

# FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF THE QURAN AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE AGAINST PATRIARCHY (AN INDONESIA CONTEXT)

## INTERPRETASI FEMINIS TERHADAP QURAN SEBAGAI SEBUAH KRITIK IDEOLOGI PATRIARKI (DALAM KONTEKS INDONESIA)

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### Abstrak

Tulisan ini memiliki dua tujuan. Pertama adalah menganalisis dan memahami metodologi yang diterapkan oleh para feminis Muslim dalam kegiatan menginterpretasikan Quran. Pemahaman mereka terhadap teks dan konteks maupun metode interpretasi secara tekstual dan kontekstual akan didiskusikan. Tulisan ini mengelaborasi bagaimana metode interpretasi kontekstual mereka mencerminkan perspektif ideologi feminisme sebagai sebuah budaya kontra-patriarki. Penulis menggambarkan bagaimana metode kontekstualisasi sebenarnya adalah pendekatan literal lain yang juga tidak dapat dilepaskan dari posisi penting teks. Kedua, tulisan ini menguji dampak dari kegiatan menginterpretasikan Quran ini dalam mengubah pengetahuan dan kesadaran masyarakat sebagai sebuah tanda perubahan ideologis. Salah satu tujuan utama dari kegiatan ini adalah untuk menyediakan dan untuk memahami bagaimana masyarakat menanggapi dan mengamati transformasi yang dipengaruhi oleh kegiatan ini. Penulis mengamati dalam aspek dan tingkat apa kegiatan ini berkontribusi terhadap transformasi ideologis dari "patriarki" ke ideologi kesetaraan gender.

**Kata kunci:** Interpretasi feminis, interpretasi Quran, patriarki

### Abstract

My goals in writing this paper are, the first, to analyze and understand the methodology the Muslim feminists apply in their project of reinterpretation of the Quran. I will discuss their understanding of text and contexts, textual and contextual methods of interpretation. I will elaborate of how their method of contextual interpretation reflects their ideological perspective of feminism as a counter-patriarchal culture. I will see how the method of contextualization is in fact another literal approach since this method cannot escape from the important position of text. The second is to examine the impacts of the project in transforming public knowledge and awareness as a sign of ideological change. One of the key objectives of the project is to provide and to comprehend how public response and observe transformation influenced by this project. I will observe in what aspects and levels the project contributes to the ideological transformation from "patriarchy" to gender equal ideology.

**Keywords :** feminist interpretation, interpretation of Quran, patriarchy.

### Introduction

From 2000 to 2006, I worked with a Jakarta based Islamic feminist organization, PUAN Amal Hayati (PUAN). The experiences with PUAN have significantly mediated my being closer to and more familiar with the so-called Islamic feminist project in Indonesia. With its mission of building knowledge and awareness on

women's rights and gender issues among Muslim communities in Indonesia, the organization works on two main goals. The first is to assist Islamic boarding schools called *pesantren* or *madrasa* establish an integrated service institution to support women and children encountering gender and sexual violence, and, the second is to introduce feminist ways of understanding the Quran to

Muslim communities. As Rinaldo (2013) notes such programs of bringing women's rights and gender issues into Muslim communities are seen as an emerging phenomenon of contemporary post-Soeharto regime since 1998.

PUAN has formed a special task-force, the Classical Islamic Books Study Forum (Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning) in which a number of Muslim scholars and ulama (clerics) as well as feminist activists gather to study the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's traditions (hadith) by applying a feminist approach. Here, Islamic teachings in this paper specifically refer to the Quran and hadith. I need to note that though the project of reinterpretation delivered by the Classical Islamic Books Study Forum is the main source of information I elaborate, I also address some works by individual Muslim feminists and scholars, yet some of them are involved in the forum.

They call their project reinterpretation of the Quran and hadith which means that they are interested in reviewing earlier understanding and interpretation found in classical Islamic books written by ancient Muslim scholars. The main reason of this project is based on the perspective that classical ways of reading and interpreting the Quran and hadith were patriarchal that extensively contribute to developing sexual and gender discrimination within Muslims, including in Indonesia. They critically view literal and textual method of approaching the Quran and hadith among the ancient Muslim scholars as the core source behind this male-dominant Islamic thinking tradition. The members of the forum argue that to challenge textually patriarchal interpretation requires contextual and critical methods of thought and questioning (Raslan 2002, Arimbi 2010).

