Feminist Reinterpretation of the Qurʿān
Nina Nurmila

Abstract

This article argues that no Qurʿānic interpretation is objective. Qurʿānic interpretation is influenced by the interest, values and the background of its interpreters. This article will identify some of the biases in the existing Qurʿānic interpretations, which are mostly written by male scholars, on gender issues such as the first human creation and male leadership, and will re-interpret the verses from equal gender perspective. This article will also argue that the correct interpretation is the one which is closer to the fundamental teaching of Islam, mainly equality and justice. Only Allah knows the maʿnā ḥaqīqī (the real/correct meaning) of the Qurʿān, but if Muslims believe that Allah is just, then it is impossible for Allah to reveal its message in the Qurʿān to support injustice. Therefore, if Muslims interpret the Qurʿān to support injustice, then their interpretations may be incorrect because they contradict the nature of God, who is just.

Abstrak

Tulisan ini berargumen bahwa tidak ada penafsiran al-Qurʿān yang objektif. Penafsiran al-Qurʿān selalu dipengaruhi oleh kepentingan, nilai dan latar belakang penafsirnya. Tulisan ini akan mengidentifikasi beberapa bias yang terdapat dalam tafsir al-Qurʿān, yang kebanyakan ditulis oleh sarjana laki-laki, tentang isu-isu jender, seperti penciptaan manusia pertama dan kepemimpinan laki-laki, dan akan menginterpretasikan ulang ayat-ayat tersebut dari perspektif persamaan jender. Tulisan ini juga akan menyatakan bahwa penafsiran yang benar adalah yang dekat dengan ajaran dasar Islam, terutama persamaan dan keadilan. Hanya Allah yang mengetahui makna hakiki al-Qurʿān,

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akan tetapi jika umat Islam percaya bahwa Allah adalah adil,
maka tidaklah mungkin bagi Allah untuk mewahyukan pesan al-
Qur’ān yang mendukung ketidak-adilan. Oleh karena itu, jika
umat Islam menafsirkan al-Qur’ān untuk mendukung ketidak
adilan, maka penafsiran mereka mungkin salah karena
bertentangan dengan sifat Allah yang selalu adil.

Keywords: male biased Qur’ānic interpretation, gender justice,
feminist interpretation

Introduction

There are many definitions of Feminism but let us take Oxford Advanced
Learners. Dictionary of Current English as the first instance where it defines
feminism as “movement for recognition of the claims of women for
rights (legal, political etc) equal to those possessed by men”. Another
definition by Azza Karam which defines feminism as “an individual or collective
awareness that women have been and continue to be oppressed in diverse ways and
for diverse reasons, and attempts towards liberation from this oppression
involving a more equitable society with improved relations between women and
men”. But in this article, I tend to define feminism as “an awareness of the
existing oppression or subordination of women because of their sex and as
working to eliminate such oppression or subordination and to achieve equal
gender relations between men and women.”

Thus, a feminist is a person, either
male or female, who is aware of the existing oppression or subordination of
women because of their sex, and he or she works to eliminate such oppression or
subordination and to achieve equal gender relations between men and women.

Gender was initially used in English grammar to refer to things neither
male nor female, then it is used by feminist to differentiate between what is
natural (kodrati/sex) from social construction (non-kodrati/gender). The use of
the word gender is one of the ways to eliminate discrimination against women
based on their sex. Before the use of gender in feminism, it was often assumed
that women are pre-determined to be housewife, to be caregiver, emotional and
irrational, while men are often assumed to be breadwinner, who is physically
strong, rational and therefore superior to women. Based on this assumption,
women are often excluded from certain jobs which require physical strength

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2 Nina Nurmila, Women, Islam and Everyday Life. Renegotiating Polygamy in
and/or rationality. With this differentiation between what is biologically pre-determined (kodrati/sex) from the social construction (non-kodrati), we can now think critically that either male or female can be either emotional or rational; that physical strength can be gained by both male and female through training; that being breadwinner is a role constructed by many societies to be suitable for men and housewife is a role constructed by many societies to be suitable for women, when in reality not all men are capable of being breadwinner and many women are capable of being breadwinner.

There are also many types of feminist in the West such as liberal feminist, radical feminist, Marxist and socialist feminist, eco-feminist and postmodern feminist. Influenced by Western feminists, some Muslims who were brought up and educated in the West have become feminists. They are aware of the existing oppression or subordination of women because of their sex and they work to eliminate such oppression or subordination and to achieve equal gender relations between men and women, for example by criticizing patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qur’ān and re-interpret the Qur’ān from equal gender perspective.

