

## Can We Not Just Talk About Men? The Bechdel Test, Narrative Saliency and Female Voices in Two Selected Malay Films

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### ABSTRACT

Western feminist film scholars' claim that female characters are often defined in relation to their male counterparts resonates well in contemporary film and gender studies. This claim highlights the representational biases towards male privilege and primacy as visible signifiers; the ramification of this biasness is the invisibility of female subjectivity that renders them voiceless. Therefore, inquiries into female subjectivity in films outside of Hollywood context are crucial. This paper aims at identifying and comparing the representation of female characters in two Malaysian films of two genres - romance and horror - to highlight the consonance between female voice with feminine consciousness and empowerment. This study administers the Bechdel Test on two films selected using criterion sampling - *3 Temujanji* and *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* - and suggests a novel approach by adding the analysis of the film using the concept of narrative saliency. The analyses using both methods revealed contradictory results. *3 Temujanji*, although failed most of the test, is revealed through narrative saliency as assiduous towards feminine consciousness and empowerment. *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, which passed the test, ironically and ideologically contained female voices within the patriarchal value system. The finding contributes towards the theorisation that women's voices in Malaysian films can be considered as an integral part of the acoustic register of films that enhances film analysis technique. Scriptwriters and filmmakers can utilise the test as a reference in which women can define themselves 'not in relation to men', while creating female characters who progressively think beyond patriarchy and androcentrism.

**Keywords:** *Women empowerment, Malay films, acoustic register, narrative saliency, Hollywood.*

### INTRODUCTION

“Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size”

(Virginia Woolf, 1994, p. 346)

“Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being”

(Simone de Beauvoir, 1975, p. 19)

Women empowerment through media representations has been a site of contestation that is solidified further considering the more recent development in gendered social movements and advocacies like the hashtags *#metoo*, *#OscarsSoMale* and *#blacklivesmatter* movements. Even though such consciousness of the need for diverse representations of women has already gained momentum before the new (online) movements take place - thanks particularly to feminism as exemplified by Virginia Woolf's evocative reflection on the

psychology of patriarchy and de Beauvoir's existential questioning of Western binary system at the beginning of this article -, the development in media technology has further ratcheted such consciousness to a global scale. Unfortunately, this is far from being a panacea for gender sensitive and responsive representations. One reason for this lies in the irony of women's movement itself, as Debbie Walsh aptly observes, "because of opportunities made possible by the women's movement, 'women have no time for the women's movement'" (in Rhode, 2017, p. 21). Similar paradox seems to linger when analysing representations of women in films.

This contradiction reveals the idea that Hollywood, in its pursuit of a global audience, is perennially ambivalent towards how women in Hollywood film production should be represented. The ambivalence can be explained in an interlacing bifurcation. First, it is embedded within the contradictions of the struggle to provide diverse and inclusive representations of women in films in the wake of women's movements and to some extent, the woke and cancelled culture. Second, to reinforce Western hegemony of gender identity politics. While the first points to the idea that such irony resides in the cleavage of representational overloads and deficits, the latter, on the other hand, establishes the significance of this study on the representation of women in films elsewhere - out of Hollywood's context - to investigate how women elsewhere are represented. Hollywood, as argued by Ross Melnick, is "selling a very specific American style of entertainment and politics in which American films, stars, and brands were the exotic allure" (2022, p. 3). In short, contradiction and the resulting ambivalence are a prevalent feature as far as Hollywood's attitude towards women is concerned.

Conterminous with the idea of contradictions is the demand for diversity that characterises the representation of women in films as becoming increasingly more complex. This notion of complexity is central to Gauntlett's conclusion in his book *Media, Gender and Identity*: "[r]epresentations of gender today are more complex and less stereotyped than in the past" (2008, p. 97). Gauntlett comes to this conclusion after studying representations of gender in the so-called Western media (mostly from the UK and neo-Europe), something that he acknowledges throughout his book. Therefore, we argue that it is crucial for studies on the representation of women in a genre film to be done at the local level to add to the big data provided by the West as a way of understanding the effects of this western default.

Interrogating the representation of women within a local context helps to liberate local women from western hegemony, as argued by Cowie (1997, p. 18), "[r]epresentation is not a system of signs referring to reality [...] [and it] can be judged as inadequate". Representation provides verisimilitude, thus functions as a site of ideological contestation. In our opinion, focusing on genre films is crucial as a way of "engag[ing] in a serious and positive way with popular cinema in general and with Hollywood in particular" (Neale, 2000, p. 10). Needless to say, "feminist film theory has been open to an expansion of the category of *womanhood* [original italic] as well as an expansion of the category of *film* [original italic], adding new topics to its scope of inquiry" (Poza, 2014, p. 187). This, in summary, supports the call for diversity in film studies and addresses the complexity of studying women in films.

