

Artificial Piety: Between Body Traps and Politic Identity

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Abstract. This article argues that Hijrah has been artificial piety which puts a person within both apolitical and political positions. Hijrah has been nowadays a “magical word”, which attracts women’s attention. The Hijaber Mom Community (HMC) has been the first female community that introduces the concept of Hijrah with special reference to urban Muslim women. Within its spiritual and moral practices, the concept of Hijrah has shifted from normative piety into the material-mode aspect through fashion. In the public sphere, the HMC has endeavored to show its identity by creating an exclusive group and utilizing social media. It shows us how the patterns of culture have moved from ethical-ideological to aesthetic-existentialist mode. Besides, the trans-national cultural process has now experienced what so-called a “vague separation” between the theological aspect and stylish fashion mode. It can be seen, among others, from the creation of a trendy shar’i salafy fashion, which appears in bright colorful models. This phenomenon confirms an argument that a woman’s body has become an object of presenting aesthetic-populist matters. Employing an interdisciplinary approach and ethnographical method this study attempts to answer a question whether the wear of shar’i fashion becomes an essential condition of Hijrah in which, ethically and normatively, it explains the identity of popular piety as well as confirms women’s theological inclination and their politic of identity.

Keywords: Artificial Piety, Body, Identity.

1 Introduction

The linkage of the middle class, which began in the political sphere towards the religious realm, has been an undeniable matter with the current *hijrah* development. The development of the meaning of *hijrah* has become a religious method which is expressed materially and it has not been exactly known when it was initiated. However, in the development of the middle class, until the emergence of Muslim women’s communities who joined several *hijaber* groups, it can be concluded that *hijrah*, within its cultural context, has been initially introduced by these groups. The rise of the middle class in Indonesia coupled with the increase in the number of headscarves users among Muslim women has brought about a substantial impact on the development of cultural and fashion trends. This also had an impact on the emergence of Muslim communities, including the *hijrah* community. *Hijrah*, which was initially understood as a migration step during the life-time of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions [and had later become the guideline for determining the year in the Islamic calendar], has been currently seen in a slightly different meaning.

Changes in the context of the interpretation of *hijrah* have evolved and shifted from the political context, especially within aspects of the state [1] to the economic context in the last ten years [2]. Robinson's [3] work on Indonesia's economic growth can be an entry point to observe the development of the middle-class group in the country. According to him, in 1965-1990, the Indonesian middle class was a small group that played no pivotal effect on the economic or political aspect. The growth of the middle class had subsequently found its impetus due to the emergence of ICMI (*Ikatan Cedekiawan Muslim Indonesia/The Association of Indonesian Muslim Scholars*) in 1990, as well as a new period of political change in the rule of the New Order [4], [5]. Historically, the middle class or better known as the *new urban Middle Class* was preceded by the emergence of the Paramadina Group in Jakarta in 1986. Robison [6] and Takashi [7] agree that the middle class was the *new urban middle class* based on their wages, employment, education, and lifestyle they have created due to their income and social status.

The way of understanding and practicing religion among the middle-class Muslims has been subsequently "modified". Nancy Hefner [8], sees their religious awareness and commitment to their religion which is noticeably marked by the wearing of the veil, especially among young groups. In the post-Soeharto era the Indonesian Muslim women are interested and actively involved in the practice of piety in the public sphere; a form of piety, which is expressed socially (Doorn-Harder, 2006; Suzanne Brenner, 2005; Rinaldo, 2008). Social piety has become a growing phenomenon mainly supported by the stability of the Indonesian economy. The development of the media has also participated in communicating the expressions of social piety of these Muslim women [12]. Jones [13] assumes that the expression of piety is a desire of middle-class women to express virtues and different values they hold. Islam, in the post-Soeharto era, has become a popular culture mainly after 2000 [14]. Qualitatively, Utomo [15] found a fairly strong relationship between the veil, measures of subjective religiosity, and the reading of religious texts among Indonesian Muslim women.

