

THE REPRESENTATION AND PRODUCTION OF GENDER LITERACY IN *PESANTREN* LITERATURE Tensions between Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract: This study examines the interplay of gender representation and cultural production within Indonesian *pesantren* literature by analyzing three novels: *Dian Wisanggeni* by Dian Latifa, *Hati Subita* by Khilma Anis, and *Dua Barista* by Najhaty Sharma. Written by female authors with *pesantren* backgrounds, these novels highlight the tensions between tradition and modernity while advocating gender empowerment. Through textual and production analyses, supported by interviews with the authors, the research identifies central themes of gender literacy, including the portrayal of educated and independent female protagonists who challenge patriarchal norms. The findings reveal how these narratives navigate traditional *pesantren* hierarchies, explore the reconciliation of religious and modern identities, and address the broader societal implications of gender inequality. The study situates *pesantren* literature within the framework of Indonesian literary tradition and underscores its potential as a medium for enhancing gender awareness. By bridging Javanese traditions with Islamic values, these works inspire dialogue on the roles of Muslim women in both domestic and public spheres, fostering a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary Islamic contexts.

Keywords: Gender literacy, *Pesantren* literature, representation and production analysis.

Introduction

The rising number of gender-based violence cases in Indonesia in recent years highlights the persistence of gender inequality as a critical issue in this country. According to the 2023 annual report by the

National Commission on Violence Against Women, there were 339,782 cases of gender-based violence, with 99% (336,804 cases) occurring in the private sphere, while 2,978 cases were recorded in the public sphere and 68 cases in the national scope. These recurring instances of violence suggest a low level of gender literacy in society. Insufficient understanding and awareness of gender inequality contribute to various forms of discrimination, harassment, and physical, verbal, and sexual violence. Therefore, improving gender literacy is essential and can be achieved through various channels, including literary works.

Within Islamic literature, gender inequality often surfaces in the portrayal of male-female relationships, especially in issues like marriage and polygamy. Studies on Islamic novels have demonstrated that these narratives often reinforce patriarchal values by affirming the practice of polygamy.¹ However, other works, such as *Dua Barista*, present alternative representations by advocating socialist feminism through strong female protagonists and a preference for monogamy². These divergent portrayals illustrate that gender relations and equality in Islamic literature are understood and interpreted in various, sometimes contradictory, ways. This subjectivity reflects the influence of the author's perspective, affirming that literary works are not neutral or objective but are shaped by individual viewpoints³.

This study focuses on *pesantren* literature, a genre selected for its potential to enhance gender literacy in Islamic boarding schools. *Pesantren*, as institutions dedicated to religious education, have unfortunately ranked second in sexual violence cases between 2015

¹ Fajrul Falah, "Hegemoni Ideologi dalam Novel Ayat-Ayat Cinta Karya Habiburrahman el Shirazy (Kajian Hegemoni Gramsci)," *Nusa Ilmu Babasa Dan Sastra*, 13 (2018): 351–60; Aquari Mustikawati, "Perempuan Berkalung Sorban: Resistance Toward Patriarchy System in The Space of Tradition of Pesantren in East Java," *Widyaiset* 14 (2011): 93–100; Khoniq Nur Afiah, "Feminisme Dalam Pesantren Kajian Kritik Sastra Feminis Dalam Novel Dua Barista Karya Najhaty Sharma," *Gender Equality: International Journal of Child and Gender Studies* 7, (2021): p. 104–24.

² Furoidatul Husniah, "Representation of the Strengths of *Santri* Women in *Pesantren* Novels: a Feminism Anthropological Perspective," *International Journal of Anthropology* 37 (2022): 235-251.

³ Paul du Gay, *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production* (London: SAGE Production, 1997).

and 2021⁴. Given the influence of *pesantren* literature and its authors, these works hold significant potential to raise gender awareness among *pesantren* students and the broader readership.

In the tradition of Indonesian *pesantren*, perspectives on gender roles can be categorized into three paradigms: conservative, moderate, and liberal. The conservative paradigm rigidly separates gender roles, assigning women to the domestic sphere while positioning men as leaders in both private and public domains. This perspective is rooted in the Salaf interpretation of the Qur'anic verse *al-rijālu qanwāmūna 'alā al-nisā'*, understood as "men are those who rule and forbid women, as leaders govern their people." By contrast, the moderate paradigm affirms the intrinsic equality of dignity and honour between men and women in Islam but highlights differences in their roles, suggesting that certain responsibilities are better suited to one gender over the other, reflecting a complementarian approach. Meanwhile, the liberal paradigm promotes gender equality across all spheres, advocating for men's and women's full participation in both domestic and public life. This view emphasizes the need for contextual interpretations of sacred texts, adapting them to contemporary societal conditions while addressing the practical challenges of balancing dual responsibilities.⁵

While previous studies on gender inequality in literature have primarily concentrated on textual and reception analysis in Islamic fiction, the production aspect remains relatively underexplored. As part of the cultural circuit⁶, literary works are cultural artifacts shaped by intertwined processes of production, representation, consumption, and regulation. Applying this multilayered cultural circuit approach to *pesantren* literature is essential to understanding the broader dynamics at play. The sociological production analysis of contemporary Islamic novels has been conducted by Muzakki⁷. He finds that Islamic novel literature in Indonesia, particularly exemplified by *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, has

⁴ "[Data Komnas Perempuan, Pesantren Urutan Kedua Lingkungan Pendidikan dengan Kasus Kekerasan Seksual](#)" Kompas.com (2021).

