

## Re-Interpretation of women's position in religious texts: A gender humanistic study

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**ABSTRACT** Along with socio-cultural changes and the development of Islam that has spread to almost all parts of the world, it demands a reinterpretation of religious texts, considering the rules made by previous scholars have not yet accommodated the changes, especially related to the position of women. This change has become the basis for women activists to reinterpret the rules that have been determined by ancient scholars which are no longer relevant and interpret new things that have not been discussed by the scholars. The debate over gender issues is unavoidable, especially between women activists and figures who consider the works of ancient scholars to still be relevant and think there is no need for reinterpretation. The purpose of this study is to provide a reinterpretation of religious texts related to gender understanding, especially those related to the position of women, especially for spots that demand equality with men. The research used is qualitative research in the form of literature study, with a hermeneutic approach and prioritizing theological, sociological and philosophical aspects. The results of this study illustrate that in addition to its nature, Islam also positions women so high and noble, in certain positions they have an equal position and degree with men, not only in their position in terms of religion, but also in other aspects, such as cultural, social, politics and other aspects.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are three major themes in the study of Islamic philosophy, as stated by Mulyadhi Kartanegara in his book *The Gate of Wisdom: God, Nature, and Man*. Humans are one of the interesting themes for us to study because of their uniqueness, and according to the author, all existing knowledge can be related to humans [1], at least from an axiological perspective.

According to Marcel A. Boisard in his book *Humanism in Islam*, there are at least three approaches that can be used to examine human beings, when viewed from the point of view of permanent and impermanent existence. First, humans are seen in terms of their essence (the elements that remain in humans). We can examine this with a philosophical approach. Second, humans are seen in terms of ideology and spirituality that shape a person's character in acting, we can approach it with a moral and social knowledge approach. Third, humans can be seen in terms of the existence of ethical and legal institutions that are formed from historical and social experiences that have protected them with the rights and obligations between them, and we can approach them with legal and historical approaches.

Gender Study as I see from Marcel A. Boisard's opinion is a research that we can approach with a moral and social knowledge approach, because this study is related to human behavior and actions in terms of ideology, spirituality, and socio-culture that shapes their character. I will also

include a discussion of philosophy in the hope of shedding light on the essential side of man, as a basis for thinking.

On this basis, this paper will examine the issue of women associated with Islam as a moral teaching, which discusses how Islam talks about women [2] from various points of view, such as: women in relation to 'ubudiyah/worship, women in relation to family, women as witnesses, women as leaders, women in relation to polygamy, and so on. This paper uses a qualitative method with a text study approach related to religion, philosophy [3], social and culture.

The debate over women's issues resulted in various terms, such as gender, feminism, and sex. The term gender was widely discussed in the mid-20th century, however, discussions related to women had begun in the Greek era [4] or even long before that, in accordance with the explanation in a compilation of essays from gender observers or activists entitled *A companion to gender history*. The book, reviewing gender from time to time; first, the classical and post-classical period (2000 BC – 1400 AD), second, the period of the development of modern society (1400 AD – 1750), third, the period of the modern world (1750 AD – 1920 AD), and fourth, the contemporary period (1920 AD – 2003 AD). [5]

The term gender can be understood by the differences in roles, duties, functions, rights, responsibilities and opportunities in the social life of society between men and women caused by certain socio-cultural values (socio-

cultural construction) that can be changed according to the needs or changing times and political power in a particular area or region. [6]

Gender is a concept that refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that occur as a result of and can be changed by social and cultural conditions of society. Gender is the division of roles and responsibilities of family and society, as a result of social construction that can change according to the demands of changing times. In another understanding, gender is an inherent trait of men and women who are produced or shaped by social and cultural orders. Changes in characteristics and traits that occur from time to time and from place to place due to changing social and cultural conditions are called the concept of gender [7].