Based on the problems of representations of women identified and the significance of the study established above, this paper investigates the representation of female characters in two film genres in Malay language films in Malaysian cinema, namely, romantic comedy and the horror genre by using the Bechdel Test and narrative saliency. We argue that the Bechdel Test can provide gender and film scholars with a foundation in which the

representation can be gauged to identify female empowerment topoi. Despite a barrage of criticisms thrown at the Bechdel Test, we argue that it could be utilised as a foundation to textually analyse a film as text. We therefore admit that the test by itself is insufficient to excavate the ideological motives of a film. As this is a small study, only a film from two genres each is analysed by using the Bechdel Test to find out whether Malaysian films provide positive or varied representations of female characters. The two films chosen are *3 Temujanji/3 Dates* (Hashim, 2012) for the romantic (comedy) genre and *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam/Pontianak - The Scent of the Tuberose* (Shuhaimi, 2004) (henceforth *Pontianak*) for the horror genre.

To avoid prolixity on the debates surrounding the definitions of a genre, which have hitherto reached a critical impasse as pointed out in works done by film scholars like Martin Rubin (1999), Steve Neale (2000), Deborah Thomas (2000) and Jamaluddin Aziz (2012), we look at the genre not merely as a form - formal patterns of similarities -, rather, we look at it as a critical category. This means, our focus is more on the role of the genre, and less on its form, which reflects our own concern about “the theoretical pursuit of the nature of genre” (Neale, 2000, p. 12) while marking the increasing need to argue how genre study can further “delineate the ideological and conventional shifts” (Jamaluddin, 2012, p. 3) of a film. By focusing on the critical role of genre we eschew the quagmire of essentialism, which means our argument is situated within the critical paradigm that permits any discussion related to generic transgression while reminding the audience of generic familiarities.

In short, the premise of the paper is that while the Bechdel Test has been criticised for its tendency to focus on specific scenes, we suggest that to fully comprehend the representation of women, the analysis of the narrative salience of the film texts should be carried out in addition to the test itself. This means by textually analysing the films to determine the major theme, the narrative salience is an apt means to reveal the female characters’ arc. We also take Sjogren’s argument that “[f]ilm is a temporal medium, the effect and meaning of which cannot be determined by isolating a few key moments that “illustrate” the whole” (2006, p. 19) as a caveat when doing film analysis. By carrying out the analysis of the films using two different methods, we hope that this research does not simply produce “expected results” - that ends up creating hierarchy associated with patriarchal orders-, but it should also open the possibility of creating a new way of understanding and interpreting films. In doing so, we would argue that the Bechdel Test can become a useful tool to magnify scenes to be analysed within the context of narrative salience; thus, making this methodologically veridical.

#### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a preponderance of studies done on the representation of women in Asian films, both by Western and Asian scholars. Western scholars such as Heider (1991), Linda C. Ehrlich (2019) and Rosalind Galt (2021) have ventured into investigating women characters in Asian films. Heider (1991, p. 120) who studies women in Indonesian cinema states that the independent women characters can be found in the Sentimental genre, “which plays out in the domestic arena”. Heider also finds the discrepancy between the ethnographic and cinematic representation of women in Indonesia, arguing that ethnographically, women are treated at least equal and dominant than their cinematic counterparts. Moreover, Ehrlich studies a Japanese director, Kore-eda Hirokazu, and dedicates some aspects of her analysis of the director’s oeuvre to studying women. She argues that Kore-eda’s work asks: “How can

women transcend the role of sexual object?" (Ehrlich, 2019, p. 12), highlighting the auteur's consciousness of gender politics. Meanwhile, Rosalind Galt's work employs "postcolonial scholarship" (2021, p. 21) as an approach to studying the Malay horror figure, the Pontianak (female banshee). These western scholars inevitably employ western lenses in their analysis and interpretations while exploring decolonisation as a way of making a new sense of its historical rootedness.

