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Psychological Trauma and Cultural Consciousness in *Bisikan Dosa* (2025): Exploring Modern Malay Psychological Horror

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ABSTRACT

Bisikan Dosa (2025) is an important work in current Malaysian psychological terror, shifting the lurking threats from external supernatural sources to inner distress due to emotional trauma, guilty and shattered self. The film is discussed here in relation to theories of psychological horror, trauma studies, feminist film criticism, as well as the author's own cultural and spiritual views, firmly grounded in Malay culture. Using the same thesis as the aforementioned one, it adapts a re-oriented model of *Blake Snyder's Save the Cat Beat Sheet* screenplay formula to lay out Sarimah's mental breakdown, postulating that the movie affects us through feelings rather than images. The discourse also reads hallucinations, delusions, and fragmented memory in forms of trauma and reads the character Zara as a projection of Sarimah's overruled guilt. Positioning *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) within the tradition of Malay horror cinema more broadly, we suggest that in the way it portrays psychological horror, the film gives expression to a uniquely Malaysian kind of ghost, articulating the woman as figured within feminist and spiritual contexts.

Keywords: *Psychological Horror; Malay Cinema; Trauma Studies; Cultural Consciousness; Feminist Film Criticism*

INTRODUCTION

Today's horror narrative has progressively shifted away from straightforward supernatural spectacle to psychological storytelling emphasising emotional wounds, internal instability, and profound affective fear (Fisher, 2014). Nevertheless, the literary study of the Southeast Asian film, and Malaysian horror in particular, has tended to improperly highlight major spiritual attributes, folklore, and religious symbolism over deeper psychological and emotional ones. Horror and post-horror in Malaysian cinema research on horror cinema in present-day Malaysia tend towards how celluloid amplifications or dramatisations emerged out from involvement with local spirit entities such as the shamanistic *Pontianak* or *Hantu*, or their critique and commentary on religious and social taboo themes rather than a space in which trauma, guilt and moral consciousness were explored narratively and visually. This interpretive limitation has not allowed for a more complete understanding of how modern This interpretive limitation has not allowed for a deeper understanding of how modern Malay horror creates the feelings of anxiety via psychological disintegration rather than through external variables.

Bisikan Dosa (2025) is a significant work that problematises the existing critical wisdom. Although the film is unmistakably rooted in Malay cultural and spiritual paradigms, its horror does not derive from familiar supernatural tropes or gratuitous violence, but rather from Sarimah's devastating emotional tumult. Fear in the film is built out of emotional disintegration, hallucination and moral self-condemnation, locating ideal forms of trauma response like madness and memory fragmentation at its narrative core. The film's careful downplay of overt supernatural elements in favour of emotive and cognitive breakdowns grounds it on the path of our ancestral progenitor for modern psychological horror, where horror is marshalled as an emergent function of affective atmosphere and emotional dissonance (Brinkema, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern psychological horror is a world away from the traditional forms of the genre, where threats often reside within the characters themselves. Indeed, as commentators such as Fisher (2014) and Krzywinska (2015) argue, the horror of the 21st century reconsider fear inward, toward internal psychic landscapes anxiety and guilt which become themselves the sites of horror. This movement is then extended in Brinkema's (2014) theory of affective horror emotion everywhere shifts not only from what the text proscribes (as when it stipulates one feels fear) to also being, itself, the horror text. This is a useful theoretical framework for analysing films that are either resistant to a clear notion of cause-and-effect or explicit supernatural logic. Trauma theory offers a vital theoretical scaffold for understanding the demonstrated psychological experiences in *Bisikan Dosa* (2025). Trauma Definitions by Kaplan (2005) and Caruth (1996) both define trauma as an event that defies narrative coherence, to be heard through its repetition, intrusive imagery, and emotional disorientation. Leys (2000) brings a paradox of trauma to the fore the desire and the forced relation to dissociate in oneself and others, and, in turn, dissociative.



Figure 1. ***Conceptual Framework for Analysing Bisikan Dosa* (2025)**

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis grounded in an adapted application of *Blake Snyder's Save the Cat Beat Sheet* as a narrative-analytical framework. Rather than employing the model as a prescriptive screenwriting tool or focusing on plot economy, the beat structure is repurposed as an interpretive lens to examine the protagonist Sarimah's progressive mental and moral deterioration across the film's narrative trajectory. Guided by the three-act structure illustrated in *Figure 2*, each narrative beat ranging from *Opening Image* to *Final Image* is analysed not as a functional plot mechanism, but as a symbolic marker of psychological transition. The beats are mapped against Sarimah's internal state, allowing the study to trace how emotional instability, ethical erosion, and

cognitive disintegration unfold in parallel with narrative progression. In this sense, the *Save the Cat* structure provides a scaffold for interpreting inner collapse rather than external causality.

Act I is examined as the establishment of Sarimah's baseline psychological condition, where the *Set-Up*, *Theme Stated*, and *Catalyst* collectively frame latent vulnerabilities. Act II, particularly through *Debate*, *Fun and Games*, and the *Midpoint*, is interpreted as a sustained phase of internal conflict and false equilibrium, during which Sarimah's perceived agency masks an accelerating psychological fracture. Act III culminates in *All Is Lost*, *Break into Three*, and *Finale*, which are read as manifestations of irreversible emotional collapse and moral reckoning, resulting in a cathartic but destabilising resolution. Through this approach, the narrative structure is contextualised within an emotion-driven analytical paradigm, where story beats function as indicators of mental states rather than narrative events alone. The end result is thus informed by the theoretical lenses mentioned in *Figure 2*, allowing a structured although psychologically detailed review of the film's narrative decline.

