

# TRANSMITTING ISLAM THROUGH STORIES

## The Sociology of Production and Consumption of Islam in Novel Literature<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Islamic novel literature has become a new commodity in Indonesia. This paper examines the Islamic creative and cultural industry in recent development in Indonesia, exploring the Islamic publication through its exploitation of storytelling method as a means of production and consumption of Islamic commodities. As an object of analysis, it focuses on Islamic novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. It particularly argues that Islamic publication has extended its capacity as a medium for transmitting religious ideas to producing and consuming economic commodities. It further argues that storytelling appears to be an effective method for both the transmission of Islamic teaching and the production and consumption of Islamic commodities. It maintains that positive responses from the market are not only in the form of purchasing the product of Islamic novel literature, but also in the form of following up the essence of cases in life exploited in stories developed in such an Islamic novel literature.

**Keywords:** Transmitting Islam, Islamic novel, Islamic publication

### Introduction

Recent development in Indonesia has witnessed the rise of Islamic publication, print and non-print, as a new commodity. This publication

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appears to be not only a means of transmitting Islamic teachings, but also an industry with high popular responses from the market. Increases in literacy rate and economic income, coupled with socio-political reform, as well as advances in printing or publishing technologies have contributed to the significance of the publication both as a way of Islamic transmission and a kind of industry.

Ideas explored within the publication are varied, and hence people can easily consume different streams of Islamic teaching without any necessities to attend the so-called traditional Islamic learning in either pesantren (Islamic boarding school) or *majelis taklim* (community-based religious learning forum), as it was previously the case. One of the methods of Islamic transmission in publication which are so effective in attracting popular responses is storytelling. By this method, Islamic teachings are not conveyed through indoctrinating processes, exploiting the *dos and don'ts* strategy. Rather, they are transmitted through stories in which Islamic ideas are produced by authors and consumed by readers.

This paper is an attempt to examine the Islamic creative and cultural industry in recent development in Indonesia, exploring the Islamic publication through its exploitation of storytelling method as a means of production and consumption of Islamic commodities. As an object of analysis, it focuses on Islamic books. It particularly argues that Islamic publication has extended its capacity as a medium for transmitting religious ideas to producing and consuming economic commodities. It further argues that storytelling appears to be an effective method for both the transmission of Islamic teaching and the production and consumption of Islamic commodities. It maintains that positive responses from the market are not only in the form of purchasing the product of Islamic publication industry, but also in the form of following up the essence of cases in life exploited in stories developed in the publication.

To begin with, the paper investigates ways Islamic novels exploit in producing and transmitting Islamic ideas. It discusses the strategies of Islamic novels in accommodating their own interests in commodifying those Islamic ideas. Central to this analysis are also positive responses from the market toward ways of transmission and commodification by each of Islamic novels.

## Methods of Islamic Transmission and Popular Responses

Not surprisingly as a result of the loose political control of the regime over Islamic socio-political activities (including publication) and the increasing literacy rate of Indonesian communities above, the development of Islamic book and magazine publication<sup>2</sup> has, therefore, deeply affected the way Islamic teachings are transmitted to wider audiences in Indonesia. Islamic teachings have not only been transmitted in the so-called *shafabi* (oral) way, a pattern of Islamic transmission using sermons and speeches as the main instruments, but have increasingly been conveyed through the so-called *maktubi* way, a mode of transmitting Islamic teaching using print media as its major mechanism.

Irrespective of the changed methods of Islamic transmission as such, the Islamic publication industry in Indonesia has different strategies in conveying Islamic ideas to the readers, from indoctrinating with huge exercises of the *dos and don'ts* principles to storytelling. This difference in strategies of Islamic transmission goes along with the diverse kinds of Islamic books. Among different kinds of Islamic books, popular type is so well-liked. The high sales of Islamic popular books, as partly suggested below, show their popularity on the market.

There are some rising genres of the popular Islamic books, from Islamic “teenlit”, Islamic “kidlit”, *tarbiyat al-ummah* literature, Islamic novel literature, Islamic how-to literature, to religious-cum-scientific book. All of them can be basically seen as signifying the various methods of Islamic transmission which are effective in attracting the attention of popular, ordinary Indonesian communities. “Transmitting Islam through stories”, “Islam as a manual” and “Transmitting Islam through medical-scientific explanation” are three methods most effective and influential for conveying and disseminating Islamic teachings to wider Muslim communities in Indonesia.

