

ÉCRITURE FÉMININE

Reconstructing Social Identity and Recontextualizing the Scripture

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Book Review



Book title : *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia*
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Écriture féminine (literally woman's writing), a term coined by Hélène Cixous, sounds like a call for women to write about themselves, define themselves, and express their feeling from their own perspective. Writing becomes a way and weapon for women to fight back to the place where they are driven away violently from their only body and right or to break free from the prison which is deeply grounded within an *androcentric* framework. Women need to reconstruct the past where their roles and voices have been lost. It implies that the feminist proponents not only consider the presence of women within current issues but they must also search for clues that inform the absence of women in the past because the sources about women have often suppressed by the patriarchy, male-dominated culture, and the religious tradition as well. To accomplish the idea of liberating women from the shackling condition, feminist scholars need a paradigm shift from

Androcentrism to *Gynocentrism*, placing the feminine point of view at the center of one's world view. One of the strategies to lead the shift to *Gynocentrism* is gender mainstreaming in all aspect of different cultures from politics to religion.

Within gender mainstreaming, the advocates of women's right, especially in post-colonial countries, can paddle into the third-wave feminism. This third wave provides the activists in developing countries many opportunities in empowering women. They can promote diverse approaches to actualize change, to gain power and equality, within their own cultures and their own communities and with their own voices without being necessarily molded to an all-encompassing single form of feminism which is initiated by white, middle class, western feminist scholars. The different challenges faced by women all around the world call for the feminist activists to deal with it in a different way. The women issues in the third world countries are more complex than the ones in the western countries. The issues cover wide range from the establishing the humanity of women and therefore should not be treated like property, struggling for total gender equality in social, political, legal, and economy, to the issues of race, social class, sexuality, and unfair maternity. The first two issues have been taken and answered by the first and second wave of feminism while the rest has to be addressed by the current advocates of women's right. One of the examples attempting to deal with these issues is made by Nina Nurmila through her book *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* published by Routledge Taylor and Francis Group in London and New York.

Currently Nina Nurmila is a lecturer at the State Islamic University (UIN) Bandung. She did her masters on Gender and Development, Development Studies in Murdoch University and accomplished her PhD on Gender and Islamic Studies in the University of Melbourne. She also wrote *Studi Islam dan Jender* (Islamic Study and Gender), a module designed to teach Gender and Islam for postgraduate students at UIN Jakarta. The book *Women, Islam and Everyday Life* is based on detailed fieldwork during her PhD program. It examines polygamy practices in Indonesia particularly in Javanese and Sundanese Ethnic in the post-Soeharto regime when polygamy was initially promoted mainly among Islamists or Islamist political party members. It is completely different from the time during the reign of Soeharto where polygamy was considered as social problems and therefore it was

discouraged by the law and government regulation. The fall of the regime marks the abrupt change in religious expression especially by the Islamists or fundamentalists. They become more outspoken to impose Shari'ah by incorporating it to the law in Indonesia. The country turns out to be like the Tower of Babel in which different religious groups find their moment to demonstrate and disseminate their conflicting views. Within this condition, Nina Nurmila takes part through her book to advocate the abolishment of polygamy in Marriage Law in Indonesia.

The first part of the books portrays the situation of Muslim women in Indonesia, to be particular within Javanese kinship system. In general, Indonesia has a bilateral or cognatic kinship system with the exception of Minangkabau ethnic that has matrilineal kinship system and Northern Sumatra, Batak ethnic and Bali which have patrilineal system. The matrilineal kinship system empowers women as controllers of land and houses; on the other hand patrilineal system puts women in subordinate position. It is the matrilineal kinship system within Javanese that provides slightly more egalitarian position to women in relation to their husbands. In more detailed, the book focuses on two important features of Javanese kinship, the structural autonomy of the nuclear family, and the absence of extended kin groups. However, this nuclear family tends to be the conjugal ties in which the wives tend to see their kin as supporting. This female-centered network of kinship among women, which is often termed 'matrifocal', becomes a secondary, supplementary structure to the primary structure of the nuclear family.

