

**Title:** Interpretation and Cultural Implementation of the Qur’ānic Jilbāb Verses: A Living Qur’ān Study in Pesantren

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## Interpretation and Cultural Implementation of the Qur'ānic *Jilbāb* Verses: A Living Qur'ān Study in Pesantren

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### Abstract

The current study aimed to explore how Qur'ānic interpretations of veiling are transformed into institutional rules and embodied disciplinary practices within an Indonesian pesantren. Focusing on the *jilbāb shar'ī* as a regulated form of dress defined through requirements of length, looseness, fabric thickness, and bodily coverage, the study argued that veiling in pesantren is not simply a matter of individual piety or direct textual obedience, rather it is shaped by the interaction between Qur'ānic interpretation, Hadith authority, and institutional regulation. The study drew on three months of ethnographic fieldwork in a female pesantren in Central Java. Data was collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with 52 participants (*santriwati*, teachers, and female supervisors), and analysis of institutional documents. The analysis examined how Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33):59 and Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31 are interpreted in largely literal ways and translated into detailed dress codes that organize everyday religious life. Using the theoretical perspectives of Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, and Pierre Bourdieu, this study showed that adherence to the *jilbāb shar'ī* serves multiple functions. It operates both as a practice of ethical self-formation and a source of symbolic value within the pesantren's moral hierarchy. Ethnographic findings further revealed that *santriwati* respond to these regulations in diverse ways, ranging from deep internalization to strategic compliance. The study concluded that the *jilbāb shar'ī* is best understood as a negotiated and institutionally shaped religious practice rather than a fixed Islamic symbol.

**Keywords:** *jilbāb syar'i*, pesantren, *Qur'ānic exegesis on the veil*.

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## Introduction

Debates surrounding the *jilbāb shar'ī* in Indonesia extend beyond theological concerns to encompass questions of gender, authority, and the institutional regulation of piety. While veiling is often presented as a universal and uncontested religious obligation, the meanings attached to the *jilbāb* are in fact produced through interpretive processes that operate within specific social and institutional contexts. One of the most influential sites where such interpretations are formalized and transmitted is the pesantren Islamic boarding schools that function not only as educational institutions but also as moral communities shaping everyday religious practice.<sup>1</sup>

In this study, *jilbāb shar'ī* refers not merely to a generic Islamic veil but to a specific institutionalized form of dress characterized by length, looseness, thickness of fabric, muted colors, and the covering of feet and face. This definition is not derived solely from classical *fiqh* texts but emerges from the interaction between Qur'ānic interpretation, selected Hadīth traditions, and pesantren regulations. Thus, *jilbāb shar'ī* should be understood as a localized, disciplined, and normatively enforced embodiment of modesty rather than a universally fixed Islamic dress code.

This study focused on pesantren because they represent a strategic institutional arena in which Qur'ānic interpretations are transformed into binding norms governing bodily discipline, moral conduct, and gendered piety.<sup>2</sup> Within many pesantren, particularly those with a scripturalist orientation, a specific model of *jilbāb* loose-fitting, long, opaque, and typically dark in color is institutionalized as the sole legitimate expression of *shar'ī*, a compliance for female students (*santriwati*, i.e., female students residing and studying in pesantren).<sup>3</sup> This institutional standardization is primarily justified through literal readings of Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33):59 and Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31, often supported by selective Hadīth references concerning women's modesty and bodily boundaries.

However, classical and contemporary Qur'ānic exegesis demonstrates that interpretations of these verses have never been singular or fixed. Diverse understandings of *jilbāb*, *'awrah*, and modesty have emerged across different historical, legal, and cultural contexts. Despite this exegetical plurality, institutional settings, such as pesantren frequently present a single authoritative interpretation as normative and unquestionable. The problem, therefore, does not lie merely in the form of dress itself but in the process by which particular interpretations are stabilized, naturalized, and enforced as disciplinary regimes shaping women's bodies and moral subjectivities.<sup>4</sup> When interpretation is rigidly institutionalized as a disciplinary system, women experience not only physical restrictions but also symbolic and spiritual constraints.

Existing scholarship on veiling in Indonesia has extensively addressed themes of identity, politics, and agency. Yet, there remains a significant gap in empirically grounded studies that examine how Qur'ānic interpretations of the *jilbāb* are lived, negotiated, and contested within Islamic educational institutions. In particular, limited attention has been given to the everyday experiences of *santriwati* and the ways they navigate institutional expectations whether through compliance,

<sup>1</sup>Saifuddin Zuhri, *Jilbab dan kuasa: Kontestasi makna hijab dalam masyarakat Muslim Indonesia* [Hijab and Power: Contestation of the meaning of the Hijab in Indonesian Muslim Society], (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>Alexander R Arifianto, "Islamic Education and the Construction of Gendered Piety in Indonesian Pesantrens," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2020.14.1.1-24>.

<sup>3</sup>Jamhari dan Saifudin Asrori, "The Making of Salafi-Based Islamic Schools in Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah* 60, no. 1 (2022): 227–264, <https://doi.org/10.14421/AJIS.2022.601.227-264>.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

internalization, ambivalence, or strategic adaptation.

Women's experiences of wearing the *jilbāb* in pesantren are far from homogeneous. For some, it constitutes a meaningful practice of devotion and moral self-formation; for others, it is experienced as coercive discipline or as a strategic performance necessary for institutional survival. Capturing these variations requires moving beyond purely normative textual analysis towards an ethnographic approach attentive to lived religious practice.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity,<sup>5</sup> Saba Mahmood's concept of the politics of piety,<sup>6</sup> and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital,<sup>7</sup> this study aimed to situate the *jilbāb shar'ī* at the intersection of text, power, and embodied practice. In the pesantren context, adherence to prescribed veiling norms often functions as symbolic capital, granting *santriwati* moral recognition, authority, and institutional privilege. These dynamics reveal that piety is not merely a spiritual disposition but also a socially mediated and hierarchically distributed resource.

By examining how interpretations of Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33):59 and Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31 along with supporting Hadith literature are translated into everyday disciplinary practices, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of the dialectical relationship between sacred texts and social institutions. It demonstrated that the female body within Islamic educational spaces constitutes a contested symbolic arena where faith, authority, and identity are continuously produced and negotiated.

### 1.1. Objective and Importance of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to analyze how interpretations of Qur'ānic verses on the *jilbāb*, specifically Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33):59 and Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31, as supported by selected Hadith traditions on women's modesty are transformed from textual discourses into institutional norms, symbolic markers of piety, and disciplinary practices within pesantren. Focusing on the lived experiences of *santriwati*, this research examined how women negotiate these norms through compliance, internalization, ambivalence, and strategic adaptation.

By employing ethnographic methods and engaging with theories of performativity (Butler), pious self-formation (Mahmood), and symbolic capital (Bourdieu), this study addressed a key gap in the existing scholarship: the lack of empirically grounded analysis linking Qur'ānic interpretation, institutional authority, and women's embodied religious practice in Islamic educational settings.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to Qur'ānic studies, gender studies, and the anthropology of Islam by demonstrating that religious practices are never purely textual or individual but are always mediated by institutions, power relations, and local contexts. In an era marked by the proliferation of visual regimes of piety in public and digital spaces, this research highlighted the *jilbāb* not as a static religious symbol but as a dynamic site of meaning where faith, discipline, and resistance intersect.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarship on the *jilbāb* in Indonesia has developed across multiple analytical domains, ranging from identity formation and modernity to political participation and institutional governance.

<sup>5</sup>Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>6</sup>Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, J. B. Thompson, ed., G. Raymond, and M. Adamson, Trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press., 1991).

Early studies by Brenner<sup>8</sup> and Smith-Hefner<sup>9</sup> demonstrated that the *jilbāb* cannot be reduced to a fixed religious symbol; rather it operates as a flexible medium through which Muslim women negotiate piety, respectability, and social mobility within specific cultural contexts. These foundational works established the importance of situating veiling practices within lived socio-cultural realities rather than treating them as purely doctrinal phenomena.

More recent scholarship has shifted attention towards the public and mediated dimensions of the *jilbāb*. Nisa's work on digital piety highlights how veiling becomes entangled in competing moral and political narratives within online spaces, particularly through platforms, such as the Women Ulama Congress.<sup>10</sup> Ni'mah and Dwifatma further demonstrated that the *jilbāb* functions as a political and mediatic resource, shaping electoral strategies and forms of Muslim women's political subjectivity. While these studies effectively capture the circulation of veiling discourses in public and digital arenas, they largely privilege representational politics over the everyday institutional processes through which veiling norms are produced and enforced.<sup>11</sup>

Another strand of scholarship foregrounds regulation, discipline, and bodily governance. Shin, Lew, and Seo conceptualized the *jilbāb* as part of broader regimes of religious governmentality, showing how Muslim womanhood is shaped through organizational norms and moral surveillance. Shin's later work further illustrated how women's dress becomes a mechanism for regulating age, sexuality, and respectability. Although these analyses offer critical insights into power and control, they tend to operate at a macro-institutional level, paying limited attention to how women themselves interpret, negotiate, or internalize these norms in daily practice.<sup>12</sup>

Within the field of Islamic education, existing studies have examined veiling primarily through the lenses of *hijrah*,<sup>13</sup> Salafi movements, and the niqab. Sunesti, Hasan, and Azca analyzed how Salafi-niqabi students negotiate agency within frameworks of moral transformation, while Kistoro and colleagues explored perceptions of the niqab in higher education, highlighting the dynamics of stigma and Islamophobia.<sup>14</sup> Dzuhayatin extended this discussion comparatively by examining the

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Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and 'The Veil,'" *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (7 Februari 1996): 673–697.

