
SEEING MUSLIM MEN AND WOMEN HERMENEUTICALLY: A LIBERAL-FEMINIST STUDY ON AMINA WADUD'S QUR'AN EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality became one of the important issues in the US as it intersects with other societal aspects, one of which is religion. In the last century, the US has seen a fast-growing number of believers in Islam, despite its unequal practices based on gender. American Muslim women are not only treated differently due to religious beliefs but also to racial backgrounds. The emergence of Amina Wadud, a female Imam with an African-American background, brings new thoughts on the position of women in Islam. Employing the Post-Nationalist approach combined with Rosemarie Tong's liberal feminism theory, this article analyzes Wadud's *Qur'an and Women: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* to reveal her thinking in becoming a female Imam in the US, as well as her fights against injustices towards Muslim women. It finds that her background as an African-American woman, a second class in American society, pushes her to put women's rights in Islam forward, which are not consistent in the Qur'an. She re-interprets it with the hermeneutic method, putting women and men in the same position. While her pro-faith determination for equality drives her to overcome the rejection from the American Muslim community when she became an imam in a mixed congregation of Friday prayers.

Keywords: *female imam; gender equality; hermeneutics; Islam*

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INTRODUCTION

American Muslims come from various backgrounds. According to a 2009 Gallup

poll, American Muslims are one of the most racially diverse religious groups in the US. According to a 2017 study done by the

Institute for Social Policy, “American Muslims are the only faith community surveyed with no majority race, with 25 percent black, 24 percent white, 18 percent Asian, 18 percent Arab, 7 percent mixed race, and 5 percent Hispanic” (Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017). Muslim-American women face the challenge of reconciling different aspects of their identities, such as gender and race (Moore, 2014). Women’s status often becomes the central discussion of the difference between Islam and the West. While questions of gender and women’s status in Islam have a long and complex history, they have been particularly vocal since the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Moore, 2014). The identity and the faith of women always become the center of discussion among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. For more than a century, western perceptions of Islam as necessarily inimical to women’s rights have made the status of women in Muslim societies into a pronounced litmus test of Muslims’ ability to “modernize”, according to Hammer, (2012, p. 5) and Elouafi (2010 in Moore, 2014). These gender issues are also of concern for the US government in its quest to ally with “moderate” Muslims.

Amina Wadud is an American Muslim philosopher with a progressive focus on the Qur’an exegesis. Wadud was born as Mary Teasley to a non-Muslim African-American family and her father was a Methodist minister (Wadud, 2006a). She was a student at the University of Pennsylvania in 1972 when she converted to Islam. Two years after she converted to Islam, Mary Teasley officially changed her name to Amina Wadud. After she converted to Islam, she concerted her efforts on the relationship between gender and Islam. She has been part

of several civil society organizations and movements for promoting principles of equality for women under Islam principles. Gender issues in Islam push her to have the urge to bring a new perspective on women in Islam as seen in *Qur’an and Women: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (Wadud, 1992).

In this article, the interpretive reading is qualitatively analyzed under the scope of Post-Nationalist American Studies using Rosemarie Tong’s theory of liberal feminism. In *Feminist Thought book* (2009), she argues liberal feminism is not about women who can do anything that men can do, but it is more about some women who can do anything that they want. Liberal feminism also focuses on individual autonomy that has justice and guarantees, so women can do what they want without any disturbance since what they do is already appropriate and guaranteed. It highlights the unequal opportunity between men and women. Liberal feminism sees women have the ability to determine their destinies. The movement has several strengths in solving problems related to gender inequality (Tong, 2009). First, liberal feminism states that men and women have the same opportunities. Second, liberal feminism encourages respect for individual rights. The last is liberal feminism offers concrete solutions to overcoming gender inequality, namely structural intervention.

DISCUSSION

Racism and Repressions of African American Women

Racism, a form of systematic oppression, is a harmful attitude which exists between races all around the world for thousands of years (Chapagain, 2020). Racism in the US

has existed since colonial times. Racism in the US involves laws, practices, and discriminative actions and has affected various groups of race and ethnicity. Racism in the US started for the first time as White landlords brought Black people to make them the workers on their farms. Black people as human beings stopped existing in the White world as a result of what those landlords did. According to Kovel (in Adhitya, et al. 2022, p. 262), the Whites dehumanized their slave, made them quantified, and became the object of the transaction as if they were a thing in the productive market. The Whites took everything that belongs to the Black people and made them nothing left to keep. The Whites also imposed their values on the Black people. As a result, Black people lost their authentic selves and started to feel inferior because of the collapse of their native values (Chapagain, 2020).

