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The Politicization of Religion in Najib Kilani's *Zhillul Aswad*: A Sociological Approach to Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the forms and implications of religious politicization in Najib Kilani's novel *Zhillul Aswad*, a work set against the backdrop of Ethiopian history and politics. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzes the narrative through a sociological lens, drawing on Swingewood's sociology of literature to explore how religious rhetoric, institutions, and violence intersect in the text. The findings reveal that Kilani portrays religious politicization in multiple forms: manipulation of religious doctrine, the use of religion to justify violence, and the consolidation of political power through religious institutions. These forms are analyzed in relation to their social impacts, including the perpetuation of violence and the erosion of moral values. The study contributes to the literature on religious politicization by systematically categorizing the mechanisms of religious manipulation within the novel and offering a critical examination of how such politicization shapes societal and political dynamics. The implications of this research suggest that literature, as a reflection of social realities, plays a crucial role in critiquing the dangerous intersection of religion and politics, providing a valuable framework for understanding contemporary issues of religious exploitation and political control.

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Introduction

Literature has long been acknowledged as a mirror of society, capturing the complexities of human experience, social conflicts, and historical change through narrative structures and symbolic representations (Banda et al., 2024; Lim, 2025; Merino et al., 2024). As a social product, the novel is not only an artistic creation but also a cultural document that reflects the ideological, political, and religious tensions within the society in which it is produced (Huda, 2016; Nescolarde-Selva et al., 2017; Reddy & van Dam, 2020). In this context, sociological approaches to literature have provided critical insights into how literary texts serve as vehicles for social critique, political expression, and the negotiation of cultural identity (Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2023; Sajarwa et al., 2023; Triandafyllidou & Kumar, 2024). Particularly relevant is the relationship between religion and politics in literature, where religion often functions as both a source of ethical guidance and an instrument of power.

The politicization of religion has emerged as one of the most significant themes in both real socio-political life and literary works. Defined broadly, politicization of religion refers to the use of religious symbols, doctrines, and institutions for political purposes whether to consolidate power, mobilize mass support, or legitimize policies and practices (Hidayah et al., 2025; Mezzanotti & Løland, 2024; Yabanci, 2020). Scholars argue that while religion can inspire social justice and solidarity, its manipulation for political ends often results in conflict, exclusion, and violence (DiPrete & Fox-Williams, 2021; Finke, 2013). This dual potential makes the politicization of religion a fertile area for literary analysis, as novels frequently illustrate the tensions between spiritual ideals and political interests (Birher, 2025; Marín Alarcón & Bahamondes González, 2025; Sabates-Wheeler & Barker, 2024).

Najib Kilani, a prominent Egyptian novelist, has been recognized for his prolific contributions to Arabic literature, particularly for works that integrate Islamic themes with socio-political critique (Hamid et al., 2021; Humphreys, 1982; Sertkaya, 2022). His novel *Zhillul Aswad* (translated as *Bayang-Bayang Hitam*) is a poignant exploration of Ethiopia's turbulent history, focusing on the reign of Emperor Iyasu and the interplay of religion, politics, and power (Arikan & Bloom, 2019; Bakare, 2025; Mezzanotti & Løland, 2024). Ethiopia, a country with a complex demographic composition of both Muslim and Christian communities, provides a compelling backdrop for the depiction of inter-religious conflict, the manipulation of faith by elites, and the struggle for justice and freedom (Desplat & Østebø, 2013). The novel illustrates how religion was not only a personal belief system but also a political tool used by institutions such as the church to maintain control and justify acts of violence and suppression.

Theoretically, this study is anchored in Swingewood's sociology of literature, which views literary works as reflections of the social structures, conflicts, and ideologies of their time (Lim, 2025; Panigrahi, 2025; Shah & Asghar, 2023). Swingewood emphasizes three analytical perspectives: literature as a reflection of society, as a product of the author's socio-historical context, and as a historical document that interacts with broader social dynamics. These perspectives are particularly relevant for analyzing *Zhillul Aswad*, as the novel engages with issues of religious manipulation, political domination, and ethical dilemmas that resonate with broader historical and sociological realities (Pawling, 1984; Swingewood, 1984).

Several studies have explored the politicization of religion in literary and social contexts, highlighting its manifestations and consequences. Ongaro and Tantardini (2024), for example, examined the political instrumentalization of religion in Indonesia, while May (2014) analyzed global patterns of religious politicization in contemporary politics. In literary studies, (Salsabila and Sajarwa (2022) reflected on social issues in Ahmad Tohari's works. While these studies have deepened our understanding of religious politicization in various contexts, research focusing specifically on *Zhillul Aswad* remains limited, particularly regarding its detailed representation of religious manipulation, the role of ecclesiastical elites, and the socio-political implications for Ethiopia's historical trajectory.

This gap underscores the importance of the present study, which aims to systematically analyze the forms and impacts of religious politicization in Najib Kilani's *Zhillul Aswad* through the lens of Swingewood's sociology of literature. By examining how the novel portrays the use of religion as a tool of power, the manipulation of sacred values for political gain, and the resulting inter-religious conflicts, this research seeks to contribute to both literary scholarship and

broader discussions on the intersections of religion, politics, and culture. The study also intends to highlight the continuing relevance of Kilani's narrative in contemporary debates on religious tolerance, political ethics, and cultural identity.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design aimed at analyzing the forms and implications of the politicization of religion in Najib Kilani's novel *Zhillul Aswad*. The primary data source consisted of the full text of the novel published by PT Syamil Cipta Media in January 2002, while secondary sources included scholarly books, journal articles, and online publications relevant to the themes of religion, politics, and literary sociology. Data collection was conducted through library research complemented by systematic online searches to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. The analysis was guided by Swingewood's sociology of literature framework, which views literature as both a reflection of its socio-historical context and a product of specific ideological struggles. The analytical procedures involved several stages, including identification of textual excerpts that depict religious politicization, classification of these excerpts into thematic categories, descriptive examination of narrative structures and character interactions, followed by interpretive analysis to uncover underlying socio-political meanings. To enhance the rigor and credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing textual evidence with secondary scholarly interpretations, while interpretive validity was reinforced through peer debriefing and reference to established sociological theories of literature. Ethical considerations were maintained by acknowledging all sources accurately and ensuring that the analysis respected the cultural and religious sensitivities inherent in the text.

