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WOMEN, ISLAM AND THEIR RIGHTS: ABIDAH EL KHALIEQY AND HER LITERARY WORKS¹

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ABSTRACT

Raising the general awareness about issues concerning women and Islam can be channelled through numerous ways, including book publication. Abidah El Kalieqy is famous for her engagement in disseminating awareness of the rights of women within the bounds of Islamic values. Her short stories and novels are commonly perceived as promoters of Muslim women's authenticity, intellectual ownership, identity and struggle within their community, in order to advocate equality for women in a male-dominated world, and her most famous fiction is *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (A Woman with A Turban) which was published in 2001, and in January 2009 has been turned into a movie directed by a highly acclaimed young director, Hanung Bramantyo. The publication of this novel was partly funded by Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF), Yogyakarta, and the Ford Foundation (FF). In this novel Abidah clearly depicts her feminist project, often defined as Islamic feminism. Metaphorically, the title signifies prescribed relations between men and women: their social positions in Islamic society where religious interpretations play as constructions formulating those relations and positions. This paper attempts to examine both the novel and the film of how both texts can promote Islamic feminist agendas. This does not mean only to promote female rights, but also to balance the sociological and theological in order to give norms perspectively flexibility to Islamic teachings. In this way Islam can face the challenges presented by social change, while still reflecting the transcendental essence of Islamic ideals.

Key words: women, Islam, rights



ABOUT ABIDAH EL KHALIEQY

Abidah El Khalieqy's narratives began to appear in mid 1990s.² She is not only known as a prose writer but also as a poet. Indeed, she started her writing profession first in poetry then moved onto prose writing. Abidah³ was born in March 1, 1965 in Menturo, Jombang Growing up in Jombang, the capital of *pesantren*, she was exposed regularly to the Islamic discourses. Her countless short stories, poems and essays have been published in several magazines such as *Horizon*, *Republika*, *Gadis*, *Amanah*, *Ulumul Qur'an* and many others. Her poems were included in *ASEANO*:

¹ This paper is a part of my book publication, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction*, ICAS Publications Series, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2009. This paper is much based on the book mentioned afore. Thank you to Amsterdam University Press for granting the copyright to publish some parts of the book into this paper.

² Korrie Layun Rampan, *Angkatan 2000 dalam Sastra Indonesia*, PT Gramedia Widiasarana Indonesia, Jakarta, 2000.

³ In this paper, Abidah El Khalieqy will be addressed using her first name as she is usually called.

An Anthology of Southeast Asia Poems, in 1995. Her publication, in addition to some poetry anthologies, incorporates prose works like *Ibuku Lautan Berkobar* (*My Mother the Burning Sea*, 1997); *Menari di Atas Gunting* (*Dancing Above the Scissors*, 2001); *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (*Woman with the Sorban Necklace*, 2001); *Atas Singasana* (*Above the Crown*, 2003); and the latest *Geni Jora* (*Jora's Fire*, 2004,) which won the second prize for 2003 novel writing conducted by Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (The Jakarta Arts Council) and her latest work *Mahabah Rindu* (*Longing for Love*, 2008). Her poems about women and abortion were translated into English by an Australian poet Geoff Fox and published in cyber-album in 1998.

A recognised Indonesian literary critic, Budi Darma, has compared Abidah's work to Taslima Nasreen's, the Bangladesh woman author whose works are mostly regarded as blasphemy to Islam. But far from Nasreen's radicalism, Abidah's presentation of Islamic gender ideology is subtle, yet voicing strong challenges to Islamic patriarchal interpretations.⁴ Most of her works are weighted with women's issues located within Islamic perspectives, and she continuously criticises formal and informal institutions entrapping women in the shackles of their gender. The strongest theme in her narratives is her call for social change and female empowerment to occur within the sanction of Islamic doctrines. In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, published under the auspices of YKF (*Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat*, Fatayat Welfare Foundation) and the Ford Foundation, Abidah powerfully takes issues of women's right to education and reproduction into account. She says that her interest in feminism is based on her experience of what she sees and senses:

If we see injustices how can we be silenced? . . . What is happening in our world? So, how can we be alert of all those? Perhaps, if I speak about those problems in my writings at least I have participated with my friends or those having concerns with problems of injustices and discrimination.⁵

Her narratives are laden with "the woman question", and she constantly creates and recreates her female characters as those who react and offer counter responses to patriarchal oppression.

Abidah's engagement with Islamic feminism started when she was an active member of *Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat* (YKF), an NGO seeking to empower women. She posits:

I try to keep myself informed about the advance of feminism either from the Western world or from the Islamic world such as the Middle East. . . . I am currently active in YKF, an NGO aiming for women's empowerment. This NGO is not affiliated with NU, although most members are also members of NU. With this NGO, we are redefining Qur'anic exegeses, researching on how to create guidelines of *fiqh perempuan* [Islamic jurisprudence from women's perspectives] in *pesantren* similar to those done by Sinta Nuriyah with her *Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning*.⁶

⁴ Back cover of *Geni Jora* by Abidah El Khalieqy, Matahari, Yogyakarta, 2004.

⁵ Interview with Abidah El Kalieqy, 7 July 2004 at her home in Maguwo, Yogyakarta.

⁶ Interview with Abidah, 7 July 1995.

