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Unveiling spiritual violence: A critical discourse analysis of the *Bidaah* series

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of spiritual violence in the Malaysian psychological religious drama series *Bidaah* through Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. Within the context of religious societies vulnerable to ideological domination based on religion, the series illustrates how religious discourse is employed as an instrument for legitimizing power and social control. This qualitative study uses purposive sampling to analyze eight selected scenes from five episodes containing dialogues and symbolic representations of religious authority within the fictional group Jihad Ummah. The textual analysis focuses on diction, sentence structure, modality, metaphor, and ideological presupposition to reveal the mechanisms of reproducing symbolic and epistemic violence that silence criticism and affirm the absolute authority of religious figures. The findings show that *Bidaah* not only represents religious violence narratively but also depicts social practices involving symbolic and structural violence that reflect the realities of religious conflict and polarization in Indonesia and Malaysia. This study contributes to a critical understanding of the relationship between language, power, and ideology in media, while opening space for reflection on repressive and exclusive religious practices in modern society.

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Keywords:
spiritual violence; *Bidaah* series; critical discourse analysis.

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji konstruksi kekerasan spiritual dalam serial drama religi psikologis Malaysia, *Bidaah*, melalui pendekatan Analisis Wacana Kritis (AWK) Norman Fairclough. Dalam konteks masyarakat religius yang rentan terhadap dominasi ideologis berbasis agama, serial ini menampilkan bagaimana wacana keagamaan digunakan sebagai instrumen legitimasi kekuasaan dan kontrol sosial. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan purposive sampling, menganalisis delapan adegan terpilih dari lima episode yang memuat dialog dan simbolisasi kekuasaan religius dalam kelompok fiktif Jihad Ummah. Analisis teks difokuskan pada aspek diksi, struktur kalimat, modalitas, metafora, dan presuposisi ideologis untuk mengungkap mekanisme reproduksi kekerasan simbolik dan epistemik yang membungkam kritik dan meneguhkan otoritas absolut figur religius. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa serial *Bidaah* tidak hanya merepresentasikan kekerasan agama dalam bentuk naratif, tetapi juga memaparkan praktik sosial yang melibatkan kekerasan simbolik dan struktural, yang mencerminkan realitas konflik dan polarisasi keagamaan di Indonesia dan Malaysia. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman kritis tentang hubungan antara bahasa, kekuasaan, dan ideologi dalam media, sekaligus membuka ruang refleksi terhadap praktik keberagamaan yang represif dan eksklusif dalam masyarakat modern.

INTRODUCTION

In religious societies, religion plays a central role in regulating social order, defining moral boundaries, and shaping collective identity. However, behind its sacred role, religion can also serve as an instrument of power used to control, restrict, and even oppress individuals or groups in the name of doctrine, norms, and piety. One form of oppression that often escapes attention is spiritual violence a type of violence that does not involve physical harm but exerts emotional, psychological, and ideological pressure through certain religious interpretations and practices (Jalil, 2021).

Every religion teaches peace and denounces violence. Islam, for instance, is a religion that does not advocate violence. In Islamic historiography, it is known as a

religion of liberation *(futuhat),* which, since the 7th century, has been historically associated with certain practices of violence (Sulaiman et al., 2019). Similarly, Christianity proclaims itself a religion of love, yet its own history has not been free from acts of violence. Even so, within every religion, there are followers committed to fostering harmony and working actively to overcome violence. Both individual and collective movements across different faith traditions have sparked internal dialogues, revealing that no religion possesses a single, uniform ideology or theological perspective (Nadira, 2019). Differences in how religions respond to the presence of others often become a source of conflict. Still, violence in the name of religion can be restrained when believers regard peace as a shared moral responsibility. In its essence, religion should serve as an ethical foundation for resolving conflict and preventing violence, for it exists to bring peace, not hostility (Jamaludin, 2022).

Spiritual abuse is a form of violence that uses religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate, control, harm, or intimidate someone. It can take many forms, such as prohibiting someone from following their chosen faith, using religious teachings to justify abusive behavior, or ostracizing someone because of a different belief (Irawan, 2023). Religious violence in Indonesia, however, continues to surface in different places and times. From the Bali Bombings, the explosions at JW Marriott and Kuningan, to attacks on the Al-Mubarok campus and the Ahmadiyah community in Parung, as well as the closure of Christian churches in Bandung, West Java (Nurhasanah, 2020). One of the more striking cases occurred on July 20, 2010, when about 2,000 people gathered at Lembah Karmel, Puncak, to protest the Holy Trinity Conference planned by the Catholic community for July 24–29. The protesters demanded that the organizers show police authorization and threatened to forcibly disband the event if their demand was not met. Such incidents are not new, especially in the post Soeharto era. Looking back, early acts of violence often targeted small groups seen as deviating from mainstream beliefs, such as the Lia Eden community in Jakarta (Makin, 2016) or Yusman Roy in Malang (Masyhud, 2022a).

More recently, violence has begun to affect groups that have long coexisted peacefully within Indonesian society, such as the Naqsyabandiyah order in Bulukumba, (Rusdianasari & Fauzi, 2021), the Miftahul Huda Islamic boarding school in Banten (Abidin, 2024), and indigenous belief communities like the Dayak Losarang

in Indramayu (Inayah et al., 2025). This type of violence, often referred to as theological violence, is carried out by invoking religious justifications for repressive actions, framed as a "holy struggle" against those considered different (Djafar, 2018). Spiritual violence often goes unnoticed because it hides behind narratives of goodness, obedience, and purification. In practice, it can appear as coercion in matters of faith, labeling others as heretics or deviants, social exclusion, and pressure to submit to particular religious authorities (al-Qaradhawi, 2020). This reflects that religious power relations are not confined to institutional spaces but also permeate everyday life and media representations (Irawan, 2023).