The Form of Racism and Oppression Toward African American Women

Since they arrived in the unknown country from their hometown, African-American women have suffered exploitation and oppression by the people who thought they were higher than those women. They had to endure the horror of slavery and live in a racist society. They were the subject of oppression; as a worker, a Black person and a woman. African-American women were the most exploited workers. They were forced to work the most menial and dead-end jobs. They occupied the lowest place on the wage scale.

Ten years after the Civil Rights Movement, 53% of the Black people population suffers discrimination because of sex (Murray & Harrison, 1981). African-

American women suffer the most in society from living in a country that is sexist and racist. They were oppressed as a Black and a woman. According to Hooks, there is no other group in the US whose identity was socialized out of existence as African American women (King, 1988). They were rarely seen as a separate group and distinguished by the other groups such as Black men. African-American women were never presented as part of the larger group of women. They were always seen as the shadow behind African-American people and White women. People tend to focus on African-American men if they talk about African-American people and focus on White women if they talk about women. This made the experiences of African-American women assumed to be equivalent to the experiences of African-American men and White women (King, 1988; Al Fajri, Atmantika & Adhitya, 2022, p. 245).

Black women in America could not stand side by side with Black men and white women (Chapagain, 2020). They were still far behind them although they kept progressing gradually. Being oppressed by three kinds of oppression made Black women could not develop their hidden potential and could not make involved in society. Steinem (in Chapagain, 2020) states “Male was universal, but the female was limited. Just like White was universal, but Black was limited”. As such, there is something that always stopping Black women to develop themselves. Black women had to struggle to survive both inside and outside of their homes because they were being oppressed by the Black men community and the Whites in society. They had been resisting multiple different forms of repression. Only about giving rise to male authority over women,

but also the higher valuation of male over female roles in society (Lewis & Lewis, 1977).

In the history of slavery and racism in the US, Black men had been excluded from participation in the dominant politico-jural society and denied access to authority (Lewis & Lewis, 1977; Ayuningtyas & Adhitya, 2021, p. 154). The Whites needed to do special measures to reaffirm Black male inferiority. A black male was seen as a potential threat to White superiority because of the concept of male dominance in society. Both White and Black women in the US also had been excluded from participation in the politico-jural domain (Lewis & Lewis, 1977). The authority and prestige position in the politico-jural society had been reserved mainly for White men. Despite sharing the same subordinate group and the potential common interest, Black women occupied a subordinate position to White women. They had no access to deference, power, and authority (Lewis & Lewis, 1977).

The lack of deference toward Black women was caused by the stereotype of the race. The lack of deference made Black women become the target of Black men's resentment because those men who could not get jobs and stable incomes saw Black women as service providers. Black women were called matriarchs and seen as the castration of Black men (Lewis & Lewis, 1977). That aspect made Black men disrespect Black women and want to dominate them. Black men also feel they must persecute Black women to despise Black matriarchs. However, Black women did not think that they can trigger Black matriarchs. They thought they just provided for their family and that they just kept

surviving for their family (Lewis & Lewis, 1977). Black women in the US can be described as a slave of a slave because they become slaves of Black men who are slaves of Whites. Their physical image has been maliciously maligned. Black women had been sexually molested and became the baby production factory for men. As a result, some of the Black women thought that they have no productive life, except to bear and raise kids (Beal, 2008).

As the same community, Black women and Black men shared the same racial oppression experience during the Black male exclusion from society. Although men were the ones who dominate the public sphere, Black men did not have the power and authority to gain respect as much as White women had. White women dominated Black men and also Black women who were in the lowest hierarchy. Attributes of the white woman's status currently criticized by many feminists as examples of sexism were seen (and are still seen) by many black women as representative of the unique privileges of women of the dominant group (Lewis & Lewis, 1977).

African American Muslim

African-American Muslims today are still the largest racial group of Muslims in America. According to PawResearch in 2017, African American Muslims make up 20% of the total Muslims in the US. Most African-American Muslims are orthodox Muslims (Wyche, 2004). The remaining Muslims in the US are of Southeast Asian, East Asian and Arabian descent. A large of these Muslims voluntarily immigrated to the US. African American Muslims view other Muslims as people who are voluntary

immigrants and more focused on religious-cultural issues (Karim, 2006).

