

# Contemporary Indonesian Pesantren Novels: Articulating Muslim Women Existence and Ideal Male-female Relationship

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**Abstract:** Gender issues in pesantren literature have become an important topic through which readers of contemporary Indonesian literature find ideas about Muslim women in Indonesia. Despite various perspective of gender among Muslim in Indonesia, some pesantren writers offer their specific ideas about Indonesian Muslim women. This article aims to find out the ideas, especially about Muslim women's existence and Muslim male-female ideal relationship the pesantren writers present in their works. In the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the analysis explores the ethical and moral ideas concerning Muslim women's existence and ideal Muslim male-female relationship.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Indonesian literature in the first period of twenty first century recognized a large number of novelists with pesantren backgrounds. They produced new creative works, followed by their popularity and influence on other media, such as film and television, (Hoesterey and Clark, 2012; Rani, 2012). The emergence of the large number of novels by pesantren writers indicates their significance in Indonesian literature and Muslim society as well. The factors influencing the emergence of such novels are the celebration of new freedoms by Muslims after the suppression of the New Order era, the emergence of a new Muslim middle class, the commodification of Islam, and the revival of religious expression (Hoesterey and Clark, 2012; Fealy, 2008). Previous studies on pesantren novels concern with patriarchal Islam, gender, Muslim identity, popular culture, Islamic literature in general and traditional Islamic poems (Abdullah, 1996; Candraningrum, 2007; Arimbi, 2009; Arnez, 2009; Hellwig, 2011; Dewi, 2011; Rani, 2012). The studies conclude that similar to other Islam-labelled products (books, films, television programs, and fashion) pesantren novels are produced for economic and political reasons. Economically, they are closely related to consumer capitalism, Islamic culture industry, cosmopolitan culture and popular taste

(Howell, 2013; Hasan, 2009; Jones, 2010). Politically, they are linked to the government's policy on democratic freedom that gives people freedom of expression, including religious expression (Heriyanto 2008; Widodo, 2008).

Gender issues as one of the main concerns of pesantren novels are also found in the works of three prolific writers, that is, Habiburrahman El Shirazy, A. Fuadi, and Abidah El Khalieqy. The three writers share the same ideas of a worldwide Muslim community and devotion to Islam as the main principle of life in their novels, that is, Shirazy's *The Romance* (2010), Fuadi's *Negeri 5 Menara* (2009), and Khalieqy's *Mataraisa* (2012). As pesantren alumni, they also share similar ideas and experience about pesantren. Pesantren with various values, including gender relation, can be found along their stories that each focuses on different themes but with the same spirit to proselytize Islam among young Indonesian Muslims who are in the stage of finding self-identity. In this stage, the need of knowledge of male-female relationship is of utmost. Hence, male-female relationship is the most requested topic and the three writers discuss the topic specifically among other topics they write. In *The Romance*, for example, Habiburrahman El Shirazy mainly talk about the way man finds good way to be good and successful person in his life. As generally in his novels, this novel also tells about love romance story. The love story is included in the

pursuit of a good life. Romantic relation between a man and a woman is still considered important that determines the happiness of their lives. Along the story, the value about male-female relationship is slipped but it still gets important portion among the love stories.

In this article the discussion of gender issues focuses on the ethical ideas of the issues. Discussion of ethical ideas on the life of Muslim women challenges the thorough explanation of three terms, that is, ethics, women, and Islam that relate to each other on the discussion of ethics of gender and women in Islam. Ethics of gender gives a perspective on how it is to be women and how it is to be men ethically and what it is ethical treatment to women and men. The discussion of women in Islam relates to how women are viewed in Islam and this includes the discussion of ethics.

