

Religious Conversion in the Movies : A Hegemonic Representation Among the Religious Diversity¹

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Abstract

As media of representation, film describes things in the society which's close and familiar with the people, including certain aspect of religion. Religious theme has already introduced since this industry started. However, religious conversion is kind of rare topic to be discussed or inserted in any movie since film is a mass production in which the dimension of its impact is particularly intensive and broad. Focusing on two movies *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Indonesia) and *Mu'allaf*² (Malaysia) , from two countries in which the Muslim is dominant, the research finds out that representing of this kind of topic is not only controversial but also unpopular since religious diversity is endorsed in most countries in the world. The represented idea is mostly based on the dominant culture preferences which implies to the way how and why things are represented. In this sense, those who control the production would eventually have a chance to present things on his/his own and project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accepts it as 'common sense' and 'natural'

Keyword : *media representation, religious conversion, dominant culture, religious diversity*

A. Introduction

Film is a media expression which in some aspects represents the society. But what we see in film is not the reality, but someone's version of it. Film tells long story with a wealth of detail from the perspective of a narrator or the team behind the scene and each has his/her own interpretation toward the images, sounds or words presented . Hence, what being

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² *Muallaf* won the Best Asian-Middle Eastern Film Award (special mention) in the 2008 Tokyo International Film Festival

represented, has never been neutral nor free from interest. The concept and how the things are represented become more essential since people behind the scene determines and constructs the messages and the objectives of the movie.

This indicates that film representation itself is not an art per se, but eventually a complicated product. It is indeed connected to the constructed models by dominant power which is in some ways interrelated with particular ideology, interest, generalization, stereotyping and even power relation. As Shohat argued, all film are political- or more accurately have a political dimension (2010:5)

Representation here is connected with how to give meaning, to describe or to depict something. To represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen or to substitute for the things which are depicted through the images, sounds or words what we are talking about.³ Here, the representation has never been a complete or a totally reflection of things, but much more than a combination of ideas of various elements.. Referring to Barker (2003 :4), in any representations there is a mixture of thing itself, such as the opinion of the people doing the representation, the reaction of the individual to the representation and also the context of the society in which the representation is taking place. In this sense, the designs, messages, the power behind the scene or how and why things are represented are kind of the primary discourse in which the dimension of its impact is particularly intensive and broad.

Furthermore, related to the themes or film message, it is interesting to find out its connection with the religion. As Andre Bazin (2002), writes, 'The cinema has always been interested in God'⁴. Religion is something personal, in Paul Tillich terms, is an area of culture that involve basic beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality, our purpose in the

³ Oxford English Dictionary

⁴ Terry Lindvall. Religion and Film. Communication Research Trend :Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture. Vol 23: 2004

world, and we find a meaning in it.⁵ In this sense, a religion or religious idea in the movies always interest the producers or the film industry, because it's close to the audience or society that it represents. That is why, since this industry began, religious movies and religious themes have been coloring the movie's genre, especially the drama

Moreover, Conrad Ostwalt in *Religion and Popular Movies* also states that films are an excellent medium and tool to initiate an exploration into how religious attitudes can affect and be affected by a wide range of human, social, and political attitudes and issues.⁶ Through various themes, movies can be powerful vehicles for communicating religious stories, meanings, and values to mass audiences and to the public sphere. No wonder that beside an entertainment, movie can function as a propaganda, gathering a public opinion, and a media of education as well. In *the Passion of Christ* for example, the audience do not only feel the emotion of the Christ's suffering on his life, but also learn the Christian history and political in trick which happen at that time.

However, from the various themes of religious movies, only some which talk or insert religious conversion as a topic of discussion. The most likely reason here is because the idea of conversion is highly sensitive and controversial in which most of the movie industries and directors prefer not to present and even try to avoid it.

Although conversion factually exists in the society especially among the multi religion's countries, to present and elaborate the case in the movie sometimes need a lot of consideration and deeply thought. By wrongly approach, it can raise protests or even triggers such 'religious war' among the community.

