

Fostering Religious Moderation through Literary Exploration: A Case Study of S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z* in University Classrooms

Dahlan¹, Nurdin², Mariano Satya Pramularsih³, Akram Ista⁴

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia; dahlan.bsi@uin-alauddin.ac.id

² Institut Agama Islam Darul Da'wah Wal Irsyad Polewali Mandar, Indonesia; nurdindakka6@gmail.com

³ SDN 4 Bajur, Labuapi, Lombok Barat, Indonesia; marinaosatyapramularsih35@guru.sd.belajar.id

⁴ STIE Pelita Buana Makassar, Indonesia; akramista@Gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

religious moderation;
literary pedagogy;
interfaith empathy;
Muslim representation

Article history:

Received 2025-04-20

Revised 2025-09-22

Accepted 2025-09-30

ABSTRACT

In multicultural societies, promoting religious moderation in higher education is essential for fostering tolerance and interfaith understanding. Literature, particularly contemporary Muslim narratives, offers a unique medium for exploring these values. This study investigates the use of *Love from A to Z* by S.K. Ali as a pedagogical tool to cultivate religious moderation among university students. The research aims to assess how literary engagement with Muslim identities and interfaith dynamics influences students' critical awareness and empathetic understanding of religious and cultural diversity. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the study involved 30 undergraduate students enrolled in a literature and religion course at an Indonesian university. Data were collected through classroom observations, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns in students' responses to the text. The findings indicate that reading and discussing *Love from A to Z* enhanced students' interfaith empathy, critical engagement with religious representation, and appreciation of pluralism. The novel's portrayal of everyday Muslim experiences prompted students to reflect on personal biases and societal assumptions, leading to more nuanced perspectives on religious identity and coexistence. Integrating diverse literary narratives into the university curriculum can effectively foster religious moderation by promoting empathy, dialogue, and critical thinking. This study highlights the pedagogical value of literature in nurturing inclusive worldviews in higher education contexts.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC-SA](#) license.



Corresponding Author:

Dahlan

Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia; dahlan.bsi@uin-alauddin.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalization marked by intense social mobility, cultural exchange, and rising religious polarization, higher education holds a strategic role in shaping students' perspectives on diversity and coexistence. One crucial concept gaining prominence in this context is religious moderation, which emphasizes balanced, inclusive, and empathetic religious understanding. In Indonesia, religious

moderation has become a national priority, formally promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a means to strengthen *wasathiyah* (moderate) values and foster social harmony (Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2021).

Despite these policy efforts, recent studies reveal that promoting religious moderation within university contexts remains a critical challenge. A national survey by Alvara Research Center (2017) found that 23.4% of Indonesian university students held intolerant attitudes toward religious minorities, and 33.3% believed Islamic law should supersede the national constitution. These findings indicate a significant gap in the effectiveness of current educational approaches, highlighting the need for innovative strategies that go beyond formal religious instruction to engage students at a personal, emotional, and reflective level.

One such strategy is the integration of literature as a pedagogical tool to nurture empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. Literature offers a distinct medium through which students can explore the lived realities of others, especially marginalized or misrepresented communities. As Martha C. Nussbaum (2010) argues, literature fosters moral imagination by encouraging readers to “enter the inner world of another,” thereby promoting ethical reflection and civic responsibility. In plural societies, such as Indonesia, this capacity to imaginatively engage with diverse perspectives is foundational to the development of religious moderation.

Despite its potential, few empirical studies have examined how literary narratives—especially contemporary texts by Muslim authors—can support the goals of religious moderation in higher education settings. This study addresses this gap by exploring the pedagogical use of *Love from A to Z* (Ali, 2019), a young adult novel by Canadian Muslim author S.K. Ali, in the university classroom. The novel centers on two Muslim teenagers, Zayneb and Adam, navigating personal faith, Islamophobia, and identity struggles in a Western, multicultural context. Through their interfaith encounters, emotional growth, and inner reflections, the novel presents a nuanced portrayal of moderate religious identity, making it highly relevant to discussions on religious tolerance and pluralism.

