

Defying Western Femininity: The Woman's Image in Indonesian Islamic Magazines

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ISLAMIC WOMEN'S magazines in Indonesia started to grow in the 21st century, when *Noor* magazine was published in 2003, which was followed by other Islamic magazines. The contents are relatively similar to other women's magazines and are predominantly about fashion and beauty tips, health and well-being, and sex and marriage. One element that differentiates these magazines from mainstream women's magazines is how they generate Islamic ideology and conventions. Islamic women's magazines present Muslim models on their front covers, and feature Islamic fashion, articles focused on women's everyday lives, and how to live the Islamic way of life. It is interesting to explore the ways in which Islamic femininity is being constructed and how it is being generated to defy and transgress from the dominant Western media stereotypes of Muslim women. In order to examine this, a textual analysis is employed for one of *Noor's* cover editions (Figure 1), along with an in-depth interview with the editor-in-chief of *Noor*, Jetti Rusila Hadi.

Size Zero and Beyond: Women's Magazines and the Discourse of Femininity

Femininity can be described as the behaviour, personality, appearance, or specific characteristics that are ascribed to women culturally. Young woman or girls, from the start, are internalised by feminine characteristics, such as 'passivity, submissiveness, and dependence.'¹ It is important to highlight the word 'culture', as feminine ideals differ from one culture to another. However, despite many feminists criticising the ideology of femininity, not many of them actually elaborate on how femininity is constructed within different cultures and geographical contexts.²

Betty Friedan, in her canonical text *The Feminine Mystique*, highlighted the roles of popular mediums—especially women's magazines and advertising—in creating pressure for women to project themselves as happy and fulfilled housewives.³ Friedan, a former magazine editor, argued that women's magazines are pivotal in constructing

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¹Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 10.

²Hollows, *Feminism*, 17.

³Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971), 10.

false representations of what feminine ideals should be. They are responsible for creating the psychological problem that she defined in her book as ‘the problem that has no name.’⁴ This psychological problem, as she stated, came from the obsessive need to portray the ‘happy heroine housewives’ which depicts women’s ultimate goals as being based on ‘fulfilling their femininity’ and centering their lives around their husbands and children.⁵

In this sense, women’s magazines are undeniably significant in shaping women’s perceptions on what feminine ideals should be. Within its glamorous advertising images, intimate articles, and wide readership, women learn to conform to the ideology of femininity, which is often related to issues of romance, beauty, motherhood, and domesticity. Marjorie Ferguson states that women’s magazines ‘promote the cult of femininity’ by constructing and supplanting feminine categorisation.⁶ Naomi Wolf argues that magazines, as a product of popular culture, convey the ‘beauty myth’ that has no historic, religious, or evolutionary roots, but comes from the patriarchal power structure.⁷ Popular media, including women’s magazines, operates as a tool of gender, by which the ideology of gender is transmitted, articulated, and represented.⁸

It is intriguing to trace the feminine quality ascribed by women’s magazines, especially discourse about the female body as it gradually changes. The early 1900s was an era of celebrating voluptuous women with real curves, where ‘not one of the fashion models weighed under eleven stone and there is no sense in which dietary regulation was promoted in women’s magazines.’⁹ This era is also noted as a time where women were becoming writers, editors, or publishers of women’s periodicals.¹⁰ This is strikingly different from the media in the 1960s and mid-1970s, when the stick thin figure, such as popular model Twiggy, started to popularise a look now called ‘ultra-thin.’¹¹ It seems that the ‘ultra-thin’ trend will continue to be the mainstream representation in the media, although there have been campaigns regarding healthy body images and ‘plus-size models.’¹²

⁴Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 29.

⁵Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 43.

⁶Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women’s Magazines and The Cult of Femininity* (Aldershot, Hants: Gower, 1985), 4.

⁷Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), 12.

⁸Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (London: SAGE, 1994), 41.

⁹Hilary Fawcett, ‘Romance, Glamour and the Exotic: Femininity and Fashion in Britain in the 1900s,’ in *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880–1930*, ed. Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham (London: Routledge, 2004), 153.

