

## *ANALYZING THE PHENOMENON: EXPLORING THE POPULARITY AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE INDONESIAN SOAP OPERA "CINTA FITRI"*

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**Abstract:** The soap opera "Cinta Fitri" is one of the most popular TV drama series (soap operas) not only in Indonesia but also in Singapore (MdEntertainment). This paper focuses on the phenomenon of soap operas and gender representation in Indonesian media. The research methods that will be used in this research include content analysis, case studies, surveys and statistical analysis, literature studies, and comparative analysis. The Indonesian soap opera "Cinta Fitri" captivates audiences with its portrayal of personal struggles and complex relationships. Lead characters Fitri and Farrel challenge traditional gender norms, resonating with viewers. The show's popularity is fueled by its relatable storyline, strong character dynamics, and dedicated fan base, making it a cultural phenomenon in Indonesia. "Cinta Fitri" is an Indonesian soap opera that was successful because it presented an evocative story, strong characters who challenged traditional gender norms, and received fanatical support from the audience. By focusing on personal conflicts and relationships between characters, this soap opera shows its appeal and becomes a cultural phenomenon that influences views on gender in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Exploration of Popularity, Women's Representation, Soap Opera Cinta Fitri

### INTRODUCTION

Television stands as a cornerstone of Indonesian culture, shaping leisure habits and societal norms. Within this landscape, the allure of television viewing has transcended mere entertainment to become a cultural phenomenon deeply ingrained in Indonesian society. AGBNielsen Newsletter reveals intriguing insights into viewership demographics, notably highlighting the predominance of the elderly and adults aged 30 to

49 in television consumption, particularly drawn to the captivating narratives of soap operas<sup>1</sup>.

This fascination with soap operas, classified as sinetron in the realm of Indonesian television, has roots dating back to the early 1990s. As Nilan (2001) elucidates, sinetron emerged as a lifeline during a tumultuous period for the Indonesian film industry, swiftly establishing itself as the premier source of televised drama. Over the years, sinetron has solidified its position as a staple in Indonesian households, commanding attention during prime daytime and early evening slots on commercial television stations<sup>2</sup>. Sinetron is a locally produced dramatization aired on television. They were established at the beginning of the 1990s and became the best alternative replacement for society when the Indonesian film industry was in trouble<sup>3</sup>. Since then sinetron has been the most-watched television program in Indonesia. Sinetron has already become a fixture for most Indonesian families because it dominated prime daytime and early evening programming on commercial television stations<sup>4</sup>.

The appeal of sinetron extends far beyond its narrative allure, particularly resonating with female audiences across diverse age groups. Sinetron serves not only as entertainment but also as a catalyst for social interaction, providing women with fodder for engaging discussions with friends. This phenomenon, often dubbed "Sinetron Syndrome," underscores the profound cultural impact of televised drama on interpersonal relationships and community dynamics. In the realm of sinetron, "Cinta Fitri" emerges as a standout example of enduring popularity, captivating audiences across five seasons and transcending national boundaries to resonate with viewers in Singapore as well (MdEntertainment). Despite the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Control is At The Elderly's Hand", *AGBNielsen Newsletter*, ed 3, March, 2010, The Nielsen Company. [www.agbnielsen.co.id](http://www.agbnielsen.co.id)

<sup>2</sup> Nilan, P., (2001), "Gendered Dreams: Women Watching Sinetron (Soap Operas) on Indonesian TV", *Indonesia and The Malay World.*, Routledge, London , UK

<sup>3</sup> Nilan, P., (2003), "Romance Magazine, Television Soap Operas and Young Indonesian Women", *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs Vol. 37.*, The University of Newcastle.

<sup>4</sup> Aripurnami, S., (1996), "A Feminist Comment On The Sinetron Presentation of Indonesian Women", *Fantasizing The Feminine in Indoneisa.*, Duke University Press.



proliferation of competing narratives, "Cinta Fitri" maintains a dedicated following, its storyline evolving in complexity with each season while retaining its core essence.

