

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ISLAMIC VEIL IN INDONESIAN CONTEMPORARY ART: A FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH

Rosmah Tami

Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin, Makassar

rosmahtami@gmail.com

A. Introduction

Indonesian Muslim women's willingness to accept veiling is an interesting phenomenon because veiling does not have strong traditional or historical significance in this country. Unlike the majority of Muslim countries where the veiling movement can be described as 'the return to the veil,'¹ in Indonesia the Islamic veil, known locally as *jilbab*,² is relatively new. Since the early 1990s, the *jilbab* is increasingly visible in the street, media, and fashion industry. Within a very short term, the *jilbab* has become a mainstream expression of Muslim identity. Political and educational institutions that once banned the *jilbab* turn to accommodate and promote, finally even obligate the wearing of the *jilbab* in public spaces.

This condition is partly explained by a shift from a negative metaphor of the *jilbab* to a positive one. For example, in

the past, Indonesian Muslim society tended to be suspicious of those who wore the *jilbab* and identified it as a symbol of radicalism or Middle Eastern tradition rather than an Islamic one. Conversely, nowadays, when a Muslim woman chooses the *jilbab*, it is mostly perceived as the individual's intention to be a better Muslim woman. However, when a Muslim woman discards her *jilbab*, it is understood as a symbol of her moral degradation. As a result, the veil has become an important means for some Muslim women to show their identity and to be valued as good women.

Suzanne Brenner, an American anthropologist who conducted fieldwork focusing on veiling in Indonesia in the 1990s argues, that a narrative conversion, 'becoming aware,' which has been a profound process that encourages Indonesian women to wear the *jilbab*. This 'awareness' implies the attainment of knowledge and suggests a new way of

¹ Eva Warburton. Private Choice or Public Obligation: Institutional and Social Regimes of veiling in Contemporary Indonesia. *Diss.* The U of Sydney, 2006, p.3

² The word *jilbab* is used for the word veil in Indonesia; it is from Arabic word *jallaba*. The word *jallaba* actually means cloak not veil, but *jallaba* nowadays is referred to heard scarf and

veil (see Fadwa El Gundy, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*. New York: Berg, 1999, p. 11, and in Asma Barlas, *Believing Women In Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Quran*, Texas: U of Texas P, 2002, p. 55. In this article, I will use the word *jilbab* and veil interchangeably.

being in the world and a new subjectivity—one in which an individual person believes that she is ultimately responsible for her own actions. This narrative describes women's rejection of their Indonesian (Javanese) tradition and their adoption of new modern Muslim identity associated with morality and discipline.³ This self-transformation is signified by the adoption of the veil.

On the basis of the newfound self-knowledge that raises the consciousness of these women, this article will examine the modalities which allow women to willingly adopt the veil. Unlike Brenner whose work focuses on ethnographic field research, I will approach the problem of the *jilbab* from a literary perspective. The inclusion of literary analysis in the discussion of the *jilbab* in Indonesia is important especially in the work of Emha Ainun Najib whose poetry collection *Syair Lautan Jilbab* may be translated as *The Poem of the Ocean of Jilbab*. Emha Ainun Najib is a prominent Islamic leader and culturalist who actively promulgate Islamic teaching through his creative art work such as his poetry, essays, short stories, music, and staged performance.

The poems of *Syair Lautan Jilbab* reflect the social upheaval during which the *jilbab* became a controversial issue in Indonesia. This collection of poetry was written for two separate plays: the first a criticism and the second, a celebration

after the government lifted the ban on the veil in the late 1980s.⁴ As the plays gained popularity, the collection of poetry on which they were based was published. This poetry is deeply infused with religious ideology such as Sufism when introducing the *jilbab*. Focusing on selected poetry from this collection, I will examine the implications of women's wearing of the *jilbab* through the prism of post structuralism.

Informed by Peggy Phelan's analysis of contemporary North American art works, I will argue that the *jilbab* symbolizes individual religious awareness and reinforces other metaphors aside from religious orientation as illustrated by the poetry to be examined. A scholar of performance study and a performance artist herself, Phelan develops the idea of the process of "unmarked" and "remarked" through her feminist analysis of art performance. Through this process of marking the other in performance, Phelan develops her argument on the exchange of the object and the viewer in which she identifies the disappearance of visibility and the appearance of invisibility. While Phelan's work focuses primarily on North American performance art, I wish to explore the ways in which her insights on art, representation, and politics help us understand the representation of the veil in Indonesia. Ultimately, this discussion will allow us to understand the cultural means through which a specific society

³ Suzanne Brenner, 'Reconstructing the Self and Society.' *American Ethnologist*. 23. 4. (1996): 673-91, p 673.

⁴ Al Muhammadiyah. Foreword. *Syair Lautan Jilbab*. Jombang: Yayasan al Muhammadiyah, 1989.

(Indonesia) appears to be undergoing a radicalization of Islamic identity.

Therefore, the first part of this article will examine the implication of women's awareness as presented in Najib's work. The second part of the article will have a close look at the play and the audience's response, and the third will be a discussion of the poetry and playthrough a feminist poststructuralist approach. My aims in this article, however, are not so much to focus on the discussion of the veil in Islam, but rather to shed light on, to 're-mark' the subtle shift in identity that Indonesia Muslim women experience in the process of veiling.

