



Unlocking the Image of Women in Classic Women's Fiqh Books: A Semiotic Analysis and Its Relevance to the Contemporary Context

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Abstract: In the past, women were restricted in their social mobility, and this was reflected in various fiqh texts, including fiqh books written specifically for women. Although these fiqh books for women are considered classical, various studies show that they are still the main reference in studying fiqh for women. This study aims to reveal the image of women as described by the authors of classical fiqh books for women using semiotic analysis. The research question is: what image of women do the authors of classical fiqh books for women present in their works? The results of this study show that the image of women in the classical fiqh book *Risālatul Mahīd* depicts the role of women as still normative, namely that women play a major role in the family and are responsible for domestic work. In contrast, the book *Masāilun Nisā'* presents women in a more substantive and respectable role, namely giving women space to study, work, and occupy strategic positions in society. However, the normative role is still considered the main role for women. The contribution of this study is to prove the hypothesis that women are still viewed as domestic beings in Islamic boarding school books. Therefore, in the learning process for students, it is recommended that classical fiqh books be accompanied by contemporary fiqh discourse that is more humanistic towards women.

Keywords: classical fiqh books on women; image of women; role of women

Abstrak: Pada masa lalu, perempuan dibatasi dalam mobilitas sosialnya, dan hal ini tercermin dalam berbagai teks fikih, termasuk kitab-kitab fikih yang secara khusus ditulis untuk perempuan. Meskipun kitab-kitab fikih perempuan ini dianggap klasik, berbagai penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kitab-kitab tersebut masih menjadi rujukan utama dalam mempelajari fikih perempuan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengungkap citra

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perempuan sebagaimana digambarkan oleh para penulis kitab fikih perempuan klasik dengan menggunakan metode analisis semiotik. Pertanyaan penelitian ini adalah: citra perempuan seperti apa yang ditampilkan oleh para penulis kitab fikih perempuan klasik dalam karya-karya mereka?. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa citra perempuan dalam kitab fikih perempuan klasik *Risālatul Mahīd* menggambarkan peran perempuan yang masih bersifat normatif, yakni perempuan berperan utama dalam keluarga serta bertanggung jawab atas pekerjaan domestik. Sebaliknya, kitab *Masāilun Nisā'* menampilkan perempuan dalam peran yang lebih substantif dan terhormat, yaitu memberi ruang bagi perempuan untuk belajar, bekerja, dan menempati posisi strategis dalam masyarakat. Namun demikian, peran normatif tetap dianggap sebagai peran utama bagi perempuan. Kontribusi penelitian ini adalah membuktikan hipotesis bahwa perempuan masih dipandang sebagai makhluk domestik dalam kitab-kitab pesantren. Oleh karena itu, dalam proses pembelajaran kepada para santri, disarankan agar kitab fikih klasik didampingi dengan wacana fikih kontemporer yang lebih humanis terhadap perempuan

Kata Kunci: citra perempuan; kitab fikih perempuan klasik; peran perempuan

Introduction

In the current era, women have experienced many advances in society, but historically, they have been placed in a subordinate position to men. In the past, women were not considered equal to men and were not given equal opportunities (Engineer, 2003). They were not considered worthy of having a major role in society, were not allowed to obtain a good education, and could not become leaders of the country. In many places, women are still limited to domestic roles, while men dominate the public sector. In most Arab countries, men dominate the political and governmental spheres, and there are no female leaders on the political stage in the Gulf countries (Spierings, 2014). In some parts of the world, such as the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, women have indeed achieved leadership positions. However, the condition of women in these regions is not much better than in the Middle East, as gender inequality is still widespread (Hashmi, 2000).

Islam itself essentially places women in a position of equality with men (Muhtarom 2021), because the main source of Islamic law, the Qur'an, contains values of equality and justice (Nuryatno, 2007). However, there is often a gap between the values in the holy book (the Qur'an) and its interpretation (Engineer, 2003). It is difficult to reconcile arguments for gender equality with orthodox religious interpretations (Clarissa, 2007). The assumption that women are secondary beings to men is seen as an inherent part of religion (Fahmi, 2020). In the classical fiqh book, women are often described as subordinate beings and burdened with domestic household tasks. These domestic tasks, also referred to as women's nature, include serving their husbands, taking care of the household, and educating their children as the next generation (Deshpande & Kabear, 2024). Not only that, these books also describe that women's social mobility is limited compared to men. In fact, these books form religious doctrines that shape women's roles and positions (Muhtarom, 2021).