⁵ Leyden, John. *Film as religion : Myths, Moral, Rituals*. NYU Press. New York.2003

⁶ Conrad Ostwalt .*Religion and Popular Movies* Journal of Religion and Film Vol. 2, No. 3 December 1998

In this paper, I would focus on the religious conversion in two religious films , *Muallaf* (Malaysia) and *Ayat- Ayat Cinta* (Indonesia). These films have some in common. The similarity is not only on the genre of movie, religious drama, but also cultural background. They are produced from nations with multi religions in which Islam is the majority.

B. Films Description

The '*Muallaf*' by Yasmin Ahmad (Malaysia) focuses on a 20 years old Rohani and her 14 year old sister Rohana with a 30 year old ,Brian, a Catholic school teacher. The strength of this movie is the way the director builds conflicts among the characters through interreligious nuances and dialogues, Catholic and Islam.

These two Malay girls who initially seem to live peacefully in their secret little world finally got a serious problem when one them (Rohana) has a trouble with one of her teachers at school. These girls were in fact in refuge and ran away from their father, because of a domestic violation. This conflict finally lead these girls to meet and have acquaintance with Brian who also has a conflict of his own. Through this relationship, then develop religious dialogues among the characters especially between Brian and Rohani which leads him know more about Islam and (might) ends with conversion.

Ayat –Ayat Cinta by Hanung Bramantyo is actually a love story. The strength of this movie lies in the way director/writer portrays and combines numerous conflicts like triangle love, revenge, loyalty and idealism into one of particular framework. This religious love story is based on a best-selling novel of the same title by Habiburrahman El Shirazy.⁷

⁷ http://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_televisi.

Set in Cairo, Egypt, *Aya-Ayat Cinta* actually focuses on the relationship between Fahri (Ferdinand Nuri) and some of the girls who love him in different ways. These four women are his college mate Nurul (Melanie Putri), Noura (Zaskia Adya Mecca), a victim of domestic violence who turns against him; Maria (Carissa Putri), his Catholic neighbor; and Aisha (Rianti Cartwright), who Fahri meets by coincidence.

From these four girls, Fahri then chooses Aisha to be his wife. But the conflict then is getting intensive when Noura who initially was helped by Fahri from a domestic violation then turns against him and accuses him of rape only because she can't win his love. On such a critical determination, Maria shows up as a witness to help Fahri. He could be finally released. By Aisha's permission, Maria then becomes his second wife, and by the end of her life, she converts to Islam.

C. Religious Conversion

These two films insert religious conversion from Catholic to Islam. Although these films set in the countries in which Muslims are the majority, this kind of theme is still considered risky and dangerous.

When films are called modern 'myth' and refer to a set of stories that represent the two functions Clifford Geertz calls "model of" and "model for" reality, in *Muallaf* and *Ayat –Ayat Cinta*, the audiences can figure out that the directors are trying to accommodate and adjust with this viewpoint. 'Model of' reality describes the way we think the world really is, while 'model for' reality describes how we would like to be.

By presenting such sensitive and controversial themes, the directors try to present 'model of' reality in which this case indeed almost happens all the time, exists, but many people seem to ignore or be reluctant to discuss or even present in the cinema because of its sensitivity. Religious belief is something personal and prone to human

right violations. By portraying this kind of issue, these films try to pose that conversion could happen in various ways to anybody with a range of causes and social backgrounds

As a 'model for' reality, in these films, the directors try to present how the religious life should be, including tolerance, pluralism, and how to respect and appreciate each other among the pluralistic society

a. The Causes of Conversion

- **Love**

There are some reasons, why people change their own religion. As portrayed in these two films, love is probably the main reason of conversion of Brian and Maria. In *Muallaf*, for example, the director doesn't exactly show that Brian's love to Rohani is a main reason of his conversion, but the fact that he loves a girl with a different religion and getting interested in Islam is clearly shown in this movie. Through their conversation, the way he observes Rohana and Rohani's religious activities like reciting Al Quran, praying in the mosque or reading a lot of religious books, indicate his interest in Islamic teachings. The fact that he finally loves Rohani is shown during his care of Rohani's house while she's away or his jealousy when discovering a picture of Rohani with somebody. These circumstances or descriptions lead to a clear explanation that he has indeed a feeling for this girl.

