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## Correspondence:

Editorial Board, al-Burhān Journal,

Research Management Centre,

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P.O Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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## Women's Role as *Mufassir* and Their Contributions to Qur'anic Exegesis

Nur Saadah Hamisan @ Khair\*

Norwardatun Mohamed Razali\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** The role of the Qur'an as the primary legal source in Islam is inevitable among Muslims. Previous and present scholars have discussed the study of the Qur'an in various fields, and many efforts have been done to understand its content from multiple languages. In addition, Qur'anic exegesis or *tafsir* is another important branch that contributes a lot in understanding the Qur'an. However, it has been long debated that Qur'anic exegesis was dominated by men since the seventh century. Due to the challenge debated by feminists, women began to question males' interpretation and gradually produce their own interpretation by affirming the concept of 'women-friendly'. Therefore, this study aims to analyse their arguments and to discover the contributions of women in Qur'anic exegesis from the eighteenth century to the present day. By applying the qualitative method, this study found that all *tafsir* written by female *mufassirs* have different formats, purposes, methods, and approaches. There is also need and demands of women scholars in Qur'anic exegesis, because undeniably, there are differences found in the interpretations of male and female scholars. However, 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 & Phrases:** *Quranic studies; Quranic exegesis; Women; Feminist; Tafsir.*

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\* Lecturer, Faculty of Quranic and Sunnah Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), email: [saadahkhair@usim.edu.my](mailto:saadahkhair@usim.edu.my)

\*\* Lecturer, Faculty of Quranic and Sunnah Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), email: [wardatun@usim.edu.my](mailto:wardatun@usim.edu.my)

## Introduction

Undeniably, the authenticity of the Qurʾān is unquestioned. It is the final book revealed gradually to the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, and the best people who understood the Qurʾān were the first three generations of Muslim: The Companions (*ṣaḥābah*), the successors (*tābiʾīn*), the successor of successors (*tābiʾ tābiʾīn*). They were also the first group who opened the door of interpretation and introduced the concept of *tafsīr*.

*Tafsīr* or also known as Qurʾānic exegesis literally means clarification and identification. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Dhahabī defines it as a science of knowledge to understand the Qurʾān, to explain its meaning, to reveal its rulings, and to remove the confusion and ambiguity about its verses.<sup>1</sup> It also refers to elucidation, explanation, interpretation, context, or commentary which are carried out for clear understanding of the Qurʾān and its commandments.<sup>2</sup> It covers linguistic, juristic, and theological aspects of the Qurʾān.

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 PBUH, his Companions (*ṣaḥābah*), and the generation of successors (*tābiʾīn*). The second stage is the period of the disciples of the successors (*tābiʾ al-tābiʾīn*) which involves changes in the structure of the exegetical literature of the Qurʾān. The third stage is the period between the early decades and the last quarter of the third century after Hijrah in which the discipline of the Qurʾānic interpretation developed. 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 Qurʾānic exegetical literature was developed under the 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 Qurʾānic interpretation were already established by the end of the fourth stage.<sup>3</sup>

Among the classical works of Qurʾānic exegesis published were written by al-Ṭabarī (9th-10th century), al-Ṭūsī (11th century), Ibn ʿArabī (12th-13th century), al-Qurṭubī (13th century), Ibn Kathīr (14th century), al-Jalālayn (15th century), and Rashīd Riḍā (20th century). Looking at those names, it raises a question that why none of them were written by woman? Not only that, literature on women has also been dominated by male scholars.<sup>4</sup>

This question has been seriously debated among the feminists who argued that Islamic scholarship had been monopolised by male scholars for many centuries. For them,

<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Ṣalāh ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Khālīdī, *Taʾrīf al-Dārisīn Bi Manābij al-Mufasssīrīn* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Wahiduddin Khan, *Women Between Islam and Western Society* (New Delhi: al-Risala Books, 1995); Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Asghar Ali Engineer, *Rights of Women and Muslim Societies*, 2004; Abū Aʿlā Mawdūdī, *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam*, 16th Editi (Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic Publication Ltd, 1988); Syed Mohammed Ali, *The Position of Women in Islam: A Progressive View* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2004); Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Qurʾān, Women, and Modern Society* (UK, USA & India: New Dawn Press, 2005).

there are instances where interpretation by male scholars had negatively affected women which perpetuated bias, discrimination, and injustice against them.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, the feminists were fully aware that women in the past have contributed to the interpretation of the Qur'an.

