

## An Analysis of Interfaith Tolerance in Contemporary Digital Storytelling Entitled *A Lesson For My Teacher* by Abdul Kalam

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### Abstract:

This research employs a qualitative approach, using New Criticism to examine themes of interfaith tolerance in the digital story “Abdul Kalam: A Lessons for My Teacher,” available on the letsreadasia.org platform. Through close reading, the research explores the story’s emphasis on tolerance, equality, and forgiveness, highlighting how its structure and symbols contribute to the broader message of interfaith harmony. Key findings show that instances of discrimination are used as main points to illustrate both challenges and responses to religious prejudice, with symbolic elements—such as the friendship between characters from different faiths and the role of a religious leader as an advocate for tolerance. Dialogues and essential actions reinforce these themes, presenting a cohesive message that tolerance is essential for unity in a diverse society. The study concludes that digital storytelling platforms can be powerful tools for promoting respect across cultures and religions, underscoring digital media's role in fostering a culture of inclusivity and understanding in contemporary settings.

**Keywords:** new criticism; contemporary digital storytelling; interfaith tolerance

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, menggunakan Kritik Baru untuk meneliti tema toleransi antaragama dalam cerita digital “Abdul Kalam: A Lessons for My Teacher,” yang tersedia di platform letsreadasia.org. Melalui pembacaan yang cermat, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi penekanan cerita pada toleransi, kesetaraan, dan pengampunan, dengan menyoroti bagaimana struktur dan simbolnya berkontribusi pada pesan yang lebih luas tentang kerukunan antaragama. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa contoh-contoh diskriminasi digunakan sebagai poin utama untuk menggambarkan tantangan dan respons terhadap prasangka agama, dengan elemen simbolis—seperti persahabatan antara karakter dari agama yang berbeda dan peran pemimpin agama sebagai pejuang toleransi. Dialog dan tindakan penting memperkuat tema-tema ini, menyajikan pesan yang kohesif bahwa toleransi sangat penting untuk persatuan dalam masyarakat yang beragama. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa platform penceritaan digital dapat menjadi alat yang ampuh untuk mempromosikan rasa hormat lintas budaya dan agama, yang menggarisbawahi peran media digital dalam menumbuhkan budaya inklusivitas dan pemahaman dalam lingkungan kontemporer.

**Kata kunci:** kritik baru; penceritaan digital kontemporer; toleransi antaragama

## INTRODUCTION

Significant transformation with the presence of modern digital platforms has made storytelling experience innovation (Ramadhani, 2023). Although many traditional books have many fans, in the field of children's literature there has also been innovation. This is because in digital media, various interactive and animated content has become a strong and popular medium for children's narratives. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for free online platforms such as websites to provide children with an immersive storytelling experience. This storytelling platform can even compete with printed pages. The advantages that can be provided by digital storytelling platforms make many fans because they make content more accessible to a wider audience. In real life situations, we don't need to carry piles of physical storytelling books, we only need to bring a cellphone and an internet connection. In fact, some online storytelling platforms can be downloaded, so they can be read anytime. Judging from its advantages, this shift to digital storytelling also introduces children to stories that feature diverse characters and narratives. In addition, digital storytelling can foster inclusivity and allow young readers to connect with perspectives from various backgrounds and cultures. This is evidenced by the existence of [letsreadasia.org](https://letsreadasia.org) platforms that provide facilities so that readers can become writers in the story. Therefore, engaging children in these stories can shape a more connected and empathetic generation.

In the education, entertainment, and social development of children, digital storytelling is a multifaceted tool that plays a vital role. Digital Storytelling can also be a potent tool for students who are taught to create their own stories (Robin, 2011). When compared to traditional stories, digital narratives often include interactive features. In particular, there are themes that we want to read that can be clicked, so that children actively engage with the content. After all, this immersion not only enhances learning but also fosters a deeper understanding of complex social issues. At this point, digital storytelling encourages children to confront topics such as bullying, racism, and environmental responsibility. Since children are indirectly taught about empathy, justice, and inclusivity. Furthermore, in this digital storytelling, the author can focus on a carefully designed and engaging narrative. In general, by actively participating in these stories,

children learn valuable social skills and develop a sense of responsibility and compassion, which are essential for their personal and social growth.