Thematically, *Love from A to Z* reflects the complexities of being Muslim in a globalized world marked by misunderstanding and stereotypes. Zayneb’s encounters with prejudice in her school and Adam’s struggle with illness and spirituality highlight how young Muslims confront and negotiate their identities in hostile environments. These narratives not only challenge monolithic representations of Islam but also humanize Muslim experiences for non-Muslim readers. As Shabebuddeen (2022) points out, literary and media portrayals of Muslims have often reinforced negative stereotypes; however, works by Muslim authors offer counter-narratives that restore agency and authenticity to Muslim voices.

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework, drawing on literary studies, religious education, and cultural pedagogy. It posits that literature functions not merely as aesthetic entertainment but as an ethical space where students can explore issues of belief, justice, and coexistence. As Nussbaum (2010) and others have emphasized, the humanities have a crucial role in cultivating democratic citizenship and intercultural empathy—capacities essential for maintaining pluralist societies.

Within Islamic discourse, religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) emphasizes values such as justice, compassion, coexistence, and balance (Kusmidi, 2023). These principles align closely with the educational goals of tolerance and mutual understanding. However, popular Western media often obscures these dimensions of Islam by portraying Muslims as inherently violent or regressive (Abadi, 2018). This misrepresentation contributes to societal polarization and undermines efforts to foster peaceful religious coexistence.

Therefore, it becomes essential to incorporate culturally relevant narratives—like those found in *Love from A to Z*—into the university curriculum. The novel not only addresses the real-life challenges faced by Muslim youth in the diaspora but also invites readers into meaningful engagement with issues of faith, prejudice, and cross-cultural understanding. Its accessibility and emotional depth make it particularly effective for university students, who are in a formative stage of moral and intellectual development.

This research is guided by the following research question: How is religious moderation through love and understanding reflected in the novel *Love from A to Z* by S.K. Ali?

The aim of this study is to examine how the novel articulates themes of religious moderation through its characters' emotional journeys, interfaith relationships, and everyday acts of compassion and reflection. By analyzing students' responses to the novel in a classroom context, this study also explores how literature can serve as a transformative space for cultivating empathy and religious literacy.

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with the pedagogy of religious education—an area that remains underexplored, particularly in Indonesian higher education contexts. While previous studies have highlighted the role of religious literacy and character education in shaping moderate perspectives (Azra, 2019; Muttaqin, 2021), there is a lack of empirical research examining how literary texts by Muslim diaspora authors can function as tools for promoting interfaith understanding and tolerance in the classroom.

In sum, this study contributes to broader efforts to develop educational models that integrate the humanities with civic and interfaith education, using literature not just as a cultural artifact, but as an active participant in shaping students' moral and religious worldviews.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using a case study approach to explore how *Love from A to Z* by S.K. Ali can be used to promote religious moderation through literary engagement in a university setting. A case study was chosen for its strength in providing an in-depth, contextualized understanding of how students interpret literary texts and relate them to moral, cultural, and religious values (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018).

2.1 Participants and Setting

The research was conducted in a literature course at an Indonesian public university, which incorporates themes of religion, culture, and identity. The course was designed to encourage reflective engagement with literary texts, particularly those that address contemporary social and religious issues.

Thirty undergraduate students (aged 19–23) enrolled in the course participated in the study. They were selected through purposive sampling, based on their active participation in class activities and willingness to contribute written reflections and participate in discussions (Palinkas et al., 2015). Prior to data collection, all participants provided informed consent.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of a semester through multiple sources to allow for triangulation:

1. Reflective journals: Students kept weekly journals documenting their responses to *Love from A to Z*, with prompts focused on themes of faith, identity, empathy, and cultural understanding.
2. Classroom discussions: Observations were made during structured class discussions, with field notes recorded to capture student interpretations and responses in real time.
3. Reflective essays: At the end of the course, students submitted essays analyzing how the novel influenced their understanding of religious moderation and interfaith dialogue.

All data were anonymized and organized for systematic analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization: All journal entries, essays, and observation notes were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding.

2. Generating initial codes: Relevant segments were coded manually based on recurring ideas such as empathy, identity, resistance, and coexistence.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were grouped into broader themes that aligned with the research questions: *Love and Compassion as Moderation, Faith and Identity, Interreligious Dialogue, and Challenging Stereotypes and Islamophobia*.
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed across all data sources for coherence and consistency.
5. Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined to reflect specific dimensions of religious moderation as portrayed in the novel.
6. Producing the report: Extracts were selected to illustrate each theme, followed by interpretative commentary connected to the theoretical framework.

