

JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Representation of Power and Domination in Deviant Religious Practices in the Film *Bidaah*: A Critical Discourse Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the representation of deviant religious practices and the construction of power in the film *Bidaah* using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The film was selected for its complex portrayal of religious deviation through the character of Walid, a charismatic spiritual leader who manipulates religious symbols to consolidate personal authority. Practices such as "spiritual marriages" without legal or Islamic validity, ritualistic glorification of the leader, foot-washing rites as a form of *tabarruk* (seeking blessings), forced abortion, and ideologically driven divorce are examined as forms of deviation cloaked in religious legitimacy. This research employs a qualitative method with content analysis of the film's narrative, visual symbolism, and dialogue. Data were analysed using Fairclough's three-stage CDA framework: textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural context. The findings reveal that *Bidaah* exposes the dynamics of power within a closed religious community, where the spiritual leader monopolises religious interpretation and exerts control over individuals' bodies and choices, especially those of women. The film illustrates how language, symbols, and rituals legitimise exploitation under the guise of piety. These practices are not only deviant from Islamic legal principles, particularly in the domains of *aqidah* (creed) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), but also violate the objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid al-sharia*), including the protection of intellect, religion, and lineage. In conclusion, *Bidaah* offers a sharp social critique of the misuse of religious authority as a tool of domination. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to fostering critical religious literacy in society and providing guidance for filmmakers and religious leaders to convey Islamic narratives in a responsible and ethically grounded manner through popular media.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, religious deviance, power and domination, *bidaah*, media representation

Received: 9 April 2025, **Accepted:** 25 October 2025, **Published:** 29 December 2025

1.0 Introduction

Film is a visual medium with a special capacity to shape, reflect and criticise social reality. More than just entertainment, films are cultural constructions that construct meaning and mediate social values to audiences. In a sociocultural context, films serve as *cultural texts* that can influence collective perceptions of various social phenomena, including issues related to religion and power dynamics. Hall (1997) states that representation in the media records reality and actively shapes it through symbolic codification. Through narrative structure, character visualisation, and use of symbols, films can shape discourse that influences how society interprets authority, truth, and piety.

Films are never neutral. It always carries a particular ideology, either explicitly or implicitly, which is reflected in how it represents relations between individuals and social groups. Nichols (2010) emphasises that film is a rhetorical practice that can direct the audience's understanding of certain social realities. Even fictional films can produce convincing effects of truth through their depiction of characters, storylines, and spatial construction. Within this framework, films reflect the world and offer an ideological interpretation of it, a discourse machine that cannot be separated from the interests of power.

In the development of contemporary cinema, the issue of deviant religious practices is a theme that is often explored. Film *Bidaah* is one example that displays the dynamics of deviation from religious teachings through a central character named Walid, a spiritual leader in the fictional Jihād Ummah community. This film shows how religious symbols such as marriage, loyalty, and devotion are manipulated to support the interests of personal domination. Practices such as spiritual marriages without guardians and witnesses, excessive glorification of leadership figures, and the elimination of women's bodily autonomy through forced abortions are part of a spiritually framed system of power.

The figure of Walid is depicted as a charismatic leader who monopolises religious interpretation, regulates the lives of his followers absolutely, and demands total loyalty through language and religious rites. In a sociological framework, this phenomenon resonates with Max Weber's (1978) concept of *charismatic authority*, where power is based on the belief in the leader's spiritual or supernatural specialness, which is then collectively legitimised. This representation also shows how uncontrolled religious authority can become a means of repression and control, especially against vulnerable groups such as women and young people.

To understand the power dynamics in this kind of representation, the approach of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) offers an adequate analytical framework. CDA views language as a social practice that shapes, reproduces, and legitimises societal power structures (Fairclough, 2013). In the context of the film *Bidaah*, CDA can be used to identify how narratives, dialogue, and visual symbols are used to build hegemonic structures, where religious leaders are positioned as centres of authority that cannot be challenged. These discourses operate not only through verbal utterances but also through ritual practices, body regulation, and manipulation of collective emotions represented in the film's cinematic structure.

Such domination takes place not coercively, but rather hegemonically; that is, it is accepted voluntarily by community members through the internalisation of values and symbols that are continuously reproduced (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony operates through agreements established through discourse that appears legitimate, logical, and even spiritual. In the movie *Bidaah*, this condition is reflected in how Walid's followers display an attitude of submission and even feel grateful for their appointment in certain marriages, rituals, or religious duties, even though all of this is a disguised form of exploitation.

Based on this background, this research begins with a concern about how deviant religious practices can be represented aesthetically and ideologically in popular media, particularly in films. *Bidaah*, as a visual text, not only displays symptoms of deviation at the levels of ritual and teaching but also constructs power relations symbolically through central figures and narratives that are rich in ideological content. The representation of religious practices in this film cannot be separated from the interests of the discourse of domination, which systematically wraps deviations in religious legitimacy.

This paper aims to examine how power and religious control are represented through discourse in the film *Bidaah*. Specifically, it investigates how symbolic language, visual imagery, and narrative structure are used to construct and legitimise asymmetrical power relations within a closed religious community. Drawing on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the study focuses on how the manipulation of religious teachings and rituals serves as a mechanism of ideological domination, particularly over women's bodies, choices, and identities.

Bidaah is a particularly relevant film for this kind of analysis because it portrays a fictional yet realistic scenario in which charismatic religious leadership becomes a vehicle for coercion under the guise of spiritual guidance. The film stages various controversial practices, such as spiritual marriages without guardians, forced polygamy, ideological divorce, ritualistic veneration of leaders, and the exploitation of religious symbols, to depict how religious authority can be distorted for personal and political gain. These dramatisations provide a rich discursive field to analyse how religion is mediated, performed, and contested in visual culture, making *Bidaah* a compelling case study for exploring the intersection of discourse, power, and piety in contemporary media narratives.

To address this complexity, the research is guided by two main questions: (1) How are deviant religious practices represented in the film *Bidaah*? and (2) How does the construction of discourse in the film reflect and reinforce power relations? The first question explores how deviations from normative Islamic teachings are depicted through dialogue, scene composition, and symbolic actions. The second examines how these elements operate discursively to naturalise obedience and elevate the leader's authority. By doing so, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how media can shape public perceptions of religious authenticity, authority, and gendered subjugation.

Studies on the representation of religion in the media, particularly in films, have been conducted within the context of power relations and ideology. Film as a cultural text is understood to record social reality and form and distribute meaning through discourse construction. Hall (1997) states that representation is not passive but actively shapes people's understanding of identity, power, and truth through socially codified symbols and language. In this context, film serves as a medium that can both strengthen and challenge existing power structures, including those in the religious realm.

Several previous studies have proven that films have the potential to be a tool of resistance and legitimation against religious authorities. Research by Syarif et al. (2020) on the film *Well* reveals how the discourse of individual spirituality is constructed as a counter-hegemony to conservative religious authorities. With the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Gramsci's theory, this research explains how Ana's character produces a counter-narrative to the dominant religious interpretation that restricts her. Likewise, the study of Rahayu et al. (2023) on the film *Uwais Al-Qarni* examines patriarchal power relations through Foucault's power approach. The film is analysed as a field of production of power over women's bodies and will, through religious narratives, controlled by dominant male actors.

Meanwhile, a study by Fauziyah and Nasionalita (2018) on the film *The Enlightener* highlights aspects of reform discourse in religious institutions. In the film, KH. Ahmad Dahlan is described as a reform agent who opposes religious conservatism through educational movements and the rationalisation of Islamic teachings. These three studies employ a social theoretical framework, drawing on the work of Gramsci and Foucault, to examine the dynamics of power in the representation of religion in films. However, their focus is limited to institutional conflicts of religious authority and resistance to dominant interpretations.