One of the valuable social skills that must be taught to children is tolerance. If we look at history, the world is not homogeneous, there are many cultural backgrounds and beliefs, such as religion. In Indonesia, there are six religions recognized by the state. If society is not taught about tolerance towards religion, there will be many negative impacts. In the real world, teaching tolerance is important not only to live side by side peacefully but also to foster mutual respect and understanding. Halwati and Alfi (2022) stated that the diversity of religious potentials does not have to be presented in a "uniform" dictum but is presented in a configurative, dynamic and harmonious manner. This is really necessary because of the diverse conditions of society. When viewed from its function, tolerance is an important value that shapes the socialization, worldview, and attitudes of children from an early age. One tool that functions as an effective medium to introduce children to the concept of tolerance is digital storytelling. To be specific, this is important in the context of "interfaith tolerance". Therefore, children must be encouraged to respect and appreciate religious diversity. In the end, so that children can develop a more open perspective as they grow is by promoting tolerance through interesting digital stories.

One of the contemporary digital storytelling full of tolerance values is entitled Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher. This work was written by Abdul Kalam and Arun Tiwari, both of whom are famous Indian scientists who uphold the values of tolerance and humanity. Abdul Kalam once served as the president of India, and he was also an engineer who played an important role in the organization, technical, and politics of India's Pokhran-II nuclear test in 1998. Although he is no longer young, he is an expert in various fields, including the field of writing literary works. There are messages of tolerance in his work entitled Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze what kind of tolerance values appear in this digital contemporary storytelling which focuses on the application of elements and texts used as symbols of the importance of living with tolerance values in the work of Abdul Kalam and Arun Tiwari entitled "Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher". This research is quite interesting to

discuss because it can provide practical benefits for readers by emphasizing awareness of the importance of living with a strong sense of interfaith tolerance.

### **Previous Studies**

The research by Burhamzah et al (2023) entitled "Analysis of Sociology of Literature in the Film Script about Interfaith Tolerance Titled 'My Name is Khan'" focuses on the application of sociology of literature in analyzing social phenomena depicted in the film My Name is Khan. Literary works often reflect social conditions and life experiences faced by the author or taken from their community environment. In this study, a qualitative descriptive approach is used to examine how social aspects in the film affect the behavior of its characters. The results of the analysis show four main social aspects in the film: interfaith tolerance, the role of motherhood, moral and religious values, and the depiction of characters with Asperger's syndrome. The results of this article are in line with the article written by the author, that there are values of interfaith tolerance contained in the research data.

This study by Febriyantasari and Yulistiyanti (2024) uses John Crowe Ransom's New Criticism theory to analyze Robert Frost's poem The Road Not Taken, which is often converted in various ways because of its ambiguous elements. The New Criticism approach, with a close reading methodology, focuses on internal text analysis to explore the themes, figurative language, ambiguity, and symbolism used by Frost. With this theory, the study reveals that Frost uses symbolism and figurative language to describe the clarity and consideration in the decision-making process, the emphasis of the central theme of life choices. This study also aims to enrich the methodology of literary analysis and provide new perspectives for scholars, researchers, and students in understanding how textual elements of the poem support the exploration of the theme of life choices that are still relevant today. This article also uses the same new criticism theory but has different theories and types of literary works.

