VIOLATIONS OF THE GENDER EQUALITY PRINCIPLES REVEALED IN CARMEN BIN LADIN’S INSIDE THE KIGDOM

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Abstrak

This paper analyzed the theme of violations of the gender equality principles in Carmen’s Bin Ladin’s Inside the Kingdom. The best seller novel was based on the true story of the author’s life in Saudi Arabia under the gender prohibitions of Wahhabi custom. The analytical perspective adopted in this study is shaped by the idea of Islamic feminism. The analysis resulted in the finding that gender problem revealed in the novel was due to the violations of the gender equality principles. The violations of the gender equality principles included the practice of honor killing, women’s face covering, the construction of women’s inferiority, the prohibition of entering mosque for women, segregation of sexes, divorced women’s getting no child custody rights, no obligation of educating women, forced marriage, temporary marriage, female genital mutilation and improper polygamy practice. In conclusion, the women depicted in the novel are not truly treated according to the gender equality principles.

Key words: gender equality principles, Islamic feminism, Inside the Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

Today more women are involved in the discussion and reformation of identity than any other time in the human history. Therefore, people might think of feminism as a recent phenomenon. However, Weiner (1994) argues that feminism has a very long history and every era has had its women movement. Moreover Fadl (1991) asserted that gender and gender related issues have attended the conception of the earliest human society.

While gender and gender related issue should be viewed as far from new, what is modern, as Fadl points out, is the emergence of the gender debate and the interest of academia in “gender studies”. Further he suggests that learning about Muslim society and about gender relation in particular is part of the modern encounter of the west with Islam.

The issue of women in Islam is highly controversial. It is commonly assumed that women are particularly oppressed in Muslim societies and the oppression has something to do with Islam (Fadl, 1991). However, Ragab quoted in Wahab (1997) warns that this is not due to Islamic ideology but misapplication of the ideology in the societies. She also argues that much of the practices and laws of Muslim countries have, to some degree, based on the cultural and traditional customs. Further, Wahab (1997) says that Islam claims to value gender equality and equity because The Quran and Sunna clearly reveal women’s role and responsibilities as well as their rights and opportunities.
Warhol and Herndl quoted in Green and Lebihan (1996), argue that gender leaves its traces in literary texts including novel. In this study, the novel entitled Inside the Kingdom by Carmen Bin Ladin is the topic under discussion. Inside the Kingdom, The International Best Seller Novel in 2004 is based on the true story of the author. In the story, the gender issues are highlighted. It tells us about how the women live in Saudi Arabia. The objective of this study was to describe the violation of the gender equality principles revealed in Inside the Kingdom. Since this study is constructed within the Islamic perspective which has not been adequately explored, it would give the readers some new viewpoints on the topic under discussion which might be different from the mainstream.

Fadl (1991) states that to truly understand the gender in Muslim societies, Muslim cultures and tradition against Islamic standards need to be referred, instead of the standard assumptions and theoretical practices which have been established in other traditions, especially in the West.

Abou Bakr (1999) emphasizes on the need to use The Qur'an and the authenticated Sunna as referential framework in looking at the gender in Muslim Societies. She makes us aware that the concepts and notions of gender in the societies have developed historically as a result of a very complicated process of acculturation or, sometimes, as a result of pre-Islamic ideas that considerably influenced religious thought.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION
Several issues related to the method are presented as follow:

Object of the Study
The object of the study is the text of the international best seller novel entitled Inside the Kingdom by Carmen Bin Laden. This 206-page novel was published in 2004 by Warner Book. The novel is divided into 19 chapters. The novel tells us about the author’s life in Saudi Arabia.

Data of the Study
The data available in this novel text is in form dialogue, phrases, sentences and the explicit or implicit utterances found in the novel.

Procedure of Collecting the Data
The procedure of collecting the data includes reading, identifying, classifying and inventorying. They are elaborated as follows.

Procedure of Data Analysis
The data are analyzed to gain the objective of the study. Since it is qualitative study, the data are analyzed using several techniques. The topic under discussion is attributed to the gender issue in Muslim society setting, therefore the analytical perspective adopted for this study principally shaped by the ideas within Islamic feminism.