In their project of reinterpretation, the Muslim feminists take into account linguistic analysis by paying a serious attention to the ways classical (male) Muslim scholars approach to language used in the Quran. While the Arabic language the Quran uses seems to reflect patriarchal culture of the Arab society, male ulama did not really consider it in their understanding the messages of the Quran. As a result, the Muslim feminists view, the Islamic knowledges these ulama produce display patriarchal interests and

ideologies. Critical linguistic analysis is meant as a contra-ideology of patriarchy they found in the classical interpretations of the Quran and hadith. In this paper, I will discuss how the project of reinterpretation the feminist Muslims in Indonesia work on represent both intellectual and political movements against patriarchal ideology within Islamic intellectual traditions and beyond.

My goals in writing this paper are two. The first is to analyze and understand the methodology the Muslim feminists apply in their project of reinterpretation. I will discuss their understanding of text and contexts, textual and contextual methods of interpretation. I will elaborate of how their method of contextual interpretation reflects their ideological perspective of feminism as a counter-patriarchal culture (Hafidz 1994). There is no such thing as literal meaning since every meaning must go through a "rational understanding"; I will see how on the contrary contextualization is in fact another literal approach since this method cannot escape from the important position of text. In other words, the so-called contextual approach is not independent from texts, and therefore this process implies textual approach. I will address the importance of considering the experiences of women encountering gender and sexual violence as a source of developing ideological argument of the feminist contextual interpretation.

The second is to examine the impacts of the project in transforming public knowledge and awareness as a sign of ideological change. One of the key objectives of the project is to provide and to how public response and observe transformation influenced by this project. I will observe in what aspects and levels the project contributes to the ideological transformation from "patriarchy" to gender equal ideology.

I draw my analysis based on my experiences and engagement in PUAN in its various programs and a literature review of the Muslim feminists' works of the reinterpretation project. In addition, I conducted a small online interview and I also observe some online discussion forums particularly to gather data related to the impacts on social change of the project.

## **Text and Context; Textual and Contextual Methods; and Contextualizing the Voices of Women's Survivors**

The Muslim feminists who work on the project of reinterpretation underline the textual and literal method of approaching the Quran and hadith as the main source of methodological problem in "patriarchal" understanding. This approach is seen to significantly contribute to producing tafsir or knowledges based on the Quran and hadith that are ignorant to the contexts and histories, the specific situations that inspired the revelation of the texts in the Quran and hadith.

How do these Muslim feminist understand text and context (of text)? How do they understand textual and contextual methods of understanding the Quran (and hadith)? How their criticisms against textual method of Quranic interpretation reflect a critical ideology (of patriarchy?)

In an online discussion forum Husein Muhammad, a key figure of Muslim feminists engaged in the project of reinterpretation, stated that "Texts do not create understanding and knowledge by themselves; it is the psychological aspect and knowledge of their readers that create understandings." From this statement, texts are understood as dependent "entity" that requires others, the readers, to produce their meanings. I view that based on this point of view, the greater power in producing meanings and knowledge is not held by the texts, but the readers. To some extent, it can be said in the mind of the Muslim feminists like Muhammad, there is no textual knowledge since texts has no capacity to produce it; the only knowledge existing is the knowledge of the readers.

This point of view is both fundamental and strategic in the feminist criticism against textually patriarchal approach of the Quran. This view depoliticizes the textualist scholars of the Quran and the religious texts. This depoliticizes the textualists including the (prominent) ancient Muslim scholars as the "regime" of Islamic knowledge and thoughts can be challenged and criticized. The readers are depoliticized by positioning the tafsir and knowledge they produce as a product of specific individually psychological and intellectual processes and capacity so they are not only relative but also possibly personal. In

another discussion forum, Muhammad (2013) mentioned, "Those claiming that the Quran can only be interpreted through literal approach are disclosing their intellectual capacity. Their understanding is only true for themselves; it is a mistake if they insist others to follow their misunderstanding. The Prophet and his companions in fact emphasize that the Quranic texts have multiple meanings for those with extensive knowledge." Religious texts are also "depoliticized" by understanding them as sacred and permanent only in its texts but profane in its tafsir or interpretation (Masudi 2000, Muhammad 2001, Umar 1999, Abdul Kodir 2006, Nuriyah et al 2005) and, as a consequence, it is always legitimate and even necessary to create renewal and reinterpretation.

Those who oppose this feminist method of approaching texts indeed often view it as a direct challenge against the power of the Quran Itself and the claim of the Islamic truth. Nevertheless, as a critical ideology of patriarchy, this feminist criticism against textual approach is fundamental and strategic in the way that this criticism does not consider only "academic truth" but also contextual truth by introducing different "values" based on gender equality ideology. As Nuriyah (2006:iv) mentions, "The validity of an Islamic thought is developed when it is situated in a specific social realm that always changes and how this thought provides a contextual response to the ongoing social problems." When knowledge and tafsir produced from the textualist tradition are overwhelmed and powerfully influential within Muslim religious and social beliefs applied as a legitimacy for gender and sexual discrimination, this criticism is therefore ideologically strategic.

