Rereading Gender in Qur'anic Exegesis: Philosophical and Critical Hermeneutic Perspectives

Tafsir Gender dan Batas Metodologis: Suatu Kajian Hermeneutika Filosofis dan Kritis

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Abstract

This study examines the application of a gender approach in Qur'anic exegesis aimed at maintaining a balance between social critique and the ta`abbudī dimension. The background of this research is rooted in feminist critiques of classical tafsir, which often reproduce patriarchal biases through androcentric interpretations and the politicization of the text by male elites. This qualitative study employs Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Jürgen Habermas's critical theory as analytical frameworks. A literature review was conducted on classical and contemporary tafsir works, as well as related scholarly literature, to classify verses related to women into the social (mu`āmalah) and ta`abbudī realms and to evaluate the proportional application of the gender approach in these interpretations. Findings reveal that Gadamer's hermeneutics affirms the dialogical process between tradition and modern horizons in gender interpretation while delineating proper boundaries respecting the authority of ta`abbudī texts. Habermas's framework highlights the role of gender critique as an emancipatory instrument in the social realm but emphasizes that communicative rationality does not apply to the normative and transcendent ta`abbudī domain. Consequently, this study underscores the importance of maintaining methodological and epistemological balance to ensure that gendered tafsir neither diminishes nor disregards the authority of revelation, while fostering constructive dialogue between religious tradition and modern demands.

***Keywords*:** *Gender approach, Gadamer's hermeneutic, Habermas's critical theory*

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengkaji penerapan pendekatan gender dalam tafsir Al-Qur'an dengan tujuan menjaga keseimbangan antara kritik sosial dan dimensi ta`abbudī. Latar belakang kajian ini didasari oleh kritik feminis terhadap tafsir klasik yang sering kali mereproduksi bias patriarkal melalui interpretasi yang andro-sentris dan politisasi teks oleh elite laki-laki. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan hermeneutika filosofis Hans-Georg Gadamer dan teori kritis Jürgen Habermas sebagai kerangka analisis. Studi kepustakaan dilakukan terhadap tafsir klasik dan kontemporer serta literatur terkait untuk menelaah bagaimana ayat-ayat yang berkaitan dengan perempuan diklasifikasikan ke dalam ranah sosial (mu`āmalah) dan ta`abbudī, serta mengevaluasi proporsionalitas penerapan pendekatan gender dalam penafsiran tersebut. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hermeneutika Gadamer menegaskan proses dialogis antara tradisi dan cakrawala modern dalam penafsiran gender, sekaligus menandai batas-batas wajar dalam menghormati otoritas teks *ta`abbudī*. Pendekatan Habermas memberikan kerangka untuk memahami peran kritik gender sebagai instrumen emansipatoris dalam ranah sosial, namun menegaskan bahwa rasionalitas komunikatif tidak berlaku pada ranah ta`abbudī yang bersifat normatif dan transenden. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya menjaga keseimbangan metodologis dan epistemologis agar tafsir gender tidak mereduksi atau mengabaikan otoritas wahyu, sekaligus membuka ruang dialog konstruktif antara tradisi keagamaan dan tuntutan modernitas.

Kata Kunci: *Pendekatan gender, Hermeneutika Gadamer, Teori kritis Habermas*

Introduction

Classical Qur'anic exegesis often reflects the patriarchal social structures of the early Islamic formation period, in which interpretations of verses concerning women, such as those on inheritance, leadership, or testimony, were inseparable from the cultural biases of that era.[1]

Muslim feminist thinkers such as Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi have critiqued the tendency of medieval exegesis to

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[1] Muhammad Tahir ibn Asyur, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, jilid 4, Tunisia: al-Dar al-Tunisi al-Nasyr, 1984, hlm. 256.

perpetuate gender inequalities. According to Amina Wadud, this tendency is rooted in an andocentric patriarchal culture that treats men and their experiences as the normative standard. In this context, Qur'anic interpretation often represents male perspectives as the only legitimate viewpoint, thereby marginalizing women's experiences from religious discourse.[2]

In a similar vein, Fatima Mernissi argues that gender inequality in Islamic law does not originate from the Qur'an itself but from the interpretations of medieval male elites who politicized sacred texts to preserve masculine dominance. For Mernissi, the problem lies not in the revelation but in the historical process of interpretation shaped by power relations within patriarchal societies.[3]

A similar idea is proposed by Siti Musdah Mulia, who emphasizes the importance of renewal or reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses that appear gender-biased so that they align with the principles of justice in Islam. She argues that the Qur'an does not uphold the notion of the "second sex," which privileges a particular gender, nor the "first ethnic," which elevates a specific tribe or ethnicity. This view underscores that the egalitarian values of the Qur'an must be reinterpreted contextually to remain relevant and just for all humanity, without discrimination based on gender or ethnicity.[4]

Studies on gender-based Qur'anic interpretation have been developed by several prominent scholars, particularly Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Siti Musdah Mulia. Amina Wadud argues that patriarchal bias in classical exegesis emerges from the dominance of androcentric perspectives that position male experience as the

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[2] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective Amina Wadud*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, hlm. 80.

