

GENDER EQUALITY IN RELIGION IN PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF INTERPRETATION ASMA BARLAS

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Abstract - Gender equality is a discussion that is always busy being discussed in every scientific community. The study raises by this author is in the form of gender equality in the realm of Asma Barla's thought which focuses on the study of its interpretation, both in terms of the principles and methods that adopts in expressing the issue of gender equality. The purpose of this paper is to examine, analyze and uncover the study of gender equality carried out by Asma Barlas. This research is a qualitative research with using type of library research, with the methode used is historical descriptive-analytical type, as a way ti explain Asma Barla's thought on gender equality. The result of the study is a perspective from Asma Barla that gender equality in the religious realm can be formed from reading the Quran in a holistic way and the approach of reading it from behind and from the front can be avoid patriarchy in the concept of monotheism. Thus, it can see the equality of the positions of men and women, because according to it, the difference is not seen from gender, but from the behavior of the individual. When these things can be done, then what will be formed is a relationship between the two (male and female), who are bound in marriage bonds or what it calls an equal relationship. In conclusion, Asma Barla's perspective leads to its achievement in seeing religion as a way to minimize gender problems in social life, so it can from a good social society.

Keywords: Equality, Gender, Religion, Asma Barlas, Al-Qu'ran

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender equality between men and women has always been discussed, even debated. There are opinions, whether based on an understanding of biblical texts or traditions of human thought, that place men in a more privileged position than women. This privilege is based on various arguments such as men being more rational and women being more emotional, or the belief that women carry inherited sins because their ancestor, Siti Hawa, was considered the cause of humans being brought down to earth.

In the end, the beliefs and opinions above, both in relation to God and in their social context, according to some people, women occupy the second position. Finally, it is not uncommon for this to result in persecution such as domestic violence and a lack of respect for women. Seeing this, the question arises: is it true that the Qur'an positions men as more special than women? Or is it the other way around: the Koran is anti-patriarchal? So what exactly is the concept of gender equality in the Qur'an? Is it consistent with the theory of some feminist thinkers who demand similarities between the two?

To answer some of these questions, Asma Barlas came up with an offer to read the Koran with the spirit of liberation, especially for women. In her book, *Believing Women in Islam*, Barlas tries to explore the verses of the Qur'an about gender equality, which according to her is different from the reading of patriarchy. Barlas also questioned why interpretations related to women's rights tend to be considered irreversible, even though aspects of diversity and subjectivity also apply in this case.¹ For this reason, the author is interested in examining and analyzing Asma Barlas's thoughts on gender equality in the realm of religion.

2. METHOD

The approach in this study uses a qualitative approach which aims to produce research in the form of interpretation of the data obtained.² While the type of research is Library Research whose data is obtained from books, archives, documents, journals, notes, audiovisual documentation, monographs, diaries, and letters,³ which are related to primary literature from Asma Barlas on gender equality in religious realm. Because this research is a study of the character's thoughts, the object of the research is Asma Barlas's entire thought on gender equality and the formal object is philosophical.⁴ In other words, the data collection technique in this paper is documentation, because documents can help to see things

¹Asma Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan, Cara Quran Membebaskan Perempuan Terjemah dari Believing Women in Islam*, PT Serambi Ilmu Semesta, Tahun 2005, hlm. 13

² Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif Dan R&D* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2016), 8.

³ Bungaran Antonius Simanjuntak and Soejidto Sosrodiharjo, *Metode Penelitian Sosial (Edisi Revisi)* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014), 8.

⁴ Ali Zainal Abidin, "Nabi Muhammad Saw Dalam Perspektif Esoteris Seyyed Hossein Nasr" (Skripsi UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, 2012), 18.

that have been done before. Meanwhile, to verify the validity of the data, this study performs interpretations and conclusions.⁵

Data analysis in this study used historical methods with descriptive-analytical methods, the aim of which could be a bridge to explain Asma Barlas's thoughts on gender. The theory in this study uses the theory of effective hermeneutics from Hans George Gadamer. The aim is to analyze the meaning of the text contained in the writings of Asma Barlas. As for testing the validity of the data, the author uses source triangulation, which is to test the credibility of the data by using a way to verify the truth of the data that has been obtained through several sources.⁶ The author chose the validity of this data because the research in this paper is a type of library research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Brief Biography of Asma Barlas

