



Beyond the Womb: Reconceiving Motherism as an Ethic of Rahmah in Islamic Theology

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Received:

2025-11-15

Revised:

2025-11-28

Accepted:

2025-12-20

Published:

2025-1-25

Abstrak: Artikel ini secara singkat membahas rekonseptualisasi ibuisme. Artikel ini berupaya melakukan pembacaan ulang terhadap narasi domestifikasi perempuan yang berkedok pemuliaan, tetapi memberikan batasan akses pada perempuan di ruang lainnya. Secara khusus penulisan artikel ini bertujuan untuk menggali ulang makna ‘ibuisme’. Penulis pada gilirannya berupaya melakukan re-interpretasi terhadap narasi ibuisme yang sempit, menggeser pemahaman menjadi sebuah paradigma *ethics of care* atau etika kepedulian. Adapun metode yang digunakan dalam penulisan artikel ini adalah studi literatur, di mana buku-buku dan artikel jurnal yang fokus membahas ibuisme, domestifikasi, dan peran gender menjadi sumber utama. Melalui pendekatan analisis teologis, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa nilai-nilai inti yang dilekatkan pada sosok ibu, khususnya rahmah (kasih sayang) dan tarbiyah (pengasuhan) sejatinya memang bukan atribut yang terikat pada gender atau rahim semata. Keduanya merupakan sumber etika yang bersifat universal. Sementara itu domestifikasi perempuan dengan dalih peran keibuan adalah sebuah distorsi teologis. Sebaliknya, pengasuhan bersama (*co-parenting*) dan keterlibatan laki-laki dalam ranah domestik adalah sebuah keharusan etis. Pada akhirnya, re-konseptualisasi ini tidak hanya bertujuan membebaskan perempuan dari belenggu kodrat yang sempit, tetapi juga mengajak laki-laki untuk berpartisipasi penuh dalam

etika kepedulian, demi mewujudkan keluarga yang adil dan maslahah.

Kata kunci: *Ibuisme, Etika Kepedulian, Teologi Islam, Teologi Gender.*

Abstract: This article provides a brief discussion of the reconceptualization of ibuism. It attempts to reread the narrative of women's domestication, disguised as glorification, while restricting women's access to other spaces. Specifically, this article aims to deconstruct the meaning of 'ibuism.' The author, in turn, seeks to reinterpret the narrow narrative of ibuism, shifting its understanding to a paradigm of ethics of care. The method used in writing this article is a literature study, where books and journal articles that focus on discussing ibuisme, domestication, and gender roles are the main sources. Through a theological analysis approach, this research finds that the core values attached to the mother figure, particularly rahmah (compassion) and tarbiyah (nurture), are not attributes tied solely to gender or the womb. Both are universal sources of ethics. Meanwhile, the domestication of women under the guise of motherhood is a theological distortion. Conversely, co-parenting and men's involvement in the domestic sphere are ethical imperatives. Ultimately, this reconceptualization not only aims to free women from the shackles of narrow nature but also invites men to participate fully in the ethics of care to realize a fair family and maslahah.

Keywords: *Motherism, Ethics of Care, Islamic Theology, and Gender Theology.*

INTRODUCTION

Discussing the figure of the mother within socio-religious discourse is an inexhaustible topic. In the theological domain, mothers are highly revered, particularly through the popular adage "paradise lies beneath a mother's feet." However, in the Indonesian context, the position of mothers is inherently paradoxical. Culturally, the veneration of motherhood is

manifested through the recognition of maternal affection, sacrifice, and the central role of mothers within the family. On the other hand, there are institutional and discursive mechanisms that, in the name of such veneration, perpetuate the subordination and domestication of women (Wardani, 2025) legitimizing unequal gender relations under the guise of honor and reverence (Hasanah, 2022: 45).

The role of women as mothers, which is imbued with noble values, is often reduced and confined solely to biological functions and domestic responsibilities. These two roles are subsequently essentialized as women's "natural destiny," thereby restricting women's mobility and participation in the public sphere (Khairunnisa dkk., 2025). At the ideological level, this paradoxical positioning of motherhood is reflected in the concept of "ibuisme"—referred to by Julia Suryakusuma as the "state ibuism"—in which women's roles are reduced, depoliticized, and domesticated, ultimately limiting women to functions of reproduction and service (Suryakusuma, 2011: 102).

Ironically, this ideological construction is intertwined with theological legitimation, which is partially derived from Islamic teachings (Putri, 2025). Narrow and patriarchal interpretations of Qur'anic verses and the commentaries on Hadith reinforce the notion that women's duties and obligations are confined to the domestic sphere—serving their husbands and caring for children. Consequently, the figure of the mother, once associated with a noble and esteemed role, transforms into a mere biological destiny, internalizing socially constructed notions of kodrat that ultimately constrain and restrain women's agency (Wadud, 1999).

