

Adab and Guidelines of Breastfeeding Based on Kitab Adab Perempuan

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ABSTRACT

Breastfeeding has frequently been discussed from both Islamic and health science perspectives. Breast milk has been proven to be the best nourishment for infants, a divine gift from Allah s.w.t. to mothers. Within Malay society, breastfeeding has long been a cultural practice among women, who not only observe it themselves but also encourage their daughters to continue the same tradition. Advice and guidance are typically transmitted orally from mothers to daughters.

This article aims to examine the breastfeeding guidelines and related fiqh rulings as presented by the author of Kitab Adab Perempuan. Data were collected using document analysis based on the text of Kitab Adab Perempuan and subsequently analysed through content analysis. The findings reveal that breastfeeding guidelines have been systematically documented over time to help women refer to and comprehend essential aspects of breastfeeding.

The Kitab Adab Perempuan, authored by Imam Ahmad b. Ya'qub al-Johori, was once used as a syllabus for female students at Malay Religious Schools in Johor and several other states. However, scholarly research and academic discussions on this work remain scarce, signifying the need for more comprehensive studies.

Keywords: Ethics, Guidelines, Breastfeeding, Mother's Milk, Kitab Adab Perempuan

INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding is an essential practice emphasised in Islam. It has long been discussed from both Islamic and health science perspectives, as breast milk has been proven to be the best nourishment granted by Allah s.w.t. to mothers for the benefit of their infants. In Malay society, breastfeeding has been a longstanding tradition practised by women from one generation to the next. Besides practising it themselves, mothers have also encouraged their daughters to continue this noble culture of breastfeeding. Such encouragement, advice, and guidance are often given verbally, passed down informally from mother to daughter.

However, over time, these guidelines on breastfeeding began to be written and arranged systematically to help women refer to them more easily and understand key aspects of breastfeeding more comprehensively.

In 1926, a book containing several chapters on breastfeeding guidance entitled Kitab Adab Perempuan (The Book of Women's Etiquette) was composed. The book was a Malay translation of an Arabic text by Ahmad b. Ya'qub al-Johori — an author renowned for producing several religious works used as textbooks in schools under the Johor Religious Department. Kitab Adab Perempuan was later employed as a syllabus for female students in Malay Religious Schools in Johor and several other states in Malaysia.

The adab (ethics) and guidelines in the book reflect deeply moral values. The wisdom behind these etiquettes and principles deserves to be explored and shared for the benefit of those involved in the practice of breastfeeding. Hence, this study analyses the wisdom and guidelines on breastfeeding presented by the author.

This qualitative study employs document analysis as the primary method of data collection. The data were extracted from the *Kitab Adab Perempuan* and analysed using content analysis techniques. The researchers carefully examined the entire text and selected specific passages related to the themes of adab and breastfeeding guidelines. The study utilised a Romanised transliteration of the original Jawi text to facilitate accurate interpretation and analysis.

Background of Kitab Adab Perempuan

Kitab Adab Perempuan is a Jawi manuscript translated from Arabic into Malay by Haji Ahmad b. Ya'qub al-Johori in 1926. Apart from his writing talent, Haji Ahmad b. Ya'qub al-Johori was also known as a prominent chef who authored two recipe books entitled *Medan Selera* and *Hidangan Terpilih* — collections of recipes he compiled, tested, refined, and personally endorsed for their quality. Following his passing, his wife, the late Hajjah Jamaliah, continued his culinary legacy through the family spice business “al-Johori”, which remains in operation today in Johor Bahru. In 2012, Shakesport Publishing reissued his culinary collection under the title *Nostalgia Medan Selera* (Goodreads, 2022).

The *Kitab Adab Perempuan* was transliterated and republished by Akademi Jawi Malaysia in 2017, with multiple print runs (Ahmad, 2019). The book comprises 31 lessons or chapters, beginning with “Marriage” and ending with “Handicrafts”. The text is not a literal translation of the original Arabic but rather an adaptation contextualised to the culture and lifestyle of the local Malay community. Generally, each issue in the book is discussed concisely yet effectively, using a gentle and advisory tone suited to women’s nature. The religious arguments (dalil) cited are also brief and easy to understand.

For instance, in discussing the mahr (dowry) — one of the rights of a wife — under the chapter *The Obligatory Rights of a Wife Over Her Husband*, the author begins by emphasising that it is obligatory for a husband to pay his wife the dowry decreed by Allah s.w.t. He then cites the Qur’anic verse:

“And give the women their dowries graciously, as an obligation decreed by Allah.” (Surah al-Nisa’, 4)

The author does not mention the specific surah or verse number in the text. This style mirrors the writing conventions found in classical Malay manuscripts authored by scholars such as Tok Pulau Manis and Syeikh Abdul Qadir Bukit Bayas (Zurita, 2017). This was because the general public of that period preferred concise legal explanations without lengthy citation details.

Out of the 31 lessons contained in *Kitab Adab Perempuan*, five chapters specifically address the practice of breastfeeding:

1. Lesson 10: Children’s Food
2. Lesson 11: Guidance for Mothers Who Breastfeed
3. Lesson 12: Rules of Breastfeeding
4. Lesson 13: Conduct When Breastfeeding Children
5. Lesson 14: Rules for Selecting a Wet Nurse

These chapters are written sequentially and interconnected in theme. Collectively, they may be categorised as *The Infant Breastfeeding Section*. Lesson 10 introduces the importance of breast milk as the main source of nutrition for infants, Lesson 11 provides guidance for nursing mothers, Lesson 12 discusses breastfeeding methods, and Lesson 14 elaborates on the selection of wet nurses. The sequential arrangement of these chapters allows readers to follow the subject matter easily and coherently.

Analysis of Breastfeeding Ethics and Guidelines in Kitab Adab Perempuan

Breastfeeding is a practice prescribed by Allah s.w.t., as mentioned in both the Qur’an and the Hadith of the

Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. The benefits of breastfeeding are scientifically proven, not only for infants but also for mothers. From a health perspective, breastfeeding helps the mother regain her physical form after childbirth, assists in uterine contraction, reduces excessive bleeding, and strengthens the emotional bond between mother and child (Zurita et al., 2019).

However, to ensure that breastfeeding is conducted properly and blessed by Allah s.w.t., mothers must observe certain ethical and practical guidelines. In *Kitab Adab Perempuan*, five chapters discuss breastfeeding in detail — Children's Food, Guidance for Nursing Mothers, Rules of Breastfeeding, Conduct During Breastfeeding, and Rules for Choosing a Wet Nurse. From these five chapters, six important guidelines for mothers are identified and elaborated upon below:

1. Understanding the benefits and virtues of breast milk
2. Maintaining the health of the nursing mother
3. Ensuring personal hygiene during breastfeeding
4. Managing an appropriate breastfeeding schedule
5. Observing proper breastfeeding conduct
6. Selecting a suitable wet nurse

Understanding the Benefits and Virtues of Breast Milk

Understanding the importance and virtues of breastfeeding is crucial for all women. Awareness of its benefits encourages mothers to breastfeed wholeheartedly for the well-being of both mother and child. Only those who appreciate the nutritional and spiritual value of breast milk will make every effort to breastfeed exclusively, ensuring the infant receives adequate nourishment.

In *Kitab Adab Perempuan*, the author writes:

“It has been observed as one of Allah’s blessings that a mother’s milk is a natural sustenance which completes the life of her child. During pregnancy, the child lives by feeding on its mother’s blood, and after birth, that blood transforms into milk — how wondrous is Allah’s wisdom!” (Ahmad, 2019)

The author highlights that breast milk is a divine provision essential for the child’s survival — a remarkable manifestation of Allah’s wisdom. Modern science corroborates this understanding. Breast milk contains antibodies that protect infants from infections, reducing cases of diarrhoea and other diseases compared to formula-fed infants (The Asian Parent, n.d.). It also supports optimal brain development due to its rich content of proteins, fats, and other vital nutrients (Consumers Association of Penang, 1990).

Furthermore, breastfeeding benefits mothers by lowering the risk of breast cancer, aiding uterine recovery, and promoting healthy weight reduction after childbirth (Arini, 2013). Thus, scientific evidence affirms the truth of the author’s statement that breast milk is “the perfection of a child’s life.”

Maintaining the Health of the Nursing Mother

A mother’s health — both during confinement (nifas) and beyond — is vital to ensure safe and effective breastfeeding. An infant’s health can be adversely affected if the mother neglects her well-being, as illnesses such as fever or the flu can easily transmit to the child. Even during illness, many paediatricians and lactation experts encourage mothers to continue breastfeeding for the infant’s benefit.

In the context of modern pandemics such as Covid-19, nursing mothers must take additional precautions to prevent infection for both themselves and their babies (Pandemik Covid-19: Cabaran Menyusukan Anak Buat Ibu, 2020).

