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Ismah, Nor

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Platform Writers and the Production of Digital Literature: The Professionalism of Female *Pesantren* Novelists in Indonesia

Nor Ismah

Abstract

The new global genres of “chick lit” and “teen lit” in the early twenty-first century led to the rise of a new generation of Muslim women writers in Indonesia. They gained public attention, particularly from teen readers, by publishing Islamic novels and popular *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) novels. Focusing on two online platforms for digital literature, the Komunitas Bisa Menulis and Halaqah 1001 Aksara as case studies, this study employs online observation of the platforms, content analysis of the works, and interviews with three young Muslim women writers from the *pesantren* tradition to explore their experiences of embracing socio-religious changes and technological developments in Indonesia. The article aims to answer three questions. Firstly, how and why do Muslim women writers from the *pesantren* tradition choose to publish their works on online platforms? Secondly, what are the predominant themes, genres and ideological messages present in their writing? And finally, to what extent do these platforms benefit women in developing their professionalism?

Keywords: Indonesia, Muslim women writers, professional writers, platform writers, digital literature, *pesantren* literature, online platforms, social media

The advent of the internet and digital media has had a profound impact on the development of writing among a new generation of writers in Indonesia. Islamic popular novels have introduced new perspectives on young Muslim women in present-day urban Indonesia. The notion of being a Muslim girl is no longer constrained by the “left behind, illiterate and submissive” stereotype imposed by male writers in the early twentieth century (Arimbi 2023: 176).

With the proliferation of online platforms, writers can now easily publish their works and earn income without first needing to establish themselves as well-known authors. Online platforms like Wattpad, Gravity Tales, Web Novel

Nor Ismah, Association for Asian Studies and Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, Michigan, USA; nismah@umich.edu.

and Web Fiction Guide provide ample opportunities for aspiring writers to develop their skills and pursue a professional career in writing. These platforms are not limited to website-based portals, but also encompass social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and mobile applications.

The proliferation of online platforms has bypassed traditional aspects of professionalism. One platform that stands out in the domain of literature and creative writing is called “Wattpad”. Founded by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen in 2006, after 13 years of development, Wattpad has become the largest reading and writing platform in the world, with a social community of more than 70 million users per month and over 565 million original stories uploaded (data as of the last Wattpad website, accessed 3 December 2023). This system has changed the traditional selection of quality works by publishers, because both professional and amateur writers can easily publish their works for a global audience without going through the traditional publishing process. Moreover, this platform also features asynchronous communication between writers and readers, recreating the typical interactions that exist among users on other social media platforms (Kardiansyah 2019: 420, Bold 2018: 119).

At the same time, writing groups with an Islamic background in Indonesia, like the Forum Lingkar Pena (Pen Circle Forum), are usually concerned not only with the quality of writing but also with the message and content being conveyed to the readers.¹ This is especially true for publications that go through the traditional publishing selection process. Monica Arnez and Eva F. Nisa’s (2016) study on the Forum Lingkar Pena, which boasts a significant number of Muslim women members, reveals that the group is defined by a sense of moral solidarity, which involves showing empathy towards the moral concerns of others. According to this understanding, moral solidarity is established through a bond between individuals in positions of privilege and those who are oppressed, which is fostered through a compassionate comprehension of their difficult circumstances. In similar fashion, women writers from the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) tradition who joined the Matapena Community show moral solidarity by adhering to *pesantren* values such as tolerance (*tasamuh*), balance (*tawazun*), justice (*ta’adul*) and moderation (*tawasuth*) in the production of their works (Ismah 2019).²

1 The Forum Lingkar Pena is the largest writers’ collective for Muslim readers, writers and publishers in Indonesia, with about 7,000 members in 125 national and thirteen international branches. The group aims to improve the quality and productivity of its members’ writing, establish a network of writers who produce informative and high-quality texts, promote literacy and campaign for better working conditions for writers. It primarily focuses on young and inexperienced writers, and provides them with training and mentorship from senior authors to transform them into productive authors who uphold Islamic values (Arnez / Nisa 2016).

2 Matapena is a community of writers with a *pesantren* background, established in 2005 by Matapena Publisher, a division of LKiS Book Publisher in Yogyakarta. Since its inception, Matapena has published 38 popular *pesantren* novels and short story collections and has amassed 1,313 members across 37 branches, situated in *pesantren*, madrasah, public schools, and local organisations coordinated with IPNU (Nahdhatul Ulama Student Association). Operating under the motto *Matapena Hati Pesantren* (“Matapena, the Heart of Pesantren”), the community aims to foster literacy culture among youth by exploring values and traditions originating from *pesantren*, thereby enriching Indonesia’s literary heritage (Ismah 2019).

The focus of this article is to examine the development of professionalism in authorship, specifically among three exemplary female *pesantren* writers who use online platforms to publish their works. In the realm of religious knowledge production, traditions within *pesantren* continue to be predominantly shaped by men, as evidenced in both literature and scholarly works (Arimbi 2009: 11). Beginning with Djamil Suherman's work in 1963, which marked a literary milestone within the *pesantren* tradition, male writers have overwhelmingly dominated this literary landscape. Prominent figures in this tradition include Zawawi D. Imron, Syu'bah Asa, Fudoli Zaini, Emha Ainun Nadjib, K.H. Mustofa Bisri, Jamal D. Rahman, Acep Zamzam Noor, Ahmad Syubbanuddin Alwy, A Elwa, Hamdi Salad, Nasruddin Anshory and Kuswaidi Syafi'ie. It wasn't until the 1990s that Abidah El-Khaliqy emerged as the singular well-known woman writer among these earlier generations (Ismah 2011).

As I have argued elsewhere (Ismah 2011 and 2012), the emergence of a new generation of women writers from the *pesantren* tradition is closely linked to the rise of the chick lit and teen lit genres.³ In the mid-2000s, these writers produced popular *pesantren* novels such as *Twinnings* ("The Twins of Ning"), *Kidung Cinta Poisi Pegon* ("Love Song in Pegon [Islamic classical writing] Poetry), *Santri Semeleke* ("A Disobedient Religious Student"), *Hadrah Cinta* ("Music of Love") and *Jadilan Purnamaku, Ning* ("Be My Full Moon, Ning"), which effectively bridged the gap between the world of the boarding school students (*santri*) and readers beyond the *pesantren* community.

