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By

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INTERSECTIONS: MODERNITY, GENDER, AND QUR’ANIC EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT

Modernity imparted a new theoretical significance to the issue of gender reform in the Muslim world. This dissertation examines the impact of modernity on the hermeneutical approaches and interpretations of three modern exegetes on significant gender issues in the Qur’an. It compares the tafsīr works of Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Sayyid Quṭb, and Muḥammad al-Ṭāḥir ibn ʿĀshūr with those of pre-modern exegetes concerning three Qur’anic verses: 2:228, 4:3, and 4:34. These verses, among others, gained significance in modern exegetes’ quest to articulate Islam’s position on gender, a debate that was tied to the larger ideological question on whether or not Islam was fit for modern times. By situating the exegeses of ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr within their broader historical and intellectual contexts, this dissertation demonstrates how their tafsīr on gender reflects their engagement with the broader contemporaneous debates on gender and Islam in late-nineteenth- and mid-twentieth century Egypt and Tunisia. The interpretations of all three modern exegetes evince a heightened gender-consciousness that is absent from the interpretations of pre-modern exegetes on the same verses. This underscores the particularity of an exegetical gender-consciousness to the modern period.

The tension between continuity and change in modern Islamic intellectual thought demonstrates that interpretive differences between modern and pre-modern exegetes are not black and white. While ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr reach significantly new conclusions on certain verses, they also echo many of the pre-modern interpretations on gender. As such, the
exegetical tradition on gender reflects a variety of interpretations that defies existing
generalizations of this tradition as *consistently* patriarchal.

While the works of all three exegetes reflect full engagement with modernity, their
approaches are grounded in very different methodologies, traditions, and orientations. This
dissertation argues that ʿAbduh and Riḍāʾs *Taṣfīr al-Manār* and Quṭb’s *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān* both
signal a departure from the classical methodologies of the pre-modern exegetical tradition,
whereas Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr* revives the methodologies of the pre-modern,
philological exegetical tradition. As such, Ibn ʿĀshūr represents the classical Sunni practice of
renewal based on pre-existing scholarly norms.
My bedrock of support,
Reservoir of unconditional love,
My every hope and dream come true,
Omar, Ibrahim, and Jinan

I am indebted to you,
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I. Introduction: Gender, Islam, and Modernity

Modern conversations on the Qur’an and gender are rooted in a historical context that can be traced to the late nineteenth century. The history of colonization and nationalism in the Arab world brought the issue of women’s status in Islam to the fore of the national and ideological debate on the role that religion, specifically Islam, should play in the development of Muslim societies. From the onset, the debate on gender in Islam was premised on the notion that women could not advance in a society that strictly adhered to Islamic teachings. Colonialists, Christian missionaries, and well-meaning western feminists in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Egypt established a discourse that viewed Islam as the “fatal obstacle” to women’s rights, and Western Europe as the model to which Muslims should look in their pursuit of national reform.\footnote{Leila Ahmed, \textit{Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 154.} Indigenous responses to this discourse either internalized and repeated the earlier colonial rhetoric on Islam as an impediment to women’s progress, or, refuted this assessment. Muslim women themselves also played an important role in shaping this discourse, as two different strains of feminism emerged in the twentieth century, one rooted in “a native, vernacular Islamic discourse,” and one valorizing “Western ways as more advanced and more ‘civilized’ than native ways.”\footnote{Ahmed, \textit{Women and Gender in Islam}, 174, 178.} The fusion between the issue of gender and the evaluation of Islam as unfit for modern times created a highly charged atmosphere in which ‘gender’ became an indicator of Islam’s relevance to modernity. This historical context imparted a new level of theoretical significance to the issue of gender in modern Muslim thought.

This dissertation examines the intersection of modernity and Islamic exegetical thought on issues of gender. Modernity unleashed a wave of gender consciousness that affected not only
women, but ‘ulama as well, who were engaged in shaping the discourse on women’s rights. As modernity gave rise to a greater level of theoretical concern with gender justice, I examine the impact it had on three major exegetes’ hermeneutical and interpretive approaches to controversial gender issues in the Qur’an: Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), and Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1973). The exegeses of all three modern exegetes reflect an engagement with the most pressing and ideologically charged issues facing Muslim society. Yet their engagement with such issues through the Qur’an was grounded in very different methodologies, traditions, and orientations.

ʿAbduh, the earliest of the three exegetes, represents a form of Islamic modernism that emerged in response to the perceived political, moral, and intellectual crisis that faced the Muslim umma. Quṭb reflects a strain of Islamist intellectual thought that emerged in the context of post-revolutionary Nasser Egypt; this period in which Quṭb was most actively writing his tafsīr had witnessed the Nasser regime’s systematic repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Quṭb was a member. This context of repression, I argue, contributed to the evolution of Quṭb’s ideological thought. Ibn ʿĀshūr represents a form of intellectual thought that has not received as much attention as the former two. He was one Tunisia’s most renowned scholars, holding the positions of Shaykh of Zaytūna University, Mālikī Shaykh al-Islām and the state Grand Mufti. Firmly grounded in the Islamic scholarly tradition, he articulated a path for change through the principles and methodologies that underlie the scholarly tradition.

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First, by situating the exegeses of ‘Abduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ‘Āshūr within their broader historical contexts, I demonstrate how their *tafsīr* on gender in specific represents *not only* an engagement with the Quran, but also an engagement with the broader contemporaneous debates on gender and Islam. For all three exegetes, their *tafsīr* becomes an opportunity to articulate what they believe is Islam’s true position on gender. Writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century at the height of colonial criticism against Islam’s treatment of women, ‘Abduh is most concerned with refuting Orientalist and colonial charges on Islam as an impediment to women’s progress. By the mid-twentieth century, during the period in which Quṭb was writing, secular, Muslim voices had internalized much of the earlier western rhetoric on gender, which argued that Muslim societies’ advancement is contingent upon the abandonment of religious practices, specifically those deemed to be misogynistic or patriarchal. Quṭb’s *tafsīr* on gender is, therefore, primarily responding to Muslim secular criticism. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s *tafsīr* on gender is also responsive, in ways, to the contemporaneous debate on gender, but his analysis is impassioned and tempered in comparison to that of ‘Abduh and Quṭb. Ibn ‘Āshūr grounds his *tafsīr* in a rigorous philological methodology, lends itself to a less polemical tone on gender issues than what one tends to find in both ‘Abduh and Quṭb’s *tafsīrs*.

Second, this dissertation employs a comparative analysis of ‘Abduh’s, Quṭb’s, and Ibn ‘Āshūr’s exegeses with pre-modern exegeses on three significant Qur’anic verses: 2:228, 4:3, and 4:34. These verses have generated much controversy in the modern debate on whether Islam is irreparably patriarchal or even misogynist. This dissertation attempts to measure the breadth of exegetical interpretation regarding the meanings of women’s and men’s mutual rights and men’s *daraja* in Q. 2:228, the restrictions or licenses on polygyny in Q. 4:3 and men’s *qiwāma* and women’s *nushūz* in Q. 4:34, and the prerogatives that are set in motion as a result. By comparing

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6 Ahmed, 128-129.
modern exegeses with pre-modern ones on these three verses, this dissertation sheds light on the impact of modernity on exegetical interpretations of the Qur’an. Does the theoretical concern with gender justice in the modern period lend itself to significantly new interpretations on these verses in the works of these three major exegetes? How do ‘Abduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ‘Āshūr signal a continuity or departure from pre-modern exegetes in their interpretations of these verses?

Third, in the context of “overlapping and interacting junctures of intellectual rupture and continuity”7 in modern Muslim thought, I examine the ways in which these three exegetes reflect different forms of engagement with both the Islamic tradition and modernity. By situating their exegetical works within the broader historical developments in the genre of tafsīr, I demonstrate the ways in which their tafāsīr reflect continuity or a rupture with the pre-modern exegetical tradition. Where do their respective exegeses fit in the larger intellectual trends in the genre of tafsīr? Whereas ‘Abduh’s al-Manār and Quṭb’s Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān have received much attention in western scholarship, Ibn ‘Āshūr’s al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr, in contrast, has received scant attention in western literature. One of the goals of this dissertation, therefore, is to shed light on the importance and significance of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s exegesis in the spectrum of modern exegesis.

A. Pre-Modern and Modern Exegesis: Homogenous or Diverse?

Scholars lack consensus as to whether or not modern exegesis has contributed new methodologies or interpretations to the genre of tafsīr. Rotraud Wielandt and Johanna Pink both argue that “modernising trends” in the field of exegesis have been the exception, not the norm.8 Describing modern and contemporary exegesis, Wielandt writes:

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Many Qurʾān commentaries of this time hardly differ from older ones in the methods applied and the kinds of explanations given. The majority of the authors of such commentaries made ample use of classical sources like al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) without necessarily adding anything substantially new to the already available interpretations.⁹

In the exceptions where modern exegeses do in fact depart from pre-modern ones, these have generally been prompted by the need to respond “to new questions which arose from the political, social and cultural changes brought about in Muslim societies by the impact of western civilization.”¹⁰ Barbara Stowasser, one of the first scholars to examine modern exegesis on gender in the Qurʾān, also argued that the “stirrings” of modernity “required a different scripturalist canon on women.”¹¹ As such, the significance “of the female symbol in the formulation of self-identity” became “vastly different in the classical period from what it became in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”¹²

Nonetheless, for scholars such as Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud, the genre of tafsīr has not produced much that is viably different on issues of gender. For Wadud, whether modern or pre-modern, traditional tafāsīr have employed an “atomistic methodology” which was unable to produce gender-friendly interpretations because this methodology failed to link together larger Qurʾānic principles, themes, and ideas.¹³ She notes some exceptions to this, however, particularly Quṭb’s Fī Ṣīlah al-Qurʾān.¹⁴ Yet for Wadud, the genre itself is marked with a “voicelessness” and exclusion of the female perspective.¹⁵ Similarly, Barlas depicts the exegetical tradition’s approach to gender as monolithic. This is due to the exegetes’ “linear-

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⁹ Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Early Modern and Contemporary.”
¹⁰ Ibid.
¹² Stowasser, 9.
¹³ Amina Wadud, Qurʾan and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.
¹⁴ Wadud, 72.
¹⁵ Ibid.
atomistic” methodology, a term she borrows from Mustansir Mir, and also due to the misogyny of the classical period, which “was assimilated into Islam by way of the commentaries and super-commentaries on the Quran (Tafsīr).”¹⁶ For both authors, their portrayal of the exegetical tradition is not substantiated by a full engagement with this tradition.¹⁷ Whereas Barlas does not engage the tafsīr literature, Wadud does so quite minimally.¹⁸ They justify their lack of engagement with tafsīr by their a priori conclusion that the exegetical tradition has nothing to offer in the way of egalitarian or gender-friendly interpretations of the Qurʾan.

More recently, Karen Bauer and Ayesha Chaudhry have extensively examined the pre-modern exegetical tradition on significant gender issues in the Qurʾan. In her work, Bauer underscores the diversity and heterogeneity of the pre-modern exegetical tradition on gender, in terms of both methodology and interpretation. She specifically examines interpretations of verses 2:228, 4:1, and 4:34. Based on her findings, she writes,

Despite broad agreement on some essential points, the interpretations of these verses present a striking range and variety through time. The nature of the variation found in these exegeses means that they defy simple categorization of “dogmatic” … A more precise way of describing the exegeses of these verses is that certain interpretations remain constant through time, while others vary between times, places, and individual authors. This gives the impression of constancy while incorporating change and variety.¹⁹

In contrast to this representation of diversity, Chaudhry depicts the pre-modern exegetical tradition on gender as “consistently and monolithically patriarchal.”²⁰ While she notes a variety

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¹⁷ Wadud makes ample references to the modern commentaries of Quṭb and Mawdūdī. Nevertheless, the only pre-modern exegete she cites her in references is Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH/1144 CE). The only exegete that Barlas lists in her 12 pages of references is a 1987 English translation of “Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī” (d. 311 AH/923 CE), as she lists him.
¹⁸ Wadud consults the works of Quṭb, Abū al-ʿAlā al-Mawdūdī and Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH/1144 CE) on few particular issues.
in interpretation, she argues that a constant feature of all pre-modern exegetes in their exegesis on Q. 4:34 is that they predicate their interpretations on “a patriarchal idealized cosmology.”

Her 2009 dissertation, which offers the most exhaustive study of pre-modern exegesis on Q. 4:34, stops short of the modern period, as she states, “in order to mitigate—but not avoid altogether—the effects of colonialism, which … fundamentally altered the discourse of Muslim scholars, especially with respect to issues related to gender.”

Chaudhry’s assessment of the impact of colonialism on Muslims’ discourse on gender is absolutely correct. Yet no study so far has examined the impact of this change on modern exegetical interpretations on gender. Although Chaudhry incorporates the voices of modern Muslim scholars and intellectuals into her later work, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition*, she does not engage modern exegetical works. Despite the important contributions of her work, her comparison of pre-modern and modern perspectives on 4:34 is limited by its lack of engagement with the modern exegetical tradition as a genre.

There is a serious gap in the field of Qur’anic studies towards understanding how modern exegetical approaches and methodologies differ in light of the pre-modern exegetical tradition. What are the strains of change and continuity between works produced in this genre during different historical periods? What does this tell us about the continuity of tradition in the modern period? The answers to these questions, based on an in-depth textual analysis of exegetical works in the pre-modern and modern periods, would help inform scholarly approaches to exegesis as a genre. Are “attempts at periodization” in the development of *tafsīr* useful as modes of analysis?

Further, how does the distinction between modern and pre-modern exegesis on gender in the

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21 Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence*, 54-5.
22 Chaudhry, “Wife-Beating in the Pre-Modern Islamic Tradition: An Inter-Disciplinary Study of Ḥadīth, Qur’anic Exegesis and Islamic” (PhD diss., University of New York, 2009), 17.
23 Pink, 56.
Qur’an challenge a priori presumptions regarding what this genre has to offer towards the project of determining gender egalitarianism in the Qur’an?

B. Patriarchy: Qur’anic or Exegetical?

A persistent question in the scholarship on gender in the Qur’an has been whether the concept of patriarchy is inherent to the text of the Qur’an or the product of its exegetical interpretations. There have generally been three approaches to this question. The first has been a scripturalist approach of examining the Qur’an’s portrayal and treatment of women. The second approach is the scholarly, feminist approach of separating the Qur’an from its exegesis with the aim of recovering what proponents of this viewpoint believe is the Qur’an’s “anti-patriarchal epistemology.”24 This approach resembles the first in examining the Qur’an’s portrayal of women independently of its exegesis. The third approach emerged as a result of feminist scholars’ approaches to the question of patriarchy in the Qur’an. This approach, which is primarily theoretical, has been to interrogate the subjectivity of feminist or scripturalist approaches to the question of patriarchy in the Qur’an.

1. Scripturalist Approach

While a few scant articles on women in the Qur’an25 had appeared prior to this time, Barbara Stowasser was the first26 Western scholar to comprehensively examine how women appear in the Qur’an, specifically through the Qur’an’s depiction of historic female characters and the Prophet’s wives. In her analysis of female characters in the Qur’an, Stowasser compares

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24 Barlas, 12.
26 Lamya (Lois) Faruqi published in Women, Muslim society, and Islam in 1988. Although it dealt with women’s issues from a Qur’anic perspective, it differed considerably from Stowasser’s work in that she focused on Islam in general and not specifically the Qur’an. Second, although academic in style, her work was written with the aim of demonstrating the authentic ‘Islamic’ position on gender issues from an egalitarian approach to Islam.
pre-modern and modern exegetical commentaries with the Qur’anic text. One of her key findings was the fact that Qur’anic exegesis and the Qur’anic text itself are not always consistent in their portrayal of women. She specifically notes the divergence between medieval exegesis’ treatment and portrayal of women as innately weak and “dangerous to the established moral order” in comparison to the “Qur’ānic theme of female spiritual freedom and moral responsibility.”

Stowasser’s work was important not just because of its contribution to the field of gender in Islamic Studies, but also because it brought attention to the important role of hermeneutics in the production of religious knowledge. Quoting Richard Martin, she notes that interpretations of the Qur’an are an extension of its productivity—hence themselves in need of interpretation.

Stowasser situates the interpretive commentaries of the Qur’an that she analyzes in their historic contexts. As Tamara Sonn writes in her review of Stowasser’s work, “While Stowasser is not the first scholar to be sensitive to these issues and their impact on scholarly methodology, her articulation of them here is one of the most accessible and concise discussions of the state of hermeneutical discourse in Islam currently available.”

2. Feminist Scholarly Approach

The second approach, a later development in the field of Qur’anic studies and gender, is the scholarly, feminist approach of separating the Qur’an from its interpretation in pursuit of realizing its egalitarian epistemology, or to “unread” patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an.

The two most significant works in this field are Wadud’s *Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Qur’an*.
Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective (1999) and Barlas’ “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qurʾan (2002). The starting point of both authors is that the Qurʾan is inherently egalitarian, and according to both of them, the ascription of patriarchy or misogyny to the Qurʾan is due to patriarchal interpretations that have been imposed upon the Qurʾanic text. These ‘mis-readings’ gradually became entrenched in peoples’ minds, where they became confused with the text itself.\(^{31}\)

In her aim to recover the Qurʾan’s anti-patriarchal epistemology, Barlas blames misogynistic interpretations of the Qurʾan on medieval classical exegesis.\(^{32}\) Wadud argues that traditional exegesis failed to examine the Qurʾanic text as a totality; therefore the issue of gender has not been examined “in light of the entire Qurʾan and its major principles.”\(^{33}\) According to both Wadud and Barlas, two factors influenced the pre-modern exegetes’ patriarchal readings of the Qurʾan: 1) The pre-modern exegetes’ prior-text or extra-textual context,\(^{34}\) and 2) the “linear-atomistic” methodologies they employed, which dismissed the Qurʾanic paradigm or worldview on gender. Both Barlas and Wadud make important theoretical contributions to this field in their articulation of how scholars’ “prior text”\(^{35}\) influences their reading of the Qurʾan. Despite the differences in their approaches, they both apply this theory to challenge patriarchal interpretations of the Qurʾan as inconsistent with the Scripture itself.

3. **Critiques of Scripturalist and Feminist Approaches**

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\(^{31}\) Barlas, 9; Wadud, 2.

\(^{32}\) Barlas writes, “…the misogyny that has found a niche in Islam derives mostly from extra-Qurʾānic sources, notably the *Tafsīr and Ahādīth*, both of which are used to interpret the Qurʾan,” (37).

\(^{33}\) Wadud, 3.

\(^{34}\) Wadud uses the term “prior text,” whereas Barlas uses the term “extra-textual context.”

\(^{35}\) Wadud, 1. Barlas does not use the term “prior text,” but rather provides a much more analytical and thorough examination of how one inevitably reads from a temporal site. She writes “applying new insights to read the Qurʾan is both unavoidable and justified. It is unavoidable because one always reads in and from the present; it thus is impossible not to bring to one’s reading sensibilities shaped by existing ideas, debates, concerns, and anxieties…” 25.
A methodological critique that spawned off the wheels of the approaches adopted by Stowasser, Wadud and Barlas has been to question whether andro-centric or patriarchal readings are, in fact, inherent to the text itself, and not mis-readings by pre-modern exegetes. Three scholars who provide this methodological critique are Andrew Rippin, Kecia Ali, and Aysha Hidayatullah. Whereas Rippin critiques Stowasser’s conclusions, Ali and Hidayatullah challenge Wadud’s and Barlas’ conclusions that blame secondary exegetical texts for enabling misogynistic readings of the Qur’an. Despite their common critiques, they diverge considerably in the premise upon which they rest their arguments.

Rippin’s critique, the earliest of the three, interrogates the idea that Scripture could exist in “a contextual vacuum.” More specifically, he critiques Stowasser’s methodology in distinguishing between what the text says and what classical exegetical commentaries say about women. He writes,

Stowasser feels she can read the text from a scholarly perspective devoid of the cultural biases that the medieval exegetes imposed. But has the text of the Qur’an ever been read in such a way before? Does it really ‘mean’ what Stowasser contends? Has the story of Eve, for example, ever been understood within the Muslim milieu devoid of its biblical context and everything that goes along with that? Does the absence of narrative detail mean that the Qur’an has excluded such material ‘intentionally’ or is the background to be assumed by the reader?

Rippin’s critique suggests that the text itself intends the meanings deduced by the pre-modern exegetes; he questions whether one could read the text of the Qur’an outside of the narrative detail that exegetes provided. There are a few identifiable issues with this critique.

First, it fails to consider the multiplicity of meanings derived by pre-modern exegetes. If one is to

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36 Rippin’s critique is limited to Stowasser’s work, since his review was published in 1996, well before Wadud and Barlas wrote their respective books on women in the Qur’an. Ali’s critique is limited to feminist approaches employed by scholars like Wadud and Barlas. Hidayatullah also primarily focuses on Wadud and Barlas, but includes other voices engaged in the scholarship on gender and the Qur’an, such as Azizah al-Hibri and Abdullah Adhami.


38 Rippin, 559. The single quotation marks on ‘mean’ are the author’s quotation marks.
presume that the Qur’anic text *intends* the meanings that pre-modern exegetes derived, how does one reconcile the exegetical tradition’s textual polysemy with this presumption, especially when those meanings are by no means monolithic? Second, Rippin’s critique of Stowasser’s approach appears to privilege the interpretations derived by exegetes living in a certain milieu as the meaning the text intends; as such, he blurs the lines between the text and its exegesis. As Barlas argues, “it is…impossible not to bring to one’s reading sensibilities shaped by existing ideas, debates, concerns and anxieties.” 39 As such, it is critical for scholars to distinguish between the Quranic text and its exegesis. It is theoretically problematic to assume that the knowledge produced by male, pre-modern exegetes “transcends its own historicity,” as Barlas states. 40

Scholars such as Kecia Ali and Aysha Hidayatullah have challenged, on methodological grounds, Wadud’s and Barlas’ arguments that patriarchy is *not* inherent to the Qur’anic text, but a product of its exegesis. For both Ali and Hidayatullah, the controversy at hand is the subjectivity of feminist or gender-conscious scholarly approaches to the Qur’an. They both caution against “prioritizing our common sensibilities in the course of our interpretations.” 41 While modern scholars have demonstrated how exegetes’ own cultural assumptions about women have led to seriously flawed exegeses of certain verses, Ali argues that some modern scholars have fallen into the same trap by allowing their presuppositions to “color their interpretations of the Qur’an to the extent that they fail to consider other possibly legitimate readings.” 42 She writes,

…[O]ne must acknowledge that esteeming equality as the most important interpersonal value is a peculiarity of some modern Muslims and not something

39 Barlas, 25.
40 Barlas, 24.
inherent in the text of the Qur’an. Feminist exegetes\textsuperscript{43} must take care not to be as blinded by the commitment to equality, and the presumption that equality is necessary for justice, as classical exegetes were by their assumptions about the naturalness of male superiority and dominance in family and society.\textsuperscript{44}

Hidayatullah take a similar line of critique. She writes:

…in placing feminist demands on the Quran, we have projected a historically specific (and at the same time theoretically unclear) sense of ‘gender justice’ onto the text without fully considering how our demands might, in fact, be anachronistic and incommensurate with Qur’anic statements (and the exegetical tradition…) … When scholars of feminist tafsīr have come across portions of the Qur’anic text that have not easily yielded meanings in line with contemporary notions of gender equality, we often forget that our notions of equality are guided by historical values of our own that we bring to the text; we have perhaps become blind to the historicity of our feminist viewpoints in encountering those instances when the Qur’an does not easily conform to our understandings of gender egalitarianism.\textsuperscript{45}

Both Hidayatullah and Ali take issue with the claim by feminist or gender-conscious scholars that sexual differentiation in the Qur’an does not necessarily mean sexual inequality.\textsuperscript{46}

Wadud argues, in her earlier work \textit{Women in the Qur’an}, that gender differences in the Qur’an, such as that represented by men’s \textit{qiwāma} in verse 4:34, are functional and not biological or inherent.\textsuperscript{47} Similarly, in Barlas’ “groundbreaking”\textsuperscript{48} work, she argues that differentiation between sexes does not necessarily mean inequality. Barlas writes,

In light of these teachings,\textsuperscript{49} it is difficult to view the Quran’s different treatment of women and men as evidence of its anti-equality stance. For one, as I have

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  \item \textsuperscript{43} I take issue with labeling feminist scholars (or others who do similar work) of the Qur’an as “exegetes,” because there is a huge difference between producing commentaries on select Qur’anic verses and between producing an entire exegesis of the Qur’an based on a certain philosophy and methodology. I reserve the term “exegete” to the latter.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Ali, 132.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Aysha Hidayatullah, 150-151. Parenthetical insertions are hers.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Hidayatullah, 156-159; Ali, 115.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} Wadud, 72-3.
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Despite her criticism of Barlas’ ideas, Hidayatullah still acknowledges that Barlas’ work, among others, was groundbreaking at the time it was released in 2002 (ix).
  \item \textsuperscript{49} She demonstrates that “the Qur’an does not mandate obedience to fathers/husbands, or authorize rule by the father/husband, or propagate the idea that men have any advantage over women in their capacity as males, though clearly, men have some advantages and also some disadvantages!) in their capacity as husbands…there is no narrative in the Qur’an that suggests even the remotest parallels between God and husbands, just as nothing in the
\end{itemize}
emphasized repeatedly, difference does not always imply inequality, particularly if it is not based in a theory of sexual differentiation; indeed, difference may even be “compatible with [definitions] of similarity” (Ricoeur 1974, 471). Thus the Quran’s different treatment of women and men does not invalidate its teachings about human equality or similarity.  

Ali and Hidayatullah both challenge Barlas’ premise that different treatment does not always imply general inequality. Ali argues, however, that while the existence of differences between genders does not necessarily mean injustice between genders, it does in some cases mean inequality between genders. As an example, she mentions the Qur’an’s requirement of two women in place of one man in the witnessing of financial loans (Q. 2:282). Based on this and other examples, Ali concludes:

Difference, in these instances, involves obvious inequality, though whether this inequality constitutes injustice is a separate and more complicated issue. The clear Qur’anic declarations of sameness and the equally clear Qur’anic acceptance of inequality based upon differentiation must be understood in the context of an ever-present tension in the Quran between egalitarianism and hierarchy, which exists not only with regard to the sexes but also when it comes to matters such as wealth or slavery.

Hidayatullah departs from Ali’s premise in that she does not find a necessary tension between the existence of a male-female hierarchy and male-female mutuality in the Qur’an. She makes the sharp observation that:

[the ‘dissonance’ that registers with us between Qur’anic statements on mutuality and hierarchy is produced through our contemporary point of view; it is we who perceive their coexistence as contradictory and it is we as feminist readers who desire to resolve the contradiction we observe … therefore, it is high time to own up to the historical particularity of our claims to feminist justice—as well as to what this means in terms of our relationship with the Qur’anic text.}

Qur’an suggests that males are intermediaries between God and women” (Barlas, 198). Parenthetical insertion is her own.

50 Barlas, 199.
51 Hidayatullah, 156-9; Ali, 115.
52 Ali, 115. She notes Marlow, Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought for further reading on the topic.
53 Hidayatullah, 151.
54 Ibid., 151-2.
In a sense then, there are layers of subjectivity that influence not only our reading of the Qur’anic text, but also influence how we examine and interpret the exegetical tradition itself. Despite their immense contributions, a limitation of both feminist scholarly approaches to gender in the Qur’an, as well as the critiques of feminist approaches, is their lack of substantive engagement with the exegetical tradition. First, their lack of substantive engagement with the exegetical tradition leads to a blurring of lines between contemporary exegetical opinions and tafsīr proper, the boundaries of which have been illustrated by scholars such as Jane McAullife, Walid Saleh, and Norman Calder, among others.55 Second, no attention is paid to the significance of methodological differences in the genre of tafsīr, or to important developments in the exegetical field throughout different historical periods. Therefore, what is currently lacking in feminist approaches to the Qur’an is a consideration of tafsīr as a genre of its own and in its broader intellectual context.

As a result, existing studies overlook the ways in which certain exegetes or exegetical approaches signal a rupture or continuity in the genre. This leads to characterizations of the exegetical tradition that I find to be fundamentally inaccurate, such as one scholar’s assessment that “interpretations obtain their legitimacy by repeating not only the methods of traditional exegesis but also by repeating the results of traditional exegesis.”56 Based on my assessment of the exegeses of ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr, the continuity of tradition in the exegetical tradition was the exception and not the norm. Yet without substantively engaging the exegetical tradition as a genre, it is not possible to test the strength of either assessment.

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56 Hidayatullah, 179. Italics are her own.
II. Filling a Void in the Scholarship

Despite the growing scholarship in the field of women in the Qur’an, none of the current literature provides a thorough comparative analysis of modern and pre-modern exegesis on issues of gender. A few scholars, such as Babara Stowasser, Rotraud Wielandt, and Mehmet Pacaci, have undertaken comparisons between modern and classical exegesis on a specific verse, or on their hermeneutics in general without specific regard to issues of gender. Wielandt and Pacaci conduct a general comparison of pre-modern and modern exegetes without a focus on gender. Others, like Chaudhry and Bauer, whom I discussed earlier, have examined exegetes’ treatment of gender issues, but have either confined their focus to pre-modern exegetes or have included modern voices outside the exegetical genre.

