EXPERIENCING LITERATURE
Discourses of Islam through Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*

Wening Udasmoro
Universitas Gadjah Mada
udasmoro@ugm.ac.id

Abstract

This article departs from the conventional assumption that works of literature are only texts to be read. Instead, it argues that readers bring these works to life by contextualizing them within themselves and draw from their own life experiences to understand these literary texts' deeper meanings and themes. Using *Soumission* (*Surrender*), a controversial French novel that utilizes stereotypes in its exploration of Islam in France, this research focuses on the consumption of literary texts by French readers who are living or have lived in a country with a Muslim majority, specifically Indonesia. It examines how the novel's stereotypes of Muslims and Islam are understood by a sample of French readers with experience living in Indonesia. The research problematizes whether a textual and contextual gap exists in their reading of the novel, and how they justify this gap in their social practices. In any reading of a text, the literal meaning (surface meaning) is taken as it is or the hidden meaning (deep meaning), but in a text that is covert in meaning, the reader may either venture into probing the underlying true meaning or accept the literal meaning of the text. However, this remains a point of contention and this research explores this issue using critical discourse analysis in *Soumission*'s text, in which the author presents the narrator's views about Islam. The question that underpins this analysis is whether a reader's life experiences and the context influence his or her view about Islam in interpreting *Soumission*'s text. Five French readers participated in this survey by reading the novel and offered their opinions on the narrator's views on Islam in France. Overall, the responses showed that the respondents based their readings not only on the literary text, but used a contextualization process to comprehend the work within their own social contexts. Their views about Islam differed significantly from the narrator's in *Soumission*. They also used their life experiences to understand and process the literary texts, highlighting the value of varied life experiences and sharing others' social experiences in the present socio-political climate.

Keywords

Discourses, Stereotype, Islam, Text, Context

About the Author

Wening Udasmoro is Associate Professor in Literature at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Indonesia. She received her PhD in Gender Studies from the University of Geneva, Switzerland in 2005. She obtained her Master's degree in the same field from the same university. Her main research interests are literature, gender issues, religion, violence, identity politics, and critical discourse analysis. Among her new publications are *La politique de l'avortement durant la periode post-suhartoiste en Indonésie* published in Mousson (France), "Transgender in Indonesian Media: Negotiating the Self Project of Identity" in *Regional Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* and "Preachers, Pirates and Peacebuilding: Examining Non-Violent Masculinities in Aceh" (with Rahel Kunz and Henri Myrttinen, 2018) in *Asian Journal of Women's Studies.*

LITERATURE ON ISLAM IN FRENCH CONTEXT

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, French literature has experienced an increase in works with Islamic themes. These themes have emerged, first, as a reaction to the widespread discourse on the destruction of the Twin Towers in the United States by terrorists who claimed their actions as *jihad* (Bowen 1). Second, Islam has received increased discussion in France (Zwilling 333; Bowen 4), as physical, verbal, and psychological violence and terror have escalated and been widely covered in the media, peaking with the deadly assault on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015 (L'Espinay 1). Third, the massive influx of migrants from majority Muslim countries, fleeing from lands beset with war and conflict, has accelerated the *othering* of Muslim immigrants (Motadel 13). And fourth, the increased practice of Islam in France has reinforced feelings of xenophobia and Islamophobia in the country (Davidson 1); feelings with a lengthy history that can be traced back through the French classics of Charlemagne, Voltaire, Lamartine, etc., who simultaneously admired and criticized Islam (Pirenne 77).

Various authors have taken different approaches to writing their thoughts about Islam, but 9/11 marks a turning point in literary works' treatment of the religion. In earlier years, such as in the 1980s, works on Islamic culture (within a Maghreb context) tended to identify an impropriety of sorts in the everyday lives of Muslims, a paradox in how they practice Islam and how they carry out their daily activities. Works by Maghreb authors from this period include those by Tahar Ben Jelloun, Fouad Larui, and Yasmia Khadra, the vanguard of Maghreb auteurs in France. Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, *L'Homme rompu* (*Corruption* 1994), highlights the rampant corruption that plagues Morocco (Pramudita 3). In this work, Jelloun criticizes the incongruence of religious and cultural values and the practice of corruption in the everyday lives of Moroccans. Likewise, before 2001, many writers viewed Islam as a non-French culture being assimilated into French culture. Their attempts to explain Islam as social practice were framed as criticism of that very practice. Islamic practice was positioned as an outside one, as part of Maghreb cultural practices. Before 2001, authors' works also tended to be narratively ambiguous (Galle 113). Developments in Islamic discourse were linked to the ideological and political activities of these authors.

Since the fall of the World Trade Center, French works with Islamic themes have tended to question Islamic doctrines through dialogue with French social and political life. Authors writing about Islam have become increasingly open to various aspects of the religion and its practice (Mustofa 2). Muslim authors in France—both immigrants and descendants of immigrants—have subsequently found themselves trapped in a difficult position. They and their families are Muslims, perhaps of Maghreb origin, yet in their everyday lives they face social tensions owing to the

terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslims (Udasmoro 77). They are frequently challenged with navigating a cultural milieu in which they must negotiate between two identities: their French identity and their Muslim and immigrant identities.