¹⁰Kristin H. Gerard, ‘International Women’s Periodicals: Late 18th Century to the Great Depression,’ revised 2013, *International Women’s Periodicals* [Accessed: http://iwp.library.cornell.edu/iwp/women_intro.html. 10 May 2013].

¹¹The term created by the mass media to describe supermodels or celebrities that have size ‘zero’ in US or equivalent with UK size 4. This phenomenon has also been popularised by the supermodel Kate Moss in the UK.

¹²The term refers to models of size 12 (UK) and beyond. Fashion retailers such as Marks and Spencer and beauty product manufacturer Dove are amongst the first to use plus-size models. *Elle Quebec* magazine has also recently been praised for featuring a model with a voluptuous body on their front cover. Margot Peppers, ‘The Thighs The Limit: Elle Quebec Casts Plus Size Models,’ revised 1 May 2013, *Daily Mail: Femail* [Accessed: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2317410/The-thighs-limit-Elle-Quebec-casts-plus-size-model-latest-cover--puts-sensational-curves-center.html>. 10 May 2013].

It is also interesting to note how women's magazines represent the behaviour and personality traits of women. The theme 'The Working Wife is a Bad Wife', which was prevalent as a women's magazine ideology during the 1950s, has shifted into 'The Working Wife is a Good Wife' during the 1970s.¹³ It is evident that the discourse surrounding women's femininity is tightly bound to social and economic changes. Second wave feminism emerged during the mid-1960s and led to an increase in the number of working women, this changed the content of magazines from domesticity-led to working-led. Themes, such as 'self-determination,' 'self-help,' and 'female accomplishment,' were prominent in women's magazines from the 1970s to the 1980s. Significantly, the themes that have always been dominant in women's magazines are the depictions of motherhood, happy families, and how to maintain relationships. Feminist scholars have highlighted these rather vague and sometimes contradictory representations of women with various terms, such as 'popular feminism,' 'sexy feminism,' and even 'post-feminism.'

Angela McRobbie coined the term 'popular feminism' to address the popular media, such as TV shows, films, magazines, and advertising that seem to be issuing feminist ideology into their texts.¹⁴ Popular TV shows, such as *Sex and The City* (HBO, 1998-2004), and worldwide franchise magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, often highlight feminist issues. These include women's exploitation, sexual abuse, and reproduction rights, but are also imbued by the plethora of airbrushed beauty images, which are contradictory to the feminist agenda. These vague messages are one of the many factors that, in turn, make women confused about how to project their identity.¹⁵

Muslim Woman's Image in *Noor*

I generated a textual analysis to interpret the Muslim woman's image in the *Noor* cover below (Figure 1). The cover was taken from *Noor*'s April 2012 edition which featured Rachel Maryam, the prominent Indonesian movie star who became a politician and was elected to sit on the House of Representatives Committee. It is interesting to look at the life story of Rachel Maryam. She was one of the most promising young Indonesian movie stars and had won several national and international movie awards throughout her career, including the Best Young Cinema Award and the Best Promising Young Director, for her directorial debut at the Singapore Film Festival in 2007. She was married at the age of 25 and had a son. Five years later, she was divorced, joined a political party, and was elected to committee of the House of Representatives from 2009–2014.

The article entitled *New Life New Love* by Rachel Mariam [*sic*], told the story of Maryam after she wore a hijab (headscarf) following her election to the House of Representatives, and how she was divorced and then remarried. She told the magazine that she found a meaning in life when she wore a hijab. Wearing a hijab gave her a new direction as well as a renewed responsibility to be a good and devout Muslim woman, wife, mother, and politician. It seems that Rachel Maryam is represented as being a

¹³Ferguson, *Forever Feminine*, 55.

¹⁴Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009), 13–14.

¹⁵Tracy Lynn Rundstrom Williams, 'Textual Construction of Femininity in Women's Fitness Magazines' (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Arlington, 2007), 3.

Figure 1: Example of Islamic Women's Magazines: *Noor* (April 2012). Cover © Majalah Noor



good example of how Muslim women should be. In one of the interviews, Maryam cried when she remembered her unfortunate past and stated that she was inspired to wear a hijab after she visited Mecca several times.¹⁶ She also stated that she wanted to forget her past—presumably her divorce and her entertainment career—and the hijab symbolised this change. She expressed how she felt that she was going in a good direction, having a successful career as a female politician, being a good mother, and wearing a hijab. The pose of Rachel Maryam, with one hand on her hip, also signifies confidence and authority.

