

Cultivating Feminist Hermeneutics As The Interpretation Of Al-Qur'an: A Comparative Study Between Asghar Ali Engineer And Muhammad Al-Ghazali

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengkaji ide dan pemikiran Asghar Ali Engineer dan Muhammad al-Ghazali, khususnya mengenai rekonstruksi metodologi tafsir mereka terkait ayat-ayat gender serta penerapan dan implikasi teoritis dari metode yang mereka bangun. Sebagai pejuang teologi pembebasan dan pejuang hak-hak perempuan, kedua tokoh tersebut berusaha membela perempuan dengan menafsirkan al-Qur'an berdasarkan kesetaraan gender dan mencoba mengkritik penafsiran ulama klasik yang atomistik. Artikel ini merupakan studi komparatif pada karya Asghar Ali Engineer dan Muhammad al-Ghazali. Pendekatan yang dilakukan adalah menggunakan deskriptif-analitis. Dalam penelitian ini, setidaknya saya menemukan bahwa Asghar Ali Engineer menggunakan tiga metode penting: historis, sosiologis-antropologis, dan filosofis. Di sisi lain, al-Ghazali menggunakan pendekatan yang lebih tradisional-progresif: Membaca teks dan realitas, mengontekstualisasikan makna teks lebih lanjut, dan memisahkan ayat-ayat dinamis dari ayat-ayat statis. Selanjutnya, menerapkan hermeneutika feminis pada ayat-ayat al-Qur'an yang dilakukan oleh kedua tokoh tersebut sangat menentang diskriminasi dan ketidakadilan terhadap perempuan.

Kata Kunci: *Feminis; Hermeneutika; Interpretasi; Poligami; Wanita*

Abstract

This paper examines the ideas and thoughts of Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali, especially regarding the reconstruction of their tafsir methodology related to gender verses and the application and theoretical implications of the method they built. As fighters for liberation theology and fighters for women's rights, both figures try to defend women by interpreting al-Qur'an based on gender equality and trying to criticize the interpretation of classical scholars who are atomistic. This article is a comparative study based on the works of Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali. At the same time, the approach taken is using descriptive-analytical. In this study, at least I found that Asghar Ali Engineer uses three essential methods: historical, sociological-anthropological, and philosophical. On the other hand, al-Ghazali uses a more traditionalist-progressive approach: Reading text and reality, contextualizing the meaning of the text further, and separating dynamic verses from static verses. Furthermore, applying feminist hermeneutics to the verses of al-Qur'an carried out by the two figures strongly opposes discrimination and injustice against women.

Keywords: *Feminist; Hermeneutics; Interpretation; Polygamy; Woman*

Introduction

The disparities between men and women continue to present several issues, particularly concerning their roles and significance in society. While the clear biological differences between them exist, these distinctions can sometimes lead to unfair treatment for one gender. These physical dissimilarities give rise to various cultural ideas, shaping what we refer to as gender. Consequently, when cultural interpretations of sex lead to imbalances in assigning societal roles, it results in gender inequality.¹

This is based on the phenomenon of conservative scholars reinterpreting misogynistic texts, disregarding the importance of gender justice values. Moreover, these interpretations have become widely accepted by the public. Removing this influence is challenging since it has deeply embedded itself in the modern generation. Thus, when examining the understanding of the

¹Atik Wartini, "Tafsir Feminis M.Quraish Shihab: Telaah Ayat-Ayat Gender dalam Tafsir al-Misbah", *Jurnal Studi Gender*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2013, 473-494. (DOI: 10.21043/palastren.v6i2.995).

fundamental rights of Islam, this statement seems irrelevant. The core message of Islam is to humanize all individuals through the concept of tawhid, as taught by Prophet Muhammad Saw. This teaching emphasizes the equal humanization of both men and women, as they hold the same degree and status before God, with the only distinction being their level of devotion.²

Amid the growing prevalence of gender-related concerns, some scholars such as Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali emerged, endeavoring to reconstruct the methodology of interpreting al-Qur'an to foster a gender-sensitive perspective. Numerous works on feminist hermeneutics have been penned from different angles, including the contributions of Irsyadunnas³, Inayah Rohmaniyah⁴, and Agus Nuryatno⁵, who examined the influence of feminist hermeneutics on Engineer's thinking. Engineer believes that Qur'anic interpretation must consider three key elements: the concept of Qur'anic liberation, challenging patriarchy, and categorizing verses into normative and sociological contexts. Furthermore, Wardatun Nadhiroh⁶ and Parluhutan Siregar⁷ made significant contributions in reconstructing Muhammad al-Ghazali's thoughts. They argue that al-Ghazali's hermeneutic style resembles Gadamer's, renowned for his four core theories: Effective Historical Awareness, Pre-Understanding, Fusion of Horizon, and Application.

Through a comprehensive literature review, it becomes apparent that no one has explored the comparative approach between Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali regarding their methodologies for interpreting al-Qur'an using a feminist hermeneutic approach. This represents a novel and meaningful contribution to the study of Qur'anic interpretation.

I will argue that both Engineer and al-Ghazali share a similarity in their hermeneutical approaches, which involves interpreting the Quran not solely through its textual dimensions, but also by considering the contextual aspects inherent within the Quranic text itself. However, despite these similarities, they also exhibit distinct differences in their interpretations. For instance, Engineer tends to adopt a more philosophical approach in comprehending the Quranic texts, whereas al-Ghazali emphasizes the observation of empirical phenomena and the opinions of experts in fields such as astronomy and medicine.

To gain a deeper understanding of these two figures, this article poses several key questions. How do Engineer and al-Ghazali interpret al-Qur'an? To what extent do they apply feminist interpretation in their approaches? What are the distinctions and commonalities in their feminist hermeneutics?

