

Women as rivals, men as heroes: polygamous romance and formulaic narratives in Indonesia's digital Islamic fiction

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

Today, digital Islamic fiction in Indonesia frequently turns polygamy into a romance formula. This article examines what such narratives teach readers about love, marriage, gender, and religious morality by comparing two KBM serials: *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* (2024–2025) by Chicha/Kolom Langit and *Misteri Anak-anakku* (2025) by Herni Rafael. Both texts emerge from digital literary culture in which Islamic romance, women's authorship, and patriarchal family ideals intersect. This study reads these serials as popular narratives that do not merely represent polygamy, but reinterpret Islamic gender norms, and reflect patriarchal socio-cultural context of Muslim-majority Indonesia.

Design/methodology/approach

This article applies John G. Cawelti's theory of formulaic narratives to identify the romance structures that shape both serials. This study uses qualitative textual analysis, with close attention to characterization, conflict, narrative repetition, and resolution with particular attention to motif of polygamy. Insights from feminist narrative theory and Islamic gender discourse are used to explain how gendered authority is constructed, contested, and legitimized. Textual novels here are read as digital cultural texts that combine entertainment, religious sentiment, and moral instruction.

Findings

Both serials deploy polygamy as a formulaic device for resolving romantic and moral tensions. In *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang*, male protagonist appears as a morally superior figure, repudiating his first wife's betrayal while idealizing second wife as pure, patient, and self-sacrificing. In *Misteri Anak-anakku*, polygamy is concealed, justified through deception, and sustained by division of women into rivals, victims, or maternal instruments. Across both narratives, men consistently emerge as heroic decision-makers, protectors, and moral centers. Women, by contrast, are often vilified, marginalized, or confined to redemptive suffering. These patterns depart from egalitarian Islamic interpretations of gender and instead reinforce hierarchical gender relations prevalent in Indonesian society.

Originality/value

This article demonstrates how digital Islamic fiction commodifies religious morality and gendered ideals through highly recognizable romance formulas. It also contributes to debates on popular Islamic culture, gender representation, and digital media ideology in Indonesia by showing how KBM

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operates simultaneously as a creative marketplace and as an ideological apparatus that normalizes polygamy, reinscribes patriarchy, and reshapes Muslim women's identities for mass consumption.

Introduction

Today, polygamy in Indonesia is not debated only in courts, religious forums, or women's rights activism. It also circulates as a popular story form through which readers learn to imagine marriage, piety, desire, and gendered justice. Polygamy remains legally restricted yet culturally present in sermons, self-help seminars, television talk, films, and everyday moral conversation. Since Reformasi, this "polygamy talk" has moved across print culture, screen media, and religious activism, shifting between campaigns that present polygamy as a pious lifestyle and feminist critiques that expose it as gendered violence and structural inequality (Sari, 2023; van Wichelen, 2009). Popular Islamic culture has absorbed and reworked these tensions. Post-1998 Islamic bestsellers and screen adaptations frequently stage righteous husbands, wounded first wives, and morally unstable "other women", turning polygamy into a narrative arena where male desire, religious authority, and domestic justice are repeatedly tested (Budiyanto & Latifah, 2022; Nasir et al., 2019; Wajiran, 2018). The rise of digital religious romance on platforms such as *Komunitas Bisa Menulis* (KBM) apps extends this arena. Women writers now serialise Islamic love stories for large online readers, while platform visibility intensifies familiar fantasies of sacrifice, rivalry, and marital redemption (Fahmy et al., 2025; Fitriani & Muassomah, 2021). For this reason, polygamous romance is a significant site for examining how Indonesian Muslims negotiate everyday piety, intimacy, and justice through popular digital fiction.

Previous research has shown how controversies on polygamy are encoded in narrative and visual culture in post-Reformasi Islamic fiction. Wajiran (2018) argues that contemporary Muslim novels transform Qur'anic permissions into stories that both criticise and normalise men's access to multiple wives, often by foregrounding women's ambivalence and suffering. Other studies extend this discussion across media. Nasir et al (2019) examine how *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku* uses affective strategies to make a shared husband appear emotionally sustainable, while Budiyanto and Latifah (2022) compare *Athirah* and *Waiting Papa* to trace trauma, resilience, and religious meaning in Muslim and Chinese-Buddhist polygamous households. Communication studies have also examined televised melodrama and pro-polygamy activism, showing how genre conventions and commodified da'wah reproduce male dominance while offering women scripts of patient piety and self-fashioning (Sari, 2023; Yazid et al., 2022). Research on women's novels on social media, including KBM, shows that digital storytelling platforms allows married women to fictionalise domestic injustice and patriarchal religious discourse for large audiences (Fitriani & Muassomah, 2021). Yet available literature has paid less attention to KBM's Islamic romances centred specifically on polygamy. Still less examined are narrative formulas through which such stories circulate, gain visibility, and make polygamous desire appear emotionally, morally, and religiously intelligible.

