DAKWAH NOVEL AND COMMODIFICATION OF ISLAM IN INDONESIA: THE CASE OF VERSES OF LOVE

Syamsul Rijal

Abstract


Introduction

The best-selling novel Ayat-ayat Cinta (Verses of Love) has become a phenomenon in contemporary Indonesian literature. The author, Habiburrahman El-Shirazy has shown that Islamic novels can be both popular and marketable. Amrih Widodo reported that by February 2008, the Verses of Love had been reprinted 30 times since its launch in December 2004. It sold more than 400,000 legal copies excluding an
unknown number of pirated ones (Widodo, 2008). The novel had also been translated into Malay and received a significant readership in Malaysia and Singapore. Following on from this popularity, the novel had been adapted into a feature film and had attracted around three million people to the box office. Of particular interest is the fact that for the first time in Indonesian history, an Islamic novel has gained such popularity, surpassing the sales of other ‘secular’ novels. Other Muslim authors such as Hamka, who wrote the Islamic novels *Di Bawah Lindungan Ka’bah* (under the Protection of Ka’bah) and *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van der Wijk* (the Sinking of the Van der Wijk), along with A.A Navis who wrote *Robohnya Surau Kami* (the Collapse of our Small Mosque) have achieved some degree of success. However, these novels did not reach the levels of popularity gained by *Verses of Love*.

Although El-Shirazy’s novel is very popular, it has not received significant appreciation from Indonesian literary experts and artists. It is largely writers associated with FLP (*Forum Lingkar Pena*, Pen Circle Forum), an organization of young Muslim authors to which El-Shirazy belongs to, who have praised this novel. In a recent interview, the Indonesian liberal novelist Ayu Utami commented that *Verses of Love* could be categorized as a pop version of *dakwah* or Islamic propagation. She went on to compare the novel’s style with Hollywood’s stories of the 1950s which emphasized happy endings. She criticizes the novel as trying to impose one ‘truth’ while overlooking other ‘truths’ (2008). It implies that the novel is deemed exclusive or sectarian as it inserts moral standards as outlined by a particular stream of Islam rather than universal morality which is commonly shared by other religions.

Despite the lack of appreciation from literary experts, a large number of readers have read and praised *Verses of Love*. The reason for its popularity is not dependent on whether the novel has “high culture” values, but rather on the enjoyment readers gain from the novel. This paper argues that the popularity of El-Shirazy’s novel is closely linked to the recent rise in Islamic piety among Indonesian Muslims. Indeed, as this paper will discuss, the novel has served as Islamic manual for
Muslims dealing with their lives in the midst of the state’s failure to bring about social and political improvements.

The first section of this paper discusses the rise of Islamic piety in contemporary Indonesia and its effects on consumption. The second section discusses the features of the novel and examines the “Islamic” elements as represented therein. The last section of this novel is assigned to analysing the popularity of the novel in light of popular culture theories.

Islamic Piety and Consumption in Indonesia

The popularity of *Verses of Love* and similar Islamic novels should be seen in the broader context of the rise of Islamic piety in Indonesia. I argue that this is the result of a long standing Islamisation processes which began during the New Order era and has since enjoyed more freedoms during the Reform era. This rise in Islamic piety is partly manifest in the expanding commodification of Islamic goods.

The Islamisation process in Indonesia began in the 1970s and 1980s. While Suharto attempted to suppress Islam as a political force, the popularity of Islam as “a source of social, ethical and spiritual advice began to rise” (Schwarz, 1999: 173). The influence of Iranian revolution in 1979 and the flow of ideas from the Middle East to Indonesia spurred the Islamic resurgence in Indonesia. Many works of Iranian thinkers such as Ali Syariati, Murthada Muthahhari, and Khomeini were translated into Indonesian. Apart from this influence, the New Order government’s focus on development and modernization caused anxiety and confusion among Muslims, particularly the young who were not ready for such rapid change. In this respect, young Muslims found Islam as “a stable bedrock of belief in a rapidly changing, modernizing and often confusing world” (Schwarz, 1999: 173). This process of Islamisation could be seen in the proliferation of Islamic study groups (*usrah*) in several ‘secular’ universities as well as the rising popularity of veil among female Muslim students in the 1970s and 1980s (Damanik, 2003: 18).
The accommodation of Islam by the government in the late 1980s enabled Muslims to express their identity. The government for example relaxed restrictions on the use of the veil at public schools, introduced more Islamic elements into the national school curriculum, and gave more authority to Islamic courts (Vatikotis, 1998: 175). President Suharto and his family began to adopt a Muslim lifestyle, including a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1991. It was in this era, Islam began to engage with the modern development projects of the government. Many Muslim politicians became members of the state's political party (Golkar, Golongan Karya) and worked in bureaucracy. The expression of Islam was no longer considered as “fundamentalist” or backward. There was, in particular, a growing Islamic consciousness among Indonesian’s middle class. The growing Islamic media in the form of dakwah (Islamic propagation) cassettes, Islamic books, and magazines enabled people to access more information and insight about Islam. It was at this time commodification of Islam began.