The “transmitting Islam through stories” method is manifested through the increasing genres of Islamic “teenlit” (a kind of popular Islamic printed book publication devoted and segmented to teenage consumers), Islamic “kidlit” (a genre of popular Islamic printed book

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<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Rokib identifies that in recent development, literature on Islamic themes has become increasingly popular in Indonesia. See Mohammad Rokib, “Reading Popular Islamic Literature: Continuity and Change In Indonesian Literature,” *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2016): 183-194.

publication devoted and segmented to consumers at childhood, including Islamic comic books, Islamic cartoon storybooks, and Islamic short storybooks), and Islamic novel literature. The Islamic “teenlit” is represented by *Santri Semelekete* (“lay students of Islamic boarding school”) written by Ma’rifatun Baroroh,<sup>3</sup> the Islamic “kidlit” is by *Hamzah bin Abdul Muthalib, Singa Allah di Padang Pasir* [*Hamzah bin Abdul Muthalib: The Lion of God in the Desert*] written by Kak Kusumo,<sup>4</sup> and Islamic novel literature is by *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love) written by Habiburrahman El Shirazy.<sup>5</sup> The “Islam as a manual” method is represented by the genre of *tarbiyat al-ummah* literature (such as *Cahaya Penerang Umat* [*The Illuminating Light for the Muslim Communities*] written by `Aidh al-Qarni<sup>6</sup>) and of Islamic how-to literature (represented by the work *La Tabẓan* [*Don’t Be Sad*] written by `Aidh al-Qarni<sup>7</sup>). The “Islam through medical-scientific explanation” is exemplified by the genre of religious-cum-scientific books (such as the work *Terapi Salat Tabajud: Menyembuhkan Berbagai Penyakit* [*The Medical Therapy of Tabajjud Prayer: Curing Various Sicknesses*] by Moh. Sholeh<sup>8</sup>).

“Transmitting Islam through stories”, in particular, has an important role in conveying Islamic teachings to communities in a valuable and easy way. Analysing Islamic stories presented in Javanese literature, Ronit Ricci argues that Islamic transmission through printed stories “contributes to the teaching of religious concepts by incorporating them into the narrative, while at the same time conveying...a story.” He further argues, “Combining an entertaining and engaging story with religious doctrine makes for an effective method of teaching”.<sup>9</sup> Borrowing this perspective of Ricci, the concept

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<sup>3</sup> Ma’rifatun Baroroh, *Santri Semelekete* (Yogyakarta: Matapena, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Kak Kusumo, *Hamzah bin Abdul Muthalib, Singa Allah di Padang Pasir* (Bandung: DAR! Mizan, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, 28<sup>th</sup> edition (Jakarta: Penerbit Republika, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> `Aidh al-Qarni, *Cahaya Penerang Umat*, transl. Buldan M. Fatah, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Jakarta: Cakrawala Publishing, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> `Aidh al-Qarni, *La Tabẓan: Jangan Bersedih!* (Jakarta: Qisthi Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Moh. Sholeh, *Terapi Salat Tabajud: Menyembuhkan Berbagai Penyakit*, 17<sup>th</sup> edition (Jakarta: Hikmah-Mizan Pustaka, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Ronit Ricci, “Shared Stories: Islamic Teachings in Javanese Literature,” in Alef Theria Wasim et al. (eds), *Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice, and Education* (Yogyakarta: Oasis Publisher, 2005), p. 128.

“transmitting Islam through stories” can be considered, therefore, as one of the effective methods for transmitting Islamic teachings. It greatly helps attempts to formulate and construct Islamic beliefs within societies.

The following subheading discusses particularly how storytelling is exploited by Islamic book and how popular responses are towards it. The novel literature written by El Shirazy, *Ayat Ayat Cinta* is taken as an example of how Islamic books exploit this method of Islamic transmission, and *Hidayah* is selected to represent the Islamic magazine and its method of Islamic transmission. Even though strongly subscribing to storytelling method, both have different strategies in Islamic transmission. The following discussion is so illustrative of this trend.

### **Fiction-Based Storytelling**

Islamic novel literature in its capacity which represents the genre “transmitting Islam through stories” constitutes one of the effective methods for Islamic transmission. It has a greater role, not only in conveying Islamic teachings, but also in formulating Islamic beliefs within communities. In a more concrete way, just to mention one example among many, the Islamic novel literature helps the reader to behave in an Islamic way in response to the specific cases selected in the novel. More importantly, fiction-based storytelling is the most commonly exploited method by Islamic novel literature.