One author active since 2001 is Atiq Rahimi, an Afghan-born writer whose book, *Syngué sabour. Pierre de patience* (*The Patience Stone*, 2016), considers how Islam has been viewed in its positioning of women. Another author, Algerian Boualem Sansal, whose novel, *2084: la fin du monde* (*2084: The End of the World*, 2015), criticizes the fundamentalism in Islam. Both authors are immigrants living in France. Atiq Rahimi has tended to link Islamic discourse to Afghanistan's authoritarian regime (Sentana 3), while Boualem Sansal has tended to examine Muslim lives using the ideological aspects of Islamic teachings.

Another author who has received much public attention is Michel Houellebecq, born in the French territory of Réunion. He has written two novels that deal specifically with Islam, *Platforme* (*Platform*, 2001) and *Soumission* (*Surrender*, 2015). A best-selling author, Houellebecq has received numerous awards, including the Prix Goncourt in 2010 for his novel, *La carte et le territoire* (*The Map and the Territory,* 2010), and most recently in 2019, he was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur, the highest order of merit in France. Nonetheless, Houellebecq is considered a controversial author, due to his tendency to write about provocative issues in terms of the social context, confronting lifestyles, nature, sex, love, and many other aspects of society. His writings on Islam have garnered particular attention, because he has clearly positioned himself within the tensions between Islam and France's *laïque,* or the separation between the State and religion (Rootham 971), in a very controversial way. His first novel on Islam, *Platforme,* was published eight days before 9/11 and, centering on sex tourism and Islam, depicts the destruction of a resort in Thailand by Muslim extremists (Mortimer 1). *Soumission* was released on 7 January 2015, mere hours before two terrorists forced their way into the Parisian offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a magazine that had satirized the prophet Muhammad. In *Soumission*, Houellebecq presents a satirical view of Europe's future, in which increased waves of Muslim immigrants have created new contestations within French society. Houellebecq explores a French existence in which all aspects of life—including politics, education, society, and the economy— are dominated by Islam. Moreover, the novel describes the Muslims presidential candidates that expect the support from non-Muslim voters who aim to defeat right-wing National Front.

The aforementioned authors, including Houellebecq, have positioned Islam, its stereotypes, and its practitioners differently. Still, authors with Islamic and non-Islamic backgrounds alike have been found to reproduce the same stereotypes. Common sense stereotypes have constructed a dichotomous distinction between

France (Europe) and Islam (Arabia). Contentious, frequently discussed issues, of dogs, veils, polygamy, pigs, women's blood (i.e., menstruation), and "restrictive" Islamic education systems, have shaped a paradigm of Islamic culture, one that is influenced by whichever viewpoint prevails in the social discourse. The consequent view of Islam and Arabic culture, positioned as they are dichotomically from France and French culture, has come to dominate perspectives of Islamic practices around the globe. Despite its localized origin, however, Islam cannot be separated from its various forms of cultural contextualization, as its practitioners have had diverse historical experiences.

Different historical and discursive movements have influenced the way in which Muslims practice their faith. For Indonesian Muslims, the writings of these authors reflect different practices than those found in Indonesia. Problematically, since 9/11, French literary works with Islamic themes have been replete with stereotypes, which provide mental models that shape French "common sense" through continued repetition in everyday life, an effect observed by Van Dijk (73) in *Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (1985).

Analyses of *Soumission* have explored the novel from a wide range of perspectives. In a discussion of *Soumission*'s errors, Conan ("Soumission les Trois erreurs de Houellebecq" 2015) argues that it presents a misogynistic view of women, and that Houellebecq positions himself in the National Front political party, motivating its head, Marine Le Pen, to be more anti-migrant. Salim Kheloufi's "*Soumission* de Michel Houellebecq: un roman moderne de la désillusion" ("Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*: a Modern Novel on Disillusion" 2016) argues that the book creates a disillusioned, problematic hero. It shows a desperate and absurd world as the result of globalization (25). Meanwhile, Udasmoro ("Othering and Selfing: Reading Gender Hierarchies and Social Cathegories in Michel Houellebecq's Novel *Soumission*" 2018) focuses on the selfing and othering process depicted in the novel. She argues that the other is represented by the different outsiders while the self is the French narrator, a heterosexual man who comes from a higher social class. All these analyses use different approaches, but each one concentrates on the text itself (the "inside of the text") (Udasmoro 97). This article attempts to connect the text and the "outside of the text" (*hors du text*), namely its reader. This approach in the theory and method of critical discourse analysis builds on that originally introduced by Dominique Maingueneau, who proposed the importance of the reader, as the consumer of the text, alongside the production.

Maingueneau writes that there are dominant paradigms within the analysis of literature. However, he rejects the view that one must use such a dominant paradigm in analyzing a literary work. The classical approach to literature has been to apply a psychological or sociological understanding to examining extratextual

elements with the hopes of articulating the connection between the text and its context. In this approach, the text itself is more important than extratextual aspects (Maingueneau 22). A literary work is only a tentative experience, as it is shaped by other texts consumed by the reader. In *Discours et l'analyse du discours* (*Speech and Speech Analysis* 30), Maingueneau explains that the classical literary approach recognizes the *hors du texte*, which is outside of literature, in the hopes that it can articulate a bridge between the text and the context (2). According to Maingueneau, discourse analysis seeks out the *hors du texte*. There are problems with this approach, however. On the one hand, this might cause a reduction in the object of the analysis, the literary text. On the other hand, this might lead to sociological studies that are unconnected to the literary text. In *L'Enjeux de l'analyse du discours* (*The Issues of Speech Analysis* 22), Maingueneau also holds:

> *Les analystes du discours s'efforcent de prendre en compte à la fois la manière dont les textes sont produits et consommés et la manière dont ils sont inscrits dans une archive et réutilisés: ce sont deux dimensions inséparables.*

> Discourse analysis must consider the manner in which a text is produced and consumed, as well as the manner in which the text is archived and resurrected. These are two inseparable elements. (Translation mine.)

