

## THE PORTRAYAL OF SECTARIAN LEADERS AND THE DEMONS THEY MADE PACTS WITH IN PENGABDI SETAN AND HEREDITARY

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**Abstrak:** *The phenomenon of sects in modern horror films depicts the tension between belief, social power, and trauma inherited from patriarchal systems. This research examines the relationship between the sectarian leader and the demon in the films Pengabdi Setan and Hereditary as a representation of power and gender dynamics. A qualitative approach uses Daitz's (1960) theory to analyze the character formation of the sectarian leader. The results show that both films not only depict a pact with the demon but also depict intergenerational inheritance mechanisms that reinforce patriarchal structures and gender inequality. In Pengabdi Setan, the sectarian leader makes a pact with the demon Raminom to obtain offspring and success. In Hereditary, the sectarian leader is not physically visible but controls a family tragedy to summon the demon king Paimon. Both films demonstrate that the sect power does not end after the leader's death, but rather leaves a legacy of darkness for the next generation. This study contributes to horror studies by highlighting the relationship between power, gender, and collective fear and enriches film studies through an in depth understanding of social anxiety and patriarchal systems in supernatural symbolism.*

**Keywords:** horror film, sectarian leader, gender power, Pengabdi Setan, Hereditary

### INTRODUCTION

Horror films are not just scary stories meant to scare people, but can also create anxiety, sectarianism, and highlight issues related to power dynamics in society. In horror films, ghosts and demons not only scare people, but are also often associated as symbols of power, belief, and the differences in roles between men and women. For example, this is represented in the films *Pengabdi Setan (Satan's Slaves)* (2017, 2022) and *Hereditary* (2018).

In horror films about pacts with the demon, sect leaders and demons are not only connected through rituals or mystical elements, but also through the interplay of male and female roles that influence who holds power. Examples of this can be seen in the films *Pengabdi Setan* (2017, 2022) and *Hereditary* (2018). The research discusses *Pengabdi Setan* before *Hereditary* because it came out earlier, making it easier to understand how Indonesian horror films portray the sectarian practice. Meanwhile, *Hereditary* presents a sectarian framework originating from a Western sectoral context and significantly different from the Indonesian context.

In the film *Pengabdi Setan*, the sectarian leader is depicted as making a pact with the demon to have a child, which will become the next sectarian leader. Meanwhile, in the film *Hereditary*, the sectarian leader is depicted as a hidden (deceased) figure. This figure organizes

the ritual to resurrect the demon king Paimon. The pact is not only a mystical connection, but also a way to preserve power inherited through the bloodline. In both films, the death of a family member tied to the sectarian, whether the mother in *Pengabdi Setan* or the grandmother in *Hereditary*, does not end the pact with the sectarian, but rather leaves a legacy that brings terror to the surviving family.

Several previous studies discuss *Pengabdi Setan* and *Hereditary* using various theories. According to Brown, (1996) cinematography theory, techniques such as framing, lighting, color, and camera movement in *Pengabdi Setan*. These films create emotional reactions in viewers, both positive and negative, through their attachment to characters, plot, and moral messages (Tremblay et al., 2016). Another study by Wawat Rahwati, Cut Novita Srikandi, Nina Alia Ariefa, and Bustanuddin Lubis (2020) examined the portrayal of women through the mother and grandmother characters in the film *Pengabdi Setan*. They explained how women's roles are portrayed in a house filled with frightening elements. In the film *Hereditary*, Beth Kattelman (2022) examined how sound and music in films can increase fear and sadness in viewers. Furthermore, according to Rodríguez-Testal and colleagues (2021), hallucinations and delusions can arise due to stress or problems within the family and community. This is similar to the story in *Hereditary*, where supernatural phenomena emerge due to trauma, grief, and inherited family problems. Some of these studies provide information about the differences between modern horror films between Asia and the Western in aesthetic, emotional, and thematic dimensions.

The gap from the previous studies is that no one has addressed the role of sect leaders and their relations with demon beings in shaping power and gender dynamics. In addition, comparative studies between Asian horror and Western horror, especially Indonesian horror, in the context of sectarian leaders are also rarely carried out. This article contributes by comparing how the sect leader is portrayed in *Pengabdi Setan* and *Hereditary*, and how their relationship with demon creatures shows a legacy of power and terror between generations. This approach not only enriches the study of horror in terms of power and gender, but also opens up a new understanding of how sectarian leaders are constructed in modern horror discourse across sectors.