Meanwhile, Asian scholars who have studied women in Malay cinema include Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006), Alicia Izharudin (2019) and Jamaluddin Aziz (2020a). Although they employ postcolonial perspective in their analysis, their understanding of women's desire and power in films is still coloured by Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) that uses psychoanalytic theory to locate male pleasure in the act of looking itself or scopophilia. However, they are also conscious of the plurality and discursivity of the conception of women, as pointed out by Cowie (1997, p. 17), that is "constructed by feminist discourse". Khoo, in *Reclaiming Adat*, dedicates a chapter on Malay modern women of the 1990s to investigate how "anxieties related to modernity and tradition are often projected onto women" (2006, p. 126). By using Suhaimi Baba's film *Selubung* as a case study, she argues that the ideal Malay woman in the film negotiates tradition and modernity as epitomised by the female protagonist "feels equally at home in the city and in the kampung" (Khoo, 2006, p. 144). Meanwhile, Jamaluddin Aziz does a critical appraisal of Suhaimi Baba's body of work, arguing that her female characters are usually strong women who have found "a powerful way of rejecting a restrictive cultural definition of women" (2020, p. 4). Past studies on the representation of women in films have been done extensively; however, research on female voices in Malaysian films has not received enough attention. This literature review focuses on past studies on female voices as a sign of empowerment.

### *Female Voices in Films*

One central concern in feminism is related to the notion of women's voice as a source and result of women empowerment. Past studies done by feminist psychoanalysts such as Kaja Silverman (1988) and Elizabeth Cowie (1997) relate women agency with the importance of women's voice as an indication of empowerment since historically women's story is often silenced or consigned to the private sphere. The corollary of this is women's writing in the form of letter or epistolary is often associated with the private sphere where women are expected to occupy. Representation of women has been complex, and in many Hollywood films, for example, techniques such as voice-over, can eliminate a woman's story. For instance, Kent (2021) points out that in *Spider Man 2* (2002), although the first shot of the film is of the female character Watson, the voice over was Peter Parker's. Therefore, Kent argues that "this is not Watson's story, but Peter Parker's" although he narrates that "This, like any story worth telling, is all about a girl - that girl" (Kent, 2021, p. 37). In Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part One* (2021), the female narrator's voice exists within the male protagonist's dream, doubly victimising her; 1) by patriarchy and 2) by the narrative technique itself. These examples illustrate how important it is for women to be given a voice - embodied or disembodied - and that the voice is heard in film. This section looks at past studies that discuss women's voices in films.

Female voices in films have always been seen as a sign of power. The need to be heard and counted stems from feminist movements that fight for women's voices to be heard, starting with the first wave that fights for women's vote to the third wave championed by

postcolonial feminists. Rhode (2017, p. 16), while discussing the third wave, remarks: "Much of their focus is on personal narratives, collected in multiple anthologies and circulated online, in a style accessible to a broad audience". In film analysis context, the emphasis on female voices is common. For instance, Alicia's analysis of female voice in Malay folk horror states that "it is her voice that makes equally transgressive as she is terrifying" (2019, p. 2). Although Alicia focuses on the "sonic excesses" of the vampire laughter, the relationship between women and their voices is made apparent here. Her study contributes towards the understanding of female subjectivity through women's voice, which no matter how grotesque it is, can accentuate the destabilisation of patriarchal representation of women in films. Therefore, this proves that female voices are central to women's agency.

Conterminous with the idea of women empowerment, women's voice can also indicate deviation from and subversion of the patriarchal norms. In certain cinematic traditions, women's voices are expressed via songs. It is through a song that women's desire is often enunciated. For example, Ira Bhaskar (2019, p. 28) studies "nonconformist feminine desire" in Bombay films from 1930s to 1950s, which are the first two decades of sound cinema. Her analysis reveals that "it is that songs structure the narrative and shape its emotional contours and articulate its deepest significances" (Bhaskar, 2019, p. 38). This shows how important songs are as a medium of expressing women's desire in the Bombay melodrama genre. Moreover, women's voice is seen as powerful as it can challenge patriarchal value systems. For example, Creech (2016) studies the representation of women in some East German women's films. She argues that German women's film "opens up a space for the film's larger critique of generic conventions and socialist femininity" (Creech, 2016, p. xi). She concretises this argument by illustrating that "[a]s the film's climax, Margit's monologue gives voice to the contradictions of a femininity defined by new socialist ideologies of egalitarianism and emancipation, and by residual gender ideologies (re)produced through social structures (the nuclear family) and narrative conventions (romance, fairy tales, etc.)" (Creech, 2016, p. xiii).

Another example of women's voice challenging the patriarchal system is by challenging the western binary opposition itself. In western binary opposition, men are always associated with positive attributes and women otherwise. However, Sanyal's work on Indian Cinema also reveals that women in Satyajit Ray's films often provide the "voice of rationality", while admitting that "the fact that she is a woman she remains largely unheard" (2022, p. 40). This may offer a sense of contradiction, but it points to the idea that film scholars have now focused on how women's voices in film are structured under patriarchy. In conclusion, this shows that the female voices in a film's narrative can radically challenge patriarchal ideologies.

