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The Objectification of Muslim Women in Indonesia: The Case of Fashionable Niqab in Social Media

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Abstract

Currently, some niqab wearers are actively expressing themselves on social media, and the niqab has become part of a fashion trend. The internet and social media enable niqab wearers to actively and freely engage in social interactions, especially on contemporary social media platforms. They differ from conventional niqab wearers, who are often depicted wearing dark-colored niqabs and utilizing online activities as an alternative means of communication due to restrictions based on their religious ideology. These new niqab wearers tend to appear in bright, fashionable colors and are active in both online and offline activities. This study employs critical discourse analysis to examine two aspects: firstly, the discourses shaping the moral and Islamic construction of women's bodies in the Indonesian context; secondly, how the emergence of a new niqab trend relates to the discourse on women's bodies. The findings reveal that the new niqab trend represents a shift in the meaning of the niqab from a moral identity to being associated with fashion expression now and individuality in the digital era. This research contributes to academic studies by offering a new perspective on the relationship between religion, fashion, and social media, while also enriching the discourse on Muslim women's bodies in the modern Indonesian context.

Keywords: Islam, Women, New Media, Niqab

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INTRODUCTION

In recent days, many niqab wearers have appeared with various expressions on social media and other public spaces. This emergence is also followed by an increasing number of women wearing headscarves or niqabs. The increase in the number of wearing headscarves or niqabs also raises the diversity of women's religious expressions in public spaces starting in terms of fashion and trends in clothes and niqabs to how they behave. Thus, the increase in the number of women wearing headscarves or niqabs is not only considered a positive sign but also raises anxiety and criticism of women. This paper wants to focus on the criticism given to women with niqabs who are fashionable and expressive

on social media. Social media is a representation of public space. Social media is a place for self-expression, channeling religious expression and enabling them to interact with the wider community with more diverse views. Therefore, all parties and people are perceived that they have the authority and right to criticize, stigmatize, and even control women's bodies. Based on the observation, I argue that the objectification of the women's bodies which are influenced by several ideologies and interests becomes a constructed idea that has based the others' responses to the phenomena. Finally, understanding the dynamics of wearing a niqab will lead the research to understand the complexity of the relation between the socio-political, religious, and gender issues.

The niqab is closely related to women's discourse in Islam. However, other factors can't be neglected. Recent studies are trying to have women talk and no longer simplify the niqab as a symbol of men's oppression. The results have been mixed. The niqab became a symbol of resistance to western hegemony in general and a response to the economic- social-political conditions in the country in particular (Awan & Zempi: 2016; Golnaraghi & Dye: 2016; Kevin J. Ayotte and Mary E. Husain: 2019; Mohammadi & Rastegar: 2018; Nasrin Akter Chowdhury, Hanif Suhairi Abu Bakar: 2017; Nisa: 2011). This was very clear and quite affected the study of Islamic anthropology, when Mahmood saw a large number of niqab wearers in Egypt and the strengthening of religious activities in mosques by women as the politics of pious people (Mahmood: 2001, 2005). The further work that criticizes the opinion of women's powerlessness and simplifies women's religious expression is Lila Abu Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Need Saving" (Lila Abu-Lughod: 2013). These studies do not want to say that religious factors or religious reasons are not important, but religious reasons and the opinion that religion tends to be patriarchal reduces the role of women in making decisions and their empowerment.

Based on previous studies, this paper wants to see the religious expressions of fashionable niqabi women as a form of their abilities. In addition, this paper also wants to further examine why women's clothing or women's expression in public spaces is a serious problem that must be controlled and regulated in the Indonesian context. At the same time, the problematic position of the niqab -between Islamic practice, Religious Freedom of Human Rights, extremist group (which threads Pancasila)- have been discussed and occurred in certain situations in Indonesia (Afifah: 2019; Kudhori: 2018; Kurniawan: 2018). By utilizing library data and analysis of social media content, this paper wants to see

the complexity between religious expression and community response in an ongoing process. This paper also includes some research on veiled wearers related to the discourses of women's bodies. Hence, I consider that women's religious expressions that arise from their empowerment and choices can't be separated from their response to social conditions, thus, the Indonesian context related to women becomes important.

