Chapter 2
Abidah El Khalieqy's Struggles of Islamic Feminism Through Literary Writings

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Introduction

Women, gender, and Islam in Indonesia always form a contested site because women's *locus* in relation to Islam is problematic when their status is seen through the eyes of the practiced Islam.[1] Various interpretations of Islam have managed to define, locate, and perhaps entrap women under certain fixed categories. Yet, women's position in Islam in Indonesia is never about religious matters alone. The interests and agendas of various social, political, and cultural actors within the society play a significant role in shaping the life of public culture. Indeed, within such perspective, Islam is not simply a religious ritual; the spirit of Islamic values can be reflected in all aspects of life, art, and cultural expressions. Nonetheless, despite the vast availability of Islamic productions in guidebooks, magazines, fiction, and popular works, works on the politics of Islamic identity within Indonesian settings are still limited. This also applies to issues concerning women and Islam and their conditioning within Indonesian contexts as portrayed in fiction writing. Not many Muslim writers have raised matters of women in Indonesian Islam in their writings. However, among these few writers, Abidah El Khalieqy fills in some of the blanks in writing about women and Islam in Indonesia. Her gift to Indonesian readers is manifested through her literary works. In this gift she often discusses problems that Muslim women in Indonesia frequently deal with. Her narrative gift touches

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Indonesian readers, especially on women's rights in the heart of Islamic discourses. Through Abidah's stories, issues on education and reproduction rights, and also domestic violence, are placed at the centre of women's self-construction. The ways women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions, which are intricately linked to their social, cultural, and political environments, are some of Abidah's narrative gifts. She uses the language of the female body to represent women's own culture. Women's rights in the private sphere, which are commonly neglected by Muslim writers, are brought to life through Abidah's fictional tales. This is truly her indispensable gift.

About Abidah El Khalieqy

Abidah El Khalieqy's narratives began to appear in the mid-1990s (Rampan 2000). She is not only known as a prose writer but also as a poet. Indeed, she started her writing profession first in poetry then moved on to prose writing. Abidah[2] was born on March 1, 1965, in Menturo, Jombang, Indonesia. Growing up in Jombang, the capital of *pesantren*,[3] she was exposed regularly to Islamic discourses. Her countless short stories, poems, and essays have been published in several magazines such as *Horizon*, *Republika*, *Gadis*, *Amanah*, *Ulumul Qur'an*, and many others. Her poems were included in *ASEANO: An Anthology of Poems from Southeast Asia*, in 1995. Her publication, in addition to some poetry anthologies, incorporates prose works like *Ibuku Lautan Berkobar* (My Mother the Burning Sea, 1997), *Menari di Atas Gunting* (Dancing Above the Scissors, 2001), *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman with a Turban Covering Her Neck, 2001), *Atas Singgasana* (Above the Crown, 2003), and the latest *Geni Jora* (Jora's Fire, 2004), which won the second prize for 2003 novel writing conducted by *Dewan Kesenian Jakarta* (The Jakarta Arts Council) and her latest work *Mahabbah Rindu* (Longing for Love, 2008). Her poems about women and abortion were translated into English by an Australian poet, Geoff Fox, and published in a cyber album in 1998.

A recognized Indonesian literary critic, Budi Darma, has compared Abidah's work to Taslima Nasreen's, the Bangladeshi woman author whose works are mostly regarded as blasphemy to Islam.[4] But far from Nasreen's radicalism, Abidah's presentation of Islamic gender ideology is subtle, yet voices strong challenges to Islamic patriarchal interpretations (El Khalieqy 2004a). Most of her works are weighted with women's issues located within Islamic perspectives, and she continuously criticizes formal and informal institutions entrapping women in the shackles of their gender. The strongest theme in her narratives is her call for social change and female empowerment to occur within the sanction of Islamic doctrines. In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, published under the auspices of YKF (*Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat*, Fatayat Welfare Foundation) and the Ford Foundation, Abidah powerfully takes issues of women's right to education and reproductive control into account. She says that her interest in feminism is based on her experience of what she sees and senses:

> If we see injustices how can we be silenced? … What is happening in our world? So, how can we be alert of all those? Perhaps, if I speak about those problems in my writings at least I have participated with my friends or those having concerns with problems of injustices and discrimination. (El Khalieqy 2004b)

Her narratives are laden with "the woman question," and she constantly creates and recreates her female characters as those who react and offer counterresponses to patriarchal oppression.

