

## Rejecting Romance: The Reality of Migrants and Indonesian Identity in the Film *Tabula Rasa* (2014)

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**Abstract**—Indonesian films often portray migration with a romantic nuance, where the hometown is represented as an idealized place that is always missed. This study, however, analyzes the film *Tabula Rasa* (2014), which appears to reject this narrative. The film focuses on the reality of migrants driven by failure and disaster, not idealism. Using a qualitative film analysis method, specifically semiotic and narrative approaches, this research aims to identify how the film represents the pragmatic reality of migrants and, at the same time, portrays a new vision of Indonesian identity (*keindonesiaan*). The findings show that *Tabula Rasa* deconstructs the romance of the hometown through its characters who focus on adapting in the present. Furthermore, the film successfully presents cuisine as a central medium that bridges cultural differences. The kitchen of the "Takana Juo" restaurant becomes a microcosm of Indonesian identity, where individuals from different ethnic backgrounds find harmony and build a new "home." This research offers a new perspective that "home" is a dynamic concept, which can be formed through tolerance and acceptance, and that diversity is a unifying strength.

**Keywords**—Migration; Realism; Indonesian Identity; Cuisine; *Tabula Rasa*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Migration (*merantau*) has become a phenomenal social behavior in Indonesia. Since the colonial era to the present, population movement from villages to cities or from one island to another has been driven by various factors, ranging from economic motives, education, to the search for self-identity [1], [2], [3]. Undeniably, this behavior not only changes the demographic landscape but also forms a rich cultural narrative.

In Indonesian cinema, migration is often portrayed with a strong touch of romance. Films frequently depict the hometown as a "beautiful lost dream," a place of happiness, simplicity, and noble values. A deep longing for the hometown has become the main narrative motif in several Indonesian films. This implies that true happiness can only be found upon returning to one's "roots"—the romance of the hometown. For example, in the film *Laskar Pelangi* (2008), childhood in Belitung is remembered with idealism and noble values [4], [5]. Similarly, not a few Indonesian films position the hometown as the antithesis of the chaos of big cities, such as the film *Merantau* (2009) [6], [7].

Such narratives, while representative for many people, tend to ignore the harsh realities faced by migrants. The process of adaptation, economic struggle, and the formation of a new identity in a new place are often sidelined in favor of highlighting nostalgia. Such films tend to portray "home" as a static physical place, rather than as a dynamic concept that can be formed wherever a person finds a sense of belonging [8], [9].

Amidst the dominance of this narrative, the film *Tabula Rasa* (2014) emerges, offering a different perspective. Directed by Adriyanto Dewo, the film successfully presents the migration paradigm with a more realistic and humane approach. *Tabula Rasa* tells the story of Hans, a young man from Papua who fails to realize his dream of becoming a footballer, and Emak, the owner of a Padang restaurant in Jakarta. Their meeting opens a new chapter that not only restores Hans's spirit but also highlights how cultural differences can be unified through cuisine. The

film won four prestigious awards at the 2014 Indonesian Film Festival, including Best Director and Best Original Screenplay, which proves its artistic quality and thematic depth.

The narrative of *Tabula Rasa* positions food not merely as a way to satisfy hunger but as a medium for communication, identity, and healing. Padang cuisine becomes a bridge connecting Hans (Papua) with Emak (Minangkabau), as well as with other characters. The film cleverly shows that home and identity are not tied to one's birthplace but can be built from interaction and kindness wherever a person is.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Representation is the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged among members of a culture through the use of language, signs, and images [16]. According to Stuart Hall, representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active construction that shapes how we understand the world. In other words, a film's representation does not just "show" but also "constructs" meaning. Hall also explains that humans use signs (such as images, words, and sounds) to represent the world to ourselves and others. These signs form a system we call "language" in a broader sense.

Hall (1997) states that representation is part of the process of making meaning of "something" produced and changed within a cultural group by its members. Representation involves language and other media as signs to represent something. Hall adds that within this representation process, there are two systems of representation: mental representation and language. Furthermore, Hall argues that representation is never neutral. It is always tied to ideology, values, and power. Representation can reinforce existing stereotypes or, conversely, challenge them.

On the other hand, migration is a process that definitely affects a person's identity. Berry [17] explains how individuals interact with a new culture (in a new place) while maintaining their original culture. Berry identifies four adaptation strategies: assimilation (letting go of the original culture), separation (rejecting the new culture), integration (maintaining the original culture while interacting with the new culture), and marginalization (losing both identities).

