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Muslim Feminism's Epistemological Critique Of Classical Interpretation

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Abstract

This research aims to dissect the epistemological structure underlying classical interpretations of gender verses and how Muslim feminism criticizes and deconstructs these traditions. The main problem raised is the entrenched gender bias in the intellectual treasures of Islam, which is often considered a divine doctrine when it is the result of human construction influenced by patriarchal culture. The importance of this writing lies in efforts to revitalize the Qur'an's message of equality so that it remains relevant in answering the challenge of gender justice in the contemporary era. The methodology used is library research with a critical hermeneutic approach and content analysis of the works of key figures such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Fatima Mernissi. The results of the study show that gender bias in classical interpretation stems from the atomistic pattern of bayani epistemology, the influence of the Israiliyat narrative, and the dominance of male mufasir in religious authority. Muslim feminism offers reconstruction through a tawhid paradigm and a holistic-contextual approach to realizing an inclusive and equitable understanding of Islam. Overall, this paper emphasizes that tafsir is a product of ijtihad that is tentative and must continue to be in dialogue with social reality to achieve universal benefits..

Keywords: Epistemology, Muslim Feminism, Classical Interpretation, Hermeneutics, Gender Justice.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of gender inequality in contemporary Muslim society is still a sharp and challenging social reality for academics and religious practitioners alike. This injustice not only arises in the form of economic marginalization or restrictions on political roles, but is also deeply rooted in the systems of understanding and interpretation of religious texts that have been inherited for centuries. In various parts of the Islamic world, including Indonesia, gender issues

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continue to grow and become more real as the number of Muslim scholars from among women demands space for their experiences in the process of producing meaning. The issue of women's subordination is often legitimized through authoritative interpretations that position men as the sole holders of control in the domestic and public spheres.

Factually, the discourse on gender equality in Indonesia has long historical roots, starting from the struggle for the emancipation of R.A. Kartini to the emergence of the modern Muslim feminist movement that demands a reinterpretation of regulations that are considered unfair. However, despite the growing awareness of the importance of gender justice, practice on the ground still often clashes with cultural conservatism and textual understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith. Socio-religious facts show that many classical mufasir produce interpretive products that do not reflect gender justice because they live and grow up in a very strong patriarchal culture. This creates an "epistemological stagnation" in which classical interpretation is considered the final truth that critics should not touch.

In the literature review, the study of gender interpretation has shifted from an apologetic-reactive approach to a more methodological-hermeneutical approach. Figures such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Fatima Mernissi have offered a new framework of thought that challenges the dominance of androcentric views in the Islamic tradition. In Indonesia itself, Muslim feminist scholars such as Husein Muhammad, Zaitunah Subhan, and Nasaruddin Umar have contributed a lot through offering different methods of reading misogynistic verses. However, most of the literature still focuses on the results of partial interpretation of the verse without deeply dissecting the epistemological structure that is the foundation for the emergence of such biases. There is an urgent need for a critical analysis of how knowledge about gender is constructed in the tradition of interpretation and how Muslim feminism challenges the basis of that knowledge.

The main aim of this paper is to undertake an epistemological critique of classical interpretation through the lens of Muslim feminism, focusing on dismantling existing biases and offering a fairer alternative methodology. This paper intends to answer three main questions: first, identify the factors that cause the emergence of gender bias in the epistemology of classical interpretation; second, dissecting the methodology of deconstruction and reconstruction offered by Muslim feminist thinkers; and third, analyzing the implications of the paradigm shift on religious understanding and social order. Through this exploration, it is hoped that a more comprehensive understanding of how Islam can be the foundation for gender equality today.

The central argument put forward in this report is that gender bias in classical

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interpretation is not a pure representation of God's will (kalamullah), but rather the result of human interaction of the mufasir with texts in patriarchal sociological spaces. The research hypothesis states that the shift from a rigid "Bayani" epistemology to a holistic-contextual approach based on the principle of "Tawhid" is an absolute prerequisite for producing liberating interpretations. Interpretation must be understood as a dynamic, tentative process, and must continue to be revised along with the development of human civilization in order to maintain the relevance of Islam as a religion that is salih li kulli in the era of human consumption.

