

Reinterpret Polygamy in Islam: A Case Study in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: *It is the consensus of ulema (religious leader) in Indonesia that polygamy is allowed in Islam, while polyandry is prohibited. That is why even though that the practice of monogamy has negative impacts to women, some people still conduct it and believe that polygamy is sunnah (the manner or deeds of Muhammad) and part of syariah (Islamic law). This article will explore the perspective of fundamentalist and modernist about polygamy and how the modernist Muslim scholars in Indonesia fight for opposing polygamy.*

KEYWORDS: *Polygamy, Gender, Indonesia, Women, Religion*

I. INTRODUCTION

Polygamy is one of sensitive issues in Muslim society, particularly in Indonesia. Many cases have shown that polygamy practices have strongly existed in Indonesia. Surprisingly, many of them who practiced polygamy are *ulema* such as Aa Gym, has two wives,¹ and Hamzah Haz, has three wives.² This issue becomes more popular when Habiburrahman El Shirazy, an Indonesian Muslim scholar, graduated from the Al Azhar University, wrote 'The Verses of Love', an Islamic best-seller novel about polygamy in December 2004. The interesting thing about this novel is even though the content is about polygamy, most people who admired it are women. Before these, Puspo Wardoyo, the owner of Wong Solo restaurant who has successfully married four wives, presented 'Polygamy Award' in 2003. This program aimed to campaign polygamy in Indonesia and the winner got a trophy and some money.³

The practice of polygamy has received protests from some modern Muslim scholars who seen polygamy as the practice marriage which tends to marginalise women, downgraded women's dignity and being unfair to women. They argue that Islam basically is monogamy, while polygamy is allowed but with some strict rules. Their belief to reject polygamy comes from the basic argument that Islam always respects to women and lifts the women's status. The feminist Muslim scholars also believe that Islam basically supports monogamy. Most of them reject the practice of polygamy through *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (The Liberal Islamic Network) which formed in 2001.

On the other hand, the fundamentalists, who support polygamy, believe that the practice of polygamy is a part of *syariah*. They claim that modernists, who have mission to reinterpret polygamy in Islam, have been contaminated by the western ideology (pluralism and gender) in order to attack Islamic familial foundation. They argue that the issues of pluralism, gender and human rights basically are germs that have been planted to modern Islam scholars by western ideology (orientalist). As a consequence, many of them have organised some demonstrations in which aim to close the *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (JIL) and they also have made open statement to allow their members to kill the head of this organisation.⁴

The debate of polygamy between fundamentalist and modernist indicates that people in Indonesia have been divided in to two groups. This article will examine both the fundamentalist's and modernist's perspectives

¹ KapanLagi.Com, 'Ingin Masuk Surga, Istri Aa Gym Rela Dipoligami (Want to Enter the Heaven, Aa Gym's wife Accepted Polygamy)', *KapanLagi.Com*, revised 2012, <http://www.kapanlagi.com/h/0000146511.html>., accessed 28 September 2012.

² Elistiawaty, Debat Publik Poligami Ricuh, Diwarnai Aksi Pro Kontra (Public Debate about Polygamy is Chaos, Many Pros and Cons), *Detik News*, revised 2012, <http://www.detiknews.com/index.php/detik.read/tahun/2006/bulan/12/tgl/15/time/171230/idnews/720669/idkanal/10>., accessed 28 September 2012.

³ Lily Zakiyah Munir, 'Querying Polygamy Award', *The Jakarta Post*, revised 2012, http://www.law.emory.edu/ihr/worddocs/lily_jp5.doc., accessed 5 October 2012.

⁴ Gamal Ferdhi & Nurul Huda, 'Menanti Negara Bernyali (Waiting the Courageous Government)', *The Wahid Institute*, revised 2012, <http://www.wahidinstitute.org/indonesia/images/stories/SUPLEMENGATRA/gatraedisi-v.pdf>. accessed 28 September 2012.

regarding polygamy and providing analysis the practices of polygamy in Indonesia whether it is marginalise women or not.