Following the criticism against textualist approach, the Muslim feminists come up with the idea of contextual method of understanding religious teachings, the Quran and hadith. What do they mean by context and contextual method of religious interpretation? How their understanding and project reflect a social movement against patriarchal ideology?

For these Muslim feminists, contexts are defined in three ways. The first is the specific social circumstances and the specific Prophet Muhammad's individual situation as historical

background (*asbab an-nuzul*) that inspire the revelation of the religious texts, the Quran and hadith. The second is the specific social situations and the particular individual condition of Muslim scholars who produce tafsir or Islamic knowledge. The last is the contemporary social situations with their specific social problems and their specific “ideologies.” The main rational principle of their method is that while the religious texts are static, permanent and unchanged, social problems always change. Understanding specific social and individual situations related to the religious texts is an academic and political way to reconcile the two different situation, in order the religious teachings to be able to answer the social problems; this is the method of contextualization of the religious texts (Nuriyah et al 2005, Muhammad 2001).

A study of the history of the texts (*asbab an-nuzul*) is an important method they really consider in developing contextual approach. Following one of the foundation in developing Islamic law (*ushul al-fiqh*) saying that “*al-hukmu bi khushush as-sabab la bi ‘umuum al-lafdz*” (the formulation of law is under specific cause not under general term), the Muslim feminists here argue that the texts were revealed to respond to a very specific situation that must be considered in the development of Islamic knowledge and law in the more recent time. They apply analogical approach with critical thinking which means that they take into consideration the historical situation of the text as the basis of analogy, yet they also take into serious account contemporary problems and “ideology” to put the analogy into more contemporary context. It is feminism and gender equality ideology they embrace that leads these Muslim feminists to contextualize the Quranic texts as an Islamic support to women’s rights and gender equality. This is in correlation with their including an understanding of context as the contemporary social situations with their specific social problems and “ideologies.” This is also at this level that the project of reinterpretation using contextual method reflects a project of ideological transformation to challenge patriarchy and misogyny toward gender equality under the flag of Islamic teachings. In other words, the feminist method of contextualization in Islamic teachings requires a specific ideology to be able their product of *tafsir* really responsive to the contemporary

problems of gender and sexual discrimination legitimized by the literally patriarchal method of interpretation.

I view that the validity of knowledges they produce from the contextual approach is not merely based on “academic standard”, yet an ideological perspective that the knowledges are based on feminism, gender equality and women’s rights. In contrast, the knowledges produced from the textual approach are seen invalid based on the view that these knowledges do not follow the ideology of feminism, gender equality and women’s rights. The validity of the knowledge here are not defined based on merely academic standard, but based on pragmatic view of how the knowledges are functional to respond to the contemporary problems of gender and sexual discrimination within the Muslim contexts. Nuriyah (2005), one of the leading Muslim feminist who leads the Classical Islamic Book Study Forum acknowledges the relativism of the knowledge the Muslim feminists produce at the academic level, yet suggests that the knowledges are ideologically more valid since they can provide a religious answer to the recent problem of gender and sexual discrimination.

It is important to note that as a result of their emphasis on ideology in the development of contextual *tafsir* that reflects their strong feminist activism against patriarchy, I view that they are often trapped in an ambiguity. For instance, one aspect of the literal approach they criticize is what they call “arabization” of Indonesian culture, including in language. This arabization is viewed as a process to transfer the Arab patriarchal culture into Indonesian society. It is in fact that those engaged more in the textual approach like to change some Indonesian terms to Arabic, such as *ta’aruf* for dating relationship, *akhi* for brother, *ukhti* for sister, and *ana* for I. However, these Muslim feminists indeed use a similar strategy to gain a public support of the Muslim groups who still view Arabs as an important symbol of Islam. These Muslim feminists produce feminist programs and name them in Arabic, such *Fiqh An-Nisa* for a program of women’s reproductive rights, *halaqah* for discussion forum, *ta’liq* and *takhrij* for critical text analysis. Since their project of reinterpretation is based on a review of the textual interpretation of ancient Muslim scholars written in

Arabic, the “contextual” knowledge they produce are often displayed also in books written in Arabic (Nuriyah et al 2005, Abdul Kodir 2006). Though, this appears to be a form of ambiguity of their criticism, this way is strategic in bringing their products of contextual feminist tafsir more popular within Indonesian Muslims.

