

# HERMENEUTICS OF THE QUR'AN: A STUDY OF MUHAMMAD SYAHRUR'S THOUGHTS ON THE MEN AND WOMEN EQUALITY

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## HERMENEUTICS OF THE QUR'AN: A STUDY OF MUHAMMAD SYAHRUR'S THOUGHTS ON THE MEN AND WOMEN EQUALITY

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### Abstract:

*This article discussed The Qur'an hermeneutics: Study of Muhammad Syahrur's thoughts on the of men and women equality. The study aimed to find out more about the concept of men and women equality in Muhammad Syahrur's hermeneutics. This article used a literature approach (Library Research) by describing and analyzing research objects, namely reading and analyzing various sources related to the topic, for later being analyzed and finally drawing conclusions and being formulated in a written report. The results showed that Muhammad Syahrur is one of the Islamic thinkers who used a hermeneutic approach in interpreting the Qur'an, especially on fundamental themes such as equality between men and women. In this scope, Syahrur saw a methodological error and there is no revolutionary interpretation of Islamic laws relating to women to be the culprit of gender inequality. Therefore, Syahrur made a legal breakthrough through hermeneutics studies and succeeded in proving that there is no gender bias in Islam..*

**Keywords:** *Muhammad Syahrur, Gender, Hermeneutics*

### Introduction

One of the crucial problems faced by Muslims in Islamic studies is the use of hermeneutics in the process of studying and interpreting the Qur'an. Hermeneutics becomes one of the objects of study which causes both pros and con controversy. For the pros group, hermeneutics is a historical necessity because the understanding of the scriptures cannot be separated from the intention, mental condition, audience, experience, social conditions and ideology of the interpreter's subject (Iswahyudi, 2012: 141). In addition, the sacredness of texts and traditions will cause the dimming of the light and dynamics of Islamic discourse, which in turn will become more and more hardened when ideological intervention occurs from the authorities which favor certain idea extremely (Adawiyah, 2016: 19).

On the other hand, contra group, which uses hermeneutics in studying the Qur'an, believes that the term hermeneutics is vocabulary from Western philosophy, which is also closely related to the interpretation of the Bible. Therefore, hermeneutics does not deserve to be equated with the interpretation of the Qur'an (Armis, 2004: 38). The application of hermeneutics to the Qur'an is clearly proven as problematic (Husaini, 2006: 192). For that reason, hermeneutics is not needed because interpretation as a scientific method can accommodate current challenges, even the hermeneutic method used by modernist Muslims including Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Amina Wadud, Hasan Hanafi, and Fazlur Rahman were proven as problematic.

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Moreover, the use of the term hermeneutics for the interpretation of the Qur'an is an awkward nomenclature (naming) (Zarkasy, 2004: 5). In addition, the tradition of Islamic interpretation is not the same as the tradition of hermeneutics in Christianity. In short, the hermeneutics used in Christian theology has its own background and is different from Islamic traditions (Suharto, 2004: 50).

It must be admitted that since the descent of the Qur'an, various studies on it continue to be carried out to this day. The books of interpretation that always come up with various methods of interpretation, approaches, and patterns are clear evidence that the effort to interpret the Qur'an is very high and it never stops. Of course, this is a very encouraging scientific phenomenon. Because in general Muslims want to always make the Qur'an as a dialogue partner for their life-survival and to develop their cultural talent. The continuous dialectical process between finite texts and infinite contexts is actually the main driving force for the rapid development of the process of understanding and interpreting the Qur'an until now.

Islamic reformers such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) had made the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an a major concern. Therefore, FazlurRahman in his book *Islam and Modernity*, opposed that the basic problem of the Qur'an hermeneutics methodology was not raised by Muslims. He stated that imperfections and shortcomings of these tools were used to formulate laws and everything from the Qur'an. All were done by a weak method, so it failed to understand the unity of the Qur'an. Therefore, Mohamed Arkoun in his brilliant work called for using a new approach, one of which is hermeneutics in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an (Poonawala, 2006: 148).