<sup>9</sup>N. Smith-Hefner, *Jilbab and the New Indonesian Muslim Woman, In Islamic Legitimacy in a Plural Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>Eva F Nisa, "Islamic Veiling in Indonesia: Between Religious Piety and Social Pressure," *Asian Studies Review* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1473335>.

<sup>11</sup>Zulfatun Ni'mah, "The Political Meaning of the Hijab Style of Women Candidates," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no. 1 (2021): 174–197, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1177/1868103421989071>; Dwifatma, Andina, and Annisa R. Beta, "The 'Funny Line Veil' and the Mediated Political Subjectivity of Muslim Women in Indonesia," *Asian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 3 (2024): 284–297, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2024.2320900>.

<sup>12</sup>Jiwon Shin, "Religion, Age, and Sexuality: An Empirical Approach to the Regulation of Female Sexuality through Dress among Indonesian Muslims," *Religion* 15, no. 8 (2024): 1017, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3390/re115081017>.

<sup>13</sup>Yuyun Sunesti, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Muhammad Najib Azca, "Young Salafi-Niqabi and Hijrah: Agency and Identity Negotiation," *IJIMS: Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (2018): 173–197, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v8i2.173-197>.

<sup>14</sup>Hanif Cahyo Adi Kistoro, Badrun Kartowagiran, Eva Latipah, Ngainun Naim, Himawan Putranta, and Darmanto Minggele, "Islamophobia in Education: Perceptions on the Use of Veil/Niqab in Higher Education," *IJIMS: Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 2 (2020): 227–246, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i2.227-246>.

intersections of Islamism and nationalism among niqabi women in Egypt and Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> While these studies are invaluable for understanding ideological contestation and identity politics, they focus predominantly on the niqab and reformist movements, leaving the everyday institutionalization of the *jilbāb shar'ī* in pesantren underexplored.

Theoretically, scholars, such as Mahmood, Butler, and Bourdieu provided critical frameworks for analyzing veiling beyond binary oppositions of oppression and agency. Mahmood's concept of pious self-formation reframes veiling as an ethical project embedded in bodily discipline,<sup>16</sup> while Butler's theory of performativity elucidates how repeated veiling practices produce normative religious subjectivities.<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital further enables analysis of how compliance with veiling norms generates moral distinction and institutional privilege. However, much of the existing literature applies these theories in abstract or generalized ways, without grounding them in sustained ethnographic engagement with Islamic educational institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Taken together, previous studies demonstrate that research on the *jilbāb* in Indonesia is theoretically rich and thematically diverse. Nevertheless, a critical gap remains in ethnographic analyses that examine how Qur'ānic interpretations, particularly of Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33):59 and Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31 are translated into institutional norms within pesantren, and how *santriwati* negotiate these norms in everyday life. By situating veiling practices within established typologies of pesantren (traditional, modern, and hybrid forms) and foregrounding women's lived experiences, this study moved beyond representational and ideological analyses to reveal the dialectical relationship between sacred texts, institutional discipline, and embodied piety. In doing so, it advanced the existing scholarship by demonstrating that the *jilbāb shar'ī* in pesantren is not merely a marker of personal devotion but a contested site where religious authority, gendered power, and interpretive practices converge.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the meanings and practices of the *jilbāb shar'ī* within a pesantren context. In Indonesia, a pesantren refers to an Islamic boarding school that functions not only as a site of formal religious instruction but also as a residential moral community in which students (*santri*) live under continuous supervision and discipline. A pesantren typically consists of religious leaders (*kyai*), teachers, students, dormitories, and institutional regulations governing daily conduct, including dress, worship, and gender relations. This institutional configuration makes pesantren a particularly relevant setting for analyzing how Qur'ānic interpretations are translated into embodied and regulated religious practices.<sup>19</sup>

The research was conducted in a female pesantren located in Jepara, Central Java. Throughout the study, the term pesantren has been used consistently. The phrase "Islamic boarding school" has been employed only as an explanatory gloss for international readers and does not indicate a different institutional category.

#### 3.1. Site Selection and Anonymity

The pesantren selected for this study represents a contemporary institutional form that combines structured religious discipline with formal organizational systems, such as written regulations,

<sup>15</sup>Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, "Islamism and Nationalism among Niqabis Women in Egypt and Indonesia," *IJIMS: Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 49–77, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i1.49-77>.

<sup>16</sup>Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

<sup>17</sup>Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

<sup>18</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (California: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

scheduled supervision, and standardized dress codes for female students (*santriwati*). The name of the pesantren is anonymized and referred to as “Pesantren X.”