Her full name is Asma Barlas. She was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1956 to husband and wife Iqbal Barlas and Anwar Barlas. Both of his parents had an important role in her intellectual career, so she became a critical thinker and activist. According to Syafiq Hasyim, in 1976, Asma Barlas became the first woman in Pakistan to work for foreign services. However, during Ziya'ul Haq's time, due to her strong criticism of the military regime's power in Pakistan at the time, Asma Barlas was dismissed from his duties. After being fired from her job, Barlas joined a newspaper which was keen to voice opposition to government policies. In this newspaper called *The Muslim*, he occupies the position of assistant editor.

After several years working at *The Muslim* newspaper, in 1983, Asma Barlas had to leave Pakistan. She was expelled by the regime in power at that time. She then headed to the United States. There he obtained political asylum. If you look at her educational history, Asma Barlas has a fairly broad focus on several sciences. She earned his B.A. in English literature and philosophy from a university in Pakistan. She also got an M.A. degree at the same university, but in a different field: journalism. After she moved to America, Asma Barlas continued her studies and earned M.A and Ph.D. in international studies from the University of Denver, Colorado.

In introduction to the Indonesian edition of Barlas's book, Syafiq Hasyim said, Asma Barlas is an intellectual who has a fairly broad spectrum. Her writings are scattered in many places. According to him, Asma Barlas can be said to be one of the prolific writers among Islamic women intellectuals, even if we look closely, Asma Barlas's writings are not only about Islam and women, but also related to international politics and other interesting issues.⁷

⁵ Annu Rofiq Djaelani, "Teknik Pengumpulan Data Dalam Penelitian Kualitatif," *PAWIYATAN* 20, no. 1 (2013): 88.

⁶ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif Dan R&D*, hlm. 355.

⁷ Syafiq Hasyim, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan, Cara Quran Membebaskan Perempuan Terjemah dari Believing Women in Islam*, PT Serambi Ilmu Semesta, Tahun 2005, hlm. 6.

B. Interpretation of Al-Qur'an Asma Barlas about Gender

Asma Barlas explained that the Qur'an is against patriarchy.⁸ It is believed that the patriarchal and misogynistic readings are not sourced from the Qur'an, but from Islamic commentators and interpreters. They, according to Barlas, read the Koran in a patriarchal way. Actually, Barlas herself does not deny that the Qur'an can be read that way, but what she feels is that this patriarchal reading is hegemony and then does not give room for other readings. In fact, according to Barlas, all texts, including the Koran, are polysemous which can be read with a variety of readings. Regarding the Qur'an, Barlas herself argues, like classical and modern scholars, that the Qur'an is a holy book that cannot be imitated, disturbed and debated for its authenticity.

In other words, Barlas's recitation of the Qur'an is the recitation of a believer who does not challenge the authenticity of the Qur'an. However, Barlas's belief does not apply to interpretation. According to her, interpretation is an understanding that is open to debate. Therefore Barlas opposes sexual/textual oppression in Islamic society. Barlas sought to improve the egalitarian sound of Islam in an attempt to counter the authoritarian Islam portrayed by the Western media at the time. Barlas, citing Leila Ahmed, argues that it is an obligation to oppose authoritarian and patriarchal readings of Islam, whose influence has been deeply ingrained in women's lives and futures.

Asma Barlas in her book, *Believing Woman in Islam*, in an effort to show that the epistemology of the Qur'an is inherently anti-patriarchal and supports gender equality, claims to have used an interpretive methodology which she calls hermeneutics extracted from the Qur'an. In addition, Barlas also uses two definitions of patriarchy – the tradition of paternal power and the politics of gender inequality based on the theory of gender differentiation. This explanation can be seen through her understanding of the hermeneutical principles of the Qur'an and the method of interpreting the Qur'an.⁹

First, the hermeneutical principle of the Qur'an always has a relationship with the revelation of God which consists of the oneness, justice and uniqueness of God. The simple form of the oneness of God that leads to God's sovereignty is monotheism. While the theory that glorifies men, according to her, does not exist. Because God is the only absolute sovereign. Then with regard to justice, explained by Barlas that God has never done injustice to anyone, then His word is likewise. That is, if God is not misogynistic, then His words also cannot be misogynistic or teach misogynistic concepts which mean injustice.

