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The "Qawwam" Paradox: A Reformist Analysis of Quranic Misinterpretation and the Construction of Female Subordination in Malay Patriarchy

Paradoks "Qawwam": Analisis Islah terhadap Salah Tafsir Al-Quran dan Pembinaan Subordinasi Wanita dalam Sistem Patriarki Melayu

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the "Bowling Narrative" in Malaysia, a cultural expectation of absolute female submission often justified through literalist interpretations of *Surah An-Nisa (4:34)*. By analyzing the intersection of Malay *Adat* and Islamic jurisprudence, the study argues that this narrative is an "invented tradition" that contradicts the Quranic principle of *Karamah* (human dignity). Through a systematic literature review, the research contrasts modern domestic subordination with the "normative egalitarianism" of the Islamic Golden Age, citing the agency of figures like Sayyidah Khadijah and Sayyidah Aisyah. The study traces the sociological shift toward patriarchy to the 20th-century *Dakwah* movement and the subsequent "Shariatization" of Malay identity, which distorted *Qiwamah* from a service-oriented responsibility into a right of dominance. Finally, the paper advocates for a Reformist "Middle Way" rooted in reciprocal stewardship, *Shura* (consultation), and the re-centering of *Muwaddah* (love) and *Rahmah* (mercy).

Keywords: Qiwamah, Karamah, Shura, Nusyuz, Malay Adat, "Bowling Narrative", Dakwah Movement, Reformist "Middle Way".



1. Introduction

In the contemporary Malaysian landscape, the intersection of Malay *Adat* (customary tradition) and Islamic jurisprudence has produced a unique socio-religious friction regarding gender hierarchy. Central to this friction is the "Bowing Narrative", a cultural expectation that demands absolute female submission, often justified through the strategic, literalist citation of specific Quranic verses, most notably *Surah An-Nisa (4:34)*. While modern Malay male discourse frequently frames this submission as a divine mandate, critical scholarship suggests a "weaponization of religious discourse" where cultural patriarchy masquerades as religious piety (Anwar, 2006; Wadud, 2006).

Despite this foundational legacy of female sovereignty, the subsequent centuries witnessed a gradual institutionalization of patriarchal norms across the Muslim world. In Malaysia, this shift reached a critical juncture in the late 20th century, where the 'Dakwah' movement catalyzed a 'Shariatization' of Malay identity (Mohamad, 2020). The result is a 'Conventionalist' trap that forces Malay women into a false binary: total subordination or secular rebellion. Within this framework, 'secular rebellion' is often framed by traditionalists not as a pursuit of autonomy, but as an outright apostasy from cultural and religious values. By positioning empowerment as inherently 'Western' or 'anti-Islamic,' the narrative erases the middle ground where a woman might exercise agency while remaining deeply rooted in her faith."

Historically, the "Golden Age" of Islam provides a starkly different archetype of the Muslim woman, representing a "normative egalitarianism" those modern interpretations often obscure (Barlas, 2002). From the entrepreneurial prowess and economic independence of Sayyidah Khadijah to the political and intellectual authority of Sayyidah Aisyah, the foundational era of Islam was defined by female agency. Figures such as Fatima al-Fihri, the architect of higher education, and Ash-Shifa bint Abdullah, a pioneer in public governance, occupied positions of *Wilayah* (authority) that demonstrate a historical precedent for women as leaders of civilization rather than domestic subjects (Ahmed, 1992).

Despite this legacy of public agency, the subsequent centuries saw a gradual contraction of female visibility, a trend that crystallized in the Malaysian context through the late 20th-century "Dakwah" movement. This movement led to what scholars describe as the "Shariatization" of Malay identity (Mohamad, 2020). In this process, the nuanced, protective concept of *Qiwamah* (guardianship) has been distorted from a burden of financial responsibility into a "divine right" to domestic dominance. This shift has institutionalized a form of "patriarchal bargaining," where women's rights are often sacrificed at the altar of cultural preservation (Kandiyoti, 1988).

The result is a "Conventionalist" trap that forces Malay women into a false binary: total subordination or secular rebellion. In this polarized landscape, any pursuit of female autonomy is framed as "secular rebellion"—a perceived rejection of faith and tradition in favor of Western liberalization. By characterizing empowerment as an act of apostasy or cultural betrayal, this binary erases the possibility of the "pious feminist," leaving women to choose between a silent, domestic piety or an identity completely divorced from their religious roots.