With a few exceptions, such as Stowasser’s, Bauer’s and Chaudhry’s works, modern scholarship in the field of gender in the Qur’an tends to analyze controversial verses on gender in isolation from their exegeses. Rather, many authors in this field pass judgments on the exegetical tradition as patriarchal, misogynist, or “voiceless” of women’s perspectives without seriously engaging it. There is a need for a close and nuanced textual analysis of both modern and pre-modern exegeses that takes into account important historical developments in the genre of *tafsīr* and situates respective exegeses accordingly. For this reason, this dissertation employs a comparative textual analysis of three modern exegetes, ‘Abduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr, with each

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58 Rotraud Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qur’an: Early Modern and Contemporary,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*.


60 Despite the immense contribution of their works, both Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud make certain judgments regarding the exegetical tradition without engaging it. For Barlas, misogynistic readings of the Qur’an derive from Muslim exegetes and Qur’an commentators (Barlas, *Believing Women*, 8-9). Wadud argues that traditional *tafsīr* excluded women’s experiences or interpreted them through male perspectives (Wadud, *Qur’an and Women*, 2).
other and with select pre-modern exegetes. It also situates their works within their own historical contexts and larger intellectual trends in the genre.

There is a need in this field for scholarship that can adequately provide insight on how modern exegetes, in comparison to pre-modern exegetes, approach verses that feminist critics have singled out as ‘problematic,’ and to shed light on the historical range of their interpretations. Can we discern an interpretive hermeneutics that is distinct to the modern period, and if so, how does this change the meanings that modern exegetes derive from the same verses? In other words, what is the relationship between exegetes’ methodology and interpretation of gender-related verses?

Finally, in the current scholarship on exegesis and gender, there is a tendency to examine exegetical texts in isolation from the broader intellectual and methodological frameworks that inform the exegetes’ approach to the Qur’an. Rather, we tend to study gender in the Qur’an from the narrow prism of whether or not, or to what extent, they fulfill certain notions of “egalitarianism,” which, as Hidayatullah correctly points out, are contingent on our modern subjectivities. As such, we make sweeping judgments about the entire career of an exegete based on our findings of his gender-related interpretations, without taking into account the overall methodologies that underlie the exegete’s intellectual thought, not just the outcome of his interpretation on two or three verses. There is thus a clear void in the field of gender in the Qur’an for the type of analysis this dissertation aspires to fulfill.

The impetus for examining this critical question comes from my conversations with the late professor Barbara Stowasser, who continually prompted me to consider the question of how exactly modern exegetes differed from pre-modern ones in their interpretations on gender issues. This question occupied the center of much of Stowasser’s work, which had evolved in its
analysis of pre-modern and modern exegesis. In her 1994 work, Stowasser found a disparate difference between pre-modern and modern exegesis (specifically Quṭb and ‘Abduh’s) on the Qur’anic narratives on human creation and historical female figures. However, she found this difference to be more nuanced in her examination of verse 4:34, which deals with hierarchy in marital relations, in a later essay published in 1998.61 Her essay pointed me towards greater questions regarding methodological, theological and paradigmatic differences that emerge in Qur’anic exegesis in the modern period. This dissertation builds upon her scholarly contributions to this field and the questions she posed to me as her student.

A. Contentions and Research Design

Far from being monolithic, it is my contention that the exegetical tradition has been marked by a diversity of both methodology and interpretation. Among its many functions, the genre of *tafsīr* has long created an interpretive space for understanding the Qur’anic text. The Islamic exegetical tradition underscored textual polysemy as an inherent feature of the Qur’an, rendering it amenable to a multiplicity of readings.62 Interpretive differences that arose between exegetes were the product of two sources of influence: 1) the realm of hermeneutics, in which the exegetes’ methodological, legal, and theological inclinations came to bear in their participation in the interpretive process;63 an exegete declared his loyalty to a specific school or trend of exegesis by engaging the *tafāsīr* that represent the school in which he grounds his work; and, 2) the exegete’s intellectual and social milieu, in which is he is trained and socialized and which reflects his intellectual preoccupations and concerns.64 In Qur’anic exegesis, like in other

61 Stowasser, “Gender Issues and Contemporary Qur’an Interpretation,” in *Islam, Gender and Social Change*.
62 Calder, 103.
63 Calder, 105-6.
exegeses, there is a life-relation between the exegete and the subject matter of the text, which becomes most evident upon comparing a number of exegeses on a specific text.

The genre of tafsīr was not immune to the ruptures in Islamic intellectual thought witnessed in the twentieth century. As modern education produced new “spokespeople” for Islam, who participated in a previously ʿulama-dominated enterprise, the field of modern exegesis also generated new forms of engagement with the Qurʾan. This dissertation seeks to situate the works of ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr within the broader historical and intellectual developments in tafsīr, as well as within their personal historical contexts. In consideration of their respective paths, trajectories and visions for change in the modern period, how did ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr differ from each other, and how do they differ from pre-modern exegetes? I will compare three important sets of factors in the interpretations of modern and pre-modern exegetes:

1) The hermeneutics they employ: What is the methodology that underlies their approaches to exegesis, and how does this relate to larger developments and trends in the field of tafsīr? If they derive new interpretations on gender verses, how do they anchor these interpretations within the tradition? Do modern exegetes utilize different sources than pre-modern exegetes to derive their interpretations or do they utilize existing sources to derive new opinions? Do they establish an alternate hierarchy of sources?

An important dimension to my comparative analysis of pre-modern and modern exegeses is to examine the extent to which modern exegetes apply a more thematic or unitary approach to Qurʾanic verses in comparison to the former, who are critiqued for

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66 Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer Nafi, 5-6.
their linear-atomistic approach.\textsuperscript{67} Do the three modern exegetes surveyed reflect a more thematic approach in their Qur’anic interpretation, and how does this bear influence on the meanings they derive from the verses?

2) The meanings they derive from specific verses on gender: Do ʿAbduh, Ḥuṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr conform to classical interpretations on gender or depart from them? How do they differ in their interpretations? How does their departure from pre-modern exegesis reflect an engagement with modernity?

3) The influence of their cultural, historical and socio-political context on their interpretations of gender-related verses in the Qurʾan: How did the interplay of women’s issues with nationalism and colonial resistance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries influence the way these three modern exegetes interpreted gender-specific verses of the Qurʾan? Do the modern exegetes reflect an attempt to reconcile certain notions of ontological gender equality and gender justice with the Qurʾan? And if so, how do they reconcile these notions with Qurʾanic verses that have been not been interpreted in ways that are consistent with ‘modern’ notions of gender equality and gender justice?

B. My Selection of Exegetes and Verses

My selection of ʿAbduh, Ḥuṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr is guided by three factors: 1) each represents a unique orientation of Islamic thought in the modern period; 2) their exegeses are regarded as among the most significant in the twentieth century in terms of influence and originality,\textsuperscript{68} and 3) their exegeses reflect a critical engagement with modernity. While both

\textsuperscript{67} Fazlur Rahman was the one of the first scholars to articulate this critique in \textit{Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2. Other scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas adopted this same line of critique against classical exegesis.

\textsuperscript{68} Basheer Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr: The Career and Thought of a Modern Reformist ʿālim, with Special Reference to His Work of tafsīr,” \textit{Journal of Qur'anic Studies} 7, no. 1 (2005): 1-2; Johanna Pink, “Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunni tafsīr: Towards a Typology of Qur’an Commentaries from the Arab World,
ʿAbduh and Ibn ʿĀshūr were trained religious scholars, Quṭb was an intellectual with a non-ulama background who succeeded nonetheless in writing one of the most widely read and influential exegesis of the twentieth century.⁶⁹

The pre-modern classical exegetes whose works I examine are Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad Ibn Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Abū Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurtūbī (d. 671/1273), ‘Abdullāḥ ibn ʿUmar al-Bayḍāwī (d. 691/1292)⁷⁰, and Abū l-Fidāʾ Ismâʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr (d. 773/1371). I select these six exegetes in particular because they, among others, represent the most significant approaches of the Sunnī exegetical tradition. Further, their exegeses span the genres of both tafsīr bil-maʾthūr and tafsīr bil-raʾy, despite the problems with modern usages of these labels, as Walid Saleh contends.⁷¹ Throughout this dissertation, I briefly cite their interpretations only to demonstrate how and where ʿAbduh, Riḍā, Ibn ʿĀshūr and Quṭb’s works signal a variation or continuation of pre-modern exegetical

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⁶⁹ The fact that an exegesis by a non-ʿālim can surpass or be equivalent to the influence of those written by ‘ulama is an indication of the unique symptoms of modernity, which would have never previously existed in the history of Islam.


⁷¹ Saleh writes, “The introduction of the term ‘al-tafsīr bil-maʿthūr’ into the historiography of tafsīr was the result of a fascinating development that only now is becoming apparent. What has happened is that the internal, modern, Sunnī struggles over hermeneutics, by lending a term to the history of tafsīr, shaped (or misshaped) the historiography of tafsīr negatively (both in the Arab world and in Western academia). A term that was first used by al-Suyūṭī as a title for his Qurʾān commentary, to reflect his alliance to Ibn Taymiyya’s radical hermeneutical paradigm, would surface in the twentieth century as the defining characteristic of Sunnī mainstream practice, which was never actually the case. The term was then picked up by Western scholars (especially English language scholarship) to be used as an analytical descriptive term for Sunnī hermeneutical practices, adding to the conundrum” (Walid Saleh, “Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of tafsīr in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach,” Journal of Qur’anic Studies 12 [2010]: 24).
commentary. This dissertation does not examine female or feminist exegetical interpretations due to the number of variables that would introduce to my comparison.

As the Qurʾan has become the focal point of the modern debate on whether Islam is irreparably patriarchal or even misogynist, this dissertation takes three different verses as the center of its focus: 2:228, 4:3, and 4:34. These verses have generated much controversy in the debate on the Qurʾan’s potential to be a site for gender justice. Verse 4:3 has elicited attention in the debate on gender for granting men the right to marry up to four women, under certain conditions. Verses 2:228 and 4:34 have both garnered controversy because they appear to give men privileges or prerogatives over their wives, albeit in very different contexts. Verse 2:228 establishes legal procedures following a husband’s pronouncement of divorce, and the last part of the verse concludes that “women have rights like men’s rights upon them, according to what is equitable [bil-maʿrūf], and men have a degree [daraja] over them, and God is Almighty, Wise.” Verse 4:34, the subject of even greater debate, grants husbands the function of qiwāma over women due to “what God has preferred over others” and men’s financial maintenance of women. Among other themes, it also prescribes three measures for dealing with a wife who is guilty of nushūz. Based on a literal reading of the verse, these three measures are first, giving advice, second, hajr in beds (primarily interpreted as sexual abandonment or separation of beds), and third, hitting. I leave the terms qiwāma and nushūz in their Arabic form throughout the dissertation because one cannot disengage the translation of these terms from their interpretation. Due to the interpretive range regarding the precise meaning of these terms, any translation implies an interpretation.

72 The scholarship on gender in the Qurʾan focuses extensively on this verse in specific. See for example, Chaudhry, Domestic Violence in the Islamic Tradition; Stowasser, “Gender Issues and Contemporary Qurʾan Interpretation,” in Islam, Gender and Social Change; Mubarak, Hadia, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34,” Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and Islamic World 2, no. 3 (2004): 261-289, among others.
C. The Politics of Selection

In an interview with NPR’s Diane Rehm on his book A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power, former President Carter underscored the heterogeneity of religious texts regarding their positions on women. Commenting on how the Bible can be used to argue for both the equality and inferiority of women, Carter states,

There are some verses ... [that] can be interpreted either way. And, for instance, St. Paul, who's looked upon as the chief theologian in the Christian church, has differing points of view. In one letter, to the Galatians, he says there's no difference between Jews and gentiles; there's no difference between male and female; there's no difference between slaves and masters. That all of us are equal in the eyes of God. In another letter, written to Corinthians and others, he says that women should not adorn themselves, that women should not speak openly in church and that wives should be subservient to their husbands. But at the same time, in the same passage as the last one that I mentioned to you, it says that husbands and wives should respect each other on an equal basis and that the husbands should love the wives as Christ loved the church. … So you can pick out individual verses throughout the Bible that shows that the verse favors your particular preference. 73

The same is absolutely true of the Qur’an. Our selection of specific verses as the focus of analysis is neither arbitrary nor inconsequential to our findings. In Western academia, there tends to be a disproportionate emphasis on Qur’anic verses that elicit controversy at the expense of other verses that establish female rights and promote egalitarianism, kindness, mercy, and fair treatment. Academic honesty compels me to concede that the findings of my dissertation would look much different had I chosen to instead compare modern exegeses on those verses, such as verses 4:4, 4:19, 4:32, 30:21, and 65:6 among others. Why does this dissertation, like

74 “And give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, Take it and enjoy it with good cheer” (Qur’an, 4:4). I use Yūsuf ʿAlī’s translation for this and subsequent verses, unless otherwise stated.
75 “O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness, that ye may Take away part of the dower ye have given them,-except where they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If ye take a dislike to them it may be that ye dislike a thing, and Allah brings about through it a great deal of good” (Qur’an, 4:19).
most of the scholarship in this field, instead, focus on controversial verses that appear to establish a gender hierarchy rather than these other verses?

While this dissertation does not signal a break with the dominant trend to examine verses deemed as problematic, it reflects a conscious and deliberate choice to focus on verses that have elicited controversy for specific reasons. The question of whether patriarchy can be ascribed to the Qur’an or to exegetical interpretations, which has occupied much of the scholarship in this field, rests upon an examination of specific verses that feminist critics deem to be problematic. They qualify them as such because the outward meanings of these texts appear to give men prerogatives over women or to create a gender hierarchy within a marriage. Therefore, any attempt to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on this question must engage these controversial verses.

One’s engagement with these verses, however, should be guided by two theoretical considerations. First, as G. Vermes, a scholar of Biblical texts, once stated, one should distinguish “between a problem that arises because of something in the text” itself, and one that arises “because something external to the text is imposed upon it.” Our disproportionate emphasis on controversial Qur’anic verses in relation to gender is most certainly a reflection of our own times and intellectual priorities, rather than a reflection of the text itself. Second, it is important for us, in academia, to recognize that our own engagement in this discussion is not

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76 “...To men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn: But ask Allah of His bounty. For Allah hath full knowledge of all things” (Qur’an, 4:32).
77 “And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect.”
78 “Let the women live (during their waiting periods) in the same style as ye live, according to your means: Annoy them not, so as to restrict them. And if they carry (life in their wombs), then spend on them until they deliver their burden: and if they suckle your (offspring), give them their recompense: and take mutual counsel together, according to what is just and reasonable. And if ye find yourselves in difficulties, let another woman suckle (the child) on the (father's) behalf.”
divorced from the historical roots of the debate on gender and Islam that Leila Ahmed so eloquently describes in her classic work *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. We must be conscious of why we ask the questions we ask and what presumptions are implied or associated with those questions. Thus, the conclusions we draw and analyses we make must be rooted in an understanding of where our approach fits in the larger conversation on gender in Islam. By recognizing that our work comes as a response, in one form or another, to existing discourses in this field, we gain a more holistic understanding of the significance of our conclusions.

III. Significance

My comparison of these three unique modern exegetes will yield insights into three scholarly debates in this field. First, this dissertation develops existing conceptual arguments regarding the influence of context on readings of the text. How are readings shaped by the readers’ concerns, sensibilities, and academic backgrounds? Does the impact of modernity yield new understandings of the text as it relates to gender?

Second, this study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate regarding the existence of either gender justice or patriarchy in the Qur’an. How do the modern exegetes’ interpretations of the three verses inform the scholarly discussion on gender justice in the Qur’an? If modern exegetes interpret these verses in way that offer the potential for gender egalitarianism in the Qur’an, then this challenges the argument made by some scholars that the meanings produced by pre-modern exegetes are inherent to the text itself. If exegetes, modern and pre-modern, lack

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80 Ahmed, 245. She states, “The study of Muslim women in the West is heir to this history and to these discourses [of colonialism on gender] and to the ideas and assumptions they purveyed. The main assumption was that Muslim women can pursue progress only through the abandonment of native ways for “the non-androcentric, non-misogynist ways…of the West” (245).

81 This argument was made by both Andrew Rippin and Kecia Ali, although they based this on very different premises and reasons.
consensus about the meanings of certain verses, then to argue that some meanings are inherent to the text while others are not is to privilege the interpretations of some exegetes over others. As such, this dissertation will shed light on the range of interpretive space offered by both pre-modern and modern exegesis on gender in the Qurʾan.

Third, this study illustrates the relationship between meanings and methodologies. What methodologies do modern exegetes employ? Are “innovative trends” in *tafsīr* limited to methodological ones? What do we make of an exegete’s ability to employ existing methodologies to produce new meanings? If modern exegetes produce new meanings based on existing methodologies, this reflects the tradition’s internal capacity to accommodate change through its methodologies. In other words, it would reflect the fact that exegetical methodologies are pliable and could yield different results. On the other hand, if modern exegetes employ new methodologies to interpret the text, do these new methodologies consistently produce meanings that are different than those reached by pre-modern exegetes? The answers to these questions will demonstrate the relationship between methodology and meaning in Qurʾanic exegesis in a way that departs from superficial generalizations. Further, the findings will shed light on markers of authority in the exegetical tradition. How is interpretive authority formed? Is it, as Hidayatullah claims, achieved only through a repetition of both the methods and content of “traditional exegesis?”

### IV. Outline of Study

Chapter two will provide an overview of ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr’s intellectual frameworks and biographical backgrounds. It will situate their works within their historical contexts and describe the challenges that modernity posed to the Muslim world. This chapter

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82 Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Early Modern and Contemporary,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān.*
83 Hidayatullah, 179.
also puts into perspective the drastic changes that the religious establishment underwent and the ways in which these changes created levels of ruptures and continuities in modern Muslim thought. It examines where ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr fit in the context of these ruptures and continuities.

Chapter three examines ʿAbduh, Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr’s aims and approaches to tafsīr. It identifies important developments in the genre of tafsīr in the modern period and notes where ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr fit within these developments. In doing so, this chapter illustrates how their respective exegeses represent a rupture or continuity with the pre-modern exegetical genre. It further illustrates the ways in which their tafsīr reflects either an engagement with the pre-modern exegetical tradition or a conscious critique of this tradition. It demonstrates what makes these three exegetes among the most influential of the twentieth century. In doing so, it argues that ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr thoroughly engaged modernity in their exegeses, yet in drastically different ways.

Chapter four examines the historical context of modernity and the divergent discourses in the debate on gender in Islam in the Muslim world. It provides a historical background of colonial, Western and indigenous, secular narratives on women in Islam in the Arab world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It further explores the implications of these narratives on the question of Islam’s compatibility with modern society. How was the question of gender related to the larger issue of Islamic self-identity? What impact did this historical context have on ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr’s respective tafsīr on gender issues? In specific, this chapter situates their exegetical commentaries on 4:3, dealing with polygyny, in this historical context. In what ways do their commentaries reflect and engage the larger contemporaneous debates on gender in Islam in that period? This chapter also compares modern
and pre-modern exegetes’ interpretations on 4:3 to illustrate the significance of the issue of polygyny in the modern period.

Chapter five will examine pre-modern and modern exegesis on verse 4:34, which is regarded as one of the most controversial verses in the Qur’an in regards to women’s rights. I examine significant gender-paradigmatic concepts in this verse, such as the meaning of men’s qiwāma in a marital relationship, and women’s nushūz. Do the modern exegetes interpret these in a significantly different manner than pre-modern exegetes? Further, how do pre-modern and modern exegetes interpret the third disciplinary measure to “hit” women who are guilty of nushūz?

Chapter six will explore pre-modern and modern exegesis on verse 2:228, also known as the “daraja” verse. I examine the interpretive range of opinion on the meaning of men’s and women’s mutual rights and men’s daraja over women. How do ‘Abduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿAshūr’s interpretations signal a continuation or change from pre-modern interpretations of this verse? Do the modern exegetes necessarily bring in new opinions, or do they revive classical opinions previously lost in the ashes of exegetical history? This chapter aims to shed light on the range of interpretive meaning that exegetes brought forth regarding the meaning of men’s degree, and demonstrate how “new” interpretations in the twentieth century have roots in the early classical period (3rd-4th century AH).

V. Notes on Translation and Transliteration

I leave the terms qiwāma, qānitāt, nushūz, and bil-maʿrūf in their Arabic original, due to the interpretive choice that would underlie any translation. The exegetical and Western scholarly literature lacks consensus on the precise meanings of these terms. Therefore, one cannot disengage the translation of these terms from their interpretation. For transliteration purposes, I
transliterate all Arabic words except for those words that have become familiar to most readers.

Therefore, I do not transliterate the following terms and spell them accordingly: Qur’an,
Qur’anic, ʿulama, and fatwa.
CHAPTER TWO: BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

I. Change and Continuity

A. Introduction

The rapidness, volume, and magnitude of change in the modern period in the Muslim world are largely unprecedented in the history of these societies and cultures.\(^8^4\) To quote Taji-Farouki and Nafi, “this change has transformed the discursive underpinnings and assumptions of Islamic thought in the twentieth century, as well as its subject matter. It has created overlapping and interacting junctures of intellectual rupture and continuity never witnessed before in Islamic intellectual history.”\(^8^5\) As noted by many historians of the Arab and Muslim world, the intellectual stage in the Muslim world is governed by this perpetual tension of ruptures and continuities.\(^8^6\)

This dissertation deals with the themes of continuity and change in the modern Muslim world and the emergence of new forms of discourses on gender issues, which is reflected to varying extents in modern exegesis. In the span of the twentieth century, the Muslim world witnessed the demise of its last religious empire, the creation of modern nation-states, and the forging of new national identities, sources of legislative authority, and institutions of learning. These changes, along with the cultural and military domination of the West, threatened to permanently change everything that the Muslim world knew as normal, and created a context


\(^{8^5}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{8^6}\) Ibid., 5. As examples of these ruptures and continuities in Islamic thought, John Voll, Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994); Basheer Nafi, “The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and its Challenge to Traditional Islam;” William Shepard, “The Diversity of Islamic Thought: Towards a Typology;” and Elizabeth Sirriyeh, “Sufi Thought and its Reconstruction” in Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004). In his 1991 essay, Albert Hourani, who attributes this concept to Jacques Berque, describes two rhythms of change that dominated the Arab world, one was externally imposed while the second was “that which a great stable society with a long and continuous tradition of thought and of life in common was producing from within itself, partly by its own internal movement, and partly in reaction to forces coming from outside.” (Hourani, “How should we write the history of the Middle East?” IMES 23, no. 2 [1991]: 129).
which gave rise to new intellectual modes of engagement with modernity. These varying modes of Islamic thought sought to reconcile issues that became of significant theoretical concern, in an effort to uphold the relevance of Islam to Muslim societies.

In the context of these drastic changes emerged Muslim intellectuals and scholars who sought to respond to the challenges of modernity through an Islamic religious framework. The three exegetes whose exegeses I compare, Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905), Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966), and Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr (1879-1973), share the objective of reviving the importance and relevance of Islam to society at all levels: politically, socially, and intellectually. Each of these exegetes, however, represents a unique ‘response’ to the challenges of modernity, as a result of their differing academic training, engagement with the Islamic sciences, ideological orientation, and lastly, the contexts in which they produced their works. Although each of them pursued a form of “change” in their respective societies, they diverged in their visions, methodologies, and engagement with the Islamic tradition as they charted out paths for Islamic renewal and change. As such, rather than study these individuals as representing a typology of Islamic thought, a common approach of many studies, this chapter takes as its point of departure the specific methodologies and outlooks that underlie each individual’s program for change.

Muḥammad ʿAbduh, the earliest of the three exegetes, followed a trajectory that evolved from an emphasis on Muslim political unity, to one that pursued the restoration of the umma’s strength through national, legal, and educational reforms. Sayyid Quṭb, a literary critic, intellectual and Islamic activist, envisioned the way forward for the Muslim community through the direct implementation of the religion’s sources—a return to the pristine past in order to restore the values that brought success and triumph to the first Muslim community. Of the three
exegetes, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr, whom I believe is the most intellectually grounded in the Islamic tradition, envisioned the way forward for the Muslim community through a revival of Islamic principles and methodologies, which he viewed as yielding timeless results that were relevant to every age and society. The principles and methodologies that undergird the Islamic tradition themselves offered the potential for change that the Muslim community was seeking, change that could remain at once authentic to the community’s values and yet relevant to new societal circumstances. This belief guides Ibn ʿĀshūr’s most important works in *tafsīr* and law.

**B. Change Through Continuity**

In the twentieth century, change has taken many forms. While Islamic modernists and reformists have been significant agents of change, there has been an overlooked pattern of change in the form of ʿulama who recognized and embraced the need to respond to the challenges of modernity from within the intellectual Islamic tradition. As John Voll acutely observes, the struggles unleashed in the Muslim world due “to the influence of Western ideas” and Western political and military domination “have not eliminated the basic dynamics of Islamic continuity.”

While modernists and Islamists certainly deserve their share of attention, we must not overlook those processes of change that come in forms we do not conventionally treat or perceive of as “change.” As Qasim Zaman eloquently articulates in the introduction of *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, “appeals to tradition are not necessarily a way of opposing change but can equally facilitate change.”

In our study of modern intellectual history in the Muslim world, the academic community has tended to reflect a methodological bias in its attraction to individuals, trends, and ideas that appear to be radically innovative and a departure from what is perceived as “tradition” or

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“traditional.” Riveted by our own cultural bias and ideas of reform and “progress” grounded in Enlightenment thought, as Daniel Brown writes in *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, we have paid disproportionate attention to modernist and reformist trends at the expense of internal processes of transformation that are rooted in a continuous tradition of Islamic thought.  

The presumption of Enlightenment’s clear-cut dichotomy between tradition and modernity underlies methodological approaches to the study of modern Muslim thought, which views controversies and debates as a larger battle between tradition and modernity, revelation and reason, liberalism and reaction. Such approaches undermine the power and influence of internal processes of change that build upon existing norms within the intellectual Islamic tradition.

Ibn ʿĀshūr, who served as Grand Muftī of Tunisia, represents this overlooked modality of change. Rather than adhere to a puritanical notion of tradition in the guise of a return to the past, as has been the case among the dominant salafi trend, Ibn ʿĀshūr represents the classical Sunni practice of renewal based on pre-existing scholarly norms. As Felicitas Opwis describes, “efforts at renewal have been a constant feature of Islamic law.” I argue that such efforts of renewal were also characteristic of the discipline of *tafsîr*. As such, Ibn ʿĀshūr advances an intellectual renewal, not by bypassing or dismantling the intellectual tradition, but by reviving its timeless methodologies and employing them to reach new opinions for changed realities.

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90 As an example, see Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s classic *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957).

While much ink has been spilled on both ‘Abduh’s and Quṭb’s visions and exegeses alike, comparatively scant attention has been paid to Ibn ‘Āshūr in Western scholarship. One of my goals will be to shed light on Ibn ‘Āshūr’s importance in terms of his intellectual vision for change and the methods he employed and promoted to achieve that change. I will focus on the significance of his scholarly output, specifically his tafsīr, al-Tahrīr wa-l-Tanwīr. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s tafsīr best illustrates that parallel to the “rupture” that has characterized the modern period in the Muslim world, there has been an equally strong force of continuity of tradition sustained through local seminars and scholars who have maintained autonomy from the “center.”

In many ways, his tafsīr is an attempt to bridge the rupture between modern Islamic discourse and the intellectual Islamic tradition.

On other hand, ‘Abduh’s and Quṭb’s respective tafsīr are, in certain ways, reflective of this rupture. As I demonstrate below, two of the factors that contributed to the rupturing of traditional Islamic authority were the rise of a non-ʿulama intelligentsia who spoke in the name

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92 Yvonne Haddad devotes a section on Abduh’s exegesis in “Muḥammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform” in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1994). As an example of the attention paid to Quṭb and Abduh’s exegesis in western scholarship, the only modern exegetes that Stowasser fully examines in her book are Muḥammad Abduh/Rashīd Riḍā and Sayyid Quṭb. She does, however, make references to other exegetical works in the modern period such as Bint al-Shaṭi’, whose work Stowasser identifies as an “application” of the methodology of the Egyptian philologist and theologian Ayman al-Khūlī (d. 1967) (Stowasser, *Women in the Quran, Traditions and Interpretation*, 120).


