



Resisting hegemony: Islam and identity in the *Mentega Terbang* film

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the controversial Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang* constructs alternative representations of Islam and challenges dominant religious discourses within the Malaysian socio-cultural context. In Malaysia, Islam occupies a central position in public life, with state institutions playing an important role in regulating religious interpretation and discourse. Within this environment, *Mentega Terbang* generated significant public debate due to its engagement with sensitive religious themes. While discussions have largely focused on the controversy surrounding the film, limited scholarly attention has been given to how it constructs meaning through its narrative and cinematic strategies. Drawing upon the concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony and media representation, this study employed qualitative narrative analysis to examine the film's storyline, character development, dialogue, symbolism, and visual construction. Through repeated viewings, thematic coding and contextual interpretation, the study analysed how the film negotiates dominant understandings of Islam, identity and religious authority in contemporary Malaysia. The findings suggest that *Mentega Terbang* functions as a counter-hegemonic cinematic text by presenting alternative spiritual perspectives and questioning institutionalised religious norms through narrative construction, symbolism, and emotional framing. Rather than evaluating the theological validity of the beliefs represented, the study focuses on how the film negotiates meanings surrounding religion, identity and authority. At the same time, its controversial reception reflects broader societal sensitivities concerning religion, social harmony and media regulation in Malaysia. This study contributes to the scholarship on media representation, religion and Malaysian cinema by demonstrating how films can function as a site of ideological negotiation where dominant religious narratives are symbolically questioned, reinterpreted, and contested.

Keywords: *Mentega Terbang*, hegemony, status quo, Islamic representation, Malaysian film

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, with the majority of its population consisting of Malay Muslims. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia establishes Islam as the religion of the Federation, although religious freedom is guaranteed under its Article 3. Within this pluralistic framework, Islam is not only a religion but constitutes a core element of the Malay ethnic identity. The definition of ‘Malay’ under Article 160 of the Federal Constitution effectively merges ethnicity and religion, making Islam an integral component of Malay identity. As a result, any deviation from Islam by a Malay individual would not only be regarded as religious apostasy but also a rejection of their ethnic identity, which often brings significant social, legal, and familial repercussions (Ahmad Sabri et al., 2025; Latif, 2024; Saat & Alatas, 2022).

In Malaysia, the Muslims predominantly adhere to the Shafi’i school of Islamic jurisprudence, which was introduced to the Malay Peninsula by Muslim traders and became firmly established by the 15th century (Hassan, 2014). Today, it continues to dictate religious practices and institutional norms, shaping the administration of Islam at both federal and state level. In the Malaysian context, a school of jurisprudence (*mazhab*) is also officially recognized by the government as the authoritative source for determining legal rulings, interpretations, and fatwas. This was affirmed through a resolution passed during the 14th *Muzakarah* (Deliberation) of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI), held in Johor on 22–23 October, 1985, which required all states in Malaysia to issue their fatwas in accordance with the Shafi’i school of thought. Nevertheless, the application of other schools of jurisprudence may still be possible, provided there are valid justifications and endorsement of the Sultan or Ruler of the respective state.

Post-independence, the administration of Islam in Malaysia has been carried out by both federal and state institutions (Latif, 2024). The Federal Constitution stipulates that Islamic affairs fall under the shared jurisdiction of the federal and state governments. At the federal level, the administration of Islamic affairs falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), established in 1997, while Islamic Religious Departments are set up and run by individual states under the authority of the respective state rulers who oversee the administration of Islamic law, education, and mosques. The establishment of the National Council for Islamic Affairs in 1968 and Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM) in 1974 broadened the federal government’s role in promoting and directing national initiatives for Islamic outreach (*dakwah*) and coordinating religious programs. Prior to the formation of YADIM, religious affairs were mostly managed independently by each state. The setting-up of YADIM prompted the federal government to systematically organize, fund, and supervise Islamic initiatives nationwide, enabling a more cohesive national Islamic identity.

