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Al-Qur'an Portrays Women's Bodies: Critical interpretation of verses on existence, freedom, and morality

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ABSTRACT

The oppression of women often stems from the way a person or tradition interprets the body. From ancient times to the present, the history of women's bodies has always been about the history of oppression, specifically about the fate of women's bodies in the face of patriarchal culture. When women's bodies often become symbols of various forms of oppression, liberating women must start from their liberation efforts that are embodied in patriarchal biased interpretations, both in formal and cultural interpretations. At this point, there is a need for an interpretation that departs from other possibilities in understanding verses related to women. The focus of the study is to criticize interpretations of the verses of existence, freedom, and morality of women interpreted through Merleau Ponty's phenomenology of perception. This stems from the author's basic assumption that when the Qur'an is understood as 'rahmatan lil alamin' (a mercy to all worlds), it is impossible for the Qur'an to produce discriminatory interpretations.

KEYWORDS: *existence, female body, freedom, morality, patriarchal interpretation*

INTRODUCTION

No one can deny the fact that humans live in the world (*Dasein*) with others (*Mitsein*), a situation of worldliness that confirms the character as well as projects the meaning of their existentialism. In this situation of worldliness, the body becomes the first marker of the subject's presence in the world, a worldliness that requires no consciousness outside the body. Undoubtedly, the body becomes the initial moment of one's contact with the world, along with a little

meaning that dissolves and embodies in it.

Not as simple as bones wrapped in flesh, the body becomes a vehicle for one's worldliness, which requires the formation of a knowledge of self-existence. As described by Adian (2010, p. 98), knowledge is only possible to the extent that the body is involved in the process of a person's appreciation of the world, especially if it concerns the female body with its various interpretive complexities. Unfortunately, in some contexts, women often lose the

connection between themselves and the world, which also reduces and even negates the meaning of existence, freedom, and the foundation of morality. This often stems from the fact that women's bodies are thrown into the world with vaginas. Something that seems simple becomes complicated and problematic in women's daily lives.

Being born with a vaginal body in a society that still affirms patriarchal culture has reduced the female body to the most absurd and unfortunate situation, so the meaning of the body is never complete. As a biological fact, women's bodies often experience sadistic, even tragic, shifts in meaning in the process of existing in the world. As a result, women's psychology often experiences social deprivation. Women's bodies tend to be perceived in a patriarchal way and are interpreted as nothing more than commodities, whether economic, political, cultural, or religious commodities. In this situation, the meaning of women's bodies tends to be exploited in such a way using market logic, a kind of logic that positions all forms of expression of freedom over the body based on the logic of transactions, pleasure, and desire.

In the frame of market logic, the body immediately becomes meaningless. A woman's expression of freedom, reflected in how she treats her body, is immediately shackled by meanings that negate the meaning of freedom of expression itself. Women's sexuality is thrown into the territory of power market contestation through politicization and commodification of the body. In the political realm, to borrow Prabasmoro's (2016, p. 292)

idea, the relationship between the body, sexuality, and power forms a spectrum of knowledge with a patriarchal bias. It is common for power-knowledge relations to repress the meaning of women's bodies in the biases of masculinity power.

Not much different from the politicization of the body, with all its aesthetic character, passion, sensuality, and eroticism, the female body is often caught in the shackles of capitalism. The body is often peddled as a profit-maker, like the main pulse of economic commodities (Piliang, 2020, p. 308). This phenomenon is manifested, for example, in the *Miss World* event, which is specifically a big opportunity for beauty companies. Without realizing it, this phenomenon often influences women's mindset regarding the fulfillment of beauty standardization according to market tastes. As a result, women flock to buy a variety of beauty products without considering their needs, suitability, and wisdom. Instead of empowering women by giving them space to express themselves, women's bodies are swallowed by the valley of capitalism.

Like a datum that passively suffers misfortune, the oppression of women's bodies also spreads in religious discourses. Women's bodies are often interpreted as religious commodities hidden behind patriarchal dogmas and interpretations. The implication is that women are positioned as sub-existence, often legitimized by the interpretation of Qur'anic verses, about the process of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, as illustrated in the

interpretation of QS. 4:1 which states:

“O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one (Adam), and created his mate (Eve) from him; and from them He multiplied men and women. Fear Allah in whose name you ask one another and (maintain) kinship. Verily, Allah is always watching over you.”

