

WOMEN IN QUR'AN : A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CLASSICAL AND MODERN INTERPRETATION

Submitted by

SHAFEEFA FADHILA AK

Under the guidance of

FATHIMA FARHANA WAFIYYA

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**SAYYID HYDER ALI SHIHAB THANGAL MEMORIAL ALHUDA
RESIDENTIAL CAMPUS FOR GIRLS VALIYAD KODUR
MALAPPURAM**

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INTRODUCTION

The status of women in Islam has been a sustained and complex subject of scholarly debate within both classical Islamic thought and modern academic discourse. Central to these discussions is the Qur'an, the primary source of Islamic guidance, which addresses women in diverse and significant roles: as spiritual beings equal to men in their relationship with God, as integral members of family and community life, and as legal subjects entitled to defined rights and responsibilities. The Qur'anic portrayal of women thus combines ethical, social, and legal dimensions that have been interpreted in varying ways across history.

The Qur'an was revealed in the socio-cultural context of seventh-century Arabia, a society structured by tribal affiliations and patriarchal norms. Within this context, Qur'anic revelations introduced reforms that challenged prevailing practices and improved the condition of women. These reforms included the prohibition of female infanticide, acknowledgment of women's moral agency, regulation of marital relations, and the establishment of economic and inheritance rights. While these measures were transformative in their historical setting, the question of how they should be understood as universal principles applicable across different times and societies has remained open to interpretation.

Classical Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr) developed elaborate interpretive frameworks grounded in Arabic linguistics, prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), jurisprudential reasoning (fiqh), and the circumstances of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl). Classical exegetes interpreted women-related verses within the intellectual paradigms and social realities of their own eras, thereby

producing authoritative commentaries that shaped Muslim understanding for centuries. However, these interpretations were also influenced by the gender norms and epistemological assumptions of their historical contexts.

In the modern period, rapid social change, increased female education and participation in public life, and engagement with global discourses on human rights and gender equality have led to renewed readings of the Qur'an. Modern scholars—both within the Islamic tradition and in contemporary academic settings—have revisited classical interpretations, employing new hermeneutical tools to reassess Qur'anic teachings on women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classical Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr) constitutes a central and authoritative body of Islamic scholarship that developed over more than a millennium through diverse interpretive traditions. Early exegetes relied largely on transmitted sources (tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr), interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an itself, prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), and explanations attributed to the Companions and early Muslim authorities. Foundational works such as al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān* and Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* exemplify this approach, emphasizing continuity of meaning while allowing for interpretive plurality. Alongside transmitted exegesis, rational interpretation (tafsīr bi'l-ra'y) evolved, giving priority to linguistic analysis, logical reasoning, and theological reflection, as seen in the influential works of al-Zamakhsharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Jurisprudential tafsīr, particularly in the writings of al-Qurṭubī, focused on deriving

legal rulings from Qur'anic verses, especially those concerning family law, social organization, and women's legal status.

The earliest exegetes predominantly employed transmitted tafsīr (tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr), interpreting the Qur'an through its own verses, prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), and explanations attributed to the Companions and early Muslim authorities. Seminal works such as al-Ṭabarī's Jāmi' al-Bayān and Ibn Kathīr's Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿAẓīm illustrate this approach. These scholars compiled multiple chains of transmission and provided a range of interpretive possibilities, reflecting methodological caution and a respect for authoritative knowledge. Women-related verses were interpreted with attention to both textual meaning and social practice, often emphasizing moral guidance and legal implications.

Modern engagement with the Qur'an reflects profound changes in social conditions, intellectual paradigms, and ethical concerns. Reformist and modernist scholars highlighted the Qur'an's moral universality and its compatibility with reason, emphasizing a distinction between enduring ethical principles and context-specific regulations. Neo-traditional approaches maintained continuity with classical methodologies while selectively reassessing women-related issues in light of contemporary realities. Feminist and gender-justice scholars introduced critical hermeneutical perspectives that challenge patriarchal interpretations and emphasize justice, equality, and human dignity as central Qur'anic values. Academic studies employing historical-critical, sociological, and literary methods further explore how social contexts and power relations shaped exegetical traditions.