In order to gain and maintain support from the Malay Muslim majority, government policies often incorporate elements of Islamisation (Jha, 2009; Walters, 2007). Miller (2004) noted how Islamic symbolism and discourse are deeply ingrained in Malaysian political narratives, influenced by historical, institutional, and structural

forces. In the early 1980s, during the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad, Islamisation became a more prominent feature, with Islamic principles systematically integrated into education, administration, finance and various other sectors (Saat & Alatas, 2022). Subsequently, the premiership of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi applied a more moderate approach through *Islam Hadhari*, which received criticism from more conservative factions. Meanwhile, under the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak, Islamic conservatism became more apparent, particularly following his endorsement of the controversial Bill 355 proposed by the Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, PAS), which sought to expand the punitive powers of Sharia courts.

In the current political landscape, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's *Malaysia Madani* concept embodies a renewed take on Islamisation that seeks to integrate Islamic ethical values with good governance, social equity, and national unity (Musa, 2023). Initially introduced in 1995, *Masyarakat Madani* was later reduced from an alternative socio-economic vision to a general idea of "civil society" after Anwar's political fall in 1998. Upon his return to power in 2022, Anwar revived and renewed the concept, giving special focus to *Maqasid Al-Shariah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law). As a form of post-Islamism concept, Madani seeks to balance Islamic principles with democratic governance and multicultural coexistence.

In practice, however, the implementation of *Malaysia Madani* continues to operate within a politically fragile environment shaped by ethno-religious contestation and ideological pressure from conservative factions. Shi (2025) argues that despite the reformist aspirations associated with the unity government under Anwar Ibrahim, issues related to race, religion, and Malay-Muslim identity continue to function as important political instruments within Malaysia's post-GE15 landscape. The increasing reliance on 3R (race, religion, and royalty) narratives reflects the government's ongoing need to balance progressive ambitions with conservative political realities. In this context, religion continues to operate not merely as a matter of personal belief, but also as a mechanism of political legitimacy, ideological control, and cultural governance.

Within this broader religious and political landscape, the Malaysian film and media industry operates in a regulatory environment shaped heavily by sensitivities surrounding Islam, Malay identity, race, royalty, and national unity (Augustin, 2024; Khoo, 2009; Mohd Sofian et al., 2025; Weintraub, 2011; Zainal, 2019). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and the Film Censorship Board (LPF) closely monitor media content that engages with religious beliefs, interfaith interactions, personal faith struggles, or issues perceived to threaten social harmony. Film censorship occupies a particularly significant position in Malaysia, as cinema remains one of the few artistic mediums subjected to prior censorship before public release (Augustin, 2024). Consequently, filmmakers frequently encounter institutional restrictions and censorship when attempting to address controversial or sensitive themes (Annisa et al., 2025). These limitations do not entirely prevent creative expression in Malaysia; rather, they shape the boundaries of acceptable public discourse by determining which narratives may be publicly circulated and represented on screen.

As Augustin (2024) and Ngo (2025) further observed in relation to the *Mentega Terbang* controversy, contemporary Malaysian media culture remains deeply influenced by broader ideological struggles between conservative orthodoxy, state regulation, and competing interpretations of Islam, particularly within the politically sensitive environment following the 15th General Election (GE15). Although the Anwar-led unity government was initially associated with hopes for greater openness and reform, concerns over conservative backlash and the need to maintain Malay-Muslim political support continue to influence media regulation and censorship practices. In this context, unofficial “red lines” surrounding race, religion, and royalty (3R) continue to shape the boundaries of acceptable cinematic discourse in Malaysia. The banning and public vilification of *Mentega Terbang*, alongside increasing scrutiny towards independent filmmakers, therefore, reflect not only concerns over religious sensitivity, but also wider tensions surrounding ideological authority, political legitimacy, and the regulation of acceptable discourse in contemporary Malaysia. Controversial films may thus function not merely as entertainment products, but also as ideological sites where competing understandings of religion, identity, and national culture are negotiated and contested.