This paper seeks to chart a Reformist "Middle Way". Through a systematic literature review, this research deconstructs the patriarchal misuse of Quranic text by contrasting it with

the lived realities of women during the Prophetic era. By separating the "Divine Islam" from "Malay Culture," this study argues that the demand for female "bowing" is an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) that contradicts the Quranic principle of *Karamah*, the inherent dignity of all human beings.

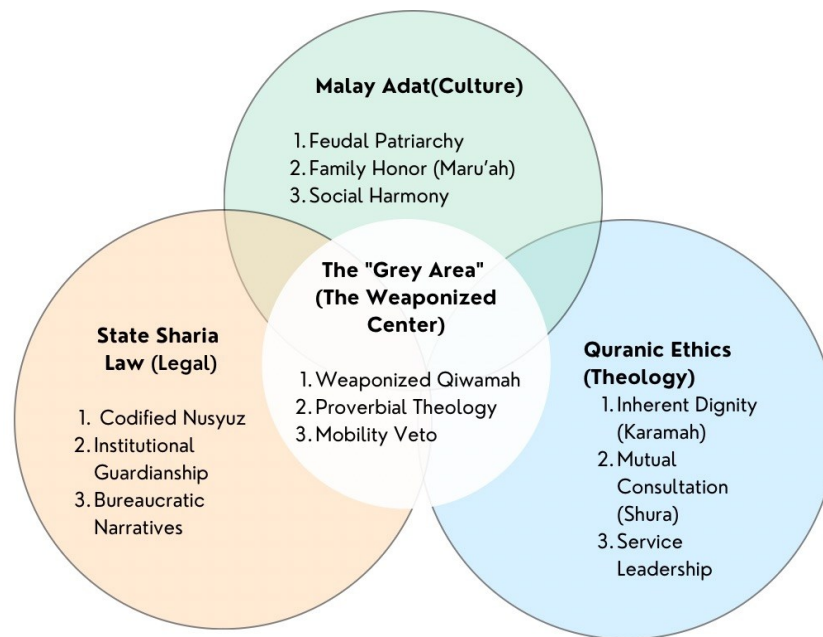
To understand how Quranic verses are utilized to demand female submission in Malaysia, one must first categorize the competing discourses surrounding gender. The "Balanced" approach of this paper is situated between the stagnation of conventionalism and the total deconstruction of secularist.

This table distinguishes the ideological lenses used to interpret gender roles in the Malay-Muslim context.

Table 1: Comparative Framework of Gender Narratives

Feature	Conventionalist (Patriarchal)	Reformist (Balanced)	Deconstructionist/Secularist
View of 4:34(Qiwamah)	Interpreted as absolutmae male authority/leadership.	Interpreted as a functional responsibility based on service.	Viewed as an outdated relic that should be discarded.
Concept of Obedience	Unconditional Ta'at (obedience) to the husband.	Conditional on justice (Adl) and mutual consultation (Shura).	Rejected; replaced by individual autonomy only.
Treatment of Adat	Blurs Malay custom with Islam; treats patriarchy as "sacred."	Critically separates Adat (Culture) from Ibadah (Faith).	Dismisses both Adat and religious tradition.
Ideal Womanhood	The "Solehah" trope: silent, domestic, and submissive.	The "Golden Age" archetype: active, vocal, and contributing.	The "Global" archetype: disconnected from religious identity.

As visualized in Figure 1, the core problem addressed in this research is the 'Grey Area' where Malay cultural expectations and Islamic theology overlap. In the Malaysian context, the demand for female submission is often located in this intersection, making it difficult for the layperson to distinguish between a divine command and a cultural custom. This research seeks to 'pull' the discourse back toward the left sphere—The Universal Islamic Ethics—by using the historical precedents of the Golden Age to prove that the current overlapping center is an ethical distortion."



2. Methodology

This research adopts an integrated methodological framework that synthesizes a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with Critical Textual and Historical Analysis. This multidisciplinary approach ensures a balanced investigation by combining empirical research standards with classical Islamic inquiry ('aqliyah and naqliyah) (Abu Bakar, 2022).

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) Protocol

To ensure transparency and minimize selection bias, this review adheres to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 standards (Page et al., 2021). The protocol is structured across three primary phases:

Database Selection and Search Strategy: Systematic searches were executed across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar (AgaKhan et al., 2026). To account for regional socio-legal nuances in Malaysia, localized repositories such as MyCITE and the CLJ (Current Law Journal) Malaysia were also consulted.

