

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF EXORCISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE HORROR FILM KUASA GELAP (2024)

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### ABSTRACT

The practice of exorcism, which is often popularly used as a theme in horror films, is interesting and essential to study so that the concept can be understood properly. This study is expected to be useful as an additional reference for research purposes in the field of humanities and to increase knowledge about the concept of exorcism from different perspectives. The discussion focuses on constructing the meaning of exorcism through the Indonesian horror film *Kuasa Gelap* (2024). Scenes, plots, and dialogs gathered from the film are used as primary data to be analyzed and discussed. This study, which is categorized as library research, utilizes Stuart Hall's representation theory in analyzing and interpreting the representation of exorcism in the film. The meaning of exorcism is generally discussed from a religious perspective and the exploration of its meaning in this study is related to human life, not the supernatural or magical powers. The results of the data analysis reveal that the concept of exorcism in the film represents the unwillingness to accept the loss of a family member, strong determination for good intentions, and sincerity in praying

**Keywords:** exorcism, horror films, representation, *Kuasa Gelap*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological developments have brought about various advances in entertainment media, especially in film. Everyone certainly understands that films can be used for various purposes. Through films, people can get satisfaction in entertainment and also many phenomena, knowledge, experiences and messages that can be learned (Rudy, 2024a). Among the existing film genres, horror films can be said to be one of the genres that are in great demand by the audience (Scrivner *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, horror films are quite often produced. Besides, they can also be an interesting object to study and discuss. One of the popular themes in the horror genre that is the focus of this study is exorcism. The exorcism activity that is often shown in horror films is in the form

of a scene showing a religious ritual carried out by one or several priests from a church to expel evil spirits that possess a person's body.

The theme of exorcism with church traditions was initially often used in popular American horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Rite* (2011), *The Possession* (2012), *The Conjuring* (2013), *The Nun* (2018), *The Pope's Exorcist* (2023), etc. Literature review is applied in this study to gain more knowledge about exorcism. The result of the literature review shows that there are several previous studies on exorcism from various perspectives. In terms of media perspective, there have been several studies on exorcism. In fact, the theme of exorcism has also been used by many playwrights for their works in the

17th century to help others to increase religious faith and to criticize political deception (Sulaiman, 2023). Thus, such a theme has become commonly used in entertainment media. Many people question whether the practice of exorcism portrayed in films is exactly similar to the explanation from the bible.

A study conducted by Oktavianus (2015) revealed that there were differences of opinion in the form of agreement and disagreement from religious clerics regarding the film about exorcism, *The Conjuring*. (Wijaya et al., 2024) in their study revealed that the exorcism ritual shown in the films *The Nun I* and *II* had similarities and differences when compared to the Bible. However, the use of religious ritual in film may cause reactions from religious group as well. There is also a study on the horror film with the theme of exorcism *The Exorcist* conducted by Chambers (2021) which revealed that a theme like this can create controversy because it can offend the Catholic Church and this point can actually help popularize the film. From the studies above, it is true to say that the theme of exorcism in western horror films is always associated with religious rituals because basically this activity is part of church rituals, especially Catholicism.

Some popular Indonesian horror films with the ruqyah theme such as *Ruqyah: The Exorcism* (2017), *Roh Fasik* (2019), *Qodrat* (2022), *Hidayah* (2023), *Khanzab* (2023), *Menjelang Ajal* (2024), etc. are also not much different from western exorcism-themed films because exorcism rituals in various cultures and religions are basically aimed at removing evil influences or energy from a person's body. Therefore, to fill the research gap, it concentrates on what the exorcism symbolizes by using an

Indonesian horror film with a Catholic exorcism theme entitled *Kuasa Gelap* was released on October 3, 2024. The film, directed by Bobby Prasetyo, can be called the first horror film to feature a Catholic-style exorcism ritual. This is certainly different from previous Indonesian exorcism-themed films which tended to adopt Islamic exorcism traditions.