[3] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland, Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1991, hlm. 8.

[4] Siti Musdah Mulia, *Muslimah Reformis; Perempuan Pembaru Keagamaan*, Bandung: Mizan, 2005, hlm. 43.

normative framework for understanding the sacred text. Fatima Mernissi critiques the historical processes through which Islamic exegesis and legal thought were formed, asserting that they were shaped by patriarchal social and political structures that reinforced unequal power relations between men and women. Meanwhile, Siti Musdah Mulia emphasizes the necessity of reinterpreting Qur'anic verses that appear to reflect gender bias so that they align with Islam's universal and egalitarian principles of justice. These works collectively demonstrate that the issue of gender bias in Qur'anic interpretation does not stem from the Qur'anic text itself, but rather from the methodological approaches and historical contexts that have shaped its interpretation.

Although Muslim feminist scholarship has offered extensive critiques of classical exegesis, most of these studies focus primarily on social and ethical criticisms. There is still a lack of research that specifically addresses the methodological limits of applying a gender approach, particularly within the framework of philosophical hermeneutics and usul al-fiqh. This study positions itself within that gap by addressing this methodological void.

The application of a gender-sensitive lens in Qur'anic exegesis often leads to critical evaluations of verses that have traditionally been interpreted to justify male superiority or to prescribe specific gender roles. Some of the most frequently examined verses in this regard include those related to *qawwāmah* (QS. An-Nisā' [4]:34), inheritance laws (QS. An-Nisā' [4]:11), and women's testimony (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:282). Traditional interpretations of these verses generally emphasize fixed and immutable legal rulings, viewing them as part of the *taʿabbudī* category, namely provisions grounded in pure obedience that leave little room for rationality or contextual reinterpretation.

This traditional view frequently clashes with gender-oriented approaches that seek to reinterpret these verses in pursuit of social

justice and equality between men and women. Tensions arise because traditional interpretations tend to resist the interpretive flexibility offered by gender-sensitive methodologies, often perceiving them as a threat to the established norms of Islamic law and the sanctity of the revealed text. A common concern is that re-readings grounded in historical and sociological analyses may produce diverse and even contradictory interpretations, which in turn could lead to fragmentation within the Muslim community.

The urgency of this research lies in the growing need for an exegetical methodology that can bridge the demand for gender equality with the normative authority of the Qur'anic text. The ongoing debates surrounding the verses on qawwamah, inheritance, and female testimony demonstrate that a hermeneutical reconstruction is necessary so that Qur'anic interpretation does not fall into two extremes: textual conservatism on one side or gender relativism on the other.

Within the framework of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, scholars distinguish between verses that are *taʿabbudī* and those that are *taʿaqqulī*. According to al-Shāṭibī, the *taʿabbudī* category refers to rulings that must be followed exactly as prescribed by the Lawgiver, without allowing room for rational deliberation.[5]

Conversely, *taʿaqqulī* refers to rulings classified as *maʿqūl al-maʿnā*, namely legal provisions that allow the intellect to discern the rationale and underlying cause (*ʿillah*) behind their prescription. This approach provides space for human agents (*mukallaf*) to explore the wisdom and benefits (*ḥikmah* and *maṣlaḥah*) embedded in the law, both for individuals and for society at large.[6]

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[5] Abu Ishaq al-Syatibi, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Syarīʿah*, Jilid II, Beirut: Dar Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2003, hlm. 304.

[6] Mukhtar Yahya dan Fathurrahman, *Dasar-Dasar Pembinaan Hukum Islam*, Bandung: PT Al-Ma'arif, 1986, hlm. 362.

In line with this, Mun'im Sirry emphasizes that any approach to the Qur'an, including a gender-based approach, must be grounded in a hermeneutic responsibility toward the text. Exegesis should not merely function as a tool to reinforce particular ideological perspectives but must remain attentive to linguistic structures, historical contexts, and established exegetical methodologies. [7] If these elements are disregarded, a gender approach risks falling into interpretive relativism that lacks both academic and theological accountability.

