

Original Article

The Meaning of Divorce For Muslim Women (A Phenomenological Study of Widows in Ponorogo)

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Abstract - *The phenomenon of divorce in Ponorogo, Indonesia, known as Kota Santri (the City of Muslim Students), demonstrates peculiar social, cultural, and spiritual complexities of Muslim women. Divorce is not a mere legal and social event, but also an existential experience that shakes the meaning of life, identity, and spirituality of women in a religious-patriarchal society. This study aims to understand how Muslim women in Ponorogo construct the meaning of divorce in their daily lives, deal with the social and religious stigma, and rebuild their spirituality and self-identity post-divorce. An interpretive hermeneutic-phenomenological approach was employed using purposive sampling (n=6). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and personal documentation, and then analysed thematically, guided by the principles of intentionality and lived experience, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Triangulation of techniques and sources, member checking, and ongoing researcher reflection were carried out to ensure validity. The results reveal three main patterns of interpretation of divorce: as a spiritual test that fosters patience and faith; as a space for self-liberation and the discovery of personal meaning; and as a process of spiritual reconstruction that deepens the relationship with God. For Muslim women in Ponorogo, divorce is a dialectic between suffering and enlightenment, between stigma and spirituality. Through religious practices, such as night prayer, dhikr, and involvement in religious study groups, they build spiritual resilience, strengthen their identity, and gain new social legitimacy as spiritually and socially empowered women.*

Keywords - *Divorce, Meaning, Muslim, Women, Widow.*

1. Introduction

Divorce cases in Indonesia have experienced a significant surge, becoming a major concern for various groups, including academics, legal practitioners, religious leaders, and the wider public. Current data from the Directorate General of Religious Courts at the Supreme Court reports that the number of divorce cases continues to increase annually. In 2024 alone, approximately 399,921 divorce cases were recorded throughout the country, despite the slight reduction from 2023, with 408,347 cases [1]. In Jawa Timur, including Ponorogo, approximately 79,293 cases took place in 2024, reflecting a phenomenal situation where the divorce rate remains high in a regency known for its religious and collectivist culture.

Concurrently, divorce statistics in Ponorogo between 2019 and 2024 have shown a consistent upward trend each year, from 1,450 to 1,770 cases. This increase reflects the complex social dynamics in the region known as the “City of Santri,” where traditional religious and cultural values presumably coexist with modern social changes.

Interestingly, the proportion of divorces filed by women increased to 60% in 2024, while divorces filed by men decreased to 40% [2].

Such a number is at odds with the notion that for women, divorce often means not only the loss of a spouse but also the loss of social status, economic security, and identity within the community [3]. The title “widow” carries a deep stigma in which women are perceived as failing to maintain household harmony; their morality is questioned, and they are socially shunned. This stigma is reinforced in societies with a patriarchal cultural structure, such as Ponorogo, where family honour is often linked to women’s success in maintaining the household [4]. It thus can be said that divorce is not merely a legal and administrative event, but rather a multidimensional experience that touches on an individual’s psychological, social, and spiritual aspects [5].

Concurrently, research has shown that women are the most socially and psychologically impacted in divorce cases. These psychosocial impacts include social exclusion, economic hardship, societal stigma, and mental health



disorders such as depression and anxiety [6]. There is a need for a deeper understanding of how women experience and interpret divorce within specific cultural and religious contexts [7].

Studies that delve into the subjective experiences of Muslim women after divorce, especially in the context of a religious region such as Ponorogo, are still very limited. This present study offers novelty in the form of a phenomenological approach that seeks to explore the meaning of divorce, allowing a more comprehensive perspective of Muslim women's own lived experiences. This present study aims to: 1) reveal the meaning of divorce as constructed by Muslim women in Ponorogo based on their daily experiences, both in the emotional, spiritual, and social realms; 2) analyse the experiences of Muslim women in facing social, psychological, and religious stigma after divorce, as well as the strategies they use to respond to normative pressures within the religious community; and 3) analyse how Muslim women restructure their identities, social roles, and relational orientations after divorce as a form of spiritual and social transformation in the context of local Islamic culture.