There are also several techniques used in analyzing the data to solve the problems. Firstly, the data are exposed to reveal the context. Secondly, in order to find the violations of the gender equality principles, the data were compared to the gender equality principles. Since the principles are derived from the Islamic standards, it is necessary to refer to the
verses of The Qur’an and the Sunna. After comparing, the next step is making conclusion. The description and explanations of the data are presented in the analysis. Based on analysis, some conclusions can be drawn in order to answer the statement of the problem.

RESULT

The gender problem was caused by the absence of equal condition between men and women in the setting or in other words there are violations of the gender equality principles. The violations revealed in the novel are described in the following analysis.

Honor Killing

The datum below reveals how women who are considered to bring dishonor to their families are forced to pay a terrible price at the hand of the family members. The Datum is given as follows:

Nonetheless, Mish’al had been caught. I don’t know how. And her Grandfather, Prince Mohamed, the brother of the king Khaled, had ordered her killed, for bringing shame on her family. King Khaled apparently resisted his brother’s order, but prince Mohamed had insisted that she be killed, and he was the patriarch of his clan. There was no trial, I was told. Mish’al was shot six times in a parking lot downtown (Datum number 110).

In the above datum, the author recounts the tragic story of a girl named Mis’al. Mis’al was one of the King’s great nieces. Although she was still young, her family had arranged to marry her off to a much older man. She had tried to flee the country with her lover. Unfortunately she had been captured in the airport and then killed.

The idea behind the practice is closely related to the root of the culture of the setting. The author puts the matter in the novel as the following datum illustrates:

In Bedouin culture, clan loyalty is all you can count on. As nomads, Bedouins travel light; the family is the anchor of the tribe. Women and camels are Bedouin’s tribe’s only possession. Ruthless is a positive value in the desert. And honor, for reason I cannot even begin to fathom, does not come from compassion, or good works—it is focused on the absolute possession of women. Women are not free to have emotion, such as love and longing. A disobedient woman dishonors her clan and is eliminated (Datum number 113).

We can see that “honor killings” reflects the men domination toward women who are regarded as nothing more than possession, both physically and symbolically.

The Requirement to Cover Almost All of the Women’s Body (Women’s Face Covering)

Women in Saudi Arabia are required to dress in what so-called Abaya. From the following datum, we may assume that the Abaya is a kind of dress for women that almost completely cover the whole body including the face. The datum reads: “This time, as we
circled the airport, I had a proper thin silk Saudi Abaya to put over my head, my eyes, my hands, and every inch of my body (Datum number 65).

To analyze the data related to the modesty, the Brochure Series published by The Institute of Islamic Information and Education (...) provides us with the information on the matter. It reads that Islam has no fixed standard as to the style of dress or type of clothing that Muslim must wear. However, some requirements must be met. The first of these requirements deals with part of the body which must be properly covered. As quoted in the brochure, the following is the Sunna related to the requirements:

Ayesha (R) reported that Asmaa the daughter of Abu Bakr (R) came to messenger of Allah (pbuh) while wearing a thin clothing. He approached her and said: ‘O Asamaa! When a girl reaches menstrual age, it is not proper that anything should remain exposed except this and this. He pointed to the face and hands (Abu Dawood).

The Construction of Women’s Inferior Status

From the following datum, we learn that women in the setting are subjected to the inferior status. The datum reads:

The certainty of women’s inferior status and subservience is bred into their bones as they grew. In the car, Haifa’s older son –who was only ten or twelve- would instruct her sharply to veil if saw men coming. Little girl knew they must walk, dress, and talk unobtrusively. They had to be submissive, docile, and obedient: it was common to see a young boy walk into a room and motion his older sister off her chair (Datum number 124).

Through the datum above, it was depicted that the society values women as inferior gender and women are not worth respects.

The extreme attitude showing such value is visible when the author as the employer ordered her Sudanese workers. She asked him to do something for her but he refused to do it just because the employer was a woman as the following datum shows: ‘I repeated my self. I raised my voice. Finally he turned his head slightly, still not facing me. ‘I do not take order from women,” he growled (Datum number 101).

As it is narrated in the story, the Sudanese kept on ignoring the Author’s order until the secretary of the author had insisted that he should do the order.

The similar assumption was also held by the society in general. The author experienced the turmoil when she was expecting a baby. Living in the society in which having male baby was such an issue, she expected that her baby would be a boy. She illustrates that longing for a boy was just a whim that occupied her in those last weeks of pregnancy as shown in the following datum:

I knew now that in Saudi Arabia it was vital that I have a son (Datum number 93.

For Saudi women, having male heirs has something to do with her status in the society as the following datum illustrates:”For Saudis women, it is essential to
produce male heirs. It is not just a question of your personal status in society (Datum number 91)".

In the above datum we learn that male gender is somehow preferable than female. Further, she said that in the society of the setting since reproducing male heir is essential, married women feel their personal status when they are called by the name of their son. Even the author herself never called her mother in law by her name but by the name of her oldest son as shown in the datum given below:

I always called my mother in law Om Yeslam. She had a name of her own, of course, but it was never used. Like most women in the kingdom, she took the name of her eldest son. (if she has only daughters, a Saudi woman carries the name of her first born- until a son comes, and his name supersedes his sister’s) (Datum number 31).

The value of women inferiority is also implied in the attitude of the male workers who seemed to regard that women’s jobs were low in quality, as the author perceived from the attitude of her male workers living in her compound. The workers scorned what they consider women’s work as exemplified by the following datum: “The man who lived there went home to see their wives and families perhaps once every two years. They scorned what they considered women’s work (Datum number 99)”.

Since inferiority is constructed in the society of the setting, the women’s dependency to men is prescribed. Women have no right to decide or to choose. Without the husband’s permission, a wife in Saudi Arabia can not do anything as illustrated in the following datum:

A wife in Saudi Arabia cannot do anything without her husband’s permission. She cannot go out, cannot study, often cannot eat at his table. Women in Saudi Arabia must live in obedience, in isolation, and in the fear that they might be cast out and summarily divorced (Datum number 78).

The attitudes described above surely violate the gender equality principles that women are also entitled to the same dignity as men. The Qur’an is explicit in its emphasis on the equality of women and men before God: “Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he/she male or female: you are members one of another..(The Qur’an 3:195)

The Prohibition of Entering Mosque for Women

We learn from the novel that in Saudi Arabia, women were not allowed to enter the mosque. The prohibition is illustrated in the following datum: “We were not permitted to pray in public space- we were women. In Saudi Arabia women are not permitted to step into a mosque (Datum number 46)”.

To analyze the datum related to the women’s right on the access of mosque, we may refer to the Sunna that Prophet (pbuh) granting the permission to women to attend the mosque and pray behind the row of men. The Prophet, (pbuh) is reported to have said: "Don’t
stop women from going to mosques at night”. It is also reported that He even advised the companions: “Do not prevent the female servant of Allah from going to the mosque”. And husbands were specifically told by him: “When your womenfolk asked you for permission to attend the mosque do not prevent them”.

Segregation

It is revealed in the novel that women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to go to the public space as they please because of the segregation of the sexes. The segregation leads to many other prohibitions and prescriptions. One of the consequences is that the society prescribes that women of quality could not shop as the following datum shows: “But Bin Laden women could not shop—men might see her (Datum number 43)”.

Another prohibition related to the segregation is that women are not allowed to drive a car. The following datum exemplifies the prohibition: “There was no reason to go out, and in any case we could not go out: and legally could not drive (Datum number 74)”

Relating this to the gender equality principles, the prohibitions are considered as violations of the principles that women have the right to participate in public affair as the following verse of The Qur’an quoted in Badawi (1995) reveals:

The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His apostle. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise (Qur’an 9:71).

The following verse of The Qur’an quoted in Badawi (1995) also clearly bears out that woman can go out of their houses:

"O Prophet! tell your wives and daughters and the women of the believers to lower their outer garments on their persons. That is likely to allow them to be recognised and by consequence, not be molested, and God is most Forgiving and most kind” (Al Ahzab, 59).