Therefore, formulating methodological and epistemological boundaries in the application of a gender approach to the Qur'an becomes essential. This is intended to ensure that the interpretive process retains both scholarly and theological integrity, without undermining the authority of the sacred text as divine revelation. Such a discussion is part of the broader effort to maintain a balance between the spirit of renewal in understanding religious teachings and the reverence for the Qur'anic text as the primary source of Islamic law. In this study, the author employs Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and Jürgen Habermas's critical communication theory as analytical frameworks to assess the extent to which a gender approach can be responsibly applied in Qur'anic exegesis.

For this reason, it is crucial to delineate clear methodological and epistemological limits in applying a gender approach to the Qur'an. The aim is to ensure that the resulting interpretation remains both academically and theologically sound, while preserving the authority of the sacred text. This discussion also serves as an effort to sustain equilibrium between the drive for renewal in religious interpretation and the respect owed to the Qur'anic text as the foundational source of Islamic law. In this analysis, the author employs the approaches of Gadamer and Habermas.

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[7] Mun'im A. Sirry, *Hermenutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an,* Jakarta: Pustaka Alvabet, 2014, hlm. 144-146.

The novelty of this study lies in its use of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Habermas's theory of communication as analytical tools for evaluating the methodological limits of gender-based Qur'anic interpretation from both scientific and theological perspectives. This approach has not been systematically employed in previous Muslim feminist scholarship.

Method

This study is a qualitative inquiry that integrates philosophical hermeneutics and critical theory as its analytical framework. Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics is employed to read the text dialogically, emphasizing the importance of the fusion of horizons between the reader and the text, as well as openness to the meanings embedded within tradition.[8] Meanwhile, Jürgen Habermas's critical theory provides a framework for assessing interpretations laden with ideological content and highlights the need to distinguish between the public sphere, which is open to critical discourse, and the religious sphere, which possesses normative authority.[9] The data collection method consists of a literature review examining classical and contemporary exegetical works, along with scholarly studies relevant to gender exegesis and hermeneutical theory. The analytical method used is exegetical discourse analysis, aimed at classifying Qur'anic verses related to women into two major domains, the social domain (*muʿāmalah*) and the *taʿabbudī* domain, and evaluating the extent to which gender approaches are applied proportionally across the various interpretations analyzed.

Result and Discussion

Hermeneutics

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[8] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York: Continuum, 2004, hlm. 301-305.

[9] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, hlm. 130.

The term "hermeneutics" derives from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which means "to interpret." Its nominal form, *hermeneia*, refers to "interpretation," while *hermeneutes* denotes an "interpreter." The term is often associated with the Greek mythological figure Hermes, who is known as the messenger of the gods. In ancient Greek belief, Hermes functioned as the intermediary responsible for conveying divine messages to human beings.[10]

Scholars of hermeneutics have formulated six principal definitions that capture the scope of hermeneutics as a discipline of interpretation. *First*, hermeneutics is understood as a theory for interpreting sacred texts. *Second*, it functions as a method in philological studies. *Third*, it pertains to the science of linguistic understanding. *Fourth*, hermeneutics serves as a methodological foundation for the humanities. *Fifth*, it provides an approach for understanding human existence and existential phenomenology. *Sixth*, hermeneutics constitutes a comprehensive and integrated system of interpretation.[11]

Philosophical Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer

One of the reasons Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics is referred to as philosophical hermeneutics is that he views interpretation not merely as a technical or methodological process but as an integral part of human existence. This idea is strongly influenced by Martin Heidegger, who emphasized that understanding is an ontological process concerned with human existence, rather than something that simply follows a set of procedures or methods, as argued by earlier figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm

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[10] Fahruddin Faiz, *Hermeneutika Qur'ani: Antara Teks, Konteks, dan Kontekstualisasi*, Yogyakarta: Qalam, 2003, hlm. 20.

[11] Nafisul Atho dan Arif Fachruddin, *Hermeneutika Transendental: Dari Konfigurasi Filosofis Menuju Praksis Islam Studies*, Yogyakarta: Ircisod, 2002, hlm. 18-21.

Dilthey, who focused more heavily on the methodological aspects of interpreting a text.[12]

Sahiron Syamsuddin, in *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*, clarifies that philosophical hermeneutics does not prioritize interpretive techniques or methods but instead examines the fundamental conditions that enable a person to understand a text. One of the key concepts in this approach is the fusion of horizons, as explained by Hardiman.[13] A horizon may be likened to a field of vision or perspective through which one understands reality. This means that the extent to which someone can comprehend a text is determined by the breadth and openness of their horizon of understanding.[14]

The concept of fusion of horizons refers to the interaction between the horizon of meaning inherent in the text and the horizon of understanding possessed by the reader. Interpretation, within this framework, is not a process of recovering the original meaning of a text but a process of generating new meaning as a result of a dialogue between these two horizons. This raises further questions: How does this fusion of horizons occur? What factors enable the merging of the text's horizon and that of the reader?

