

Unveiling Choice: Debate on the Use of Hijab Religious Studies and Feminism in Malaysia

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Abstract

Hijab is an important symbol for Malaysia as a country that implements Islamic values in its social system. However, Maryam Lee sees that the decision of Malaysian Muslim women to wear the hijab is largely influenced by social demands. Maryam also sees that women who decide to take off their hijab are often criticized by society. These views Maryam wrote in her book entitled Unveiling Choices. In this book, Maryam narrates her views and decision to remove the hijab. Maryam also explained that women should be freed in deciding whether to wear or take off the hijab. This study aims to understand Maryam Lee's view of the hijab and how Malaysians respond to it. Therefore, this study will also look at the position of the hijab for the Malaysian people, Maryam Lee's thoughts on hijab, and the public's response to Maryam's thoughts. This research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative research method, namely by describing the thoughts of Maryam Lee and the public's response to her thoughts. Feminist Standpoint Theory chosen to understand Maryam's views and the public's response to her views. The results show that Maryam's view of the hijab contradicts the general view of Malaysian society. So that Maryam's view has sparked pros and cons from Malaysian society, this polarity occurs because there are groups who see Maryam's thoughts as a form of deviation from Islamic identity while other groups consider Maryam's actions as a form of resistance to the patriarchal system that demands justice for Malaysian women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country with a majority Muslim population. So that apart from being a source of state law, Islamic values have been used as norms and culture inherent in Malaysian society. The use of hijab by Muslim women is one example of the implementation of Islamic law in Malaysia. In other words, the hijab has become an identity for Malaysian Muslim women. Although the state does not require the wearing of the hijab, the wearing of the hijab for Malaysian Muslim women seems to be an obligation because the use of the hijab has become inherent in the norms in society. For Malaysians, wearing the hijab is not only a form of religious observance but also a form of

implementing social norms. So often the decision of Malaysian Muslim women to wear the hijab is influenced by their family and social environment. Maryam Lee wrote about this view in her book, *Unveiling Choice*.

In her book, Maryam Lee tries to tell her journey in deciding to stop wearing the hijab. Through her book, Maryam criticizes the hijab culture of Malaysian society which requires Muslim women to wear the hijab. Maryam also criticized the social criticism that women get when they decide to take off the hijab. Maryam thinks that women should have the freedom to wear or take off the hijab. Maryam's view has received various responses from the Malaysian people. This is because Maryam's view is different from the

view of the majority of Malaysians regarding the hijab. Therefore, the author seeks to understand Maryam Lee's view of the hijab which contradicts the views of the general Malaysian public. Furthermore, this study also aims to see the response of Malaysian society to Maryam Lee's thoughts on the hijab.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The journal entitled *Islamic Law and Human Rights in Malaysia* written by Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil, and Nisar Mohammad Ahmad published in *Islam and Civilizational Renewal* in January 2014 [1], discusses the implementation of legal law in Malaysia which is influenced by two main factors, namely Sharia law and human rights. This journal does not specifically explain the limitations of the implementation of Sharia law in Malaysia but concludes that Sharia law has the potential to support the implementation of human rights so that this journal provides an important overview to explain the position of Sharia law in Malaysia.

The journal entitled *Sisters in Islam Thinking Methodology on Hijab: Analysis of Criticism Based on Fiqh al-Hadith* written by Shah Rizul Izyan Zulkiply, Mohd Muhiden Abd Rahman, Mohd Zahir Abdul Rahman and published in *Al-Basirah Journal* in December 2016 [2] discusses the recommendation to wear the hijab based on the argument - the arguments of the Qur'an and Hadith as well as criticizing the ideas of Sisters in Islam which are considered to deviate from religious teachings. This journal through the elaboration of these arguments denies that wearing the hijab is an option, but an obligation. This journal helps us to see Maryam Lee's actions, namely to see the feminism movement and its resistance to patriarchy which is at the same time faced with

Sharia law that applies in Malaysia.