The emergence of several *hijaber* groups along with *hijrah* groups raises questions whether there has been a connection between the development of *shar'i* clothing and *hijrah*? Has *shar'i* clothing become a method to explain the quality of piety, identity, status, and fashion trends among these groups? The results of this study reveal that the ethical-normative aspect explains the identity of popular piety while explaining the direction of theological and political identity. They express and show a form of freedom from a *stereotype* that being a Muslim woman plays not the only role in the domestic arena, but also within the public sphere [16]. This result strengthens Jones's finding [17] that the piety of Indonesian Muslims firmly confirms the increase of consumer attitudes, the increase of the commodification of Muslim clothing in urban areas which is related to beliefs, gender, and materiality, especially among the Indonesian middle class.

2 Method

This is qualitative research. It focuses on individual actions, which can be communicated through symbols, thoughts (*mind*), body language (*body*), mental conditions (*soul*), and problems faced (*matter*). Ethnographic methods and ethnomethodology analysis along with phenomenological methods have been employed to reveal the aforementioned aspects. The interview is also applied. There have been a number of *upper-middle-class* Muslim women, aged between 35-53 years, interviewed. They have averagely joined the Hijaber Mom Community for more than five years. The designation of this community as the *upper-middle class* is based on the definition used by Solay Gerke [18]. *Styling*, in addition to aspects of

education, economics, and social status, has been the main element observed during the interview process.

3 Result and Discussion

In the context of the popular culture of *hijab* community in urban middle-class groups, *hijab* blogs on the Internet together with the *Instagram* or *WhatsApp* application in social networking have become their practical needs to overtly explain about *self-perceptions* as Muslims [19]. The Hijaber Mom Community (HMC) community was formed by young Indonesian designers, one of whom is Dian Pelangi along with her colleague Ria Miranda in 2010 (Hijaberscommunity.id). The community has rapid growth due to its massive collaborative works with several fashion bloggers to widely spread Muslim fashion trends into the community. Dian Pelangi once acknowledged that the basic idea established by this community is to negate the “plebeian” impression upon young Muslim women who wear *hijab* [20].

The presence of the HMC among Muslim women, especially in several urban areas, has become a medium of expressing their diversity and, at the same time, without neglecting an impression of “being looked old”. This community has been also supported by several famous Indonesian designers, such as Monika Jufry, Irna Mutiara, Hannie Hananto, Jeny Thahyawati, and Naju Yanti. They aim at developing a new trend of *hijab* for Indonesian Muslim women [21].

The rapid development of this community can be seen, among others, in the number of its members, which has reached 8000 people only a few years after its establishment. The HMC members spread across 18 branches in several major cities in Indonesia. Becoming a member of HMC does not require any exceptional requirements. It requires a sole “normative” condition, namely wearing *hijab* for every new member. It is, therefore, expected that there will be a positive change for every member, especially for those who initially did not wear *hijab*. In general, the members of the HMC are middle-class Muslim women measured from both the economic and educational aspects. The members of this community consist of not only designers, but also professional women such as doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and housewives [22]. The HMC has brought about a significant influence on the development of *hijrah* phenomenon in Indonesia regardless of recognition and rejection toward the formation of this group.

This study finds that HMC has become a means of communication among Muslim women who wear the veil (*jilbab*). *Jilbab*, as a symbol of religion, has been used as a means of political and cultural communication, gender politics, and *the performance* of women’s power. Yakin [23] considers that women are analogous to Barbie dolls where fashion and body are two important things that are popular among women and are used as a means of communication and expression. Barbie’s fashion and body become patrons to communicate bodily expressions and religious behavior, which is wearing *jilbab*. Religious norms and symbols become political tools and the production of “Barbie culture”. Wearing Muslim clothing and “Barbie styled-*jilbab*” have been a symbol of popular culture that demonstrates high aesthetic value. Barbie has become an icon of consumerism, racism, sexism, and materialism.

