Reframing Quranic Exegesis through the Lens of Gender: A Critical Study of Contemporary Feminist Interpretations

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Abstract

This article explores emerging feminist approaches in the field of Quranic exegesis (tafsir), with a focus on how gender-conscious readings reinterpret classical Islamic thought. Drawing upon the doctoral research titled "A New Trend to Quranic Understanding in the Light of Gender Studies", this study critically examines the works of three influential female Muslim scholars: Dr. Amina Wadud, Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar, and Fatima Mernissi. Each scholar brings a distinctive methodological and ideological perspective to their readings of key Quranic verses that pertain to issues of gender, authority, testimony, inheritance, polygamy, and veiling. This research traces how their interpretations challenge dominant patriarchal readings within Islamic tradition, suggesting a hermeneutical shift that reclaims the Quran's egalitarian ethos. Through a comparative and analytical method, this study underscores the tension between classical tafsir frameworks and evolving gender discourses. It concludes by reflecting on the implications of feminist tafsir for contemporary Muslim societies, the authority of interpretative traditions, and the broader discourse on Islamic reform.

Keywords: Tafsir (Quranic Exegesis), Gender Studies in Islam, Islamic Feminism, Contemporary Quranic Interpretation, Amina Wadud / Laleh Bakhtiar / Fatima Mernissi Inequality

Introduction

Islamic intellectual tradition has placed a strong emphasis on the study of tafsir, or Qur'anic exegesis, since the early Muslim generations. It is the culmination of academics' efforts to comprehend, interpret, and place the divine counsel found in the Qur'an in various linguistic, cultural, and temporal settings. In Islamic theology and jurisprudence, classic tafsir works including those by al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭubī, and al-Rāzī remain fundamental sources. However, the worldview, presumptions, and social standards of the male professors who created these interpretations in patriarchal countries are unavoidably reflected in them. Therefore, even though the Qur'an affirms the moral and spiritual equality of men and women (Q 33:35), gender-related verses are frequently interpreted in ways that support male authority and female subjugation in classical exegesis.

These traditional interpretations have started to be questioned and reevaluated by contemporary research, especially in the last few decades. Scholars that stress both textual faithfulness and sensitivity to modern ethical demands are at the forefront of this critical reevaluation, which emerges from within the Muslim intellectual framework. Muslim women are among the most important of these scholars because they approach the Qur'an not just as believers but also as interpreters who can provide new perspectives based on their personal experiences. They contend that the ethical and egalitarian values of the Qur'an have been veiled by centuries of male-centered exegesis, rather than viewing the book as intrinsically patriarchal.

Dr. Amina Wadud, Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar, and Fatima Mernissi are three trailblazing pioneers in this genre whose achievements are examined in this article. These academics each provide a unique analytical framework for analysing the Qur'an from a gender-conscious perspective. For example, Dr. Amina Wadud promotes a tafsir methodology that takes socio-ethical, linguistic, and contextual factors into account and highlights the Qur'an's theme and structural coherence (naẓm). "A comprehensive model for Qur'anic interpretation must necessarily integrate the perspective of women as

subjects of the text, not merely as objects," according to Wadud's seminal work Qur'an and Woman (Wadud 1999, 2). For her, this means re-reading verses traditionally understood as legitimizing male dominance (e.g., Q 4:34) through an interpretive lens that centers on divine justice, reciprocity, and moral agency.

Likewise, Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar, in her English translation The Sublime Quran (2007), undertakes a linguistic revision of key terms that have historically underpinned patriarchal interpretations. She famously translates the word "wa-ḍribūhunna" in Q 4:34 not as "beat them" but as "go away from them," citing grammatical and semantic possibilities within Arabic, and aligning her translation with the Prophetic ethic of nonviolence and compassion. Her approach, while controversial among traditional scholars, exemplifies a hermeneutical shift aimed at restoring the ethical core of the Qur'an, rather than perpetuating readings that reinforce male authority.

