Wahyudi Akmaliah and Dini Dwi Kusumaningrum

Film Review
Legenda Kelam Maling Kundang (Smothered)

(Rafki Hidayat / Kevin Rahardjo, ID 2025)

In Southeast Asia, mythological and religious narratives function not only as a form of collective memory but also as a moral framework that shapes social attitudes across generations. Within the Malay world, the story of Malin Kundang occupies a significant place as a moral-religious narrative that conveys ethical teachings concerning filial piety, obedience to parents, and the consequences of violating familial obligations. While widely recognised as part of regional mythology, the narrative has also been embedded within Malay Muslim cultural understandings of morality, divine justice, and social order. Across generations, the story has served as a transcendent narrative through which communities negotiate the relationship between individual desire, parental authority, and moral responsibility. Although the majority of the population in West Sumatra is Muslim, the narrative of Malin Kundang does not belong exclusively to the region. Variants of this story are also found among the people of Mandailing Natal in North Sumatra, where it is known as *Sampuraga*.[1] In West Kalimantan, it appears as *Batu Menangis* (The Crying Stones).[2] In Malaysia and Singapore, the story is widely recognized as *Si Tanggang*.[3] In Brunei Darussalam, it is known as *Nakhoda Manis*.[4] Across these versions, the central narrative remains consistent. It tells the story of a child who, after a long period of wandering and success, becomes

1 Aldi 2022.
2 Reza Yunanto 2022; Faizi 2023.
3 See, for example, Shazlina Md Isa 2023.
4 Leman Ahmad 2017.

www.jrfm.eu 2026, 12/2, 135–139
DOI 10.25364/05.12:2026.2.9

disobedient, refusing to acknowledge their mother. As a consequence of this disobedience, the child is cursed and transformed into stone.

Engaging with these narrative materials, directors Rafki Hidayat and Kevin Rahardjo deconstruct this traditional narrative by rearticulating the story from the perspective of the disobedient child. The result is the psychological thriller Legenda Kelam Malin Kundang (which translates as "The Dark Legend of Malin Kundang", although the official English film title is Smothered). This film not only revisits a well-known mythological narrative but also interrogates the moral and quasi-religious assumptions that have historically legitimised parental authority and condemned filial disobedience within Malay society. Specifically, the film raises a critical question that remains unaddressed in conventional versions of the tale: Through what inherited perceptions is Malin Kundang constituted as a disobedient child? In doing so, it interrogates the socio-cultural and structural conditions that led to his condemnation and transformation into stone, while proposing a contemporary reinterpretation that reconfigures the narrative without entirely abandoning its core symbolic signifiers.

The story begins with Alif (Rio Dewanto), a talented young artist, globally recognized for his skill in micro-painting, using small stones as his artistic medium. Alif is involved in a car accident which causes partial memory loss, as evidenced by his impaired recognition and understanding of his immediate family, specifically Nadine, his wife (Faramadina Mufti), and Emir, his child (Jordan Omar). Despite his memory impairment, both Nadine and Emir respond positively to his current condition, as he appears to have undergone a significant transformation in personality compared to his pre-accident self. Not only is he kinder, but he also demonstrates a deeper sense of care and emotional attentiveness toward his family. During his recovery process, Alif receives a sudden reminder on his smartphone that his mother will be visiting him. This notification triggers a sense of panic as he was unaware of her impending arrival after fourteen years of estrangement and has completely forgotten her face.

On the one hand, the impending arrival of his mother spurs on Alif's recovery from the accident and prompts him to respond to Nadine's and Emir's questions regarding her prolonged absence. On the other hand, Alif, Nadine, and Emir's daily interactions with his mother, introduced as Amak Aminah (Vonny Anggraini), along with her accounts of Alif's childhood in a village in West Sumatra, begin to trigger fragmented and unsettling memories that do not align with his recollection of the past. The more Alif

attempts to reconstruct his childhood through Amak Aminah's narratives, the more he experiences psychological distress, as these memories surface only in partial and disjointed fragments. This condition fosters a growing suspicion regarding Amak Aminah's identity. His doubts intensify when he examines her wallet while she sleeps and discovers that the name on her bank card does not match that of his mother. His suspicion is reinforced when she abruptly leaves the house in the night, although without taking any of its valuable belongings.

Rather than simply allowing her to leave, Alif attempts to uncover the woman's true identity. As his memory gradually returns, he begins to trace points of information that might lead him to her whereabouts. This development marks the film's first major plot twist. It is revealed that Amak Aminah is in fact a woman whom Alif had previously, before the accident, hired to impersonate his mother. He had first encountered her during a staged traffic incident in a slum area of Jakarta. She had deliberately thrown herself in front of a passing car; when the vehicle stopped, several individuals associated with her demanded money from the driver as compensation. The directors have based this scene on real incidents reported in certain areas of Jakarta where such illicit tactics are used to obtain money. For Alif, the woman's willingness to endanger herself and convincingly perform in such a scenario demonstrated her capacity as a persuasive actor, prompting him to recruit her to assume the role of his mother. This decision was driven by repeated pressure from Nadine's parents, who insisted on meeting Alif's mother.