In *Kitab Adab Perempuan*, the author begins this discussion by stressing the importance of postnatal care:

“A mother should protect herself during the period of nifas from anything that may harm her health. She should remain indoors for at least six weeks after childbirth, avoiding cold exposure, and wear warm clothing during

cool seasons to prevent illness.” (Ahmad, 2019)

This passage recommends three key practices: avoiding harmful activities, staying indoors for at least six weeks, and keeping the body warm. The Malaysian Ministry of Health reports that confinement periods vary by ethnicity: Malay women generally observe 40–44 days, while Chinese and Indian women observe about 30 days (Pemakanan Semasa Berpantang, Ministry of Health Malaysia).

Although certain postnatal customs lack direct religious proof, the advice to rest adequately after childbirth remains medically sound. Medical studies show that women typically require 56–60 days postpartum for complete recovery — a period known as the postpartum stage (Hello Doktor, n.d.). During this phase, new mothers experience significant emotional and physical adjustments.

From an Islamic perspective, mothers and infants are also encouraged to remain indoors temporarily to avoid harm, as mentioned in the Hadith of the Prophet s.a.w.:

“There is no child born except that Satan touches it, whereupon it cries loudly due to Satan’s touch, except Maryam and her son (Isa).” (Muslim)

In addition, the author prescribes a list of recommended foods for breastfeeding mothers, such as bread, porridge, potatoes, milk, eggs, cauliflower, green beans, pumpkins, black radish, and ripe fruits. The best meats are goat, veal, rabbit, chicken, and pigeon.

Conversely, mothers are advised to avoid excessive spices, immature fruits, salted vegetables, duck meat, dried fish, and hard cheese — as these may harm the mother’s or infant’s health. He further warns:

“Avoid consuming medicines without medical advice, for they may alter the nature of the milk and affect the nursing child.” (Ahmad, 2019)

These insights align closely with modern nutritionists’ recommendations, which emphasise iron-, calcium-, and protein-rich foods such as meat, liver, eggs, milk, and soybeans (Rita Rahayu, 2012).

Ensuring Personal Hygiene During Breastfeeding

A nursing mother must maintain personal hygiene to prevent infection and ensure her baby’s health. The author stresses the importance of breast cleanliness to prevent blocked milk ducts:

“If the infant refuses to nurse because the nipple is blocked or hardened, the mother should gently cleanse the nipple with warm water and a clean cloth until the obstruction is removed.” (Ahmad, 2019)

Beyond breast hygiene, mothers must ensure overall cleanliness of their bodies, clothing, and sleeping spaces. Health guidelines from the University of Malaya Medical Centre recommend daily baths, wearing clean clothes, and frequent handwashing — especially before handling the infant. Maintaining hygiene promotes comfort for both mother and child and prevents bacterial infections.

Managing an Appropriate Breastfeeding Schedule

Breastfeeding can be exhausting because it demands much of a mother’s time and energy. Disrupted sleep and irregular meals may lead to fatigue and decreased milk quality. To maintain both physical well-being and milk consistency, the author encourages mothers to establish a balanced breastfeeding schedule.

He writes:

“Many women nurse their infants throughout the day and night, especially whenever the child cries. This, however, is a mistake that harms both the mother’s health and the child’s well-being, for neither gains adequate rest. Fatigue weakens the mother’s milk and negatively affects the child.” (Ahmad, 2019)

The Kitab Adab Perempuan further recommends breastfeeding the child seven or eight times daily, ideally every three hours. Modern paediatric advice concurs: newborns generally require feeding every two to three hours (Kent et al., 2012). A structured schedule benefits both mother and child by ensuring rest and sustaining milk quality.

Observing Proper Breastfeeding Conduct

A mother must remain attentive during breastfeeding to ensure the safety and comfort of her baby. Negligence during feeding could result in suffocation or choking. The author writes:

“Place the child on the lap and support it with the arm. Ensure the nose is not covered so that it can breathe easily. Do not leave the nipple in the baby’s mouth once it falls asleep, for the remaining milk may curdle and cause harm.” (Ahmad, 2019)

This passage underlines the importance of proper positioning and attentiveness during nursing to avoid accidents and maintain hygiene.

Selecting a Suitable Wet Nurse

When a mother cannot breastfeed, Islam allows hiring a wet nurse, with the father responsible for payment. Allah s.w.t. says:

“And if they are pregnant, then provide for them until they give birth. Then, if they breastfeed your children for you, give them their due payment, and consult together in kindness. But if you face difficulties, then another woman may breastfeed for him.” (al-Talaq: 6)

Historically, wet nursing was common among Arabs; even the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. was breastfed by Halimatussa’diah. The author of Kitab Adab Perempuan emphasises that a wet nurse’s health, morality, and personal character greatly influence the child’s development. He identifies several criteria:

1. **Age:** Preferably between 20 and 30 years old, ideally similar to the infant’s biological mother.
2. **Experience:** The wet nurse should be currently lactating or recently nursed her own child of similar age to the infant to avoid digestive discomfort.
3. **Physical health:** The wet nurse should be neither too thin nor excessively obese, as both conditions may impair milk quality or reflect undesirable traits such as laziness.