1. How do *Pengabdi Setan* and *Hereditary* represent sectarian leaders in relation to their pacts with the demons in shaping the dynamics of power and gender?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In horror films, the relationship between sect leaders and demons is seen as a symbol of power. Sectarian leaders in horror films, in particular, tend to emphasize their role as representations of demonic power and intermediaries between humans and supernatural beings. This explains that sect leaders not only have power over rituals but also act as a link between humans and demons. Sharma et al. (2024) argue that sectarian leaders in the horror films *Midsommar* and *The Other Lamb* demonstrate patriarchy and social control.

This contrasts with oppressive forces that challenge religious and moral norms. In these films, a sect leader is portrayed as someone who exerts influence over his members and can control demonic power. Research on Asian horror films, particularly Indonesian ones, has found a different pattern. Khader (2012) argues that the purpose of Asian horror films is not only to frighten audiences, but also to depict sectarian beliefs, backgrounds, and fears of the supernatural. According to Heider (1991), Indonesian horror films often incorporate traditional myths and religious symbols. This creates an experience related to the beliefs and fears that arise from these myths. In the horror film *Pengabdi Setan*, several characters ally themselves with the demon to save their lives. In this film, the sect leader is not only portrayed as a villain

but also reflects society's fear of deviation from tradition and religion. Research by Wijaya et al. (2025) tends to highlight films that show limited roles for women, where women are more often depicted as victims and perpetrators of crime in horror films.

Meanwhile, Western horror films tend to emphasize the connection between sectarianism and belief in demons. The difference in controllable demonic powers also adds a dynamic to the film's storyline. For example, in *Hereditary*, the leader is depicted as someone who manipulates the events that befall his family to summon the demon Paimon. This demonstrates how the character determines humanity's fate through a pact with the demon. Research by Collins et al. (2021) shows that the emergence of supernatural spirits is often associated with sectarian rituals as a primary source of power. Frohlich (2010) argues that the figure who leads these supernatural and demonic spirits opposes the authority of God.

Ille (2021) argues that many studies states that sectarianism is a fixed phenomenon limited to the context of certain religions and sects, not dynamic, for example forming inter-sectarian relations. Meanwhile, Frohlich (2010) suggests that the emergence of supernatural spirits will cause destruction. This opinion is very important for horror film research because it shows how sect leaders can interact with supernatural beings, both for personal gain and for ritual purposes, as in the films *Pengabdi Setan* and *Hereditary*. According to Taofeek (2024), Asian horror films, especially in Indonesia, often relate rituals or myths, according to their respective regional traditions. Khader (2012) adds that Asian horror films focus more on local beliefs and myths, and depict deviant religious groups as threats, both physical and psychological, which makes the horror experience different from Western horror films. Minanto (2019) also argues that horror films from Asia, especially Indonesia, usually not only aim to scare the audience, but also to convince them of spirituality, created through local myths and religious teachings. Meanwhile, Western horror films focus more on ritual elements, the summoning of supernatural spirits, and conflicts between good and evil forces.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Data and data analysis

The approach used in this research is a qualitative descriptive method. The focus of this research is on understanding the meaning of objects, analyzing symbolism, and characters in the roles related to the sect leader and the demonic entity in the films *Pengabdi Setan* (2017, 2022) and *Hereditary* (2018). Data collection techniques in this research are carried out in two ways: by taking screenshots as visual data and transcribing relevant dialogues as textual data. Visual data in this research was used to analyze cinematic elements such as symbols that appear and support the theme of demonism and sect leadership. Then, textual data is used to understand the context of the conversations and the implied meanings that emerge in the interactions between the characters in the films. *Pengabdi Setan* (2017, 2022) can be accessed through official platforms, such as Netflix and Disney+, while *Hereditary* (2018) can be accessed through Google Play.