As the film industry and digital media have grown, spiritual violence has become more visible through visual storytelling. Earlier studies usually describe spiritual violence as a form of non-physical control supported by religious authority, focusing on its psychological effects and the social structures that keep it in place (Saifuddin, 2011). However, many of these studies define the concept in broad terms and rarely look at how spiritual violence actually appears or is portrayed in contemporary visual media. This study responds to that gap by offering a clearer and more practical definition of spiritual violence, supported by new empirical material from the series *Bidaah.* The series shows how religious interpretation can be used to target people who are seen as straying from dominant beliefs. By examining how *Bidaah* presents and visualizes these forms of pressure and control, this study adds to previous discussions and provides a more grounded understanding of how religious authority can operate as non-physical domination. In this way, the study both complements and expands earlier research by showing how media can reveal subtle forms of repression that silence criticism and limit spiritual freedom.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Norman Fairclough's model, this study seeks to explore how spiritual violence is constructed and reproduced in the *Bidaah* series. This approach views texts not merely as linguistic artifacts but as parts of broader social practices that carry ideology and power relations. By examining the series' dialogue, symbols, narratives, and the socio-cultural context of its production, this research aims to reveal how media can function both as a space of resistance and as a tool that perpetuates symbolic violence in the name of religion (Madnur, 2023). This framework enables an in-depth analysis of the

textual, discursive, and social dimensions that shape and sustain power narratives in media (Putri et al., 2022). By analyzing the text, its production context, and its socio-cultural implications, this study seeks to show how spiritual violence operates not only as a theme but also as an ideological construction that mirrors existing power relations in society (Perdana, 2021).

This research gains particular relevance amid the growing wave of religious conservatism and social polarization driven by competing religious interpretations in Indonesia. By unpacking how religious discourse is represented and how power functions within the spiritual domain, this study aims to contribute critically to discussions on religion, media, and power in modern society (Apriliyadi & Hendrix, 2021). It also seeks to open a reflective space for examining religious practices that tend to coerce, suppress, or deny diverse spiritual experiences. Thus, this study is not only descriptive but also normatively critical, challenging the hidden structures of power embedded within religious narratives (Fismatika, 2019).

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach, which aims to gain a deep understanding of reality through an inductive reasoning process (Khilmiyah, 2016). In addition, the study applies Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. This model was chosen because it effectively explains the interrelation between language, power, and ideology within a social context. Fairclough divides discourse analysis into three main dimensions: (1) textual analysis, which focuses on the linguistic structure of the text; (2) discursive practice, which examines the processes of text production and consumption; and (3) social practice, which situates the text within broader social and ideological contexts (Fairclough, 2023).

The focus of this research is the Malaysian drama series "*Bidaah*", a psychological religious fiction composed of fifteen episodes. However, not all episodes were analyzed. The researcher used a purposive sampling technique where data were deliberately selected based on specific considerations relevant to the research focus (Maharani & Bernard, 2018). Seven scenes from episodes one to five were selected using purposive sampling. These scenes were chosen because they directly relate to the study's main question about how religious discourse legitimizes

the authority of the leader in *Jihad Ummah*. The selected scenes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Studied scenes

No	Episode	Time Stamp	Scene Description	Analytical Category
1	Episode 1	3:57–5:14	Walid's sermon urging obedience; Qur'anic citation (An-Nisa 59)	Leadership Legitimacy
2	Episode 2	22:37–23:40	Sermon linking the group struggle with Ashabul Kahfi	Leadership Legitimacy
3	Episode 1	6:22–7:24	Followers kissing and drinking Walid's foot water	Ritualization & Cult of Personality
4	Episode 4	27:00–27:49	Bathwater poured into "Well of *al-Kautsar"*	Ritualization & Cult of Personality
5	Episode 2	17:19–18:12	Indoctrination of a new female recruit	Indoctrination Through Language
6	Episode 5	20:30–21:49	Prayer manual equating Allah, Prophet, and Walid	Indoctrination Through Prayer
7	Episode 5	24:45–28:32	Walid proclaimed himself "Sultan Muhammad Mahdi Ilman."	Sultan Narrative & Obedience

Data were collected through intensive viewing of the entire "*Bidaah*" series. This process involved detailed note-taking and transcription of dialogues that reveal instances of symbolic power, religious legitimization, and ideological indoctrination. Each relevant scene was identified using three criteria: (1) the presence of religious textual references (such as Qur'anic verses or Islamic legal terms); (2) the construction of power relations through speech acts; and (3) the use of symbolic actions that demonstrate a hierarchical relationship between the leader and followers. Once collected, the transcripts were analyzed using five textual analysis categories adapted from Fairclough's (1995) framework: (1) diction – the selection of words and terms carrying ideological significance; (2) sentence structure – the syntactic patterns that reflect power relations or submission; (3) modality – expressions of certainty, obligation, or belief within speech; (4) metaphor – the use of spiritual symbols or comparisons that reinforce claims of authority; and (5) ideological presupposition – implicit assumptions embedded in the discourse. These five analytical dimensions were employed to critically interpret how linguistic practices within the series operate not merely as narrative devices, but as vehicles of religious, ideological, and political

violence, constructing a form of absolute obedience toward the central religious figure, Walid.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher presents and analyzes the research findings using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), namely: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice.

Textual analysis

At this level, the analysis focuses on the lexical aspects that reflect particular purposes, such as the use of specific terms, metaphors, and linguistic structures that carry certain meanings or imply particular actions (Fairclough, 1995).

The discourse of religious leadership legitimacy

This subsection uses the idea that religious leaders often gain authority by connecting their words to religious texts and sacred language. In the literature, it is commonly explained that a leader's power becomes stronger when their instructions are presented as part of God's will, for example, by quoting scripture, using religious terms, or claiming a higher spiritual position. When this kind of language is used, people may feel that obeying the leader is the same as obeying God. In the *Bidaah* series, this pattern appears clearly. The scenes below show how Qur'anic references and religious expressions are used to support Walid's authority.