2. Materials and Methods

This present study employed an Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach with six primary participants selected purposively and theoretically [8]. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and personal documentation, and then analysed thematically based on the principles of intentionality by Husserl [9] and lived experience by van Manen [10]. Research validity was maintained through triangulation of techniques and sources, member checking, and ongoing researcher reflection [8].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

This present study focuses on three main problem formulations that serve as the foundation for a phenomenological interpretation of the fieldwork findings. These three focuses serve as the main foundation in analysing the experiences of Ponorogo Muslim women, who, through the process of loss, reflection, and the discovery of new meaning, demonstrate that divorce is not merely a social event, but an existential journey toward deeper maturity in faith and spirituality [11].

The first results explicate how the meaning of divorce is constructed by Ponorogo Muslim women in their daily experiences, particularly in the context of post-divorce inner, social, and religious struggles. The second results explain how they deal with the social, psychological, and religious stigma inherent in Ponorogo's religious community, where the value of piety is often used to measure women's

morality. Last, this present study also describes their interpretation of life after divorce, particularly in the process of self-reconstruction, strengthening spirituality, and the socio-religious roles they rebuild after losing their domestic roles as wives [12].

3.1.1. *The Meaning of Divorce in the Daily Experiences of Muslim Women in Ponorogo* *Divorce as an Existential Crisis*

In the early post-divorce phase, women experience an identity crisis, feelings of worthlessness, loss of direction, and failure to fulfil the feminine roles culturally and religiously associated with marital status. In Ponorogo, a religious region steeped in patriarchal values, divorce is not only understood as a failed marriage but also as a tarnished moral image, leaving women socially and spiritually vulnerable. In such a religious society, divorce is often viewed not as a rational or spiritual decision, but as a moral failure for women. Thus, women experience not only personal suffering but also a collective symbolic burden, where their bodies and identities become battlegrounds for the struggle between religious values, social morality, and gender justice [13].

However, amidst this crisis, self-awareness slowly begins to arise. This phenomenon can be understood as a shift from existential anxiety to existential awareness, which views suffering beyond feeling, but rather as part of a spiritual journey. Hence, divorce for Muslim women in Ponorogo is a form of a dual existential crisis: on the one hand, it shakes both their sense of self and the social structures supporting their lives; on the other, it paves the way for spiritual enlightenment and a revival of faith. They learn to rediscover God's presence amidst the destruction, and realise that behind their loss lies the opportunity for rebirth, not as wives or widows, but as whole, faithful human beings.

Suffering as a Spiritual Transformation

The journey of divorced Muslim women in Ponorogo demonstrates the dynamics of self-transcendence, as explained by Viktor Frankl within the framework of logotherapy, known as the human ability to find meaning through suffering. This process does not occur suddenly, but rather as a result of deep reflection, a long inner struggle, and a gradual reconstruction of faith [14].

Suffering, which was initially felt as a suffocating and shameful burden, slowly transformed into a spiritual space to encounter divine meaning. For the Muslim women in Ponorogo, divorce is no longer understood as punishment or failure, but rather as a divine calling to re-establish spiritual relationships that had been neglected during marriage. The suffering has become a space for the birth of profound spiritual transformation, in which divorce is no longer interpreted as the end of religious life, but as a process of

purification of the soul and the revival of faith. Through suffering, they learn to know themselves, rediscover God, and reimagine the meaning of life with a more mature spiritual awareness. In other words, divorce becomes a bridge from hurt to meaning, from brokenness to healing, and from loss to an existential encounter with the All-Merciful.

Daily Spirituality as Recovery

The spiritual transformation experienced by Muslim women in Ponorogo does not stop at the level of reflective awareness or inner experience alone, but rather manifests as everyday spirituality, a form of faith that is alive, flowing, and present in simple daily routines. Post-divorce women establish a religious and contemplative rhythm of life as a way to restore inner balance, strengthen self-confidence, and reaffirm their relationship with God [15].

Moreover, this growing spirituality is not the result of social coercion or normative obligation, but rather arises from an existential need to find peace and new meaning after loss. This daily spirituality becomes the foundation of existential recovery, where wounds are transformed into sources of meaning, solitude becomes a space for dialogue with God, and suffering becomes a path to maturity in faith and inner peace. Thus, divorce is not destruction, but a spiritual turning point, a journey from loss to enlightenment, from sadness to gratitude, and from adversity to true Divine peace [16].