The journal, entitled *Is Hijab a Fashion Statement*, was written by Fadila Grine and Munazza Saeed which was published in the *Journal of Islamic Marketing* in 2017 [3]. This journal examines whether the hijab habit of the Malaysian Muslim community is based on religious obligations or based on fashion trends. The results showed that the majority of the Malaysian Muslim community who wear hijab is based on religious obligations rather than fashion trends. Malaysian Muslim women regard the hijab as a religious obligation and as a spiritual content regardless of whether it is attractive or not. For them, the hijab does not only cover the head but the body must also be covered by wearing loose clothing under Islamic rules. This journal provides an overview of how the habit of wearing the hijab is influenced by social characteristics and norms that exist in Malaysia. This journal helps the author to understand the social system of Malaysian society in the context of the hijab.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using descriptive qualitative research methods. Through this method, the writer tries to explain and describe the object under study descriptively. This study specifically describes Maryam Lee's thoughts on hijab and how Malaysians respond to these thoughts. The process of collecting data was obtained through a literature review by analyzing documents collected from various sources, such as journals, research, surveys, news portals, and other relevant sources. The keywords used in the data search process are the value of hijab in Malaysia, Maryam Lee's thoughts on hijab, and the public's response to Maryam's thoughts. Based on the data that has been obtained, the researcher will reduce the data by categorizing the data into

several categories, arranging them into patterns, selecting important information, narrowing the data, and making conclusions.

IV. THEORY

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist Standpoint Theory assumes that a person's knowledge is obtained based on his position in social society. A person with a unique social position determines how he lives his life and influences his knowledge. Because it is related to the social structure, this social position has a level according to the distribution of power. The dominant social group usually controls the social structure and cultural expectations which results in the mastery of control over the minority group. Therefore, this theory is useful for explaining the experiences of minority and marginal groups. In contrast to feminist theory which focuses on the discussion of restrictions on women, Standpoint theory focuses more on the sources of women's experiences that are often ignored [4].

In other words, this theory focuses on seeking a clearer understanding of women's communication choices and the meaning of understanding their experiences. Communication is very important in this theory. Feminist Standpoint Theory tries to see the interpretation and meaning of someone's experience which usually starts from dialogue, discourse, and changes in perspective. Furthermore, this new perspective becomes a dominant thought that continues to experience and changes in the understanding of changing experiences. In the end, women who see the world from a feminist perspective witness how power works in their position as a marginal group, feel its effects in life and decide to reject patriarchal control [4].

Malaysia's dominant group may perceive the

hijab as a national identity, but women who decide to stop wearing the hijab like Maryam Lee may have different views on the hijab. Feminist Standpoint Theory seeks to see women's experiences as a communication and how these experiences are influenced by various sources of demands. This theory seeks to understand Maryam Lee's decision to stop wearing the hijab as a symbolic expression and reflect her perspective on the hijab that is different from the dominant concept. This theory also attempts to explain how the dominant concept of hijab in Malaysian society has higher power than the marginal concept of hijab such as Maryam's thought.

V. ANALYSIS

A. The Position of Hijab for Malaysian Society

The spread of Islam in Malaysia began in the 14th century due to the conversion of King Parameswara (hereinafter known as Sultan Iskandar Shah) after marrying the daughter of the Islamic Kingdom of Samudra Pasai. This religious conversion was followed by Malaysians. Sharia law was then applied because of the increasing influence of Islam in the state life of Malaysian society. The implementation of Sharia law was also influenced by the great support from the Sultanate of Malaysia which is still respected by the Malaysian people. Today, Islam is the official and majority religion for the Malaysian population. Because of this history, Islamic values have become very embedded in the social life of the people. Malaysia was then known as a culturally Malay country with Islamic characteristics from the Sultanate of Malaysia [1].