This essay delves into three pivotal inquiries. Firstly, it seeks to unravel the enigma behind the unparalleled popularity of "Cinta Fitri" among Indonesian women. Secondly, it explores the prevailing depiction of women in sinetron as dependent, emotional, and passive, probing into Indonesian women's perceptions of these portrayals. Lastly, it scrutinizes the interplay between the representation of women in sinetron and the contemporary construction of gender in Indonesian society, offering insights into broader cultural and social dynamics. Through this multifaceted analysis, we endeavor to shed light on the intricate tapestry of Indonesian television culture and its profound implications for gender discourse and societal norms?<sup>5</sup>

## **THEORETICAL BASIS**

### **Cultivation Theory**

Developed by George Gerbner, this theory suggests that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of social reality. In the context of Indonesian television, where soap operas dominate prime time, constant viewing of these programs may lead to the cultivation of certain values, norms, and stereotypes, particularly regarding gender roles and relationships. The widespread popularity of "Cinta Fitri" among Indonesian women may be attributed to its ability to reinforce or resonate with existing societal norms and values, thus cultivating a sense of familiarity and relatability among its audience.

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

This theory posits that individuals actively seek out media content to fulfill specific needs or gratifications. For Indonesian women, sinetron like "Cinta Fitri" may serve as a form of entertainment, escapism, or social interaction. The narrative simplicity of the plot in the initial season and its subsequent complexity across seasons may cater to the different

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<sup>5</sup> Nilan, P., (2001), "Gendered Dreams: Women Watching Sinetron (Soap Operas) on Indonesian TV", *Indonesia and The Malay World*., Routledge, London , UK



psychological needs of viewers, thereby sustaining their engagement and loyalty over time.

### **Feminist Media Theory**

Drawing from feminist perspectives, the dominant depiction of women in Sinetron as dependent, emotional, and passive reflects broader patriarchal ideologies prevalent in Indonesian society. These representations may perpetuate traditional gender roles and reinforce societal expectations of femininity, thereby influencing how Indonesian women perceive themselves and their roles in society. By examining Indonesian women's responses to these depictions, this theory can provide insights into the negotiation of gender identity and agency within the context of media consumption.

### **Reception Theory**

This theory emphasizes the active role of audiences in interpreting and negotiating media texts. Through qualitative research methods such as interviews and focus groups, scholars can explore how Indonesian women engage with and make meaning of the representations of women in sinetron like "Cinta Fitri." By examining audience responses and interpretations, researchers can uncover the nuanced ways in which media content intersects with lived experiences and cultural contexts, shedding light on the complexities of gender construction and identity formation in Indonesia.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The research methods that will be used in this research include content analysis, case studies, surveys and statistical analysis, literature studies, and comparative analysis. First, a content analysis will be carried out on episodes 10-13 of the soap opera "Cinta Fitri" to understand the narrative, character characterization and message conveyed. Second, a case study will be conducted through in-depth interviews with women who watch this soap opera to find out directly their reasons for watching, their perceptions of women's representation, and their views on gender construction. Third, a survey will be conducted to collect audience demographic data and their preferences for soap opera characters and stories. Survey data will be analyzed statistically to identify patterns of



audience preferences and their correlation with gender views. Fourth, a literature study will be carried out to gain an in-depth understanding of media culture in Indonesia, the soap opera industry, and previous research regarding gender representation in the media. Fifth, a comparative analysis will be carried out by comparing the representation of women in soap operas with other television programs as well as the current social reality of Indonesian women. By combining these methods, it is hoped that this research can provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of the soap opera "Cinta Fitri" and gender representation in Indonesian media.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Sinetron "Cinta Fitri"

This TV drama is the second longest drama, after "*Tersanjung*" with 8 seasons and 1187 episodes from 1998 to 2005 (sinetron). "*Cinta Fitri*" began in December 2007 and it is still running. The producer of "*Cinta Fitri*" predicts that it will reach 700 episodes in season 5. It shows from Sunday to Monday at 8.30 pm (Indonesian time) for two hours straight (Sinetron-cinta-blogspot)<sup>6</sup>.

"Cinta Fitri" is produced by MD Entertainment, which is one of the largest production houses in Indonesia. MD Entertainment has produced more than 200 titles and more than 40 hours of programs per week on air in television (MD Entertainment). They try to produce *Sinetron's* stories based on the real lives of ordinary people in Indonesia. Manoj Punjabi is a member of the Punjabi family who manages MD Entertainment. The Punjabi family is famous in Indonesia as a sinetron family. It is because of another large production house in Indonesia, Multivision Plus Production Company, owned by Raam Punjabi.

