of Islamic law, women are expected to submit and obey the patriarchal system reinforced by specific readings of religious texts. In this context, women's submission is considered a form of obedience to Islamic teachings^{41,42} Sayyid Qutb, in *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, emphasizes that women's roles should be oriented towards the household and submission to their husbands as part of the traditional Islamic social structure.⁴³ Within the framework of classical *fiqh*, the concept of *qiwamah* or male authority over women as stated in the Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa (4):34, is often used to justify the subordinate position of

⁴¹Moh Bahardin, "The Position of Women in the Perspective of Islamic Law," *ASAS* 4, no. 1 (2012).

⁴²Lulu Mubarokah, "Women in Islam," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 6, no. 1 (June 25, 2021): 1–22.

⁴³Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, Trans. Adil Salabi (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2000).

women.^{44,45} This verse states that "men are leaders for women because Allah has made some of them excel others..."⁴⁶. Conservative interpretations by Ibn Kathir suggest that this verse legitimizes male authority, including the regulation and direction of women's roles in both domestic and social lives.⁴⁷ In *Fiqh*, male authority is influenced by patriarchal culture that occurred in history, not merely rooted in religious teachings. However, in conservative discussions, this position is maintained on the grounds of maintaining social and moral stability of the community.⁴⁸ Fatima Mernissi shows how hadith and religious texts are often used to justify the restriction of women in the public sphere. She reveals that women's submission is maintained through the selection of texts and interpretations that support male dominance.⁴⁹ The results of this study are in line with previous findings showing that women do not have a single attitude towards conservative interpretations of Islamic law. Some women accept it as a form of religious obedience, but some others reject it on the grounds of gender justice. In many situations, conservative applications of Islamic law, especially regarding gender roles and relationships in the household, often put women in a lower or subordinate position. Martiani, in her study on female students in Islamic boarding schools, found that most female students accepted the concept of women's submission as a path to worship and become

⁴⁴ Wardah Nuroniyah and UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, "The Concept of Qiwamah and the Phenomenon of Female Heads of Families," *Equalita: Journal of Gender and Child Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 114–134.

⁴⁵ Isti Khoiroh, Agus Setiawan, and Hafid Nur Muhammad, "The Concept of Women's Leadership in QS. An-Nisa Verse 34 (A Comparative Study of the Interpretation of Al-Jami' li Ahkam Al-Qur'an by Imam al-Qurthubi and the Interpretation of Hatred by Zaitunah Subhan)," *Al Mubafidz: Journal of the Science of the Qur'an and Interpretation* 2, no. 2 (August 30, 2022): 184–194.

⁴⁶ MAS Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁷ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2000),

⁴⁸ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "The Construction Of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought and Strategies for Reform," *Hawwa* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 1–28.

⁴⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (MA: Addison-Wesley; MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

pious people.⁵⁰ They believe that submission to the husband is part of obedience to Allah, a belief instilled by Islamic boarding school education and cultural influences. Such belief is also confirmed in a study by Nisa (2019), who found that Muslim women in conservative communities in Java prefer to "consciously submit" in order to maintain household harmony and family reputation.⁵¹ Yusuf al-Qaradawi also explained that rules, such as *qiwamah* and gender role division, are socially logical with aims to create balance and eliminate domination.⁵² On the other hand, criticism of conservative interpretations continues to grow. One of them is voiced by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, who argues that classical *fiqh* on gender relations is often historical and biased against women, as it was formulated in a patriarchal society.⁵³ Fatima Mernissi even exposed the manipulation of certain hadiths used to justify the subordination of women, such as in the limitation of public roles and the prohibition of female leadership.⁵⁴ Research by Rinaldo (2013) on Muslim women's activism in Indonesia found that many women activists accept Islamic law but in a way that is more just and advocates gender equality.⁵⁵ In addition, Julia Suryakusuma's study on "state *ibuism*" in the New Order era criticized the use of state-institutionalized religious interpretations to confine women to domestic roles.⁵⁶

The findings of this study, as reflected in the films analyzed, reinforce the complexity of these responses. The films portray

⁵⁰Dina Martiani, "Pesantren Community Perceptions of Women and Men Relations (Study in East Java and Central Java)," *Aspirasi: Journal of Social Problems* 8, no. 1 (June 28, 2017): 29–41.

⁵¹Eva F. Nisa, "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019): 434–454.

⁵²Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, "Al-Halal Wal Haram Fi'l Islam," *Trans. Kamal El-Helbany, M. Moinuddin Sniddiqi, and Syed Shukery (Reviewed by Ahmad Zaki Hammad), The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (1960).

