



Challenging the Mainstream Portrayal of Islam in Indonesian Screen Culture: Religious Representation in *Hati Suhita* Film

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Islam in Indonesian screen culture, focusing on the genre of *film Islami*. It discusses the dominant portrayal of muslims piety and modernity in these films and explores the smaller number of films that depict *pesantren* culture, a manifestation of traditional Islam. The article analyzes the *Hati Suhita* film as a significant shift in representing a solid traditional Islam rooted in history, culture, and the modern values to shape religiosity. It highlights the film's exploration of a love triangle within an arranged marriage in a non-cliché manner through strength and resilience, grounded on Javanese philosophy and sufism, while promoting a gender justice perspective. It also discusses the film's impact on the *pesantren* community, and its role in becoming a convergence point between *pesantren* and screen culture, two domains that have been considered distant from each other. This article also observes that the success of this film is the result of a long endeavor to negotiate *pesantren* with popular culture. Overall, the article contributes to the ongoing discourse on the representation of Islam in Indonesian screen culture, and the intersection of tradition, modernity, and religion.

Keywords: *Hati Suhita*; *Film Islami*; *Representation*; *Pesantren*; *Screen Culture*.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji representasi Islam dalam budaya layar Indonesia, dengan berfokus pada genre film Islami. Artikel ini membahas penggambaran dominan tentang kesalehan dan modernitas umat Muslim dalam film-film tersebut, dan mengeksplorasi bagaimana sedikit film menggambarkan budaya pesantren sebagai manifestasi dari Islam tradisional. Artikel ini menganalisis film *Hati Suhita* sebagai sebuah pergeseran signifikan dalam upaya merepresentasikan Islam tradisional yang berakar pada sejarah, budaya, serta nilai-nilai modern untuk membentuk religiositas. Artikel ini menyoroti kisah cinta segitiga dalam pernikahan pada film *Hati Suhita* yang disajikan secara tidak klise melalui kekuatan dan ketangguhan, yang didasarkan pada filosofi Jawa dan sufisme, sembari mempromosikan perspektif keadilan gender. Artikel ini juga membahas dampak film tersebut terhadap komunitas pesantren, dan perannya sebagai titik konvergensi antara pesantren dan

budaya layar, dua domain yang selama ini dianggap bertentangan satu sama lain. Artikel ini juga mengamati bahwa keberhasilan film ini merupakan hasil dari upaya panjang untuk menegosiasikan pesantren dengan budaya populer. Secara keseluruhan, artikel ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskursus yang sedang berlangsung tentang representasi Islam dalam budaya layar Indonesia, serta persinggungan antara tradisi, modernitas, dan agama.

Kata Kunci: *Hati Suhita; Film Islami; Representasi; Pesantren; Budaya Layar.*

Introduction

In Indonesia, *film Islami* (or referred as Islamic preaching film -*film dakwah Islam*) is a promising industry. The era of democratization has influenced the media industry, where some young filmmakers are allowed to experiment with new modes of film production, giving birth to creativity in horror films and *film Islami* (Barker 2019). The booming of *film Islami* in the country occurred in 2008 when *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* garnered not less than three and a half million viewers. Academics consider this to be a turning point of popular Islamic culture presence in films (Heryanto 2015). The emergence of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* was followed by a wave of leading *film Islami* in the Indonesian silver screen, such as *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1* (2009), *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 2* (2009), *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (2009), *Sang Pencerah* (2010), *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* (2011), *Negeri Lima Menara* (2012), *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* (2013) and so on.

As a medium of representation, *film Islami* serves as a means to portray and depict various aspects of Islamic culture, values, beliefs, and practices. These films present a platform to showcase Islamic ideals, promote moral messages, and foster a deeper understanding of the religion which cannot be separated from religious affiliation and political participation. In Indonesian case, many of them resonate with the anxieties, desires and frustrations of middle-class Muslims in Indonesia (Hoesterey and Clark 2012). Through post-Islamism perspective, *film Islami* also illustrates how consumer identities, particularly those of the middle-class Muslims, are shaped (Heryanto 2015). Indeed, these films have been highly favored by the middle-class urban Muslim community, as evidenced by their frequent box office success.