As a cultural artifact, a film serves not only as entertainment but also as a reflection and shaper of social values [18], [19]. A film can be considered a "text" that can be read and interpreted to understand the ideology, norms, and dynamics of society. This is why a film can be called both a social product and a reflection of social phenomena. A film is also a means of communication containing symbols conveyed in a complex manner through audio and visual dimensions. However, its meaning-making process will inevitably refer to a generality, to something logical and acceptable. The concreteness of meaning emerges in representation. This form does not just connect a thought (assumption) with an object. On the contrary, mental content is related to an external object and reflectively realizes this relationship. This is called interpretation. This triadic process of object – sign – assumption becomes a complete representation when a correlation occurs between the three [20].

As a cultural product, a film is a representation of cultural beliefs, convictions, and values. A film is also an imitation and record of life containing signs, conventions, and social ideologies. Therefore, the analysis of a film is not limited to a textual approach. To achieve a complete understanding, a contextual approach must also be practiced. A film in a contextual approach is also seen as a sociocultural process (social ideology, politics, policy, economy, commerce, industry, and others). A film is a social institution that contains certain political tendencies that determine what films are made and how they are watched [21].

Several studies using *Tabula Rasa* as material are still limited to the study of locality and ethnicity. In this regard, researchers have examined aspects of Minangkabau local wisdom [10], culinary characteristics [11], [12], linguistic messages [13], tourism [14], and human strategies within a philosophical framework [15]. Although it has been widely studied, no research has been found that analyzes *Tabula Rasa* as a text that intentionally rejects the romance of the hometown. The film does not romanticize Hans's hometown in Papua; on the contrary, the hometown is portrayed as a place that holds the bitter memory of failure. Hans does not return because of longing but because he is forced by circumstances. The film emphasizes the importance of building life in the present and finding new meaning in a new place.

Therefore, this article aims to answer the question of how the film *Tabula Rasa* (2014) represents the reality of migrants who reject the romantic hometown narrative and instead emphasize adaptation and the formation of a new identity. The novelty lies in the analytical approach that specifically deconstructs the common migration narrative. Thus, this article not only contributes to film studies but also enriches our understanding of the social dynamics of migration and cultural diversity in Indonesia.

## III. METHOD

This article uses a qualitative approach with the film studies method to interpret the hidden meanings within the cinematic text. This approach was chosen because the research's focus is to gain a deep understanding of the meanings behind the visual, narrative, and symbolic representations in the film. Qualitative research allows for a rich and contextual interpretation of the film text as a cultural artifact [22].

The type of research is film analysis or film studies. Unlike content analysis, which focuses more on counting the frequency of certain elements, film analysis is more in-depth by examining how cinematic elements (such as *mise-en-scène*) contribute to building the narrative and thematic meaning. This research focuses on narrative analysis to understand the plot and character development, as well as thematic analysis to identify the research's theme: the rejection of romance and multiculturalism.

The research data were obtained from the film *Tabula Rasa* (2014). The data, in the form of visuals and character dialogue within the film, was obtained through repeated viewings. These repeated viewings were conducted to get a general overview and the overall storyline, to note narrative details relevant to the research topic, and to analyze cinematic elements that support the arguments. The data recorded was a scene-by-scene analysis that documented significant scenes, dialogues, and visual elements.

Like linguistic structures, visual structures also lead to interpretation, representation, and social interaction formats. Meaning always resides in the cultural domain rather than merely as a semiotic model. Therefore, verbal and visual expressions will produce different meanings. The meaning expressed by a speaker, writer, or creator is social in nature, although it ultimately has an individual effect. This is what causes multimodal texts in the form of visuals, verbal expressions, and writing to produce different meanings of images, speech, and text [23].

The collected data were then analyzed using semiotic and narrative analysis methods. The film is viewed as containing signs and symbols, both visual and verbal. In this case, the authors used film semiotics [24] and *mise-en-scène* [25] for the narrative analysis. Subsequently, thematic analysis was conducted to find and analyze themes about the construction of the romance of the hometown for migrants and the identity adaptation carried out by the migrants.

#### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION



Fig. 1. *Tabula Rasa* film poster (<https://www.behance.net/gallery/19921727/Tabula-Rasa-Film-poster-Illustration>)

Hans, a talented young man from Serui, Papua, is forced to become a homeless person in Jakarta after his football career ends tragically. A football club recruits him for his skill but then discards him after he suffers a broken leg during a match. Without a place to go, Hans is stranded on the streets.

Meanwhile, Emak, Nasir, and Parmanto, three Minangkabau migrants, struggle to make a living in Jakarta by managing a Padang restaurant called "Takana Juo." They are victims of a devastating earthquake that destroyed their hometown in West Sumatra in 2009.

One day, Emak and Nasir find Hans lying on a railway overpass, injured. They help him and take him to the restaurant. However, from the start, Parmanto, the chef, is suspicious of Hans and feels that Hans has bad intentions. He tries to convince Emak, but ignored. Emak even hires Hans to shop at the market and eventually allows him to live with them.

Parmanto disagrees, arguing that Hans's presence will reduce their profits. Hans's cooking skills make Parmanto feel rivaled and his position threatened. Eventually, Parmanto decides to leave "Takana Juo." Unexpectedly, Parmanto gets a job as a chef at a more modern Padang restaurant called "Caniago," located not far from "Takana Juo." He uses Emak's signature *rendang* recipe at his new workplace. As a result, "Takana Juo's" customers dwindle.

Hans then suggests selling fish head curry, a dish Emak had served him when he first arrived. However, Emak refuses because the dish brings back painful memories of her late son who died in the earthquake. After Hans insists, Emak finally agrees. With Hans's help, Emak prepares the special dish again. Gradually, "Takana Juo" becomes crowded with customers again. When "Takana Juo" gets an order for a wedding, Emak falls ill. Unexpectedly, Parmanto appears to help Hans cook and prepare the order. Through the food and teamwork, they find a way to make peace.

The brief narrative of *Tabula Rasa* above shows that the characters' motives for migrating are very different from the idealism often portrayed. Hans does not leave Papua with the ideal of a career as an athlete; on the contrary, his journey begins with failure due to the injury he suffers. Similarly, the characters Emak, Parmanto, and Nasir do not migrate based on ambition but are forced to. They are at rock bottom after an earthquake devastates their homes and livelihoods. Their motivation is economic pragmatism, not idealism.

The migrants' motives in *Tabula Rasa* are a clear contradiction to the widely known idealism of *merantau*, especially in the Minangkabau tradition, which emphasizes self-development to achieve success in a new place. This idealism is often still tied to the hope of returning with success. However, in *Tabula Rasa*, throughout the story, there is no expression or narrative from any character showing a desire to return to their hometown. This even violates the cultural taboo mentioned by Navis (1984), that it is taboo to bury a migrant in a foreign land, something that does not appear at all in the film's narrative choices. Thus, the film deliberately focuses on the reality of adaptation in the present, and not on a nostalgic past. The further discussion outlines how this narrative is expressed through the characters Hans as the wounded migrant and Emak as the pragmatic migrant.



Fig. 2. Hans (in red) and his friends when they were about to be recruited by a football club from Jakarta (*Tabula Rasa*, 02:16).

Hans is built as a character who aspires to be a football player. In his hometown of Serui, Papua, Hans is one of the skilled football players. But from the beginning of the story, Hans is built as a character who has no intention of migrating or pursuing a career. His decision to leave Serui is because he is recruited by a football club in Jakarta. Even during the recruitment, Hans appears to have no interest or intention of being chosen.



Fig. 3. Hans sells scattered rice at a rice depot (*Tabula Rasa*, 06:07).

Apparently, good fortune is not on his side. After suffering an injury, Hans is abandoned by his club. The club refuses to pay for his medical treatment and recovery. To make a living, Hans has to scavenge for spilled rice to sell. Hans lives a homeless life in Jakarta. At one point, Hans even seems to intend to commit suicide on an overpass above the railway tracks.





Fig. 4. Hans intends to commit suicide (*Tabula Rasa*, 10:22).

He abandons his intention to commit suicide. Hans's fate and life change after he meets Emak. Emak and Nasir see Hans lying on the overpass and help him. Emak takes him to her Padang restaurant "Takana Juo." In the following days, Hans is allowed to stay at "Takana Juo" to help Emak, Parmanto, and Nasir.



Fig. 5. Hans at the village football field (*Tabula Rasa*, 44:44).