Method

This research includes qualitative research with data from library sources, so it is classified as library research. The data to be studied consists of two groups: primary and secondary. Primary data is data from Asghar Ali Engineer, especially those related to feminist issues, including *The*

²Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Qira'ah Mubadalah: Tafsir Progresif untuk Keadilan Gender dalam Islam* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2019), 440.

³Irsyadunnas, "The Hermeneutic Thoughts of Ashgar Ali Engineer in The Interpretation of Feminism", *Jurnal Ushuluddin*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2017, 1-18. (DOI: 10.20414/jush.v25i1.2120).

⁴Inayah Rohmaniyah, *Poligami atau Monogami? Menggagas Penafsiran Asghar Ali Engineer Terhadap Q.S Al-Nisa' (4):3* (Yogyakarta: UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2001), 1-14.

⁵Agus Nuryatno, "Examining Asghar Ali Engineer's Qur'anic Interpretation of Women in Islam", *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2007, 389-414. (DOI: 10.14421/ajis.2007.452.389-414).

⁶Wardatun Nadhiroh, "Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an Muhammad Al-Ghazali (Telaah Metodologis atas Kitab Nahwa Tafsir Maudhu'i li Suwar al-Qur'an al-Karim)", *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Quran Dan Hadis*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2014, 281-298.

⁷Parluhutan Siregar, "Hermeneutika Muhammad Al-Ghazali dan Aplikasinya Terhadap Ayat-Ayat Al-Quran tentang Jihad", *Bertuah: Journal of Shariah and Islamic Economics*, Vol. 2, No 1, 2021, 56-68.

Rights of Women in Islam (1992), *Islam and Liberation Theology* (1990), and *Al-Qur'an Women and Modern Society* (1990). At the same time, the primary data from Muhammad al-Ghazali are *Nabwa Tafsir Maudu'i li suwar al-Qur'an al-Karim* (1996) and *Qadaya Mar'ab bain al-Ta'alid al-Rakidah wa al-Rafidah* (1998). While secondary sources of this research are books, classical Islamic literature, and other data sources that discuss all the thoughts of Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali, which are the results of other people's interpretations and other books related to the object of this research.

After the data is obtained, the data is analyzed using the descriptive-analytical method to analyze two elements of this study, namely: to find out the hermeneutics of Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali's interpretation of polygamy verses and also to find out the location of the similarities and differences in feminist hermeneutics between the two figures.

Discussion

A Brief Biography of Asghar Ali Engineer

Asghar Ali Engineer, was born on March 10, 1939, in Salumbar, Rajasthan, India, the son of one of the founding clerics of Dawoodi Bohra, a denominational movement of the Ismaili branch of Shi'ism. From childhood, he learned Arabic, al-Qur'an, hadith, Islamic law, and the exegesis of al-Qur'an from his father. After graduating in civil engineering from Vikram University in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, he served 20 years as an engineer in the Bombay Municipal Corporation. In 1972, he retired, then devoted himself to the Bohra reform movement, and in 1977 was elected secretary general of the Central Board of Dawoodi Bohra Community. However, in 2004, he was expelled from Dawoodi Bohra for founding Progressive Dawoodi Bohra to criticize the Movement's leaders. In 1980, he founded the Institute of Islamic Studies in Mumbai as a platform for progressive Muslim thinkers. Moreover, in 1993, he founded the Center for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS) to bring social harmony between Muslims and Hindus who were in conflict. He also founded the Asian Muslim Action Network.

He has written 50 books and hundreds of articles in national and international journals. In the context of his Islamic thought, he focuses more on issues of liberation theology that provide theoretical frameworks for disseminating religious thought to Muslims. Therefore, Asghar Ali Engineer offers thought, philosophy, and hermeneutics to understand the verses of al-Qur'an, whose "liberation theology" color is very thick. Even though his efforts often get reactions from the older generation, he consistently advocates not only the formulation of "transformative theology" as also offered by Hassan Hanafi from Egypt, who wrote "*Min al-Aqidah ila al-Tsaurab*", and Ziaul Haque, who wrote "*Revelation and Revolution in Islam*". More than that, he also encouraged the younger generation to reconstruct "Transformative Radical Theology." When the idea of liberation theology emerged in church circles in Latin America, Asghar Ali Engineer imported the thought and reflected on it by writing on "liberation theology in Islam."

This liberation theology is the central issue of Asghar Ali Engineer in his writings. In this regard, he attempts to break the ice of conventional theology that only addresses metaphysics and ritualism while ignoring contemporary problems. Instead, Asghar Ali Engineer focuses on egalitarianism, which is related to concepts or themes of justice, social, political, economic, and family justice, and gender.⁸

Thanks to his persistence in disseminating his thoughts, he received many honorary degrees, one from the University of Calcutta, where he taught (1983). He was invited to international Islamic conferences in various countries and taught at universities in England,

⁸Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

France, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Mexico, Lebanon, Egypt, Japan, and others. He passed away on May 14, 2013.⁹

A Brief Biography of Muhammad al-Ghazali

Muhammad al-Ghazali is a scholar and contemporary Muslim thinker whose name is well-known throughout the Islamic world. Al-Ghazali was born into a poor, religiously devout family in Nakhla al-Inab village, Bukhaira Province, Egypt, on September 22, 1917 AD. He is classified as an intelligent human being. He could memorize the entire Qur'an at the age of 10 years.¹⁰

His education began at Alexandria's al-Azhar Islamic School (*Ma'had al-Dini*). In 1937, he went on to study Islamic theology (*Ushuludin*) in Cairo. Among his teachers was Shaikh Mahmud Syaltut. This year he met Shaikh Hassan al-Banna and became active in the Islamic Brotherhood movement (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*). He obtained his Shahadah Alamiyah from al-Azhar in 1941. At the same university, al-Ghazali obtained a master's degree from the Faculty of Arabic Language in 1943.¹¹

Al-Ghazali is an Islamic thinker who devoted himself to the world of da'wah and education. Until the end of his life, he was recorded as a da'i and educator who was not tired of conveying whatever he felt was not in line with his conscience. In education, he actively taught at al-Azhar University at the Faculties of Islamic Law (*Sbari'ah*), Islamic Theology (*Ushuluddin*), Education (*Tarbiyah*), and Islamic Studies (*Dirasah Islamiyah*). In addition, he also actively taught at various Islamic universities such as Ummul Qura University, Mecca, Qatar University, and the Islamic Institute of Al-Jazair.

