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MALAY IDENTITY AND CINEMATIC REALISM: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF *MUNAFIK* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the criticism that commercially oriented box office films often prioritize financial gain over the authentic portrayal of cultural identity. Focusing on the representation of Malay identity, this study examines the Malaysian film *Munafik* (2016). The analysis is guided by Mieke Bal's cultural analysis (2002), André Bazin's cinematic realism (1967), and Abdul Latif Bakar's (2012) concept of Malay identity, applied to the film's thematic, narrative, and visual elements. Employing a qualitative approach through document analysis and descriptive discussion, the study explores how Malay identity is constructed through the main characters and their struggles with supernatural disorders in a postmodern context. The findings reveal four key markers of Malay identity: strong Islamic faith and practices, respect for traditional healing methods, emphasis on family values, and the tension between modernity and spirituality. These elements demonstrate that *Munafik* integrates cultural authenticity with commercial appeal, proving that box office success and dignified cultural representation are not mutually exclusive. This study underscores Malay cinema's role in sustaining cultural identity, urging policymakers, filmmakers, and scholars to advance authentic representation, educational value, and interdisciplinary research on identity in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: Malay identity, cinematic realism, cultural representation, Malaysian cinema, box office

INTRODUCTION

The objectives of the study are twofold: first, to identify the specific markers of Malay identity embedded in *Munafik*; and second, to analyse how these markers are expressed through the film's thematic, narrative, and visual dimensions. By achieving these objectives, the study provides a clearer understanding of how Malay identity is constructed and communicated in a commercially successful film, thereby contributing to broader discussions on culture, representation, and national cinema in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1.0 Representation of Malay Identity in Film

1.1 *Cultural and National Identity Frameworks*

To understand the interplay between religion, nationhood, and identity, it is essential to examine the broader cultural and national myths that shape these concepts (Radovic, 2014). Cinema is central to this process, functioning as a medium through which modern myths are narrated and reinterpreted. Filmmakers act as contemporary myth-makers, with images, symbols, and mise-en-scène carrying “culturally determined connotations” that can shift across contexts. This underscores that identity in cinema is fluid, negotiated, and culturally situated rather than fixed.

In this study, the analysis of identity draws on Bal's (2002) narratology and Bazin's (1967) realist film theory. These frameworks are introduced here to show how they complement one another in addressing the research objectives: Bal highlights how meaning is generated through narrative and visual structures, while Bazin illuminates how realism and film form shape spectatorship. Chapter 3 will focus only on the process of applying these frameworks to the film under study.

1.2 *Conceptualisations of Malay Identity*

Scholars have offered competing conceptualisations of Malay identity beyond Abdul Latif Bakar's (2012) model. For instance, Siti Zamrah Isa and Che Ibrahim Hj Salleh (2014) emphasise Zaaba's perspective, which anchors Malay identity in language, Islam, and education. Other approaches stress culture, history, or communal practices. This study adopts Abdul Latif's (2012) conceptualisation because it synthesises historical loyalty to the Malay monarchy and the practice of good manners and values—traits observable in contemporary Malay society and relevant to cinematic representation. Zainal Abidin Borhan (as cited in Abdul Latif Bakar et al., 2012) similarly documents Malay identity as a record of customs, behaviour, and personality rather than physical traits, aligning with this study's focus on character portrayal.

Malay identity thus emerges from the expression of one's mind and soul, influencing speech, behaviour, and habits. Abdullah Hassan (2009) notes the reciprocal relationship between individual and community identity, where social and cultural dynamics leave a profound imprint on both.

1.3 Representation of Malay Identity in Film

Because cinema reflects and influences identities, the study of Malay identity in films reveals how individual and communal identities are constructed within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. In Malay box office films, character portrayal is particularly significant. Characters drive the story, embody cultural traits, and enable audience identification. As Seger (1990, p. 4) argues, "character was the key to a workable story...If the characters don't work, the story and theme will not be enough to involve audiences and readers." Aristotle similarly stressed that action defines character, while Boulton (1975) and Bennett (Hashim Awang, 1984) highlighted that credible, well-crafted characters mirror real human experiences.

Accordingly, characters in Malay box office films not only advance the narrative but also personify the cultural and social traits that define Malay identity. Their portrayal allows audiences to engage with Malay values and culture, making characterisation a vital element in representing Malay identity on screen.

This study therefore examines Malay identity through document analysis of *Munafik* (2016), integrating Abdul Latif's (2012) conceptualisation with Bal's (2002) and Bazin's (1967) frameworks. Together these provide a critical lens for analysing how thematic, narrative, and visual dimensions express specific markers of Malay identity in a commercially successful film (*Figure 1*).