B. Contemporary Poetry and the *Jilbab*

The narrative conversion through which women attain awareness its relations to the veil are clearly implied in Najib's collection of poetry. The first notable implication of such narration is that he provides an argument for his reader to realize the necessity for women to veil. Based on his assumption about men's desire for the opposite sex and his belief that women's bodies are the source of such desire, Najib convinces his reader that veiling women has been a profound means to refrain men from acting on desire. In the following poem, 'Merawat Rahasia' ('Nurturing the Enigma') Najib explains the attitude of men toward unveiled women in the public space:

Women who show their legs,

should not be offended

if men stare at them

because that is the greeting for
how to be.

Those who do not want a
salutation,

should stay in locked rooms

because when one opens a door,

people have a right to knock.

By exposing her *awra*

a woman gives the man the right

to look at beauty she has to offer

and to see pleasure in her bounty

Women should have mercy for

a flock of men along a street

by not tempting them with the
exposed bodies

displaying flesh will for nothing
but

to stare at them.

And a man through out his life

adoring: how beautiful woman is!

So, please help him treasure the secret

that only his wife can unveil.’⁵

The setting of this poetry is the public sphere which Najib perceives as a men’s realm. Here, Najib requires women to stay indoors if they detest men’s gaze. He describes male gaze in terms of ‘greetings’ and ‘salutations’ addressed to women’s displayed bodies. These ‘salutations’ and ‘greeting’ take place when unveiled women step into this malecentric arena and open their private spheres: as Najib says, ‘when the door is open, people have a right to knock.’ Using the locked rooms as a metaphorical description for *jilbab*, Najib views the locked rooms as the private realm where women’s bodies are held from men’s sight.

Furthermore, Najib advises women to seclude themselves in the locked rooms, or the *jilbab*, because of his assumption that women’s bodies are *awrat* or ‘secret.’ There are many terms related to the word *awrat* in the *Quran*, but it is generally understood as a concept that literally refers to female genitalia. *Awrat* is derived from an Arabic word which means ‘blind’ or ‘concealed,’ and

from which the words for ‘pudenda’ and ‘private parts’ are also derived. Further, this meaning extends to indicate anything shameful that must be concealed because it is considered to be the most private of the private.⁶ In Islam, women’s entire bodies, except the face and hands, are considered *awrat*⁷. This definition of *awrat* is based on the prophetic traditions, according to which the prophet Muhammad’s wife’s sister, Asma, had to cover her entire body but her face and hands.

‘A’isha said: Asma, daughter of Abu Bakr, entered upon the Apostle of Allah (May peace be upon him) wearing thin clothes. The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) turned his attention from her. He said: “O Asma, when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and hands.”⁸

However, the exact circumstances under which the prophet Muhammad instructed his wife’s sister to cover her body remain unknown. Therefore, some Muslims believe that the obligation to cover the entire body applies only when in the act

⁵My translation of Emha AinunNajib, *Syair Lautan Jilbab*. Jombang: Yayasan Al Mahammady, 1989, p 27.

⁶Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005, p. 107.

⁷*Awrat* does not belong to womenonly. Men’s bodies, from belly button to knees, is considered

awrat and men are obligated to wear proper clothes during prayer or in the presence of an outsiders.

⁸ Imam Hafidz Abu Daud, *Sunan Abu Daud*. Trans. Ahmad Hassan. In Sunan Abu Daud <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/abudawud/032.sat.html> site accessed 1 April 2007.

of worshipping God, while others believe that Muslim women are obligated to cover their entire bodies in the presence of male outsiders or *mahram*.⁹ In Indonesia, the covering of the entire body is mostly compulsory during prayer time.

Najib's consideration of women's entire bodies as *awrat* actually sexualizes their entire bodies. Yet, he shows that these sexual bodies are passive objects which a man will greet. Al Ghazali argues that the passivity of women's bodies is in reality destructive because their energy is to be conquered by men who subjugate women's bodies. This energy is a fatal attraction that is endowed to women. Therefore, women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties in the public sphere. Moreover, when a man experiences pleasure and cannot control himself because of looking at a woman, this woman is likened to Satan or the incarnation of the evil power.¹⁰ Since the public realm belongs to men, Najib accordingly puts the responsibility of controlling human sexuality squarely on women, especially beautiful women, by secluding themselves in locked rooms or under *jilbab* to restrain the aggressiveness of men. Women are responsible for their

sexual desire as well as the sexual desire that they may arouse in men. The only tools available to accomplish this great task of controlling human sexuality are the *jilbab* and seclusion.

Assuming that women have responsibility to control their sexuality, in the other lines, Najib calls upon women to 'have mercy' on men by covering their bodies in the public sphere: 'Women should have mercy for a flock of men along the street.' The unveiled body is a temptation for men and only women can shelter them from such temptation. In this respect, he implies that not only does the *jilbab* protect women from men's gaze, but also it keeps men from behaving disrespectfully. Related to this reason, an Egyptian scholar, Qasim Amin asserts that such sexual segregation is a protective device for men, not for women. He proposes that men should veil themselves if they fear succumbing to feminine attraction.

