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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE REIMAGINED: SATIRICAL CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN TIGA ABDUL (1964)

Afeez Nawfal Mohd Isa<sup>1</sup>, Ammalina Dalillah Mohd Isa<sup>2</sup>, Li Mengjiao<sup>3</sup>, Mohamad Yusob B. Ismail<sup>4</sup> and Muhammad Hasif B. Nor Muzaffar<sup>1</sup>

1. Faculty of Art, Sustainability and Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia.
2. Research Centre for Arabic Language and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.
3. Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Xi'an International University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China.
4. Faculty of Communication and Creative Industries, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management & Technology Perak Branch, Kampar, Perak, Malaysia.

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#### Abstract

Reinterpreting historical eras in film adaptations allows for the creative reshaping of past events, figures, and cultures to resonate with contemporary audiences. Filmmakers often blend historical accuracy with artistic expression, using historical settings as a platform to comment on modern societal dynamics, power structures, and cultural questions. In particular, historical contexts are frequently utilized to reinforce specific film genres, such as comedy. This paper explores the satirical portrayal of the Ottoman Empire in P. Ramlee's film Tiga Abdul with the direct translation being Three Abdul (1964), a seminal work that adapts historical motifs to enhance its comedic narrative. Utilizing qualitative content analysis and cultural discourse methods, this study examines how P. Ramlee integrates elements of Ottoman culture and civilization into the film's settings, characters, and narratives. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the research deconstructs these cinematic elements to uncover the symbolic and satirical reinterpretations of Ottoman motifs. Findings reveal that P. Ramlee's adaptation not only reflects the historical grandeur of the Ottoman Empire but also recontextualizes it as a satirical commentary, thereby amplifying the film's comedic impact. This study highlights P. Ramlee's innovative use of historical reimagination to engage audiences and sustain the relevance of comedic narratives across temporal and cultural boundaries.

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#### Introduction:-

History encompasses events of the past, intricately linked to present conditions and future developments. It also encapsulates aspects of human life in filling the progress and evolution of the world over time. Each historical narrative carries its own unique values and meanings, enabling individuals to shape their own history, which, in turn, influences and shapes humanity (Samsul Munir, Amin, 2018).

**Corresponding Author:- Afeez Nawfal Mohd Isa**

Address:- Faculty of Art, Sustainability and Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900, Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

Historical events represent a meticulous, critical, and analytical record of humanity's collective experiences from the past, essentially serving as a re-portrayal of what has transpired. Furthermore, history is not something that emerges independently of human endeavor; rather, it is humanity itself that plays a vital role in the creation of both historical events and the discipline of history. Thus, historical knowledge or narratives are inevitably subjective in nature, shaped by human agency (AB Yass, Marzuki, 2004).

According to Muhammad Naufal and Sanusi (2023), history also plays a significant role in the world of art, with art providing insights into the structure and characteristics of a civilization. History within film production can serve as both a concept and a source of inspiration, catalyzing the creation of a film. Therefore, a clear understanding is essential to distinguish between historical facts as the central theme and the storyline enriched with fictional elements to develop the thoughts, attitudes, and emotions of characters portrayed through dialogue. This approach ensures that the historical messages embedded in the film are effectively conveyed to the audience.

Reinterpretation in film adaptations based on historical eras involves reshaping past events, figures, and cultures to reflect contemporary perspectives, often blending historical accuracy with creative expression. Rather than strictly adhering to documented history, filmmakers reinterpret elements of the past to provide audiences with a narrative that resonates with modern values, questions, and aesthetic preferences. This approach enables filmmakers to engage with the past in a way that connects with present-day audiences, often using historical narratives to comment on contemporary social issues, power structures, or cultural dynamics.

There are, however, films that use historical settings as the backdrop to reinforce and shape specific genres, such as comedy. This approach is evident in the works of P. Ramlee during his filmmaking era. As a director with a unique authoritative style, P. Ramlee's films, particularly in the comedy genre, frequently adapt portrayals reflective of specific eras and periods. These adaptations draw from diverse cultural contexts, including representations of Arab culture and the Ottoman Empire at its peak of cultural progress.

This paper employs qualitative content analysis along with cultural discourse to examine the satirical comedy in P. Ramlee's *Tiga Abdul*. This film was chosen for their shared narrative elements and the effective use of settings that adapt aspects of the Ottoman Empire. The study further utilizes Roland Barthes semiotic analysis to investigate how elements of Ottoman civilization are integrated into these portrayals. Semiotic analysis is applied to assess the extent to which Ottoman motifs are reinterpreted as satirical adaptations, thereby enhancing the comedic genre within both films.

