



MONSTROUS MATERNAL FIGURES: FEMINIST HORROR ANALYSIS OF EVIL DEAD RISE PRODUCED BY SAM RAIMI

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ABSTRAK

Representasi ibu dalam film horor kerap menghadirkan ambivalensi dengan menampilkan figur maternal yang menyimpang dari idealisasi peran keibuan. Penelitian ini menganalisis karakter Ellie dalam *Evil Dead Rise* (2023) karya sutradara Lee Cronin sebagai figur ibu monstros yang merefleksikan pembalikan fungsi-fungsi maternal dalam ruang domestik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif–interpretatif, penelitian ini mengkaji adegan visual dan dialog sebagai data utama, yang didukung oleh teori horor feminis sebagai data sekunder. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Ellie direpresentasikan sebagai figur maternal monstros melalui pembalikan peran pengasuhan, pengikisan fungsi perlindungan ibu, serta penggambaran tubuh maternal sebagai sumber kengerian dan kekerasan. Transformasinya menjadi entitas demonik merusak relasi kekeluargaan dan mengubah ruang domestik menjadi medan teror. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Evil Dead Rise* menempatkan sosok ibu sebagai pusat horor untuk mengekspresikan kecemasan kultural terkait peran dan tanggung jawab keibuan, sekaligus menunjukkan bagaimana horor kontemporer memanfaatkan figur maternal sebagai medium kritik feminis.

Kata Kunci: *Keibuan, Kerasukan, Horor Tubuh, Keluarga*

ABSTRACT

The representation of mothers in horror cinema frequently embodies ambivalence by presenting maternal figures that depart from idealized constructions of motherhood. This study examines the character of Ellie in *Evil Dead Rise* (2023), directed by Lee Cronin, as a *monstrous maternal* figure that signifies the inversion of maternal roles within the domestic sphere. Employing a qualitative descriptive–interpretative approach, the analysis draws on visual scenes and dialogues as primary data, supported by feminist horror theory as secondary sources. The findings demonstrate that Ellie is constructed as a monstrous maternal figure through the distortion of nurturing functions, the collapse of maternal protection, and the portrayal of the maternal body as a locus of horror and violence. Her transformation into a demonic entity fractures familial bonds and reconfigures the domestic space as a site of terror. The study concludes that *Evil Dead Rise* situates motherhood at the core of horror to articulate cultural anxieties surrounding maternal roles and responsibilities, illustrating how contemporary horror mobilizes the maternal figure as a vehicle for feminist critique.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Possession, Body Horror, Family*

INTRODUCTION

Film as a visual medium functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that reflects social anxieties, ideological tensions, and psychological concerns. In film studies, cinema is widely understood as a symbolic space where cultural fears and desires are negotiated



through visual narratives and character constructions. Horror cinema, in particular, occupies a crucial position because it transforms abstract anxieties into embodied images of danger, vulnerability, and emotional conflict. Recent developments in horror theory emphasize that twenty-first-century horror increasingly engages with issues of gender, identity, and domestic life rather than relying solely on supernatural spectacle (Corstorphine, 2023), thereby making horror a productive lens for examining social transformation and cultural insecurity.

One of the most visible thematic shifts in contemporary horror is the growing emphasis on motherhood and maternal identity. Mothers are no longer represented merely as passive caretakers but as complex figures whose emotional, physical, and moral roles are continuously negotiated within the narrative. Mothers in horror films are frequently depicted through ambivalent portrayals that oscillate between care and destruction, reflecting conflicting cultural expectations toward women and caregiving. Zanelli (2025) argues that modern horror narratives present motherhood through diverse and evolving classifications, moving beyond simplistic depictions of the “evil mother,” a tendency that aligns with findings on the persistent imbalance and stereotyping of female figures in horror cinema (Annissa & Adiprasetyo, 2022).

The concept of the monstrous maternal offers a crucial theoretical lens for understanding these representations of maternal ambivalence. Creed (2023) explains that horror cinema often constructs the maternal body as a site of fear through processes of abjection, in which the boundaries between life, death, and bodily integrity are destabilized. Through this process, the maternal body is transformed from a source of nourishment into a locus of threat and disruption. This transformation also resonates with feminist analyses of violence, which suggest that female bodies are frequently positioned within structures of symbolic and cultural aggression rather than individual pathology (Devianty, 2017), making monstrous motherhood a reflection of broader gendered tensions.

