The Strategies of Islamic Popular Novels in the Arena of Cultural Struggle in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract—This study investigated the strategy of Islamic popular novels written by Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP) community within the arena of cultural struggle. Using the sociology of literature perspective, it found that the format of Islamic popular novels put Muslim in a portrayed condition due to the decline of Islamic empire, underdevelopment of general knowledge, ignorance and Muslim morality as a conflict to the real world. The placement of Islamic ideology in the form of realism novel presented authentic evidence of Islamic ideas as the only truthful way. The use of the novel as works of art allowed FLP to play significant ideological and economical roles in the arena of class and ideological struggle. Ideologically, popular novels were used as a tool of hegemony to construct collective will of determined Muslim subject. Islamic popular novels, economically had an added value that created jobs for members and their network provided consumers for the production of the novels. The combination of religious value and the form of popular novels became effective and powerful over another hegemony tools in imposing the super structural values in establishing infrastructural power.

Keywords—Forum Lingkar Pena, Cultural Struggle, Islamic Popular Novel

I. INTRODUCTION

The reappearance of Islamic popular novels has been widely received by Muslim society since 2005, and when adapted into movies, they spread up quickly and were captured as phenomenon. However, their wide celebration has invited severe criticism, which was even worse than that of the polemic in 1939s. At that time, the novel was rigorously criticized as a part of western modern traditions to convey Islamic teaching.

The mixture of Islamic value and western modernity in the field of literature still becomes an ongoing debate until today. Some viewed that Islamic popular novel, as a part of the popular culture product, signify the involvement of Muslims in capitalist industry by labelling their product with religious symbols. Piety that appears in the product is considered as the appeal of commodity goods that make Muslims as the target consumers. It is viewed as the emergence of religious products as lifestyles, not as a sign of the rise of Islamic spirituality. The emergence of these products makes it easier for Muslims to pursue piety very instantly [1], [2], and [3]. Rinaldo [4] argued that the piety shown in public space on the one hand mobilized a special identity, on the other hand it triggered a new form of distinction between the pious and the ungodly. It became a way in order that people forget the mistakes of those who committed a crime and adopted the identity of piety [2], or the piety was used as a means of passing that means hypocrisy [5].

Those who rejected Islamic novels expressed their fear of polluting the purity of Islamic teaching if conveyed through the form of popular culture [3]. For others, the use of the novel was an incredibly effective means to spread the Islamic teaching among Muslims. Islamic popular novels played a significant role to counter and balance the massive production of liberal popular culture in the arena of ideological struggle. By using Islamic popular novels, the Muslim authors intended to educate young Muslim about Islam [6].

II. METHOD

This study argued that the use of Islamic popular novels did not limit to economy and identity purposes, yet it expanded to the field of cultural struggle. This was a continuing struggle of the formation of subjects within Islamic society in the contemporary Indonesia which had been commenced since 1939. The process of changing the meaning was explained by using Gramsci’s modern prince. This article intended to show the prose of negotiating the new conception of jihad into the consciousness of the subjects. Therefore, this article firstly showed the continuing struggle within the area of literature in the contemporary Indonesia. Second, it tried to uncover the process of shifting meaning by using popular literature; and followed by the conclusion.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Struggle of Islamic Popular Novel in Indonesia

FLP, a transnational community organizes writers in almost all regions of Indonesia. Its network crosses the boundaries of cultural, social and ethnical differences, and is united under the spirit of Islam. They gather and practice writing guided by the spirit of jihad armed with a pen to fight against secular literatures. They interpret their activities as jihad with pens and FLP writers are pen-wielding mujahid [7]. This mujahid was
formed by a way of recruitment, writer training and religious study.

The spirit of FLP jihad spreads through a network system connecting writers as producers, publishers, distributors and readers as consumers. With this system, the supply of popular works is always ready, meanwhile consumers and markets are organized [8]. This organized system results in Islamic popular novels rapid progress and a wider acceptance marked by the novel production as the best-seller which keeps strengthening the position of Islamic popular writers and novels in Indonesian society. The reception of the Islamic popular novels also can be seen from award bestowed to the writers of Islamic popular novels, such as The Pena Award from the FLP as a commendable novel given every year to the FLP authors.

