

SYED SYEIKH AHMAD AL-HADI'S THOUGHT ON WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION AND GENDER EQUALITY: RE-EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Known as the early 20th century Malay-Muslim scholar, Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi (1867-1934) has written several works concerning women's issues; including *Faridah Hanom*, *Hikayat Anak Dara Ghasan*, *Hikayat Puteri Nurul'Ain*, *Kitab Alam Perempuan* and many others. The present study attempts to examine his thought on the emancipation of women and gender equality, since not many Malay scholars focus on a similar issue during his time. This paper discusses on the development of his idea through magazines and novels since the 1920s, which later gave impact to the Malay society from cultural, social, political as well as religious aspects. This study also highlights several factors which might influenced his thought by discovering his educational background and analysing his different methods of arguments applied in his writings. By using qualitative approach, the study concludes that Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi has integrated both Islamic and modern perspectives in his writings, particularly concerning women's issues such as on the emancipation of women and gender equality. Although some of his ideas seem controversial, it was among the earliest effort to propose a change to Malay traditions, where women were often given a limited role in society, for they only had major roles in domestic affairs.

Keywords: Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi; emancipation of woman; gender equality; Islamic perspective; modern perspective.

Khulasah

Dikenali sebagai ulama Melayu-Muslim pada awal abad ke-20, Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi (1867-1934) telah menulis beberapa karya yang menyentuh isu-isu wanita, termasuklah *Faridah Hanom*, *Hikayat Anak Dara Ghasan*, *Hikayat Puteri Nurul'Ain*, *Kitab Alam Perempuan* dan lain-lain. Kajian ini cuba meneliti pemikiran penulis tentang emansipasi wanita dan kesaksamaan jantina kerana didapati tidak ramai ulama Melayu memberi fokus kepada masalah yang sama pada zaman tersebut. Ia membincangkan bagaimana idea tersebut berkembang melalui penulisannya di majalah dan novel sejak 1920-an, dan kemudiannya memberi impak kepada masyarakat Melayu dari segi budaya, sosial, politik dan agama. Kajian ini juga menonjolkan beberapa faktor yang mempengaruhi pemikirannya dengan mengkaji latar belakang pendidikan dan menganalisis kaedah argumen beliau yang berbeza dalam pelbagai bentuk penulisannya. Dengan menggunakan kaedah kualitatif, kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi telah mengintegrasikan perspektif Islam dan moden dalam penulisannya khusus mengenai isu-isu wanita. Walaupun sesetengah ideanya kelihatan kontroversial, ia adalah salah satu usaha awal untuk mencadangkan perubahan kepada adat dan tradisi Melayu di mana wanita sering diberi peranan yang terhad dalam masyarakat, iaitu dalam urusan domestik semata-mata.

Kata kunci: Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi; emansipasi wanita; kesaksamaan jantina; perspektif Islam; perspektif moden.

Introduction

In the late 19th and early 20th century, debates concerning women became one of the controversial issues among the Western and Muslim scholars. Western magazines, journals, and books were published openly to propose changes; not only in the social and legal aspects, but also to promote new perspectives in endorsing women's rights. All of these changes were proposed without religion, for the West believes that religion is generally considered as an obstacle to hinder progress, an anti-science, a supporter for theocracy, an oppressor for women (misogynists), and a cause of divisions and hostility.¹

Muslim society, on the other hand, were bounded with traditional custom and conservative perspective which defending that women's roles are better performed in the private sphere with their stereotyped responsibility of wife and mother. But during this time, the efforts to 'free' women have begun to circulate with the emergence of women movements and their voices to fight for women's rights and their liberation. Simultaneously, the struggle in advocating equal rights for women to access education and work, and to vote in political election was undertaken by number of male-Muslim reformists by considering the 19th and 20th century as a period characterised by social, economic, and political changes.

The reformists introduced a new approach of accommodating social change without abandoning Islamic principles, but in the same time rejecting cultures that did not originate from Islam. Muḥammad 'Abdūh (1849-1905), for example, criticised the patriarchal domination of women within family and society using the name of Islam. He started a discourse on Islam and gender in 1890;

¹ Khalif Muammar A. Harris, "Islam dan Liberalisme: Antara Maşlahah dan Mafsadah", *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 20(2) (2018): 1-52. doi:10.22452/afkar.vol20no2.1

particularly in *al-Manār*, whereby he refused to believe that the West first granted full equality to women.

This was because it could be perceived from the Qur'an that Islam had developed the concept of justice earlier than the West. He also advocated gender equality in various aspects by claiming that the Qur'an has given equal rights and responsibilities to all humankind. He strongly emphasised the concept of justice as the highest priority in maintaining equal rights between the genders.²

'Abdūh's thoughts on emancipation of women have influenced many other thinkers, such as Qāsim Amīn who wrote *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah*³ (The Liberation of Women) and *al-Mar'ah al-Jadīdah*⁴ (The New Woman); Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī (1917–1996), the author of *Qadāyā al-Mar'ah*⁵ (Women's Issues) as well as 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Abū Shaqqa (1924–1996), who wrote *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah fī 'Aṣr al-Risālah*⁶ (translated as Liberation of Woman in the Age of Revelation) in a six-volumes book. Their writings became major references among the reformists who advocating to liberate women from the traditional and patriarchal practice and indirectly to promote gender equality.

