



Indonesian Women Writers

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sastra wangi ("perfumed" literature)² and the emerging *chick lit*.³ There are certainly other writers than these selected four, and like them, too, they are often ignored.⁴ These writers have published numerous works of fiction, yet their names are seldom acknowledged, and such is the primary reason for selecting them as research objects. Each author represents their generation in Indonesian literary periods. Although such selection fails to include all writers of all generations outside the mainstream, these four bring multiple representations of Indonesian Muslim women in fiction outside *sastra wangi* or *chick lit*. Not all of these writers' works are selected; the choice of works is based on writings which offer sources adequate to discuss issues affecting Indonesian women. In the discussion, the authors will be referred to by their first names only. This is partly because Indonesians rarely have a family name and also because all these four authors prefer to be called by their first names.

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Although women writers have always existed in the Indonesian literary tradition just as long as their male counterparts, the following discussion will start from the 1970s when women writers began to play

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Indonesian Muslim Women Writers and Their Writings: Women, Islam and Religious Identity¹

Diah Ariani Arimbi

Introduction

In Indonesian literary culture today, numerous women writers have represented in their writings women's own ways to look at their own selves. Literary representations become one way among others trying to portray women's strategies that will give them maximum control over their lives and bodies. Muslim women writers in Indonesia have shown through their representations of Muslim women in their writings that Muslim women in Indonesian settings are capable of undergoing a self-definition process. However, from their writings, too, readers are reminded that although most women portrayed are strong and assertive it does not necessarily mean that they are free from oppression.

Among Muslim women writers in Indonesia, four writers, namely Titis Basino P I, Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim, Abidah El Khalieqy, and Helvy Tiana Rosa are prolific authors spanning from the older to younger generation. Their works produce rich sources of identity politics of Muslim women in Indonesia, covering issues of authenticity, representation and power that are inextricably intertwined in a variety of aesthetic forms and narrative structures. The choice of the authors for subject analysis was purposely selected as these four writers are Muslims and their works are widely published yet their names are often forgotten in the canon of contemporary Indonesian literary culture which is dominated by younger generation of authors categorized as

¹ This article is an excerpt from *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers: Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction* published by Amsterdam University Press – ICAS in 2009. I am grateful to AUP – ICAS for granting me permission and right for reprinting some parts of the book.

sastra wangi ("perfumed" literature)² and the emerging *chick lit*.³ There are certainly other writers than these selected four, and like them, too, they are often ignored.⁴ These writers have published numerous works of fiction, yet their names are seldom acknowledged, and such is the primary reason for selecting them as research objects. Each author represents their generation in Indonesian literary periods. Although such selection fails to include all writers of all generations outside the mainstream, these four bring multiple representations of Indonesian Muslim women in fiction outside *sastra wangi* or *chick lit*. Not all of these writers' works are selected; the choice of works is based on writings which offer sources adequate to discuss issues affecting Indonesian women. In the discussion, the authors will be referred to by their first names only. This is partly because Indonesians rarely have a family name and also because all these four authors prefer to be called by their first names.

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a stronger role in Indonesian fiction. In the previous era, according to Teeuw (1967), women have long contributed their writings to the then Dutch East Indies literature, their names only were overshadowed by their male counterparts. Not until the 1970s were women's writings taken into account in Indonesian literature (Winarto 1976).

It is indeed difficult to place authors within a rigid timeframe. However, the feature of each generation, though relatively subtle, is apparent, particularly the fictional narratives written by women writers often labelled by Teeuw as 'lady-authors'. The 1970s to 1980s saw the appearance of many new authors; however, the following discussion will be limited to female authors whose works were closely associated with the general issues of the time.

From the 1970s on there was a significant growth of women's magazines, such as *Kartini*, *Femina*, *Dewi*, *Sarinah*, and *Gadis*, all of which gave considerable space to women's fiction. Newspapers such as *Kompas* also made room for short stories, and novels in serial form, which led to a boom in the so-called *sastra koran* (newspaper literature). *Sastra koran*, in existence since the colonial era, refers to the publication of various genres of literary works in newspapers, usually in weekend editions or in literary supplements. *Sastra koran* itself is controversial. Bandel argues that *sastra koran* is inherently 'dangerous' for the development of Indonesian literature as this literature is too dominant over literary magazines, and the writings published would depend entirely on newspaper editors - not literary editors (Bandel 2006: 45-46). Bandel's argument might be an exaggeration. *Sastra koran* perhaps defies the definition of literature in the conventional sense, but through *sastra koran* a number of writers have indeed established their position in Indonesian literature, such as Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim. *Sastra koran* itself has also given birth to local writers such as Sirikit Syah and Lan Fang of Surabaya. Local newspapers that include *sastra koran* in their weekend editions, like *Jawa Pos* in Surabaya, have given room to local writers to publish their works in their literary sections. Local writers not residing in Jakarta usually have difficulties to have their works published in Jakarta-based national newspapers like *Kompas* or *Republika*; *sastra koran* of the local newspapers can be their channel for such literary creativity.

In the 1970s and 1980s national political stability and economic development fostered the growth of a reading public and film industry. People who had lived in unstable social conditions for decades now enjoyed a bit of luxury, such as reading colourful and glossy maga-

maleness is not complete unless she fulfils her motherhood role – her *kodrat* (Indonesian, meaning unalterable nature one is born with, or predetermined).⁶ Until then, she will forever lack the reader's sympathy. Here also, sexual division of labour is perceived as mainstream gender ideology, its violation means disrupting the order. The novel *Karmila* was later transformed into a movie entitled *Dr. Karmila* (1981). This film was produced and released in the heyday of the New Order period. As Krisna Sen observes for Indonesian cinema, disorder is often viewed as criticism of a working woman facing a crisis. To overcome disorder, a woman must come to the realization that her occupation in the public sphere (Karmila's profession as a medical doctor) neglects her 'natural' positioning in the private sphere (motherhood). Restoration of order can only happen if she repositions herself to private occupation (motherhood) (Sen 1994: 131–156). This is the theme of *Karmila*; she finally accepts her motherhood role, therefore embracing her ideal femininity and lives happily ever after.

