

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

1. Introduction

The status and role of women in Islam have remained one of the most widely discussed and debated subjects within both Islamic scholarship and modern academic discourse. At the heart of this discussion lies the Qur'an, the primary and most authoritative source of Islamic guidance, which addresses women as moral agents, spiritual equals to men, and active participants in social, familial, and legal spheres. Qur'anic discourse on women encompasses ethical principles, legal regulations, and social norms that have been interpreted differently across historical periods.

The Qur'an was revealed within the socio-cultural context of seventh-century Arabia, a society largely governed by tribal affiliations and patriarchal traditions. In this context, Qur'anic revelation introduced significant reforms that improved women's status, including the prohibition of female infanticide, recognition of women's independent moral responsibility, regulation of marriage and divorce, and the establishment of inheritance and property rights. These reforms marked a profound transformation in comparison to prevailing pre-Islamic practices.

Classical Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), developed over centuries, provided structured interpretations grounded in Arabic linguistics, prophetic traditions (*hadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalīm*), and the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). While these interpretations became authoritative within Islamic tradition, they were also shaped by the social realities and gender norms of their respective historical contexts.

In the modern period, rapid social change, expanding educational opportunities for women, and engagement with global discourses on human rights and gender justice have prompted renewed engagement with the Qur'an. Contemporary scholars have revisited women-related verses using new hermeneutical tools, raising critical questions about inherited interpretations and proposing alternative readings rooted in Qur'anic ethics.

2. Review of Literature

Classical Qur'anic exegesis represents a vast and diverse intellectual tradition developed over more than a millennium. Early exegetes relied primarily on transmitted interpretation (*tafsīr bi'l-māthūr*), explaining Qur'anic verses through other Qur'anic passages, prophetic traditions, and statements of the Companions and early authorities. Foundational works such as al-Tabarī's *Jamī' al-Bayḥān* and Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* exemplify this method.

Alongside transmitted exegesis, rational interpretation (*tafsīr bi'l-rā'y*) developed, prioritizing linguistic analysis, grammar, rhetoric, and theological reasoning. Scholars such as al-Zamakhsharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī incorporated philosophical inquiry and logical argumentation into their exegetical works.

Jurisprudential *tafsīr*, represented by scholars like al-Qurṭubī, focused on deriving legal rulings from Qur'anic injunctions, particularly in areas related to family law, inheritance, testimony, and marital relations.

3. Research Problem and Rationale

Many classical interpretations of women-related Qur'anic verses have been treated as fixed and normative, often without sufficient attention to the socio-historical contexts that shaped them.

Conversely, some modern readings risk overlooking the depth and methodological rigor of the classical tradition. The absence of balanced comparative analysis has contributed to polarized debates between traditionalist and reformist positions.

4. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of classical and modern interpretations of Qur'anic verses related to women. The study also aims to analyze methodological differences, explore historical influences, and contribute to contemporary discussions on Qur'anic hermeneutics and gender justice.

5. Research Questions

How have interpretations of women-related Qur'anic verses changed between classical and modern periods? What methodological differences account for divergent interpretations? How do socio-historical contexts influence Qur'anic interpretation regarding women?

6. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive methodology. It involves close textual analysis of selected Qur'anic verses and their interpretations in classical and modern tafsīr works. A thematic approach is used to examine verses related to spiritual equality, family relations, legal rights, modesty, and social participation.

7. Expected Outcomes

The study is expected to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of women-related Qur'anic interpretations, clarify foundational ethical principles, and highlight methodological strengths and limitations within both classical and modern tafsīr.

8. Conclusion

This research argues that interpretations of women in the Qur'an are dynamic rather than static, shaped by historical context, methodological choices, and evolving ethical perspectives.

9. References

Al-■abar■, J■mi■ al-Bay■n. Ibn Kath■r, Tafs■r al-Qur'■n al-■A■■m. Al-Zamakhshar■, Al-Kashsh■f. Fakhr al-D■n al-R■z■, Maf■t■■ al-Ghayb. Al-Qur■ub■, Al-J■mi■ li-A■k■m al-Qur'■n. Fazlur Rahman, Major Themes of the Qur'an. Amina Wadud, Qur'an and Woman. Asma Barlas, Believing Women in Islam.