This anonymization is a deliberate ethical choice. Given that the study documents internal regulations, disciplinary mechanisms, and students’ ambivalent or critical reflections on veiling practices, revealing the institutional identity could expose participants particularly *santriwati* to social pressure or institutional sanctions. Anonymity therefore serves to protect participants and the institution, in accordance with ethical standards in ethnographic research involving unequal power relations.

### 3.2. Fieldwork Duration and Data Collection

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over a period of three months, from January–June, 2025, allowing sustained immersion in the everyday life of the pesantren. During this period, the researcher resided within the pesantren environment and participated in daily routines, including prayers, study sessions, and communal activities.

Data was collected through three primary methods:

1. Participant observation, focusing on daily veiling practices, institutional enforcement of dress codes, and informal negotiations surrounding the *jilbāb shar‘ī*.
2. In-depth semi-structured interviews with a total of 52 participants, consisting of:
  - 40 *santriwati* (female students),
  - 7 teachers, and
  - 5 female supervisors (*musyrifah*).
3. Document analysis, including institutional regulations, dress-code guidelines, teaching materials, and internal documents related to women’s conduct and modesty.

### 3.3. Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. *Santriwati* were chosen based on variation in age, length of residence in the pesantren, and levels of institutional responsibility (e.g., regular students and student leaders). Teachers and *musyrifah* were selected due to their roles in transmitting religious interpretations and enforcing institutional norms. This selection strategy enabled the study to capture diverse perspectives on veiling from both regulatory and experiential positions.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Firstly, observational notes, interview transcripts, and documents were coded thematically, focusing on categories, such as forms of veiling, interpretations of Qur’ānic verses (particularly Q.S. al-Aḥzāb [33]:59 and Q.S. al-Nūr [24]:31), epistemological references (classical and contemporary *tafsīr*, Hadith, and pesantren teachings), and women’s responses to institutional discipline.

Secondly, the findings were organized through ethnographic narratives (*thick description*) and thematic mapping to illustrate the relationships between interpretation, institutional regulation, and lived practice. Thirdly, analytical interpretation was conducted by engaging three theoretical frameworks: Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Saba Mahmood’s concept of pious self-formation, and Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and symbolic capital.

### 3.5. Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Ethical considerations were central to this study. Informed consent was obtained from all

participants, anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and sensitive information was handled with care to avoid potential harm. Particular attention was given to power relations between the institution and *santriwati*, as well as between the researcher and participants.

The researcher's positionality as a Muslim woman facilitated access to the pesantren and fostered trust with participants, particularly *santriwati*. At the same time, this positionality required ongoing reflexivity to critically assess how shared religious identity and gender may shape data interpretation. Reflexive field notes were maintained throughout the research process to mitigate bias and to situate the researcher's interpretations within the broader ethnographic context.

By employing an ethnographic approach within the *Living Qur'an* framework, this study demonstrated how Qur'anic verses on the *jilbāb* are not only interpreted textually but are embodied, negotiated, and institutionalized in the everyday life of pesantren communities.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. Empirical Exegesis of Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33):59 and Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31 in Pesantren X

This section presents the empirical findings on how Qur'anic verses on the *jilbāb* are understood and taught in Pesantren X, prior to their theoretical analysis. In Pesantren X, Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33):59 is understood as the primary normative foundation for the obligation to wear the *jilbāb shar'ī*. In *halaqah* sessions and women's *fiqh* classes, *musyrifah* and female teachers consistently refer to narratives of *asbāb al-nuzūl* that emphasize the function of the *jilbāb* as a social marker distinguishing respectable women from those considered vulnerable to harassment.

This study revisited Q.S. al-Aḥzāb (33): 59 and Q.S. al-Nūr (24): 31 through both classical exegesis (al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr) and contemporary interpretations (Amina Wadud, Shahrur, Abou El Fadl). The exegesis of these verses has undergone processes of historization and ideologization throughout Islamic history. Q.S. al-Aḥzāb: 59 was revealed prior to Q.S. al-Nūr: 31. As the thirty-third chapter of the Qur'an, al-Aḥzāb was revealed in Medina during a period of significant social and political transformation for the Muslim community under the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The verse was revealed amid external threats and internal social challenges, with the aim of protecting the Prophet's family and the wider Muslim community from slander and harm.<sup>20</sup> At that time, Muslim women were subjected to verbal and physical harassment by men who distinguished between free women and female slaves in public spaces.<sup>21</sup> Within this context, the verse functioned primarily as a form of social protection and a marker of identity, rather than as a timeless prescription of a fixed dress code for Muslim women. "O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful."<sup>22</sup>

Several reports address the circumstances of this verse's revelation, including a Ḥadīth narrated by al-Bukhārī from 'Ā'ishah (RA). According to al-Bukhārī, Saudah, one of the Prophet's wives, once left her home for a particular need after the verse of *hijāb* had been revealed. Saudah was a tall and physically distinctive woman, easily recognizable in public. On that occasion, 'Umar saw her and remarked: "O Saudah, by Allah, we can still recognize you. Why, then, do you go out?" Distressed, she quickly returned home, where the Prophet who at that time was in 'Ā'ishah's house,

<sup>20</sup>Hadiye Unsal, "On The Revelation Circumstances And General Emphases of Surat Al-Ahzab: An Analysis Within The Scope Of Textual And Non Textual Context," *Ilahiyat Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 53–85, <https://doi.org/10.12730/13091719/2016.71.140>.

<sup>21</sup>Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup>Ahzab 33:59.

holding a bone while eating was present. Upon entering, she said: “O Messenger of Allah, I went out for a need, but ‘Umar rebuked me because he still recognized me”. In response to this incident, the verse Q.S. al-Aḥzāb: 59, was revealed to the Prophet while he was still holding the bone in his hand. The Prophet then declared: “Indeed, Allah has permitted you to go out for your needs”.

Ibn Sa‘d narrated from Ḥasan and Muḥammad ibn Ka‘b al-Qurazī that the wives of the Prophet (PBUH) once went out at night to relieve themselves (*qaḍā’ al-hājah*). At that time, the hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) harassed and harmed them. This matter was brought before the Prophet (PBUH), who then rebuked the hypocrites. They responded, “We only harass slave women.” Consequently, the verse Q.S. al-Aḥzāb: 59, was revealed, commanding women to dress more fully in order to distinguish themselves from female slaves. This narration is reported by Ibn Sa‘d in al-Ṭabaqāt, based on a transmission from Abī Mālik.

From an exegetical standpoint, this narration indicates that the verse was revealed in response to particular socio-historical conditions rather than as a universal regulation prescribing a fixed dress code for all Muslim women. Classical exegetes, such as al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr often interpreted the verse as an instruction aimed at safeguarding Muslim women from public harassment by distinguishing them from others in society. By contrast, contemporary scholars argue that the report highlights the protective and contextual dimensions of the verse, positioning the *jilbāb* as a social marker of dignity and security rather than an immutable form of clothing. This suggests that the meaning of the *jilbāb* is historically situated and remains open to multiple interpretations.

The Ḥadīth narrated by al-Bukhārī concerning the incident involving Saudah bint Zam‘ah is not cited merely as historical background but is employed as a normative legitimation for minimizing the visual recognizability of women’s bodies. In pesantren instruction, this Ḥadīth is interpreted as a justification for requiring the *jilbāb* to be sufficiently long, thick, and loose so as not to reveal bodily contours, thereby ensuring that women are “not easily recognized” and protected from disturbance. In this way, the Ḥadīth functions as a bridge between the Qur’ānic text and contemporary dress regulations within the pesantren.

Field findings indicate that these Ḥadīths are not positioned simply as historical reports rather as authoritative sources used to standardize a particular form of the *jilbāb*. This is evident in statements by several *musyrifah* who asserted that “a *jilbāb* that still reveals the shape of the body does not fully fulfill the intended meaning of the verse.”

#### 4.2. Institutional Regulation and Visual Piety

Pesantren X was established in the early 2007s and currently accommodates approximately 515 female students, supervised by 20 female teachers and *musyrifah*. The pesantren promotes a scripturalist orientation combined with modern organizational management, including written regulations, scheduled supervision, and standardized dress codes. This institutional background shapes how religious interpretations are transmitted, enforced, and embodied in everyday practices.

Normatively, Pesantren X enforces highly specific dress regulations: female students are required to wear long, loose-fitting *jilbāb* that nearly reaches the knees, made of thick fabric, with colors determined by the institution. Even the use of socks is considered obligatory, since feet are regarded as part of the *‘awrah*. During classroom interactions with male teachers (*ustādh*), female students are required to wear the *niqāb* or a face mask as an additional form of visual protection and a means of restricting gender interaction. These regulations construct a system of visual piety that disciplines the female body. In this context, the female body is framed as a site that must be guarded and controlled, not only through religious injunctions but also through institutional systems of

representation.<sup>23</sup>

Every part of the female body considered *'awrah*, including the feet, is regulated in detail. The use of socks becomes a crucial requirement to ensure that no part of the *'awrah* is visible, even in domestic or non-formal activities. Such regulation is not only aimed at maintaining normative modesty but also at producing a kind of visual uniformity or symbolic conformity that shapes the collective landscape of piety.

