

## Misrepresentation of Islam in Mentega Terbang: A Narrative Analysis

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.61796/icossh.v2i2.52>



### Sections Info

#### Article history:

Submitted: February 10, 2025

Final Revised: March 28, 2025

Accepted: April 14, 2025

Published: May 24, 2025

#### Keywords:

Mentega terbang

Narrative analysis

Misrepresentation

Islam

Media representation

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study investigates the misrepresentation of Islam in the controversial Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang* through a detailed narrative analysis. The film, centered on a young Muslim girl's spiritual exploration and questioning of religious boundaries, has ignited significant public discourse and backlash, particularly within Muslim communities. The objective is to examine how *Mentega Terbang* portrays Islamic values, beliefs, and practices, and to identify elements within the narrative that may challenge or contradict mainstream Islamic teachings. **Method:** A qualitative narrative analysis was employed to examine the film's storyline, character development, dialogue, and symbolism. This approach enabled the identification of underlying messages and potential misrepresentations related to Islamic principles. **Results:** The findings reveal that *Mentega Terbang* presents a complex and sometimes conflicting depiction of Islam, often deviating from established religious teachings. These portrayals may contribute to misunderstandings and reinforce negative perceptions among viewers. **Novelty:** This study offers a nuanced perspective on media representation of religion in Malaysia, highlighting how cinematic narratives can influence public perceptions of Islam. It contributes to media and religious studies by addressing the gap in understanding how fictional media shapes interfaith understanding in multicultural Muslim-majority societies. Recommendations are offered for responsible religious representation in film.

## INTRODUCTION

*Mentega Terbang* is a film that incited considerable controversy among Malaysian culture, especially among Muslims, in 2023 [1]. The dispute culminated when the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) formally designated the film as prohibited (haram) for exhibition in the nation. The controversy arose from multiple parts in the film that were alleged to portray aspects of Islamic faith (aqidah) in a poor and misleading light [2].

*Mentega Terbang*, directed by Khairi Anwar in conjunction with Arjun Thanaraju, Vishnu Varman, and Ti Teng Hui, premiered at the Jogja-Netpac Asian Film Festival in 2021 [3]. Nonetheless, it only garnered significant notice among the Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia in 2023, subsequent to its distribution on the streaming platform Viu. Zabidi Mohamed, the scriptwriter, was one of the initial individuals to vocally oppose the film's exhibition, asserting that it addressed matters of Islamic faith in a manner that was profoundly sensitive and contentious [4].

The film faced significant criticism from Islamic authorities, notably the former Mufti of Kuala Lumpur, Datuk Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, who contended that it

presented numerous sensitive topics pertaining to aqidah [5]. In Malaysia, most Muslims follow the doctrines of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, characterised by a rigorous commitment to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), informed by the methodologies of the salaf and khalaf, specifically the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools of thought [6]. The film is regarded as diverging from the fundamental principles of Islam as adhered to by the majority of Malaysian Muslims, especially those who subscribe to the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence (mazhab).

In Malaysia, Islam is not only the religion of the majority but also the religion of the Federation, as stipulated in Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution. Consequently, the representation of Islam and Muslims is deeply embedded within the nation's state identity, cultural fabric, and governance structures [7].

In both public discourse and media portrayals, the Malay identity is often closely linked with Islam. According to Article 160 of the Constitution, a Malay is constitutionally defined as someone who professes Islam, speaks the Malay language, and adheres to Malay customs. This intersection of religion and ethnicity has contributed to the portrayal of Islam not merely as a personal faith but as an essential component of ethnic and cultural identity in Malaysia [8].

Media representations – particularly in alternative and digital media spaces – tend to depict Islam through a conservative lens, where religious institutions and figures are positioned as authoritative sources of moral and communal guidance [9]. Furthermore, deviations from mainstream Islamic interpretations are frequently framed as threats or forms of misguidance, especially within narratives shaped by state-aligned media.

Considering that film is a powerful medium—though not always comprehensive—in shaping viewers' personality, beliefs, and moral values [10], it is essential to conduct a detailed analysis of the controversial scenes in *Mentega Terbang*. This study seeks to investigate how Islam is represented in the film and whether such representations constitute a misrepresentation of the religion – particularly in relation to the understanding and practices of Islam as embraced by the Muslim community in the Malaysian context.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a narrative analysis approach to examine the representation of Islam in the film *Mentega Terbang*. Narrative analysis is particularly suited for exploring how meaning is constructed through storytelling, including the structure of the plot, character development, dialogue, and visual elements [11]. By focusing on how the film tells its story, this method allows for a deeper understanding of the values, ideologies, and messages embedded within the narrative.

