A Contextual Approach to the Views of Muslim Feminist Interpretation of the Qur’an Regarding Women and Their Rights

Md. Yousuf Ali, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract: The interpretation of the verses of the Qur’an regarding women’s rights, role, and leadership is a challenge and much debatable subject. In Islam, the Qur’an is seen by almost all Muslims as the words of Allah (swt). The majority Muslim exegetes interpreted the verses of the Qur’an by applying a method of literal reading. In modern context, Muslim feminist interpreters of the Qur’an have applied contextual and historical reading of the Qur’an toward understanding women’s rights and leadership, which engrosses reading a verse with regard to the historical, social, and political context in which the verses were revealed. This approach aims to liberate Muslims from a literal reading of the Qur’an and to liberalize Muslims from stringency with regard to basic human rights and equality between men and women, which articulate the values of a true Islam. Such approach is supported by many modern Muslim scholars. However, by applying this method, Muslim feminists face a great challenge and accusation from traditional Muslim exegetes. The accusation is that feminist scholarship is not loyal to the teachings of Islam and denies its heritage, which is the contribution of a male domain experiences. Such approach also produces liberal Islam and liberal Shariah, influenced by the Western values and imposed upon Islam and Muslims as believed by anti-feminists. The article focuses on how the method of contextualization is applied to some contentious verses in the Qur’an, which discuss women’s rights and their roles in the society. Two questions on the basis of those verses will be examined; one is the question of men’s authority over women and the other is woman’s leadership in modern context. For instances, the contentious verse 4:34 recognizes man’s authority and superiority over woman for certain tasks and the verse 9:71 also recognizes the sovereign power of women ‘al-Wilaayah al-Mutlaqah’ equally in participating nation-building. We examine how two contemporary feminists Muslim thinkers; Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and Aminah Wadud Muhsin, an African-American professor of Islamic Studies use the hermeneutical method of contextual reading to interpret the texts of the Qur’an. The article also evaluates the theoretical and practical challenges faced by them from traditional exegetes and argues that whether such a methodology strengthens their arguments and establishes woman’s rights and their roles in society? It is also argued that through the interpretation of the contextualization one may find difference with the previous interpretation of the Qur’an, which is central to feminists exegesis.

Keywords: women’s rights, feminists, contextualization, literal reading

Introduction
The interpretation of the verses of the Qur’an regarding women’s rights, role and position of women is a challenge and much debatable. In Islam, the Qur’Én is seen by all Muslims as the
words of Allah(swt) and it is translated by almost all Muslim exegetes by using the method of literal reading, which cannot be rejected by the feminist scholars. In contemporary period, Muslim feminist interpreters interpreted the Qur’an by applying a method of contextualization, which absorbs reading a verse with regard to the historical, situational, social and political context in which the verses were revealed. Such approach aims to liberate Muslims from a literal reading of the Qur’an and to liberalize Muslims to implement equal rights of humanity, which articulate the values of a true Islam. Such an approach is supported by many contemporary Muslim scholars as Charles Kurzman identifies it as the liberal shariah approach in broader sense. However, Muslim feminist interpreters have faced confrontation from anti-feminists and traditional exegetes including accusation. The accusation is that the feminist scholarship denies the past contribution of the early Muslim scholars who were the authority of Islam. Feminists are not loyal to the true teaching of Islam, but produce a liberal shariah and liberal Islam. It is also argued that such an approach imposed western values upon Islam and Muslims. However, feminist interpreters of the Qur’an have a problem regarding woman’s rights and roles with the contentious verses from feminist perspective on which the Qur’an is relatively silent. That is why; this is necessary to examine the exegetical method of contextual reading utilized by scholars who seek to undermine the authority of this literal interpretation and focuses on contextual reading of the verse. It is also an important that through contextual reading of the verse one can find some differences between the mass age of the Qur’an and the previous interpretation. The distinction is the central point of this study according to the feminist scholars regarding woman’s rights in the society.

In the history of exegesis of the Qur’ān, the mainstream interpretation of the verse is based on upon both a literal and de-contextualized reading: men’s authority over women, who are should be obedient of men, and women’s leadership is permissible in developing the society. With regard to the literal readings of the contentious verses of the Qur’an concerning women’s roles, rights and leadership, it must be noted that the early as well as modern exegetes commented on that with different approaches and justified the inherent superiority of men over women. In the verse 4:34, for example, the classical exegetes al-Qālī `Abdul Nā’īz bin al-Baraj, Al-Qurtubi, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn `Arabi emphasized that the ‘qawwamun ‘alaa women’ to mean ‘men are in charge of the affairs of women as leaders to fulfill the rights of women at the family level. Al-qawwamun, to Ibn Manzur, is rectification, correction, heed, responsibility and liability toward family. Alusi argues that men’s leadership is a gifted quality, (wahbi), given to men absolutely by Allah and also acquired quality (kasbi), achieved by man’s power of evaluation. Based on the verse, he argues that man’s superiority over women is inherent quality from God, because of women’s deficient in intellect and weakness in din. In history of Islam, there was no woman prophet, but all are male. So Khilafah, Imamat-i-kubra or sughra (major and minor leadership), Adhan, Iqamat, khuthba etc. are confined to men, who are the authority to rule the nation and lead prayers. In modern period, scholars such as, Maududi and Yusuf al-Qarašawi interpreted the term ‘qawwamun’ as ‘men are as guardians and in charge over women. Maududi commented on the Hadith of Abu Bakrah that nation would not prosper which hands over the supremacy of its state to a woman. Based on the above, he argued that women would enjoy the right to vote as it was allowed in the early period of Islam but she is proscribed to contest in elections for either parliament or cabinet positions or the head of the state. His four conditions i.e. to be a Muslim, a
male, adult and citizen of the state, also prevent them for being the eligibility of the head of the state and the parliament members. Maududi passionately defended the system of the total seclusion of women, and the absolute segregation of sexes under the system of veiling with his normative approach. He argued that the verse 4:34 obliges women to stay at home otherwise; it would be a violation of the commandments of Allah (swt) and considered as sinful act. His logical analysis is that there are basic differences between men and women because men are born with physical strength and hard working, while women are born with emotion, politeness, softness and weakness. His justification shows that getting involvement in civil-political affairs would jeopardize family life and leads to chaos, as it would upset the natural function of women. ‘Qawwamun `ala women’ Yusuf al-Qarawi argues, means ‘men are the guardian of the family and he is obliged to be undertaker of his wife and children’. He argued that the verse 2:228 obliges men to hold high position upon women and to take all their burdens and responsibilities. Mahmud Saltut argues that ‘men’s leadership over women’ is not the position of king or high official key position but man’s leadership over women at home in fulfilling their all needs and responsibilities. The superiority of men, Ibn ‘Arabi argues, is due to three reasons on the basis of a Hadith: a. perfect understanding, b. perfection of din, and c. participating in jihad and enjoining the good and preventing the evil. Men with having all qualities would be able to carry out the heavy burden of the nation and society. Al-Shami explained the purpose of remaining women at home for safeguarding their modesty and chastity from ill-treatment and slavery. Muhammad Shafi argues based on the verse 2:228 that man has a special superior quality over woman in order to carry out all her burdens and expenditures including family responsibilities. Rashid Rida also believed the equal rights of women like men in all aspects of life, but man’s superiority over woman in leading, managing, developing and maintaining the family, society and nation. However, Fazlur Rahman(1919-1988) argues that men’s superiority is not inherent quality, but agrees that ‘men are in charge over women because they must fulfill their duties towards women and the functional authority can be further contextualized.

