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Narrative and Linguistic Construction of Main Characters in the Film Budi Pekerti: A Semiotic Analysis of the Concept of Personality from the Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the character transformation of the main character in the film Budi Pekerti (2023) through Tzvetan Todorov's structural narrative approach and the concept of personality in Islamic psychology (nafs). The study was conducted using an interpretive qualitative method based on multimodal discourse analysis, emphasizing the relationship between changes in narrative flow, visual symbolism, and the inner dynamics of the main character, Bu Prani. The results of the study show that the character's journey follows Todorov's five-stage pattern—from equilibrium to new equilibrium—which reflects the process of spiritualization of the soul from *nafs ammarah* to *nafs mutma'innah*. The semiotic and linguistic approaches also reveal the depth of emotional expression and inner control in dealing with a reputation crisis due to cyberbullying. This study shows that film narrative can be an educational medium that represents the process of psychological healing and ethical resilience in the digital era.

Keywords: *semiotic; linguistic; budi pekerti; todomov; nafs*

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Introduction

Cyberbullying is a form of contemporary psychological violence that is carried out intentionally, repeatedly, and through digital media to hurt, humiliate, or bring down victims who do not have the power to defend themselves. (Noh & Rahman, 2013). This phenomenon has grown in line with the widespread access to social media, which enables massive dissemination of offensive content in a short period of time—for example, by 2023 there will be more than 275 million social media users in Indonesia, making it the fourth most-used country in the world. (ElectroIQ, 2024). This situation is exacerbated by the anonymous nature that protects the perpetrators, so they feel they are not responsible for their actions. (Aboujaoude et al., 2015). Data from ChildFund Indonesia (2022) shows that 49.1% of

adolescents are involved in cyberbullying, both as perpetrators and victims, while 58.6% of them claim to have been direct victims. (Haning et al., 2022).

The digital situation in Indonesia shows that 71% of online violence incidents occur on social networking platforms, 19% through messaging applications, and the rest are spread through other online media such as games and videos. (Identitas Unhas, 2023). The psychological impact of cyberbullying has proven to be severe, causing mental damage such as depression, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and social isolation. (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Javed et al., 2023). Global data by UNICEF also shows that one in three adolescents in 30 countries, including Indonesia, have been victims of online bullying, and most have missed school due to the trauma. (UNICEF, 2019). This situation is even more worrying because social media has become an integral part of teenagers' lives—the Central Bureau of Statistics states that 61.65% of students access the internet, especially for social media. (Jakarta Globe, 2024)—Thus, the risk of exposure to cyberbullying victims is very high among the productive age group.

In an Islamic perspective, cyberbullying is an anti-social act that is contrary to the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* which prioritizes the protection of the soul (*hifz al-nafs*), honor (*hifz al-'ird*), and reason (*hifz al-'aql*) (Noh & Rahman, 2013). The act of verbally or symbolically harming others contradicts the value of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (blessing for all the universe), a fundamental principle of communication ethics in Islam. Therefore, understanding human responses to cyberbullying from an Islamic perspective is crucial, not only as a psychological study but also as a spiritual one. One representative media outlet that addresses this theme is the film *Budi Pekerti* (2023) by Wregas Bhanuteja. This film tells the story of the main character, Mrs. Prani, facing public backlash after her viral video is misinterpreted, leading to verbal and digital attacks from the wider community. Mrs. Prani is depicted as remaining calm and non-reactive, instead demonstrating psychological depth and moral fortitude in responding to social attacks. This makes *Budi Pekerti* a potential object for interdisciplinary analysis in terms of narrative structure, visual cues, and Islamic spiritual values.

