

## Unravelling the Family-based Haunted House Film Patterns in Malaysian and American Haunted House Films

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article, we attempt to unravel the family-based haunted house film patterns in both Malaysia and America. Certain types of tropes and attributes have been used by horror filmmakers over the years to define the family motif-pattern of haunted houses in the media. Some of these elements have undergone change over time but most of them still adhere to the rules that constitute the family-based haunted house film patterns based on two Malay films and two American films. These rules were compared and contrasted by applying a combination of two theories which were formulated by Propp and Bailey. Application of these formulas has resulted in the findings of twelve plot functions as examined in this article. Upon analysis of the corpus, it has also been found that there are 10 existing attributes of a haunted house. The findings suggest that the haunted house film pattern is not merely a motif but it is also able to exhibit a number of themes which are considered prominent in haunted house films such as the Manichean clash between good and evil. The convergence and divergence between the Malaysian and American horror flicks show that cultural and religious practices govern the ways in which good and evil are expressed.*

*Keywords: family; patterns; structure; Haunted House; gothic; horror*

### INTRODUCTION

Elements of the haunted house across the horror genre can be traced back to as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century as displayed in Gothic literature of European and its Western counterparts. Haunted castles, abbeys, mansions and cathedrals made up the prime settings of the genre. This can be seen in novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and M.G Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). However, there is Gothic literature that utilises the haunted house as the chief backdrop of hauntings. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is a good example; Catherine plagues Heathcliff in the childhood home that was the location of their heart-breaking love story. Another haunted house that hosts a torturous relationship is in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), while other important examples include Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and De Chomon's *La Maison Ensorcelee (The Haunted House; 1908)*. These Gothic cultural edifices utilise basic elements such as a house, supernatural occurrences, and demons.

As the film industry grows, the productions of Gothic and horror have flourished. Noticeably, the common use of haunted houses draws attention to a scheme of pattern which is made up of tropes and attributes. According to Valerie Wee (2014), their manifestations in horror films continue to dominate the contemporary American horror genre. Much earlier, Dale Bailey (1999) examined the haunted house formula in American popular fiction. Using his insight, this article will focus on four haunted house films in which two are of Malaysian origin, *Congkak* (2008) and *Flat 3A* (2010) while the remaining two are of American origin, *The Amityville Horror* (2005) and *The Conjuring* (2013). These films will be used to identify gothic patterns and attributes that show elements of their convergence and divergence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In America, the adoption of the Gothic trope of the haunted house has been widely utilised in films, poetry, songs, as a setting in Gothic novels and is accordingly commodified during the Halloween season. Goldstein, Grider and Thomas (2007, p. 165) aver that toy haunted houses and model kits have been “marketed since at least the 1960s, when the famed Aurora Plastics Company manufactured a detailed Addams Family Haunted House model kit.” The popularity of the use of fictional, domesticated or realistic approach has resulted in the haunted house trope in films. Such labelling occurs because a number of haunted house films deploy a certain motif thus resulting in a change of their patterns.

The classical Gothic tale uses motif of the Gothic heroine in a Gothic mansion, which has the pattern of exploration, investigation and unravelling of the evil and the injustice that lurks in settings such as mansions and abbeys. As Rajaram Sitaram Zirange (2013, p. 92) emphasizes, “Gothic” is “normally associated with unearthly characters, damned heroes, eccentric passions, black cats and owls, stone castles and frightening antique structures and also variety of things”. Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe are fine examples that demonstrate the manifestations of these agents of darkness. During the Victorian era, the motif changed as the deployment of a realistic, transgressive and domesticated approach was seen as a better motif in the haunted house novels, resulting in a diverse form of plots, themes and even characters. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the birth of the silver screen, the haunted house industry began to grow. This has affected the haunted house patterns as well. Motifs which are quite prominent in the haunted house films include the scientific, family and, money motifs. These motifs and their expansion in terms of plots, characters, theme and type of supernatural occurrences will be briefly explained.

The scientific motif generally disproves existence of the supernatural through scientific means, while the characters are usually made up of random people from mixed backgrounds, most commonly from scientists to commoners. The scientist will usually initiate the research and he will invite the remaining characters to conduct this research. Similarly, there will always be one character who will either become attached to the house or become the victim of haunting which means a particular character will repeatedly become the centre of haunting which later leads to his or her demise. In terms of plot, the film usually begins with the scientist facing a problem in his research. After the arrival of the characters, strange yet progressive results begin to appear but soon, a particular character start to experience disturbances in the house, thus leading to a more serious form of haunting. The film will conclude with the demise of the central character and the escape of the remaining characters. The theme usually involves the clash between scientific views and the unexplainable supernatural occurrences. The typical type of supernatural incidents that appear in this type of haunted house film are apparitions, faded screaming, psychokinesis and

the drop of temperature in certain areas of the house. An example of this motif and pattern is showcased in several haunted house films during the 19<sup>th</sup> century which include *The Haunting* which was directed by Robert Wise in 1963 and *The Legend of Hell House* which was directed by John Hough in 1973.