One crucial context of past studies on women's agency via their voices is the postcolonial context. Research on women's voices in the context of postcolonialism asks for the possibility of decolonising western's theorisation of women. Earlier studies on women's voice in the postcolonial context is traceable in Spivak's seminal work: *Can the subaltern talk?* (1988). In this work, Spivak works within the postcolonial feminism paradigm to ask whether women can be read or heard. The conclusion drawn by this study is that "[t]he subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak, 1988, p. 308). Using Spivak's line of enquiry, a study done by Yang Li (2019) investigates the possibility of listening to the female characters in Pema Tsedan's Tibetan film trilogy entitled *The Silence Holy Stones* (2006), *The Search* (2009) and *Old Dog* (2011). Yang Li's research asks: Can the Tibetan women speak? And if yes, from

where can they speak? Using visual analysis as the method, the study reveals that approaching the films from a postcolonial feminist perspective allows women to be heard as it challenges the Western dichotomy of women as “image” and “bearer of the look”.

Postcolonial context is also used to interrogate the state, and women characters in films are analysed as a way of accessing the state modernisation project. Sanyal’s work on Indian cinema and modernity is an example of this interrogation. She argues that as many Indian filmmakers are men and come from “the privileged classes”, therefore, “one category of the ‘marginal’ whose experiences every artist has access to is the category of women” (2022, p. 112). Women in Satyajit Ray’s films, she argues, “represent a counterpoint to the man’s action” (2022). In short, postcolonial perspective is an angle in which women’s voices in films are investigated to understand female agency.

### METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach, using a close textual analysis of the film texts as its main methodology. This study employs the term “text” from the perspective of post-structuralism and cultural studies. Simply put, a close textual analysis privileges meaning constructed via interpretive and critical analysis. According to Julien (2008, p. 120) in qualitative research, “text is open to subjective interpretation, reflects multiple meanings, and is context dependent”. This subjectivity characterises post-structural treatment of relativism in meaning (Neuman, 2014, p. 109). Meanwhile textual analysis as a method can be understood via its function. For instance, according to McKee (as cited in Punnett, 2018, p. 16), “Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world”. Punnett (2018) refers to “text as can be anything that we intentionally interpret”. In conclusion, the qualitative approach using a close textual analysis is the main methodology chosen for this study.

This study uses a Criterion Sampling under the purposive sampling rubric. Purposive sampling technique is used as a strategic way of addressing the research objective (Palys, 2008). As a strategy, we employ a “Criterion Sampling” in which samples chosen “meet a certain criterion” (Palys, 2008, p. 697). There are two selection criteria: 1) the films contain scenes in which central female characters have a dialogue with each other; 2) the films encourage, what Britta Sjogren terms as “spectatorial identification of a feminine order - an “address” to a female audience was implicit in their production” (2006, p. 9). In the case of *3 Temujanji*, the film’s use of female voiceover is an explicit way spectatorial identification is established. For *Pontianak*, meanwhile, the spectatorial identification is both with the female lead as the explicit narrative’s stream of consciousness, as well as the female filmmaker, Shuhaimi Baba, as the implicit association. The term films here are used to include narrative films whose exhibitions were not restricted to cinema, but to include streaming networks. The two films chosen are as follows:

Table 1: Research samples

No	Title/Director/Production	Genre	Year
1	<i>3 Temujanji/ 3 dates</i> Director: Hashim Rejab Production: Metrowealth Pictures	Romance (Romantic Comedy sub-Genre)	2012

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2	<i>Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam/ Pontianak - The Scent of the Tuberose</i>	Horror genre	2004
	Director: Suhaimi Baba Production: Pesona Picture		

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In conclusion, the films are textually analysed based on the following procedure. The first step is applying the Bechdel test. For this step, some scenes that fit into the test criteria are selected. Then, the result of the test, i.e., either pass or fail is tabulated. The second step is determining a dominant theme of the film. For this step, the films are analysed textually to determine the major theme. According to Neuman (2014, p. 482), themes can be gathered by “(1) recognising patterns in the data, (2) thinking in terms of systems and concepts, (3) having tacit knowledge or in-depth background knowledge [...], (4) possessing relevant information [...]”. The final step is axiological in nature. The results as stated in steps one and two are evaluated. This is done by providing explanations for the evaluation and answers to whether narrative salience can support or challenge the Bechdel test.

