

Manuscript Received Date: 21 January 2019

Manuscript Accepted Date: 20 March 2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33102/ulum.2019.27.03>

The Critique of Feminism on Traditional Christian Theology: An Analysis from Qur’ānic Perspective

Adibah Abdul Rahim

Associate Professor, Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion,
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur
adibahar@iium.edu.my

Nadzrah Ahmad

Corresponding Author

Assistant Professor, Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion,
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur
anadzrah@iium.edu.my

Abstract

The study attempts to highlight feminists’ critics against traditional Christian theology on women. Traditional Christian theology or known as Biblical or Christian patriarchy by the feminists has allegedly been studied and comprehended from a patriarchal perspective of male dominance hence misrepresentation of female scriptural image within the Bible. In this study, feminists’ critics on issue pertaining to women in the Bible were selected and analyzed its specifics before scrutinized further from Qur’anic point of view. The study finds that despite the feminists’ claim of image defamation of women in the Bible, the Qur’ān on the other hand represented its female subjects in the most acceptable non-discriminative manner. Women as depicted in the Qur’ān were purged of any offensive and denounced outcomes of their own existence and nature. Utilizing scriptural-textual analysis method, the study embarks on deriving points of comparison between the two scriptures highlighting agreements and discrepancies of both texts.

Keywords: *Feminists criticism, women, traditional Christian theology, Biblical patriarchy, Qur’ānic Perspective.*

Introduction

The term feminism according to *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* is ‘the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes’ and the ‘organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests’. Meanwhile, Christian theology is concerned with the knowledge of God as centered in Jesus Christ and his word in the Bible. There are different stages of the theology; first, biblical theology, which

studies the teachings of the Bible in the perspective of biblical history; second, historical theology, which studies Christian teachings as they developed in Christian history; third, systematic theology, which seeks to give a coherent account of the Christian faith in the terms and context of learning today (Diehl, 1990). Feminist theology is one of the types of liberation theology. This new feminist theology

raised parallel to other liberation theology since 1960s. It was a theological reflection of a movement in the society as a whole. Part of the initial work has been a retrieval of the past, seeking the elements in the history of Christianity that had been ignored or suppressed by male-dominated theology.

The feminist theologians were opposed to the traditional Christian theology which is popularly called as Biblical patriarchy and also known as Christian patriarchy by the feminists. They claimed that the Christian tradition was recorded and studied by theologians who consciously or unconsciously understood them from a patriarchal perspective of male dominance, which considered as bias and injustice for women community. It also creates a violent pattern of relationship between men and women (Rether, 1990). Elizabeth Cady Stanton stated that the biblical text is androcentric and that men

Background of the Study

Feminists believed that the root cause of discrimination between man and women was due to the religious myths and history in Christian theology. Therefore, they reinterpreted the myths and history and abandoned the traditional Christian theology to achieve the equality for women in modern society. They criticized the traditional Christian theology in two aspects; an emphasis on patriarchal and bias against women. They consider that traditional Christian theology is rooted in a patriarchal-sexist culture and shares its biases and prejudices. Scripture and theology express truth in sexist language and images and participate in the myth of their patriarchal-sexist society and culture.

There are numerous books on feminism written by feminist writers. The major work written from the new perspective of feminist theology is Mary Daly's book entitled *The Church and the Second Sex* (Daly, 1968). Daly argued that that the church has fostered a view of women as being inferior and that subsequently manifests the oppression of women in society. Another famous book written by her is *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Daly, 1973). In his book, she does not only

have put their stamp on biblical revelation. The Bible is not just interpreted from a male perspective; rather it is man-made because it is written by men and is the expression of a patriarchal culture (Stanton, 1999). Therefore, the feminists claimed that biblical language is male language and that the cultural conditions and perspectives of the Bible are that of patriarchy (Fiorenza, 1994).

Subsequently, the feminist theologians assume a new method of doing theology. The main objective of their movement is to achieve equality for women in modern society, especially through the removal of obstacle, including beliefs, values, attitudes, which hinder the process (McGrath, 1994). Feminism is opposed to discrimination of the basis of sex, and it questions the place of women in Christian theology as well as in early Christian communities.

dislike the idea of God as Father but she also rejects everything in traditional Christian theology. She criticizes the traditional Christian theology for advocating the patriarchal culture. She also proposes for a rejection of the doctrine of Trinity and the preexistence of Christ as the Son of God because they part of male-dominated culture (Daly, 1973). In addition, she rejects the doctrine of original sin because it is sexist and regards women the origin of evil (Daly, 1973). Mary Daly, therefore, can be regarded as anti-Christian and anti-male. She argues for the superiority and separation of women into a new religious movement of lesbian radical feminist.