This does not mean that in this period Indonesian literature was fully preoccupied with romantic novels. Though small in number there were other, more literary writers, many of whom are still productive today. Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim is one example and she will be discussed later in a more detailed manner. As with *sastra koran*, the emergence of popular novels helped to increase the numbers of the Indonesian reading public. When this type of novel first appeared in the 1920s it was known as *roman picisan* ('dime novels'). *Roman picisan* were romance stories, usually in paperback edition, and the name derives from the price of the story in the colonial period; one *picis* (one pence in Dutch colonial currency) for one book. In the 1970s the name *roman picisan* was hardly ever used because very few people knew what *picis* meant, thus the genre was renamed. Even today, the popularity of this genre is indeed largely linked with the cheap price. In urban areas there are shops where these novels and comic books can be rented or bought for little money. When novels such as *Karmila*, and *Kabut Sutera*

⁶ Saskia E. Wieringa in 'The Birth of the New Order State in Indonesia: Sexual Politics and Nationalism' defines *kodrati* as "a religiously-inspired code of conduct based on women's intrinsic 'nature.' The *kodrat* of Indonesian women prescribed that they should be meek, passive, obedient to the male members of the family, sexually shy, self-sacrificing and nurturing. To the end, their main vocation was wifehood and motherhood." *Journal of Women History*, Spring 2003 vol. 15 issue 1, p. 74.

may be urban and educated, yet she is content to be male dominated. The Javanese adage that says a girl should not have as high an education as a man, for in the end her place is in the kitchen, is perfectly suited to the stories of Indonesian romance fiction.

There are indeed many authors that can be seen as *sastra pop* (popular literature) writers. To name a few: Ike Soepomo, Maria A. Sarjono, La Rose, Mira W., and probably the champion of all, Marga T., as she is known to be one the forerunners of this genre. Marga T.'s *Karmila I and II* (1975) received a great deal of attention and was made into a film. *Karmila*, like most popular fictions, is set in an urban setting, styled in easy reading fashion, revolves around the love relationship between a girl and a young man, and closes with a happy ending. Again, typical of Indonesia's popular narratives, the protagonists enjoy a quite respectable social position: they have tertiary education and come from wealthy or at least middle-class families. What should be noted in the story is the rape of Karmila by Feisal, who later marries Karmila because she becomes pregnant. Karmila does not seem to have the reader's sympathy even though she is the victim of rape. The reason for the lack of sympathy is that directly after the birth of her child Karmila refuses to fulfil her motherhood role. Tineke Hellwig critically reads this scene:

[T]he story is focalized so as to create more reader sympathy for Feisal, who shows his regret and is humble, than for Karmila, who is indifferent and even heartless toward her son. When Karmila finally realizes that she has responsibilities as Fani's mother, this insight is presented as the best she could have. Even though rape brought them together, Karmila remains faithful to Feisal as the first man in her life and the father of her child (Hellwig 1994: 185).

The fact that even though Karmila is raped the reader's sympathy goes to Feisal, is a conflicting terrain in the light of feminist reading.⁵ The portrayal of Feisal as the villain simply disappears. He even reappears as a hero who, at the end of the story, saves Karmila from her denial of motherhood. Despite Karmila's success as a female doctor, her fe-

⁵ Feminist reading here means to follow what Belsey and Moore further remark on the political role of feminist readers: "A feminist does not necessarily read in order to praise or to blame, to judge or to censor. More commonly she sets out to assess how the text invites its readers, as members of a specific culture, to understand what it means to be a woman or man, and so encourages them to reaffirm or to challenge existing cultural norms" (Belsey and Moore 1).

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Ungu (Silky Violet Mist, 1979) by Ike Soepomo, were made into movies, they were box office hits.

Women's writings, regardless of the genre, may function well as women's efforts to authorize their female gaze on their own body and experience. Within the domain of the politics of feminist reading, women's stories, by women, will determine how texts are perceived in looking at what it means critically to be a woman or man. The many kinds of women's writings, be it *sastra pop* (popular literature) or *sastra serius* (*sastra berbobot*, serious literature) deserve attention because their writings provide documentation of women's concerns, and this reveals the intertwined relationship between the author, society and the reader. Toeti Heraty's long poem *Calon Arang* and Ike Soepomo's *Kabut Sutra Ungu* are perfect examples of such intertwining. Toeti's work is known to be part of *sastra serius/sastra berbobot*, while Ike's is *sastra pop* (popular literature). My classification that differentiates *sastra serius/sastra berbobot* and *sastra pop* is based on Kayam's and Nurgiyantoro's categorizations for serious literature and popular literature (Kayam 1981: 82–88, Nurgiyantoro 1998: 18–20). Toeti's work fits well within the serious literature framework as her work conveys deep meanings and sends messages that do not typically cast women as either good or bad. In the meantime, Ike's work more or less stereotypically portrays women as good or bad and no woman in between. Nevertheless, they both express a similar notion of what it means to be a *janda* (widow). *Janda* has always been subjected to prejudices and ill treatment in society. As an older widow, *Calon Arang* is victimized by her portrayal as a wicked witch, and the younger one, *Miranti* in *Kabut Sutra Ungu* is continually seen as a seducer. Hellwig posits how a *janda* is perceived in *Kabut Sutra Ungu*:

A (young) *janda* is considered to be a woman who has nothing to lose – neither her husband nor her virginity – and who tries to lure married men astray. *Jandas* [widows] are distrusted by their own sex, not by men, who too are prone to have extramarital affairs. *Miranti's* experience is that no matter what a *janda* does, she is viewed with suspicion. (Hellwig 1994: 182)

The recording of the widow's positioning by Toeti Heraty and Ike Soepomo, despite the differences, shows that women's writing of any kind is respectful of identity politics. These writings signify implications of both individual and social levels in which an identity is perceived. A widow is stereotyped by double marginalization, by her own sex and

by men. The picture of a *janda* may well function as a channel for both authors to show a 'denigrated identity' that has been taken for granted by social norms, and to show also that such identification is loaded with patriarchal oppression. *Janda* is a signification of oppression; a *duda* (widower) is never subjected to similar denigration. A widow, who is assumed to be independent of men, is seen as a threat, thus, necessarily, she will have to be caged by a derogatory identity such as a wicked witch or a seducer. The perception of the *janda* in the world's largest Muslim society is certainly problematic. It is frequently stated in the Qur'an that *jandas*, orphans and the poor are those primarily deserving shelter and a guarantee of protection from all societal members, Surah An Nisa verse 19 saying that *jandas* should not be treated with harshness and that men are forbidden to force them against their will (perfectquran.com/4/19/3) could be used as an example. Moreover a Hadith passed down by Abu Hurairah saying that those looking after, working for and helping a widow and a poor are exercising *jihād* (a struggle in the name of God) (<http://hadithoftheday.com/todays-beautiful-hadith-is-about-widows-and-orphans>) indeed guarantees widows', the orphans' and the poor's protection by members of their communities. Regarding *jandas* in a deprecating way is against the spirit of Islam. In Indonesian life there is a weight of cultural meaning attached to the name *janda*: that being a *janda* a woman must necessarily be a sexual predator to men, making a *janda* a bad woman who is put in lower social status and denied her rights to be treated justly and equally as other women who are not *jandas*. This is a derogatory meaning for a *janda* which heavily reveals patriarchal domination over the Islamic spirit of equality and justice.

Women writers of the generation 2000

With the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998 new channels of liberalism emerged. Women's political, social and cultural activism flourished. Women's involvement in almost every aspect of life levitated significantly, particularly their engagement with literary writings. This does not mean that previously women were non-existent in the tradition of Indonesian literature, but many of them were placed at the margin of the canonized Indonesian literature. Their positioning as popular romance authors, among others, contributed to their marginalization.

The present generation of writers, *Angkatan 2000* (the Generation 2000), positions many young female writers at the heart of mainstream literature: they are classified as writers of *sastra wangi* ('perfumed' literature). The name comes from the members of this group, such as Ayu Utami, Djenar Maesa Ayu, Fira Basuki, Dewi Lestari, Nova Rianti Yusuf, and others, who are female, young, beautiful, attractive, very urban-centered and cosmopolitan, and for the most part have enjoyed celebrity status even before the publication of their writings (Bodden and Hellwig 2007: 9). The very name *sastra wangi* distinguishes their narratives from their antecedents. If the *Balai Pustaka* generation of the 1920s is marked by the conflict between the individual and *adat*, the *Pujangga Baru* with the nationalist movement, the 1945 generation linked with humanism, the 1966 generation with social and political protest, and the 1970s–1980s generation with popular fiction, generation 2000 is identified with liberalism in every aspect of their writings. The writings are often harsh with no pretence of morality, and full of everyday slang and social references.

Ayu Utami, the most popular of the Indonesian women writers, is known for bringing the discourse of sex into her writings. Her novels *Saman* (1998) and *Larung* (2000) 'display wildness and openness, which gives a very spacious room for freedom' (Rampan 2000: iv). Issues previously taboo are relocated from the private to the public world. This new trend in Indonesian literature was entrenched with the publication of Dewi Lestari's *Supernova*, and Djenar Maesa Ayu's *Jangan Bermain Main dengan Kelaminmu* (*Don't Play with Your Genitals*, 2001). Drawing on a cosmopolitan world they know very well, these writers place their stories and novels in 'urban settings, peopled with hip intellectuals whose speech is sprinkled with English phrases, no different than the young executives gathering for a drink at a café after work' (Hua 2005). The language used is fresh, alive, and loaded with colloquial speech narration; covering all topics from sex, drugs, and homosexuality to politics. The audacity of these young writers is highly valued, as they construct new images of young modern Indonesian women who are unconventionally reactive in responding to the problems of modern life. Hatley posits:

The range of themes addressed by women fiction writers in recent years has greatly expanded; their freer representation of sexuality includes among other things considerable reference to lesbianism. And several texts by women authors appearing during the last few years challenge the arche-

typal images (...) of faithful wife, alluring but threatening temptress and monstrous widow-witch. The new interpretations boldly refute accepted, age-old meanings. What is suggested is both a perception of ongoing social force of gender assumptions embodied in these ancient symbols, and a commitment to opening up new visions of 'female' and 'male' by dismantling them. Other writers, meanwhile, create new myths for this new time, from the flow of daily life or from futuristic images. (Hatley 2002: 131)

In the hands of these writers, images of women deviate considerably from previous images of submissive women victimized by patriarchal domination. These new images undeniably picture women as holders of the world and their own destiny, no longer as subdued individuals whose nature is determined by a prescribed role of a dutiful woman whose subsistence is worthy only of a man's pleasure. Nevertheless, as groundbreaking as the images in *sastra wangi* are, because their characters are members of the burgeoning urban middle- and upper-classes with higher education and global experiences (many of the settings are placed overseas in New York, London, and Singapore), they seemingly refer to only a small number of Indonesian women. Other stories need to be translated to the concerns of the majority of Indonesian women – suburban and rural – who are, by and large, still victimized by patriarchal domination.

