



Research Article

Faith, Apostasy, and Inner Conflict of Kakure Kirishitan in Martin Scorsese's *Silence* (2017): A Literary-Historical Analysis

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Article Information	Abstract
Received : 24 October 2025 Revised : 12 November 2025 Accepted : 13 December 2025 Published: 23 December 2025	This study examines the representation of faith conflict experienced by Kakure Kirishitan as depicted in Martin Scorsese's film <i>Silence</i> (2017), which portrays the persecution of Catholic Christians in seventeenth-century Japan during the Tokugawa period. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, this research applies intrinsic literary analysis—particularly literary psychology—to explore the inner conflicts of three Catholic priests: Cristóvão Ferreira, Sebastião Rodrigues, and Francisco Garupe. An analysis of mise-en-scène complements the study to evaluate how cinematographic elements such as lighting, costume, and acting construct a historical atmosphere of religious oppression. The findings reveal distinct responses to faith conflict among the three priests. Ferreira and Rodrigues experience profound moral dilemmas between preserving doctrinal integrity and saving the lives of persecuted converts, ultimately choosing apostasy while maintaining their faith secretly as Kakure Kirishitan. In contrast, Garupe remains steadfast in his beliefs and decides to martyr himself. His analysis demonstrates that inner conflict is central to the narrative, shaped by guilt, the silence of God, and ethical responsibility toward others. Furthermore, cinematographic techniques effectively reinforce psychological tension and historical realism, strengthening the film's role as a medium of historical memory. This study contributes to literary-historical and film studies by illustrating how cinematic adaptations of historical narratives function as critical reflections on faith, power, and resistance under religious persecution.
Keywords Kakure Kirishitan; faith conflict; <i>Silence</i> (2017); literary history; religious persecution.	
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INTRODUCTION

The historical experience of Christianity in non-Christian societies has often been marked by intense struggle and persecution. In Japan, the presence of Christianity was perceived as incompatible with indigenous beliefs and political stability, leading the state to reject the religion as a potential threat. According to Sakamoto (2001), the Tokugawa government strongly opposed Christianity due to fears that Christian influence could undermine dynastic continuity, weaken traditional cultural defenses, and facilitate European political and colonial intervention. This rejection significantly contributed to Japan's image as an anti-Christian nation and was further reinforced by its isolationist policy, which limited foreign contact for approximately 250 years.

Within this context, Catholic Christians in Japan came to be known as *Kakure Kirishitan*, or "Hidden Christians" (Budiman, 1994). This term refers to individuals who outwardly claimed to have abandoned Christianity while continuing to practice their faith in

secret. Putri and Yuniarsih (2023) explain that Kakure Kirishitan concealed their religious identity to avoid persecution, often camouflaging Christian symbols to resemble Buddhist or Shinto objects (Drajat, 2015). Their survival reflects a long and complex historical process marked by adaptation, resistance, and negotiation. Today, this legacy is officially recognized through UNESCO's designation of the "Hidden Christian Sites in Nagasaki," which commemorate early missionary activity and the severe persecution endured by Japanese Christians (Kawashima, 2021). The eventual lifting of the ban on Christianity during the Meiji period, following Japan's engagement with Western powers, formally guaranteed religious freedom and marked a significant shift in Japan's spiritual history (Rizky, 2023).

The persecution of Christians during the Tokugawa era was systematic and brutal. Historical records indicate that at least 3,125 martyrs were documented, although the actual number may have been significantly higher due to unrecorded deaths in remote regions (United States OMF, 2020). To identify Christians, the authorities implemented *fumie*, a method that required suspected believers to trample on images of Jesus or Mary. Those who refused were subjected to torture or execution. This practice was enforced over generations, even extending to descendants, in an effort to eradicate Christianity. As a result, many believers were forced underground, preserving their faith secretly for more than two centuries as Kakure Kirishitan.

These historical struggles have been widely reflected in literary and artistic works. Literature often emerges from historical circumstances, serving as a medium through which authors interpret, critique, and memorialize past events. Modernization and socio-political transformations have further shaped literary expression, reinforcing the relationship between history and literature as mutually constitutive forces (Majid, 2023). Literary works that engage with historical realities thus function not only as artistic creations but also as sources of cultural memory and education.

