

Genre Studies on Popular Islamic Literature in Indonesia

M. Oky Fardian Gafari¹, Muhammad Hafidz Assalam², Wahyu Wiji Astuti³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

Email: oky@unimed.ac.id

Abstract:

Religious values, especially Islam, have always been attractive themes in the preparation of literary works. Since the era of oral literature, to written literature, even digital literature as is currently happening, Islamic themes have always been a magnet for readers. In fact, since the spread of the era of ecranization, the nuances of darkness have also become a magnet for audiences in cinemas. From here then comes the term Popular Islamic Literature. Popular Islamic Literature is a differentiator from Islamic Literature which is noble and tends to be absurd. This article aims to reveal 1) The characteristics of popular Islamic literature that distinguish it from other genres, 2) The motives for the emergence of Popular Islamic Literature in Indonesia. The results obtained are that Popular Islamic Literature dominates the distinctive features which include practical Islamic naming code and fashion code. Islam is different from noble Islam which tends to be absurd and transcendental. The Popular Islamic Literature genre follows market tastes that place more emphasis on instant culture and visual beauty. The genre of Popular Islamic Literature will become an established genre if its authors, such as Helvi Tiana Rosa, Habiburrahman El-Syirazy, Asma Nadia, Tere Liye and so on, remain productive in producing works with the same theme that are of interest to many readers.

Keywords:

literary; islamic; popular

I. Introduction

In the realm of Indonesian novels, Islamic overtones often appear and attract attention, both from readers and from literary critics. Novels wrapped in Islamic nuances are one thing that is of interest to the public. It can be observed that masterpiece novels in the same class as 'The Sinking of the Van der Wijck Ship, Hamka's Under the Protection of the Ka'bah, or Kuntowijoyo's Sermon on the Hill are very well known among novel connoisseurs. Or, the most recent one can observe the emergence of novels such as *Ayat-ayat Cinta* or *When Love is glorified* by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy. (Supriadi: 2011)

Intrinsically it can be seen that the novels above are Islamic novels, however there is a different side between these noble novels and the new style of Islamic novels that were so widespread in the 2000s. Noble Islamic novels do teach Islam in their narratives, but these teachings tend to be existentialism, related to the search for God or also related to the nature of human life. Meanwhile, Islamic novels in the 2000s tended to be practical and applicable in conveying Islamic teachings.

Diachronically, popular Islamic novels appeared in the early 2000s and were pioneered by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy with his best selling novel, *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. After the boom of the novel, then there were also novels similar to the novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, both those written by Habiburrahman himself or those authored by others. The rise of popular Islamic novels has indeed created a new phenomenon in the world of literature. There are those who think that these novels have a positive impact on providing moral teachings, but there are also those

who think negatively and think that these popular Islamic novels are only an attempt to "sell" God's verses with low aesthetic value.

Article This paper seeks to explain the phenomenon of popular Islamic novels in the perspective of genre theory and attempts to present the intrinsic elements in several novels, as well as draw their threads in society. How can these novels be welcomed so well by the public, and is it possible that these novels can give birth to a new genre in the world of literature?

II. Research Method

The method used in this study adopts a phenomenological method by viewing literature as a phenomenon. This phenomenon is reduced in the form of data. The research data is in the form of a novel in the context of phenomena and their representations. This research approach is a qualitative research with reference to conceptual works based on the phenomena that are the subject of study. The data analysis is based on the naming code and fashion code concepts explained by Wening Udasmoro.

III. Results and Discussion

The emergence of Indonesian novels with light Islamic nuances was marked by the birth of the novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy. The novel gained immense popularity in society, along with the filming process. The popularity of the novel is marked by the royalty which reaches 1.5 billion for the author. Love Verses have also become a unique phenomenon in society. On the one hand, the novel is labeled as a dime novel with low literary value, but on the other hand, the novel is experiencing a very high process of popularity. Many observers say that the novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta* tries to sell God's verses in order to gain sales.

