



## LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND GENDER (ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER'S THOUGHTS)

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### Abstract

Asghar Ali Engineer (1939-2013) was a theologian and feminist from India. Born into an elite religious environment, he then experienced dirty exploitation in the name of religion which made him study the nature of religious law. He collaborated between Islamic literature and Western literature to discover the essence of Sharia. This article will discuss his popular thoughts on liberation theology and gender and Asghar Ali's efforts in reinterpreting the Koran. The research method used in this study is qualitative research, a type of library research. The research data source uses books written by Asghar Ali and several studies that are relevant to the research focus. Based on the research results, in interpreting the Qur'an Asghar Ali used three methods. One way is to differentiate the normative and contextual aspects of a verse to understand the historical aspects when the Qur'an. Another side discussed by Asghar Ali is gender, for him, gender equality and gender justice are closely related. The realization of justice and gender equality is realized by the absence of discrimination between men and women, as well as the opportunity to participate in all aspects of life. This cannot be separated from the situation in India where he lives, where there is inequality and injustice between men and women. The research results concluded that it is necessary to reinterpret the interpretation of the Qur'an so that the theological views regarding the Qur'an *Salihun Li Kulli Zaman Wa Makan* can still be applied in life while still prioritizing human values.

**Keywords:** Liberation Theology, Gender, Asghar Ali Engineer

## INTRODUCTION

Issues of justice, equality, oppression, violence, and ignorance are problems faced by most Muslims in the world, including Indonesia. Women often experience discrimination in various areas of life such as education, economics, and even in the realm of religious practice. This fact shows that religion cannot be a solution to existing problems, this is because many people think that religion only talks about rituals and doctrinal and mystical matters. This is due to the lack of discussion about social life, which essentially falls into the realm of spiritual piety and social piety.

This inequality is rooted in religious texts which are interpreted as demands for humans' relationship with God alone, so that people's attention is focused on theological issues and marginalizes economic and social problems. This results in people not being aware of universal religious teachings, which cover all aspects of human life as divine creatures and social creatures (AJK Men, 2023). There are many religious texts, both in the Qur'an and hadith, which explain the command to balance life in this world and the afterlife or matters of a doctrinal and social nature. So reinterpretation of religious texts is needed so that these texts become functional. These facts ultimately encourage thinkers to come up with ideas as alternative concepts and present a cool and peaceful religion, so that ideas and attitudes of diversity emerge which are known as inclusivism (Mujahideen, 2023).

One of them is Asghar Ali (1939-2013). A thinker and theologian who comes from India, who lives in a situation where the backward Muslim society of India is marginal to a defensive-conservative attitude in facing reality. By seeing conditions like this, Asghar Ali tried to make a change with an idea known as "liberation theory". Apart from that, Asghar Ali has another important idea about gender equality. According to him, if Islamic law is interpreted and understood correctly, then teachings that guarantee equality between men and women will be found. Therefore, there is a need for excavations into Islamic treasures, these excavations will strengthen Islamic praxis which is liberating. This liberation will not be successful without being accompanied by women's liberative liberation (Engineer, 1999).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Three articles constitute the literature of review which functions as material for comparison as well as comprehensive discussion. The first is an article from Negara in 2023 regarding *Renewing Islamic Theological Discourse: A Study of Asghar Ali Engineer's Thoughts* which was published in the *Journal of Islamic Thought* edition volume 3 number 1. Negara examines the Engineer's perspective on Islamic theology which has a distinctive style. Engineer's thought became a pioneer of Islamic reform thought in the contemporary era with strict characteristics. The main criticism of Engineer's thinking is that it was born from Islamic theological research which, in his opinion, is trapped by classical thinking so that it is unable to provide solutions to current problems (Negara, 2023).