This phenomenon is considered as series of Islamization that has been going on for a long time in Indonesia. The rise of Islamic popular culture is seen as the reawakening of the glory and the victory of Islam and season of the Islamic spring in that Islam has conquered the world of secular capital in the arena of popular novel [8].

The immense support and widely reception to this Islamic popular culture, on the other hand, reawakens a number of polemics that Islamic popular novels contribute to the emergence of bad morality. Heryanto asserted that it has a negative moral impact on Islam itself [2]. This influence can be seen through the use of religious symbols such as the hijab, as a turn and a symbol of piety after one has committed bad morality which means hypocrisy and does not present their true selves [5].

This criticism of the popular Islamic novel as morally flawed is parallel to the polemic of Islamic romance of Banjir Roman that occurred in the 1930s. Even though the polemic nowadays is sharper, more structured and more widespread, it tends to relate between Islamic popular novel and morality. This reveals that moral issue as the main polemic was a part of weapon to fight again the rise of Islamic popular novels and a part of the struggle between modern and Islam in the arena of culture.

In the past, modern Islamic literature in Indonesia tended to be problematic. The tension between modern literature and Islamic literature has been noticed since the early 20th century. In the late 1930s there was a polemic reflecting the deep anxiety of Muslim writers on the lack of acceptance of Islamic-based literature among western-educated Muslims [9], [10]. This debate was recorded in a polemic published in magazines, such as the Islamic Pandji. This polemic was known as Banjir Roman.

The term Banjir Roman at first was directed at all romance novels published in Medan. This term also implied a concern about the massive novel production and consumption. Yet, this term then referred to Islamic roman when a cleric participated in producing Islamic romance that were widely welcomed by the Muslims.

Natsir marked the beginning of the Banjir Roman polemic [10]. He did not reject the emergence of the romance novels but was critical to that they did not have benefits to his readers, especially the younger generation. Hamka, a Muhammadiyah cleric and figure, was in the spotlight in this polemic because he wrote a number of Islamic romances. He in essence, criticized the bad influence of cheap romance novel written by Chinese ethnic and the influence of modern literature from Europe as expressed in in his poetic Angkatan Baru [11]. As an Islamic modernist reformist who gained a direct influence from the echo of the rise of Islam in Egypt, he got inspired and created another literary model by bringing together Islamic values with modernity. By combining Western and Islamic values, he tried to pose Islamic literature as the only representative of reasonable national literature for the Muslim majority in Indonesia [11].

However, the presence of Islamic roman was challenged by the traditional Muslim group and western-educated nationalist Muslim group. They considered romance novels to pollute Islamic values and morality which might damage Muslim generation. Romance novels did not give any benefits [12]. The religious perception of literature triggered the Tarbiyah Islamiyah Union (TIU) to gather scholars and religious teachers in a conference to express protests and denials on the Islamic romans. The conference called on participants to read a monograph mockery, condemned Hamka and his friends, burned Islamic artworks and complained of Islamic novels to colonial rule [13]. In addition to traditional clerical groups, western-educated Muslim groups rejected the presence of novels that contained the Islamic spirit. Western-educated natives rated Hamka's works as low literature on Pujangga magazine because they did not meet the high literary requirement that was free from religious content High literary requirements applied in the era of Pujangga Baru pioneered by western intellectuals in 1933.

Pujangga Baru brought and represented a new culture of Indonesia's national culture [14]. Conceptually, national culture was a harmonious blend of past values that survived with positive influences that were the effects of modernization. However, in practice, the Islamic value in the romanticism did not make Hamka's works acceptable in general, and even both groups rejected them. The Islamic spirit and da'wa novels were regarded as religious propaganda, though later reluctantly accepted as a national literature [14]. The rejection of these two groups left Hamka insults such as "a lewd cleric" [15] and "Kyai I Love You" [10].