The above situation gives women more autonomy and independence. Javanese women are responsible to spend money and manage the household finances in order to take care of their husband and children. This condition is supposed to put women in equal position to men within the household. It is indeed a kind of quasi-equality relationship. Wives' authority in managing household finances is not genuine but derived authority from husbands who control the ultimate direction of the household. Women do not spend money on their own interests because they are not the main breadwinners who earn money. The power remains the prerogative of men; women achieve only derivative form of power'. It indicates that male potency and self-control tend to be more emphasized in formal discourse, while the belief that men have less self-control than women often

appears in informal discourse when there is no ideological risk. Moreover, women also lack control of their sexuality. They are even regarded as passive sexual agents whose major task is to fulfill the needs of their husband. This subordinate position of women is hidden by the the prevalent patriarchal social system and dominant gender ideologies supporting the idea that Javanese men and women are separate but equal. Within such social system, women are vulnerable to polygamous marriage.

After discussing women's situation in Java, the book continues talking about the changing patterns of marriage and feminist critique of the family structure in Indonesia. There have been tremendous changes in the tradition of marriage and family structure in Indonesia. Formerly, arranged marriage by the parents was very common in Indonesia. The practice was beautifully captured and carefully criticized by Indonesian novels *Siti Nurbaya* and *Azab Membawa Sengsara*. Parents mostly arranged marriages at an early age and often without the couple's consent. Marriage is a part of religion and it is incumbent upon the parents to look for a husband for their daughters'. Parentally arranged marriage served to fulfill many interests of the parents. They tended to protect family honor by marrying off their daughters soon after they reached puberty, to prevent sexual misconduct and pregnancy outside marriage. No wonder if most Javanese girls had been married by the age of 16 or 17. Many Javanese parents in the 1950s would be embarrassed if they had a 16-year-old unmarried daughter.

However, ten years later the average age of marriage rose sharply to twenties and continued to rise until now. This is due to the social change that has taken place in Indonesia during that time. Modernization, industrialization, and urbanization have opened up women to have higher level of education and labor force. They have a greater access to economic sources and gain independency. The rising age average of marriage and the increasing number of free-choice marriages initiated by courtship or premarital relationship concerns the Islamists who believe that postponing marriage will only cause fornication. The book *The Beauty of Early Marriage* was intentionally written to address the prevailing practice of romantic love leading to free-choice marriages. Besides, the high number of unmarried women over 30 years old considered as a 'problem' which should be solved by encouraging polygamous marriages.

The book continues to discuss the family structure in Indonesia that has changed in line with the greater role that women played in public spheres. The inception of women's involvement in social life does not automatically provide equal gender division of labor. Their social activity is deemed as ancillary to their husband's role as it is institutionalized within gender state ideology of *Ibuism* (motherhood). The Ideology state that women are housewives. Therefore, they tend to be regarded as the 'secondary income earner', an assumption which is then used to justify lower wages and salaries for women. *Ibuism* is subject to criticism of being class-biased and Javanese aristocratic ideology especially during colonial era. It is likely to be urban and upper-middle class-oriented, because it promotes activities and values that are irrelevant to the lives of poor rural women who mostly must work for their survival. The ideology is also perpetuated by media, particularly Indonesian TV series like soap operas (*sinetron*). The programs convey state gender ideology i.e. no matter how extensive women's responsibilities outside the home, they must still be responsible for domestic work. Therefore, the egalitarian relationship between women and men within family is hardly found. This social context plays significant role in supporting background to the practices of polygamous marriage.

After the discussion of the social context of Indonesian family and kinship system, the author proceeds to deal with religious discourse on polygamy. The book shows that the understanding of the term Shari'ah throughout Islamic history has implications as to how Muslims understand polygamy. Those who understand Shari'ah in general as Islamic way of life take what is written in the Qur'an and Hadith. Thus, both of them might be interpreted in different ways. On the other hand, those who treat Shari'ah in narrower sense as *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), which is in fact a result of human interpretation, tends to understand it as the religion itself. For the former, polygamy is seen as one kind of marriage that might be contested while for the latter, it is a legitimate form of marriage and part of religion. In spite of that, the author argues that the way of reading the Qur'an determines the attitude towards polygamy. She goes with Saeed's classification of reading the Qur'an. Saeed identifies three approaches in interpreting the ethico-legal content of the Qur'an in the modern context: Textualist, Semi-textualist and Contextualist. The textualists who base their reading on literal meaning of the Qur'an

verses 4:2–3 believe that Islam allows polygamy and justify their opinion by referring to the Prophet Muhammad's practice of polygamy. The Semi-textualists, believe that polygamy is only permitted under certain circumstances, when wives can be treated equally. They base their understanding on literal meaning with wider consideration to the adjacent texts but neglecting in the contextual background. On the contrary, the Contextualists believe that polygamy is prohibited. They interpret the verse comprehensively and contextually.

