

A Review on Issues Concerning Women in the Malay Scholars' Writings of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: *In the twentieth century, many efforts were taken in advocating equal rights for women to access education, work, and to vote in a political election. Media and publications are among the powerful medium to express the voice and create awareness as have been applied by the Malay scholars. This study aims to review the emergence of discussion on issues concerning women in the Malay writings, particularly from the religious perspective. Furthermore, this study attempts to analyze the contributions of Malay scholars and their published works in promoting women's rights based on the Islamic perspective. As a qualitative study, this study applies descriptive, historical, and analytical approaches in order to review previous researches encompassing the Malay writings concerning women. The finding shows that there are limited number of studies conducted regarding this topic, but this study may contribute to highlight that the Malay scholars were diligently advocating gender justice and disproving of gender discrimination.*

Keywords: Malay scholars; Malay writings; Women's issues, Twentieth century, Literature Review

1. Introduction

Undeniably, women's issues have been the subject of debate over the past decades and continuously discussed and debated until today. Although women's issues are sensitive, Muslim male scholars have contributed in promoting rights and justice for women since years ago. Among the first reformist in Egypt to come up with ideas for the emancipation of women was Al-Thahthawi (1801-1873). He argued that women's education is the only way to free women from marginalization and subordination that tortures them (Erasiah, 2014). In addition, he emphasized that women who have primarily role as a housewife should be prepared with early education in all aspects of life, so that they can perform their roles and responsibilities in both social and intellectual life (Basid & Aulia, 2017).

Besides, Syeikh Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) was also among the reformists who fought for women's rights in Egypt. He criticized the patriarchal domination of women within family and society in the name of Islam. Besides, he started a discourse on Islam and gender in 1890; particularly in *al-Manār*, where he refused to believe that the West first granted full equality to women. It was because the Qur'an highlighted that Islam developed the concept of justice earlier than the West. Abduh's thoughts on the emancipation of women influenced many other thinkers, such as Qasim Amin (1863-1908) who is popular with his book *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah* (The Liberation of Women) and *al-Mar'ah al-Jadīdah* (The New Woman); Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī (1917–1996), the author of *Qaḍāyā alMar'ah* (Women's Issues) as well as 'Abd al-

Ḥalim Abū Shaqqa (1924–1996), who wrote *Tahrīr al-Mar’ah fī ‘Asr al-Risālah* (translated as Liberation of Woman in the Age of Revelation). Their writings became major references among the reformists who were advocating to liberate women from the traditional and patriarchal practices and indirectly to promote gender equality.

Interestingly, past Muslim reformists have a big influence among scholars including those in the Malay’s archipelago. Their ideas in many of their writings have influenced the Malay scholars to promote similar changes in the Malay world which covers in many aspects of religious practices including how to deal with women’s issues. It led them to advocate the importance of women’s rights in their writings and publications whether directly or indirectly.

Furthermore, in line with this understanding, the appearance of scholars in Malaya also had been dominated by men for centuries. Women are seen as 'the silent' especially in the matter of religion and culture, and they were given domestic responsibilities and being secluded in the private sphere for many generations. Men also conquered the teaching and writing area while almost all the yellow books as the reference of Islamic knowledge was written by male scholars (Bruinessen, 1993). However, there is no denying that there are also some important female figures in Malaya in contributing to the educational aspect and fighting for independence (Fatimah, 2017), but the contribution of women in the interpretation of religious texts is little compared to men.

2. Women Issues in the Malay Writings

In the early of the 20th century, it can be found that women issues were written through magazines such as *Majalah Guru*, *Saudara*, *Kenchana*, *Bulan Melayu*, *Al-Ikhwān*, *Majalah Lembaga Melayu*, and many others. These magazines actually discussed many issues and concerns related to the Malay intellectually, culturally, politically and many other topics. But, issues concerning women got a special place among the authors of these magazine. For example, in ‘*Majalah Guru*’ a special section entitled ‘Female Division’ was dedicated to female teachers to express their voices. This section is used by Malay women teachers to express their voices such as on education, Malay custom and tradition, marriage problem, women’s character, and the lackadaisical attitude of the Malays in education and health care (Fadli & Fawzi, 2012; Padzil, 2017).