Then the second article is Rido Putra and Amril which discusses *Asghar Ali Engineer's Theology of Death and Liberation Theology*. This article was published in the journal *Al-Aqidah* Volume 11 No. 2 of 2019. In this article, Putra and Amril take a full perspective on Engineer's criticism of classical theologians who are considered to have failed to strive for more relevant life values. According to this study, the difference lies in Engginer's interpretation of the *Al-Quran* which has a deeper and more complicated meaning when compared to classical theologians. Therefore, the conclusion from Putra and Amril's research is that the main axis of difference between engineers' thinking and classical theologians lies in a more comprehensive way of thinking and interpretive interactions (R. Putra & Amril, 2019).

Finally, there is an article by Rasyid Ridho published in 2021 with the title *Reformulation of Tafsir: A Study of Asghar Ali Engineer's Gender Thought*, published in the *Sophist Journal* Volume 2 No. 2. Ridho saw that Engineer's interpretation style was carried out in three methods, namely distinguishing *Al-Quran* verses which have normative and contextual aspects, then the meaning of the *Al-Quran* is greatly influenced by certain experiences and perspectives, and finally that the meaning of the *Al-Quran* verses is broad by time. This is what encourages Engineers to reinterpret verses from the *Al-Quran* with contemporary issues so that they have a broader perspective regarding today's life (Rasyid Ridho, 2021).

These three writings have the same main points and study perspectives that emphasize the relevance of Islamic theology to contemporary life. However, these three studies are classified as descriptive, namely explaining the main ideas based on the engineer's perspective. Therefore, this article takes a different perspective, namely taking a central position in discussions of Islamic theologians who examine contemporary theology and gender with Engineer's thinking as the main comparison. This study also examines what and why engineers' thinking has a different style and tends to reject the thinking of classical theologians.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research is a type of qualitative research. Qualitative research is characterized by an emphasis on analyzing data or information in non-numerical form. Including this research which focuses on scientific discussions regarding Asghar Ali Engineer's thoughts on liberation theology and gender. The research method used is the library research method. Research steps include collecting sources, both primary sources and secondary sources in the form of books, journals, articles, and so on. The data analysis technique used is an analytical descriptive technique, namely explaining the problem and then continuing with the discussion. Analysis of the problem gave rise to sub-discussions to explain in detail the essence of this study. The data that has been collected is then carried out in a comprehensive analysis process to answer the questions that have been formulated in the introductory section.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Asghar Ali Engineer Biography**

Asghar Ali Engineer was born on March 10, 1939, in Salumbar, Rajashtan, India. His family belongs to the Shia Ismaili sect. Among several Ismaili Shia sects, the Daudi Bohras have a large number of followers, estimated at around 1 million followers spread across the Islamic world. However, the majority of his followers are in India, including Asghar Ali

Engineer's family. His father was Sheikh Qurban Husain, a Daudi Bohras leader, and his mother was Maryam.

Asghar took religious education and secular education. He received Islamic religious education directly from his family, such as interpretation of the Al-Quran, *ta'wil*, fiqh, Hadith and Arabic which he then developed himself. Apart from Arabic, Asghar masters several languages such as English, Urdu, Gujarati, Hindu, Persian, and Marathi'. And because of this, he was able to learn various kinds of knowledge which he then developed himself. Apart from that, Asghar read a lot of works by Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx which then influenced his analysis and way of thinking about oppression, justice, revolution, and so on.

Besides studying religious sciences, his father sent him to study secular sciences, he got a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Vikram University and then worked for Bombay Municipal Corporation for 20 years, then in 1973 he quit his job and became a reformer in the Bohra community.

While active in the movement, Asghar Ali devoted all his abilities and thoughts to big things, namely reforming the Movement and internationalizing the movement both through his writings and lectures. Thanks to his persistence and hard work in social matters, in 1983, Engineer received a DLitt (Doctor of Letters) degree.

Asghar Ali is a productive intellectual, he has written a lot of work, both in the form of books and articles, which have been published through websites and publishers. Asghar Ali has written no less than 40 books about Islam, some of the works are written in English, even though English is not the language used every day, but the aim is for these works to be read by the international world.

