Visions of the future: imagining Islamic modernities in Indonesian Islamic-themed post-Suharto popular and visual culture

Schmidt, L.K.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 5

‘So Islam really honours women?’: Muslim masculinity and feminity in Islamic-themed films
Chapter 5
‘So Islam really honours women?’:
Muslim masculinity and feminity in Islamic-themed films

“I wiped away my tears several times. It is a touching film; it delivered its messages very well. I think all of us agree that this film teaches us good values… about how we should uphold tolerance and peace in life.”
- President Yudhoyono after watching Ayat-Ayat Cinta (Nurhayati, The Jakarta Post 2008)

On 28 March 2008, Plaza EX in Jakarta was closed down to host a special film viewing. On that Friday evening, Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was joined by his cabinet ministers, state officials, the Jakartan diplomatic community, journalists, cast members, and his own family to watch the Islamic-themed blockbuster film Ayat-Ayat Cinta (Verses of love, 2008). In the weeks before, the romantic drama about a pious Indonesian student and his female admirers had spread a film-fever across the archipelago never seen before in the history of Indonesian cinema. Attracting a staggering four million Indonesians in the first month, Ayat-Ayat Cinta crushed all previous visitor-records in Indonesia. The Muslim must-see also drew the strictest Muslims to ‘the secular spaces’ of cinemas and malls, spaces they generally like to avoid (Nurhayati, The Jakarta Post 2008). It seemed as if nobody could escape the Ayat-Ayat Cinta fever. Viewers even declared “if you did not cry when you saw the film, then there must be something wrong with you as a Muslim.” (Widodo 2008)

After watching the film, Yudhoyono admitted that he too had to wipe away tears and that he felt the film set a good example of “how Indonesians should struggle to show the true face of Islam to the world, i.e. as a religion of peace, harmony and tolerance.” (Indonesia Matters 2008) The president also stated that he was proud of the Indonesian film industry and that he believed that it could continue to thrive in the future. As it turned out, with this last statement Yudhoyono was not far from what would soon thereafter happen to the Indonesian film industry. In retrospect, Ayat-Ayat Cinta was the film that opened the cinematic floodgates for the portrayal of Islamic lifestyles and issues in popular film, thereby giving the domestic film industry a new impulse.
Ayat-Ayat Cinta set off a wave of Islamic-themed films (The Jakarta Globe 2011). Films with titles like Ketika Cinta Bertasbih (When love is glorified by God, 2009), Perempuan Berkalung Sorban (The woman with a turban, 2009), 3 Doa, 3 Cinta (Three prayers, three loves, 2009), Sang Pencerah (The enlightener, 2010), and Di Bawah Lindungan Ka’bah (Under the protection of Ka’bah, 2011) were released and have often beaten Hollywood productions in the Indonesian box-office. Before Ayat-Ayat Cinta’s success, only few Islamic-themed films were made. Among them were Al-Kautsar (1977), Titian serambut dibelah tujuh (1982), and Nada dan dakwah (1991). As I pointed out in the introduction of this dissertation, cultural expressions of Islam in popular culture were long suppressed during Suharto’s rule. Katinka van Heeren (2007) however asserts that during the New Order religious elements were present in the horror and supernatural film genre. In this genre, Islam was often personified by the kyai (teacher of Islam) who exorcized all evil and restored moral order (Van Heeren 2007: 213).

The recent emergence of Islamic-themed films reflects the increasing prominence of Islam in the cultural landscape of post-authoritarian Indonesia. The rise of what in popular discourse is often called film Islami (‘Islamic film’), has not escaped controversy. Ekky Imanjaya (2009) explains how the undertaking of film Islami has been rejected by cultural critics and Islamic groups. Lukman Hakim, an intellectual and well-known blogger belonging to the conservative Salafi School, for instance stated: “buying a ticket to watch a movie like Ayat-Ayat Cinta is like buying a ticket to hell.” (Hakim, cited in Imanjaya 2009) For him, “watching movies is a useless and pointless activity that takes place in an environment of ikhtilat, a space where boys and girls mingle.” (Hakim, cited in Imanjaya 2009)

Ariel Heryanto (2011) has pointed out that many cultural critics now also admit to “the diverse motivations, meanings, and intentions involved in what may appear to be a common pattern of consumerist passion” and that they acknowledge “the pleasure of displaying both wealth and piety among contemporary urban-based young and educated Muslims in Indonesia” (Heryanto 2011: 61).

In response to the controversy, filmmakers and cultural organizations have also expressed their views on combining film and Islam. The independent organisation MAV-NET (Morality Audio Visual Network), for instance claims that Muslim filmmakers should make films that avoid the violation of the Islamic law (Imanjaya 2009). To facilitate such filmmaking, the network actively tries to find ways around problems that could surface during filming. A scene showing intimacy between a husband and wife could for example be troubling if the actors are not married in real life. Following Ustadz Abu Ridho from the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), MAV-NET
advises that such a scene is acceptable as long as the focus is on Islamic virtues (Imanjaya 2009). As Fendy Purohito of the independent Yogyakarta-based production company Mata Productions explains, many filmmakers have found ways to work around sensitive issues. According to him, most filmmakers rely on the audience’s knowledge of cinematic conventions. “A love affair between two characters does not have to be shown through kissing, but can also be suggested through the exchange of love-struck looks.” (conversation with author, July 2010)

More liberal Muslim directors see things yet differently. Deddy Mizwar (Ketika Cinta Bertasbih), for example, claims that it is a filmmaker’s duty to expand the language of film in new and creative ways. Mizwar believes that syariah (Islamic law) and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) should not hinder filmmakers, but could open up creative spaces in the search for alternative idioms and forms of storytelling (Imanjaya 2009). For him, showing an unmarried couple hugging to express their feelings for each other is just another cinematic cliché. Instead Mizwar opts for a more poetic alternative by having the male character in Para Pencari Tuhan address his love interest with the words: “If syariah allows it, I will purify myself in the water of your tears.” (Imanjaya 2009)

Despite these creative alternatives, Islamic-themed cinema remains a catalyst for debate. And nothing appeals more to commentators than the content of these films, i.e. the stories they tell, the characters they create, and the issues they put forward. In this context, particularly portrayals of Muslim femininity and masculinity have figured prominently in wider public debates. As Sonja van Wichelen (2010) points out, representations of gender have in the past few years stirred national debates about polygamy, the position of women in Islam, sexuality, and domestic violence (cf. Van Wichelen 2010: 235; Hoesterey 2013). The film Berbagi Suami (2006) has for instance helped people to publicly assess polygamy, thereby challenging the taboo on talking about the subject (Van Wichelen 2010: 235).

I would like to stress here that the post-New Order representations of gender need to be seen in the light of Indonesia’s recent history. During Suharto’s New Order (1966-1998), representations of masculinity and femininity were part of the regime’s national project, and as such served a national function. Media products frequently contained ‘messages’ from the government. As Sita Aripurnami (1996), Saraswati Sunindyo (1993; 1998), and Suzanne Brenner (1999) show, these messages often had a strong gender implication. They linked good citizenship for women to good domestic qualities, thereby creating highly stereotypical images of women (Brenner 1999: 15).

In her study of gender discourses in New Order TVRI television programs,
Sunindyo (1993) provides an example. She cites the ‘Panca Dharma Wanita’, the five duties of women that were repeatedly propagated through state-run women’s organizations. According to these, “a wife’s role is to support her husband, provide offspring, care for the children, be a good housekeeper, and be the guardian of the community” (Sunindyo 1993: 135). The impact of these precepts was enhanced by media, which functioned as part of the state’s ideological apparatus (Sunindyo 1993: 134; Brenner 1999: 15). Consequently, media portrayals of women during the New Order showed them mostly in the domestic sphere, catering to their husbands and taking care of the children. And while it is hard to document the impact of the state’s gender ideologies on media and other social domains, there is a broad agreement among scholars that the New Order state’s policies had a marked influence on public discourses surrounding gender (Brenner 1999: 15).

The fall of the New Order regime in 1998 opened up a space for identity politics and for a critical attitude toward New Order gender stereotypes, although regulation and (self)censorship continue to exist today. The newly liberalized cultural scene nevertheless provides ample opportunities for the creative industry to construct different representations of gender and to tackle issues that are considered to be taboo.

This raises the question how today’s post-New Order representations of gender compare to their New Order counterparts. How are representations of Muslim masculinity and femininity in post New Order Islamic-themed cinema constructed? How do these constructions negotiate ‘sensitive’ topics like polygamy, sexuality, and (domestic) violence? And do these constructions also serve a specific national function?


In the previous chapter, I explored how self-help books mobilize governmental tactics to promote and construct specific modern Islamic citizen-subjects that are fit to participate in Indonesian Islamic modernities. In this chapter, I look at the three films to explore how this process is gendered. I do so by drawing on Michel Foucault’s (1975-1976; 2003) notion of ‘biopolitics’. For Foucault, biopolitics refers to a particular modern notion of governmental reason in which bodies, life, and biological processes move to the heart of political struggle (Lazzarato 2002: 99).
Whereas in the previous chapter, I drew on a more general notion of
governmentality as a range of forms of action aimed in a complex way at steering
individuals and collectives, I here focus on a particular mode of governmentality that
aims to govern a population through seeking control over bodies and biological
processes. Since ‘a politics of the gendered (Muslim) body’, ideal images of Muslim
femininity and masculinity, issues of reproduction, and related to that, questions of
motherhood and fatherhood, are central to the negotiation of ‘sensitive issues’ in
*Berbagi Suami, Virgin*, and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, analyzing them through the prism of
biopolitics can provide insight in the ways in which Islamic governmentality is
gendered. Through the analysis, I propose that the sensitivities portrayed in these
films are closely linked to anxieties that come with processes of modernization, and
that it is through the representation of gender that modernity is negotiated. In this
way, post-New Order representations of masculinity and femininity obtain their own
national function; they negotiate ‘right’ male and female modern identities in an era
of modernization.

This study of post-New Order representations contributes to a growing body of
work that is concerned with gender relations in post-authoritarian Indonesia (cf.
Most of this research has concentrated on the realities of women. Tom Boellstorff
(2005; 2007), Sharyn Davies (2010), and Dede Oetomo (2000) have nevertheless
done extensive work on other genders and sexualities in Indonesia (e.g. gay, lesbi,
waria, bissu). Significantly less attention has been paid to heterosexual masculinities
(but see Paramaditha 2007; Clark 2004; Hoesterey and Clark 2013). As Lyn Parker
(2008) notes in her study of adolescent sexuality in Indonesia: “at present we have
the rather bizarre situation that we seem to have more explicit and sophisticated
work on alternative sexualities than we do on hegemonic heterosexuality” (Parker
2008: 4, cited in Clark and Hoesterey 2013: 4). By studying heterosexual Muslim
masculinity and femininity, this chapter aims to bring more balance into the
discussion of gender in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Also, by exploring how ideas about manhood and womanhood serve a national
function, I formulate a critique on a number of theoretical treatments that are
concerned with ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’, but that have ignored gender (e.g.
Gellner 2008; Greenfeld 1992; Hobsbawn 2012; Anderson 1983; 2006). Simultaneously, I will look critically at theories that share a concern with bringing the
notions of ‘gender’ and ‘nation’ together, but that have largely ignored masculinity
(e.g. Yuval-Davis 1997; De Mel 2001). Finally, this chapter problematizes the much
celebrated identity politics that the fall of the New Order regime has brought about.
I suggest that the contestatory force of stereotype-defying representations of gender is thrown into question by the ways these representations become subject to biopolitical governance. Their instrumentality to this kind of governance marks the emergence of ‘new’ representations of gender highly contradictory.

The ways in which identity politics are here encapsulated by a governmental project also raises questions about the practice of critical politics. How to resist when identity politics become subject to (biopolitical) governance? Are identity politics a useful tactic of contesting structures of power? What strategies for politics does Islamic-themed popular and visual culture offer? How can Muslims practice identity politics? What forms can contestations take? I will engage with these questions in the conclusion of this chapter.

**Islamic-themed cinema: notes on selecting case studies**

To investigate representations of femininity and masculinity, I take three Islamic-themed films as objects of analysis: *Berbagi Suami* (2006), *Virgin* (2004), and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2008). *Berbagi Suami* tells the stories of three women who live in polygamous marriages in the city of Jakarta. Indonesia’s capital city also provides the backdrop for *Virgin*, which follows three girls as they explore both the city and their sexuality. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* is a love story about the pious male student Fahri and his three female admirers.

While *Berbagi Suami* and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* are considered to be *film Islami* (‘Islamic films’), *Virgin* is not immediately typified as such. It nevertheless features significant Islamic themes, characters, and storylines. I would like to underscore here that to investigate representations of Muslim femininity and masculinity, one does not necessarily has to focus on *film Islami* exclusively, but can also investigate other (Islamic-themed) films. To explain my point of view, I will first expand on what *film Islami* is understood to be.

*Film Islami* is a term that in post-New Order popular discourse has been used to refer to films that bernafaskan Islam (films that ‘breath Islam’). In recent years, several scholars have tried to understand *film Islami* as a specific film genre. Here, they have paid particular attention to unpacking what the adjective *Islami* means in the context of film. Hence, what makes films ‘Islamic’? What makes them ‘breath Islam’?

According to Eric Sasono (2013), the adjective *Islami* cannot be traced back to the films’ directors or producers. Indeed a small number of respected Muslim directors is particularly prominent in making *film Islami*, e.g. Hanung Bramantyo (*Ayat-Ayat*
Cinta, Perempuan Berkalung Sorban, Sang Pencerah, Tanda Tanya, Doa Yang Mengacak), Chaerul Umam (Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1 and 2), and Nurman Hakim (Khalifah, 3 Doa, 3 Cinta) (Sasono 2013: 48-50). These filmmakers however emerge – like most producers, actors and crewmembers of film Islami – from a secular film industry rather than from Muslims groups. In addition, some of them are not even Muslim themselves. The producers of Ayat-Ayat Cinta – the Indian father and son Dhamoo and Manoj Punjabi from MD Pictures – are for instance Hindus and not Muslims. In a similar vein, Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1 and 2 (2008, 2009) and Dalam Mihrab Cinta (2010) were produced by Sinemart, the production company owned by the Catholic Chinese businessman, Leo Sutanto (Hoesterey and Clark 2013: 16).