EPISTEMOLOGY OF TAFSIR AND ITS TYPOLOGY

The definition of epistemology in the context of interpretation includes a discussion of the source, method, and parameters of the truth of an interpretation. Epistemology serves to dissect how a mufasir acquires knowledge of the meaning of the text and how he validates the claim of the truth. In the history of Islamic intellectuals, Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri divided the reason of knowledge into three main patterns: Bayani, Irfani, and Burhani.

Epistemological Patterns	Key Characteristics	Impact on Gender Issues
Hero	Focuses on the authority of the text (*nash*) and the rules of Arabic linguistics; it tends to be normative and textual.	Often maintains patriarchal views and male superior positions in law.
Burhani	Relying on logic, rationality, and demonstrative proof of natural reality.	Providing space for critical analysis of texts through the lens of modern rationality.
Irfani	Emphasizing intuition, inner experience, and spiritual enlightenment (*kashf*).	It does not touch on the legal-formal aspects of gender, but emphasizes the spiritual equality of human beings.

The epistemology of classical interpretation is strongly dominated by the Bayani style which has sectarian tendencies and is strongly bound to the pre-understanding of mufasir which

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is influenced by the social environment. This causes the product of classical interpretation to often be regarded as a closed doctrine, which then gives birth to claims of absolute truth and rejects different perspectives.

MUSLIMS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

Muslim feminism emerged as a critical response to the dominance of traditional interpretations that were perceived to be loaded with patriarchal bias. The movement seeks to reinterpret religious texts through a critical hermeneutic approach to show that the basic principles of Islam are justice ('adl), compassion (rahma), and human dignity (karamah). Muslim feminism does not reject the Qur'an, but rather rejects humane interpretations that marginalize women.

Manifestly, Muslim feminism can be categorized into several streams, but the most relevant in the study of interpretation is the group of "Progressive Quasi-Objectivists". This group, represented by figures such as Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud, has a dual task: to explore the historical meaning of the verses as they are revealed and to reinterpret them (re-actualization) according to the current context. They reject the assumption that classical interpretation is final and emphasize the importance of the involvement of women's experiences as interpreting subjects.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CLASSICAL VS CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION METHODOLOGY

One of the fundamental differences between classical and contemporary interpretive epistemology lies in the "Atomistic" versus "Holistic" approach. Classical interpretation generally uses a partial or atomistic approach (*juz'i*), in which the Qur'an is understood verse by verse separately in the order of the mushaf. This approach often ignores the connection between one verse and another and fails to capture the universal moral spirit (worldview) of the Qur'an.

By contrast, feminist mufasir adopts a holistic method (*kulli*) that sees the Qur'an as a coherent unit (*al-Qur'an yufassiru ba'dhuhu ba'dhan*). This method involves three main aspects: the socio-historical context of the verses, an in-depth analysis of the language, and the worldview (*weltanschauung*) of the Qur'an as a whole. The main weakness of classical interpretation according to this perspective is the inclusion of foreign elements such as the Israiliyat story and the influence of gender-biased Arabic structures into the interpretation process.

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CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF QS. AN-NISA VERSE 34 (THE CONCEPT OF QIWAMAH)

In the classical tradition of tafseer, the verse *ar-rijālu qawwāmūna 'ala an-nisā'* is often translated literally as "men are leaders for women." Classical mufasir such as Ibn Abbas and mufasir in the Middle Ages interpreted *qawwāmūna* as a party that has absolute power or authority over the wife, where the wife is positioned as a servant. Tafsir At-Thabari, for example, affirms that the husband is the head of the household because Allah has given men "advantages" in the form of intellect, thinking ability, and physical strength.

Aspects of Interpretation	Classical Tafsir (Example: At-Thabari)	Criticism of Muslim Feminism (Amina Wadud/Asma Barlas)
Leadership Traits	Fixed authoritative status and nature based on gender.	Functional social responsibilities can shift depending on economic conditions and roles.
Justification of Superiority	Men are considered more perfect in their intellect and physique than women.	Man's intrinsic equality before God; "Excess" refers to a specific economic contribution.
Response to Conflict	The justification of beating as a punishment for a wife who *is nusyuz* for the sake of obedience.	Beatings were the last step in the context of 7th-century history to limit violence, not a universal command.