This article aims to explore the ethical ideas of gender issues presented in the three novels and specifically focuses on women existence and ideal male-female relations. It is expected to give some perspectives about the ethical ideas of gender issues in pesantren novels and open other perspectives about the same topics or other topics in the study of pesantren novels or literature.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethics and gender in western tradition is explained by Parsons (2002) who tries to make relation between ethics that has long established in the tradition of western thinking with the notions in gender theory and gender studies. Parsons defines ethics as having three features, that is, ethics as a discourse concerning good that should be learned by participating in the discourse ourselves, ethics as a textual field in which our lives follow its thinking, ethics as a deliberate practice that gives a way to shape our lives because ethics gives a bridge between our lives and what is called good. To think with gender leads to the way of thinking about what it is to be a woman and what it is to be a man (Parsons, 2002: 9-17). Gender issues are closely related to the discussion of ethics in that the issues challenge almost all dimensions of ethical thinking. Ethics relate to gender issues in the question of how the notions of good are defined in the context of men and women's reality (Parsons, 2002: 4).

The ethics of gender in the western perspectives are here related to the view of Islam on gender issues. Many Muslim scholars have paid specific attentions on how Islam views gender issues. One of the prominent discussions is concerned with the interpretation of an important

verse of the Qur'an describing the relationship between men and women that is proposed by Chaudhry (2013). She focuses on the two different interpretations of the verse (Q 4: 34), that is "Islamic tradition" interpretation and gender-egalitarian interpretation. The general interpretation (more according to pre-colonial Muslim scholars or Islamic tradition) of the verse into "Men are qawwamun (in authority) over women, because God has preferred some other and because they spend of their wealth..." is interpreted in the perspectives of egalitarian ethics. The spot of difference between the Islamic tradition based and modern interpretation to the verse is on the word *qawwamuna* that in traditional interpretation it is interpreted as "having authority to" while in egalitarian interpretation the meaning does not suggest authority but equality so that there is no subjugation of women. Chaudhry focuses her discussion on the marital violence that is legitimate based on the Islamic tradition interpretation. She questions the ethical problems of the domestic violence and the answer is to bring egalitarian "that treat men and women with equal human worth" (Chaudhry, 2013: 8). This also deals with hermeneutical negotiation that meets its correspondence to a gender-egalitarian Islam that find its way to the fact about the compatibility between Islam and modernity.

Concerning the position of men and women in Islam, Amina Wadud (1999) criticises the interpretation of traditional Muslim scholars to the Qur'an that only uses verse per verse interpretation from the beginning to the end of the Holy Book. This kind of interpretation ignores the relation between a verse to the others, among all the verses and a verse to the whole meaning of the Qur'an. It is not a holistic interpretation so that it could miss the whole meaning of the Holy Book. Similarly, the method that relates the various ideas, syntactic structure, themes and the related principles is not conducted. In this respect, the kind of interpretation is only partial that the result is questionable. Modern Muslim scholars inquire the traditional approach to the interpretation of the position of women in Islam in relation to men. However, the approach is still used by most of Muslim scholars at present. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999) in her study reports that one of the approaches used by Shia religious leaders in Iran to discuss gender issues is that of traditional patriarchal interpretation that demonstrates complementary but unequal relation between men and women. This approach clearly represents the traditional approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an. One of the verses that arises so many discussions about the position of women and men in Islam is Q 4: 34.

Related to the context of Indonesian Muslim women in pesantren, gender equality has obtained its place in pesantren sphere. Ismah (2016) in her study finds that the existence of female ulama is identified as destabilising the male domination. Female ulama have existed in the history of pesantren but their authority has not been as strong as male ulama. In contemporary development the condition has changed in that the female ulama have now obtained increasing supports from male ulama to get their religious, social and cultural, and institutional authority. In related context, in her study of Muslim girls and religious authority in a Modernist Islamic boarding school in Indonesia, Hefner (2016) concludes that in spite of the decreasing interest of girls to attend modernist Islamic boarding school whose aim is to mould the future female leaders even shows a positive change in that Muslim women or in this study Muhammadiyah women involve in broader scope and proceed to the higher ranks of various social and educational fields. The movement places women in to the position of higher education and profession that show the fact about the role of education as a powerful force for gender change and their potential roles for transformation.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This study is a literary criticism and uses ethical criticism as the literary theory to analyse the novels. Ethical criticism is employed to explore the ethical ideas of women existence and ideal male-female relationship. Ethical criticism is concerned with the ethical and moral values of literary works and how the values affect the readers (Gregory, 2010; Booth, 2005). As a literary criticism it assesses value systems (Womack, 2002: 106-107). The significance of ethical criticism has been shown in many studies. Marshall W. Gregory (2010) shows ethical criticism can even work to a literary work that does not apparently show any ethical references. Stephen K. George (1997) finds out that in spite of bad experience the character still has responsibility and moral progress at the end. This insight can only be done by the application of ethical perspective to literature. In another study James Phelan (1998) analyses the ethical perspectives on the choice of the main character to kill her children rather than let them return to slavery. The choice is considered beyond the standard ethical judgement, but it clarifies that slavery is really an evil, not any more an abstract evil. Ethical criticism enables critics to explore such ideas.