Abidah's engagement with Islamic feminism started when she was an active member of *Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat* (YKF), an NGO seeking to empower women. She posits:

> I try to keep myself informed about the advance of feminism either from the Western world or from the Islamic world such as the Middle East.… I am currently active in YKF, an NGO aiming for women's empowerment. This NGO is not affiliated with NU (*Nahdlatul Ulama*, a leading Islamic organization in Indonesia) although most members are also members of NU. With this NGO, we are redefining Qur'anic exegeses, researching on how to create guidelines of *fiqh perempuan* [Islamic jurisprudence from women's perspectives] in *pesantren* similar to those done by Sinta Nuriyah with her *Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning* (*Kitab Kuning* Studies Forum). (El Khalieqy 2004b)

Abidah believes that the best way to disseminate the notion of feminism, be it Islamic or any other, is through literary writings, since narratives are reflections of everyday lives that the readers can easily identify with and make meaning out of. Her narratives are her tools in reacting against injustices and discrimination against women, which in the end she hopes can inspire readers to create better conditions. The best way to vocalize her feminist views is through writings because she can use her own language, the woman language:

> The more I develop my knowledge and interest on feminism, the more I like discussing about it as it is now actual and I think I have to start writing about it. I know some writers who have no concern about it.… Then, I wrote with my own language, which means that I have full authority on *bahasa perempuan* (female language), utilizing that female language which is not masculine. Masculine language colonizes almost all spheres both knowledge and literature.… Actually, what I feel [about the masculine hegemony of the language] is not coming only from actual discourses that are in circulation but also because my friends around me feel the same way. Thus, I must begin entering that sphere [feminism]. (El Khalieqy 2004b)

Abidah argues that *bahasa perempuan* (female language) is not only crucial but also accurate in presenting women's own experiences and views. It creates a strong identification that suggests a resistance to the essentializing agenda of identity politics created by the dominant male culture (El Khalieqy 2004b). Of course, the problematic of female language is complicated when women project language assumed to be women's but which is, instead, a projection of hegemonic male language. In this case, women write in response to men's ideas rather than their own genuine insights. Nevertheless, through careful reading and scrutiny, the problematic of female language can be identified and reclaimed in order to provide women with an entry into self-knowledge and language. Abidah refers to Nawal Sa'dawi's books, specifically *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which she believes corresponds to the views she wants to

articulate in her writings. The core of her narratives lies in the spirit of equality, though it may appear in different shapes through different literary characterization or different poetical expression.

Abidah's prose works are usually set in a *pesantren* background. The *pesantren* world is the world she knows well, and the language of *pesantren* is her mother tongue. She even calls herself "*santri* minded" (having an orientation the same as a *pesantren* student). Her intention is to bring to life a *pesantren* world that has been largely ignored and marginalized by a number of writers. Only a very few writers, such as Huda Huzairini and A. A. Navis, take account of the *pesantren* world. The *pesantren* world is normally regarded as exclusive, estranged, closed, very conventional, and traditional. It is assumed to be a closed world because only those of *santri* background and family live there. Unless one wants to have an education in Islamic teachings, ordinary Indonesians do not usually live within a *pesantren* area. It can be said that the role of Abidah's writings is to bridge the *pesantren* and ordinary Indonesian world, linking the imaginings of the general Indonesian public to the factual life in the *pesantren* world. She is thus situated among these very few writers who explore the dynamics of *pesantren* life against the grain of the received view of the outside world. Her narratives are her readings of the personal experiences of those living there, though they are not necessarily hers.

Her challenge to orthodox interpretations of women's role and position in Islamic society brings criticism from various *ulama* (Arabic, meaning Islamic clerics). Her novel, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, is an example. The first edition of this novel – about 3000 copies were distributed free to NGOs, *pesantren*, religious and social organizations, and *kyai* (Indonesian, meaning Islamic male clerics) – was controversial when first launched in 2001. Many in the invited audiences, which included *kyai*, showed their disagreement with her story which touched on women's right to education and the not-to-be-spoken-of issue of women's reproductive rights within Islamic tenets. In 2009, when the novel was adapted into a film with the same title, the novel sold thousands of copies, according to the Indonesian newspaper *Jawa Pos* (26 March 2009, 25). The novel became extremely popular after its film adaptation. Nevertheless, the following discussion will centre only on the novel.

