

HEGEMONIC CULTURE AND SUBALTERN: A COMPROMISED VEIL IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC POPULAR NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This research was based on the powerful function of the aesthetics in the society. Novel as an art work also functioned as an arena in which ideologies contest and negotiate. The research intended to show a mechanism underlining novel to have a significant hegemonic role. The material object was taken from Islamic popular novel namely "Ketika Mas Gagah Pergi dan Kembali". The formal object was the negotiation of ideology which focused on the contact between intellectual and subaltern leading to the formation of a new compromised cultural practice. By applying the theory of hegemony in discussing the contestation and negotiation of ideologies in the novel, it is found that the contestation and negotiation between hegemonic and subaltern ideology lead to the occurrence of a compromise between the interest of the intellectual and the subaltern. The interest of the subaltern is based on the nostalgia of the past and fear or uncertain condition of future which lay in the domain of imagination that structures the novel.

Keywords: hegemonic culture, subaltern, negotiation, contestation, Islamic novel

INTRODUCTION

The rise of Islamic popular literature has always been a polemic each time, it springs and gains popularity among Indonesian Muslim readers. Due to the rise of Indonesian modern literature, there has been an on going debate, disagreement and polemic between those who actively set up Indonesian modern literature, and those who proposed the establishment of Islamic modern literature. This contestation can be seen in two phenomenal events called *Banjir Roman* (The Float of Roman) in the late 1939s and the recurrence of Islamic popular novel in 2005 which is called *Musim Semi Sastra Islam* (Springs of Islamic popular literature (Ronidin, 2016).

The reappearance of Islamic popular novels has been widely received by Muslim society since 2005. When adapted into movies, it spread up quickly, and was captured as phenomenon. Yet, this has returned and its wide celebration has invited severe criticism, which is even worse than the polemic in 1939s. The use of novel as part of Western tradition to convey Islamic teaching has been the main object of criticism. Some views that Islamic popular novel, as part of the popular culture product, signifies the involvement of Muslims in capitalist industry by labeling their product based on religious symbols. Those who

reject the Islamic novel express their fear of polluting the purity of Islamic teaching if conveyed through the form of popular culture (Piliang, 2011). For others, the use of the novel becomes the incredibly effective means to spread the Islamic teaching among Muslims. Islamic popular novel plays a significant role to counter and balance the massive production of liberal popular culture in the arena of ideological struggle (Hidayatullah, 2008). By using Islamic popular novel, the Muslim authors intend to educate young Muslim about Islam (Sakai, 2012).

These polemics lead to a question that, why the form of novel centers to the polemic when related to cultural struggle? This article tries to uncover the crucial questions by using the theory of hegemony developed by Gramsci. Gramsci (2012) provided a method of reading cultural struggle within a literary work that may help explaining the polemic of the existence of Islamic popular novel within cultural struggle in Indonesia. By using this method, this research is intended to elaborate the crucial functions of the form of the novel as a powerful means to ensure the success of ideological negotiation in hegemony. Therefore, this research will show how ideologies contest and negotiate through the structure of the novel. The second part of the research will show how the form of the novel structures the plot of stories to reach subaltern's consensus.

METHODS

This study applies a sociological approach to literary work. Sociological theory provides a framework to understand the phenomenon of literature as an arena where ideologies are contested and negotiated. Literature can be part of a conservative force trying to maintain a social structure, or a progressive force that is trying to undermine the structure for the sake of the establishment of a new social structure (Boelhower, 1981). Antonio Gramsci's contribution to the sociology of literature can be understood through his goal to reorganize the culture and to form a new historical block, the new hegemonic culture, new people and even a new country (Boelhower, 1981 & Woolcock, 1985). According to Gramsci (1971, 2012, & Zompetti, 1997), literary art has an important position as a cultural strategy for distributing and planting ideas in ways that literature has the power to capture and arouse sensual feelings of the readers. Gramsci's theory is known as the moral and intellectual leadership strategy or hegemony.