In her work, Suryakusuma explains that *ibuisme* (motherism) is distinct from the term *ibu rumah tangga* (housewife). In the Indonesian context, the concept of *ibu* is inherently fluid and does not merely refer to women who have children. Women with professional expertise, spiritual authority, healing abilities, foreign women, and even elderly women may be addressed as *ibu*. By contrast, *ibuisme* refers to a particular doctrine or ideology that confines women within rigid and restrictive positional frameworks (Suryakusuma, 2011: 3).

In her book, Julia Suryakusuma, citing Madelon Djajadiningrat, conceptualizes *ibuisme* as an ideology that provides legitimacy while defining women within limited capacities. This ideology encompasses all actions

performed by women in their roles as mothers who care for families, groups, or particular classes without demanding anything in return, whether in the form of material rewards or power. As a result, women are denied authority over themselves and are instead consistently attached or subordinated to something or someone else (Suryakusuma, 2011). In Indonesia, women often unconsciously reproduce and embody this ideology in their everyday practices. The internalization of *ibuisme* operates, among other mechanisms, through state interventions in women's bodies, particularly via public policies.

Following Suryakusuma's seminal work, studies on *ibuisme* and the domestication of women have been further developed in several research contexts, including the study conducted by Wicaksono (2018). Through an ethnographic approach, Wicaksono demonstrates that the concept of *ibuisme* has been indirectly embedded in societal structures, shaping women's perceptions of what it means to be an "ideal" woman (Wicaksono, 2018). In the religious context, Made (2020) finds that the domestication of women is evident in religious sermons delivered by Ustadz Firnanda Andirja, in which wives are portrayed as being expected to remain at home and refrain from opposing their husbands' authority (Made, 2020). Meanwhile, Augustine and Juniarti reveal that the ideology of *ibuisme* can also be implicitly conveyed through television advertisements—specifically in advertisements for children's milk products. In this sense, the media plays a significant role in disseminating state-endorsed notions of ideal motherhood (Augustine & Juniarti, 2022).

Sociological studies on the State of *Ibuisme* or state-sponsored motherhood ideology in Indonesia have, indeed, been extensively conducted (Suryakusuma, 2011). alongside critiques by Muslim feminist scholars who challenge practices of women's domestication (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999). However, much of the existing scholarship on *ibuisme* and critiques of this ideology largely remain at the level of sociological analysis, without offering an alternative paradigm. Departing from this gap, the present article seeks to reread narratives of women's domestication that are cloaked in the rhetoric of veneration yet simultaneously restrict women's access to other social spheres. The scholarly contribution this article aims to make lies in proposing a theological reconstruction of *ibuisme*—an effort to shift its meaning from a constraining ideology into a universal ethic of liberation.

The primary focus is not motherhood per se, but *ibuisme* as an ideology that constrains, reduces, and limits women's agency, and which stands in clear contradiction to the fundamental principles of Islam.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method (Suyitno, 2018) supported by library research to explore the foundational concept of *ibuisme*. In its analytical process, the article adopts two complementary approaches. First, critical discourse analysis is employed to uncover the underlying assumptions of *ibuisme* and its manifestations in the domestication of women. Second, thematic analysis is used to examine and reconstruct maternal values—particularly *rahmah* (compassion) and *tarbiyah* (nurturing/education)—by collecting Qur'anic verses that share thematic relevance, arranging them contextually, and interpreting them comprehensively in order to construct a coherent conceptual framework.

The selection of *rahmah* and *tarbiyah* is grounded in the argument that these values constitute the core pillars of maternal attributes, which in the Qur'an are linked both to divine (*ilahiah*) qualities and to universal human values. As such, they are highly relevant as an antithesis to domestication. More specifically, this article seeks to deconstruct the prevailing meaning of *ibuisme*. The author subsequently attempts to reinterpret the narrow narrative of *ibuisme*, shifting it toward an ethics of care paradigm. Furthermore, a theological foundation is proposed to critique domestication and to promote gender-equitable roles in caregiving (co-parenting) as well as women's participation in the public sphere.

The Construction of Motherism: From Ideology to Domestication

The narrative of *ibuisme* (motherhood) should be clearly distinguished from the figure of the mother, which refers to the subject, as well as from mothering, which denotes practices or forms of implementation. *Ibuisme*, in this context, constitutes an ideology—that is, a set of socially, culturally, and politically constructed ideas that position women and define what it means to be a “good mother” within society. (Niko, 2023).