There are many aspects and meanings that need to be discussed in this film. That is the reason this film was chosen to be studied. This film, starring Jerome Kurnia, Lukman Sardi, Astrid Tiar, and Lea Ciarachel, tells the story of a Catholic priest's struggle to save a school girl who is possessed and controlled by an evil spirit. Exorcism may not be a new term among moviegoers. However, the term exorcism certainly contains a lot of knowledge that needs to be explored further. The explanation above opens up the opportunity to find out and identify the concept of exorcism reflected in the film *Kuasa Gelap*. There are many views and theories that can be applied to explain the meaning of exorcism. People may use religious, psychological, anthropological, or historical perspectives to define what exorcism actually is. This shows that the meaning of exorcism is not limited to a certain perspective.

By utilizing the film *Kuasa Gelap*, this study explores more deeply the meaning of exorcism, not only by presenting its denotative meaning, but also interpreting the symbolism and representation behind the meaning of exorcism to fill in the research gaps that have not been done in previous studies. This study is expected to be useful theoretically to enrich theories in the fields of cultural studies, literature, media and film studies, etc. and to be an additional reference for increasing

understanding for researchers in the humanities who study the concept of exorcism and the theme in films.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Basically, almost all religions in the world recognize the exorcism of evil spirits that disturb and have a bad influence on someone. There are many studies that explain exorcism from a religious perspective. In Christianity, it is even stated that every Christian can perform exorcisms, but not all of them can succeed because of faith, prayer, holiness and knowledge of the Bible (Illu, 2020). Even in Catholicism, the practice of exorcism is seen as a tradition that is still maintained and exorcist priests carry out this task professionally representing the Roman Catholic Church (Rusu, 2016). In Islamic teachings, exorcism is called "*ruqyah*" which means expelling evil spirits or jinn from within a person using certain verses in the Quran (Untung & Muiz, 2020). Whereas, Hindus believe that angry spirits or ghosts can bring illness or disaster to a person, so exorcisms of these evil spirits are often carried out in Hindu temples (Dwyer, 1999).

The discussion of exorcism when viewed from a religious perspective can actually be related to the development of a person's belief in the influence of the devil on a person's life as is often found in religious scriptures. This may seem in line with Hunt's idea (2020) suggesting that the practice of exorcism in cases of possession provides the exorcist with an understanding of the existence of evil spirits. The reviewed studies of exorcism above mostly emphasize that the practice of exorcism is closely related to religion. So, horror movies that use the theme of exorcism always feature several basic

characters - people who are possessed by evil spirits and religious figures who are experts in exorcism rituals. Indonesian horror films also often use the theme of Islamic exorcism rituals (*ruqyah*) which are usually carried out by an Islamic expert with strong faith.

Understanding the concept of a phenomenon is related to interpreting the meaning of the phenomenon. This can usually be done by applying an approach as a determinant of the direction of analysis and interpretation. After that, a certain theory that is in accordance with the approach can be used to understand the fact and meaning contained in the phenomenon being studied (Rudy, 2024b). One of the basic approaches applied in this study is semiotics. The semiotic approach aims to find or explain how a sign can be interpreted as a message, idea, feeling, etc. (Mudjiyanto & Nur, 2013). This means that studies that apply a semiotic approach generally seek or form meaning from a phenomenon being studied. For that, any object, for example, a phenomenon, text, event in the semiotic view are signs that can be studied, explored and interpreted with relevant and appropriate theories.

Although semiotics is the basis of thinking in this study, Barthes' or Saussure's semiotic theory is not a tool of analysis and interpretation in this study. This study actually utilizes the theory of representation which is also inseparable from the semiotic approach to form a meaning. One of the relevant theories used to construct meaning is Hall's representation theory. (Hall, 1997) explains that in representation theory certain meanings can be found in language, symbols, or images through meaning constructing. So, one of the ways in Hall's representation theory is to construct the

meaning of an object. This means that people who study or research an object play an important role in constructing the meaning of the data obtained for the purpose of building a concept (de Casterlé et al., 2012). Thus, in this study, the constructionist system of representation theory can explore the hidden meanings in the concept of exorcism.