## 4 ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Women Existence

The female characters in the novels by the three writers are involved much in gender issues at different levels. The issues lead to the identification of women existence because when women fall victim to the gender issues the result is always the comparison between men and women and the question about the existence of women compared to men. The three novels have female characters with different background and character.

The main female characters in *The Romance* are Zizi and Silvie, young women with different family backgrounds but a similar interest in Islamic teaching and its application in everyday life. Zizi is a daughter of a *Kiai* or Muslim scholar and pesantren owner. She is a *hafidhah* or a woman who memorizes the Qur'an and studies Islamic teachings seriously in a pesantren since she was a child. Silvie is a daughter of a rich businessman, a university student and very fashionable but religious. The choice of these two different characters is not without any reason. The two women are involved in romantic relationships with the same man, but at the end of the story Silvie is killed in an accident. It seems that the writer gives his preference to a woman with a very religious background while also giving respect to the woman with non-specific religious background but very religious. Although the writer never directly talks about the existence of women in the novel, through the main female characters, the existence of women can be identified from the novel. His idea on this matter can be explored from the way he presents his female characters, the way they build relation with the male characters, and how the male characters treat them as women.

In *The Romance* the writer presents the female characters as bright and respected. As a daughter of a *Kiai* and a *hafidhah*, Zizi has a very high position as a woman in Muslim society. Similarly, as a daughter of a respectable businessman, a university student, and having good religious knowledge, Silvie is also considered as having high position. Both main female characters in the novel are presented in a socially good position and are described as ideal women to whom the male characters idolize. Their relation with the male characters is in equal position. Zizi, in spite of a woman coming from a pesantren family she can express her ideas freely among the men of the family members. She also builds an equal relationship with other male characters or even the other male characters put her in a higher place than their own

due to her position as the daughter of a *Kiai*. The members of pesantren owner family have privileges and honour from the society. In the relation between man and woman, Zizi places herself as equal to them, even in personal matters, such as marriage proposal. It is actually rare in Indonesian people in general, except in certain ethnics that women propose for marriage but Zizi does it. The writer does not consider the common custom in Indonesian society but the Islamic rules in proposing a marriage. Here, the writer also shows one of the Islamic rules that are new and not recognized by Indonesian people in general. This also shows that Islam treats women and men as equal. They have the same and equal rights, even in a very personal matter, such as marriage proposal. The male characters and also the other characters treat Zizi as a respected woman. They listen to her and respect her. Correspondingly, Silvie is also presented as a respected woman. Even she has been treated badly by one of the male characters, it is not because she is not respected but the male character, Burhan, is actually a bad guy. Silvie is Syamsul's, the main male character, fiancée who is finally dead because of an accident. The accident leads to the engagement between Syamsul and Zizi. The two women become models of good women in Muslim society. Both of them represent women from completely different background but the same interest in Islam. They are the representation of Muslim women in current Indonesian Muslim society. Not only Zizi and Silvie, but also all other female characters are treated respectfully. None of them get bad treatment from male characters. This shows that women described in *The Romance* have equal rights and are respected as men.