Hans finally gives up his dream of becoming a football player. His limping leg can no longer be a capital for a football career. He has no interest in playing even with the village kids. However, his spirit to live in the new place has changed. Hans intends to help revive "Takana Juo" when it is in a slump.



Fig. 6. Hans is determined to restore "Takana Juo" (*Tabula Rasa*, 1:08:14)

Parmanto, the chef of "Takana Juo," leaves Emak and Nasir. He feels jealous and rivaled by Hans, who can also cook. Hans is even taught by Emak to cook and prepare traditional Minangkabau dishes, *rendang* and *dendeng*. As it turns out, Parmanto becomes the chef of a Padang restaurant "Caniago" not far from "Takana Juo." Because of its more modern management, the new restaurant gets more customers, surpassing Emak's restaurant.



Fig. 7. Emak tells Hans why she migrated (*Tabula Rasa*, 41:59).

Emak is a middle-aged female character who, along with other characters, Parmanto and Nasir, migrated (evacuated) to Jakarta because their hometown was leveled by an earthquake in 2009. Emak started from scratch in a new place. She built her business to survive and also to help her relatives in her hometown, Minangkabau. She carries a "wound" because her son died in the earthquake.



Fig. 8. Emak wants to try Hans' cooking (*Tabula Rasa*, 45:06).

Before Hans's arrival, Emak still seemed to hold on to a nostalgia for her past from her hometown, especially her son. Emak is unwilling to sell her son's favorite dish to attract customers back to "Takana Juo." For Emak, the fish head curry has an emotional connection to her son and her hometown.



Fig. 9. Nasir explains to Hans the reason why Emak doesn't want to sell fish head curry (*Tabula Rasa*, 1:06:19).

Over time, with Hans's persuasion and arguments, Emak finally agrees to share her recipe for fish head curry, her late son's favorite. Emak sees Hans's sincerity in helping her at "Takana Juo." Emak seems to find a replacement for her late son in her new place. This is built through the narrative of *Tabula Rasa*. The event of Emak's first meeting with Hans is built on the moment when Emak cooked fish head curry and served it to Hans.

Nasir: "The day *Amak* first found you was the same day as her late son's birthday. Do you remember what you were served then? Do you know what *Amak's* son's favorite food was? Ah... that's why *Amak* doesn't want to sell fish head curry, Hans. Yes, I understand what you mean, Hans. Your intention is good, but you also have to respect *Amak's* memories."

(*Tabula Rasa*, 1:06:19)

Emak: "Hans. Cooking fish head curry, for Emak, is a pilgrimage. When Emak cooks it, Emak feels like she's meeting her late son."

Hans: "The first time Emak met me, Emak cooked this too, right?"

Emak: "Can you promise, Hans? Every time you cook fish head curry, you'll remember that."

Hans: "I promise, Emak."

(*Tabula Rasa*, 1:14:04)

The analysis of the characters Hans and Emak shows that they represent migrants who are not lost in the romanticism of the past and their hometown. Both, with their respective efforts, try to adapt and transform from migrants tied to past memories into realistic individuals. They both discard their traumatic old wounds and live to survive in their new place.

Hans is the representation of the wounded migrant. Hans's idealism of becoming a football athlete changes after his career fails. Ultimately, his journey from Papua to Jakarta can be called an escape, not a romantic adventure. After meeting Emak, Hans seems to find a new "field," not football but cuisine. The failed dream does not make him give up. On the contrary, he chooses to be realistic and fight to survive in Jakarta. Hans's identity and love for his hometown are shown pragmatically through the event of him calling his mother in Serui, not through a narrative of melancholic longing.

On the other hand, Emak is the representation of a migrant who, although emotional, is wise. She has no place to return to. All her possessions and memories in her hometown were leveled by the earthquake. Emak's statement, "Cooking fish head curry is a pilgrimage," shows that her love for her hometown does not have to be manifested by a physical return. Indirectly, Emak shows her identity in a way that is oriented towards the present. However, Emak also experiences internal conflict. She tries to maintain the romance of the past and her hometown, represented by her reluctance to sell the fish head curry. This struggle contrasts with the character Parmanto. Parmanto's jealousy of Hans can be seen as a representation of the anxiety about change that threatens his established life and old identity. However, that changes. Parmanto's move to "Caniago" is a representation of a compromise with the modern world. Indirectly, Emak's conflict with Parmanto is a representation of the internal struggles of migrants that are not always harmonious, namely between maintaining tradition and adapting to a changing world.