The two previous studies discussed interfaith tolerance in various literary forms but left gaps in comparing how digital storytelling, film, and poetry communicate similar messages of inclusivity. The first study analyzed the film My Name is Khan through a sociological lens but did not consider digital narrative or poetry, which could have provided additional insight into the same themes. The second study looked at Robert

Frost's poetry using New Criticism but did not connect his exploration of life choices to the theme of interfaith tolerance. These gaps suggest that future research should integrate these different literary forms to better understand how different media convey messages of tolerance and inclusivity in today's society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction to New Criticism

New Criticism, a dominant form of literary criticism in the mid-20th century, emerged largely in response to earlier interpretative traditions, particularly historical-biographical criticism. Developed in the United States during the 1930s to 1960s, New Criticism emphasizes close reading and the analysis of the text as an autonomous entity, independent of authorial intent, historical context, or reader response. The focus is on elements within the text—such as metaphor, irony, tension, and ambiguity—and how they contribute to the organic unity of a work. Scholars associated with New Criticism, including John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and W.K. Wimsatt, rejected extrinsic approaches, instead advocating for an intrinsic analysis of texts (Ransom, 1941).

### Core Principles of New Criticism

New Criticism is built on a foundation of specific principles, including the concept of the "intentional fallacy," introduced by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946). They argued that interpreting a text based on an author's intent is flawed, as meaning should be derived exclusively from the text. Similarly, the "affective fallacy" contends that personal emotional responses to a text are subjective and not a legitimate basis for interpretation (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949). Cleanth Brooks, in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), further advanced these ideas, analyzing poetry to reveal how paradox and irony contribute to the unity and complexity of texts.

### Key Theorists and Influences on New Criticism

#### *John Crowe Ransom and the Southern Agrarians*

John Crowe Ransom, often credited as the father of New Criticism, first outlined his ideas in *The New Criticism* (1941). Ransom's focus on "ontological" interpretation meant viewing the poem as an "object" rather than as a subjective experience or historical artifact. Ransom's work was influential, especially among the Southern Agrarians, a group of Southern intellectuals who emphasized the preservation of traditional Southern values

against industrialization. Ransom's approach to analyzing literature was conservative, yet it offered a revolutionary take in focusing on the structure and self-sufficiency of texts.

### ***Cleanth Brooks and the Emphasis on Irony and Paradox***

Cleanth Brooks, another major figure, promoted the idea that paradox and irony are essential to poetry, arguing that these elements reflect the complexity of language itself (Brooks, 1947). In *The Well-Wrought Urn*, he famously analyzed poems by John Donne, William Wordsworth, and John Keats, demonstrating how internal tensions create an organic unity. Brooks suggested that rather than providing "answers" or truths, poetry offers complex responses that require careful and sustained interpretation. His work solidified New Criticism's focus on the text as an intricate construction of language, demanding close attention to formal elements.

### ***W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley: The Intentional and Affective Fallacies***

Wimsatt and Beardsley's contributions were pivotal in establishing interpretive objectivity. Their articles "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949) argued that the text's meaning resides in its language and structure, not in its effects on readers or the intentions of authors. They reasoned that relying on external sources dilutes the autonomy of the text, shifting focus away from what is concretely present in the words and structure of the poem or narrative. Their contributions have been seminal in encouraging critics to prioritize formalist analysis, stripping away biographical and psychological interpretations.

### **Criticisms of New Criticism**

While New Criticism has been highly influential, it has also been criticized for its perceived limitations. Scholars argue that by ignoring historical and biographical contexts, New Criticism may overlook significant cultural and social factors. For instance, feminist and Marxist critics contend that New Criticism's ahistorical approach fails to account for power dynamics, gender, and class issues inherent in texts (Eagleton, 1983). Additionally, post-structuralists like Roland Barthes challenged the New Critical focus on text-centered interpretation, suggesting that meaning is more dynamic and constructed through the interaction between the text and the reader (Barthes, 1977).

## **Influence on Later Theories**

Despite its decline as a dominant critical paradigm, New Criticism's focus on close reading has influenced other literary theories, including Structuralism and Deconstruction. Structuralists retained the emphasis on linguistic structures, though they focused more on systems of meaning rather than individual texts. Deconstructionists, such as Jacques Derrida, also perform close readings but question the stability of meaning itself, a concept contrary to New Criticism's quest for textual unity (Derrida, 1976).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study uses qualitative research methodology to explore themes of interfaith tolerance in the context of contemporary digital storytelling. Specifically, this research analyzes the narrative "Abdul Kalam: Lessons for my Techer," which is available on the [letsreadasia.org](https://letsreadasia.org) accessible online website, provides a platform that reaches diverse audiences and demonstrates the potential of digital storytelling for interfaith tolerance.