1. Walid's sermon urging obedience to the leader

In Episode 1, at minute 3:57, Walid gathers the members of *Jihad Ummah* and delivers a sermon. The translated excerpt reads:

> *[3:57] Walid: "No matter how great one's sacrifices may be, they will never be perfect unless bound by obedience. Obedience to the leader is an obligation. As Allah says in Surah An-Nisa, verse 59: 'O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger (Muhammad) and those in authority among you. If you disagree on something, refer it back to Allah and His Messenger, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day.' Beyond obedience, the Jihad Ummah possesses the*

> *quality of walah toward its leader, that is, loyalty. Loyalty is a quality even greater than obedience. Through obedience and loyalty, you shall walk with Walid and the Prophet along the sirat al-mustaqim toward paradise."*
> *[5:14] Congregation of Jihad Ummah: "Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!"*

In this sermon, the main character, Walid, employs authoritative religious discourse to construct an image of absolute leadership within his congregation. He asserts the normative statement that *"obedience to the leader is obligatory,"* immediately grounding it in Qur'anic authority (Surah An-Nisa: 59). He further emphasizes that the *Jihad Ummah* must uphold *walah* (loyalty), which he elevates above mere obedience. This statement reinforces the expectation that all members must maintain unconditional loyalty and submission to their leader under any circumstances. The diction Walid uses, *"obedience," "obligation," "loyalty,"* and *"paradise,"* carries strong modal force and expresses an uncompromising tone that leaves no room for interpretation or doubt. The high degree of modality here establishes that disobedience to the leader equates to disobedience to God.

Through declarative sentence structures intertwined with religious reasoning, Walid positions himself as an authority parallel to *ulil amri* (those in power) and even the Prophet himself. The sermon follows a deductive structure: it begins with a Qur'anic citation, followed by its practical application, and is delivered with rhetorical flair typical of a religious sermon, intensifying his perceived authority among followers. This construction implies an ideological presupposition that Walid's will and actions represent divine intent. Moreover, his metaphor *"walking along the sirat al-mustaqim toward paradise with Walid and the Prophet"* symbolically elevates his position as the intermediary between the congregation and salvation. It subtly suggests that only through Walid can one attain redemption in this world and the hereafter. This metaphor psychologically conditions followers to perceive dissent as deviation from divine guidance. In this sense, the discourse operates as a subtle mechanism of domination, reflecting how religion may be utilized to sustain social and political control within an internal hierarchy.

2. Walid's sermon on the story of Ashabul Kahfi

In Episode 2, at minute 22:37, Walid delivers another sermon during a nightly gathering in the group's hall:

> *[22:37] Walid: "The struggle of Jihad Ummah belongs to Allah. The loss of one preacher does not mean the da'wah will end. Consider Ashabul Kahfi: though they vanished from their people for 300 years, their community eventually embraced faith. Today, Allah has sent Walid and all of you who remain faithful after the departure of Ashabul Kahfi. For what purpose? To unite our hearts and minds in the path of jihad for the ummah. You should be grateful, for Allah has allowed you to meet Walid and to serve as His preachers in these end times. Therefore, beware of Satan, who envies our unity of hearts."*

Here, Walid constructs religious authority by drawing symbolic parallels between himself, his followers, and the story of Ashabul Kahfi, a Qur'anic narrative about a group of young men steadfast in their faith who withdrew from a polytheistic society to preserve their monotheism. Historically, these youths, including Maximianus, Martinus, Dionysius, Malkus, Constantinus, and Suresius, fled persecution during the reign of King Decianus (249–251 CE), seeking refuge in a cave alongside a shepherd named Yemlikha and his dog, Kitmir (Fatih, 2023). This story is a symbol of Allah's steadfast faith and protection of His obedient servants.

By invoking this story, Walid builds a religious metaphor that positions himself as a spiritual successor to the Ashabul Kahfi. The parallel between their "disappearance" and his "presence" creates a historical and spiritual continuum, suggesting that his leadership is divinely ordained. The diction *"struggle," "da'wah," "end times,"* and *"brought together with Walid"* constructs an ideological presupposition that his leadership is not accidental but part of Allah's plan. Hence, following Walid becomes not merely an act of loyalty to a leader, but a form of worship to God.

The structure of his sermon is both narrative and persuasive. He begins with an analogy, the story of Ashabul Kahfi, then relates it to the present situation of his congregation, concluding with moral imperatives such as "be grateful" and "beware of Satan." Phrases like *"you should be grateful"* and "*Allah has brought Walid to you"* employ strong modality, leaving little space for doubt or alternative interpretation.

Through this discourse, Walid transforms a religious narrative into a political instrument of legitimacy. By aligning himself and his followers with a sacred Qur'anic story, he constructs a symbolic framework that sanctifies his leadership. In doing so, *Bidaah* exposes how religious discourse can be strategically used to justify authority, manipulate belief, and maintain social control under the guise of divine mission.

Ritualization and the cult of personality

Here, the focus is on how rituals and a cult of personality form around a leader. Ritualization refers to repeated symbolic actions that make a person appear sacred. A cult of personality develops when followers start seeing the leader as someone spiritually special or above ordinary people. In the literature, it is often explained that rituals such as touching certain objects, giving blessings, or using specific gestures can slowly turn a leader into the main focus of spiritual devotion. In the *Bidaah* series, this pattern can be seen in several scenes. Everyday actions around Walid are turned into ritual acts, making him appear not just respected, but almost worshipped. The scenes below show how this process works.