One prominent work addressing the conflict of faith in Japan is *Silence* (2017), directed by Martin Scorsese. The film is adapted from Endo Shusaku's novel *Chinmoku*, representing the transformation of a literary narrative into a cinematic text. This adaptation allows historical experiences to be communicated to broader audiences while preserving their moral and emotional complexity. *Silence* portrays the persecution of Kakure Kirishitan through the experiences of Catholic priests who confront extreme moral dilemmas while attempting to sustain their faith under oppressive conditions (Aruan, 2018).



Fig 1. Official Poster of *Silence* (2017) directed by Martin Scorsese
Image credit: IMDb.com

Previous studies have examined Kakure Kirishitan from historical and religious perspectives, particularly their development after the Meiji period (Budiman, [1994](#); Drajat, [2015](#)). Other scholars have emphasized Japan's perception of Christianity as a Western intrusion and its tension with nationalism (Ichijo, [2023](#)). Additionally, theological interpretations of *Chinmoku* have explored the motif of God's silence as a form of divine love rather than abandonment (Budiman, [2004](#)). However, limited attention has been given to *Silence* as a literary-historical text that integrates psychological conflict and cinematographic representation.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the inner conflicts experienced by Catholic priests in *Silence* through an intrinsic literary approach, focusing on literary psychology to examine mental and moral struggles shaped by historical circumstances. An examination of mise-en-scène complements the analysis to evaluate how cinematographic elements contribute to the representation of religious persecution and historical realism. By doing so, this research aims to contribute to literary history and film studies by illustrating how cinematic narratives convey faith, power, and resistance in contexts of religious oppression.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive, qualitative approach to examine how historical faith conflicts are represented in literary and cinematic works. The research focuses on the depiction of Christian persecution in Japan as portrayed in Martin Scorsese's film *Silence* (2017). This approach is appropriate for analyzing narrative meaning, character psychology, and historical representation rather than measuring numerical data.

The analytical framework is based on intrinsic literary analysis, with particular emphasis on literary psychology (Endraswara, [2023](#)). This approach examines the inner conflicts experienced by the main characters—Catholic priests—by analyzing their dialogues, actions, moral dilemmas, and emotional responses as presented in the narrative. Inner conflict is understood as psychological tension arising from ethical choices, environmental pressures, and historical circumstances faced by the characters (Parhana & Hidayatullah, [2023](#)).

In addition, the study incorporates mise-en-scène analysis as a supporting analytical technique to examine cinematographic elements, including lighting, costume, setting, acting, and visual composition. This analysis aims to identify how visual elements reinforce psychological tension and contribute to the construction of historical realism within the film.

Data collection was conducted through repeated observation of the film and close reading of key scenes and dialogues relevant to faith conflict and persecution. The selected scenes were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of inner conflict, apostasy, resistance, and martyrdom. By combining intrinsic literary analysis with cinematographic examination, this study treats *Silence* as both a literary narrative and a historical representation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Faith Conflict in *Silence* as a Literary-Historical Narrative

The film *Silence* (2017) can be categorized as a literary work that encapsulates the historical reality of faith struggles experienced by Christians in Japan. Although presented in cinematic form, the film functions as a literary-historical narrative that reconstructs the past through character experiences, dialogue, and symbolic imagery. The story situates Christianity within

Japan, a country traditionally rooted in Shinto and Buddhist belief systems, where the introduction of a foreign religion was perceived as a cultural and political threat.

The film illustrates that Christianity entered Japan through Portuguese trade expeditions, followed by the arrival of Catholic missionaries whose mission combined commercial interests with evangelization. As reflected in historical studies, Christianity initially encountered relatively limited resistance during the reign of Oda Nobunaga, allowing the religion to spread among specific segments of Japanese society (Drajat, 2015). However, as Christianity grew, it increasingly attracted the suspicion of political authorities, eventually becoming the target of systematic repression. *Silence* presents this historical transition as the foundation of the faith conflicts experienced by both missionaries and Japanese converts.

Within this historical framework, the film focuses on three Portuguese priests—Cristóvão Ferreira, Sebastião Rodrigues, and Francisco Garupe—whose journeys represent different responses to persecution. Their experiences form the core data of this study, as each character embodies a distinct form of faith conflict shaped by historical pressures, psychological struggles, and moral responsibilities.

Ferreira: Apostasy as Moral Dilemma and Psychological Burden

Ferreira is portrayed as a senior missionary whose success in spreading Christianity provokes intensified retaliation from the Japanese authorities. His arrest marks the beginning of a prolonged psychological crisis rather than a mere physical punishment. The film repeatedly emphasizes that Ferreira's suffering is not limited to his own torture, but is deeply connected to witnessing the suffering of Japanese Christians who refuse to renounce their faith.