Fatima Mernissi, although primarily a sociologist and historian, brings another dimension to this discourse. Her work situates Qur'anic interpretation within the broader politics of Hadith and male elite control of religious discourse. In The Veil and the Male Elite, she critiques the manipulation of religious texts to exclude women from public and leadership roles. She states, "Whenever women have tried to assert their rights through religion, they have come up against a monopoly of men on interpretation" (Mernissi 1991, 12). For Mernissi, this monopoly has functioned not merely as a theological position but as a political mechanism to sustain male hegemony.

These gender-sensitive interpretations do not arise in a vacuum. They respond to broader transformations in Muslim societies—rising literacy, the emergence of women's scholarship, global discourses on human rights, and the pressing need for reform in Islamic legal thought. Their work reflects what may be termed a hermeneutical turn in contemporary Islamic thought: an effort to re-engage the Qur'an not only as a sacred text, but as a living guide whose meanings unfold through ethical reflection, intellectual rigor, and historical awareness.

The reinterpretation of gender-related Qur'anic verses by scholars like Wadud, Bakhtiar, and Mernissi poses significant questions for both traditional scholarship and contemporary Muslim societies. These questions center on authority, legitimacy, and methodology: Who has the right to interpret the Qur'an? On what basis can earlier interpretations be revised or critiqued? What constitutes a faithful yet progressive engagement with scripture? As Amina Wadud argues, "To limit the interpretation of the Qur'an to an exclusive, male perspective is to restrict the universality of the Qur'an's guidance" (Wadud 1999, 5). Her statement underlines the central premise of feminist tafsir: that inclusivity of perspective is not merely a social or political demand, but a theological imperative rooted in the Qur'an's claim to be a guidance for all people (Q 2:2; Q 14:1).

This study investigates how feminist hermeneutics challenge established exegetical paradigms and invite a reconsideration of interpretive norms. By critically analyzing key verses—such as Qur'an 4:1 (on human creation), 4:34 (on male authority), 2:282 (on women's testimony), 33:59 (on veiling), and others relating to inheritance and polygamy—this article illustrates how interpretations have been shaped not just by textual content, but also by socio-historical contexts and the assumptions of their interpreters. Importantly, these scholars do not call for a rejection of tradition wholesale. Rather, they advocate for a contextual and ethical reading of the Qur'an, one that aligns with the overarching Qur'anic values of justice (ʿadl), mercy (raḥma), and mutual consultation (shūrā). For instance, in discussing polygamy (Q 4:3), Wadud asserts that the Qur'an permits polygyny under specific ethical conditions, primarily justice between wives, which, she contends, is practically impossible to fulfill. Thus, the verse, when read contextually, discourages rather than promotes polygyny (Wadud 1999, 76).

Similarly, Laleh Bakhtiar emphasizes the need to return to the maqāṣid al-sharīʿa—the higher objectives of Islamic law—as interpretive tools. She argues that linguistic flexibility and a deeper appreciation of Qur'anic style and idiom allow for non-patriarchal interpretations that remain faithful to the core message of Islam. In her view, "Translation is interpretation, and interpretation must reflect the ethics of the text" (Bakhtiar 2007, xvii).

Fatima Mernissi expands this argument by exposing how certain Hadiths and Qur'anic interpretations were historically manipulated to justify the exclusion of women from public space and leadership. In Women and Islam, she demonstrates how a critical historical method can help deconstruct authoritative texts and restore women's agency within Islamic frameworks. "What is at stake," she writes, "is the monopoly of men over political and religious power and their resistance to sharing it with women" (Mernissi 1991, 19).

The present article builds upon these contributions by systematically examining their interpretive strategies, hermeneutical tools, and theological claims. It also engages with critiques posed by traditional scholars who argue that these feminist approaches either misread linguistic norms or undermine consensus (ijmāʿ) on legal matters. In doing so, this study situates feminist tafsir within the broader discourse of ijtihād (independent reasoning), reform, and the revival

of critical scholarship in Islam. Furthermore, this article reflects on how these gendered interpretations resonate in Muslim societies, particularly in regions where legal and cultural norms continue to reinforce gender inequality. By highlighting the interplay between scriptural interpretation and social reform, the article underscores the potential of feminist tafsir to serve as a catalyst for ethical renewal within Islamic thought. As Wadud succinctly states, "Interpretation must be measured by its capacity to realize justice—not merely to preserve tradition" (Wadud 2006, 219).