1. The act of kissing and drinking Walid's foot water

In Episode 1, at minute 6:22, Walid is shown sitting on a chair while soaking his feet in water. One follower steps forward, bows before him, kisses his feet, and drinks the water as an expression of reverence. Others, both men and women, follow suit. In this scene, Baiduri and her mother witness the event and engage in the following dialogue:

> *[6:49] Baiduri: "Mother, what is this? They're kissing his feet, drinking the water, this is bid'ah! Please, Mother! Oh, Ya Allah, don't let us be ignorant. This is heresy! A grave sin!"*
> *Astaghfirullahalazim!"*
> *[7:13] Baiduri's Mother: "Be quiet! Just follow!"*
> *[7:24] Abi Saifullah: "May Allah bless you all. Tonight, we have received the blessing of the saint of Allah, our mursyid."*

The dialogue contains several key lexical choices revealing contrasting ideological positions. Baiduri's use of theological terms such as *bid'ah* (innovation), heresy, and great sin expresses her moral rejection of the ritual, aligning her response with orthodox Islamic doctrine. Her mother's reply, *"Just follow!"* signifies coercive conformity and the suppression of critical thought. Meanwhile, Abi Saifullah, a senior member of the group, employs sanctified diction such as *"blessing," "friend of Allah,"* and *"mursyid,"* which elevate Walid's status to that of a divinely favored figure.

The phrase *"May Allah bless you all"* functions as a declarative utterance that legitimizes the ritual by embedding it within a religious framework. The expression carries a high degree of religious modality, implying that the act is not merely acceptable but meritorious. Linguistically, this moment exemplifies how religious vocabulary and symbolic gestures are used to sanctify personal devotion to the leader rather than to God. The refusal to participate, therefore, is framed not as a rational disagreement but as an act of disobedience against faith itself.

2. Pouring Walid's bathwater into a sacred well for blessings

Another ritual involves followers collecting and pouring Walid's bathwater into a golden well believed to be equivalent to the heavenly pool, *al-Kautsar.* This occurs in episode four (minute 27:00), when three followers are seen transferring the water. The act is observed by Hambali, who questions them:

[27:12] Hambali: "Assalamualaikum"
[27:15] Tiga orang jamaah: "Wa'alaikumussalam"
[27:20] Hambali: "Has the well dried up?"
[27:23] Jamaah: "No, we regularly pour Walid's and Mother Rabiatul's bathwater into it."
[27:28] Hambali: "Walid's bathwater?"
[27:29] Jamaah: "Yes."
[27:30] Hambali: "For what purpose?"
[27:33] Jamaah: "You don't know it? Masya Allah! People here drink from this well to receive Walid's blessings. This sacred water is like al-Kautsar, that's why we call it the Well of al-Kautsar."
[27:43] Hambali: "Astaghfirullah. al-Kautsar?"

> *[27:49] Jamaah: "This well is connected to al-Kautsar. Walid said it's holy water from heaven."*

This scene depicts how symbolic acts and language are intertwined to construct a discourse of sanctification and leader worship through bodily spiritualization. The repeated references to "*holy water,*" *"blessing,"* "*al-Kautsar,"* and *"heaven"* embed the act within religious imagery. The metaphor of *al-Kautsar*, the Prophet's heavenly fountain, implicitly equates Walid with the Prophet Muhammad, situating him as a divine intermediary.

The declarative statements "*This holy water is al-Kautsar"* and *"Walid said it's holy water from heaven"* carry strong assertive modality, leaving no room for doubt or alternative interpretation. The line *"You don't know? Masya Allah!"* further reinforces epistemic authority, positioning the speaker as a bearer of absolute truth derived from Walid's words. This reflects an internalized and collective belief system in which the leader's utterances are accepted as divine revelation. Metaphorically, the *"Well of al-Kautsar"* becomes the ultimate symbol of spiritual legitimacy and transcendence, transforming Walid into a sacred conduit between the earthly and the divine. Ideologically, the discourse exposes how spiritual authority and symbolic violence are enacted through the ritualization of the leader's body, guiding followers to equate submission to Walid with devotion to God.

Indoctrination through language and prayer

This part discusses indoctrination, especially how language and prayer are used to shape the followers' thinking. Indoctrination occurs when repeated messages, commands, or ritual speech slowly limit a person's ability to question or reflect on what they hear. In many religious settings, fixed prayers, set phrases, and instruction-based speech are commonly used to strengthen certain beliefs. In *Bidaah*, this pattern appears through scripted prayers and firm commands given during recruitment and in daily routines. The scenes below show how repeated words and ritual speech become tools for guiding and controlling the followers' beliefs. The analysis reveals how verbal expressions, ritual speech, and symbolic gestures function as instruments of ideological transmission and control:

1. Ideological transmission through command-based dialogue during the recruitment of new members

Like many organized groups, Jihad Ummah recruits new members through a standardized initiation process, which includes a face-to-face meeting with the leader and a ritual prayer accompanied by recitation of the group's internal rules. This is depicted in episode two (minute 17:26), where Umi Hafidzah (Walid's first wife and head of the women's congregation) sits above a new female recruit while delivering a formal instruction:

> *[17:19] Umi Hafidzah: "Umi only wants to tell you one thing. Here, we have laws and rules that must be obeyed. The first and most important is obedience, obedience to all teachers, especially Walid. The second is manners and morality. If we are obedient and maintain good conduct toward our teachers, insya-Allah we will attain blessed knowledge. Insha-Allah, if we wish to reach Allah, we must obey our mursyid. Only he can lead us there (to heaven)."*
> *[18:12] Jama'ah (New member): "Yes, Umi."*

The language in this scene is rich with theological vocabulary such as obedience, teacher, adab, morality, blessing, *mursyid,* and heaven. Each term reinforces the doctrine of absolute submission to Walid as the spiritual authority, leaving no space for questioning or negotiation. The word obedience is repeated three times, signaling its ideological centrality in the discourse of Jihad Ummah. The phrase *"if we wish to reach Allah, we must obey our mursyid"* employs normative religious reasoning to justify a hierarchical power relationship.