In fact, in the world of Islamic boarding schools, there have long been several classical fiqh books that specifically discuss women's issues, such as *Risālatul Mahīd*, *I'anatun Nisa*, *Kifayatun Nisa'*, and *Masāilun Nisā'*.

Although these books are classical, they are still the primary reference for students in studying women's issues from an Islamic perspective. However, these books do not fully reflect the essential position of women in Islam. This encourages the need for more in-depth research on how women are constructed in these books.

Umi Masfiah's (Masfiah, 2010) research on santri responses to the book *Risālatul Mahīd* and various other studies, both in the form of journals and theses, focus more on teaching methods, santri's understanding of core material, and issues of women's blood. However, research reviewing the image of women in the book *Risālatul Mahīd* or other classical books of women's fiqh is still very rare. Fuad Mustafid's writing entitled "Studi Perempuan bagi Masyarakat Jawa, Kajian Kitab Risalatul Mahid karya KH Masruhan Ihsan" (*Study of Women for Javanese Society, A Study of the Book Risalatul Mahid by KH Masruhan Ihsan*) 2012 describes in detail the contents of the book and its connection to Javanese tradition, but it does not examine the image of women in the book (Mustafid, 2012).

Risālatul Mahīd and *Masā'ilun Nisā'* are classical books on women's fiqh that are worthy of study. These books discuss women's issues, especially those related to women's blood, such as menstruation, istihadhah (blood disorders), nifas, and how Islam views and resolves these issues. Interestingly, unlike other books on women's fiqh, these two books also touch on other themes related to women's lives, such as the position and role of women, reflecting the social constructs of the author's time.

Given the scarcity of research on the image of women in these books, this study will reveal the image of women through semiotic and feminist analysis to identify and explain the portrayal of women in the books *Risālatul Mahīd* and *Masā'ilun Nisā'*. The researcher will also explore the meaning of these portrayals. Feminist analysis will be used to examine the extent to which these constructions reproduce patriarchal power relations.

Main Theories About the Image of Women

The theory of female image refers to the description of a woman's personality and visual impression formed by someone through words, phrases, or sentences. This is an important element of the concept of female image, which can be divided into two categories—personal image and social image. Personal image refers to a woman's physical appearance and positive perceptions of her. Meanwhile, social image is closely related to the norms and values of the social group to which a woman belongs, and serves to build interpersonal relationships. Social image is also related to a woman's self-experience, which is reflected in both her personal and social image. These experiences shape how a woman interacts and behaves in her community (Kadwa & Alshenqeeti, 2020). In classical female fiqh books, the image of women can be studied through various theories.

Semiotic Theory

Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field that studies communication. This field focuses on signs, which can be words, sounds, or even body language (Husain et al., 2021)). Humans use signs to communicate, and semiotics helps us understand how these signs have meaning. Semiotics teaches us that reality is a system of signs, not something that has a completely objective existence. In semiotics, there are two main principles, namely the signifier and the signified. A sign is a physical object that has meaning. It consists of: Signifier: the physical form of the sign that we perceive, Signified: the mental concept referred to by the sign. This mental concept is generally understood by all members of a culture who use the same language. Second, denotation and connotation are two terms used in semiotics to describe the relationship between signifier and signified. Denotation is the literal meaning of a sign. Connotation is the additional meaning, association, or cultural values that accompany a sign (Mulyani, 2016).

