



Proceedings of the International Symposium

PERFORMING THE SELF AND PLAYING WITH THE OTHERNESS:

CLOTHING AND COSTUMING UNDER
TRANSCULTURAL CONDITIONS



Proceedings of the International Symposium

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ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

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RELIGIOUS DEMOCRATIZATION IN WEARING THE HIJAB: A STUDY ON THE THEATER PERFORMANCE TITLED ISLAM YANG MANA?¹

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses a theatrical performance titled *Islam yang Mana?*, translated as “Which Islam?” The performance represents a phenomenon that examines how Muslim women are intimidated into accepting hijab styles that are considered the most appropriate. This performance was enacted by the women’s theater group “Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama” (Fatayat NU) of the Yogyakarta Special Region with the support of the Yogyakarta Actors Forum. The performance was staged on July 3rd, 2019 at the *Taman Budaya Yogyakarta* (Yogyakarta Cultural Park) in celebration of the 69th anniversary of *Fatayat NU*. The theatrical script for *Islam yang Mana?* emerged from the discussions that took place among the actors. There are three polemics presented in this staged performance: 1) variety of hijab styles, 2) polygamy, and 3) terrorism. This research discusses only the first polemic, namely the various styles of headscarves and the accompanying problems.

Contextually, one of the principles followed by most Muslims requires Muslim women to wear veils. There are disagreements among fellow Muslims in relation to the above, especially regarding the kind of hijab style considered the most correct in accordance to their respective beliefs. This study mainly examines the intimidation experienced by Muslim women who adhere to hijab styles that are different from that of their peers.

The study does not address as to which beliefs are right or wrong; rather, it focuses on exploring the following three questions: 1) How does the women’s organization, *Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama*, represent the phenomenon that examines the intimidation of Muslim women to accept hijab styles that are considered the most appropriate through theatrical media? 2) What kind of social reality lies behind the polemic concerning the various ways of wearing the hijab in the theater performance titled *Islam yang*

Mana? 3) Why did *Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama* choose theatrical performance as a medium to express their concerns?

A book edited by Daniels (2013) tries to understand how performance in Indonesia and Malaysia mediates piety in various ways and means. Its writings try to explore the practices of esthetic forms and how they construct, connect, and negotiate with social relations and religious piety. In contrast to the book, this paper explores how a religious organization, namely Fatayat NU, makes use of the theater performance stage as a medium to voice issues concerning religious life.

According to Khoiri (2019), when responding to a religious extremity, moderation appears to be the only final solution to every problem. Khoiri noted that, in the last two decades, the aspects of Islamic violence in Indonesia have become more massive and have gained great public attention. The strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism in Indonesia further emphasizes the main challenges faced by this plural country. Thus, efforts should be made towards the preservation of unity in diversity. The moderation of Islam as an urgent need and the prevalence of extremism presents the emergence of a paradoxical phenomenon in Indonesia.

The theater performance titled *Islam yang Mana?* explicitly brings to focus the strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism in Indonesia. The choice of hijab style and how to wear it, which is considered the most correct, is one of the manifestations of this phenomenon. If Khoiri presents the idea of Islamic moderation as an answer to the problem of Islamic fundamentalism, the analysis in this paper borrows the idea of democracy from Jacques Rancière, which is placed in the context of religious democracy.

Nurul Afifah (2018) wrote an article titled *Pakaian Syar’i, media, dan konstruksi kesalehan perempuan*. In this article, Afifah observes how media discourse

1. Many thanks to my friends at Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama Yogyakarta Special Region who have been very helpful in this research process. All informants' names in this paper are pseudonyms.

attracts attention and constructs women's understanding of syar'i clothing by using the discourse analysis approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The results of her study reveal the following: 1) the discourse on syar'i clothing on social media is a form of social phenomenon in society, namely the emergence of a movement from certain groups in the State of Indonesia 2) basically these discourses are a form of hegemony towards clothes that are considered not syar'i; and 3) these discourses also indicate the existence of certain motives from the pro-syar'i group, namely demanding equality and recognition as part of the cultures of Indonesians.

The second inference from the results of Afifah's study, which indicates that the discourse on syar'i clothing is a form of hegemony towards clothes that are considered not syar'i is one of the footholds of this paper. However, this study did not use hegemony theory in its analysis. The phenomenon presented in the performance of *Islam yang Mana?* brings out the symbolic and verbal violence inflicted by certain circles on others. This research is analyzed using Michel Foucault's "regimes of truth" (via Barker 2004) concept and Jacques Rancière's concept of democracy (via Indiyastutik 2016). Truth in cultural studies is perceived as a matter of interpreting reality, which can be considered true. Foucault does not talk about truth, he speaks about certain regimes of truth that regulate and combine various statements concerning the world or reality, and in turn define the knowledge that is supposed to be true. This is to say that truth and knowledge are limited to a certain time and space (Barker 2004).

