

Law and Representation: Gender, Power, and Religious Narratives in Indonesian Film

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 01-05-2025 Revised: 31-05-2025 Accepted: 01-06-2025 Keywords: visual communication; semiotics; religious patriarchy; gender and law; Indonesian cinema	<i>This article critically examines the intersection of gender, power, and religious ideology in the Indonesian film Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa, using Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework within a communication studies perspective. By analyzing the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings of key visual elements—such as the hijab, spatial dynamics, lighting, and body language—the study reveals how symbolic narratives in the film reproduce patriarchal discourse and religious authority that regulate women’s bodies and moral identities. Film, as a form of mediated communication, functions not merely as entertainment but as a powerful ideological text that shapes public perception, reinforces cultural myths, and contributes to the construction of social norms. Building upon this, the article expands the analysis by connecting the film’s symbolic representations to Indonesia’s legal and policy frameworks, including Islamic family law, local moral regulations (Perda Syariah), and recent legislation on sexual violence. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study engages feminist legal theory and reformist Islamic scholarship to show how cinematic representations both reflect and challenge institutionalized gender inequality. The findings demonstrate that visual communication in film can serve as a discursive arena for negotiating religious authority, exposing moral hypocrisy, and contesting legal injustices. Ultimately, this study underscores the critical role of film as a medium of cultural resistance and legal reflection in contemporary Indonesian society.</i>

I. Introduction

Film has been acknowledged as a fundamental narrative medium and form of visual representation, having a considerable influence on public opinion for a long time, reflecting societal realities, and serving as an instrument for social change or a tool of power and control (King, 2017). A product of popular culture, film goes beyond documenting events or imagination; it also presents interpretations of reality, shapes societal perceptions, and acts as a symbolic space where various ideologies, values, and power dynamics interact and are contested (Spennemann & Orthia, 2022). Film's ability to portray societal power struggles and resistance makes it a complex subject for academic analysis (Balio, 1985). Film serves as a significant mass communication platform, capable of replicating and spreading social, cultural, and ideological discussions (Bordwell & Thompson, 2017; Pasaribu et al., 2025). Film can influence people's views on various aspects of life through storytelling, characters, and visual imagery, encompassing morality, social conventions, and the dynamic between individuals and societal entities such as religion and government (Pasaribu et al., 2025). Even subconsciously, films can have a significant impact on viewers' values, perceptions, and behaviors (Stone, 1999).

Films in Indonesia have investigated issues related to power and resistance within political, religious, and cultural environments (Fahmi, 2020; An, 2018; Hamonangan, 2024). Notable examples include *The Act of Killing* (2012), which sheds light on the 1965 mass killings detailed in Oppenheimer, Cynn, & Anonim (2012); *Cahaya dari Timur: Beta Maluku* (2014), which examines the intersections of religious and identity conflicts as discussed in Sasongko (2014); and *Lima* (2018), which illustrates the practice of Pancasila values including tolerance and humanity in Amaria et al. (2018). These films show that narratives of power don't just come from official authorities like the government or religious organisations, but also from deeply ingrained social values that exist in everyday life (Nururi et al., 2025). These films demonstrate how power functions in intricate ways within both societal and personal lives, with opposition to power often manifesting in non-confrontational forms such as symbolic, spiritual, and cultural expressions (Nururi et al., 2025).

The film *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa*, directed by Hanung Bramantyo in 2024, is a highly relevant cinematic work suitable for in-depth analysis. The film

was based on Muhiddin M. Dahlan's novel, *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Menjadi Pelacur!*, which was published in 2005 and caused significant controversy due to its provocative title, as noted by Kevin (2024). The title change to *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* aimed to decrease public sensitivity while drawing attention to the film's central theme of moral struggle and religious values (Tempo, 2024). A title change signifies a creative approach to engaging a broader audience without compromising the narrative's essence (Nururi et al., 2025). The film had its global premiere on December 1, 2023, at the Jogja Netpac Asian Film Festival (JAFF), and it subsequently opened in theaters on May 22, 2024 (Kurnia Handita, 2024; Natasya et al., 2024).

Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa portrays in a complex manner the relationships of power and resistance within the Indonesian socio-religious setting (Nururi et al., 2025). This research seeks to examine how power is perceived, wielded, and challenged within the film's storyline, and how these portrayals are connected to the role of film as a medium of religious evangelism (dakwah) that transmits moral and religious values (Nururi et al., 2025). The film explores repentance, sin, and the quest for life's purpose through its main character, Kiran (portrayed by Aghniny Haque), who struggles with societal structures and power dynamics that influence her identity and life (Masyhuri, 2016; Natasya et al., 2024). A university student, Kiran, is depicted as intelligent, coming from a low-income rural background, being deeply devout and disapproving of hypocrisy (Pasaribu et al., 2025; Sulistyaningtyas et al., 2025). Her life is torn apart by hypocrisy, which ultimately leads her to join a strict religious group led by Abu Darda (Ridwan Raoull). Kiran is subjected to a series of unyielding challenges, including being compelled to marry Abu Darda as his fourth wife, facing allegations of defamation, being shunned by her parents, and experiencing unwanted advances from her advisor and a seemingly devout classmate (Pasaribu et al., 2025).