To get a sense of how the Islamic novel literature exploits the method of fiction-based storytelling; how it affects the readers; and how the readers consume it; consider the case of the most-popular ever and far-reaching Islamic novel written by El Shirazy, *Ayat Ayat Cinta*. This novel performs well, as its high sales suggest its popularity and marketability. First published in 2005, it has sold more than 350,000 copies up to the beginning of the year 2008, and it has been published 29 times in 2008 since its first appearance.

The novel *Ayat Ayat Cinta* is itself concerned specifically with a love drama endorsed with values undeniably rooted in Islamic teachings. The story presented within the novel is centred around five prominent figures: Fahri, and four girls, including Aisha, Nurul, Noura, and Maria. One of the angles of the story is about the four girls falling in love with Fahri, and the way Fahri responds to the so-called “five angular-love” between him and those four girls, in an Islamic way.

Having read the novel, Shelly Tutupoho, a middle-aged female reader from Bandung, maintains, “Reading the novel has inspired me to become an Aisha-like girl...and to have a partner like Fahri.”<sup>10</sup> A very similar comment about the inspiring personality of the characters of the novel comes from Sylvia, one of the readers from Jakarta. She encapsulates how the novel affects the way she perceives her personal life:

In my view, the novel describes a concept of tranquil and wise life which everybody as the slave of God would like to achieve even though many obstacles have to be faced. And that novel, in my opinion, is a reading of not only the novel, but also of self-motivating Muslims, both male and female, to become more wise and better in life. The male character Fahri, in the novel, awes me very much. This character has inspired me a lot in attempts to seek God’s blessings. I would like to have a soulmate like Fahri, and become a woman like Aisha and Maria, *insya Allah* (lit. “if God permits”).<sup>11</sup>

The success of such a novel has given rise to two phenomena which follow, the publishing of other Islamic novel literatures and the adoption of the novel into movie or TV miniseries. Many Islamic novels were published following the success of *Ayat ayat Cinta*. Some can be cited here, including a series of the spiritual-romance-based works Taufiqurrahman Al Azizy, *Syahadat Cinta* (The Testimony of Love),<sup>12</sup> *Munajat Cinta* (The Prayer of Love),<sup>13</sup> and *Makrifat Cinta* (The Acquaintance of Love).<sup>14</sup> El Shirazy also publishes his different works, such as *Di Atas Sajadah Cinta* (One the Payer Mat of Love)<sup>15</sup> and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (When Love Chants).<sup>16</sup>

The adoption of the novel into movie or TV miniseries constitutes another striking phenomenon following the success of the novel. The film *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, for example, came to its success, attracting no less

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<sup>10</sup> See Tutupoho’s comments in “Komentar untuk Novel ‘Ayat Ayat Cinta,’” in El Shirazy, *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> See Sylvia’s comments in “Komentar untuk Novel ‘Ayat Ayat Cinta,’” p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Taufiqurrahman Al Azizy, *Syahadat Cinta* (Yogyakarta: Diva Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Taufiqurrahman Al Azizy, *Munajat Cinta* (Yogyakarta: Diva Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Taufiqurrahman Al Azizy, *Makrifat Cinta* (Yogyakarta: Diva Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Di Atas Sajadah Cinta* (Jakarta: Republika, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Di Atas Sajadah Cinta* (Jakarta: Republika, 2007).

than three million moviegoers within less than two months since its first release in the end of February 2007. Its attainment has furthermore stimulated other movies of religious genre developed from the Islamic novel, such as *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* and *Di Atas Sajadah Cinta*, to come to the forefront. Both the novel-based Islamic movies were then adopted into miniseries, the former broadcast on RCTI and the latter on TransTV.

Religious movies have recently moved at large on the market. All gained positive responses from the market. One point deserves mentioning in this regard, however, that the booming of religious movie cannot be separated from the rising phenomenon of popular Islamic book. This is because most of religious movies on the market are developed from the plot, story, and materials presented within popular Islamic novels. More importantly, those religious movies are given the same title as the heading of the novel. The marketability of the popular Islamic novel seems to have guaranteed the saleability of the religious movies which adopt its plot, story, and materials. A similar title to the novel is necessary, therefore, for the marketing of religious movies.