The main story of "*Cinta Fitri*" is the love story between a countryside girl named Fitri, played by Shireen Sungkar, with Farrel, played by Teuku Wishnu, who is the son of Mr Hutama, the owner of one of the most famous advertising agency in Jakarta. This *sinetron* shows

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<sup>6</sup> "Cinta Fitri Season Ramadhan SCTV", September 14, 2009., <http://sinetron-cinta.blogspot.com/2009/09/cinta-fitri-season-ramadhan-sctv.html>



different conflicts and problems among the people around them in every season. In the first season, Fitri comes from a place called Wonogiri, a small town in Central Java. She comes to Jakarta to married to his fiancé Firman. But after she arrives in Jakarta, she is informed about Firman's death. Moreover, Fitri decided to stay on in Jakarta and worked at *Nasi Soto* (Soto Rice) food stall owned by a woman named Maya, Mr. Hutama's Daughter. Maya had a problem with her father because she married a man who was poor but hardworking. As far as the relationship between Farrel and Fitri, they get along very well. But Mr. Hutama is hoping to see his son, Farrel, marry Moza, who is his best friend's daughter and has the same social class as Hutama's family. As a consequence, Farrel is forced to choose between Fitri and family business. At the end of the story, Farrel chooses to be with Fitri.

In season two, finally, Fitri and Farrel married. Since they lived together, the conflict between in-laws automatically appeared. Farrel's grandma was always provoking Farrel's mother (Lia), as a result, Fitri and Lia often have conflicts. In this season, every character in this *sinetron* faces different conflicts and problems. Furthermore, in the next season, Fitri was pregnant while Farrel was jailed and accused of murdering Bram. After Farrel was released from jail, he decided to rent a house and lived there with Fitri. It is because his family rejected them to live together anymore. But one day Fitri was shocked because she saw Bram in a public place. Everyone thought that Fitri was hallucinating. Mischa, Farrel's ex-girlfriend, found a new partner through Bram's disappearance to attack Fitri and Farrel's happiness. They claimed to be Hutama's only true son.

The fourth season of "*Cinta Fitri*" called as season of Ramadhan began running in July 2009. Through the hardest and longest struggle, Fitri and Farrel's baby was born safely and was named by Mrs. Hutama, "Raffa Emeraldy Hutama". They now were living in Hutama's home, although there was still pressure from Maya, Bram, Faiz, and Mischa. In this season, Mr. Hutama Died, and Bram managed to get hold of the CCTV master video and witnessed how Mr. Hutama died. Farrel and Fitri know that Mischa and Faiz are the murderers; Farrel forces them to confess that they killed Mr. Hutama.





The fifth season of "*Cinta Fitri*" tells the audience about Lia (Farrel's mother) trapped under the debris of the hotel after this huge earthquake rocks Yogyakarta. Meanwhile, Mischa keeps on trying to find out about Lia's condition. She is hoping that Lia is dead. Faiz asks her, even forcing her to run away but she insists that she will not leave Yogyakarta before knowing for sure if Lia is dead. The truth about Mischa lying about Faiz that had to be spoken about did not happen. Mischa does not sit and wait.

### **The popularity of *Sinetron "Cinta Fitri"***

Soap opera became a popular television program around the world in 1980.<sup>7</sup> The housewife watched these television programs in the odd moment of her busy day. There are some key factors of the soap opera that make these television programs so popular among women, which can be implemented in *sinetron "Cinta Fitri"* as well. The first significant factor of soap operas in general is the reflection on personal problems and the emphasis is on the talk not on action, slow development rather than the immediate response, on delayed retribution rather than instant effect.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the soap opera stories may seem to be repetitive and over-familiar.

Personal relationships are the backbone of the soaps. They provide dramatic moments, including marriage, birth, divorce, and death, and more day-to-day exchanges of quarrels, alliances, and dilemmas that make up the narrative.

The plot of "*Cinta Fitri*" would seem to confirm this argument. "*Fans of the television series, or sinetron, "Cinta Fitri" might have to prepare tissues before watching its newest season, which is said to be loaded with conflicts and tears.*" (The Jakarta Pos) "*There will still be many conflicts and she (Fitri) will still cry,*" (The Jakarta Post) "*In the first season,*

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<sup>7</sup> Geraghty, C., (1994), "A Woman Space", *Woman and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps.*, Polity Press, Oxford, UK.

<sup>8</sup> Cassidy, M. F., (2005), "The Charm Boys Woo the Audience: Garry Moore, Arthur Godfrey, and Art Linkletter", *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s.* University of Texas Press, Austin.



*Fitri was Farel's girlfriend but in the new season they are married."* (The Jakarta Post)

The alliance is apparent on Mischa and Bram in season three. Bram and Mischa work together to make Mr. Hutama's family fall. In this sinetron, Mischa acts as a bad woman who wants to dominate the treasure of Hutama's family and also tries to separate Fitri's marriage. She also likes to provoke the family members of the Hutama Family to assault Fitri and Farrel.

