

Young Women Writers from the *Pesantren* Tradition: Self Initiative, Learning Environment, and the Education System

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Introduction

The publication of *popular pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) *novels* in recent years in Indonesia signifies the emergence of a new generation of women writers from the *pesantren* tradition who are influenced by *chick lit* and *teen-lit* novels. Although these young women writers still need to develop their writing, they fill significant roles in the area of *pesantren* and Indonesian literature, as I have discussed elsewhere.²⁷⁸ These novels are a way for *pesantren* culture to interact with “outsiders”—those who do not share the *pesantren* tradition. Outsiders can read, learn about, discuss, and even criticize *pesantren* knowledge and traditions through this literature. In addition, these young writers can be viewed as representing a regeneration of women’s writing from the *pesantren*, following a tradition represented by earlier writers such as Abidah El-Khaliqy. Their emergence has opened a new window for the development of authorship in the *pesantren* tradition, which has been dominated by men for many decades.²⁷⁹

Through *pesantren pop literature*, the members of this new generation are building their identity as writers, sharpening their writing skills, and gaining experiences and confidence as they reach toward attaining the quality of serious literature.²⁸⁰ Because it is important to support this continuation of women writers from the *pesantren* tradition, this paper examines their emergence in an effort to determine factors, including family assistance, self-esteem establishment, and schooling, that may encourage or discourage them, and also considers some programs to support and develop the skills they need to achieve careers as writers. I argue that these young women writers are not born from random circumstances but emerge in an atmosphere

²⁷⁸ Nor Ismah, “The New Generation of Women Writers from the Pesantren Tradition,” *Explorations*, 11, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 106–120.

²⁷⁹ From the 1960s to the 1990s, there were a number of male writers from the *pesantren* tradition such as Djamil Suherman, Syu’bah Asa, and Fudoli Zaini. They explored the *pesantren* tradition in their works. However, Abidah El-Khaliqy was the only woman acknowledged as a writer from the *pesantren* tradition during this period. Ismah, “The New Generation,” 107.

²⁸⁰ This statement is based on the idea that the “*pesantren pop novel* is an embryo for *sastra pesantren* in which the older generation of women writers will be followed by a new generation, while young women writers can develop and improve their talent expressing their experiences using their own language. Therefore, *pesantren pop novel* can provide a training ground for young writers to develop writing skills which will help promote the introduction of women writers in Indonesian literature.” Ismah, “The New Generation,” 118.

in which talented girls are encouraged. The paper concludes with the proposal of various steps that could be considered by *pesantren* in order to support an ongoing regeneration of women's writing.

The *Pesantren* and Writing Traditions

Writing and authorship play important roles in spreading Islamic thought and traditions. As suggested by Van Bruinessen (1994, 14), the works that form the foundation of Islamic tradition were written between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, and before that period only a small number of significant references were composed. Core Islamic thought had been accomplished by the end of the fifteenth century, and after that no important elaboration followed. The writing tradition in the *pesantren*, influenced by the link between Indonesian *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and scholars from the Middle East, has strengthened from the nineteenth century onwards from a basis established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Mas'ud 2006, 85). Nawawi al-Bantani (d. 1896–7), Ahmad Khatib (d. 1915), and Kyai Mahfuz Termas (d. 1919–20) are the three most prominent *ulama* who studied in Mecca and then taught there in the Masjid al-Haram; through their writings they influenced and inspired the *ulama* of *pesantren* in Indonesia (Van Bruinessen 1994, 20).

In the *pesantren* tradition, the works of these intellectuals are considered Islamic classical texts and called *kitab kuning*²⁸² (yellow books), a term that refers to “classical texts of the various Islamic disciplines, together with commentaries, glosses, and super commentaries on these basic texts written over the ages” (Van Bruinessen 1994, 1). These works demonstrate that writing is part of the *pesantren* tradition because they were written by scholars from the *pesantren* and are learned and rewritten by people in the *pesantren*. The production of works from *kyai* of the *pesantren* continues into the twentieth-first century, and most of the works relate to Islamic knowledge, either for education or devotional purposes.

