



***Ethical Commitment in Iranian Cinematic and Dramatic Art:  
A Semiological study of the film Henas  
L'engagement éthique dans l'art cinématographique  
et dramatique iranien :Une étude sémiologique du film Henas***

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**Abstract ;**

*This study investigates the manifestation of ethical commitment in Iranian cinema, positioning it as a distinct cultural phenomenon shaped by the ideological framework of the Islamic Revolution. Through a methodological approach integrating inductive reasoning, descriptive analysis, semiological examination, and critical analysis, the research examines Iranian cinema's transformation across pre- and post-revolutionary periods, exploring how ethical imperatives influence narrative structures, thematic elements, and production methodologies, mainly through state-imposed regulatory mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that Iranian cinema constitutes an innovative paradigm of ethically committed Islamic*

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*art. This paradigm has effectively reconciled ideological imperatives with artistic integrity, garnering international acclaim while maintaining indigenous cultural values. However, the study identifies substantial challenges, specifically mediating the tension between regulatory oversight and artistic expression in cinematic production.*

- ✓ *Soft Power*
- ✓ *Resistance*
- ✓ *Muslim family*

### **1. Introduction**

Language has consistently demonstrated profound communicative and transformative power, leading civilizations to cultivate its expression through diverse mediums—poetry, prose, literature, dramatic works, and visual arts. The advent of photography revolutionized society with its unprecedented capabilities; it captured temporal moments with greater efficacy than multiple written descriptions. This technological innovation gave rise to silent cinema, where gestural expression and kinetic narrative enabled audiences to experience profound emotional engagement, manifesting both mirth and melancholy. The evolution of photographic and cinematographic arts has persistently shaped viewer perception through multiple semiological elements: compositional camera angles, synchronized musical accompaniment, intentional chromatic and illumination choices, narrative architecture, and dramatic progression. These elements commanded audience attention and exerted significant influence through multiple mechanisms: they presented narratives that paralleled human experiences, mirrored social realities, catalyzed imagination, and elicited diverse emotional responses—ranging from anxiety and trepidation with corresponding adrenergic activation to tranquility, elation, and euphoria with associated dopaminergic stimulation.

Cinema and theatrical productions inherently convey explicit and implicit messages, objectives, and ideologies, serving as sophisticated instruments of soft power that influence audiences across all demographic and cognitive spectrums. This characteristic establishes them as potent agents of social transformation in the hands of their creators. The historical dominance of Hollywood and Bollywood corporations in this domain has granted them considerable cultural influence, potentially affecting societal values and transmitting embedded messages through their advanced mastery of narrative techniques and visual effects.

Analysis of the Islamic world reveals an underutilization of the cinematic medium, predominantly attributed to the limited presence of authentic Muslim dramatic cinema. While dramatic productions from Syria, Egypt, and Turkey exist, these works generally do not fully embody or represent the Muslim identity, with notable exceptions found in select Indonesian, Malaysian, and Iranian productions. Iranian cinematic and dramatic works, in particular, demonstrate an intrinsic Islamic moral foundation governed by the principle of "commitment" that encompasses both revolutionary messaging and the responsibility of its effective transmission.

Unlike preceding Islamic movements, which took a predominantly prohibitive and skeptical stance toward the arts, the Iranian Revolution emphasized the strategic importance of media and cinema, acknowledging their instrumental role in influencing youth development and their intrinsic connection to younger generations. This study examines the fundamental question: How does ethical commitment manifest in Iranian cinematic and dramatic productions?

To systematically explore this relationship between revolutionary ideology and artistic expression, this investigation addresses three critical subsidiary questions: First, how is ethical commitment defined within artistic expression? Second, what is the philosophical significance of commitment in artistic production? Finally, through what processes has Iranian cinema and drama evolved toward this commitment?

This research pursues several key objectives: developing a theoretical framework for understanding ethical commitment and its relationship with soft power, documenting the historical trajectory of Iranian cinema's evolution towards committed literature, evaluating the impact of censorship on artistic commitment, and examining manifestations of commitment through semiological film analysis.