African American Muslims belong to two main groups, which are the American Muslim Society, also known as the Muslim American Society (MAS), and the Nation of Islam (NOI) (Wyche, 2004). The MAS is the largest, with approximately 2.5 million members. The NOI members are estimated between 30,000 and 70,000 to 100,000 (Wyche, 2004). The American media focuses more on NOI than on the MAS so the American public thinks that most African-American Muslims belong to the NOI. African Americans who are Muslims do not face issues of assimilation like Muslims who immigrated to the US. They are Americans who have the right to choose their religion. African-American members of NOI were different from members of traditional or orthodox Muslim groups. Since membership in the NOI is only open to African Americans, they have an identity that is both racial and religious as a symbol of distinctiveness (Wyche, 2004).

The earliest Muslims were African slaves, but the plantation owners were primarily Christian (Wyche, 2004). Slaves, as property, did not have a choice in their religion. Nowadays, African-American Muslims who belong to traditional Islamic groups have chosen racial integration, for Muslims, as a group, united by the religious faith allowing no differentiation between followers along ethnic, racial, or linguistic lines. However, in the US, cultural stratification based on religion, ethnicity, race and social class can undermine this sense of unity and identity (Karim, 2006).

African-American Muslims argue that they feel more discriminated against than Black Christians and nonblack Muslims (Karim, 2006). African-American Muslims think that many other Muslim immigrants exclude and discriminate against them. Based on research conducted by the American mosque study in 2000, sixty-four percent of mosques in the US have one dominant ethnic group active in the mosque (Karim, 2006). In some situations, the two ethnic groups that predominate in the mosque in the US are African Americans and South Asians (Karim, 2006). At this point, people can see that there is no marginalized in the Muslim community in the US. African-American Muslims are not only become one of the most substantial groups but also became one of the most independent Muslim communities and separated from the three biggest Muslim communities in the US. About 90% of African-American Muslims worship in a mosque filled with African-American Muslims (Karim, 2006).

When two are ethnically represented in the mosque, it makes an immigrant combination consisting of Middle-Eastern and South-Asian Muslims, it will never be African American and immigrants (Karim, 2006). Because of this issue, African American Muslims separate themselves from immigrants. This becomes one of the reasons that makes the unity between African-American Muslims and Muslim immigrants not happening. This causes the number of immigrants who come to African-American mosques to be less than the number of African-American Muslims who attend the other immigrant mosques. Many African Americans learn about Islam through immigrant communities and maintain contact with those communities, whereas Middle-

Eastern and South-Asian Muslims, who are born Muslims, have no ties to African-American Muslim communities (Karim, 2006). In addition, the immigrants live in separated neighborhoods and few of them want to spare their time to go to African American mosques. Therefore, African-American Muslims attend a mosque more often where they appear as a minority.

African-American Women and Islam

African-American Muslim women had a hard journey to embrace their beliefs. As the ones who received multiple oppression, African-American Muslim women were forced to accept the treatment given by the non-Muslims and Muslims in the US. People will never have the image of African-American women if they were asked about Muslim women. They will imagine a woman who has the characteristic of an Arabian woman or Malaysia and Indonesia. This becomes one of the reasons why African-American Muslim women were looked down upon by American society. Their status as Black and women worsened the discrimination that they got. In addition, the stereotype of Islam and Muslims about the oppression of women has added confusion in American society that could hinder their understanding. Therefore, African-American Muslim women started to fight for their rights and equality for being American citizens and Muslims.

Karim (2006) proves how African-American Muslims are discriminated against by the people around them and even by other Muslims among Muslims in the US. The research involved three women with different racial backgrounds, namely African-American and South-Asian Muslims. One of

the sources for this interview is Melanie, an African-American Muslim woman. Melanie says that she is treated differently in society, not because other women are prettier or smarter, but because she is an African American. She is seen so at first sight, then as a woman, and then as a Muslim. She believes that it is her apparent identity as an African American that makes her treated differently, even in Muslim society. How she was treated differently when she joined a mosque visited by Muslims of all races. Muslim women from other races will shun her off, cut her in the middle of a conversation, some of them even do not make a move to make a conversation with her. Therefore, she no longer prays in mosques containing people of various races in the US because she felt she was more valued and closer to her fellow human beings. Even some of them did not make a move to make a conversation with her. Because of that issue, she decided to not pray in mosques containing people of various races in the US anymore.

The Background of Amina Wadud

Wadud is one of the most influential Muslim intellectuals in the US. Since the 2000s, she has been talking about women's issues especially in the context of Islam through various media in the US. She is a Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University and is also a visiting scholar at Star King School for the Ministry (Wadud, 2002).