The discussion about the body becomes increasingly interesting. This is so because the discussion of the body, which was initially limited only on the cultural aspects, namely social values which consist of shape and size [also called as *decorative attribute*], has nowadays shifted and developed in how the body constructs industrial and technological developments

[24]. The body becomes a symbol and entrance to the discussion of the economy, status, and gender as well as religion. The body has the influence of consumerism and self-representation in urban society [25] which has consequences for discussing gender issues. Nelly (an interviewee) explains that the appearance of the body is important; a woman has to be beautiful and attractive. There has been an apt motto: “Though I’m fat, I have to be looked slim. This is closely related to our “intelligence” to camouflage our body shape which, in fact, increasingly becomes imperfect and flawed because of aging.”

The body and social realm are two undeniably matters, especially their correlation to sexuality aspect (Richardson, D. and Seidman, 2002; Seidman, S., Fischer, N., and Meeks, 2002, which are in their development closely related to cultural capital [31] and spiritual aspect. Socially, the body becomes a form of representation in social relations and it functions as a symbol system that explains one’s identity. One aspect that can be examined in the discussion of the body is social perceptions that emerge due to social construction. These social perceptions shape *self-images* and identities which explain symbols and social status [32]. The body becomes a symbolic capital that ends in physical expression in the hierarchy of social power. In aesthetic settings, the body has important points in the cultural realm which, in daily practice, are connected into individual consciousness [33].

Beauty or aesthetics is a necessity in the symbolic communication of the body. Within the reality of pop culture, the body becomes an instrument of pleasure and a means of expression and self-representation [34]. Even though judgments about beauty are relative and depend on prevailing social constructions, body, and facial beauty shape self-confidence. The self-identity of a person will change once his/her body shape changes. Featherstone [35] explains that body image is status and, socially, it explains social acceptance at the same time, that is, it depends on how a person looks. The assumption that the face is a mirror to one’s self, inner character or personality is seen on the outside appearance. The body and face explain how a person transforms differently. Therefore, clothing and cosmetics, as body covers, can explain one’s presentation.

Although informants, such as Inne, Sukma, Rosi, and Nelly, have different social backgrounds, they feel the benefits of being HMC members for it emphasizes its members to get used to always wear loose *shar’i* clothes, yet fashionable. The abovementioned informants initially wore a short *jilbab*, but then they subsequently changed their appearance by wearing a long *hijab* and loose clothing (*shar’i*). The choices and changes in the fashion they wear have not been caused by changes in their views, beliefs, and ideologies they adhere to, but rather due to the development of fashion trends. Fundamentalist-look *hijab* and fashion trends, which are “modified” in such a way, have been a representation of “stylish” public piety. Their rejection of the views and ideology of fundamentalist groups is a sign which shows us that they are constructing self-concepts. To them, clothing and *shar’i hijab* is not merely a necessity for religiosity, but also the appearance of an identity that has important meaning and value for their daily life.

In the case of the HMC, to whom they socially and economically belong to the middle-class group, self-awareness about “who they are” and how to present themselves become two important aspects. Outward appearance becomes important and a necessity matter for every member of this group. Beauty is a must, while things considered beautiful and privileged are symbolized by logos and brands. Wolf [36] concludes that beauty is transformed into an ideology of women, which is another form of subordination upon women. The construction that women are synonymous with beauty is part of the economic, educational, cultural, sexuality, and religious aspects. Therefore, for this community, logos and brands become important as a symbol of external appearance.

In line with Bourdieu's opinion, Hunter [37] and Chancer (1998) explain that aspects of *cultural capital* are the main cause of the construction of beauty related to brands and logos. This relation is proportionally in line with the object (things) and the subject (human). The higher the value of the brand or logo (*the privileged mode of production*) used by women, the higher the value of the status of the wearer and the object of production [38], [39]. There is an exchange of social values (*social exchange*) between production results and the object of production. "Who" and "what is worn" by the female body explain how and where her economic power, social status, and social relations are.

The relationship between economic power, social status, and social relations of the HMC women has changed their views and opinions about how a woman's body should be. Body construction, including a beautiful face, is understood not only as a gift (*given*), but also as something that can be achieved, sought, and made. A beautiful facial appearance and a well-maintained body signify that a woman has high economic power which automatically marks her social status.