The idea of a truth regime is supported by Richard Rorty's opinion (via Barker 2004), who says that we cannot insist on maintaining a description of truth, for truth is not final. What is believed to be the truth is very likely to change when faced with a significant challenge, say in the form of ideas along with arguments that can be accepted by several circles. In this paper, the concept of truth regime is used for analyzing the phenomenon of forcing the truth in the practice of religious life, which has been represented in the performance.

Referring to Rancière (via Indiyastutik 2016), the essence of democracy is equality. Equality is the starting point for examining the reality of democracy in people's lives. According to Rancière, democracy is a power that has continuously fought against all forms of domination by minority over the majority. Democracy refers to a political action carried out

by demos to verify or find equality in the dominant social order. Democracy prioritizes dialog, rather than violence. Rancière opposes intolerant groups who demand leadership and social order based on a particular religion or ethnicity, for they are not political, and they are not demos. In this research, the concept of democracy is placed in the context of religious democracy to observe the phenomenon of living with intolerant groups that impose certain beliefs on others.

Data collection was carried out in several ways. I documented a staging poster *Islam yang Mana?* made by the organizers as preliminary data about theatrical performances that I studied (Figure 1). I conducted field observations by watching the theatrical shows of *Islam yang Mana?* live. I made video recordings, took some staging photos, and carried out literature and media searches. Following this, the screenwriters, directors, and performers were invited to discuss about things related to their theatrical performances.



Figure 1: This picture is a staging poster *Islam yang mana?* used as a publication of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama theater performance (PW Fatayat NU DIY 2019).

2. Results and Discussion

This section begins by narrating the story performed on stage to answer the formulation of the first problem. The second part answers the formulation of the second problem by describing the social reality that lies behind the polemic of wearing the hijab in various ways. The last section answers the formulation of the third problem by mapping the reasons Fatayat NU uses theater as a medium to voice their anxieties.

2.1. The Paradox of Piety Coercion

This section is titled the paradox of imposing piety, for coercion and piety are the two opposites that are present together. The following is a scene narrative related to the polemic of various hijab styles and their various problems as an answer to the formulation of the first problem.

The main character in the theater performance is Melati, described as a young Muslim woman who is active, cheerful, and loves art, especially music and dance. She is also described as someone who thinks and is critical of the problems that exist in religious life. In the dialog presented on stage, Melati expresses her concern about the term Syar'i, an Arabic word, which means, according to the rules (sharia or religious law). On the one hand, Melati is quite aware that the rules of human life include human relations with God, humans, and the natural environment. Melati also agrees that in Islam, hijab is seen as a syar'i garment, hence, as a Muslim woman, Melati wants to dress in accordance to the Islamic teachings. This desire indicates that the construction of piety is in progress in Melati's self, which she has come to accept.

On the other hand, since there are various styles of hijab, Melati is confused about making a choice (Figure 2). Melati worries that, if she chose the wrong hijab style, her friends might bully her. She displayed this concern by referring to data that proved the bullying of her friends by other friends, who were members of certain Islamic groups. Even though Melati was unsure, she eventually chose a hijab style that she considered comfortable and appropriate for her religious beliefs.



Figure 2: This image shows a scene in the performance of Islam yang Mana? when Melati was confused about choosing the correct hijab model (photo by Yustina Devi Ardhiani, 3 July 2021).

The next scene depicts the four friends wearing different hijab styles visiting Melati (Figure 3). They

introduce themselves by stating that the hijab style they wear is the most appropriate as per the Islamic teachings. Initially, their greeting were friendly; however, in the next scene, Melati, who was wearing trousers, was constantly bullied, for her clothes were considered to be incompatible with their Islamic beliefs. Each of them tried to influence her to change the way she dressed and to be like them. She was very annoyed by their attempts to persuade her, which led to she eventually shouting at them to shut up! This resulted in them not talking to her.



Figure 3: This image shows a scene when four friends of Melati came wearing different hijab models (photo by Yustina Devi Ardhiani, 3 July 2021).

The scene depicts how the regimes of truth represented by the presence of four women wearing four different hijab styles worked toward imposing a believed interpretation on Melati. While Barker (2004) emphasized that truth and knowledge are limited to a certain time and space, Rorty (via Barker 2004) emphasized on a description of truth, which could not be forced on others. Fatayat NU shows the opposite situation through the theater performance. Just because she wore the hijab differently, Melati became the target of bullies. Melati is shown to be under siege and fighting against it simultaneously (Figure 4).



Figure 4: This image shows a scene when four women were trying to influence Melati to change her hijab models (photo by Yustina Devi Ardhiani, 3 July 2021).

While the scene was hyperbolic, for it brought together four people from different groups trying to influence Melati, the scene was able to describe a phenomenon that transpired to real life. Several Islamic groups with different backgrounds and ideologies try to increase their followers by influencing anyone who is considered as a potential member of their group.

One of the ways in which the groups represent the truth regimes is by influencing the choice of hijab style worn by those who are their target. Melati is presented as a target, thus, it is up for grabs. She expressed her anger through the loud screams and emotions seen on her face. Her anger expressed her criticism of the Truth being forced on her.