These three different approaches come up as a response to modernization brought through the colonization. In other words, these polygamy discourses are highly political. It was used by Muslim political leaders to demonstrate their resistance to the Dutch colonial government when the government issued the 1937 Marriage Ordinance. The Ordinance offered voluntary marriage registration, and stipulated that marriage is basically monogamous and that non-monogamous marriage is invalid. The women organization supported this policy. However, the Indonesian Muslims took this ordinance as another form of intrusion to the family affairs. Finally, they agreed with polygamous marriage notwithstanding women's objection. The women continued their struggle to reform the existing Marriage Ordinance after the Independence. Only after the emergence of New Order ruled by Soeharto, had the woman movement managed to consummate their expectation to have a better position within the 1974 Marriage Law. Concerning polygamy, even though it was not abolished from the law, its practice was restricted to a certain extent for the civil servant and it was particularly formulated in the Government Regulation No. 10/1983 known as PP 10. The regulation itself was amended by PP 45/1990 seems to provide better protection than PP 10 from injustice.

PP 10 remains unchallenged during Soeharto regime. However, the proponent of polygamous marriage found their moment to confront the regulation when Soeharto regime collapsed in 1998. The Islamists demand amendment for the Government Regulation. The women's wing of one of the Islamist parties, Muslimah Partai Bulan Bintang, required that the government permit polygamy and abolish the current restrictions but the government did not respond to it. Being unsuccessful to abolish government regulation of restricting polygamous marriage from legal way, the Islamists took popular media

to sponsor polygamy. Sponsored by Puspo Wardoyo, a well-known polygamist and a prominent successful restaurateur, the Islamists ran campaign for polygamy. Puspo Wardoyo's Polygamy Award was held in July 2003 and supported by some religious leaders. They promote and encourage that polygamy is better than fornication and the wives would be rewarded in heaven for allowing their husbands to take another wife. The award roused the resentment of women activists. They protested against polygamy through rallies and publications condemned the award. No matter how hard both the Islamists and Contextualists to either establish or abolish polygamy, there has been no government response to the debates over PP 10 so far.

The final parts of the book demonstrate women voices from within polygamous household through detailed case studies. Most of all women respondents, no matter what their religious inclination, especially the first wives in this research suffer from physical, mental, and economic distresses. The finding confirms the argument of the advocates of feminist movement that polygamy is a not only a form of violence against family members, children, additional wives particularly the first ones but also the purpose of marriage within Islam as to achieve peace and tranquility. Overall, the book argues that polygamy has been a source of injustice towards women and children, that this is against Islamic teaching, and that a just Islamic law would need to call for the abolition of polygamy. Last but not the least, the book invites the readers to do research focusing more on the perspective of additional wives and children being raised in polygamous family.

As an *Écriture féminine*, this book has accomplished its purpose to write polygamy from women' point of view regardless their objection to the dominating patriarchal system residing on religious discourses. The book also has managed to bring up the absence of women in public spheres. The author has done the research with more empathic way to the victims of polygamy. However, the author's inclination to the feminist ideas tends to be exclusive to universal ideal of women set by the first and second wave of feminism. Besides, the author's separation on the Qur'aṅ as a religious scripture and its interpretation is anachronistic because it has been agreed upon Muslim community to treat the Qur'aṅ and its interpretation differently. The problem is how to differentiate the meaning of the Qur'aṅ from its own text or how to measure one interpretation over the others. Since the measurements vary from on religious group to the others, it is impossible to share

one-single meaning. The need for contextual approach in reading the Qur'aan suggested by the author deserves an appreciation but it does not necessarily mean that the Qur'aan needs only to be approached in one universal-contextual approach. It is supposed to be done in multi-cultural way in favor to the universal one.[]