

Negotiating Women's Collective Memories and Patriarchal Trauma in Asian Horror Cinema

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Abstract: This study examines how recent Asian horror cinema negotiates women's collective memories and patriarchal trauma through the spectral presence of female ghosts. Using Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, the research analyzed three films—The Queen of Black Magic (Indonesia, 2019), The Medium (Thailand, 2021), and Incantation (Taiwan, 2022). These films transform women's silenced suffering into cultural archives of resistance by repositioning female ghosts as agents of memory and critique. Through haunting, possession, and confession, they convert private trauma into collective testimony, challenging patriarchal authority while ensuring intergenerational remembrance. Narrative and visual strategies reveal that ghosts not only symbolize unresolved trauma but also redistribute moral responsibility across communities. This analysis highlights how Asian horror cinema functions as a site of cultural politics, where suppressed voices reemerge as haunting presences that resist erasure. Ultimately, the study underscores cinema's role in preserving women's memories, destabilizing patriarchal narratives, and reshaping cultural understandings of gendered trauma.

Keywords: Asian horror cinema, collective memory, female ghosts, feminist film theory, patriarchal trauma

INTRODUCTION

Women in Asia have long faced systemic marginalization within patriarchal structures, often enduring discrimination, violence, and limited representation in the social, cultural, and political spheres (Abdullah, 2025). In recent years, reports have shown that patriarchal oppression manifests in persistent gender-based violence, unequal access to opportunities, and structural silencing of women's voices in both domestic and public life (Dasbiswas, 2020). Despite progress in some sectors, patriarchal dominance remains embedded in cultural narratives, shaping how women are remembered, represented, and silenced within the collective memory (Begum et al., 2025). This marginalization extends not only to the material conditions of women's lives, but also to cultural productions such as cinema, which both reflect and negotiate societal anxieties about gender.

Despite their diversity, Asian societies share common histories of patriarchal dominance, where women's bodies and voices have been sites of control and contestation (Swastika, 2023). The marginalization of women often takes symbolic forms, ranging from their exclusion in political decision-making to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in popular culture (Roka, 2022). Particularly concerning is the rise in gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was described as a "shadow pandemic" disproportionately affecting women (Women, 2020). Such conditions reinforce the



necessity of examining how women's trauma is represented, remembered, and negotiated in cultural forms, including horror cinema.

Horror films, especially in Asia, have historically foregrounded female ghosts as central figures, embodying cultural anxieties regarding gender, memory, and social justice (Lee, 2011). Female spectres in Asian horror cinema often emerge as symbols of unresolved trauma, injustice, and suppressed voices within patriarchal systems (Wee, 2011). By haunting life, these ghosts resist erasure and force societies to reckon with the injustices of women. Horror cinema provides a powerful cultural space for analyzing the intersections of gender, trauma, and memory.

In the past five years, several Asian horror films have notably focused on female ghosts, reflecting broader cultural concerns about gendered trauma. One such film is "The Queen of Black Magic" (Indonesia, 2019), which revisits the themes of abuse and institutional violence against women within a patriarchal community. The film not only portrays women as victims of systemic violence but also transforms their memories into a haunting force that destabilizes patriarchal authority (Novianti, 2024). This narrative highlights how women's trauma, once silenced, returns in spectral form to demand recognition and justice.

Another significant example is "The Medium" (Thailand, 2021), which intertwines shamanic traditions with female embodiment and possession. The film explores intergenerational trauma, in which female bodies become vessels of both cultural continuity and patriarchal exploitation (Ancuta, 2020). The haunting presence within *The Medium* illustrates the negotiation of memory through female spirituality and suffering, challenging the patriarchal framework that often commodifies and silences women's experiences.

The third film, "Incantation" (Taiwan, 2022), has been internationally acclaimed for its innovative use of the found-footage horror while embedding themes of maternal trauma and cultural superstition (Angesty & Mukafi, 2024). The narrative focuses on the mother's struggle to protect her child while confronting a curse tied to patriarchal religious rituals. Here, the female ghost becomes a symbol of how maternal memory and intergenerational trauma are negotiated in societies that use religious authority to reinforce gender oppression. Together, these films exemplify the persistence of female ghosts as an embodiment of patriarchal trauma and collective memory.