Another example is *Majalah Kenchana* which can be regarded as the earliest women's magazine published in Kota Bharu Kelantan, in April 1930 by Mariam Saadi. This magazine was written using *Jawi* letters and printed by Maktabah al-Kamaliah in Kota Bharu, Kelantan (Hussiin, 2011). The establishment of this magazine is also purposeful to promote the education and progress of women. *Kenchana* provides the column *Bahagian Kaum Ibu* in order to discuss on the education and women’s position in Kelantan and the rest of the Malay states. The editor-in-chief of this magazine, Asaad Shukri has used this magazine to offer an opportunity for writers to highlight women’s emancipation and women’s crafts in Kelantan.

In addition, *Majalah Bulan Melayu* which was published in 1932-1941 by the Malay Women Teachers Association of Johor also highlights many women issues, as has been inspired by the popular women’s Magazine in Europe. The lead author of this magazine was Ibu Zain who was actively fought for Malaysian independence and she was also a teacher. Hence, the magazine aims to raise the issue of women's welfare and create awareness on the importance of modern education to help them adapt to a new and ready life seeking more complete knowledge in accordance with the requirements of Islam (Hussiin, 2011; Mahani Musa, 2010). Other women-

focused magazine during that time included *Ibu Melayu* (1946), *Dewan Perempuan*, *Ibu*, and *Puteri*.

Beside magazines, newspapers also had an important influence in promoting women's issues. For instance, *Saudara* was published in September 1928 by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, but women issues were discussed in depth only in 1934 (Mustikawati, 2015). It discussed further on the emancipation of Malay women mostly due to a reason that this newspaper was influenced by the writing of magazines and newspapers in Turkey and Egypt which at that time had raised feminist issues (Padzil, 2017). Moreover, *Saudara* also raised the issue of moral issues by criticizing prostitution activities involving Malay women due to the influence of westernization policy and modern life as introduced by the British. Prostitution, adultery, gambling, and materialism will only lead women into negative impacts (Hussein, 2011). Therefore, the appearance of *Saudara* has opened a new dimension of awareness to the community, especially towards women.

Apart from magazines and newspapers, literary writing like novels also has significant role in expressing women's issues directly and indirectly. These novels included *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* (1925/26) by Syed Ahmad al-Hadi, *Iakah Salmah* (1928) by Ahmad Rashid Talu, *Mencari Isteri* (1929) by Muhammad Yusuf Ahmad, *Melor Kuala Lumpur* (1930) by Harun Aminurashid, *Melati Kota Bharu* (1941) by Abdul Khadir Adabi, *Korban Kesuciannya* (1949) by Keris Mas, *Ustazah* (1950) by Ahmad Lutfi, *Salina* (1961) by A. Samad Said, *Sayang Ustazah Sayang* (1968) by Salmi Manja, *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (1975) by Ahmad Kotot, and many others. Most of these novels portrayed a female character with positive values and avoided stereotype perception that might oppressed women in a negative manner. It is vital to emphasise that these novels were written by male authors.

3. Male Scholars and their Works concerning Women

Although there are many publications regarding women were highlighted by male, this study aims to discover specifically on the contribution of Malay male scholars who were actively produced their extensive works in various fields beginning from the 15th century. Their manuscripts are majorly related to religious issues. Based on the observation on the previous studies, many of them have been conducted in analyzing their contents without classifying which work emphasised on the women's issues. Therefore, there are a limited number of researches being conducted to analyze the contributions of male scholars in their writings concerning women issues.

