

Women's Contributions in The Qur'anic Exegesis: Issues and Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the Qur'an as the primary legal source in Islam is inevitable among Muslims. Previous and present scholars have discussed the study of Qur'an in various fields, and many efforts have been done to understand its content from multiple languages. In addition, the tafsir or Qur'anic exegesis is another important branch which contributes a lot in understanding the Qur'an. However, it has been long debated that the Qur'anic exegesis were dominated by men since the seventh century. Due to the challenge debated by the feminists, women began to involve in questioning males' interpretation and gradually producing their own interpretation by affirming the concept of 'women-friendly'. Therefore, this study aims to analyse their arguments and to discover the contribution of women in the Qur'anic exegesis from the nineteenth century to the present days. By applying qualitative method, the finding from this study will re-evaluate the importance of women and their involvements in the Qur'anic exegesis from historical and textual aspects. It is vital to highlight that the main responsibility to understand the Qur'an and apply its content in daily life should not be determined by gender, but it lies within an individual's obligation.

KEYWORDS: The Qur'an; Qur'anic Exegesis; Woman; Debate; Feminist

Introduction

Undeniably, the authenticity of the Qur'an is unquestioned. It is the final book revealed to the Prophet Muhammad gradually, and the best people who understand the Qur'an was the first three generations of Muslim: The Companion (*ṣaḥābah*), the successor (*tābi'īn*), the successor of successor (*tābi' tābi'īn*). They were also the first group who opened the door of interpretation and introduced the concept of *tafsir*.

Tafsīr or also known as the Qur'anic exegesis literally means clarification and identification. Imam Al-Dhahabi (2005) defines it as a science of knowledge to understand the Qur'an, to explain its meaning, to reveal its rulings, and to remove the confusion and ambiguity about its verses. It also refers to elucidation, explanation, interpretation, context or commentary which carried out for clear understanding of the Qur'an and its commandments (Esposito, 1995). It covers linguistic, juristic, and theological aspects of the Qur'an.

Historically, the development of exegetical literature can be divided into five stages. The sequence of these stages cannot be followed chronologically because there were stages which were overlapping each other. The first stage includes a period from the time of the Prophet, his companions (*ṣaḥābah*), and the generation of successor (*tābi'īn*). The second stage is the period of the disciples of successor (*tābi' tābi'īn*) which involves changes in the structure of the exegetical literature of the Qur'an. The third stage is the period between the early decades and the last quarter of the third century after Hijrah which developed the discipline of the Qur'anic interpretation. The fourth stage is the period from the middle of the third century till the early decades of the fourth century of the Hijrah, where new academic discipline of Qur'anic exegetical literature was developed under Abbasid empire. The final stage is the longest period which starts from the fourth century and has continued until today, however, it should be noted that all the main trends in the Qur'anic interpretation were already established by the end of the fourth stage (Al-Khalidi, 2006).

Among the classical works of the Qur'anic exegesis published were written by al-Ṭabari (9th-10th century), al-Ṭusi (11th century), Ibn 'Arabi (12th-13th century), al-Qurṭubi (13th century), Ibn Kathīr (14th century), al-Jalālayn (15th century), and Rashid Rida (20th century). Looking at those names, it raised a question that why none of them was written by woman? Not only that, literature on women also has been dominated by male scholars (Ali, 2004; Engineer, 1992, 2005; Khan, 1995; Mawdūdī, 1988).

This question has been seriously debated among the feminists that the Islamic scholarship had been monopolised by male scholars for many centuries. For them, some of male's interpretation had negatively affected women which perpetuated bias, discrimination and injustice against women (Hassan, 2001). They also argued that the Qur'anic rules and values concerning women must be understood and interpreted in the light of the socio-historical context of the time of the revelation (Saeed, 2006). Simultaneously, the feminists were fully aware that women in the past have contributed in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Although the Qur'anic exegesis was dominated by male scholars, it does not indicate that woman has no single contribution in the Qur'anic exegesis in the past and present. This study aims to discover the historical background of women's participations in the study of Qur'an, to examine emergence of women's study in the contemporary time, and to analyse the importance of women's interpretation in religious texts concerning women.