⁵³Mir-Hosseini, "The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought and Strategies for Reform."

⁵⁴Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, *Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland*.

⁵⁵Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁶Julia Suryakusuma, *State Ibuism: The Social Construction of Womanhood in New Order Indonesia* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2011)

female characters who voluntarily obey conservative interpretations of Islamic law, accept domestic roles, and submit to male authority as part of the values of their faith. However, the films also represent female characters who refuse to simply submit. They question male authority, demand equal roles, and refuse religious interpretations that are considered limiting. These findings indicate that women's agency in the films extends beyond personal resistance, constituting an implicit critique and reformulation of conservative Islamic legal interpretations governing gender relations. Thus, this study not only supports the results of previous studies but also broadens the understanding of women's agency in facing the dominance of conservative Islamic law.

The results of analysis of the two films suggest that the position of women in conservative interpretations of Islamic law is not always accepted. Some women choose to submit because they believe it is part of religious teachings, but other women dare to question and refuse because they feel they are being treated unfairly. The films *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* illustrate very clearly that women are not meant to be silent; they both have a voice and a power to choose. They can understand, interpret, and even challenge the rules that they think restrain their rights and freedom. Responding to a fair legal justice space that supports women is not an easy task. Egyptian feminists, Saadawi for example, have spoken loudly that the law has indeed been castrated to disadvantage women. The law often favors men that all crimes committed by men are not identified as wrongdoing but rather are justified within a religious or legal-religious framework.⁵⁷ Saadawi also notes that the law tends to protect men and favor them in legal proceedings.⁵⁸ In contrast, women are frequently defeated by the law. When resisting the legal systems, women will be criminalized and imprisoned or even sentenced to death.⁵⁹ In the legal context, Mernissi, a feminist, also fiercely

⁵⁷ Nawal El Saadawi, "War Against Women and Women Against War: Waging War on the Mind," *The Black Scholar* 38, no. 2/3 (2008): 27–32.

⁵⁸ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi: A Reader* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

⁵⁹ Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

advocates that women play a vital role as agents of change. She believes that women should actively engage in reconstructing, deconstructing, and reinterpreting laws that have been dominated by male perspectives.⁶⁰ Feminist thought demonstrates that women in the legal context must be recognized as subjects, not objects. This reflects the ongoing debate surrounding religious law, especially in relation to gender. Interpretations of religious law continue to develop in response to changing social contexts. Therefore, it is important to create wider spaces for dialogue that allow women to be recognized not merely as obedient entities, but also as contributive agents in shaping a more just and humane understanding of religion.

Conclusion

This study shows that cinematic depictions of Muslim women in Indonesia appear in three main categories as follows.

First, Muslim women are oppressed in the name of conservative interpretations of Islamic law. In the film *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Muslim women are defeated by the law and forced to submit to it. Otherwise, women are considered to have violated religious law and will go to hell. In *Tuhan Izinkan Aku Berdosa*, women are oppressed by their husbands because the husbands take advantage of the religious law to justify violence and demand absolute submission from the wives.

Second, Muslim women challenge conservative interpretations of Islamic law. In this context, the film *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* represents Muslim women who challenge conservative interpretations of Islamic law, namely the prohibition on women going to college, the prohibition on women opening libraries, and the justice of God's law and the social system framed as religious teachings. In *Tuhan Izinkan Aku Berdosa*, the female character challenges the social *fiqh* and patriarchal culture that do not give justice to women.

⁶⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (MA: Addison- Wesley,; MA: Addison- Wesley, 1991), <https://archive.org/details/veilmaleelitefem00mernrich/page/n3/mode/2up>.

Third, Muslim women are portrayed as agents of change in response to conservative interpretations of Islamic law. In this context, the films *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *Tuhan Izinkan Aku Berdosa* depict Muslim women who resist and attempt to prove the genuine roles of women in conservative interpretations of Islamic law. Women are not only objects but also subjects. In this film, female characters are able to resist the power of men who exploit conservative interpretations of Islamic law. They are also able to divorce their husbands due to acts of violence against them. In addition, women also try to learn to open new discourses about women. In the film *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa*, female characters successfully defeat a man who is a criminal, symbolizing their ability to reveal the truth within the legal system. This reflects a shift in women's perspectives and attitudes toward the law. Ultimately, the films demonstrate that Islamic law is not a closed normative system but a contested field in which Muslim women actively participate as agents of interpretation, critique, and change.

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