Theoretically, the story construction in the film can be analyzed using the narrative structure approach developed by Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov (1969) proposed five narrative stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, repair, and new equilibrium, which allow researchers to trace the character's psychological transformation from a stable state to conflict, reflection, resolution, and finally, new stability. Meanwhile, in Islamic personality studies, the concept of *nafs* (self-centeredness) serves as a relevant model for examining personality dynamics. In Islamic psychology, there are three types of *nafs*: *nafs ammarah* (negative impulse), *nafs lawwamah* (reflective, regretful), and *nafs muṭma'innah* (calm and stable soul) (Al-Ghazali, 2004; Asy-Sya'rāwī, 2010). These three levels provide a framework for understanding the process of internalizing values and developing a holistic character in stressful situations like those experienced by Mrs. Prani. By integrating Todorov's theory with the *nafs* (self-consciousness), an analysis of *Budi Pekerti* (moral character) can reveal how character is shaped by external crises but responded to spiritually and ethically from within.

Several previous studies have addressed the themes of character construction and identity crises in film, from both Western and Islamic perspectives. For example, a study by Ahmad et al. (2020) examined the role of Islamic spirituality in the narrative of the film *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* (99 Lights in the Sky of Europe), using a thematic and semiotic approach. Meanwhile, Todorov's narrative theory is often used in the analysis of Western films, such as in his study of character structure in *The Pursuit of Happiness*. (Monica et al., 2023). However, it has not been developed in the context of integrating Islamic spirituality. This gap indicates that there is still a lack of research linking Todorov's narrative structure

with the dynamics of the nafs (self) and the principles of maqāṣid al-sharī'ah (objectives of the law), particularly in the context of contemporary Indonesian films such as Budi Pekerti.

Based on this background and theoretical review, the research questions are formulated as follows: (1) How is the narrative construction of the main character in the film Budi Pekerti based on Todorov's narrative theory? (2) How do the linguistic and visual representations of the main character reflect the dynamics of the nafs in Islamic psychology? (3) The purpose of this research is to integrate Todorov's structural narrative approach with the concept of personality in Islam and the interpretation of maqāṣidī (objectives of the law) in order to explore in depth the construction of the main character in the film Budi Pekerti as a reflection of Islamic ethics and spirituality in facing the challenges of the digital era.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with an interpretive orientation, which aims to explore the narrative and symbolic meanings in the film Budi Pekerti (2023) through narrative theory, semiotic-linguistics, and the concept of personality in Islam. The qualitative approach was chosen because the main focus of this study is not on quantitative measurements, but on an in-depth understanding of the psychological and spiritual dynamics of the main character in the context of the social crisis caused by cyberbullying. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, this study will describe the story structure and linguistic elements of the film, as well as interpret the value content and personality dimensions within an Islamic framework.

The primary data in this study comes from the film Budi Pekerti, specifically scenes depicting the main character's (Bu Prani) inner conflict, character development, and dialogue and visual symbols related to responses to social pressures. This film is analyzed as a narrative and cultural text reflecting the construction of identity and values in modern Indonesian society. Secondary data sources include the work of Todorov (1969) in narrative theory, Barthes' (1972) semiotics, and the concept of nafs (self-centeredness) in Islamic psychology. (Al-Ghazali, 2004), and maqāṣidī interpretations such as Tafsir al-Sya'rawi (2010) and al-Farmawi's (1984) approach to thematic interpretation of the Qur'an.

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation and non-participatory observation of the film. The initial procedure began with watching the entire film several times to understand the plot and narrative intent. Next, key scenes that demonstrated Bu Prani's psychological and moral dynamics were selected, and dialogue transcripts and visual expressions such as symbols, gestures, and tone of voice were recorded. All these elements were compiled into a data corpus categorized based on Todorov's narrative structure stages and the dynamics of the nafs (ammarah, lawwamah, mutma'innah). A semiotic approach was used to interpret the narrative and cultural codes that emerged, such as the use of color, clothing, facial expressions, and social symbols in the film's setting. (Barthes, 1972).