The article, however, focuses on how the contextual reading approach is applied to interpret some contentious verses interpreted by feminists regarding women’s rights and roles. Two questions on the basis of those verses will be examined; one is the question of men’s authority over women and the other is woman’s leadership in modern context. For instances, the contentious verse 4:34 recognizes man’s authority and superiority over woman for certain tasks and the verse 9:71 also recognizes the sovereign power of women ‘al-Wilayah al-Mutlaqah’ equally in participating nation-building. We also examine how two contemporary feminist Muslim thinkers; Fatima Mernissi, and Aminah Wadud Muhsin, have applied the hermeneutical method of contextual reading to interpret the sacred texts of the Qur’an. The article also evaluates the theoretical and practical challenges faced by them from traditional exegetes and argues that whether such a methodology strengthens their arguments and establishes woman’s rights and their roles in society? It is also argued that through the interpretation of the contextualization one may find difference with the previous interpretation of the Qur’an, which is central to feminists exegesis.
The Method of Contextualization

The method of contextualization in interpreting the Qur'ān with its social and historical context is not a new style. Among the Muslim classical exegetes such as al-Tabari (838-923), Ibn Kathir (1301-1373), al-Qurtubi, Ibn Hazm, and Ibn al-ʻArabi, asbab al-nuzal (the occasions of the revelation), historical context, situations and al-tafsir bi-riwayah (exegesis based on reason and experience) had been used in interpreting the Qur’ān. Verses were interpreted by referring to particular historical event, the Hadith literatures and biography of the prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). In fact, there was a question whether a particular ruling or order in the Qur’ān is to be universally applicable or not? However, it is understood that even though law was made by a specific situation, but its application nevertheless becomes universal. Thus, the contemporary Muslim exegetes such as Mawdūdi, Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad ʻAbduhu (1849-1905), Rashid Rida, Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), Fatima Mernissi (b1940), and Amina Wadud (b1952) have applied a method of explanatory and contextualization in interpreting the Qur’ān.

However, contextual reading method is only applied to cases which have two literal readings of the Qur’ān or more meanings of the verses or context is applied in order to maintain the chronology of the verses, but not to change their real meanings, or when there is a contradiction between verses, contextual reading is an essential in order to understand the applicable meaning of the verses. It is also argued that if using asbab al-nuzul, historical context and al-rewayah in interpreting the Qur’ān is permissible by the traditional exegetes, and then using contextual method in interpreting the contentious verses should be valid in modern context. The method of abrogation, for example, by which a later verse was substitute of the previous verse, which is supported by the Qur’ān that indicates that God revised His commands. (16:101) This also indicates that God abrogates its order in place of another, which is the best one and it contains more than one possible meanings. This placement shows that contextual reading is necessity in order to adjust the rulings with the situations. The method of usual interpretation focuses on one verse at a time, and refers to the sayings, doings and approvals of the prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) with analysis of linguistic intricacy and obscurity of that verse. According to modern Muslim scholars, there was a failure ‘to understand the Qur’ān as a deeper unity yielding a definite Weltanschauung’. Muslims did not engage ‘systematic working out of the values and principles of the Qur’ān’. In many cases, the interpretation of the Qur’ān was influenced by the custom of the conquered lands.

Today, some modern scholars argue that the verse should be read with regard to the occasions of revelation (asbab al-nuzul) in order to understand a true meaning of the verse as well as its purposes and universal principles related to the contemporary life. Mawdudi, for instance, as one of the original Islamic thinkers, adopted an explanatory or interpretive exposition instead of literal translation for understanding the message of the Qur’ān. His tafhim al-Qur’ān reveals that he was quite aware of the problems of modernity confronted by man and society. He therefore, argues that the Qur’ān was sent down to man in response to the practical needs of the early community, and as such, it was and continued to be a socio-religious guide for now. His explanatory interpretation has made popular of his tafhim al-Qur’ān because of his ability to apply the relevance of Islamic teachings to the problems of the present age and a relatively greater emphasis on the contemporary issues. In fact, Mawdudi has covered extremely wide
spectrum of subjects in vindicating the position of Islam and in relating the Qur’an to modern life by discussing the matter not merely from an ethical and spiritual viewpoint but also from an economics, political, and sociological angle appropriate to the subject matter. The aim of this approach is to understand the message of the Qur’an. From the very beginning, Mawdudi focused his attention on expounding the teachings of the Qur’an and improving the true spirit and nature of Islam among Muslim youths in particular and Muslims in general. One of the unique methods he adopted is the method of “an explanatory or interpretive exposition” — instead of giving literal translations of the text of the Qur’an — to make it easier for readers. The historical background, the context of every chapter (surah) in the beginning, the periods, circumstances and occasions of its revelation, ashab al-nuzul and the authentic sources of the issues, before discussing a particular issue, are discussed for understanding the real purpose of every single verse. The most significant methodology of his writing was that he chose a specific chapter and recited it a few times, and then studied it for a few days in order to arrive at the fundamental theme of the chapter under discussion. He then would begin his exegetical explanation of that chapter in a few sittings or in one sitting. The rational arguments are provided in his explanatory exposition.

