



## SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS SCENES IN THE FILM "SURAT KECIL UNTUK TUHAN"

Melisa Naibaho<sup>1</sup>, Nurhanifah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: [melisabahok@gmail.com](mailto:melisabahok@gmail.com)

### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received :

Revised :

Accepted :

Available online

<http://jurnal.uinsu.ac.id/index.php/analytica>

E-ISSN: 2541-5263

P-ISSN: 1411-4380



This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license

### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to examine the symbolic meanings within religious scenes in the film Surat Kecil untuk Tuhan (A Little Letter to God) using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The film, based on the true story of a teenage girl named Keke who suffers from cancer, presents various religious symbols such as prayer, places of worship, a letter to God, and other spiritual expressions. The analysis is conducted through three levels of meaning: denotative (literal meaning), connotative (emotional and cultural meaning), and myth (ideological meaning). The findings reveal that these religious symbols are not merely decorative visual elements but serve as powerful conveyors of spiritual messages about faith, hope, sacrifice, and tolerance. The film effectively constructs a touching and humanistic religious narrative, offering viewers a medium for reflection on the values of life and spirituality.*

**Keywords:** semiotics, Roland Barthes, religious symbols, film, Surat Kecil untuk Tuhan

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst the rapid flow of globalization and digital media, film has become a highly effective medium of mass communication in conveying cultural, moral, and spiritual values to the wider public. Beyond entertainment, film plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of social, religious, and humanitarian issues. As an audiovisual medium, film has the power to evoke emotions and internalize messages through complex narratives and visual symbols (Effendy, 2006). One film imbued with spiritual messages and humanitarian values is "A Small Letter to God," which tells the true story of a teenager's struggle with cancer, while reinforcing religious values through powerful symbolism.

The phenomenon emerging in "A Small Letter to God" demonstrates that religious messages do not always come in the form of conventional sermons or

preaching, but also through visual and narrative symbols. In the context of Indonesia's religious and multicultural society, the representation of religious symbols in popular media is an effective means of conveying universal spiritual values. However, the reality on the ground shows that viewers often consume these symbols literally without understanding the depth of their meaning. This raises the need for in-depth studies capable of uncovering layers of meaning through a semiotic approach.

Several previous studies have examined religious representation in the film "A Small Letter to God" from various perspectives. Farica Adhani and Wika Soviana (2021) analyzed the novel adaptation using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach, highlighting the aesthetic and structural structure of signs. Abdul Majid (2019) emphasized the aspects of social representation and religious meaning integrated into the film's narrative. Meanwhile, Wivio Aulia (2021) criticized the commodification of religious symbols in popular culture using Barthes's semiotic approach. These studies demonstrate that religious symbols in media are not merely decorative but also ideological and educational.

However, there is a gap in previous semiotic studies: the lack of in-depth exploration of the film's religious scenes using Roland Barthes's systematic approach across three levels of meaning: denotative, connotative, and mythical. Most studies focus on single symbols or general moral aspects without examining the structure of sign meaning holistically. This research aims to bridge this gap by focusing on religious scenes as visual narrative units imbued with ideological meaning, and examining how these symbols shape spiritual awareness in Indonesian popular culture.

The novelty of this research lies in Barthes's semiotic analysis, which is used to interpret the layers of meaning of religious symbols in films thematically and contextually. Rather than simply classifying symbols as icons, indices, or emblems, this research examines how symbols such as letters to God, communal prayers, interfaith places of worship, and religious texts shape grounded spiritual narratives. This approach not only offers a new understanding of religious representation in film but also constructs film as a semiotic space that reflects cultural values, social ideologies, and individual transcendental experiences (Barthes, 1964; Sobur, 2003).

The urgency of this research is based on the increasing consumption of visual media among adolescents and the general public, which brings with it challenges in interpreting aesthetically presented religious messages. In Indonesia's religiously and culturally diverse context, a shallow understanding of religious symbols in films can lead to perceptual bias and value distortion. Therefore, it is important to re-examine how media, particularly film, constructs spiritual meaning and human values through symbols. This research is not only relevant to communication and media studies but also contributes to strengthening visual and religious literacy in society.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis method. This approach is used to deeply understand the hidden meanings behind the religious symbols in the film "A Small Letter to God." Qualitative research allows researchers to explore symbolic representation within the cultural and ideological context underlying the film, without the need for statistical measurement or hypothesis testing.

Barthes's semiotic method was chosen because it offers a three-layered analytical framework: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (culturally and emotionally associated meaning), and myth (ideological meaning inherent in society). With this model, researchers can thoroughly analyze the representation of religious symbols in the film, from the surface level to deeper ideological meanings.