4.1 Imagery of Islamic Nuances

The image of Islam is indeed very prominent in the novel. According to Habiburrahman, Islam and all the value systems contained therein can apply and be enforced at all times, in all places and in all types of human civilization. (Sirsaebea, 2007:240). This statement implies that at that time Islam was indeed imaged as an exclusive and closed religion. Through his novel, Habiburrahman tries to criticize minor views about Islam.

According to Udasmoro, (2012: 89), after the 2000s, stories based on religious education mushroomed in book exchanges in Indonesia. For example, the Islamic book exchange, almost every year, several exhibitions are held in Yogyakarta under the title Islamic Book Fair. The events of September 11, 2001 which brought religious contestation in this context between the West (Christianity) and Islam (Global) received a response with increasingly strong claims of Muslim identity in Indonesia. Islamic religious books are also increasingly appearing, including in the form of children's reading books.

So, it can be drawn that the emergence of popular Islamic novels is an attempt to give a positive image of Islam after the September 11 tragedy. The universality of Islam is raised by popular Islamic novels, something that is not obtained when reading noble Islamic novels which tend to be self-exclusive. By universally speaking, popular Islamic novels such as *Verses of Love*, *When Love Is Glorified*, *Memorizing Delisa Prayers*, *Negeri Lima Menara*, *Ranah Tiga Warna*, *Lafazh-lafazh Cinta* etc. be acceptable to all groups, even non-Muslims.

In general, Islamic literature has clear characteristics. Aqidah and morals are characteristics of Islamic literature which form the basis of all genre themes of Islamic literature. (Manshur, 2011: 165). Thus, Islamic literature, which includes popular Islamic literature, seeks to instill good faith and morals in its readers. Aqidah is related to belief in God, while morals are related to human morality towards each other. Both form a vertical-horizontal relationship that is interrelated with one another. Furthermore, Manshur (2011: 167) explains that Islamic literature must remind its readers that Islam is something that must be practiced, not just spoken orally. This is what is clear from popular Islamic literature. Islam is understood not in a philosophical framework.

In the novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, for example, the teachings regarding Islam are carried out by the characters without the high philosophical process as in the noble Islamic novels. The teachings regarding the use of the headscarf for women are applied without having to ask why one should wear the headscarf. The teachings regarding the obligation to pray are carried out without questioning the nature of prayer. This is the peculiarity of the popular Islamic literary genre. Readers do not need to think hard to understand a novel, because in fact the novel is projected not to invite readers to contemplate, but simply to feel entertained by the reading and then be inspired and then motivated to follow what is in the novel. So, apart from being entertained, readers are also inspired by the novel's narrative. As Luxemburg (1984:116) states,

4.2 Genre-shaping readers

The reader is indeed very decisive in the development of literature. The popularity of a work is determined by its readers, even the genre is also formed by readers. Especially in popular genres. In popular fiction, genre is not static. Genre continues to evolve and it is the reader who determines the development of the genre. As stated by Adi (2011: 197), that the flexibility of popular genres is determined more by the audience or readers. So, the formation of the popular Islamic genre that is currently being discussed is an accumulation of the aspirations of readers in determining their expectations of a reading. When the novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, which carries an intrinsic element as a popular Islamic novel, exploded, it was followed by other novels - such as *When Love is Glorified*, *In the Mihrab of Love*, *The Fading Enchantment of Cleopatra*.

In order to classify a work into a genre, it is necessary to compare several works. Genres are created through dialogue between the similarities and differences in the formulas of many fictions, Adi (2011:200). By recognizing the formulas in several similar novels, it will be known which genre these novels belong to. It is further explained that the conventional definition of genre tends to be based on the conventions of elements of fictional texts such as theme and setting. Adi (2011:200). Intrinsic elements of literary works are indeed a tool for genre classification. Through the theme, plot, setting and characterization, the genre can be identified.

