

The Myth of Bidadari and the Betrayal of Women: Reading Gender in Islamic Sermons through Barthes' Semiotics

Febi Komala Dewi¹, Iklilah Muzayyanah Dini Fajriyah²

^{1,2}Master's Program in Gender Studies, School of Strategic and Global Studies,
Universitas Indonesia

Correspondence: febi.komala@ui.ac.id

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Abstract

This study critically examines the symbolic construction of bidadari (heavenly maidens) as eschatological rewards for men, with particular reference to an Islamic sermon delivered by Habib Nabil on the YouTube program Islam Itu Indah, in the episode titled "Laki-Laki Mendapatkan Bidadari, Kalau Perempuan Dapat Apa?". The sermon presents a gendered vision of paradise that reflects patriarchal interpretations by depicting women as passive rewards associated with male virtue. Such perspectives draw upon essentialist claims of men's "natural inclination" toward women and have been widely circulated through religious media. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory alongside postmodern feminist analysis, this research uses qualitative content analysis to unpack the verbal and symbolic messages embedded in the sermon. The findings suggest that the image of bidadari does not derive directly from the Qur'anic text, but has instead been shaped through cultural, historical, and clerical interpretations into a patriarchal myth. This myth can obscure Islam's egalitarian principles and reinforce gendered norms that position women in subordinate roles both theologically and socially. By deconstructing the bidadari narrative as a second-order myth, the study demonstrates how religious symbols may function hegemonically while concealing their socio-historical origins. It calls for a re-reading of Islamic eschatology that foregrounds 'adl (justice) and karamah (dignity) as central ethical values, affirming the equal spiritual agency of both men and women in the afterlife. Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing efforts in developing gender-sensitive approaches within Islamic hermeneutics.

Keywords: *Bidadari Symbolism, Patriarchal Myth, Islamic Sermons, Gender Construction, Barthesian Semiotics*

INTRODUCTION

The promise of *bidadari*, celestial maidens often portrayed as rewards for pious men in paradise, has long occupied a central role in Islamic eschatological imagination. These figures are frequently described in religious sermons and cultural narratives as physically beautiful, obedient, and eternally youthful women who await male believers in the afterlife. While commonly accepted as spiritual incentives, such portrayals raise fundamental questions

about gender representation, the interpretive traditions that shape these views, and their alignment with the ethical principles of Islam. A striking example of this portrayal can be found in a televised sermon delivered by Habib Nabil on the YouTube channel *Islam Itu Indah*, in the episode titled “Laki-Laki Mendapatkan Bidadari, Kalau Perempuan Dapat Apa?” (TRANS TV Official, 2020). The sermon explicitly claims that men are promised *bidadari* in paradise due to their so-called “natural inclination” toward women, an assertion that is contested within theological debates and tends to reinforce asymmetrical conceptions of gendered spiritual rewards.

In many such sermons, including Habib Nabil’s, the concept of *bidadari* is often linked to the biological roles and “natural tendencies” of men and women. The argument suggests that since men are biologically more desirous of women, it is only natural that paradise would accommodate this with sensual rewards. This reductionist perspective not only simplifies the complex metaphysical conceptions of the afterlife but also risks reinforcing the perception that women’s role, both in this world and the hereafter, is primarily defined in relation to men. Such interpretations reflect clear gender biases and reproduce patriarchal narratives that situate women in a subordinate role within both earthly and divine orders.

These interpretations are not isolated or marginal, they are deeply embedded in public consciousness and carry powerful cultural consequences. The aforementioned sermon, for instance, has garnered tens of thousands of views and over 1,891 critical comments, many of which raise serious ethical and theological concerns. Viewers have pointed out the objectification of women inherent in the concept and questioned the fairness of a paradise that appears skewed in favor of male pleasure. This indicates that *bidadari* is not merely a symbolic figure in religious thought, but a socially and ideologically charged myth that shapes how Muslim communities envision paradise, morality, and gender roles.