DISCUSSION

1. The discourses of women in Indonesia

1.1. Before the Soeharto Era Ended: Moral Panic

The freedom of the Indonesian press and the political context has supported the increase of moral panic. In the last period of the New Order, it became the beginning of the movement of religious movements, especially Islam. In that era, religious movement and the freedom of speech were so limited by the government. The collapse of the regime that has pressed the people for decades and the freedom celebrated by the people, make the people make the most of the opportunity. Platt, Davies, and Bennett have asserted in the conclusion of their paper: "We believe that these contributions demonstrate that morality projects concerned with defining and disciplining gender and sexuality have become more intensive and more visible in the public domain than they were during the New Order period" (Platt et al.: 2018). The issue of gender and sexuality become one of the issues that attract a lot of attention in the issues of moral panic. The huge wave of the new media supported by the freedom of speech, which has emerged in the post-New Order era, has produced social anxiety.

In addition, the mass media (i.e. television, magazine, newspaper, internet content, and social media in the recent period) become the space of the contestation between many ideas of sexuality. Lyn has cited Cohen who has developed the term 'moral panic':

A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Okin: 1999 in Parker & Nilan: 2013)

Based on Cohen's argument, the moral panic was produced by many parties with their arguments about the threat against certain social values. Hence, society becomes the subject and the object of those moral panic.

The strong and unstoppable presence of modernity has forced society to make defenses to protect the social values of Indonesian. In the post of New Order era, modernity will always be related to the western culture, which contradicts Indonesia culture as the eastern. As Lyn has mentioned: "There are some keywords that crop up repeatedly in this discourse: the need to 'filter' (*filter*) modernity, to stem the rotting or deterioration (*merosot*) of the moral fibre and to strengthen the 'fortress' (*benteng*) of morality." (Parker & Nilan: 2013). The words 'filtering', 'stemming', and 'strengthening' have been applied to protect the influence of westernization in the media. Indonesian people have perceived that one of the western cultures is included the irresponsible sex.

Moral panic has been shown in the way how society and even the authority treat a woman's body. The moral disorder of society has been related to what women wear and do. The openness and the freedom of the press encompass the freedom of expression of sexual both men and women. In other words, uncontrolled women lead the only cause of the nation's moral destruction. Candraningrum's observation of the Indonesian sexual lifestyle made her come up with the argument: "In order to maintain these so-called values, it is girls' sexuality rather than boys' that must be curbed: in cases of rape, girls are the ones investigated and scrutinized and judged to be guilty of *zina* (illegal sexual intercourse)! We are indeed in a woeful state." (Candraningrum: 2013) Candraningrum's argument was also affirmed by Lyn's argument: "This comment reflects hierarchies of sexual conservatism both of gender and place. Girls are more vulnerable to stains on their reputation than boys." (Parker & Nilan: 2013). Lyn's argument has resulted in collecting Indonesian youth's comments about their sexual lifestyle. Therefore, the idea of the threat to a woman's body leads the authorities to take responsibility for controlling women's bodies.

Based on religious and cultural values, many parties have constructed the idea of womanhood, and even determined the legal regulations to realize the ideal woman. According to Candraningrum: "Another argument holds that a combination of religious belief and a culture of gender normativity causes deep sexual anxiety among Indonesian religious believers." (Candraningrum: 2013). For instance, the argument that was built based on the religious and cultural normativity has made the local government in a

particular region of Indonesia enforce the regional regulations based on Islamic law, called Perda Shari'a. Another instance is the state schools in particular that impose their women students to wear the veil in order to be looked at modesty (Candraningrum: 2007). In short, the idea of the threat to women's bodies was constructed massively. Thus, it can be ensured that the idea will be internalized and it will become the ultimate true idea of what a woman is. All woman is the source of disaster.