The rise of Islamic novels exploiting the method of fiction-based storytelling and Islamic movies cannot be separated from the increasingly opened public space. The fall of Soeharto has stimulated the liberation of public sphere along with the deliverance of mediascape. This stimulation then gave rise, in particular, to the changed position of Islamic expressions to become more central for social life. At this point, the rising manifestation of Islamic novel as a popular Islamic publication in recent developments does not appear except as a result of the increasing move of Islamic literature from, borrowing the words of Amrih Widodo,<sup>17</sup> “a marginalized into a mainstream and defining genre”. Religious movies take benefits of this changed situation. And that is why, as a business activity, they are currently on the rise.

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<sup>17</sup> Widodo, “Writing for God: Piety and Consumption in Popular Islam,” (Paper presented to the Conference “Indonesia Ten Years After (1998-2008)”, organised by KITLV, ASiA and Inside Indonesia, Oost Indisch Huis, University of Amsterdam, 22-23 May 2008), 1. The paper is then published in *Inside Indonesia*. See Amrih Widodo, “Writing for God: Piety and consumption in popular Islam,” *Inside Indonesia*, No. 93 (August-October 2008), accessed on 20 October 2008 from URL: <http://insideindonesia.org/content/view/full/1121/47/>.

An increase in economic income is certainly a factor which gives rise to the increasing public consumption. The more digestible, didactic, and practical versions of Islamic teachings presented within, and conveyed as the materials and the contents of, popular publications, print and non-print, contribute a lot to the marketability of popular expressions of Islam, however.

The public demand for the materials of Islamic teachings which are not doctrinal but rather inspiring adds another factor to the increasing trend of popular Islamic publications, including the religious movies. People tend to have been bored with the materials of Islamic teachings focusing on, and preaching about, too many dos and too many don'ts. There is, rather, a popular demand for less indoctrinating materials of Islamic teachings but full with handy, practical guidelines.<sup>18</sup>

Characters such as “being based on personal experience,” “inspiring,” and “factual through examples” represent the key elements, therefore, for the increasingly marketable materials of Islamic teachings people currently prefer to consume. Borrowing the words of Virginia M. Hooker,<sup>19</sup> the increasing public demand for the popular Islamic expressions, including those presented in movie form, can be seen as resulting from “the transmission through practical example” the popular Islamic novels and religious movies develop.

Such a popular demand for materials of Islamic teachings as characterised above can be seen through the attractiveness of religious movies above which have surpassed the age border. Not only do the moviegoers come from the adult people, but also from the young and the teenagers. The wide-ranging moviegoers seem to be attracted to the way religious movies present Islamic teachings through the plot and story of movie drama. People may consider the religious movies as a new development of Islamic transmission through audio-visual media in Indonesia. They may perceive the long-chain of Islamic transmission through preaching or sermons of being too monotonous and doctrinal.

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<sup>18</sup> For comparison, see Asep Supriadi, “Transformasi Nilai-Nilai Ajaran Islam Dalam *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* Karya Habiburrahman El-Shirazy: Kajian Interteks,” (Unpublished MA thesis, Diponegoro University of Semarang, Semarang, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Matheson Hooker, “Transmission through Practical Example: Women and Islam in 1920s Malay Fiction,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*, vol. 67, part 2, no. 267 (December 1994): 93-118.



In comparison, the transmission of Islamic teachings through movies potentially paves the much easier and digestible way for people to sensibly consume those teachings. Presenting Islamic values on matters, including particularly male-female relationship, by means of practical examples with less indoctrinating, as Hooker argues above, contributes to the internalisation of those values. As a result, the fact that the religious movies are so inspiring becomes a common image. This way of transmission encourages the moviegoers to further learn about Islam, since it leads them to be able to discern the Islamic teachings in more a digestible way but with a deeper impression and a longer-lasting memory than too-many-do-too-many-don't-styles as promiscuously available on the market of preaching.

In short, the development and popularity of “transmitting Islam through stories” method, as particularly developed through fiction-based storytelling, cannot be separated from the practicality of this technique for wider Muslim communities in Indonesia, in having a better grasp of Islamic teachings. The so-called ordinary Muslim communities need to have Islam as practical teaching for their life. The Islamic novel literature presents Islam to the ordinary Muslims as a practical inspiration and guidance through stories.

