



**MUSLIM FEMINIST HERMENEUTICAL METHOD TO
THE QUR'AN
(Analytical Study to the Method of Amina Wadud)**

Irma Riyani*

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung

e-mail: irmariyani@uinsgd.ac.id

Abstract: Muslim feminist hermeneutical methods to the Qur'an is a response to the conservative interpretations which hegemonizes knowledge construction to shape the tradition and the methodology of the patriarchal reading of the texts. This approach demonstrates that the Qur'an is compatible with modernity and supports gender equality. This article explores one of the leading Muslim feminist scholar, Amina Wadud, and examines her Qur'an feminist hermeneutical method. Amina Wadud is a Muslim feminist who proposes feminist hermeneutical method to interpret the Qur'an which she called '*tawhidic* paradigm.' This article shows that Wadud's hermeneutical approach interrogates the patriarchal reading of the Qur'anic verses that privileges one sex over another. According to her, in understanding the Qur'an three principles should be considered, namely: *first*, the context in which the Qur'an was revealed; *second*, the grammatical composition of the text; and *third*, the whole text, that is its *weltanschauung* or world-view.

Keywords: Amina Wadud; feminist; gender equality; hermeneutics; Qur'an

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v21i2.320>

*Irma Riyani is a teaching staff at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung (State Islamic University) in West Java, Indonesia. She finished her doctoral study at Asian Studies, School of Social Sciences, The University of Western Australia. Her PhD research title is *The Silent Desire: Islam, Women's Sexuality and the Politics of Patriarchy in Indonesia*.

Introduction

MODERN society raises many questions that are not answered directly in the Qur'an. In order to guide modern Muslim society, some Muslim scholars have proposed a new perspective in interpreting the Qur'an: a hermeneutical approach. This approach is an attempt to reinterpret the Qur'an in order to respond to contemporary social and political conditions. Muslim scholars like Rahman¹, Abu Zayd², and Arkoun³, to name a few who initiated the hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an, emphasize the importance of context in interpreting the Qur'an.

Most Muslims agree that the Qur'an is God's word. However, since the Qur'an is addressed to human beings and was revealed to the Prophet (who was a human being), it had to be delivered in a human language in order for its message to be understood properly. The Qur'an uses Arabic because Muhammad lived in Arabia. It was revealed section by section to respond to the needs of the community being addressed at that time. The chosen language (Arabic), the trusted person (Muhammad) and the specific region (Arabia) where the revelation took place constitute the context of revelation.

The hermeneutical approach emphasizes not only the textual meaning of the Qur'an but also its socio-historical context that includes the society and culture: the attitudes, norms and values of the Hijaz and Arabia where the text emerged.⁴ In addition, it emphasizes the unity concept of the Qur'an, the importance of the ethical dimension of the Qur'anic message, and the application of rational *ijtihad* (interpretation) which is opposed to *taqlid* (blind imitation).

This article explores the hermeneutical approach of the Qur'an proposed by a Muslim feminist Amina Wadud. She is chosen to be

¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

² Naşr Hâmid Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-Naşṣ: Dirāsah fi al-"Ulūm al-Qur"ān* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Amma li al-Kitāb, 1993).

³ Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?*, revised. (London: Saqi Books, 2006).

⁴ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

analyzed for the reason that she has developed and established a theory systematically to understand Qur'anic messages and address gender bias. It is quite a challenge to present her method, especially in Indonesia as she is known to be a controversial figure especially after she led congregational Friday prayer. Besides, Wadud's opinion related to the Qur'anic interpretation is also considered different with that of already established and dominant interpretation. In addition, as she is a woman and trained in a Western country, several accusation of her method are being influenced by Western agenda. Thus, this article attempts to answer some questions, i.e.: *first*, what is wadud's method of Qur'anic interpretation? *Second*, how Wadud convinced that her method is deserved attention and in accordance with the rules of Qur'anic interpretation? *Third*, in what ways Wadud's method provide significant contribution to the understanding of the Qur'an?

