



To Wear, to Wander, and to Write: Women's Subjectivity and the Jilbab in Asma Nadia's Jilbab Traveler

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Abstract. Since the last decade, travelogues written by Muslim women that discuss religiously motivated journeys have constituted a significant portion of contemporary Indonesian literature. Apart from conveying information about distant worlds, they predominantly reflect the subjectivity of their authors. These writings capture how Muslim women construct their subjectivity through expressing their appearances, especially the Jilbab while traveling and encountering the Other. One prominent example is the book *Jilbab Traveler* (2009), written by Asma Nadia and 12 other Muslim women, in which the authors record their journeys to various countries worldwide. This research relies on concepts related to travel literature, subjectivity, and fashion. As a method, it utilizes discourse analysis. Thereby, it provides an insight into the subjectivity constructions among the book's authors by examining how they wear their Jilbab when they are on their journeys and write about it. This study finds that Jilbab emerges as an arena for contestation and negotiation between the idea of being cosmopolitan on one side and the idea of Jilbab as a narrow, closed, and inferior attribute of the Other.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Travelogue, the Jilbab.

1 Introduction

In discussing contemporary Indonesian travel literature, Asma Nadia's *Jilbab Traveler* series has garnered significant attention from researchers and literary critics. Aside from being written by Asma Nadia, who is renowned as one of the most prolific and influential writers of Islamic literature in Indonesia (badanlanguage.kemendikbud.go.id, 2022; Kompas, 2022), the series has achieved remarkable success in terms of sales and popularity among readers. They comprised three books: *Jilbab Traveler* (2009), *Assalamualaikum, Beijing!* (2013) and *Jilbab Traveler: Love Sparks in Korea* (2015), the series has been reprinted multiple times, with the latter two books even adapted into films.

The original version of the chapter has been revised. The repetitive phrase "in discussing contemporary Indonesian travel literature" in the first sentence of the section "Introduction" has been removed. A correction to this chapter can be found at

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Notably, at a time when most Indonesian travelogues were predominantly written by men, reflecting a masculine agenda, exemplified by the travelogues of Agustinus Wibowo and Sigit Susanto, which record journeys to explore and to adventure (Akmal, 2022), these series stepped in. They offered stories of journeys by veiled Muslim women that offered more emotional purposes. When the former emphasizes adventurous, public, and physical journeys, the latter delves into the inward journey, a pilgrimage, with a significant consideration of the mental world (Smith, 2001). Interestingly, these pilgrimages are not undertaken in a traditional sense, such as visiting sacred places, but instead incorporated into their travels for work and study. This distinction sets it apart from other travelogues authored by female travelers in Indonesia, where the primary motive is often leisure. One amongst a massive number of these touristy travelogues is *The Naked Traveler* by Trinity.

Such a perspective implies that the journeys in *Jilbab Traveler* have the potential to lead to the formation or change of the traveler's subjectivity. It is reverberated especially by how their *Jilbab* is worn, how it symbolizes something and carries a specific role, and how it may change or be modified after encounters or negotiations with other values. The *Jilbab*, during the journey, transcends mere clothing and fashion for Indonesian Muslim women; instead, it becomes a quintessential arena for constructing subjectivity. The aim of this article is to address the aforementioned questions by focusing analysis only on the first book in the *Jilbab Traveler* series. As an anthology, it represents more voices, backgrounds, and rationales of travel from its writers. To a certain extent, the other studies in this anthology have not touched on the aspect of fashion as an element that forms the subjectivity of its writers (see Jaya et al., 2020; Putri, 2020).

2 Theoretical Frameworks

Travel is often considered one of the processes in which subjectivity is formed. As people encounter new environments and diverse individuals during their journeys, their responses to these encounters play a pivotal role in forming their subjectivity. Throughout the journey, the subject will do self-fashioning, self-declaration, and finally, self-creation (Thompson, 2011, p. 11). A significant aspect of this self-expression is reflected in the way they dress, among other things. Travel literature itself is a literary genre that records the entire process of travel, which raises questions about the politics of representation in it, one of which is through fashion (Boter & Illán, 2020, p. 78).