In addition, al-Ghazali is also known as an extraordinarily productive scientist; he has written many books in various fields. Among his works are *Aqidah al-Muslim*, *Al-Islam wa al-Audha' al-Iqtishadiyah*, *Al-Islam wa al-Istibdad al-Siyasi*, *Kaifa Nata'amal ma'a al-Qur'an al-Karim*, *Al-Mahawir al-Khamsah li al-Qur'an al-Karim* and so on. Thus from various contributions of his enormous services. Then precisely on Saturday 9 Shawwal 1416 H / March 6, 1996, the Islamic world was shocked by the news of the death of Muhammad al-Ghazali in Riyadh while giving lectures and attending a seminar "Islam and the West" in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. His body was flown to Egypt and buried there.¹²

Understanding Sociological and Intratextual Meaning of al-Qur'an.

Al-Qur'an is a sacred text encompassing timeless moral teachings meant for all of humanity across generations. It serves as a guiding book believed to hold perpetual relevance. Nevertheless, the actual understanding of al-Qur'an is often limited and influenced by ideological biases, causing the text to appear lifeless and disconnected from contemporary times.¹³

Engineer argues against the notion of applying an interpretation derived from a specific sociological context to all times and locations with diverse sociological conditions.¹⁴ This is due to the fact that, despite earnest efforts to comprehend al-Qur'an in accordance with God's intent, the interpretation process remains inherently human, and it is inevitably influenced by individual circumstances and perceptions of reality. As a result, the understanding and interpretation of al-

⁹Ashgar Ali Enginerr, *Tafsir Perempuan* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2022), 324-325.

¹⁰Aunur Rofiq, *Model Rekonstruksi Tafsir Gender Ulama al-Azhar* (Malang: UIN Maliki Malang Press, 2019), 88.

¹¹Abd-al-Halim Uwais, *Al-Shaikh Muhammad al-Ghazali: Marabil Azhimah fi Hayah Mujahid Azhim* (Kairo: Dar al-Shahwah, 2000), 15.

¹²Suryadi, *Metode Kontemporer Pemahaman Hadis Nabi* (Yogyakarta: Teras, 2008), 29-30.

¹³Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: LKiS Group, 2012), 1.

¹⁴Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

Qur'an are subject to change, as they must adapt to the shifting circumstances of individuals.¹⁵ This aligns with the principles established by Fazlur Rahman regarding the historical-sociological approach to understanding al-Qur'an. Firstly, the historical approach aims to unveil the true 'meaning' of al-Qur'an by unraveling its underlying metaphysical aspects, as well as considering its sociological context. This involves delving into the chronological and social conditions of the society as deeply as possible to approach the truth. By doing so, the flexibility and adaptability of al-Qur'an become apparent.

The subjective interpretation of al-Qur'an must take into account the perspectives and inclinations of the companions, *tabi'in* (successors to the companions), and past scholars. However, this approach should remain bound within the boundaries set by their previous determinations. This encourages critical thinking, allowing for the strengthening, challenging, and offering of realistic and accountable solutions.¹⁶

Additionally, understanding the objectives of al-Qur'an requires contextualizing the time of its revelation and considering its sociological background. This involves gaining insight into the environment in which the Prophet lived and operated.

In the view of Engineer, the interpretation of Qur'anic verses heavily relies on the interpreter's perception, worldview, experiences, and socio-cultural background.¹⁷ He asserts that interpreting empirical facts or scriptural texts is inevitably influenced by one's a priori position. This means that each person has their own unique *weltanschauung* or worldview, making a purely objective interpretation of the scripture unattainable.¹⁸

Engineer further emphasizes that sociological situations consistently influence interpretation, and no one can escape this influence. As a result, a single verse may inspire a multitude of interpretations, especially when interpreted by individuals from different historical backgrounds. Engineer articulates this notion eloquently, stating, "Each individual comprehends the text based on their unique background, preexisting political, social, and economic stance. This pattern of interpretation has been followed throughout history. Determining the exact intent of God in the text proves to be a challenging task, as everyone approaches its meaning through their own preconceived notions."

It is worth noting that classical *mufassirs* (exegetes) acknowledged the inherent uncertainty in their interpretations, often concluding their opinions with the humble phrase, "Allah knows best." This acknowledgment highlights the complexity of interpreting the divine text and the need for humility in grappling with its meanings.

Engineer's approach to subjective interpretation acknowledges the subjective nature of understanding al-Qur'an while still respecting the depth and diversity of interpretations throughout history. By recognizing the role of socio-cultural backgrounds and individual perspectives, his methodology fosters a nuanced and inclusive understanding of al-Qur'anic text, paving the way for continual dialogue and exploration of its profound messages.¹⁹

Based on assumptions like this, then, for him, the interpretation of the verses of al-Qur'an must be made by considering the context of experience and existing sociological awareness. Interpreting al-Qur'an in the context of experience and sociological awareness cannot be said

¹⁵Asghar Ali Engineer, *Al-Qur'an, Women, and Modern Society* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1999), 18-19.

¹⁶Fazlur Rahman, *Cita-citas Islam* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2000), 52-54.

¹⁷Abdul Rasyid Ridho, "Reformulasi Tafsir: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer", *Sophist Jurnal Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2020, 218-251. (DOI: 10.20414/sophist.v2i2.36).