Referring to the verse, some classical scholars interpreted the creation of Eve as a sub-existence of Adam. Quoting Kodir (2019, p. 237), Ath-Thabary (p. 513) interprets the words “*min nafsin wahidah*” as “one self,” namely Adam. Meanwhile, the word *zawjaha* is interpreted as his partner, Eve. Ath-Thabary based this interpretation on *isra'iliyyat* narrations through the companions Ibn' Abbas and Ibn Mas'ud. Borrowing Hanafi's (2016, p. 150) understanding, At-Thabary's interpretation is in line with the redaction contained in the Old Testament, which reads:

“It is said that when Adam was deep in sleep, God took one of the ribs from his body. After that, from that rib, God created a woman who was able to reassure Adam's life, namely Eve.”

At this point, many interpretations say that Eve is nothing but a part of Adam's body (rib), which then gives birth to the meaning of the male body as the initial source of the essence of his human existence. This kind of interpretation of sub-existence is then used as the basic foundation in interpreting the relationship as well as the distinction between men and

women in religious discourse. The implication is that a situation of subordination is formed in all aspects of women's lives, both private and public (Kodir, 2019, p. 236).

Because of this subordination, women's bodies are caught in the web of standardization of piety adopted by men. Women's piety in the public sphere is often not defined in their work and leadership but is manifested as far as men's morals are maintained. Instead of nurturing women's piety and bringing modesty to their bodies, patriarchal interpretations often expose and obscure women's subjectivity. For example, the prohibition of a woman leaving the house without a mahram is often based on the interpretation of QS. 33:33 which reads:

“And remain in your houses, and do not be adorned and (behave) like the people of the former ignorance; and perform the prayer, pay the alms, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Verily, Allah intends to remove sin from you, O ahl al-bayt, and to cleanse you as cleanly as possible.”

The phrase “let you remain in your homes” is increasingly emphasized as a prohibition of women's presence in public spaces. This is often strictly linked to the stigmatization of the female body, that is, the body as a source of *fitnah*. Such interpretations are often linked and reinforced by the Prophet's hadiths. For example, the hadith narrated by Imam Sahl bin Sa'd which means:

"I have left no greater fitnah for men than women." (HR. Al-Bukhari)

Not infrequently, such hadith texts are also used to validate domestication and stigmatization of women's bodies.

Based on the abovementioned patriarchal situation, this paper attempts to respond to the perpetuation of patriarchal interpretations. Various readings and reinterpretations of sacred texts are attempted to reconcile the misfortunes of women's bodies. However, this is not sufficiently established to dissect the root of the problems experienced by women's bodies and their projection in the public sphere. This is because a more critical look is needed in the ontological area, namely the female body. To elaborate on the above issues, phenomenological arguments may be adapted as the best argument to dismantle the existence of patriarchal interpretations.

Argument of Phenomenology

Borrowing Moran's interpretation (2000, p. 2) as cited by Purnama (2018, p. 71), phenomenology is one of the many famous philosophical traditions that have developed since the beginning of the 20th century. Initiated and launched by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology coexists with many other major currents of philosophical thought. The term phenomenology comes from the Greek words *phainomenon* (*phainomai*, to appear) and *logos* (*reason*). Attempting to dismiss all

assumptions that often harm concrete human experience, phenomenology emphasizes the oblivion of everything from the existence of presuppositions (Adian, 2010, p. 5). As Husserl originally intended; namely, building a philosophy that is free from fallacies and hidden presuppositions—which is reflected in the dictum he emphasized as "returning to the things themselves" (Tjaya, 2020, p. 4).

As one of the philosophical disciplines that does not struggle with the search for the essence behind appearances, phenomenology concentrates entirely on the appearance itself. The tradition of phenomenology is increasingly widespread and always gives its phenomenological breath in several disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and architecture. In addition, phenomenology has also given birth to variants in its development. One of them is the phenomenology of perception initiated by Merleau-Ponty (Adian, 2010, p. 20).

The basic assumption of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is to critically examine the understanding of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not simply a physical struggle between a person and their world. However, more than that, perceiving means being aware of the sensed quality. In Merleau-Ponty's understanding, awareness always encompasses the bodily process of the subject as a whole (Adian, 2010, p. 81).

The adaptation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception in this research will

always play a fairly central role. This is because having a body is no longer considered just having a bodily organ. Through the body, women's existence will always be the starting point in understanding their world. At this point, Merleau Ponty's phenomenology of perception tries to discern how women find their existence, freedom, and morality. Moreover, the freedom in question is based on the principles of ethical responsibility, in accordance with the moral values in the Qur'an.

METHODS

This research is qualitative research, a type of approach or search that focuses on deepening and understanding a phenomenon's meaning (Raco, J., 2010, p. 7). This research also uses a hermeneutical thinking style to find new meanings interpreted from previously developed discourses. This is based on the notion of hermeneutics itself. Referring to Palmer (1969, p. 44) as described by Purnama (2018, p. 127), hermeneutics is generally categorized into six definitions: (1) hermeneutics as a Biblical theory of exegesis, (2) hermeneutics as philological methodology, (3) hermeneutics as a science of linguistic understanding, (4) hermeneutics as a methodological foundation of the social-human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), (5) hermeneutics as the phenomenology of Dasein and existential understanding, and (6) hermeneutics as a system of interpretation.

Based on this qualitative and hermeneutical character, this research is categorized as library-based research that is read critically

(critical research), namely research conducted by collecting data and critically examining references related to the object under study. In addition, this research uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception as its methodological reference. Phenomenology is used because this research constantly studies an experience. Phenomenology is a philosophical method that wrestles with assumptions to clarify essence (Adian, 2010, p. 5).

The elaboration in this study contains Qur'anic interpretations that wrestle with the verses of the female body, both related to existence, freedom, and moral consequences following Qur'anic principles. By using the details and basic principles of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the issues surrounding the female body are elaborated and interpreted to find a unique interpretation of the female body.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Understanding Phenomenology

Experience is widely discussed in various philosophical traditions. The tradition of empiricism asserts that there is no knowledge outside of experience, while rationalism tends to put experience as secondary objects that are thought about to become knowledge. The question is what makes an experience phenomenologically valuable and even a source of critical phenomenology.

Conceptualized and popularized by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is one of the many influential philosophical traditions

that have developed since the beginning of the 20th century. Its existence coexists with other major currents of philosophical thought, such as Neo-Kantianism, Idealism, Logicism, Pragmatism, Empiricism, and Positivism. In fact, phenomenology has a close relationship with these various philosophical traditions, both in a positive (affirmative) and negative (critical) framework (Purnama, 2018, p. 71). However, in contrast to the tendency of these various philosophical traditions to place experience as a reflective object, phenomenology returns experience to its pre-reflective character so that an experience has phenomenological value, both descriptive and critical.

The term phenomenology itself comes from the Greek, namely *phainomenon* (*phainomai*; appearing) and *logos* (reason). Phenomenology, which was initiated by Husserl, is then known as the science of appearances (phenomena); that is, the science of what appears in the subject's experience. At this point, phenomenology seeks to dismiss various assumptions that contaminate concrete human experience, while emphasizing efforts to embrace "the thing itself"—which escapes all presuppositions (Adian, 2010, p. 5).

In general, phenomenology seeks to return philosophy to the *Lebenswelt* (everyday life), namely returning to the richness of concrete human experience praxis, close and full of deep meaning. The richness of this meaning emerges from its involvement with the phenomenal world. This is because human involvement in daily praxis has always preceded any form of

reflective-theoretical observation (Purnama, 2018, p. 72).

Through the iconic dictum proclaimed by Husserl (2001, p. xviii), "We must return to the thing itself" (*Wir wollen auf die 'Sachen selbst' zurückgehen*), phenomenology is generally about returning to the thing itself, without first being buried in various suppositions of subjectivity that cover it (Suseno, Franz, et al., 2011, p. 196).

Before being popularized and conceptualized by Husserl, the term *phenomenology* first appeared in the space of philosophical discourse in the 19th century through the writings of several philosophers such as Johann Heinrich Lambert, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Hegel. However, Husserl's greatest inspiration did not refer to these philosophers but to Franz Brentano's descriptive psychology related to the concept of intentionality (the directionality of consciousness on something/object) (Moran, 2000, p. 6).

Husserl emphasized that no matter how complex one's logical propositions and philosophical assumptions are, the world lived as experience is always broader and deeper than both. This also characterizes phenomenology as a transcendental thinking model. As a model of transcendental thinking, phenomenology requires a phenomenologist to abandon various assumptions embedded and crystallized in a particular tradition and then enter the heart of the phenomenon itself. To allow the phenomenon to be revealed clearly before being buried by various assumptions that cover it (Al-Fayyadl, 2009, p. 24). This requires

one to constantly postpone various theoretical formulations of reality (*epoché*).