**Table 1. Data Sources**

Movies	Reasons
<i>Pengabdi Setan</i>	This film is chosen as a data source because it is set in a family horror setting, depicting a pact between humans and demons to obtain and achieve worldly desires. The film's uniqueness lies in the depiction of a mother as the sect leader, a rare occurrence in similar themes. After the death of Mawarni, the mother, the pact with the sect does not

	simply end, but instead seeks a new successor to become the next leader.
<i>Hereditary</i>	This film is chosen as a data source because it also has a theme and storyline similar to <i>Pengabdi Setan</i> , a family horror setting depicting a pact between humans and demons led by a woman, Ellen. After Ellen's death, the sect she led does not simply end, but instead seeks a new leader to continue the sect's community.

### Data Analysis

This study uses Spradley's (1980) data analysis, which has four stages of analysis. First, domain analysis, which describes the cult leaders and their relationship with Satan by identifying general categories of data. Second, taxonomic analysis, which examines the relationships between elements by explaining the categories in more detail. Third, component analysis, which identifies similarities and differences by comparing each category. Last, sectarian thematic analysis, which draws conclusions from the general patterns of character depiction and the consequences of the film's overall meaning.

**Table 2.** Data Analysis

#### *Pengabdi Setan*

	Description	Innuendo	Contrast	
			Direct	Interplay
Female Sectarian Leaders-Female Demons	✓	✓	×	✓
Female Sectarian Leaders-Male Demons	✓	✓	✓	✓
Male Sectarian Leaders-Female Demons	✓	✓	✓	✓
Male Sectarian Leaders-Male Demons	✓	✓	×	×

**Table 3.** Data Analysis

#### *Hereditary*

	Description	Innuendo	Contrast	
			Direct	Interplay
Female Sectarian Leaders-Female Demons	✓	✓	×	✓
Female Sectarian Leaders-Male Demons	✓	✓	✓	✓
Male Sectarian Leaders-Female Demons	✓	✓	✓	✓
Male Sectarian Leaders-Male Demons	✓	✓	×	×

In describing the depiction of character, how personality, and relationships are constructed in narrative, researchers use the theory of Daitz (1960). In his book, Daitz states that Tacitus believes that events are not only the result of impersonal forces, but are also shaped by the nature and individuals of those in power. Tacitus views character as an inherent characteristic, meaning that every action of the character can be understood in terms of that characteristic.

There are four techniques used by Daitz (2016) to describe characters, namely direct description, innuendo, contrast, and interplay. The first technique is direct description, which explains the traits of a character explicitly. The second technique is innuendo, to explain the implied and hidden traits of the character. The next technique is contrast, a technique that depicts differences between one character and another that emerge naturally through interaction, dialogue, or conflicting motivations. The final technique is interplay, where Tacitus depicts characters through dynamic relationships that demonstrate emotional, moral, and power differences. By applying Daitz's theoretical approach and Spradley's analytical method, this research aims to uncover the relationship between the sect leader and the demon, both visually and narratively.

## FINDINGS

The film *Pengabdi Setan* (2017) shows the story of the Suwono family who face various mystical disturbances after the death of Mawarni due to a long illness. The father's departure to work out of town makes his children face increasingly frequent mystical events until it is revealed that the mother's spirit is trying to take their youngest child to become part of a sect. The story ends in *Pengabdi Setan 2* (2022), when the Suwono family moves to an apartment to escape the terror. However, the expected peace never comes, new terrors reappear, and it is finally revealed that the apartment stands on the original site of the sect that has long haunted their family. In the film *Pengabdi Setan*, the sect is depicted as a group of devil worshippers who operate in secret who aim to obtain offspring and worldly success through the worship of a demon creature called Raminom.

In line with this, *Hereditary* (2018) also raises the theme of family terror related to demon worship. After the death of their grandmother, Ellen, the Graham family experiences mystical events that reveal inherited secrets. It is revealed that the grandmother is a member of the Paimon sect, which is targeting her grandchildren's bodies as a new home. Peter, her brother, becomes the next target after Charlie's death. *Hereditary* is a psychological horror film that presents a terrifying story of a sect, family trauma, and family breakdown. The sect depicted in *Hereditary* worships a statue of King Paimon. Ellen, the leader of the sect, tries to devise a strategy to transfer Paimon's spirit into Peter's body. Then, the sect's followers perform a ritual to summon the devil.