According to Bancroft (2012:2), fashion extends beyond the expression of identity or the products of a particular business; rather, it is more concerned with innovation on the (surface) body and how the social and cultural dimensions respond to it. This encompasses who wears the fashion and how it is worn, encompassing the act of wearing itself. Meanwhile, subjectivity in this study aligns with Foucault's notion of *rapport à soi* (relationship to the self). This concept encompasses the step-by-step practices humans undertake—including choosing, wearing, and presenting their fashion—to construct their own identity (Rabinow, 1984, p. 352). Consequently, travel

and fashion, in this context, the jilbab, together with subjectivity, form a triangle of processes that mutually reflect, influence and change one another.

This triangle of influences also gives rise to various ideas surrounding it. Travelogues alone (especially those written by Westerners) have been criticized for perpetuating orientalist ideas that supported colonial practices. Narratives about 'distant lands' have been deemed the basis for creating and strengthening unequal, unfair, and exploitative relations between colonizing and colonized countries (Lisle, 2006; Smethurst, 2009; Clark, 1999; Pratt, 1992). To dampen or even eliminate traces of orientalism, contemporary travelogues seek to promote ideas that are no longer based on hierarchical relations but on equality, namely cosmopolitan vision. It is embedded in travelers' acts to reveal moments of empathy, recognition of differences, realization of equality, and insight into shared values (Lisle, 2006: 4).

The tension between the two ideas also affects people's views of jilbab. From an orientalist perspective, the meaning of the jilbab ranges from a symbol of narrowness, an inferior other, a symbol of conservative Islam, to a symbol of oppression of women and outdated Islam practices (Arimbi, 2009, p. 36). However, such interpretations have been challenged as they perpetuate a colonial narrative against the jilbab. Leila Ahmed (1992) argues that the jilbab has actually become a symbol of women's resistance to Western colonialization. Furthermore, the meaning of the jilbab intersects and interrelates with other notions, such as globalization and cosmopolitanism (Imila, A-M & Inglis, D. 2018). Consequently, wearing the jilbab can be perceived as cosmopolitan, good Muslim, and non-Western simultaneously (Brenner, 1996, p. 684).

3 Methods

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis as a method. Discourse refers to written discourse in the form of a travelogue. The analysis applies the Dialectical-Relational Approach, which was developed by Norman Fairclough. This approach believes that discourse or the use of language can be a place for power to reside. The primary data used are sentences in the *Jilbab Traveler* anthology. These data were selected according to the theoretical perspective regarding subjectivity in travel writing. The secondary data is the supporting literature and the theories cited in this study. These data were collected using reading and noting techniques. The data that has been obtained will be linked to each other in the process of data analysis. The research first examines the relationship between social practices and the formation of discourse, which in this context is the practice of traveling and wearing jilbab. Second, it adheres to the relationship and dialectic between these practices and the discourse in the text. Furthermore, the study delves into the milieu of text production, text consumption, and socio-cultural aspects that influence the formation of discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

4 Result and Discussion

4.1 To Wear: Jilbab and the Declaration of the Self

Wearing Jilbab is the first marker of subjectivity for Indonesian women travelers, as portrayed in the book *Jilbab Traveler* (Jaya et al., 2020). The Jilbab defines their identity, social standing, and life aspirations (Arimbi, 2009). The decision to wear a Jilbab is directly linked to the context of travel. In the book's opening, Nadia recounts that she began wearing the hijab in the third grade of junior high school. At that time, she pondered, "Will her jilbab hinder her movement? Moreover, one of my goals is to travel the world" (Nadia et al., 2009, p. 1). Nadia's thought reflects concern that Jilbab might limit her global experiences, curtailing opportunities, making her sessile, and hindering her travels. Additionally, her family's modest economic situation amplified her fear.

