



Submission date: 27/08/2020

Accepted date: 10/11/2020

**ISLAMIC MORAL COMEDY? THE REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN
MALAYSIAN COMEDY FILMS *SYURGA CINTA* (PARADISE OF LOVE,
2009) AND *USTAZ, MU TUNGGU AKU DATANG!*
(USTAZ, I'M COMING! 2013)**

*Komedi Moral Islamik? Representasi Islam dalam Filem Komedi Malaysia
Syurga Cinta (2009) dan Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang! (2013)*

Suria Hani binti A.Rahman, Rosidayu binti Sabran & Rosnawati binti Hussin
Communication Program, Faculty of Leadership and Management
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

suriahani@usim.edu.my

Abstract

This article examines how Islam is being represented in Malaysian comedy films: *Syurga Cinta*/Paradise of Love (Ahmad Idham, 2009) and *Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang!*/Ustaz, I'm Coming! (Pierre Andre, 2013). As one of a popular genre in film, comedy and its comical narratives has the ability to critique social, cultural and political conditions within the specific context of Malaysia. Using film narrative analysis, this study identifies that both films revolve around a similar plot of a male quest for *haram* (forbidden) obsessions, such as fortune or women, and a return to morality (i.e. humility and true love). As these comedies attempt to illuminate the intersection between religion and comical narrative, the way they feature the main characters are not simply as sinful or immoral. Rather, they are portrayed as misguided, but equally amusing in dealing with misfortune and wrongfulness. This article found that the central element of both films lies in its incongruity between the traditional Islamic principle and trajectories which against morality. Besides the call for morality, this article also argues that Malaysian comedy is also shaped in response to the Islamisation of the public sphere, thus, underlines the 're-imagine social life' within the Malay (sian)-Muslim context.

Keywords: Malaysian film, Islam, comedy, representation, moral story.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana Islam dipaparkan dalam filem-filem komedi Malaysia: *Syurga Cinta* (Ahmad Idham, 2009) dan *Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang!* (Pierre Andre, 2013). Sebagai salah satu genre popular dalam filem, komedi dan naratif lucunya mempunyai keupayaan untuk mengkritik keadaan sosial, budaya dan politik khususnya dalam konteks Malaysia. Menerusi analisis naratif filem, kajian ini mengenalpasti plot kedua-dua filem adalah berkisar tentang obsesi lelaki terhadap perkara yang haram (dilarang), seperti kekayaan atau wanita, dan kemudiannya kembali kepada nilai moral (seperti rasa rendah diri dan cinta sejati). Oleh kerana kedua-dua komedi ini cuba mengetengahkan pertembungan antara agama dan naratif lucu, watak-watak utama yang dipaparkan bukan hanya sebagai insan berdosa atau tidak bermoral. Sebaliknya, mereka digambarkan sebagai orang yang sesat atau tiada pedoman, dan pada masa yang sama menghiburkan dalam menghadapi nasib malang dan kesilapan mereka. Artikel ini mendapati bahawa elemen utama kedua-dua filem terletak pada ketidakselarian di antara ajaran Islam dengan amalan yang bertentangan nilai moral. Selain itu, artikel ini juga menghujahkan bahawa penghasilan cerita komedi Malaysia adalah merupakan tindak balas daripada proses Islamisasi awam, yang seterusnya menekankan konsep 'membayangkan semula kehidupan sosial' dalam konteks Melayu (Malaysia)-Muslim.

Kata kunci: Filem Malaysia, Islam, komedi, representasi, cerita moral.

INTRODUCTION

The cinema, or film, which is understood as being part of the commodities of 'popular culture', provides a platform for exploring the multiplicity of genre, as it appears in mass-produced generic fiction and art in general (Neale, 1990, p. 194). By this, Deleyto (2011) raises the issue of 'genre belonging', which deals with the traditional view of genres as film groups and simultaneously facilitates in making references about a particular film's type and characteristics, such as horror, comedy, melodrama, and Western films. The genre characteristic also allows critics to recognise, appreciate and articulate similarities and differences among films, which also echoes Grant's (2007, p.80) account that genre films feature standard ways of representing gender, class, race, ethnicity, and as this paper will show, the representation of religion i.e. Islam.