¹⁸Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

¹⁹Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1990), 130.

haphazardly as a Reasoning interpretation (*bi al-Ra'yi*). According to him, it must be distinguished between understanding the verses of al-Qur'an by reasoning (*bi al-Ra'yi*) and understanding al-Qur'an in the context of an interpreter's consciousness. Suppose understanding by reasoning (*bi al-ra'yi*) prioritizes lust and personal desires as described in a prophetic hadith. In that case, interpreting al-Qur'an with awareness is still within the framework of obtaining Qur'anic guidance only by looking at the context of a interpreter's experience. Asghar Ali himself realizes that the difference between the two is fragile, only distinguished by the personal integrity and sincerity of a person who will distinguish between the two.²⁰

For Engineer, what is the essence of al-Qur'an itself is its guidance, its principles, and its sacred values. The key word used by al-Qur'an is goodness (*al-Ma'ruf*), which means following the values and principles in the existing circumstances and social environment. According to him, the word *ma'ruf* itself has two dimensions, moral and social, which complement each other. Morals must be connected with society. Even theology is not born from divine revelation alone, but much is conditioned by the social circumstances of the traditions prevailing in a society. In understanding al-Qur'an once again, one must consider the sociological factors surrounding it.

Concerning the interpretation of al-Qur'an in the context of modern society today, the Engineer emphasizes that there are only two choices for Muslims: Either al-Qur'an is to be ignored because the prevailing laws of society are secular, or al-Qur'an is to be reread, reinterpreted to suit current conditions. People will not be interested in al-Qur'an by continuing to accept the current interpretation. Therefore, there is no other choice for Muslims except to strive for al-Qur'an to continue showing its existence amid rapid social change today.²¹

So how does al-Qur'an still exist? It should be underlined that modern human consciousness is currently conditioned by two things, namely, the concept of human rights and human dignity. The main problem now is how al-Qur'an follows human rights and human dignity, which is none other than the value of al-Qur'an itself. Although in reality, it is not uncommon for interpreters to say Islam is incompatible with human rights because Islam comes from an 'obligation-based paradigm' where obligations are emphasized more than rights.²² It is this basic assumption that Engineer has attempted in some of his works.

Classical interpretations of "gender" verses in al-Qur'an often employ atomistic methods, which have been the subject of suspicion. These methods tend to perpetuate a patriarchal culture that places women in a subordinate position to men. Consequently, gender-biased interpretations emerge, failing to acknowledge the full humanity of women and denying them certain rights and opportunities.

In such interpretations, women are not recognized as whole human beings, and their agency is limited. They are often confined to domestic roles, denied leadership positions, and expected to be obedient wives, even in the context of polygamous marriages. Such a model of interpretation poses challenges for modern women who, in line with the concept of human rights, seek equal status and recognition of their individual capabilities.²³

Engineer emphasizes that the interpretation of al-Qur'an must align with the true spirit of Islam, which is liberal, humanistic, and progressive. By adopting a more inclusive and egalitarian

²⁰Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

²¹Abdel-Maguid, Thoraya E., and Rabie E. Abdel-Halim, "The Qur'an And The Development Of Rational Thinking", *Urology Annals*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2015, 135-140. (DOI: 10.4103/0974-7796.152926).

²²Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights and Human Dignity: An Analytic Critique of Non-Western Conception of Human Rights", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2, 1982, 306-307. (DOI: [10.2307/1961111](https://doi.org/10.2307/1961111)).

²³Mardety Mardinsyah, *Hermeneutika Feminisme Reformasi Gender dalam Islam* (Jakarta: Bitread Publishing, 2018), 3.

approach to interpretation, Islam can ensure the growth and successful development of humanity. This approach would value the contributions and potential of both men and women, empowering women to participate fully in all spheres of life, including leadership and decision-making roles.

In the pursuit of a more equitable interpretation, contemporary scholars like Engineer aim to challenge the historical gender biases ingrained in classical interpretations. They seek to promote a vision of Islam that upholds the principles of justice, compassion, and equality for all individuals, regardless of gender.²⁴

The call for a liberal, humanistic, and progressive interpretation of al-Qur'an reflects the aspirations of many Muslims today, who strive to reconcile their faith with modern values and to create inclusive and empowering spaces for women within the Islamic tradition. This evolving approach to interpretation not only aligns with contemporary notions of human rights but also fosters a more harmonious and just society, where both men and women can thrive and contribute to the betterment of humanity.

From the above explanation, if we make a methodological comparison between Engineer and other Qur'anic interpretation scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud, and Fatima Mernissi, then the methodology used by Engineer is much simpler. However, her elaboration on the distinction between normative and contextual verses is significant. With this distinction, people can distinguish between fundamental values that become the essential spirit of al-Qur'an and contextual values that are bound by time and space so that they cannot apply universally.²⁵

An approach that is no less interesting in reading al-Qur'an than those mentioned above is the intratextual approach. That is an approach that reads the verses of al-Qur'an holistically and thematically. Reading al-Qur'an holistically is reading the verses of al-Qur'an as a whole and understood as a unity of the whole text. It is said thematically that the verses in the same theme are collected and viewed as a single unit, and the meaning is drawn from the entire text.