This study situates itself at the intersection of classical Islamic sciences and contemporary gender theory. It neither dismisses tradition nor romanticizes modernity. Instead, it affirms that the Qur'an remains a living text, whose meanings continue to unfold through sincere, critical, and contextually informed engagement. The goal is not to impose a new orthodoxy, but to open interpretive space where women's voices, experiences, and scholarship are fully integrated into the intellectual and spiritual life of Islam.

Literature Review

The Islamic scholarly tradition has a rich and extensive body of literature on tafsir. The mainstream exegetical discourse in Sunni Islam has been influenced by classical comments such Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Tafsīr al-Kashshāf by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273), and Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373). These texts are highly regarded for their careful examination of Arabic grammar, theology (ʿaqīdah), jurisprudence (fiqh), and the Prophet and his companions' narrations (riwāyāt). Although these interpretations are rich in content, they were developed in civilisations that were very patriarchal, and their discussions of women frequently reflect androcentric presumptions about legal competence, power, and gender roles.

For example, Qur'an 4:34, also known as the passage on male guardianship, is typically interpreted to give men a supervisory role over women because of their alleged superior strength and financial responsibilities. Because "men are the leaders, governors, and commanders," according to Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, "men are the maintainers of women" (Ibn Kathīr 2000, 1:463). These opinions gained traction in the legal and social domains, impacting Muslim family rules over ages and geographical areas. On the other hand, there have been notable changes in modern and current tafsir literature, particularly with the emergence of reformist and critical voices. Thinkers like Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Rashid Rida (d. 1935), and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) emphasized the necessity of contextual readings that align Qur'anic values with ethical objectives and the demands of modern society. Fazlur Rahman, in particular, argued for a "double movement theory" in interpreting the Qur'an—first understanding the historical context of revelation, and then extrapolating universal principles for application in the present (Rahman 1982, 5–7).

In the realm of gender studies and Islamic thought, Amina Wadud's Qur'an and Woman (1999) stands as a foundational text. She critiques the traditional male monopoly over tafsir and proposes a framework where women are active interpreters of the Qur'anic text. Drawing from Qur'anic coherence (naẓm), thematic analysis, and a focus on gender-inclusive language, Wadud identifies egalitarian patterns within the text. For example, her analysis of verse 4:1 (on the creation of humanity) disputes hierarchical interpretations that place men above women, arguing that the verse presents both as originating from a single nafs (soul), thus establishing ontological equality (Wadud 1999, 10–12).

Laleh Bakhtiar's The Sublime Quran (2007) contributes a unique dimension by being the first full English translation of the Qur'an by an American Muslim woman. Her reinterpretation of the word wa-ḍribūhunna in 4:34 from "beat them" to "go away from them" sparked intense debate. She bases her reading on the semantic range of the triliteral root ḍ-r-b and the ethical imperative to align translation with the overall message of mercy and justice in Islam (Bakhtiar 2007, xv–xvii). While conservative scholars have criticized her translation as a deviation from established meanings, her work exemplifies a hermeneutical shift toward a more compassionate, context-sensitive exegesis.

Fatima Mernissi's contribution to gender-focused Qur'anic interpretation takes a different route from Wadud and Bakhtiar. Trained as a sociologist, Mernissi contextualizes the exclusion of women from public and religious life within broader socio-political structures of power. In The Veil and the Male Elite (1991), she challenges both Hadith authenticity and the patriarchal readings of Qur'anic verses that are often used to justify male superiority. By examining the historical development of tafsir alongside the political interests of ruling male elites, Mernissi demonstrates how interpretation has been used as a tool of gendered control. She writes, "A historical analysis shows that the political and social restrictions imposed on women were legitimized by a particular reading of the sacred texts, not by the texts themselves" (Mernissi 1991, 21). Her emphasis on historicity and power relations complements the more theological and linguistic approaches of Wadud and Bakhtiar.