Hegemony is not a short event that requires a long-term process that operates in the cultural arena (Smith, 2010). The process of hegemony in the novel can be described as follows: (1) the contact of intellectual to the subaltern to build faithful relation to the subaltern; (2) the deconstruction of common sense by contesting subaltern ideology; (3) subaltern self-criticism and consensus of subaltern (Gramsci, 1971).

The material object of this research is a novelette, *Ketika Mas Gagah Pergi dan Kembali* (KMPdK). This novel is written by Helvi Tiana Rosa, the founder of Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP) literary community. The formal object is the negotiation and contestation of ideologies in the novel. The data is collected through identification of elements referred as ideology and its element involved in ideological negotiation and contestation. Based on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, data analyzed aims to interpret and give meanings to the relation of negotiation and contestation as a way reaching consensus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

By applying theory of Hegemony, this research focuses on the narrative contestation and negotiation between ideologies within Islamic ideologies in the Islamic popular novel written in Indonesia. Islamic ideology is presented in three different ideologies. All characters are intellectuals of their Islamic ideologies. They represent three different groups of people who (1) practice Islam based on traditional value and reject modernity, (2) strictly practice Islam, yet accept modern value as long as it does not confront the basis *tauhid* (oneness of God) and *syariah* law, and (3) practice Islam as private spiritual practices within a private domain, not in the public domain.

Mas Gagah, the hero of the novel, was not a strong and religious Muslim. He was a very modern liberal young man who only practiced basic Islamic beliefs. However, after visiting a remote place in Madura together with his lecturer and friends where he met an old traditional Muslim cleric, he became a traditionally fundamental Muslim. He refused all modern lifestyle such as music, movie, fashion and terms, a lifestyle which he was used to seize with his younger sister. In addition, *Mas Gagah* started to introduce Islam by conducting *dakwah* (calling to Islam) to people around him including his family. He kept persuading the

female Muslim to wear hijab. Most people agree to him except his younger sister (Rosa, 2011).

The confrontation between *Mas Gagah* and his sister *Gita* was the main factor influencing the plot moves of the novel. *Gita*, the narrator of the story, *Mas Gagah's* younger sister believed that religion is one private spiritual belief, and it was not a public identity that everybody should know. She still wanted to hang out with friends and enjoyed young people's life while looking for her potential mate, a boyfriend. She was afraid that by hiding under the hijab, nobody would notice her. Therefore, she avoided wearing hijab, and she still felt to need a little exposure for her existence in the public sphere.

The other ideology intellectuals presented in the novel is *Nadia Hayuningtiyas* and *Yudistira*. *Nadia* and *Yudistira* were illustrated as western university graduates who actively spread Islamic values. *Nadia* started to consciously practice Islam both in the public space and private when she was pursuing her study in America. She was depicted to show her Islamic identity by wearing hijab when she was in America meanwhile she accepts America as a destination where she enlightened her intellectual capability. *Yudistira* actively spread Islamic beliefs in the public place such as in a bus, train and any places where people might possibly listen to him. *Yudistira* concerned about the government's regulation in the country, corruptions and economic class differentiation.

Nadia and *Yudistira* believe that Islam is a perfect guidance for all part of life, yet Muslim also should open to western education to empower their life. This ideology is identified as modern Islam. Modern Islam accepts western value, science, and knowledge. In doing this, modern Muslim, intellectuals tend to adjust the practical daily life by referring to Al-Quran, *Sunnah*, and the tradition of *muttazilah* school.

These three ideologies contested and negotiated in the novel through the relations between characters that represent ideologies. The succession of the negotiation depends on how the relations between ideology intellectual and subaltern are tighten and protected. The following part is the elaboration of which ideology intellectual succeeds in maintaining a negotiation and how this intellectual leads the subaltern to consensually compromise to the dominant ideology.