Somehow, the common theme in films, e.g. comedy, horror or love, has never faded but inserting religious values into this theme would certainly become an advantage (Mazni *et al.* 2010). Efforts made by several Malaysian film producers in presenting an Islamic theme in their films should be appreciated. The interpretation of Islamic film may not be definite, or rather determined by individual producers. This paper examines the relationship between film genres, in particular comedy, and its

representation of Islam in the context of Malay films, and to provide evidence of how and what kind of depiction of Islam being presented in comedy films.

Representation of Islam in the Malaysian Comedy

Comedy narrative is associated with humour and an intention to invite laughter. It is not just a 'light' and 'amusing' media genre, but is generally marked by a happy ending and reconciliation, a non-tragic theme or motif, and also by its concern with the representation of everyday life (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p.2; Lewis, 2002; Norman, 2004). Lewis (2002, p.155) adds that jokes, laughter, irony, the unexpected, are all examples of the rhetorical tradition of comedic expression. More importantly, the nature of humour in a comedy fiction can also reflect social, political and cultural trends in a particular context. The way comedy presents its subject of criticism on-screen will reveal whether the presentation is simply to invite ridicule or to call for the rehabilitation of those subjects (Horton & Rapf, 2013; Bonnstetter, 2011, p. 18).

This paper investigates Malaysian comedy in which the selected films involve a diverse comical dimension of romantic comedy (*Syurga Cinta*, 2009, dir. Ahmad Idham) and a presentation of 'Islamic comedy' in *Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang!* (2013, dir. Pierre Andre). Although the term 'Islamic comedy' may suggest a contrasting vision between religion and humour, this variety seems to have its own way of representing its cultural/religious understanding in a particular context. Such an understanding fits with Morreall's (1999, p.23) observation that comedy also encourages "reframing", entailing looking at situations from new and unusual perspectives, via the portrayal of diverse narratives and characters.

From the Malay film industry, no account of comedy would be satisfactory without mention of P.Ramlee's classical comedies, which made him popular with Malaysian audiences of all ages and ethnicities (Mohd. Zamberi & Aimi, 2005; Norman, 2013). During the golden period of the Malay film in 1950s and 1960s, the majority of P.Ramlee's comedy accentuated class issues which often criticising the Malay feudal system and the socio-economic condition of the people. P.Ramlee's first comedy, *Bujang Lapok* (1957), depicted the struggles of three *kampong* (village) working class men in their economic and romantic pursuits. The next two of his *purba* (period) comedies, *Musang Berjanggut* ('The Bearded Fox', 1959) and *Nujum Pak Belalang* ('Pak Belalang, The Fortune-Teller', 1959), were loosely adapted from humorous folktales poking fun at the fallibility of the Malay sultans (Amir, 2010). P.Ramlee often deployed satire in his comedies such as in *Madu Tiga* ('Three Wives', 1964), a modern-day, polygamy-themed comedy. The film critiques the practice of polygamy by middle-class Malay-Muslim men, a theme that remains popular today on the big screen (Norman, 2013; Hassan, 2013, p.57-58).

These classical comedies illustrate some contextual interpretations of humour and laughter. From the era of P.Ramlee to the recent years, comedy film is deemed to be one of a popular film produced in Malaysia. In the recent list of Malaysia's top 50-feature films (released by National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) as of October 2019, for films that were released for screening between 1990an until 2018), twelve (12) of them were comedies (including films which were produced under the mixture label of action-comedy and horror-comedy) (FINAS, 2019).

Film Analysis

This paper employs film narrative analysis by examining the narrative structure of selected films, since narrative highlights the intended meaning and subsequently allows us to understand the plot presentation. According to Lacey (2000), film narrative presents information in a connected sequence of events, from the most basic linear narrative sequence (ibid, p.13) to non-linear storytelling. The selected films for this study have been partly labelled as Islamic comedy, for both films demonstrated a mixture of genre characteristics and Islamic narrative: the romantic-comedy in *Syurga Cinta* (2009), and Islamic comedy in *Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang!* (2013). For analysis purposes, it is essential to identify the narrative structure of the film in order to understand its motion and emotion, particularly the plot and character development in a comedy story.

