Recasting Gendered Paradigms: An Indonesian Cleric and Muslim Women in the Malay World

Khairudin Aljunied

To cite this article: Khairudin Aljunied (2016) Recasting Gendered Paradigms: An Indonesian Cleric and Muslim Women in the Malay World, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 27:2, 175-193, DOI: 10.1080/09596410.2016.1142761

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2016.1142761

Published online: 10 Mar 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 73

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Recasting Gendered Paradigms: An Indonesian Cleric and Muslim Women in the Malay World

Khairudin Aljunied

Department of Malay Studies, Faculty of the Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the ideas of a prominent Indonesian cleric, Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Hamka), about the place of women in Islam and in Southeast Asian Muslim societies. I argue that Hamka was engaged in the project of “recasting gendered paradigms,” which involves reinterpreting, reconceptualizing and reconfiguring various dominant understandings about the roles, functions and responsibilities of women in Islam as reflected not only in the Qur’an and the adat (traditional customs), but also in modern discourses about women’s empowerment. I show that Hamka’s commitment to advocating for women’s rights and critiquing prevailing ideas about the place of women in religion and society was a product both of his personal experiences and of the profound social and intellectual shifts that characterized his day and age.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 December 2015
Accepted 6 January 2016

KEYWORDS

Muslim women; Malay world; gendered paradigms; Islamic modernism; intellectual reform

This article analyzes the ideas of a renowned Muslim scholar and cleric, Haji Abdul Malik bin Abdul Karim Amrullah, better known as “Hamka” (1908–81), regarding the predicament of Muslim women in the Malay world, where he is regarded today as one the most influential Muslim public figures. His life story was closely linked to the seismic shifts that took place in the lives of Muslim women in the region during the twentieth century. Born in the matrilineal world of Minangkabau, Sumatra, on February 17, 1908 during an age of Islamic modernism and high colonialism, Hamka was an active participant in debates between reformers and traditionalists on issues surrounding gender relations in Islam and society. Although he was the scion of an illustrious line of Muslim religious scholars, he chose to pursue a different path from that of his predecessors; his writings criticized polygamy, which was widely practiced in his time and he also ventured productively into contentious journalism and even wrote romantic fiction that scrutinized the treatment of Muslim women (Hamka 1928).

At the young age of twenty, Hamka was already a strong proponent of what would become the largest modernist Muslim organization in Indonesia, the Muhammadiyah, which called upon Muslim women to take part in a mass movement that propagated formal education for women. At the same time, he was a political activist, agitating for
the independence of Indonesia through the *Partai Syarikat Islam*, which he joined with the encouragement of his brother-in-law, Sutan Mansur (Hamka 1986, 103). During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), he advised the Japanese on Muslim affairs, which resulted in his being briefly marginalized by many Muslim leaders, who accused him of selling out his religion to reap benefits from the Japanese occupiers. However, Hamka redeemed himself by becoming an active partisan and propagandist on behalf of the Indonesian revolution and for a brief time (1945–49) the leader of a coalition of revolutionary groups in West Sumatra (Hamka 2009a, 364). As Mantovani (2015, 134) has observed, during these four defining years and thereafter, Hamka became an active promoter of women’s participation in mainstream politics. He was soon elected to the constitutional commission, or the Konstituante, as a representative of the Parti Islam Masyumi, on which he served from 1955 to 1959 (Hashim 2010, 189). Ironically, his popularity was boosted when President Soekarno unfairly imprisoned him in the 1960s for his alleged involvement in vague antigovernment conspiracies. Released by President Suharto after two years in captivity, Hamka then achieved the status of a celebrity scholar, known for his religious work and his advocacy for women rights (Watson 2000, 113).

By the 1970s, Hamka had secured a comfortable place as one of the leading Muslim scholars in the Malay world. Among the marks of recognition of his stature was the awarding of honorary doctorates from Al-Azhar University in Egypt and other universities in Malaysia and Indonesia. He was also elected as the first chairman of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI; the Indonesian Ulama Council) in 1975. Although his life was cut short by heart failure only six years after his taking on MUI’s highest position, Hamka left a legacy of more than a hundred books covering a wide variety of topics, ranging from Islamic philosophy, theology, history, jurisprudence and ethics, to works on contemporary culture and romantic literature. His books are still widely read and are often referred to by many Muslim scholars across the region today, more than three decades after his demise. Many of his writings are now assigned as essential texts for university courses in Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia.2

One of the issues that preoccupied Hamka throughout his life was the reformation of the position of Muslim women in the Malay world. While much has been written about the roles of Muslim women in agitating, mobilizing and advocating for gender rights and equality in the region, very little attention has been given to the contributions of men in that realm. There are many reasons for this gap in scholarly knowledge, the most important being the long-standing assumptions that the subject of Muslim women is mainly (if not solely) the province of women and that women should be given pride of place in any study of feminist politics and women’s activism. Indeed, although there have been some noteworthy acknowledgements of the influences of men in the genesis and evolution of Muslim feminism, such coverage has tended to be, at best, mere tokenism, and at worst, reflective of the sheer neglect of the many efforts of Muslim men, including clerics, in their struggle for gender justice and women’s rights in the Malay world.3

This article therefore develops the argument that Hamka sought to chart new intellectual pathways to address the challenges facing Muslim women in the Malay world. His writings on Muslim women are best described as attempts to “recast gendered paradigms” that were current and prevalent during his prodigious writing career. Recasting gendered paradigms involves interrogating, critiquing, reinterpreting, re-envisioning and reconfiguring various discourses and ideas about Muslim women. By paradigms, I refer to
what Kuhn (2012, 454) has defined as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.” “Gendered paradigms” are thus beliefs, values and techniques that have served to represent women’s issues in partial ways. Gendered paradigms may be masculinist or feminist in orientation. The promoters of such paradigms may come from different backgrounds, including traditionalist, modernist, liberal or fundamentalist. Hamka subjected each of these points of view to his scholarly scrutiny.