1.2. The Old Disease: 'Objectification' of Women's Body

Perceiving a woman's body as a source of problem implies that women are nothing more than objects. As Rachel has argued in the theory of objectification: "Women are defined, evaluated, and treated more often as objects than men are. In particular, it is the viewing of women as *sex objects*, as instruments for the sexual servicing and pleasure of men that is perhaps the phenomenon most familiar to scholars and laypersons alike." (Calogero: 2011). Based on the objectification, women are blamed for all sexual acts between women and men that deviate from community norms, (i.e. rape, sexual harassment of women, catcalling, pre-marital sex, and other forms of sexual violence). The people surrounding the women will be asked about women's clothing and behavior that can cause them to be harassed. Furthermore, based on the treatment received by women, Rachel has mapped the objectification out. According to Rachel:

Sexual objectification plays out most obviously in two areas: actual interpersonal or social encounters (e.g., catcalls, "checking out" or gazing at women's bodies, sexual comments, and harassment) and exposure to visual media that spotlight women's bodies and body parts, depicting them as the target of a non reciprocated male gaze. (Calogero: 2011)

The main problem that constructs the objectification is the unequal relation and nonreciprocal relation between women and men in social life as well as in sexual life.

Understanding how the strong construction of the objectification of a woman's body makes the objectification in a woman's mind itself as unavoidably affected. I argue there are two overlapped contrast reasons played behind wearing the niqab. *First*, beyond religious reasons, perceiving women's bodies as slander is the other reason that has based women to wear the niqab. To understand the logic behind wearing the niqab, I reanalyze the interview results of Amalia Sofi Iskandar's research entitled "Identities Construction Muslimah of Cadar". In other words, the men's interest was considered by a woman as her own mistake. Based on her interviews, I do not only understand the way how the niqab-

wearers perceive their own body, especially their face as the object of men's interest and blame their bodies as the source of slander that made men interested but also based on the consideration that the niqab-wearer perceive and believe that veil (covered head) is not enough to protect their selves and prevent men's interest. The inability of the hijab has also been experienced by and has made Virgoun's wife wears the niqab as well. Virgoun's story was told by Derry -who is an Islamic preacher- in the electronic media interview.

“Once Virgoun confided, he was often angry when many men teased or saw the beauty of his wife @inararusli on the road...even at the mosque after praying...his wife walked first, Virgoun was behind, so there were 2 (two) young men in front of him, they were talking about his wife...eh uh...beautiful...ta'aruf...do not date....astaghfirullah... (that person can just be tempted to pray) hmmm...moreover someone who does not pray...” (Noviarina: 2018)

In conclusion, besides the religious reason, the use of the niqab has been motivated by the niqab function of the extra protection because the women have perceived their bodies as the slander.

Second, the objectification of women's bodies has been shown in the way how women are conscious that they are always watching and will always be watched by all men. Based on the women's consciousness, they will always be attempted to fulfill men's eyes and minds of their standard of womanhood. As Musliha has said: “Hijab can also function as a tool to show ourselves that *we are not twopenny women*. Because *covering aurat is an identity of good people*. Moreover, with good and polite behavior *there is no way of anyone would say we are twopenny women*.” (Amalia et al.: 2013). The niqab becomes a women's image. The women with covered bodies were identical with modesty, pious, and protected women. By using the niqab, women want to be considered as good people. Bartky's argument was cited by Rachel.: “In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. The woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (Calogero: 2011). Finally, the objectification that makes a woman judge herself from the way the other men see her, or imagines a man's view of her, will make the woman judge another woman from her assumptions about a man judgment.

