

“GOD IS BEYOND SEX/GENDER”: MUSLIM FEMINIST HERMENEUTICAL METHOD TO THE QUR’AN

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Abstract

Muslim feminist hermeneutical methods to the Qur'an attempts to challenge conservative interpretations that tend to sustain hegemonic knowledge construction and the patriarchal reading of the texts. Implementation of this approach shows that the Qur'an is compatible with modernity and supports gender equality. They offer a new paradigm in reading the Qur'an from a gender-sensitive perspective and accommodate a woman's point of view. This article investigates analytical study of Asma Barlas' anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'an. This article shows that Barlas challenges the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an and exposes the egalitarian voices of the Qur'anic text. She argues that the Qur'an is an egalitarian text that established the principle of the equality of the sexes.

Keywords: feminist, gender equality, hermeneutics, Qur'an

Introduction

Qur'anic studies in recent era offer many approaches to reading the Qur'an. One of approaches available is hermeneutics. Regardless of controversies surrounding its application to understanding the Qur'an, hermeneutics is employed by several contemporary Qur'anic scholars like Fazlur Rahman (1982), Abu Zayd (1993, 2010) and Muhammed Arkoun (2006), to name a few. This approach is an attempt to reinterpret the Qur'an to respond to contemporary social and political conditions.

The hermeneutical approach emphasizes not only the textual meaning of the Qur'an but also its socio-historical context that includes the society and culture: the attitudes, norms, and values of the Hijaz and Arabia (Saeed, 2006) where the text emerged. Also, it emphasizes the unity concept of the Qur'an, the importance of the ethical dimension of the Qur'anic message, and the application of rational *ijtihad* (interpretation) which is opposed to *taqlid* (blind imitation).

Several Muslim women who concerned with gender equality in Muslim societies are trying to question the interpretation of the Qur'an that seems to degrade women's position. Several of them employ a hermeneutical method to reread the Qur'anic text from woman's point of view. They are Amina Wadud (1999), Asma Barlas (2002), Riffat Hassan (1990), Aziza al-Hibri (1982).

This article explores the hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an proposed by Muslim feminist namely Asma Barlas. She is chosen to be analysed for the reason that she has written her theory systematically especially in her book *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qur'an* (2002) related to understanding Qur'anic messages and challenge the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an. This article employs textual study to the work of Asma Barlas and other related publications on the topics.

Content analysis is used to describe the findings of the research. Before analyzing their methods, the following section will present briefly information concerning hermeneutics and feminism.

Hermeneutics, Feminism and the Qur'an

Hermeneutics, feminism and the Qur'an are the terms that attracted polemic to discuss. Especially the usage of hermeneutics and feminism are controversial for its concept and incompatible with the Qur'an. However, regardless of the heated debate surrounding the use of the first two terms, several Muslim scholars have adopted those ideas as an approach to understanding the Qur'an.

Hermeneutics is "the theory or philosophy of the interpretation." (Bleicher, 1980: 1). It usually refers to both the methodological principles of interpretation and the philosophical exploration related to activities of all understanding of human history. Most importantly, hermeneutics attempts to bridge the gap of text understanding between the past and the present. In accordance with the definition, hermeneutics can be a suitable tool for analysing the Qur'an especially for current understanding to accommodate various issues faced by Muslims.

Feminism is also a controversial term to be used in the Islamic context. There are disagreements not only about the concept but also about its applicability: the word "feminism" is usually associated with Western ideology. In Indonesia, many Indonesians consider this term a „non-indigenous“ and therefore, irrelevant to Indonesian values (Sadli, 2002). In many other Muslim countries, people attempting to import feminist ideas have been accused of "betraying" local cultural authenticity (Kandiyoti, 1991) like in Iran (Moghadam, 2002; Ahmadi, 2006) and Egypt (Badran, 1989, 1995; Karam, 1998). Some scholars like Tohidi (2007) advises the use of the term "Muslim feminist" rather than "Islamic feminist": the former term seems to be less troubling as it refers to personal identity ("a Muslim who is feminist") rather than the religion as a whole.

Nevertheless, as Badran (2002) argues that although the term "feminism" originated in the West, it is not Western. She states that "feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms" (Badran, 2002: 1). Islamic feminism in this study follows Badran's definition:

A feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm, ... [it] derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence (2002: 1).

Several Muslim feminists employ hermeneutics to read the Qur'an, and one of them is Asma Barlas. Asma Barlas (2002) is not that familiar with other names such as Amina Wadud or Fatima Mernissi in Indonesia. Thus, this article finds it significant to introduce her methods related to the Qur'an to be more visible. Her structure finds it useful to read the text from a woman point of view questioning inequality between man and woman that use Qur'anic teachings as a framework for justification.

Muslim Feminist Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur'an: Challenging Patriarchal Reading of the Qur'an

The hermeneutic approach is extended by Muslim feminists to demonstrate that the Qur'an is compatible with modernity and supports gender equality. Muslim feminists began researching about the women position in Islam in the late twentieth century, especially in the 1990s (Badran, 2002). They began to form a new paradigm in interpreting the Qur'an from a gender-sensitive perspective. Muslim women scholars like Riffat Hassan (1994), Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002) share a

methodology in their critical examination of religious texts: it is a hermeneutical model. Following the male scholars above, the Islamic feminists' hermeneutical approach emphasizes the need to reread and reinterpret the Qur'an and especially challenge the patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an within an egalitarian and anti-patriarchal epistemology (Barlas, 2002, 2006; Wadud 1999).

