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SEEDS OF GENDER EQUALITY WITHIN ISLAM

Abū Shuqqa's Approach to Hadith on Women's Liberation

Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir

7.1 Introduction

Over the past three decades feminist and progressive Muslims have severely criticized the hadiths as sources of patriarchal Islam and dismissed them from their project of gender equality. On other side, contemporary clerics still utilize the hadiths to perpetuate traditional interpretations of Islam that conceptualize the ideal female Muslim identity as completely invisible from public domain. However, many other scholars seem uneasy with these discriminatory interpretations without disregarding authority of Hadith. They prefer rather to circumvent the seemingly harsh element of literal meanings of the hadiths and attempt to find out an ethical message to draw a conclusion in a friendlier interpretation to women.

In line with this interpretative approach to the hadiths is the work of 'Abd al- Ḥalīm Muḥammad Abū Shuqqa (1924-1995), *Tahrīr al-Mar'a fī 'Aṣr al-Risāla* (The Liberation of Women at the Time of the Prophecy, 1990). This work came out in early 90s of Egypt that witnessed a considerable number of books bringing conservative tendency against

women; calling them back to home, forbidding them from work, banning them from politics, and imposing an ideal model of a sex segregated society.¹ This work is the biggest collection of the hadiths that has ever been written to deliberately criticize those conservative interpretations and to provide inspiring interpretative examples that later influence many Islamists to hold more favoring position to women's rights.²

7.2 Abū Shuqqa: A Moderate Scholar

Abū Shuqqa is “moderate scholar” who uses religious interpretations to revise and redeem internal conditions of Muslim. Born in 1924 in Cairo, he received a traditional religious education from mosques close to his house. He graduated from the Fuad First University, the former of Cairo University, from the Department of History. He was impressed and influenced by the reformist thoughts of Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, Ḥasan al-Bannā (1928-1949), Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr (1892-1958), Muḥammad al-Khiḍr Ḥusayn (1876-1958), and Muḥib al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (1886-1969). He also read western philosophy and admired French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) and German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He worked in Qatar and had a chance to live in Kuwait. He moved back to Cairo in 1974 and died in 1995.³

¹ Mūnā Abū al-Faḍl, *Al-Mar’a Al-‘Arabiya Wa Al-Mujtama’ Fī Qarn; Taḥlīl Wa Bibliografīya Li Al-Khiṭāb Al-‘Arabī ḥawl Al-Mar’a Fī Al-Qar Al-‘Ishrīn* (Dimashq; Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 2001), 120–122.

² Muḥammad Salīm al-‘Awwā, *Al-Islāmīyūn Wa-Al-Mar’ah* (Al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Wafā’, 2000), 13–14; Jenny Berglund, “Global Question in the Classroom: The Formulation of Islamic Religious Education at Muslim Schools in Sweden,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32, no. 4 (2011): 505–508.

³ On his biography see Wail Mirza, “Qirā’a Fī Kitāb Taḥrīr Al-Mar’a Al-Muslima Fī ‘Aṣr Al-Risāla Li Al-Ustādz ‘Abd Al-Ḥalīm Muḥammad Abū Shuqqa,” *Majalla Al-Rashād*, December 1997; al-‘Awwā, *Al-Islāmīyūn Wa-Al-Mar’ah*; Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, “‘Abd Al-Ḥalīm Abū Shuqqa; Rajul Mabādi’ Wa

During his settlement in Kuwait, in 1967-1973, Abū Shuqqa set up a publishing house and establishing the International Journal “al-Muslim al-Mu’āṣir”. In this Journal, Abu Shuqqa conveys his ideas about the magnitude of the crisis experienced by the Muslims’ thought. The crisis, according to him, was due to stagnation in blindly holding the past tradition and excessive hatred against Western civilization. He also launched a critique of Islamic movements which began to grow, tending to be exclusive, focusing mostly on trivial moral issues, and paying attention not to the development of knowledge which is a prerequisite for the progress of a nation. Unlike major trends of Islamic movements, to Abū Shuqqa, a great attention should be paid to intellectual rather than moral crisis, and to cultural rather than political problems.⁴

In Cairo, Abū Shuqqa joined a group of thinkers and professionals known as advocates of moderate Islam (*al-wasaṭiyya*). In 1981, along with lawyer Kamāl Abū al-Majd and, he formulated a manifesto of “contemporary Islam” (*al-Islām al-Mu’āṣir*).⁵ In this manifesto, Islam is regarded as basis for reconstruction of a new Islamic civilization. It encourages Muslims to take lessons from a wide range of knowledge and experience given by modern civilization in all fields, social, political and economic. The current democratic system, in general, is part of the Islamic value. Positive law in Egypt largely does not need to be replaced because it is in conformity with the spirit of the Islamic law. All citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women are equal in the eyes of