The depiction of family ties are intertwined with mystical powers and the influence of sects is a theme in the films *Pengabdi Setan* and *Hereditary*. Both films not only depict and highlight the breakdown of family relationships are influenced by mystical and unpredictable forces, but also illustrate the central role women play in the devotion, sacrifice, and relationships with demonic spirits within these sects. This discussion focuses on the representation of female and male sectarian leaders and their relationships with female and male demonic entities. This analysis explains how gender shapes constructions of power, spiritual strength, and hierarchical relationships between people.

## Female Sectarian Leaders-Female Demons

### *Pengabdi Setan*



**Figure 1.** Female sectarian leaders-Mother (Mawarni)



**Figure 2.** Female demons-Pocong

A direct description is found in the film *Pengabdi Setan*, shown through images and worship by the sect's followers. The figure in the photo is Mawarni, who is the sect's leader. It begins when Mawarni is persuaded by her husband to join the sect in order to have children and a successful career. In reality, Mawarni is only a front for her husband. As a result of this involvement, Mawarni becomes ill and eventually dies. After Mawarni's death, much terror is experienced by her family and also claims many victims around them. Then, the sect's followers, namely Pocong, are depicted in the film representing both men and women. This is clearly seen in the elevator accident scene, where the victims, both men and women, are wrapped in shrouds. Although not directly depicted on screen, this indicates that the pocong in this film are not limited to one gender. Finally, Mawarni's youngest child, Ian, is taken by the sect to become the next leader, replacing their mother.

There is an Innuendo in the scene after Mawarni's death. Many terrors occur in Rini's house, such as objects moving on their own, doors opening and closing on their own, and the appearance of a figure resembling Mawarni. This also signifies the "rise" of the sect's power. The indirect interaction between Pocong and Ian may also hint at a connection between Mawarni's past and Ian's present fate as the sect's successor.

Furthermore, there are contrasts that show the contrast between life and death that can control living beings. For example, the influence of the mother's evil power, even though she is dead, still affects her family due to ties to the sect, and how a good mother's love can turn into a demon. The appearance of Mawarni's spirit makes her youngest brother, Ian, the next target as the sect leader.

### *Hereditary*



**Figure 3.** Female sectarian leader-Grandmother (Ellen)

**Figure 4.** Female demons

The Graham family frequently experiences unexpected events after the death of their grandmother, Ellen, who is involved in a cult. The lives of Annie, Peter, and Charlie, often plagued by tragic and mystical events, can be described as direct description, as the film and story clearly depict this as being caused by the influence of the cult their grandmother belongs to. This results in psychological impact, family conflict, and a curse stemming from these tragic events.

The curse that befell the Graham family began when Charlie cut off a bird's head. The film features Innuendo, a curse, and demonic powers inherited from the grandmother, even after her death. This is due to the grandmother's role as a sect leader, and her influence and reactions can still cause chaos in the family home, causing mystical occurrences, such as objects moving on their own and doors opening and closing on their own.

Although the grandmother has passed away, her actions during her lifetime continue to influence the family. Charlie's tragic death and Annie's levitation demonstrate the mystical influence that affects the family. These two events demonstrate how the grandmother symbolically continues to "interact" with the family through her malevolent power. This demonstrates the interaction between the grandmother as a female sectarian leader and the subsequent sect leader.

### Female Sectarian Leaders-Male Demons

#### *Pengabdi Setan*



**Figure 5.** The picture of mother and friends



**Figure 6.** Rini takes care her mother (Mawarni)

In the early part of the film, the mother character is depicted as a former singer who is battling a serious illness and is no longer recognized. There is no indication of his involvement in sects or anything related to darkness. This character is still clearly depicted as a weak and suffering woman, not as a spiritual leader. This lays the groundwork for the female sect leader's character before her spiritual aspect is revealed, which relates to the description.

Innuendo shows the moment when Rini sees her mother's photo album containing pictures of herself with a group of people dressed in black, standing in a ritual formation, signifying sect involvement through photos and letters, without a thorough explanation. The difference is very striking when the Mother initially seemed fine. However, toward the end of the story, she admits that she is a member of the sect that is frightening her children.