Works on feminism can also be found in the writings of feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther, for instance, her book entitled *Sexism and God Talk* (Reuther, 1983). This book can be considered as a systematic survey of traditional areas of theology from a feminist perspective. One of her major criticism is revolved around the view of God. In her opinion, Jesus's use of the term Abba (father) creates the term holy fathers and claims the fatherhood and kingship of God as the basis of their power over others. Therefore, Reuther suggests that there

must be different liberal images of God, and she claims that the term 'God/ess' is an appropriate designation of God. For her, this term can avoid exclusive male image of God, and can incorporate features of female deities.

Another activist feminist is Anne Mc Grew Bennet who was a founding member of the first academic center for women in theology. Among her famous writings is her book *From Women-Pain to Women-Vision* in which she emphasized on the biblical heritage, especially the Old Testament and the church history which portray the heavily male-dominated thought and structure (Bennet, 1989). She observes that the

patriarchal culture still exists although scientific knowledge, economic, and political systems have changed. She criticizes this patriarchal culture since it manipulates religion and hold women in an inferior and submissive place.

Luce Irigaray a French philosopher and feminist observe that the gender of God is always masculine and paternal in the West. Women were left to minor or less important task which bears insignificant result (Irigaray, 1993). She advocated for as much God is masculine, similarly femininity should be imposed over the existence of God in order to complete female subjectivity (Habets & Wood, 2011).

General Theological Positions Related to Feminism

Feminists differ in theological perspective rendering to different approach they hold. Views and responses of certain sect of feminism may therefore relevant to their notion and perspective of the issue based on their approach and conceptualization of it.

Traditionalist

Traditionalist holds that the Bible as the infallible Word of God teaches the hierarchical structure of man as leader and woman as subordinate. This is a universal norm ordained by God from the creation as thought in Genesis and confirmed by Paul. For the traditionalist, patriarchy is God's will for both the home and the church. Traditionalist also holds that only men are allowed to be ministers or hold positions of authority in the church. Women may be involved in various types of services, but are not to be elders or teachers of men. Besides, the patriarchal language about God in the Bible and church liturgy should be maintained. Therefore, traditionalist sees the feminist struggle for equality between the sexes as unbiblical, and it is only a product of modern secular humanism (Diehl, 2011).

Liberated Traditionalist

This group holds that the Bible as the infallible Word of God does not teach the hierarchical structure that places man over women. They are more positive than traditionalist toward feminist

concerns because they see the Bible as teaching a moderate hierarchy in male/female relations, and they emphasize the difference between this and the authoritarian types of patriarchy in Judaism. According to liberated traditionalist, women can also be teachers and ministers provided these leadership positions are subordinate to elders or ministers who are men. Therefore, liberated traditionalist views reflect a middle position between the traditionalist and the Christian feminist (Diehl, 2011).

Reformist Feminist

Reformist feminist holds that although the Bible contains the word of God, it is not infallible. Much of Bible teaches or supports patriarchy, thus, it should not be considered as divine revelation. Other than that, they suggested the language about God should use both male and female models and metaphors. Also, they suggest women's story in the Bible needs to be redressed (Diehl, 2011).

Radical Feminist

There are two types of radical feminist; Christian and Post-Christian. Both are revolutionary in their approach to religion. First, Radical Christian Feminist; who holds that patriarchalism pervades the Bible. So, the locus of revelation cannot be seen in the experience of women-church (a community of women-affirming Christian seeking liberation from patriarchal

oppression). The Radical Christian feminist believed that from the time of Jesus, women-church was present in primitive Christianity, and is reemerging today as the manifestation of God's work of human liberation. Second, Radical Post-Christian Feminist; who holds that not only biblical authority must be rejected and

superseded if the liberation is to be realized. For them, women must engage in a spiritual revolution and rename God and the world according to their own radical religious experience that is totally free of men (Diehl, 2011).

The Critiques of Feminism on Selected Theological Issues

The Image of God

One of the critiques of feminism against traditional Christian theology is about the image of God. In traditional Christian theology, God was described as strongly masculine, for instance, the biblical doctrine of Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). Moreover, Christian faith is centered in a Jesus Christ who is male. This tradition therefore, provided a strong tendency to consider men more appropriate as representatives of God in family, society, and the church. In relation to this, the feminists criticized the emphasis on male in the biblical understanding of the image of God. They believed that changes have been made in the biblical text to describe God in which feminine words have been changed to masculine. For example the golden dishes on the altar, the bread, curtains, rings, candlesticks are feminine words but they have changed to masculine (Bennet, 1994). The feminists claimed that traditional Christian theology often associated God with the male image, and this contributed to tendency to grant man the primary role in society. They criticized the idea of calling God the Father saying that it reinforces a patriarchal social structure and is therefore damaging to women.

