



Millennials, Peacebuilding, and Popular Islamic Novels: Exploring Transformative Bridges for Interfaith Relations

This article explores the role of interfaith relations in Indonesian society, with a particular focus on their representation in contemporary Islamic novels. While various programs have been implemented to foster interfaith harmony, the role of literature in promoting such relationships has received less attention. This study highlights the incorporation of interfaith themes within contemporary Islamic novels, where romantic storylines are intertwined with Islamic teachings. Millennials and young people, who constitute a significant portion of the readership, find enjoyment in these narratives and ideologies. The inclusion of interfaith narratives in these novels serves as a countermeasure to the popular "chick lit" that employ vulgar language and lack religious nuances. Employing Ervin Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, the research focuses on the works of Habibburahman El Shirazy and Asma Nadia as representations of popular Indonesian Muslim novelists. The findings reveal that Islamist novels have received positive responses from millennial readers, and the elegant delivery of interfaith values contributes to peacebuilding within the context of this generation. Overall, this study emphasizes the promotion of peace and interfaith understanding through the medium of popular Islamic novels, catering to the needs and preferences of the millennial demographic.

Keywords: Millennials; Popular fiction; Interfaith relations; Dramaturgy; Indonesia.

Artikel ini menjelajahi peran hubungan antaragama dalam masyarakat Indonesia, dengan fokus khusus pada representasinya dalam novel Islami kontemporer. Meskipun berbagai program telah dilaksanakan untuk mempromosikan perdamaian antar-iman, peran sastra dalam mempromosikan hubungan antar-iman belum mendapat perhatian mumpuni. Studi ini menyoroti fenomena lintas-iman dalam novel Islami kontemporer yang ditandai dengan penggabungan alur cerita romansa dengan nilai-nilai keislaman. Generasi milenial dan kaum muda, yang merupakan segmen utama dari pembaca novel Islami, menikmati narasi dan ideologi semacam ini. Penyertaan narasi antar-iman dalam novel berfungsi sebagai sikap perlawanan terhadap tren "sastra wangi" yang berbahasa vulgar dan minim nuansa religi. Dengan menerapkan teori dramaturgi Ervin Goffman, penelitian ini berfokus pada karya-karya Habiburrahman El Shirazy dan Asma Nadia selaku novelis Muslim populer di Indonesia. Temuan-temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa novel-novel Islamis mendapat tanggapan positif dari pembaca milenial, dan penyampaian nilai-nilai antar-iman secara elegan berkontribusi pada pembangunan perdamaian dalam konteks generasi ini. Secara keseluruhan, riset ini menekankan promosi perdamaian dan pemahaman antar-iman melalui novel Islam populer yang menyesuaikan kebutuhan dan preferensi dari demografi milenial.

Kata Kunci: Milenial; Fiksi populer; Relasi lintas-iman; Dramaturgi; Indonesia.

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Received 21 May 2022

Revised 12 Jun 2022

Accepted 17 Nov 2022

Published 24 Nov 2022

How to cite this article:Nurul Aula, Siti Khodijah,
and Moch Nur Ichwan.

"Millennials,

Peacebuilding, and

Popular Islamic Novels:

Exploring Transformative

Bridges for Interfaith

Relations". ESENSIA: Jurnal

Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin

23 (2), 233-250

[https://ejournal.uin-](https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/ushuluddin/esensia/article/view/4082)[suka.ac.id/ushuluddin/ese-](https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/ushuluddin/esensia/article/view/4082)[nsia/article/view/4082](https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/ushuluddin/esensia/article/view/4082)**Copyright:**

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Introduction

Islamic literature has significantly influenced the everyday life of the millennials and its texts encompass tones, trends, and styles that resonate with the younger demographic. Millennials are drawn to works that embrace a contemporary framework, avoiding condescension and formal language.¹ The merits of light and fictional works written by muslim authors are evident in their compelling narratives, the skillful portrayal of characters, and the steadfast adherence to Islamic values by protagonists. Such literature presents a novel approach to grounding religious principles within the youth generation. Notably, despite the digital era's dominance and pervasive social media, printed Islamic literature such as novels and poets remain popular among millennials.²

Academics have undertaken new discourse on Islamic literature, examining its production, distribution, and appropriation in Indonesia. For instance, Noorhaidi Hasan and his team (2018) have conducted a meticulous research project mapping out the Islamic literary landscape in Indonesia. There is also Ismatu Ropi's scholarly work investigating the conflict between Muslims and Christians in colonial era-to-early Indonesia, by choosing works from Nūr ad-Dīn ar-Raniri (d. 1658) and Hasbullah Bakry (d. 2020). He uncovers

the illustration of Islamic-Christian dynamics in decades-old Indonesian religious literature as intricate and responsive forms of relationship.³ Rokib highlights the commencement of Islamic literature in the Indonesian context with a high rate of acceptance of Habiburahman El-Shirazy's fiction, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* [Verses of Love], in 2004 that brilliantly incorporates Islamic symbols, characterizations, and nuances with the popular culture of Indonesian muslim youth.⁴ Muzakki emphasizes the evolving nature of knowledge transmission as popular media witness a shift from oral communication to modern pathways. The "fresh" mode of Islamic dawah called "Islam Through Stories"—prevalent in works of fiction—garners significant attention from millennials.⁵

These studies indicate two key conclusions. First, Islamic novels receive favorable responses from the millennial readership, highlighting their appeal. Second, this literature elegantly conveys interfaith relationships and provides insightful perspectives on peacebuilding within the context of millennial readership. Religious novels serve as an effective medium for spreading theological values transcending the conventional means and media. Referring to the financial data from The Union of Indonesian Publishers [Ikatan Penerbit Indonesia – IKAPI], sales figures of the popular

¹ Najib Kailani, "Kepanikan Moral dan Dakwah Islam Populer: Membaca Fenomena 'Rohis' di Indonesia," *Analisis: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 11, no. 1 (2011): 1–16; Roberta R. King, "Music, Peacebuilding, and Interfaith Dialogue: Transformative Bridges in Muslim-Christian Relations," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 3 (July 1, 2016): 202–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939316636884>.

² Noorhaidi Hasan, ed., *Literatur Keislaman Generasi Milenial: Transmisi, Apropriasi, Dan Kontestasi* (Yogyakarta: Pascasarjana UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2018); Kareem El Damahoury, "Fighting Religious Extremism with Faith-Based Entertainment-Education: The Portrayal of Isis in Arab Drama," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 11, no. 2 (January 31, 2023): 171–97.

³ Ismatu Ropi, "Muslim-Christian Polemics in Indonesian Islamic Literature," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 9, no. 2 (July 1, 1998): 217–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596419808721149>; Quite similar premises are mentioned in Antonia Carcelén-Estrada, "Jewish and Islamic Foundations of Late Medieval Christian Literary Practices," *Viator* 51, no. 1 (January 2020): 45–65.

⁴ Mohammad Rokib, "Reading Popular Islamic Literature: Continuity and Change in Indonesian Literature," *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 4, no. 2 (2015): 183–94, <https://doi.org/10.31291/hn.v4i2.83>; Mohd Zariat Abdul Rani, "The Conflict of Love and Islam: The Main Ingredients in the Popular Islamic Novels of Malaysia," *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 417–33, <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2014.0222>.