Thanks to his persistence, Asghar Ali was invited to many seminars held by national and international forums. And also became a lecturer at several foreign universities, such as Canada, Indonesia, Malaysia, United States, France, Mexico, Pakistan, Yemen, and so on.

The efforts made by Asghar Ali cannot be underestimated. Besides channeling his works through writing, he is a social activist. He is also responsible for the mandate he carries out as leader of the Shiite group *ismāiliyyah al-Musta'liyyah al-Ṭayyibah*, Dāwudī Bohras based in India.

In Indonesia, Asghar Ali is well known as a social figure and feminist and has traveled to Indonesia several times to attend various seminars and be a guest lecturer. His thoughts have been widely studied at universities in Indonesia and his work has become reference material in academic circles.

### **Asghar Ali Engineer's Thinking Methodology**

The essence of Islamic teachings comes from two things, namely the Al-Quran and Hadith. However, it is clear that the message in the Qur'an is still general and still requires interpretation so that it can be applied in religious life. Therefore, many differences in society stem from differences in interpretation.

Asghar Ali views that the Qur'an can be interpreted using various methods. The Qur'an is open to interpretation which is of course in accordance with predetermined procedures and can be accounted for. Dynamic and open interpretation is very necessary so that the values and teachings contained in the Koran remain relevant throughout time and place.

With this view, Asghar Ali then provided a solution by interpreting the Qur'an or what is called reinterpretation of the Qur'an. For him, there is a need to reinterpret the verses of the Koran because many interpretations have been distorted by pro-establishment ulama. Asghar Ali starts with an interpretation of key terms in the Al-Quran such as usury and patience. According to Asghar Ali, usury is not only acts related to *muamalah*, but all forms of oppression, oppression, and injustice are included in the category of *usury* or any form of exploitation.

In reinterpreting the Koran, Asghar Ali raised three important things to pay attention to. First, the Koran has two aspects, namely normative and contextual. The normative aspect contains universal values which are basic principles such as equality, justice, and equality. This principle can be applied at all times and places. Furthermore, the contextual aspect is a response to the problems that occurred at that time. As a contextual response, according to developments over time, many of these verses are no longer relevant, in fact, their spirit is contrary to the normative spirit of the Al-Quran (Salim, 2010). In the Engineer's view, the normative aspect has more closeness and holiness, while the contextual aspect is closer to

humans (Rasyid Ridho, 2021). The purpose of distinguishing between normative and contextual verses is to understand the social reality that was formed when the Koran was revealed. And also, to know the intentions desired by Allah and the Koran at that time. With the existence of normative and contextual verses, the dialectic between "what should be" and "what happened" can be seen, making the Koran acceptable to society in the social context in which the verse was revealed, as well as by society who adhere to universal principles. This is what the Engineer calls an "ideological-pragmatic" approach. Second, interpretation is formed by the interpretation of the interpreter, the experience, and the socio-cultural background of the person interpreting. It cannot be denied that the interpretation is also influenced by the style of the interpreter and it is very possible that the open interpretation is inaccurate and misses the mark. In order not to lose its relevance, a new interpretation is needed that is appropriate to the place and time. Third, the Al-Quran is general in nature, the language used is symbolic or metaphorical and the meaning has multiple interpretations. With this multi-interpretation character, there are differences in interpretation between the current generation and previous generations.

If interpretation is not free from perception and there is no responsibility for its truth, then Asghar Ali sets the limit that interpretation must not conflict with 4 things: justice (*'adl*), truth (*ihsan*), reason (*'aql*), and wisdom (*hikmah*) (Nuryanto, 2001).

These three points should be taken into consideration when interpreting the Al-Quran. According to Asghar Ali, the normative aspect must take precedence over the contextual aspect, because the normative aspect refers to the system and basic principles which are the core of the Al-Quran. Meanwhile, when interpreting contextual verses, it must be done strictly and reviewed from various socio-historical points of view that accompany the revelation of the verse.