In addition to these three scholars, others have also contributed to the feminist tafsir discourse. Riffat Hassan, for example, argues that the Qur'an's humanistic and egalitarian principles have been overshadowed by male-authored interpretations rooted in non-Qur'anic sources such as fabricated Hadith and biased legal reasoning. In her various essays, Hassan critiques the traditional notion that women are theologically or intellectually inferior, using verses like Qur'an 49:13 ("Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you") as a proof of Qur'anic gender neutrality in matters of dignity and piety (Hassan 1987).

Moreover, scholars like Asma Barlas emphasize the Qur'an's resistance to patriarchy when read outside the framework of patriarchal tafsir. In "Believing Women" in Islam (2002), Barlas argues that the Qur'an does not speak in patriarchal voice, but has been interpreted in patriarchal ways. She draws attention to the Qur'an's rhetorical structure, its emphasis on moral agency, and its consistent appeal to taqwā (God-consciousness) as the basis of human excellence. Barlas writes: "What is patriarchal are not the teachings of the Qur'an, but the framework within which it has been interpreted" (Barlas 2002, 12). Her work builds on a post-structuralist understanding of interpretation, where the authority of meaning is not fixed but negotiated through discursive and historical contexts.

While feminist interpretations of the Qur'an are growing, academic engagement with these interpretations remains relatively recent. As Abdul Samad Tahir's original PhD thesis argues, very few scholarly efforts in South Asian Islamic studies have taken up a critical review of Wadud, Bakhtiar, and Mernissi's interpretive methods. Much of the discourse in Pakistan, for example, continues to rely on classical tafsir without critically engaging with gender perspectives. Notable exceptions include Hafiza Aysha Madni's dissertation on the reinterpretation of women's rights in the 20th century, and Mastori R.H. Almuthairi's work on wives' rights in Islamic fiqh, but these remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Furthermore, critiques of feminist tafsir have come from conservative scholars who argue that such readings rely too heavily on secular feminist paradigms and neglect traditional interpretive tools such as qawā'id al-tafsīr (rules of exegesis), ijmā' (consensus), and qiyās (analogical reasoning). Others, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, caution against individualist or subjective tafsir that could undermine textual authority and communal consensus (Qaradawi 1999). Nonetheless, proponents of feminist tafsir maintain that interpretation must evolve to uphold the Qur'an's ethical vision in a changing world.

The literature reviewed shows a critical gap between traditional tafsir and emerging feminist interpretations. This study seeks to bridge that gap by providing a systematic, critical, and comparative evaluation of how key gender-related Qur'anic verses are interpreted across these intellectual paradigms. It highlights how feminist scholars aim not to undermine the Qur'anic text, but to reassert its original ethical and egalitarian spirit in contemporary terms.

Methodology

The methodological framework employed in this research article is both **interpretive** and **comparative**, combining the tools of traditional Islamic scholarship with the insights of contemporary gender theory. The study is rooted in the hermeneutical tradition of **tafsīr bi-l-ra'y**, or reasoned interpretation, which permits the application of critical reasoning and contextual analysis alongside the foundational sources of Islam—the Qur'an and Sunnah.

1. Primary Sources
The primary source of this study is the **Qur'anic text** itself, with particular focus on verses commonly cited in discussions on gender roles and women's rights. These include:

Qur'an 4:1 (creation of man and woman),
Qur'an 4:34 (male guardianship),
Qur'an 2:282 (women's testimony),
Qur'an 33:59 (hijab),
Qur'an 4:3 (polygamy), and others related to inheritance, leadership, and marital ethics.

Each verse is examined in light of both **classical tafsir** (e.g., al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī) and **contemporary interpretations**, especially those offered by feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud, Laleh Bakhtiar, and Fatima Mernissi.

Hadith collections (particularly *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*) are consulted for Prophetic context and commentary, in line with the principle of *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-ḥadīth*.

2. Secondary Sources and Scholarly Commentary
The study also engages with a range of secondary literature, including:
- Classical and modern tafsir scholarship,

- Feminist theological writings,
- Academic theses on Islamic gender studies,
- Linguistic analyses of key Arabic terms,
- Juridical opinions (*fiqh*) on issues such as testimony, inheritance, and leadership.

These texts are evaluated for both their **textual fidelity** and their **interpretive frameworks**, identifying shifts in meaning, emphasis, or theological rationale when examined through a gendered lens.

3. Hermeneutical Approach

This study applies a **hermeneutical approach** grounded in the following key principles:

- **Textual Coherence (Naẓm al-Qur'ān):** Recognizing the thematic and structural unity of the Qur'anic text. As argued by scholars like Fazlur Rahman (1982), verses cannot be interpreted in isolation but must be read within the broader moral and theological objectives of the Qur'an.
- **Contextualization (Asbāb al-Nuzūl and Historical Background):** Attention is given to the circumstances of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl) to distinguish between universal principles and context-specific directives. This allows for a nuanced understanding of verses like Q 4:34, which has often been read outside its historical and ethical context.
- **Linguistic Analysis (Taḥlīl Lughawī):** Particular attention is paid to the semantic range of key Arabic terms. For instance, the term *wa-ḍribūhunna* in Q 4:34 has traditionally been rendered as "beat them," but contemporary linguistic analysis reveals alternative meanings such as "leave them" or "go away from them" (Bakhtiar 2007, xv).
- **Ethical Paradigm (Maqāṣid al-Sharī'a):** The interpretation is evaluated against the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid*), such as justice (*'adl*), compassion (*raḥma*), and human dignity (*karāma insāniyya*). As Amina Wadud (2006) insists, any interpretation that contradicts these principles must be reassessed for its fidelity to the Qur'an's moral vision.

4. Comparative Analysis

A central component of this methodology is **comparative analysis**—systematically contrasting the interpretations of key verses by classical scholars and contemporary feminist exegetes. This involves evaluating:

- The interpretive strategies employed (textual vs. contextual, literal vs. ethical),
- The theological implications of each reading (e.g., hierarchical vs. egalitarian views of gender),
- The societal impact of such interpretations on Muslim women's legal and social rights.

By positioning the feminist tafsir literature alongside traditional exegesis, this study does not aim to dismiss classical authorities, but to **critically engage with their legacy** in light of evolving ethical and epistemological standards.

5. Research Tools and Data Collection

The data for this article is drawn from:

- Primary Arabic and English texts,
- Digitized classical tafsir collections,
- Peer-reviewed academic journals and dissertations,
- Comparative translations of the Qur'an,
- Critical feminist essays and public lectures.

This mixed-method approach allows for a **holistic view** of the discourse and grounds the analysis in both textual rigor and socio-intellectual relevance.

Discussion and Analysis

Human Creation and Ontological Equality (Qur'an 4:1)
The theme of human creation is foundational in establishing a Qur'anic anthropology of gender. Qur'an 4:1 states:

"O mankind! Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul (nafs wāḥidah), and from it created its mate (zawjahā), and from them both spread many men and women…" (Q 4:1)

Traditional exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr understood this verse to imply the creation of Ḥawwāʾ (Eve) from Ādam's rib, often citing Hadith literature to support this interpretation. For example, Ibn Kathīr writes, "Allah created Hawa from the shortest left rib of Adam while he was asleep" (Ibn Kathīr 2000, 1:459). This understanding implicitly reinforces male priority and female derivation—an ontological asymmetry echoed in pre-modern gender hierarchies.

By contrast, Amina Wadud challenges this hierarchy. In Qur'an and Woman, she closely analyzes the linguistic structure of the verse. She emphasizes that the Arabic term nafs (soul or self) is grammatically feminine, yet does not refer to womanhood per se. Wadud argues:

"There is no indication that the 'nafs' refers specifically to a male, nor that the 'zawj' was extracted from the rib of that male. The idea that woman is created from man is not substantiated by the Qur'an itself" (Wadud 1999, 10).

Her reading views both man and woman as emerging from a shared origin, thereby affirming full ontological equality. This interpretation undermines the hierarchical anthropology implicit in earlier tafsīr and supports the Qur'an's repeated emphasis on mutual dignity and reciprocity (cf. Q 30:21, Q 49:13).

Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar aligns with this reading in her translation The Sublime Quran, rendering the relevant portion of 4:1 with the phrase "from a single soul and created from it its pair," carefully avoiding the patriarchal overtones of "male-first" language (Bakhtiar 2007, 77). She does not impose a gendered origin story but preserves the grammatical neutrality of the text.

