

NING AS THE FEMALE WRITERS IN THE RE-AWAKENING OF PESANTREN LITERATURE: CRITICAL ANALYSIS FROM BOURDIEU'S CAPITAL THEORY

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Abstract

Novels written by female writers in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) from 2019 to 2020 were republished by *Ning*, who was the daughter of a *Kiai* and *pesantren* caregiver. The writers of the original novels include Khilma Anis, Najhaty Sharma, Nisaul Kamilah, Mar'atul Makhmudah, and Liza Samchah. The attempt made by *Ning* shows the effort to revive *pesantren* literature, specifically those written by female writers. The phenomenon is interesting because the works are read in different *pesantren* despite the limited space for female writers. Therefore, this study aims to show how literacy in *pesantren* is developed through the interaction of social capital, social media, and independent publishers, which enable writers to express ideas and expand their audience. The perspective of literary sociology and the capital theory of Bourdieu was used to connect social capital with the production of works by female writers in *pesantren*. The theories were also used to understand how the works reflected the social structure of *pesantren*. The results showed that *Ning* articulated the experiences, ideas, and Islamic identities through novels based on the interaction of capital possessed. The resulting works provided a new perspective on the experiences of female writers. It was observed that the works functioned as a personal expression and a negotiation of social structures experienced. The results contribute to the development of *pesantren* literature, currently dominated by male authors. Moreover, this study shows the social transformation in the tradition of more inclusive *pesantren* literacy as well as an increase in the awareness of issues related to female writers.

Keywords: *social capital, social media, independent publishers, literacy, pesantren female writers*

INTRODUCTION

A new generation of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) female writers are observed to have started writing and publishing novels in the early 2000s. The novels were influenced by chick lit and teen lit, which led to the production of *pesantren* pop literature (Ismah, 2011) and Islamic chick lit (Dewi, 2011). Twenty years after the presence of the two genres, a novel was written and published by the daughter of a *Kiai* who was also *pesantren* caregiver. The typical term for the daughter of a *Kiai* in the tradition of *pesantren*, specifically in East Java, is *Ning* (Zakiyah, 2018). *Ning* wrote novels on Facebook and printed hard copies through independent publishers for subsequent distribution through *pesantren* networks. This shows that the existence of *pesantren* female writers is closely related to social capital developed by Bourdieu (1989) as well as social media and independent publishers assisting in the process of expressing the ideas and expanding the audience base.

The five novels published sequentially include *Hati Suhita* (2019) by Khilma Anis, *Dua Barista* (2020) by Najhanty Sharma, *Surat Cinta Ning Zuraida* (2020) by Mar'atul Makhmudah, *DUR: Diary Ungu Rumansyah* (2020) by Nisyaul Kamilah, and *Cincin Kalabendu* by Lisa Samchah (2021). The focus is on the typical experiences of being a wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law of a *Kiai* in *pesantren*. It is important to observe the novels considering the ability of *Ning* to write and distribute despite the limited space.

This study is expected to complement existing literature on *pesantren* and female writers as previously conducted by Nor Ismah (Ismah, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2019, 2023). A new generation of female writers initiated the genre of pop literature with a strong desire and tradition of writing in *pesantren*. The writers were motivated by students through Matapena community to face the massive popular culture and to provide alternative media to support the identity of Muslim youth. This was achieved using online platforms where the writers practised writing and developed professionalism (Ismah, 2023).

Ning phenomenon shows the new passion among *pesantren* circles which are known for being patriarchal. This study argues that the process is due to the availability of the writing community and online platforms as well as the social status of the writers, independent publishers, and a strong market of 'militant' readers. The social and economic capital possessed by *Ning* led to the dissatisfaction with writing only on digital platforms, which led to the decision to print the content in the form of novels through independent publishers. Therefore, this study is conducted to answer three main questions, including (1) how social

and cultural capital significantly influence the literacy experience of *Ning*, (2) how *Ning* uses social media and independent publishers to support their presence as professional writers, and (3) how the representation of this capital appears in the narratives of *pesantren* female writers.

Pesantren has been a topic of discussion among Indonesian prose authors such as Djamil Suherman, Ahmad Tohari, Mustofa Bisri, Mahfud Ikhwan, and Ahmad Fuadi, with a focus on social life. Some female writers with similar content include Abidah el Khaliqy, Farahdiba, Vita Agustin, and Ira Mardan (Haryanti et al., 2022). These authors describe education and cultural traditions in *pesantren*, as well as the role and outlook on life of *Kiai*. The female from *Ning* Circle also provides a different character compared to the previous stories. The focus has been on students and *Kiai*, with the identity of *Ning* used by Khilma Anis, Najhaty Sharma, Nissaul Kamila, and Mar'atul Makhmudah as the main characters. This choice allows the writers to move more freely in conveying ideas, as well as being critical of values considered conservative.

In Indonesia, *pesantren* is unique traditional Islamic educational institution (Bruinsessen, 1995). The presence of dormitories ensures schools are dedicated to transmitting classical Islamic knowledge, including studying the Qur'an and Hadith, fiqh, Arabic grammar, and Sufism (Azra et al., 2007). A major characteristic is the focus on teaching yellow books in order to obtain formal education for subsequent application by students after leaving school. This is necessary because formal education is a way to guarantee the future, while religious education is a method to seek blessings (Nurtawab & Wahyudi, 2022). The trend shows that *pesantren* serves as a place to learn character education and Islamic religious procedures (Baso, 2012).

The schools are significant to the development of literacy culture in Indonesia, specifically before independence, due to their role as the oldest educational institution in the country (Hussin et al., 2017). The literacy culture is deeply rooted in understanding the Qur'an, Hadith, and other literary readings. This shows that the main literature is based on religion, but the focus has shifted from religious texts to socio-economic themes, specifically regarding life skills (Suharso & Sarbini, 2018).