The money motif has a similarity with the scientific motif in terms of character but it is different in other salient aspects. The most obvious difference is in terms of the money motif scenario. The scenario usually occurs in the form of a tea party where the challenge of an investigation is announced or the distribution of an inheritance is contested. The plot begins with an invitation from the host to a tea party or to investigate a mystery in the house and a reward will be given to those who are able to solve it or those who manage to stay the longest which is actually an obvious reason due to the fact that the house abounds with ghosts, serial killers and trap rooms. Some characters might die during the progression of the plot and its closure will usually reveal the mystery of the house. The themes reveal patterns of hidden evils of the house and the nature of human when they are being tested. The types of supernatural occurrences are quite typical such as spectral ghosts and apparitions. In some cases, there are trickeries and imposters in the house, disguising themselves as ghosts or using trap doors and peeping portraits to spy on others. This film pattern can be clearly seen in films such as *Murder by Death* directed by Robert Moore in 1976, and of course, *The Haunting of Hill House* directed by Shirley Jackson in 1959.

Before delving into the third motif which is the family motif, it must be noted that there are two terms that have become a permanent motif and attribute in numerous horror and haunted house films - exorcism and demonic possession. In general, exorcism is a practice to fend off demons which have possessed or reside within a human body. Possession is an act by the devil or any other supernatural entities in sealing away the victim's soul by controlling it and replacing it with their personality. This allows the possessor to use their supernatural abilities such as floating, superhuman strength, telekinesis and the change of voice to destabilise one's faith. Exorcism is practised; each culture and religion has its own chants and methods of execution. The notion of exorcism and possession is also quite prominent and has become the crux of horror films. These aspects are so powerful that they pit good and evil against each other. They bring out sinister characters to the fore for instance, Satan himself as the instigator of evil. According to Tine Van Osselaer, Henk de Smaele and Kaat Wils (2017, p. 119) "Protestant and Catholic commentators alike remarked upon the exorcism as genuine proof of the existence of Satan." The fear of the ultimate evil as symbolised by Satan has been present in Gothic and horror literature from the beginning – existing not just in Lewis's *The Monk* but in James Hogg's chilling *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. However, the definitive exorcism-possession motif in film and popular culture occurred in 1973 with a film titled *The Exorcist* which was directed by William Friedkin. It showcases a girl named Regan McNeil, a normal girl who suddenly experiences bizarre changes in terms of behaviour and speech. The explanation behind her sudden changes cannot be proven by medical, psychological and scientific means until her mother decides to call a priest to check on her condition. He confirms that her daughter has been possessed by an ancient demon named Pazuzu. The demon Pazuzu's power is so intense to the extent that Father Jason Miller is not able to exorcise the demon through normal Christian exorcism, thus he forces Pazuzu to possess himself and kills it by jumping out from the two-storey house. The story ends with the death of the Father and the vanishing of the demon while Regan resumes her life normally.

*The Exorcist* was also inspired by true events. According to Steven A. LaChance (2017), the film was inspired from a true case of exorcism of a possessed Roland Doe between the years 1939 to 1949 in Maryland. The factor which triggered the possession is through an Ouija board; a board comprising Romanic alphabets, numbers and optional words

such as ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. This particular board is meant to be used to communicate with spirits by placing a coin or a glass contraption on top of it and when the user begins to ask questions, the coin or the contraption will slowly move on its own to answer the user’s questions. In some cases, the use of this Ouija board has accidentally called upon uninvited spirits and this has caused the possession of Roland. The film obviously did not cast Roland as the star as Freidkin altered a few aspects such as the characters and the settings. According to Edmund G. Bansak (1995), *The Exorcist* has become one of the crown jewels in the history of horror and money, making an estimated \$400 million worldwide with the number still growing up to this day. Due to popular demand, the sequels were made in 1977 entitled *The Exorcist: Heretics* directed by John Boorman, *The Exorcist 3: Legion* by William Platty Blake in 1990, *Exorcist: The Beginning* in 2004 by Renny Harlin and *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* in 2005 by Paul Schrader. Another film that was based on *The Exorcist* franchise is *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* by Scott Derrickson in 2005. The film was also one of the major hits in worldwide box-office and collected a total of \$140 million. As commented by Fecilitas D. Goodman (2005), the film was inspired by a true event of demonic possession that happened to a woman named Anneliese Michel in Germany but unfortunately the exorcism failed, costing Anneliese’s life. After her death in 1976, the priest who was involved and her parents were charged with negligent homicide.