Kiran's suffering is extremely severe, encompassing both physical and emotional abuse (Fitriani et al., 2025). Those nearest to her exploit her sexually and betray her, while also causing her anxiety about the sins attributed to her body. Marginalization and neglect of women's voices, as well as oppression, also manifest in the form of Fitriani et al. (2025) stating. Kiran's reaction to this pressure is a wounded silence, which ultimately becomes a form of symbolic resistance as Fitriani et al. (2025) pointed out. Her faint voice, low pitch, falling intonation, and shaking vowel pronunciation suggest trauma and a restricted capacity for expression (Fitriani et al., 2025). The film illustrates how power functions not just within systems but also internally, influencing physical

bodies, personal spirits, and individual spiritual decisions (Bramantyo, 2023; Wahyuningsih, 2019). Kiran's decision to engage in prostitution is portrayed as a deliberate act of defiance against a societal hierarchy that shields clergy and the affluent (Pasaribu et al., 2025). By entering a world viewed with disdain by society, Kiran indeed collects proof of the hypocrisy of religious leaders and officials who employ religion as a moral pretence (Pasaribu et al., 2025). Her journey embodies a form of defiance that is not only expressed through spoken words but is also rooted in her personal experiences and tangible evidence gathered by her direct participation in a world widely criticized yet tolerated by those in authority (Pasaribu et al., 2025).

The film also powerfully illustrates how religious ideology can be manipulated as a means of social control and domination, rather than purely as a liberating moral guide (Pasaribu et al., 2025). Abu Darda and other religious leaders leverage their religious authority to influence personal conduct and mould public opinion in their interest (Pasaribu et al., 2025). Kiran's disillusionment stems from the discrepancy between religious teachings and the social customs surrounding her, prompting feelings of abandonment by both the social and spiritual justice systems (Pasaribu et al., 2025). The film portrays power as being wielded not only by external authorities but also by influencing people through social conventions and monitoring (Foucault, 2005; Nururi et al., 2025). This film offers a reflection on morality and religion, and also critiques exclusive and unjust social systems (Nururi et al., 2025). The video encourages viewers to consider the connection between faith and ethics in everyday life more thoughtfully and to understand the challenges faced by people striving to improve their circumstances despite societal obstacles (Nururi et al., 2025).

Despite offering a narrative rich in religious values, symbolic power, and existential struggles of its characters, academic research on "Although Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa" remains relatively scarce (Nururi et al., 2025). Previous studies have looked at this film from various viewpoints. For instance, Natasya, Abdur Rozaq, and Muslimin (2024) investigated the film's dakwah messages through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotics, identifying robust messages concerning faith, sharia, and ethics, as well as criticisms of hypocrisy in social and religious life, and personal struggles for spiritual meaning under pressure (Natasya et al., 2024; Sulistyaningtyas et al., 2025). Zakariyah et al. in 2024 also drew on Barthes' semiotics, with Aqilah Wardah Zakariyah, Naulia Fauziah Rosidy, and Sri Wulandari specifically analysing film posters to reveal underlying layers of significance and the interactive relationship between visual and textual components in order to form profound messages (Zakariyah et al.,

2024).

A study conducted by Nanda Tri Wardana Pasaribu, Fiza Anjani, Stevani Mahdalena Naibaho, and Hera Chairunisa (2025) looked into how power and religious ideology are reproduced in the film using Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Research has shown that religious ideology acts as a means of social control, with Kiran's decision to engage in prostitution representing a form of defiance against religious hypocrisy and power dynamics (Pasaribu et al., 2025). This study asserts its originality by emphasizing the social context aspect linked to power and religious ideology (Pasaribu et al., 2025). Rahmania Alya Fitriani, Dwi Nur Sa'adah, Firdausin Nuzula, and Novia Adibatus Shofah (2025) employed paralinguistic and feminist literary criticism methodologies to examine the forms of physical and emotional oppression faced by Kiran. This research demonstrated that Kiran's vocal expressions symbolize trauma and serve as a form of defiance against patriarchal and religious systems that suppress women's rights, as detailed by Fitriani et al. (2025). Furthermore, studies conducted by Hesty Putri Utami in 2025 on gender representation in the film, utilising Fiske's semiotics, revealed that it depicts women as outspoken figures who are nonetheless stigmatised for deviating from societal norms (Utami, 2025).

While previous research has offered valuable insights into the film's dakwah, poster visuals, power ideology, and gender oppression, a significant gap persists in comprehensive analyses that apply Roland Barthes' semiotics to the entire narrative and visual components of the film to elucidate how power is reproduced, how religious ideology operates as a form of social control, and how issues of gender justice are critiqued through the interactions of denotation, connotation, and myth. Existing research often concentrates on dakwah messages or solely on the analysis of posters using Barthes' semiotics. This study fills the gap by providing a more detailed semiotic deconstruction of the film's ideological implications beyond an examination of messages or posters alone.

This study adopts a qualitative methodology incorporating a semiotic analysis design that draws on Roland Barthes' theoretical framework. According to Barthes, language is a sign system that mirrors societal attitudes at a particular point in time, with media meaning extending beyond literal representations to encompass hidden or associative levels (Barthes, 1977; Zakariyah et al., 2024). Barthes suggests that a sign consists of two distinct levels of meaning: denotation and connotation (Fiske, 2012; Pratiwi, 2018; Dianiya, 2020).

The term denotation pertains to the literal or objective meaning of a sign, which is discernible and comprehensible without requiring further analysis or interpretation (Zakariyah et al., 2024; Pratiwi, 2018). This marks the beginning of the signification system (Briandana et al., 2022).

The connotation refers to the underlying, culturally associated, or emotional meaning that emerges when a sign interacts with users' emotions and feelings, as well as their cultural values and beliefs (Zakariyah et al., 2024; Pratiwi, 2018). Barthes regards connotation as equivalent to ideological operations that he terms "myth" (Barthes, 2007; Briandana et al., 2022).