Structurally, Umi Hafidzah's speech is declarative and imperative, evident in statements such as "*the first and foremost is obedience"* and *"must be obeyed*." These grammatical choices underscore command and compliance, while the visual power dynamic (Umi seated on a chair and the new member sitting on the floor) further reinforces hierarchical dominance. Phrases *like "insya-Allah we will attain blessed knowledge"* employ epistemic and religious modality, framing obedience to Walid as the sole path to divine blessing.

By referring to Walid as the *mursyid* who can lead us to heaven, Umi Hafidzah metaphorically equates obedience to a spiritual journey toward salvation. This

constructs Walid as a sacred intermediary between God and the followers. The underlying presupposition (unstated yet assumed) is that obedience to Walid is the only legitimate path to divine knowledge, while disobedience implies spiritual failure. Through this logic, alternative interpretations of Islam are excluded, and authority becomes monopolized within the group's ideological structure.

Thus, this scene exemplifies how religious language, coupled with hierarchical communication, is used to transmit ideology and limit critical reasoning. By linking divine blessing and salvation to obedience, the discourse confines the followers' religious identity within a symbolic system that reinforces Walid's absolute power.

2. The fusion of God and leader within a single prayer entity

In episode five (minute 20:30), Hambali is shown sitting in the lodge, reading a prayer manual written for Jihad Ummah members. A few moments later, Abi Saifullah (Hambali's father) enters, and the following conversation unfolds:

> *[20:30] Hambali (reading the book of prayer): "O Allah, I seek tawassul through Walid Muhammad Mahdi Iman, my imam, the one You have sent to guide me closer to You. O Allah, O Messenger, O Walid Muhammad Mahdi Iman, grant me Your intercession from this world, sustenance from Your earth, and faith strengthened by the blessings of my mursyid."*
> *[21.03] Hambali: "Astaghfirullah."*
> *[21:05] Abi Saifullah (Hambali's father): "Before studying hundreds of shari'a and tariqa texts written by great scholars, remember, they all come from the Qur'an and the Prophet's Hadith. Yet, before understanding them, people already call them heresy. Islam is not based on intellect or logic, Hambali!"*
> *[21:39] Hambali: "Abi, I..."*
> *[21:40] Abi Saifullah: "I know what's in your mind."*
> *[21:43] Hambali: "My intention is only to try to understand what is written and implied in this book, Abi."*
> *[21:49] Abi Saifullah: "Do not be arrogant with your knowledge. Knowledge alone is not enough without spiritual experience. You will not find God if you make yourself a god. The malamatiyah are those who hide their goodness and cleanse their hearts from evil. Understand that and turn yourself to Allah."*

The prayer text employs sacred diction such as *tawassul,* imam You have sent, and my *mursyid,* all of which elevate Walid's spiritual authority to a level comparable with prophetic figures. Walid's name appears alongside O Allah and O Messenger, establishing a symbolic equivalence that conflates divine and human figures. The repetitive structure *"O Allah, O Messenger, O Walid…"* normalizes Walid's presence within the spiritual hierarchy, embedding him in the divine chain of supplication.

Phrases such as *"I seek tawassul through Walid, the imam, whom you have sent"* reflect an epistemic modality of certainty, implying that Walid's divine appointment is absolute and beyond challenge. This prayer thus functions as an ideological mechanism, where belief in Walid's divine role is not optional but doctrinally required.

Within this discourse, Walid is metaphorically portrayed as both divinely appointed imam and *mursyid,* a spiritual guide capable of granting *syafa'ah* (intercession) in the afterlife. This blurs the boundary between human leadership and divinity. Furthermore, Abi Saifullah's remarks reinforce a presupposition that intellectual critique represents spiritual arrogance, as expressed in his statement: *"You will not find God if you make yourself a god."* This rhetorical move disciplines rational inquiry, replacing critical reflection with dogmatic submission.

Consequently, the prayer and dialogue serve as explicit demonstrations of how religious language is deployed to construct and preserve absolute authority. Through the merging of divine invocation and leader worship, the text reveals how spiritual discourse can operate as a mechanism of ideological control and symbolic violence within extremist structures.

Absolute obedience through the claim of being a sultan

This section focuses on the linguistic strategies employed to enforce total obedience among Jihad Ummah members through Walid's self-proclamation as a Sultan. Here, the focus is on how absolute obedience is built through Walid's claim to the title Sultan. In many cultural and political contexts, titles such as "king" or "sultan" carry meanings tied to sacred authority, inherited power, and unquestioned loyalty. When a religious leader adopts a title like this, the boundary between spiritual guidance and political control becomes unclear, allowing the leader to claim a higher

and more total form of authority. In *Bidaah*, Walid draws on the symbolism of Malay kingship, such as *daulat,* hierarchy, and royal-style appointments, to place himself above ordinary religious figures. The scene below shows how this royal language strengthens the demand for absolute loyalty among his followers. In episode five, a key scene depicts Walid gathering his followers to deliver a sermon announcing the appointment of royal officials within the "kingdom" he claims to lead. The following is an excerpt from his speech:

> *[24:45] Walid: "Why does Walid emphasize the Malay world? The history of the Malays should strengthen the identity of the Malay ummah, elevating it to a noble and proud stature. What makes the Malays great? Three elements form the pillars of the Melakan system that defined its glory: the king, the nobles, and the people, all bound by the concept of daulat, the sacred bond between obedience and treason. That is why Walid seeks to merge the Malay heritage and the Islamic system in our current struggle. Where does Malay strength lie? It lies in the people's obedience to the Sultan and the Sultan's obedience to Islam and its entire system. Today, Walid wishes to restore the role of women who once stood as pillars of religious and national struggle. This inauguration is based on the inner qualities of those whom Walid shall appoint. Umi Hafidzah, of course, will be the queen. Dewi will be Princess Balkis… And Walid is Sultan Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, the Sultan of the Archipelago in this century."*
> *[28:30] Abi Saifullah: "Long live the King!"*
> *[28:32] Jama'ah: "Long live the King!*