*"Mischa provoked Maya to get an inheritance from Hutama"* (MDEntertainment) *"Mischa found a new partner through Bram's disappearance to attack Fitri and Farrel's happiness, Faiz claimed to be Hutama's only true son"* (MDEntertainment)

The second factor is soap operas convince women that their highest goal is to see their family united and happy while consoling them for their inability to realize this ideal and bring about familial harmony. Although the goal is unrealizable in more ways, there is an argument that the soap opera does not offer a mirror image of the viewer's own family but a kind of extended family (Mumford, 1995)<sup>9</sup>. In *Sinetron's "Cinta Fitri"*, Fitri is struggling women who try to maintain her marriage to remain perfect. Although, Mischa as an 'evil' woman character, always try to ruin Fitri's marriage.

*"[Mochammad Ricky F S](#) CINTA FITRI DAN FAREL IS THE BEST !!!!!!!!!!"* (facebook) *"[Sulis Tyawati](#) seandainya cinta kita bisa sekuat cinta Fitri dan Farel"* (Facebook) (She hopes that her love story is as strong as Fitri and Farrel's) *"[Nurani Prasetyanti](#) ingin memiliki kisah cinta seindah cinta fitri dan farel..."* (Facebook) (She wants to have a love life like Fitri and Farrel because she thinks their love story is so perfect) *"[Mei Elisani](#) shireen sungkar&teuku wisnu ko bs duet mudah2an kalian bisa jadi pasangan beneran d.. kalian*

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<sup>9</sup> Mumford, L. S., (1995), "Public exposure: Privacy and The Construction of The Soap Opera Community", *Love and Ideology in The Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women and Television Genre*. United State of America.





*pasangan paling cocok bgt*" (She hopes that Fitri and Farrel could be a real husband and wife because she thinks they are a perfect couple) "[Shidah Idah Sapuan](#) I just love watching the chemistry between Shireen (Fitri) and Teuku Wisnu (Farrel). Truly a soulmate!!!"

Another factor that makes *sinetron* "Cinta Fitri" popular among women in Indonesia is the charming boy. focused on the masculinity of the male cast, which is associated with women's 'sweetness', gentleness toward children deference to others, empathy, and good husband (Cassidy, 2005)<sup>10</sup>. In this *sinetron*, Farrel as a main male cast is a good man, son, husband, and also father. He is always prioritizing his family and religion. Moreover, he is smart and a hard worker, and as a result, he becomes a successful businessman.

*"[Dhiyah Rahmawati](#) aku ngfans bgt...ma farel cz krenz bgt dh aktingnya..w pkoknya pnggemar sinetron cinta fitri dr awal smp skrng nie..top abiz critanya seru bgt.." (facebook) (she likes Farel because he is a good actor in "Cinta Fitri")*  
*"[Annisa Sachiko](#) Slm knl kak wisnu aq icha d pdng. Aq ngefans bgeeeet sma kmu. Aq jg ngefans bgt sma sntrn cnta fitri knp. Knp sich sntrn cnta fitri hrs berakhr dlm wkt dkt"* (She is fans of "cinta Fitri". She likes Teuku Wisnu (Farrel), and because of that she always watches "Cinta Fitri")

Finally, the last factor that makes "Cinta Fitri" become the most favorite drama series is the fanatic fans. This particular group is a type of people who do not want to miss just one episode of their favorite *sinetron*. Many people in Indonesia are addicted to *Sinetron*, with their reasons for lapping out the programs (Sinetron Syndrome).

*"[Dhea Markhamatul Aeni](#) Melewati Malam Tanpa Sinetron Cinta Fitri Serasa Malam Tanpa Bulan." (facebook). (She said not watching "Cinta Fitri" feel like night*

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<sup>10</sup> Cassidy, M. F., (2005), "The Charm Boys Woo the Audience: Garry Moore, Arthur Godfrey, and Art Linkletter", *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s*. University of Texas Press, Austin.



without the moon) "[Nur Amelia](#) ini kak shireen sungkar yaaaa? aku setiap hari nonton cinta fitri karna sinetron cinta fitri paling toppp seduniaaa" (She watches "Cinta Fitri" every day because she thinks this sinetron is the best around the world) "[Kartini Ismail](#) sing by Fitri n farel....romantisssss!!!!" (She thinks the movie's soundtrack that sung by Fitri and Farrel is so romantic) [Norish Muhriz](#) I like teuku wisnu, acting nya berkesan. Malam terasa sunyi tanpa Cinta Fitri..we all waiting for Season5" (She likes Teuku Wisnu (Farrel) and she will feel lonely in the night without "Cinta Fitri" ..)