Results and Discussion

Forms of Religious Politicization in Zhillul Aswad

This study identifies several forms of religious politicization present in Najib Kilani's *Zhillul Aswad*, particularly the use of religion for political control, justification of violence, and manipulation of religious teachings. These forms are summarized in Table 1, illustrating how religious discourse is manipulated for political purposes.

Tabel 1. Forms of Religious Politicization in *Zhillul Aswad*

Form of Politicization	Description	Example from the Text
Religious Manipulation	Religion is used as a political tool to influence governance	"The clergy controls the emperor through the divine authority of the church."
Justification of Violence	Violence against religious minorities justified as a holy war	"In the name of God, we must cleanse the land of the infidels."
Institutional Power	Religious institutions dominating political decisions	"The emperor's decisions are merely dictated by the church's will."

These findings reflect how religion in the novel is not simply a spiritual force but a political tool wielded by the clergy to justify violence and control the political structure.

In addition to the forms of politicization, the study categorized the themes into three primary dimensions: hypocrisy, violence, and the abuse of religious authority. These thematic dimensions highlight the socio-political consequences of religious manipulation. Table 2 illustrates the relationship between these themes and their narrative implications.

Tabel 2. Thematic Dimensions of Religious Politicization in the Novel

Theme	Narrative Function	Example from the Text
Hypocrisy	Religious leaders' actions contradict their teachings	"They preach love, but their actions spread hatred and violence."
Violence	Religion used to justify acts of brutality	"Under the banner of God, entire villages were destroyed."
Abuse of Authority	Religious figures manipulating faith to maintain power	"The church rules through the emperor's puppet regime."

These themes underline the tension between the ideals of religion and the exploitation of those ideals by political figures for personal gain.

The Role of Characters in Representing Religious Politicization

Kilani's characters offer a range of responses to the politicization of religion. Emperor Iyasu represents resistance to this manipulation, while the clergy and political elites embody the oppressive forces of religious control. These perspectives are summarized in Table 3.

Tabel 3. Character Perspectives on Religion and Politics in *Zhillul Aswad*

Character	Role in Politicization	Perspective on Religion
Emperor Iyasu	Resistance	Advocates for tolerance and justice
The Clergy	Manipulation	Uses religion to dominate and control
The Political Elites	Coercion	Exploits religion for political gain

This character analysis demonstrates the moral and political struggles that unfold in the novel as a result of religious manipulation and its impact on governance.

Discussion

The findings of this research align with the existing literature on the politicization of religion, particularly in how religion is used as a tool for political manipulation and control. First, the forms of religious politicization found in *Zhillul Aswad* are consistent with the observations of Arikan and Bloom (2019), who highlighted how religion is used to justify violence and control in socio-political contexts. Similarly, Bakare (2025) examined the global use of religious discourse for political purposes, a theme mirrored in Kilani's novel. Marwantina (2022) also explored the role of literature in reflecting societal conflicts, which aligns with this study's findings that *Zhillul Aswad* serves as a critique of religiously motivated violence. Furthermore, Thorburn (2014) discussed Swingewood's sociological theory of literature, which this study applies to analyze the social consequences of religious manipulation in Kilani's work.

The novelty of this study lies in its focused examination of *Zhillul Aswad*, which has been underexplored in the context of religious politicization in literature. While previous research on Kilani's works often centers on broader themes of political oppression and social justice, this

study is the first to systematically categorize religious politicization in the novel and its impact on Ethiopian society. This research contributes to the field of sociology of literature by extending Swingewood's theoretical framework to Arabic literature, demonstrating the power of fiction in shaping perceptions of religion and politics.

The implications of this study are significant for both literary criticism and contemporary political discourse. Academically, it provides a model for analyzing religious politicization in literature, encouraging further studies in this area. Socially, the study highlights the dangers of using religion as a political tool, which can lead to violence, social polarization, and the erosion of moral values. This insight is particularly relevant in today's global context, where religious and political conflicts remain prevalent.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on one text, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other works by Kilani or to other literary traditions. Second, the study relies solely on textual analysis and does not include ethnographic research or audience reception studies, which could offer additional insights into how religious politicization is perceived in different cultural contexts. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a broader range of texts, as well as field-based approaches to better understand the real-world implications of religious politicization in literary works.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Najib Kilani's *Zhillul Aswad* offers a nuanced exploration of religious politicization, illustrating how religious rhetoric, institutions, and violence intertwine to sustain political power. Through a sociological lens, the novel exposes the manipulation of religious authority to legitimize violence, perpetuate political dominance, and suppress dissent, thereby reflecting the broader societal impact of religious politicization. The findings align with existing literature on the politicization of religion, but this study uniquely contributes to the field by providing a systematic categorization of religious politicization in Kilani's work, which has been underexplored in previous research. The study highlights the implications of religious manipulation for contemporary political and social discourse, suggesting that literature can be a powerful tool for critiquing and understanding the consequences of religious exploitation. While the research contributes valuable insights into the intersection of religion and politics in literature, it is limited by its focus on a single text and the absence of ethnographic data, indicating the need for future studies that incorporate a broader range of texts and methodologies.

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