Before analyzing her methods, information concerning hermeneutics and feminism will be presented briefly.

Hermeneutics, Feminism and the Qur'an

Hermeneutics, feminism and the Qur'an are three terms that seem incommensurable to be put together. Especially because the first two terms are controversial in Islamic world for its usage and concept and is believed to be incompatible with the Qur'an. This article attempts to combine the three terms as heuristic tool of understanding the sacred text in contemporary Muslim society.

Hermeneutics is defined as "the theory or philosophy of the interpretation".⁵ It usually refers to both the methodological principles of interpretation and the philosophical exploration related to activities of all understanding in human history.⁶ Most importantly, hermeneutics attempts to bridge the gap of understanding texts between the past and the present. In practice, hermeneutics in Islamic world can be traced back to the time of Qur'anic revelation where the Prophet Muhammad implemented

⁵ Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 1.

⁶ Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*.

to understand the 'word of God' sent down to him. Furthermore, the period of first generations of *mufasssir* (interpreter) has implemented what it is now called hermeneutics. However, as hermeneutics is a new terms that emerges in the 7th century and usually used in understanding Biblical tradition, hermeneutics is controversial to use in Islamic world especially to understand the Qur'an.

In Indonesia, the discourse of the hermeneutic approach to the Qur'an has attracted favorable attention from modern scholars like Nurcholis Madjid⁷, Hidayat, Amal & Panggabean⁸, and several Muslim feminist like Marcoes-Natsir (Sciortino, Marcoes-Natsir, & Mas'udi, 1996) and Mulia (2005). However, I acknowledge that few Muslims in Indonesia accept this hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an. There are many who reject it, particularly conservative writers such as Husaini (2008) and Al-Anshari (2008). They argue that hermeneutics originated from the West and is used in Biblical interpretation, and is therefore not suitable method to read the Qur'an. They say that as the words in the Qur'an are divine and sacred; thus applying this approach could be sacrilegious. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical approach offers dynamic and active interaction between text and its context, to derive the general principles of the text and to be re-contextualized in various social contexts.⁹

One of the famous hermeneutical approaches is that proposed by Rahman for his theory of double movement:

In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a twofold movement: First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Qur'an - taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account - to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there

⁷ Anthony H. Johns and Abdullah Saeed, "Nurcholish Madjid and the Interpretation of the Qur'an: Religious Pluralism and Tolerance," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 67-96.

⁸ Taufik Adnan Amal and Samsu Rizal Panggabean, "A Contextual Approach to the Qur'an," in *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107-133.

⁹ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ*.

must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining.¹⁰

Similarly, Abu Zayd (2010) proposes an interpretation of the Qur'an which focuses on the dialectical interaction between the text and reality. According to him, the historical context of the revelation is important in distinguishing between *ma'nā* (historical meaning) and *maghzā* (significance). *Ma'nā* is taken from the context of revelation which is fixed while *maghzā* is the meaning derived in accordance with the present socio-cultural context, which is changeable.¹¹

Arkoun is another sophisticated Muslim intellectual who contributed to the critical thinking of not only the Qur'an but also Islam in general. In terms of Qur'anic studies, Arkoun suggests evaluating not only the content of the Qur'anic interpretation but also the theoretical approaches with regard to Islamic context and religious traditions.¹²

Feminism is another term used in this article that is controversial in the Islamic context. There are disagreements not only about the concept but also about its applicability. The word 'feminism' is usually associated with Western ideology. In Indonesia, many Indonesians consider this term a 'non-indigenous' concept and irrelevant to Indonesian values (Sadli, 2002). In many other Muslim countries, people attempting to import feminist ideals have been accused of 'betraying' local cultural authenticity (Kandiyoti, 1991). There has been heated discussion of this topic in Iran and Egypt.¹³ Other Muslim scholars suggest that in the Islamic context great care should be taken in using this term. Tohidi (2007) advises use of the term 'Muslim feminist' rather than 'Islamic feminist'. The former term seems to be less troubling as it refers to personal identity ('a Muslim who is feminist') rather than the religion as a whole. The word Islam in

¹⁰ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 20.