⁵ Akh Muzakki, "Transmitting Islam Through Stories: The Sociology of Production and Consumption of Islam in Novel Literature," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11, no. 1 (July 6, 2017): 59–76; Ahmad Bahtiar et al., "Islamic Values in Popular Malay Literary Novels," *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology* 29, no. 6s (April 14, 2020): 1243–52; Diah Ariani Arimbi, "Being Religious, Cool, and Global in the Eyes of Indonesian Muslim Women Writers: Negotiating Religion and Popular Lifestyle in Islamic Pop Novels," in *Muslim Women's Writing from across South and Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2022).





Islamic novels from previous decades—before the global disaster of the Covid-19 pandemic—indicate a substantial increase in revenue, with fiction and religious-themed books consistently ranking highest with children's readings.⁶

This research adopts Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory which views social life as a series of theatrical performances.⁷ His sociology is useful for the study of youth and religion. It distinguishes between the "front-stage", where performances unfold to define the situation for its audience, and its "back-stage" situation that encapsulates the authors' ideologies and goals.⁸ Goffman's theory underscores the main elements and nuances necessary for successfully staging a character, including the techniques of capturing of everyday life's social interactions in literature.

This article utilizes a descriptive-analytical methodology to investigate two popular muslim novelists, Habiburrahman El Shirazy and Asma Nadia. It offers a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of Islamic novels in instilling religious values among millennials. The research commences with an exploration of Islamism as a global phenomenon and its connection to transnational movements. Subsequently, it provides a concise overview of prominent Islamist novelists and their notable works. The article delves into the ideological significance of interfaith peace-building embedded within narratives of popular Islamic novels in Indonesia while also examining

the various factors contributing to the prevalence and diverse forms of these novels.

Islamism: A New Direction of Moral Literature

Islamism continues to evoke significant opposition, often being closely associated with radicalism and terrorism.⁹ Its concept and issue is massively discussed as the aftermath of terror events such as the 9/11 attacks, Bali bombings, Madrid bombings, Istanbul bombings, Brussels bombings, the assassination of Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam, and protests against the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad in Denmark. Gilles Kepel defines Islamism as a collection of discourses, practices, and movements shared by individuals with common ideological-doctrinal similarities who celebrate the "democratic essences" of Islam to stand shoulder to shoulder with the secular middle class.¹⁰ Islamism becomes a sociopolitical phenomenon involving groups of Muslims who actively pursue religious movements based on their specific systems of belief. Such communities strive to establish the "Islamic state," a nation founded on Islamic legitimacy, reflecting Islamic symbols in their daily thoughts, activities, and the realization of Islamic values and principles.¹¹

Ideology holds a central position within the Islamist movement, permeating social and political spheres with religious and political allusions, while encompassing collective and individual activism to establish a fundamental system. This movement seeks to cultivate devout

⁶ IKAPI, "Buku Indonesia dalam Angka" (2015); "Resume Survei Dampak COVID-19 Terhadap Industri Penerbitan Buku di Indonesia" (2021); "Laporan Hasil Riset Perbukuan Indonesia" (Jakarta: Ikatan Penerbit Indonesia, 2020), <https://www.ikapi.org/riset/>.

⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1959), 69–84.

⁸ Paul M. Harrison, "Toward a Dramaturgical Interpretation of Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 38, no. 4 (1977): 389–96; Paul Creelan, "Vicissitudes of the Sacred: Erving Goffman and the Book of Job," *Theory and Society* 13, no. 5 (1984): 663–95; Irene Trysnes, "Camping with God and Goffman," in *Political Religion, Everyday Religion: Sociological Trends* (Brill, 2019), 157–71.

⁹ A. Singgih Basuki, "Religions, Violence, and Interdisciplinary Dialogue," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 19, no. 2 (October 23, 2018): 171–83, <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v19i2.1401>.

¹⁰ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 6–9, 368.

¹¹ See also Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia*, Studies on Southeast Asia 40 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2006), 160, <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780877277408/laskar-jihad/>; Yuyun Sunesti, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Muhammad Najib Azca, "Young Salafi-Niqabi and Hijrah: Agency and Identity Negotiation," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (December 2, 2018): 173–98, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v8i2.173-198>.





adherence to Sharia values among Muslims.¹² One notable characteristic of this group is their emphasis on a holistic lifestyle, prioritizing obedience to Allah's commandments in Islamic sharia, and rekindling the spirit of the Quran and hadith as *salaf as-ṣāliḥ* exemplified.

Islamism itself is not inherently inclined towards radicalism, but the manipulation of religious symbols can incite violence and radical acts within the context of religion. Islamism is closely tied to the use of symbols, doctrines, language, ideas, and ideologies within Islam. It is not uncommon for Islamism to have a specific agenda, where political data serves as a means to express opinions and challenge existing ruling regimes. Daniel Martin Varisco critiques the term "Islamism" due to the stigmatization of Islam as a violence-based religion.¹³ Both Hasan and Bayat argue that Islamic literary activism possesses unique characteristics and aims for social change. They criticize experts who overemphasize the symbolic, linguistic, and ideological value of Islamist activities, which are often encapsulated in discourse and structures.¹⁴ As Islamism gains influence among the Indonesian Muslim middle class, the global prevalence of Islamism produces narratives that deeply resonate with its audience and hence influence the sociopolitical domain.

Islamism has exerted a visible influence on Indonesian society over the past four decades where Islamic dogma serves as a vital system of collective and symbolic identity.¹⁵ It has become the dominant framework for envisioning a just socio-political and cultural system, particularly among the emerging Muslim middle class. This

networked approach allows for connections and interactions across diverse backgrounds, both online and offline, amplifying the messages of Islamic revival. Simultaneously, this network provides opportunities for social mobility and serves as a market for Islamic popular literature. This research further elaborates on the reception of Islamist novels among the Indonesian muslim youth, highlighting their appeal and their ability to convey interreligious relations and promote peace in a multi-faith society. The mobilization of Islamic dogma using unconventional mediums of knowledge transfer shall be discussed with a particular focus on popular Islamist novelists.

Popular Islamic Novelists

In the realm of Islamic literature, there are several figures who have gained popularity for their thought-provoking and morally driven novels. Some of prominent Indonesian muslim novelists are Habiburrahman El Shirazy and Asma Nadia. Their works have resonated with readers, offering insights into Islamic values and interfaith relationships. This academic writing aims to explore the biographical backgrounds of these authors, highlight the similarities and differences between them, and discuss the titles and dates of their popular novels.

Habiburrahman El Shirazy, hailing from the Nahdliyin neighborhood in Central Java, was deeply influenced by his family's adherence to the Nahdlatul Ulama tradition. He initiated the *Forum Lingkar Pena* (FLP) with Asma Nadia and other novelists. FLP is an Indonesian Muslim writers' organization dedicated to spreading the Islamic teachings and morals through literary

¹² Ustadi Hamsah, "Perang Dan Kekerasan Atas Nama Agama Dalam Wacana Ilmiah," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 13, no. 1 (January 22, 2012): 151–66, <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v13i1.727>; Yuyun Sunesti, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Muhammad Najib Azca, "Young Salafi-Niqabi and Hijrah: Agency and Identity Negotiation," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (December 2, 2018): 173–98.