Abidah believes that the best way to disseminate the notion of feminism, be it Islamic or any other is through literary writings, since narratives are reflections of everyday lives that the readers can easily identify with and make meaning out of. Her narratives are her tools in reacting against injustices and discrimination against women, which in the end she hopes can inspire readers to create better conditions. The best way to vocalise her feminist views is through writings because she can use her own language, the woman language:

The more I develop my knowledge and interest on feminism, the more I like discussing about it as it is now actual and I think I have to start writing about it. I know some writers who have no concern about it. . . . Then, I wrote with my own language, which means that I have full authority on *bahasa perempuan* (female language), utilising that female language which is not masculine. Masculine language colonises almost all spheres both knowledge and literature. . . . Actually, what I feel [about the masculine hegemony of the language] is not coming only from actual discourses that are in circulation but also because my friends around me feel the same way. Thus, I must begin entering that sphere [feminism].⁷

Abidah argues that *bahasa perempuan* (female language) is not only crucial, but also accurate in presenting women's own experiences and views. It creates a strong identification that suggests a resistance to the essentialising agenda of identity politics created by the dominant male culture.⁸ Of course, the problematic of female language is complicated when women project language assumed to be women's but is, instead, a projection of hegemonic male language. In this case, women write of men's perception rather than their own genuine perception. Nevertheless, through careful reading and scrutiny the problematic of female language can be identified and reassembled in order to provide entry into self and language. Abidah refers to Nawal Sa'dawi's books, specifically *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which corresponds to the views she wants to articulate in her writings. The core of her narratives lies in the spirit of equality, though it may appear in different shapes through different literary characterisation or different poetical expression.

Abidah's prose works are usually set in a *pesantren* background. The *pesantren* world is the world she knows well, and the language of *pesantren* is her mother tongue. She even calls herself "santri minded." Her intention is to bring to life a *pesantren* world that has been largely ignored and marginalised by a number of writers. Only a very few writers, such as Huda Huzairini and A.A. Navis, take account of the *pesantren* world. The *pesantren* world is normally regarded as exclusive world, estranged, closed, very conventional and traditional. It is assumed to be a closed world because only those of *santri* background and family live there. Unless one wants to have an education in Islamic teachings, ordinary Indonesians do not usually live within a *pesantren* area. It can be said that the role of Abidah's writings is to bridge the *pesantren* and ordinary Indonesian world, linking the imaginings of the general Indonesian public to the factual life in the *pesantren* world. She is thus situated among these very few writers who explore the dynamics

⁷ Interview with Abidah, 7 July 2004. Abidah's definition of female language is similar to Ratna's.

⁸ Interview with Abidah, 7 July 2004.

of *pesantren* life against the grain of the received view of the outside world. Her narratives are her readings of the personal experiences of those living there, though they are not necessarily hers.

Her challenge to orthodox interpretations of women's role and position in Islamic society brings criticism from various *ulama*. Her novel, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, is an example. The first edition of this novel—about 3000 copies were distributed free to NGOs, *pesantrens*, religious and social organizations, and *kyais*—was controversial when first launched in 2001. Many in the invited audiences, which included *kyais*, showed their disagreement with her story which touched on women's right to education, and the not to be spoken of issue of women's reproduction rights within Islamic tenets. In 2009, when the novel was adapted into a film with the same title, the novel was sold thousands of copies.⁹ The novel was boomed due to its film adaptation. The following discussion will center on Abidah's *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, the novel and its film adaptation. The controversy raised by the film marks that discourses of women and Islam are not an easy matter.

MUSLIM WOMEN AND THEIR RIGHTS

Abidah's *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman with a Sorban Necklace) was first published in 2001. The publication of this novel was partly funded by Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF), Yogyakarta, and the Ford Foundation (FF). It is stated in the introductions from both YKF and FF that the novel seeks to educate readers on women's rights, especially reproduction and education rights within the tenets of Islam. In this novel Abidah clearly depicts her feminist project, often defined as Islamic feminism.

The novel strongly articulates women's demands for equality with men. The title itself suggests that the positioning of women is always confined within limitations produced by men. *Perempuan berkalung sorban* literally means a woman who is wearing *sorban* as her necklace. *Sorban* is the headdress worn only by male Muslims. Metaphorically, the title signifies prescribed relations between men and women: their social positions in Islamic society where religious interpretations play as constructions formulating those relations and positions.

EDUCATION RIGHTS

The story focuses on the life of Nisa, the shorter name for Annisa Nuhayyah, meaning an intelligent woman.¹⁰ Nisa is the daughter of KH. Hanan Abdul Malik, a famous *kyai*, the head of a *Pondok Pesantren Putri* (*pesantren* for girls). As the only daughter, it is understood that Nisa will be her father's successor in heading the *pesantren*: nowadays it is common for *pesantren putri* to be headed by *ibu nyai*, the wife, or the daughter, of a *kyai*. However, Nisa doesn't see herself living only within the *pesantren* walls, she desires to seek knowledge beyond the *pesantren* walls and she often mingles with the village children outside the *pesantren*. Nisa is raised in a patriarchy-dominated world where the sexual division of labour is seen to be

⁹ Dua Bulan Cetak 16 Kali, Kamis 26 Maret 2009, *Jawa Pos*, p. 25.

¹⁰ Abidah El Khalieqy, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat, Yogyakarta, 20001, p. 51.

natural. At school she uses reading materials supportive of this division: within the family the father is the bread winner working in an office; the mother is in charge of domestic duties; the son plays in the yard, and the daughter helps her mother's household load.¹¹ Abidah displays her criticism of Indonesian formal education, especially of the elementary level where the ideology of the sexual division of labour is persistently reinforced; gender hierarchy is maintained by propagating such representation and roles. Domestic ideology becomes a powerful means to strengthen the patriarchal domination through such teachings.

The protagonist of the story, Nisa, intends to break all the constraining walls, which limit women in their social roles. She wants to grow up having male roles rather than female roles, because this will provide her with more control in the public sphere. Nisa's status as a daughter is symbolic. All women are daughters, but not all are wives and mothers. Nisa's daughterhood acts as a representation of all women, because it shows that all women can be oppressed, but at the same time it also shows that daughters can respond to unjust situations and demand their rights as though they were sons. Nisa's close relationship with her distant relative *Lek Khudhori* (Uncle Khudhori) contributes greatly to her striving for gender equality. From Khudhori, the young Nisa learns about the equality and justice that Islam ideally brings to its adherents. Khudhori satisfies Nisa's thirst for knowledge about women's history in Islam:

I was more and more yearning to learn *qira'ah* [to recite the Qur'an beautifully] and horse-back riding. I did them all with high spirit though secretly. . . . I spent all my free time exercising for horse-back riding, listening to the stories of the Prophet's wives, the forgotten queens of Islam and stories of female Sufis from *Lek Khudori*.¹²

The passage above well illustrates Nisa's desire for education beyond domesticity. Her dream is to imitate Aisyah, the Prophet's youngest wife, who led an army in the Battle of Camel. Although Aisyah led the losing side, the fact that she led indeed captivated the young girl. For Nisa, Aisyah's heroism, and her ability to lead an army of men, conjures up images of an earlier Islam where women were given greater space in public life. Within these images Nisa sees women's authenticity.