Negotiation is an important element in the process of hegemony. All parties aim at reaching an agreement in persuasive ways. However, hegemony is more than just a persuasive way to win negotiation. According to Fontana (2005) hegemony is a strategy which consists of a combination of classical rhetoric concept derived from Isocrates and Cicero, and philosophy from Plato. Rhetoric is the art of language that leads people to follow the will of the speaker. Rhetoric works on the arena of heart, while a philosophy is in the domain of mind. Philosophy is the knowledge that the search for truth by combining moral reasoning and rational argument. These classical concepts shows three elements of negotiation namely language, speakers/philosophers, and people to whom the object of the rhetoric of philosophical argument speak for.

Similar to the classical concept, Gramsci (2012) identified those three elements by naming the speakers as the ideology intellectuals, the ideology, and the subaltern to whom the ideology objected. The key variable of negotiation of the ideology is the contact between the intellectuals and the subaltern (Howson & Smith, 2008). Subaltern refers to a subordinated condition caused by political, social,

and cultural domination. Subaltern is an individual who becomes the object of reshaping subjectivity or the object of “educating people” conducted by the intellectuals (Green, 2006).

Contestation among ideologies can be seen when one ideology criticizes other ideologies. Resistance to this process can be linked to the creation of subaltern. In *KMGpdk*, Gita could be referred to a subaltern because she resisted to *Mas Gagah*’s advice. She was the person whom *Mas Gagah* encouraged to veil, and was defined as disobedience. Her subalternity was described by her condition in which she feels abandoned and ignored by her brother since she refused to wear the hijab. She was deserted and ignored because she defended her common sense regarding her view on religious practices.

Gita was an urban young girl who enjoyed the city life. Her brother’s extreme change in his religion beliefs did not get in line with her interest, and thus she viewed him as a different person. This influenced her negative response to both his opinion and his action. In contrast, *Mas Gagah*’s new conception of world changed his way to see her sister. For Gita, he was no longer as he was used to be. Gita thought that he has changed to a different person who is no longer a brother for her.

Gita resistance against *Mas Gagah* could be seen to have taken place at the level of subjectivity. In other words, subalternity is created around the subjectivity (Smith, 2008). When Gita resisted to veil and to live her brother life, it means that she resisted the construction of her new subject because there actually would be two Gitas; the one who did not wear veil and the other one who wore veil. These two Gitas may produce a difference subject. Gita would have limited access to the public if she wore the veil. It would limit her. Gita did not want to trade her freedom with that. When Gita expressed her protest, people laughed at her ignorance. She was criticized for being so left behind, for not being up dated for Islamic trends. She inherited something wrong in herself. As a result, her brother hid Gita from his friend as the narration below:

“[...] watching movie with friends,” I said while putting on my shoes, “Because *Mas Gagah* always rejects every time I ask for being together. [...] there was no *Mas Gagah*’s friend that I did not know and was close with. But now, *Mas Gagah* seldom introduces me to them, unfortunately they look quite handsome. (Rosa, 2011, 8–11).

Criticism objected to the subaltern is part of a strategy to awaken the consciousness of subaltern’s knowledge (Gramsci, 1971). This criticism is intended to deconstruct the subaltern common sense in order that a new conception to be built right to her heart and mind of the subaltern, Gita.

Gita is criticized not only by *Mas Gagah* but also by *Tika*, Gita’s best friend. She also blames Gita for rejecting *Mas Gagah*. Yet, *Tika* mediates Gita to meet her cousin to enlighten herself, another intellectual who had put on the veil while she was studying in America. This step is related to what Gramsci showed that the encounter of Gita and *Nadia* opens a possibility of what identified as negotiation between subaltern common sense and the hegemonic ideology.

Furthermore, the quality of intellectual is one part of strategy which may allow negotiation works smoothly (Gramsci, 1971). As shown in the novel, *Nadia*’s graduated from an American university was a quality that attracts Gita’s attention. She did not reject the negotiation. Veiling

and America for Gita was a contradiction, yet *Nadia* was able to combine them perfectly. This situation seemed appealing and interesting for Gita as she had been fantasizing and idolizing America by looking up to the life style, the movies and music. America became Gita’s own perception of life and liberty. Her common sense was built from western popular culture.