¹³ Daniel Varisco, "Inventing Islamism: The Violence of Rhetoric," 2009, 125–32.

¹⁴ Asef Bayat, "When Muslims and Modernity Meet," *Contemporary Sociology* 36, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 507–11,;

Noorhaidi Hasan, "Pengantar: Menuju Islamisme Populer," in *Literatur Keislaman Generasi Milenial: Transmisi, Apropriasi, dan Kontestasi*, ed. Noorhaidi Hasan (Yogyakarta: Pascasarjana UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2018), 1–28.

¹⁵ Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere," *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): 229–50; "Salafism, Knowledge Production and Religious Education in Indonesia," in *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*, ed. Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), 131–50.





works. El Shirazy was active in many intellectual activities during his study at Cairo. He joined the academic forum of “Misykati” between 1996-97 thus later presented an oral presentation entitled, *Tahqīq al-Amni wa as-Salām fi al-’Ālam bi al-Islām* [The Actualization of Security and Peace in the World with Islam] in The 1996 World Assembly of Muslim Youth. Later from 1998 to 2002, he was also active at the Society of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals [ICMI]. El Shirazy became a Board Member of Virtual Pesantren of Nahdlatul Ulama in Cairo hence he co-edited an Arabic-Indonesian popular dictionary [Kamus Populer Bahasa Arab-Indonesia] in 2003 contributed in the publication of the encyclopaedia of pesantren intellectualism [Ensiklopedia Intelektualisme Pesantren] in 2004. His intellectual journey becomes evidence that El Shirazy is ideologically associated to Nahdlatul Ulama and is active in its intellectual activism.

Asma Nadia is known for her prolific works and best-selling novels. Despite not completing her studies at Institut Teknologi Bandung due to illness, her passion for writing fiction remained undeterred. She built her career in authorship and feminism through workshops, seminars and writers’ forums. At her early career as an author, Adikarya IKAPI awarded Nadia as Best Teenage Writer at national-level. Some of her captivating fictions are *Surga yang Tak Dirindukan* [the unmissable heaven] published in 2007, *The Jilbab Traveler* [the veiled traveler] in 2009, *Sakinah Bersamamu* [harmony with you] in 2010, into both *Assalamualikum, Beijing!* and *Salon Kepribadian* [Saloon of Personality] published in 2013. Beyond providing entertainment, Nadia's novels serve as moral compasses addressing contemporary life's challenges. She was invited as writer-in-residence program in 2009 by la Château de Lavigny where

she visited European cities and participated in various authorial events.

Some of Nadia's works have been adapted into blockbuster movies. Her life experiences provide references in compiling narratives in the Islamic novels she wrote. Her experience visiting Eastern Asian and European countries is reconstructed in the fiction. Nadia has also been invited to ICMI Cairo’s workshop on authorship El Shirazy’s domain. Both writers founded FLP to facilitate future muslim novelists among Indonesian millennials and instill teachings and values of Islam. Dedicated to aspiring Indonesian muslim youths, Nadia’s activism as a women muslim preacher-cum-activist indicates her close relation to the Tarbiyah ideological and cultural movement in contemporary Indonesia.¹⁶ Nadia also initiated her own foundation, “Yayasan Asma Nadia”, that focuses on building reading centers and education institutions for orphans and underprivileged children around the nation.

The two renowned Islamic novelists, Nadia and El Shirazy, share similarities and differences between their works. Both authors are associated with FLP and ICMI. Their novels convey Islamic values and explore interfaith relations. However, their backgrounds and writing styles diverge. El Shirazy's novels often reflect his experiences as a lecturer at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Al-Qur’an An-Nur [The “An-Nur” Higher School of Qur’anic Studies] and The Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta. Each campus gains a political-cultural affirmation from a massive Islamic organization in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, subsequently. The pesantren tradition, as conveyed by El Shirazy in his novels, is related to the culture of Nahdliyyin while FLP has nuance with the Tarbawi Movement carrying the spirit of proselytizing popular literature.¹⁷

¹⁶ Najib Kailani, “Forum Lingkar Pena and Muslim Youth in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 46, no. 1 (2012): 33–53; “Preachers-Cum-Trainers: The Promoters of Market Islam in Urban Indonesia,” in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity*, ed. Norshahril Saat (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 164–91.

¹⁷ Najib Kailani, “Muslimising Indonesian Youths: The Tarbiyah Moral and Cultural Movement in Contemporary Indonesia,” in *Islam and the 2009 Indonesian Elections, Political and Cultural Issues: The Case of Prosperous Justice Party*, ed. Remy Madinier (Bangkok: IRASEC, 2009), 71–96.





El Shirazy, a man standing in-between two distinct ideo-religious movements, thus becomes a charismatic figure for his accommodative and positive attitude toward different backgrounds of readership. His charisma affects millennials' acceptance of his fictional works characterized by the pesantren environment, youth culture, romance, and Islamic morale. Nadia, on the other side, draws from her urban upbringing and personal experiences. Within many sections of her novels, the plots illustrate the protagonists' interreligious relationships and ethnostereotypes in regions and countries of East Asia.¹⁸ Her works address the stigmatization of muslim identity as minorities, the casual dynamics between muslims with other believers, and the challenges of interreligious romances.

Islamism and Popular Islamic Fictions

Both Habiburrahman El Shirazy & Asma Nadia have made significant contributions to the world of Islamic literature through their thought-provoking novels. While El Shirazy's educational background in the pesantren environment and socio-cultural affiliation with Nahdlatul Ulama shape his narratives, Nadia's urban upbringing and interfaith exploration provide a different perspective. Despite their differences in cultural and educational backgrounds, both novelists share a common goal of spreading Islamic values through their works. Such Islamist literature has garnered significant popularity and continue to resonate with readers who seeking a blend of entertainment and moral guidance.¹⁹

Their works, including El Shirazy's *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* in 2004, *Bumi Cinta* [Earth of Love] in 2010, *Api Tauhid* [Fire of Monotheism] in 2014 also Nadia's *Assalamualaikum, Beijing!* [Peace Be Upon You, Beijing!] in 2009 and *Jilbab Traveler* [A Veiled Traveller] in 2015. These novels share common

ideological similarities. These novels delve into themes of love, faith, and interfaith relationships in different parts of the world. This discussion analyses these literary works focusing on their unique nuances and commonalities.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta explores the dimensions of love. The novel follows Fahri, a student from Indonesia studying in Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. El Shirazy employs a forward-moving plot while occasionally delving into past events. Characters in the novel such as Aisyah, Maria, Syekh Akhmad Tagiyyudin, and others play significant roles in shaping the narrative. Set in Egypt, the novel provides a backdrop for depicting sociocultural conditions. El Shirazy's success with *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* paved the way for other novels with similar Islamist novels, like *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* [When Love Glorifies].²⁰ The popularity of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* led to its adaptation into a blockbuster Indonesian film in 2005 followed by other adaptations in soap operas and theaters. The rise of this proselytizing novel and its multiple adaptations demonstrates a shift in the literary trend among Indonesians from the sexist fictional literature "sastra wangi" (or, chick lit) into the mainstreaming of religious dogma and interfaith peacebuilding in fictional works.²¹

