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A Comparative Religious Concepts: Gender Equality in Islam and Buddha

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Abstract. This research is based on the author's discontent with the problems of inter-religious conflicts that frequently occur within communities. These issues often arise from mutual ignorance, leading to misunderstandings and triggering conflicts. The problems do not stop at violent conflicts but also intersect with gender issues, which still frequently occur, especially among minority communities. The role of religion itself becomes vital and urgent in raising awareness among its followers about what they collectively believe in. Therefore, it is hoped that this writing can present a new perspective that, both in Islam and Buddhism, there is an equal emphasis on the fair role of gender in the context of social life. To find out how religions interpret gender equality, this study trying to compare two religious concept on Islam and Buddha. The aim is to obtain what the ideal-moral on gender equality from Islam and Buddha, and concludes that both Islam and Buddhism share a concept of equality and the emancipation of women.

Keywords: Gender Relations; Comparative Religions; Comparation.

INTRODUCTION

Studies, research, discussions, and a variety of scientific activities concerning gender relations have been extensively conducted by various groups, including academics, activists, and grassroots communities. However, issues regarding gender problems still seem to be never-ending. Various assumptions have emerged in the search for the root causes of these problems. Feminist groups, being at the forefront of this issue, often point to patriarchy as the root and main cause. The patriarchal cultural roots are considered to have infiltrated and confused many people's thinking, leading the majority to still view women as a subordinate group, one level below men. These issues, in one of their branches, also influence the thinking of Islamic scholars and thinkers when considering or deciding on ijtihad and fatwas, which are then followed by many followers of these scholars. Religious leaders of other faiths also often perpetuate these patriarchal thought roots.

This problem has deeply rooted itself because many people ultimately fail to understand that their actions, no matter how small, can sometimes still be gender-biased. For instance, there is the belief that someone's competence is based on their gender, thereby ignoring the existence of nongendered individuals who can be competent in a field considered inconsistent with their gender role. Take, for example, the context of soccer, which is heavily associated with masculinity. Here, most people would think and assume that women could not be better than men, thus overlooking the presence of someone like Alexia Putellas, a woman who excels at soccer and has won numerous individual and club-level awards.(*How Brilliant Is UEFA, Ballon d'Or Award and World Cup Winner Alexia Putellas?* | *UEFA Women's Champions League* | *UEFA.Com*, n.d.)

The issue becomes far more complex than the simple matter of soccer when the discussion shifts to the position of religion in addressing gender problems. The relationship between women and religion seems to align with the nuanced statement by Moriz Winternitz, which suggests that women have always been friendly toward religion, but religion has not always been friendly to women.(Wijaya, 2004) This statement serves as a critique of religion because, in reality, the roles and positions of women are often made subordinate to men, or if analogized in writing, they only occupy the position of sub-chapters. In Islam, such a position can be observed in many gender relations that are considered unequal. This contradicts the concept of Islam as rahmatan lil alamin, a mercy for all worlds, not just for a particular group. We can examine verses regarding the creation of humans, inheritance rights, divorce rights, leadership, and so on. Women's positions are often seen as secondary or complementary, leading to the perception of injustice in religious practices and understandings. Currently, interpretations and explanations often take a male-centric perspective. For instance, the depiction of paradise filled with houris (heavenly maidens) caters to men's desires on earth, while paradise is not described in terms of what women might desire. This results in interpretations that are insensitive, unbalanced, and lacking empathy, often appearing to be heavily male-oriented.(Kodir, 2021)

The way or methods to rebuild the conceptual thinking about gender have been widely advocated by Islamic thinkers, from the modern to contemporary era. The presence of interpreters (*mufasir*) is also crucial due to their central position in the hierarchy of Islamic religious authority. Borrowing the term from Thomas Kuhn, who popularized the theory of paradigms, namely "shifting paradigm", by Professor Amin Abdullah argues that what is urgently needed today is to use this term in reading the heritage (*turats*). Let the ancient texts remain as they are, but when it comes to the perspective or paradigm used to reread these texts, it must develop and not remain monotonously fixed in the old classical paradigm.(Iwanebel, 2016) With this approach, the hope is that the texts will be revitalized as new meanings emerge that are relevant to contemporary contexts.

Simply put, the complexity of gender issues is often attributed to misunderstandings in how genders perceive each other, ironically often perpetuated by the misogynistic views of incompetent religious leaders who unfortunately have many followers. In this discussion, the author will attempt to outline some of the conceptions of gender justice that have actually existed within Islamic thought and have been widely reproduced in the form of articles, discussions, and lectures. However, due to a lack of highlight, they remain less renowned in society. By briefly comparing them with the teachings in Buddhism, which are often considered more gender-friendly, the author hopes to provide new insights to readers and the scholarly discourse on gender relations.