Because the personal backgrounds of filmmakers and producers do not function as an organizing principle for film Islami, most scholars have used a definitional approach to understand film Islami as a genre (Mittell 2004: 2-3). They have tried to identify the core elements of film Islami by looking at a number of different texts. In his study of Islamic (electronic) films, Muzayin Nazaruddin (2008) for instance found that Islamic films have three recurring features. First, they use Islamic symbols. Characters wear Islamic attire and titles of films refer to Islamic idioms, e.g. Pintu Hidayah (The guidance way) or Rahasia Ilahi (Divine secret). Second, the (electronic) films are adaptations from religious books. The films often draw on stories from Muslim novelists (e.g. Habiburrahman El Shirazy) or even use the hadith as a source. And third, the figure of the Islamic cleric has a central role. In the films, clerics represent (male) Islamic authority and give moral advice to other characters (Nazaruddin 2008, paraphrased in Hakim 2010: 109-110).

While usefully pointing at the textual features of a number of films, these kinds of conceptions of film Islami ignore the idea that genres do not emerge exclusively from texts. As Jason Mittell (2004) has emphasized, genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not (only) found within media texts, but that operates across the cultural realms of media industries, policy, critics, audiences, and historical contexts (Mittell 2004: xii). Rather than developing from texts, genres work to link texts into clusters of cultural assumptions through discourses of definition, interpretation, and evaluation.

Therefore, the discursive utterances of critics, producers, and marketers who are calling certain films film Islami or say they bernafaskan Islam (‘breath Islam’) may seem to reflect on an already established genre, but they are themselves constitutive of the genre. They are practices that define genres, delimit their meanings, and posit their cultural value (Mittell 2004: xii). Defining films as film
Islam is then not only a tactic of branding and a smart way of targeting Indonesia’s large Muslim market, but it is also a way of demarcating a genre.

Indonesian audiences too are constitutive of the adjective Islami. Film Islami is especially remarkable in its capacity attract Muslims to the cinemas. As James Hoesterey and Marshall Clark (2013) argue, film Islami articulates forms of aspirational piety that particularly resonates with the anxieties, desires, and frustrations of middle-class Muslim audiences in Indonesia, who consume these films in large numbers (Hoesterey and Clark 2013: 2). This does not mean that film Islami speaks only to Muslim audiences, as non-Muslims can also enjoy the films’ universal themes of love, friendship, and family. Finally, the adjective Islami needs to be understood in the context of the long suppression of Islam during Suharto’s rule. Calling films Islami is an affirmative act; it is an act that carves out a new space in Indonesia’s cultural scape for Muslim issues and identity politics.

Although symptomatic for the post-New Order boom in Islamic popular culture, film Islami is not automatically better suited to study representations of Muslim masculinity and femininity than other Islamic-themed films. Films like Laskar Pelangi (Rainbow Militia, 2008), Rindu Kami padaMu (Our Longing for You, 2004), and Virgin (2004) are not considered to be examples of film Islami, but they are still full of Islamic values and representations of Muslim society. As Imanjaya (2009) asserts, film critics would even argue that sometimes these films are more ‘representative’ of Islam in Indonesian society than works that are considered film Islami (Imanjaya 2009).

For this reason, the label ‘film Islami’ was not a prerequisite for including films in my corpus. Rather, I selected films that feature significant Islamic themes, storylines, characters, and values. I particularly selected Berbagi Suami (2006), Virgin (2004), and Ayat-Ayat Cinta (2008) as case studies for two reasons.

First, these three films engage with different ‘sensitive’ topics. Berbagi Suami deals with polygamy, Virgin confronts teen sexuality, and Ayat-Ayat Cinta confronts (domestic) violence and the position of women in Islam. Exploring how the three films represent these topics helps to provide insight in the ways in which contemporary cinema positions itself in the post-authoritarian cultural scene. A study of these films allows me to look critically at the post-authoritarian cultural scene. This cultural scene has often been (uncritically) celebrated as liberalized and as providing space for identity politics (Widodo 2008). This view is understandable after more than three decades of state-dominated media, censorship, and fears of publicly expressing one’s beliefs and identity. But how ‘liberal’ is this scene? How does it for instance deal with issues that are considered taboos? An analysis of Berbagi Suami,
Virgin, and Ayat-Ayat Cinta enables me to look at these questions through the prism of film.

Second, I selected particularly these three films because they show a range of different femininities and masculinities. While Virgin deals with teenage sexuality, Ayat-Ayat Cinta explores gender related issues that young adults encounter, and the storyline of Berbagi Suami that I will analyze follows a middle aged couple. A comparison across age is particularly relevant considering that in public discourse it is often Indonesia’s next generation of young Muslims whose gender and sexuality is under intense scrutiny.

I pay attention to both masculinity and femininity. As Ayat-Ayat Cinta features a male character in a leading role, the analysis of this film is skewed towards masculinity. I particularly focus on Ayat-Ayat Cinta since the kind masculinity the film portrays seems to have inspired, or is at least part of, a larger trend in Indonesian Islamic-themed cinema in which a gentle Muslim masculinity is linked to piety. Hamid in Di Bawah Lindungan Ka’bah (2011) and Khairul Azzam in Ketika Cinta Bertasbih (2000) are other examples of this trend.

Similarly, since Berbagi Suami and Virgin feature female characters in leading roles, the analyses of these films will focus on femininity. I specifically choose to focus on these two films as both feature a variant of ‘the modern woman’ in a leading role. ‘The modern woman’ is a representation that blatantly defies the proper behavior of the ideal New Order woman (cf. Brenner 1999: 20) and that is symptomatic for a more liberal post-authoritarian cultural scene. While Berbagi Suami features the figure of the wanita karier (career woman) as a modern woman, Virgin casts ‘wild girls’ (promiscuous girls) as modern women. Both the figures of the ‘educated working woman’ and the ‘wild girl’ mark a break with the New Order stereotype of the ‘caring housewife’. They signify a shift in the representation of women from the passive, dependent New Order woman who serves her husband to a more independent woman, who does not need her husband’s financial support and/or enjoys sexual freedom. As I will show in the analysis, this shift is rendered contradictory when considering how representations of gender become subject to biopolitical governance and obtain a specific national function.

**Gender, nation and biopolitics**

To study how the representations of gender obtain a national function, I draw on Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. Foucault first elaborated his ideas on biopolitics in
the lecture series ‘Society Must Be Defended’ (2003 [1975-1976]), ‘Security,
1979]), which he gave at the Collège de France. In these lecture series, Foucault
viewed ‘biopolitics’ as a particular modern notion of governmental reason. As I
explain in the following, for Foucault, biopolitics refers to the way modern states
regulate populations through seeking control over bodies and biological processes.

In ‘Society Must Be Defended’ (2003 [1976]), Foucault describes how biopolitics
departs from traditional modes of power. It specifically departs from sovereign and
disciplinary power, which characterized the epochs that preceded the modern
industrial era. Importantly, biopolitics does not replace these preceding modes of
powers, but superimposes them.

In a sovereign society – where people obey to the laws of a monarch or central
authority figure – “the right to ‘take’ life or ‘let’ live” defines power (Foucault 2003
[1976]: 241). In the classical theory of sovereignty, the right of life and death was
one of sovereignty’s basic attributes. The sovereign can grant life in the same way
that he can inflict death. However, as Foucault explains, the balance is always tipped
in favor of death (240). Sovereign power’s effect on life is only exercised when the
sovereign can kill. It is at the moment when the sovereign can kill that he exercises
his right and obtains power over life (240-241).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries disciplinary power emerges and
gradually takes over from sovereign power. The techniques of disciplinary power
were focused on the individual body and included practices that ensured “the
spatial distribution of individual bodies (their separation, alignment, serialization)
and the organization, around those individuals, of a whole field of visibility.” (242)
These mechanisms attempted to exercise or to drill individual bodies with the aim of
increasing their productive force (Ibidem).

Then, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Foucault witnesses the
emergence of yet a new form of power: biopower. Foucault writes of its emergence:

It is as though power, which used to have sovereignty as its modality or organizing
schema, found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that
was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization. So much so that far
too many things were escaping the old mechanism of the power of sovereignty, both at
the top and at the bottom, both at the level of detail and at the mass level. A first
adjustment was made to take care of the details. Discipline had meant adjusting power
mechanisms to the individual body by using surveillance and training. […] And then at
the end of the eighteenth century, you have a second adjustment; the mechanisms are
adjusted to phenomena of population, to the biological [...] processes characteristic of human masses. (249-250)

Foucault describes this second adjustment as the ‘biopolitics of the human race’ (243). Importantly, biopolitics does not exclude disciplinary power, but “dovetail[s] it into it, integrate[s] it, modifi[es] it [...], and above all, use[s] it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques.” (242) Hence, biopolitics does not do away with disciplinary techniques, but “exists on a different level, on a different scale, and it makes use of very different instruments.” (242) In contrast to disciplinary power, which focuses on individual bodies, biopower is applied not to man-as-body, but to man-as-living-being, to man-as-species. As Foucault writes:

The new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on (242-243).

Hence, the purpose of biopolitics is to intervene at the level of life. Life expectancy has to be increased, birth rate has to be stimulated and mortality has to be lowered. Biopolitics is not about ‘taking’ life or ‘letting’ live, but about ‘making’ live and ‘letting’ die (241). It aims to optimize the state of life and installs security mechanisms around random elements inherent to a population. It thereby tries to control the series of random events that occur in a living mass by predicting the probability of these events and by compensating for their effects. In this way, a population is not disciplined, but regularized (246).

From the end of the eighteenth century onward there are thus two technologies of power – one disciplinary, one regulatory. These modes of power were established at different times and were superimposed. Both technologies are obviously technologies of the body, but one is a technology in which the body is individualized as an organism endowed with capacities, while the other is a technology in which the body is massified to regulate the population as a whole (249). Because these two sets of mechanisms do not exist at the same level, they are not mutually exclusive and can be articulated together (250). This power is not centralized in state apparatuses, but is fragmented through society, across the entirety of social relations.

In this chapter, I address how media, and in particular film, articulates this form of power. I suggest that through their representations of gender, the selected films are
engaged in biopolitical governance. More specifically, their portrayals of masculinity and femininity revolve around both the pole of discipline and around the pole of regulatory control. The films seek to discipline male and female bodies in a way that secures, governs, and controls a larger future modern Indonesian nation and that protects the – quality of – life within this nation. As a result of these practices, gendered bodies are subjugated to a larger national project that revolves around the (desired) modernization of the Indonesian nation.

This chapter is then centrally concerned with the notions of gender and nation. My understanding of gender follows Judith Butler’s idea that gender is culturally constructed (Butler 1990: viii-ix), while my understanding of nation follows Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation as “an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both limited and sovereign” (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 6). Both notions are useful to this study as they are culturally and historically specific, which enables me to embed the analysis in the context of contemporary Indonesia.

Anderson’s (2006 [1983]) seminal work on imagined communities has, like other prominent theorizations of nations and nationalism (e.g. Hobsbawn 2012; Gellner 2008; Greenfeld 1992), ignored gender as irrelevant. As Nira-Yuval Davis (1997) asserts, this is most remarkable, especially when realizing that a major school of scholars, ‘the primordialists’ (e.g. Geertz 1963; Shils 1957; Isaacs 1975), has viewed the nation as a natural phenomenon that is an automatic extension of kinship relations (Yuval-Davis 1997: 1). And yet, when discussing issues of ‘national production’, prominent studies of nations and nationalisms do not relate to women or gender, but instead prefer to emphasize the role of intellectuals and state bureaucrats in the production of the nation (1-2).

Carole Pateman (1988) explains why gender has been conspicuously absent from theorizations of national production. She points at classical theories of ‘the social contract’, which divide civil society into a public and a private domain. These theories locate women and the family in the private domain, which is not seen as politically relevant for national processes (Pateman 1988: 4, paraphrased in Yuval-Davis 1997: 2). And since these theories have been widely influential, gender has been largely absent from theorizations of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997: 2).

The work of Partha Chatterjee (1990) forms an important exception to “gender-blind theorizations” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 4) of nations and nationalisms. He points out that we need to see the production of the nation as a gendered process. In ‘The National Resolution of the Women’s Question’ (1990), Chatterjee shows how national production is gendered. He observes that in colonial India the issue of female emancipation disappears from the public agenda right at the moment when
the national movement emerges. According to Chatterjee, this is no coincidence. During the national struggle, issues relating to women were to be looked upon as internal matters, which had to be resolved without the interference of the British colonial rule (Chatterjee 1990: 240; Taneja 2005: 36). As Chatterjee writes:

In the entire phase of national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of national culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the colonizer must be allowed in that inner sanctum. In the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity, at home they were tantamount to the annihilation of one’s very identity. (240)

Indian nationalist ideology thus locates the assumed core of national culture in the space of the home. For Indian nationalism, the home is the domain of the woman, while the outside world is the domain of the man. As Chatterjee continues:

The world is external, the domain of the material; the home represents […] our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. (Chatterjee: 238-239)

By framing ‘the home’ as the space that must prevent ‘the nation’s true identity’ from crumbling under foreign forces, and by assigning the domain of the home exclusively to women, the weight of safeguarding the nation is placed on their shoulders.