Interestingly, there were also several influential scholars with reformism thoughts who came from the Malay region. One of them was Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi (hereafter, al-Hadi) who was not only known as an important Malay reformist, but also regarded as a propagandist and polemicist with progressive thought and

² Muḥammad 'Abdūh, *al-Islām wa al-Mar'ah* (Cairo: al-Qāhirah lil-Thaqāfah al-'Arabiyyah, 1975), 20-45.

³ Qāsim Amīn, *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'ārif, 1899).

⁴ Qāsim Amīn, *al-Mar'ah Jadīdah* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lā li al-Thaqāfah, 1900).

⁵ Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Qadāyā al-Mar'ah* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1994).

⁶ 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Abū Shaqqa, *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah fī 'Aṣr al-Risālah* (Kuwayt: Dār al-Qalam li al-Nashr wa Tawzī', 2005).

brilliant social critic.⁷ His contributions cover numerous aspects including education,⁸ religion, social and politics. However, one of his highly significant contributions that is being discussed again and re-analysed among the researchers in the past and present is his engagement towards issues concerning women's rights.

Al-Hadi's Life and Contributions

Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi was born on 22 November 1867, in the Malaccan village of Hulu. His mother was Malay, while his father, Sayyid Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan ibn Saqqaf al-Hādi al-Ba'lāwī, was an Arab-Malay of Hadhrami descent.⁹ He received his early childhood education in Malacca, and then he was sent away to a religious school at Kuala Terengganu. Then, later on he followed his uncle to continue his school at Pulau Penyengat, Riau. In Riau, he was adopted by Raja Ali Kelana bin Raja Ahmad, Crown Prince of Riau, who was also the Mufti; whom personally taught him the Malay language and Islamic knowledge.

He learned Arabic language and deepen his religious knowledge from many prominent scholars such as Haji Husain Palembangi and Haji Saleh Minangkabau. In 1891, al-Hadi married his cousin, Sharifah Sheikun binti

⁷ Hafiz Zakariya, "Sayyid Shaykh Ahmad al-Hadi's Contributions to Islamic Reformism in Malaysia", in *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 203-223.

⁸ Sulaiman, A., Jamsari, E. A., Jusoff, K., Yaakub, N. I., Mujani, W. K., Mohd, W., Zainol, Z. A., "Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady: A Religious Education Reformist in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century", *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 7, Special Issue of Diversity of Knowledge on Middle East (2011), 14-21; Hasnah Hussiin, "Isu Pendidikan Wanita dalam Akhbar dan Majalah Melayu, 1920-an Hingga 1940-an", *SEJARAH: Journal of the Department of History* 19(19) (2011), 135-151; Ibrahim Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya: The Life and Thought of Sayid Syeikh Al-Hadi, 1867-1934* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1994).

⁹ Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 50-51.

Muhammad while he was still in Riau. His first son, Syed Alwi was born a year later.¹⁰

He travelled to and from Mecca and Cairo several times. According to his son, this opportunity was due to the request from the Riau royal families to perform pilgrimage or to study. During his visit, he had chances to sit and learn with Muḥammad 'Abdūh and his disciple, Rashīd Riḍā. Their meetings were positively reported by Za'ba in his writings.¹¹ Although there was no special certificate or degree received by al-Hadi, he devoted himself to read tremendously; particularly religious books and journals from Egypt.

His thoughts were only formed when he came to live in Singapore in 1901, where he focused on his intellectual and practical activities. In 1906, together with Sheikh Muhammad Tahir, Sheikh Muhammad Salim al-Kalili and Haji Abbas Muhammad Tahar, he published the magazine *Al-Imām*, the first monthly modernist journal in Malaya. In 1907, he was a founder of a religious school, Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah in Singapore.¹²

After *Al-Imām* closed down in 1908, al-Hadi moved to Johor Bahru and worked as a Syariah lawyer for six years (1909-1915). However, in 1915, he left the position and returned to Malacca. In Malacca, he opened another religious school with Haji Abu Bakar Ahmad; which was later known as Madrasah al-Hadi. Due to controversial issues in that school, he decided to settle down in Penang in 1916 or 1917, where he found a passion to start teaching and promoting religious education.

He was appointed as the Principal of the school known as Madrasah al-Mashoor. This religious school

¹⁰ Alijah Gordon, *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady with Selections of his Writings by his Son Syed Alwi al-Hady* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999), 111.