94 Walid Saleh, “Marginalia and Peripheries: A Tunisian Historian and the History of Qur’anic Exegesis,” *Numen* 58 (2011): 287. Walid Saleh makes the point that certain lands of the Muslim world, such as Tunisia, had autonomy from the “center” (i.e. al-Azhar in Egypt and Saudi Arabia) in that their scholars’ knowledge was autonomous and not reliant on what the center made available or on its “conceptual vision” of Islamic history in any of the genres, and specifically the genre of tafsīr (299). He cites the work of al-Fāḍil ibn ‘Āshūr, al-Tafsīr wa Rijāluhu, as evidence of this autonomous knowledge.
of Islam,\textsuperscript{95} and the powerful case made by “reformists” for returning to the foundational texts, the Qur’an and Sunna. As Taji-Farouki and Nafi write, “As the salafi idea of returning directly to the founding texts gradually displaced the assumption of the ulamatic traditions of learning as the necessary credentials for speaking on behalf of Islam, the Islamic cultural arena became wide open to a new assortment of voices, reflecting new notions of authority.”\textsuperscript{96} It was in this context that Ibn ʿĀshūr was reasserting the authority and relevance of the Islamic tradition as methodologically capable of renewal, regeneration, and change in its response to the crises facing Muslim societies.

C. Decline of the ʿUlama: New Spokespeople for Islam

The impact of modernity was felt across all levels of society, but most acutely by the religious establishment, the ʿulama. Throughout much of Muslim history, the ʿulama were uniquely positioned as guardians of the faith. They held the recognized authority to interpret the Qur’an, derive juristic rulings from their cardinal sources, and define the community’s religious outlook.\textsuperscript{97} Their source of authority was the unique position they held to establish and safeguard the tenets of Islam, maintain the societal nexus, and extend legitimacy to the state.\textsuperscript{98}

Significant changes in the modern period dealt several fatal blows to the ʿulama, such as: the rise of non-ʿulama spokesmen of Islam, the appropriation of the awqāf by the state (which deprived the ʿulama of a major source of economic power and independence), the creation of modern state courts and state appropriation of legislative processes, the restructuring of traditional seminaries, and the rise of modern education, which brought with it new disciplines

\textsuperscript{95} Quṭb reflects the trend of new spokesmen for Islam, in which non-ʿulama Muslim intellectuals successfully produced an intellectual Islamic discourse for renewal or change that surpassed the influence of that produced by ʿulama. As Taji-Farouki and Nafi point out, the vast majority of influential Islamic political leaders and intellectuals in the twentieth century were of a non-ʿulama background (7).
\textsuperscript{96} Taji-Farouki and Nafi, 10.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 5-6.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 4.
and produced new types of intellectuals. All of these factors led to the gradual marginalization of the ʿulama, who previously enjoyed unparalleled social authority and prestige. Further, as Opwis describes, “the gradual secularization” of the educational system significantly undermined the ʿulama’s authority, as they “used to have almost exclusive control over education.”

These reforms led to the rise of a new intelligentsia educated outside the sphere of religious education, and these “spokespeople” for Islam offered competing narratives on Islam. These changes increasingly made the ʿulama’s knowledge appear irrelevant to the state, society and even the legal sphere. The dissemination and production of their knowledge was previously part of a highly-valued, long-honored, and prestigious enterprise; yet the simultaneous marginalization of the ʿulama class and their knowledge also meant that this once very active and cherished enterprise was crumbling under the weight of modernity.

II. Muḥammad ʿAbduh

A. Biographical Sketch

Often dubbed the ‘father’ of Islamic modernism, Muḥammad ʿAbduh represents one of the earliest intellectual responses to the crisis that modernity unleashed in the Muslim world. He was born in the village of Maḥallat Naṣr (in Buḥayra province) in Lower Egypt in 1849, to “a family renowned for its commitment to learning and religion.” His first teachers were a private tutor and a reciter of the Qurʾan, and by the age of twelve, he had memorized the entire Qurʾan. At the age of thirteen, he was sent to Tanta to study at the Aḥmadī mosque, “considered second

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only to the great al-Azhar University as the place to learn the Qur’an and recitation.”¹⁰³ According to Haddad, he was dismayed by the instruction at the Ahmadī mosque, which focused on rote memorization. He left the Tanta mosque “convinced that he would never again take up academic life.”¹⁰⁴ One of his uncles, a Shaykh of the Shādhilī Ṣūfī order, would later rekindle his love for learning, as ‘Abduh became acquainted with the ascetic practices and moral teachings of the Ṣūfī order. In 1866, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, he left for al-Azhar University in Cairo. ‘Abduh’s traditional learning gave him the experience that informed much of his later critique of the educational systems of traditional Islamic seminaries. As Muḥammad Mustafā al-Marāghī (1881–1945) writes of ‘Abduh’s experience at al-Azhar that it was “a lusterless age … he, and others like him, went on studying dull, lifeless rules cut off from their wellsprings in the Qur‘ān and the canonical writings, shorn of their roots in the language of the Arabs.”¹⁰⁵

‘Abduh did not settle for the type of education that al-Azhar offered and exposed students to other texts during his studies there. According to the entry on ‘Abduh in Encyclopaedia of Islam, “‘Abduh instructed advanced students in a complicated work that was hardly ever taught, the commentary of the Ash‘arī Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 793/1390) on ʿUmar al-Nasafī’s (d. 537/1142) treatise on Māturīdī dogma (ʿaqāʾid), thereby risking the revocation of his permission to teach.”¹⁰⁶ He, Nonetheless, received his degree of ʿālim from al-Azhar and began to teach at the newly established Dār al-ʿUlūm college in 1878. According to Haddad, “he used this as an

¹⁰³ Ibid., 31.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
opportunity to speak and write on political and social matters, and especially national education, during this period of heightened national consciousness in Egypt.”  

Within one year, however, ʿAbduh was dismissed from his position and banished to his native village, due to his affiliation with Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897). The latter had become increasingly controversial due to his outspoken criticism of the country’s leaders and rejection of foreign intervention in the country. As a result, al-Afghānī was expelled from Egypt by Khedive Ismāʿīl in 1879. Nonetheless, ʿAbduh remained in Egypt and was even reinstated to his position within a year. Prime Minister Riyāḍ Pasha also appointed him editor-in-chief of al-Waqāʾiʿ al-Miṣriyya, Egypt’s official state publication. It was here that ʿAbduh’s views regarding reform gained much exposure and he became an influential voice in the broader national discourse on various aspects of reform, including gender.

B. Political Consciousness

The changes brought forth by rapid modernization, colonialism, and the dissolution of the Ottoman state had not yet reached their climax during ʿAbduh’s lifetime. Nonetheless, by 1870 European military imperialism in the Muslim world, specifically North Africa, was becoming a reality that could no longer be ignored. Al-Afghānī, whom ʿAbduh names as his second teacher, first introduced him to the political challenges facing Egypt and the rest of the Muslim world. His association with Al-Afghānī, without question, influenced the trajectory of ʿAbduh’s career and thought. Al-Afghānī’s lectures, which emphasized the urgency of resisting European

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107 Haddad, “Muḥammad ʿAbduh,” 32.
110 von Kügelgen, “ʿAbduh, Muḥammad,” EI.
intervention and the unification of the Muslim world, as well as his friendship with ‘Abduh, urged the latter to “[enter] the world of socio-political activism from which he never retired.”\textsuperscript{111}

In 1882, ‘Abduh was exiled from Egypt due to siding with the nationalist cause against the Khedive’s pro-British policies. After a two-year stay in Beirut, at al-Afghānī’s invitation, he moved to Paris, from where al-Afghānī had been warning against the dangers of Western imperialism and control of Muslim territories.\textsuperscript{112} There, the pair founded the greatly influential organization, \textit{al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā (The Firm Bond)}, and an eponymous publication.\textsuperscript{113} Al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh called upon Muslims to unite politically under a pan-Islamic identity and overcome racial and national differences. They identified the internal division among Muslims to be one of the main sources of the community’s decline and vulnerability.

The reasons are up to speculation, but at some point in the middle of his career, ‘Abduh shifted his focus from political activism to legal and educational reform as the path to restore the Muslim \textit{umma} to its original vigor. According to Osman Amin, ‘Abduh’s change in direction was due to the failure of his and al-Afghānī’s political aspirations, and perhaps due to the risk involved in pursuing their political goals of colonial resistance and Muslim unification. Further, ‘Abduh believed that broader educational reform would give rise to the moral regeneration of society in a way that was far more lasting than an abrupt, political coup. Amin explains,

\begin{quote}
After the disappearance, at the end of 1884, of the journal \textit{al-‘Urwa al-Wuthkā}, and after the failure of their revolutionary projects, ‘Abduh proposed to his mentor [al-Afghānī] to consecrate henceforth their efforts to the education, and to the creation of a sort of special school, which, following a new method, would contribute to the regeneration of the manners and customs, and to the formation of an elite among Egyptian youth, which would better correspond to the moral idea
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{111} Haddad, “Muḥammad ’Abduh,” 31-32.
\textsuperscript{112} Haddad, “Muḥammad ’Abduh,” 34.
which they pursued. Every result obtained by this means was certainly much slower than could be obtained by a revolution, but it is also more profound and certain.\textsuperscript{114}

For ʿAbduh, political activism and legal reforms both offered different forms of solutions to the umma’s problems. While one dealt with the external challenge of European colonialism, the latter dealt with the internal problems of intellectual deterioration, the inability to change the law with changing conditions, and internal division. The urgency that ʿAbduh once felt towards politically responding to the external threat seems to dissipate towards the latter half of his career. Perhaps he realized that the task of overcoming the imperial threat of colonialism was too daunting a task for men outside the role of governance. Perhaps, he saw his role, as a man of religion, better executed by undertaking another difficult task of intellectual regeneration and reform. At any rate, it is clear that he saw the treatment of internal problems as part of the solution to the external challenge facing the umma.

In 1888, the Khedive allowed ʿAbduh to return to Cairo, but he was forbidden from teaching there, perhaps due to fear of his influence on the young people of Egypt.\textsuperscript{115} Instead, he was appointed as a judge in the country’s ‘native courts,’ established to implement the Khedive’s new laws. In 1895, he became a member of al-Azhar’s administrative council and was appointed as the Grand Muftī of Egypt. He used these positions to introduce reforms to Egypt’s religious courts and educational system, specifically its ancient and prestigious al-Azhar University.\textsuperscript{116} As Muftī, he also brought changes to the religious courts. According to Anke von Kügelgen, ʿAbduh was unique in his issuance of legal opinions, fatāwā, because “unlike his predecessors, he not only issued legal opinions for the government (according to the Ḣanafī school), but also

\textsuperscript{115} Haddad, “Muḥammad ʿAbduh,” 32.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 33.
answered personal inquiries sent from all over the world.”

Further, in issuing fatāwā for individual cases, he did not confine himself to the Ḥanafī state law.

C. Impetus for Reform

Pointing to what he called the “backwardness” of Egyptian society, ‘Abduh blamed the decline of the Muslim umma, at the internal level, on ignorance and misunderstanding of the faith, as well as sectarian divisions, the prevalence of taqlīd and the misguided policies of Muslim leaders. He insisted that an Islamic reform must begin with the bare bones of religion, upon which all schools of law and factions could agree. His advocacy for a return to the ways of the “pious forefathers” (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ) gave his reform message a distinctly Salafī outlook, although not a Wahhābī one. Scholars like W. Ende have labeled ‘Abduh as a neo-orthodox reformist, because of his distinct employment of al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ in his methodology. Although he believed in a return to the authority of the early salaf, he believed in a selective re-appropriation of the salaf’s teachings.

Specifically, he argued that every text, except for the Qur’an, was subject to analysis and critique. This distinguishes him from the position of later Salafīs. In his major works, Risālat al-Tawḥīd and Al-Islām wa-l-Naṣrāniyya, ‘Abduh argues for the primacy of reason in Islam. Although he attempts to demonstrate the harmony between revelation, reason, and human moral temperament in Islam, reason wins out. “In case of a disparity between reason and what has been transmitted by tradition, reason predominates,” ‘Abduh writes.

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117 von Kugelgen, EI. Haddad also mentions this point. She writes, “It is in these fatwas that some of the most interesting glimpses into the thought of this complex man are to be found,” (33).
118 I refrain from translating the term taqlīd where it appears in this dissertation due to the scholarly controversy regarding what this precisely represents, especially in law.
119 Haddad, 36.
120 He was accused of Wahhābism by some of the older Mālikī Zaytūna scholars, specifically the Zaytūnī ālim Ṣāliḥ al-Sharīf, because of ‘Abduh’s “sympathy with the Wahhābī drive against saint-worship,” (“Salafyya,” Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed.)
121 ‘Abduh, Al-Islām wal-Naṣrāniyya, (Cairo: al-Manār, 1938), 54-55, as cited in Haddad, 45.
The Qurʾan took center stage in the project of intellectual reform ʿAbduh envisioned, as he argued that it was the one true source on which Muslims cannot disagree. Hence, a return to the Qurʾan’s laws and values would be the “only means of the revival of the nation.” For ʿAbduh, there was no question that Muslim societies’ political decline was correlated with their intellectual and religious decline. Therefore, his focus on educational and legal reforms stemmed from his belief that greater political change will ensue from changing the people’s condition, specifically by awakening their knowledge of their faith. It was with this objective that ʿAbduh produced his Qurʾanic commentary. An example of this belief is ʿAbduh’s commentary on 2:29, in which he writes,

Yes indeed, the Muslims have become backward compared with the other peoples of this world. They have fallen back into a state inferior to what they were in before the advent of Islam liberated them from their paganism. They have no knowledge of the world they live in and they are unable to profit from the resources of their surroundings. Now foreigners have come, who snatch these riches away from under their noses. However, their Book interposes itself and exclaims: He has subjected to you what is in the heavens.

D. ʿAbduh’s Disciple: Rashīd Riḍā

While Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935) merits attention apart from his association with ʿAbduh, for the purposes of this dissertation, I examine his thought only to the extent of his contribution to *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, as the editor and co-author of this influential exegesis. Riḍā was born in Qalamūn, near Tripoli on the Mediterranean coast in northern Lebanon. He received his primary

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122 Haddad, 37.
123 Jansen, J.J.G. *The Interpretation of the Quran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1974), 30.
125 According to most western accounts, ʿAbduh is regarded as the main author of *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, whereas Riḍā’s contributions to the tafsīr are mainly regarded to be, first, editing and transcribing ʿAbduh’s notes and, second, writing the rest of the tafsīr from 4:124 to 12:107. This account, first mentioned by C.C. Adams and repeated by many other Western academics, is based on Riḍā’s introduction to the first volume of *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, first published in its present form in 1927. See Jansen (1974), 24n22. However, in an article by Muḥammad al-ʿAfdil ibn ʿAshūr, he argues that there are, in fact, three contributors to *Tafsīr Al-Manār*: al-Afghānī, ʿAbduh and Riḍā. He then states, that if we were to attribute to this work to one of these three contributors, we would attribute it to Riḍā, who is its “true author” (*al-muʿallif al-ḥaqīqī*).
education at the *kuttāb* of Qalamūn, and his secondary education in the Ottoman state school in Tripoli, specifically, *al-Madrasa al-Waṭaniyya*, founded there in 1879. Riḍā was first exposed to the journal *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā* and ʿAbduh’s ideas during the latter’s exile from Egypt. Between 1885-1888, ʿAbduh resided in Beirut, where he had succeeded in attracting a significant number of followers in Lebanon. It was during this period that Riḍā became a dedicated and loyal student of ʿAbduh.

Riḍā is regarded as most influential in the dissemination of Islamic reformist thought into the public square. In 1897-1898, Riḍā traveled to Egypt with the mission of publishing a journal with his mentor, ʿAbduh, covering issues related to Islamic reform. With ʿAbduh’s collaboration, Riḍā single-handedly founded *al-Manār*, which was both a printing house and the name of the periodical journal. The journal, first published in Shawwāl 1315/March 1898, became an important mouthpiece for the vision and ideas of Islamic reformers. As John Voll observes, the journal was “a major factor in shaping Muslim thought from North Africa to Southeast Asia.” It included articles by ʿAbduh, al-Afghānī, Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī

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127 von Kügelgen, “Muḥammad ʿAbduh,” *EI.*

128 Ende, "Rashīd Riḍā."

129 Voll, *Continuity and Change*, 163.

130 Since al-Afghānī died in 1897, before the journal’s official publication, these articles are presumably ones that al-Afghānī had previously written and were either re-published or published for the first time in *al-Manār*.
Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (1866-1914), and others. However, “the bulk of the material was drawn from his [Riḍā’s] own tireless pen.” 

The collected corpus of the *Manār* provides a mine of information on the attitudes, the focuses of interest, the hopes and disappointments of reformists over a period of nearly forty years. It reflects the major events of the Muslim world seen from Cairo, as well as the personal development of Rashīd Riḍā.

Like ʿAbduh, Riḍā was exposed to Ṣūfī teachings at a young age, but later turned to criticize practices and teachings that he believed to be false and *bidʿa* (religious innovation).

This and other positions that Riḍā took brought him into conflict with leading scholars of al-Azhar. As Hourani notes, however, his criticism of Ṣūfī teachings was qualified and not a rejection of all forms of Ṣūfism. Nonetheless, Riḍā underwent a clear evolution of intellectual thought, specifically in regards to his thoughts on Wahhābism. According to W. Ende,

Until his death in 1935 he repeatedly explained how and why his judgment of the Wahhābiyya had changed: in his youth, under the influence of Ottoman propaganda, he had regarded the Wahhābis as fanatical sectarians; after his arrival in Egypt, however, through reading the chronicle of al-Djabartī [q.v.] and works of other authors and through direct information, he had understood that it was the Wahhābis, not their opponents, who defended true Islam, even if they were inclined to certain exaggerations.

As the co-author of *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Riḍā’s developing salafī tendencies and conservatism are evident. Despite the shared platform of Islamic reformist thought between

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131 An influential Syrian intellectual and author, al-Kawākibī, called for pan-Arab solidarity against Ottoman intervention.
132 al-Qāsimī, a close associate of ʿAbduh’s, is regarded as one of the most influential voices of reformist thought in Syria and had attracted a huge following from the younger generation of Syrians. See David Commins, “Religious Reformers and Arabists in Damascus, 1885-1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, no. 4 (Nov. 1986): 405-425.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., “al-Manār.”
136 Ibid., “Rashīd Riḍā.”
138 Ende, “Rashīd Riḍā.”
ʿAbduh and Riḍā, I argue that there is a distinct difference between Riḍā’s and ʿAbduh’s discourse on gender issues. Throughout *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Riḍā interlaces ʿAbduh’s words with thorough citations, clarifications, and supplements to his teacher’s explanation of verses. On gender issues in specific, Riḍā articulates a more conservative conception of gender issues, specifically regarding women’s role in society and what he regards to be women’s “natural work.”

What is most evident in Riḍā’s exegesis on controversial issues, such as polygyny in Q. 4:3 and “hitting” in Q. 4:34, is an apologetic tone that does not exist in ʿAbduh’s discourse on gender issues, in my assessment. While ʿAbduh does not shy away from critiquing Muslims for what he regards to be their abuses and injustices against women, Riḍā, on the other hand, tends to justify and defend certain institutions such as polygyny by pointing to European moral deficiencies, such as the practice of extra-marital affairs. Therefore, in certain instances, ʿAbduh’s attempts to reform societal attitudes toward women turn into an entrenchment of these attitudes in Riḍā’s apologetics.

III. **Ibn ʿĀshūr**

A. **Life and Career**

Ibn ʿĀshūr was born into a prestigious family which had produced some of Tunisia’s greatest scholars and religious leaders. His paternal grandfather, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1284/1868), after whom he was named yet never met, was a renowned scholar who rose to the position of chief Malikī judge. He was appointed Muftī in 1861 and eventually combined this post with the distinguished position of *naqīb al-ashraf*. On the other side of his family, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s maternal grandfather, Muḥammad al-ʿAzīz Bū ʿAttūr (1825-1907), was the first

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139 Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 4:354. The original fatwa was published in *al-Manār* 7 (17 Rabī’ al-Awwal 1322 – 1 June 1904): 231-238.

minister of ʿAlī Bey III (reg. 1882-1902). His family background of religious learning and high standing in Tunisia’s political and religious circles shaped and influenced the trajectory of his life and career.

For his primary education, Ibn ʿĀshūr attended a traditional Tunisian kuttāb, where he studied Arabic, Qurʾan and some French.\textsuperscript{141} At the young age of thirteen, he began his studies at the prestigious Zaytūna University, where he studied with some of the most renowned scholars of the time.\textsuperscript{142} All of his teachers, except one, were Mālikī scholars.\textsuperscript{143} He completed his studies at Zaytūna between 1892 and 1896 and was then appointed as an auxiliary professor.

To get a sense of this scholar’s astuteness, one need only follow the milestones of his career. In 1900, he became a lecturer at Ṣādiqiyya College. Within three years, at 24, he “passed the oral exam to become a first-class professor at Zaytūna.”\textsuperscript{144} The following year, he was nominated a state deputy at the niẓāra of Zaytūna, “a position in which he would take the first steps in his life-long project to reform Zaytūna education.”\textsuperscript{145} As one of Tunisia’s leading young ʿulama, Ibn ʿĀshūr participated in the official commission entrusted with reforming all levels of education that functioned between 1908 and 1912. A year later, he was named the Jamāʿa Mālikī judge, the most senior juridical position. In 1923, he left the judiciary to return to his teaching posts at Zaytūna and Ṣādiqiyya College, respectively. By 1932, “he was declared the Mālikī Shaykh al-Islām, becoming the first Mālikī ʿālim to be given such a title.”\textsuperscript{146} He intermittently also held the influential position of Shaykh of Zaytūna University. He resigned from the position in the 1930s, but was eventually re-appointed in November 1944, and continued to hold it until

\textsuperscript{141} Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr,” 8.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 10.
1951, while also holding the position of Mālikī Grand Mufti. These positions he held offer only a glimpse into the contributions of Ibn ʿĀshūr to twentieth-century Islamic thought in Tunisia and to the breadth and height of his intellectual caliber.

B. The Tunisian Context

Although Western literature on Ibn ʿĀshūr’s intellectual thought and contributions is dim, much of what exists primarily depicts Ibn ʿĀshūr as a reformer inspired by ʿAbduh’s Islamic reform project. Ibn ʿĀshūr welcomed ʿAbduh warmly during the latter’s visit to Tunisia in September 1903, two years before ʿAbduh passed away. Further, he wrote an anonymous defense of ʿAbduh in al-Manār after ʿAbduh was severely rebuked by a segment of the Tunisian ʿulama. Although most biographies of Ibn ʿĀshūr mention his enthusiastic support for ʿAbduh during his last visit in 1903, support for ʿAbduh among Tunisia’s reformist ʿulama had been cultivated long before his two visits there in 1884 and 1903, respectively.

According to a recent essay, “Mawqiʿ al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr fil-Fikr al-Īṣlāḥī al-Ḥadīth,” the seeds of Tunisian support for ʿAbduh’s reformist vision had been sown in the early 1880s, when the Tunisian reformer and statesman Khayr al-Dīn (1820-1890) directly

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147 Ibid.

148 See for example Basheer Nafi’s “Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr: The Career and Thought of a Modern Reformist ʿālim, with Special Reference to His Work of tafsīr.” Another example is the 3-page biography of Ibn ʿĀshūr that prefaces the English translation of his Treatise on Maqāsid al-Shariah. It identifies Muḥammad ʿAbduh as Ibn ʿĀshūr’s inspiration for writing Maqāsid al-Shari’a. The author of the biography, who is unidentified but is presumably Muhammad El-Mesawi, writes, “the issue (al-maqāsid) became a major concern for the author as early as 1903 when he met Shaikh Muḥammad Abdu, the spokesman for modern Islamic reformism in Egypt and the Arab world, during his visit to Tunisia. The meeting sealed ibn ʿĀshūr’s alignment with the spirit of the Islamic reform movement and shortly thereafter he began to publish articles on the need for reforming Islamic education (in terms of content, method and administration, etc.) laying special emphasis on the place that Maqāsid al-Shariah should occupy in the teaching of Islamic jurisprudence…” (Treatise on Maqāsid al-Shariah [Herndon, VA: IIIT, 2006], xv).


affiliated with al-Afghāni and ʿAbduh’s *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā*. There are unmistakable parallels between ʿAbduh and Khayr al-Dīn’s reformist vision, which held that the *umma*’s political decline stemmed from its political, intellectual, and moral degeneration, and that the ʿulama had an essential role to play in the regeneration of the Muslim community.\(^{151}\)

As Prime Minister of Tunisia from 1873 to 1877, when it was an Ottoman sultanate, Khayr al-Dīn attempted with limited success to push forth a program of reform that sought a middle path between appeasing the French, British and Italian demands and seeking the endorsement of the established ʿulama. Khayr al-Dīn won the support of many leading Tunisian ʿulama, as he successfully incorporated them in the dissemination and administration of these reforms. His well-known treatise, *Aqwām al-Masālik*, had an appendix of favorable reviews written by a group of ʿulama. Further, he included them in crucial administrative positions, such as in the management of the new public library, the new government gazette, and the new modern Șādiqiyya College.\(^{152}\)

Many of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s own teachers were members of the reformist camp of Tunisian ʿulama, most particularly Sālim Bū Ḥājib (1828-1924),\(^{153}\) Maḥmūd ibn al-Khūja (1854-1911), and Muḥammad al-Nakhūlī (1860-1924). Like ʿAbduh, Bū Ḥājib advocated educational and political reforms as charting the way forward for Tunisian Muslims. Ibn ʿĀshūr’s influential maternal grandfather, Muḥammad al-ʿAzīz Bū ʿAttūr, was also a scholar and reformist politician who as prime minister during the 1890s, embraced and continued Khayr al-Dīn’s reform projects.\(^{154}\)

\(^{151}\) Al-Chaouachi, Sulayman, “Mawqiʿ al-Shaykh,” 57.
\(^{152}\) Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr,” 4-5.
\(^{153}\) Of all Ibn ʿĀshūr’s teachers, Sālim Bū Ḥājib is the only whom I’ve noted was endowed with an equally long life as Ibn ʿĀshūr.
\(^{154}\) Al-Chaouachi, 66-67; Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr,” 8.
C. Ibn ’Ashūr’s Unique Orientation of ‘Reform’

Basheer Nafi is one of the first academics in the West to duly bring attention to Ibn ’Āshūr’s contributions to Islamic reform in the modern period. In his essay on “The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and its Challenge to Traditional Islam,” Nafi includes Ibn Āshūr in a long list of influential reformist ‘ulama, intellectuals, and statesmen, such as ‘Abduh, Riḍā, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī in Damascus, Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī (1857-1924) in Baghdad, and Sayyid Aḥmad Khān in India (1817-1898), among many others. Despite its great academic merit, one weakness in this essay’s approach is that its examination of these reformists through the prism of a typology of thought distorts important differences between them. For example, Nafi writes, “what unified the various reformist currents and groupings, however, was a shared opposition to Ash‘arī/Ṣūfī theology and a strong desire to challenge its dominance on the level of the learned classes and societal level as well.”

Ibn ’Āshūr here becomes a stark exception to this statement made by Nafi. Unlike the rest of the reformist groups described by Nafi, Ibn ’Āshūr did not challenge the dominant Ash‘arī tradition, but rather championed it, specifically in his approach to tafsīr, as I describe in the next chapter. Ibn ’Āshūr took mainstream Ash‘arī theological positions throughout his tafsīr, especially in his discussions on the attributes of God, the createdness of God’s speech, and the Ash‘arī concept of kasb. Nafi, however, redeems his generalization of Ibn ’Āshūr’s orientation of reform in a later essay specifically devoted to the subject of al-Ṭāhir ibn Āshūr. It is in this later essay that Nafi acknowledges that “Ibn ’Āshūr does not accept the whole Salafi

156 Ibid., 42.
methodology, at least as it was advanced by Ibn Taymiyya and his disciple, the renowned exegete of the Qurʾān, Ibn Kathīr.”

In this essay, Nafi points out where Ibn Ṭāhir significantly deviates from the Salafī paradigm and embraces mainstream Ashʿarī positions. This issue will be further discussed in the third chapter, in my discussion on Ibn Ṭāhir’s taḥfīz and his challenge to the dominant exegetical trend that viewed taḥfīz bil-maʿthūr as the authoritative mode of taḥfīz.

Despite the permeation of Ṭāhir’s reformist vision in Ibn Ṭāhir’s career and thought, if one traces the trajectory of Ibn Ṭāhir’s ideas, we find a clear and decisive rupture between Ibn Ṭāhir’s methodology for reform and that of Ṭāhir. Ibn Ṭāhir’s approach to reform was one based on seeking change through the complex, internal processes of the tradition itself, whereas Ṭāhir’s took a less nuanced approach and sought a return to Islam’s foundational source, unadulterated by the intellectual tradition through which it had been interpreted. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, their exegesis is the best representation of their markedly different approaches to tradition.