Although Islamic rulers had been denied harshly, Hamka strived to bring up the sources of Islamic ideas and the establishment of Islamic culture in Indonesia by working with the Middle East. In 1950, he co-operated with Egyptian writers, such as Husain Haikal, to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries. In 1958, Hamka visited Pakistan to build a cultural relationship. In 1959, he published Panji Masyarakat magazine which consistently voiced the development of Islamic culture in Egypt and Pakistan [13]. This magazine also presented short stories and stories in the form of a popular Islamic culture. However, discussing literature and religion were always considered to be at risk because both were often subject to conflict [16].
In the midst of literary polemics, the Islamic popular culture, had always won the hearts of the people and was widely accepted in society. For example, the rise of Muslims' awareness on Islamic Party, and the wearing of hijab by Muslim women. Its closeness to the heart of the Muslim community in Indonesia showed that the popular novel was a tool that was able to approach, inflame people's feelings so that it was the most important tool in making shifts in a hegemonic way. As Gramsci showed the popular novel was the modern prince that played significant role in participating in the social and political changes [17].

B. The Strategy of Islamic Popular Novels in the Arena

By focusing on the Islamic popular novels written by FLP, I intended to unveil the powerful way these novels formed people's collective will. As mentioned earlier, Gramsci uncovered the involvement of modern prince using rhetoric and logic to approach people feeling in order that they may consensually accepted the new conception and followed moral and intellectual leadership. The modern prince is not the character but a media that addresses the subaltern. It is a media that organizes and popularizes the moral and intellectual reformation. The combination of rhetoric and logic were intended to persuade subaltern to have the collective will [18].

Based on this concept, the popular novels which translated philosophical idea into a common sense of people functioned as the modern prince to the people. The way of modern prince shifted the commonsense conception into the good sense could be seen in three Islamic popular novels: Ketika Mas Gagah Pergi dan Kembali (KMPdK) [19], The Road to Empire (TRtE) [20], and Bulan Matti di Javasche Orange (BMDJO) [21]. The three novels narrated the same steps in introducing a new conception of jihad. They covered the quality of intellectual organic, the condition of subaltern community, the close relation of the intellectual to subaltern (negotiation) and the consciousness of the subaltern.

1) Intellectual Organic

The intellectual organic in the novel consisted of the character who brought the Islamic teaching especially the idea of jihad. The success of a cultural transformation depended upon the availability of subaltern groups and intellectual expertise approaching them. The novels studied, showed that the characteristics of Islamic intellectual were physically attractive, mastering religious knowledge, good morality, and religiously devoted. In BMDJO, the intellectual Hamzah was depicted to have a good tall white body, pointed nose and European face different from the native people (44). The physical appearance of intellectual character, Gita, in KMPdK was described a hijab beautiful girl. Through their physical appearance, the intellectual can build an intensive contact to subaltern [19].

Furthermore, the moral value of the intellectual also contributed to the contact between the intellectual and subaltern. The strong personality charmed the subaltern that influenced the growing of their faith to the morality of the intellectual. Almost all intellectuals in the novels had a good personality that touched the deep feeling of the subaltern. They were illustrated as humble, kind and well-mannered people [21] [19]. They also mastered a specific knowledge as another key to approach subaltern community. Their expertise on specific knowledge legitimated their intellectuality. In addition, their religious devotion also reassured the capacity of intellectual which allowed the subaltern to trust them.

2) Subaltern Group

Subaltern was the entrance to the negotiations, without which the process of hegemony becomes impossible. Subaltern was an individual or mass that was easily triggered to mobilize a movement. They experienced as subjects or groups that were rejected and redefined.

The opening of an Islamic popular novel usually begun by a subalternisation of one protagonist figure illustrated as a victim. From the three novels, all the subaltern figures (Johana, Gita, Takudar) experienced a fall which resulted in their isolation and loneliness. This fall was caused by the influence of common-sense antagonists' characters.