Al-Ghazali used the thematic method (*maudu'i*) in interpreting al-Qur'an. However, it should be underlined that al-Ghazali's thematic interpretation of al-Qur'an can be classified into two primary forms that we can find in his works. First, the interpretation that concerns one surah in al-Qur'an by explaining its general and specific objectives, as well as the relationship of various issues in the letter so that they are interrelated as one issue and form a series of concise and directed discussions to explain the grand theme of al-Qur'an surahs. This interpretation model is found in al-Ghazali's work entitled "*Nahwa Tafsir*". Second, collecting verses of al-Qur'an that discuss specific problems from various letters of al-Qur'an and, as far as possible, sorting something with the time of its descent while paying attention to the cause of its descent, then explaining the overall understanding of the verses as an answer to the problem that is the subject matter. This second interpretation model can be found in al-Ghazali's work entitled "*al-Muhawir al-Khamsah*," in which al-Ghazali summarizes the verses relating to the five main themes he thinks are central to al-Qur'an. In addition, al-Ghazali also discusses this second method in his work entitled "*Naẓarat fī al-Qur'an*," which explicitly discusses the theme of man and the problems of his life, prophethood, rewards, damage to humanity, and others.

The thematic method adopted by Muhammad al-Ghazali provides sufficient space for readers to interact with al-Qur'an through contemplation, interpretation, and constructive reflection. Based on his recognition, this is intentional. He chooses some verses in a surah that support the central theme of the surah and leaves some other verses for the reader to group

²⁴Aysha Hidayatullah, "Feminist Interpretation Of The Qur'an In A Comparative Feminist Setting", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2014, 115-129. (DOI: 10.2979/jfemistudreli.30.2.115).

²⁵Abdul Rasyid Ridho, "Reformulasi Tafsir: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer", *Sophist Jurnal Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2020, 218-251. (DOI: 10.20414/sophist.v2i2.36).

themselves in the appropriate context (sub-theme). This is so that the discussion is brief and concise. In his interpretation, it is evident that Muhammad al-Ghazali tried to place *al-'aql* and *al-naql* in balance to gain knowledge. Rational, critical, and logical, with a delivery that uses simple language to characterize his interpretation.²⁶

Shihab noted that it takes at least seven steps to establish this thematic method, including Determining the topic of the problem to be discussed and collecting verses related to the problem. Third, Arrange the sequence of verses following the time of their descent accompanied by knowledge of *Asbab al-Nuzul*. Fourth, Understanding the correlation of these verses in their respective surahs. Fifth, Arrange the discussion in a perfect framework (outline). Sixth, Complement the discussion with traditions relevant to the subject matter. Seventh, Studying the verses as a whole by compiling verses that have the same meaning or compromising between the general ('am) and the specific (typical) or those that seem contradictory so that all of them meet in one estuary without difference or coercion.²⁷

The Feminist Hermeneutics of Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali

Many heavenly religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, legitimize the superiority of men over women. The position of religion, which is the main element of social consciousness and determinant of various traditions in society, makes the view of male superiority over women justified by religion, such as women being positioned as objects of law, especially laws related to family law such as marriage and inheritance law. Al-Qur'an is also not free from this reality; some of its verses state the superiority of men over women. The problem is, are these verses sociological or theological?

Most classical interpreters (*mufassirs*) treat these verses of al-Qur'an related to women theologically, and it is not uncommon for them to make subjective choices.²⁸ This theological interpretation tends to be dogmatic, justifying the assumption of male superiority over women.²⁹ In addition, the classical interpreters (*mufassirs*) also projected the meaning of al-Qur'an related to women based on the male perspective so that the position of interpretation of women who are not equal to men was born. No wonder there is an assumption that the view of male superiority over women is justified by religion, which in this case is al-Qur'an.³⁰ However, it is important to note that the interpretation of al-Qur'an is not a monolithic enterprise, and there are different approaches to interpreting the text. Some contemporary scholars such as Ali Engineer has proposed new approaches to interpreting al-Qur'an that take into account the historical and social context in which the text was revealed. They argue that al-Qur'an should be read as a dynamic and evolving text that is relevant to the contemporary world. The question then is whether the male superiority reflected in various verses of al-Qur'an is a normative value or a contextual means to uphold an essential norm. This is a complex issue that requires careful consideration of the historical and social context in which al-Qur'an was revealed, as well as the different approaches to interpreting the text.

Al-Qur'an has two aspects: Normative and contextual. Understanding the distinction

²⁶Abdul Rasyid Ridho, "Reformulasi Tafsir: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer", *Sophist Jurnal Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2020, 218-251. (DOI: 10.20414/sophist.v2i2.36).

²⁷Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan al-Qur'an: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), 115.

²⁸Asma Barlas, *Believing Woman In Islam* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2022), 33.

²⁹Mardety Mardinsyah, *Hermeneutika Feminisme Reformasi Gender dalam Islam* (Jakarta: Bitread Publishing, 2018), 83.

³⁰Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

between these two aspects is important to understand al-Qur'an. The normative aspect refers to the value system and basic principles in al-Qur'an, such as equality, equity and justice, which are eternal principles that can be applied in various contexts of space and time. Contextually, Al-Qur'an relates to verses that were revealed to respond to certain problems at that time. For instance, al-Qur'an devotes two hundred verses to admonishing those who are guilty of injustice and oppression.³¹ Justice in al-Qur'anic context is about conforming to the divine law and being obedient to god, and it has no room for discrimination based on color, race, or gender. Al-Qur'an provides the principles of justice, but scholars have differed as to how they should be implemented. Classical muslim philosophers, such as al-Isfahani, were open minded representatives of Islam and were not averse to knowledge from foreign sources. Al-Qur'an affirms the objective validity of moral and ethical principles as virtues inseparable from goodness, beauty and divinity itself. Inspired by al-Qur'anic message, earlier generations of jurists created a complex system interpretations, rulings, and laws that were based on the pursuit of moral absolutes within the bounds of moderation or reasonableness.³²

According to Engineer, some verses of al-Qur'an can be abrogated, meaning that they are no longer applicable due to changing circumstances[. This is because some verses are normative and universal, while others are contextual and specific to certain situations. Therefore, it is important to understand the normative messages of al-Qur'an, rather than focusing solely on the contextual statements. As Engineer argues, al-Qur'an presents a dialectic between the normative statements and the empirical reality, and the scriptural guidance is accepted by a concrete society with concrete conditions. This means that al-Qur'an provides guidance for what "should and ought to be,"but also takes into account the empirical reality of the world. However, the transcendental norm is also shown so that in the future when concrete conditions are more conducive to the acceptance of the norm, it will be applied or efforts to approach it begin in earnest. Therefore, the interpretation of al-Qur'an is not a fixed or static enterprise, but rather a dynamic and evolving process that takes into account the historical and social context in which the text was revealed.³³

Concerning gender discourse in al-Qur'an, Engineer applies his hermeneutical offer to understand al-Qur'an by utilizing three main approaches: Historical, Sociological-anthropological, and philosophical. Regarding the historical approach, Engineer asserts that religion is always related to the complex situation of its origin. God's intervention, however, recognized in various schools of Islamic theology, is not arbitrary. History is not a myth or an arbitrary project completely devoid of social causality. Al-Qur'an does have a theological approach, but causality is addressed.³⁴

Therefore, Engineer believes that al-Qur'an does not ignore historical determinism, but rather takes historical events and their decisive influences seriously. He pays close attention to space and time, and his feminist hermeneutic approach uses a historical method to understand the context of the revelation of verses that speak about women. With this method, the universal teachings of al-Qur'an that underlie the various normative commands can be found by adjusting them to the contemporary socio-cultural context. This method follows the double movement theory of Fazlur Rahman, which involves interpreting al-Qur'an by moving from the current situation to the situation in which al-Qur'an was revealed and then back to the present.

³¹Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

³²Asghar Ali Engineer, *Rights of Woman in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992), 7.

³³Asghar Ali Engineer, *Rights of Woman in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992), 16.

³⁴Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

Engineer's book, "The Origin and Development of Islam: An Essay on Its Socio-Economic Growth," offers a comprehensive analysis of the socio-historical background of the emergence and evolution of Islam, coupled with an in-depth economic exploration. The book provides a broad overview of the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions prevalent in Arab society during the early developmental period from the time of the Prophet in Mecca to Madina.³⁵

From a hermeneutic perspective, this book can be likened to an intellectual engineer's journey into the historical context of the Islamic text. Drawing upon Richard Palmer's hermeneutic concept of merging horizons and worldviews, as well as Gadamer's idea of the Fusion of Two Horizons, Ali delves into the interplay between the historical milieu and the religious teachings of Islam.

An intriguing historical example presented in the book is the case of "Talaq al-battah" as applied by Umar ibn al-Khattab. While al-Qur'an stipulates that divorce (talaq) is valid only once at a time, Umar holds a different perspective and enforces the practice of pronouncing three divorces simultaneously.³⁶ This exemplifies how historical context and the interpretation of religious texts can shape the understanding and application of Islamic law.

Engineer's work not only sheds light on the socio-economic factors influencing the early development of Islam but also demonstrates how historical insights enrich our understanding of religious practices and legal traditions. Through a meticulous exploration of the past, the book contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the complex interplay between history, religion, and societal norms in the Islamic world.

According to Engineer, Umar's decision to enact the triple divorce was a response to the exceptional circumstances prevailing at that time. The context during the wars of conquest saw the capture of numerous women from regions such as Syria and Egypt, who were subsequently brought to Medina. Arab men were eager to marry these captive women, but due to their unfamiliarity with the concept of marriage, they requested the men to divorce their current wives three times so that the newly-wedded women could feel secure in their marital status.³⁷

However, this practice led to unintended consequences, causing significant strife in society. After divorcing the women three times, some men would eventually remarry them, creating confusion and complexity within the community. In light of these challenges, Umar considered it appropriate to allow for an irrevocable triple divorce, effectively preventing men from taking advantage of this situation.

It is crucial to note that Umar's decision was not based on divine teachings but rather a practical response to specific social pressures of the time. Nevertheless, over the years, this practice was legitimized and subsequently codified in the books of the madhhab of fiqh (school of law), where it continues to be recognized and applied to this day.

Asghar Ali's analysis highlights the importance of understanding the historical context in which certain Islamic practices and rulings emerged. This case demonstrates how certain laws and interpretations were influenced by the social, cultural, and political circumstances of the time, rather than being inherent divine teachings. By recognizing the human element in the formulation of Islamic law, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of religious practices and the complexities of interpretation.

³⁵Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

³⁶Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

³⁷Abdullah Saeed, "Some Reflections on the Contextualist Approach to Ethico-Legal Texts of the Quran" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 71, No. 2, 2008, 221-37.

The sociological-anthropological approach to understanding al-Qur'an becomes essential as al-Qur'an was revealed in specific social situations and conditions. Engineer highlights that the imbalance in various interpretations of al-Qur'an arises when interpreters neglect the sha'n al-Nuzul, which refers to the socio-anthropological context surrounding the revelation of al-Qur'an. Since al-Qur'an exists within the framework of space and time, intertwined with particular sociological conditions, it would be naive to generalize verses that were revealed to address specific problems in certain situations.³⁸

To address this issue, it is crucial to consider al-Qur'an from a sociological perspective. Fazlur Rahman's perspective reinforces this idea by emphasizing that each revealed verse does not stand alone but is intrinsically related to the socio-cultural and historical context in which it was revealed. The emergence of al-Qur'an and the formation of the Islamic community were deeply intertwined with historical and socio-cultural backgrounds.

For instance, in the past, women were often perceived as weak, a perception directly resulting from sociological beliefs about male superiority rather than theological principles. The problem is that even as sociological conditions have evolved and women are now legally treated as equal to men, some interpretations continue to uphold archaic sociological concepts, placing women in a second-class position. These interpretations tend to align with men's visions, perspectives, will, and needs while neglecting the experiences of women.

During the period of classical interpretation, the issue of women was frequently silenced or overlooked. Here, Engineer stresses the importance of distinguishing contextual verses, which were specific to particular historical circumstances, from normative messages that hold universal relevance across time.

By adopting a sociological-anthropological lens, scholars can better comprehend the context and complexities of al-Qur'an's teachings, accounting for the dynamic nature of human societies and the need for contextual understanding. This approach ensures a more nuanced and accurate interpretation of al-Qur'an, resonating with the diverse realities of today's world while upholding its underlying messages of justice, compassion, and equality.

Engineer adopts a philosophical approach, particularly in the development of his liberation theology, to strengthen the understanding of key concepts like jihad. Traditionally perceived as a holy war, Engineer interprets jihad as an ongoing struggle against exploitation, corruption, and injustice in all its manifestations, with the ultimate goal of eradicating these evils from society. He emphasizes that al-Qur'an urges believers to fight for the interests of the oppressed, regardless of their identity, and liberate them from the clutches of oppressors.

Central to Engineer's approach is al-Qur'an's emphasis on the unity of humanity, rejecting any form of discrimination based on caste, group, class, or race. Islam, as described in al-Qur'an, recognizes excellence based on good deeds rather than mere differences in worship practices between different societies. Furthermore, al-Qur'an champions justice as a way of life, opposing all forms of injustice in economic, political, gender, racial, and other aspects of society.³⁹

Engineer's methodological framework offers a profound understanding of al-Qur'an while advocating for social change. His effort is to preserve the normativity of al-Qur'an by contextualizing its teachings in the pursuit of a just and equitable society. By utilizing a philosophical lens, Engineer unveils the transformative potential of al-Qur'an's teachings,

³⁸Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

³⁹Ahmad Baidowi, *Tafsir Feminis: Kajian Perempuan dalam al-Qur'an dan Para Mufasir Kontemporer* (Bandung: Nuansa Cendikia, 2005), 136-138.

encouraging believers to actively engage in the struggle for a fair and compassionate world.

In essence, Engineer's liberation theology presents a comprehensive and dynamic interpretation of al-Qur'an, guiding adherents towards a path of activism and social reform. By acknowledging the ongoing relevance of al-Qur'an's principles in contemporary contexts, he emphasizes the importance of upholding the essence of Islamic teachings while adapting to the ever-changing socio-political landscape. This approach fosters a deep sense of social responsibility among Muslims, inspiring them to work tirelessly for positive societal transformation and the realization of justice and compassion for all.

Meanwhile, I will reconstruct the hermeneutic used by al-Ghazali in interpreting al-Qur'an. First, according to al-Ghazali, the source of knowledge of the interpretation of al-Qur'an can be obtained through two readings, namely the direct reading of al-Qur'anic text (*Qira'ah al-mahyi*) and our reading of the reality and phenomena that occur (*Qira'ah wujud*). Even Islam commands us to do both readings at once because both are like two sides of a coin that cannot be separated and complement each other to become a perfect reading sourced from Allah SWT.

Furthermore, al-Ghazali emphasized that there is no contradiction between reading the text and reality simultaneously. Instead, he criticizes someone who only uses one of them. Al-Ghazali considers them to have a fatal mistake in carrying out the methodology of interpreting al-Qur'an if they rely on more than reading text or reality alone. One of the scholars who considered only reading the text without considering reality is al-Qurthubi. When interpreting the letter al-Kahf: 51, which reads:

"I did not present them (the devil and his children and grandchildren) to witness the creation of the heavens and the earth nor the creation of themselves; and I did not take those who mislead as helpers."

In interpreting this verse, Qurtubi believes that the earth's shape is not round, regardless of social realities and phenomena. He states that mentioning the earth is a criticism of engineers (*Mubannadis*) who believe the earth's shape is round. Al-Ghazali considered that the interpretation made by al-Qur'tubi was a fatal mistake based on the need for more knowledge of al-Qurtubi about the reality of the universe.

Furthermore, according to al-Ghazali, the word of God is universal and was revealed for the benefit of all humanity in every place and time. In addition, al-Qur'an also includes all the guidelines for human life, both material and non-material. It speaks to every human being and belief and is not limited to specific individuals. From this perspective, we can find his various interpretations of al-Qur'an, be it on morals, women, western thought, and Islam. Therefore, he rejects al-Qur'an verses that are interpreted incompletely and rigidly.

Second, al-Ghazali's interpretation method is to contextualize the meaning of a Quranic text and interpret it outside the commonly used meaning. This is done because interpreting a text's original meaning will lead to rigidity. The implication that will occur from limiting the meaning of al-Qur'an is the closing of the possibility of other meanings, which will cause al-Qur'an to be assumed to be unable to adjust to the conditions and space of time. We can see this view from al-Ghazali's acceptance of democracy which, according to him, does not conflict with the concept of deliberation in Islam. He believes that democracy is a system that leads to social justice, which is very valuable.

Third, separating verses open to meaning, interpretation, and *ijtihad* (*Dhanni*) with verses that have a definite meaning because they are expressed as a single meaningful lafaz and are not interpreted with other meanings (*Qath'i*).⁴⁰

From here, I ensure that al-Ghazali's hermeneutic style is very much different from what many people claim that the interpretation methodology used by al-Ghazali is similar to the four

⁴⁰Fathi Hasan, *al-Atha al-Fikri li al-Shaikh Muhammad al-Ghazali* (Oman: Markaz al-Tsaqafi, 1996), 34-37.

principles of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, namely, Effective Historical Awareness, Pre-Understanding, Fusion of Horizon, and Application.

If we compare the hermeneutic style of Engineer and al-Ghazali's interpretation, we will find differences that we can see in the table below.

Table 1.