The analysis begins by examining the narrative structure to identify the sequence of the plot for each film. A proposed narrative structure is adapted from the plot schema shown in the following Table 1 (Gillespie 2006, p. 97, expanded from Todorov's narrative pattern).

Table 1: Plot Structure

Exposition	The initial equilibrium, a state of normality, stability, social order (the introduction/beginning of the story)
Disruption	A causal event by an agent of change, creates a de-equilibrium, creating a problem or a quest
Complication	A series of obstacles occur
Climax	Dramatic highpoint of the conflict, excitement or tension; followed by release
Resolution and closure	The main protagonist resolves the problem, obtains their goal and fulfills their desire; this instigates a revised equilibrium as the story ends

The representation concept proposed by Hall (1982) will guide the analysis of meanings in the film narratives, which illustrates the work of signifying events in a particular way via media texts. The process then will identify the ideas or themes related to Islam that are being represented in the narrative structure.

DISCUSSION

***Syurga Cinta*: An Account of Reverse Orientalism?**

Film *Syurga Cinta* (2009), in brief, is a romantic comedy (rom-com) film about love between the two people: a young Muslim man (Irham, played by Awal Ashaari) and a Muslim woman (Syuhadah, played by Heliza AF5), who are pursuing different ways of life. Irham adores a Western lifestyle, as he always demands freedom e.g. enjoying nightlife. In contrast, the main female protagonist, Syuhadah, is portrayed embracing the teachings of Islam in her daily life. Irham meets Syuhadah because of a bet he made with his best friends. According to the bidding agreement, Irham has to date Syuhadah for a month, and then disclose their pact to her, in order for Irham to win a prize. Little did they know that when their two worlds collide, they have to deal with each other and finally to learn the true meaning of love and life from one another.

At the beginning of *Syurga Cinta*, the film shows that Irham prefers to live abroad as he feels free to live (the Western lifestyle) and he has been criticised by his best friends for not being patriotic. Hence, Irham's Western lifestyle is portrayed judgmentally from the exposition (initial) stage of the narrative. In one of the early scenes, Irham is seen carrying a drunken young woman in a mini-skirt from a nightclub to his house to spend the night with him. As they drive past the mosque, laughing in an expensive sport car, the camera pauses for a static shot of the mosque, gleaming and towering in the darkness, which symbolises the Muslim way of life that the couple is ignoring.

The depiction of a materialistic and decadent western lifestyle in *Syurga Cinta* functions as a villain that prevents one from discovering the true meaning of love and life. As Irham comes from a wealthy family, there are moments establishing how he enjoys a materialistic lifestyle without any thought of spiritual needs and guidance. Various symbols of materialism have been presented; a high angle shot of their mansion, an excessive interior, and the possession of luxury vehicles as well their preferred spot for socialising activities. The film seeks to represent an Eastern and Islamic perspective set in contrast to the Western, which brings the film's discourse to a cultural specificity context. Turner (2006, p.112) explains that this cultural specificity in film narrative allows the spectator to differentiate the dominant discourses of one culture from those of another. *Syurga Cinta* signifies a conflicting representation of an Eastern perspective set against Westernisation and materialistic values, as this film contrasts the Malay-Muslim perspective against cultural

imperialism (of the West). It ends up rendering the West as a caricature for this contrasting representation.

Said (2003, p.2) points out that the East (or what is famously termed ‘the Orient’) has helped to define the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience. *Syurga Cinta* exemplifies this contrasting perspective as the conversion narrative in the film illuminates the notion of ‘reverse Orientalism’. Irham’s claim that he adores the Western secular lifestyle is in contrast with the idea of morality within the Malay(sian)-Muslim social and cultural context. The film challenges the idea of Western cultural superiority, and represents Islamic morality as the fundamental in the quest for conflict closure. The quest and complication are connected in conventional storytelling – featuring the relationship of Irham and Syuhadah – and what Islam (as guidance) means to them. The intersection between the quest for love and life through the light rom-com plot portrays the emerging Islamic principle that eventually leads Irham to the right path in life. As a way in which religious value and principle is communicated, *Syurga Cinta* also reveals the main female character (Syuhadah) as a bearer of moral values which function as a catalyst for moral transformations in the man.

