Transnational Muslim Mediascape: Cosmopolitan, Pious Representations of Feminine Muslim Identities in *Aquila Asia*

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**Abstract**

The extensive growth of diverse Muslim believers all over the world has become a factor which helps the progress of Muslim lifestyle media and engulfs Muslim mediascape globally. This paper thus revisits the concept of transnational Muslim mediascape (Lewis, 2010), in particular, Muslim woman magazine, as a form of reflection towards the need of Muslim women to see themselves defined with identities related to piety, modesty, and yet at the same time urban, cosmopolitan, and desirable (Jones, 2010). To put this context into focus, this paper takes the Asian market, with its large Muslim population, as an instance. By putting *Aquila Asia* as the center of analysis, I discuss variations of identities offered in the transnational magazine with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei as its market, which would definitely inflict more cosmopolitan representations of different cultures and contemporary understanding of Muslim communities in South East Asia. Moreover, the magazine's fashion spread analyzed in this research displays a new sense of Muslim women identity, as the magazine visualizes poise, powerful, trendy Muslim women. This paper therefore questions the kinds of feminine or perhaps cultural identities selected in the magazine’s representation of South East Asian Muslim women and how, though contestation in form of visual representations may persist, the quality of Islamic values of modesty cannot be ignored. This paper sets out to show representations of pious, cosmopolitan Muslim women of globalized South East Asian countries in *Aquila Asia* magazine, by using discourse analysis to see connections between clusters of images and texts, and to see its production of “effects of truth” (Rose, 2001). I, then, use Hall’s theory of representations and cultural identities (Hall, 1990; Procter, 2004) to explain the interpretation, while also using Parekh’s definition on cosmopolitan multiculturalism (Parekh, 2003).

**Keywords:** transnational muslim mediascape, piety, representations, cultural identities

In her paper, *Marketing Muslim Lifestyle: A New Media Genre*, Reina Lewis (2010) acknowledges the emergence of a new, segmented form of media for women: Muslim woman magazine. Numerous titles of this type of magazine have been published with variety of subscription rates. Some last for years, some others stopped its
publication over its lack of readership. Muslim woman magazines in Britain such as *Emel* and *Sisters* have been popular for its middle-income readers or even those readers whose profiles do not fit the magazine target (Lewis, 2010: 63-64). *Azizah* and *Muslim Girl*, published in North American area, find its market growing as they try to connect with Muslim women across the country by representing diversity and different concepts of Islamic values as the readers look for people ‘who look like them’ in the magazines (Lewis, 2010: 79-83).

According to Lewis (2010: 61), the growth of international Muslim consumers and commodities; fashion diaspora; the influence of the next-generation of Muslim migrants; the extensive growth of diverse Muslim believers all over the world have become factors which help the progress of Muslim lifestyle media. These factors help to see how the development of Muslim lifestyle magazines have actually engulf Muslim mediascape globally. To put this context into focus, I take Asian market, with its large Muslim population, as an instance.

The South East Asian market, just as British and American ones, has started to have its own kind of Islamic lifestyle represented in woman magazines. Malaysia is the home of several muslimah publications, namely *Midi*, *Nur*, and *Nona*. Indonesia, in particular, has quite a lot Muslim magazines published, such as *NooR*, *Umni*, *Muslimah*, *Annida*, and *Paras*. Carla Jones (2010), in fact, investigates how *NooR*, a Muslim lifestyle magazine in Indonesia, has been very successful in aiming Indonesian urban Muslim women. These magazines, however, cannot be detached from their relations to major Islamic cultures, especially the strong Arabic interpretation of Islam to global *umma*. Other countries specific Muslim background, of course, can not be overlooked. Indonesia and Malaysia’s strong image as populous Muslim countries means a lot to the magazines (Lewis, 2010:70). That fact, therefore, has created a strong sense of transnational connections in Islamic media, or as Lewis (2010: 70) puts it: transnational Muslim mediascape.

Transnational, relations between nations, occurs as one of the effect of globalization, while mediascape is one of the well-known terms coined by Arjun Appadurai in his article *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*. Appadurai defines five “scapes”: (1) ethnoscapes, (2) mediascapes, (3) technoscapes, (4) financescapes, and (5) ideoscapes; forms caused by strong cultural transaction in today’s globe. Mediascapes is defined by Appadurai as “distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information…, which are now available to a growing number of private and public interest throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media… What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide… large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world… the audiences around the world experience the media themselves as a complicated and interconnected repertoire” (1990: 322-326).