This article delves deeper into the ways in which these women writers interact with online platforms and the extent to which the online platforms shape their idealism and professionalism as female *pesantren* writers. It attempts to address three main questions: First, what factors influence female *pesantren* writers to opt for online platforms to publish their works; what motivates this choice? Second, what prevalent themes, genres and ideological messages can be identified in the writings of Muslim women from the *pesantren* tradition who publish their works online? And thirdly, to what degree do online platforms contribute to enhancing the professional development of women within the given context of Indonesian Muslim literature?

To answer these questions, I conducted an online observation of two different platforms: Komunitas Bisa Menulis (Community Can Write, KBM) and Halaqah 1001 Aksara (1001 Characters Group, H1A). Komunitas Bisa Menulis is an online platform that was established in 2004 by Isa Alamsyah, who is the husband of the Indonesian author and novelist Asma Nadia and also the founder

3 Chick lit and teen lit employ a classic romance plot weaving throughout the novel. Both of the genres adopt everyday language and conversational style, akin to a diary, making them accessible and appealing to readers. Typically centred around the protagonist's daily life, the novels often reflect urban culture and share similarities with popular TV drama series. An important characteristic is their predominantly female authorship and readership, although men also contribute to the genre by adopting pen names to align their writing with the categories (Ismah 2011).

of the Forum Lingkar Pena. By contrast, Halaqah 1001 Aksara was founded in mid-2018 by Nisaul Kamila, a Muslim woman writer from the *pesantren* tradition. She has published a series of novels with the Matapena Community (*Ning Aisyah 1, Ning Aisyah 2 and Ning Aisyah 3*).

Furthermore, I conducted qualitative interviews with three women writers who graduated from *pesantren* and actively utilise online platforms such as the Komunitas Bisa Menulis and Halaqah 1001 Aksara: Khilma Anis, Azri Dzakiyah and Mambaul Athiyah. Despite the demands of their respective livelihoods, these women have continued to produce written works. The interviews provide valuable insights into their motivations for selecting online platforms, the challenges they encounter and the perceived impact on their professionalism. Additionally, the interviews explore the features and advantages of the online platforms used by these writers, considering factors such as accessibility and audience engagement. The information gathered from the interviews was further complemented by a content analysis of the interviewees' literary works.

Utilising feminist literary criticism as a foundational framework, this article delves into the role of Muslim women novelists as creators of textual meaning. Elaine Showalter's seminal work, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), significantly contributes to this exploration. Drawing inspiration from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Showalter grappled with the issue of women's exclusion from academic discourse. In her comprehensive analysis of literary women throughout history, Showalter highlighted overlooked nineteenth-century writers such as Sarah Grand and George Egerton. Rather than defining a "universal woman's text", Showalter advocated for the recognition of the female "sub-culture" that produced these texts (Humm 1994: 12). In the context of literature

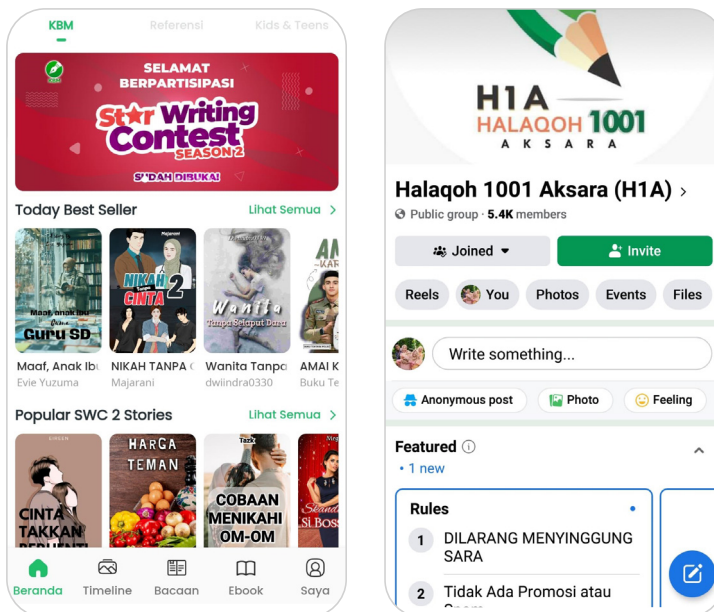


Figure 1:

Homepages of the KBM mobile app and the H1A Facebook Group.

Source: Screenshots taken by the author, accessed on 15 May 2023 from the KBM and H1A mobile applications

and authorship in Indonesia, I consider female authorship within the *pesantren* tradition as a subculture. In this specific context, establishing a literary identity proves exceptionally challenging for women, considering that literature, like other institutions, often upholds a system of masculine meaning (Humm 1994: 16).

The initial segment of this article provides an overview of the researched online platforms used by Muslim female novelists to disseminate their works. The subsequent discussion systematically delves into the novelists' motivations for opting for online platforms, the themes, genres and ideological messages embedded in their writing, and the role of online platforms in advancing their professionalism as novelists.

Online platforms and professional writing

The world of literary authorship has historically been closely linked to book publishing. In the past, it was only renowned writers who were able to publish and print their works with ease. These authors produced works that were deemed to be of high quality in terms of both language and content, and were often already familiar to the readership, which positively impacted sales. However, the digital revolution brought significant cultural changes to authorship and publication. Discussions on the “death of print” and the future of books have gained significant attention since the mid-1980s, when personal computers became more widely available. In the 1990s with the advent of the internet, anyone with an internet connection now had access to global information, making it the preferred tool for research and discovery (Gomez 2008: 5, 190). In the world of digital publishing, up-and-coming writers have the freedom to select from a variety of platforms to attract readers. Meanwhile, book buyers are not limited to only those titles they are already familiar with, but can use the internet to explore and find new authors and books.