Hamka questioned, first, the inflexibility of classical and literalist Islam, the limitations of the modernist paradigm and the approaches of proponents of an emerging group of liberal thinkers towards gender issues. Towards that end, Hamka reinterpreted qur’anic verses as an avenue to redefine the place of Muslim women in Islam and society. Women, according to Hamka, should be honored, protected and respected as the equals of men in society. Hamka confronted the misconceived notions of those who argued that women should not be given opportunities and rights, which are based on misinterpretations of the sacred sources of Islam. He also promoted the idea that the Qur’an is still relevant as a guide for modern Muslims in addressing women’s issues, but he argued that this can only be achieved by embracing exegetical methods in keeping with contemporary developments in society.

Second, Hamka reconfigured the understanding and importance of traditional Malay culture (adat). Although he stressed that adat should still be upheld and respected and, to some extent, promoted, Hamka maintained that the preservation of adat should not lead to the marginalization of Islamic laws and values, particularly on issues such as inheritance and marriage. Adat should thus be in harmony with Islam and, at the same time, be dynamic and fluid enough to keep up with the demands of the modernizing world. To buttress his arguments, Hamka drew upon usūl al-fiqh (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence), while providing sociological evidence as to why adat should be reformed for the benefit of men and women in society.

Hamka’s arguments about adat were linked to the way he conceptualized the paradigm of empowerment to argue for the opening up of more spaces for women in the Malay world. He urged Malay Muslims to permit more roles for women and allow them to participate in public affairs without threatening the fabric of the Muslim family (Hamka 1982a, 3). Hamka was a strong advocate for the right of women to hold leadership positions in social movements and political parties. He supported this contention by giving historical examples of prominent women in Islam. However, he also cautioned against mimicking hedonistic lifestyles and the pursuit of freedom devoid of moral and religious constraints, which Hamka saw as inherent in modern-day Western notions of women’s empowerment.

Further, what makes Hamka’s ideas a fascinating subject of study is that he was probably one of the few male Muslim scholars in Malay history to have delved extensively and in detail into the subject of Muslim women. While other Malay Muslim thinkers, such as Sayyid Shaikh Al-Hadi (1867–1934) (see Abu Bakar 1994) and Agus Salim (1884–1954) (see Salam 1961), had written about the conditions and circumstances of Muslim women in the region, no writers prior to Hamka had written so much about the subject or made it their lifelong intellectual pursuit. Hamka’s *Kedudukan Wanita Di Dalam Islam* (“The Position of Women in Islam”) (2009b; first published in 1974) has now become a classic that has been reprinted several times and is currently still in circulation.
in bookstores across the Malay world. The appeal of Hamka’s writings about women has much to do with his tenacity in advocating for women’s rights from within the Islamic tradition. His popularity can also be attributed to his ability to reconcile opposing ideas about culture, freedom, modernity and Islam. The late Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005), who was one of Indonesia’s Muslim intellectual giants, confirmed this: “His [Hamka’s] ideas are accepted by a wide spectrum of Muslims, principally the Muslim community in Indonesia who identify themselves as ‘the modernist group’ or the ‘reformist group’” (Madjid 1997, 123–124).

To understand Hamka’s commitment to the project of reinterpreting, reconfiguring and re-envisioning various ideas regarding Muslim women, it is important to consider (at least briefly) the biographical, social and intellectual contexts that motivated him to tread a relentless intellectual path of advocacy for the rights of the other half of humanity.

The making of an advocate for women’s rights

Hamka’s spirit of outspoken advocacy on behalf of Muslim women was shaped by his circumstances. Specifically, we can identify three categories of factors in his attitudes towards women. The first is related to his personal life struggles, the second to the impact of the societal conditions of his time, and the third to shifts in thinking about gender relations, at both the local and global levels. These circumstances drove him to carve out his own unique interpretations of the position of Muslim women in the Malay world.

To begin with his personal life struggles, Hamka was born in 1908 into a polygamous family and grew up in a divorced household. His father, Abdul Karim Amrullah (1879–1945), was a scholar and local reformer whose denunciations of local customs and folk Islam led conservative Muslims to label him “sesat” (“wayward”). “Sesat” in that context referred to those ideas and practices that did not conform to the prevalent understandings of Islam that were shaped by a mixture of Shafi’i law, Ash’arite theology and local manifestations of Islamic piety (see Allen 1983). Notwithstanding his harsh criticisms of the prevailing Muslim practices of the day, Abdul Karim followed the local custom of taking multiple wives and divorcing them when domestic conflicts arose. He married more than a dozen wives during his lifetime and maintained four at one time in keeping with Islamic laws. This practice was common among religious elites in Minangkabau in the early twentieth century. Hamka’s paternal grandfather had eight wives who bore him 46 children (Aryumardi 2002, 262). The 1930 national census conducted by the Dutch colonial authorities confirms the prevalence of polygamy. According to this census, 8.7% of marriages in Minangkabau were polygamous. This was more than four times the percentage in Java and Madura, where 1.9% of marriages were reportedly polygamous (Wieringa 1995, 252).

Widespread polygamy went hand-in-hand with high rates of divorce in the Malay world in Hamka’s lifetime. Jones (1994, 218–234), in his study of marriage dissolution in the twentieth century, found that divorce among Malays usually occurred within the first five years of marriage. The high rates of divorce in Indonesia and Malaysia resulted from many interlocking factors, including early marriage, the economic independence of women, spousal incompatibility, social safety nets made available to divorcees by their kith and kin, the ease of remarriage and problems that arose from polygamy. Writing about the
frequency of divorce in Aceh in the 1930s, Loeb (1935, 238–239) wrote, with some degree of hyperbole that it was normal for an Acehnese woman to marry 10–15 times.