The phenomenological tradition underwent a radical change from Husserl's descriptive phenomenology to Heidegger's existential phenomenology. Through an examination of the iconic dictum proclaimed by Husserl, to "return to reality itself", which was originally found in the object, to "return to the subject or consciousness", Heidegger's phenomenological tradition gives a new direction to phenomenological discernment. According to Heidegger, the "return to the subject" has the tendency to forget concrete existence, so what happens is just a repetition of the mistakes of idealism.

The fragrance of idealism inherent in Husserl's phenomenology always affirms consciousness as the center of reality. Meanwhile, Heidegger's phenomenology pivots on a more fundamental issue, namely the issue of Being, which, according to him, has long been lost in the history of Western philosophical construction (Purnama, 2018, p. 74). At this point, Heidegger focuses his phenomenological gaze on going beyond the category of subject-object duality, namely by focusing on the "human world"—which he calls "being-in-the-world" (*in-der-welt-sein*) (Adian, 2010, p. 50).

Heidegger's radicalization of Husserl's phenomenology led him to an understanding that consciousness is not superior to Being, but on the contrary, Being is superior to consciousness because it always precedes any attempt to theorize about it. No doubt, consciousness is

only a mode of revealing Ada (*Alètheia*) in its situatedness and timelessness; that is, the revelation of meaning in the history of Ada. Thus, Heidegger's phenomenology is more closely related to the question of *how* rather than *what*. As in, 'how does something unfold before us as a reality that contains meaning in the world?' At this point, Heidegger's phenomenology is linked to the existentiality of *Dasein*; 'being-there', worldwide (Heidegger, n.d., p. 59).

Starting from Heidegger's phenomenology that pivots on the search for the meaning of Being, Sartre then provides phenomenological discernment in a broader frame as a complement to his teacher's phenomenology (Simbolon, 2020, p. 94). Adapting Moran's (2000, p. 358) interpretation, as cited by Adian (2010, p. 72), Sartre's phenomenology stems from Cartesian philosophy mediated through the idealistic views of his teachers, especially Leon Brunschvicg (1869-1944). Sartre's entanglement with Cartesian philosophy stems from his efforts to break down the ambiguity of idealistic formulations by embracing the clarity and discernment of a concept.

Instead of being attached to Cartesian philosophy, Sartre rejects the Cartesian subject-object dualism that is lame in linking existence and consciousness. This is triggered by the illusion of Descartes' thought, which is a kind of involvement of substance terms in understanding consciousness. For Sartre, consciousness is neither substance nor density but an uncharged void that distinguishes itself from objects (Adian, 2010, p. 73). Furthermore, Sartre said that self-consciousness is

the mode of human existence; only humans are able to realize themselves (consciousness cannot be reflected as an object). Although different, both consciousness and objects are impossible to separate from each other, as Sartre's adage states that "consciousness is always aware of itself, insofar as it is aware of objects outside itself" (Adian, 2010, p. 77).

If Husserl's phenomenology tries to describe the psychology of the subject, its existence is questioned by Heidegger. Linked to the object by Sartre, the three phenomenological traditions still presuppose the existence of a subject-object dichotomy. A more critical and radical view is needed to overcome the dichotomy problem, so the subject-object dualism that has long been the paradigm of Western philosophical thought needs to be overcome and even surpassed.

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Among the phenomenologists who tried to overcome the subject-object dichotomy problem that has long been rooted in the philosophical tradition is Merleau-Ponty. Referring to Guenther's (2020) statement, the position of his thought in the phenomenological tradition marks the emergence of critical phenomenology. Describing phenomena is about describing and engaging in efforts to find possibilities for other meanings.

The important difference between classical (descriptive) and critical phenomenology lies in the extent to which intentionality is understood as the direction of consciousness (intentional action/*noesis*) towards the intended

object (intentional object/*noema*). If descriptive phenomenology interprets the *noesis-noema* relationship as a process of consciousness that constitutes the intentional object—but not vice versa, then in critical phenomenology, the two form a reciprocal relationship that alternately determines and constitutes each other. In this case, Husserl's phenomenology takes the first position, while Merleau-Ponty's is the second (Guenther, 2020, p. 12).

Phenomenology of Perception: The Embodied Body and Perception

The understanding of the body has always been contrasted with the soul or mind. Such an issue then results in a unique understanding of global perception. At this point, through his phenomenological discernment, Merleau-Ponty seeks "to recover the often misunderstood world of perception."