Mawdudi, argues that modern educated Muslims should strive towards understanding all teachings of the Qur’an and implement them in real life using their knowledge, energy, ability, property and other efforts, not by overthrowing the government by force and using violence. Unlike Ayatullah Khomeini, Mawdudi is not primarily concerned with charting the path to power but rather with Islamizing the mindsets of people and shaping the Islamic state. In order to provide more effective understanding the Qur’an in modern context, he presents the Qur’an as an immediate and direct dialogue between God and man. He provides the backgrounds of the verses, and depicts the historical setting and environment in which the verses were revealed in the explanatory notes, which have been elaborated with the broad outlines of the total scheme of life adumbrated in the Qur’an and to suggest how this can be translated into the reality of the present time. This method is illustrated in Mawdudi’s understanding of war and peace treaties between Muslims and non-Muslims and polygamy, which was practiced by pre-Arabia and the Qur’an then, restricted the number of wives a man could have to four.

Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), another contemporary Islamic thinker, who argues that “The Qur’an is the divine response, through the prophet’s mind, to the moral-social situation of the prophet’s Arabia.” The Qur’an declares itself, he argues, to be a comprehensive guidance for the entire humanity. The response of the Qur’an was to the situation of the Arabia and it consists of moral, social, political, religious and legal pronouncement. It is the failure, he argues, for Muslims towards ‘understanding the Qur’an as a Qur’anic weltanschauung, proved disastrous’. In order to understand the Qur’an in modern context, he argues, one has to study the Qur’an, its formulated principles, objectives and application and to relate those principles and objectives to the moral-social situations of the present time. The interpreter, he suggests, should study carefully the present situation and analyzes its various components and implement the Qur’anic values afresh whatever necessary. One should not implement the rules of the Qur’an on the basis of its literal meaning, which shuts one’s eyes to social change and overwhelms its moral-social purposes and objectives. Every verse/surah, to him, always had a background and a historical context, which Muslim commentators of the Qur’an call ‘occasion of revelation’. Sometimes, the early Muslim community raised the questions and the Qur’an responded immediately with the general principles or the rulings for a specific issue/s. Those principles and rulings can be related and implemented to the contemporary society according to the need and situation. However, the method of contextualization is
illustrated for instance in his understanding of polygamy, which was practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia. The permission for polygamy for Muslims, he argues, was at a legal plane while the restrictions of four wives put on it were in the nature of a moral ideal towards which the society was expected to move, since it was not possible to remove polygamy at one stroke. However, the early exegetes interpreted the verse by using literal reading method within the time frame of the revelation. In modern context, Muslims should continue the interpretation with the method of contextualization beyond the time frame of the community.

A Contextual Approach by Feminist Interpreters

Fatima Mernissi

Fatima Mernissi39 (b.1940) applied the method of contextualization in the interpretation of the Qur’Én and explains critically the right, responsibility, authority and position of women from Islamic perspective. She has constructed the contemporary Islamic thought on the basis of a ‘historical reading’ and ‘contextual reading’ of the text. It is by undertaking *ijtihad* with a contextual and historical reading in line with the objectives of the *Shariah*. For understanding the Qur’an in modern context, one must, she argues, study and interpret its verses from historical, social, political and legal dimensions in which a verse is revealed. In her book, ‘Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry’, Mernissi laments women’s rights and roles in contemporary Muslim society, which she sketches to some early Islamic scholars who distorted and manipulated the texts of the Qur’an and *Ahadith* were fabricated. Women, she argues, were used by men as a political weapon; they were not given their rights, which made the subjugation of women. The early Muslim exegetes, she argues, added the causes of the revelation, its circumstances, and the linguistic analysis of each word etc, but the synthesis of the verses and *surah* are absent in analyzing its socio-political and psychological impact. However, without synthesis and examination, she argues, we today cannot understand all the complexities of the event, especially, rights and roles of women in modern context.42

With regard to equal rights, Umm Salma, a wife of the prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), Mernissi argues, was one of the leaders who asked the messenger of Islam for the equal participation of women in the management of military and political affairs.43 In response of her question, the verse 33:35 was revealed to the prophet, in which, Mernissi argues, God confirms the equal rights and roles of the two sexes as believers and surrenders to the all Mighty.44 It is an important to note that Umm Salma’s question, according to Mernissi, was the result of political agitation and certainly, not the capriciousness of an adored wife. From historical perspective, some women came to know from the wives of the prophet why Allah (swt) has spoken of you by name in the Qur’an, but nothing about us. Is there then nothing about us that merits mention?45 From the historical reading of the verse 4:11, Mernissi argues, was revealed like a bombshell among the male population of Medina, in which women were given inheritance. Before this verse, men only were assured the rights of inheritance in Arabia and women were usually part of the inherited goods. *Surah al-Nisa*, Mernissi argues, contains the new laws on inheritance and ‘woman would no longer be ‘inherited’ like camels and palm trees, but she would herself
The new laws put men of Medina in a difficult situation and some of them, Mernissi argues, rejected the new rulings about inheritance and they wished to continue to apply the custom of the *jahiliyyah* despite their conversion to Islam. There were many women during life time of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) who complained to him that they are deprived from gaining the privileges of inheritance such as the case of Umm Kajja, Kubaysha and so on. Even some raised the question, ‘how …one can give the right of women and children who do not work and earn their living?’ Jabir Ibn Abdullah had a blind and ugly girl cousin who had inherited a large fortune from her father, but neither he neither wanted to marry nor agreed letting her marry anyone else. According to the verse, prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) was asked to give her right and recited the verse 4:127:

“They ask of you a decision on the subject of women. Say; God has informed you of a decision. It has been told to you in the part of the book concerning fatherless girls to whom you have not handed over what is prescribed.”