⁵ Wardah Nuroniyah, "Gender Discourses within Pesantren in Cirebon: Understanding the Typologies of Kyais' Interpretations of the Concept of Qawwām", *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 7, 2 (2023).

⁶ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

⁷ Akhmad Muzakki, "Transmitting Islam Through Stories: The Sociology of Production and Consumption of Islam in Novel Literature," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11, 1 (2017): 59-76.

evolved into a significant commodity in the creative and cultural industry by effectively utilizing storytelling methods not only to transmit religious ideas but also to facilitate the production and consumption of economic commodities. He notes the market responses indicated consumer engagement that extends beyond mere purchases to a deeper exploration of the themes presented in these narratives. At this point, his study focused on the publishers and readers. The authors' point of view regarding the writing process and the production of the novels has not become the central issue to discuss. Thus, this study seeks to address gaps in prior research by focusing on representation and cultural production, specifically examining how the authors' gender literacy informs gender representation within their narratives to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how gender knowledge is produced and articulated through literary works. This approach offers a deeper and more nuanced analysis than previous studies, which often limited their focus to textual analysis without considering the context behind the production of gender knowledge in the texts.

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing both primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through close readings of three novels—*Wisanggeni*, *Dua Barista*, and *Hati Subita*. Secondary data includes biographical information about the authors, contextual details on the *pesantren* environment, and other relevant sources. The textual approach involves examining the intrinsic elements that illustrate gender issues. The result of the analysis serves as the basis for understanding the gender literacy of the authors, which is the second approach. Data for this process is obtained through interviews with Dian Latifa, the author of *Wisanggeni*, Khilma Anis, the author of *Hati Subita*, and Najhaty Sharma, the author of *Dua Barista*. Based on the textual and production analysis of the three novels, this study identifies several gender issues depicted in these works, which are categorized as follows: the representation of empowered Muslim women; the intersection of gender, tradition, and modernity; and gender and social hierarchy in *pesantren* tradition. However, to understand the contextual background of *pesantren* literature in Indonesia, it is needed to locate this subgenre in Indonesian Literature studies.

Locating *Pesantren* Literature

Pesantren literature has developed as an integral part of the *pesantren* tradition in Indonesia. This makes *pesantren* literature different from other types of literature. Abdurrahman Wahid⁸ mentions two characteristics of *pesantren* literature, namely, first, literary works that explore the customs in *pesantren*; and second, the existence of a *pesantren* psychological pattern with a strong religious structure (religious colour). Meanwhile, Ahmad Tohari⁹ emphasized that *pesantren* literature is literature that is written and flourished within the *pesantren* community itself, and carries the mission of *da'wah* (Islamic preaching). In its development, *pesantren* literature is not only influenced by classical traditions that refer to the works of classical scholars such as religious poetry, fables, and poetry. Along with the modernization of *pesantren*, *pesantren* literary works often involve contemporary themes and more varied writing styles.

Based on a historical study conducted by Tobrani,¹⁰ the tradition of *pesantren* literature began with the Tegalsari *pesantren* which was established in 1742. At that time, the *pesantren* became a place for palace poets such as Yasadipura I, Yasadipura II, and Ranggawarsita to write literary works in the form of *kakawin*, *serat* and *babad*. These poets used *kitab kuning* (the yellow book) and the history of the Hindu, and Buddhist kingdoms, and the Walisongo era as sources of inspiration. Thus, *pesantren* literary works during this period were often adaptations of works such as *Nusantara*, Middle Eastern, and Indian folklore which became the taste of *Islam Nusantara*. This adaptation had a socio-religious purpose, as shown in *Serat Cebolek* written by Yasadipura I, which shows the interweaving of mystical teachings and moral teachings. Another example is *Serat Sasana Sunu* by Yasadipura II. This literary work describes four ideal religious human personalities, symbolized by the characters of *priyayi*, *santri*, farmers, and merchants. Meanwhile, Ranggawarsita through his work *Serat Kalatidba*, reminds humans to believe and surrender to the will of Allah. The three works show the character of *pesantren* literature which prioritizes the theme of

⁸ A. Sunyoto, "Sastra Pesantren dalam Pergulatan," <https://sastra-indonesia.com/-2012/01/sastra-pesantren-dalam-pergulatan/>

⁹ Ahmad Tohari, "Sastra Pesantren, Sastra Dakwah," <https://nu.or.id/opini/sastra-pesantren-sastra-dakwah-q5868>

¹⁰ Roni Tabroni, "Sastra Pesantren dalam Lintasan Sejarah," *Tamaddun* 9, 2 (2019): 388-403.