In this scene, Walid's language is imbued with historical, political, and religious diction such as king, *sultan, daulat*, and *derhaka* (treason) terms deeply rooted in the classical Malay monarchy, each carrying connotations of sacred power and hierarchical obedience. The words inauguration, queen, and Princess Balkis evoke feudal imagery, symbolically transforming the congregation into a royal court rather than a religious community. This choice of diction reinforces Walid's claim to divine and political authority, legitimizing an absolute, vertically structured hierarchy. Walid's sentences are predominantly declarative and symbolically imperative, as seen in phrases like *"Today, Walid wishes to restore the role of women…"* or "*Walid is Sultan Muhammad Mahdi Ilman…".* These statements allow no dialogic space or alternative

perspectives. The delivery is dogmatic, self-assured, and performative, asserting Walid's position as the supreme leader.

The modality of his speech is entirely authoritative and certain. Phrases such as *"of course will be the queen"* and *"Today Walid wishes to restore…"* project a tone of inevitability and divine ordination. There are no hedging expressions like perhaps, maybe, or if only, definitive statements that close off interpretive ambiguity. Terms like Sultan, Princess Balkis, and Sultan Muhammad Mahdi Ilman function as religiously infused metaphors that link Walid to the archetype of a divinely guided ruler in Islamic Malay history. By proclaiming himself "Sultan of the Archipelago in this century, Walid situates his leadership within a mythic continuum of prophetic succession and cultural revivalism. This fusion of religious and ethnic narratives strengthens his ideological legitimacy. The discourse also carries an implicit ideological presupposition: that followers have no agency in determining their own roles or identities because all positions are ordained by the will of the "Sultan," i.e., Walid himself. Such presuppositions naturalize obedience and render hierarchy sacred and unquestionable.

In summary, this scene demonstrates how language operates as a mechanism of power production. By merging religious and monarchical narratives, Walid constructs himself as an absolute ruler in both spiritual and political domains. His language is hegemonic, demanding unconditional obedience and eliminating space for critique. This exemplifies a classical form of charismatic authoritarianism, where symbolic language, religious myth, and cultural identity are manipulated to sustain personal cult and ideological domination.

Analysis of discursive practice

Within Norman Fairclough's framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (1995, 2001), discursive practice occupies the middle dimension among the three levels of analysis: text, discursive practice, and social practice. This stage focuses on how discourse is produced, distributed, and interpreted within a specific social context. In other words, discourse is not merely a collection of words; it also reflects and shapes power relations, ideologies, and social structures. Fairclough emphasizes that every discursive practice is closely tied to particular institutional and historical settings. He

states: "discursive practice mediates the relationship between text and social practice. It involves processes of text production, distribution and consumption, which are socially determined" (Fairclough, 1995).

In this sense, the analysis of discursive practice examines how discourse is created, circulated, and understood by social actors within existing power structures. Within this context, the Malaysian drama series *Bidaah* illustrates the production of ideological discourse through the figure of Walid, the spiritual leader of the fictional group Jihad Ummah. The texts and dialogues previously analyzed at the linguistic and symbolic level reveal a systematic discursive process aimed at building and maintaining symbolic domination over the followers.

Bidaah is a drama series written and directed by Eirma Fatima and produced by Rumah Karya Citra (M) Sdn. Bhd. (TVOne News, 2025a). The series consists of fifteen 30-minute episodes in Malay and premiered on March 6, 2025, on the streaming platform *Viu*. It belongs to the genre of psychological religious drama, grounded in social reality (TV One News, 2025b). The story revolves around a fictional religious sect called *Jihad Ummah,* led by a charismatic yet manipulative figure, Walid Muhammad. The narrative follows Baiduri, a young woman forced by her mother to join the sect. Alongside Hambali (the son of one of the sect's leaders), she becomes a central character struggling to expose the group's deviations and free their loved ones from its destructive influence. Walid serves as the main antagonist, depicted as someone who exploits religious symbols and rhetoric as instruments of manipulation for personal ambition. The central conflict lies in Baiduri and Hambali's resistance against an authoritarian and heretical system. Their struggle involves emotional pressure, moral dilemmas, and the constant threat of violence, yet it underscores their determination to reveal the truth. The overarching theme of the series is the importance of authentic religious understanding and the dangers of distorted teachings used for power and social control.

The series *Bidaah* was not created solely for entertainment. Its writer and director, Erma Fatima, has openly stated that the story draws from real cases involving cult-like groups and abuses of spiritual authority in religious communities. In a media briefing in Kuala Lumpur, reported by The Star in March 2025, she explained: *"This story is inspired by real cases that I've read in the news."* Erma added that the purpose of

the series is to offer a gentle yet firm reminder about the hidden problems inside closed religious groups, noting: *"This is a critique of those who use religion as a weapon for personal gain"* (Ardian, 2025). Her comments clarify that the series is not depicting any specific sect, but rather responding to broader patterns of manipulation and symbolic violence found in various real-life cases. In a public interview, Faizal Hussein (the actor who plays Walid) stated that the series serves as *"a reflection on society's tendency to idolize so-called holy figures and to entrust their salvation to them, so that viewers become aware of this deception"* (Raspati, 2025).

From a technical perspective, *Bidaah* is meticulously produced from its cinematography and sound design to its choice of filming locations that resemble an isolated rural community. These elements reinforce the image of separation between the sect's world and the outside society. Ideologically, the series functions as a form of religiously grounded social criticism. Its messages are expressed through dense metaphors and religious symbols, from rituals involving "holy water" and the exaltation of a *mursyid* figure, to the recontextualization of prayers and Qur'anic verses. The moral message of *Bidaah* emphasizes the need for critical thinking in faith, the courage to oppose falsehood, and awareness of manipulative practices that often emerge within deviant religious structures. The series also touches on broader social issues such as forced marriage and the misuse of spirituality in power relations, topics that resonate deeply with contemporary social realities. Thus, the production of the series represents a form of intervention in dominant religious discourses, particularly those that tend to overlook ideological and symbolic forms of violence hidden behind religious devotion.