Not only does Nisa have an early education in the history of early Muslim women, she also has an interest in literature and poetry. Khudhori often recites the poems of famous poets, in particular those of Jalaluddin Rumi. Nisa often writes her own poems and sends them to Khudhori who is away at Al-Azhar, Cairo, for tertiary education. Imagination is a powerful ally for Nisa's struggles. Imagination enables her to create her own interpretations and thus fill the gaps in the collective memory of Islamic tradition, which, by and large, erases the presence of female Muslims in history. She begins her own interpretations at an early age when critically assessing *Sura At-Takwir* on female infanticide in pre-Islamic Quraishi culture:

How could they be called fathers? Or is it what they really are? Burying baby girls alive? Who are then their mothers? Who are their wives? Aren't they women

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

themselves? Why don't they bury their wives alive as well? Sometimes I feel that father doesn't really love me. [Is it] because I am a girl?¹³

From an early age Nisa criticises the gender hierarchy that discriminates against girls in her environment, because of their sex. Her most essential effort is to defy her worst enemy—patriarchal domination—and achieve justice and equality. She persistently maintains her goal: to obtain her freedom. “Women are not men’s servants. Nor are they slaves of life. I don’t want to be a slave.”¹⁴

Nisa’s struggles are not without challenge. Soon after her graduation from elementary school, at the age of twelve she is forced into marriage with Samsudin, the son of a famous *kyai*. Forced marriage and child marriage are another form of subordination that Nisa has to undergo. Her struggle to be an autonomous body must necessarily be punished, as it deviates from the religious and social norms of the *pesantren* world. Samsudin, who is considered the black sheep of his family, comes from a devout *santri* family. He is a promiscuous young man, incapable of the upstanding behaviour expected of a *santri* gentleman. The narrative paints him as a monster: he abuses Nisa, and frequently rapes her when she does not desire sexual intercourse. When Nisa protests about Samsudin’s immoral behaviour to her family, they simply tell her that it is her responsibility to change him into a better person. Nisa is sacrificed and punished for attempting to have her own autonomy.

For Nisa, education is her way to cope with this unjust treatment. She focuses only on her education and ignores Samsudin’s misbehaviour. Samsudin is outraged that Nisa ignores him and soon brings a woman, Kalsum, home as his second wife. Kalsum is a widow and far older than Samsudin. Although it is perhaps unusual for wives to share the same house in Indonesia, it sometimes happens in *pesantrens*. Samsudin’s polygamous marriage is a relief for Nisa, as it releases her from her responsibilities as a wife: she accepts this practice gladly. She can now concentrate more on her education, because Kalsum, being her helpful ally, takes over Nisa’s responsibility for managing the household and fulfilling Samsudin’s sexual needs. Kalsum also gives him a daughter, Fadillah. Here, Abidah gives polygamy a new face. The dynamic of polygamy is presented very well when Abidah uses it as a useful ally for Nisa in seeking her self-empowerment. Because Samsudin takes a second wife, Nisa can finish her education. However, Kalsum is also Samsudin’s victim: his promise of material luxury, which seduced her, is a lie. A bond between Nisa and Kalsum is established when Kalsum shows interest in Nisa’s education, and asks Nisa to be her mentor on issues concerning women and Islam: sisterhood emerges between the victimised women. Their bond is their response to an external threat, as they remember events they come together in sorrow. And through Nisa’s teaching to Kalsum they establish a sense of collective identity.

Education is centralised within this story. Lack of education is an essential contributing factor in women’s victimisation. Kalsum’s lack of education, not knowing her rights as a wife, makes her an easy target for Samsudin’s violence. Nisa’s young age and her high school education are inadequate for her to fight back against Samsudin’s violence. Abidah shows that within a *santri* family marriage, which

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

is commonly perceived to be closest to Islamic ideals, domestic violence can take place. Abidah further questions gender bias in relation to the wife's responsibilities regulated in *kitab kuning* and taught in *pesantren*. At school Nisa is taught that a wife will be cursed if she refuses her husband's desire for sexual intercourse. However, in her explanation to Kalsum on this matter, Nisa critically rebuffs such teaching, saying that it is heavily drawn for men's benefit, and intentionally neglects women's own words about it. Nisa believes women's feelings need to be taken into account: is she prepared? Does she want to? For Nisa, a husband's imposition of intercourse when the wife refuses, is clearly an act of rape. However, Nisa's knowledge means nothing, because she has no power to stop Samsudin's violence: she is too young and too scared to defy her husband. Nisa's young age and Kalsum's ignorance indeed make them perfect allies for subjugation.

As Abidah vocalises her discontent with child marriage and polygamy, these seemingly perpetual problems Indonesian women have to deal with, she illustrates the hostile conditions in which women have to live. Abidah even goes further, saying that child marriage is largely due to patriarchal manipulation of what is termed *ijbar* in Islamic *shari'a*. This is where a Muslim girl is subjected to the over-ruling power, or *ijbar*, of her father or guardian, supposedly in the interests of the girl herself. Through the story of Nisa, Abidah critically assesses *ijbar*. How could a girl twelve years of age know her own interest, particularly in the choice of husband? The most common interpretation of *ijbar* is when the father, or a guardian, asks a girl whether she approves of a certain person and if she keeps silent this means she agrees with the father's (or guardian's) choice. This is Nisa's experience. Her silence when she is asked, which shows her ignorance, is simply perceived as her agreement. Through the voice of Nisa's uncle, Khudhori, Abidah criticises *ijbar*, because she believes that it is entirely against the spirit of autonomy in Islam. *Ijbar* should be located within certain contexts and conditions, it was never meant to be monolithically applicable to all circumstances.

