



VEILING THE FACE, REVEALING SELF-ESTEEM: A STUDY OF THE MUSLIMAH STUDENTS AT STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY IN EAST JAVA

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Abstract

In a country where most of the population is Muslim, wearing a face veil is not new. However, the face veil for Muslimah students in Indonesia is still polemic because it seems old-fashioned, rigid, and underestimated by some people, so they are considered Islamic fanatics, radicalized Muslims, extremists, or terrorists. Several state Islamic universities govern how to dress on campus. This qualitative research aims to reveal the motivations and struggles of Muslimah students in wearing face veils at UIN Sunan Ampel and IAIN Jember (now: UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember) during 2019-2020. Therefore, the researcher also used interview and observation methods to obtain the data. The study results are the Muslimah students' motivation to wear the face veil because of the need for self-security from men and the need to be respected (need for self-esteem). The struggles carried out by the informants are different from the motivation and acceptance of the milieu. The higher the motivation to wear the face veil, the stronger they maintain it. Although they do not support the milieu, a strong motivation will defend their honor (*murū'ah*). In addition to motivation, the milieu is also significant. The more tolerated the milieu, the easier the struggle made by the informants.

Keywords: *Face Veil, Muslimah Students' Motivation, Self-Esteem, State Islamic Universities.*



Introduction

Wearing the face veil in Indonesia is not new because most of the population is Muslim. However, wearing the face veil for Muslim women (Muslimah) in Indonesia is still polemic. The pros and cons of wearing the face veil are still often debated because not all Indonesians can accept the face veil, especially in public places.

The face veil in public places is often regarded as old-fashioned, rigid, and underestimated because it seems fanatical, radical Islam, hard-line Islam, or even synonymous with terrorists. Especially with the Surabaya bombing on 13–14 May 2018, the perpetrators allegedly wore a face veil.

The face veil is a cloth covering the face or part of a woman's face. In Arabic, the face veil is called the niqab, which covers the entire face of a Muslimah except for the eyes or something visible around the eyes.

As one type of clothing is often discussed, many researchers are interested in discussing the face veil, including the symbols¹ and self-identity of a Muslimah.² Although Indonesia is a country

that respects the right to dress, there are several universities in East Java that set dress codes for their female students. The college made regulations governing dress but not including the face veil.

Regulations that prohibit wearing face veils in universities do not necessarily make Muslimah students on campus take off their face veils. From preliminary research, it was found that the wear of face veils tends to increase.

Wearing the face veil for Muslimah students on campus that prohibits the face veil is not easy. The phenomenon of Muslim students wearing face veils at State Islamic Universities in East Java, especially at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya and IAIN Jember (now: UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember), is interesting to study whether they maintain the face veil or surrender to the campus rules.

Before discussing this research further, it is necessary to mention the previous research that has been done, both research with the theme of struggle and research on the veil. Research that discusses the struggle for identity is a book written by Afthonul Afif, *Menjadi Indonesia: Pergulatan Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia* (Becoming Indonesia: The Struggle for Indonesian Muslim Chinese Identity). In this book, it is illustrated that real identities are not singular, but can be stacked or even mixed (hybrid). One can be both Chinese and

¹ Siti Juwariyah, "Muslim Women and Veiling: What Does it Signify?" *MIQOT* 43, No. 1 (2019). DOI: 10.30821/miqot.v43i1.680.

² Anjum Alvi, "Concealment and Revealment: The Muslim Veil in Context." *Current Anthropology* 54, No. 2 (April 2013). DOI: 10.1086/669732.

Muslim, or perhaps the categorization is mixed: Chinese Muslim.³

In addition, Aimee Dawis also wrote a book entitled "The Chinese of Indonesia and Their Search for Identity: The Relationship between Collective Memory and Media".⁴ If Afif discusses the issue of ethnic Chinese identity related to religion, Dawis observes it through the media, in this case, the film. As stated above, during the New Order era, the Chinese were discriminated against in various fields, including in the use of language, so they could not express their Chinese identity. The New Order's assimilation policy excluded them so that Chinese people could not learn Mandarin in school and could not read Chinese newspapers. All of them want to see the diversity of identities from various points of view; some complexities and knick-knacks require more profound observation, which cannot only be observed at a glance. There are sometimes severe struggles between Islamic culture and ideology, as well as processes of mutual influence that sometimes take the form of syncretic patterns, conflicts, or other patterns that are sometimes difficult to define.

³ Afthonul Afif, *Menjadi Indonesia: Pergulatan Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia* (Depok: Kepik, 2012).