¹¹ Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59-60.

used Arabic as a medium of instruction, which is one of the famous schools for the influence of radical movements in the colonial era. The Madrasah was an instrument to educate young Muslim reformers and thinkers at that time.¹³

In 1919, he resigned from the Madrasah and devoted his time to literary activities. Numerous works on various subjects were produced for he actively published his writings in newspapers, books, and novels. In 1926, he opened Jelutong Press in Pulau Pinang, an Islamic reform publication. He published the Quranic Tafsir written by Muḥammad 'Abdūh and many other articles. Beginning September 1926, he launched his own monthly journal, *Al-Ikhwān* and in 1928, he published a daily newspaper, *Saudara*. Among the authors of the newspaper was Abdul Rahim Kajai. Al-Hadi died of brain disease at his home in Penang on 20 February 1934.¹⁴

Throughout his 86 years of life, he has contributed to society in many ways. First, by establishing and operating a religious school, i.e. Madrasah al-Hadi (1915-1917) and Madrasah al-Mashoor (1916-present). Second, by writing through books, magazines, and newspapers; which emphasizes on various topics, particularly on religious issues among the Malay community.

Besides magazine of *Al-Imam*, journal of *Al-Ikhwān*, and newspaper of *Saudara*, al-Hadi's other works were including: (1) *Hikayat Setia Asyik kepada Maksyuknya atau Syafik Affandi dengan Faridah Hanom* (published in 1926, reprinted in 1927); (2) *Hikayat Taman Cinta Berahi atau Mahir Affandi dengan Iqbal Hanum* (1927-1928); (3) *Hikayat Anak Dara Ghasan atau Hindun dengan Hamad* (1928-1929); and (4) *Hikayat Puteri Nurul'Ain* (1929). All these works were written in the Jawi-Malay script, with only the first novel being republished in romanized Malay.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64-72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 74-77.

In addition, *Hikayat Puteri Nurul 'Ain*, atau *Bahaya Bercherai Talak Tiga dan Berchina Buta* (The Story of Princess Nurul 'Ain or the Dangers of Triple Divorce and the Blind Chinese Man) (1929), a short story of 200 pages; *Hikayat Chermin Kehidupan* (The Mirror of Life) (1929), *Hikayat Pembelaan dalam Rahasia* (Story of a Secret Upbringing) (1929) or *Kaseh Saudara kapada [sic] Saudara-nya* (Brother to Brother's Love) (1929-30), a work of 579 pages adapted from English by Syed Shaykh's son, Syed Alwi and edited by Syed Shaykh; and finally *Cheritera Dhu'l-Ruhain* (Possessor of Two Lives) (1930-31), a tale of 540 pages with a Turkish background, adapted and expanded from the Arabic by Abdul Rahim Kajai.¹⁵

Al-Hadi also has numerous writings on Islamic subjects, naming a few: (1) *Tafsir Juz 'Ammā* (Translation of Muḥammad 'Abduh's Commentary on the final section of the Qur'an) (1927); *Tafsir al-Fatihah* (Translation of the Commentary on the First Chapter of the Quran written by Muḥammad 'Abduh) (1928); (2) *Agama Islam dan Akal* (1931); (3) *Kitab Alam Perempuan: Bahas dan Huraian Kegunaan dan Kebebasan Perempuan bagi Faedah Dirinya dan Perhimpunan Kaum Bangsa dan Watannya dengan Dalil-dalil Akli dan Nakli Syariah* (1930); (4) *Kitab Agama Islam* (1931); and (5) a booklet called *Kitab Hadiah Kebangsaan* (1933).

Majority of these works were previously published serially in *Al-Ikhwān*, which were all written in the Jawi-Malay script except *Agama Islam dan Akal* which was republished in romanized Malay.¹⁶ However, was recently republished by Akademi Jawi Malaysia in both Jawi and romanized Malay.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gordon, *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady*, 119-120.

¹⁶ Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 76-77.

¹⁷ Syed Syeikh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi, *Kitab Alam Perempuan* (Kajang: Akademi Jawi Malaysia-Klasika Media, 2019).

From his various works, it can be found that al-Hadi promoted a vision of Islamic modernism that would be recognized by Malay community and simultaneously addressing their daily problems.¹⁸ The influences from Muslim reformists in Egypt were strongly expressed in his writings especially in the effort to preserve the rights of Malay-Muslim women. Due to that, he was considered as the Malaysian feminism activist¹⁹ by advocating women's emancipation mainly through his publications. He emphasised to enlighten particularly Malay-Muslim women to break free from the practices of customs and traditions, which were against the Islamic law and causing them to be ignorant or left out of modernization. Therefore, two concepts will be further analysed based on his writings which are women's emancipation and gender equality.

The Domain of Women's Emancipation

Emancipation of women can be referred to the "process, strategy and myriad efforts by which women have been striving to liberate themselves from the authority and control of men and traditional power structures, as well as to secure equal rights for women, remove gender discrimination from laws, institutions and behavioural patterns, and set legal standards that shall promote their full equality with men."²⁰ It is a universal fight for all women around the world against all forms of discrimination, bias and inequality, which are actually contradictory to the religious and moral law.

¹⁸ Sean Foley, "Islamic Modernism in Southeast Asia", Oxford Islamic Studies Online, retrieved May 16, 2012, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t343/e0041>.