However, Nadia later discovered that this perceived limitation catalyzed her emancipation. Rather than viewing Jilbab solely as a hindrance, poverty, she realized its potential as a path to entrepreneurship. Her passion for writing Islamic stories as a job made her frequently invited abroad and paved the way for her globetrotting adventures. She proved that women who wear Jilbab and engage in creative pursuits can fulfill their travel dreams. Nadia firmly asserted that women wearing Jilbab can step closer to the broader world.

Furthermore, Nadia distinguished her style of travel with Jilbab from that of other women who did not wear it. To her, it was disheartening to read travel accounts that propagated the idea of freedom, whereas every journey should draw one closer to Allah (Nadia et al., 2009:vii). This contrast stemmed primarily from their motivations. Asma and the other women featured in the anthology embarked on pilgrim journeys. Although they did not visit well-known Muslim pilgrimage sites, their objective was spiritual proximity to God. They embark on a secular pilgrimage. The destination is not necessary; the process of getting there, the movement, matters most (Akmal, 2022, p. 206). Such a journey is contrasted with openness and non-hijab-ness, which is equated with the degradation of faith. Nadia's perspective diverged from cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan travelers are expected to be receptive to new experiences, allowing novel values to influence their identity. At the same time, Nadia emphasized the significance of adhering to her faith and principles during her travels. She also highlighted that traveling with her husband would be ideal for a veiled woman as it provides an added layer of protection (Nadia et al., 2009, p. 7). For her, an independent and alone woman is not the ideal image of a female Muslim traveler. In her tips, she stressed that veiled women should avoid meeting strangers, especially those of the opposite sex, and always be with female friends as much as possible (Nadia et al., 2009, p. 267). This belief contradicts the cosmopolitan image of Indonesian veiled women, which, according to Saraswati (2017:156-162), is cultivated, creating relationships between Muslim women and foreigners, both in private and public life.

Hence, from the outset, Jilbab is not perceived as a hindrance to travel but rather as a symbol of affirmation and protection during the traveling. Jilbab serves as a marker of identity that protects women from potential influences that could undermine their

faith. Within this context, it becomes evident that Nadia is still influenced by the prevailing notion of Jilbab as a protective covering, guarding against values that may challenge one's faith while traveling. These perceived values are hurdles that must be overcome to establish a more steadfast and empowered subjectivity for Muslim female travelers.

4.2 To Wander: Jilbab and Encountering the Other

Tia Barmawi, one of the contributors to this anthology, recounts her work trip to the Caribbean, where she and her Jilbab attracted significant attention. The Jilbab is considered a strange thing, standing in stark contrast to the attire of the local population and tourists on vacation. The tourists wore revealing outfits, including bikinis, and topless sunbathing was not uncommon (Nadia et al., 2009, p. 13).

Both tourists and Caribbean natives expressed curiosity and asked questions about Tia's Jilbab (Nadia et al., 2009, p. 14). They viewed it as a novel garment and praised its beauty, although, as Tia noted, this admiration lacked complete understanding. They were unaware that the Jilbab was not just a fleeting trend but a customary attire for Muslim women (Nadia et al., 2009, p. 14). Nevertheless, people referred to Tia as "Madam Theresa," an example of principle attachment, where individuals encounter something unfamiliar, do not comprehend it, and associate it with something familiar from their knowledge (Thompson, 2011, p. 67).

The interactions between Tia Barmawi and the people in the Caribbean were characterized by a significant gap in understanding rather than a relationship of superiority and inferiority. They attempted to comprehend each other's perspectives, but their understanding remained limited to their own experiences. The cosmopolitan character is still present to the extent that no one is patronizing, yet understanding still needs to be improved. People accepted Tia's presence based on their existing reservoir of knowledge. Tia's response, which highlighted others' doubts and astonishment towards her, also revealed a sense of inferiority complex. She felt compelled to assert herself excessively in her attempt not to feel inferior.