II. FUNDAMENTALIST AND POLYGAMY

Fundamentalists believe that polygamy is allowed by Islam and it is *sunnah*. They often cite the Qur'an⁵ to support their belief, saying, '*If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry the women of your choice, two or three or four*'. Based on this text, they interpret that a man can marry more than one woman and Islam gives limitation until four. They claim that as polygamy is mentioned clearly and explicit in the Qur'an, thus, there are no reasons to ignore it. As a Muslim, people have to acknowledge and follow it without any doubts. For those who reject polygamy, the fundamentalists have classified the as 'lesser evil' and have been contaminated by western ideology.

The fundamentalists also cite a *hadith* (Muhammad saying) to support their position, saying, '*Be married! The most bless in Islam are to those who have many wives*'.⁶ This is also supported by the Qur'an,⁷ saying, '*So take what the Apostle assigns to you, and deny yourself that which he withholds from you*'. Based on the *hadith* and the Qur'an, therefore they believe that the more wives a Muslim has, the more *rewarded* by God. This is due to the difficulties to manage his wives and the high responsibility that they have got when they conducted polygamy.

Another argument that used by fundamentalist is that polygamy can prevent Muslims from *zina* (commit adultery). In their opinion, if the practice of polygamy is spread, the social problem such as prostitution can be eliminated. The prostitution grows in many countries because they do not allow polygamy as it happens in many western societies. In this context, the fundamentalists argue that basically a man has strong desire in sexuality relationship. Without polygamy, they will go to prostitution or commit adultery behind his wife.⁸

The fundamentalist also believe that polygamy is needed due to the number of women is higher than men. Through polygamy, women will have no fear to get a chance to married since a man can marry more than one wife. The other impact of polygamy is many women especially poor widows with their children (orphans) can get full protection from a man who marries them. In conclusion, they who support polygamy convince that if polygamy will be rejected, many widows and orphans will suffer due to their lack in economical and social status.⁹

Those, who pro polygamy, explain that polygamy is one of solution when a wife has serious diseases or contagious diseases which can endanger his husband. It prevail also when a wife can not bearing a child for his husband.¹⁰ In this context, the fundamentalists believe that the husband will get happiness in his household as his new wife can help in caring his first wife and can give him a child. The fundamentalist also allow a husband other woman if his wife is disobeying him or she has bad characters which is difficult to change.¹¹ By polygamy, his wife will see and learn appropriate behaviours that will be shown by his second wife. This leads to the modification behaviour from the character of his first wife and will obey his husband. The other advantage is his wives can help each others to support his husband to be a nice family. Due to the good purposes of polygamy, a man can marry again without consultation to his wife as there is a *hadith*, saying, '*Ask the opinion of your wives, but always do the opposite*'.¹² Based on this *hadith*, the fundamentalists believe that polygamy is a prerogative of men.

Finally, fundamentalists accuse that they who oppose polygamy have been contaminated by orientalist or western ideology. The idea to reinterpreting polygamy is a germ from western which is planted to feminist Muslim scholars. Thus, fundamentalists believe that those scholars have been running out of the track from

⁵ The Qur'an, Women 4: 3, Penguin Classics Translation.

⁶ Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, 'Nabi pun Setia Monogami (Muhammad also loyal in Monogamy)', Jaringan Islam Liberal, revised 2012, <http://islamlib.com/id/index.php?page=article&id=336>., accessed 10 October 2012.

⁷ The Qur'an, Women 4: 80.

⁸ Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Woman in Shariah*, London, 1989, p. 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹² Fatima Mernissi, *Doing Daily Battle*, London, 1988, p. 207.

Islam and become a 'lesser evil'.¹³ As a consequence, the fundamentalists believe that many divorces happen in some Muslim societies due to the result of modernists' movement.