¹¹ Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*.

¹² Arkoun, *Islam*.

¹³ Margot Badran, *Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?* (Cairo: Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 2002); Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998).

'Islamic feminism' is also problematic. Which Islam is represented in this phrase?

Feminism and religion are two contested terms in the study of both fields. Feminism has accused religion of contributing to inequality between man and woman through its teachings while religious studies has long been dominated by male scholars with an "androcentric presupposition" and has ignored gender and feminist theory in its analysis.¹⁴

Islamic feminism in Indonesia is indebted to work by Islamic feminists in the Middle East and North America, particularly by Mernissi, Hassan and Wadud. Intensive discussions concerning women, gender and Islam began in the 1990s (Van Doorn-Harder 2006; Robinson 2006; Syamsiyatun, 2008; Nurmila, 2011).¹⁵ Robinson (2006, 2009) mentions that in the 1990s many Indonesian Islamic scholars began to refer to the works of the international Islamic feminists mentioned above to support their cause.

Nevertheless, as Badran argues that although the term 'feminism' originated in the West, it is not a Western term. She states that "feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms".¹⁶ Islamic feminism in this study follows Badran's definition:

a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm, ... [it] derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence.¹⁷

Amina Wadud¹⁸ refuses to call herself a feminist, even though she admits that she is doing feminist work and using a feminist methodology. She emphasizes "*pro-faith* and *pro-feminist*"

¹⁴ Ursula King, "Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion," in *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 2; Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Nelly van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Nina Nurmila, "The Influence of Global Muslim Feminism on Indonesian Muslim Feminist Discourse," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 49, no. 1 (2011): 33–64.

¹⁶ Badran, *Islamic Feminism*, 1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women Reform in Islam* (Oxford: One world, 2006).

perspectives that are based on the Qur'an as a transcendent and ultimate reality.¹⁹ Badran (1995) classifies these Muslim women as feminists not because of their self-identification but because of their ideas, agendas and actions. Thus, they can be called what Parker identifies as "faith-based feminist[s]", as they operate within the Islamic perspective.²⁰

Nevertheless, although the term feminism is rejected, "this does not mean that a feminist consciousness and agenda are absent" in Islamic countries.²¹ Muslim women's movements began questioning inequality between men and women in many Muslim countries in the 1990s. These movements gained inspiration from the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) internationally, including among Muslim countries, and the expansion of the international women's movement.²² Several women's movements adopted the term feminism with the aim of liberating women from various oppressions they experienced in everyday life. In this way, Islamic feminism has become an integral part of the global contemporary Islamic movement in many Muslim countries.²³

Within this parameter, Several Muslim feminist are trying to understand the Qur'an as a primary text of Islam to proof that the Qur'anic spirit is trying to empower woman's position. They began to form a new paradigm in interpreting the Qur'an from a gender-sensitive perspective. Muslim women scholars like Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas share a methodology in their critical examination of religious texts: it is a hermeneutical model. Following the male scholars above, the Muslim feminist

¹⁹ Amina Wadud, "Engaging Tawhid in Islam and Feminism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10, no. 4 (2008): 436.

²⁰ Lyn Parker, "Of Faith and Feminism: Imagining Discursive Feminist Space for Muslim," *Outskirts: Feminism along the Edge* 17 (2007), accessed November 24, 2011, <http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/volume17/parker>.

²¹ Karam, *Women*, 6.

²² Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Beyond 'Islam' vs 'Feminism,'" *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (2011): 67–77.

²³ Saba Mahmood, "Mahmood, S. (2001). Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. *Cultural Anthropology*, 16(2), 202–236.," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–236.

hermeneutical approach emphasizes the need to reread and reinterpret the Qur'an and especially challenge the patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an within an egalitarian and anti-patriarchal epistemology.²⁴ In this article, the hermeneutical model of Amina Wadud will be analyzed in detail.

