Defining Islamic Modernity

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Defining Islamic modernity through creative writing: a case study of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT
Indonesian domestic workers (IDWs) have been frequently stereotyped as uneducated and submissive women with little or no bargaining power in transnational labour migration. This article examines why and how literacy practices help foster the activism of IDWs in Hong Kong. In particular, I seek to understand the significance of IDWs' writing in relation to Islamic modernities. Using the framework of alternative modernities, I argue that the creative process of IDWs' writing sheds light to their attempts to exercise individual and collective agency. Specifically, the article looks at the role of Forum Lingkar Pena (Pen Circle Forum, FLP) Hong Kong, an IDW writing community, to reveal how its collective literacy practices help affirm Islamic values as part of a modernisation process on IDWs' own terms.

KEYWORDS Spiritual habitus; creative writing; Islamic modernity; domestic workers

> 10.30 pm. My boss just finished having a barbeque, and now it was my turn to clean up. There was nothing left, except pork. Such a humiliation! I'd rather starve than eat pork. I swallowed my saliva and held my stomach. It had been empty since yesterday. I know my boss was trapping me. When she ate anything other than pork, she wouldn't offer it to me. Yet, when she had pork, she would ask me to eat it […] She's crazy. No matter how starving I am, I will not eat pork. (Bramasta 2013, 119)

The above excerpt is taken from a short story titled '*Bertahan dalam Ketidakadilan*' (Holding on in the midst of Injustice) by Sofi Bramasta (2013), an Indonesian domestic worker (IDW) who worked in Hong Kong. The story portrays the author's life when she worked as a live-in housemaid in Hong Kong. The quotation indicates her attempt to maintain her religious practices by negotiating with the pork consumption that is frequently imposed by her employer. Coming from Indonesia, most IDWs are Muslims, and thus are subject to the complexities of negotiating between religious commitment (as exemplified by halal consumption) and the demand of working as a maid in Hong Kong households, in which pork-rich cuisine is part of everyday

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consumption. Living as a Muslim minority in a predominantly non-Muslim country such as Hong Kong provides a lot more challenges for domestic workers than for other Muslims in Hong Kong and other countries, as their efforts in maintaining their religious practices are frequently complicated by the unequal employer/employee relationship. Nevertheless, such cultural experiences provide rich materials for IDWs who turn to writing.

This article is based on a case study of a writing community called *Forum Lingkar Pena* Hong Kong (*FLP-HK*), whose members are IDWs who work in Hong Kong. *FLP-HK* community itself is a branch of Jakarta-based *FLP* writing network that is recognised by Indonesian readers for its spiritual mission. *FLP* has recorded more than 5000 members and extended to the national scale in various cities in 30 provinces in Indonesia, and has even become transnational, with branches in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, the USA, Canada, Australia, Egypt and some other countries (Rosa 2007). *FLP* is inclusive in recruiting new members and opens up the possibility for people from various walks of life – students, lecturers, housewives, professionals, labour workers and domestic workers – to join the community, with two elements that bring them together: interest in writing and the spirit of Islam as a *da'wah* (proselytisation).

With this in mind, this article seeks to demonstrate how IDWs attempt to establish their spiritual habitus as they take up new roles as writers can be considered self-modernisation projects, which pivot around various elements of cultural modernity. I argue that IDWs' creative writing illuminate their attempts to improvise their habitus by working on their own meanings of modernity. This article specifically examines the elements of reflexivity and subjective and spiritual interiority in IDWs' literacy practices, within the conceptual framework alternative modernities. In particular, this article analyses the role of *FLP-HK*, to reveal how its collective literacy practices help affirm Islamic values and spiritual habitus as part of a self-modernisation process on IDWs' own terms, through which they elaborate a form of Islamic modernity. The works discussed here are taken from several anthologies of short stories and essays published by *FLP* network. Originally written in Indonesian, the excerpts were translated in English to serve this article's purpose.

As this article's epigraph suggests, a choice to stick to halal dietary practices while producing pork-rich cuisine due to the demands of work contributes, for some IDWs, to the establishment of a new spiritual habitus. Rouse and Hoskins (2004) argue that religious practices such as choices of food and clothing permitted in Islam are intertwined with habitus, as they are structurally predetermined and therefore have potentials to be altered (227). Arum Budiastuti (2013) refers to the 'the sacredness' of halal food consumption as mediating her body and mind, to support her argument about the role of agency in producing what she calls 'new Muslim subjects." Therefore, the deliberate choice of keeping the practice signifies a process of building the capacity to make changes (Bellah 1968), to conduct self-

questioning (Gaonkar 1999) or self-correction (Eisenstadt 2000). All these capacities are key elements of modern selfhood, and in the context of Islamic practice, connect to the alternative modernities concept.

In order to illustrate the relationship between IDWs' literacy practices and alternative modernity, in particular the form of Islamic modernity that I argue is being worked on through these practices, this article begins with a brief review of literature on migrant domestic service and modernity project. It then continues by providing a conceptual framework of spiritual habitus and Islamic modernity. It then leads to my analysis of IDWs' writing to reveal how IDWs respond to Hong Kong modernity in their creative works. Through this discussion, I will demonstrate that in *FLP-HK* we see an attempt to establish a new spiritual habitus, in which IDWs use their writing to maintain a specifically *modern* formation of Muslim identity. Hybrid culture is present in the writings by IDW writers, in that they mobilise their own cultural resources not to directly resist Westernisation, but more to negotiate between different formations of social and cultural modernity.