III. THE CHALLENGE FROM MODERNIST

Some Muslim scholars who oppose polygamy, called modernist, believe that those who support polygamy have made misinterpretation to understanding the Qur'an. They argue that to understand the meaning of verses in the Qur'an, people need to consider *asbab al-nuzul* (occasions for revelation).¹⁴ Therefore, the modernists believe that the fundamentalist who interpret the Qur'an based on the text only, will never know the exact meaning of the verses.

Firstly, the modernists argue that the Qur'an¹⁵, saying, '*If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry the women of your choice, two or three or four. If you fear that you will not be able to do justice, then marry only one*', must be read in the whole sentences. In the last sentence, it is clear that Islam suggest Muslims to do monogamy. The modernist ignored this sentence, saying, '*If you fear that you will not be able to do justice, then marry only one*', while it gives strong explanation that it is difficult to a man married more one woman since it is difficult give equal treatment to his wives. This argument is supported also by another verse in the Qur'an,¹⁶ saying, '*You will never be able to be fair and just between women even if it is your ardent desire, but do not turn away from a woman altogether so as to leave her as it were hanging in the air*'. Based on this verse, Leila Badawi believes that monogamy is fulfils the criteria for Muslin to marriage.¹⁷

Secondly, the modernist did not ignore that Muhammad conducted polygamy in his life. However, they believe that Muhammad did polygamy with some reason in which it was needed to support his mission. The modernists also believe that Muhammad conducted polygamy do to the increasing the number widows and orphans after the battle of Uhud. To solve this problem, Islam then allows men to married more than one woman until four. In conclusion, this practice is only relevant in the context of that time as it is very emergent and urgent. This argument is supported by some *hadiths* in which Muhammad suggest to avoid polygamy, saying, '*A man who marries more than one woman and then does not deal justly with them, will be resurrected with half his faculties paralysed*'.¹⁸ Similarly, the other *hadith* also suggest tokeep away from polygamy, saying, '*Anyone who has two wives and does not behave with them with justice and show more inclination to one than the other, he will be resurrected on the day of judgment and one side of his body will be dragged along the ground till at last he shall enter hell fire*'.¹⁹ In the context of practicing polygamy Muhammad then warned, saying, '*La dharar wala dhirar*' which means that it prohibits of harm among spouses.²⁰ This is because many cases have shown that husbands often do discrimination to his wives by loving his new wife and the practice itself insult the women's feeling.²¹

Thirdly, the modernists have questioned the assumption that men's desire in sexuality is stronger than women. This is because the stereotype reflects a patriarchal culture in which men are more superior to women and putting women as subordinate.²² The modernists believe that the assumption is merely a cultural construction that has been made by men and only good for men. Regarding to this, Leila Ahmed says that polygamy is an institution of marriage in which based on male's rights in order to disempowering women in their sexual relation.²³ She argues that polygamy is not part of *sunnah*, but it is reflection of a culture in which misogyny to women.²⁴

¹³ Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, New York, 1999, p. 131.

¹⁴ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, New York, 1994, p. 86.

¹⁵ The Qur'an, Women 4: 3.

¹⁶ The Qur'an, Women 4: 129.

¹⁷ Leila Badawi, 'Islam', in *Women in Religion*, eds. Jean Holm & John Bowker, London, 1994, p. 103.

¹⁸ Doi, *Woman*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Mudasar Sulaiman, 'Polygamy in Islam: Correcting the Misconception', *Sun News Online*, 18 July 2012, Revised 2008, <http://www.sunnewsonline.com/webpages/features/sunlightofislam/2008/jul/18/sunofislam-18-07-2008-001.htm>, accessed 28 August 2012, p. 2.

²⁰ Ibnu Katsir, *Jami' al-Ushul*, juz XII, 162, no hadith: 4926, Jakarta: 1985.

²¹ Jamila Brijbhusan, *Muslim Women: In Purdah and Out of It*, New Delhi, 1980, p. 60.