To achieve these objectives, we employed a mixed-method descriptive approach, integrating inductive reasoning, descriptive analysis, and semiological examination. This methodological framework enables a systematic investigation of the commitment concept and its evolution within Iranian cinema, with particular attention to the historical development and influencing factors. The 2022 film "Henas," a representative work of sacred defense cinema, serves as a primary case study for detailed semiological analysis.

The research is structured around three core areas: a theoretical examination of ethical commitment's conceptualization and significance within artistic expression; a critical analysis of censorship's role and impact within Iranian cinematic and dramatic arts; and a semiological investigation of ethical commitment's manifestation in Iranian cinema, specifically through the analysis of "Henas".

## **2. What is Ethical Commitment in Art?**

### ***2.1 Definition of Ethical Commitment in Art***

This analysis seeks to conceptualize ethical commitment as an autonomous construct, transcending the discrete linguistic definitions of its constituent elements, as our investigation centers on its conceptual framework and theoretical implications. Aisha Abdul Rahman examined multiple interpretations of commitment, noting that when interpreted as "the writer's artistic struggle for societal causes," historical evidence demonstrates this commitment's existence since art's inception ('Abd al-Raḥmān, p. 229). When viewed as "the writer's adherence to prevailing societal conditions and support of an established system governing their people," writers have historically assumed both defensive and advocacy positions since inception. ('Abd al-Raḥmān, p. 229). Furthermore, when commitment signifies "art functioning as an instrument of ruling authority, whether individual or

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partisan," certain writers have fulfilled this instrumental role inception ('Abd al-Raḥmān, p. 229). Through this analysis, Abdul Rahman delineates the historical dimensions of commitment in literary works, encompassing the spectrum from societal advocacy to systemic conformity to serving ruling powers—elements that have remained fundamental to literature since its origins.

Badawi, as cited in (Ṭabānah, 1984, pp. 79-80), posited that the concept of commitment "in its connotation and substance represents an ancient idea that has accompanied humanity since the emergence of literary art among human arts, and since the development of literary consciousness and attempts at evaluation based on critical foundations and objective criteria." The emergence of commitment literature as a distinct methodological approach occurred in response to the nineteenth-century art-for-art-sake movement, coinciding with the proliferation of European literary schools. This movement characterized the deliberate engagement of writers and poets with humanitarian, national, and nationalist causes. Literary figures and artists adhered to specific principles and ideas around which their artistic expression revolved, functioning as conduits for messages they aimed to communicate to their audience through various interpretive methods that enhanced accessibility (Pīshvāī et al., 2022).

The fundamental principles governing literature permeate all artistic domains, encompassing cinema and dramatic arts. Ethical commitment in artistic expression represents a conscious developmental trajectory that follows a comprehensive paradigm and distinct vision for human elevation and values. This development manifests through the reception of ethically committed and virtuous imagery, scenes, and messages that penetrate consciousness to facilitate individual refinement. This artistic responsibility aligns with Quranic verses addressing verbal accountability: "Nūn. By the pen and what everyone writes!" (Quran 68:1), and "not a word does a person utter without having a 'vigilant' observer ready 'to write it down'." (Quran 50:18), as well as physical accountability: "on the Day their tongues, hands, and feet will testify against them for what they used to do." (Quran 24:24). Thus, commitment emerges as fundamentally intrinsic to literature itself, with ethical commitment serving as its essential component in emphasizing human ethical values.

### **2.2 Significance of Ethical Commitment in Art**

'Abd al-'Azīz (2023, p. 125) argues that "cinema exerts diverse influences on its audience through both its fundamental components—including shots, colors, and music—and through the narrative's inherent messages and values, as well as their collective impact." This observation raises a fundamental question regarding the manifestation of such influence when deployed judiciously or detrimentally. This analysis necessitates examining soft power, wherein cinema and dramatic arts function as essential elements. While conceptual definitions vary, al-Ḥājj Ḥasan (2018, p. 85) synthesizes these perspectives by emphasizing soft power's encompassing scope: "all influential tools and mechanisms—spanning media, cinema, culture, academia, commerce, diplomacy, and public relations—and every resource not classified within military capabilities and hard power." A

crucial instrument in this context—one that consistently reaches Arab populations—is media in both its electronic and traditional forms, which shapes perceptions and beliefs through systematic repetition and reinforcement of targeted audiovisual elements (Qāsim, 2012).