This is what Muhammad Syahrur did. Syahrur believed that the interpretation of the Qur'an is one of the bases for reforming and developing Islamic teachings, social, political thought and law. For this reason, he believed that Qur'an is the only source of reinterpretation of Islamic thought. The following article tries to look a little in the direction of the hermeneutics of the Quran from the perspective of Muhammad Syahrur, a Syrian scholar who had no religious basis from the educational background or the occupation. However, he was very interested in conducting studies and research on Islamic religion, especially in the works he produced. In addition, the classical scientific tradition that is used today is filled with doctrine as the truth, which unexpectedly descends from the sky and is transformed into absolute truth, even though all of that is merely tentative and tends to be reversed (Syahrur, 1991: 29).

### **The Understanding of Hermeneutics, the History, and Its Development**

The word hermeneutics is a derivation from the Greek from the root word *hermeneuin*, which means to interpret. However, hermeneutics as the art of interpretation requires three components, namely text, interpreter and reconciliation to the reader. Hermeneutics has the role of explaining the text as what the creator of the text wanted. This role is exactly like the figure of Hermes which is in charge of bringing the message of Lord Zeus to humans. Because these messages are still in heaven and need intermediaries who can interpret and translate it into the earth languages. From this function and

role, hermeneutics begins to gain new meaning as science or the art of interpreting (Nasir, 2004: 30).

The term hermeneutics was first used by Plato (237 BC) in one of his works "Politics, Epinomics, Definitione, and Timeus". Furthermore, hermeneutics developed into a science of allegorical interpretation under the pioneers of Stoicism (300 BC) who tried to understand texts by looking for deeper meanings than just literal meanings. Accordingly, for an allegorical interpretation of mythology, the Stoic applied the doctrines of inner logos and outer logos (inner word and outer word). The allegorical method was further developed by Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-50 BC), a Jew who was later considered as the Father of the allegorical method. The method also called typology which basically taught that understanding the spiritual meaning of a text does not originate from text or text information, but through symbolic understanding that refers to something out of the text.

This allegorical hermeneutic method is then transmitted into the thinking of Christian theologians. The figure, Origen (185-254 AD) has succeeded in writing an explanation of the Old Testament with this method. His theory about the three layers of meaning in the very famous Bible was developed by Johannes Cassianus (360-430 AD) into four meaning layers, namely; literal or historical, allegorical, moral, and anagogical (spiritual) (Zarkasy, 2004: 19). From allegorical, hermeneutics developed more and invented semiotics (theory of symbols) under the pioneer of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD). After that, hermeneutics which was originally (allegorical and semiotic) used to read literature began to touch the theological areas of Christianity at that time. Hermeneutics is used as a tool to dissect the Bible, the Christian Scriptures (Shofan, 2006: 229).

The development of hermeneutics from theological discourse became a discussion of philosophy along with the changing in the way of life of modern and postmodern Western societies. The 18th century is considered the period of the validity of the modernity project, namely rational thought that promises liberation from irrationality, mythology, religion, and khufarat. It is within this milieu of thought that the meaning of hermeneutics changes into a philosophical methodology..

The appearance of Fredrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher (1768-1834 AD) marked a new chapter in the method of philosophical hermeneutics. Through Scheleirmacher, the hermeneutics discussion of the reading device of literature text, religion, and other classical texts became a whole method (*epistemology*) in philosophy. Then from Schleiermacher, various hermeneutic genres were finally born such as the hermeneutics of Betti initiated by Emilio Betti (1890-1968 AD) which was a Roman legal scholar of Italian nationality. There was also the hermeneutics of Hirsch, which was conceived by Ric D. Hirsch, an American Nation literature critic. There was hermeneutics of Gadamer, initiated by Hans Georg Gadamer, a philosopher, and there were also the hermeneutics of Dilthey, the hermeneutics of Habermas, etc (Suharto, 2004: 51).

Although hermeneutics was born from the womb of mythology, then it lapsed into the Bible and grew into one of the concentrations in philosophy, using hermeneutics as an alternative in formulating Islamic religious texts is something that can be taken into account. Because one of the problems that hermeneutics is trying to solve is how to interpret texts critically, objectively,

*muthobiq bi makanwazaman* (contextual), not to cage and even to make it free. Because in hermeneutics, it is discussed how a religious text (past) and presents it back to people who live in a place that is far away in distance and differences in time. Hermeneutics helps differentiate the process of understanding, interpretation and (*translating*) of a text, both scripted and unscripted, henceforth, being conveyed to the people who live in different worlds.