The term “online platform” in this article can refer to various forms, including social media sites, e-commerce websites, online marketplaces and collaboration tools. It refers to various electronic communication platforms that enable individuals and communities to gather, interact, share personal messages, exchange different types of information and sometimes collaborate or engage in recreational activities online (Masson / Ross 2017: 2). The emergence of digital media has also led to the development of a specific kind of literacy that to a certain degree requires knowledge of digitally-networked genres and the wider digitally-networked paradigm. Digitally-networked genres that include blogs, email, computer games and social networks have redefined modern literacy, sociability and culture as a whole.

The emergence of new communicational practices has also influenced art, which, since the 1990s, has been intensely exploring and partly shaping the field of new media (Liubinienė / Keturakis 2015: 232). Online media have become

a means of communication and interaction between writers and readers, creating a suitable environment for digital networking – both personally and professionally. Manuel Castells (2000: 368) characterises the networked society, particularly online communities, as having a value system of “decentralization, diversification, and customization”. This ideology is especially well reflected in the Wattpad community, where individuals from various regions can upload and access a vast assortment of diverse stories.

For this article, I examined two online media platforms in particular – Komunitas Bisa Menulis (Community Can Write, KBM) and Halaqah 1001 Aksara (1001 Characters Group, H1A). KBM is the digital successor of the Forum Lingkar Pena established in 1997. KBM as a digital community shares the same objective of providing a learning platform for writers. With over one million members, KBM has become a significant player in the Indonesian writing world, offering numerous benefits to its members. Writers can increase exposure for their works, and publishers can discover and potentially publish their works. KBM started as a Facebook group and later expanded to a mobile application in 2020. The KBM app has various writing and reading features including a “Funboard” for interaction between readers and writers, an “Inbox” for personal messaging, a “Coin Transfer” system where users can pay each other for reading their work, “Daily Missions” that offer free coins or prizes and a “My Reading List” section to keep track of read novels. There is also a “Learn from the Stars” feature, where users can receive mentorship from their favourite authors, and a “Money from Writing” section, which rewards writers with a monthly fee based on the number of subscribers to their work on KBM (KBM App 2020, accessed 15 May 2023).

Halaqah 1001 Aksara (H1A) is associated with Halaqah Bisnis Online (Online Business Group), established by Nisaul Kamilah in 2017, a community of women who manage micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) and are mostly alumnae of *pesantren*. They sell products or become resellers for MSME products through online sales. Members of Halaqah Bisnis Online had asked to learn about writing, so H1A was formed one year later. Unlike KBM, H1A utilises only Facebook as a platform for interaction and publishing. The group has 5417 members, and it manages writing seminars, book reviews and gatherings among members. Two admins manage the writing skills development programme, which provides daily themes for members to write about and publish through the Facebook group. Members can publish their writing or act as readers, commenting on the published works through the comments section or private Facebook messages. In 2019 H1A published an anthology of short stories titled *Perempuan Tali Jagat* (“The Woman as the World’s Thread”, Yogyakarta: Telaga Aksara) and plans to publish a second anthology called *Petichor* (the smell of dry earth after the first rain).⁴

4 Author’s interview with Nisaul Kamila, 1 September 2021, and Mambaul Athiyah, 13 August 2021.

The operational structure and functions of both KBM and H1A demonstrate the intertwined relationship between online platforms and the field of writing as a profession that requires the development of expertise. In contrast to conventional social media platforms that cater to a wide audience seeking information or entertainment, these platforms are more restricted, limiting access to members and subscribers only, thereby enhancing the notion of professional credibility of those platforms. In general, the concept of “profession” has undergone transformations over time, initially rooted in trait theories that associated specific characteristics with varying levels of professionalism within a particular occupation. Aristotle’s virtue theory, which included traits such as integrity, competence, care, trustworthiness, conscientiousness and impartiality, influenced the development of these ideas (Beauchamp / Childress 2013).

However, Lowe, Zimmerman, and Reid (1989; cited in Masson / Ross 2017: 4) suggested that assessing the presence of power and control is crucial in defining a profession, beyond simply examining traits and attributes such as integrity and competence. This includes legitimate professional authority, membership solidarity and a sanctioned monopoly on providing services. Each profession has a unique domain of expertise, and only members of that profession can provide its exclusive services. Therefore, professionalism involves not only possessing distinct knowledge but also specific responsibilities, according to a structuralist perspective.

Professional writers also have their own specific professionalism that distinguishes them from other professions, such as for example medical doctors, lawyers or judges. Nonetheless, American feminist Elizabeth Kemper Adams (1927) noted that providing a precise definition of professionalism in the arts is quite challenging. This difficulty arises not only from the unique demands of artistic work, but also from the constantly changing and context-dependent nature of the concept itself and the influential factors such as time, location and the specific types of visual production that define the cultural landscape (Huneault 2012: 4). I operate on the assumption that the online platform, the written content and the Muslim women writers originating from *pesantren* backgrounds collectively embody a distinct professional experience. Therefore, the objective of this article is to investigate how the concept of profession and professionalism is manifested in the context of these Muslim women writers, and how their engagement with online platforms influences this dynamic.

Utilising online platforms for professional development

During my interviews with Muslim female *pesantren* writers, I discovered that they utilise online platforms for their writing process and professional development as authors, albeit with distinct purposes and methods. One of the writers I spoke to was Azri Zakkiyah, who published a *pesantren* pop novel titled *Mawar Surga* (“The Rose of Heaven”; Matapena 2008) with Matapena Community.⁵ She admitted that she did not consider herself an online reader or frequent user of online platforms. She used the Kwikku platform solely to participate in a national novel writing competition in 2020, where she ended up winning third place. Her novel, *Khudr* (“Presence”; Interlude 2021), was selected from among 7000 participants and was judged by prominent writers including Dee Lestari and Ahmad Fuadi.⁶ The novel, with its central concept of “unity”, was presented at the Melbourne Emerging Writers Festival in 2017. “If there had not been a competition, there was no way I would have used an online platform,” Azri explained in an interview (13 August 2021).