Women as a *Mufassir*

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (2003), *Mufassir* can be defined as “the writer of a commentary on the Qur’an. The word likely had its earliest usage in the tenth century, designating a specific group of people; prior to that other terms such as *ahl al-ta’wīl* (people of interpretation) were used.” This definition has been developed into specific conditions for anyone who seeks to interpret the Qur’an. These conditions including: be sound in ‘*aqīdah* (belief); well-grounded in the knowledge of Arabic and its rules as a language; well-grounded in other sciences that are connected with the study of the Qur’an; have the ability for precise comprehension; abstain from the use of mere opinion; begin the *tafsīr* of the Qur’an with the Qur’an; seek guidance from the words and explanations of Prophet (hadith); refer to the reports from the *ṣaḥābah*; consider the reports from the *tābi’in*; and consult the opinions of other eminent scholars (Al-Khalidi, 2006; Denffer, 2011; Saeed, 2006).

Based on that, gender is not included in the requirement of a *mufassir*. There is no specific condition that only men allow to interpret the Qur’an, and women were disallowed in this area. The Islamic history also shows that being a woman is not an obstacle to be an expert in the Qur’an and its exegetical part. They are numerous evidences that women around the Prophet including female Companions and Successors have contributed in the Qur’anic exegesis, and their commentaries are as important as male’s.

Taking ‘Aishah bint Abu Bakr as the main example, she is among the most important figure in the history of exegesis. As the wife of the Prophet, she is also considered as the first female *mufassir* in the Islamic history. Her interpretation towards the Qur’an belongs to *tafsīr bi al-ma’t’hūr* by referring to the narrations of the hadith of the Prophet (approximately 355 verses) and by developing from her own knowledge. ‘Aisha’s contributions are not limited to women’s issues but cover bigger issues including legal, social, political, and others. Several cases show that Aishah might be the only one witnessed the process of revelation and understood the real context of the revelation.

However, at that particular time, there was no single companion write down their interpretations including famous companions who expert in *tafsīr* like Abdullah ibn ‘Abbas, but their commentaries on the Qur’an were delivered by verbal communication to people and later were transmitted to next generations and were comprised in the written works. Only in the twentieth century, two books were published compiling ‘Aisha’s commentaries on the Qur’an: first was written by Sa’ud ibn ‘Abdullah al-Fanisan (1992) entitled *Marwiyyāt Umm al-Mu’minīn A’isha fī al-Tafsīr*, and second was authored by ‘Abdullah Abu al-Sa’ud Badar (1996) with the title *Tafsīr Umm al-Mu’minīn A’isha*.

Ummu Salamah is another example of female companion who used to interpret the Qur’anic verses, such as verses 222-223 from Surah al-Baqarah, 195 from Surah Ali-Imran, and there are other 20

verses. She is one of the Prophet's wives who also became one of the reasons Qur'anic verses (The Qur'an 33: 35, 9: 102, 9: 118) were revealed pertaining women. Besides, Fatimah bint Qays, an intelligent and wise companion of the Prophet had experience in articulating her interpretation on specific verses from Surah al-Talaq. Due to her courage on the divorce matter, she was able to use her interpretation to override some court decisions.

In fact, there were many other women at the time of the Prophet participated in the interpretation of the Qur'an and can be a part of exegetical activities. However, their narratives are not sufficient to elevate them to be considered as scholars of the Qur'anic exegesis.

The Emergence of Contemporary Women Interpreters

The previous contributions of female scholars in the Qur'anic exegesis is an important benchmark that women also have the ability to well verse and enlightened in the interpretation of the Qur'an. They fulfilled the requirements, and being a woman has nothing to do with their knowledge capabilities.