The plot of romantic love that burns at the core of this film is also represented as pure, and embedded in the religious and moral sense. The relationship between Irham and Syuhadah has also revealed each other’s life story and feelings, as Irham begins to change into a different man and develops feelings for Syuhadah. During their first meeting, as arranged by Ikmal (Syuhadah is also a teacher of Ikmal - Irham’s little brother), Irham appears to be exaggerated in his attire and pretends to look pious and well-mannered, presuming that this ‘look’ meets the characteristics of the ideal man for Syuhadah. While this exaggeration injects some comical effect, the character of Irham also makes use of the look that fits the accepted social definition of religious and piety - wearing a robe or *jubah*, complete with headgear/turban. This initial phase of transformation takes place only at a physical level, as Irham is a non-conformist who exhibits an opposite lifestyle. However, his meeting with Syuhadah allows him to experience an inner transformation that truly changes him at the end of the film.

The transformation process enables Irham to (re)experience and (re)learn a ‘new way of life’, beginning to perform his daily prayers and attending *Quranic* recitation class with Syuhadah’s grandfather (*Atok*). But at the same time, this journey into the self is also being exaggerated for comic effect. The scene highlighted here during their first visit to Syuhadah’s place and meeting *Atok* for the first time, *Atok* asks Irham to be the *imam* and lead the prayer. Irham, who does not know what to do, starts to ‘hit’ Ikmal (on his feet) as a trick to save him from that ‘emergency’ situation. Even though

Ikmal succeeds in helping Irham to avoid being the *imam*, the scene also shows that Irham starts to realise how he has lived his life before, far away from the teaching of Islam and fancying a ‘modern western’ lifestyle. Subtly, the scene also articulates awareness and brings its transformative power into the main protagonist’s character. In such an event, difficulties and motivation will evolve the characters based on a certain system of motivation within the comic surprise moments (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p.42). The comic relief in the scene satirises a person’s lack of knowledge about his religion and reflects how Irham has become estranged from Islamic practices. This indicates that not only does comedy provide light amusement and laughter, but it also underlines the problematic side of human experience.

After some conflicts between the main protagonists i.e. Syuhadah found out about Irham’s betting deal, the final reconciliation between Irham and Syuhadah marks the happy ending for this romantic comedy. As the film highlights romantic and dramatic moments, particularly in dealing with complications (for example, in the character of Syuhadah and Ikmal, and their connection with Irham), the values that this film postulates also bestow dignity on the lives of people. Overall, *Syurga Cinta* is not merely about love, romance, and the trivial presentation of comedy. Rather, it unfolds the significance of the quest for the true meaning of love and life. The main male character, Irham, discovers God and the true teaching of Islam through the female protagonist (Syuhadah), mainly from the life values that she embraces; this brings the closure of their happy ending.

***Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang!:* Male, Introspective and Islamic comedy**

Structurally, the film proposes a straightforward narrative, which begins with an idea to meet the famous local preacher, Ustaz Azhar Idrus (famously known as UAI). The following sequence to the meeting represents a journey of morality and life principles for both the main male protagonists, Muiz and Dadu. As a visit from Hamzah (Dadu’s cousin) marks the turning point for both men in seeking changes in their life, the character of Hamzah functions as the ‘helper’ that inspires transformation in the protagonists. Along the journey for protagonists’ moral transformation, disruption and complication emerges in the form of human acts. The first is when they are mistakenly captured as criminal accomplices and the second is when they have been arrested, again, for being at a homosexual ‘gathering site’ by mistake. These events illuminate the experience of misunderstanding between the main protagonists (Muiz and Dadu), the mistaken events and the policemen. Rather than human manipulation, Neale and Krutnik (1990, p.40) refer to mistakes as the consequence of innocence rather than of deliberate deception.