2. New Niqab Trend and the Women's Body

2.1. The Moral is Directly Comparable to Appearance

The inability of the veil and the hijab to prevent men's interest has reduced the meaning of the veil. At the same time, the people's assumption of the connection between covering and controlling women's bodies has made the veil related to the issues of sexuality. As Candraningrum has asserted: "Thus, the veil has, perversely, come to define erotic desirability. Sensual poses have become embedded into the jilbab." (Candraningrum: 2013). The logic of the objectification either in the men's mind or even in the women's mind that has hegemony make interaction with same-sex or with the opposite sex has been based on consideration of the appearance, such as the dress, the attitude, the beauty, the wealth, and so on. As the statement that Rachel was cited:

As Berger (1972) explained, She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. . . . Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it. (Calogero: 2011)

In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between men and women. The men will treat the women based on their judgment. Hence, women will always pay attention and adjust their desires to be treated as well as the women wish. The problem is that logic does not work oppositely. Therefore, the objectification that has involved both men and women has occurred in a different meaning and unequal position. As I said earlier, that objectification is the inequality of perceptions and relations between men and women. The involvement of women in the objectification does not make the women objectify men as women's part of the counteraction effort, but their awareness of the objectification, the women use to gain their interests. Furthermore, the men will continue to regard the women as an object, regardless of how women dress. In addition, the appearance is not only perceived concerning the morality that was seen and judged by the other human but also is related to the judgment before God. The determination of moral quality that refers to appearance does not only occur in relations between humans but also the relationship between humans and God. Therefore, the dressing becomes a symbol of obedience, both in social and religious affairs.

2.2. Developing in a Different Direction: The Emergences of Contradiction in the Digital Era

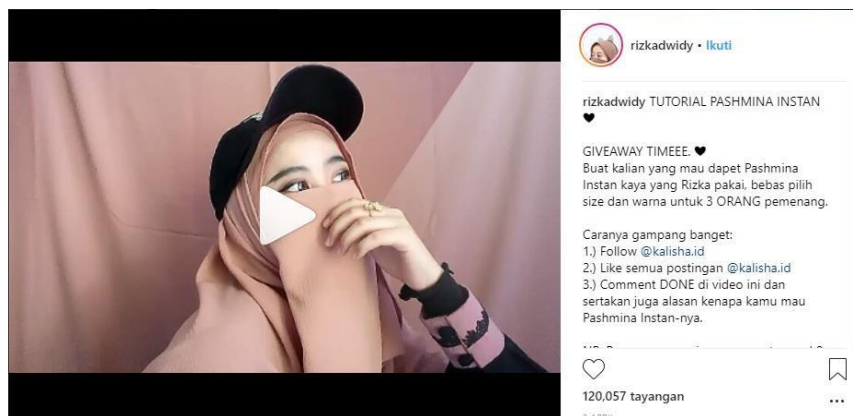
Based on the niqab-wearers statements, the niqab should not attract the other eyes. Yet, the recent trend of the niqab has shown the opposite. The ground notion of religion about the niqab is that women should not expose their beauty so that it will not attract the men's attention. In the digital era, many niqab-wearers have been involved and their photos have emerged in many uploaded photos on certain digital platforms. Many pros and cons have emerged on social media, especially Instagram, about the religious point of view about the niqab-wearer photos in social media. In addition, the platform of social media has two dimensions of space. Social media could be private and public at the same time. According to Piela: "This collapse of traditionally understood private and public categories represent a 'localized and vernacular version of intimate publics in an age of mobile intimacy'." (Hjorth and Lim, 2012: 478 in Piela: 2017). It is private because everyone has one account that is able to be controlled by herself. In other words, an individual's account is his or her private stuff. On the other side, it is public because many people will be seen, commented on, and involved in the discourse that is raised by the owner of the account or the uploaded content. The presence of the niqab-wearers on social media will automatically expose the women's bodies through the posted photos.



Capture 1: @tasyasayeed

From many Instagram users of the niqab-wearers, the two people who are controversially famous on Instagram, are Tasya Sayeed (@tasyasayeed) and Rizka D. Widy (@rizkadwidy). Sayeed, who is a professional makeup artist, has frequently uploaded her