It is also interesting to interpret the fashion choice for this edition. Rachel Maryam wears clothing that is unconventionally fashionable. The fashion choice for Maryam has a masculine look, in a black with gold lining Panama hat, black butterfly tie with masculine camel-coloured tops. Her headscarf is almost invisible, and is merely a tight black bonnet hidden under her Panama hat; this seems to signify that the veil embraces fashion discourses and is adaptable. Maryam's pose is serious; she is not smiling and is gazing directly at the reader. It gives the impression that she is trying to not be alluring and is refusing to look inviting, unlike mainstream women's magazines covers which convey overt sexuality.

Other captions on the front cover, *High Heels High Risk* and *Fashion Outer Wear*, were deliberately written in English. *Noor's* target market appears to be middle-class, educated women who understand English. *High Heels High Risk* represented the dangerous aspect of wearing high heels and tells the reader how to minimise this risk. Another article *Muslimah Kembang Peradaban* (Muslim Woman as the Flower

¹⁶Rachel Maryam, 'Rachel Maryam Sesali Masa Lalu,' revised 26 November 2012, *Kapanlagi* [Accessed: <http://www.kapanlagi.com/showbiz/selebriti/rachel-maryam-sesali-masa-lalu-ca9d36.html>. 16 May 2013].

of Society), and the article '*Kepompong*' *Buat Si Kecil* (Playground for the Little One), both show that the magazine is concerned about motherhood and family well-being. Furthermore, the article *Fashion Outer Wear* outlines the fashion for working women, which has been represented by the masculine look of Rachel Maryam on the magazine's cover, along with the caption *Putih versus Coklat* (White versus Brown) which represents the choice of colour for working women's fashion.

From the choice of cover models, the use of English for the magazine's captions, and the fashion and colour choice for a masculine look, *Noor* seems to be trying to transgress from the stereotypical image of a Muslim woman, who usually wears loose garments and wide monochromatic hijabs. *Noor* also chooses prominent female Muslim figures in Indonesia, to show that a Muslim woman can be smart, independent, and maintain her career, while simultaneously being a loving mother and wife. The fashion featured in this edition also seems to push the boundaries from conventional Islamic fashion, which is usually the abaya,¹⁷ to something edgier, with the use of a panama hat and a black butterfly tie. The need to defy Western femininity is also represented through the cover model, who seems to avoid sensuality, unlike other women's magazines. Islamic femininity is thus represented as the respectable feminine ideal, which embraces modernity and yet still holds traditional gender ideologies, such as motherhood and marriage.

A Different Kind of Muslim Woman: Interview with the Editor-in-Chief

I conducted a semi-structured interview with the 55-year-old Jetti Rusila Hadi in 2009, who has been the Editor-in-Chief from the time *Noor* was first published in April 2003 until the present day. The inspiration to publish the first women's Islamic magazine in Indonesia came from her life experience abroad. Jetti Rusila Hadi spent many years of her life in the United States of America and Australia where she followed her husband to study. She was also working as an engineer in Australia as the City Planning Consultant. It was at this point that she finally decided to cover herself by wearing a hijab. Her co-worker's comments shocked her when she came to her office one day wearing headscarves.

The comment, 'I didn't know you're a Muslim. You're smart!', made her realise that this is the typical Muslim stereotype for Western people.¹⁸ The veil is one of the most ambiguous, ambivalent, and intriguing subjects to talk about. It is ambiguous because every Islamic culture has their own specific style of veiling, for example from the tent-like burqa in Afghanistan to the glamorous silk hijabs worn by Dubai socialites. Ambivalent because its meaning is heavily attached to the discursive power on how Islam is perceived. Alison Donnell stated that there is a shifted meaning of the 'veil' from the pre- and post-September 11 attacks period, from 'an object of mystique, exoticism, and eroticism' to a symbol of 'Islamophobia'.¹⁹

¹⁷Loose and long Islamic dress. Usually worn by Middle-Eastern women.