Several previous studies have extensively examined the concept of gender equality from a religious perspective. For example, Fatrawati Kumari's work. In her writing, she explains how the concept of gender equality is understood in major world religions, including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. She analyzes this using the Taoism-Islamic philosophy approach developed by Sachiko Murata, concluding that all these religions possess concepts of gender equality in accordance with their respective teachings.(Kumari, 2022) Then, there is a work by Jihan Abdullah, who seeks to elaborate on the concept of gender equality in Islam. She concludes that gender injustice must be eradicated because Islam aspires to establish equitable gender relations.(Abdullah, 2009) Lastly, there is a work by Fadhila Izzaty discussing the concept of gender equality in Buddhism. This work concludes that Buddhism embodies the concept of gender equality through the presence of Bhikkhunis in monasteries, signifying that Buddhism teaches not only men but also women.(Izzaty et al., 2021)

METHOD

This research is using library research type, as a method. Which is this research, obtains data using library literature, that written in the form of books, journals, and articles, that according with this main topic and object of the theme of research.(Meleong, 1989)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

At a Glance: Gender and Patriarchy

Gender in linguistic terms (etymologically) means sex.(Echols & Shadily, 1975) On "Webster's New World Disctionary", Gender is defined as "the visible differences between men and women, seen from the perspective of values and behavior".(Neufeldt & Sparks, 1989) In the Women's Studies Encyclopedia, it is explained that gender is a cultural concept that attempts to make distinctions in terms of roles, behavior, mentality, and emotional characteristics between men and women that develop within society. (Tierney, 1989) Hillary M. Lips on her famous books,

"Sex & Gender: An Introduction" defined gender as cultural expectations for women and men. (Lips, 2005) This view aligns with the general opinion of feminists such as Linda L. Lindsey, who consider all societal determinations regarding an individual as male or female to fall within the field of gender studies. "What a given society defines as masculine or feminine is a component of gender." (Lindsey, 2005)

H.T Wilson on his book, "Sex and Gender", define gender as a basis for defining the different contributions that man and woman make to culture and collective life by dint of which they are as man and women. (Wilson, 1989) Elaine Showalter defines gender as much more than just the distinction between men and women seen from a socio-cultural construction. She emphasizes it as an analytic concept that can be used to explain various phenomena. (Showalter, 1989)

According to Fatimah Usman, gender refers to non-natural issues involving the differentiation of tasks, functions, and roles assigned by society or culture to men and women, both in personal and social life. (Sukri, 2002) According to Zaitunah Subhan, gender is a concept used to identify the differences between men and women from a socio-cultural perspective. (Subhan, 2015) From the various definitions above, it can be concluded that gender is a concept used to identify the differences between men and women from a social and cultural perspective. In this sense, gender defines men and women from a non-biological standpoint. (Umar, 1999)

Patriarchy is a social system that places men as the primary authority figures central to social organization. Men hold higher positions than women in all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life.(Pinem, 2022) The father has authority over the mother, children, and property. Implicitly, this system institutionalizes male governance and privileges, demanding the subordination of women. It is even considered the cause of women's oppression. (Susanto, 2007)

Patriarchy is a concept used in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and feminist studies, to refer to the distribution of power between men and women, where men have advantages in one or more aspects. These aspects include determining lineage (exclusive patrilineal descent and carrying the family name), primogeniture rights, personal autonomy in social relationships, participation in public and political or religious status, or the attribution of various jobs to men and women as determined by the sexual division of labor.(Israpil, 2017)

Another definition suggests that patriarchy is a social system of gender relations characterized by gender inequality. Men monopolize all the existing roles.(Manurung et al., 2002) Gender relations are the social relations between men and women embedded within various social institutions and structures. The concept of patriarchy combines the concepts of gender relations and then evolves into two views. First, it encompasses the injustices often present in gender relations. Second, it draws attention to the interconnectedness of various different aspects of gender relations, which then form a social system.

At a Glance: Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha, lived and resided in Northern India around 2500 years ago. He was a central figure in the spread of the Buddhist religion, as well as the primary inspiration and founder of the Buddhist faith. The word "Buddha" essentially means "enlightened one" or "awakened one" regarding the nature and meaning of life itself. Buddha is a

designation and not a name. This term signifies someone who has reached enlightenment and embodies the ultimate spiritual condition, representing eternal happiness.(Stokes, 2000)