Unlike these studies, this research focuses on a topic that many have not explored: the representation of deviant religious practices, often cloaked in spiritual rhetoric and religious symbols. Film *Bidaah* presents relevant examples, where the power of the central figure is reproduced through practices such as internal marriage without a contract, the worship of spiritual leaders, and the justification of abortion as a form of purity. Unlike *The Enlightener* or *Well*, which displays the conflict between reformers and religious institutions, *Bidaah* shows how power works hegemonically through manipulative spirituality.

2.0 Literature Review

The present literature review synthesizes scholarly work on the representation of religion in contemporary media, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a primary lens to uncover concealed relations of power and ideology. It examines the construction of religious deviance, hegemonic authority, and gendered marginalization in cinematic narratives while identifying significant gaps, particularly the limited attention devoted to cultic and heterodox practices in recent Islamic-themed films. Drawing on foundational theoretical contributions from Foucault (1978), Gramsci (1971), and Fairclough (1989), this review establishes a conceptual framework for analysing the 2025 Malaysian series *Bidaah* (directed by Erma Fatima) as a contested site of religious meaning-making in visual media. The discussion is organised into three principal sections: the representation of religion in media, the application of CDA in film studies, and deviant religious practices within Islamic contexts.

2.1 Representation of Religion in Media

Scholarship on the mediation of religion consistently demonstrates that films and television series do not merely reflect social reality but actively participate in its construction, thereby shaping perceptions of authority and legitimacy (Hall, 1997). In relation to Islam, such representations frequently reproduce ideological biases in both Western and non-Western contexts.

Baker et al. (2013) conducted a corpus-based analysis of collocations surrounding the lemma “Muslim” in the British press, revealing recurrent associations with violence and extremism that reinforce an implicit “us-versus-them” dichotomy. Similarly, Bazzi (2019) applied CDA to news discourse on Islam during periods of conflict, illustrating how lexical and translational choices perpetuate hegemonic ideologies that frame the religion as inherently problematic. Together, these studies underscore the subtle mechanisms through which media naturalise power asymmetries and instrumentalise religious symbols to legitimise domination.

In Southeast Asia, cinematic representations of Islam are deeply intertwined with local socio-political dynamics. Bahruddin and Hamad (2021) employed CDA to examine the Indonesian film *Bid'ah Cinta* (2017), highlighting the agent–structure tensions within Muslim communities and the discursive negotiation between tradition and perceived deviation. Analogous concerns appear in Malaysian cinema, where narratives frequently interrogate doctrines officially classified as “ajaran sesat” (heretical teachings) by state religious authorities. Although such portrayals reflect genuine societal anxieties—evidenced by numerous fatwa declarations against deviant groups—existing research tends to privilege mainstream or reformist depictions, devoting comparatively little attention to the internal dynamics of insular religious communities.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis in Film Studies

Critical Discourse Analysis provides a robust methodological framework for interrogating the ways in which cinematic texts reproduce or challenge relations of power through language, imagery, and narrative structure (Fairclough, 1989). Rahayu et al. (2023) integrated Foucault’s theory of power/knowledge with CDA to analyse patriarchal domination in the Iranian film *Uwais Al-Qarni*, demonstrating how religious discourse regulates female agency and corporeality through masculinist interpretive monopolies. In a contrasting reformist vein, Fauziyah and Nasionalita (2018) utilised Fairclough’s model to explore counter-hegemonic discourse in the Indonesian biopic *Sang Pencerah* (The Enlightener), presenting K.H. Ahmad Dahlan as an agent of rational modernisation against conservative orthodoxy.

These applications illustrate CDA’s capacity to illuminate ideological struggles, yet they predominantly address institutional or reformist conflicts rather than heterodox practices masquerading as authentic spirituality. Van Dijk (1998) emphasises the internalisation of dominance as ideological common sense, a process vividly enacted in media portrayals of Islam. Richardson (2004), for instance, deployed CDA to reveal how British broadsheet newspapers construct Muslims as existential threats through rhetorical topoi that legitimise social exclusion.

2.3 Deviant Religious Practices in Islamic Contexts

Religious deviance, or commonly labelled “*bid’ah*” (blameworthy innovation), has increasingly attracted researchers’ attention for its challenge onto orthodox Islamic beliefs and its socio-political reflection. In Malaysia and Indonesia, cinematic narratives frequently serve reflective purposes, enhancing religious literacy among viewers. *Bidaah*, film directed by Erma Fatima, inspired by documented cases in Malaysian societies of cult manipulation issues raise awareness by dramatising the consequences of doctrinal distortion (Hanifansyah et al., 2025). Reports on extremist Sufi networks in Indonesia (International Crisis Group, 2019) provide real-world parallels, illustrating how charismatic leaders exploit mystical symbolism to consolidate authority.

Practices such as coerced abortion and ideologically mandated divorce which are portrayed in *Bidaah* where it directly focuses on the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī’ah*), particularly the preservation of life and lineage (Malisi, 2022). Hasan (2006) examine how radical movements regulate intimate relationships to enforce allegiance, a pattern mirrored in the series’ representation of marital control. Despite these thematic, focus, few studies has been systematically integrate CDA with normative Islamic jurisprudence to analyse the discursive construction of such practices in popular media.

2.4 Gaps and Current Study Positioning

Although existing scholarship effectively applies CDA to religious representation, it predominantly focuses on mainstream, reformist, or overtly antagonistic portrayals, thereby marginalising the discursive operations of insular heterodox communities. Films and series such as *Bidaah* offer new scope for examining how hegemonic spirituality is sustained through pious rituals. The current study addresses this aspect by applying Fairclough (1989) three-dimensional CDA framework to *Bidaah*, contributing new insights into the role of visual media in critiquing religious domination, particularly its gendered dimensions and in fostering critical religious literacy within contemporary Muslim societies.

3.0 Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach with a content analysis method, aiming to gain a deep understanding of the structure of meaning within audiovisual texts. In this context, films are positioned as cultural constructions laden with symbolic and ideological content, thus necessitating an approach that is not merely descriptive but also interpretive and critical. The primary data source for this study is the full broadcast of the film *Bidaah*, consisting of 15 episodes, which are analysed comprehensively alongside relevant Islamic legal literature concerning the concepts of *bid’ah* (religious innovation) and doctrinal deviation.

The data collection process began with multiple viewings of all episodes to identify scenes representing deviant religious practices. Identified scenes were documented and categorised thematically based on visual and narrative similarities. A parallel literature review was conducted to reinforce the normative interpretative framework, focusing on classical and contemporary *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) texts. This dual strategy enabled the analysis to be grounded in both textual evidence and Islamic normative ethics.

The data analysis utilised the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, following Norman Fairclough’s (2013) model, which conceptualises discourse as a social practice inseparable from broader political, cultural, and social contexts. CDA is particularly suitable for analysing *Bidaah*, given that the film narrates fictional events and constructs discourses surrounding religious authority, doctrinal deviation, and power relations within Muslim communities. This methodological orientation enables the researcher to uncover how language, symbols, and narratives in the film reproduce, legitimise, or challenge ideological structures.

The analytical procedure was conducted in three main stages. First, textual analysis focused on micro-level elements such as word choice, character dialogue, and narrative structures to identify linguistic patterns that signify ideological stances. Second, discursive practice analysis examined how these texts

are produced, circulated, and interpreted within the film's internal social world, including the depiction of santri (students), spiritual leadership (Walid), and gender dynamics. Third, the broader sociocultural context was analysed to understand how the film reflects, reinforces, or contests dominant religious ideologies and institutionalised power structures.