The demise of President Suharto in May 1998 then provided a real public sphere for groups in Indonesia, including Muslim groups to express their views. In a newly established democratic environment, political Islam gained more opportunities to express and articulate its ideas in the public sphere. Jamhari and Jahroni (2004: 10) described this phenomenon as “the delayed psychological responses” to the authoritarian New Order regime.

There are four key developments which illustrate the rise of political Islam in the post-New Order era. Firstly, the establishment of numerous Islamic political parties that adopted Islam as their foundational basis, replacing the Pancasila. Secondly, the growing demands from certain regions of Indonesia for the formal implementation of shari’a. Thirdly, the emergence of Muslim groups considered by many as radical Islamists, such as the Lasykar Jihad (Jihad Troops), the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, or Front of Islamic Defenders), the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (Indonesian Party of Liberation), and the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (the Council of the
Jihad Fighter Groups of Indonesia). Lastly, the proliferation of the Islamist media such as Sabili, Salafi, Saksi, Islamia, al-Wa’ie, Tarbawi, and so forth (Azra, 2004: 133-134).

According to Bahtiar Effendy, the emergence of Islamic radical groups was a response to the socio-religious and political circumstances which evolved during the period of transition, which in their view did not seem in accord with Islamic values or Muslim interests. The inability of the state to effectively administer and address pressing problems that concerned many Muslims (for example, socio-religious conflicts, law enforcement on gambling and prostitution, and regulation of alcoholic beverages) has contributed to the emergence of these Islamist groups. Similarly, the foreign policy of the United States towards the Islamic world, which is often perceived as uneven-handed, discriminatory, and unjust, has also played a key role in this emergence (Effendy, 2003: 217-218).

It is apparent that in Indonesia’s newly found democracy, Islamist groups are gaining momentum. As defined by many scholars, Islamism is a concept which views Islam as both a belief and political ideology. It was assumed that there was a substantial support for political Islam or Islamism in Indonesian Muslim society. If a willingness to implement shari’a is an indication of Islamism, then support for Islamism seems to be strong. In November 2002, the Research Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta State Islamic University conducted a survey on Indonesian Muslim attitudes toward Islamism. The survey found that many Indonesian Muslims appear to be Islamist on the broadest term (they believe that laws should somehow be basically in accord with Islam). Of those surveyed, more than two-thirds (67 percent) of respondents express support for an Islamic state. An even larger percentage (71 percent) felt that the government should require Indonesian Muslims to follow shari’a. However, when given the more specific choices of Islamic law such as amputating the hands of thieves and restricting the public role of women, support for Islamism drops sharply from 71% to 46%. A further
finding of the survey was that at a community level, Islamism in Indonesia is a more rural rather than urban phenomenon (Mujani and Liddle, 2004: 113-116, 118-120).

The rising support for Islamism reflects the rise of piety among Indonesian Muslims. The failure of the government in handling economic and political instability and the “invasion” of cultural influences from the West have turned many Muslims to look at Islam as a solution to and safeguard against these problems. It is in this context one is able to gain an understanding of why Islam has been increasingly commodified. By consuming Islamic prints such as books, magazines, and novels, Muslims can both improve their understanding of Islam and express their religiosity.

**Verses of Love: An Islamic & Romantic Novel**

*Verses of Love* can be seen as Islamic novel. The term ‘Islamic novel’ here refers to literature which upholds Islam as guiding principle and an ideology in various aspects of life. Instead of bringing Islam into critical discourse, Islam is seen as a perfect and complete belief system and it serves as a guideline for the lives of Muslims. So in this regard, the Islamic novel does not include works which have Islam as the backdrop to the story such as is seen in the corpus of Marah Rusli or Kuntowijoyo. Islamic literature in the form of novel or short stories is actually not new in Indonesia. In the late 1990s, there were Islamic fiction novels such as *Ketika Mas Gagah Pergi* (When the Handsome Guy Has Gone) written by Helvi Tiana Rosa. Islamic short stories were also published in Islamic magazines such as *An-Nida* (Rijal, 2005: 51). Most of the authors of Islamic novels are members of FLP. This forum was established in 1997 by Helvy Tiana Rosa with the aim of developing the talents of young Muslim authors (Pusat Bahasa Diknas, 2008).