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

### 1. The Role of Woman as A Mufassir

*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 those other terms such as *ahl al-ta'wīl* (people of interpretation) were used."<sup>7</sup> This definition has been developed into specific conditions for anyone who seeks to interpret the Qur'an. These conditions include: having sound *'aqīdah* (belief); well-grounded in the knowledge of Arabic and its rules; 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 the Prophet (*ḥadīth*); refer to the reports from the *ṣahābah*; consider the reports from the *tābi'īn*; and consult the opinions of other eminent scholars.<sup>8</sup>

Based on that, gender is not included in the requirement of a *mufassir*. There is no specific condition that only men are allowed to interpret the Qur'an. The Islamic history also shows that being a woman is not an obstacle to be an expert in the Qur'an and its exegesis. They are many proofs that women around the Prophet PBUH including female Companions and Successors have contributed to Qur'anic exegesis, and their commentaries are as important as their male counterparts.

Taking 'Ā'ishah bint Abu Bakr RA 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 Islamic history. Her interpretation of the Qur'an belongs to *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* as she referred to the narrations of the Prophet (approximately 355 verses) and her own reasoning. 'Ā'ishah's contributions are not limited to women's issues but also includes legal, social, political, and other aspects. Several cases suggest that she might be the only one witnessed the process of revelation and understood the real context of revelation.

<sup>5</sup> Riffat Hassan, 'Challenging the Stereotypes of Fundamentalism: An Islamic Feminist Perspective', *The Muslim World* 91 (2001): 55–70.

<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195125580.001.0001>.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum Al Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an (Koran)* (Kano, Nigeria: The Islamic Foundation, 2011); Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*; al-Khālīdī, *Ta'rif al-Dārisīn Bi Manābij al-Mufasssīrīn*.

However, at this time, there was no single companion who wrote down their interpretations including famous Companions who were experts in *tafsīr* such as ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās, but their commentaries on the Qurʾān were transmitted orally to people and later were narrated to next generations and were incorporated in written works. Only in the twentieth century, two books were published compiling ‘Ā’ishah’s commentaries on the Qurʾān: first was written by Sa‘ūd ibn ‘Abdullāh al-Fanīsān<sup>9</sup> entitled *Marwiyyāt Umm al-Mu‘minīn ‘Ā’ishah fī al-Tafsīr*, and second was authored by ‘Abdullāh Abū al-Sa‘ūd Badar<sup>10</sup> with the title *Tafsīr Umm al-Mu‘minīn ‘Ā’ishah*.

Ummu Salamah is another example of a female companion who used to interpret Qurʾānic verses, such as verses 222-223 from Sūrah al-Baqarah, verse 195 from Sūrah Āli-Imrān, and 20 more Qurʾānic verses. She is one of the Prophet’s wives who also became one of the reasons Qurʾānic verses (The Qurʾān 33: 35, 9: 102, 9: 118) were revealed pertaining women. Besides, Fāṭimah bint Qays, an intelligent and wise Companion of the Prophet had experience in articulating her interpretation on specific verses from Sūrah al-Ṭalāq. Due to her courage on the matter of divorce, 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 who interpreted the Qurʾān and took part in exegetical activities. However, their narratives are not sufficient to elevate them to be considered as the scholars of Qurʾānic exegesis.

## 2. The Emergence of Contemporary Women Interpreters

The contributions of female scholars in the Qurʾānic exegesis as recorded in Islamic history are an important benchmark that women also can be well verse and enlightened in the interpretation of the Qurʾān. They fulfilled the requirements, and being a woman has nothing to do with their intellectual capabilities. Although there are not many studies conducted on the existence of female *mufassirs* compared to male *mufassirs*, it is worthy to mention that several efforts have been done to acknowledge women’s role in Qurʾānic exegesis.