The characteristics of Malaysian Islam can be seen, one of which is about how to dress

women who are closed or through the habits of women wearing the hijab. Malaysia calls the hijab 'hood', which is to functions as a hair and neck cover accompanied by brackets [5]. The use of hijab has become an identity for Muslim women, especially for countries with a majority Muslim population such as Malaysia. This is because Islam requires its adherents, especially women, to wear the hijab. However, the use of the hijab, which is a form of religious observance, has turned into a demand for the family and social environment [6]. There are two groups of women who wear the hijab in Malaysia, namely those who wear the hijab based on religious observance and the basis of fashion trends. [7]

Media such as Hijabista and Nur magazines play a role in building the conception of the use of hijab in Malaysia. The content presented by Hijabista magazine leads to the hijab as fashion because the magazine provides opinions about hijab fashion trends, while Nur magazine provides more content towards conventional hijab by not giving the feel of the modern hijab [8]

Based on a survey to look at the factors that encourage the use of hijab among 362 Malaysian Muslim women with an Islamic higher education background and aged under 24 years, it was found that parents and social environment have a greater influence than the media (referring to social and mass media). to encourage the use of the hijab for Muslim women in Malaysia. In the same survey it was found that the reasons for wearing the hijab in Malaysia began to shift, with the highest reason being to follow fashion trends followed by reasons related to religion, also found reasons to facilitate communication with other Muslims. The survey concludes that Muslim women get

great encouragement from their parents and the surrounding environment, but the shift in the value of using the hijab is influenced by the media [9]. Celebrities who are active on social media also have a considerable influence in shifting the value of hijab to fashion trends. Celebrities who promote hijab fashion often make the products they promote to become the latest hijab trends [10].

A similar survey was also conducted by Sandra Hochel in 2010 in Malaysia with the respondents being Malaysian Muslim women. The results show that most Malaysian Muslim women feel the demand to wear the hijab [11].

There are three aspects of piety that women have, namely hijab, polygamy, and caring for children [12]. Hijab is one of the social imaginations about the piety of Malaysian Muslim women. Society determines the level of the piety of Muslim women through the hijab they wear. This social imagination is then transformed into a social obligation for Malaysian Muslim women to wear the hijab. This obligation is further supported by countries where Malaysia is an Islamic country [13].

B. Hijab from Maryam Lee's View

Maryam Lee has become a widely discussed figure in Malaysia because of her views on the hijab. Through her book, *Unveiling Choice*, Maryam tells the story of her journey in deciding to take off her hijab. Through this experience, Maryam tries to voice the importance of freedom for Muslim women to choose to wear the hijab or not. In her book, she writes that "What people need to understand is that the hijab can be both liberating and oppressive, depending on the situation and context." Maryam also criticized the wearing of

the hijab which has been imposed by the social environment, especially for children, at the behest of their parents and the surrounding environment [14].

According to Maryam, wearing the hijab should be a matter of individual choice, because Maryam sees that Islam has become an instrument of power and control for Malaysian Muslim men. Maryam also criticized how they did not even hear women's voices in decision-making. He also criticized how women until recently could not become imams and ulama, because the role of leader was exclusively for men. (Hunt, 2020). In addition, Maryam also emphasized that the common enemy for women is men who try to tell women what to wear [15].

Maryam has been wearing the hijab since she was 9 years old. In her mid-20s, Maryam realized that the reason she wore the hijab was only to satisfy social expectations rather than a form of religious observance. Therefore, Maryam finally decided to stop wearing the hijab. For Maryam, her decision to open the hijab is a step to get out of the patriarchal form and not out of Islam. In her book Maryam asserts that "I was born a Muslim, I'm still a Muslim - I'm no less of a Muslim because I removed my hijab". Maryam also emphasized that she was not calling on the public to take off the hijab, but rather inviting the public to rethink the teachings that have been given to them, in this case regarding the hijab issue. In Maryam's view, Malaysian women experience social criminalization if they decide to remove the hijab. Maryam also said that women were "imprisoned by social expectations" [14].

Unveiling Choice is Maryam Lee's attempt to inspire women who are on a spiritual journey and knowledge that makes them decide to do things that are against the social system. For

Maryam, she is a reminder to the government and society that freedom of expression is not a crime and freedom of religion is not part of an insult to Islam, and the protection of freedom is a fundamental right in human rights [14].