Fatima Mernissi, though not primarily focused on the creation narrative, critiques the ways in which male-dominant hadith and tafsir traditions have constructed myths of male superiority, often importing extraneous Judeo-Christian and Persian ideas into Islamic discourse. She identifies the Eve-from-rib story as one such example, noting how it serves to legitimize gender subordination in both theology and law (Mernissi 1991, 34–36).

In sum, feminist scholars reinterpret Q 4:1 as a verse of ontological parity, rejecting the rib narrative and affirming the Qur'an's foundational language of unity, mutuality, and human equality. This reading disrupts traditional exegetical patterns that have long situated women as derivative beings—biologically, morally, and legally.

Male Authority, Marital Ethics, and Qur'an 4:34

Qur'an 4:34 is often cited as a primary scriptural basis for male authority within the Muslim family. The verse begins:
"Men are the protectors and maintainers (qawwāmūn) of women because Allah has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means…" (Q 4:34)
Classical exegetes, including al-Qurṭubī and al-Rāzī, interpret *qawwāmūn* as evidence of **male superiority and leadership**, reinforced by their financial obligation (*nafaqah*) and perceived rational strength. Al-Qurṭubī states, "The man is the guardian over the woman by virtue of his rational strength and responsibility for providing maintenance" (Qurṭubī 1967, 5:168). The verse's second half, which outlines measures against *nushūz* (rebellion) by wives—admonishing, separating from the bed, and finally *wa-ḍribūhunna* (commonly translated as "beat them")—has historically been interpreted as granting men disciplinary authority over women.
Amina Wadud radically reevaluates this interpretation. She argues that *qawwāmūn* does not imply absolute male guardianship but contextually limited responsibility based on financial support. She writes:
"The Qur'an's reference to men as *qawwāmūn* over women does not establish male superiority but expresses a functional duty linked to socio-economic context" (Wadud 1999, 72).
She further critiques the standard translation of *wa-ḍribūhunna* as "beat them," contending that such a reading contradicts the overarching Qur'anic values of mercy (*raḥma*) and mutual kindness (*mawadda*), especially in marital relations (Q 30:21). Wadud's exegesis reorients the verse from a disciplinary mandate to a **relational ethic** of justice and care.
Laleh Bakhtiar goes further in her controversial translation of *wa-ḍribūhunna*. She chooses "go away from them" rather than "beat them," arguing from Arabic lexicons that *ḍaraba* has over twenty meanings, including "to set forth," "to travel," or "to separate" (Bakhtiar 2007, 78). Her linguistic choice aligns the verse with the Prophet Muhammad's own behavior, who is recorded to have never struck a woman. She writes:
"The Prophet interpreted the Qur'an by his own actions. He never hit a woman, so a translation that licenses such behavior is morally and historically flawed" (Bakhtiar 2007, xvii).
Fatima Mernissi, in *Women and Islam*, critiques how Q 4:34 has been historically weaponized to reinforce male domination and justify domestic violence. She identifies the *daraba* clause as an example of textual ambiguity that has been resolved by generations of scholars in favor of patriarchy. She notes:

"When the sacred text was ambiguous, interpreters made it conform to their social norms—ones that often excluded or subordinated women" (Mernissi 1991, 38).

In contrast to traditional exegesis, which often sees Q 4:34 as justification for hierarchical gender roles, feminist exegetes reclaim the verse as a site for **ethical reinterpretation**. They expose how socio-political power has shaped classical readings and argue for new interpretations that reflect Qur'anic values of equity, compassion, and nonviolence.

Testimony, Inheritance, and Legal Personhood

The themes of testimony and inheritance are pivotal in Islamic legal discourse on gender. They are often perceived as areas where the Qur'an assigns women a position of legal inferiority. Two verses are central here:

Qur'an 2:282: "…and bring to witness two witnesses from among your men. And if two men are not available, then a man and two women…"

Qur'an 4:11: "Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females…"

Classical jurists interpreted these verses as codifying a woman's legal status as half that of a man in terms of witnessing contracts and inheriting property. For instance, al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī viewed the 2:1 inheritance ratio as divine prescription, rooted in men's greater financial responsibility. Al-Qurṭubī argues, "This division is based on wisdom, as men bear the burden of maintenance" (Qurṭubī 1967, 5:199). Similarly, women's testimony being equal to half was traditionally justified by appeals to emotionality or forgetfulness.