Sufism and has additional socio-religious functions. *Pesantren* literature with these characteristics continued to develop until the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century.

In the mid-late 20th century, the tradition of *pesantren* literature experienced rapid development, with many *pesantren* literature writers becoming increasingly well-known, such as in the 1970s the emergence of Emha Ainun Nadjib who was an alumnus of the Gontor *Pesantren* who was known for his socio-religious poems. The 1980s and 1990s were known for writers including K.H. Mustofa Bisri or Gus Mus, the caretaker of the Raudlatut Tholibin Islamic Boarding School, Rembang, Jamal D. Rahman, Acep Zamzam Noor, son of the former Rois Syuriyah PBNU, KH Ilyas Rukyati (Tasikmalaya), Ahmad Syubbanuddin Alwy (son of a *kiai* from Cirebon), Abidah El-Khaliqy, Ahmad Tohari, Abdul Hadi WM, Zawawi Imron, Hamdi Salad, Nasruddin Anshory, Kuswaidi Syafii'e and others. Then in the 2000s, novelist Habiburrahman El-Shirazy emerged. These writers had studied at Islamic boarding schools and their works generally breathe the religious values of Islamic boarding schools (*ibid.*). The rise of writers with the *pesantren* tradition that emerged and the works they produced in this century gave rise to the label of *pesantren* literature as a new genre in the history of Indonesian literature.¹¹

Pesantren literature not only functions as a medium for artistic expression but is also used as a medium for education and preaching. *Pesantren* literature has enriched the treasury of Indonesian literature by providing a different perspective on life and spirituality. *Pesantren's* literary works often give voice to groups that are less heard in the mainstream literary narratives. *Pesantren* literature also plays a role in the development of modern literature in Indonesia by inspiring contemporary writers to process religious and social themes. Its influence can be seen in modern literary works that integrate spiritual and moral elements in their narratives.

The Representation of Empowered Muslim Women

Wisanggeni, *Dua Barista*, and *Hati Subita* share similarities in portraying Muslim women as the main characters. All three novels depict Muslim women with relatively high levels of education; the main characters of the novels have graduated from universities. It aligns with

¹¹ Sri Muniroch, "Pesantren Literature in Indonesian Literature Constellation," *Lingua* 9, 2 (2014): 155-166.

the educational backgrounds of Dian Latifa, who graduated from the English Literature program at Jenderal Soedirman University, and Khilma Anis, who graduated from UIN Sunan Kalijaga. Meanwhile, Najhaty Sharma – the author of *Dua Barista*, did not pursue formal higher education, as she chose to deepen her religious studies as preparation for teaching in *pesantren*¹². Nonetheless, she places great importance on education. For her, education is not limited to formal education alone. Studying religion is also a pursuit of knowledge, so there should be no dichotomy between formal education (studying in schools) and studying religion (in *pesantren*).

Equal access to education remains a significant gender inequality issue in Indonesia. Although opportunities for women to pursue education have increased, many still face challenges in accessing education comparable to that of men. This is largely due to the deeply ingrained patriarchal ideology that persists in society. In many cultures that adhere to traditional gender roles often dictate that women are responsible for household matters and child-rearing. In this context, formal education is often deemed less important for women compared to men, who are expected to be the primary providers for their families. This patriarchal ideology is one of the primary sources of the misinterpretation of Islamic teachings, which are perceived as restricting women's freedom to access education. Quranic verses and hadiths are selectively chosen and misinterpreted to reinforce and reproduce gender inequalities by actors and agents with vested interests in the subordination of women. Meanwhile, verses that emphasize equality and honour women are avoided.¹³ The portrayal of educated Muslim women constructed through the female characters in these three novels reflects the authors' resistance to these traditional beliefs.

¹² After completing her education at elementary school, Najhaty Sharma continued her studies at a traditional Islamic boarding school, specifically at Annur Maron pesantren in Purworejo. She then memorized the Quran at the PPSPA Sunan Pandanaran tahfidz pesantren in Yogyakarta, and sought blessings at the Alfalah Ploso pesantren, Kediri. Najhaty Sharma and her husband established the Almunir Islamic boarding school in Pangkat Tegalrejo Megelang as a way to continue their parents' struggle to spread NU in remote villages.

¹³ Azis Erwati, A. Irwan, and HP. Zaenuddin, "Why are Women Subordinated? The Misrepresentation of the Qur'an in Indonesian Discourse and Practice," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21, 6 (2020): 235-248.