Subsequently, the representation of Islam in Indonesian *film Islami* tends to be uniform. The formula for successful *film Islami* is not far from a combination of piety and modern

Muslim values. After the boom of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, *film Islami* have flocked to depict Islamic ideals in the form of normative piety through clothing, dialogues, rituals, and the cosmopolitanism of Muslims through adventures in various countries. In general, the central figure of the "modern" Muslim man illustrated as a pious, prosperous, and compassionate person, succeeds in his steadfast search for personal meaning, worldly success, and heavenly blessings (Hoesterey and Clark 2012). Moreover, modernity is commonly depicted through the exploration of Muslims abroad. This identical portrayal constructs a singular imagination of Islamic identity within popular culture. Therefore, traditional Islamic practices are not entirely absent in these portrayals, but very limited. They serve as mere complements and often pose problematic issues.

Hati Subita (2023) is another *film Islami* which represents Islam in Indonesian screen culture. Compared to its predecessors, this film is set in and emerge from traditional Islamic *pesantren* (boarding school) environment, a group that is majority in offline realm but underrepresented in Indonesian screen culture. By the strong presence of Javanese philosophy and sufism, this film offers a new representation of religiosity on the Indonesian silver screen.

During its initial release, *Hati Subita* managed to grab significant attention. The tickets for its premiere tour in 17 cities across Java were sold out, even after additional screenings were added. This euphoria has already been anticipated considering that *Hati Subita* was adapted from a best-selling novel that sold no less than 90,000 copies. Although it may not have reached the level of success achieved by previous *film Islami*, this buzz indicates a high level of enthusiasm for the unique representation that *Hati Subita* brings to the screen.

As a representation of traditional Islam, *Hati Subita* also serves as a space of identification for the *pesantren* community amidst the popular culture universe. The success of *Hati Subita* produced by a reputable production house, featured well-known capital city artists, and made its way into commercial cinemas, is celebrated with great enthusiasm. The audience affiliated with traditional *pesantren* fills the cinemas with many of them admitting that it's their first such experience. Several women's institutions affiliated with traditional Islamic mass organization, and even respected women leaders of *pesantren*, along with their

santri (students), book multiple studios to watch the film together. Through *Hati Subita*, they reclaim the foreign spaces that have long been dominated by urban Muslims.

Research on Islamic films in Indonesia has been extensively conducted. Since the popularity of Islamic films soared in the post-New Order era, various studies have tried to map different aspects within it. For example, the representation of men and masculinity (Hoesterey and Clark 2012), how Islamic films shape youth identity (Hariyadi 2013), and how Islamic films depict liquid religiosity among the middle class muslim (Supriansyah 2019).

Islamic films have also been studied in relation to cosmopolitanism (Barker and Broga 2016) and the phenomenon of religious conversion (Paramaditha 2010). The most dominant research discusses the aspect of Islamic preaching in Islamic films, including the content of Quranic and Hadith values, as done by Yayan (2021).

At a more macro level, Huda (2012) tried to define what is considered an Islamic film and conversely, an un-Islamic film. Meanwhile, Sasono (2010) and Heryanto (2015) tried to view Islamic films as a form of socio-political cultural change in Indonesian Islam rather than merely a commodification phenomenon.

In relation to traditional Islamic groups, Huda (2012) examined how cinematic practice is carried out by traditional Islamic students of *pesantren*. From the above literature review, no study has specifically looked at how traditional Islam is represented in Islamic films. This is what this research aims to contribute.

The research question this study seeks to answer is how does the film *Hati Suhita* represent the values and identity of traditional Islamic groups in Indonesian screen culture? This article argues that the *Hati Subita* film contested the mainstream *film Islami* by offering a new representation of Islam in Indonesian screen culture. It presents a rarely explored and a solid portrayal of traditional Islam. The spirituality derived from Javanese philosophy and sufism allows its proselytization aspect to avoid being didactic. Modernity is substantially depicted through open-mindedness and gender equality. The film also serves as a platform for traditionalist muslim groups to identify themselves amidst popular culture trends.

Result and Analysis

The Mainstream of Islamic Representation in Indonesian *Film Islami*

Stuart Hall defined representation as the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language (Hall 1997). In the other words, it involves the utilization of language by individuals within a culture to create significance. It encompasses the arrangement of signs, enabling us to comprehend and depict the world based on a broader range of values and ideologies. These meanings are not static or objective; rather, they are shaped and defined by the society in which they exist.