Pesantren is a social institution with specific characteristics (Srimulyani, 2009). The location is often adjacent to the community environment but schools are isolated and implement a separate pattern of life. Therefore, cultural life is sometimes stronger than that of the surrounding community. This leads to the identification of schools as a subculture and part of social transformation (Wahid, 2001). Communication is also established with the community to continue the

tradition of knowledge and produce socio-cultural-economic activities such as art, trading, and farming. Schools are considered part of the centres to produce knowledge and literacy, specifically in villages (Alfathon et al., 2022). Students collect sufficient knowledge from *Kiai* to subsequently spread to the village community.

Pesantren was originally established and provided by and for male figures (Hasyim, 2010). The intention changed in 1919 when *pesantren* of Denayar Jombang opened a boarding section for female students. This segregation system led to the introduction of *Nyai*, the wife of *Kiai*, to manage the school (Zakiyah, 2016). *Nyai* Nur Khadijah, as the initiator, opened a female class for families and neighbours with an informal class system. This was subsequently transformed into formal learning with a class system in 1930 (Ma'ruf et al., 2021). The assumption that *pesantren* did not have specific socio-political implications for the lives of female students (Marhumah, 2008) led to the implementation of *da'wah* method by *Nyai* Khadijah Majahadah. The purpose is to study religion seriously because Islam significantly glorifies females (Suharto, 2022). The development of *pesantren* provides female students with access to education and becomes an option for parents who emphasise religious education for their children (Srimulyani, 2007).

The efforts increased the discourse on *pesantren* leadership, focusing only on *Kiai* and including *Nyai* and *Ning* as caregivers. This image also appears in the novels published by *Ning* which are the study corpus. Moreover, the literary analysis by Bourdieu intersects with his sociological theory, which offers a comprehensive view of how cultural capital and social structure influence the production and reception of literature (Speller, 2011). The concept is explained further in the next section.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The development of digital technology has changed the activities of *pesantren* over the last decade (Mustofa et al., 2022). This is because the digital world allows students to obtain and reproduce information cognitively, productively, informatively, and creatively (Fitriyah et al., 2024). The negative effects of social media cannot be denied, but online platforms continue to be the most popular methods of communication and self-affirmation (Beta, 2024). In addition to some digital platforms that can improve writing skills, expand connections, and reach wider readers (Ismah, 2023). Therefore, the introduction of social media has expanded writers' reach and literary authority.

Literature produced by the young generation of *pesantren* in the form of poetry, novels, and humour was widely published through Matapena and Diva Press before the development of online and digital platforms (Mustafied, 2012). Matapena is a traditional book publishing platform for the most popular *pesantren* literary community. The platform uses the chick or Islamic teen lit style with the aim of introducing young readers to fiqh, references to Islamic holy books, and jokes from school (Pujiati, 2020). Matapena spreads and preserves idealism, targeting young individuals through popular culture, such as magazines and novels (Ismah, 2019). However, the shift to online writing communities provides an alternative for female writers who have limited space to explore compared to the initial face-to-face channels or direct attendance. The process ensures the works of *pesantren* writers continue to appear and receive attention from several studies.

Some studies have focused on the development of *pesantren* literary texts. For example, Machsum analysed the works of students in East Java between 2000 and 2010 and reported their close relationship with *Kiai*, yellow books, and Javanese language. This further showed a binding relationship between humanity and spirituality (Machsum, 2013). Previous studies on other students' work showed that humanist religious discourse in *pesantren* literature allowed humanitarian issues proportionally along with cultural context (Astutiningsih & Pujiati, 2019). However, studies related to the presence of *Kiai* figures in Indonesian literature are needed to resolve different physical and spiritual matters required to occupy a strategic position in Islam and the community (Salam, 2014). The presence of *Nyai* and *Ning* in Indonesian or *pesantren* literature was not recognised in the early period.

Previous scholars analysed the works of *pesantren* female writers, specifically Abidah el Khalieqy, who focused on characters that placed education, social reform, and reproductive rights at the centre of the formation of female identity (Arimbi, 2009). The important position of Abidah makes her a reference for a new generation of writers who use different storytelling strategies and genres (Ismah, 2011). This is also evident in the works of Khilma Anis, Najhaty Sharma, and Abidah el Khalieqy. The writers have different views on the role and position of female students (Husniah et al., 2022), but all discuss the tradition of matchmaking in *pesantren* (Haryanti et al., 2022). Female characters presented in the novels written in the 2000s were intellectual, independent, and had the desire to be equal to the male characters (Muniroch & Furaida, 2020).

Pesantren females have a distinctive habitus, which is explained as the habits, skills, and character embedded and acquired by individuals through life

experiences (Bourdieu, 1991). Habitus shapes the way individuals view and react to the surrounding world (Ambrasat et al., 2016; Piroddi, 2021). It is also related to social position, which is determined by different types of capital, such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Medvetz & Sallaz, 2018). Capital can be used to maintain differences and dominance in the arena (Bourdieu, 1977). For example, the cultural capital an individual possesses, such as education and knowledge, is capable of influencing the position and understanding in the field of literature (Glaubitz, 2021; Speller, 2011). Bourdieu states that literature entertains and arouses the emotions of readers in addition to its role in expressing political, social, and ideological messages (Speller, 2011). Social capital is a network of social relationships used to obtain resources or benefits (Bourdieu, 1989). *Ning* was observed to have used social, cultural, and economic capital in producing and distributing literary works. Social capital is in the form of social networks, legitimacy, and access to symbolic resources. It was observed that *Ning* used the relationships developed in *pesantren* community to gain recognition and support in the world of writing.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative analysis was used to obtain information about the literacy tradition in *pesantren* through individual narratives and ideas shared with others (Sugiarti et al., 2020). The subjects of this study were female writers in schools and the novels published, while the object was capital theory by Bourdieu. Textual analysis was applied through a literary sociology perspective that focused on determining the close relationship between literary works, writers, and the environment. Literary sociology by Bourdieu perceives literature as a cultural product, arena for ideological struggle, and product of complex interactions between writers, publishers, readers, and broader structures (Speller, 2011).

Bourdieu used the concept of capital to explore how female writers used their social position in the community, specifically in *pesantren* (Bourdieu, 1983). The role of *Ning* provides a strategic position for female writers to mobilise the masses and present ideology through their work. Social and cultural capital also allows the mobilisation of the literacy tradition in *pesantren*. This is achieved through the participation of the writers and the reflection of their social experiences in literary works.

The screening process conducted led to the selection of five female writers from *pesantren* as the focus of the study. These include Khilma Anis, writer of *Hati Suhita*, Nisaul Kamilah, writer of *Diary Ungu Rumaysha*, Mara'tul Makhmudah, writer of *Surat cinta Ning Zuraida*, Najhaty Sharma, writer of *Dua barista*; and Liza

Samncha, writer of *Cincin Kalabendu*. Moreover, the selection of the writers as the study corpus was based on four reasons. First, the writers were the daughters or daughters-in-law of *Kiai* and were considered a core family of *pesantren*. Second, the novels that became the study corpus were initially published as serial stories on Facebook before finally being printed through an independent publisher. Third, the works written describe the typical experiences of being the daughter of *Kiai* and all the associated privileges and responsibilities. Fourth, the works use themes and character narrative patterns that are nearly similar. The literacy activities related to females in *pesantren* were subsequently identified by interviewing these five writers through WhatsApp in July 2022 and May 2024.

The qualitative method adopted was based on the design of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which required data categorisation, data display, and conclusions along with data collection (Suwastini et al., 2023). The data collected include the initial reading of the five novels to gain a general understanding of the works used as the subject. Moreover, interviews were conducted with the writers, and their social media activities were observed. This was followed by a careful reading of the five novels to understand how the characters in the novels became agents through the cultural and social capital possessed. The perspective of literary sociology was also applied to determine the relationship between the text, the environment, and the writers. The quotes were marked in the novels considered useful as the data, recorded, and categorised according to the study topic. Furthermore, interview data and social media posts were explained to show how the tradition of literacy and social media support the development of *pesantren* female writers. The quotes were also analysed to identify the capital represented in the narrative of female writers, and the last aspect was the conclusion.

ANALYSIS, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION

Harvest Season for Female Writers from *Pesantren*

Abidah El Khaeliqy was considered a productive writer because her works explicitly raised the rights and awareness of females in *pesantren* based on modern interpretations of Islamic texts (Hellwig, 2011). However, it was difficult for the new generation of *pesantren* female writers who emerged in the early 2000s to follow the popularity of Abidah. The presence of *Hati Suhita* by Khilma Anis in the digital era led to a breath of fresh air to the development of *pesantren* literature. Despite not being her first novel, *Hati Suhita* introduced Khilma Anis into the

literary arena and sparked the existence of similar writers, as explained in this section.

Ning Khilma Anis is the most popular female writer from *pesantren* due to her work *Hati Suhita*. She is the caregiver of Pesantren An-Nur, founded by her father, KH. Lukman Yasir, in Jember. *Ning* Khilma is married to Chazyal Mazda Choiruziyad, the grandson of KH. Turaichan Adjuri, a *Falak* expert from Kudus. In several literacy seminars, Khilma stated that her writing career could not be separated from the support and blessing of her family, specifically Abah *Kiai* and her husband. The background of Khilma in the Jember-Kudus *pesantren* family shows the existence of strong symbolic capital. This is expanded by being an alumnus of Pesantren As-Sa'idiyah Bahrul Ulum Tambakberas and Ali Maksum Krapyak.

The social capital possessed by Khilma is further extended through participation in social media. On Facebook, Khilma Anis has 183 thousand followers, and 146 thousand on Instagram using the account @khilma_anis. In addition to selling books, the commodification of works also appears through bags, clothes, and hijabs. The posts on the Facebook account showed that the novel *Hati Suhita* was completed, and the printing process was initiated on March 4, 2019. The popularity of the novel led to its adaptation into a film in 2023 which was enjoyed by 507,167 viewers spread across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Khilma's writing career developed in 2008 when she published the first novel, *Jadilah Purnamaku, Ning*, through Matapena, a traditional (major) publisher in Yogyakarta. Her second novel, *Wigati*, was self-published due to the desire to freely determine the content and writing style, including the distribution channels. This further ensures freedom in writing the conflicts associated with the characters. Moreover, the decision of Khilma Anis to present a religious, intelligent, and strong female figure made the novel *Hati Suhita* popular among readers, as observed in more than 90 thousand copies sold (Amaliyah, 2023). Another observation was that the novel combined *pesantren* life with a strong Javanese culture (Novitasari & Anggraini, 2021; Ulfa & Nuryatin, 2021; Zulaikhah, 2021).

Nisaul Kamilah (*Ning* Mila) is the writer of *Diary Ungu Rumaysha*, hereinafter abbreviated as DUR. She and her husband, Haris Chulaifi, are caregivers of Pesantren Sabiluth Thoyyib, Bugul Lor, Pasuruan. *Ning* Mila was raised in Bahrul Ulum Tambakberas Jombang environment as the daughter of KH Chisnulloh Abdurrohman and Hj. Aminatussurur. She graduated from MAN Tambakberas Jombang, continued her education at State Islamic University Malang and received a scholarship to study for a master's degree at State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. The symbolic capital of this writer was

being part of Tambakberas family, and cultural capital was developed through higher education. Moreover, *Ning* Mila built Halaqoh Bisnis Online (HBO) in 2017 to expand the social capital already possessed. HBO has 20,000 students spread across Indonesia and abroad as members. *Ning* Mila uses the platform to drive the creative economy of housewives by selling and marketing different health, beauty, fashion, and book products under Nisaul Kamila (NK) brand through social media.