Despite the traditional plot structure that revolves around heterosexual relationships, this film emphasises all-male characters, hence illuminating the vision of masculinity

and the crisis between good and bad. In view of this vision of masculinity, Khoo (2006, p.158) argues that Malay cinema offers several versions of what it means to be a man in modern times, but the enduring image of “authentic” masculinity in cinema is undergoing some challenges from the social realities and changes in Malaysia. For example, a scene when both Muiz and Dadu were accidentally caught on top of each other at the park filled with homosexuals, followed by the ‘grabbing’ situation between Muiz, Dadu, and the men in the cell. These scenes appear to criticise homosexuality as immoral and as a threat to the societal power structure, particularly pertaining to gender role and heterosexuality. The sequences of events involving Muiz and Dadu, and the homosexual group, explicitly remark on gender taboo, and its relationship to the traditional male role and morality.

The scene may appear to joke about homosexuality, but at the same time it articulates a ‘threat’ to the moral and social values in society. This gender conflict demonstrates that the image of masculinity can be manipulated or easily influenced and, as a result, they contradict the male role within the traditional institution of the family and community as a whole. The ending shot between Muiz, Dadu and the men in the cell illuminates the call for morality, as Dadu reminds them not to be involved again with this immoral activity, and urges them to repent to God. Also, this ending shot portrays an interesting event, which represent a sign of their faith and skill (of Muiz and Dadu), as they manage to turn around the situation in the cell – finally, the men are listening to morality advice from the two friends. In raising the question of homosexual desire, this particular scene and its appeal to morality signifies a call for the ‘re-stabilisation’ of the nature of heterosexual identity.

Since most comical characters in this film appear to be misguided and mistaken, *Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang!* renders a notion of introspective and self-reflection, which also calls for self-transformation and morality as a resolution. Therefore, it might be worth noting that the label of Islamic comedy fits the film, as much humour revolves around the troubles and difficulties that challenge the main protagonists in trying to conform to Islamic values. And at the same time, they are also negotiating their role within the demands of societal expectation and approval, particularly within the Malay (sian)-Muslim context.

Given that this film is labeled under Islamic (comedy) film, the depiction of all-male cast may also represent a notion of adhering to Islamic principles in terms of the depiction of male-female relationship (on- and off-screen). It can be read that the basic idea of presenting Islamic values and morality is also to advocate the Islamic principle of ‘enjoining good and forbidding wrong’ (for example in Rosmawati *et.al*, 2011; Naim, 2010). As the plot flows, this issue of gender representation, in particular the all-male characters is highlighted and being challenged by underlining the specific

concern about a male group and their trials in life (i.e. the issue of homosexuality and power structure – as discussed above).

The narrative achieves its classical finale, for both Muiz and Dadu are finally able to meet Ustaz Azhar Idrus in person and attend his lecture (as they always desired from the beginning of the film). As the plot develops, the narrative conveys a positive sense of self-transformation and illuminates the journey of a man’s life towards the path of morality. Muiz and Dadu represent two characters that are misguided in some aspects of their life, as the initial scenes establish the living condition of Muiz and Dadu (e.g. not performing the daily prayers and avoiding to pay the house rental), and how Hamzah (Dadu’s cousin) persuades them to be a good Muslim by being close to Allah. Therefore, the search to meet the ‘Ustaz’ (religious teacher) has guided them on a morality path.

CONCLUSION

Comic settings, according to Horton and Rapf (2013, p.148) illuminate the way in which ‘culture talks about itself to itself.’ The point is that there are various ways that people can learn about their socio-cultural condition and crises, including through the lens of local comedies as they help in revealing and commenting on the prejudices, preoccupations and dreams of the societies that produce them (ibid, p.2). As for both films that correspond to the intersection between religion and comedy, the use of the comic frame allows us to acknowledge its simplicity in delivering the didactic message.