The analysis process was conducted through three main stages. First, the film's story structure was mapped based on Tzvetan Todorov's narrative model: initial balance (equilibrium), disruption (disruption), recognition of the crisis (recognition), repair efforts (repair), and new equilibrium (new equilibrium) (Todorov, 1969). Second, the visual and linguistic elements of the characters were analyzed using Barthes' semiotic theory through reading the hermeneutic code (story questions), symbolic code (inner conflict), and cultural code (social values). Third, the reading of the characters' personalities was carried out through the theory of nafs in Islamic psychology, by interpreting scenes based on the

classification of *nafs ammarah* (QS Yusuf: 53), *nafs lawwamah* (QS Al-Qiyāmah: 2), and *nafs muṭma'innah* (QS Al-Fajr: 27–30).

The interpretation of these verses uses the *tafsir mawḍū'ī* approach as explained by al-Farmawi (1984), which involves formulating themes, compiling related verses, reading them in a modern context, and drawing on the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the protection of the soul, protection of the soul, protection of the mind. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Result and Discussion

1. Mapping Narrative Structure from Todorov's Perspective

Tzvetan Todorov's theory of narrative structure is an important approach for analyzing the psychological and moral journeys of main characters in works of fiction, including films. Todorov divides narrative structure into five main stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, repair, and new equilibrium, each of which describes the dynamics of character change resulting from the conflict they experience (Todorov, 1969). This model not only helps map the storyline systematically but also reveals how character development—both social and spiritual—evolves alongside changes in narrative structure. Therefore, analyzing the narrative structure in the film "Budi Pekerti" through Todorov's theory provides a deeper and more focused understanding of Bu Prani's personality transformation in the face of social pressures caused by cyberbullying.

The narrative analysis of "Budi Pekerti" shows that the film systematically follows Tzvetan Todorov's five-stage structure. The equilibrium stage (initial balance) is depicted through the opening, which depicts Mrs. Prani as a respected counselor, engaging in warm dialogue with students in the classroom and interacting sympathetically within her family at her home in Yogyakarta (IMDb, 2023). This creates an initial impression of an emotionally and spiritually stable character before conflict arises.

The disruption stage occurs when a video showing Mrs. Prani reprimanding a queue-cutter at a market goes viral on social media, causing a significant disruption in the narrative. The public immediately reacts with offensive URLs and hateful comments, demonstrating the modern phenomenon of cancel culture (Medium–Nightman, 2023). Furthermore, research on the phenomenon of virality explains how misinformation and misinformation spread through digital platforms, allowing the film to capture the true essence of today's media behavior (EBizMark, 2024). This narrative disruption goes beyond a local conflict—it triggers a reputational crisis, emotional turmoil, and psychological threats for Mrs. Prani and her family (Indonesian Lantern, 2023).

The recognition or crisis awareness stage is depicted when Mrs. Prani realizes the impact of the video on her reputation, children, and her husband, who has a history of bipolar disorder. Scenes involving FaceTime or Zoom meetings show her internal dialogue and tense expressions as she faces public pressure and negative responses from her son, who has lost career opportunities (Medium–Nightman, 2023). This response aligns with reception research findings that suggest the film carries strong emotional resonance with themes of cyberbullying and social stigma (Djalins: 2024).

In the repair stage, Mrs. Prani takes systematic steps to remedy the situation: she provides clarification via community radio and provides direct reflection in class. She chooses a reflective-educational approach as an effort to foster relationships with students and the public (IOCSscience, 2023). This tactic aligns with the character's emphasis on reconciliation—reflecting the pastoral communication strategy in educational films. (Mujiwati & Syaifudin, n.d.). This approach effectively reduces external pressures through ethical dialogue and restorative narrative.

The final stage is the new equilibrium, when Mrs. Prani decides to resign from her formal teaching position and chooses to focus on inner peace and reflect on the essentials of life. This is marked by simple family scenes, in-depth dialogue in the living room, and visual symbols of soft colors, signifying a new, spiritually chosen stability (IOCSscience, 2023; Nightman, 2023). This stability is not a restoration of social prestige, but rather a moral transcendence—Mrs. Prani realizes that inner peace and strengthening religious values are more important than public image.