## FRAMEWORKS

### *The Bechdel Test*

The Bechdel Test starts as comic relief by Alison Bechdel, who herself is a comedian, and has been taken up as a challenge worldwide by some film analysts because it can exemplify the representation of women in film. Although it is seen as a “pop culture” method of analysing female characters in Hollywood films, it has its own academic merits. For instance, the simple yet systematic nature of the Bechdel Test itself produces a pattern that is logical and appropriate for a quick sense-making. One advantage of this kind of a test is that it is easy to be used by a wide range of film audiences from feminist film scholars to film students as well as film aficionados. Although admittedly, it is not based on any academic framework, it is able to afford film critics an avenue into gender politics.

The Bechdel Test consists of a set of rules that are used to measure the female characters’ dependence or independence from men. There are three criteria in these rules that are related to the representation of women in film. When analysing a film, the three criteria to look for in relation to women are:

- 1) The scene has to have at least two women in it who;
- 2) Who talk to each other; about
- 3) Something besides a man”

(Feminist Frequency, 2009)

These criteria were established to see not only the content of the female characters’ conversation, but also their preoccupation with everything male. This essentially means that if two or more women talk about something other than men, the scene passed the test.

Academically speaking, we also have our own scepticism regarding this simple test. Film as a signifying practice, requires a gamut of complex technicalities to make sense of; therefore, a simple test can only result in simplicity and overgeneralisation. Likewise, as the main criticism of the Bechdel Test is its inability to provide the full picture of the representation of women in films, we take this test a notch further by suggesting that the test should be combined with the analysis of the film’s narrative salience. We define narrative

salience as referring to the part of the narrative - a film's textual - that contributes towards the formation of one of the main themes and pushed forward by the dynamic of the character and characterisation.

### *Narrative Salience in Films*

Narrative as a concept is amorphous at best; yet it is often understood semiotically. Scholars such as Roland Barthes (1977) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2017) define narrative as an observable phenomenon. Barthes' famous work captures the fluidity of narrative when he describes that "[t]he narrative of the world is numberless. [...] narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (1977, p. 79). Meanwhile, Ryan argues that as narrative is ubiquitous, it reflects its "phenomenological, existential dimension" (2017, p. 517). This existential dimension harks back to Barthes' idea of narrative as "like life itself", in which narrative is directly linked to representation. Defining narrative, in sum, is possible semiotically despite its varied conceptualisation.

As narrative is a conceptual conundrum, it is often related to scarce descriptions. For example, according to Keen (2015, p. 2), "narrative tells a story; so, it has a teller [...]; it relates events [...]; it features characters or agents". Therefore, doing narrative research is useful in making sense or creating meaning out of films as texts. Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2008, p. 2) argue that "by focussing on narrative, we are able to investigate not just how stories are structured and the way in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed; and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted". Their argument encapsulates the importance of analysing narrative to excavate conflicting discourses within a film text. This argument prioritises the idea of narrative as textually embodied. In the context of this study, narrative of the film is analysed by focusing on the parts that are useful to the main theme of the film, which we define as narrative salience. Indeed, doing narrative research helps us make sense of the selected films.

Apart from character and characterisation, analysing narrative films requires the use of a bricolage of filmic language as a mediated enunciation of the film's narrative salience. The first aspect of filmic language refers to how films function as "a signifying practice", i.e., the production of meaning (Colman, 2014, p. 41). This relates to the idea that "narrative is a communicative event" (Woodiwiss, Smith, & Lockwood, 2017, p. x). Linked to semiotics, this essentially reflects the "compositional elements - camera placement, movement, juxtaposition of foreground and background of people or things, light, sound [...]" (Dancyger, 2019, p. 205). Filmmakers and the audience alike rely on the systematic use of signs to "explain the narrative" (Dancyger, 2019, p. 205). This means that signifying practice refers to the production of meaning by the filmmaker. The meaning produced by the filmmaker and the audience does not have to be the same as signs are arbitrary in nature. For example, the use of close-up shots of a woman's face is often associated with the idea of intimacy, which can mean the woman's face is eroticised. However, the production of meaning of the same shot is communicated and understood differently between the director and the audience. While there is an apparent crevice in interpretation, narrative salience on the other hand alludes to Barthes' conception that "narrative is a hierarchy of instances [...], [which means], to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next" (1977, p. 87). Barthes' conception is amplified by James Carey's argument that "What one rarely finds is any analysis of the voice in which films speak"



(2009, p. 42). This study, in effect, analyses filmic language to operationalise the narrative salience to answer the overarching question of “Who actually speaks?” in the selected films.