Haryati Hasan (2014) found that the Malay manuscripts such as *Sejarah Melayu*, *Tuhfat al-Naffs*, *Hikayat Siak*, and *Rengkesan Cetera Kelantan* have discussed that women have an important role behind the sovereign power of the government palace and influential role as in Kelantan, Melaka, and Johor-Riau. Other manuscripts such as the *Taj al-Salatin*, *Sulalah al-Salatin*, and *Bustan al-Salatin* in the 17th century in Aceh also discussed slightly about women in leadership aspect (Shah Rul Maher, 2012). The position of women as the political leader and in the governmental sector in Aceh was also popularly discussed in many previous studies, where Aceh was recognised as a centre of *Zawiyah Syakhkuala* in spreading Islam in the Malay world during the 17th century (Abdullah, M.S.Y., 2009). It indicates that female leadership was one of the important issues being discussed in the Malay manuscripts of the 15th century to the 18th century. It also shows the importance of women's role in the traditional historiography and in ensuring the stability, peace and security of their ruling communities.

Discussion concerning women were also becoming more intense in the yellow book (*turath* book) especially in the 20th century. Martin van Bruinessen (1993) in his article entitled *Kitab Kuning dan Perempuan, Perempuan dan Kitab Kuning* attempts to argue some questions emphasized by Masdar F. Mas'udi, who criticised the tradition found in the yellow book. Among the critics including the subordinate position of women compared to men from the religious point of view and many Islamic laws that can be interpreted as bias against women. One of the reasons highlighted by Bruinessen was due to the different local cultures that might influence the writing of the *kitab kuning*. Another reason was due to the authorship of these religious books was dominated by male scholars. This similar issue was also discussed by Riffat Hassan and Fatima Mernissi who both criticised male scholars in discriminating against women vis-à-vis religious texts from the Quran and Hadith.

However, Mohd Anuar Ramli (2010) found that majority of the Malay Muslim scholars on classical Islamic law have discussed the gender issues with more intimate towards women, and they also emphasized on the interaction of customary laws and traditions concerning the status of women. For instance, the concepts of matrimonial property were decided as the right of women in the classical Malay rule. It showed that these scholars applied a 'women-friendly' approach in Islamic teaching and promoted no discrimination against women. A similar issue was also discussed in the fiqh writings compiled by Malay scholars such as Syeikh Dawud al-Fatani, Syeikh Arshad al-Banjari dan Syeikh Ahmad Muhammad Zayn al-Fatani.

Due to the limited study on male scholars' contribution on women issues in the Malay writings, this study found that there are numbers of Malay male scholars which are significantly discussing women issues as the main theme of their writings. First, Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi published many writings regarding women, but *Kitab Alam Perempuan* (1930) is an important book to analyze women's issues from the Islamic perspective. Originally, this book gathered articles which were previously published serially in *Al-Ikhwān*, a magazine which using the Malay language which was printed between 1926 to 1931 (Noor, 2007). All those articles were written in the Jawi-Malay script and later compiled in a book namely *Kitab Alam Perempuan*. However, this book was recently republished by Akademi Jawi Malaysia in both Jawi and romanized Malay in 2019. Al-Hadi was known as the first who introduced the emancipation of women in Malaysia both directly and indirectly. His purpose was none other than to stir emancipation of Malay people not only on gendered terms, but against colonialism (Alicia Izharuddin, 2013). He criticised the traditional practice which limited the freedom of women to seek knowledge and blamed males in the past who did not offer education for women over the past generations (Khair, 2020).