Hermeneutics as a method of interpretation is very relevant to be used in understanding the message of the Qur'an so that the intelligence subtlety (Understanding accuracy) and explicit subtlety (accuracy of translation) of God's message can be comprehensively explored. The point is that the message of Allah revealed in the text of the Qur'an through the Prophet Muhammad is not only understood textually. However, it is also understood to be contextual and comprehensive by not limiting oneself to the text and context when the Qur'an revealed. Thus, the text of the Qur'an and its surroundings can be used to be in harmony and in accordance with the conditions of space, time, and place where we are and live (Shofan, 2006: 238).

## **Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: Muhammad Syahrur's Perspective on Equality of Men and Women**

### **1. Muhammad Syahrur Biography**

Muhammad Syahrur is one of a few contemporary Muslim scholars who studied the Qur'an by using hermeneutics, besides FazlurRahman, FaridEsack, Mohammad Arkoun, HasanHanafi, Ashgar Ali Engineer, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid. Muhammad SyahrurIbnuDayb was born to DayblbnDayb and SiddiqahbintSalihFilyun, on April 11, 1938 in Shalhiyyah border Damascus Syria (Aravik, Choiriyah & Saprida, 2018: 48).

Muhammad Syahrur began his career in elementary education (Ibtida'iyah) and his I'dad began with Damascus school. While his secondary education (Tsanawiyah) was obtained from the Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi school, Damascus, the school named after a well-known Arabic writer who lived in 1849-1903 and perseveringly called for resistance against a corrupt Turkish nation. He completed his Secondary Education in 1957, at the age of 19 (Jalil, 2016: 5-6).

After graduating from Secondary Education, Syahrur obtained a scholarship from the Syrian government, to study in Moscow (Soviet Union) and learned about Civil Engineering (*al-Handasah al-Madaniyyah*) (Husnah, 2016: 113). In Russia, Syahrur knew and learned about the ideas of Marxism and Communism which were the basis for the government there. Here he also met and acquainted with Ja'far Dak Albaab, who would later have a major influence on Syahrur, especially in the aspects of language studies. Syahrur graduated from Moscow Technical University in 1964 (Adinugraha, 2018: 4). In 1965 Syahrur returned to his country and devoted himself to the Syrian Damascus University.

In 1967 Syahrur had the opportunity to conduct research at Imperial College London, England. Syahrur was forced to return to Syria, because at that time, precisely in June 1967 there was a six-day war between Arabs (the combination of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria) against Israel which resulted in diplomatic relations between Syria and Britain broken because Britain, in

this case, was in Israel side. Finally, Syahrur decided to go to Dublin, Ireland as the representative from Damascus University to take his Masters and Ph.D. program at The National University of Ireland (NUI) by taking Foundation Engineering and Soil Mechanics (*al-Handasah al-Madaniyyah*) (Mustaqim, 2017: 3).

His doctoral degree was obtained in 1972. Furthermore, Syahrûr has officially been a teaching staff at the University of Damascus until now besides his position as a lecturer, Syahrur actually also became an engineering consultant. In 1982-1983, he was sent by the university to become an expert staff at al-Saud Consult, Saudi Arabia. In addition, along with some of his colleagues in the Faculty, Syahrur opened an engineering consulting bureau (dar al-istisyarat al-handasiyyah) in Damascus (Aseri, Fauzi, Abidin dan Wardani, 2014: 17).

