

Islamic Science Fiction in Indonesia

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How do scientific and technological advancements change our world and our lives? How are we to understand these changes in a global context, and particularly, how do we perceive and judge them from an Indonesian perspective?

I will approach this topic by looking at three popular novels that are somewhat exceptional in the field they are part of, i.e. Islamic youth literature¹. The novels are exceptional because they appropriate a genre that has so far largely been ignored in Indonesian creative writing: the genre of science fiction. Analyzing popular fictional texts of this kind may seem to be a rather too limited, maybe even irrelevant endeavor. Of what importance are these novels? The three novels I will look at certainly are not particularly high literary achievements – they are popular novels written by very young, inexperienced authors, with the obvious goal of entertaining the reader, with an additional sprinkle of da'wah (as is the convention for popular Islamic literature). But it is not literary quality that I want to look at on this occasion. By imagining future worlds and positioning Islam and Indonesia in those worlds, the authors take up popular narrations of progress, as well as rather commonly held views on the position of Islam in the world. As I will argue, the novels thereby make visible some of the ambivalences these narrations bring about, particularly if combined with one another.

Positioning Science Fiction

It would be inappropriate to call science fiction a purely Western genre. Surely science fiction novels, stories and films have been written/made in various cultural contexts. Nevertheless, it can still be said that science fiction is concerned with issues surrounding particularly Western concepts of modernity and progress, and most science fiction

¹ While there have long existed novels intended for a teenage readership in Indonesia, a more specific genre of youth literature has only emerged lately, i.e. since the 2000s. Unique about these novels is their use of a particular youth language (*bahasa gaul*), as well as the fact that the authors mostly belong to the same age group as the intended readers. Apart from these common characteristics, this new youth literature is rather diverse. There has not been enough research on this genre to make precise statements about its development, but from what I observed it seems that the subgenre of Islamic youth literature appeared as a response to earlier novels mostly focusing on teenage love, particularly among urban middle-class or high-class youth. In comparison to these teenage love stories, Islamic youth novels tend to stress the need for stricter moral barriers limiting the interactions between unmarried boys and girls. But this Islamic youth literature is in itself extremely diverse, reflecting the diversity of Indonesian Islam. Particularly, there is a modernist strain associated mainly with the Muslim writer's organization Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP), as well as groups with a traditionalist orientation, as for example Matapena whose writers mostly have a NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) pesantren background. The three novels analyzed here belong to the modernist strain.

addresses basic anxieties about what this modernity has brought about and will bring about in the future.

What will the scientific and technological advancements of the future be? What will be made possible by them, and how will human life change? Dystopias are very common in mainstream science fiction, and most of these dystopias are based on imagined negative effects of what technology will make possible. How will artificial intelligence develop in the future: Will machines outwit humans one day? Will technology turn against men? Another common motive is total surveillance and control over human's bodies and minds, as for example in early science fiction novels like George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Will technological progress enable dictators of the future to set up control systems that are so totally encompassing that human agency will be made impossible? Another motive found in many science fiction films and novels is space exploration, often linked to the encounter with aliens. From a postcolonial perspective, this motive is particularly interesting. The resemblance with earlier, i.e. colonial, encounters with a strange, incomprehensible, often threatening Other, is often only too obvious.

Additionally, science fiction often concerns itself with contemporary global problems we face, many of which seem utterly impossible to solve: the ongoing destruction of the natural environment, population growth, scarcity of resources. What will happen when the population keeps growing while resources are limited? In what manners will human reproduction be limited or controlled? Or will humans finally leave the earth and create new environments for themselves elsewhere?

What is so particularly "Western" about all this? First of all, it is a genre expressing the anxieties of those who control science and technology. Will they meet their responsibilities, and be able to face future challenges? Will they, willingly or unwillingly, destroy what is dear to them? From the other side of the East-West (or North-South) divide, though, other issues would have to be brought up. Concerning science and technology, people in the so called "Third World" or "developing world" face problems that seem rather more pressing and urgent than that speculative fear about future risks. The main problem with science and technology is not the question if they will one day overpower us somehow "out of themselves", but that right now - not in some distant future - they are almost entirely in the hand of others. Indonesians, for example, are certainly consumers of all kinds of technological devices, but they are mostly uninvolved in the development and production of these devices, except as cheap laborers. Therefore, the profits made are also mainly the profits of others. This situation results in a different perspective, as is clearly reflected in Indonesian public discourse on technology, e.g. the electronic media and communication technology. Concerns about "Western values" corrupting Indonesian consumers are far more commonly voiced than more general concerns about the dangers of technology "as such".