Upon her graduation from high school at the age of seventeen, and encouraged by Khudhori who has returned from Egypt and Germany, Nisa finally agrees to speak about Samsudin's abuse to her parents. When matters are settled between her family and Samsudin's, she files for divorce. Being a young divorcee, she is subjected to public prejudice, in particular about her close relation to Khudhori. However, determined to start a new life and pursue higher education, Nisa leaves her hometown for university education in Yogyakarta. A year later she marries Khudhori. Her second marriage is her escape from her *janda* status, because she cannot bear the prejudicial societal treatment: with her marriage to Khudhori, who is a lecturer in Islamic studies, these prejudices soon disappear. Nisa gains what she has struggled for. Her activism on women's issues within an Islamic perspective is supported by her Khudhori and she becomes a strong supporter of the women's movement. Her feminist project is to provide equality and justice for women who are subjugated through patriarchal domination, her own experience. Her marriage to Khudhori is an ideal one, each supporting the other in creating *sakinah mawaddah wa-rahmah* family (a harmonious, peaceful and affectionate family). When their son Mahbub is one year old, Khudhori dies in a car accident. It is rumoured that Samsudin is responsible for the hit and run accident, which kills Khudhori, but the truth is never revealed in the story. Nisa herself believes that life and death are in the hands of the Creator. The death of Khudhori is a significant device in the story, for it

reminds the readers that the kind of family life that Nisa and Khudhori have exists only at an ideal level.¹⁵

Nisa's struggle for education is not an easy struggle, but Nisa pursues education despite her circumstances. She is iconic, because she attempts to formulate interpretations of Islam within the perspectives of women's experiences. In this story women become the central social actors: first subjugated then empowered, Abidah moves women's social position from the periphery to the centre. She advocates women's rights within Islam, and within the contexts of Islamic teaching, and highlights domestic violence, because it is often believed to be non-existent in Islamic reality. She creates a heroine who portrays a course of action that constantly resists gender bias, and who refuses to play the role of a slave victimised by patriarchy. The role of education sets the central theme of the text. In addition to her explicit opinions on child and forced marriage, polygamy, and domestic violence, Abidah emphasises the significance of education in resisting oppression based on conservative Islamic teachings. For Abidah, education functions as a means of psychological independence; freeing women from oppression and providing room for emancipation. It is a reverberating call against certain traditional practices, such as child and forced marriage, and polygamy.

REPRODUCTION RIGHTS

As part of their responsibilities as the vicegerents on earth, Muslims are adjured to ensure the survival of the human race through reproduction conducted through sexual relationships regulated within the sanction of marriage. Women, with their sole ability to bear children are then central, for they are the linking entity of the past and the future. Humankind relies on women's bodies to secure the existence of future generations. However, in a society like Indonesia where religious teaching regarding the power of a husband over a wife is very strong, a woman's right over her own body is significantly disregarded. Her ownership and reproduction rights are denied, because the ability to control her own reproductive behaviour smacks of self-determination and freedom from male authority—anathema to men in most societies, let alone Indonesia. Women's reproductive health is, by and large, dismissed from male politics.

Although recent developments have shown that many NGOs and women's organizations are now strongly addressing reproduction rights, according to UNICEF the maternal mortality rate and lifetime risk of maternal death are still high, because of the poor handling of women's reproductive health.¹⁶ To make matters worse, numerous aspects of women's reproductive rights have intentionally been neglected by the state, for example, abortion and infertility.¹⁷ Blackburn argues that it is difficult for women who fall pregnant against their will to secure an abortion, because there is no consensus on the issue. Religious objections create more difficulties for the state to sanction abortion based on women's needs. Infertility is another problematic matter. In infertility problems the blame is simply placed on the

¹⁵ Interview with Abidah, 7 July 2004.

¹⁶ UNICEF, Internet, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/indonesia_statistics.html1/#1, (2 May 2005).

¹⁷ Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 155 – 162.

woman, rather than on men, without really knowing the cause.¹⁸ In addition, despite the fact that leukorrhea,¹⁹ commonly known as *keputihan*, can be a vital symptom of dangerous reproductive diseases, such as sexually transmitted diseases, the Ministry of Health fails to classify it as needing urgent attention.²⁰

The lack of women's awareness on the notion of "woman's body woman's right" also contributes greatly to the failure to implement women's reproductive rights. There is very little discourse about, or attention given to, the subject. Religion is probably the most significant reason for this lack of attention. Traditional interpretations of Islam view that women are half of men, and a woman's body is owned by the male lineage, exemplified exclusively with the *ijbar* right when she is single, and her husband's control when she is married. A wife is subject to her husband's responsibility, thus control over her body and integrity is in the hands of her husband. Who is the owner of a woman's body is certainly problematic. The notion of "woman's body woman's right" implicates authority, and the right for women to control their bodies, sexuality, reproductive organs: for most men, this will definitely jeopardise their control over women.