Connotation arises from the denotative signifier, which means that denotation can give rise to a new set of connotations. The difference between denotation and connotation is analytical. Culture, as a dynamic form of human creation, produces various connotations to create new meanings from the same signifier. Sign users are given the space to expand their creativity in using signs according to their socio-cultural context. As a person grows and interacts through signs, they adjust the way they make signs according to a particular culture that has rules of signification (Haq & Nugraha, 2020). Although culture determines meaning, some "liberating" cultural characteristics allow sign users to add new constructions of meaning conventionally (Mulyani, 2016). The transition from first-level meaning to second-level meaning or connotation reflects certain cultural practices. New meanings at this connotative level contain the views of certain groups. If connotations are continuously maintained by sign users, they can become myths (Mulyani, 2016). The texts in classical female fiqh books can be considered a semiotic phenomenon. These texts produce meaningful signs, both denotatively and connotatively. This connotative meaning may be formed by communities or individuals who have a certain vision, which is then expressed and maintained through text.

Feminist Theory and Islamic Feminism

Another theory used in this study is feminism, which demands equal rights and justice between men and women (Mohajan & Haradhan, 2022). Feminism is relevant because women have historically lived in a patriarchal system, and feminism has become a global movement for women's liberation. Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse that seeks to reinterpret the Qur'an in an egalitarian manner by challenging classical patriarchal religious interpretations. Islamic feminism aims to reclaim the ethical vision of the Qur'an's, especially regarding verses that have been interpreted in ways that are detrimental to women. Through a new discourse on gender relations in the context of Islam, Islamic feminism encourages greater gender and religious awareness and promotes gender equality (Constance, 2023).

Feminism aims to analyze how women are portrayed in religious texts. Classical Islamic discourse shows that fiqh has various legal provisions relating to women. However, these provisions often view women solely from a biological perspective, such as menstruation, impurity caused by men or women, differences in aurat, and inheritance laws. Meanwhile, other aspects related to women have not received much attention.

Double Burden Theory

The double burden theory discusses the imbalance in the division of roles between men and women, which causes one party to experience a heavier workload (Hidayati, 2016). Working women often experience a double burden: they are required to play a role in the public sphere through their work, but at the same time they must also carry out a dominant role in the domestic sphere (Purnawati, 2021). Michelle (1974) explain the concept of cultural duality, which is the idea of women's dual roles in society, including domestic and public roles. Traditional roles include women's duties as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Transitional roles include women's roles as workers, community members, and contributors to development. In their transitional role as workers, women are actively involved in economic activities, such as earning a living through various jobs according to their skills and education (Hidayati, 2016).

Research Method

This study is a descriptive qualitative study that comprehensively describes all findings. To collect data, the researcher examined various classical fiqh books commonly used in Islamic boarding schools, such as *Risālatul Mahīd*, *Masāilun Nisā'*, *I'ānatun Nisa*, and *Kifayatun Nisa*. Of the four books, only two contain images of women; the rest only discuss the laws of fiqh () related to women's blood. As for the data analysis technique, it uses the semiotic analysis method, which reveals the meaning of signs, symbols, and constructions of women in the text

through heuristic and hermeneutic reading or retroactive reading. Feminist and Islamic feminist analysis is used to assess the potential for patriarchal bias in the texts and compare it with the principles of equality in Islam. Finally, double burden analysis is used to examine the potential for the division of domestic and public spheres imposed on women and its impact in a contemporary context.

Results And Discussion

Classical Women's Fiqh Book

The concept of women's fiqh covers practical laws related to the implementation of sharia. Women's fiqh refers to the understanding of laws and arguments about women's participation in various activities (Jufri, 2014). The topic of women's blood problems dominates every discussion in classical books on women's fiqh. Although there are several authors who discuss other themes such as the role of women in Islam, their position in the household and in public spaces, the main focus of these books remains on the issue of women's blood.

Risālatul Mahīd

Risālatul Mahīd is a classical book that discusses women's issues. This book was written by Kyai Masruhan in 1955 (Masfiah, 2010). This book discusses various topics, such as types of blood, how to deal with menstrual blood, marriage, relationships with husbands, and how to care for newborns. The author also criticizes certain community traditions and stigmas that are considered unfounded and contrary to Islamic values. The author's purpose in compiling this book is to educate women, both old and young, about menstrual blood and related issues. The language used is simple and easy to understand. The author wants this book to be accessible to women who may not have the opportunity to study outside the home or who do not have their husband's permission to learn about menstruation. This book was written by , using the Pegon script and several Arabic loanwords in Javanese, such as "syirkahan." It should be noted that today's readers may find it difficult to read this book without a good understanding of ancient Javanese, even though the author's writing style is very easy to follow for anyone, even without a background in the language.