The history found that the first woman who offered writing a *tafsir* in the eighteenth century was Zayb An-Nisa Al-Makir (1658-1702). She was the daughter of the Timurid king of India, Shah Sultan Alemgir al-Hindi, and her mother, Dilres Banu Sahur Han came from the Safavid dynasty. She dedicated her entire life to learn and to teach, without getting married. Her work on *tafsir* was given a title *Zayb al-Tafāsir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, but there are two different opinions regarding this work. First, a view saying that it is merely a translated version of the *Tafsir* al-Razi into Persian. Second, a view stating that it is not a translation work but a distinct *tafsir* which only made use of its antecedents. If the first view is correct, it cannot be considered as the *tafsir*, but if the second view is accepted, her *tafsir* might be the first written work of Qur'anic exegesis by a female scholar (Aydar & Atalay, 2014).

In the twentieth century, the appearance of women interpreters bloomed. Nusret Begüm Emin (1890-1983) from Iran might be considered as the first non-Arab woman who did exegetical work of the entire Qur'an. She was also known as Banu Amin, Banu Irani and Bintu Mujtahidah. She was the only female scholars during her time, and she became a specialist in jurisprudence as well as Islamic studies particularly the Qur'anic study. Her work on *tafsir* known as *Makhzan al-Irfan der Tafsir Qur'an* was written in Persian, 30 chapters, 15 volumes, and it was based on Shiite interpretation.

Nonetheless, Aisha Abdel Rahman (1913–1998), also known as Bint al-Shati', might be the first woman to have started interpretation work on the Qur'an from a female perspective (Roded, 2006). She applied a contextual approach and mostly critiqued orthodox interpretations of religious texts. She also known as the author of variety books including books in biographies of women of the Prophetic households (Hatem, 2011). Her book *al-Tafsir al-Bayān li al-Qur'ān al-*

Hakīm consists of the interpretation of seven chapters of *Juz 'Ammā* (Al-Ḍuḥā, Al-Insyirah, Al-Zalzalah, Al-'Ādiyāt, Al-Nāzi'āt, Al-Balad, and Al-Takāthur), and seven other short chapters in the second book (Al-'Alaq, Al-Qalam, Al-'Aşr, Al-Layl, Al-Fajr, Al-Humazah, and Al-Mā'un).

Another scholar of Qur'anic exegesis worthy of mention in this context is Zaynab Al-Ghazali (1917-2005). She is an Egyptian scholar who wrote a complete *tafsīr* entitled *Nazarāt fī Kitābillah*. Her interpretation has a reformative tendency that drives the Qur'an as the book of law of the people and a book of progress. Among the important contents in her work is to defend women's rights by rescuing them from negative values and to encourage them to hold fast to the Islamic rules and regulations (Al-Ghazali, 1994).

From Egypt to Palestine, Na'ilah Hasyim Sabri (1944-present) originated from Qalqilya, a city in the West Bank of Palestine. She started writing *al-Mubassir li Nūr al-Qur'ān* in 1982, in 16 volumes. This *tafsīr* covers the Qur'an as a whole which was the result of her lengthy study that lasted about 20 years ("Nailah Sabri: Murabitoh fi al-Quds bi Suhbat Allah," 2010). The methodology applied in her *tafsīr* are varied: first, contextual approach by referring to the context of the verses were revealed; second, interpretation by narrations (*tafsīr bi al-riwāya*) by referring to the hadith of the Prophet and words of his companions; third, scientific approach by engaging modern monumental scientific and technological developments as pointed out by the Qur'an; and fourth, semantic and rhetoric approach by focusing on the linguistic matters (Aydar & Atalay, 2014).

Other than that, Hannan al-Lahham (1943-present) came from Syria, and received her education there, but in 1979, she immigrated to Saudi Arabia with her family. She interpreted 13 chapters in the Qur'an and published them in under the title *Silsilat al-Nazarāt fī Kitābillah*. She also produced several works focused for children in understanding the meaning of the Qur'an, such as *Hikāyat li Ahfādi* which contains her stories to her grandchildren based on the Qur'an. She was actively teaching the Qur'anic studies in Girls' Faculty at King Abdul Aziz University of Jeddah. Her recent works on *tafsīr* were published by Qur'anic chapters, for example, *Tafsīr Sūrah al-Ṭalāq* and *Tafsīr Sūrah al-Tawba* (Aydar & Atalay, 2014).