The object of this research is the religious scenes in the film "A Small Letter to God," namely scenes containing religious symbols or expressions, whether through actions (such as prayer or worship), visual props (such as crosses, mosques, or holy books), or narratives or dialogues reflecting spiritual values. The film was chosen because it is full of religious symbols that represent moral values, spirituality, and life's struggles.

Data was collected through two main techniques: documentation and literature review. The documentation technique involved repeatedly watching the film and taking notes on scenes relevant to the research focus. Each scene containing religious elements was analyzed from visual, verbal, and contextual perspectives. Meanwhile, literature review was conducted by reviewing references related to semiotic theory, symbolism in film, and literature discussing related religious and cultural values.

The data analysis process was carried out in three stages. First, the researcher identified religious signs appearing in the film. Second, the denotative and connotative meanings of these symbols were interpreted. Third, the mythological or ideological meanings attached to these symbols were explored, reflecting the worldview, spiritual values, or moral messages the film seeks to convey to its audience.

Using this method, the research aims to uncover how the film shapes and conveys religious meaning through visual and narrative symbols, and how these symbols play a role in building spiritual understanding and human values within the context of Indonesian culture.

## 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

"Surat Kecil Untuk Tuhan" is an Indonesian drama film released in 2011, directed by Harris Nizam and produced by Skylar Pictures. Adapted from a novel

by Agnes Davonar, it was inspired by the true story of the struggle of a teenager named Gita Sesa Wanda Cantika known as Keke who suffers from a rare form of soft tissue cancer (rhabdomyosarcoma). At a very young age, Keke undergoes a series of treatments and faces the harsh reality of her illness, yet she continues to demonstrate extraordinary resilience, sincerity, and genuineness.

The film contains many humanitarian and religious values, reflected in emotionally and spiritually powerful scenes. The narrative is built around inner conflict, family relationships, friendships, and reflections on faith, which are then expressed through religious symbols such as prayer scenes, letters to God, and places of worship. The presence of religious elements in the film serves as an important marker that not only supports the storyline but also serves as a means of communicating moral and spiritual values to the audience. Therefore, this film is relevant to analyze using a semiotic approach to uncover the deeper meaning of its religious symbols.




Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the film "A Small Letter to God" presents scenes that can be analyzed at three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. For example, the act of writing a letter to God is denotatively a form of personal communication, but connotatively it carries the meaning of hope and acknowledgment of divine power. At the mythical level, the letter symbolizes unwavering faith in the face of life's hardships. Symbols such as the cross, prayer, places of worship, and the main character's illness can also be interpreted as signs conveying moral messages and religious ideology within the context of Indonesian culture.

The film also visualizes the concept of religiosity as part of the human existential struggle. The main character, Keke, struggles not only physically but also spiritually. She uses the power of prayer, family support, and faith as a foundation to accept and embrace her destiny. These values are conveyed through visuals rich with symbolic meaning, such as the soft lighting during prayer scenes, the symbols of interfaith places of worship emphasizing tolerance, and the steadfast facial expressions that convey inner strength.

Thus, the film "A Small Letter to God" not only presents an inspiring story but also serves as a semiotic space where spiritual meanings are constructed and communicated to the audience. Analyzing the film's religious scenes is crucial for understanding how symbols function in visual media as a means of representing the values of faith, fortitude, and hope amidst life's hardships.

Identifying Religious Scenes through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the meanings of these symbols are analyzed based on three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth.

No	Image	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
1.		A girl writing a letter	Letters serve as a means of spiritual communication with God	Symbolizes the faith, surrender, and spiritual hope of a child facing hardship.
2.		A group of people praying	Solidarity, emotional strength, and spirituality in the face of adversity	Illustrate that communal prayer is a form of social support and collective faith.
3.		A mother praying for her child	Representation of a mother's love and spiritual role in the family	Mothers as moral guardians and spiritual protectors in the face of family calamities.
4.		A girl delivering a final message	Self-surrender and spiritual reflection on life	Death is understood as the beginning of a spiritual journey, not the end.
5.		A written religious text	Reminder of spiritual and religious values	Emphasizes the importance of religious teachings in daily life.

6.		An invitation to worship together	Togetherness in carrying out religious obligations	Shows that worship can strengthen social relationships and provide strength in facing trials.
7.		A typical Chinese prayer building with dragon ornaments, striking red colors, and an incense burner	Symbol of spirituality, good fortune, and harmony between humans and the universe in Chinese culture	Represents Chinese cultural and religious identity and a symbol of tolerance in Indonesia's multicultural society.
8.		Keke expresses admiration for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in a narrative	Depicts spiritual closeness and moral example	Shows that religious figures serve as inspiration in facing life's trials.

Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis divides the meaning of signs into three layers: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural and emotional meaning), and myth (dominant ideology or values in society). In the context of the film "A Little Letter to God," the religious scenes depicted are not only part of the narrative but also represent a deeper value system.

First, in the scene where Keke writes a letter to God, denotatively, this is simply the act of writing. However, connotatively, the letter becomes a medium for expressing faith and hope. Mythologically, this act represents that spiritual communication does not have to be verbal or ritualistic, but can take personal and narrative forms. The film establishes the myth that hope and faith can be channeled through simple yet meaningful actions.

Second, the scene of communal prayer in the hospital demonstrates that suffering is not only experienced individually but also collectively. The denotation is the act of praying together. The connotation suggests emotional and spiritual support among the characters. In its myth, the film conveys that in facing trials, communal spiritual strength is a crucial means of recovery. Solidarity is portrayed as a religious force in itself.

Third, the character of Keke's mother is portrayed as a religious and patient figure. Her prayers, advice, and presence illustrate the role of motherhood in shaping spiritual values within the family. This is not merely a denotative mother-child relationship, but also a form of spiritual protection and moral education. The myth that is constructed is that women, especially mothers, are the primary figures in transmitting faith values within the family environment.

Fourth, Keke's message before her death represents the culmination of the character's spiritual reflection. Denotatively, it represents a child's final narrative. Its connotation implies resignation and acceptance of fate. Within the mythological layer, the film constructs the idea that death is not the end of meaning, but rather part of a spiritual journey that affirms the values of life.

Fifth, the appearance of written religious texts, whether in the form of quotations from holy books or moral messages with religious overtones, is denotatively only a literal representation of the writing or sentence. However, connotatively, the text serves as a reminder of spiritual values that need to be internalized in daily life. The myth that is created is that religious teachings are the primary foundation for shaping individual and societal character. Thus, the film constructs a narrative that goodness, patience, and sincerity in life stem from religious teachings deeply embedded in culture.

Sixth, the scene depicting a call to worship together, both verbally and through collective action, conveys the denotative meaning of a call to worship together. The connotation is one of togetherness and solidarity in carrying out spiritual obligations. Furthermore, the myth that is created is that worship is not only a vertical practice between humans and God, but also a means of strengthening horizontal bonds between individuals in society. The film implicitly builds the understanding that spiritual power is more meaningful when practiced communally, creating spiritual and social unity amidst suffering.

Seventh, the presence of a temple scene in the film enriches cross-cultural religious symbolism. Denotatively, a temple is a place of worship for Confucianists. Its connotations relate to spirituality, harmony, and reverence for ancestors. At the mythical level, this visualization demonstrates a recognition of the diversity of beliefs and upholds cultural and religious pluralism in Indonesia. The film subtly conveys that noble values are not monopolized by a single religion.

The film "A Small Letter to God" not only presents a touching storyline but also contains various religious symbols rich with meaning. These scenes, whether verbal, visual, or narrative, play a crucial role in conveying spiritual and humanitarian values to the audience. Using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach, these scenes are not understood in isolation, but through three levels of meaning: denotative, connotative, and mythological.

Interpreting the scene of the letter to God, for example, reveals that the act of writing is not merely a literal expression, but rather a deeply personal form of spiritual communication. The letter serves as a medium for conveying the

sincerity, hope, and honesty of a child being tested by extraordinary suffering. This demonstrates that faith is not always formal but can be expressed through simple and emotional mediums.

Communal prayer, featured at several key moments in the film, provides a collective spiritual dimension. This scene illustrates the power of worship as a form of social solidarity. Prayer is no longer merely a vertical connection between humans and God, but also a horizontal activity that strengthens human bonds in the face of grief. This religious value invites the audience to reflect on the importance of emotional and spiritual support within a community. Furthermore, the scene of the temple represents the diversity of beliefs that coexist in Indonesian society. This scene serves a dual purpose: reinforcing the narrative of pluralism and highlighting the importance of interfaith tolerance. In its mythological context, the film conveys the message that noble religious values are not tied to any particular religion but are universal and uphold the values of love, sacrifice, and hope.

The written religious texts and invitations to worship together are not merely narrative ornaments, but serve as reminders and affirmations of the importance of religious values in everyday life. In Barthes's interpretation, both construct the myth that religious teachings are the primary moral foundation that keeps humans strong in the face of suffering and loss.