Prior to the emergence of Muslim feminism, most Muslims tend to take for granted the existing Qur’ānic interpretations as absolutely true, as if the words of the interpreters are equal to the words of Allah. No one was brave to criticize the existing Qur’ānic interpretations; especially those are produced in the classical period. Similarly, no one was daring to be critical and to question the validity of the hadith compiled in the Sahih Bukhari or Sahih Muslim.

Fatima Mernissi may be the first Muslim feminist who is brave to criticize and question the validity of the hadith which undermine female leadership, compiled in the Sahih Bukhari.3

The emergence of Muslim feminism in the 1980s has provided new alternative approach in interpreting the Qur’ān. Muslim feminists tend to be critical to the patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qur’ān. They argue for the reinterpretation of the Qur’ānic verses from equal gender perspective. They believe that God is just and therefore it is impossible for God to deliver the message which supports injustice. Among the pioneers of Muslim feminists are Amina Wadud, Azizah Al-Hibri, Asghar Ali Engineer, Riffat Hassan, Farid Essack and Asma Barlas. Most of the works of these Muslim feminists have been translated into Indonesian in the 1990s, affecting many Indonesian Muslims to be critical to the existing Qur’ānic interpretations. On

the other hand, the influence of non-Indonesian Muslim feminists on Indonesian feminist scholarship can be seen, for instance, in the books written by Masdar F Maṣūdi, Nasaruddin Umar, Zaitunah Subhan and Nurjannah Ismail.

This article argues that no Qur’anic interpretation is objective. Qur’anic interpretation is influenced by the interest, values and the background of its interpreters. This article will firstly identify some of the biases in the existing Qur’anic interpretations, which are mostly written by male scholars, on gender issues such as the first human creation and male leadership, and then will re-interpret the verses from equal gender perspective.

Patriarchal and Male Biased Interpretation of the Qur’anic Verses on Gender Issues

Patriarchy is a system which puts adult men in the center of the system, while others such as women and children are put in relation to the center. In patriarchal system, women and children are seen as subordinate to adult men. For example, women are positioned as the supporter and the companion of the men, who are expected to serve all the men’s needs such as to prepare for food, clean clothes, clean and tidy house, to provide emotional support and comfort, to fulfill their sexual needs and to take care of their children. Within this system, women are not seen as independent human beings who have their own interest in their own life. Similarly, male children are positioned as the next generation of the patriarch and the entertainers for their parents, which could give a sense of satisfaction and completeness of life to the patriarch (adult man). Patriarchal interpretation of the Qur’ān which means the interpretation of the Qur’ān that tends to subordinate women, not seeing them as fully human being and put them only in relation to men.

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4 Masdar F Mas‘udi, Islam dan Hak-hak Reproduksi Perempuan. Dialog Fiqih Pemberdayaan (Bandung: Mizan, 1997).
The bias is “leaning of the mind towards or away from something”.男 biased means leaning of the mind towards men or being in favor of men or being against women without having full knowledge of the women. Bias has negative connotation because of the partial attitude toward certain group without being supported by the fact about that group. Male biased interpretation of the Qur’an is the interpretation of the Qur’an which tends to be partial to men due to the lack of knowledge of the women. For example, a Qur’anic interpreter who is brought up in the family or in the society in which no women are educated may assume that women are by nature subordinate to men or that women can never be smarter than men.

In this part of the article, I will identify some examples of the patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qur’an on gender issues such as on the first human creation and male leadership and then will re-interpret the verses from feminist perspective or from equal gender perspective.

1. The First Human Creation

Most Muslims refer to the classical Qur’anic exegeses when they want to know the interpretation of the Qur’anic verses. Among the classical Qur’anic exegeses that we can identify the patriarchal male biased interpretation is in the interpretation of Qur’anic verse An-Nisa’ (4): 1:

There are differences among the Qur’anic exeges in interpreting the word nafsin wāhidatin. Most classical Qur’anic exeges (muftassirin) such as Tabari (d. 310 H), Zamakhshari (d. 538), Qurtubi (d. 671), Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H), Baidawi (d. 685 H) and Maḥalli and Suyūṭī (d. 864) interpret nafsin wāhidatin as Adam. This means, they believe that the first human being created by Allah was Adam (which is often imagined as an adult man); from him (which is often interpreted as from his left crooked rib), Eve (often interpreted as an adult woman) was created. Because of the belief that the first woman was