### **Literature Review:-**

To frame this study within the literature review, this paper will focus on several debates closely related to the key aspects of this research. Among them is the use of satire in film, which serves as a nuanced tool for critiquing cultural issues relevant to the society in which the film is produced. Additionally, the unique quality of satire is skilfully portrayed by directors like P. Ramlee, who situates the narrative within specific historical and cultural contexts. In this study, this refers specifically to the depiction of Ottoman Turkish elements, reflecting aspects of Islamic civilization's that manipulated by him in films.

By emphasizing the historical setting of this era, satire is subtly woven into the narrative, connecting it to developments in Ottoman history, particularly during the empire's decline. This connection is skilfully integrated and linked to the plotlines of P. Ramlee's films. Although the historical accuracy of these portrayals may be questioned, this paper does not aim to conduct a detailed comparative study of P. Ramlee's storytelling and the factual narrative of the Ottoman Empire's decline. Instead, the study focuses on how adapted settings are reinterpreted to produce sharp satire that critiques without alienating the local audience.

Parody interchangeably word as satire in film serves as a form of entertainment that engages critically with historical events and cinematic traditions. It operates on multiple levels, including actor selection, character creation, and film language elements (Piwińska, 2017). Parody can be differentiated into traditional and reaffirmation types, with the Western genre being the most frequently spoofed in American film history (Gehring, 2024). In Turkish cinema, parody films of the 2000s create critical intertextuality with classical Turkish genres of the 1960s and popular Hollywood cinema, exposing and ridiculing discourses of modernity (Akser, 2010). The relationship between cinema and classical epic traditions is evident in films adapting ancient narratives, exploring themes such as

heroism, divine intervention, and spectacle. This connection extends to historical epics and even parodies of the genre, demonstrating how cinema serves as a modern vehicle for ancient storytelling traditions (Paul, 2013).

Ottoman costumes and historical representations in films have been subjects of academic interest. European travellers' accounts from the 17th century provide insights into the complexity and social significance of Ottoman clothing (Koçak & Açıık, 2023). In Turkish cinema, films have been used as tools for public policy, particularly in shaping narratives around historical events like the Armenian genocide (Seckinelgin, 2023). The representation of Turkish women in international films, such as the James Bond series, has evolved over time, reflecting Turkey's changing geopolitical position (Bayraktaroglu, 2019). Historical accuracy in films depicting Ottoman history, like "Fetih 1453," has been analyzed, revealing a mix of factual content and fictional elements. This film portrays key events of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, including Sultan Mehmed II's reign and military strategies, providing a visual reference for historical understanding (Hidayat & Ismail, 2023).

The decline of the Ottoman Empire was a complex process influenced by various factors. Economic issues played a significant role, including overpopulation, European economic warfare, currency deflation, price inflation, and unemployment (Saad E. M. Ibrahim & Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, 1975). Trade policies, such as foreign capitulations and treaties with European countries, initially beneficial, later proved detrimental to the Empire's economy (Meirison Alizar Sali et al., 2020). The integration into the global economy between 1830-1840 was driven by factors like sending students to Europe, internal revolts, the Balta Limanı Treaty, foreign investments, and debts (İlyas Balci, 2023). Political struggles for renewal also contributed to the Empire's downfall, with tensions between reformists and the Muslim population, shifts in state values from Islamic to nationalist identity, and the influence of movements like the Young Turks complicating efforts at transformation (Indra Martian Permana et al., 2024).

Ottoman costume albums from the 16th and 17th centuries often depicted various scenes of entertainment, including dancers, musicians, and other leisure activities (Kynan-Wilson, 2019). These visual representations played a significant role in shaping perceptions of Eastern masculinity within the framework of Orientalism, often relying on exaggerated and biased accounts provided by non-Muslim merchants (Gümüşel, 2021). Such constructed identities contributed to the development of stereotypical portrayals of Turkish men in Western media, as exemplified by the film *The Lustful Turk* (Gümüşel, 2021).