Second, Ahmad bin Ya'qūb (1891-1959) in a book entitled *Kitab Adab Perempuan*. It was written in 1926 in conjunction with the 53rd birthday of Sultan Ibrahim al-Mashhur ibn al-Marhum Sultan Abu Bakar al-Khalil, the second Sultan of Johor–It was a text of reading and reference used in female religious schools in Johor during the early 20th century, as mentioned in the introduction part of the recent version of the book which was re-published by Akademi Jawi Malaysia in 2017. The original manuscript was published by Johor Religious Department, and printed by al-Ahmadiyyah Press, Singapore in 1967. This book was divided into four parts, but only two parts were re-published recently. This study will be specifically analysed the content of the third part of *Kitab Adab Perempuan*, because it was published earlier than the other parts. It contained 31 chapters which were arranged chronologically from the pre-marriage life to life after marriage, and from the husband-wife world to the realm of parenting. Home management and early childhood education were carefully written as guidance not only for women but also for men. There are several chapters that contained a few small chapters,

and the author took the approach of organizing paragraphs using numbers to make them easy to read and refer to.

Third, Abdullāh ‘Abdur-rahmān (1876-1950) in his book entitled *Risalah Seruan Kepada Jenis Yang Lembut Perempuan-Perempuan*. The first edition of this book was printed and published by Jamiliyah Press, Muar, Johor in 1939. In the introduction of the book, it has been mentioned that this book was a translation of the book authored by Sayyid Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā entitled *Nidā’ ilā Jins al-Laṭīf* or *Huqūq al-Nisā’ fī al-Islām* which was written in Arabic and has been translated to other languages. Thus, *Risalah Seruan Kepada Jenis Yang Lembut Perempuan-Perempuan* is the only work translated in the Malay language. Similar to the previous books, this book also has been republished by Akademi Jawi Malaysia, in 2017. Among the important content of this book is the position of women who are not different from men, and it emphasised on women's rights in various aspects of life. The book attempts to elevate the dignity of women by recognizing that women also have the right for freedom of choice and to act as a companion to men. It also contains marriage-related matters, such as *nusyuz* and polygamy, from various perspectives. Some Western figures are also quoted to discuss the history, rights, and role of women in their civilization that can be compared to Islamic civilizations (Khair, 2019).

Fourth, *Kitab Muhimmah* which was written by Syeikh Abdullah bin Abdul Rahim Fatani. This book was originally published in 1949 by Matba’ah Persama Achen Street, Pulau Pinang, and later was combined with another book entitled *Al-Mawa’iz al-Badi’ah* written by Syeikh Abdul Rauf Fansuri, released by Fatani Press. Generally, this book discusses the role and responsibility of a wife towards a husband by highlighting all related hadiths (Embong et al., 2011; Shah, 2014). It contains twelve chapters which cover the advantages and disadvantages of the wife’s action in the form of encouragement and threats (*targhib wa tarhib*) based on the Prophetic traditions. Muhammad Faidz Mohd Fadzil (2014) has analyzed that there is a total of 133 hadiths mentioned in this book, but only 36 of them were clarified their status and source of the hadith. However, further information regarding the author of this book is unknown.

In addition, other Malay scholars also have generally discussed women issues in their literary works, but there were not extensively in any specific issue but combined with many different aspects like in *ibadat* (worship), *mu’amalat* (economic contract), *munakahat* (family Islamic law), *akhlaq* (moralities and ethic) and others. For example, Haji Muhammad Sa’id bin Umar (1854-1932) applied gender justice in interpreting the Quranic verses concerning women in his published exegetical work as known as *Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan*. Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah or known as Hamka, an Indonesian Muslim scholar also has a positive view towards women. He emphasized that Islam recognizes the existence of women similarly as the existence of men even though there biological differences among them, and gender discrimination is contrary with the Quranic principle (Mohd Yusoff, Abdullah, & Sudiro, 2010).

4. Discussion and Analysis

Issues concerning women were widely discussed in many publications since years ago, however, this study found that there are limited studies conducted in exploring women issues in the Malay manuscripts. Although there are also a limited number of manuscripts in the Malay world that highlighting women as the main issue, it is interesting to analyze how women were portrayed either in a positive or negative way particularly in the Malay context in addition to analyze the issue from the Islamic perspective. This study also attempts to refuse the

argument that male scholars who dominated the writing of religious texts have discriminated against women or promoted gender bias in the interpretation of the Islamic texts.