Previous scholarship on Malaysian cinema has examined themes such as censorship, Islamisation, multiculturalism, Malay identity, and religious representation in film. Khoo (2009), Beng (2015) as well as Changsong and Kerry (2022), for instance, explored how Malaysian filmmakers, particularly Yasmin Ahmad, negotiated issues of cosmopolitanism, Malay subjectivity, religion, and identity through alternative cinematic narratives that challenged dominant socio-cultural norms. Similarly, Shi and Baharudin (2015) demonstrated how Yasmin Ahmad’s *Muallaf* constructed alternative interpretations of Islam through narrative and visual strategies that questioned conservative religious understandings while promoting multiculturalism, tolerance, and interreligious engagement. Other studies have focused on censorship practices, digital film activism, and the regulation of controversial content in Malaysian cinema (Ahmad et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2022), while more recent scholarship on *Mentega Terbang* has primarily examined audience reception, multicultural interpretation, and public controversy surrounding the film (Annisa et al., 2025).

While these studies provide important insights into religion, identity, and media regulation in Malaysia, limited attention has been given to how controversial Malaysian films themselves construct counter-hegemonic Islamic discourse through narrative strategies, symbolism, dialogue, and representations of institutional religious authority. Existing studies have largely focused on censorship systems, multicultural negotiation, audience reception or broader issues of religious representation, with comparatively little emphasis on how films function as ideological sites of contestation within the socio-political context of contemporary Malaysia. This study addresses that gap by analysing *Mentega Terbang* through the framework of hegemony and counter-hegemony, focusing specifically on how the film negotiates dominant Islamic narratives, institutional authority, religious identity, and personal autonomy within Malaysia’s evolving Islamisation landscape. In doing so, this article contributes to broader discussions on media representation, ideological resistance, and the role of cinema as a space for negotiating competing understandings of Islam in Muslim-majority societies.

Mentega Terbang

As Islamic governance and identity politics continue to evolve, cultural and creative works that challenge dominant religious narratives would often spark public debate. One example that drew much attention is the controversial indie film, *Mentega Terbang*.

Mentega Terbang, a film directed by Khairi Anwar, Arjun Thanaraju, Vishnu Varman, and Ti Teng Hui, debuted at the Yogyakarta Film Festival in 2021 (“*Mentega Terbang* flies into Jogja-Netpac”, 2021). It caught the attention of the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia when it premiered on the streaming platform Viu in 2023. Interestingly, the initial opponent of the film’s distribution was none other than the scriptwriter of the film, Zabidi Mohamed. He asserted that the film gives rise to serious issues surrounding the Muslim faith (Augustin, 2024).

Mentega Terbang was strongly criticised by Islamic authorities, including the former Mufti of the Federal Territories, Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, for tackling sensitive issues on the Muslim faith in ways deemed inappropriate and provocative (Al-Bakri, 2023). In Malaysia, the majority of Muslims adhere to the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah tradition, which is based on the teachings of the Qur’an, the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, and the theological approaches of the *salaf* and *khalaf*, particularly through the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools of thought (Al-Bakri, 2020). The film drew widespread criticism for presenting ideas seen as incompatible with the fundamental principles of Islamic doctrine, particularly those upheld by the Shafi‘i school of thought (“*Filem Mentega Terbang bertentangan dengan akidah Islam, pihak terlibat akan dipanggil*”, 2023). Consequently, on 21 August, 2023, MOHA exercised its powers under the Film Censorship Act 2002 and officially banned the screening, distribution, and promotion of *Mentega Terbang*. To this effect, the Film Censorship (Prohibition) Order 2023 was issued, endorsed by the Minister of Home Affairs, Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution.

Freedom Film Network (Palatino, 2024), an organization which supports independent filmmaking that raises awareness of social justice and human rights issues, spoke against the government’s move to ban *Mentega Terbang* and to take legal action against its creators, describing it as a regressive measure that suppresses creative freedom. The organization argued that open dialogue, mutual understanding, and safe platforms for sharing diverse viewpoints are needed in order to foster true religious harmony. They argued that the film encouraged interfaith conversations, with many viewers finding that it helped them gain a deeper understanding of other religions and have empathy with the main character’s journey. This constructive feedback has seemingly been overlooked by the authorities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media hegemony and resistance in Malaysian films

Hegemony refers to the way a social group secures leadership in moral, intellectual, and political life not through coercion, but through the voluntary consent of other groups (Althusser, 1995/2014). This is accomplished by mobilizing social institutions

such as education, religion, family, and the mass media to shape culture and ideology. Media hegemony, therefore, describes how dominance over society and social thought is achieved by embedding prevailing cultural principles into everyday life (Durham & Kellner, 2006). It significantly influences societal values, beliefs, and worldviews (Altheide, 1984), assuming that the ruling class's ideas will become the dominant ideology, with mass media serving as a primary vehicle to reproduce and normalize these ideas.