The entertainment media complex, which al-Masīrī (2013) conceptualizes as the "pleasure sector," encompassing cinema, television drama, and related industries, has evolved into a pervasive force exerting significant influence over societies and their constituencies. This sector's impact has expanded to such an extent that it now possesses the capability to define human identity, shape personal narratives, infiltrate private domains, influence subconscious processes, and fundamentally alter individuals' self-perception and interpretation of reality.

The visual paradigm inherent in cinematic and dramatic productions parallels the cognitive processes of daydreaming, engaging psychological domains typically reserved for dreams and dramatic narratives (Waḥīd, 2022). This visual medium facilitates passive consumption while limiting critical engagement with content meaning. Visual narratives impose their intended interpretations through their creators' ideological frameworks, exercising substantial influence over audience perspectives. As al-Masīrī (2013, p. 105) notes, "Media institutions in most countries operate without electoral legitimacy, oversight mechanisms, or mandatory quality standards." Within this context, cinema and dramatic productions exercise heightened creative latitude, frequently transgressing societal norms to generate audience engagement and critical discourse (al-Muḥammadī, 2020). Critical discourse serves as an additional engagement mechanism, heightening issue salience and reinforcing presented concepts through iterative exposure. These media forms resonate across diverse demographic segments, transcending gender, educational, and cultural parameters, facilitating immediate and longitudinal influence over heterogeneous audiences (Waḥīd, 2022).

Cultural security is essential for Muslim societies ('Abd al-'Azīz, 2021, p. 215), constituting "a crucial requirement for preserving the unique identity and character of each people and civilization while consciously and intelligently engaging in cultural exchange." This conceptual framework encompasses the methodological application of cinematic techniques and analysis of narrative structures that have demonstrated sustained audience engagement, adapting these elements to align with Islamic ethical principles. Iranian cinema exemplifies this paradigm by systematically developing an Islamic cinematic tradition rooted in Persian cultural heritage.

### ***3. Censorship in Iranian Cinema and Drama***

#### ***3.1 Post-Revolution Iranian Cinema***

The analysis of artistic commitment in Iranian cinema necessitates an examination of its post-revolutionary trajectory. The 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic fundamentally transformed the cultural landscape, instituting new values that the cinema industry either willingly adopted or was required to implement. The initial revolutionary period witnessed citizens destroying numerous theaters, perceived as centers of moral degradation. Washfūn (2020, p. 345) observes, "Shah-era

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Iranian cinema was characterized by its liberal nature, with actresses demonstrating greater freedom in both modern attire and romantic performances. Themes were boldly social, and the Shah's particular cinema patronage later became a focal point of revolutionary opposition." The revolutionary leadership's position was explicitly articulated in 1978: "We oppose cinemas that corrupt youth morality through the contradiction of Islamic culture, while we support programs that enhance ethics and scientific education in society" (Burjkānī, 2009, p. 98).

The 1981 Ministry of Art and Culture merger with the Ministry of Sciences centralized political, cultural, and economic affairs under state authority. This consolidation resulted in restrictions on foreign film imports, the elimination of high taxation on domestic productions, and improved access to bank financing for producers. By 1985, significant cinematic works emerged, garnering public and critical recognition as filmmakers pursued the development of Islamic cinema (Burjkānī, 2009). Iranian cinema maintained its progressive trajectory, producing films distinguished by their unique characteristics (Binshilīkhah,

2009). These works demonstrated "realism, humanitarian messaging, and aesthetic sensitivity while upholding values, preserving heritage foundations, and avoiding female objectification... without requiring expensive production elements." This approach established "fundamentally simple, committed, purposeful cinema" that produced "numerous masterpieces and exemplary works of sophisticated humanitarian art" (Binshilīkhah, 2009). The industry's technical approach primarily utilized shoulder-mounted digital video cameras and non-professional actors, avoiding dependence on a star system. The screenplays exhibited exceptional depth and linguistic richness, incorporating narrative elements deeply rooted in Iranian popular culture. Iranian cinema's defining characteristic emerged through its profound simplicity of content and symbolism, enabling international competitiveness through its dedication to documenting societal challenges. Consequently, Iranian cinema developed a straightforward, realistic dimension that comprehensively reflected Iranian society, emerging as a significant cultural phenomenon by achieving unprecedented success among Islamic nations' film industries.