Muslim Women and Their Rights

Abidah's *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman with a Turban Covering Her Neck) was first published in 2001. The publication of this novel was partly funded by Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF), Yogyakarta, and the Ford Foundation (FF). It is stated in the introductions from both YKF and FF that the novel seeks to educate readers on women's rights, especially reproduction and education rights within the tenets of Islam. In this novel, Abidah clearly depicts her feminist project, often defined as Islamic feminism.

The novel strongly articulates women's demands for equality with men. The title itself suggests that the positioning of women is always confined within limitations

produced by men. *Perempuan berkalung sorban* literally means a woman who is wearing *sorban* as her necklace. *Sorban* is the headdress worn only by male Muslims. Metaphorically, the title signifies prescribed relations between men and women, i.e., their social positions in Islamic society where religious interpretations play a strong role in the construction of those relations and positions.

Education Rights

The story focuses on the life of Nisa, the shorter name for Annisa Nuhayyah, meaning an intelligent woman (El Khalieqy 2001: 51). Nisa is the daughter of KH. Hanan Abdul Malik, a famous *kyai*, the head of a *Pondok Pesantren Putri* (*pesantren* for girls). As the only daughter, it is understood that Nisa will be her father's successor in heading the *pesantren*: nowadays, it is common for *pesantren putri* to be headed by *Ibu Nyai*, the wife, or the daughter, of a *kyai*. However, Nisa does not see herself living only within the *pesantren* walls; she desires to seek knowledge beyond the *pesantren* walls, and she often mingles with the village children outside the *pesantren*. Nisa is raised in a patriarchy-dominated world where the sexual division of labour is seen to be natural. At school, she uses reading materials supportive of this division: within the family, the father is the breadwinner working in an office, the mother is in charge of domestic duties, the son plays in the yard, and the daughter helps her mother's household load (2001: 10). Abidah displays her criticism of Indonesian formal education, especially of the elementary level where the ideology of the sexual division of labour is persistently reinforced; gender hierarchy is maintained by propagating such representation and roles. Domestic ideology becomes a powerful means to strengthen the patriarchal domination through such teachings.

The protagonist of the story, Nisa, intends to break all the constraining walls, which limit women in their social roles. She wants to grow up having male roles rather than female roles, because this will provide her with more control in the public sphere. Nisa's status as a daughter is symbolic. All women are daughters, but not all are wives and mothers. Nisa's daughterhood acts as a representation of all women, because it shows that all women can be oppressed, but at the same time, it also shows that daughters can respond to unjust situations and demand their rights as though they were sons. Nisa's close relationship with her distant relative *Lek* Khudhori (Uncle Khudhori) contributes greatly to her striving for gender equality. From Khudhori, the young Nisa learns about the equality and justice that Islam ideally brings to its adherents. Khudhori satisfies Nisa's thirst for knowledge about women's history in Islam:

> I was more and more yearning to learn *qira'ah* [to recite the Qur'an beautifully] and horse-back riding. I did them all with high spirit though secretly.… I spent all my free time exercising for horse-back riding, listening to the stories of the Prophet's wives, the forgotten queens of Islam and stories of female Sufis from *Lek* Khudhori. (2001: 24)

The passage above illustrates well Nisa's desire for education beyond domesticity. Her dream is to imitate Aisyah, the Prophet's youngest wife, who led an army in the Battle of Camel. Although Aisyah led the losing side, the fact that she did lead an army indeed captivated the young girl. For Nisa, Aisyah's heroism, and her ability to lead an army of men, conjure up images of an earlier Islam where women were given greater space in public life. Within these images, Nisa sees women's authenticity.