Another characteristic that depicts empowered Muslim women is their role in the public sphere. The female characters of the three novels are described as the successors of the leadership of the *Pesantren* managed by their parents or families. Muslim women in leadership roles are still often viewed as controversial, due to the traditional belief that men are by nature independent, strong, responsible, and rational; thus, it makes men more suitable for taking positions as leaders. This traditional belief is challenged by Khilma Anis through the character of Alina Suhita, whom she portrays in the novel *Hati Suhita*. Khilma Anis named the protagonist Suhita, referencing the Majapahit queen, Suhita. She explains:

“Alina is a gentlewoman. She has a soft heart, but she is indeed strong. Thus, the title 'Hati Suhita' was chosen. Her name is Alina Suhita. Suhita was a woman who led the Majapahit kingdom. Just imagine, a woman leading such a vast kingdom during a politically complicated time. Many men struggled to lead; how could a woman do it? Nevertheless, she has a gentle heart. In this story, I want to portray that Suhita possesses intelligence—not only emotional intelligence but also spiritual intelligence. She has an intelligence of the heart. She is always a woman, *wani tapa*—a woman who dares to meditate. She is gentle, yet she has the strength to prevent anyone from destroying her kingdom, even from her husband's past. I want to show that being a strong woman does not require weakening others. It doesn't mean undermining others or taking away their happiness. The essence is that if you want to be strong, you must keep learning. Learning what? Learning many things. Furthermore, I also want to illustrate that although a woman may spend her life learning about gentleness, she should never be seen merely as an object.”¹⁴

Alina Suhita exemplifies a leadership model that transcends traditional masculine traits, redefining strength through emotional and spiritual intelligence. Drawing inspiration from Suhita, a historical queen of Majapahit, the narrative challenges the conservative notion that leadership is inherently male, highlighting that women have long navigated complex political landscapes and guided their communities with wisdom and strength. She is depicted as a "gentlewoman" with the courage (*wani tapa*) to protect her kingdom and embrace

¹⁴ Interview with author was conducted (via online) on 13 July 2024

continuous learning, celebrating the idea that women can lead without undermining others or forsaking their feminine identity. Furthermore, the call for women to be recognized as autonomous agents that are capable of learning, growing, and leading, promotes a redefining of traditional values of gender roles. This notion aligns with the liberal paradigm of gender roles in *pesantren*.¹⁵

In line with Anis, Najhaty Sharma, the author of *Dua Barista* states that this traditional assumption is incorrect. According to her, Islam does not prohibit women from participating in the public sphere. She cites the examples of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, who worked and had roles in society, including being traders and narrators of *hadith*¹⁶. Women during that time also participated in warfare, such as Nusaibah binti Ka'ab, a female warrior who is known for her bravery in the battles of Uhud, Hunain, and Yamamah. This depiction of women during the time of the Prophet demonstrates that Muslim women have equal opportunities in the public sphere.

Najhaty Sharma sees that the domestication of women is logically flawed. She believes that both women and men are intellectual beings capable of working professionally in the public space. For her, the public sphere is not the issue; "It doesn't matter where you work or where you are, what's important is that we maintain our dignity".¹⁷ In this regard, Najhaty Sharma emphasises the importance of education so that women are well-equipped, and their roles are not limited to domestic duties alone. The statement is reflected in her activities in the public sphere. Together with her husband, Najhaty Sharma established the Al Munir Islamic boarding school in Tegalrejo Magelang. In addition, she also founded a publishing house called *Najhatipena* and a boutique named *Sharma Boutique*.

Sharma's practices of empowering women through education resonate with the ideas of Walidah, an influential Indonesian Muslim woman who advocated for women's active participation in spiritual, societal, and personal development. Walidah argued that women's roles should extend beyond raising children and managing household duties,

¹⁵ Nuroniyah, "Gender Discourses within Pesantren in Cirebon.

¹⁶ Hadith refers to the recorded sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. These texts are crucial in Islamic tradition, as they provide guidance on various aspects of life, law, and morality. Hadiths complement the Quran, serving as a source of Islamic jurisprudence and teachings.

¹⁷ Interview with the author, conducted on August 3, 2024

stressing the importance of education and life skills to elevate women's status and equip them to address broader societal needs. Her progressive views, rooted in modernization, challenged traditional norms by advocating for gender equality and independence. Similarly, Sharma emphasized that women, like men, have the right to education and an active role in worship and societal progress, positioning them as vital contributors to both family and community life.¹⁸

What Khilma Anis and Najhaty Sharma express indicates that Muslim women must be empowered. Muslim women often face various obstacles that limit their participation and diminish their voices. This marginalization comes from patriarchal views regarding religious interpretations, social norms, and cultural practices that prioritize male voices over female voices. Therefore, Muslim women need space and voice to assert their presence and influence in the public sphere. In addition, they should not only participate but also take on leadership roles in communities as the liberal paradigm in the *pesantren* tradition emphasizes gender equality across all spheres.¹⁹ The novels they write serve as a platform to voice the presence of empowered and emancipated Muslim women within the public sphere.