The verses of the Qur’an, Mernissi argues, made it clear that Mohammad (peace be upon him) and his God are not always with their interests in mind. This new religion does not represent the promise of conquests, but also guides an ethical values and systems that imposed some sacrifices. It was, according to Mernissi, a significant improvement to the new situation in pre-Islamic Arabia, where women had no rights to inheritor own property. With regard to beating a wife, from the contextual reading of the verse 4:34, Mernissi argues ,that the verse was revealed in response to an incident concerning a woman who was beaten by her husband and hastened to the prophet Muhammad(peace be upon him) for mediation. Throughout the incident, Umm Salama and ‘Umar played the role of intermediaries with the prophet Mohammad(peace be upon him); Umm Salama spoke for the wife and ‘Umar for the husband.

With regard to slavery, the principle of the equality of all believers was set forth by the prophet and regulated by the Qur’an, which condemned slavery. Various verses such as 2:177, 90:13, 9:60 and 4:92, Mernissi argues, encouraged the freeing of slaves as an act of faith and a work of charity in order to show the equal position of women in Muslim society. The purposes of freeing of a dozen of slaves in the history of Islam, Mernissi argues, were to affirm the dignity of a slave as a human being in order to determine ‘social relations’ by making Islamic rulings and to prevent the practice of making women slaves prostitutions. Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) set the example by freeing, before marrying his wives, some of his wives who had been prisoners of the war. It was, she argues, a way of showing the egalitarian message of the new religion and was like a socio-cultural revolution in order to determine the equal position and status of women in the society.

With regard to participating to war in order to gain booty, the verse 4:32, Mernissi argues, declares the equal right to have the same privileges as men and consents their right to go to war and thus to gain booty. Al-Tabari stated that the verse; ‘for men there is reward for what they have earned, and likewise for women there is reward for what they have earned’ is an answer to women’s demand to bear arms, because war with access to booty, beside the trading of the Meccans and the agriculture of the Medinese, was one of the important resources of revenue.
In this regard, ‘Umar could not imagine that Islam overturns the practices of pre-Arabia. That is why, women’s demand to bear arms and to participate actively in military operations instead of passively waiting to be taken prisoner, as the jahiliyyah tradition required, seemed absurd according to ‘Umar. Preventing women from participating to war and sharing booty, Mernissi argues, was the practice of the pre-Islamic Arabia, because, according to al-Tabari, ‘men excluded women and children from inheriting, because….they did not go to war and did not share booty’.57 The verses nullified the practice of jahiliyyah and affirmed women’s rights to participate to war and gain booty.

With regard to the meaning of sufaha, Mernissi applies this Weltanschauung to a historical reading of 4:5. The ambiguous word ‘al-sufaha’(the foolish), she states, means ‘persons incapable of managing their fortune, who might squander their assets’. The meaning of the verse is ‘one should not hand over to a foolish person his or her fortune, whatever that person’s age or sex. The person, she argues, must put under guardianship with the guardian controlling the usage of the assets. Mernissi disagrees to limit the controversial meaning to one precise category of foolish people. Tabari, she referred to, insisted to put the general meaning of the word sufaha, which means, ‘people who do not achieve maturity in the sense of discernment’. It is wrong to specify only to one gender, which does not exist in the text of the Qur’Én as he said; ‘those who say that in this verse ‘sufaha’ specifically designates women are simply distorting the language’.58

Another interesting point raised by Mernissi’s analysis is the apparent disconnect between what God and prophet wanted. Mernissi argues that Mohammad (peace be upon him) was ‘troubled by divine revelations that went counter to his aims’ and that God wanted one thing and the prophet another. Mernissi’s exegesis advises that in order to evaluate the depth of the contemporary Muslims’ amnesia, which sees equality of the sexes as an alien phenomenon, that we must return to Medina, to its narrow streets where the debate on equality of sexes raged and where the men demanded it.

With regard to equal rights between sexes, Mernissi refers to the verse 33:35: “For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who are humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah’s praise, for them Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward”.59

The above verse, Mernissi argues, makes a clear that God provides the equal rights for both male and female as believers, that is, as members of the community. She argues that there is no ‘blatant contradiction’ between the verse 4:34 and 33:35. She explained the context of the verses. The first 4:34 was revealed in response to an incident about a woman who was beaten by her husband and complained to the prophet for mediation, the second 33:35 was revealed in response to the situation when some men and women went to shout about their conflicts at his door, as she describes:
“At that time he had to deal with serious military problems and often went off on expeditions. When he returned home, instead of finding rest, he was harassed by hordes of men and women who came to shout about their conflicts at his door. He had no longer the energy and vigor of youth.”

With regard to the violence on women, Mernissi raised the question that prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) advised his companions not to mistreat women, but Umar represented a contrary opinion. How can, she was surprise’ we account for the fact that such an important disagreement between the prophet and Umar on violence towards women, was not made subject of syntheses and treatises of fiqh which put the sunnah into perspective for the believer? However, she selectively uses the sources but she did not discuss the historical challenges involved in arriving at this picture, particularly, Umar’s approach who tried to influence the prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) as she raised the question. The motivation of the prophet, Mernissi argues, was not to mistreat wives, that is why he never had beaten his wives and he told men who did that they were not the best among you. However, Mernissi raised another question about the revelation, why God did not send down another verse in order to settle down the demand of equality made by women. In this situation, Mernissi needs to argue strongly that the verse may be temporary measure to avoid internal conflict and she also needs to refers to either the Quran or Hadith.