The emergence of *sastra wangi* is not without disputes. The junction between literary writings (novels, short stories or plays), female characters or authors and sex has never been taken into account as in *sastra wangi*. Pros and cons whether women writers should or should not portray sex blatantly in their writings is a contested terrain. In his cultural speech, Taufiq Ismail, a champion of Indonesian Islamic writings, believes that the time when shame is no longer embraced by Indonesian literary writers has come (Ismail 2008). He calls this sort of writing *sastra syahwat* (Indonesian, literally meaning: sexual desires) or *sastra selangkang* (Indonesian, literally meaning: groin).⁷ Taufiq's strong criticism was immediately followed by a polemic in columns in some Indonesian newspapers. On the one hand, Taufiq and other writers like Muhammad Subarkah were against the bringing of sex into literature, especially sexual taboos and vulgarity, while on the other hand, writ-

⁷ In Taufiq's words, *sastra syahwat* or *sastra selangkang* means writings that merely talk about sex and sexual taboos. Taufiq parallels this kind of writing with pornography.

ers like Hudan Hidayat and Mariana Amiruddin celebrate the freedom of expression, particularly of women writers, through offering sex discourse in fiction.⁸ Djenar Maesa Ayu, one of the leading figures in *sastra wangi*, disagrees with the term, saying that it is discriminative because the gender of the writers overpowers the issues that they write about, although it is true that in *sastra wangi*, in Djenar Maesa Ayu's works for example, they do explore women's sexuality (though not so much by writing about sex), and bigger issues such as domestic abuse against women, patriarchal domination over women's sexuality and issues in feminism (Fitria 2008). Bodden and Hellwig argue that these *sastra wangi* writers take up new literary and social issues in modern Indonesian literature asserting issues raised in their writings covering a much wider social scope, such as 'issues of government coercions toward the nation's citizens and the injustice of the gap between the rich and the poor, (...) masculinist ideological structures and social patterns, violence by adults against children and marital infidelity' (Bodden and Hellwig 2007: 9).

The dispute over *sastra wangi* still continues to this day. Perhaps it is wise to follow what M. Faizi, a Madurese poet, says. In his words, the discussion about sex in fiction also needs to listen to what readers have to say, yet, this has hardly been done. Instead of having such a never-

⁸ The dispute about *sastra wangi* was turned into polemics and many writers voiced their opinions, comments and remarks in different circulated newspapers as evidenced by the the following list: Taufiq Ismail, 'Pidato Kebudayaan: Budidaya Malu Dikikis Habis Gerakan Syahwat Merdeka.' http://www.republika.co.id/koran_detail.asp?id=276485&kat_id=3, 20 Desember 2006, Internet, (19 March 2008); Muhammad Subarkah, 'Gerakan Syahwat Merdeka Mengepung Indonesia,' *Republika*, Jumat, 22 December 2006; Hudan Hidayat, 'Sastra yang Hendak Menjauh dari Tuhannya,' *Jawa Pos*, Minggu, 06 May 2007; Taufiq Ismail, 'HH dan Gerakan Syahwat Merdeka,' *Jawa Pos*, Minggu, 17 June 2007; Hudan Hidayat, 'Nabi tanpa Wahyu,' *Jawa Pos*, 01 July 2007; M. Faizi, 'Hudan, Taufiq, dan Generasi Nol Buku,' *Jawa Pos*, Minggu, 08 July 2007; Mariana Amiruddin, 'Perkosaan Teks-Teks Sastra Tanggapan tulisan Taufiq Ismail,' *Jawa Pos*, Minggu, 15 July 2007; Viddy AD Daery, 'Gerakan Sastra Anti Neo-Liberalisme,' *Republika*, Minggu, 01 July 2007; Muhidin M Dahlan, 'Proyek Lekra Yang Teralpa: Ismail dan Pelacur Kencur Samaritan Girl Sutradara Kim Ki Duk,' *Media Indonesia*, Minggu, 8 July 2007; Firman Venayaksa, 'Jurnal Bumi-poetra, Liberalisme dan Ode Kampung,' *Republika*, Minggu, 08 July 2007; Veven Sp Wardhana, 'Sastra Perlawanan Terhadap 'Neo-Takhyul',' *Republika*, Minggu, 15 July 2007; Mahdiduri, 'Sastra Indonesia dalam Skenario Imperialisme,' *Republika*, Minggu, 22 July 2007.

ending polemic, it is about time to ask readers about their opinions, particularly those poor readers believing that literary reading is still a luxury. Writers write in relation to their readers' conditions and it is the sacred duty of a writer to show readers the 'truth' (Faizi 2007). Faizi reminds us of the crucial role of readers. The polemic of sex discourse in fiction still largely neglects the readers' perspective about it. Though it may be said that fictional narratives on sex by *sastra wangi* writers are widely read, the questions that follow are necessary to problematize: Which readers? Urban readers? Rural readers? From which economic, social and cultural levels? Again, the relationship between a writer, her/his works, and her/his readers and the existing contexts of production and literary environment cannot be eradicated when talking about issues or trends in literature. And the most important question is, perhaps, which media and capital giants help this *sastra wangi* to become successful, because, unfortunately, members of *sastra wangi* are mostly centered in Jakarta. These mostly Jakarta-based women writers were also born and raised there – only very few (if not none) are rural natives. It is worth noting that media (newspapers, magazines) that frequently cite their names are considerably from Jakarta; local writers and newspapers are largely ignorant about this trend. In local media such as *Radar Surabaya* (a local Surabayanese newspaper) or *Panjebar Semangat* (a Javanese weekly magazine published in Surabaya) local writers hardly touch the sex discourse in their narratives. Indonesian literature today is not only based on region. The phenomenon of the sex discourse of *sastra wangi* writings certainly enriches the development of Indonesian literature; however, local, regional or provincial trends, voices and issues are in need of being embraced, too. The conflicts between *kaum tua* (those of the older generation persisting in the *adat*/local custom) and *kaum muda* (those of the younger generations ready to break away from the confinement of *adat*) in *Minangkabau* stories which strongly influenced the 1920s Indonesian literature have shown that local or regional issues could color the highlights of Indonesian literary writings as much as the metropolitan influences (Freidus 1977).