Issues of reproduction rights are also presented strongly in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. The novel is included amongst the few books published in Indonesia from 1990-2003 which are said to cover "all issues concerning women's reproduction rights and women's reproductive health, including violent acts and violations of women's rights."²¹ The story translates the issues of reproduction rights from social and cultural approaches within the context of the *pesantren* world. Abidah's fictionalisation of these issues proves to be more powerful and influential than if they were represented in more clinical terms, as the story relates to the life and experiences of many women. It articulates women's own concerns, and turns their concerns into an informative teaching method, for instance, when Nisa tells her relative, *Lek Ummi* (Aunt Ummi) about women's reproduction rights:

Caring for children is the husband's responsibility. . . . Also, for example if *Lek Ummi* refuses to breastfeed the baby because the household load is too heavy, *Lek Mahmud* [*Lek Ummi's* husband] is obligated to find a surrogate mother whom he'll pay well enough. These are the husband's responsibility, *Lek*. . . . You mean, you don't know if you have the right to decide whether you want to get pregnant or not, *Lek*?²²

Abidah's story covers important reproduction rights issues: domestic responsibilities are to be shared by both husband and wife; the wife has the right to her body; she has the right to decide whether to have a baby. On other occasions, Abidah, through the voice of Nisa, speaks of a wife's right to initiate and enjoy sexual intercourse with

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁹ Leukorrhea may occur at any age and affects most women. It is a non-blood vaginal discharge, which may be normal, or represent minimal pathological changes from various causes. Leukorrhea during mature periods, before or after menstruation, or during pregnancy without any other symptoms or odour, is normal vaginal discharge. Once it is persistent and accompanied by other symptoms, such as pain and itchiness, then it may be a pathological reaction, an early symptom of more serious diseases, such as reproduction organ diseases or liver, kidney and heart disorders. See http://www.martha-tilaar.com/indo/perlutahu/perlutahu_07.shtml.

²⁰ An Interview with Sri Endah Kinasih, a researcher in Women's Studies Centre of Airlangga University, Surabaya, Indonesia, 23 April 2004.

²¹ Irfan Abubakar, 'Islam and Gender Books Published in Indonesia (1990 - 2003)', *Kultur The Indonesian Journal For Muslim Cultures*, Volume 2, No 2, 2002, p. 138.

²² Abidah, *Perempuan*, p. 259

her husband. Although this might seem odd to most Indonesian Muslims, as only men may initiate sexual relations, Abidah directly voices her feminist rhetoric on the issue of sexual rights, always bearing in mind that sexual relationships are only to take place within marriage.

Indeed reproduction rights are not new in Islamic law. Classical books on *fiqh* have regulated such issues ranging from sexual relations to childbearing. According to K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, classical religious interpretations of such rights place women at the centre.²³ Verses in the Qur'an secure these rights: husbands are responsible to treat their wives with respect, and women, due to their childbearing ability, deserve to receive respectful treatment.²⁴ Islam says that because of their so-called reproduction burden, women are given exemption in their vicegerent responsibilities, particularly in the matter of *ibadah* (worshipping). However, Kyai Sahal reminds us that the practicality of those verses is far from the ideal in most Muslim communities. Women's reproduction rights often exist only on a rhetorical level, and are never actually applied at the practical level. Efforts to raise women's awareness of their reproduction rights are still needed to finally reach the ideal goal of just and equal Islamic communities.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In her novel, Abidah also raises one of the most contemporary issues that Muslim feminists struggle against: violence against women. To a certain degree, most female characters in the story suffer from gender-based violence, whether direct or indirect, physical or mental. Exposing marital rape, a term only recently used by the Muslim feminist movement, is Abidah's attack on patriarchal subjugation. Nisa, her co-wife Kalsum, her relative *Lek Ummi*, and even her mother, reflect many Muslim women who are taught that anytime a husband wants sexual intercourse with his wife, even if she is not ready, or willing, his wife should never refuse. The practice has long been uncritically accepted due to an interpretation of a Qur'anic verse, which states that a husband has "the right" to beat his wife if she is found to be *nusyuz* (disobedient).²⁵ *Nusyuz* has long been subject to debate in Islamic communities. Conservative interpretations believe that this verse endorses a husband to be the sole controller and owner of his wife, including the right to "punish" her in case of *nusyuz*. Modern and gender-equal interpretations of this term demand contextual readings of this verse. If it is not to be abolished, just like the abolition of slavery, *nusyuz* is only applicable under special conditions. Hussein Muhammad reasons that most violence against women in Muslim societies is basically an extension of this verse.²⁶ It, therefore, is against the Islamic ideals of protecting five basic human rights in the perspective of modern interpretations of Islam: rights to have

²³ K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, 'Islam dan Hak Reproduksi Perempuan: Perspektif Fiqih,' *Menakar Harga Perempuan Eksplorasi Lanjut atas Hak-Hak Reproduksi Perempuan dalam Islam*, Syaif Hasyim (ed), Penerbit Mizan, Jakarta, 2002, pp. 113 – 118.

²⁴ *Al Qur'an*, Sura Al-Nisa verse 19, and Sura Luqman verse 14.

²⁵ Sura An-Nisa verse 4.

²⁶ Hussein Muhammad, 'Refleksi Teologis tentang Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan,' *Menakar Harga Perempuan*, p. 203 – 212. *Nusyuz* is controversial in its nature. Interpretations of this term vary between *ulama*. Generally it is understood that "to beat" his wife, a husband must not harm her physically, and it is best not to use "the right."

religion, to live, to think, to reproduction and to possession of property.²⁷ Hussein Muhammad argues further that theological dogma, which says that man's authority over woman is natural, needs to be reformed and reconstructed in order to be more gender equal, which is indeed the basic of Islamic ideals. Marriage is a contract based on equality and justice, and relations between husband and wife are not to be based on hierarchical power-relations.