**Amina Wadud-Muhsin**

Wadud focuses on two methods, namely, a common thematic and hermeneutic method. The theme contains the Qur’an’s conceptualization of gender and gender relationships and the second contains her hermeneutic method, which focuses on how best to read the text itself, particularly contentious verses in order to discover ‘a women’s voice’ therein. She concentrated on examining ‘what the Qur’an says, how it says it, what is said about the Qur’an, and who is doing the saying’. The aim of her interpretation of the Qur’an is ‘to make a reading of it that would be meaningful to women living in the modern era with the process of reviewing the words and their context. Her hermeneutic approach establishes the gender equality on the basis of the Qur’an. Women, she argues, historically have been excluded from Muslim male-dominated interpretive communities and consequently from the exegesis of the Qur’an regarding women’s role in the society. She emphasizes on making relevant the Qur’Én to Muslim women’s lives today and making a fresh insight regarding women’s role and right in the light of the Qur’Anic teachings. As she states: “in any era, if every generation continues the Quranic interpretation in a manner which reflects its whole intent, the Qur’an can guide human”. She reads the Qur’an as a discursive unity and explains it in accordance with the historical contexts of its teachings as well as its linguistic and syntactical structures. Wadud therefore, discards the ‘false justification of such smugness through narrow interpretations and misinterpretations of the Qur’anic text, namely interpretations, which ignore the basic social principles of justice, equality, and common humanity that the Qur’an teaches. The allegation, Wadud disputes, is made by her critic, ‘her contextual approach undermines its universalism by historicizing it’ is not really so. The Qur’an itself acknowledges the ‘necessarily periodic and contextual nature of its content’ as Rahman argues, ‘the Qur’an ‘occurred in the light of history and against a social-historical background
and is a response to it’. The decontextualized interpretations, Wadud grouses, suit their individual whims, perceptions and prejudices about women, which are called to her ‘male-domain interpretations of the Qur’Én’. Wadud describes interpretations of the Qur’Én about the issue of women into three categories: a. Traditional interpretation consists of certain objectives, which could be legal, esoteric, grammatical, rhetorical and historical, which make differences in the tafasir. She viewed that there are shortcomings in traditional and contemporary methods of the interpretation of the Qur’Én. The method, for instance, does not recognize themes and discuss the relationship of the Qur’Én to itself. She charges that “traditional tafasir” were exclusively interpreted by males based on their experiences, but women’s experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective and desire, or needs of women. b. Modern interpretation consists of some pessimistic reactions about issue of women, which handicap women as an individual and as a member of the society. The status of woman is treated as poor in interpretation and its justification on the basis of the test is not a strong argument. This method has failed to differentiate between the interpretation and the text, that is why, many women or persons opposed to the massage of the Qur’Én. c. The whole method of the Quranic exegesis should be reconsidered with regard to various modern social, moral, political and economic concerns, including the issue of women.

For a contextual reading of the Qur’Én, Wadud applied a hermeneutical model as a most effective tool for liberating Muslim women from literal reading. This model consists of three aspects: i. the context in which the text was revealed. ii. the grammatical composition of the texts, how it says and what it says. iii. the whole text, its Weltanschauung or world view must be explained in broader sense with regard to social, economic, political and historical concerns. In this category, there is no substantial consideration of a particular issue of woman in the light of the Qur’Én and its major principles. Therefore, one must understand the Qur’Én according to a particular context and a situation in Arabia at the time of the revelation as well as in modern time.

Regarding the verse 4:34, Wadud challenges the literal translation of it with other contentious verses that establish ‘man’s superior over woman, mandate obedience (qanitat) to her husband and give the right to beat(disobedient wives’.

In the verse, ‘Qawwamun ‘ala women’, Wadud undermines the claims of anti-feminists with a contextualized reading of relevant ayat that ‘God has preferred men to women’ and ‘given them a degree over women, and made them women’s guardians’. Giving degree of men over women, she argues, refers to a husband’s rights in a divorce and not on man’s biological or ontological superiority. The term ‘qawwamun ‘ala’ refers to the husband’s role as a breadwinner and not to the men’s guardianship and rulership over women.

The word ‘qanitat’, she argues, refers to a moral attitude of obedience on the part of both women and men to God and it describes a characteristic and personality trait of believers towards Allah (swt). Men and women should be co-operative and subservient to each other and they should have a mutual understanding. The word, Ía’la she refers to Sayyid Qutb, indicates that the Qur’Én intends to be a personal emotional response rather than the external ‘obeying of orders’.

322
The word ‘nushuz’ she argues, means ‘to state of disorder between married couples’ as Sayyid Qutb explains and the word is used for both males(4:128) and females(4:34). It cannot mean, to her, ‘disobedience to husband or not to a wife’s disloyalty.’

Applying a contextual reading, the word ‘nushuz’, she argues, does not refer to the obedience of a wife to her husband, but ‘a kind of wife’s rebellion against husband’ and ‘a state of disorder between a married couple’. The verse does not indicate it as a disciplinary measure against wife, but emphasizing on regaining the relationship between the couples. The main goal, she argues, is resolving disharmony and a resolution of the difficulties for returning to peaceful and harmonious life of the couples(4:128), not for violence or forced obedience between husband and wife. A verbal solution, she interprets, is the best method for resolving a marital disorder between husband and wife, which is the Qur’Énic principle of mutual consultation. In the verse, “banish them to beds apart”, she argues, does not indicate to abuse physically his wife, but separation is a peaceable solution and mutual measure to cool down each other and this measure can be taken as a part of the overall context of irreconcilable differences between the married couple.