The story, written by Indian president and author A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, provides a rich text to examine how digital narratives can foster understanding and tolerance among different religions. Abdul Kalam's reputation as a pioneer of unity and respect among different cultures and religions also influenced the selection of the data. To analyze the following data, this study uses Brooks' (1949) theory of New Criticism, which emphasizes close reading and the inherent meaning of the text, independent of authorial intent or reader response. This approach makes it possible to examine the themes, symbols and story structures that contribute to the promotion of interfaith tolerance.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Synopsis of Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher**

The contemporary narrative titled *Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher* recounts the tale of camaraderie between two boys, Kalam and Rama, who hail from disparate religious backgrounds. However, this divergence does not impede their friendship; rather, they support one another. One day, during class, Kalam and Rama, seated on the same bench, found themselves in a conflict with their new teacher. The teacher reprimanded Kalam for sitting alongside Rama, the son of a revered religious figure in the temple. Initially, Kalam, filled with joy over his friendship with Rama, became disheartened,

fearing the loss of this bond. Subsequently, a significant event transpired when Rama's father, a prominent Hindu religious leader, admonished the new teacher regarding the critical role educators play in fostering tolerance within the classroom, highlighting the detrimental impact of intimidating students from minority religious backgrounds. Consequently, the teacher extended an apology to Kalam, restoring harmony to the situation. Ultimately, the friendship between Kalam and Rama remained unscathed by this challenge.

### **Attitude of Inequality Within the Story of Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher**

The attitude of inequality is the contrast of the word tolerance, which means here the attitude of not respecting other religions. There are several data that show the act of inequality in Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher. The first,

“I always felt like a stranger there, as the temple goers stared suspiciously at me. They probably wondered what a Muslim boy was doing in front of a temple”

The aforementioned data indicates that Kalam, as a Muslim youth, is perceived as peculiar by the surrounding Hindu individuals. This is evidenced by the use of the term 'they' in the preceding data, which pertains to Hindus. This can be proven in the picture below. The picture shows a child wearing a white cap walking among people wearing typical Hindu clothes with a look that dislikes Kalam.



Pict. 1

The second is a picture 1, when Kalam and Rama were in grade 5, a new teacher came to their class.

“He went around the class tapping his cane on his palm and stopped before us. ‘You, the one in the white cap,’ he shouted. ‘How dare you sit beside the temple priest’s son! Go sit on the last bench.’”

From the data above, it shows that the teacher did not like Kalam’s presence. Kalam’s presence beside Rama became the center of the teacher’s attention. The sentence “How

dare you sit beside the temple priest's son!" shows the difference in Rama's position who was praised because he was the son of a religious leader, while Kalam fought for his rights without carrying the label of whose son or from what religion.

### **The Value of tolerance in Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher**

This section will take us to explore various aspects of Abdul Kalam's story that highlight the importance of tolerance, especially in an environment full of diversity. By studying the values of tolerance from the perspective of this story, we are expected to gain a deeper understanding of how tolerance can strengthen a sense of togetherness, reduce conflict, and build a harmonious environment.

First, there is a wise sentence from Kalam:

“The truth was that I loved to listen to the rhythmic chanting of the mantras, though I never understood a word.”

Kalam, a remarkably astute student in the fifth grade, demonstrates an admirable capacity to embrace the religious diversity surrounding him. He has expressed a preference for the music associated with Hindu prayer rituals, albeit without an intention to study the religion or comprehend the significance of the lyrics.

The second, about interaction between Kalam and Ramanadha Sastry that reinforces the theme of interfaith friendship:

“My best friend, Ramanadha Sastry, was the son of the head priest. He would sit beside his father at this hour, reciting hymns. Ram would steal a smiling glance at me from time to time.”