In contemporary Turkish action cinema, representations of masculinity remain a central narrative element. Male protagonists are typically characterized as either fearless, self-sacrificing figures committed to family and national ideals or as negative archetypes embodying traits that deviate from socially sanctioned norms (Gürkan & Ege, 2021). These films predominantly present a male-centric worldview, with female characters occupying minimal roles, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Gürkan & Ege, 2021). This persistent depiction of Turkish masculinity in cinema continues to be shaped by historical influences and prevailing societal expectations.

P. Ramlee's films serve as significant historical artifacts and artistic platforms for communicating societal messages (Ahmad Faisal Mohamed Fiah, 2023; Nur EzatullFadtehahHedel & Mary Fatimah Subet, 2023). His cinematic works often utilize implicit dialogues and satirical depictions to reflect and critique aspects of Malay culture, society, and values (Nur EzatullFadtehahHedel & Mary Fatimah Subet, 2022, 2023). Scholars have adopted various analytical frameworks, including inquisitive semantics and relevance theory, to uncover the underlying philosophical insights and expressions of common sense embedded in his films (Nur EzatullFadtehahHedel & Mary Fatimah Subet, 2022, 2023).

P. Ramlee's cinematographic techniques further enhance the cultural representation within his works. For instance, his strategic use of deep depth of field and medium shots effectively portrays communal values such as solidarity, brotherhood, and social responsibility (Zaki & Zainodin, 2020). Collectively, these studies underscore P. Ramlee's auteur status, highlighting his technical proficiency, distinctive personal style, and ability to infuse profound interior meanings into his body of work (Zaki & Zainodin, 2020).

P. Ramlee, a legendary Malaysian artist, used film as a medium to convey important messages to society (Nur EzatullFadtehahHedel and Mary Fatimah Subet, 2022). His works often featured implicit conversations that reflected Malay cultural influences, thinking, and intellectuality (Nur EzatullFadtehahHedel and Mary Fatimah Subet, 2023). As an auteur, P. Ramlee employed distinctive visual narrative techniques to represent cultural values such as communal spirit, brotherhood, responsibility, and manners in his films (Zaki & Zainodin, 2020).

However, P. Ramlee's films, influenced by the depiction of characters and narratives from the Middle East, reveal his affinity for incorporating Middle Eastern cultural settings as a subtle means of critiquing contemporary society. These portrayals, however, are frequently intertwined with considerations of film genre and narrative structure. This approach is particularly evident in his use of the comedy genre, where he masterfully integrates these elements to deliver nuanced social commentary.

#### **About Tiga Abdul (1964)**

Tiga Abdul (1964) is a Malay black-and-white film directed by P. Ramlee, produced in Singapore, which at the time was part of the Federation of Malaysia. It premiered on April 22, 1964. The film shares similarities with *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok*, featuring a Middle Eastern theme. This was also the last film in which Salleh Kamil played a villainous role in a P. Ramlee production in Singapore. It marked his final collaboration with Malay Film Productions before relocating to Kuala Lumpur to work at Merdeka Film Studio. The film carries the tagline displayed on its poster: "The most mischievous story of all the mischief that has ever been mischievously created!" True to its tagline, the film is indeed mischievous, and as usual, P. Ramlee masterfully conveys an anti-feudal theme.

The story is set in Isketambola. A wealthy businessman, Ismet Ulam Raja, has three sons: Abdul Wahab, who is malicious; Abdul Wahib, who is greedy for wealth; and Abdul Wahub, who is wise. Another businessman, Sadiq Segaraga, who is nearly bankrupt, has three beautiful daughters: Hamidah, Rafidah, and Ghasidah. Ismet Ulam Raja, whose immense wealth in Isketambola is unmatched, suffers from a common ailment of the wealthy—heart disease. Abdul Wahab has a deep affection for animals and opens a pet shop specializing in birds. Abdul Wahib, with his passion for carving, establishes a carving shop. Meanwhile, Abdul Wahub, who has a love for music, chooses to run a music store.

The film narrates the story of three brothers who become entangled in a web of deception orchestrated by the shrewd Sadiq Segaraga. Utilizing his three daughters as accomplices, Sadiq Segaraga manipulates the brothers, ultimately stripping them of their wealth. The film is interspersed with narrative delivery by a man dressed as an Arab, identified as S. Shamsuddin Al-Haj. P. Ramlee frequently incorporates Arabic and English as linguistic and cultural subjects in his comedic films, likely due to the significant influence these cultures exert on society.