To enhance the transparency and rigour of the research, coding procedures were applied systematically. Each identified scene was coded according to thematic categories (e.g., spiritual manipulation, gender control, ritual domination), and cross-checked through iterative comparison. The researcher's positionality was critically reflected throughout the analysis, acknowledging the influence of the researcher's academic background in Islamic studies and media analysis on the interpretative process. Triangulation was employed by comparing the film analysis with Islamic legal sources and secondary scholarly literature on religious authority and manipulation. This ensured that interpretations were not solely based on textual elements but were supported by normative and contextual validations.

4.0 Results and Findings

4.1 The Doctrine of Inner Marriage without Formal Legal Ties

The film *Bidaah* portrays deviant religious practices through its central figure, Walid, the leader of the Jihad Ummah group. In one pivotal scene, Walid approaches several young Muslim women among his followers and invites them to engage in a form of "spiritual marriage." This marriage is conducted without a guardian, witnesses, or official registration, contrary to either state or Islamic law. The scene serves as a symbolic critique of the manipulation of religious teachings, which are rhetorically cloaked in language that appears devout.

At the textual level, the central symbol in this sequence is "spiritual marriage" (*nikah batin*), used to conceal exploitation beneath the veneer of piety. The following direct dialogue illustrates this discursive manipulation:

Walid	"Amira, mesti walid jadikan istri batin." (Amira, Walid must make you his spiritual wife).
Amira	"Istri batin?" (Spiritual wife?)
Walid	"Kita nikah batin dan menghalalkan semuanya. Bila batin Amira dah bersatu dengan batin Walid, maka Amira akan naik. Amira faham? Amira sanggup jadi istri batin Walid?" (We perform a spiritual marriage and make everything lawful. When your soul unites with Walid's soul, you will ascend. Do you understand? Are you willing to be Walid's spiritual wife?)
(Amira nods)	
Walid	"Ya Rasulullah, aku terima nikahnya Amira binti Marzuki, maksud nikah batin, bermaskawinkan Al-Fatihah. Mulai malam ini Amira jadi istri batin Walid, sah." (O Messenger of God, I accept the marriage of Amira binti Marzuki, through a spiritual bond, with Al-Fatihah as her dowry. From tonight, Amira is my lawful spiritual wife).

(Fatima, 2025)

The recitation performed by Walid is imbued with solemnity and ritualistic cadence, carefully crafted to simulate the linguistic patterns of a legitimate Islamic marriage ceremony. However, beneath its ceremonial veneer, the ritual lacks the essential legal and ethical requisites mandated by Islamic law. Terms such as "*sah*" (legitimate) and "*maskawinkan Al-Fatihah*" (to solemnise marriage using Al-Fatihah as a dowry) are employed not as genuine legal markers, but as rhetorical devices that invoke the aura of religious sanctity. The invocation of *Al-Fatihah*, a sacred *Qur'anic surah*, in place of a real dowry and contract reflects a deliberate manipulation of religious symbols to obscure the absence of contractual legitimacy. This sacred diction functions to naturalise Walid's unilateral authority while cloaking his dominion over Amira's body and agency in a performance of piety.

At the level of discursive practice, Walid's speech act operates within a closed communicative structure where religious language is not open to challenge, reinterpretation, or negotiation. His exclusive claim to interpretive truth is reinforced through performance and timing; the pronouncement of marriage occurs without soliciting verbal consent from Amira, whose only response is a silent nod. In Islamic legal tradition, consent (*ridha*) must be verbal and conscious, but here, consent is coerced through affective manipulation and sacralised pressure. Walid's references to "*batin bersatu*" (inner selves uniting) and "*kenaikan ruhani*" (spiritual ascension) reframe sexual subjugation as a metaphysical elevation. This language displaces juridical and rational procedures with mystical abstraction, discouraging scrutiny while normalising submission. As a result, legal and familial safeguards, such as a *wali*'s presence or community witnesses, are rendered obsolete in a privatised and symbolic performance of authority.

On the sociocultural level, the scene exemplifies how Islamic symbols (marriage) can be co-opted to consolidate patriarchal domination under the guise of religious obedience. The fictional representation of *spiritual marriage* echoes real-world cases of cultic manipulation, in which charismatic male leaders use doctrinal innovation to authorise exclusive sexual or marital access to women in their communities. The repeated assertion that Amira will "*naik*" (ascend) upon uniting spiritually with Walid disguises her loss of autonomy as spiritual progress. This kind of mystified subordination reflects what Van Dijk (1998) terms *discursive hegemony*, where ideological domination is internalised as moral or spiritual truth. In such contexts, the authority of religious rhetoric becomes indistinguishable from divine command, thus invalidating dissent and rendering resistance sacrilegious.

From the standpoint of Islamic jurisprudence, the ritual performed by Walid not only violates the procedural requirements of a valid marriage but also contravenes the ethical objectives (*maqasid al-sharia*) of justice, dignity, and protection of lineage. Classical Islamic jurists across the four major schools unanimously affirm that a *wali* and two trustworthy witnesses are indispensable for the legitimacy of a marriage. Furthermore, the dowry (*mahar*) must be real, agreed upon, and freely exchanged, not symbolically substituted by a Qur'anic verse without consent. The use of *Al-Fatihah* as a maskawin, in the absence of legal clarity or a contractual framework, constitutes a form of symbolic violence. It transforms *nikah* from a mutually agreed contract into a performative act of submission, whereby sacred language is weaponised to authorise domination.

In conclusion, this scene in *Bidaah* powerfully illustrates how spiritualised language, authoritarian interpretation, and emotional coercion converge to legitimise unequal and exploitative relationships. By applying Fairclough's CDA model, the analysis reveals how textual symbols (e.g., "maskawinkan Al-Fatihah"), discursive strategies (e.g., the denial of consent and ritual language), and broader cultural norms (e.g., patriarchal authority) are woven together into a system of religious manipulation. This portrayal urges critical reflection on how religious authority can become a mechanism for gendered control, disguised under the moral veil of sacred devotion.

4.2 Ritualistic Practices through Special Prayers Addressed to Spiritual Leader Figures

One of the most ideologically charged discursive moments in *Bidaah* lies in the ritualistic veneration performed by the congregation toward their spiritual leader, Walid. In a key scene, dozens of students gather in solemn formation inside a dimly lit hall. The cinematic arrangement, subdued lighting, steady camera movement, and ambient spiritual music construct an atmosphere of sacredness and submission. At the visual and symbolic centre sits Walid, physically elevated while his followers kneel beneath him, preparing to recite an oath of allegiance. The setting does not simply represent reverence; it materialises power.

The text of the oath is linguistically constructed to fuse Islamic devotion with personal glorification of the leader. One follower declares:

"Bismillahirrahmanirrahim. Atas nama Allah dan Rasul, berkatnya Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, saya bersumpah akan melaksanakan amal dan perbuatan yang telah ditetapkan dalam Jihad Ummah ini, menjaga hati agar senantiasa bersih agar selalu sesuai dengan tindakan yang dicontohkan oleh Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, mencontohi

mursyid yang mencontohi mursyid yang berasal dari keteladanan akhlak Rasulullah SAW yang menjalankan syariat Islam. Saya berjanji akan membaktikan diri agar tidak termasuk dalam golongan orang-orang munafik, mereka apabila berbicara berdusta, apabila dipercaya berkhianat. Saya juga bersumpah, jihad saya, hidup dan mati saya adalah untuk Jihad Ummah, serta mentaati dan mengabdikan dengan seluruh jiwa raga saya kepada Allah dan Rasul dan kepada mursyid Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman."