The figure of the Buddha is estimated to have lived around the period 563-483 BCE, although there is still debate among scholars regarding the exact timing of his life. He is believed to have been born on a full moon day in a place called Lumbini Garden, in Uttara, India. This event is said to have occurred on a hillside at the foothills of the Himalayas, in an area now known as Nepal. He enjoyed a comfortable life from birth due to his position as a prince, but eventually, he was moved to explore the meaning and significance of spiritual truth after witnessing the suffering inherent in life. In another version, according to Huston Smith, the historical facts known about the Buddha are that he was born around 560 BCE in Northern India, about a hundred miles from Benares (Varanasi). His father was a king, who, in the context of the time when India was not yet united, might be more accurately described as a feudal lord. The environment in which the Buddha lived could be likened to that of a Scottish nobleman's daughter in the Middle Ages. The Buddha's full name is Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakya clan. Siddhartha was his childhood name, Gautama came from his family name, and Sakya refers to his clan name. (Smith & Sloan, 2017)

Karen Armstrong discusses Buddhist texts, noting their vast quantity across Asia, which, if collected, could fill entire library shelves. She remarks that the writing of these texts is highly complex, and many of the sources are controversial. However, there is a general belief that the most useful texts as references are those written in Pali, which is a language with a dialect of Northern India. Its origin itself is unclear, but it appears to be related to the Magadha language, which was used by Siddhartha Gautama himself. (Armstrong, 2004) Buddhism itself is a religion that emerged around the sixth century BCE in Northern India, within the region of the Magadha Kingdom. It was taught and initiated by the Buddha or Siddhartha Gautama, who, according to his life story, initially practiced Hinduism like his parents. During his early years, he was secluded from society with the intention of protecting him from activities that might weaken his faith in his religion. He was not allowed to socialize or experience life outside the palace walls, receiving education that was isolated from the general public. (Arifin, 1991)

His father, King Suddhodana, was the ruler of the small kingdom of Kapilavastu in Northern India, bordering Nepal. During a time when India was fragmented by various political, social, and religious issues, the lives of the people were dominated by hardship. Until Gautama was sixteen years old, he lived in luxury and abundance within the palace and was married to his cousin. Although he was not allowed to venture outside the palace grounds, he could still see the lives of the common people through the palace windows, witnessing their suffering and misery as the poor lay on the streets afflicted with various illnesses. This became a turning point in his thinking, realizing that such conditions needed to be changed. (Romdlon, 1988)

According to the teachings of Buddha, what distinguishes one person from another is their character formed by their everyday behavior. Meanwhile, Buddhist social ethics emphasize that everyone must fulfill their duties and responsibilities according to their social position, determined by their relationship with other members of society, based on moral principles. Thus, individuals will achieve prosperity, wealth, and happiness within society. Conversely, those who do not fulfill

their duties, positions, and responsibilities within society are unworthy of recognition or social status. To fulfill their duties and responsibilities to the best of their ability, Buddhism adheres to and practices teachings on goodness (*dharma*). More than that, social norms of behavior serve as the root or foundation that will produce what is called social emotions, which awaken social consciousness in humans, nurture moral and spiritual bonds in social relationships, cultivate and strengthen social relationships, and thus create happiness in life within society.

The Concept of Gender Equality on Islam

Gender concept indeed originated from the West in the mid-19th century. This concept developed in the Western world, Europe, and America; it flowed so quickly and continued to evolve. The influence of this gender concept can create friction in the relations between men and women in all areas. In the Islamic world, the highest authority is the holy book, the Quran, believed by every Muslim to be the word of Allah SWT conveyed to Prophet Muhammad SAW through the angel Gabriel and then transmitted to his companions. And what we witness today is the authentic holy book (regardless of human ignorance) as a guarantee of the purity and sanctity of the Quran forever. (Subhan, 2015)

In relation to the issue of men and women, the fundamental principle of the Quran actually demonstrates its egalitarian view. Several verses of the Quran and hadiths that express this principle can be read, for example:

O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may 'get to' know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. (QS. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13)

Whoever does good, whether male or female, and is a believer, We will surely bless them with a good life, and We will certainly reward them according to the best of their deeds. (QS. An-Nahl [16]: 97)

The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakāh and obey Allāh and

His Messenger. Those - Allāh will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allāh is Exalted in Might and Wise.

(QS. At-Taubah [9]: 71)

Prophet Muhammad PBUH also conveyed about gender justice in one of his hadith narrations:

النِّسَاءُ شَقَائِق الرِّجَلِ. أخرجه أبو داود والترمزي.

The womens are men's siblings. (HR. Abu Dawud dan Tirmidzi). (Abu Dawud, n.d.)

The descent of the Quranic verses and the statements of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) can be viewed as a truly spectacular and revolutionary step. It not only transformed the structure of Arab society at that time but also deconstructed the pillars of civilization, culture, and traditions that were discriminatory and misogynistic and had been practiced by previous societies for so long. In the pre-Islamic era, the value of women was very low. They were considered as objects or possessions that could be treated in any way. In fact, giving birth to a daughter was often seen as something shameful, and it was only tolerated if the child was buried alive.