Two terms that have similarities and differences in the discussion of women are the terms gender and sex. These two terms have the same object of study, namely humans (male and female), the difference between the two lies in the dimensions that exist in humans. The term sex is more appropriate to refer to the biological dimensions of men and women which are natural (given by God), while the term gender is based on the socio-cultural dimensions of a man and woman which are temporary (changing) along with existing socio-cultural conditions. Associated characteristics and traits are based not only on biological differences, but also on social and cultural interpretations of what it means to be male or female.[5]

By the mid-twentieth century, the term gender had engulfed discussions of women's issues, such as the emergence of a group of people calling themselves the women's advocacy movement from London. This movement introduced "Gender Discourse". The term gender has led to misunderstandings about what is meant by the concepts of gender and sex, and what is the connection between these concepts and the efforts for women's emancipation (women's empowerment) that women are fighting for, not only in Indonesia, which was pioneered by Kartini, but also in various other parts of the world.[8]

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used is library research or literature study. Literature study is a series of activities related to the methods of collecting library data, reading and taking notes, and managing research materials. This technique is carried out with the aim of revealing various theories that are relevant to the problems being faced/researched as reference material in the discussion of research results.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Gender Theories

Gender has a lot of theories, and one of them is from the philosopher, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) with his psychoanalytic theory, which focuses on the understanding that the development of sexuality determines the attitudes and personalities of men and women. According to Freud that every person has three characters, namely; First, the id is a physical-biological trait that is present in a person from birth. The character id is the main source that influences the next two characters. Second, the ego is a character that is in the scope of the ratio, which is in charge of controlling the aggressiveness of the id.(Freud & Crick, 1999) Third, the

superego plays a role in the moral sphere for the perfection of life that goes beyond satisfaction and pleasure, and serves to remind the ego in controlling the id.(Umar, 2019) According to Freud, a son will identify with his father, as well as a daughter will identify with his mother. This is due to their similarities.

While the Structuralist Functionalist Theory holds that society consists of various elements that influence each other. Functionalist theory is more on psychological issues, while structuralists are more on sociological issues.(Umar, 2019) Functionalist and structuralist can be used with reference to the past, that a man served as hunters and women as gatherers. This theory can be applied in modern times.

Conflict theory states that gender groups are inspired by Marx's theory of social class. The social class at the top is the bourgeoisie, the class that owns capital and the social class at the bottom is the proletariat, namely the workers or workers. This group identifies men as the bourgeoisie (oppressor) and women as the proletariat (oppressed).(Acton & Edwards, 1967; Umar, 2019; Lasch, 1997; Abdullah, 2014)

### 3.2 Study and Analysis

Empowerment and assurance of women's rights require understanding and reinterpretation of religious texts, along with the socio-cultural changes of contemporary Muslim society. It did not become a problem during the time of the prophet, because the problem can be asked directly to him.(Abdullah, 2014) This problem arises at this time due to socio-cultural changes and the development of Islam that differs in character from the area of origin of Islam, the Arab area, and there are still many contemporary Muslim communities who hold fast and believe that fiqh has been composed by the fuqoha (fiqh experts). In the past, it was final and sacred, even though it still needs to be reviewed, especially in the case of women.(Sharify-Funk, 2016)

Islam as a moral teaching and guidance in society and the nation has provided explanations related to women, including; Islam talks about women related to creation, caliphate, servant, leadership, witness, inheritance, marriage, and so on.