### 3. RESEACH METHOD

This study uses qualitative data for analysis. To discuss and interpret the concept of exorcism in the film *Kuasa Gelap* (2024), it is certain that the main data needed is obtained from the film. Elements in films such as dialogue, plot and scenes can be transformed into text which functions as data for analysis. Since the primary data comes from films, the first stage, the activity of watching films is carried out repeatedly to obtain the core message of the film to formulate the concept. The second stage is using the video summarizing method and note-taking technique for data transcription. The video summarization method involves selecting a number of important portraits from the film as the main frame to represent the contents of the film (Ying Li et al., 2006). The third stage is description and transcription. The images are then described in full text to show what they convey. Important dialogues that have been collected from the film are also transcribed in text form for the purpose of analyzing and interpreting meaning. In the final stage, the important images from the film that have been collected are then analyzed and interpreted by gathering various opinions, explanations and arguments from various relevant references to construct the meaning of

exorcism.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Result

The result of the data analysis shows that in constructing the concept of exorcism through the film *Kuasa Gelap*, it is inseparable from religious and moral views. Therefore, the exorcism discussed in this study represents the willingness to accept the situation, strong determination for good intentions and sincerity in praying.

### 4.2 Discussion

#### a. The Willingness to Accept the Loss

The analysis of the concept of exorcism in the film *Kuasa Gelap* needs to be discussed from one of the important portraits in the film. One of the scenes in the film that is key to explaining the concept of exorcism is the event experienced by the two main characters in the film, namely losing a family member they loved very much. The first is Thomas, a priest who teaches at a Catholic school, has bitter memories of losing his mother and younger sister in a tragic traffic accident. The incident left him chained in sadness and was unable to let go of the memories of his mother and younger sister. The second character is a high school student Kayla who still believes that her deceased father can be present to keep her mother away from her mother's boyfriend. The similarity between these two characters is that there is a feeling of unwillingness to accept the death of their family members.

Many people often have difficulty forgetting painful or sad event and memories because psychologically, the ability to willingly forget these events is not easy to get (Noreen & MacLeod, 2021). Various major sad incidents such as the



death of a family member, friend, career failure, bankruptcy, accident, etc. experienced by a person will have a big impact on his or her life. Any event that happens to someone can create emotions in someone and it is these emotions that according to (Mather, 2015) help shape what people remember and forget in their lives. This means that the bigger the event that someone experiences, the deeper the emotions that will form in someone's heart. This is what makes it difficult for someone to forget something and will keep remembering it.

The characters of Priest Thomas and Kayla are depicted in the film as people who feel devastated because they have to part with their loved ones. This is an important description to explain the meaning of exorcism because the film shows that Kayla began to be possessed by the evil spirit when she played a game of calling her father's spirit at the cemetery because she did not want her mother to marry another man. This means that Kayla is still unwilling to accept her father's death. Because of that, she dared to call her father's spirit. Since then, all the disasters began to happen. In this context, the meaning of exorcism basically does not always have to be associated with supernatural powers, although in the view of religion, negative supernatural powers such as evil spirits and demons are depicted as disturbing and destructive spirits. Religions also teach good character and attitude to avoid bad things.

Willingness to accept the death of a family member is a good thought and deed and must be applied in the life of every human being in order to see the truth of life. In Christian teachings, death is a part of human life and every Christian must learn to accept everything with sincerity

and gratitude for the gift of life that has been experienced (Pranadi, 2019). The willingness to accept death wholeheartedly is also discussed in Islamic teachings that death is not the end but the beginning of a new human life towards the afterlife until reaching Allah's heaven (Miskahuddin, 2019). In Buddhist teachings, death is one of the realities and is a characteristic of human life which includes *dukkha* and because of that, humans must accept death as one of the stages of life that cannot be avoided (Gokhale, 2024). Similar to the teachings of other religions, the Hindu tradition in India also teaches Hindus to accept death as something natural and an opportunity to achieve *moksha* (Ghosh & BK, 2024). Religious teachings provide knowledge to humans that by willingly accepting death with sincerity, then a person is said to be able to truly understand the nature and nature of living things.