In *Negeri 5 Menara* Alif's mother and Ustad Khalid's wife and daughter, Sarah, represent female characters. Fuadi represents female characters that also play important roles in the development of the novel. Alif's mother, Amak, is a very strong and tough woman. For Alif, she is the best model of woman. Compared to his father, Amak has stronger power that finally makes Alif goes to pesantren. With the background of Minangkabau culture that is not patriarchal but matriarchal, Amak's role in the family is very significant. However, there is no sign that the father's role is not respected. The writer who is also the narrator of the novel, describes Amak as not only strong but also with all character that supports her strength. She is discipline, self-reliant, determined and decisive. Supported by the cultural privilege as a Minangkabau woman who holds the power of the family line, Amak is an innate strong woman. The cultural privilege only supports because personally Amak is a woman with strong character who has great concern with the development of the

people, not only her family but also her community and human in general. Such concern is represented in all aspects of her life, as a member of a big family, a mother, a wife, a teacher, a colleague, and a member of society. She is concerned with the character building and moral development of her children, her family, her students, her colleagues, and even her superordinates. She is a very brave woman. Concerning with character and morality, she has no accuse if immorality happens around her. It starts from her strong personality that enables her to do something that not many people have courage to do that, which is, challenging whoever doing something immoral, even her colleagues and her superordinates. In a condition where people choose to save themselves more than refining the condition that may cause negative impacts personally, Amak chooses to be in front of them to refine the condition. She does not care who does that and she is not afraid of any consequences that may be harmful for her personally. But instead of getting the consequences, Amak can motivate other people to do the same, refining the condition and their morality. For her family and her children Amak is a model they use as a patron of doing good things in their lives. Amak motivates Alif very much. Whenever he loses his spirit of study, he remembers Amak's strong spirit in facing her life. Other female characters, Ustad Khalid's wife and daughter represent women in pesantren environment. They have only small role in the novel but significantly present the writer's presentation of women. As a wife and daughter of an Ustad in pesantren, they do the roles perfectly. They do not much involve in the pesantren business but give big support for their husband and father to be great ustad with total dedication, ignoring their worldly needs to be successful in general image. For Ustad Khalid, dedication to the pesantren is a life choice, it is his dedication to education and Islam. Without considering his economic success, he devotes his knowledge and energy to pesantren. His wife and daughter fully support his choice. The support is very valuable for Ustad Khalid to dedicate himself to pesantren. Women's roles in supporting men's career are considered very important and they must support to each other. The description shows us that women and men in this novel exist side by side in complete harmony. Amak is a teacher and Ustad Khalid's wife is a housewife. Both of them play their roles harmoniously.

Different from the two novels, *Mataraisa* questions and corrects many things about the existence of women. *Mataraisa* looks at women from the eyes of a famous woman writer, Raisa, the main character of the novel. Her concern with women inherently appears and integrates with her

personality as a result of long and deep experience of male-female relationship in her personal life. Since she was a child she witnesses uneven relation pattern between her own mother and father. As a young girl she has realised how man and woman should relate to each other. Her concern with gender issues is her innate capacity as a human being and a woman. Her eyewitness of other women's bad experience of gender issues enriches this concern from time to time. It seems that she was born as a woman with great concern with her woman fellow's condition. As a result, this novel becomes true portrait of women condition shot by the pure eyes of a woman with deep and brilliant views of women's problem and gender issues.

As a writer, Raisa thinks that her noble duty is to give enlightenment over the unfair condition for women. She acknowledges that it is gender issues that she is familiar with because she is a woman. For her, it is not related to the label of a feminist, and more, a liberal feminist. The statement implies that women will understand their own problems in the best way. Women can perfectly look into their own situation. This novel seems a perfect novel to portrait woman condition since both the writer and the main character are women.

The representation of women in the novel is viewed from Islamic perspective. Raisa has pesantren educational background. As a woman good in Islamic knowledge, Raisa has ample capacity to talk about women and their problems in Islamic perspective. Along the story, she not only talks about her own problem as a woman, even she talks more about women's problem in her society. She not only discusses the existence of women from the very basic perspective but also tries to help them overcome their problems. Her concern with women includes in her duty of life as a human, a woman, and a Muslim.