Drawing from Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, this study understands hegemony as the process through which dominant groups secure ideological leadership by normalising particular worldviews and social values as "common sense" within society (Gramsci, 1971). This hegemonic process is particularly significant within the Malaysian media environment, where Islamic discourse has historically been shaped through institutional regulation, political interests, and commercialization. Mohamed and Azzman (2018) argue that the Islamisation of Malaysian media is closely connected to the state's broader project of institutionalising Islam within public life, resulting in media structures that normalize particular representations of Islam and Malay-Muslim identity. In this context, media functions not merely as entertainment, but also as an ideological apparatus that reinforces socially acceptable religious norms and boundaries.

Consequently, films that challenge dominant religious narratives may be perceived as disrupting hegemonic understandings of religion, morality, and national identity within the Malaysian society. Hall (1982) further argues that media representation plays a crucial role in the construction and circulation of ideological meaning, where media texts actively shape social understanding rather than merely reflecting reality. As such, films may function both as a site for reproducing dominant ideological narratives and as a space where alternative meanings and resistant discourses emerge. Within this framework, *Mentega Terbang* is examined as a counter-hegemonic cinematic text that negotiates dominant religious narratives through its representations of spirituality, interreligious inquiry, and Muslim identity.

Films function as a cultural medium where diverse social discourses may be articulated and made available for public engagement. However, in Malaysia, this potential remains largely theoretical. In practice, local filmmaking is heavily constrained by censorship laws, bureaucratic procedures, regulatory requirements, cultural norms, and religious sensitivities (Ahmad et al., 2017; Weintraub, 2011). Such restrictions limit the film industry's capacity for critical reflection and alternative representation. Malaysian film critics further argue that a hegemonic social discourse continues to shape how cultural themes are framed and interpreted, resulting in films produced from narrow racial perspectives that fail to capture the nation's multicultural complexity (Changsong & Kerry, 2022; Weintraub, 2011).

The hegemonic influence of the Malaysian state is most visible in its formalized censorship system (Wood et al., 2022). Film censorship is governed by the Film Censorship Act 2002 and administered by the Board of Censors and the Appeal Committee, both housed under the Ministry of Home Affairs. These bodies are empowered to modify, restrict, reclassify, or ban films entirely. Their decisions rely on the Film Censorship Guidelines 2010, which cover sensitive areas such as religion,

morality, public order, and socio-cultural values. Yet the guidelines are often vague and subjectively interpreted, enabling the state to maintain ideological dominance and suppress narratives that challenge political, religious, or cultural norms.

Filmmakers interviewed by Wood et al. (2022) described the censorship process as opaque, inconsistent, and restrictive, often prompting self-censorship even before films are submitted for review. This internalised policing of content illustrates how hegemony operates not only through formal institutional control but also through the normalization of creative boundaries and expectations (Gramsci, 1971). Wood et al. (2022) further demonstrated that censorship reinforces hegemonic control through vague guidelines, inconsistent enforcement, non-transparent appointment processes for censors, limited avenues for judicial review, and ministerial powers to override decisions. Together, these mechanisms contribute to an environment where dominant ideological preferences shape the cultural landscape and restrict film's potential as a platform for social critique and alternative representation.

Within this environment, counter-hegemony—referring to ideas, practices, or movements that question or disrupt dominant ideological narratives (Fiveable, 2024)—becomes especially important. Counter-hegemonic practices promote marginalized viewpoints and create spaces for dissent, often through artistic and media forms such as film. Cinema can amplify the voices of marginalized communities and challenge the status quo by presenting alternative narratives and lived experiences (Fiveable, 2024). Filmmakers may employ strategies such as irony, humour, unconventional storytelling, or symbolic critique to provoke public reflection and debate. These approaches aim not only to critique social structures but also to inspire broader awareness of injustice and complex power relations. Counter-hegemonic films are effective precisely because they spark dialogue and encourage audiences to interrogate dominant ideologies.

