

Power and Resistance in A Singapore Film: *La Luna*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a Singapore film, *La Luna*. This film tells the story of Hanie, a modern business woman from a big city who opens a lingerie shop in a conservative village of Bras Basah. The villagers gradually welcome the shop with open arms. However, the religious leader of the village, Tok Hasan, sees that the store threatens the religious values of the society, and thus he wants to drive the shop out of the village. Through the story of Hanie, *La Luna* exposes several important issues such as corrupted power, authoritarian leader, oppression, and resistance. Because of these issues, we are interested in analyzing this film. By using Michel Foucault's theory of power and resistance and James Scott's theory of everyday resistance, we investigate the way Tok Hassan exercises his religious power and the way the villagers resist his power. We find out that Tok Hassan exercises his religious power by establishing laws and rules, surveilling the act of villagers and also using violence. In response, the villagers show their resistance by protesting, disobeying and making an ally. Even though it has to be carried out slowly, the action was successful to bring change in the village. All these show that even under oppressive conditions, resistance will always exist in its own way.

Keywords: authority, disciplinary power, everyday act of resistance, la luna, singapore film

INTRODUCTION

The cinema world, including the one in Southeast Asia, is developing. A new wave of regional filmmakers, including those from Singapore, tends to explore their own unique and deeply rooted stories that are in line with the themes of their identity and belonging. And this makes analyzing Singapore films interesting. In this article, we analyze a Singapore film, *La Luna*, which was released in 2023. This film successfully captures the landscape of Southeast Asian cinema where cultural specificity meets global storytelling. As stated by Justin Ang, the assistant chief executive at the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), *La Luna* film was able to show a diverse cast and stories that explore diverse cultural perspectives from Singapore (Brzeski, 2024). The film was successfully screened in several film festivals, such as International Film Festival Rotterdam 2023, Tokyo International Film Festival 2023, and also in Shanghai International Film Festival 2024 (MUBI: LA LUNA, n.d.)

La Luna is an interesting film because it blends comedy and drama. The blending of these two genres is called dramedy. According to Landau (2018), the dramedy genre creates a balance between drama and comedy and explores how characters cope with hardships and moral dilemmas. This situation often presents emotions that feel raw, honest and uncomfortable. By mixing humor with drama, this genre helps the audience feel more connected to the characters and understand them better. *La Luna* reflects this idea by blending comedy and serious topics and allows the audience to laugh while also thinking about deeper themes like faith and life challenges. The story does not offer simple solutions but instead highlights their struggles, resistance, and personal conflicts in a way that blends serious themes with moments of irony and humor.

La Luna takes place in Kampong Bras Basah, a small village led by Tok Hassan, who is a very conservative religious leader. He is known for his strict enforcement of his belief, so that

all things that deviate from the religion are treated as a police matter. The strictness of his belief severely restricts villager's rights and activities. It requires them to obey Tok Hasan, otherwise man or woman will be punished depending on what they did. However, his authority is challenged when Hanie, a modern businesswoman, arrives at his village and turns her grandfather's inherited house into a fancy lingerie shop that later will be called *La Luna*. Since the construction of the shop, Tok Hassan has considered this as sin because it is not in line with his beliefs. Tok Hasan starts to mark and express his dislike toward her and also the store. However, Hanie continues to build the shop because she felt that it was her right. So, Tok Hassan tries every possible way to shut the shop down. Feeling that her rights were being violated, Hanie shows her resistance because what Tok Hassan did to her was too much. Moreover, the villagers start to help Hanie in order to keep their beloved store safe. The clash between Tok Hassan and Hanie is inevitable as they always show different ways to stand on their stance.

La Luna explores several issues that become the key points of the story. One issue that attracts our attention is power and resistance. It shows that there is contestation of power between the religious leader, represented by Tok Hassan, on the one hand, and Hanie, the woman who brings changes in the village, and the villagers on the other hand. Because of that, in this article, we analyze how Tok Hassan exercises his religious power over the villagers, including Hanie, and how the villagers and Hanie show their resistance for subverting Tok Hassan's religious power.