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created from man, then it is interpreted that women are subordinate from men and that women are created for men.\textsuperscript{9}

The above Qur\’\nic exegetes’ interpretation that \textit{nafsin w\=ahidatin} is Adam is one of the examples of the patriarchal male biased interpretation. Why? The word \textit{nafsin} is a neutral word, neither female (\textit{mu’annath}) nor male (\textit{mudhakkar}), but in Arabic grammar, it is categorized as \textit{mu’annath}, therefore its attribute is \textit{w\=ahidatin} (\textit{mu’annath}). In addition, the word \textit{zaujatun} is neutral word, that can be used for either male or female, which means “spouse”. This means that the male \textit{zaujatun} is female and the female \textit{zaujatun} is male. In addition, we often use the word \textit{zaujatun} for male and \textit{zaujaha} for female. However, the patriarchal ideological assumption of the above Qur\’\nic exegetes that it was man who was firstly created by God has made them to ignore the Arabic grammar, that \textit{nafsin w\=ahidatin} is \textit{muannath}, not \textit{mudhakkar}. In addition, if we refer to Arabic grammar, the word \textit{zaujaha} should be literally interpreted as “the male spouse of the female”. However, due to their patriarchal bias, they interpret \textit{wa khalaqa minha \textasciitilde zaujaha \textasciitilde} with the opposite grammatical meaning: “and Allah created from him, his spouse”, which should actually be interpreted as “and Allah created from her, her spouse”.

Not all classical exegetes are male biased. For example, Qur\’\textsuperscript{u}bi\textsuperscript{1} (d. 671) interprets \textit{nafsin w\=ahidatin} as \textit{tur\=ab}. In addition, modern and more contemporary Qur\’\nic exegetes such as ‘Abduh (1905M), and Indonesian exegetes such as the translation team of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), Hasby ah-Shiddieqy (d. 1975) and Hamka (d. 1981) do not interpret \textit{nafsin w\=ahidatin} as Adam. For instance, MORA interpret \textit{nafsin w\=ahidatin} as “one person” [\textit{seorang diri}];\textsuperscript{10} Shiddieqy\textsuperscript{11} and Hamka\textsuperscript{12} interpret it as “one essence”. Like ‘Abduh, Shiddieqy argues that the Qur\’\textsuperscript{a}n does not state that Eve was created from Adam’s rib.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, Hamka argues that Muslims would not interpret \textit{nafsin w\=ahidatin} as Adam unless they refer to the story of Isra\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{i}l}liyat. It was in the Old Testament, Genesis 21-22, which states that Eve was created from Adam.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{9}See http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=34&Display=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1, date access 7 December 2012.

\textsuperscript{10} MORA, \textit{Al-Qur\’\textsuperscript{a}n dan Terjemahnya} [The Qur\’\textsuperscript{a}n and Its Translation] (Semarang: Karya Toha Putra, 1989), 114.

\textsuperscript{11} Teungku Muhammad Hasbi ash-Shiddieqy, \textit{Tafs\=ir Al-Qur\’\textsuperscript{a}nul Majid An-Nuur}, i (Semarang: Pustaka Rizki Putra, 1956, rev. ed. 2000), 776.

\textsuperscript{12} Hamka, \textit{Tafs\=ir Al-Azhar}. I-VI (Jakarta: 1966, revised 2004), 277.

\textsuperscript{13} Shiddieqy, \textit{Tafs\=ir Al-Qur\’\textsuperscript{a}nul Majid}, 776.

\textsuperscript{14} Hamka, \textit{Tafs\=ir Al-Azhar}, 277.
Similar with Hamka, Riffat Hassan (b. 1943), may be the first Muslim feminist who is critical to the classical interpretation on the first human creation. She argues that this interpretation was influenced by Christian tradition, which was then written in the form of ḥadīth. She argues that the Qur’ānic verse 4: 1 rejects the idea that women are created from Adam’s rib mentioned in the ḥadīth. More recent Indonesian Muslim feminists such as Umar, Subhan and Ismail also reject the interpretation that nafsin wāḥidatin means Adam. Umar, for instance, argues that nafsin wāḥidatin is grammatically feminine. If it means to be Adam, the attribute should be wāḥidīn. Similarly, Subhan and Ismail argue that the phrase is grammatically female, and therefore it cannot be interpreted as male, Adam. They believe that the classical interpreters were influenced by the ḥadīth, that Eve was created from Adam, which contradicts the Qur’ānic verse 4: 1. Like Hassan, Ismail even strongly states that the Qur’ānic verse 4: 1 aims to correct the previous scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, which both state that human beings are created from a male, while the Qur’ān make it clear that human beings are created from two people: a male and a female.