### **Strategies of Commodification of Islam**

Islamic novels develop the essence of spirituality through the exploitation of romance and love. Themes about “cinta” (love; romance) are highly made use of. It is clear from the content that Islamic novels have recently tended to promote spirituality as a particular need of Muslims in modern era. They seem to translate the essence of this spirituality by the spirit and practices of love.<sup>20</sup> In a broader context of Indonesia, the spirit and practices of love, to a certain level, are not present in the public life, as the transition towards democracy has opened up rooms for public to raise their own interests, political, economic, social, and cultural. The difference in these interests, in many cases, have given rise to conflict and confrontation, overcoming the spirit and practices of love. Hence, the

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<sup>20</sup> See also Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, “Islam, Romance and Popular Taste in Indonesia: A Textual Analysis of *Ayat Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy and *Syabadat Cinta* by Taufiqurrahman al-Azizy,” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 40, Issue 116 (2012): 59-73 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2011.648998>).

endorsement of spirituality within the publication content is just topical in recent development in Indonesia.

In addition to the cultivation of the keyword “cinta”, those novels make use of Arabic-borrowed Indonesian words. Just to mention some, “Ayat Ayat”, “Sajadah”, “Tasbih”, “Syahadat”, “Munajat”, and “Makrifat” are examples which are so common in the title of the Islamic novels (and their adoption into Islamic movies). Moreover, ideas newly introduced to lay Muslim readers in the country, briefly defined as those who do not come academically from the background of Islamic studies, are also developed by highly making use of Arabic-borrowed Indonesian words. This can be viewed from the body of the novels. Ideas about *ta’aruf* (self-introduction between different sexes), *liqa’* (meeting), and *talaqi* (meeting for religious learning) can be easily found in the Islamic novels (and their adoption into Islamic movies as well).

Such a phenomenon cannot be separated from the landscape of Islamic politics in recent development in Indonesia. Following the collapse of Soeharto from power, many Islamic political parties are established, promoting their own political interests. One of the striking political parties in this context is Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party, formerly Partai Keadilan/Justice Party). Activists of this party are mostly alumni of the Middle Eastern Universities, supervising students of the so-called secular state, large universities such as the University of Indonesia, the Bandung Institute of Technology, and the Bogor Institute of Agriculture). The exposure of students of these large universities to Islamic ideas developed by the alumni of the Middle Eastern Universities tends to be high.<sup>21</sup>

The ascent of a number of alumni from the Middle Eastern Universities to the current political stage of Indonesia has opened up the rooms for attempts to introduce the cultural aspects of the Arabs. Meanwhile, their sociological base is predominantly in the urban Muslim middle class, particularly with university background. Their production of Islamic ideas tends to be mainly oriented to this group of Muslims.<sup>22</sup> This is not to say, however, that only this group of

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<sup>21</sup> Yon Machmudi, *Islamising Indonesia: The Rise of Jemaah Tarbiyah and the Prosperous Justice Party* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> For discussion of relationship between the consumption of popular culture, Islam and the middle class, see Ariel Heryanto, “Upgraded Piety and Pleasure: The New Middle Class and Islam in Indonesian Popular Culture,” in Andrew N. Weintraub

Muslims consume those Islamic ideas which are enriched with the Arabs-based Islam. Central to this production of Islamic ideas is the fact that the exploitation of Arabic has been undertaken to promote these cultural aspects of the Arabs-based Islam. Lay Muslims, though coming from university background, start to be familiar with Arabic terms. So, their understanding of Islamic teaching goes in parallel with the high exploitation of Arabic terms.

Meanwhile, many authors of Islamic novel come from such an educational and cultural background. Some even make grouping under the name of, and affiliate with, Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP, or Pen Circle Forum), a self-funded Muslim writers association established on 22 February 1997. The forum is famous for developing Islamic literature of popular genres within Islamic publications. They are fluently enough in conveying their ideas in Arabic and also introducing Arabic terms to local Indonesian audiences.<sup>23</sup> So, the exploitation of Arabic cultural aspect and words can be discerned from this sociological and cultural perspective.

Since its first inception, the forum has grown very rapidly. With thirty people as its initial memberships in 1997, as indicated above, the forum then boomed with 5,000 members in 2002. In 2008, as Irfan Hidayatullah, the recent chief of the national board of the forum, maintains, the membership of the forum reached 7,000.<sup>24</sup> Rosa notes, however, that only 700 of them are currently active in producing and publishing their own ideas in popular Islamic publications.<sup>25</sup>

At the course of the journey, the membership of FLP has been then expanded, covering diverse background. Currently, some of the members are university and high school students, and others are government and non-governmental officials, teachers, labourers, housewives, farmers, and even maids. Despite their diverse background, female Muslim writers have dominated the membership of the forum, comprising 70 percent of the membership.<sup>26</sup> While

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(ed.), *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 60-82.