This article employs Maingueneau's method of critical discourse analysis, and attempts to connect a literary work, taken as a discursive product, with its consumption by readers—in this context, non-Muslim French people living in Indonesia. The first question, then, is how is *Soumission* understood by French people who were born and raised in France, and who grew up with the stereotypes depicted in the novel, but have since experienced living in other countries where different meanings are attached to Islam, such as in Indonesia? Second, is there a gap in the textual understanding and reading of literary works? If such a gap exists, what cognitive aspects are used to justify it? And third, how are stereotypes of Islam and Muslims contextualized within readers' everyday lives?

The readers' consumption of the literary text is part of the context, as their understandings are informed by their particular social and cultural perspectives. The bridging of the gap between text and context is intended to explain the cognitive aspects of the text's consumption. By understanding this cognitive aspect, the repeated patterns behind readers' cognitive processes and their attempts to overcome challenges, including how they negotiate a way across this gap, can be found.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE AS METHOD IN LITERATURE

This article uses the critical discourse analysis method, viewing text and context at both the micro- and macro-levels. Here, Islamic themes constitute one area being investigated. Critical discourse analysis is used to examine the connection between the literary text and the readers' consumption of said text, focusing not on the readers' interpretations of the text's narrative, but rather their cognitive explanation of the literary work. In doing so, it utilizes several analytic units, including lexical choice, wordings, and paradoxes. For instance, when a reader explains the stereotyping evident in the work's discussion of the Muslim veil, that reader's experience—a symbiosis of social experience and individual experience— is used to explain the work.

In this research, critical discourse analysis is used to explain the interconnections between the text produced and its consumption, and then to investigate how it is reproduced.
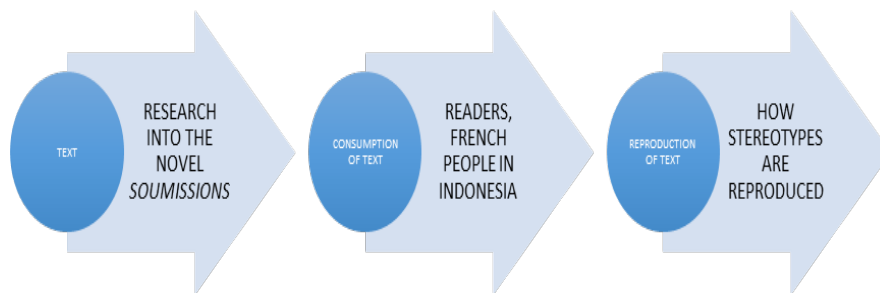
The main source of data for this research is the French-language novel *Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq. The meaning of the novel is not the focus. Instead, it is used as a way of understanding the connection between it as a literary text and how this text is consumed by a group of readers with specific life experiences. *Soumission* was selected because it utilizes various stereotypical depictions in its discussion of Islam. These stereotypes include Islam's positioning of women, as well as its prohibitions and allowances, which are understood as running contrary to those in French culture.

The second source of data is a set of interviews with five French people who are living or have lived in Indonesia. As critical discourse analysis is a qualitative methodology, this article is not aimed at using numbers of informants as a way of assessing the representation of French people living in Indonesia. Rather, it is specifically interested in how the cognitive model of the discourses of these informants relates to the stereotyping of Islam in France. The five informants were

aged 20–50 years old. The group was composed of three women and two men. Two of the female informants were married to Indonesian Muslims, and stated that they follow the religion of their husband but do not practice it. The three other informants claimed to be secular. All interviews were carried out from April to June 2017.

Informants were selected based on their French origin and experience living in Indonesia, either permanently or temporarily, with a minimum of one year living in Yogyakarta in the latter case. The length of one year in Indonesia was considered enough for one to understand Islamic culture, having adapted to and experienced the culture during this time. Informants' experiences of living in Indonesia were cultural experiences that shaped their individual experiences. The longest time spent in Indonesia among the informants was eight years. All participants spoke Indonesian fluently, including colloquially. Yogyakarta was chosen because, compared with Jakarta, the city has closer contact to the local Muslim people and consequently closer cultural interactions with them. Informants were asked to read *Soumission* before being asked questions regarding their arguments in terms of how Islam and Muslims are positioned within the work.

In-depth interviews were used to understand the discourses reproduced by the informants after they had read the text. Questions included how the author introduces his idea of Islam in his novel, how women are placed in the novel, whether the informants agreed with the content of the novel, and whether they see some of the stereotypes introduced by the author and how they perceive these stereotypes. Informants were also asked if they observe different aspects of the practice of Islam as it is depicted in the novel, as well as in French social practice, and how it differs— if at all—from their own experiences of Islam in Indonesia. Finally, the informants were asked how they would position themselves within those differences, or how they would position Islam within their own views in everyday life.