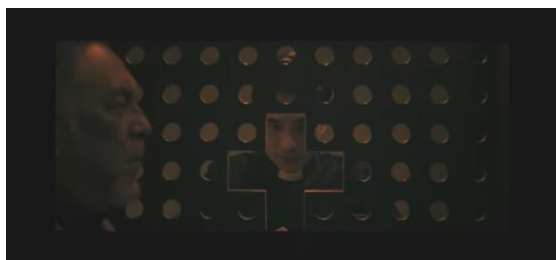
The attitude of willingly accepting the death of a family member with sincerity also helps reduce a person's suffering by keeping him away from negative thoughts that will make his life more miserable.



**Figure 1.** The portrait showing Thomas struggling to accept the loss of his mother and younger sister

The characters of Thomas and Kayla can be examples of the attitude of unwillingness to accept the death of a family member. The possession that happened to Kayla may symbolize a

problem, disaster or difficulty faced by humans and is painful.



**Figure 2.** One of the portraits in the film *Kuasa Gelap* that shows Thomas' anxiety and sadness over the death of his family members

The anxiety, fear and weakening of faith experienced by Priest Thomas because of his unwillingness to accept the death of his mother and sister, made him hesitate to practice exorcism. A person who is still unable to accept the death of a loved one will develop negative behavior, such as feelings of guilt, hatred towards oneself and others, anger, unhappiness, and others which can certainly harm oneself and others. Psychologically, according to (Boyras et al., 2015), those who can view death as part of the natural life process, can understand the meaning of life well and tend not to get lost in excessive sadness. This means that people must be able to think clearly to be willing to accept the loss of family members due to death so that emotions and thoughts can be controlled well, so that life becomes more peaceful.

Therefore, exorcism can reflect the emergence of problems within a person because they do not learn to let go of the past, especially events related to losing people they love. Unwillingness to accept the reality of losing a loved one will only bring hardship, problems, and suffering. The concept of exorcism in *Kuasa Gelap* shows that by accepting and letting go, a person's life will become better. So, if the

evil spirit possession in the film *Kuasa Gelap* appears because Kayla and her friend summon her father's spirit, then this image can represent a problem faced by humans that is created by themselves. In other words, realizing that problems will always exist in life, people should be able to learn to minimize the occurrence of problems and learn to eliminate attitudes that will bring problems.

#### **b. Strong Determination for Good Intentions**

The analysis of the film *Kuasa Gelap* also shows that in addition to the depiction of unwillingness to accept the loss of a family member, the portrait that also often appears in the film is a strong determination for good intentions. In other words, behind the concept of exorcism in the film, there is a meaning of determination or steadfastness for good intentions. This shows that both, exorcism and determination for good intentions are interrelated. The image of steadfastness for good intentions is one of the keys in conceptualizing exorcism. The discussion for this begins with understanding the meaning of steadfastness. Generally, people who have determination can be simply interpreted as people whose minds do not change easily.

Determination plays a significant role in growing someone's enthusiasm and confidence needed to be a better person (Rahma et al., 2013). This means that with determination, a person can demonstrate an attitude and mentality that will not be affected by anything and can confidently and enthusiastically do something that he believes is right. Determination can be clearly reflected in the character of Thomas in *Kuasa Gelap*. The figure of Thomas, who is depicted as a Catholic priest, is a portrait of determination

because basically he does not give up in fighting to expel the evil spirit that possesses Kayla. This means that he believes that what he does is for the good and is based on God's will. In the Catholic view, determination is an inner ability related to self-control or strengthening the soul to fight for good and this steadfastness must be activated by being trained (Nadaek, 2022).