Apart from being related to intrinsic elements, there are also ways to identify Islamic literature, especially those that are popular, namely by looking for fashion codes and naming codes (these terms are abstracted from Wening Udasmoro's book, *Children's Literature and Character Education*, in the sub-chapter *Religion-Based Stories*). Fashion code is an identification based on something that is attached to the character and is the identity of the Islamic religion, such as the headscarf, skull cap, Islamic boarding school, greetings and so on. The naming code is more directed to the identity of the name of the character who has a very strong Islamic aroma, such as the names of the characters Fahri, Husna, Azzam, Delisa and

others, which are typical Arabic names that are synonymous with Islamic names. In addition, the naming code can also be seen from other names such as the name of Al-azhar university, Faculty of Tarbiyah and so on. Even from the title alone it can be seen that it is a naming code - Verses of Love, When Love Is Glorified, Munajat Cinta, Lafaz-lafaz Cinta - is a code which contains a clear Islamic identity.

In the novel *When Cinta Bertasbih 1 & 2* by Habiburrahman, for example, the fashion code emerges from the depiction of the female character wearing the headscarf, by giving codes such as "blue headscarf" and so on. Apart from that, the characters also like to pronounce phrases that are synonymous with Islam, such as *assalamu'alaikum*, *astagfirullah*, *alhamdulillah* and so on. The depiction of the character Azzam who is diligent in praying, diligently reciting the Koran is also a fashion code that identifies the character with the nuances of the Islamic religion. As for the naming code, it can be seen from the names of the characters, such as Choirul Azzam, Anna Althafunisha, Husna, Ustadz Mujab, all of which are names from Arabic which are the identity of the Islamic religion. The existence of the name Darul Qur'an Islamic boarding school and the book of wisdom of Ibn Athailah is also a naming code. From this it is very clear that there is indeed an attempt by the author to convey Islamic identity openly and freely. However, it is not only identity that the author wants to convey, but also related to Islamic thoughts and teachings. In *When Cinta Bertasbih 1 & 2* can be seen Azzam's character as a role model. A senior student at Al-Azhar University who works part time in Egypt as a seller of meatballs and tempeh to support his mother and younger siblings in Indonesia. Azzam is a simple, smart, hardworking, kind and obedient person to his religion. Azzam's personality is the ideal personality for readers. When the reader is bored with the main characters who are "too" what they are and even tend to be stupid, then a figure like this extraordinary Azzam gives new nuances to the minds of readers (at that time). Readers also experience saturation with characters whose nature is gray – a kind-hearted criminal or a loving thug – which is indeed a characterization formula that has been quite dominating lately in Indonesian novels. This is possibly one reason why popular Islamic novels are so popular with the reading public.

4.3 Thematic peculiarities of popular Islamic literature

Love theme is also a very interesting thing and deserves to be studied in this genre of popular Islamic literature. Love in the context of Islamic literature is certainly different from love in general which tends to be free. Moreover, love in the romantic genre in general involves young couples, men and women. (Khaerunisa: 2020) Even though it is in Islamic packaging, the theme of love in Islamic literature is indeed very prominent. This is because Islam itself teaches about love for fellow human beings. As stated by Manshur, (2011: 162) that Islamic literature also does not miss talking about love for family, for example a child loves his father and mother, loves his brothers and sisters, loves his wife, daughters and sons, descendants, close relatives and distant relatives, love the whole man and love others as love himself. Thus, it can be concluded that the Islamic theme of love has indeed become a separate formula in popular Islamic literature. Like in *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, for example, the love story between Fahri and Aisha is a strength in itself in the novel. Or also the love story between Azzam and Anna Althafunisha. The nuances of romanticism wrapped in thick Islamic is one of the most prominent formulas in popular Islamic literature. These love stories tend to be happy ending or have a happy ending. This is because the popular characteristics themselves present stories with a happy ending. This also appears in the novels *Tere Liye*, *Asma Nadia*, and *Helvy Tiana Rosa*, (Akhiriani:2018, Nuryanti:2020)

The happy ending of the story is indeed the most important part of popular Islamic novels. It can be seen that Azzam and Anna Althafunisha are finally able to get married and live happily (in *When Cinta Bertasbih 2*), or it can be seen that the five alumni of Gontor Islamic Boarding School finally succeeded in five different countries (in *Negeri Lima Menara*).