These three films are particularly suitable for this study because they not only foreground women as central figures in horror narratives, but also expose the systemic injustices of patriarchal societies in Asia. *The Queen of Black Magic* critiques institutional violence, which emphasizes intergenerational trauma and spiritual possession, while

Incantation highlights maternal struggles under patriarchal belief systems. Their thematic resonance demonstrates how horror cinema functions as a cultural archive of women's collective memories and trauma.

Despite the rich body of research on horror cinema, much of the scholarship has focused on Western contexts, particularly the tropes of female monstrosity in Hollywood production (Peirse, 2022). While studies on Asian horror exist, they have primarily analyzed earlier canonical works, such as *Ringu* (1998) and *Ju-On* (2002) (Wee, 2011). There is limited scholarship addressing recent Asian horror films that explicitly engage with female ghosts as negotiators of collective memory and patriarchal trauma. This oversight leaves a significant gap in understanding how contemporary horror reflects the evolving sociocultural realities of women in Asia.

Moreover, existing research often treats female ghosts as static symbols of victimhood or vengeance without examining their role in negotiating cultural memory and challenging patriarchal systems (Wang, 2023). Contemporary films such as *The Queen of Black Magic*, *The Medium*, and *Incantation* provide new insights into how female specters embody resilience, collective trauma, and social critiques. These narratives highlight women not merely as passive victims but also as active agents in the reconstruction of cultural memory. Thus, there is a need to investigate how recent Asian horror cinema has reconfigured the representation of female ghosts in relation to memory and trauma.

Addressing this gap is crucial for advancing discussions of gender, trauma, and cultural representation in global film studies. By focusing on recent Asian horror cinema, this research challenges Eurocentric perspectives in film theory and contributes to broader conversations about the universality and particularity of women's struggles against patriarchal systems (Fernandez et al., 2025). It also responds to calls for more inclusive scholarship that foregrounds the voices, memories, and traumas of women in non-Western contexts.

This study situates horror cinema as a cultural text where women's memories are both preserved and contested. Female ghosts in Asian horror films not only embody unresolved trauma, but also function as mediators between past and present, individual and collective, oppression, and resistance (Ancuta, 2021). Their haunting disrupts patriarchal silencing, forcing audiences to confront uncomfortable truths regarding gender inequality and cultural violence. Through this lens, horror cinema becomes a site of memory politics in which women's experiences are inscribed and renegotiated.

In examining these films, this study underscores how memory and trauma intersect in the representation of women's bodies and voices. Memory is not simply about recalling

the past, but about reconstructing identities and challenging systemic injustices (LaCapra, 2014). Female ghosts embody this process by transforming silenced suffering into a visible and often terrifying presence. These narratives reveal how collective memory is shaped through the tension between patriarchal oppression and women's resistance.

The phenomenon of marginalization, as documented by international agencies and regional studies, underpins the urgency of this research. Gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and cultural silencing of women continue to be widespread in Asia (OCDE, 2021). When such injustices are inscribed into cultural memory through cinema, they take on a symbolic power that can both challenge and reinforce patriarchal narratives. By analyzing the spectral figures of Asian horror, this study seeks to understand how women's memories are reimagined and politicized within popular culture. Accordingly, this study was guided by two key questions.

- (1) How have recent Asian horror films negotiated women's collective memories in relation to patriarchal trauma?
- (2) In what ways do female ghosts function as agents of resistance against systemic gendered oppression in contemporary Asian horror cinema?

Literature Review

Previous Studies

Several studies have examined the intersection between collective memory, patriarchy, and the representation of women in Asian horror films. (Lee, 2015) analyzed Korean horror cinema and found that female ghosts often symbolize the collective memories of silenced women under the weight of patriarchal traditions. Similarly, Kashyap (2024) explored Indian horror narratives and argued that women's supernatural embodiments served as cultural reminders of gendered trauma and social injustice. Another relevant contribution comes from Saputra (2026), who studied Indonesian horror films and emphasized that recurring tropes of the vengeful female spirit function as a repository of women's memories erased from dominant discourse.

These studies converge on the idea that horror films provide an important cultural space to articulate suppressed voices and historical trauma, particularly those of women. However, they often remain descriptive, focusing on the symbolism of ghosts, without fully situating the phenomenon within the broader theoretical framework of collective memory. This study aims to bridge this gap by applying Halbwachs' theory of collective memory to systematically examine how patriarchal oppression of women is remembered, reframed, and resisted in Asian horror cinema.