The Three Indonesian Islamic Science Fiction Novels

The three novels I want to look at are *Secret Project* by Sandia Primeia (2005), *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda* by Efi F. Arifin (2004), and *Reva Floyd* by Taufiq Affandi (2004).² As already mentioned above, the authors are all very young. Sandia was 19 at the time her novel was published, Efi was 23 and Taufiq 21. All three books were published by publishing houses that have special divisions for Islamic youth literature, i.e. Dar! Mizan (*Secret Project* and *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*) and Gema Insani's Fiksi Remaja Islami (FikRi) (*Reva Floyd*).

Secret Project is the story of a group of young Indonesian Muslims who discover a Zionist plot, i.e. the plan to dominate the earth by using biotechnology. The Zionists intend to create superior human beings ("the Best Variety on Earth"), with the hope to then be able to wipe out their foes (first and foremost among whom are, naturally, Muslims). The events take place in a research facility called Bio-Island located in Indonesia. The Zionist "Secret Project" illegally set up in an underground division of Bio-Island is eventually uncovered by the protagonists, and thereby successfully stopped. Anyhow, the novel ends by suggesting that this is only a partial and temporary victory: the project will be continued in other places, as will Muslim resistance to it.

NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda ("NSJ 2122 The Legendary Mummy") imagines an even larger future challenge to Islam. In the aftermath of violent events in the form of wars between religious communities in the years 2003 to 2022, religion is totally outlawed. This is part of a scheme by a particular group who purposely triggers conflicts, only to then depict religion as inherently evil and violent. This group then sets up a central government ruling the whole earth. The events narrated in the novel take place a century later, i.e. in 2122. Islam and other religions have survived underground, but their position is extremely difficult. The main character is Rekha, a young scientist working in Bandung. Having grown up without religion like everybody else in her society, she eventually finds out that she is the daughter of one of the last Muslims, a woman preserved in a frozen state (the "legendary mummy" of the title) by the regime. After having first been suspicious towards the underground Muslim community, in the end she helps them by making the memories of her mother accessible, thereby providing them with an alternative historical source. The novel ends with the resolve of the community to fight for their legal rights to practice their religion.

Reva Floyd is the only novel with a setting not in Indonesia, not even on the planet earth. The temperatures on earth having become unstable because of the effects of global warming, humans have moved to space colonies. The plot takes place on a space colony that is a caliphate, Duden 11 in the orbit of Saturn. The main event narrated is an attack on the colony that can finally be successfully warded off. In contrast to the other two novels, this is not an attack on Islam as such, but is rather based on personal rivalries between the attacker and one of the senior scientists of Duden 11.

² Sandia Primeia, *Secret Project*, DAR! Mizan, Bandung 2005; Efi F. Arifin, *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*, DAR! Mizan, Bandung 2004; Taufiq Affandi, *Reva Floyd*, Gema Insani, Jakarta 2004.

Indonesia in the novels

What are the fate of the Indonesian state and of Indonesian cultures and languages in the novels? In *Secret Project* the Indonesian nation seems to exist in quite the same way as today, the novel being set in a rather near future (2018-2025). However, we do not learn much about Indonesia's fate, except that in terms of technology and scientific development it is still a little backward, but is quickly catching up. In *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*, Indonesia exists only as a part of the worldwide NSJ or "Nations Society for Justice" [sic], not as an independent nation. Even though its setting is "Bandung City", the society and environment portrayed have almost nothing specifically Indonesian. The town is divided into "districts", Rekha's colleagues at the "International Lab" are from all over the world, and even the two local policemen who chase the underground Muslims bear the rather unindonesian names Hans and Angel. In *Reva Floyd*, Indonesia is not mentioned at all, it being part of the earth that has been left behind.

In all of the novels, English words and phrases are used frequently, especially in dialogues. However, the question of language is very seldom brought up explicitly. Are the English phrases to signify that English has become the main language of communication? We don't really get to know it. In *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*, it is mentioned that when Rekha chats with her British friend Will, he tries to use the Indonesian language. So the Indonesian language does still exist. But where is it used? Does Rekha speak English or Indonesian with her mother, her servant, her colleagues? We don't know.

In fact, questions of language and of the Indonesian nation are rather marginal to the novels' plots. The authors seem not very much concerned about the future fate of Indonesian language(s) and cultures. Their main concern is the future of Islam, not the future of Indonesia. This lack of attention results in an image of future societies where, just as it is the case today, European languages are the ones considered most prestigious, and English is somehow "naturally" used as universal means of communication. So even in the space caliphate Duden 11, the protagonist Ihsan quite naturally praises the son of a colleague who has learned to speak French at the early age of 5 and is now learning Italian, while just as naturally never mentioning Indonesian, let alone mentioning any regional Indonesian languages.

Interestingly, apart from a few common Arabic phrases like *alhamdulillah* or *jazakallah*, even in Islamic contexts English is dominant. For example, in *Secret Project* and in *Reva Floyd*, places of worship are referred to as "Islamic Center", not as *masjid*. Additionally, none of the imagined future Muslim communities seem to be dominated by Arabs, or to be oriented towards an Arab center. Arabs are most strikingly absent in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*: the two *mujahidin* brothers Don and Terry fighting for the existence of the underground Muslim community are Americans, and Rekha's mother Maryam, the brave Muslim woman who refuses to give in to the NSJ, seems to be an Indonesian (her daughter is described as having genuinely Indonesian features). In this way, the novels create a vision of a global/universal ummah where Indonesians are not anymore looked down upon as "second-rate Muslims" (as is often the case in the present), while at the same time rather uncritically embracing the further development of globalized, anglicized world.

The joys of progress

None of the typical anxieties about future technology described above are in any way central to the three Indonesian novels. No aliens exist in any of them, and in *Reva Floyd* the idea that there might be alien life somewhere out there in the universe is even explicitly judged as probably just a myth. Neither do environmental problems, population growth, or the scarcity of resources cause much trouble in the imagined future worlds. It is not that those problems don't arise. But they are rather easily dealt with, for example by moving to space colonies as in *Reva Floyd*, or by creating new species for consumption as in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*. Nor do artificial intelligence or total surveillance pose serious threats. Artificial intelligence is mostly friendly and harmless, and surveillance may be worried about occasionally, but it is always rather easy to evade: it is sufficient to avoid the use of communication technology and rather meet face to face when discussing important matters.

As is common to science fiction, much attention is given to the description of technological advancements. For example, in all three novels the tasks of maids and other servants have been taken over by humanoid robots. Transportation has become faster and more convenient, and new flying vehicles (*airmobile*, or *spacetrans*) exist – in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda* and *Reva Floyd* they are even lovingly given names by their owners. New communication devices are also described in all novels. Strikingly, this future technology appears to be almost completely harmless: sometimes friendly, helpful or amusing, at other times a bit annoying. Even artificial intelligence living closely together with humans does not become a menace, as for example in the case of the cyber servant James who helped to bring up Rekha after her father's death in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*. Even though this machine clearly has chances to influence Rekha – he educates her, tells her stories (including the NSJ's official history on the violent nature of religion), and even programs her dreams – his power over her is extremely limited. When she gets annoyed or bored with him, she just kicks at him, thereby deactivating him temporarily. And the programming of dreams might remind us of the total control over humans by "sleep-conditioning" in *Brave New World*, but it does not the least resemble it in its scary, dystopian quality. Just like a child growing up and not wanting to hear the same old fairytales anymore, Rekha decides that she'll rather dream her own dreams, and she is free to do so.

In *Secret Project*, scientific and technological progress is explicitly celebrated as something Indonesia can be proud of: "Bio-Island will make the world know that Indonesia ... *still exist[s]!*"³. While in *Secret Project* Indonesia is described as still backward and therefore having to prove itself is this way, *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda* and *Reva Floyd* portray future worlds where there is no such backwardness anymore. People of different races and ethnicities interact freely, and no discrepancies in the access to technology are described. Neither is science dominated by any particular race or group. It is remarkable that rather than on explanations about how this new technology works, the narrations focus on describing the ease with which the protagonists make use of it. Some

³ *Secret Project*, p. 10. The words in italic are English in the original, but without the "s" of "exists". The use of (sometimes incorrect) English words or phrases in the Indonesian text is rather typical for these novels.