This narrative transformation emphasizes that the film *Budi Pekerti* uses Todorov's structure not only as a formal framework, but as a tool to represent the main character's moral and spiritual transformation process. By mapping each narrative stage based on Disney-like structures and media virality research, the film illustrates how the characters' external and internal conflicts influence each other symbiotically—interesting for narrative theorists and filmmakers alike, and providing insight into the representation of spirituality in the context of modern cyberbullying.

2. Linguistic-Semiotic Construction of the Bu Prani Character

The linguistic and semiotic approach in the film *Budi Pekerti* focuses on the language patterns, visual expressions, and symbolism that reflect the ethical and spiritual internalization process of the main character, Bu Prani. This study emphasizes multimodal theory, which views language and visuals as an integral system of meaning (Jewitt, 2014; Machin & Mayr, 2012), where all components—from discourse structure to symbol choice—synergize to evoke empathy and reflection among the audience regarding the character's inner conflict.

In the linguistic study, Bu Prani's dialogue demonstrates the use of hedging and weak modality—such as phrases like "I think..." or "could we..."—which reflect interpersonal communication strategies to reduce tension. Hyland (2015) explains that hedging functions to reduce the speaker's authority while maintaining the possibility of meaning, while simultaneously establishing an inclusive and cooperative tone. (Parvaresh, 2014). The application of this pattern in Mrs. Prani's narrative emphasizes a dialogical and empathetic approach to students and the community, aligning with the principles of the pastoral education model, which emphasizes relational harmony (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Visually, the use of proxemics—namely, close camera distances in certain scenes—displays Mrs. Prani's micro-expressions and subtle gestures, such as a deep sigh or a teary eye. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) state that posture and gaze are modality markers in building depth of visual emotional meaning. For example, a close-up of her suppressing her emotions not only conveys her emotional state but also demonstrates the inner control that aligns with the process of mature internalization of the *nafs* (self-centered *nafs*).

The symbolism of color and lighting is also selectively presented. The pastel color scheme and soft, high-key lighting in the classroom and home convey an atmosphere of inner peace and spiritual serenity. This theme aligns with the findings of Njiric and Miloslavic (2024), who stated that warm color schemes in educational films support emotional resonance with the audience. So, Bu Prani's visual identity is not only aesthetic, but is connected to the representation of hidden spiritual and moral values. (Njirić & Miloslavić, 2016).

Further discourse analysis reveals a shift toward inclusive discourse through a shift in style from my claim ("I experienced...") to a collective question ("Can we learn together?"). Fairclough (2015) emphasizes that this shift in discourse reflects a shift in authority toward collaborative dialogue and the

strengthening of collective identity. This strategy is significant in the context of restoring Mrs. Prani's public image, while also structurally strengthening the concept of moral and emotional literacy.

The film's background music is used as a nonverbal semiotic element that helps establish Mrs. Prani's mental state and moral intentions. The soft piano and string music integrated during the critical moment reflection scene demonstrates Lecaroz & Perullo's (2018) musical semiotic theory, which states that music in film functions as an introduction to emotions and introspective narrative. This combination draws the audience's emotions into the depths of the characters and expands their understanding of unspoken dialogic meanings (Alyssa, 2019).

Overall, the linguistic and semiotic analysis in *Budi Pekerti* shows that the character of Bu Prani is constructed through verbal, gestural, visual, and musical modalities that together produce psychological, emotional, and ethical readings of the character. This approach captures how the film's in-depth character design has accommodated the complexity of inner conflict—making room for spiritual transformation and inner moral care without the need for explicit moral dialogue (Azminah, 2020).