In her linguistic analysis of the word ‘daraba’ in the verse 4:34, Wadud acknowledges the authority of husband to strike his wife, but it does not mean ‘force’ or ‘violence’. It is used like a phrase, ‘daraba Allah mathalan (Allah(swt) sets an example). Striking a wife, she argues, after completely following the Qur’anic suggestions, is applicable. The goal of the verse does not indicate to create conjugal violence and a struggle between couple, which were exposed to in pre-Islamic Arabia. This verse should not be taken as a permissible command, but, a harmful act and a severe restriction on spousal abuse, and not a license for beating her randomly. The word ‘ta’a’ in the verse describes the marital norm for Muslims and non-Muslims at the time of the revelation in the case of marriages of subjugation. The emphasis of the verse, she argues, is ‘not to seek a way against obedient wives by husband’ and ‘on the male’s treatment of the female’. With regards to maintenance and obedience (66:5, 30:21) from contextual perspective, Wadud identifies the question of the relationship between maintenance and obedience as an example. In the Qur’an, with regard to be a better woman, obedience is not one of the characteristics (66:5) in the sense that marriage develops harmony mutually with love and mercy (30:21). Wives therefore, in marriage subjugation, naturally should obey their husbands who maintain the family. This belief in the need to obey the husband is a remnant of marriages of subjugation and is not exclusive to Muslim history. With regards to maintenance, men are as natural leaders who deserve obedience, but today couples seek partners for mutual emotional, intellectual, economic, and spiritual enhancement. Their compatibility is based on mutual respect and honor, not on the subservience of the female to the institution to enslave a woman to the man who buys her at the highest price and sustains her material and physical needs only. In broader context, this relationship develops a mechanism for resolving difficulties through mutual or extended consultation and arbitration. If this shortcoming, Wadud argues, does not overhaul for the liberation of Muslim women, the absence of a comprehensive analysis of the Qur’an causes them to vindicate the position of women in the society. She claimed that there has been no substantial consideration of the particular issue of woman in the light of the entire Qur’an and its major principles. She therefore, feels strongly that there is an urgent
necessity to use an effective tool to overcome the shortcomings exit in the Muslim society for the liberation of Muslims women. She proposes to interpret the Qur’an based on the female experiences, and to recognize themes arid to discuss the relationship of the Qur’an to itself thematically.83

As the traditional interpreters claim that the Qur’an provides the concept of male ontological superiority and of female inferiority or subordination to men, is rejected by Wadud. The Qur’an does not teach, she argues, that there are essential distinctions between male and female in terms of creation, capability and function in the society.84 The Qur’an as the universal guidance, she argues, does overcome ‘gender or sex distinction’ and there is no ‘concept of woman or of man’ in the Qur’an. The Qur’an does not, Wadud argues, teach the concept of sexual distinction rather this relation is based on the ontological equality of the sexes.85 Men and women, she argues, for instance were not created from different substances, or woman was not created from man, and or she was created after man.86 Regarding the contentious verse 4:1, Wadud, argues, teaches that man and woman were originated from a single self and both are endowed with the same nature, capacities and abilities. The verse confirms that both genders are equally essentials, even though both are created as humans in the male and female pair. In this regard, the Qur’an neither identifies Adam or Eve as a responsible for expulsion from the Paradise. Hence, some Muslims though argue, but the Qur’an does not address the issue in this way. Contextual or historical method, she argues, are needed to apply for interpreting towards understanding the position of woman in the light of this verse. The distinctions between male and female, she argues, are on the basis of their moral personality, God-awareness, taqwa (piety), or physical ability. Every individual will be questioned on the Day of Judgment before Allah according to the degree of faith (Iman) and Ṣaml (action).87 These arguments indicate that in contextual context, men and women are equal.

With regard to man’s authority over woman,88 Wadud applies the hermeneutical method of contextual reading to interpret the verse 4:34, ‘men are qawwamuna ‘ala women’. With grammatical analysis, she argues that in a sentence, ‘bi’ means ‘on the basis of’, which implies that characteristics are determined ‘on the basis of what comes after ‘bi’. Preference is conditional, she argues, if a man fulfills the following two conditions, then, ‘man is qawwamun over woman’, the first is ‘preference’ and the second is ‘supporting women from men’s means’. If he fails to fulfill one of them, then, ‘man is not qawwamun ‘ala.89 She observes that some of exegetes interpreted this verse and assert that ‘men are created by God superior to women in strength and reason’. However, “this interpretation, she argues, is unwarranted and inconsistent with other Islamic basic teachings, because there is no reference in the passage to male physical or intellectual superiority”.90

Faddala (preference), she argues, is relative and not absolute. Although the Qur’an states that humankind is preferred over the rest of the creation(17:70) and some Prophets are preferred over others(2:253, 6:86), it also states that no distinction is made between them (2:228). It is like darajah is given to test one to whom it is given. No one is the authority of earning fadl, everyone can be recipient of His fadl.91 However, it, she argues, cannot be unconditional that ‘men are created by God superior to women in strength and reason’, because this interpretation is
unwarranted and inconsistent with other Islamic teachings and the verse 4:34 does not read ‘they (masculine plural) are preferred over them (feminine plural). It reads b’ad (some) of them over b’ad (others). The use of b’ad indicates that all men do excel over all women in all manners. Some women excel over some men in some manners. Likewise, some men excel over some women, which is absolutely true. From wording context, Azizah al-Hibri argues that: “men are qawwamun over women in matters where God gave some of the men more than some of the women, and in what the men spend of their money, then clearly men as a class are not qawwamun over women as a class”

Furthermore, Wadud referred to other exegetes for a clear understanding of the parameters of its application such as Pickthall translates this as ‘in charge of’, to al-Zamakhshari, as ‘men are in charge of the affairs of women’, to Mawdudi, as ‘men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other’. However, all meanings indicate that some are qawwamun over others. In this regards, Azizah al-Hibri objects to translate this as ‘men are ‘protector or maintainer of women’ because she argues that it is a moral guidance and caring for men. Wadud argues that faddala, an unconditional preference of males over females, does not restrict qawwamun to the family relationship or husband and wife relationship, but it applies to society at large and preference over each other depends on the situation and context. Preference over women, according to Wadud, should be based on the functional relationship rather than family relationship as Sayyid Qutb proposes between husband and wife towards the collective good concerning the relationship between men and women in society at large. In social context, men and women are the members of the most significant institution of the society and both have a certain responsibility in the society according to the ability such as women’s responsibility is in society child bearing, which requires a great deal of physical strength, stamina, intelligence and deep personal commitment. Men’s responsibility is physical protection and material sustenance for women to avoid oppression against them. Wadud argues that the situation and context demands to review the Qur’anic interpretation with regard to human exchange and mutual responsibility between males and females. The verse establishes an ideal obligation for men with regard to women to create a balance and shared society. In broader terms, it should apply to the spiritual, moral, intellectual and psychological dimensions as well. Such a prospective on qiyamah will allow men to truly fulfill their khilafah on earth, as ordained by Allah(swt) upon human beings. Such attitude will overcome the competitive and hierarchical thinking.