particularly interesting scenes celebrating this new equality can be found in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*. Rekha's British friend Will is described as being worried about using the *teleport*, a transportation device that enables people to move from one place to another in a few seconds by disassembling and reassembling the cells of their bodies. Will's preference for more traditional, slower vehicles appears as rather unreasonable – there is nothing wrong with using the *teleport*, Will is just being old-fashioned. Another humorous element of the novel is the description of James (the cyber servant) as being modeled upon Prince Charles, and constantly annoying Rekha with his old-fashioned British attitudes and tastes. So the imagined worlds are worlds where progress is joyfully embraced, worlds of a relaxed, happy use of the newest technological devices by everyone regardless of identity and origin. They are also worlds where young Indonesian scientists work together as equals with colleagues from all over the world. Compared to the darker, less optimistic futures in much of Western science fiction, these celebrations of progress and equality may seem extremely naïve. But on the other hand, the joy and satisfaction of imagining a world beyond the East-West (or North-South) divide, where global inequalities have totally vanished, make very much sense from the perspective of those who are not among the creators of today's technology, but among its passive consumers. Why should a young Indonesian author adopt the anxious attitude of those having to blame themselves for creating something that might become (or has already become) a threat to humanity?

Technology and the Will of God

Basically, the anxieties articulated in mainstream (Western) science fiction can be seen as routed in a secularist, linear version of progress. Science will penetrate everything, knowledge will continue to increase, and technology will become more sophisticated and powerful. Computers will know more and more – they may very well one day become all-knowing, all-powerful, or may be used to make some human being seem godlike. Religious ideas are quite common in mainstream science fiction, but only very rarely is science fiction based on faith. On the contrary: In science fiction, beliefs and gods are often consciously created to deceive and subdue the masses.

As they are routed in the firm belief that the one all-knowing and all-powerful God does indeed exist, the plots of *Secret Project*, *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*, and *Reva Floyd* are not troubled by such fears. For example, in the imagined world of *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda* it is possible to download the memory of a human being onto a chip, thereby making it accessible to others. Imagining a technological advancement of this sort may seem rather terrifying, as it opens up of the human mind to a total surveillance, making it impossible to keep anything secret. But the novel puts a limit to these scary images: by the will of God, Maryam's memory cannot be downloaded by the regime's scientists – only her daughter Rekha succeeds to access this memory.

An extremely interesting character with regard to technology and religion is the humanoid robot Reva in *Reva Floyd*. In the imagined reality of the novel, intelligent humanoid robots are used for the protection of peace and safety in the space colonies, and therefore are mainly fighting machines. However, they are portrayed in a way that does not at all make them appear threatening, but rather friendly and sympathetic. They are capable of

emotions, communicate with each other in a playful way, and have a tender relationship to the humans taking care of them. Reva, the latest and technologically most advanced of these robots, puzzles his human technician by spontaneously developing a need he was never programmed for. Without anyone teaching him this – the humans he has contact with are not Muslims – Reva feels the wish to submit to God by performing the Muslim ritual prayer, which he describes as a personal form of “recovery”, additional to the recovery phases that the robots need to regain their strength.

Representations of artificial intelligence have been extremely diverse in science fiction, and the question if machines can have emotions is certainly not new. However, the idea that they may also have spiritual needs is rather unique. Here the Islamic concept that everything in the world, be it a mountain, a tree or a human being, is naturally inclined towards submission to God, is extended to artificial intelligence.

It can be concluded that in contrast to those science fiction versions where technology (or those in control of technology) rises to a somewhat godlike status, in these three Indonesian novels technology stays firmly in its limits. However advanced it becomes, it stays part of a human world full of imperfections, submitted (or submitting itself) to the will of God just like everything and everyone else.

A life for science and progress?

So it is not technology or science as such that poses a threat in the three novels. Is there then absolutely nothing wrong with those future ways of life made possible by the imagined scientific and technological progress?

At least in two of the novels, i.e. *Secret Project* and *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*, there is indeed something wrong with the way the young scientists lead their life. But the concern is not so much with some threat inherently arising from the advancement of science and technology, but with the position those worldly matters of science and progress are given in the life of the individual. In *Secret Project*, the main character Reva (coincidentally her name is the same as the humanoid's name in *Reva Floyd*) is repeatedly lectured, sometimes even severely scolded, by her friends for working too much. The reason is not that there is anything wrong with her work as such. But foregrounding work the way she does, thereby leaving only a minimal amount of time for religious activities, is seen as harmful to her identity as a Muslim. Indeed, Reva herself feels that she has left “the balanced life of a Muslim”⁴ she once lead.