This transnational connections of globalised Islamic *umma* as represented in woman magazines do not necessarily mean they reflect all Muslim. Fashionable urban and cosmopolitan *muslimah* are actually those called into the readership, since lifestyle magazines have to acknowledge consumptive and capitalistic global market, where fashion is, most of the time, put into focus as a representation of Islamic identities embodiment (Lewis, 2010: 68). In the context of South East Asia, Jones states that “the
Asian economic crisis was a key factor in the environment that allowed the Islamic fashion media to develop” (2010: 98).1

Lifestyle and Fashion in Muslim Woman Magazine

Fashion, as defined by Holbrook and Dixon (1985, in Kawamura, 2005:94), is “public consumption through which people communicate to others the image they wish to project”. This imagery is a form of reflection of oneself, as lifestyle choices construct self-identity, and it is also a form of selfhood commodification, which intentionally and strategically narrated by the media as a personal style investment, including religious identities brought up in media (Ibrahim, 2007: 135-137).2

Consumerism, consequently, engage people to build up the imagery they wish to project. By buying and using products relevant to identities they have chosen, the consumers imply certain subjectivities. Piety, in this case, is one of the expressions of emerging awareness of religious ideology in South East Asia public. Rianne Subijanto3 argues that the religion, however, is not the institution that constructs pious identity, but rather the production of the discourse on piety itself. She goes on by saying that variety of texts actually builds the popular piety culture.

Related to her argument, Muslim woman magazines, as in any other cases of woman magazines, still echo the same way to attract its readers, by “creating her, speaking to her, and defending her” (Jones, 2010:96) using popular interpretation of Muslim identities in relation to Islamic context. Albeit its emphasis on religious identities, fashion is put forward by the magazines to visualize who Muslim women really are. Modest and pious clothing is an important aspect for them, although Mahmood (2005, in Lewis, 2010: 68) argues that the dresses and veil-donning are simply instruments “to create and maintain pious self-identity”.

Therefore, I would like to use Jones’ argument here, that it is impossible for Muslim woman magazines to detach itself from “pious symbolism and femininity” (2010:92). Though contestation in form of visual representations may persist, the quality of Islamic values of modesty, which therefore pushes pious identity, cannot be ignored. To challenge this view, I would like focus the analysis in this paper to a new Muslim woman magazine, titled Aquila Asia, a bimonthly Singapore-Jakarta based magazine, which target its reader to South East Asian Muslim countries, namely Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia.

Aquila Asia and Contemporary Muslim Feminine Identities

Aquila Asia’s first issue came out in March 2010. The glossy magazine’s intention not to suggest conventional ideas of Muslim woman magazine is clearly shown, even from the cover. Its tagline, “modest and fabulous”, goes hand in hand with

1 Although Jones focuses her analysis in Indonesian context, she sees that the economic shift in Asia in early 2000s helped the articulation of Muslim identities in Asia, to acknowledge the availability of Islamic market, rather than waiting for “mainstream” media to acknowledge the visibility of Muslim women (see Jones, 2010: 96-99).


3 I would like to thank Prof. Melani Budianta for the information on the reading material, and of course, Rianne Subijanto, for letting me use her forthcoming paper, titled The Visibility of a Pious Public.
texts provided on its first cover. Readers can see “Fabulous Muslimah”; “Let’s Talk about Sex, Baby”; “Hong Kong”; and the one put in bold, bigger font: “Women on Top”. Not to mention, the model on the cover who wears white, floral transparent-on-the-shoulder dress, and blue headscarf which does not cover the model’s long neck. She uses smokey-eye makeup with glossy lips. Her sways in her pose, suggesting her lenience.

Her lenience suggests the magazine’s ideology on a more open, modern reception on Islamic rules and ideologies. Göle (2000) has discussed modern reception of Islamic values and norms as the visibility of Muslim subjectivities appear more public in present decades. Asia’s economic crisis, the September 11 tragedy, the Iraq war, or even natural disasters (Subijanto, forthcoming) have contributed to redefinition of Islam and the Muslim world. Aquila Asia, as other Muslim lifestyle magazines and media forms, uses this chance to re-construct the imagery of Islam.