Simply put, the term perception stems from the Latin *perceptio/percipio* (the act of recognizing), which is then articulated at the intersection of two root words, *percipio* (perceive/catch) and *-ion* (see). Through this link, perception tends to be understood as the ability to capture something outside of oneself using sensory tools. This understanding is in line with what has been embedded in the tradition of empiricism and intellectualism. However, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception contrasts with the understanding that both traditions have introduced.

In the view of empiricism, perception is a sensing that comes from outside—which is then passively received by consciousness.

Then, intellectualism considers that perception is a pure consciousness that occurs in the mechanism of the subject's mind, so it always overcomes the empirical world. Meanwhile, for Merleau-Ponty, perception is more than just a person's perceptual activities in describing the world, not limited to listening to sounds, seeing, or touching objects. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is an intention of the whole existence; that is, one's way of being in the pre-reflective world—*être-au-monde* or *in-der-Welt-sein* (being-in-the-world), which always shows that consciousness is global in concrete existence and is always an embodied consciousness (Adian, 2010, p. 110). Consequently, such traditional analysis often misses the complexity of the world from the subject's observation.

In constructing his phenomenology of perception, Merleau-Ponty sees humans, first of all, not as a bodiless mind but as being-in-the-world. Thus, human perception cannot be understood as a detached contemplation but rather a person's active engagement in the world that begins with the perception of his or her body, that the body is a human anchor in the world, and that without the body, humans cannot be understood (Tjaya, 2020, p. 37).

Through this new understanding of the nature of perception, Merleau-Ponty seeks to completely break down past assumptions that have taken root in the Western philosophical tradition, namely radically divorcing the connection between 'the physical' (body) and 'the mental' (mind) (Tjaya, 2020, p. 70). The gap between the two often reduces the body to a

complementary entity of the subject. For Merleau-Ponty, the body cannot be understood as just skin, bones, and blood, but as a body that is global. At this point, Merleau-Ponty proves that through his body, the subject is able to not only perceive but also understand the world and his existence (Dewi, 2015, p. 81).

As "the speaking trace of an existence," the meaning of one's existence is only possible to be understood to the extent of the body's involvement in perceiving the world; that is, "we are our bodies and consciousness is not only locked in the head" (Adian, 2010, p. 109). Adapting Tjaya's (2020, p. 137) description, a person's existence in the world is never abstract as it decays in Western philosophy but is always concrete in its embodiment. In Adian's analysis (2010, p. 100), Merleau-Ponty asserts that the existential condition is the intertwining of the body and the world as a whole.

In addition to affirming the close relationship between the body and the world, the above description implies that the body and the world cannot be understood as two different entities but as threads in a knit. The two are not intertwined in a series of situations-and-reactions/stimuli-and-responses, but as an intertwined fabric (Tjaya, 2020, p. 92). Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the intertwining of the body and the world stems from Husserl's thoughts, who often discussed the issue of "intertwining" (*Verflechtung*) the self and the world (Adian, 2010, p. 101).

Borrowing Tjaya's (2020, p. 138) expression, the close intertwining of the body with the world always makes the body subject to changes in

time. In addition, the body is the *locus* (place) of human self-expression—and because self-existence is revealed through the body, the self is impossible to fix; that is, the body is always developing over time. The nature of time emerges from the presence of an embodied subject. Undoubtedly, as an embodied self, the subject's perception of the world is always based on a unique perspective, not only in time but also in space.

In Dewi's (2015, p. 86) understanding, space is a three-dimensional condition for the body in receiving and experiencing phenomena, thus enabling knowledge formation. Meanwhile, time is a fourth-dimensional concept that always shows the subjectivity of the body in the world. Thus, as a bodied subject, all thoughts, feelings, and freedom in the world are always revealed through the body. This connection between the body and the world ultimately creates a sensational, expressive, and ambiguous condition due to the necessity of human existence that is spatial and temporal.

*Phenomenology of Perception:
Sensation, Expression, and
the Ambiguity of the Globalized Body*

The interplay of the body and the world leads to the emergence of various unique situations in the subject, as well as being a practical consequence of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception; that the ubiquity of the body produces a unique sensation; that the ubiquity of the body displays a unique expression; that the ubiquity of the body presupposes a unique situation of ambiguity. Why is this so?