Like Qurṭūbī and other Muslim feminists, I believe that nafsin wāḥidatin does not mean Adam, but a single essence, that is the essence of clay. From that essence, the couple: female and male, were created. This interpretation is based on some Qur’ānic verses (QV) which inform us about the origin and the process of human creation such as QV al-Hijr (15): 26; Al-Mu’minuun (23): 12-14; Fathir (35): 11; and Ash-Shaffat (37): 11. These verses tell that human being is originally created from clay. The word used in these verses for clay vary but has the same meaning, for example, salsālin min ḥama’in masnūn (QV 15: 26), sulālatīn min tin (QV 23: 12), turāb (QV 35: 11) and tinīn lazīb (QV 37: 11). Therefore, if either male or female is created from the single or the same essence of clay, then there is no justification to claim the superiority of male over the female. Male and female are equal before Allah, what differentiates them is their degree of taqwā (QV 49: 13).

16 Umar, Argumen Kesetaraan Jender.
17 Subhan, Taṣfir Kebencian.
18 Ismail, Perempuan dalam Pasungan.
20 Subhan, Taṣfir Kebencian, 174.
21 Ismail, Perempuan dalam Pasungan, 333-34.
2. Male Leadership

There are two verses which are often used to justify male leadership and the superiority of men over women: QV 4: 34 and QV 2: 228:

الرجال قوماً على النساء، بما فضل الله بضحاهم على بعضهم وبما أنفقوا من أمواتهم، فألصليحوا في بنين خلفيت لعليكم بما حفظ الله، وألم يخففون دُوَّارهم، فعطوهم وما أضروا بها. وآهروهم في المضاجع وأصرموهم فإن أطفاعكم فلا تبغوا على بنين سبألا. إن الله كارد عليبا

The male biased interpretation of the Qur’ān can be found in most of the classical exegeses such as those written by Tabari (d. 310 H), Zamakhshari (d. 538), Al-Rāzī (d. 606 H), Qurtubi (d. 671), Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H) Baidawi (d. 685 H), Mahalli and Suyuti (d. 864) and Al-Shaukani (d. 1250 H). They interpret the verse 4: 34 to mean that men are the leader, the educator and the protector of women because men are superior to women. This superiority, according to them, is in terms of reason (‘aql), knowledge (‘ilm) and physical strength, that is why some men became the prophets, ‘ulamā’ (scholars), judges and leaders, while none of the women become prophets and ‘ulamā’. Men, according to them, are also superior for the money they spend to give women the mahr (marriage gift) and maintenance; and the amount of inheritance and the number of wives that they can have. Here is one of the examples of the interpretation of the Qur’ānic verse 4: 34 according to Ibn Kathir, which is similar with other classical Qur’ānic exeges:
Unlike most classical exegetes, more contemporary Muslim feminists such as Asghar Ali Engineer (b. 1939), Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid (d. 2010), Kiyai Husein Muhammad (b. 1953) interpret the verse 4: 34 as socio-theological verse, not theological verse; descriptive, not prescriptive verse and informative, not normative verse. This means, according to Engineer, that the Qur’ānic verse 4: 34 is not the rigid example of gender relation for any society, anywhere and anytime, but sociological or contextual description of gender relation at the time of revelation, which may be the same or different from the current situation. This verse, according to Abū Zaid, does not prescribe all men to be the leader of women, but a description on what happened at the time of revelation. It informs us that at the time of revelation, according to Kiyai Husein Muhammad, men are the qawwām (the economic supporter/leader) of women, not the norm that everybody should follow anytime and anywhere. If it is the norm, then the verse should include, for example, the word “wājib”; wājibun ‘alā r-rijāl qawwāmūn ‘alā n-nisā’. But the verse only describes or informs that at that time, ar-rijāl qawwāmūn ‘alā n-nisā’.