When mainstream media is influenced by authoritarian tendencies or restricted political environments, alternative media becomes crucial in providing platforms for opposition groups or critical voices (Mohd Sofian & Qasem, 2020; Mohd Sofian et al., 2023; Mohd Sofian et al., 2025). Alternative media offers relatively autonomous spaces—even within democratic societies—where competing narratives may be articulated (Foster, 2009). By challenging mainstream representations, alternative media contributes to the counter-hegemonic discourse by enabling discussions on sensitive issues, including debates on Islam, that are often absent from mainstream public narratives (Mohd Sofian et al., 2023). Thus, alternative media enables both creators and audiences to participate in critical discussions and resist dominant ideological frameworks.

The expansion of digital technology and online streaming platforms has further complicated the dynamics of media hegemony in Malaysia. Unlike conventional cinema releases that remain subject to strict censorship regulations, streaming platforms provide relatively less regulated spaces for the circulation of alternative narratives and politically sensitive content (Shukri et al., 2024). This shift enables filmmakers to engage audiences more directly and potentially challenge dominant ideological frameworks by presenting perspectives that may otherwise be restricted within mainstream media environments. In this regard, digital platforms may function as important spaces for counter-hegemonic

expression and ideological negotiation in contemporary Malaysian cinema. The circulation of *Mentega Terbang* through online and alternative digital spaces, rather than through mainstream cinematic distribution channels, further illustrates how digital media may facilitate the dissemination of narratives that challenge dominant religious and cultural discourses in Malaysia.

METHODS

This study employed a narrative analysis to examine how *Mentega Terbang* constructs representations of Islam through its storyline, character portrayals, dialogues, and symbolic visual elements. Narrative analysis is widely used in film and media studies to uncover how meaning is produced, negotiated, and communicated through narrative structures (Bal, 2017; Riessman, 2008). This approach enables researchers to investigate not only what is represented in a film, but also how ideological meanings are embedded within plot development, characterization, dialogue, and visual semiotics (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010; Chatman, 1980). The method is particularly suitable for analysing ideological representations in cinema, as films often function as cultural texts that reflect, negotiate, and challenge dominant social values and hegemonic discourses.

The primary unit of analysis in this study was the scene, defined as a continuous sequence of actions occurring within a specific narrative setting or interaction. Secondary units of analysis included character dialogues, visual symbolism, religious references, and interactions involving ideological or theological conflict. The film, with a total runtime of 1 hour and 43 minutes, was viewed repeatedly to ensure analytical rigour and accuracy. Repeated viewings are a standard procedure in qualitative film analysis, allowing researchers to identify subtle narrative patterns, ideological tensions, and symbolic cues that may not have been immediately evident during initial observation (Rose, 2016).

During each viewing session, detailed analytical notes and memos were recorded focusing on several narrative dimensions, including plot progression, character development, dialogue relating to religion and belief systems, symbolic representations associated with Islam and religious identity, and moments of narrative tension that challenged or subverted dominant religious norms within the Malaysian sociocultural context. Although the entire film was examined holistically, analytical emphasis was placed on scenes containing explicit or implicit references to Islamic discourse, apostasy, interfaith interaction, institutional religious authority, and ideological conflict. These scenes were selected purposively due to their relevance to the study's objective of examining how the film constructs alternative discourses surrounding Islam.

Following the viewing phase, the study undertook thematic coding guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for qualitative thematic analysis. The coding process began with open coding, whereby recurring narrative patterns, ideological tensions, symbolic religious elements, and counter-hegemonic representations were identified across the selected scenes. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories through constant comparison, before being refined into final themes. This iterative process enabled themes to emerge inductively from the film text rather than

being imposed a priori. The coding process ultimately generated several major thematic categories, including apostasy and personal autonomy, interfaith parallels, alternative theological perspectives, and critiques of institutional religious authority.