The Intersection of Gender, Tradition, and Modernism

The narratives presented in the novels of *Wisanggeni*, *Dua Barista*, and *Hati Subita* illustrate how gender issues intertwine with tradition and modernity. The intersection of these three aspects often leads to conflicts regarding the values held in society and how individuals negotiate to resolve these conflicts. As discussed in the previous section, gender inequality issues frequently arise due to clashes with social traditions that dictate the division of gender roles and establish specific norms regarding how men and women should speak, behave, dress, and act. For instance, in some societies, tradition may emphasize the role of women as the homemakers and men as the breadwinners. This role division aligns with the masculine and feminine attributes assigned to men and women. Masculine traits are associated with men, linked to their role as providers, thus requiring them to be strong, independent, rational, and capable of being leaders. Meanwhile,

¹⁸ Lailatul Huda and Dwi Susanto, "Siti Walidah, Gender Equality and Modernist Islamic Women's Movement in Indonesia: A Critical History," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 18, 1 (2023)

¹⁹ Nuroniyah, "Gender Discourses within Pesantren in Cirebon.

women are characterised by feminine traits due to their roles as mothers (reproductive roles) and caregivers. These roles create an image of women as gentle, emotional, weak, often dependent on men, and thus incapable of being leaders.

On the other hand, modernity refers to social, economic, and cultural changes often associated with industrialization, urbanisation, and globalisation. Modernity emphasises individuality, rationality, freedom, and the ability of humans to control nature, as Wagner²⁰ puts it:

“Modernity is the belief in the freedom of the human being - natural and inalienable, as many philosophers presumed - and in the human capacity to reason, combined with the intelligibility of the world, that is, amenability to human reason. In a first step to concreteness, this basic commitment translates into the principles of individual and collective self-determination and in the expectation of ever-increasing mastery of nature and ever-more reasonable interaction between human beings.”

In the context of gender, modernity introduces new ideas about equality, human rights, and changes in family and work structures. It often challenges existing traditions and introduces concepts such as gender equality, individual rights, and mobility. In some cases, this equality is perceived to enjoy those traditionally exclusive to men, like smoking.²¹

The intersection of gender, tradition, and modernity frequently creates both conflict and negotiation regarding the clashing values and gender roles. This is illustrated through the main characters of the three novels, who exhibit both masculine and feminine traits. On one hand, the main characters are portrayed as strong, educated, and independent women; on the other hand, they also display caring and nurturing qualities. They demonstrate themselves as individuals who work and are responsible for managing the *Pesantren*, while also fulfilling their roles as daughters, wives, or mothers within their families. Thus, the protagonists in these novels depict how women can participate in the public sphere without neglecting their roles in the

²⁰ Paul Wagner, *Modernity: Understanding the Present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

²¹ Wahyu Mafrukha et.al., “Smoking, Hijab, and Gender Identity: Indonesian Muslim Women at Café Bars from Social Jurisprudence Perspective,” *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 20, 10 (2025).

domestic sphere. This representation reflects the negotiation process to avoid conflicts arising from the intersection of gender, tradition, and modernity.

Pesantren is often viewed as entirely traditional, leading to a clash with the concept of modernity. Najhaty Sharma opposes this assumption, noting that more and more members of *pesantren* are also working and taking on roles in non-religious fields, such as becoming doctors, architects, fashion designers, and more. Sharma's perspective is reflected in the character of Mazzarina in her novel, where she is portrayed as a fashion designer. Similarly, Najhaty Sharma, in addition to being involved in the *pesantren* administration and a novelist, runs a fashion business called Sharma Boutique. She shares her journey into the fashion industry and her views on fashion as follows:

“Initially, I was born into a *pesantren* family that upheld simplicity. My grandmother often commented on her grandchildren who were too glamorous, saying, “This attire is not clothing; it’s knowledge.” In other words, “What wraps you is not just clothing, but wisdom.” I kept those words in my novel—they come from my grandmother. Today, as part of the current generation, I interpret it this way: indeed, attire is not just knowledge, but what wraps my body is not clothing; it is knowledge. Because I want to realise or implement that knowledge in my life, I became an entrepreneur, applying that knowledge. Today, when students become independent or empowered, that is part of practicing knowledge. If I practice knowledge, whether I trade, teach, or do anything else, I am being empowered. One way I express this empowerment is through selling. This embodies the idea that “this attire is not just clothing, but knowledge.” So, this is how I practise that knowledge; that’s how I see it”.²²

From the interview above, it can be concluded that *pesantren* are very open to so-called modernisation. Through the fusion of modesty and contemporary fashion, Muslim women are redefining their identities and expressions through their clothing choices. This integration also reflects an increasing acceptance and visibility of Muslim women's fashion, which has the potential to challenge Western stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and constrained. For Najhaty Sharma, Muslim women can be knowledgeable, empowered,

²² Interview with author was conducted on August 3, 2024.

and capable of expressing themselves while still maintaining their identity as Muslims. Her actions are similar to those of female *santri* who reconcile their Islamic identity with their interest in Korean popular culture by adopting a balanced approach that enables them to engage with both aspects of their lives without perceiving conflict. Both occupy a distinctive position at the convergence of Islam, globalization, and youthfulness.²³

Meanwhile, Khilma Anis chooses to combine Eastern and Western cultures through the portrayal of two female characters, Suhita and Rengganis. In the novel, she constructs the character of Suhita, who comes from Java, so that the knowledge within her heart and mind is largely drawn from the inner world of Javanese women. This includes Javanese philosophy, from *wayang* (shadow puppetry) to *keris* (daggers), and history. On the other hand, Rengganis, depicted as an activist and journalist, naturally cannot have the same references as Suhita, because her world is different. She uses references from the Western world, as they are closer to her reality. Nonetheless, in their respective contexts, both female characters must embody strength; they are women, as I mentioned earlier, with hearts as vast as the ocean. In short, Khilma Anis, through her novel, shows that tradition (represented by the *pesantren*/ Suhita) can go hand in hand with the Western world or modernity (represented by Rengganis), as both support the idea of equality and empowerment of women.