With regard to women’s empowerment and leadership, Wadud argues that in the light of the Qur’an, the general principle for leadership is similar to the rule for fulfilling any task. It can be led by the ‘one best suited person on the basis of whatever qualifications and characteristics i.e. biological, psychological, educational, economic, social and cultural. Those characteristics and qualifications were not restricted to men in the Qur’an. Motivation and opportunities should be made available according to her capacity to become ‘best suited person’ in order to carry out the responsibility of the society. Men as natural leaders are not stated in the Qur’an even at time of revelation. The Qur’an, in the context of patriarchal Arabia, gives the example of Bilqis who was given favorable consideration as a female ruler. The Qur’an does not prevent women for being in authority, either over other women or both men and women. The implication of the verse is to
fulfill the task by the qualified and efficient person, whether he/she. A more independent and insightful woman, she argues, might better lead a people into their future endeavor. Wadud argues that the Qur’an does not specify rights, responsibilities and treatment of women in Maccan period, if there was any discussion of woman, it was a generic example for all human beings. It is interesting to note that in the Madinan period of revelation, most reforms and responses of the Qur’an, she argues, were for the benefit of the females. The above discussion reflects the real spirit of the verses of the Qur’an.

In her latest book *Inside the Gender Jihad*, she argues that the first stage of textual interpretive con be considered at the time and in the context of its revelation and the second stage of interpretive development is demonstrated continually and in divers ways during the two or three centuries. It was, she argues, a practical intervention between literal textual application of the text and contextual application of the text. She uses the Qur’an’s contextual patriarchal circumstances with predominant focus on male experiences in order to provide both uncovering meaning from the Qur‘anic text as well as for implementing the Qur‘anic intent for universal guidance.

**The Contextual Interpretation: An Evaluation**

What do we learn from contextual reading of the Qur’Én as a methodology in modern context. There is no doubt that the contextual reading is one of important tools in reconciling some contentious verses from a feminist perspective and in breaking down their endocentric interpretations. It also acquiesces a more liberal reading of the Qur’an. It might help the contemporary Muslims towards understanding the texts according to the need and demand of the modern society in line with the objectives of the Shariah.

However, the contextual reading methodology raises a number of questions from anti-feminist critiques. This type of interpretation provides limitless openness of the text, which is not in line with the early exegetes. Can this methodology maintain the correct interpretation of the text? How can feminists blame the literal reading methodology of the early exegetes? Is it acceptable to impose from outside this kind of methodology in response to modern pressures? How the one can understand the sincerity of feminists in interpreting the texts according to the necessity of the situation? How can specific instructions be distinguished from universal values?

Raising questions by traditionalists is not based on assumption, but their demand is that literal reading is more objective and compelling. It produces liberal Islam and liberal Shariah. However, Wadud accuses her critics by saying that women’s reading of the Qur’an is not perfect and comprehensive, “they are inadequate.” She states: “I believe the Qur’Én adapts to the context of the modern woman as smoothly as it adapted to the original Muslim community fourteen centuries ago. This adaptation can be demonstrated if the text is interpreted with her in mind, thus indicating the universality of the texts.”

In order to overwhelm the challenges, feminists need to emphasize on two key areas for strengthening the contextual methodology. First, many exegetes did not explain sufficiently the
question of the psychological manner of revelation in general and the contentious verses in particular as Rahman argued that ‘the feeling, the idea and the word are an organic entity and born in the mind of the prophet at once although the origin of this feeling came from the prophet himself, which is unavoidable:

‘whereas the source and the origin of this creative process lies beyond the ordinary reach of human agency, nevertheless, this process occurs, in some definite sense as an integral part of the agent’s mind. If the entire process occurs in his mind, then, in ordinary sense, it is his word, insofar as the psychological process is concerned, but is revealed word insofar as its source lies beyond his reach.’

The feminists must address the relationship between revelation and the prophet’s mind in order to relate the question of ‘God wanted one thing and I wanted another’. Wadud and Mernisi applied the contextual methodology in line with Fazlur Rahman, but Saeed criticizes Fazlur Rahman’s work and comments that his work was incomplete and lack of specific example of application. Saeed continued that the implementation of the Qur’an cannot be carried out literally in the context of today because this may result in awkward the very purposes of the Qur’Èn. The fuqaha and ulama studied the texts to fulfill the necessity that society but not for today. However, Rahman believed that the psychological aspect of revelation has been explored within modernist readings of the Qur’an, which shows the relationship between pragmatism and ideals. Mernisi argued that God revealed the contentious verses as a pragmatic way of reconciling differences in the community. Wadud argues that perhaps God improved the status of women in order to reconcile the tension between a deeply pragmatic God who adjusts to circumstances and the notion of universal. The absolute values is the best addressed within this framework.

Another methodological problem is the relationship between Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) and the revelation. The interpreters’ analysis of Hadith was not a systematic approach in order to gain knowledge of what the context of the verses actually was. Mernissi’s interpretation of the verses, for instance, depends directly on a certain understanding of its occasions of revelation, while the Qur’Èn gives some indications of the dates of surah. Muslim scholars’ methods of dating surah focus on the Hadith and the biography of the prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). However, the historical validity of this literature used by Mernissi is questionable. They did not address the issue of how we know what happened during the time of revelation.