A study has been conducted by Maslina in discovering women’s involvement in the field of Qurʾānic interpretation since the Prophet’s time until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> The article is entitled: ‘*Women’s Contribution in the Field of Quranic Interpretation: Analysis since the Beginning of Islam until the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.*’ It emphasizes that the earliest women group who played major role in the interpretation of the Qurʾān recorded in Islamic history was among the *ṣaḥābiyyāt* and *tābi‘īn*. Although there was a huge gap in the era of writing and producing of works of *tafsīr* particularly among women, the study found that Zayb al-Nisā’ can be regarded as the first female *mufassir* whose *tafsīr* was published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and she has paved the way to proof that the authority of female *mufassir* is comparable to that of the male *mufassir*.

Besides, Afaf has discussed several female *mufassirs* in her studies: *Min Juhūd al-Mar’ah fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm fī al-‘Asr al-Ḥadīth* (The Efforts of Women in the Interpretation of the Qurʾān in the Modern Era); and *Min Juhūd al-Mar’ah “al-Mubassir li Nūr*

<sup>9</sup> Sa‘ūd Ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Fanisan, *Marwiyyāt Umm al-Mu‘minīn ‘Ā’ishah Fī al-Tafsīr* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Tawbah, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Abd Allāh Abū al-Sa‘ūd, *Tafsīr Umm al-Mu‘minīn ‘Ā’ishah* (Riyadh: Dār ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Maslina Muhammad, Mustaffa Abdullah, and Monika Munirah Abd Razzak, ‘Sumbangan Wanita Dalam Bidang Tafsir : Sorotan Dari Zaman Awal Islam Hingga Abad Ke 18’, *Online Journal Research in Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 29–43.

*al-Qurʾān*”: *Awwal Juhd Kāmil fī Tafsīr li al-Marʾah* (The Efforts of Woman in ‘*al-Mubassir li Nūr al-Qurʾān*’: The First Effort in the Interpretation of Tafsīr for Women).<sup>12</sup> She did not focus on any specific period of time but has selected three female scholars and their contributions in *tafsīr* who are ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, Zaynab al-Ghazālī and Ḥannān al-Laḥḥām. In another study she also includes Nā’ilah Hāshim Ṣabrī who wrote a work of *tafsīr* entitled: *al-Mubassir li Nūr al-Qurʾān* and discussed its content and the methodology applied by the author in her works.

In addition to that, Aydar and Atalay wrote an article ‘*Female Scholars of Quranic Exegesis in the History of Islam*’ which covers nine Muslim female scholars and one female orientalist who were involved directly or indirectly in Qurʾanic exegesis. Interestingly, it categorises these scholars respectively under three categories of *tafsīr*: complete *tafsīr*, incomplete *tafsīr*, and partial *tafsīr*.<sup>13</sup> The complete *tafsīr* contains the interpretation of the whole Qurʾan, and the example is *Zayb al-Tafāsir fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* which was written by Zayb al-Nisā’. Meanwhile, the incomplete *tafsīr* is intended to cover the whole Qurʾan but yet to be completed, such as that written by Semra Kürün Çekmegil which only so far has 8 volumes. The partial *tafsīr*, refers to that which covers only a part of the Qurʾan like one chapter, for instance, ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd al-Raḥmān who wrote *al-Tafsīr al-Bayān li al-Qurʾān al-Ḥakīm*. The study also found that the language used by these female scholars are diverse, where the majority of them are in Arabic, two of them are Persian, two of them are Turkish, and only one is in German.

Nevertheless, this study found that none of the previous studies have collected the female scholars of *tafsīr* comprehensively and completely. Thus, this study aims to gather their names together with their contributions in Qurʾanic exegesis from the eighteenth century to the present day.

In the eighteenth century, history recorded that the first woman who wrote a *tafsīr* was Zayb al-Nisā’ 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 Safevid dynasty. She dedicated her entire life to learn and to teach, without getting married. Her work on *tafsīr* was given a title *Zayb al-Tafāsir fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, but there are two different opinions regarding this work. First, a view saying that it is merely a translated version of *Tafsīr al-Rāzī* into Persian. Second, a view stating that it is not a translation but a distinct *tafsīr* which only made use of its antecedents. If the first view is correct, it cannot be considered as a *tafsīr*, but if the second view is accepted, her *tafsīr* might be the first written work of Qurʾanic exegesis by a female scholar.<sup>14</sup> Her name was the only one among the female *mufassir* mentioned in *Muʾjam al-Mufassirīn min Ṣadr al-Islām hattā al-ʿAsr al-Ḥādīr* written by Adil Nuwayhad.<sup>15</sup>