The writing career of *Ning* Mila started in 2006 through *Ning* Aisyah novel trilogy published in Matapena. In mid-2018, she built Halaqah 1001 Aksara (HIA) writing network with 5,417 members through social capital possessed and using Facebook as a forum for interaction and publication (Ismah, 2023). The development of technology and the desire to empower females around her led to the self-publication of the novel *DUR* in 2020. The preference for self-publication was to have the capacity to set the price scale and target market with the aim of driving the small economy. In an interview, she stated that *DUR* was initially random writing on Facebook and not projected as a novel. However, the novel sold up to 10 thousand copies when it was published. Her entrepreneurial and writer activities made *Ning* Mila use social media to maintain the community and network she had built. Currently, she has 51 thousand followers on Facebook and 117 thousand on her Instagram account @nisaulkamilah.hbo.

Najhaty Sharma (*Ning* Haty), the writer of the novel *Dua Barista*, is the caregiver of Pesantren Al Munir Putri Pangkat, in Tegalrejo, Magelang. She studied at Pesantren Sunan Pandanaran in Yogyakarta and Al Falah Ploso in East Java. She has 42.4 thousand followers on Instagram @najhaty_sharma and 36 thousand on Facebook. Her novel, *Dua Barista*, also first appeared as a serial story on Facebook, as observed with *Hati Suhita* and *DUR*, before Telaga Aksara published it in early 2020. *Dua Barista* criticises the polygamous life in *pesantren*, which occurs because of the demands of having offspring as successors to the leaders. Previous studies have focused on the feminism and polygamy aspects of the novel (A'yun, 2022; Fatmawati, 2021; Mutia, 2022; Untari, 2021). A positive response from readers was observed, as more than 12 thousand copies were sold. In addition to *Dua Barista*, Najhaty Sharma also wrote short story collections such as *Lipstick and Kupu-Kupu Marrakech*. She received the Santri Awards for Culture and Tourism category on National Santri Day in 2023. This award legitimised her writing career and strengthened the social capital she already possessed as a caregiver of *pesantren*.

Mar'atul Makhmudah is the caregiver of Pesantren Annur 1, Bululawang, Malang. She spent her childhood in Lamongan, studying at Pesantren Annajiyah Bahrul Ulum, Tambakberas, Jombang, and was active as a regional administrator

of Fatayat NU East Java. This shows social capital possessed through both schools and organisations because she teaches at school every day. The two novels, *Rahasia Cinta* and *Surat Cinta Ning Zuraida* (SCNZ) were written during the process of managing several *pesantren* activities. She also uses Facebook by deliberately posting several early chapters, but the complete novels are in the form of printed books. The Facebook account of Maratul Makhmudah currently has 13 thousand followers, and her Instagram account, @maratulmakhmudah, has 7053 followers.

Li'izzah Nur Diana or Liza Samchah is from a *pesantren* family in Rembang. Her formal education was at *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* Salafiyah Bangilan Tuban, *Madrasah Tsanawiyah*, and *Madrasah Aliyah* Mathali'ul Falah, in Kajen, Pati. *Ning* Liza continued undergraduate studies at the State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, and received a master's scholarship at the Qur'an Science Institute (IIQ) Jakarta. Her novel, *Cincin Kalabendu*, was published in 2021. She appears to be the last compared to the other four writers discussed. This is observed from the fact that she has only 1641 followers on Instagram and 1200 on Facebook. Liza Samchah also published her early writings on Facebook as identified in the trends for the other writers. The comments and likes received on uploads made Liza more enthusiastic about completing the novel.

Bourdieu's theory identifies *pesantren* as arenas with interconnected systems and social struggles (Bourdieu, 1977). As a core family and caregivers of female *pesantren*, the five writers have strong symbolic capital based on kinship status as children of *Kiai* and the position occupied. The title, *Ning*, is a family status and symbolises exemplary behaviour, knowledge, and female leadership in school. Students' sense of belonging and devotion to the teacher ensures that the readers of the novels published by *Ning* are a network of students and alumni of *pesantren*. This shows the ease with which female writers who have strong relationships with *Kiai* or *pesantren* networks gain legitimacy for their novels.

The movement of the five writers from one *pesantren* to another allowed *sanad* or knowledge relationships that strengthened their social and cultural capital. Therefore, the network of students, alumni, *Kyai*, *Nyai*, and other religious institutions became strong social capital by providing significant solidarity and support. Social capital was also maintained through social media, as observed in the active usage of the platforms to show different activities conducted within and outside boarding schools, including the promotion of their novels. Social media provided unlimited access for these female writers to write and interact with readers. This leads to the discussion on how social media is used to write and build literacy movements in *pesantren* in the next section.

Social Capital and Literacy Movement in Pesantren

The growth of female writers as bestsellers shows that reading and writing literary works in *pesantren* is no longer prohibited. This openness allows initiative and a strong desire to become capital to pursue a career as a writer. Therefore, *pesantren* offers different programs to support the development of writing skills in students to ensure self-confidence, expression of ideas about Islam, and presentation of *pesantren* identity to the general readers (Ismah, 2012). Bourdieu interprets this concept as part of the process of forming cultural capital because literacy skills are a tool to achieve a certain social status and gain recognition outside *pesantren*.

The participation of parents in raising children is currently an important element in transferring social inequality from one generation to the next (Hemmerechts et al., 2017). According to Bourdieu, the parenting pattern leads to a primary habitus ingrained in several future practices. It is observed that the five female writers have a strong tradition of literacy, as they are members of the nuclear family in *pesantren*. The status as the daughter of *Kiai* allows *Ning* to access several reading materials, which leads to the development of a writing tradition. The habit of reading and writing from an early age due to the parenting pattern is cultural capital that assists female writers in gaining social recognition both inside and outside *pesantren*. For example, Khilma Anis was raised in Pesantren An-Nur environment, Jember, and was strongly influenced by her father, KH Lukman Yasir, a campus journalist in the Soeharto era (Rengganis, 2019). This influence reflects how the family's cultural capital, which is in the form of knowledge and literacy tradition, facilitates the development of writing talent. Her father's freedom and openness increased Khilma Anis's enthusiasm for writing novels.