The fact that Abidah addresses gender-based violence in her novel is indeed crucial, because many studies conducted by NGOs on women's issues have shown that reporting of gender-based violence, especially domestic violence has increased due to the rise in awareness of such issues. Rifka Annisa, an NGO specialising in women's issues in Yogyakarta, recently published its research on domestic violence in Central Java. Its findings are noteworthy, because they show that domestic violence, either physical, sexual or emotional, which was previously perceived to be non-existent was suffered by many women in the research area.²⁸ Violence from a partner was the most common form of domestic violence:

Women are at the greatest risk of violence from their husbands; one in every four women in our sample had been sexually or physically abused by a partner. Sexual violence was more common than physical violence, with one in five women reporting sexual violence (i.e., being forced to have sex against their will ensuing physical force or threats), whereas one in ten women experienced physical violence from a husband at some point in their lives.²⁹

On the 14th September 2004, the Indonesian government enacted *Undang-Undang* No. 23 tahun 2004 called as *Undang-Undang Penghapusan Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga* (PKDRT—Abolition of Domestic Violence Act). This act aims to give legal protection for women from violence occurring within domestic walls. However, the act does not automatically guarantee a more women-friendly environment. The Javanese idea of harmony might hamper the implementation of this act. Many women victims of partner violence are still reluctant to report their suffering, because Javanese ethics, reinforced by traditional Islamic interpretation of women's duties, emphasise harmony within the family at all cost. Women are burdened with their duty to be loyal to their husbands even though their wellbeing is at stake, and many women choose silence over reporting violence to the police for the sake of a harmonious household.³⁰ Indonesian women, irrespective of ethnic, religious, cultural or social backgrounds, are all at risk of being victimised by domestic violence, and some cultural and religious norms even encourage a tolerant attitude to gender-based violence, as well as encouraging silence in the face of abuse.

Abidah's *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* remarkably raises these issues in the context of women and Islam, placing such issues at the heart of women's everyday life. In a rather blatant manner, Abidah writes about previously taboo issues,

²⁷ K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, p. 114.

²⁸ Hakimi Mohammad, Elli Nur Hayati, V. Utari Marlinawati, Anna Winkvist, Mary C. Elsberg, *Silence for the Sake of Harmony: Domestic Violence and Health in Central Java*, CHN-RL GMU, Yogyakarta, Rifka Annisa Women's Crisis Center Yogyakarta, Umeå University, Sweden, Women's Health Exchange & Program for Appropriate Technology in Health, USA, 2001. The research sample was 13,094 women at their reproduction age 15 – 49 years. The research area was Purworejo District in Central Java.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

such as marital rape and domestic violence. She brings them to public notice and, transparently, seeks to educate her readers, hoping that they will come to understand that any violence is intolerable. That any violence in the name of Islam is un-Islamic: this is the awareness that Abidah hopes to create.

FROM LITERATURE TO FILM

In 11 January 2009, a film adaptation of Abidah's *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* was premiered. Using the same title *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (A Woman with a Turban), the cast of the film includes Revalina S. Temat as Annisa, Oka Antara as Khudhori, Reza Rahadian as Samsudin, Joshua Pandelaky as Kyai Hanan, Widyawati as Bu Nyai Hanan and several minor characters. The film was directed by Hanung Bramantyo, a famous young director, while the scenario was written by Bramantyo himself and Ginatri S. Noor. Abidah also made a short appearance in the movie as a cameo when she played the role as Annisa's lecturer in her university life.



The film posters. The poster in left is also used as the book cover of most recent publications.

Although the film was set in 1980s when some issues might have changed in the light of present day situations, still the patriarchal nature of the world-view constructed in this film is clearly declared, and this produces controversy. Several discussions were made on issues that Bramantyo put in the film.³¹ One member of MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia - Indonesia's Council of Ulama), Ali Mustafa Yaqub, in an interview, demanded that the film to be revised as it illustrated a bad image of

³¹ There were several debates and discussions about the film on several channels such as Debat Tentang Kontroversi Film Perempuan Berkalung Sorban by tvOne on 11 February 2009. This debate was attended by Hanung Bramantyo, the director, Siti Musdah Mulia, a Muslim activist, Ridwan Saidi, an essayist, and a MUI representative, Aminuddin Yaqub, a deputy of MUI secretary general.

Islam and of the *pesantren* world.³² In the same interview, the film director, Hanung Bramantyo defended that he had no intention to expose bad images of Islam, he simply wanted to show a father's patriarchal domination over his daughter by using Islamic religious teachings. Bramantyo's defense is backed up by several notable scholars such as the head of PP Muhammadiyah, an Islamic social organization, Din Syamsuddin who believes that this film is really good in sending messages of change and teaching appreciations for women within Islamic domain. Meutia Hatta, the state minister of women empowerment also gives the similar remarks saying the film depicts women's ability to empower themselves through the figures of Anissa and her mother Muthmainnah.³³ As the film is no longer played in the cinemas, its controversy dies out accordingly. Yet, the controversy raised by this film both boosts the film audiences. Its controversy, the popularity of its director, actresses and actors prove to be a powerful formula for the sales of both the film and the novel. It is a box office film and a best-selling novel too.

If the novel ends with the death of Khudhori, the film moves on to several years later when Annisa decided to come home with her child and was persistent to set up a library that housed various books: not only religious books. This perhaps correlates to Abidah's strong criticism of *pesantren* education focusing only on *kitab kuning* and forbidding other non-Islamic books. *Kitab kunings* in Abidah's perspective are conditional and should not be rated more importantly than the Qur'an. The fact that many of those living in *pesantren* make more primary use of these books than the Holy Book is her reason for criticising them. The use of *kitab kuning* as a sole reference for *pesantren* students only produces graduates who are not able to cope with the world outside once leaving the *pesantren*. She also notes that what she criticises is the culture in which the world of the *pesantren* people reside; a culture which is in principle oppressive to women because it limits them solely to the domestic domain, and denies their rights to education. For Abidah this is against the core of Islamic teachings.³⁴ In this film, books metaphorically signify education. What Abidah articulates in her narratives is crucial. She promotes balancing the sociological with the theological, a perspective that will provide the flexibility for Islamic doctrines to face various challenges presented by social changes, while reflecting the transcendental essence of Islamic spirit.

There are several issues that depart the film from the novel. One example is the death of Annisa's father, Kyai Hanan that left the succession to lead the *pesantren* to Nisa's brothers. One striking difference is a scene that portrays Nisa's anger, and in her anger she attempted to conduct a *zina* with Khudori though Khudori wisely rejected her idea. This led to prosecution of the mass (*pesantren's* students) with the accusation of being together without a presence of a third party.³⁵ If reproduction rights are clearly presented in the novel, it does not appear in the film. The film focuses more on the rights of girls' education and women's struggles, through the figure of Nisa, to have education. The role of a mother that is depicted strongly in

³² Film timbulkan kontroversi, BBC Indonesia.com, [http:// http://www.bbc.co.uk/indonesian/news/story/2009/02/090206_woman_turban.shtml](http://http://www.bbc.co.uk/indonesian/news/story/2009/02/090206_woman_turban.shtml). Access date, 1 June 2009.