Hamka was the child of divorced parents. He documented the painful experience of growing up deprived of the presence an enduring father figure who stayed with the family. Indeed, the men in Hamka’s society took pride in having multiple wives at different stages of their lives and divorcing them whenever they deemed it necessary or when the circumstances were not favorable for their own well being. Hamka (2009a, 63–64) described himself as a neglected child, disliked by his father’s family and was ostracized by his maternal family. This experience of displacement and lack of parental love at an early age drove him to run away from home and later inspired him to write polemical essays and books in defense of Muslim women. He began his foray into the world of publishing with a book entitled Si Sabariah, which tells the story of a young woman whose materialistic mother forced her to divorce her husband and marry a richer man. This was soon followed by books and popular novels entitled Agama dan Perempuan (“Religion and Women”; 1929), Di bawah lindungan Ka’bah (“Under the Protection of the Ka’bah”; 1936), Tenggelamnya Kapal van der Wijck (“The Sinking of van der Wijck”), Merantau Ke Deli (“Sojourning to Deli”; 1962) and Kerana Fitnah (“Because of Defamation”; 1938), all of which made references to the travails of Muslim women in Malay societies.

The radical transformations that took place in Muslim societies across the Malay world in Hamka’s time provided him with another impetus to write on behalf of women and to firmly advocate for their rights. The advent of Islamic reformism, which called for a breaking away from traditional attitudes and ways of thinking that had denied women access to formal education and schooling, yielded antithetical outcomes. On the one hand, Muslims in the Malay world slowly yet progressively became receptive to allowing girls to be sent to schools established by the colonial and postcolonial governments. The flip side of this was the defensive reaction of the traditionalist Muslims (also known as kaum tua) towards modern understandings of women’s roles at home and in society. For many decades after the 1920s, traditionalist Muslims were opposed to Western-style schooling for girls and subscribed to the notion that women should be nurtured to become good wives and mothers. In colonial Malaya, the British had to devise a system of fines for Malay parents who refused to send their children to school (see Blackburn 2004, 47; Aljunied 2015, 32). This counter-current against the reformist efforts was exacerbated by the unwillingness among some reformists to accept women’s leadership in many areas of public life. They were also against women delivering public speeches in the presence of men. As an activist and eventual ideologue of reformist and modernist movements in Indonesia, Hamka held that both strands of thought needed correction (Hamka 2007a, 259).

Parallel with these developments was the rise of Muslim women’s movements and organizations in Malay society. The first women’s movement, Poetri Mardika (Liberated Women), was established in Batavia in 1912. Its founder was Mrs Abdoel Rahman, who received support from a male reformist organization, the Boedi Oetomo (“Noble Endeavour”). Members of this movement agitated for the provision of scholarships for local girls. The organization inspired many other bodies of its kind throughout Indonesia, and also Malaya, such that the first women’s congress, attended by over a thousand participants, was held in December 1928 in the city of Yogyakarta. More than a dozen other congresses were held in the decades that followed, the most prominent being in Jakarta (in
1935) and in Semarang (in 1941). Among the recurrent issues discussed were the “status and progress of women, marriage and divorce laws, child marriage, women and Islam, social work, child care, education, health, economic and labour issues, nationalism, suffrage, and the responsibilities of women” (Martyn 2005, 41). Women’s activism remained uninterrupted during the Japanese Occupation (1942–45). The Indonesian Revolution (1945–49) and the achievement of Indonesian independence further broadened the scope of women’s involvement in public life, notably in the areas of nation building. By the late 1950s, women’s organizations in Indonesia had attracted international attention for their efforts and were aggressively challenging many laws pertaining to marriage and the family that were enacted by the state (Soewondo 1959).

Hamka witnessed the growth of what has become known as “Islamic feminist activism” in Indonesia from the 1960s until his death in 1981. Led by the Muslimat NU and ‘Aisyiyah, the women’s wings of the Nahdatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah, Islamic feminist activism advocates for women’s rights within the framework of the syariah (the Islamic legal and ethical code [Arabic: shari‘a]). These activists employ the terms “feminism” and “activism” to refer to “activities that work to improve the condition of women and men of all classes, strive for equality between sexes and classes, and engage in Islamic discourse with the goal of empowering women, men, and the suppressed” (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 37).

Islamic feminist activism grew alongside various intellectual currents that were flowing into the Malay world via Europe and the Arab world, which also informed Hamka’s thinking about the plight of Muslim women. To be sure, he was part of what Laffan (2003, 10) has vividly described as the “alternative religious-print network” in Southeast Asia that “was bound to a religious centre, Cairo, where politics had firmly entered the realm of the popular Muslim imagination.” Hamka’s house was filled with books written by reformist and modernist thinkers from Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia (Hamka 2009a, 175–183). Although fluent only in the Malay-Indonesian and Arabic languages, Hamka’s wide collections of books included translated works of European authors, especially books concerned with philosophy, theology and gender issues.

One of the books on gender issues that impressed him most was a novel, La Dame aux camélias (The Lady of the Camellias), by Alexandre Dumas fils. Hamka translated it from Arabic into Malay with a new title, Margaretta Gauthier (1940). The book tells the story of a French courtesan, Margaretta, whose love for a man was hindered by the morals of society in the late nineteenth century. Aside from writing and translating this book, which places the travails and tribulations of women at the center of the plot, Hamka also disseminated ideas about female emancipation that developed in Egypt. He discussed the works of thinkers such as Muhammad ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida, Taha Hussein and ‘Abbas Mahmud ‘Aqqad in many of his writings and introduced their stances on the emancipation of Muslim women to local readers. Hamka was also a purveyor of the ideas of Qasim Amin, whose seminal text, Tahrir al-mar‘a (“The Liberation of Women”), was published in 1899. This book was read by a small group of Malays who were plugged into the Egyptian scholarly scene. It gained a wider audience within the Muslim community when Hamka began to write extensively about the importance of Qasim’s proposed reforms in the remaking of Malay Islam (see Salim 2012). It is through the prism of these overlapping contexts that we can understand his advocacy of Muslim women. To this, we shall now turn.
Recasting approaches to the Qur’an