The cinematic release of *The Exorcist* in 1973 provided the catalyst for production of other films of that ilk. Horror films which contained these two aspects are *Abbey* 1974 by William Gridler, *Possessed* in 2000 by Steven E. de Souza, *The Vatican Tapes* in 2015 by Mark Neveildine, *Exorcismus* in 2010 by Julio Fernandez, *The Rite* in 2011 by Mikael Hafstrom, *The Possession* 2012 by Ole Bornedal and *Incarnet* by Brad Peyton in 2016. These are just a fraction of the horror films which offer a glimpse of these factors. In fact, a preview of these two factors can also be seen in the family motif haunted house. Before *The Exorcist*, there was no trace of the exorcism-possession motif in classical family motif haunted house films, and this example can be seen in *The 13 Ghosts* in 1960 which was directed by William Castle. The film depicts a bankrupt family moving into a huge mansion after inheriting it from their rich late uncle but the house is filled with 13 different types of ghosts. The typical pattern of the family motif haunted house is quite similar to *The 13 Ghosts* where a family begins their new life by living in a new house that is full of ghosts. It draws on mixed styles such as the exorcism-possession motif and the true story trajectory. Hence, while the films offer different gothic presentations, certain traits are clearly shared as common markers.

Family-based patterns seem to dominate the horror flicks. Dale Bailey’s (1999) work is useful in delineating certain features. The first characteristic provides information on the socio-economic status of the family. The second quality reveals their scepticism towards the supernatural. The third trait relates to access of a supernatural helper. The plot is made up from a series of escalating events which leads to the character’s escape and finally a concluding scene which shows the house meeting its demise or continuing to exist. The themes consist of conflict between gender and class, economy, consequences, good versus evil, scientific issues and the cycle of evil. By identifying these constituents, Bailey emphasises the repeating structure which many horror films emulate.

The expansion of the Western haunted house films and its elements has a strong and firm root in the Gothic, but what of the Malaysian haunted house films? In the Malaysian scenario, Malaysian horror or haunted house films are quite similar to the traditional Gothic or Western horror and haunted house pattern but with a cultural twist. The showcasing of Gothic issues, motifs and attributes from the Malay lens has resulted in mass confusion as it is quite difficult to identify whether Malay horror films or haunted house films are truly original or are instead adaptations of their Western counterpart. As this is argued by Azlina Assari and Jamaluddin Aziz (2013), the Malays are believed to have a strong cultural



acceptance of the supernatural instead of claiming it as Gothic because believing, embracing and practising the supernatural is traceable to a period long before the arrival of any religion in Malaya; the Malays have been practising animism in Malaya. Animism constitutes that every living thing has a spirit or *semangat* which resides within it and by controlling it, they will be granted a special power which can be used to control other spirits. The cultural twist is best described by Azlina Assari and Jamaluddin Aziz (2014) as freedom in expressing creativity in presenting the Malay supernatural cultural influence in films although there are subtle traces of Western Gothic elements in Malay haunted house films.

This example may be seen in *Rahsia* (Secret), directed by Othman Hafsham (1987). The film showcases Hamdan's family who recently moved into a new house near the beach but soon after residing in the new house, they lose one of their children. Days after the loss of their daughter, supernatural occurrences begin to appear in the house and they start to think that it is caused by their late daughter's restless spirit. Later they find out that the spirit is not of their daughter but is instead the soul of a murdered child who has been buried within the walls of Hamdan's house. Towards the end of the film, Hamdan reveals the murderer's identity; a rich man who previously murdered his sibling and son so he can be the sole receiver of the family's inheritance. The application of pattern and trope of the classical Gothic novel in this film such as the restless spirit, the rich man's evil murder and the embattling of aristocratic evil are extremely visible, but the coating of cultural motif that is strongly present in the film has somehow blurred its motifs. However, if a Malaysian viewer were to watch this film, one might conclude that it is the human nature of rich men abusing their powers and richness in a developing country due to the fact that the film was aired in the 1987, the year in which Malaysia was undergoing vast development alongside the degradation of social decency.

The embodiment of the Gothic in the stated film can be traced back to its director, Othman Hafsham, the previous chairman of FINAS (Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia). According to William Van der Heide (2002), Othman was a graduate from London in the field of films and music and has managed to create films that attempted to cross boundaries such as *Rahsia* (Secret) in 1987 and *Mekanik* (Mechanic) in 1983. Based on this, it is clear that he was one of the film directors who was exposed to Gothic motifs in London during his stint as student and as a film director, he has tried to implement the motifs in his Malaysian production. This film also depicts that although this type of aristocratic evil has oft been shielded by privilege and circumstance, justice will always prevail no matter the place and the time.