Amina Wadud's Method: Fighting for Gender Justice

Amina Wadud is an African-American and converted to Islam in 1972 while she was an undergraduate student at University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.²⁵ Since then, she dedicated her life to increase her knowledge about Islam. She have studied at The American University of Cairo, Cairo University, and Al-Azhar University. She granted her MA in Near Eastern Studies and Her Ph.D in Arabic and Islamic studies from Michigan University. She also have taught in several university around the world including Qar Younis University in Libya and International Islamic University in Malaysia.²⁶ Experiencing discrimination as a female and an African origin living in America, Wadud then begun her specific work on Islam and gender, in particular focus on the methodology of Qur'anic exegesis. Later, she herself developed her own approach based on her participation working with pro-faith feminist perspective to reform gender in Islam.

Wadud proposes a method based on woman's experience in everyday life facing various discriminations under Islam. She, then, proposed a question: does Islam a religion that degrade woman's position? Because as far as she knows about Islam as she has learned, the Qur'an highly upholds woman's position. In her method, she emphasizes the importance of "*what* the Qur'an says, *how* it says it, what is said *about* the Qur'an, and *who* is doing the saying, have been supplemented by a recent concern over what is left *unsaid*: the ellipses and silences."²⁷

²⁴ Asma Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*; Wadud, *Inside the Gender*.

²⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender*, 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁷ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xiii.

She wrote her first book on Qur'an and Woman and published in 1992 and revised edition in 1999. In this book she offered a reformed understanding of verses. Many of them are related to issue of woman from "a female-inclusive perspective."²⁸ There are appreciation of her book from Muslim scholars, but many also criticise it. She concludes that discussing gender in Islam is 'ill-respected'. In this book she offers alternative reading to the Qur'anic verses regarding woman and challenges the literalist Qur'anic reading. She tries to bring back to the surface "the Qur'anic ethos of equity, justice, and human dignity."²⁹

Amina Wadud's method of reading the Qur'an is called the hermeneutics of *tawhīd*. She explains further as follows:

I propose a hermeneutics of *tawhīd* to emphasize how the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts. Rather than simply applying meanings to one verse at a time, with occasional references to various verses elsewhere, a framework may be developed that includes a systematic rationale for making correlations and sufficiently exemplifies the full impact of Qur'anic coherence.³⁰

The concept of *tawhīd* as conceived by Wadud is different from how most Muslims understand it. Most Muslims understand *tawhīd* not as the unity of the Qur'an but as the theological concept of God as the one and only God (monotheism). The concept of the unity of the Qur'an is usually called *waḥdah ma'wḍū'iyyah li al-Qur'ān*. Later, in her article "Engaging *Tawhīd* in Islam and Feminisms"³¹ she clarified her "*tawhidic* paradigm" as the expansion of Islamic monotheism. She translates it as "unicity" which means "God is one, God is unique, God is united and God unites all things". Inherent in this meaning, she explains, is "the basis for non-discrimination and a challenge to patriarchy in Islamic worldviews".³² Using this *tawhidic* paradigm, Wadud argued that only God has the greatest power of all, and all human being is equal before God and no one more privilege than the others.

²⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

³¹ Wadud, "Engaging *Tawhid*," 436.

³² *Ibid.*, 437.

Conservative interpretations tend to sustain hegemonic knowledge construction in the name of shaping the tradition and the methodology that supports the patriarchal reading of the Islamic texts. Wadud emphasizes that her method is designed to challenge “the inherent sexist biases of the historicity of words”.³³ She said that the Qur'an was revealed in the specific socio-historical context of patriarchal Arabia of the seventh century. These socio-historical contexts affect meaning construction through cultural and linguistic construction.