The moment of the encounter between Gita and *Nadia* was a moment of negotiation. *Nadia*’s qualities contributed to build Gita’s trust or faith to *Nadia*. Gita loved *Nadia*’s realm, and she trusted *Nadia* for her ability adjusting Islam in modern life. Gita did not want to leave her modern realm, and *Nadia* was right in the center of the realm. *Nadia* provided her a perfect model of a kind Muslim that she would love to be. Gita still wanted to enjoy music, movies and fashion even though she was going to put on the hijab in the future. Gita trusted *Nadia* that she was not like her brother who keeps asking Gita for not doing many things. This trust becomes the symbol that the negotiation has begun which is in accordance to Gramsci’s note that there will be not hegemony without a relation between subaltern and intellectual. Furthermore, this relation is based on faith. Faith to whom or to what is the most important element in negotiation (Gramsci, 1971).

As the relation has firmed its foundation by developing trust, the door of ideological dissemination widely opens. Let’s see the quote below:

Mas Gagah laughed one afternoon and patiently he taught me. [...]

“Do you understand what I said?”

“Don’t worry, Gita indeed understood!” I said honestly. Of course, *Mbak Nadia* has also said the same thing. I understood even though I do not know it properly. That night I slept between *Mas Gagah*’s Islamic books. It seems I have got *hidayah* (Rosa, 2011, 13-14).

The dialogue implies that the Islamic information gained by Gita is not from *Mas Gagah*, but from *Nadia*. She listened to *Mas Gagah* not because she wanted to accept his conception, yet her intention was to win back *Mas Gagah*’s love for his sister, Gita herself. She needed a companion since felt lonely without him.

Nadia was her source of information. *Nadia* had explained everything before *Mas Gagah* taught her. It clearly shows that she did not learn anything from the books *Mas Gagah* lend her, but she slept with the pile of the books. Gita’s denial to his persuasion also can be seen in the dialogue below:

The days passed. *Mas Gagah* and I get close again. [...] Actually, there are lots of things I still cannot understand, and *Mas Gagah*’s changes are still unacceptable for me, yet I do not want to miss him again. [...]

“Try to put on *jilbab* Git!” He asked me once.

[...]

“[...] I do not want it yet!”

Mas Gagah smiled. “Gita will look elegant with veil and *Insha Allah* God loves Gita. Like *mama*.”

Gita does want to veil, but not now.” I said. I consider how my activities, my future, and the prospect of my future husband will be.

“It will not be a burden.” *Mas Gagah* said like he understood my thought. I did shake my head (Rosa, 2011, 13-14).

This dialogue again emphasizes that Gita refuted *Mas Gagah's* conception. The rejection seems to be based on a Gita's consideration of her future. The future is an important consideration for subaltern to decide whether to accept or not to accept the opinion of the intellectual. As it is shown in the dialogue, *Mas Gagah* had no convincing reason related to Gita's rational thought. *Mas Gagah's* reason for the veil is "Allah will love you" did not make any sense for Gita. As a modern rational girl, she could not see and feel the love of Allah, while 'Allah's love' needed a spiritual explanation. Yet, *Mas Gagah* did not explain future for what he meant. The author silences *Mas Gagah*.

In addition, *Mas Gagah's* changes did not attract Gita to live *Mas Gagah's* life. Therefore, following Gita's question of her future, the author designed a meeting where the fear would be overcome. To overcome the fear for wearing *jilbab*, Nadia explained how *jilbab* can be adjusted in the present time and the future. As explained by Howon & Smith (2008) that past and future is an essential element in reaching hegemonic ideology. The intellectual uses the future to gain the consent of the subaltern of the present. The future is clearly emphasized in the dialogue between Gita and Nadia. In her explanation why she chose to wear *jilbab*, Nadia explained eight reasons in which she rationally highlights *jilbab* as women empowerment as quoted below:

[...]

The sixth, by *jilbab*, the control is in woman's hand. She has rights to decide which man may see her and may not see her."

The participants nodded.

"The seventh, by wearing *jilbab*, women have indeed done some selection on her future husband. A man, who does not have any basis knowledge on Islam, will be reluctant to propose a veiled woman. I nodded deeply.