This article takes two widely read KBM serials, *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* (2024-2025) by Chicha/Kolom Langit and *Misteri Anak-Anakku* (2025) by Herni Rafael, as its main material for understanding how polygamy-centred Islamic romance organises desire, marriage, and piety in Indonesia's digital literary culture. Both narratives are written by women and addressed largely to female readers, yet both organise desire, marriage, and piety around highly idealised male figures. Husband figures are competent, attractive, financially secure, and repeatedly marked as restrained or religious. Around them, the stories arrange a familiar constellation: a jealous or calculating first wife, a poor and devout second wife, and another man who offers protection or emotional rescue. This recurring pattern raises three related questions: How plots, cliff-hangers, and character types produce a formula in which women become rivals and men become heroes in contemporary digital

Islamic romance? How these narratives invoke Islamic ideas of justice, consent, and responsibility while also legitimising male authority and disciplining female anger and aspiration? And how does Indonesia's Muslim-majority, patriarchal, and digitally mediated reading culture make such stories intelligible, marketable, and emotionally persuasive? By addressing these questions, this article treats KBM romance not merely as entertainment, but as a cultural site where polygamy, gendered virtue, and religious authority are narratively organised.

Preliminary readings suggest that these KBM narratives do not simply mirror current debates on polygamy. They transform those debates into persuasive romance scripts in which male sacrifice, reason, and spiritual steadiness occupy moral centre, while women's desires are redirected into rivalry, jealousy, and self-abnegation. Ammar and Satria, for instance, are repeatedly framed as heroic providers whose failures can be repaired through repentance. By contrast, first and second wives are alternately demonised as home-wreckers or sanctified as long-suffering "angels of the house." Secondary male figures then appear as rescuers for women injured by polygamous arrangements. This article therefore examines how these recurring patterns organise polygamous romance as a moral grammar of gender: men decide, repent, and rescue; women suffer, compete, and endure. Read against Islamic gender-justice discourses and legal debates on polygamy in Indonesia, this pattern suggests that digital Islamic romance does not simply reproduce patriarchal readings of scripture. It also exposes their tensions in moral imagination of its readers (Sari, 2023; Wajiran, 2018).

Theoretical background

John G. Cawelti's (1976) idea of formulaic narrative offers a practical way to read KBM polygamous romances after Reformasi. It does not treat popular fiction as naïve repetition, but as a negotiation between convention and invention. Familiar plots, character types, and settings return, yet each return gives readers recognition, suspense, and small surprise (Cawelti, 1969; Raharjo, 2023; Jusrianti, 2024; Sriningsih, 2025). In this frame, "polygamous romance" is not simply a story about a man with several wives. It is a patterned arrangement of motifs: wounded but virtuous husband, the jealous first wife, the sacrificial second wife, and the providential child. These motifs manage anxieties about desire, morality, and social order. Studies of romance formulas show that such patterns also crystallise social fantasies about gender, class, and religion (Raharjo, 2023; Ulhaq, 2023). Read this way, *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* and *Misteri Anak-anakku* turn medical professionalism, orphanhood, arranged marriage, and pious suffering into a KBM formula of yearning, repentance, and marital repair.

This study turns Cawelti's model into three textual connected indicators. First, plot structure: an initial marital crisis, escalating conflict between first and second wives, and a resolution that restores male authority as affective order. Second, character ensemble: The hero-husband, rival wives, rescuing "other man" and miraculous children form recurring types whose functions echo romance conventions identified in earlier formula studies (Jusrianti, 2024; Sriningsih, 2025). The third is setting and incident: Hospitals, elite homes, mosques, and cemeteries do not merely provide background; they become moralised spaces where intimacy, betrayal, repentance, and reconciliation are rhythmically staged (Raharjo, 2023; Ulhaq, 2023). These indicators clarify how KBM's polygamy-centred romances do more than repeat inherited romance forms. They stabilise them, adjust them, and occasionally stretch them for Indonesian Muslim readers whose expectations are shaped by religion, class aspiration, and serial suspense in digital reading culture. Formula therefore becomes a method for seeing how narrative pleasure is built from recognisable crises and carefully managed moral closure.

Bronwyn T. Williams's (2006) work on digital literacy and gender provides a second route into the same texts. Online reading and writing, in this view, are not neutral acts. They are sites where

gendered identities are performed, contested, and restyled within the limits and possibilities of platform architectures. Gender in a digital world therefore names an ongoing literacy practice, not a fixed attribute. Girls and women craft selves through fan fiction, blogs, message boards, and similar spaces that may both reproduce and disturb dominant heteronormative scripts. Later research on gender and media representation shows that digital circulation often intensifies stereotypes: women appear through emotional communion and self-sacrifice, men through agency, competence, and decisive action (Santonniccolo et al., 2023). Applied to KBM Islamic romance, this vocabulary makes polygamy-centred narrative visible as collaborative gender performance. Mostly female authors and readers co-produce stories that both endorse patriarchal arrangements and register their emotional costs. The patient digital Muslimah who narrates suffering or longing across episodes confirms Williams's insight that online empowerment can still bind femininity to care, pain, and relational virtue, especially when algorithms reward such affective scripts (Fahmy et al., 2025; Williams, 2006).