Chatterjee’s example shows how ideas about womanhood and manhood thus play an important role in the production of nations. Other authors have – in different national contexts – observed similar processes. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) for instance notes how in Israel, the construction of nationhood brings with it specific notions of gender. Yuval-Davis describes how women produce the nation biologically, symbolically, and culturally (Yuval-Davis 1997: 21-23). Similarly, Neloufer de Mel (2001) describes how in Sri Lanka a nationalist discourse is produced that:

renders the male as the author and subject of the nation, while the female stands for the nation itself, in need of male protection, [she is] the reproducer and nurturer of future generations and the transmitter of cultural values. As reproducer she carries the responsibility of avoiding miscegenation to ensure ethnic, class, caste or racial purity. Her sexuality has to be policed and regulated to this end in the service of the nation. (2-3)
In this discourse, women are thus cast as instrumental to the ‘health’ of the nation. Through biopolitical practices that seek to regulate their sexuality, their mobility, and their motherhood, women are kept at the boundaries of the nation. And although in Sri Lanka – as well as in other postcolonial contexts – nationalism has been commensurate with the rise of women’s movements and the construction of ‘the modern woman’ through reforms that encompass education and marriage laws, it is often through these reforms that women are controlled (cf. De Mel 2001: 2).

In the context of Indonesia, Saskia Wieringa (2003) has shown how the New Order state has, for over thirty years, waged a war of sexual imagining against the communist party’s (PKI) women’s movement Gerwani. During the New Order, the government continuously posed itself against ‘the communist whores’ by launching a campaign that depicted the army under General Suharto as the virile saviors of a nation on the brink of destruction (Wieringa 2003: 70). As Wieringa writes: “their wrath seemed specifically aimed at women who had breached the kodrat wanita (women’s moral code), a [New Order] ideology that suggested women should be meek, submissive, and politically passive” (Wieringa 2003: 70). Through portraying communist women as disobedient and sexually aggressive, the New Order state could delineate and promote its own models of femininity that were to sustain New Order ideals of discipline and order.

By showing how discourses of gender serve a national function in post-authoritarian Indonesia, this chapter articulates a critique of gender-blind theorizations of the nation. Simultaneously, my study contributes to the existing body of work that has been concerned with bringing the notions of gender and nation together (e.g. Chatterjee 1990; De Mel 2001; Yuval Davis 1997; Sharp 1996; Kandiyoti 1991; Boehmer 2005; Geiger 1997). The national projects that these authors have studied – the works of Chatterjee, De Mel, Yuval-Davis, and Wieringa here form a case in point – often assign a central role to women. Consequently, masculinity, and specifically of non-military and non-violent masculinity, has often been ignored (but see Nagel 1998; Banerjee 2012; Lambevski 1999).

The present case study of contemporary Indonesia interferes here. The analysis of the representations of gender in post-New Order films demonstrates how not only women, but also men, become subject to biopolitical regulation. In Indonesia both men and women are imagined to be part of a national project that revolves around the (desired) modernization of the Indonesian nation. I propose that the ways in which these ‘national subjects’ are envisioned both confirms and contests the
dualistic view that sees men as the authors of the nation while women stand for the nation itself.

_**Berbagi Suami**: polygamy and the struggle of the modern woman_

*Berbagi Suami* (Love for Share, 2006) is the second fiction film by Nia Dinata, a feminist artist and director. Dinata is known for her explicit use of the medium ‘film’ to practice affirmative identity politics. Her debut film, *Arisan!* (2003), was the first Indonesian film to show a gay couple kissing on the big screen. In *Berbagi Suami*, Dinata tackles the ‘issue’ of polygamy. The film was well received and won several prices in the international film festival circuit. It was also sent to the 79th Academy Awards as Indonesia’s official submission, but was not shortlisted.

Polygamy, the right for a Muslim man to marry more than one woman, has long been a subject of debate in Indonesia (Van Wichelen 2010: 187). President Suharto, who promoted the conjugal couple and the nuclear family, had legally restricted the practice of polygamy (189), thereby temporarily silencing Muslim groups who advocated the practice. The fall of Suharto’s regime re-opened the discussion about the controversial topic. And when in 2003 the polygamous entrepreneur Puspo Wardoyo set up the ‘Polygamy Awards’ – to be rewarded to men who were regarded to have successful polygamous marriages – a nationwide debate came into effect with arguments against and in favor of polygamy. This debate intensified when in 2006 the popular celebrity preacher AA Gym announced his polygamous marriage. Arguments in favor of polygamy included the idea that men practice polygamy because of their biological sexual drive, and the idea that polygamy protects the nation from social ills. In this latter reasoning, men shoulder to the ‘heroic’ burden of saving women from poverty. Arguments against polygamy included the idea that polygamy is detrimental to the freedom and health of women and children, and the idea that polygamy discredits the harmony of the family (188).

Through this debate, polygamy-endorsing and polygamy-discouraging images and narratives entered public discourse. Gradually the taboo on polygamy was lifting, replacing silence with openness and allowing a variety of discourses about polygamy to be heard.

The film *Berbagi Suami* participates in this public discussion about polygamy. *Berbagi Suami* follows, in three separate stories, three women who are dealing with polygamy. I focus on the story of Salma. Salma (Jajang C. Noer) is a middle class *wanita karier* (educated working woman) who discovers that her husband has
secretly married four other women. Salma works as a gynecologist in a clinic where she monitors pregnant women and conducts research. Her husband, Ali Rohim (El Manik), is a politician and bears the title ‘Pak Haji’, which indicates that he has gone through pilgrimage in Mecca. Together they have a son, Nadim (Winky Wiryawan), who at the beginning of the film is a young child and at the end of the film is a young adult. I particularly zoom in on the story of Salma, as her middle-class background and her professional status allow me to investigate the representation of ‘the modern woman’. The other two stories, one about a lower-class couple and one about a Chinese-Indonesian woman, however also provide rich material for analysis.

In the following analysis, I propose that through the story of Salma, Berbagi Suami constructs a highly critical discourse about polygamy. This discourse views polygamy as an unjust and perilous practice. This critical discourse may at first – especially for those who see polygamy as detrimental to women – seem very progressive. It is however highly contradictory. In Berbagi Suami polygamy is framed as a challenge for women to overcome. The film suggests that even in an extremely painful situation, like a polygamous marriage, women should put their family – and not their own happiness – first. Through articulating this discourse, Berbagi Suami offers women an ‘right modern’ subject position in which her role as a mother and her role as citizen of the nation are linked together.

The discourse that is critical of polygamy is constructed through three sub-discourses. In these discourses, polygamy is considered to be (1) detrimental to the unity of the family, (2) hurtful to women, and (3) destructive to men themselves. These discourses are in Berbagi Suami constructed through different narrative and audiovisual techniques.

Through the use of sound, editing and framing, Berbagi Suami’s opening scene straightaway articulates the discourse that polygamy threatens the unity of the family. In the opening scene, Salma discovers to her surprise that her husband has married a second wife. We see Salma and her husband Pak Haji at a fundraiser party, where Pak Haji is a guest of honor. Salma and Pak Haji are introduced to the viewer in a two-shot (Figure 1). They are listening to a band that is playing and they are enjoying each other’s company: we see them chatting, happily smiling, and affectionately touching each other. The shots of Salma and Pak Haji signify a harmony and balance between husband and wife. This balance is disrupted when a woman and her daughter join their table. As Figure 2 shows, the woman literally comes to stand in between Salma and Pak Haji, thereby breaking up their two-shot (Figure 2). This signals a first interruption of Salma and Pak Haji’s unity.
A second and much stronger interruption of the couple’s unity takes place when the woman – unaware of the fact that Salma does not know of her existence – introduces herself as Indri, and her daughter as Icha. Salma listens politely to Indri’s introduction (Figure 3). When Icha addresses Pak Haji as “daddy!” Salma realizes that her husband has secretly married a second wife, and that Icha is their child. Precisely at the moment that Salma discovers this, *Berbagi Suami* cuts from a shot of Salma’s face (Figure 3) to a black screen (Figure 4) while all sound is muted. After the screen remains black for a few seconds, we return to the scene. It appears that the venue suffered from a power failure. Significantly, when the lights flash back on, we see Pak Haji holding his daughter, while Salma has been pushed to the border of the frame (Figure 5).

---

Figure 1: Two-shot of Salma and Pak Haji at a fundraiser party

Figure 2: Indri and her daughter join Salma and Pak Haji
Figure 3: Salma listens politely to Indri’s introduction

Figure 4: Insert of a black screen

Figure 5: Salma looks at her ‘new’ family and has herself been pushed to its borders
The black-screen interruption generates a threefold meaning. First, it signifies the cut that has just been made in Salma’s family by the polygamous marriage, while also pointing at the disruption of the harmony between Salma and Pak Haji. Second, the black screen expresses Salma’s mental state, i.e. her shock reaction to the discovery of the polygamous marriage. The insert of the black screen suggests that Salma is for a moment disconnected from her surroundings; that for a few seconds everything has turned black before her eyes. And when Salma ‘comes back’, she is faced with the harsh reality that there is a new woman and a new child in her life, and that she has moved from a central position in the family (Figure 1) to its border (Figure 5). It is from that position that she is now forced to watch a new family enter into her old family. Finally, the insert of the black screen breaks up the unity and the flow of the film itself. This not only points to the breakup of the unity of the characters onscreen, but it also distances the viewer from the film for a moment, before pulling the viewer back in again. By doing this, *Berbagi Suami* aligns the experience of the viewer with Salma’s experience of temporary alienation.

The opening scene puts forward the issue with which Salma has to deal in the rest of the film. In the remainder of the film, Salma’s struggle to keep the family together is shown. *Berbagi Suami* stresses that this struggle is painful and difficult. The film constructs a discourse that polygamy is hurtful to women, but that they have to hold on for the sake of the family. In *Berbagi Suami*, this discourse is constructed through at least two patterns. I will elaborate each in the following.

In *Berbagi Suami*, the use of setting, light, framing, and composition repeatedly suggests that Salma is trapped in, and confined by, the polygamous marriage. Moreover, it is suggested that in this marriage Salma is subjected to the will and wishes of her husband. Illustrating this pattern is the scene where Salma and Pak Haji come home after the fundraiser party. After the shock discovery at the fundraiser Salma remains composed. However upon their arrival home, Salma rushes into the bathroom, locks herself up, and starts crying. When Pak Haji manages to open the door, they have an argument about his polygamous practices. The setting, lighting, framing, and dialogue of this scene construct Salma’s confinement and her lack of power in the polygamous marriage. As Figure 6 shows, the bathroom in which Salma locks herself up is a rather dark closed off space. The impression is created that the only light in the room is the light that falls through the venetian blinds (Figure 7). The blinds, which create a barred space, construct Salma’s imprisonment; they highlight her entrapment. Simultaneously, the blinds create the impression that it is darker and more claustrophobic inside the room, in which the characters are confined, than it is outside. This inside-outside opposition is
significant as we later learn that Salma tries to hide her painful struggle from the outside world. For the outside world, Salma and Pak Haji still perform that they are a happy couple.

Figure 6: Salma and Pak Haji argue in the bathroom

During their conversation, Pak Haji explains that he decided to marry Indri, because by marrying her he would avoid adultery. In the scene, Salma is constructed as subordinate to Pak Haji in several ways. First, Pak Haji is quick to tell Salma that she needs to accept the situation and “throw away all the anger that she holds against him”. The dialogue thus makes clear that Salma is rather powerless in this situation.

Simultaneously, Salma is ‘cornered’ through various visual strategies. While they are arguing, Salma is positioned in the corner of the room, and often in the corner of the screen (Figure 7). During the full length of the scene, Salma is positioned lower in the frame than Pak Haji (Figures 6-7). Consequently, Pak Haji is constantly looking
down at Salma (Figures 6-7), while Salma has to look up at Pak Haji (Figure 8). In this way, Pak Haji is constructed as a powerful and dominant person. The fact that Salma is crying, looks dishevelled and dressed in a bathrobe, while Pak Haji remains composed and is dressed in a formal shirt, further adds to the impression that he is in control of the argument and the situation, while Salma lacks control and power.

At the same time, Pak Haji is in this scene constructed as an unsympathetic and dodgy character. Chiaroscuro lighting constantly covers half of Pak Haji’s face in shadows (Figure 9). This in contrast to Salma’s face, which is fully lit (Figure 8). This lighting creates the impression that Pak Haji is hiding something. And as it later turns out, Pak Haji has indeed not told the whole truth during their bathroom argument. It later appears that he did not just marry one, but four other wives. Hence, through the setting, framing, lighting, and dialogue this scene (in combination with later events where Salma finds out Pak Haji has lied to her) constructs not only the discourse that polygamy is confining and hurtful to women, but also that men who practice polygamy are untrustworthy.

Figure 8: Salma looks up to Pak Haji

Figure 9: Chiaroscuro lighting covers Pak Haji’s face in shadows during their argument
The pattern in which Salma is trapped in spaces in which she has to obey to the wishes of her husband – no matter how painful this is – recurs several times. Halfway through the film, Pak Haji suffers from a heart attack and becomes bed-ridden. He wants to be treated at Salma’s home. As a result, the other women move into Salma’s place as they all strive to offer attention to the sick man. Until then, Salma has avoided the other women. Seeing them is too painful for her. But now that they moved into her house, Salma cannot escape them anymore. *Berbagi Suami* emphasizes that Salma stays strong for Nadim. As her voice-over sounds: “looking at Nadim and his dedication to his father adds to my drive to care for Pak Haji.”

The situation is about to get even more painful. When Salma heads home to treat Pak Haji – she is after all a doctor – two other wives greet her in front of her own house (Figure 10). When Salma tells them that she has stopped by to treat Pak Haji, the women object and physically block her from walking into her own house. Salma is during this conversation positioned next to a birdcage (Figure 10). The presence of the cage is highlighted through tweeting sounds. As the scene develops, the cage comes to signal Salma’s own confinement. The women tell Salma that they have found an alternative doctor and that Salma is no longer needed. Salma objects, but the women push her back, walk inside and close the door of her house on her (Figure 11). The camera zooms out to a long shot, while slow, sad non-diegetic violin music is played. As figure 12 shows, Salma is again caught in a barred setting. Moreover, she is positioned in between two birdcages, which symbolize Salma’s ‘imprisonment’. Significantly, through this imprisonment, she is not closed in, but shut out, creating an even more agonizing experience for Salma. She is shut out from her own house. In the long shot, the distance – which makes Salma look small,
especially in front of the big house – in combination with the violin music and the shut door emphasizes her loneliness. As her voice-over had earlier commented: “loneliness comes when he [her husband] has to share his time, but I have to be strong for Nadim and looking at his peaceful face gives me the power to go on.” Although the situation is utterly painful, Salma holds on for her son.

Figure 11: The door is closed on Salma

Figure 12: long shot of Salma in front of her own house

The scenes in which Salma is caught in barred spaces and is subjected to the will and wishes of her husband are contrasted with a scene where she finally makes her own decision. Near the end of the film, Salma and Nadim go horse riding and are shown jumping obstacles, a practice that is symbolic for what happens as the scene develops. Figure 13 shows Salma riding a horse, an act that creates the impression that she is in control. The low-angle shot shows the obstacle’s bars in the foreground, while Salma and her horse – who are seen in the background and who
we look up to – have just leapt over the obstacle. This shot suggests that the bars do not trap Salma anymore, but that she literally overcomes them.

And when we subsequently see Salma and Nadim talking in the stables – again a barred space – (Figure 14) it appears that Salma has finally made a decision of her own. In the stables, Salma and Nadim have a disagreement about how Pak Haji has ordered Salma to go on a publicity trip and how Salma never fights the hurtful situation she is in. Nadim objects to Salma’s lack of resistance. The distance between them during their conversation (Figure 14) emphasizes their difference of opinions. Their conversation goes as follows:

Salma: Don’t be upset Nadim, it’s our fate we have to accept it.
Nadim: Fate? Fate is decided by Allah. Mankind has no power to change that. You have a choice. I always thought you were the smartest, most independent woman I’ve ever known.
Salma: Being smart and independent has nothing to do with this.
Nadim: Well, as a doctor you should feel ashamed to go to Aceh with dad’s political entourage.
Salma: Who says that I will do so? I cancelled the trip with your dad.

In this conversation two opposing discourses about polygamy are constructed. On the one hand, polygamy as constructed as a fate one has to undergo, while on the other hand polygamy is constructed as a choice where there is a way out of a painful situation. Nadim finds Salma’s position incompatible with her identity as a modern woman, i.e. as an independent, educated, and smart woman, as a doctor. While Salma and Nadim’s disagreement about polygamy remains unresolved – no discourse is favored – the scene negotiates a midway. Salma’s view on polygamy does not change, but she finally makes her own decision and takes a first step towards improving her condition. The remainder of the scene supports this decision. After telling Nadim that she has decided not to join Pak Haji on his publicity tour, they walk from the barred setting together (Figure 15) into an open space (Figure 16). The open space points at Salma’s self-acquired freedom. The distance between them has disappeared and as Figure 16 shows, Nadim has put his arm around Salma, constructing them as a unity.
Figure 13: Salma jumping obstacles

Figure 14: Salma and Nadim talking in the stables

Figure 15: Salma and Nadim walk away from the stables
Hence, so far I have suggested that through a pattern of spatial confinement, *Berbagi Suami* constructs a discourse in which polygamy is hurtful to women and in which polygamy suppresses women. A second pattern contributes to the construction of this discourse. This pattern not only shows polygamy as hurtful to women, but it also constructs the (public display of) struggle and pain as incompatible with Salma’s (public) identity as a strong and independent ‘modern woman’. In this pattern, the divide between private and public breaks down, which leads people to see Salma’s subordination. As a result, Salma is humiliated and loses face.

A scene in which Salma is at work illustrates this pattern. While Salma is treating a patient, her voice-over sounds: “When fate revealed its absolute power, my life has changed. But I try to act as if nothing has changed, despite all the contradictions. The design of the exterior still has not been changed.” Hence, Salma makes a distinction between her private and her public life. Although Pak Haji’s polygamous marriage has changed her private life, she aims to keep her public life intact, i.e. her life in which she is a well-respected woman, has a career, and has status.

In *Berbagi Suami* the private/public divide however continuously breaks down. During a lunch with her colleagues at the hospital, Salma is paged by Pak Haji and immediately leaves the table to call him. Her colleagues act surprised that she immediately comes to his aid and start gossiping about Salma, saying: “When it comes to her husband she is not that tough. She is only tough at work. By the way, the rumour that her husband has another wife is really true.” While her colleagues are gossiping, we see that Salma overhears their conversation and ashamedly looks away. Despite her attempts to maintain the divide between her private and her
public life, it is breaking down. Moreover, Salma’s subservient reply to Pak Haji’s message and the discovery of her polygamous marriage are here threatening her image as a ‘modern woman’, i.e. as a strong, respected, and tough professional.

A second example of the breakdown of the public/private divide is a scene where Salma heads to Pak Haji’s favourite restaurant to pick up his favourite meal. Salma does everything she can to protect her family, and most important her son. When she notices a crack in the bond between father and son because of her own bitter attitude toward her husband, she tries to repair it. As Salma heads to the restaurant, we hear her voice-over: “apparently my bitterness has caused him [her son] to become a cynical young man. I think it is time to repair the bond. I’ve bought their [her husband and son’s] favorite roasted duck for dinner tonight.” While Salma pays for the duck, she chats with the cashier, who is a family friend. When Salma takes her seat in the car that is waiting for her, she looks out of the window (Figure 17). To her shock she notices that Pak Haji and his second wife are eating in the same restaurant. Sad non-diegetic violin music is played. Simultaneously, we hear Salma’s voice-over: “He’s still busy with the same old face, and ten years are still not enough to completely heal my wound.” Despite the passing of time, the polygamous marriage thus remains painful to Salma.

Figure 17: Salma watches her husband having dinner with his second wife

Salma sadly watches how Pak Haji and Indri walk up to pay for their dinner. The cashier, with whom Salma had just made a conversation, recognizes Pak Haji and realizes he has another wife. She directly gives Salma a surprised look (Figure 18). Salma looks shaken, not only because she feels humiliated, but also because she has been caught in public looking distracted – which contrasts with her normally composed and in-control demeanour and appearance. In response, Salma immediately closes the car window (Figure 19). By closing the window Salma not
only shields herself from the public eye, but closing the window also symbolizes her attempt to restore the divide between public and private, between an outside where she acts strong and composed, and an inside where she lacks control and breaks down. As Salma drives away, she is overwhelmed. Despite the painful situation, she later that evening sits calmly at the table with her husband and Nadim, acting like nothing has happened to not disturb the father-son bonding. Upholding family harmony is for Salma thus of utmost importance.

Figure 18: The cashier finds out about the polygamous marriage and gives Salma a shocked look

The biggest threat to the breakdown of the private/public divide comes from Nadim. At this point in the film, it has become widely known that ‘the politician Pak Haji’ is in a polygamous marriage. Being his first wife, Salma is therefore invited to discuss polygamy on a talk show. Salma is hesitant, but she has little choice: a positive message would be good publicity for Pak Haji. The host and the other guest, a female Muslim professor who is against polygamy, question Salma critically.
When asked if she sees polygamy as a setback for women, Salma answers: “I simply lead my life with the Qur’an as guide. In the Annisa [the Woman] verse the following is written: marry another woman that you like, two, three, four…” Hence, Berbagi Suami stresses that Salma does not only stay in a painful polygamous marriage, because she believes that her son needs a family with a mother and a father, but also because she is a devoted Muslim.

During the broadcast, Salma acts like a ‘happy wife’ and defends herself and her polygamous husband. Salma’s performance of confidence and control does not only serve Pak Haji, but can also be read as an attempt at restoring her public image. Nadim was also asked to appear on the talk show, but refused, as he is angry with his father for hurting his mother. When the host asks Salma what her son thinks about the situation, Salma answers that he is completely fine with it. Nadim, who is watching the live broadcast at home, is stunned by Salma’s comments. When the host asks people at home to call in and respond to the show, Nadim immediately picks up the phone and dials the show’s number. Nadim thus is about to break down the private/public divide and threatens to reveal the truth about Salma’s struggle on live television. When Nadim calls to the studio, the show is interrupted by breaking news: the tsunami has hit Indonesia. The interruption prevents that Salma’s struggle is revealed in the worst way possible: on national television, by her own son. The interruption however also ensures that Salma can – or has to – continue with keeping up appearances, which leads to more painful situations in the remainder of the film.

In Berbagi Suami two patterns thus construct a discourse in which polygamy is hurtful to women: (1) a pattern of ‘imprisonment’ and (2) a pattern in which a public/private divide breaks down or is threatened. This latter pattern does not only construct polygamy as hurtful, but it also constructs the (public display of) struggle and pain as incompatible with Salma’s (public) identity as a strong and independent ‘modern woman’. Berbagi Suami suggests that being a modern woman and being in a position of subordination do not go well together.

Berbagi Suami does not only show polygamy as hurtful to women, but the film also constructs the discourse that polygamy is destructive to men themselves. Berbagi Suami takes a strong stance against polygamy when halfway through the film Pak Haji suffers from a heart attack. It appears that handling four wives was too stressful for him. Over the course of the film, we witness how polygamy transforms Pak Haji from a self-confident and powerful man (Figure 6, 7) into a bed-ridden weak old man who has to rely on others to take care of him (Figure 20).
film Pak Haji dies from heart failure, regretting that he, through practicing polygamy, has made a terrible mess and now pays for it with his life.

It is Nadim who, despite his anger with his father, takes care of Pak Haji on his deathbed. Salma is proud; she apparently has passed her good (family) values on to Nadim. On his deathbed Pak Haji tells Nadim: “Nadim, when you marry, later, promise me, only one wife.” Salma’s voice-over sounds: “those were the most important words for Nadim, right before Pak Haji died. He is not angry anymore.” Pak Haji’s death, and the fact that it was caused by the stress of his polygamous marriages, underlines *Berbagi Suami’s* rejection of polygamy.

Figure 20: Salma and a nurse have to support Pak Haji while he tries to walk

Hence, *Berbagi Suami* constructs a highly critical discourse about polygamy. This discourse views polygamy as an unjust and perilous practice. This discourse is constructed through three sub-discourses. In these discourses, polygamy is considered to be (1) damaging the unity of the family, (2) hurtful to women, and (3) destructive to men themselves. This critical discourse may at first – especially for those who see polygamy as detrimental to women – seem very progressive. It is however highly contradictory. *Berbagi Suami* frames polygamy as a challenge for women to overcome. The film suggests that even in an extremely painful situation, like a polygamous marriage, women should put their family – and not their own happiness – first. The scenes that follow Pak Haji’s death suggest that Salma did the right thing by staying in the polygamous marriage.

After Pak Haji’s funeral, Salma is ‘released’ from her painful situation and is ‘rewarded’ for being a good mother, for keeping her family together and for passing good values on to her son Nadim, as he becomes a ‘national hero’. Nadim becomes
a volunteer for the Red Cross to help people who have been hit by the 2004 tsunami. He has learnt from Salma that it is important to genuinely care about others. In his explanation for volunteering, he blames sensation-seeking Indonesians who do not contribute to society: “I really don’t get it, we are Indonesians, every time we want to help we always just look for media exposure… everybody is lining up to go there [Aceh], religious leaders, movie stars, rock stars… after taking some snapshots of them with the disaster they run back home.” By contrast, Nadim decides to go to Aceh for a longer period of time, so that he can help to rebuild the province. Salma, in her role of being a mother, here thus comes to play an important part in the development of the Indonesian nation. Because she passed on the ‘right’ values to her son he can now actively and genuinely contribute to society.

Salma not only embodies this role as a ‘guardian of the nation’ in her private life, but also in her professional life. After Pak Haji’s death, Salma has to adjust to a life alone. As she puts it: “For the first time, I am leading my life without my son and husband. I have to find a way to give more meaning to my existence.” As it appears, Salma finds happiness and solace in her work. It is also there that she continues her role as a guardian of the Indonesian nation. Salma, in being a gynaecologist who works in a clinic where pregnant women are monitored, has literally made safeguarding the life of women and their unborn children her calling. Her job is to protect the production of Indonesia’s next generation and to secure its health. Now that her son and husband are no longer around, it is this job that, in Salma’s words, “gives meaning to [my] existence.”

*Berbagi Suami* here then constructs a subject position for women, which conflates a woman’s role as a mother and her role as a citizen of the nation. As I have demonstrated, it is in *Berbagi Suami* the figure of the woman who, in spite of all difficulties, must safeguard the well being of the family – and by extension that of the nation. Women’s choices are then not just seen as individual choices, but as choices that have a bearing on the future of Indonesian nation. Because of this great responsibility women cannot be selfish. They cannot divorce a polygamous husband, as this could break up the family and endanger the future of the nation.

To understand why women are, at this particular moment in time, viewed as the harbingers of the future of Indonesian nation, we need to look at the association of women with tradition and men with modernity. Suzanne Brenner (1999) explains this association:

As tradition and modernity are conceptualized, women tend to be identified as the keepers of tradition and the guardians of those institutions, domains and values that are
most closely linked to tradition. This does not confine them conceptually to the past, however, because their duty is to maintain continuity with the imagined moral values of the ancestral past and to transmit them to future generations. (Brenner 1999: 21).

According to Brenner, particularly in their role as mothers, women are considered to hold the moral fate of the nation in their hands. By contrast, men are typically envisioned as the pioneers of the economic, political, and social innovations that are associated with modernization. Hence, they are not burdened with the moral baggage of the past to the extent that women are. In a period in which Indonesia is increasingly modernizing, the task of maintaining good morals and values is therefore likely to be placed on women’s shoulders (Brenner 1999: 21). *Berbagi Suami* demonstrates this dynamic. As we have seen, it is Salma’s task to keep her family together and pass ‘the right’ values on to her son. Significantly, it is in Islam that she finds the strength to continue this task.

*Berbagi Suami* then very much confirms the observations of Chatterjee (1990), Yuval-Davis (1997), and De Mel (2001). As elaborated earlier, these authors identified a discourse that sees the man as the author and subject of the nation, while the woman stands for the nation itself, which needs masculine protection. Similarly, Salma here stands for the nation through her role as mother, and as a nurturer of the next generation, while it is Nadim who actively protects the nation and national development by volunteering in Aceh.

By rejecting polygamy and by offering women a ‘right modern’ subject position in which their roles as mothers and Indonesian citizens are linked, *Berbagi Suami* is engaged in a two-fold biopolitical practice. First, through the articulation of a discourse that rejects polygamy, *Berbagi Suami* is set out to prevent this ‘illness’ from affecting the family and by extension the nation. Second, through creating a subject position for women in which they put their family above everything else, *Berbagi Suami* constructs a ‘back up plan’. In case polygamy does affect the family, it is women who must compensate for the effects. The critical discourse on polygamy that *Berbagi Suami* articulates is then thus highly ambivalent.

Significantly, *Berbagi Suami* also finds a way to make the subject position it promotes compatible with a woman’s identity as a ‘modern woman’. We have seen that *Berbagi Suami* suggests that being a modern woman and being in a position of subordination do not go well together. But, we have also seen how the film supports women making their own decisions in polygamous marriages. The film suggests that women do not necessarily have to be subjugated to their husband’s will and wishes.
Being a modern woman and being in a polygamous marriage then do not necessarily always conflict.

**Virgin: controlling wild girls**

In Indonesia, the state has always had a strong role in defining sexuality as it frequently intervened in matters of sexuality for ‘moral reasons’. An example is the anti-pornography law that was passed in October 2008 and that was mainly supported by Muslim groups. Earlier drafts of the bill had caused intense debate. What particularly sparked debate was the fact that the bill did not only attempt to restrict artistic displays of sexuality, but that it also tried to also confine *pornoaksi* (public displays of sexuality), such as kissing in public or the exposure of ‘sensual’ parts of the (female) body.

Sonja van Wichelen (2010) examined the debates about the anti-pornography law and noticed the centrality of what she calls ‘morality talk’, i.e. “discursive strands focusing on moral issues that intervene normatively in public matters.” (Van Wichelen 2010: 113) This morality talk entered the public sphere at a time when sexuality became more openly discussed. The national newspaper Kompas, for instance, introduced the curhat (‘to confess’) section, a space for readers to discuss issues relating to sexuality in an open manner. In contrast to New Order times, in which the subject of sexuality was less openly discussed, these new developments in ‘sexuality talk’ paved the way for new ways of thinking and speaking about sexuality in Indonesia. However, particularly Muslim groups criticized this development, and it did not take long before the ‘talk of sexuality’ was followed and challenged by ‘talk of morality’ (Ibidem).

The film *Virgin* (2004) directed by Hanny Saputra internalizes this interplay between talk of sexuality and talk of morality in its narrative. The film uses the constant struggle between talk of sexuality and talk of morality to negotiate Indonesian modernities. As I will show, this negotiation specifically takes place at the site of the representation of ‘the modern woman’. In *Virgin* ‘the modern woman’ is present in the figure of the ‘wild girl’, a woman who defies the norms of ‘proper behavior’ and enjoys sexual freedom.

*Virgin* shows the lives of three Jakartan high school girls as seen through the eyes and diaries of Biyan (Laudya Chintya Bella), a girl who desperately tries to keep her virginity in a climate where this is seen as old fashioned. In the film, Biyan’s two friends Ketie (Angie) and Stella (Ardina Rasti) lose their virginity quickly. Biyan wants
to keep hers, but as the girls become involved in all kinds of situations in which alcohol, sex, and money play a central role this becomes increasingly difficult.

*Virgin* was tremendously popular among Indonesian youth who seemingly could relate to what was being depicted in the film and who were attracted by the fashionable and ‘materialistic’ lifestyle that was being portrayed (cf. Barendregt 2007). The film particularly ties in with what Bart Barendregt (2007) calls ‘the new sexual reveille’ among Jakartan teens. Among young (Muslim) Indonesians, premarital sex is on the rise, even if it is outwardly condemned. Today, more young Indonesians are sexually active and more couples are involved in de facto relationships (The Conversation, 27.08.2013). Fuelled by scandals, which include sex tapes of drunken teens circulating on the Internet, the ‘modern lifestyle’ and the ‘loose morality’ of urban youngsters have in the past few years become topics of debate.

In response to youngsters’ alleged ‘loose morality’ several measures were taken. A measure that has recently has sparked outrage is the ‘virginity test’. In August 2013, it was announced by chief of education in one Sumatra’s districts that female teens attending high school there, should undergo annual virginity tests, beginning in 2014. He stated that the tests are a way to protect the girls from free sex and misbehavior. Similarly, a member of the regional parliament in Jambi, was suggesting that a virginity test should be a requirement for new students in junior high school, senior high school, and college (Herlinda 2013).

In this context, it not surprising that not everyone positively greeted *Virgin*. As Barendregt (2007) observes: “the film […] shocked many who did not appreciate the provocative language and vulgar behaviour being portrayed” (Barendregt 2007: 2). As a result, the film was banned in a number of provincial towns.

In the following analysis, I propose that *Virgin* constructs an ambivalent discourse about the ‘new sexual reveille’ and about the urban lifestyle of which it is part. On the one hand, the film fetishizes this lifestyle; it constructs it as a hip, cool and fun lifestyle. On the other hand, the film strongly rejects this lifestyle. *Virgin* frames it as a ‘Western-inspired lifestyle’, which leads to a pollution of the body and with it a pollution of the society.

This ambivalent discourse is in *Virgin* constructed through a threefold narrative pattern. In this pattern, sexuality talk leads to ‘vulgar behaviour’ (*pornoaksi*), which is in turn constantly criticized by morality talk that focuses specifically on the female body. The interplay between sexuality talk and morality talk takes place on two interlocking narrative levels. First, the threefold pattern of ‘sexuality talk – *pornoaksi* – morality talk’ informs the girls’ individual stories and the events that are happening
to them. And second, the pattern can also be found in the larger overarching narrative that is pushed forward by these events.

![Figure 21](image1.jpg) Biyan is licking crisps of a table, while Stella takes a picture with her phone

![Figure 22](image2.jpg) Disapproving looks of other café visitors follows the shot of Biyan (Figure 21)

Virgin’s three-part opening scene is illustrative for the threefold pattern of sexuality talk – *pornoaksi* – morality talk that informs the girls’ individual stories and events happening to them. In the first part of the opening scene, the girls are sitting in a café in one of Jakarta’s upscale shopping malls. The scene starts with sexuality talk as the girls discuss who has the biggest breasts. Ignoring the other visitors of the café, the girls lick their crisps off the table in a playful sexual manner (Figure 21) and put their mobile phones into their school uniforms to take pictures and compare the size of their breasts. When they find out that Ketie has the biggest breasts they all burst out in laughter. While the girls are laughing, the editing creates the impression that the girls’ behavior is not fun, but abnormal, even, or especially, for girls their
age. Figures 21-24 show how the shots of the girls having ‘fun’ are interspersed with shots that show shocked and disapproving looks of other young café visitors. The fact that these looks are coming from other young people constructs the idea that this not a normal way for youngsters to behave in public.

Figure 23: Stella is taking a picture of her breasts with her phone

Figure 24: Disapproving looks of other young café visitors follows the shot of the girls

Stella, Ketie and Biyan then start talking about virginity. Ketie has suddenly decided to give up hers: “Stel, Stel!! I want to give up my virginity!” Biyan is surprised and asks Ketie if she is kidding, but Stella is quick to answer: “Finally! What did I say? You won’t survive that long! Who do you want to do it with?” Ketie answers: “anyone who is willing to pay a lot!” Ketie thus wants to sell her virginity. Stella then proposes to sell Ketie’s virginity right away. Here, the sexuality talk leads to pornoaksi; it leads Ketie to having sex in the mall.

In the second part of the opening scene, the girls walk out of the café and into
the mall to pick out a man for Ketie. They look at the men who are passing by. The dialogue and the editing here construct the girls as ‘active’, it is the girls who are ‘looking’ and the men who are ‘looked at’ (Mulvey 1975). When the girls try to pick a man for Ketie, they are however not treating these men as (just) objects of sexual desire. We instead hear them talking about them in a denigrating manner. When Ketie points at a potential candidate, Stella answers: “no... he is the kind who is afraid of his wife! He is so afraid of his wife that he cannot get it up!” When Biyan points at another guy who looks like an artist to her, Ketie comments that he is just “someone who smells”. Through the denigrating dialogue, the girls position themselves above the men. In the end they finally pick out a man and negotiate a price with him (ten million rupiah, about 630 euros). Subsequently, Ketie has sex with him in the mall, that is, in the toilet for disabled people. The pomoaksi that started with the girls in public touching and showing each other their breasts culminates with Ketie’s sex act.

The fact that the scene takes place in a mall is significant. As I pointed out in chapter 2, the mall is a symbol of consumerism and of an urban lifestyle. In the remainder of the scene, we see how the film constructs a discourse that both fetishizes and criticizes consumerism. When Stella asked Ketie earlier if she wants to sell her virginity for sex or for money, Ketie answers “for money of course”. That money is something desirable is emphasized when we later see a close up of the pile of money that Ketie earned (Figure 25). While we see this close-up, we hear girls cheering in excitement.

Figure 25: Close-up of Ketie flipping through her pile of money

Immediately after Ketie has received the money, the girls indulge in a shopping
spree. Through a number of audio-visual techniques this shopping trip is constructed as fun, fast, but superficial. We see the girls happily running around the mall (Figure 26). These shots are accompanied by an upbeat soundtrack, which underlines both the pace and the fun of the event. While running, Stella, Ketie, and Biyan are looking around for nice shops. We see their ‘hunt’ for good buys through point of view shots. These point of view shots consist of quick pans, which blur the space of the mall (Figure 27). These blurs do not only suggest the speed of the shopping spree, but also the girls’ own blurred vision in which (spending) money is all that matters. During the whole scene, jump cuts are used to add a sense of franticness to the shopping spree. This franticness is also created by the fact that the Stella, Ketie, and Biyan are all the time moving: shots of them running in and out of shops are interspersed with shots in which we see them buying everything they see (Figure 28). The scene ends with the girls looking ecstatically happy with their many shopping bags (Figure 29).

By showing how conspicuous consumption makes the girls incredibly happy, the scene fetishizes consumerism. The editing and the fast pace of the scene on the other hand also construct their behavior as superficial. We only see the girls frantically running in and out of shops, and spending their money carelessly in a seemingly very short amount of time. The scene almost becomes a parody of the consumption-oriented ‘shopping mall’ or ‘air-conditioned’ lifestyle (cf. Van Leeuwen 2011) of Jakarta’s urban middle classes.

![Image of girls running in a mall](image-url)
The morality talk occurs in the third part of the opening scene. After their day in the
mall, the girls drive home. In the car a song is played, which in the film becomes Biyan’s theme song and with which the girls sing along. The song goes:

Friends we are holding hands, but my perspective is different, friends we are running, but not in the same direction, I’m a virgin, I don’t regret this, I’m a virgin, I don’t care if people say I’m out-dated. For me virginity is important to hang on to. And I’m sure God will give me the most beautiful place. I choose my own way. With pride, I’ll carry myself.

Here, morality talk challenges the sexuality talk and what followed from it, the pornoaksi, as Biyan happily sings that it is acceptable – or better – to be a virgin. And as all events in the film are seen through the eyes and diaries of the lead character Biyan, each event ends with Biyan writing on her laptop, sharing with the viewers her reflection on events. The story of Ketie selling her virginity is also closed with Biyan sharing her reflections. We see Biyan writing on her laptop while we hear crying, her voice sounds: “Ketie I love you. But I don’t know whether I have to be happy or sad in knowing the loss of your virginity. Because for me, losing a virginity means losing your dignity as a girl. But, I do not understand, why did I join you in spending the money?” This event thus ends with morality talk that criticizes the pornoaksi, which was, in the first place, mobilized by sexuality talk.

The individual stories of the girls and the events happening to them in the film all follow the above demonstrated threefold pattern of sexuality talk – pornoaksi – morality talk. If we for instance look at Ketie, we see that, inspired by the money she made with selling her virginity, she fantasizes with the girls about more sex and more money (sexuality talk). She then decides to go into prostitution. One day, after having unsafe sex with a client in a hotel (pornoaksi) she thinks she might be pregnant. What follows is morality talk. Virgin here cross-cuts between Ketie who is sitting on the school’s bathroom floor feeling nauseous (Figure 30) and Ketie’s biology teacher who is lecturing on sexuality (Figure 31). She says:

Never carry out a sexual activity without love and responsibility. Because having sex without love is the same as committing a crime. Have you got any idea how it is, for someone as young as you, to get herself pregnant, then having to raise a child, take care of them and provide them with education? There are some teenagers who have been kicked out of their homes and shunned by their own families.

The teacher here thus explicitly challenges Ketie’s behavior by morality talk and even frames it as a crime. As Figures 30-31 show, the shots of Ketie and the shots of the teacher, between which the film cuts back and forth, form an opposition. While
the light falls precisely next to Ketie (Figure 30), the face of the teacher is fully lit during the full length of the scene (Figure 31), giving her an almost angelic presence. And whereas Ketie is seen through a high-angle shot that makes the viewer look down on her (Figure 30), the students are looking up to the teacher who is standing in front of the class. Ketie is shown sadly looking down, while the teacher is during her speech looking up, into the light. The opposition that is created here not only underlines the characters’ opposing perspectives on sexuality, but it also constructs the teacher’s view as good/right and Ketie’s view as bad/wrong.