Compared to other contemporary commentators such as Fatimah Mernisi, Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud, Asghar Ali's concept of interpretation is simpler. Asghar Ali's interpretation focuses on the differences between normative and contextual verses, understanding this is very important. So, the important values that characterize the Koran and contextual values are bound by time and space so they cannot apply universally (Nuryanto, 2001).

## Asghar Ali's Views on Liberation Theology

Liberation theology is one of Asghar Ali's popular thoughts. For Asghar Ali, theology has a broad meaning, but the existing style of theology is stagnant, status quo, and does not make a concrete contribution to the progress of Muslims. Classical theology tends to focus on mystical, metaphysical matters and does not touch the realm of justice, peace, and prosperity. In liberation theology the focus is on concrete and historical things, where the emphasis is on contemporary reality, not virtual reality (R. Putra & Amril, 2019).

So, the liberation theology pioneered by Asghar Ali was a reaction to many social phenomena that occurred with arrogance, injustice, oppression of the weak, violence, discrimination between nations, skin, violence in the name of religion, and so on.

According to Asghar Ali, Islam is a religion that encourages social revolution and fights oppressive structures. The Prophet Muhammad was present not only to bring a message but to carry out social liberation, and social emancipation, but after the death of the prophet, Islam lost its vital elan.

Liberation theology is an important part of Islam for several reasons because liberation is life. When someone is not free and oppressed, they tend to be psychologically frustrated, pessimistic, and have weak faith. Situations like this make a person unable to be completely and perfectly religious, that is what theology is for (Nuryanto, 2001). Liberation turns those who are weak and oppressed into active and independent beings. Because only by making humans active and free can they free themselves from the shackles of oppression.

The main goal of liberation theology, firstly, is universal brotherhood. Second, equality. Third, social justice. (Engineer, "Islam and Liberation Theology, Trans.") This goal is in line with what is stated in the Koran, namely that all humans have the right to justice, and every human being has the right to political rights regardless of their identity. The only criterion that differentiates is piety (which means not only religious piety in carrying out worship rituals properly and correctly but also social piety), nothing else (Negara, 2023).

In the Al Qur'an, Allah has explained that justice is the highest position in a society. "Say: "My Lord commands you to do justice" (Al Quran, 7:29). In another verse, "Indeed Allah loves those who do justice" (Al Qur'an 49:9). The Al Qur'an also explains that the

meaning of piety cannot be separated from the meaning of justice. "Do justice, and that is closer to piety" (Al Qur'an, 5:8). Therefore, the meaning of *taqwa* in Islam is not just carrying out ritual worship. Piety will not be perfect if it is not accompanied by social justice. In the social field, 'adl and ahsan are basic concepts in the Qur'an.

Through the spirit of liberation theology, Asghar Ali transformed three basic concepts of liberation theology: first, the concept of monotheism. According to Asghar Ali, the concept of monotheism does not only refer to the oneness of God but also refers to the unity of man (unity of mankind). Unity is not only about faith but crosses belief boundaries, including non-Muslims. People who believe in monotheism will not accept discrimination against religion, ethnicity, race, or skin color. According to Asghar Ali Engineer, a true monotheistic society does not accept all forms of discrimination in the form of race, religion, or social class. Because monotheism can guarantee perfect unity between humans and to achieve this it is necessary to form a classless society (Latif, 2018). According to Asghar Ali, the meaning of *Kafirs* is those who do not believe in God, as well as those who are against efforts made to reorganize the social construction of society to make it more just.

Second, the concept of faith. According to Asghar Ali, the word Iman comes from the word amn, which means safe, peaceful, protection, reliability, trust, and confidence (Engineer, 1999). For this reason, the meaning of faith is not only believing in Allah, but more than that, believers can be trusted, and able to create order, comfort, and security. Faith in Allah truly will lead to enjoyment in religion and give birth to justice and prosperity for society.