Such portrayals sharply contrast with the core ethical message of the Qur’an. In particular, Surah al-Hujurat [49]:13 asserts an egalitarian principle as foundational to Islamic theology, affirming that all human beings are created from a single pair and that **the** most noble among them is the most righteous, regardless of gender, race, lineage, or social status

(Suhra, 2013). Any interpretation that suggests otherwise risks undermining the Qur’anic emphasis on justice (*‘adl*) and dignity (*karāmah*) as non-negotiable pillars of Islamic belief.

Furthermore, critical scholars such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd have emphasized the role of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) in understanding how Qur’anic verses addressed and responded to the social realities of the Prophet’s time. According to Aseri and Wardani (2013), this historical approach reveals how certain verses were revealed to either challenge or affirm prevailing societal norms, including those related to gender. Thus, it is essential to interrogate whether current interpretations of *bidadari* reflect the intended universality of Qur’anic ethics or merely reproduce patriarchal norms rooted in historical contexts.

Although several scholarly works have examined the Qur’anic concept of *bidadari*, such as Sigit Suhandoyo (2022) article “*Bidadari dalam Kajian Para Penafsir Al-Qur’an*”, the majority of these studies remain focused on linguistic analysis or classical tafsir traditions. They seldom interrogate the symbolic or ideological functions that the *bidadari* figure performs in modern religious discourse, especially in contemporary media. This creates a significant gap in the literature—one that this study seeks to address by analyzing *bidadari* not merely as a theological concept, but as a semiotic sign laden with gendered ideological meaning.

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a case study of Islamic sermons, using discourse analysis as its primary approach. To fill this gap, the present study draws on Roland Barthes’s theory of myth (Barthes, 1972) and postmodern feminist critique (Butler, 1990; Tong, 2009) to explore how the figure of *bidadari* operates as a second-order signifier within patriarchal myth-making. Barthes conceptualizes myth as a type of speech that naturalizes cultural values through semiotic layering, wherein signs move from denotation to connotation, and finally to myth (Barthes, 1972). Through discourse analysis, this research operationalizes Barthes’ semiotic framework to interrogate gendered religious imaginaries, particularly the myth of *bidadari* (celestial maidens), as they are constructed and circulated in popular Islamic sermons. By applying Barthes’ triadic model of meaning-making, denotation, connotation, and myth, this study seeks to uncover how the figure of

bidadari becomes a site for legitimizing patriarchal theology and disciplining women's spiritual subjectivity.

The data for this research consist of a widely circulated video sermon titled “Laki-Laki Mendapatkan Bidadari, Kalau Perempuan Dapat Apa?” (TRANS TV Official, 2020). This sermon was purposively selected based on its high viewership and explicit content related to gendered portrayals of paradise. The data collection technique involved purposive sampling and documentation, focusing on audiovisual materials with rich visual and verbal signs for semiotic interpretation. The analysis was carried out in three stages: (1) Denotative analysis, identifying the literal content of the sermon (what is said and shown on the surface level), (2) Connotative analysis, unpacking the cultural and ideological meanings that emerge from the verbal and visual rhetoric, and (3) Myth analysis, revealing how the sermon naturalizes patriarchal structures and turns them into taken-for-granted religious "truths." To ensure data validity, triangulation was employed through repeated viewing, and consulting relevant scholarly literature on gender and Islam. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to acknowledge subjectivity and bias. This semiotic analysis enables a deeper understanding of how religious discourse, through language, image, and symbolism, functions ideologically to produce normative gender roles and marginalize women's eschatological agency.

DISCUSSION

Denotation: Bidadari in the Patriarchal Imagination

Roland Barthes's semiotic theory defines denotation as the literal or primary meaning of a sign, its surface-level, non-ideological interpretation (Nofia, 2022). In Islamic eschatological narratives, this level of meaning often presents *bidadari* or *ḥūr al-‘ayn* as literal rewards for pious men. Mehmood et al. (2023), for instance, describe houris in highly sensual terms, beautiful, untouched virgins often described as companions whose existence is framed in relation to male believers' pleasures in paradise, as supported by Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions. This denotative reading reflects a dominant, male-centered understanding of paradise that is widely disseminated in both classical exegesis and popular religious discourse. However, such surface-level portrayals rarely undergo deeper semiotic or

ideological analysis. In this study, the denotative interpretation becomes the first layer of meaning, which is later problematized through a connotative and mythical reading to expose how gendered power structures are reproduced through seemingly neutral religious symbols.