The blockbuster film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* not only set off a wave of *film Islami* but also a genre of Islamic piety representation. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* film is based on the best-selling novel by El Shirazy which reflect the modernist ideal of returning to the Quran and the example of the Prophetic Tradition as the primary and guiding sources for everyday ethics (Hoesterey and Clark 2012). The story revolves around the main character Fahri, an incredibly pious Indonesian diaspora in Egypt. As the protagonist, Fahri endeavors to conquer life's challenges, including his intricate love story, while upholding the principles of Islam. It is clearly reflected from dialogues that explicitly cite Islamic texts.

The same premise is also presented in films adaptation from other Habiburrahman El Shirazy's novels such as *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (2009), *Dalam Mibrab Cinta* (2010), *Cinta Suci Zabrana* (2012), and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2* (2017). *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2* was released a decade after *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 1*. Once again, the story still revolves around the life of Fahri, as an extremely devout man who always attract women around him. The sequel showcases Fahri's extraordinary kindness in his daily life, while he is looking for his missing wife, Aisha, who became a volunteer in Palestine. The film received sharp criticism not only for glorifying an unrealistic level of piety but also its illogical dramatic twist revealing that Aisha had actually returned and disguised herself as a maid in Fahri's house. Despite these shortcomings, the film still succeeded in attracting nearly three million viewers.

Aside of a textual yet utopian depiction of modern Muslim piety, another mainstream representation of Islam in Indonesian cinema is the cosmopolitanism of muslims. *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* (2013), *Assalamualaikum Beijing* (2014), *Haji Backpacker* (2014), *Jilbab Traveler - Love Sparks in Korea* (2016) films have moved away from the Middle East to feature stories set in Europe, South Korea, and mainland China. By identifying the main characters as

Muslim, the films explore how Indonesian Muslims encounter otherness, negotiate difference, and imagine the world.

However, the films are presented as potentially cosmopolitan but they merely serve as a means of proselytization by remapping the world according to an Indonesian Islamic perspective. Barker defined it as limited cosmopolitanism. The movies express a cosmopolitan longing for travel and depict the world as an exotic commodity, emphasizing the significance of preserving faith, particularly in foreign settings (Barker and Broga 2016). However, they do not view the world as a place for cross-cultural interactions where Indonesian Muslims can become global citizens. Instead, they portray it as Islamicized spaces and history. On the other hand, the portrayals of Muslims who are globally active, modern, and simultaneously uphold Islamic values in their daily lives, can be seen as an effort targeting the tastes of Indonesia's middle-class Muslim which recently has high buying power (Yuswohadi et al. 2017).

The mainstream representation of modern Muslims above sideline the muslim traditional images in Indonesian screen culture. Nonetheless, representations of *pesantren* culture as a manifestation of traditional Islam in *film Islami* can still be found, albeit in smaller numbers. One year after the success of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, the film *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (2009) was released, directed by the same director, Hanung Bramantyo. Based on a novel by Abidah El-Khalieqy, the story depicts the rebellion of Annisa, the heroine of the film, against the restrains in a conservative Islamic *pesantren*. The *pesantren* is portrayed as an old-fangled institution that enforces arranged marriages, lacks gender equality perspectives, and exhibits abusive behavior. *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* is quite didactic and Bramantyo garnered some criticism for this, as well as for the fact that he should have chosen a more “progressive” *pesantren* in which to set his film (Aquadini 2009).

Controversy also emerged from Nurman Hakim's film, the *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (2008) which rather than projects a utopian version of Islam, it explores terrorism, homoerotic play and same-sex relations in *pesantren*. Basicaly Hakim aspired to show boarding school life as he experienced it, not as projected by government official who are wary to the *pesantren* community following the second bomb blast in Bali in 2005 (Hoesterey and Clark 2012). Nevertheless, this film precisely garnered a lot of criticism. Certain scenes and dialogues were

considered disrespectful or trivialized religious beliefs, which led to accusations of insensitivity towards the faith of the characters and the audience. Thus, eventually, the film is less successful in commercial terms. Lately, a film that specifically aims to highlight the image of moderate *santri* is *The Santri* (2019). Released on the National *Santri* Day on October 22, 2019, the film got a strong criticism as considered not to accurately represent the actual life of *santri*, especially their relationships with the opposite sex, and the excessive level of tolerance.

