

# Feminizing the Islamic Exegetical Tradition

## Introduction

When examining gender in Islam, the mention of Quranic verse 4:34 is unavoidable. While there are many verses that deal with gender and/or have impacted gender relations, the aforementioned verse is particularly poignant because classical exegesis of this verse plays an integral role in establishing the gender paradigm in Islam.<sup>1</sup> Classical exegesis betrays a certain degree of misogyny; this tendency has become associated with the verse itself and to some minds inherent to Islamic gender relations. It has been suggested that there is a tendency to extend the infallibility associated with the Quran to classical exegesis due to the exegetes' proximity to the time of the Prophet and the Muslim belief that history is sacred. This presumed infallibility prevents many scholars and Muslims from challenging misogynist interpretations stemming from the male-dominated culture at the time. Historically, androcentric culture means that there is also a grave lack of female voices in classical exegesis, which further propagates a male-centered and misogynist exegetical tradition.

There is a new trend in Muslim thought which argues that continual re-interpretation is key to properly understanding Islam. It challenges the infallibility extended to classical exegesis on the Islamic basis that nothing should be infallible save for God and the Revelation. Islamic feminism, as it is called, seeks to re-interpret the Quran from a feminist perspective in order to prove that Islam is, and has always been, an inherently egalitarian religion. Islamic feminists believe that misinterpretation by classical exegetes has led to the convoluted nature of contemporary Islamic gender issues. Scholars such as Amina Wadud, Hadia Mubarak, and Fatima Merinssi, just to

name a few, have engaged in an examination of Islam from a feminist perspective. They do not, however, forgo their Islamic identities. Instead, these Muslim feminists believe that it is entirely possible to retain one's Muslim identity whilst engaging in a feminist re-interpretation and that indeed their work may also conform to a distinctly Islamic framework.

The following paper will examine the problem created by the lack of women's voices in classical exegesis, especially that of verse 4:34. It will subsequently investigate contemporary feminist exegesis, and the work of Islamic feminists. Finally, it will explore the implications of feminist re-interpretation for contemporary Muslim women.

## Classical Exegesis

***Men are [qawammuna] over women with what God has favored some over others and with what they (men) spend out of their wealth. (In their turn) righteous women are devoted and guard the unseen as God has guarded (it). As for those (women) on whose part you fear [nushuz], admonish them (first), (next) separate them in beds (and last) beat them. But if they obey you, then seek nothing against them. Behold, God is most high and great (Verse 4:34).***<sup>2</sup>

Verse 4:34 is an important verse related to gender relations not only because of its subject matter dealing with marital relations, but

<sup>1</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 262-3.

<sup>2</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 264.

also because it introduces key words: *qiwama* (*qawammuna*) refers to husbands' rights over his wife; *nushuz* refers to disobedience on the part of the wife. Interpretation of these words by classical exegetes has become an inherent part of their meaning, and thus an inherent part of interpreting the verse in its entirety.

Examining classical exegesis is important for understanding the current status of Verse 4:34 and the controversy surrounding it. Due in part to the sanctity accorded to classical exegesis, traditional interpretation forms the undeniable basis for contemporary understanding of the verse. The importance placed on history in the Islamic tradition plays a role in this sanctity as well; even those, such as the Islamic feminists, who posit continual re-interpretation of the Quran, acknowledge that historical interpretation is part of that continuous dialogue.

Finally, traditional exegesis of Verse 4:34 is an excellent example of the connection between interpretation and its practical application. Classical exegesis affects not only academic interpretations of the verse, but also how it is used to justify domestic violence and subjugation of women. According to classical interpretation, these actions are Quranically sanctioned; therein lays the major impact of classical exegesis for contemporary gender relations.