The body becomes a means of communicating status that explains how one's preference position and taste are. The higher the perceived ethical value displayed, the higher the value of one's status. The presence of the Barbie doll industry in 1959 by Mattel Inc. has inspired women to be like fashionable Barbie and full of accessories. Barbie has become a symbol of women's sexual and aesthetic objectification. Barbie has been continuously developed and it is following the fashion trends that are favored by women, which is why Barbie becomes a cultural icon [40]. Barbie becomes not only a fan, collector, designer or consumer, but it is also about the acceptance and introduction of people of all ages to itself. This is important to look at since Barbie's cultural products contain values, beliefs and norms hold by the society.

It is in this context, women also become a means and a place to develop the political image of Islamic culture. Women are aesthetically seen to have a stronger appeal. The same is true with the popularity of fashion design and style which plays a role and colors religious style. Göle [41] sees such a phenomenon, which presents a new impression of material, i.e. *hijab*, as *Public Islam*. This *hijaber* group utilizes a global communication network to track the development of fashion and patterns of consumption and to study market rules. I tend to call them the "Popular Religious" group. They combine religion and culture in public spaces. The combination enables the "transfer of values", namely the transfer of sacred values to profane matters.

Profanization can be observed, among others, in *shar'i* clothing (long *hijab* and *abaya* clothes) which were originally considered sacred and seemingly "fundamentalist" into something fashionable. The *shar'i* and *hijab* fashions have nowadays turned into fashionable, elegant, and high-bargaining power dress when they had passed through the re-production process of this *hijaber* community. They always make changes and variations in *shar'i* fashion. The Popular Religious group realizes that a firm and clear identity is important. They want to be a Muslim group that has an exclusive characteristic. This group carries out moderation on the social changes they deal with. They unceasingly moderate religious values and adjust them to the continuous changes occur within the social sphere. Kamali [42] considers this phenomenon as a *middle path (wasatiyyah)*. They fully realize that life, situations, and conditions will always dynamically change.

Their understanding of religion tends to be very substantive. Therefore, the elements of historicity are highly emphasized and, to them, Islamic symbols on the objects are important. Nevertheless, they try to understand aspects of the historicity and background of religious texts in accordance with the present context, which has been adapted, certainly, to their understanding. More importantly, these aspects have been also confirmed by their spiritual

teacher (*ustadh*) they refer to. Their study and understanding of religious teachings neglect no cultural, sociological, and psychological aspects. The Popular Religious group develops opinions on identity transformation and religious demonstrations. Identity transformation has been built not only on the symbolic-aesthetic aspect but also on the substantive-ethical aspect. They believe in themselves as the trendsetters *shar'i* fashion; fashion that reflects piety. Intrinsically, the *shar'i hijab* shows us the sacred value and, at the same time, it becomes a measurement of a woman's piety as well as her theological and dogmatic observance and obedience. On the contrary, extrinsically, the *shar'i hijab* shows us the profane value, which is a popular model the Islamic fashion, but still, it has ethical and aesthetic religious values.

4 Conclusion

The symbol of women's piety towards religious teachings is a focus that should be put into account within academic discourse. Women become a means of developing an artificial political identity of piety. The different appearance of clothing along with the form of piety is a symbolic consumption process and the transformation of identity that brings about added value as well as the value of art (*the work of art*). Ethically, *shar'i* clothing is a representation of piety which is aesthetically able to cover a body which, according to them, gradually becomes imperfect and flawed. They show their identity and attainment of understanding Islam in the form of articulation of better religious practices. They feel that they have an obligation to show their identity as devout Muslims along with their hope of becoming an *agency* or *trendsetter*. This starts from the material aspect to the spiritual (religious) one. They believe that religion must be represented within an elegant appearance both personally and socially. Since they are very open to the development of popular culture, which in this context is *hijrah*, *shar'i* clothing becomes the main entry point and a prerequisite for personal change which leads to social change.

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