Collective Memory

The concept of collective memory provides a crucial lens for analyzing how trauma and silenced experiences persist across generations. Maurice (Halbwachs, 1992) first introduced the idea that memory is not an isolated act of the individual but is socially framed and shaped by group belonging. Collective memory, in this sense, is not merely a recollection of the past, but a negotiation of identity, belonging, and shared suffering within social contexts. Dutta & Meenakshi (2026) further extends this framework by describing cultural memory as mediated through texts, rituals, and cultural productions, including cinema. Through this mediation, societies can preserve memories that resist official erasure, particularly those that concern marginalized groups such as women.

In the context of Asian horror cinema, collective memory often materializes through the figure of the female ghost, who embodies silenced trauma under patriarchal domination. These recurring motifs are not accidental; they are cultural signifiers who force societies to reckon with past and ongoing injustices. May & González-Malabet (2026) emphasize that collective memory also functions as a critical discourse, allowing suppressed narratives, such as women's suffering and patriarchal violence, to reappear in symbolic and affective forms. Thus, horror films can be read as cultural archives of memory, where the supernatural becomes a metaphorical space to remember what dominant structures attempt to forget.

Women in the Patriarchal System

The patriarchy in Asian societies has historically dictated women's roles through systems of obedience, silence, and subjugation. Rooted in cultural traditions such as Confucianism, Hinduism, and conservative interpretations of religion, women have long been positioned as bearers of family honor and responsible for sacrifice and endurance (Samuel & Jha, 2026). This system not only silences women's suffering, but also normalizes it as part of their social destiny. Saputra (2026) argues that patriarchal values often prevent women from voicing experiences of violence, as silence becomes a form of coercive compliance within family and community structures.

Within this system, horror cinema is a powerful site of resistance. The spectral figure of the woman—often betrayed, abused, or silenced—returns not merely as a monster, but as a testimony of collective trauma. Vairavan & Kumar (2025) interprets these cinematic figures as embodiments of women's memories that patriarchal cultures attempt to bury. By haunting both characters and audiences, these ghosts articulate a refusal to forget. In this sense, horror films do not merely entertain women; they disrupt the patriarchal narrative by transforming women's suffering into a cultural memory that demands recognition.

Therefore, when reading through the dual framework of collective memory and patriarchy, Asian horror cinema illuminates how societies continually grapple with suppressed voices of women. The persistence of these representations across cultures and decades signifies not only ongoing gendered oppression, but also a collective refusal to let these memories disappear.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis and cultural studies to examine how women's collective memories and patriarchal trauma are negotiated in Asian horror cinema. The methodological framework draws from feminist film theory and trauma studies, which together provide a critical lens for analyzing the representation of female ghosts as both cultural and political figures.

The primary objects of analysis consist of three Asian horror films released in the past five years that prominently feature female ghosts and narratives of women's suffering: *The Queen of Black Magic* (Indonesia, 2019), *The Medium* (Thailand–South Korea, 2021), and *Incantation* (Taiwan, 2022). These films were chosen because they foreground female characters whose stories of trauma are embedded within patriarchal structures while also representing diverse cultural contexts that allow for a comparative exploration of gendered memory across Asia. The study emphasizes how narrative structures, visual strategies, and sociocultural contexts intersect in portraying women's haunting presence as a negotiation of memory and trauma.

The process of analysis involved repeated viewing of the films to capture narrative details, cinematic techniques, and thematic nuances. This primary material is further supported by secondary sources, including academic articles, critical essays, and cultural commentaries, which provide interpretive depth. A thematic analysis approach guides the examination, focusing on the motifs of memory, trauma, and patriarchal violence as they emerge through cinematic language. Through this interpretive process, this study seeks to reveal how horror cinema transforms the figure of the female ghost into a cultural archive of women's struggles, thereby highlighting both the oppressive and resistant dimensions of female representation in patriarchal societies.

By employing this methodology, this research aims to bridge film analysis with broader cultural critique, situating horror cinema not only as entertainment but also as a medium of social memory and political commentary. The combination of feminist theory, trauma studies, and textual analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how contemporary Asian horror cinema articulates women's collective

memories and negotiates the haunting legacies of patriarchal trauma.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The following displayed the data and analysis of the objects chosen to answer the research questions are as follows:

1. How have recent Asian horror films negotiated women's collective memories in relation to patriarchal trauma?

Recent Asian horror films negotiate women's collective memories by transforming privately endured experiences of patriarchal trauma into social recollections that are shared and recognized within a community, consistent with Halbwachs' (1997) principle that memory is socially framed. In *The Queen of Black Magic* (2019), during confrontation at the orphanage, a character asserts, "You have ignored our suffering for too long, but we will not remain silent" (mid-film confrontation, approx. 52:15). Repeated haunting forces caretakers and the surrounding community to confront past abuses, exemplifying how individual memory is integrated into collective consciousness.