Williams's (2006) emphasis on gendered literacy practices can be translated into three textual indicators for KBM polygamy serials. The first concerns voice and focalisation: whose perspective dominates a scene, whose interior monologue gains depth, and how male and female characters express reason, anger, doubt, or submission. The second concerns emotional labour. The analysis asks who apologises, forgives, prays, waits, or undertakes self-correction, and how these acts link femininity to patience and relational repair. This pattern resonates with findings that women are culturally coded as sources of warmth and communion, while men embody agency and competence (Santonniccolo et al., 2023). The third concerns platform-specific forms: chapter titles, cliff-hangers, and comment threads that invite readers to support, condemn, or ship combinations of husband, wives, and rescuing male figures (Fahmy et al., 2025). Together, these indicators show how KBM polygamous romance mirrors, bends, and popularises Islamic discourses on justice, obedience, and marital authority through gendered identification, emotional participation, and repeated digital response across episodes and comment cultures.

The third analytical axis concerns patriarchal ideology and popularity of polygamy-centred narratives in Indonesian digital Islamic fiction. Research on Indonesian polygamy debates shows that legal permissibility is often framed through male-centred ideals of sacrifice and religious leadership, although feminist and reformist voices contest these readings (Brenner, 2006; Hasan, 2022; Rohman, 2013). At the textual level, Islamic literature often locates women's subjectivities within obedience, domesticity, and patience, thereby reinforcing male headship even while invoking equality (Andalas, 2025; Wajiran, 2018; Nisa et al., 2024). Patriarchal ideology is therefore understood here not only as open domination, but as a web of religious, legal, and affective assumptions that normalises male authority and obscures inequality inside Muslim families (Hasan, 2022; Humaira et al., 2025). Studies of Islamic women's discourse in popular culture also show how media products stage competing ideals of Muslim womanhood while reproducing conservative norms under the language of empowerment (Azhari et al., 2023; Sari, 2018). In this context, KBM polygamous romance extends patriarchal imaginaries digitally: language, miraculous children, and repentant husbands legitimise unequal arrangements while inviting female readers to find meaning in suffering, loyalty, and limited resistance (Fahmy et al., 2025; Fikri et al., 2025; Hasan, 2022).

Patriarchal ideology is operationalised through indicators that connect popularity to gendered power in a Muslim-majority, post-authoritarian setting. The first indicator is moral economy of legitimacy: which male behaviours receive redemption and community approval, and which female responses (jealousy, refusal, or strategic acceptance) are narrated as sinful, excessive, or exemplary (Hasan, 2022; Humaira et al., 2025). The second is selective use of legal and religious discourse. Polygamy is often simplified through male rights, leadership, lineage, or protection, while structural limits on women's consent are minimised (Brenner, 2006; Rohman, 2013). The third is platform mediation: algorithmic recommendation, genre tagging, serial updating, and comment cultures that

present polygamy stories as especially Islamic, romantic, or emotionally satisfying (Fahmy et al., 2025). Together, these indicators suggest that KBM polygamy narratives draw on, and help stabilise, wider patriarchal currents in contemporary Indonesian Islam. Digital piety and serial reading habits make polygamous romance emotionally plausible, even when its injustices remain narratively visible and ethically unresolved for readers within the platform.

Methods

This article uses two serialised Islamic romances on KBM digital writing platform as its primary material: *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* (Chicha/Kolom Langit's) and *Misteri Anak-anakku* (Herni Rafael). Both texts are authored by women yet revolve around male-centred polygamous households, featuring exemplary husbands, rival wives, and rescuing male figures that embody a distinctly post-Reformasi configuration of polygamous romance in popular fiction. *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* appeared between 15 November 2024 and 11 February 2025 in 51 chapters, with large recorded views and subscribers. *Misteri Anak-anakku* appeared between 12 January and 31 March 2025 in 60 chapters, also attracting substantial views and subscribers. Both are written by women but centre on male-dominated polygamous households: exemplary husbands, rival wives, vulnerable second wives, and rescuing male figures. Their settings (hospital wards, elite homes, domestic quarrels, Qur'anic references, and piety talk) make them useful cases for examining digital Islamic popular fiction after 1998 (Fahmy et al., 2025; Wajiran, 2018). Together, they provide a compact corpus for tracing romance formulas, digital gender performances, and patriarchal Islamic discourse.

This study adopts a qualitative design combining close reading, narrative analysis, and critical discourse analysis. This research aim is to examine how two serials are structured, how their meanings are produced, and how readers are invited to interpret polygamy as romance, moral trial, and religiously charged domestic conflict. Cawelti's (1976) concept of formulaic narrative is used to map recurring plot structures, character ensembles, and motifs of crisis and resolution that shape reader expectation in popular romance (Cawelti, 1969; Raharjo, 2023; Sriningsih et al., 2025). Williams's account of gendered literacies in digital environments helps analyse how femininity and masculinity are performed through episodic narration, comment threads, and platform paratexts (Williams, 2006). Feminist and Islamic studies on polygamy and patriarchy in Indonesia then situate the serials within wider debates on religious authority, legal justification, and emotional scripts that legitimise male power while allowing partial critiques of inequality (Brenner, 2006; Hasan, 2022; Wajiran, 2018). These approaches are applied iteratively across scenes, chapters, and reader responses.