Not only does Nisa have an early education in the history of early Muslim women, she also has an interest in literature and poetry. Khudhori often recites the poems of famous poets, in particular those of Jalaluddin Rumi. Nisa also writes her own poems and sends them to Khudhori who is away at Al-Azhar, Cairo, for tertiary education. Imagination is a powerful ally for Nisa's struggles. Imagination enables her to create her own interpretations and thus fill the gaps in the collective memory of Islamic tradition, which, by and large, erases the presence of female Muslims in history. She begins her own interpretations at an early age by critically assessing *Surah At-Takwir* on female infanticide in pre-Islamic Quraishi culture:

> How could they be called fathers? Or is it what they really are? Burying baby girls alive? Who are then their mothers? Who are their wives? Aren't they women themselves? Why don't they bury their wives alive as well? Sometimes I feel that father doesn't really love me. [Is it] because I am a girl? (2001: 43)

From an early age, Nisa criticizes the gender hierarchy that discriminates against girls in her environment, because of their sex. Her most essential effort is to defy her worst enemy – patriarchal domination – and achieve justice and equality. She persistently maintains her goal: to obtain her freedom. "Women are not men's servants. Nor are they slaves of life. I don't want to be a slave" (2001: 85).

Nisa's struggles are not without challenge. Soon after her graduation from elementary school, at the age of 12, she is forced into marriage with Samsudin, the son of a famous *kyai*. Forced marriage and child marriage are another form of subordination that Nisa has to undergo. Her struggle to be autonomous must necessarily be punished, as it deviates from the religious and social norms of the *pesantren* world. Samsudin, who is considered the black sheep of his family, comes from a devout *santri* family. He is a promiscuous young man, incapable of the upstanding behaviour expected of a *santri* gentleman. The narrative paints him as a monster: he abuses Nisa and frequently rapes her when she does not desire sexual intercourse. When Nisa protests about Samsudin's immoral behaviour to her family, they simply tell her that it is her responsibility to change him into a better person. Nisa is sacrificed and punished for attempting to express her own autonomy.

For Nisa, education is her way to cope with this unjust treatment. She focuses only on her education and ignores Samsudin's misbehaviour. Samsudin is outraged that Nisa ignores him and soon brings a woman, Kalsum, home as his second wife. Kalsum is a widow and far older than Samsudin. Although it is perhaps unusual for wives to share the same house in Indonesia, it sometimes happens in *pesantrens*. Samsudin's polygamous marriage is a relief for Nisa, as it releases her from her responsibilities as a wife: she accepts this practice gladly. She can now concentrate

more on her education, because Kalsum, being her helpful ally, takes over Nisa's responsibility for managing the household and fulfilling Samsudin's sexual needs. Kalsum also gives him a daughter, Fadillah. Here, Abidah gives polygamy a new face. The dynamic of polygamy is presented sympathetically when Abidah depicts it as a useful ally for Nisa in seeking her self-empowerment. Because Samsudin takes a second wife, Nisa can finish her education. However, Kalsum is also Samsudin's victim: his promise of material luxury, which seduced her, is a lie. A bond between Nisa and Kalsum is established when Kalsum shows interest in Nisa's education and asks Nisa to be her mentor on issues concerning women and Islam: sisterhood emerges between the two exploited women. Their bond is their response to the same threat, as they relate events and so come together in sorrow. It is also because of Nisa's teaching Kalsum that they can establish a sense of collective identity as women.

Education is central to this story. Lack of education is an essential contributing factor in women's victimization. Kalsum's lack of education, not knowing her rights as a wife, makes her an easy target for Samsudin's violence. Nisa's young age and her high school education are an inadequate basis for her to fight back against Samsudin's violence. In portraying this, Abidah shows that, within a *santri* family marriage, which is commonly perceived to be closest to Islamic ideals, domestic violence can take place. Abidah further questions gender bias in relation to the wife's responsibilities regulated in *kitab kuning* (the yellow book) and taught in *pesantren*. At school Nisa is taught that a wife will be cursed if she refuses her husband's desire for sexual intercourse. However, in her explanation to Kalsum on this matter, Nisa critically rebuffs such teaching, saying that it is obviously designed for men's benefit, and intentionally neglects women's own words on the subject. Nisa believes women's feelings need to be taken into account. Yet, is she prepared? Does she want to raise this problem? For Nisa, a husband's imposition of intercourse when the wife refuses is clearly an act of rape. Nisa's knowledge means nothing, however, because she has no power to stop Samsudin's violence. She is too young and too scared to defy her husband. Nisa's young age and Kalsum's ignorance indeed make them perfect subjects for further subjugation.

