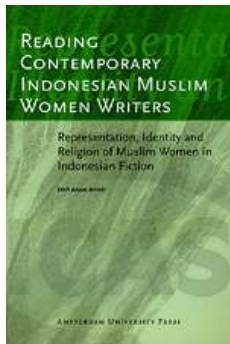


## RESENSI



### RE-READING ABOUT MUSLIM AND WOMEN IN LITERATURE

#### Membaca Ulang Muslim dan Perempuan dalam Karya Sastra

Arimbi, Diah Ariani. 2009. *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers: Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, ICAS Publication Series, 236 pages.

#### Maimunah

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How do women issues represented by women writers (Muslim) in our contemporary Indonesian literature? This question emerges initially when reading a book of Diah Ariani Arimbi's PhD dissertation work. Divided into six chapters, the discussion of this book is initiated by observing socio-politic context of Muslim Women issues in contemporary world and specifically examines the representation of such issues through women characters created by the authors in their works. Four chosen Muslim women authors are Titis Basino P I, Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim, Abidah El Khalieqi and Helvy Tiana Rosa. It is important to notice the motive of choosing the four authors which officially unfamiliar for recent decade readers. However, this motive becomes the main criteria of the writer of this book (page 14). A side thought that deserve to be appreciated since the four women authors seems to be 'the forgotten' among the chick-lit phenomenon crowd which is celebrated by the elite community of Indonesian literature post new-orde (Orde-Baru). The feminist post-structural approach results a very interesting book to read; it is not only discussing the ideology of the text but also the supporting factors of such issues for instance the production process, regulation and obviously how such texts

are consumed by the recent decade readers.

The four authors have quite various literary eras. Titis represents the 70's generation, Ratna the 80's generation, meanwhile Abidah and Helvy are both authors from Reformation era. Hence, this generation matter affects the Muslim Women issues that are raised. Titis explores the women world from Muslim esoteric perspective known as *tasawuf*. In certain sensitive issues, polygamy for instance, Titis captures how the husbands merely understand the polygamy concept from the point of view of patriarchy without considering spiritual concept behind it. For example her book, *Pelabuhan Hati* (1978), *Aku Supiyah Istri Hardian* (1998), and *Tersenyumpun Tidak Untukku Lagi* (1998) narrate about various social classes women experience as the victim of polygamy but then they become capable of turning over the *powerless* situation into a strong character fighting for their future and their family future.

Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim focuses more on capturing sexual identity matter and women's body by criticizing social values constellation, culture, and also religion which, in times, marginalizing women. In one of her work, *Noda Pipi Seorang Perempuan*, she captures about identity crisis of a 40 year old wife who

finds wrinkles on her face. However, the husband does not agree for a plastic surgery and when other guy shows up to admire her beauty, the character becomes restless. The narration is ended when the woman character realizes not to leave her marriage, and refuses to become a prostitute. She also refuses the thought that woman's body and beauty are merely for male business (*male gaze*). The character can accept and love the wrinkle as a maturity symbol and as her part that cannot be separated from her body. Through this work, *Male Gaze* which has become an ideology among beauty industry and successfully deceives women femininity for the importance of capitalism which is very masculine critically accused. According to Ratna, woman's body is a *battle field*; woman's body cannot totally be separated from *male gaze*. However, Ratna believes that *male gaze* is not a system which is linear but circular; women can turn over the *gaze* to appreciate themselves. Women's body position as a passive object is turned to an active subject and totally autonomous (Page 142).

Apparently, Abidah El Khalieqi who was raised in Muslim environment, *pesantren*, focuses on women reproduction matters, social revolutions and particularly rights for education as the most important tool to improve women's future. For instance, in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (2001), the writer observes Abidah's narration that criticizes patriarchy domination in education system in *pesantren*. Through its protagonist Nisa, a daughter of an admired *Kiai*, Abidah portrays marriage process which is arranged; a lot of violence acts happen in the marriage life (KDRT) when the husband Samsudin decides to do polygamy. Interestingly, Kalsum presence, Samsudin's second wife, becomes a mediator for Nisa in continuing her college and decreasing

her domestic and sexual responsibility as a wife. Polygamy has a different face in this story. Sisterhood relation emerges between both polygamy victims as Kalsum makes Nisa as her mentor. Through this work, Abidah also reveals *ijbar* concept which potentially manipulates women's rights of their body. *Ijbar* gives parents or the proxy an authority to authorize an arranged marriage for female children (even under age) to be married with a man chosen by the parent. Abidah believes that *Ijbar* must be re-contextualized so it will be in the same direction with the spirit of women's autonomy in Islam (Page 147).