²² Mernissi, *Doing*, p. 5.

²³ Leila Ahmed, 'Women and the Advent of Islam', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 11, 1986, pp. 668-670.

²⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, New Heaven, 1992, p. 87.

The modernists also question the fundamentalists' reason that the number of women is higher than men. For example, in Indonesia, a country with the highest Muslim population has equal number between men and women. A report from the Indonesia Statistical Bureau has shown that in 2005 the total population in Indonesia is 218,086,288 people and it is consisted of 109,613,519 men and 108,472,769 women.²⁵ Based on this data the reason that proposed by fundamentalists failed. So the reason based on population reason is fail. Furthermore, many cases have shown that the practice of polygamy in the reality is not for marry old widows and caring orphans. Most of men who conducted polygamy was marry young girls who still virgin and women who have a good looking.

Feminist Muslim scholars also criticised the fundamentalists' reason that a man can marry another woman if his wife has serious diseases or because his wife cannot bearing a child. This is because these conditions often misused by a husband.²⁶ For example, when a husband ill and the women want to divorce and married again, the fundamentalists will say that his woman is not loyal to her husband. However, when his wife ill, he can marry another woman as a part of *sunnah*. This rule is obvious unfair to women. Many cases showed how a husband just asked his wife to examine her fertility but never for men. As a consequence, a husband who conducted polygamy still has not a child but his first wife has been a victim. This situation becomes worst when a husband never consulted his willingness to conduct polygamy to his wife and when his wife rejected it men often abuse her. This means that women never have rights to reject polygamy.²⁷

From the modernist's perspective, the fundamentalist's argument to support polygamy due to the bad behaviour of wife is difficult to accept and very irrational. To educate a wife is not have to be married to other woman. Many cases have shown that most men conducted polygamy only to fulfil their ego as they will proud have many wives. They treat women as a property and marry them just for having sex and fun by using the religious reasons.²⁸

The modernists also believe that polygamy has *mudharat* (badness) as it is mentioned by Muhammad Abduh.²⁹ He describes how the practices of polygamy affect a wife and her children both their emotional and psyche. In polygamy family, children will live under conflict situations while it is not good for their development.³⁰ Many of them are lack of love, withdrawing from their social environment and neglected by their parents. Polygamy also leads to vulnerably women and children for being victims of domestic violence and abuse.³¹ As a consequence, many women become heartbroken and it also damages many households.³² Haifa A. Jawad argues that the raising of polygamy is due to the lack of education of women.³³ This is proved by the fact that many rejections to polygamy have come from modern Muslim scholars who received good education so that they can think more critically and start their movement.³⁴

Regarding the accusation from fundamentalists that the modernists are agents from western to destroy the familial Islamic foundation in Muslim countries, the modernist argues that the essence of the fundamentalists accusation is that they want to maintain status quo since it will give them benefits, pleasure and joys but not for women.³⁵ They are afraid that this rejection will destroy the patriarchal culture that they have created.³⁶ They oppress the freedom of thought in Muslim society so that they can control people.³⁷ Related to this, Fatima Mernissi believes that patriarchal culture in Islam was created by men who achieved it through manipulating sacred texts in the Qur'an.³⁸ The western ideology helps and stimulates Muslims scholars to think critically and to understand Islam based on text and context. Thus, modernists believe that the fundamentalists

²⁵ Statistics Indonesia, *Census 2005*, revised 2012, http://demografi.bps.go.id/versi1/index.php?option=com_tabel&task=&Itemid=165., accessed 5 October 2012.

²⁶ Brijbhusan, *Muslim*, p. 62.

²⁷ Halef Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms*, London, 1998, p. 171.

²⁸ Moghissi, *Feminism*, p. 87.

²⁹ Haifaa A. Jawad, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, London, 1998, p. 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³¹ Ahmad, *Women and Gender*, p. 107.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁴ Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, London, 1993, p. 158.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁶ Moghissi, *Feminism*, p. 85.