Myth is a cultural way of thinking used to explain or comprehend specific aspects of reality or the natural world, representing the second level of signification (Barthes, 2007; Pratiwi, 2018; Dianiya, 2020). In the traditional sense, the term "myth" does not refer to mythology as a form of storytelling, but rather to a manner of expression or a specific "type of speech" (Briandana et al., 2022). Myth aims to convey and legitimise the values that are widely accepted and prevalent at a particular point in time (Briandana et al., 2022).

This study applies Barthes' semiotic model to 'Izinkan Aku Berdosa' with the goal of:

Examine the literal meanings of pivotal scenes, conversations, and visual components illustrating power structures, religious rituals, and social interactions (Zakariyah et al., 2024).

Examine the connotations and cultural undertones of these elements, investigating how they represent or contradict dominant religious beliefs, social conventions, and gender roles in Indonesian culture (Zakariyah et al., 2024).

Examine the film's portrayal of moral authority, sin, repentance, gender roles, and societal hypocrisy by analysing the relationship between the literal meaning and implied meaning (Zakariyah et al., 2024; Briandana et al., 2022) of the ideologies it presents.

Delving deeper into the cultural significance of Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa reveals its role as a cultural artifact grappling with intricate social and religious themes, with Kiran's journey exemplifying resistance and spiritual metamorphosis within this context.

The data will be collected using documentary methods, which include a thorough analysis of the film and its visual elements pertinent to the social context established within its narrative (Moleong, 2018; Pasaribu et al., 2025). This research employs a critical interpretive paradigm, enabling the researcher to critically evaluate and deeply interpret the meanings embedded in the film's discourses and social practices (Dianiya, 2020).

The study's importance is reflected in several substantial contributions. Theoretically, this enhances research on film as a space for power representation and as a communicative and transformative medium of dakwah (Nururi et al., 2025). Gaining a broader understanding will result from examining how power and resistance are conceptualized in a multi-faith and culturally complex community such as Indonesia (Nururi et al., 2025). In practical terms, these research findings will provide insights for academics, film reviewers, and the general public in understanding ideological portrayals in the media (Pasaribu et al., 2025). This study can offer a more in-depth understanding of how films shape and maintain specific discourses by examining representations of power and religious ideology in film, as well as how individuals who diverge from religious norms are depicted in film narratives (Pasaribu et al., 2025).

This study also makes a contribution to the growing concern of gender in Indonesia. The film effectively constructs and critiques dominant ideological narratives, highlighting the intersections of gender, power, and religious discourse as it portrays the stigmatization and oppression of individuals who do not conform to religious norms (Pasaribu et al., 2025). The connections between sustainable development and the empowerment of various societal groups should be highlighted, as they are reflected in Gender issues and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Agusalim & Amalia, 2023). Kiran's portrayal, notable for her courage in speaking out and her determination to uncover the truth despite being later misrepresented, offers insights into women's resilience in the face of oppressive systems (Utami, 2025). This study is anticipated to not only enhance the cinematic analysis of *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* but also promote social reflection and critical understanding of key issues in Indonesian culture.

2. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach within a critical interpretive framework to reveal underlying meanings and ideologies embedded in the analysed media. Understanding how communication is used to dominate and control is crucial, as well as how researchers can use their interpretation of data to facilitate positive social change (Liliweri, 2018, p. 50). Neuman (2014, p. 110) suggests that critical social science involves a more in-depth examination that goes beyond superficial appearances to uncover the underlying factors influencing reality, ultimately enabling people to make changes and work towards a more improved society. The interpretive paradigm centres on explaining occurrences through socially constructed meanings and subjective perspectives (Neuman, 2014, p. 84). Interpretive researchers acknowledge that social

situations inherently involve ambiguity, as actions and statements can have multiple meanings that are open to interpretation (Neuman, 2014, p. 108).

Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis.

This research employs Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to break down the "codes" in visible messages and uncover the underlying meanings that lie beneath them (Rully et al., 2020, p. 33). Signs and symbols, as studied in semiotics from the Greek word *semeion*, meaning "sign," explore how meaning is constructed socially through systems of signs (Griffin, 2012, p. 332). According to Eco (1976, cited in Chandler, 1999, p. 8), semiotics is the study of anything that can be perceived as a sign, encompassing words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects, as Chandler (1999, p. 8) and Dianiya (2020, p. 90, 93) also note.

Barthes was a prominent structuralist who applied semiotic principles to visual imagery (Pratiwi, 2018, p. 196, 197), demonstrating that the meanings associated with images are not the natural result of what we see but are constructed (Curtin, 2009, p. 54). At the core of Barthes' methodology is his concept of "Two Orders of Signification" (Dianiya, 2020, p. 90, 93; Pratiwi, 2018, p. 168, 198; Rully et al., 2020, p. 5, 31), comprising three interrelated levels.

The denotation is the initial, literal level of meaning, referring to the direct, objective interpretation of a sign, text, or image (Pratiwi, 2018, p. 198; Rully et al., 2020, p. 5). It clarifies the direct relationship between the signifier and the signified, connecting a sign with the object it depicts in external reality. This is generally consistent with what people's common sense would suggest (Pratiwi, 2018, p. 199).

Connotation extends beyond the literal meaning, encompassing cultural values, emotional connotations, and ideologies that intersect with a signifier (Pratiwi, 2018, p. 199, 200; Rully et al., 2020, p. 5, 30, 31). Barthes used photography to demonstrate this concept: what is depicted in the image is denotation, whereas connotation refers to the way it is presented, drawing on more extensive social narratives (Pratiwi, 2018, p. 200). Connotations often unconsciously influence the way we view things (Rully et al., 2020, p. 47).