Similarly, El Shirazy's next publication six years after, *Bumi Cinta*, emphasizes faith, piety, and resilience in an alien setting to the millennial Indonesian readership. Set in Russian society, the novel provides a socio-historical backdrop and presents challenges for muslims in maintaining their faith as minorities in a non-Islamic region. The protagonist, Muhammad Ayyas, represents a devout Muslim who upholds religious dogma despite the hardships he encounters. The novel also introduces characters like Yelena and Linor, who have contrasting attitudes toward Islam due

¹⁸ See also Shatunov Yury Shatunov, "Muslims and the Muslim World in the Works of Anton Chekhov," *Imagologiya i Komparativistika*, no. 18 (2022): 305–22.

¹⁹ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 10–13, 107, 134.

²⁰ Muhammad Zidan and Marudut Bernadtua Simanjuntak, "Moral Value Of Film 'Ketika Cinta Bertasbih' Written by Habiburrahman El Shirazy," *PUSTAKA: Jurnal Bahasa Dan Pendidikan* 2, no. 2 (April 22, 2022): 33–43.

²¹ Monika Arnez, "Dakwah by the Pen," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 37, no. 107 (March 1, 2009): 45–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639810902743040>.





to their limited understanding of the religion.²² Through the incorporation of Quranic verses, El Shirazy infuses religious values into the storyline, aligning the novel clearly visible with a picture of the people in Moscow. *Bumi Cinta* intertwines the romantic main plot with Islamic teachings and the contrasting experiences related to Muslims in a foreign land.

El Shirazy's next magnum opus after six years is *Api Tauhid*. Combining the main plot and nuance of its two predecessors, *Api Tauhid* adds sociohistorical elements and a romance storyline centering around a Lumajang man named Fahmi, a young man studying in Egypt and Medina, and his encounters with the history of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi in Turkiye. Within this overarching plot, *Api Tauhid* explores interfaith relationships. Fahmi's romantic interest is Aysel, a Turkish girl who joins their group during the trip. Aysel faces threats and violence from her ex-husband Carlos which deepens Fahmi's sympathy towards her. Yet his feeling provokes Carlos to brutally attack Fahmi, resulting in severe permanent injuries. The incident involving Fahmi reaches Nuzula, his divorced wife, as she extends forgiveness and understanding. The novel concludes with Fahmi and Nuzula formalizing their marriage. Overall, *Api Tauhid* explores Fahmi's personal journey for pursuing spiritual enlightenment, interreligious relationships, and compassion while tracing the historical struggles of Said Nursi.

Similarly, *Assalamualaikum Beijing!* tells the character of Ra, a young Indonesian Muslim woman who moves to a foreign land. After her failed marriage, Ra decides to pursue her study in Beijing where she encounters Zhongwen, a local tour guide. Through Ra's journey in Beijing, she discovers the presence of Islam and visits its heritage, challenging the common perception of China as a communist country. Through her interactions with Zhongwen and her exploration of Islamic sites, the narrative highlights the potential for interfaith understanding and the

spread of Islam in diverse cultures. It also delves into Ra-Zhongwen's relationships as Zhongwen becomes amazed by the character of Ra and their interactions escalate further with the conversion of Zhongwen to Islam. Through her interactions with Zhongwen and her exploration of Islamic sites, the narrative highlights the potential for interfaith understanding and the spread of Islam in diverse cultures. The setting includes various locations such as bus stops, mosques, colleague houses, hospitals, and the Great Wall of China. The novel evokes a range of emotions, including sadness, disappointment, and happiness, as it weaves together the Islamic proselytization of China with a romantic storyline and the personal growth of young Indonesian Muslim women.

Thus Nadia's novel *Jilbab Traveler* follows the story of Rania, an Indonesian hijab traveler who embarks on a journey to seek evidence of God's greatness in various countries, and Heun Geun, a South Korean male who undergoes a transformation for love. Heun Geun, initially depicted as a bad-tempered young thug due to past trauma, changes his appearance and attitude to align himself with Rania, a hijab traveler who embodies the qualities of a true Muslim. Despite facing challenges and obstacles, Heun Geun persistently fights for his relationship with Rania and consistently demonstrates his commitment. Heun Geun's efforts to convince Rania of his sincere intentions showcase the intersection of romance and religious values in the novel. The narrative delves into the exploration of faith, highlighting the significance of prayer, fasting, and maintaining a strong connection with Allah amidst cultural diversity. It promotes the main message that love and personal transformation can transcend cultural and religious differences, fostering harmony and acceptance.

Despite the varying plots and contexts, the novels by Habiburrahman El Shirazy and Asma Nadia share common ideological themes. Both authors delve into the exploration of love,

²² Y. B Mangunwijaya, *Sastra Dan Religiusitas* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1982).





faith, religiosity, and the challenges of interfaith relationships. Both novelists incorporate Islamic dogma with engaging storylines and relatable young characters. By weaving Islamic ideology into their novels, these authors contribute to the development of Islamic literature, resonating with readers who seek both entertainment and spiritual enlightenment with engaging stories that resonate on emotional and spiritual levels.

Peacebuilding in Popular Islamic Novels

A. Tolerance and the Preservation of Faith

The term "tolerance" originates from the Latin word "tolerantia," which conveys a notion of leniency, gentle disposition, and patience. Its etymological significance gained prominence in Europe, particularly during the Revolution of French embodying principles of solidarity and fraternity.²³ In English, "tolerance" implies an attitude of ignorance that manifests as disregarding, acknowledging, and respecting the beliefs of others without necessitating their agreement.²⁴ In Arabic, the word finds its roots in "tasāmuḥ," denoting permission and a spirit of mutual convenience.²⁵ Islam constitutes it as a central tenet encompassing wisdom, justice, and compassion.