¹⁸Interview with Jetti Rusila Hadi, 7 December 2009.

¹⁹Alison Donnell, 'Visibility, Violence and Voice? Attitudes to Veiling post-11 September' in *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, eds. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2003), 123.

This contrasting perception is blatantly rejected by Jetti Rusila Hadi. She stated that veiling is one thing that makes Muslim women different from their counterparts. Veiling, as she stated, is a kind of agency for Muslim women to de-sexualise themselves and a way to avoid the male gaze. The veil, as Jetti argued, is a way for women to gain respect, not by their 'sexuality but by intelligence.' Thus, Islamic femininity in this sense differs greatly from the Western perception of the female body. While in Western women's magazines femininity is represented through the body and sexuality, Islamic magazines represent femininity through the body in veil. The reader can see the body, but it is hidden behind the veil. This is also generated from the magazines' practise of featuring up-to-date fashion, as long as it is coherent with Islamic convention. As Hadi argues: 'Our clothes shouldn't be transparent, tight or showing the body shape.'²⁰

When asked about the type of Muslim women that are represented through *Noor*, she answered 'a different kind of Muslim women.' She states that this means Muslim women who are 'smart, not conservative, but also not liberal, modern but not Westernised, maintain her career but also a loving wife and mother at home.'²¹

Being not conservative, but also not liberal and modern but not Westernised seems quite difficult to implement. This 'neither here nor there' position is similar to William's statement that women today are clueless about how to project themselves as being successful without losing their femininity, because of the massive and sometimes contradictory messages of body image and beauty throughout popular media.²²

The idea 'not conservative and not liberal' is the magazine's representation of what the Indonesian Muslim woman should be, as someone who is not wearing monochromatic colours and the tent-like burqa, like the ones often labelled as terrorists, but also not overtly sexual, such as the ones in western women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogue*. Furthermore, the statement 'modern but not westernised' represents Muslim women who are educated, but still hold Islamic values, especially being a good wife and a loving mother.

The eagerness to represent 'different kinds of Muslim women' seems to be tied to the post-September 11 Attacks and the Bali bombings in 2002, where Indonesia has tried to define and redefine the Indonesian Muslim as being representative of moderate Islam. Without being overtly conservative there has been a widespread discourse and a regular academic discussion to explore the issue of the nation's identity as being Muslim.²³ The Bali bombing, which killed 88 Australians from the total of 202 victims, by the Jamaat Islamiyah, made this 'moderate Islam' discourse more relevant to the nation's future.²⁴ The issue of a moderate Islamic identity has been clearly addressed by the version of a 'different kind of Muslim woman' by *Noor*.

²⁰Interview with Jetti Rusila Hadi, 7 December 2009.

²¹Interview with Jetti Rusila Hadi, 7 December 2009.

²²Williams, 'Textual Construction,' 3.

²³Moderate Islam can be described as being for tolerant Muslims, and which involves being adaptable to democracy, human rights and global civil society. Indonesia is one country that shows that Islam and democracy can survive, whereas in other Islamic countries this has failed. Munim Sirry, 'Indonesian Muslim Can Pave Towards A "Moderate Islam"', revised 6 June 2005, *World Security Network* [Accessed: <http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/Broader-Middle-East/Sirry-Munim/Indonesian-Muslims-can-pave-the-way-toward-a-moderate-Islam>. 27 May 2013].

²⁴'Bali Death Toll Set at 202,' revised 19 February 2003, *BBC News* [Accessed: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2778923.stm>. 27 May 2013].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Islamic women's magazine does defy western femininity to some extent. On the one hand, the veil functions as the signifier to the Islamic bodies, one that cannot be seen, especially by men. This body discourse is supported by the model's pose, to emphasise the un-sensuousness of the model. However, it seems also rather vague and contradictory, since Islamic fashion still—and always will—absorbs the international trends in western fashion, in order to signify Muslim women as being modern individuals who are adaptable to changes. This notion of a 'posh but pious' attitude comprises the nation's search for a national identity: the moderate Islamic nation.

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