Myth encompasses the cultural process of naturalizing specific meanings, thus rendering historically situated concepts timeless and universal (Dianiya, 2020, p. 121; Rully et al., 2020, p. 32). Barthes claimed that myth is the most significant operation of signs, showing how certain social products achieve dominance by becoming accepted as natural facts (Rully et al., 2020, p. 32, 36). Historical experience and knowledge are relied upon to disguise ideology as common sense (Ronda, 2018, as cited in Rully et al., 2020, p. 30). Visual media can reveal parts of a community's actual reality and expose concealed ideological systems through myth (Rully et al., 2020, p. 33).

Data Gathering and Focus of Examination

Data were collected via close observation of visual and audiovisual media, including films and advertisement videos. Key scenes were captured to enable a more in-depth analysis (Dianiya, 2020, p. 122; Pratiwi, 2018, p. 168, 196). Literature studies, incorporating books, academic journals, and relevant online sources, were utilised to develop the researcher's interpretive lens and enhance the analysis (Dianiya, 2020, p. 123; Rully et al., 2020, p. 36).

The main subject of analysis is the film "Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa," which serves as a case study to examine how visual media influence cultural interpretations. Studies on film semiotics have previously been conducted on films such as "AFTER 11" (Rully et al., 2020, p. 35), "Parasite" (Dianiya, 2020, p. 118), and political campaign videos (Pratiwi, 2018, p. 195). These media forms are not simply forms of entertainment; they are selective portrayals of social reality that assist in shaping and reproducing cultural products that are deeply rooted in the community's experience (Hall, 1982, p. 64, as referenced in Rully et al., 2020, p. 22).

3. Results and Discussion

This section offers a layered semiotic reading of selected key scenes from the film, unpacking their denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings to reveal how power, gender, and religious ideology are visually constructed and contested.



Source: Daily Motion, 2024

Figure 1 Pool Scene

Denotative Level

At a literal level, Kiran, clearly wearing a hijab and modest swimwear, is depicted standing very close to a well-dressed man by a swimming pool at night. The ambiance is created by soft and warm lighting, evoking a sense of intimacy. The physical proximity, Kiran's arm resting on the man's shoulder, and their intense eye contact suggest a moment filled with personal strain. In the background, indistinct figures and lights imply a lively social atmosphere, possibly a party or an informal get-together.

Connotative Level

Connotatively, this scene suggests deep-seated tensions connected to gender, religious identity, and moral wrongdoing. Kiran's hijab and modest clothing are

culturally symbolic representations of her piety, chastity, and commitment to Islamic values. Her physical closeness to a man in a romantic position disrupts this signification, creating a tension between the visual symbols of religiosity and those of emotional sensitivity. The luxurious poolside area, often linked to leisure and bodily display, exacerbates this contradiction due to its cultural association with moral looseness.

Kiran's posture, despite appearing assertive (her arm resting on him), also conveys an emotional ambiguity. Her tilted face and parted lips may convey hesitation, conflict, or allure, depending on how the viewer chooses to interpret them. The man's forward-leaning posture suggests dominance, encompassing power dynamics that extend beyond gender to include possible class or social status, as evidenced by his formal clothing. This moment suggests a complex interplay of emotional and psychological dynamics.

Mythical Level (Ideological Construction)

At this mythological level, the scene legitimizes several cultural and ideological processes. It first undermines the notion of the "ideal Muslim woman" who is supposed to maintain physical and emotional detachment from men who are not mahram. The film challenges dominant religious discourses by placing Kiran—a woman coded as religious—into a scene that suggests transgressive intimacy, thereby subverting rigid boundaries of piety.

The scene also reveals the hypocrisy inherent in societal expectations. The combination of Kiran's religious symbols (the hijab) with a morally complex encounter serves as a visual commentary on how effortlessly appearances can be distorted or misinterpreted. In accordance with Barthes' concept that myth functions to make cultural ideologies seem "natural," this tension highlights how gendered moral expectations are culturally imposed rather than universally true.

The man's assertive presence, combined with the surroundings, suggests the exertion of patriarchal control over women's bodies and desires. This visual narrative can be seen as demonstrating how women's religious identities are constantly negotiated and, on occasion, compromised within relationships of power shaped by male authority and societal norms.

Power, Resistance, and Gendered Spirituality

This instant vividly exemplifies Foucault's notion of power being exerted through the physical body, personal desires, and societal expectations rather than overt force. The delicate, almost romantic atmosphere here illustrates how women like Kiran cope with an overwhelming system of societal demands. By entering this space and choosing to be close, a person's bodily autonomy is both a potentially hazardous involvement and a nuanced form of defiance against overly strict moral

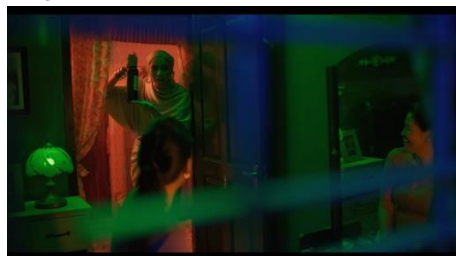
control.

The film utilises this visual contradiction to underscore the psychological complexity of pious femininity. Kiran's struggle is not just a matter of external opposition (from authorities like Abu Darda), but also a deeply personal and internal conflict, encompassing her own desires, feelings of guilt, and spiritual deliberations. Feminist critiques (Fitriani et al., 2025) highlight how women's voices and choices are frequently undermined or viewed through the prism of patriarchal attitudes.

A Symbolic Critique of Religious Hypocrisy

The film challenges the inconsistent exercise of moral and religious authority by juxtaposing a potentially indulgent leisure scene with an ambiguous encounter. This critique is evident in the differing treatment of men and women, with women often facing harsh consequences while men's transgressions are frequently ignored or accepted as the norm. Furthermore, Kiran's hijab, which typically symbolizes moral integrity, takes on an ironic significance as a site where power and vulnerability converge. Her visible restraint does not shield her from social observation or influence; rather, it serves as a backdrop for society to project both its expectations and its disapproval.