The central element of *Syurga Cinta* and *Ustaz, Mu Tunggu Aku Datang!* lies in their incongruity of a representation between the religious (Islamic) principle/morality versus the Western and/or trajectories that are against moral principles. This conflicting interpretation derives from the direct representation of the life quest among the main male characters in the films. Evidently, these films utilise their comical appeal to deliver their didactic messages and mobilise the classical transformation narrative; there is a transformation of knowledge, a return and a reward at the end of the film (Gillespie, 2006, p.100). On the other hand, the way comedy makes the male character seem ‘misguided’, rather than evil, is by depicting their struggles in overcoming various difficulties in life. As Michael (2011, p.138) emphasises, laughter can help us understand the social functions and subversive capacities that qualify humour as an instrument for subordinate social groups to challenge social assumptions and re-imagine social life. While film in the Malaysian context should reflect the moral and religious value of the local community (e.g. the Malay-Muslim), the ending of both films exhibits a closure which suggests that religion (i.e. Islam) and its moral path serve to “manage disagreement or conflict, celebrating the collective and ultimately promoting social cohesion through the articulation of commonly agreed

values, roles and obligations” (Wright, 2007, p. 14); a resolution that proposes an ideal way of life. Thus, both films use comedy, in a distinctly Malay way, to teach the dominant Muslim morality by condemning immodesty, ignorance and Western, secular materialism.

REFERENCES

- Deleyto, C. (2011). Film genres at the crossroads: What genres and films do to each other. In Barry Keith Grant (Ed). *Film, genre and reader iv*, pp. 218-238. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- FINAS (2019). Retrieved on 18 October 2019 from <http://www.finas.gov.my/industry-information/top-50-feature-film/>.
- Gillespie, M. (2006). Narrative analysis. In Marie Gillespie and Jason Toynbee (Eds.). *Analysing media texts*, 79-118. United Kingdom: Open University Press.
- Grant, B. K. (2007). *Film genre: From iconography to ideology*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Hall, S. (1982). The rediscovery of ‘ideology’: Return of the repressed in media studies. In Michael Gurevitch *et. al* (Eds.). *Culture, society and the media*, 111-141. London: Methuen.
- Hassan Abd Muthalib (2013). *Malaysian cinema in a bottle: A century (and a bit more) of wayang*. Petaling Jaya: Orange Dove Sdn. Bhd.
- Horton, A. & Rapf, J. E. (Eds.). (2013). *A companion to film comedy*. West Sussex: Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Khoo, G.C. (2006). *Reclaiming adat: Contemporary Malaysian film and literature*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Lacey, N. (2000). *Narrative and genre: Key concepts in media studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lewis, T.V. (2002) Religious rhetoric and the comic frame in the Simpsons, *Journal of Media and Religion*, 1(3), 153-165,
- Mazni B., Suria Hani A.R., Mohd Faizal K. & Noor Adzrah R. (2010). Religious theme in film. In Mazni Buyong, Nur Kareelawati Abd Karim, Sofia Hayati Yusoff & Suria Hani A. Rahman (Eds.). *Portrayal of Islam in the media*, 182-190. Nilai: Penerbit USIM.
- Michael, J. (2011). American Muslims stand up and speak out: trajectories of humor in Muslim American Stand-up comedy. *Contemporary Islam*, 7, 129-153.
- Mohd. Zamberi A.M. & Aimi Jarr (2005). *Malaysian films: The beginning*. Kuala Lumpur: FINAS.
- Morreall, J. (1999). *Comedy, tragedy and religion*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Naim Ahmad (2010) Filem Islam: Satu perbincangan. Paper presented in *Bengkel Fiqh Penyiaran*. Organized by JAKIM, TV al-Hijrah & FDAM. ILIM, Bangi 20 June.

- Neale, S. (1990). Questions of genre. In Barry Keith Grant (Ed.). *Film, genre and reader iv*, 178-202. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Neale, S. & Krutnik, F. (1990). *Popular film and television comedy*. New York: Routledge.
- Norman Yusoff (2013). Contemporary Malaysian cinema: *Genre, gender and temporality*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University Of Sydney.
- Rosmawati Mohamad Rasit, Mohd Salleh Hassan, Mohd Nizam Osman & Muhamad Sham Shahkat Ali (2011). Film as a medium of communication for da'wah: Analysis of religious elements in selected Malay films. *Islamiyyat*, 33, 67-76.
- Said, E. W. (2003). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Turner, G. (2006). *Film as social practice iv*. New York: Routledge.
- Wright, M.J. (2007). *Religion and film: An introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris.