

Wadon Sing Mendhem Rasa: A Feminist Reinterpretation of Woman Who Commits Adultery

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Abstract—This article aims to reflect the narrative of John 7:53-8:11 as a theological response to gender-based violence in cyberspace that appears in the Internet of Things (IoT) era. The patriarchal interpretation of John 7:53-8:11 results in the title “The Woman Who Commits Adultery” for this narrative which implicitly reflects the form of judgment from the religious leaders to the woman. This article proposes rereading women in the narrative of John 7:53-8:11 as a ‘wadon sing mendhem rasa’. The silence of victims of cyber gender-based violence, often seen as submission to public judgment, must be seen as unspoken anger because of the weak bargaining position. Through a reinterpretation of the narrative of John 7:53-8:11 using a feminist lens, we reflect on gender-based female victims as victims who are silenced by the patriarchal social system in an oppressive state. This reinterpretation results in a new perspective that favors victims for the church in responding to cyber gender-based violence in the IoT era. Research contribution: this research contributes to theological thinking on the contemporary issue of gender-based violence in cyberspace (GBVC). The proposed theological thinking will provide a foothold for the church in responding to GBVC issues theologically and pastorally. In addition, this study provides academic advocacy for women victims of GBVC to obtain a safe space.

Keywords—gender-based violence; cyberspace; john; new testament; gender and sexuality studies

I. INTRODUCTION

World Health Organization data in 2017 shows that around 35% of women worldwide experience violence, whether perpetrated by a physical/sexual partner or non-partner, during their lifetime [1]. Catalan & Buzon's research on 1,468 Andalusian adolescents aged 13-17 years showed that one in four adolescents had seen various forms of gender-based violence in cyberspace (GBVC) against women and girls in cyberspace [2]. More than a third of teenagers witnessed it but did nothing about it. Meanwhile, those who provide support or assistance are dominated by teenage girls. It is also revealed that the GBVC action is considered normal in cyber interactions [2, p. 2031]. Other studies have shown that women are the group with the highest potential to become victims of cyber violence or GBVC [3, p. 4]. Mishna, et al. present violence in the form of cyberbullying when viewed with a gender lens. It will conclude that women are the most dominant gender experiencing cyber-based violence in many forms [4, pp. 404–405].

Gender-based violence can be interpreted as direct violence against individuals based on gender [5]. In the online context, GBVC can be understood as direct attacks or violence against individuals based on their gender through online media. The term is then also widely understood to refer to aggressive acts or speech, including attacks on the sexuality or sexual orientation of a particular individual or group [6, pp. 199–200]. The forms of GBVC are very diverse and continue

to grow. Indonesian women's national commission (Komnas Perempuan) records at least eight forms of GBVC until 2018, namely cyber-grooming, cyber-harassment, hacking, illegal content, infringement of privacy, malicious distribution of personal photos/videos, online defamation, and online recruitment in the context of human trafficking and terrorism [7]. Another form of gender-based violence that is also included in online media to become GBVC is cyber dating violence or cyber-based dating violence [8, p. 5158]. These forms of GBVC can occur through various online means, such as group conversations, e-mail, forums, and other social media sites [6, p. 199].

In early 2021, we refuse to forget the case of an Indonesian Christian artist with the initials GA who experienced cyber gender-based violence in the form of distributing private intimate videos without permission. GA can only be silent and apologize to the public for the intimate video that was spread due to the crimes of others. If she talks about his private right to keep private documentation, she will be bullied even more by netizens. GA is a victim because of its weak bargaining position. Komnas Perempuan [9] stated that GA and her partner were victims of cyber gender-based violence. Ironically, the Indonesian Church Association (PGI), as the representative of the Indonesian church in the government, is silent on this issue. Not only GA, many other Christian women out there are forced to remain silent because of the unequal power relations in the church. The church tends to try to hide cases of sexual abuse committed by church authorities. In some cases, the victim apologizes to the perpetrator [10, pp. 18–35].

Gender-based violence appears in the New Testament text at John 7:53-8:11. This narrative features the public humiliation of a woman accused of adultery and then presented to Jesus for the death penalty. Without being judged along with the man who committed adultery with her, the woman becomes a single public spectacle and cannot voice the injustices she faces alone. Therefore, this narration is known as the "Woman Who Commits Adultery" (TB-LAI), which is a title that shows the accusations against her by the Jewish religious leaders at that time. Instead of standing with Jesus on the side of the woman, the label "Woman Who Commits Adultery" seems to have been conceived in favor of the accusations of religious leaders. In the light of feminists who take sides with women's voices and experiences, we propose rereading the female character in John 7:53-8:11's narration as a *wadon sing mendhem rasa*. We propose a thesis that women in the narrative of John 7:53-8:11 are victims of gender-based violence who cannot voice justice because of their low bargaining position. She is not correctly labeled as a woman who commits adultery, but *wadon sing mendhem rasa* (a woman who harbors bitter feelings, disappointment, anger because of injustice) because she was framed for a specific purpose. We will prove this new perspective on women by interpreting the historical-critical narrative of John 7:53-8:11 through a feminist lens. Then we will reconstruct the thought of women in John 7:53-8:11. In the end, we will reflect on the gender-based violence that befell women on today's gender-

based victims who need advocacy from the church theologically and pastorally.

II. METHOD

The rereading of John 7:53-8:11 is done narratively with a feminist lens [11, p. 73]. The narrative approach used is a historical-critical approach that sees the text in its historical aspect. The feminist lens used in writing this article suggests that the interpreters of this article have a position to side with women in the narrative of John 7:53-8:11 to create a friendly perspective on victims of gender-based violence. For this reason, first, the narrative of John 7:53-8:11 will be exposed historically-critically to see the problems and meaning of the text. Then the exposition will be continued in feminist-critical analysis to reconstruct the voices and experiences of women in the narrative of John 7:53-8:11. The reconstruction of women's voices and experiences will be a theological reflection relevant to victims of cyber gender-based violence and criticism of the church's response to it.

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

One of the narratives that show violence against women in the New Testament is the story of the woman caught in adultery in the Gospel of John 7:53-8:11. The text, entitled "Woman Who Commit Adultery" in the New Indonesian Bible Translation passage, has various problems. One of the issues that have become a hot topic of discussion is the canonicity of this text. Miller believes that this text was added later because it did not appear in the variants of the early text. That is why they believe that the text is not canonical but can be taught to the congregation with an accountable exposition [12]. Some argue that the story of the woman caught in adultery is referred to as an extension of the gospel of John [13]. In response to this, Gench's theory offers a different argument. In his article, Gench asserts that this problem occurs because the text is under pressure. The story in which Jesus quickly extended love to an adulterous woman embarrassed the intolerant early Christian community for the congregation's moral transgression [14]. In addition, Augustine argues that this text was discarded because men feared their wives would see the text as a license to commit adultery [15]. Thus, the text of Jn. 7:53-8:11 is essentially a canonical text that has lost its authority due to the influence of male power suppressing the text in their favor.

The narrative begins with the information that the people who listened to Jesus went back to their respective homes while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. After that, the narration is continued by changing the setting of the place. After spending the night on the Mount of Olives (8:1), Jesus returned the next day to the Jerusalem temple to teach because the Jews had just celebrated the great annual feast. There were probably still many visitors around the Jerusalem temple, so that the crowds came to Him [16]. It is no coincidence that the narrator mentions He went to the Jerusalem temple very early in the morning to teach. For in that city, Jesus had no place to live and, as He usually did, spent the night on the Mount of

Olives [17]. Because the place was open to the public, it was pretty easy for the scribes to come and gather with the disciples and those who came to hear Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees then came to take the woman to the temple and placed her in the meeting center. The woman was physically surrounded by people accusing her. She is an object on display, unnamed, voiceless, no identity shown other than she was accused, as a woman caught in adultery [18]. However, a question will arise from the people around him why the man is also not brought along with the woman. Alternatively, there is another possibility for the scribes and Pharisees themselves to focus exclusively on the woman [19].