Ṭāhir’s primary influence on Ibn Ṭāhir, I argue, is owing to his unrelenting insistence that Islam was a religion based on reason, that God speaks to man through reason, and that “Islam is the only religion whose essential dogmas can be proven by reasoning.” This premise leaves a perpetual imprint on Ibn Ṭāhir’s intellectual trajectory and persists throughout the evolution of his reformist vision. This influence of Ṭāhir’s insistence on reason as the basis of religion is given expression in Ibn Ṭāhir’s employment of the notion of taʿlīl throughout his taḥfīz. According to the notion of taʿlīl, all divine legislation, commandments, and prohibitions,

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are amenable to human reason, a belief which ‘Abduh expressed earlier and was at the heart of the reformists’ call for *ijtihād*.\(^\text{161}\) As Nafi eloquently states,

> only a few other Sunni scholars of tafsīr before, or even since, have employed human reason in understanding the legal implications of the Qur’ānic text on the scale demonstrated in Ibn Ṭāhir’s tafsīr. *Al-Taḥrīr wa’l-tanwīr* is a work that is almost entirely underpinned by the notion of or the ability of human reason to grasp the legal connotations of the Qur’ānic text.\(^\text{162}\)

‘Abduh’s second influence on Ibn Ṭāhir, or at least a point of agreement between them, is in their vision of educational reform. Among Ibn Ṭāhir’s teachers were many who embraced Khayr al-Dīn’s project of educational reform, and Ibn Ṭāhir also became one of its proponents. As I mentioned earlier, Khayr al-Dīn was directly affiliated with al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh’s reform project. This influence continued to permeate a certain segment of the Zaytūna ‘ulama, including Ibn Ṭāhir. Therefore, like ‘Abduh, Ibn Ṭāhir’s vision lent itself towards practical reforms.

First, they both correlated the intellectual decline of the *umma* at large with the regressive state of the Islamic educational system during their times. Second, they both regarded the state as responsible for the function of education; hence, they both cooperated with the state as the vehicle through which reform should be implemented.\(^\text{163}\) Third, like ‘Abduh, Ibn Ṭāhir called for greater standardization of the methods and content of the educational system. As Nafi writes, “Like other Arab-Islamic reformists, Ibn Ṭāhir was the product of the nineteenth century Euro-Ottoman culture of modernization which sought in centralization and control the surest answer to what appeared to have been a lack of dynamism and innovation in traditional social organisations.”\(^\text{164}\) Ibn Ṭāhir felt that the freedom that characterized the traditional Islamic


\(^{162}\) Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn Ṭāhir,” 22.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{164}\) Ibid.
seminaries was dangerous and that, for example, teachers should not be given complete freedom to choose which books to teach.Fourth, Ibn ‘Āshūr and ‘Abduh both advocated the development of analytical and critical approaches in higher education and a move away from rote memorization, which Ibn ‘Āshūr considered to be most suitable for only the primary stages of education.165

Ibn ‘Āshūr’s life (1879-1973) spans the last sixteen years of ‘Abduh’s life (1849-1905) and the entirety of Quṭb’s life (1906-1966). His long life span gives him the advantage of hindsight that his contemporaries ‘Abduh and Quṭb did not have.166 While Ibn ‘Ashūr was a strong advocate and supporter of ‘Abduh’s reformist message,167 he ultimately became disenchanted with the reformist project, as he witnessed the secular direction it took, specifically in Tunisia, during the span of the twentieth century.168 By 1961, Ḥabīb Bourguiba moved to implement the most radical educational reforms in any Muslim country, except for Turkey, and turned the historic institution of Zaytūna into a mere Sharīʿa college attached to the University of Tunisia.169 By turning it in a secular direction, Bourguiba succeeded in making the ‘ulama’s vision of Islamic reform utterly meaningless. Although Ibn ‘Āshūr was initially cooperative with Bourguiba, who sought in him an ally among the ‘ulama, Ibn ‘Āshūr eventually retreated from politics in complete distrust and disenchantment with the project of Islamic reform. As Nafi writes, “Ibn ‘Āshūr was reaching the end of the road in his search to reconcile Islamic reformism

166 Nafi puts Ibn ‘Ashūr’s exegesis on equal footing with Quṭb’s and ‘Abduh’s exegesis in terms of their influence in the modern period (Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr,” 1-2).
167 Ibn ‘Ashūr warmly received ‘Abduh during the latter’s visit to Tunis in Sept. 1903 and wrote an anonymous defense of his ideas in al-Manār (See al-Manār 6 [1904]: 927-38 and Ṣādiqā, Tārikh al-Ustādh al-Imām 1:717).
168 An entire chapter can be dedicated to this aspect of his life, alone, because he was initially close to Ḥabīb Bourguiba, but became very disillusioned with the nationalist, reformist camp, as it took a very anti-religious direction.
169 The most controversial of Bourguiba’s drastic reforms was the prohibition of fasting in Ramadan because it allegedly decreases productivity. Ibn ‘Ashūr publically rejected this position and refused to endorse it when asked to do so (Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr,” 12).
with the modern world.”

By this point, Ibn ʿĀshūr avoided all forms of public involvement and turned, instead, to writing and responding to inquiries he received from within and outside Tunisia.

IV. Sayyid Quṭb

A. Life and Career

One could very well argue that the significance and influence of Quṭb’s ideas reached a climax only after his execution by the Nāṣṣer regime in 1966. Decades later, Quṭb’s personality, thought and vision are still very much in contention. In the heated post-9/11 climate, the subject of Quṭb’s work became the center of much attention by politicians, policymakers, and journalists, as they sought to understand the ideological motivations behind those who committed the attacks on the United States. Many identified Quṭb’s writings, in particular Maʿālim fi-l-Ṭaʾarīq (Milestones), as the source of the terrorists’ ideological inspiration. Despite this focus on the more controversial aspects of his writing, his most significant literary output has been, by far, his Qur’anic exegesis, Fī Ṭiẓal al-Qurʾān. It has been reprinted (both legally and illegally) several times, translated into English, French, German, Urdu, Turkish, Indonesian, Persian and Bengali, and figured as the subject of hundreds of works of secondary literature in many languages.

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171 Ibid.
173 Fī Ṭiẓal al-Qurʾān was first translated into English in 1979, and then revised in 2003 and 2009. The revisions have been published by Islamic Foundation (UK) in 2003 and 2009. The French translation of the first volume was first published in 1988 by al-Hidāyah al-Islāmiya in Paris. It has been translated into Urdu by by Sajid-ur-
Quṭb was born in 1906 to a middle-class family in the village of Mūsha near Asyūṭ in Upper Egypt. He left his native village in 1920 to pursue his secondary education in Cairo. He studied at Dār al-ʿUlūm, an educational institution that combined traditional Islamic education with the secular sciences. Later, in 1946, this institution would become a part of Cairo University as the “The Faculty of Dār al-ʿUlūm.” After completing his education there, Quṭb worked as a teacher for almost six years, after which he served as a functionary in the Ministry of Education for nineteen years. During this time, Quṭb made his mark as a literary critic and writer in Egyptian cultural circles, but his tone was still not overtly religious. It is not until he joined the Muslim Brotherhood around 1951, after a lengthy trip to the United States, that his tone became staunchly religious.

B. Intellectual Climate

Quṭb was both a product of his intellectual climate and a contributor to the ideas that permeated Egyptian intellectual life during the 1920s-1960s. As a public intellectual, writer, and teacher, he was clearly engaging in a dialectic, responding and contributing to the passionate debate of his time: defining what it meant to be Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim. As Adnan Musallam notes, secularism was on the offensive in the 1920s, especially after the liberal, nationalist movement gained political power in 1919. The leadership of the 1919 Wafd
Revolution, which Quṭb had supported, was dominated by secularists who appeared to be under "the spell of European thought and who were willing to adopt not only European ideas, but the very institutions that grew in Europe."\(^{179}\) Although they did not reflect a grassroots movement, their control of centers of power gave currency to some of their secular ideas and attacks on traditional Islam.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, there was evidence of a renewal of Islamic sentiments in Egypt, as prominent literati (\(udabā\)'\) began to take interest in Islamic topics, Muslim associations began to form, and the liberal nationalists lost credibility due to their political failures. This renewal was triggered in response to the secular intellectual offense, as many Egyptians began to rediscover their Arab, Islamic heritage.\(^{180}\) The themes that run throughout Quṭb’s writings, especially those after 1948, strike at the core of this debate, such as questions regarding Egypt’s legitimate cultural and intellectual heritage and the viable alternatives that Islam could offer for Egypt’s future.

C. An Evolution of Thought

Quṭb’s \(tafsīr\) can best be understood in the context of his own personal, ideological, and religious development. It represents the last phase of his own religious and political development, as most of it was written during his intermittent twelve-year imprisonment up until his execution in 1966.\(^{181}\) By this last phase of his life, his discourse had significantly changed in tone from his previous works, in his insistence that Islam provides the only comprehensive system by which Muslims should live on this earth and that all other forms of government were


\(^{180}\) Musallam, 4-11.

\(^{181}\) Sixteen of thirty volumes were written prior to Quṭb’s arrest in 1954. However, a revised edition of these volumes was published in 1960. “It is this revised edition which is often characterised as \(tafsīr\) harakī ‘activist exegesis,’” according to Jansen. The remaining volumes were written from prison, with Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazālī acting as government-appointed censor. See Jansen, J. J. G. "Sayyid Kuṭb." *Encyclopaedia of Islam.*
illegitimate and should be overturned. He had concluded that any compromise with secular ideologies or man-made systems of governance was non-negotiable.

The tone in Quṭb’s *tafsīr* is markedly different from what it was in the early stage of his literary career, during which he flirted briefly with secularism. As a young man, he came under the influence of liberal, nationalist intellectuals, especially ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889 – 1964), and his writings at that point “reflected a fairly secular, nationalist viewpoint.”\footnote{William Shepard, “Islam as a system in the Later Writings of Sayyid Quṭb,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (Jan. 1989): 31-50.} For example, he makes it clear in his introduction to *Taṣwīr al-Fannī fi-l-Qurʾān* (published in 1945) that he approaches the text from a purely linguistic sense, not a religious one.\footnote{William Shepard’s “The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Quṭb as Reflected in Earlier and Later Editions of ‘Social Justice in Islam,’” *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, 32, Nr. 2 (1992):198.} Despite his interest in Islamic subjects from the onset of his literary career, though, his approach was still mildly secular at this point.

In 1948, Quṭb returned from a two-and-a-half year educational, study-abroad visit to the United States. By this time, he is completely disenchanted with what he sees as the West’s “double standards” in its policies with the Muslim world. He is especially outraged by the West’s position towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as Yvonne Haddad writes, and he returns to Egypt at the height of this conflict.\footnote{Yvonne Haddad, “The Qurʾanic Justification for an Islamic Revolution: The View of Sayyid Quṭb.” *Middle East Journal* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 17-18.} He joins the Muslim Brotherhood at this time and becomes one of its most important figures. In 1956, he is imprisoned with the rest of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1955, Quṭb is sentenced to fifteen years in prison. In 1964, however, Iraqi president ʿAbd al-Salām ʿĀrif mediated for Quṭb’s release from prison. However, he was arrested again shortly after in August 1965.\footnote{Jansen, “Sayyid Ḳuṭb,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam.*} During this period of his life, we can discern a gradual evolution of his religious and political thought, which ultimately leads to the extreme
positions he took vis-à-vis jāhilī society in *Milestones* and *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān* (both written in the 1960s). As mentioned by William Shepard and others, it was *Milestones*, published in 1964, that became the basis for his trial and execution in 1966; in this work, he accuses all existing Muslim governments of being un-Islamic and calls for an Islamic revolution.

**D. Quṭb: His Intellectual Framework**

Four themes are central to Quṭb’s later intellectual framework and inform his approach to *tafsīr*: 1) the conception of Islam as a “divine system,” by which all Qur’anic principles and legislation outline the “constitution” of this system; 2) a reification of Islam as an entity; 3) the employment of the term ḥākimiyya, God’s sovereignty, which he believes to be the defining characteristic of an Islamic political entity (i.e. it rules by God’s ḥākimiyya); and 4) the indictment of all societies that do not fully implement Islamic teachings as jāhilī. These concepts are relevant to his *tafsīr* for two reasons. First, they clearly shape his understanding of the Qur’anic text and influence his interpretations. Second, they demonstrate the ways in which influential Islamic thinkers signal a rupture with the Islamic tradition in the terminology and concepts they employ. As Nafi and Taji-Farouki describe in their introduction to *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, modern Islamist intellectuals and political activists “speak for Islam using novel idioms and discourses, expressing new concerns and preoccupations, and crystallizing the contradictions of modernity while they reflect the ruptures it has brought with Islamic intellectual traditions.”[^186] This is absolutely true of Quṭb’s *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān* in certain respects.

First, the concept of Islam as a “comprehensive system” becomes a central point in Quṭb’s writings. He borrows the concept from Abū al-ʿAlā al-Mawdūdī (1903-1979), but he

[^186]: Nafi and Taji-Farouki, 7.
develops it to a greater extent than Mawdūdī.\textsuperscript{187} Quṭb’s conception of Islam as a comprehensive, divine “system” reflects his employment of modern idioms to articulate Islamic teachings. As Shepard writes, “his [Quṭb’s] view of Islam as a system is one of the ways … that the dynamism of modernity is, so to speak, channelled into Islamic form.”\textsuperscript{188} Shepard analyzes at length Quṭb’s use of this concept in his essay, “Islam as a ‘System’ in the Later Writings of Sayyid Quṭb.”\textsuperscript{189}

The two Arabic terms that Quṭb uses to denote the term “system” are \textit{manhaj} and \textit{niẓām}. When he uses the former, \textit{manhaj}, he usually denotes a broader, more abstract and ideational way or method by which human beings are to organize their affairs.\textsuperscript{190} Based on my own reading of his works, I have further noticed that he often modifies \textit{manhaj} with the term \textit{ilāhī}, or divine, whereas when he uses the term \textit{niẓām}, he most often modifies that with the term \textit{islāmī}. Hence, as Shepard notes, in Quṭb’s writing, \textit{niẓām} generally refers to something more concrete which objectively exists in a society.\textsuperscript{191} I agree with Shepard’s assessment that “[o]f the two words … \textit{manhaj} leads us closer to the heart of Sayyid Quṭb’s conception of religion. It seems to be more distinctively characteristic of his thought, and particularly of his later as opposed to his earlier writing.”\textsuperscript{192}

In the ten-page introduction to his \textit{tafsīr}, the term \textit{manhaj} appears eighteen times. He maintains that submission to the divine system is not an option, but a must. It is a matter of belief

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 31-50.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 34. Interestingly, on the term \textit{manhaj}, Shepard writes, “The word hardly appears in the earlier editions of \textit{'Adālah}, and I think an investigation would show that it is distinctive of his later writings. At several points the word manhaj in the later edition of 'Adalah replaces fikrah nazariyyah or falsafah, in the earlier editions [compare \textit{'Adālah}, 1972 edition, pp.43, 97, 197, 282 with pp. 41, 92, 175, 255 respectively in the 1952 edition],” (Shepard, 47n19).
and disbelief. The significance Quṭb attaches to adherence to this divine *manhaj* permeates his *tafsīr*. He describes it as the only system on earth that is in sync with human nature and the only system that can elevate the status of mankind to the ultimate height of perfection. According to Quṭb, the composition of human beings, their inclinations and the processes they undergo remain the same throughout human history. The universality and relevance of the divine order means that its legislation applies to treat this basic nature of human beings, which does not change from one generation to the next. The divine order does not change according to historical contingencies, because it is a system that is intended to last throughout human history. Hence, Qur’anic legislation, teachings, and principles are all manifestations of this comprehensive system.

Second, in his conception of Islam as a system, there is a discernible reification of Islam, which is a unique feature of Islamic modernist discourse that reflects the complexities and contradictions of Muslim intellectual responses to modernity. As Nafi and Taji-Farouki brilliantly explain, the objectification of Islam in modern Muslim intellectual thought is due to the penetration of a number of ideological and philosophical orientations “with which ‘Islam’ must compete, and with which it must favourably compare.” While appealing to Islam as the ultimate source of authority, Quṭb also projects it as the object of the intellectual process. The construction of Islam as an independent, functioning entity introduces the modern aspect into Quṭb’s thought. In the introduction to his *tafsīr*, he writes,

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194 In his introduction to the *tafsīr*, he writes “The return to God, as reflected in *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān*, has one image and one path, only one, with no equivalent. It is the return of this entire life [of this world] to the divine *manhaj* that God has sketched for humanity in His noble Book. It is to make this Book the sole arbitrator in the life of humankind, and to appeal to it alone [as a source of legislation] in running the affairs of humanity. Otherwise, there will be corruption on the earth, misery for man…and a return to the *jāhiliyya* which worships the whims [of men] rather than God (*Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān*, 1:15).
196 Nafi and Taji-Farouki, 4.
197 Ibid., 9.
But Islam flows smoothly and gently with the fitra (innate human nature), pushing it forward from here and restraining it from there. It [Islam] keeps it [the fitra] upright when it slants, but it does not break it or destroy it. Rather, it is patient with it [the fitra] like the patience of one who knows and is perceptive and confident of the ultimate end sketched out for it.\textsuperscript{198}

Therefore, Islam is an entity in itself that grows and exhibits life processes, not the product of a collective body of individuals acting throughout history. What is missing in this objectification of Islam as an entity is the historic consciousness of Islam as the product of interpretive processes driven by human beings. This reification of Islam is clear in Quṭb’s tafsīr, as he endows Islam with “beliefs and actions that are aggregated in an organic dynamic fusion.”\textsuperscript{199}

A third concept that is related to Quṭb’s conception of Islam as a comprehensive system is ḥākimiyya, the ultimate sovereignty of God. The significance of the term ḥākimiyya is in its political connotation. The cornerstone of Islamic theology is tawḥīd, the unique oneness of God. If one is to confess that divinity belongs to God alone, then it follows that one must also accept that sovereignty, “the right to ordain the programme of human life,”\textsuperscript{200} belongs exclusively to God. Accordingly, Islam is both religion and state. Although this conception of Islam as religion and state is reflected in the thought of many modern Muslim reformists, Quṭb departs from many such reformers, including the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), in his rejection of Islamic equivalencies to Western conceptions of popular and legal sovereignty.\textsuperscript{201} Like Mawdūdī, Quṭb denies that human beings can partake in legal or political sovereignty since sovereignty (ḥākimiyya) belongs to God alone. Interestingly, Quṭb does not

\textsuperscript{198} Quṭb, Fī Zīlāl, 1:14.
\textsuperscript{200} Sayed Khatab, “‘Hakimiyyah’ and ‘Jahiliyyah’ in the Thought of Sayyid Quṭb,” \textit{Middle Eastern Studies} 38, no. 3 (Jul., 2002): 147.
address the question of what form a political entity based on God’s sovereignty would take. Further, it leaves unresolved the tension of how one could grant human beings the authority to implement God’s legislation on earth (a necessary step for the realization of the divine order), yet deny all forms of human sovereignty.

The fourth central concept to his intellectual framework and approach to tafsīr is the concept of jāhiliyya, a corollary to the concept of ḥākimīyya. Those societies that fail to accept the exclusive sovereignty of God by allowing man-made ideologies, governance, and legislation to reign have fallen into jāhiliyya. Hence they represent the reemergence of the very jāhiliyya that the Qurʾan came to extinguish. He defines jāhiliyya in the introduction to Milestones:

This jāhiliyya is based on rebellion against God’s sovereignty on earth. It transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others. It is now not in that simple and primitive form of the ancient jāhiliyya, but takes the form of claiming the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed.  

This definition of jāhiliyya remains consistent throughout Quṭb’s tafsīr. Essentially, all forms of political systems that do not base their legitimacy upon God’s law and do not derive their legislation from the Sharīʿa are jāhilī. As such, Quṭb concludes that “all the existing so-called ‘Muslim’ societies are also jāhilī societies.”

The centrality of these four concepts to Quṭb’s tafsīr reflects its modern dimension. Whereas pre-modern exegetes measured the Qur’anic text against a variety of scholastic disciplines, for Quṭb, what establishes the meaning of the Qur’anic text is not the scholastic disciplines, but 1) the concept of Islam as an ideal and comprehensive system to be implemented, 2) his definition of God’s sovereignty and 3) the indictment of societies that partake in God’s

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202 Quṭb, Milestones (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 2007), 11.
203 Ibid., 82.
sovereignty as jāhilī. These concepts provide the theological and theoretical background against which he measures the meaning of the Qurʾanic text.

In all fairness to Quṭb, hints of extremism that one could read into his tafsīr must be measured against the radical conditions in which Quṭb was forced to write his tafsīr. Unlike ‘Abduh and Ibn Ṭūsī, Quṭb was by no means writing this tafsīr under the normal conditions afforded to most intellectuals who have produced such commentaries. As mentioned earlier, the last fourteen volumes and the revisions to the earlier sixteen volumes were all written during his twelve-year imprisonment in Egypt’s notorious prisons. Historians of Egypt have noted the level of unusual persecution and torture leveled against Muslim Brotherhood members during the Nasser regime.204 While this subject is beyond the scope of my dissertation, an objective comparison of the three exegetes must take into consideration the drastically different conditions in which Quṭb wrote his exegesis in comparison to ‘Abduh and Ibn Ṭūsī.

V. Conclusion

The differences that emerge between ‘Abduh, Ibn Ṭūsī and Quṭb’s exegeses are the product of many factors: 1) their diverse educational training; 2) their engagement with the Islamic tradition; and 3) the intellectual and political contexts in which they produced their exegesis. Quṭb stands out among the three exegetes, for his lack of formal training in the religious disciplines. As mentioned above, he was a graduate of Dār al-ʿUlūm, which sought to harmonize the secular and Islamic sciences. Hence, Quṭb is well-versed in the tenets of the faith and its main sources, the Qurʾan and hadīth. What he lacks, however, is a deep grounding in the sciences of the Islamic “tradition” and the “worldview” that comes with the “age-long tradition of learning, a teacher-student system of intimate companionship, established customs of ʿijāza-

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204 As an example of the Nasser regime’s use of torture towards Brotherhood members, see Zainab al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh: Memoir in Nasir’s Prison*, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1994).
granting, piety and societal recognition.”\textsuperscript{205} As such, Quṭb represents a new mode of authority which speaks for Islam “using novel idioms and discourses” and “expressing new concerns and preoccupations.”\textsuperscript{206} He interprets the Qur’an through the framework of three important concepts: that Islam is a divine and comprehensive “system” (manhaj) to be implemented; that hākimiyya belongs to God alone, and that jāhiliyya is the manifestation of all systems of thought and governance that do not rule according to God’s law. In many ways, his tafsīr reflects a rupture with the Islamic tradition through the methodologies and idioms it employs, notwithstanding its great influence in Muslim societies.

Unlike Quṭb, ʿAbduh and Ibn ʿĀshūr both have firm grounding in the Islamic scholastic disciplines. There is a difference, in my assessment, between Ibn ʿĀshūr’s and ʿAbduh’s educational training. Despite the structural changes that Zaytūna College underwent during Ibn ʿĀshūr’s teaching career, this age-old institution maintained an autonomy of knowledge from the ‘center’ of the Muslim lands through its library and scholars, and the knowledge they produced and disseminated.\textsuperscript{207} Ibn ʿĀshūr’s training is grounded in the well-established tradition of Mālikī law, Ashʿarī theology, and philological tafsīr that is unique to the western North African context.

This grounding, I believe, gives Ibn ʿĀshūr a different outlook than ʿAbduh on the type of reform that scholars should promote and that Muslims should pursue. Although Ibn ʿĀshūr supported ʿAbduh’s message of reform, especially when the latter visited Tunisia at the beginning of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s career, the two part ways in the specific methodologies they believe should undergird such reform. ʿAbduh emphasized the primary texts, specifically the Qur’an and Sunna, as the authoritative basis of Islamic reform. According to Nafi, “the emphasis on the

\begin{references}
\textsuperscript{205} Taji-Farouki and Nafi, 10.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 7.
\end{references}
primacy of the Qur’ān and Sunna” served a major challenge to the dominance of the Ashʿarī tradition. ʿAbduh’s vision of reform sought a liberation of sorts from the “middle Islamic traditions,”208 which he believed hinder attempts at reform. For Ibn ʿĀshūr, on the other hand, his pursuit of reform did not attempt to bypass the ‘tradition,’ but to employ its principles and methodologies towards new ends. As Nafi mentions, some reformists felt there was a “risk involved in the process of unguarded subordination of the naṣṣ to the contingent.”209 Ibn ʿĀshūr certainly exhibits a level of reservation towards unhindered interpretations of the naṣṣ. In his tafsīr, therefore, he adopts a methodology that is fully conversant with the linguistic, legal, and theological debates of the pre-modern philological exegetical tradition. Yet, remaining true to a claim he makes in his introduction, he employs these methodologies to yield new insights and interpretations.

Quṭb also intensifies the modern tendency to “return” to the primary sources of the religion, most specifically, the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition. Yet he applies this towards different ends than ʿAbduh does. For ʿAbduh, the appeal to the primary texts is a way to unbridle scholars from the weight of the scholastic tradition and to give them authoritative space to derive new rulings for new contexts. For Quṭb, on the other hand, the ‘return’ to the primary texts is a way to revive the unique features that characterized the early Muslim community. The path to this revival, according to Quṭb, is to drink from the same unadulterated wellspring from which the early Muslims drank, which is the Qur’an, first and foremost, and then, prophetic guidance.210 For both, however, the Qur’an takes center stage in their efforts to revive the umma’s moral and political strength. This aim shapes their approach to tafsīr, as they both

209 Ibid., 43.
210 Quṭb does not view prophetic guidance as a separate source, but as the “offspring of this fountainhead” (i.e. the Qur’ān) and for proof of this, he quotes a ḥadīth by ʿĀ’isha that the Prophet’s character was the Qur’ān (Milestones, 17).
sought to make the Qur’an’s words relevant to peoples’ lives and the conditions of their societies.

Further, the climate in which they were writing their *tafāsīr* changed considerably in the time period between ‘Abduh and Quṭb, and between ‘Abduh and Ibn ‘Āshūr. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the reformist vision that ‘Abduh, Khayr al-Dīn, and others had sought in countries like Egypt and Tunisia was still quite ‘Islamic’ in form. For the early reformers, the processes set in motion by modernization could in fact be reconciled with Islamic principles and higher aims. Therefore, during the burgeoning modernization of Muslim societies in ‘Abduh’s lifetime, there was still a level of optimism regarding reformers’ ability to base modern political ideas and institutions on Islamic values and philosophies, rather than foreign ones.

By the time Quṭb and Ibn ‘Āshūr were writing their exegeses in the mid-1950s, the political and intellectual climate in Tunisia and Egypt had considerably changed. In both Egypt and Tunisia in the mid-twentieth century, the governments had become far more distant from Islam than Islamists and reformist ‘ulama had ever imagined at the beginning of the century. The Free Officers military coup in Egypt in 1952 led the country towards a more secular direction than Quṭb and the Muslim Brotherhood had originally expected. As documented by various sources, Quṭb was initially close to the Free Officers and allegedly advised them.\(^{211}\) By 1954, Nāsser’s regime took a sharp turn against the Brotherhood and imprisoned most of its leadership, including Quṭb.

Similarly in Tunisia, Bourguiba implemented aggressive secular reforms. At the height of his secularizing drive in the 1960s, Bourguiba prohibited religious television programming, eliminated religion as a subject from public education, and most drastically, ordered restaurants

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to remain open during Ramadan and told the Tunisian people to renounce fasting. Bourguiba’s controversial 1956 Personal Status Code was accompanied with a campaign against the hijāb. In her article on Islamists in Tunisia, Marion Boulby writes, “In Sfax, Bourguiba went so far as to outlaw the veil in the classroom and even described it as an ‘odious rag.’”

A striking resemblance, then, in the lives of Ibn ʿĀshūr and Quṭb is an ultimate sense of disappointment in the development of events around them. For both of these thinkers, this disappointment led to a retreat to the pen, yet this recourse signals something different for each of them. For Quṭb, who was imprisoned for most of this time, it was a means to continue his political struggle against all forms of tyranny and injustice, the greatest of which he believed to be the usurpation of sovereignty from God by men. The aim of his writing was to incite his readers to action of sorts. For Ibn ʿĀshūr, on the other hand, his retreat to the pen did not signal a response to existing conditions, but was an attempt to rise above existing conditions in his view that knowledge is the only medium that could rise above the confines of historical contingencies.

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CHAPTER THREE: MODERN EXEGETICAL APPROACHES

I. Introduction

Modern exegeses have not generally differed from pre-modern ones in their methodologies or their interpretations.\textsuperscript{214} It is for this reason that Rotraud Wielandt and Johanna Pink both argue that “treating early modern and contemporary exegesis of the Qur’an as a distinct subject”\textsuperscript{215} is unwarranted, unless “one chooses to focus exclusively on modernising trends when looking at contemporary exegetical efforts…”\textsuperscript{216} Wielandt writes, treating early modern and contemporary exegesis of the Qur’an as a distinct subject implies that there are characteristics by which this exegesis differs noticeably from that of previous times. The assumption of such characteristics, however, is by no means equally correct for all attempts at interpreting passages of the Qur’an in the books and articles of Muslim authors of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even where such an assumption holds true, those authors do not always deviate significantly from traditional patterns and approaches.\textsuperscript{217}

I agree with Pink and Wielandt’s general assessment that, for the most part, modern exegesis did not bring much that is new or different; their assessment guides my selection of modern exegetes, all three of whom were distinctly original.\textsuperscript{218} At the same time, what I find to be problematic in Wielandt’s assessment is the implication that methodological continuity in the exegetical tradition represents a stagnant, non-innovative stage of development. She writes in the same piece, that the “majority” of modern exegetes make “ample use of classical sources like al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) without necessarily adding anything substantially new to the already available interpretations.