El-Shirazy is a typical *santri* author. He studied Islam in various Islamic institutions from Indonesia and Egypt. He graduated from Al-Anwar Islamic Boarding School in Demak, the Special Program of Senior Islamic High School (Madrasah Aliyah Program Khusus, MAPK)
in Solo, and Al-Azhar University in Egypt (Kertanegara, 2008). Like other FLP writers, he incorporates Islam as a source of values and inspiration in his novel. He explains that the verses in the Holy Qur’an inspired him to write stories with poetry. It was when reading the verses of al-Zukhruf and Yusuf in the Qur’an, which addresses the concept of universal love, that he was inspired to write a love story based on Islamic teaching (El-Shirazy, 2006). According to El-Shirazy, Verses of Love brings the message to Muslims to conduct good deeds (berakhlaqul karimah) as Islam is a blessing for universe (rahmatan lil-alamin). The novel also calls readers to follow Islamic monotheism (tauhid). It is apparent that the author intended to make his novel a medium of dakwah (the call to Islam).

Verses of Love is a story about a poor but intelligent Indonesian student, Fahri, who is studying at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. Fahri is described as an ideal Muslim student who is very discipline and observant of his religion. He prays, joins Qur’anic study groups and aligns his behaviour to fall under Islamic teachings. The romantic plot begins when four women fall in love with Fahri at the same time. The women are Nurul, his Indonesian friend at Al-Azhar University and daughter of kiyai (religious leader); Maria, a Coptic Christian who is Fahri’s neighbour; Noura, a another one of Fahri’s neighbours who has been abused by her family; and Aisha, a rich German Muslim. The author incorporates conflicts and romance among the characters to heighten the emotions of the reader. For instance, when Nora gets pregnant after being raped by Bahadur, she accuses Fahri of having raped her that makes Fahri to be put in jail. Noura does this, however, as her love is not reciprocated by Fahri. The story ends with the humble Fahri marrying the rich but religious woman, Aisha. Fahri also takes Maria as a second wife to help her during her illness. Maria eventually dies from this illness but before dying, she converts to Islam, guided by Fahri.

Although the novel deals with romance, it contains various messages of Islam related to dakwah and fiqh (Islamic legal law) as
practiced by Fahri. The novel, for example, illustrates the views of Islam toward women, the interaction between men and women, and the interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim people. El-Shirazy tries to show Islam as universal religion by referring to textual and classical reference. For instance, when explaining the position of women in Islam to the US journalist Alicia, Fahri refers to a verse of the Qur'an (Annisa: 34) dealing with how a husband should treat a rebellious wife:

"Husband should take good care of their wives, with [the bounties] God has given to some more than others and with what they spend out of their own money. Righteous wives are devout and guard what God would have them guard in their husbands' absence. If you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them of the teaching of God, then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them: God is most high and great" (Abdul Haleem, 2005: 54).

This verse is often misunderstood by non-Muslims to mean that Islam endorses violence against women. Fahri, however, clarifies what actually Islam means by referring to Islamic legal law (fiqh), indicating that Islam actually respects women. At his point, the author is both conveying message to Muslim readers of how Islam treats women as well as countering common perception in the West that Islam promotes violence against women.

Another example of how Islam treats non-Muslims peacefully is illustrated when Fahri engages in debates with Egyptian passengers in a bus. Some American tourists, in which among of them is an old lady, cannot get any seat that make them stand. Seeing this, a veiled woman leaves her seat and pleases the old lady to sit on it. Other male passengers are angry as the woman shows a kindness to American tourists. For them, American tourists should not receive a friendly treatment since the US troops have invaved and destroyed the Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Irak. Fahri then stands from his seat and defends the woman who has helped the old lady. Using the classical sources such as hadith and Islamic history, Fahri argues that the foreign tourists, although they are non-Muslims, should be
welcomed and respected because they are regarded as visitors and the Prophet suggests Muslims to respect them.

Although the author has tried to present the universality of Islam to readers, he, in some places, tends to use a conservative approach to Islam. This is illustrated in the conversion process of Maria to Islam. He seems to argue that salvation is only found through Islam. When Maria is dying, she tries to enter the gates to heaven (bab al-rayyan, bab al-salat, bab al-zakat, bab al-rahmah), but is rejected as she has no key. The key to heaven, as stated in the story, is taking ablution and declaring shahadah (the confession that Allah is one God and Muhammad is His Messenger). Maria then takes ablution, helped by Fahri and Aisha, and recites shahadah, indicating her conversion to Islam (El-Shirazy, 2008: 308-309). It implies that maria finally finds a ‘truth’ before passing away, and the truth in this regard is Islam.