Preventing women from showing themselves unveiled expressed men's fear of losing control over their minds, falling prey to *fitna*¹¹ whenever they are

⁹*Muhram* or *Muhrim* is a noun form for Arabic word *harama*. This word refers to those for whom the incest taboo is applicable because of blood or fosterage relationships. El Guindi, *Veil*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Muhammad Al Ghazaly, *Ihya Ulumuddin*. Vol. III. The Book of the Destructive Evils. Trans. Fazlul. Karim. Lahore: MasudSarwarSindSagarAcademy, No Year, p. 103.

¹¹*Fitna* is an Arabic word which primarily means 'rebellion against divine law,' or 'civil war' and "revolt" in which the believers faith and unity of community is put in grave danger. *Fitna* can also mean "temptation" and "attractiveness". When discussing female sexuality, Muslim jurists use the verb *yuftinu* from the word *fatana*, the same root from which *fitna* derived, which literary means "to charm or enamor someone"; these jurists intimately connect seduction with sedition. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p 111.

confronted with a non-veiled women.¹²

Indeed, Najib's poetry illustrates men's fear about unveiled women and thus tries to persuade women to have mercy on men by covering their bodies. He not only reveals men's inability to control themselves, but also supports women's seclusion. Najib seems to ignore men's responsibility of controlling themselves. In Islam, both men and women have equal responsibility to control their sexuality, as seen in verses 24: 30-31 of the Quran:

Say to the believing men
that they should lower
their gaze and guard their
modesty:
(...)
And say to the believing women
that they should lower
their gaze and guard
their modesty

However, this responsibility in *Najib's* poetry falls entirely on women. Najib is drawing on a larger body of fundamentalist Islamic discourse on the nature and responsibilities of women as a

sexual being. His insistence on the obligation of women to wear *jilbab* in this selected poetry brings his audience to a new consciousness of women's sexuality and naturalizes men's gaze toward women's bodies.

The second implication of women's awareness can be found in the following excerpt Najib's poetry, in which he explores the basic Islamic model of the *jilbab* as necessary for women because it keeps them safe. He 'remarks' women's bodies by highlighting their chastity and virtue, and raises the audience's awareness as expressed in the lines below:

'Thousands of veils have faces of
love
wrapping their hair, bodies
through their
toes.
(like) The real of the light of Allah
is covered by secret
Who can find this light?
not anyone but their husbands
if flesh is shown on paper and
along the street
Allah will take his light from
them.

¹² Fatimah Mernissi. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*.

Revised Edition. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987, p. 31.

Silky tight and long and slender
neck remain

shape of hips and the color of
breasts stay

when men stare at them

they will find only flesh

if a woman is proud of being flesh

she is lower to the level of stones

if the beauty of the world
intoxicates a man

his lust fades away his
humanness.¹³

In this poetry, Najib suggests that covering women's bodies from head to toe is like preserving God's light, covering it like a secret. Following this description, he goes on to say in his lyrics that God's light exists within the veiled women's bodies: 'who can find the light? Not anyone but their husbands.' This line implies that *jilbab* conceals women's bodies, and women, in turn, conceal and thus preserve the divine light. When they are uncovered, God takes away His light. The absence of God's light within women's bodies leads to the decreasing of their humanness. Therefore, uncovered women's bodies, according to Najib, will become 'flesh without value.' In this

way, he attempts to attribute the value of women to the presence of God's light. This has an effect of locating human access to the divine within women's bodies, as I will discuss at length below.

In this poetry, Najib grounds his reason for veiling on the presence of God's light within women's bodies. The incorporation of the light of God into the discussion of the veil is very significant. In Sufism, achieving God's light is one of the highest manifestations of Muslims' spiritual goals because God is the source of the light of heaven and earth, as is illustrated in Quran verses 24:30:

God is the Light of the heavens
and the earth;
the likeness of His Light is as a
niche
wherein is a lamp
the lamp is a glass
the glass as it were a glittering
star
kindled from a Blessed Tree,
an olive that is neither of the East
nor of the West
whose oil well-nigh would shine,
even if no fire touched it;
light upon Light;
God guides to His Light whom
He will.
and God strikes similitude for
men,
and God has knowledge of
everything

¹³My translation of Emha Ainun Najib, *Syair Lautan Jilbab*. Jombang: Yayasan Al Mahammady, 1989, p 26.

In Sufism, according to Al Ghazaly, the divine light shines on human beings and worldly objects. Yet, not all human beings have an ability to perceive the light of God reflected on in object because this ability requires an achievement of God's knowledge or wisdom. This knowledge is accomplished by comprehending the *Quran* and the symbols residing in the universe, and by practicing Sufi disciplines called *Maqam*.¹⁴ *Maqam* is spiritual stages which marked spiritual paths followed by Sufis that lead them to the vision and the union with God. In his poetry, Najib suggests that divine light is accessible through the adoption of the *jilbab*, rather than through access to the divine knowledge.

Najib's perception of God's light residing in women's bodies might have been influenced by a Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry which describes women as the ray of God:

Love and tenderness are human qualities; anger and lust are animal qualities.