Azri Zakkiyah is a women writer from a *pesantren* background who has received awards and recognition in Indonesian literary competitions. Her novel *Alunan Vektor Allah* (“Vector Strains of Allah”; Republika 2009) was awarded first place in the National Fiction Writing Competition of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2016. In the same year, she was recognised as the youngest Emerging Writer at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival. Azri also participated as an Exchange Writer at the Melbourne Emerging Writers Festival in 2017 and was the youngest writer selected for the 2017 Writer Residency Program in Australia organised by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Book Committee. An excerpt from her novel I&A (UB Press 2016) was published in English and used as lecture material at Swinburne University, Melbourne. Despite her limited usage of Kwikku, Azri’s participation in online competitions on the platform has resulted in her being acknowledged as a skilled novelist. This recognition has further solidified her professional standing among readers.

5 Azri Zakkiyah received her *pesantren* education from Ma’had Al Qalam Malang and Pesantren Ilmu Al Quran Pasuruan, both located in East Java. She completed her undergraduate studies at Airlangga University and her graduate studies at Brawijaya University.

6 Dee Lestari is the pen name of Dewi Lestari. She has achieved remarkable success with the publication of 17 books, each of them becoming national best-sellers. Her literary journey commenced in 2001 with the release of her debut novel, *Supernova*. This captivating masterpiece, which marked the beginning of the renowned Supernova series consisting of six books, catapulted Dee Lestari to the heights of fame, establishing her as one of Indonesia’s most celebrated writers (Kinasih 2023). In 2009 Ahmad Fuadi crafted the first installment of his captivating trilogy, *Negeri 5 Menara* (“The Land of the Five Towers”). This literary gem swiftly soared to the top, earning a spot on the esteemed 2009 Best Seller list. Its overwhelming popularity led to its transformation into a feature film of the same title. Two years later, in 2011, the second book of the trilogy, *Ranah 3 Warna* (“3 Color Realm”), was published, followed by the third and final book, *Rantau 1 Muara* (“Wandering 1 Estuary”), in 2013. In addition to the *Negeri 5 Menara* trilogy, Ahmad Fuadi has also enriched the literary world with numerous other works. As a versatile writer and esteemed columnist, he has contributed over 300 captivating articles to multiple publications (see the entry on Ahmad Fuadi on Viva: <https://www.viva.co.id/siapa/read/496-ahmad-fuadi>, accessed 16 May 2023).

Unlike Azri, Khilma Anis has a different story regarding the use of online platforms.⁷ She began her creative journey with the Matapena Community in the early 2000s and published her first novel *Jadilah Purnamaku, Ning* (“Be my Full Moon, Ning”; Matapena 2008) in traditional book form. Khilma’s most recent novel, *Hati Subita* (“The Heart of Suhita”; Telaga Aksara 2019), has sold over 80,000 copies and has been adapted into a movie of the same name. According to Khilma, the process of writing *Hati Subita* started with her participation in an online writing community that she stumbled upon by accident. This community, based on a Facebook group, offered co-writing and peer review activities, which she found unique, as it was not focused on promoting the founders of the group. This online writing community was free of charge, and participants were given writing prompts based on songs curated by the group’s admin. Khilma found the experience akin to writing therapy. The assignments were given every day at 9 am and collected after midnight. The group comprised diverse members with varying backgrounds, including housewives, labourers and employees, none of whom Khilma personally knew. Khilma was involved in only two rounds, after which she left the group and continued the novel writing process independently.

Khilma shared that the writing activity she participated in was an excellent source of inspiration for her. In her own words: “[...] we think freely, meaning we want to write who the character is, what they look like, it’s up to us [...] I came up with Suhita on a whim.”⁸ During that time, Khilma did not give much thought to the response of the group members who were her readers; she was solely focused on challenging herself to write. Khilma also read the works of other writers in the group and provided feedback. However, unlike the other writers, who created stories with different characters each day, Khilma continued to use the same character, Suhita, because she was contemplating the possibility of developing her writing into a complete novel.

Khilma perceives the writing process of *Hati Subita*, evolving through readers’ feedback, as distinct from how she approached her previous novels, *Jadilah Purnamaku, Ning* and *Wigati* (a girl’s name; Telaga Aksara 2019). She asserts that *Hati Subita* is “a product of the digital era”.⁹ Her experience implies that the interactions between writers and readers within online communities contribute to the development of digital-networked genres and the broader digital-networked paradigm, playing a role in the emergence of the digital literature phenomenon. When authors engage in conversation with their readers, the act of writing can transform into a dynamic, communal experience (Fitzpatrick 2011). Digital

7 Khilma Anis graduated from a *pesantren* in Jombang, East Java and earned her BA from Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University in Yogyakarta. She also manages an Islamic educational institution founded by her family back home in Jember, East Java.

8 Author’s interview with Khilma Anis, 5 September 2021.

9 Ibid.

fiction is literature specifically crafted for consumption on a computer screen. It is characterised by a structure, form and meaning that are not only influenced by but also engage in a dialogue with the digital context in which it is created and experienced (Ghosal 2023: 1). After sharing her posts twice with the group, Khilma received positive responses from readers who encouraged her to continue writing until the end. She shared her novel with the community readers up to chapter fourteen, and thereafter, she continued writing independently until chapter thirty-four. The third author interviewed is Mambaul Athiyah, another *pesantren* woman writer who effectively utilises various online platforms such as H1A, KBM, Kwikku, Innovel, Bestory and Joylada to publish her digital novels.¹⁰ As one of the admins of H1A, she has already written 57 novels, and half of them are available on H1A, some are published in printed books and the rest are posted on other online platforms. Her popular works published on the plat-

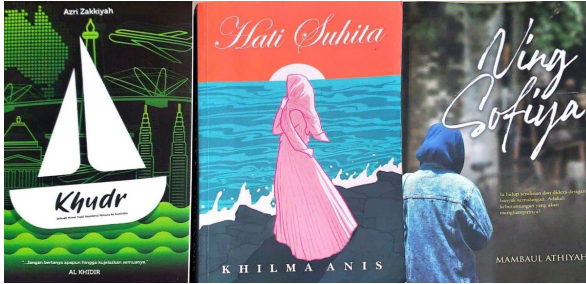


Figure 2:

The covers of three novels: *Khudr* by Azri Zakkiyah, *Hati Suhita* by Khilma Anis and *Ning Sofiya* by Mambaul Athiyah

Photos taken by the author, 2023

forms include *Gus Yazid* (a boy's name), *Ning Sofiya* (a girl's name), *Setangkai Mawar Kamila* ("A Kamila Rose"), *Cinta Segitiga* ("Triangle Love"), *Sebening Air Mata Ruqayya* ("As Clear as Ruqayya's Tears"), *Beautiful Soul*, *Honey*, *Putri Rahasia Abah* ("Abah's Secret Daughter") and *Ning Salsabila* (a girl's name). Mambaul has also published non-fiction books on parenting and social etiquette for young adults. By using online platforms, Mambaul has gained recognition and a professional reputation as a novelist and book writer. Furthermore, she stays informed about emerging trends in literary themes and generates income from readers who purchase and enjoy her works.

After spending a year with H1A, Mambaul joined KBM in 2019. She subsequently published her novel, *Kamar Gus Yazid* ("Gus Yazid's Room"), which garnered 6000 readers, on that platform, attracting the attention of Pelangi Media, a publisher based in Bandung. As a result, she received multiple offers from other book publishers for her subsequent novels, which she uploaded on KBM. But she also published some novels on her own through a print-on-demand system, such as *Cincin Kedua* ("The Second Ring"; Telaga Aksara 2020) and *Gus Leo Worojati* (a boy's name; Telaga Aksara 2020). Initially, Mambaul's decision to join KBM was fuelled by curiosity, as she wanted to gauge the

¹⁰ Mambaul Athiyah attended Pesantren Denanyar in Jombang, East Java before moving to Yogyakarta to pursue a bachelor's degree at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University. She commenced her journey as a fiction writer in 2017 by publishing short stories in the faculty magazine *Literasia*, and has since been honing her craft.

readership of her works and to test how well-received they were. She had already joined several writers' communities, including H1A and other online communities with limited members. However, she managed to demonstrate that her novels resonated positively with the readership on KBM.

The literary works of Azri Zakkiyah, Khilma Anis and Mambaul Athiyah generally conform to the digital literature genre, which includes the use of everyday language with light and relatable themes that resonate with average readers, and a maximum length of 200 pages for online publication. Novels that deviate from these conventions may attract fewer readers, as Azri discovered with her 484-page novel *Khudr*, which describes the journey of three characters to carry out an important, unexpected mission. In this philosophical novel, the characters embark on a profound quest to discover their true identities within the realms of their individual lives. Despite its relatable elements, the novel's philosophical storyline diverges from the typical digital literature narrative. Azri understood that her victory in the Kwikku competition was based on the judges' assessment, not because her novel suited the digital literature reader market:

In the end, the readership is very small, under 5000 at most, while works that are popular among readers according to the size of online platforms must be read by 10 million people and above. (interview with Azri Zakkiyah on 13 August 2021)

The interaction between writers, online platforms, and readers has given rise to a new label – “platform writers” – due to the characteristics of the digital system and the works they produce. These interactions have led to a notable transformation within the chick lit and teen lit genres. Platform writers adopt the style and language typical of chick lit and teen lit, but their digital works exhibit a heightened fluidity. Mambaul sees the emergence of platform writers and digital novels as a mixed development:

In terms of quantity, this is encouraging, because surveys show that the literacy movement in this country is lacking, but when it comes to quality, selectivity is essential. This is because many platform writers, particularly those who are pressured by word count deadlines, end up producing content of subpar quality. (interview with Mambaul Athiyah on 13 August 2021)

Nonetheless there are still numerous writers who remain committed to their ideals and refuse to submit exclusively to the demands of the online readership.

The experiences of Mambaul Athiyah, Khilma Anis and Azri Zakkiyah highlight their expertise in producing literary works, encompassing a variety of themes, genres and ethical messages. This aspect of craftsmanship is crucial in meeting the readers' expectations, thereby necessitating its careful execution. Consequently, an intriguing question arises: How do these three writers navigate the delicate balance between their idealistic vision as professional writers with creative autonomy and the practical considerations of meeting the demands of the readers' market?

Themes and ideological messages in “platform writing”

From their time in the *pesantren*, Mambaul Athiyah, Khilma Anis and Azri Zakkiyah acquired a comprehensive grasp of Islamic classical knowledge and the values engrained in the moderate and inclusive *pesantren* practice. As novel writers, they incorporate their insights and familiarity with Islamic values into their literary pieces. Several terminologies frequently employed in *pesantren* discourse can also be found in the literary works of these writers, including, for example *kiai* (a founder of a *pesantren* school), *gus* (son of a *kiai*), *ning* (daughter of a *kiai*), *su’ul adab* (without manners), *dzurriyah* (descendants of a *pesantren* family) and *sekufu’* (having the same social status, cultural and religious background).¹¹ Mambaul, for instance, conveys the importance of honouring educators through her novel *Ning Sofiya*, exemplified in the following sentence:

In any case, as a mere student, it would not be proper for me to develop a close relationship with the *kiai*’s son. Doing so might lead to *su’ul adab*, and it could potentially disturb my inner peace, thereby disrespecting the *kiai*’s *dzurriyah*. The person who eventually becomes Gus Sahrul’s soul mate should be *sekufu’*, not be a woman like myself, without any parental ties. (Athiyah 2020: 65; translation by the author)

Furthermore, in addition to their Islamic and *pesantren* knowledge, the three writers also possess the ability to incorporate their personal experiences and expertise in social and cultural issues related to the theme of their novels. For instance, Azri draws upon her experience of attending a writer’s residency in Australia to vividly portray the surroundings of one of the characters in *Khudr*, Hazel Lochlann:

I guide Clare up the escalator towards Platform 12, opting for the shortcut subway that links Elizabeth Street to Southbank Gate. As we emerge, we find ourselves right in front of the Evan Walker Bridge. This exit isn’t frequented by many; only a handful of people intentionally take the tranquil underground passage to bask in the calming breeze of the Yarra River. (Zakkiyah 2021: 3; translation by the author)

Khilma expertly weaves her knowledge of Javanese culture and puppetry into the narrative and structure of *Hati Suhita*. She cleverly utilises names from traditional puppet stories such as *Suhita*, *Dharma* and *Rengganis*, and skilfully brings the characters and settings to life by drawing on the themes found in these stories. An example is Khilma’s portrayal of Suhita’s emotions regarding her unrequited love for Gus Biru, which she describes using characters from the famous puppet story Mahabharata:

11 *Su’ul adab* refers to attitudes that are deemed by society to be incompatible with the principles of decency and honourable conduct when interacting with others. Examples of *su’ul adab* include disrespecting teachers and using harsh language towards parents. The term *dzurriyah* originates from *dzarrab*, which can be translated as “seed” or “very small object”. In this case, *dzurriyah* specifically refers to human seed or offspring. While the word carries a broader meaning encompassing all individuals born from the lineage of the Prophet, within the context of the sentences in the novel mentioned above, *dzurriyah* pertains to the descendants of the *pesantren* family.

Maybe this is what Prabu Duryudana experienced when he was miserable. His wife, Banowati, only had affection for Arjuna. It could be that Duryudana's heart was broken when he found out that Banowati gave herself to his enemy Arjuna. He may have suffered the pain of having a kingdom, power, wealth, and the ability to conquer other kingdoms, but his own wife did not give him the respect he deserved. As a woman, I can still empathise with the feeling of being disregarded and ignored. (Anis 2019: 7; translation by the author)

According to Mambaul, the professionalism of writers depends not only on their linguistic aptitude but also on their idealism and the values they aim to impart through their works. In her opinion, a writer who prioritises monetary gain over their craft is compromising their professional integrity. Platform writers tend to favour themes that are trendy, marketable and lacking values or ideals. These popular themes often centre around recurring topics such as marital infidelity, suffering wives and female sensuality, as evidenced by titles on KBM.¹² The top categories for stories include domestic dramas, adult novels, romance novels, family dramas, dramatic scripts, inspirational works, romantic comedies, true stories, fantasy novels, fan fiction, Korean novels, horror stories, religious novels, mystery novels, dime story collections, young adult novels, humour novels, chick lit and inspirational works (KBM App 2020).

Not all writers on online platforms are women, and identifying the gender of a writer can be challenging since often only the pen name is provided. However, in my observation, the majority of pen names tend to be associated with women. Despite this, there are male writers present. For instance, Mambaul discovered a male writer named Abidin Ubaidillah, as indicated by his Facebook account name. She mentioned, "When I was on the KBM Facebook platform, I used to reply to comments from Abidin" (interview with Mambaul Athiyah on 13 August 2021). She acknowledges the prevalence of female pen names among writers who publish on online platforms. In her assessment, male writers sometimes adopt a more lyrical style and diction when writing in romance genres, a trend that has been established by female writers. This can lead readers unfamiliar with their work to assume that the writer is a woman. Additionally, Mambaul notes that male writers excel at creating stories from a male perspective, with the male character as the main protagonist. Another notable male writer on the online platform is Ramdan Nahdi. Mambaul commented: "I liked his writing on the world of jinn, which often includes intense duels and mystical elements. It's reminiscent of the themes explored by Abidin."¹³ On the other hand, according to Mambaul, who is also the admin of the platform, H1A appears to consist entirely of female members.

12 See for example *Hasrat Seorang Ipar* ("Desire of an In-law"; 263k views, 2.73k subscribers), *Gairah Kakak Perempuan* ("Desire of an Older Sister"; 53.6k views, 662 subscribers), *Wanita Tanpa Selaput Dara* ("A Woman without Hymen"; 28.7k views, 583 subscribers) and *Cobaan Menikahi Om-Om* ("Temptation of Marrying a Sugar Daddy"; 4.6k views, 136 subscribers).

13 Author's interview with Mambaul Athiyah, 13 August 2021.

Azri observes a stark contrast between the language and themes employed by platform writers and the ones she typically incorporates in her novels. “I have a friend who is a new writer, and her writing style is replete with slang language like *gue gue* [I, I], *elo elo* [you, you], etc. Yet, her readership exceeds one million,” she stated, noting that the topics the writer addresses are highly sought-after among online platform readers.¹⁴ Consequently, Azri feels increasingly out of place in the world of online platforms. Khilma was also privy to feedback from her readers with regard to the themes she ought to explore in her writing. Her readers suggested that she diverge from her usual story of *pesantren* life, given that she had penned on the topic extensively. They felt that Khilma ought instead to explore popular themes that appeal to online platform readers. Nevertheless, Khilma expressed her reluctance to diverge from her familiar themes, asserting that such an undertaking made her feel as though she were a different person. “To compel me to emulate a popular writer, admired by many, is a feat beyond my capabilities. Yet, I can still draw readers in through my characters,” she explained.¹⁵

In her novel *Hati Suhita*, Khilma thoughtfully included characters like Alina Suhita and Gus Biru, who were positioned as figures from the *pesantren*.¹⁶ However, she also created female characters such as Rengganis to voice the experiences and emotions of non-*pesantren* individuals. Additionally, the character of Aruna, a woman who is neither a *kiai*'s daughter nor a *pesantren* student, serves as Alina's sincere and loyal friend. Khilma skilfully employs the relationship between the two women from contrasting backgrounds to evoke the reader's memories of their own friendships. While Khilma's choice of language and genre remains consistent with her writing style, she seems to have captivated the interest of platform readers, including those outside of the *pesantren* community, with her novels.