Rama occasionally steals glances and smiles, showing that the difference in beliefs does not reduce the emotional between them. Rama's smile is a form of acceptance; he not only carries out his duties as the son of a priest but also appreciates the presence of his friend near him. This contains the value of tolerance in the form of simplicity, accepting the presence of someone of a different religion with joy.



In the picture 2 shows the courtyard of a Hindu temple as one of the settings that has a symbolic meaning. The character 'Kalam' as a Muslim chooses to sit in his friend's place of worship, showing acceptance and respect for Hindu religious rituals. By being in the courtyard of the temple without feeling disturbed or alienated, he respects his friend's beliefs and also his family's traditions. This reflects an active value of tolerance, by being in a space dominated by other cultures or religions, without prejudice or discomfort.

The third occurred when the characters Kalam and Rama were at school:

“Ram and I always sat together on the first bench of our classroom. We were like brothers.”

From that quotation we know that, their sitting in the first class together shows equality and acceptance. Despite coming from different religious backgrounds, they still sit side by side, reflecting an equal friendship without religious barriers. They not only sit together physically, but also emotionally and socially, showing that religious differences do not limit their close and deep relationship. In the context of education, this is a clear example of active tolerance where cross-identity relationships are respected without prejudice or discrimination. Furthermore, this friendship illustrates how tolerance can manifest itself in the form of acceptance of each other's identities. Rama and Kalam do not try to change or hide their religious attributes, but rather are present in their respective identities with mutual respect. This is a mature form of tolerance, where one is able to look beyond religious symbols and focus on personal qualities and human relationships.



Pict. 3

In picture 3, in addition to sitting side by side, their respective religious attire and attributes become symbols of their identity that they carry with pride. Despite wearing clear symbols of their religion – sacred thread for Hindus and white caps for Muslims – they still respect each other without feeling threatened or alienated by these differences. In

this case, they do not interpret these symbols as barriers, but rather as part of a diversity that can coexist harmoniously.

The fourth is the condition in which Rama's father defended Kalam:

“In the light of our discussion, apologise to Kalam here,’ said Ram’s father with a stern face.”

The importance of tolerance as a universal value is evident in the attitude of Ram's father. Although in context he is a Hindu religious leader, he still stands up for Kalam regardless of religion. His actions emphasize that true tolerance is not just about passively respecting diversity, but also demands an active response to injustice. This attitude conveys the message that equality and respect are not limited to one religious group, but apply to all human beings, regardless of their beliefs. Ram's father's firm statement, "apologise to Kalam here," shows that tolerance also includes the courage to rebuke mistakes and demand correction. This firm stance sends an important message to the teacher and the entire community, namely that discrimination is unacceptable in any form, even in an environment marked by religious differences. As a religious leader, Ram's father has great influence in the community, and his actions here serve as an example, teaching that tolerance does not only mean respecting the existence of other religions, but also ensuring that everyone is treated wisely.

The fifth occurred before the teacher apologized to Kalam for the discrimination he had committed in the classroom:

‘No child is less than another in God’s eyes,’ Ram father said.

This statement shows the understanding that true religion transcends religious boundaries. Thus, he places equality of dignity as a higher spiritual value. Ram's father not only spoke out to protect Kalam as an individual, but also underlined the important principle that all human beings have equal dignity. Tolerance, in this context, is not only about respecting people of different religions, but also about viewing each individual as a human being who is equally valuable in the eyes of God. In his actions, Ram's father reminds us that true religion promotes unity and equality, not discrimination or division. Another Ram’s father statements that related with tolerance:

“It is your duty as a teacher to help students live in harmony in spite of the differences in their background.”

This section contains Father Rama's message to teachers regarding the important role of educational harmony in cultivating the value of tolerance. He reminded that teachers have a great responsibility to build mindsets among students, not only through academic teaching, but also through examples in respecting diversity.