Lastly, *jilbab* never hinders a Muslim woman to pursue her future for her chastity, "Mbak Nadia continued. "Oh ya... wearing *hijab* is not the only one indication of Muslim devotion to Islam, however, it indicates the practical realization of devotion from a faithful *muslimah* [...].

I stood giving applause to *Mbak Nadia*. Her reasons why women should wear *jilbab* were very convincing. "Mbak Nadia's argument is acceptable for me!" I shouted. "I often listen: we are obligated to veil to help men protect their sights (Rosa, 2011, 17-18).

In this arena, the novel describes the contestation of two ideologies, Nadia and *Mas Gagah's* ideology. However, in this event *Mas Gagah's* voice was not described, and Nadia's voice was intensified by giving Gita chances to have more dialogue with Nadia. This dialogue is a dialogue between Gita and Nadia, and also between Gita and herself. The dialog between Gita and herself is a self-criticism which shows her conscious mind criticizing her own common sense. This dialogue to herself is portrayed through Gita's actions such as laughing at herself, agreeing and clapping hands, withering, and nodding deeply.

Nadia seemed able rationally explain the possible future that Gita might gain by wearing the hijab. In her answer to Gita's doubt for assuming that *jilbab* or veil might limit woman's movement and hide her under the veil, Nadia stated her logical assumption by pointing empirical facts that Nadia has experienced. After understanding the logical

reason that veil empowers women position both the access to material as well as access to future husband or man, the fear of Gita's future by wearing veil seemed to fade. She agreed to wear the veil. She had a faith on what Nadia said because Nadia herself wore the veil. Besides, she was able to explain logically based on her own experience. She had an accurate experimental data. Nadia's explanation about how veil might be beneficial for her future seemed very acceptable for Gita.

At the end of the part one of the novel, the author closes the arena for *Mas Gagah* to articulate his voice. The author silenced him by describing him passed away in an accident on his way back from conducting *dakwah* Islam in a slum area. He was not given a space in the material world but was moved to after world. He was described to be a *sahid* in his *jihad*, which means that he passed away while he was doing a spiritual journey to do good things and spread Islam religion.

The second part of the stories showed the important role of nostalgia during the process of ideological negotiation. The term nostalgia comes from two Greek words which are *notos* (to return home) and *algos* (pain or sorrow). Nostalgia is associated with the loss of nation, home and childhood (Starobinski & Kemp, 1966). In this story, nostalgia can be identified in the presence of a new mysterious character, later known as *Mas Yulistira*, a decent young man wearing simple long-sleeved shirt and jeans who actively promulgated Islam in public place such as public transportation. *Yulistira's* activities brought up Gita's nostalgia of her childhood with his brother, *Mas Gagah*, and overs had owed her guilt of rejecting his *dakwah*. *Yulistira* appeared as the shadow of the late *Mas Gagah* whose *dakwah* about wearing *jilbab* or veil was once rejected by Gita. Through listening to *Yulistira's dakwah*, Gita visited her nostalgia through imagination. As nostalgia haunted her, she came to meet the old friends of *Mas Gagah* and unveiled that she found the spirit of the late *Mas Gagah* in *Yulistira*.

I am silent "maybe his face, ohh no *Bang*. But what he did, his empathy, I do not know. Gita feels close to him. Gita feels the same spirit in him as in *Mas Gagah* (Rosa, 2011, 57).

The returning to childhood may also function to ensure a certain figure that a person would love to recover. Nostalgia may guide to a certain model or patron of happiness that people would love to restore in the future life. The story showed when the feeling of guilt to *Mas Gagah* transform into feeling of love to *Mas Yulistira*, Gita revisited nostalgia to ensure the form of her possible future. Assuming that the Islamic ideology of *Mas Gagah* is similar to *Yulistira*, Gita begins to consensually adopt *Mas Gagah's* style that she once hated and rejected. She did not know *Yulistira*, yet she tried to capture his attention. This led Gita to uncritically enter the world of *Mas Gagah* and *Yulistira* by following her idols' ways, participating in *dakwah*, and expanding the size of her veil.

