

## Debate on Patriarchal Interpretation of Misogynist Hadith

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### Abstract

Criticism of hadith as a source of law in Islam is still debated today. For some reason, the hadith has been overlooked as an infallible source, and its authenticity is often the subject of debate among past and present scholars. One of the important debates in hadith studies is the existence of misogynist traditions which are claimed to exist in the *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith collection. This article aims to find out how this hadith has been criticized because it is influenced by patriarchal interpretation and anti-women prejudice as claimed by feminists. This is caused by male dominance in various key aspects of Islamic texts, including the processes of transmission, preservation, publication and interpretation. Unfortunately, the interpretation of hadith, especially those relating to women, contains gender bias and discrimination against women. Feminists argue that these hadiths are interpreted in the interests of men and patriarchal culture. Apart from that, this research also tries to examine several reasons for rejecting patriarchal interpretations initiated by feminists, with the aim of rejecting anti-women discourse and emphasizing women-friendly interpretations of Islamic texts. These findings indicate that patriarchal interpretation may be the reason for the persecution of women, but the hadith contains equal divine wisdom for both sexes. It is a shared responsibility to provide a better understanding of hadith textually and contextually.

**Keywords:** Debate, Patriarchy, Misogynistic

### Abstrak

Kritik terhadap hadis sebagai sumber hukum dalam Islam masih menjadi perdebatan hingga saat ini. Entah mengapa, hadis dianggap sebagai sumber yang tidak dapat salah, dan keasliannya kerap menjadi bahan perdebatan di kalangan ulama masa lalu dan masa kini. Salah satu perdebatan penting dalam kajian hadis adalah keberadaan tradisi misoginis yang diklaim ada dalam kumpulan hadis *ṣaḥīḥ*. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana hadis ini dikritik karena dipengaruhi oleh penafsiran patriarki dan prasangka antiperempuan sebagaimana diklaim oleh kaum feminis. Hal ini disebabkan oleh dominasi laki-laki dalam berbagai aspek utama teks-teks Islam, termasuk proses transmisi, pelestarian, publikasi, dan interpretasi. Sayangnya, penafsiran hadis, terutama yang berkaitan dengan perempuan, mengandung bias gender dan diskriminasi terhadap perempuan. Kaum feminis berpendapat bahwa hadis-hadis ini ditafsirkan demi kepentingan laki-laki dan budaya patriarki. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga mencoba mengkaji beberapa alasan penolakan terhadap tafsir patriarki yang digagas oleh para feminis, dengan tujuan untuk menolak wacana antiperempuan dan menekankan tafsir teks-teks Islam yang ramah perempuan. Temuan-temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa tafsir patriarki mungkin

menjadi alasan terjadinya persekusi terhadap perempuan, tetapi hadis mengandung hikmah ilahi yang setara bagi kedua jenis kelamin. Merupakan tanggung jawab bersama untuk memberikan pemahaman yang lebih baik tentang hadis secara tekstual dan kontekstual.

**Kata Kunci:** Debat, Patriarki, Misoginis

## Introduction

Hadith has been recognized by Muslims as the second source in Islam after the Koran. As one of the most important subjects among Muslims, hadith technically refers to the sayings, actions, approvals, silences or descriptions of physical characteristics and moral characteristics attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, both before and after his prophethood (Azami, 1977). During the first two centuries of Islam, hadith were transmitted orally and were not entirely compiled into written form. Official documentation of hadith was not created until the ninth century and several collections were produced in the early tenth century, especially six canonical collections. These collections, also known as al-Sittah poles, consist of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Jāmi' al- Tirmidhi*, *Sunan Ibnu Mājah*, *Sunan al- Nasā'ī* and *Sunan Abū Dāwud*.

The hadiths in this collection are organized by topic based on books and chapters, which were compiled in the second half of the ninth century (Lucas, 2008). Although these six canonical collections contain original works and *ṣaḥīḥ*, they may also include *ḥasan* and *ḍa'īf* (weak) hadith by al-Tirmizī, Ibn Mājah, al-Nasā'ī and Abū Dāwud. However, the authenticity of the hadiths in this collection is questioned for various reasons, one of which is because there is an opinion that the *ṣaḥīḥ* hadiths contain reports that are gender-biased, misogynist and anti-women (Ilyas, 2005).