Related to the topic of *pesantren*, it is essential to consider two noteworthy films that revolve around this setting, namely *Negeri Lima Menara* (2012) and *Sang Kiai* (2013). *Negeri Lima Menara* portrays *pesantren* as modern religious educational institutions that not only emphasize religious teachings but also broader knowledge. This film highlights the positive aspects of the *santri*'s life as they pursue their dreams exploring Europe and America. On the other hand, the role of *pesantren* especially in the final years of Indonesia's struggle for independence highlighted in the biopic *Sang Kiai*, directed by Rako Prijanto in 2013. The film narrates the story of Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic organization in Southeast Asia. This film showcases historical facts that have not been widely known, regarding the role of traditional ulama in issuing a jihad resolution during the struggle for Indonesia's independence. Both films have received positive responses as educational and inspiring *pesantren* films.

Film Islami Revisited: A Solid and Proper Representation of Traditional Islam

From the dominant portrayals presented by Islamic films in the previous discussion, *Hati Subita* offers a quite distinctive perspective. The film *Hati Subita* does not belong to the category of *film Islami* with utopian piety, nor does it sell limited cosmopolitanism, and most importantly, it originates from the realm of traditional Islamic groups rather than urban Muslims.

Hati Subita has displayed more realistic piety of society's life compared from the previous *film Islami* in Indonesian screen culture. The movie has portrayed such form of Islamic value by considering the local value especially Javanese culture. Instead of succumbing to the trend of Muslims' obsession with exploring overseas, the film *Hati Subita*

chooses to delve into philosophical sites in Java as the foundation of its religiosity. However, among the Islamic films that attempt to represent *pesantren*, the article finds that *Hati Subita* has provided the solid and proper representation of traditional Islam in Javanese culture. In general, the distinction of Islam depiction in *Hati Subita* film can be seen from four aspects: religiosity, exploration of local sites, gender equality, and the encounter of *pesantren* and modernity.

At first glance, the premise of the *Hati Subita* film is not much different from other Islamic movies that explore the story of a love triangle. The drama revolves around the suffering of a legal wife who competes for her husband's love with a third person in their marriage. Suhita refers to the name of the female protagonist, Alina Suhita, who is arranged to marry Gus Birru, the son of Kiai Hanan, the caretaker of a reputable *pesantren* in Kediri, East Java. Suhita herself is a daughter and granddaughter of kiais (religious scholar). Her name is inspired by a ruler of Majapahit, Queen Suhita. This name becomes the core premise of the story, showcasing how Alina resolves the love triangle within her arranged marriage in a non-cliché manner. The film focuses on Alina's efforts to prove to her husband that she is the right wife through strength and resilience, grounded on Javanese philosophy and sufism.

The Islamic and Javanese culture has been represented widely in the *Hati Subita* movie. It portrays the harmonious encounter between Islamic and Javanese culture. The cultures itself have embodied as a life principle of Javanese society. At the form of character, Alina was characterized as a religious or piety. Interestingly, Alina's religiosity is depicted based on Javanese philosophy and Islamic sufism. In the context of Javanese philosophy, Alina adheres to the Javanese principle of "*mikul dhuwur mendem jero*". It is a form of Javanese ethic which shows the concept of respect or obedience to others.

"Mikul dhuwur" means that we must respect our parents and uphold their good name. "Mendem jero" means that we should not highlight or emphasize the shortcomings of our parents. The ethic, then, becomes more solid by accommodating the Islamic value on how to respect parents and grandparents (*birrul walidain*). It resulted on Alina's resilient on facing Gus Birru who unloved her in their arranged marriage. Through that proverb, Alina

demonstrates her endurance in facing marital conflicts by drawing inspiration from the strength of the Majapahit queen.

The use of Javanese terms, which form the spirit of the story in *Hati Subita*, contrasts with previous Islamic films that chose to use Arabic proverbs. The most famous example is the slogan "*manjadda wa jada*," which means "he who strives will succeed," in the *Negeri Lima Menara* film, serving as a motivational trigger to achieve one's dreams.

In the film, the conflict begins with the revelation of the engagement between Alina and Gus Birru. Gus Birru's refusal to accept the engagement due to his feelings for Rengganis, the third character, becomes the catalyst for the conflict. This leads to the way he treats Alina. The rest of the movie focuses on the dramatic efforts made by Alina to convince Gus Birru and cope with her emotions in response to his treatment.

Pilgrimage is her way to face her problematic conditions on the family. In this context, the targeted pilgrimage is the grave of some Javanese leaders and religious leaders, such as Ranggawarsita, Kiai Hasan Besari, Sunan Kudus, Sunan Pandanaran, and Sunan Bayat. In the cinematology, the pilgrimage choices has various specific meaning given to the targeted audience.