#### 3.2.1 Women in the Religious Texts

**A. Human Creation** Regarding the origin of of human, the Qur'an states in Surah An-Nisa' (4): 1, as follows:

"O mankind! Have piety (taqwa) towards your Lord, Who created you from a single soul (Adam may peace be upon him) and from him created his mate and from the two of them dispersed a multitude of men and women. Have piety towards Allah by whose Name you request one of another and be careful of the wombs (the rights of kinship). Surely, Allah is Watcher over you.." (Qs. Al-Nisa' (4): 1)

In the gender concept adopted by feminists, the verse of Al-Nisa' (4): 1 is very discriminatory since it said that Adam was the first human. The claim that was socialized was the Qur'anic expression "min nafsina wa>hidah" which is widely interpreted as Adam while Hawwa (as a connotation of a woman's symbol) was created from Adam which is contained in the phrase "zaujaha>" and this is strengthened in the explanation of the Hadiths. which emphasizes that Eve was created from Adam's rib. According to M. Quraish

Shihab in the introduction to the book Gender equality argument by Nasaruddin Umar, this view causes women to have unfavorable impression because women came from men (Adam). Then, there is a hadith explanation about it, which the previous scholars understood as it is (literally), but contemporary scholars understand it metaphorically, some even reject the authenticity of the hadith. For metaphorical circles, this hadith warns men to treat women wisely because there are traits, characters, and tendencies that are not the same as men. (Umar, 2019)

According to Husein Muhammad the expression of the Qur'an "Nafsin Wahidah" translated (one self) is not the figure of Adam, while the expression "Zaujaha" (his partner) is not the figure of Eve, because in the verse it is not clearly explained the time of the figure of Adam or Eve, but only explains that a man and a woman are a couple. (Muhammad, 2001)

According to Aminah Wadud, there is no essential difference in the process of human creation between men and women. They have the same qualities and there is no difference between them, except for their gender. (Wadud, 1999) They have the same qualities and opportunities before their God without exception.

**B. Women as Servants of God** According to (Qs. al-Zariyat (51):56).

"And I (Allah) created not the jinns and humans except they should worship Me (Alone)." (Qs. al-Zariyat (51):56)

In the capacity as servants of God there is no difference between men and women. Both have the same potential and opportunities to become ideal servants. The ideal servant in the Qur'an is usually termed as pious people (muttaqun), and to achieve this degree of muttaqin there is no known difference in gender, ethnicity or certain ethnic groups (Wadud, 1999), as mentioned in al-Hujurat (49:13)

"O mankind! Surely We have created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes, that you may get acquainted with one another (your lineage). Surely the most honorable of you in the Presence of Allah is he who is the most pious of you (not by your race or lineage). Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware." (Qs. Al-Hujurat (49):13)

Perempuan dan laki-laki sama-sama mengemban amanah dan menerima perjanjian awal dengan Tuhan, seperti dalam. al-Araf (7:172) yakni ikrar akan keberadaan Tuhan yang disaksikan oleh para malaikat. Sejak awal sejarah manusia dalam Islam tidak dikenal adanya diskriminasi jenis kelamin. Laki-laki dan perempuan sama-sama menyatakan ikrar ketuhanan yang sama

"And when your Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their backs their progeny and made them bear witness against their own souls. (Allah said:) "Am I not your Lord"? They said: "Yes, (You are our Lord) we bear witness", lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: "Verily, we were heedless of this"" (Qs. al-Araf (7):172).

Al-qur'an juga menegaskan bahwa Allah memuliakan seluruh anak cucu Adam tanpa pembedaan jenis kelamin. (Qs. al-Isra' (17):70)

"And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference.." (Qs. Al-Isrâ' (17): 70)

Men and women has the same capacity and opportunity as God's creatures and will get the same reward according to what they do. If they do good, they would get reward; likewise, if they do something bad, then they would get punishment. (Umar, 2014)

The verse above implicitly explains the ideal concept of gender equality and emphasizes that individual achievement, both in the spiritual field and in a professional career, does not have to be dominated by one gender only.

The Qur'an views the position of men and women equally. There is no difference between men and women, even if there is, then it is the result of the main functions and tasks assigned by religion to each sex through the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. So that the existing differences do not result in one feeling having an advantage over the other, but they complement each other and the fundamental difference is in piety and righteous deeds, as explained in the Qur'an letter al-Hujarat (49): 13 and al-Nisa' (4): 124.