The field observations of the author as an ethnographic researcher at *Pesantren X* in Jepara demonstrate that the practice of wearing the *jilbāb shar'ī* cannot be reduced to mere textual compliance, rather it represents the manifestation of a complex encounter between sacred texts, institutional regulation, and the embodied practices of women's bodies. Methodologically, the ethnographic approach enabled the author not only to document observable (visual) phenomena but also to capture the relational dynamics between the subjects (female students), the pesantren authorities, and the broader socio-religious context. As Geertz explains, ethnography is an interpretation of meaning rather than a mere recording of objective facts.<sup>24</sup> This aligns with Emerson's assertion that ethnography is not simply about observing actions but about understanding the meanings embedded within those actions.<sup>25</sup>

The *musyrifah* (female supervisors) routinely guide students, particularly during *halaqah* sessions that discuss dress regulations, focusing on Q.S. al-Aḥzāb: 59 and Q.S. al-Nūr: 31. These verses are interpreted within a framework of piety and the obligation to safeguard women's honor. Such normative readings are then embedded in institutional discourse and reinforced through surveillance of female students' appearances. In this context, Saba Mahmood's perspective on the politics of piety becomes highly relevant. Mahmood emphasizes that piety is not merely the outcome of patriarchal ideology but can also constitute a project of women's agency in shaping the self through bodily discipline and moral training.<sup>26</sup>

Some female students at *Pesantren X* appear to adopt the *jilbāb shar'ī* as part of their spiritual struggle, wherein obedience is not merely a duty but also a pathway to cultivating an existential relationship with God. At the same time, however, the female body becomes both a site of discipline and a field of negotiation. Reprimands for violations of the *jilbāb* code are delivered not only personally by the *musyrifah* but also collectively within the *halaqah*.

From Bourdieu's perspective, these dress regulations also function as a form of symbolic capital within the pesantren. Female students who consistently comply with the institutional standard of the *jilbāb shar'ī* are often regarded as moral exemplars, entrusted with greater responsibility, and positioned as representatives of the institution. Thus, clothing becomes more than an expression of religiosity; it is simultaneously a mechanism of social stratification and a resource in the competition for recognition and authority. In this sense, the regulation of dress is not only a moral obligation but also an institutional strategy for cultivating social cohesion and legitimizing authority through embodied symbols of piety.

From Judith Butler's (1990) perspective, the practice of wearing the *jilbāb shar'ī* can be understood as a form of identity performativity, an iterative act that, through the body, produces and affirms religious identity. The daily wearing of the *jilbāb*, adjustments of size, folding techniques,

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<sup>23</sup>Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

<sup>24</sup>Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

<sup>25</sup>Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>26</sup>Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

and the comportment associated with maintaining the garment in both public and private spaces, constitute a kind of “bodily ritual” that reproduces the image of the ideal Muslim woman as defined by the pesantren institution. However, such performativity does not always culminate in ideological awareness. It may function as a social tactic, a form of formal compliance, or even a medium of symbolic resistance when the practice is abandoned after graduation.

The ethnographic findings of the author at Pesantren X illustrate this dynamic. Some *santriwati* display strong commitment by continuing to wear the *jilbāb shar'ī* beyond the pesantren setting, embodying it as a marker of lifelong piety and religious identity. For these students, the practice becomes internalized as both a spiritual discipline and an existential relationship with God. Conversely, other graduates adopt more standard urban styles of the *jilbāb*, which are shorter, colorful, and less restrictive. This shift demonstrates how performativity may also serve as a contingent strategy: within the pesantren it operates as conformity to institutional norms, while outside it becomes negotiable and open to reinterpretation. The divergence between these two trajectories highlights the fluidity of religious embodiment, where the *jilbāb shar'ī* oscillates between discipline, social strategy, and symbolic resistance.

Therefore, the practice of *jilbāb shar'ī* at Islamic boarding school X transcends its role as a mere religious symbol; it constitutes a multifaceted social practice embedded with ideological, political, and cultural dimensions. It functions simultaneously as a site for ethical self-formation and a mechanism of social control. It can represent an expression of personal piety as well as a strategic practice; it is both institutionally mandated and individually negotiated. This complexity underscores the necessity of an ethnographic methodology attuned to embodied language, symbolic power, and localized social contexts.

These empirical findings demonstrate that the observance of *jilbāb shar'ī* within the pesantren cannot be reductively interpreted as a straightforward enactment of textual doctrine or religious creed (*aqidah*), rather it is produced by an institutional regime that inculcates specific dispositions in the female students (*santriwati*) through symbolic, ritual, and social mechanisms. However, the body is not merely a passive recipient of this discipline; it possesses the agency to resist, subvert, or renegotiate the prescribed meanings of the *jilbāb shar'ī* beyond the institutional framework. It is within this dialectic that the researcher's role is positioned: to interrogate and elucidate the "semantic tensions" inherent in this ostensibly homogeneous practice.

In the pedagogical practices of Pesantren X, Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31 is understood as complementing the earlier command to wear the *jilbāb* by emphasizing visual and moral regulation of the female body. The directive to draw the head covering over the chest (*wal-yaḍribna bi-khumūrihinna 'alā juyūbihinna*) is interpreted literally and translated into an obligation to cover the entire body, including the neck, chest, feet, and, in certain contexts, the face.

