

Dynamics of Interreligious Relations in Indonesian Film Works: A Semiotic and Narrative Analysis

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INFO ARTIKEL	ABSTRAK
Accepted : 19/07/2025 Revised : 26/08/2025 Approved : 27/08/2025	Indonesia, as a multireligious country, faces challenges in building harmonious relations between religious communities. Film, as a popular cultural medium, plays a crucial role in representing these dynamics. This study aims to analyze how interreligious relations are represented in Indonesian films through a semiotic and narrative approach. Three films were selected as the objects of study: 3 Hati Dua Dunia Satu Cinta (Three Hearts, Two Worlds, One Love), Bumi Itu Bulat (Earth Is Round), and Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2 (Verses of Love 2). The study employed a qualitative method with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis technique and Todorov's narrative structure. Data were collected through film observation, literature review, and interpretation of symbols and storylines. The analysis shows that the films display religious symbols such as crosses, headscarves, and places of worship as visual signs that are not neutral but contain ideological and emotional meanings. The story structure generally follows a conflict-reconciliation pattern, reinforcing messages of tolerance and empathy across faiths. The main characters are generally portrayed as moderate figures who bridge interfaith dialogue. In conclusion, Indonesian films not only reflect the pluralistic reality of society but also shape social discourse on tolerance and inclusivity. Films function as a means of cultural education and an agent of social transformation in building harmony between religious communities.
Keywords: <i>Interreligious Relations, Indonesian Films, Semiotics, Narrative, Tolerance.</i>	

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with a complex multicultural and multireligious society. With six officially recognized religions and hundreds of local faith groups, Indonesians live in a social space that demands harmony and tolerance between religious communities. However, in reality, interfaith relations in Indonesia often experience dynamics that are not always harmonious. Various incidents of intolerance, discrimination, and even open conflict have become important milestones in the nation's journey. In this context, film, as a medium of mass communication and popular culture, holds a strategic position as a tool for representation and reflection of social dynamics, including interfaith relations. Film is not merely a medium of entertainment, but also a



cultural artifact that embodies specific values, ideologies, and social constructs.(Hidayatullah, 2020)Films have the power to shape opinions, reinforce stereotypes, or, conversely, deconstruct prejudices that develop within society. Therefore, examining the representation of interfaith relations in Indonesian films is crucial, especially when films are used to convey messages of tolerance, coexistence, and religious pluralism within society.

Several Indonesian films explicitly address the issue of interfaith relations, such as Tanda Tanya (?), 3 Hati Dua Dunia, Satu Cinta (One Love), Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2 (Verses of Love 2), Bumi Itu Bulat (Earth Is Round), and Cahaya dari Timur: Beta Maluku (Light from the East: Beta Maluku). These films attempt to depict religious diversity in Indonesia and its accompanying social dynamics, from prejudice and conflict to reconciliation efforts. In Tanda Tanya (?), for example, the issue of religious diversity is presented through the story of three main characters from different religious backgrounds, who live side by side in one community (Hidayatullah, 2020). This film not only depicts a social portrait of society but also voices criticism of growing intolerance. Analysis of religious representation in films generally uses a semiotic approach, particularly based on Roland Barthes' theory that distinguishes between the denotative and connotative meanings of a sign.(Wijaya, 2024)Semiotics helps uncover the hidden meanings behind visual symbols, gestures, or dialogue used in films. Furthermore, a narrative approach is also needed to understand how story structures are formed to convey specific ideological messages. Narrative theories such as those developed by Tzvetan Todorov and Vladimir Propp can be used to analyze story patterns, character roles, and dramatic plots in constructing narratives of interfaith relations.

A number of previous studies have examined the representation of religion in Indonesian films.Princess (2024)In his research on the film Bumi Itu Bulat (Earth That Round), he showed how the message of tolerance and diversity is constructed through characterization and the use of religious symbols. Another study byLestari (2025)Analyzing the film 3 Hearts, Two Worlds, One Love, she reveals how the film represents the relationship between Muslims and Catholics using a visual semiotic approach. Meanwhile,Sukmono (2024)In his study of the short film WEI, he showed that visual symbols such as lanterns, clothing, and dialogue were used to depict the religious conflict experienced by the Chinese community in Indonesia. Furthermore,Yatsir (2024)also explores religious pluralism in the Bollywood film Bajrangi Bhaijaan and presents potential comparisons with Indonesian films. However, existing studies still have limitations. Generally, previous research has used only one approach, either semiotic or narrative, without combining both simultaneously. This limits a more comprehensive understanding of how representations of interreligious relations are shaped through symbols and narrative structure. Furthermore, most studies focus solely on a single film without comparing several films thematically to examine patterns or differences in the representation of religious diversity. Studies using intertextual and cross-film approaches are still rare.