Recent scholarship has further emphasized the instability of maternal embodiment in modern narratives. Williamson (2023) highlights how maternal bodies in contemporary fiction are often portrayed as excessive, fragile, or out of control, which makes them especially vulnerable to horror symbolism. In horror films, this instability is visualized through bodily distortion, injury, and transformation, rendering the maternal body both familiar and terrifying. DiGioia (2021) similarly demonstrates that representations of childbirth and parenting in horror cinema frequently frame reproduction as a site of anxiety, fear, and loss of control, reinforcing the idea that motherhood itself becomes a symbolic terrain of cultural unease.

In addition to the maternal body, domestic space functions as a central element in shaping maternal horror. Aureli and Giudici (2016) contend that the home in modern horror is no longer a secure refuge but a contested site where intimacy and violence intersect. When the maternal figure becomes the primary source of danger, the domestic environment is transformed from a place of protection into a zone of threat and instability. This transformation is particularly significant in contemporary urban settings, where confined living spaces intensify emotional pressure and vulnerability. Kurniawan (2023) notes that post-New Order horror increasingly situates fear within modern urban environments, indicating a broader shift in how spatial anxiety is represented in film.

These theoretical and spatial concerns converge clearly in *Evil Dead Rise* (2023), which relocates traditional demonic horror into a high-rise apartment setting. The film centers on Ellie, a mother who becomes possessed and transformed into a demonic entity, thereby reversing the traditional maternal role from nurturer to predator. This reversal highlights how motherhood becomes a site of conflict rather than security, especially under conditions of emotional and



social strain. This transformation aligns with feminist interpretations of evil that understand transgression not as inherent immorality but as a response to social expectations and gendered pressures (Raphael, 2018), allowing the film to operate simultaneously as supernatural horror and social critique.

Despite the expanding body of research on monstrous motherhood, significant gaps remain in how maternal horror is analyzed within contemporary urban domestic spaces. Existing studies often prioritize mythological, symbolic, or rural contexts, while the realities of apartment-based families and modern domestic confinement receive far less scholarly attention (Zanelli, 2025; Corstorphine, 2023). This imbalance is especially striking given the increasing prevalence of urban living and fragmented family structures in late modern societies. This study addresses that gap by examining the representation of the monstrous maternal figure in *Evil Dead Rise* through a feminist horror framework. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on motherhood as the primary source of horror within an urban domestic environment, contributing new insights to feminist analyses of contemporary horror cinema.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate how the monstrous maternal figure is constructed in the film *Evil Dead Rise* (2023). The qualitative approach is chosen because the research focuses on interpreting meanings, visual symbols, and narrative patterns rather than measuring variables numerically. The analysis is directed toward understanding how maternal identity is shaped through cinematic techniques, character interactions, and narrative development. By prioritizing interpretation over statistical generalization, this design allows the study to explore the complexity of maternal representation within the film's visual and narrative structure.

The primary data consist of selected scenes and dialogues from *Evil Dead Rise* that explicitly depict motherhood, bodily transformation, domestic interaction, and maternal violence. The film was obtained from legally accessible digital platforms and viewed repeatedly to ensure careful and accurate observation. Scenes were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, particularly those showing the inversion of maternal roles or the disruption of family relationships. Secondary data were collected from scholarly books, journal articles, and academic publications related to feminist horror theory and monstrous motherhood to support and contextualize the analysis.

Data collection was conducted through systematic viewing and detailed note-taking of relevant scenes, dialogues, and visual compositions. Each selected segment was then classified into analytical categories such as distorted nurturing, bodily transformation, domestic conflict, and maternal aggression. The data were analyzed using a descriptive–interpretative technique, in which visual and verbal elements were first described and then interpreted through feminist horror theory. This analytical procedure enables the study to connect cinematic representation with broader cultural and gendered meanings embedded in the film.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the research findings regarding the representation of the *monstrous maternal* figure embodied by the character Ellie in *Evil Dead Rise*. The findings indicate that motherhood is consistently portrayed through a reversal of its normative functions, shifting from care and protection toward threat and violence directed at Ellie's own children. These

representations are constructed through recurring actions, verbal expressions, and visual imagery that emphasize the distortion of maternal identity. The findings discussed here reflect dominant patterns identified in selected scenes and do not attempt to generalize every moment in the film.

The analysis identifies four dominant forms of monstrous maternal representation enacted by Ellie following her possession: perverted nurturing, familial corruption and contagion, corruption of motherly protection, and physical as well as symbolic birth imagery. These forms recur across key scenes and function as narrative mechanisms through which maternal intimacy is transformed into horror. Rather than appearing incidentally, the patterns operate systematically to construct Ellie's maternal role as a source of fear within the domestic sphere. Each form contributes to the destabilization of motherhood as a symbol of safety and care.