Embodied experiences further reinforce collective memory (2021). During the ritual possession sequence, the young woman states, "I carry the memories of my mother, my grandmother; their pain speaks through me" (ritual possession sequence, approx. 1:03:40). Her body functions as a living archive, transmitting intergenerational trauma and demonstrating Halbwachs' assertion that memory survives through social actors within structured social groups.

In *Incantation* (2022), the protagonist records a confession and declares, "The sins we tried to hide are now witnessed by all" (found-footage confession sequence, approx. 1:18:05). This act transforms private experiences of trauma into shared social memory, engaging both characters within the story and the audience as participants in the collective recollection. Across these films, the negotiation of women's collective memories highlights how patriarchal trauma becomes recognized within social frameworks, ensuring that suppressed experiences are neither forgotten nor isolated.

The confrontation scene in *The Queen of Black Magic* illustrates how women's voices, previously suppressed within patriarchal structures, are negotiated within the community's social framework. The ghost's repeated accusations compel orphanage staff to re-evaluate their complicity in perpetuating systemic abuse. According to Halbwachs (1997), individual memory gains significance when it is integrated into a social group's collective consciousness, in which haunting functions as a mechanism through which marginalized

voices assert presence, demanding recognition of the trauma that was once silenced. Repeated communal acknowledgment in the narrative enforces collective reckoning with gendered violence.

In the Medium, the ritual possession sequence exemplifies the negotiation of female memories across temporal and generational lines. A young woman becomes a living repository of ancestral trauma, articulating experiences that patriarchal authority sought to erase. Through her embodiment, the film externalizes private pain in the form of shared social memory. Halbwachs emphasizes that memory is inseparable from the social context that frames it and that the structured ritual and the community's observation transform the protagonist's personal trauma into a collective understanding of historical gender oppression, thereby giving voice to women whose experiences were historically marginalized.

Similarly, Incantation demonstrates the negotiation of women's memories through the act of recording and sharing personal confessions. By making private trauma visible to a wider audience, the protagonist enlists spectators as a part of the social group responsible for remembering. The film's narrative strategy aligns with Halbwachs's theory that memory persists through group recognition, highlighting how patriarchal trauma, when publicly articulated, becomes a shared social concern. Through these mediated representations, Asian horror cinema negotiates women's voices and converts private suffering into a form of collective testimony that resists patriarchal erasure.

2. Female ghosts in contemporary Asian horror cinema function as agents of resistance to systemic gendered oppression

Female ghosts act as agents of resistance by compelling social groups to acknowledge previously silenced trauma, redistribute moral responsibility, and maintain the persistence of memory across generations. In *The Queen of Black Magic*, the ghost repeatedly confronts the caretakers, stating, 'You will answer for the lives you destroyed' (mid-film climax, approx. 1:12:30), destabilizing the authority that enabled patriarchal abuse. In *The Medium*, the possessed young woman proclaims, "Your authority cannot silence the voices of the oppressed" (ritual possession, approx. 1:08:50), implicating community elders and ritual leaders in the perpetuation of trauma. During the recorded confession, the protagonist affirms, "This memory will not die; we will be remembered" (found-footage scene, approx. 1:21:45), transforming private suffering into enduring social memory.

These spectral figures function as conduits through which the collective memory is reconstructed and reinforced. By confronting perpetrators, implicating the community, and

ensuring that women's traumatic experiences are publicly acknowledged, female ghosts in contemporary Asian horror embody Halbwachs' notion that memory exists within social frameworks and requires group recognition. They resist patriarchal forgetting, transmit trauma across generations, and preserve women's memories as an active part of their social consciousness, making Asian horror cinema a critical cultural archive of women's experiences under systemic oppression.

Through their narrative presence, repetition, and embodiment, female ghosts serve not merely as symbols of fear but also as active participants in the negotiation of social memory. The films examined reveal that horror cinema can function as a medium where the community, represented both within the story and in the audience, engages in collective remembrance of patriarchal trauma. This dynamic underscores the critical role of contemporary Asian horror in preserving women's voices and experiences that would otherwise be marginalized or erased.