"And whoever does ameliorating deeds (cleansing of the soul's heart) whether male or female as a believer; these shall enter Heaven and they shall not be wronged even to the size of a speck on the back of a date seed." (Qs. al-Nisa' (4): 124).

"But when she delivered her, she said, "My Lord, I have delivered a female." And Allah was most knowing of what she delivered, and the male is not like the female. "And I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for her in You and [for] her descendants from Satan, the expelled [from the mercy of Allah]." (Qs. Ali Imran (3); 36)

**C. Women and Inheritance** In the context of gender discussion which is also often in the spotlight is about the inheritance of men and women, as the Qur'an explains:

"Allah enjoins you concerning (the heritage for) your children: to a male, a portion equal to that of two females; and if they are more than two females, then their share is two-thirds of the inheritance, and if there is one (woman) her share is half; and if the deceased had a child, each parent shall have the sixth of the inheritance. But if he has no child and only his two parents inherit from him, then his mother shall have the third (the remaining is for his father). But if he has siblings, then his mother shall have the sixth after a bequest he may have bequeathed or debt. You do not know which of your parents or your children is nearer to you in usefulness; these (fixed shares) are an ordinance from Allah; And Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise." (Qs. al-Nisa' (4); 11).

According to Nasaruddin Umar, Islam has changed the inheritance tradition that already existed in pre-Islamic Arabs. One to two ratio the inheritance that women get is a reform of Arab culture by Islam, because in the Arab tradition before Islam came, women did not have inheritance

rights from their families. Women were treated like property, in that a son child could inherit his stepmother once his father died. In a sense, what Islam had done to women at that time was very appropriate. (Umar, 2014) Islam creates a law of one to two ratio so that women could also inherit. It also relates to a man's responsibilities towards the family in equal proportions. According to Amina Wadud, the distribution ratio of inheritance for men (two) and woman (one) is accompanied by the double responsibility men had compared to women, even if many men ignore this. (Wadud, 1999).

According to Nasaruddin Umar, inheritance in the current context especially in Indonesia, rarely uses one to two. Inheritance shares in general is the same between men and women. (Umar, 2014)

**D. Women and Polygamy** Polygamy is one of the controversial issues in contemporary Islamic studies; some are supportive, some are against it especially women activists. (Mashhour, 2005) This difference is caused by different interpretations or approaches to religious texts.

"And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, then marry two, three, four (other permissible) women that you like; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then be pleased with (concubines) what you have with you. That is more appropriate for you not to part from justice." (Qs. Al-Nisâ': 3).

Amina Wadud in her book explains that the verse above emphasizes the concept of justice for orphans, and justice for wives, not as a legitimacy to allow polygamy. According to her, the concept of justice is not only related to the problem of time which is commonly understood by polygamists, but also relates to funds, compassion (the justice of compassion is not easy to measure) and so on. (Wadud, 1999) This means that polygamy is very difficult to actually be done. Scholars generally agree that polygamy is permissible, but, not with strict conditions. (Umar, 2014) The explanation of the verse above, regarding the permissibility of polygamy, seems to be narrowed down by the following verse;

"And you will never be able to be just between wives, even if you should strive, so do not incline too much to one of them so as to leave the other hanging, and if you reconcile and have piety, then surely Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (Qs. Al-Nisâ': 129).

According to the author's opinion, the concept of justice is something abstract and impossible to achieve that has different standards between people between cultures, regions, time periods and so on. Even though polygamy is allowed, it should not be done because of the difficulty of the conditions specified and almost impossible to do as explained in the paragraph above. We must return to the purpose of marriage, which is to form a family that is *sakinah*, *mawaddah* and graceful, and it is very difficult to achieve that goal, especially with polygamy.