Based on the previous review, it shows that there are positive possibilities that Malay scholars in the twentieth century highlighted women issues either directly or indirectly in their literary works, compared to earlier than the twentieth century. It was probably because that the twentieth century was an important period of the emergence of Islamic reformism and feminism and many other ideologies in advocating women's right and fight for their justice and equality. Therefore, it can be found that there are some of Malay scholars have influenced by thoughts in line with the reformist movement in Egypt such as Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida.

It was found that 'Abduh's views were published in the Malaya's newspaper *al-Ikhwān*, due to the similarities of issues confronting the Malay and Arab communities (Adibah Sulaiman@Mohamad & Ezad Azraai Jamsari, 2011). This newspaper was also used by al-Hadi to publish his writings, and he was also given a chance to sit and learn with Muḥammad 'Abdūh and his disciple, Rashīd Riḍā, as being positively reported by Za'ba (Abu Bakar, 1994). In order to spread the idea of Muslim reformism among the Malays, Abdullah Abdurrahman has translated a book authored by Rashid Rida which was originally written in the Arabic language to the Malay language, so that the idea of women's emancipation can be positively disseminated into the Malay culture. The transformation and reformation introduced not only involved the issue of education which tried to combine religious and modern knowledge in schools, but importantly lead the movement to educate Malay women.

The effort to fight for women's education and to encourage their involvement in society was reinforced by religious intellectuals and male reformers. Haji Aḥmad bin Ya'qūb al-Johori, Syed Syekh Ahmad al-Hadi, and Abdullah Abdul Rahman were only a few of them, but there were many others like Za'ba (Noor, 2007), Asaad Ashari and Abdul Kadir Adabi. Similar to other Asian and Middle Eastern countries, male reformers were the ones who gave a huge impression of women's emancipation. For example, Qasim Amin in Egypt; Ziya Gokalp and Ahmed Agaoglu in Turkey; and Kang Yu Wei and Sun Yat Sen in China (Mahani Musa, 2010).

The active participation of the Malay scholars in the twentieth century which were known as local genius have huge contributions to the Malay community in developing the system of knowledge based on the guidance of the Quran and Sunnah. Islam has promoted the importance of seeking knowledge both male and female, honouring the position of women and respecting all mankind, maintaining brotherhood, and many other positive values that have been emphasized by these Malay scholars. They were not only aiming to publish their works for the purpose of academic recognition, but their works help the Malays to learn the religion from a small to a bigger issue. Their works make a significant contribution to every aspect of life and have become a reference in the Malay region.

The changes brought by these Malay scholars also aim to give more benefit to the Malay society, and the concept of knowledge highlighted by them is contrary to the Western concept of education. Knowledge in Islam has the main purpose to gain the pleasure of Allah and to complete everyone's need as a servant of God. In other words, the concept of knowledge encouraged by these Malay scholars is not for the purpose of profit and wealth alone (Abd. Rahim, Pawi, Abd Jalal, & Abdul Malik, 2019), but to emphasize the importance of knowledge which gave positive impacts to the society.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Malay scholars who discussed women's issues have produced positive impacts on society to eradicate the patriarchal culture which directly and indirectly have been practiced by the Malay. Besides, they are using various medium to advocate and promote justice for women's rights in many of their writings, in order to raise awareness on the importance of women's role in the educational, economical, and political aspects. Therefore, these Malay scholars have contributed to open the minds of the Malay society about gender issues. However, research regarding women's issues in the Malay writings which have been written by the male scholars in 20th century are found limited and can create interest among the researchers to analyze their works and contributions to protect women's rights. The results of this study will help in better understanding that Islam promotes gender justice by giving equal opportunity for both men and women, and it proves that Malay male scholars also applied women-friendly in the interpretation of the Islamic texts.

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