The second major plot twist reveals that Alif is responsible for his mother's death. CCTV footage retrieved from his car, recorded before the accident while he was attempting to investigate Nadine's activities, reveals a pivotal scene. In this recording, he discovers that Nadine is engaged in an extramarital affair with Iqbal (Gambit Saifullah), who is not only Alif's trusted lawyer but also Nadine's close associate. Her actions could be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim Alif's attention, given his intense focus on his work, which renders him emotionally distant, introverted, and at times abrasive. Nevertheless, for him, the affair constitutes an unforgivable betrayal. More significantly, this moment serves as a traumatic trigger, recalling his childhood experiences in the village, where his mother had worked as a prostitute. The revelation functions as a temporal loop, reactivating long-repressed memories sublimated into his sketchwork, which he has kept hidden in a locked drawer. Within this recovered memory, the film reveals

that Alif's mother had been compelled to engage in sex work because of the severe poverty in their village in West Sumatra. In a critical incident, Alif had been provoked by one of his mother's clients, leading to a violent altercation. During this confrontation, he not only sustained a machete wound to his forehead but also killed the client. In the chaos of the encounter, he inadvertently caused his mother's death as well.

Watching this film is likely to evoke discomfort among audiences, as the two directors critically interrogate a moral and religious narrative that has long been transmitted doctrinally across generations, namely the expectation that children must obey their parents. Moreover, the film advances a deeper inquiry into the structural roots of the representation of Malin Kundang's disobedience. In particular, it examines two crucial factors: first, the absence or weakness of parental role models, and second, the injustices embedded in economic structures that push individuals into survival strategies such as prostitution. These conditions help explain how characters like Alif internalise and reproduce inherited trauma within their own familial relationships.

This critique of parental authority can be situated within the broader contemporary Indonesian political context. Widespread distrust of political elites amid persistent and unresolved socio-political problems has driven many young Indonesians, particularly those who have become part of the precariat class,[5] to engage in protests and demonstrations, notably in August 2025. Rather than addressing the structural grievances underlying these mobilisations, the state, specifically under Prabowo's presidency, has frequently responded with coercive measures. Law enforcement and military institutions have framed such dissent in moralistic terms reminiscent of the Malin Kundang narrative, positioning youth protesters as "disobedient" subjects, as was evident in the arrest of approximately 7,500 young people following these demonstrations.[6]

At the same time, the film demonstrates that the mythology of Malin Kundang functions as more than a religious lesson on filial obedience. Drawing upon a narrative deeply embedded in Minangkabau cultural memory and Islamic ethical teachings on filial piety *(birr al-walidayn)*, the film mobilises this religiously inflected story as a symbolic language through which broader existential, social, and political questions are articulated.

5 Standing 2011.

6 Irfani 2025.

Rather than presenting disobedience as an individual moral failing within a religious framework, the film invites audiences to reflect on how poverty, intergenerational trauma, social marginalisation, and unequal power relations shape human choices and behaviour.

In this sense, the film serves as a vehicle for interrogating authority, responsibility, justice, and the structural conditions that produce social suffering in contemporary Indonesia. By doing so, it challenges religiously moralistic interpretations that reduce social conflict to individual wrongdoing and instead directs attention to broader systems of inequality and exclusion. Such a reading highlights how narratives of disobedience can displace structural accountability and obscure the systemic roots of social dissent. There can be no doubt that the sources of the crisis lie not with Indonesian youth themselves but with policy orientations among political elites that prioritise capital accumulation and vested interests over collective social welfare.

Bibliography

Aldi, Nizar, 2022, Sampuraga, Legenda Anak Durhaka Dari Mandailing, *Detik.com*, 5 May 2022, https://t1p.de/sdxwt [accessed 7 April 2026].

Faizi, Lutfan, 2023, Legenda Batu Menangis Dari Kalimantan Barat: Kisah Dan Pesan Moral, *Sindonews.com*, 16 December 2023, https://t1p.de/0g7g3 [accessed 5 June 2026].

Irfani, Faisal, 2026, "Ketika Negara Menangkap Anak-Anak Muda Setelah Demonstrasi Agustus 2025 – 'Pemburuan Terbesar Sejak Reformasi 1998'", *BBC News Indonesia*, 12 March 2026, https://t1p.de/9n1mm [accessed 7 April 2026].

Isa, Shazlina Md. Si Tanggang, *Berita Media Corp.Sg*, 23 December 2023, https://t1p.de/42cs5 [accessed 7 April 2026].

Leman Ahmad, Haji, 2017, *Nakhoda Manis* (Multilingual), Brunei: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei.

Standing, Guy, 2011, *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class*, London / New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Yunanto, Reza, 2022, Cerita Rakyat Kalimantan Barat Legenda Batu Menangis, *Kalbar.Inews.id*, 8 August 2022, https://t1p.de/w6bgo [accessed 5 June 2026].