Rational tafsīr (tafsīr bi'l-ra'y) emerged alongside transmitted approaches, prioritizing linguistic analysis, logic, and theological reasoning. Scholars such as al-Zamakhsharī, with his Mu'tazilī background, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī incorporated philosophical and theological debate into their exegesis. Their works examined language, grammar, and semantics in depth, sometimes offering allegorical or contextual interpretations of women-related verses. Rational tafsīr allowed for a more analytical and reflective engagement with the Qur'an, enabling scholars to explore ethical, spiritual, and social dimensions beyond literal readings.

Jurisprudential tafsīr, exemplified by al-Qurṭubī and al-Jaṣṣāṣ, focused on deriving legal rules from Qur'anic injunctions. Such works closely linked exegesis with Islamic law (fiqh), particularly in areas concerning family structure, inheritance, testimony, marriage, and women's rights. These interpretations often provided detailed guidance for practical application, reinforcing both social norms and legal hierarchies. While highly methodical, classical tafsīr frequently reflected the gendered assumptions of the time, embedding patriarchal norms into both legal reasoning and exegetical conclusions.

Despite methodological sophistication and rigorous textual analysis, classical tafsīr was deeply situated within the socio-historical and cultural context of medieval Islamic societies. Women-related interpretations often accepted hierarchical gender roles and functional differentiation as normative, with limited critical engagement of these assumptions. This contextual embeddedness influenced centuries of Muslim thought, often

conflating social custom with divine prescription, and shaping the interpretive lens through which later generations read the Qur'an.

Modern Qur'anic interpretation reflects changing social, intellectual, and ethical contexts. Reformist and modernist scholars, such as Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, emphasized the ethical universality of the Qur'an and its compatibility with reason, distinguishing between timeless moral principles and context-specific regulations. Neo-traditional scholars retained classical methodologies while re-evaluating women-related issues such as education, public participation, and political involvement. Feminist and gender-justice scholars—including Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Fazlur Rahman—introduced hermeneutical approaches centered on justice, equality, and human dignity. Academic and historical-critical studies examine how social contexts, institutional authority, and power relations influenced both classical and modern interpretations of women's roles.

Despite a rich and growing body of literature, systematic comparative studies between classical and modern tafsīr are limited. Most research focuses on interpretive outcomes rather than the methodological assumptions or historical evolution behind them. This study addresses these gaps through a structured comparative analysis of classical and modern Qur'anic interpretations of women, highlighting how context, methodological framework, and ethical orientation shape meaning. Such an approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's status in Islam and the dynamic negotiation between tradition and modernity within Qur'anic scholarship.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

This study provides a comprehensive and comparative analysis of Qur'anic verses concerning women, focusing on how classical and modern interpretations have shaped the understanding of women's status in Islam. Classical tafsīr, which developed over more than a millennium, forms the foundation of Islamic scholarly engagement with the Qur'an. Exegetes relied on transmitted exegesis (tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr), rational reasoning (tafsīr bi'l-ra'y), and jurisprudential analysis (fiqh-based tafsīr), interpreting women-related verses with careful attention to linguistic nuances, historical circumstances, and legal reasoning. Seminal scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Qurṭubī emphasized continuity with authoritative sources while permitting interpretive plurality. Classical interpretations consistently acknowledged women's spiritual equality before God, yet prescribed differentiated roles in social, familial, and legal contexts. Legal rulings related to inheritance, testimony, marriage, polygyny, and modesty were closely linked to the prevailing patriarchal social norms, often conflating customary practices with divine mandate. While methodologically rigorous, classical tafsīr was deeply embedded in the socio-cultural realities of medieval Islamic societies, resulting in interpretations that frequently accepted hierarchical gender roles as normative rather than critically examined.