As Abidah expresses her discontent with child marriage and polygamy, these two seemingly perpetual problems Indonesian women have to deal with, she illustrates the hostile conditions in which women have to live. Abidah even goes further, saying that child marriage is largely due to patriarchal manipulation of what is termed *ijbar* (Arabic: "the act of forceful order") in Islamic *shari'a*. This is where a Muslim girl is subjected to the overruling power, or *ijbar*, of her father or guardian, supposedly in the interests of the girl herself. Through the story of Nisa, Abidah critically assesses *ijbar*. How could a girl 12 years of age know her own interest, particularly in the choice of husband? The most common interpretation of *ijbar* is when the father, or a guardian, asks a girl whether she approves of a certain person and if she keeps silent this means she agrees with the father's (or guardian's) choice. This is Nisa's experience. Her silence when she is asked, which demonstrates her ignorance, is simply perceived as her agreement. Through the voice of Nisa's uncle,

Khudhori, Abidah criticizes *ijbar*, because she believes that it is entirely against the spirit of autonomy in Islam. *Ijbar* should be located within certain contexts and conditions; it was never meant to be monolithically applicable in all circumstances.

Upon her graduation from high school at the age of 17, and encouraged by Khudhori who has returned from Egypt and Germany, Nisa finally agrees to speak about Samsudin's abuse to her parents. When matters are settled between her family and Samsudin's, she files for divorce. Being a young divorcee, she is subjected to public prejudice, in particular about her close relation to Khudhori. Determined to start a new life, however, and to pursue higher education, Nisa leaves her hometown for university education in Yogyakarta. A year later she marries Khudhori. Her second marriage is her escape from her *janda* (Indonesian: "a widow or divorcee") status, because she cannot bear the prejudicial societal treatment. With her marriage to Khudhori, who is a lecturer in Islamic studies, these prejudices soon disappear. Nisa gains what she has struggled for. Her activism on women's issues within an Islamic perspective is supported by Khudhori, and she becomes a strong supporter of the women's movement. Her feminist project is to help provide equality and justice for women who are subjugated through patriarchal domination, as happened in her own experience. Her marriage to Khudhori is an ideal one, each supporting the other in creating *sakinah mawaddah wa-rahmah* family ("a harmonious, peaceful, and affectionate family").

When their son Mahbub is 1 year old, however, Khudhori dies in a car accident. It is rumoured that Samsudin is responsible for the hit and run accident, which kills Khudhori, but the truth is never revealed in the story. Nisa herself believes that life and death are in the hands of the Creator. The death of Khudhori is a significant device in the story, for it reminds the readers that the kind of family life that Nisa and Khudhori have exists only at an ideal level (El Khalieqy 2004b).

Nisa's continued struggle for education is not easy, but she pursues education despite her circumstances. She is courageous, because she attempts to formulate interpretations of Islam from within the perspectives of women's experiences. In this story women become the central social actors. At first subjugated then empowered, women's social position is moved by Abidah from the periphery to the centre.

Abidah advocates women's rights within Islam, and specifically within the contexts of Islamic teaching, she highlights domestic violence, because it is regarded as being nonexistent in Islam. In this way Abidah creates a heroine who follows a course of action that constantly resists gender bias and who refuses to play the role of a slave victimized by patriarchy. The role of education is the central theme of the novel. This is because in addition to her explicit opinions on child and forced marriage, polygamy, and domestic violence, Abidah emphasizes the significance of education in resisting oppression based on conservative Islamic teachings. For Abidah, education functions as a means of achieving psychological independence, freeing women from oppression and providing room for emancipation. In this way Abidah's book is a challenging call against certain traditional Islamic practices, such as child and forced marriage and polygamy.

Abidah and Reproductive Rights

These issues of reproductive rights are presented strongly in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. The novel is included among the few books published in Indonesia from 1990 to 2003 that are said to cover "all issues concerning women's reproduction rights and women's reproductive health, including violent acts and violations of women's rights" (Abubakar 2002: 138). The story translates the issues of reproductive rights from their social and cultural context within the *pesantren* world. Abidah's fictionalization of these issues proves to be more powerful and influential than if they were represented in more clinical terms, as the story relates to the life experiences of many women. In this section I would like to relate Abidah's criticisms to the present situation of women in Indonesia.