Wadud was born in 1952. She comes from a devoted Christian family and her father was a priest. She converted to Islam in 1973 when she was 21 years old. As an African-American woman, she understands

the experiences of other African-American women who live in the US for years. Because the patriarch system happened around African-American women, Wadud and the other African-American women fought for gender equality. Wadud then realized the importance of fighting for the equality of all women. According to her, Islam is the oasis in the middle of the world which suffered from global turmoil, stating, "Obviously, this most recent resurgent movement has a strong relationship to the liberation from colonialism" (Wadud, 2002). She (2006b) recounts converting to Islam because she experiences double oppression as an African-American woman. She was trapped in racial and sexual discrimination in the US without privilege. Wadud found Islam as the new foundation that offered women care, protection, support, and adoration.

Wadud's Re-interpretation of the Qur'an

As someone who embraces the thought that states that men and women have the same opportunity and have their rights, Wadud shows her movement by reinterpreting Qur'an verses that are considered detrimental to women and the interpretations that ignore the principles of justice, equality and humanity. Her thoughts on gender and feminism are an affirmation that women are whole beings. She rejects the patriarchal system that dominates society. According to her (Wadud, 2006b), the gap between the rights of women and men in the Qur'an is a form of interpretation dominated by the patriarchal culture which results in the subjective interpretations of the Qur'an and the interpretations tend to elevate the status of men above women. As someone familiar with gender and feminist issues, Wadud is considered a Muslim feminist figure who

criticized the method of understanding the Qur'an which is considered discriminatory against women. As a form of her fight, Wadud released her interpretation of the Qur'an to provide a new perspective on the equality of women and men in Islam.

Starting from changing the way of thinking and the interpretation of women in the Qur'an, Wadud started her reconstruction movement. She elaborates that thoughts on women in the Qur'an needed to be reconstructed into a new thought. It will help people to learn that the Qur'an is never biased and that it supports the equality of men and women in society.

1. The origin of women and men are equal

Wadud (1992) states that men and women are merely the classifications of the human species. Both of them are given the same or equal potential in terms of creation, pairing, and reward they will receive in the afterlife. *Taqwa* is the only distinguishing aspect between men and women. It is what the Qur'an confirms, the reference of all Islamic references.

2. The distinction between men and women

Regarding the different roles between males and females, Wadud argues that the Qur'an treats women as individuals as well as men. She explains that there are two conditions under which the statement men are the leader of women can be applied, which are the husband is able to prove his strengths and the husband is able to earn a living for supporting his family's life. Wadud argued husband cannot be named as the leader of his wife if he does not meet the criteria stated before. For feminists, the notion that places the husband as the head of

the household contradicts the main idea of feminism, namely the equality of men and women. Thus, the consequence of the concept of equality between men and women is the creation of the status of a wife who is equal to her husband (Wadud, 1992).

Wadud continues that if the husband is no longer able to provide for his wife, the status as a leader in the family will lose. Moreover, in this era, there are many women (wives) who work and become the head of the household. Wadud stated that the facts show that some men do not become the breadwinner of the family and the role is switched to women who also become the center of the family both economically and socially. Therefore, the interpretation of household leadership has changed.

3. The Qur'an concept of Angels

According to the traditional interpretations, women do not just become the second sex and men's complementary, but also the ones who satisfy the desire of men. The Qur'an clearly states pious men will get beautiful angels in heaven. For Wadud, this interpretation is the opposite of the Qur'an paradigm about justice, equality and pluralism (Wadud, 1992).

Wadud defines pious women should get the same reward as the pious men in heaven as they have the same rights and opportunities. Quoting a verse in QS. Ali-Imran, she mentions not only men but pious women are also entitled to a special reward in heaven someday. Wadud considers that every human being, woman or man, who following to Islamic teachings has the same right to get their reward in heaven in the form of a good partner. Therefore, the concept of

angels (*bidadari* in Bahasa) should refer to both men and women.

4. Leading a Prayer

Islam is always led by men. The one who lead the prayer in Islam is a man. Amina Wadud breaks through one of Islam rules by leading a mix-gender prayer in 2005. Amina Wadud considers that women also have the same opportunities as men in terms of being the prayer leader. She continues that there are no verses in the Qur'an which stated that the one who lead the prayer in Islam must be a man. She also states that a man leading a prayer is a conservative tradition and culture. She quotes on of hadits mentioning a woman, Ummu Waraqah, led a prayer in Prophet Muhammad's home. Ummu Waraqah was appointed as an imam for *shahabiyah* (Prophet Muhammad's female followers) and led their prayer. Wadud sees this as a chance for women to lead prayer in general. Amina wanted to be free from men's domination and she hope someday she could be free from Islam regulation that was dominated by men's interpretation (Wadud, 2006b).