Woman is the ray of God: she is not the earthly beloved. She is creative: You may say she is not creative.¹⁵

¹⁴ Muhammad Al Ghazaly, *The Alchemy of Happiness*. Trans. C. Field New York, M. E. Sharpe Inc. 1991, p 30.

Rumi's description of women as the ray of God does not require the *jilbab* as the prerequisite for the presence of divine light. He argues that Sufism emphasizes the ability of an individual to perceive the light. Therefore, if Najib's assumption that the presence of divine light in women's bodies is related to Rumi's perception, men must achieve knowledge or wisdom in order to see God's light in women's bodies. In contrast to Rumi who focuses on the subject's ability of seeing divine light, Najib asserts women's *jilbab* as the object of men's gaze. Clearly, this poetry, as Phelan indicates, is a process of reinforcing and 're-marking' women's bodies. Meanwhile, Najib fails to address men's ability because they are already "marked" with value, thus he leaves them 'unremarked.'¹⁶

Following his explanation of God's light, Najib continues his stanza by severely criticizing the 'flesh shown on the paper and along the street.' The 'flesh on the paper and along the street' means unveiled women in the public sphere including their images on media. Through this criticism, he clearly exposes women's bodies as '[s]ilky tight and long and slender neck, [s]hape of hips and the color of breasts.' In this context, Najib himself has unconcealed and unveiled women's bodies, exposing them to his own uncontrolled, lusty gaze. In

¹⁵ Jalaluddin Rumi, *Rumi: Poet and Mystics*. Trans. R. A. Nicholson. London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1956. p. 44

¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of the Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 5.

imagining what lies behind the *jilbab*, Najib is doing for women what he forbids women from doing for themselves, namely: he is unclothing them. Like the magazines and paper that he derides, he is exposing this image to be consumed by the public. Najib, thus, sees himself as one of the helpless ‘flock’ of men on the street who might be swayed by women’s visible (and imagined) sexuality. These verses also unveil and lead his audience to be aware of what lies behind the veil. Somewhat counter-initiatively women’s disappearance behind the veil actually serves to reinforce their sexual visibility. As Phelan asserts in her study of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs, the image can only be glimpsed in its disappearance.¹⁷

The third implication of women’s awareness can be found at the end of Najib’s poetry collection. This long poem is unique because Najib uses angels as characters who speak about the necessity of the *jilbab*. In this poem, entitled “Maka Inilah *Jilbab*” (“Here is the Real *Jilbab*”) the angels narrate that *jilbab* is fundamental to the identity of both Muslim men and women. These angels define the meaning of *jilbab* in a larger sense, while criticizing the immorality and depravity of modern age as can be seen in the excerpt below:

The angels are crystal
clear like the mirror of the
mirror

¹⁷ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 40.

that reflects their sound:

This veil is a song of our
demeanor, ink of our
decision,

the early step of our fight.

This veil is a letter of our
belief, a long way

of our learning, a process
of our endeavor.

This veil is a temptation of
bravery in the midst of

education that furtively
introduces fear.

This veil is a light against
darkness,

honesty in the midst of
falsehood.¹⁸

The angelic characters do not have an actual conversation between them but rather en masse recite to other groups. The word ‘our’ in these verses indicates that these angels who possess the veil are one group talking to another group who is not veiled. The angels celebrate the *jilbab* as their ‘demeanor,’ ‘decision,’ ‘endeavor,’ and ‘bravery.’

The presence of angels is important in relation to the previously analyzed poetry in which Najib believes that veiled women possess divine light.

¹⁸My translation of Najib, *Syria Lautan Jilbab*, p. 56.

Here, Najib presents the *jilbab* as the property of angels. In Islamic theology, angels are believed to be created from the light and created to serve and obey God. As the veiled women obey God by donning the *jilbab* thus preserving the light of God within their bodies, these indicate that the presence of angels is a metaphor for veiled women. This metaphor allows the audience to see the women with *jilbab* as pure, saintly, and sacred like angels. As a result, the humanness of the veiled women is erased and elevated to the status of sacred angel. Nietzsche explains in his essay, 'Truth and lies in nonmoral sense' that the process through which metaphorical meaning replaces real meaning, strengthen the constructed metaphorical meaning, and thus the real will be forgotten.¹⁹

In addition, the inclusion of angels signifies the veil as the truth versus to the non-veiled as untruth. Through the angels' voices, Najib suggests that the veil defines Muslims' 'bravery,' 'song of demeanor,' 'beliefs,' 'endeavors,' 'bravery,' 'honesty' and 'light.' This stands in stark contrast to the words 'fear,' 'darkness' and 'falsehood,' which point to unveiled women. In this context, Najib constructs the binary meaning of the veil by associating the veiled women with light, truth, and bravery, and women without veil with falsehood and darkness. The positive meanings are possessed by

the veiled women, while the negative are associated with unveiled women.

Najib's poetry seeks to increase women's awareness about the positive attributes, significance, and impact of the *jilbab* on their identity. Encountering these images, the audience is inundated with the metaphors conveying positive associations with the veil. For further illustration, the following analysis will examine the construction of *jilbab's* meaning through theatrical performance.