A little background information is necessary to understand the issue of reproductive rights as they are understood in Islam in Indonesia. As part of their responsibilities as the vicegerents on earth, Muslims are adjured to ensure the survival of the human race through reproduction conducted through sexual relationships regulated within the sanction of marriage. Women, with their sole ability to bear children, are then central, for they are the entity linking the past and the future. Humankind relies on women's bodies to secure the existence of future generations. In a society like Indonesia, however, where religious teaching regarding the power of a husband over a wife is very strong, a woman's right over her own body is significantly disregarded. Her ownership and reproductive rights are denied, because the ability to control her own reproductive behaviour smacks self-determination and freedom from male authority – something that is anathema to men in most societies, let alone Indonesia. Women's reproductive health is, by and large, dismissed from male politics.

Although recent developments have shown that many NGOs and women's organizations are now strongly addressing reproductive rights, according to UNICEF, the maternal mortality rate and lifetime risk of maternal death are still high, because of the poor handling of women's reproductive health (2005). To make matters worse, numerous aspects of women's reproductive rights have intentionally been neglected by the Indonesian state, for example, abortion and infertility (Blackburn 2004: 115–62). Blackburn argues that it is difficult for women who fall pregnant against their will to secure an abortion, because there is no consensus on the issue. Religious objections create more difficulties for the state to sanction abortion based on women's needs. Infertility is another problematic matter. In problems of infertility, the blame is simply placed on the woman, rather than on men, without really knowing the physical cause (2004: 162). In addition, despite the fact that leukorrhea,[5] commonly known as *keputihan*, can be a vital symptom of dangerous reproductive diseases, such as sexually transmitted diseases, the Ministry of Health fails to classify it as needing urgent attention (Kinasih 2004).

The lack of women's awareness of the notion of "woman's body, woman's right" also contributes greatly to the failure to implement women's reproductive rights. There is very little discourse about, or attention given to, the notion of the subject.

Religion is probably the most significant reason for this lack of attention. Traditional interpretations of Islam view women as half the value of men, and a woman's body is owned by the male lineage, exemplified exclusively with the *ijbar* right when she is single and her husband's control when she is married. A wife is subject to her husband's responsibility; thus, control over her body and integrity is in the hands of her husband. Who is the owner of a woman's body is certainly a problematic issue. The notion of "woman's body, woman's right" implies authority and therefore the right for women to control their bodies, sexuality, and reproductive organs. For most men, support of this position would definitely jeopardize their control over women. Thus, it is not so surprising that there is very little discourse about, or attention given to, the subject of reproductive rights.

These issues of reproductive rights are presented strongly in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. It articulates women's own concerns and turns their concerns into an informative teaching method as, for instance, when Nisa tells her relative, *Lek* Ummi (Aunt Ummi), about women's reproductive rights:

> Caring for children is the husband's responsibility.… Also, for example if *Lek* Ummi refuses to breastfeed the baby because the household load is too heavy, *Lek* Mahmud [*Lek* Ummi's husband] is obligated to find a surrogate mother whom he'll pay well enough. These are the husband's responsibility, *Lek*.… You mean, you don't know if you have the right to decide whether you want to get pregnant or not, *Lek*? (El Khalieqy 2001: 259)

Abidah's story presents important reproductive rights issues: domestic responsibilities are to be shared by both husband and wife; the wife has the right to her body; she has the right to decide whether to have a baby. On other occasions, Abidah, through the voice of Nisa, speaks of a wife's right to initiate and enjoy sexual intercourse with her husband. Although this might seem odd to most Indonesian Muslims, as only men may initiate sexual relations, Abidah directly voices her feminist views on the issue of sexual rights. Nevertheless, she always bears in mind that sexual relationships are only to take place within marriage.