Most critics believe that *sastra pesantren* (*pesantren* literature)²⁸³ must represent and obey Islamic and *pesantren* values (Munawar 2007). Accordingly, starting in the

²⁸² They are called *kitab kuning* because of “the tinted paper of books brought from the Middle East in the early twentieth century.” Martin van Bruinessen, “Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic Script Used in the Pesantren Milieu (Comments on a New Collection in the KITLV Library),” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 146 (1990), 226–269.

²⁸³ Jamal D. Rahman suggests three characterizations of *sastra pesantren*: first, the literature subsists and widens in *pesantren*, such as *syair* and *nazham* (poems in Arabic language); second, the literature is written by people who have experiences living in the *pesantren* tradition, for instance *kyai* and *santri*; third, the literature concerns knowledge and traditions associated with the *pesantren*. These three characterizations have opened opportunities to expand *sastra pesantren* from its original appearance and substance. Jamal D. Rahman, “Sastra, Pesantren, dan Radikalisme

as newspapers and magazines in her home, and this helped her learn that she could express her ideas through writing. She likes writing poetry and word composition and is today the author of seventeen books.²⁸⁷ In addition to these writers, Pijer Sri Laswiji,²⁸⁸ Uly Maftuhah,²⁸⁹ Ana FM,²⁹⁰ and Ma'rifatun Baroroh²⁹¹ also began their writing hobby with a reading hobby.

For these young women, reading stimulated their writing skills, during their childhood when still under their parents' guidance. However, this does not mean that their interests and talents were generated by their parents. Furthermore, none of these writers have parents who are writers. Specifically, Ma'rifatun Baroroh, author of *Santri Semelekete* (2005), gained no assistance from her parents. Born in 1986 and from an ordinary family, Baroroh had to make a strong effort to find reading material, using her initiative to collect used children's magazines from her friends.²⁹² Therefore, it can be said that all of these writers decided their own way of becoming writers, and this was maintained when they continued their studies in the *pesantren*. In other words, personal initiative seems to be the key aspect in their achievement as writers, while assistance and facilities provided by the family helped stimulate and support them.

Many young women writers have overcome some of the obstacles that might appear to exist in the *pesantren* environment and have made this experience part of their continuing progress. Becoming a writer requires a continuing process, with regular self-training and decisions about possible ideas and topics on which to write (Peha 1995). Indeed, these are challenges that were faced by these young women writers when they continued their studies in the *pesantren*. Uly Maftuhah, the writer of *Blok I* (Unit I) (2009), which explores the experiences of new *santri* in the *pesantren*, said that when she feels unable to develop new ideas, she asks permission from the *pesantren* board members to go out into the town. Then she will sit for a long time, observing objects and events in the street as a way of focusing her view in order to learn about and contemplate characters for her story. Furthermore, because her *pesantren* does not provide computers, she writes her work out by hand, typing it later when she is at home.²⁹³

The "ability to act in one's best interest" is also shown by Rida Fitria, who published her novel *Bunga dan Duri* (Flower and Thorn) (2011) in Yogyakarta. When she was in the *pesantren*, she had time to develop her writing hobby, but now she has to take care of her children, manage her family business, and stay involved with a

²⁸⁷ Jazimah Al-Muhyi, email, 5 July 2011.

²⁸⁸ Pijer Sri Laswiji, interview, 11 July 2011.

²⁸⁹ Uly Maftuhah, interview, 10 July 2011.

²⁹⁰ Ana FM, interview, 10 July 2011.

²⁹¹ Ma'rifatun Baroroh, interview, 11 July 2011.

²⁹² Ma'rifatun Baroroh, interview, 11 July 2011.

²⁹³ Uly Maftuhah, interview, 10 July 2011.

students do not have their own initiative to write,” Sobariah emphasized.³²⁴ As a result, activities and media offered by *pesantren* are only supporting programs, and students who want to be writers must make their own decisions and efforts to reach their goal, while they build their self-esteem in the *pesantren* environment.