Hamka’s interpretation of the Qur’an drew upon and extended a few exegetical approaches while questioning their gendered assumptions to bring out his own unique ideas about Muslim women as reflected in sacred sources. His approach to women’s rights was eclectic, just as he sought a moderate balance between the divergent interpretations of the Qur’an.\footnote{Stowasser (1998) observes that there are multiple contemporary approaches to qur’anic exegeses on issues relating to women. Such classifications could well be applied to the interpretations of Hadith (the Prophetic sayings and traditions), as argued by Brown (2009) in his masterly survey of Hadith literature since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The first was the classical and literalist approach, by which gender issues were addressed in ways that echo medieval interpretations of the roles of women as enshrined in the syariah. In this approach, women are regarded as the equals of men in the eyes of God but are expected to be obedient and submissive. In addition, the classical and literalist approach claims that men have precedence over women in intellectual and leadership matters and other public duties.}

Stowasser (1998) calls the second approach a “modernist” approach that emphasized a clear division of roles between men and women in the family and society. Modernist exegetes also highlight the need to ensure the personal protection and fair treatment of women and their access to education. The modernist approach was developed further by scholars such as Mahmud Shaltut (1893–1963), who stressed the qur’anic principles of equity, harmony and social justice in laying down the rights and responsibilities of Muslim women and women in general. Shaltut was a reformist Egyptian scholar internationally respected as a distinguished rector of the Al-Azhar University in Cairo and for his writings on the modernization of Muslim societies globally (see Zebiri 1993).

The third approach to qur’anic exegesis radically departs from the above. Stowasser (1998) calls it the “new epistemology” promulgated by the late Fazlur Rahman (1919–88) and developed by Amina-Wadud Muhsin and Abdullah An-Na’im, among others, who argue that past interpretations of the Qur’an were obsolete because they did not adequately address the complexities of modern times. Proponents of the new epistemology thus interpret the subject of Muslim women anew and draw upon the sciences of linguistics and semiotics as well as discourses of human rights to argue against the idea of male guardianship and the authority of men over women. In Indonesia, a prominent Muslim thinker who subscribed to the same paradigm as the new epistemology group was Nurcholish Madjid, who wrote and gained prominence during Hamka’s lifetime. More crucially, these approaches to the Qur’an reflect the various paradigms regarding women to which the various segments of the Muslim population subscribed.

Hamka criticized, first of all, the classical and literalist interpretation of the origins of women. The first woman (Eve) is regarded as an inferior derivative of the first man (Adam); thus, women are by nature “crooked.” This presumption is based on the over-reliance of classical and literalist exegetes upon the Jewish rendition of the story of Adam and Eve, which teaches that God created Eve from one of Adam’s ribs. There is a Hadith:

> Treat women kindly. Women have been created from a rib and the most bent part of the rib is the uppermost. If you try to turn it straight, you will break it. And if you leave it alone, it will remain bent as it is. So treat women kindly.\footnote{Treat women kindly. Women have been created from a rib and the most bent part of the rib is the uppermost. If you try to turn it straight, you will break it. And if you leave it alone, it will remain bent as it is. So treat women kindly.}
Hamka (1982b, vol. 1, 166–170) says that classical and literalist exegetes have misinterpreted this to support their theory of female crookedness and have for too long embraced the fallacious theory that the first woman was created from the rib of the first man to validate their societal and cultural suppositions about women. This forceful assertion in a context where creation theories about the inferiority of women in the Qur’an were predominant, corresponds with recent feminist scholarship on the subject. For example, Anwar (2006, 47) notes that:

Muslim feminists have taken the issue of the creation of humans and its implication for the making of gender inequality seriously. … because if men and women have been created equal by Allah who is the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot be unequal, essentially, at a subsequent time.

Similarly, Hamka (1982b, vol. 1, 166–170) argued that there is no mention in the Qur’an of the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam and that the Hadith about creation from a rib is meant to be an analogy and not to be accepted as a literal representation. It was the Prophet’s way of urging his followers to treat women with delicate care, gentleness and kindness so as to avoid fractures, splits and conflicts in the family.

In essence, Hamka emphasized that men and women share common origins (nafs wāhida). They were created as equals and are given similar acknowledgements by God as evidenced in Q 4.1: “O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women [my translation].” Hamka (2009b, 4) explained:

This verse shows that the origins of human beings are but one … It follows then that even though there are two kinds [of creation], male and female, but the crux of it is that they are essentially one and the same, that is, they are human. Both men and women are similar human beings. And because of their shared origins, which are divided into two, both will naturally feel that they are in need of one another. Life will not be complete if both men and women are not reunited.7

Hamka also registered his disagreement with classical exegetes who regarded women as intellectually inferior and prone to follow their desires rather than their intellect. He took issue with the idea pervasive among many classical exegetes that Eve was responsible for the fall of Adam from Heaven, more commonly referred to as “original sin” in Judeo-Christian theology. He argued that the Qur’an clearly states that both Adam and Eve were responsible for transgressing the rules set by God (Hamka 1982b, vol. 8, 2333–2335).