There is a lack of studies that combine semiotic and narrative approaches in an integrated manner. Most studies use only one analytical approach, even though understanding meaning in films requires the integration of visual symbols (semiotics) and storyline (narrative). Furthermore, there is a lack of cross-film studies on the theme of interreligious relations. The majority of previous studies only examine one specific film, thus not providing a comprehensive picture of how the representation of interreligious relations is constructed in Indonesian films in general and in various ways.

This study has novelty in three main aspects, namely: 1) the combination of semiotic approaches and narrative analysis simultaneously in examining the representation of interreligious relations in Indonesian films. This allows for a deeper disclosure of symbolic and ideological meanings. 2) a cross-film study of several Indonesian works that explicitly address the issue of religious diversity. This allows for mapping patterns of representation of interreligious relations and changes in discourse over time. 3) a contribution to film studies from a humanities perspective in Indonesia by showing how popular media can play a role in shaping social discourse and influencing public perceptions of the issues of tolerance and religious pluralism. Based on the problems that have been described and the research title that has been raised, the formulation of the objectives of this research is to analyze the dynamics of inter-religious relations in Indonesian film works through a semiotic and narrative approach.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with semiotic and narrative-based content analysis methods, which aims to understand the symbolic representation and story structure in Indonesian films that raise the issue of interfaith relations. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the interpretive and cultural nature of the study object. The research was conducted from April to July 2025, with the analysis location being carried out online and physically in two places: the National Film Documentation Center (Jakarta) for access to old film archives, and the Faculty of Cultural Sciences Library at two state universities in Central Java for literature study and theoretical references. The research objects consist of three Indonesian films that explicitly display the dynamics of interfaith relations, namely *3 Hati Dua Dunia Satu Cinta* (2010), *Bumi Itu Bulat* (2019), and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2* (2017). In this context, the research objects are not interpreted as quantitative variables, but rather as symbolic and narrative units that will be analyzed in depth, including visual aspects (icons, indices, symbols), dialogue, conflict between characters, and narrative resolution related to interfaith relations.

Data collection techniques were conducted through audiovisual documentation (repeated screenings of the film for scene segmentation), literature studies from scientific journals, semiotics and narrative theory books, and informal interviews with two lecturers in cultural studies and film for thematic clarification. Data analysis was conducted using two complementary approaches. First, Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis that examines the denotative and connotative meanings of visual signs such as religious clothing, places of worship, colors, and character gestures. Second, a narrative analysis based on Todorov's structure that maps the story's phases from initial equilibrium, disruption, conflict, recovery, to new equilibrium. The researcher maps the dynamics of interreligious relations in the film by identifying: (1) stereotypical or tolerant representations, (2) latent and symbolic conflicts, and (3) narrative resolution that indicates the film's ideological direction. Data validation was conducted through triangulation of sources and theories, as well as analytical dialogue with cultural studies experts to ensure depth of interpretation. With this design, the research is expected to be able to capture not only what is represented in the film, but also how and why these constructions are formed in the context of Indonesian culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Visual Symbols as Markers of Identity and Tension

Visual symbols in films play a crucial role in conveying religious identity and the tensions that accompany it. In *3 Hearts, Two Worlds, One Love*, the cross and the hijab are not merely visual accessories, but serve as key markers of character identity and triggers of conflict. Scenes where Muslim and Catholic characters share space within a family, but clash over differing religious values, demonstrate how religious symbols in films serve as both markers and battlegrounds for meaning. Symbols such as places of worship, religious attributes, and religious rituals are systematically used as semiotic elements that mark the boundaries or possibilities of interfaith encounters. The study by Syahminan, (2022) supports this finding, that in Indonesian religious films, symbols are used to bridge the values of faith and social reality cinematically.

2. Color Contrast and Lighting as Interfaith Emotional Codes

In *Bumi Itu Bulat (The Earth Is Round)*, the use of cool lighting in scenes of isolation of the characters from conservative Islamic families is contrasted with warm lighting when the characters develop close relationships with interfaith friends. This is a cinematic strategy that creates an emotional atmosphere without the need for dialogue. This technique aligns with the film *Ave Maryam*, where the changing colors represent the inner conflict of a nun held hostage by values and feelings. Thus, color and lighting are not merely visual elements, but a system of signs that reinforce the emotional dimension in the representation of interfaith relations. (Latifah, 2016).