In fact reproductive rights are not new in Islamic law. Classical books on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) have regulated such issues, ranging from sexual relations to childbearing. According to K. H. Sahal Mahfudz, classical religious interpretations of such rights place women at the centre (2002: 113–18). Verses in the Qur'an secure these rights: husbands are responsible for treating their wives with respect, and women, due to their childbearing ability, deserve to receive this respectful treatment (*Al Qur'an dan Terjemahnya* 2001: *Surah* Al-Nisa verse 19 and *Surah* Luqman verse 14). Islam says that because of their so-called reproduction burden, women are given exemption in their vicegerent responsibilities, particularly in the matter of *ibadah* (worshipping). However, Kyai Sahal reminds us that the practicality of those verses is far from the accepted ideal in most Muslim communities. Women's reproductive rights often exist only on a rhetorical level and are never actually applied at the practical level. As Abidah's work reveals, efforts to raise women's awareness of their reproductive rights are still needed to help them finally reach the ideal goal of just and equal Islamic communities.

Abidah on Gender-Based Violence: Domestic Violence

In her novel, Abidah also raises one of the most contested issues in contemporary Muslim feminists' struggle against violence against women. To a certain degree, most female characters in the story suffer from gender-based violence, whether direct or indirect, physical or mental. Abidah's attack on patriarchal subjugation exposes marital rape, a term only recently used by the Muslim feminist movement. Nisa, her co-wife Kalsum, her relative *Lek* Ummi, and even her mother reflect the situation of many Muslim women who are taught that anytime a husband wants sexual intercourse with his wife, even if she is not ready, or willing, his wife should never refuse. The practice has long been uncritically accepted due to an interpretation of a Qur'anic verse, which states that a husband has "the right" to beat his wife if she is found to be *nusyuz* (disobedient) (*Al Qur'an dan Terjemahnya* 2001: *Surah* An-Nisa verse 4). The term *nusyuz* has long been subject to debate in Islamic communities. Conservative interpretations believe that this verse endorses a husband to be the sole controller and owner of his wife, including the right to "punish" her in case of *nusyuz*. Modern and gender-equal interpretations of this term demand contextual readings of this verse. If it is not to be abolished, just like the abolition of slavery, *nusyuz* is only applicable under special conditions. Hussein Muhammad reasons that most violence against women in Muslim societies is basically an extension of this verse (2002: 203–12). Such violence, however, is against the Islamic ideals of protecting five basic human rights in the perspective of modern interpretations of Islam: rights to have religion, to live, to think, to reproduction, and to possession of property (Mahfudz 2002: 114). Hussein Muhammad argues further that theological dogma, which says that man's authority over woman is natural, needs to be reformed and reconstructed in order to be more gender equal, which is indeed the basic of Islamic ideals. Marriage is a contract based on equality and justice, and relations between husband and wife are not to be based on hierarchical power relations.

The fact that Abidah addresses gender-based violence in her novel is indeed crucial, because many studies conducted by NGOs on women's issues have shown that reporting of gender-based violence, especially domestic violence, has increased due to the rise in awareness of such issues. Rifka Annisa, an NGO specializing in women's issues in Yogyakarta, recently published its research on domestic violence in Central Java. Its findings are noteworthy, because they show that domestic violence, whether physical, sexual, or emotional, which was previously regarded as nonexistent, was experienced by many women in the research area (Mohammad et al. 2001).[6] Violence from a partner was the most common form of domestic violence:

> Women are at the greatest risk of violence from their husbands; one in every four women in our sample had been sexually or physically abused by a partner. Sexual violence was more common than physical violence, with one in five women reporting sexual violence (i.e., being forced to have sex against their will ensuing physical force or threats), whereas one in ten women experienced physical violence from a husband at some point in their lives. (2001: 77)

On 14 September 2004, the Indonesian government enacted *Undang-Undang*, No. 23 tahun 2004 called as *Undang-Undang Penghapusan Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga* (PKDRT – Abolition of Domestic Violence Act). This act aims to give legal protection for women from violence occurring within domestic walls. The act, however, does not automatically guarantee a more women-friendly environment. The Javanese idea of harmony might hamper the implementation of this act. Many women victims of partner violence are still reluctant to report their suffering, because Javanese ethics, reinforced by traditional Islamic interpretation of women's duties, emphasize harmony within the family at all cost. Women are burdened with their duty to be loyal to their husbands even though their well-being is at stake, and many women choose silence over reporting violence to the police for the sake of a harmonious household (Mohammad et al. 2001: 85). Indonesian women, irrespective of ethnic, religious, cultural, or social backgrounds, are thus all at risk of being victimized by domestic violence. Indeed, some cultural and religious norms even encourage a tolerant attitude to gender-based violence, as well as encourage silence in the face of abuse.