However, due to the many challenges and criticisms of hadiths from time to time in terms of their authenticity, reliability, credibility and interpretation, the contents of hadiths as an infallible source of law have been questioned and criticized by scholars for various reasons. One of them is the debate that the *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith contains gender bias, misogyny and anti-women. The issue of anti-women or misogyny in the Prophet's hadith has been gradually debated since the end of the eighteenth century until the present. According to Stowasser: "Hadith material about the inferior nature of women was accepted and disseminated based on the consensus (*ijma'*) of learned doctors of law and theology until in the 18th century pre-modern reformers began to question their authoritative status. Since the nineteenth century, Islamic modernists have denied the authenticity and doctrinal validity of what they viewed as alien medieval exegetical "knowledge," while at the same time reemphasizing the Koranic notion of woman's complete personhood and moral responsibility (Stowasser, 1994).

The twentieth century was a period in which efforts were gradually made to challenge conservative and fundamental ideas regarding women. This probably

started in the 1990s when many publications appeared calling for gender equality and social justice for Muslim women. Zanan, an Iranian women's magazine, for example, raises the issue of women's rights and criticizes radical interpretations of Islamic sources (Najmabadi, 1997). There are many magazines, journals and other books published openly to the public with the aim of proposing changes not only in social and legal norms, but also to promote new perspectives in promoting women's rights without imitating patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts.

Feminists such as Barbara Stowasser and Leila Ahmed found that conservative and fundamentalist interpretations of the hadith were unfavorable to women, and their rights were interpreted as being excluded and their roles were limited to household functions, motherhood, childcare, and similar work (Ahmed, 1992). The interpretation of hadith has also led to the exclusion of women from public spaces, even though women were recognized in the transmission of hadith and actively participated in religious and social activities in early Islam. However, feminists argue that the belief in women's exile was never mentioned directly in the original sources of the tradition; Al-Quran and Hadith, however, are constrained by the social order usually adhered to by previous generations. They also argue that Islamic texts have been influenced by patriarchy and gender discrimination. For feminists, the conservative approach has more or less spread anti-women messages, using religious texts, especially hadith. Therefore, the majority of feminists reject this interpretation and produce their own interpretation that accommodates women's interests, does not conflict with human values and rights, and is in line with current developments.

## **Method**

This research is qualitative research, which seeks to reveal and explain the characters' thoughts in viewing problems. This research tries to understand the thoughts of the characters objectively, in responding to hadith patriarchy in the context of misogynistic hadith. Qualitative research, according to Bogman and Biklen, is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of speech or writing and the behavior of the person being studied. In this research, it is hoped that it will be able to produce a comprehensive analytical description in a particular context setting which is studied from a complete and holistic point of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Definition of Patriarchy**

Patriarchy can refer to male gender dominance, where women are denied formal power and public positions. It is "a politics of male privilege based on the idea of sexual differentiation"; "confusion between sex (biology) and its social construction"; "sexual differences with gender hierarchies and inequalities"; (Barlas, 2001) and "hegemonic presumptions of dominance and superiority that lead to the

erasure of women's agency." (Wadud, 2006) In fact, patriarchy has had a huge impact on women in Islam even though it is said that there is no inherent or logical connection between patriarchy and Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 2003), which is claimed to have been a practice among tribes in pre-Islamic times. This patriarchal culture and misogynistic practices are also believed to have originated from other cultures, such as Persia (Aadelzadeh, 2012), Byzantium and Greece, but were later embedded in the social practices of Muslims. Some scholars also believe that the anti-women stance in Muslim society has no sacred sanction, whether from the Koran, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, or even from the early traditions of Muslim society (Fahham, 2007) However, Azizah al-Hibri emphasized that "Patriarchy co-opted Islam after the death of the Prophet" (Al-Hibri, 1982).

During the time of the Prophet, equality as prescribed by the Qur'an was granted to everyone. Women enjoy freedom in seeking knowledge and participating in social welfare. However, socio-political changes occurred after the death of the Prophet. Especially in the eighth century, Islamic law had been codified and implemented, but unfortunately there were many influences including pre-Islamic and non-Islamic cultures as well as conservative interpretations of religious texts that had an impact on the thinking of Islamic jurists (Ali, 2004). The status of male ulama is considered higher than that of women, and the majority of legislators are controlled only by male authority. Therefore, the dominance of men in hierarchical positions received criticism even from among the Prophet's companions.