Modern engagement with the Qur'an reflects significant shifts in social, intellectual, and ethical paradigms. Reformist and modernist scholars, including Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd

Riḍā, emphasized the Qur'an's moral universality, reason-based compatibility, and the distinction between timeless ethical principles and context-specific regulations. Neo-traditional scholars maintained continuity with classical methodologies while selectively reassessing women-related issues in light of contemporary realities, particularly in areas such as education, political participation, and public engagement. Feminist and gender-justice scholars, including Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Fazlur Rahman, introduced critical hermeneutical approaches that challenged patriarchal interpretations and foregrounded justice, equality, and human dignity as central Qur'anic values. Historical-critical, sociological, and literary studies further illuminate how social context, institutional authority, and power dynamics have shaped both classical and modern exegesis, highlighting the complex interplay between scripture, interpreter, and society.

Comparative analysis reveals both continuities and divergences between classical and modern interpretations. Classical tafsīr emphasizes social order, legal obligations, and functional differentiation of gender roles, whereas modern interpretations prioritize ethical intent, universal moral principles, and context-sensitive application. Key contested issues, such as qiwāma (Q.4:34), polygyny (Q.4:3), inheritance (Q.2:282), testimony, modesty and dress codes (Q.24:31, 33:59), and public participation, exemplify how methodological frameworks, historical context, and ethical orientation influence interpretive outcomes. Modern scholarship situates these verses within the socio-historical context of revelation, while advocating for egalitarian and justice-oriented applications suitable for contemporary Muslim societies.

This research adopts a systematic comparative methodology, examining both classical and modern exegesis on key women-related verses. By analyzing methodological approaches, socio-historical influences, and ethical assumptions, the study identifies patterns of continuity, reinterpretation, and innovation. It also addresses gaps in existing literature, particularly the lack of holistic comparative studies and limited attention to the epistemological and methodological foundations that underlie both classical and modern interpretations.

this research demonstrates that Qur'anic interpretations of women are dynamic, shaped by historical context, methodological choices, and evolving ethical perspectives. Classical tafsīr reflects the socio-legal and patriarchal realities of its time, while modern interpretations negotiate between tradition and contemporary social, ethical, and gender-sensitive frameworks. By systematically comparing these approaches, the study provides a nuanced understanding of women's status in Islam and highlights the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity in Qur'anic scholarship. This research contributes to broader discussions on gender justice, hermeneutical methodology, and the ethical application of sacred texts, offering insights relevant to both academic and social discourse within contemporary Muslim societies.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a systematic and comparative analysis of classical and modern interpretations

of Qur'anic verses concerning women. This includes an examination of women's spiritual status, legal rights, social roles, and ethical standing as articulated through the Qur'an and reflected in the exegetical tradition. The study aims to identify and critically analyze the methodological differences between classical and modern approaches, focusing on strategies such as linguistic analysis, contextualization, intertextual reading, integration of prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), juridical reasoning, and ethical reflection. By mapping how these methods were applied across historical periods, the research seeks to illuminate the processes through which interpretive meanings are generated, transmitted, and transformed.

A central concern of the research is the role of context in shaping Qur'anic interpretation. Social structures, prevailing gender ideologies, economic systems, political arrangements, and intellectual paradigms have all influenced the exegetical frameworks adopted by scholars. Classical interpretations often embedded patriarchal assumptions within legal and moral reasoning, while modern approaches reflect evolving social consciousness, ethical considerations, and engagement with contemporary human rights and gender justice discourse. This study aims to trace the continuities and transformations within the interpretive tradition, highlighting which aspects of classical tafsīr persist, which have been revised, and which have been contested or reinterpreted in response to changing contexts and methodological innovations.

Another key objective is to contribute to contemporary discourse on Qur'anic hermeneutics and gender justice by offering historically informed, methodologically rigorous analysis. The

research seeks to respect the integrity of the Islamic scholarly tradition while recognizing the legitimacy of interpretive renewal and the possibility of ethically grounded, egalitarian readings of the Qur'an. In doing so, it aspires to bridge the gap between historical scholarship and contemporary concerns regarding women's rights and social equity within Muslim societies.