In this context, the denotative analysis of *bidadari* (heavenly maidens) in Islamic eschatological discourse refers to the basic, literal meanings as found in Arabic linguistic principles, classical *tafsir* (exegesis), and official language references such as the Indonesian Dictionary (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, KBBI). This article explores the denotative meaning of *bidadari* in paradise by examining Qur'anic verses that specifically describe the attributes and roles of these celestial figures. A central verse often cited is Surah Ar-Rahman [55]:70:

فِيهِنَّ خَيْرَاتٌ حِسَانٌ

"In them are good and beautiful women."

In Arabic grammar, the word *khayrātun* (خَيْرَاتٌ) is the plural of *khayr* (خَيْرٌ), which denotes goodness, moral excellence, or virtue (Nisa', 2007). The word *ḥisānun* (حِسَانٌ), also in plural form, directly refers to physical beauty or comeliness (Nisa', 2007). Combined, these terms are used in the Qur'anic context to describe celestial beings, *bidadari*, who are portrayed as both virtuous in character and physically attractive. These denotative attributes, repeatedly cited in Islamic eschatological texts, provide a framework for understanding the classical imagery of paradise as a place of sensual and aesthetic reward.

Traditional Qur'anic commentaries (*tafsir*) further emphasize the literal qualities of *bidadari*. In *Tafsir Al-Mukhtashar*, supervised by Shaykh Dr. Shalih bin Abdullah bin Humaid (Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca), the verse is interpreted as referring to “women of good character and beautiful appearance” living in the gardens of paradise (TafsirWeb, 2024). These companions are described as being devoted to their husbands and untouched by others. Such exegesis underscores a vision of paradise in which male believers are granted not only spiritual salvation but also material delights, including the companionship of idealized women.

Moreover, subsequent verses in Surah Ar-Rahman reinforce this imagery more explicitly. Verse 72 describes them as “maidens secluded in tents,” while verse 74 emphasizes

that they are “untouched by man or jinn before them” (TafsirWeb, 2024). This depiction frames women as virginal, hidden, and preserved exclusively oriented toward male-centered reward. From a semiotic perspective, the denotative signs, virginity, seclusion, and purity, are elevated at the connotative level into cultural values that equate female worth with sexual inaccessibility. At the mythic level, these signs naturalize patriarchal assumptions that women’s ultimate role in paradise is to embody male fantasies of untouched beauty, thereby legitimizing a male-centered eschatology. Classical tafsir often reinforces this reading by highlighting whiteness, youth, and exclusivity, limiting women’s subjectivity primarily to bodily attributes.

Additionally, the sixth edition of *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI) defines *bidadari* as: (1) a celestial princess or goddess, and (2) a beautiful woman (figurative). The emphasis on beauty in both literal and figurative usage reflects how the concept of *bidadari* is deeply rooted in perceptions of physical allure. Even outside religious contexts, the term is widely used in Indonesian culture to denote women of exceptional beauty, reinforcing its primary association with appearance over other human attributes.

The consistency between Arabic linguistic interpretation, classical tafsir, and KBBI definitions points to a shared denotative foundation: *bidadari* are beautiful female beings whose primary roles are linked to visual pleasure and companionship. This representation mirrors a broader pattern in patriarchal systems where female value is often correlated with physical appearance and service to men. As such, even in the spiritual realm of paradise, the reward structure appears gendered, granting men female companionship as a form of divine recompense.

The image of *bidadari* has also permeated secular culture. Indonesian soap operas such as *Bidadari* (2000) and *Bidadari Takut Jatuh Cinta* (2014) present idealized women who are beautiful, obedient, and emotionally nurturing. These shows do not directly reference the Qur’anic *bidadari*, but they appropriate the term and the imagery, reinforcing the same symbolic associations. As such, the *bidadari* becomes not only a religious symbol but also a cultural template for femininity within the national psyche.

This alignment between religious texts, linguistic references, and popular culture illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence: systems of domination are internalized as natural or desirable through repetition in everyday discourse (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius, & Sanghera, 2016). When women are consistently portrayed as beautiful, passive, and emotionally available, as the *bidadari* is, it shapes expectations about real women's roles and values in society. These expectations are so deeply embedded that they are rarely questioned, even when they conflict with principles of gender justice.