The Syahrur intellectual works include: *al-Kitab wa al-Qur'an: Qira'ah Mu'ashirah* (1990). *Al-Islam wa al-Iman, Manzumat al-Qiyam* (1995) which has been translated into Indonesian namely "Islam-Faith: Basic Principles". Then *Dirasah Islamiyah fi al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama'* (1996) which means "Contemporary Islamic Studies of the State and Society". *Masyru' al-Amal al-Islam* (1999), *Nahw Usul al-Jadidah li Fiqh al-Islam* (2000), in Indonesia means "*Metodologi Fiqih Islam Kontemporer*". Everything was translated by al-Haliy at-Tiba'ah wa an-Nasyr wa at-Tauzi 'in Damascus. In 2008 Syahrur republished a book called *Tajfif Manabi' al-Tarhib, Al-Qashish al-Qur'ani* (2010), *Al-Sunnah al-Rasuliyah wa Sunnah al-Nabawiyah* (2012), *Al-Din wa al-Sulthah* (2014), and *Ummu al-Kitab wa Tafsiliha* (2015) (Jalil, 2016: 6).

Besides writing books, Syahrur wrote scientific articles in several media, such as "The Divine Text and Pluralism in Muslim Societies" in *Muslim Politics Report 14* (August 1997), 3-9. "Islam and the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women", in *Kuwaiti Newspaper*, was published in *Liberal Islam* book. The editor, Charles Kuzman was published in New York by Oxford University Press in 1998 (Nasution, 2007: 79). "Proposal for Islamic Covenant", "Reading the Religious Text: A New Approach", "*Al-Harakah al-Libraliyyah Rafadlat al-Fiqh wa Tasyri'atiha wa Takinnah lam Tarfudh al-Islam ka Tawhid wa Risalah Samawiyyah*", and "*al-Harakah al-Islamiyyah lan Tafuz bi asy-Syari'iyah illa idza Tharahat Nazhariyyah Islamiyyah Mu'ashirah fi ad-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama'*" (Fanani, 2008: 2003).

## 2. Men and Women Equality Concept from the Perspective of Hermeneutics al-Qur'an of Muhammad Syahrur

Principally Interpreting the Qur'an by using hermeneutics is not new to contemporary Muslim scholars. Mohammed Arkoun, for example, might be someone who thoroughly tried to use hermeneutics in interpreting the Qur'an. To carry out this hermeneutical interpretation, the first step that must be taken is to sort out and to show the first text or forming text and which hermeneutical text. Arkoun returned Islamic thought to the Qur'anic discourse as it was open to various readings and thus open various understandings (Shofan, 2006: 243). In addition, the character of Islamic law must meet the needs of modern society with all its dynamics (Hamzani, Aravik & Khasanah, 2018: 224) taking part requires open spaces of dialectics and rhetoric with new knowledge including hermeneutics.

Muhammad Syahrur Hermeneutics is based on three main keywords, namely *kainunah* (state of being), *sairurah* (condition of process), and *shairurah* (condition of being). These three keywords are always interrelated and become a starting point in any study in philosophy, including about divinity (*theology*), nature (*naturalistic*), and humans (*anthropology*) (Tarlam, 2016: 96).

The basic foundation <sup>30</sup> indicates that there is Syahrur's suggestion to be aware of the history in understanding the Qur'an, especially in the concept of *sairurah*, or in the language of Amin Abdullah, as a way of historical reading (Tarlam, 2015: 96). The reason, however, is that the product of interpretation and methodology is a part of the *kainunah* existence that is unbreakable by the journey of history (*sairurah*) which of course must be developing or even changing according to the needs and <sup>32</sup>hands of the times. Therefore, the methodology project in understanding al-Qur'an as a "process condition" of the course of interpretation as an attempt to ground the Qur'an in the classical era may have been obsolete because it experienced "the conditions being" (Tarlam, 2015: 96).

As the <sup>2</sup>amples of one of al-Qur'an hermeneutics made by Muhammad Syahrur is <sup>12</sup>; the concept of equality between men and women in Islam. The theme of equality between men and women or often referred to as "gender" is one of the themes in Muhammad Syahrur's *shudud* though.

The discourse on Rights equality was initially a new breakthrough in Islam in order to reform various forms of injustice against women during the period of *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic Arabic). Injustice practices such as unlimited polygamy were replaced by Islam with limited polygamy, no more than four wives. Likewise, the marriage of *istibdaa'* (polyandi) and *zawaj al-muth'ah* (temporary marriage), *zawaj al-hiba* (sacrifice marriage) were eliminated. Even marriage transactions that were similar to bargaining (*zawaj al-musyarakah*) are replaced by the dowry concept (Esposito, 1982: 14).