(In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. In the name of Allah and His Messenger, by the blessing of Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, I swear to carry out the deeds and actions prescribed in this Jihad Ummah, to guard my heart so that it remains pure and always aligned with the actions exemplified by Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, to emulate the spiritual guide who emulates another guide whose conduct reflects the character of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who upheld Islamic law. I pledge to devote myself so that I will not be among the hypocrites, those who lie when they speak and betray when they are entrusted. I also swear that my jihad, my life and death, are for Jihad Ummah, and that I will obey and devote my whole soul and body to Allah, His Messenger, and to the spiritual guide Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman)

(Fatima, 2025)

This speech is structured in a ritualistic cadence that mimics the linguistic register of Islamic oaths of allegiance (*bai'ah*). Still, with one key deviation, it positions Walid in parallel with Allah and the Prophet. The phrase "*berkatnya Walid*" introduces a spiritual causality that attributes divine blessing to a human intermediary. At the same time, the final pledge of body and soul to "*mursyid Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman*" completes a discursive elevation of Walid's status. Such diction represents what Bruce (2002) identifies as sacralised language, language that appropriates the tone, rhythm, and theological resonance of religious expressions to construct and legitimise asymmetrical relations of power.

This ritual moment is not isolated; it operates within a system of controlled discourse that suppresses individual reflection and amplifies emotional immersion. Walid's silence during the oath reinforces his constructed status as a figure beyond questioning, as followers recite their allegiance in unison, kneeling in physical submission. The camera work further cements this hierarchy by positioning Walid consistently above eye level, bathed in soft light, while his followers remain dimly lit and visually inferior. This use of cinematic technique aligns with what Grimes (2014) calls the "ritual aesthetics of authority," where light, spatial dynamics, and symbolic framing all serve to encode spiritual legitimacy into a visual form.

Discursively, the act of oath-taking here is not merely performative but deeply ideological. The repetition of phrases like "*jihad saya, hidup dan mati saya adalah untuk Jihad Ummah*" and "*mengabdikan kepada mursyid Walid*" reveals the conflation of religious piety with organisational loyalty. The word *jihad*, originally denoting personal or communal ethical striving, is appropriated to serve institutional obedience under a single authority. Moreover, the speaker's statement about "*mencontohi mursyid yang mencontohi mursyid yang berasal dari keteladanan akhlak Rasulullah*" presents a nested chain of emulation, but without theological or legal anchoring. Instead of tracing legitimacy back to the Prophet through scriptural or scholarly transmission, legitimacy here is circular and closed, self-referential and centred solely on Walid's image and speech.

Culturally and theologically, this depiction raises significant concern. Within the framework of Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*), no individual is permitted to serve as a source of spiritual allegiance that competes with or parallels divine authority. The Qur'an and the Sunnah provide clear warnings against *ghuluw* (excessive reverence) and the sanctification of human beings. The Prophet Muhammad stated, "*Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians exaggerated in praising Jesus, son of Mary. I am only His servant. So say the servant of Allah and His Messenger*" (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 3445). The Qur'anic injunction in QS. An-Nisa 171 likewise condemns theological excess. By allowing religious

followers to attribute “blessing” to a living leader and by equating obedience to God with submission to Walid, the scene dramatises a profound theological deviation from core Islamic teachings.

In broader social terms, the film captures how charismatic religious leaders may institutionalise obedience through emotionally charged rituals that appear pious but operate ideologically. As Van Dijk (1998) argues, discursive hegemony is most effective when dominance becomes internalised, when followers no longer perceive the need to question authority because sacred language and ritual have already naturalised subordination. In *Bidaah*, the oath-taking ritual not only silences dissent but also redefines loyalty as indistinguishable from faith.

In conclusion, this scene illustrates how textual language, visual symbolism, and discursive structures operate together to construct an apparatus of religious domination. Through Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis, it becomes clear that the glorification of Walid is not an incidental excess, but a deliberate ideological strategy encoded in sacred forms. The film warns of the dangers posed when spiritual rituals are stripped from theological boundaries and reoriented toward the sanctification of power itself. In such conditions, the language of God becomes the language of obedience, not to divine truth, but to human control.

4.3 A symbolic ritual in the form of consuming the water used to wash Walid's feet to seek blessings

One of the most ideologically charged ritual practices depicted in *Bidaah* is the act of congregants taking turns kissing the feet of their spiritual leader, Walid, and drinking the water used to wash those feet (see Figure 1). This is not merely a fictional dramatisation, but a symbolic performance of total submission, captured in the film through carefully crafted visuals and ritualistic framing. From a textual and visual analysis standpoint (Fairclough, 2013), this scene encapsulates how bodily acts and religious symbols coalesce into a discourse of glorification and power.

Figure 1

One of the members of Jihad Ummah drinks the water from Walid's foot washing



In the frame above, the camera captures a devotee in extreme close-up, bowing his face directly into a wooden basin to sip the water used to wash Walid’s feet. The follower’s head bent low, shoulders hunched, lips pressed to the water, constitute a striking visual code of servitude. The act of bending one’s body to such a degree, especially in proximity to another person’s feet, evokes classical gestures of prostration, not toward God, but toward a fellow human. This moment is rendered with aesthetic precision; the camera lingers on the tactile intimacy of hand, water, and mouth, reinforcing the sacralisation of the leader’s physical body. The liquid, although unclean in conventional terms, is visually framed as a holy essence, not filth; its murkiness paradoxically reinforces its mystical character, as if purification comes not from cleanness but from submission itself.

There is no spoken dialogue in this moment. Instead, the silence is deliberate and profound, creating an atmosphere akin to a sacred rite. The absence of verbal language allows the viewer’s attention to be focused entirely on the bodily gesture and its symbolic resonance. In Fairclough’s textual analysis framework, non-verbal elements, such as gesture, posture, and silence, function as semiotic resources

that communicate reverence, awe, and subjugation without a single word being uttered. This absence of language does not neutralise meaning; it heightens it, turning the act into a ritual performance whose power lies precisely in its speechlessness.

At the level of discursive practice, the act is not interpreted as degrading or irrational within the logic of the community. Instead, it is reframed as a deeply spiritual act known as *tabarruk*, the seeking of barakah (blessing) from the physical remnants of a holy figure. Within this internally consistent belief system, the more extreme the bodily submission, the greater the perceived spiritual reward. Hence, the act of drinking dirty foot-water is not read as humiliation, but as a symbol of intimate access to divine favour. Through this discourse, bodily abasement is rearticulated as elevation, and loyalty to the leader becomes the metric of piety. As Foucault (1978) might suggest, power here is productive; it does not merely repress but produces subjects who desire their submission as a form of spiritual merit.

This shows how discourse is not only spoken but embodied, circulated through ritual, gesture, and repetition. The ritual is not spontaneous; it is socially learned, enacted, and sustained within the internal logic of the group. Any form of dissent or discomfort is neutralised not through explicit punishment, but by the fear of being excluded from grace. Thus, the performance of devotion becomes an ideological mechanism, as Fairclough (2013) notes, such practices reproduce dominant discourses precisely because they are internalised and enacted through daily symbolic behaviour.

From the sociocultural dimension, this scene reveals the mechanics of hegemony in Gramscian terms, where religious authority is embodied in a charismatic figure; control is no longer exerted through external pressure but through the followers' own moral and emotional investment. The act shown is not enforced through physical compulsion, but through a subtle architecture of expectation, spiritual longing, and fear of exclusion. Van Dijk (1998) would describe this as the success of discursive control, which is power that becomes invisible, embedded in language, symbol, and ritual. The bodily act seen in the image is thus a crystallisation of emotional loyalty and symbolic surrender, simultaneously private and performative.

From an Islamic theological perspective, the gravity of this scene cannot be overstated. The sanctification of Walid's physical body through this ritual constitutes a clear transgression of tawhid, the central pillar of Islamic belief. Tawhid demands that only Allah is the source of blessings, healing, and guidance. By treating a human being's physical remnants as sacred, the followers are treading dangerously close to *shirk* (associating partners with Allah). The Qur'an warns, "*O People of the Scripture, do not exaggerate in your religion beyond the truth...*" (Q.S. An-Nisa 171), while the Prophet Muhammad forbade glorification of himself, saying "*Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians praised the son of Mary. I am only a servant, so say the servant of Allah and His Messenger*" (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 3445).