As noted by Tanya Thomas (2010), this magazine does not work with the “traditional school of thought”. Aquila Asia’s editor-in-chief, Liana Rosnita Redwan-Beer, describes the magazine she manages as “a hybrid between US magazine Cosmopolitan and high-society publication Tatler.” The magazine, she asserts, focuses more on its reader lifestyle than in the religion. Redwan-Beer compares the magazine to other Muslim magazines in Asia, mentioning its contemporary understanding of Muslim communities in South East Asia. The magazine, Thomas records, offers a more open discussion on sexuality and other controversial issues to empower its modern, Muslim readers.

Claims on the magazine different treatment in projecting its Muslim readers are actually stated by Redwan-Beer in her first remarks in Aquila Asia first issue:

Dear Readers
In this age of misunderstanding, turmoil and quick judgment calls, efforts that promote mutual acceptance and appreciation are applauded. So when we told men and women, Muslim and non-Muslims, our friends, family and business associates alike about Aquila Asia, they were—in short—extremely excited and supportive.

Aquila Asia tackles the tribulations and celebrates the joys of modern Muslimah living. By ‘modern Muslimah living’ we mean the cosmopolitan way of life as we know it today. A lifestyle filled with beautiful things to own, wonderful places to visit and great knowledge to share.

Modern Muslimah living is also about the drawing of strength from one another to overcome any challenges that we may have. Learning from each other about how to solve the problems we face at work, at home and in our hearts. All these alongside doing good things such as being kind to others, caring towards our parents, helpful to the underprivileged, looking out for each other and being prudent about our fardhu ‘ain—our individual obligation.

All in all, Aquila Asia is about being the proud and beautiful Muslim women that we are, both inside and outside. We are about moderation yet we are about doing things great. We are modest whilst at the same time, well, we are fabulous.

So, welcome.
Salaams,
Liana
(Aquila Asia, March-April 2010)
Her remarks clearly convey the idea of cosmopolitan, modern, urban way of living for Muslim women who are definitely a part of the consumer culture. The act of consuming is implied as modern, and at the same time religious through “Islamic lifestyle consumption” (Navar-Ohshin [2002] and Tarlo [2009] in Lewis, 2010:68). By using fashion, the Islamic lifestyle magazines try to define and visualize the modern, cosmopolitan Muslimah they represent, as it is also a tool to define their target readership (Lewis 2010; Jones 2010). By putting Aquila Asia as the center of analysis, this paper discusses variations of identities offered in the transnational magazine. Muslim women, as visualized in the magazine’s fashion spread, should not fear challenges nor the need to look good. This paper discusses representations of Muslim women in Aquila Asia’s fashion pages in relation to pious feminine identity, cosmopolitanism, and consumerism.

As cosmopolitan identities is conveyed in the remarks written by the editor on Aquila Asia’s first edition, this paper therefore asks what concept of cosmopolitanism is represented in the magazine? Moreover, in the matter of transnational Muslim mediascape, what kinds of feminine or perhaps cultural identities are selected in the magazine’s representation of South East Asian Muslim women?

**Identities, Representation, and Cosmopolitanism**

I would like to put forward theories I consider useful to analyze one of the fashion spreads in *Aquila Asia*’s first issue namely discourse analysis to see connections between clusters of images and texts to let the details of the materials guide my analysis, and to see its production of “effects of truth” (Rose, 2001:150-154). I will then use Hall’s theory of representations and cultural identities (Hall, 1990; Procter, 2004) to explain my interpretation, while also using Parekh’s definition on cosmopolitan multiculturalism (Parekh, 2003).

Discourse, in Foucault’s definition, according to Rose (2001:136) “refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, the way we act on the basis of that thinking…[it] is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it”. Potter (1996 in Rose, 2001:150) explains that discourse analysis “is interested in, for example, how a particular discourse describe things…, in how it constructs blame and responsibility, in how it constructs stake and accountability, in how it categorizes and particularizes”. This theory, in my paper, will be very useful to understand the meaning behind the illustrations, pictures, and texts on the fashion spread.

I will also use Hall’s notion on identity as it is defined by something that “is not fixed nor free-floating” (Procter, 2004:120). Hall believes that “there is a world outside representation but we can only make it signify and ‘mean’ through representation. Moreover, representations are not reflexive but constitutive and therefore have a real, material impact” (Procter: 2004:125). These representations, as Hall argues in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, would only have meaning, as we understand the positions of the enunciation of identities. Muslim and feminine identities as represented on the spread, I believe, can be understood by using those definitions of identity, representations, and positioning.