⁴ Aimee Dawis, *The Chinese of Indonesia and Their Search for Identity: The Relationship between Collective Memory and Media* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2010).

Reni Julian,⁵ in her article entitled "*Stigmatisasi Mahasiswa tentang Maraknya Mahasiswa Bercadar di Kampus: Studi Kasus Pada Mahasiswa Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik Universitas Teuku Umar Meulaboh Kabupaten Aceh Barat* (Stigmatization of Students on the Rise of Face-veiled Students on Campus: A Case Study of Students from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Teuku Umar University, Meulaboh, West Aceh Regency)," examines discrimination against veiled students at Teuku Umar University (UTU) Aceh. Juliani concluded that there was no negative stigma against them at the campus. It is due to the university's establishment of mutual respect and appreciation.

In an article entitled "Islamophobia in Education: Perceptions on the Wear of Veil/Niqab in Higher Education," Hanif Cahyo Adi Kistoro and colleague discuss the issue of Islamophobia and its relation to the motivation of using the face veil among female students from a private university in Yogyakarta. The article reveals that there are five main themes in the use of face veils in universities, namely the average age of female students who wear a veil, motivations

⁵ Reni Juliani, "Stigmatisasi Mahasiswa tentang Maraknya Mahasiswa Bercadar di Kampus: Studi Kasus pada Mahasiswa Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik Universitas Teuku Umar Meulaboh Kabupaten Aceh Barat," *Community: Pengawas Dinamika Sosial* 4, No. 1 (2018): 91-104.

and reasons for wearing the veil, perceptions from within themselves and their milieu, obstacles faced, and consistency in wearing the face veil.⁶

Meanwhile, Lisa Aisyah Rasyid and Rosdalina Bukido discussed the legal problems of the face veil in Islam.⁷ This qualitative research has attempted to examine the various views of commentators and Muslimah scholars on the law on the wear of the face veil for Muslimah without heeding the normative and historical side of the face veil user. The results of this study are normative; wearing the face veil may become mandatory in a region if it has become a mutual agreement and socially accepted norm. Meanwhile, in specific milieu, not wearing the face veil would be better when it aims to avoid harmful effects (*madarat*). It can happen because the *obligation* command to wear the face veil at the time of the Prophet was intended as an identity for Muslimah and free, so that Muslimah should not be disturbed, not because their faces had to be covered and treated as a veiled part. In contrast to the generally accepted

chest veiling command, considered at least in all non-tribal societies, to provoke sexual feelings. Therefore, the Qur'an explicitly requires Muslimah to wear *khimar*, a cloth generally worn by women and carried across their shoulders.

Therefore, this study has never been conducted before. The discussion here is divided into two major themes: Muslimah students' motivation to wear the face veil and their struggles at State Islamic Universities in East Java, especially at IAIN Jember and UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya.

Motivation of the Muslimah Students Wearing the Face Veil

From several universities in East Java, the researcher decided to interview three Muslimah student informants of IAIN Jember and UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya. The results show that each informant has different reasons for wearing the face veil in an milieu where the majority do not.

The first informant is a Muslimah student of the Arabic Language and Literature Study Program at IAIN Jember. From the interview, the researcher obtained information that informants wearing the face veil on campus because of deep shame if non-*mahram* men saw their face—*mahram* is a person who cannot be married [by Islamic law]). Wildly if the man stares intently or gazes

⁶ Hanif Cahyo Adi Kistoro et al., "Islamophobia in Education: Perceptions on the Wear of Veil/ Niqab in Higher Education," *IJIMS: Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 2 (2020): 227-246. DOI: 10.18326/ijims.v10i2.227-24.

⁷ Lisa Aisyah Rasyid & Rosdalina Bukido, "Problematika Hukum Cadar dalam Islam: Sebuah Tinjauan Normatif-Historis," *Jurnal Ilmiah al-Syir'ah* 16 No. 1 (2018).

at his face, in this sense, the informant believes that some men can describe a woman's *awrat*—body parts [required by Islam] to be covered) by looking at her face, especially when looking at a woman's lips. It was said by the 7th-semester Muslimah student of the Arabic Language and Literature Study Program of IAIN Jember, as follows:

The book of *Fathul Izzar* states that a Muslimah's *awrat* can be seen from her face. The face can describe a Muslimah's *awrat*. For example, if the woman's lips are like this, her genitals are like this.

The knowledge gained from the book caused this girl to cover her face. For her, the face reflects all his limbs, especially the sensitive parts, prompting her to veil his face. When the researcher mentioned a little about her involvement in the affiliation of the radicalism movement, she replied that she wore the face veil because she wanted to protect her honor from men who had not married her for no other reason.