The Islamic essence of *tasāmuḥ* denotes an approach of mutual consent and convenience, allowing individuals and society the freedom to shape their destinies while upholding shared values and avoiding frictions.²⁶ Thus interpreting tolerance in religious practice entails exercising restraint and patience, ensuring respect for beliefs, religions, and diverse rituals observed by each faith. El Shirazy provides a great depiction of this concept when Maria invites Fahri to dance and her invitation ends up with polite rejection, mentioning the forbiddance of touching people

of other sexuality. The dialogue between the two characters and the scene is written as follows:

"Fahri, would you like to dance with me? This is my first timer for dancing," she [Maria] said timidly. [Fahri, in a first-person perspective, reconsiders her offer:] "What should I do? Should I follow European culture... Maria's offer is tempting for a young man [like Fahri]. Which man wouldn't enjoy holding hands and dancing with a pretty girl like her? This is where the test lies." [Fahri again, speaking his thought out loud to Maria:] "I'm sorry, I can't," I replied with a smile, crossing my hands in front of my chest. [Maria responds:] "Same here, I can't either. Let's learn together slowly. Let's give it a try!" [Fahri replies to her:] "Forgive me, Maria. I mean, I cannot possibly do it. The teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah forbid me from touching a woman unless she is my wife or mahram [a family member]. I hope that you understand and aren't disappointed!" I explained firmly. [Fahri said silently:] In any case, I must not leave any room for doubt that would allow the devil to enter my bloodstream."²⁷

This scene illustrates Fahri's hardship in the European sociocultural setting. Dancing in pairs has been a longstanding custom for bonding, self-expression, and entertainment rooted in cultural expressions and social gatherings. The interaction of Fahri-Maria regarding this custom adds depth to the storytelling. The character of Fahri, a santri who is accustomed to a pesantren setting and received an educational background in Islamic education institutions in Indonesia and Egypt, and his interaction with an attractive female accustomed to the European culture like Maria show the complexities of intercultural interaction and make this particular narrative significant for the plot. Similar nuance, or arguably more bold interaction, is found in El Shirazy's *Bumi Cinta* as the male protagonist is being confrontative and sensually seduced by his female interlocutor. The

²³ Zuhairi Misrawi, *Al Qur'an Kitab Toleransi: Inklusivisme, Pluralisme, Dan Multikulturalisme* (Jakarta: Fitrah, 2007).

²⁴ David G Gularnic, *Wester's World Dictionary of America Language* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1959).

²⁵ Abd Maoqsith Ghazali, *Argumen Agama: Membangun Toleransi Berbasis Al Qur'an* (Depok: KataKita, 2009).

²⁶ Humaidi Tata Pangarsa, *Akhlaq Yang Mulia* (Surabaya: PT. Bintang Ilmu, 1980).

²⁷ Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Ayat Ayat Cinta [Verses of Love]* (Jakarta: Republika Penerbit, 2004), 132–33.





interaction between two characters is illustrated in the following narrative:

Ayyas prostrates for the last rak'at of his prayer at the moment. He feels someone entering his room. He composes himself from finishing his prayer which is almost complete. Right after [closing his prayer signed with the reading of] salām, Ayyas looks his back and startles beyond measure [for what he sees]. "*Astagfiru-Allāh al-Aẓīm*" [I ask forgiveness to Allah the Almighty], Ayyas exclaimed. [Linor, already dressed in a beaded white lingerie dress and applied her best perfume, replies to Ayyas's startle while sitting at his back:] "... by seeing me dressed like this, don't you understand?" [He responds in doubt:] "I do?" [Linor questions him further:] "*Do I also have to take off everything I'm wearing for you to get the point?*" Ayyas is taken aback. He understands Linor's intention. He is also a normal male. His heart is beating fast. His blood is warming up. No one would see if he accepted Linor's invitation. His family would not know about it either.²⁸

Ayyas embodies a character of unwavering faith and resilience in preserving his religious beliefs. After residing in Moscow for some time, he has reached enlightenment of the purpose of his life's journey. The protagonist's contrasting lifestyle with his communicant sheds light on the prevalence of casual sexual relationships in Moscow. Linor, driven by her desire, consistently tempts Ayyas to engage in illicit acts. This is evident when Linor seduces him during prayer. Ayyas' reaction to Linor's advances is punching Linor in her back rendering her unconscious thus he drags her body out of his room, then he locks himself in his room and cries all long.²⁹ The detailed description of Ayyas' reaction signifies the inner struggle he experiences in navigating the clash of values. His act of resisting sexual

temptations could also be a reference to the story of Joseph and Zulaikha in mentioned the Qur'an. This interaction portrays the challenges Muslim youth may encounter as they navigate their faith in non-Islamic regions³⁰ where societal practices may differ from the Islamic dogma and require them to actively uphold their moral integrity while facing contradicting external influences.

Genuine tolerance, as posited by Luxemburg, transcends mere acceptance and encompasses a profound reverence for the autonomy of thought, coupled with a profound recognition of the equal standing of different morale.³¹ It necessitates an embracing of diversity and an active engagement in social bonds characterized by unwavering mutual respect. These intricate facets of tolerance unveil the intricate challenges faced by Muslim millennials where their deeply cherished values are prone to collision with the dominant mores of society.³² By understanding and navigating these complexities, the youth can foster genuine inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogues promoting harmonious coexistence in pluralistic societies.

B. Interfaith Cooperation

Characters undergo significant changes and find redemption through their spiritual journeys. In the context of interfaith cooperation, the concept of accommodating differences and fostering mutual assistance becomes relevant. The narratives in *Bumi Cinta* exemplify how individuals from different backgrounds can find common ground and undergo transformations through their encounters with faith. Devid's test of faith and subsequent return to his religious beliefs as well as Yelena's repentance and acknowledgment of God's guidance highlight the potential for each character's development within the storyline and sparks the idea of

²⁸ Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Bumi Cinta [Earth of Love]* (Semarang: Author Publishing, 2010), 368–70.

²⁹ El Shirazy, 370.

³⁰ Djam'anuri, *Ilmu Perbandingan Agama: Pengertian Dan Objek Kajian* (Yogyakarta: PT. Karunia Kalam Semesta, 1998); Zuhairi Misrawi, "Toleransi versus Intoleransi" (Jakarta: KOMPAS, 2006).

³¹ Nobuhiro Takemoto, "Rosa Luxemburg's Arguments on the Socialist Movements," *Kyoto University Economic Review* 41, no. 1 (90) (1971): 49–77.

³² Höffe Otfried, *Wirtschaftsbürger, Staatsbürger, Weltbürger. Politische Ethik im Zeitalter der Globalisierung* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2004), 187.





positive relations within the realm of interfaith collaboration.

The novel implies that faith can transform one's nature. A small amount of faith in each's heart will receive Allah's guidance regardless of matter how sinful an individual may be in the past. In this context, the story of Devid and his marriage with Yelena may be one of the best cases in this novel. Despite his experience with pesantren tradition, Devid engages in corruptive behaviors in Moskwa; succumbing to various wrongdoings, indulging in promiscuity, and questioning the existence of God. His turning point occurs when he listens to Ayyas's recitation of the Qur'an,³³ Similarly, Yelena who previously was a high-class prostitute in Russia eventually acknowledged the existence of God, recognizing that God saved her from death when she was on the verge of dying after being tortured by one of her clients and abandoned on the dark street. She realized her misguided way, married Devid, and found their inner-peace.

During their flight back to Moskwa, Devid asks Yelena on the plane: ... "Did you regret marrying me?" [she replies:] "On the contrary, I deeply regret not accepting your proposal for marriage. Believe me, the jahiliyya Yelena has perished, and now the one who is your wife is a different Yelena. A Yelena who is prepared to devoutly follow Allah's commands and avoid His prohibitions."³⁴

It is also worth mentioning that Ayyas—the protagonist who helped Yelena on her verge of death and whose Qur'anic recitation acts as an inspiration for his pesantren fellow Devid—is associated with the radical movement according to mainstream Russian media and reports at The Police Department of Russia. The novel invites its readers to apprehend religion and religiosity as a fluid dynamic. It also implies such fluidity in the story of Linor, a Jew who joined the Zionist movement as an assassin before converting to

Islam.³⁵ At the end of her life, she made a solemn promise to be dedicated her-self to Islam and devout towards Allah.

