

# Feminist Reinterpretation of the Qur'ān

Nina Nurmila<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*This article argues that no Qur'ānic interpretation is objective. Qur'ānic interpretation is influenced by the interest, values and the background of its interpreters. This article will identify some of the biases in the existing Qur'ānic interpretations, which are mostly written by male scholars, on gender issues such as the first human creation and male leadership, and will re-interpret the verses from equal gender perspective. This article will also argue that the correct interpretation is the one which is closer to the fundamental teaching of Islam, mainly equality and justice. Only Allah knows the ma'nā ḥaqīqī (the real/correct meaning) of the Qur'ān, but if Muslims believe that Allah is just, then it is impossible for Allah to reveal its message in the Qur'ān to support injustice. Therefore, if Muslims interpret the Qur'ān to support injustice, then their interpretations may be incorrect because they contradict the nature of God, who is just.*

## Abstrak

*Tulisan ini berargumen bahwa tidak ada penafsiran al-Qur'ān yang objektif. Penafsiran al-Qur'ān selalu dipengaruhi oleh kepentingan, nilai dan latar belakang penafsirnya. Tulisan ini akan mengidentifikasi beberapa bias yang terdapat dalam tafsir al-Qur'ān, yang kebanyakan ditulis oleh sarjana laki-laki, tentang isu-isu jender, seperti penciptaan manusia pertama dan kepemimpinan laki-laki, dan akan menginterpretasikan ulang ayat-ayat tersebut dari perspektif persamaan jender. Tulisan ini juga akan menyatakan bahwa penafsiran yang benar adalah yang dekat dengan ajaran dasar Islam, terutama persamaan dan keadilan. Hanya Allah yang mengetahui makna hakiki al-Qur'ān,*

---

<sup>1</sup> Dosen Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Keguruan Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. E-mail: ninanurmila@yahoo.com

*akan tetapi jika umat Islam percaya bahwa Allah adalah adil, maka tidaklah mungkin bagi Allah untuk mewahyukan pesan al-Qur'ān yang mendukung ketidak-adilan. Oleh karena itu, jika umat Islam menafsirkan al-Qur'ān untuk mendukung ketidak-adilan, maka penafsiran mereka mungkin salah karena bertentangan dengan sifat Allah yang selalu adil.*

**Keywords:** *male biased Qur'ānic interpretation, gender justice, feminist interpretation*

## Introduction

There are many definitions of Feminism but let us take *Oxford Advanced Learners. Dictionary of Current English* as the first instance where it defines feminism as “movement for recognition of the claims of women for rights (legal, political etc) equal to those possessed by men”. Another definition by Azza Karam which defines feminism as “an individual or collective awareness that women have been and continue to be oppressed in diverse ways and for diverse reasons, and attempts towards liberation from this oppression involving a more equitable society with improved relations between women and men”. But in this article, I tend to define feminism as “an awareness of the existing oppression or subordination of women because of their sex and as working to eliminate such oppression or subordination and to achieve equal gender relations between men and women.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, a feminist is a person, either male or female, who is aware of the existing oppression or subordination of women because of their sex, and he or she works to eliminate such oppression or subordination and to achieve equal gender relations between men and women.

Gender was initially used in English grammar to refer to things neither male nor female, then it is used by feminist to differentiate between what is natural (*kodrati/sex*) from social construction (*non-kodrati/gender*). The use of the word gender is one of the ways to eliminate discrimination against women based on their sex. Before the use of gender in feminism, it was often assumed that women are pre-determined to be housewife, to be caregiver, emotional and irrational, while men are often assumed to be breadwinner, who is physically strong, rational and therefore superior to women. Based on this assumption, women are often excluded from certain jobs which require physical strength

---

<sup>2</sup> Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life. Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2009), 4.

and/or rationality. With this differentiation between what is biologically pre-determined (*kodrati/sex*) from the social construction (*non-kodrati*), we can now think critically that either male or female can be either emotional or rational; that physical strength can be gained by both male and female through training; that being breadwinner is a role constructed by many societies to be suitable for men and housewife is a role constructed by many societies to be suitable for women, when in reality not all men are capable of being breadwinner and many women are capable of being breadwinner.