In the Indonesian context, the narrative of *ibuisme* is deeply embedded in the legacy of the Orde Baru regime. State *Ibuism* or State-sponsored *Ibuisme* systematically defined the ideal woman through five

principal roles known as *Pancadarma Wanita*. These roles include: (1) women as loyal companions to their husbands; (2) women as reproducers for the nation, tasked with producing future generations; (3) women as educators and guides of children; (4) women as managers and regulators of the household; and (5) women as useful members of society or productive citizens. (Suryakusuma, 2011: 17).

Although these roles appear comprehensive, their hierarchical ordering and practical emphasis indicate that women's public and economic roles are positioned last and treated as secondary. The primary focus lies in the domestication of women as servants to their husbands and as factories of reproduction (Suryakusuma, 2011: 105). Over time, this ideology has effectively confined women to the domains of *sumur, dapur, dan kasur* (well, kitchen, and bed), relegating them to second-class society. Women's participation in the public sphere is permitted only insofar as it does not interfere with their primary domestic duties. This represents a form of pervasive hegemony, in which women themselves internalize these values as natural and inherent aspects of their gendered roles (Isthiqonita, 2024).

Crucially, this hegemony is further reinforced by theological legitimation that is understood only partially. Hadiths concerning male leadership, wives' obligations to serve their husbands, or interpretations of the concept of kodrat (fiṭrah) are frequently invoked to justify male superiority and the confinement of women to the domestic sphere (Kodir, 2022: xiv). Scriptural references that are in fact contextual or possess deeper, more nuanced meanings are thus reduced to instruments for legitimizing a patriarchal social order. It is precisely this reductionist understanding that becomes the primary target of gender theology critiques (Barlas, 2002). Without dismantling such theological justifications, the ideology of *ibuisme* will continue to be perceived as an integral part of religious doctrine or divinely ordained nature.

It is important to recognize that such reductionist interpretations are not a phenomenon that emerged solely during the New Order era. Rather, they are rooted in long-standing traditions of religious interpretation dating back to the classical period. As articulated by thinkers such as Fatima Mernissi (Mernissi, 1991) and Asma Barlas (Barlas, 2002), many classical exegetes lived within male-centric social structures and therefore tended to read Qur'anic texts through such lenses. As a consequence, verses imbued

with egalitarian impulses were often marginalized or deliberately interpreted in ways that legitimized existing social orders, including the domestication of women. Accordingly, theological justifications grounded in previously established traditions of tafsir and fiqh must be reinterpreted through critically conscious readings, to align them with socially beneficial (maslahah) realities (Kodir, 2021: 144).

Theological Analysis: Motherly Values in The Qur'an

In order to dismantle the reductionism embedded in the ideology of *ibuisme*, it is crucial to return to the primary sources of Islamic theology and examine how the noble values traditionally associated with motherhood—such as compassion, care, and education—are constructed and interpreted. To this end, thematic analysis is employed by tracing the root words and contextual meanings of Qur'anic verses that embody values of nurturing and care. The author ultimately selects rahmah (compassion) and tarbiyah (nurturing/education) as the central focus, as both constitute the core of maternal identity while theologically extending far beyond the confines of domestic roles. Indeed, the Qur'an positions these values not as biologically or femininely bound attributes, but as universal divine ethics and fundamental responsibilities of humanity.

The Roots of the Ethics of Caring: Mercy as a Divine Attribute

The selection of *Rahmah* in this study is grounded in a theological-linguistic consideration. The fundamental point of departure in Islamic theology is the concept of rahmah. The two most prominent *Asma' al-Husna*, *Ar-Rahmān* (The Most Compassionate) and *Ar-Rahīm* (The Most Merciful), are both derived from the same root word (ر-ح-م). This very root also forms the word *rahīm*, which in Indonesian usage refers to the female womb. Such a linguistic connection can hardly be regarded as coincidental. Rather, it conveys a profound theological signification: that compassion, care, and the most primordial form of nurturing—symbolized by the womb—are, in essence, manifestations of God's most exalted attributes. (Shihab, 2002: 21-22).

The ideology of *ibuisme* reduces rahmah by confining it to maternal instinct, rendering it biological and domestic in nature. Explicitly, however, the Qur'an elevates rahmah to the highest theological level. When rahmah is

established as a principal attribute of God, it cannot be circumscribed by gendered constructions. *Rahmah* is, in essence, a universal divine ethic. If God is *Ar-Raḥmān*, then the obligation to embody (*takhalluq*) the attribute of *rahmah* applies to all human beings, encompassing both men and women. (Kodir, 2021: 432).