Returning to the idea of a continuing writing tradition, *pesantren* have the opportunity to play important roles in helping the *santri* to become writers. Moreover, living in the dormitory encourages *santri* to study intensively. *Pesantren* can apply a gifted education program according to the student’s needs, including writing. However, producing writers is not its key objective, so it may seem unrealistic for *pesantren* to focus on it. But if they can see the benefits of writing skills, even small changes would be useful for young women. Through writing, young women can develop their analytical skills, interpret their experiences, express their voices, and share their ideas with public readers. These exercises can help them to build their self-esteem, and as a result, young women will feel more confident. In addition, *pesantren* will have the opportunity to attract various students, some of whom may want to be writers.

Another issue that emerged during my interviews was the idea of same-sex education as regulated by *pesantren*. The idea that same-sex education promotes better achievement for female students is supported by one study conducted by Carter (2005, 69). She finds that female students normally show better achievement in science and are more convinced about their ability when they are educated in a same-gender environment. However, according to these young women writers, their male counterparts in the *pesantren* give them ideas about male worlds that support their exploration when they create male characters. Uly Maftuhah gives an example: “I can write not only about female students, but also male students, of course, because the *pesantren* programs involve males.”³²⁵ Similarly, Ana FM also claims that the environment of the co-ed system of education created no significant problems regarding her achievement. Moreover, male students sometimes are requested to share their experiences in creative writing in front of female students.³²⁶

Although Kompleks Q is a single-sex *pesantren*, this does not necessarily mean that students have no interaction with males. Students of Kompleks Q normally attain formal education outside the *pesantren* where they have the chance to interact with their male counterparts.³²⁷ In co-ed *Pesantren* Nurul Ummah, the male and female students cooperate with each other in certain programs, such as the publication of the *pesantren* magazine, news paper, and notice board. Widiastutik provides another example: “The male *santri*, Kang Zaki is one of our instructors for the Sahara

³²⁴ Siti Sobariah, interview, 18 July 2011.

³²⁵ Uly Maftuhah, interview, 10 July 2011.

³²⁶ Ana FM, interview, 10 July 2011.

³²⁷ Siti Sobariah, interview, 18 July 2011.

writers are males, and very few records provide detail information on women's involvement in authorship, rather than their involvement in education. Abidah El-Khaliqy is the first woman who was known as the most prominent woman writer from the *pesantren* tradition in the mid-1990s when her work was published.

Following Abidah eL-Khaliqy, there is the new generation of women writers from the *pesantren* tradition. I have discussed six of them, examining their backgrounds in order to determine some factors that have influenced their achievements. The emergence of these writers, Jazimah al-Muhyi, Pijer Sri Laswiji, Rida Fitria, Ana FM, Ma'rifatun Baroroh, and Uly Maftuhah, is significant because they give a new color in the history of women's authorship in the *pesantren*. Based on the experiences of these young women writers, there appear to be a few factors important to all of them. The most influential factor in their achievement is that they have shown initiative in pursuing their careers. They have chosen the identity of writer, and made an effort to preserve it by making their own decision in pursuing this profession.

Self-esteem and learning environments including family and *pesantren* are important, and self-esteem is partly developed in a learning environment in which the writers can sharpen their writing skills, strengthen their identities, and broaden their minds. The education system in the *pesantren* can offer valuable programs to support for this career development. Contrary to the generally accepted view, these limited samples show that co-ed *pesantren* are more beneficial in terms of career development and improvement in writing skills than is a single-sex program. Male and female students cooperate in certain programs, and due to this cooperation, female writers gain understanding of the male world that supports their character descriptions when they write a story. At the same time, however, males and females do not enjoy the same opportunities; thus, in order to better support young women writers' achievement, *pesantren* programs should develop gender equality.

Although the main purpose of *pesantren* education is to train the student with Islamic knowledge, according to these young women writers' experiences, programs that support writing skill development in the *pesantren* are useful in achieving their career as writers. Through writing, they can build their self-confidence, express their ideas about Islam, women, and *pesantren*, share their experiences, and even help maintain the writing tradition and present *pesantren* identity to the public readers. Furthermore, supporting writing skill development may help *pesantren* to attract many students enrolling education in there. Thus, if *pesantren* could consider a design education appropriate for women writers, it would be advantageous for both the students and *pesantren*.

There are some specific points derived from these young women's experiences that could be considered by *pesantren* that wish to support women's writing. First, becoming a writer is a personal decision; therefore every *santri* must have a solid self-