3. The Dynamics of Bu Prani's Personality in the Framework of Nafs

Understanding the personality dynamics of the main characters in the film *Budi Pekerti* can be explored more deeply through an Islamic psychological approach, particularly the theory of the nafs as a dynamic structure of the human soul. In both classical and contemporary Islamic studies, the nafs is not simply defined as the "self" or "soul," but encompasses the potential for basic human impulses that shift from destructive tendencies to the pinnacle of spiritual stability (Al-Ghazali, 2004; Latif et al., 2024). Islamic psychology proposes that there are three layers of the nafs such as nafs ammarah (soul that tends to evil), nafs lawwāmah (soul that criticizes and regrets), and nafs muṭma'innah (soul that is calm) (Khan & Nisa, 2024; Rassool, 2021). These three layers form a spiritual spectrum that demonstrates the progress of a person's inner transformation in facing the pressures and trials of life.

Within the context of the film's narrative, the dynamics of the nafs (self-centeredness) primarily represent the psychological response of Mrs. Prani to the social pressures brought on by the virality of a video on social media. In the disruption and recognition stages, the film depicts the activation of the nafs ammarah (self-centeredness), a state of mind under intense emotional stress and potentially reactive. Mrs. Prani, despite appearing visually calm, experiences intense inner conflict due to massive and disproportionate public stigmatization. This representation parallels the so-called *jihad al-nafs* (self-centeredness), the inner struggle of humans to restrain their own destructive impulses, as described in classical Sufism and modern Islamic psychology (Saefulloh, 2024; Ghozali, 2022). Shaikh and Nisa (2024) emphasized that the nafs ammarah (self-centered nafs) is the initial phase of a psychological crisis, where an individual is driven by emotions of anger, fear, or shame, which, if uncontrolled, can lead to the destruction of social and personal relationships. In the film, this tension is demonstrated through silent scenes, close-ups of faces, and internal dialogue that suggests an inner struggle, though not verbally expressed.

Moving into the repair phase, Bu Prani's character shows signs of entering the nafs lawwāmah phase, where the soul begins to reflect on its actions, regret social entrapment, and seek a path to self-improvement. This process is evident through scenes of conscious and measured public clarification, as well as classroom teaching dialogue that transforms into a shared contemplative space. In Islamic psychology, the nafs lawwāmah is the stage where a person no longer allows themselves to be controlled by emotions, but instead begins to engage in *muhasabah*, or self-evaluation (Rassool, 2021). The

character's regret and caution are not merely defensive mechanisms, but rather part of *tasfiyah al-nafs* or inner purification, which is characterized by increased awareness of the essence of the self and connection to higher moral values (Haryanto et al., 2024). At this stage, spirituality becomes not only an escape, but also a space for articulating meaning and reflecting on the crisis.

Furthermore, the new equilibrium phase shows the character achieving *nafs muṭma'innah*, the inner stability that emerges after going through a phase of turmoil and reflection. Mrs. Prani no longer seeks to respond to stigma with aggressive defense, but instead chooses serenity, distance from social conflict, and a contemplative life focused more on meaningful emotional relationships with family. Asghar (2018) explains that *nafs muṭma'innah* is a soul that has made peace with itself and its environment, and accepts life's circumstances with full awareness and sincerity. This process is known in Islamic psychology as *tasarruf al-nafs*, namely the management of the soul towards continuous inner purification (Khan & Nisa, 2024). In the film, this aspect is visualized through soft lighting, melancholic background music, and scenes of silent, contemplative dialogue, which serve as nonverbal expressions of the character's peak spiritual transformation.

This analysis demonstrates that Bu Prani's journey cannot be understood linearly as a reaction to social conflict, but rather as a spiritual trajectory reflecting how one grows through suffering, manages emotions, and achieves inner peace through *tazkiyah al-nafs* (soul purification). The narrative of Budi Pekerti can thus be read as a dramatic representation of a psychospiritual process that is highly contextualized within today's digital social dynamics.