Ḥadīths narrated by Ibn Abī Hātim and Ibn Jarīr which describe early Arab women still displaying bodily adornments are cited in *ḥalaqah* sessions as evidence that visual noncompliance may give rise to *fitnah*. Consequently, these texts form a moral framework that legitimizes strict supervision of *santriwati*'s bodies, including the mandatory use of socks and the *niqāb* when interacting with male *ustādh*.

### 5. Critical Analysis: Semantic Tensions of the *Jilbāb Shar'ī* in Pesantren X

This study revealed that the practice of wearing the *jilbāb shar'ī* in Pesantren X, although visually uniform, is internally marked by layered semantic tensions. These tensions do not simply emerge between text and practice but unfold at the intersection of Qur'ānic interpretation, institutional authority, and embodied female subjectivity.

### 5.1. Textual Literalism and Bodily Regulation

In Pesantren X, Qur'ānic verses on veiling, Q.S. al-Aḥzāb 33:59 and Q.S. al-Nūr 24:31, are interpreted through a literal and prescriptive lens, which is subsequently translated into a standardized dress code: long and loose garments, thick fabrics, dark colors, face coverings, and socks. Within this framework, the body becomes the primary object of regulation.

Rather than serving as a medium for ethical reflection or spiritual cultivation, the female body is positioned as a site that must visibly manifest obedience. The semantic shift from moral guidance to corporeal discipline marks a key tension, whereby religious interpretation functions less as meaning-making and more as a technology of control.

### 5.2. *Jilbāb shar'ī* as Visual Piety and Institutional Symbol

Beyond bodily regulation, the *jilbāb shar'ī* operates as a form of visual piety that must be publicly displayed, monitored, and evaluated. Compliance with dress regulations is not merely a personal religious act but a visible marker of moral legitimacy within the pesantren hierarchy.

Drawing on Bourdieu, this study showed that the *jilbāb shar'ī* accumulates symbolic capital: those who most closely embody institutional norms are more likely to be recognized as exemplary, morally authoritative, and suitable for representational roles. In this sense, the veil functions simultaneously as a religious symbol and an institutional instrument, mediating access to status and recognition.

### 5.3. Negotiating Submission and Agency

Using Saba Mahmood's politics of piety, this study argued that veiling practices in Pesantren X cannot be reduced to either coercion or resistance. For some *santriwati*, the *jilbāb shar'ī* is internalized as part of a project of ethical self-formation. For others, compliance reflects pragmatic negotiation within a tightly regulated environment. Agency, therefore, is exercised not outside discipline but within it. *Santriwati* actively interpret, adjust, and navigate institutional expectations, demonstrating that submission and agency are not mutually exclusive but dynamically intertwined.

### 5.4. Living Interpretation and Institutional Fixity

While the living Qur'ān framework emphasizes the fluid and contextual nature of interpretation, the ethnographic findings reveal an opposing dynamic: interpretation in Pesantren X is stabilized and institutionalized to the point of rigidity. Qur'ānic meaning is no longer negotiated through lived experience but fixed through regulation. This produces an epistemic tension between lived religiosity and authoritative interpretation, where meaning does not emerge from women's embodied experiences but is imposed upon them as a normative ideal.

### 5.5. Analytical Synthesis

Taken together, the *jilbāb shar'ī* emerges as an arena of contestation structured by four interrelated tensions:

**Table 1.** Key Axes of Tension and Their Core Dynamics in Veiling Discourse

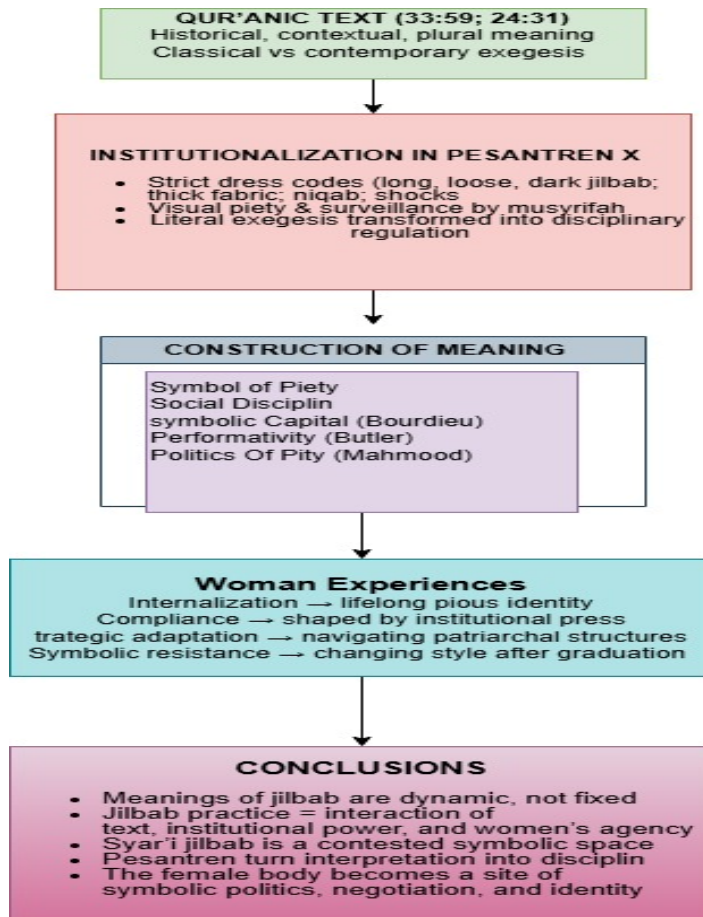
Axis of Tension	Core Dynamic
Text and Body	Interpretation disciplines the body rather than animating ethical reflection
Institution and Agency	Women navigate, rather than merely absorb, disciplinary power
Symbol and Spirituality	Veiling signifies institutional recognition alongside personal piety
Interpretation and Social Reality	Fixed interpretations marginalize lived plurality

These tensions demonstrate that the *jilbāb shar'ī* is not a singular or static symbol but a socially produced practice shaped by power, interpretation, and embodiment.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the practice of wearing the *jilbāb shar'ī* in pesantren settings is not merely an expression of individual piety but a dynamic configuration of text, interpretation, institutional regulation, and lived experience. While Qur'ānic discourses on modesty have historically been plural and context-dependent, pesantren environments often transform selected interpretations into rigid disciplinary regimes that regulate women's bodies and construct normative ideals of female piety.

Through the combined lenses of Judith Butler's performativity, Saba Mahmood's politics of piety, and Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital, this research showed that the *jilbāb shar'ī* functions simultaneously as a bodily practice, a moral project, and a marker of institutional power. *Santriwati* respond to this configuration in diverse ways, ranging from deep internalization to strategic compliance, revealing the complex interplay between discipline and agency.



**Figure 1.** Process of Meaning Construction of Syar'i Jilbab within Pesantren Culture

Ultimately, the female body within the pesantren emerges as a contested site where faith, authority, and identity are continuously negotiated. The *jilbāb sharī* should therefore be understood not as a fixed religious attribute but as a dynamic symbol shaped by cultural, political, and institutional forces. This finding underscores the importance of contextual and interdisciplinary approaches in the study of Islamic dress and gendered religious practices.

### 6.1. Future Research Pointers

Future research may explore how pesantren dress regulations intersect with state policies on Islamic morality and education, particularly in shaping gender norms and bodily governance. Such studies would illuminate the broader nexus between religious institutions and state authority in regulating women's bodies.

Additionally, theological-ethical approaches, such as *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* or feminist Qur'ānic hermeneutics could offer alternative interpretive frameworks that challenge rigid institutional readings of veiling verses. These perspectives may contribute to more context-sensitive and ethically expansive understandings of modesty in contemporary Muslim societies.

### 6.2. Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research was conducted in a single pesantren (anonymized as "Pesantren X") with a scripturalist-modern orientation. While the ethnographic approach allowed for deep observation of local practices, the findings cannot be generalized to all pesantren traditions in Indonesia, particularly those with NU, Muhammadiyah, or Salafi orientations that may have different approaches to veiling.

Secondly, the study primarily relied on participant observations and interviews with female students, teachers, and supervisors. Although triangulation was employed, perspectives from parents, alumni, or broader community members were not systematically included. Their voices could have provided additional insights into how pesantren dress codes interact with wider social, cultural, and familial contexts.

Thirdly, the positionality of the researcher as a Muslim woman both facilitated access and shaped interpretation. While reflexivity was maintained, subjective biases may still influence the analysis of students' experiences and institutional discourse.

Finally, the scope of the study was limited to religious and institutional dimensions of veiling. Economic factors (such as affordability of prescribed clothing), psychological impacts (such as stress or pride), and digital influences (such as social media discourse) were beyond the primary focus. Future studies may expand on these dimensions to offer a more holistic picture of the practice of *jilbāb sharī* in pesantren and beyond.

#### Author Contribution

**Ana Rahmawati:** conceived the study, conducted fieldwork, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript. **Darnoto:** contributed to research design and qualitative methodology. **Nursodik:** contributed to Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic legal analysis. **Ahmad Zaenuri:** contributed to the educational and pesantren framework. **M. Mukhsin Jamil:** contributed to theoretical framing, critical analysis, and manuscript revision. **Akhmad Arif Junaidi:** contributed to theoretical framing, critical analysis, and manuscript revision.

#### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study would be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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