³⁷ Mernissi, *Islam*, p. 93.

³⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 8-9.

are fear to accept the concept of pluralism, gender and human rights due to their immature to understand Islam. That is why they are difficult to accept differences.

IV. POLYGAMY IN THE EARLY OF ISLAM

Before the advent of Islam, polygamy was practised in Arab without any limits.³⁹ In that time, women lived under oppression and injustice as they are property of men.⁴⁰ Islam sought to deal with the situation and limited this practice to four wives. This practices aim to the independence of slaves and to upgrade the dignity of widows due to the death of their husband in the battles.

To study polygamy in Islam it needs to know exactly the type of polygamy which practised by Muhammad. During his life, Muhammad had only two normal marriages, those were with Khadija and Aisha. Muhammad married Khadija when his age was twenty five and Khadija was forty. He spent twenty eight years monogamy with Khadija. After Khadija died in her sixty six, Muhammad married to Aisha and Saudha and started polygamy.

The polygamy that practiced by Muhammad has some purposes to establish Islam and to protect old widows in that time: (1) Muhammad married Juwayriyya from the Banu Mustaliq clan due to expected that her clan would accept Islam; (2) Muhammad married Maymunah from the Najd clan so that her clan accepted Madinan authority under the leadership of him; (3) Muhammad married Ummu Habibah, Abu Sufyan's daughter so that he never fought against Muhammad; (4) Muhammad married Safiyyah, Huyay ibn Akhtab's daughter so that the Jews did not oppose Muhammad's mission; (5) Muhammad married Hafsa, Abu Bakr's daughter to tighten his relationship with Abu Bakr; (6) Muhammad married Zaynab, the widow of his adopted son to show that adopted son is different with real son. (7) Muhammad married Ummu al-Masakin from Hawazin clan to rescue her from widowhood.⁴¹

The history shown how Ghaylan ibn Salamah in which he had ten wives and when he wanted to accept Islam, Muhammad said to Islam has limited polygamy until four wives, saying, '*Keep four of them and set the others free*'. Harith also said, '*I accepted Islam and I had eight wives. I mentioned this to the Prophet and he told me to choose four of them*'.⁴²

Muhammad was angry when heard Ali bin Abi Thalib, the husband of Fatimah, wanted to conduct polygamy, saying, '*I do not permit, I really do not permit, I really do not permit, except the son on Abi Thalib (Ali) divorce my daughter. Fatimah is a part of me; what make her sad, it also make me sad, and what irritate her, it also irritate me*'.⁴³ Another *hadith* saying Fatimah heard Ali wanted to marry Abu Jahl's daughter, then she went to his father. After heard, he was very angry, saying, '*I married one of my daughters (Zainab) to Abu Al Aas ibn Ar-Rabi before Islam and he proved truthful in whatever he said to me. No doubt Fatimah is part of me; I hate to see her troubled. By Allah, the daughter of Allah's Messenger and the daughter of Allah's enemy cannot be the wives of one man*'.⁴⁴

Polygamy is difficult to do since many wives are often jealous to others. It was also happened in Muhammad household. For example, Aisha was very jealous when Muhammad married Hafshah, while Ummu Salamah when was jealous when Muhammad married Saffiyah.⁴⁵ They were afraid that Muhammad would love his new wives and ignored them. However, as a prophet, Muhammad dealt to these with his patience due to his specialties, given by God.⁴⁶ The history mentioned that rejection to polygamy also did by Sukaynah, the grand daughter of Muhammad. She preferred to divorce four to six times rather than supported his husband practiced polygamy.⁴⁷

³⁹ Jawad, *The Rights*, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 54.

⁴¹ Doi, *Woman*, p. 73-74.

⁴² Sulaiman, 'Polygamy', p. 1.

⁴³ Katsir, *Jami'*, no hadith: 9026.