To specifically draw the context of *Aquila Asia* as transnational product of popular culture, I will use Bhikhu Parekh’s definition of cosmopolitan multiculturalism,
where he believes that this type of multiculturalism tries to “freely engage in intercultural experiments and evolve a cultural life of their own” (Parekh, 1997). Aquila Asia’s four main target countries, in my opinion, clearly becomes a consideration for the magazine’s editorial team in its effort to reflect its readership. As Jones (2010) have mentioned, woman magazines always try to be what its readers want. Thus, Aquila Asia’s market, which mostly are urban, globalised countries would definitely inflict more cosmopolitan representations of different cultures, so that the magazine can connect with its readers to keep its publication going.

Analysis on Aquila Asia’s Fashion Spread

Aquila Asia, as other Muslim woman magazines, has fashion spreads, in addition to other fashion pages, displaying variety of products endorsing different brands. In its first edition, the magazine has three fashion spreads titled Women on Top, In the Spotlight, and Burkini Bonanza. These fashion spreads features white, thin models in quite atypical poses for Muslim magazine. Texts written on the spreads are rather provocative as the titles suggest. These combinations seem to create a new sense of Muslim women identity, as the magazine visualized poise, powerful, trendy Muslim women. However, I would like to argue that the fashion spread on Aquila Asia conveys messages of urban, cosmopolitan women, yet at the same time, it maintains pious, traditional identities of Muslim women, who adhere domestic roles and conventional feminine representations.

Visually speaking, pictures in the fashion spread in Aquila implies cosmopolitan ideas that the editor, Liana Rosnita Redwan-Beer, has proudly declared on her first remarks, as she said “Aquila Asia tackles the tribulation and celebrates the joys of modern Muslimah living. By ‘modern Muslimah living’ we mean the cosmopolitan way of life as we know it today. A lifestyle filled with beautiful things to own, wonderful places to visit and great knowledge to share” (Aquila Asia, March-April 2010). Clothing items, especially dresses, are not tied to basic Islamic principles of covering woman body parts mostly used in other Muslimah magazines such as Indonesian Muslimah magazine NOOR, which maintains conventional Islamic style of dressing in veiling. Meanwhile, dresses, in the fashion pages of Aquila Asia, are tight, short, or transparent. The model is depicted in quite provocative poses, that inflict quite an unusual proposal to the modest root of religious identity. What is also interesting is the use of headscarves in the pictures. While the model wears tight, body-conscious dresses, headscarves remain to cover the head and hair, although most of the model’s body parts, e.g arms, hands, neck are exposed. I would like to argue that headscarf, as also other clothing items, featured in the pictures do not serve as ideological reference for Aquila, as the magazine seems to simply put them as a part of the cosmopolitan fashion itself, not in a larger religious background. The concept of veiling in Islamic context seems to lose its roots in the representations of Muslim women visualized in Aquila Asia. The reproduction of pious feminine identity in Muslim context for these fashion spread negate familiar ideas of modest Muslim women.

One instance of this argument is Aquila Asia’s fashion spread titled Women on Top. This eight-page spread seems to celebrate the ability of Muslim women to be in power in public arena: to have power, to be in control, to own high rank positions. The pictures projects five styles of clothing of a model who wears short, skin-tight dark green dress; white transparent dress with boots; a black suit; white shirt; and a long
mustard dress with faux fur mantle which reveals the model’s body shape, all of which have headscarves to cover the model’s head, though they don’t really cover her neck. They also have background illustrations to support the theme of the spread.

What is interesting, if I may suggest, is how the text attached to this spread somehow has different angle than its pictures. The opening text of Women on Top states that “The cosmopolitan woman of today is beautiful and confident. Whether she commands respect out of a boardroom, basks in the limelight of life or cares for her child at home, she is as great at whatever she does as she represents herself”. Janice Winship (1987, in Storey: 2008:153) argues that “Many of the guises of femininity in women’s magazines contribute to the secondary status from which we still desire to free ourselves. At the same time it is the dress of femininity which is both source of the pleasure of being a woman – and not a man – and in part the raw material for a feminist vision of the future”. It is clear that this text use the representations of feminine ideal of a woman who should be able to master her public and also her private sphere. As repressive as it is, woman empowerment has generally linked with superwoman, who is acknowledged only when she is able to be on both public and domestic areas.