Several studies addressed the works of Muslim feminist who try to criticise understanding of the Qur'an that dominated by male especially on Qur'anic verses regarding women's position. Duderija (2015) for example has categorized the works of several Muslim feminists who employ what he called 'Islamic feminist scriptural hermeneutics.' In this discussion, he excludes Barlas for she belongs to Qur'anic ontology while he focuses on epistemology/hermeneutics (Duderija, 2015: 48). Hammer (2008) also examines the work of Muslim women's approach to the Qur'an in North America. She is comparing the work of Wadud, Barlas, and Barazangi (Hammer, 2008). Similarly, the work of Rivera de la Fuente (2015) analysing the work of Wadud, Barlas, and Mir-Hosseini. Hidayatullah (2010) comprehensive study is analyzing the work of several Muslim feminists where she categorized as feminist theology following the term of Schussler Fiorenza's term.

In this article, the hermeneutical model of Asma Barlas to understand the Qur'an is chosen for the reason of having systematically well-written method. Asma Barlas is a Pakistani origin that paid attention to the oppression experienced in her own country. She served as a staff in Zia ul Haq government, but since her criticism, to Haq's governmental system she was expelled from her country and received political asylum from the United States. She received her Ph.D in International Studies from University of Denver and she currently works as a senior lecturer at Ithaca College, USA.

Barlas is not only criticising the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an but also offering her method in reading the Qur'an as a counter of such approach. She argues "that Muslim women can struggle for equality from within the framework of the Qur'an's teachings" (Barlas, 2002: xi). Barlas began her discussion by throwing two fundamental questions asking whether the Qur'an is a sexist (misogynistic) scripture and whether the Qur'an allows for liberation opportunity (Barlas, 2002: 1).

Barlas traces the first questions by examining whether the Qur'an represented God as father/male that embodied divine attribute therefore, he is seen as symbolizing God on earth. Meanwhile, women is considered weak and should obey the order of the male. The second question is directed toward whether the Qur'an through its texts give the opportunity for liberating capacity for women from inequality and oppression.

Barlas begins her hermeneutical approach of the Qur'an by discussing the idea of *tawhid* (the Oneness of God) as the basis for an anti-patriarchal reading. Barlas (2002: 13) starts her method by exposing God's self-disclosure, which consists of three principles: "divine unity, justness, and incomparability." By divine unity (*tawhid*), she demonstrates the "indivisibility of God's Sovereignty to challenge the theory which assumes male as an extension of God's rule." By justness, she reveals the term *zulm* (harming to others by transgressing their rights) in the Qur'an, which clarifies that God never does any *zulm* to anybody. From analyzing this term, she derived divine justice as "respect for the rights of the human as a moral agent" (Barlas, 2002: 14). And God's "incomparability" means that God is absent of anthropomorphic terms; this rejects the attribution of God as male, as represented in the Arabic-gendered language used in the Qur'an, because, as she argues, "God is beyond sex/gender" (21).

Barlas (2002) challenges the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an and exposes the egalitarian voices of the Qur'anic text which she claims "have been submerged or lost

because of the patriarchal nature of its exegesis and the gendered nature of human language" (22).

Barlas proposes to read the Qur'anic text holistically and intra-textually to discover God's intended meaning. She emphasizes her hermeneutics to the text that "certain meanings are intrinsic to the text"(2002: 21). Her hermeneutics is influenced by Gadamer as she quotes in agreement with him at this stage. When reading the text to derive its intrinsic meaning, Barlas suggests to also read behind the text to reconstruct the historical context surrounding the revelation or the text production and to read in front of the text to re-contextualize the text in the present context (Barlas, 2002: 21). By applying this method, Barlas (2002: 25) concluded that the Qur'an is an egalitarian text that established the principle of the equality of the sexes.

For example on understanding the verse regarding polygyny. Many Muslim men understand Q. 4: 3 as permission to practice polygyny. The polygyny proponents seem to ignore the conditions associated with polygyny. In Indonesia, as reported by Nurlaelawati (2013), the courts grant permission for husbands proposing polygyny on the grounds of the husband's high sexual desire. Barlas (2002) argues that this verse does not serve a sexual function, but that in fact the polygyny verse should be seen as a restriction of polygyny, to be practiced only when an exceptional requirement (i.e., justice for orphans) is to be satisfied; it was not intended primarily to satisfy sexual desire.

Most Islamic feminists focus on the primary source of Islam that is the Qur'an, as the most authoritative text against which other texts cannot stand. Islamic feminists argue that the Qur'an, in particular, promotes the equality of human beings.

The hermeneutical approach to Islamic source aims to analyze the text not merely through its grammatical structure, but equally with attention to the socio-historical context of the production of the texts. Another important aspect of the hermeneutical approach is the idea of intertextuality, which means that texts in Islam are interconnected. The text is not isolated. To grasp a comprehensive understanding of texts in Islam requires treating the texts as a whole. The Islamic feminist hermeneutical approach to Islamic texts critiques the patriarchal reading of texts that are used to justify men's superiority over women.

Conclusion

The hermeneutical reading to the Qur'an emerged from the fact that Islamic texts have been abused in Muslim communities to oppress people, especially women. Muslim feminists offer a liberatory and a non-repressive reading of the texts through their anti-patriarchal approach of the Qur'an (Barlas, 2002) and the sexist biases of Arabic language (Wadud, 1999).

Barlas operates her method within Islamic feminism and employs hermeneutical approach to understand Islamic sources to provide a comprehensive understanding that supports gender equality and to counter a literalist understanding of Islamic texts that marginalizes women's position in Islam. A feminist hermeneutical approach that analyze Islamic texts provides a critical interpretation of Islamic texts that enable other voices to contribute knowledge production especially from women's point of view.

Critical examination of the texts using an Islamic feminist hermeneutic approach is significant to open the discourse to equity and social justice.

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