Postmodern feminist theory offers a critical lens through which to analyze this denotative representation. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity argues that gender is not an innate quality but a set of repeated social performances (Butler, 1990). The literal portrayal of *bidadari* as inherently beautiful and obedient constructs an ideal that real women are expected to emulate. This performance becomes institutionalized within both religious and cultural norms, reinforcing patriarchal expectations under the guise of divine will.

The problem with this denotative framework lies in its reinforcement of women's objectification. By assigning *bidadari* a passive, reward-based role, available to men as compensation for piety, the text risks reducing women's eschatological significance to their utility for male enjoyment. While male believers are rewarded with agency, pleasure, and choice, *bidadari* are cast as static beings, existing to serve. This imbalance contradicts the broader Islamic principles of justice and moral equality found in verses such as Q.S. Al-Hujurat:13, which states that the most honorable person in the sight of God is the most righteous, without gender distinction.

Classical scholars such as Al-Sya'rawi warn against reading the imagery of paradise in overly literal terms. He suggests that descriptions of rivers, fruits, or companions, *including bidadari*, are metaphoric illustrations intended to convey spiritual rewards in terms that humans can understand (Asy-Sya'rawi, 2007). From this view, the imagery of *bidadari* should not be interpreted as the actual structure of the afterlife but as symbolic approximations meant to inspire righteousness. Misinterpretation of these metaphors risks distorting Islamic theology into a patriarchal promise that privileges men while marginalizing women.

In conclusion, the denotative meaning of *bidadari*, while rooted in religious and linguistic texts, constructs a gendered imagination of paradise that centers male pleasure and marginalizes female agency. This analysis demonstrates how literal interpretations, when left unexamined, may serve as tools for ideological reinforcement. As postmodern feminist critique reveals, even religious symbols, when interpreted through patriarchal lenses, can become vehicles of inequality. It is thus essential to revisit such symbols with critical inquiry, theological depth, and a commitment to justice for all genders.

Connotation of Bidadari: Between Reward and Objectification in Religious Discourse

While the denotative reading of *bidadari* centers on their literal representation as beautiful and virtuous celestial beings, such interpretations are not ideologically neutral. The repetition of these portrayals in religious texts, linguistic references, and popular culture reveals that the figure of the *bidadari* functions beyond its surface meaning. Rather than merely describing heavenly rewards, the literal image often conceals deeper socio-cultural constructs that reinforce gender hierarchies. Therefore, to uncover the broader implications embedded in this symbol, it is necessary to move beyond the literal and explore its connotative dimensions, where cultural assumptions, power structures, and ideological influences reside.

According to the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI), connotation refers to an associative meaning or emotional nuance attached to a word, forming additional layers of interpretation beyond its literal definition. Thus, analyzing *bidadari* in terms of connotation requires contextual examination to uncover deeper cultural and ideological meanings. The connotative meaning of *bidadari* is historically linked to entrenched patriarchal structures, particularly in its emphasis on the physical beauty of women. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women occupied a subordinate status under male-dominated social, political, and cultural systems. This historical reality has often been misunderstood and weaponized by both internal and external critics of Islam, who argue that the religion itself condones or perpetuates the marginalization of women, ignoring the fact that many of these inequalities were deeply rooted in pre-Islamic customs rather than Islamic teachings (Shanin, 2024). Their roles were

narrowly confined to the domestic sphere, where they were often treated as property without autonomy (Marwing & Yunus, 2021). Women were expected to serve men at will, reinforcing the prevailing view that their value lay in their function as caregivers and sexual companions. This historical context gave rise to the enduring notion that a woman's destiny is limited to the *three*: kitchen (*dapur*), well (*sumur*), and bed (*kasur*) (Sutiono, 2020). Within this framework, the idea of *bidadari* as celestial servants aligns with feminist critiques of female objectification. Postmodern feminism argues that the representation of *bidadari* is often interpreted in ways that reduce their bodies to instruments of male desire, thereby limiting their perceived spiritual agency or subjectivity. Such connotations reveal not only deep-seated gender bias within patriarchal culture but also the extension of male dominance into the imagined space of paradise.