\textsuperscript{216} Pink, 56.
\textsuperscript{217} Wielandt, \textit{EQ}.
\textsuperscript{218} I describe this in detail in the next few paragraphs.
One should thus always bear in mind that in the exegesis of the Qur’an there is a broad current of unbroken tradition continuing to this day.” The conception of “unbroken tradition” in this argument presumes a certain dichotomy between what this continuity represents in comparison to “innovative” methodological trends. My dissertation examines the extent to which methodological continuity in the exegetical tradition, to reach new conclusions, could represent a higher form, not a more primitive form, of intellectual development. Further, Wielandt’s argument reflects a tendency to measure what is “significantly new” through methodological indicators. Thus, the presumption is that those exegetes who use “innovate trends” ultimately bring new meanings to bear on the Qur’an, whereas those who don’t employ such trends do not.

My comparative analysis of ‘Abduh, Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr with select pre-modern exegetes demonstrates that there are strains of both change and continuity between them. Interpretive differences that arise between the three modern exegetes and pre-modern ones are not black and white. For example, even when exegetes like ‘Abduh and Quṭb use innovate and distinct methodologies in comparison to pre-modern exegetes, this does not always lead to different or new interpretations on certain gender-related Qur’anic texts, although there is much that is distinct. On the other hand, Ibn ʿĀshūr, who represents a more complex exegetical trend, does in fact employ a hermeneutic that is rooted in the pre-modern philological tradition. Nonetheless, this does not, as the following chapters demonstrate, prevent him from reaching new interpretations and conclusions, specifically on gender-related Qur’anic texts. This forces us to re-examine common assumptions about the relationship between methodology and meaning. That is, there is not a direct correlation between new methodologies and original interpretations. I argue that differences and similarities between pre-modern and modern exegetes, specifically

219 Wielandt, EQ.
those representing modern trends, are complex enough that they cannot be superficially
generalized without substantive evidence.

Both ʿAbduh’s and Quṭb’s exegeses have received much attention in western scholarship
for their influence, originality, and engagement with modernity. Johanna Pink, for example,
notes the significant interest in ʿAbduh’s and Quṭb’s works as setting “modernizing trends” in
the field of exegesis.220 Regarding ʿAbduh’s tafsīr, J.J.G. Jansen writes, “Modern Egyptian
Koran interpretation is still largely traditional … The only real innovations were introduced by
Mohammed ʿAbduh (d. 1905) and Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1967).”221 Similarly, Rotraud Wielandt
writes, “The first significant innovation in the methods of exegesis, as they had been practised
for many centuries, was introduced by two eminent protagonists of Islamic reform: the Indian
Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) and the Egyptian Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905).”222
Mustansir Mir singles out Quṭb from among six modern exegetes who distinctly employ an
“organic and holistic” approach to their interpretation of the Qurʾan by viewing each sūra as a
unity.223 Due to this unique approach, Mir writes that Quṭb’s exegesis “makes a definite break
with traditional-style exegesis, which in general terms, … lasted from the early Islamic centuries
to the end of the nineteenth century.”224

In contrast to al-Manār by ʿAbduh and Riḍā and Fī Ṣilāl al-Qurʾān by Quṭb, Ibn
ʿĀshūr’s al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr has received scant attention in western literature. Basheer Nafi is
one of the first academics to note the significance of this monumental exegetical work. He
writes,

220 Pink, 56n3.
221 Jansen, Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 17.
222 Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qurʾan: Early Modern and Contemporary,” Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan.
223 Mustansir Mir, “The Sura as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Qurʾanic Exegesis” in Approaches to
the Qurʾan, eds. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1994), 204.
224 Mir, 198.
Highly overlooked in studies of modern Qur’ānic exegesis, *al-Tahrīr wa’l-tanwīr* is a major contribution to the ongoing attempt by Muslims to define the place that the Islamic founding text occupies in their lives. If the *Tafsīr al-manār* of Muḥammad ʻAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā, published early in the twentieth century, was the first significant work of *tafsīr* to reflect the impact of modernity on Muslim comprehension of the Qur’an, *al-Tahrīr wa’l-tanwīr* represents the persistence of classicism, but is at the same time both an internalisation of, and response to, modernity.225

It is not a coincidence that most academic surveys of modern exegesis choose *not* to include Ibn ʻĀshūr’s *al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr*, translated as “The Verification and Enlightenment.”226 The scant attention paid to his exegesis in western scholarship is not *all* due to failure to recognize the value of his work,227 but rather to the fact that his exegesis defies most generalizations that one could derive from embarking on a study of modern exegeses.228 Although his *tafsīr* shares many

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226 Basheer Nafi’s translation. The original title of the *tafsīr* was much longer: *Tahrīr r al-ma’nā al-sādīd wa tanwīr al-ʻaqī al-jādīd min tafsīr al-kitāb al-majīd* (Verification of the Sound Meaning and Enlightenment of the New Mind in the Exegesis of the Glorious Book). Ibn ʻĀshūr chose the shorter title, according to Nafi, “The Thought and Career for a Reformist ʻālim,” 29n78.

227 The survey of *tafsīr* in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* makes a blatant disregard of Ibn ʻĀshūr’s *tafsīr* in the section in which it deals with modern philological contributions to *tafsīr*. The author of this piece, Andrew Rippin, devotes a section to modern trend he labels as “modern literary-philological-historical criticism.” While he takes the Moroccan professor, ʻĀ’isha ʻAbdul-Raḥmān (also known as Bint al-Shāṭi’), as the prototype of this trend, it is ironic that he makes absolutely no mention of Ibn ʻĀshūr, whose philological contributions to *tafsīr* are unmatched in the twentieth century. This could be because Rippin specifically distinguishes the trend of “modern literary-philological-historical criticism” as being straight-forward and void “of unnecessary material which is seen to be a hindrance to understanding in the modern world.” Ibn ʻĀshūr on the other hand, is not necessarily concerned with restricting the value of his interpretation to the sensibilities of the modern world, but with unearthing the timeless meaning of each verse through the discipline of language and its various branches. Again, the timelessless of Ibn ʻĀshūr’s *tafsīr* makes it difficult to neatly fit his *tafsīr* in most categories of modern *tafsīr*. See Andrew Rippin, “Tafsīr,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 13:8949-8957.

228 For example, in her article, “Tradition and Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunni *Tafsīr*: Towards a Typology of Qur’ān Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia and Turkey,” which surveys 12 different modern exegeses, Johanna Pink mentions in a footnote that she deliberately does not include Ibn ʻĀshūr because he does not fit the same generation as the other exegetes she is studying, which she says “shows both in his biographic and academic background and in the style of his commentary.” However, this reason is not very convincing, as *al-Tahrīr wa’l-Tanwīr* was published during the same time period as the other exegeses she includes in her study. Ibn ʻĀshūr based on his but her reason behind this decision is not convincing. She is definitely right about two things however. Ibn ʻĀshūr’s academic background, not his biographic, and the style of his commentary, do set him apart from most of the exegetes producing works in the same time period. But this is not necessarily a matter of being of a “different generation.” His biographic background shares aspects very similar to those exegetes Pink includes in her study, such as Muhammad Abū Zahra (d.1974), dean of Cairo University’s Sharī’a Faculty and member of al-Azhari’s Islamic Research Academy; Muḥammad Sayyid al-Ṭanṭāwī (d. 2010), shaykh al-Azhar and author of *Tafsīr*
aspects with modern exegeses, what makes Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr somewhat of an anomaly is his employment of pre-modern methodologies to reach new insights and conclusions. As I explore below, it is in form, not content, that Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr bears resemblance to the classical, pre-modern tradition. In the context of ruptures and continuities in the modern period, Ibn ʿĀshūr is unique in charting out a path of change through continuity with the tradition.

Despite important methodological differences, all three exegetes converge on the principle that the exegete has the right to bring new meanings to bear on the Qur’anic text. All three exegeses offer insightful and original interpretations on critical issues regarding gender and women’s status and rights in society and the family. ʿAbduh, Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr all believed that exegetes in the twentieth century are not confined to the meanings produced by their predecessors in the early years of Islamic history nor its middle ages. For these modern exegetes, the capacity to bring new insights to the Qur’an is continual.

II. The Function of Tafsīr for ʿAbduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr

A. ʿAbduh’s Tafsīr: Relevance to Modern Conditions

ʿAbduh’s tafsīr, Al-Manār, shattered all pre-existing typologies of tafsīr by creating a new form of tafsīr that was unique in both methodology and content. As Jansen writes of Al-Manār in 1974, “No new Koran commentaries had appeared in nineteenth century Egypt. Abduh and Riḍā, however, paved the way for the huge quantities of twentieth century commentaries that have appeared since and that still are appearing.”229 Haddad echoes this analysis of ʿAbduh’s

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229 Jansen, The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt, 31.
In a sense, he [ʿAbduh] initiated the twentieth-century of individual interaction with and interpretation of the Quran."\(^{230}\)

*Tafsîr al-Manâr* was compiled in three stages. The first stage consisted of a series of lectures which ʿAbduh delivered at al-Azhar University around the year 1900, which covered the beginning of the Qurʾan until verse 4:124. The second stage was, as most sources note, ʿAbduh’s student Rashîd Riḍā’s faithful transcription of these lectures, which Riḍā showed to his teacher for approval or correction before their publication in the journal *al-Manâr* as the commentary of Muḥammad ʿAbduh.\(^{231}\) As a third step, the *tafsîr* pieces from the periodical were compiled into *Tafsîr Al-Manâr*, as it is currently known. After ʿAbduh’s death in 1905,\(^{232}\) Riḍā continued the commentary until verse 12:107.\(^{233}\) The final *tafsîr*, up to verse 12:107, was first published in its present form in 1927.

The uniqueness and influence of ʿAbduh’s *tafsîr* lie in its awakening the relationship between the Qurʾan’s words and the affairs of humans in this world. ʿAbduh delivered his exegetical commentaries at a time when the exegetical tradition had become bogged down by the weight of extra-textual, hagiographic information from other disciplines, which rendered the

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\(^{231}\) Čüng C. C. Adams (*Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, 199), Jansen quotes, “Rashîd Riḍā attended these lectures and took notes, which he afterwards revised and enlarged. The result was shown to Muhammad ʿAbduh who approved or corrected as necessary…” (Jansen, 24). See also Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾan, Traditions and Interpretation*, 6; Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qurʾan: Early Modern and Contemporary,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*.

\(^{232}\) There is an important development that occurs in Riḍā’s edits to *Tafsîr Al-Manâr* in the second sūra. According to Riḍā’s notes, his teacher had just passed away, at the point of Riḍā’s edits to the commentary on verse 2:228. At this verse, Riḍā begins to add the honorific, “qaddasa Allāhu rūḥahu” or “raḥmatu Allāhi ‘alayhi” for the first time in *Tafsîr al-Manâr*. Riḍā adds a footnote the first time he uses this honorific and states, “With this prayer, we have indicated that the teacher (al-ustâdh), mercy be upon him, had passed away at the point of writing the tafsîr of this verse. And we now transcribe his views from the notes that we wrote after his lessons” (“…kāna ‘inda kitābat tafsîr al-āya qad tuwufiyya…” *Tafsîr al-Manâr*, 2:370n1). It is only after this point that Riḍā seems to consistently distinguish his own edits from his teacher’s. Since Riḍā had shown drafts of the tafsîr to ʿAbduh before they were published, based on Jansen’s sources, this would mean that prior to Q. 2:228, Riḍā would not have felt a pressing need to clearly distinguish his own words from his teacher’s.

\(^{233}\) This account, provided by many Western historians, is based on Rashîd Riḍā’s introduction to the first volume of *Tafsîr al-Manâr*, first published in its present form in 1927. See Jansen, 24n 22.
book of God inaccessible to the average Muslim. The main objective of his *tafṣīr* is to bring back the Quran’s relevance to the people to whom it was revealed. ‘Abduh writes that Muslims too often did not realize that they themselves were being addressed at all in the Qur’an, and that the text was not just aimed at their theologians, especially deceased ones.\(^{234}\) Lamenting the intellectual condition of Muslims at the time, he complains that one could almost compare a Muslim who reads and chants the Qur’an nowadays with a donkey who carries books without being able to understand them.\(^{235}\)

At the center of ‘Abduh’s intellectual framework was the belief that Muslim society’s decline at all levels correlated with its intellectual-religious decline. While the first half of his career was devoted to political activism, ‘Abduh shifted gear in the middle of his career, and became focused instead on educational and legal reforms in his belief that greater political change will stem from changing the people’s condition—specifically by awakening their knowledge of their faith.\(^{236}\) It was with this objective that ‘Abduh produced his Qur’anic commentary.

‘Abduh and Riḍā’s *tafṣīr* did not gain immediate success.\(^{237}\) It was not until a few years after its publication that *al-Manār* reached the level of influence it now enjoys. Writing in 1974, Jansen assesses that it was quoted often by later commentators and held to be authoritative by


\(^{235}\) Ibid. This is a reference to Qur’ānic verse 62:5: “The similitude of those who were charged with the (obligations of the) Mosaic Law, but who subsequently failed in those (obligations), is that of a donkey which carries huge tomes (but understands them not). Evil is the similitude of people who falsify the Signs of God and God guides not people who do wrong.” Yūsuf ‘Alī translation.

\(^{236}\) An example of this belief is Abduh’s commentary on 2:29, in which he writes, “Yes indeed, the Muslims have become backward compared with the other peoples of this world. They have fallen back into a state inferior to what they were in before the advent of Islam liberated from their paganism. They have no knowledge of the world they live in and they are unable to profit from the resources of their surroundings. Now foreigners have come, who snatch these riches away from under their noses. However, their Book interposes itself and exclaims: He has subjected to you what is in the heavens…” *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 1:250, cited and translated by Jansen, 30.

\(^{237}\) Jansen, 19.
conservative and progressive scholars alike.\textsuperscript{238} As Jansen mentions, the rise in popularity of ‘Abduh’s *tafsīr* could also be attributed to increasing literacy rates among Egyptians. Previous to the twentieth century, literacy had been limited to those who had been trained in religious educational institutions, whereas in the modern period, there was a growing number of men and women who could read, but did not have any religious training and to whom the traditional exegeses were meaningless.\textsuperscript{239} Further, as Felicitas Opwis argues, the spread of the printing press in the second half of nineteenth century provided Islamic reformists like ‘Abduh ample opportunity to disseminate their ideas.\textsuperscript{240}

While the entire commentary evinces ‘Abduh’s ability to revive the relevance of Islam’s foundational text to Muslims’ lives, this is especially true in ‘Abduh’s *tafsīr* on gender issues, undoubtedly influenced by the contemporaneous Orientalist charges against Islam’s treatment of women, which concerned ‘Abduh very much.\textsuperscript{241} For example, in his *tafsīr* of verse 2:228, he mentions a story of a French tourist who visits ‘Abduh at al-Azhar, and while they are walking through the masjid, a young woman enters and the French man is shocked. ‘Abduh asks him why he is astonished and the man comments, “We believe that Islam does not regard women as possessing souls and therefore, they are not obliged to worship,” an accusation to which ‘Abduh responds with various verses from the Qur’an. After mentioning this story in his *tafsīr* lecture, he rhetorically asks his audience, “See how we have become a justification against our religion? And look at this man’s ignorance of Islam, although he is the president of a large organization, so what do you expect of their laymen?”\textsuperscript{242}

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{238} Jansen, 19-20.
\item \textsuperscript{239} Jansen, 20.
\item \textsuperscript{240} Felicitas Opwis, “Changes in Modern Islamic Legal Theory: Reform or Reformation?,” 34-36.
\item \textsuperscript{241} See Y. Haddad on Abduh’s personal concern for gender issues, *Pioneers of Revival*.
\item \textsuperscript{242} ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2:376.
\end{footnotes}
B. Quṭb’s Vision of the Qur’an as an Instruction Manual

Quṭb viewed the Qur’an as a life-transforming source. The Qur’an’s objective is not to be intellectually appreciated, but to be internalized by its readers. Its purpose is to be implemented in peoples’ lives, to become their source of consciousness and understanding to the extent that it becomes the prism through which they view the world. This vision of the Qur’an, although different than ‘Abduh’s, also led him towards a hermeneutic of making the Qur’an’s words relevant to the existing conditions of his society.

Quṭb’s *tafsīr* comes as a response to the socio-political and moral currents unraveling in Egyptian society at his time. It is also a reflection of his own evolution from mild secularism to full-fledged Islamism, the active pursuit of Islamicizing society and politics. Like ‘Abduh’s *tafsīr*, Quṭb’s simultaneously represents an analysis of and commentary on the conditions of the society in which he lives, a society which he believes has gone far astray in its theological, moral and social principles. It is a society that is Muslim only by name, but which resembles pre-Islamic pagan society in its ways and attitudes more than it resembles the early Muslim community.²⁴³ It is the nature of this latter society that Quṭb wishes to revive, and the way to revive it, he believes, is through the Qur’an. More specifically, it is through the Qur’an, purely understood and unadulterated by other external narratives imposed upon it.

Quṭb outlines his conception of what constitutes a proper approach to the Quran, not in his *tafsīr*, but in the first chapter of *Milestones* (*Ma‘ālim fi-l-Ṭarīq*), titled “The Qur’ānic Generation.”²⁴⁴ There, he identifies the objective with which a believer should read the Qur’an and the requirement the Qur’an makes of its readers. Quṭb poses the question to his readers, what

²⁴³ Quṭb writes, “We are also surrounded by jāhiliyya today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper,” (*Milestones*, 20).
²⁴⁴ The introduction to Quṭb’s *tafsīr* is mainly a personal reflection of faith and offers very little insight on his approach to the Qur’an. Rather, *Milestones* provides a much methodical and structured organization of Quṭb’s thought on the function and role of the Qur’an in society.
made the first generation of Muslims so unique, such that no other generation like it has been produced in the history of mankind? “It is true that we do find some individuals here and there of this caliber in history, but never again did a great number of such people exist in one region as was the case during the first period of Islam,” Quṭb writes.\textsuperscript{245}

The secret, for Quṭb, lies in the early community’s relationship with the Qurʾan, which according to him consisted of three factors: 1) the purity of the “source from which they quenched their thirst,”\textsuperscript{246} the pure Qurʾan, unadulterated by other facets of knowledge; 2) the method by which the early generation approached the Qurʾan, which is instruction for action, not for intellectual discussion or enjoyment;\textsuperscript{247} and 3) the decision to wholeheartedly embrace Islam and cut off all aspects of jāhili life, including its concepts, ideas, customs, and traditions.\textsuperscript{248}

The three factors that Quṭb identifies are important to understanding his exegetical approach to the Qurʾan. Within the first two factors he provides is an implicit condemnation of the classical exegetical tradition. First, he argues for a return to the pure Qurʾan, unadulterated by other facets of knowledge. Even the prophetic hadīth, he argues, was an “offspring of this fountainhead” (the Qurʾan) and for proof he quotes a hadīth by ʿĀʾishah that the Prophet’s character was the Qurʾan.\textsuperscript{249} In other words, if the Prophet’s very mannerisms emanated from the Qurʾan, then the prophetic hadīth reflect the Qurʾan’s teachings, the one and only source to which Muslims should look. He laments the deterioration of the pristine state in which the first Muslim community found itself:

This generation, then, drank solely from this spring [the Qurʾan]\textsuperscript{250} and thus attained a unique distinction in history. In later times it happened that other

\textsuperscript{245} Milestones, 15.
\textsuperscript{246} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{250} My own insertion.
sources mingled with it. Other sources used by later generations included Greek philosophy and logic, ancient Persian legends and their ideas, Jewish scriptures and traditions, Christian theology, and in addition to these, fragments of other religions and civilizations. These mingled with commentaries of the Holy Quran and with scholastic theology, as they were mingled with jurisprudence and its principles. Later, generations after this generation obtained their training from this mixed source, and hence, the like of this generation never rose again. Thus we can say without any reservations that the main difference between the first unique and distinguished group of Muslims and later Muslims is that the purity of the first source of religious guidance was mixed with various other sources…

The second important factor Quṭb identifies for the unique success of the early Muslim community, which Quṭb seeks to revive in the modern period, is that the first Muslims understood the Qurʾan as an instruction manual, as divine message to be implemented, and not just the object of intellectual pursuits. Quṭb clearly condemns the scholastic, exegetical tradition, which he believes not only imposed other sources upon the Qurʾan, but also lost sight of its main purpose, which is to be a guide for action. In the first few pages on Milestones, he argues that the Companions would stop at the memorization of ten verses and not proceed any further until they implemented what they memorized. Ultimately, the Qurʾan is to be acted upon. This idea of the Qurʾan as an action-inducing source stems from his conception of Islam as a movement-based religion.

The third factor which Quṭb identifies, to fully embrace Islam and reject all aspects of the jāhili, forms an important principle in his tafsīr. Three important ideas are embedded in this principle: 1) that Islam is a movement-based religion with the end goal of changing society; and interestingly, Quṭb frames this societal change as both bottom-up and top-down. A vanguard of believers represents the bottom-up direction of societal change, whereas the non-negotiable mandate of changing the leadership (i.e. revolution) reflects the top-down direction of change; 2) Islam is a comprehensive system, which must absolutely include political governance; and 3) a

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251 Milestones, 17.
252 Ibid., 18.
true Muslim society must reject all that is conceived of as non-Islamic. While the concept of jāhiliyya as a corrupt human condition had existed in the pre-modern Islamic tradition, as William Shepard demonstrates, Quṭb took this idea to further extremes.253 For example, Quṭb writes,

We can say that a Muslim community has been extinct for a few centuries, for this Muslim community does not denote the name of a land in which Islam resides nor is it a people whose forefathers lived under the Islamic system at some earlier time. It is the name of a group of people whose manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from the Islamic source. The Muslim community with these characteristics vanished at the moment the laws of God became suspended on earth.254

For Quṭb, jahiliyya is the antithesis of Islam, not just theologically, but in the manifestation of the social, moral and political order it represents.

C. Ibn ṬĀshūr: Tafsīr as an Academic Affair

Like ‘Abduh and Quṭb, Ibn ṬĀshūr’s tafsīr reflects full engagement with modernity. What sets Ibn ṬĀshūr apart from his modern counterparts, however, is that first, he also thoroughly engages the arguments and debates of the pre-modern exegetical tradition, whereas ‘Abduh and Quṭb do not engage them except minimally. They both make a conscious effort to “free” their exegesis from what they consider to be un-useful theological, legal and linguistic debates that occupied pre-modern exegetes. Rather, as described, they seek to make their tafsīr accessible and relevant to the average Muslim, in content and terminology. Ibn ṬĀshūr, on the other hand, viewed tafsīr as primarily an academic, scholarly endeavor. The primary function of tafsīr is not to serve as a pulpit from which one preaches to the layman, but it is to unearth the rich layers of meaning of the Qur’an through the scholarly methodologies of an exegete highly trained in all

253 William Shepard, “Sayyid Quṭb’s Doctrine of Jāhiliyya,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 35, no. 4 (Nov., 2003): 523-4. He writes, “…the idea of jāhiliyya as a contemporary condition found among Muslims did not originate with Qutb, as is sometimes suggested. It has always been present in the tradition and has received increased attention in modern times. What Qutb did was to take it further than others have done” (ibid.).

254 Qutb Milestones, 9.
the essential disciplines related to *tafsīr*, and most importantly, philology. His *tafsīr* is an attempt to revive the enshrined, but neglected methodologies that he believes constitute a proper *tafsīr*. He renews the pre-modern exegetical methodology of interpreting the text by applying a hierarchy of highly-specialized, related disciplines. Consistent with the pre-modern philological tradition, the disciplines of language sit at the top of the hierarchy of sources that exegetes should employ to interpret the text. Yet Ibn ’Āshūr’s employment of pre-modern exegetical hermeneutics and his engagement with this pre-modern exegetical tradition does not lead to a regurgitation of its conclusions. Ibn ’Āshūr’s *tafsīr* is a testimony to the intellectual tradition’s potential to embrace change through its timeless methodologies.

III. A Shift in the Exegetical Field Between ʿAbduh and Ibn ʿĀshūr

In order to grasp the significance of Ibn ’Āshūr’s *tafsīr* in the modern context, it is critical to provide a background of developments in the exegetical field after ʿAbduh’s *tafsīr*. Two important developments occurred in that span of seven decades, from the early 1900s when ʿAbduh first began delivering his series of lectures which were later compiled into *Tafsīr al-Manār*, to the time that *al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr* was published in its entirety in 1970. One important development was the emergence of what Walid Saleh calls the modernist and literary nationalist camps in exegesis. The second was the gradual dominance of the Salafi hermeneutic in *tafsīr*, which regarded the corpus of inherited material from the Companions and Successors (*al-maʿthūr*) as the basis of legitimate interpretive efforts.

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255 As documented by various works on ʿAbduh’s *tafsīr*, his Qurʾānic commentaries first appeared as lectures and were then published as articles in the *Manār* journal, edited by Riḍā, between the years 1900 to 1905. *Tafsīr Al-Manār* was published in its entirety (which ends at 12:107) in 1927.

256 Ibn ʿĀshūr’s introduction, which is divided into ten parts, and the first volume of this daunting project were first published in 1956. However, the entire *tafsīr* was published in 1970.

After ʿAbduh, a number of exegetical works appeared that were inspired by a similar aim of restoring the Qurʾan’s relevance to current times and freeing it from the weight of the exegetical tradition. The authors of these commentaries (or, in some cases, histories of *tafsīr*, such as Amīn al-Khūlī) diverged in their orientations, but the effect of their works was similar: a dismantling of the classical, exegetical tradition. One of the results of this shift, for example, was the establishment of the school of scientific exegesis (*al-tafsīr al-ʿilmī*), which aimed to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam’s foundational text with modern science.\(^{258}\)

A second important trend that emerged in this period, established by al-Khūlī and applied by his widow, ‘Āʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān under the pseudonym Bint al-Shāṭi’, is the historical- and literary-critical approach to *tafsīr* that deals with the text thematically and philologically, irrespective of religion. A student of al-Khūlī, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallāh, published a dissertation under al-Khūlī’s supervision that applied this historical- and literary-critical approach to the prophetic stories of the Qurʾan. First submitted as a dissertation to Fuʿād University (now Cairo University) in 1947, it was rejected by the University allegedly due to pressure from al-Azhar.\(^{259}\)

Much attention was brought to this commentary by the Egyptian press, which kept the discussion of Khalafallāh’s historical and literary treatment of Qurʾanic prophetic stories alive for several years.

Another important exegetical trend that developed in the first half of the twentieth century was the thematic approach\(^{260}\) to the Qurʾan championed by exegetes like Sayyid Quṭb,

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\(^{258}\) The trend of scientific exegesis was not well-received at the time and highly rebuked by certain scholars such as Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, twice rector of al-Azhar. He writes, “Nowadays however, another disease has smitten them: they want to elucidate the Qurʾan with scientific theories that may or may not prove to be true…this is a great danger to the Book…these theories are not fit to be drawn into the explanation of the Qurʾan,” (al-Marāghī, “Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt,” *Durūs Dīniyya*, 42, cited in Jansen, 78).

\(^{259}\) Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾan*, 18.

Ashraf ʿAlī Thanvī (1863-1943), Muḥammad ʿIzzat Darwaza (1888–1984), Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1904-1981) and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1917-1996), significant differences between these authors notwithstanding. We also have a continuation of ʿAbduh’s modernist exegetical trend in the commentary of Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī (1881–1945), who, like ʿAbduh, was also on the Azhar University reform committee.261 Twice rector of al-Azhar, al-Marāghī had produced a number of exegetical lectures on a few verses of the Qurʾān.

Like ʿAbduh, al-Marāghī’s approach to tafsīr was thoroughly modern with the aim of reviving its relevance to contemporary society. Therefore, by the time Ibn ʿĀshūr was writing his tafsīr, ʿAbduh’s innovative and bold attempt to write a tafsīr that was unbridled by the weight of the scholastic exegetical tradition was no longer novel—it had become a norm.

The second and even more important major development that occurred over those seventy years was the ideological shift in the Muslim world that led to the victory of the Salafī, Ibn Taymiyyan-inspired hermeneutic in tafsīr. An understanding of this historical context is essential to recognizing the significance of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr. By the mid-twentieth century, tafsīr bil-maʾthūr (which was never previously labeled as such) came to represent the correct and authentic mode of tafsīr, whereas the Ashʿarī exegetical tradition, previously the center of the discipline, was pushed to the margins of the exegetical tradition.262 One of the goals, therefore, of al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr, is to challenge the status quo and to reclaim the centrality of tafsīr bil-raʾy to the exegetical tradition.