photos wearing colorful a niqab and applying thick makeup around her eyes. Her account on Instagram has been followed by more than 28.5 thousand users. Those photos have obtained the pros and cons of the viewers. Some of them have praised the beauty and beauty of makeup, and on the other side, other people argued that the thick makeup does not fit with the niqab. Furthermore, Sayeed's expression was perceived as an insult action against the niqab (Putri, 2018). Another niqab-wearer who is criticized by the viewers is Rizka D. Widy. Widy is one of the Indonesian celebrities on Instagram with more than 114 thousand followers. The viewers criticize that the uploads show the beauty of a woman in the niqab, which is considered to be contrary to the Islamic principle of wearing the niqab itself. Furthermore, some of the viewers have told her to take the niqab off rather than insult the niqab. Besides, both of them have used their account as a promotion platform. They have frequently uploaded photos to endorse and advertise particular types of products. Sayeed frequently endorses the makeup products, whereas, Widy frequently endorses the niqab product. The existing critiques have affirmed the evidence of the objectification of women's bodies, even to the niqab-wearer. The people the public perceives as having the right to control women's bodies. According to Candraningrum: "Femaleness is a commodity that comes in for heavy stigmatization in the arena of religiosity." (Candraningrum: 2013). In short, religion has absolute authority in regulating women's bodies.



Capture 2: @rizkadwidy

However, their emergence is a form of resistance against certain fashion standards and certain stigma of the niqab. As Scott argued, (fashionable) niqab is like everyday action

and expression is a form of resistance (Scott: n.d.). In this case, both Sayeed and Widy provide and show the different standards of Muslimah's beauty and the new meaning of the niqab. As Heffner's assentation that has been cited by Piela: "In fashion discourse, the body shape sought through specially designed garments remains an unquestioned, mostly unattainable ideal. Independent fashion blogs, while rejecting the idea of a single ideal of beauty, still maintain their focus on the visibility of the body" (Hefner, 2012 in Piela: 2017). Besides reconstructing against certain standard of beauty and fashion, the user of social media also uses the digital platform to determine their selves, their identity, and even their belief. Piela argued:

Publication of self-portraits online and subsequent discussions about them are an important step in the self-identification of women who wear the niqab, as they are then able to create safe spaces for appreciation and positive discussion of the niqab. This is where they are able to resist dominant discourses about the niqab and Islam and construct their expressions of religiosity. (Piela: 2017)

Thus, the digital platforms, especially social media, which have both dimensions of private and public space, are able to reproduce and reconstruct the form of fashion and its meaning of it in the discourses on women's bodies.

In another analysis, capitalism can shift the meaning of the niqab. Based on observations from both Instagram users, both Sayeed and Widy often make creative and attractive uploads for promoting certain products that they endorse. In other words, to promote the product, the user should make the content as attractive as possible. As the niqab-wearer, attracting attention is prohibited. "This type of market, or call it simply Islamic capitalism, is driven by spiritual fervor, peer pressure and probably even a desire to stray beyond secular norms—funky jilbab as counterculture" (Candraningrum: 2013). The increase of the niqab-wearer has been marked as a business opportunity. Capitalism makes the people who get involved in the market read, provide, and exploit the desire of buyers to fulfill their desires, including the desire for religion. Finally, the interests of capitalism, which prioritize the profits, are ensured to shift religious ideology.

CONCLUSION

The use of the niqab is not solely based on women's awareness of the objectification of their bodies by men but is also influenced by the perception of the potential slander associated with their faces. This awareness of objectification leads women to view both themselves and other women in an objectified manner, following the will of

the subject (men). The presence of social media allows niqab wearers to shape their own identities, counter negative stigma, and create a space for self-expression. Meanwhile, capitalism plays a significant role in transforming the value of the niqab, from a symbol of avoiding attention from the opposite sex to becoming part of a trend that attracts attention.

This study contributes to academic discourse by offering a new perspective on the relationship between religiosity, Muslim women's identities, social media, and capitalism. It demonstrates how elements of modern culture influence traditional values within the context of Islam. However, this study has limitations, particularly in its geographical and cultural scope, which may not represent the experiences of all niqab-wearing communities. Additionally, the approach used lacks comprehensive empirical data to support generalizations. Future research is recommended to expand the geographical and cultural scope, explore the phenomenon of the niqab in other communities, and delve deeper into the relationship between capitalism and religious symbols in the modern era. Further studies could also investigate the impact of social media on the identities of other religious groups.

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