Bidaah was initially released exclusively on *Viu*, a strategic choice that targeted a specific audience segment, urban, middle-class viewers who are socially conscious and critical of religious and cultural issues. This mode of distribution fostered a more segmented and intimate form of engagement. Following its online release, audience responses on social media revealed two major trends: first, appreciation for the series' boldness in addressing the sensitive issue of religious abuse in private spaces; and second, resistance from groups who felt the series unfairly portrayed Islamic symbols. Empirical data from a sentiment-analysis study provides concrete evidence of audience reactions to *Bidaah*. It is important to note that this sentiment data reflects

Indonesian audiences, not Malaysian viewers. The study examined thousands of social-media mentions over ten weeks and found that positive responses outweighed negative ones (860 positive vs. 587 negative mentions). These findings are derived from a sentiment-analysis study that processed thousands of Indonesian social media posts during the series' early release period. Most positive reactions took the form of humor and memes, especially the viral line *"Walid nak Dewi boleh?"* indicating that many viewers engaged with the series playfully. Negative reactions mainly appeared in news platforms discussing real cases of sexual abuse in Islamic institutions, where users drew parallels with the character Walid. Overall, the data show that the public response was mixed but largely favorable, supporting the claim that the series received both appreciation and criticism (Nurhidayah et al., 2025). In this sense, *Bidaah* was not consumed merely as visual entertainment but as a cultural artifact that provoked ideological discussions about religious authority, patriarchy within spiritual hierarchies, and the legitimacy of scriptural interpretation in everyday life.

Later, on June 2, 2025, the series began airing on Indonesia's national television network TRANS TV every Monday to Friday at 8:00 p.m (Syaifullah, 2025). This expansion marked a significant shift in audience reach from a streaming-based niche to nationwide broadcast, allowing the discourse to penetrate broader layers of society.

As Fairclough (1995) points out, the consumption of media texts is shaped by social context and class structure. In the case of *Bidaah*, digital distribution and the accessibility of streaming platforms have created a new landscape of media consumption, allowing discourses on religious violence to reach a wider and more educated audience, while simultaneously prompting new forms of opinion-making and reinterpretation of long-held religious values. The subsequent broadcast on national television further extended this process, engaging not only digital-savvy viewers but also the general public, thus embedding the discussion into the collective social consciousness.

Analysis of social practice

Fairclough views the editorial or production space as never value-free, but rather as something shaped by the social realities surrounding it (Efendi & Mubayyamah, 2023). The analysis of social practice highlights how external social

factors influence the formation of discourse (Yuhandra et al., 2024). In this framework, social practice can be understood through three interrelated levels: the situational, the institutional, and the broader social-structural level (Kritina, D et al., 2023).

In the context of the *Bidaah* series, religious violence functions not merely as a narrative theme but as a structure constructed through language, relationships, and character representation. The notion of religious violence discussed in this study encompasses symbolic, epistemic, and structural violence, all of which are legitimized through religious justification. Across the eight scenes previously analyzed, the series presents a systematic narrative showing how religion can be enacted as an instrument of control and domination. Linguistically, the use of terms such as *Mursyid*, Imam Mahdi, and a king who must be obeyed by the character Walid serves not merely as religious labeling but as an ideological strategy to reinforce his absolute authority. These lexical choices build a discourse of religious absolutism that elevates Walid as a sacred figure beyond challenge. The repetition of these sacred titles constructs an atmosphere of domination and silences dissent, effectively normalizing symbolic violence under the guise of religious devotion. The recurring use of religious symbols strengthens this ideological legitimacy, reflecting a power structure grounded in the notion of singular truth.

The discourse production process of *Bidaah* is also influenced by the creators' position as social critics who aim to unveil the repressive and exclusionary aspects of religious practice that are often left untouched by mainstream media. Narrative choices, visual composition, and dialogue are deliberately crafted to expose the hidden dynamics of power within religious institutions. On the level of consumption, *Bidaah* provoked a wide range of audience responses, particularly on social media, where discussions reveal that the series encouraged critical reflection on the phenomenon of religious violence. More broadly, the social practices underlying the series' production reflect the complex relationship between power and religion in Indonesian and Malaysian societies.

A similar pattern appears in several real cases in Malaysia and Indonesia, where religious leaders strengthen their authority by claiming special spiritual status. In Malaysia, Ayah Pin was known for presenting himself as a divinely chosen figure, and some reports even mention Mahdist claims that increased his influence among

followers (Citra, 2021). GISBH shows a comparable dynamic, as its leaders were often portrayed as having unique spiritual authority that placed them beyond the reach of formal religious institutions (Bernama, 2024). In Indonesia, the Ahmadiyya movement recognizes Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as the promised Imam Mahdi, which frequently creates tension with mainstream Islamic interpretations. These examples show that claims of being a sacred figure or Imam Mahdi are not new in the region; they have often been used to build religious authority outside official structures. This is where *Bidaah* becomes relevant: the character Walid also presents himself as the Imam Mahdi to his followers, and this claim becomes the basis for the power dynamics he constructs. In other words, the series not only presents fiction but also reflects a real social pattern of how spiritual claims can be used to control, influence, or shape a religious community.

These phenomena reinforce the relevance of *Bidaah* as a cultural text depicting religious violence in its symbolic, epistemic, and structural forms rooted in real social conflicts across Southeast Asia, particularly in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. The series illustrates how religious discourse can be used as a hegemonic tool by dominant groups or individuals, legitimizing control and oppression through spiritual authority. The violence represented is not merely physical but also symbolic and epistemic, shaping how believers think, act, and perceive truth through a single, dogmatic narrative.