There are also many types of feminist in the West such as liberal feminist, radical feminist, Marxist and socialist feminist, eco-feminist and postmodern feminist. Influenced by Western feminists, some Muslims who were brought up and educated in the West have become feminists. They are aware of the existing oppression or subordination of women because of their sex and they work to eliminate such oppression or subordination and to achieve equal gender relations between men and women, for example by criticizing patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qur'ān and re-interpret the Qur'ān from equal gender perspective.

Prior to the emergence of Muslim feminism, most Muslims tend to take for granted the existing Qur'ānic interpretations as absolutely true, as if the words of the interpreters are equal to the words of Allah. No one was brave to criticize the existing Qur'ānic interpretations; especially those are produced in the classical period. Similarly, no one was daring to be critical and to question the validity of the ḥadīth compiled in the *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* or *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Fatima Mernissi may be the first Muslim feminist who is brave to criticize and question the validity of the ḥadīth which undermine female leadership, compiled in the *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*.<sup>3</sup>

The emergence of Muslim feminism in the 1980s has provided new alternative approach in interpreting the Qur'ān. Muslim feminists tend to be critical to the patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qur'ān. They argue for the reinterpretation of the Qur'ānic verses from equal gender perspective. They believe that God is just and therefore it is impossible for God to deliver the message which supports injustice. Among the pioneers of Muslim feminists are Amina Wadud, Azizah Al-Hibri, Asghar Ali Engineer, Riffat Hassan, Farid Essack and Asma Barlas. Most of the works of these Muslim feminists have been translated into Indonesian in the 1990s, affecting many Indonesian Muslims to be critical to the existing Qur'ānic interpretations. On

---

<sup>3</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

the other hand, the influence of non-Indonesian Muslim feminists on Indonesian feminist scholarship can be seen, for instance, in the books written by Masdar F Maşudi,<sup>4</sup> Nasaruddin Umar,<sup>5</sup> Zaitunah Subhan<sup>6</sup> and Nurjannah Ismail.<sup>7</sup>

This article argues that no Qur'ānic interpretation is objective. Qur'ānic interpretation is influenced by the interest, values and the background of its interpreters. This article will firstly identify some of the biases in the existing Qur'ānic interpretations, which are mostly written by male scholars, on gender issues such as the first human creation and male leadership, and then will re-interpret the verses from equal gender perspective.

### **Patriarchal and Male Biased Interpretation of the Qur'ānic Verses on Gender Issues**

Patriarchy is a system which puts adult men in the center of the system, while others such as women and children are put in relation to the center. In patriarchal system, women and children are seen as subordinate to adult men. For example, women are positioned as the supporter and the companion of the men, who are expected to serve all the men's needs such as to prepare for food, clean clothes, clean and tidy house, to provide emotional support and comfort, to fulfill their sexual needs and to take care of their children. Within this system, women are not seen as independent human beings who have their own interest in their own life. Similarly, male children are positioned as the next generation of the patriarch and the entertainers for their parents, which could give a sense of satisfaction and completeness of life to the patriarch (adult man). Patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'ān which means the interpretation of the Qur'ān that tends to subordinate women, not seeing them as fully human being and put them only in relation to men.

---

<sup>4</sup> Masdar F Mas'udi, *Islam dan Hak-hak Reproduksi Perempuan. Dialog Fiqih Pemberdayaan* (Bandung: Mizan, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender: Perspektif Al-Qur'an [The Argument of Gender Equality. Qur'ānic Perspective]* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Zaitunah Subhan, *Tafsir kebencian. Studi Bias Gender dalam Tafsir Qur'an [Tafsir of Hatred. The Study of Gender Biased in the Qur'ānic Exegesis]* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Nurjannah Ismail, *Perempuan dalam Pasungan. Bias Laki-laki dalam Penafsiran [Women in the Stocks. Male Biased in Interpretation]* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003). For further information on the influence of non-Indonesian Muslim feminists on Indonesian feminist scholarship see Nina Nurmila, "The Influence of Muslim Global Feminism on Indonesian Muslim Feminist Discourse." *Al-Jami'ah* (UIN Yogyakarta, 49, No. 1, 2011): 33-64.