Islam does not call for segregation between men and women. Al Turabi’s article Women in Islam and Muslim Society (http://www.jannah.org/sisters/turabi.html) shows us that there is no segregation of sexes in public area. He exemplifies one of the evidence that women can engage in business and commerce in the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) as follows:

Take the case of Qailah Umm-Bani Atmar, one of the merchant ladies. She said, "I am a woman who buys and sells”. (Al Isabah). Umar Ibn Al Khattab delegate the supervision of administrative market affairs to Shaff’a bint Abdullah bin Abd Shams. Umar used to seek her advice and respect her (Al-Isabah). Islam does not call for segregation between men and women (Turabi, ….).
Divorced Women’s Getting No child Custody Right

From the novel we are assured that it was the custom that when a women is divorced, the child custody will automatically go to the father. It is illustrated in the following datum: “If I had been in Saudi Arabia, the divorce could have been so simple. It would have been over in less than half day, and I would lose my children forever (Datum number 141)”. If we relate this to the gender equality principles, we can assume this is another kind of violation. In ideal marriage men and women are equal. They have right and responsibility and child custody is among those rights that also go to women. In the following hadith quoted in Ideals and role models for women in Qur'an, Hadith and Sirah (published by Islamic.org), we note how Propet (pbuh) solves the case related to child custody dispute by asking the child: “This is your father and this is your mother, so take whichever of them you wish by the hand (Abu Dawud, Nasa’i, Darimi)”. 

No Obligation of Educating Women

Having awareness on the custom of the society where they were living, the author thinks that there is great possibility that her two daughters may not get education because they are women as the following datum: “Unless I had a son, I would need a brother in law’s approval to leave the country, or even Jedda. Wafah and Najia could be denied an education, or married to a person of their guardian’s choosing, without any input of me (Datum number 95)”. “To this day, there is no legal obligation to educate girls in Saudi Arabia. Many Saudi men do not send their daughters to school, and very few of them feel it is important (Datum number 122)”. Relating this to the gender equality principle, women’s right is denied in the case presented in the above datum because education and knowledge is more than just a right. Seeking knowledge is a mandate upon men and women in Islam. The concept is clearly stated in one of the Prophet’ (pbuh) sayings quoted in Badawi (1995): “To seek knowledge is duty for every Muslim”.

Forced Marriage

As described in the novel, women in the setting also have to accept the fact that their guardian could also decide whom they would marry. From the novel, we can see that the author worried about her daughter’s future. She was scared of thinking that this would happen to her daughters as shown in the following datum: “Unless I had a son, I would need a brother in law’s approval to leave the country, or even Jedda. Wafah and Najia could be denied an education, or married to a person of their guardian’s choosing, without any input of me (Datum number 95)”. Relating this to the gender equality principle, we may assume that women’s right is violated. One of recorded sayings of the Prophet (pbuh) quoted in Badawi (1997) told us that to consult the marital proposal is a must in Islamic marriage as illustrated below: Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of Allah, and she reported that her father had
forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice (Between accepting the marriage or invalidating it) (Ahmad). Another version of the report states that "the girl said: 'Actually, I accept this marriage, but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right to force a husband on them.'" (Ibn-Majah).

Temporary Marriage

From the novel we learn that in Saudi Arabia men can set a marriage contract for a period of time. In addition, this concept of marriage is considered legal as the following datum illustrates:

After many years of living in Saudi Arabia I learned that, in addition to maintaining wives and divorced wives, Sheikh Mohamed sometimes chose to establish contact with semi wives. The practice of *serah*-what we would call concubines, though the word is not perfect one- is not well regarded in Saudi Arabia, and it is something you encounter rather rarely, but it has always been legal. Probably because in Islam no child illegitimate, it was long ago established that man could set up a contract with a girl, or her father, for a kind of limited marital arrangement. The marriage last an hour or a lifetime, according to the contract. Whatever the relationship, the semi-wife does not inherit wealth on man’s death (Datum number 81).