The narration continues with the scribes and Pharisees asking Jesus' opinion on what to do with the woman since she had been caught in adultery. This question was asked not because they had doubts about what was written by the Mosaic law regarding adultery. In the Torah, the penalty for adultery was death for both men and women (Lev. 20:10). The death penalty should be given to both men and women by stoning. Nevertheless, injustice has occurred in this narrative because only the woman was brought before Jesus. Therefore, in silence, this woman became a tool used by religious authorities to overthrow Jesus through a question, "What do you think about it?" They asked that not because of whether they should apply the punishment, but they asked Jesus because of the different attitude towards people who experienced events like this woman [20]. So if Jesus defended the woman, then according to them indirectly, Jesus had contradicted the law of Moses. In addition, they would have grounds to bring charges against Jesus before a Jewish court [21]. On the other hand, if Jesus justified the decision of the scribes and Pharisees, then as Morris points out, Jesus could have been reported to the Romans that Jesus was the one who incited the scribes and Pharisees to punish the woman [22]. Thus their real purpose in asking Jesus was only to humiliate him in public and reduce his popularity [23, p. 13]. In other words, the woman was just a tool in the hands of religious rulers who overthrow their political opponents. At the same time, the adulterous man benefited by not accepting public humiliation and death penalty because the existing culture and religious authorities are on their side.

Jesus responded to the question by bowing and writing. The text does not provide information about what words or sentences Jesus wrote. To be sure, Jesus' response in silence and writing on the ground was a form of resistance. An attempt to fight the injustice received by the woman. That is why He said, "of you who is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at him." This statement is a form of resistance to the domination of the Pharisees and scribes' power and an attempt to break their efforts to overthrow Him [24]. This resistance of Jesus paid off because they left the woman, starting with the oldest (v. 9). They withdrew their demands, resulting in the release of the woman [25]. Thus, when the scribes and Pharisees left the woman without punishing her, Jesus gave her freedom from the oppression that the scribes and Pharisees had done to her.

Verse 11 is the climax of the narrative of the woman who was caught in adultery; Jesus then got up and asked the woman. The question that Jesus asked was what finally made the woman able to speak. In this case, Jesus acts as a third party who can match the power of the scribes and Pharisees. Through Jesus, the woman can be freed from the social violence she received, both from the public and the authorities. He answered Jesus' question by saying, "No man, Lord." Then Jesus answered the woman, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more." Here it is seen that Jesus' side is not on the woman's sin but for the injustice experienced by the woman. Jesus did not want the woman to be the object of violence by religious authorities, especially to humiliate and kill her. On the other hand, Jesus still ordered the woman not to repeat the sin of adultery.

The exposition on John 7:53-8:11 has four subjects that need to be discussed in depth. First, the issue of canonicity. The absence of this narrative in several early texts shows that there was no partiality for woman as the victim of violence in the early church. Gench's argument reveals that the primary consideration for the absence of the narrative is textual criticism, but rather the political aspect. By allowing this narrative to be absent from the canonicity of John's text, the early church has implicitly kept silent on the issue of violence occurring in the name of religion.

Second, the indictment of the Jewish religious leaders. The charges filed were proven legally flawed. The absence of a male partner for adultery indicates that the woman has been framed in a conspiracy to overthrow Jesus. Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 state clearly that the punishment for the adulterous partner is. This allegation of conspiracy was reinforced by the fact that no one dared to throw stones at the woman. Judging from the perception of the people of Israel that day towards religious leaders, they were seen as people who were close to God. Images of men as righteous and holy and women as unfaithful Israel often appear in the prophets' prophecies, apparently adopted by religious leaders to justify their accusations against women. Thus they see themselves as righteous on God's side and the woman like unfaithful Israel [26, p. 3]. Religious leaders want to impress themselves as righteous who sue the woman as a sinner who deserves to be punished like Israel in the past without the need to consider the principle of justice. Not only arrogant and unfair, but this attitude is also a reflection of misogynistic thinking born of patriarchal bias.

