Book Review
Young Indonesian Muslim Women (Not) Only Pursue Piety
Pious Girls: Young Muslim Women in Indonesia
by Annisa R. Beta
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This book is a comprehensive initial study of the ideal construction of young Muslim women in Indonesia. In the Introduction, Annisa positions the ideal of young Muslim women in Indonesia not as something singular, but rather in contestation. This contestation has implications for at least two perspectives, which are seen further in the following chapters of this book. First, there are many ideals and constructions of young Muslim women, all of which are related to the socio-political conditions of society from at least three aspects: religious practice, market logic, and political life. Second, apart from through the contestation between existing constructions, young Muslim women themselves show their agency by defining these constructions and ideals themselves.

This agency depends on historical context. Previous studies often forget that there is a changing sociocultural context, especially developments in technology and social media, which also has an impact on this contestation. That's why Annisa focuses on young Muslim women who are more affected by technological developments such as smartphones and social media which will later help shape their agency and

the contestation of the ideal of young Muslim women themselves. The logical consequence is the use of methods that also include the experiences of young Muslim women in creating, distributing, and consuming social media content. From Annisa's observations, young Muslim women tend to form a public space that is simultaneously intimate by sharing their experiences.

Annisa begins with a discussion by outlining how the ideals of young Muslim women are formed from contestation, especially from the lenses of secularism, the state, and religion. In a global context, young Muslim women are often the targets of interventions that position young Muslim women as victims because they do not conform to Western standards. This view ignores the agency of many young Muslim women who now exist in public spaces. However, their existence cannot be separated from the construction of *kodrat wanita* (innate nature of women) in Indonesia. This construction spreads throughout the grassroots through *pengajian* (religious study groups). In the context of the young Muslim women's communities, the meetings and lectures they hold use a similar construction: young Muslim women can do business and need to be active in social activities such as charity, but at the same time, they cannot forget their *kodrat* as women, lest they go crazy. Doing business is a good alternative, it is argued, because young Muslim women can remain productive without forgetting their *kodrat* as women.

This discourse regarding productivity refutes the 'accusation' of Muslim women as victims while at the same time affirming the state and religion's construction of active piety and still being within the corridor of *kodrat wanita*. This activity is not only in business, but also in sharing inspirational stories, especially one that is widely discussed by young Muslim women, namely the issue of wearing the hijab. The hijab itself illustrates the agency of young Muslim women to appear in public spaces. Their appearance, or visibility, refers not only to visual and physical appearance, but also includes the experience of young Muslim women in accepting the ideal of being a Muslim woman. They realize this acceptance through their appearance and activities which form an authentic

experience as part of a community of young Muslim women. Annisa calls the appearance of this community in public spaces "the formation of a Muslimah intimate public". These young Muslim women habe stylish characteristics while still following the 'ideal' of wearing the hijab. This is their way of reclaiming the 'right to looks' by negotiating between appearing in public spaces and obeying religion. On one hand, they challenge the idea of young Muslim women being confined to the hijab, but on the other hand, they negotiate their form of piety in public spaces with religious standards. For young Muslim women, the context of this public space includes social media, where they upload content and network with each other.

The ideal constructed in these young Muslim women's communities reduces the diversity of Muslim women to one single standard. This construction is not only the result of negotiations between secularism, state construction, and religion, but also market logic through the process of subjectification. This subjectification takes the form of 'freedom of choice', which has been directed by certain subjects as role models, such as the success stories of Muslim women in the business world, like Dian Pelangi and Ukhti Sally, highlighted in Annisa's book. These various success stories, apart from being presented in religious lectures, are also widely spread through the media, including social media, television, and books. The main essence of this success story is that the choices made as a Muslim woman were an effort to *memantaskan diri* (to make oneself worthy). To *memantaskan diri*, Muslim women are not passive, but active in building piety through various activities such as doing business.

The emphasis on subjectification through this community is described by Annisa as a global assemblage of ideal values that young Muslim women should have. This global nature is most visible from the closeness of this young Muslim woman to the fashion industry business. The steps taken by young Muslim women in business are in line with global subjectification represented by neoliberalism which prioritizes entrepreneurship. The government has strengthened this by

strengthening the creative economy which supports creative individuals. 'Translating' neoliberal ideas into a form of creativity makes these ideas more easily accepted, including by young Muslim women. The success of this 'translation' has resulted in the young Muslim women interviewed by Annisa not feeling like they are part of the global community, including that of neoliberalism. However, the fact that they are part of this global set can still be seen in their participation in the fashion industry commodity chain. In this commodity chain, young Muslim women as businesspeople emphasize their pious values, such as family and active worship, but are less aware that, in other parts of the commodity chain, there are those who are paid poorly and live less prosperously.

Does this mean that young Muslim women, in fact, remain within a certain construct? Annisa states that it is not that simple. The point is that the participation of young Muslim women needs to be taken seriously, not just certain ideals, but the result of negotiations at various levels, from individuals, citizens, to parts of the global citizenry.

However, there are still several notes that need to be paid attention to in this book, at least from the two main aspects of its discussion: feminist methods and youth studies perspectives. First, methodically. In her analysis of communities, especially on social media, Annisa emphasizes 'influence' as the reason that these communities are worthy of research. The problem is that Annisa limits eligibility to only the number of followers. In her claim to be a feminist cultural studies scholar, this includes marginalizing groups with little influence, even though on the other hand, Annisa emphasizes the aspect of intimacy. For example, *pengajian* are examples of sporadic communities; many *pengajian* are not very large but have a big impact on their members. Annisa also states that she would remain critical of the points of view of her research subjects. She seems to have done this successfully, by placing them in a national and global context. However, as an individual researcher, Annisa does not describe this process of reflexivity in her research activities, even though

this is emphasized a lot in feminist research.[1] In other words, Annisa's positionality has not been sufficiently explained in relation to her methods.

Second, the perspective of youth studies. When discussing the construction of state and religion in Chapter 1, Annisa does not discuss the construction of young people, especially young women. The construction described is only ageless, which Annisa herself rejects. In fact, young people are also 'subjugated' by the state through constructions such as *pemuda* (youth)[2], *remaja* (teenager),[3] or *anak* (child)[4]. In fact, here Annisa emphasizes the importance of her book, because young Muslim women experience multiple forms of subjugation: as young people, as Muslims, and as women. The consequence is that when talking about the ideals of young Muslim women, Annisa does not provide explanation of how young Muslim women articulate their activities as young people, such as undergoing education or looking for work, which are generally found in the non-linear process of transition to adulthood[5]. Annisa only explains her subjects' search for soul mates, making it seem as though Annisa was narrowing down a woman's life to just finding a soul mate as part of her *kodrat*. Returning to Annisa's critical position, here Annisa should also provide an explanation of her positionality.

However, these notes are not major weaknesses. On the contrary, this book provides an important basis for launching other studies regarding young women in general and young Muslim women in particular. There are still many everyday terms in both Islam and Indonesia that need to be dissected, such as *ukhti*, *jilboobs*, and *Nurul*, ensuring Annisa's work will remain important in the future.

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[1] Dupuis, 2022.

[2] Parker & Nilan, 2013.

[3] Parker & Nilan, 2013.

[4] Shiraishi, 2009.

[5] Woodman & Bennett, 2015.

References

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