⁴⁴ Masagung, *Saheeh al-Bukhaari*, vol. 4, book 53, no hadith: 2900, Jakarta, 1989.

⁴⁵ Stowasser, *Women*, p. 110.

⁴⁶ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

V. LESSON LEARN FROM INDONESIA CASE

Polygamy in Indonesia has been discussed since 1919 before rising again in 1935 when the Indonesian Women Congress in their recommendation pretends to abolish polygamy practice in Indonesia. However, their voice was split in two different group which are secular and Islam. Secular group wanted to address the abolishing of polygamy in the state, while the other was disagree.⁴⁸

Prior to 1974, there was no codified marriage law for Muslims. Muslims mainly referred to Islamic law which was written in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) books for matters related to marriage. The problem is most of *fiqh* books were mostly written by male Middle Eastern *ulema* as the products of their interpretation of the Qur'an. In these books which many feminist Muslim scholars criticised as having male's perspective and containing gender bias that shown by some statements in which polygamy and divorce are often regarded as men's right. Interestingly, none of those books prohibit polygamy.⁴⁹

Regarding practice polygamy in Indonesia, Mawardi⁵⁰ argues that many protests and rejections to this practice came from the wives of religious leaders such as *ulema*, *kyai*, *ustadz*, and *tuan guru*. He explains that they opposed polygamy based on some reasons: (1) A woman often accepts the fact of her husband's second marriage, but with some sorrow; (2) There can be no greater cruelty than to force a woman to share her husband's attention with another; (3) The institution of polygamy is barbarous and must certainly be changed; (4) Many women allow their husband polygamy because they want to smell the fragrance of heaven as it is promised by many Islamic religious leaders; and (5) Most of wives prefer to divorce rather than polygamy, but many of them are housewives with no job, so that in the end they give permit to their husband to marry again.

The study of Lucy A. Whalley⁵¹ in Minangkabau Indonesia has shown that the practice of polygamy happens mostly by rich people or those who have power in the society. Most of them are over 50 years old and marry young women. However, this situation changed dramatically when many women have got higher education. They have started to reform old tradition, so that the practices of polygamy in Minangkabau rarely happen nowadays.⁵²

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has shown that polygamy only relevant in the context of early Islam after the battle of Uhud. The practice of polygamy nowadays has brought many bad things rather than the positives. In some parts of Indonesia, the movement to reject polygamy running successfully since many women have higher education. On the other hand, there are still women who allow polygamy due to their lack of understanding about Islam so that they did not realise that they have been hegemony by men and also due to their lower of social and economical status. The western ideology is not a germ to attack familial foundation in Islam, but they merit stimulating Muslim scholars to think critically in term of finding the truth about Islam. Those who are afraid about western ideology and difficult to accept pluralism, gender and human rights issues basically are immature in seeing differences. Therefore, it is important to provide education to women and some jobs for their independence. In the context of polygamy, it is important to put women as decision makers since they are the first who affected by the practice of polygamy.

⁴⁸ Nina Nurmila, 'Negotiating polygamy in Indonesia: between Islamic discourse and women's lived experiences', in *Indonesian Islam in a New Era*, eds. Susan Blackburn, Bianca J. Smith & Siti Syamsiyatun, Victoria, 2008, p. 29.

⁴⁹ Nurmila, 'Negotiating', p. 28.

⁵⁰ Mawardi, 'Istri Nolak Poligami (Wives Reject Polygamy)', *Pustaka Mawar*, revised 2012, <http://pustakamawar.ordpress.com/2007/11/22/istri-nolak-poligami.>, accessed 5 October 2012.

⁵¹ Lucy A. Whalley, 'Urban Minangkabau Muslim Women: Modern Choices, Traditional Concerns in Indonesia', in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity*, eds. Herbert L. Bodman & Nayereh Tohidi, London, 1998, p. 234.

⁵² Whalley, 'Urban', p. 241.

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