Furthermore, according to Barlas, the hermeneutic impact is that God is incomparable, which is automatically not represented, especially in terms that liken God to His creation. So it is very clear that God rejects gender (sexuality).

⁸ The Qur'an provides space for women and the Qur'an does not describe God as a father or the relationship of men. See more at Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 32.

⁹ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 33.

From this it can be concluded that God is not male and does not resemble Him. Therefore, there is no reason to say that God has a special inclination towards men. Moreover, Islam rejects a patriarchal God and must also be used as a hermeneutic area to read the anti-patriarchal epistemology of the Qur'an. This means that the potential for liberation can not only be found from the teachings of the Qur'an on creation, ontology, and human relations, but also from the characteristics of the divine ontology.¹⁰

In addition to using the three theological aspects above as a barometer in reading the Koran, Barlas also emphasized the importance of reading the Koran holistically, not piecemeal. According to him, this kind of reading is emphasized by the Koran itself in several verses. Such reading is also in accordance with the opinion of classical scholars who say that the Qur'an interprets each other between its verses.¹¹ This kind of reading, by Barlas referred to as intertextual. Barlas explained that the reading of the Qur'an is different but the search for the best meaning is one that leads to the idea of a just God, because the concern of the Qur'an is justice.

Second, the method of interpreting the Koran carried out by Barlas is reading from the front and reading from the back. The purpose of reading backwards, said Barlas, means reconstructing the history in which the text, in this context the Qur'an, appears. In other words, linking the Qur'an to the context in which it was revealed. While the meaning of reading from the front is an effort to contextualize the values contained in the Koran to be actualized in the current era. Barlas's method seems to be similar to Fazlurrahman's double movement theory.¹² Looks like Barlas is following him. After Barlas explained the meaning of backward and forward reading, she quoted Rahman:

"From the present to the past and back again to the present. The first half of the movement allows us to specifically explain the context of the revelation and teachings of the Qur'an, and the next half of the movement allows us to distill "moral-social" principles from it so that they can be actualized today."¹³

Even though it looks the same between the two, and it's even clear that Barlas is following Rahman, that doesn't mean the two can just be equated. As we have discussed in the principle of hermeneutics, Barlas's reading of the Qur'an is also supported by three theological principles that are nuanced in liberation, especially for women.

The use of the method of reading from behind is also very reasonable considering the liberation that Barlas is trying to achieve. She believes that the Qur'an is against patriarchy, but the interpretation or understanding of the Qur'an which then presents the Qur'an seems to legitimize patriarchy. By reading

¹⁰ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 54-57.

¹¹ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 62.

¹² Fazlurrahman, *Tema-Tema Pokok al-Qur'an*, (Bandung: Pustaka ITB, 1983).

¹³ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 70.

backwards, or going back to the past if you borrow Rahman's term, Barlas wants to research and at the same time prove that the concept of patriarchy is not derived from the Qur'an but from an understanding of it which is closely related to the socio-economic interactions of the people at that time.

The two twin steps of Asma Barlas' reading above: reading from behind and reading from the front, can also be referred to as intertextual and extratextual reading. Intertextual means reading the text with everything that surrounds it, such as something behind the birth of the text, and the meaning of the text itself. While the second, extratextual, is how to contextualize the text based on current needs.

C. Implications of Asma Barlas's Thoughts on Gender

The theme highlighted by Asma Barlas in her book, *Believing Woman in Islam*, is the issue of the relationship between men and women in life. In her book, Barlas talks a lot that the Qur'an does not privilege men, in the sense that gender is not a differentiator for a servant to be more special in the eyes of his Lord. In addition, Barlas also discussed about family and marriage. These themes are dealt with by the methods and principles we have touched upon earlier. At least, according to Syafiq Hasyim, there are three themes that are the main focus of Asma Barlas in her book, *Believing Women in Islam*. These themes by Barlas are studied from the point of view of the Qur'an by comparing them with other points of view, such as the West and Christianity.

1) Patriarchy

Islam by some Western thinkers is accused of being a religion that supports the practice of patriarchy, in the sense of placing men as more special than women. In order to straighten this view, and also as a representation of her belief, Barlas emphasized that the Qur'an as the source of Islamic teachings rejects this privilege. Even the Qur'an can be called anti-patriarchy.