3. Narrative Structure: Conflict–Reconciliation in Todorov's Scheme

The three films studied follow Todorov's classic narrative structure—starting from a stable state, then experiencing disruption due to religious differences, then a process of crisis and inner conflict, and finally reaching a resolution through empathy or compromise. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2* depicts the main character navigating a dilemma in her relationship with a non-Muslim, compounded by pressures from the community and geopolitical situation. However, the plot ultimately leads to interfaith understanding. This structure demonstrates that narratives about religious encounters in Indonesian films are framed within an idealistic framework that leads to harmony, not confrontation. This is in line with Aizharuddin (2010), who believes that post-New Order religious films tend to carry the narrative of "Islam in dialogue with plural reality".

4. Gestures and Interactions as Symbols of Tolerance

Tolerance in films isn't always expressed verbally. In many scenes, tolerance is built through small, symbolic gestures: bowing one's head while others pray, sharing food during an interfaith fast-breaking meal, or simply listening to another character's spiritual experiences. In *Bumi Itu Bulat (Earth Is Round)*, the interaction between a group of buskers from different religious backgrounds actually serves as a bridge of solidarity that builds a narrative of reconciliation. This aligns with research by Hanif,

(2022), that the empathetic interfaith action in the film *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* becomes a universal symbol of peace that is more effective than normative religious rhetoric.

5. Divided Audience Reception: Dominance, Negotiation, and Opposition

Audiences interpret interfaith representations in films based on their social backgrounds, beliefs, and collective experiences. Bustam (2023) A study of Indonesian multicultural students shows that films about interfaith marriage can be positively received by some viewers as a reflection of reality, but also rejected by others as contradicting religious doctrine. This emphasizes that film is a non-neutral field of interpretation, and its meaning is shaped through dialogue between the text and the audience. Therefore, reception plays a crucial role in determining the extent to which a film's message of tolerance is accepted or debated in the public sphere.

6. Moderate Character and Tolerance Values

Indonesian films generally tend to position their main characters as representatives of religious moderation. These characters are not only religious, but also reflective, open, and willing to listen to other views. In *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2*, the character of Fahri not only represents an intelligent and ethical Islam but also serves as an interfaith mediator in a multicultural environment. This figure is not only a narrative idealization but also a cinematic strategy to create an inclusive Islamic narrative that is more compatible with global realities. This supports Aizharuddin's (2010) notion of the presence of "cosmopolitan Islamic reasoning" in post-reform cinema.

7. Representation of Minority Religions in Majority Films

One important finding is the inclusive representation of minority religions in films predominantly set in Islam. In *Bumi Itu Bulat* (Earth Is Round), Catholic and Christian characters appear as active figures and are not constructed as antagonistic "others." They become part of a community that fights alongside the main character to voice diversity. This shows that contemporary Indonesian films are beginning to move away from old stereotypes about minority religions and are beginning to construct narratives of equality within diversity. This approach is also evident in *Lovely Man*, where a minority character (a transgender Muslim) is presented as humane and spiritual. (Yahya, 2020).

8. Film as a Medium for Educating Interfaith Tolerance

Several studies have shown that films can serve as effective tools for moral and social education. Yahya (2020) demonstrated that post-screening discussions on interfaith relations can enhance students' understanding and empathy across faiths. Films such as *3 Hati Dua Dunia Satu Cinta* (Three Hearts, Two Worlds, One Love) and *Bumi Itu Bulat* (Earth Is Round) can be used as teaching materials in courses on multiculturalism, religious studies, and intercultural communication. The films' emotionally packaged, non-doctrinal messages make them more easily accepted and digested by the younger generation, compared to rigid, dogmatic approaches.

9. Connotative and Ideological Meaning of Religious Symbols

Through a semiotic approach, religious symbols in films convey not only literal (denotative) meaning but also ideological connotations. For example, in *3 Hearts, Two Worlds, One Love*, the cross worn by the Catholic character not only indicates identity but also becomes a symbol of resistance against the dominance of social norms. This context demonstrates that religious symbols in films carry social and political implications that are not neutral. Hasfi (2017) He calls it a cultural myth of signs that operates to legitimize dominant values. Religious symbols in Indonesian films operate in a similar way: shaping understanding while simultaneously questioning existing social structures.