A key aspect the Muslim feminists take into a serious account in their contextual approach is language used in the Quran. They argue about language as a cultural practice that reflects certain ideology (Umar 1999, Muhammad 2001, Nuriyah et al 2005). They view that the literal approach of the Quran neglects the importance of examining linguistic analysis leading this approach fail in understanding patriarchal influences on the Quranic texts. The Muslim feminists observe that the Quranic texts on women’s issues seem to echo the same patriarchal expression existing in the ancient Arabic society. For instance, the Quran prefers to use the masculine form in its verses rather than include feminine form. If the Quran is free from this linguistic influence of the Arab tradition, it can develop its own character of language that precisely represents both masculine and feminine forms. Furthermore, this linguistic strategy also indicates that Islamic teachings follow the process of gradual cultural change, to step-by-step open the minds of the Arabic society. Besides the problem of language, some Quranic verses seem to keep the patriarchal values when the verses do not clearly restrict women’s discrimination and subordination. In some verses of the Quran, for instance, it is literally mentioned that, “*Ar-rijal qawwamun ‘ala an-nisa’bi ma fadhhalah al-Lahu ba’dhahukm ‘ala ba’dh*” (Men are *leaders* upon women which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter).

Umar (1999) points out, these linguistic problems have two sources. First, the Arabic language used in the Quran has gender-biases in its structure. Even though the Arabic language is grammatically divided into feminine (*muannath*) and masculine (*mudzakkar*), it is not rare that the Quran uses words that refer only to the male while the purposes of the words are also for females. For instance, in the case of the obligation of prayer over Muslims, the Quran uses “*Aqiimuu as-shalat wa aatuu az-zakat*” (And be constant in prayer (*shalat*) and render the purifying dues (*zakat*)). The

words *aqiimuu* and *aatuu* are masculine forms, though the obligation of *shalat* and *zakat* are for both Muslim males and females. Based on this fact, we possibly find a problem of gender biases when dealing with the social verses rather than theological or normative verse like the obligation of prayer. An obvious example of the social verse is “*Fankihuu ma thaba lakum min an-nisaa’ mathna wa thulatha wa ruba’*” (Then marry from among (other) women such as are lawful to you [even] two, or three or four). Some classical Muslim scholars view this verse as an approval for only male Muslims to practice polygamy with up to four wives. However, this verse uses the word “*fankihuu*” (marry!) in the masculine form that gives possibility not only to male but also to female Muslims.

The second factor is regarding the characteristics of the Arabic language as a multi-meaning-word language. For instance, the words *an-nisaa* and *ar-rijaal* refers to not only a biological meaning as female (*an-nisaa*) and male (*ar-rijaal*) but also to socio-cultural meanings as feminine (*an-nisaa’*) and masculine (*ar-rijaal*). Some literal-based interpretations that focus only on the literal text and ignore the contextual backgrounds of the texts will possibly be hampered from accomplishing more comprehensive understanding of the social meanings of the texts. This linguistic analysis therefore reflects ideological criticism against patriarchy and misogyny of textual Quranic interpretation seen to be the religious source of gender and sexual discrimination within the Islamic context.

The Muslim feminists have developed methods of tafsir through a direct engagement with women’s experiences of violence. I found that the powerful innovation of the feminist project of reinterpretation is indeed in this methodological level of taking into a priority consideration the voices and experiences of women’s survivors. Clearer evidence that the project of contextual interpretation the Muslim feminists work reflects a project of critical ideology of patriarchy is therefore found in their ways of contextualizing the voices of women’s survivors who experience gender and sexual violence. For instance is in their analysis of the Quranic text on polygamy. First of all, they argue that the texts have specific historical background must be considered in its interpretation

which is the problem of girl orphans and widows among the Muslim groups after the battle of Uhud. By understanding this historical context, they understand the Quranic text on polygamy is not a signal of the Islamic support to polygamy, rather the Quranic message of providing support to the orphans and widows. This is the theoretical foundation to consider the voices of women encountering social obstacles. Since they are engaged in various programs to provide assistance and other services for women's survivors, these Muslim feminists bring their empathy toward the survivors as the ongoing contextual basis in developing their feminist interpretation of the Quran. This is not only based on the understanding of the historical background of the Quranic text on polygamy that they oppose this marital practice, but also based on their empathy toward the difficult situation faced by women and children under a polygamous relationship. I found that by considering the voices of women's survivors of gender and sexual violence into account in developing contextual interpretation, the Muslim feminists powerfully exhibit that their project of reinterpretation is a critical ideology against patriarchy, particularly within the Islamic context. The voices of women's survivors appear to be undeniable fact about the impacts of patriarchal perspective of the Quran. The empathy to the women's situation becomes a importantly persuasive rhetoric of campaigning feminist contextual interpretation of Islamic teachings.