From a literary psychology perspective, Ferreira's inner conflict arises from an ethical dilemma between personal faithfulness and collective responsibility. The choice he faces is presented as profoundly tragic: maintaining his faith would result in continued torture and death of innocent believers, while apostasy could potentially save lives. This moral tension creates severe psychological distress, reflected through his expressions, physical trembling, and moments of emotional collapse. His cries and bodily weakness symbolize the fragmentation of spiritual certainty under extreme coercion.



Fig 2. The scene of torturing Ferreira's followers
Image credit: Paramount Pictures

Ferreira's eventual apostasy is depicted not as a complete rejection of faith, but as a sacrificial act driven by compassion and empathy. After publicly renouncing Christianity, he assumes a Japanese identity and participates in state institutions that oppose Christian missions. However, the film suggests that his apostasy is external rather than internal. His hesitation during trials and his quiet demeanor imply unresolved guilt and lingering belief. This dual existence positions Ferreira within the Kakure Kirishitan tradition, where faith survives in secrecy under enforced conformity. Thus, Ferreira's narrative challenges simplistic interpretations of apostasy by framing it as a survival strategy under moral extortion rather than spiritual failure.

Rodrigues: Inner Conflict, Guilt, and the Silence of God

Rodrigues represents the most psychologically complex figure in the film. His initial motivation to travel to Japan is driven by devotion, obedience, and the desire to defend his mentor's reputation (Ferreira). However, once he encounters the harsh realities faced by Kakure Kirishitan communities, his sense of priestly calling transforms into a heavy moral burden.

Rodrigues' inner conflict intensifies as he witnesses repeated acts of torture inflicted on believers who shelter him. From a literary psychological standpoint, guilt becomes the dominant emotional force shaping his mental state. Each act of violence against the converts is interpreted as a consequence of his presence, leading him to question his role as a spiritual protector. His dialogues reveal increasing despair, frustration, and helplessness, particularly in relation to God's perceived silence.



Fig 3. The scene of torturing Rodrigues' followers
Image credit: Paramount Pictures

The motif of divine silence functions as a central philosophical problem in Rodrigues' journey. His prayers are met with no visible intervention, creating tension between theological expectation and historical reality. This silence deepens his psychological suffering and forces him to confront the limits of faith under oppression. When Rodrigues is eventually captured, the coercion to apostatize becomes a test not only of belief but of moral responsibility.

Apostasy is framed as a means to stop further torture, placing Rodrigues in the same ethical dilemma previously faced by Ferreira.

"Deus (Jesus), You punish Japan through You." (Rodrigues in *Silence*, 2017)

"I am angry. I cannot pity them. Even the guards have been touched by your hand (God)"
(Rodrigues in *Silence*, 2017)



Fig 4. Rodrigues' faith negotiations with Ferreira
Image credit: Paramount Picture

Rodrigues' decision to renounce his faith publicly is portrayed as a moment of internal rupture. Yet, the film later reveals that his spiritual identity persists in hidden form. His secret devotion, symbolized through subtle gestures and final imagery, reinforces the concept of Kakure Kirishitan. Rodrigues' journey illustrates how persecution can transform faith into an internalized and psychologically burdensome experience, rather than eliminating it.

Garupe: Martyrdom, Compassion, and Absolute Faith

Unlike Ferreira and Rodrigues, Garupe represents unwavering faith. Although his screen time is more limited, his role is symbolically significant. Garupe witnesses the same atrocities as Rodrigues, including executions and torture, yet he consistently refuses to renounce his beliefs. His capture and imprisonment further test his resolve, but he remains steadfast in his commitment to Christian doctrine. However, he is revealed to have been taken hostage by the investigators since he was separated from Rodrigues. The Japanese guards said:

"Remember this: if you are truly Christian, renounce your faith and do not let them die." (Garupe in *Silence*, 2017)

From the perspective of literary psychology, Garupe's inner conflict manifests not through doubt, but through feelings of helplessness and compassion. His emotional distress arises from witnessing suffering he cannot prevent. This culminates in his final act—attempting to rescue Christians being drowned by authorities. His decision to swim toward the victims reflects an instinctive moral response driven by empathy rather than strategic reasoning.