Another question raised by anti-feminists is about the firmness of the interpretation. It is argued that a contextualized reading of the Qur’Èn might be valid but there is no certainty of its correctness. It is tune with the Qur’Ènic heritage of ikhtilaf, the notion that a text could capitulate a number of interpretations. The other are that needs to be developed relates to the question of liberalizing the implication of the verses of the Qur’an. It is as the liberal shariah approach, which is an accusation by anti-feminists that western values are being imposed upon Islam and Muslims. Charles Kurzman considers the liberal approach of the shariah. This approach argues that ‘shariah sanctions liberal positions such as the issue of human rights, democracy and equality between men and women, which express the true value of Islam’. Such liberal norms
sanctioned by the *shari`ah* have been explored. However, Hadia offers an alternative reading of the Qur’an by using various methods within the Islamic paradigm. Her claim is that she found various readings of the verses. Therefore, one, she argues, cannot depend on only one method in order to explain the texts. Scott refers to Barlas and argues that ‘all readings do not have equal values and the Qur’an warns itself against reading it in a decontextualized, selective, and piecemeal way. She also confirms that some meanings and some readings are better than others’. She argues that reading into the Qur’an various forms of *zulm* as defined by its victims cannot be considered legitimate. Barlas again argues that since the contentious verses have many different meanings, which sometimes show a measure of inequality, in this regard, we must be careful and be willing to rethink our commitment to its centrality in our own understanding of the teachings of the Qur’an. The contextual approach, however, does face a number of challenges from anti-feminists and traditional exegetes. In modern context, it might be acceptable according to the necessity of the society as far as if it is not incongruous and absurd. The contextual approach as one of the methods, includes some contentious verses, which should be explored in modern context in order to fulfill the needs of the society without misleading believers of the Qur’an. It is a moral responsibility for a Muslim exegete to maintain the mainstream interpretation of the Qur’an in order to shift the debate away from the question of which reading is correct. This is high time for Muslims to rethink our commitment to its centrality in our own understanding of the Qur’an’s teachings.


9 Ibid, p.375. See 2:228 and 4:34.


13 Al-Qur`an: 2:228, “and women have rights similar to the rights against them (i.e. the right of men) according to what is equitable and men have a degree over them.”

Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Huqaq-al-Nisaa fi al-Islam*, ‘Arif ‘AlÊ argued on the basis of the views of Ibn al-Juza and other ÑUlama that woman has no guardianship over her own marriage, so how she will decide the dispute of others marital affairs? Moreover, how she will settle the cases of others divorce while she has no right of her own divorce? Al-Khattabi said: She cannot carry out her own marriage, so how she can make the arrangement of others marriage. But Abu ×anifa, ×asan Ibn Zaid, and Abu Yusuf agreed that women are allowed to be the guardianship of their own marriage as Allah (swt) says: ‘…do not prevent them from their marrying their husbands, if they mutually agree on reasonable basis.


Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 3

Ibid, 26


Ibid, vol. 5, 100, al-×ujurat(49): 14, note: 31, for instance, the word ‘Islam’. See also Mufti Mohammad Yusuf, ÑA’in, 164-165

(Q16:89), *We have sent down to you a book explaining all things, a guide, a mercy and glad tidings to Muslims. Here is a plain statement to men, a guidance and instruction to those who fear Allah (swt), and “We sent down the book to you for the express purpose, that you should make clear to them things in which they differ, and that it should be a guise and a mercy to those who believe."


Q 12:111, 10:37, 6:114


Ibid, 3

Ibid, 7

Ibid, 19

Ibid, 17

Ibid, 7


Fatima Mernissi (b.1940) is a contemporary Moroccan sociologist. Mernissi had both a traditional and a Western secular education, obtaining a master’s degree in politics from Muhammad V University in Rabat, Morocco, a PhD in sociology from Brandies University in 1973. She returned to Morocco to teach Rabat. Her work on women in Islam has made an important contribution to both the critique of the position of women of Islamic world and to textual interpretation.


Ibid, 34, 39, 73

Ibid, 93-94

Ibid, 118-119
44 The Qur’an addresses: “Lo! Men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who believe…..Allah (swt) has prepared for them forgiveness and vast reward”, For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves) for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God’s praise, for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward.” (33:35).

46 Ibid, 120
47 Ibid, 121-122
48 Ibid, 125
49 Ibid, 121
50 Ibid, 145
51 Ibid, 145
52 Ibid, 148-149
53 Ibid, 149
54 Ibid, 149
55 Q4:32
56 Ibid, 131-132
57 Tabari, Tafsir al-Tabari, vol. 9, 256
58 Mernissi, 127-128, also see; Tabari, vol. 7, 567
59 33: 35
60 Mernissi, 154
61 Ibid, 155
62 Amina Wadud was born in 1952 in Bethesda, Maryland. She is an African-American Muslim and associate professor of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. She gained her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. Wadud is a contentious figure; whose leading of mixed-gender prayer at a New York mosque in 2005 aroused an angry response from many Muslims. She received her B.S. from The University of Pennsylvania, between 1970 and 1975. In 1972 she pronounced the shahadah and accepted Islam, not knowing of her maternal ancestry and by 1974 her name was officially changed to Amina Wadud to reflect her chosen religious affiliation. She received her M.A. in Near Eastern Studies and her Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan in 1988. During graduate school, she studied advanced Arabic in Egypt at the American University in Cairo, continued with Qur’enic studies and tafsir at Cairo University, Egypt.
63 Ibid, p. 101
65 Wadud, p.104
66 Ibid, 96
67 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, 5
68 Ibid, 97
69 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, p.p. 1-2
70 Ibid, p.2
71 Ibid, p.2
72 Ibid, p.77-78
73 Wadud, Qur’an and Women, 66-74
74 Ibid, p. 74, she includes other verses such as 2:238, 3:17, 33:35, 33:34, 66:5, 66:12 etc.
75 Ibid, p.75
76 Although it has been defined differently for each, the first one means ‘hates/dislikes’ and the second means ‘evil companion’ to other.
77 Amina Wadud, Qur’an and Woman 75
78 Ibid, 75-76
79 Ibid, 76
Men are qawwanuna ‘alá’ women on the basis of what Allah has preferred (faddala) some of them over others, and on the basis of what they spend of their property for the support of women. So good women are (qanitat) guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear admonish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them”. (4:34)