The meaning is directly clear at the end of the film, when the sect's followers kneel before the mother's portrait. This scene vividly shows that the mother is the center of worship, and the ceremony is performed to summon the power of the male demon to be present thru her

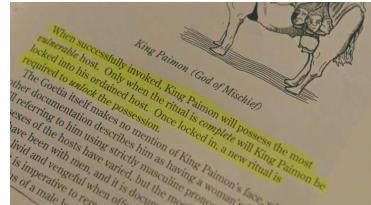


son, Ian. The relationship between the leader of the women's group and the male demon is openly revealed. The interaction in the worship ritual shows that the mother and the demon are two mutually dependent entities. They created a system of interdependent power. The mother gives power to the demon, and vice versa, the demon gives power to the mother.

### *Hereditary*



**Figure 7.** The grandmother's funeral (Ellen)



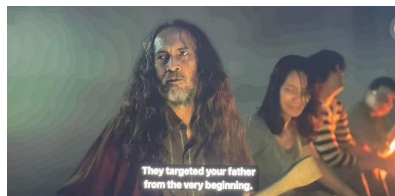
**Figure 8.** King Paimon symbol

The descriptive meaning is explained when Annie finds the inherited books and ritual symbols containing the symbols of King Paimon. Visually, this scene represents the initial stage of the male demon's awakening through the role of a woman (Ellen and then Annie). Meanwhile, the innuendo meaning is explained that Ellen's death is not an ordinary end of life, but also a ritual that will most likely bring out the spirit of the demon Paimon through spiritual means. This meaning also explains that Ellen's death is a ritual sacrifice. This suggests a hidden connection between the female sectarian leader and the male demon.

The contrast meaning is explained by Ellen as a woman who controls the ritual and the group. Meanwhile, King Paimon is a male demon who has power. In this contrast meaning, it shows that the woman does not fully have personal power because the female sectarian leader is a tool to revive the male demon's power through spirituality. The direct meaning in this film is very clear in the scene above the attic, where the sectarian members kneel before the symbol of King Paimon. This shows the meaning of interplay in this film, where the power of the female sectarian leader and the male demon is reciprocally related. The female sectarian leader is the ritual implementer, while the male demon is the recipient of spiritual power and gives power back to the woman.

### **Male Sectarian Leaders-Female Demons**

#### *Pengabdi Setan*



**Figure 9.** The shaman speaks to the Suwono children (1)



**Figure 10.** The shaman speaks to the Suwono children (2)

The film *Pengabdi Setan* shows that the sect is led by men, while women only serve as vessels in the sacrificial rituals. This power imbalance is evident in the scene where the old man says to Rini, "They targeted your father from the very beginning.", "Your mother only served as a camouflage." This dialogue shows that the spiritual role of the mother is not by her own will, but is controlled by men.



The film also contains innuendo such as the bell, and the photo. These symbols show that even after death, the female body remains under control. The bell that rings before the mother's spirit appears symbolizes the invisible male power that calls her back to serve the ritual. The mother's face trapped within the frame depicts how her figure gets frozen and turned into a memory object by men. She was not alive and could not speak, but she still participated in the ritual. This invisible power indicates that the man was in control, while the woman is merely part of his power.

The contrast lies in the male and female characters. Male characters like the sect leader are portrayed as calm, rational, speaking with authority, organizing rituals, and becoming the source of knowledge in the sect. His attitude reflects structured dominance, namely the power to decide who gets sacrificed and who gets saved. Meanwhile, female characters like Rini and her mother are portrayed as emotional, reactive, and trapped in family suffering. This difference shows how the film associates masculinity with control and logic, while femininity with emotion and weakness.

### *Hereditary*



**Figure 11.** The symbol of patriarchy (Triangle shape)



**Figure 12.** Male Sectarian Leaders- Petter

In the film *Hereditary*, a hidden sect worships the Demon King Paimon, and all summoning rituals occur through the bodies of women in the Graham family. Although Paimon is a male figure, his spiritual power manifests through female figures like Annie and Charlie, who serve as mediums for the demon's power.