Moreover, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology both emphasise the prohibition of *ghuluw* (religious excess). The act of kissing or drinking from a religious leader's body is unprecedented in normative Islamic practice. Instead, it resembles saint-worship practices found in syncretic traditions, which Islamic orthodoxy has long criticised. Such rituals are not only theologically unsound but also politically dangerous, as they foster authoritarian systems disguised in spiritual language.

In summary, this scene encapsulates how religious discourse, bodily rituals, and cinematic aesthetics are interwoven to naturalise submission and legitimise charismatic domination. Through the lens of Fairclough's CDA framework, it becomes evident that power in *Bidaah* is not only spoken but performed, inscribed on bodies, embedded in silence, and sanctified through communal ritual. This reinforces the broader theme of the film, which is that religious manipulation thrives not only in doctrinal error but also in the aesthetics of obedience.

4.4 Legitimacy Of Polygamy Teachings and Marriage Practices between Masyaikh and Female Students

Film *Bidaah* presents a representation of complex religious discourse, especially in the practice of polygamy and marriage, which takes place in a closed community controlled by a charismatic spiritual leader, namely *Walid*. In a fictional community, *Ummah's Jihad*, the practice of marriage is no longer

interpreted as the result of personal consensus based on freedom to choose a life partner, but as part of a tightly controlled social and spiritual system. *Walid*, as an authoritative figure in the community, plays a central role in determining the partner, time, and implementation of the female student's marriage to the *sheikh*. It is important to note that in Islamic tradition, the term "sheikh" (Arabic: شيخ) generally refers to a respected elder, a leader, or a scholar who possesses religious knowledge and authority. In many communities, a sheikh is an individual entrusted with providing spiritual guidance based on Islamic teachings. The dialogue that took place is striking:

Abi Datuk Bendahara *"Alhamdulillah. Syukur pada Allah. Malam ini, atas putus Walid dan khususnya pesanan Rasulullah SAW, tiga orang akan jadi insan terpilih untuk mengairi kehidupan dunia dengan berbakti pada insan yang akan menjadi syurga buatan."* (Praise be to Allah. Tonight, by Walid's decision and specifically the Prophet's instruction, three individuals will be chosen to irrigate worldly life by serving those who will become paradise incarnate).

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| Abi | <i>"Insan terpilih yang pertama, Salmiah Khairuddin. Dengan syurganya, Syekh Ali Anwarullah. Yang kedua, Muhaymah Syukur. Dengan syurganya, Syekh Karim Al-Baratfah."</i> (The first chosen one, Salmiah Khairuddin, with her paradise, Sheikh Ali Anwarullah. The second, Muhaymah Syukur, with her paradise, Sheikh Karim Al-Baratfah). |
| Muhaymah | <i>"Terima kasih, Abah. Terima kasih Walid."</i> (Thank you, Father. Thank you Walid). |
| Baiduri | <i>"Mereka memang suka kahwin macam ini kah?"</i> (Do they like getting married like this?). |
| Amira | <i>"Eh, suka lah. Berkat tahu dapat kahwin dengan ulama ni."</i> (Of course they do. It is a blessing to marry these religious scholars). |
| Abi | <i>"Dan yang terakhir, Liana Surya Abdul Ghani. Dengan syurganya, Syekh Husin bin Hamzah."</i> (And finally, Liana Surya Abdul Ghani, with her paradise, Sheikh Husin bin Hamzah). |
| Liana | <i>"Ya Allah, terima kasih Ya Allah, terima kasih Walid. Syukurlah, Alhamdulillah."</i> (O Allah, thank you, thank you Walid. Praise be to God). |
| Baiduri | <i>"Kahwin dengan orang tua, habis itu jadi bini nombor berapa pula?"</i> (Married to an old man, what number wife is she going to be now?). |
| Amira | <i>"Muda saja. Kalau yang muda, dapat tujuh hari bersama. Kalau yang cantik, dapat dua minggu bersama. Bagus kan?"</i> (Young ones just get seven days with him. If you're pretty, you get two weeks. Isn't that great?). |
| Walid | <i>"Salmiah Khairuddin. Aku nikahkan akan dikau dengan Syekh Ali Amirullah. Disaksikan Rasulullah SAW. Berwalikan aku, Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, dengan mas kahwinnya, senaskah Al-Qur'an."</i> (Salmiah Khairuddin, I marry you to Sheikh Ali Amirullah. Witnessed by the Prophet SAW, with me, Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, as your guardian, and the dowry a copy of the Qur'an). |

(Fatima, 2025)

This ceremonial language is steeped in religious symbolism and meticulously staged authority. The phrase “*atas putus Walid dan pesanan Rasulullah SAW*” (based on Walid's decree and the Prophet's message) symbolically positions Walid not merely as a religious guide, but as a divinely ordained intermediary, echoing the theological notion of *wasilah* —a spiritual medium, yet reinterpreted here in an authoritarian form. By appropriating the Prophet's name and conflating it with his personal decision, Walid embeds his authority within the most sacred of Islamic symbols, effectively shielding his actions from scrutiny. The term “*syurganya*” (her paradise), assigned to each bridegroom, functions as a euphemistic substitution that reframes forced marriage as an eschatological reward. It mirrors what Bourdieu (1991) terms *symbolic violence*, a form of gentle, invisible domination that is misrecognised as legitimate due to its alignment with established belief systems.

The ritual speech act, “*Aku nikahkan akan dikau...*”, further consolidates Walid's control by replacing the traditional Islamic structure of *wali nikah* (the legal guardian appointed to protect a woman's consent in marriage) with himself as the unilateral officiant. In classical Islamic jurisprudence, the *wali* must act in the best interest of the bride and secure her explicit consent (Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.; Rahmawati, 2021). However, in this scene, the legal and spiritual rationale for the *wali* is subverted, rather than ensuring autonomy; Walid's assumption of the role becomes a mechanism of control. The symbolic act of including a Qur'an as *mahar* (dowry) adds another theological layer meant to sanctify the marriage. Still, it is instrumentalised as a rhetorical shield rather than an ethical foundation. As Foucault (1978) argues, modern forms of domination often function not through overt coercion but through discourses that naturalise power by wrapping it in accepted truth regimes, in this case, the sacralised language of Islam.

This linguistic framing is a textbook instance of what Fairclough (2013) defines as *ideological interpellation*, a process by which language produces subjects who internalise their social roles as natural and righteous. The phrase “*dengan syurganya*” (with her paradise) discursively transforms materially unequal or undesirable pairings, such as young women married to significantly older religious elites, into gifts bestowed by divine favour. The euphoric responses from characters like “*Ya Allah, terima kasih Walid*” (Thank You, God, thank you Walid) are evidence of this internalised discourse. Submission is not experienced as subjugation but as spiritual privilege, and agency is effectively neutralised through the illusion of chosenness. Here, piety is rearticulated as compliance, and resistance becomes spiritually illegitimate.