Principles of her hermeneutics of *tawhīd* consist of three aspects of the text: “*first*, the context in which the text was written (in the case of the Qur'an, in which it was revealed); *second*, the grammatical composition of the text (how it says what it says); and *third*, the whole text, its *weltanschauung* or world-view.”³⁴

Wadud argues that the meaning of the Qur'an represented by specific key term should be seen as a whole and unity: in both, the whole revelation and in the particular context where the key term was stated.³⁵ The context of revelation is important to derive moral principles from the Qur'an. Further, Wadud challenges that since Arabic language is categorized according to masculine and feminine, this gender-specific language used in the Qur'an should be analyzed because it influences the interpretation and understanding of meaning. Wadud tries to avoid understanding the key term in the Qur'an separately from one another because that could not grasp its meaning comprehensively. Partial understanding of the Qur'an is mostly practiced in traditional exegesis where most of them are men. The concept of the unity of the Qur'an suggests that the verses in the Qur'an are related to each other and should not be read separately.

In 2006, she also published her book entitled *Inside the Gender Jihad*. In this book, she explains further concerning her methods and provides revisit on her thought of several verses especially on 4: 34 concerning wife beating. This book also consist of her experiences of being Muslim, scholars, and mother, as well as her

³³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender*, 206.

³⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 3.

³⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*.

engagement with other organizations, institutions and Muslim groups who dedicated themselves in the same direction – Islamic gender reform.

There are some other Muslim women who propose similar method with Wadud in understanding the Qur'an like Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, and Azizah al-Hibri, to name a few. For example, Barlas method of understanding the Qur'an suggests that when reading the text to derive its intrinsic meaning, readers have also to understand the occasion behind which the text was revealed or composed. This is important point to reconstruct the historical context surrounding the revelation or the text production and to put the meaning of the text in the present context.³⁶ By applying this method, Barlas arrived at the conclusion that the Qur'an is an egalitarian text that establishes the principle of equality of the sexes.³⁷

In several occasions, Wadud's view on certain verses of the Qur'an are in line with all these Muslim feminists as they fight for the same goal i.e. fighting for gender justice through rereading Islamic text that free from gender bias and challenge patriarchal reading of the Qur'an. Apart from that, Wadud's method seems more comprehensive and consistent in promoting equal opportunity and recognition for women as fully human agency.

The Concept of Men's Authority over Women: An example

Men are the protectors and maintainers of (*qawwāmūn 'alā*) women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) (*faḍḍala*) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women (*ṣāliḥāt*) are devoutly obedient (*qānitāt*), and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct (*nushūz*), admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (*idribū*) (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all). (*Sūrah al-Nisā'* 4: 34)

There are three key terms in this verse that represent three themes: *qawwām*, *nushūz* and *daraba*, often translated respectively

³⁶ Barlas, *Believing Women*, 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

as men's authority, women's disobedience and the beating of wife. There have been various translations, interpretations and understandings of this verse from Muslim scholars since the first time the verse was revealed.

The word *qawwāmūn* has been translated in English translations of the Qur'an as "in charge of,"³⁸ "maintainers,"³⁹ "protectors and maintainers,"⁴⁰ "the support"⁴¹ and "taking full care."⁴² According to Al-Ṭabarī, men's authority over women is limited to financial matters, as the verse states clearly.⁴³ Other traditionalist interpreters after al-Ṭabarī like Ibn Kathīr, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī expanded the term *qawwām* to other aspects, such as mental and physical superiority of men over women, stating that men are more rational and stronger than women, who are considered weaker and more emotional.

The reformist Muslim scholars understand this verse differently. Wadud argues that Muslims should read this verse within its context (i.e. the first time it was revealed) and understood hermeneutically, according to the time when Muslims practiced it. In understanding the term *qawwām*, Wadud argues that the men's *qawwām* toward women can only occur if two conditions are met, as stated in the verse above; namely, men have more means or more prominence than women and second, men spend their wealth on supporting women. It represented by the word *bi* that means conditioned for man to practice *qawwām*. Besides, the word '*ba'ḍuhum 'alā ba'd*' inferred that only some (not all men) of them have the preference given by Allah, while some others are not. This phrase also implies that some women do have preferences over others too. Wadud concludes that these privileges and responsibilities are conditional and that this

³⁸M. Pickthall's translation (1930).