Scriptural Exegesis, no matter the time period in which it was conducted, reflects contemporary societal gender norms. Hadia Mubarak notes El-Fadl's observation that "all interpretations of religious texts are ultimately negotiated by human beings' engagement with, experience and understanding of the text."<sup>3</sup> The work of al-Tabari (d.923) is the "first major work in the development of traditional Quranic Sciences."<sup>4</sup> Traditional exegesis built upon al-Tabari's work, and credited him with building the foundation for later exegetical work. Al-Tabari's work

is based heavily on hadith and the principle of multiple readings. He rejected the reductionist tendency favored by some exegetes, instead citing the Islamic principle that there cannot be one singular reading of the Quran; as argued by El-Fadl, "to argue that the majority of religious texts have one possible meaning, then one might co-opt the authoritativeness of the religious text, and transform it into human authoritarianism."<sup>5</sup> Of interest here is that, although classical exegesis is comprised of multiple readings, the androcentric interpretation by al-Tabari forms the singular basis for each subsequent reading.

Al-Tabari's interpretation of verse 4:34 does many things to "constrict the meaning of this verse and impose upon it a misogynistic readings that is unsubstantiated by other verses in the Quran or teachings in the sunnah."<sup>6</sup> First, he assigns androcentric meanings to the words *qiwama* and the phrase *bi ma faddala Allahu ba'dahum 'ala ba'd*. *Qiwama* he defines as legislating men's authority over their women, and thus positions women in relation to man as man is in relation to God. Perhaps more significant is his interpretation of the phrase *bi ma faddala Allahu ba'dahum 'ala ba'd*, which he takes to mean that God has explicitly favored men over women. An important grammatical consideration here is that the suffix "hum" attached to the object "ba'd" indicates double gender neu-

<sup>3</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 275.

<sup>4</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 276.

<sup>5</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2: 3 (2004): 275. 2:2004): 278.

<sup>6</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:2004): 278.

trality, and as such could refer to either men or women.<sup>7</sup> Al-Tabari has gendered language that would not otherwise be gendered, and thus propagates the idea that God Himself has favored men over women. In taking for granted this gendered interpretation of the phrase, those exegetes basing their work on al-Tabari's promulgate his position "that God's favoring of "some over others" refers specifically to the male gender over the female gender."<sup>8</sup> As such, they are notably subverting the Islamic principle of multiple readings by assigning to all later readings a set of assumptions based in the first reading.

Hadia Mubarak notes that al-Tabari's assignment of gender is limited to the husband's authority over the wife as defined in the law and nothing more.<sup>9</sup> Building on this over time, however, classical exegetes such as Zamakhshari (d. 1144) expanded the definition to include the husband's authority to a position of command and domination in any matters, not limited to those rights set out in the Quran.<sup>10</sup> That definition was further developed by Razi (d. 1209) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), who expanded the man's authority to include the political sphere as well as the domestic, subsequently to liken the domination of husband over his wife to the domination of men over women in society as a whole.

It has been suggested that the dominion of man over woman was a political necessity at the time of revelation of this particular verse. Dating revelation to the critical years in the formation of the *ummah*, al-Talbi suggests that the verse was meant to settle and prevent conflict in society. He posited that the *nushuz* of women and their questioning of male authority threatened the stability of the entire community in a time when internal stability was a growing necessity.<sup>11</sup> While this interpretation attempts to justify androcentric interpretation

of the verse according to the 'occasion of revelation,' it is necessary to note that the primary condition that informs the verse is the power relationship between men and women, in which men are dominant and take precedence over women.<sup>12</sup>

It is easy to see how this line of reasoning became embedded in society over the centuries, beginning with those closest to the time of the Prophet. Citing little known or weak hadith, such as that which foretells the destruction of any society ruled by a woman, and providing justification based on their own views, has given classical exegetes interpretive and theological authority. With each interpretation building on the previous, misogynist exegesis has become part of the historical authority upon which contemporary scholars and authorities build their interpretation.