It is a positive value that plays an important role in keeping someone motivated to achieve what has been decided (Imamudin et al., 2020). So, in other words, people who are determined can usually continue to carry out actions or achievements that have become their mission or goals. Determination for good intentions is important for people as a compass that determines the direction of a good life path. In this discussion, determination and good intentions are united because both have a relationship. People who believe that their intentions are good or what they do is for the good, then they need determination to do it. Therefore, to grow good intentions, a person must first organize his mind by growing good basic ideas in his mind that what he does is in accordance with his conscience, does not violate the rules and is not against the law. This includes all the knowledge, ideas, perspectives, etc. that one has acquired in his or her life.

The seeds of kindness stored in the mind will be manifested in behavior, attitudes and actions. This condition is also agreed by (Gray, 2012) who has presented the results of his research that all physical experiences that arise come from what has been embedded in a person's thoughts and the way he views other people's perceptions and that is what is called intention. So, good or bad intentions all

come from the seeds of thoughts that have been planted from everything that is known, learned, experienced, and internalized. The portrait of determination that appears in the film *Kuasa Gelap* is best shown by the character of Thomas.



**Figure 3.** The scene portraying priest Thomas exorcising the evil spirit from Kayla's body

As a Catholic priest, he is obliged to help people. However, the bitter memory of the accident that took the lives of his mother and younger sister often weakens his faith in God. However, he tries his best to fight the fear and hatred in his heart with prayer, confession and advice from senior priests so that he can have the determination to fight to help others on the path of God.

When Thomas agreed to accept the task of performing an exorcism, that was when his determination emerged. His determination became even more apparent when he had to perform the exorcism himself without Father Rendra. Although Thomas experienced difficulties, his struggle in expelling the evil spirit from Kayla's body made him even more convinced that his determination would save others and himself. So, from a Christian perspective, steadfastness must be developed, strengthened, and maintained by increasing knowledge through the Bible, following God's path of truth, and the determination to face all challenges in life (Melkisedek et al., 2024). The process of developing determination is

clearly depicted in Thomas' character. After Thomas listened to Father Rendra's advice and prayed sincerely to God for strength to face difficulties, at that moment, he began to strengthen his mind and show his steadfastness to fight darkness, fear, and evil. So, observing the film *Kuasa Gelap* provides clues and knowledge that the concept of exorcism can be linked to the meaning of determination for good intentions because with determination, a person will have strong mentality to eliminate bad behavior and thoughts from within himself.

### c. Sincerity in Praying

Praying is certainly an inseparable scene from the film *Kuasa Gelap*. Analysis and interpretation of data from this study shows that the portrayal of sincerity in prayer in the film plays an important role in constructing the concept of exorcism. Prayer is an activity that is routinely carried out by religious people. The meaning of exorcism is related to sincerity in praying because basically, in the film, evil spirits or demons are expelled and defeated with the power of prayer. Therefore, prayer is a point that needs to be discussed further in this study. Discussions about praying are generally seen from a religious and psychological perspective. Both perspectives are interrelated.

This discussion begins with the views of several religions regarding prayer. From an Islamic perspective, prayer is a way to get closer to God, calm the soul, foster patience and form a good character for a person (Oktaviani & Rhamadhan, 2024). Therefore, all Muslims must pray 5 times a day according to the Qu'ran. This means that the more often a person draws closer to God by praying, the better his life will be. For Christians, the holy Bible also explains that when praying, one must be humble,

focus only on God, ask for guidance to behave well and the basic needs to live a good life, and ask to be kept away from evil or bad things (Hidayat, 2022). It is understandable that when praying, people may ask for blessings from God so that everything in life can go well. This is usually the motivation for most people to pray.

In Buddhism, the concept of prayer can be seen as a good activity or deed that includes chanting, reciting sutras, contemplation, etc. which can increase good karma (Wati et al., 2022). So, from a religious perspective, praying is a good activity and is required in religions as a way to connect humans with the God spiritually so that humans can be blessed and their hopes can be achieved. Therefore, to get a peaceful and good life, religion teaches humans to appreciate and respect God by praying sincerely. In the film *Kuasa Gelap*, the evil spirit that possessed Kayla's body made her suffer and the people who loved her felt anxious, sad, and they struggled to help her. This can symbolize a portrait that shows how people who are facing difficulties, problems and suffering need help. With sincere, deep prayer and strong determination, Thomas who already has the determination believes that he can conquer the devil in Kayla's body. So, prayer to God symbolizes the power for Thomas to cast out evil spirits.