4. The Relevance of Analysis on Strengthening Character and Digital Ethical Literacy in Islamic Education

Drawing on the previous series of analyses—narrative, linguistic-semiotic, and the dynamics of the *nafs* based on *maqāṣid*—this analysis strengthens the relevance of the film *Budi Pekerti* as reflective material in the realm of modern Islamic character education. Visual media such as film have transformative potential in shaping digital ethical literacy in the younger generation. According to Hobbs and Jensen (2016), media literacy can increase users' critical awareness of digital content, thereby enabling them to combat online harassment and cyberbullying through reflective education (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). The context of this film offers an authentic moral narrative that challenges students to understand the public consequences of digital actions, while deepening spiritual values through the depiction of the *nafs muṭma'innah* (self-willed) contrasted with the tendencies of the *nafs ammarah* (self-willed).

The application of this film in the classroom context can be enriched by an ethical digital literacy model based on the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the principles of Islamic law). For example, educators can use the “repair” scene as a case study for a discussion on the theme of *hiḏ al-nafs* (self-will), encouraging students to understand the need to maintain mental health in the digital age. The use of narrative case studies such as the film supports reflective processes and strengthens digital empathy, enabling students to develop ethical solutions to online challenges. Similarly, the film's call for inclusive dialogue (“can we learn together?”) is an effective resource for practicing *hiḏ al-'aql* through reflective and collaborative classroom dialogue (Ferrari et al., 2022).

This film can also be used as an educational tool to build a culture of Islamic digital literacy, training students to recognize and control their inner *nafs* (self-centered instinct) that impulsively responds to negative or discriminatory comments. Research by Kuru et al. (2021) shows that combining

Islamic media with a moral psychology approach significantly improves students' digital self-regulation and empathy. By assigning students to map the narrative flow and dynamics of the self in the film, educators can design learning modules that enable students not only to understand the theory but also to internalize the values of protecting the soul (*hifẓ al-nafs*), honor (*hifẓ al-'ird*), and reason (*hifẓ al-'aql*).

Overall, the integration of the Budi Pekerti film into the Islamic character curriculum brings the academic material closer to students' realities—making it not simply media consumption but a space for reflection and learning digital ethics. This aligns with Islam's view of education as a process of *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul) involving the heart, mind, and actions. (Ma'muroh et al., 2024). Thus, this film can be considered as an interactive medium that combines imaginative, symbolic and spiritual narratives, which shape the student's character holistically and in accordance with the goals of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively examines the construction of the main character in the film Budi Pekerti through narrative, linguistic-semiotic, and Islamic perspectives, including the concept of *nafs* (self-centeredness). The narrative analysis shows that Bu Prani's character journey follows Todorov's five-stage structural pattern, which forms a moral developmental trajectory from equilibrium to crisis, reflection, and inner resolution. Furthermore, the linguistic and semiotic analysis demonstrates how the film's lexical choices, gestures, symbolic visuals, and music implicitly shape the character's psychological and ethical dimensions, making the film a richly meaningful multimodal text. The moral message is not conveyed directly verbally, but rather through a visual narrative that evokes empathy and reflective awareness.

The integration of these three approaches demonstrates that Bu Prani's character development represents the dynamics of *nafs* in Islamic psychology—from the impulsive *nafs ammarah* (self-centeredness), to the introspective *nafs lawwāmah* (self-centeredness), and finally to the calm and accepting *nafs muṭma'innah* (self-centeredness). This transformation occurs in harmony with Todorov's narrative structure and is reflected through actions that are in accordance with the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, especially the protection of the soul (*hifẓ al-nafs*), honor (*hifẓ al-'ird*), and reason (*hifẓ al-'aql*). Thus, the film Budi Pekerti not only presents the personal story of a teacher in facing digital social pressures, but also represents Islamic ethical values contextually and aesthetically. This film has the potential to be used as an educational medium in Islamic character education and digital ethical literacy based on spirituality and deep moral reflection.

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