Not only in the portrayal of the female characters, but Anis also uses Javanese philosophy to weave the narrative in this novel. *Hati Subita* was written while she was reading about Asta Brata, which inspired her novel writing, as she states below:

“Before I wrote this novel, I was studying the *Asta Brata* theory, which outlines eight leadership traits in Javanese culture. These traits include *laku ning lintang* (the path of the stars), *laku ning rembulan* (the path of the moon), *laku ning angin* (the path of the wind), *laku ning geni* (the path of fire), *laku ning bumi* (the path of the earth), *laku ning surya* (the path of the sun), and *laku ning samudra* (the path of the ocean). Honestly, at that time, I wanted to create a story that incorporated elements of these eight traits. For example, *laku ning lintang* describes someone who is a loner, much like a star that shines brighter as

²³ Inayatussahara and Hasan, “Between Hallyu and The Qur’an: Everyday Life of Female Santri in Yogyakarta,” *Ulumuna* 27, 2 (2023): 501-528.

night falls. Typically, a person with this character becomes more radiant the more they are ignored, and in darker skies, their light shines even brighter. On the other hand, *laku ning rembulan* usually indicates a calm personality. In *Hati Subita* novel, this is exemplified by Kang Dharma, who is always calm and offers guidance and light; he is someone others can rely on. Next is *laku ning angin*, which signifies empathy. In *Hati Subita*, Alina embodies this trait, as she is always empathetic and her affection can be felt by others. Then there's *laku ning geni*, characterized by enthusiasm. Anything dim becomes vibrant in the presence of someone with this trait. *Laku ning bumi* is illustrated by Suhita herself. The more she is neglected, the more she grows. The earth absorbs everything, and despite its suffering, it continues to nurture life. *Laku ning surya* is about being punctual and consistent, like Gus Birru, who provides light and remains steadfast. He always brings life with his presence. Lastly, *laku ning samudra* was a concept I explored as I sought to incorporate these traits into the characters I created".²⁴

Mastuhu²⁵ notes that *pesantren* represents a traditional institution deeply rooted in local customs, tracing its origins back to pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist educational establishments. Anis emphasizes that the pesantren tradition, while predominantly Islamic, also preserves traces of pre-Islamic influences, particularly from Hinduism. The Asta Brata theory, with its eight symbolic leadership traits, reflects a connection to ancient Javanese spiritual beliefs, many of which have roots in Hindu-Buddhist traditions that preceded Islam in Indonesia. This highlights how pesantren education integrates indigenous wisdom and cultural values, blending Hindu-Buddhist teachings with Islamic principles. Just as the Asta Brata's symbolic paths, such as *laku ning lintang* (the path of the stars) and *laku ning bumi* (the path of the earth), are connected to the natural world and spiritual harmony in Hinduism, pesantren education has long been shaped by a fusion of pre-Islamic worldviews and later Islamic influence.

Moreover, Anis' use of Javanese philosophy in her novel illustrates that traditional ideas need not be at odds with modernity. The relational dynamics within Javanese philosophy recognize values of

²⁴ Interview with the author was conducted (via online) on July 13, 2024

²⁵ Suwendi et.al., "Roles and Challenges of Pesantren Intellectual Networks", *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 24, 2 (2024): 458-470.

equality and empowerment, similar to the ideals of modernism, which advocate for individual freedom regardless of gender identity. It thus proves there is no tension between tradition and modernity.

Gender and Social Hierarchy in Pesantren Tradition

The novels *Wisanggeni*, *Hati Subita*, and *Dua Barista* depict the dynamics of gender and social hierarchy in *pesantren*. As a traditional Islamic educational institution, *pesantren* often have a social structure influenced by religious and cultural norms. Typically, *pesantren* feature a clear leadership hierarchy, with the *kiai* or leader holding the highest authority, followed by caregivers, teachers (*ustadz/* male teacher and *ustadzah/* female teacher), and students (*santri*). This hierarchy creates a system where decisions are often made by those in higher positions with limited participation from those below.