In the BMdJO novel, Johana, a Dutch princess who owned a tea garden in Banyumas and was a colonial government official as well as a Christian zending, signified her family as a global capital. Being kidnapped due to her abundant wealth, and divorced due to her Christianity and Dutch identity triggered Johana to become the subaltern of the novel.

Gita in KMPdK enjoyed her freedom to access public spaces such as hanging out in cafes, going to the mall, watching in theaters. When her brother Mas Gagah asked her to wear a hijab, she refused the hijab because she thought it restricted, imprisoned and held back a woman's movements. It was a symbol of Islam which meant limiting her freedom. For her, a religion was a personal business and should not be shown in a public place. She was subaltern and her identity was redefined, and was expelled from her group.

Gita became a subaltern when her brother Mas Gagah turned into a ikhwan and had an Islamic perspectives he learned in Madura. Gita who was accustomed to having modern life lost her brother and her parents' support. She also lost her friend, Tika, who wore the hijab, and his brother’s friends [19]. The reasons why she protested and laughed at Mas Gagah did not get support from anyone. She was rejected and precisely her identity was redefined. Even, Mas Gagah did not introduce his friends to her any more [19].

The subalternisation of novel characters played the soul of subaltern characters and gave a big influence on their feelings. It was designed to influence and to shape the conception of the subject. It is an entrance for the intellectual organic to build affection to subaltern to later conducting a smooth negotiation.

3) Negotiation

The relationship between intellectuals and subalterns in the ideological negotiation process was the door to reaching agreement or consensus. Subaltern was a subject that approved the ideas put forward by organic intellectuals. The common-sense transformation of the subaltern society became good sense through a process of negotiation that took place continuously.

Gramsci showed an intellectual way to inject new
ideologies so that subalterns were willing to follow his ideas [20]. Their criticism of common sense began by attracting and touching the subaltern hearts. This criticism was useful to arise their awareness of their reality. According to Howson and Smith, this criticism also arouses awareness of the subaltern knowledge and experience historically and economically [22]. This criticism used subaltern’s past to bring them into their imagined future, but always used current reality as a problem.

Before criticizing common sense, intellectuals had to build strong emotional bound with subalterns. In the BMdJO novel, Hamzah and Johana were described as having been used to meeting since childhood and living on Orange plantations. She was the daughter of the Dutch plantation owner, and he was the village child who played on the plantation. Although they often met, she never accepted his friendship because of class and race differences. When he almost sacrificed his life to help her from kidnapping, she looked at him well and identified his advantages from other natives. His sacrifice touched and opened her heart to accept him as her brother [21].

Common sense criticism is built in dialogue after the relationship between intellectual and subaltern was awakened. In BMdJO, Hamzah built a dialogue with Johana after she opened her heart to him by helping taking out her bullets, rubbing her head and confessing her as a brother. Their dialogue criticized what Johana experienced in everyday life to be considered things that were based on common sense. Some dialogue juxtaposed the morality of the two religions, Islam and Christianity through the representation of Johana’s father. She rejected some facts, but he was able to point out Christian morality which broke her arguments. This confirmed her experience so that she was able to accept the truth. As a result, Johana was confused and cried. This section caused Johana to experience a turning point marked by the acceptance of the new conception and to release some of her old common senses. Since the dialogue that criticized his consciousness, she continued to doubt her common senses and questioned the truths that he embraced.

KMGiPdK also displayed the process of criticism of the old subaltern conception in the form of dialogue. The process of criticism of common-sense took place in two stages. The first stage was seen in the dialogue between Gita and Mas Gagah, and the second stage of Gita’s presence in Yudistira’s preaching. He criticized her freedom and advised her to use the hijab and to practice Islamic morality [19]. However, she still refused to use the hijab because of her activities and expectation to look for a future prospective husband. She thought the hijab would hide her existence in the public so that she would not get a prospective husband.