The fact that Hamka departed from the gendered approaches of classical exegetes does not necessarily imply that he was totally against that paradigm. His 30-volume Tafsīr al-azhar exhibits a judicious utilization of the classical method of exegesis while he at the same time introduced new methods drawn from modernist thinkers. Hamka analyzed qur’anic verses about women through tafsīr bi-al-ma’thūr (exegesis by way of using the Qur’an itself, the Hadith and the sayings of the Companions) and tafsīr bi-al-ra’y (exegesis by way of reason) (see Yusuf 2005). He went a step further by providing his own contextualized readings of the Qur’an in order to make it congruent with the demands of the present moment. This aspect of his approach to the Qur’an brought him closer to the modernist paradigm and the new epistemology paradigm.
Hamka’s deployment of the modernist paradigm was manifested in his frequent references to Egyptian scholars such as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida in his *Tafsîr al-azhar* (1982b) and his discussions of both the prospects and the problems of modern life. For instance, he cited Rashid Rida’s *Tafsîr al-manâr* and his interpretation of the verses about the treatment of wives. Hamka’s reading of Rida’s works led him to conclude that Rida gave much weight to the importance of husbands’ fidelity to their wives. Hamka (1982b, vol. 4, 1141–1142) argued that a good Muslim must also look beyond the weaknesses of his wife, to unceasingly acknowledge her strengths and sacrifices and ensure that her needs are attended to.

Rashid Rida also provided Hamka with the intellectual basis to reinterpret the roles that women can play in public life. Hamka explained that the Qur’an and the Hadiths provide many examples of women who participated in political life, social reform and war. Many classical and contemporary Muslim thinkers have, however, suppressed this aspect of Islam to propound the idea that women should be domesticated. Middle Eastern scholars were guilty of such flawed reasoning about the roles of women. In Hamka’s own assessment, some Indonesian ulama (Islamic religious scholars) who took Rashid Rida’s exegesis seriously had permitted women to participate in many social, religious and political movements in the twentieth century, but a majority were still resistant to these ideas due to the burden of traditional interpretations of the Qur’an and their personal biases (Hamka 1982b, vol. 3, 794–795).

Hamka did not speak in the language of Fazlur Rahman and his protégées but rather foreshadowed many of the exegetical approaches of the new epistemology. This accounts for the currency of his writing even now, even though he died in 1981. He interlaced his interpretations with the research and findings of social scientists, which parallels the approach taken by Fazlur Rahman. His approach to selected qur’anic verses shows striking similarities with Wadud (1999, xxi–xxii), who wrote that: “It was not the text [of the Qur’an] which restricted women, but the interpretations of that text which have come to be held in greater importance than the text itself.”

This is seen in his discussion of Q 17.42, which reads: “And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is immoral and an evil way.” Instead of interpreting this verse from the perspective of laws per se and from the idea that women are the main reason why men commit illicit acts – an interpretation that is common among many classical and even modernist Qur’an interpreters – Hamka (like Fazlur Rahman) explicated the qur’anic verses in a manner that “takes into account the conditions of the times of the revelation and those of the modern period, and thus relates the text to the needs of the community” (Saeed 2006, 128). The notion that mankind should not come close to unlawful sexual intercourse, Hamka explained, is as relevant now as it was during the time of the Prophet Muhammad if one takes a sociological view of modern society. Among the problems that Hamka vividly highlighted were fornication and adultery.

Medical studies and social surveys conducted by practitioners such as Dr Marion Hilliard (1902–58) of Toronto, Canada validated the fact that the modern world is rife with elements that promote fornication and adultery. Renowned for her specialization in gynecology and women’s health, Hilliard advocated for the total well being of women. She researched and wrote some best-selling books that touched on the causes of chronic diseases and mental problems among women in the 1950s (e.g. Hilliard 1957, 1960). Hamka cited such studies in his exegesis of the Qur’an. According to Hamka, Dr Hilliard found
that unmarried women who were exposed to pornographic films and intimate relationships with men were most vulnerable to becoming pregnant outside marriage. It is for this reason that the Qur‘anic injunction “Do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse” is germane. Avoidance as enjoined in the Qur’an is the key to preventing fornication and adultery and the social problems that come with them. The problem of fornication and adultery, Hamka stressed, should not be seen as a malaise rampant only in the West. It was a pervasive problem affecting Muslims and non-Muslims alike globally. To quote him at length here:

Thinking about life in the modern world makes us shiver. All the elements that encourage fornication and adultery are made available anywhere. Uncensored films, pornographic magazines and books and, more recently, free mixing has become more noticeable. In this land of ours, we used to say that such was the decadence of the West, but of late, marrying off girls who became pregnant out of wedlock in order to conceal the shame that comes with it has become commonplace in our society. Anyone brave enough to highlight such issues [in our society] for the fear of the effects on future generations will be laughed at. But the truth is that the European and American societies no longer conceal such matters. They look at the issue from the perspective of societal effects and the destructive implications as evidenced in the work of the lady doctor from Toronto, Canada. (Hamka 1982b, vol. 15, 4049)

In sum, Hamka’s approach to the Qur’an was a creative melding and filtering of the different approaches that have become paradigmatic in his context. In dealing with the question of Muslim women from the vantage point of sacred scriptures in Islam, Hamka demonstrated the dire need for Muslims to incorporate and appreciate varying interpretations, or as Saeed (2006, 63) has it, to adopt an inclusive, sociological and up-to-date approach to the Qur’an without compromising the basic precepts and values of Islam. Hamka adopted such an approach because he was determined to enable Muslims to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the high status that women occupy in God’s word, and, more importantly, the various functions that women can play in both the private and public spheres.

Reconfiguring adat and its relationship with Islam

The tensions between adat (traditional culture) and Islam lay at the center of the question of Muslim women in the Malay world. In her study on adat and Islam in the Malay world, Karim (1992, 7) observed that adat and Islam are the two main components of Malay culture that “serve to provide contradictory and conflicting statements of gender relations, particularly in areas of ritual, economic and political activity.” Hamka was confronted with these contradictions and conflicts. He was situated in a context in which adat and Islam had become reified and rigidified. This was the upshot of the many decades of colonialism and the colonial policy of systematizing and codifying Malay social systems. The wars between adat chiefs and Islamic reformers coupled with the forces of Islamic reformism and secularization in the Malay world in general and in Minangkabau in particular, all contributed to the dichotomization and dilution of adat and Islamic practices (Hadler 2008, 117–180; see also Hamka 1977, 125).