<sup>23</sup> See Najib Kailani, "Forum Lingkar Pena and Muslim Youth in Contemporary Indonesia," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2012): 33-53.

<sup>24</sup> As quoted in "Berbagi Kiat Menulis," *Koran Tempo*, 21 May 2008.

<sup>25</sup> As quoted in "Berbagi Kiat Menulis."

<sup>26</sup> As quoted in "Berbagi Kiat Menulis."

indicating the wide spread of the so-called “popular Islamic literature fever” across people from different backgrounds, this analysis of the backdrop also suggests that many female Muslims have recently emerged among the important agents of popular Islamic publication writers.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Identity Politics Behind Commodification**

From a larger political perspective of Southeast Asia, the rising phenomenon of the production and consumption of Islamic commodities under the mode of “transmitting Islam through stories” in publication industry gives rise to the manifestation of changed identity politics among communities.<sup>28</sup> Two points of identity politics appear to be common among Muslims as a result of this commodification of Islam. First is the increasing exhibition of the so-called Arabised Islam, both in ideas and practices. This is mainly apparent in the publication of fiction-based Islamic novels through two ways of exchange of ideas, the promotion of Islamic ideas by exploitation of Arabic terms and the introduction of newly developed Arabs-based Islamic ideas, as suggested earlier.

In daily conversation, the exploitation of Arabic terms as developed by the aforementioned Islamic novels can now easily found particularly among the new urban, lay, middle class Muslims. The recent development shows that among this group of Muslims, or even wider, the term *ta'aruf* which means “self-introduction”, for example, is increasingly more largely used than the term *kenalan* as commonly used by Indonesians. Moreover, the term *ta'aruf* which is initially promoted in the novel to refer to the self-introduction between different sexes for strengthening relational ties towards marriage is currently extended

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<sup>27</sup> One of those popular Islamic publication writers is Helvy Tiana Rosa. See Monika Arnez, “Dakwah By the Pen: Reading Helvy Tiana Rosa's *Bukawu*,” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, volume 37, issue 107 (2009): 45-64 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639810902743040>). The rising female popular writers, according to Miriam Cooke, will give rise to the so-called “Islamic feminism through literature”. See Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Islamic Feminism through Literature* (Routledge, New York, London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Turkey's experience illustrates a similar trend. Islamization along with secularization of society becomes an increasing identity politics in Turkey's contemporary Islamic literature. See Kenan Çayır, *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

to cover also self-introduction between people irrespective of sex and purpose.

Furthermore, the exploitation of Arabic terms other than those promoted by Islamic novels has also started to be common particularly among such a group of Muslims. Day-to-day expressions can be taken as examples, including the label *ikhwan* (“brothers in Islam”, a term to refer to male Muslim colleagues), *akhawat* (“sisters in Islam”, a term to refer to female Muslim colleagues), and *ummahat* (“Muslim mothers”). The label *Ikhwan* is used to refer to both a married and single male Muslim. Different from the label for male Muslims, the specific naming for female Muslim has a specific term. While *akhawat* is used for a single female Muslim, *ummahat* applies only to a married female Muslim.

From the perspective of practices, the change in identity politics can be viewed partly from day-to-day Muslim dressing. Following the increasing practices of commodification of Islam,<sup>29</sup> Muslim fashion is also subject to the changed identity politics. The novel *Ayat Ayat Cinta* can be taken as an example in this regard. How Aisha, one of the four prominent female figures in the novel, wears a veil covering all of her face called *cadar* in Indonesian and *burqah* in Arabic can be viewed as a case.

**Picture 1:** Aisha and Her *Cadar*



Source: The Film *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (2007)

<sup>29</sup> See also Eric Sasono, “Islamic-themed Films in Contemporary Indonesia: Commodified Religion or Islamization?,” *Asian Cinema*, volume 21, number 2 (September 2010): pp. 48-68 ([https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.21.2.48\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.21.2.48_1)).