ISLAM AND MUSLIM IN EVERYDAY DISCOURSES

Soumission is considered a work of satire, written by the author to criticize the extreme political polarization of France. On the far right of the French political spectrum is the National Front, which claims to represent native French people in centers of social, economic, and political life, while often (being perceived as) marginalizing foreigners, immigrants, and Muslims. Meanwhile, Centrist groups attempt to negotiate a middle position, avoiding taking any extreme point of view in relation to immigrants and Islamic identity, and focus instead on balancing these identities with traditional French identity (Boulton 1). This polarization is

deeply entrenched, as seen in a Reuters poll that found that one-fifth of French citizens supported the extreme right and its chosen candidate, Marine Le Pen, in the 2017 election, compared to one-third who supported Emmanuel Macron, an independent candidate supported by the Centrist bloc.

Polarization has also emerged within the context of everyday social life, between those—often on the far right—who reject the immigrants, and those who consider their Islamic identity to be ignored or marginalized. This ignoring and marginalization then leads to their radicalization and drives them to protect their own identity. The presence of these groups has been considered a disturbance of the status quo in France, particularly in the wake of numerous incidences of terror. Concern over the presence of Muslims in France has stressed relations between French people and Muslim migrants, leading to a rise in Islamophobia.

Some practices of Islam, such as the wearing of the veil, the polygamy combined with terrorist attacks, and radicalism are seen as threatening by sectors of the European population that have become Islamophobic. However, some other practices in Islam such as the prohibition of alcohol consumption, not having dogs practiced by the Europeans are becoming the focus of non-Muslims. This situation contributes to the polarization of identity between the Muslims and Europeans.

There are several important religious principles and regulations practiced by Muslims mandated by Islamic theological teaching. The first principles are related to what the Muslim has to do, such as praying and fasting. The second is composed of the regulations known as Syariah. Syariah is based on the above principles, however it is interpreted in different ways in theory and practice. The third one is the set of detailed norms of Islamic belief or Fiqih. This third aspect is implemented differently across Muslim societies in the world. For instance, the Syariah law says that Muslim females should wear the veil. However, every Muslim culture has different interpretations and practices on how the veil should be worn.

This dynamic has been realized dramatically in Houellebecq's novel, in which the feared Muslims (and, by extension, Islam) become the majority and seize mainstream power. In *Soumission*, Islam is depicted as gaining both political and public power. All structures of French society, including its politics, economy, society, and culture, are shown by the author as becoming Islamic. The fictional and real become one, with real-life French political figures such as François Hollande being used to emphasize the reality present within the fiction.

Islam is presented stereotypically. For instance, the novel depicts the women of France as wearing burqas, as being positioned as subordinate. In the French social context, such a practice is frequently questioned, as shown in Bowen's rather

directly titled book, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (2008). In education, women are not given freedom of thought; they are solely indoctrinated in Islamic thought. This reflects the Western stereotype of Islam as a restrictive and closed belief system. This stereotype is translated into another form: hypocrisy, through which the moral order of Islam is subverted. One example of this hypocrisy is shown below, in a passage that describes how women, whose sexuality is controlled through the burqas, act hypocritically regarding their sexuality, leading the narrator to suspect control:

> *Vêtues pendant la journée d'impénétrables burqas noires, les riches Saoudiennes se transformaient le soir en oiseaux des paradis, se paraient de guêpières, de soutien-gorge ajourés, de strings ornés de dentelles multicolores et de pierreries; exactement l'inverse des Occidentales, classe et sexy pendant la journée...* (Houellebecq 91)

> Hidden all day in impenetrable black burqas, rich Saudi women transformed themselves by night into birds of paradise with their corsets, their see-through bras, their G-strings with multicolored lace and rhinestones. They were exactly the opposite of Western women, who spent their days dressed up and looking sexy... (Translation mine.)

There is a clear contrast found within the sentences above. Approaching the above paragraph using Critical Discourse Analysis, the choice of words is viewed as important. Contradictory wordings representing the Muslims and the Europeans uncover the dynamic between the insiders and the outsiders. The phrase, "Hidden all day in impenetrable black burqas," implies that the wearing of black burqas is unnatural, unreal. The passage, "rich Saudi women transformed themselves by night into birds of paradise with their corsets, their see-through bras, their G-strings with multicolored lace and rhinestones," likewise paints an extraordinary picture. Whereas the first phrase presents unnaturalness by positioning another culture as an "outside" culture, the second presents it through another approach. This behavior would not be strange among Western women, as emphasized by the sentence, "They were exactly the opposite of Western women, who spent their days dressed up and looking sexy," which underscores the narrator's view. The words "dressed up" and "sexy," which have ameliorative functions, are signifiers for Western women. If these attributes were shifted to Saudi women, they would have an odd effect. There exists a dichotomy, such as that between night and day; strangeness and familiarity are used to contrast representations of Arabic and European women. Different connotations emerge within the Western mindset; Western women wear sexy clothes during the daytime, but Arab women, who are always perceived as wearing burqas, would be considered "unusual" to do so; this is manifested with the use of the term "birds of paradise" to refer to their nighttime activities.

Et l'habillement féminin s'était transformé, je le ressentis immédiatement sans parvenir à analyser cette transformation; le nombre de voiles islamique avait à peine augmenté. (Houellebecq 185)

Also, women's clothing had been transformed. I felt the change right away, but I couldn't put it into words. *The number of Muslim veils* had increased only slightly. (Translation mine.)