10. Local Films in the Global Discourse of Tolerance

Indonesian films now speak not only to the domestic public but also offer messages that can be appreciated globally. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2* features characters living in the Middle Eastern diaspora, confronting Islamophobia, and building interfaith relationships in a global context. This demonstrates that the discourse of tolerance is not merely local, but also part of a global discourse. Just as *The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck* uses universal symbols of love and class conflict, Indonesian films also have the potential to bring the values of Pancasila to the world stage through cinema. (Fadillah, 2024).

The following chart summarizes the thematic distribution based on emphasis throughout the findings and discussion section. It visualizes the relative weight given to each thematic category and helps illustrate the analytical priorities of this study:

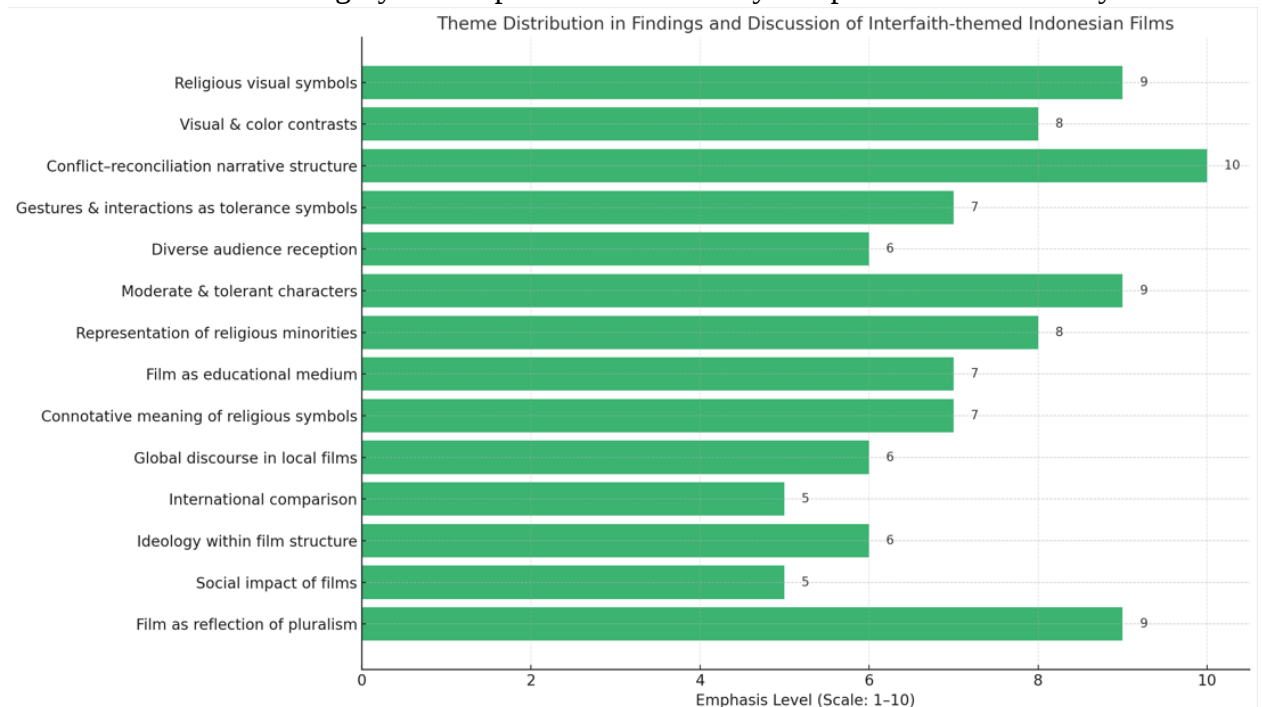


Figure 1. Theme Distribution Chart

Figure 1 presents the distribution of themes analyzed in the results and discussion section based on the level of emphasis of each theme, measured on a scale of 1 to 10. This graph represents the intensity and depth of discussion of the 14 main themes identified in three Indonesian films on interfaith relations. The theme with the highest emphasis is "Narrative structure of conflict–reconciliation" (score 10), reflecting the study's primary focus on how film narratives shape patterns of interfaith tension and resolution. Furthermore, "Visual symbols of religion," "Moderate and tolerant figures," and "Film as a reflection of pluralism" each received a score of 9, indicating that symbolic representation and characterization of characters are also very dominant in the findings of this study. Meanwhile, themes such as "International comparison" and "Social impact of film" have relatively lower scores (score 5), not because they are unimportant, but because the analysis portion of these aspects is shorter compared to other main themes. Themes such as "The connotative meaning of religious symbols," "Representation of minority religions," and "Film as an educational medium" occupy a medium position with scores ranging from 6 to 8. This graph not only provides a visual depiction of the distribution of the intensity of the topics discussed but also demonstrates the consistency of the analytical approach used. The emphasis on semiotic and narrative dimensions is very strong, supporting the main objectives of this study. This visualization also emphasizes that Indonesian films function not only as cultural artifacts but also as complex ideological narratives in depicting interfaith dynamics.