In the nineteenth century, there was no single female scholar who published works of *tafsīr*, but the appearance of women interpreters has started at the end of the nineteenth

<sup>12</sup> Afaf Abd al-Ghafur Hamid, ‘Min Juhūd al-Marʾah Fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm Fī al-ʿAṣr al-Ḥādīr’, *Majallat Kuliyah Sharīʿah Wa al-Dirasāt al-Islāmiyyah* 25 (2007): 166–232.

<sup>13</sup> Hidayet Aydar and Mehmet Atalay, ‘Female Scholars of Quranic Exegesis in the History of Islam’, *Journal of Theology Faculty of Bülent Ecevit University* 1, no. 2 (2014): 1–34.

<sup>14</sup> Aydar and Atalay.

<sup>15</sup> Ah Fawaid, ‘Pemikiran Mufasir Perempuan Tentang Isu-Isu Perempuan’, *KARSA: Jurnal Sosial Dan Budaya Keislaman* 23, no. 1 (2015): 57–80; Muhammad, Abdullah, and Abd Razzak, ‘Sumbangan Wanita Dalam Bidang Tafsir : Sorotan Dari Zaman Awal Islam Hingga Abad Ke 18’.

century and bloomed in the twentieth century. First, Nusret Begüm Emin (1890-1983) from Iran might be considered as the first non-Arab woman who embarked on an exegetical work of the entire Qurʾān. She was also known as Banu Amin, Banu Irani and Bintu Mujtahidah. She was the only female scholar during her time, and she became a specialist in jurisprudence as well as Islamic studies, particularly Qurʾānic studies. Her work on *tafsīr* known as *Makhzan al-Irfan der Tafsīr Qurʾān* was written in Persian, in 30 chapters (15 volumes), and it was based on Shiite interpretation.

Nonetheless, ʿĀʾishah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (1913-1998), also known as Bint al-Shāṭī, might be the first woman to have pioneered Qurʾānic exegesis from a female perspective.<sup>16</sup> She applied a contextual approach and mostly critiqued orthodox interpretations of religious texts. She is also known as the author of various books including books on biographies of women of the Prophetic households.<sup>17</sup> Her book *al-Tafsīr al-Bayān li al-Qurʾān al-Ḥakīm* consists of the interpretation of seven chapters of *Juz ʿAmmā* (al-Ḍuḥā, al-Inshirah, al-Zalzalah, al-ʿĀdiyāt, al-Nāziʿāt, al-Balad, and al-Takāthur), and seven other short chapters in the second book (al-ʿAlaq, al-Qalam, al-ʿAṣr, al-Layl, al-Fajr, al-Humazah, and al-Māʿūn).

In the twenty-first century, a female scholar of Qurʾānic exegesis worthy of mention in this context is Zaynab al-Ghazālī (1917-2005). She is an Egyptian scholar who wrote a complete *tafsīr* entitled *Naẓarāt fī Kitābillah*. Her interpretation has a reformative tendency that drives the Qurʾān 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 Islamic rules and regulations.<sup>18</sup>

From Egypt to Palestine, Nāʾilah Hāshim Ṣabrī (1944-present) who originated from Qalqilya, a city in the West Bank of Palestine. She started writing *al-Mubassir li Nūr al-Qurʾān* in 1982, in 11 volumes, but could be only printed in full in 2003 and published by the end of 2013. This *tafsīr* covers the Qurʾān as a whole which was the result of her lengthy study that lasted about 20 years.<sup>19</sup> The methodology applied in her *tafsīr* are varied: first, contextual approach by referring to the context of the verses revealed; second, interpretation by narrations (*tafsīr bi al-riwāyah*) by referring to the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet PBUH and words of his Companions; third, scientific approach by engaging modern monumental scientific and technological developments as pointed out by the Qurʾān; and fourth, semantic and rhetoric approach by focusing on the linguistic aspect.<sup>20</sup> She also wrote many other books in various fields, among them are *Tajwīd Āyāt al-Raḥmān fī Tilāwāt al-Qurʾān*, *Kawākib al-Nisāʾ*, *Fī Zilāl Āyāt al-Raḥmān*, and others.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Roded, ‘Bint al-Shati’s “Wives of the Prophet”: Feminist or Feminine?’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006): 51–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530190600603915>.