The film *Tabula Rasa* shows how cuisine functions as a cultural bridge that transcends differences. For the character Hans, Padang cuisine is a medium to start a new chapter in his life. When Hans learns to cook *rendang*, *dendeng*, and fish head curry, he is not just learning recipes but also integrating a new culture into himself. This process is a real-world application of identity adaptation theory, where Hans's identity, which was almost destroyed, begins to unite in his new place.

Furthermore, the film successfully shows that food also functions as a non-verbal language for compromise and reconciliation. Parmanto's sadness when tasting the fish head curry from "Takana Juo" can be called a representation of a deep identity. The dish brings back memories of his identity and origin. This is reinforced by the event of Parmanto returning to help Hans cook at "Takana Juo," which shows that reconciliation can be achieved through teamwork and cuisine. This is the point where the internal struggles of the migrants find a way out, not with one party giving up, but with finding harmony in diversity.

Overall, *Tabula Rasa* successfully builds a rejection of the romance of the hometown by displaying migrants who are realistic and pragmatic. The film cleverly shows that home does not have to be a static place but can be built anywhere, through adaptation, tolerance, and intercultural acceptance.

More than just an entertainment medium, the film successfully builds the kitchen of "Takana Juo" as a microcosm of Indonesian identity (*keindonesiaan*). The film's tagline, "food is a good intention to meet," is not just a slogan but the central thesis the film carries. In that simple place, the film unites Hans (a Papuan), Emak, Parmanto, and Nasir (Minangkabau), who all migrated because they were forced by bitter circumstances. They are forced to live, work, and make peace under one roof. The unity offered by this film is not an ideological coercion but a harmony that grows organically from solidarity in the midst of hardship.

In this context, cuisine becomes a representation of a national identity that is being formed. Padang cuisine, which represents Minangkabau culture, becomes a "playground" where other identities can interact and acculturate. When Hans, a Papuan youth, masters the way of cooking *rendang* and fish head curry, the film symbolically states

that Indonesian identity is not a process of assimilation that eliminates the original identity. On the contrary, it is a process of integration. Local identity is a part that enriches national identity. The film shows that food is not just a way to satisfy hunger but also a new language for building relationships, sharing stories, and forming new families.

Parmanto: "The world is truly strange. A Padang restaurant, with a Papuan chef.  
Hahaha... Let's cook, Hans."  
(*Tabula Rasa*, 1:32:17)

Ultimately, the film *Tabula Rasa* presents a vision of Indonesian identity that is built from the ground up, from the dining table, and from the kitchen, where diversity is processed into strength. The climax of this narrative is seen when Parmanto and Hans finally find a way to make peace in the kitchen. Their reconciliation is not just about two individuals but a symbol of how different parts of Indonesia can find harmony through teamwork and understanding. Thus, the film successfully presents an alternative narrative about national unity, one that is more honest and touching than political discourse.

## V. CONCLUSION

Overall, this research shows that the film *Tabula Rasa* (2014) successfully deconstructs the migration narrative that is often romanticized in Indonesian cinema. Instead of portraying the hometown as an idealized place to return to, the film deliberately depicts the more complex and pragmatic reality of migrants. Through the characters of Hans and Emak, past trauma and failure are portrayed as motivations for survival, not as sources of paralyzing nostalgia. Hans, a wounded migrant, finds a new "home" and purpose in Jakarta, symbolized by Padang cuisine. Meanwhile, Emak represents a migrant who adapts by transforming cultural heritage into capital for survival.

More than just a migration narrative, *Tabula Rasa* also functions as a cultural text that portrays everyday multiculturalism in Indonesia. The film effectively shows that cuisine can be a powerful medium to unite cultural differences. Through the process of cooking and interacting in the kitchen of the "Takana Juo" restaurant, Padang cuisine becomes a universal language that allows for dialogue, reconciliation, and identity integration. The conflict between Emak and Parmanto, and their reconciliation at the end of the film, further confirms that intercultural harmony is not always easy but can be achieved through mutual understanding and compromise.

This research contributes to film studies by offering a new perspective that challenges conventional views on migration films. *Tabula Rasa* shows that "home" is a dynamic concept, which can be built anywhere through acceptance, adaptation, and tolerance. This finding is relevant to the increasingly diverse social dynamics of Indonesia, where diversity is not a barrier but a source of collective strength and identity.

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