Figure 30: Ketie sitting on the floor of the school’s bathroom

Figure 31: Morality talk by the biology teacher

The three-fold pattern of sexuality talk – pornoaksi – morality talk, which structures individual stories of Ketie, Stella, and Biyan is also reflected in a larger overarching narrative. At the level of the overarching narrative, a morality discourse against
sexuality talk and *pornoaksi* can be recognized which focuses directly on the female body.

In the beginning of the film all girls have their own dream, Biyan for instance wants to be a writer and Stella an actress. But when the girls start having ‘sexual things’ on their minds (sexuality talk), they start to lose themselves in a fast and seemingly hip Jakartan ‘modern life’ of partying and having sex (*pornoaksi*). The actions of Ketie and Stella are characterized by a lack of ‘bodily integrity’. They ‘mistreat’ their bodies as they constantly break down ‘bodily boundaries’, by letting ‘dirty’ things enter their bodies which, in popular discourse, should not enter a young girls’ body, e.g. drugs, alcohol or a man’s penis. The girls also violate bodily boundaries through smoking and having tattoos. Ketie and Stella pay a high price for *pornoaksi* and for disrespecting bodily boundaries. Ketie goes into prostitution and ends up pregnant, while Stella has sex with a film director who secretly tapes her and distributes the DVD. Stella is not only humiliated for the rest of her life, but can also forget her acting career. In the end, only the dreams of Biyan, who maintains bodily integrity, come true. Moreover, her diary, which contains all her moral reflections, is published and she becomes a successful writer. The film thus constructs a strong moral discourse in which teenage girls should maintain bodily integrity. *Virgin* articulates that when you maintain bodily integrity, your dreams will come true, but when you violate bodily boundaries punishment will follow.

We can understand the punishment via the body when reading *Virgin*’s politics in the light of Mary Douglas’ analogy between ‘the body and society’ (Douglas 1966). Douglas identifies the concern for purity as a key theme at the heart of every society. She sees an analogy between the body and society. But, instead of seeing the body simply as society, Douglas sees the body as a coding and transmitting machine: “the body communicates information for and from the social system of which it is part.” (Douglas 1966: 172) Hence, the body expresses the relationship of the individual to the group and contributes to the social situation at a given moment. When considering this analogy between the body and the society in the light of the ideas that conceptualize women as standing for and producing the nation, the punishment of the girls can be understood. Instead of keeping their body pure, the girls pollute and violate their body and with this, if we follow Douglas’ insights, the society. As women are held responsible for future of the nation, they endanger this future by polluting their bodies.

Important is that the girls pollute their bodies by adopting a ‘modern lifestyle’. By setting the story in Jakarta, the film links this ‘modern lifestyle’ with ‘Western modernity’, as in public debates, Jakarta is often criticized as being the overtly
‘Westernized’ metropolis, which is not a particularly healthy environment for Indonesian youth to grow up. An official statement on the banning of the film in a few provincial towns said that it was “feared that the film might be taken as a role model for teenagers trying to ape a ‘Western-inspired life style.” (Barendregt 2007: 2)

The attitude toward modernity that is displayed via the representation of ‘the modern woman’ is ambivalent. Virgin fetishizes consumerism and a Jakartan modern lifestyle by dressing its characters in the hippest outfits, letting them use new media gadgets (mobile phones, laptops), and having them dance in trendy clubs. At the same time, the film suggests that a ‘Western lifestyle’ leads to a pollution of the body and with it a pollution of the society.

Virgin frames the dysfunctional family as a cause for the adoption of a ‘wrong’ lifestyle. After a night of partying, Biyan arrives home. In an eye-line match we see that upon her arrival home, she runs into her father having sex with another woman (Figures 32-33). When she goes upstairs, she finds her mother crying on the floor. A close-up of a torn family picture underlines the break-up of Biyan’s family (Figure 34). That the dysfunctional family is causing Biyan to (almost) lose herself in modernity is confirmed when she, later, is asked why she is behaving like this. She breaks down and blames her dysfunctional family (Figure 35).

Figure 32: Biyan arrives home
Chapter 5 | Muslim masculinity and femininity in Islamic-themed films

Figure 33: Biyan’s father is about to have sex with his mistress

Figure 34: A torn picture of Biyan’s parents

Figure 35: Biyan breaks down and points at the dysfunctional family as a cause for her behavior

While *Virgin* rejects a ‘Western-style modernity’, it offers Islam as an alternative. In
Virgin, Islam is present in two ways. First, Islam is present in the morality discourse that the film articulates. Second, Islam is present through the figure that ‘saves’ Biyan. After experiencing the tragic break-up of her family, Biyan runs away from home and finds refuge with her Muslim ‘uncle’. When Biyan knocks on his door, the skimpy outfit she is wearing surprises him. He nevertheless warmly welcomes her into his home and comforts her (Figure 36). The Muslim man provides Biyan with a safe home and keeps her from losing herself in a modern life, and from, as she puts it herself: “becoming like one of the women my dad dates and who ruined my mom’s life.” Under his guidance, Biyan becomes the only girl in the film who makes the ‘right’ decisions and who consequently has a ‘happy end’.

His home is also the place where Biyan starts writing her moral reflections as closures to the film’s events (Figure 37). Also, at the level of the overarching narrative it is this man who discovers Biyan’s writing talent and who supports her in becoming a writer. And when her diary becomes a best-seller and she is interviewed on TV, she tearfully thanks him for saving her, saying in direct address – thereby inviting the viewers’ complicity: “You were the one with the power to determine the ending of this story.” (Figure 39) ‘Islam’ through the figure of the Muslim man both provides the base for morality talk and keeps Biyan from losing herself in a modern life.

By offering Islam as an alternative to a ‘Western-style modernity’, Virgin orchestrates specific national narratives. As Brenner (1999) points out, government officials and religious leaders have often warned Indonesians for ‘Western-style modernity’ and have promoted Islam as an alternative. According to them, modernity may offer a multitude of choices, but some of those choices are not suitable for Indonesia (Brenner 1999: 22).
By articulating these national narratives, Virgin practices a biopolitics that revolves around both the pole of discipline and the pole of regulatory control. As we have seen, Virgin internalizes the tension between talk of sexuality and talk of morality and makes the constant struggle between the two central to the negotiation of modernity. And as we have also seen, these struggles and negotiations are taking place via the (individual) female body. The female bodies in Virgin are however not just individual bodies. They come to function in a larger project. In Virgin, the young female body is central to an ambivalent discourse that both rejects and fetishizes a particular modern lifestyle. In the film, young women’s bodies and sexuality thus serve as an arena in which symbolic battles over modernity are waged, suggesting that women’s attitudes and behavior are crucial in determining the course that Indonesian modernity will take. Control over the nation, can be gained through
control over the female body (Brenner 1999: 22). Biyan, Ketie, and Stella do then not only become the representations of the choices, dangers and anxieties of modernity. They become the focus of national narratives of modernization in the Indonesian society, as well as of persistent anxieties underlying those narratives.

This national function renders the representation of the modern woman highly contradictory. Virgin’s wild girls signify a departure from the New Order ‘housewife’ stereotypes. However, they become subject to a larger national project that revolves around the (desired) modernization of the Indonesian nation, which seems to be a patriarchal project. It is in fact striking that the only one who can in the end get ‘control over the female body’ is a Muslim man.

**Ayat-Ayat Cinta: violence, polygamy and ideal Muslim masculinity**

Ayat-Ayat Cinta is one of Indonesia’s most successful films. It broke visitor records and triggered a wave of Islamic-themed films. Following its success on the national market, the film was also released in other parts of Southeast Asia, resulting in packed cinemas in both Singapore and Malaysia.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta is based on the same-titled novel by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy and is set in Egypt. The film portrays the life of Fahri (Fedi Nuril), who is described by director Hanung Bramantyo as “an archetypical shy, smart, pious, but poor Javanese student”, who won a scholarship to complete his graduate degree in theology at Egypt’s esteemed Al–Azhar University (Bramantyo cited in Anand, *The Jakarta Post* 2008). The film zooms in on the romance between Fahri and four beautiful young women who all desire him as their husband. One of these female protagonists is fully veiled, something that was still very rare in Indonesian cinema at that time (Heryanto 2010). Through its multiple-angled love story and series of events, Ayat-Ayat Cinta invokes Islamic teachings as written in the Qur’an and hadith and translates them into ordinary language that is applicable to situations that young modern Muslims may encounter in their everyday lives. In Bramantyo’s words: “Ayat-Ayat Cinta is a movie that aims to show how you can be young, modern, and gaul (young/social/hip), while at the same time living by Islam” (Bramantyo cited in Anand, *The Jakarta Post* 2008). The film provides Islamic solutions for issues like romantic interactions, interreligious relationships, polygamy, xenophobia, global negative discourses about Muslims, and the position of women in Islam.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta starts when Fahri has almost graduated. At that moment in his life, Fahri ponders the goals he set for himself at the beginning of his journey in
Egypt. He realizes that only one goal is yet unaccomplished: the pursuit of marriage. Three women are in love with Fahri. First, there is Maria (Carissa Putri), who is Fahri’s neighbor and one of his best friends. Maria is a Coptic Christian girl, who is attracted to the teachings of the Qur’an. She finds herself falling in love with Fahri, a fact she only reveals to her diary. Second, there is Nurul (Melanie Putria), a Muslim girl who is also a student at Al-Azhar. Third, there is Noura (Zaskia Adya Mecca). She is an Egyptian Muslim neighbor, who is publicly hit and abused by her father. Despite all the attention, Fahri is not aware of the fact that he is actually desired by these women. Right at the moment that he is about to give up on finding love, he meets Aisha (Rianti Cartwright), his bride-to-be, on the Cairo subway.

Through the analysis of several key scenes, I suggest that Ayat-Ayat Cinta constructs an ideal-type of Muslim masculinity that aspires to be modern, educated, pious, modest, compassionate, respectful towards women, and that is adapted to global sensibilities and lifestyles. As such, it departs from stereotypical images of Muslim men as hypermasculine, aggressive, and intolerant (see also Hoesterey and Clark 2012). Moreover, it is against these types of masculinity that Ayat-Ayat Cinta coins its gentler version of Muslim masculinity.

In Ayat-Ayat Cinta, this type of Muslim masculinity is produced through a pattern in which an opposition is created between aggressive hard-line Muslim masculinities and Fahri’s gentler Muslim masculinity. This opposition works to both delineate and to promote Fahri’s model of masculinity as the ‘right’ model of Muslim masculinity.

The scene in which Fahri meets his wife-to-be – Aisha – for the first time illustrates this pattern. In this scene, Fahri takes the subway in Cairo. A close up of a ventilator (Figure 39) and tightly framed shots of passengers (Figure 40), directly create the space of the wagon as a hot and cramped space. This is significant, as from here onwards the scene builds up tension – in the already cramped space – and points at men as instigating this tension.

![Close up of a ventilator](image_url)

Figure 39: Close up of a ventilator
While on the subway, Fahri runs into an Egyptian friend and they catch up on things. The non-diegetic piano music suddenly stops when two American women pass by. Fahri’s friend looks at the women and says to Fahri: “Fahri, Fahri... look, those are American infidels.” The sudden muting of the music draws attention to the friend’s comment and adds a dramatic effect to the introduction of the two women. Fahri does not respond to his friend’s comment and picks up their conversation again. By here racking the focus from the foreground, which shows the women, to the background, which shows the men talking about the women (Figure 41), the viewer’s attention is directed to the hostile comment. The hostility of the men towards the American women is further emphasized when we subsequently see the women making their way to the back of the train to find a seat (Figure 42). Figure 42 shows the men covered in shadows as they look aggressively at the women who are passing by. Tension is added by high-pitch noises that accompany the aggressive looks of the men. When one of the women almost faints from the heat, a fully veiled
Muslimah – Aisha – stands up to give the woman her a seat. She apologizes in English for the ignorant behavior of the men, as “they don’t understand.”

Figure 42: The American women make here way through the wagon as men look on

Figure 43: Low angle, medium close up of angry Egyptian Muslim yelling at the Muslimah

Figure 44: The angry Muslim man on the verge of hitting the Muslimah
All of this happens under the watchful eye of an Egyptian man who is recognizably dressed as a Muslim (Figure 43). He gets up from his seat and starts an argument with the Muslimah. He tells her: “oh Muslimah, why did you offer her your seat? They are infidels!” In turn, she responds: “I didn’t have the heart to stay seated.” The man yells at her: “but they deserve it! We’re intentionally not giving them our seats! Are you a Muslimah or not?” While the man is yelling at the woman we see him in medium close up from a low angle (Figure 43). The close distance shows his angry expressions very well, while the angle suggests the man’s power over the woman – it creates the impression that the man is dominant and threatening. The dialogue and the aesthetic choices here construct the Egyptian Muslim man as the stereotype of aggressive anti-Western Muslim masculinity. The Muslimah on the other hand defies the stereotypical image of a docile Muslim woman who listens to men. She stands up to the man and corrects him: “Islam teaches us to be kind to everybody.”