The cultural capital possessed by Khilma Anis is not limited to her family but extends to the institution of *pesantren* and formal education. Her participation in SUSANA (*Suara Santri Assadiyah*) Magazine, ELITE Magazine (MA Tambakberas Jombang Student Magazine), and KRESIBA Magazine (*Kreativitas Siswa Siswi Jurusan Bahasa*) at Tambakberas showed that *pesantren* were important in developing her literacy skills. These media instilled the discipline to write different articles, including journalistic ones (Anis, 2019). The writing discipline possessed by Khilma is associated with the strong tradition of literacy in *Nyai* because students are trained to recite the Qur'an as well as to write and conduct journalistic activities. At a time when other boarding schools have not yet provided access for female students, *Nyai* provides a room, computer, and freedom for Khilma to complete magazines and bulletins. This statement can identify this: "Even though they are under the same institution, the boarding

school for boys already has a magazine, and the girls are required to make their own magazine. The boys' and girls' magazines may not be combined" (interview with Khilma Anis in July 2022).

The opportunities provided for female students allow *Nyai* to participate in managing *pesantren*. The symbolic capital possessed as the wife of *Kiai* provides *Nyai* the power to change the rules, policies, and habits, specifically in female *pesantren*. Another important observation is that *Nyai*, with a charismatic leadership pattern, is more effective in driving school activities (Hadi, 2020). Khilma explained that she finished writing bulletins and magazines and also had to learn design, printing, distribution, and maintenance of the continuity in the production process through the direction of *Nyai*. The experience garnered as a student in Tambakberas made Khilma Anis adapt quickly when she joined the Student Press Institute (LPM) Arena, Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta State Islamic University). Moreover, the facilities and experiences provided by Pesantren As-Sa'idiyah Bahrul Ulum Tambakberas show the importance of economic capital in facilitating the production of works and allowing female students to hone writing skills from an early age.

Nisaul Kamilah (*Ning Mila*) was raised in the literacy tradition of Pesantren Bahrul Ulum Tambakberas. The habit of writing at boarding school made *Ning Mila* continue the hobby while studying at State Islamic University of Malang. She was once the editor-in-chief of the Gempar Bulletin, the general editor of the Gumsi Bulletin, and the editor of Revolutioner Bulletin. The education and writing skills became cultural capital that strengthened her social and economic capital. After completing her studies, she built a strong network through Halaqoh Bisnis Online (HBO) and Halaqoh 1001 Aksara (H1A) communities. HBO was used to share her experiences in starting and managing a business and mentoring more than 20,000 students and alumni. Her love for the writing world also made her open an online writing class through H1A (Kamilah, 2020). The class allows *Ning Mila* and other writers to support each other, share experiences, and strengthen their writing skills. All the members are from *pesantren*, including the students and *Ning* circles, such as Najhaty Sharma, writer of *Dua Barista*, Mar'atul Makhmudah, writer of *Surat Cinta Ning Zuraida*, and Liza Samchah, writer of *Cincin Kalabendu*.

The obedience of *pesantren* students to *Kiai* and *Nyai* during their studies and as alumni allows the writers to become a core family, which further serves as strong symbolic and social capital supporting the development of their writing careers. The community also provides access to resources not owned individually as observed in this statement: "The influence of the community is very large, specifically in increasing friendship. I personally only want to share the writing

knowledge that I have, even though it is only a little" (Interview with Nisaul Kamilah on July 2022).

The Tambakberas that joined the H1A community was Mar'atul Makhmudah who founded NUANSA bulletin (Nurani dan Aspirasi Santri Annajiyah) with other female students while in Tambakberas where she was taught to focus on and appreciate writing. The trend could be identified from the statement: "Tambakberas provide a wide space for students to love the world of writing. The atmosphere of the *pesantren* does provide a higher appreciation for the world of writing which transcends individual interests" (interview with Mar'atul Makhmudah, on July 2022).

The writing skills gained while attending *pesantren* led Mar'atul Makhmudah to return to managing *Auleea* Magazine, which is owned by the management of Fatayat NU East Java. Writing and journalism, both print and electronic, are part of her daily life (Makhmudah, 2020).

Khilma Anis, Nisaul Kamilah, and Mar'atul Makhmudah all attended school in Tambakberas in the 90s and went to college in the early 2000s. The strong tradition of literacy in Tambakberas produced a conducive environment for writing. The habit of writing in the magazines led to an internalised habitus, which was transferred to a broader context as directed by Nisaul Kamilah through the H1A Community after leaving school. This social and cultural capital possessed by *Ning* Mila enabled the writing community (H1A) to develop rapidly.

The seriousness of Najhaty Sharma in writing was formed after joining the H1A community, and this was different from the situations observed by the other three writers. However, she has been writing diaries and rewriting books and films since the age of ten. The desire to focus on boarding and memorising the Qur'an stopped her writing hobby at the age of 20. After getting married, the busyness of taking care of the family and managing *pesantren* reduced the time to write. *Ning* Haty also assisted students in reading and memorising the Qur'an in addition to teaching basic fiqh, Arabic grammar, and books that discussed morals (Izzati, 2022). Her writing hobby reappeared at the age of 32 when she started being active on social media. Through the H1A community, Najhaty connected with the student writing network and began producing her first short story: "I accidentally met *Ning* Mila on Facebook. She invited fellow students to join and practice writing short stories at the H1A" (interview with Najhaty Sharma in July 2022).

The H1A community influenced Liza Samchah to write novels. Reading tradition has been formed in her family since childhood through the habit of going to the library. She read Bobo magazine, short stories, and history books and learnt

to write independently in the community. It was only when attending Aliyah school in Kajen that she participated in different non-fiction writing training and was active in the magazine division in her final year. At Islamic high school, Liza also read *Langit makin mendung* by Ki Pandji Kusmin and short stories by Gus Mus. She participated in Liburan Sastra di Pedesaan (Literature Camp in the Village) event held by Matapena Publisher and started writing short stories when studying at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University. In addition to short stories, Liza wrote theatre scripts staged at her boarding school. After completing her Master's studies, she joined H1A and succeeded in publishing *Cincin Kalabendu* novel.