This aligns with Fairclough's view that discourse functions as a form of social practice that either reproduces or challenges existing power relations. *Bidaah*, therefore, operates not only as a critique of exclusive religious movements that reduce faith to an instrument of power, but also as an invitation for audiences to engage in critical reflection on the subtle forms of religious violence embedded in everyday life. Through its portrayal of indoctrination, intellectual silencing, and the glorification of the *mursyid* figure as a strategy of domination, the series opens up a discursive space that has long been marginalized in public conversations about faith, authority, and resistance.

After outlining Fairclough's CDA, this study offers a new contribution by showing how spiritual authority in *Bidaah* is not only constructed at the textual level, but also through the production and circulation of discourse. The analysis of Walid,

for instance, reveals how religious language, symbolic titles, and spiritual claims are reproduced across scenes in ways that create a form of symbolic dominance over his followers. This extends the application of CDA in media contexts by demonstrating that a television drama can function as an ideological space where power relations are shaped, negotiated, and challenged. Therefore, this study does more than describe how characters speak; it uncovers how the discourse surrounding *Bidaah* exposes hidden forms of spiritual violence embedded within social practices.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on religious and spiritual violence, which shows that such violence often emerges through doctrinal legitimization, monopolization of truth, and the sanctification of a charismatic leader. However, this study adds a different perspective by illustrating how these dynamics can also be examined through fictional media that reflect real social conditions. Walid's discourse, such as his claim to be the Mahdi, his use of the title *mursyid*, and his reinterpretation of verses and rituals, mirrors patterns found in real cases like Ayah Pin, GISBH, and the Ahmadiyya conflict. This study helps clarify how religious symbols and language can produce epistemic and structural violence that makes followers submit without physical coercion. As a result, it enriches previous literature by showing that fictional representation can be a powerful analytical lens for understanding mechanisms of spiritual manipulation in real life.

This study contributes to discourse studies by integrating linguistic features, discursive practices, and broader social practices within a single analysis of a television drama used as social critique. It demonstrates how media texts can shape public understanding of religious authority and spiritual abuse through systematic discourse strategies. For Islamic communication, the study highlights how religious authority can be constructed, interpreted, and misused through language. Walid's portrayal as a sacred and unquestionable figure illustrates how religious legitimacy can be transformed into a tool of control. In this way, the study opens new discussions on ethical religious communication, especially concerning the need to protect communities from symbolic manipulation and epistemic violence hidden behind religious rhetoric. This is consistent with the ethical values of Islamic communication, such as rationality, humanization, and democratization (Adeni & Mudhofi, 2022).

Emphasizing these values can minimize the potential violence arising from unchecked religious authority.

Taken together, these findings show that *Bidaah* offers more than entertainment; it opens a window into how spiritual authority can be shaped, abused, and challenged through discourse. By examining the language, symbols, and social meanings surrounding Walid's character, this study illustrates the subtle ways religious power can operate and how communities can become vulnerable to manipulation when sacred legitimacy goes unquestioned. Ultimately, this research not only enriches academic discussions on discourse and religious violence but also encourages a more critical and responsible approach to how religious messages are communicated in contemporary Muslim societies.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that *Bidaah*, a series created by Eirma Fatima, functions not merely as a form of entertainment but as a discursive instrument that produces ideological critique toward religious violence manifested in its symbolic, structural, and epistemic forms. Through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this research examines the representation of power and spiritual manipulation within a fictional narrative deeply rooted in the social realities of Malaysia and Indonesia. At the textual level, the study finds that linguistic construction, religious symbolism, and narrative structure are employed to reproduce power relations within a closed religious community. The deliberate use of religious terminology, repetition of sacred titles, and deployment of spiritual metaphors strengthen the image of Walid's absolute authority as a central figure. These strategies illustrate how language operates as an ideological instrument to control, silence, and legitimize domination. Within the dimension of discursive practice, *Bidaah* was consciously produced as a response to real-life phenomena surrounding deviant religious sects. The writer and production team utilized the power of digital media and national television to disseminate an alternative narrative that disrupts the dominance of conservative discourses on piety. The variety of audience reactions demonstrates an ongoing struggle over meaning in the contemporary consumption of religious discourse.

At the level of social practice, the emergence of religious sects in Malaysia and Indonesia, such as the Kerajaan Langit movement led by Ayah Pin, GISBH, and the Ahmadiyya community, forms the sociocultural backdrop of *Bidaah*'s narrative. The series does not stand alone; it reflects wider public anxiety about how faith can be misused as a source of power. Religious violence appears here not as isolated wrongdoing but as part of a hegemonic system embedded in social and spiritual hierarchies across Southeast Asia. In this sense, *Bidaah* serves as an ideological text that both represents and challenges the exercise of power within religious life. It shows how violence can hide behind sacred symbols and authoritative doctrines, while encouraging viewers to practice critical reflection and open dialogue within religious spaces that are often closed or hierarchical. This study affirms that discourse is never neutral; it is a site of struggle over meaning where language can be used either to reinforce or to challenge existing structures of authority.

However, this study also has several limitations that open space for future research. First, the analysis focuses mainly on textual and discursive elements, without examining audience reception in depth beyond online sentiment. Future studies could integrate ethnographic work or interviews to understand how different social groups interpret *Bidaah* in everyday contexts. Second, this research centers on one media text, which means the findings may not fully represent broader patterns of religious discourse in Southeast Asian media. Comparative studies involving other films, series, or digital content could provide a wider map of how spiritual authority and violence are framed across genres and platforms. Recognizing these limitations does not weaken the study; it highlights the value of continuing to explore how discourse, religion, and power intersect in contemporary Muslim societies.

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