In addition to that, there was a Turkish female scholar who had contributed in the exegetical literature. She is Semra Kürün Çekmegil who was born in Malatya, a large city in the Eastern Anatolia region of Turkey. According to Aydar & Atalay (2014), her work entitled *Okuyucu Tefsiri* was the first *tafsīr* written by a female scholar in Turkey. She started writing this *tafsīr* in 2004 and published several parts in 8 volumes in 2006. Another Turkish female scholar, Necla Yasdımın (1962-present) published *Kur'an Tahlili: Arapça Gramer Işığında Sözlük-Meal-Tefsir* gradually from 2006 until 2014. She is a PhD holder, who had numbers of working experiences before she gave full attention in publishing her *tafsīr*. In this *tafsīr*, she mentioned that the methodology applied in her work can be categorised to three stages: first, dictionary meaning; second, grammatical analysis; and third, explication. However, it is incomplete *tafsīr* because it contains numbers of Qur'anic chapters only.

Another female scholar in *tafsīr* is Fevkiyye Ibrahim al-Sirbini who was actively delivered lectures on Islamic studies in Cairo, Egypt. She wrote *Taysīr al-Tafsīr* which majorly depended on her lectures which were recorded and transcribed by the audience. The *tafsīr* was completely compiled in 2006 and it covered the whole Qur'an. The language used in her book was easy to understand which was presented in phenomenological way (Aydar & Atalay, 2014).

There was a female scholar who was originated from Doha, Qatar, known as Kamila bint Muhammad al-Kawari. She memorized the whole Qur'an and had master's degree specialising in the Islamic law. She published many religious books and one of her outstanding works on *tafsīr* is *Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qur'ān*. In this tafsir, she tried to explain the rare and peculiar words mentioned in the Qur'an which cannot be literally understood. It was published in 2008 and has one volume only ("Kamilah al-Kawari," n.d.).

Additional to the above scholars, Kariman Hamzah is a former general manager of religious programs at the Egyptian Radio and Television Union. She has anchored several successful religious programs, producing more than 1,500 episodes by spending time in broadcasting for 35 years. She published more than 25 books on Islam, and her *tafsīr* known as *al-Lu'lu wa al-Marjān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* in 4 volumes. This work is presented to experts from al-Azhar University to verify its contents before approved to the publication. According to Sheikh Ibrahim Negm, spokesperson for Egypt's Grand Mufti Ali Goma, her interpretation of the Qur'an was made for the youth, using a simple language and writing style (Saleh, 2008).

Miyadah bint Kamil al-Madi came with her exegetical work entitled *al-Durrah fī Tafsīr Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2006). The main purpose of writing this *tafsīr* was due to help her students in understanding the message and contents of Surah al-Baqarah and in memorising this second chapter of the Qur'an. Besides al-Baqarah, she also interpreted other chapters like Surah al-Nisa' and Surah al-Maidah, but it was not published yet. Her methodology of writing was based on *ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jamā'ah*. At the same time, she is an expert in the knowledge of al-Qira'at ("Su'al 'an al-Ustazah Miyadah al-Madi," 2007).

There were also female scholars who contributed in the work of *tafsīr* not by interpreting the whole Qur'an or any particular Qur'anic chapter, but they interpreted specific verses. Nazira Zayn al-Din (1908-1976), for instance, was popularly known with *al-Sufur wa al-Hijāb* or *Removing the Veil and Unveiling: Lectures and Reflections towards Women's Liberation and Social Form in the Arab World* (1928). She emphasised the issue of hijab as mentioned in verses from Surah al-Ahzab and Surah al-Nur. She was also among the first women who offered detailed re-interpretations of Islamic sources and argued against male interpretation and patriarchal oppression in her book.

Besides her, Amina Wadud (1952-present), a contemporary feminist, also interpreted selected verses from the Qur'an in her book, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspectives*. She aims to make Qur'an the ultimate source to prove gender equality within Islamic

context, to challenge patriarchal interpretations, and to reject any misinterpretations of the Qur'an that ignores basic social principles of justice, equality, and common humanity. She suggested a hermeneutic model that considers the context in which text was written or revealed, grammatical composition of the whole text, and its *Weltanschauung* or world-view (Wadud, 1999) as an important methodology in re-interpreting Islamic texts.