This is consistent with Barthes' notion that myth operates by presenting culturally constructed meanings as natural, inevitable facts. The idea of female modesty is revealed to be weak and dependent on specific circumstances, easily overturned by the presence of personal autonomy, emotional requirements, and uneven gender-based social hierarchies.



Source: Daily Motion, 2024

Figure 2 Drinking Scene

Denotative Level

At a literal level, this scene shows Kiran standing in the doorway, lit up by a powerful orange-red glow, holding something resembling a bottle of liquor. Two other women inside the room are being smiled at or spoken to by her. The view is partially obscured by what appears to be green blinds, which adds a sense of voyeurism or secrecy. The two women inside the room are smiling back, indicating a sense of complicity or joint amusement.

Connotative Level

Connotatively, this image conveys profound tensions. Kiran, dressed in a flowing modest garment and hijab – visual indicators of her Islamic faith – holds a bottle in a posture implying playful presentation or defiant celebration. In the Indonesian Muslim context, alcohol represents a culturally charged object that signifies moral transgression or indulgence forbidden by religious codes. This complex layering of femininity, agency, and social daring is enhanced by her earrings and confident expression.

The colours intensify this ambiguity. A warm orange-red glow enveloping Kiran conveys a sense of desire, transgression, or danger, whereas the green shadows cast across the scene imply secrecy or moral censure. The green lines of the blinds evoke an eerie resemblance to prison bars, subtly alluding to the presence of surveillance or societal scrutiny. In the background, the mirror reflects the two women's reactions, echoing themes of watching, duplicity, and concealed truths.

This moment thus serves as a charged representation of female camaraderie in a small act of rebellion, set against the backdrop of religious expectations and societal moral codes.

Mythical Level (Ideological Construction)

This scene at the mythological level disassembles the leading ideological formula linking outward religious signs with innate moral goodness. The hijab, generally representing cultural values, typically evokes expectations of modesty and avoidance of forbidden behaviors. The film challenges the idea that religiosity automatically leads to moral conformity by depicting Kiran, who is wearing a hijab, playfully offering alcohol.

The subversion of social norms highlights the vulnerability and inconsistency inherent in societal expectations, with morality being practiced through contradictions, compromises, and personal decisions—particularly for women, who are frequently expected to uphold community values through their actions and physical appearance.

The use of blinds in voyeuristic framing suggests that women's moral decisions are being continuously monitored, reflecting Foucault's concept of panopticism, in which power is exerted through social observation. The scene also encourages viewers to re-examine the intense moral criticism targeted at women's personal lives.

Power, Gender, and the Ethics of Enjoyment

The film employs this scene to highlight the interconnection of power dynamics, gender roles, and moral regulation. The narrative challenges the prevailing double standard by bringing alcohol into a scene that features women

who are conservatively attired, highlighting the disparity between how men's vices are often ignored and how women's private acts of defiance are viewed as morally reprehensible.

Kiran's action, despite appearing lighthearted, functions as a subtle act of resistance. By engaging in a behaviour considered immoral within her faith, she reasserts control over her body and personal desires. This does not reduce her to simply being "immoral," but rather complicates her human nature beyond the simplistic categorizations of saint and sinner that are often imposed on women by patriarchal religious norms.

These results are consistent with those of Fitriani et al. (2025), who investigated how women in films resist oppressive systems through subtle acts of defiance. This study further elaborates on the reading provided by Natasya et al. (2024), in which semiotic contradictions expose the challenges people face in seeking spiritual meaning amidst societal constraints.

Religious Ideology, Surveillance, and Myth

Barthes' concept of myth as a cultural speech that naturalises ideology is central to this point. The notion that a hijab inherently signifies moral flawlessness is debunked by Kiran's bold yet lighthearted action. The film subverts the narrative of pious femininity by revealing how religious symbols are often used in social performances that conceal personal complexities and hardships.

Moreover, the perspective through blinds not only creates an aesthetic of secrecy but also metaphorically captures how women's moral conduct is constantly scrutinized, reinforcing social control through internalized surveillance.



Source: Daily Motion, 2024

Figure 3 Party Scene

Denotative Level

This scene denotes Kiran, who is easily identifiable by her hijab and modest clothing, dancing enthusiastically among a group of women wearing casual party outfits. Her arm stretches out in a playful gesture towards another woman wearing a white sleeveless top, whose hands are raised in a dancing or mock-surprised reaction. The background is crowded with other individuals dancing, bathed in vibrant party lights that include shades of green, yellow, and purple—clearly indicative of a lively nightlife atmosphere.

Connotative Level

This image powerfully stages a collision between visual signs of piety and symbols of secular pleasure at the connotative level. Kiran's hijab, once more symbolising a strong cultural emphasis on modesty, restraint, and religious devotion, visibly contradicts the nightclub environment—a space associated with indulgence, physical freedom, and occasional moral looseness. Her happy expression, relaxed posture, and close physical proximity to other dancing women imply a temporary loosening of moral rules, a moment of freedom that contrasts with the serious expectations associated with her outward religious appearance.

This contrast is further heightened by the surrounding bodies wearing more revealing clothing. The scene challenges conventional portrayals of hijabi women as being isolated from or removed from public or hedonistic spaces. It depicts Kiran actively engaging in a setting commonly perceived as being at odds with devout religious behavior.

This atmosphere of abandon and vitality is reinforced by the lighting and colour palette, which is rich in neon greens and yellows, while also hinting at moral ambiguity or transgression. The scene connotes a complex interplay between joy, agency, and culturally defined limits.