The contact of the body and the world, which intertwines and determines each other, always produces a unique sensation. The sensation is formed because the worldliness of the body is both the anchor and the origin of the body's contact with the world. Sensation presupposes a process of human perception of the world to obtain various kinds of information captured through the five senses, then becomes a set of signals that contain certain meanings (Azisi, 2020, p. 192). Through this interpretation, Merleau-Ponty arrived at an interpretation that consciousness is not only cognitive but also physical. Thus, the body's contact with the world is not limited to a matter of knowledge (*knowing*) but also about how the body receives sensations (*sensing*) of the world concretely. Without a doubt, sensation does not mislead but instead becomes a trigger for reflective action (Dewi, 2015, p. 80).

As a sensation, the body's contact with the world is just a moment of personal emotional feeling. Sensation is a pre-reflective condition that rumbles in one's mind. No doubt, sensation is only possible to be understood and interpreted to the extent that it has been embodied through various verbal and non-verbal expressions. Through an expression, sensation—initially emotional, personal, and pre-reflective—finds its network of interpretative meaning. The expression has elevated personal experience to a phenomenal level that demands ethical accountability in the public sphere.

*Women in the Spectrum
of Interpretation (Tafsir)*

In the belief of the Muslim community, the Qur'an, which was revealed through the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, is believed to be the greatest miracle in which the treatise of the previous prophets is contained. So central is the Qur'an in shaping awareness and fostering a fundamental understanding that the content of the Qur'an is the best guidance for humankind, especially the Muslim community. It is not only about fulfilling one's piety in this world but also about the self that extends to the world after death.

The discussion about women in the consciousness of Muslim society, especially around the issues of existence, freedom, and morality, cannot be separated from how the Qur'an is interpreted and understood, then translated into everyday life. Not infrequently, the Qur'an, which in principle teaches about how to glorify women, is actually used as legitimization for patriarchal actions through its biased interpretation; that women are often interpreted as sub-existence who lose their authority of freedom before men; that the role of women tends to be subordinated under the power of men; that the struggle for women's liberation from male power is often not based on—even beyond—the limits of morality, especially Qur'anic morality.

In the spectrum of tafsir literature, the issue of sub-existence, subordination, and the loss of moral responsibility is based on several Qur'anic verses. In the context of women's sub-existence, the Qur'anic verse that is often referred to then

used as legitimacy to reduce and even negate the meaning of their existence, is based on the verse about the process of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, as illustrated in QS. 4:1:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ
وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا
كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً^٥

وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

“O mankind, fear your Lord who created you from a single being (Adam) and He created from him his mate (Eve). From them Allah multiplied many men and women. Fear Allah in whose name you ask one another and (maintain) kinship. Verily, Allah is always watching over you.”

The above verse illustrates that the process of human creation was originally from a single existence (*nafs wahidah*), which became the origin of human diversity in the world (the origin of creation).

In this regard, the majority of mufassirs, as described by Ar-Razi (1981, p. 167), identify this existence as Adam, who became the origin of all human existence on earth. According to Ibn Abbas, as quoted by Ar-Razi, Adam was named because his creation was formed from various types of soil elements, both red and black soil, both fertile and barren soil. This perspective is further strengthened by various narrations, as described by Ath-Thabary in his tafsir, including the interpretation narrated by Muhammad ibn al-Husain, from Ahmad ibn al-Mufadhhol, from Asbath, from as-Sudy, that “the meaning of your creation from a

single existence is from Adam (Ath-Thabari, Abu Ja'far, n.d., p. 339)."

Starting from this single existence interpreted as Adam, his partner (*zaujaha*) was created. The majority of mufassirs interpret *zaujaha* as Eve, who was created from a rib (*dhol'un*). Ath-Thabary explained that what is meant by *zaujaha* is Eve, who was created from the lower rib (*qushaira*) of Adam, as legitimized by the narration from Muhammad ibn Umar, from Abu' Ashim, from 'Isha, from Ibn Abi Najih, from Mujahid (Ath-Thabari, n.d., p. 341).

The problem is that the interpretation that positions Eve as a sub-existence of Adam, through interpretations such as the above, suggests an interpretation that the essence of human existence begins with the male body. This kind of sub-existent interpretation is often used as an initial legitimization in interpreting power relations and the distinction between men and women, which has implications for the interpretation of women with a patriarchal bias. In fact, the meaning that Eve was created from Adam's rib is not the only interpretation that has developed among the *mufassirs*.