Alina visited the grave of Ranggawarsita, for instance, for contemplating his teaching which is show the importance of loyalty, courage and justice in living life as shown from the novel of *Hati Subita*. She also visited the Kiai Hasan Besari grave. Throughout the novel, Kiai Hasan Besari faces various challenges and obstacles, but he remains strong and steadfast in his beliefs. His character represents the values of faith, compassion, and resilience. Alina wants to learn from Hasan Besari about how he could be resilience through all problems he faced and compared to her problems. All the grave she visited has any relation to the philosophy of life that she wanted to contemplate.

Furthermore, the symbol of visiting pilgrimage is the form of religious practice showed by Alina and her parents in law. Alina's display of peaceful mind while facing her circumstances served as evidence of her inclination towards religiosity. She feels a freedom to crying and praying at the ancestor's grave. Besides, some scenes on the movie also displayed clearly on how the parents in law was really happy after having some days of visiting

pilgrimage. Indeed, the spirituality derived from Javanese philosophy and sufism allows its proselytization aspect to avoid being didactic.

The various pilgrimages portray the harmonious relationship between Islam and Javanese philosophy. The targeted pilgrimage and the philosophy behind it have any relation to the Islamic teaching and Javanese philosophy. This is the uniqueness of *Hati Subita* movie which is different from the previous *film Islami*. In Indonesian screen culture, the *film Islami* are mostly represented the Islamic value under modernism that refers to cosmopolitanism. *Hati Subita* chooses to explore religiosity at local grave sites rather than taking the audience on a spiritual journey across horizons to other continents like America (*Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika*, 2015), Europe (*99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa*, 2013), East Asia (*Assalamualaikum Beijing*, 2014; *Jilbab Traveller: Love Sparks In Korea*, 2016), or the Middle East (*Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, 2008; *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*, 2009)

In term of Javanese philosophy, Alina has been called as “*pengabsah wangsa*” (descendant legitimator). The *pengabsah wangsa* is a Javanese term which means a suitable and compatible life partner. Alina has been a cadre of Gus Birru’s parents for a long time to be the next leader of Pesantren Al Anwar. It was a strategy used by the leader of Al Anwar after seeing the Gus Birru’s activity which is different from his parent’s point of view or expectation. The term *pengabsah wangsa* was the crucial term used in the movie which shows the embodiment of Javanese culture and Islamic value especially in the context of leadership within the dynastic descent of *pesantren*.

As the form of practice, the religiosity in the *Hati Subita* film has been shown by two main characters, Gus Birru dan Alina, considering the Javanese principle, *mikul dunnur mendem jero* and Islamic value *birrul walidain* (serving or being devoted to one's parents). To respect his parents, Gus Birru decided to marry his unloved one, Alina. Although he does not happy with the marriage, he forms an agreement with Suhita to show a happy life together. The religiosity of Gus Birru could be seen in the way he treated his parents on his marriage. Indeed, it is not about the symbols or rituals often emphasized in *film Islamis*.

On other hand, Alina shows her religiosity by consistently reciting Alquran every scene when the husband come home from his work. Furthermore, she is portrayed to be a devout muslim which avoided handshake with a man in the movie. It is one of the forms of religiosity

taught in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). However, those scenes are merely symbolic, the substance of her religiosity lies mainly in the she was going to the pilgrimage and treated her parents in law. Symbols of obedience to parents and religious authority as a form of religiosity are also portrayed in how the *santris* bow their shoulder and say greetings when meeting their *pesantren* leader of Islamic boarding school and the descendants. This image becomes an authentic practice carried out in traditional *pesantren*.

As a *film Islami*, *Hati Subita* doesn't heavily emphasize religiosity through clothing symbols. For example, the character Gus Birru is portrayed in a modern style with jeans, t-shirt, and a hoodie. Meanwhile, Alina and Ummik (the mother-in-law) are depicted wearing stylish Islamic dresses with moderately sized hijabs, not too wide or even fully covering the face. In the wedding scene, Alina even wears a tight-fitting traditional Javanese bridal outfit with a hijab that doesn't cover her chest. This is different, for example, from the choice of outfits used in its predecessors such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*, which preferred using wide hijabs and even Middle Eastern-style veils (*cadar*) to signify piety.

The movie has also intentionally showcasing a progressive gender perspective compared to other *film Islamis*. In the case of marriage, romantic love is not the primary consideration. *Hati Subita* portrays the use of social and cultural considerations in building a family, as seen in the arranged marriage between Alina and Gus Birru. This approach is a traditional and logical approach in pre-capitalist societies, where people work as family units, and marriage is sought with someone who can support the family's mission (Bandel 2020).