By reading the novel, people start to understand the essence of Muslim dressing as exemplified by Aisha. The adoption of the novel into movie has facilitated the audience to grasp a better understanding of the way to dress, especially by wearing the *cadar*. People are then increasingly aware that attempts to push themselves to become more pious can be done by following the way Aisha gets dress, particularly by having the *cadar*.<sup>30</sup> So, even though it is still restrictedly used in public sphere, the *cadar* has casted to be an identity politics of female Muslims in some groups of urban, lay, middle class Muslims.<sup>31</sup>

The popularity and the high consumption of this genre of popular Islamic print publications can be taken as evidence of the effectiveness of such a method of Islamic transmission. This demonstrates that there is a parallelism between the marketability of the genre of popular Islamic publications and the effectiveness of their method of Islamic transmission. The more marketable the popular Islamic print publication, the more effective the method of Islamic transmission it promotes, and vice versa.

Further, from a wider perspective, the high popular consumption of popular Islamic print publications, particularly under the category of fiction-based storytelling, signifies the importance of popular Islamic publication for Islamic transmission in Indonesia. This transmission affects what Clifford Geertz,<sup>32</sup> Brian Ellis,<sup>33</sup> and John Morgan<sup>34</sup> refer to as the construction of the system of belief and practices within ordinary or popular Indonesian communities. Due to the influential contributions of popular Islamic print publications, the trajectory of the future of Islam in wider, ordinary Indonesian communities can be traced back to such popular Islamic novel literature in Indonesia.

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<sup>30</sup> For comparison, see Ahmad Nuril Huda, "Negotiating Islam with Cinema: A Theoretical Discussion on Indonesian Islamic Films," *Wacana*, vol. 14, no. 1 (April 2012): pp. 1-16.

<sup>31</sup> Alicia Izharuddin, "The Muslim Woman in Indonesian Cinema and The Face Veil As 'Other'," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, volume 43, issue 127 (2015): pp. 397-412 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2015.1033162>).

<sup>32</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock Publishers, 1966), pp. 1-46.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Ellis, *Rational Belief Systems* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> John Morgan, "Religion and Culture as Meaning Systems: A Dialogue between Geertz and Tillich," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 57, no. 4, (October 1977): pp. 363-375.

The adoption of materials in the novel literature into movie suggests that what Roger Fidler terms “mediamorphosis” from print to audio-visual media publications as indicated earlier is just another kind of commodification. The rising phenomenon of this mediamorphosis is a result of effective strategies in production and consumption of the Islamic ideas developed within Islamic publication.

As a result of the increase in Islamic publication activities, followed by the phenomenon of mediamorphosis as such, it is easy not only for the Muslim scholars to produce their ideas of Islam, but also for lay Muslims to consume the ideas of Islam produced. With all of its benefits, Islamic publication gives the readers flexibilities and rooms for reflection upon the contents developed within itself. The readers are not required to attend physically any religious forums in order for them to learn about and consume ideas of Islam. In the past, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), mosque, and *majelis taklim* (meeting for religious learning) were very common and dominant Islamic learning centers for lay Muslims to improve their understanding of Islamic teaching. This is no longer to be the case following the boom in Islamic publication, as people are not required to go in person for Islamic learning, as required by conventionally defined Islamic learning centers such as *pesantren*, mosque, and *majelis taklim* above.

## Conclusion

In short, the fact must be recognised that the activities of Islamic transmission have shifted from mainly conventional ways (including oral preaching at the mosque and *majelis taklim* or Islamic learning in *pesantren* and even formal Islamic schools) to unconventional ways, leading to the central position of popular media, both print and non-print, as the vector. People are increasingly facilitated with different products of Islam on the market, both print and non-print, so that they consume what they think suits their interest.

The increasing popularity of the mode of Islamic transmission called “Islam through stories”, realised through both fiction-based storytelling, has enhanced the effectiveness and the acceptability of the so-called unconventional ways above to the Muslim public. Non-indoctrinating practices of this genre of Islamic transmission have further attracted popular attention. The young and the teenagers, in particular, tend to subscribe to this way of Islamic transmission, as suggested earlier. The saleability of the Islamic novel literature oriented

among other things to this age of people shows their considerably high consumption of this Islamic transmission. Through the consumption of different publications and varied kinds of the content, the young and the teenagers are now increasingly provided with varied ideas and materials of Islamic teachings. So, the future of Islam in Indonesia is partly determined by the production and consumption of Islamic commodities currently developed.[]

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