The Qur'an, in fact, commands humanity to disseminate compassion not only within the domestic sphere but also across broader social relations. In QS. *Al-Anbiyā'* (21:107), it is stated that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sent by God as a mercy to all creation (*raḥmatan lil-‘ālamīn*), representing the most complete form of public care and compassion. Consequently, restricting *rahmah* solely to women within the household ultimately diminishes its profound theological significance. Compassion and care constitute reciprocal ethical principles—a form of social *tawḥīd* that transcends the domestic–public dichotomy—and thus must be embodied by all of God's servants. (Kodir, 2021: 100).

Tarbiyah as a Humanitarian Duty

Tarbiyah – which includes education and upbringing (Prasetya, 2021), *Tarbiyah* constitutes the second aspect that is often attributed to the figure of the mother. The ideology of *ibuisme* positions women as the primary and first educators of children. In the context of the New Order regime, this notion was institutionalized in the third principle of *Pancadarma Wanita*, namely, women as educators and guides of children. (Suryakusuma, 2011: 16). The consequence of assigning *tarbiyah* as an exclusive responsibility of mothers, while fathers are primarily oriented toward breadwinning, is the creation of an imbalanced division of roles.

However, when the Qur'an addresses child-rearing and education, it frequently employs dual-gender or gender-neutral terminology. Two of the most commonly used terms are *abawayh* and *wālidayn*, both of which refer to both parents. As stated in QS. *Al-Isrā'* (17:23), immediately after the command to worship God, the subsequent injunction is to show devotion and kindness to one's parents. This verse clearly indicates that the responsibility for caregiving—which subsequently gives rise to the right to be honored—is borne by both parties, father and mother alike. (Shihab, 2002: 442-444).

An example of a father figure who takes a central role in educating his child is Luqman al-Hakim (Lajnah Pentashihan mushaf Al-Qur'an, 2022). Luqman does not merely teach tawḥīd, but also moral conduct and social ethics. The presence of QS. Luqmān (31:12–19) effectively challenges the assumption that child education is the exclusive domain of mothers. Another illustration can be drawn from the prayers of the prophets, such as those of Prophet Ibrahim and Prophet Zakaria, who pray for their offspring, thereby demonstrating the emotional and spiritual involvement of fathers in the nurturing and education of their children. (Lajnah Pentashihan mushaf Al-Qur'an, 2022).

Fundamentally, the Qur'an conceives tarbiyah as a human responsibility that is borne reciprocally by both parents. Therefore, when a man takes an active role in educating, nurturing, and performing care work for his children, he is neither assuming a woman's role nor merely "helping" his wife. Rather, he is fulfilling one of his own obligations in carrying out one of the most fundamental ethical imperatives of humanity as mandated by the Qur'an. (Kodir, 2021: 432).

Beyond Biological Roles: Female Figures in the Qur'an

As is widely acknowledged, the Qur'an accords profound respect to the biological dimensions of motherhood, as reflected in QS. Luqmān (31:14), which highlights the hardship and physical vulnerability experienced by mothers during pregnancy and breastfeeding (Departemen Agama RI, 1989). Nevertheless, Qur'anic narratives concerning women never reduce their status solely to these biological roles. On the contrary, the Qur'an presents female figures who demonstrate agency, intellectual capacity, and forms of care that extend beyond the confines of the domestic sphere.

For instance, the story of the mother of Moses (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an, 2022) is often read narrowly as a narrative of motherhood alone. Yet, the mother of Moses can be understood as a woman who received divine inspiration (ilham) (Wadud, 1999: 39). In the midst of extreme adversity, God enabled her (Barlas, 2002: 175) to make a strategic yet highly risky decision—placing her infant in the river. Furthermore, in her efforts to protect Moses, she mobilized and managed her social network. This narrative ultimately leads to Moses' survival and his later mission to

liberate his people. The actions of Moses' mother thus constitute a form of care that is both political and prophetic in nature (Wadud, 1999: 38-39).

The Qur'an also presents the figure of Maryam (Departemen Agama RI, 1989) who stands as a direct antithesis to *ibuisme*, which prescribes that women must be positioned as companions to husbands. Maryam is portrayed as an autonomous woman, an '*abidah* (devout worshipper), chosen by God to carry out a noble mission and bear an immense responsibility without passing through the institution of marriage. Her excellence clearly transcends gender. Maryam confronts society with spiritual strength and personal integrity (Wadud, 1999: 39-40).