In this case, if gender fairness considered in the sense of men and women having equal and interchangeable roles, then this film does not adhere to gender fairness. It is based on specific role divisions between men and women in Islamic and Javanese culture. However, there is a variety of roles for women in the story *Hati Subita*. Some are entrepreneurs, activists, so that the femininity displayed by Alina is not an ideal representation but rather a character's chosen role (Bandel 2020).

One of the gender perspectives shown in the film is the habit of *musyawarah* or discussion between Kiai Hanan and his wife. They discuss various topics, including religion, education, and the role of women in society. Kiai Hannan and his wife also discuss the

relationship between husband and wife, and the importance of communication and support. They talk about the importance of understanding and accepting our partners as they are.

The gender perspective is also evident in how Alina is represented as the next leader of Pesantren Al Anwar. On the other hand, Rengganis, as the third person in Alina-Gus Birru's marriage, is also portrayed as an independent activist who can make her own choices, such as pursuing higher education abroad. Interestingly, the relationship between Alina and Rengganis in the love triangle is not depicted in tense or irrational conflicts. Instead of being portrayed as antagonistic, Alina and Rengganis choose to be rational and acknowledge their respective roles.

The film also demonstrates Alina's agency in convincing her husband that she is the right wife for him. One of these instances is when, in the evening, as her husband returns home, Alina dresses up in lingerie and greets him shyly. Although the strategy seemed successful at first, Gus Birru gets distracted when he receives a call from Rengganis, which leads to the failure of the plan. Alina's patience in seeking Gus Birru's love is not portrayed as utopically limitless. At its peak, after all her efforts to maintain their marriage prove futile, Alina asks for a divorce and leaves the *pesantren* to find solace at her grandfather's house. This plot also illustrates Alina's agency within her household. This more subtle gender construction is more acceptable compared to the rebellious nuances that actually provoke controversy like in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*.

Moreover, *Hati Suhita* film was not only focused on representing traditional Islam but also representing the encounter between traditional Islam and modernity. The use of technology is one of the example on how *pesantren* is not depicted as an outdated institution. The array of Gus Birru and Alina's reading ranging from Javanese history, literature, to Western philosophy, also shows how the *pesantren* is open to diverse discourses.

Pesantren Identification in Pop Culture

Research on the film *Hati Suhita* is relevant not only because of its unique storyline but also because, as a cultural product, this film shows the shift of *pesantren* identification in pop culture. The euphoria surrounding *Hati Suhita* demonstrates how cinema is no longer taboo

among the *pesantren* community. Santri groups not only flock to cinemas but also enjoy popular cultural products from their own circles.

A film, as a popular cultural product, not only conveys statements about what is considered normal, good, strange, funny, interesting, or terrifying, but also provides a space for identification for the audience. *Film Islami* are the outcome of Muslims' negotiations with religious, social, political, economic, moral, and cultural issues intertwined in the processes of producing, distributing, and consuming these films (Huda 2012).

The great success of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* lies in its ability to represent the desires of young Muslims who are stylish, mature, and devoted to their faith. This phenomenon is even seen as a sign of a new era in public life in Indonesia, especially among its youth, demonstrating that religious devotion and modernity do not always contradict each other. Instead, both can be chosen and embraced simultaneously. This is perceived as a spirit of post-Islamism that infiltrates into the realm of popular culture: not anti-Islamic, not non-Islamic, and not secular either (Heryanto 2015).

However, on the other hand, not all Muslim groups in Indonesia feel adequately represented through the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. The film is considered too biased towards urban settings, promoting a formalistic religious approach full of symbols and individual piety that is not aligned with other Islamic groups.

Efforts to counter the Islamic discourse presented in *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* have been ongoing within *pesantren* circles. Despite the significant number of *santri*, they still form a minority in the Indonesian cinema scene. Over time, a new generation of *santri* has emerged, taking a progressive approach to film production across the country. Utilizing modern film technologies such as personal video recorders and digital cameras, many of these young students have created films that focus on the lives of Muslims in *pesantren* and explore other subjects as well. While some of these films have been limited to the *pesantren* circuit, most of them have reached wider audiences through alternative public screenings, especially on platforms like YouTube. Some have even been showcased at local film festivals and commercial cinemas (Huda 2014).