The man loses his temper and screams: “But not American infidels! Do you know what the Americans did in Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq? They are accusing Muslims of being terrorists whereas in fact they are the terrorists!” When she tells him: “I don’t care about all of that”, the man tries to hit her (Figure 44). All passengers watch the scene unfold, but no one stands up for the woman. It is finally Fahri who, in this hostile environment, dares to come in between and grabs the man’s arm right before he hits the face of the woman (Figure 44). The Egyptian Muslim now turns to Fahri. At that moment, the camera becomes a bystander itself (Figure 45). As Figure 45 shows, this camera position works to create and emphasize a passive aggressive crowd composed of men that had previously looked aggressively at the American women (Figure 45). Although men who probably sympathize with the angry Muslim now encircle Fahri, he still continues to interfere, which emphasizes his bravery.
The Egyptian man angrily asks Fahri who he is. Fahri tells him: “I am an Indonesian and you have offended Rasullulah, you have defied the prophet and will be hostile against Allah in the judgment day.” When the Egyptian tries to attack Fahri, Fahri’s friend tells the man that Fahri is an Indonesian student from the prestigious Al-Azhar University. The man responds: “if you are indeed one of Al-Azhar, what do you know about the suffering of the Arab nation?” Fahri bases his answer in his knowledge of Islam and says: “if foreigners have entered a country legally their honor and safety must be protected.” Again, the man yells: “but they are not foreigners, they are Americans, infidels, terrorists!” Fahri recalls what he has learned through his education and corrects the man: “Muhammad said: he who hurts foreigners hurts me, and he who hurts me, hurts Allah. We may hate somebody’s bad deeds, but we still have to keep our fairness.” The man attacks Fahri and walks away. The Muslimah thanks Fahri and introduces herself as Aisha, a Muslim of German-Turkish origin. She tells Fahri: “you are a good Muslim, I rarely come across a Muslim like you.”

Central to this scene are anti-Western, or rather anti-American, sentiments. Particularly after 9/11 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, these kinds of sentiments have made their way into public discourse in Indonesia as well as in other Muslim countries. The scene here links these sentiments to a particular type of Muslim masculinity, namely to the Orientalist – hard-line, aggressive, oppressive, violent, and intolerant – Muslim masculinity that is so pervasive in (Western) media today. Against this type of masculinity, the scene coins a different kind of Muslim masculinity, which is globally oriented, liberal, rational, open-minded, and compassionate.

Both masculinities are marked by piety, but in the former piety leads to violence, whereas in the latter piety is used against violence. This is also where Fahri’s model of masculinity gains significance: it shows that (1) piety can be used against aggression and intolerant forms of Islam, and that (2) piety and a liberal mind-set go very well together. By articulating these two discourses about piety, Fahri’s masculinity forms an alternative and a challenge to the violent militant strains of Islam that have gained ground after the fall of Suharto’s regime. At the same time, this Muslim masculinity blurs and problematizes the assumed boundaries between two forms of Islam – orthodox and liberal Islam – that are allegedly dividing Indonesia. This blurring of boundaries is also present in the very way Fahri behaves and dresses in the film. There is no doubt that Fahri is pious. He sticks strictly to Islamic teachings. Throughout the film he constantly consults the Qur’ān and the hadith to make decisions. Simultaneously, he has been given a laid-back and
modern look that matches global youth culture. As shown in Figure 46, Fahri for instance does not wear Islamic attire, but casual jeans, T-shirts or blouses, and aviator sunglasses. He does not have a beard, but a nonchalant hair-do (see also Heryanto 2010). Even during his marriage he does not opt for Islamic dress, but instead wears a Western style business suit (Figure 55). This blend of piety and a liberal mind-set is in the subway scene also demonstrated by the fully veiled Aisha who stands up for the American women.

What is also significant about the subway scene is that it constructs the violent and intolerant Egyptian Muslim as someone who has strayed from Islam and who needs to be brought back its teachings. That Fahri here takes up this role is significant. The scene stresses that Fahri is not just a Muslim, but an Indonesian Muslim. As we have seen, Fahri here introduces himself to the angry Muslim with the words “I am an Indonesian”, while his friend too points at his nationality: “he is an Indonesian student from Al-Azhar.” This is something that recurs throughout the film. Later in the film, the Egyptian authorities even call him “Indonesia” instead of “Fahri”. In the global Muslim world, Indonesia is, because of its location and its moderate/syncretic Islamic traditions, often seen as a ‘secondary’ or ‘peripheral’ Muslim country. In this view, the center of Islam is to be found in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. By lecturing the Egyptian Muslim and solidly grounding his arguments in Islamic teachings, Fahri – as an Indonesian – here decenters Islam and assigns religious authority to Indonesian Muslims.

In the subway scene, Fahri’s pious, liberal, compassionate, and globally oriented Muslim masculinity is thus coined against an aggressive, narrow-minded, violent,
and intolerant masculinity. That Fahri’s masculinity is here the ‘right kind’ of Muslim masculinity is emphasized when he is in the end of the scene ‘rewarded’ for his attitude. Through publicly displaying his piety, his compassion, and his open mind, he wins Aisha’s heart.

The pattern that opposes a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ kind of Muslim masculinity recurs several times throughout the film. Notably, the pattern also constructs and promotes a Muslim masculinity which respects and honors women. This ‘women-friendly’ Muslim masculinity is constructed through the dynamics between subsequent three scenes.

In the first scene, Fahri walks through a narrow alley and sees a Muslim woman – Noura – falling over and dropping her shopping basket. The Muslim man she is with does not help her up, but instead publicly degrades her by asking her: “What kind of human are you? You can’t even carry this thing up!” The man looks down at her – clearly overpowering her – and then hits her in the face, yelling: “You prostitute!” (Figure 47). During the abuse, Fahri is placed in the foreground as we see him watching the action unfold in the background (Figures 47-48). Through this composition, Fahri is constructed as a prime witness to the abuse. A motion-less Fahri appears to shocked to interfere. Fahri ‘corrects’ himself the second time he witnesses the abuse. In the second scene, Fahri is looking out of the window at night and sees how the same man beats Noura. During the abuse, the man’s face is covered in shadows, which underscores the danger and threat he poses (Figure 49). Stressing the gravity of the violence, the scene shows a shot in which the man almost chokes Noura, while she begs him for forgiveness (Figure 49). The man subsequently leaves Noura bleeding and wounded on the street.

Figure 47: Noura falling over on the street
Muslim masculinity and femininity in Islamic-themed films  |  Chapter 5

Figure 48: The man hitting Noura

Figure 49: The man almost chokes Noura

Figure 50: Noura hiding from her ‘father’
Together with his friend Maria, Fahri comes to Noura’s help and arranges for her to stay the night at Maria’s place since Fahri himself cannot stay with a woman outside of marriage. While Fahri and Maria comfort Noura, it appears that Noura had a fight with her ‘father’, because he wanted to sell her as a prostitute. The abusive ‘father’ found out that Noura is actually not his own daughter, but that she was exchanged as a baby. Therefore, he does not want to care for her anymore. While Noura tells Maria and Fahri this story, we see shots of the ‘father’ looking for Noura, while she is trying to hide herself from him (Figure 50). The closed space in which Noura is trapped, her position in the corner and the man’s large looming shadow that is cast on the wall as he approaches her, underline both Noura’s fear and her ‘father’s’ intimidation. Fahri steps in and helps Noura to find her real parents, as in his own words “it here concerns the matter of the life or death of a Muslimah.” With the help of Fahri, Noura is re-united with her real parents and all her troubles seem to have disappeared.

In the two ‘abuse scenes’, the kind of Muslim masculinity that is represented through Noura’s ‘father’, again matches a stereotypical form of Muslim masculinity. Against this violent, abusive, and dominant type of Muslim masculinity, Ayat-Ayat Cinta coins its more gentle and compassionate Muslim masculinity. This masculinity is however not less patriarchal. In both the subway and the abuse scenes, it is a man – Fahri – who ultimately saves the threatened women. But as the third scene shows, the Muslim masculinity that is promoted in Ayat-Ayat Cinta honors and respects women and thereby clearly departs from the violent type of Muslim masculinity.

In the third scene, Fahri is interviewed. After defending the American women on the subway, one of them – Alicia – thanks Fahri and tells him that she is an American journalist who is in Egypt to conduct research on the position of women in Islam. Fahri promises to help Alicia with her research and they meet up for an interview.

The scene directly assigns authority to Fahri to speak about the subject. The scene does so through showing a close up of a paper that Fahri has written and that is titled ‘The Status of Women in Islam” (Figure 51). The first sentences of the paper read: “The status of women in society is neither a new issue nor a fully settled one. The position of Islam on this issue has been among the subjects presented to the Western reader with the least objectivity.” These sentences foreshadow the discourse that is constructed in this scene. Through its dialogue, the scene tries to contest the – Western – view that Islam is hostile to women. Alicia first asks Fahri: “So Islam really honors women?” The use of the word “really” and Alicia’s accompanying surprised facial expression underscore the idea that Westerners –
here represented through Alicia – have a negative impression of the position of women in Islam.

Fahri then challenges Alicia’s negative view and calls on the hadith: “Islam teaches us that heaven lies on our mother’s feet. This is a basic principle that is written in the hadith, and it explains that Islam really honors women.” When Alicia confronts Fahri with the issue of domestic violence and asks him whether or not the Qur’an states that men can hit women, Fahri interprets the Qur’an and answers:

Many Muslim men who are cowards read the Suroh Annisa [the women’s verses] too literally or they give it their own individual interpretation and use it as an excuse to hurt their wife. But in fact, the Suroh explains three steps on how to deal with a wife that doesn’t respect the marital commitment. And the first is to give her advice, the second is to warn her, and the third… then you can hit her, but not on the face, and without the intention of actually hurting her.

Fahri here states that men who hit women – like Noura’s ‘father’ – interpret the Qur’an in the wrong way. It is hence not the Islam that is to blame, but the way it is interpreted. This supports the discourse that was also present in the subway scene. In this discourse, violent Muslims are Muslims who interpret Islam the wrong way; they are Muslims who have strayed from Islam. And like in the subway scene, Ayat-Ayat Cinta suggests here that the solution can be found in devoutness, i.e. in closely studying Islamic teachings and texts. Fahri’s masculinity is then not only constructed as a type of Muslim masculinity that helps, respects, and honors women, but also as one that is grounded in a solid knowledge of, and education in, Islam.

Figure 51: Close up of the paper written by Fahri
The Muslim masculinity that is promoted in Ayat-Ayat Cinta not only honors and respects women, but also aspires marriage. Right from the start, Ayat-Ayat Cinta constructs the discourse that marriage is desirable.

In the beginning of the film, Fahri contemplates the targets that he set for himself at the start of his stay in Egypt. A close up of Fahri’s mind-map (Figure 53) stresses that only one goal is yet unaccomplished: nikah (‘marriage’). Making matters worse, a close up of the sheer amount of wedding announcements at Fahri’s university suggests that everyone else around him seems to be getting married (Figure 54). Fahri stares at this board, and when he gets home from university it becomes clear this greatly upsets him. While facing the wall on which his mind map hangs, Fahri starts an emotional prayer. During this prayer, the film uses an eye-line match to connect Fahri’s prayer to his mind map (Figures 52-53). In this eye-line match Fahri looks up (Figure 52) to the last unaccomplished goal on his mind map (Figure 53) while he is praying. The connection that is in this way established suggests that Fahri is praying for marriage.

When we subsequently see Fahri making a phone call to his mother in Indonesia, it becomes clear that Fahri is family-oriented, and that his desire to get married is also tied to a desire to please his parents. When his mother kindly asks him if he has already found a suitable candidate, Fahri answers: “I haven’t been able to fulfil your and father’s wishes yet, mother. It is hard, I haven’t yet found the woman that Allah has chosen for me.” After he hangs up the phone, we see him crying, which stresses the strength of his desire. That his wish to get married is nevertheless also personally motivated is emphasized when he later tells Maria that he is longing to find his soul mate.

Fahri eventually finds his soul mate in Aisha and they marry in a lavish Bollywood-like (cf. Heryanto 2010) ceremony. During the wedding we see shots of a jubilant audience, hear triumphant music, and see slow-motion shots of people throwing rose petals at a widely smiling Fahri (Figure 55). In this way, his marriage to Aisha is constructed as a victorious moment, which further adds to the idealization of marriage in the film.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta here constructs a discourse in which marriage is desirable and leads to happiness. The Muslim masculinity that is promoted through this discourse is family-oriented and aspires marriage. In the remainder of the film, Fahri and Aisha’s happiness is challenged by a polygamous marriage, against which the film signals a warning.
Figure 52: Extreme close up of Fahri looking at his mind map

Figure 53: Fahri’s mind map of his goals

Figure 54: Close up of wedding invitations at the university
Fahri and Aisha’s happiness is short-lived. In a soap-like turn of events, Noura accuses Fahri of rape and Fahri is put on death row. The only person – Maria – who can testify that Noura did not sleep at Fahri’s place the night they saved her from her abusive ‘father’, is in a coma after a car accident. According to the doctor and Maria’s mother, the chances of Maria waking up are very small. Maria has always been secretly in love with Fahri. She was so heartbroken and depressed after she heard that Fahri married Aisha that she now lacks the will to wake up.

Aisha comes up with a plan to get Fahri off death row. She arranges with the court that Fahri can visit Maria in the hope that she will wake up in his presence. In the hospital, Fahri sits on Maria’s bed and talks about the memories they share. Maria responds, but does not wake up. Aisha then says to Fahri: “tell her you’ll marry her.” Fahri tells Aisha: “Aisha, polygamy is not that simple. There are many things to be accounted for. You are the one that I chose in the name of Allah. You are the only one that I chose... you are my soul mate, Aisha.” Aisha starts crying and tells Fahri: “soulmates are Allah’s secret, Fahri. A part of Maria is Muslimah, she needs you.” Aisha also tells Fahri that she is pregnant and that her child needs a father, so that it is important that he stays alive. While Fahri is very critical of polygamy, he puts the life of his unborn child first. He marries Maria as his second wife while she is in a coma. After he has put a ring on her finger, Maria wakes up. Maria testifies against Noura and Fahri is freed from jail. The polygamous marriage has thus saved Fahri’s life. Ayat-Ayat Cinta however constructs ambivalent discourses about polygamy.