In her heart, she vowed that if she lived a long life, she would devote herself to struggling in the path of Allah.³⁶

The narratives serve to reinforce the concept that interfaith cooperation surpasses tolerance and understanding; it encompasses the potential for individuals from diverse faiths to provide mutual support on their spiritual journeys. *Bumi Cinta* highlights the transformative power of faith and divine intervention, offering a compelling illustration of how interfaith peacebuilding can foster personal and spiritual growth. By sharing experiences and engaging with others, each man can discover solace, guidance, and ultimately, a profound sense of unity that transcends religious identities and divisions.

Assalamualaikum Beijing! explores the love of two characters, Asma and Zhongwen, as they both grow closer to God. Asma's desire to guide Zhongwen in his spiritual journey leads to her own deepening connection to God. The man's love for the protagonist serves as a catalyst for their spiritual journey. When Zhongwen decides to convert to Islam, it becomes a pivotal moment in his life, as he realizes that Allah has touched his heart through the girl he loves. This transformative experience is portrayed in the novel beautifully, emphasizing the power of love and faith to bring individuals closer to God.

And His plan, the way Allah extends guidance through that girl in bright hijab, is incredibly beautiful according to Zhongwen. It's touching.³⁷

Indonesia with its diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious groups represents a great window for the interfaith cooperation.³⁸ Scholars such as Clifford Geertz, Bhiku Parekh and Robert Hefner

³³ El Shirazy, *Bumi Cinta*, 481, 482–84.

³⁴ El Shirazy, 508.

³⁵ El Shirazy, 459, 468.

³⁶ El Shirazy, 257.

³⁷ Asma Nadia, *Assalamualaikum, Beijing!* (Jakarta Selatan: Noura Books, 2013), 255.

³⁸ Nasikun, *Sistem Sosial Indonesia* (Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, n.d.).





have examined the intricacies of the Indonesian state and its abundant cultural pluralism. Geertz emphasizes the challenge of understanding the intricate nature of Indonesian society. Bhiku Parekh acknowledges that multicultural reality encompasses various interpretations of culture, values, and meaning.³⁹ Hefner underscores the remarkable pluralism in Indonesia, recognizing that not all countries possess such a rich tapestry of cultural diversity.⁴⁰

Interfaith cooperation in Indonesia offers valuable insights into the dynamics of society and the fundamental conditions that exist.⁴¹ The nation's cultural heritage, particularly the local elements of Nusantara, strengthens national solidarity. However, conflicts arising from issues like SARA (religion, ethnicity, race, and societal groups) demonstrate the challenges of fostering harmony in a diverse society.⁴² The analogy of diverse fingers used by Sujanto illustrates the importance of recognizing and appreciating diversity.⁴³ Pancasila, the guiding principle of Indonesia, emphasizes unity in diversity, urging its preservation without suppression. Embracing the pillars of Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, Bhineka Tunggal Ika, and the Republic of Indonesia is crucial for nurturing stability in an era of globalization.

The concept of acknowledging Nusantara knowledge and the inherent diversity in plural societies while promoting unity through shared meals and embracing a holistic perspective that sees interconnectedness among individuals and the world.⁴⁴ While this presents great potential, it also poses challenges, including the possibility of

societal conflicts if the intercultural and interfaith dialogue and cooperation are not fostered.

C. Interfaith Dialogue

El Shirazy's *Ayat Ayat Cinta* is prominent in showing positive traits of other people of faith and their influence on the character development of muslim protagonists. That style is visible in the interaction between Fahri and Maria as she tries to prove her memorization of two chapters of the Qur'an, Q. Al-Mā'idah [5] and Maryam [19]. Just before Fahri gives the benefit of the doubt, Maria already prays for God's protection against evil (ta'āwuz) and recites the Qur'an thoroughly. The interaction of the two characters is illustrated in the narrative below:

"If non-Muslim women are able to memorize and recite the holy verses of the Quran with good manners, then why can't I and some other women do the same?"⁴⁵

Bumi Cinta contains a brief explanation of the revelation of God and the importance of doing His commands and preventing His prohibitions. Ayyas as a minority in Russia upholds Islam in the conversation between Him and Yelena. This was after she flinched at the admission that Yelena did not trust God.⁴⁶ She argues that God's existence complicates matters, so she believes that God does not exist. This led Ayyas to advise that religion exists to solve men's problems.⁴⁷

[Yelena says:] "Don't be shocked. Many people here are not religious. Based on my experience, to make our lives easy and gain abundance, we don't actually need a religion or a God. In fact, the presence of religion and God only creates problems!" [Ayyas replies:] "That's

³⁹ Azumardi Azra, "Pancasila Dan Identitas Nasional Indonesia: Perspektif Multikulturalisme," in *Restorasi Pancasila: Mendamaikan Politik Identitas Dan Modernitas* (Jakarta: Rienaka Cipta, 2006).

⁴⁰ C. Mahfud, *Pendidikan Multikultural* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2009).

⁴¹ C. Mahfud.

⁴² Wingarta, "Transformasi (Nilai-Nilai Kebangsaan) Empat Pilar Kebangsaan Dalam Mengatasi Fenomena Konflik Dan Kekerasan," in *Transformasi Empat Pilar Kebangsaan Dalam Mengatasi Fenomema Konflik Dan*

Kekekrasan: Peran Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan (Bandung: Lab.PKN UPI, 2012).

⁴³ B Sujanto, *Pemahaman Kembali Makna Bhineka Tunggal Ika: Persaudaraan Dalam Kemajemukan* (Jakarta: Sagung Seto, 2009).

⁴⁴ HAR Tilaar, *Mengindonesiakan Etnisitas Dan Identitas Bangsa Indonesia* (Jakarta: Rienaka Cipta, 2006).

⁴⁵ El Shirazy, *Bumi Cinta*, 23–25.

⁴⁶ El Shirazy, 51.

⁴⁷ El Shirazy, 48.





*not true. Religion exists precisely to solve the various problems that afflict humanity. You can say whatever you want, but God still exists. Even if the entire population of the Earth claims and believes that God doesn't exist, He still does. God existed before the universe, including the world and its inhabitants. The existence of God is part of the truth of a postulate."*⁴⁸

In another scene, Yelena accompanied Ayyas through the snowy morning in Moscow. Yelena agreed to accompany him because Ayyas was afraid of getting lost in an unfamiliar setting. It was his first time exploring the city, and Ayyas was amazed by the beauty of the falling snow, seeing it as a manifestation of God's goodness.

"Ayyas, look at the grass. It seems to emerge from within the snow. And the sunlight is so beautiful. From my childhood until now, I have never witnessed a natural phenomenon like this. The grass is visible in winter, and the sun greets us with its rays." [Yelena comments on her view on the city's view] *"If it is God's will, anything can happen!"* Ayyas replies.