### How Indonesian Women Watch the Sinetron "Cinta Fitri"

Most Indonesian women who watch a *sinetron* have a better education and a professional job. But for those who have little time for themselves watching Sinetron is the way to relax and escape from reality as a wife, mother, and worker. For most of them, the story of soap operas is read as a claim for realism.<sup>11</sup>

The typical of *Sinetron* Indonesia is women are presented as an over-emotional vulnerable and dependent person and the plot of some supporting characters such as a saintly mother-in-law and bitchy daughter-in-law. This type of sinetron could make a woman's eyes well over with tears because they were amused to see their own everyday life (Nilan 2001)<sup>12</sup>. For example, women who watched the "Cinta Fitri" said that

"Ada satu kali ketika aku nonton sinetron cinta fitri episode 13 Februari 2009, Aku nangis. Disana dikisahkan tokoh utama yang bernama Farel tiba-tiba mengetahui kenyataan bahwa ia bukanlah anak kandung keluarga Utama. Aku bisa merasakan pedihnya perasaan Farel saat itu." (hifni1985.wordpress.com) (One day she watched "Cinta Fitri" episode 13, and she cried when she knew that

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<sup>11</sup> Nilan, P., (2003), "Romance Magazine, Television Soap Operas and Young Indonesian Women", *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* Vol. 37,. The University of Newcastle.

<sup>12</sup> Nilan, P., (2001), "Gendered Dreams: Women Watching Sinetron (Soap Operas) on Indonesian TV", *Indonesia and The Malay World*., Routledge, London , UK



Farrel was an adopted child because she could feel the pain of Farrel's feelings at that time).

*"[RiaDindanya Fauzy](#) yup.. setuju banget, CF nih beda sama sinetron laen.. beda banget.. cerita sehari2 bgt" (For her, "Cinta Fitri" is different from other sinetron in Indonesia because the story comes from the reality) "[Nani Shikha Arjoe](#) Kalo nani berfikir sih sinetron ini bisa lebih mengajarkan banyak hal aja...kan season Ramadhan...^\_^" (Facebook) (She thinks that "Cinta Fitri" could teach her about the real life in "Cinta Fitri" season 4)*

### **The Representation of Women in *Sinetron* related to the contemporary construction of Genre in Indonesia**

Many feminists believe that television programs contain unhealthy messages for their audiences, particularly concerning the role of women. Each *sinetron* usually creates a central figure who is meant to be seen by the audience as an ideal character. But the role is often unrealistic. According to Aripurnami, she claimed that most of the *sinetron* productions in Indonesia are about families, and inevitably, in that situation, the place of women. However, the dominant character of women in *sinetron* "*Cinta Fitri*" is described as independent emotional, forgiving, innocent, and religious. She always fights for her husband and family, never complaining about bad situations that happened in their family. This character is far from the dominant picture of women in Indonesia as dependent, passive, weak, and incapable women. Fitri's character tries to build a new women's perspective on women's position in Indonesian society. The central women characters that are the primary focus in *Sinetron* Indonesia are a lot of crying, sudden faints, bitchy conversation, and sudden violent death. This intense emotional world pleasures women to watch the programs and copy the ideas in their real lives in the context of contemporary gender relations in Indonesia.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Nilan, P., (2001), "Gendered Dreams: Women Watching *Sinetron* (Soap Operas) on Indonesian TV", *Indonesia and The Malay World*., Routledge, London , UK



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, soap opera shows have been the most-watched television programs among women in Indonesia. It is one of the few formats that acknowledge the overwhelming emotional and practical maintenance work of women in the private sphere and endorses it. There are four reasons why "*Cinta Fitri*" is popular among women in Indonesia. Namely, first, the reflection on the personal problems and the emphasis is on the talk not on action, second, convincing women that their highest goal is to see their family united and happy, third, The charm boy's characteristics and finally, the fanatic fans. Moreover, most Indonesian women read a *sintered* as a claim for realism, because sometimes the story is too close to their real life. However, "*Cinta Fitri*" is an unusual *sinetron*. They try to represent Indonesian women as far from the dominant thought in society as a dependent, emotional, passive, weak, and incapable woman. Although there are a few *sinetrons* in Indonesia are seem unreal, at least they offer alternative views for women in Indonesia. It may also allow women to fantasize about the world in which they have.

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