3.1.2. Facing the Social, Psychological, and Religious Stigma

This result explains how Ponorogo Muslim women face the social, psychological, and religious stigma that arises after divorce. In a religious society like Ponorogo, the status of "widow" not only signifies a change in marital status but also carries a symbolic burden with moral and social meaning. However, this present study finds that Ponorogo Muslim women do not completely submit to these pressures. Instead, they display gentle and meaningful resistance strategies through piety, solidarity, and social engagement.

The piety they develop is no longer passive or normative, but rather becomes an affirmative action and religious agency. These women show the ability to use faith values to negotiate dignity, strengthen themselves, and build new meaning in life after divorce. This phenomenon is evident in their religious lives, particularly in the activities of the *majelis taklim* (Islamic study group), which functions as a safe religious space: a secure and inclusive spiritual space for widowed women to heal wounds, build solidarity, and reaffirm their religious identity.

Social Stigma and Symbolic Abuse

The post-divorce Muslim women in Ponorogo face a very strong social stigma embedded in the collective

consciousness of the religious community. Socially, being labelled as "widow" signifies post-marital status and further carries negative moral and social connotations. This status is often viewed as a sign of failure to maintain a household, an inability to fulfil the role of a pious wife, or even a threat to the social and moral order of the community.

From the perspective of Islamic feminism and social phenomenology, this experience demonstrates how patriarchal norms and traditional religious structures can internalise guilt and shame around women's bodies. This demonstrates that such stigma against widows is not merely a social practice, but also a strategy of cultural control, where religious and moral values are used to maintain patriarchal dominance. Post-divorce Muslim women face both personal wounds and social burdens that test their psychological and spiritual resilience [17].

Piety as Resistance and Religious Agency

Ponorogo Muslim women do not respond to negative stigma with confrontational resistance, but through symbolic resistance based on piety. They transform piety from mere passive obedience into an affirmative strategy for negotiating self-dignity, rebuilding their social image, and affirming their spiritual existence. The social stigma and symbolic violence that initially limited women have instead become the breeding ground for a more autonomous and reflective religious consciousness [18].

Through active piety, they create new meanings of honour, nobility, and faith. They reaffirm that a woman's dignity is not determined by marital status, but by steadfastness in faith and good deeds. In this context, post-divorce Muslim women in Ponorogo have successfully transformed social wounds into spiritual strength, making piety not merely a form of consolation but a symbolic resistance that affirms their existence and humanity amidst biased social structures.

3.1.4. The Meaning of Life Post-Divorce and Identity Reconstruction

Reflective Spirituality and Maturity of Faith

The post-divorce phase for Muslim women in Ponorogo is marked by the emergence of reflective spirituality, a form of faith awareness that grows from experiences of suffering and deep inner reflection. After going through a phase of crisis and social stigma, the women begin to rebuild their relationship with God in a more personal, conscious, and meaningful way. This spirituality is no longer ritualistic or formal, but rather rooted in the experience of loss and a new understanding of divine love.

Simple rituals like these become a means of existential reconstruction, where silence and worship become therapy for the soul. The spirituality they experience is a form of faith tested by suffering, a faith that finds depth precisely

when all worldly things have collapsed. Thus, the post-divorce phase marks not merely emotional recovery, but the birth of a more mature and authentic awareness of faith. They find God not in victory, but in humility, and from there grows a peace that is no longer dependent on humans, but rooted in spiritual intimacy with the Creator [5].

Social Independence and Reorientation of Marriage Value

Post-divorce Muslim women in Ponorogo also demonstrate social and economic independence, marking the reconstruction of their self-identity. After losing their partners' support and facing social stigma, they strive to rebuild their self-confidence through meaningful social, religious, and economic activities. This process marks an existential awakening, where women no longer define themselves based on their marital status, but rather on the contributions, benefits, and religious values they provide to society. The post-divorce phase for these women is not a time of destruction, but rather a time of reconstruction of self-meaning. They rebuild their lives through reflective spirituality, social independence, and a new awareness of the value of life. Divorce, once considered final, is now interpreted as a gateway to spiritual freedom and existential maturity. In Frankl's terms, they have found meaning in suffering and turned it into a source of strength to live more fully, with dignity, and with faith. These women's experiences portray the process of transformation of meaning that takes place in three main hermeneutic stages: existential crisis and loss of meaning, spiritual reflection and revelation of meaning, and self-reconstruction and revival of faith [18].