**E. Women and Leadership** Leaders and leadership in Islam have a *naqliyah* reference, meaning that there are signs from the Qur'an that reinforce the need and importance of leadership in the social system. Meanwhile, talking about women in the Qur'an requires us to start from the beginning about how the Qur'an positions women. The discourse

of leadership in an Islamic perspective is rooted in the interpretation of Surah al-Nisa' verse 34 which reads:

"The men are the maintainers (and protectors) of the women because Allah has made some of them to excel the others and because they spend out of their property (for the women as bridal-money and livelihood). Therefore the improved women (the women who do the soul's cleansing) are devoutly obedient, and as Allah has guarded (their property and chastity) they (too) guard in the unseen (in their husband's absence themselves as well as their husband's property and honor). As for those (women) from whom you fear disobedience (opposition) admonish them (first) and leave them alone in their beds (then) and (if they go on disobeying) hit them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely, Allah is Most Exalted, the Greatest." (Qs. Al-Nisa' (4); 34)

This verse is widely interpreted textually so that it seems full of gender bias and is also often used to legitimize male superiority. According to al-Razi, *lafad Qawwamun* in this verse is interpreted with leaders, rulers, judges and educators for women. This is because of the advantages possessed by men, which include knowledge and physical abilities, such as al-Razi, *Zamakhshari*, al-Qurtubi etc. However, this statement has now undergone a shift with evidence that many women have found success and brilliant achievements. (Muhammad, 2001; Mashhour, 2005)

In the author's opinion, the discourse on women leaders in religious texts must also be viewed from a socio-cultural perspective. For areas where there is still a gender bias in education, of course, the reasons put forward by the commentators above, such as al-Razi, *Zamakhshari*, al-Qurtubi and so on, which state that women and men have differences in knowledge capacity, may be acceptable, but it will be different in an area that has given the same freedom or rights in education to women and men.

### 3.2.2 Women in Philosophy, Social and Culture

In the discussion of women in the religious text above, there are those who argued that they need to be reinterpreted because they are related to current changes in existing social life. The discussion of the origin of the occurrence of humans and women as servants of God is not argued against since they do not have a direct relationship with social life. The next point that has a relation with social life requires reinterpretation of the text, due to local socio-cultural changes.

First; The debate on religious texts about "women and inheritance" which explains that women can get half as much as men must be reinterpreted, because this implies women are still looked on unfavorably on a practical level, which risks causing social conflict, especially in current socio-cultural climate. The possibility of social conflict in terms of inheritance, if we look at the class theory of Karl Marx about the upheaval of the bourgeoisie as the oppressor and the proletariat as the oppressed. The description of inheritance cases in religious texts, men as the bourgeoisie and women as the proletariat. (Acton & Edwards, 1967)

Second; Marx's thought is also interesting if we apply it in relation to the role or position of women in social and cultural structures. Marx is one of the philosophers who



stated the importance of the role of social class in social life, such as; the working class, farmers, financiers, businessmen, sellers and so on, have an equally important role, because the economy will not run without the working class, as well as the others. This is exactly the same as the issue of gender. The existence of women will determine the existence of men, and vice versa. Marx's thinking, can be used as a foothold in overcoming gender problems.

The role of women in social interaction has a very important role in determining new things for society. The character of perseverance and tenacity and supported by experiences and experiments carried out daily by women are important points in fulfilling or contributing to improving the world, according to pragmatist gender activist. Actually, gender activists in the pragmatism group wish to state that women have their own uniqueness that is unavailable in men, and vice versa. On this basis, it is important to provide equal places or opportunities for women and men according to their abilities.

There are still many things related to women that we have to deal with in line with socio-cultural changes, such as; how Islam responds to Miss World, how Islam talks about abortion in general, how Islam talks about abortion in cases of rape, and so on.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Islam has put women in a proper and respectable position. Islam has also freed women from civilization that has imprisoned their creativity and rights. In the author's opinion at this time, it is not enough to say that "behind the success of men there are strong women", since "behind the success of women there are strong men" must be true, because at this time, men and women have equal opportunity and opportunity to achieve success.

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