Moreover, as the text wants to bring up woman empowerment, it mentioned names of important inventions from Islamic world which mostly feature men such as Ali ibn Nafi, Al-Kwarizmi, Ibn Al-Haitham, and Al-Zahrawi. This text is commonly found in Muslim magazines, as Lewis argues that “mixing consumption with ideology, the Muslim magazines share with the queer lifestyle publication…the need to reclaim hidden histories and activate cultural heritages” (2010:71). Using the concept of positioning, from Hall’s perspective (1990:226), cultural identities, Islamic one here, is constructed through the memory and narrative of the great discoveries of (male) Islamic scientists.

The name of Al-Khwarizmi, for example, is followed by an explanation of the establishment of algebra and his book. “Fact: Al-Khwarizmi was the first person to clearly establish algebra as an independent mathematical discipline. Algebra was named after Al-Khwarizmi’s book, Al-Jabr Wa-Al-Muqabilah”. With this text, the spread (see figure 1.1) illustrates the model wearing white transparent dress and boots with dark purple headscarf. She sits on an illustrated table, and reads a book in a pose that implies fearlessness and perhaps intelligence. As daring as her pose is, I would argue that the theme of ‘Women on Top’ does not show woman empowerment as names of male inventors still correlate with the topic. Gender empowerment as the theme would like to offer fails to be delivered by the text of the fashion spread.

The representations of cosmopolitan Muslim women in Aquila Asia’s Women on Top, as I have shown, declare a different type of fashion style as it allows unconventional ideas of clothing for Muslimah. The body of the model, as the representation of Muslim women this magazine wants to visualize, is free and exposed as a part of the magazine philosophy of cosmopolitan, modern Muslim woman. The visual, indeed, seems to go in line with the text attached to the spread, which tries to define strong, powerful women. The text, nonetheless, lose its gender empowerment theme it wants to convey as it requires women to be good in all areas, public and private, and also as it mentions names of Muslim male inventors. These ideas, of course, maintain domestic ideas of women who still have to go below men in some areas or follow what men have made for them. Furthermore, if we go back to the pictures, the
model still use headscarves in each style. This is quite ambivalent since the clothing items reveal a lot of the models body part, yet somehow headscarf plays an important role: to keep the woman’s head and hair covered. Freedom of wearing various types of dresses is cut short by the need to have headscarves all the time, although these headscarves do not follow the conventional Islamic veiling principals.

To put it briefly, the fashion spread on Aquila Asia visually tries to stick on its ideals of urban, cosmopolitan women as it perhaps wants to link itself to the development of South East Asian cities which grows into globalization. The text of the spread, however, keeps pious, conventional identities of Muslim women, who still have to remember their domestic roles, e.g taking care of children, and keep wearing headscarves to embrace their religious ideology, while trying to expand to the public world, following the steps of male inventors, as the ‘owner’ of knowledge (and power) in Islamic historical and cultural discourse.

Conclusion

If religious identities have become today’s commodity, *Aquila Asia* sells its popular deconstruction of Muslim Identities by actually putting (un-)pious Islamic representations of its readers, who are represented to be those urban, cosmopolitan women. As the embodiment of the representations, the magazine uses clothing items as an expression of a more secular, cosmopolitan female selves. However, as I have argued, the notions of modesty and piety in Islamic context are internalized clearly by the use of headscarves, and as the discourse of male power in Islam are placed in the text analyzed.

In the context of *Aquila Asia*, transnational Muslim mediascape still represents its multicultural audience as oneself, the one who is (apparently) white, urban, cosmopolitan yet piously domestic. In the analysis, I mentioned that the model in the spread is white, perhaps Caucasian. This fact has triggered my attention to the concept of ideal beauty in global community. The South East Asian female readers are proliferated as generally white, which clearly, I believe, is not how the community in Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia consist of. The invisibility of the non-white arguably matches McCracken’s notion on imagined future self for global feminine subject (1997, in Prabasmoro, 2003: 72).

Clearly, *Aquila Asia*, as Jones argues, cannot separate itself from “pious symbolism and femininity” (2010:92) which represents domestic, feminine representations of muslimah. If anything, Aquila Asia’s effort to voice out “empowerment” is actually limited to the consumptive acts of women, where the need to look good and the ability to do so can reflect their readers need of who they are as cosmopolitan, fashionable yet modest women. Or to put it Winship’s terms: “women ‘being caught up in defining their own femininity, inextricably, through consumption’” (1987, in Storey).
Attachment

Figure 1.1 One of the pages of the fashion spread titled *Women on Top*, discussing Al-Khwarizmi.¹

Bibliography


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