Migrant domestic service and modernity project

Research on domestic work, be it local or transnational, frequently associates it with modernity project (Barker et al. 2009; Chin 1998; Elmhirst 1999; Momsen 1999). In relation to the role of domestic workers in modern societies, the idea of being/becoming modern is demonstrated through the perspectives of either the state, the employers or employees, both within local and transnational contexts (Cheng 2004; Chin 1998; Elmhirst 1999; Lan 2006; Loveband 2006). In the local context, an attainment of middle-class status as a sign of modernity is expressed in the presence of local live-in maids in Indonesian urban families. Domestic servants play a central role in enabling middle-class women to reconcile 'the contradictory images of modern Indonesian femininity' (Elmhirst 1999, 240). Furthermore, hiring housemaids is perceived as crucial to maintaining the convenience of urban life style in a metropolitan city such as Jakarta (Elmhirst 1999, 244). In the transnational context, hiring foreign domestic workers is also perceived as a sign of middle-class identity. Being able to pay someone to do the domestic work in one's household is an example of consumptive practice in a modern middle-class family in Malaysia (Chin 1998).

Chin (1998) employs Bourdieu's (1984) concept of distinction to illustrate that the presence of a live-in housemaid as part of middle-class lifestyle reveals this class's attempt to distinguish itself from the lower working classes . Moreover, the Malaysian state legitimises the pursuit of this distinction through a set of employment rules that regulate minimum income, religion and family size as aspects that permit middle-class families to hire paid domestic workers. These regulations imply that only middle-class

families can afford this type of consumption, which involves commodifying foreign servants as a symbol of social status (Chin 1998).

From the perspective of domestic workers on the other end of the employer–employee relationship, working as domestic workers is spurred by complex motives, one of which is to pursue a modern life. For domestic workers in the Indonesian local context, mobility from rural villages to work in urban homes is perceived as a way to become modern, even though it might only be through gaining familiarity with the technology used in household appliances, which frequently pose challenges to women who come from poor rural households (Elmhirst 1999, 248).

It is interesting to see that consumption is an aspect used to represent modern life styles, by both the employers and the employees' side. While hiring a live-in maid is the symbol of middle-class status, as in the case in Malaysian and Indonesian employers (Chin 1998; Elmhirst 1999), possession of material goods such as nice clothing and jewelleries, as well as the economic ability to renovate houses are symbols of modernity for domestic workers both in local and transnational context. Rachel Silvey observes that the increasing scale of overseas labour migration among women in West Java has changed Sunda's landscape, as indicated by the presence of satellite dishes on house roofs, remodelled houses and even the building of new mosques entirely funded by overseas migrants' donations (Silvey 2006, 29–30). My own observation during occasional visits to Madura Island in East Java province and Lombok Island in the province of West Nusa Tenggara presented a contrast between the renovated mansion-like houses belonging to migrant workers and earthen-floored, modest houses in the surrounding areas.[1]

While burgeoning literature widely discusses the relationship between modernity and transnational labour migration, very few studies have been done on domestic workers' written narratives to reveal the multiple aspects of their lives as domestic helpers, particularly their negotiation of cultural and economic modernities. Ming-Yan Lai considers fictional narratives written by IDWs as a rich resource in understanding the dynamics of modern family life in Hong Kong, as represented by live-in maids. In her study, Lai uses two short stories written by IDWs in Hong Kong to explore the idea of surrogate mothering (Lai 2009, 570). IDWs frequently serve to mediate the conflicts between the responsibility of motherhood and demands of the labour market, a conflict that exemplifies the impact of modernisation faced on their female employers. As live-in maids, IDWs take over the responsibility of domestic chores, including child-minding, while still under the employers' supervision, thus giving the employers a sense of control and authority on domestic work.

Meanwhile, Shiho Sawai (2009) examines the issue of the way IDWs navigate their identity as reflected in their written narratives. Her ethnographic study of Indonesian literary communities, including the *FLP-HK* community, reveals IDWs' strategies to negotiate their subjectivity. In her

analysis of '*Jilbab in Hong Kong*,' a short story by an IDW writer, Wina Karnie (2005), Sawai points out how the character in the story uses strategies to negotiate her Islamic identity (as represented by her intention to wear a veil) with her Hong Kong employer.

The relative lack of studies on IDWs' writing in relation to their attempts to negotiate cultural and social modernities is puzzling, given the burgeoning literature on the relationship between modernity and transnational labour migration as exemplified by the trajectories of migrant workers in both industrial and domestic sectors. In most studies, a simple search for better economic conditions is considered the dominant motive for migrant workers to work overseas, which undermines the idea that the *imaginative* pull of the *idea* of modern urban life is a key motivating factor, and thus authorises the relative lack of attention to IDWs' cultural production and literary expression of their subjective experience. The lack of study of IDWs' writing is also understandable in light of the general perception of creative writing as outside the domain of domestic workers.