According to Maslow, the categories of human needs include safety needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.⁸ The need for security motivated

⁸ Sayyed Javad Asad Poor Zavei & Mahmud Mohd Jusan, "Exploring Housing Attributes. Selection based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 42 (2012): 314-317. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.04.195.

the informants to wear the face veil to protect themselves from men.

Meanwhile, according to the second informant, a Muslimah student of the Sharia Economics Study Program at UIN Sunan Ampel, the reason for wearing the face veil is to maintain relationships with men. She claimed to have worn the face veil even since she was in the second grade of senior high school.

I wear the face veil honestly out of love for the Prophet Muhammad. I want to imitate the wives of the Prophet who wore veils, guarding my honor against men who are not *mahram*. And because I have a terrible past related to the association.

The decision to wear the face veil is due to the need to maintain her honor (*maru'ah*). In this case, experience makes her more mature in making decisions. She hopes to wear a face veil so that she can better protect herself from other men and be able to make herself more comfortable in her activities. As with Maslow's theory of needs, the attitude of this second informant is included in the category of need for self-esteem. In his theory, Maslow divides *the need for self-esteem* into two parts, namely, respect for oneself and respect for others. Therefore, the motivation of this second informant is included in the category of self-respect.

When asked about her involvement in radical affiliation, this girl smiled, then replied that not all women with the face veil are radical. Many people use the face veil because they want to carry out religious orders according to what they believe. I still love Indonesia. I also condemn the suicide bombings. So, it is my understanding and belief that is the reason why I decided to cover my face.

Like the first informant, this Muslimah student of the Hadith Studies Program of IAIN Jember decided to wear a face veil from the beginning as a student on campus. The decision to wear the face veil was due to the need for self-security. Sexual harassment, rape, violence, and other unpleasant incidents against women cause women to become victims and feel anxious. This fear will happen to her, causing this third informant to take better care of herself, her honor, and her self-respect by wearing a face veil. This first-semester student believes the face veil can protect her from these threats. She believes it begins with women's physical appearance, from head to toe.

When asked about her decision to wear the face veil, she has nothing related to radicalism. The informant replied that she was one of those who criticized the existence of radical groups. It is because this group is considered dangerous and can harm others.

Of the three successfully interviewed informants, two kinds of needs motivated Muslimah students to wear the face veil. Maslow's theory of needs,⁹ according to their needs, the motivation for wearing the face veil is *the need for self-security* and *the need for self-esteem*. However, there is no reason for wearing the face veil because of their affiliation with radicalism or Islamic fundamentalist movements.

Regulations of Muslimah Students Wearing Face Veils on Campus

Each institution has regulations that are considered appropriate according to the policymakers. One of the IAIN Jember and UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya regulations prohibits Muslimah students from wearing the face veil. However, this prohibition does not make Muslimah students obey these regulations. Some Muslimah students constantly wear face veils when they are on campus.

The campus policy to prohibit students from wearing the face veil when attending lectures or participating in other academic services does not diminish the enthusiasm for Muslimah students of the Arabic Language and Litera-

⁹ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivasi dan Kepribadian: Teori Motivasi dengan Pendekatan Hierarki Kebutuhan Manusia (Motivation and Personality) Jilid 1*, trans. Nurul Imam (Jakarta: PT. Pustaka Binaman Pressindo, 1994), 55.

ture Study Program to wear a face veil. However, for her, the rules for banning the face veil are not strictly enforced in her faculty, causing her to feel welcome in her milieu, even though the way she dresses is different from the others. For almost a year of wearing the face veil on campus, she has never been warned by the authorities (study program, faculty, or campus) regarding the wear of the face veil. So, she feels still given space to maintain her honor. However, if one day the regulations are enforced, especially in the faculty, then this first informant will comply with the rules that apply at the campus. She prioritizes education because seeking knowledge is obligatory, while the law on wearing the face veil is permissible. Something obligatory (*wajib*) cannot be negated by something permissible (*mubah*). However, as long as the campus still tolerates Muslimah students wearing the face veil, she will feel grateful for not forbidding her to do something she believes in.