C. The Performance

1. The political Background of the performance

Although this collection of poetry, *Syair Lautan Jilbab*, did not become a best seller, Najib's poem did reach a larger public audience through the medium of performance. In the 1988, Najib continued his endeavor of supporting veiling, extending it into the visual realm by overseeing the production of his poem as not one but two separately staged plays. Each play was influenced implicitly, and motivated explicitly, by political concerns.

Collaborating with experienced directors such as Jujuk Prabowo from theater Gandrik and three other directors from theater Salahuddin Jogjakarta, Najib staged *Lautan Jilbab* in 1988 in Jogjakarta. Jogjakarta is a city, known as the main destination for students for their

¹⁹ Frederic Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,' URL:

<http://www.mylibrarybook.com/books/663/Friedrich-Nietzsche/on-truth-and-lies-in-a-nonmoral-sense-1.html> site accessed 30 March 2007.

higher education. This city has long been the Indonesian center of science, art and culture. The popularity of the play *Lautan Jilbab* was not limited in Jogjakarta only, but it expanded to other cities and the play was staged more than ten times, including in Makassar in 1989 and Malang in 1988.²⁰

This first performance was inspired by the debate on the *jilbab* between those who reject and accept it. Since the *jilbab* is not part of Indonesian tradition, many parents prohibited their children from wearing the *jilbab* because they perceived it as a representation of Middle Eastern culture. In addition, the history of radical Islamic movements in the 1950s caused some people to have a negative opinion for the *jilbab*. Therefore, the socialization of the new meanings of *jilbab* through this visual performance was important to establish a more positive quality and to challenge other negative meanings attributed to the *jilbab*.²¹

Responding to the audience's enthusiasm to *Lautan Jilbab I*, *Syair Lautan Jilbab II* was staged the following year. Budiman S. Hartoyo, a journalist for a national magazine, *Tempo*, wrote about the performance which was shown in Surabaya in 1991 and entitled '*Samudra Cinta Kasih*' ('The Ocean of Love'). He reported that around ten thousands

spectators were 'hypnotized' by the show. Among those 'hypnotized' was the commander of Military, Pangdam V Brawijaya, R. Hartono.²²

This second performance, *Lautan Jilbab II*, was intended to celebrate the government's lift of the ban on the *jilbab* in public schools. The forbiddance of the *jilbab* had caused many students who refused to take off their *jilbab* to be expelled from schools.²³ This condition evoked a protest from university students and culturalists who expressed their dispute through demonstration and art works. At the same time, in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Iran the *jilbab* was being promoted through positive metaphors. For example the veil was used as a symbol of empowerment, resistance and solidarity. Consequently, this powerful Middle Eastern's movement influenced and enflamed Indonesian Muslim students and encouraged them to began a movement called *revolusi jilbab* or the veil revolution, in which they lobbies the Government for freedom to wear the veil.²⁴ As it can be seen in the staged versions of the second wave of performance, the inclusion of sixty high school students signified the celebration of veil freedom. Focusing on the second performance, *Syair Lautan Jilbab II*, the following analysis intends to show the

²⁰Budiman Hartoyo, 'Samudra Cinta Kasih.' *Tempo*. 24 August 1991:
URL:http://www.pdat.co.id/tempo/view_article.php?article_id=12152, site accessed 18 January 2007

²¹ Hartoyo, 'Samudra Cinta Kasih.'

²² Hartoyo, 'Samudra Cinta Kasih.'

²³Brenner, 'Reconstructing the Self and Society,' p, 675.

²⁴Warburton, 'Private Choice or Public Obligation,' p, 26.

process of ‘re-marking’ the women’s bodies as ‘the other’ through the medium of performance.

2. Analysis of the Performance

When proposing the new meaning of the veil in the second celebratory performance, the play appears to be dominated by religious symbols and Middle Eastern culture in its setting, musical backgrounds, costumes, and characters. The stage decoration consisted a of mosque’s dome, four pillars, and a big mosque drum, which was designed based on Middle Eastern styles. In addition, to emphasize Middle Eastern atmosphere, some Arabic musical instruments and songs were used in the soundtrack of the play, including some vocals by a famous Egyptian singer, the late Ummu Qalzum. According to one of directors of the play, Middle Eastern decoration was very important in establishing religious and sacred atmosphere. Moreover, this religious and sacred atmosphere was emphasized by presenting some characters in the role of angels. Although more than sixty performers took part, only four actors were actively enacting monologue or dialogue. These two angels were narrating the significance of the *jilbab* for women.²⁵

Through the used of this exotic musical background, stage decoration,

and costumes, this performance attempted to accomplish what Peggy Phelan calls the process for ‘re-marking’ women by valuing them based on their visible markers, in this case the *jilbab*. Based on Lacan’s theory of symbolic order, Peggy Phelan explains that men always perceive women as lacking in something. They are ‘unmarked’ with value and meaning, and therefore must be ‘re-marked,’ while men already marked by value, thus may go ‘unmarked.’²⁶ In the play *Lautan Jilbab*, the process of re-marking women’s bodies is Najib’s effort of adding value onto female bodies. In this context, re-marking women’s bodies is accomplished through veiling them. Women’s bodies become valuable in Najib’s terms when their bodies are covered. As Najib maintains in his texts, women have no value without their veils; donning the veil is the only way women can achieve social and moral value.²⁷ This marking process can be seen on the stages where only women wore veils, while men were left in their black Malayan traditional attire. The visual effect of this was that male characters faded into dark backdrop, while the veiled women were clearly visible.