Another Malaysian horror and haunted house films that follows the American horror and haunted house pattern which have traces of Malay cultural twist is *Jwanita* which was aired in 2015 by Osman Ali, following in the footsteps of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and other films of the cannibal horror genre such as *The Silence of the Lambs* starring Anthony Hopkins. However, in *Jwanita*, the film director asserts the notion of Malay black magic that requires a character to eat its victim in a brutal manner to restore or gain power. *Puaka Balai Gombak* by Wan Mohd Hafiz Wan Hussein in 2015, *Ia Wujud* by Dharma Aizat in 2014 and the famous Highland Tower film in 2013 by Pierre Andre all share the same pattern which can be seen in the *Blair Witch Project*, the Paranormal Activity franchise and the reality television show which searches for the supernatural and the existence of the Malay ghosts or other supernatural entities. For instance, in *Puaka Balai Gombak*, team Puaka X has filmed numerous haunted house or abandoned locations in search of either a *langsuir* (banshee), *pontianak* (vampire) or *pocong* (wrapped ghost). Due to their failures, they believe there is no such thing as ghosts until one day when they decide to investigate Balai Gombak which is an old abandoned police station in Gombak. Unfortunately, this investigation has led to their demise while recording a live *langsuir*. *Villa Nabila* which was directed by Syafiq Yusof

(2015) is a documentary film depicting the real horrific events during the demolishing of an abandoned villa named Villa Nabila in Johor Bahru. That being said, it is now clear that there are adoptions of elements, aspects and film patterns from the Western horror and haunted house films in the Malaysian cinema. Another aspect which is commonly found in both Malaysian and American haunted house films is the utilisation of the religious aspect in battling the ghost or *hantu* in the films. This is supported by Rosmawati Mohd Rasit (2014) who confirmed the utilisation of religious elements and icons such as the ustaz or the father, or use of holy items and the reciting of holy prayers in banishing the ghost. Viewers love this religious aspect; it confirms their strong faith in religion (Rosmawati Mohd Rasit 2014.)

What of the family-based pattern? Understanding the family-based haunted house film pattern is quite an intriguing task as the patterns and elements are in constant change and are unstatic in nature. For example, one of the earliest family based haunted house film is the *13 Ghost*, aired in 1960 by William Castle, USA. The film depicts a family who has gone bankrupt and soon after, inherited a haunted mansion. During their stay, they can see and are disturbed by numerous ghosts but they do not take the initiative to run or exorcise the ghosts until the ghosts leave by themselves. Later in the millennium, the family-based haunted house film has begun showcasing numerous patterns with extended elements. Taking example of the film *The Conjuring* by James Wan (2013), it showcases expansion in terms of plot; it begins with the family entering the house which leads to the discovery of hauntings and secrets of the house. This will eventually lead to the clash between the evil spirit and the family. Looking at the plot alone shows how great the shifts of pattern have occurred in the family-based haunted house films. More revelations of the family-based haunted house film patterns and elements will be revealed in the analysis. The implication of this research contributes to the field of academia through understanding the structural aspect or the blueprint of the family-based haunted house film patterns and their attributes. Additionally, it is also able to reveal how the family motif and its value has managed to overcome the threat of the supernatural.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the conceptual framework, a combination of two theories will be utilised - Vladimir Propp's concept of structuralism and Bailey's haunted house film formula, haunted house pattern or structure, attributes and its templates. Vladimir Propp's structuralism will be used to uncover the structuralist imperatives behind the corpus and to examine how this may be harmonious with Bailey's formula. Since Propp's model and Bailey's formula are structuralist in nature, they will be merged as a tool of analysis for the contemporary family-based haunted house film patterns and attributes.

Propp's model was initially used to study Russian folktales. After Propp's model was translated in 1928, it inspired numerous scholars in the field of structuralism such as Levi-Strauss, Dundes, Bremond and Greimas (Propp 1968). Additionally, the influence of Propp's Morphology has expanded as there are other contemporary scholars who have utilised or adapted Propp's method of analysis. According to Propp (1968), there will always be structural borrowings or content borrowings. This means that there are other structural models which were created through the borrowing of other constructs and their contents. It is suggested that Dale Bailey's haunted house formula which was presented in 1998 was inspired by Propp's Folktale Morphology.