Here, "Muslim veil," such as hijab is used by Houellebecq to emphasize the change of government. Why, then, is it necessary to emphasize Islam through the phrase, "Muslim veils"? Within the European context, nuns, practicing Orthodox Christians, and Romani women also wear veils. Emphasizing the "Muslim" nature of the veil is a xenophobic trope in French contemporary discourse. The veil, a part of Islamic identity, is viewed as symbolizing the subordination of women in Arabic culture. This xenophobic view is also connected to the drastic increase in the number of Muslim women in France wearing the veil. Compounding that, the negative discourse surrounding Islam after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America in fact created a robust polarity between Islam and the West, and that strengthened and reinforced the xenophobic view towards women wearing the veil.

Another important issue is that of food; in the novel, the concepts of *halal* (allowed) and *haram* (prohibited) foods are problematized.

Les règles concernant l'alimentaire des cantines, le temps dévolu aux cinq prières quotidiennes devront être respectés. Le programme scolaire devra être adapté aux enseignements du Coran. (Houellebecq 138)

Schools would observe Muslim dietary laws and the five daily prayers; above all, the curriculum itself would have to reflect the teachings of the Koran. (Translation mine.)

The concepts of *halal* and *haram*, as with other Islamic practices, are different from those in France. In the novel, they are shown as having the potential to transform the everyday activities and habits of the French people. Another issue presented explicitly as transforming France's administrative system and social life is polygamy.

Pour la polygamie d'ailleurs ils sont déjà parvenus à un accord qui pourrait leur servir de modèle. Le mariage républicain restera inchangé, une union entre deux personnes, hommes ou femmes. Le mariage musulman, éventuellement polygamie, n'aura

conséquence en termes d'état civil, mais il sera reconnu comme valide, et ouvrira des droits, par les centres de sécurité sociale et les services fiscaux. (Houellebecq 89)

> They'll probably model it on the polygamy agreement, which will maintain civil marriage as a union between two people, men or women, but will also recognize Muslim marriage – and ultimately polygamy – even though it isn't administered by the state, and will come with the same benefits and tax exemptions. (Translation mine.)

The aspects of Islam discussed in the novel are those that frequently become part of everyday discourse on religion in France. The author draws numerous contrasts between French life before and after its fictional Islamization. He contrasts, for example, the concepts of *civil marriage* and *Muslim marriage*, depicting civil marriage as the union of a couple (i.e., two people) and Muslim marriage as polygamous—even though in many majority Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, Muslims tend to be monogamous. By the emphasizing the practice of polygamy in the novel, the author takes a minority practice and presents it as if it were common or even predominant.

The examples of Muslim practices presented in the novel suggest a fear that the existing systems and habits in France may change. There is a fear that the French Republic, as well as its perceived egalitarianism in everyday life, will be replaced by an authoritarian regime, one shown in the novel as affecting not only the society of France, but also (and more importantly) its identity, as well. This is particularly underscored by the use of the term *mariage républicain* in the French edition of the novel.

UNDERSTANDING STEREOTYPES IN SOCIAL PRACTICE

The stereotypes presented within *Soumission* were seen differently by each informant. However, generally speaking, all of them considered these stereotypes to be contrary to the reality of the matter. Islam, according to one informant, was presented as being misogynic and sexist.

> *Il a une tendance de montrer une mauvaise image de l'Islam en France comme si la France est un pays islamique où les femmes portent leurs voiles, etc. Il montre aussi que l'Islam est complètement misogyne et sexiste. Donc c'est une image négative mais l'auteur raconte toute l'histoire avec l'air positive car il est privilégié. Il y a aussi la question du charisme ou la charme qui peut attirer l'attention des gens.* (Interview with M)

> There was a tendency to show **negative images of Islam** in France **as if France were a Muslim country where all women wore veils and what have you. It was shown too that Islam is very misogynic and sexist.** So, it showed **negative pictures** but **the author presents the whole story with a positive face** because **he has that privilege**. There were also questions of **people's charisma, their ability to draw others' interest.** (Translation and emphasis mine.)

The informant above perceives the novel's depiction of Islam as being negative, as having misogynistic and sexist tendencies. The informant stated that this was permissible, as the author had the privilege of creating the narrative. The informant's awareness as a reader indicated a critical understanding of the author's own subjectivity. Following the argument of Maingueneau, the consumption of a text is a paradox. Someone can agree on certain things but also accommodate other things. In the above-quoted interview , the consumer of the text with the cognitive experience admits the polarization of negativity and positivity of the text because of the legitimized role of the author. This informant opined that the negative depiction of Islam was presented positively by the author because of his own power. This power to transform a negative into a positive was considered as intended to draw readers' interest in the text. As such, it was seen as a commodification of sorts, in which Islam was used as a tool by the author to seek popularity and promote sensationalism. Commodification is frequently intended to maximize financial profit (i.e., to increase the number of books sold). In other social situations, similar forms of commodification are common. For example, in an opinion article, Noor (1) notes how specific religious symbols are used throughout the world as a means of commodifying religion for an increasingly capitalist public. However, where Noor notes religious symbols as being used to accumulate economic capital, in *Soumission* such commodification cannot solely be attributed to an intent to ensure high sales and massive profits. Specific ideological messages are also presented through the stereotypes used in discussing Islam, something that has frequently been the target of criticism from French writers.