Hamzah Sahal is one of the *pesantren* literacy activists dedicated to bringing the traditional face of *pesantren* to the cinematic screen. In 2016, in collaboration with an

independent filmmaker affiliated with NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and funded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, a documentary film about pesantren titled *Jalan Dakwah Pesantren* was produced. The film was then screened in various cities through a roadshow.

For *pesantren*, cinema has been a sensitive territory to navigate. Due to the secular associations and perceived impropriety, film-going by young students has been severely restricted. For example, Pesantren Kidang in West Java explicitly prohibited its students from openly going to the cinema to watch *Negeri Lima Menara* (2012). As a result, some students secretly visited what they considered a secular space: the cinema (Huda 2015).

The film *Hati Subita* successfully depicts the life of *pesantren* in a solid, balanced, and accurate manner, resonating with its predominantly female audience who are affiliated with *pesantren*. They identify with the film not only due to its portrayal of *santri* identity but also its depiction of arranged marriages, which is closely connected to the *pesantren* life.

The film's audience base within the traditional Muslim circles can be seen from the series of premieres held for *Hati Subita*. Instead of targeting major cities, most of the film's premieres and meet-and-greet events with the cast took place in smaller cities in East Java, such as Malang, Kediri, Probolinggo, Lumajang, Jember, Banyuwangi, Mojokerto, and Madiun. Some were also held in smaller cities in Central Java and West Java, like Solo, Pekalongan, Tegal, and Cirebon. Those cities widely known for their strong *pesantren* culture. However, only four major cities, namely Surabaya, Semarang, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta, were part of the premiere list.

In these cities, *Hati Subita* received high enthusiasm during the gala premieres, with tickets selling out quickly, leading to additional studio screenings. After its release, the film was shown simultaneously in 280 cinemas across Indonesia and garnered at least 62,000 viewers on its first day.

The enthusiasm for *Hati Subita* brought a different sight in cinemas dominated by women, most of whom were mothers, wearing hijabs and traditional loose clothing associated with *pesantren*. The film introduced them to spaces they were unfamiliar with. The vibrant stories behind the hype of *Hati Subita* included the fact that for many *pesantren* women, it was their first experience going to a cinema, or even a mall. They had questions like how to enter a cinema, buy tickets, park vehicles at the mall, and find the toilet and prayer

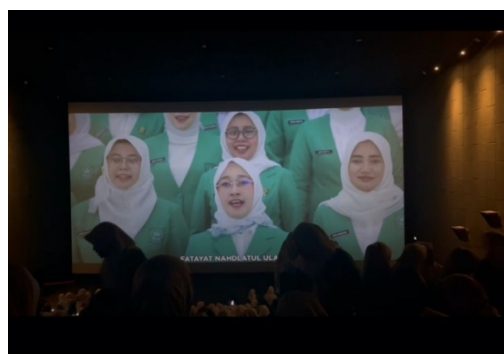
room. The impact of *Hati Subita* even led some mothers to leave their children for a day, resulting in the coinage of the term *Hari Bapak-Bapak Momong Anak Sedunia* among them (Sundari 2023).

It is not surprising recalling that from its inception as a serial novel on Facebook, *Hati Subita* has received a grand reception. Many who read it claimed to have developed a newfound love for reading, particularly novels. The enthusiasm was evident in how they enthusiastically shared the novel's script through various accessible platforms (Sundari 2023).

The new audience trend introduced by *Hati Subita* in the Indonesian screen culture was further reflected in the wave of *pesantren* communities and traditional Islamic organizations booking cinemas to watch the film together. *Hati Subita* openly challenged the belief within *pesantren* that cinemas were forbidden places. For instance, a Nyai (female religious leader) of a *pesantren* in Jombang, where Khilma Anis once spent her adolescence, brought hundreds of her *santri*, complete with their distinctive uniforms, to the cinema to watch the film together. Moreover, they expressed their excitement upon meeting and having a dialogue with the main actors, such as Omar Daniel, Anggika Bolsterli, and Devina Aureel. Similarly, Fatayat NU groups in various cities booked studios for all their members to watch the film together while wearing their organization's attributes. Before the film started, they even sang the Fatayat anthem while its music video played on the cinema screen.



Picture 1. A group of female *santri* watching the film together and greeting cast enthusiastically



Picture 2. Members of the Fatayat NU organization sing their anthem before watching the film together.