However, Amina Wadud critiques these interpretations as reductionist and context-blind. Regarding testimony in Q 2:282, she notes the verse deals specifically with financial contracts in a 7th-century Arabian context. Wadud explains:

"This does not establish an absolute legal principle about women's testimony in all areas… The second woman is there not because she is mentally deficient, but to provide mutual support" (Wadud 1999, 65–66).

She highlights that in other legal matters—like liʿān (mutual cursing in accusations of adultery)—a woman's testimony is equal to a man's (Q 24:6–9). Thus, testimony should be understood situationally, not as an immutable rule about gender capacity. Fatima Mernissi, analyzing Q 4:11, critiques the classical rationale that justifies unequal inheritance through male financial obligation. She questions whether such economic assumptions still hold in modern contexts where women may serve as primary breadwinners. She writes:

"The Qur'an assigns shares based on responsibility, not gender. To treat women's inheritance as permanently inferior, despite changing realities, is to fossilize the text" (Mernissi 1991, 67).

She also examines the word "al-sufahāʾ" (foolish or immature people, Q 4:5) and how it was used in classical commentaries to limit women's control over their wealth. Mernissi argues that this interpretation is gender-biased and has no solid textual justification. Laleh Bakhtiar, in her translation, maintains the classical rendering but uses footnotes to explain the historical context and ethical rationale, calling for a reinterpretation that matches the maqāṣid (higher objectives) of justice and equity (Bakhtiar 2007, 102–3). Together, these feminist interpretations suggest that legal personhood in Islam is dynamic, not static. They call for a maqāṣid-based approach to legal verses, where gendered rulings are evaluated against ethical goals like justice, equity, and social welfare—core Qur'anic values.

Female Leadership and the Veil

Two other critical areas in the discourse on gender and tafsir are female leadership and the regulation of women's public visibility, commonly associated with the concept of hijab or veiling. Both issues have sparked significant debate within Islamic scholarship and practice, especially as they relate to women's roles in political, religious, and social domains. The question of female leadership has been contested based on specific hadith and traditional interpretations of Qur'anic verses. For instance, classical jurists often cite a hadith reported in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: "No people will ever prosper who appoint a woman in charge of their affairs" (Bukhārī, 4425). This report has been used to argue against women serving as judges, imams, or political leaders. Yet the Qur'an itself offers the example of Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba (Q 27:22–44), as a ruler who demonstrates wisdom, consultation, and submission to divine truth—without condemnation.

Amina Wadud interprets the story of Bilqīs as evidence of the Qur'an's openness to female leadership. She argues:

"The Qur'an did not criticize her leadership because she was a woman. In fact, it highlights her use of consultation (shūrā) and rational diplomacy" (Wadud 1999, 79).

She critiques the misuse of isolated hadiths to create legal absolutes that contradict Qur'anic narratives and ethical standards. Wadud advocates for inclusive models of leadership grounded in competence and piety, rather than gender. Fatima Mernissi goes further by historicizing the hadith used to bar female leadership. In The Veil and the Male Elite, she reveals that the hadith in question was narrated by Abu Bakrah, a politically compromised figure during the civil war against ʿĀʾishah. Mernissi writes:

"It is alarming that the most misogynistic traditions were accepted from politically unreliable narrators… revealing a political agenda behind theological discourse" (Mernissi 1991, 51–53).

By interrogating the chain of transmission (isnād) and the political context of the hadith, Mernissi dismantles the presumed theological consensus against women's leadership.

The topic of hijab or veiling, especially as expressed in Qur'an 33:59 and 24:31, has also received critical reassessment. Classical tafsir typically views these verses as commands for modesty and gender segregation. Ibn Kathīr, for instance, interprets the verse as a means of protecting women from male harassment (Ibn Kathīr 2000, 3:485), with emphasis on veiling as a social duty. Laleh Bakhtiar and Wadud reframe these verses not as universal dress codes but as contextual solutions to specific social conditions in Medina. Wadud asserts:

"The Qur'an commands modesty of both men and women. The directive to cover is not about restricting women's movement, but about mutual ethical conduct" (Wadud 1999, 44).