The study also incorporated contextual interpretation, which is essential in cultural and ideological film analysis (Hall, 1997; Kellner, 1995). Interpretation was conducted by relating narrative structures, character portrayals, dialogues, and symbolic imagery to broader sociocultural and political discourses surrounding Islam in Malaysia. Particular attention was given to how the film negotiates hegemonic understandings of Islam, challenges dominant religious narratives, and presents counter-hegemonic perspectives through its narrative construction and cinematic representation. This interpretive approach allows the analysis to move beyond textual description by situating the film within Malaysia's socio-religious landscape, particularly concerning the institutionalisation of Islam, the role of religious authorities, and sensitivities surrounding religious pluralism and religious identity. To enhance methodological rigour and analytical transparency, the researcher maintained continuous engagement with the film through repeated viewing sessions, analytical memo writing, and systematic comparison between emerging themes and existing scholarship on religion, ideology, and Malaysian cinema. By combining narrative analysis, thematic coding, and contextual interpretation, this study provides a comprehensive qualitative framework for understanding how *Mentega Terbang* constructs and negotiates alternative representations of Islam within contemporary Malaysian cinema.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section critically examines how *Mentega Terbang* challenges religious hegemony and dominant norms within the Malay Muslim society. Through its narrative, the film engages with sensitive issues such as apostasy, reincarnation, and interfaith relations, while also questioning religious authority and societal expectations surrounding faith and identity.

Apostasy and the crisis of faith

The issue of apostasy is sensitively but provocatively handled in several key scenes. A significant moment takes place at 1:17:39, when Aisyah, in a dream sequence, tries to convince her dying mother to convert to Hinduism. She feels that through reincarnation, they could remain together even after death:

Aisyah: “*Why do you have to go, mama? ... Did you think about changing your religion? To be reincarnated... you can still be here with me, mama.*”

Before her mother could respond, Aisyah interrupts by challenging her mother's faith:

Aisyah: “*Mama, how do you know that Islam is right?*”

This depicts Aisyah's internal struggle and her growing doubts about her faith, particularly concerning the afterlife. Following her mother's death, another crucial conversation takes place between Aisyah and her father (1:35:06), where he openly expresses his support for her to explore other religions if she feels compelled to do so:

Father: *"If there is any other faith that speaks to you... go ahead, dear. I trust you."*

This dialogue presents faith as an individual spiritual journey rather than a rigid inherited identity, reflecting a liberal and existential understanding of religion. The scene challenges hegemonic constructions of the Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia, where Islam is institutionally tied to ethnicity and citizenship. Hall (1997) argues that representation is closely linked to power because it shapes which identities become normalized or marginalized. The father's calm tone and emotional openness further disrupt dominant patriarchal and religious expectations commonly associated with Muslim family structures in Malaysian media. Cinematically, the use of medium shots creates emotional intimacy and equality between the characters, reinforcing mutual trust rather than hierarchical authority (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). The film therefore frames religious exploration as a personal and reflective process rather than a moral transgression.

Islam and Christianity: Portraying parallels and complexities

Mentega Terbang repeatedly constructs Islam and Christianity as interconnected rather than oppositional belief systems. At 03:28, Aisyah discusses a Bible verse with her parents, and her father acknowledges that both Christianity and Islam contain diverse schools of thought. This dialogue challenges exclusivist understandings of religious truth by presenting religious identity as fluid and interpretive, rather than fixed. Through Hall's representation theory, the scene destabilizes binary constructions between "self" and "other," where Islam is often positioned as singularly true while other religions are viewed as fundamentally different (Hall, 1997). The domestic setting, warm lighting, and medium close-up framing further normalize interfaith discussion within the Muslim household, presenting theological plurality as ordinary rather than threatening.

Similarly, at 16:10, Aisyah's father draws parallels between Islam and Christianity by suggesting that both religions promote moral goodness and promise rewards in the afterlife. This comparative framing reflects a universalistic spiritual discourse that prioritizes ethical values over doctrinal exclusivity. Barthes (1977) argues that cultural texts construct myths that normalize particular worldviews; here, the film promotes a myth of interfaith moral commonality that contrasts with dominant exclusivist narratives. The scene's calm pacing and balanced dialogue structure avoid privileging either religion, further reinforcing the film's emphasis on theological openness and religious coexistence. A dialogue at 59:00 between Aisyah and her Christian neighbor, Esther, further reinforces this interfaith perspective:

Esther: *"Islam and Christianity are like siblings—lots of similarities but always quarrelling."*
(laughing)

Although presented humorously, the dialogue carries significant ideological implications by framing religious conflict not as absolute opposition, but as tension within shared origins and similarities. Through casual conversation and humour, the film makes interfaith comparison more emotionally accessible to audiences. Fiske (1987) argues that media texts often encode ideological meanings through ordinary interactions, allowing complex ideas to appear natural and relatable. The use of eye-level shots, relaxed body language, and laughter further creates equality and empathy between the characters, avoiding hierarchical authority. The scene therefore functions as a counter-hegemonic representation that challenges exclusivist religious narratives and promotes a more pluralistic understanding of faith relations in Malaysia.