Third, the concept of jihad. It means struggle. *Jihad* in liberation theology is interpreted as a struggle to eliminate all forms of oppression and tyranny. Jihad here is not defined as military war, but progressive activity in the context of fighting for justice and liberation from the oppression that befell it. In Indonesia, such an understanding is not suitable because the population is diverse. After all, if it continues to be enforced it will lead to bloodshed between religious adherents and the country cannot be a comfortable place to live for its residents.

In liberation theology, Asghar Ali uses several strategies. First, by imitating the Prophet Muhammad and learning the prophetic and liberating spirit when the Prophet was in

Mecca. According to Asghar Ali, the rejection of the Quraysh infidels in Mecca was not only because of religion but also more than that, namely economic matters, they were afraid that the economy that was already in their hands would be disrupted and the existing power would be lost. Following the Egyptian thinker Taha Husein, Engineer said that if the prophet Muhammad only preached Islam about the oneness of God, without attacking the socio-economic system (R. Putra & Amril, 2019). Apart from that, the prophet carried out a revolution by defending the *mustad'afin* (weak people), the prophet encouraged the importance of science, the prophet encouraged economic independence through commerce, the prophet upheld the status of women, and also liberated slavery that existed due to the exploitation of the wealthy. The second strategy is to learn from previous revolutionary theologies in the Islamic religion. The third strategy is to reinterpret the Qur'an. As explained above.

### **Asghar Ali's Views on Gender**

Regarding gender, Asghar Ali has thoughts and ideas in fighting for freedom and equality for women. According to him, one of the real and concrete steps in fighting for women's freedom is to reinterpret religious texts which are the main source of religious life. For him, the Koran, which is the main source, explains the fundamental value of equality between men and women in all aspects of life, including sexuality. The most modern Islamic value system (justice and equality). If applied in Islamic law relating to women's issues; then this law will be among the most progressive and gender equitable. It is the 'shadow' of the medieval social ethos that has covered the spirit of Islam (Hikmawati, 2018).

Gender equality and gender justice are closely related. Justice is a process of creating justice for men and women. The achievement of justice and gender equality is marked by the absence of discrimination between men and women. both get the opportunity to participate and take part in every development, and also get fair benefits from this development (Rosnaeni, 2021). When gender justice is in effect, it means that there will be no standardization of roles, double burdens, subjugation, marginalization and violence against women and men. Gender inequality is a system and structure where men and women are victims of the system (Wahab & Pambayun, 2022).

Asghar Ali believes that the specific conditions for equality are: First, the acceptance of equal values between men and women in general. Second, society must know that men and women have the same rights in the social, economic and political fields, both must have the right to own or manage their property without interference from others: both must be free to choose a profession or lifestyle, both must equal in responsibility and freedom. The Qur'an explains that gender equality is about equal dignity in a general sense. The Qur'an says that both sexes share the same living being and therefore have equal rights (Farah, 2020).

Just as previously explained, in the interpretation of the Qur'an, there are two important aspects, namely the normative aspect and the contextual aspect. Even though normatively, the Koran emphasizes equality between men and women, contextually the Koran states that there are differences between men and women. However, Asghar regrets the fuqaha' who ignore the context and try to give men a superior status in a normative sense. An example is the husband's status as *Qawwamun* in Surah An-Nisa' verse 34 (Ismail, 2015). According to Asghar Ali, Allah does not differentiate between gender or traits that are innate from birth. The advantages and superiority of men over women are not based on gender, but because of the social structure that causes men's superiority over women (Ismail).

The double appearance of the Al-Quran is something that is unfair in the interpretation of the Al-Quran. This happens because they take the message of a verse of the Qur'an without looking at the spirit that underlies the revelation of the Koran. The Koran, as has been explained, does not only consist of normative verses, but also contextual ones. Normative verses are transcendental in nature, while contextual verses are adapted to changes in time and place, also looking at the socio-historical nature of Arab society at the time the verse was revealed.