Apart from the theme of love, several popular Islamic novels also deal with the theme of life's struggles. Islam is synonymous with struggle or jihad to face the hardness of life. Someone who used to come from a simple background in life, then after doing extraordinary struggles (and also accompanied by prayer), will eventually get success. This is what the author wants to convey to the reader. Ahmad Fuadi's *Negeri Lima Menara* novel describes such a theme. Gontor Islamic boarding school students who struggled through effort and prayer, eventually succeeded in various fields and in various parts of the world. Or in the novel *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* which describes the struggle of a child in dealing with the tsunami disaster in Aceh.

Even so, there is indeed an assumption that these themes are talkative themes from previous successful novels, such as the phenomenal novel *Laskar Pelangi*, by Andrea Hirata. The theme of struggle is also raised there, and from there there are indeed many novels that follow the theme in *Laskar Pelangi*, including popular Islamic novels. This also applies to the theme of love. When the novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta* exploded in the market, other novels followed with similar themes, even with similar book covers and similar author names. This is in accordance with Ida Rochani Adi's statement that fiction can be new in terms of plot, narration and other elements in the story. This can happen because it is so rich in inventions and it is also impossible to know in advance whether a fiction will be liked or not. However, as soon as the new type is liked, it will be followed by other products with similar stories or elements. (2011:201-202). Apart from all that, it cannot be denied that the themes raised in popular Islamic novels are indeed themes that are currently popular with the public.

Popular Islamic literature is deliberately aimed at the tastes of readers. At this time, readers do have a tendency to prefer everything that is instant and easy. Not only popular Islamic literature, popular literature itself is also an answer to the people's desire to obtain easy and light readings. It is undeniable that nowadays, instant culture and consumerism are spreading in Indonesian society. Everyone wants everything in an easy and fast way. Likewise with reading. Society is relatively more fond of popular readings than heavy reading that requires extra energy to decipher the sentences in each paragraph. Therefore, popular literature became very popular. With the love of popular literature, then everything that smells popular is also popular, and one of them is Islamic literature. Islamic literature in the 2000s was indeed projected to become popular and easy reading.

Simple flow that are built into popular Islamic novels are very common and do not require much effort for the reader to follow. The plot tends to advance with very little distortion. This kind of thing makes it easier for the reader to understand each event that the author wants to convey through his novel. For example, the novel *Memorizing Prayer Delisa* by Tere Liye. The plot is advanced and tends to be simple. Starting from the task of practicing reading prayers to Delisa, a 6 year old child. When reading it turns out that the tsunami hit Aceh. Delisa went missing, then met with her father and from there it was known that Delisa's entire family had died. The conflict arose because Delisa could not accept reality. Finally Delisa was able to let go of everything. The story ends with Delisa finding a necklace that her mother wanted to give her if Delisa was able to complete the task of memorizing prayer readings. The plot built by the author is very simple and easy to follow, especially for

readers who are not used to the complicated plots typical of serious novels. That way the reader feels involved in the storytelling of the novel. Readers seem to be dragged into the events in the novel, with the same fear, the same sadness and finally a happy ending together too.

The same plot characteristics will also be found in other popular Islamic literature novels, such as in *Ayat-ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy, you can see that the plot structure is very simple, and it will definitely have a happy ending. Starting from the daily life of Fahri's character, then his conflict with several girls, then the conflict ends happily. These kinds of plots are very popular with readers. Readers who basically like popular reading, then add the theme of love typical of teenagers, wrapped in Islamic overtones, to become a perfect combination to make a novel (and its genre) popular. This can be compared to Kuntowijoyo's Islamic novels or Gus Mus' short stories which are transcendental and absurd in nature.