### **Criticism of the Interpretation of Patriarchy**

In fact, patriarchal interpretations exist in all religious scriptures including the Koran and the Bible. Islam and Christianity were not originally patriarchal, but societies that adhere to these religions have a strong tendency to follow a patriarchal culture where men impose gender norms and control authority over women (Stepp, 2016). Therefore, patriarchal interpretations of religious texts are questioned and criticized because they lead to discrimination and oppression of women. This negative impact also has an impact on the name of religion.

In Islam, two important sources are the Koran and the hadith of the Prophet. Many argue that Islamic sources are influenced by patriarchal culture and interpreted by the control of male dominance. Interpretations produced by male ulama are also considered responsible for this patriarchal interpretation. Khaled Abou El-Fadl states that "it is a very real possibility that most or all of the anti-female traditions resulted as a form of male resistance to the active public role played by women in early Islam." (El-Fadl, 2003). Many feminists also blame that the main cause of conflict and debate regarding women's issues is caused by the misinterpretation of men who dominate their active role in society (Zein Ed-Din, 1982).

In the past, women actively participated in many aspects; socially, economically, academically and politically, but their role gradually changed and

disappeared, as men opposed gender mixing and they limited women's participation by reclaiming the practices of the Prophet's wives and earlier generations. Furthermore, the interpretation of patriarchy reflects the understanding that women's security and responsibility are theologically dependent on men's power. Most conservative experts believe that the role of women as mothers who give birth, care for and educate children is very important and vital. For them, there is no overlap in gender roles because both men and women have their own roles, and inequality between the two is normal. Women are naturally trained to master home activities rather than outdoor or public activities, and men are expected to be the main supporters and leaders in the hierarchical structure of private or public institutions. Women are not only restricted in education and work, but their way of dressing is also taken into account, the hijab is a must and sexual separation between genders is very important.

Conservative Islamic practices emerged in countries such as Pakistan, under the leadership of Ziaul Haq, he instituted restrictions on women and laws that took into account women's testimonies half as much as men's testimonies were introduced; in Afghanistan, women were restricted from domestic work and prohibited from taking part in government under the Taliban in Algeria, women who did not veil were brutally murdered; in Syria, not only are women's dress codes restricted, their access to employment, education, and public space is also severely limited under ISIS; and many other un-Islamic practices and rules against Muslim women (Hamisan, 2021). Unfortunately, discrimination against women in Islam is said to originate from the sources of Islamic law, namely: the Koran and hadith.

Many hadiths were created and disseminated relating to women according to the author's convenience. Among the report's examples are: Women should not be taught to read or write but should be taught to knit; women must remain hungry and needed, so that they remain at home; and many others, but all these reports were rejected as false by a large number of legal experts. However, it becomes a real challenge among Muslims when the *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith is not only questioned but also rejected because of its controversial content. Among the examples of *ṣaḥīḥ* history which states that women were created from ribs; the majority of Hell's inhabitants are women; women are one of the bad signs; women do not bring good luck; and others.

Even though the debate seems big, the number of hadiths that are labeled 'anti-women' is relatively small compared to the number of hadiths that prioritize equality, freedom and justice for women's rights. A recent study found that the number of hadiths containing anti-women discourse in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* is only 36 out of 636 hadiths and the percentage is 0.48% which is less than 1% (Khair, 2017). Similar cases may occur in other collections of *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith. Asma Barlas also questioned why a small number of misogynistic hadiths, compared to a number of positive narratives towards women, received so much attention and great

controversy due to Muslims' misinterpretation and misunderstanding of these hadiths (Barlas, 2012).

Apart from that, it cannot be denied that a small portion of the 'anti-women' reports circulating have been interpreted in a patriarchal way, and have had a huge impact on the image of women in Islam. Feminists took the choice to criticize these reports and demand re-evaluation, whether these reports originally came from the Prophet or were simply interpretations from narrators. Due to the predominance of men among hadith transmitters, their reliability is doubted and some of their hadith narrations are rejected by feminists. Some of the Companions of the Prophet were also labeled misogynists. According to Mernissi: "If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is not because of the Koran, the Prophet, or Islamic tradition, but simply because these rights conflict with the interests of the male elite" (Mernissi, 1991).