The feminists quoted the verse in the first chapter of Genesis, "then the God said, let us make man in our image" (1: 26). They argued that the Hebrew word for God in this passage is not *Yahweh*, which is masculine and singular noun used to refer to God but it is *Elohim*, which is a plural word used for both female and male Gods. Another passage which was argued by the feminists is the verse "so God created man in his own image" (Genesis 1: 27). According to feminists, the word 'man' in this verse is a generic term which includes women, and not a

male term (Bennet, 1994). It should be translated 'persons' or 'humankind', not 'man' which may mean male and always describe a male image. In this sense, the feminists tried to reinterpret and described God as inclusive being and God's attributes are not limited to man.

From an Islamic perspective the Qur'anic usage of the terms and verbs related to God is masculine as it utilizes the pronoun of '*huwa*' which mean 'He' (male). Nevertheless, Muslims and scholars of Islam had never assigned any gender role or gender entity towards God. In Islam, Allah has always been viewed as transcendental and above gender in existence. By saying so, God in Islam cannot be classified as neuter or androgynous rather God in Islamic understanding is above gender (Murad, 1999).

The usage of the masculine term in Arabic referring to Allah can be grammatically established and explained. According to Karamali, linguists distinguished between natural and grammatical gender. Natural gender is always rendered from the type of sex organ each living thing possesses. While grammatical gender is due to language structure. In Arabic language structure, the nouns are always either feminine or masculine even in the circumstances where the gender of certain thing cannot be determined. English on the other hand was of a different construction. Karamali explains (Sunnipath, 2017):

The distinction between natural and grammatical gender is blurred in English because words are only grammatically masculine or feminine if they are correspondingly naturally masculine or feminine. When a word doesn't have a natural gender—like "chair"—it is

grammatically neuter and one refers to it with the neuter pronoun, “it”, not the masculine pronoun “he”, nor the feminine pronoun “she” (Sunnipath, 2017).

The very fact that Arabic language has no neuter has resulted into the usage of the easier and simpler form in pronouns; masculine. Masud in *Islam, Irigaray and the Retrieval of Gender* argues on the absence of Godhead in Islamic theology. He emphasizes the rationale of divinity should persist without judgement and therefore genderless. He excerpts:

When we turn to the Qur’an, we find an image of Godhead apophatically stripped of metaphor. God is simply Allah, the God; never Father. The divine is referred to by the masculine pronoun: Allah is He (huwa); but the grammarians and exegetes concur that this is not even allegoric: Arabic has no neuter, and the use of the masculine is normal in Arabic for genderless nouns. No male preponderance is implied, any more than feminine is implied by the grammatically female gender of neuter plurals (Murad, 1999).

According to O’Neill, Muslim’s usage of the masculine pronoun referring to Islamic God – Allah – was without further implication of gender roles whether in conscious or unconscious usage of the term (O’Neill, 1990). Habets and Wood argue on the very nature that God is in fact beyond sexual difference. It is from God that human – man or woman - learned his/her responsibilities towards his/her children. Therefore, either which is the metaphor – masculine or feminine – used to signify God, God models common humanity and personhood of a man but never his gender (Habets & Wood, 2011).

Islam has a very clear conception of God. Although the masculine pronoun is used to show Allah, the notion of gendered God has never been introduced into Muslim’s understanding of God. God has always been viewed as above nature and beyond human capacity to be physically predisposed. Only the common usage of the Arabic language used masculine pronoun

to signify God which have never imposed any sex differences.

The Relationship between Man and Women

Another critique of feminism is about the biblical description of the original relationship between women and men. In traditional Christian theology, women were described as subordinate to men. Eve was considered as a helper to Adam, at the same time she was responsible for the sins of Adam and humankind in general. The legacy of Eve in Christian theology has always been marred by the exposition of Eve as a treacherous wife who caused the befallen of her husband into this world. Due to this religious myth, feminism argued that woman has not been trustworthy and must be kept in subordinate position to men. Therefore, the feminists refuted this religious myth and claimed that Eve is superior over Adam due to her position as a helper to Adam. They believed that the word ‘help’ in Hebrew language refers to divine or superior help instead of inferior help. In this regard, the position of woman as a helper to her husband does not necessarily mean an inferior position or should be treated as a second class citizen.