The bias is “leaning of the mind towards or away from something”.<sup>8</sup> Male biased means leaning of the mind towards men or being in favor of men or being against women without having full knowledge of the women. Bias has negative connotation because of the partial attitude toward certain group without being supported by the fact about that group. Male biased interpretation of the Qur'an is the interpretation of the Qur'an which tends to be partial to men due to the lack of knowledge of the women. For example, a Qur'anic interpreter who is brought up in the family or in the society in which no women are educated may assume that women are by nature subordinate to men or that women can never be smarter than men.

In this part of the article, I will identify some examples of the patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qur'an on gender issues such as on the first human creation and male leadership and then will re-interpret the verses from feminist perspective or from equal gender perspective.

### 1. *The First Human Creation*

Most Muslims refer to the classical Qur'anic exegeses when they want to know the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses. Among the classical Qur'anic exegeses that we can identify the patriarchal male biased interpretation is in the interpretation of Qur'anic verse An-Nisa' (4): 1:

يٰۤاَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَّاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا  
زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ  
وَالْآرْحَامَ ۗ اِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيَّكُمْ رَقِيبًا ﴿١﴾

There are differences among the Qur'anic exegetes in interpreting the word *nafsin wahidatin*. Most classical Qur'anic exegetes (*mufasssirin*) such as Ṭabarī (d. 310 H), Zamakhsharī (d. 538), Qurṭūbī (d. 671), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 H), Baiḍāwī (d. 685 H) and Maḥallī and Suyūṭī (d. 864) interpret *nafsin wahidatin* as Adam. This means, they believe that the first human being created by Allah was Adam (which is often imagined as an adult man); from him (which is often interpreted as from his left crooked rib), Eve (often interpreted as an adult woman) was created. Because of the belief that the first woman was

<sup>8</sup> AS Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 80.

created from man, then it is interpreted that women are subordinate from men and that women are created for men.<sup>9</sup>

The above Qur'ānic exegetes' interpretation that *nafsin wāḥidatin* is Adam is one of the examples of the patriarchal male biased interpretation. Why? The word *nafsin* is a neutral word, neither female (*mu'annath*) nor male (*mudhakkār*), but in Arabic grammar, it is categorized as *mu'annath*, therefore its attribute is *wāḥidatin* (*mu'annath*). In addition, the word *zaujun* is neutral word, that can be used for either male or female, which means "spouse". This means that the male *zaujun* is female and the female *zaujun* is male. In addition, we often use the word *zaujun* for male and *zaujatun* for female. However, the patriarchal ideological assumption of the above Qur'ānic exegetes that it was man who was firstly created by God has made them to ignore the Arabic grammar, that *nafsin wāḥidatin* is *muannath*, not *mudhakkār*. In addition, if we refer to Arabic grammar, the word *zaujāhā* should be literally interpreted as "the male spouse of the female". However, due to their patriarchal bias, they interpret *wa khalaqa minhā zaujāhā* with the opposite grammatical meaning: "and Allah created from him, his spouse", which should actually be interpreted as "and Allah created from her, her spouse".