One prominent manifestation of the monstrous maternal is perverted nurturing, in which acts associated with maternal care are rendered grotesque and threatening. This is evident when Ellie expresses an extreme desire for bodily closeness with her children, stating that she wants to "cut you all open and climb inside your bodies." The statement reframes maternal intimacy as violent consumption rather than affection. Through such dialogue, nurturing is inverted into destruction, positioning the maternal body as invasive instead of protective.

Another recurring pattern is familial corruption and contagion, where Ellie's possession extends violence beyond herself and destabilizes the family unit. The household becomes a site of infection in which harm spreads from the mother to her children and surrounding individuals. This transformation causes the domestic space to lose its function as a safe environment and instead become a conduit for violence. As a result, maternal corruption is depicted as a force that disrupts both familial bonds and the broader social environment connected to the household.

Ellie's transformation also produces a sustained corruption of motherly protection, as she repeatedly targets her own children rather than shielding them from danger. In one scene, Ellie manipulates her youngest child by adopting a softened maternal tone and saying, "open up now, like a good girl," before launching an attack. The use of affectionate language in this context demonstrates how maternal trust is weaponized. Emotional bonds that typically signify safety are transformed into mechanisms of control and entrapment.

Figure 1 illustrates the visual dimension of this corrupted maternal protection by depicting Ellie confronting her child after possession. The image emphasizes physical proximity, facial expression, and bodily posture to communicate dominance and threat. Ellie's presence is framed as predatory rather than protective, reinforcing the inversion of maternal roles identified in the verbal analysis. The figure provides visual support for the recurring patterns observed in Ellie's actions and dialogue.



Figure 1. *Ellie's possessed maternal figure confronting her child in Evil Dead Rise*

As shown in Figure 1, the maternal body is no longer positioned as a source of comfort but as the immediate locus of danger within the domestic space. The visual composition underscores the collapse of maternal protection by highlighting Ellie’s aggressive stance and the child’s vulnerability. This imagery strengthens the finding that maternal identity in the film is constructed through fear rather than care. The figure thus complements the verbal data by reinforcing the monstrous framing of motherhood.

To further clarify the dominant findings, Table 1 summarizes the forms of monstrous maternal representation identified in the analysis. The table categorizes each form and provides a concise description of how it operates within the narrative. Presenting the data in tabular form highlights the consistency of these patterns across the selected scenes. The table serves as a structural overview of how Ellie’s maternal identity is systematically constructed as monstrous.

Table 1. Dominant Forms of Monstrous Maternal Representation

No.	Category	Description of Dominant Representation
1	Perverted Nurturing	Maternal care is transformed into grotesque and violent expressions, where affection is intertwined with threats and bodily harm.
2	Familial Corruption and Contagion	The mother becomes a vector of violence, spreading destruction from the domestic sphere to the wider communal environment.
3	Corruption of Motherly Protection	The protective maternal role is inverted, with the mother directly inflicting harm upon her own children.
4	Physical and Symbolic Birth Imagery	Birth and bodily fusion are depicted through grotesque imagery, reframing creation as horror rather than renewal.

As summarized in Table 1, each form contributes to the construction of Ellie’s maternal identity as unstable and threatening. Although the forms differ in narrative expression, they consistently reinforce motherhood as a central site of horror in the film. The table demonstrates that the monstrous maternal figure is built through multiple, interconnected representational strategies. These findings emphasize that the portrayal of motherhood in *Evil Dead Rise* is structured around recurring patterns rather than isolated scenes.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the representation of Ellie as a monstrous maternal figure in *Evil Dead Rise* is not constructed through isolated moments of violence but through a systematic inversion of normative motherhood. This pattern aligns with broader feminist horror scholarship that views monstrous motherhood as a cultural strategy for articulating anxieties surrounding maternal power and responsibility (Biru, 2024; Piper, 2024). Rather than portraying monstrosity as an inherent female trait, the film frames it as a condition produced through the collapse of expected maternal functions. In this sense, the horror emerges from the destabilization of culturally idealized motherhood.

The pattern of perverted nurturing identified in the Results reflects what previous studies describe as maternal ambivalence in horror cinema. Acts associated with care and intimacy become sites of fear when excessive closeness is transformed into invasion and violence.