The corpus consists of the full KBM serialisations of *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* and *Misteri Anak-anakku*, including revised chapters, author notes, blurbs, cover images, and reader comments attached to episodes. These materials are treated as parts of one digital artefact, where narrative, visual display, and audience response jointly shape meaning (Fahmy et al., 2025). Secondary studies on polygamy in Indonesian literature and media supports the contextual reading of post-Reformasi cultural production (van Wichelen, 2009; Wajiran, 2018). Data collection involved repeated holistic readings, followed by systematic coding of episodes, scenes, and paratexts related to romance formulas, gendered positioning, and explicit or implicit commentary on polygamy. Each chapter was annotated for motifs such as arranged marriage, betrayal, child loss, miraculous reunion, intimacy, piety, and power. Reader comments and author responses were sampled to identify how audiences justify, condemn, or emotionally invest in polygamous configurations. This procedure clarifies how patriarchal meanings are co-produced textually and digitally (Hasan, 2022; Wajiran, 2018; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Williams, 2006).

Result and discussion

Reading *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* and *Misteri Anak-Anakku* shows a stable romance formula that fits Cawelti's (1976) concept of formulaic narrative: a pious and professionally successful husband stands between two women, while rivalry, childbirth, and rescue organise the plot's moral closure. In Chicha's serial, Ammar is framed as "*dokter anak yang menjaga setiap sentuhan seolah ibadah*." (a pediatrician who guarded every touch as though it were an act of worship.) His marriage to Sevia, however, begins under betrayal. After finding her with another man, he declares, "*Aku tidak akan menyentuh tubuh yang telah mengkhianati akad ini*." (I will not touch a body that has betrayed this marital covenant.) The plot then introduces Nindy, a poor orphan and surrogate mother, who gradually becomes the emotionally legitimate second wife. Herni Rafael's serial repeats the pattern through Satria, who marries Sarah while hiding Eva, his first wife. After each birth, he tells Sarah, "*Maaf, anak kita tidak tertolong*," (I am sorry, our child could not be saved.) while secretly transferring the children to Eva and staging false graves. These repeated motifs (male restraint, female betrayal, substitute womb, hidden child, and providential revelation) turn polygamy into a melodramatic crisis-machine. They also confirm that Indonesian polygamy narratives often criticize women's suffering while still normalizing male authority (Wajiran, 2018). On KBM, this formula gains further force through serial suspense, reader attachment, and platform visibility, where religious romance is shaped by algorithmic recommendation and emotional repetition (Fahmy et al., 2025). Thus, polygamy appears less as ordinary domestic practice than as a recognisable script of yearning, conflict, repentance, and marital repair.

When these patterns are described in terms of plot structure, character ensemble, and recurring motifs, two serials closely resemble romance "formula" mapped in recent applications of Cawelti (1976) to popular fiction: crises that threaten the couple bond, narrative detours through suffering and misunderstanding, and an ending that reconciles desire with moral order. In *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang*, Ammar's story moves from coerced marriage to a morally compromised wife, then from emotional withdrawal to a redemptive union with Nindy, the surrogate whose womb carries his "pure" child. In *Misteri Anak-Anakku*, Sarah's arc moves from marital trust to repeated child loss and belated discovery, before opening toward a reconstituted family with a more protective male figure. The first wives receive dramatic scenes of rage. Sevia expels Nindy from Ammar's house, while Eva insists, "*Rahimku boleh kosong, tapi rumah ini milikku*" (My womb may be empty, but this house is mine). Yet their power remains limited. Wealth cannot secure affective centrality. By contrast, second wives are marked by poverty, orphanhood, prayerful patience, and an almost unlimited capacity to forgive male cruelty. Sarah's line beside the false grave, "*Kalau ini jalanku ke surga, aku akan tetap menunggu Abang*" (If this is my path to heaven, I will still wait for you), condenses this moral economy. These contrasts create a rhythm of jealousy, injury, tenderness, and reconciliation across many episodes. They also confirm that polygamy in Indonesian Islamic fiction often exposes women's suffering while still normalizing male authority and domestic hierarchy (Wajiran, 2018). The formula works because it makes familiar conflicts emotionally readable and imaginatively resolvable for readers.