All three interviewees – Azri, Khilma and Mambaul – highlight the importance of creative authority in defining their own uniqueness as a professional writer. They emphasise that professional writers have the freedom to choose their own themes and genres, without being constrained by market trends. In Azri's words, they have the freedom to “*menjadi diri sendiri*” (“be ourselves”, interview on 13 August 2021). Writing on themes that have value, even if they are not currently popular, can still attract readers.

Creative authority can be defined as a writer's ability to exercise their creativity in a way that can attract readers to their work without resorting to coercion.

14 Author's interview with Azri Zakkiyah, 13 August 2021.

15 Author's interview with Khilma Anis, 5 September 2021.

16 The novel *Hati Suhita* narrates a tale of a complex love triangle involving Gus Biru, Alina Suhita and Rengganis. Despite being married to Alina through an arranged marriage, Gus Biru harbors feelings of love towards Rengganis. The novel takes the readers on a journey of the relationship between Gus Biru and Alina, who start as strangers and eventually fall in love with each other, navigating through the intricate bonds of marriage.

Khilma compares professional writers to “eagles, who fly alone” and have their own beliefs and preferred genres, rather than following the flock “like ducks”. Professional writers should not be solely concerned with market demands, but should maintain their own character and ability to adapt to new technologies. This is essential for their survival and longevity in the ever-evolving world of writing. In the context of literature production, I have observed that creative authority serves as a crucial element in the formation of professional authority. It encompasses more than just the ability to govern work processes and markets; it also involves the acknowledgement and acceptance of such control as valid and legitimate, based on the professionals’ own perspectives and understanding of their work (Heuman 2016: 198).

The demand for professionalism in writing requires creative authority to produce original works, rather than copying others. Azri, Khilma and Mambaul share this concern for authenticity regarding their novels, which have been plagiarised on online platforms and falsely claimed by other writers. To sum up, the interviews indicate that writing with idealism, creative authority and integrity in one’s authentic work are crucial dimensions of professionalism for Muslim women writers from *pesantren* backgrounds.

Becoming professional writers: Challenges and strategies

The advent of digital technology has transformed the landscape of writing and reading, altering the characteristics of both writers and readers, and raising concerns about ownership and plagiarism. In terms of readership, Azri Zakkiyah and Khilma Anis have identified two distinct categories: “old” readers who prefer printed books and do not engage with online platforms, and “new” readers who actively use digital platforms for reading and engagement. A major debate related to writing and readership revolves around the question of whether a writer should prioritise his or her own authority over the work or cater to the tastes of the reader market, which holds the popular authority. Azri Zakkiyah suggests that novice writers who have limited experience, knowledge and skill can publish their writing on online platforms with popular themes and genres to gain readers and approval. With large numbers of readers, a new work might attract the attention of book publishers and even make it to the big screen. Nowadays, even many publishers release novels on online platforms with large followings to boost their popularity.¹⁷

Khilma Anis, along with Azri and Mambaul, prioritises the authority of her work above market demands. However, Khilma recognises the challenge of communicating complex ideas in today’s language, which requires writers to

¹⁷ Author’s interview with Azri Zakkiyah, 13 August 2021.

be both creative and adaptable. While writing *Wigati*, which was published traditionally, Khilma felt at ease describing the intricacies of crafting *keris* (daggers). She used language that was suitable for “old” readers who prefer printed books and felt free to write what she knew because it was published in print. In contrast, while writing *Hati Subita*, Khilma had to be more deliberate in adjusting her language to suit her audience of “new” readers online. To accomplish this, she avoided showing off her knowledge, and focused on being more communicative and empathetic, understanding the psychology of the reader and reducing idealistic content.¹⁸ Azri, on the other hand, usually writes for “old” readers who have a preference for serious literature and printed books. As a result, she sees no need to make any adjustments to her writing style.¹⁹

The convenience of digital publishing has an impact on the mindset of platform writers, who are often driven to produce works at a rapid pace. The rise of writing communities has made the process more accessible, with Khilma highlighting their importance for novice writers who may feel disheartened if their work is not received well on their personal social media pages. In a writing community, even the simplest pieces of writing are likely to be read, appreciated and responded to. “It’s important for writers to receive appreciation for their work, even if it’s not perfect. The process can be addictive – once you write episode one, the words just flow out of you. Getting a comment like ‘keep up the good work’ can be very encouraging,” Khilma explained.²⁰ While some may criticise the existence of writing communities for their lack of profitability and credibility, they remain an essential space for beginner writers to learn and grow, as they provide the necessary readership and appreciation that aspiring writers crave.

Mambaul, who actively participates in multiple online writing communities and administers H1A, shares this perspective. H1A is dedicated to developing writing skills and regularly organises activities to achieve this goal. For instance, members are encouraged to publish their works every Saturday and Sunday, with the freedom to choose their own theme. Additionally, the admin provides a more light-hearted theme on different days, such as writing about memories associated with rainy days. Mambaul recalls that during her early years of involvement in KBM, the organisation provided helpful feedback on writing techniques and punctuation through its Literary Criticism rubric. However, such feedback seems to have dwindled in recent times. The rules set by a writing community can also impact the quality of the themes and writing produced by members. Mambaul notes that in H1A, writers are required to produce works with themes that promote certain values, meaning that writers are discouraged

18 Author’s interview with Khilma Anis, 5 September 2021.

19 Author’s interview with Azri Zakkiyah, 13 August 2021.

20 Author’s interview with Khilma Anis, 5 September 2021.

from creating works that are distasteful or offensive.²¹ However, Khilma's experience with writing communities has not always been positive. As a result, she has chosen to pursue writing as an independent author. "I don't want to be a community writer because it can complicate my writing process," Khilma explains.²²

Khilma noted the potential drawbacks, such as the potential for megalomania among the founders of online platforms. While it can help to legitimise the professionalism of members as writers, it can also create a patron-client relationship where the founder seeks recognition for producing successful writers through the platform. The power and influence held by established figures in the traditional sphere, such as renowned writers or reputable publishers, can be transferred to the digital realm. The online space is also occupied by up-and-coming networks of influencers, including emerging authors and micro-celebrities, who gain fame due to specific trends in certain domains at particular times. To gain a better understanding of gatekeeping practices, networked gatekeeping and the modern landscape of authorship and publishing, it is crucial to comprehend these emerging influencers and the way popularity and authority are negotiated in the digital sphere (Bold 2018).