These guidelines demonstrate the author’s profound awareness of health, psychology, and moral values — written nearly a century ago, yet still relevant today. His advice reflects the deep Malay concern for the child’s spiritual, moral, and physical well-being.

Legal Rulings on Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is a command and an encouragement prescribed in the Qur’an. This is evident in Allah’s words:

“Mothers shall breastfeed their children for two complete years, for those who wish to complete the nursing period. The father must provide for them and clothe them in a reasonable manner. No person shall be burdened beyond their capacity. Neither mother nor father shall suffer because of their child. If both decide, by mutual consent and consultation, to wean the child, there is no sin upon them. And if you wish to have your children breastfed by another woman, there is no blame upon you, provided you pay her fairly. And fear Allah and know that Allah sees all that you do.” (al-Baqarah: 233)

This verse outlines several important principles regarding breastfeeding. It prescribes that mothers should ideally breastfeed their children for two complete years, though weaning earlier is permissible if both parents mutually agree. It also affirms the father’s duty to provide financial support and permits the hiring of a wet nurse, who must be paid fairly (Muhammad Rashid Rida, 2005).

In *Kitab Adab Perempuan*, the author includes a subchapter entitled **“The Obligation of a Mother to Breastfeed Her Child.”** At first glance, this statement may appear to contradict the Shafi‘i school’s position, which holds that breastfeeding is not legally obligatory but rather encouraged.

According to Shafi‘i jurisprudence, a mother cannot be compelled to breastfeed her child if she refuses to do so, unless in exceptional circumstances (al-Khin et al., 1992). Imam Zakariyya al-Ansari states that it is obligatory for a mother to provide *al-laba’* (colostrum) — the first milk — only when it is medically essential for the child’s survival.

Although the general ruling is that breastfeeding is not obligatory, it becomes *wajib* (compulsory) in situations of necessity, such as:

1. When the infant cannot tolerate any milk other than the mother’s due to illness or allergies.
2. When there is no other woman available to breastfeed the child, and formula milk cannot be obtained due to poverty or other constraints.
3. When the father cannot afford to hire a wet nurse.

In the subchapter “The Obligation of a Mother to Breastfeed Her Child,” the author explains the importance of breastfeeding and warns of the consequences of neglecting it:

“If a mother refuses to breastfeed her child, she will suffer humiliation and hardship from having to hire a wet nurse. She will also experience illnesses and fever due to neglecting her milk. Some women avoid breastfeeding out of vanity, wishing to preserve their beauty — but this is ignorance and a grave sin.” (Ahmad, 2019)

This statement clarifies that the author’s use of the term “obligation” (*wajib*) is not to be understood as a strict legal requirement (*taklifi hukum*), but rather as a moral exhortation emphasising the importance and virtue of breastfeeding. It reflects the author’s concern for maternal duty and his desire to encourage mothers to uphold the best practice for their children.

The author’s approach harmonises religious reasoning with health awareness — highlighting the physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits of breastfeeding as a divinely ordained act of compassion and care.

CONCLUSION

Kitab Adab Perempuan contains moral guidance and ethical teachings relevant to women’s daily lives, particularly mothers. The book demonstrates that the Malay community had long recognised the religious and health significance of breastfeeding as early as the early 1900s. The author’s discussions reveal a deep understanding of maternal responsibility, spiritual awareness, and child welfare.

Most of the guidelines presented in the book align closely with modern medical and nutritional findings. The *Kitab* presents breastfeeding not only as a biological act but as an expression of moral virtue and obedience to divine instruction. The author’s statement that breastfeeding is *wajib* (obligatory) should not be interpreted as a strict legal requirement but rather as an emphatic encouragement (*sunnah mu’akkadah*) — highlighting the importance and benefits of breastfeeding for both mother and child.

Furthermore, breastfeeding serves as a means of strengthening the emotional bond between mother and child while protecting infants from diseases and promoting holistic development. The ethical and practical advice in *Kitab Adab Perempuan* remains relevant today, providing valuable insight for Muslim mothers, scholars, and health practitioners who seek to integrate Islamic principles with maternal and child health practices.

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