Coding was conducted by the researcher, and the findings were validated through peer review by two fellow lecturers in literature and religious education.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines *Love from A to Z* by S.K. Ali through the lens of Genetic Structuralism, particularly Lucien Goldmann's concepts of worldview, human facts, and transindividual significance, to explore how religious moderation is expressed through the narrative. As a literary artifact, the novel reflects the socio-cultural and ideological structures shared by the author and her community—Muslims living in Western societies. The thematic findings are presented according to the four analytical categories derived from the research question: *Love and Compassion as Moderation, Faith and Identity, Interreligious Dialogue, and Challenging Stereotypes and Islamophobia*.

3.1 *Love and Compassion as Moderation*

One of the most striking ways the novel articulates religious moderation is through love—both romantic and familial—as a moral force. The portrayal of Adam's character offers a powerful example. In one passage, Adam reflects on his father's peaceful demeanor:

"Maybe that's why he touched his heart, because the peace was there" (p. 188).

This brief reflection demonstrates Adam's internalization of Islamic values such as *rahmah* (compassion) and *salaam* (peace). His quiet strength and emotional awareness reflect what Goldmann (1977) calls "transindividual significance"—the expression of shared values through individual characters, representing the ethical foundation of a social group.

Zayneb's vulnerability in her journal further reveals how love becomes a site of moral transformation:

"I want to be seen... really seen. But what if he doesn't get it? What if it's all just temporary?" (p. 120).

This entry shows that love, for Zayneb, is more than emotion; it is a quest for dignity and mutual recognition. As a response to systemic dehumanization (Islamophobia, stereotyping), her desire to be "seen" reflects a deeper collective struggle for recognition, resonating with Goldmann's (1977) notion of a worldview—a shared way of perceiving reality shaped by historical and social forces.

3.2 Faith and Identity

The novel also explores the interplay between religious faith and personal identity. Adam's faith is portrayed as a steadying force in the face of his multiple sclerosis diagnosis. In a conversation with Zayneb, he shares:

"It's my faith... a rhythm, a reminder... When I think about what I believe, I feel lighter." (p. 203).

Here, faith is not a rigid set of rules but a flexible, compassionate worldview that brings comfort and resilience. This interpretation supports Nussbaum's (2010) argument that moral imagination, fostered through literature, enables readers to empathize with religious worldviews different from their own.

Similarly, Zayneb's religious identity is portrayed as deeply rooted yet questioned in public spaces. In a swimming pool scene, she tells her aunt:

"Everyone's looking at me like I don't belong here." (p. 102).

Her aunt responds with a powerful reminder: *"You do belong here, Zayneb... Wear your pride as boldly as you wear that swimsuit."* (pp. 102–103).

This dialogue illustrates a human fact in Goldmann's terms—a lived experience that reflects both individual and collective realities. The tension between religious expression and social exclusion becomes a space where moderation is asserted through self-acceptance and courage, not confrontation.

3.3 Interreligious Dialogue

Love from A to Z offers moments of genuine interfaith engagement. In a reflective conversation between Adam and Zayneb, they agree on the need for deeper understanding across differences:

"Understanding a little more about each other would make things so much easier for everyone." (Zayneb)

"Maybe if we all just took a bit of time to ask and listen, we wouldn't feel so divided." (Adam) (p. 203)

These conversations echo Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism—where meaning arises through interaction with others' perspectives. The characters do not seek to convert, correct, or dominate, but to listen and connect. Through these dialogues, the novel illustrates religious moderation as a practice of coexistence grounded in mutual curiosity and respect.

This resonates with Goldmann's idea of collective consciousness: Adam and Zayneb, though fictional, are constructed as members of a larger community striving for understanding in a polarized world. Their interactions are not only personal but represent social aspirations of their Muslim diasporic context.

3.4 Challenging Stereotypes and Islamophobia

The theme of religious moderation is most explicitly presented in Zayneb's responses to prejudice and misrepresentation. In her history class, she corrects a peer's assumption:

"The choice to wear a hijab... comes down to each woman's personal decision... It's not about force—it's about faith." (p. 226)

Zayneb's explanation challenges the dominant media-driven stereotypes of Muslim women as passive or oppressed. Instead of reacting with hostility, she educates through calm but assertive dialogue—a clear embodiment of religious moderation through civic engagement.