Hamka spilt much ink criticizing those who placed adat above Islam. Although he himself was regarded by Muslims in the Malay world as an expert on matters pertaining to adat, as is evidenced in the illustrious title conferred upon him – Datuk Indomo – he
took to task the defenders of a regressive form of *adat* in his home region of Minangkabau and also in Negri Sembilan, where the same *adat* practices were enforced (Hamka 1963, 73). Hamka would probably agree with the conclusions of the Minangkabau anthropologist Sanday (1990, 146) that *adat* had grown to be “a hegemonic ideology … which legitimates and structures political and ceremonial life in the villages.” He was thus scathingly critical of uncontrolled polygamy, the high frequency of divorce and the lack of responsibilities given to men in that society. These prevailing practices, which were upheld and sustained by both men and women, had, in Hamka’s analysis, proven to be detrimental to Muslim women. Hamka (1963, 35) wrote:

> It is clear then that polygamy as it is practiced in Minangkabau is not the polygamy as Islam has outlined, because in Islam, men are supposed to be the heads of their families, as husbands and fathers, but the practice of polygamy in Minangkabau has it that the father is from a different tribe than his own son. And divorce is made easy, because even though children are aplenty, these children are usually closer to their mothers than their fathers. When Islam came, the people of Minangkabau selected aspects of Islam to strengthen their *adat*. In the event that it is stipulated that property should be handed down to the children, the *ahli adat* (experts of *adat*) will insist that the child has no rights whatsoever according to *adat Perpatih*.

At the other end of the debates about the place of Muslim women within *adat* and Islam were the Muslim puritans. This group agitated for a radical transformation of *adat* to give way to the enforcement of the *syariah* as stipulated in the Qur’an and the Hadith. The Muslim puritans called for an end to matrilineal and matrilocal customs, which, to them, were residues of pre-Islamic practices in Malay society. They were concerned, as Abdullah (1966, 22) has acutely observed, “with the rediscovery of the Islamic spirit” rather than with blind obedience to customs and traditional laws. There were a select few among these puritans who were impatient with the slow rate of change in society and therefore migrated away from Minangkabau. Hamka (1963, 37) cited the cases of Syeikh Ahmad Khatib and Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin, who left their homes and died in self-imposed exile because they could not accept the ignorant cultures (*adat jahiliyyah*) that had plagued Minangkabau for too long.

Hamka began his writing career on the side of the Muslim puritans but changed his views when he encountered fierce resistance from the *adat* groups and as he delved more deeply into writings on Islam and its relationship to local customs (see Yusof 1997, 157). From the early 1940s onwards, Hamka occupies a third space between *adat* and Islamic groups on the path to recast both paradigms. On the road to reconcile *adat* and Islam, he reconceptualized the term *adat*, defining *adat* as habitual practices (*kebiasaan*) developed through the passage of time. *Adat* shapes the codes of conduct, mannerisms, values, rights and responsibilities of those who adhere to it, but *adat* is not fixed or cast in stone. It is dynamic, adaptive and responsive to changing times. Hamka maintained that there was no such thing as a pure form of *adat*. The Malay *adat* was a hybrid product of the synthesis between local practices and customs that came from other societies. It was the outcome of interactions between the indigenous ways of life and the processes of religious conversion, as well as of encounters with modernity (Hamka 1963, 61; Hamka 2007b, 141).

From this, it follows that some aspects of *adat* should be recast, while others should be carefully preserved to ensure the progress of Minangkabau society and the strengthening
of its Islamic identity. Hamka insisted that uncontrolled polygamy and divorce should be stopped, and that men should fulfill their responsibilities to their families. He was strongly opposed to the practice of polygamy except in exceptional circumstances. Islam, Hamka contended, allows polygamy only when a man is able to uphold justice and equality for all his wives in terms of love, respect and basic necessities. This requirement in itself is difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill, and so most men should be monogamous. In one instance, Hamka stressed (1982b, vol. 4, 1072): “And we can surmise that monogamy is the best and most ideal practice. Indeed that is our ultimate goal.”

Hamka also expressed his disapproval of the rules of inheritance as specified by adat, and subscribed to the view that men should be given twice the share of women when it comes to the disbursement of wealth. He explained that this provision had little to do with men being intellectually superior to women, as most classical and literalist Muslim scholars would argue. In Hamka’s view, both men and women share the same intellectual capacities and they should complement each other to bring about harmonious family life, and proper management of wealth and other affairs. As to why Islam stipulates that men should be given twice the share of women, Hamka (1982b, vol. 4, 1116–1117) clarified that this clearly shows that men are responsible for their womenfolk, including their mothers, sisters and wives. The greater amount of inheritance given to men must be utilized not for themselves but for the welfare of those under their care.

It is obvious that Hamka’s main preoccupation was to ensure that adat was congruent with Islam. In the event of conflict between the two, he encouraged scholars and adat chiefs to engage in dialogue so as to guarantee the continued protection of both aspects of Minangkabau society. Hamka argued that this process of reforming adat and the preponderant paradigms linked to it should be carried out as quickly as possible. To him, many aspects of adat were akin to what he termed “stones covered with moss” (batu sudah berlumut) which should be kept in museums to inform people of what the society was like before. If these practices were not stopped and changed, many Minangkabau youths would leave Minangkabau in search of new places where they would find a just balance between Islam and adat (Hamka 1963, 62).