Third, the affirmative act of Jesus. Jesus' affirmative act is not a justification for adultery. The last sentence of Jesus, who did not tolerate the sin committed by the woman, showed his firm attitude towards the law. We agree with Sullivan that Jesus' rejection of the woman's punishment was a form of rejection of religion-based violence [26, p. 4]. Jesus has a transformative attitude in dealing with violence that shows God's original redemptive work. Jesus taught siding with victims of violence who have a low bargaining position. For Jesus, not only because someone made a mistake, he deserved to be removed. Furthermore, Jesus put himself on the side of

the woman and gave her a safe space in an affirmative action. The gender-based violence that appears in John's narrative is responded differently by Jesus with a moderate approach.

Fourth, the silent woman. The woman's silence is often seen as the woman's acceptance of the sin she has committed. Referring to the great injustice she experienced and the lack of space for her to express her voice and experience, silence is silence in anger. She was angry because she was framed, used, humiliated, marginalized, and silenced. It was used as a tool for political contestation by groups of religious leaders fighting over the influence that Jesus had taken from them. She lost the rights to his body and life when she was dragged to the front of the city gates. Her voice was unspoken because of the low bargaining position of women in the patriarchal Jewish social structure. Therefore, women's voices and experiences have no room to be heard. She was silenced twice, namely when this narrative happened historically and when the church did not recognize it as a canonical text in the Gospel of John.

In Javanese culture, there is an expression of *mendhem rasa*. *Mendhem rasa* is a condition in which a person holds back his disapproval of the opinions or actions of others because of his inability to express feelings or thoughts due to certain obstacles. *Mendhem rasa* can contain an element of anger that is held in the heart and not resolved. The woman in John 7:53-8:11 is better known as *wadon sing mendhem rasa* (a woman who holds back feelings) rather than a woman who commits adultery. The term adulterous woman implicitly associates negative sexuality with women's bodies and self. By retaining the term, Christian theology contributes to the stereotype of women survivors of violence as promiscuous, slut, or harlot. The woman in John 7:53-8:11 is a *wadon sing mendhem rasa*. The four previous discussions show that this woman experience injustice. She experienced psychological, physical, and social pressure from the elite for political purposes. Instead of getting the opportunity to present a defense against her, the construction of society at that time did not allow her to speak at all. She was forced to accept the fate of a woman who is now caught in adultery. The woman was silent because of the anger, disappointment, and unspeakable depression caused by the corrupt system.

IV. CONCLUSION

A The narrative of women in John 7:53-8:11 reflects today's victims of gender-based violence in cyberspace who unable to speak up because of the heavy pressure and stereotypes against them. A search of the narrative proves the injustice faced by this woman. Adultery committed is only directed to her, but not to her partner. This injustice shows that the main issue of this text is not "a woman who commits adultery," but the injustice of religious leaders for the sake of fighting for influence. The term "a woman who commits adultery" is a form of the sexualization of women's bodies and self by a patriarchal society. Instead of "a woman who commits adultery", she was a *wadon sing mendhem rasa*. Victims of gender-based violence are generally silent victims.

Despite many calls to speak out against the injustices experienced, the victims – especially women – remain silent since there is no safe space to speak out.

The church must be sensitive and take a stand on the side of the victim. On the other hand, the church must be firm with the perpetrators, even though they are leaders within the church body itself. The church must not stand with the scribes and Pharisees who judged the victims unjustly. Instead, the church must stand on the side of Jesus, who is transformative and advocates for victims of cyber gender-based violence to face the IoT era. The church must start by reformulating the church's teachings concerning the sexualization of the female body and self as if the female body is the source of male lust and guilt. Then the church must formulate a structured pastoral service to respond to the issue of cyber gender-based violence in the congregation. Establishing a task force to serve cyber gender-based violence is especially urgent to be formed and made a priority for church services.

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