Garupe's death represents martyrdom in its most traditional sense. Unlike apostasy, martyrdom offers no compromise with power. The film presents his death as both heroic and tragic, emphasizing that absolute faith carries its own form of suffering. Through Garupe,

Silence acknowledges martyrdom as a meaningful but costly response to persecution, contrasting it with the hidden faith practiced by Ferreira and Rodrigues.

State Power, Fumie, and the Mechanism of Religious Control

The Tokugawa government's repression is visualized through institutionalized practices such as fumie. In the film, *fumie* functions as a tool of psychological domination rather than a mere religious test. Being forced to step on sacred images transforms faith into a visible act of submission. Refusal results in torture or death, while compliance ensures survival.



Fig 4. Rodrigues' faith negotiations with *fumie*
Image credit: Paramount Picture

This mechanism creates fear, social division, and moral compromise within communities. The film illustrates how state power exploits human compassion by punishing others rather than the individual directly. Such strategies effectively dismantle resistance while preserving the appearance of order. Rather than depicting Japanese society as inherently inhumane, *Silence* reveals how authoritarian systems normalize cruelty through bureaucratic control.

Mise-en-Scène and the Visualization of Psychological Suffering

Cinematographic elements play a crucial role in reinforcing the narrative's emotional and historical depth. The film employs dim lighting and muted color palettes to evoke a sense of despair and secrecy. Darkness dominates torture scenes, visually mirroring the spiritual uncertainty and fear experienced by the characters. The absence of dramatic music further intensifies the atmosphere of silence and suffering.

Costumes and makeup emphasize social inequality and physical deterioration. Ordinary villagers appear worn, dirty, and fragile, while officials are presented as orderly and authoritative. Blood-stained clothing and disheveled appearances visually communicate the brutality of persecution. Acting and facial expressions, particularly in close-up shots, convey inner conflict more powerfully than dialogue. Through mise-en-scène, psychological tension is externalized, allowing the audience to experience the weight of faith conflict alongside the characters (Ibad, et al., [2023](#)).

Film as Social Critique and Historical Memory

Beyond individual struggles, *Silence* functions as a broader social critique. The film exposes the erosion of human rights under authoritarian rule, highlighting how absolute power suppresses religious freedom and moral autonomy. Faith conflict is thus presented as both a personal and structural phenomenon.

At the same time, *Silence* serves as a medium of historical memory. By dramatizing the experiences of Kakure Kirishitan, the film preserves narratives of suffering that might otherwise remain marginalized. Literature and film, in this sense, serve as vehicles for education and reflection, enabling historical trauma to be revisited and reinterpreted across generations.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of faith conflict in Martin Scorsese's *Silence* (2017) within the historical context of Christian persecution in Tokugawa Japan. Using a literary-historical and psychological approach, the analysis demonstrates that faith conflict in the film is portrayed as a complex moral and inner struggle shaped by coercion, compassion, and power rather than as a simple opposition between belief and unbelief.

The findings show that systematic persecution did not eliminate Christianity but transformed it into hidden forms of belief practiced by Kakure Kirishitan. Through the experiences of Ferreira, Rodrigues, and Garupe, the film presents three distinct responses to oppression: ethical apostasy, hidden faith, and martyrdom. Ferreira and Rodrigues illustrate how apostasy may function as a morally conflicted act aimed at preventing further suffering, while Garupe represents uncompromising devotion that leads to martyrdom. These contrasting trajectories reveal that under extreme repression, faith persists in multiple and often painful forms.

The study also highlights the role of *mise-en-scène* in reinforcing psychological and historical meaning. Visual elements such as dim lighting, restrained sound, and worn costumes effectively convey fear, silence, and inequality, allowing the audience to experience persecution as both a historical and emotional reality. Through these cinematic techniques, *Silence* operates as a medium of historical memory and social critique, exposing how authoritarian power suppresses religious freedom and moral autonomy.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single film and its qualitative interpretative approach. Future research may expand this analysis through comparative studies with Endo Shusaku's novel *Chinmoku* or other representations of religious persecution across different cultural contexts. Interdisciplinary approaches may further enrich understanding of faith conflict as a historical and psychological phenomenon.

In conclusion, *Silence* portrays faith not as a fixed doctrine but as a lived struggle shaped by suffering, moral responsibility, and historical constraint. The film affirms that even under conditions of extreme oppression, belief does not simply vanish but is transformed into hidden, conflicted, and resilient forms.

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