As Ar-Razi (1981, p. 167) described, Abu Muslim al-Asfahani interpreted *wa khalaqa minha zaujaha* with the meaning of *min jinsiha* (of its kind). This kind of meaning gives an idea that each of Adam and Eve is an autonomous existence. While in its chronological context, not in its existential context, the verse provides an understanding that the creation of Adam came before Eve. Ibn' Ashur, on the other hand, expressed another opinion that the meaning of *wa khalaqa minha zaujaha*

is interpreted as *min baqiyyah ath-thinah* (from the rest of the land), the creation of Adam.

The interpretation that affirms Eve as a sub-existence of Adam often leads to various subordination in all aspects of women's lives, both in the private and public spheres. At this point, there is a need for an interpretation that departs from other possibilities in understanding the verse above. As long as this possibility is not revealed, the subordination of women will continue to be perpetuated. For example, the role of women is often limited to the domestic sphere, which then reduces, even negates, their freedom. The practice of subordination is legitimized in the consciousness of Muslim society through QS: 33:33:

وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ
الْأُولَىٰ وَأَقِمْنَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ
اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ
الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

"Remain in your houses and do not adorn (and behave) like the people of the pre-Islamic era. Establish prayer, pay the zakat, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Verily, Allah wants only to remove sin from you, O ahl al-bayt, and to cleanse you as cleanly as possible."

The above verse illustrates the command for women to stay at home and not to show their adornments.

The term *qarna* in the verse above implies the command to remain silent (*aqama wa istaqarra*). According to Ibn' Ashur, this verse is interpreted as an order addressed to the Prophet's wives to always remain silent at home to maintain and

affirm their honor, which is worth worshipping. Ibn' Ashur further explained that the obligation to remain silent at home is only specific to the Prophet's wives, while women other than them are only worth perfection (Ibn' Ashur, 1984, p. 10).

The prohibition illustrated through the expression *laa tabarajna* means not to show jewelry or behavior that can harm women's honor. Ar-Razi explained that the term *la tabarruj* means the prohibition of bad behavior, such as acting flirtatious (*tataghannaj*) and lewd actions (*tatakassar*), or the meaning of the prohibition of displaying jewelry (*tadzahir az-zinah*) as was done by the women of ignorance (Ar-Razi, 1981, p. 210).

The above interpretation gives an idea that women's honor lies within the walls of their homes and their modesty. However, the command that is explicitly illustrated in the term *wa qarna fii buyutikunna* (stay in your houses) and the prohibition in the term *laa tabarajna tabarruj al-Jahiliyyah* (do not adorn/ behave like the people of the jahiliyyah) are not as narrow as the prohibition of women to move in public spaces.

Often, this verse is immediately narrowed down to the prohibition of leaving the house or limiting freedom of expression that curbs women's role in the public sphere so that the interpretation becomes a patriarchal bias. Whereas this verse arises from a unique situation, that there are various prerequisites, contexts, and certain conditions that encourage the implementation of the meaning of the command. First, this command is specific only to the

Prophet's wives, not women in general.

Second, the prohibition of leaving the house for the Prophet's wives is not absolute (*muthlaq*), considering that the Prophet's wives had left the house to accompany him to fight, preach, and do various other activities. This gives the term great-grandmother a metaphorical meaning so that it is not limited to the physical house but conditions that resemble the meaning of the house in the form of security guarantees, honor, and glory of women. Moreover, in a narration quoted by Ibn' Ashur, the Prophet said, "Allah allowed the Prophet's wives to leave the house because of their needs" (Ibn' Ashur, 1984, p. 11). This is further emphasized by the action taken by Siti Aisha when she went to Bashrah to lead the Battle of Jamal. In Ibn' Ashur's observation, Aisha's leaving home for the benefit of the Muslim community is an area of *ijtihad*, so it does not necessarily abrogate her obligation to stay at home as stated in the verse above, nor does it necessarily harm her honor as the Prophet's wife. (Ibn 'Ashur, 1984, p. 12).

For Muslim women, the honor and glory of women embodied in certain principles, as illustrated in the interpretation of the above verses, basically arises from a faith commitment that has its own moral consequences. Affirmed in QS. 74:38:

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ

"Everyone is responsible for what he or she has done."

This verse implies that the souls created are a *rahinah* (pledge, promise, confinement, limit). Thus, the freedom/efforts to liberate women in the public and private

spheres are always limited by their existential commitment to their faith. At this point, freedom that often violates the existential commitment of a Muslim woman cannot be said to be a freedom based on the Qur'an. So the problem is about dismantling the position of women who are considered sub-existence into an autonomous existence and giving total freedom—without harming their commitment as Muslims. At this point, this research seeks to find other possibilities in portraying the patriarchal biases legitimized by the verses above, namely by aiming at it from the perspective of the phenomenology of perception.