We must first trace the historical development of the concept of tafsīr bil-maʾthūr to understand how it came to represent this polemical and ideological narrative in the history of

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261 Jansen, *Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, 77.
The basis for this approach to *tafsīr* comes from Ibn Taymiyya’s (d. 728/1328) *Muqaddima fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, which was regarded as an inconsequential work prior to the twentieth century, according to Walid Saleh. Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutic demanded that Qur’anic *tafsīr* be based on the āthār (reports, narrations) and interpretations of the Salaf, the early generation of Muslims; hence, the term *al-maʿthūr*, on the premise that these reports are Prophetic in origin.

As Walid Saleh writes, “when the theory was first propagated no exegete worth his salt bothered with it.” There were just a few exegetes who attempted to demonstrate an alliance with Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutic prior to the twentieth century. First, Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372), a student of Ibn Taymiyya, attempted to implement his teacher’s approach in his own *tafsīr*. Thereafter came Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who demonstrated his alliance with Ibn Taymiyya by using the term *tafsīr bil-maʿthūr* in the title for his *tafsīr, al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bil-Maʿthūr*. According to Saleh, this “can be seen as the defining moment of the birth of the term.” Saleh identifies two other exegetes who “would carry the torch of this approach, although still gingerly:” al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) and Muḥammad Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1890). Still, this approach was marginal in the exegetical field and it was only in the twentieth century that it was brought to the fore.

In 1936, a Ḥanbali muftī of the city of Damascus published Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise, which was one event of many that helped the Salafī ideology come to prominence. By the fifth
to seventh decade of the twentieth century, during which time Ibn ʿĀshūr was writing his *tafsīr*, Ibn Taymiyya’s manifesto gained a level of unrelenting influence that gripped the centre of the scholastic tradition, represented by al-Azhar and other institutions. Saleh describes that “on the eve of modernity … his call found an unexpected resonance that afforded this theory a currency unmatched before. It took less than a decade before this booklet, and the theory it expounded, became an unstoppable force on the hermeneutical level.” In the modern period, the term ‘*al-tafsīr bil-maʿtūr*’ has polemical implications, as Arabic historiographies of *tafsīr* use the term to inaccurately define what they regard to be “‘Sunnī’ mainstream hermeneutical practice.” Saleh asserts:

> A term that was first used by al-Suyūṭī as a title for his Qurʾan commentary, to reflect his alliance to Ibn Taymiyya’s radical hermeneutical paradigm, would surface in the twentieth century as the defining characteristic of Sunnī mainstream practice, which was never actually the case. The term was then picked up by Western scholars (especially English language scholarship) to be used as an analytical descriptive term for Sunnī hermeneutical practices, adding to the conundrum.

In the context in which Ibn ʿĀshūr was writing his *tafsīr*, therefore, the exegetical field was marked by these two important developments. The new, literary and modernist trends in *tafsīr* were discarding the methodologies of the “old” classical *tafsīr* as obsolete and unfit for the modern age. Those *tafṣīr* that did engage the classical tradition primarily regurgitated the conclusions of the classical exegetes without adding fresh or new insight to the meanings they derived. Second, the triumph of the Salafi paradigm, with the aid of wealthy patrons,

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269 Ibid.
270 Ibid., 24.
271 Ibid.
272 See for example Rotraud Wielandt’s assessment in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*: “Many Qurʾan commentaries of this time hardly differ from older ones in the methods applied and the kinds of explanations given. The majority of the authors of such commentaries made ample use of classical sources like al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) without necessarily adding anything substantially new to the already available interpretations,” (“Exegesis of the Qurʾan: Early Modern and Contemporary,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*).
undermined the authoritativeness of the classical, philological tradition in which Ibn ʿĀshūr clearly situates his *tafsīr*.

A. *Al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr*: A Challenge to the Prevailing Paradigm

Ibn ʿĀshūr consciously rejects the dominant Salafi paradigm and reclaims the position of *tafsīr bil-raʾy* as the center of the scholastic exegetical tradition in a number of important ways. First, he counters the ideological stance regarding the authoritativeness of *tafsīr bil-maʾthūr* by dealing a blow to its underlying premise, the hermeneutics established by Ibn Taymiyya in his *Muqaddima*. According to Ibn ʿĀshūr, it is a fallacy to imagine that the inherited corpus of traditions from the Companions and their Successors was anything more than their own interpretation of the Qurʾan based on their understanding of the text. Hence, their interpretations are not prophetic in origin and do not merit greater weight than the opinions of those who came after them.

Second, Ibn ʿĀshūr establishes philology as the basis of all proper *tafsīr*, without which one will rarely reach a correct interpretation. Language is the ultimate arbitrator of meaning for Ibn ʿĀshūr. The hermeneutic role of the disciplines of language, which he identifies in the introduction to his *tafsīr*, supersedes the hermeneutic role of post-prophetic narrations (*riwāyāt*) from the early centuries of Islam. Ibn ʿĀshūr is therefore reviving the medieval exegetical tradition that established “philology as the foundation of interpretation.”

Third, *al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr* re-positions the commentaries of the philological triad in their historic place at the center of the *tafsīr* genre, a position they had occupied since the seventh Hijrī century. Ibn ʿĀshūr thoroughly engages pre-modern exegesis, specifically the philological, *tafsīr bil-raʾy* tradition represented by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), al-Rāzī (d. 1025/1615), and al-Ṭabarī (d. 398/1009), among others.

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275 Ibid., 11.
606/1209), and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 791/1388). Ibn ʿĀshūr’s introduction clearly situates their works as the most important in the field and he thoroughly engages them in his tafsīr, despite minimal direct references to them. In doing so, Ibn ʿĀshūr is consciously rejecting the Salafī, Azharī historiographic narrative, which had displaced the philological works and positioned the commentaries of Ibn Kathīr, al-Ṭabarī, and to a lesser extent al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) at the center of tafsīr.

B. Ibn ʿĀshūr: Reclaiming the Validity of Tafsīr bil-Raʿy

Ibn ʿĀshūr is not shackled by the prevailing contemporary Sunni paradigm of viewing the inherited material (al-tafsīr bil-maʿthūr) as the core of tafsīr. He does not privilege this material, and rather considers only that which made its way into the saḥīh ḥadīth canon as authoritative. He devotes an entire chapter of his ten-chapter introduction to the validity of leaving al-tafsīr bil-maʿthūr and the meaning of tafsīr bil-raʿy. His telling title for this chapter reads, “Regarding the Validity of Exegesis by non-Maʿthūr [material], the Meaning of Tafsīr bil-Raʿy and Related Matters.”

One of his most potent arguments against this blind reliance on al-maʿthūr is that not all opinions transmitted from the Companions or Successors are from the Prophet, but are in fact their own opinions based on their knowledge and independent reasoning. He cites the opinions of al-Ghazālī and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), who both stated that “It is not true that everything the Companions narrated in [the field of] tafsīr comes from the Prophet, peace be upon him, for two reasons.” The first reason is that the Prophet provided an interpretation for a limited number of verses only, and these are the interpretations that have been narrated by his wife ʿĀʾishah. Secondly, the Companions differ in their interpretations of the verses, and there has never been a

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276 The Arabic title of his third introduction is في صحة التفسير بغير المأثور ومعنى التفسير بالرأي و نحوه.
consensus between their opinions in the field of *tafsīr*. If a Companion had heard a stated opinion from the Prophet himself, then he would have added the phrase, ‘The Prophet said,’ in which case a person who differed with him would have rescinded his opinion, argues Ibn ‘Āshūr. However, this is not the case. Instead, it has been proven without doubt that every *mufassir* gave a *tafsīr* based on his own deductive reasoning (“*fatabayyana ‘alā al-qat‘ anna kull mufassir qāla fī ma ‘nā al-āya bi-mā zahara lahu bi-istinbāṭīhi*”).

In making this argument, Ibn ‘Āshūr is also setting up the grounds for a different one. If the Companions and their Successors gave an opinion on the meaning of certain words and phrases in the Qur’an based on their knowledge and independent reasoning and not based on a direct prophetic tradition, then we can also make the argument for the validity of interpretations by later scholars based on their own knowledge and deductive reasoning. Ibn ‘Āshūr goes on to demonstrate that the *riwāyāt* which form the basis of the *ma ‘thūr* material most often do not originate from the Prophet, but from the Companion or Successor himself. For example, he mentions that Sufyān ibn ‘Uyayna (d. 198/814) gave an interpretation of verse 14:42, and then when asked, “Who said this?” became agitated and responded, “The one who knows it said it,” meaning himself.

Ibn ‘Āshūr is re-claiming the position of *tafsīr bil-ra‘y* in mainstream exegetical thought. He does so in a rather brilliant way, which is to argue that what is commonly assumed to be *tafsīr bil-ma ‘thūr* is in fact *tafsīr bil-ra‘y*, because those companions of the Salaf were ultimately relying on their own knowledge and deductive reasoning for their interpretation and not on any report from Prophet Muḥammad. This is not to undermine the authenticity or validity of their

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279 Qur’an, 14:42 “Think not that Allah doth not heed the deeds of those who do wrong. He but giveth them respite against a Day when the eyes will fixedly stare in horror,” (Yūsuf ‘Alī translation).
interpretation, argues Ibn ‘Āshūr, but simply to state that the ability to deduce meanings from the Qur’an based on requisite knowledge does not stop with them; it continues and must continue over time.\textsuperscript{281} To ridicule the dominant, rigid definition of \textit{tafsīr bil-ma’thūr} applied in the modern period, Ibn ‘Āshūr argues that a blind reliance on the reports by the Salaf of the Companions is actually a barrier to deeper understanding. Here, he cites a direct quote by al-Ghazālī, “To assume that no further meaning could be added to the \textit{tafsīr} of a verse beyond what Ibn ‘Abbās [d. 68/687] or Mujāhid [d. 102/720] stated and to view everything after them as \textit{tafsīr bil-ra’y} is among the great impediments”\textsuperscript{282} to understanding the Qur’an.

Ibn ‘Āshūr then rhetorically asks, what is the basis for the deduction of legal rulings in the first three Islamic centuries, except for the interpretation of the Qur’an in a way in which it was not previously interpreted?\textsuperscript{283} In other words, Ibn ‘Āshūr argues that what has been labeled as \textit{tafsīr bil-ra’y} actually forms the methodological basis of the entire Islamic legal system. For proof of this, he references none other than the pro-tradition jurist, al-Shāfi’ī (d. 204/819). Accordingly, al-Shāfi’ī searches everywhere for a legal justification for the principle of \textit{ijmā’} and he finds it in verse 4:115.\textsuperscript{284} As this verse does not explicitly mention \textit{ijmā’}, Ibn ‘Āshūr makes it clear that al-Shāfi’ī must have come to this conclusion based on his own independent analysis of the verse. For evidence of the validity of \textit{tafsīr bil-ra’y}, Ibn ‘Āshūr argues that legal rulings were deduced based on the scholars’ understanding of the verses, even when there was no precedent for it.\textsuperscript{285}

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{284} Qur’an, 4:115: “If anyone contends with the Messenger even after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him, and follows a path other than that becoming to men of Faith, We shall leave him in the path he has chosen, and land him in Hell, - what an evil refuge!” Yusuf ‘Abī translation.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibn ‘Āshūr, \textit{Al-Taḥrīr wa-Tanwīr}, 1:29.
Ironically, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s relationship with the inherited material (al-maʿthūr) gives his tafsīr a “modern” dimension. This is not because it fits the dominant trends of other exegeses produced in the modern period (quite the opposite, in fact), but because his treatment of this material reflects those values that are ultimately prized in the modern period—historical criticism, independent thought, and originality. Nonetheless, this method of selectively using the corpus of inherited material is not a new one. As Bauer demonstrates, with most pre-modern exegetes, they referenced the opinions of early exegetes, but did not bind themselves to it. They often included those opinions to broaden the scope of possible interpretations. The exegete carefully selected which references to include and those early opinions that were included were up to interpretation.286

While Ibn ʿĀshūr generally does not cite the opinions of early exegetes, his rare inclusion of them demonstrates that he is clearly aware of the content of this material. When he does include those opinions, however, Ibn ʿĀshūr takes liberty to add insight to those opinions or disagree with them. In the genre of tafsīr, they do not hold any more authority than the opinions of later exegetes. For example, in his interpretation of verse 4:34, he cites a tradition attributed to ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 115 or 114/733 or 732)287 and then cites Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī’s (d. 543/1148) analysis of this tradition. Ibn ʿĀshūr then points out that his own analysis of ʿAṭāʾ’s statement is perhaps more precise and accurate than Ibn al-ʿArabī’s analysis of the same statement. In other words, he demonstrates that the analysis of statements made by Companions

286 Bauer writes, “Although Qur’anic exegesis is a conservative genre, meaning that great importance was placed on continuity with previous authorities, sometimes earlier interpretations are not satisfying to the exegetes, and they must add their own interpretation or cite rationales which had not previously entered the genre. New exegeses reflect the exegetes’ understanding of the text and previous interpretations through the lens of their current milieux, their own opinions, and their development of new interpretive methods as time passes. New interpretations often appear and then are subject to later elaboration,” in “Room for Interpretation” (PhD Diss., Princeton University, 2008), 3.

and their Successors is not the exclusive domain of those exegetes who are closest to that time period. New insights and analyses can be added to the corpus of inherited material that could be of greater precision than those made centuries before. This is a hallmark of Ibn ʿAshūr’s *tafsīr*. His entire exegesis is a bold statement of establishing his authority to produce an exegesis that is of equal value and precision, if not greater, to those “classics” produced in the pre-modern period in explaining the Qurʾan’s meaning.

**C. Ibn ʿĀshūr: *Tafsīr* Must be Grounded in Philology**

Language is the ultimate arbitrator of meaning for Ibn ʿĀshūr, not the collection of narrations from the early centuries of Islam (*riwāyāt*), despite their significance in interpretation. He follows a rigorous methodology of applying the various linguistic disciplines to the text of the Qurʾan, such as grammar, morphology, *balāgha* (rhetoric), poetry, etymology, among others. He pays meticulous attention to the grammatical function of nearly every word in the verse, how this function affects the general or specific meaning, and the realm of possible meanings one could derive from it.

In this way, Ibn ʿĀshūr brings back to life linguistic debates that were presumably exhausted in the pre-modern period regarding the meaning of certain terms, the significance of the grammatical structure of certain phrases, and the implications of using certain forms of a root word. His aim is not to bring forth these issues for the sake of argumentation or merely to demonstrate his knowledge of them, but because he has deduced new layers of meaning and interpretations that have yet to be put forth. As Ibn ʿĀshūr writes in his 100 plus-page introduction,

I pay careful attention to elucidate the meaning of terms in the Arabic language with a level of precision and accuracy which is lacking in many Arabic dictionaries. It is hoped that one who reads this *tafsīr* will find in it his/her objective and receive from it benefit and subtleties according to his/her capacity
I put forth much effort to uncover the Qurʾan’s subtleties of meaning and points of iʿjāz, which have been neglected by exegeses … this tafsīr contains the best of what one finds in [other] tafāsīr and better than what one finds in [other] tafāsīr.288

The introduction to Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr is divided into ten sections to uphold a classical method of framing a discipline by ten issues. The entire second section of these ten is devoted to the argument that the proper sources of tafsīr are the branches of philology. Ibn ʿĀshūr writes, “The Qurʾan is Arabic speech, so therefore, the principles of the Arabic language constitute the path to understanding its meanings.”289 The basis of proper tafsīr, according to Ibn ʿĀshūr, stems from five branches of knowledge: 1) lexicology, 2) morphology, 3) grammar, 4) ʿilm al-maʿānī, and 5) ʿilm al-bayān. The latter two are difficult to translate without diluting their meaning. Both are subdivisions of balāgha. The first, ʿilm al-maʿānī, deals with logic and meaning, whereas the second, ʿilm al-bayān, deals with emotions and imagination. Ibn ʿĀshūr gives special emphasis to these latter two disciplines, which he mentions were previously known as ʿilm dalāʿ il al-iʿjāz.

Ibn ʿĀshūr uncompromisingly asserts that ultimately, an exegete must employ the tools of these disciplines to interpret the Qurʾan with any accuracy. Any exegete who attempts to interpret the Qurʾan without a strong training in ʿilm al-maʿānī and ʿilm al-bayān will make mistakes most of the time, he states. Quoting al-Sayyid al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1414), Ibn ʿĀshūr writes, in rare instances will such an exegete ever be correct, and even in those instances, he would have been mistaken to embark on the project of writing a tafsīr.290 Ibn ʿĀshūr leverages an arsenal of citations from exegetical heavyweights to defend this argument. These include exegetes like ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī291 (d. 470/1078), al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, al-Sakākī (d.

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289 Ibid., 1:18.
290 Ibid., 1:20.
291 Some of his important works are: ʿAbdul-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, Asrār as-balāgha, (Ritter, Istanbul, 1954) and ʿAbdul-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, Dalāʿ il iʿjāz al-Qurʾān, (Cairo, 1372). According to the Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan’s entry on
626/1229), and al-Sayyid al-Jurjānī, among others. The significance of the exegetes whose opinion Ibn ʿĀshūr uses as evidence for the strength of his position is that all of them, without exception, gave weight to the philological interpretation of the Qurʾan.

IV. Hermeneutical Differences

A. Features of the Pre-Modern Exegetical Genre

The feature that most distinguishes classical pre-modern tafsīr from modern ones is the interplay of the text of the Qurʾan with the academic disciplines in which the muḥāfīsir is most grounded. Norman Calder’s theory on the juxtaposition of text and scholastic disciplines, despite being two decades old, is of great value in understanding the process of interpretation in classical tafsīr.292 According to Calder, the classical exegetical tradition is distinguished by certain formal characteristics. These main characteristics are the segmentation of verses into text and commentary; the citation of named authorities; the juxtaposition of scholastic disciplines against the Qurʾānic text, and the establishment of polyvalent readings or meanings to the text.

Of all these features, I am most interested in exploring the juxtaposition of scholastic disciplines to the Qurʾānic text. It is this feature, I believe, that most distinguishes the methodologies of the pre-modern exegetical tradition from modern exegesis. As Calder notes, exegetes “systematically juxtaposed” the Qurʾānic text “to certain structures which exist independently (more or less) of the Qurʾān itself; most notably the grammatical and rhetorical


structures of the Arabic language, but also the scholastic disciplines of law, theology and prophetic narrative.” In other words, the exegetes’ ability to apply their training in other fields to the interpretive process added a level of complexity and specialization to their works. Calder describes:

The interplay of discipline and text was neither random nor absolutely constrained: it was controlled by the knowledge, interests, skills, sensitivity, imagination, even humour, of individual exegetes, as well as by their literary and sectarian loyalties. … the qualities that distinguish one mufassir from another lie less in their conclusions as to what the Qur’ānic text means than in their development and display of techniques which mark their participation in and mastery of a literary discipline. Just as the skill of, say, a football player can be recognized only in relation to a complex body of rules (variously constituted by such things as white lines on grass or a complex and developing off-side rule), so too the literary skills of a mufassir must be assessed not in terms of the end product (the Quran explained), but in terms of their skillful participating in a rule-governed activity.294

This is not to say that the interpretations derived by the exegetes did not matter, but as Calder notes, one’s skill as a mufassir lies less in the conclusions one drew than in one’s ability to skillfully apply complex bodies of knowledge to the hermeneutic process. Ibn ʿĀshūr understands this process very well and his tafsīr is an attempt to revive the methodologies that he believes constitute a proper tafsīr. With the dismantling of traditional methods of learning and the emergence of new forms of religious authorities in the modern period, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s exegesis stands as a guardian of tradition, whereas ‘Abduh’s and Quṭb’s exegeses represent new forms of authority with which this tradition must now compete.

B. Departure from Pre-Modern Hermeneutics

‘Abduh’s and Quṭb’s exegetical approaches signal a methodological break from the pre-modern exegetical tradition in three ways. First, both of their tafsīrs signal a critique of the pre-modern exegetical tradition, in certain respects, and they both consciously avoid the scholarly

293 Calder, 105.
294 Ibid., 106.
debates known to it. As a result, they both reject the *isrāʾīliyyāt* literature as a source of interpretation as well as the *asbāb al-nuzūl* material, except that which is contained in *ṣaḥīḥ* texts. Second, they both do away with the formal characteristic of the pre-modern *tafsīr* genre of applying a certain hierarchy of scholastic disciplines to interpret the Qur’anic text, as Calder had described it. Third, ʿAbduh and Quṭb both depart from pre-modern exegetical hermeneutics in their attempt to expand the scope, and therefore, relevance, of their *tafsīr* by including important political, societal, scientific, historical and psychological dimensions to Qur’ānic interpretation.

These differences also set ʿAbduh and Quṭb apart from Ibn ʿĀshūr, who thoroughly engages the pre-modern exegetical tradition and renews its methodology of interpreting the text by applying a hierarchy of highly-specialized, related disciplines. Although his *tafsīr* evinces a limited engagement with modernity, his consistent use of philological disciplines to interpret the text mitigates the level of subjectivity that one can discern in the exegesis of ʿAbduh and Quṭb. Despite these differences, there are also important similiarities between the three modern exegetes. As I demonstrate below, Ibn ʿĀshūr was influenced by ʿAbduh’s notion on the harmonization of reason and revelation, which informed and guided both of their interpretations of the Qur’ān. There are also important parallels between Ibn ʿĀshūr’s and Quṭb’s use of philological devices and their linguistic analysis of the Qur’ān.

C. Modern Rejection of Isrāʾīliyyāt

ʿAbduh and Quṭb both intensified the critical stance towards *isrāʾīliyyāt* material, a genre of biblical traditions used by classical exegetes in their *tafāsīr*, specifically in relation to *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, historical narratives of prophets before Prophet Muḥammad.295 For both ʿAbduh and Quṭb, the pre-modern exegetes’ use of these biblical narratives is further evidence of their

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295 Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 34, 54; W ielandt, “Exegesis of the Qur’an: Early Modern and Contemporary.”
deviation from the Qur’anic text and encumbering it with unsound narratives.\(^ {296}\) This trend of rejecting isrāʾīliyyāt narratives dates as early as the beginning of the rise of Abbasid dynasty, which prompted a reformulation of the criteria used to establish the authenticity of such narratives.\(^ {297}\) What began as a negative attitude towards isrāʾīliyyāt traditions in the Abbasid period becomes a full-fledged rejection of this material in the modern period, Stowasser demonstrates.\(^ {298}\)

Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Kathīr are identified by some scholars as the origin of modern criticism of using isrāʾīliyyāt in exegesis.\(^ {299}\) However, as Younus Mirza points out, the positions of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr were nuanced in their qualified rejection of the isrāʾīliyyāt. Despite Ibn Taymiyya’s scathing criticism of previous exegetes for what he calls blind acceptance of isrāʾīliyyāt, he puts forth a methodology for assessing the accuracy of isrāʾīliyyāt, which Ibn Kathīr adopts.\(^ {300}\) This methodology consists of measuring the biblical narratives against Islamic sources; if the Islamic sources corroborate the Biblical narratives to be true, they could be accepted, and if proven to be false, they would be rejected. When the biblical narratives cannot be verified as either true or false, in which case judgment regarding its authenticity “should be suspended.”\(^ {301}\) Nonetheless, both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr preferred not to use isrāʾīliyyāt in such cases because they often delve into particulars, whereas the Qurʾan left them unknown. Reflecting this skeptical position towards use isrāʾīliyyāt, Ibn Kathīr writes,

The method we follow in this tafsīr is to abandon many of the isrāʾīliyyāt because they constitute a waste of time (limā fīhā min tadyīʿ al-zamān), and because many of them contain lies imposed upon [the Banī Isrāʾīl] owing to their lack of

\(^{296}\) Stowasser, 54. Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qurʾan: Early Modern and Contemporary.”

\(^{297}\) Stowasser, 23.

\(^{298}\) Ibid., 22-24.

\(^{299}\) Calder, 125-131.


\(^{301}\) Mirza, 5. Calder, 120,
distinction between true and false. This has been explained by the authorities of our community, those who preserve [its bases] and have achieved certainty.  

In the modern period, however, exegetes like ‘Abduh and Quṭb throw Ibn Taymiyya’s methodology of qualified rejection of the isrāʾīliyyāt out the window in favor of purging the exegetical tradition of all such narratives. According to Wielandt, this trend began with Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s 1892 Tahrīr fi Uṣūl al-Tafsīr, and was exercised by both ‘Abduh and Quṭb, among others. In addition to engaging this new rigor, the semantic meaning of the term isrāʾīliyyāt was also expanded. As Stowasser writes, “The moderns’ use of the term isrāʾīliyyāt perpetuates the medieval meaning of ‘stamp-of-disapproval,’ but it is also made to apply to a far wider range of tradition.” In the modern period, the term isrāʾīliyyāt came to signify any kind of medieval “lore,” from the spurious to the paradigmatic.  

In comparison to ‘Abduh and Quṭb, Ibn Ṭāṣḥīḥ ismī’s stance towards the isrāʾīliyyāt is more nuanced. He employs biblical narratives, but sparingly, and conditions it on their concordance with the Qur’ān. Despite Ibn Ṭāṣḥīḥ’s clear Ash’arī leanings, interestingly, modern Salafis reserve the greatest criticism of his tafsīr for his use of isrāʾīliyyāt literature. Despite that, Ibn Ṭāṣḥīḥ draws on it only in cases where there is a void in the Muslim hagiographic literature and where the isrāʾīliyyāt narrative does not contradict the Qur’ānic one. As expected, his employment of this literature is mainly used in pre-Muhammad prophetic narratives. It is interesting to note the level of precision with which Ibn Ṭāṣḥīḥ employs the isrāʾīliyyāt. Not only does he carefully cite his sources, but he also cross-references them. For example, to identify the

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303 Wielandt, Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān; Stowasser, Women in the Qurʾān, 23-24, 33-34.  
304 Ibid.  
305 Stowasser, Women in the Qurʾān, 24.  
306 In some instances, he rejects the isrāʾīliyyāt narratives, calling it myths, as in his exegesis of 38:34. However, in other instances (20:39, among others), he employs the isrāʾīliyyāt, but much less in comparison to pre-modern exegetes.  
307 Most salafī forums on tafsīr or electronic collections of tafsīr cite this criticism of Ibn Ṭāṣḥīḥ. See for example this website’s review of Ibn Ṭāṣḥīḥ’s tafsīr: http://forum.gamalat.com/showthread.php?t=435563
sister of Moses in verse 20:40, he cross-references the Torah with the Tanakh, the canonical collection of Jewish texts, and cites specific parts of the Book of Exodus and the Book of Numbers.\(^{308}\)

The elimination of *isrāʾīliyyāt* narratives from the exegetical tradition, nonetheless, had a positive outcome for producing more gender-friendly interpretations of historic female figures in the Qurʾan. Exegetes like ʿAbduh and Quṭb recognized the negative impact of these narratives on modern Muslim thought on various issues, gender being one of them. As Stowasser writes,

> The modern age, which in the Arab world had its first stirrings in the eighteenth century and broke in full force during the nineteenth, required a different scripturalist canon on women. As the images of female spiritual, mental and physical defectiveness were being replaced by those of female nurturing strength and the female’s importance in the struggle for cultural survival, the old Bible-related legends ceased to be meaningful. It is, therefore, in nineteenth century modernist exegesis that we find a full-scale rejection of *isrāʾīliyyāt* traditions.\(^{309}\)

For example, in respect to the Qurʾanic narrative on human creation and the fall of Adam and Ḥawwāʾ from heaven, ʿAbduh rejects the classical interpretation that Ḥawwāʾ was created from Adam’s rib and blames this on “unreliable foreign materials.”\(^{310}\) His interpretation of the Qurʾanic narrative on human creation affirms a belief in gender equality. Quṭb, who also rejects the *isrāʾīliyyāt*, gives a new interpretation to the role of female historical figures in the Qurʾan, such as the Queen of Sheba, whom he sees as equal to Solomon, “since in Islam the vanquished and the victor are equal brothers, as are the ‘called’ and the ‘caller,’ the ‘followers,’ and the leader.”\(^{311}\)


\(^{310}\) Ibid., 34.

\(^{311}\) Stowasser, 66, citing Quṭb, *Fi Zilāl*, 5:2640.
D. The *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* Genre

There is a dearth of scholarly literature on modern exegetes’ evolving attitude towards the genre of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. Like the genre of *isrāʾīliyyāt* literature, the genre of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, as employed in the pre-modern exegetical tradition, also underwent a level of scrutiny and critique. Unlike the *isrāʾīliyyāt*, however, *asbāb al-nuzūl* material was not rejected as a whole, but its acceptance was limited to only those reports deemed *ṣaḥīḥ* which have a verified chain of transmission going back to the Prophet. However, the classical genre of *asbāb al-nuzūl* contains many reports that only go back to the Successors or Companions, in a similar vein to those exegetical narrations dubbed *maʿthūr*, an argument that Ibn ʿĀshūr makes in his introduction.