This kind of exclusive approach is not only used by conservative Muslims but also Islamist ones. Islamist groups often use books and magazines to emphasize the idea that salvation is only through Islam. Media Dakwah and Sabili for example are two Indonesian Islamist magazines which harshly challenge the doctrines of Judaism and Christianity in order to emphasize the finality and the perfection of Islam. This kind of dakwah is popular with many Indonesian Muslims as it justifies the truth of their faith.

**Popular Culture Analysis**

The popularity of Verses of Love, along with the large consumption of other Islamic materials indicates that Islam has been transformed into commodity. While Islamic expression in the 1970s was associated with extremism and backwardness, today it is regarded as modern. Islamic cultural products have now engaged in modernity and capitalist industries. To borrow Jones’ words, “this shift could be read as an index of two apparently contradictory or mutually exclusive
phenomenon, a rise in Islamic piety and a rise in consumerism” (Jones, 2005: 211).

**Verses of Love** emerged in an environment where Islam had become a mainstream cultural discourse. As already discussed above, there has been a rise of Islamic piety in Indonesia since the late of New Order era. Muslims now have the freedom to express Islamic beliefs in various forms. Islam not only serves as legitimacy and guidance for Muslims but also as commodities in markets and media. Private television and radio stations have large numbers programs and drama serials with *dakwah* themes. Product advertisements using Islamic language and themes are also common. A popular television preacher Ustadh Jefry Al-Bukhari (Uje), for example, always wears a particular brand of Islamic clothes (*baju koko*) when delivering his sermon to advertise them indirectly to Muslim viewers. Therefore, given this situation, the emergence of Islamic novels such as **Verses of Love** serves to strengthen Islam as a mainstream cultural discourse.

The rise of Islamic consciousness, and with its Islamic consumption, are also strengthened by the facts that the view that government since 1998 have failed to provide meaningful outcome for the Indonesian people. The failure of reform (*reformasi*) and worsening economic conditions brought about by inflation, the decline in government subsidies, and weakening of institutions, along with the high rates of crime and unemployment have led many Indonesian Muslims to see Islam as alternative solution to these problems. In fact, several Islamic movements such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) intensively promote shari’ah as a solution to overcoming the perceived multi-dimensional crisis in Indonesia. Indeed, several provinces have demanded and already implemented shari’ah through local regulations (*Perda*).

**Verses of love** not only provides entertainment to readers but also Islamic guidance. The novel is seen to provide a framework for young Muslims of how to foster a loving relationship between man and woman in accord with Islam. Therefore, the novel’s consumption is not
only an action of consumerism but also of religious expression. In this
regard, the novel has fallen to what Marx referred to as “commodity
fetishism” (Storey, 2000: 476). According to Jones (2005: 213), this
concept can be applied to commodities that are associated with
religious piety because "Marx perceived the mystification of consumers
to be a nearly spiritual effect of capitalism". Moreover, Widodo, as cited
by Jones, also argues that this concept is perhaps the best-suited
analytical lens through which to interpret the rise in Islamic consumer
goods in Indonesia, as the "fetish concept frames objects having both
economic and religious values" (Jones, 2005: 218). Using this concept,
the popularity of the novel indicates as a result of both consumerism
and Islamic piety.

The religious motivation behind the Islamic novel consumption is
widespread. Many Muslim organizations such as Islamic study groups
actively encourage young Muslims to read such novel. Young active
Muslims are major consumers of this novel as it accommodates their
Islamic understanding and ideals. Owing to the inter-mingling of the
love story and the Islamic messages, as well as the use of popular
language, the novel has successfully attracted a substantial readership.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the reason why Verses of Love is so
popular in Indonesia. It has argued that this popularity cannot be
isolated from the social and politics development which led to the rise of
Islamic piety in post-New Order Indonesia. This rise of Islamic piety led
to the commodification of Islam and saw the emergence of Islamic
novels such as Verses of Love. The paper finally draws three
conclusions. Firstly, Islamic piety in contemporary Indonesia is a result
of Islamisation process which gained momentum after the fall of
Suharto regime. The social, economic and political uncertainty in
Indonesia has led Muslims to look at Islam as an alternative solution
and source of guidance. Secondly, Verses of Love is an Islamic novel
which combines romance and Islamic message (dakwah). The truth and perfection of Islam is a message indirectly expressed in this novel. Lastly, in the light of fetish concept, the huge consumption of Islamic novel indicates a rise in consumerism on the one hand and a rise in Islamic piety on the other hand. This stems from the fact that the novel’s consumption has a largely religious motive in that Muslims see the novel as a manual in dealing with their every day lives. By consuming the novel, they are expressing their Islamic piety.
References