Dale Bailey's haunted house formula was first presented in 1998 as a means of analysing the American haunted house films. Bailey's formula was firmly based on the collection of American haunted house fictions which are strongly rooted in Gothic fictions

and traditions, because he “realized that popular fictions of the last fifty years have seen the development of a uniquely American haunted house formula which finds its roots in the gothic tradition” (1998, p. xi). Through Bailey’s extensive analysis, he has structured the American haunted house into four core elements; setting, plot, character and theme, similar to Propp’s methods of analysis whereby he obtained his findings through analysing a collection of Russian folktales by arranging them into pattern and functions. There are degrees of difference in terms of principles and rules but both scholars share similarities and connections to each other in terms of structure, and this notion of inherent and similarities was also confirmed by Manuel Aguirre (2013, p. 3). Aguirre writes that “structural and semantic ‘rules’ go into the composition of all Gothic narrative”, further expanding the idea that the Gothic narrative is bound to semantics and structural rule. There are also rules in explaining this phenomenon. Aguirre (2013) asserts that the patterns of Gothic narrative are a “modification of those found in folk and fairytales”, further elucidating on Propp’s point that actions rather than intentions or motifs are “the decisive criterion for assessing the structure of fairy tales” (p. 125).

Having applied Aguirre’s distillation of Propp’s morphology, it is clear that Bailey’s haunted house formula is connected to Propp’s morphology. Bailey’s structuralism is heavily influenced by Propp’s morphology. The act of merging both Bailey’s basic model with Propp’s morphology is suitable for analysing the family motif haunted house film patterns in Malaysia and America. Additionally, the execution of the framework consisted of two major aspects. Firstly, the framework is linear and function-driven. Secondly, Bailey’s four major elements of plot, setting, character and themes are incorporated into the discussion of the findings.

## DISCUSSION

Upon deployment of the framework, it has been discovered that the corpus has a total of twelve plot functions throughout the duration of the films. The twelve plot functions reveal the structure of the plot in the chosen corpus even though it initially reveals that the millennial family-based haunted house film is structurally straightforward in manner although there are little flashbacks in re-telling the audience about the dark and evil history of the house. In addition, the plot also reveals some kind of premonition to the viewers regarding what will happen next. The main intention of revealing the plot function as the first finding is that it helps in revealing more of the family-based haunted house patterns and attributes.

### PLOT FUNCTIONS

#### FUNCTION 1: THE INDICATOR

The indicator acts as an indication on the nature, flow, theme or pattern of the film. It displays a Koranic verse or the credibility of the film whether or not it is based on a true story. It commonly appears in the beginning of films. The explanation will begin first with the Malaysian films, *Congkak* and *Flat 3A*. Both films display different verses from the Koran, and every verse has its own meaning and purpose. In *Congkak*, the film displays the Surah An-Nas verse 1-6 meanwhile Flat 3A presents the Surah Al-An’am verse 112 from the Koran. Surah An-Nas highlights the evil of the devil, and one must seek refuge from Allah from such evil. According to Haron Din Mokhtar Hassan (2013), this particular surah is grouped under the term ‘Al-Muawizzat’. ‘Al-Muawizzat’ is a compilation of three different surahs in the Koran; Surah Al-Alaq, Surah An-Nas and Surah Al-Ikhlās. It is primarily meant to seek Allah’s protection from the evil deeds of the devil and jinn and to protect us from them. Moreover, according to Ibnu Katsir (2005), the practice of the Al-Muawizzat can also

repel the evil devil of Khannas; it is the devil whose objective is to seduce human to carry out evil deeds. In the film, the devil's or the demon's action is aligned with the Surah's message, meaning and intention, as the demon is responsible for disturbing Kazman's family. The demon is also very cunning in executing its plan, whispering chaos upon the family and stirring their faith. *Flat 3A* showcases Surah Al-An'am, verse 112 from the Koran. Summarized by Ibnu Katsir (2005), this verse explains the warnings of the enemies of Allah and the Prophets. The enemies can be in the form of humans or devils (jinn). Furthermore, this verse also discusses on the trickery of the devil in tricking humans to be a part of them. It also displays the ill nature of the human being who is keen to submit to the devil's seduction. The film *Flat 3A* presents a similar message with the stated Koranic verse, where the characters were seen to be allured by devil's trickery in using and practicing black magic. In fact, it also displays the deceitfulness of human behaviour who only seeks pleasure and power to the extent of becoming the devil himself instead of seeking Allah's grace and forgiveness. In general, the verses share a similar thematic concern which highlights awareness of the evils of Satan and jinn. The display of the Koranic verse at the beginning of the film provides a clue to the theme of the film. Additionally, the Koranic verses also act as a reminder to the audience especially Muslims to reject evil and encourage them to always seek protection from Allah from such malevolence.