ʿAbduh and Quṭb both signal a departure from the pre-modern tradition of employing the *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature in their exegesis. Quṭb does not entirely eliminate the *asbāb al-nuzūl* from his *tafsīr*, but rather, briefly mentions the immediate occasion preceding the revelation of a *sūra* or verse and limits these usages to the *ṣaḥīḥ* texts. Ibn ʿĀshūr, on the other hand, in maintaining the importance of this genre to *tafsīr*, will occasionally cite *asbāb al-nuzūl* from the classical tradition. While he does not confine himself to the canonical *ḥadīth* texts, he expresses reservations about pre-modern exegetes’ free and unguarded use of the genre.  

He relies most specifically on al-Wāḥidī al-Nīsābūrī’s (d. 468/1075) *Kitāb Asbāb Nuzūl al-Qurʾān*, which, as Rippin writes, represents the earliest works in this field and firmly established the genre of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. Ibn ʿĀshūr occasionally cites al-Wāḥidī’s work when mentioning the occasion of a certain revelation, but also indicates when there is no chain of transmission (*sanad*).

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313 Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī al-Nīsābūrī
315 See for example Ibn ʿĀshūr’s interpretation of 20:1-5. Ibn ʿĀshūr writes (emphasis mine):
E. Bringing Relevance to Qurʾanic Exegesis

There is a discernible attempt among ʿAbduh and Quṭb to expand the scope, and therefore, relevance, of Qurʾanic exegesis by including important political, societal, scientific, historical and psychological dimensions to Qurʾanic interpretation. By doing so, they have made their works much more politically, culturally, and socially relevant to their respective contexts, unlike the case with pre-modern exegetes. As Jansen notes, ʿAbduh was reluctant to add one more commentary to the “enormous library of exegetical literature, precisely because Koran exegesis had come to mean, for the Moslems of his time, cataloguing such rather pedantic pieces of erudition.”316 ʿAbduh’s goal in writing a commentary, as mentioned, was to make the Quran’s words relevant to Muslims’ daily lives.

Paradoxically, while ʿAbduh and Quṭb’s methodology of connecting the Qurʾanic text, it ultimately yields a layer of subjectivity to their tafsīr that confines it, to some extent, to the contingencies of a certain historical reality.317 Their attempt to bring relevance to the Qurʾanic text is based on the principle that the Qurʾan is valid for every time and place (ṣāliḥ li-kull zamān wa-makān), yet interpreting the Qurʾan through the lens of contemporary conditions appears to limit that very timelessness which forms the basis of this principle.

It is in this respect that a wide gulf separates the methodology of Ibn ʿĀshūr from that of his exegetical contemporaries ʿAbduh and Quṭb. Ibn ʿĀshūr’s employment of philological devices is an argument against a subjective analysis of the Qurʾan. At the same time, all three...
exegetes converge on the principle that the exegete has the right to bring new meanings to bear on the Qur’anic text. As such, ‘Abduh, Quṭb, and Ibn Ṭāhiri offer insightful and original interpretations that challenge, in certain ways, pre-modern interpretations regarding gender and women’s status and rights in society and the family. All three believed that the authority to bring new insights to the Qur’an does not cease with any given generation, but is continual.

V. Hermeneutical Similarities

A. ‘Abduh and Ibn Ṭāhiri on Reason and Revelation

According to ‘Abduh, there is no question that Islam is a thoroughly rational religion and that the Qur’an’s conclusions and commandments naturally accord with human reason and intellect. An implication of ‘Abduh’s belief is that human intellect can discern the rationale for God’s commandments. If one wants to know, for example, why God has asked us to not kill or take interest on capital, it is sufficient for one to use one’s intellect.

It is perhaps in this area that Ibn Ṭāhiri was most influenced by ‘Abduh, although ‘Abduh took this belief to a much greater level than Ibn Ṭāhiri. As Basheer Nafi explains, “at the heart of the reformists’ call for ījtihād is their belief in the notion of ta‘līl, or the intelligibility of God’s injunction … the reformists … believed that the wisdom behind the divine nasṣ/hukm (text/injunction) is amenable to human reason and is thus open to interpretation.” As I argue in chapter two, although Ibn Ṭāhiri represents a different orientation of intellectual thought than ‘Abduh, he was nonetheless influenced by the former and specifically, by his ideas on the need to employ reason in understanding religious texts. The notion of ta‘līl permeates Ibn Ṭāhiri’s tafsīr on the Qur’an’s legalistic verses. Nafi writes,

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319 Jansen, 23.
only a few other Sunni scholars of tafsīr before, or even since, have employed human reason in understanding the legal implications of the Qur’ānic text on the scale demonstrated in Ibn ‘Āshūr’s tafsīr. Al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr is a work that is almost entirely underpinned by the notion of ta’līl, or the ability of human reason to grasp the legal connotations of the Qur’ānic text.  

Despite this convergence between ‘Abduh’s and Ibn ‘Āshūr’s approaches to exegesis, there is an important difference between the two. Because ‘Abduh feels unencumbered by the weight of the exegetical tradition before him, he reaches, at certain points, conclusions that are totally aberrant with the mainstream consensus in the exegetical field. For example, in ‘Abduh’s interpretation of the word furqān in verse 3:4, he reaches a conclusion quite different than pre-modern exegetes. According to Jansen, all classical exegetes agreed that the word furqān reflected some form of revealed knowledge, whether it be one particular Holy Book or holy books in general. ‘Abduh instead interprets furqān as reason, by which man can discern between truth and falsity. Nonetheless, Riḍā’s additions to this interpretation serve to justify his teacher’s unconventional interpretation. Riḍā concedes that many exegetes have interpreted furqān as the Qur’an, but “this is rejected,” he argues, because God already mentioned revealing the Qur’an in the preceding verse, “It is He Who sent down to thee, in truth, the Book…” He then notes that al-Ṭabarī had in fact interpreted furqān as everything that can distinguish between truth and falsehood in every matter, such as proofs and evidence. Nonetheless, as Jansen notes, “This ['Abduh’s] statement … certainly looks suggestive if not provocative: ‘Abduh seems to have replaced revelation by reason.” On the other hand, Ibn

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322 Jansen, 22.
324 Qur’an, 3:3, Yūṣuf ‘Alāf translation.
325 Taṣfīr al-Manār, 3:160.
326 Jansen, The Interpretation of the Qur’an in Modern Egypt, 22.
ʿĀshūr’s engagement with the pre-modern tafsīr tradition offsets his application of ‘Abduh’s premise of the ‘rationality of Islam.’

B. A Comparison of Ibn ʿĀshūr and Quṭb’s Literary Approaches to the Qur’an

1. Ibn ʿĀshūr: Building Upon Pre-Modern Linguistic Approaches

Al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr adopts certain traits that have been characterized as being unique to the modern period. Like other modern exegetes, he approaches each chapter as a coherent unit. Like Quṭb, Ibn ʿAshūr prefaces his tafsīr of each sūra with a brief introduction, and in addition to its historic chronology, he also lists its main objectives. These are succinct and straightforward, void of the long commentaries that Quṭb usually adds to the chapter’s themes. However, unlike modern exegetes such as Quṭb, Saʿīd Ḥawwa (1935–1989), or Amīn Aḥsan Islāhī (1903-1997), Ibn ʿAshūr does not approach the sūra as a unity through a thematic division of the sūra. Rather, he threads together various verses of the Qur’an by connecting them linguistically and semantically, in an effort to establish the Qur’an’s internal coherence.

The practice of identifying the “connection” between verses (irtībāṭ al-āyāt) is not entirely new, as Mir points out in “The Sūra as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Quran Exegesis.” Al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1391) devotes an entire chapter to it and points out the positions of some preceding scholars who either paid attention to this science, which he calls ʿilm al-munāsaba, or those who criticized it. Most significantly, al-Zarkashī points out that al-Rāzī was one of the very few scholars who cultivated this science. Al-Rāzī held the position that the arrangement of the Qur’an’s chapters and verses was full of subtleties. In his commentary, al-Rāzī regularly explains the connections between the verses. Despite efforts by scholars like al-Rāzī, “ʿilm al-munāsaba never acquired the status of mainstream exegetical thought,” as Mir

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points out. Al-Rāzī’s contributions to this field stand out, but they were not “conducive to the development of an organic approach to the Qur’ānic sūras,” according to Mir. Unlike thematic approaches to the sūras, a unique development in twentieth century exegesis, al-Rāzī’s efforts fell into a linear-atomistic approach, Mir contends, and connecting each verse merely to the next missed the forest for the trees.

In his foreword, Ibn ʿĀshūr interestingly notes al-Rāzī’s contributions to this field as well as his shortcomings; hence, the need to develop this field. He writes, “I have also given attention to elucidate the suitability of the connection between verses (tanāsūb ittiṣāl al-āya baʾduhā bi-baʾd).” He then mentions that al-Rāzī and al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480) both devoted attention to this field, but that their arguments were not always compelling. The appetite of those who seek this knowledge has not been quenched. There is still a great need to add to this field, Ibn ʿĀshūr writes. His attempt to apply this field at a higher level in his tafsīr is largely successful. As I mention earlier, Ibn ʿĀshūr situates himself in the philological exegetical tradition. For the most part, he engages the philological triad of al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, and al-Bayḍāwī, in addition to al-Biqāʿī, among a few others in his tafsīr. Al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī, whom Ibn ʿĀshūr esteems as giants in the field of exegesis, both left an indelible mark on Ibn ʿĀshūr’s style.

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329 Ibid.
330 Ibid.
331 Ibid.
332 Ibn ʿĀshūr, Al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr, 1:8.
333 Ibid., 1:7. In his foreword, which precedes his ten-chapter introduction, Ibn ʿĀshūr discusses which exegeses he considers to be the most important in the field. Many of those he considers most important are glosses on some of the major works of tafsīr, specifically glosses of al-Bayḍāwī’s and al-Zamakhsharī’s tafsīrs. As Saleh notes in his article “Marginalia and Peripheries,” “After the 13th century the gloss became the main vehicle for scholarly creativity in tafsīr.” (308). It is interesting that al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr mentions the commentaries of al-Bayḍāwī and al-Zamakhsharī as being most important, because as Saleh mentions, the earliest works of tafsīr to be published in the nineteenth century were glosses on al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī.
2. Ibn ʿĀshūr: Establishing the Qurʾan’s Internal Coherence through
Grammatical Analysis

Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr represents a full-fledged employment of the discipline of linguistics, including grammar, rhetoric, syntax, morphology, and semantics. For Ibn ʿĀshūr, the chronology and order of every verse fulfills a specific function; its placement within the sūra is not random or arbitrary but adds to the meaning of the verse. Further, his tafsīr is unique in the attention it gives to the order and grammatical function of terms within a specific verse, the connection between these terms and others within the same or different verses, and the way that these connections affect the meaning of the verse. He generally achieves this in the following four ways.

First, he identifies the grammatical function of each term, such as whether it is a subject, predicate, direct object, unrestrictive object (māfūl muṭlaq), causative object (māfūl lahu), object of concomitance (māfūl maʿahu), adjective, annexed term (iḍāfa), exception (istithnāʾ), a state qualifier (ḥāl), conjunctive (ism maʿṭūf) or a preposition, among countless others. Second, after identifying the term’s grammatical function, he then connects the term, where appropriate, to other terms in preceding or succeeding verses.

He gives unique attention to the function of conjunctions, prepositions and connectors in clauses and the way they connect various meanings. For example, in verse 20:9, Ibn ʿĀshūr examines the function of the conjunction “and” at the beginning of the verse: “And, has the story of Moses reached you?” Ibn ʿĀshūr brilliantly connects verse 20:9 with verse 20:2 by employing the grammatical principle that every conjunction (ḥarf ʿatf) must always be conjoined to a previous word or statement, the conjunctive (maʿṭūf ʿanhu). Accordingly, he argues that the conjunction “and” attaches the former to the latter, which is the last verse before this one that
addresses the Prophet in second person. Based on this principle, verse 20:9, “And, has the story
of Moses reached you” conjoins seven verses earlier with verse 20:2, “We have not revealed
this Qur’an unto thee (Muḥammad) that thou should be distressed.”

Third, after identifying the grammatical connection between the verses, Ibn ʿĀshūr
establishes internal coherence by finding the munāsaba, or suitability of the connection between
these two verses. He points out that the suitability of this connection is that after God affirms to
the Prophet that the Qur’an’s revelation is not to distress him, He brings up the story of Moses to
give the Prophet patience and solace in the face of burdens and hardships while delivering the
Message by connecting his experience with Moses’ before him, and to give him comfort in
knowing that those who attack him will find the same fate as those who attacked previous
Messengers. Ibn ʿĀshūr’s attention to the role of conjunctions and connectors through the
discipline of grammar plays a definite hermeneutic function in his tafsīr.

Fourth, in addition to paying attention to the connection between verses, Ibn ʿĀshūr takes
note of the chronology and ordering of verses within a sūra. In verse 2:228, Ibn ʿĀshūr is the
only exegete of those surveyed who actually looks at the verse order and examines why Q. 2:228
would precede Q. 2:229 in chronology. He does so by focusing on the conjunction that
commences Q. 2:228, although these conjunctions are often dismissed as marginal or trivial to
the meaning of the verse. According to Ibn ʿĀshūr, this conjunction at the beginning of the verse
“and the divorcees” connects verse 2:228 to 2:226 because of the relationship between the
occasions of both verses, which establish the waiting period of women. Verse 2:226

333 “وهل أتاك حديث موسى” The focus here is on the function of the conjunction at the beginning of the verse, “and.”
334 “ما أرأئك من القرآن تشتكي”
336 Ibid., 2:388.
establishes the waiting period of a woman whose husband took an oath of īlā 337 against her, whereas 2:228 establishes the waiting period of a woman whose husband pronounced a divorce against her. The relationship between the legislation of these verses is the reason, then, that 2:229 (“Divorce is permissible twice”) does not come before 2:228, even though verse 2:229 is establishing the legal limits of divorce, which one would expect to be introduced before the consequences of divorce are mentioned. 338

After Ibn ʿĀshūr grammatically links the terms and verses together, he often establishes how these connections affect the meaning of a particular verse. This is quite different from exegetes like Quṭb who use a thematic analysis as a starting point. Rather, for Ibn ʿĀshūr, the timeless rules of Arabic grammar guides the thematic analysis one could derive from verses. By identifying and connecting the grammatical function of all terms in a verse, Ibn ʿĀshūr makes the following points: 1) Every single word and letter in the Qurʾan is significant, and its placement in a certain position in the Qurʾan is not arbitrary but purposeful, and has implications for the verse’s overall meaning. In other words, changing the placement of even a seemingly subtle word, like a conjunction or preposition, will change a verse’s meaning; and 2) the grammatical connections between terms create internal coherence within different sections of the Qurʾan by linking different verses, and hence meanings, together.

3. Quṭb: Unity of the Text

The greatest strengths of Quṭb’s tafsīr, without question, are two-fold: his approach to the sūra as an organic unity, and his use of methods of literary criticism as hermeneutic tools. As Mir writes, the approach to the sūras as a textual unity is a unique development in the twentieth century.

337 The pre-Islamic practice of taking an oath to sexually abstain from one’s wife without officially divorcing her. This is a practice that the Qurʾan abolishes.
338 Ibn ʿĀshūr, Al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr, 2:388.
century that represents a break with the classical exegetical tradition. While a few other modern exegetes have also attempted to establish the chapters’ textual coherence, Quṭb’s approach in this respect is unique because his approach ultimately has great hermeneutic significance for the meanings he derives.

For each of the Qur’ān’s 114 chapters, Quṭb identifies a “miḥwar,” a central thesis (literally, a pivot or axis) of the sūra. In his prologue to chapter four, Quṭb writes,

However, every sūrah of the Qur’ān contains its own unique characteristics and distinctive features, as well as a specific idea which permeates all the themes it discusses. This uniqueness essentially means that the themes of every sūrah should gather together coherently around its central topic in a special system designed to enhance its distinctive features, just like those of a unique living being which remains the only one of its kind…

His tafsīr begins with a prologue to every sūra, identifying this main theme and then providing a general breakdown of its related topics. Breaking with the verse-by-verse approach of the pre-modern exegetes, Quṭb then arranges the verses into passages, depending on the topics they address. These sections are then interpreted independently as well as in relation to the other sections in the same chapter. Hence, Quṭb’s approach to the sūra as a unity is not simply an aesthetic one; he continues to apply this central thesis throughout the interpretation of a sūra, by relating each “section” of verses to the central theme and then by identifying the connections between the various sections of verses to each other.

Interestingly, Ibn ʿĀshūr also attempts to establish textual coherence in his interpretation of the Qur’ān, but he does so in a rather different way than Quṭb. Ibn ʿĀshūr is most interested in what he calls ‘ilm al-munāsaba, demonstrating the relationship of verses to each other, why one verse would precede or succeed another. Like Quṭb, there is hermeneutic value to this approach,

339 Mir, 198.
not just a cosmetic one. However, unlike Quṭb, he is not approaching the sūra as a whole, but maintains the pre-modern classical verse-by-verse approach to tafsīr. For Ibn ʿĀshūr, the relationship is made between independent verses, whereas Quṭb arranges the verses into passages and establishes connections between these passages of verses through the prism that the sūra represents an organic unity. Quṭb compares the sūra to a living being in the prologue to chapter four. He writes,

We almost feel that this sūrah is alive, that its well defined objective is pursued diligently and, thereby, successfully attained. It achieves this by words, verses and passages. We almost have the same sympathy with this sūrah as we would have towards a unique living being moving towards his or her clear objectives, making his or her own moves and experiencing the full gamut of feelings and emotions.  

Unlike Quṭb, Ibn ʿĀshūr maintains the pre-modern classical verse-by-verse approach to tafsīr. Throughout Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr, there is an attempt to establish a connection between each verse and the one succeeding and preceding it. In a sense, then, Ibn ʿĀshūr is also attempting to construct textual unity within a sūra, but his approach is significantly different than that of Quṭb.

On one hand, it may appear that Quṭb’s arrangement of the sūra through its themes and topics offers a more holistic approach to the Quran. Upon closer analysis, however, we find that Ibn ʿĀshūr’s meticulous attention to the order of words in a specific verse and the employment of conjunctions and connectors (al-ism al-mawṣūl) in a verse offers an integrated image of the verses in a way that is more intrinsic to the text itself. In other words, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s presentation of the connection between verses is embedded in the text itself, through an analysis of its syntax, diction, and grammar. In various instances, Quṭb’s thematic approach to the Qur’an yields a deduction of themes based on his understanding of the content of the text, not through structural analysis.

341 Ibid.
Therefore, while Quṭb’s thematic approach to the *sūra* is broader and more holistic, it is limited to some extent by the projection of a certain ideology on the text or a subjective analysis of that *sūra*’s central thesis. For example, in his prologue to chapter four, Quṭb pivots the *sūra* on the theme of a general conflict between the forces of pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya* (which still exists, he argues) and the forces of the natural, Divine order. Hence, his discussion of the *sūra*’s topics on inheritance, guardianship of orphans, the Arab hypocrites’ animosity to the Prophet, etc. all revolve around this theme of a broader conflict between these two forces. Quṭb writes in his prologue to *sūra* four:

At the same time, we see the lingering aspects of that ignorant society struggling against the new system, values and standards, trying to overshadow the bright features of the new Islamic society. We actually witness the battle fought by the Qur’ān here, which is by no means less fierce or intransigent than any other physical battle against hostile forces. When we look carefully at the residue the Muslim society carried over from the old ignorant society, we are surprised at how deeply rooted it was; so much so that its eradication continued over the years taken to reveal this *sūrah*. Indeed this *sūrah* deals with certain aspects of that residue, while several other *sūrahs* deal with other aspects. What is surprising is that such traces of past ignorance continued to be firmly rooted until such a late stage in the life of the Muslim community in Madinah.\(^{342}\)

### 4. Quṭb: Identifying the Quran’s Literary Devices

In addition to locating the main theme of every chapter, Quṭb’s *tafsīr* is unique in the modern period for its new approach to the Qur’anic element of *ʿijāz*, a subject particularly developed in the medieval period by ʿAbd al-Qahir al-Jurjani, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī, among a few other exegetes. This is yet another area in which Ibn ʿĀshūr and Quṭb’s approaches remarkably converge, despite their drastically different orientations and methodologies. Nonetheless, while Ibn ʿĀshūr’s attention to *ʿijāz* is a continuation and development of the pre-modern exegetes’ methodologies towards new insights, Quṭb’s approach is altogether different and greatly informed by his own academic training in literary criticism. Quṭb believes that every

\(^{342}\)Ibid.
sūra has a special atmosphere (jaww) that integrates its topics harmoniously, which is related to its musical rhythm. Quṭb identifies a musical rhythm (īqā’ mūsīqī) for every sūra, which is based on the rhythm of its verses, their length, the repetition of sounds, and the use of onomatopoeia, among other rhetorical devices. This musical rhythm corresponds with or matches the main topic/s discussed in each sūra.

The connection that Quṭb makes between the sounds and imagery of words to their meaning is perhaps the greatest attribute of his tafsīr. His attention to the Qurʾan’s “artistic imagery” began at much earlier period than his tafsīr, particularly in his books al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fi al-Qurʾān (1945) and Mashāhid al-Qiyāma fī al-Qurʾān (1947). These earlier works, although devoid of the polemical tone that can be found in his tafsīr, also analyze the manner in which the sūras’ structure and diction produce an imagery that enhances the meaning of the respective verses. The best analysis of Quṭb’s employment of rhetorical devices can be found in Issa Boullata’s respective works on Quṭb. Boullata describes Quṭb’s analysis of the Qurʾān’s artistic imagery as follows:

The Qurʾānic style imparts vividness, immediacy, and dynamism to its images so that abstract ideas take on shape or movement; psychological states become perceptible tableaux or spectacles; events and scenes, and stories turn into actual and dramatic appearances; human types are fleshed out as present and living beings; and human nature becomes embodied and visible. Taṣwīr in the Quran is not a stylistic embellishment; it is an established method…using variations in colour, movement, tone, and sound, an employing harmonious patterns and artistic sequences to offer an effective image to the eyes, the ears, the senses, as well as the imagination, the heart, and the mind.

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Quṭb’s appreciation of the Qur’ān’s literary devices also informs his own writing in *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur’ān*. He constantly brings abstract ideas to life by speaking of them metaphorically, as human beings or trees, for example. This is also evident in the very title of his *tafsīr*, *Under the Quran’s Shade*, which imparts the image of the Qur’ān as tree, providing shade and thus protection from the forces around it. The use of analogies and metaphors is replete in Quṭb’s *tafsīr*. For example, in his introduction, he describes the believers as being in one ark that extends throughout human history to Prophets Abraham, Isma‘il, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad. He then describes how this ark, a metaphor for faith, sails firmly, confidently, with a clear conscience, and trusting in God’s promise, in a sea of despotism, blind misguidance, threats, and banishment. Despite the variations in time and places, faith’s challenges are one and the same.346

VI. Conclusion

All three exegetes, ‘Abduh, Quṭb, and Ibn ‘Āshūr, reflect full engagement with modernity in their respective *tafāsīr*. As I will demonstrate in the succeeding chapters on gender issues, all three of these thinkers were conscious of the challenges brought forth by modernity and attempt, to some extent, to remedy such challenges by demonstrating the Qur’ān’s prescription for them. Methodologically, however, they each represent a unique approach to Qur’ānic interpretation. More specifically, ‘Abduh and Quṭb’s exegetical approaches signal a methodological break from the pre-modern exegetical tradition. They both do away with the formal characteristic of the pre-modern exegetical genre, as described by Calder, of applying a certain hierarchy of scholastic disciplines to interpret the Qur’ānic text.

Despite ‘Abduh’s decision to eschew the traditional methodologies of *tafsīr*, as a formally trained ‘ālim (scholar), he was still informed by them. For ‘Abduh, the Qur’ān was not

the place for scholars to display their philological ingenuity or hash out theological or juristic debates. Therefore, he departs from the mainstream of exegetical thought by discarding the philological, theological and legal methodologies that often guided the classical, pre-modern *tafsīr*.

Quṭb, on the other hand, was not a traditionally trained scholar. Therefore, he replaces the hermeneutic tools of the pre-modern genre with new ones, specifically devices of literary criticism and a literary appreciation of the Qurʾan. One of the most significant contributions of his *tafsīr* is his approach to each *sūra* as a unity, whereby he identifies the central thesis around which all the other topics in the *sūra* revolve. Second, his approach to *tafsīr* through the lens of his training as a literary critic yields new and important insights to the Qurʾan’s meaning. More specifically, Quṭb identifies connections between the sounds and imagery of words in the Qurʾan to their meaning. This attention he pays to the Qurʾan’s “artistic imagery” makes his *tafsīr* a significant and literary-appealing exegesis in the spectrum of exegeses produced in the modern period. A peculiarity of his *tafsīr*, however, is a certain level of subjectivity as a result of projecting a certain ideology of Islam on the meaning of the Qurʾanic text.

What sets Ibn ʿĀshūr apart from his modern counterparts, ʿAbduh and Quṭb, is that his methodology is deeply rooted in the pre-modern exegetical tradition. Ibn ʿĀshūr applies a certain hierarchy of related disciplines to interpret the text of the Qurʾan, a methodology which characterized the classical, pre-modern *tafsīr* genre, as Norman Calder points out. In this hierarchy, linguistics sits at the top for Ibn ʿĀshūr, who is a faithful bastion of the philological, *tafsīr* *bil-raʾy* tradition, in which he clearly grounds his work. His *tafsīr* signals a response and

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challenge to the dominant Salafī exegetical paradigm, as he ultimately proves the validity of Qur’anic interpretation that does not rely on the maʾthūr inherited material as the core of tafsīr.

This fact alone, however, is not what distinguishes Ibn ʿĀshūr in the context in which he is writing. What distinguishes him is his ability to revive the classical, philological methodology of tafsīr to yield new, original insights to the interpretive field. His exegesis is a bold attempt to demonstrate that the tradition’s methodologies possess the capacity to respond to new contexts and challenges facing the Muslim community. In the context of ruptures and continuities in the modern period, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr is a testimony to the intellectual tradition’s potential to accommodate change through its scholarly methodologies.

The following three chapters on verses 4:3, 4:34 and 2:228 demonstrate that even when exegetes like ʿAbduh and Quṭb use innovative and distinct methodologies in comparison to pre-modern exegetes, their hermeneutic choices do not always lead to different or new interpretations on certain gender-related Qur’anic texts, although there is much that is distinct in their methodologies. On the other hand, Ibn ʿĀshūr, who represents a more complex exegetical trend, does in fact employ a hermeneutic that is rooted in the pre-modern philological tradition. Nonetheless, this does not prevent him from reaching new interpretations and conclusions, specifically on gender-related Qur’anic texts. The next three chapters demonstrate more specifically how ʿAbduh, Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr diverge from, or, conform to pre-modern methodologies and interpretations in respect to three specific verses.
CHAPTER FOUR: MODERNITY AND DISCOURSES ON GENDER

I. Introduction: Gender and Modernity

One of the issues that witnessed great change in the modern Muslim world was the issue of gender—not just on a practical level, but also a theoretical one. For the first time in Muslim history, women emerged “as a central subject for national debate.” The subject of women first surfaced as a topic of importance in the writings of Muslim male intellectuals in Egypt and Turkey, according to Leila Ahmed. From the onset, the discussion on gender issues was intricately linked to the question of whether or not Islam was compatible with and fit to meet the demands of a modern society. Islam’s treatment of women in general and its position on issues such as veiling, segregation, and polygyny became subject to open debate for the first time. The subject was complicated by the divergence and contradictory nature of the voices that entered the discussion on gender and Islam. The ‘gender’ issue became representative of a greater, ideological debate on the merits of Islam as a religion and its capacity to deal with the changing needs of modern society.

II. Historical Context

The discourse on gender in the modern period was complicated by the quantity and divergence of voices that entered the debate on gender in Islam. On one hand, there were indigenous voices of Muslim intellectuals, such as ‘Abduh, who saw the advancement of women as a more authentic representation of Islam and who also believed it to be critical to Muslim countries’ national progress and modernization. European colonial administrators, most notoriously Lord Cromer, also entered the debate on women’s treatment in Islam, and used the issue of ‘liberating women’ to give British colonialist ambitions in Egypt the semblance of

348 Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, 128.
349 Ibid.
legitimacy. This colonialist discourse was to impact all other conversations on gender in the Arab world, because whether implicitly or explicitly, the gender issue would be permanently affected by its association with colonialists, even if only theoretically.\textsuperscript{350}

Christian missionaries and Western feminists in the Arab region also entered the debate. Despite the divergence of their aims and perspectives, they shared with the colonial administrators the conception of Islam as inherently degrading to women, a view that justified for them the attack on native culture and tradition.\textsuperscript{351} Most problematic of all, however, was the discourse of Arab intellectuals, who internalized the ideas of the colonizers and perpetuated the perception of Islam and the native culture as inherently “backward” and regressive in comparison to the civilized West, which the Arabs should look to as the ideal model in their quest for national progress. This fusion between the issue of gender and the evaluation of native culture and religion as unfit for modern times created a highly charged atmosphere in which gender issues were loaded with other meanings in terms of the role of religion and its compatibility with modernity.