There are echoes of al-Tabari's views confining male dominance to a legal framework in the work of A.A. Mawdudi (d. 1979), who stresses the duty of the wife to submit to her husband, unless he orders her to do something that is

<sup>7</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 23 (2004): 266.

<sup>8</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 267.

<sup>9</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 267.

<sup>10</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 23 (2004): 268.

<sup>11</sup> Mohamed Mahmoud, "On the Exegetical Dilemmas Over Qur'an, 4:34," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126:4 (2006): 539.

<sup>12</sup> Mohamed Mahmoud, "On the Exegetical Dilemmas Over Qur'an, 4:34," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126:4 (2006): 544.

<sup>13</sup> Mawdudi, *Purdah and the Status of Women* (1979).

expressly forbidden by God.<sup>13</sup> At the heart of this is the assumption that men are charged with women's religious education based on their duty to provide for women financially and their moral superiority. On a practical level, this translates into a measure of control by men over women's religiosity. A husband may dictate his wife's religious practices, limiting her to only those rituals that he deems necessary. In this way, man becomes to woman what God is to man.

Even those modern scholars whose discourse follows a more liberal line of reasoning reflect classical exegesis. Qasim Amin sought "liberation" of women from *niqab*, and to a certain extent from *pardah* and reasoned that they should be allowed education up to the primary level. His justification was that women couldn't be good wives and mothers if they were ignorant. A woman must be able to converse on an intelligent level with her husband if there is to be any true love between them, and should be able to provide a solid educational basis for her (male) children, lest they too become ignorant.<sup>14</sup> While at first glance this seems rather progressive, upon closer examination it is obvious that Amin is drawing on traditional definitions of women's place in society and her role as wife and mother. This reflects Zamakhshari's expansion of al-Tabari's legal framework to include man's physical and political superiority over woman; while the man is the head of the body, the woman is the body and thus should provide support for man and thereby for society as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

Classical discourse on gender is entrenched with the misogynist tendencies of classical exegesis. Continuous interpretation using the androcentric definitions established in the past, as well as the male dominated political and social realities of the classical exegetes which are reflected in their work, have set up a tradition

of interpretation which places women below men, and more importantly gives men Divine authority over women. The aforementioned interpretive tradition is devoid of not only egalitarian interpretation, but of women's voices. It is difficult to posit the effect of women's voices on classical exegesis in the past. The advent of Islamic feminism, however, and the surge of female scholars performing exegetical work could have a tangible effect on the exegetical tradition as it exists today.

### Islamic Feminism

Female scholarship is relatively new within the Islamic tradition, at least as a substantial group, and still faces as much resistance by male scholars. The Islamic feminist movement, as it has been called, is known for questioning the male-centered interpretive tradition within Islam, and also for performing Quranic exegesis from a feminist perspective. This is important not only for bringing new interpretations, but also for compiling and including women's voices as part of the overall exegetical tradition. As previously mentioned, many Islamic feminists acknowledge classical exegesis as part of the historical tradition and therefore as an important part of Islam. Nevertheless they recognize the Quran as timeless and in need of continual re-interpretation. While the patriarchal society of times past supported androcentric interpretations of the Quran, Muslim feminists argue that patriarchy no longer dominates Islamic society and thus the Quran should be re-interpreted for contemporary Muslim society.

It is important to consider the framework in which these female scholars operate. Hadia

<sup>14</sup> Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Mohamed Mahmoud, "On the Exegetical Dilemmas Over Qur'an, 4:34," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126:4 (2006): 539..

Mubarak states that she conducts her work in an “Islamic framework”<sup>16</sup> and that her identity as a Muslim woman informs her studies.<sup>17</sup> The Islamic feminist approach is distinctly biased, yet raises the issue of bias in interpretation as a whole. As we have seen, the context and status of classical male exegetes informed their work, and reflected their patriarchal values. It is impossible to expect that female exegetes, feminist or not, should produce unbiased interpretations of the Quran. I would argue that interpretation with feminist bias is precisely what is lacking in the interpretive tradition, assuming that feminism seeks an egalitarian message and not to simply demote the position of men.