The second set of the American corpus usually displays the indicator "Based on True Story or Events." The aim of displaying such a sentence means that the films were inspired by true events. For example, in *The Amityville Horror*, Ed Warren, Lorraine Warren and Robert David (2014) commented that on 13th November 1974, before the Lutz family moved in into the Amityville house, one of the sons of the Defeo family, Ronald Defeo Jr used a rifle to murder six family members brutally. Thirteen months after tragedy, the Lutz moved into the house. Some say they did not know about the murder and some say they did hear grim rumors surrounding the house. Unluckily for them, Kathleen and George Lutz immediately experienced psychological disintegration which involved drastic changes in their behaviour and became easily agitated without reason which had something to do with demonic possession. Additionally, other occult happenings also began to appear such as the severe drop of the temperature, emergence of vapory apparitions, and turning of the crucifix in the house in reverse. Due to the unexplained disturbances, they decided to move out from the house. According to Robert E. Bartholomew and Joe Nickell (2015), the film *The Conjuring* was inspired from the story of Roger and Carolyn Perron and their five daughters who accidentally bought a haunted farmhouse house in 1971, which was located in a rural area in Rhode Island. At first, Roger was extremely sceptical about paranormal activities in his home but following numerous occult hauntings such as the clock mysteriously stopping at a certain time, family members sleepwalking and the appearance of spirits or apparitions, he was convinced of the existence of sinister presence. Furthermore, according to June Pulliam and Anthony J. Fonseca (2016), the Perron's case has involved and was solved by the famous supernatural investigators, Ed and Lorraine Warren. By drawing on true stories, *The Conjuring* blurs fiction with reality.

#### FUNCTION 2: THE EXPLORATION

Shortly after their arrival, the family will enter and explore the house. In the Malaysian corpus, the female character or perhaps the mother will usually initiate the exploration followed by the remaining family members. In *Congkak*, *Flat 3A* and *The Conjuring*, the mother is the one who explores extensive parts of the house. In *The Amityville Horror*, the father is the explorer. The investigation here is different from exploring a labyrinth; they are more likely to examine the house normally since they are new tenants who are not familiar with the house. They have to walk into different parts of the house to understand its



parameters and surroundings. Their probe soon reveals a more sinister outcome. They will eventually find a secret room or a strange item which will cause the hauntings to accumulate as their act of inquisition has angered the ghosts and their domain. Hidden rooms or menacing space here means that there is a particular room or space in the house that was previously sealed away by the previous owner to hide something or someone. In addition, the space could have been used as a location of murder, suicide, ritual or a place to hide a haunted item. Usually the history of this place will be revealed later in the film. In the film *Congkak*, there is a locked room located beside the kitchen where the eerie sound of the congkak can be heard. Film *Flat 3A* has two locations - a room located at the living room and the flower bed. *The Conjuring* also has two locations - behind a wardrobe and the cellar. The secret room in *The Amityville Horror* is located in the basement.

The haunted item, which may have been owned by a deceased character, is an object which a spirit has latched on because of a curse or due to its use in an animistic ritual. The thing can be anything - from dolls to toy monkeys. Usually, it is discovered by chance by any one of the characters. The item is used to get closer or to see the spirits of the previous owner. In *Congkak*, the haunted item is a congkak board, which was previously used in a ritual, meanwhile, in *Flat 3A*, it is a marble, and it was previously owned by the deceased Fatin. *The Conjuring* exhibits a haunted jukebox that was previously owned by a dead boy while *The Amityville Horror* shows a haunted teddy bear, pre-owned by a murdered girl. These artefacts reveal facets of deceased characters which heighten suspense of the plots.

#### PLOT FUNCTION 3: DISTURBANCE

Disturbances, occultic in nature, are usually experienced by the family members during their stay in the house. These disruptions include fighting among the inhabitants, agitations, children crying at night, the smell of rotten flesh or meat, change of sleeping locations, having mysterious bruises on the body, piercing sensation under the foot, intimidating sounds, scratching, the sound of marbles dropping, repetitive knockings and voices, sleep paralysis (something pressing the body down during sleep), sightings of shadows or phantoms or worse the jinn manifesting itself, feeling lazy to perform prayers, possession, sudden drop of temperature, seeing apparitions and moving or floating objects. The only difference is the time of the occurrence. In the American corpus, as emphasised by Gerald Brittle (2013), temporally determined occultic occurrences may be referred to as demonic activity within the house and it usually starts from 9pm to 6am. In *The Amityville Horror* and *The Conjuring*, the family experiences the hauntings severely at the stated time, especially when they are getting ready to sleep or are already asleep. In some cases, some family members experience the effects of hauntings and some do not. Evidence can be seen in *The Conjuring*, particularly in the character Caroline Perron. She usually gets mysterious bruises after she wakes up in the morning:

Roger Perron: Oh no, honey you got another bruise here. Does it hurt?  
Carolyn Perron: It's weird.