Interiority, habitus and Islamic modernity

This section presents the basis of my argument that IDWs' literacy practices, in particular their engagement in the *FLP* writing community, are evidence of their elaboration of a form of Islamic modernity. For one thing, the literacy practices carried out within the *FLP-HK* community reflect women's visibility in the public sphere, which is part of a global phenomenon for Muslim women to exercise their agency in the interpretation of Islamic teachings (Mahmood 2005). Secondly, in their engagement in literacy practices, the *FLP-HK* members demonstrate self-reflexive attempts in maintaining their spiritual interiority, as a response to Hong Kong modernity. These attempts are recorded in their writings, which are clearly indicative of modernity, both in terms of the written accounts and the self-reflexive form of the writing. The issues of maintaining Muslim identity in a non-Muslim society reveal self-disciplining attempts, as demonstrated in IDWs' stories that touch on the practice of halal consumption, five daily prayers and veiling. Confirming previous studies on these religious observances as the embodiment of one's free will on the basis of Islamic norms (Budiastuti 2013; O'Connor 2012; Smith-Hefner 2007), I argue further that writings by *FLP-HK* members reflect *female subjectivity*, which, a number of scholars (Brenner 2003; Mahmood 2005) assert, is an element of modernity.

In a Weberian perspective, modernity is associated with the spread of capitalism and possesses the feature of secularism, wherein the role of religion declines to give way to rationality, which itself is considered instrumental for capitalism to develop (Taylor 2001, 174–5). A number of theorists propose that modern life may lead to moral decay and the declining role of religion because

of its overemphasis on rationalisation (Weber 1992), or individualism (Bellah 1968). However, other theorists argue that modernity, which opens up the existence of various self and social identities, actually makes it possible for moral selfhood to develop (Asad 1993; Giddens 1991; Taylor 1989).

Gail Hochachka argues that a modern, self-reflexive, interior self would seek a conducive atmosphere for personal growth, self-empowerment and self-reflection (2005, 120). Hochachka defines interiority as 'components of human life, such as ethical, cultural, psychological, and spiritual needs' (111). A reflexive and interior experience, Foucault (in Rabinow 1997) argues, is embedded in modern life, in which an individual seeks to focus on the self through disciplinary practices, as exemplified in religious doctrines. This view contradicts the Weberian perspective, which (mis)calculated that modernisation was going to bring about secularisation.

With regards to Islamic practices specifically, Talal Asad elaborates Bourdieu's concept of habitus to explain that moral dispositions are guided by Islamic tradition, rather than purely based on individual reflexivity. As Asad puts it, the devout Muslim is 'seen not as an autonomous individual who assents to a set of universalizable maxims but as an individual inhabiting the moral space shared by all who are together bound to God (the *umma*)' (1993, 219). Thus, while a Muslim has free will to make changes in his/her life, his/her reasoning is bound to Islamic values, which tell him/her not only how to believe, but how to live on everyday basis. In other words, exteriority is essential in developing a reflexive, interior self (Asad 1993). The practices of halal consumption, *salah* (five daily prayers) and clothing such as veiling, among others, are the embodiment of the dispositions.

The spiritual meaning of Islamic practices is perceived by Muslims heterogeneously. Saba Mahmood's (2005) and Nancy Smith-Hefner's (2007) study of female Muslims in Egypt and Java, Indonesia, respectively, suggest the role of disciplinary, religious obligation of veiling in forming moral dispositions (humility and modesty) to establish piety. Mahmood further argues that these dispositions that guide Muslim women how to live their lives resonate with the Aristotelian formulation of habitus, in which interiority is acquired by means of exteriority through repeated bodily acts, until the practice becomes a durable character (2005, 137). Thus, the formation of habitus takes place consciously, as compared to Bourdieu's unconscious power of habitus in which social dispositions are naturalised (Bourdieu 1977). Meanwhile, Winchester's (2008) study of Muslim converts in Maryland, USA, demonstrates that religious practices of prayers, fasting and Islamic clothing are the embodiment of a Muslim moral habitus in Bourdieu's term, which refers to the moral dispositions (submission to God, abstinence and modesty) associated with the trajectory to become virtuous Muslims. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that in both studies,

Muslim subjects exercise agency in actively selecting aspects of the moral self, which is characteristic of modern societies.

From the Weberian perspective of modernity, the Muslim world has frequently been portrayed as anti-modern. However, the everyday practices of Muslims in many parts of the world indicate otherwise. Both Muslims who live in their countries of origin and those who are migrants in Western countries are familiar with, and actively make use of, various elements of modernity, such as technologies and women's visibility in the public sphere. Essential elements of modernity such as forms of popular government, rule of law, mass media, mobility, literacy and the urbanisation of society (Gaonkar 2001, 2) are also shared by many Islamic societies and individuals. At the same time, Muslim societies maintain their adherence to Islamic teachings in people's daily lives. The alternative modernities concept enables us to conceptualise Islamic modernity, which can include Islamic values such as Muslim sisterhood/brotherhood and charity.

Gole (2000) states that self-reflexivity is one of the elements that transforms Muslims in a modernisation process. In Islamic teachings, self-questioning is fundamental for human beings to make changes in their lives. The Qur'an mentions: 'Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves' (QS 13:11). This verse is frequently cited, in modern and contemporary periods, to justify that Islam urges human beings to improve themselves; here, the traditional teaching takes on a decidedly modern resonance.