In a similar case, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* also clearly describes that Maria really loves Fahri. Started from a friendship, Maria and Fahri feel that they have a lot of things in common, but religion. In this sense, Fahri realizes that it's impossible for him to love her because she's a Christian, and he does not want to break that friendship. But for Maria, this kind of condition really hurts and leads her to get

depressed and illness. She tries to hide away from him, but the more she's away from Fahri, the more she feels hopeless and depressed.

However, after becoming Fahri's wife, it seems that there's no reason for Maria to keep on being a Christian. She probably feels that being a Moslem would make her to be fully accepted, and loved by Fahri.

- **Self Identity**

Religious movie like *Muallaf* and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, is a way the director portrays a religious pluralism among the multi religions of society. It seems that there's no different between one religion to another (Islam and Christian) although in reality they're quite different. Both directors try to present a similar perspective in perceiving the world, pluralism and human relationship.

The portrayal of Christian and Islam in both films represent that these religions have many things in common. Different with *Muallaf* in which Rohana and Rohani (Moslems) are described as the curious girls who are always interested in the comparative of religions, in *Ayat- Ayat Cinta*, it is Maria (Christian) who shows an interest in Islam and all about this religion. Like Rohani, Maria even knows more about Al Quran though she's a Christian

Like what Aisha tells to Fahri that , "she saw a Moslem in Maria", the director is seemingly trying to say that every religion is basically similar. Here, there's no judgments of right or wrong, good or bad, etc. In this context, we can say that both Maria and Aisha do not see a religion as a barrier, and this might be one of the reasons why Aisha agrees if Fahri takes Maria as his second wife . And when finally Maria decides to convert her religion by asking Fahri and Aisha to teach her

conducting 'sholat', the audience can infer that since she's become Fahri's wife, there's no reason for her for being a Catholic while her husband is Muslim.

In a similar description, in *Muallaf*, the Islamic idea of pluralism is portrayed in the way of Rohana and Rohani conduct their religion. For example, their interest to study Christian or other religion in a very specific way is shown in both of their life activities and thought. Pluralism is shown in the way these characters comprehend both Islam and Christian perfectly. The way Rohana and Rohani quote Al Quran and the Bible at the same time, their decision to choose a Catholic school rather than Islamic or national school, portrays their outlook that every religion is 'more or less the same'. There's no a contrast difference between one religion to another. In some aspects, this might interest Brian to know Islam more. He probably feels that this religion could fulfill his restlessness, mend his relationship with his family, especially his mother.

Besides, although the title clearly states about 'Muallaf' which in Islamic term means a new Muslim, somebody who used to belong to other religion but then declare him/herself to be muslim, a term of conversion (muallaf) in this movie can be interpreted in a different way, that is a change to be a better. Here there are some reasons that indicate this, among others are :

1. As being portrayed from the beginning, both characters (Rohana/Rohani and Brian) have their own secret in the past. These girls ran away from their wealthy father because of domestic violence. Since their mother died, and their father was married with another woman, Rohani felt that her home was like a hell for them. The climax is when her father humiliates her by cutting her hair and it cause a feeling of distrust and hate, toward her own father. In a different way, Brian also got a traumatic experience with his father when he was a child. Having caught reading a pornographic magazine, his father even humiliated him in the public

sphere. Since then, Brian seemed to lose his However, when the dialogue between these characters is getting intensive, both Rohani and Brian seem to understand each other that they could not run away from their past. They should make a peace, and try to forgive anything that they hate from their parent or past. In this case, the conversion is more like a change from the bad to good.