As Livingstone said (Via Adi, 2011: 206), that a genre can determine its readers or viewers. The point is that if a novel with a certain genre is liked by a reader, it is certain that the reader will like other novels in the same genre. So, if there is a reader who likes *Love's Verses*, then there is a tendency for him to also like similar works, such as *When Love Is Glorified* or *In the Mihrab of Love*. Thus a grouping of novels will appear and in the end it is the reader who determines the emergence or development of a genre.

V. Conclusion

The genre of popular Islamic literature is indeed a new genre in the realm of Indonesian literature. Although the genre of Islamic literature has existed since the glory of the serious works of HAMKA and Kuntowijoyo, the genre of Islamic literature which is more popular can be said to have originated in the 2000s after the September 11, 2001 tragedy which gave rise to an inner war between the Western world and Islam. With the negative stigma of Islam as a terrorist religion, then there is a movement to portray Islam as a universal religion that loves peace. Then, Islamic novels with popular overtones were born which are very popular nowadays. An example is the novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, *When Love is Glorified 1&2*, *In Mihrab Cinta* by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy, *Memorization of the Delisa Prayer* by Tere Liye.

The emergence of the popular Islamic novel genre is determined by readers who directly want popular Islamic formulas in a narrative. The theme of love is indeed a very popular theme, apart from that the theme of struggle is also very popular with the public. From a plot point of view, the plot developed by the author tends to be a very simple general flow. With this simplicity, the reader will easily understand the narrative and the message the author wants to convey. Apart from that, the imagery of Islam is also very strong in the narrative. The names of Islamic figures, the use of Islamic attributes, such as headscarves, Islamic boarding schools and Al-Azhar, are formulas that are distinctive and very recognizable to readers.

Apart from the controversy and criticism given to the popular Islamic novel genre, because it is considered a work of dime that is only concerned with market tastes and as if selling God's verses as a trade commodity, the popular Islamic novel genre is quite capable of creating a new phenomenon for world development. Indonesian literature. The emergence of new novels or short stories that carry the same nuances makes the Popular Islamic genre have

its own space for people who enjoy literature. The high level of productivity of writers from the Popular Islamic genre, such as Tere Liye and Asma Nadia, will continue to target the ideal market so that they can create a new, established genre.

References

- Adi, Rochani Ida. (2011). *Popular Fiction: Theory and Methods of Study*. Yogyakarta: Student Libraries
- End it, Wulan. (2018). *Analysis of the Structure and Moral of the Novel Pulang by Tere Liye*. UMSU Repository
- Anif, Sirsaeba. (2007). *The Phenomenon of Love Verses*. Jakarta: Republika Publisher
- Khaerunnisa. (2020). *Revealing Literature in Islamic History*. *Journal of Literacy Pen* pp 29-35
- Luxemburg, Jan van et al. (1984). *Introduction to Literature*. Jakarta: Gramedia.
- Mansur, Fadlil Munawwar. (2011). *The Development of Arabic Literature and Theory of Islamic Literature*. Yogyakarta: Student Libraries
- Nuryanti. (2020). *Analysis of the Novel About You by Tere Liye Using Structuralist Theory*. *Pegguruang Journal* Vol. 2 No. 2
- Ronidin. (2012). *Aspects of Religious Humanism in the Novel When Love Exalts: A Study of Genetic Structuralism*. Minangkabau Press
- Supriadi, Asep. (2011). *Takmilah; Towards Islamic Literary Theory*. *Journal of Atavism* 14 (2) 242
- Udasmoro, Wening. (2012). *Children's Literature and Character Education*. Yogyakarta: UGM Press
- Sri, Heni Wahyuni. (2017). *Structural and Moral Analysis in Asma Nadia's Dream Islamic Boarding School Novel*. UMSU repository