Mythical Level (Ideological Construction)

At a mythological level, this moment fundamentally challenges the ideological narrative that portrays the hijab as a simple symbol of moral restraint and a separation from worldly or sinful desires. The film subverts the stereotype of a devout Muslim woman by depicting Kiran openly enjoying herself in a nightclub, revealing a discrepancy between her outward appearance and private moral life.

The rupture reveals that moral subjectivities are not uniform, with individuals constantly navigating conflicting demands between personal desires, social integration, and externally imposed religious expectations. In Barthes' words, the image normalizes the myth by displaying how readily "pious appearances" can coexist with acts culturally perceived as transgressive. This directly challenges broader patriarchal and religious discourses that burden women with representing community morality through their visible behavior and clothing.

Gender, Power, and the Right to Pleasure

The scene can also be interpreted as a quiet assertion of control. By indulging in dance and enjoyable social activities with joy, Kiran momentarily regains command over her own physical form and personal preferences in the face of strict moral judgment. This simple yet symbolically charged act of dancing serves as a

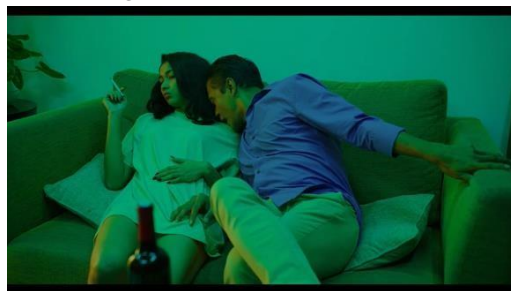
form of micro-resistance against the patriarchal norms that frequently attempt to restrict women's participation in public areas that emphasize pleasure.

According to Fitriani et al. (2025), moments of embodied pleasure play a significant role in feminist interpretations, demonstrating how women establish areas of independence despite being within limiting ideological frameworks. The film encourages viewers to understand Kiran's humanity by moving beyond strict moral categories, portraying her pleasure not as simply sinful but as a complex interaction with social norms.

Surveillance and the Breaking of Social Scripts

Despite its visually vibrant appearance, the scene also suggests a hidden sense of unease. In a film that creates a social atmosphere where people are constantly monitoring religious and communal activities, this act of freedom is fraught with danger. Kiran's involvement in such a space implicitly challenges the communal panopticism that Foucault described, where social compliance is maintained through the fear of public embarrassment and ostracism.

Barthes' concept of myth highlights that the idea of pious women naturally avoiding such venues is a cultural construct, which helps to sustain gendered power structures. By disregarding this expectation, Kiran's dance takes on a subtle form of ideological subversion.



Source: Daily Motion, 2024

Figure 4 Couch Scene

Denotative Level

At the literal level, a young woman wearing a casual, short, white shirt is depicted sitting on a green sofa. Her body language exudes a sense of relaxation, yet she appears emotionally disconnected - she holds a cigarette with a light touch while staring off into space with a blank or resigned look. Next to her, a man in a blue dress shirt and light trousers is leaning into her, his face near her chest or neck. He invades her personal space with an intrusive posture, using one hand to grasp the back of the couch for support. In the foreground, a bottle of red wine is positioned on the table, and the entire scene is dominated by a green-hued lighting effect.

Connotative Level

This image conveys connotations of exploitation, power imbalance, and gendered vulnerability. The man's aggressive posture and the way his body angles toward her imply a dynamic of coercion or predatory desire, even in the ostensibly private and relaxed domestic setting. The woman's facial expression and posture—disengaged and almost numb—suggest emotional withdrawal, discomfort, or resigned acceptance. This classic sign of anxiety, unease, or defiance is exemplified by her cigarette, a small but telling prop used for coping.

In the foreground, a wine bottle accentuates the implication of moral ambiguity or indulgence, with the predominantly green lighting creating an unsettling, unnatural ambiance that suggests corruption, illness, or the underlying decay of moral principles beneath a façade of normalcy.

The scene at a connotative level shows not only an intimate moment but also a transaction of power in which the woman's consent or comfort is ambiguous and overshadowed by male dominance.

Mythical Level (Ideological Construction)

This mythological scene effectively dismantles cultural narratives that idealize older male authority figures abusing their power to exploit younger women sexually. In various social settings, including those with conservative or religious values, these relationships are frequently minimised or concealed behind the idea of male privilege or authority. The film reveals the exploitative nature of these relationships by depicting the woman's clear disinterest and the man's evident desire.

Barthes' concept of myth reveals how cultural narratives about male entitlement to female bodies, particularly when facilitated by alcohol and private settings, become normalised - perceived as typical or inevitable. The scene subverts that framing by visually highlighting the woman's passive retreat and the unsettling closeness of the man, thus challenging the notion of such power-imbued intimacy being natural.

Gender, Power, and Moral Hypocrisy

This moment is also closely connected to the film's broader criticism of religious and social hypocrisy. In the film's earlier scenes, strict moral standards are enforced on women such as Kiran—evaluating their value based on outward religious devotion. In the privacy of one's living room couch, men's excessive enjoyment, sexual exploits, and potentially exploitative actions are carried out discreetly without public disapproval. In patriarchal societies, a double standard exists where women are judged harshly for their actions in public, whereas men's misdeeds committed in private are frequently ignored or condoned.

Foucault's idea of power is exercised not only through public surveillance but

also through uneven moral expectations that shape behavior influenced by gender. The man's freedom to follow his desires stands out starkly when compared to how Kiran's small acts of physical autonomy (dancing, drinking) are closely monitored, thereby underscoring the uneven moral burden placed on women.