Not all classical exegetes are male biased. For example, Qurṭūbī (d. 671) interprets *nafsin wāḥidatin* as *turāb*. In addition, modern and more contemporary Qur'ānic exegetes such as 'Abduh (1905M), and Indonesian exegetes such as the translation team of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), Hasby ash-Shiddieqy (d. 1975) and Hamka (d. 1981) do not interpret *nafsin wāḥidatin* as Adam. For instance, MORA interpret *nafsin wāḥidatin* as "one person" [*seorang diri*];<sup>10</sup> Shiddieqy<sup>11</sup> and Hamka<sup>12</sup> interpret it as "one essence". Like 'Abduh, Shiddieqy argues that the Qur'ān does not state that Eve was created from Adam's rib.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Hamka argues that Muslims would not interpret *nafsin wāḥidatin* as Adam unless they refer to the story of Isrā'īliyyāt. It was in the Old Testament, Genesis 21-22, which states that Eve was created from Adam.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>See

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=34&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>, date access 7 December 2012.

<sup>10</sup> MORA, *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahnya [The Qur'an and Its Translation]* (Semarang: Karya Toha Putra, 1989), 114.

<sup>11</sup> Teungku Muhammad Hasbi ash-Shiddieqy, *Tafsir Al-Qur'anul Majid An-Nuur*, i (Semarang: Pustaka Rizki Putra, 1956, rev. ed. 2000), 776.

<sup>12</sup> Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*: I-VI (Jakarta: 1966, revised 2004), 277.

<sup>13</sup> Shiddieqy, *Tafsir Al-Qur'anul Majid*, 776.

<sup>14</sup> Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, 277.

Similar with Hamka, Riffat Hassan (b. 1943), may be the first Muslim feminist who is critical to the classical interpretation on the first human creation. She argues that this interpretation was influenced by Christian tradition, which was then written in the form of ḥadīth. She argues that the Qur'ānic verse 4: 1 rejects the idea that women are created from Adam's rib mentioned in the ḥadīth.<sup>15</sup> More recent Indonesian Muslim feminists such as Umar,<sup>16</sup> Subhan<sup>17</sup> and Ismail<sup>18</sup> also reject the interpretation that *nafsin wāḥidatin* means Adam. Umar, for instance, argues that *nafsin wāḥidatin* is grammatically feminine. If it means to be Adam, the attribute should be *wāḥidin*.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Subhan<sup>20</sup> and Ismail argue that the phrase is grammatically female, and therefore it cannot be interpreted as male, Adam. They believe that the classical interpreters were influenced by the ḥadīth, that Eve was created from Adam, which contradicts the Qur'ānic verse 4: 1. Like Hassan, Ismail even strongly states that the Qur'ānic verse 4: 1 aims to correct the previous scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, which both state that human beings are created from a male, while the Qur'ān make it clear that human beings are created from two people: a male and a female.<sup>21</sup>

Like Qurṭūbī and other Muslim feminists, I believe that *nafsin wāḥidatin* does not mean Adam, but a single essence, that is the essence of clay. From that essence, the couple: female and male, were created. This interpretation is based on some Qur'ānic verses (QV) which inform us about the origin and the process of human creation such as QV al-Hijr (15): 26; Al-Mu'minuun (23): 12-14; Fathir (35): 11; and Ash-Shaffat (37): 11. These verses tell that human being is originally created from clay. The word used in these verses for clay vary but has the same meaning, for example, *ṣaḥṣālīn min ḥama'in masnūn* (QV 15: 26), *sulālatin min ṭīn* (QV 23: 12), *turāb* (QV 35: 11) and *ṭīnin lāzib* (QV 37: 11). Therefore, if either male or female is created from the single or the same essence of clay, then there is no justification to claim the superiority of male over the female. Male and female are equal before Allah, what differentiates them is their degree of *taqwā* (QV 49: 13).

---

<sup>15</sup> Riffat Hassan, "Women in Islam and Christianity. A Comparison," in *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity*. (Eds.). Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann (London: SCM Press, 1994), 18-21.

<sup>16</sup> Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender*.

<sup>17</sup> Subhan, *Tafsir Kebencian*.

<sup>18</sup> Ismail, *Perempuan dalam Pasungan*.

<sup>19</sup> Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender*, 242.