Wadud's Controversies

As someone who strongly upholds the concept that women and men have equal opportunities and individual rights, Wadud makes a controversial decision in the Islamic world. She decided to become an imam of the mixed congregation of Friday prayer. She argues that there is no written rule that an imam of mixed-congregational prayer must be a man. She believes that everyone has the right to become an imam regardless of gender. Therefore, Wadud considers women also to have the same right to become an Imam.

Every once week on Friday, Muslims around the world gather in mosques to carry out a prayer called Friday Prayer (Hammer, 2009). Generally, only men are allowed to perform Friday prayers but, in some areas, women are allowed to attend Friday prayers. Unlike the obligatory 5-times-a-day prayers, Friday prayer cannot be performed alone. In addition, every Friday prayer is always added with a *khutbah*, called a sermon, which is delivered before carrying out Friday prayer and is delivered by the prayer leader, the *Imam*.

On Friday, March 18, 2005, a different Friday prayer was held. It was different from the established Muslim prayers because the leader or imam was a woman, Wadud, who also gave the sermon (*khutbah*) before the prayer. The prayer did not separate the gender of the congregation. Wadud acted as imam for a congregation consisting of 60 women and 40 men. The adhan (call to prayer) was performed by a woman as well. They indirectly challenge the exclusive privileges of men in leading mixed-gendered prayers and they blurred lines of gender segregation in ritual prayers (Hammer, 2009).

The event was held in the Synod House, owned by the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan's Morning Heights. The organizers of this event had tried to find mosques in New York but failed to do after three mosques had refused to host the event. The second choice for the venue was an art gallery named Sundaram Tagore Gallery, but later withdrew its offer because of a bomb threat. The organizers looked for an alternative and decided to use St. John as their place to hold the prayer despite the prevailing security concern. The police in front of the cathedral and the security checks

before entering the venue showed how the organizers handle the threat in a serious manner.

How American Muslims Respond to Wadud Leading a Prayer

On the day Wadud led the prayer, there were about fifteen protesters outside the synod house, the place where the prayer will be executed (Elliott, 2005). There was a brief outburst outside the synod house caused by the people who did not agree toward the action before the event was started, but they were kept from entering the place by the presence of police. There was a poster brought by the protester that reads their hope for God to immediately cast a curse on the organizers (Elliott, 2005). One of the protesters, a young American-born activist, who went by the name Nussrah, said Wadud was not the representative of Islam and Muslim society. He said that Wadud tarnished the whole Islamic faith. Nussrah added his opinion by saying the punishment Wadud will receive when she died at the risk of distorting Islam's law.

People who followed her prayer considered that what Wadud and the organizers of this prayer were doing is a form of fighting for equality for women in Islam. They argued that this is an opportunity to change traditional regulations into more modern regulations that are adapted to the modern era. In an era where women can also be equal to men, it should also be applied in Islamic law and one of the ways to do that is by opening up new insights that women can become the imam in a mixed-congregational prayer. Ahmad Nasef, the owner of MuslimWakeUp.com and one of the organizers of the prayer, says that this event

is important for men as it is for women because only when men realize the equal space that they need to share with women, in the communities or the mosque, then they will realize the true nature of what it means to be Muslim (Elliott, 2005). Nasef's statement reflects that there is a regulation in Islam about how women are equal to men and it is written in the Qur'an, but it was different in society. In Muslim society, there are still many Qur'an practices that place women under men. Therefore, through the action of holding a mixed-congregational prayer, it was expected that it could give a new perspective to the American-Muslim community to uphold equality in Islam (Hammer, 2009).

After she was the imam of a mixed-congregational prayer, female Imams started to rise all around the world. It shows how big an impact Wadud has in the Islamic world with her thoughts reflecting feminism in Islam and her action in becoming a lady imam which shows that women also have the same rights as men to become leaders, especially as the prayer leader.

CONCLUSION

Wadud's effort to fight for equality in Islam did not stop. After the success of her book, she creates a commotion in the Muslim world. She led a mixed-congregational Friday prayer, breaking the provisions that have been believed by Islamic communities around the world for decades. She was the imam giving Friday sermons. The event sparked protests from the Muslim community in the US who considered Wadud teaching heresy. She received a bomb threat in the place where she supposedly conducted the prayer. There were about 15 protestors

outside Synod House at the time the prayer was held. One of them said that what Wadud did was a form of blasphemy and she would receive the punishment given by God. Despite being controversial, some showed support for Wadud, considering what she was doing as a new form of Islam. They agreed with the existence of female priests and this is a manifestation of the equality referred to in the Qur'an. In addition, the impact of this Wadud prayer is the emergence of female imams from various countries around the world.

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