Semiotic Contradictions and Visual Critique

The combination of green lighting, wine, cigarette smoke, and soft domestic cushions generates an unsettling blend of comfort and menace. The couch, often an emblem of domestic tranquility, serves as a location where power dynamics between genders are negotiated and where ethical unease arises. The absence of resistance from a woman does not inherently signify consent; instead, it serves as a subtle indication of how women often cope with uncomfortable, possibly coercive circumstances by emotionally detaching.

In line with Barthes' ideas, the notion that domestic, heteronormative spaces are inherently safe or moral is challenged in this context. The film reveals how these spaces enable gendered exploitation, which is often concealed by a facade of normalcy.



Source: Daily Motion, 2024

Figure 5 Intimate Close-up Scene

Denotative Level

At a literal level, this scene is a close-up shot of two characters' faces as they almost kiss. The man, with a short beard and clad in a dark shirt, bends in towards the woman whose eyes are partially closed and lips are slightly parted. Her head is wrapped in what looks like a towel, suggesting she may have recently bathed. The lighting is subdued, using muted greens and ambers, and it closely focuses on the subject, with the background becoming blurred.

Connotative Level

This moment is connotatively charged with both sensual tension and emotional ambiguity. The proximity of their faces, the slight separation of their lips, and the soft lighting all contribute to an environment of vulnerability and intense intimacy. The greenish hue of the scene, in line with the film's previous employment of green, also implies a sense of unease or moral ambiguity. This moment is not portrayed as solely romantic or joyful, but rather is infused with the

psychological depth that permeates Kiran's entire story.

The woman's towel-covered head, a departure from her typical hijab, suggests a brief instance of private vulnerability. This pivotal scene marks a visual shift—from outward expressions of devotion to inner bodily exposure—where Kiran's battles with physical self-control, spiritual unease, and emotional connections converge. The close framing intensifies the feeling of being confined within this personal moral deliberation, dismissing any external social considerations.

Mythical Level (Ideological Construction)

At the level of myth, this moment fundamentally challenges the ideological connection between outward religious symbols (such as the hijab) and inner moral conditions. In the absence of the hijab, Kiran is visibly exposed in a manner that echoes societal concerns about women's modesty being compromised when they are outside public view. The film invites viewers into her intimate vulnerability, rather than condemning her morally, thus complicating the notion that moral virtue is directly visible.

This scene also undermines the patriarchal idea that puts all the responsibility for self-control on women, requiring them to manage not only their own desires but also those of men. The film subtly critiques the harsh judgment women face for intimacy participation by capturing a moment of mutual desire, while ignoring male complicity or desire.

Gendered Power, Spiritual Anxiety, and the Body

This moment is deeply connected to the film's criticism of the ways power functions through both external and internalised moral codes. Even in this close proximity, there is an unspoken strain that Kiran bears: a burden of guilt, anxiety, or yearning linked to religious doctrines concerning wrongdoing and chastity. Foucault's idea echoes the notion that power is not only wielded by institutions but is internalised by individuals, thus influencing how they regulate their own bodies and desires.

Kiran's posture and partially parted lips convey a blend of consent and apprehension, representing a multifaceted expression of autonomy limited by internalised moral unease. This embodies the feminist critique (Fitriani et al., 2025) that women often experience intimacy as being fraught with conflicting pressures, to meet emotional or relational needs on one hand and to adhere to community moral standards on the other.

Semiotics of Desire and the Deconstruction of Moral Surveillance

Barthes' semiotics sheds light on how this scene subverts the notion that physical closeness inherently implies moral weakness for religious women. The

denotation—a scene of two people near a kiss—is overlaid by cultural connotations of impropriety, particularly for a woman who has previously been depicted wearing a hijab. The film strips away the visual signifier, compelling viewers to confront the fragility and constructed nature of these moral associations.

In this instant, it is a quiet act of ideological defiance. The portrayal depicts Kiran as a fully human character, capable of feelings of longing and seeking comfort or connection, without diminishing her to a mere symbol of communal devotion. The film prompts viewers to relate to her aspirations, revealing the oppressive nature of insisting that women continually repress their humanity in order to conform to a religious image.

When combining these layered visual analyses, it becomes evident that Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa utilizes a complex semiotic strategy to examine the intersections of gender, religious ideology, and power in contemporary Indonesian society. Each scene, whether it shows Kiran by the pool, negotiating intimacy, playfully wielding alcohol at a private party, dancing freely in a nightclub, or sharing a close moment with a man, operates on multiple levels, going beyond the surface level of the story and serving as a symbolic critique of the deeply ingrained myths that equate visible piety with inherent moral goodness. The film challenges the cultural narrative Barthes termed "myth" by revealing that the ideologies it contains are artificially created to maintain particular social class structures.

These scenes simultaneously highlight the complexities of Kiran's experiences that are deeply embodied. Her physical choices—whether to lean in, to dance, to laugh, or to nearly kiss—represent subtle negotiations within an environment formed by both external judgment and internalised moral conscience. This complex interplay between agency and constraint illustrates Foucault's claim that power functions not solely through direct control but through the ways individuals internalise self-discipline under widespread moral norms.

The film also brings attention to the disproportionate moral pressures faced by women by centring its narrative around Kiran's experiences with desire, spiritual unease, and community condemnation. Patriarchal systems continue to subject women's bodies and experiences of pleasure to control, frequently relegating their full humanity to simplistic categorisations as either virtuous or immoral. The intimate cinematography, vibrant lighting, and thoughtful composition serve not only to make Kiran's struggles visually appealing but to bring viewers into her complex inner realm—prompting them to rethink how readily they might perpetuate these exact myths.

Ultimately, this complex reading highlights that Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa is primarily not a narrative focused on one woman's moral shortcomings or

spiritual turmoil. The film offers a critical examination of the social and ideological factors that shape conventional notions of female devotion, and it advocates for a more compassionate perspective on the complexities of human faith.