We use Michel Foucault's theory of power, especially disciplinary power, and resistance in our analysis. Disciplinary power refers to the way power regulates and controls individuals in society. According to Foucault, "discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (1995, p. 170). Disciplinary power does not control people through direct force or violent punishment, but shapes individuals by subtly influencing their behavior, thoughts, and identities. It works carefully and continuously by controlling people's actions to make them more obedient. This reflects the idea that power does not always act through explicit control but instead creates a structure where individuals regulate themselves because they feel constantly observed. Through mechanisms such as system, rules, and institutional surveillance, individuals modify their behavior according to the social order. Michel Foucault views resistance as an inherent part of power relations. According to Foucault (1978, p. 95), "where there is power, there is resistance." Power is not a one-way force imposed from above but a dynamic relationship that always generates resistance. As it stated earlier, resistance is not something separate from power but exists within power relations. So, it can manifest in everyday actions and behaviors. This concept was developed further by James C. Scott (1989) through his theory of "everyday resistance." Everyday resistance focuses on the hidden, subtle, and indirect ways that marginalized groups challenge authority. Scott argues that much of the political activity of the oppressed happens in everyday life. It challenges the idea that resistance must be large and visible to be meaningful. He shows that even in the most controlled environments, people find ways to subtly push back. The traditional view as such challenges the traditional notion of power that is shown as centralized and exercised through force, but it shows that power is everywhere and so is resistance. In this sense, the everyday resistance, that often silent and subtle, becomes a powerful way to confront domination. In conclusion, understanding how power and resistance interaction helps us see how authority works and how individuals and communities respond and change the systems that control them.

TOK HASSAN'S EXERCISE OF RELIGIOUS POWER AND THE VILLAGERS'S RESISTANCE IN *LA LUNA*

In *La Luna*, the way Tok Hassan exercises his religious power plays a significant role in shaping the norms of Bras Basah Village. Through the establishment of laws and rules, surveillance, and acts of violence, Tok Hassan ensures that the villagers conform to his interpretation of religion. By framing his actions as morally justified, Tok Hassan makes sure that his authority is considered the truth. Additionally, the way the villagers resist Tok Hassan's power plays a crucial role in changing the direction of the village. Through a form of protest to his regulations, disobeying his command, and even making a village alliance, these villagers show that resistance arises within the relation of the power system.

The Way Tok Hassan Exercises His Religious Power

This part will focus on analyzing the way Tok Hassan exercises his religious power over the villagers in Bras Basah Village. Tok Hassan's authority plays a significant role in shaping the behaviors and life in the village. So, if there is something that is not in line with Tok Hassan's beliefs, then it will be considered an offense and they will be punished depending on what they have done. The way Tok Hassan exercises his religious power over the villagers is by establishing laws and rules, watching villagers' activities, and using violence.

Establishing Laws and Rules to the Villagers

In *La Luna*, Tok Hassan uses a warning, which in this context is a call to pray, as a tool for exercising his religious power, with the initiation of regulating the villager's behavior. His authority is reinforced through repeated instructions and public reminders, which functions not just as a religious duty, but as a means of control. In the timestamp 00:01:30- 00:01:47 of *La Luna*, a person, through a speaker, appealed to the people to come to pray on Friday. If the people refused, they would be considered sinners who did not obey their religion. "This is a final announcement. Friday prayers in Bras Basah Village have begun. Pray before you are being prayed for. Remember, God is watching." The call for prayer functions as a regulation for the villagers to heed. They should be aware of their duty and follow the regulations. If they do not go to the Friday prayer, they will face disciplinary action, as seen in the scene of timestamp 00:01:30.

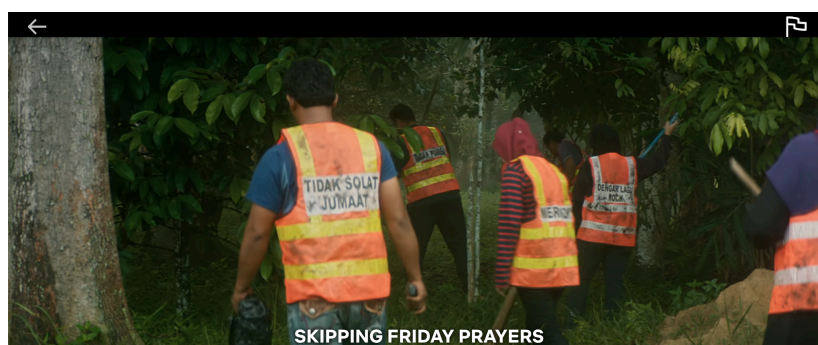


Figure 1. Several villagers are punished by doing corrective work orders (CWOs). *La Luna*, 2023, 00:01:30

This scene shows those skipping Friday prayer are slapped with a penalty in the form of corrective work orders (CWOs), that is, cleaning the streets. This CWO also applies to other offensive acts, such as skipping religious class, dancing dangdut, and even listening to rock songs. To conclude, the way Tok Hassan, in this context regulating Friday prayer through an announcer, explains that regulation can also be part of the way he exercises his religious power.

Tok Hassan is giving understanding to the villagers that the prayer on Friday must be followed by all the villagers. Discipline is enforced through moral pressure and the threat of being seen as sinful. It shows Foucault's idea that power shapes people's actions through discipline and regulation rather than visible force.

Surveilling and Watching Villagers Daily Activities

Controlling the implementation of the system and rules is another way Tok Hasan exercises his power over the villagers. Tok Hasan wants the system and rules to be implemented well. So, he needs to control the attitudes of the villagers in applying the laws and rules. Tok Hasan often comes in person and sees the way the villagers act in their daily activities by watching or commanding by himself. An example of this behavior can be seen in the way Tok Hassan controls the preaching content. As a leader in the Village, Tok Hassan has to ensure whether his religious view is practiced or not by the fellow religious leader in his village by controlling it or surveilling the sermon's content that will be delivered. That is why, Tok Hassan examines the draft of the sermon of other preachers before the preachers deliver them. For instance, reading the draft of the sermon prepared by Fauzi, a young preacher, Tok Hasan said, *"I've read your sermon for this week. I've made a few suggestions. You and your jokes"* (La Luna, 2023, 00:10:33-00:11:25)

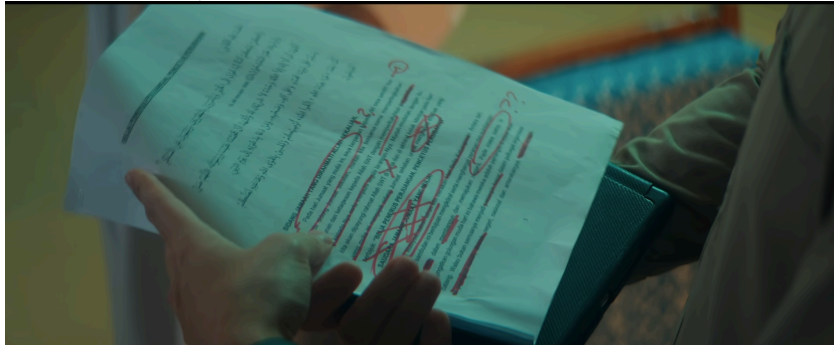


Figure 2. Fauzi's preaching content is full of scribbles from Tok Hassan. La Luna, 2023, 00:10:33-00:11:25

This moment of rejection shows Tok Hassan wants his view of his belief to be applied. By rejecting Fauzi's, the preacher, idea on his preaching, Tok Hassan makes his position clear to control and Fauzi has no freedom to make any changes but to comply with his regulation. His surveillance over the content of religious teachings is a form of disciplinary power that exercises the regulation of individuals through subtle mechanisms. Since he is considered a knowledgeable person, Tok Hassan makes people feel they must follow. It controls people by watching them, correcting them, and making them act in certain ways.

Using Acts of Violence

Besides using preaching, laws, and rules, in some moments, Tok Hassan is also not afraid of resorting to violence in order to discipline things he keeps finding contradict his belief. This act can be seen when Tok Hassan normalizes husbands in Bras Basah Village to use violence for disciplining their wives. In this case, this violence happens between Pa'at and Yam, who is a husband and wife. In the story, Yam had been abused by her husband multiple times, so she decided to go to Hanie's house to seek shelter. However, Tok Hassan goes there and demands Yam to go back to her husband.

TOK HASSAN: Is Yam here?

HANIE: Maybe.

TOK HASSAN: She has no right to run away from home and live in another's home without her husband's permission. It is wrong in our religion. This is a personal matter between husband and wife. We shouldn't intervene except—

HANIE: Except what? Except when the wife is beaten nearly to death? like that? He threatened Yam with his machete. Why is he here? Why is he not locked up?

TOK HASSAN: The laws of our village give husbands the right to discipline their wives through whatever means necessary. What Pa'at did to Yam, you don't have the right to intervene. Yam must go home to apologise.

In that conversation, in the timestamp 01:08:25-01:09:00 of *La Luna*, we can figure out that Tok Hassan might not physically abuse anyone by himself, but he clearly legitimizes and allows using violence in the relationship between husband and wife. Tok Hassan believes that husbands have the right to control their wives in any way, even, if necessary, by exercising violence. In addition, Tok Hassan justifies using violence to discipline a wife based on religious teachings. According to Foucault, “Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (1978, p. 194). Tok Hassan’s control over the village reflects Foucault’s idea of power, where power is about shaping what people see as normal and acceptable. His religious power works through the way knowledge is spread and accepted. As a result, the villagers, especially men like Pa’at, believe they have the right to control their wives through violence and do it as normal things.

Hanie and The Villagers’s Resistance toward Tok Hassan

This part will dig deeper into Hanie and the Bras Basah villagers resist Tok Hassan’s oppressive religious power. As Scott explains, “Everyday forms of resistance avoid calling attention to themselves. Such techniques are relatively safe, they often promise vital material gains, and they require little or no formal coordination let alone formal organization” (1989, p. 35). This means that resistance does not always take the form of open rebellion. In highly controlled societies where people live under harsh or dangerous authority, they may choose subtle and indirect ways to resist rather than confront power directly. In *La Luna*, this resistance is evident in the villagers’ protest of Tok Hassan’s regulations, their disobeying of Tok Hassan’s command, and their unity in the fight for freedom.

Protesting Tok Hassan’s Regulations

Protesting Tok Hassan's religious rules became the basic form that initiated the resistance. Although protests were only done through spoken words, this showed that Hanie and the oppressed villagers could resist Tok Hassan’s power. In one moment, Tok Hassan used a sermon to describe to villagers that *La Luna* is equated to an evil who works to threaten the village as shown in the timestamp 00:31:50-00:32:44. Feeling that what Tok Hassan did had gone too far, Hanie decided to go directly to Tok Hassan and protest against it.



Figure 3. Hanie enters man's restroom to protest toward Tok Hassan. *La Luna*, 2023, 00:34:50-00:36:50

HANIE: A sermon? You spread lies about me in the sermon? What did I do? What did I do wrong? I didn't intend to cause any disturbances or—

TOK HASSAN: I don't care if you intended it or not. Your shop has contaminated the purity of my village. And as the village chief, it's my responsibility to drive you away.

HANIE: I will not be driven away. And you can't do anything about it. As long as I've not committed any crimes, you can't do anything to me.

In that scene, even though one of the village staff tries to prevent Hanie from meeting Tok Hassan in the restroom, Hanie insists on breaking inside the men's restroom to directly protest. This moment reveals that Hanie's resistance is a direct challenge as she rejects the identity Tok Hassan tries to impose on her as an immoral influence. According to Foucault, resistance against forms of subjectification cannot be situated outside the networks of power since subjectivity is only possible within them (Lawlor, 2012). This means resistance itself must occur through the refusal and redefinition of the identities imposed by power. In this case, Hanie challenges the meanings and moral labels enforced by Tok Hassan's authority. By insisting that she has done nothing wrong and that Tok Hassan has no legal grounds to remove her, Hanie asserts her rights within the very system that seeks to oppress her.

Disobeying Tok Hassan's Commands and Regulations

Beside showing protest, the villagers also adopt another measure for resisting Tok Hassan. As the saying goes, action speaks louder than words. This saying unveils the next level of resisting Tok Hassan's religious power. The act of disobeying Tok Hassan's command as a way to resist is depicted by Bras Basah villagers where these female villagers together bought lingerie at La Luna. This movement was started by a woman villager named Enah, then spread to all the villagers. Although individual acts may seem insignificant, their combined effect can lead to serious consequences (Scott, 1989). As it is told throughout the film, Tok Hassan has repeatedly made it clear that the store goes against his belief. However, Enah came to the store and bought things there several times. Furthermore, since Enah started buying lingerie from the store, she and her husband became more intimate, as her outfits sparked his desire. Until one day, their lust for sex could not be restrained and decided to do it in the audio visual (AV) room in Tok Hassan's office. After enjoying their time together, they stepped out and found Tok Hassan and several women villagers waiting outside the room. By accident, Enah's husband dropped a piece of lingerie showing La Luna tag, just like the one shown below.



Figure 4. Enah's underwear that fell to the floor and showed the La Luna tag. La Luna, 2023, 00:41:15.

Seeing that, Tok Hassan and all women are shocked. These women villagers start to go to La Luna as soon as possible. In addition, a woman wants to go there near Tok Hassan, which stated in timestamp 00:41:30.

A WOMAN VILLAGER: Dear, pick me up now. Where to? La Luna. La Luna!

Even near Tok Hassan, that woman is not afraid to say that she wants to go to that store. This news quickly spread throughout the village and brought even more women to Hanie's store to buy some lingerie or underwear. Those scenes show that some villagers start to disobey Tok Hassan's command as they do not care about Tok Hassan's opinion on La Luna. This moment marks a significant shift in power dynamics within the village. What started as a single act of defiance by Enah, apparently turned into a collective movement by all women in Bras Basah Village. It shows resistance successfully can be built over time through collective participation. The simple act of purchasing lingerie became a form of resistance. It shows resistance does not always come in the form of direct confrontation but can also emerge through everyday actions.

Working Together by Making an Alliance

The villagers' resistance to Tok Hassan grew stronger as they began working together and forming alliances to stand against his oppressive rule. In a scene, where the women villagers realise that Tok Hassan will drive away the store through a petition, they start to make plans to defend the store from it. In the timestamp 00:50:15-00:51:20 of *La Luna*, in their middle of discussion, Azura comes up with an idea which is to have the women villagers persuade their husbands to be intimate with them, but only if they agree to withdraw their support from Tok Hasan's petition. The plan eventually was executed by Enah, one of the women villagers, as it shows in the timestamp 00:52:40-00:53:35 of *La Luna* where she seduces her husband to have an intimate relationship.

ENAH: If you are naughty, you will be punished, you know? Do you want to be punished? But before that, you must do one thing for me. All right?
 AYOB: Sure. I will do anything. ENAH: Withdraw your support for Tok Hassan's petition.
 AYOB: How did you know?
 ENAH: I have my ways.
 AYOB: Enah, how can I defy Tok Hassan? He will slaughter me.
 ENAH: So will you do it for me? So you won't?

Enah shows that resistance can take various forms. She exercises his capacity as a woman and wife into a tool for resistance. As a result, Ayob ended up missing out on the intimacy. Moreover, it indicates that all women villagers execute Azura's plan and they get the same result, as the husbands in Bras Basah village eventually withdrew their support for Tok Hassan's petition the next morning. It is depicted in the picture below, in the timestamp 00:54:13 of *La Luna*.



Figure 5. Men villagers gather in Tok Hassan's office. *La Luna*, 2023, 00:54:13.

This moment shows a turning point where the authority Tok Hassan once held over them begins to waver through a collective and subtle act of disobedience which is encouraged by their wives.

Rather than confronting power openly, oppressed groups often choose hidden methods of resistance to minimize risks while still undermining authority (Scott, 1989). In this case, the women of Bras Basah village did not challenge Tok Hassan directly. Instead, they used their personal relationships of marriage to undermine his influence.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, *La Luna* (2023) is one of pivotal Singapore films directed by Singaporean director Raihan Halim that successfully tells a compelling story about the villagers of Kampong Bras Basah who struggle under the restrictive and authoritarian rule of Tok Hassan in a unique and engaging way. The film successfully highlights issues of power of a religion, oppression, and freedom. Tok Hassan's use of religious power shapes the norms of Bras Basah Village through laws, surveillance, and violence, that are justified as moral actions. This reflects Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which controls people to make them obedient and useful. His influence becomes deeply embedded in the villagers' daily behavior and beliefs. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the villagers eventually could resist under Tok Hassan's strict authority. It starts to change since the arrival of Hanie who will open a lingerie store in the village. Seeing what Hanie has done violates the regulations, the villagers start to massively follow Hanie's act by disobeying his commands and making an ally to claim their freedom from Tok Hassan's. The ways they resist Tok Hassan's power align with Michel Foucault's notion of power and resistance that resistance is always present within power relations, as well as James Scott's concept of everyday resistance. This act of resistance spreads from what spoken acts and goes through small and everyday actions. Eventually, the villagers unite and prove that even in tightly controlled settings, powerful actions for change.

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