<sup>20</sup> Subhan, *Tafsir Kebencian*, 174.

<sup>21</sup> Ismail, *Perempuan dalam Pasungan*, 333-34.

## 2. *Male Leadership*

There are two verses which are often used to justify male leadership and the superiority of men over women: QV 4: 34 and QV 2: 228:

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا  
 أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ ۚ فَالْصَّالِحَاتُ قَنِيَتٌ حَفِظَتْ لِلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ  
 اللَّهُ ۗ وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَأَهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ  
 وَأَضْرِبُوهُنَّ ۗ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا  
 كَبِيرًا ﴿٣٤﴾

وَالْمُطَلَّقَاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ ۚ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَنْ يَكْتُمْنَ مَا  
 خَلَقَ اللَّهُ فِي أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِنْ كُنَّ يُؤْمِنُنَّ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۚ وَبِعُولَتِهِنَّ أَحَقُّ  
 بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوا إِصْلَاحًا ۚ وَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ  
 وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٢٨﴾

The male biased interpretation of the Qur'an can be found in most of the classical exegeses such as those written by Ṭabarī (d. 310 H), Zamakhsharī (d. 538), Al-Rāzī (d. 606 H), Qurṭūbī (d. 671), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 H) Baiḍāwī (d. 685 H), Maḥallī and Suyūṭī (d. 864) and Al-Shaukānī (d. 1250 H). They interpret the verse 4: 34 to mean that men are the leader, the educator and the protector of women because men are superior to women. This superiority, according to them, is in terms of reason (*'aql*), knowledge (*'ilm*) and physical strength, that is why some men became the prophets, *'ulamā'* (scholars), judges and leaders, while none of the women become prophets and *'ulamā'*. Men, according to them, are also superior for the money they spend to give women the *mahr* (marriage gift) and maintenance; and the amount of inheritance and the number of wives that they can have. Here is one of the examples of the interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse 4: 34 according to Ibn Kathīr, which is similar with other classical Qur'ānic exegetes:

يقول تعالى: الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ { أي: الرجل قيم على المرأة، أي: هو رئيسها وكبيرها، والحاكم عليها ومؤدبها إذا اعوجت، } بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ { أي: لأن الرجال أفضل من النساء، والرجل خير من المرأة، ولهذا كانت النبوة مختصة بالرجال، وكذلك الملك



الأعظم؛ لقوله صلى الله عليه وسلم "لن يفلح قوم ولوا أمرهم امرأة" رواه البخاري من حديث عبد الرحمن بن أبي بكره عن أبيه، وكذا منصب القضاء، وغير ذلك، { وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ } أي: من المهور والنفقات والكلف التي أوجبها الله عليهم لهن في كتابه وسنة نبيه صلى الله عليه وسلم فالرجل أفضل من المرأة في نفسه، وله الفضل عليها والإفضال، فناسب أن يكون قيماً عليها؛ كما قال الله تعالى: **وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ**.

Unlike most classical exegetes, more contemporary Muslim feminists such as Asghar Ali Engineer (b. 1939), Naṣr Ḥamid Abū Zaid (d. 2010), Kiyai Husein Muhammad (b. 1953) interpret the verse 4: 34 as socio-theological verse, not theological verse; descriptive, not prescriptive verse and informative, not normative verse. This means, according to Engineer, that the Qur'ānic verse 4: 34 is not the rigid example of gender relation for any society, anywhere and anytime, but sociological or contextual description of gender relation at the time of revelation, which may be the same or different from the current situation.<sup>22</sup> This verse, according to Abū Zaid, does not prescribe all men to be the leader of women, but a description on what happened at the time of revelation.<sup>23</sup> It informs us that at the time of revelation, according to Kiyai Husein Muhammad, men are the *qawwām* (the economic supporter/leader) of women, not the norm that everybody should follow anytime and anywhere. If it is the norm, then the verse should include, for example, the word "*wājib*": *wājibun 'alā r-rijāl qawwāmūn 'alā n-nisā'*, but the verse only describes or informs that at that time, *ar-rijāl qawwāmūn 'alā n-nisā'*.<sup>24</sup>