Ayyas represents an ideal figure of a devout Muslim while Anastasia and Dr. Lyudmila act as representations of Orthodox Christians. As our main Muslim protagonist was invited to a public discussion on "Theology in the Modern Era" to illustrate that God truly exists and doesn't exist, as stated in the following quote:

"The shining sun, the bright stars, and the earth teeming with diverse life, each serves as real evidence that the universe is temporal and had a specific starting point. So, the universe was indeed created, and its Creator is an Eternal, Absolute, Unoriginated, All-Knowing, and All-Powerful Entity."

In her efforts to guide the converted man towards embracing Islam, Asma found solace. With determination, she embarked on a journey to deepen Zhongwen's understanding of the

faith. Zhongwen, recognizing the divine purpose in Asma's presence, chose Islam as his path. As captured by the following quote:

"Why not choose other options? Why it has to do with Islam?" Guidance. The guiding light shines through Ashima.⁴⁹

Frontstage Narratives: Novels Embracing Unity

There are key elements of the psychological disposition and preferences of millennials in relation to literature, particularly in the context of Islamic popular novels. Millennials' rejection of condescending and monotonous literature in favor of vibrant storylines that reflect current conditions reflects their desire for engaging and relatable narratives.

The geographical settings in this literature play an important role in shaping the narratives. El Shirazy's works depict locations in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, and various countries in Continental Europe incorporating each hub's cultures and traditions. Nadia's popular Islamic literature is set in East Asian countries like Korea and China, focusing on interfaith issues. The selected backdrops, such as campuses, mosques, apartments, heritage buildings, and city parks contribute to the construction and intensification of the plot and storyline.

Both authors present protagonists who are devout and faithful Muslims, showcasing their strong commitment to their faiths and values. These characters undergo complex romantic experiences which ultimately lead to marital bonds. They possess tenacity and a strong drive for rationality while exhibiting resilience in the face of trials. El Shirazy's ideal characters, such as Fahri,⁵⁰ Azzam,⁵¹ and Ayyas⁵² are predominantly male while female lead like Zahrana in *Cinta Suci Zahrana* represents the archetype of ideal Muslim young women.

⁴⁸ El Shirazy, 59.

⁴⁹ Nadia, *Assalamualaikum, Beijing!*, 253.

⁵⁰ Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta [Verses of Love]*, vol. 2 (Jakarta: Republika Penerbit, 2017), 400, 578.

⁵¹ Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih [When Love Glorifies]*, vol. 1 (Semarang: Basmala-Republika, 2007), 213, 329–31.

⁵² El Shirazy, *Bumi Cinta*, 481, 482–84.





Taking account of some of Nadia's main works, protagonists and antagonists navigate various romantic predicaments and other trials. It demonstrates determination and perseverance in pursuing their goals while withstanding some temptations in an unfamiliar sociocultural setting. Her main lead characters experience challenges as a test to unveil their true faith, thus every trial in her fiction functions as a means to develop the characters. Thus, narratives containing interfaith relations and exploration of other religions act as a significant part of the character development and the storyline.

The depiction of devout and unwavering characters in these novels serves as a source of admiration for both Muslim and non-Muslim women. These individuals are seen as pious and righteous, becoming role models of successful Muslims. The resilience of the main characters to their religious principles fascinates others toward their deeply held beliefs and principles.

Overall, the portrayal of protagonists in these Islamic novels reflects the millennial audience's desire for engaging storylines that resonate with their current conditions and preferences. The depiction of characters who navigate romantic trials while upholding their values serves as a source of inspiration and admiration, appealing to readers who seek narratives that align with their own faiths and cultures.

Backstage: The Shaping of Peace-Loving Youth

A. Impression Management

El Shirazy artistically presents a tapestry of Middle Eastern culture and traditions steeped in Islamic heritage. His narrative shows the rapid progress and evolution of Islam, accentuating the seamless harmony between worldly pursuits and spiritual devotion. Almost every protagonist serves as a remarkable embodiment of scientific knowledge and deep-rooted Islamic values that

enable each of them to spread education across European and Middle Eastern nations. Most of his protagonists are also likely engaging in the academic milieu and local community activities.

Nadia exhibits adeptness in portraying a main character who unwaveringly upholds religious principles amidst the complexities of romantic entanglements. This firm commitment is evident as the character navigates daily life as a minority and adheres to religious precepts and symbols dutifully. *Surga Yang Tak Dirindukan*, for instance, showcases Arini's acceptance of her husband's polygamy,⁵³ despite personal turmoil and societal opposition as a woman. The depiction underlines the importance of upholding religious principles regardless of the surroundings. The main character's unwavering constancy leaves positive impressions thus it evokes appreciation and sympathy from others.

B. Role Distance

Role distance refers to degrees of separation between an individual and their ideal role. One notable distinction between the two authors lies in the background of writing contemporary Islamic novels. El Shirazy establishes a sense of distance by incorporating his personal life journey as a student at Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt into the narrative. The challenges faced during his studies and his experiences in life inspire him to craft several contemporary Islamic novels, such as *Ayat Ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*. This reflection holds a particular allure for those interested in experiencing life in Middle Eastern and European countries.

On the other hand, Nadia vividly portrays Muslim women living in minority communities who wholeheartedly practice their teachings and faith. Readers are immersed in an East Asian ambiance that presents the challenges of being a minority while engaging with the local society

⁵³ Asma Nadia, *Surga yang Tak Dirindukan [The Unmissed Heaven]* (Jakarta: Asma Nadia Publishing House, 2014), 266–67; See also Lina Putriyanti et al., "Kognisi Sosial Dalam Novel 'Surga yang Tak Dirindukan' Karya Asma

Nadia," in *Prosiding Seminar Internasional Riksa Bahasa XIII* (Bandung: Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, 2019), 1859–68.





and culture. The majority of the main characters in her works embody a strong awareness of education and exhibit resilience despite being far from their homeland. With the backdrop and setting of East Asian countries, some of Asma Nadia's contemporary Islamic novels have been adapted for the silver screen. The enthusiasm among readers and novel enthusiasts for these adaptations parallels the fervor surrounding Korean dramas.

C. Stigmatization

Stigmatization can be interpreted as an inherent reality that individuals should embrace, constituting a part of their backstage. It provides a clear depiction of the values that should be present in one's works or writings. El Shirazy illustrates that every youth should possess a high level of enthusiasm in pursuing their dreams, whether in the field of education or other life achievements. Departing with a blazing spirit and being prepared to withstand challenges and circumstances, El Shirazy portrays that being a role model can emerge from situations that may not be entirely conducive, through constant effort and prayer, ultimately leading to the realization of those dreams. The attainment of graduation, a harmonious family, and the desired life become a reality for many.

Nadia presents a portrayal of a Muslim's life amidst non-Muslim minority communities, a relationship filled with challenges and dialectics. Despite the differences in local culture, Asma Nadia explains that these hurdles can be overcome through a process of adaptation. Such relationships and negotiations result in positive connections, including romantic ones. Yet, Nadia firmly establishes a principled boundary in her narrative for prohibiting interfaith marriage but allowing social interaction between a Muslim female and a non-Muslim male.