KBM serial format intensifies the formulaic logic of polygamous romance. Each episode depends on an affective hook: Sevia recognizes Ammar's growing tenderness toward Nindy, while Sarah studies the dates on her children's gravestones and discovers their overlap with Eva's "adopted" children's birthdays. These scenes turn domestic suspicion into serial suspense. Both plots follow a similar trajectory: marriage is first framed as destiny; betrayal or prior marriage is then disclosed; a vulnerable "other woman" enters the household; wives confront each other in kitchens, hospital corridors, or living rooms; the husband undergoes crisis through illness, accident, or spiritual awakening; and the family is finally reordered around him as rational, repentant leader. If jealousy and piety were mapped across chapters, both serials would show the same rhythm: female anger rises, then falls into remorse, patience, or reconciliation. This pattern follows Cawelti's account of

formula as a structure that balances familiarity and variation, reassuring readers while sustaining suspense (Cawelti, 1969, 1976). It also supports the article's central argument that KBM polygamous romance repeatedly casts women as rivals and men as moral heroes. Such plotting echoes wider findings on Indonesian Islamic fiction, where women's suffering is exposed but male authority often remains normalised (Wajiran, 2018). On KBM, this rhythm becomes more than textual repetition. Platform visibility, reader comments, serial updates, and recommendation systems reward emotionally charged stories, making polygamy-centred romance commercially durable and morally persuasive in digital Islamic popular fiction (Fahmy et al., 2025).

These KBM serials do not simply depict polygamy as a social fact. They turn it into a reusable moral story. Ammar is presented as a doctor who refuses to "pollute" his lineage, yet later becomes the man who rescues Nindy from patriarchal neglect in her own family. Satria commits grave injustice by hiding Sarah's children, yet the plot keeps him at the emotional centre of two households. Through these male figures, legal and theological debates over polygamy are translated into romance plots that can be repeated, modified, and consumed across episodes. This structure follows Cawelti's (1969, 1976) view that popular formulas reshape familiar social tensions into recognizable narratives of crisis and resolution. It also reflects Indonesian debates in which polygamy is framed both as a religiously permitted practice and as a source of gendered harm (Brenner, 2006; Sari, 2023). In these serials, first wives expose the pain, jealousy, and deception that polygamy can produce. Second wives and miracle children then soften that critique by turning suffering into spiritual elevation, maternal virtue, and eventual recognition. As Wajiran (2018) notes, Indonesian Islamic fiction often criticizes women's suffering while still leaving male authority intact. KBM polygamous romance sharpens this contradiction: women become rivals or sufferers, while men become repentant heroes whose steadiness determines the moral value of the family.

Polygamous romance in these KBM serials works because it transforms a contested social practice into a readable moral drama. Indonesian law permits polygamy only under specific conditions, while public debate often frames it as a problem of justice, consent, and patriarchal authority (Brenner, 2006; Rohman, 2013). The serial formula absorbs this tension by assigning blame and virtue to different characters. Husbands make serious mistakes, but the plot softens their guilt through family honour, economic responsibility, religious duty, or eventual repentance. First wives carry a double function. They voice the legitimate demand for exclusive love, yet are easily marked as proud, worldly, possessive, or morally unstable. Second wives carry the opposite burden. They appear poor, patient, devout, and wounded; their endurance makes male authority seem forgivable. This structure does not fully defend polygamy, but it also does not reject it. It offers a middle path: male repentance and female patient can repair the family. In this sense, the formula turns legal and theological controversy into emotional order. Readers can feel the danger of betrayal, jealousy, and injustice, while still receiving the comfort of reconciliation. As studies of Indonesian Islamic fiction show, polygamy is often narrated through women's suffering, yet the final moral frame still leaves male authority largely intact (Wajiran, 2018; Sari, 2023).

In both serials, female characters' voices dominate interior monologues and emotive scenes, but narrative frame constantly re-centres male rationality and decision-making. Nindy's chapters often open like private devotional notes: "*Ya Allah, kalau laki-laki ini bukan jodohku, tolong cabut rasa ini*" (O God, if this man is not destined for me, remove this feeling from my heart). Her inner life is rich, but Ammar determines the major movements of the plot: whether to keep the baby, send Nindy away, or seek her again. Sarah's grief is also narrated through intimate sensory detail: "*Tanganku gemetar menyentuh nisan kecil itu*" (My hand trembled as it touched the small gravestone). Satria, however, speaks in language of command: "*Ini yang terbaik untuk semua. Percayalah*" (This is best for everyone. Trust me). This contrast shows how KBM polygamous romance gives women emotional depth but assigns men narrative authority. Williams (2006) notes that digital spaces allow girls and women to perform complex identities, yet these spaces remain

shaped by older gender scripts. Santoniccolo et al. (2023) similarly show that media often associates women with care, emotion, and self-sacrifice, while men appear as competent agents. On KBM, this division becomes sharper: women write, read, and feel intensely, but their fictional counterparts remain bound to plots where men decide, rescue, and restore order. Thus, the pattern of “women as rivals, men as heroes” works not only through characterisation, but through the unequal distribution of feeling and power.