In response to these questions, Richard E. Palmer[15] asserts that language plays a central role as the medium through which the reader's horizon and the text's horizon meet. In Palmer's view, hermeneutical experience emerges from the interaction between the legacy of tradition embodied in the text and the reader's world of understanding, a process mediated by language. Language is considered a historical

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[12] Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutika: Teori Baru Mengenai Interpretasi*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2005, hlm. 190.

[13] F. Budi Hardiman, *Seni Memahami: Hermeneutik dari Schleiermacher sampai Derrida*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2015, hlm. 163.

[14] Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*, Yogyakarta: Nawasea Press, 2017, hlm. 50.

[15] Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutika: Teori Baru Mengenai Interpretasi*, …, hlm. 239.

vessel that carries traces of the past and simultaneously serves as the medium through which understanding takes place.[16] This idea is also supported by Komaruddin Hidayat, who highlights that language, through text, brings past experiences into the present context.[17] Thus, the breadth of a person's horizon of understanding in interpreting a text is deeply influenced by their linguistic sensitivity and capability.[18]

Jürgen Habermas's Critical Theory

Jürgen Habermas is widely recognized as a central figure in the development of Critical Theory within the field of hermeneutics. His hermeneutical ideas are shaped by the critical spirit of the Frankfurt School, which is why his approach is known as critical hermeneutics.[19] This approach begins with the assumption that every interpretation contains elements of subjectivity, whether in the form of political, economic, or social bias, or those related to issues such as class, ethnicity, and gender. Critical hermeneutics therefore demands a posture of suspicion and critical engagement toward interpretive outcomes that may emerge from communication distorted by systemic forces, including the use of technical terminology in science and religion. Through this process, it becomes possible to uncover meanings that are more authentic, profound, and expansive.

The trajectory of Habermas's thought can be traced to the intellectual foundation laid by the early generation of the Frankfurt School, particularly figures such as Adorno and Horkheimer. This school is known for its philosophical tradition that employs critical

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[16] Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutika: Teori Baru Mengenai Interpretasi*, …, hlm. 246.

[17] Komaruddin Hidayat, *Mehamahi Bahasa Agama: Sebuah Kajian Hermeneutik*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1996, hlm. 37.

[18] Rahmatullah, "Menakar Hermeneutika *Fusion of Horizons* H.G. Gadamer dalam Pengembangan Tafsir Maqasid al-Qur'an", *Jurnal Nun*. Vol. 3. No. 2. 2019, hlm. 157.

[19] Josef Blacher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, London: Rootledge, 1980, hlm. 141-148

approaches to analyze social phenomena. [20] From this tradition emerged the concept of convergence between interpreter and author, grounded in an emancipatory conception of truth, one that seeks to liberate individuals from domination or ideologies that suppress freedom of expression. The influence of Karl Marx is evident in this framework. Habermas himself is often categorized as a neo-Marxist theorist who enriched critical theory by integrating elements of Marxist analysis with other approaches, resulting in a body of theoretical work that is both distinctive and complex.[21]

The critical theory developed by Habermas also functions as a response to the dominance of positivism in the social sciences. Positivism views social science as a value-free and neutral discipline, assuming that knowledge is valid only when generated through empirical methods similar to those used in the natural sciences. Critical theory challenges this claim to objectivity and demonstrates that positivism often serves as an ideology that supports the status quo. In Habermas's view, the social sciences should not merely describe the world but should also help liberate society from structural domination and inequality.[22]

With this awareness of the importance of social emancipation, Habermas developed the approach of social-critical hermeneutics. The goal of this approach is to probe texts, traditions, or institutions in order to uncover the power relations, structures of domination, and forms of social manipulation embedded within them. This process enables communities to liberate themselves from ideological and structural constraints that shape collective consciousness. Building on this foundation, Habermas formulated his theory of communicative action,

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[20] Ulumuddin, "Jurgen Habermas dan Hermeneutika Kritis: Sebuah Gerakan Evolusi Sosial", dalam *Jurnal Hunafa* Vol. 3 No. 1, hlm. 77.

[21] Iwan, "Menelaah Teori Kritis Jürgen Habermas", dalam *Jurnal Edueksos* Vol. 3 No. 2, hlm. 150.