In the Malay corpus, the level of hauntings and disturbance usually starts at dusk until the breaking of dawn. The liminal hours between darkness and light are therefore traditionally eldritch hours, times for unseemly activities to occur. This feeds into the sense of revelations occurring at this hour after disturbances take place. In *Congkak*, an apparition appears to disturb the house dwellers. For instance, in one scene, Kazman is getting ready to take his bath; the camera focuses on a shot framing the bathroom. In the bathroom consists of two items: the bath tub and a glass door. As Kazman checks the water temperature, suddenly a black-like apparition slowly emerges from the glass door; the appearance was accompanied with a sudden and loud 'swooshing' like sound which indicates a horrific presence of the

apparition. These disturbances, whether in terms of bruises or apparitions, add to the eeriness of the films.

#### PLOT FUNCTION 4: INFORMATION OR RUMOURS

After staying within a day or two, the mother or the father will receive bad news or perhaps bad rumours about the house. Generally, the informants may be divided into two categories: neighbours or local folks who live near the stated haunted house and knowledgeable helpers or household help. The news has the impact of validating character experiences and strengthening the position of the parents in the house. According to Bailey (1999), the knowledgeable helpers are the ones who possess the knowledge of the supernatural to help the family prove the existence of the supernatural which allows them to take action. In the American corpus, the informed helpers are commonly known as paranormal investigators or the father, while in the Malay films, they are known as ustaz or Ahli Syifa' (Healers). In *The Conjuring*, the Warrens are known as the enlightened helpers; as they are the ones who have the expertise in investigating the existence of the supernatural at the Perron's house. Commonly, after receiving the news regarding the house, the plot moves to the investigation of the house in a more thorough way in search for more proof regarding the supernatural in the house, as the Warrens are not permitted to perform the exorcism, and the exorcism must be conducted by the father. In *Flat 3A*, the female character named Fiqah also receives bad rumours regarding the apartment room that she and friend Ratna have rented. The apartment room has been previously inhabited by a Bomoh named Kang Suman who notoriously disturbs the other tenants with his demonic familiars. Soon after receiving the ominous news, Fiqah begins to investigate the supernatural happenings in her apartment room which initiates the string of events until the plot is unravelled.

#### PLOT FUNCTION 5: THE INVESTIGATION

The investigation will be conducted by the experienced helpers and the mother or the father character before the rites of exorcism take place. Furthermore, the investigation commonly takes the mother, father and the informed characters to the root of the hauntings which is the secret room. During the investigation, the utilisation of sophisticated equipment such as thermal cameras in *The Conjuring* has been employed to take pictures of the ghost while in *The Amityville Horror*, the father character explores the secret room alone to find out more answers and clues to banish the demon or the spirits. Additionally, the investigation also reveals the restless spirits intentions as to why they keep bothering the family.

#### PLOT FUNCTION 6: THE QUARREL

The characters will quarrel among themselves in an attempt to escape from the haunted and horrific events. The remaining family members do not believe what other people say about the hauntings in the house although they have been presented with a strong evidence of the spirits' existence and their ill intentions. For example, in *Congkak*, Sufiah, the mother experiences most of the paranormal episodes such as having nightmares and seeing apparitions. Additionally, she also has a difficult time convincing her husband about the hauntings in the house:

The wife: There are so many bizarre happenings in this house and I can feel them. I don't care, I'm leaving right now.

The husband: If you want to go home, you can go tomorrow! I don't want you to think about all these unusual things.

These arguments set in opposition the characters in the films. The tension raised increases the thrill that marks the characteristic of this genre.

#### PLOT FUNCTION 7: ESCALATION

The hauntings and disturbances in the house become more aggressive; characters are possessed or glimpse the appearance of apparitions. Usually the escalation is experienced by the female character first and in some cases, the male characters will hear aggressive banging on the doors, home appliances will move or work on its own; they will hear loud screams and see phantoms. Finally, the real demon of the house reveals itself and possesses the inhabitants of the house. In the case of the Malay films, the characters would be possessed by a demon or jinn.

#### PLOT FUNCTION 8: DISCOVERY

The discovery of the history or hauntings of the house is typical as part of the escalation of rising action. Similar to the Malay corpus, the discovery of the provenance occurred either before or after the arrival of the exorcist or the informed helpers to vanquish evil. In *The Amityville Horror*, the discovery occurred after the arrival of Father Callaway to exorcise the house. Kathy Lutz decided to go to the public library to do some research about the house. She discovered that the Defeos suffered the same thing as the Lutz; hearing voices to kill and they died after staying in the house for 28 days. Additionally, she also found out that in 1665, an evil reverend named Jeremiah Ketchum build a chamber at the basement of the Amityville house to exclusively torture and murder native Indians. Soon after the tortured Indians died, he threw the dead body into a nearby lake and a total of 20 bodies were found. During her research, her husband George Lutz also discovered the torture chamber located at their basement which was sealed with a concrete wall. In the case of *The Conjuring*, during the investigation by the Warren, the Perron's daughter named Cindy began to sleepwalk towards her bedroom before disappearing mysteriously. During her absence, Lorraine Warren began to hear other voices,

Mysterious voice: "Follow me, this way. This is where I hide."