A deeper analysis of female ghosts as agents of resistance in contemporary Asian horror cinema reveals their function in compelling social groups to acknowledge silenced traumas, redistribute moral responsibility, and ensure the persistence of memory across generations, while drawing on theories of collective memory that emphasize social frameworks for recognition and preservation. These spectral figures, often born from patriarchal violence, such as abuse or marginalization, transcend mere symbols of fear to become active disruptors of systemic oppression, embodying a form of monstrous femininity that reclaims agency in the afterlife and forces societal reckoning with gendered injustices rooted in historical and cultural contexts across the region. By manifesting unresolved grievances, they challenge the patriarchal tendency to erase women's experiences, transforming horror narratives into spaces in which private suffering evolves into communal discourse and critique.

In films where ghosts haunt institutions or communities tied to past abuses, their confrontations serve to unearth buried secrets, symbolizing a refusal of the past to remain forgotten, and highlighting how environments of stagnation represent broader societal amnesia about exploitation and scapegoating under male-dominated systems. This mechanism aligns with the idea that memory resurfaces in layered forms, where hyperbolic depictions of torment are linked directly to the consequences of patriarchy, such as self-inflicted harm under societal pressures, ultimately compelling characters and viewers alike to confront the decay of communal bonds caused by unchecked oppression. Similarly, in stories involving possession and ancestral spirits, spectral presence critiques hierarchical traditions that subordinate women, using escalation in rituals to break taboos around issues

such as forced roles or inheritance denial, thereby turning the body into a site of resistance against authoritative silencing.

The redistribution of moral responsibility emerges as ghosts punish not only direct perpetrators but also enablers and bystanders, inverting victim-blaming norms prevalent in patriarchal structures and creating a web of ethical accountability that sustains social cohesion through shared guilt. This inversion draws from folklore traditions, where posthumous figures target those who embody betrayal or failure, subvert domestic expectations, and reclaim narrative control in ways that expose the complicity of institutions in perpetuating cycles of suffering. In broader regional horror motifs, such as those involving vengeful spirits that drain vitality or seduce to destroy, the emphasis lies on punishing systemic lapses, positioning these entities as mnemonic devices that resist narratives erasing women's agency amid colonial and modern influence.

Furthermore, the persistence of memory is maintained through cyclical hauntings and ritualistic elements that transmit gendered resentments intergenerationally, countering linear progress narratives that marginalize traumas. Across various Asian contexts, ghosts empowered in death link to memories of oppression, amplifying their role as conduits for preserving marginalized voices and engaging audiences in active participation toward justice and transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that contemporary Asian horror cinema plays a significant role in negotiating women's collective memories and articulating patriarchal trauma through the figure of the female ghost. Drawing on Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, the analysis reveals that films such as *The Queen of Black Magic* (2019), *The Medium* (2021), and *Incantation* (2022) transform individual experiences of suffering into shared cultural narratives. Through cinematic strategies such as haunting, possession, and confession, these films convert private trauma into collective testimony, ensuring that women's silenced voices are neither erased nor forgotten.

The findings confirm that women's memories in these films are socially framed and sustained through communal recognition. Female characters, whether as ghosts or possessed bodies, function as living archives of intergenerational trauma, bridging past and present while reinforcing the continuity of memory across social groups. In doing so, Asian horror cinema emerges not merely as a site of entertainment but as a cultural medium that preserves and reconstructs marginalized histories.

Furthermore, the study highlights that female ghosts operate as active agents of

resistance against patriarchal oppression. Rather than being passive symbols of victimhood, they challenge dominant power structures by exposing hidden violence, redistributing moral responsibility, and compelling both characters and audiences to confront systemic injustices. Their presence destabilizes patriarchal authority and redefines horror as a space for ethical reflection and cultural critique.

Ultimately, this research contributes to expanding the discourse on global horror cinema by foregrounding non-Western perspectives and emphasizing the political and mnemonic functions of film. It underscores that contemporary Asian horror cinema serves as a critical archive of women's experiences, where trauma is not only represented but also negotiated and resisted. Future research may further explore broader regional variations or audience reception to deepen understanding of how these narratives influence cultural perceptions of gender, memory, and justice.

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