However, medieval scholars considered the teachings of the Koran to be formal and then normative. And it is a big mistake if the fuqoha' opinion is transcendental and cannot be changed. This opinion must be revised over time in order to actualize normative teachings (Engineer, 2000). Several aspects of gender equality were discussed by Asghar Ali, one of which was the criticism of classical jurisprudence on marriage which does not apply fairly to women. which then developed into gender-just jurisprudence. This offer departs from the

empirical problem of women in the Muslim community who are relatively placed in a subordinate position to men (Ismail, 2015).

### **Aspects of Gender Equality According to Asghar Ali**

#### 1. Marriage Concept

Happiness and tranquility are a big part of the goal in forming a household, there are many factors that support the formation of a good and happy family. A religious figure and social activist formulates the connection with marriage, by looking at anthropology and social practices that occur in his area, he is Asghar Ali. According to Asghar Ali, marriage in Islam is a contractual agreement. Some people think that marriage is a sacred contract (Engineer, 2000).

According to him, marriages that occur between men and women should both have the same or equal rights, men do not have more rights over women nor do women have more rights than men.

However, as time goes by, the concept of marriage has been widely misunderstood, as has happened in India, where discriminatory practices against women have been found that make women inferior in the household.

Through the concept of marriage, Asghar Ali explained that the concept of marriage in Islam should be a universal institution, which allows humans to relate and interact with fellow humans in a healthy and beneficial manner. Apart from that, Asghar Ali explained that marriage must go both ways and there is no unfair treatment and there is no domestic violence.

In marriage, according to Asghar Ali, ideally a woman has rights over her body, such as women being able to accept and reject an agreement. Women may make agreements as long as they do not violate the provisions that have been established by Allah. Including, women can file for divorce if they receive unfair treatment from their husbands (Engineer, 2000).

## 2. Polygamy Concept

Today, polygamy is considered a controversial issue that originates from religion. This comes from the Qur'an, Surah Annisa' verse three, which explains that a man may marry more than one woman. then used as a guide as to whether polygamy is permissible, even though on the contrary the existence of this verse does not represent a general command or statement that is specific to general polygamy but a command to do justice to orphans and widows. The majority of previous scientists absolutely allowed polygamy with a maximum of four. Some contemporary scholars provide special conditions regarding the permissibility of polygamy.

Asghar Ali criticized the practice of polygamy in Islam because it was considered to deviate from the teachings of the Koran. According to him, the Qur'an very clearly explains the basic teachings of the Islamic religion that in Islam marriage occurs between a man and a woman who have the same rights and obligations. The practice of polygamy will open the door to discrimination that negates women's rights as equal human beings.

In understanding the essence contained in this verse, according to Asghar Ali, you should consider the contents of the verses before and after it because these verses are related in content. Apart from that, we also look at the historical context when the verse was revealed. From this verse it is clear that the verse about permissible polygamy was revealed in relation to orphans and their wives, when the person who is the guardian is married to more than one (Rasyid Ridho, 2021).

If you look at the context of the verse, the permissibility of polygamy in the verse is not aimed at everyone in general. Polygamy is permitted only to ensure justice for orphans or women (widows). This means that if this problem did not exist, polygamy would not occur at all. According to Asghar Ali, fair treatment here means not only physical but also non-physical aspects such as love and affection (Rasyid Ridho, 2021).

According to Asghar Ali, three levels of fair treatment requirements must be met: first, ensuring the correct use of the assets of orphans and widows, second, ensuring justice for wives in material matters, third, giving all their wives the same love and affection (Engineer, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

The three methods used by Asghar Ali in understanding the Al-Quran are: differentiating Al-Quran verses which have normative aspects and contextual aspects, the results of the interpretation depend on the interpreter and the meaning of Al-Quran verses is global and uses symbolic language.

From the presentation of Asghar Ali's thoughts, liberation theology and gender equality are efforts to eliminate all forms of oppression, tyranny and injustice that occur. The efforts made by Asghar Ali try to reinterpret the verses of the Koran by contextualizing the theology of the era into today's discourse which tends to have an inductive-historical nuance. Thus, the concept of inferiority does not exist in Islam, the concept that must be developed is the concept of equality and justice.

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