In order to strengthen her argument, Asma Barlas put forward the concept of monotheism in the Qur'an. According to her, the concept of monotheism about the oneness of God clearly rejects the opinion that God privileges men. Barlas said, monotheism would not be monotheism if it was not based on the omnipotence of God. She quoted a verse, which roughly means "your Lord is God Almighty" (Qur'an 16:22). Barlas quotes Davies as stating that monotheism is the foundation of the conceptual building of Islam which rejects the idea of a dichotomy, or the distinction between two contradictory things. Therefore, the Qur'anic concept of the oneness of God denies the binary thought that helps shape patriarchal thinking.

The oneness of God in the Qur'an is not only limited to the absence of partners with God, but also the rejection of the beliefs of the Jews and Christians who say God is the father as in Surah al-Nisa verse 171 (rejection of God as the father of Prophet Isa) and Surah Al-Nisa. at-Taubah verse 30 (rejection of the

Jewish belief that says Prophet Uzair as the son of God).¹⁴ The reason Barlas discusses the concept of monotheism, and criticizes the view that states God as a father, is because this view helps shape patriarchal thinking. The personification of God as a father is the same as describing God as a man, which ultimately affects the privilege of men. According to Barlas, even the rejection of the Koran also includes the assumption of God as Prophet Isa which means also a son.

2) Gender Equality

The view of the Qur'an regarding gender or gender is also a topic discussed by Barlas in order to reject the modern patriarchal view that makes a distinction based on gender. Modern patriarchy places men as subjects and women as other selves.¹⁵ According to Barlas, binary thinking is basically patriarchal. The Qur'an, she said, not only does not define women and men in terms of binary contradictions, nor does it state women as half men, or as disabled men. In other words, the Qur'an is not as embraced in the tradition of Western/Western patriarchal thought which considers the two to be unequal.

Barlas said, the Qur'an does not even associate gender with gender, a certain division of labor, as well as masculine and feminine traits such as men who are closely associated with intelligence and rationality and women with instinct plus emotion. That is, the measure of human definition according to the Qur'an is not based on gender but moral behavior in order to carry out what God has commanded.¹⁶

In her work, *Believing Women in Islam*, before Barlas further elaborates on the views of the Qur'an regarding gender or gender, she first explains what is meant by gender equality. According to her, although there are many differences about what is meant by gender inequality by theorists, they generally agree that gender inequality is a mixture of biological (gender) and social meaning (gender), or, he borrows a term from Marshal Sahlin, the subordination of symbolic things under nature.

The categories above, according to her, have contributed to the formation of the Western patriarchal mind a few centuries ago and religion which is read in a patriarchal way, so that human psycho-social differences are distinguished based on their biological differences. Men and women, by the patriarchal mind, are positioned opposite (binary) and dichotomously different. They are opposed, it's like not A, not B, but A and not A.¹⁷ Because of such treatment, feminists, especially the early generation, persistently seek equality or similarity and call for equal treatment of both. However, in its development, because this notion of gender has also been used to discriminate against women, the theorists, instead of maintaining to replace differences with similarities, recognize important differences between

¹⁴ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 187.

¹⁵ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 232.

¹⁶ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 234.

¹⁷ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 237.

the two. For them, treating women and men equally does not always mean equal, and vice versa, and what must be fought for is equal.

The Qur'anic view on gender equality refers to verses about the creation of humans. Just like QS. Al-Nisa' first verse, Barlas states that women and men originate from the One Self, have the same nature and are partners for others. Barlas follows Rahman's opinion which states that the word *nafs* in the verse refers to the self or person not to the soul as interpreted by previous scholars. According to her, scholars who interpret the word *nafs* as spirit are influenced by the Greek Tradition which makes the typology of spirit, soul and body. The spirit in this typology occupies the highest position which is identified with men, while the soul in the position it carries is associated with women.