In another instance, during a discussion about activism, she states:

"I'm not advocating violence. But I am an angry person. I'm advocating for more people to get angry, get moved." (p. 236)

Her anger is not destructive but transformative—aligned with what Freire (1970) would call "critical consciousness." By channeling her emotion into dialogue and activism, Zayneb becomes a representative of a moderate but engaged worldview—assertive yet empathetic, faithful yet inclusive.

The novel, through Zayneb and Adam's experiences, offers a counternarrative to the often hostile Western portrayal of Muslims. This corresponds with Abadi's (2018) observation that Muslim representation in media tends to be stereotyped, making literary works like *Love from A to Z* essential in balancing those narratives.

3.5 Interdisciplinary Implications

This study situates literary analysis within the broader context of religious education and intercultural pedagogy. While most studies on religious moderation focus on institutional or theological approaches (Azra, 2019; Muttaqin, 2021), this study demonstrates that literary narratives—especially by Muslim authors—offer powerful tools for cultivating empathy and pluralistic thinking in classroom settings.

Using Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism allows us to see the novel as an artifact shaped by—and shaping—the collective consciousness of a marginalized group. S.K. Ali's personal background as a Muslim woman in the West informs the characters, who embody both a critique of dominant structures (e.g., Islamophobia, media bias) and a vision for an inclusive social reality grounded in love, faith, and justice.

Through its characters' emotional journeys and intercultural encounters, *Love from A to Z* offers a compelling portrayal of religious moderation as lived experience. Love is presented as both a personal and political force, guiding the characters toward empathy, resilience, and dialogue. Faith is portrayed as a personal strength rather than an institutional obligation. Interreligious engagement is marked by listening, not debating. And stereotypes are dismantled through education and moral clarity, not confrontation.

By applying Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism, the study reveals how the novel expresses the worldview of a young, global Muslim community seeking dignity and coexistence in the face of prejudice. The characters' choices, conversations, and reflections illustrate the dynamic interaction between individual agency and social structure, making the novel not only a literary text but also a pedagogical resource for religious moderation.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the potential of literary texts to serve as ethical spaces for cultivating the values of religious moderation, particularly when analyzed through the lens of Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism. This theoretical approach understands literature not as a product of isolated individual expression, but as the embodiment of a collective consciousness shaped by socio-historical realities. In *Love from A to Z*, the emotional depth and moral agency of the protagonists, Adam and Zayneb, transcend personal struggles and articulate what Goldmann (1977) describes as "transindividual significance." Their lived experiences as members of a marginalized Muslim community are elevated into universal narratives of compassion, justice, and peaceful coexistence.

Crucially, the novel offers a critique of extremism not through direct polemics, but through humanistic storytelling rooted in vulnerability, emotional resonance, and everyday acts of resistance. This subtle yet powerful critique aligns with Nussbaum's (2010) argument that literature cultivates moral imagination, enabling readers—particularly students—to navigate ethical dilemmas in pluralistic societies. Literature, in this context, becomes not merely a mirror of human experience but a tool for ethical formation. The empathetic engagement it fosters allows readers to see beyond stereotypes and encounter the complex humanity of those whose religious and cultural identities may differ from their own.

The narrative structure of the novel—framed through journal entries and moments of introspection—further enriches its pedagogical potential. This form invites readers into the private thoughts and emotional worlds of the characters, allowing for a deeper connection and a more reflective engagement with themes such as identity, faith, discrimination, and resilience. The protagonists' encounters with Islamophobia, chronic illness, and social exclusion are not portrayed as isolated or subjective grievances. Rather, they are presented as what Goldmann (1977) calls "human facts": social phenomena that arise from and reflect broader historical and structural forces. Through this framework, the novel encourages students to move beyond individualistic interpretations of suffering and recognize the collective, systemic dimensions of marginalization.

This, in turn, underscores literature's capacity to foster critical consciousness, a concept central to Freire's (1970) pedagogy. Literature like *Love from A to Z* does more than elicit sympathy—it challenges students to interrogate the cultural, political, and ideological structures that shape their own perceptions and responses. In this way, literary engagement becomes a dialogic process through which learners are invited not only to understand the experiences of others but to reflect on their own positionality within society.