Contemporary Indonesian writing has also seen the emergence of the so-called *chick lit* (chick literature), a genre in popular writing different from, although often assumed to be similar to, the more serious *sastra wangi*. *Sastra wangi* writings have philosophically deep narratives, but still lack moral pretension. *Chick lit* writings, on the other hand, have hilarious narratives dealing with women facing modern

problems in their work and social life. *Chick lit* narratives are always set in urban environments, and have stories of young cosmopolitan working women aged in their twenties or thirties concerned with issues such as fashion, shopping, sex, and the search for 'Prince Charming'. Unlike the highly romanticized fiction of the 1970s and 80s, *chick lit* is humorous and very light reading; the book covers are always in pastel colours with illustration à la Barbie. *Chick lit* is not of Indonesian origin. It first appeared in Britain with the publication of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* in 1999. This was followed by Melissa Bank's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* in 2000 and a series of *chick lit* writings, *Being Single and Happy*. The Indonesian translation of these books only appeared in 2003, but was immediately followed by local Indonesian *chick lit*, frequently cited as *lajang kota* (Urban Single). Writings of *lajang kota* are Fira Basuki's Ms. B's series: *Panggil Aku B (Call me B, 2004)* and *Will You Marry Me? (2004)*, and Alberthine Endah's *Jodoh Monika (Monika's Soulmate, 2004)*.

Chick lit's popularity is viewed cynically by a number of literary critics and feminist activists. Gadis Arivia, an outstanding feminist, and the founder of *Jurnal Perempuan* (Women's Journal) believes that *chick lit* is utopian for Indonesian settings. Indonesian women are still much troubled with gender issues such as domestic violence, child labor and problems with a gender-biased legal system, but *chick lit* largely ignores ideological and social realities discriminative to women. Accordingly some feminists say that *chick lit* is a betrayal of the feminist movement (*Kompas Cyber Media* 2004). Despite the feminist criticism of *chick lit*, numerous female readers are infatuated with such stories and the genre's popularity is increasing. Unlike romantic narratives where female depiction is always 'perfect' – beautiful, dutiful, faithful, and willing to finally accept patriarchal domination – *chick lit* stories are tales of middle-class female white collar workers who struggle to maintain their job and career. They are 'not perfect' – not that beautiful, not that smart, but they are obsessed with physical perfection. The 'not perfect' produces strong identification with readers, creating a fictional reality closer to the reader's reality. However, as realistic as it may seem, *chick lit* represents only very few women living in cosmopolitan regions.

Four of the Indonesian Muslim writers and their writings

The variety of themes that contemporary Indonesian female authors deal with is extended by those who are not classified as members of either *sastra wangi* or *chick lit*. Abidah El Khalieqy and Helvy Tiana Rosa, and their older counterparts Titis Basino and Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim are among this group of women writers. If most of *sastra wangi*'s characters are urban-centered, the characters of these four authors vary from traditional older women to young modern figures. The four can be classified as Muslim writers whose narratives vividly account for religious identification and whose works are known to be part of Islamic writings. Helvy Tiana Rosa argues that Islamic writing aims to enlighten its readers on the discourse of truth and love: love for God and all humans. Admitting that her definition is too wide, she then adds that the morals of such writings must be justifiable within the parameters of Islamic faith. Open sexual talk, sexual taboos that mostly colour *sastra wangi* writings (which she calls 'cheap pornography', Dharma 2004), for example, are indisputably non-Islamic because the discourse of sex in Islamic environments should reside in the private arena and never be brought out into the public arena. Furthermore, Islamic writings are universal in truth, justice and humanity (Rosa 2003). This is where the four writers depart from the writers of *sastra wangi* or the even more popular *chick lit*. Their writings can be deemed as a *canon counter-discourse* because not only do their writings raise issues different from *sastra wangi*, they also depict many more Muslim women identities: young, old, urban, and rural struggling to maintain and challenge their prescribed roles. In *sastra wangi* writings, religious identity is left unquestioned, while in their writings, these four writers repeatedly raise religious issues as an important aspect. Where modern Indonesian literature is now much occupied by the writings of *sastra wangi* and the more popular *chick lit*, their narratives stand at the margin of the more canonized *sastra wangi*; accordingly labelling their writings as a *canon counter-discourse* is justifiable. Their stories are balanced, but at the same time a threat, as they reveal how their female characters negotiate their daily lives in a male dominated society where women's roles are firmly affixed to that of men.

Helvy's short stories center on young Muslim females and their struggles to preserve their religious identity, making her a prominent figure in the tradition of Indonesian Islamic writing. Abidah's works

show a similar trend, but she emphasizes *pesantren* scenes in her narratives. In comparison to Helvy and Abidah, Ratna and Titis write in a more general manner. Nonetheless, their religiousness, though subtly presented, becomes more obvious when a critical reading is employed. Both authors' narratives commonly take place in suburban or rural settings with stories of women facing problems in their day-to-day lives. In addition, if Ratna often illustrates women who are essentially patronized by men, Titis always ends her novels with a short poem to illustrate that humaneness lies in the hands of God: only God can control a person's life. Titis' works end with the narrator's submission to destiny, typical of the Javanese philosophical conception of *nrimo* (Javanese, meaning one's life is predetermined by one's own destiny). Moreover, in these writers' works, the Arabic words imported into their Indonesian, such as the use of *Allah* instead of *Tuhan* (both meaning God), are quite common.