Pesantren is an arena with a strong literacy tradition that is required to provide a conducive environment for female students to love the world of writing. This is evident from the three writers, Khilma Anis, Nisaul Kamilah, and Mar'atul Makhmudah, who were born in the same *pesantren*, Tambakberas. The tradition provides a "special space" for students with writing skills, which successfully leads to an increase in their passion for literacy and the production of female writers. Moreover, all the writers, except Najhaty Sharma, show a distinctive and similar pattern, which includes reading hobbies and learning to write through school magazines. MA (Madrasah Aliyah/Islamic High School) also joined the campus magazine and the writing community, wrote short stories and novels, and published them through independent publishers. It was observed that the social and cultural capital possessed by *Ning* allowed freedom, specifically to build a self-image as writers and promote their novels through social media.

From Social Media to Independent Publisher

The introduction of the internet and digital platforms had a major impact on the development of female writers from *pesantren* (Ismah, 2023). However, some of these schools did not allow students to access the internet, which limited the space for female writers to produce writings (Fitriyah et al., 2024). The five writers did not experience using multiple social media platforms to produce, promote, and market their writings. This was due to their status as caregivers of *pesantren*, which allowed them access to social media and interaction with followers. The following table provides information on social media owned and managed by *Ning*.

Table 1: Female Writers from *Pesantren* and Social Media

Name	<i>Pesantren</i>	Facebook	Instagram
Khilma Anis	An-Nur Jember, Jawa Timur	√	√
Nisaul Kamilah	Sabiluth Thoyyib, Bugul Lor, Pasuruan, Jawa Timur	√	√
Mar’atul Makhmudah	Annur 1 Bululawang, Malang, Jawa Timur	√	√
Najhaty Sharma	Al Munir Putri Pangkat, Tegalrejo, Magelang	√	√
Liza Samchah	Salaf – Rembang, Jawa Tengah	√	√

The table shows that *pesantren* female writers have a similar characteristic of being active social media users, specifically on Facebook and Instagram. The five works were produced using the same pattern, which included appearing as a serial story on Facebook and completing the content through a novel printed independently. This pattern is also applied by popular Wattpad writers who are not satisfied with reading their works only through the platform and are willing to publish them as a novel (Mawardi, 2018). In the publishing industry, publishers have argued that books written by female writers have a lower market value than books written by male authors. This shows that novels need to be sold at lower prices to motivate the audience to increase their sales (Weinberg & Kapelner, 2018). The trend led the five female writers to publish their novels independently. For Khilma, the choice of an Indie publisher was not due to a vacuum but the need for the freedom to set the price, think about distribution channels and promote the books through *pesantren* networks and social media. The decision of Nisaul Kamila was also based on the belief that publishing books through the Indie channel had more advantages compared to the other distribution platforms. Meanwhile, the seriousness of writing and the social and economic capital of Najhaty Sharma led her to establish Najhati Pena publishing house. These three *Ning* showed continuity in the process of being writers and entrepreneurs without leaving the status as caregivers of *pesantren*. The trend was associated with the ability of the digital era to expose *pesantren* arena, which was often closed.

The study conducted before 2010 by Boyd on MySpace and Facebook showed that these social networking sites allowed young communities to represent themselves, visualise social networks, as well as participate and interact with different groups and ages (Beta, 2024). The pattern is considered more effective for writers due to the opportunities provided to interact directly with readers and adjust stories to their expectations in addition to seeing market

interest or enthusiasm. The opportunity was used by Khilma Anis, Mar'atul Makhmudah, Nisaul Kamilah, and Najhaty Sharma as writers and caregivers of *pesantren*. This can be identified from the statement of Anis (2022) as follows:

Students shall not only be taught to recite the Qur'an and memorise it but also to write. Many stories and phenomena in *pesantren* can be written. Do not just be consumers! Students need to take part in becoming producers, trendsetters, and content creators.

Hati Suhita, Dua Barista, DUR, and Surat Cinta Ning Zuraida tell the stories of Gus and Ning bearing the burden as the children of Kiai and successors of *pesantren*. The stories received a positive response and sold well among readers. Social media was also used to identify writing networks and reader communities. The meetings held by the members led to online classes to practice writing skills, including the possibilities of distribution and sales. This shows that social media allows new spaces for female writers to express themselves and promote their work without facing the physical, cultural, and social obstacles often experienced in the real world.

Nisaul Kamilah was the first to establish HBO in addition to H1A. These two online communities allowed writers to connect through writing and online businesses. Khilma Anis, Nisaul Kamilah, and Najhaty Sharma focused on writing and selling their novels through social media such as Facebook and Instagram. The preference for Instagram is based on its visual power, allowing writers to promote their novels more creatively. For example, the feed posting feature ensures writers share excerpts of writing or inspirational quotes from novels. Instagram ensures there is no reliance on formal promotional media, which are considered more expensive and difficult to reach. Mar'atul Makhmudah also developed a writerpreneur for printing, distributing, and selling novels. It was developed as an extracurricular activity for *pesantren* to ensure that students interested in writing are aware of the potential of the profession. A minimum of two students were able to succeed in publishing books in comic form through a major publisher, Gramedia. The success opened the eyes and spirit of other students to work and be empowered. Students are busy memorising the Qur'an, but they also generate passive income. According to Makhmudah (2022), "Writing spreads knowledge and the same trend is expected from my students. It cannot just be writing without meaning. We chat together, convey the purpose of writing, improve and evaluate the content together".

The digital era led to increasingly open access to literature in *pesantren*, which was previously difficult. It was assumed that literature was *thulul amal*, long-held dreams, and unrealistic. The assumption was experienced by Mar'atul Makhmudah when she was scolded and belittled for forming the writerpreneur extracurricular. However, the literacy program initiated by the government to ensure students read books inevitably motivates *pesantren* caregivers to allow literature (interview with Nisaul Kamilah, 2022). The contents and writers to be read by students are supervised in line with the report of Ismah that the development of print media or literary works targeting teenage readers has become a challenge for *pesantren* to select the right content for students (Ismah, 2016).