<sup>17</sup> Mervat F. Hatem, ‘A’isha Abdel Rahman: An Unlikely Heroine A Post-Colonial Reading of Her Life and Some of Her Biographies of Women in the Prophetic Household’, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011): 1–26.

<sup>18</sup> Zaynab al-Ghazālī, *Naẓarāt Fi Kitāb Allāh* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Maslina Muhammad, Mustaffa Abdullah, and Monika Munirah Abd Razzak, ‘Nailah Hashim Sabri: Tokoh Tafsir Wanita Abad Ke-21’, *Journal al-Muqaddimah* 7, no. 2 (2019): 1–12.

<sup>20</sup> Aydar and Atalay, ‘Female Scholars of Quranic Exegesis in the History of Islam’; Muhammad, Abdullah, and Abd Razzak, ‘Nailah Hashim Sabri: Tokoh Tafsir Wanita Abad Ke-21’.

Another female scholar is Hannān al-Lahhām (1943-present) who originated from Syria, and received her education there, but in 1979, she migrated to Saudi Arabia with her family. She interpreted 13 chapters in the Qurʾān and published them under the title *Silsilat al-Nazarāt fī Kitābillah*. She also produced several works focused for children in understanding the meaning of the Qurʾān, such as *Hikāyat li Ahfādī* which contains her stories to her grandchildren based on the Qurʾān. She was actively teaching Qurʾānic studies in the Female Faculty at King Abdul Aziz University of Jeddah. Her recent works on *tafsīr* were published by Qurʾānic chapters, for example, *Tafsīr Sūrah al-Ṭalāq* and *Tafsīr Sūrah al-Tawbah*.<sup>21</sup> The writing style of the author can be divided into two: first, writing that targets mature readers by discussing the Qurʾān based on a particular surah, analysing its themes, as well as examining the reasons of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). While the second approach targets children and the writing is accompanied by short stories in a coloured book.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, there is a Turkish female scholar who had contributed to 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 and Atalay, her work entitled *Okuyucu Tefsiri* was the first *tafsīr* written by a female scholar in Turkey.<sup>23</sup> She started writing this *tafsīr* in 2004 and published several parts in 8 volumes in 2006. Another Turkish female scholar, Necla Yasdıman (1962-present) published *Kurʾan Tahlili: Araçça Gramer İşığında Sözlük-Meal-Tefsir* gradually from 2006 until 2014. She is a PhD holder, who had numerous 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 into three stages: first, dictionary meaning; second, grammatical analysis; and third, explication. However, it is an incomplete *tafsīr* because it contains several Qurʾānic chapters only.

Another female scholar in *tafsīr* is Fevkiyye Ibrahim al-Sirbini who actively delivered lectures on Islamic studies in Cairo, Egypt. She wrote *Taysīr al-Tafsīr* which primarily depended on her lectures which were recorded and transcribed by the audience. The *tafsīr* was completely compiled in 2006 and it covered the whole Qurʾān. The language used in her book is easy to understand and presented in phenomenological way.<sup>24</sup>

There is a female scholar who originated from Doha, Qatar, known as Kāmilah bint Muḥammad al-Kawārī. She memorized the whole Qurʾān and had a master's degree specialising in Islamic law. She published many religious books and one of her outstanding works on *tafsīr* is *Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qurʾān*. In this *tafsīr*, she tried to explain the rare and peculiar words mentioned in the Qurʾān which cannot be literally understood. It was published in 2008 and has one volume only.<sup>25</sup>

In addition 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

<sup>21</sup> Aydar and Atalay, 'Female Scholars of Quranic Exegesis in the History of Islam'.

<sup>22</sup> Ulya Fikriyati, 'Reinterpretasi Teks al-Qur'an: Analisis Status Tafsir Pada Akun Facebook Hanan Lahham', *Subuf* 11, no. 1 (2018): 55–76, <https://doi.org/10.22548/shf.v11i1.302>.

<sup>23</sup> Aydar and Atalay, 'Female Scholars of Quranic Exegesis in the History of Islam'.

<sup>24</sup> Aydar and Atalay.

<sup>25</sup> Kāmilah bint Muḥammad al-Kawārī, *Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2008); See as well: Kāmilah bint Muḥammad al-Kawārī, 'al-Sīrah al-Dhātīyah', Mawqī' Ṭālibat al-ʿIlm Kāmilah al-Kawārī, accessed 1 August 2021, <http://alkuwarih.com/content/السيرة الذاتية>.

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 being approved to publication. According to Shaykh Ibrahim Negm, spokesperson for Egypt's Grand Mufti Ali Goma, her interpretation of the Qur'an was made for the youth, using simple language and writing style.<sup>26</sup>

Another scholar is Miyadah bint Kamil al-Madi who produced her exegetical work entitled *al-Durrah fī Tafsīr Sūrah al-Baqarah*.<sup>27</sup> The main purpose of writing this *tafsīr* was to help her students in understanding the message and contents of Sūrah al-Baqarah and in memorising this second chapter of the Qur'an. Besides al-Baqarah, she also interpreted other chapters such as Sūrah al-Nisā' and Sūrah al-Mā'idah, but it has been published yet. She is also an expert in the knowledge of al-Qira'āt.<sup>28</sup>

There are also female scholars who contributed to 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*.<sup>29</sup> She emphasised the issue of *hijāb* as mentioned in verses from Sūrah al-Ahzāb and Sūrah al-Nūr. 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 the Qur'an as 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 suggests a hermeneutic model that considers the context in which the text was written or revealed, grammatical composition of the whole text, and its *Weltanschauung* or worldview as an important methodology in reinterpreting Islamic texts.<sup>30</sup>

Hibah Rouf Izzat (1965-present) is another female scholar who offered the reinterpretation of several Qur'anic verses relating to women, especially the role of women in the public sphere. Her work includes *al-Mar'ah wa al-'Amal al-Siyāsī: Ru'yah Islāmīyah* and she published many other books, and is still active in writing until today.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Yasmine Saleh, 'Kariman Hamzah: Egypt's First Female Quran Interpreter', Daily News Egypt, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Miyadah bint Kamil, *al-Durrah Fī Tafsīr Surah al-Baqarah* (Beirut: Mu'assasah Risalah, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Shahrī, 'Šudira Ḥadīthan Kitāb al-Durrah Fī Tafsīr Sūrat al-Baqarah Li al-Ustādhah Miyādah al-Maḍī', Multaqa Ahl al-Tafsīr, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Nazīrah Zein Ed-Dīn, 'Removing the Veil and Veiling', *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, no. 2 (1982): 221–26, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(82\)90029-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(82)90029-2).

<sup>30</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading a Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Hibah Ra'uf Izzat, *al-Mar'ah Wa al-'Amal al-Siyasi: Ru'yah Islamiyyah* (Herndon: al-Ma'had al-'Alamiy li al-Fikr al-Islamiy, 1996).

The last but not least, Ulfa Yousef (1964-present) who is a Tunisian scholar who continued to enrich the discipline of Qurʾanic exegesis. She represents a Moroccan-secular perspective in interpreting Qurʾanic verses and the Prophetic *ḥadīth* concerning women issues. She published her doctoral study entitled *Polysemy in the Quran* (2003) which highlighted the linguistic approach of the Qurʾan. Her other works on the Qurʾan 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 diamonds in the sky. They were not many as male scholars of *tafsīr*, but they possessed special qualities and were significant members of society. Presence of women is vital in addressing women issues and solving their problems, because male interpretations might be accused of being biased due to gender differences. Although there are male scholars who are academically and theologically free of gender bias, this study aims to acknowledge the contributions of women in Qurʾanic exegesis in the past and present.

### 3. Findings and Analysis

From the historical points of view, women have contributed to various fields of study beginning from the Prophet's time which indicates that women scholarship have been acknowledged in the past. However, in the field of *tafsīr*, women who published books on *tafsīr* and became experts in Qurʾanic studies are relatively unknown in society. The findings from this study can be discussed as follow.