Qiyam La Rajul Makāsib Wa Maṣāliḥ,” in *Naqd Al-’Aql Al-Muslim* (Al-Qāhira: Dār al-Qalam, 2001), k–kh; Riḍā ‘Abd al-Wadūd, “‘Abd Al-Ḥalīm Abū Shuqqa Wa Tahṛīr Al-Mar’a Fi Aṣr Al-Risāla,” *Haṣād Al-Fikr*, November 2003, 109–114; Ashraf ‘Īd al-’Antabaly, “‘Abd Al-Ḥalīm Abū Shuqqa: Riḥla Jihād Fi Al-’ilm Wa Al-Tarbiyya,” *Ikhwanwiki*, n.d., accessed March 5, 2012.

⁴ ‘Abd-al-Ḥalīm Muḥammad Abū Shuqqa, “Khawāṭir ḥawl Azma Al-’aql Al-Muslim Al-Mu’āṣir,” *Al-Muslim Al-Mu’āṣir*, 1974, 12–28; ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Muḥammad Abū Shuqqa, “Khawāṭir ḥawl Azma Al-Khuluq Al-Muslim Al-Mu’āṣir,” *Al-Muslim Al-Mu’āṣir* 1–2 (1975): 41–74.

⁵ Ahmad Kamāl Abū al-Majd, *Ru’ya Islāmiyya Mu’āṣara: I’lān Mabādi’* (Al-Qāhira: Dār al-Shurūq, 1991).

Islam. Their civil rights, then, must be guaranteed by the state constitution.

7.3 Gender Equality within Islam

The only book published during his life is the *Tahrīr* favoring women's rights and advocating gender equality. The main elements of his interpretation can be identified in four themes: the humanness of women; a non-segregated society as an ideal Muslim community; the active agency of women in public activities; and mutuality and reciprocity in all matters related to spousal relationship, including sexual intimacy.

He suggests that his work is a form of liberation of women in Islam that differentiates from and redeems conservative interpretation. In his account, liberation is to free women from burden of oppressive and discriminatory interpretations, substituting with more promoting teachings of Islam toward humanity of women and equality of gender relationship. However, though Abū Shuqqa is very critical against the conservative interpretation, he is not part of progressive movement for gender justice within Islam.

Unlike the progressives, Abū Shuqqa still opines that women are primarily at home, but they should have equal rights to education, economics, social, and politics. In order to make wider opportunities for women to enjoy their rights in the public, men are encouraged to do domestic matters at home. Men and the entire society are also, according to him, obliged to provide comfortable conditions through which women may enjoy their activities in public.

Although he still agrees with basic rules of marriage of the traditional interpretation, the nature and tone of Abū Shuqqa's presentation is different. Cognizant of the potential abuse of husband's authority within traditional concept of marriage, he emphasizes on the

purposive principle of the rules, which in turn eclipses the shape of male authority. He argues further for importance of imposing the principle of partnership in reestablishing new interpretations on marriage. For this reestablishment, the notion 'helping each other among the spouse' is the most obvious moral injunction that forms new shape of marital relationship in his interpretation. This principle is brought in every stage of the journey of marital relationship, since proposal of marriage until repudiation.

He calls for reasonable minimum age of marriage and requires girl's consent for marriage. It regulates practice of polygamy and divorce under supervision of the judge in order to assure that women's rights are not violated. He opines that women and the whole family should be consulted before practicing polygamy in order not to harm them. Generally, he attempts to ameliorate the functioning of the family through curbing men's abuses of their authorities, particularly divorce and polygamy, and men's neglect of their duties, especially support of wife and children. In term of sexual desires and needs, Abū Shuqqa sees that women and men are both the objects and the subjects in the same time one to another. In this regards, he opines that female genital mutilation (*khitān*) is harmful and forbidden in Islam.

Thus, in general, Abū Shuqqa's interpretation does not aim at the root of unequal gender relations, but it has shed misconceptions about women prevalent among many Muslims and offers a more reciprocal relationship between sexes. Thus, his interpretation is not progressive as it still maintains traditional division of gender roles and his egalitarianism does not allow and does not encourage the maximum participation of each member of society. He attempts to be in the middle way of "moderate" between the conservative and the progressive Muslims.