There are many other factors that cause misinterpretation or especially patriarchal interpretation of hadith, and among them are culture and tradition; blind imitation of religious leaders; social prejudice; and other socio-political reasons. Therefore, feminists suggest that the interpretation of religious texts be women-friendly so that all genders receive equal treatment, thus having a positive impact on culture and society.

### **Female Friendly Interpretation**

In the twentieth century, efforts to reinterpret Islamic texts and traditions grew rapidly. The first woman to offer a detailed reinterpretation of Islamic sources was probably Nazira Zain al-Din (1908-1976). She expressed her opposition to Islamic principles and opposed male interpretations of patriarchal (Mojab, 2001) oppression in her book *Removing the Veil and Unveiling: Lectures and Reflections towards Women's Liberation and Social Form in the Arab World*. However, Aisha Abdel Rahman (1913-1998), also known as Bint al-Shati' was perhaps the first woman to begin interpreting the Qur'an from a woman's perspective. He applied a contextual approach and largely criticized orthodox interpretations of religious texts (Jawad, 2009). Other Muslim women who questioned gender-biased interpretations and advocated producing women-friendly interpretations were Tahereh Qurrat-al Ayn (mid-1800s Iran), Fatima Aliya Hanim (late 1800s Turkey), Zainab al-Fawwaz (late 1800s Lebanon 1800s), Aishah al-Taimuriyya, Zeyneb Hanum (Egyptian late 1800s), and Zaynab al-Ghazali (Egyptian early 1900s) (Moghissi, 1999).

Especially from feminist circles, they criticize patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and demand reinterpretations with a women-friendly approach that can be beneficial for women's rights. According to Badran, feminists may have "applied a combination of historical, linguistic, hermeneutic, literary critical, deconstructive, semiotic, historicist, and feminist methodologies in their rereading of sacred texts, pushing ijtihad to new frontiers as they explored their religion with a view fresh one" (Badran, 2009).



Apart from that, feminists also claim to use the classical methodology of *ijtihad* (independent intellectual investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Koran) in order to build a new gender-sensitive hermeneutics. They aim to open the door to *ijtihad*, as this allows for an intellectual reinterpretation of Islamic texts with the aim of promoting gender equality, especially equal rights for women in all aspects.

The process of reinterpretation begins with a critical rereading of the text, a central project in feminist circles (Moghadam, 2002). This process also includes replacing traditional interpretations, especially misogynist and anti-women interpretations, before finally claiming to produce a “correct” reading of Islamic texts and producing a “new” interpretation. The Qur’an was the first Islamic source to be reinterpreted, before other Islamic texts. Amina Wadud is one of the contemporary feminists who interprets verses from the Koran regarding women’s issues, unfortunately she is not involved in interpreting hadith. Her book *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspectives* aims to make the Qur’an the main source for proving gender equality in the Islamic context, to challenge patriarchal interpretations, and to reject all misinterpretations of the Qur’an that ignoring basic social principles, namely justice, equality and shared humanity. He proposed a hermeneutic model that pays attention to the context in which the text was written or revealed, the grammatical composition of the text, and the overall *Weltanschauung* or worldview as an important methodology in the process of reinterpreting Islamic texts (Wadud, 1999).

Especially regarding hadiths, the demand for reinterpreting hadiths is higher than other religious texts, because hadiths are perhaps one of the most important characteristics in the legitimization of male dominance in the Islamic context (Souza, 2016). Mernissi, for example, agrees that all hadiths, including *ṣaḥīḥ* hadiths, are open to question and must be reviewed, not to mention misogynistic hadiths that may have been created or manipulated by male companions of the Prophet as claimed. Mernissi applies classical Islamic methodology in assessing the reliability of the hadith and the credibility of the transmitter of the hadith (*sanad*), then evaluates the hadith based on a feminist perspective.

However, due to male dominance in determining hadith including the process of transmission, preservation, publication and interpretation, feminists take the alternative of applying their own approach by using hermeneutics when they apply the Koran to hadith. Moreover, the text of the hadith is analyzed linguistically, historically, anthologically and critically, before feminists decide to reject the hadith or reinterpret it in their perspective. Riffat Hassan is one of the feminists who rejects hadiths that contain anti-women news not only because of the negative message but also the negative impact as seen from the patriarchal culture among Muslim communities (Hassan, 1989).