Reincarnation: An alternative to the Islamic afterlife

Reincarnation, presented as an alternative spiritual framework that contrasts with dominant Islamic understandings of the afterlife, is a recurring theme throughout the film. Introduced to the concept by her Hindu classmate, Suresh, Aisyah becomes increasingly fascinated by the possibility of life beyond conventional Islamic teachings. At 44:45, she asks her mother:

Aisyah: *“Have you ever thought, what if there’s something else besides heaven?”*

This question reflects not merely curiosity, but also emotional uncertainty and a search for spiritual continuity. Hall (1997) argues that meaning is constructed through discourse and cultural negotiation rather than fixed truth. By presenting reincarnation sympathetically through Aisyah’s grief, the film frames non-Islamic beliefs as emotionally meaningful rather than inherently deviant or threatening. The use of soft lighting, contemplative pacing, and close-up shots further emphasizes Aisyah’s emotional vulnerability, encouraging audiences to engage with the scene affectively rather than doctrinally.

This theme culminates again at 1:41:47, when Aisyah and her father visit her mother’s grave and a butterfly lands on the tombstone. Smiling, Aisyah believes the butterfly may represent her mother’s reincarnation. The butterfly functions as a recurring visual metaphor for spiritual continuity beyond dominant Islamic conceptions of the afterlife. Rather than explicitly endorsing reincarnation, the film constructs emotional ambiguity through symbolic imagery and quiet pacing, shifting attention from doctrinal certainty toward the emotional and existential dimensions of religious experience. Through this symbolism, the film subtly legitimizes alternative spiritual imagination within the Malaysian Muslim context.

Questioning the authority of JAKIM

At 1:00:20, a conversation between Aisyah and Esther directly criticizes institutional religious authority. Discussing religious conversion, Esther highlights the difficulties that Aisyah would face, citing the restrictions imposed by JAKIM. Aisyah expresses

frustration at being trapped in a religion she was born into, suggesting that such regulations are put in place not so much to protect faith but mainly to impose social control:

Aisyah: “*Maybe it’s just to make people’s lives harder.*”

This scene portrays both JAKIM and, by implication, Islam itself, as limiting personal freedom. The film constructs institutional religious authority through dialogue marked by frustration, hesitation, and emotional tension. Rather than presenting JAKIM through direct visual confrontation, the narrative relies on interpersonal conversation and subjective emotional experience to represent institutional control as something embedded within everyday life. This indirect narrative strategy allows the film to critique religious bureaucracy not through overt political opposition, but through the personal anxieties and emotional constraints experienced by the protagonist. Such characterization positions institutional authority as a pervasive ideological structure shaping individual identity and religious autonomy.

Depiction of practices prohibited in Islam

At 12:42, Aisyah fondly pets her neighbour’s dog, despite casual contact with dogs generally being discouraged within Shafi’i jurisprudence unless justified by necessity. Later, at 56:07, she eats a pork bun, openly violating Islamic dietary laws, while comparing her action to her Hindu friend Suresh consuming beef. Through these acts, Aisyah symbolically challenges religious prohibitions that she perceives as arbitrary or restrictive. Rather than framing these moments as outright rebellion, the film presents them as acts of personal and ideological negotiation. The scene’s restrained pacing, reflective facial expressions, and conversational tone encourage audiences to reflect on how religious boundaries are socially internalized and personally negotiated within everyday life.