Armed with these assets, Abdul Wahub approached Sadiq Segaraga to express his intention to marry Ghasidah. Initially, Sadiq Segaraga rejected the proposal, believing that Abdul Wahub had already fallen into poverty. However, Abdul Wahub then presented files as proof of his newfound wealth. Shocked by the extent of Abdul Wahub's fortune, Sadiq Segaraga agreed to the marriage proposal but imposed the same conditions he had previously set for Abdul Wahub's brothers.

Unlike his brothers, Abdul Wahub turned the tables and imposed his own conditions on Sadiq Segaraga. The family adviser urged Sadiq Segaraga to agree, believing that if Abdul Wahub's wiser brothers could be outsmarted, it would be even easier to deceive the inexperienced and seemingly naïve Abdul Wahub. Sadiq Segaraga eventually consented to the conditions, and the marriage between Abdul Wahub and Ghasidah was celebrated.

Sadiq Segaraga then launched a plan to provoke Abdul Wahub, using the same strategy he had employed on his brothers. However, the plan failed, as Abdul Wahub remained calm and demonstrated his superior intellect. Realizing Sadiq Segaraga's schemes, Abdul Wahub turned the tables by cleverly frustrating his father-in-law instead. Every plan devised by Sadiq Segaraga ended in failure, and in the end, he became so enraged that he was sold into slavery along with Hamidah, Rafidah, and Kassim Patalon.

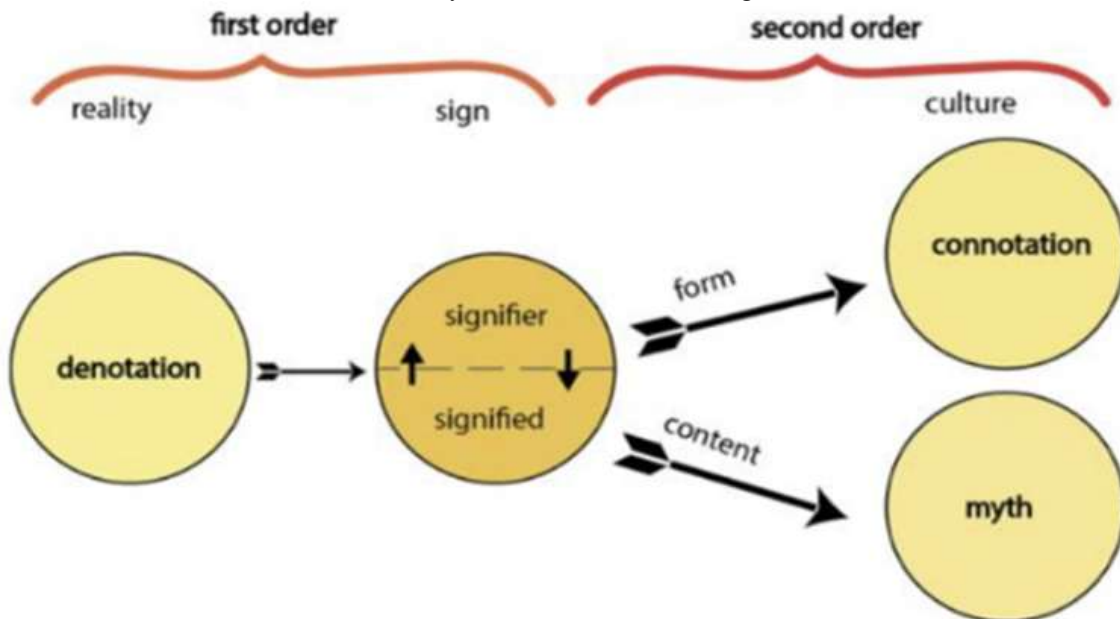
Afterward, Abdul Wahub set out to find his brothers, Abdul Wahab and Abdul Wahib. He eventually located Hussein Lempoyang, a camel trader who had purchased the two brothers. Abdul Wahub bought his brothers back from the trader. Abdul Wahab and Abdul Wahib were astonished to learn that Abdul Wahub's wealth now far exceeded their former riches. Abdul Wahub also repurchased Sadiq Segaraga, Hamidah, and Rafidah, bringing them back to his home.

Abdul Wahub reconciled with his brothers and apologized to his father-in-law, explaining that his actions were merely intended to teach Sadiq Segaraga a lesson about greed and material obsession. With his wisdom, Abdul

Wahub then divided their late father's wealth equally among his brothers and even included Sadiq Segaraga as a gesture of respect for his role as their father-in-law. From that moment, the three brothers lived together in harmony and no longer quarrelled among themselves.