2. Although the title of the film is *Muallaf*, and there are two religions being discussed, conversion is not explicitly stated in this movie. Muallaf or conversion here is multi interpretative. The director lets the audience interprets the scene or the whole theme of the movie based on their point of view and argument. For example, the director leads the story by describing Brian's search of (religious) identity. The way he observes Rohana and Rohani's religious activities and his curiosity toward Islamic teachings lead the interpretation that he is going to convert to Islam. However, there's no indication that Brian converts to Islam, except for his adaptation and interest to the girls' way of life.

Moreover, portraying a conversion in the movie indeed needs a certain courage. The director of producer can argue that she/he just wants to portray or describe the reality into the screen, but the impact of this idea sometimes is more than what people expect. The impact of conversion sometimes is not limited in a personal circumstance, but it could be wider in large scale of community.

Besides, each religion, religious community or even nation has a different way to response the conversion. Some perceive conversion as human right area, in which everybody has his own basic right to choose a certain religion or even to have no religion. But some nations or religion prefer to take a drastic action to response a conversion. For example, in the Spring of 2006 an Afghan citizen, Abdul Rahman, who had converted from Islam to Christianity was arrested under local *shari`ah* law which

mandates the death penalty for apostasy.⁸ This indicates that to a certain community like Islam in Afghanistan, conversion is a serious problem which's in some aspect seen as a serious crime. It is like a 'steal' of somebody's property without any mercy.

Besides, The problem of the right to religious conversion and the ethics of Christian mission and Islamic *da`wah* has been a longstanding topic of debate in interreligious dialogue.⁹ This issue indeed belongs to human rights domain, in which everybody has his own right to choose and determine his own belief. However, this issue sometimes becomes a cause of the religious disintegration and intolerance among the religious community.

Besides, though controversial, Yasmin Ahmad and Hanung Bramantyo are some of the directors who like to raise a religious issue on the screen. Living among the multi races and religion society, these directors have some other similarities, not only for the controversial issue, but also their point of views

Most of Yasmin Ahmad's films are about how different races and religious community can live together, can love and help each other. Like her previous movie, *Supet, Gubra*, her movie is about humanity as a whole. Besides, as it's explored in *Muallaf* Yasmin's films is also about God in ultimate sense, one God, not only a Christian God, Chinese God or Muslim God.¹⁰ These movies are actually representative of Yasmin's point of view on how religious pluralism and races relationship should be.

In a similar way, Hanung Bramantyo is also well known for some of his controversial movies. Although he doesn't always concern on the religious themes, but some of his

⁸ A.R. S. The Right to Religious Conversion: Between Apostasy and Proselytization

Kroc Institute Occasional Paper #27:OP:1 (August 2006)

⁹ Conrad Ostwalt. *Religion and Popular Movies*. Journal of Religion and Film Vol. 2, No. 3 December 1998 (p.3)

¹⁰ [http:// www Religion and Film\Some thoughts on Muallaf « Falling Stones are not Heavy.htm](http://www.ReligionandFilm.com/Some%20thoughts%20on%20Muallaf%20«%20Falling%20Stones%20are%20not%20Heavy.htm)

religious movies like *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *'? (Tanda Tanya)* raise some critics and controversy. In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* for example, Bramantyo tries to criticize woman, violation and the 'pesantren' world that used to be considered as 'a closed area'. But the most the controversial one is *'? (Tanda Tanya)* in which he depicts a religious life among different religions including conversion among the characters. These films in some aspect reflect Bramantyo's point of view on woman's dignity and religious pluralism

D. Industry Interests

Aside from the religious content and ideal messages delivered in the religious movies, we can not negate that film is an industry. According Dedy Miswar, a cineaste, a religious movie is not the same with *dakwah* (preaching) in which the film makers can set his idealistic project/idea in it. There some parties such as the sponsorship, producers, who design that a film should have a selling point.¹¹ . In *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, for example, by posing religious cloth (hijab) and religious life like *'taaruf*, the audience especially Muslims will probably feel reflected. In this way, this film succeeds in creating a trend of Indonesian cinema, inspiring the other cineastes to produce a similar description of Muslim's life not only in the wide screen but also on the television.