¹⁹ Hussiin, "Isu Pendidikan Wanita dalam Akhbar dan Majalah Melayu, 135–151.

²⁰ European Institute for Gender Equality, "Emancipation of Women," retrieved August 23, 2019, <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1098>.

Among the first Malay scholars who proposed this fight for women's emancipation was Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi. As the pioneer of Malay novels, Al-Hadi's writings on women's issues began early of the twentieth century in the magazine of *Al-Imam* and journal of *Al-Ikhwān*. However, *Faridah Hanom* was the masterpiece that successfully gave a huge impact in social, religious and literary aspects. The novel has an original long title: *Hikayat Setia Asyik kepada Maksyuknya atau Syafik Affandi dengan Faridah Hanom*, which was published for the first time in two parts; in 1925 and in 1926, and reprinted in 1927 by Jelutung Press. It was later republished several times by Pustaka Antara (1964)²¹, International Library (1985)²² and NuBook Press (2017).²³

Faridah Hanom is also considered as the first Malaysian novel²⁴ and the title was taken before the name of its main character. Besides, al-Hadi was the first Malay author who introduced a female character of knowledgeable, brave, and argumentative; which was different from stereo-typed Muslim women.²⁵ All characters in his novel were Egyptian (Arab and Turks) but the focus of the story was to confront many issues which were familiar among Malays; such as arranged marriage and pre-marital sex.²⁶

Although the novel is a triangle love story between Faridah Hanom, Syafik Afandi and Badaruddin Afandi,

²¹ Syed Syeikh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi, *Faridah Hanom* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1964).

²² Syed Syeikh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi, *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* (Kuala Lumpur: International Library, 1985).

²³ Syed Syeikh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi, *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* (Kuala Lumpur: Nubook Press, 2017).

²⁴ Mujahid M. Bahjat & Basil Q. Muhammad, "The Significance of the Arabic-Modelled Malay Novel Hikayat Faridah Hanom", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 41(3) (2010), 245–261.

²⁵ Siti Aishah Murad, "Women Characters in the Hands of Men Writers", *Malay Literature* (2001), 1–10.

²⁶ Foley, *Islamic Modernism in Southeast Asia*, 1-8.

the message of women's emancipation was clearly presented by the main character as described by the author²⁷:

"Apabila Shafik Afandi mendengar perkataan kekasehnya yang demikian itu, mengetahuilah ia-nya bahawa kekasehnya ini saorang daripada perempuan yang mempunyai perasaan menuntut akan kebebasan perempuan."

The fight for women's emancipation is focused on the social practices among the Malay communities where women's roles and responsibilities were limited in managing household chores and taking care of the children, while men have primary role as head of family and financial supporter. This belief has been practiced for many generations and it was greatly influenced by a patriarchal culture, which does not only occur among the Arabs, but also in countries with large Muslim populations. Al-Hadi highlighted that Faridah Hanom in his novel attempts to change this practice by saying²⁸:

"Bermula, kehidupan menjadi hamba laki-laki bagaimana adat datuk nenek yang ada sekali-kali beta tidak reda..."

Furthermore, Faridah Hanom also expresses the strong belief that women's freedom should not be restricted in order to fulfil their responsibilities to the nation and country²⁹:

"Janganlah sekali-kali ianya terlintas di hatinya hendak menyekat akan kebebasan beta pada berkhidmatkan kaum dan bangsa dan tanah air beta selama beta menjalankan

²⁷ Al-Hadi, *Faridah Hanom*, 1964, 132.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁹ Al-Hadi, *Hikayat Faridah Hanom*, 128.

segala kewajipan yang di atas beta kepada zahir dan batinnya"

The appearance of these messages in *Faridah Hanom* has influenced many other writers and novelists in Malaysia such as *Iakah Salmah?* (1929) and *Kawan Benar* (1927) by Ahmad Rashid Talu; *Hikayat Perchintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (1927) by Ahmad Kotot; *Melur Kuala Lumpur* (1930) by Harun Aminurrashid; and *Melati Kota Bharu* (1939) by Abdul Kadir Adabi.³⁰ In other words, al-Hadi was the first who introduced the emancipation of women in Malaysia both directly and indirectly. His purpose was none other than to stir emancipation of Malay people not only on gendered terms, but against colonialism.³¹

In addition to *Faridah Hanom*, another book consisting of al-Hadi's thought on the emancipation of women is *Kitab Alam Perempuan*. This book compiles the related articles concerning women which originally have been published in *al-Ikhwān*, and it includes his translations of articles written by Qāsim Amīn. This book emphasised that women can only achieve the emancipation mainly through education, for women are able to determine the success of the whole nation³²:

"...nescaya mendapatlah kita mengetahui bahawa tiap-tiap qawm dan bangsa itu hanya sanya mendapat kemajuan mereka itu dengan sebab kemajuan sekalian perempuan-perempuannya."

³⁰ Ismail Hashim, "Sejarah Penulisan Novel di Malaysia: Isu dan Cabaran", *Jurnal Pengajian Melayu*, No. 18 (2007), 25–40; Siti Aishah, "Women Characters in the Hands of Men Writers", 1–10.