[22] Ulumuddin, "Jurgen Habermas dan Hermeneutika Kritis: Sebuah Gerakan Evolusi Sosial", …, hlm. 79.

which classifies human actions into four categories: teleological action (goal-oriented), normative action (guided by social rules), dramaturgical action (self-presentation), and communicative action (oriented toward mutual understanding). The last of these is regarded as the ideal form of communication, in which meaning is constructed through consensus and equality among participants.[23]

Categories of Qur'anic Verses Based on the Scope of Gender Interpretation

A. Verses That Can Be Interpreted Through a Gender Lens

The discussion on gender approaches in Qur'anic exegesis often begins with clarifying the conceptual distinction between gender and sex. These two terms are frequently conflated, even though they carry fundamentally different meanings. Sex refers to biological attributes and is considered divinely determined, whereas gender refers to social and cultural constructs that shape the roles, behaviors, and expectations assigned to men and women within a society.[24]

Etymologically, the term *gender* originates from English and initially referred to biological sex. However, in contemporary scholarly discourse, gender is defined as a set of cultural norms, values, and expectations associated with the roles of men and women.[25] Elaine Showalter, for instance, views gender as a social construct that produces distinctions between men and women, and one that can be critically examined within cultural and historical frameworks.[26]

Accordingly, the gender approach in Qur'anic interpretation seeks to reassess understandings of verses that have long been

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[23] Dadang Darmawan, "Kajian Hermeneutika Terhadap Fenomena dan Teks Agama", dalam *Jurnal Holistic al-Hadis*, Vol. 02, No. 01, hlm. 15.

[24] Victoria Neufeldt, *Webster"s New World Dictionary*, New York: Webster's New World Clevenland, 1984, hlm. 561.

[25] Hilary M. Lips, *Sex and Gender: An Introduction*, London: Myfield Publishing Company, 1993, hlm. 4.

[26] Elaine Showalter, *Speaking of Gender*, London: Routledge, 1989, hlm. 3.

interpreted in a biased manner, particularly due to the patriarchal structures that have shaped classical exegetical traditions. Through this approach, readers are encouraged to distinguish between the normative and historical dimensions of the text and to consider the possibility of interpretations that offer greater justice toward women.

Several themes in the Qur'an often become focal points in gender-based approaches because they are considered to contain elements of bias or imbalance between men and women, including:

1. The Status of Men and Women

According to Musdah Mulia, the doctrine of *tawhid* does not merely liberate human beings from all forms of injustice and tyrannical power but also serves as the foundation for eliminating every form of discrimination and subordination among human beings. *Tawhid* affirms that only Allah is worthy of worship and that no creature or entity can be equal to Him. As a consequence, all human beings possess equal standing before Allah, both in their status as ʿabd and as *khalīfah* on earth. Both men and women carry the same responsibility of *tawhid*, namely worshipping Allah alone, with no difference in human worth between them.[27]

Zainab al-Ghazali, in her exegetical work *Naẓarāt fī Kitābillāh*, states that men and women originate from the same essential soul. From this single *nafs*, Allah created two distinct forms of existence, male and female, whose purpose is to complement one another. They cannot be separated, since the existence of one completes that of the other. On this basis, no hierarchy or special privilege is granted by Allah to either biological sex. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that in the divine perspective, the only criterion of merit is *taqwā*, not gender or sex.

She also explains that the purpose of creating men and women is to cultivate and sustain the earth. Allah spread humankind from the

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[27] Siti Musdah Mulia, *Indahnya Islam Menyuarakan Kesetaraan dan Keadilan Gender*, Yogyakarta: Nauvan Pustaka, 2014, hlm. 28.

first pair, Adam and Ḥawwāʾ, from whom generation after generation of men and women emerged to build and maintain life on earth.[28]

2. Women's Testimony

In the view of classical scholars such as Ibn Kathīr, the interpretation of this verse is approached textually, particularly regarding the composition of witnesses between men and women in a one-to-two ratio. Ibn Kathīr considers this provision to be final, although he limits its application only to financial transactions and commercial dealings. This interpretation is supported by a hadith narrated by Muslim from Abū Hurayrah stating that women possess deficiencies in intellect and religion. Based on this notion of a deficiency in intellect, the testimony of two women is considered equivalent to that of one man. This provision is intended as a form of protection so that if one of the two women forgets, the other may remind her.[29]

According to Muhammad Abduh, a more accurate reason why women's testimony was valued differently in the context of financial transactions is that, at the time, women were generally not involved in financial matters. As a result, their memory regarding issues related to that field tended to be weak. Conversely, in domestic affairs, women often possessed stronger memory than men due to their greater involvement in such matters. This is viewed as natural because a person's memory capability is usually influenced by the intensity of their engagement in a particular activity or discipline. However, Abduh emphasizes that this condition cannot be used as a basis to negate the capacity of contemporary women who are now widely involved in financial sectors and possess strong understanding in this field. Although their numbers might still be fewer than men, the law

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[28] Zainab al-Ghazali, *Nazarat Fi Kitabillah,* Beirut: Dar al-Syuruq, 1994, hlm. 281.