Search Strings: Boolean operators were utilized to capture the intersection of theology and sociology, e.g., ("Qiwamah" OR "Qawwam") AND ("Malaysia" OR "Malay Adat") and ("Gender dynamics" AND "Muslim women" AND "Agency").

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion: Peer-reviewed studies published between 2000–2026; research focusing on Islamic marriage, family law, or the Dakwah movement; and historical analyses of the Islamic Golden Age (AgaKhan et al., 2026; Royallite Global, 2025).

Exclusion: Non-peer-reviewed works, editorials, and studies not grounded in Islamic frameworks.

Critical Textual and Historical Analysis

Acknowledging that gender dynamics in Muslim communities are deeply embedded in the interplay of Islamic values and cultural norms (Ahmad et al., 2024), the study employs a Maqasid-oriented (Purpose-driven) Hermeneutic (Abu Shuqqa, 2021).

Text Selection: Primary sources were purposively selected for their authoritative role in defining gender roles, specifically Surah An-Nisa (4:34) and the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 1984.

Historical Analysis: This method uncovers how religious movements have shaped, and been shaped by, societal contexts (Connolly, 2001). The agency of historical figures like Sayyidah Aisyah and Ash-Shifa bint Abdullah is analyzed as a "corrective narrative" to contemporary domestic subordination, restoring the egalitarian spirit of the Prophetic period (Abu Shuqqa, 2021).

Synthesis and Thematic Mapping

The findings from the SLR and textual analysis were integrated using Qualitative Meta-synthesis (AgaKhan et al., 2026). This process allows for the identification of the "Grey Area" where Malay cultural expectations overlap with Islamic ethics, facilitating a Reformist "Middle Way" that reconciles classical interpretations with modern understandings of gender justice.

3. Literature Review

The Golden Age Precedent: Deconstructing the "Bowling" Narrative through Historical Agency

This chapter employs a comparative historical-theological analysis to contrast the foundational archetypes of Muslim womanhood with the contemporary "Bowling Narrative" prevalent in Malay patriarchal discourse. By examining the "Golden Age" (the Prophetic era and early Caliphates), we establish that the restrictive interpretations of *Qiwamah* (guardianship) currently dominant in Malaysia are not ontological truths of the faith, but rather "historical accretions" influenced by later monarchical and cultural structures (Ahmed, 1992; Barlas, 2002).

Economic Sovereignty and the Critique of Domestic Confinement

The modern Malay male's use of Quranic snippets to demand domestic submission often centers on the idea that women are "naturally" designed for the private sphere. However, the literature reveals that the first "Mother of the Believers," Sayyidah Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, was a pre-eminent capitalist whose agency directly contradicts the "confinement" model.

i. Agency as an Employer

Khadijah was not merely a wife; she was an entrepreneur who actively selected, hired, and managed male staff, including the Prophet (PBUH) himself. This provides a "Sunnah of Enterprise" that refutes the notion of male financial guardianship as a tool for control (Hassan, 2011).

ii. Governance and the Public Square:

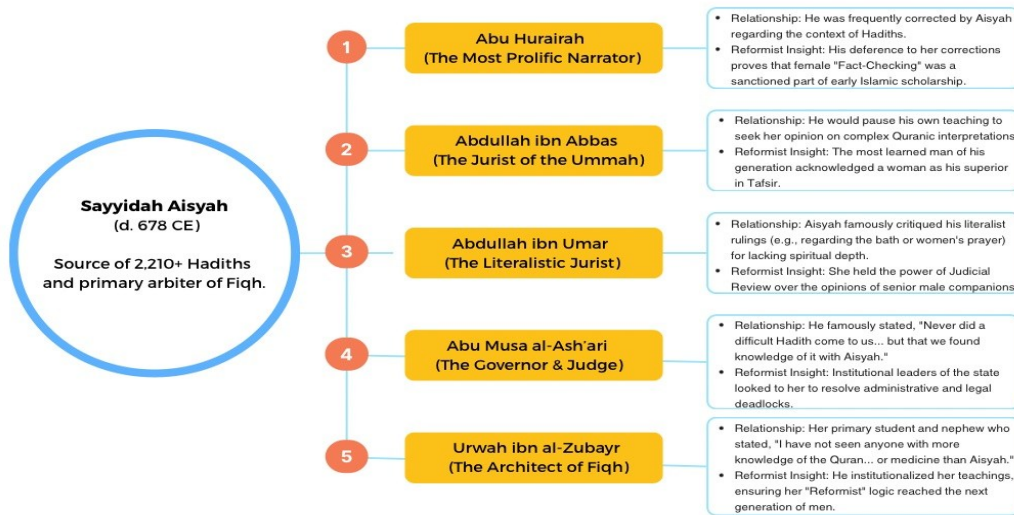
Beyond the household, the appointment of Ash-Shifa bint Abdullah as the *Al-Hisbah* (Market Inspector) by Caliph Umar is critical. This role required her to exercise legal authority over both men and women in the marketplace, enforcing commercial law and resolving disputes.