3.1 Legal and Policy Context: Religion, Gender, and Symbolic Control in Indonesia

The symbolic representations found in *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* resonate deeply with existing legal and policy frameworks in Indonesia that govern gender roles, religious authority, and bodily autonomy. The film's depiction of forced marriage, moral surveillance, and unequal treatment of men and women mirrors the ambivalent and often discriminatory nature of formal and informal legal systems in the country.

First, Kiran's coerced marriage to Abu Darda reflects the persistence of polygamy in Indonesia's Islamic family law. Although regulated under Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage, which permits polygamy under specific conditions, in practice, women often lack equal bargaining power, and religious authorities tend to legitimize male dominance under the guise of sharia compliance. The film's portrayal of a charismatic male religious leader exploiting his spiritual authority for personal gain echoes real-world legal challenges where religious courts (*Pengadilan Agama*) rarely question power asymmetries in marriage arrangements.

Second, the film illustrates the role of moral policing, both socially and legally. In provinces with regional sharia bylaws (*Perda Syariah*)—such as Aceh, Padang, or parts of West Java—women's clothing, conduct, and public appearance are subject to regulation. Kiran's visible religiosity (*hijab*) becomes a site of public expectation and judgment, echoing these local laws' tendency to enforce moral behavior as a legal obligation, thus blurring the line between sin and crime. This reflects a growing concern about the use of legal mechanisms to enforce morality, particularly targeting women.

Third, Kiran's marginalization and trauma are compounded by the lack of legal protection for spiritual violence and sexual exploitation perpetrated by figures of religious or academic authority. Although Law No. 12 of 2022 on Sexual Violence Crimes (*UU TPKS*) is a milestone in recognizing non-physical and psychological abuse, its implementation remains limited, especially when cases occur within religious institutions.

The film therefore critiques the double moral standards in legal responses: women are often punished both socially and legally for deviations from religious expectations, while male transgressors—such as religious elites—benefit from legal

silence or community protection. These dynamics align with feminist legal critiques that identify law as a gendered discourse—one that often reproduces power hierarchies under the guise of objectivity or religious legitimacy (Nussbaum, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 2009; Ratna Batara Munti, 2021).

Moreover, Kiran's silent resistance, bodily agency, and transgression of moral scripts raise questions about the criminalization of women's autonomy. Her decisions, while symbolically powerful, would likely be interpreted under existing laws as immoral or even criminal, revealing the disconnect between lived gendered experience and the formal legal apparatus. This emphasizes the need for an intersectional legal reform agenda that recognizes women's agency without subordinating it to religious orthodoxy.

By interweaving semiotic critique with legal realities, this study illustrates how visual media like *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* not only reflect but also intervene in ongoing legal and moral debates. Films thus become arenas of symbolic contestation and potential instruments for legal consciousness and feminist advocacy.

4. Conclusion

This research has shown that *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* is more than just a film version of a contentious book; it is a complex cultural text that critiques power dynamics, gender roles, moral principles, and religious beliefs within Indonesian culture. This study uses Roland Barthes' semiotics to examine the film's denotation, connotation, and myth, showing how it both reflects and challenges prevailing social norms. Every scene examined—ranging from Kiran being near a man by the pool to negotiating domestic spaces with underlying tensions, introducing alcohol in a setting coded as hijabi, or dancing in a nightclub—demonstrates how religious identity and moral expectations are consistently shaped, contested, and compromised.

The film's repeated combination of religious symbols, including the hijab, with acts or spaces that are culturally associated with transgression - such as leisure, indulgence, or sensual pleasure - consistently undermines the idea that outward piety necessarily leads to inner moral goodness. In this case, it reveals how cultural narratives function as instruments of social control, particularly in relation to women's bodies and desires. The film effectively subverts binary moral categorisations of women as either virtuous or wicked by portraying Kiran as both deeply pious and seriously flawed, joyful and hurt, and unapologetically rebellious. Her experiences underscore the intense internal and external challenges

faced by women who must balance conflicting social expectations, embodying community moral standards alongside their own personal spiritual, emotional, and physical complexities.

This analysis also demonstrates how power functions not only through obvious institutions—such as patriarchal religious authority exemplified by figures like Abu Darda—but also through subtle systems of monitoring, moral obligation, and internalised shame. The film illustrates how Kiran's autonomy is simultaneously restricted and revealed through acts of quiet defiance, such as deriving pleasure on the dance floor, subtly challenging norms in private settings, or exposing vulnerability in nearly intimate situations. These acts complicate straightforward interpretations of her fall into "sin," indicating instead a complex opposition to oppressive systems that use religious narratives to gain social power.

This study highlights the critical role of films such as *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* in ideological contestation by examining their underlying mythological themes. These revelations expose the constructed basis of social truths that frequently legitimize gender inequality and moral hypocrisy. The film serves as a reflective mirror, prompting viewers to challenge strict moral standards that give preference to male desires while enforcing strict rules for women's behavior.

This study ultimately enhances broader conversations surrounding the intersection of film, culture, and society. This film showcases the importance of semiotic analysis in exposing the underlying ideological mechanisms at play in visual stories, and underscores the need to address issues of gender equality in cultures where religion and morality are deeply intertwined. Kiran's story, as depicted in this film, serves as a cultural commentary rather than simply a personal tragedy or scandal, highlighting the consequences of perpetuating myths that link women's identities to communal honour and control. Viewed through this perspective, *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa* manifests as a crucial cinematic text, compelling viewers to reassess the multifaceted humanity inherent in social icons and to cultivate compassion towards those endeavouring to navigate life's moral and spiritual complexities.

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