Discursively, this entire ritual functions as a collective reinforcement of religious hierarchy and patriarchal control. Female characters are not granted the epistemic space to evaluate or challenge the decisions made about their lives; instead, they are scripted as passive recipients of divine decree, delivered by the mouthpiece of Walid. This reflects Mahmood's (2005) observation that pious submission in some religious contexts is not always imposed from without, but cultivated from within through internalised norms and disciplined subjectivities. The women in *Bidaah* do not merely obey; they believe in the moral and spiritual rightness of their obedience. Their speech acts, facial expressions, and emotional performances participate in what Grimes (2014) refers to as *ritualised legitimation*, a repeated, embodied affirmation of institutional authority under the cover of divine order. This is further reinforced in another scene, where Walid proclaims:

Walid

“*Walid telah diamanahkan oleh Rasulullah SAW untuk memilih mereka Ananda Fatin Najihah, ayahanda nikahkan dengan Syekh Marzuki Kalimah. Beta nikahkan Datuk Bendahara dengan Kalsum Ibrahim. Dan penguasa kepada budaya dan bangsa Melayu, Puteri Gunung Ledang akan beta jadikan permaisuri beta.*” (Walid has been entrusted by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to choose them My daughter Fatin Najihah, I marry you to Sheikh Marzuki Kalimah. I hereby marry Datuk Bendahara to Kalsum Ibrahim. And as for the ruler of Malay culture and civilization, Puteri Gunung Ledang shall become my queen).

(Fatima, 2025)

In this case, marriage is explicitly framed as an extension of religious and cultural struggle (*jihad dakwah*), rather than a personal or spiritual covenant, but rather as a political instrument to establish a holy nation. Walid's pronouncements link marital unions directly to a mission of collective salvation, as he appoints brides and grooms to serve what he claims is a divinely mandated religious agenda. This blending of spiritual authority and ethno-cultural nationalism reflects what Wodak and Meyer (2001) term *discursive legitimation*, wherein power is naturalised through ritualised language, religious symbolism, and emotionally resonant narratives. By continuously invoking sacred names, such as Rasulullah SAW, and traditional Malay cultural references like *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, Walid merges religious devotion with ethno-national pride, effectively constructing marriage as a sacred duty to God and the imagined community (Anderson, 1991). The lack of resistance from the women involved underscores the success of such symbolic control through repetition, indoctrination, and collective spectacle, obedience is reframed as piety, and political submission as divine fulfilment.

The broader sociocultural critique embedded in these scenes lies in the exposure of how unchecked spiritual authority can subvert Islamic legal norms. In Islamic jurisprudence, marriage (*nikah*) is not a symbolic gesture but a legal contract (*'aqd*) founded on mutual consent and free will (*ikhtiyar*) of both partners (Emon & Kholiq, 2021). The Qur'an explicitly affirms this right: "*Do not prevent them from marrying their husbands if they lawfully agree among themselves*" (QS. Al-Baqarah 232). The Prophet Muhammad further clarified that a woman's consent is essential in marriage, stating, "*A previously married woman must not be married without her consent, and a virgin must not be married without her permission*" (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 5136). In the scenes above, no space is given for negotiation, refusal, or personal will; women's roles are reduced to passive recipients of decisions made by male religious authorities. Their silence and expressions of gratitude, "Ya Allah, terima kasih Walid", signal not autonomy, but internalised obedience to a structure in which dissent is either unimaginable or sacrilegious.

This use of forced marriages, particularly when framed through the language of *barakah* (divine blessing), *syurga* (paradise), and *nikah jihad* (marriage as religious warfare), exemplifies how religious symbols are instrumentalised to consolidate patriarchal and authoritarian control. As Abu-Lughod (2002) has cautioned, discourses of religious and cultural authenticity often mask systems of domination, especially when they claim to preserve "tradition" or divine will. In such contexts, women are commodified, not as spiritual equals or moral agents, but as symbols of loyalty and purity to be distributed by the leader. Their value is linked not to intellect or consent but to perceived beauty, age, and spiritual "readiness," as reflected in the remark "*Kalau yang muda, dapat tujuh hari bersama. Kalau yang cantik, dapat dua minggu bersama.*" This disturbing rationalisation reduces women to temporary rewards within a sanctified hierarchy, aligning with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of *symbolic violence*, wherein domination is misrecognised as legitimate or even sacred.

Ultimately, these scenes demonstrate that what appears to be pious devotion is, in fact, a reproduction of authoritarian power disguised in theological language. Through Fairclough's critical discourse lens, it becomes evident that language in *Bidaah* operates simultaneously at multiple levels textually through ritual speech and symbolic diction, discursively through communal ritual and internalised dogma, and socio-culturally through the normalisation of gendered inequality under religious legitimacy. What is dramatised is not just marriage, but the systemic redefinition of piety as obedience to patriarchal and spiritual domination. The film, thus, offers a stark commentary on the erosion of ethical religiosity in favour of totalising power, masked as a sacred order.

4.5 Doctrine of divorce when the spouse does not want to follow the teachings of Walid

One of the most controversial doctrines in the teachings of *Jihād Ummah* is the legitimacy of divorce if the couple is deemed disobedient or reluctant to follow the teachings of Walid. This doctrine is not only internal within the group, but also significantly impacts the social structure of the families of its followers, especially women. This is illustrated explicitly in one of the scenes where Walid's wife, the most influential female figure in the community, orders directly that female congregants divorce their husbands if they are deemed unfaithful or reluctant to support Walid's vision and movement as *Imam Mahdi*. The *Imam Mahdi* refers to a prophesied figure in Islamic eschatology who is believed to appear at the end of times to restore justice and righteousness on earth before the Day of Judgment. In this

context, the divorce discourse is used to strengthen the movement's ideological dominance, *Jihād Ummah*, where even personal relationships must submit to a religious power structure centred on the figure of Walid. A particularly telling moment unfolds when Umi Hafizah (Woman leader in *Jihād Ummah*) urges Fauzia, a female follower, to leave her husband, who is reluctant to accept Walid's teachings:

- Umi Hafizah “*Cerai. Lelaki-lelaki yang keji untuk perempuan-perempuan yang keji. Perempuan-perempuan yang baik adalah untuk lelaki-lelaki yang baik. Dia tak layak untuk jadi suami awak sebab dia tak mampu untuk memimpin awak ke syurga.*” (Divorce. Wicked men are for wicked women, and good women are for good men. He is unworthy of being your husband because he cannot lead you to paradise).
- Fauzia “*Saya sayangkan dia, Umi. Kami dah lama berkahwin. Tak ada sebab untuk saya berpisah dengan dia.*” (But I love him, Umi. We’ve been married for a long time. I see no reason to leave him).
- Umi Hafizah “*Tak ada sebab, awak cakap? Dia menolak ajaran Walid. Di mana baik dia? Fauzia, betul perbuatan halal yang paling dibenci Allah adalah cerai. Tapi dalam Al-Quran ada menyatakan, perempuan berhak untuk menuntut cerai sekiranya suaminya tidak mampu untuk memimpinnya ke jalan Allah, ke syurga.*” (No reason, you say? He has rejected Walid’s teachings. What goodness is left in him? Fauzia, it is true that divorce is the most disliked permissible act in Islam, but the Qur’an also states that a woman has the right to divorce if her husband fails to lead her to Allah’s path to paradise).

(Fatima, 2025)

In the dialogue, Umi Hafizah invokes Qur’anic references and religious expressions to reframe a personal marital issue into a matter of spiritual obligation. Her use of the verse “the good are for the good” (QS An-Nur 26) establishes a moral dichotomy between pious and impious partners, positioning the husband’s disobedience not merely as personal incompatibility but as spiritual corruption. The statement that he “cannot lead you to paradise” shifts the standard of marital legitimacy from mutual consent and ethical conduct to loyalty toward religious authority. This manipulation of the concept of *qiwāmah* (male leadership) deviates significantly from classical *tafsir*, which traditionally links leadership to moral responsibility rather than allegiance to a specific figure (Ibn Katshir, 2003).