Masāilun Nisā'

Masāilun Nisā' is a book that discusses women's blood, how to deal with it, and how Islam views women's issues. This book is similar to *Risālatul Mahīd*, but it is more detailed, extensive, and complex. This book uses opaque paper and Arabic pegon script, as does *Risālatul Mahīd*. *Masāilun Nisā'* was written around 1980, 25 years after *Risālatul Mahīd*. It has 183 pages, while *Risālatul Mahīd* has only 47 pages.

The two books are genealogically related, and *Masāilun Nisā'* cannot deny that it was inspired by *Risālatul Mahīd*. In comparative literature theory (*Adab Muqarran*), this is called *ta'sir wa ta'atsur* or mutual influence (Al-Istuwār, W., & Sallūm, 2003). Kyai Misbah, the author of *Masāilun Nisā'*, openly criticizes *Risālatul Mahīd* in his book. This phenomenon shows that *Risālatul Mahīd* played a major role and had a significant influence on the writing of *Masāilun Nisā'*. He read some of Kyai Masruhan's statements and immediately opened various Islamic sources to confirm the truth of Kyai Usman's statements. Kyai Misbah suspected that Kyai Masruhan's statements could have been obtained from inspiration whispered by the devil (*Masāilun Nisā'* Page 31). This phenomenon shows that *Risālatul Mahīd* had a significant role and influence in writing *Masāilun Nisā'*.

The Image Of Women In *Risālatul Mahīd* And *Masāilun Nisā'*

Both *Risālatul Mahīd* and *Masāilun Nisā'* discuss the image of women and their limitations. In the introduction to *Risālatul Mahīd*, the author states that learning about menstruation is obligatory, just like learning Surah al-Fatihah. Therefore, women must go out to learn about menstruation, and men must give permission to women who want to learn about it. It is even considered haram for men to prevent women from learning about menstruation (*Risālatul Mahīd*, page 4). In this book, it is very clear that the sign "haram for men to prevent

women from learning about menstruation" indicates that the relationship within the household places men as the main authority figures. The implication of this label is that women's access to education is still under the shadow of patriarchy. Connotatively, this text shows that the ideology of patriarchy, in which men were considered superior at that time, and family policy was based on a single authority, namely the husband.

In the next chapter, the author of *Risālatul Mahīd* connects the relationship between husband and wife with the wisdom of menstruation. According to the author, one of the wisdoms of menstruation is to teach women about hygiene from an early age, because women are responsible for the cleanliness of the household, including cleaning their husbands' feces, removing and washing their clothes, and cleaning the house. Women are described as "nurses" who care for men and children and maintain order in the home. Therefore, women are positioned as "doctors of cleanliness" in the household (*Risālatul Mahīd*, page 10). In this quote, the markers that women are the center of household cleanliness are the words "cleaning her husband's excrement" and "doctor of cleanliness." Domestic work becomes the responsibility borne by women. The implication of this marker is that women's mobility is automatically limited to within the family. And the social connotation that arises is the division of labor based on gender. If a person is born a woman, she is naturally responsible for domestic work.

The Islamic feminist analysis of *Risālatul Mahīd* shows that this book presents the construction of women as domestic roles. According to Hasniah (Hartini, 2014), women have three roles: normative, substantive, and achievement. The normative role is the role of women within the family, which is considered irreplaceable, such as caring for children, accompanying husbands, taking care of the house, and cooking. The substantive role is related to women's involvement in social environments such as religious gatherings and organizations. The achievement role is the role of women outside of the previous two roles, such as working as teachers, lecturers, or officials.

The fiqh that developed at that time was that women were responsible for housework and did not have complete independence over themselves. This was evident from the difficulty of obtaining permission to leave the house. Husbands had complete control over women. Thus, *Risālatul Mahīd* explicitly describes women in normative roles, while their substantive roles are not mentioned at all.