Besides the four selected writers, there are certainly other writers, Kartini (1879–1904), Saadah Alim (1897–1968), and Titi Said (1935–2011), to name but a few. The issues that appear in their writings are not so dissimilar from these selected four, though Kartini also raises several issues such as her demands to improve women's roles and status through education, while Saadah Alim and Titi Said wrote mostly fictions about women as mothers and wives (Rampan 2002: ix–xxvi). None of these writers is classified as writers conveying religious identity, except for Marianne Katoppo (1943–2007) with her religious world of Christianity. Women writers in Indonesia are regarded as women writers and their works seldom (if not to say never) touch religious identity. The following discussion is meant to give a glimpse of the four writers whose works portray issues of women and their Islamic identity.

Titis Basino P. I.

Titis Basino P. I. (P. I. stands for her husband's name, Purnomo Ismadi) is the eldest of the four. This eighth of nine children of the Javanese Basino Atmodiwiryo family was born in Magelang, Central Java, January 7, 1939. She then spent her childhood in Madiun, and moved to Purwokerto with her family where she finished high school. Her writing career started during her secondary education as a writer of *majalah dinding* (a high school magazine posted on the school wall). Her tertiary

education was at the *Fakultas Sastra* (Faculty of Letters), *Universitas Indonesia*, Jakarta, where she graduated *Sarjana Muda* (equivalent to B.A.) in Indonesian literature in 1962. She then had a short career (1962–1963) as a flight attendant with the national airline, *Garuda Indonesia*.⁹ Titis spent her earliest childhood under Japanese rule and grew up in post-colonial Indonesia where she enjoyed the opportunity of having a tertiary education. Experiencing the ways in which Indonesia shifted from a colonial to postcolonial society certainly enriched her knowledge of societal changes, and how a society perceives and deals with such changes. She is currently living in Jakarta, her adopted city since 1958. In the 1960s Titis wrote short stories for the literary magazines *Horison* and *Sastra*, but her professional writing career began with the publication of her first novel, *Pelabuhan Hati* (*Harbour of the Heart*, 1978). For the span of ten years, from 1986 to 1996, due to personal reasons and family request, Titis devoted herself to her domestic role and produced very little work. She started writing again in 1997 following the death of her husband in 1996, and up to the present day she has produced at least twenty novels and numerous short stories.

Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim

Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim, or Mbak Ratna as she was frequently called, is one of the most productive short story authors in the Indonesian literary world. She was born in Malang, East Java, April 24, 1949, and passed away on March 28, 2011 at the age of 62. She had produced more than 300 short stories and several novels in the thirty years of her writing career. Ratna lived in Malang where she undertook all of her education from elementary to tertiary level. She was enrolled in the *Fakultas Ilmu Administrasi* (Faculty of Administration Science) at *Universitas Brawijaya* (Brawijaya University) Malang, but withdrew when she lost interest. Besides being a writer Ratna was also an activist concerned with social, cultural, and environmental activities. She was awarded the *Wanita Berprestasi* (Highly Distinguished Woman) award by the Indonesian government in 1993. She had won several awards for her work from women's magazines and newspapers such as *Femina* and *Kompas*,

⁹ This career links her with another prominent author, NH. Dini, who also once worked as a flight attendant.

and was also a prize winning poet. Ratna was probably part of the *sastra koran* tradition, as her works were scattered in various newspapers such as *Kompas* and *Jawa Pos* before being issued in collections of short stories. Her productivity and activity are remarkable for she had a physical disability and needed to dictate all her works to her secretary. In her early childhood, Ratna suffered from poliomyelitis, which left her with little use of her hands and legs, so she used a wheelchair to get around. Despite her physical disability she is indeed one of the most prolific authors in Indonesia.

Abidah El Khalieqy

If the previous two authors belong to older generations (*Angkatan 66*/the Generation 66 for Titis and *Angkatan 80an*/the Generation 80s for Ratna), Abidah El Khalieqy and the following writer, Helvy Tiana Rosa, are of *Angkatan 2000* (the Generation 2000), as their narratives began to appear in the mid-1990s (Rampan 2000). Both wearing *jilbab*, their claim to their religious identity is not only apparent in their narratives, but also in their authors' persona. Abidah El Khalieqy is not only known as a prose writer but also as a poet. Indeed, she started her writing profession first in poetry, then moved on to prose writing. Abidah was born on March 1, 1965 in Menturo, Jombang and comes from a big *santri* family of seven children.¹⁰ Growing up in Jombang, the capital of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), she was exposed regularly to the Islamic discourses. Soon after she finished Islamic elementary school, she continued her study in a *pesantren putri* (*pesantren* for girls) of *Persatuan Islam* in Bangil, East Java, for six years. Within this period she began to publish short stories and children's stories in newspapers and magazines under the pseudonyms Ida Arek Ronopati, Idasmara Prameswari or Ida Bani Kadir. Pursuing her secondary education in Jakarta and Klaten, Central Java, she then moved to Yogyakarta for her tertiary education. She graduated from IAIN (State Institute of Islamic Studies) *Sunan Kalijaga*. Abidah not only involves herself in writing, but also in the feminist movement: she is a supporter of both global and local feminist movements and belongs to *Kelompok Diskusi Perempuan Internasional* (International Women Discussion Group). Most of her works

¹⁰ If *santri* is gender-neutral, *santriwan* is male and *santriwati* is female.

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are weighted with women's issues located within Islamic perspectives, and she continuously criticizes formal and informal institutions entrapping women in the shackles of their gender.