Helvy is the last author that is discussed in this book. It seems that Helvy steps further by describing violence toward women in a war territory such as Palestine or Bosnia. Through this war stories, the writer finds the red line between Helvy's work that asking about the masculine state violence, for instance in Tionghoa women massal raping case on Mei 1998, the legalization of DOM in Aceh and Poso Conflict, Sambas, etc. *Jaring – Jaring Merah* (2002), for example, reveals the violence of military in Aceh through life story of Inong, rape victim who lost her family, honority and everything she has. The presence of Cut Dini refreshes Inong's mental and psychological condition who then struggle to fight the oppression to herself by creating self-identification as a bird that is trapped in a net, but she is able to fly rapidly leaving her trauma and her mental illness. Body possession in Inong's story becomes problematic. As a bird, women's body becomes body-less female which is untied by social and sexual identification. 'The Homelines' becomes a way of patriarchy resistance.

Indeed, through Helene Cixous' *écriture feminine* reading model, the writer guides the reader to understand how gender roles that are experienced by

the female characters in the four writers' work are something that negotiable, not inherent (Page 181). This book has a quite different conclusion for instance from *In Shadow of Change* (2003), one work of Tinneke Hellwig, which in her study finds that the works written by men authors such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Umar Kayam, in fact, are capable in creating a more positive and deceive female character (Hellwig, 2003: vi). Hellwig's study towards female character representation in 5 decades (1937—1986) concludes that state-ibuisism as the nation gender ideology in New-orde regime was powerfully represented in that period. Ideal women of the new-orde as a mother and motherhood are the main value of a woman; as a result, widow and single woman do not have space. Their existence does not admitted and no need to be existed (Hellwig, 244).

Reading Diah Ariani Arimbi's work precisely becomes important since after the period of Tinneke Hellwig's *In Shadow of Change* (2003), there have been none critical and scientific studies about women Indonesian author's work. This book emerges to complete such *gap* since it observes the transition period that divides gender ideology particularly before the raise of chick-lit in the 2000's and after Hellwig's study on 80's era. Even more, this book becomes a critical canon counter-discourse, provides voices to women authors and border women's world that seem to be forgotten in the chick-lit works. With this critical position, this book invites the reader to compare, for example whether there is a displacement or even a defending of *state-ibuisism* gender ideology which used to be majority in canon works published in New-order. For instance, a simple comparison, in the four authors' works discussed, marginal women sexuality rights not yet revealed distinctly. Diah concludes that only *Geni Jora* (2003),

the other Abidah's work, indistinctly portrays female homoeroticism relationship among women *santri* (page 155). As an author who is well-known as a Muslim author, dimly the four authors have not touched this sensitive core yet. The same model appears in Tinneke Hellwig's study on pop novel titled *Relung-Relung Gelap Hati Sisi* written by Mira W. in the 80's which places lesbianism as a mental illness that need to be cured. In Mira W.'s work, heteronormativity is strongly applied and result in the punishment of the character, Airin and Sisi who do not obey heterosexual norm, for insanity by the society and even by themselves (Hellwig, 230). Oppositely, the chick-lit writers explore taboo topics about body and women sexuality including lesbianism directly and without any oppression. Even sexual violence becomes *raison d'être* in Djenar Mahesa Ayu's work. Gender ideology, *state-ibuisism* is accused precisely because they celebrate and provide money for those women who are out of ideal women category of the New-orde. These related themes become majority as in Ayu Utami's works, Djenar Mahesa Ayu, Linda Kristanti (Bodden and Hellwig, 10—13). Placing books that synchronically analyze women representation in literature is a benefit for being able to distinguish how a gender ideology is redefined and renegotiated. Through literary works, in truth, reader is guided to re-think how women are seen of, and at the same time, see their society. Thus, this is the time that the book of Diah Ariani Arimbi has to be translated into Bahasa Indonesia in order to be appreciated by a wider range of public reader

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