Another strategy used by feminists in reinterpreting Islamic texts is a historical approach to restore lost history by including women. There are many works published by feminists that use this strategy such as Abbott (1941) and Mernissi (1993) who found the Queen in Islam; Stowasser who looks at the stories of prominent women in the Qur'an and female scholars in the field of hadith; (Stowasser, 1992) Assia Djebar who wrote about the women around the Prophet Muhammad; and there are many other examples. The aim of writing stories about Muslim women in the past, among other things, is to return to the glory days where women participated actively in public spaces both socially, economically, academically and nationally even though these women were surrounded by patriarchal culture. Feminists also demand the reproduction of figures such as 'Aisha, the Prophet's wife, to protect religious texts from patriarchal interpretation (Geissinger, 2011).

Furthermore, feminists made the choice to reject the literal reading of texts as applied by fundamentalists in most of their works. Literal interpretation is one approach in understanding hadith or other religious books. This is used by the Hanbali school of thought where they limit the use of analogies (*qiyās*) and human reasoning, and reject the means of adaptation as a preference for law (*istiḥsān*) and the common good (*maslaḥa*) (Sookhdeo, 2006). The literal interpretation emphasizes the primacy of the Arabic language and culture practiced by the first three generations, while rejecting new cultures or methods that undermine or oppose the last generation. Fundamentalists tend to interpret the hadith literally with regard to the role of women, following the practices of women around the Prophet and his Companions. They acknowledged women's participation in seeking knowledge, playing roles in society, and engaging in war, but women's primary responsibility in looking after the home and family remained a priority in the past and present.

By rejecting literal and patriarchal interpretations, feminists propose interpretations of religious texts that are women-friendly. These non-biased interpretations are generated from woman to woman. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in raising public awareness regarding gender equality through publications; research; seminars and workshops; and national and global networks.

However, other debates arise in questioning the need or importance of women-friendly interpretations. Although there are people who advocate the idea of having female translators. The main reason this idea is put forward is because the original content of Islamic texts is considered free from gender bias, applies to everyone, can be accepted anywhere and at any time, but remains open to interpretation textually and contextually. However, the question remains unanswered, are women-friendly interpretations relevant? Especially in today's



challenging world, where both genders compete to obtain their respective rights, but at the same time they are obliged to complement each other's needs.

People tend to understand hadith from a cultural and social perspective, then it becomes commonplace to practice it among them. For example, it is Arab culture that women must stay at home to give birth and raise children, their movement is limited to traveling outside the home, and working mothers are rare and extraordinary, but there are certain elements in Arab culture which has nothing to do with Islam. Biases in managing gender roles and responsibilities must be differentiated between cultural and religious perspectives. Although the majority of the Arab population is Muslim, not all Muslims are Arabs (Sidani, 2005). According to the Pew Research Center, there are approximately 1.8 billion Muslims in the world with more than fifty countries having Muslim majority populations. However, only 20% of Muslims live in Arab-majority Middle Eastern and North African countries, while more than 60% of Muslims globally live in the Asia-Pacific region. We need to differentiate between culture, tradition, and religious practice, but these factors may have interchangeable effects (Roald, 2001). So, patriarchy is part of culture, not a religious practice.

Even though patriarchal culture has a huge influence on social interpretation and practice, Islamic texts must be protected from these influences which have a negative impact not only specifically on women, but in general on the image of Islam. The stereotypical image of Muslim women has been portrayed negatively, but it is the younger generation who must change the scenario and take responsibility before making any interpretations.

## Conclusion

Hadiths that encourage positive attitudes towards women must be better known among society. These reports can be found in large numbers in authentic hadith collections compared to the small number of so-called anti-women reports in the Prophet's hadith. It is the responsibility of every Muslim to eliminate patriarchal interpretations of Hadith, and be aware of hidden agendas among feminists in questioning Hadith. Hadiths should not be blamed for gender bias in them, because people who spread and listen to these Hadiths may come up with different interpretations. This suggests that different hadiths may require different interpretive strategies depending on the context in which the interpreter finds himself. Hadith are best interpreted not only contextually but can also be applied holistically to everyone, regardless of their gender.

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