Bakhtiar adds that ḥijāb, as used in the Qur'an, originally refers to a barrier or screen, not a headscarf (Bakhtiar 2007, 216). These scholars argue that hijab is an evolving social symbol, and its meaning cannot be fixed through medieval interpretations alone.

In sum, feminist scholars reinterpret female leadership and hijab through textual, historical, and ethical lenses, dismantling assumptions that reduce women's agency to private spaces or marginal roles. Their readings foreground the Qur'an's deeper commitments to dignity, justice, and shared public responsibility.

Conclusion

Ontological equality, marital ethics, legal testimony, inheritance, leadership, and modesty are some of the major thematic problems that have been thoroughly analysed in this work in order to critically investigate the rise of gender-sensitive approaches to Qur'anic discourse. It has accomplished this by contrasting the contributions of modern feminist academics like Amina Wadud, Laleh Bakhtiar, and Fatima Mernissi with classical interpretations, which were mostly created within patriarchal frameworks. By re-engaging the Qur'an with the daily realities, spiritual ambitions, and moral consciousness of Muslim women today, their interpretive work constitutes a paradigm change in Islamic philosophy.

The findings of this study affirm that while the Qur'anic text itself remains theologically authoritative and morally consistent, the interpretative traditions built around it are historically contingent and ideologically diverse. The classical exegetes, despite their scholarly depth, operated within societies that often normalized hierarchical gender structures. Consequently, verses such as Q 4:34 (male authority), Q 2:282 (testimony), and Q 4:11 (inheritance) were interpreted in ways that reinforced male dominance and reduced women's agency.

In contrast, feminist exegetes have adopted a hermeneutics of equality, challenging inherited interpretations not by rejecting the Qur'an, but by reading it more closely—textually, linguistically, ethically, and contextually. Amina Wadud, for example, argues for a methodology that prioritizes Qur'anic coherence, moral objectives (maqāṣid), and gender inclusivity. Her re-reading of Q 4:1 undermines the notion of female derivation and affirms ontological parity. Laleh Bakhtiar's translation work highlights the semantic range of key Arabic terms and seeks to recover non-violent meanings in verses traditionally used to justify domestic discipline. Fatima Mernissi exposes the historical and political

construction of male-dominant interpretations, advocating for the deconstruction of hadith authority where it contradicts Qur'anic ethics.

Together, these scholars argue that the Qur'an should not be approached as a static legal code but as a dynamic, moral text that requires constant engagement through reflection (tadabbur), context (asbāb al-nuzūl), and ethical reasoning. Their work demonstrates that the authority of the Qur'an is not compromised by new interpretations; rather, it is enhanced when the interpretive process aligns with the text's intrinsic values of justice (ʿadl), compassion (raḥma), mutuality, and human dignity. Moreover, these feminist interventions address a pressing need in Muslim societies today: the revival of critical ijtihād (independent reasoning) in the service of gender justice. This is particularly vital in contexts where religious texts continue to be used—intentionally or inadvertently—to legitimize gender-based violence, legal inequality, and the exclusion of women from public, intellectual, and religious leadership.

Importantly, this study does not suggest that all classical tafsir is obsolete or that feminist tafsir is beyond critique. Rather, it advocates for a dialogical approach—one that respects the intellectual legacy of the tradition while remaining open to reinterpretation in light of evolving human understanding. The Qur'an itself invites such engagement: "Do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon their hearts?" (Q 47:24). Reflection (taʿaqqul) is not merely permissible in Islam—it is commanded.

In conclusion, the feminist approaches to tafsir explored in this article represent more than alternative readings; they constitute a hermeneutical renewal rooted in sincerity, scholarship, and a deep commitment to the ethical vision of the Qur'an. As Muslim communities navigate the complexities of modern life, including questions of gender, identity, and justice, such interpretative efforts offer a vital path toward a more inclusive and faithful engagement with Islam's foundational text.

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