Within this framework, the image of *bidadari* (*hourī*) as celestial servants aligns with feminist critiques of female objectification. Postmodern feminist theory argues that the representation of *bidadari* reduces their bodies to mere instruments of male desire, denying them spiritual agency or subjectivity. Such portrayals reflect a symbolic economy in which women's value is measured primarily by their utility to men, both sexually and spiritually. This reinforces asymmetrical gender relations, wherein men are constructed as the normative recipients of divine rewards, while women are rendered invisible or secondary in eschatological narratives.

The sermon analyzed in this study reinforces gendered connotations by sharply contrasting male and female rewards in paradise. While men are promised beautiful virgins, described with explicit sensual markers such as white skin, youth, and submissiveness, women are offered vague compensations like gold, emotional peace, or reunion with their husbands (El-Ali, 2022). This asymmetry reflects a broader patriarchal structure in which women's eschatological value is mediated through their relation to men, rather than grounded in their own subjectivity. However, some theological interpretations challenge this imbalance. As Wadud (1999) notes, Qur'anic descriptions of paradise intend mutual rebirth and renewal for both men and women, emphasizing metaphysical purity over eroticism. The term *ḥūr*, often mistranslated as “wide-eyed virgins,” shares etymological roots with *hawāriyyūn*, suggesting that it refers to spiritually pure beings, not exclusively female figures. Even

Prophet Muhammad was described as *hoori-eyed*, underscoring that such attributes are not gender-specific nor inherently sexual (El-Ali, 2022). Yet, popular interpretations persistently frame *hūr* as commodified female bodies, exposing how cultural readings overwrite theological meanings. The preacher justifies this disparity by referring to so-called “natural inclinations,” implying that women do not need or desire the same pleasures as men. This appeals to an essentialist logic that naturalizes inequality by portraying male desire as legitimate and female desire as nonexistent or irrelevant. Postmodern feminist perspectives problematize this naturalization, arguing that such gendered asymmetries are not reflections of divine will but outcomes of cultural and ideological constructs (Butler, 2006).

Furthermore, by repeatedly presenting *bidadari* alongside material possessions like gold and silk, the female form is positioned within a symbolic system that often associates women with wealth and private property (Agustina et al., 2021). This association reflects deeply rooted gender hierarchies and cultural ideologies, in which women are often represented more as passive figures than as active spiritual agents. Such framing marginalizes women's place in theological discourse, reducing their eschatological identity to a reward for male faithfulness rather than a subject of divine justice and individual merit.

Through the lens of semiotic analysis, particularly Barthes's concept of myth, this representation of *bidadari* functions as a second-order signification. What appears to be a simple religious description (signifier) becomes a vehicle for perpetuating patriarchal ideologies (signified) under the guise of divine truth. The myth of *bidadari* is thus not just a theological construct but a cultural artifact that reinforces the gendered status quo by disguising it as sacred. Denotative meanings are instrumentalized to produce connotative effects, normalizing male-centered perspectives, spiritual asymmetry, and the commodification of women's bodies. This also raises a critical question: why does divine revelation appear to be interpreted in ways that seem biased in its imagery of paradise? From a Barthesian perspective, the answer lies not in God's intention, but in the cultural mediation of divine language through patriarchal systems of interpretation. The Qur'an, as divine speech, uses metaphors accessible to its initial audience, yet these metaphors were later fixed by exegetes into literalized gendered imagery. In this sense, what seems like divine bias is actually the product of cultural and ideological filtering, where men's desires are naturalized

as divine will while women's subjectivity is sidelined. Ali Harb, a contemporary Lebanese philosopher widely recognized for his contributions to hermeneutics and critiques of classical exegesis, further emphasizes the richness and perfection of the meanings contained in the Qur'an, as elaborated in his work *al-Ta'wil*. He argues that the Qur'an is profoundly rich in meaning and does not merely employ direct language, where one word corresponds to a single meaning, but frequently relies on indirect, metaphorical language. In other words, the language of the Qur'an is metaphorical, conveying spiritual and abstract concepts through symbolic expressions rather than literal descriptions (Al-Rasyid, 2018).