The criticism of the common sense in TRiE showed a sense of fervor awakened from the cultural splendor and power of Genghis Khan as well as the greatness of Mongolia that had been sedated in Takudar consciousness. There are some conceptions that have been strongly built in Takudar before staying in the madrasah. Takudar was very proud of his great ancestor, homeland and family and his blood bound to his clan. Meanwhile, Islamic ideology considered the brotherhood was not based on blood and land but based on the bond of Islamic faith.

Takudar considered that life was practiced based on the tradition of ancestors which factually had been proved successful. The madrasah people assumed that life should run on the basis of the Quran and the traditions of the prophets, not on the basis of ancestral traditions, although the tradition of ancestors has proven to be successful. The encounters of these two concessions were ideological bouts in the TRiE arena. Criticism of common sense could be found in some dialogues available in TRiE [20].

This conception itself did not change without the consent of Takudar himself referring to the memory of Genghis Khan's brotherhood with his brother Jamuka. Takudar did not find the argument to disobey the shaykhs, though he knew he opposed the ideas of shaykhs. Inside the nobility there was a soul that was formed historically through a relationship with its environment that fought between the reality it encountered with itself that was awakened from past traditions.

Self-reflection was a dialogue with the self after the subaltern figure realized the truth of the argument based on the facts presented by the intellectual. In this phase the character experienced an inner struggle over the truth of the old conception and a new knowledge of the new conception. Subaltern awareness of the shortcomings of old conceptions and the advantages of new conceptions opened the subaltern's eyes and mind. Subaltern inner struggle was seen in the reflection and dialogue within them. This showed that negotiations also took place in the deepest souls of humans. The soul consciously reflected the experiences of characters in time and space. However, the decision of the soul to choose was influenced by the tendency and experience of the soul itself. According to Gramsci, the decision to choose is influenced by imagination related to the past or the future. In a self-reflection, subaltern figures confirmed past experiences with present reality and future expectations [17]. Contemplation and consideration of figures that caused them to decide to be willing to follow moral and intellectual leadership could be seen from the novels.

Johana’s contemplation after meeting Hamzah was described after the they met in the forest. The conversation with him made an impression in her memory, and she began to criticize herself by connecting the current reality and with her past experiences and knowledge. She began to question her father’s position as colonial and his religion which justified global colonialism. She sided with the Al-Ikhwah Islamic boarding school group as well as other Muslim children. Children were a symbol of Johana’s future and hope, and she did not obey his father anymore although he was a symbol of tradition and spirituality. This process led Johana to convert to Islam a few months later. The conversion of religion to Islam signified Johana’s willingness to recognize Islamic leadership morally and intellectually.

The consensus in KMPdK was explained in two phases, the process of Gita's willingness to accept Nadia's ideas, and to become a mujahid. The first could be seen in the section when Gita met Nadia in a seminar. She asked Nadia about the law of
wearing the hijab. Nadia explained with the hijab, a Muslim woman felt more independent, determined those who had the right to see her parts of body, and selected the future husband. She added, the hijab did not prevent Muslim women to work or do outdoor activities. Gita was very impressed with her opinion that differed from Mas Gagah’s thoughts.

4) Consensus

The consensus of figures from the three novels was influenced by past ties and their hopes about the future. The attainment of this consensus led to the transformation or conversion of Muslim religious leaders to become more pious and non-Muslims became Muslims. This consensus led to changes in the character class identity and religious identity. Almost all novels depicted subaltern characters aspiring to their desires and dreams.