In a French context, this has taken the form of responding to controversy about Islam, which has values that are considered non-European. These non-European values are presented by the author through specific stereotypes, in particular those related to everyday issues recognized by French readers and considered unnatural or improper. It is important to ask why these stereotypes are so central to the novel. One informant (B) replied critically, recognizing the author's deliberate manipulation of stereotypes.

> *J'avais l'impression que parfois c'était un peu stéréotypé, mais je pense que l'auteur veut que les questions sur l'Islam soient exagérées, parce que je pense qu'il veut bien montrer que la différence entre l'Islam telle qu'elle est en réalité et l'Islam politique. Par*

exemple, pour continuer à exercer et enseigner à La Sorbonne, les professeurs ne sont que des hommes, il n'y a pas de femmes, et les professeurs doivent se convertir à l'Islam et une fois qu'ils se sont convertis à l'Islam ils ont droit d'être polygames et d'avoir jusqu'à quatre femmes. (Interview with B)

I feel as though (the work) is **somewhat stereotypical**, but I think that the author tries to question **an Islam that is exaggerated**, because in my opinion he wants to show **the difference between (stereotypical) Islam and political Islam**. For example, to continue **teaching at Sorbonne, the professors must be men, no women**, and **they must convert to Islam**, and sometimes by converting to Islam they gained **the right to practice polygamy** and **have up to four wives**. (Translation and emphasis mine.)

From this statement, it is apparent that specific stereotypes have been specifically and deliberately used to enter the political sphere. To do so, the issues discussed are those—particularly polygamy and conversion—most emphasized by people questioning the presence of Islam in France. These two issues are highly political. Firstly, although France considers itself a secular state, Catholic traditions remain strong in the public and private lives of the French people (Chelini-Pont and Ferchiche 310). As such, religious conversion is a fundamental, deep-rooted issue. The history of Europe, and that of France, has long been marred by war between Catholics and Muslims characterized by the conversion of vast swathes of people, from the Moorish conquests to the Christian Crusades. And secondly, in Catholic doctrine, polygamy is prohibited, and as such the stereotypical practice of polygamy is emphasized and exaggerated, even as it exists outside of French norms.

In Islamic theology, polygamy exists as part of the historical discourse of Islam. In different Muslim societies across the world, polygamy is practiced differently. Polygamy is a contested practice because in Islam itself, the pro and contra polygamy arguments continue to date. The discourse that has been debated is the argument that polygamy is allowed. One argument that advances this view is that polygamy is allowed if the husband can treat all wives fairly. However, there is another argument that the husband will not be able to treat the wives fairly.

Nevertheless, the practice of polygamy has been refused by many Muslims. The refusal of the practice of polygamy is seen as a human rights issue and the rights of women that should be equal in the modern context.

One informant recognized the exaggeration inherent in the author's narrative. This informant put particular emphasis on the novel's depiction of polygamy. By converting to Islam, according to the novel, a man gains the right to have up to four wives—an oversimplification, as recognized by the informant.

Another stereotype considered negative by informants was the control of women's bodies. The informants recognized tendencies in the stereotypes of Islam: polygamy, with women in bondage, trapped as subordinates without any freedom. This stereotype can be traced to radical 19th century movements opposed to the repression of women's bodies. Historically, the French have been relatively open to body-related issues. In discussions of the body, it is used as a representation of rationality. Foucault (10), in *L'Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality* 1976), explicitly explains how discourses of sexuality and the body have transformed from century to century. The body, once considered dirty and taboo, something to be covered, has been transformed into something rational through the perspective of the new regime. The body and sexuality have been mobilized within the church, within medicine, and within psychoanalysis, depending on the regime of truth in power. In France, even more so than in the United States, the body has been positioned as free. This view clashes with the stereotypically opposite one—the Muslim view of the body—that is revealed in the novel.

> La polygamie, l'interdiction de travailler pour les femmes, je me rappelle pas de tous, mais oui, il y' en a plein de stéréotypes. Toutes les femmes sont voilées, mais plus que voilées il y a plein d'étudiants qui vont à l'école en burqa. Oui les femmes quand elles portent un pantalon, elles vont un vêtement long pour cacher leur fesse. Je me souviens pas de tous, mais ce qui m'a vraiment choqué c'est le stéréotype de la polygamie et des femmes qui n'ont pas de droit de travailler comme par exemple à l'université il n'y a plus de femmes professeur, ce ne sont que des hommes. Oui, c'est vraiment stéréotype. (Houellebecq 98)

> Polygamy, the prohibition against women working… I don't remember all of it, but yes, there are lots of stereotypes. **Every woman must wear the veil, and many students go to school in the burqa.** Yeah, women, when they wear long pants, they wear a long shirt to cover their bottoms. I don't remember them all, but what makes me really surprised are the stereotypes of polygamy and women. Like, they can't work at the university, and there are no more women professors, they must be men… yes, those are really stereotypes. (Translation and emphasis mine.)

Here, it is apparent that there is a process of consuming and reproducing the text, in which the reader denaturalizes the dominant discourse, which is replete with negative stereotypes. This process of denaturalization is important, because it allows greater space for smaller discourses to offer views that differ from the dominant one.