The graphical visualization of the distribution of themes provides a clear picture of the research's primary focus on various aspects of interreligious relations in the film. The graphic shows that the themes with the highest emphasis are the conflict-reconciliation narrative structure, character moderation, and religious visual symbols. These findings are consistent with the analysis. Wijayanto, (2021) which emphasizes that the film's strength lies in its ability to weave conflict into a narrative that bridges differences in belief. The placement of moderate figures as the main actors in the reconciliation process is also reinforced by Nasution, (2022) which states that Indonesian popular culture often reproduces tolerant figures as symbols of social hope. On the other hand, the theme of minority religious representation scored quite high, in line with the findings. Fitria (2023) which highlights the tendency for Southeast Asian films to be more inclusive of non-dominant religious groups. Furthermore, Ramadhan, (2020) emphasizes that graphs and visualizations of the distribution of themes in film studies can reveal the filmmaker's ideological tendencies in positioning interreligious issues as part of the discourse of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Therefore, graphs in this context are not merely visual aids, but also representations of Indonesian cinema's socially critical orientation toward diversity.

11. Comparison of Indonesian and International Films

Compared to Western or Bollywood films, Indonesian films tend to be more cautious in representing sensitive religious issues. However, their approach is more compromising and symbolic. In *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, Hindu-Muslim representation is conveyed through satire and humor, while Indonesian films like *Bumi Itu Bulat*

(Earth That Round) choose a dramatic, emotional, and moralistic approach. This demonstrates the distinctive cultural character and local approach in constructing a narrative of harmony. This approach is actually a strength in shaping a "typically Indonesian discourse" of peaceful pluralism.

12. Ideological Discourse in Film Structure

Film as a cultural text is never neutral. In the case of films themed around interfaith relations, it is found that narratives are not only constructed to entertain, but also to educate, guide opinion, and even intervene in social discourse. The film "Verses of Love 2," for example, despite its romantic overtones, actually conveys a message of cross-border solidarity and a rejection of extremism. Narratives like this demonstrate that film is an arena for ideological articulation, where various interests, religious, nationalist, and humanist, collide and negotiate.

13. The Social Impact of Films on Tolerance Issues

The social impact of film on public perceptions of tolerance is significant, especially in the digital age, where films spread rapidly and are widely discussed. Interfaith films spark public discussion, both on social media and in academic settings. Many community groups use films as a reference for conveying messages of tolerance, even raising them in interfaith forums. This demonstrates that film is not simply entertainment, but also a tool for social change and shaping public opinion.

14. Film as a Mirror and Reflection of Plural Society

Ultimately, films reflect the reality of Indonesia's pluralistic society. The tensions and hopes in interfaith relations are reflected in the characters, plot, and symbols constructed by the films. Films are not only cultural products, but also forms of collective social reflection that express shared concerns, hopes, and values. Therefore, semiotic and narrative studies of these films not only yield academic understanding but also open up spaces for empathy across identities. Films can serve as a mediating space, a place where differences can be woven through stories, symbols, and shared humanity.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that contemporary Indonesian films have a strategic role in shaping and representing the dynamics of interfaith relations through the integration of visual symbols and organized narrative structures. Analysis of the films *3 Hati Dua Dunia Satu Cinta*, *Bumi Itu Bulat*, and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2* shows that religious symbols such as the hijab, the cross, places of worship, and even simple gestures such as mutual respect during prayer are used as semiotic signs that are not only denotative but also contain ideological connotations, such as the struggle for identity, social resistance, and the hope for harmony. The narrative structure of the three films forms a pattern of conflict–reconciliation, where moderate figures become catalysts in building interfaith understanding, indicating that the films not only reflect pluralistic social conditions but also shape a discourse of tolerance through an emotional and communicative dramatic plot. The diverse audience reception confirms that the films are open texts

whose meanings are negotiated according to the audience's social background and beliefs, but in general these films have proven effective in voicing the values of inclusivity, empathy, and togetherness. Thus, Indonesian films can be understood not merely as a medium of entertainment or cultural reflection, but as a narrative and ideological space that can become an agent of social transformation in building public awareness of the importance of interfaith harmony in a multicultural society.

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