C. Malaysian Society's Response to Maryam Lee's Action

Maryam Lee's views on the hijab began to be widely discussed after she became a speaker at the launching of her book entitled "Malay Women and De-Hijabbing". Maryam's view got pros and cons from Malaysian society. Those who are against Maryam Lee's action are of the view that the hijab is an obligation that must be fulfilled by women. They even criticized women who only wore turbans. Based on the arguments of the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as the belief that the hijab is part of the hereditary history of the Malay community, this group views women who do not wear the hijab as violating religious rules and have committed a very big sin. Meanwhile, women who wear turbans are considered individuals who do not carry out the Shari'a according to religious guidelines, because their aurat is still visible in the form of a neck and chest that are not neatly covered [16]. In looking at the position of women, Malaysian society demands 'idealism' in which the way women dress must be adapted to the customs of Malay culture and Islam. Based on this, there will be social demands for demands in dressing for Malaysian women which are required to cover their aurat, so that if a woman does not wear clothes that cover her aurat or her hijab does not comply with the 'idealism', she will receive criticism and social criticism [6].

In addition, the contra group also considers Maryam Lee's view of the freedom to wear the hijab as a form of deviation from Islamic

identity. This counter attitude was also shown by the Malaysian government when the Minister of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Prime Minister Mujahid Yusof Rawa worried about Maryam's actions and thoughts and immediately contacted the Selangor Islamic Religion Office for follow-up [17]. The government is concerned that Maryam Lee's actions could trigger the actions of other women to participate in removing the hijab. This counter attitude was finally continued through the legal process by bringing Maryam Lee for questioning under a law that prohibits insulting Islam, namely Article 58 (1) of the 2003 Sharia Criminal Procedure Code (Selangor) [18].

However, Maryam Lee also received support from various parties who felt that wearing the hijab was a form of coercion by the family and the surrounding community. These proponents argue that Maryam's thinking is not to promote a ban on the wearing of the hijab, but rather to respond to social demands that Malaysian women wear the hijab. This group considers Maryam Lee's action as a form of women's independence and self-determination that does not depend on certain people's assumptions about the obligation to wear the hijab. They also think that society should be able to reduce blasphemy and respect each other's personal decisions and have a relevant understanding of women who decide to remove the hijab so that ultimately women who do not wear hijab can still live comfortably in society. [18].

Sisters in Islam (SIS) also voiced support for Maryam Lee's stance. SIS is an Islamic organization that was born in 1993 to uphold women's emancipation such as positions in institutions and voices in democracy [2]. SIS is a movement that claims to support female empowerment in the Islamic world debate [18].

SIS has an opinion that is in line with Maryam's view that women have equal rights with men who are entitled to positions as imams and scholars. SIS also voiced the same thing as Maryam regarding the position of women who do not wear hijab, who tend to be intimidated by their environment [19].

VI. CONCLUSION

Islamic values have been embedded in the social life of Malaysian society, one of which is the hijab. Apart from being a form of religious observance, wearing the hijab for Malaysian Muslim women has become a social identity. However, along with social changes, from the wearing of the hijab by Malaysian Muslim women from being based on religious teachings to being coercive, either subtly through social and mass media approaches or with direct approaches by parents and the surrounding community. Maryam Lee in her book *Unveiling Choice* describes how Malaysian women's decision to wear the hijab is influenced by demands from their family and social environment. Maryam criticized the behavior of society which often discriminated against women who did not wear the hijab or who chose to remove the hijab. In this book, Maryam tells of her journey in deciding to take off the hijab. For Maryam, women should have a choice in deciding whether to wear the hijab or not.

Even so, Maryam's thoughts received support and criticism from the Malaysian public. Several supporters such as Sisters in Islam agree with Maryam's opinion which also states that women who do not wear the hijab are often intimidated by their social environment. However, criticism also came from various parties, based on religious arguments this party stated that this thought was a form of deviation from Islamic identity. Feminist Standpoint Theory seeks to understand Maryam's

changing perspective on the hijab, namely as a social demand from the dominant concept. This theory also explains that the dominant concept of hijab that forms hijab culture in Malaysia has control over marginal concepts such as the Maryam concept. For the dominant group, the hijab is an obligation and identity for Malay Muslims. So that the use of hijab for Malaysian women has become a must. For Maryam, wearing the hijab should be a woman's absolute decision and should not be influenced by the demands of society.

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