An explanation of this data shows that classical mufasir tends to use the verse as an ontological postulate for male superiority without considering the integrity of the Qur'an's message about moral equality. Amina Wadud makes a critique by stating that the word qawwāmūn must be understood contextually: if a man does not provide sustenance or protection, then he loses the qualification of qawwām. The relationship between these data shows that classical interpretations often confuse patriarchal cultural norms with sacred religious messages,

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creating dominance that is difficult to contest.

ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S TESTIMONY (QS. AL-BAQARAH VERSE 282)

Verse 282 in Surah Al-Baqarah which stipulates that one male witness is equal to two women is often used as evidence of women's intellectual inferiority. The majority of classical jurists adhere textually to this verse with the conclusion that women have a "lack of intellect" (nuqsān al-'aql). The reason that is often put forward is that women have more taste and a weak memory related to financial problems.

Muslim feminism deconstructs this understanding by showing that it is conditional and temporal. Amina Wadud argues that at the time of the verse, Arab women were very rarely involved in business and financial transactions, so the presence of a second woman functioned as a companion so that mistakes did not occur.

Further explanation suggests that in a modern context in which women have had extensive access to education and field practice, such limitations on the number of testimonies no longer have strong epistemological relevance. This data relationship reveals a contradiction: in religious matters such as the narration of hadith (which requires high accuracy), the testimony of a woman (such as Aisha RA) is fully accepted, but in worldly/financial matters the portion is reduced by half. This proves that the bias is more cultural-sociological than dogmatic-theological.

FATIMA MERNISSI'S CRITICISM OF MISOGYNISTIC HADITHS

One of the most radical contributions to the epistemological critique of Muslim feminism was the dismantling of hadiths that were considered misogynistic (hatred of women). Fatima Mernissi in her research identified several hadiths that are often inserted into the literature of interpretation to limit women's movement space, such as the hadith that states that "dogs, donkeys, and women will cancel prayers".

Mernissi uses critical hermeneutics and sociological-historical approaches to perform naqd sanad (criticism of narrators). He found that these hadiths were often narrated by the companions of the prophet who had certain personal biases or political interests, such as Abu Bakrah and Abu Hurairah, whose interpretations were considered to be loaded with masculinity.

Hadith Criticized	Traditional Interpretation	Fatima Mernissi's Criticism
Woman Canceling Prayers	The presence of a woman in	Contrary to the practice of

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	front of the prayer person can cancel the worship.	the prophet and directly protested by Aisyah RA; is a form of political domestication.
Women's Leadership	"It will not be fortunate for a people to leave their affairs to women".	This hadith is situational-political (the case of the daughter of the Persian king) and is manipulated by male politicians to marginalize women.
Source of Bad Luck	"Bad luck is in houses, horses, and women".	It is the remnant of the view of ignorance that is rejected by the spirit of Islamic monotheism that glorifies humans.

This data relationship shows that many of the dogmas that are considered "Islamic law" are actually subjective constructions of male elites who feel threatened by the existence of women in the public sphere. Mernissi's criticism emphasizes that to achieve justice, Muslims must dare to separate the universal message of the prophet and the gender-biased manipulation of history.

DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the findings with epistemological theories to explain why gender bias occurs in classical interpretation and how the implications of the proposed renewal of Muslim feminism are for the future of Islamic studies.

The results of the study consistently show that gender bias in classical interpretation is not a coincidence, but a consequence of an androcentric knowledge structure. Epistemologically, there are three main factors why this happens:

A. Male Mufasir Dominance: Throughout history, interpretive authority has been monopolized by men who live in a deep-rooted patriarchal culture. As a result,

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women's life experiences have never been considered a valid source of knowledge in formulating the meaning of texts.

B. Bayani and Atomistic Thinking Patterns: An approach that focuses only on literal texts without looking at the general spirit of the Qur'an causes mufasir to get stuck in narrow meanings that favor men. They often take a single verse (e.g. about inheritance or leadership) and make it an absolute law without connecting it to verses about human moral equality.

C. External Influences (Israiliyat): The inclusion of narratives from Judeo-Christian traditions that tend to be negative towards women (such as the story of the fall of Adam because of Eve) has colored the standard books of interpretation (mu'tabar). This creates a stigma that women are secondary beings created from men and for men.