Another recent Muslim feminist, Nasaruddin Umar (b. 1959), offers a critical analysis to the wording used in the Qur’ān. According to him, the Qur’ān uses the word unthā for female and dhakar for male when it refers to biology or sex, and use the word rijāl, nisā’ and mar‘ah to refer to gender. This finding is very important in re-interpreting the Qur’ānic verse from equal gender perspective. Based on the differentiation of these terms, Umar argues that not all dhakar (male) can become rijāl (the masculine). To be rijāl,

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25 Umar, Argumen Kesetaraan Jender, 144-172.
according to Umar, a person has to fulfill certain requirements. These requirements of being *rijāl* who are *qawwāmūn* are stated in the Qur’ān verse 4: 34, that is: (1) he/she is superior to his/her spouse; and (2) he/she spends his/her money to support his/her family. Thus, being *rijāl* is not biologically predetermined, but should be achieved by fulfilling the two criteria. Superiority in the current context can be in the form of higher level of education and income. Any person, either male or female, who can fulfills the two requirements can be *rijāl* and therefore is *qawwāmūn* over his/her spouse.

Umar’s finding of differentiating between the term sex and gender in the Qur’ān is powerful in challenging male biased classical Qur’ānic exegesis of the verses 4: 34 and 2: 228, which tend to see male superiority as biologically predetermined by God. With this new finding, it can be argued that leadership is not biologically determined, but can be achieved by fulfilling the two criteria mentioned in the Qur’ānic verse 4: 34. Either male or female can be leader of his/her spouse. Thus, *dhakar* (male) will remain *dhakar* if he cannot fulfill the two criteria. In contrast, *unthā* can be *rijāl* if she can fulfill the two criteria.

Similarly, Subhan understands the Qur’ānic verse 4: 34 as not about normative male leadership, but as contextual verse concerning economic roles. According to her, male superiority is reduced if the male is incapable of financially supporting his family. The word *rijāl* is a plural from the word *rajul* (man) or *rijl* (foot), which means “those who walk or work to earn the money”; while those in domestic sphere are *nisā’*. Therefore, whoever active in the public sphere to earn the money can be called *rijāl*; while whoever is at home can be called *nisā’*.

**Conclusion**

The main conclusion of this article is that the emergence of feminist scholarship has critically uncovered the patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qur’ānic verses. This article also has shown some of the examples of these male biased interpretations of the Qur’ānic verses on the first human creation and male leadership. This article, for example shows that even though the Qur’ān has stated clearly that human being is created from *nafs* *waḥidatin*, most classical Qur’ānic exegetes ignores the Arabic grammar that this word is feminine and interpret it as Adam, based on the ḥadīths, which might come from the Christian tradition (Israiliyāt story). Unlike classical exegetes, some Muslim feminists argue that Qur’ānic verse aims to correct the Christian tradition that human being is created from Adam, but from a single

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essence, which is extracted from clay, as described in other Qur’anic verses such as QV al-Hijr (15): 26; Al-Mu’minun (23): 12-14; Fathir (35): 11; and Ash-Shaffat (37): 11.

In addition, the male biased interpretation of the Qur’anic verse can also be seen in most classical Qur’anic exegeses on verses 4: 34 and 2:228, in which most of the classical exegetes such as Ṭabarî (d. 310 H), Zamakhsharî (d. 538), Al-Rāzî (d. 606 H), Qurṭūbî (d. 671), Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H) Baidawî (d. 685 H), Ḥallî and Suyūṭî (d. 864) and Al-Shaukānî (d. 1250 H) see men’s superiority over women is pre-determined (kodrâti) and that only men who can be leader of women, not vice versa. Different from these classical Qur’anic exegetes, some contemporary Muslim feminists argue that the Qur’anic verse 4: 34 is not theological verse but sociological verse; descriptive, not prescriptive verse and informative, not normative verse. In addition, it is argued that being ṭabî should be achieved, not biologically pre-determined. To be ṭabî, a person has to fulfill the two requirements stated in the Qur’ānic verse 4: 34, that is: (1) he/she is superior to his/her spouse; and (2) he/she spend his/her money to support his/her family. Thus, whoever fulfills the two criteria, either male or female can be ṭabî and therefore can be a leader of the family. Finally, it is argued that ṭabî means those who use their feet to walk or work in public, while nisā’ are those who stay in domestic sphere, either male or female. This new feminist re-interpretation offers flexible roles for either male or female. By reading this new feminist interpretation, we can also see that Allah is just, especially when we know that superiority, such as in the level of education and income, is not biologically determined for male only, but can be achieved by either male or female. Wallâhu a’lamu bi al-ṣawâb.

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