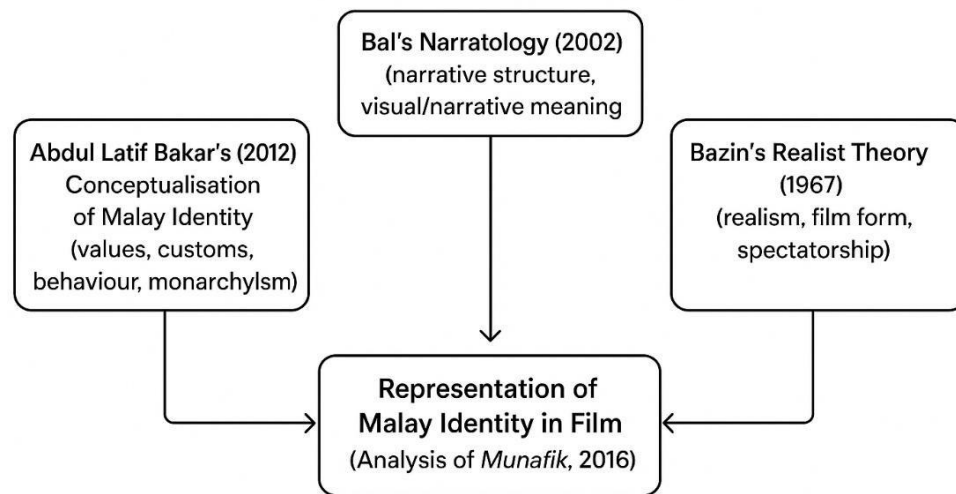


Figure 1. Integrated Analytical Framework for Analysing Malay Identity in Film

METHODOLOGY

1.0 Research Design and Rationale

This study employs a to examine how Malay identity is represented in *Munafik* (2016) The qualitative method is selected for its capacity to explore meanings, cultural symbols, and narrative structures that cannot be reduced to numeric measures. It allows for in-depth interpretation of texts, visual signs, and contextual relationships—a fitting approach for film and identity studies.

2.0 Film Selection: Criteria and Justification

To ensure that the case studies are both relevant and analytically rich, *Munafik* (2016) was selected using three criteria:

1. Commercial and cultural impact; the film must have achieved wide viewership and generated public discourse (e.g. box office success, media commentary).
2. Thematic relevance; the film must engage centrally with Malay Muslim cultural or social questions (religion, tradition, identity).
3. Representational richness – the film should offer multiple layers (narrative, symbolic, visual) that permit fine-grained analysis.

Using these criteria, *Munafik* was chosen as a primary case for its strong public resonance, its integration of Islamic themes and horror elements, and its engagement with commonly debated dimensions of contemporary Malay-Muslim identity (moral crisis, supernatural belief, religious authority). Its popularity and cultural visibility make it an exemplary case for exploring dominant and contested identity discourses.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

Al's Narrative Theory foregrounds the structuring principles of storytelling, particularly the organization of plot, the sequencing of events, and the coherence necessary to sustain narrative intelligibility (Al, 2003). Central to this framework is the concept of focalization, which interrogates whose perspective is privileged within the narrative and how shifts in viewpoint recalibrate interpretive possibilities for the audience (Al, 2003; Genette, 1980).

Equally significant is the text–context interplay, wherein narratives are situated within broader socio-cultural and historical formations, thereby revealing their embeddedness in dominant myths and ideologies (Al, 2003). In parallel, Bazin's Realist Film Theory positions *mise en scene* which comprising spatial arrangement, lighting, set design, and the positioning of actors which as a crucial site of cinematic meaning (Bazin, 1967). His theorization emphasizes the film's capacity to depict reality, not as a mere replication of the external world, but as a mode of representation calibrated against the viewer's horizon of expectations (Bazin, 1967; Andrew, 1976). Furthermore, Bazin attributes interpretive weight to symbolism and imagery, wherein culturally resonant visual motifs operate as vehicles for thematic and ideological articulation (Bazin, 1967).

4.0 Data Sources and Document Analysis

The principal data are the two films in their entirety (visual, audio, dialogue). Complementary documents include screen play and critical reviews, press coverage. Document analysis is used to triangulate intentions and contextual influences. Following Bowen (2009), document analysis is treated as a systematic procedure:

documents are examined for content, credibility, and relevance to issues of identity, context, and narrative. Particular attention is given to how filmmakers articulate cultural or ideological intentions explicitly (in interviews, press) and implicitly (in script drafts).

5.0 Data Analysis Procedure

To enhance transparency, reproducibility, and analytical rigour, the following coding and thematic analysis procedure was adopted:

1. Familiarization
Repeated film viewings and close reading of documents to immerse in the narrative, visuals, and thematic patterns. Detailed memos and annotations were kept throughout.
2. Open Coding
Initial line-by-line or scene-by-scene coding to identify concepts and recurring patterns (e.g. “religious ritual,” “tradition vs modernity,” “supernatural threat,” “gender roles”). Codes were descriptive and emergent.
3. Axial Coding
Codes were organized into thematic groupings. For example, codes related to religious practice, structure of authority, and moral tension were clustered under a theme “Islam and moral order.” Subthemes emerged, e.g. “ritual purity” vs “mystical reform.”
4. Thematic Refinement and Comparison
Themes were refined through iterative coding, constant comparison (within and across the two film cases), and alignment with the theoretical framework (narrative and realist dimensions). Discrepancies or anomalies were flagged for further interpretation.
5. Comparative Analysis
Themes and visual-narrative elements from both films were compared. The comparison highlighted shared motifs, divergences in focalization or realism, and how each film negotiates Malay identity differently.
6. Contextual and Interpretive Layering
Final themes were interpreted in light of socio-cultural, historical, and ideological contexts (e.g. Malaysian Islamization discourse, postcolonial nationalism). Document evidence (e.g. director’s remarks, press interviews) supported or challenged film, based interpretations.

All coding activities were documented in codebooks and memos, making them accessible for audit or replication. (In the full article submission, relevant codebook excerpts may be appended as supplementary material or a methodological appendix).

6.0 Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations

To increase credibility and dependability, several strategies were used:

1. Peer debriefing: colleagues familiar with film and culture studies reviewed coding decisions and interpretations.
2. Memo writing: reflexive memos captured decisions, uncertainties, and researcher positionality.
3. Triangulation: combining film text analysis, documents, and external discourse (press, criticism) to cross-check interpretations.
4. Reflexivity: the researcher acknowledges their cultural and interpretive standpoint, and how it may shape reading of identity discourses. These reflexive notes are circulated to reviewers and appended

where appropriate.

7.0 Limitations and Delimitations

While the study offers deep interpretive insight, it is delimited to *Munafik* (2016), hence not claiming generalizability. Interpretations are partial and culturally situated. The researcher's cultural standpoint may influence readings, though reflexivity and peer critique aim to mitigate bias.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

1.0 Thematic Analysis The Struggle of Faith and Religious Morality: "Hypocrite"

The film *Munafik* (2016) profoundly explores themes of Islamic faith, moral struggles, and supernatural beliefs, offering a nuanced portrayal of the central role of Islam in Malay identity. By delving into these themes, the film underscores the significance of religious devotion and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals within the Malay community. Through its narrative, *Munafik* (2016) not only engages its audience with a compelling story but also reflects the deeply ingrained religious and cultural values that define Malay society.

Osman (2016) articulates that "the protagonist's journey underscores the importance of faith and piety, resonating with the predominantly Muslim audience in Malaysia" (p. 592). This assertion highlights how the film's narrative resonates with the audience's own experiences and beliefs, reinforcing the cultural and spiritual ethos of the Malay Muslim community. The protagonist's struggles and eventual triumph through faith serve as a metaphor for the broader societal emphasis on religious adherence and moral integrity.

Furthermore, *Munafik* (2016) utilizes the supernatural as a narrative device to explore the intersection of faith and fear, depicting how religious belief provides a framework for understanding and confronting the unknown. The portrayal of supernatural elements not only adds to the film's dramatic tension but also serves to illustrate the pervasive influence of traditional beliefs and the supernatural in Malay culture. By integrating these elements, the film provides a rich, layered depiction of Malay identity, where religion and cultural heritage are intricately intertwined.

In sum, *Munafik* (2016) offers a comprehensive exploration of Malay identity through its focus on Islamic faith, moral struggles, and supernatural beliefs. The film's narrative and thematic content effectively capture the essence of Malay cultural and religious values, making it a resonant piece for its audience. This depth of portrayal underscores the importance of faith in personal and communal identity, as articulated by Osman (2016), and illustrates the powerful role of cinema in reflecting and shaping cultural narratives.

2.0 Narrative Structure

The narrative of *Munafik* (2016) centers around Ustaz Adam, a religious healer who faces a profound crisis of faith following a personal tragedy. This character arc not only drives the plot but also serves as a vehicle for exploring complex themes of faith, resilience, and redemption. As Ustaz Adam embarks on a journey to

aid a woman afflicted by an evil spirit, he encounters a series of moral and spiritual challenges that test his beliefs and fortitude. This storyline allows the film to delve into the intricate dynamics of faith and the human condition.

Hashim (2017) asserts, "The film's exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas provides a profound commentary on the contemporary Malay experience" (p. 234). This statement underscores the film's effectiveness in portraying the multifaceted nature of ethical and spiritual struggles within the context of modern Malay society. The narrative juxtaposes Ustaz Adam's turmoil with the broader societal issues, reflecting the pervasive influence of religious belief in guiding moral choices and actions.

Throughout the film, Ustaz Adam's character is confronted with the dichotomy between religious doctrine and human vulnerability. His efforts to reconcile his spiritual duties with his grief mirror the broader conflicts faced by many individuals in contemporary Malay society. The film employs this character's journey to illustrate the pervasive struggle between maintaining religious integrity and grappling with personal suffering and doubt.

Moreover, the supernatural elements in *Munafik* (2016) are not merely for dramatic effect but serve to symbolize the internal and external battles that Ustaz Adam faces. The evil spirit, representing the forces of darkness and despair, challenges his faith and moral convictions. By overcoming these supernatural adversities, Ustaz Adam's journey underscores the triumph of faith and righteousness over evil, reinforcing the film's moral and religious messages.

In essence, *Munafik* (2016) offers a rich, layered narrative that uses the character of Ustaz Adam to explore deep moral and ethical questions within the framework of Malay identity. The film's portrayal of his spiritual journey provides a compelling commentary on the role of faith in navigating personal and communal challenges. Hashim's (2017) observation highlights the film's capacity to resonate with contemporary audiences by addressing universal themes of faith, morality, and resilience through a distinctly Malay lens.

3.0 Character Analysis

Ustaz Adam's character in *Munafik* (2016) is emblematic of the profound moral and spiritual struggles that pervade modern Malay society. As a religious healer, his role is intrinsically tied to Islamic teachings and the expectations placed upon him by his community. However, his tragedy; the loss of his wife initiates a deep crisis of faith, challenging his ability to fulfill his religious duties. This conflict serves as a microcosm of the broader tensions experienced by many individuals who navigate the demands of faith alongside personal suffering and societal pressures.

The internal challenges faced by Ustaz Adam, such as his wavering belief and grief, reflect a core aspect of human experience within the Malay context. Islamic teachings, which are central to Malay cultural and moral values, often provide a framework for understanding and coping with life's adversities. However, Ustaz Adam's journey illustrates that even those deeply rooted in their faith are not immune to doubt and despair. His struggles highlight the dynamic and sometimes tumultuous relationship between personal faith and religious obligation.

Externally, Ustaz Adam confronts numerous challenges that test his spiritual resolve. The task of helping a woman possessed by an evil spirit forces him to engage with supernatural elements that are deeply embedded in Malay folklore and religious beliefs. This aspect of the narrative underscores the intersection of cultural heritage and religious practice, showing how traditional beliefs and Islamic teachings coexist and influence one another in contemporary Malay society.

The film's portrayal of Ustaz Adam's battles with evil forces serves as an allegory for the larger societal struggle against moral decay and spiritual corruption. His encounters with these malevolent entities are not just physical confrontations but represent the pervasive challenges to maintaining ethical integrity and religious piety in a modern world fraught with temptations and moral ambiguity. This duality of Ustaz Adam's fight, both personal and supernatural, mirrors the collective experience of many Malays who strive to uphold their cultural and religious values amidst rapidly changing societal norms.

Moreover, Ustaz Adam's eventual triumph over his internal and external adversities conveys a powerful message about the resilience of faith and the potential for spiritual renewal. His journey from doubt to reaffirmation of his beliefs provides a narrative of hope and redemption, emphasizing that steadfastness in faith can lead to overcoming even the most formidable obstacles. This resolution not only reinforces the importance of Islamic teachings in providing moral guidance but also highlights the role of personal agency in achieving spiritual and moral fulfillment.

In conclusion, Ustaz Adam's character in *Munafik* (2016) serves as a poignant representation of the moral and spiritual struggles that are intrinsic to modern Malay society. His journey underscores the pervasive influence of Islamic teachings on cultural and moral values while illustrating the complex interplay between personal faith and societal expectations. Through his story, the film offers a profound commentary on the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of faith in navigating life's challenges.

4.0 Visual Style and Cinematography

The film's dark and atmospheric cinematography plays a crucial role in amplifying the horror elements and accentuating the moral and spiritual themes woven throughout the narrative. According to Brown (2017), the stark contrasts between light and dark scenes visually encapsulate the battle between good and evil, faith and despair, which is central to the film's narrative. The deliberate use of shadows, muted color palettes, and strategic lighting not only creates an unsettling and foreboding atmosphere but also serves to mirror the internal turmoil of the characters, particularly Ustaz Adam. This visual style is instrumental in immersing the audience in the psychological and emotional depth of the story, fostering a sense of unease that underscores the pervasive presence of evil and the struggle between light and darkness, both literally and metaphorically (Ahmad, 2018).

The emphasis on darkness within the cinematography can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the characters' moral and spiritual dilemmas. The pervasive gloom and frequent use of chiaroscuro lighting techniques reflect themes of doubt, fear, and moral ambiguity. This visual darkness parallels Ustaz Adam's internal conflict as he navigates the complexities of his faith and personal loss. According to Brown (2017), "The stark contrasts between light and dark scenes visually encapsulate the battle between faith and despair, mirroring the protagonist's inner journey" (p. 98).

Moreover, the incorporation of traditional Islamic symbols and rituals significantly enhances the authenticity and depth of the film's portrayal of Malay identity. Elements such as Quranic recitations, prayer sequences, and religious artifacts are deeply embedded in the cultural and religious fabric of Malay society. These symbols and rituals are not merely aesthetic choices; they ground the film in a recognizable cultural and religious context, provide a sense of realism, and reinforce the significance of Islamic practices in the daily lives of the characters. As Harris (2020) argues, "The meticulous depiction of religious elements contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of Malay identity, underscoring the integral role of Islam in shaping the characters' moral compass and guiding their actions" (p. 211).

The depiction of these religious elements also deepens the thematic exploration of faith and morality. For instance, the recitation of Quranic verses during moments of crisis or confrontation with evil entities serves as a form of spiritual defense, reinforcing the power and sanctity of religious texts in providing solace and protection. Taylor (2018) states, "This thematic layering illustrates how religious faith can be both a source of strength and a guiding light in times of darkness, adding a profound dimension to the narrative" (p. 243). By highlighting the centrality of Islam in the characters' lives, the film underscores the integral role of religion in shaping their moral compass and guiding their actions. This portrayal is particularly evident in scenes where Ustaz Adam performs religious rites to combat supernatural forces, thereby intertwining his spiritual duties with his quest for redemption. The authenticity of these depictions resonates with the predominantly Muslim Malaysian audience, reaffirming their cultural and religious heritage (Jones, 2016).

Furthermore, the film's cinematographic and symbolic choices contribute to the construction of a collective cultural memory, preserving and propagating traditional beliefs and practices. By visually and narratively integrating these elements, the film acts as a cultural repository, ensuring that these aspects of Malay identity are conveyed to contemporary audiences and future generations. Anderson (2014) highlights the significance of this approach: "In the context of globalization and modernization, where traditional values may be overshadowed by secular influences, the film's authentic portrayal of religious practices helps maintain and reaffirm cultural heritage" (p. 87). The use of traditional Islamic symbols and rituals as narrative devices serves to deepen the thematic exploration of faith and morality. For instance, the recitation of Quranic verses during moments of crisis or confrontation with evil entities not only acts as a form of spiritual defense but also reinforces the power and sanctity of religious texts in providing solace and protection. This thematic layering adds a profound dimension to the narrative, illustrating how religious faith can be both a source of strength and a guiding light in times of darkness (Taylor, 2018).

In conclusion, the dark and atmospheric cinematography of *Munafik*, combined with the deliberate use of traditional Islamic symbols and rituals, significantly enhances the horror elements and underscores the moral and spiritual themes of the film. These cinematic techniques not only create a visually compelling and thematically rich narrative but also reinforce the central role of Islam in Malay identity. Through its authentic and evocative portrayal of religious practices and symbols, the film provides a profound commentary on the enduring power of faith and the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in contemporary Malay society (Green, 2019). The film's cinematographic and symbolic choices also contribute to the construction of a collective cultural memory, preserving and propagating traditional beliefs and practices. By visually and narratively integrating these elements, the film acts as a cultural repository, ensuring that these aspects of Malay identity are conveyed to contemporary audiences and future generations. This is particularly significant in the context of globalization and modernization, where traditional values and practices may be at risk of

being overshadowed by more secular influences (Anderson, 2014).

4.1 Mise-en-Scène: The Rukyah Scene

One notable example of mise-en-scène in Munafik (2016) is the scene where Ustaz Adam performs a *ruk yah* (Islamic exorcism) to help Maria, who is possessed by an evil spirit. This scene is pivotal in the film, encapsulating its themes of faith, spirituality, and the battle between good and evil.

4.1.1 Setting

The *ruk yah* scene is set in a modest, dimly lit room within Maria's house, reflecting the everyday environment of the characters. The confined space creates a sense of claustrophobia and tension, emphasizing the intense spiritual battle taking place.

4.1.2 Props

Key props in this scene include religious artifacts such as the Quran, prayer beads, and a container of Zamzam water, which Ustaz Adam uses during the exorcism. These items are central to the *ruk yah* ritual and symbolize the presence of Islamic faith and divine intervention.

4.1.3 Costumes

Ustaz Adam is dressed in traditional religious attire, including a white robe and a cap, signifying his role as a religious healer. Maria, in contrast, is dressed in simple, everyday clothing, emphasizing her vulnerability and the disruption of her ordinary life by supernatural forces.

4.1.4 Lighting

The lighting in this scene is low and eerie, with flickering candles providing the primary source of light. This creates a haunting atmosphere, enhancing the sense of dread and highlighting the spiritual gravity of the exorcism. The shadows cast by the candlelight add to the suspense and uncertainty, mirroring the internal and external turmoil faced by the characters.

4.1.5 Blocking:

The blocking of characters is carefully designed to convey power dynamics and emotional intensity. Ustaz Adam stands or kneels close to Maria, his body language exuding calm authority and determination. Maria's positioning, often lying down or in a state of agitation, reflects her distress and the malevolent force within her.

4.1.6 Performance:

The actors' performances are crucial in this scene. Ustaz Adam's calm, resolute recitation of Quranic verses contrasts sharply with Maria's tormented and convulsive reactions, visually and emotionally depicting the clash between sacred and profane forces. The intensity of their interactions heightens the dramatic impact of the scene.

This *mise-en-scène* effectively conveys the central themes of "Munafik," particularly the struggle between faith and malevolence. The modest setting and use of everyday props ground the supernatural elements in a relatable, real-world context, making the spiritual battle more immediate and personal for the audience. The lighting design enhances the horror aspects of the film while also symbolizing the presence of both divine light and encroaching darkness. The careful use of shadows and flickering candlelight creates a visual metaphor for the characters' internal struggles and the pervasive threat of evil. By placing the *rukyah* within a familiar domestic setting, the film emphasizes that the battle between good and evil is not just a religious or mystical concern but is also a part of everyday life. This aligns with the traditional Malay worldview, which often integrates supernatural beliefs with daily existence, and highlights the resilience and adaptability of Malay cultural identity in the face of modern challenges. The blocking and performances in the scene underscore the emotional and spiritual stakes. Ustaz Adam's composed demeanor and strategic positioning signify his role as a spiritual protector, while Maria's distressed movements highlight her vulnerability and the severity of her possession.

In summary, the *rukyah* scene in *Munafik* (2016) encapsulates key aspects of Malay identity, particularly the intertwined relationship between religion, morality, and cultural practices. It demonstrates how cinema can serve as a medium for exploring and reinforcing cultural narratives, highlighting the role of the Islamic faith in shaping and sustaining the moral and ethical frameworks within Malay society.

5.0 Symbolism and Allegory

Munafik (2016) effectively utilizes symbolism and allegory to convey deep-seated cultural and religious themes, particularly through its portrayal of the supernatural from an Islamic perspective. The film's incorporation of these elements not only enhances its narrative complexity but also provides a rich commentary on traditional Malay beliefs about the unseen world (*alam ghaib*).

Osman (2016) asserts, "*Munafik's* depiction of the supernatural reflects the integration of Islamic beliefs with Malay cultural practices" (p. 597). This integration is evident in the way the film uses supernatural occurrences as symbolic representations of moral and spiritual struggles. The evil spirit possessing Maria, for instance, can be seen as an embodiment of internal and external malevolent forces that challenge the faith and morality of the characters. This possession narrative serves as an allegory for the perpetual battle between good and evil, faith and doubt, within the context of Malay-Muslim identity.

The evil spirit in *Munafik* (2016) symbolizes the disruptive forces that challenge spiritual integrity and moral fortitude. This supernatural entity is not merely a plot device for horror but represents the broader concept of spiritual warfare central to Islamic teachings. The spirit's malevolence and its impact on Maria's life allegorize the temptations and trials that believers must face and overcome through steadfast faith and righteous conduct. This aligns with traditional Malay-Islamic views that consider supernatural beings as tests of one's iman (faith).

The use of religious artifacts and rituals in *Munafik* (2016) further deepens the allegorical layer of the film. Items such as the Quran, prayer beads, and Zamzam water are not only symbolic of the Islamic faith but also function as tangible means of divine protection and spiritual cleansing. Ustaz Adam's exorcism rituals,

involving the recitation of Quranic verses, exemplify the power of religious devotion in combating evil. These rituals are depicted with meticulous attention to detail, reinforcing their authenticity and cultural significance.

The recitation of Quranic verses during moments of supernatural confrontation serves as an allegory for the power of divine words in dispelling darkness and restoring spiritual order. This act symbolizes the ultimate authority of Islamic teachings in guiding the faithful through moral and spiritual crises. As Hashim (2017) notes, "The film's detailed portrayal of religious practices provides a profound commentary on the significance of faith in navigating life's challenges" (p. 234).

The protagonist, Ustaz Adam, embodies the themes of redemption and unwavering faith. His journey, marked by a struggle with grief and doubt, parallels the collective experience of the Malay-Muslim community facing modern-day spiritual dilemmas. His role as a religious healer symbolizes the potential for spiritual renewal and moral rectitude within the community. The challenges he faces and overcomes through faith mirror the broader societal need for resilience and steadfastness in the face of moral decay.

The film's portrayal of Ustaz Adam's internal and external battles serves as an allegory for the broader Islamic narrative of triumph over adversity through faith. This is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary Malaysia, where traditional values are continually tested by modern influences. The film thus becomes a vessel for exploring and reaffirming the core tenets of Malay-Islamic identity.

In summary, *Munafik* (2016) employs symbolism and allegory to articulate the intersection of Malay cultural practices and Islamic beliefs, using supernatural elements to explore deeper moral and spiritual themes. The film's depiction of evil spirits, religious rituals, and the protagonist's journey offers a rich, layered narrative that underscores the enduring relevance of faith in the Malay-Muslim context. By integrating traditional beliefs with contemporary issues, *Munafik* (2016) provides a nuanced commentary on the dynamic interplay between culture, religion, and identity in modern Malaysia. This approach not only enhances the film's thematic depth but also resonates with audiences who share this cultural and religious heritage.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1.0 Conclusions

1.1 Contemporary Situation

Munafik (2016) is firmly rooted in contemporary settings, addressing modern issues through the lens of Islamic faith and moral struggle. The protagonist, Ustaz Adam, embodies the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals in today's Malay society. His journey through personal tragedy and his role as a religious healer confronting supernatural evil serves to highlight the ongoing relevance of faith and piety. Osman (2016) asserts that "the protagonist's journey underscores the importance of faith and piety, resonating with the predominantly Muslim audience in Malaysia" (p. 592).

Munafik (2016) employs a modern narrative to explore the same values in today's context. Lim (2011) notes that "by showcasing these interactions, how narratives can influence and shape contemporary cultural identity. The narrative techniques and symbolic elements used in both films further emphasize this continuity. *Munafik*

(2016) utilizes the horror genre and psychological drama to engage with modern audiences, addressing current social and religious issues. Harris (2020) highlights the importance of such symbolic representations, noting that "providing a sense of realism and reinforcing the significance of Islamic practices in the daily lives of the characters" adds layers of authenticity and resonance to the films.

Additionally, *Munafik* (2016) incorporate traditional Islamic symbols and rituals, grounding their narratives in cultural and religious practices that are integral to Malay identity. Elements such as Quranic recitations and religious artifacts in *Munafik* (2016) are not merely aesthetic choices but serve to embed the narrative within a recognizable Malay cultural framework. This integration of religious elements serves to highlight the centrality of Islam in both historical and contemporary Malay society, further reinforcing the continuity of cultural values.

In conclusion, *Munafik* (2016) demonstrates the enduring relevance and adaptability of Malay cultural values across different temporal and narrative contexts, underscoring the centrality of heroism, faith, and moral integrity within Malay culture. The film's distinct narrative style and symbolic elements not only provide a rich exploration of these values but also reinforce their significance in shaping and sustaining Malay cultural identity through the ages.

At the same time, *Munafik* foregrounds Islamic character values—such as sincerity, piety, perseverance, and moral responsibility, that are integral to Malay identity. By dramatizing the struggles of faith and morality in a contemporary setting, the film resonates strongly with Malay teenagers, offering both reflection and guidance. In this way, *Munafik* motivates youth to embody Islamic character values in their daily lives, encouraging resilience, spiritual commitment, and cultural pride. Thus, the film serves not only as a repository of cultural heritage but also as a source of moral education and inspiration for future generations.

1.2 Faith

Munafik (2016) reveals the nuanced portrayal of religious faith as central tenets of Malay identity. *Munafik* (2016) is rooted in contemporary settings, exploring the profound influence of the Islamic faith on modern Malay life through the spiritual journey of Ustaz Adam. *Munafik* (2016) underscore the enduring relevance of heroism and spirituality in shaping Malay cultural identity.

Munafik (2016) focuses on the significance of religious faith, depicting the spiritual and moral struggles of Ustaz Adam, a religious healer grappling with his faith after a personal tragedy. Osman (2016) argues that "the protagonist's journey underscores the importance of faith and piety, resonating with the predominantly Muslim audience in Malaysia" (p. 592). Ustaz Adam's spiritual journey is emblematic of the deep-rooted influence of Islam in Malay culture, reflecting a society where religious faith permeates everyday life. The film's exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas provides a profound commentary on contemporary Malay experiences, illustrating how faith remains a cornerstone of Malay identity in the face of modern challenges.