If *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* successfully touched the hearts of millions of urban young Muslims, providing them with representation on the silver screen, *Hati Subita* had a similar effect among the *pesantren* community. The enthusiasm of the *pesantren* audience towards the novel *Hati Subita*, which carried on to the film, celebrated the representation of traditional Muslim groups in the realm of popular culture, which had been less dominated before. The success of *Hati Subita* in penetrating the film industry and commercial cinema halls, which were far from the *pesantren*'s radar, became a moment of self-recognition for the *pesantren* community.

Of course, reaching this point involved many compromises. As a film, *Hati Subita* had to negotiate visual considerations, from casting to the setting of the story. Like *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, the casting of *Hati Subita* was not based on the personal characters of the actors but was purely a visualization in line with the narrative of the novel. Omar Daniel, Nadya Arina, and Anggika Bolsterli, actors from the capital city, who were far from the *pesantren* culture, were chosen as the central cast.

Interestingly, during the production of *Hati Subita*, there was no controversy similar to the one faced by the cast of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta 1*, which was criticized for allegedly not representing Islamic da'wah. Moreover, the *pesantren* community seemed fine with intimate scenes between actors that involved physical contact despite not being *mahram* (related by marriage or family ties) -something that would be considered against Islamic law. At this point, the audience appeared to be able to distinguish between the realm of religion and the realm of popular culture without negating either. The critical notes from the audience were more focused on the substance of scenes, such as Alina holding the Quran in one hand and her husband's head with the other, which was deemed not in accordance with *fiqh*.

On the other hand, the *pesantren* leaders joyfully took selfies and openly acknowledged Omar Daniel's handsomeness. Regarding the choice of *pesantren* setting, some lamented that it looked too urban and modern, but others understood it as a cinematic choice.

Until the end of its screening, *Hati Subita* had garnered not less than 500,000 viewers, which paled in comparison to *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. Nevertheless, its presence brought a different nuance that cannot be ignored in the cinematic battle of post-Islamism in Indonesia's screen culture.

Looking back further into its history, the success of *Hati Subita* did not happen overnight. The popularity of *Hati Subita* is inseparable from Khilma Anis's skill in crafting the story. Her background, being part of a renowned traditional *pesantren* family in Jember and Kudus, also allowed her works to accurately and authentically capture the essence of *pesantren* life.

Khilma Anis's journey as a writer has been honed for over a decade since she joined the Matapena Community in Yogyakarta. The Matapena Community aims to foster a culture of literacy among youth by exploring the values and traditions originating from *pesantren* to enrich Indonesia's literary treasures (Ismah 2019). The establishment of this community was in response to the surging popularity of Islamic stories in Indonesia at 1980s (Hefner and Horvatic 1997). Before Matapena's inception, there was the Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP), which produced Islamic youth novels (*novel remaja Islami*) with a strong network with PKS (Social Justice Party) who promotes individual development of faith and individualistic pattern of Islamization. On the other hand, Matapena brought characters from popular *pesantren* novels (*novel pop pesantren*), which is reflected in Matapena's motto: *Matapena Hati Pesantren*.

Hati Subita is Khilma Anis's third novel, following *Jadilah Purnamaku Ning* (2008), published by the Matapena Community, and *Wigati* (2017), which she independently published through Mazaya Media. Through her first two novels, both of which were rooted in the *pesantren* background, Khilma Anis had already built a fan base among traditional Islamic circles. Thus, the true success of the film *Hati Subita* is the harvest of years of efforts in cultivating the seeds of popular literature within the *pesantren* environment.

Conclusion

Film Islami serves as a medium of expression to showcase various elements of Islamic culture, values, beliefs, and practices in public sphere. In the context of Indonesia, these films often resonate with the concerns, aspirations, and frustrations of middle-class Muslims in the country. Among these films, *Hati Subita* stands out due to its incorporation of Javanese philosophy and sufism, offering a unique portrayal of religiosity on the Indonesian silver screen.

Unlike mainstream Islamic films, *Hati Subita* presents a fresh perspective on Islam in Indonesian screen culture. It delves into the lesser-explored aspects of traditional Islam and skillfully weaves in spirituality derived from Javanese philosophy and sufism, avoiding a didactic approach to proselytization. The film also portrays modernity through its open-mindedness and emphasis on gender equality.

Furthermore, *Hati Subita* serves as a platform for traditionalist Muslim groups to assert their identity amidst prevailing popular culture trends. By doing so, it challenges and contests the conventional narratives of Islamic representation in film, paving the way for a more diverse and nuanced understanding of Islam within the Indonesian society through screen culture.

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