The first thing that *Mataraisa* questions and corrects is concerned with the basic creation of women compared to men. There is a common belief that women are created from men's bent rib. This makes women become subordinate to men because their function is only to complete men's existence. A woman is only a part of a man so that she has no roles at all except as a complement of men's existence. This novel tries to correct that based on the Qur'an women and men are equally created from soil through gradual processes. Raisa's witness of how her father treats her mother leads her to ask all the time about the real existence of women compared to men, including the question about the creation of human beings. Through Raisa this novel wants to give appropriate answer for many questions that have never been answered and still become big questions for many people. All are basic questions

about the existence of women compared to men. Another question is about women's intellectual capacity. Since a child, Raisa always listens to her father saying that women's brain is smaller than men's and the quantity of the brain influences the quality of thinking so that women is considered having less logical capacity. Raisa cannot accept this even she is still a child and always refuses when his father says that her mother is not clever because of her brain size. Raisa is always so curious about the truth about the size of women's brain that finally she read an article that the size of a cow's brain is bigger than a man's. She is so happy to find the fact and that she can mock his father to be more stupid than a cow. One more, this novel tries to correct what people think in general about women's capacity of thinking.

Clarifying the existence of women seems the main mission of this novel. The creation of men and women from the same substance, that is, soil, is the essence of all concepts of the equality between men and women. God give them distinctions to each of them. The difference between them does not make them unequal. They are equal with their own distinctions, their own excellences by which they can complete to each other. Women's excellences are that they have reproductive organs, they have honourable positions as the mothers of human beings, and they are given extraordinary power and strong mentality. With the excellences women are truly the mothers of culture and the subjects of civilization. The excellences require them to access knowledge to the highest level. The facts of subordination to women are the results of distortion to the excellences by some authorities for many centuries. The facts that women in any situation and with any background always experience bad and unequal treatment are undeniable. Raisa in her novel reveals that not only women from lower class society experience such bad experience, but those from upper class society and other milieus with various background, such as pesantren, Arab culture, intellectuals, students, artists and those with extreme religious conception and the others. Raisa is directed to be for Raisa, her novel is as her efforts to support the thinking revolution concerning women's positions, especially after they reach intellectual and economic independence and correct interpretation to the verses of the Qur'an. Raisa always tries to inseminate her ideas about women's excellences in all occasions.

From all of the presentation about women in the three novels, we can see that the three writers have no difference in concepts of women existence. They may present in different ways and different angles, but they have one similar concept on women's excellences.

The ethics emerges in the novels include the three dimensions of feminist ethics, that is, ethics of equality, ethics of difference, and ethics of liberation. Ethic of equality gives the idea of goodness in equal relationship among human beings regardless the gender. Ethics of difference is based on feminist positive claim to the differences of women and men. Women and men have natural differences and distinctive qualities and characteristics that even can be used to revalue them as equal or even superior to those of men. Ethics of liberation involves the notion of goodness in this ethic is based on the belief that trueness and goodness are the products of the particular historical situation, material circumstances and social conditions in which women and men's lives are formed into the roles and activities in order to keep the good required in the social-economic condition. The ethics brings a sense of responsibility for women to shape their own lives and to change the conditions in which they are living. The expected result is more humane social relationship for women and men.

#### 4.2 Ideal Male-female Relationship

The concept of ideal male-female relationship in the three novels seems refreshed and different from the old conception of male-female relationship. The three writers in their own ways present new conceptions that will open the readers' minds on how Muslim men and women should interact and relate to each other. The three novels seem to remake and also refine the common concept of male-female Muslim relationship. The common concept in general asserts that men are the leaders of women. This concept denotes that men will have initiatives of everything and women should follow men. This concept is redefined in the three novels.

*Mataraisa* clearly present the redefinition of male-female relationship. Looking at her parents' relationship pattern, Raisa learns how women and men should relate to each other. Her father is typical old-fashioned Muslim man who holds a belief that men are superior to women. In relation to his wife he determines everything and makes his wives only stay at home and he is responsible to any economic needs of their households. He believes that women have no capacity to do something more than those of domestic affairs. The husband or man in general determines the relationship pattern between husband and wife or man and woman. Women have no power and capacity to determine any affairs, including the domestic one. In short, women are only subordinates who have to follow what men want and ask. Women are only complements and have no important roles

in this world. For Raisa, the relation between her father and mother gives many lessons and perspective to redefine the relation pattern between man and woman. Not only the relation between her father and mother but also the polygamy in her father's households gives perspectives of an ideal relationship between men and women. Raisa witnesses how women in polygamist family feel from the very inside hearts of her two mothers. They can live peacefully because of their sincerity and compliance to accept the condition. But the fact that her mother always felt unhonoured as a woman because of her father's treatment cannot be denied. From the personal experience, Raisa has her ideal about male and female relationship that she wants to create in her future and this is what she always presents in her novels.