#### 3.1 Different formats, different purposes

Based on the number of female interpreters and their works as mentioned previously (summarised in Table 1), some of the publications cover the whole Qurʾan, some include partial of the Qurʾan, and some focus on several Qurʾanic verses only. It is high probable that each of them had different purposes in publishing their works in Qurʾanic exegesis. Fevkiyye Ibrahim al-Sirbini's *tafsīr* covers the whole Qurʾan, which is a compilation of her lectures with the help from her students. Miyadah bint Kamil al-Madi also had a specific purpose to write her *tafsīr*, which was to help her students understand a specific chapter in the Qurʾan. While the exegetical works of Nusrat Begum Emin and Nāʾilah Hāshim Ṣabrī covers all the Qurʾanic chapters, the *tafsīrs* of Semra Kürün Çekmegil and Necla yasdıman contains parts of the Qurʾan only, as perhaps they require more time to publish the rest of their works. Among the scholars who only interpreted several verses from the Qurʾan were Nazira Zayn al-Din, Amina Wadud, and Hibah Rouf Izzat, where all three selected the verses based on specific issues which they addressed in their particular works.

Table 1: Women Scholars and Their Exegetical Works

| Name                               | Origin | Publication                                 |
|------------------------------------|--------|---|
| Zayb al-Nisā' al-Makir (1658-1702) | India  | <i>Zayb al-Tafāsir fī Tafāsir al-Qurʾān</i> |
| Nusret Begüm Emin (1890-1983)      | Iran   | <i>Makhzan al-Irfan der Tafāsir Qurʾan</i>  |

|                                     |               |  |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|--|
| 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān (1913–1998) | Egypt         | <i>al-Tafsīr al-Bayān li al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm</i>  |
| Zaynab al-Ghazālī(1917-2005)        | Egypt         | <i>Nazarāt fī Kitābillah</i>   |
| Nā'ilah Hāshim Ṣabrī (1944-present) | Palestine     | <i>al-Mubassir li Nūr al-Qur'ān</i>  |
| Hannān al-Lahhām (1943-present)     | Syria         | <i>Silsilat al-Nazarāt fī Kitābillah.</i>  |
| Semra Kürün Çekmegil                | Turkey        | <i>Okuyucu Tefsiri</i>   |
| Necla Yasdıman (1962-present)       | Turkey        | <i>Kur'an Tahlili: Arapça Gramer Işığında Sözlük-Meal-Tefsir</i>   |
| Fevkiyye Ibrahim al-Sirbini         | Turkey        | <i>Taysir al-Tafsir</i>  |
| Kāmilah bint Muhammad al-Kawāri     | Qatar         | <i>Tafsir Gharib al-Qur'ān</i>   |
| Kariman Hamzah                      | Egypt         | <i>al-Lu'lu wa al-Marjān fī Tafsir al-Qur'ān</i>   |
| Miyadah bint Kamil al-Madi          |               | <i>al-Durrah fī Tafsir Sūrah al-Baqarah</i>  |
| Nazira Zayn al-Din (1908-1976)      | Lebanon       | <i>al-Sufur wa al-Hijāb</i>  |
| Amina Wadud (1952-present)          | United States | <i>Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspectives</i>   |
| Hibah Rouf Izzat (1965-present)     | Egypt         | <i>al-Mar'ah wa al-'Amal al-Siyāsi: Ru'yah Islāmiyyah</i>  |
| Ulfa Yousef (1964-present),         | Tunisia       | <i>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).</i> |

### 3.2 Different methods and approaches

These women had adopted different methods and approaches to interpret and reinterpret Qur'anic texts. Interpretation needs in-depth and extensive knowledge of various aspects including theology, linguistics, history, and many others, while reinterpretation begins with re-reading critically, displacing traditional interpretation,

and coming with 'new' interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, each female scholar of Qurʾanic exegesis not only has different purposes of publishing their works, but 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 Qurʾanic verses to correct false stories in general circulation; (2) citing verses that explicitly enunciate the equality of women and men; and (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 *ḥadīth* and other reliable traditions to support their interpretations like Nāʾilah Hāshim Ṣabrī; contextual approach by referring to the appropriate context like ʿĀʾishah ʿAbd al-Rahmān, Zaynab al-Ghazāli, Fatima Mernissi and many others; and linguistic approach such as 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."<sup>33</sup> Only one *tafsīr* published by a female scholar was based on Shiite interpretation, while the majority were sunni.