Helvy Tiana Rosa

As a short story and essay writer and playwright Helvy's world is perhaps unknown to most Indonesian women. Her days are filled with activities other than those of a housewife. Born in Medan, North Sumatra on April 2, 1970, Helvy moved to Jakarta in her teens, where she finished her secondary and tertiary education. She received her B.A. from *Universitas Indonesia* in Arabic literature. Recently, she was awarded her master's degree in Indonesian literature from the same university. In her undergraduate years she founded a contemporary Muslim theater (1991), and she directs her own plays. She has travelled extensively to cities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, and the United States where she discussed her works. Along with nine other women she was awarded the Best Muslims award by *Amanah*, a Muslim women's magazine. She founded *Forum Lingkar Pena* (FLP, Pen Circle Forum) in 1997, a literary organization with a current membership of more than 5,000 spread around 120 cities in Indonesia and overseas. This organization aims to support, guide, and train its members to be writers. To date FLP through its own publishing house, *Lingkar Pena Publishing House*, has published at least 300 books written by its members.

Women and Islam in the works of Titis Basino, Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim, Abidah El Khalieqy, and Helvy Tiana Rosa

The various strands of contemporary feminism call for more nuanced readings of the political and ideological construction of women's roles within which feminist theory, practice, and reading are situated. Muslim women are undeniably responsive to such calls and suggest various ways of engaging with their own social, cultural, and political conditions. Through various discourses of their own they demonstrate their subject position and call for the 'woman's question' to be centered at the public level. In so doing they show that they are no longer 'objects' in identity construction.

The works of Titis Basino, Ratna Indraswati Ibrahim, Abidah El Khalieqy, and Helvy Tiana Rosa offer narratives of feminist discursive practices, which provide new and fresh engagements of women with both Islam and modernity. Within their feminist reading the writers understand that gender roles are negotiable rather than inherent. In representing women in a variety of discourses they draw multi-faceted women struggling against repression and domination, and resisting their status as 'powerless'. The authors tackle various issues across a wide spectrum in their works, ranging from women's place in the domestic sphere to women's place in the public domain. What is central in their writing is their refusal to define women other than from the perspective of women themselves. Giving women a voice allows them to place themselves at the center of their identity construction.

Helvy Tiana Rosa, for example, uses a discourse of women and war to represent the struggles of women. In her narratives women are victims because they are subjected to violence, yet at the same time women can be perpetrators of violence, especially against men. Women can be actors, perpetrators or victims in these home front narratives. Helvy challenges the notion of women's physical weakness. In so doing, the characters she creates are a mixture of feminine and masculine qualities. The erosion of a clear-cut division between the feminine and the masculine is a sharp challenge to gender construction and roles: she shows roles can be negotiated. Through her characters, she authorizes the 'other', and creates *ukhuwah Islamiyah*, sisterhood under the banner of Islam. Helvy is often accused of presenting through her narratives an 'us versus them' attitude: Muslims against non-Muslims. Nevertheless, if read closely, her stories construct women deprived by warfare, yet from this they learn understanding, how to negotiate, and find ways to move peacefully through their lives. When Helvy's characters use *jihad* to protect their bodies and land, the term takes on new meaning. What happens to women in war and conflict? The answer to that question is provided by Helvy's war stories: she gives women a place in history.

Abidah El Khalieqy is indeed a promoter of women's rights in the heart of Islamic discourses. Her narratives capture the ways in which women conceptualize 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 center of women's self-construction.

Ratna Indraswati Ibrahim's discourse is different. Her narratives concentrate on the victimization of women because of their sexual identity. In her narratives women function as objects inherited from a society that says women matter less than men: a society that thinks women barely belong to the culture that marginalizes and silences them through domesticity. Ratna raises critical issues about the subjugation and domination of women, and captures the imbalance in social relations. Yet Ratna's women are not all submissive: those denied their rights respond to the injustice they experience. Through her narratives Ratna acknowledges the struggles of women, especially those in underprivileged conditions.

In establishing a women's culture, Titis Basino presents narratives that view women from the perspective of an Islamic mystical terrain, namely Sufism. Titis' works largely emphasize the spiritual dimension of her female characters, representing the inner or esoteric sphere of Islam. Her characters are mostly housewives, whose first and foremost struggle involves choosing at each critical moment in their lives to remember and surrender actively to God. Her use of Sufism attacks the general perception of Sufism as being orthodox. In Titis' world, the spiritual realm of Islam is everywhere, and is not limited by time or space. Titis believes that without spirituality an adherent of a religion will simply lose her/his core identity. Titis' other strong narrative issue is the practice of polygamy; she approaches the issue from various stands. She looks at the influence of historical conditions, and her narratives show that the voices of women involved in the practice must certainly be heard, and understood in terms of complex cultural and social relations.

Where Islam is the core entity around which identity revolves, it must be understood by Muslims that Islam teaches justice and equality, but also that Islam is subject to interpretation, which is contextualized across time and space, and across cultures and regions. The construction of Muslim women's identity is also subject to different contexts of time, space, cultures and regions. Through their fiction Titis, Ratna, Abidah, and Helvy present the multi-faceted identities of Muslim women: they depict different experiences in response to different settings. Nevertheless, all the women aim for the creation of more just and equitable conditions for human beings of all sexual and social categories.

In breaking the silence and giving women a voice the four authors have indeed created 'feminist novels'¹¹: novels that show strong struggles of female characters in an attempt to end patriarchal oppressions based on sex and gender. They take ethical and moral positions and are didactic in the project of cultural transformation, of establishing new values, which underline justice and equality. They are revisionist mythmakers who refuse to keep silent. They replace heroes with heroines, and revise the stories of grand heroic figures with stories of ordinary women. The authors celebrate female survival that may be found in the different ways in which women have responded to their historical situations.