2.2. The Power of the Regime of Truth

The second research question, namely “What kind of social reality lies behind the polemic concerning the different ways of wearing a hijab in the theater performance titled *Islam yang Mana?*,” directs our response to the following two phenomena:

First, the issue of friendship is presented in the show. In reality, the different choices of hijab styles can potentially break friendships. In the focus group discussion, Ninik, who played Melati in theatrical performance, said that she had an experience similar to what she presented in the play. Rita, another actor in the theatrical show, reported a similar experience. There is another real story from Rita and Ninik. They had a close friend who suggested that Rita and Ninik improve their dressing. She further advised them to break up with their boyfriends. They felt uncomfortable with how she treated them and chose to break up their relationship with her. Rita and Ninik mentioned that there were other friends who also experienced such a thing.

Second, the issue of family relationships has been presented in the performance. In practice, the differences in religious beliefs have the potential to disturb family harmony. There is a real story available from Lilin. Her younger brother no longer wanted to greet her owing to their differing opinions on Islamic teaching. When she told him about her plan to continue her studies, he replied, “May God guide you on the right path, *semoga segera dapat hidayah dari Allah*.” This response further confirms their views on how one can be religious. Lilin’s plan to continue studying was not responded to, for it was not considered important. However, since Lilin was deemed as a person who did not carry out the

Islamic teachings properly, her younger brother prayed for Lilin receiving immediate guidance from Allah.

Ninik narrates another incident that occurred immediately after her marriage. She was misjudged by her new family because the hijab style she wore was different from that of theirs. Ninik was worried that she would not fit into the family. This situation led her to rethink her religious teachings. She felt that there was nothing wrong with her clothes, even though her hijab was not the same as that of others.

The above phenomenon, which also occurs in many places in Indonesia, proves that the truth regimes tend to impose their point of view on how to dress, which is considered to be more correct and in accordance to the Islamic teachings. When a truth regime acts to impose its will, conflict situations are difficult to avoid. That was what Ninik and Rita experienced among their friends, and what Lilin experienced with her family.

2.3. Voicing Religious Democracy on Stage Performance

The answer to the third question, namely “Why did Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama choose theater as a medium to express their anxiety?,” is as follows.

Around 700 people attended the anniversary celebration of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama and watched the theater performance. Those who were present were mostly members of Fatayat NU in Yogyakarta, students from several boarding schools, and a few guests from various circles. They are the main target of the message that *Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama* wanted to convey through the play *Islam yang Mana?*

The audience looked enthusiastic about enjoying the theatrical performances of *Islam yang Mana?*. The audience resonated the speech or actions of the players in the show by shouting “Go on! Great! and *Jangan Kasih Kendor!*,” an Indonesian slang used for reverberating the spirit of not giving up. On the other hand, the audience would give a rumbling sound like *Huuu* when disagreeing with the speech or actions of the performers. The spontaneous remarks indicate how the audience participated in the play. While the extent of the audience’s participation is limited to *celetukan*, an Indonesian word referring to interruption, there is chance that the presented material might induce the audience to rethink on the issue of religious life presented in the play.

Does the phenomenon presented in the Fatayat NU performance represents a democratic life? The answer is undemocratic because, when referring to Rancière's ideas, the essence of democracy is equality. There was no equivalence in the phenomena presented. The power relationship is very visible in the performance. On one hand, there are four women who represent the presence of truth regimes in the name of Islamic law; on the other hand, Melati represents those who are under siege and are fighting oppression.

Having watched the theatrical performance of *Islam yang Mana?*, the story disturbs me because it shows a lack of tolerance toward religious life. On the other hand, those who participated in the play were aware of the problem. If democracy is understood as a force that is constantly fighting against all forms of minority domination over the majority, then whoever taking part in the performance is struggling to achieve equality, which is the essence of democracy. Furthermore, if dialog is the priority of democracy, Fatayat NU is striving for the realization of democratic religious life through non-violent theater performances.

What I see, experience, and feel shows how extraordinary a play is. Thus, I agree with *Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama* Yogyakarta, who used theater as a medium to communicate the various problems that are faced in religious life. Theater proved to be a medium for voicing humanitarian issues. Theatrical performance has the potential to invite the audience to rethink on an issue without teaching, rebuking, and hurting others. Performers, thus, deserve the right to place theater as a medium to reflect humanity.

3. Concluding Remarks

This research demonstrates that an act of imposing religious truths on others runs the risk of ruining friendships, family harmony, and peaceful community life. This situation gradually paralyzes democracy in the life of religion. The principle adhered by Fatayat NU organization, which is the same principle adhered by Nahdlatul Ulama, is to uphold tolerance, respect differences, and uphold the tradition of observing and understanding Islamic teachings in the context of Indonesian culture. Thus, Fatayat NU accepts the different ways in which Muslim women wear the hijab and try to fight for a democratic religious life through theater media. The openness to appreciate the various kinds of hijab

styles, with the implied messages and explicitly voiced performances found in *Islam yang Mana?*, is expected to be the beginning of the realization of democratization in religious life.

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