In fact, says Barlas, the Qur'anic explanation of men and women being created from the One Self – although this *nafs* is not interpreted as God, men and women are related to each other, not only sociologically but also ontologically – is sufficient for view that they are equal and equal. But why do some Muslims still consider the two as opposite entities, instead of a pair. This, according to Barlas, may be influenced by a dualistic way of thinking, so that pairing is interpreted as opposite.¹⁸

In addition to the above, Barlas also opposes the opinion that men were created before women. She quoted Hasan as saying, "Of about thirty verses that mention the creation of man, not one can be interpreted as an affirmation or statement that men were created before women...". According to her, the opinion that men were created first will lead to male superiority. Whereas as previously explained, men and women are equal, and women are not a type of man. Citing Wadud, Barlas wrote, that men and women are two categories of the human species who are endowed with the same potential and reasoning. Based on this opinion, Barlas then concluded that the Qur'an treats men and women as partners (A and B) not opposites (A and not A). Barlas said, the Qur'an distinguishes humans based on their behavior, as stated in the letter al-Lail.

Hierarchy based on sex or superiority because it was created first, said Barlas is an important concept in the Bible which states that women came from men and were created for men. This is different from the Qur'an as already explained. In addition, the Qur'an is also different from the Qur'an which blames Eve for hereditary sin, which according to feminists leads to the degradation of women. However, said Barlas, the Christian tradition that made the above claim, which was later also followed by some Muslims, actually has flaws. The idea of inherited sin and Eve being created from Adam's rib is not found in the Old Testament. These ideas are additions that come later. According to Barlas' reading, many Muslim ideas towards women that do not come from the Qur'an are even contradictory. Therefore, Barlas suggested, we must question the textual strategies that make misogynistic themes, which are not part of the three major religious

¹⁸ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 242.

scriptures, so neatly arranged in religious discourse.

3) Marriage and Family

After discussing the two themes above, Asma Barlas continued the discussion related to marriage and marriage and what was included in it like family. According to her, the concept of family, or the relationship between women and men in Islam, is not patriarchal. Barlas said, as for the assumption that the family in Islam is patriarchal, it is due to a misunderstanding of the text. Barlas emphasizes, as we have discussed in the previous point, in understanding the text, one must also pay attention to the context.¹⁹ In her search, Barlas stated that the relationship between parents and children, for example, instead of talking a lot about rights, is actually closely related to obligations. The reading of rights, like the reading of Syafiq Hasyim, according to Barlas is usually a derivation of the discussion about obligations.

Barlas also has another interpretation, which seems to be different from most interpretations, of verse 35 of Surah al-Nisa'. The word *qowwamina*, which is usually interpreted as a leader, was not chosen by Barlas. She actually leans towards the meaning of breadwinner. The word *dharaba* by Barlas is also not interpreted as hitting, but giving an example. The reason he refuses to give the meaning of hitting is none other than his view of equality which is taught by the Qur'an that marriage must be based on love, forgiveness, harmony and tranquility.

The husband-and-wife relationship that Barlas put forward, if we look closely, is closely related to Barlas's stance on the previous theme, especially regarding the equality of women and men. Instead of being contrasted like A and not A, by Barlas, of course by referring to an understanding of the Qur'an, the two are more suitable as A and B, which need each other. Barlas also discussed the issue of polygamy. According to her, in reading the polygamy verse, as well as other verses, one must also pay attention to the context, so that one knows which of the Qur'an is universal and which one is particular. Barlas invites to see polygamy from a historical context. According to her, there was no prophet who practiced monogamy other than Jesus. Prophet David, he said, had 900, which he called *harem*.

In Islam, although the verse explicitly allows polygamy, it is accompanied by strict rules. Barlas believes that the permissibility of polygamy in the Qur'an is specific for orphaned women who are in foster care, plus two or three conditions, which are difficult for a Muslim to do. According to Barlas in her interview, men who have more than one wife based on the fulfillment of lust do not apply the Qur'an. Even Barlas, said, "Tell me a man who marries more than one woman for the sake of attaining piety!".

¹⁹ Barlas, *Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan*, hlm. 250.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the study of Asma Barlas's thoughts on gender in the realm of religion, can be seen from her explanation in understanding the Qur'an. The Qur'an is a divine word, according to which there is no word that discriminates, with her understanding that the Qur'an has different meanings but the best meaning is that which leads to justice. There are three important points in this study, namely First, Barlas rejects the patriarchy of the concept of monotheism, which explicitly states that God does not take sides, in the sense of privileging or similar to men. Second, the Qur'an places men and women equally. The distinction is not based on gender, but from the behavior of each. While the last point, or the third, in the Qur'an, the relationship between women and men in the marriage bond is an equal relationship.

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