### Methodology:-

This study aims to understand the relationship between Ottoman Empire signs portraying in the film 'Tiga Abdul' and the comedian genre that used as a social critical towards viewers. First, the researchers will delve into scenes that depiction of Ottoman portrayals in Tiga Abdul through signs used to analyze the connotation by employing semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes. This research is a qualitative exploratory study that uses the thematic analysis method. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic approach to analysing textual data that involves identifying, coding, and interpreting patterns, themes, and meanings within the content (Zeynivandnezhad, Saralar-Aras, & Hala, 2024). The primary objective of this study is to analyze the depiction by the symbols of Ottoman Empire in Ramlee's films and the enhancement of the story structure within comedic genre.



**Figure 1:-** Roland Barthes' Semiotics.  
Source: Fiske, 2010.

### Results and Discussions:-

By using Roland Barthes' semiotics framework, P. Ramlee's film Tiga Abdul(1964) can be analyzed as a multi-layered text wherein signs—both visual and narrative—construct meanings that resonate with audiences. The film's depiction of Ottoman influences is evident in its aesthetic choices, character names, and cultural settings, serving not only as a backdrop but as a deliberate tool to enhance its comedic genre. P. Ramlee's Tiga Abdul draws inspiration from the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire, using its aesthetic and cultural cues to craft a vibrant and exaggerated world that complements the film's comedic tone. The mise-en-scène elements—encompassing setting, costumes, props, and characters' performances—play a crucial role in portraying this imagined Ottoman-esque realm, adding depth and humor to the narrative.

#### Ottoman Imagery as a Signifier

The visual and narrative elements in Tiga Abdul(1964) draw heavily from a Middle Eastern aesthetic, transcontinental aesthetic, blending elements of both Middle Eastern and European cultures, including costumes, architecture, and the fictionalized setting of Isketambola, loosely inspired by Istanbul. These elements act as signifiers, evoking the grandeur and exoticism associated with the Ottoman Empire. Names like Ismet Ulam Raja and Fatima Hatem Thai further underscore this connection, invoking associations with Turkish and Arabic cultural legacies. These signifiers, when contextualized within the film's comedic framework, create a contrast that satirizes societal norms, such as materialism and familial discord, through an exaggerated and fantastical lens.

**Myth and Satire in Cultural Representation**

Barthes' concept of myth—the cultural connotation layered onto signs—provides insight into how P. Ramlee constructs humor. By referencing Ottoman culture, the film mythologizes transcontinental opulence and social dynamics, juxtaposing them with absurd and exaggerated character behaviours. For instance, the portrayal of Ismet Ulam Raja as a wealthy but ailing patriarch and the scheming Sadiq Segaraga as a manipulative antagonist transforms cultural grandeur into a comedic narrative of folly and moral lessons.

**Enhancing the Comedic Genre**

The integration of Ottoman-inspired elements amplifies the film's comedic impact by creating an ironic dissonance between the setting's perceived majesty and the characters' often petty or ridiculous actions. This contrast is particularly effective in emphasizing the anti-feudal themes prevalent in P. Ramlee's works, as it lampoons the hierarchical and patriarchal structures often associated with such historical contexts. Furthermore, the inclusion of Arabic and English linguistic elements—both in dialogue and narration—adds a layer of playful intertextuality, appealing to a culturally diverse audience and enriching the film's humour.

**Setting and Architecture**

The fictional city of Isketambola, where the story unfolds, is loosely modelled after Istanbul. The architectural motifs featured in the film, such as domed buildings and ornate interiors, evoke the splendour often associated with the Ottoman Empire. These elements are stylized to fit the comedic narrative, exaggerating the wealth and status of the characters while providing a fantastical backdrop for the unfolding drama.

**Costumes and Attire**

Costuming is central to the film's depiction of an Ottoman-inspired society. Characters are dressed in elaborately designed robes, turbans, and accessories that signal wealth and social status, particularly for figures like Ismet Ulam Raja and his sons. These costumes serve a dual purpose: grounding the film in a Middle Eastern aesthetic and adding an element of visual comedy. For instance, the oversized turbans and exaggerated opulence of the outfits underscore the satirical portrayal of greed and materialism.