In the context of religious education, the study highlights the benefits of interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literary analysis with religious and cultural studies. Traditional models of religious instruction often focus narrowly on doctrinal knowledge, which can limit students' capacity to understand religion as a lived and dynamic phenomenon. In contrast, this study demonstrates how literature can function as a vehicle for promoting empathetic engagement with the lived realities of religious others. The novel's depiction of interreligious dialogue—particularly through the respectful and thoughtful conversations between Adam and Zayneb—illustrates the potential of narrative to bridge divergent worldviews without collapsing them into a single authoritative voice.

This narrative dialogism echoes Bakhtin's (1981) theory that meaning is co-constructed through interaction and multiplicity of voices. The dialogic structure of the novel, as well as its thematic emphasis on listening, questioning, and mutual respect, aligns with contemporary pedagogical models that emphasize dialogical religious education (Jackson, 2014). Such an approach not only promotes religious literacy but also nurtures intercultural competence, a skill increasingly essential in diverse and globalized societies.

Furthermore, by reading *Love from A to Z* through the framework of Genetic Structuralism, this study contributes to broader efforts to re-center marginalized voices in academic discourse, particularly those of Muslim youth navigating hybrid identities in Western contexts. The novel challenges dominant representations of Islam in mainstream media (Abadi, 2018) and offers an alternative narrative grounded in authenticity, dignity, and resistance. In doing so, it exemplifies Goldmann's assertion that literary works emerge from and give voice to the collective worldview of a social group responding to its historical conditions.

The experiences of Adam and Zayneb reflect a nuanced, intersectional identity—at once religious, diasporic, and youth-centered—that resists both orientalist misrepresentations and homogenizing narratives of Muslim life. Their stories reflect the complexity of negotiating faith in secular contexts, and their choices embody a form of ethical agency that models moderation not as passivity, but as principled, compassionate resistance.

In sum, *Love from A to Z* stands as both a cultural artifact and a transformative educational resource. Its emotionally resonant storytelling, coupled with its sociopolitical engagement and intellectual depth, positions it as an effective tool for fostering religious moderation and intercultural understanding. This study demonstrates that literary texts, when engaged with critically and reflectively, can offer rich opportunities for ethical formation. Far from being ancillary to religious education, literature provides a vital space in which values of coexistence, justice, and empathy can be nurtured in ways that are both affectively compelling and intellectually rigorous.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Love from A to Z* by S.K. Ali effectively promotes the values of religious moderation—particularly love, empathy, interfaith dialogue, and resistance to prejudice—when analyzed through the lens of Genetic Structuralism. The novel reflects the collective worldview of a marginalized Muslim community, offering a narrative that challenges stereotypes and fosters moral reflection among university students. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single text within one institutional context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand by incorporating comparative studies across multiple literary works or involving diverse educational settings to explore how different narratives contribute to religious literacy and intercultural understanding in broader academic contexts.

REFERENCES

- Abadi, H. (2018). Muslim representation in Western media: Between stereotypes and counter-narratives. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 17(2), 89–101.
- Ali, S. K. (2019). *Love from A to Z*. Salaam Reads.
- Alvara Research Center. (2017). *Survei nasional keberagamaan mahasiswa Indonesia*. Alvara.
- Azra, A. (2019). *Moderasi Islam di Indonesia: Konteks dan tantangan*. Kementerian Agama RI.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Eagleton, T. (2008). *Literary theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
- Goldmann, L. (1977). *Essays on method in the sociology of literature*. Telos Press.
- Jackson, R. (2014). *Signposts: Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education*. Council of Europe Publishing.
- Kusmidi. (2023). Islamic moderation as a foundation for multicultural society. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 15(1), 45–60.
- Ministry of Religious Affairs RI. (2021). *Roadmap Penguatan Moderasi Beragama 2020–2024*. Kementerian Agama RI.
- Morrell, E. (2008). *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. Routledge.
- Muttaqin, A. (2021). Character education and religious moderation in Indonesian higher education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 23(1), 75–92.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>

- Shabebuddeen, M. (2022). Muslim narratives in Western media and literature: The rise of counter-representation. *Muslim World Journal*, 18(3), 211–229.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.