For Raisa, ideal male-female relationship lies on the equality between men and women. Women and men have the same rights and they are not superiors and subordinates but equal partners. Concerning the relation between husbands and wives, both of them should complete to each other. A husband and a wife are soul mates that will find a part of him in her and vice versa a part of her in him. Nothing is less and nothing is more. If people want to know a husband, they can see his wife. It means that a wife is the reflection of her husband and a husband is also the reflection of his wife. That is in accordance with a verse in the Qur'an, "Hunna لباسun lakum wa antum لباسun lahunna." If a husband is bad so is his wife, if a wife is bad so is her husband. In this context no one can say that men are superior to women. In Islam the term '*kufu*' meaning the same level is known in the context of marriage. A husband to be and the wife to be are in the same level. That implies that no husband or wife is in lower level than the other. Marriage in Islam will not distort women's dignity. That is what Raisa worries about before deciding to get married. Marriage will make women busy with household chores, childcare and other domestic affairs. Raisa criticizes the facts that some marriages trap women into domestic affairs. They have no chance to improve their capacity because they will be busy with pregnancy, giving birth, caring for the children while his husband can improve his career. At the end, women will only be plunged in the corner of the house without any hope to improve their lives, while men will enjoy their successful careers. For Raisa, the goal of marriage that only produces children cannot be accepted at all. In a marriage women and men should improve and develop their capacities and potentials to make better and more qualified lives, not only for them but also for their next generation and society in general.

She describes how men can voluntarily feel and think as equal to women through her ideal man, Fozan Ibadi. For a long time Raisa has been haunted with her thought and imagination of how man will treat woman because of her bad experience of seeing how her father treats her mother. Due to this thought, she cannot decide to accept Fozan Ibadi as her husband while she actually falls in love with him and even decides not to get married if she cannot find a man who can treat woman equally as a man. The thought and imagination influences her so much and it is a serious problem for her that she cannot stop being worried about her husband to be. She finally decides to accept Fozan Ibadi due to his promise and her belief that Fozan is the man who will treat her as a human not as a woman that is different from man. Raisa can see that Fozan Ibadi is different from her father and believes that he is the right man who will respect her and understand about the equality between man and woman. That is the ideal man she has imagined.

Fozan Ibadi is an ideal man for Raisa. He is a typical romantic but serious man. Their relationship is little bit different compared to Indonesian people in general. Fozan Ibadi is like an admirer for Raisa. He not only falls in love with Raisa but also voluntarily wants to be a person who will do anything for her. Raisa's character as a woman is also different from Indonesian women in general. As a woman, she is very independent, self-confident, brilliant, educated, easy-going, and determined. The character of both of them is compatible and complete to each other. This creates an equal relationship that is a requirement for an ideal male-female relationship.

The ideal male-female relationship also shows ethics of equality, ethics of difference, and ethics of liberation. There is no fundamental difference between women and men. Full humanity brings about a fundamental equality of human beings that is grounded in the capacity of human beings for reasoning and for understanding. The base of the emphasis on the capacity of reason can be found in the theological insight. The insight is in line with feminist idea that the common possession of reason and moral consciousness refers to the actual capacities of men and women.

Humans are gendered persons and the abstraction about universal humanity. This becomes an ethic concerning the differences between men and women, the existence of gender differences, and the importance of social order of roles and relationships that enable our gendered identities to be manifested. The notion about the naturalness and the function of social order that enable differences to grow in balance and in complementary will be the best for women and men together.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

In spite of different representation, the three pesantren writers demonstrate somewhat similar ideas about Muslim women existence and the male-female relationship. The pesantren novels present the excellence of Muslim women. They are described as intellectual, independent, and equal as men. Their relationship to men shows a new kind of male-female relationship pattern compared to the pattern in the previous era. Muslim women and men have equal right and responsibility even they may change their position in certain task. Ethical ideas shown in the analysis include ethics of equality, ethics of difference, and ethics of liberation.

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