**Props and Symbols of Wealth**

The use of props, such as ornate furniture, golden artifacts, and piles of treasure, reinforces the theme of excess and the characters' obsession with material wealth. These elements of *mise-en-scène* not only reflect the supposed grandeur of Ottoman culture but also serve as satirical tools, highlighting the absurdity of the characters' greed and the consequences of their moral failings.

**Performances and Characterization**

The performances of the actors, especially the exaggerated mannerisms and comedic timing, further enhance the Ottoman portrayal. Ismet Ulam Raja's regal demeanor, contrasted with his sons' distinct personality traits—Abdul Wahab's arrogance, Abdul Wahib's greed, and Abdul Wahub's wisdom—creates a dynamic that mirrors the power structures and familial dramas often depicted in tales of Ottoman royalty.

**Lighting and Color Palette**

The lighting in *Tiga Abdul* (1964) is bright and theatrical, emphasizing the vibrancy and fantasy of the setting. The colour palette, while limited by the black-and-white format, is implied through textures and contrasts, with lavish patterns and reflective surfaces suggesting richness and decadence.

**Historical perspectives**

The portrayal of the fictional setting of Isketambola in P. Ramlee's *Tiga Abdul* bears striking similarities to the Ottoman Empire, particularly the cultural and socio-political dynamics of Turkey before the reforms implemented by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The film references specific Ottoman elements, such as the *tarbush*, a traditional headgear worn by men, which became symbolic of Ottoman identity before its prohibition during Atatürk's reforms. These reforms, aimed at modernizing Turkey and erasing remnants of Ottoman traditions, marked the transformation of the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923) into the Republic of Turkey in 1923 (Geyikdagi, 2011).

The name Isketambola also closely resembles Istanbul, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire from 1453 until its dissolution. Following the empire's collapse, the capital was relocated to Ankara as part of Atatürk's sweeping changes (Geyikdagi, 2011). The choice of Isketambola as the film's setting reinforces thematic parallels with the

decline of the Ottoman Empire, symbolizing a society grappling with internal conflicts and external pressures. This analogy resonates with the socio-political commentary embedded in the film, wherein the characters' moral and financial shortcomings reflect the larger narrative of decay and exploitation.

Historically, the Ottoman Empire faced significant challenges during its decline, earning the moniker "the sick man of Europe" due to its financial instability, territorial losses, and inability to compete with emerging European powers. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which partitioned Ottoman territories among Britain, France, and Italy, further symbolized the empire's diminished sovereignty (Geyikdagi, 2011). Similarly, in *Tiga Abdul*, the inhabitants of Isketambola embody the moral and social ailments of a declining society, with themes of greed, manipulation, and eventual redemption mirroring the broader historical narrative of the Ottoman Empire's fall.

Additionally, the film alludes to the financial burdens faced by the Ottoman Empire, particularly during the Crimean War (1853–1856), which left the empire indebted to foreign creditors. By the late 19th century, the empire owed £5 million in foreign debt, a sum coincidentally reflected in the amount Abdul Wahub uses to reclaim Sadiq Segaraga in the film (Geyikdagi, 2011). While this parallel may be coincidental rather than intentional, it underscores the thematic alignment between the fictional Isketambola and the historical Ottoman Empire.

### Conclusion:-

Through Barthes' semiotics, *Tiga Abdul* (1964) emerges as a complex text where Ottoman-inspired signs and myths are employed not merely as decorative elements but as integral components of its comedic narrative. P. Ramlee's strategic use of these cultural references not only reinforces the film's satirical critique of societal norms but also enhances its comedic appeal by juxtaposing grandeur with absurdity, making it a timeless piece of cinematic art. Besides, its carefully crafted *mise-en-scène*, *Tiga Abdul* (1964) successfully portrays an imagined Ottoman-inspired world that serves as both a satirical reflection of societal norms and a visually engaging backdrop for its comedic narrative. P. Ramlee's attention to detail in the setting, costumes, props, and performances not only reinforces the film's thematic elements but also enhances its humour, making the portrayal of the Ottoman Empire integral to the film's storytelling and appeal. Finally, on the historical aspects, *Tiga Abdul* (1964) integrates elements of Ottoman cultural and historical identity into its narrative, using these motifs to enrich its satirical commentary. By drawing on Ottoman symbolism and parallels with its decline, P. Ramlee not only enhances the comedic elements of the film but also provides a subtle critique of societal dynamics that transcend time and space.

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