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The first step of the analysis is applying the Bechdel test. In doing so, each film is dissected based on the test criteria outlined by the Bechdel test. In conclusion, this section presents the analysis of each film and the discussion that ensues.

#### *The Bechdel Test of the Selected Films*

The Bechdel Test is employed in the first stage of this analysis. In doing so, each scene chosen is coded by using the time counter. A time counter refers to the time during which the scene appears in the film. As the films are analysed from YouTube channels, the time of each scene is made explicit by the time that appears at the counter (used to be known as video player’s counter). For instance, 3.45 refers to the 3 minutes and 45 seconds of the running of the film. The time counter code is usually done in duration, that is, the length of the scene itself. For instance, 3.45 to 4.00 refers to the length of the scene involving the dialogue to be analysed. By doing this, instead of providing the details of the characters’ exchanges, a summary of each scene is given. Then a brief analysis is carried out based on The Bechdel Test. If the conversation between the female characters is about a man, the scene fails the test. As the analysis of each scene is time counter coded, this section is organised based on each film and the analysis of the scene is carried out chronologically and tabulated, although the scene may not reflect the chronology of the story itself.

Table 2: The Bechdel test of the film *3 Temujanji*

No	Time counter	Summary of the scene	Analysis	The Bechdel Test Result
1	3.50 – 4.58	The main female character, Reanna, meets her female business partner - Amanda - who is in a state of mawkish sadness as she has just been left by her boyfriend, Kamil. Reanna scolds Amanda for being “the reason” behind Kamal’s departure.	The scene shows the two female characters talking about a man	Failed
2	7.18- 8.41	Reanna meets her mother at home, who is feeling down since her husband has remarried.	The scene shows that the conversation between the two female characters pivot around a man, i.e., the father.	Failed
3	11.24- 12.30	Reanna adjures Amanda to work on a business proposal so that she is not wasting her time.	Although the conversation between Reanna and Amanda is the result of the latter’s ex-boyfriend, direct reference to him was not made.	Passed
4	18.29- 19.39	Amanda asks Reanna if there is true love. Reanna suggests that Amanda follows her way of restricting to three dates and parts company after the third day.	The conversation centres on love, and as Amanda starts with asking whether there is a man for her, this conversation makes reference to a man, which is Riana’s next “victim” (Mohsin)	Failed

5	28.16-29.48	Amanda is hysterical at Reanna's house. The reason being she is missing her ex-boyfriend, Kamal. Amanda plans for revenge.	The conversation centres around a man, Kamal.	Failed.
6	36.25-36.43	Reanna talks to her mother whose husband has just left her. Her mother adjures her not to trust any man.	The conversation centres around a man, her father.	Failed
7	37.10-38.58	Amanda informs Reanna that she has gone to spy on Kamal and found that Kamal is still in love with her. Amanda also discovers that Reanna is in love with Husin	The conversation centres on two men, Husin and Kamal.	Failed.
8	42.03-42.25	Amanda discovers that Reanna has been in communication with Husin and asks about him.	The conversation centres on a man, Husin.	Failed.
9	43.26-44.12	Amanda is annoyed that Reanna is avoiding Husin's call for the third date.	The conversation makes a reference to a man, Husin	Failed
10	56.40-59.08	Amanda asks about Reanna's third date. Reanna confesses that it is the first time she feels she belongs to a family as Husin took her to see his whole family. Amanda suggests that it is not considered a date as the meeting involves a lot of people; Reanna agrees.	The conversation makes a direct reference to a man, Husin.	Failed.
11	1.12:47 - 1.14:52	Reanna wonders who Amanda is talking to. Amanda admits that she is talking to a rose given by Kamal, in the hope that Kamal would love her again as the pink rose symbolises their love. This makes Reanna realise that there is a symbol of her love with Husin and searches for it.	The conversation makes a direct reference to a man, Kamal.	Failed
12	1.19:17 -1.	Adira comes to see Reanna at the funfair, asking why she is there. The funfair is one of the places Reanna and Husin went for their date. Adira comes to "return" Husin to Reanna as she believes Husin only loves Reanna.	The conversation makes a reference to a man, Husin.	Failed.