iii. **Synthesis**

If a woman can hold the "police power" of the state over a marketplace, the cultural demand that she must obtain *Izin* (permission) for basic public mobility is exposed as a sociological control mechanism rather than a theological requirement (Sisters in Islam, 2011).

Figure 2 illustrates the "Reverse Hierarchy" of the Golden Age. It maps the flow of over 2,210 Hadiths and numerous legal rulings (Fatwas) from Sayyidah Aisyah to the leading male companions and successors (Tabi'un). This visual evidence refutes the "Bowing Narrative" by demonstrating that the male intellectual elite of the era sat at her feet as students, acknowledging her superior authority in the primary sources of Islam.

Figure 2: The Transmission of Knowledge.



Intellectual Sovereignty of Sayyidah Aisyah and the Critique of Submissiveness

A core component of the "Bowing Narrative" is the suppression of female dissent. In Malay *Adat*, a "good" wife is often synonymous with a "silent" wife. This cultural trope collapses when viewed against the intellectual legacy of Sayyidah Aisyah bint Abu Bakr.

i. **The Authority of the Critic**

Aisyah did not merely transmit knowledge; she acted as a "Corrective Authority." In her work *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi (1991) highlights how Aisyah challenged the narrations of male companions like Abu Hurairah when they appeared to favor patriarchal biases. She famously retorted to interpretations that equated women with "donkeys or dogs" in the context of prayer, asserting her own lived experience and theological insight to debunk them.

ii. **Instructional Hegemony**

Aisyah taught over 200 students, the majority of whom were men. Sayeed (2013) notes that her intellectual authority was so absolute that it formed the basis of nearly one-quarter of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This establishes that a woman's "voice" and "intellect" are not subject to male censorship in the authentic Islamic tradition.

Institutional and Tactical Agency of Nusaybah and Fatima al-Fihri

To further deconstruct the "Bowling" archetype, one must look at physical and institutional agency. The modern Malay discourse often frames the male as the "sole protector," using this to demand submission.

- i. **Combat and Physical Agency of Nusaybah bint Ka'ab (Umm 'Amara)** at the Battle of Uhud provides a narrative of "Protective Equality." When the Prophet (PBUH) was in danger, she abandoned the traditional "nursing" role and took up the sword. The Prophet's own testimony, that he saw her fighting to protect him in every direction, subverts the binary of "Protective Male/Protected Female" (Cook, 2003).
- ii. **The Architecture of Civilization of Fatima al-Fihri's** founding of Al-Qarawiyyin in 859 CE demonstrates that women held the power of "Waqf" (Endowment). She was an institutional architect whose vision outlasted empires. Lulat (2005) emphasizes that her ability to utilize her inheritance for a global educational mission proves that female wealth in Islam is an independent tool for social engineering, not a resource managed by male relatives.

The literature review of the Golden Age indicates that the "Bowling Narrative" is a later invention, likely born from the fusion of Islam with Persian, Byzantine, and later, Malay feudal structures. While the Quran introduces *Qiwamah* as a service-oriented responsibility, culture has redefined it as a dominance-oriented right. As argued by Wadud (1999), the "Golden Age" archetypes offer a "Hermeneutic of Continuity" a way for modern Malay women to remain devoutly Muslim while rejecting the "Adat-based" demands for their subordination.