Regarding the power of prayer, there have been a number of scientific studies from the field of psychology that examine the effects of prayer. Research from (McCulloch & Parks-Stamm, 2020) revealed that participants who were given the task of praying showed that they had good ideas and were more accepting of the problems they faced because praying could broaden their psychological perspective, so that emotionally they could



handle their problems better. Research conducted by (Tri Wulandari et al., 2022) suggests that psychologically, praying can reduce mental burden, anxiety, and other mental disorders, because when praying, the mind becomes focused and calm. So, various kinds of problems faced by humans often make them afraid, depressed, and sad. According to psychology, all of that is basically created by people in their minds. That is what causes the mind to become turbulent, unstable and chaotic. At times like this, prayer can calm the mind. So, praying sincerely to God is an important image in the film *Kuasa Gelap*.

Some portraits that depict praying are the characters of Father Thomas and Kayla's mother.



**Figure 4.** The portrait of Priest Thomas and Priest Rendra praying to God for helping them in conducting exorcism successfully

Thomas prays sincerely to get blessings from God to be given strength to fight the devil. Kayla's mother, during the exorcism ritual, also prays incessantly so that her child can be healed. The interpretation of the portrait of praying in this film can reflect three conditions: (a) first, people need to pray to prevent major problems from happening. This does not appear to be done by Kayla's character, so she has to face major problems. (b) second, people need to pray after to gain spirit and strength. This image appears in the character of Thomas who prays to the church asking for guidance and strength from God. (c) third, people need to pray to

express gratitude for having succeeded in solving problems. This image is reflected in the characters of Thomas and Mother Kayla.

Although the phenomenon of possession is often found in society, this phenomenon is often associated with mysticism or supernatural powers, studies still cannot provide scientific evidence about it. Therefore, many studies link it to the psyche or categorize it as part of religious studies. In literary and cultural studies, the phenomenon of possession and exorcism can be interpreted as a picture that represents or symbolizes conditions or realities in human life. The concept of exorcism in the film *Kuasa Gelap* discussed in this study can show that basically human life is not free from problems. So, if the picture of sincere prayer activities shown by the character of Thomas in the film can give him the strength to fight the devil, then the portrait in human life can be interpreted that those who face problems need to calm their hearts to pray to God earnestly so that their minds become focused, clear, peaceful and can think of a way out for the problems they face.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study of the concept of exorcism in the film *Kuasa Gelap* (2024) produced several important points that can be concluded. First, the study that focuses on exploring the meaning of exorcism for constructing concepts is carried out by watching and observing the film *Kuasa Gelap* carefully to find and identify representations of exorcism in the film. Second, by utilizing Hall's representation theory, this study suggests that the concept of exorcism does not always have to be associated with supernatural,

mystical and demonic elements or conditions. Third, the discussion of exorcism is certainly closely related to religious perceptions and perspectives. However, the findings of this study regarding the representation of exorcism also show that psychological and moral perspectives can also help describe the meaning of exorcism the interaction is held. In political discourse, the candidates tend to convince the public.

Fourth, the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained from the film Kuasa Gelap shows that exorcism can represent three human conditions is also seen as three images in the film that are closely related to the meaning of exorcism - unwillingness to accept the loss of loved ones, determination in good intentions and sincerity in praying. Fifth, the portrait of unwillingness to accept the loss of a family member in the film is understood as the cause or source of the problem. The portrait of determination for good intentions can be understood as the strength to be determined and committed to doing good deeds. The portrait of sincerity in praying represents a sense of gratitude for the blessings that have been given by God. Lastly, the concept of exorcism can be interpreted as a process of human life that is always filled with problems. However, humans can also train to develop determination for the purpose of goodness and in the end when the problem has been resolved, humans should be grateful.

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