From an Islamic tradition, Eve received different treatment as the Qur’anic verses related to the origin of Adam and Eve were silenced on several occasion by which mentioned clearly in the Bible;

When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive to the eye, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some of it to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. (Genesis 3:6).

The Qur’ān and the Bible disagree on some different points in the story of Eve. According to the Bible it was Eve who was deceived, not Adam, as Eve is the one that gave the fruit to Adam without Adam knowing that it was taken from the forbidden tree. Adam in the Bible was therefore deceived by Eve;

The man said, “The woman whom you gave me, she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it.”¹³ So the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And

the woman replied, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:12-13).

On the other hand, more than one verse in the Qur’ān mention that they were both deceived while one verse specifically says that the one Satan approached was actually Adam. But in the Qur’ān, both are accountable for their mistakes and repented. Adam is held responsible for the sin he committed, he cannot blame it on his wife, since he is as a responsible human being as she is. The Qur’an does not single out Eve for blame in any passage.

Many of the understanding developed later in Islam with regard to women could have foreground from the many different experiences faced by women – Muslim or not – at the level of their own cultural and public sphere (Jardim, 2014).

Riffat Hassan commented on the Qur’ānic exposition of Eve by stating clearly the verses of Q.2:35-39 and Q.7:19-25 indicated that Satan has led both Adam and his wife astray. In different verses of Q.20:115-124, Adam was charged of forgetting covenant with God and was tempted by the Satan hence they both ate from the tree. These verses actually did not indicate in anyway the temptress role of Eve. On the contrary their disobedience was regarded as collective act of both Adam and his wife (Riffat, 1999).

The Maleness of Jesus Christ

Feminism is also in conflict with traditional Christian theology with regard to the maleness of Christ. The maleness of Christ is regarded as a theological abuse. The feminists claimed that the maleness of Christ has been made as the theological foundation for the belief that only male may adequately be an image of God or only male can appropriately be a role model. The maleness of Christ, according to feminism, is a contingent aspect of his identity, and not an essential aspect. It has no ultimate significance;

Analysis

The feminists proposed a new interpretation to the traditional Christian theology. Their main objective was to achieve equality for women in

therefore it cannot become the basis for the domination of males over females.

From an Islamic perspective, Allah The Almighty has never sent a female messenger. This is indicated in the verse “And We sent not before you [as messengers] except me...” (Qur’ān 12:109). Some scholars maintained that some women were granted prophethood without assigning a message to them. This is evident in the case of Maryam (Qur’ān 19:17) (Islamweb.net, 2011). Al-Qurṭubī discusses the prophethood of Maryam mother of Prophet ‘Īsā (as) by her vision of the Arch-Angel Gabriel in the occasion by which she received information from Allah pertaining to her conception and later on delivering the child (baby ‘Īsā). He later concludes that the vision of Gabriel in human form is similar to the vision of the Arch-Angel in the form of Dihyah during the time of Prophet Muhammad (saw) which al-Qurṭubī meant that mere vision of the Arch-Angel does not imply designation of prophethood to the Companions (ra) witnessing the occasion (Al-Qurṭubī, 1964).

Nevertheless it can never be argued that Maryam was not a Prophet. This is maintained by al-Qadi ‘Iyad who narrated from a group of scholars. Al-Nawawī in “*Adhkār*” stated that Imam al-Ḥaramayn narrated that there was consensus on the point that Maryam was not a Prophet. This was also maintained in *Sharḥ al-Muhadhdhab* as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was quoted as saying that there were no Prophets among women and the (genies) *Jinns* (Al-Munajjid, 2012).

The reason for males to have chosen to be prophets was that due to the burden accompanying such responsibility. This is evident through the history of past prophets of Islam. Nūh, Mūsā, ‘Īsā, Ibrāhīm and Muhammad were all regarded as the most persevered among them as they were encountered by difficulty and turbulences along their period of propagation (*da’wah*) (Karacabey, 2010).

society especially through the removal of obstacle, including beliefs, values and attitudes, which hinder the process (McGrath, 1994). The

feminists seemed to critically reconstruct the whole traditional Christian theology in which they criticized every major doctrine, such as, the doctrine of God, creation, redemption, sin and grace, and the church practices. They wanted to revise the religious doctrines and practices, and they believed that their movement is a spiritual movement because it aims at humanization of women from any pattern of oppression. The feminists seemed to have ignored the non-oppressive values like equality, mutuality, and freedom which have been testified and not denied by traditional Christian theology. In addition, feminism only concerned with the social status of women and their economic as well as material development. Therefore, its mission is just confined to this world alone and

Conclusion

To a certain extent, the feminists' critiques were valid to be raised due to instability teachings of Christianity itself. Since it was not based on the original revealed religion, the teachings were interpreted differently in various versions which create a lot of confusions and misconceptions. The feminist in their arguments dare to address and criticize the major area of doctrine in Christianity's theology.