The juxtaposition of heroism and faith in these films highlights the adaptability and resilience of Malay cultural values. *Munafik* (2016) brings religious faith into the modern era, addressing contemporary issues through the lens of Islamic teachings. *Munafik* (2016) integrates traditional Islamic symbols and rituals into its narrative, enhancing the authenticity and depth of its portrayal of Malay identity. The film's use of Quranic recitations, prayer sequences, and religious artifacts grounds the story in a recognizable cultural and religious

context, as Harris (2020) observes: "Providing a sense of realism and reinforcing the significance of Islamic practices in the daily lives of the characters" (p. 105). This integration of religious elements into the film's visual and narrative structure underscores the centrality of faith in the Malay experience.

Furthermore, *Munafik* (2016) illustrate how it reflects the ongoing integration of Islamic teachings into contemporary life, showing how faith continues to shape moral and ethical perspectives in modern times. In conclusion, *Munafik* (2016) demonstrates how the themes of heroism and faith are central to Malay identity.

1.3 Religious Intergration

In analyzing *Munafik* (2016) through the lens of cultural and religious settings, it is evident that these film offer profound insights into the adaptive and integrative nature of Malay culture. *Munafik* (2016) delves into the integration of religious beliefs in everyday life, underscoring the pervasive influence of Islam in shaping contemporary Malay identity. This comparative analysis illuminates how Malay culture has historically absorbed and synthesized diverse influences, maintaining its core values while evolving.

In contrast, *Munafik* (2016) is set in contemporary Malaysia, where Islamic beliefs are deeply interwoven into the fabric of daily life. The film's focus on religious faith reflects the profound influence of Islam, which has been a cornerstone of Malay identity since its introduction in the 15th century. According to Osman (2016), "The protagonist's journey underscores the importance of faith and piety, resonating with the predominantly Muslim audience in Malaysia" (p. 592). Ustaz Adam's struggle with his faith and the incorporation of Islamic rituals and symbols throughout the narrative highlight how religion shapes moral and ethical perspectives in modern Malay society. The film's contemporary setting offers a compelling portrayal of how Islamic teachings continue to influence and guide the lives of Malays today.

These film, through distinct settings, illustrate the enduring capacity of Malay culture to absorb and synthesize diverse influences while preserving its core values. *Munafik* (2016) collectively underscore the adaptability and resilience of Malay cultural identity. Harris (2020) asserts that "the integrative nature of Malay culture is a testament to its historical and ongoing capacity to incorporate and harmonize external influences without losing its essence" (p. 105). This integrative approach is evident in the way how *Munafik* (2016) shows the contemporary blending of traditional Islamic practices with modern life.

Moreover, the films highlight different aspects of Malay cultural and religious settings, offering a holistic view of how these elements interact and reinforce each other. *Munafik* (2016) focuses on the religious dimension that has become central to Malay identity. This duality reflects the multifaceted nature of Malay culture, where both historical and religious contexts play crucial roles in shaping the identity and worldview of its people.

In conclusion, *Munafik* (2016) demonstrates the enduring relevance and adaptability of Malay cultural values across different temporal and narrative contexts, underscoring the centrality of heroism, faith, and moral integrity within Malay culture. The film's distinct narrative style and symbolic elements not only provide a rich exploration of these values but also reinforce their significance in shaping and sustaining Malay cultural identity through the ages.

At the same time, *Munafik* foregrounds Islamic character values, such as sincerity, piety, perseverance, and moral responsibility, that are integral to Malay identity. By dramatizing the struggles of faith and morality in a contemporary setting, the film resonates strongly with Malay teenagers, offering both reflection and guidance. In this way, *Munafik* motivates youth to embody Islamic character values in their daily lives, encouraging resilience, spiritual commitment, and cultural pride. Thus, the film serves not only as a repository of cultural heritage but also as a source of moral education and inspiration for future generations.

2.0 Recommendations

Based on these insights, several recommendations can be made. For policymakers, there is a need to support film industries that prioritize authentic cultural representation, ensuring that cinematic narratives continue to preserve and promote Malay heritage. For filmmakers, greater engagement with narrative structures and realist aesthetics can strengthen the cultural and educational value of their productions, while also appealing to broader audiences. For scholars, future research should extend beyond *Munafik* (2016) to include comparative analyses across regional cinemas, genres, and historical periods, thereby enriching understandings of cultural identity in transnational contexts. In particular, interdisciplinary approaches that combine film theory with cultural studies, sociology, and religious studies may provide deeper insights into how cinema negotiates identity in multicultural societies.

In sum, the study affirms the enduring significance of Malay cinema in articulating and sustaining cultural identity, while also opening avenues for further scholarly inquiry, policy development, and creative innovation in the field.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

“The authors declare no conflict of interest.”

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