Gender study in Syahrur's perspective is not just interesting to be discussed, but more than that gender is a very sensitive theme and has encouraged a unique awareness not only because of philosophical views, but has practical implications that are highly demanded. Therefore, many efforts have been made to overcome the equality gap between men and women, but no effective formula has yet been found. Whereas naturally, destiny said that men and women are both created by Allah SWT. Both men and women are members of the most important institutions in society, namely the family. The family is institutionalized through marriage between a man and a woman. In the family, each member has certain responsibilities. Biologically, a woman's primary responsibility is childbearing and is morally responsible in children's education. For this reason, through Syahrur's hermeneutics study, there are at least a number of fundamental weaknesses made by previous interpretations in studying the theme of equality between men and women, including:

<sup>1</sup> First, methodological errors that do not pay attention to the characteristics and flexibility of understanding the text <sup>1</sup> of the scriptures. As a result, legal products that are born are more burdensome and not contextual. For example mistakes in interpreting Surah Ali Imran [3] verse 14 (*Zuyyina li al-nash hubb al-syahawat ...*) and surah al-Baqarah [2] verse 223 (*Nisa'ukum harts vacuum ..*) so that it traps them in fatal mistakes by

positioning women as men's property. This of course greatly discriminates against women.

*Second*, there is no revolutionary change in interpretation of Islamic laws relating to women, as it is happened to the case with the verses on slavery, even though there has been a historical awareness that women's emancipation began in the Prophet Muhammad era and it has never ended until now (Aravik, Choiriyah & Saprida, 2018: 61-62).

In the editorial view of Al-Quran verses, it will be found that many verses which explicitly uphold the principles of equality of men and women, such as men and women alike namely as the servants of Allah SWT (Surah Adz-Dzariyat [41]: 56), men and women are as the caliph of Allah SWT on earth (Surah Al-Baqarah [2]: 30, Al-An'am [6]: 165), men and women are alike to accept the initial agreement with Allah SWT (QS. al-A'raf [7]: 172, al-Isra' [17]: 70), men and women are alike to have the highest potential for achievement (Surah Ali Imran [3]: 195, An-Nisa' [4]: 124, An-Nahl [16]: 97), men (Adam) and women (eve) are both actively involved in cosmic drama (Surah al-Baqarah [2]: 35, al-A'raf [7]: 20, al-A'raf [7]: 23, and al-Baqarah [2]: 187).

Gender inequality occurs because of the wrong implementation of religious teachings (including in interpreting verses about gender), which is caused by the influence of historical factors, patriarchal cultural environment, and traditions in the community, thus provoking the attitudes and behavior of the community to continually determine the status of women and gender inequality (Shofan, 2006: 305).

In addition to the explanation above, Syahrur also discussed the issue of polygamy which is a crucial issue in gender justice. Syahrur included this discussion of polygamy in the category of hudud positions with minimum and maximum limits that came together but did not merge in one point or one line (Jalil, 2016: 2). Therefore, verse 3 of an-Nisa', as *hududiyah* verse, the meaning of the verse contains the interpretation of "the limits of determining the law", both quantitatively (*hudud al-kamm*) and qualitatively (*hudud al-kait*).

Thus, the verse only gives a hint about the principles of establishing polygamy law, which he called the terms "al-hadd al-adna (lowest / minimum limit) and al-hadd al-a'la (highest / maximum limit), both in terms of quantitative and qualitative. These two limits, according to Syahrur, are things that must be considered at the same time in the practice of polygamy (Ismail, 2003: 226). Syahrur first discussed the two key words in the verse from an etymological point of view namely *qasatha* and *'adala*. In Arabic, each of the two pronunciations has two potential paradoxical meanings. *qasatha* has two potential meanings: (1) *al-luadlu al-musa'adah* (fair by providing help), as contained in the QS. Al-Ma'idah [5]: 42, QS. Al-Hujurat [49]: 9, and QS. Al-Mumtahanah [60]: 8, and (2) do not straight or deviate (*i'wija*). Of the two potential meanings for the two pronunciations, the potential meanings referred to in QS. An-Nisa' [4]: 3 are the potentials of the first meaning, which is to do good and be fair.