The discourses of Titis, Ratna, Helvy, and Abidah remind their readers of a uniting value of various identity constructions for Muslim women. Their female heroes affect and inspire readers and convey to them that Islam opens its door widely for its adherents to speak their minds in response to the authoritative discourse restricting and denying Muslims their rights. Their readers' responses show that these writers raise issues of women's rights and pose challenges to the prevailing women's identity which is often believed to be very restricted. They give readers new eyes to look at the problems of gender conveyed in their writings. Their female readers may find inspiration in the characters presented, while male readers may be made aware of how male-dominated culture impacts on gender constructions. Their authors' messages may well be received, thus readers can soon put into action their jihad for equality and justice.

This study is only a part to show gender representations in the writings of Indonesian Muslim women writers. Joining other women in the rest of the Muslim world, women presented in this study are struggling to improve women's conditions and grant women a better life in

¹¹ What I mean by 'feminist novels' here are novels written by writers (mostly women writers) who navigate gender politics that variously script the ways women's identities are narrated, defined, and regulated. These writers' rhetoric of gender equality attempts to construct alternative spaces where women can articulate new understandings of their subjectivities through discourses they themselves have authorized. These writers manifest their discourses in the form of their writings (novels). Feminist novels may question, among other things, the ways novels represent women, how these novels portray gender relations, how they label sexual difference, how they deal with power-relations between different gender roles, and so forth.

quantity and quality. Certainly, other studies are deemed beneficial to fill the gaps, to complete what is lacking and to continue where the others have left off. Further research of Muslim women, their identities, and their efforts to obtain rights are crucial in giving a broad spectrum of how Muslim women look at their identity. As this study is an academic endeavour to portray the dynamics and multiplicity of the politics of religious identity of Muslim women in Indonesian fiction and their demands for women's rights, such activism does not stop here. NGOs, academic lectures or public lectures can be tools for expressing women's ideas and beliefs, providing a necessary avenue of analysis for a comprehensive understanding of Indonesian Muslim women's lives.

Muslim women in Indonesia do enjoy greater freedom than other women the Middle Eastern regions. Yet, sharing similar goals for promoting and striving for women's equal position in the eyes of Islam, the Indonesian Muslim women are shaped by local interpretations and local cultures. Because of the transnational network of Islamic movements across the globe, there are certainly those who attempt to color Indonesian Islam with only Middle Eastern emblems and cultural practices. However, there are still many of those who believe that the practice of Muslim religious identity in Indonesia is uniquely Indonesian because of different cultures and traditions. Muslim women in Indonesia arguably enjoy a better social position than other women in more conservative Islamic regions. Yet, exemplified by the writings of the four selected authors, women are not automatically allowed freedom equal to men. Women's participation in private and public arenas is still limited, reminding readers that the road to equality is still a long way off. A danger for the future is when the more women demand having equal rights as men, the more conservative interpretations of Islam that confine women from a broader social participation become. These may be consciously exaggerated and exploited to satisfy vested interests of individuals having political power. Muslims in Indonesia should be made aware of such agendas. Radicalism in theological practices poses another danger to the development of the feminist movement. A culture of tolerance needs to be supported and encouraged in order to prevent emotional and strident reactions within the Islamic community accusing reformers of betraying Islam. The seeds for civil and public tolerance, which have been within Indonesia's Islamic community for so long, can be developed and used as a core to represent a form of Islam fully compatible with democracy, pluralism, and non-

confrontational relationships with elements of Indonesian society and the rest of the world.

Indonesian Islam, in its attempt to represent democratic aspirations, provides needed balance to understand politics in the Islamic world. In speaking of Islam, Muslim women, and gender construction, Indonesian interpretations and its on-going cultural dynamics certainly need to be included. The importance of Indonesian Islam within the global Islamic scope should not be underestimated, suggesting that it is necessary to remind the international world that Islam comes with numerous faces and its adherents make sense of it in numerous ways considering its culturally diverse contexts.

It is hoped that this study will reach greater readers outside academia. A larger readership will generate more dissemination of the messages delivered by the authors this study has examined. In so doing, this study will not solely reside in academic discourse. My hope is that it becomes a moving text in the mind of its readers so that they will eventually understand how women are portrayed by women writers in their attempt to speak women's conditions in their own words.

Conclusion: various women, various lives, various identities

This writing never aims to classify women's works in any identification, it simply wishes to describe and document women's writings for fear of losing their works in history. Through their female characters all four writers promote an agenda of female agency and autonomy. Through their heroines the authors disseminate their ideas on female identity, and use their narrative strategies as a means of suggesting new ways of thinking about women's own selves. The writings produced by these writers have an allegorical quality: they exemplify women of multiple faces showing a complexity of female experiences. A woman is subjugated yet achieves power; one is in a peripheral position yet is able to center herself, and another gains autonomy through hardship. They are stories of complex forms of resistance to women's subjugation and exclusion, which offer ways for women to claim themselves as subjects through negotiation and re-negotiation of their positions.

Despite the criticism that the works of the four selected authors are merely didactic and lack literary merit, their works are significant as they present a variety of ways women can make meaning of their lives.

For example, although the works of Abidah and Helvy are said to have a strong didactic element, their didacticism is a valuable element in disseminating messages and ideas. Abidah and Helvy make powerful points in presenting circumstances where injustice takes place. The reader gains a clear picture of what is just as opposed to unjust, and what is equal as opposed to unequal. Even though their pictures are fictional, the characters the authors create in their narratives represent women within various cultural, social, and political constellations. These characters raise questions, often providing answers, about situations in which real women in real life might find themselves. The authors' accommodation of various female representations in their works is an affirmation of women's search for identity and position. They deserve their position within the canon of Indonesian literary tradition.

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