An even stronger sense of unease and unhappiness is felt by Rekha in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*. Her work is described as boring and unfulfilling, while at home she often meets no one but the cyber servant James, her mother⁵ being extremely busy with her own work. This feeling of boredom and aimlessness is depicted as connected to the atheist way of life

⁴ *Secret Project*, p. 138.

⁵ The mother referred to here is not the “legendary mummy” Maryam mentioned above, but the woman who has adopted and raised her. At this moment of the plot, Rekha is not aware of the fact that this is not her biological mother.

prescribed by the regime. In a conversation between Rekha and her friend Will, this issue is brought up openly. Will points out how people in the past seemed to have something more meaningful to live for – living and working “for the NSJ” seems utterly unsatisfactory. He also brings up the question of death and the afterlife. “Where will we go after we die, Re[kha]?”, he asks, then sarcastically adding that according to his colleagues who are all NSJ staff (as are Will and Rekha themselves), after death they will meet again at some place called “NSJ staff resting place”.

The chapter ends with Rekh's reflections on this conversation. Reflecting on how the issues Will talked about are totally absent in public discourse, as if the NSJ are all that matters, she then comments: “Indeed, it is justified that the NSJ should be talked about this much because the NSJ have solved all racial conflicts, there are now no more superpowers, everything is perfectly taken care of by the NSJ, everyone is happy. Is everyone really happy? What kind of happiness? Happy or ‘happy’?”⁶ The message conveyed by this scene (as well as by the entire novel) is perfectly clear: Progress is to be embraced and a scientifically advanced and just society is possible and desirable, but without religion true happiness is impossible.

Clash of Civilizations

But when looked at more closely, this perfectly clear message about progress and true happiness seems rather bizarre and questionable. The NSJ regime is described as having purposely pitted religions against each other, with the aim of then outlawing them. At the same time, it is portrayed as then creating a just and prosperous society. So why did it have to get rid of religion in the first place, and in whose interest was this? Who profits from it, and in which way? Does it really make sense to picture a government sincerely committed to abolishing inequalities as having to be created and upheld by crude force and oppression?

Science fiction almost always imagines the future by departing from problems and issues faced in the present, envisioning what might become of them. Two issues are rather clearly identifiable as starting points in the three Indonesian science fiction novels, most clearly in *Secret Project* and *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*. The first issue is the feeling that Islam is under attack. The notion of a Jewish conspiracy as in *Secret Project*, as well as the threat that Muslim ways of life will be subdued by an all-encompassing secularism (as happens in an extreme version in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*), are very clearly based in the discourses and realities of the present. The second issue is the issue of global inequalities and economic exploitation. As already discussed above, the novels create worlds where inequalities have been reduced or have vanished altogether. But how has this happened? Which events or historical processes have caused the gulf between First and Third World to disappear? None of the authors seem to give this question much thought. It rather seems that the promises of equality and prosperity for all, present in public discourse through the rhetoric of development and progress, are optimistically taken at face value, without questioning the sincerity and benevolence of those who make the promises.

⁶ *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*, pp. 54-55.

This creates a strange, unsettling amalgam of ideas. On the one hand, a world with no economic exploitation where all humans are equal seems possible. On the other hand, hostility towards Islam will continue. Why should this hostility persist, when the global power balances are imagined to change so drastically? A historical explanation of animosities between Islam and its others having been foreclosed in this way, identities and conflicts become extremely essentialized. Why are the Muslims feared and persecuted in *NSJ 2122 Mumi Legenda*? Why do the Jews want to erase Muslims from this planet in *Secret Project*? There are no real answers to these questions in the novels. Instead, clashing identities seem only natural: The Jews and the atheists hate Muslims because they always have and always will, no further explanation needed.

Conclusion

The notion of science advancing in a benevolent, linear way bound to bring blessings to humankind, the anticipation of ongoing future "clashes of civilizations" ("they" will go on hating "us"), the promises of democratization, progress and prosperity – all these ideas and images are very much present in Indonesian everyday life. They coexist in a way that seems unproblematic and is often not reflected upon. By looking at the futures emerging out of these popular ideas in the imagination of three young Indonesian writers, I have tried to make visible some of the inherent contradictions and ambivalences of this coexistence.