Furthermore, Syahrur did not consider the word *qasatha* to be a synonym of the word *'adala*. Both of them, although they have meanings, they have different connotations. It means that the meaning of justice in the word *qasatha* is seen from one direction or without comparison. Meanwhile, doing



what is meant by the word 'adala' is to be fair between two different parties (*musawah baina tharafain mukhtalifain*). Syahrur argues, that the word *tuqsitu* used at the beginning of surah an-Nisa '[4] verse 3 with the word *tadilu* at the end of the same verse has different meaning consequences. However, the commentators mostly interpret *tuqsitu* and *tadilu* with the same food and understanding which means fair. According to Syahrur, in *lafaz wa in khiftum alla tuqsitu*, *tuqsitu* is fair here only in one end. Because Allah is talking about justice for orphans. "If you cannot do justice to orphans (just one end or not the other party, that is, orphans)". Whereas when Allah says about our worries we cannot do justice to our own children, one party, and the innate orphans of the wife of the other party, Allah uses the word *adala*, *wa in khiftum alla ta'dilu fawa hidatan*.

Thus the redaction of surah An-Nisa '[4] verse 3 must be comprehended or translated into "And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice]" Because the general redaction of the verse is closely related to polygamy and widows who have orphans.

In other words, Syahrur wants to emphasize that in terms of qualitative, obtaining the practice of polygamy is associated with the requirement at the second wife and so on must be widowed women (because her husband died) and have orphans. To strengthen this view, Syahrur then analyzing the grammatical structure of the above verse language, linking the determination of the practice of polygamy to the phrase *fankihu ma thaba lakum min an-nisa 'matsna wa tsulasa wa ruba'* as the structure of the answer *asy-syarath* with the expression *wa in khiftum an la tuqsithu fi al-yatama as syarath* (conditional) structure (Aravik, Choriyah & Saprida, 2018: 62). So principally, according to Syahrur, Allah is not only allowing polygamy, but encouraging, but with two conditions that must be met. If these requirements are not fulfilled, the polygamy order will be void. Namely: First, the second, third and fourth wives must be widows who have orphans, and second, there must be a fear of not being able to do justice to orphans (Jalil, 2016: 10).

For Syahrur in polygamy, there are humanity and social side that will be decomposed (resolved) when justice for orphans can be accomplished by marrying widowed women who have orphans (Ulum, 2015: 4). Moreover, the command of polygamy is the solution to a number of very large problems, which demand social struggle, including: (1) the presence of a man on the side of a widow will be able to guard and maintain her from falling into despicable acts. (2) Provision of safe shelter for orphans where they can develop and, (3) the presence of the mother on the side of their orphaned children can always continue to educate and care for them (Jalil, 2016: 11).

Thus, it can be concluded that the vision and paradigm of Syahrur's interpretation of several verses on gender, has proven to be. Syahrur implicitly cares deeply about the problem, and intends to fight for women's rights on the basis of justice. For this reason, Syahrur's thinking is worth considering, because Syahrur rests on the foundation of the Al-Quran and hermeneutic methods which are very powerful to create legal products based on justice and respecting human rights (women).

### Conclusion

From the explanation above, it can be comprehended that interpreting the Qur'an by using Muhammad Syahrur hermeneutics is actually continuous<sup>23</sup> what scholars have done before and during his lifetime with him such as Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, Mohamed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, etc. The concept of Muhammad Syahrur hermeneutics is based on three main keywords, namely *kainunah* (state of being), *sairurah* (condition of process), and *shairurah* (condition of being). The results of Syahrur's interpretation by using hermeneutics produce a lot of controversies and are contrary<sup>2</sup> to the results of existing interpretations. As the example is in the scope of equality between men and women. In this scope, Syahrur sees a methodological breakdown and a revolutionary change in the interpretation of Islamic laws relating to women, which has been the culprit of gender inequality. There<sup>2</sup>re, through the study of al-Qur'an hermeneutics, Syahrur found the fact that there is no gender bias in the teachings of Islam.

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