Another Ram's father statements that related with tolerance:

“You can no longer teach in this school.”

Rama's father's decision to ban the teacher from teaching at the school reflects his firmness in maintaining the integrity of the values of tolerance in the educational community. This action shows that tolerance is not just about being passive, but also has a component of taking action when injustice occurs. By banning the teacher, Ram's father asserts that discriminatory and intolerant behavior will not be accepted in an environment that should be a place to learn to appreciate differences. True tolerance, as demonstrated by Ram's father, does not tolerate behavior that is demeaning and discriminatory.

Rama's father's change his decision:

“Rama's father saw that the teacher sincerely regretted his behaviour and permitted him to continue teaching.”

His change of heart to forgive the teacher shows that true tolerance includes the ability to see positive changes in a person and give him space to improve. Rather than focusing on the mistakes that have been made, he assesses the teacher's sincerity and sincerity to improve his behavior. By giving the teacher, the opportunity to continue teaching, Ram's father shows that tolerance also involves believing in the human potential to learn from mistakes and grow into a better person. This attitude reflects that true tolerance is a dynamic process, where a person is not only judged based on his past actions but also on his sincerity to change in the future.

In analyzing Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher through the lens of New Criticism, we can delve into how the story's themes, symbols, and narrative structure reveal deeper meanings, without focusing on the author's intention or the reader's response. New Criticism, as advocated by Brooks, emphasizes “close reading,” exploring a text's formal elements to unearth the meaning inherent within.

### **Themes of Inequality**

The instances of inequality depicted through discrimination are not just plot devices; they act as symbols highlighting the divisions fostered by societal and religious biases.

Kalam's exclusion near the temple and the teacher's reprimand are central motifs that embody barriers created by prejudice. Viewed through New Criticism, these incidents show how the text itself reveals a critique of social hierarchies, encouraging a reading that understands the effects of inequality as constructed through language and action within the text.

### **Tolerance as a Core Value**

The theme of tolerance is embedded as a formal element within the narrative structure and character interactions. Kalam's admiration for Hindu rituals and Rama's welcoming gestures demonstrate tolerance as an ongoing choice, while the priest's rebuke of the teacher reinforces this value through dialogue and moral authority. Through a New Critical lens, these interactions do more than advance the plot; they reveal an underlying structure where tolerance is not just promoted but is necessary for harmony in a diverse society. This unity in the narrative's structural elements strengthens the theme's centrality.

### **Forgiveness and Growth**

Rama's father's forgiveness, symbolizing a mature tolerance, becomes a key resolution that ties the narrative together, demonstrating growth as an outcome of tolerance. Rather than treating tolerance passively, the text invites readers to see it as a dynamic force that fosters self-reflection and redemption. For a New Critic, this narrative closure offers a complete and cohesive understanding of tolerance, as each character action and dialogue builds toward this resolution, making it an inherent and inseparable part of the story's meaning.

Thus, through New Criticism, the text's language and symbols consistently reinforce the themes of tolerance, inequality, and forgiveness, revealing an intricate message about unity and respect within diversity.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The analysis of "Abdul Kalam: Lessons for My Teacher" reveals that digital storytelling can effectively promote interfaith tolerance by emphasizing themes of equality, forgiveness, and unity through symbolic actions and dialogue. The story's structure and character interactions highlight the importance of tolerance in overcoming prejudice and fostering respect among diverse religious backgrounds. This study demonstrates that

digital media platforms can play a crucial role in encouraging inclusivity and harmony in multicultural societies.

It is our hope for future research to examine how digital stories promote interfaith tolerance among different age groups and cultural backgrounds to better understand their role in promoting inclusivity. Comparative studies of digital narratives from different regions could help uncover how cultural differences shape messages of tolerance. Additionally, research could analyze how audiences engage with platforms such as letsreadasia.org to assess how well these stories resonate and foster understanding across groups. This research can provide useful insights into how to better use digital media to support empathy and social harmony in diverse communities.

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