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### *Narrative Saliency in 3 Temujanji*

*3 Temujanji* begins with the introduction of the main female character, Reanna, and her attitude towards love. She is introduced as often fulminating and spurning her ex-boyfriends who refuse to accept her reasons for not continuing dating them. The eponymous number 3 in the title refers to her principle of allowing a man to date her thrice only. Then they would split up on friendly terms, so she thinks. The initial comic moments and the ensuing conflicts of the film are created through the introduction of two other male characters who have dated her and could not accept the end of their relationship. While the opening scene functions as a vignette of her character and characterisation, it reveals the crucial attitude the film has towards its main female character. The use of her voiceover as the narrator creates depth to her character, in which her scepticism about love is compensated by the idea that she still believes in a true love. This is the main theme of the film.

There are 12 scenes selected by using the Bechdel Test for this film. Most of the scenes selected involved Reanna's communication with her business partner and friend, Amanda. Amanda's character functions as a ruse for Reanna's, providing a point of comparison in terms of their character and characterisation. While Amanda is a rambunctious romantic, Reanna is shown as a practical and business-minded person. For her, love is like business, merely a transaction. Reanna's attitude towards love is rooted in her mother's devastating relationship with her estranged father, making her uninterested in pursuing a romantic love. Amanda's failure in love with Kamal, further cements Reanna's belief that true love is elusive. Nonetheless, the voiceover in the beginning of the film belies Reanna's tough exterior, revealing its function as a veneer that the film is eager to expose and to prove that Reanna's personal principle is flawed.

In its pursuit to reveal Reanna's flawed attitude towards love, the film introduces a male protagonist that provides a binary opposition in the form of Husin, who is a meek, family oriented, and hopeless romantic. Husin comes to Reanna's wedding planner shop to prepare for his wedding with a wannabe actress, Adira. However, Husin's proposal was turned down by Adira in front of his family. Through such an event, Husin's attitude towards love is revealed, making him the perfect "albatross" for Reanna's principles. It is after their second meeting at Husin's workplace that they agree to go for the three dates. We argue that it is within the structure of the romantic genre conventions that Reanna's character should be read. While Amanda's and Kamal's romance is risible and mawkish, providing comic moments for this subgenre, Reanna's relationship with Husin is supposed to lean on tragedy as the film tries to show that Reanna would have missed the true love she has been after if she had continued with her principle.

What the selected scenes fail to reveal is the kind of power struggle that takes place in the film, which provides Reanna with, to a great extent, female agency. In this case, while her conversations with Amanda and her mother centre on men, hence providing backgrounds for her attitude towards love, the film's narrative does not trap her absolutely within the quiddity of a romantic genre, denying the "politics of hetero-masculinity whose homogenising power" guarantees a happy ending (Jamaluddin Aziz, 2020b, p. 88). In the scenes selected, Reanna is in control of all interactions, which in turn pushes the narrative further. Her character is not made static by the narrative; indeed, the narrative becomes more meaningful and salient due to the decisions made by her. In this case, Reanna's character is in the position of power – a Foucauldian sense of power as according to Foucault, "power is something *exercised* [original italic] within interactions... [as she has] many opportunities to exercise

power” (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 128). Although the film is built on the premise that her principle is flawed through Husin’s character, she undeniably has control over the narrative direction. Instead of being a character that is simply there to provide the love interest to the male character, her consciousness as a woman becomes a narrative salience that pushes the film to its albeit predictable ending. Therefore, despite the failure highlighted by the Bechdel Test, the film provides a model of empowerment for young women through Reanna’s character.

Table 3: The Bechdel test of the film *Pontianak*

No	Time Counter	Summary of the Scene	Analysis	The Bechdel Test Result
1	31:30-34:00	Laila and Sitam found Mariam covered in blood. Mariam asks them to cut her stomach to save her unborn baby. When Mariam died, Sitam saves the baby and Laila and Sitam split. Sitam was killed defending Mariam.	The conversation does not refer to man.	Passed
2	43:09-43.20	Ana tells Maria that she is going to the construction site and asks Maria to compute some information. Maria meets Afi who talks to her about the orders the business receives.	The conversation does not refer to any man. The female characters talk about work in their working environment.	Passed.
3	43:34-43:37	Ana asks Maria what the matter is, and the latter responds that she feels that she is being watched.	The conversation is a bit ambiguous as we are not certain whether it really takes place or part of Marsani’s nightmare. But no reference to a man is made.	Passed.
4	51:53-52:07	Afi confesses to Maria that Asmadi is going to marry her. Maria asks why Afi wants to marry Asmadi.	The conversation makes a reference to a man although there is a resistance in Maria’s motivation.	Failed.
5	1.12:59-1.13:03	Ana asks whether Maria is okay. Maria wants to borrow the gong as it sounds like hers.	The conversation does not refer to a man.	Passed
6	1.16:22- 1.17:48	Ana asks Maria whether she is okay as the latter just tried to asphyxiate her. Maria admits that she is fearful of herself and of her recurring dream.	The conversation does not make any reference to man.	Passed