From an Islamic perspective, the idea of feminism on gender equality and equal opportunity between man and women in society is very much associated with liberalism. The liberal feminists seemed to ignore about the biological and behavioral differences between man and women. They have mixed up the issue of equality and identity, and ignored the fact that man and women are not identical. Equality is different from identity. Man and women are no doubt equal in some respect but they are not identical. Due to their biological and behavioral

References

Al-Munajjid, M. S. (2012). There Were No Female Prophets or Messengers – Discussion of the Wisdom behind That. Retrieved from <https://islamqa.info/en/158044>.

revolves around the material advancement, and it does not concern about the spiritual and religious consideration. The feminists viewed religion as the source of oppression for women and as an obstacle for their development. This notion was further strengthen through the defamed image of women presented in the Bible. On the other hand, the Qur'ān held a non-discriminative stand towards women. Women in the Qur'ān were never clothed in negativism or offensive manner. The Qur'ān individualized both genders when ascribing social responsibilities between them. In Islam, men and women were merely differentiated due to the social responsibilities they held.

differences, certain responsibilities are suitable for the nature of man and others are suitable for the nature of women. Therefore, the feminists should take account that roles and spheres of human life are gender-specific. The Qur'ān calls for justice and equity in human life. The division of which cannot be comprehended by simple analogy of one plus one equals to two. The very connotation of fairness in Islam lies within the understanding of man and woman as a whole, and not merely subject of their gendered sex. Similarity and difference between both sexes is observed in the whole conception of man's existence towards entire aspects of his/her life; spiritual, social, financial etc. The Qur'ānic observation covers the area of human function and relation in life taking into consideration of the nature of man's existence with God and other beings.

Al-Qurṭubī, M. A. A. B. (1964). *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, Aḥmad al-Bardūnī & Ibrāhīm Atfāsh (Eds.). Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah.

- Bennet, A. M. (1994). *Overcoming the Biblical and Traditional Subordination to Women*. In Lois K. Daly (Ed.), *Feminist Theological Ethics*. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Daly, M. (1968). *The Church and the Second Sex*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Daly, M. (1973). *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon.
- David W. Diehl, D. W., & Hegen J. S. (Eds.). (1990). *Theology and Feminism, Gender Matters: Women's Studies for the Christian Community*. Michigan: Academic Books.
- Files and Resources Used for the Muslim Answers Sites Why Does the Qur'an Refer to Allah with the Masculine Pronoun?. (2017). Retrieved from <https://muslimanswersfiles.wordpress.com/2013/05/01/why-does-the-Qur'an-refer-to-allah-with-the-masculine-pronoun/>.
- Fiorenza, E. S. (1994). *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad.
- Habets, W. & Wood, B. (Eds.). (2011). *Reconsidering Gender: Evangelical Perspectives*. USA: Pickwick Publications.
- Hurt, M. E. (1989). *From Women-Pain to Women-Vision: Writings in Feminist Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Irigaray, L. (1993). *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. (Trans.) Burke, C., Gill. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Jardim, G. L. (2014). *Recovering the Female Voice in Islamic Scripture: Women and Silence*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Karacabey, S. (2010). Ulu'l-Azm Prophets and their Common Characteristics. Retrieved from <http://www.lastprophet.info/ulul-azm-prophets-and-their-common-characteristics>.
- Mc Grath, A. E. (1994). *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Murad, Abdal Hakim. (1999) Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender. Retrieved from <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/gender.htm>.
- O'Neill, M. (1990). *Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Reuther, R. R. (1983). *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Reuther, R. R. (1990). *Scottish Journal of Theology: Is Feminism the End of Christianity? A Critique of Daphne Hampson of Theology and Feminism*. Scotland: Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd.
- Riffat, H. (1999). Feminism in Islam. In Arvind Sharma & Katherine K. Young (Eds.), *Feminism and World Religions* (248–278). Albany: State University Press.
- Stanton, E. C. (1999). *The Women's Bible*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- There Were No Female Prophets. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=31788>.