E. Film as a hegemonic Representation

In various forms, styles and representations, every single item presented in the movie is indeed by design. Here, there is a process of selection in which some of them will be dominant, and the others will be hidden or erased. In this sense, the media itself actually has a frame work of presentation which controls any issues presented. Thus, there's no

¹¹ <http://www/Religion and Film\Plus Minus Film Religi Kita.mht>

truth version nor reality's reflection in the media framework. Moreover, each crew or man behind the scene has his/her own perspective to present this constructed work, based on his/her preferences toward a certain object, events or situation.

In this sense, there is no natural nor coincidently thing in film production. The film maker make decisions about how to depict or present a certain object including what and how to film it. Even, during the process, editing (montage) provides means to get and cut the wanted shots. As Sergei Eisenstein argues, even the most 'realistic' film like documentaries do not simply set up a camera in front of the event. They involves choices that are designed to elicit responses in the viewers¹².

When a sensitive topic like a religious conversion is exposed in a media representation the question is that how do people behind the scene determine their position among the religious diversity ? How can they be sure that what's being represented will be accepted by everybody especially the minority one (Christian) in this movie? In the case of *Muallaf* and *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, the result or the acceptance will probably different if the conversion is from Islam to Christian or other religion. As it's found in another Bramantyo's movie , '?' (tanda tanya) for example, when the director was trying to present another version of conversion (from Islam to Christian) the audience response was quite negative. A part from the other qualities as has been criteria of a certain movie to be successful, these both movies can't be comparable in terms of marketing and the audience response.

Here, the ideas presented are mostly based on the dominant culture preferences which implies to the way how and why things are represented. In this sense, those who control the production would eventually have a chance to present things on his/his own. In short, according to Hall, this is like what Foucault called a ' power/knowledge' sort of game. It classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other'.

¹² Stam, Robert and Ella Shohat . *Stereotypes, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation* , p : 180

Referring to Marx concept of ideology, this is what he calls the ideology of the ruling class. The dominant culture or power articulates its class interest in sets of ideas which is not only on economic but also in ideology that legitimate the capitalist as the ruling class. Burton(2002) also defines Ideology as a set of beliefs and values that add up to a particular view of the world and of power relationships between people and group. In this term, people are driven to believe how thing is and how it should be. The dominant ideology would be a dominant view of the world in a given culture. This is the one that media offers us. We are influenced by the messages what should believe in or what should value as important (p 219).

Moreover, this is also in line with Gramsci's theory of hegemony which denotes the predominance of one social class over others. This domination is not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accepts it as 'common sense' and 'natural'(Alvaro & Boyd- Barret 1992 : 51) . Here, as being represented in the movie, the idea of conversion seems to be natural in the country where Islam is the dominant religion. The way the director present the idea of conversion in a smooth and multi-interpretative mode, is kind of means to minimize a possible conflict among the audience. However, when a religious diversity both in Indonesia and Malaysia is intended to eliminate such religious conflicts, this kind of theme is still not very popular.

Nevertheless, we need to realize that movie is indeed about the industry in which the audience pleasure and profit are the dominant interest. With or without ideological messages, it is merely an entertaining business, nothing is purely religious although some indicators on these movies identify them to.

F. Conclusion

Film is a media representation. Into a wide screen, this industry could portray and depict the object, events, or the reality which seems to be real and represent the society including the religious aspect. Yet, since film is a mass production in which the dimension of its impact is particularly intensive and broad what is perceived in the movie is not merely about art nor entertainment. It is a constructed work based on the preferences of the dominant culture behind.

Concerning of the theme, film often describes things in the society which's close and familiar with the people, including certain aspect of religion. Religious theme has already introduced since this industry started. However, when the director tries to present this unpopular theme like the conversion in the movie, the respond is exactly various . not only because of its controversy, but in some ways it potentially triggers such religious conflict. Presenting this kind of idea need a lot of considering and deeply thought, not only because is this belongs to a private area, the basic right of human being, but the impact of it sometimes beyond what people expected, especially in the time when the religious diversity is endorsed.

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