### ***3.2 Censorship and Ethical Compliance in Iranian Cinema***

The practice of cinematic censorship in Iran emerged well before the revolutionary period. The initial implementation occurred in 1941 with the prohibition of German films, as occupying powers, predominantly British forces, established their regulatory framework. A significant formalization of censorship occurred in 1950 when the Iranian Interior Ministry enacted specific legislation and established a dedicated regulatory body to oversee theaters, cinemas, films, and theatrical productions. The regulatory framework prohibited several categories of content: anti-Islamic propaganda, materials contradicting religious principles, demonstrations of disrespect toward authority and the royal household, and depictions of foreign political coups. Additional restrictions

encompassed incitement against the monarchical system, portrayals of unpunished criminal activity, successful prison uprisings against security forces, and content promoting inter-class opposition to authority or institutional damage. The regulations extended to foreign films containing criticism of royal family members or nobility while implementing age-restricted viewing protocols for individuals under 16. The oversight committee, which included government generals, maintained a dynamic regulatory framework that evolved in response to public discourse (Burjkānī, 2009).

The post-revolutionary period saw the continuation of cinematic censorship, marked by the Council of Ministers' establishment of a film evaluation committee in 1983. Burjkānī (2009, pp. 116-117) documented that the regulatory framework delineated comprehensive prohibitions. These restrictions encompassed disrespect toward Islamic sacred figures and sanctities, extending to other religions recognized within the Islamic Republic's constitution. The framework prohibited content denying human equality based on color, race, language, or nationality while restricting material rejecting piety as an excellence criterion or promoting ethnic and national distinctions. Additional proscriptions addressed the degradation of fundamental human values and the propagation of vice, corruption, and impropriety. The regulations explicitly prohibited content instructing or promoting harmful addictive behaviors and illicit income sources, including smuggling activities. Further restrictions targeted materials opposing national interests that adversaries could exploit, the presentation of inaccurate geographical information that might confuse viewers, and the exhibition of films lacking technical and artistic merit or those deemed detrimental to audience taste.

The censorship system maintained its influence through official, unofficial, and self-imposed mechanisms (Burjkānī, 2009, pp. 117-118). Filmmakers addressed this phenomenon by incorporating artistic strategies into their works. Notably, censorship occasionally enhanced cinematic quality by necessitating directorial innovation in message conveyance. However, these adaptive techniques sometimes result in excessive narrative complexity, potentially impeding audience accessibility and comprehension.

Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi articulated the constraints of censorship, stating that while specific prohibitions are universally understood to varying degrees, their scope extends beyond obvious restrictions (Baqūr, 2019-2020, pp. 87-88). He noted that fundamental limitations, such as the prohibition of physical contact between genders, necessitate specific cinematographic techniques—for instance, focusing exclusively on a female physician's face rather than her hands during medical procedures. Farhadi emphasized that these restrictions transcend physical parameters to encompass complex political, religious, and social domains. These domains include mandates regarding female characters' hijab retention in intimate settings, the portrayal of law enforcement personnel, and the necessary depiction of consequences for ethical transgressions such as theft, murder, and adultery.

Director Reza Sarkanian articulates that censorship officials conceptualize their function as cultural arbiters, viewing their role as one of project enhancement and validation (Baqūr, 2019-2020, p. 88). He observes that these officials operate within a framework of moral society, wherein they perceive

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specific values as requiring preservation and respect—values they associate with maintaining public morality.

Iranian directors and screenwriters acknowledge censorship's foundational role in preserving public morality despite occasional constraints. 'Abd al-'Azīz (2023, p. 127) contextualizes this practice within historical, philosophical discourse, noting Plato's advocacy for artistic censorship as a means of youth protection. The inherently ideological nature of cinematic and dramatic works, which convey distinct perspectives on their subjects, aligns with Iranian cinema's post-revolutionary identity as Islamic cinema. This positioning aims to maintain fidelity to Islamic artistic expression principles, values, and ethics.