The rise of digital media publishing has prompted discussions on the security of ownership and the risks of plagiarism in the online realm. Muslim women writers with a *pesantren* background encounter the usual challenges when it comes to security and plagiarism. Khilma, for example, once uploaded a fragment of a chapter of *Hati Subita* on her Facebook page, but it was later reposted on a reader's personal Facebook account without mentioning Khilma Anis as the author. Azri also faced the issue of plagiarism when another writer submitted her *Khudr* manuscript to a publisher under her own name instead of Azri's. This was only discovered when the publisher announced the list of novels to be published on social media. The issue of security and plagiarism is faced not only by writers who publish their manuscripts through online platforms, but also occurs in works published by traditional book publications.²³

Khilma has come up with a unique approach to combat book piracy by focusing on attracting more readers and building an audience. She believes that providing additional offers to customers who buy her original novels is an effective way to do this. Khilma has maintained the price of her novel, *Hati Subita*, at 99,000 IDR (approx. 6 EUR), but offers bonuses such as bracelets and brooches that she produces under her own brand. She has also expanded her author brand by producing other products, such as headscarves, bags and Muslim dress, featuring images representing Javanese culture and puppetry. As a result, Khilma has expanded from being a novelist to becoming an entre-

21 Author's interview with Mambaul Athiyah, 13 August 2021.

22 Author's interview with Khilma Anis, 5 September 2021.

23 Author's Interview with Khilma Anis, 5 September 2021, and with Azri Zakkiyah, 13 August 2021.

preneur. She manages the sales of her novels herself and has formed a team of 100 online-based resellers. Khilma and her team never talk about book piracy publicly because she does not want to expose the existence of cheaper versions of her novel.²⁴

The credibility of online platforms is closely linked to their accountability in managing a cohesive online community. Azri argues that professional platforms are those that can be held accountable, especially when organising events such as competitions. However, after winning the online novel competition, Azri was disappointed with the lack of cooperation shown by the platform network publishers:

I submitted the manuscript to one of the platform network publishers, but it didn't pass their selection process. Another publisher didn't respond for up to eight months. This highlights the poor management of the online platform. What's the point of having a media platform if the management is not up to par? It made me lose confidence in online platforms. (interview on 13 August 2021)

Additionally, when Azri uploaded all the chapters of her novel, *Khudr*, to a platform that was supposed to require payment, she found them accessible without a password, allowing readers to access the content for free. Based on this experience, Azri stresses that there is no guaranteed privacy and security on online platforms unless the platform's system and management are run professionally.²⁵

Summary

The emergence of digital technology has transformed the way literature is written and read, altering the media and culture of the literary world, and shaping the characteristics of writers and readers alike. The dimensions of professionalism shown by the experiences of Azri Zakkiyah, Khilma Anis and Mambaul Athiyah – idealism in writing, authority of work and integrity in producing original works – result from a long process of practice and habituation. This study has shown that the progress of internet technology has proved to be beneficial for Indonesian women writers, providing them with opportunities to improve their writing skills, broaden their connections and reach out to a wider readership. However, it has resulted in a clash between their desire to write about *pesantren* stories and the market's preference for popular themes, which sometimes dilutes the essential messages they intend to deliver. Furthermore, the authors confront the difficulty of harmonising their idealism with the authenticity and quality of their works.

24 Author's interview with Khilma Anis, 5 September 2021.

25 Author's interview with Azri Zakkiyah, 13 August 2021.

The interviewed Muslim women writers Azri Zakkiyah, Khilma Anis and Mambaul Athiyah employ online platforms, each with different motivations and approaches. Azri, despite her limited use of online platforms, discovered the value of participating in a national online writing competition, which led to recognition and acknowledgment as a skilled novelist. Khilma, by contrast, stumbled upon an online writing community that offered co-writing and peer review activities, which became a transformative experience for her novel *Hati Subita*. The interactions with readers within the online community played a significant role in shaping her work and contributing to the digital literature phenomenon. Mambaul effectively utilises various online platforms, publishing numerous digital novels, gaining recognition as a novelist and staying informed about emerging trends in literary themes. Her participation in writing communities like KBM has opened doors for publishing opportunities and further success.

The predominant themes, genres and ideological messages present in the writing of Mambaul Athiyah, Khilma Anis and Azri Zakkiyah reflect their comprehensive grasp of Islamic classical knowledge and values acquired during their time in the *pesantren*. They incorporate these insights in their literary pieces as a means of communication, utilising terminology frequently employed in *pesantren* discourse. Additionally, they skilfully weave their personal experiences and expertise in social and cultural issues into their novels. While they acknowledge the pressure to conform to popular themes and market demands, they emphasise the importance of creative authority and maintaining integrity. By staying true to their own beliefs and preferred genres, they assert their professionalism and strive to produce original works that resonate with readers. They also highlight the need for authenticity in the face of issues like plagiarism. Overall, professionalism for these *pesantren* women writers encompasses idealism, creative authority and integrity in their writing, allowing them to make meaningful contributions to the literary world. This practice aligns with Aristotle's ethical definition of professionalism.

Furthermore, organising in online communities can provide significant benefits for women in the evolving landscape of writing and reading. These communities offer a supportive space for aspiring writers, especially novices who may feel disheartened by the lack of recognition on personal social media pages. Writing communities provide the necessary readership, appreciation and constructive feedback that can encourage and nurture growth. While some may question their profitability and credibility, these communities can remain vital for beginner writers to learn and develop their skills. The convenience of digital publishing has made it easier for writers to produce and share their work, and online communities offer a platform for writers to gain recognition, attract publishers and even transition to other media formats, such as film. However, it is important to acknowledge and address the challenges associated with online

communities, such as issues of plagiarism, security and accountability. By navigating these challenges, women can leverage the power of online communities to empower themselves as writers and entrepreneurs, expanding their reach and building a loyal audience.

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