In the above datum, the temporary marriage is called “*serah*”. The practice has another term among the Islamic law school called *mut’a*. To describe how the practice leads the injustice for women, I found the explanation from one of the Islamic law school arguments (http://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/muta/5.htm). One of the arguments is as follows:

……because it excludes such things as inheritance, divorce, sworn allegation, forsweoring, and *zihar*. Since these necessary concomitants of marriage do not apply to *mut’a*, it cannot be considered marriage, so the woman cannot be considered a legitimate wife. If she is neither a wife nor property, sexual intercourse with her is illegitimate: 'Prosperous are the believers, who. ..guard their private parts, save from their wives and what their right hands own. ..; but whosoever seeks after more than that, those are the transgressors' (23:1-7). Hence, persons who engage in *mut’a* transgress God's law.

Female Genital Mutilation

Women issue presented in the novel also includes the practice of female circumcision (Female Genital Mutilation). The practice is revealed in the datum: “One time I read a magazine article about female circumcision- the horrible practice of mutilating girls’ genital, which is still common in Egypt and parts of West Africa (Datum number 105).

Islam refers the the sexual relationship in marriage as one of “mutual satisfaction” that is considered a mercy from Allah (swt). The verse is given as follows: “It is lawful for you to go in unto your wives during the night preceding the (day's) fast: they are as a garment
for you and you are as a garment for them (2:187)...and He has put love and mercy between you (The Qur’an, 30:21)“.

Polygamy

Monogamy—one husband, one wife— is the norm for marriage in Islam. However, as it is revealed in the novel, we can see that in the society of the setting, it is common for men to practice polygamy as the following datum exemplifies:

Some of the Saudi princess, whom I met then, and later, lived lives of such decadence and inertia that it was hard not to feel disgust. They were brought up in complete obedience and absolute foolishness. Some were married to men who had several wives, and they had little to do with their husbands. A few had been divorced. Their children were cared for by battalions of maids and household personnel, and tough those princes lacked for nothing in terms of material possession, they also had nothing to do (Datum number 135).

To describe how the practice of polygamy violates the gender equality principles, we can refer to the following verse of The Qur’an quoted in the article published by the Coalition on women’s right in Islam (2003). The verse related to the polygamy is as follows:

And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with your wives) then marry only one”. The Qur’an imposes limitations upon the then-existing practice of polygamy and is the only scripture to contain the phrase “marry only one” (The Qur’an, 4: 3).

Further, it argues that monogamy is the norm of Islamic marriage. The argument is as follows:

The Qur’an imposes limitations upon the then-existing practice of polygamy and is the only scripture to contain the phrase "marry only one”. The norm is also supported by the fact that: the Prophet (pbuh) was monogamous for more than 25 years, i.e. throughout the lifetime of his first wife Siti Khadija (r.a.) and that his polygamous marriages after her death were to widowed or divorced women for political and tribal reasons. The only virgin he married was his second wife, Aishah (r.a.).

There is also an authentic Tradition that the Prophet (Pbuh) forbade his son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib (r.a.) from marrying another woman unless Ali first divorced the Prophet's daughter, Fatimah (r.a.), A great-granddaughter of the Prophet (pbuh), Sakinah binti Hussein, a granddaughter of Ali and Fatimah, put various conditions in her marriage contract, including the condition that her husband would have no right to take another wife during their marriage.
However, we note that the exercise of polygamy is utilized by the society in the setting to facilitate sexual desire rather than under extraordinary circumstances as the datum given below:

Islam permits a man to marry four wives, and most Saudis are content to marry one or two or most. But like a few of the royal princess, Sheikh Muhammad swelled the rank of is wives by divorcing older omen and marrying new ones as the whim took him (Datum number 76).

CONCLUSION

The violations were the results of the practices and laws of the society of the setting summarized as follows: honor killing, the requirement to cover almost all of women’s body (women’s face covering), the women inferiority constructed in the society, segregation, denying women’s access into mosque, denying divorced women’s right for child custody, women are denied from their right for education, forced marriage, temporary marriages, female genital mutilation, and polygamy.

The findings lead us to the conclusion that in the society setting of the novel in which Islam is used to legitimize its government, women are not truly treated according to the gender equality principles revealed in the Islamic standards.

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