While the second informant said that at the beginning, as a member of the academic community of UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, she tried to defend her position, she admitted that at the beginning of college, it was a bit difficult because the authorities at her campus did not fully tolerate the face veil. On one occasion, she was verbally warned by the faculty authorities that

the campus forbade Muslim students from wearing the face veil. However, she did not take it for granted to take off her face veil. She attempted to explain the reasons she chose to wear the face veil. However, in the end, the faculty authority handed over the case to the study program authority. Once again, this second informant was warned by the Head of the Sharia Economics Study Program. She also explained to the study program authorities and sincerely requested that she be allowed to wear a face veil. The head of the study program finally gave tolerance. Finally, she was allowed to wear a face veil on the condition that when in class, the lecturer also allowed it. In addition to consistently wearing the face veil, she also tried to explain the reason for it in a friendly and polite manner so that her friends received her well.

With a different dress style from most students, the second informant did not effortlessly actualize herself at UIN Sunan Ampel to be accepted by the people around her. Not all lecturers tolerate her wearing a face veil. There was one lecturer who objected to her dress style. Under the agreement with the faculty authority, it is permissible to use the face veil as long as the lecturer in the lecture class does not prohibit it. However, if the lecturer objected, she had to follow his rules. The refusal by one of the lecturers caused her to think

about how she could still attend lectures without giving up her stance. She had considered wearing a mask in class, but that was also not allowed. In the end, she was forced to take off her face veil while attending lectures, but her Muslimah student friends in class helped her maintain her *murū'ah*. When she took off her face veil, the other Muslimah student friends immediately covered her so that the male students would not see her.

When asked about options, if the campus did not allow her to wear a face veil, would she leave campus with a face veil or continue to study at campus without a face veil? This second informant replied that she chose to keep her face veil even though that was different from her parents' choice, who would ask her to maintain her education. Therefore, she thinks and looks for other alternatives for a win-win solution. As has been done before, it will be very problematic for her. Her experience with a lecturer who required her to take off her face veil made her reluctant and worried. She could not imagine if it had to be like that in all her courses.

The case of the second informant happened the same as the third informant. In the beginning, the third informant was wearing a face veil on campus made her the center of attention in her class. Her new friends in the class felt strange about the face veil, but this did not dampen her enthusiasm to continue

to wear the face veil. In the end, one of the lecturers admonished her not to wear a face veil in class. The reprimand made her undecided between keeping her face veil or giving up taking off her face veil to attend lectures. Like the second alternative, she also changed the face veil by wearing a mask in class because what was prohibited was a face veil, not a mask. Wearing masks in class became more acceptable; she no longer received a warning from the lecturer. Her classmates also began to accept her, making it easier for her to guard herself and be afraid of things that threatened her.

The interview relates to Manuel Castells' theory of identity,¹⁰ that if the majority is dominant in a society, there will undoubtedly be some people who are dominated and fight against the economy, culture, and politics. In this case, resistance was carried out by several Muslimah students against the prohibition of not wearing the face veil by the institution where they studied—the struggle of a Muslimah student to implement what is believed to be exceedingly difficult. The reprimands and warnings from the institution's authorities and the cynical gazes of fellow students did not cause the face veiled Muslimah student to back down in defending her position.

¹⁰ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity: The Information Age, Economy, Society and Cultural*. Vol. II (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

The motivation of each Muslimah student influences the determination to maintain the face veil. The higher the need for the face veil, the stronger the struggle she experiences. The needs of the first and third informants are included in *the need for self-security* so that when the informants are faced with a choice: whether to take off their face veils or leave the institution where they study, they both prefer to take off their face veils. In contrast to the second informant, whose need to wear a face veil is included in *the need for self-esteem* category when faced with this choice: whether to take off the face veil or leave the institution where she studied, the second informant prefers to keep the face veil with the consequences of having to leave the campus.

Conclusion

Wearing the face veils of the Muslimah students at the university in East Java, especially at IAIN Jember and UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya was motivated by *the need for self-security* from men. By wearing a face veil, they feel protected from the eyes of a naughty man, who has a sensitive view of the anatomy of a woman's body. At the same time, others are due to the need to maintain *murū'ah* or honor (*the need for self-esteem*) as a Muslimah stands by wearing the face veil. However, not all Muslimah students who wear face veils have stable religious

motivations. Likewise, not all Muslimah students with face veils are terrorists. So, this view of them cannot be generalized.

The experiences and struggles of informants vary according to their motivation, conditions, and responses from their friends and institutions. The higher the motivation for wearing the face veil, the stronger she is to maintain the face veil. Even though the institution's condition does not tend to give the space of tolerance, they still maintain their face veil with stable motivation. In addition, the milieu and social activities also affect the acceptance of fellow female students, other Muslimah, and campus authorities. Thus, the more accepted the milieu, the easier the struggle made by the informants and otherwise.

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