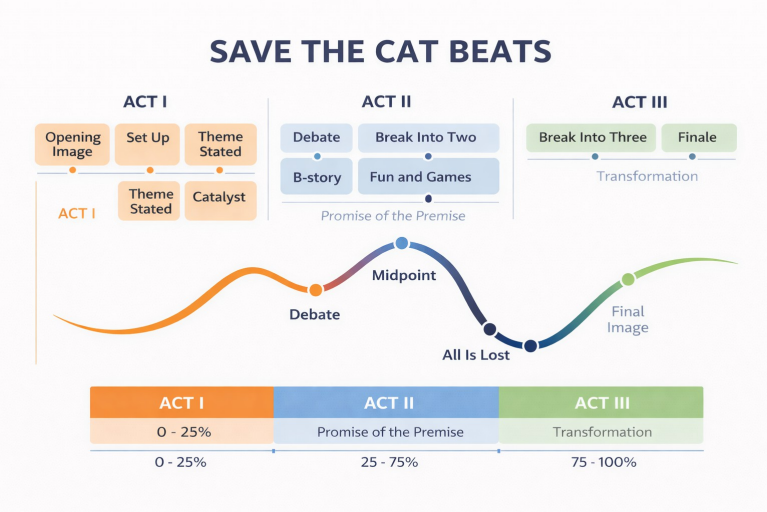


Figure 2. ***Adapted Save the Cat Beat Structure as a Framework for Psychological Narrative Analysis***

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mapping such aspects onto the utilised *Save the Cat Beat Sheet* for *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) now displays a narrative architecture unique to the deconstruction of Sarimah's mind. The film reframes conventional narrative beats as markers of emotional and cognitive progression starting with the *Opening Image*. The atmosphere of emotional discord is established as Sarimah is shown grief-stricken and withdrawn. The *Catalyst* is not necessarily a violent or supernatural break in it is an emotional disruption in the already unstable mind of Sarimah. Most importantly, however, the *All is Lost* beat is not a matter of physical peril or defeat by the outside world so much as emotional collapse, in this case, Sarimah's full-on interior breakdown of guilt and self-contempt. This juxtaposition from which narrative beats shares common ground with a man's psychological breakdown further establishes the claim that narrative tension is redefined in *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) as emotional decay.

At the heart of *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) is Sarimah's guilt, which becomes the film's primary emotional and psychological driver. Her visions, especially her obsession with whatever Zara represents to her are signposts of extraordinary self-hatred and unhealed psychic injury. Zara is portrayed not as a different persona, but as a spectral expression of Sarimah's repressed guilt and mourning in itself based on trauma theory (Caruth, 1996; Kaplan, 2005). Through this mechanism, delusion works as a

means of survival to eliminate trauma rather than facing or overcoming it. The horror of the film stems from that constant emotional unease, that psychological suffocation, which, in turn, fortifies Brinkema's (2014) theory of affective horror. The spectator shares the perspective and perception of the tie, which is so vacillating that we feel a sense of craziness, angst, and horror alongside her. This affective alignment underpins the film's psychological realism and frames emotional pain as an ethical and experiential centre for the horror.

From a feminist standpoint, *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) provides readers with a powerful re-signification of the "monstrous woman" figure. Instead of presenting Sarimah as an inherent threat, however, the film locates her monstrousness within mechanisms of social censure, maternal absence and moral scrutiny. Utilising feminist paradigms (Butler, 1990), Sarimah can be read as a suffering woman magnified by socially constructed ideals about the institution of motherhood, piety and emotional restraint. Her mental collapse is not depicted as a personal failing but the product of a culturally conditioned sense of moral duty. The horror is not of her making, but in the social and cultural machinery that makes her grief unreadable and her guilt unending. In this manner, *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) critically examines the ways in which women are subjected to gendered structures of experience through which trauma is rendered pathological and subsequently internalised.

Malay cultural and spiritual systems function as symbolic forces that animate the film's psychological horror. Spiritual imagery in *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) does not function as a literal supernatural explanation but as a culturally specific language through which guilt, trauma, and moral anxiety are articulated. Concepts of *dosa* (sin), moral accountability, and spiritual contamination permeate Sarimah's emotional world, shaping how she interprets her suffering. These spiritual ingredients should be understood metaphorically rather than as a cause of validity. The ghostly force terrorising Sarimah is not some brand of supernatural threat, but another kind of horror intimacy and cultural specificity become spiritual. This final convergence confirms that the film articulates a distinctly Malaysian psychological horror rooted in a specific cultural and moral context.

Collectively, the reskinned *Blake Snyder's Save the Cat Beat Sheet* paradigm shows how *Bisikan Dosa* (2025) ritualises classical narrative beats as affective and cognitive borders. The film's horror builds in the gradual unravelling of its psycho-somatic premise, which situates it as a particularly Malaysian sort of psychological horror one that finds horror far from the showy spectacle or mythic monstrosity, and closer to affective experience, trauma and moral perceptions embedded within culture.

CONCLUSION

Bisikan Dosa (2025) is a departure from the "ghost-story-as-cautionary-tale", a significant shift for Malay horror cinema, which has linearly externalised tremor spiritual threats, venturing to glimpse at ancient and modern traumas that wield devastatingly personal, psychological guilt. Using an interdisciplinary method that includes narrative analysis, as well as trauma, affective and feminist theories, this study seeks to provide a more complex sense of Malay horror as not only a site of emotional trauma but also cultural awareness and gendered subjectivity where localised forms of psychic fright take place, which operate to affect users emotionally. Future research may conduct comparative studies with other recent Southeast Asian psychological horror films to further refine this critical model.

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