While Islam, to some extent, can be considered part of tradition, a number of studies note that Islamic movements attract middle class women because Islam is perceived as a break from tradition, particularly in its treatment of men and women in equal terms (Rinaldo 2008). The egalitarianism in Islam contests the patriarchal values in society, and Muslim women in the middle class see Islam as constituting modern elements such as education (Gole 2000) and subjectivity through self-discipline (Brenner 2003). As middle-class Muslims are seen engaged in public life through various social and cultural practices, the public visibility of Islamic ways of life has indeed increased in the eyes of the secular world. The visibility of Muslims in the public sphere is strengthened by the increasing rate of their attendance in higher education, their mobility, their growing use of communication technology, and media coverage (Gole 2000, 124). The emergence of Muslims in public life, Gole argues further, urges us to reconsider religion's important role in modern societies everywhere (130).

Islamic modernity attempts to discourage the conservative-traditionalist view of modernity as a dangerous and polluting morality. It actually encourages Muslims to embrace modernity while holding on to *Syariah* (Islamic values), as exemplified in the use of technology for religious purposes. Mobile communication technologies may be seen as a symbol of modern life

style, but their use does not necessarily reflect Western notions of modernity. Bart A. Barendregt explores Islamic modernity by investigating the creative adaptation and appropriation of mobile communication technologies by Indonesian young Muslims in their everyday practices of Islamic values (Barendregt 2009, 73). The uses of mobile technologies for religious purposes such as *adhan* (call to prayer) reminders, and *Qur'an* and *Hadith*[2] apps suggest that the Western way is not the only path to modernity (Barendregt 2009). Barendregt's term 'funky but at all times *syariah*' (89) for mobile Muslims reflects the intertwining of Islam as both tradition and modernity.

The above argument about Islamic modernities as possessing a number of values shared by a broader concept of modernities becomes especially relevant in the context of diasporic communities such as IDWs who live and work overseas. Coming from a country with the biggest Muslim population in the world, IDWs are likely to meet challenges when they find themselves becoming minorities in a predominantly non-Muslim territory such as Hong Kong. Complicating the problems is the subordinate position that they cannot help but take as domestic helpers. In the hands of IDWs who engage in *FLP-HK* writing community, such daily struggles are recorded in pieces of creative writing. To a large extent, IDWs' writing reflects IDWs' trajectory to Islamic modernity. It is therefore essential to look at the development of the Islamic IDW writing community in Hong Kong. I begin by presenting the background context of *FLP-HK* as a writing community that carries a spiritual mission.

Forum Lingkar Pena Hong Kong and the construction of Islamic modernities

It is in the challenging atmosphere of demanding work in the domestic sector in predominantly non-Muslim Hong Kong society that *FLP-HK*, by far the most established writing community within the IDW circle in Hong Kong, has consistently maintained its literacy practices. As mentioned earlier, *FLP-HK* is one of the many branches of *FLP*, a Jakarta-based writing network. With an orientation towards spirituality, *FLP* encourages its writers to write and conduct literacy activities with the spirit of Islam as a *da'wah* (proselytisation). *FLP* attempts to embrace a universal value of humanity, on which people can write to speak out a message of truth and righteousness. One of the founders of *FLP*, Helvy Tiana Rosa, characterises the content of Islamic fiction in terms of its consistent remembrance of God, Islamic-based humanity and avoidance of explicit sexual intimacy, as well as emphasis on physical beauty (Rosa 2003). According to Monika Arnez, Helvy Tiana Rosa's voice illuminates the vision of *FLP* in general as a 'literary *da'wah* movement that calls out to both young men and women to work for the country's moral and social reform' (Arnez, 2009, 62). Amrih Widodo observes *FLP* as part of Islamic popular culture that has been rapidly growing in Indonesia.

Along with the growing popularity of Islamic films and TV series, novels produced through the *FLP* network serve as an opposition to *sastrawangi* (fragrant literature) that is much more permissive to explicit sexuality and sensuality (Widodo 2008).

Following the spiritual mission of its main branch in Jakarta, *FLP-HK* was established and maintained its literacy practices with the goal of spiritual empowerment. Established in February 2004, *FLP-HK* is unique in that it was initiated and managed by Indonesian foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. The establishment of *FLP-HK* was triggered by the increasing number of IDWs who turned to writing and had their works published. As the group progressed, more members have joined the journey by publishing their works through writing competitions and auditions held by *FLP-HK Hong Kong, Namaku Peri Cinta* (Hong Kong, My Name is Love Fairy) (Nadia 2005) was the first book published by *FLP* Publishing, and showcases seven new writers, all of whom were still working as domestic helpers at the time of its publication.

The existence of *FLP-HK* as a spirituality-oriented writing community in Hong Kong is quite visible, not only in terms of their biweekly meeting held at a particular corner of Victoria Park but also by its presence in the local media, as represented by the members' published works. This is strong evidence of women's visibility in the public sphere. Gole asserts that Islamic modernities can be seen in the ways in which modern Muslim women exercise agency by being visible in public life. Muslim women's success in education enables them to 'participate in public life, acquire an independent personal life-space and distance themselves from the socially expected roles of spouse and mother' (Gole 2000, 99); and in IDWs' case, as housemaid. Therefore, *FLP-HK* can be seen as an embodiment of modern Islamism, which validates Muslim women's visibility in public life to contribute to the cause of Islam.