Iranian cinema endeavored to cultivate a sense of commitment and responsibility among its creative practitioners (Bahjat, 2009, p. 96). As articulated in Islamic thought, this commitment emerges organically from Muslim artists' spiritual consciousness, providing an expansive creative domain bounded by Islamic principles rather than restrictive constraints. However, the tension between voluntary commitment and institutional compulsion raises the specter of hypocrisy.

Iranian intellectual Malikiyān (2015, pp. 95-96) addresses this complexity, asserting that intellectual advancement requires space for reasoned discourse. He identifies a critical challenge in contemporary Iranian religious thought: preserving and enhancing societal morale within a framework where ethics and religiosity are intrinsically linked for the majority. Malikiyān emphasizes that religious hypocrisy poses a significant threat, potentially catalyzing both religious alienation and ethical deterioration. Consequently, Iranian cinema occupies a nuanced position between commitment and compulsion, navigating the imperative to produce Islamic cinema aligned with societal ethical values.

### *4. How Ethical Commitment Manifests: A Semiological Analysis of "Henas"*

#### *4.1 Censorship and Ethical Compliance in Iranian Cinema*

**Title:** "Henas."

**Director:** Hussein Darabi.

**Screenplay:** Mahdia Ainollahi, Ehsan Zaafi.

**Principal Cast:** Merila Zarei, Behrouz Shoeibi, Siavash Tahmores.

**Release Date:** 2022.

**Duration:** 143 minutes.

**Country of Origin:** Iran.

**Original Language:** Persian.

#### **4.2 Film Synopsis**

The film depicts the factual account of Iranian nuclear scientist Dariush Rezaei-Nejad's assassination, which transpired in the presence of his spouse, Shohreh Pirani, who sustained injuries alongside their daughter. The narrative examines the intersecting dimensions of the scientist's and his wife's experiences, demonstrating their collective sacrifices in service of their nation. Central to the film's thematic framework is exploring tensions between familial security, resistance to material inducements, and maintenance of patriotic allegiance. This cinematic work represents both a dramatic narrative and an emergent subcategory within Sacred Defense cinema—Nuclear Jihad films—which documentarily illuminate scientists' lives, challenges, and martyrdom in this field.

#### **4.3 Technical and Denotative Analysis**

The following section presents a technical analysis and denotative reading of key sequences from *Henas* to further reveal manifestations of ethical commitment. Table 1 provides an overview of this analysis, outlining the visual components and their corresponding denotative descriptions.

**Table 1.** Technical Analysis and Denotative Reading of Selected Sequences from the Film *Henas*

<b>Seque nce No.</b>	<b>Duration (m:ss)</b>	<b>Visual Components</b>	<b>Denotative Description</b>
1	05	The domestic setting reveals a modest academic residence characterized by visible maintenance deficiencies and concealed surveillance apparatus, which the household remains unaware of. The male protagonist (Dariush) exhibits civic responsibility and neighborly concern, while his professional credentials are established through exposition.	The sequence depicts a couple gathering their remaining belongings as they prepare to head to the airport for an academic sojourn to Germany, which is subsequently canceled. A domestic maintenance event—the repair of a water fixture—is interrupted by professional correspondence from the protagonist's employer. His spouse (Shohreh) advises against answering, knowing that he would likely cancel their trip for any work

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			request that might come his way.
2	02	The father demonstrates affection toward his daughter and values their shared time together.	The sequence depicts Dariush in repose alongside his daughter on the floor. This tableau is interrupted when Shohreh enters, adjusting the child's position and consequently rousing Dariush. Upon awakening, he solicits writing implements, citing creative inspiration from his somnolent state.
3	5	Shohreh encounters enticements from her husband's adversary, causing internal fear and doubt.	Shohreh meets Farhad, who offers her a prestigious position in exchange for convincing her husband to resign, revealing that two of her husband's colleagues have been assassinated.
4	3	Shohreh confronts Dr. Sagherian to verify information discovered through online research.	During her visit to Dr. Sagherian, Shohreh learns of her husband's involvement in a sensitive nuclear project and the potential threat to his life.
5	2.45	Dariush attends the cinema with his wife and daughter, attempting reconciliation.	Dariush apologizes to his wife and agrees to her request for his resignation.
6	2.30	Shohreh receives a threatening call, leaving her in a state of uncertainty.	An anonymous caller instructs Shohreh to connect her husband's computer to the internet for three minutes, promising their safety