Masdar Farid Mas'udi (1991) argues that the assumption that women are responsible for domestic affairs stems from economic factors. Historically, men were seen as breadwinners, marriage applicants, dowry providers, and providers for the family. This gave rise to a patriarchal culture in which men demanded obedience from their wives and children (Mas'udi, 1991). Engineer argues that women's domestic roles are a legacy of the past when housework was considered a woman's duty and feminist awareness was still low. He asserts that men's superiority over women is not due to biological superiority, but because of their role as breadwinners (Nuryatno, 2007).

The "superiority" attributed to men over women is best understood as a precursor to their more important responsibilities as defenders of human rights and custodians of financial relations in Arab culture during the Prophetic Period. The hadith "Men are the supervisors of women, because Allah has made them some of them exceeded the expectations of others, and because of their wealth they spent" (Quran 4:34) (Yasir Farooq & Ghauri, 2017) reflects male superiority in *Risālatul Mahīd*, where a wife must seek her husband's permission to leave the house or travel. A woman's obedience is also considered not only related to individuals (*hablu minan nas*) but also related to her God (*hablu minallah*) as also mentioned for example in the hadith: "it is not halal for a wife to fast while her husband is at home, unless it is with his blessing." Even sexually, they don't get freedom. As in the following hadith: "If a man calls his wife to the altar and the wife rejects him and the husband does not agree, then the curse of a thousand angels will befall him until dawn (HR. Bukhari) (Muhammadun, 2015).

Hadiths and verses such as QS An-Nisa '34 are often used as the basis for male superiority over women, including in *Risālatul Mahīd*, which states that wives must ask their husbands' permission to travel, and that

women's obedience is also considered part of their relationship with God. Hadiths related to sexual relations are also often understood textually, even though more equitable alternative interpretations are available.

Different interpretations exist regarding this hadith. If taken literally, it can be argued that it goes against the principles of justice promoted by Islam, which include happiness within the household. Such happiness can be achieved when both partners attain sexual satisfaction without force. If a wife declines sexual relations due to exhaustion or other reasons, there is no need to resort to cursing. After all, marriage should be a place of love and peace, (Gojali et al., 2020) not a place of punishment. In Arab tradition, women are generally marginalized from public spaces. Therefore, classical fiqh rarely discusses women working in public spaces. QS 33:33 is also often used as an argument to encourage women to stay at home, even though the verse is specifically addressed to the Prophet's wives. In many fiqh interpretations, men are still placed as the head of the family (Muhammadun, 2015).

When this construct is normalized by society and considered part of religion, women are only given normative roles, while substantive roles and achievements are never given space (ignored). This is addressed in the book *Risālatul Mahīd*, which does not discuss the social or professional roles of women. In the modern context, this kind of construction ultimately becomes the most fundamental reason for the double burden phenomenon. When women today begin to participate in society, both as professionals and social activists (achievement roles), they still have to take responsibility for domestic work. Therefore, *Risālatul Mahīd* not only presents the image of women in the past, but also influences the emergence of gender inequality in contemporary society.

Unlike *Risālatul Mahīd*, the discussion of women in *Masā'ilun Nisā'* is broader and more complex. It ranges from children's education to social life. *Masā'ilun Nisā'* views women and men as equal in access to learning. Women are allowed to work, study, and hold strategic positions. *Masā'ilun Nisā'* states that "In Islam itself, there is no prohibition on women engaging in any work or business activity or, if possible, continuing their education in any specialization they are interested in, especially if that specialization is greatly needed by society. It even adds that if the community needs women in a job that cannot be done by men, then women are obliged to step in and share whatever knowledge they have that needs to be applied" (*Masā'ilun Nisā'* page 60-61).

However, even though women are given space in public life, their domestic role is still considered their primary role because it is their natural role as women, as stated in *Masā'ilun Nisā'*, "Naturally, the duty of a Muslim woman is to take care of all household matters and educate her children to be righteous. Children who understand their rights and obligations to Allah (religion), know and fulfill their rights in society, or help their husbands or parents in facing life's problems on earth (*Masā'ilun Nisā'* page 60).