In many legal practices, the value of women was half that of men. Legal treatment of women was highly discriminatory. By Islam, misogynistic and discriminatory views and practices were then changed and replaced with fair and humane views. Islam gradually restored the autonomy of women as independent human beings. (Muhammad, 2001) Umar bin Khattab has known (before converting to Islam) to buried alive his daughter's, also said:

We initially did not consider (respect or regard) women at all. When Islam came, and God mentioned them, we realized that they also have rights over us. (al-Bukhari, 1987) **The Concept of Gender Equality on Buddhism**

The teachings of Buddha emerged as a form of resistance to the domination of Hinduism, where the understanding of Brahmanism as the highest caste system in India at that time was very strong, and it relegated women to secondary beings. In Brahmanism at that time, women were prohibited from performing worship, except with the status of being a 'part of the husband'. Studying sacred texts was also forbidden for women unless through serving and being loyal to a husband. Due to the prevailing social norms where women had to be attached to a man, women were compelled to marry. Upon entering marriage, women could not stop or escape from fear. Women were still haunted by the obligation to bear sons because only sons could perform the final religious ceremonies for their parents so their souls could enter heaven. Thus, women were burdened with marriage and maternal status.(Kabilsingh, 1997)

Buddha emerged not only to liberate from caste but also to free from gender differences. Buddhism liberates all the heavy burdens of women by providing them with equal status and opportunities as men. Women, whether maidens, widows, or married, are treated equally as men, whereas previously they faced discrimination. Women are given the same rights and opportunities to attain the highest spiritual excellence by becoming nuns or bhikkhunis. The Buddha regarded women as having equal potential with men to achieve enlightenment or spiritual salvation. Some of the best nuns were praised by the Buddha for their achievements both in teaching and in obeying the monastery rules. The liberation of women from negative social values can be found in Buddhist texts about the Tripitaka. (Kabilsingh, 1997)

The principle of equality in Buddhism is exemplified by Dhammasiri through a story he quotes from a text and writes about in a book. Dhammasiri recounts the story of King Pasenadi, who met the Buddha and sadly told him that his newborn child was a girl. At that time, the Buddha responded with the following verse:

"The woman, o my king

Can be better than Man

She can be wise and have more morality

Can be loyal wife, compliant to the in-laws

The child she gave birth to

Can be a hero, o my king

That noble daughter

Can become the ruler of the world." (Dhammasiri, 2004)

The verse demonstrates the perspective and attitude of the Buddha, who believed that birth does not determine a person's status. It is one's outlook on life and behavior that determines their position of nobility. Gender equality in Buddhism can be seen from the teachings of the Buddha.(Kumari, 2022) The status and role of women in Buddha Dhamma are equal to those of men, as both men and women are regarded as human beings, and their worth and strength are determined by their behavior, not their gender. The Buddha taught the Dharma to anyone willing to listen, regardless of their gender or caste. The Buddha came to elevate the status and role of women in various aspects. He liberated women from various forms of violence prevalent at that time. The Buddha always treated women with kindness and respect, showing them the path to peace and purity. The structural changes made by the Buddha in society at that time brought about the emancipation of women. The caste systems that looked down upon women were abolished by Siddhartha.

On the Anguttara Nikaya books, verses 280-283, explained that "Women can become a ruler of the wheel-turning monarch, a woman can occupy the position of Sakka, a woman can occupy the position of Maradan, and a woman can occupy the position of Brahma." (Buddha, 1999)

Buddha says that "Kammam satte vibhajati yadidam hinappanitataya", that means, "The distinction between each being, coarse or refined, is determined by their own behavior." (MN: 135). After the advent of Buddha Gautama, women were greatly honored and placed on equal footing with men. Buddha also stated: "*If a woman were not inferior or less excellent than a man, she would give birth to another Buddha*."

CONCLUSION

In terms of gender justice, the positions of Islam and Buddhism are similar when drawn from their primary sources in discussing the concept of gender justice. Both hold the view that men and women are equal, and the difference lies in their respective virtuous deeds. Thus, upon examination, both religions provide foundational arguments for the understanding of gender relations, wherein both genders have equal rights and responsibilities to perform virtuous deeds on Earth.

Secondly, both of these religions were introduced by two revolutionary figures in their respective times regarding gender issues. Prophet Muhammad emerged among the ignorant Arabs who had extremely cruel and horrifying customs towards women at that time. Female infants were allowed to be buried alive, women were regarded as mere property that could be married in any number, inherited, and even divorced and remarried multiple times without limitations. These practices were undoubtedly harsh and deprived women of their freedom.

The existence of the caste system in Hinduism itself divided humanity, and those in the lower castes felt as if their basic human rights were stripped away. The caste system particularly deprived women of their rights, relegating them only to domestic duties and prohibiting them from engaging in honorable work, leading to various forms of discrimination. Then, the emergence of Buddha boldly broke and transformed the system, ultimately restoring women's rights as they should be.

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