Another woman explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an is Queen Balqis (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an, 2022). Although not depicted within a biological motherhood narrative, Queen Balqis may be understood as a "mother" to her people. She embodies the highest ethic of care on a public scale by leading through consultation, prioritizing peaceful diplomacy over warfare, and, by God's enabling, guiding her people toward faith (Wadud, 1999: 40). These Qur'anic narratives of women affirm that noble values such as care, protection, and wisdom are not monopolized by domestic roles, but can be realized in even the most strategic public capacities.

Without negating the importance of domestic roles, the most urgent point to be emphasized here is the rejection of restricting women's roles exclusively to that sphere. It may be argued that the female figures presented in the Qur'an represent exceptional cases. However, the theological argument advanced here is that the Qur'an deliberately presents these figures as evidence of women's agency and public participation, neither of which is inherently deviant. On the contrary, through these narratives, the Qur'an appears to establish a divinely sanctioned normative precedent. Through a holistic reading, it becomes evident that an ethic of care can be fully realized beyond the biological boundaries of the womb and the walls of the domestic sphere.

Reconceptualization of Motherism as The Ethics of Grace

The spirit conveyed by the Qur'an through the presence of female figures ultimately leads to the understanding that values traditionally articulated through the narrative of *ibuisme* are not merely feminine-biological attributes, but rather attributes that are both divine and humanistic

in nature. In Islam, rahmah possesses a universal, relational, and transformative ethical dimension that transcends its conventional portrayal as a passive emotion. Accordingly, the reconceptualization of ibuisme should not be understood merely as a role bound to the womb, but more profoundly as a universal ethic of rahmah (Sumadi, 2018: 77). By virtue of its universality, practices of care, nurturing, protection, and the sustaining of life become the duty and responsibility of every individual, both men and women (Kodir, 2021: 437). Such responsibility is not confined to biological life alone, but extends to social, intellectual, and spiritual life, both within the family and in society at large.

By disentangling the ethic of rahmah from the obligation for women to become biological mothers, women are implicitly liberated from constraining notions of kodrat (Wadud, 1999). The implications of this reconceptualization of ibuisme can be outlined in three key points. First, it offers a theological critique of the domestication of women. If ibuisme is understood as a universal ethic of rahmah rooted in divine attributes, then its use as a justification for confining women to the domestic sphere constitutes a serious theological distortion. Domestication, therefore, cannot be regarded as a form of honoring women (Deva Yulinda & Suci Ramadhani Putri, 2023). rather, it represents a systematic curtailment of women's human potential.

Second, this reconceptualization provides a strong theological foundation for the implementation of co-parenting. As an ethic of *rahmah*, values of care and nurturing function as moral standards for every individual, not exclusively for women (Sumadi, 2018: 77). Previously, fathers who actively engaged in childcare were often perceived as merely helping their wives or assuming women's roles (Hasanah, 2022). Fundamentally, however, such assumptions are misguided. When a father or man actively participates in caregiving (tarbiyah), his actions are an expression of rahmah. Likewise, when a man is involved in domestic work, he is not "helping," but rather fulfilling a religious obligation (Kodir, 2022: 117). In other words, he is practicing takhalluq, emulating the divine attribute of *Ar-Rahmān*.

Third, as a paradigm, the ethic of rahmah should be advanced as a public ethic. Values often labeled as feminine or maternal—such as empathy, dialogue, care, and nonviolence—are, in fact, universally necessary values that ought to permeate public spheres across various domains, including

politics, economics, and even law. These public arenas are frequently dominated by logics of competition, aggression, and profit maximization. The participation of both women and men in public life, guided by an ethic of care, therefore does not represent a deviation from *ibuisme*. Rather, it serves as a critical lens to ensure that public policies are grounded in the spirit of *rahmah* and oriented toward the common good, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women and children.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the core values traditionally associated with motherhood—particularly *rahmah* (compassion) and *tarbiyah* (nurturing)—are not attributes bound to gender or the womb alone. Rather, they constitute an ethical source and a form of human responsibility that the Qur'an assigns to both parents (*abawayh*). On this basis, a reconceptualization of *ibuisme* is necessary: from a biologically and domestically defined role into a universal ethic of *rahmah*. This ethic calls upon both men and women, in whatever capacities they inhabit—whether as parents, leaders, or individuals—to actively nurture, care for, and sustain life. The domestication of women under the pretext of maternal roles thus represents a theological distortion. Conversely, shared parenting (co-parenting) and men's engagement in domestic spheres emerge as ethical imperatives. Ultimately, this reconceptualization seeks not only to liberate women from constraining notions of *kodrat* but also to invite men to fully participate in an ethic of care, toward the realization of more just and beneficial family and social orders.

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