³¹ Alicia Izharuddin, "Malaysian Feminist Activism as an Effect of History", *New Mandala* (2013), retrieved August 6, 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/malaysian-feminist-activism-as-an-effect-of-history/>

³² Al-Hadi, *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, 30.

In *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, he criticised the traditional practice which limited the freedom of women to seek knowledge, and blamed male in the past who did not offer education for women over the past generations. He said³³:

"Bermula orang yang kehilangan kebebasan itu tentulah hilang daripadanya kequwwatan perbezaan yang datang daripada 'ilmu pengetahuan. Tetapi yang patut sangat dicerca itu di atas cerca laki-laki itulah sekalian laki-laki yang dahulu daripada kita yang telah meringan-ringankan perkara memelihara dan memberi pelajaran perempuan-perempuan kita."

However, although al-Hadi focused on the importance of an educated mother and knowledgeable wife among the Malay society, he also stressed that women's liberty cannot be designed to the rules of freedom practiced by the West, and must not go against the teachings guided by the Qur'an and Sunnah³⁴:

"Tetapi hanyalah kehendak al-Ikhwān memberi perempuan-perempuan itu kebebasan di dalam had sempadan yang dibenarkan oleh Allah dan RasulNya sehingga tiada tersekat mereka itu daripada belajar segala perkara yang wajib ke atas mereka itu bagi menyempurnakan kewajipannya di dalam perhimpunan qawmnya pada ketika itu menjadi isteri dan ibu anaknya kerana ibu itulah guru sekolah yang pertama bagi anak-anak manusia di dalam 'alam ini dan di dalam segala perhimpunan tiap-tiap suatu qawm."

³³ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

Furthermore, the book also discussed in length on the use of *hijāb* (veil) and its law according to Islam, as well as its practices among people in the Arab and the West. The commandment of wearing veil has no negative consequence to women's freedom. Similar to marriage, being a wife does not indicate that she is a slave to her husband, for marriage aims to create a successful union between man and woman that promotes love and tranquillity as mentioned in the Quran.³⁵

Gender Equality Concept

Gender equality was indirectly injected in al-Hadi's writings together with his main agenda of women's emancipation. He believed that women should be liberated first before emphasising the equality between genders.

In *Faridah Hanom*, al-Hadi indirectly interpreted the message delivered in the Qur'an that both men and women are equal in responsibility and accountability to God, that each of them needs the other, and complement one another. The analogy is like a position of head is on the top, but it cannot be well-functioned if there is no stomach which is located in the middle of the body. Both head and stomach need one another to make one's physical body perfect³⁶:

Kata Faridah Hanom, "Pada faham beta, adalah kelebihan yang dikehendaki Tuhan itu ialah umpama kelebihan kepada seorang daripada perutnya, atau daripada kaki-tangannya. Iaitu sungguh pun di dalam anggota kita ini kepala kita dilebihkan daripada segala anggota yang lain, ertinya kepala itu tidak boleh hidup dengan tidak

³⁵ "And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between your affection and mercy. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought." al-Rūm, 30: 21.

³⁶ Al-Hadi, *Hikayat Faridah Hanom*, 121.

[ada] perut. Demikianlah dengan kelebihan yang dikehendaki oleh Tuhan di antara laki-laki dengan perempuan itu. Sebab laki-laki itu tidak boleh hidup dengan tidak ada perempuan..."

Not only that, he clearly rejected the view that women are inferior in nature and status, and subordinate to men. Based on his view, a woman is a man's twin, and a woman is a human being just like a man, as mentioned in the hadith of the Prophet: "Indeed, women and men are bodily twins."³⁷ Both were created by God and the purpose of their creation is similar, which is to obey His commandments. He believed that the equality between men and women has been strongly stated in the Qur'an, "O mankind, We have created you male and female, appointed you race and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing of you."³⁸

Among the methods used by al-Hadi in his writings is to conceptualize e.g. what if things happened to women also happen to men. He questioned the ability of men if they were secluded from the society and restricted from learning and seeking knowledge. In terms of *hijāb*, he even asked men to cover themselves because slander could happen to anyone and both genders were inborn with sexual desire. Regarding to human creation, both men and women were created for similar purposes and from similar sources. He emphasised that this kind of equality is sufficient to verify that no gender should be higher or lesser than another. He said³⁹:

³⁷ This hadith was cited in *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, 23. The hadith is also translated to "Women are the twin halves of men," narrated by Abū Dāwūd, Book 1, Ḥadīth 236.

³⁸ Al-Hujurāt, 49: 13.

³⁹ Al-Hadi, *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, 75.

"Darah kita daripada darah perempuan, daging kita daripada darah perempuan. Bukankah laki-laki ini datangnya daripada perempuan dan perempuan itu datangnya daripada laki-laki? Mereka itulah kita dan kita inilah mereka itu! Adakah kita oleh mendapat cukup kesempurnaan laki-laki itu jika perempuan-perempuan kekurangan? Tidak, tidak boleh bertuah laki-laki itu melainkan dengan perempuan!"

Based on his view, inequality and discrimination will only produce negative impact compared to positive either toward women or men. Therefore, he emphasised that any traditional practices and customs which directly or indirectly resulted in bias against both genders particularly on women should be abolished. Nevertheless, the gender bias highlighted by al-Hadi is more focused on the patriarchal tradition that has been practiced by the Malay community in general, and he did not much discussed on the gender bias found in understanding the religious texts as criticized by many feminists. There were number of feminists accused that Arabic language practiced bias against women and simultaneously they are criticizing the Qur'an and Ḥadīth for using Arabic as the main language.⁴⁰

Discussion and Analysis

The main purpose of this study was to analyse al-Hadi's thought and perspectives on women's emancipation and gender equality. This present study found that from his numerous writings, only *Faridah Hanom* and *Kitab Alam Perempuan* majorly presented al-Hadi's view concerning on women's issues. In general, he emphasised that

⁴⁰ Henri Shalahuddin & Mohd Fauzi Hamat, "Telaah Kritis Terhadap Dekonstruksi Bahasa Gender Dalam Pengajian Islam", *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 14(1) (2013): 1–32.

women's rights should not be limited to the family matters, despite them having a very important role in the family institution. Responding to the problems faced by women in the Malay community, he made a serious attempt to voice out that women should be given their rights in wider areas.

Women's Right in Acquiring Knowledge

In line with the Qur'an and Ḥadīth, education is the first objective highlighted by al-Hadi. This is due to the fact that it is highly important for women in order to liberate themselves from any traditional and patriarchal culture as practiced by Malay generations.⁴¹ Education will improve women's performance to fulfil their duties, roles and responsibilities.

Educated generation especially among women will determine the achievement of progressive and developed society. His efforts were not only conveyed through writings and publications, but he even established educational support by building religious school for girls and women.⁴² Female students were cultivated with knowledge being the 'weapon' of life, because they might not be able to protect themselves without the right knowledge. As an essential element of human development, knowledge together with education and information are highly important for the wellbeing of both men and women.⁴³

In his writings, for example, the character of Faridah Hanom in his novel was someone with passion in

⁴¹ Sarji Kasim, "Emansipasi Wanita Islam dalam Faridah Hanom: Penilaian Semula", in *Syed Syeikh al-Hadi: Cendekia dan Sasterawan Ulung* (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit USM, 2003), 99-117.

⁴² Talib Samat, *Syed Syeikh al-Hadi: Sasterawan Progresif Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992), 42.

⁴³ Mohamed Saladin Abdul Rasool, Mohamed Azmil Mohd Yusof & Siti Mariam Ali, "Wellbeing of the Society: A Maqasid al-Shari'ah Approach", *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam*, Special Issue 1 (2020): 25-46. <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.sp2020no1.2>.

knowledge, who received both religious and secular education. Although she was bounded with the arranged marriage, she had courage to stand up for her rights because of her educational background and she was surrounded by educated people. The importance of knowledge among women was also been emphasised by him in his articles in *al-Ikhwan*, which was later re-published in *Kitab Alam Perempuan*.

He stressed that the task of women was not merely to give birth and to nurture the offspring but to determine the progress of the nation (*Al-Ikhwan*, May 1927; *Al-Ikhwan*, October 1930). On behalf of that purpose, women need education regardless of their age, status, position, and religion. Al-Hadi also wrote in his article entitled *Berubah Pemeliharaan Anak-Anak Perempuan itu Sangat-Sangat Dikehendaki* (An Urgent for Changes in the Upbringing of Girls) published in *al-Ikhwan* magazine⁴⁴ about the urgency of the development of Malay women intellectuals. Besides, he criticized men and traditional culture which restricted women from obtaining proper education and focusing on their roles in private sphere in many of his writings.⁴⁵

Women's Right regarding Marriage and Divorce

In Islam, marriage is one of the most significant agreements which involve a man and a woman, by requiring both parties to have the freedom and capacity to consent. Al-Hadi believed that a successful marriage lies within the consent of females as a requirement of marriage. He used the main character of Faridah Hanom in

⁴⁴ Syed Syeikh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi, "Berubah Pemeliharaan Anak-Anak Perempuan itu Sangat- Sangat", in *Al-Ikhwan* (n.p. 1930), 43–48.

⁴⁵ Nur Nasrah Isahak & Adibah Abdul Rahim, "The Response of Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi (1867-1934) to Educational Concerns among the Malays in Malaya", *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 4(2) (2020): 51–68.

his novel to voice out the issue of arranged marriage, which occurred among the Malay society, and has led to negative consequences. This novel represented a revolution against the traditions that deprived women of their right to choose their husband.⁴⁶

Referring to the hadith that one lady reported to the Prophet about her father forcing the marriage,⁴⁷ al-Hadi used it as an evidence that the Malay culture of forced or arranged marriage is contradict to the Islamic teaching. Although in the hadith says that "her silence is her approval"⁴⁸, it is no longer a social norm in most cultures and a woman's silence can no longer be interpreted as her agreement.

Besides, al-Hadi also had his views on divorce. Considering the consensus of Muslim jurists that divorce is recommended only as a last resort with the support of religious texts such as Hadith saying that, "The most hated of permissible things to Allah is divorce".⁴⁹ But particularly in his novel, *Faridah Hanom*, he proposed that divorce is allowed with certain conditions, and women have their rights in demanding this option. However, al-Hadi was silent on the issue of polygamy.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Bahjat & Muhammad, "The Significance of the Arabic-Modelled Malay Novel, 245–261.

⁴⁷ It was narrated that Abu Hurairah said: "The Messenger of Allah said: "An orphan girl should be consulted with regard to marriage, and if she remains silent, that is her permission. If she refuses, then she is not to be forced." Al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan al-Nasā'ī* 4, Book 26, Ḥadīth 3272 and al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī* 2, Book 6, Ḥadīth 1109.

⁴⁸ It was narrated from Ibn 'Abbās that the Prophet said: "The guardian has no right (to force) the previously married woman (into a marriage). And an orphan girl should be consulted, and her silence is her approval." *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*

⁴⁹ *Sunan Ibn Mājah* 3, Book 10, Hadith 2018.

⁵⁰ Ibrahim Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya: The Life and Thought of Sayid Syekh Al-Hadi*, 152.

As far as this study observed, none of his writings have discussed on polygamy with unknown reason.

Women's Right in Political Participation

Islam has no objection that both male and female can participate in the politics. Al-Hadi brought this political right among women indirectly in his writings. For instance, Faridah Hanom as the main character of his novel articulated her sadness that colonisation gave huge impact on Muslim women to practice their rights respectively. Women were not given space and opportunity for them to speak, and political participation is one of the ways that can be used to express their voice.

In Islam, there are several reliable religious texts that approve women's political activities. Such as the Qur'anic verse 60:12,⁵¹ which was revealed in the conquest of Mecca when the Prophet took a pledge not only from men, but also from women. Women are still permitted to participate in the public sphere. Yet, allowing women to attain higher positions in public authorities' remains arguable. Other political rights that can be freely practised by Muslim women include rights to express opinion, entitlement to protection and care, to be involved in pledges of allegiance, and to participate in Jihad. These political rights have been practiced by women during the time of the Prophet as examples have been recorded in the book of *sīrah*.

⁵¹ "O Prophet! When believing women come to thee to take the oath of fealty to thee, that they will not associate in worship any other thing whatever with Allah, that they will not steal, that they will not commit adultery (or fornication), that they will not kill their children, that they will not utter slander, intentionally forging falsehood, and that they will not disobey thee in any just matter,- then do thou receive their fealty, and pray to Allah for the forgiveness (of their sins): for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."

Women's Right in Social Freedom

In this case, al-Hadi argued that women should be given freedom to mix and socialise with men, as long as both follow the Islamic guideline. It is important for women to discuss matters related to various aspects such as politics, economic, legal and others with different gender;⁵² to develop constructive discussion and to open their minds. This has been practiced by Faridah Hanom and Shafik Afandi in his novel because there were few scenes portraying both of them alone in a room and had secret meetings several times. Simultaneously, few people around them supported their actions. Although the dialogue between them was free from sexual intercourse, this kind of social freedom contradicts to the Islamic teaching.

The Prophet said, "No man is alone with a woman but the *shayṭān* is the third one present."⁵³ Any action taken between a man and a woman who loves one another has bigger chance to lead to adultery (*zinā*) which is not only limited to intercourse. It was narrated from Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet said: "Allah has decreed for every son of Adam his share of *zinā*, which he will inevitably commit. The *zinā* of the eyes is looking, the *zinā* of the tongue is speaking, one may wish and desire and the private parts confirm that or deny it." Thus, it is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an that anything leads to adultery is not permissible.⁵⁴

Women's Right in clothing and dressing

In al-Hadi's novel, Faridah Hanom was also described with her specific dress in details. She was illustrated in a scene wearing a tight suit of the same colour as her skin

⁵² Kasim, "Emansipasi Wanita Islam dalam Faridah Hanom, 114.

⁵³ Narrated by Ahmad (Book 2, Ḥadīth 32), al-Tirmidhī 4, Book 7, Ḥadīth 2165 and al-Ḥākim.

⁵⁴ "And do not come near to adultery, it is a shameful deed and an evil, and opening the road to other evils." Al-Isrā', 17:32.

with a purpose to test her lover's faith. This scene is shocking to the readers; especially among the conservatives.

This is because despite a woman who did not end up with a sexual scene, she had a bold goal and had the courage to expose her *'awrah* to a non-*mahram* or stranger. It indicates that al-Hadi wanted to describe a modern woman who was influenced with the Western ideology. Based on his view, the behaviour of a person especially a woman could not be measured by just looking at how she dresses. This can be seen in the character of Faridah Hanom, who was able to maintain her dignity regardless of her Western style dressing.

On the other hand, in *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, al-Hadi emphasised the importance of *hijāb* based on the authentic religious texts; particularly the Qur'an. He encouraged Muslim women to follow the right Islamic teaching without blindly following the custom practiced by previous generations.⁵⁵ However, the term *hijāb*⁵⁶ in his writing has inclination to the term *niqāb*⁵⁷ or *burqa*, which refers to the outer garment that covers most of the face except the eyes.

He had his own view in this type of garment by clarifying that it is a law specifically applied for the wives of the Prophet, which is not obligatory for all Muslim women.⁵⁸ In fact, many scholars agreed that there is no

⁵⁵ A.Sulaiman & E. A. Jamsari, "Pandangan Syed Sheikh al-Hadi Terhadap Isu Kelumbung (al-Hijab) dalam Kalangan Wanita Melayu", *Jurnal Majlis Islam Sarawak* 2(3) (2010), 27-42.

⁵⁶ *Hijāb* refers to the many varieties of headscarves which cover all of the hair, neck, and ears but leave the entire face exposed. In Malay, it is commonly translated as *tudung*. See: S. Hochel, "To Veil or Not to Veil: Voices of Malaysian Muslim Women", *Intercultural Communication Studies* 22(2) (2013), 40-57.

⁵⁷ *Niqāb* refers to face-veil where only eyes are visible. In Malay, it is commonly translated as *purdah*, but al-Hadi used *kelumbung*. See: Al-Hadi, *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, 79-96.

⁵⁸ Al-Hadi, *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, 99-105.

specific verse mentioned in the Qur'an for women to wear *niqāb* or *burqa*, but covering the 'aurah is compulsory for both men and women.⁵⁹

Women's Right from *Naqlī* and 'Aqlī Perspectives

Based on this analysis, it can be discovered that al-Hadi combined the revealed (*naqlī*) and acquired ('*aqlī*) knowledge to develop his own perception concerning women's issues. He was also among the earliest Muslim scholars who integrated both Islamic and modern perspectives in the Malay society; as he presented his idea of Islamic education integration like al-Faruqi.⁶⁰ The integration of both perspectives (*naqlī* and '*aqlī*) is an important benchmark used by al-Hadi in advocating women's right and releasing them from the conservative view, which limit their rights to the home affairs only.

In terms of *naqlī*, Qur'an is the highest authority where there are numerous verses promoting equality and accountability between men and women. It is the main reference used by al-Hadi in most of his writings. The role of Ḥadīth as the legal source in Islam was also not denied by al-Hadi. He cited many related hadith concerning women from authentic sources. As of '*aqlī* perspective, he referred to several sources from Muslim and Western scholars.

For example, his novel contains the opinion from the Mufti of Egypt government; and *al-Ikhwān* referred to Qāsim Amīn, Alphonse Daudet⁶¹, and history of women's

⁵⁹ Khalif Muammar A. Harris & Adibah Muhtar, "Konsep Kesetaraan Gender Menurut Perspektif Islam dan Barat", *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 21(2) (2019), 33–74. <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol21no2.2>

⁶⁰ Asran, M. A., Wan Zakaria, W. F. A., & Mohd Nizah, M. A., "The Integration of Education in Al-Hadi and Al-Faruqi", *The Social Sciences (Pakistan)* 10(1) (2015), 20–23; Asran, M. A., & Wan Zakaria, W. F. A., "Reformasi Pendidikan al-Hadi dan al-Faruqi", *Islamiyyat* 37(1) (2015), 39–48.

⁶¹ A French novelist (1840-1897).

revolution in Egypt, Turkey and Japan. The combination of both revealed (*naqli*) and acquired (*'aqli*) knowledge is significant to establish a balance between spiritual and material aspects of life for any issue including women's issues.

Conclusion

It is well-known that Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi has contributed not only in terms of literary works, but he translated his thought on religious, social, educational, and political aspects; both theoretically and practically. However, his contributions gave higher impacts in issues regarding women since there were not many scholars addressing this issue during his time, particularly in the Malay region.

Undeniably, al-Hadi's writings on women's emancipation and gender equality influenced many other Malay authors, such as Ahmad Rashid Talu in *Iakah Salmah* (1928), Keris Mas in *Korban Kesuciannya* (1949), Ahmad Lutfi in *Ustazah* (1950), A. Samad Said in *Salina* (1961), and Arena Wati in *Sandera* (1971). These male writers portray a woman as a progressive character which fights for their independence and freedom, far from stereotypical character of a weak woman.

In fact, books, novels and any publication supporting this women's rights; either directly or indirectly, have bigger influence in the society. This is because society need motivational and moral support from every angle that women having significant position in religion and nation, together with men.

To conclude, this study shows that al-Hadi's effort in advocating women's emancipation and gender equality did not contradict to the Islamic value. Although his views on particular issue were different with conservative and traditional customs, his proposal to the integration of Islamic and modern perspectives to improve the status of

Muslim women was acceptable and applicable to the Malay context.

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