In terms of gender, *pesantren* usually have both male and female *santri*. Male *santri* generally have greater access to lessons and opportunities, while female *santri* often face more limitations in their roles and mobility. The gender norms upheld in *pesantren* often reflect traditions that prioritise male roles as leaders and female roles as supporters. However, *pesantren* has undergone significant changes, reflecting gender equality and women's evolving roles in pesantren and wider communities. Female *santri* is shifting from passive participants to active contributors in education, religious discussions as well as social activities. Women are no longer only seen in relation to domestic roles and supporting roles but can become leaders and equal partners in Islamic boarding schools, as exemplified by Nyai Masriyah Amva (the leader of Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al Islami), Nyai Badriyah Fayumi (the leader of Pesantren Mahasina Darul Quran wal Hadith)²⁶. Another modern example is Nyai Nissa, the leader of Pesantren Ath-Thaariq, who, alongside her husband, has pioneered ecological and social initiatives by integrating ecofeminist practices into their pesantren. These leaders challenge traditional gender expectations, reshaping the roles of both *nyai* and female *santri*.²⁷

²⁶ Evi Muafiah et.al., "Gendered Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia: Female agency, institution, and everyday lives," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies (QIJIS)* 12, 1 (2024): 39-74.

²⁷ Mardian Sulistyati, "Locality, Equality, and Piety: Pesantren Ecofeminism Movement in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 30, 2 (2023).

Dian Latifa, the author of *Wisanggeni*, mentions that hierarchy exists in the *pesantren* tradition. Families within *the pesantren* hold high status among both *santri* and the surrounding community. Some even enjoy privileges, being protected, served, and treated specially by the students. However, for Latifa, the privilege that the *pesantren* family receives should not be interpreted as they are different or better from the *santri* or other people. Her grandfather told her that *santri* should be treated as her siblings, not her subordinates. This perspective leads her to take on her role as an educator and protector of these students. Her social status thus comes from the respect and appreciation due to her role and contribution to the students' education.

Meanwhile, through the characters of Maysaroh (a student from the *pesantren* managed by Mazarina's parents) and Mazarina (the daughter of the *pesantren* owner), Najhaty Sharma criticizes the *pesantren* community, which seems to separate itself from the society. In her novel *Dua Barista*, Sharma portrays Maysaroh as a girl who comes from a village. People who live in rural areas tend to be close to each other; thus, Maysaroh is described as a girl who is close to the community, making people around her feel connected. In contrast, although Mazarina is knowledgeable in religion, well-educated, and has a broad perspective, she is not close to the community. The comparison between Maysaroh and Mazarina illustrates that proximity to the community is an important factor for *pesantren*. For Sharma, *pesantren* is not an ivory tower; as it grows alongside the surrounding community, integrating with it; thus, should actively participate in it. The involvement of *pesantren* in the surrounding community or the broader society is crucial for fostering attitudes of inclusivity among the *santri*. Multicultural education is thus important because students at *pesantren* are more likely to live in mono-religious neighbourhoods and they lack interreligious experiences. By exposing and engaging *santri* in diverse environments, *pesantren* aim to cultivate social humility and tolerance, enabling them to live harmoniously in the future and contribute to reducing religious intolerance.

Moreover, the social hierarchy is present through the practice of arranged marriage between *pesantren* families. The three novels acknowledge arranged marriage as part of the *pesantren* tradition. According to Najhaty Sharma and Khilma Anis, arranged marriage usually occurs between families who come from similar Islamic teachings and traditions. The purpose is to ensure the continuity of the

pesantren, as the children of *pesantren* leaders are typically educated to prepare them to become the next leaders of the *pesantren*. In line with Sharma, Anis states that every *pesantren* has the right to preserve its dynasty. Arranged marriages in *pesantren* are acceptable as long as they are conducted properly, without hurting anyone, in a graceful manner, well-organized, and humanely, without being left to chance. They should be supported and nurtured by their parents. Further, she argues that arranged marriage is conducted to seek out the qualities needed to continue their lineage. Anis refers to the Javanese concept of *bibit*, *bobot*, and *bebet* ²⁸in looking for a match. In the *pesantren* world, it is “*limaliba wa lijamaliba wa lidiniba wa linasabiba*”, which means “seeking qualities related to character, beauty, religion, and lineage”, and so on. She believes that the potential, not the wealth, of the in-laws is important to develop the *pesantren*, to continue the legacy, and to preserve the dynasty. However, arranged marriage is not an absolute requirement. According to Latifa, *pesantren* families can also marry their children to someone from a regular (non-*pesantren*) family, as long as the individual has a background in *pesantren* education. Her argument is illustrated in the novel *Wisanggeni*, where the protagonist, Afra—the daughter of a *pesantren* leader, chooses to marry *Wisanggeni*, who comes from a peasant family. Nonetheless, *Wisanggeni* is also a *santri*, meaning that he has adequate religious education. Thus, *Wisanggeni* has the potential to continue the legacy and develop the *pesantren*.

²⁸ The concept of *bibit*, *bobot*, *bebet* is contained in the *Serat Warayagnya*, written by Mangkunegara IV, a poet and ruler of the Kadipaten Mangkunegara of Surakarta in the mid-19th century. See Umi Masfiah, “Bobot, Bibit, and Bebet in Choosing a Mate: A Study of *Serat Warayagnya* Manuscript by Mangkunegara IV,” *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Religious Literature and Heritage* (2021). Today, especially in Javanese society, the concept is still adopted in choosing a spouse/a mate. *Bibit* refers to the social status of the parents. It considers whether they come from noble lineage, high-ranking government officials, or are just commoners without any social status. *Bobot* is related to the level of education and the parents' economic status. The economic status is also a factor to consider so that, when they eventually start a household, the burden does not solely fall on the parents. In Javanese customs, the man is the leader of the family; therefore, the man must be truly capable, and one way to demonstrate that capability is through financial stability. *Bebet* includes the quality of character and moral integrity of the individual in the future. It also relates to the moral quality of the parents. See Kusnul Kholik, “Mitos-Mitos Penghalang Perkawinan pada Adat Jawa dalam Prespektif Hukum Islam,” *Usratuna* 2, 2 (2019): 1-26.