Hamka’s nuanced approach towards polygamy was extended to adat in that he did not call for a total obliteration of local customs and cultures. As he put it: “Taking this standpoint does not necessitate the complete removal of adat, and adat cannot possibly be removed, but it will undergo change and transformations. If adat does not follow this course, then we cannot term it as such” (Hamka 1963, 96). To hasten the process of transforming adat and harmonizing it with Islam without doing away with either one of these elements in Malay society, Hamka opined that the government should flex its legislative muscle. It was the duty of the Indonesian government, Hamka (1967b, 96) argued, to bring order and restrict the practice of polygamy and customary practices. It is here that we see the legalist element in Hamka’s thinking. This was partly a byproduct of his upbringing within a family of reformist scholars who saw the use of laws as effective tools to change the conditions of Muslim societies.

On the empowerment of Muslim women

One of the major transformations that Muslims in the Malay world were confronted with in the early twentieth century was the coming into prominence of new discourses
regarding women’s empowerment. The spread of ideas from Egypt and Europe into Southeast Asia and the publication of novels such as Hikayat Faridah Hanum (“The Story of Faridah Hanum”) (1925), by the reformist thinker, Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi, aided in the internalization of the notion of women’s empowerment during the pre-World War II period, when Hamka became a public figure (Hooker 2000, 26). By the eve of Hamka’s demise in 1981, Malaysian women were already collaborating with other Muslim and non-Muslim female activists in the Malay world to address problems of domestic violence and unfair treatment at home and in the workplace by setting up crisis centers and helplines (Stivens 2003).

Hamka reacted to these emerging paradigms about women’s empowerment and responded to the shifting constellations of female advocacy in three ways. He intervened in the discourses about women’s empowerment by arguing, first, that such calls were already embedded in the Islamic tradition. Hamka also sought to contextualize the ideas of empowering Muslim women by urging men not to trivialize women’s choices in life. Above all, Hamka questioned Western notions of women’s empowerment, which, to him, could prove to be detrimental to Muslims if such ideas and practices were left unfiltered to fit in with the cultures and beliefs of Muslims in the Malay world.

The empowerment of women, in Hamka’s appreciation, is one of the cornerstones of the Islamic tradition. It is embedded in the Qur’an, the Hadith and in many other classical texts through narratives about the contributions of women in the making of human civilization and the shaping of Islam. The stories of the Queen of Sheba, the Pharaoh’s wife, Mary the mother of Jesus and the noble women during the time of the Prophet Joseph that have been read and studied by Muslims for over a millennium are proofs of Islam’s acknowledgement of the critical roles that women have played in politics and in many areas of social life. In point of fact, the first converts and martyrs in Islam were women. Hamka (2009b, 15) asserted that, in Islam, women are akin to “the pillars of the nation. If the womenfolk are good, the nation will be good, and if they are decadent, so shall be the nation … .This is a clear guidance from the al-Qur’an.”

By arguing in this way, Hamka was setting the premise of any discussion about women’s empowerment within the framework of Islam. He urged his audience to think through the notion of women’s empowerment in the light of the sacred Islamic scriptures first, before other sources. Hamka therefore obliquely de-centered a dominant idea in his time that the idea of women’s empowerment was a modern phenomenon in Islamic societies. This was a mistaken view, according to Hamka. Islam acknowledged women’s rights to inheritance and property long before the coming of modernity (Hamka 2009b, 111). The implication of such an argument is that Muslim women are not necessarily in need of modern values in order to be empowered. Rather, Muslim societies as a whole must return to the spirit of the Qur’an, the Hadith and the best practices of the early generations of Muslims in order to realize the fair and just treatment of Muslim women.

Hamka readily admitted that modernity posed many challenges to Muslim women in the Malay world. Modernity dictates a rethinking of standard views about the noble place that women occupy in the Islamic scriptures. It is for this reason that Hamka sought to provide a more contextualized view of what women’s empowerment is all about, aside from citing idealized examples found in the scriptures. He stressed the need to respect women’s personal choices and preferences. No woman should be stopped from pursuing
formal education. No woman should be coerced into marrying someone she does not approve of or consider appropriate. No woman should be forced to obey her husband in situations where her rights are transgressed (Hamka 2009b, 23). Hamka advocated women’s involvement in civil society and encouraged them to take up leadership positions in public institutions, social movements and political parties in order to safeguard their rights. On this score, Hamka differed significantly from other influential thinkers in his time, including the late Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), an Egyptian intellectual whom Hamka personally admired. Qutb promoted the opinion that the modern world is unkind to women and that women should therefore focus on their roles as wives and mothers and not as social activists and public figures in order to reform society (see Shehadeh 2003, 74).

The issue of women taking up leadership roles has probably been one of the most contentious questions in the Malay world, especially in the 1930s. Even Muslim reformers such as Hamka’s own father, Haji Abdul Karim, were against women becoming leaders in organizations and giving public speeches (Hamka 1967a, 125). Hamka differed from his father on this issue. He provided examples of women in Islamic history who became rulers in the medieval Arab world and the Malay world. The Queens of Aceh and Patani, whose reigns were supported by the ulama, buttress this point. This clearly shows that Islam does not prohibit women from becoming leaders, even at the highest levels. What is more crucial is for women to demonstrate the ability to uphold justice and equality. They should also exhibit the necessary intelligence to govern and the wisdom to lead, and should be advised and backed by experts “who are willing to provide useful and constructive ideas to the women leading them” (Hamka 1973, 3–4).

While Hamka was adamant in his outspoken advocacy for the empowerment of Muslim women, he was careful about giving his all-out intellectual endorsement to the feminist movement of his own day and age. Hamka believed that feminism should be supported because it was one of the avenues by which women’s issues could be aired and advocated. The problem, in Hamka’s view, lay in selected strands within modern-day secular feminism, which propagates the secularization of Muslim societies and gender relations (Hamka 2003). This brand of feminism assumes that men and women are in constant tension with one another and that the empowerment of women begins and ends with the liberation of women from local customs that are regarded as unjust. Hamka’s views on secular feminism parallel the view of Souaiaia (2008, 90) who noted that:

Some self-proclaimed feminists see their success in promoting women’s rights to be contingent on framing the movement in the secular and liberal discourses. It is argued that only in the secular framework could Muslim women achieve their goals. Clearly, this is a direct response to some Muslim women who are working within the Islamic system to reform it.