Islam, however, upholds the principles of justice (*'adl*) and human dignity (*karamah*) for all believers, regardless of gender. Indeed, without question, Islam is a religion that affirms the full moral, spiritual, and social agency of women, emphasizing equity as a foundational value (Sofiani, 2010). As Judith Butler's postmodern feminist framework emphasizes, gender roles are socially constructed discourses that often distort or suppress egalitarian principles. Interpreting *bidadari* solely as beautiful servants for men is a reductive reading that diminishes the holistic dignity afforded to women in Islamic teachings (Andrabi, 2016). Reclaiming the meaning of *bidadari* requires a hermeneutical shift, one that deconstructs patriarchal readings and affirms women's full moral and spiritual agency within the Islamic tradition. Only through such critical engagement can religious narratives move toward a more just and inclusive theology.

Deconstructing the Symbolism of Bidadari: From Reality to Myth

Roland Barthes's theory of myth, as an extension of semiotics, conceptualizes myth as a second-order semiological system in which the sign from the first system (a complete signifier-signified pair) becomes the signifier in the second. In this framework, Barthes argues that myth operates by "emptying history" and naturalizing cultural constructions to make them appear eternal and unquestionable (Al-Bastomi, 2018). The myth of *bidadari* (celestial maidens in paradise) exemplifies this mechanism. Originally derived from Qur'anic imagery, the figure of the *bidadari* has often been interpreted within patriarchal narratives that emphasize women primarily in relation to male desire. This transformation from theological metaphor to gendered myth allows for the subordination of women to be perceived not as constructed, but as divinely ordained and natural.

The myth of *bidadari* works by masking its ideological foundation and embedding itself within religious discourse, often through clerical interpretation and popular media. Through repeated visual, verbal, and performative reinforcement, *bidadari* becomes a normalized symbol of ideal femininity, submissive, beautiful, and existing solely for male gratification (Hamdan, 2019). Barthes's notion that myth removes history is critical here: the socially constructed and historical subordination of women is erased, replaced by a sanitized narrative that presents patriarchal ideals as if they were grounded in religious truth. This myth, therefore, functions hegemonically by shaping moral expectations, social norms, and gender roles in contemporary Muslim societies.

One of the most visible manifestations of this myth-making occurs in modern Islamic media. For instance, a YouTube broadcast of *Islam Itu Indah* (13 July 2020) featuring Habib Nabil includes a segment in which the cleric proclaims that men will receive *bidadari* in paradise as a reward for piety, while the role of women remains undefined or marginal. This video went viral and has amassed tens of thousands of views, along with 1,891 critical comments, many of which question the justice and gender implications of the *bidadari* concept. Commenters argue that such portrayals objectify women and reduce the Islamic vision of paradise to male pleasure. The virality of such content illustrates the pervasive cultural power of the *bidadari* myth and how it continues to shape public religious consciousness.

Beyond digital media, the myth has significant geopolitical and ideological implications. Nerina Rustomji (2007), in her analysis of Western discourse post-9/11, notes that the image of the *houris*, Islamic paradise maidens, was appropriated by Western commentators to depict Islam as inherently oppressive to women. In this context, the mythical portrayal of *bidadari* served as both a critique of Islam's gender politics and as a justification for orientalist narratives and colonial interventions. Rustomji argues that the eroticization of Muslim women's bodies became a site of ideological struggle, where both Muslim and non-Muslim actors contested the meaning of freedom, piety, and agency. Thus, the myth of the *bidadari* not only marginalizes women within the Muslim ummah but also reinforces external perceptions of Islam as a religion of male dominance.

In practical terms, the myth of *bidadari* exerts a powerful regulatory function on Muslim women’s behavior and roles. It sets normative expectations for female morality, sexuality, and social duties, Women are constructed into roles of service and caregiving, such as wives, mothers, or sexual objects (Putra, Asri, & Hayati, 2017). The ideal Muslim woman is subtly expected to conform to the traits attributed to *bidadari*: beauty, obedience, and emotional availability. Feminist postmodernism identifies this as a strategic deployment of myth to uphold gender hierarchies and limit women’s autonomy under the guise of divine mandate. Through sermons, school curricula, and cultural productions, this image is internalized and reproduced, becoming a disciplinary tool to ensure that women remain within predefined boundaries.