The determination of the contents considered suitable for students is based on the need to prevent the entry of unwanted reading materials. The existence of writers from *pesantren* provides space for literary works to be accepted. Najhaty Sharma remembered how literature used to be taboo because it was considered to have the potential to present pornography and love affairs. The prohibition forced students to finish reading most literature outside school premises secretly. However, the introduction of Islamic articles by Habbiburahman El Shirazy, A. Fuadi, and Asma Nadia, improved the acceptance. *Hati Suhita*, *Dua Barista*, and others produced by female writers also made *pesantren* increasingly open to literary readings such as novels and poetry. This is confirmed through the following statement by Khilma Anis in a personal interview (July, 2022).

Nowadays, *Hati Suhita* is widely disseminated in various *pesantren*, not only in Java but also in Sumatra. I am certainly happy because there was only a tradition of book dissection in the past; now there is novel dissection. Although some *pesantren* prohibit their students from reading novels (generally), Alhamdulillah, none have prohibited reading *Hati Suhita*. It turns out that in *pesantren*, the first filter for whether or not students are allowed to read novels is more about the background of the writer, not just the story.

As a writer and caregiver of *pesantren*, Najhaty Sharma obtained positive responses to her work and writing activities. The presence of Facebook and Instagram allows her to distribute and sell through online stores, providing readers with easy access. Najhaty Sharma has often been invited to several *pesantren* to share her writing experiences due to her popularity. She says *pesantren* is enthusiastic about inviting students to read and write. As she recounts, "The

curriculum has not probably changed, but extracurricular writing activities have increased. The spaces for students to express themselves have also become wider” (Haryanti, 2022b).

Capital in Female Narration of *Pesantren* Literature

In a study conducted on the new generation of female writers from *pesantren*, the emergence of *chick lit* and *teen lit* in the early 2000s significantly influenced the production of pop literature (Dewi, 2011; Ismah, 2011). The genre focuses on the life of a student at boarding school, such as the habit of sharing and memorising the Qur'an, expressions of individual love faced with the limitations for males and females, and several traditions. Writing about the experience of being a (female) student is important because of *pesantren*'s unique and distinctive culture and traditions (Husniah et al., 2022).

The sociology of literature considers novels as representations of social structure and cultural capital owned by the writers. This was observed from the stories presented by the five writers studied, which showed their lives as core families of *pesantren* through the narratives of the main female characters. The novels articulate the experiences and tensions experienced by females in *pesantren*. The theme maintained relates to arranged marriages, typical of novels set in these schools, as presented in the following discussion.

Hati Suhita by Khilma Anis tells a story related to the household life of *Ning* and *Gus*, who were matched for the sake of the continuity of *pesantren*. The main character, Alina Suhita, is the daughter of *Kiai* Jabbar, the owner of a famous Salaf *pesantren* in Mojokerto. The symbolic capital owned by her family made Alina ask *Kiai* and *Nyai* Hannan from Pesantren Al Anwar to become their daughter-in-law since she was a child. This request strengthens social capital and networks through matchmaking between *pesantren*. The education acquired made Alina a Pesantren Al Anwar leader and became a beautiful, attractive, smart, and polite girl. As the daughter of a great *Kiai*, Alina Suhita inherits her mother's skills in leading *pesantren*. This shows the narrative formed through the main female character, who has symbolic, social, and cultural capital. The trend shows that *pesantren* females are no longer presented as backwards but as agents of change due to their position and knowledge.

A similar picture is observed in the novel *Dua Barista* by Najhaty Sharma. The main character, Mazarina (*Ning Maza*), is the daughter of *Kiai* Manshur, the owner of Pesantren Banyu Kuning. She married *Gus Ahvash*, the son of *Kiai* Solahuddin, the only successor to Pesantren Al Huda. There was initially happiness in the marriage, but it changed when *Ning Maza* could not provide a

child to maintain school continuity. The trend shows that marriage is part of the efforts to ensure the continuity of *pesantren*. It is considered a tool to hold position and social status as well as an effort to guarantee leadership. Therefore, Ning Maza's persistence in developing female *pesantren* is considered vanity when she has not been able to give birth as a female. The trend shows that the main purpose of females or wives is to have children (Haryanti et al., 2025). The narrator perceives the leadership of *pesantren* who are close to the nuclear family as presented in this quote: "Islamic boarding is not a business that is considered prestigious, so we shall be possessive in maintaining it with descendants" (Sharma, 2021, p. 458).

The symbolic, social, cultural, and economic capital possessed allows Ning Maza to speak up and make her life choices. It was observed from the story that the polygamous marriage implemented based on correct Sharia caused suffering to several parties and led to voices of rejection against the marriage. Capital owned by Ning Maza leads to bravery to leave the polygamous life and fight against the discourse of patriarchal domination.

Hati Suhita and *Dua Barista* discuss the lives of Ning as caregivers of *pesantren*, but *DUR* focuses on the marriage between Gus Asy and Rumaysha (Rum). The marriage was initially considered non-ideal because Rum did not come from a *pesantren* background. Fate used Rum to replace her sister, who died a few days before the wedding. Rum was not the child of a *Kiai* but was born into a family with a tradition of *muhibbin* and fans of *Habib* and *ulema*. This was the reason studying (*ngaji*) and learning religious texts were common in her family. The process increased her respect for her family and her closeness to *Kiai* and *Nyai*. Rum is also described as the main character as a smart girl with a leadership spirit who likes to write. Her sweet face, cheerful nature, and fashionable appearance led to her identification as a celebrity with hundreds of thousands of followers. She receives endorsements and markets different *hijab* (veil) and *gamis* (abaya) products through Instagram to earn income. This shows that Rum does not have symbolic and social capital in *pesantren*, but Instagram allows her to open an unlimited network. Rum also gained social capital through her activities in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the Student Executive Board. The character shows how females are represented as strong, fast learners, and brave. The story of Rum further leads to the criticism of the life and leadership of *pesantren*, as presented in the following quote:

I never defined the son of a *Kiai* as a crown prince. I also do not want to consider myself a future queen of the Darul Quran. It is enough for me if I

can be a queen in my husband's heart. There is no need to view the *pesantren* as part of patriarchal neo-feudalism. Anyone worthy and qualified can be a successor, both sons and daughters (Kamilah, 2020, p. 212).