³⁹Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation (1973).

⁴⁰M. Yusuf Ali's translation (1975).

⁴¹Ahmed Ali's translation (1993).

⁴²M. Assad's translation (2003).

⁴³Imām Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl ay al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1992).

qawwām can be applied to both men and women in marriage as they are partners and their responsibilities are interdependent.⁴⁴

Al-Ṭabarī interpreted *nushūz* as a wife's disobedience toward her husband, which may include refusing sexual intercourse. Reformist Muslims like Wadud reject this interpretation, because the term *nushūz* also applies to men as mentioned in *Sūrah al-Nisā'*/4: 128. She argues that *nushūz* is better translated as "disruption of marital harmony".⁴⁵ In this case, three solutions are offered by the Qur'an: *first*, verbal advice; *second*, sleep in separate beds (a cooling down process); and *third*, and only in a severe case, severe punishment (*ḍaraba*). In her later book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadud argues that she can no longer tolerate a man striking a woman. Although the text says so, the Muslim community cannot tolerate any violence towards women because this is against the spirit of Qur'anic justice as a whole.⁴⁶

She gave thought a lot on this verse which literally she argued cannot tolerate the 'beating' of woman in any kind of reason. Thus, she come to her opinion to finally say "no" to the literal meaning of the passage related to wife beating because it violates the basic meaning of Islam and human dignity. She offers four stages in understanding the passage of wife beating stated in verse 4:34, namely:

First, the prophet's response to the text and his life exemplary. The Prophet Muhammad in his lifetime never made violence toward his wives.

Second, the intervention of *fiqh* on this verse restricts that the beating should not with the intention of harm (*ghayr mubarrih*). This is confirmed of not to do abuse toward one's wife.

Third, language possibilities. There are many possible and multiple meanings in the word *ḍaraba* from the verse that could promote 'perhaps not' to do this stage of beating.

⁴⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender*.

Fourth, She argues to say no to the text about beating the wife with the consideration that it would violate the basic meaning of Qur'an of "justice" and human dignity.⁴⁷

From the above explanation, Wadud is consistent in her attempt of liberating women's position in Islam, and she showed it by re-reading the Islamic texts that justify male superiority. Her method is important in giving opportunity for other methods and voices to contribute to the understanding of the Qur'an which for long period has been dominated by male interpreter. This has resulted that women's voices, experiences and perspectives were ignored and not considered. Besides, Wadud's method that emphasis on analyzing not only the language but also the context – of revelation and the reader – gives opportunity for possible accommodation of comprehensive social justice derived from the texts as seen in the example provided above.

Reading this verse in Indonesian context, based on field research conducted by the writer in 2012, the majority of man and women understood the cited verse as absolute authority of husband toward his wife in marriage. Thus, any decision the wife has, should be in accordance with or approved by the husband. Even in the case that the husband has no economic contribution to the family income. Many cases showed that the wife gave up working after getting married because the husband did not allowed her to do so while he himself has no stable job. In this case, Wadud method provide space for woman an opportunity for an alternative understanding of the verse based on the texts itself and the experience in everyday life.

The hermeneutical approach to Islamic texts aims to analyze the text not merely through its grammatical structure, but equally with attention to the socio-historical context of the production of the texts. Another important aspect of the hermeneutical approach is the idea of intertextuality, which means that texts in Islam are interconnected. The text is not isolated. To grasp a comprehensive understanding of texts in Islam requires treating the texts as a whole.⁴⁸ The Islamic feminist hermeneutical approach to Islamic

⁴⁷ Ibid., 202–203.

⁴⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*.

texts critiques the patriarchal reading of texts that are used to justify men's superiority over women.

Wadud employs hermeneutical approaches in her understanding of Islamic sources to provide a comprehensive understanding that supports gender equality and to counter a literalist understanding of Islamic texts that marginalizes women's position in Islam. A feminist hermeneutical approach that analyse Islamic texts provides critical understanding of Islamic texts that enable other voices to contribute knowledge production especially from women's point of view.