The data presented in Table 2 highlights a "Regressive Shift" in the status of women. In the Reformist view, if the Prophet's era represented the peak of Islamic practice, the current Malaysian demand for female "bowing" must be identified as a sociological decay. The shift from "Public Agency" (Ash-Shifa) to "Domestic Confinement" suggests that Malay patriarchy has utilized a "Selection Bias," cherry-picking verses that support male dominance while ignoring the historical precedents of female sovereignty.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Female Archetypes (Golden Age vs. Modern Malay Culture)

Domain	Golden Age Archetype (Historical Reality)	Modern Malay "Bowling" Stereotype (Cultural Construct)
Mobility	Public Agency Ash-Shifa bint Abdullah regulated the market in Medina.	Domestic Confinement Mobility is strictly conditional upon husband's <i>Izin</i> (permission).
Intellect	Authoritative Sayyidah Aisyah corrected male companions on legal errors.	Submissive A "good" wife is silent and defers to male interpretation without dissent.
Economy	Independent Sayyidah Khadijah managed her own wealth and employed men.	Dependent Men are "breadwinners," giving them the right to demand total submission.



Domesticity	Partnership The Prophet (PBUH) performed household chores (<i>Muna'ala</i>).	Hierarchy Domestic labor is a woman's religious debt; the husband is the "King."
Legal Status	Subjectivity Women negotiated marriage contracts and divorce (<i>Khul'</i>).	Objectivity Women are often treated as "dependents" under <i>Nusyuz</i> (disobedience) laws.

4. Discussion

The Malaysian Synthesis on The "Dakwah" Movement, *Adat*, and the Erosion of Female Agency

While the previous section established the historical precedent of female autonomy, this section will investigate the sociological "pivot" in Malaysia. It examines how the 1970s Islamic resurgence (*Dakwah* movement) and deep-seated Malay cultural norms (*Adat*) effectively "overwrote" the Golden Age archetypes, replacing them with a narrative of domestic subordination.

The "Dakwah" Movement and the Middle-Easternization of Malay Identity

The late 1970s and 80s marked a radical shift in the Malaysian socio-religious landscape. The *Dakwah* movement sought to "purify" Malay Islam, but in doing so, it often imported neo-traditionalist Middle Eastern interpretations of gender that were more restrictive than the indigenous Malay *Adat* (Nagata, 1984).

i. **The Literalization of Text**

During this era, verses like Surah An-Nisa (4:34) began to be taught through a literalist lens in universities and urban *ceramahs*. The focus shifted from the "service" aspect of *Qiwamah* to the "authority" aspect.

ii. **The "Solehah" Trope**

The movement popularized the ideal of the *Wanita Solehah* (pious woman), defined primarily by her *Tafaqquh* (religious understanding) but manifested through her *Ta'at* (obedience) to her husband. This period saw the rise of the "veil" not just as modesty, but as a symbol of a woman's "return" to a domestic, submissive role (Ong, 1990).

Table 3 highlights the 'Ethical Gap' in Malaysian Sharia discourse: while the Quran provides a framework of mutual mercy, the localized interpretation of *Nusyuz* has been narrowed to serve as a tool for male domestic hegemony. This institutionalization of submission represents a clear departure from the 'Reciprocal Stewardship' practiced during the Islamic Golden Age."

Table 3: Analysis of Nusyuz (Disobedience) in Malaysian Discourse vs. Quranic Ethics

Trigger for Nusyuzin Malaysia	Cultural/Legal Application	Quranic/Reformist Ethical Counter
Refusing Polygamy	Often framed as "disobedience" to the husband's divine right to more wives.	The Quran (4:3, 4:129) emphasizes absolute justice (<i>Adl</i>), which is almost impossible to achieve. Refusal is a quest for justice.
Working/Career	A husband can declare a wife <i>Nusyuz</i> if she leaves the house for work against his "Izin."	Based on Khadijah's legacy , female economic agency is a right. Work is an act of <i>Karamah</i> (dignity), not rebellion.
Dissent/Argument	Raising one's voice or questioning a husband's decision is seen as "biadab" (rude).	Based on Aisyah's precedent , intellectual dissent is a Sunnah. The Quran mandates <i>Shura</i> (consultation), not autocracy.
Domestic Labor	Refusing to perform all household chores is cited as failing "marital duties."	The Prophet (PBUH) performed muna'ala (household help). Domestic labor is a shared mercy, not a master-servant debt.

The Fusion of Adat and Sharia on The Institutionalization of "Bowling"

A unique feature of the Malaysian context is the blurring of lines between cultural patriarchal norms (*Adat*) and the state-administered Sharia law.

i. **Legalized Submission**

The concept of *Nusyuz* (disobedience) in the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 1984 serves as a primary example. While the Quranic context of *Nusyuz* is specific and nuanced, in the Malay cultural-legal context, it is often weaponized to silence wives who seek career autonomy or dissent against a husband's decision.

ii. **Status Inconsistency**

Mohamad (2020) notes that as Malay women became more educated and economically active, the "Bowling Narrative" became a defensive tool for men. When women gained power in the "public square," men used religious rhetoric to re-assert dominance in the "private square."