Moreover, Umi Hafizah’s assertion that “*divorce is the most hated permissible act*” (a paraphrase of a hadith in Sunan Abi Dawood, no. 2178) is selectively reinterpreted. Rather than serving its original purpose of cautioning against frivolous separation, this phrase is redeployed as a justification for ideological purification. The framing of divorce as necessary to preserve doctrinal integrity replaces personal agency with institutional allegiance, effectively transforming emotional bonds into mechanisms of communal discipline.

Within the internal discursive structure of *Jihād Ummah*, Umi Hafizah’s language functions as a ritualised speech act that marks the boundaries of acceptable belief and behaviour. Her gendered role lends credibility to the coercive instruction, giving the impression that women in the community hold leadership positions while reinforcing a patriarchal system. This co-optation of female figures into enforcing ideological submission echoes Mahmood’s (2005) critique of how piety movements mobilise women to uphold structures of domination under the guise of religious virtue. Van Dijk (1998) refers to this process as discursive hegemony, where dominant ideologies are reproduced and legitimised through internal agents, particularly in insular communities.

The privatisation of ideological loyalty, as seen in this scene, transforms the household into a theatre of power. By tying marital status to adherence to Walid’s teachings, the narrative illustrates how

authoritarian religious movements weaponise personal relationships. This aligns with Hasan's (2006) analysis of radical Islamic groups, which often regulate intimate life as a means of testing and reinforcing communal loyalty. Bukhtiar et al. (2025) similarly observes that practices such as ideologically mandated divorce serve to sever emotional ties that might weaken the leader's control, effectively isolating followers from competing influences.

At the broader sociocultural level, *Bidaah* critiques the ideological distortion of Islamic legal principles. Divorce (*ṭalāq*) is indeed permissible in Islam. Still, it is constrained by procedural ethics, including mediation, mutual respect, and a commitment to justice (QS 4:35). The manipulation of divorce into a religious weapon undermines these principles. It violates the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), particularly the protection of family integrity (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*) and rational judgment (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*). By redefining spiritual worth in terms of compliance with Walid's authority, the community replaces theological ethics with authoritarian dogma. Fairclough's (2013) notion of ideological interpellation is evident here language does not merely describe reality but constructs subject positions, such as the "faithful woman", that demand submission disguised as moral responsibility.

This scene thus reveals how sacred language, when deployed through gendered authority, becomes a powerful tool of coercion. The textual deployment of religious expressions reconfigures private choices into spiritual mandates; the discursive structure of the community ritualises loyalty as divine obedience; and the sociocultural consequences of this structure expose how Islamic ethical teachings can be misappropriated to sustain authoritarian power. Through this multi-layered representation, *Bidaah* demonstrates how spiritual rhetoric, when stripped of ethical integrity, can justify domination under the guise of piety, particularly at the expense of women's autonomy.

4.6 Legitimacy of the Practice of Abortion for the Character Mia

One of the critical events in *Bidaah* is the forced abortion imposed on Mia, under the direct authority of Walid, the community's spiritual leader, who exercises absolute control. Walid rationalises the abortion by asserting that the relationship between Mia and her husband is merely an emotional connection, lacking physical legitimacy. Consequently, Mia's pregnancy is portrayed as a violation of the sanctity of spiritual bonds, rather than a natural extension of human relationality.

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| Walid | "Walid sayang Mia. Memang Mia isteri batin Walid. Sebab itu anak dalam perut Mia itu tak boleh dizahirkan. Sebab hubungan kita hanya pada batin sahaja." (Walid loves Mia. Mia is indeed Walid's spiritual wife. That is why the child in Mia's womb cannot be brought into the physical world, because our relationship exists only in the spiritual realm.) |
| Mia | "Mia tak tahu nak buat apa, Walid. Semua orang dah tahu Mia mengandung, memang malu, Walid." (Mia does not know what to do, Walid. Everyone already knows I'm pregnant. It's shameful, Walid). |
| Walid | "Mia sayang Walid? Mia masih nak jadi isteri batin Walid? Yang batin tetap batin. Kita tak boleh zahirkan. Walid nak Mia gugurkan anak itu." (The one who loves Walid. Does Mia still want to be Walid's spiritual wife? What is spiritual must remain spiritual. It cannot be made visible. Walid wants Mia to terminate the pregnancy). |

(Fatima, 2025)

At the textual level, Walid's statements are deeply embedded with spiritualised and authoritative language that redefines abortion not as an act of violence, but as a morally justified ritual of purification, by referring to Mia as his *isteri batin* (spiritual wife). Walid constructs a fictitious category of religious intimacy that superficially imitates the sanctity of Islamic marital relations while deliberately bypassing the legal and ethical foundations that underpin legitimate unions in Islamic law. This rhetorical move

enables Walid to establish a relationship framework that affords him power without accountability, cloaked in the semblance of piety. His declaration, “*yang batin tetap batin. Kita tak boleh zahirkan*”, functions as a boundary-setting utterance that negates the physical implications of intimacy and strips the fetus of any recognition as human life. Instead, the pregnancy is discursively reframed as an illegitimate by-product of a spiritual bond that must remain hidden, intangible, and unmanifested.

This selective use of religious language to sanitise coercive control aligns with what Fairclough (2013) terms *ideological interpellation*, in which language constructs specific subject positions and moral obligations. In this case, Mia is interpellated as a subject whose moral virtue lies in her willingness to erase biological truth in the service of a theological fiction. Her worth becomes conditional on submission, not only to Walid’s authority but also to a spiritual logic that denies her corporeality. The scene thus reveals how religious rhetoric, when severed from normative legal-ethical grounding, becomes a potent instrument for re-inscribing gendered hierarchies.

Beyond the textual layer, the scene also reflects entrenched discursive practices that normalise bodily regulation within the community. Mia’s response, “*Mia tak tahu nak buat apa, memang malu*”, reveals a profound sense of helplessness and internalised shame, signalling the collapse of personal agency under communal judgment. Her emotional state is not met with compassion or guidance, but instead with cold, religious instruction, as Walid leverages her vulnerability to enforce doctrinal compliance. His form of control does not rely on physical coercion; instead, it is discursively sustained through the use of sanctified language, emotional manipulation, and the authoritative aura of his spiritual status. This dynamic resonates with Mahmood’s (2005) observation that the agency of religious women in certain piety movements often manifests not through resistance, but through disciplined self-effacement, shaped by structures that valorise obedience over autonomy.

Viewed through a sociocultural lens, the representation of Mia’s forced abortion critiques the convergence of patriarchal authority, spiritual abuse, and reproductive domination. Mia’s body becomes a battleground upon which the ideological purity of the community is contested and maintained. This transformation of the biological into a domain of spiritual governance echoes Foucault’s (1978) concept of *biopower*, wherein institutions and systems of authority exert control not merely over behaviour but over life itself, including reproduction, bodily autonomy, and mortality. In this context, the fetus is not acknowledged as a nascent life but recast as a contaminant, a material manifestation that threatens the immaterial sanctity of Walid’s constructed spiritual order. Consequently, abortion is not represented as a painful moral dilemma or a last-resort medical decision, but as an imperative of ideological hygiene. It is a ritualised purification that reinforces the boundaries of legitimacy and power within the sect.

This portrayal stands in stark contradiction to normative Islamic teachings on the sanctity of life. Islamic jurisprudence holds that life begins to acquire legal and spiritual status progressively during gestation, particularly after 120 days, when the *rūḥ* (soul) is believed to enter the fetus (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 3208). Within this framework, abortion is only permitted under exceptional conditions, such as to preserve the mother’s life, and even then, it must be evaluated with utmost ethical sensitivity. The Qur’an is unambiguous in condemning the destruction of life without just cause “*Do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We provide for them and you. Surely, killing them is a heinous sin*” (Qur’an, 17:31). The coercive abortion practiced in *Bidaah*, driven solely by ideological fear of exposure and moral dissonance, directly violates two core objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī’ah*) *ḥifẓ al-nasl* (protection of lineage) and *karāmah* (protection of human dignity). As scholars such as Rahmawati (2021) and Malisi (2022) argue, these objectives form the backbone of Islamic ethical reasoning in matters of family, reproduction, and legal personhood.