Using the Warrens' sophisticated devices, they managed to find Cindy in a hidden room behind the wardrobe. The Warrens continued their investigation and Lorraine decided to explore the hidden space, suddenly the floor broke and she fell down directly to the cellar. As she regained consciousness, she saw a restless spirit repeating this sentence,

The restless spirit: "Look what she made me do."

Soon she figured out that the demon witch Bathsheba possessed the mother to kill her own child.

In the film *Congkak*, the discovery happens before the vanquishing of the demon guardian. As the characters gather, the Tok Imam reveals that the "land was previously inhabited by royalties. Countless rituals have been conducted on that land. Perhaps that is the best explanation on why the site is haunted." Once the cause of the haunting has been divulged, then the process of recovery can take place.

#### PLOT FUNCTION 9: THE VANQUISHING OF EVIL

The vanquishing of evil is performed by the knowledgeable helpers. Since they appear in the form of ustazs, ahli syifas, fathers and paranormal investigators, their methods are almost always related to religion. They all have different methods in vanquishing or exorcising the demons or the evil spirits. According to John M. Duffey (2011), holy items that are commonly used in a Christian exorcism are crucifixes, saint's medallion, the Bible, holy

water, class-two relics and communion ware. Duffey (2011, p. 178) explains why these items are more effective in dealing with evil spirits, “Holy items performs and represents certain aspects of Christian identity and the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, they become powerful weapons against unclean spirits.”. Usually the father wears a religious attire; black with white collar. Typically, in the Malay haunted house films, the helpers surface as Ustazs or Ahli Syifas. Furthermore, they appear towards the climax of the film, to exorcise satans and jinns that have possessed the characters. But in the case of *Flat 3A*, the helpers materialise at the beginning of the film. The exorcism executed by the ustaz or ahli syifa in both films where verses were recited from the holy Koran. This act of vanquishing has led to the closure of the film having two possible alternate endings - the family escapes and the house is destroyed, or alternatively, the family manages to escape, but the house continues to exist and its cycle of evil continues. In *Congkak*, after the vanquishing happens, the family manages to escape and the house self-destructs. It displays that the demon has a special power to sustain the appearance of the house. In *Flat 3A* and *The Conjuring*, the families escape but the respective houses maintain their existence. Finally, in *The Amityville Horror*, despite the family managing to escape the house, the house continues its existence and the cycle of haunting repeats itself; it silently waits to haunt its new owner. Something chilling yet unique has been noticed in not just the pattern, but the house itself. The house itself has become a lair for the evil supernatural to cultivate and harness its haunting for years, to the extent that it has assimilated itself with the demon as in the film *Congkak* where the house itself is somewhat alive. After the demon has been defeated, the house too faces its deadly fate. In *The Conjuring* and *Flat 3A*, the house itself manages to maintain its existence although the demons have been defeated. Finally, in *The Amityville Horror* the house maintains itself and its cycle of evil continues. Hence, the house itself has a life of its own, and horror films provide different closures to provide further sinister foreshadowing or an end to future evil deeds.

## CONCLUSION

By examining four films of the same genre, their similarities and differences can be discerned. The formula does not simply reveal the haunted house structures and their attributes but it also becomes a platform in understanding the nature of the haunted house films according to country. It can be concluded that they share similar notions in terms of structure, pattern, and the strategies of fear. The only differences between these four films are functions of culture and religion. While both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic religions, they differ in terms of the way each creed is used to ward off evil. Religious verses are used in the Malaysian films as a caveat for the audience to be aware of certain fictitious acts that run contrary to Islamic beliefs. Similar admonitions are absent in American films.

Families feature strongly in the films chosen. The gothic formula that deal with families exhibit noteworthy outcomes. The pattern exhibits the motif of the Manichean clash between good and evil. Restless spirits and their unfinished business reside within the house; with the new inhabitants residing in it, the family who represents the good has sparked war with the evil forces. Commonly, good wins with the help of religious figures. The family is also the representation of love, good, and decent moral behaviour. These traits are the opposite of the haunted house and its demon which represent hate, revenge, vileness and evil. Ultimately, by pitting good against evil, the films provide satisfactory closure.

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