No	Name	Hermeneutics Model	Interpretation
1.	Asghar Ali Engineer	Historical	Rejecting polygamy because, in reality, the practice of polygamy that occurs in the field no longer pays attention to the factors of justice, morals, and the financial ability of men as outlined by al-Qur'an.
		Sociological-Anthropological	
		Philosophical	
2.	Muhammad al-Ghazali	Reading the text (Qira'ah al-Wahyi) and Reading the Reality (Qira'ah al-Wujud)	Allowing polygamy, although, on the other hand, he still fights for justice for women. For him, whether monogamy or polygamy, creating a family full of faith, love, and affection is essential in a marriage.
		Contextualizing The Meaning	
		Separating dynamic and static text	

The Implementation of Feminist Hermeneutics

Polygamy is part of family life. History tells us that many people in the past practiced it. Ibrahim, Ya'kub, Daud, and Sulaiman are prophets known to have had more than one wife. When Islam came to the Arabian Peninsula, this practice of marriage was still going on, then Islam regulated it and put a limit of four wives. In the sociological reality of Muslims, the controversy over polygamy stems from the understanding of verse 3 of surah an-Nisa:

"And if you fear that you will not be able to do justice to the rights of orphaned women (when you marry them), then marry (other) women whom you like: two, three, or four. Then if you fear that you will not be able to do justice, then marry only one, or the slaves you own, and that is closer to not doing wrong."

If scrutinized, it turns out that the verse above does not command, nor does it prohibit, polygamy. Because this kind of thing is conditional. Al-Qur'anic emphasis is only on the establishment of justice.

This normative idea then becomes a problem in the Engineer's perspective. The practice of polygamy that occurs in the field no longer pays attention to the factors of justice, morals, and the financial ability of men as outlined by al-Qur'an. As a result, women are again victimized. Although, in essence, Engineer himself also does not deny the superiority of men over women in some normative issues such as Imam prayers and so on.

To understand the essence of the above verse, Engineer must consider the previous verse (an-Nisa: 2) and after it (an-Nisa: 127). from the verse, it is clear that the verse allowing polygamy was revealed in the context of orphans and their wives if the person who is the guardian marries more than one. When viewed from the social context, the verses on polygamy are not a general license for men to marry more than one at will. Polygamy is allowed only to ensure justice for orphans or widowed women. This means that polygamy would not have arisen if these issues did

not exist. According to Engineer, what is meant by fair treatment here is not only physical but also non-physical aspects, such as love and affection.

Furthermore, the Engineer states that the condition of fair treatment has three levels that must be fulfilled: First, the guarantee to use the property of orphans and widows properly. Because, in essence, the context of the permissibility of polygamy is merely a solution to prevent the abuse of orphans' property. Second is the guarantee to provide justice to the wife regarding material things. If a husband can divide the material fairly to his wives, they consider the sense of justice has been fulfilled. He was third, providing all his wives the same love and affection.⁴¹

Engineer's interpretation of polygamy above, I think, is still in a reasonable stage compared to other feminist figures such as Musdah Mulia, who firmly state that polygamy has denied women's humanity. Women are not considered whole human beings with all their human potential. But they are considered goods that can be treated as they please.⁴²

Unlike Engineer, al-Ghazali has another interpretation of the verses that are claimed to legitimize polygamy. According to al-Ghazali, unmarried men are encouraged to fast to suppress their lust in Islam. In a different context, with someone who cannot be polygamous but still insists on it, it should not be allowed because it is certain that the man will not be fair.

Al-Ghazali conveys an exciting idea: there is no coercion in marriage; the wife is free to choose between refusing or accepting to be polygamous. The instrument supporting this is a letter of agreement or agreement between the wife and husband before the marriage contract.

This can be done if she is worried about being married to her husband. This means that from the beginning she can propose a condition in her marriage contract, namely an agreement not to be polygamous. The husband must also be consistent with this agreement. Otherwise, he should divorce her. Family relationships must be built based on piety, justice, and peace.⁴³

Another critical point conveyed by al-Ghazali is that the institution of marriage, whether polygamous or monogamous, is only a means or a place for fostering and growing a family that is Imani, just, peaceful, loving, and full of grace.⁴⁴

Conclusion

From various studies that have been conducted on two feminist male figures, namely Asghar Ali Engineer and Muhammad al-Ghazali, related to Feminist Hermeneutics, it can be concluded as follows:

First, Engineer and al-Ghazali developed feminist hermeneutics because they have the same vision regarding gender equality issues in Islam. That the colonization of men against women is done in-human, gets theological legitimacy, although it is very interpretative, at least it still puts women in a derivative position. Al-Qur'an gives an honorable place to all human beings, including men and women.

Second, feminist hermeneutics both have significant differences. Engineer uses three main approaches that are slightly progressive, namely, Historical, Sociological-anthropological, and philosophical. In comparison, al-Ghazali uses a slightly progressive approach but does not leave the thick traditionalist style attached. These approaches include reading text and reality, contextualizing the meaning of the text further, and separating dynamic verses from static verses.

Third, in their application of the polygamy verse, the two also appear to have very significant differences. Engineer, for example, tends to reject polygamy because, in reality, the

⁴¹Asghar Ali Engineer, *Rights of Woman in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992), 152.

⁴²Musdah Mulia, *Muslimah Sejati: Menempub Jalan Islami Meraih Ridha Ilahi* (Bandung: Penerbit Maja, 2011), 208.

⁴³Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Nahwu Tafsir al-Maudu'i* (Cairo: Dar al-Syurq, 2019), 48.

⁴⁴Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Qadhaya al-Mar'a* (Cairo: Dar al-Syurq, 2006), 108.

practice of polygamy that occurs in the field no longer pays attention to the factors of justice, morals, and the financial ability of men as outlined by al-Qur'an. As a result, women are again victimized. On the other hand, al-Ghazali seems more lenient and tends to allow polygamy, although, on the other hand, he still fights for justice for women. For him, whether monogamy or polygamy, creating a family full of faith, love, and affection is essential in a marriage.

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