Conclusion

Abidah's novel, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, remarkably raises these issues in the context of women and Islam, placing such issues at the heart of women's everyday life. In a realistic manner, Abidah writes about previously taboo issues, such as marital rape and domestic violence. She brings them to public notice and openly seeks to educate her readers, hoping that they will come to understand that any violence is intolerable. Abidah understands that any violence in the name of Islam is un-Islamic. It is this drastic change in awareness that Abidah hopes to accomplish.

Abidah's gift – showing that Islam indeed can open the door widely for its adherents to speak their minds in response to the authoritative discourse restricting and denying Muslims their rights – is well expressed in her novel, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. Through her novel, she raises issues that previously were rarely recognized or, rather, largely suppressed by mainstream male interpretations of women's rights in Islam.

In breaking silence and giving voice to women, she has indeed created "a feminist novel." Her gift to Indonesian women readers is narrated through the portrayal of women voicing their rights in the private sphere where women are mostly considered as a silent majority. She takes ethical and moral positions and is eloquent on the project of cultural transformation, of establishing new values, which support justice and equality. As a revisionist writer, refusing to keep silent, she replaces heroes with heroines and revises the stories of grand heroic figures with stories of ordinary women. In this way, Abidah El Khalieqy celebrates the experiences of female survival that can be found in the different responses women have enacted in their specific historical situations.

Notes

1. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, and Muslims in Indonesia are predominantly Sunni following Syafi'i *madhab* (school). There are minorities of other Islamic schools such as Ahmadiyah and Shi'ah often accused to be un-Islamic and also syncretism between indigenous religions and Islam existing throughout Indonesia. One might find that in Indonesia on one hand, there are radical Muslims, but on the other there are many more progressive Muslims who believe in democracy, civil society, human rights, and equality of women. Indeed, Indonesian Islam is still mostly moderate.
2. In this paper, Abidah El Khalieqy will be addressed using her first name, as she is usually called.
3. *Pesantren* are Islamic boarding schools managed by Muslim clerics, or *kyai* (Indonesian, meaning Islamic male clerics). *Pesantren* is segregated between male and female boarding schools. Students of *pesantren* are called *santri* or *santriwan* (male *santri*) and *santriwati* (female *santri*). It is common that *kitab kuning* (Indonesian, meaning yellow books) are taught in the *pesantren. Kitab kuning* are classical books recording exegeses and explications of Islamic teachings by *ulama* of premodern schools of thoughts. Although secular Muslims apparently do not use such *kitab* (books), for *santri* (students of *pesantren*) and their surrounding communities, such books are very popular.
4. Taslima Nasreen (age 48) is a Bangladeshi feminist, an author, a poet, and a human rights activist who has published fiction (novels and short stories), poems, and articles that are mostly banned in Bangladesh and India. She was born and raised in a Muslim family but in a secular environment. Since 1994, she has been living in exile after she received death threats from Muslim fundamentalists because of her feminist views and strong criticisms of Islam in the region. Since then she has been famously known to write about secular humanism, equality for women, freedom of thinking, and human rights through publications, lectures, and campaigns. For detailed information, please visit her website: *The Official Website of Taslima Nasreen* at http://taslimanasrin.com.
5. Leukorrhea may occur at any age and affects most women. It is a non-blood vaginal discharge, which may be normal or represent minimal pathological changes from various causes. Leukorrhea during mature periods, before or after menstruation, or during pregnancy without any other symptoms or odour is a normal vaginal discharge. Once it is persistent and accompanied by other symptoms, such as pain and itchiness, then it may be a pathological reaction, an early symptom of more serious diseases, such as reproductive organ diseases or liver, kidney, and heart disorders. See http://www.martha-tilaar.com/indo/perlutahu/perlutahu_07.shtml.
6. The research sample was 13,094 women at their reproductive age of 15–49 years. The research area was Purworejo District in Central Java.

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