Hibah Rouf Izzat (1965-present) was another female scholar who offered for the reinterpretation of several Qur'anic verses relating to women, especially the role of women in the public sphere. Her work entitled *Al-Mar'ah wa al-'Amal al-Siyāsi: Ru'yah Islāmiyyah* (1996) and she published many other books, and active in writing until today.

Ulfa Yousef (1964-present), is a Tunisian scholar who continued to enrich the discipline of the Qur'anic exegesis. She represented a Moroccan-Secular perspective in interpreting the Qur'anic verses and the Prophetic hadith concerning women's issues. She published her doctoral study entitled *Polysemy in the Quran* (2003) which highlighted the linguistic approach of the Qur'an. Her other works on the Qur'an include *Women in the Quran and Sunnah* (1997), *The Quran at the Risk of Psychoanalysis* (2007), and *the confusion of a Muslim Woman: on Inheritance, Marriage and Homosexuality* (2008).

Overall, the above female scholars are like a diamond in the sky. Their quantity is not as much as male scholars of *tafsīr*, but they possessed special quality and significant place among the society. It is vital for the presence of women in addressing women's issues and solving their problems, because male's interpretations might be accused of being biased due to gender differences. Although there are male scholars who are academically and theologically free of a gender bias, this study aims to acknowledge the contributions of women in the Qur'anic exegesis in the past and present.

Discussion and Analysis

From the historical points of view, women have contributed in various fields of study beginning at the Prophet's time which indicates that women scholarship have been acknowledged in the past thousand years ago. However, in the study of *tafsīr*, there are unknown source among society that there are numbers of women published books on *tafsīr* and became experts in the Qur'anic study. The findings from this study can be discussed as follow.

Different formats, different purposes

Based on the numbers of female interpreters and their works as mentioned previously, it can be found that some of the publications cover the whole Qur'an, some includes partial of the Qur'an, and some focuses on several Qur'anic verses only. It is high probability that each of them has different purposes in publishing their works in the Qur'anic exegesis. Fevkiyye Ibrahim al-Sirbini, for example, her *tafsīr* covers the whole Qur'an which is a compilation of her lectures with the help

from her students who regularly attended her lectures. Miyadah bint Kamil al-Madi also had a specific purpose to write her *tafsīr* just because to help her students understand a specific chapter in the Qur'an. While the exegetical works of Nusrat Begum Emin and Na'ilah Hasyim Sabri covers all the Qur'anic chapters, the *tafsīrs* of Semra Kürün Çekmegil and Necla yasdıman contains parts of the Qur'an only, perhaps they took longer time to publish the rest of their parts. Among the scholars who only interpreted several verses from the Qur'an were Nazira Zayn al-Din, Amina Wadud, and Hibah Rouf Izzat, where all three selected the verses based on specific issues they addressed in their particular works.

Different methods and approaches

These women had adopted different methods and approaches to interpret and re-interpret the texts in the Qur'an. Interpretation needs in-depth and extensive knowledge of various aspects including belief, linguistic, history and many others, while re-interpretation begins with re-reading critically, displacing traditional interpretation, and coming with 'new' interpretation (Moghadam, 2002). Therefore, each of female scholar in the Qur'anic exegesis not only has different purpose of publishing their works, they also applied different methods. For example, Amina Wadud and few other Muslim feminists established new gender-sensitive hermeneutics which can be applied via three approaches: (1) revisiting Qur'anic verses to correct false stories in general circulation; (2) citing verses that explicitly enunciate the equality of women and men; (3) deconstructing verses that have been commonly interpreted in ways to justify male domination (Badran, 2009).