Similar ambivalence has been observed in Southeast Asian and Indonesian horror films, where affection and threat coexist within maternal figures (Angesty & Mukafi, 2024; Saputra & Sulistyani, 2019). This suggests that the inversion of nurturing is a recurring narrative mechanism used to challenge the idealization of maternal devotion across different cultural contexts.

The expansion of maternal monstrosity beyond the nuclear family, as seen in the pattern of familial corruption and contagion, resonates with research emphasizing the social consequences of disrupted family dynamics in horror narratives. Noor (2025) argues that contemporary horror frequently represents family trauma as a force that extends into wider communal spaces, particularly when parental figures fail to fulfill protective roles. In *Evil Dead Rise*, Ellie's possession transforms the apartment building into a shared site of threat, indicating that maternal collapse symbolically endangers social order. This reinforces the idea that motherhood in horror carries cultural significance beyond the private sphere.

The corruption of motherly protection further illustrates how maternal authority becomes a source of terror rather than security. Previous feminist analyses of horror films highlight that maternal power often operates through emotional bonds and trust, making its betrayal especially disturbing (Piper, 2024; Warsito, 2023). Ellie's manipulation of her children through affectionate language exemplifies how emotional intimacy can be weaponized. The horror arises not only from physical harm but from the violation of assumed unconditional maternal protection.

The film's emphasis on bodily transformation and grotesque birth imagery situates Ellie's monstrosity within long-standing anxieties surrounding reproduction and the female body. Patrick-Weber (2020) notes that horror cinema frequently medicalizes and distorts pregnancy and childbirth, framing reproductive processes as abject and threatening. In *Evil Dead Rise*, bodily fusion and distorted creation reframe birth as destruction rather than renewal. This representation echoes feminist critiques of how female reproductive power is often rendered monstrous within patriarchal narratives.

Spatial representation also plays a crucial role in reinforcing maternal horror. Studies on mise-en-scène in Asian and global horror films emphasize that domestic interiors often function as psychological extensions of familial tension (Widyaevan & Wiguna, 2021). In this film, the urban apartment replaces the traditional rural horror setting, intensifying claustrophobia and emotional confinement. The domestic space becomes inseparable from the maternal figure, reinforcing the collapse of home as a safe environment once motherhood itself is corrupted.

Overall, the discussion indicates that *Evil Dead Rise* constructs monstrous motherhood as a culturally produced narrative strategy rather than an expression of innate female monstrosity. This finding aligns with feminist studies on violence and representation, which emphasize that horror reflects structural anxieties related to gender roles and power (Eriyanti, 2017; Kurnia & Hidayatullah, 2024). By contrasting Ellie's destructive motherhood with Beth's protective potential, the film suggests competing models of maternal identity. Consequently, *Evil Dead Rise* reaffirms the relevance of monstrous maternal theory in contemporary horror while expanding it within an urban and transnational cinematic context.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Evil Dead Rise* employs monstrous motherhood as a deliberate narrative and symbolic strategy to interrogate cultural expectations surrounding



maternal care, protection, and emotional labor. By systematically inverting normative maternal functions, the film reframes motherhood from a source of safety into a locus of threat, thereby exposing the fragility of idealized maternal norms. The four dominant patterns identified—perverted nurturing, familial corruption and contagion, corruption of motherly protection, and symbolic birth imagery—collectively demonstrate that maternal horror operates through relational and emotional betrayal rather than through violence alone. In this sense, the film confirms that maternal monstrosity functions as a culturally mediated construction rather than an inherent characteristic of motherhood.

At a broader interpretative level, the findings suggest that maternal horror in *Evil Dead Rise* reflects contemporary anxieties about responsibility, care, and the pressures imposed on women to embody ideal motherhood. Ellie's transformation illustrates how deviations from these ideals are framed as catastrophic, turning maternal failure into existential threat. Conversely, the narrative positioning of Beth as a protective figure indicates that motherhood is ultimately defined by ethical commitment and acts of care rather than biological status. This contrast reinforces the film's critical stance toward rigid maternal ideologies while highlighting the moral dimensions of survival, responsibility, and resilience within fractured family structures.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to feminist horror scholarship by reaffirming the relevance of the monstrous maternal as a lens for analyzing gendered fear and cultural anxiety in contemporary horror cinema. The findings demonstrate that horror films continue to use maternal figures as symbolic battlegrounds for negotiating boundaries between care and control, intimacy and violence. Future research may expand this inquiry through comparative cross-cultural analysis, audience reception studies, or interdisciplinary approaches incorporating psychology and media studies. Such developments may further illuminate how representations of motherhood in horror function not only as entertainment but also as cultural critique and reflection of evolving social values.

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