Another recent Muslim feminist, Nasaruddin Umar (b. 1959), offers a critical analysis to the wording used in the Qur'an. According to him, the Qur'an uses the word *unthā* for female and *dhakar* for male when it refers to biology or sex, and use the word *rijāl*, *nisā'* and *mar'ah* to refer to gender.<sup>25</sup> This finding is very important in re-interpreting the Qur'ānic verse from equal gender perspective. Based on the differentiation of these terms, Umar argues that not all *dhakar* (male) can become *rijāl* (the masculine). To be *rijāl*,

<sup>22</sup> Asghar Ali. Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (London: C. Hurst&Co, 1992), 45-46.

<sup>23</sup> Nasr Abu Zaid, "The Nexus of Theory and Practice," in *The New Voices of Islam. Rethinking Politics and Modernity*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 163.

<sup>24</sup> Husein Muhammad, *Ijtihad Kyai Husein. Upaya Membangun Keadilan Gender [Kyai Husein's Ijtihad. Efforts to Build Gender Justice]* (Jakarta: Rahima, 2011), 49-67.

<sup>25</sup> Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender*, 144-172.

according to Umar, a person has to fulfill certain requirements. These requirements of being *rijāl* who are *qawwāmūn* are stated in the Qurʾān verse 4: 34, that is: (1) he/she is superior to his/her spouse; and (2) he/she spends his/her money to support his/her family. Thus, being *rijāl* is not biologically pre-determined, but should be achieved by fulfilling the two criteria. Superiority in the current context can be in the form of higher level of education and income. Any person, either male or female, who can fulfill the two requirements can be *rijāl* and therefore is *qawwāmūn* over his/her spouse.

Umar's finding of differentiating between the term sex and gender in the Qurʾān is powerful in challenging male biased classical Qurʾānic exegesis of the verses 4: 34 and 2: 228, which tend to see male superiority as biologically pre-determined by God. With this new finding, it can be argued that leadership is not biologically determined, but can be achieved by fulfilling the two criteria mentioned in the Qurʾānic verse 4: 34. Either male or female can be leader of his/her spouse. Thus, *dhakar* (male) will remain *dhakar* if he cannot fulfill the two criteria. In contrast, *unthā* can be *rijāl* if she can fulfill the two criteria.

Similarly, Subhan understands the Qurʾānic verse 4: 34 as not about normative male leadership, but as contextual verse concerning economic roles. According to her, male superiority is reduced if the male is incapable of financially supporting his family. The word *rijāl* is a plural from the word *rajul* (man) or *rijl* (foot), which means "those who walk or work to earn the money"; while those in domestic sphere are *nisāʾ*. Therefore, whoever active in the public sphere to earn the money can be called *rijāl*, while whoever is at home can be called *nisāʾ*.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

The main conclusion of this article is that the emergence of feminist scholarship has critically uncovered the patriarchal and male biased interpretation of the Qurʾānic verses. This article also has shown some of the examples of these male biased interpretations of the Qurʾānic verses on the first human creation and male leadership. This article, for example shows that even though the Qurʾān has stated clearly that human being is created from *nafsīn wāḥidatin*, most classical Qurʾānic exegetes ignores the Arabic grammar that this word is feminine and interpret it as Adam, based on the ḥadīths, which might come from the Christian tradition (Isrāʾīliyāt story). Unlike classical exegetes, some Muslim feminists argue that Qurʾānic verse aims to correct the Christian tradition that human being is created from Adam, but from a single

---

<sup>26</sup> Subhan, *Tafsīr Kebencian*, 178-179.

essence, which is extracted from clay, as described in other Qur'ānic verses such as QV al-Hijr (15): 26; Al-Mu'minun (23): 12-14; Fathir (35): 11; and Ash-Shaffat (37): 11.