Table 1. Diagram of Roland Barthes’ Semiotics

<i>Signifier</i>	<i>Signified</i>
Houris	Ethereal women in paradise whose role to serve male believer
I	
<i>Signifier</i>	<i>Signified</i>
The depiction of houris as ideal women characterized by physical beauty and a rule of service	A patriarchal ideology that construct women as object of male gratification
II	
<i>SIGN</i>	
A patriarchal symbol that perpetuates female subordination within worldly and eschatological exegesis	
III	

This semiotic structure demonstrates how religious imagery becomes a vehicle for ideological dissemination. The myth of the *bidadari* functions not as a neutral or purely theological construct but as a powerful narrative that reinforces male dominance while concealing its own cultural and political origins. It naturalizes an unequal gender order, both in the eschatological imagination and in lived religious practices. Understanding this myth through the lens of Barthes allows us to critically interrogate the power of religious symbols and the ways in which they are mobilized to shape social reality.

The *bidadari* myth also serves as a mechanism of psychological internalization. When young Muslim women are repeatedly told, directly or indirectly, that divine reward is shaped by male desire, it alters their self-perception and spiritual aspiration. Rather than seeking fulfillment based on agency and ethical merit, they may feel pressured to align with patriarchal ideals of piety and beauty. This form of internalized patriarchy is particularly insidious because it disguises itself as religious devotion, making resistance appear as heresy rather than liberation. In this way, myth operates not only in the public sphere but in the innermost domain of identity formation.

Given these implications, a critical approach to the *bidadari* narrative is not merely academic but necessary for promoting gender equity within Islamic thought. If Islamic theology is to affirm its commitment to justice (*‘adl*) and human dignity (*karamah*), it must deconstruct the myths that compromise these values. Re-reading Qur’anic descriptions of paradise through ethical and egalitarian lenses opens space for a more inclusive spiritual imagination, one that honors both men and women not based on desire, but on virtue, struggle, and faith.

Challenging the Bidadari Narrative in Religious Sermons

Religious leaders play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of religious teachings. Unfortunately, many prominent clerics, both local and national, propagate interpretations of *bidadari* in paradise that overlook Islam’s commitment to gender equity. These interpretations often uphold social structures that position women in subordinate roles. For instance, in a sermon delivered by Habib Nabil on the YouTube channel *Islam Itu Indah* (13 July 2020 edition), he stated:

"According to certain religious interpretations, the Qur'an defines justice as placing everything in its rightful position. Within this framework, men and women are differentiated based on their primary roles and functions. It is argued that men possess a "natural inclination" toward women; thus, men are permitted, if financially and emotionally capable, to marry more than one woman. From this reasoning, the Sharia is said to distinguish between the genders, with men ultimately rewarded with bidadari (heavenly maidens) in paradise..."

This perspective associates justice with a rigid division of gender roles, suggesting that men are entitled to multiple wives and *bidadari* as rewards due to their "natural tendencies." Such interpretations equate equality with biological determinism, overlooking Islam's foundational principles of mutual rights and responsibilities. The Qur'anic message affirms that both men and women are accountable before God based on their deeds, not their gender or roles. Surah Al-Hujurat [49]:13 declares:

إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْفَقَكُمْ

"Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you."

This verse underscores Islam's emphasis on moral excellence rather than gendered status. However, interpretations centered on male pleasure and privilege risk distorting this message. Interpreting *bidadari* merely as beautiful women serving men risks overshadowing the Qur'an's vision of paradise as a reward for piety, not masculinity.

From a postmodern feminist perspective, narratives like these are not only biased, they are harmful. They uphold patriarchal ideologies that have been embedded in society for centuries, mandating women's subservience to male desires. Yet, as Al-Sya'rawi (2007) notes, the reality of paradise cannot be fully comprehended through human language. Divine illustrations are metaphors drawn from earthly pleasures to help believers grasp a fraction of paradise's grandeur, including the depiction of *bidadari*.