In the following section, I provide a textual analysis of IDWs' writing to show that the theme of modernity has been present throughout the development of IDWs' literacy practices. The stories by *FLP-HK* writers are used to elaborate how modernity is questioned, in response to the conflicting values between the old, cultural and religious ones originating from home and new, westernised ones in the receiving country. One of the ways IDWs respond to the Hong Kong modernity is by turning to their Islamic values, thus attempting to establish a spiritual habitus. My textual analysis is strengthened by selected oral accounts from my interviews with *FLP-HK* members.

Questioning modernity

The challenge of Westernised Hong Kong modernity is responded to in various ways by IDW writers, and to a large extent, the responses are partly shaped by the kind of relationship the IDWs have with their employers. To a large extent, Muslim IDWs' responses to modernity reflect challenges to their Muslim

identity and their self-reflexive attempts to maintain the spiritual interiority. Syifa Aulia's short story, *Elegi Bunga Rantau* (The Elegy of a Diasporic Flower) (2005) provides an excellent example of the temptations of Western-style modernity and cultural and religious norms presented as the solution, as perceived by the protagonist. It is one of the 15 short stories included in the anthology *Hong Kong, Namaku Peri Cinta* (2005). In the story, Aulia presents Wik, the protagonist, who heads to Hong Kong with an imagination that the country possesses an ability to change someone to be a tough and more religious person, as she sees in her friend's success story. She knew Inayah, her former schoolmate, as a rebellious and carefree girl. Yet, after working in Hong Kong, she transforms herself into a tough and virtuous Muslim woman. She encourages Wik to try her luck in Hong Kong. Seeing herself as a virtuous Muslim, Wik is determined to follow Inayah's path, only to find that her working conditions pose different challenges. Fleeing to a shelter from her employer due to physical abuse, Wik eventually meets Peter, a foreigner, and a writer, who is researching the lives of migrant workers in Hong Kong. With her linguistic capital in the form of her English and Cantonese competences, Wik becomes Peter's assistant. The legal work contract puts them in an employer/employee relationship, but in real life, they live together as a couple. The Western lifestyle is represented through the character of Peter, who has uprooted Wik from her cultural and religious identity:

> Slowly but surely, I was carried away with his lifestyle. His glamorous and free kind of life. Not a moment too soon, Peter changed my life. The social and even religious norms that I once held to tightly were slowly wiped out. I had no more norms to follow. Pubs, discotheques, and nightclubs were the places we hung out. Wine, whiskey, champagne, and the like were good company in between meals. (48)

Throughout the story, Wik is portrayed as having no ability to let go of Peter, who has provided her with emotional and financial security. Yet, psychological restlessness calls Wik to go home to her village in Indonesia, only to find that the missing piece is her religious values. As she steps on the ground at her village, the call to *Maghrib* prayer welcomes her:

> From afar, the sound of *adhan*[3] was beautifully delivered. A holy call to meet the Creator. My soul trembled, and I was awakened. […] All this time, I had never answered His calls. The sound of children learning to recite the Qur'an took me to the past. I was one of them when I was a child. (54)

The above short story presents the idea of the role of migrant social capital in encouraging a woman like Wik to work overseas. As Filiz Garip asserts, 'migrant social capital resources are defined as information or direct assistance provided by prior migrants to potential migrants' (2008, 594). My interaction with prospective IDWs and reading of IDWs' writing similarly suggest that the success stories of and assistance from friends and relatives who have previously worked

overseas become one of the pull factors in the decision to work overseas. As in the above story, the imagined modernity of Hong Kong is the one that shapes an IDW like Inayah to develop life wisdom and spirituality. The new figure of a pious woman represented by Inayah becomes one of the resources that motivates Wik to migrate, with an imagination that her primary, economic-driven intention to become a migrant worker in Hong Kong will not affect her spiritual habitus. In reality, the same kind of modernity swallows Wik to the extent that for a time, she loses her spiritual life altogether. It is only through self-reflexivity that Wik senses a missing part in her hedonistic life with Peter, the embodiment of Western modernity. The story ends with Wik's attempt to reclaim her spiritual habitus, as she decides to go back to her cultural and religious roots by marrying Hardi, a pious young man, on her ailing father's persuasion.

Thus, we see here that Aulia's story carries the collective, spiritual mission of *FLP-HK*. In dealing with the theme of the conflicting values between religiosity and Hong Kong modernity, Aulia offers an answer, in which self-reflexivity may make an IDW regain her conscience and return to her spiritual root. The story suggests a self-modernisation project, in which the element of reflexivity on the basis of Islamic values is perceived as playing an important role in one's decision to observe the religion.

Maintaining spiritual habitus

In exercising self-reflexivity as a response to Westernised modernity in Hong Kong, some IDWs face various challenges when they choose to maintain their spiritual life. To be a virtuous Muslim is not only a matter of interiority, but it requires one to pay attention to one's exteriority in the form of religious practices (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). In fact, many IDWs who choose to turn to religion as a response to Hong Kong modernity face various conditions, ranging from support to prohibition, depending on their working conditions and the kind of relationship they have with their employers. In many cases, the exterior aspects of IDWs' religious life pose challenges to their employers. Some IDWs' writings address a number of challenges in maintaining their Muslim identity, as exemplified in the matters of halal food practices, five daily prayers and veiling.