The Digital Panopticon on "Ustaz" Culture and Social Media

In the 21st century, the demand for submission has migrated to digital platforms. The "Influencer Ustaz" culture in Malaysia often utilizes short-form content to propagate the "Bowling" narrative.

i. **Spiritual Emotional Labor**

Women are told through viral clips that their "Heaven" is conditional upon the husband's *Redha* (pleasure). This creates a psychological state where women self-regulate their behavior to avoid "divine wrath," effectively internalizing their own subordination (Basarudin, 2016).

ii. **The Erasure of History**



By focusing almost exclusively on a narrow set of verses, these digital discourses erase the history of figures like Ash-Shifa or Nusaybah. In this "digital Islam," the Golden Age is replaced by a "Victorianized" version of Islam that prioritizes male comfort.

The Reformist Response on Reclaiming the Middle Ground

Modern Malay reformists (the "Balanced" approach) argue that the current Malaysian discourse is a "double patriarchy" a combination of feudal Malay *Adat* and neo-traditionalist religious interpretation. To counter this, reformists advocate for "Reciprocal Qiwamah," where guardianship is seen as a shared responsibility based on the Quranic principle of *Shura* (consultation). They point to the fact that since modern Malay women contribute significantly to the household economy, the "conditional" nature of male authority in 4:34 (based on providing) must be re-evaluated (Anwar, 2006).

Towards a Reformist Synthesis of "Muwaddah" and "Adl"

The final chapter synthesizes the historical precedents of the Golden Age with the sociological realities of contemporary Malaysia. It argues that the "Bowing Narrative" is not a theological necessity but a cultural artifact that can be dismantled through a Reformist Hermeneutic.

Synthesis on The Disconnect Between History and Modernity

The systematic review of literature reveals a profound disconnect between the normative Islam of the 7th century and the lived Islam of 21st-century Malaysia. While the Golden Age provided archetypes of women as merchants, jurists, and political actors, the Malaysian post-*Dakwah* era has successfully "shrunk" the female role to a domestic sphere characterized by unconditional obedience.

As established in Chapter 2, the agency of women like Ash-Shifa bint Abdullah and Aisyah bint Abu Bakr was not an exception to the rule, but a manifestation of the Quranic principle of *Karamah* (Human Dignity). The Discussion argues that the modern Malay male's insistence on a "bowing" female is a response to Status Anxiety. As Malay women achieve parity in education and the workforce, the "weaponization" of verses like 4:34 serves as a psychological and social anchor to maintain a fading patriarchal order (Mohamad, 2020).

The Reformist "Middle Way" on Reciprocal Stewardship

The "Balanced" approach advocated in this paper does not suggest a secular abandonment of the Quran, but a Radical Return to its ethical core. This reformist path proposes:

1. **Shared Qiwamah**
Re-interpreting "guardianship" as a functional division of labor based on circumstance, rather than an ontological hierarchy of being (Wadud, 1999).
2. **The Supremacy of Shura (Consultation)**
Elevating the Quranic mandate of *Shura* over the cultural mandate of *Ta'at*. In a balanced Islamic marriage, decisions are made through mutual agreement, rendering the "bowing" requirement obsolete.
3. **The Re-Centering of Muwaddah and Rahmah**
Reminding the discourse that the primary goal of Islamic marriage, according to Surah Ar-Rum (30:21), is "tranquility, love, and mercy," none of which can flourish under a master-servant dynamic.

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the Malay male's demand for female submission is a synthesis of feudal Adat and modern literalist theology, rather than an authentic reflection of the Islamic Golden Age. The historical evidence of Khadijah's economic power, Aisyah's intellectual defiance, and Fatima al-Fihri's institutional legacy serves as a permanent refutation of the "Bowling Narrative."

For the Malaysian Ummah to move forward, it must bridge the gap between its progressive socioeconomic reality and its regressive domestic rhetoric. The Reformist path, one that is neither conventionalist nor secularist offers a way to honor the Quran while restoring the full human agency of women. By stripping away the "cultural pollutions" that have distorted the text, Malaysia can reclaim an Islam that looks less like a hierarchy of power and more like a community of justice.

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