Leaving male characters invisible, unrepresented, and ‘unremarked’ can also be identified through the effect of color presented on the stage. The black color worn by male characters blurs their appearance which implies their presence to be unimportant

²⁵ Hartoyo, ‘Samudra Cinta Kasih.’

²⁶ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 5.

²⁷ Najib, *Syair Lautan Jilbab*, p. 56.

because they are already socially and morally 'visible.' In contrast to male characters' costumes, white costumes highlighted female characters' presence and focused the audience's eyes on them. In this way, women's usual invisibility was underscored, 'remarked.'²⁸ In the meantime, the four main characters, one female character and three male characters engaged in prolonged dialog and monolog about the significance of the veil for women. The music, the setting and the angels' poetry transformed the stage performance into an apocalyptic religious hymn which emphasized the *jilbab* as the only means to save the world. Yet, this relentless discussion of the *jilbab* effectively dissolves the presence of women. The performance, which is normally about women, instead changes into a conversation on the *jilbab*; women, as a topic of discourse, disappear behind the fabric of the veil.

As a result, the *jilbab* become what Phelan considers a 'token in a discourse of and about men.' In her article, 'White men and Pregnancy: discovering the body to be rescued,' Phelan argues that when discussing the issue of pregnancy and abortion, the men will place their own voice and heroism in the center of the stage. Meanwhile, the women who men want to rescue, disappear from discourse. Women are pushed off outside the stage and the performance of anti-abortion demonstration instead center on the conversation about men's physical

relation to the fetus. Their paternity roles are challenged, and they are anxious that they are not able to locate the reproductive visibility of the in female womb.²⁹

Likewise, the female performers in this play disappear and this play represents something else in their staged-the *jilbab*. It becomes the object of the narrators' and spectator's gaze. Focusing on the *jilbab*, the play turns to 'ignores' what is inside the *jilbab*, the women. The narrative on the *jilbab* drowns out the narrative on the rights of women. When the narrators speak about and for the *jilbab*, they highlights a moral ideology which turns the play into political theater. Conveying ideological and religious beliefs about the *jilbab*, the men, two of them acting as angels, speaks about rescuing the decadency of morality which can only saved by the *jilbab*. Thereby, they place their own voice and heroism at the center stage. Meanwhile, women become invisible and unspoken. Locating maleness within the image of the veil strengthens the relation between the veil and the men. As Najib implies in his texts, one of the veil's primary functions is to rescue men from inappropriate behavior. This play reasserts that *jilbab* is actually a subject of homosocial male discourse. According to Qasim Amin, it is because of men's weakness that women should veil and under the discourse of protecting

²⁸ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 6.

²⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 134.

women, men continue protecting themselves.³⁰

In addition, value of the *jilbab* seems to govern ideas about representation. As the veiled woman is highly valued, the play turns to repress the question of the value of unveiled women. As a result, the women without the *jilbab* are rendered valueless. In similar way in his texts, Najib explains that those who show their bodies in the public are on the same level as stones; they are not human beings but rather things.³¹ Given this condition, it is not a coincidence that there are many girls who choose to prove their value by adopting the veil. With their veil, they accept the value of the *jilbab* and communicate its value to others, while simultaneously reproducing the otherness of those women who are unveiled. Above all, the representation of the *jilbab* through words and images allows Najib's audience to become aware of the new meaning of the veil. Therefore, the following section will discuss the audience's memories of this performance.

3. Audience

The interactive exchange between the art object and the viewer is important to note. Phelan indicates that in this interactive exchange, there is an element of consumption in which the gazing spectators should consume all the elements enacted on the stages. The

reason is that the performance does not have a copy but it disappears into memory of their spectators. The writing about the performance is the act of writing toward this disappearance. Phelan maintains that in a performance, a limited number of people in a specific time/ space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward. Thus, the possibility to revalue and to rewrite the performance is through tracing its effect on its spectators. Yet, Phelan maintains the possibility of the production of the Impossible, by which she means the production of a new real which does not exist in the play.³² Through phone interview and email correspondence with seven spectators who watched the play more than ten years ago, I sought to explore the disappearance of the play itself. All those interviewees said that they had forgotten the story. Yet, when the spectators, who are already in their late twenties and middle thirties and were university students when the performance was shown, started to digest the play, the play seems to have had different effects on them.

For example, most spectators agreed that the topic of the play is about the necessity of veiling for women. Yet, when they were asked to describe the play, most of them said they could not remember totally because the play was shown more than ten years ago. A female audience member, who was veiled at the time and who is now working as

³⁰ Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 42.

³¹ Najib, *Syair Lautan Jilbab*, p. 26.

³² Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 148.

journalist, showed her disappointment and became critical when asked to retell the play. She said that she did not enjoy the play and did not remember the show because there was nothing worth remembering about it.