7.4 Hadith as Source of Interpretation

Abū Shuqqa's project on Islamic gender equality is established on the revivalist element referring back to Qur'an and Hadith. Unlike some reformist Muslims who attempt to disregard and lessen authority of Hadith on their project of Islamic reformism,⁶ Abū Shuqqa relies most of his work on the Hadith. For his concern is mostly interpretation, Abū Shuqqa does not make any discussion on the issue of authentication. He just follows judgment of texts as valid (*ṣaḥīḥ*), fair (*ḥasan*), and weak (*da'īf*) hadiths made already by classical scholars such as al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dawud, al-Turmudhī, and Ibn Ḥajar, and even by contemporary cleric Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī.

Indeed, in the *Taḥrīr*, there are many sources on which Abū Shuqqa bases his interpretation to advocate his notion of gender equality (*musāwā*). They are verses of Qur'an, texts of Hadith, classical scholars' comments on a hadith being discussed, facts of the past history relate to the subject, opinions of the classical and contemporary scholars on an issue being discussed, as well as expert's analysis on the context of contemporary social changes. However, texts of the Hadith literatures are primary sources in the *Taḥrīr* while the others are complementary.

There are 2,697 hadiths referred by Abū Shuqqa in the *Taḥrīr*.⁷ The most of this number is coming from the two sources, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī and the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, as it reaches up to 2,117, or 78.49 %

⁶ See Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁷ Personally I registered those amount of 2,697. The issue is rather about locations and organization in the *Taḥrīr* where Abū Shuqqa referring the hadiths in his interpretation. Many hadiths are repeated more than once and in my accounting each repeated hadith is treated as a single hadith. I also considered other narrative as single hadith that incorporated by him into the main hadith quoted. But when he referred to a long hadith, which he broke it into fragments, I considered it one quotation of hadith. Moreover, if he referred to certain opinion of an authority such as Ibn Ḥajar to clarify the meaning of a hadith in question, and the authority further associate it with other hadith/s, these hadiths are not considered by me.

of the total hadiths of the *Tahrīr*. He quotes also 212 texts from collections of the Four Sunans; Abū Dāwud, al-Turmudhī, al-Nasa'ī, and Ibn Mājah. It is about 7.86 % from the total. The rest is 368 texts, or 13.64 %, quoted from many sources out of the Six Books (*al-Kutub al-Sittah*) and from different genres, *hadīth*, *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, *sīra*, *ṭabaqāt*, *tārikh*, and even *taṣawwuf*.

7.5 Interpretative Approaches to Hadith

The whole attempt of his interpretative approach to the hadiths is, first of all, characterized with his acknowledgement of male biases within prevalent traditional interpretations, thereby, seeking strategies of centering women, particularly by mainstreaming the notion of partnership, mutuality, and reciprocity. He also acknowledges that the field research on women is very important to reproduce contemporary interpretations of the hadiths on gender issues.

There are at least five methods observed in the *Tahrīr* in approaching the hadiths for gender equality. First, he includes experiences of the female Companions as religious authority to which Islamic teachings on gender relations should refer. These experiences, according to Abū Shuqqa, represent the origin prophetic guidance on gender relations. He names these experiences as “practical and applied ḥadīths” (*al-ahādīth al-‘amaliya al-taṭbīqiyya*) on relationship between men and women in diverse aspects of life.⁸ He also attributes prophetic guidance (*hady al-nabī*) to the deeds of ‘Āisha, Umm Ḥarām, and Zaynab bint Jaḥsh.⁹ Indeed, he alludes that there are *Sunna* of the Prophet and of the early women of Islam.¹⁰

⁸ ‘Abd-al-Ḥalīm Muḥammad Abū Shuqqa, *Tahrīr Al-Mar’a Fī ‘Aṣr Al-Risāla; Dirāsa “an Al-Mar’a Jāmi’a Li Al-Nuṣuṣ Al-Qur”ān Wa Ṣaḥīḥay Al-Bukhārī Wa Muslim* (Al-Kuwayt: Dār al-Qalam, 1990), I: 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I: 28–31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II: 35.

Second, he treats Qur'an and Hadith as united texts which have a coherent meaning. He enjoins them in formulating the prophetic guidance of gender equality and justice. If a hadith is, as long as authentic, found contrary to the principle it should be read in multiple meanings until it becomes coherent to the principle. This contradicting text is not subject of dismissal. It should not be implemented in contrary sense against the principle too. Rather, it needs serious attempt of continuous questioning to dig up meaning that is truly coherent to the principle. Having this approach, a hadith can be interpreted in the light of Qur'an, such as a hadith that bans female leadership. A verse of Qur'an also can be interpreted within practices of the Prophet, such as the verse on wife beating.