In semiotic analysis, the signifier is shown through the sentence "there is no prohibition for women to engage in any work or business activities." The signifier of this signifier is freedom for women in the sense that women are given both substantive and achievement roles. Thus, the social connotations accepted by patriarchal societies begin to erode with the constructions in this book. This thinking is also in line with Islamic feminists who emphasize that historically, women have been involved in the world of work since the time of the Prophet, so that working is not something that is forbidden.

However, in the following text, the author mentions that "naturally, a woman's duty is to take care of the household." The implication of this marker is that although women can play a role in substance and achievement, the normative role is still the main role assigned to women. The text still views work based on gender. Thus, this text also influences contemporary discourse on the double burden for women who are active in society.

Masā'ilun Nisā' describes the breadth of public space for women. However, this book also emphasizes the issue of double burden. Women are not only required to have a career, but also to bear domestic responsibilities. Even though they work, women's main responsibilities are still considered to be in the domestic sphere. This makes women have to balance their careers and households, which is a big challenge. This double burden is influenced by

the patriarchal culture of Indonesian society, which views women as second-class citizens responsible for reproductive matters, while men are responsible for productive matters (Hidayati, 2016). Because this unfair division of labor is considered normal, women still have to take care of the household even if they work.

Implications In The Contemporary Context

Women's fiqh is currently widely criticized as discriminatory, unfair, and oppressive. This is due to the method of *istinbat*, which is considered flawed, as well as indications that women's fiqh is more male-centered (Nugroho, 2020). This can be seen in *Risālatul Mahīd* and *Masā'ilun Nisā'*.

However, these classical texts are confronted with the modern world, where women have made great strides in various fields. In the context of health and beauty alone, there is a separate debate in Islam (Raehanatul, 2017). The role of women in the domestic and public spheres has now become a complex discourse. Although women have broad access to education and employment, they are still burdened with domestic and childcare tasks that should be shared with their partners.

Based on the spirit of Islamic feminism, if women work outside the home, domestic tasks should not be entirely imposed on them. Husbands and wives should share roles fairly. Domestic tasks are not the wife's obligation, but a shared responsibility. When wives perform domestic tasks, it is important to recognize economically that work in the home complements the work of men outside the home. The unfair division of roles is one of the factors that trigger divorce, especially when the wife's income is greater than the husband's (Wahyu et al., 2023). Therefore, classical texts such as *Risālatul Mahīd* and *Masā'ilun Nisā'* should be studied alongside contemporary texts that are gender-sensitive. Students must read these texts critically to develop a gender-sensitive mindset from an early age. According to postfeminist theory, gender is a social construct, so Islamic boarding school education needs to interpret these texts from a broader perspective.

Conclusion

The classical fiqh book *Risālatul Mahīd* describes women as having limited roles, particularly in the family and domestic work. Meanwhile, *Masā'ilun Nisā'* presents women in more prestigious roles—they are allowed to study, work, and hold strategic positions. However, women are still placed in normative roles that limit their full participation. It can be concluded that this research makes an important contribution to gender studies, the study of classical Islamic boarding school texts, and the development of contemporary Islamic feminism. *First*, this research demonstrates a broad academic understanding of gender constructs in traditional fiqh literature, which has been studied in Islamic boarding schools, through a comparative analysis of *Risālatul Mahīd* and *Masā'ilun Nisā'*. Previous studies have only highlighted aspects of the book related to women's issues surrounding menstruation (*haid*), but have not criticized the husband-wife relationship described in the text. Meanwhile, by using semiotics, Islamic feminism, and the double burden theory, this study opens up a new space for reading classical fiqh books, which have so far only been read from a normative perspective. *Second*, this research not only enriches academic literature in the field of gender and Islamic feminism, but also provides practical contributions to Islamic boarding school education and classical Islamic text studies. Furthermore, it makes a concrete contribution to efforts to reconstruct fiqh thinking that is more responsive to gender justice in the context of contemporary Muslim society. To build Islamic boarding schools that are women-friendly and gender-neutral, classical texts need to be supplemented with contemporary texts that are gender-sensitive. Further research is needed to critically examine other texts related to the position, role, and function of women in Islam.

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