The juxtaposing of the nostalgia of *Mas Gagah* and the hope for the love of *Yulistira* means that two spaces of time are imposed to Gita at the same time that she is detached from her present time. The nostalgia of past and the hope for future can only be accessed through the imagination. The experience of imagining of her past and her future connects to her feeling which will design her acceptance or rejection to an ideology. As narrated in the story, nostalgia of the

past and obsession for the future intensify Gita's cultural transformation and consensual acceptance to the ideology of the late *Mas Gagah* and the prospect mate, Yudistira. Imagination through which the past and the future are accessed is directly linked to the heart and the mind of Gita. The strong feelings to the past and the hope for future do not allow her to connect to her conscious awareness of her present time. She changes swiftly, directly and obediently for the sake of the nostalgia of past and the hope for the future. Her imagination occupies both her heart and her mind, a place where the negotiation takes place, where subjectivity is imposed, and where a decision is made. Cultural transformation is decided based on imagination which its material existence is absent. The subaltern is removed from her reality and brought to wander around the past and the future by imagination as shown below:

Now, I look neat in *jilbab*. Tutut is so happy that she prostrates expressing her gratitude hearing my decision not to put on tight shirt or transparent *jilbab*. *Alhamdulillah*. Honestly, *Mas Kotak-Kotak* (Yudistira) is my inspiration in my Islamic way even though I wear *jilbab* not because of him but Allah (Rosa, 2011, 58)

This quote shows that Yudistira is the inspiration of her adopting larger veil. However, to ensure Yudistira's Islamic way, Gita visited her childhood nostalgia, *Mas Gagah's* ideology.

The imagination of Gita toward Yudistira's ideology is relatively true. She finally found out that Yudistira was not exactly like what was in Gita's imagination. *Mas Gagah* did not accept the Western tradition, while Yudistira viewed Western as one of sources that might empower Islamic ideology. *Mas Gagah* rejected Western life style, while Yudistira pursued his doctoral degree at a French University.

His return from French became an interruption and correction to Gita's transformation. Yudistira seemed to accept Western values to be the role model and guide for life style. The Islamic ideology projected by the author in this novel is an Islam assimilated to the capital power like America and Europe. America and Europe have certain sources of power that may empower the position of Islam. Here the author deserts *Mas Gagah's* ideology, and put the emphasis on the importance of Western value along side with the Islam value. This story emphasizes both in the first part and the second part that Western has a significant role in developing Islam. The story emphasizes that Gita has transformed and consensually agree to be led morally and intellectually first by Nadia and then by Yudistira, not by *Mas Gagah*.

As the story closes to end, Gita comes closer to her dream future husband, Yudistira. Her struggle of putting on larger veil and her consistency in practicing *dakwah* are rewarded a chance to meet, and then unite to Yudistira. This unveils other idea that women transformation to veil and her encounter to America and Europe also point to the assimilation of female purity to global power. The Islamic ideology of the novel implies the vital position of female chastity in attaining global power. It shows that the requisite of Gita's participation in Yudistira's economy, *dakwah* and maybe his life lies on her personality which is formed, marked, and identified through the veil.

CONCLUSIONS

The novel is the realm of aesthetical imagination within which imagination provides space to see a clear past and future. Imagination related to sensual sphere where people experience through their senses which powerfully influence human conception and thus, their decision to consent or not to consent. This position unveils the effectiveness of using novel as a mean to move the feeling of the object of hegemony. By arousing the subaltern's feeling through moving them away from their present time to the past and the future, the novel persuades and urges object of hegemony to consensually decide his or her movement. It means that hegemony moves people away from their conscious mind. By doing this, hegemony works as the most effective way to move and to unite people's conception of the world to become a powerful force in cultural struggle. This may answer the question regarding the position of Islamic popular novel which centers to the debate since the unification of Islamic content and the novel form may powerfully affect the social and cultural changes. These cultural changes consist of the assimilation of Islam to the powerful capital power by establishing and forming an Islamic life style which is, first, by wearing *jilbab* or veil.

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