### Narrative Saliency in *Pontianak*

*Pontianak* is a horror film that focuses on the characters Maria and Mariam. The story of Mariam takes place in the recent past, while Maria is the embodiment of Mariam's present. The two characters are linked together by their physical resemblances as Maria is Mariam's posthumous baby. Through flashback techniques, the film creates two narratives that eventually converge and reveal the main theme of the film – revenge. Although the initial narrative about the eponymous Pontianak is told by the male antagonist, Marsani, the song that precedes this narrative tells us that this is a female avenger story. Indeed, the film starts with a song sung by a female singer that narrates revenge as the film's main motive, and that the revenge will materialise when both narratives converge as one.

Suhaimi Baba employs this narrative strategy to foreground her female characters' story, hence making her the integral stream of consciousness. As the Bechdel Test result reveals that the main female characters in the film are empowered by the idea that they are not preoccupied by matters merely related to men, revenge as the main theme of the film seems to undermine the result. When Mariam's character appears on screen, she is shown as beautiful and mesmerising. Her role as an elite dancer titillates the male audience and the male characters alike, reducing her into their object of male desire. She is reduced into an object to be possessed and exchanged by both men, Marsani and Daniel. The jewellery gifted to her by both men signify that objectification and fetishisation of her look. As Mariam, she is an object to be ogled at by the male characters, and some of Marsani's men externalised this objectification by kidnapping and trying to gang rape her. The failure to possess her body results in her accidental death-cum-murder.

As Maria's story is unravelled, she becomes an ambivalent character, apparently has no control of her body and mind. Indeed, she is mostly shown in her professional space – her workplace – which explains why her conversations with her female colleagues centre on work and not personal matters. This is proven by the Bechdel Test result, revealing the weakness of the test in manifesting women empowerment. As revenge becomes the film's leitmotif, the trajectory of the film segues the narrative focus into a preoccupation with the object of revenge, Marsani and his family; thus, turning the film into a revenge narrative film in which the overarching focus is ultimately on a man. While the Bechdel Test shows the positive portrayal of the main female characters, the narrative saliency indicates otherwise. This is because the female character's preoccupation with revenge freezes her dynamics, creating a narrative circle and predetermines her ending into oblivion as proven by Maria's eventual departure. Indeed, Mariam is only allowed to become powerful when she is neither a woman nor human - a spectre - reducing her into a figure of pathos.

### CONCLUSION

The Bechdel test administered on the two films revealed two strikingly different results. For the romantic comedy genre, the film *3 Temujanji* contains 12 scenes that fit into the criteria set by the Bechdel Test. The test is administered on each selected scene and the result is indicated in Table 2. The test reveals that out of 12 scenes selected, only one scene passed the test. This means, for the film, the female characters mostly have a conversation with each other while making references to men. Meanwhile, for *Pontianak*, which is a film of the horror genre, 6 scenes have been selected that fit into the criteria set by the Bechdel Test. Out of the 6 scenes, 5 scenes passed the test. This evinces the idea that the female characters in the

film rarely talk about men when they are with each other. Therefore, it can be concluded that while *3 Temujanji* failed virtually all tests, *Pontianak* passed almost all tests.

The narrative salience analyses, however, reveal the opposite of Bechdel Test results. On one hand, the analysis of *3 Temujanji* reveals that the narrative is made salient by the main female character's ability to push the narrative further. As she is able to control the interactions, she demonstrates the idea that she is often in the position of power. On the other hand, although the Bechdel Test reveals the female characters' independence from men in their interactions, the narrative salience of *Pontianak* reveals that the main female characters are trapped within the revenge narrative of the film, pushing it into a circle of perpetual dilemma that continues to haunt her.

The finding of the research contributes to the knowledge of women empowerment in films by showing that there are different ways in which gender can be analysed. It also shows that while a test like the Bechdel Test can help quantify the reading of a film, it does not consider the whole context of storytelling and sense-making of a film. Scriptwriters and filmmakers, nonetheless, can utilise the test as a reference in which women can define themselves outside of the gender binary system, i.e., "not in relation to men", while creating female characters who can progressively think beyond patriarchy and androcentrism.

#### BIODATA

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