Understanding this theological point reframes *bidadari* as symbolic or metaphor, not literal (Yakuba et al., 2025). The portrayal of women in sermons as heavenly rewards not only objectifies them but denies their dignity and agency. The myth of *bidadari* ultimately reinforces the view that women's happiness is contingent upon serving men, both in this life and the next. However, feminism exposes this myth as a narrow, patriarchal fabrication that limits our understanding of divine justice.

The myth of *bidadari* blatantly positions women alongside material possessions, gold, jewels, and luxurious dwellings, granted to men as divine compensation for piety. In this symbolic transaction, women are rendered passive prizes devoid of agency, their value reduced to their ability to gratify male desire. This theological commodification is a betrayal of women's moral autonomy and spiritual equality, as it erases their subjectivity and aligns their eschatological worth with patriarchal fantasies. Moreover, by framing such unequal rewards as "natural inclinations," these narratives legitimize the normalization of asymmetrical relationships, including polygamy and infidelity, as spiritually acceptable. Postmodern feminist theory deconstructs this essentialism, arguing that what is often labeled as 'natural' is, in fact, a cultural fabrication that masks the power structures privileging male desire.

Islam does not reduce women to tools of male satisfaction. Amina Wadud proposes seven foundational concepts, *tawhid*, *kebilafah*, ethics, piety, justice, *shari'ah*, and strength and power, as essential standards for evaluating the truth of values within Islamic teachings. These principles emphasize not only theological coherence but also the ethical imperative to uphold human dignity and gender justice (Khansa & Azizah, 2023). The value of women is not measured by their ability to please men, but by their piety, intellect, and moral agency. In this light, *bidadari* can be reinterpreted not as literal maidens, but as metaphors for the divine joy prepared for those who live righteously, regardless of gender.

This reflection is especially important for men who have internalized patriarchal narratives as religious truth. This study argues that *bidadari* should be understood metaphorically, not as physical rewards designed to satisfy men. Paradise transcends worldly imagination, and any symbolic imagery must be read within its metaphorical and spiritual intent. Rather than reinforcing gendered privilege, sermons should uphold the Islamic ideals of justice, equity, and shared spiritual reward. Justice and equality are essential values in Islam and constitute a moral message of the Qur'an's revelation. Metaphysically, justice is a manifestation of one of Allah's names, *al-'Adl*; therefore, it serves as a guiding principle in shaping human life across all domains, including gender relations (El-Jauharie, 2025). Now is the time to rethink the ways we interpret and disseminate religious discourse. Religious teachings must not reinforce patriarchal hierarchies that undermine women's dignity and

freedom. Instead, interpretations should reflect the inclusive, compassionate, and equitable spirit of Islam, where paradise is not a prize for men alone, but a divine promise for all who pursue faith and righteousness. Thus, the myth of *bidadari* not only distorts the spiritual meaning of womanhood but also risks obscuring Islam's egalitarian promise by framing paradise in ways that reproduce male-centered interpretations of revelation.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the narrative associating justice in Islam with rigid gender role divisions, as reflected in Habib Nabil's sermon, represents an interpretation that may not fully align with Islam's broader principles of justice and equality. Such a perspective suggests that men are granted greater rights and *bidadari* (heavenly maidens) on the basis of their "natural inclination" toward women, an assumption that tends to reinforce patriarchal systems and position women in subordinate roles. In reality, the representations of paradise found in the Holy Qur'an are inherently metaphorical, designed to assist human understanding of a realm that surpasses the limits of language and reason.

This highlights the need for Muslims to approach such interpretations with caution, as they may not fully reflect Islam's core values of justice and equality and could risk perpetuating limiting views about the role of women. The concept of *bidadari* as a reward can be understood as a cultural construction influenced by patriarchal contexts, rather than a definitive description of the true nature of paradise. In light of these findings, it would be valuable for religious leaders to exercise care in delivering sermons, so as to avoid unintentionally reinforcing gender stereotypes or patriarchal interpretations. Religious discourse could place greater emphasis on gender equality, highlighting that Islam promotes equal rights and responsibilities for both men and women in this world and the hereafter. A more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to religious preaching may foster a more just and enlightened understanding within Muslim communities.

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