Halal *food practices*

IDWs and employers can reach compromises of differences in cultural values, and oftentimes, new cultural practices are embraced. However, conflicts with religious values are more difficult to handle. Muslims will try their best to avoid any practices that are contradictory to Islamic values. In terms of halal food consumption, for instance, living in a non-Muslim country frequently poses a challenge on day-to-day basis. According to O'Connor, for Muslims living in

non-Muslim countries, a decision to maintain halal food consumption serves as a constant reminder of their identity as Muslims, and at the same time, as minorities (2012, 97). Muslims will search for ways to consume only halal meat, since pork is forbidden. Beef, lamb and chicken consumption, while not prohibited, also becomes contested and negotiated. Many would strictly consume only red meat and chicken that are slaughtered in a halal manner, while others would just take any meat and not question the halal issue. For many Muslims, the consumption of other kinds of food should also be self-regulated by checking whether the food has halal labelling or contains halal ingredients before they consume them. In order to do it, Muslims rely on Islamic websites and friends' suggestions for information on halal matters.

While halal food consumption is a choice made out of religious awareness for many diasporic Muslims, the case is more complicated when unequal power relationships play a role. Most IDWs in Hong Kong are Muslims, but many express concerns about their negotiation with their employers with regards to maintaining their Islamic practices. Many fear that their intention to avoid eating pork in the household of southern Chinese employers, with their pork-rich cuisine, may bring about problems as serious as violence and job termination, and are too afraid to negotiate. This fear is further stimulated by horror stories that circulated among IDWs about pork consumption. Consuming or not consuming pork is a serious and sensitive matter and may actually lead to abuse by the employer. In her other short story '*Saat Luka Menyapa*' (When Pain Greets) (2006), Aulia tells about Murni, an IDW, who is shocked when she learns that the work contract she signed at the employment agency states her acceptance of pork consumption. She remembers clearly during the interview that she opted not to consume pork. This difference in the matter creates a problem with her new employer:

> Wong Dai forces Murni to eat pork. She just doesn't care. Or maybe she intentionally mixes all food with pork.
>
> "Hey, listen! You're here to work. Not to be a master!" she scorned me. "Maids don't choose what to eat, you understand!" she continued, her hand pointing at Murni's face. (33)

Murni's resistance to pork consumption leads to physical abuse, which eventually forces her to run away and seek help from the police.

Meanwhile, some IDWs are fortunate to work for employers who not only treat them well but also provide decent working conditions. As in the case of Bayu Insani, the co-author of *TKW Menulis* (Migrant domestic workers Write) (Insani and Raihan 2011), her religious life was easily maintained as she worked for a devout Christian elderly lady who displayed respect for Insani's religious practice. Insani writes, 'I was grateful that they [the employer's family] understood that my religion did not allow me to touch pork, or

eat it. That was why, whenever pork was part of the menu, Mama would handle it herself' (2011, 19).

However, a good relationship with employers may not guarantee religious tolerance, even when the working conditions are satisfactory. For some IDWs, religious practices are not to be negotiated, and cultural misunderstanding cannot be resolved, as revealed in Ida Raihan's written account in *TKW Menulis* (Insani and Raihan 2011). Halal dietary practice was one of the main reasons that forced Raihan to end her contract. In her reflexive story of her trajectory as an IDW, Raihan tells her readers that a good relationship with her female employer fails to make her stay longer. When her employer asks her to extend the contract, Raihan agrees on one condition, that is, not to be taken to restaurants, as pork consumption is out of question for Ida:

> In Chinese restaurants that serve pork, there's no way any single menu would be safe, either because of the oil, or the knife, or the pan. As a Muslim, I must avoid all these. But my employer just didn't get it. To them, as long as you don't eat the pork, it should be fine. (2011, 135)

However, the employer refuses for the reason that Raihan is considered part of the family, and she doesn't feel right to let Raihan not join in family gatherings. Eventually, Raihan works for a Buddhist monastery, which provides her a more Muslim-friendly atmosphere in terms of food consumption, as vegetarian cuisine is the way of life: 'In my next job, meat was prohibited from entering the place. It was all about veggies. My main duty was to help a female monk [...] I felt much more relieved here.' (142).

The writings by Aulia, Insani and Raihan provide readers with different perspectives on IDWs' responses to halal dietary practices regulated by their employers. While Aulia presents her voice through Murni, her protagonists, Insani and Raihan refer to their own experiences as IDWs. Nevertheless, their written accounts indicate their self-reflexive attitudes towards differences in social and cultural life in Hong Kong that shape their attempts to establish their spiritual habitus. Put together, these written accounts carry *FLP-HK*'s emblem of Islamic modernity, in which religious observances (in this case, halal dietary practice) are done out of self- awareness that is based on Islamic norms, rather than blindly following dogmatic practices.

The various trajectories reflected in the writings also suggest that IDWs prefer working conditions that open up space for spiritual interiority by allowing the observance of religious practices. This preference can be traced in some IDWs' writings that reveal their expectation and acceptance of what IDWs perceive as Muslim-friendly working conditions, even when the relationship with the employer is far from being equal. This is seen in IDWs' attempt to maintain the five daily prayers – a religious practice that may bring more challenges and negotiation with their employers on day-to-day basis.