³³ The back cover of the film jacket. *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Starvision, 2009.

³⁴ Interview with Abidah El Kalieqy, 7 July 2004.

³⁵ Islam teaches that a woman and a man who are not relatives (*muhrim*) should not be together in a room without a presence of a third party for fear of conducting *zina* (sexual relation outside wedlock).

the film does not appear so in the novel. In the film, Nisa's mother plays a significant role as an influential strong figure whose steps Nisa would follow. At the end of the film, Nisa told her child Mahbub that her mother, Muthmainah was the first person she admired followed then by her deceased husband, Khudhori. Despite differences between the novel and the film, many core issues like education rights, marital rapes, domestic violence, polygamy and Nisa's activism in women empowerment appear both in the novel and the film. Concerning these issues, the film adaptation follows the novel plot faithfully thus making it a visual description of the novel or mirrors of crucial moments in the novel.

In a recent interview, Abidah stated that through this novel she wanted to create a "female androgyny: an individual having both male and female capacities."³⁶ Her creation rings true both in the novel and the film. Chand Praves, the producer stated that he desired to show woman's power and her ability to work with men to create harmony, a balance between both sexes.³⁷ The film visually ends with Nisa throwing away the turban she always wore while riding on a horse with her child Mahbub away from the turban left on the beach. This image reinforces Nisa's ability to finally break the shackles of patriarchy.

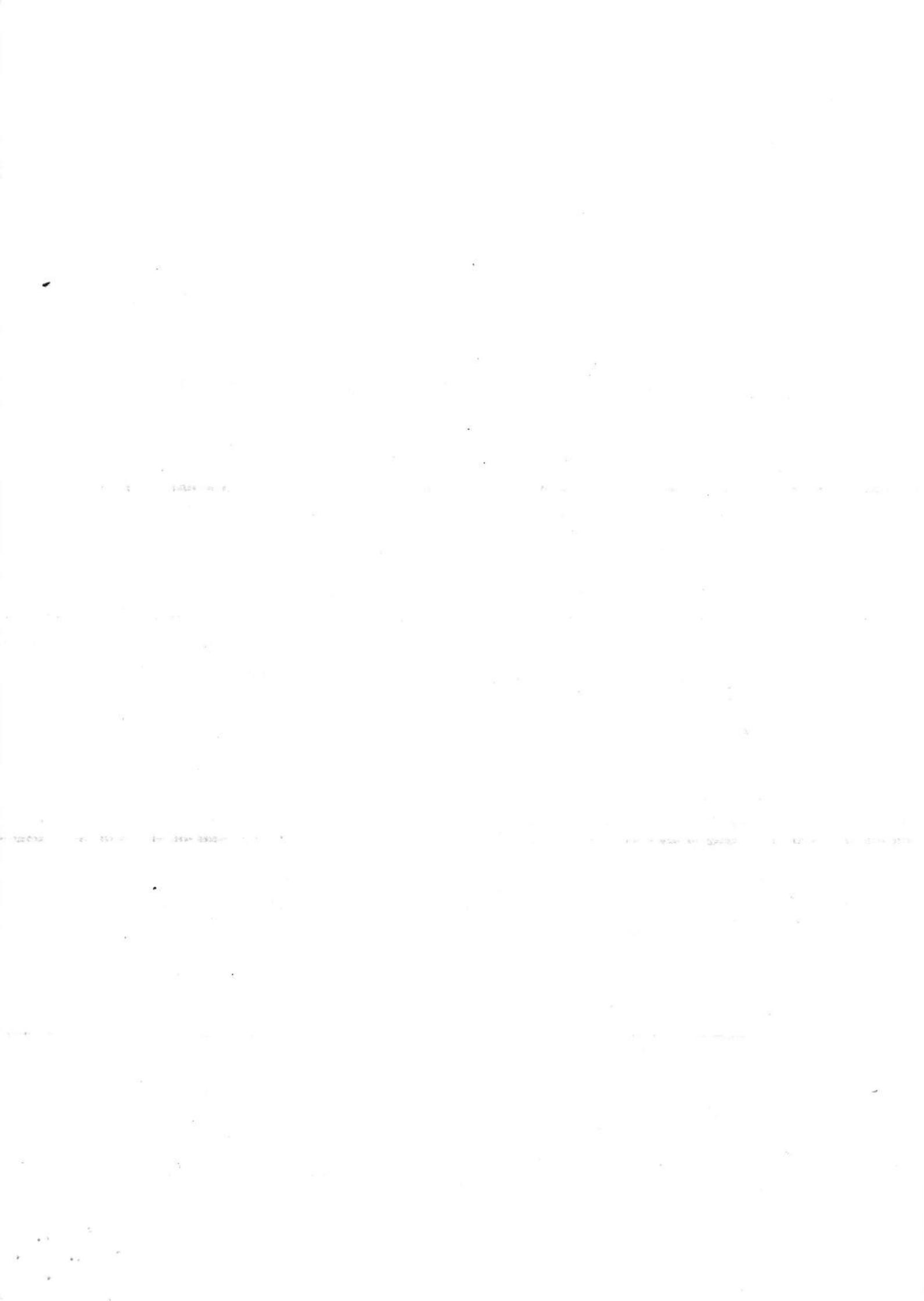
Nisa's story both in the novel and film is an example of feminist fiction. These two texts characteristically construct a woman's struggles for equality within her parameters of faith. In Nisa's story, female education specifically is not an anomaly within Islamic tradition; it must, therefore, be aspired to and highly prized, and shared equally between both sexes. Abidah's feminist agenda, projected through her writing, is to promote female rights, but also to balance the sociological and theological in order to give norms perspective flexibility to Islamic teachings. In this way Islam can face the challenges presented by social change, while still reflecting the transcendental essence of Islamic ideals.