[29] Ismail ibn Umar ibn Katsir, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-`Aẓīm*, jilid 1, Beirut: Dar al-Ma`arif, 1976, hlm. 315-317.

that applies in general is grounded in the dominant reality and reflects the majority context at the time the ruling was established.[30]

Muhammad Shaltūt argues that the testimony of women holds the same value as that of men. In his view, the verse on testimony does not speak in the context of formal court procedures that serve as the basis of legal judgment. Rather, it provides practical guidance aimed at fostering trust and creating reassurance between parties engaged in *muʿāmalah*transactions such as debt agreements. Thus, the verse does not intend to invalidate the testimony of one woman or more, even when not accompanied by a male witness. Women's testimony may still serve as a basis for establishing truth, and judges may issue rulings based on such testimony. What is most essential in judicial processes, according to Shaltūt, is the presence of valid evidence and clear information, not merely the gender composition of the witnesses.[31]

It is important to note that in addition to Surah al-Baqarah 2:282, which discusses testimony, there are seven other Qur'anic verses that address the issue of testimony: Surah al-Nisāʾ 15, al-Māʾidah 106 and 107, al-Nūr 4, 6, and 8, and al-Talāq 2. However, none of these verses state that the testimony of one man must be replaced by the testimony of two women.

B. Verses That Cannot Be Interpreted Through a Gender Lens

Although the gender approach offers important contributions in reinterpreting verses that potentially contain bias, not all Qur'anic verses can be read freely through a gender lens. This limitation applies especially to verses that are *taʿabbudī* in nature, meaning those related to pure acts of worship, or verses that are *qaṭʿī al-dilālah*, whose meanings are definitive, as well as those directly connected to the

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[30] Muhammad Abduh dan M. Rasyid Ridha, *Tafsîr al-Qurʾân al-Hakîm: Tafsīr al- Manār*, jilid 3, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, hal. 124-125.

[31] Muhammad Syaltut, *al-Islām Aqīdah wa al-Syarīʾah*, Kairo: Dar al-Syuruq, 1980, hlm. 240.

immutable divine legal order (*tsawābit*). Interpretation of such verses requires caution to avoid falling into relativism that neglects the fundamental values of religion.

The *taʿabbudī* principle in inheritance law refers to the understanding that implementing the distribution of inheritance according to Islamic legal provisions constitutes an act of worship to Allah. Observing this law is rewarded, just as obedience to other obligatory teachings of Islam is rewarded.

This understanding is grounded in the sequence of verses in Surah al-Nisā' 11 and 12, which outline inheritance regulations in detail, and is then reinforced in verses 13 and 14. In verse 13, Allah states:

"These are the limits set by Allah. Whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger, He will admit him to gardens beneath which rivers flow, to abide therein forever. And that is a great triumph." (QS. al-Nisa: 13)

Verse 14 then emphasizes a warning for those who violate these provisions:

"And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger and transgresses His limits, He will admit him to a Fire, to abide therein, and he will have a humiliating punishment." (QS. al-Nisa: 14)

These verses indicate that inheritance law is not merely a social regulation but a divine ruling that is definitive (*qaṭʿī*) and must be obeyed. Therefore, approaches to inheritance verses must take into account their *taʿabbudī* dimension as an expression of obedience to the Sharīʿah.

Zainab al-Ghazālī argues that these inheritance verses contain an implicit command to uphold justice among heirs, particularly considering that during the pre-Islamic era all inheritance was given exclusively to men, while women received nothing. These verses were revealed to equalize inheritance rights between men and women,

including in relation to lineage (*aṣl al-mīrāṣ*).[32] In other words, the verses aim to establish justice among heirs of that period.

As for the provision stating that "for the male is a share equal to that of two females," it is based on divine wisdom known only to Allah, the All Wise and All Knowing. Men bear financial responsibilities, living expenses, difficulties in seeking livelihood, work obligations, commerce, and various hardships. Therefore, it is just that men receive a portion twice that of women. [33]

Al-Ghazālī's interpretation demonstrates that gender bias in exegesis is not necessarily linked to the biological sex of the exegete. In other words, there is no guarantee that a female exegete will automatically support women's issues, just as a male exegete does not necessarily endorse a masculine perspective. In the context of inheritance verses, al-Ghazālī views the Qur'anic provisions as a revolutionary response to pre-Islamic practices in which women and children had no inheritance rights at all, since inheritance was given only to adult men capable of fighting.