Praying

Another aspect of Muslim life that many IDWs attempt to keep is the five daily prayers. In Indonesia, Muslims may not see the need to be alerted to prayer times, as mosques are everywhere, and calls to prayers can be heard through loud speakers five times a day (at dawn, midday, afternoon, dusk and early night). Meanwhile, living in a non-Muslim country, every single thing in daily life will be a reminder about their status as a religious minority (O'Connor 2012). In my own experience, travelling and living overseas, an *adhan* app on my cell phone and desktop or laptop serves as my constant reminder of prayer times. But while IDWs and I share the same status as part of Indonesian diasporic communities, their working circumstances call for a much higher level of negotiation to ensure the possibility of daily prayers being carried out.

Winchester (2008) argues that embodied religious practices such as five daily prayers are significant in establishing Muslim converts' moral habitus. This is echoed, in a different context, in IDWs' experience in maintaining their five daily prayers in working conditions that tend to restrain them from doing so. Anxiety about not being able to commit to religious practices to maintain spiritual habitus is expressed in the story *Jilbab in Hong Kong* by Wina Karnie (2005). In the story, Ginasih, the narrator, voices a self-reflexive thought about the declining spirituality she feels, as shown in her feeling of detachment from God.

> Ginasih sat solemnly on her prayer mat. It was past midnight. She had grown restless recently. Before coming to Hong Kong, she was a devout Muslim. But since she worked as a domestic helper, she had changed a lot. Dear God, even though I'm away from home and family, I shouldn't distance myself from You, should I? (Karnie 2005, 27)

The short story unfolds the narrator's aspects of her moral self as embodied in daily prayers, which are supposed to be done five times a day, but can only be carried out 'by stealing time,' without her employer's knowledge, for fear that her contract would be terminated (31). Ginasih has to negotiate between her public and private space to carry out the prayers. This space negotiation is similar to the experiences of domestic workers in Pei Chia Lan's (2006) study, in a way that they negotiate between their front/back stage when using mobile phones to communicate with their families and friends.

While Ginasih in the above story avoids the risk of getting caught praying by her employer, Murni in Aulia's short story '*Saat Luka Menyapa*' (When Pain Greets) (2006) experiences physical abuse for the same action of praying secretly. Murni's employer considers *mukena*, or praying gown (usually white)[4] a taboo from the Chinese cultural perspective, as, being white (a colour associated with death), it may invite ghost spirits. She thus beats up Murni for such action:

> [...] She saw Murni overslept on the *sajadah*[5] [...] Her pretty face changed to be like a hungry lioness, ready to attack her prey. "Why are you wearing white

> clothes? It's taboo, didn't you know?" she shouted as she was pulling off Murni's *mukena*. She tore it off and dumped it into the rubbish bin.

As the story comes to an end, the physical abuse and humiliation to the religion, as represented by the employer's act of throwing away the praying gown to the bin, spur Murni's decision to run away from her employer and seek protection from Hong Kong authorities.

In the above two short stories, the characters both face unwelcoming attitude towards religious practices. Both Ginasih and Murni, the protagonists, secretly keep their daily prayers, both to maintain their spiritual interiority and to secure their job contract, which Murni in Aulia's story cannot endure. For Murni, the impossibility to keep her religious practices and the abuse that entails leave her with no option but to escape. In many cases, it is the availability of spiritual space that compensates more than the uncomfortable material, working space. Given two options, good working conditions or space for religious practices, some IDWs opt to take the latter. In another short story *Indahnya Doa* (The Beauty of Prayers) by Emma Vey (2013), the protagonist willingly accepts uncomfortable living conditions such as limited private material space, as long as spiritual space is still available.

> *Alhamdulillah*,[6] although I had to sleep on the floor, at least I can still pray. Whenever praying time came, I would run to the kitchen, as they would not allow me to pray in other rooms. Praying on a newspaper as my mat and full sweat in summertime was a common thing when I prayed, as the kitchen was not ventilated. (156)

Thus far, I have demonstrated the various conditions that regulate IDWs' observances of their religious practices, in particular, keeping their five daily prayers. The above examples suggest two reflexive acts. For one thing, despite the working conditions that restrict IDWs from maintaining daily prayers, these experiences suggest their reflexive, interior selves, in which disciplinary practices as embodied in the prayers need to be maintained. IDWs' heightened awareness of the importance of maintaining the daily prayers in whatever the conditions that either permit or restrict them from doing so is a reflexive attempt to ensure that their spiritual habitus stay intact. More importantly, the act of writing (semi) fictional narratives about these reflexive experiences itself clearly demonstrates reflexivity. IDWs' reflexive writing about their self-reflexive attempts in establishing spiritual habitus is clearly indicative of self-modernisation projects. In what follows, I discuss IDWs' other attempt to maintain their spiritual habitus with regard to veiling, which may put more challenges to their status as Muslim women.