In addition, the male biased interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse can also be seen in most classical Qur'ānic exegeses on verses 4: 34 and 2:228, in which most of the classical exegetes such as Ṭabarī (d. 310 H), Zamakhsharī (d. 538), Al-Rāzī (d. 606 H), Qurṭūbī (d. 671), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 H) Baiḍāwī (d. 685 H), Maḥallī and Suyūṭī (d. 864) and Al-Shaukānī (d. 1250 H) see men's superiority over women is pre-determined (*kodrati*) and that only men who can be leader of women, not vice versa. Different from these classical Qur'ānic exegetes, some contemporary Muslim feminists argue that the Qur'ānic verse 4: 34 is not theological verse but sociological verse; descriptive, not prescriptive verse and informative, not normative verse. In addition, it is argued that being *rijāl* should be achieved, not biologically pre-determined. To be *rijāl*, a person has to fulfill the two requirements stated in the Qur'ān verse 4: 34, that is: (1) he/she is superior to his/her spouse; and (2) he/she spend his/her money to support his/her family. Thus, whoever fulfills the two criteria, either male or female can be *rijāl* and therefore can be a leader of the family. Finally, it is argued that *rijāl* means those who use their feet to walk or work in public, while *nisā'* are those who stay in domestic sphere, either male or female. This new feminist re-interpretation offers flexible roles for either male or female. By reading this new feminist interpretation, we can also see that Allah is just, especially when we know that superiority, such as in the level of education and income, is not biologically determined for male only, but can be achieved by either male or female. *Wallāhu a'lamu bi al-ṣawāb.*

### Bibliography

- Abu Zaid, Nasr. "The Nexus of Theory and Practice." In *The New Voices of Islam. Rethinking Politics and Modernity*. Ed. Mehran Kamrava. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006, 153-176.
- Engineer, Asghar Ali. *The Rights of Women in Islam*. London: C. Hurst & Co, 1992.
- Hamka. *Tafsir Al-Azhar*. I-VI. Jakarta: 1966, revised 2004.
- Hassan, Riffat. "Women in Islam and Christianity. A Comparison." In *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity*. (Eds.). Hans Kung and Jürgen Moltmann. London: SCM Press, 1994.

- Hornby, AS. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=34&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>, date access 7 December 2012.
- Ismail, Nurjannah. *Perempuan dalam Pasungan. Bias laki-laki dalam Penafsiran [Women in the Stocks. Male Biased in Interpretation]*. Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003.
- Karam, Azza M. *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*. New York: St Martin's Press, 198.
- Mas'udi, Masdar F. *Islam dan Hak-hak Reproduksi Perempuan. Dialog Fiqih Pemberdayaan*. Bandung: Mizan, 1997.
- Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- MORA. *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahnya [The Qur'an and Its Translation]*. Semarang: Karya Toha Putra, 1989.
- Muhammad, Husein. *Ijtihad Kyai Husein. Upaya Membangun Keadilan Gender [Kyai Husein's Ijtihad. Efforts to Build Gender Justice]*. Jakarta: Rahima, 2011.
- Nurmila, Nina. *Women, Islam and Everyday Life. Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- , "The Influence of Muslim Global Feminism on Indonesian Muslim Feminist Discourse." *Al-Jami'ah*, UIN Yogyakarta, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2011), 33-64.
- ash-Shiddieqy, Teungku Muhammad Hasbi. *Tafsir Al-Qur'anul Majid An-Nuur*. I. Semarang: Pustaka Rizki Putra, 1956, rev. ed.2000.
- Subhan, Zaitunah. *Tafsir Kebencian. Studi Bias Gender dalam Tafsir Qur'an [Tafsir of Hatred. The Study of Gender Biased in the Qur'anic Exegesis]*. Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1999.
- Umar, Nasaruddin. *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender: Perspektif Al-Qur'an [The Argument of Gender Equality. Qur'anic Perspective]*. Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999.