In contrast, Hamka posited that any form of feminism should be grounded in the experiences and traditions of Muslims in the Malay world. Muslim men and women are equal partners in relationships and complement each other. The individuality of Muslim women is clearly seen in that they use their own surnames rather than their husbands’ surnames and assert their rights when necessary. “The modern women,” Hamka wrote, “should not be overly worried. Islam does not enjoin anyone to prostrate to other than God” (2009b, 23). In other words, the problem, in his view, did not lie in
feminism or in feminist aspirations per se, but, rather, in the sort of feminism that is imperialistic and which imposes its ideals upon Muslim women.

Moreover, respecting feminist aspirations does not mean that all codes of Muslim conduct must also be thoroughly changed. Hamka highlighted the issue of free interaction between men and women as a consequence of modernity and ultra-liberal feminism. Traditionally, men and women in Malay society were always careful about how they conversed with each other, especially if they were not related. Women were, of course, allowed to speak to men, but usually in public areas or in the presence of their brothers or fathers. Hamka felt that the coming of modernity had changed all this. “Pergaulan sopan (decent socialization) is slowly fading away. The influence of Western norms and its impact on old ways of interacting is most felt by the young women” (Hamka 1982a, 3).

The Westernization of Malay society, especially of Malay women during the 1960s, occupied a substantial part of Hamka’s thinking and writing. As mentioned above, he did not regard everything Western as bad and decadent. In fact, he admired the material progress and intellectual culture that was tangible in Western society (Hamka 1954, 39–40). He was, however, critical of the capitalist project and the unbridled materialism that it had fostered among Muslims. These developments contributed to the dilution of Islamic norms and moral codes which, in turn, resulted in the breakdown of families, the loss of a sense of honor and shame and the doing away with a sense of respect for one’s own body. Hamka (1982c, 84) explained:

How can the womenfolk ever be attentive in protecting their honor and harmony in their families when the modes of women’s clothing (mode pakaian wanita) are determined by the textile capitalists, who are always seeking to introduce new and updated styles and that which is always strange, changing each and every time, to the point that clothes have to change even before they are frequently used because the fashions have changed?

Hamka’s recasting of the paradigm about women’s empowerment was therefore neither a total acceptance nor a total rejection of secular modernity and feminism. To be empowered as a Muslim woman is to be deeply aware of the Islamic notions of empowerment, to use modernity as a tool to realize such notions and to appropriate feminism within the ambit of local traditions on the road to overcome the gendered paradigms advocated by various groups in society.

Conclusion

Hamka’s writings about Muslim women in the Malay world have gained so much traction in the region that he has recently been described as providing the germ of inspiration for many studies of women’s rights and gender justice (Nurmila 2013, 161). I would go even further to argue that Hamka was a male Islamic feminist who sought to probe the question of Muslim women in the Malay world by interrogating the various gendered paradigms. I use the term “male Islamic feminist” to describe Hamka because he was indeed doing Islamic feminism in the manner that Badran (2009, 323) has explained as the articulation of “socially-just Islam rooted in a Qur’anic ethos.” Badran elaborates further that Islamic feminism

aims to recuperate the idea of the umma or Islamic community as shared space – shared by women and men equally – and as a pluralistic global community. Islamic feminism
transcends dichotomies of East-West, public-private, and secular-religious. It is in opposition to divide and rule, divide and contain, or divide and discipline, which are hegemonic tactics and not an expression of the Qur’anic message.

Hamka’s recasting of gendered paradigms clearly manifests Badran’s definition of Islamic feminism.

As an Islamic feminist rooted within the reformist tradition of Islam, Hamka questioned and recast various exegetical approaches to verses in the Qur’an that depicted women as inferior and second to man. In contrast, he showed that the Qur’an and other sacred scriptures of Islam endorsed the equality of men and women and their shared functions and roles in the making and reconstructing of Islamic societies. Hamka also sought to make the adat pertaining to women in his society more congruent to Islamic ideals while arguing for women’s empowerment in the light of an Islamic worldview that must also be regulated by the mechanisms of law and order. This multi-faceted project of reorienting gendered paradigms places Hamka on the same plane as renowned Islamic thinkers such as Sayyid Syalik al-Hadi, Rashid Rida and Qasim Amin, to whom he owed intellectual debts, and whose spirit of advocacy for the reformation of the state of Muslim women expanded their fame in their respective societies. In putting his erudite pen at the service of exposing the effects of masculinist religiosity, highlighting the problems that came with local cultures and airing the disenfranchisement of Muslim women as they encountered modernity, Hamka provided Muslims in the Malay world with tools to reflect and rethink the rightful place of women in Islam and in Muslim societies. Indeed, Hamka was not only, as one commentator has suggested, “the most successful Islamic populist of twentieth-century Indonesia” (Hadler 1988, 125); he was also a prominent male advocate of women’s rights and gender equality in the Malay world.

Notes
1. The “Malay world” here refers to present-day Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, South Thailand and Indonesia.
2. The number of postgraduate theses and critical studies on Hamka deserves a bibliography of its own. A few years after his death, a French scholar put together what is now a rather dated, yet still indispensable bibliography of Hamka’s publications and works about him, a considerable of which touched on women’s issues; see Moussay (1986).
3. For a good review of works on Muslim feminism in Southeast Asia, see Khanam (2002).
4. The papers and resolutions presented during this iconic congress have been published in Blackburn (2008).
5. Moderation is the hallmark of Hamka’s approach to the different strands of ideas of his time. See Abdullah and Adnan (2011).
7. This and all the translations from Hamka that follow are my own.
8. For an excellent study of the prominent roles women played as heads of states and leaders in Southeast Asian Muslim societies, see Andaya (2006).

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
References