In her view, Islam introduced a radical transformation by recognizing inheritance rights for women and children while affirming the principle of equality before the divine law. The difference in inheritance proportions between men and women must be understood as part of a perfect divine system rather than an act of discrimination.

A Hermeneutical Analysis of Gender Interpretation: Perspectives from Gadamer and Habermas

1. Gadamerian Hermeneutics

In the context of Qur'anic exegesis, classical interpretations shaped by patriarchal structures can be understood as manifestations of a dominant tradition in which certain prejudices, such as

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[32] Zainab al-Ghazali, *Nazarat Fi Kitabillah*, …, hlm. 285.
[33] Zainab al-Ghazali, *Nazarat Fi Kitabillah*, …, hlm. 285.

assumptions regarding the inferiority of women or rigid gender roles, significantly influenced the understanding of social verses. These prejudices, although often unacknowledged by classical mufassirīn, played an important role in shaping their interpretive approaches.

The gender-sensitive approach in Qur'anic exegesis, which seeks to reassess interpretations of verses considered biased, represents an attempt to enact what Gadamer describes as a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). This process involves a dialogical engagement between two horizons: first, the horizon of the text and the classical interpretive tradition; and second, the horizon of the modern interpreter, which includes contemporary understandings of gender as a social construct, principles of equality, and the lived experiences of women today.

When modern interpreters such as Musdah Mulia, Muhammad Abduh, or Muhammad Shaltut revisit social verses, including those concerning the status of men and women or the rules of testimony, they do not simply reject the tradition. Instead, they engage in a dialogue with it. They introduce new questions arising from the modern context into the interpretive process, and through this reflective engagement they aim to produce interpretations that are more just and relevant. Abduh, for example, contextualizes the verse on testimony within the historical reality of women's limited involvement in financial transactions. Shaltut treats the verse as practical guidance rather than an expression of ontological inequality. These examples demonstrate how the fusion of horizons can generate an understanding that moves beyond traditional prejudices while still respecting the text. This embodies a living hermeneutics in which the meaning of the text is continuously renewed through interaction with contemporary concerns.

Although Gadamer emphasizes openness to tradition and the fusion of horizons, his hermeneutics also implicitly recognizes the

limits of this process. With regard to verses that are *ta'abbudī* (purely devotional) or *qaṭ'ī al-dilālah*(definitive in meaning), for example the laws of inheritance, the truth embedded within the religious tradition carries a particularly strong authority.

From Gadamer's perspective, gender interpretation becomes excessive when the effort to fuse horizons no longer respects the authority and inherited truth of the tradition in *ta'abbudī* matters. Such verses are accepted by the community of faith not as products of negotiable social consensus but as divine commands that require submission. The prejudices that shape the understanding of *ta'abbudī* verses are therefore rooted in devotion and transcendent belief.

When gender interpretation seeks to apply modern egalitarian logic in a radical way to the Qur'anic proportions of inheritance, it may be perceived as an attempt to impose the modern horizon in a manner that fundamentally alters or disregards the truth upheld within the faith tradition. This is no longer a dialogical engagement that respects the autonomy of the text and the tradition but an effort to assimilate the text entirely into the modern horizon. Such an approach risks undermining the integrity of *ta'abbudī* belief.

Zainab al-Ghazālī, although a female exegete who aimed to affirm the justice of Islam toward women, maintained the fixed inheritance proportions. She regarded these differences as part of a perfect divine system and as a revolutionary response to pre-Islamic practices rather than a form of discrimination that should be revised through modern egalitarian logic. Her position shows that even within a fusion of horizons, certain aspects of tradition and *ta'abbudī* texts possess an intrinsic truth that limits the extent to which reinterpretation can proceed without exceeding the boundaries of faith.