Conclusion

The hermeneutical reading to the Qur'an emerges from the fact that Islamic texts have been interpreted by various Muslim scholars and with myriad objectives, some of which have been used to oppress people, especially women. Islamic feminists offer a liberatory and egalitarian reading of the texts through their anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'an⁴⁹ and the sexist biases of Arabic language⁵⁰.

Wadud's method of interpreting the Qur'an is important in contemporary situation to acknowledge that women's voices should be considered as giving perspective related to religious text. She offered a Qur'anic reading from women's point of view which have been silenced for long period and dominated by male counterpart. Wadud's method proposed three important steps in understanding the Qur'an namely: linguistics and grammatical analyses, socio-historical contexts of revelation and connect those to current contexts, and last to derive moral guidance from the text.

Critical examination of the texts using an Islamic feminist hermeneutic approach is important in order to open the discourse to equity and social justice. The hermeneutic approach interrogates the domination of knowledge construction and distribution by certain authoritative religious powers and enhances the opportunities for other voices to contribute to knowledge

⁴⁹ Barlas, *Believing Women*.

⁵⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender*.

construction and create new meaning. These critical methods address the use and abuse of Islamic teachings⁵¹ for the purpose of preserving a status quo, and aim to end discrimination that occurs in the name of Islam. They have the potential to transform Islamic social relations and practice. It is because of this that the hermeneutical approach to Islamic texts finds its significance and deserved acknowledgment.

References

- Abū Zayd, Naṣr Hāmīd. *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah fi al-“Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-Amma li al-Kitāb, 1993.
- Amal, Taufik Adnan, and Samsu Rizal Panggabean. “A Contextual Approach to the Qur’an.” In *Approaches to the Qur’an in Contemporary Indonesia*, edited by Abdullah Saeed, 107–133. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Arkoun, Mohammed. *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?* Revised. London: Saqi Books, 2006.
- Azra, Azyumardi. “The Use and Abuse of Qur’anic Verses in Contemporary Indonesian Politics.” In *Approaches to the Qur’an in Contemporary Indonesia*, edited by Abdullah Saeed, 193–208. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Badran, Margot. *Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?* Cairo: Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 2002.
- Barlas, Asma. “Believing Women” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.
- Bleicher, Josef. *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
- van Doorn-Harder, Nelly. *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur’an*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- Gross, Rita M. *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

⁵¹ Azyumardi Azra, “The Use and Abuse of Qur’anic Verses in Contemporary Indonesian Politics,” in *Approaches to the Qur’an in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 193–208.

- Johns, Anthony H., and Abdullah Saeed. "Nurcholish Madjid and the Interpretation of the Qur'an: Religious Pluralism and Tolerance." In *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, edited by Suha Taji-Farouki, 67–96. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Karam, Azza M. *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*. London: Macmillan Press, 1998.
- King, Ursula. "Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion." In *Religion and Gender*, edited by Ursula King, 1–38. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Mahmood, Saba. "Mahmood, S. (2001). Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. *Cultural Anthropology*, 16(2), 202–236." *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–236.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. "Beyond 'Islam' vs 'Feminism.'" *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (2011): 67–77.
- Nurmila, Nina. "The Influence of Global Muslim Feminism on Indonesian Muslim Feminist Discourse." *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 49, no. 1 (2011): 33–64.
- Parker, Lyn. "Of Faith and Feminism: Imagining Discursive Feminist Space for Muslim." *Outskirts: Feminism along the Edge* 17 (2007). Accessed November 24, 2011. <http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/volume17/parker>.
- Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Saeed, Abdullah. *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- al-Ṭabarī, Imām Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd. *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl ay al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1992.
- Wadud, Amina. "Engaging Tawhid in Islam and Feminism." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10, no. 4 (2008): 435–438.
- . *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2006.
- . *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.