If the show was good I would never forget it because a good play will retain in memory, I did not enjoy at all.

Yet when asked to remember about the veil, she pointed out that the characters who wore the white veil on the stage, Middle Eastern music and the audience which was mostly veiled. She asserted that her use of veil is not because of the influence of *Najib's* play, as she wore the veil long before the play was staged.

When I asked the same questions to three male audience members, they did not speak about whether they disliked or liked the show. One of them, a playwright, criticized the performance and stated that there was nothing really special about the story of moral decadency and social problems except the idea that society could only be saved by veiling women. The other two interviewees did not have much to say about the performance, instead but approached another topic regarding *Najib's* recent work and his dedication to society.

Another female audience member, who is now a writer and a poet, shows her enthusiasm when explaining the play. According to her, the play was enlightening. Even though the play was

performed a long time ago, she was able to explain the meaning of the symbols presented on the stage and linked them to the necessity for women to veil. She asserted that, as it was presented on the stage, veiling is one way of worshiping God. The *jilbab*, for her, signifies and separates those who follow religious paths and those who do not. Yet, she asserts that she is wearing the veil not because of *Najib's* play. At the end of the conversation, she said that she wanted to inform *Najib* about my analysis on his work.

Though my survey pool is too small for me to draw any absolute conclusions, on the basis of this preliminary research, I noticed that there was a strong distinction between how female and male interviewees responded to the performance. The male audience members tended to focus on the moral significance of the play for society at large. While one female audience mentioned the religious messages of the play which she framed them in relation to personal decisions. Indeed, the poem, the performance of the poems, the audience responses show the process of the construction the meaning of the *jilbab* and the shift from its negative to positive attributes. In the following section, I will refer to feminist and poststructuralist theory in order to outline my own response to the poetry and its two incarnations as stage performance. In this section, I am writing both as Western-trained scholar and as an Indonesian woman who has experienced both veiling and unveiling. I seek to understand the

reactions and responses of recent Indonesian Muslim society to the *jilbab*.

D. Discussion and Conclusion

The examination of the selected texts, the performance, and the audience's response toward the performance has provided an understanding of women's awareness that brings them into a self-transformation which is signified by the adoption of the veil. This awareness is expressed by distancing themselves from their past Indonesian tradition because the newfound knowledge stimulates their personal change. This personal change, by performing a new gender role, communicates importance messages about women's identities and values.

Returning to the first analyzed text, Najib highlights women's obligation to veil because he considers women's bodies *sawrat* or sexual bodies. This poetry brings his audience into a highlighted awareness of women's bodies as sexual. As Najib's audience becomes conscious about this sexuality, they turn to cover themselves and distance themselves from their Indonesian tradition because the definition of sexuality in Indonesia differs from that which Najib offered in his poetry. In his poetry, Najib asserts women's bodies are sexual but their face and their hand. While in traditional Indonesian culture, the terms sexuality is referred to a private part or genitals.

Women are accustomed by dresses which show their hairs, necks and their bare arms, and are not considered as sexual part of their bodies.

As Berger illustrates in her research, women are stimulated to veil by their newfound knowledge. Part of this knowledge brings them to consciously see their bodies as sexual. This condition was explained by Luce Irigaray as *phallogentric* function of the gaze based on her reading on Freud's account of castration, a discovery which triggers the recognition and the subsequent articulation of sexual difference.³³ Through this gaze, sexual difference is discovered and confirmed. In Phelan's framework, the men see women 'unmarked', therefore they 'remark' them. The invisibility of the genitalia in her bodily anatomy allows her to be characterized as 'nothing to be seen' in Freudian terms, and 'unmarked' in Phelan's,³⁴ which is interpreted by Irigaray as 'nothing to be.' The 'nothing to be' seen in her body pushes her to show something to be seen.³⁵ For Phelan, this 'unmarked' quality allows them into a process of 'marking'.³⁶ In Najib's poetry, the 'marking' of women's bodies can be seen through his texts and performance which emphasizes the significance of the *jilbab* because they have no value to be seen or they are 'unmarked' by it.³⁷

³³ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. New York: Cornell UP, 1974, p. 57.

³⁴ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 6

³⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 57

³⁶ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 6

³⁷ Najib, *Syair Lautan Jilbab*, p. 26.

Furthermore, recognizing the *jilbab* elevates women's value and, believing that without the *jilbab* they will lack a 'mark' of their value or their 'nothing to be seen,' the women agree to be 'remarked' by the value of *jilbab*. This 'marker' allows them to possess the divine light in their bodies to be found by their husbands. They thus become narcissists and lift themselves in order to mask themselves into the object to be desired, which Freud called Penis envy. To use Phelan terminology, the 'unmarked' women see themselves as the other, as 'negative men.' They are striving for the organ substitute to make themselves complete and to recover their divine light. Without a husband the light will remain an enigma, and they will remain uncompleted or 'negative men.'³⁸ According to Phelan, the effect of woman's lack of a phallic mark allows them to submit to the phallic functions to assert that she belongs to him. Their bodies, thus, will represent *phallicized* body.³⁹

In Najib's poetry, when women agree to adopt the 'value' of the *jilbab*, the women are invisible under the *jilbab*, the marker. Hence, men are able to see their own reflections on women's invisible bodies. This process of 'marking' by the *jilbab* makes women invisible for what is seen is not the women but the *jilbab*. This evidence can be seen from the staged performance which shows that the dialogue about the

veil elides the presence of female characters. The play transforms into a dialogue about the *jilbab* and ignores women's presence inside the *jilbab*.