A similar character, a beautiful, smart, independent, superior, and leadership-minded female figure, is used by Mara'atul Makmudah in her novel *Surat Cinta Ning Zuraida*. The story tells the story of *Ning* as a student, the awareness of her status as a *Kiai's* child, and the burden of her future to manage *pesantren* in Mojokerto, which belongs to her parents. This makes *Ning Zuraida* to often be serious about studying and memorising the Qur'an (p. 5). The narrator shows the readers that *Ning Zuraida* has "lineage, wealth, beauty, and religious knowledge" (p. 233), leading to their status as a popular girl in *pesantren*. She is also known to be friendly and does not discriminate against the community according to social strata. Social and cultural capital possessed by this main character allows her to criticise the lives of *Gus* as presented in this quote: "What is the meaning of being a *Gus* if you do not have noble morals and adequate religious knowledge?" (Makhmudah, 2020, p. 251).

Cincin Kalabendu shows a female character who does not have many choices in her life compared to the other four that present strong female characters with diverse capital. The main character, Latifah, is a student who is forced to marry *Kiai Ghani*, her teacher at Pesantren Jatikemuning. The marriage is not blessed with a child and *Kiai Ghani* proposes to Latifah to become "a woman who can be trusted as the mother of the successor to the struggle at *pesantren*" (Samchah, 2021, p. 36). Latifah was forced to accept the proposal to serve *Kiai* family and *ngalap barokah*. She is described as a young girl who has not graduated from Aliyah, is beautiful and has a polite personality. Latifah is active and smart and has a dream to continue school. However, her position as a student and second wife leads to difficulty in positioning herself and making peace with her destiny. The change in her status to *Nyai Muda* (Young *Nyai*) did not automatically lead to more respect and position at *pesantren*. She consistently received criticism, coldness, and sarcasm as the second wife of *Kiai Ghani*. Latifah subsequently voiced the anxiety in her head through writing. She believed her life as a modern girl was confined in the shadow of three men, including her grandfather, father, and husband (Samchah, 2021, p. 28).

She lived under pressure and received several slanders but her respect for the Pesantren Jatikemuning family made Latifah powerless to fight back. According to Bourdieu's theory, this situation is related to the doxa *Birrul Walidain*

(devotion to parents) successfully instilled in Latifah. The belief made her experience symbolic violence up to the point *Kiai* Ghani divorced her through a message on her cellphone. The period she used to study and serve ended with the status of a widow. This is shown in the following quotation:

Kiai Ghani is not only my ex-husband who has caused me pain, but more than that, he is my *Kiai*, my teacher, and my *murabbi*. And that is not going to change. No matter how painful the wounds he has caused, I still respect him and uphold him (Samchah, 2021, p. 207).

The five novels by *Ning* show similar attributes for the character, including smart and tough females in a family circle associated with *pesantren*. Social and cultural capital possessed allowed the main female characters to negotiate the habitus, specifically regarding matchmaking, a reverent attitude, and leadership in a closed *pesantren*. The events and conflicts presented in the stories are different, but the five novels show the same tendency of voice, which focuses on females as agents who support the sustainability of *pesantren*. Four novels have happy endings, including *Hati Suhita*, *Dua Barista*, *DUR*, and *Surat Cinta Ning Zuraida*. This is observed from the fact that the level of capital possessed allows female characters to succeed in voicing their anxieties. Meanwhile, *Cincin Kalabendu* offers a dark story in *pesantren* from the start and ends with the failure of the main character to achieve her dreams, love, and rise from her gloomy past. This happens because Latifah does not have sufficient capital to fight and make changes as a student. Therefore, the five novels show the connection to the writers as observed in the significant influence of capital possessed by females on the space for movement. The status of *Ning* allows females to become agents of change who voice concerns about injustice in *pesantren*.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the publication of novels by female writers from *Ning* circles, including daughters/in-laws of *Kiai*, showed the revival of *pesantren* literature, which male authors had consistently dominated. It was observed that the works articulated females' experiences, ideas, and identities in *pesantren*. All the five writers studied had almost the same tendency to show the role of females as agents supporting the sustainability of these schools. As the core family, the writers had a good tradition of literacy, which later served as social and cultural capital. Social capital provides support, legitimacy, and access to intellectual resources. This was achieved in the form of networks and communities maintained and cared for

through social media, which served as a new space for female writers. The platforms allowed writers to interact with readers, promote their writing, and expand networks outside school. Therefore, the literacy of female writers was determined by both personal initiative and capital accumulated through social, family, and *pesantren* environments.

Female writers developed through a similar pattern by being active users of social media, taking online writing classes, starting to write novels via Facebook, and publishing independently. It was observed that independent publishers served as an alternative channel to convert social capital into concrete cultural capital in the form of books. The trend was due to the opportunity provided to publish novels according to the desired style and market through the network of students and alumni. The writing classes conducted offline and online also supported the growth and development of literature in *pesantren*. This was observed in the classes conducted by students and caregivers through their networks. The novels also presented a new perspective, which was considered more reflective of the experiences of females in *pesantren*. Therefore, the re-emergence of female writers was due to the interaction between social capital, social media, and independent publishers. The novels produced were based on personal expressions and also as a form of negotiation with social structures experienced.

This study provides several recommendations to increase the production of literature and the number of female writers from *pesantren*, considering the status as an educational and social institution dominated by patriarchal values. First, there is a need to strengthen access to literacy education, specifically for female students. Second, social media can be used for promotion and literary discussion. Third, there is a need to develop online and offline writing classes to serve as a platform for learning to write as a team. Fourth, the distribution network needs to be improved to strengthen the position of female writers in the literary world and offer more diverse and inclusive narratives.

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