The film also contains innuendo through, the triangle symbol and dim lighting imply hidden meanings about male dominance over feminine power, by embedding it through visual cues that portray female spiritual power as merely a tool in the male system. Meanwhile, the contrast between male and female characters is clear, men appear as controllers and receivers of power, while women become victims and vessels of suffering. Annie and Charlie stand at the center of the supernatural events, but they never possess control over their fates.

Finally, on a direct level, the film explicitly affirms patriarchal meaning through the climax scene, where Peter becomes Paimon's vessel and receives the chant "Hail Paimon!" from the sect's followers. Joan crowns Peter as the new king while saying, "You are our king now, Paimon," showing that the spiritual power originally born from women's bodies now fully belongs to men. *Hereditary* demonstrates that the relationship between male sect leaders and feminine power (female demons) builds through visual and narrative systems that affirm gender imbalance, where female spirituality is never autonomous but co-opted by male authority.

## Male Sectarian Leaders-Male Demons

### *Pengabdi Setan*



**Figure 13.** Mawarni takes Ian



**Figure 14.** Male Sectarian Leaders-Ian

In *Pengabdi Setan* (2017), after the death of his mother, Mawarni, a lot of terror befalls the family. It turns out that the terror occurs because the mother wants to take her last child, Ian. Ian had been planned from the start to become his mother's successor, namely a sect leader. Ian is initially depicted as an adorable and mischievous little boy who has a disability of not being able to speak. At the end of the story of the *Pengabdi Setan* (2017) film, Ian reaches out to his family while holding his mother's hand, this scene shows that Ian will be raised by his mother and prepared to become the next sect leader.

After disappearing into the spirit world with her for a long time, in the *Pengabdi Setan* (2022), Ian suddenly reappears in one of the rooms in the apartment building. His brother, who feels something is wrong but cannot bear to leave him, decides to stay by his side. Ian pretends to be a good and innocent brother to deceive his brother and maintain his image in front of the family. His sweet side disappears when he became the sect leader, especially when he is ordered to torture his father and family.

Ian has the power to control the followers of the sect and demons, but the followers of the sect and demons do not only follow Ian's orders, they follow people who can use sign language. The demons in the film *Pengabdi Setan* are not directly depicted as male or female demons, because both are depicted the same in the form of a shroud, but the presence of male demons is indicated by the presence of male and female victims when an accident occurs in an elevator.

### *Hereditary*

Peter is described as a quiet teenager with low self-esteem. His life changed drastically when his younger sibling had an accident that killed him. He felt very guilty about his younger sibling's death, but he was also too afraid to be honest with his parents.

After his sister's death, Peter became increasingly lost. Due to Charlie's unexpected death, Peter was chosen to be the next successor to the sect after his grandmother. Strange events continued to plague him leading up to his ascension. However, Peter couldn't fully understand what was happening to him.

In the film *Hereditary*, Paimon is the leader of the sect. In this film, Paimon is depicted as an active force present and terrorizing the Graham family; he is the figure behind the

tragedies that occur. The death of the Graham family was caused by his role as a vessel preparing for him, namely Peter. And in the end, Peter was the only one alive, and he became the new leader through the male vessel as the primary medium for demonic control.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that the films *Pengabdi Setan* and *Hereditary* not only use horror elements to evoke fear, but also as a medium to reflect power dynamics, ideology, and gender through the figures of sectarian leaders and their relationships with demonic entities. Both films depict deals with demon forces not just as mystical contracts, but as a mechanism for the intergenerational transfer of power that impacts family structures.

Through a qualitative approach and Daitz's characterization theory, it is found that the sectarian leader in *Pengabdi Setan* is depicted as someone who makes a pact with the demon for the sake of offspring, while in *Hereditary*, the sectarian leader is portrayed as a hidden but dominant figure who orchestrates all family tragedies for the resurrection of King Paimon.

Both films show that the sect doesn't end after the leader dies; they leave a legacy for future generations to continue their leadership. This study examines the differences between Indonesian Asian horror films and Western horror films. This research emphasizes the figure of the sect leader, the legacy, and social influence in modern horror films.

Future research can further expand the scope of cross-sectural horror films, to find out the differences between sect leadership and agreements with the demon, such as in Japanese, Korean or Thai horror films. In addition, we can also conduct research on the audience's response from various sectoral backgrounds, and how they view the sect leadership and its belief system towards the demon.

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