Third, he reorganizes the hadiths in newly themes of chapter headings in which women are become visible, knowledgeable, having good characteristics, and shown as active participants of domestic and public activities. The familial life is also presented in much more favorable to perspective of partnership between women and men. All of these themes are observed in the chapter headings of the hadiths in the *Tahrīr*. This approach to the hadiths is known in classical scholarship as *tarjamah al-abwāb*.

Fourth, being Arabic as gendered language and that stories are mostly structured in male expression, he calls to "hermeneutics of equality" to include women as the subjects. This hermeneutic operates in two indispensable features, wakening consciousness of discriminating context of the text and moving to that of "equalizing" understanding of it as well. Having this, he counters the traditional hermeneutics that puts onus only to women to be responsible of everything regarded as religious deviation. He calls to balance the meaning by means of centering women in the stories of the text.

Of the hadith that "Many amongst men reached (the level of) perfection but none amongst the women reached this level except Asia,

Pharaoh's wife, and Mary, the daughter of 'Imran'"¹¹ for instance, Abū Shuqqa introduces very creative and inspiring interpretation.

He explains this hadith that the nature of being elevated into religious perfection (*al-kamāl*) is initially embedded in both men and women. He clarifies that the little number of noble women stated in the report above is not because they are women, but because the society where they live encourage them to have other duties considered as not part of "religious perfection", such as having pregnant, giving birth, rearing child, and taking care of all familial matters. In such condition, women are not prepared by the society to be elevated into the state of religious perfection. He urges to open spaces, equally, to women as we do to men for this elevation into the perfection. He also proposes "such female activities" to be considered religiously possible elevator through which one may reach her perfection. We will not see noble women otherwise.

Fifth, he suggests the principles-based reinterpretation of the conflicting and problematic hadiths (*mukhtalaf wa mushkil al-aḥādīth*) on gender issues. In Islamic scholarship, conflicting problematic hadith is often defined as an accepted hadith that apparently contradicts to the principles or other authoritative text, so it needs serious attempt to avoid from its literally alluded understanding. In the *Tahrīr*, on the ground of the principle of human dignity, independency, and responsibility of women, Abū Shuqqa makes interpretative attempts of problematic hadiths; by limiting the scope of meaning only for certain context not for generalization, taking the metaphorical meaning, focusing on the main message that ethically binds Muslims, and applying the inclusive meaning of other subject in partnership.

The famous hadith of al-Bukhārī: "*After me, I have no left fitna [trial or affliction, etc.] more harmful to men than women*"¹² is explained by

¹¹ Muḥammad ibn Isma'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī* (Al-Qāhira: Jam'īyya al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000), II: 672, hadith no. 3447.

Abū Shuqqa that temptation is not exclusively coming from women. Since many texts prescribe possibility of temptation by members of family, wealth, social status, and many others, emphasizing on women is obviously oppressive and discriminatory. Abū Shuqqa regrets that female temptation is often exaggerated by many conservatives to restrict women from activities that initially are lawful in Islam.

7.6 Conclusion

Linda Clark (2003) regrets the progressives neglecting the Hadith and letting it harvested by the conservatives, while reinterpretation of it is still possible for gender equality. Here as above discussed, Abū Shuqqa applies approaches to have meaningful interpretation of the hadiths for Muslim women living in this modern era. Moreover, I suggest that through the approaches to the hadiths, four strategies of centering women are observed in the *Tahrīr*, i.e. centering women in the stories of Hadith; appreciating domestic role of women; dissolving bodily and spiritual acts as both regarded as parts of religious experiences; and dissolving private and public activities.

In conclusion, the *Tahrīr* has instigated on how the hadiths can be the basis to claim necessary social recognition of Muslim women's roles in both private and public spheres. Since Hadith remains important for religious experience of modern Muslims, Abū Shuqqa's approach to Hadith greatly deserves appreciation and discussion through which equal relationship between women and men can be advanced in their contemporary daily lives. Yet the extent of his egalitarian Islam is debatable, his *Tahrīr* provides Hadith-based hermeneutical spaces to counter prevailing traditional patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

¹² *Ibid.*, III: 1064. See also the hadith in IHN, 21.

7.7 Reference

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