Secondary objectives include the development of a theoretical framework for understanding interpretive change in religious traditions more broadly. The research also examines the internal diversity within both classical and modern interpretive communities, recognizing that exegetical traditions are not monolithic but contain multiple, often competing voices. In addition, it explores the interaction between exegesis (tafsīr), jurisprudence (fiqh), and theology (kalām) in shaping the understanding of women's status, highlighting how legal and doctrinal considerations have influenced the moral and social dimensions of interpretation. The study further investigates the role of authority structures and institutional mechanisms in validating or marginalizing particular interpretive approaches, acknowledging the sociopolitical dimensions of hermeneutical authority. Finally, the research explores the potential for the retrieval and reconstruction of egalitarian interpretive possibilities within the Islamic tradition, offering insights into how historical analysis can inform contemporary discussions on gender justice, religious ethics, and the dynamic engagement between tradition and modernity.

Research Questions

How have interpretations of Qur'anic verses related to women changed between classical and modern periods, and what patterns of continuity and transformation can be identified?

What methodological differences between classical and modern exegesis account for divergent interpretations of women-related verses?

How do historical, social, cultural, and intellectual contexts shape Qur'anic interpretation regarding women?

To what extent do divergent interpretations reflect textual ambiguity versus hermeneutical frameworks brought to the text?

How do classical and modern exegetes navigate the relationship between universal principles and contextually specific regulations in the Qur'an?

What role do extra-Qur'anic sources (ḥadīth, jurisprudence, theology) play in shaping interpretations of Qur'anic verses about women?

How do different theological commitments (regarding divine justice, human nature, gender, etc.) influence interpretive outcomes?

What are the implications of interpretive diversity for contemporary Muslim communities navigating questions of gender justice?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive research methodology to examine representations of women in the Qur'an. The research is grounded in close textual analysis of selected Qur'anic verses and their interpretations, focusing on meanings, concepts, and exegetical approaches rather than quantitative data.

A comparative method is employed by analyzing classical and modern tafsīr traditions side by side. Classical interpretations are examined for their linguistic, juristic, and theological frameworks, while modern interpretations are analyzed for their contextual, ethical, and reform-oriented perspectives. This approach enables the study to identify continuities, differences, and methodological shifts in the interpretation of women-related verses.

The study follows a selective thematic approach in choosing representative Qur'anic verses related to women's spiritual status, family and marital relations, legal and economic rights, social participation, and historical narratives. By situating interpretations within their socio-historical contexts, the research aims to provide a balanced and critical understanding of the evolving interpretations of women in the Qur'an.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- To produce a comprehensive and systematic analysis of Qur'anic verses related to women, examining their meanings through both classical and modern interpretive traditions.
- To clarify the Qur'an's foundational principles regarding women's spiritual equality, moral responsibility, and human dignity, distinguishing these principles from later interpretive and cultural influences.
- To identify and critically analyze methodological differences between classical and modern tafsīr, including approaches to language, context (asbāb al-nuzūl), use of ḥadīth, juristic reasoning, ethical frameworks, and intertextual interpretation.
- To demonstrate how historical, social, and intellectual contexts have shaped classical interpretations and how modern realities have influenced contemporary re-readings of women-related verses.
- To highlight areas of continuity and change in Qur'anic exegesis concerning women, showing how certain interpretations have been maintained across time while others have been re-evaluated or reformulated.
- To contribute to a nuanced understanding of contested issues such as marriage, family relations, legal rights, testimony, inheritance, modesty, and social participation through comparative exegetical analysis.
- To provide a balanced scholarly assessment that avoids both uncritical traditionalism and reductive modern readings, emphasizing methodological rigor and textual fidelity.

- To contribute to contemporary Qur'anic studies and gender discourse by offering academically grounded insights that can inform future research, teaching, and constructive dialogue within Islamic scholarship.
- To establish a conceptual and methodological framework that may be applied to further studies on Qur'anic interpretation, gender, and ethics in Islam.

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