The film first constructs the discourse that polygamy is painful and stressful to all of those involved. After Fahri is freed from prison, Maria moves in with Aisha and Fahri. From the beginning, it is clear that the situation in the house is awkward,
particularly for the women. The film constantly shows the sad looks of Aisha and Maria as they watch how their husband spends time with ‘the other woman’. This awkwardness soon turns into jealousy and frustration, and at a certain point Aisha packs her bags and leaves the house. In an emotional speech, Fahri promises Aisha that he will work harder to make the polygamous marriage work. When Fahri tells a friend that he finds two wives very stressful, the friend confirms that polygamy is very difficult and advices him to work hard to treat Aisha and Maria both fairly.

Aisha accepts Fahri’s promise and returns home with him. Maria welcomes her back and gives her a hug. The women try hard to be kind to each other and Fahri follows his friend’s advice. From that moment, Ayat-Ayat Cinta constructs a utopian image of polygamy. A montage accompanied by an upbeat soundtrack creates the impression that the women have become friends. They have fun together, there is no jealousy anymore, the three of them go out for dinner, and they even go happily to the hospital together to check on Fahri and Aisha’s unborn child. It is the ideal image of a polygamous marriage. Polygamous marriages are often criticized for being extremely painful and stressful for women. At this point, the women are however perfectly happy and are enjoying each other’s company. The film here thus articulates a discourse that states that when all of those involved try hard, a polygamous marriage can work.

This discourse is marginalized when the utopian situation turns dystopian. It all starts when Aisha hospitalized, because there are complications with her pregnancy. It turns out that these complications were caused by the stress that she experienced in the first months of her pregnancy. All Fahri’s attention goes out to Aisha now, and it is Maria who suffers from this. Maria gets a heart attack because of all pain and sadness. When examined in the hospital it appears that Maria has a heart-problem: she suffers from a hole in her heart, a condition that is caused and worsened by stress, and from with she in the end of the film dies. In her dying moments, she apologizes to Fahri and Aisha for all the stress and troubles she has caused in their marriage: “forgive me Fahri, Aisha, I apologize for all my faults, now I realize that to love and to possess are two different things…forgive me Fahri…Aisha forgive me.”

The film here thus signals a strong warning against a polygamous marriage. The stress and pain of the polygamous marriage cause Aisha to have severe complications with her pregnancy and lead to the death of Maria, who literally and metaphorically dies from a broken heart. Significantly, it all goes wrong at the moment that Fahri cannot balance the attention that he gives to his two wives. Ayat-Ayat Cinta thus not immediately rejects polygamy, but it does points to its dangers.
Significantly, Maria dies when Aisha is almost due. In this way Maria cannot distort the unit of the nuclear family.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta thus constructs an ideal-type of Muslim masculinity that aspires to be pious, compassionate, open-minded and respectful towards women, and that is adapted to global sensibilities and lifestyles. As shown, it is also a type of Muslim masculinity that aspires marriage; that is family-oriented, and that functions best in a nuclear family. The film grounds this masculinity in a thorough knowledge of Islam. It is through Fahri’s education in Islam that he is able to make the ‘right’ decisions. Through promoting this type of Muslim masculinity, the film offers an Islamic alternative to secular modernities and its accompanying models of citizenship and subjection. This model of Muslim masculinity gains particular national – and biopolitical – significance in three ways. First, it works to protect the nuclear family, and safeguards by extension the reproduction of the nation. Second, it blurs the boundaries between modernist and traditionalist or orthodox and liberal strains of Islam (cf. Introduction) that are allegedly dividing Indonesia. And third, the Muslim masculinity that is promoted is an open and outward-looking model that is adapted to a globalizing world and that emphasizes the place of Indonesian Muslims in this world. This type of Muslim masculinity is highly useful to an Indonesian project of modernization. It eases internal tensions, i.e. tensions between forms of Islam that imagine a different future for the modern Muslim nation. At the same time, it also eases external tensions, i.e. tensions between a Muslim nation and a global world that might be antithetical to Islam. Easing these external tensions is of crucial importance if Indonesia is to interact successfully and productively on a global stage.

The national function of post-New Order femininities and masculinities

The post-New Order films Berbagi Suami, Virgin, and Ayat-Ayat Cinta show a public fascination with what it means to be modern and engage with the question whether or not Indonesians are on the ‘right’ path to the ‘right’ kind of modernity. The films negotiate modernity through their representations of femininity and masculinity and simultaneously make the representation of gender central to addressing and negotiating ‘sensitive’ topics like polygamy, teenage sexuality, and domestic violence. This development is highly contradictory. On the one hand, the films, by discussing taboo-matters of gender and sexuality, signify a positive development as they open up the debate for new ways of thinking about sexuality and gender issues
in post-authoritarian Indonesia. On the other hand, the representations of these issues form the ground for biopolitics and the propagation of ‘right’ modern behavior.

Through their representations of gender, _Berbagi Suami_, _Virgin_, and _Ayat-Ayat Cinta_ are engaged in biopolitical governance. In constructing men and women’s professional, private and sexual lives as arenas in which battles over modernity are waged, the three films map much of the public anxiety about modernization on men and women, suggesting that their behavior is crucial in determining the course that an ‘Indonesian modernity’ might take (see also Brenner 1999). As shown, the films’ portrayals of masculinity and femininity revolve around both the pole of discipline and around the pole of regulatory control. The films seek to discipline male and female bodies and mentalities in a way that secures, governs, and controls a larger future modern Indonesian nation and that protects the quality of life within this nation. As a result of these practices, gendered bodies are subjugated to a larger national project that revolves around the desired modernization of the Indonesian nation.

Through converting gender identity to national identity, post-New Order representations of gender obtain their own national function. While the stereotype of the housewife had a specific national function during the New Order, namely to teach women how to be a good citizen, post-New order representations of masculinity and femininity promote ‘right’ male and female modern Indonesian identities in an era of modernization and Islamization. In _Berbagi Suami_, _Virgin_, and _Ayat-Ayat Cinta_, representations of gender function as a site where the imagination, negotiation, and contestation of modernity takes place. As shown, it is via the pollution of the young female body, that _Virgin_ displays an ambivalent, but highly critical attitude toward ‘Western modernity’. And while _Virgin_ rejects a Western-style modernity, all three films suggest Islam as an alternative. It is _Ayat-Ayat Cinta_, which through its representation of Muslim masculinities, most clearly imagines what a Islamic modernity should look like. As we have seen, the film rejects a hardline and closed-off model of Islamic modernity. Instead, it promotes an open and outward-looking model that is adapted to a globalizing world and that blends both orthodox and liberal strains of Islam.

By showing how discourses of gender serve a national function in Indonesia, this chapter articulates a critique of gender-blind theorizations of the nation. Simultaneously, it shows how not only women, but also men, become subject to biopolitics. Whereas _Berbagi Suami_ and _Virgin_ confirm dominant ideas that women – via the domestic domain and the family – stand for the nation itself, which needs
male protection (cf. Yuval-Davis 1997; De Mel 2001), Ayat-Ayat Cinta presents us with a more complex picture. Ayat-Ayat Cinta shows that men, as much as women, are held responsible for the family, the reproduction and the health of the nation, and a peaceful and successful project of modernization.

The involvement of men can be understood when we see how the nuclear family becomes central to the adoption of a ‘right’ kind of Islamic modernity. All three films suggest that the nuclear family forms the base of a successful and ‘right’ project of modernization. And since both men and women, young and old, are part of the nuclear family, masculinity as well as femininity is subjected to a biopolitical form of governance and regulation. By pointing out the role that heterosexual masculinity plays in the safeguarding of the family, and in extension the nation, this study contributes to the existing body of work that is concerned with bringing the notions of gender and nation together, but that has largely ignored non-military and non-violent masculinity.

This study has however focused exclusively on heterosexual masculinity and femininity. To provide a more complete picture of the national function of gender representations in post-New Order cinema, more research is required, and particularly research that zooms in on different genders, e.g. homosexuality, transgender. In this context, James Hoesterey and Marshall Clark’s (2012) observations about – the rejection of Muslim homosexuality in – 3 Doa, 3 Doa (2009) form an relevant starting point, and also underscore my observations about the importance of the idea of the nuclear family.

Importantly, the national function of post-New Order representations of gender renders their break with the New Order representations contradictory. When we for instance look at femininity, we see that the post-New Order representation of ‘the modern woman’ departs from the stereotypical New Order representation of the housewife. The modern woman, whether as wanita karier or wild girl, may seem to be the opposite of the stereotypical domesticated New Order woman. Contrary to the New Order stereotypical image of the docile (house)wife, the ‘modern woman’ in post-New Order cinema is constructed as financially independent, ambitious, and as a person with sexual desires. The analysis of the films has however shown how the modern woman is still subject to a patriarchal project of modernization.

This chapter then problematizes the much celebrated identity politics that the fall of the New Order regime has allegedly brought about. The fall of the New Order regime opened up a space for identity politics (Widodo 2008) and for a critical attitude toward New Order gender stereotypes. As I have shown, the contestatory force of stereotype-defying representations of gender is challenged by the ways in
which these representations become subject to biopolitics. Their instrumentality to this kind of governance marks the emergence of ‘new’ representations of gender highly contradictory.

The ways in which identity politics are here encapsulated by a governamental project also raises questions about the practice of critical politics. How to resist when identity politics become subject to (biopolitical) governance? Are identity politics a useful tactic of contesting structures of power? What strategies for politics does Islamic-themed popular and visual culture offer? The encapsulation of identity politics is not unique to films. As I showed earlier, in Gigi’s Nationalism (chapter 3) and in Islamic self-help books (chapter 4), the practice of identity politics and the newly attained presence of Islam in the post-authoritarian media and public sphere also became part of governamental politics.

In contemporary political thought, thinkers have been long suspicious of identity politics since they rest on normalizing notions of recognition, and often result in a balkanization of political action (Cheah 2013: 82; McNay 2009: 65). Governamental reason throws the contestatory force of identity politics further into question. The analysis of post-New Order films and self-help books shows how identity politics enables, rather than challenges, the governmental logic that works through a differentiation of the social realm.

Let me here briefly revisit the questions with which I ended my chapter on Islamic rock music (chapter 3):

What relations of power are underpinning Islamic-themed popular and visual culture? How to view Islamic-themed popular cultural products? Do they constitute sites of creative experimentation and contestation, or do they attempt to discipline people into responsible modern citizens? Or do both apply? And if so, how do both go together? How are an ethics of possibility and an ethics of probability (cf. Appadurai 2013, see chapter 3) balanced?

In the last three chapters, we have seen that Islamic popular and visual culture constitutes both a site for creative experimentation and contestation, and a site that attempts to discipline people into desired modern citizens. Both are in constant tension. On the way hand, we see how through popular culture and visual culture Muslims, whose shared interests, identities and ideologies were oppressed and marginalized during the Suharto regime, now participate in public discourses about the course of modernity. We also see how Islamic popular and visual cultural products critically and creatively experiment with Islamic modernities. They attest to
Appadurai’s ethics of possibility (cf. Appadurai 2013, see chapter 3). On the other hand, we see how these processes work in a governmental logic. They are appropriated by structures of power, which seek to control what kinds of future are envisioned as wrong and right. In this sense Islamic popular and visual culture attests to Appadurai’s ethics of probability (cf. Appadurai 2013, see chapter 3). Are there ways to escape or circumvent this logic? How to contest dominant structures of power? How can Muslims practice identity politics – without immediately being encapsulated by the system? What forms can contestations of power structures take?

Lois McNay (2009) points out that one troubling political consequence that ensues from governmental politics is that it disarms conceptions of individual autonomy, which commonly underpin much political thought on resistance and political opposition. In governmental reason, individual autonomy is not the opposite of, or limit to governance, but rather lies at the heart of control (McNay 2009: 65). The possibilities for critical politics, for contesting dominant structures of power, are diminished by a power that seems to have the capacity to absorb and thereby disarm forms of resistance (Ibidem).

Nevertheless, scholars have discussed two options for the practice of critical politics. One option revolves around a politicized reading of Foucault’s (1984a) ethics of the self, which is a historical and practical form of reasoning that takes the form of a permanent self-critique and experimentation (Foucault 1984: 44). This relation to the self is a liminal process, which seeks to explore ways of being beyond the already known (McNay 2009: 67). It is an experimentation with the possibility of going beyond what seems natural in the self. In Foucault’s words: “the critique of what we are is at one and the same time an historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” (Foucault 1984b: 50; McNay 2009: 67). As McNay points out, in the light of Foucault’s powerful analysis of governmentality, it is reasonable to ask how a politicized reading of ethics of the self can actually from a basis for critique. How can an individualized process of ethical self-formation have sufficient resources to present a challenge to a form of power that operates through the management of individual autonomy? (67)

Another option that has been discussed revolves around rights discourse (cf. Patton 2005; Brown 2000; McNay 2009). Although Foucault is ambivalent about rights discourse (cf. Foucault 2003: 39-40) as basis for critical politics, it might assist in the mitigation of injustice. Foucault has asserted that the more frequently the discourse of law and right is mobilized to counter the subjugations of normalizing
biopower, the more it is weakened as a form of opposition. Disciplinary power invades right discourse itself with the consequence that it too becomes normalizing (McNay 2009: 70). Rights are however important as they serve as a catalyst for bestowing a certain de facto legitimacy upon marginal identities and practices. Rights can constitute a crucial ‘episode’ in a longer struggle, whose end is the creation of new ‘cultural forms’ (cf. McNay 2009: 71).

Vis-à-vis these two options, I will, in the next chapter propose another possibility for the practice of Muslim politics and the contestation of dominant power structures. This form of politics surpasses the problematic identity politics that were recognized in the post-New Order films and self-help books in that it does not invoke a notion of an absolute block or challenge to the workings of power. Instead, I will show that it mobilizes a ‘critical history’ that works to unpack and fragment the workings of power and history.