### **The Impacts Social and Political Change: the Sites of Ideological Circulation**

The Muslim feminists view that academic sources of Islamic knowledge that carry out feminist and gender equality perspectives are still very few in Indonesia. As a result, textual way of patriarchal understanding of the Quran and hadith are influential in both religious and social lives of Indonesian Muslim. They argue that, on the one hand, this problem contributes to applying Islamic teachings as a religious legitimacy of sexual and gender discrimination, and, on the other hand, this situation gives a difficulty for feminists, including Muslim feminists in the country in providing counter arguments against patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teachings. Therefore, it can be said that, two key audiences of this project of

reinterpretation are Muslim women in a vulnerable situation of being a victim of gender and sexual discrimination and the second the feminists and women's rights activists. I view that these two communities are the main "site of ideological circulation" presented in the knowledge produced from the project of reinterpretation. In other words, the project does not give an extensive impact in transforming the feminist ideology of those coming with from textual tradition with patriarchal ideology.

For the Muslim women, this project is essential since they are more knowledgeable about Islam but less knowledgeable about feminism and women's rights. For the feminists and women's rights activists, the knowledges are important since they are more knowledgeable in feminism and women's rights but less knowledgeable in Islam. The knowledge the Muslim feminists produce through the contextual interpretation appears to combine both feminism and Islam; a feminist approach to Islam, and an Islamic approach to feminism.

As an important result, feminist and women's rights issues become more popular among Muslim women; the rejection against feminism under the propaganda of anti-West is weaker. Some female respondents I interviewed online said that after reading the books written by these Muslim feminists she now has no fear that learning feminism and women's rights will destroy their belief in Islam. To some extent, this indicates an important ideological transformation influenced by the project of feminist reinterpretation. However, I found an interesting phenomenon within Muslim women's rights activists who show a powerful feminist ideology but still consider the importance of the literal approach of the Quranic texts. They particularly highlight the need to keep such literal understanding of the texts viewed as supportive to women's rights and gender equality.

For the activists, though the key transformation does not happen at the level of ideology since they already embrace feminism, the project of feminist reinterpretation is influential in the way that this project provides information on religious supports to their works often challenged as voicing the Western and the Zionist missions. An activist I interviewed mentioned that they now

have powerful arguments to respond to those viewing feminism and gender equality as un-Islamic. Another prominent women's rights activist I interviewed stated that the Islamic knowledge produced from the project of feminist interpretation plays an important role in formal-legal process when the Islamic court now considers the feminist interpretation as legal arguments to give justice to women encountering gender and sexual violence.

Finally, the popularity of the knowledge and method of feminist contextual interpretation also contributes to changing the way some Muslims view the regime and authority of Islamic knowledge. My observation of some discussion forums, including virtual that discuss feminist interpretation found that there has been a growing phenomena among Muslim groups in Indonesia to show critical view against the traditional institution of ulama previously viewed as the only authority in Islamic knowledge and law production. This situation even inspires the development of more extensive intellectual spaces to discuss feminist issues based on Islamic approaches. Not only those with academic background in Islamic studies involved in these intellectual spaces, but a more "generic" public group who seek for feminist arguments of Islam and Islamic arguments of feminism.

## Conclusion

The contextual approach the Muslim feminists in Indonesia apply in understanding and interpreting the Quran and hadith reflects an critical ideology against patriarchy since this project directly challenge the textually patriarchal method of understanding the Quran dominantly found in Islamic books written ancient male Muslim scholars. However, this approach does not seem to be academically convincing as an ideological tool since despite its depolitization of religious texts, the contextual approach indeed still needs texts in developing Islamic knowledge. Therefore, the contextual approach to some extent operates similarly with the textual approach in dealing with the texts as the main source of information. A more powerful aspect that the contextual method of interpretation is a form of counter-ideology of patriarchy within Islamic knowledge tradition found in the ways that the

Muslim feminists take into an important consideration the voices of women's survivors in their development of feminist perspective of the Quran and the Islamic perspective of feminism.

As an effort meant to contribute to ideological feminist transformation, this project is seen effective and successful within two main groups that are "traditionally" close to feminist ideology: Muslim women's groups and (secular) women's rights activists. However, this project does not really play an important role in the ideological transformation of Muslim groups traditionally engaged with "patriarchal" and textual Islamic traditions. The knowledges produced through the feminist contextual interpretation indeed are not widely circulated among this "traditional" Muslim group.

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