Through these scenes, the film conveys the message that spirituality is not merely an additional element, but is the core of the characters' strength in facing life. Viewers are invited to re-evaluate their own values, and how seemingly simple scenes actually contain profound meaning and relevance to their individual life experiences. This semiotic interpretation of religious scenes demonstrates that film has the power to shape collective consciousness and serve as a reflective medium for transcendent values within culture.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of the film "Surat Kecil Untuk Tuhan" using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, it can be concluded that the religious scenes depicted in the film are not merely narrative elements, but rather sign constructions imbued with spiritual, emotional, and ideological meaning. Symbols such as letters to God, communal prayers, places of worship, and religious quotations contain three layers of meaning: denotative (literal meaning), connotative (emotional and cultural meaning), and mythological (ideological meaning or dominant societal values). Through these symbols, the film represents the values of faith, fortitude, sacrifice, and the importance of solidarity and tolerance in life.

The film successfully visualizes the main character's spiritual struggle as a reflection of human suffering addressed through faith and hope. The religious scenes in the film function not only as religious illustrations but also as a means of



cultural communication, creating a space for reflection for the audience. Thus, the film provides more than just entertainment; it also serves as an educational and contemplative medium that bridges religious messages with the realities of modern life.

Barthes' semiotic approach has proven effective in revealing the structure of meaning of these religious symbols, while also strengthening the understanding that film can be a powerful medium of spiritual communication, capable of touching aspects of humanity and strengthening transcendental awareness in a pluralistic society.

## References

- Adhani, F., & Soviana, W. S. (2021). Analisis semiotika novel Surat Kecil Untuk Tuhan karya Agnes Danovar. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra*, 9(3), 45–55.
- Akbar, T., Nasution, S., & Nurhanifah, N. (2023). Communication network of Islamic boarding schools improves social cohesiveness of Acehnese people in Ma'had Fahmussalam Al-Aziziyah neighborhood in Deli Tua. *JHSS (Journal of Humanities and Social Studies)*, 7(1), 343–348.
- Allan, S. (2006). *Journalism: Critical issue*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Aulia, W. (2021). Representasi komodifikasi simbol religi dalam serial film *Messiah* (Analisis semiotika Roland Barthes terhadap tokoh Payam Golshiri). *Jurnal Media dan Budaya*, 5(1), 12–21.
- Barthes, R. (1964). *Elements of semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Berger, A. A. (2014). *Media analysis techniques* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Burhan, B. (2006). *Sosiologi komunikasi: Teori, paradigma, dan diskursus teknologi komunikasi di masyarakat*. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Davonar, A. (2009). *Surat kecil untuk Tuhan*. Jakarta: Inandra Publishing.
- Diah, A. N. (2021). Representasi sabar dalam film *Surat Kecil Untuk Tuhan* (Skripsi). Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ponorogo.
- Effendy. (2006). *Ilmu komunikasi: Teori dan praktek-praktek*. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Heri, B. (2019). Kontestasi politik dalam ruang media: Perspektif critical discourse analytic. *Jurnal Komunikasi*, X(X), XX–XX.
- Karyanti. (2009). *Mass communication: An introduction*. Jakarta: Prenada Media.
- Kinanti, K. S., & Rifa'i, A. B. (2021). Analisis semiotika nilai-nilai moral agama pada film *Tarung Sarung*. *Jurnal Budaya Islam*, 6(3), 90–102.
- Majid, A. (2019). Representasi sosial dalam film *Surat Kecil Untuk Tuhan* (Kajian semiotika dan sosiologi sastra). *Jurnal Sosiologi*, 15(2), 123–134.
- Monaco, J. (2009). *How to read a film: Movies, media, and beyond* (4th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nurul, F. U. (2012). *Studi semiotika pesan moral dalam film Hafalan Shalat Delisa*

- (Skripsi). Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar.
- Pawito. (2008). Analisis dalam media massa: Analisis semiotika Charles Sanders. Yogyakarta: LKIS.
- Prasetya. (2019). Komunikasi massa melalui film: Film sebagai media komunikasi. Yogyakarta: Deepublish.
- Ratna, N. K. (2010). Teori, metode, dan teknik penelitian sastra. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Rowmaens. (2012). Film sebagai medium komunikasi yang sarat makna. Jakarta: Komunika Press.
- Segers, R., & Wiryaatmadja, M. dalam Santosa, P. (1993). Kajian simbol-simbol religi melalui pendekatan semiotika Roland Barthes. Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi, X(X), XX-XX.
- Semi, A. (2012). Anatomi sastra. Bandung: Angkasa.
- Sobur, A. (2003). Semiotika komunikasi. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.