The researcher conducted an in-depth viewing of the entire film, which has a runtime of approximately 1 hour and 43 minutes. During the viewing process, close attention was paid to various narrative elements such as characterisation, dialogue, key scenes, plot development, and symbolic representations. Notes were taken systematically

to document significant scenes that appeared to reflect or challenge Islamic teachings, particularly those aligned with mainstream Malaysian Islamic thought.

Following the initial viewing, the film was segmented into key scenes for further thematic analysis. These scenes were then categorised into emergent themes based on recurring patterns, ideological cues, and representations of religious belief and identity. This thematic coding allowed the researcher to identify moments within the film that could be interpreted as misrepresenting or contesting Islamic values, especially those commonly practiced and accepted within the Malaysian context.

The narrative analysis also considered contextual factors, such as Malaysia's sociocultural and religious landscape, to better understand how the film's portrayal might be perceived by local audiences. This qualitative method provides a nuanced framework to explore the film's deeper messages and their potential impact on public understanding of Islam [12].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Results*

In this study, there are several scenes that appear to portray Islam and Muslims in a misleading manner. One such scene involves a discussion comparing Islam and Christianity.

There are several scenes that attempt to equate all religions, particularly Islam and Christianity. For example, in the scene at minute 03:28, Aisyah is shown discussing a verse from the Bible with her parents, which she received from one of their neighbors, Aunty Esther. During their discussion, her father mentioned that in Christianity, only those of the Catholic denomination practice "sins confession" – the act of confessing one's sins to the church, as often portrayed in films. Meanwhile, Protestants do not observe this ritual.

Aisyah then remarked that Christianity is a very complex religion due to the existence of many denominations. Her father responded by comparing this to Islam, stating that Islam also has four different schools of thought (*mazhab*). This scene attempts to portray Islam and Christianity as being similar in terms of their "complexity." However, in reality, Islam is not a complicated religion. The existence of four schools of thought in Islam is the result of scholarly differences (*khilaf*) among the *ulama* (Islamic scholars). This diversity does not complicate the religion; rather, as mentioned in a hadith of the Prophet, the difference of opinions among his *ummah* (community) is a mercy.

In addition, there are several scenes that appear to be inconsistent with Islamic teachings, particularly those of the Shafi'i school of thought, which is followed by the majority of Muslims in Malaysia. For example, in the scene at minute 12:42, Aisyah is seen affectionately petting and cuddling her neighbor Aunty Esther's dog. This clearly contradicts the teachings of the Shafi'i school. As explained by the former Kuala Lumpur Mufti, Dr. Zulkifli Al-Bakri, scholars of the Shafi'i school permit the keeping of dogs only under specific circumstances – namely, for hunting, guarding crops, and protecting livestock. Moreover, intentionally touching a dog without a valid reason or necessity,

thereby deliberately exposing oneself to impurity (*najasa*), is considered prohibited in Islam.

In addition, at timestamp 1:00:20, Aisyah and Aunt Esther are seen discussing the issue of religious conversion. Aunt Esther shares with Aisyah how she converted from Hinduism to Christianity. Aisyah appears to be amazed by this and remarks that, for her as a Muslim, it is not that easy to change her religion—even after having read about and learned other religions besides Islam. Simply put, Aisyah is impressed that Aunt Esther had the option to change her religion, while she herself does not have that choice. Aunt Esther then responds, saying that of course Aisyah cannot simply convert because she would face consequences from JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia). Aisyah expresses her discontent by suggesting that being born into Islam feels like being forced into a religion without ever having had a choice. She questions the rationale behind such restrictions and cynically remarks that the intention might simply be to make people's lives more difficult. Aisyah's statement reflects a deep sense of pressure and frustration towards JAKIM, which is portrayed in the film as an institution preventing her from converting out of Islam—a notion that strays far from correct Islamic doctrine. In fact, Aisyah appears disillusioned not only with JAKIM but also with Islam itself. This scene gives the impression that both Islam and JAKIM function as oppressive forces that restrict an individual's freedom of belief.

Lastly, the characters of Aisyah and her parents are portrayed in a manner that does not accurately reflect the true characteristics of Muslims who fully adhere to Islamic teachings, particularly within the Malaysian context. For instance, Aisyah's father is shown with a tattoo, despite the fact that tattooing is clearly prohibited in Islam. Additionally, both Aisyah and her mother are depicted wearing clothing that does not fully cover their *aurat*, which contrasts with the norms observed by the majority of Muslims in Malaysia. Such portrayals can create confusion among viewers and potentially lead to misunderstandings about what constitutes appropriate behavior and appearance for Muslims. This highlights the inconsistency in the depiction of Muslim characters in the film, especially in terms of their outward representation.