Furthermore, the increase in women's adoption of the veil allows women to compete in the *phallic economy*. As can be seen in Najib's narration, veiled women possess the light of Allah while unveiled women are at the level of stone. Further, this 'light' value can only be found by their husband, which indicates that this value is the exchange commodity between different genders. Clearly, this implies that the 'awareness' that women find is the exchange value in relation to their opposite sex. Yet, this value does not reside in women's bodies but in the *jilbab*. Therefore, when women discard the veil, this value accordingly disappears.

This *jilbab's* value is not only possessed by women but also by men. The evidence presented reveals that veiling women allows men to speak about this value to other groups who do not support veiling. For example, in Najib's poetry, he displays the *jilbab* as the 'light,' 'song of demeanor,' 'ink of decision,' 'bravery in the midst of education that furtively fear,' and 'honesty in the midst of falsehood.' These values oppose those identified by some Western feminists who characterize the *jilbab* as a sign of backwardness, women's oppression and a moving

³⁸ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 17

³⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 63

prison. Similar to Fanon's, a postcolonial scholar, framework in his analysis of the Algerian veiling and unveiling,⁴⁰ the metaphor of the veil projected by Western feminist and scholars allows Najib to create meanings which contradict those of Western feminists. For example, people from Algeria, Turkey and some Middle Eastern countries claim their veil as cultural tradition and wear it to symbolize their resistance to 'modernization.' However, in Indonesia, since it is impossible to define the *jilbab* as tradition, Najib creates metaphors for the veil which are associated with the tradition of religion and Sufism.

Consequently, these metaphors replace the real meaning of the veil and thus become a means of communication between those who support the veil and those who reject the veil. In this case, the veil and women have been a medium for humiliation and demonization. Using women's bodies as a medium of communication in conflict is powerful. In terms of race and ethnicity, women are valuable members of an ethnic group because they are valuable possessions; they are the principal vehicles for transmitting values to the next generation, they are bearer to the next generation ('nationalists wombs'), and

they are the most vulnerable members of a community.⁴¹ In terms of gender roles, men are the protectors, while women are the protected.⁴² In this context, communication between the veil supporter and his antagonist is considered to be male to male communication that speaks about 'the good' as the powerful and 'the bad' as the powerless men. Those who enforce the veil upon women, consider themselves to be "good" because they are able to protect, dominate and 'remark' their women's bodies through the veil. On the other hand, those who do not support the veil and let their women be uncovered are considered incapable of 'protecting' and controlling their women. They fail to 'remark' their women, and thus they are viewed as incompetent men. The capability of controlling women allows men to be masculine. Conversely, the incapability of controlling women leads men to be deemed feminine because their incompetence as protectors and rulers diminishes their masculine dignity. The uselessness of masculine power is the reduction of their masculine identity to feminine identity. In addition, the masculine identity becomes visible when the feminine identity is visible as well.⁴³ The feminization of male power is used to humiliate and to dominate

⁴⁰ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. Haakan Chevalier. New York: Grove Press, 1965. p. 35

⁴¹ Grace, Daphne. *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*. London: Pluto Press, 2004. p. 26

⁴² Ruth Seifert, 'War and Rape: A Preliminary Study' *Mass Rape, the War against Women in*

Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ed. Andrew Stigmaqyer. United State of America: U of Nebraska, 1994, p. 58.

⁴³ Judith Butler, 'Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions.' *The Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2001. 2490-2501, p. 2490.

‘incompetent’ men, just as the masculine dominates or subordinates the feminine.⁴⁴ Through this male to male communication, the women bodies disappear. Consequently, the women are not ‘there’ and they are always invisible, replaced by a symbol of value, and are forgotten.

The analysis of the enforcement of veiling also reveals that women’s bodies have become the medium of the establishment of cultural coherence. Foucault pointed out that women’s bodies are figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription. The powerless position of women within a society brings them into a difficult situation regarding the enforcement of veiling or unveiling.⁴⁵ Similarly, the mission of Islamic revitalization by veiling women indicates that women’s bodies have become the bearer of cultural changes. Their bodies have been imposed forcedly and ideologically to display such culture. This can be identified in Najib’s poetry in how he enforces the metaphorical meanings of the veiled women. These examples directly show that cultural values emerge and are marked through inscription on women’s bodies. As a result, when the values of the culture shift to other meanings, women become the first subject in need of change. The inside of this cultural value, the women themselves, are forgotten. Not only they

are invisible; they are forced into a double invisibility behind the veil.

⁴⁴, Joshua Goldstein. *War and Gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 301 and Ruth Seifert, ‘War and Rape,’ p. 58.

⁴⁵ See Butler, ‘Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,’ p. 2491.