### 3.3 Women 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-ʿAyn (mid 1800s, from Iran), Fatima Aliya Hanim (late 1800s, from Turkey), Zaynab al-Fawwāz (late 1800s, from Lebanon), ʿĀʾishah al-Taimuriyya and Zaynab 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.<sup>34</sup> The women-friendly interpretation aims to remove bias or discrimination from male perspectives which might distance women from having their rights accordingly.

### 3.4 Need and demands of women scholars in *tafsīr*

According to Barazangi, there is a high demand for female scholars who can contribute to Islamic thought and knowledge to avoid any misinterpretations from the opposite gender.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the absence of women scholars is also one of the factors that have made women feel that 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

<sup>32</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, 'Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1135–71.

<sup>33</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London, UK and New York, USA: Zed Books Ltd, 1999); Nur Saadah Binti Khair, 'Anti-Woman Discourse in the Hadith Literature: An Analytical Study of Debates in Literary Works of Feminists and Fundamentalists' (University of Birmingham, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Nimat Hafez Barazangi, 'The Absence of Muslim Women in Shaping Islamic Thought: In Shaping Foundations of Muslims' Peaceful and Just Co-Existence', *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008): 403–32.

to protect any discrimination against women which limits their rights to seek knowledge and practice it.

### 3.5 Differences between male and female's interpretations

There are different views in comparing both male and female interpretations. First, female scholars of Qurʾanic Exegesis have their own views but are still in line with male interpretation particularly in the issue of women's rights. Women scholars also promote the importance of man's position as a leader in the family as mentioned in verse 4 from Sūrah al-Nisā'. Zaynab al-Ghazālī interpreted the word '*qawwāmūn*' 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 is responsible in managing everything in the house.<sup>36</sup> She emphasised that this verse should not be an excuse for a man to commit violence and discrimination against women.

Second, there are female scholars who referred 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 stated that the word '*qānitāt*' cannot be seen as an obedience to the husband, as this verse was intended for both husband and wife.<sup>37</sup> She quoted Sayyid Qutb's opinion in his *tafsīr* that this choice of word was intended to be personal emotional response rather than the external 'following of orders' which *tā'ah* (obedience) would suggest. Thus, because of '*nushūz*' is disorder between husband and wife, so the Qurʾan provides perfect solutions that need to be followed by husbands in order to maintain harmony in the marriage.

Third, there is no contradiction between male and female scholars in the interpretation of the Qurʾan. For example, in the meaning of word '*ḍaraba*', although it literally means 'to beat' or 'to strike', male scholars like Ibn Kathīr and Rashīd Riḍā highlighted that the purpose of this action is to educate, not to hurt the woman.<sup>38</sup> Surprisingly, Amina Wadud agreed that the action is only allowed for very extreme cases.<sup>39</sup> It is also undeniable to mention that there are many other interpretations on this sensitive topic.

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

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study achieved its objective to discover the historical background of women participations in Qurʾanic studies, to examine emergence of women scholars in contemporary time, and to analyse the importance of women's interpretation of religious texts concerning women. It is found that women have contributed to Qurʾanic exegesis since the Prophet's time, and their works on *tafsīr* has been published starting in the eighteenth century until present day. From the findings, it is important to acknowledge that all *tafsīrs* written by female *mufasssirs* – whether completed or yet to be completed – have different formats, purposes, methods, and approaches. There is also a need and demand for women scholars in Qurʾanic exegesis, because undeniably, there are

<sup>36</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Naẓarāt Fi Kitāb Allāh*.

<sup>37</sup> Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading a Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspectives*.

<sup>38</sup> Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAzīm* (Beirut: Dār Maktabah al-Hilāl, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading a Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspectives*.

differences found in the interpretations of male and female scholars. However, it is vital to highlight that the main responsibility to understand the Qur'an and apply its teachings in daily life should not be determined by gender, but it lies within an individual's obligation.

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 views 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 is a great achievement that women since the time of the Prophet engaged in interpreting the Qur'an and this legacy continues till this day.

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