After Johana sided with the pesantren and left his father and later became a Muslim, Johana was reunited with her beloved husband. Her transformation was marked by changing her name to Khadijah, her departure from the archipelago and ceasing to be colonial, from European clothing to Muslim clothing. On her way home, Johana, accidentally met Mahmud Syah on a ship in the port of Port Said. Both were headed for the Middle East to study religion and raise their children. This meant that the ideals of the future were a combination of the rational great power of European capital and Eastern spiritual. Meanwhile, Hamzah was martyred in the struggle to defend religion, the state and his younger brother. The martyrdom of Hamzah showed that he got heaven which meant happiness in another life. The portrait of the Johana couple and Mahmud continued the struggle in the world and Hamzah got heavenly happiness was the achievement of negotiations. Islam was considered to be unsuccessful without this combination of forces. From the achievement of this consensus it was found that the ideology agreed upon referred to an Islamic ideology aspiring to Islamize global capitalism.

Ideological negotiations in KMPdK novel gave birth to the consensus that Gita received a hijab because it did not prevent her from achieving her goals and love. She campaigned the hijab and preached adopting Mas Gagah's lifestyle supported by Nadia and Yudistira. Nadia and Yudistira symbolized the combination of Islamic spirituality and Western rationality. This meant that this story also illustrated the importance of the West in the author’s ideology. While the traditional Mas Gagah which rejected the West was turned off in the story. The death of Mas Gagah which had traditionally indicated that novel ideology did not side with traditional ideology rejected Western capital values. After Gita consensus on the ideology that combined West and Islam, Gita was reunited with Yudistira. Gita’s fear of the future due to wearing hijab and preaching was broken. Gita met Yudistira who had a good career. Gita’s union with Yudistira was an economic reformation in her life. Her economic reform was possible because it had transformed to meet the ideal ideological standards of the author.

In TRtE, Takudar agreed to follow the ways of the Prophet Muhammad and left the ways inherited by Genghis Khan. Takudar acted as commander to fight his brother. At the time of the war, the Takudar forces almost lost, because Muslim figures who supported him had lost power. The novel again showed its ambiguity by presenting the power of the Mongols who recognized Takudar and defected to support the Takudar army. This novel showed that Takudar’s victory did not come from the combination of the power of Muslims, warriors and governors who were eliminated, but the support of several defected Mongol commanders. This novel implied an established force, Mongolia was an important element in building the Islamic empire. Without this power, it is impossible for Takudar to take power.

IV. Conclusion

The physical, moral, intellectual, and faith power were forces that were able to form a new awareness by sub-energizing and building relationships between intellectuals and subalterns. This relationship built ensured that hegemony to take place.

The power of faith is a characteristic found in Islamic novels. It had a major influence on religious transformation of subaltern figures. Its presence caused other ideologies to be silenced. It then became a moral selection determining whether the novel contained good or bad values.

The subaltern negotiation process took place when they questioned new knowledge introduced by intellectuals through confirming past experiences or future expectations by means of imagination. There were also characters who did not contemplate in the negotiation process because his feelings were co-opted by intellectual charm. The strong intellectual charm did not leave a room for the subalterns to talk with his soul more deeply so that decisions were made based on a sentimental bond with an emotional past and future obsession. Past and future were only reached by imagination. It stimulated the mind to wander and leave the soul without any consideration.

The conception of the novel was identified through intellectual relations with subalterns. Dominant conception offered love, power and materiality. This power of love and materiality was accessed through cultural transformation. Intellectuals were generally students with Middle Eastern education, such as Hamzah and the shaykhs at Babussalam, while Nadia, Mas Gagah and Yudistira who had a secular education both in the West and Indonesia were actively involved in conducting Islamic studies in campuses and Islamic organizations. Subaltern figures had different conception from intellectuals. Gita, for example, received the hijab because it strengthens itself to access modern spaces.

The death of several intellectual figures, like Hamzah, Mas Gagah, Shaykh of Babussalam, invited to fight against jihad on the battlefield were described to end in the heaven. The heaven was not explained in the novels but it was believed to be with the arguments of the Qur’an presented. Some intellectual figures were brought to life such as Nadia and Yudistira. They were intellectuals who had the ability to combine and appreciate values and strengths both in the West and in the East. Acceptance of the West as a source of strength was a
characteristic of modern Islam which was strengthened in these selected novels.

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