			and giving her three days to decide.
7	2	Shohreh visits Dariush's workplace and requests his presence.	While visiting Soheil's workplace, Shohreh discovers that Farhad is his manager, causing her embarrassment over her previous request.
8	4	Shohreh approaches Dr. Sagherian to submit her husband's resignation.	Dr. Sagherian signs the resignation letter, revealing her husband's exceptional character and dedication to truth and national interests.
9	2	Shohreh converses with her friend about their life choices and respective paths.	Shohreh reflects on choosing her husband for his strong principles, realizing her recent actions attempt to transform him into someone else.
10	3	A dialogue between Dariush and Farhad concludes with Shohreh's decision against encouraging collaboration.	At her husband's teaching location, Shohreh overhears Farhad repeatedly belittling her husband. When Farhad dismisses potential future pleas from both of them, her husband delivers a silencing response.
11	5	Dariush shares memories of his village during the Iraq-Iran war with his wife.	The couple reaffirms their commitment to their chosen path together.

#### ***4.4 Semantic Analysis of Commitment***

The film presents multiple semantic implications that can be categorized into the following fundamental themes:

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**Ethical Discourse:** The dialogue exhibits consistent refinement, employing romantic and aesthetically sophisticated expressions. The linguistic register maintains its propriety and decorum even during confrontation scenes and heightened emotional intensity.

**Patriotic Dedication and Sacrifice:** The narrative arc centers on the sacrificial trajectory of scientist Dariush and his wife's unwavering commitment to their homeland, culminating in his martyrdom. At the same time, she maintains their shared ideological mission alongside her maternal obligations.

**Spousal Support Dynamic:** Although Shohra initially expressed reservations regarding her husband's chosen path, citing concerns about their collective future and their daughter's welfare, she subsequently acknowledged that his principled nature constituted her initial attraction to him, leading to her ultimate embrace of his decision and its attendant consequences.

**Ethical commitment Fortitude Amid Temptation:** The film delineates numerous enticements confronting the couple, encompassing material affluence, opportunities for international relocation, and prospects for a tranquil existence. Nevertheless, they consistently prioritized national interests over personal advantage.

**Cultural Appropriateness:** While maintaining its family-oriented narrative focus, the film adheres to cultural protocols regarding physical contact between genders, ensuring its suitability for familial viewership.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

The development of ethically oriented Islamic cinema in Iran represents a pioneering institutional endeavor that emerged from the Islamic Revolution. Through systematic regulatory frameworks, Iran has cultivated a distinctive approach to cinematic art that prioritizes ethical commitment while balancing domestic societal needs with global influence. This study of "Ethical commitment in Iranian Cinematic and Dramatic Art" reveals several key insights into this unique cultural phenomenon.

The analysis demonstrates that ethical commitment in Iranian cinema operates through deliberate artistic choices—from principled imagery to conscious message crafting—all oriented toward ethical development. This commitment is particularly significant given the entertainment sector's profound influence as a soft power mechanism in contemporary society, especially within Arab contexts where content regulation remains limited. While censorial oversight in Iranian cinema predates the revolution, the post-revolutionary framework specifically emphasizes Islamic integrity and familial values, as exemplified by the sacred defense cinema genre.

The Iranian model offers valuable lessons for developing ethical Islamic cinema more broadly. However, future development should integrate insights from this approach with the rich cultural

diversity of Islamic nations while selectively incorporating technical innovations from global cinema. This synthesis becomes particularly crucial in addressing contemporary humanitarian challenges, including the erosion of established ethical frameworks and the persistent struggle against exploitation and oppression in modern society.

This pioneering venture, despite facing challenges regarding artistic autonomy and creative expression, establishes important precedents for ethical filmmaking. Given the relative scarcity of Islamic cinema examples—with notable exceptions like the Egyptian production "The Message"—the Iranian approach merits continued scholarly attention as it evolves toward a more refined ethical Islamic paradigm. Future research should examine how this model can adapt to emerging cultural contexts while maintaining its core commitment to Ethical development through artistic expression.

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