3.1. Discussion

3.1.1. Meaning of Divorce within Daily Experiences

Divorce as an Existential Crisis and Meaning-Losing

For Muslim women in Ponorogo, divorce is not simply a social or legal event, but an existential crisis that shakes the entire structure of self-awareness. In the initial phase, women experience a profound sense of failure and loss of meaning in life. This phenomenon indicates personal grief and reveals the existential tension between destruction and the search for meaning.

In the context of May's (1958) theory of existential anxiety, this experience marks the loss of the structure of meaning that supports one's existence. In a religious and patriarchal society such as Ponorogo, where a woman's piety is measured by her success in maintaining a household, divorce becomes "the collapse of her spiritual self-image." Within the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology, such a crisis is not simply a point of destruction, but a moment of revelation of being [19].

This is also in line with van Manen [10], who states that extreme experiences can provide a space for existential reflection that reveals the deepest relationship between humans and God. This existential crisis serves as a "mirror"

for Ponorogo Muslim women to reinterpret their relationship with the divine, moving from mere formal obedience to reflective spiritual intimacy.

From Suffering to Spiritual Transcendence

The process of meaning-making after divorce reveals the dynamics of self-transcendence as described by Viktor Frankl [20]. Through suffering, women rediscover meaning beyond personal wounds. This transformation of existential orientation is from a horizontal relationship (to humans) to a vertical relationship (to God). In Frankl's perspective, suffering becomes a means to discover spiritual meaning that cannot be destroyed by external circumstances.

In the present study, divorce actually fosters an awareness that faith is not merely an obligation, but an existential experience that sustains the self. This reflection demonstrates a form of lived transformation [10], namely, a change in consciousness that emerges when suffering is reflected upon as a vehicle for spiritual learning. The women no longer define themselves as victims, but rather as spiritual subjects being "forged" by God. In Ricoeur's perspective, this process is a form of refiguration, namely the rewriting of life's narrative from tragedy to a transformation of faith. Thus, divorce is not the end, but a path to spiritual awakening, a revival of faith born from the depths of wounds [21].

Daily Spirituality as Existential Recovery

The spiritual transformation of Ponorogo Muslim women does not stop at the level of reflection, but manifests itself in daily religious and contemplative practices. Within Pargament's (1997) framework, such rituals are a form of spiritual coping, using religious faith as a means of re-establishing psychological and existential balance. Daily spirituality becomes existential therapy that heals inner wounds.

From a classical Islamic perspective, this is similar to *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of desire) as explained by al-Ghazali, who argued that life's trials are a means of purifying the soul so that humans return to God with a pure heart. Thus, the meaning of divorce in the lives of Ponorogo Muslim women does not end simply in loss, but develops into a spiritual space for the rebirth of a new self. They rediscover God not in the mosque or the assembly, but in the silence of their homes and in the simple rhythms of everyday life [22].

3.2.2. Facing Social, Psychological, and Religious Stigma Stigma as Symbolic Abuse and Religious Alienation

Muslim women in Ponorogo face profound social stigma after divorce. In a Muslim society that largely values the household as a symbol of piety, the status of "widow" is often associated with moral failure. This phenomenon illustrates a form of symbolic violence, as described by

Pierre Bourdieu as social domination that operates subtly through language and moral norms [23]. In this case, patriarchal power reinforces gender hierarchy through tacit exclusion: women who fail to marry are no longer considered "worthy" of social presence. This stigma even permeates religious spaces, where women lose their sense of connection to the religious community that once served as a source of identity. This phenomenon demonstrates how religion, within patriarchal social practices, can become an instrument of symbolic exclusion that exacerbates women's existential suffering.

Piety as Religious Agency and Symbolic Resistance

Muslim women in Ponorogo responded to these social pressures not with anger, but with symbolic resistance through piety. Piety becomes a form of pious agency, a spiritual force that allows women to negotiate their dignity amidst an oppressive social order. They do not confront the structure head-on, but instead reverse its meaning from within: demonstrating that obedience is not the same as resignation. From Pargament's perspective, this can be considered as a form of religious resilience: the ability to transform suffering into a source of strength for faith. Collective piety here is not merely worship, but a form of moral and social reconstruction that allows women to reassert their religious dignity.

3.2.3. Meaning of Life Post-Divorce and the Reconstruction of Spiritual Identity

After overcoming a period of crisis and social pressure, Muslim women in Ponorogo have now reached a stage of self-reconstruction and a reflective spiritual awakening. This stage demonstrates a profound maturity of faith. These women now view worship not merely as an obligation but as a longing for God. This phenomenon signifies a spiritual shift from ritual obedience to reflective spirituality [10], a spirituality born of existential contemplation.

Within Ricoeur's framework, this transformation is a form of refiguration of meaning, in which the narrative of life is rewritten in the light of a new faith [21]. Thus, post-divorce for Muslim women in Ponorogo is not a phase of emptiness, but a spiritual space for rebirth. They construct new meanings in life rooted in closeness to God and tangible social contributions. According to Ricoeur, their journey is a hermeneutic transformation from suffering to meaning, from wound to wisdom of faith, from loss to spiritual wholeness. Divorce, initially perceived as destruction, becomes a space of existential enlightenment, where women rediscover themselves before God.

4. Conclusion

1. Viewing divorce as a process of spirituality and existential transformation shows that divorce for Muslim women in Ponorogo is not interpreted as the end of life, but rather as a space for spiritual and existential

transformation. The experience of loss, failure, and identity crisis at the beginning of divorce becomes a turning point for women to reorganise their relationship with God, themselves, and their social world. In this process, they rediscover the meaning of life through worship, *dhikr*, and deep inner reflection. Religious values such as patience, *tawakkul*, and *muhasabah* serve as the foundation of a new awareness that fosters self-transcendence, Frankl, and lived transformation van Manen. Women's spirituality does not grow from comfort, but from suffering accepted with a sense of faith. Thus, divorce becomes a moment of spiritual birth, which refers to a process of inner cleansing (*tazkiyatun nafs*) that leads women to maturity of faith and existential wholeness.

2. On the social stigma and religious agency in a religious-patriarchal society, this second finding confirms that social, psychological, and religious stigma are the main challenges faced by women after divorce. In Ponorogo, being labelled as "widow" is often associated with moral failure, social threat, and even as a sign of "family shame". However, these women do not simply submit to these pressures. Through spiritual reflection and social solidarity, they develop a form of religious (pious) agency, namely the ability to use piety as a means of symbolic resistance against patriarchal hegemony. Religious practices such as *majelis taklim* (Islamic study groups) and social and religious activities become safe religious spaces where women find acceptance, strength, and solidarity. In these spaces, they transform grief into prayer, stigma into meaning, and marginalisation into the power of faith. Thus, spirituality is no longer passive, but becomes a mechanism of moral resistance against an oppressive social system.
3. Last, the identity reconstruction and spiritual maturity show that the post-divorce life of Muslim women in Ponorogo is marked by a process of reflective and spiritually mature identity reconstruction. They no longer define self-worth based on marital status, but on closeness to God and social contribution. Some women choose to live independently by teaching the Quran, trading, or being active in religious study groups, while others look to the possibility of building new households with a deeper perspective of faith. As one participant expressed, prayer is no longer merely an obligation, but a "longing to return to God." This statement marks the emergence of reflective spirituality, namely, a religious awareness born from experiences of suffering and self-transformation. This process illustrates hermeneutic refiguration, in which women rewrite their life stories from pain to serenity, from loss to meaning, and from suffering to the wisdom of faith. The newly constructed feminine identity is not based on hierarchical relations with men, but on moral integrity, spiritual maturity, and existential freedom.

Conflict of Interest

The researchers have no conflict of interest to declare.

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