The representation of gender across two serials can be broken into three interlocking categories: distribution of perspective, allocation of emotional labour, and moral evaluation. Across the two serials, women are given many pages of feeling, but men retain control over decision and direction. Nindy and Sarah often carry narration through fear, hope, grief, and prayer. Their perspectives make domestic pain intimate and readable. Yet when decisive moments arrive (divorce from Sevia, revelation of Sarah’s children, or possibility of another marriage with Juno or Bisma) the narrative shifts toward male judgment. Husbands’ conflicts are framed in calmer, more rational language. Women apologise, forgive, wait, pray, and repair the emotional atmosphere of the household. Men decide, explain, rescue, and restore order. This pattern reflects broader media conventions that associate women with warmth, care, and communion, while attaching men to agency, competence, and authority (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). It also echoes Williams’s view that digital spaces allow women to voice complex identities, but do not automatically free them from older gender scripts (Williams, 2006). Moral judgment confirms the division. Sevia’s jealousy and Eva’s manipulation are punished, while Nindy’s and Sarah’s endurance is rewarded through recognition by a husband or a protective male figure. On KBM, therefore, female-centred narration does not necessarily produce female-centred power. It turns women’s suffering into emotional value, while keeping resolution in male hands. This is why polygamous romance remains affectively persuasive: it lets readers feel women’s pain, but teaches them to expect male authority as the final source of order (Fahmy et al., 2025; Wajiran, 2018).

On KBM, serial form shapes how gender is written, read, and valued. Authors publish chapter by chapter; readers respond through comments, views, subscriptions, and likes. This structure rewards scenes that are emotionally intense, morally clear, and easy to follow. Sevia’s suspicion of Ammar’s tenderness toward Nindy, or Sarah’s discovery that the dates on her children’s gravestones match Eva’s “adopted” children’s birthdays, works as more than suspense. It invites readers to return, judge, sympathise, and take sides. A typical reader response: “*Kak, aku nangis baca bagian Nindy diusir*” (Sis, I cried when reading the part where Nindy was expelled), shows how female suffering becomes a shared emotional event. Digital spaces allow women to experiment with identity, yet they remain shaped by wider cultural scripts (Williams, 2006). Media often ties femininity to care, emotion, and sacrifice, while associating masculinity with action and control (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). KBM intensifies this pattern. Female authors and readers articulate pain, loyalty, and piety, but recommendation systems tend to reward familiar stories of patient women and morally restored men (Fahmy et al., 2025). The result is a digital romance culture in which women’s emotional complexity becomes visible, while patriarchal roles remain narratively profitable and morally persuasive (Wajiran, 2018).

These gendered scripts echo Islamic debates on justice in marriage, but they also reshape them into romance plots that protect male authority. References to the Qur’anic demand to “be just” in polygamous marriage usually appear through scenes where husbands suffer privately, repent, or claim responsibility. Yet they still decide what justice means. Ammar’s remorse gives him moral depth; Satria’s guilt keeps him central to both households. Women’s pain becomes visible, but male spiritual growth remains the main path toward resolution. Studies of Indonesian polygamy narratives show this repeated tension: fiction may expose women’s suffering, jealousy, and abandonment, yet still return moral authority to husbands (Wajiran, 2018). In KBM serials, the digital form deepens reader identification. Readers can comment, share memories of betrayal or

endurance, and ask for different plot turns. Still, women's agency is most accepted when it appears as patience, dignified withdrawal, forgiveness, or acceptance of another male protector. Direct refusal of polygamous authority rarely becomes the privileged moral option. Digital Islamic romance therefore becomes a space where obedience, endurance, and pious femininity are rehearsed and debated. It teaches readers which female actions look desirable, acceptable, or excessive in polygamous conflict. This pattern also fits wider Indonesian debates in which polygamy is both legally permitted and publicly contested as a site of gendered inequality (Brenner, 2006; Rohman, 2013; Sari, 2023), while platformed religious romance amplifies emotionally familiar scripts through recommendation, comments, and serial consumption (Fahmy et al., 2025).

These gender patterns grow from meeting point of religious pedagogy, media stereotypes, and platform economy. Commercial storytelling often casts women as emotional, nurturing, and self-sacrificing, while men receive plots of competence, action, and moral transformation (Santonniccolo et al., 2023). In Indonesian Islamic popular culture, this pattern intersects with da'wah-oriented narratives that present women's lives as lessons in *sabr* (patience), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *tawakkal* (trust in God). Polygamous romance gives these virtues an intense dramatic setting. A woman is hurt, displaced, or betrayed, yet her value rises when she remains patient and faithful. A man fails, repents, and returns as provider or protector. This structure also fits a wider public culture in which polygamy is both religiously defended and commercially packaged as moral instruction (Sari, 2023). KBM strengthens the pattern through its digital economy. Premium chapters, subscriber counts, reader comments, and algorithmic promotion encourage authors to repeat genres and character types that already attract attention (Fahmy et al., 2025). The result is not accidental. These serials use gender models that are culturally familiar, religiously resonant, and platform-profitable. More egalitarian stories may exist, but they must compete with formulas that already promise tears, piety, conflict, and male redemption.