POSITIONING OF THE LITERARY TEXT WITHIN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

In critical discourse analysis, literary texts and their contexts are closely connected. The text is not simply read by the reader, without any social effect, as mentioned by Fairclough in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992). Each text is connected in some way with its social context through its readers' interpretations, which, according to critical discourse analysis, are realized through a process of intertextualization (Wijsen 2). In this process, readers connect a text with other texts, literary or otherwise, produced and consumed by a certain culture. These texts are consumed by readers, interpreted, and then reproduced in other forms.

Readers of *Soumission*, thus, do not simply read the novel, but contextualize it within their own individual experiences and involvement in social practices. From an interview with one informant (K), it is apparent how readers could react to the narrative of *Soumission* by intertextualizing it with their own lives elsewhere (Indonesia, in this case). Some of the informant's views regarding *Soumission* are presented below.

(Q):   *D'après vous comment l'auteur parle de l'Islam dans ce roman?*

K: *D'après moi l'auteur parle de l'Islam comme une religion dictatrice qui impose et force les gens à suivre ses principes, il compare l'islam à certain pays où il y a le charia et ne pense pas aux pays tel que l'Indonésie ou la Turquie*

(Q):   *Est-ce que vous avez trouvé des stéréotypes dans ce roman sur l'islam ou sur les musulmans?*

K: *Oui comme quoi toute les femmes doivent porter le voile etc... c'est pas vrai dans tout le pays*

(Q):   *Vous avez vécu quelque temps en Indonésie. Est-ce que vous avez trouvé des différences des pratiques de l'Islam dans ce roman avec les pratiques de l'islam en Indonésie?*

K: *L'Indonésie est un pays ouvert avec serte quelques extrémistes mais l'Indonésie est très ouvert*

(Q):   In your opinion, did the author talk about Islam in the novel?

K: In my opinion, **the author talked about Islam as if it were a dictatorial religion that forces all people to follow its principles. The author compared Islam in various countries that have enforced Sharia law, without considering countries like Indonesia and Turkey.**

Q: Did you find any stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in the novel?

K: Yeah, for example, where **all women must be veiled** et cetera… things aren't like that in every country.

Q: You've lived for some time in Indonesia. Have you seen any differences in the practices of Islam in the novel and in Indonesia?

K: Indonesia is an open country. **With some extremists**, but Indonesia is an open country. (Translation and emphasis mine.)

This informant has taken a position opposed to the ideas presented in *Soumission*, as well as the author's depiction of Islam as forcing its principles (particularly Sharia law) upon others. The informant referred to this element of the novel when identifying the author's main idea in *Soumission*. When asked what were some of the stereotypes presented in the novel, women wearing veils was the informant's first answer. Likewise, when asked about the differences between the practice of Islam in Indonesia and the practice of Islam in the novel, they answered that Indonesia is an open country, despite the presence of several extremists.

The informant's answers here define the literary text being consumed. However, other texts also influenced the informant's cognitive framework. The informant's mental model is of primary importance when explaining how other texts are internalized when they are consumed, informing the informant's position regarding a new text (Van Dijk 95). However, the informant's new experiences also color this positioning. For example, the sentence, "The author compared Islam in various countries that have enforced Sharia law, without considering countries like Indonesia and Turkey," implies that another text, i.e., the informant's experiences in Indonesia, served to shape their view of the author's treatment of Islam, particularly his decision to concentrate only on Muslim countries that are more conservative.

A different opinion was voiced by another French person (M), who found similarities and differences in the novel and in everyday life in Indonesia.

Oui mais il y a aussi certains choses similaires qui se passent en Indonésie. Malgré une mauvaise interprétation de l'Islam, les musulmans en Indonésie surtout pour les femmes, elles ont plus des droits pour travailler ou des libertés pour choisir leur vie. Cependant, en Indonésie il existe encore les polygames et aussi les petites filles qui se marient avec des hommes (les mariages des enfants). (Interview with M)

Yes, but some of the same things are happening in Indonesia. Although there are bad interpretations of Islam, **Muslims in Indonesia, particularly women, they have more rights to work or freedom to choose their own lives**. However, **in Indonesia there is still polygamy and young girls marrying adult men** (child marriage). (Translation and emphasis mine.)

This informant took a critical and questioning approach to understanding the practice of Islam in the novel compared with that of Indonesia. The informant avoided constructing a "black-and-white" dichotomy, and refused to simplify the novel as simply stereotyping, or to view the practices of Islam in Indonesia as better than those shown in the novel. The sentence, "Yes, but some of the same things are happening in Indonesia," indicates that the informant recognizes similarities between what has been read and what has been seen. In other words, M continued to see correlations between the practices of Islam as consumed in France, those seen in Indonesia, and the stereotypes depicted in the novel. Furthermore, there is the argument that "Muslims in Indonesia, particularly women, they have more rights to work or freedom to choose their own lives," which contrasts the practice of Islam in Indonesia and the stereotype that the religion prohibits women from participating in public activities. In Indonesia, it is common for women to work, whether it be in the public or private sector, in urban or in rural areas. As such, there is a cultural gap between informants familiar with the stereotype of Muslim women being forbidden from working and the life choices actually available to women in Indonesia.

SOCIAL PRACTICE TOWARDS THE LITERARY TEXT

After readers complete the novel, discursive reflections emerge regarding everyday life in society, both directly and indirectly. Fairclough explains that there is a process of textual production, consumption, and reproduction. The text is read to be consumed, and then undergoes reproduction. Social practice, meanwhile, is the context in which readers connect the contents of the text with everyday practices (Van Dijk 95).