Oftentimes, coming from a *pesantren* family grants an individual a higher status compared to those who are from regular (non-*pesantren*) families, as they are considered to possess greater religious knowledge and are believed to protect and bring blessings to the surrounding community. In Indonesian traditional society, especially in rural areas, Kyai is generally regarded as a scholar with deep religious knowledge and a special closeness to God. This closeness is believed to bring blessings to those who interact with him, whether through religious gatherings, prayers, or simply seeking advice. Similarly, *pesantren* is not only a place for religious education but is also considered a space for getting closer to God. The conducive environment of *pesantren* for worship and learning is believed to provide blessings for the *santri* and the community in general. The belief in the blessings of a Kyai is expressed in various forms, such as *Ngalap Berkah* (blessing seeking) and *Ziarah Makam* (grave pilgrimage).

Ngalap berkah is a mystical ritual within Javanese belief systems that predates the spread of Islam in Indonesia. This ritual is performed to seek blessings from a higher power. Typically, the *Ngalap Berkah* ritual employs offerings such as *kembang tujuh rupa* (seven types of flowers), *jajanan pasar* (traditional snacks), and other symbolic items, which are believed to attract positive energy and blessings from divine or supernatural forces²⁹. As Islam developed, this ritual was integrated with Islamic teachings, as in the *Grebeg Maulid* celebration, which commemorates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Meanwhile, *Ziarah Makam* (grave pilgrimage) also has important value for Muslim society. *Ziarah Makam* involves visiting the graves of *wali* (the saints) and respected figures as a means of acquiring blessings. Typically, *Ziarah Makam* is conducted collectively, as it is believed that petitions made in a group are more powerful. However, individuals engage in this practice in various ways; some do so by reciting the Qur'an, while others incorporate local traditions and rituals that may contradict Islamic teachings. This has led to debates regarding the appropriateness of the *Ziarah* practice with Islamic teachings.³⁰ Nonetheless, overall, the pursuit of blessings and *Ziarah* reflect a

²⁹ Novia Wahyu Wardhani, et.al., “Merawat Misticisme dalam Tradisi Ngalap Berkah sebagai Upaya Menjaga Tatanan Sosial Masyarakat Di Surakarta,” *Jurnal Antropolgi: Isu-Isu Sosial Budaya* 23, 1 (2021).

³⁰ Jamhari, “In the Center of Meaning: Ziarah tradition in Java,” *Studia Islamika* 7, 1 (2000).

blending of Javanese mysticism and Islamic beliefs, particularly in the belief in the divine or supreme power. The essential value of the tradition lies in the significance of divine blessings and the role of prayer and entreaty in the life of a Muslim.

In sum, a hierarchical structure exists both within the *pesantren* community and in the broader society, elevating the kyai as the *pesantren* leader and granting higher social status to him and his family. This elevated position often affords the *kyai's* family certain privileges in their daily lives. This social status reflects a deep respect for the *kyai*, who is regarded as having a significant role in safeguarding *the santri* and community while bringing blessings to them. The *kyai* is perceived as having a special closeness to God, which, in turn, is believed to bring blessings, prayers, and welfare to those in his proximity.

Conclusion

The study explores the representation of empowered Muslim women in three novels: *Wisanggeni*, *Dua Barista*, and *Hati Subita*. The main characters in these works are educated women, reflecting the authors' backgrounds and challenging traditional gender roles in Indonesia. Despite improvements in women's access to education, deep-seated patriarchal ideologies continue to hinder equality. All three novels depict female protagonists who take on leadership roles within the *pesantren*, countering the traditional belief that men are more suited for leadership. The authors argue that Islam does not prohibit women's public participation, referencing historical examples of women in leadership during the Prophet Muhammad's time. Najhaty Sharma, in particular, emphasizes the importance of education for women to ensure they are not confined to domestic roles.

The narratives also examine the intersection of gender, tradition, and modernity, highlighting the conflicts and negotiations that arise from these dynamics. The protagonists balance their strong, independent identities with nurturing qualities, demonstrating their ability to engage in both public and domestic spheres. By embracing both so-called feminine and masculine features, women can use them to take part and actively contribute to religious and social activities. Additionally, the article addresses the social hierarchy within *pesantren*, where male students typically have more opportunities than female students. The authors critique these structures, advocating for equality and integration between *pesantren* and the wider community. Ultimately,

the novels portray a vision of empowered Muslim women who navigate and reconcile tradition with modernity, asserting their roles in both the public and private domains. []

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