Veiling

As compared to halal food practices and the five daily prayers that practically all Muslims find compulsory, veiling invites diverse perceptions among

Muslims. Veiling itself is one of the most vehemently debated aspects concerning the position of Muslim women in the society. It is highly politicised as the supposed embodiment of women's suppression and subordination in Islam (Ahmed 1992; Esposito 1992). Within Muslim women themselves, the interpretation of *hijab*/veil varies, depending on the social backgrounds of those who interpret the practice. Some consider veiling compulsory for Muslim women, as stated in several Qur'anic verses that are often cited to justify it. Veiling is prescribed for Muslim women to keep their modesty (QS 24: 31), and for self-protection against abuse (QS 33:59). Among Indonesian and Malaysian young Muslim women, the resurgence of Islam is represented by the veiling practice. The veiling has symbolised not only the awakening of self but also transforms the idea of what it means to be a devout Muslim (Brenner 2003; Ong 2003). Such perception of veiling is held by some IDWs, who see veiling as a disciplinary practice that is deemed necessary to embody a moral self. Ita, an IDW, asserts, 'Don't see my *jilbab* as evidence of my piety, but consider it as my journey to become more pious' (individual interview, 14 January 2013).

The diverse perception of veiling contributes to the regulation of veiling in the transnational labour business. Some IDWs' writing addresses the complexity of veiling not only in the workplace but also prior to their temporary migration overseas. The work requirement that demands prospective IDWs let go of some aspects of religious practices such as veiling may occur as early as when they are undertaking the training centre in the home country. In her written account about her journey to become an IDW in Hong Kong, Sani laments having to take off her veil once she enters the training centre in Indonesia.

> For years I've been covering my *aurat*[7] and wearing *jilbab*, and now I have to take it off again. I even had to cut my bottom-long hair up to my shoulder. *Masya Allah*. I cried inside my heart. I asked for Allah's forgiveness for having to expose my *aurat* that had been covered for so long. (Insani and Raihan 2011, 6)

The prohibition to wear veil regulated as early as in the training centre implies that this religious observance is perceived as not fitting in Hong Kong society, and may trigger problems with employers. Whether or not this perception continues when IDWs already reside in Hong Kong largely depends on the employer's perception. In *TKW Menulis* (Insani and Raihan 2011), Raihan still held this assumption during her first months of working in Hong Kong. She commented on her new friend who was wearing *jilbab* on her day off: 'The first time I saw Atik wearing *jilbab*, I said to myself, 'wearing *jilbab* in this country, isn't it weird? Huh, I wouldn't do that.' (Insani and Raihan 2011, 129), but eventually donned her veil when her job gave her freedom to do so (142). Similarly, when Insani was already in Hong Kong, she was fortunate to be given freedom by her employer to practise her religion, including veiling (29).

Insani's and Raihan's experiences differ from what Ginasih experiences in Karnie's story in '*Jilbab in Hong Kong*' (2005). Besides a prohibition on praying because it supposedly reduces a maid's productivity, Ginasih's employer does not allow her to wear a veil. Ginasih employs a strategy to negotiate her spiritual space by wearing her veil only when she is outside the employer's house. She is eventually granted permission to wear *jilbab* at home following an incident in which a strand her hair was found in the soup she served for her employer. She cleverly explains that covering her hair with a shower cap when working at home and wearing a square of fabric over it (which is actually her veil) would prevent such an incident from recurring.

All the examples elaborated above clearly indicate that IDWs' spiritual conscience has the potential to be challenged, especially when conflicts between the Westernised Hong Kong modernity and religious values arise. These experiences of veiling, both in the accounts of IDWs' real experiences and fiction based on IDWs' daily lives, suggest that the choice of aspects of spiritual habitus lies with the individual perception of IDWs. At both sides of the veil debate, IDW writers in the *FLP-HK* community present themselves as self-reflexive subjects. Their various decisions with regard to maintaining their spiritual habitus indicate that the decision is intentional and based on their spiritual consciousness, as shaped by their understanding of Islamic teachings. This indicates the role of agency and reflexivity in IDWs' establishment of spiritual habitus as embodying their self-modernisation process.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated in this article that literacy practices within the *FLP-HK* community can be seen as collective action to frame a collective identity of smart, creative and religious IDWs. I should emphasise here that the trajectories taken by IDW writers in transforming themselves, and later, empowering their community are clearly also a path to self-modernisation. IDW writers in the *FLP-HK* community are able to work on their own definitions and embodiments of Islamic modernity. Living and working in a non-Muslim environment that poses different values that often contradict those they strongly hold, IDW writers undertake reflexive self-modernisation centrally incorporating modern-style versions of Islamic religious beliefs and practices. Through their creative writing, IDWs express their attempts to maintain their spiritual habitus – embodied in the practice of halal food consumption, five daily prayers and veiling. It is apparent that modern elements are present in the form of their subjectivity in observing the religious practices and the reflexive form of writing they use in sharing the experiences to public. By so doing, they can rest assured that being modern, in the sense of undergoing a self-questioning process in order to effect self-transformation, is not only compatible with Islamic values, but is in fact an essential element in becoming a better Muslim.

Notes

1. Madura and Lombok Islands are among the largest senders of Indonesian migrant domestic workers to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.
2. In Islam, Qur'an represents the Words of God, and Hadith is the collection of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) as narrated by his Companions.
3. Adhan: a call to prayers in Islam.
4. Many IDWs are given a list of things not to bring when they go overseas. The list may include *mukena* (white praying gown).
5. Sajadah = praying rug.
6. *Alhamdulillah* means Praise be to God.
7. In Islam, *aurat* refers to parts of the body that should be covered. For women, it refers to the whole body except face and hand.

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