Abidah's novel is more complex than the film. This is understandable due to the time constraint when a novel is adapted into a film. The novel could span for a life while a film only lasts customarily an hour and a half. The complexity of the novel shows that Abidah El Khalieqy is indeed a promoter of women's rights in the heart of Islamic discourses. Her narratives capture the ways women conceptualise their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions, which are intricately linked to their social, cultural and political environments. She uses the language of the female body to represent women's own culture. Abidah's female characters place education, social reform and reproduction rights at the centre of women's self-construction.

In breaking silence and giving voice to women, she has indeed created "feminist novels". She takes ethical and moral positions and are didactic in the project of cultural transformation, of establishing new values, which underline justice and equality. As a revisionist mythmaker refusing to keep silent, she replaces heroes with heroines, and revise the stories of grand heroic figures with stories of ordinary women. She celebrates female survival that may be found in the different ways in which women have responded to their historical situations.

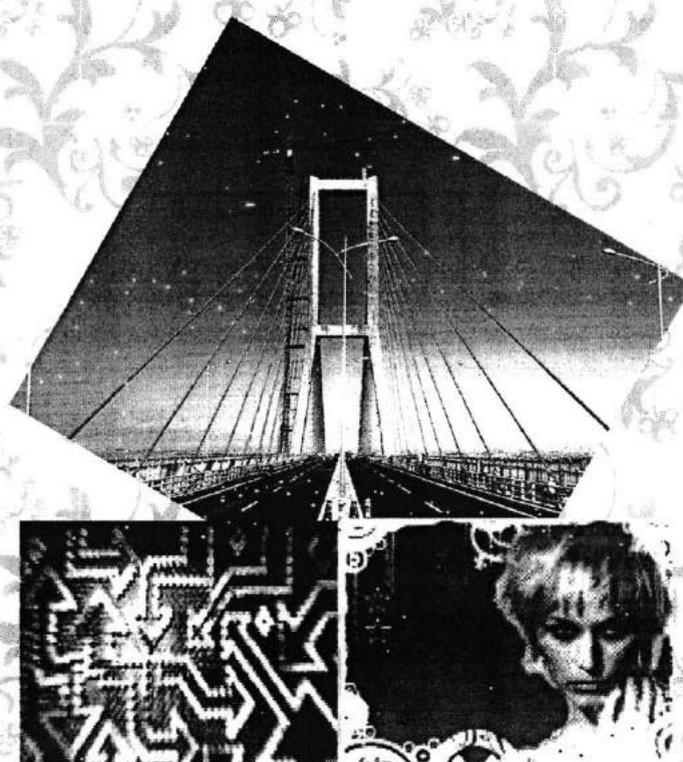
³⁶ Ibid. "Dua Bulan Cetak 16 Kali."

³⁷ Perempuan Berkabung Sorban Sebuah Permasalahan Keluarga, Saturday, 10 January 2009, Republika Online, http://www.republika.co.id/koran/58/25356/Perempuan_Berkabung_Sorban_Sebuah_Permasalahan_Keluarga, Access date 1 June 2009.





SASTRA DAN BUDAYA URBAN DALAM KAJIAN LINTAS MEDIA



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**PROSIDING KONFERENSI INTERNASIONAL KESUSASTRAAN XXI
HIMPUNAN SARJANA-KESUSASTRAAN INDONESIA
(HISKI)**

WOMEN, ISLAM AND THEIR RIGHTS: ABIDAH EL KHALIEQY AND HER LITERARY WORKS¹

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ABSTRACT

Raising the general awareness about issues concerning women and Islam can be channelled through numerous ways, including book publication. Abidah El Kalieqy is famous for her engagement in disseminating awareness of the rights of women within the bounds of Islamic values. Her short stories and novels are commonly perceived as promoters of Muslim women's authenticity, intellectual ownership, identity and struggle within their community, in order to advocate equality for women in a male-dominated world, and her most famous fiction is *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban (A Woman with A Turban)* which was published in 2001, and in January 2009 has been turned into a movie directed by a highly acclaimed young director, Hanung Bramantyo. The publication of this novel was partly funded by Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF), Yogyakarta, and the Ford Foundation (FF). In this novel Abidah clearly depicts her feminist project, often defined as Islamic feminism. Metaphorically, the title signifies prescribed relations between men and women: their social positions in Islamic society where religious interpretations play as constructions formulating those relations and positions. This paper attempts to examine both the novel and the film of how both texts can promote Islamic feminist agendas. This does not mean only to promote female rights, but also to balance the sociological and theological in order to give norms perspective flexibility to Islamic teachings. In this way Islam can face the challenges presented by social change, while still reflecting the transcendental essence of Islamic ideals.

Key words: women, Islam, rights



ABOUT ABIDAH EL KHALIEQY

Abidah El Khalieqy's narratives began to appear in mid 1990s.² She is not only known as a prose writer but also as a poet. Indeed, she started her writing profession first in poetry then moved onto prose writing. Abidah³ was born in March 1, 1965 in Menturo, Jombang Growing up in Jombang, the capital of *pesantren*, she was exposed regularly to the Islamic discourses. Her countless short stories, poems and essays have been published in several magazines such as *Horizon*, *Republika*, *Gadis*, *Amanah*, *Ulumul Qur'an* and many others. Her poems were included in *ASEANO*:

¹ This paper is a part of my book publication, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction*, ICAS Publications Series, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2009. This paper is much based on the book mentioned afore. Thank you to Amsterdam University Press for granting the copyright to publish some parts of the book into this paper.

² Korrie Layun Rampan, *Angkatan 2000 dalam Sastra Indonesia*, PT Gramedia Widiasarana Indonesia, Jakarta, 2000.

³ In this paper, Abidah El Khalieqy will be addressed using her first name as she is usually called.