Amina Wadud’s work, *Quran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, is an example of Islamic feminism in its most complete form. She notes that while women’s “voicelessness during critical periods of development in Qur’anic [sic] interpretation has not gone unnoticed...it has been mistakenly equated with voicelessness in the text itself.”<sup>18</sup> Wadud’s rereading follows much the same process as al-Tabari beginning with language.<sup>19</sup> Wadud focuses on the terms *ayat* [sign], *min* [and], *nafs* [soul], and *zawj* [spouse], which recur throughout the entire Quran<sup>20</sup>. She focuses on these specific terms because they are key terms in the “Qur’anic [sic] version of the story of the origins of humankind,”<sup>21</sup> and the Creation story is essential because

***Allah demonstrates in the Quran that the form given to human-kind is that form best suited to fulfil its vicegerency on earth. In addition, one characteristic of human creation is the two distinct but compatible genders. The two constitute a part of that which ‘perfects’ the human created form.***<sup>22</sup>

She asserts the gender neutrality of each term, and more importantly that those places in the Quran where the language is not entirely specific (or is up for interpretation) indicate one of the following things:

***1. the reader already has enough details about a story to understand it and other details are unnecessary – even redundant; 2. these details are unimportant to the point which the Qur’an [sic] is making at the particular time; 3. the Qur’an is referring to something Unseen, for which human language is already deficient.***<sup>23</sup>

To apply this approach to Verse 4:34 would mean re-examining the language used, in particular the language interpreted by al-Tabari as positioning men over women. Not only does his interpretation of the language in verse 4:34

<sup>16</sup> Hadia Mubarak, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34,” *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 284.

<sup>17</sup> Hadia Mubarak, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34,” *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 285.

<sup>18</sup> Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 5.

<sup>19</sup> Emma Leary, “Rewriting Tradition: The Islamic Feminist Approach to the Study of Religion,” *Final Research Paper 409* (Montreal: Concordia University, December 2, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 17.

<sup>21</sup> Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 17.

<sup>22</sup> Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 16.

<sup>23</sup> Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 16.

assign details to the Quran where none were explicitly given, it also suggests that women are an inferior creation to man. Wadud refutes this, arguing instead that man and woman were created to complete two *equal* parts of a perfect whole.

In re-interpreting verses like 4:34, Islamic feminism has a twofold effect. First, neutralizing traditionally gendered language sets a new standard for gender relations, and facilitates Quran justification for gender equality. Second, contributing women's voices to the greater interpretive tradition is essential to shifting the exegetical tradition towards a more egalitarian institution. This twofold effect reflects the impact of classical exegesis as well, which impacted traditional gender relations and set the standard for a male dominated interpretive tradition.

### Conclusion

The classical exegetical tradition reflects the bias of male Islamic scholarship. Al-Tabari's gendered interpretation of language in verse 4:34 and his understanding of the verse as prescribing male dominance became the basis upon which following (male) exegetes based their interpretation. This male-dominated discourse seems to have both originated in and propagated patriarchal society. Islamic feminism is unique in its mandate to advance a feminist agenda within an Islamic framework, advocating retention of Islamic faith and identity, and belief that Islam is an inherently egalitarian religion. While they posit misinterpretation on the part of classical exegetes, the Islamic feminists do also acknowledge traditional *tafsir* as important part of the historical tradition.

It is, as Hadia Mubarak notes in her paper, impossible to conduct exegesis without bias.<sup>24</sup> I would like to suggest that balancing the bias of the overall exegetical tradition by including

women's voices will be one of the most tangible long-term effects of Islamic feminism. Feminist interpretation itself will provide a solid basis for Muslim men and women upon which to base egalitarian relationships, and for women to regain the status the feminists claim was assigned to them by God.

<sup>24</sup> Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 270.

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