A similar situation occurred with Hartati Nurwijaya during her trip to Greece, where she felt at ease wearing Jilbab despite the limited presence of Muslims in the region. This comfort arose from the resemblance of the Jilbab to the attire worn by nuns in Greece (Nadia et al., 2009, pp. 109-111). Again, the use of simile provided a means for the veiled woman to navigate her journey and gain acceptance in the host society. However, this acceptance was not of her true self. Ultimately, the outcome reflects forms of mutual negotiation that are beneficial but not founded on genuine mutual understanding.

A contrasting experience was encountered by De Veba while residing in Australia with her husband. During a visit to a supermarket, she sensed being surveilled and followed, feeling akin to a "terrorist being sought by security forces," solely due to her wearing the Jilbab (Nadia et al., 2009, p. 203). Subsequently, she complained via email to the department store, leading to an apology. De Veba openly sought justice against the discriminatory treatment she faced because of her Jilbab. Compared to Tia

Barnawi's encounter, De Veba was more challenged, being subjected to marginalization and inferiorization.

Nevertheless, she chose to resist. This resistance exemplifies a clear cosmopolitan vision. De Veba called for respect for Jilbab and demanded equal treatment. As Lisle (2006:4) states, cosmopolitanism emerges through interaction with other ideas, such as the colonial vision accentuating hierarchical relationships. This interaction may manifest antagonistically, as evidenced in De Veba's experience when she actively showed rage and resistance to the marginalization she received.

4.3 To Write: Jilbab and Transformation of the Self

When Asma Nadia and her companions embarked on narrating their journeys as veiled women, their objective extended beyond mere storytelling and encompassed encouragement. According to Asma, "I want this book to be a dream driver, especially for those of you who are already veiled. That, even with jilbab, we can still soar. Jilbab should not impede our dreams" (Nadia et al., 2009:xi).

This book constitutes a small fragment of the community Nadia established on the social media platform Facebook, under the same name. She said: "This group is open to all Muslimah, even if you are not yet veiled" (Nadia et al., 2009:xi). This statement highlights the intended transformation from not wearing the Jilbab to wearing it. The term "belum" (not yet) also conveys a sense of exclusivity, implying that those who choose not to wear the Jilbab are excluded from the invitation.

Nadia's commitment to empowerment is further evident in her strategy of inviting 12 women travelers who were not writers to contribute to this anthology. Asma Nadia fosters empowerment through storytelling by welcoming women with no prior writing experience, akin to her journey. The overarching intent is to illustrate the emancipatory aspect of their stories, even though their journeys into the wider world may not necessarily result in genuine contact. As seen in some examples above, on the one hand, veiled women can travel around the world. However, on the other hand, the changes that may occur due to the encounter process with various people and situations (especially those that might change their beliefs) on the journey are avoided.

5 Conclusion

This research demonstrates that Jilbab, in the journey of Indonesian Muslim women, serves multiple purposes and symbolizes several views. Throughout their travels, the Jilbab became an integral part of these women's self-identification, serving to present themselves as Muslim women. Additionally, the Jilbab assumes a protective role, safeguarding against unwelcome changes. As a result, these female travelers are emboldened and strengthened in their faith during their journeys. Such success stories are documented and shared, inspiring other veiled women to follow similar paths.

Those views demonstrate how female travelers perceive their Jilbab. Despite their global travels and interactions with diverse cultures and societies, these women travelers do not necessarily adopt a cosmopolitan subjectivity. The challenges they en-

counter emanate from both within themselves and from the global community. Internally, the changes they undergo are premeditated and guided by Sharia, resulting in a distinctly narrow and exclusive outlook. This narrowness stands in contrast to the fundamental tenets of cosmopolitanism. Externally, the perception of Jilbab is still influenced by Western prejudices as an inferior attribute of the Other that is often characterized as foreign, radical, and potentially dangerous.

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