Women's Body in the View of Phenomenology of Perception

Discussing women's bodies phenomenologically is always about discussing the complexity of women's reality (bodies). It is as if many things are unreadable in the process of understanding women's bodies—due to the noise of various interpretations that suppress their existence. As a result, women have to face the bitter reality of being a sub-existence that often exposes various oppressions on their bodies. Such a reality often overturns the verses of the Qur'an that are interpreted patriarchally, especially related to the verses of existence and freedom.

In relation to the verse of the creation of women/Eve, many interpretations solidify that Eve is nothing more than a part/derivative of Adam's body (rib)—which then often subverts the meaning of men as the origin of human existence. This verse, if interpreted using phenomenology, will always revive

the sub-existent meaning of the female body. This is because each subject undoubtedly realizes its existence through each body. In a sense, both men and women always realize and find their existence through their respective bodies—with various experiences that are unique, concrete, and full of meaning. No doubt, women's bodies are bound to find sovereign freedom—which is not bound by the power outside themselves, as long as women's bodies have been freed from the meaning of male sub-existence.

As long as women's bodies are submerged in the meaning of bodies that are not autonomous, women will continue to be entangled in various value standardizations adopted by men. Not infrequently, women are always considered pious figures as long as their bodies are able to shed male morality. Instead of finding themselves as pious figures, patriarchal interpretations often bury women's presence in the public sphere. For example, the command to stay at home and the prohibition of *tabaruj* for women are often based on the interpretation of QS. 33:33. In fact, if interpreted phenomenologically, the verse actually presupposes a new meaning of the female body—which still intersects with the existing meaning. This is because the connection between women's bodies and the world encourages the emergence of various situations unique to women; that is, they always bring about sensations, expressions, and ambiguities of the body. Moreover, the three situations always require each other—the sensation of the female body is only possible to be understood and interpreted to the

extent that it is translated into various expressions, and the expression of the female body made possible by a sensation always presupposes a unique condition of ambiguity or termed the paradox of expression. No doubt, the paradox presupposes that a typical expression refers to an objective meaning that has been sedimented since the beginning. However, on the other hand, it presupposes creativity that demands a novelty value.

At this point, the meaning of the command to stay at home and the prohibition of *tabaruj* on women's bodies illustrated in QS. 33:33 allows for another interpretation, namely that women are allowed to go out of the house, as long as there is a need that brings benefits in it; women are allowed to adorn themselves, as long as they do not harm their honor. Thus, women's bodies can be said to have found freedom over their bodies.

Instead of being liberated from various patriarchal meanings, women are tricked by the freedom of their bodies. Inevitably, the freedom that often forgets the limits of her existential commitment as a Muslim often makes her body slip back into the pit of misfortune, especially entangled in economic-political power. Borrowing Piliang's (2015, pp. 263-264) understanding, in the context of political economy, women's bodies tend to be explored to the extreme—then dragged into what is called libidonomy (libidonomics). The body and all its libidinal potentials are always used as the central element and *raison d'être* (purpose) in reaping maximum profits (added values)—and capitalist breeding. No doubt, in the grip of capitalism, women's bodies are not

only explored for their use value—workers, prostitutes, servants—but also produced and reproduced for their exchange value—model girls, showgirls, hostesses. Further, they are now stripped of their sign value—erotic magazines, erotic art, erotic videos, erotic photography, and erotic films.

At this point, the freedom that often exceeds the limits—and often violates the existential commitment as a Muslim, cannot be said to be a morally responsible freedom.

CONCLUSION

Talking about women from a phenomenological perspective is always about discussing how complex it is to be a woman. Born amid a society steeped in patriarchal beliefs, women's bodies are often pushed to the brink of misfortune and faced with various forms of oppression.

Departing from the unrest over the various oppressions that are often attached to women's bodies, instead of being increasingly disturbed by the noise of various interpretations of patriarchal bias that tend to legitimize the oppression, the author believes that other possibilities can be revealed from the meanings that have been obscured.

This research is a unique combination: using a phenomenological approach from the philosophical tradition to uncover other possibilities of the meaning of a Qur'anic interpretation. Women's liberation efforts from various patriarchally biased interpretations can find

ethically responsible freedom according to the Qur'an's values.

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