### ***Discussion***

The film depicts various scenarios that seemingly represent Islamic doctrines and organisations in manners that could result in misinterpretation, especially for audiences lacking familiarity with the faith or the Malaysian cultural milieu.

A significant instance is a conversation between Aisyah and Aunt Esther, where Aisyah articulates her displeasure with her perceived lack of autonomy in selecting her faith. Her assertion—"It's as though we are compelled to adhere to a religion, with no initial choice"—conveys a sentiment of disillusionment towards JAKIM, depicting the institution, and by extension, Islam, as an impediment to individual liberty. This depiction is profoundly flawed and diverges markedly from the authentic tenets of Islam. Islam fundamentally prioritises advice, compassion, and education over coercion. The Qur'an asserts, "There is no compulsion in religion" (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:256), emphasising that faith must originate from genuine inner conviction.

In the Malaysian context, the participation of religious authorities like JAKIM in apostasy issues is not meant to be punitive. It is an integral component of a systematic process of counselling and support, designed to ensure that individuals comprehensively grasp the ramifications of departing from the religion. Islam perceives faith as a lifelong dedication that includes both individual belief and communal obligation. Consequently, these institutional safeguards are intended not to suppress, but to uphold the dignity and integrity of religious belief – especially within a legal framework where Islam occupies a unique status as the religion of the Federation [13], [14].

Furthermore, the video seeks to establish analogies between Islam and Christianity regarding religious intricacy. In a particular scenario, Aisyah and her father engage in a dialogue over the existence of various denominations within Christianity, drawing a comparison to the four schools of thought (*mazhab*) in Islam. Although the scene appears to indicate a parallel in complexity, it neglects a crucial divergence. The diversity of opinion in Islam reflects intellectual conversation and jurisprudential depth rather than confusion. The four *mazhab* are founded on credible interpretations of Islamic texts, and the presence of divergent scholarly perspectives is regarded as a manifestation of mercy and adaptability for the *ummah*.

Moreover, several exchanges in the film are at odds with fundamental Islamic principles. The figure Aisyah is depicted gently stroking a dog and thereafter consuming pork – both actions are explicitly forbidden in Islam according to the Shafi'i school of thought, adhered to by the majority of Muslims in Malaysia. These actions, depicted without context or elucidation, threaten to normalise behaviours that are incongruent with Islamic practice. They may also mislead viewers into perceiving such activities as permissible inside the religion.

Finally, the depiction of Muslim characters exacerbates the likelihood of misunderstandings. Aisyah's father is illustrated with a tattoo, while both Aisyah and her mother are portrayed in attire that inadequately conceals their *aurat*, contradicting prevalent standards among Malaysian Muslims. Such representations may inadvertently misguide viewers regarding the standards of appropriate Islamic conduct and appearance, particularly in a community where religious identity is intricately linked to external display.

These examples illustrate how specific artistic decisions in the film – although possibly aimed at fostering inclusion or stimulating dialogue – may unintentionally misrepresent Islamic doctrines and principles. Filmmakers bear the need to provide truthful and respectful portrayals when addressing religious themes. Misrepresentation not only compromises the narrative's authenticity but may also facilitate the normalisation of activities that contradict the religious views of the target audience. A critical and culturally educated approach is required for the production and study of religiously related media output [15], [16].

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding** : This study reveals that the film *Mentega Terbang* inadequately addresses religious themes, resulting in portrayals of Islam that deviate from its doctrinal foundations and misrepresent the lived experiences of Malaysian Muslims. Such misrepresentation risks distorting public perceptions and undermining religious understanding in a multi-religious society. **Implication** : The findings underscore the critical responsibility of filmmakers and media practitioners to ensure religious depictions are accurate, respectful, and contextually sensitive, as these representations have significant implications for interfaith harmony, national identity, and public trust in religious institutions. **Limitation** : The study is constrained by its reliance on a qualitative narrative approach focused solely on *Mentega Terbang*, without incorporating audience reception data or stakeholder interviews, which limits the generalizability and depth of the conclusions. **Future Research** : Subsequent studies should adopt a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating audience analysis, stakeholder interviews, and comparative studies with other religious-themed films to gain a more comprehensive understanding of media influence on religious perception and social cohesion in Malaysia.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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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