2. Jürgen Habermas's Hermeneutics

Jürgen Habermas, in his monumental work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, introduces a fundamental distinction between instrumental rationality, which is oriented toward goals, efficiency, and control, and communicative rationality, which focuses on achieving mutual understanding through dialogue that is free from coercion and domination. Instrumental rationality operates within systems such as the economy and bureaucracy. Communicative rationality, by contrast, functions within the realm of the lifeworld, the space in which individuals interact, coordinate actions, and build shared meanings.[34]

In the context of Qur'anic exegesis, verses that regulate social norms and human interactions, such as those concerning the status of men and women, testimony, leadership, or other social rights, belong to the domain of the lifeworld. This is the arena in which individuals engage in communicative processes and negotiate social understanding. According to Habermas, whenever a validity claim is questioned, including claims about the justice of a particular gender role or social norm, it must be subjected to rational discourse.[35]

Classical exegesis that contains patriarchal bias can be understood as the product of systematic communicative distortions. These distortions arise when unreflected assumptions of power or prejudice, such as male dominance, implicitly or explicitly shape understanding and hinder open and egalitarian dialogue. Gender criticism functions as an emancipatory tool that aligns with the aims of Habermas. It exposes these distortions, brings marginalized perspectives into the public sphere, and encourages the pursuit of a more just and inclusive consensus.

The efforts of modern interpreters such as Musdah Mulia, who connects the doctrine of *tawhid* with the principle of human equality,

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[34] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, jilid 1, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, hlm. 70-73.

[35] Josef Blacher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, …, hlm. 141-148

and the reinterpretations of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Shaltut regarding the verse on women's testimony, illustrate the role of communicative rationality in deconstructing biased interpretations. Abduh, for example, contextualizes the different weight of women's testimony within the financial practices of the Prophet's era. He explains that the provision was not based on intellectual deficiency but on the limited involvement of women in financial matters at that time, a condition that no longer applies in the modern period. Shaltut argues that the verse on testimony functions as practical guidance rather than a rigid legal prescription, emphasizing the truth of evidence instead of the gender composition of witnesses. These reinterpretations aim to produce understandings that are socially just and contextually relevant, which corresponds to the ideals of Habermasian discourse.

Although gender discourse is crucial for verses dealing with social relations, it is essential to recognize that the scope of Habermas's communicative rationality is limited when it encounters *ta'abbudi* verses, which concern purely devotional matters, or *qati al-dilalah* verses, whose meanings are definitive. These types of verses regulate rituals, specific inheritance laws, and other norms regarded as absolute divine commands. For this reason, they are beyond the reach of human-centered social consensus.

From a Habermasian perspective, validity claims concerning *ta'abbudi* practices are not grounded in rational consensus among human beings. They arise from faith-based submission to transcendent authority. The implementation of inheritance law is considered an act of worship and obedience to God, as affirmed in Surah al-Nisa 13 and 14, which describe these provisions as "the limits of God" and attach reward or punishment to their observance. Applying egalitarian logic that is based on social rationality to the domain of *ta'abbudi* norms becomes problematic. It represents an

attempt to reduce or alter norms whose foundation is divine command rather than human negotiation.

When gender interpretation attempts to revise or abolish religious norms, such as the fixed inheritance proportions, it becomes excessive from the standpoint of Habermas. This occurs because it applies criteria of validity that do not correspond to the nature of the claim involved. A mufassir such as Zainab al-Ghazali demonstrates awareness of this distinction. In her interpretation of inheritance law, she affirms the justice introduced by Islam in comparison to pre-Islamic practices and yet maintains the prescribed proportions. She views them as part of a "perfect divine system." Her stance shows that even interpreters committed to gender justice recognize certain boundaries of interpretation. These boundaries belong to a fundamentally different domain, one that cannot be altered solely by invoking the logic of equality.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that applying Gadamerian hermeneutics and Habermasian critical theory offers a precise methodological framework for evaluating the scope and limits of gender-based Qur'anic interpretation. Through Gadamer, the research clarifies how gender-oriented readings can legitimately challenge patriarchal biases in classical socio-legal exegesis by engaging in a genuine fusion of horizons between the inherited interpretive tradition and contemporary understandings of gender. At the same time, Gadamer's framework allows us to identify the boundary where reinterpretation becomes methodologically excessive, namely when modern egalitarian assumptions attempt to override the intrinsic authority of taʿabbudī and *qatʿī* verses.

Habermas strengthens this analysis by showing how gender critique functions as an emancipatory tool for correcting distortions

rooted in asymmetric power relations within the exegetical tradition. Yet his theory also underscores that communicative rationality cannot be imposed on domains whose validity rests on transcendent authority rather than social consensus. Together, these two frameworks delineate a clear methodological limit for gender interpretation while preserving the legitimacy of critical engagement with socio-legal verses.

By integrating philosophical hermeneutics with critical theory, this study provides a distinctive contribution to the methodological discourse on Qur'anic interpretation. It offers a balanced approach that affirms the importance of gender justice without dissolving the structure of religious normativity. In the context of Nusantara Qur'anic studies, where debates on gender equality and textual authority remain vibrant, this framework provides a constructive model for reconciling modern ethical concerns with the theological integrity of the Qur'anic tradition.

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