The film further frames institutional religion not merely as spiritual guidance, but also as a mechanism of social regulation and control. Through Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, institutions maintain dominance by normalizing ideological values within everyday life (Gramsci, 1971). *Mentega Terbang* represents religious authority as part of a broader hegemonic structure that regulates identity, belief, and personal autonomy. Rather than depicting direct political resistance, the narrative emphasizes emotional frustration and psychological tension, illustrating how institutional authority operates affectively and socially. The use of conversational intimacy and medium close-up shots visually communicates the emotional burden of religious regulation.

Hall (1997) argues that representation shapes how power is socially understood and experienced; here, institutional authority is portrayed as pervasive, emotionally restrictive, and embedded within ordinary life. Through this subtle yet resonant critique, the film positions religious bureaucracy as a hegemonic force shaping both public behavior and personal spiritual freedom. The film’s representation of institutional religious authority also reflects broader structures of media and religious regulation within Malaysia. Mohamed and Azzman (2018) argue that the Islamisation of Malaysian media has

been closely tied to institutional control and the normalization of dominant Islamic values within public discourse. In this context, *Mentega Terbang*'s alternative representations of spirituality and religious questioning may be understood as counter-hegemonic disruptions to established religious narratives within the mainstream Malaysian media culture.

Within this analytical framework, it is important to emphasize that the study does not seek to evaluate the theological correctness of the beliefs, practices, or interpretations represented in *Mentega Terbang*. Rather, the analysis focuses on how the film constructs and negotiates meanings surrounding religion, identity, and authority within a particular socio-cultural context. Islam is therefore approached primarily as a representational and discursive framework within the filmic text rather than as an object of doctrinal assessment. The emphasis lies on examining how cinematic narrative, symbolism, characterization, and emotional framing articulate tensions between dominant religious discourse and alternative forms of spiritual subjectivity within contemporary Malaysian society.

At the same time, these findings should be understood within the scope and limitations of textual film analysis. The interpretations presented are derived from the narrative and cinematic construction of a single film and therefore do not aim to make definitive claims regarding the Malaysian society, public opinion, or broader transformations in religious discourse. Instead, the study focuses on how such tensions and alternative representations are articulated within the filmic text itself. Broader conclusions concerning audience interpretation, social impact, or changes in religious attitudes would require additional empirical approaches such as audience reception studies, interviews, ethnographic research, or comparative analysis involving multiple media texts. Nevertheless, the study highlights how contemporary Malaysian cinema may function as a site of ideological negotiation where dominant religious narratives are symbolically questioned, reinterpreted, or contested through cinematic representation.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the film *Mentega Terbang* represents an act of resistance against dominant religious and socio-political discourses which prevail in Malaysia by dealing with sensitive themes such as apostasy and reincarnation, and by portraying the rigidity of institutionalized religion, the film challenges the idea that there is only one correct interpretation of Islam, namely the state-enforced interpretation. Through the main character's personal journey of questioning and negotiating faith, the film places emphasis on individual autonomy and spiritual exploration over adherence to deeply rooted institutional norms.

At the same time, the controversy surrounding *Mentega Terbang* also reflects the broader sensitivities associated with religion, identity, and social harmony within Malaysia's multicultural and multi-religious society. Given the politically and socially sensitive nature of religious discourse in Malaysia, concerns regarding the film's

potential impact on public understanding of Islam and interreligious relations may also help explain the rationale behind institutional responses such as censorship and banning. In this regard, Beng (2015) argues that Malaysian films engaging openly with sensitive issues involving religion, ethnicity, and morality frequently generate public and institutional tensions because such representations challenge established cultural expectations and dominant constructions of Malay-Muslim identity. The controversy surrounding *Mentega Terbang* therefore reflects not only ideological resistance and counter-hegemonic representation, but also broader anxieties concerning the negotiation of religion, identity, and acceptable public discourse within Malaysian media culture.

Rather than evaluating the theological validity of the film's representations, this study has examined how *Mentega Terbang* functions as a cinematic site of ideological negotiation where dominant religious narratives are symbolically questioned, reinterpreted, and contested through narrative construction, symbolism, and emotional framing. The study therefore highlights the role of contemporary Malaysian cinema as a space where issues surrounding religion, authority, identity, and personal belief may be represented and negotiated, even within highly regulated cultural environments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was funded by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia under the International Matching Grant project, with the reference code USIM/MG/UMY/FKP/SEPADAN-A/71924

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