Two serials do not defend male authority through explicit argument; they embed it in prayer, family advice, marital command, and women's hesitation to speak. Ammar is described as "*imam yang tak pernah lalai berjamaah, bahkan ketika rumahnya sendiri retak*" (an imam who never neglects congregational prayer, even when his own household is breaking apart). His mother then instructs Nindy, "*Laki-laki seperti Ammar tidak boleh digugat, Nak. Tugasmu hanya menjaga hatinya*" (A man like Ammar must not be questioned. Your duty is only to protect his heart). In *Misteri Anak-Anakku*, Satria uses the same logic of husbandly command: "*Seorang suami berhak menentukan yang terbaik untuk keluarganya*" (A husband has the right to decide what is best for his family). Sarah's hesitation is silenced through obedience; her doubt becomes "*lidah yang kelu di hadapan lelaki yang selama ini ia taati*" (a tongue frozen before the man she had long obeyed). These sentences do more than reveal individual attitudes. They place male leadership and female submission at the emotional centre of domestic life. Indonesian debates on polygamy often defend the practice through claims of male sacrifice, religious duty, and family responsibility, even when women's rights perspectives expose its harms (Brenner, 2006; Sari, 2023). Hasan (2022) also shows how patriarchal readings of religious texts can normalize women's subordination under the language of morality. In these KBM serials, that public logic becomes household drama. Polygamy is not argued in legal terms; it is felt through mothers' advice, husbands' commands, wives' silence, and scenes of pious suffering. Women compete, endure, and obey; men decide, repent, and remain heroic.

Polygamy in these serials is narrated less as a shared marital decision than as a test imposed on women, whose anger must be softened into patience and whose suffering must be given religious meaning. Major decisions (marrying another woman, hiding children, granting divorce, or withholding it) belong largely to husbands. Consultation may occur, but usually with male authority figures, not with the wives most affected by the decision. When women resist, the plot narrows their anger into personal weakness. Sevia's outbursts become "*kemarahan yang membutakan*" (anger that blinds), while Eva's control over the household is linked to wealth, pride, and possessiveness

rather than to a legitimate fear of abandonment. By contrast, Nindy and Sarah are praised because they suffer quietly. Their patience, prayer, and self-restraint become signs of ideal Muslim womanhood. This pattern echoes studies showing that Indonesian polygamy narratives often expose women's pain while still preserving male authority as the final moral centre (Brenner, 2006; Wajiran, 2018). It also reflects how patriarchal interpretations of religion can make unequal marriage appear ethical, even sacred (Hasan, 2022). The most revealing phrase is "*surga itu mahal*" (heaven is costly). In these serials, jealousy, loneliness, and humiliation become tests on path to divine reward. Polygamy is therefore not presented only as domestic conflict. It becomes a moral drama in which women compete, endure, and forgive, while men fail, repent, and remain entitled to lead. Such storytelling helps explain why polygamy-centred romance can feel emotionally persuasive on KBM: it converts unequal power into pious sacrifice and romantic resolution (Sari, 2023).

These serials resonate because they place KBM romance inside Indonesia's contested landscape of law, religion, and popular media. Polygamy is legally possible under specific conditions, yet it remains morally disputed in public debate, especially among women's rights advocates, Muslim feminists, and reform-minded religious voices (Brenner, 2006; Sari, 2023). The serials absorb this tension by turning legal and theological conflict into domestic feeling. In one direction, state law and religious discourse provide the language of permission, duty, leadership, and family protection. In another, popular fiction turns that language into scenes of jealousy, forgiveness, betrayal, and reunion. KBM sits at centre of these forces. Many of its writers are women, and many of its readers respond emotionally to stories that make patriarchal norms appear both painful and familiar. When Ammar is praised for taking responsibility for Nindy and Kimmy, or when Sarah is admired for forgiving rather than leaving, readers do more than follow a plot. They participate in moral rehearsal of gendered expectations. Patriarchal power, in these stories, rarely appears as crude coercion. It appears as realism: a husband must lead, a wife must endure, and a wounded family must be repaired. This helps explain why polygamy-centred romance remains attractive. It allows readers to feel the harm of unequal marriage while still imagining reconciliation through male repentance, female patience, and religiously framed domestic order (Fahmy et al., 2025; Wajiran, 2018).

KBM polygamous romance matters because it turns patriarchal family ideals into stories that can be read as entertainment, moral guidance, and emotional companionship. These serials reach readers who increasingly encounter Islamic values not only through sermons or printed books, but also through digital fiction, comments, recommendations, and shared affect (Fahmy et al., 2025; Williams, 2006). Within this space, polygamy is made familiar through scenes of humiliation, forgiveness, rivalry, and reunion. Nindy's expulsion from Ammar's house invites sympathy for the wounded second wife. Sarah's horror after discovering that her children were taken from her exposes the violence hidden beneath Satria's paternal authority. Yet the serial form also leaves room for disagreement. Some readers may condemn the men's actions as "toxic" or "*bukan poligami syar'i*" (not a sharia-compliant polygamy), while others praise female patience as proof of faith. This tension matters. Patriarchal ideology remains strong, but it is not uncontested. KBM becomes a space where readers cry, judge, defend, reject, and reinterpret polygamous marriage, one episode at a time. As studies on Indonesian Islamic fiction and polygamy debates suggest, such stories often reveal women's suffering while still returning moral order to male repentance, authority, and household restoration (Sari, 2023; Wajiran, 2018). The platform therefore does not simply circulate romance. It helps negotiate which forms of marriage, obedience, and female endurance become emotionally legitimate for digital Muslim readers.