This study identified a shift in orientation among Muslim feminists themselves. As noted in some literature, there are concerns that the feminist movement is beginning to shift from a tool of social analysis to an ideology that is sometimes trapped in the same rigid narrative as the one it rejects. Criticism of classical thinkers is now more ideological-paradigmatic than merely epistemological-hermeneutical. This gives birth to epistemological consequences in the form of new truth claims that sometimes reject dialogue with different parties.

However, the greatest contribution of Muslim feminism such as Amina Wadud is the use of the Tawhid paradigm as an ethical foundation. If in the classical interpretation "monotheism" is understood only theologically-metaphysically, in a feminist perspective, monotheism has sociological implications: if God is the only omnipotent, then no human being (including men) has the right to dominate other human beings (women). This is a shift from "theology of submission" to "theology of partnership".

The implications of this epistemological criticism are significant for the development of contemporary Islam, especially in Indonesia:

A. Family Law Reform: Criticism of classical interpretations is pushing for more gender-friendly legal reforms, such as in the issues of guardianship, polygamy, and divorce access. The concept of mublah (mutuality) began to be integrated in legal discourse to create justice in the family.

B. Educational Transformation: These findings affirm the importance of integrating gender perspectives into Islamic education curricula to dismantle negative stereotypes against women from an early age.

C. Expansion of the Object of Study: The real impact can be seen in the increasingly varied

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verses discussed in the gender perspective, no longer limited to domestic issues but penetrating into political rights, employment rights, and reproductive health.

The reflection of the results of this study shows that interpretation is not something absolute and static, but a human product that must continue to dialogue with the spirit of the times. To ignore feminist criticism is to allow Islam to lose its relevance in answering the challenges of modern humanity.

Going forward, the main challenge for Qur'anic and gender studies will be how to bridge the gap between the authority of tradition and the demands of changing times. An epistemological system is needed that is able to accommodate a plurality of approaches: Bayani to maintain the purity of the text, Burhani to answer the rationality of the times, and Irfani to reach a just spiritual dimension.

The development of an inclusive interpretive ecosystem must involve cross-disciplinary dialogue, including sociology, anthropology, and history. In addition, modern mufasir must have technological literacy and a deep understanding of social dynamics so that divine messages can be conveyed with a more "down-to-earth" approach. The integration between the richness of traditional heritage and the sophistication of modern hermeneutic approaches is the key to the birth of an interpretation that is not only scientifically valid but also a solution to the complexity of the times

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Muslim feminist epistemological critique of classical interpretation is an intellectual necessity to restore the universal message of the Qur'an about justice. The most important findings suggest that gender bias in traditional interpretation is rooted in the atomistic Bayani reasoning and the strong influence of patriarchal culture in male mufasir. Factors such as the use of the Israiliyat story, the masculine structure of the Arabic language, and the dominance of male elite religious authority have constructed a religious understanding that is subordinate to women for centuries.

The added value of this research is its affirmation of the Tawhidic paradigm offered by Muslim feminists as a transformative alternative. This paradigm not only deconstructs old biases but also reconstructs new meanings that place men and women as equal partners before God and in the social order. Methodologically, the shift from an atomistic approach to a holistic-contextual approach allows the Qur'anic texts to continue to provide just solutions to contemporary problems.

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The limitation of this research lies in its still dominant focus on the literature of the main texts of global figures, so that a more in-depth study of the practical application of this feminist epistemology in a more specific local context, such as regional interpretations in the archipelago, is still needed. The suggested direction of further research is to conduct a comparative study between the products of state institutional interpretation and women's social movement-based interpretation to see the extent to which gender justice has been internalized in public policy. In the end, this effort is not to change the Qur'an, but to provide a new alternative in understanding the word of Allah so that it can truly be a blessing for all mankind regardless of gender.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Epistemological Transformation and the Future of Emancipatory Interpretation This research confirms that the future of gender-just Islamic studies depends heavily on the intellectual courage to deconstruct Bayani's atomistic reasoning. The direction of future knowledge development should no longer be merely discussing historical injustices, but rather move toward strengthening the Tawhidic paradigm as the primary foundation for producing religious meaning. This demands a radical methodological shift, from a textual-partial approach to a holistic-contextual one, so that the Quran remains relevant in addressing the challenges of the times without being shackled by past patriarchal biases.

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