Ultimately, this scene from *Bidaah* illustrates how sacred discourse, when abstracted from its ethical anchor, can be weaponised to justify systemic control over women’s bodies and choices. Through the lens of Fairclough’s CDA, it becomes evident that abortion in this narrative is not simply a medical or personal act but a symbolic performance of submission, orchestrated through layered mechanisms of linguistic manipulation, emotional subjugation, and spiritual justification. At the textual level, Walid reframes coercion as purification; at the discursive level, his authority is upheld by internalised community norms that elevate obedience to the divine; and at the sociocultural level, *Bidaah* critiques

how religious ideology can be transformed into a regime of domination, one that reconfigures spiritual devotion into a structure of gendered violence and moral silencing.

5.0 Discussion

The film constructs a critical inquiry into how religious language can be transformed into a mechanism of domination. Through a combination of symbolic ritual, moral prescriptions, and charismatic authority, the narrative depicts a discursive environment in which women's autonomy is systematically diminished. A synthesis of Critical Discourse Analysis, Foucauldian power theory, and feminist scholarship helps clarify how these processes unfold at the level of discourse, embodiment, and institutional power.

From a CDA perspective, the distortion of marriage ritual represents a deliberate restructuring of linguistic and symbolic authority. Walid deploys a vocabulary of spiritual elevation that masks the absence of any legal or ethical foundation. The notion of inner union is intentionally vague and resists verification, a feature that CDA identifies as a strategy that obscures asymmetries in power. The ritual becomes persuasive not because it adheres to normative religious practice but because the language surrounding it is presented as unchallengeable. By monopolising interpretive authority, Walid positions his speech as the only legitimate frame through which reality can be understood. This control of discourse becomes the primary condition that enables coercion.

Foucauldian theory further illuminates the operations of power in the film. Power is exercised not only through overt control but through the creation of regimes of truth that shape what individuals consider acceptable, moral, or natural. Walid's authority relies on a discursive apparatus that connects obedience with spiritual safety and dissent with moral danger. This configuration produces a form of pastoral power, in which the leader frames himself as the guardian of the followers' salvation. The ritual of spiritual marriage thus functions as a technique of governance that binds individuals to the authority of the leader by shaping their desires, fears, and moral imaginations. The absence of legal procedure is not a flaw but a strategic emptying of institutional oversight, allowing power to operate in intimate spaces without accountability.

Feminist theory deepens this reading by foregrounding how patriarchal structures target women's bodies as central sites of control. Amira is framed as pure, innocent, and spiritually receptive, and these qualities are then used to justify her subordination. The film demonstrates how ideals of femininity are not self-generated but imposed through a male-centred interpretive regime that equates female virtue with compliance. In this context, the female body becomes an ideological surface upon which notions of purity, sacrifice, and obedience are inscribed. The mechanisms of control do not rely on force alone. They rely on affective conditioning that encourages women to internalise their own subordination. This aligns with feminist analyses of symbolic violence, which highlight how domination becomes most effective when it appears natural or spiritually meaningful.

The relationship between Amira and Walid becomes the clearest intersection of these theoretical lenses. Walid's discourse shapes the terms of intelligibility for Amira's choices. His authority operates through pastoral rhetoric that blurs care and coercion, while patriarchal norms define Amira's moral worth in relation to her willingness to surrender autonomy. The symbolic ritual completes this system by presenting bodily submission as a sacred act rather than a violation. In Foucauldian terms, Amira's subjectivity is produced within a system that limits the possibilities for resistance. She does not lack agency because she is naive but because the discursive environment has narrowed the conceptual space available for critical refusal.

Taken together, the film reveals a structure in which religious discourse, patriarchal authority, and charismatic power function as mutually reinforcing mechanisms. The exploitation presented in the narrative is not merely a matter of individual immorality but the product of a discursive formation that

legitimises violence through sacred language. The synthesis of CDA, Foucauldian theory, and feminist critique demonstrates how coercion becomes sustainable when it is embedded within interpretive frameworks that present domination as devotion. The film therefore exposes the broader sociocultural conditions that allow spiritual rhetoric to become a tool for subjugating women, and it invites a deeper reflection on how sacred meanings are constructed, contested, and weaponised.

6.0 Conclusion

Based on the analysis, the film *Bidaah* may be interpreted as offering a strong social critique of deviant religious practices through symbolic representations imbued with power-laden ideology. The narrative suggests how religious teachings can be manipulated by charismatic figures such as "Walid" to legitimise personal authority, suppress women's agency, and construct closed, repressive, and patriarchal social structures. Representations of spiritual marriage conducted without guardians or witnesses, rituals of leader worship, the symbolic consumption of foot-washing water, forced polygamy, ideological divorce, and even coerced abortion, all illustrate how personal autonomy may be systematically silenced under the guise of religious obedience.

Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study has shown that *Bidaah* does more than tell a story—it arguably constructs a discourse of domination, using language, symbols, and visual codes to position religion not as a means of liberation, but as a tool of control. The film invites reflection on the ways in which religious texts and practices, when appropriated by unchecked leadership, can become vehicles for coercion and structural inequality.

From a normative Islamic perspective, the findings suggest that the practices represented in the film could be viewed as significant deviations from both the legal and ethical foundations of Islamic law. Instances such as marriage without a *wali* (person or body that exercises parental authority in shariah law) and witnesses, deification of religious leaders, and bodily interventions like forced abortion may contradict both procedural requirements and the *maqāsid al-sharī'ah*, which emphasise justice, human dignity, and the sanctity of family. However, rather than dismissing such representations as mere dramatic exaggerations, the film may serve as a critical lens through which audiences are invited to discern the boundaries between authentic piety and distorted spirituality.

The practical relevance of this analysis lies in its potential to contribute to broader discussions on religious authority, gender relations, and the influence of media in contemporary society. By illustrating how sacred language and imagery can be instrumentalised for ideological purposes, *Bidaah* offers a valuable case study for exploring issues such as religious manipulation, the regulation of women's bodies, and the sociopolitical role of Islamic narratives in popular media. This may be particularly important in religiously plural and media-saturated societies where visual culture shapes public perceptions of piety, morality, and power.

This study's primary limitation lies in its analytical scope, which focuses solely on one film text without exploring audience reception or production context. It does not investigate how the public interprets or engages with the religious discourses portrayed, nor does it examine the ideological positioning of the filmmakers or market pressures that may have influenced narrative construction. As such, the findings should be regarded as exploratory rather than conclusive.

Future research should consider a broader corpus of Islamic-themed films to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how religious power is mediated, normalised, or contested in the cinematic realm. A cross-disciplinary approach, that combining media studies, gender analysis, and the sociology of religion, will be essential to deepen interpretive frameworks and avoid oversimplified readings. Incorporating reception studies will also be crucial in investigating how different demographic groups, particularly younger audiences, interpret and respond to religious narratives in film. Such research could offer important insights into the evolving relationship between media, belief, and identity in the digital age.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to the English Department of Multimedia University for the academic support provided throughout the development of this study. Special acknowledgment is also extended to MMU Press as the organiser of the MMU Article Writing Competition, through which this research was conceived, developed, and subsequently awarded First Place in the General Category by JCLC Journal.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

Authors Contribution Statement

AF: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation.
AHI: Project Administration, Writing; AF & AHI: Review & Editing.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethics Statement

This research did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval because it did not involve human participants.

Data Access Statement

Research data supporting this publication are available from the NN repository at located at www.NNN.org/download/

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