The popularity of these serials grows from the meeting point of money, feeling, and religion. On KBM, stories that fit familiar ideals of family and gender are easier to recognise, follow, and recommend. Conservative domestic plots can attract loyal readers, and loyal readers raise visibility through views, subscriptions, comments, and repeated engagement. The emotional logic works in the same direction. Readers are invited to cry over women who endure humiliation, betrayal, and

loss, yet the story still promises male repentance, divine reward, and restored domestic order. This pattern reflects wider media habits that attach women to care, sacrifice, and emotional labour, while giving men plots of competence, authority, and transformation (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). The religious appeal is equally strong. These serials echo da'wah language that presents obedience, patience, gratitude, and trust in God as signs of pious womanhood. Polygamous romance gives that lesson a dramatic setting: a woman suffers, waits, and forgives; a man fails, repents, and returns as protector. Such narratives resonate with Indonesian public debates in which polygamy is both religiously defended and commercially packaged as moral guidance (Sari, 2023). They also match studies of Indonesian Islamic fiction, where women's suffering is often made visible while male authority remains intact (Wajiran, 2018). In this platform economy, *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* and *Misteri Anak-Anakku* are not exceptional cases. They are likely products of a system where emotional intensity, religious familiarity, and patriarchal romance make a serial readable, marketable, and ideologically effective (Fahmy et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Across two KBM serials, *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* and *Misteri Anak-Anakku*, the analysis shows that formulaic plotting, gendered voice, and patriarchal common sense work together to make polygamous romance both emotionally compelling and morally thinkable for large female readerships. Cawelti's notion of formulaic narrative helps illuminate how recurrent ensembles of the virtuous but flawed husband, rival wives, miracle children, and rescuing male figures stabilise a script in which transgressive desire and domestic cruelty can still end in spiritualised reconciliation (Cawelti, 1976; Wajiran, 2018). Read through Williams's account of gendered literacies in digital spaces, these serials further demonstrate how women's voices dominate register of feeling and confession, while crucial choices remain attached to male characters' reason and authority, echoing broader media patterns that align femininity with care and masculinity with competence (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Williams, 2006). Finally, work on Indonesian debates over polygamy and patriarchal ideology clarifies why narratives that validate male headship and valorise women's patient endurance are not only legible but intensely marketable in digital Islamic fiction (Brenner, 2006; Fahmy et al., 2025; Hasan, 2022). Taken together, these insights suggest that two KBM novels function as narrative laboratories where readers rehearse, contest, and re-naturalise polygamy as a scene of suffering, piety, and ultimately redeemable male authority. These narrative lessons are the central interpretive gain of the investigation for readers.

The main strength of this study lies in its triangulated conceptual and methodological approach, which brings together formula theory, digital literacy studies, and feminist readings of Islamic family discourse in a single, text-focused design. By treating the serials simultaneously as patterned popular romance, as instances of gendered writing and reading on a commercial platform, and as carriers of Islamic moral pedagogy, this analysis moves beyond earlier work that tended to isolate either literary form or socio-religious context (Brenner, 2006; Wajiran, 2018). Combining Cawelti's, Williams's, and Indonesian feminist scholarship also refines existing variables for studying Islamic popular fiction, offering a portable toolkit for mapping how plot conventions, platform architectures, and patriarchal norms interact in other genres and media (Fahmy et al., 2025; Williams, 2006). The KBM corpus thus sharpens debates on Islamic romance.

At the same time, the scope of the corpus and the focus on a single platform necessarily limit the generalisability of the conclusions. *Belahan Jiwa yang Hilang* and *Misteri Anak-Anakku* represent only a small fraction of the vast and heterogeneous field of contemporary Indonesian Islamic popular prose, which spans print bestsellers, film and web-series adaptations, independent webfiction, and cross-platform fan communities (Fahmy et al., 2025; Sudibyo et al., 2025). A larger comparative sample, including narratives that explicitly reject or experiment with non-patriarchal marital models, would allow stronger claims about the range and evolution of polygamous romance formulas.

Moreover, this study reads comment fields and paratexts only selectively; future work could incorporate systematic reader-response analysis, platform data, and interviews with authors to trace how audiences negotiate, appropriate, or resist the scripts identified here (Santonniccolo et al., 2023). Such extensions would help clarify whether the narrative logics observed in these two serials are typical, aspirational, or increasingly contested within Indonesia's changing digital Islamic literary ecology. Extending this analysis across platforms, reader communities, and transnational Muslim contexts would reveal whether similar formulas and gendered scripts circulate, mutate, or fracture beyond the specific narrative ecologies examined here.

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