However, there were also among them who applied classical approach by referring to the Hadith and other reliable traditions to support their interpretations like Na'ilah Hasyim Sabri; contextual approach by referring to the appropriate context like Aisha Abdel Rahman, Zayneb al-Ghazali, Mernissi and many others; and linguistic approach like Ulfa Yousef. However, some of them may have "applied a combination of historical, linguistic, hermeneutic, literary critical, deconstructive, semiotic, historicist, and feminist methodologies in their re-reading of sacred texts, pushing *ijtihād* to new limits as they explore their religion with fresh eyes" (Badran, 2009, p. 233). Only one *tafsīr* published by female scholar which based on Shiite interpretation, majority were sunni.

Women's friendly interpretation

Besides the aforementioned female scholars, there are also other Muslim women who questioned gender-biased interpretations and advocated producing women-friendly interpretations. They were Tahereh Qurrat-al Ayn (mid 1800s, from Iran), Fatima Aliya Hanim (late 1800s, from Turkey), Zainab al-Fawwaz (late 1800s, from Lebanon), Aishah al-Taimuriyya and Zeyneb Hanum (late 1800s, from Egypt), Riffat Hassan (1900s, from Pakistan) and Fatima Mernissi (1900s, from Morocco) who also actively participated in the re-interpretation of religious texts (Khair, 2018; Moghissi, 1999). The women-friendly interpretation aims to remove bias or discrimination from male perspectives which might distance women from having their rights accordingly.

Need and demands of women scholars in tafsīr

According to Barazangi (2008), there is a high demand for female scholars who can contribute to the Islamic thought and knowledge to avoid any misinterpretations from the other gender. Moreover, the absence of women scholars is also one of the factors that have made women feel religious texts have been manipulated by men. This demand is in line with the objective to return to the golden era of female scholarship in the past and to protect any discrimination against women which limits their rights to seek knowledge and practice it.

Differences between male and female's interpretations

There are different views in analysing the comparison of both male and female's interpretations. First, female scholars on Qur'anic Exegesis have their own views but still in line with male's interpretation particularly in the issue of women's rights. Women scholars also promotes the importance of man's position as a leader in the family institution as mentioned in verse 4 from Surah al-Nisa'. Zaynab al-Ghazali (1994) interpreted the word '*qawwāmun*' by pointing out that even though man is a leader and has power in the household, woman also has her significant roles as a wife and a mother who responsible in managing everything in the house. She emphasised that this verse should not be an excuse for man to commit violence and discrimination against women.

Second, there were female scholars who refer to the interpretation of male scholars in order to strengthen their views to protect women's right in any issue. In the verse about *nushūz* for example, Amina Wadud (1999) stated that the word '*qānitāt*' cannot be seen as an obedience to the husband, as this verse intended for both husband and wife. She quoted Sayyid Qutb's opinion in his *tafsīr* that this choice of word intended to be personal emotional response rather than the external 'following of orders' which the *ṭā'a* (obey) would suggest. Thus, because of '*nushūz*' is disorder between husband and wife, so the Qur'an gives perfect solutions that need to be followed by husband in order to harmonize the marriage.

Third, there is no contradiction between male and female scholars in the interpretation of the Qur'an. For example, in the meaning of word '*ḍaraba*', although it is literally meaning as 'to beat' or 'to strike', the male scholars like Ibn Kathir (2000) and Rashid Ridha highlighted that the purpose of this action is to educate, not to hurt the woman. Surprisingly, Amina Wadud (1999) agreed that the action is only allowed for very extreme cases. It is also undeniable to mention that there are many other interpretations on this sensitive topic.

Based on that, the assumption that male's interpretations are promoting bias could not be hundred percent proven its certainty. There are some male scholars who advocated women's rights and made a serious attempt to elevate women's issues.

Conclusion

The interpretation of the Qur'an has always been evolving by a principle known as "ijtihad", or the use of one's knowledge, reasoning, and best judgement to offer his or her view on any matter. It is not limited to a specific gender, for both men and women who are capable and fulfil the requirements are allowed to interpret the Qur'an. It was a great achievement when the practice of women at the time of the Prophet to interpret the Qur'an has continued its legacy. Women are very important asset in any society, and the presence of knowledgeable women in any field of knowledge will produce positive impact especially in developing a culture of knowledge among the society.

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