One informant expressed a view of the text that connected it with events and practices in society, as expressed below.

> *Il faut aussi penser aux autres, aux personnes qui sont marginalisées comme aujourd'hui les immigrants en France, les personnes qui arrivent par bateau et on n'a pas envie d'intégrer. On les marginalise, on leur donne pas de travail, parce qu'on pense que c'est plus important de donner du travail aux français, mais c'est pas la bonne solution. C'est pas comme ça qu'on va faire baisser le chômage, c'est pas comme ça que la société peut marcher. (Interview with E)*

> We need to think about others, about the people who are marginalized, like the immigrants in France. Those who arrive by boat and want to integrate. They are marginalized, without any jobs, because we think it's better to give jobs to the French, but that's not a good solution. That is not the way to reduce unemployment. That is not how society works. (Translation mine.)

This informant expressed an opinion on how society should be formed. The informant defended the immigrants based on the novel's narrative, which was seen as marginalizing immigrants. However, this does not represent a conclusion to the informant's positioning, as seen in the informant's further thoughts below.

> *Et je pense que l'auteur veut nous faire réfléchir sur ça, il veut nous faire réfléchir sur l'effet que c'est en marginalisant toutes les partis de la population qu'on peut arriver à quelques choses de bien. Il faut que tout le monde soit intégré. Ça c'est le côté intéressant du roman. En fait c'est absurde, jamais ça arrivera en France.* (Interview with E)

> I think the author wants us to really contemplate this. He wants us to think about the effects of marginalizing all parts of society, claiming we'll find something better. Everyone has to be integrated. That's what's interesting in the novel. But actually it's absurd. That would never happen in France. (Translation mine.)

This defense of immigrants is replaced with the view that, in the informant's opinion, the author only hopes to make readers consider the question of immigration, as expressed through the passage, "I think the author wants us to really contemplate this… Everyone has to be integrated. That's what's interesting in the novel." However, this position, supporting the author's perceived endeavor, is negated with the last sentence, in which the informant expresses doubt that such a situation could be realized in France and characterizes the concept of an integrated France as absurd.

The dialogic switching of the informant's arguments, informed by the text and the context (Bakhtin 95), indicates a dialogue within the informant regarding his/

her beliefs. This dialogism indicates that multiple voices exist within the informants. These multiple voices are rooted in the influences of different discourses that exist within them, and the gap between these discourses contribute to the different views and arguments expressed.

CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPE
THROUGH READER'S CONTEXTUALIZATION OF TEXT

It is apparent that, when discussing a literary text consumed by a reader, a discursive process exists. Readers do not consume the text for themselves, but undergo a naturalization process, connecting the text with their own experiences as part of society. The fact that readers have different cross-cultural experiences (in the case of this article, French but living in Indonesia) gives nuance to their arguments, but there are tendencies where the experience of living in Indonesia enriches their understanding of Islam. This naturalization process is applied to the literary text, and as such the text becomes dynamic, as each reader has different intertextualities that shape the text based on his or her own social experiences.

All of the informants expressed the view that Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission* invoked the stereotyping of Islam and Muslims. These informants, having lived in a country with a Muslim majority, opined that such stereotyping occurred because of the ideological differences found in France and Islam. The exact form of these stereotypes is consequently rooted in the novel's author applying a French perspective to the depiction of Islam. Elsewhere in the informants' responses, we find a diversity of opinions. There was a discursive gap, in which informants' individual experiences contributed to their differing views of Islamic stereotypes. Cultural justifications were consistently used as the informants experienced intertextualization. They continued to connect the texts with their different experiences, thereby creating multiple voices within themselves and expressing these voices as they discussed the novel.

The informants also contextualized stereotypes of Islam and Muslims within social practices. Aspects that they considered important were connected with their own social contexts, creating a discursive process of looking at the text and then the context, going from social practice to text, and finally back to justifying their arguments. This spiraling process in looking at phenomena related to Islam (from text to context and from context to text) indicates their openness when giving their opinions. There is no closed text or closed context. There is always the possibility of dynamic interactions between the open consumption of text and context, even for persons who are considered very closed to specific ideological positions. The value

of having varied personal experiences, by experiencing others' social experiences, can thus scarcely be overstated. In a time where political and cultural discourse is fraught with fear and misconception, empathy and understanding grow increasingly important.

However, there is still also a negotiating space taken by the informants in order to bridge the gap between the informants reading and their experiences in the practical life. Some of the common sense about the stereotype of Muslim still appeared in the discourses.

There are three main conclusions about the narrator and readers in this discussion. First, the analysis from this research reveals that the context and recent negative catastrophes and migration into Europe linked to Muslims influences the narrator's writings in *Soumission*'s text, which reinforced his views that primarily stems from existing prevalent Muslim stereotypes among non-Muslims. Second, on the contrary, the French readers did not concur with the narrator's stereotypical views of Islam because they have life experiences with Muslims in the Indonesian context that enable them to have different views and understanding of Islamic ideology and practices. Third, the narrator is a non-Muslim and his bias towards Muslims is shown clearly in his writings and moreover, he has not lived in a Muslim dominated country and therefore lacks an understanding of Muslim ideology and practices. Overall, the findings in this discourse analysis supports Maingueneau's view, which shows that any reader's understanding of people and issues in context provides a more meaningful interpretation of any text than the text interpreted as it is.

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