D. Frame Analysis

The concept associated with this analysis reveals the cognitive framework through which individuals perceive, identify, interpret, and label every event in their personal and global lives that hold a universal nature. El Shirazy is depicted as a person with profound knowledge of religion and an impressive ability to memorize Quranic texts. Many narratives in his literature are a reception of his understanding of specific verses, particularly those addressing Islamic teachings and doctrines. This is evident in the portrayal of rituals and religious expressions that describe the storyline. It is this effort of El Shirazy to elaborate on the fusion of these two elements that captivates a broad audience segment with strong religious nuances, such as communities in Islamic boarding schools and religious circles.

Nadia, in her narratives, elucidates various reflections of Islamic dogma, such as the principle of marriage, which, according to popular Islamic teachings,⁵⁴ require both parties to be Muslims. Despite portraying two individuals deeply in love, their beliefs are carefully considered, leading to the necessity for one of them to convert to Islam before proceeding with the marriage. In a familial situation faced with the challenge of a potential second wife, one of the main characters chooses to embrace polygamy instead of succumbing to slander and infidelity. This serves as proof that Islamic values remain the primary guiding principles for Nadia when crafting the storyline, ensuring that her narratives do not contradict the fundamental principles of Islam.

Marketplace of Islamic Fiction

A. Youth Agency and Consumptive Culture

The instantaneous development of the times provides convenience in accessing all needs from a gadget. This convenience has greatly influenced millennials, highlighting their ability to shape and control their preferences and desires. From

⁵⁴ Dzalfa Farida Humaira, et al., "Kontestasi Wacana Tafsir Berkeadilan Gender di Indonesia: Telaah Konsep-Konsep Kunci," *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 7, no. 1 (July 1, 2022): 65, 70; Noorhaidi Hasan et al.,

Fikih Humanis: Meneguhkan Keragaman, Membela Kesetaraan dan Kemanusiaan, ed. Noorhaidi Hasan and Maufur (Yogyakarta: Pasca UIN Sunan Kalijaga Press & Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, 2022), 18, 336–66.





an economic standpoint, millennials represent a promising market segment, as advertisers and businesses capitalize on this trend by launching extensive product promotions and marketing campaigns on campuses, mosques, and public spaces.⁵⁵ Such trend is visible in the consumption patterns of millennials when it comes to their reading materials, including Islamic fiction.

Indonesian Muslim novelists have leveraged this existing business opportunity to effectively reach out to millennials. The works of authors like Shirazy and Nadia consistently adorn best-selling bookshelves and even find their way into adaptations for television shows or films. From a market perspective, it can be argued that the production of Islamist novels proves to be financially rewarding for both the authors and the industry as a whole. While the popularity of the novelists themselves serves as a central asset in this market, the economic benefits derived from publishing royalties and rights to republish best-selling novels also contribute significantly to their income.

B. The Quest for Muslim Youth's Ideology

The present era witnesses a multitude of influences shaping the diversity of millennials, encompassing factors such as their religious background, favored religious authority, and the pervasive impact of ideologies and aphorisms prevalent on social media platforms. Millennials find themselves traversing a paradoxical terrain, where they navigate the overwhelming realm of social media and the currents of globalization, while simultaneously being expected to embrace a deeper religiosity in other facets of life. This oscillation presents a pathway for millennials to reconcile their contemporary existence with the intrinsic religious values that underpin their lives, effectively bridging the gap between the two realms. Consequently, when millennials opt for fiction, they gravitate towards novels that

intricately weave religious nuances with popular vocabularies and romantic plots.

The phenomenon becomes apparent through the active engagement of young individuals in the literary endeavors of esteemed authors. Figures such as El Shirazy and Nadia exemplify authors who prioritize the concentration and profound exploration of religious values. This discernible pattern is discerned within thematic elements, symbols, stylistics, and nuances in their highly acclaimed novels. It is common for religious scholars and popular Muslim preachers (Ustādh, Kiai) to recommend works of Islamic fiction to their pupils and audiences who seeking a light and fun reading experience that parallels their spiritual inclinations. The trend signifies that youth are seeking narratives that seamlessly integrate with their religious convictions while remaining attuned to its milieu. By immersing in novels that delve into Islamic themes, millennials discover a wellspring of guidance and inspiration to navigate the intricacies of their personal and spiritual journeys.

Conclusion

Interfaith relations in Indonesian society have shown promising developments, although they have yet to reach their full potential and satisfy all segments of society. The trend signifies that youth are seeking a light and fun reading that parallels their spiritual inclinations. Interfaith themes and issues regularly serve as enriching elements within the storylines of contemporary Islamist novels. These narratives interweave romantic relationships with doctrines embedded in Islamic dogma. By blending these elements, authors create captivating storylines that explore the dynamics between romance and religious principles. Such novels contribute to the broader discussion on intercultural and interreligious relationships, offering a unique perspective on the interplay between personal relationships and religious beliefs.

⁵⁵ Iswandi Syahputra, "Agama Di Era Media: Kode Religius Dalam Industri Televisi Indonesia," *ESENSIA*:

Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 125–38, <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v17i1.1283>.





The result found that popular Islamist novels contain themes of religious commitment, women empowerment, and interfaith peacemaking in the romance main plot as a form of resistance against sexist and vulgar nuance in "chick lit" or "fragrant novel" genre in the 90's Indonesian fiction. Two popular Muslim novelists kept the exciting tale of a young couple adopted from the previous genre while annihilating the use of a sensual tone that is far from both Islamic dogma and local tradition. Connoisseurs of contemporary Islamic novels, most of whom are millennials and young people, are one of the causes of narratives or dictions between faiths being widely enjoyed, this is to instill authors' backstage ideologies in its readers, particularly the millennials.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to all fellow researchers and supervisors for their genuine passion for the making of this research.

Competing Interests

None of the authors had any financial or personal relationship with novelists and others that could appropriately influence or bias the study.

Author's Contributions

Khodijah wrote the original draft and compiled the research. Machasin and Moch Nur Ichwan reviewed the manuscript, formed the theoretical framework, and gathered additional resources.

This research provides an overview of the forms and patterns of interfaith presented to millennials today. Seeing millennials as one of the interfaith objects that need to be considered and get special treatment, is inseparable from the existence of the post-truth era which makes information circulate freely, and requires guidance and signs in voicing the relationship between faiths to millennial groups.

This research still has limitations in terms of objects and theories. The object of study is still limited to two contemporary novelists and has not seen some other novelists who may have a distinctive interfaith perspective and promotion.

In the theoretical sense, the use of dramaturgical theory is still not in seeing the extent of readers' response to popular Islamic novels, therefore we encourage further studies with a bigger scale to determine the acceptance rate of popular Islamic fiction among millennials.

Ethical Considerations

This article follows all ethical standards for research, without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding Information

This research did not receive a specific grant from any funding agency in public, commercial, or non-for-profit sector.

Data Availability

Data sharing does not apply to this paper because no new data was created or analyzed

Disclaimer

The views and assumptions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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