As this context framed all subsequent indigenous discourses on gender in the twentieth century, whether Islamist, conservative, secular or feminist. Before I assess the emergent discourses and situate the three exegetes in these respective discourses, it is first crucial to provide a historical backdrop of the colonialist impact on this debate, and then trace the chronological development of the subsequent discourses that emerged on gender issues.

A. The Appropriation of Feminist Rhetoric: Colonialism in the Arab World

No discussion on the subject of gender and modernity in the Arab world would be complete without assessing the role of Western colonialism in promoting the issue of women’s

\[350\] Ibid., 167.
\[351\] Ibid., 153.
rights. As Leila Ahmed eloquently demonstrates, Western colonizers in the Arab world appropriated feminist terminology regarding women’s rights in the colonized world and used it to morally legitimize the colonial project.\(^{352}\) Their use of feminist language was an “appropriation” because while they gave lip service to the issue of women’s rights in the lands that they occupied, these colonial administrators were also opponents of feminist initiatives in their own home countries. Ahmed best explains this phenomenon as follows:

Even as the Victorian male establishment devised theories to contest the claims of feminism, and derided and rejected the ideas of feminism and the notion of men’s oppressing women with respect to itself, it captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in the service of colonialism toward Other men and the cultures of Other men. It was here and in the combining of the languages of colonialism and feminism that the fusion between the issues of women and culture was created. More exactly, what was created was the fusion between the issues of women, their oppression and the cultures of Other men. The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized people.\(^{353}\)

The new colonial discourse on Islam “centered on women,” Ahmed writes.\(^{354}\) Evelyn Baring, later Lord Cromer, Britain’s Chief Representative in Egypt in the 1880s, saw Islam as a failed social system for many reasons. He argued that one reason, “first and foremost,” is the religion’s treatment of women.\(^{355}\) Quoting Stanley Lane-Poole, a well-known Orientalist in his day, Cromer cites, “The degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam.”\(^{356}\) Islam’s degradation of women was “the fatal obstacle” to the Egyptian’s “attainment of that elevation of thought and

\(^{352}\) Ibid., 150-155, 236-237.
\(^{353}\) Ibid., 151.
\(^{354}\) Ibid.
\(^{355}\) Ibid., 152.
character which should accompany the introduction of western civilization.” The inferiority of Muslim men, Cromer argued, was due to their degradation of their women, specifically in the practices of veiling and segregation.

Evident in Cromer’s words is the blurring of Islam and Muslims; to him, they occupied the same position. He makes no distinction between Islam as a religion and the practices of Muslims—be they warranting condemnation or not—a distinction that ʿAbduh strives to make throughout his *tafsīr*. Further, Cromer’s remedy for this “baneful effect on Eastern society” was to force the natives to abandon their backward ways and instead, imbibe “the true spirit of western civilization,” primarily by changing the position of women in their society. Thus, the discourse on women’s rights that emerged in late nineteenth-century Egypt was entrenched in the idea that women’s oppression in colonized societies rendered morally justifiable the colonialist project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized people.

What is most paradoxical about Cromer’s rhetoric on women in Islam was his own misogynist position toward women in his native country of England. This “champion” of Egyptian women’s rights was a founding member and sometime president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage in England. A cursory reading of the women’s suffrage movement in England makes clear Cromer’s notorious opposition to women’s suffrage in his own country to the extent that the anti-suffrage movement was sometimes called the Curzon-Cromer combine, named after Lord Cromer and Lord Curzon, the first marquis of Kedleston.359

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358 Ibid., 2:538. Quite literally, Cromer writes that it is essential for Egyptians to “be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of western civilization,” cited in Ahmed, 153.
Worse yet, Cromer’s own policies towards Egyptian education were detrimental to women. When it was pointed out to him in 1901 that many male graduates of primary-schools were unable to go on to secondary school and could hardly attain government employment, he responded by raising tuition fees at primary schools in order to reduce enrollment. He implemented the same policy with girls’ primary schools. The British administration’s decision to curb government funding on education was deliberate, Ahmed finds, for both political and financial reasons.

The impact of this policy on Egyptian education was rather detrimental. For example, in 1881, one year before the British took control of Egypt, 70 percent of Egyptian students received government aid for tuition, clothes and books; by 1892, ten years after British control of the country, 73 percent of students paid all of their expenses. It was the private funding of Muslim benevolent societies and committees, founded by Muslim reformers such as Muhammad ‘Abduh, that met the increasing demand for education. The contrast between government schools and the benevolent society schools was stark; while the government schools provided for 11,000 male and 863 female students, the benevolent societies provided for 181,000 boys and 1,164 girls. Further, ‘Abduh’s initiatives helped establish a number of primary schools for girls by 1909, whereas the government opened its first primary school for girls in Alexandria in 1917. Lord Comer’s duties as British consul-general to Egypt had ended by 1907, and therefore, he claims no credit for this primary school.

360 Ahmed, 137.
361 Ibid.
362 Ibid.
363 Ibid., 138.
364 Ibid.
Cromer also restricted the medical training of women to midwifery.\footnote{Ibid., 153. Whereas the School of Ḥākīmas had previously trained women to be physicians by providing equal years of medical training to men, under British control, the School for Ḥākīmas became only a school of midwifery. For further reading, see Amira el-Azhary Sonbol, \textit{The Creation of a Medical Profession in Egypt, 1800-1922} (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, c1991). Her work provides a thorough review of the impact of British policies on the medical profession in Egypt. While she credits the British for improving health facilities, she effectively calls into question the colonial claim of advancing the modern medical profession to Egypt.} To justify this decision, Cromer argued, “I am aware that in exceptional cases women like to be attended by female doctors, but I conceive that throughout the civilized world, attendance by medical men is still the rule.”\footnote{Cromer Papers, cited in Judith E. Tucker, \textit{Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 122 and in Ahmed, 153.} Despite Cromer’s rather misogynist and patriarchal attitudes, the lip service that he and other British colonial administrators paid to the issue of women’s rights in Egypt would leave an indelible imprint on contemporaneous and subsequent discussions on the topic.

\textbf{B. Christian Missionaries and Feminists in Egypt}

Like Cromer, Christian Missionaries and feminists also advanced the theory that empowerment and progress for Egyptian women were contingent upon the abandonment of indigenous, cultural and religious ways. It was a theory that viewed Islam and Arab culture as inherently oppressive to women and regressive. They distorted the practices that existed around them, or those they “imagined” to exist with Islam itself. Because of this blurring of contours, the abandonment of oppressive practices against women meant for them the abandonment of Islam itself.\footnote{Ahmed, 129 and 152.} It was this perception of Islam to which ʿAbduh was most responding in his own discourse on gender in Islam. Throughout his works, he acknowledges and repudiates contemporary practices that inhibit and repress women. Yet he also absolves Islam of such misogyny and instead, blames it on the “ignorance” of Muslims who have become a “ḥujja” (proof) against their religion.\footnote{ʿAbduh, \textit{Tafsīr al-Manār}, 2:376.}
Despite their divergent aims, the colonial narrative on women in Islam was perpetuated by Christian missioners, who saw it as their duty to “save” their Muslim sisters from the “ignorance and degradation” in which they lived.\(^{369}\) Christian missionaries focused on female education in their campaign to save women from “the evils of Islam”.\(^{370}\) By 1912, American missionary schools had succeeded in enrolling 5,517 girls in Egypt, whereas the number of girls attending Egyptian state schools had dropped to 786 by 1914.\(^{371}\)

Similarly, well-meaning feminists in the country, such as Eugénie Le Brun (d. 1908), also advanced a strain of feminism that was premised on the abandonment of native religion. For example, she encouraged removing the veil as the first critical step in the struggle for women’s liberation. She inducted young Muslim women like Hudā al-Shaʿrāwī (1879-1947), one of Egypt’s first feminists, into this conception on the meaning of the veil.\(^{372}\) In fact, al-Shaʿrāwī is remembered in the history of Egyptian feminism, along with Sīzā Nabarāwī (1897-1985), for staging the first public removal of the veil, after returning from an international feminist conference in 1923.\(^{373}\) A member of the upper class, al-Shaʿrāwī acknowledges in her memoir the role of her friend and mentor, Le Brun, on the development of her feminist thought and


\(^{370}\) Ibid.

\(^{371}\) Ahmed, 138.

\(^{372}\) What I find problematic in most of the literature I have read on the topic is the loose use of the term ‘veil,’ without indication as to whether the author is referring to a headscarf or face-veil. Similarly, in the case of Shaʿrāwī, it remains unclear to me whether her removal of the veil was the face-veil or headscarf. Ultimately, I believe the removal of both coverings was an objective of the Egyptian feminist movement. For example, Badran writes: “At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, notwithstanding their feminist critique of segregation and female seclusion, it was a function of feminist strategy not to call for immediate unveiling and an abrupt end to the old system. Malak Ḥifnī Nāsif called for a gradual reduction of veiling, preferring the modified, lighter veil worn by Turkish women to the heavy cloth covering of the older generation of Egyptian women. Some upper-class women in Egypt were proceeding too fast in unveiling, in her view, for which she criticized them, praising the more discreet middle-class practice. Huda Shaʿrawi likewise accepted the gradualist approach, understanding the time was not yet ripe for unveiling,” (Margot Badran, “The Feminist Vision in the Writings of Three Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Women,” *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 15, 1/2 [1988]: 14).

growth. She writes that Le Brun conveyed to her that “the veil stood in the way of their
[Egyptian women’s] advancement.” Ahmed describes,

Whether such proselytizers from the West were colonial patriarchs, then, or missionaries or feminists, all essentially insisted that Muslims had to give up their native religion, customs, and dress, or at least reform their religion and habits along the recommended lines, and for all of them the veil and customs regarding women were the prime matters requiring reform. And all assumed their right to denounce native ways, and in particular the veil, and to set about undermining the culture in the name of whatever cause they claimed to be serving – civilizing the society, or Christianizing it, or saving women from the odious culture and religion in which they had the misfortune to find themselves.

C. Internalizing Colonial Rhetoric: Egyptian Feminists and Intellectuals

As Ahmed meticulously explains, two distinct strains of feminism emerged in Egypt and the Arab Middle East in general. The strain of feminism that ultimately became dominant was that championed by Hudā al-Sha’rāwī and others, which was affiliated, although discreetly, “with the westernizing, secularizing tendencies of the upper, upper-middle, and middle-middle classes” and measured progress in terms of a move towards Western-type societies.

Nonetheless, these Egyptian feminists, like al-Sha’rāwī, took nationalist positions in the political realm. They opposed British political domination of Egypt, but not in the extreme sense that opposed all things British or Western. Yet on a cultural level, and in her feminism, al-Sha’rāwī’s “perspective was informed by a Western affiliation and a westernizing outlook and apparently by a valorization of Western ways as more advanced and more ‘civilized’ than native ways.”

375 Ahmed, 154.
376 The second strain of feminism, which was overshadowed by the dominant western-oriented strain, “searched [for] a way to articulate female subjectivity and affirmation within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse – typically in terms of a general social, cultural, and religious renovation” (Ahmed, 174-5). This renovation was not aimed solely at women, but the overall society.
378 Ibid., 178. I must add here that Margot Badran strongly contests this narrative on Hudā al-Sha’rāwī in her article, “The Feminist Vision in the Writings of Three Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Women” (1988), although published before Ahmed’s work. She rebukes this type of analysis of Egyptian feminism, found in earlier works than Ahmed’s.
Likewise, Arab intellectuals who at least nominally advocated for women’s rights regurgitated some of the same ideas to which Lord Cromer, the missionaries, and feminists gave expression. For example, Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), a French-educated, upper-middle class lawyer, who is often dubbed the father of Arab feminism (a rather oxymoronic label as I demonstrate below), espoused much of Cromer’s views in his book *The Liberation of Women*. As he argued for the improvement of women’s status as an important component to Egypt’s national progress and modernization, he advanced certain ideas that implicitly accommodated the colonialist justification for eradicating certain forms of the indigenous culture and replacing it with colonial culture. Amīn wrote how anyone familiar with “the East” had observed “the backwardness of Muslims in the East wherever they are.”

Despite local differences he observes between Turks and Egyptians, for example (the former he held in higher regard), he asserts that both were “equal in ignorance, laziness and backwardness.” He juxtaposed that with the West, by describing that “European civilization advances with the speed of steam and electricity, and has even overspilled to every part of the globe so that there is not an inch that he [the European man] has not trodden under foot … What drives the Englishman to dwell in India and the French in Algeria … is profit and the desire to acquire resources in countries where the

and asserts, “The feminism of Egyptian women was indigenous, not Western as commonly claimed, and the feminists were not confined to a single class, the upper class, as often asserted. Dismissing feminism as ‘Western’ implicates it as a form of cultural imperialism robbing it of its indigenous authenticity, while restricting feminism to a small elite reduces its social relevance” (Badran, 12). Despite her intent to show al-Sha’rāwī’s feminist aspirations as thoroughly indigenous, she completely fails to then reconcile this portrayal with the actual role of western, colonialist and feminist ‘gender discourse’ in Egypt and its impact on indigenous, feminist voices. The fact that al-Sha’rāwī was a native Egyptian and motivated by the internal conditions she witnessed does not negate the fact that she was informed by her French education, reading and personal friendships. It is not a coincidence that al-Sha’rāwī herself chooses to emphasize this aspect of her upbringing in her public presentation, despite her obvious influence by internal impulses, as perhaps a recognition “of the value of being influenced by the West in her own eyes and in the eyes of the readers she had in mind – presumably members of her own class and of the upper-middle class, for whom to assimilate to a certain degree to Western ways also represented assimilating to more ‘civilized’ ways,” (Ahmed, 179).


inhabitants do not know their value nor how to profit from them.” After juxtaposing the regressive state of Muslims with the West’s civilization and advancement, he then proceeded to make women’s liberation the catalyst for social transformation. Changing the women was necessary “to make Muslim society abandon its backward ways and follow the Western path to success and civilization.”

Amīn’s nominal adoption of the feminist cause is not to be confused with feminism itself. His scathing critique of Egyptian women in his time reveals a high level of contempt and disdain. He describes them as unclean, ignorant and trivial. His most basic recommendation, that primary education for girls be necessary, was not radical by any stretch of the imagination and was not contested by any of the works published in response to his book. He confessed that he was not “among those who demand equality in education,” but that a primary-school education was important for women in order to fulfill their function as wives and mothers. He writes,

It is the wife’s duty to plan the household budget … to supervise the servants … to make her home attractive to her husband, so that he may find ease when he returns to it and so that he likes being there, and enjoys the food and drink and sleep and does not seek to flee from home to spend his time with neighbors or in public places, and it is her duty—and this is her first and most important duty—to raise the children, attending to them physically, mentally and morally.

Given the conservative nature of Amīn’s actual ideas, why then did his book generate such heated debate in the Egyptian press, sparking the publication of over thirty articles and

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382 Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, 156. See also Abu-Lughod, “The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism,” in Remaking Women, 256.


384 Ahmed, 159-60, 162.


386 Ibid., 31, quoted in Ahmed, 159.
As Ahmed demonstrates, the most vehemently and widely denounced idea expressed by Amīn was his depiction of segregation and veiling as backwards and his call for the cessation of these practices. Amīn wrote that the veil was “a huge barrier between the nation and its advance.” Like Cromer, he measured women’s progress through their outward appearance, specifically in a way that adhered to Western notions of progress. Ahmed writes that “his assault on the veil represented not the result of reasoned reflection and analysis but rather the internalization and replication of the colonialist perception,” which he held in highest esteem.

Arab intellectuals like Amīn and Arab feminists like al-Shaʿrāwī who promoted a Western-oriented discourse on gender reform influenced the debate on gender thereafter. Although quite different, their standards for reform generated another response in the form of an Islamist discourse that sought to “return” to an authentic form of Islam. Islamist voices took a defensive position towards indigenous, secular voices calling for an end to practices regarded as ‘time-honored’ and representative of Muslim society’s dignity and independence. Below, I shall discuss how the three exegetes represent different types of responses to the discourses on gender that emerged in the early twentieth century.

D. ‘Islamic Modernist’ Discourse(s) on Gender

This historical context is important for understanding the various forms of Islamic discourse that emerged on gender issues in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two of the most distinct forms of Islamic discourse that emerged were those articulated by

[387] Ahmed writes, “This book is reckoned to have triggered the first major controversy in the Arabic press…” (162).
[390] Ahmed, 160. Describing the European man, Amin writes, “Any place he goes, he takes control of its resources…and turn them into profit ….for the most part, he uses his intellect, but when circumstances require it, he deploys force. He does not seek glory from his possessions and colonies, for he has enough of this through his intellectual achievements and scientific inventions….When they encounter a nation like ours, with a degree of civilization, with a past, and a religion…and customs and…inquisitions…they deal with its inhabitants kindly…” (Amin, 69-70, quoted in Ahmed, 155-56).
Modernists and Islamists, both of which signaled a new paradigm, to some extent, on gender issues. Islamic Modernists and Islamists alike founded a new discourse on gender that repudiated misogynist practices based on culture and argued for social and institutional changes that would improve women’s status. Modernist discourse on gender was based on the view that women’s advancement was essential for national progress and the modernization of Muslim societies. 'Abduh is a quintessential example of this type of discourse, who argues in his *tafsīr*, how can a society ever advance if half of its population is illiterate and like animals? The improvement of women’s status was consistent with the aim of modernists like ‘Abduh to reform society as a whole from its backward and ignorant ways.

Modernists’ “advocacy” of gender issues partially comes as a response to Western criticism of Islam’s treatment of women. 'Abduh represents one of the earliest responses to the colonialist discourse on Islam and gender. He attempts to reclaim the issue of promoting women’s status as one that is central not only to the project of national progress, but to the intrinsic values of Islam as divinely ordained. In doing so, he makes a clear distinction between women’s status in Islam, as can be discerned through the Qur’an, and between modern conditions of Muslim women, which he finds to be inferior. As Leila Ahmed writes, “He ['Abduh] was probably the first to make the argument, still made by Muslim feminists today, that it was Islam and not, as Europeans claim, the West that first recognized the full and equal

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394 Islamic feminists, I suggest, is a more appropriate term here, as many Muslim feminists operate from a secular perspective, whereas Islamic feminists ground their arguments in religious discourse, like ‘Abduh.
humanity of women.” He makes this argument in his *tafsir* of Q. 2:228, which I discuss in chapter six, and in other writings. He writes,

> Anyone who knows how all previous nations before Islam preferred the man and made the woman a mere chattel and plaything of the man…can appreciate at its true value this Islamic reform in…its treatment of women. Moreover, it will be clear to him that the claim of Europeans to have been the first to honor the woman and grant her equality is false, for Islam was ahead of them in this matter, and … yet their [Europeans’] laws and religious traditions continue to place the man above the woman….Muslims have certainly been at fault in the education and training of women, and acquainting them with their rights; we acknowledge that we have failed to follow the guidance of our religion, so that we have become an argument against it.  

ʿAbduh, Leila Ahmed attests, is “among the most influential thinkers on reforms with respect to women.” He first began to address the need for gender reform in his articles, published in *al-Waqāʾiʿ al- Miṣriyya*, of which he was the editor in the early 1880s, and in *al-Manār*, a weekly publication in the 1890s and early 1900s. ʿAbduh recognized the need to improve the status of Muslim women, but his discourse on gender is distinct from other Egyptian voices advocating women’s right at this historical period in that he couches his advocacy as one that is thoroughly consistent with Islam. Rather than identify religion as the source of Muslims’ backwardness and ill-treatment to women, as did other secular intellectuals during this time, ‘Abduh instead argues that Islam’s fair treatment of women remains unparalleled in comparison to all other nations, legal systems, and religions. Further, his advocacy of women’s rights on a Qur’anic premise is an attempt to offset Western criticism of Islam’s treatment of women.

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395 Ahmed, 139.
396 This is Charles C. Adams’ translation in *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1933), 152, as quoted in Ahmed, 139.
397 Ahmed, 138.
398 Such as Qāsim Amīn, whose writings I mention above. Regarding his work, Ahmed writes, “…the fundamental and contentious premise of Amin’s work was its endorsement of the Western view of Islamic civilization, peoples and customs as inferior, whereas the author’s position on women was profoundly patriarchal and even somewhat misogynist” (162).
In an article which Riḍā attributes to ʿAbduh in the May 1907 monthly publication of al-
Manār, ʿAbduh directly addresses Lord Cromer’s writings on women in Islam. He argues that
Cromer is not able to distinguish between Islam as a religion with principles and laws, and the
attitude and behavior of Muslims. Ninety percent of the blame for the difficulties Muslim women
face is assigned to Muslims themselves, whereas ten percent of the blame goes to the rigidity of
jurists, ʿAbduh writes.399 He then laments the difficulties which many women face in the courts.
As ʿAbduh himself had served as a judge in the courts, he was most familiar with its conditions.
He describes the types of difficulties which women endured when they appear in courts due to
divorce, harm, abandonment, and husbands’ failure to provide financial maintenance. From some
judges, these women faced insults and difficulties due to the judges’ rigidity in customs and
habits [“wa-mā yuqāṣīna min jumūd al-quḍāt ‘alā al-taqālīd wal-ʿādāt”].400 “It is a state that stirs
mercy in the hearts and incites the tongue to speak out,” ʿAbduh asserts.401

ʿAbduh’s advocacy of women’s rights in this period stands out in relation to secular,
Western-educated Egyptians who regurgitated the colonialist rhetoric on women. More
specifically, ʿAbduh’s tone is distinct in its expression of gender equality based on what he
argues is a proper religious understanding. In his tafsīr, he touches upon important themes, such
as the singular source of humanity, female financial autonomy, and female education. Stowasser
also demonstrates in her work on Women in the Quran how ʿAbduh interprets the verses on
Eve’s creation in a more egalitarian way than previous exegetes. He argues that the verses on
human creation demonstrate women’s full humanity and equality with men before God.402

399 Al-Manār 10, issue 3 (May 1, 1907 – Rabīʿ al-ʿAwwal 12, 1325): 224-226.
400 Ibid., 224.
401 Ibid.
402 Stowasser, Women in the Qur’an, 34.
E. Islamist Discourse on Gender Issues

Islamist discourse on gender is based on the view that women are critical partners in the establishment of an Islamic society based on the pristine sources of Islam. Women must be treated as equals not only to be invested in the Islamist project, Islamists believe, but also, because it is a more authentic representation of Muslim women’s involvement in the prophetic Muslim community. In Islamists’ struggle to Islamicize society, they “recognize women as soldiers in a popular battle for communal righteousness.”

Islamists seek to reclaim the ‘gender issue’ from secular, liberal, and feminist discourses by demonstrating that Islam, as a complete way of life, grants women the very freedom, dignity, and justice to which the feminist agenda aspires. As Yvonne Haddad demonstrates in her essay, “Islam and Gender: Dilemmas in the Changing Arab World,” Islamists take “the feminist movement head on.” They do so by arguing that the ideals which feminists wish to attain are more fully realized through an implementation of Islamic legislation and values. Appropriating some of the feminist discourse, they demonstrate how Islam’s specific mandates, such as the mahr, the man’s obligation for nafaga and a woman’s right to financial autonomy, best guarantee the honor, financial security, and freedom that women aspire to achieve. Islamists engage more controversial issues like polygyny and men’s greater share of inheritance through distinct ‘feminist’-conscious arguments. Licenses such as polygyny are presented as the more dignified alternative to extra-marital affairs, in which the woman has no legal rights or social recognition as a spouse. Men’s extra share in inheritance is explained through the prism of men’s extra share of financial liabilities.

403 Haddad, “Islam and Gender: Dilemmas in the Changing Arab World,” 19-22; Ahmed, 194.
404 Stowasser, 7.
405 Haddad, 22.
In his *tafsīr* of 4:32, Quṭb argues that men’s share of liabilities far outweighs his share of inheritance. This is because the husband must provide a marital gift (*mahr*), financial maintenance (*nafaqa*) for his wife and children, financial maintenance for close family members who are in need, elderly or incapable of working, and, even in cases of divorce, he must pay the woman wages for breastfeeding and expenses for the child(ren) under her custody. Quṭb writes, “All of this (legislation) is to afford women complete comfort and reassurance, so that she could guard the most valuable human balance … [i.e. raising children].” Quṭb’s terminology reflects careful thought and a great awareness of the discourse on gender around him. For example, in the quotation above, instead of simply referring to a woman’s duty as child-rearing, he instead expresses it in euphemistic terminology, as “guarding the valuable human balance.” As in most Islamist writings on gender, he frames his defense of seemingly-controversial legislation as ultimately in women’s favor. In this perfect and complete “system” (*niẓām*), the division of responsibilities ultimately determines the division of inheritance, Quṭb argues.

An important theme that arises in Quṭb’s *tafsīr* is the idea that Islam represents a totality, a natural order, and a blueprint for society that is consistent with the innate condition in which man is born (*fitra*), termed *al-manhaj al-Islāmī*. Quṭb often invokes this theme of Islam as a perfect social order in sync with the nature of human beings to explain Islam’s regulations for men and women. For example, in verse 4:32, he refers back to the idea of Islam being a natural way of life to demonstrate that following this “natural order” would solve the ongoing gender

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407 Ibid.
408 Ibid.
409 See for example, Rāshid al-Ghannūshī’s writing on the subject, which is also premised on the idea of a discrepancy between the Qur’ān’s fair treatment of women and Muslims’ unfair treatment of women. Haddad analyzes his writing as “most instructive” of Islamists’ new interpretation on women (Rāshid al-Ghannūshī, *Al-Mar’a bayn al-Qur’ān wa-Waqā’ī al-Muslimīn* [Tunis: Maṭba‘at Tūnis Qurtāj al-Sharqiyya, n.d.], as cited in Haddad, “Islam and Gender,” 19-25).
debate in Egypt. There is no reason for men to covet what God has given women or for women to covet what God has given men, because their rights and duties are divided according to men and women’s natural qualities. These rules and regulations stem from Islam’s comprehensive outlook of society, which aims to dignify human beings for the benefit of the entire society, not for just one of the sexes or any single individual.\footnote{Quṭb, 2:110.}

Like ʿAbduh before him, Quṭb also distinguishes between Islam as a “system,” as he describes it, and between the normative practices of Muslims. The reason that women suffer degradation and injustice in Muslim societies is clearly due to the latter, according to Quṭb. Society is steeped in a deep jāhiliyya, according to Quṭb, which infringes upon the rights of God, men, and women. Quṭb was deeply disturbed by the state in which Egypt found itself in the middle of the twentieth century, which he describes as even more jāhilī than Arab pagan society in the seventh century. Quṭb’s repudiation of modern-day abuses against women and general discourse on gender stems from his repudiation of society’s overall condition. Hence, his discourse on gender departs from this diagnosis of society as jāhilī. If Islam, as a comprehensive, natural system, was implemented as it had been revealed, then there would be no need for a feminist movement or “battle of genders,” as he calls it, which currently afflicts Egyptian society.\footnote{Ibid., 2:644.} As Quṭb does with other verses, he constantly relates his commentary on gender verses to the contemporary realities he witnesses in Egyptian society. He writes,

There may be a battle of this sort in jāhilī societies which initiate their own systems according to their will and to serve their immediate interests, or, to serve the interests of certain classes, families or individuals. Such societies may deprive women of certain rights due to their extreme ignorance of the human being as a whole or of the function of the two sexes in life, or, they may deprive working women of some of their rights for economic reasons, by giving women lower wages than men for the same job, or giving her a smaller share of inheritance
[than she has the right to], or depriving her of the right to manage her own property, such as the case in our modern ḥālī societies.\(^{412}\)

Injustice towards women stems from people’s ignorance, but as for Islam, its treatment of women is the highest ideal that any civilization has reached, Quṭb argues.\(^{413}\) For example, in his \textit{tafsīr} of verse 4:32,\(^{414}\) he argues that Islam gave women an equal right to men to own property and earn a living.\(^{415}\) Whereas in other societies women do not have the right to act independently regarding their own wealth, Islam “gave women this right from the onset, without her demanding it, without any protests, without women associations, and without membership in Parliament!”\(^{416}\) Quoting ʿAbd al-Wāḥid Wāfī’s work, \textit{Human Rights in Islam (Ḥuqūq al-Insān)}, Quṭb compares the rights that Islam gave women in relation to the “Christian west.”\(^{417}\) He mentions that when women in France get married, they adopt their husbands’ last name and become known as Madame “so and so,” based on their husbands’ last name. The French woman, therefore, loses her individuality and civic identity, which merges with that of her husband.\(^{418}\) Similarly, married women cannot act freely with their wealth without their husbands’ permission. Therefore, “the status of women in France, up until recently—indeed, until today—most resembles the status of civic slavery.”\(^{419}\) In comparison to these restrictions, Muslim women can act freely with their wealth, without needing their husbands’ permission, and maintain their own family name and

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\(^{412}\) Ibid.
\(^{413}\) Ibid., 2:646, quoting ʿAbdul-Wāḥid Wāfī, \textit{Ḥuqūq al-Insān}, (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Misr, 1967), np.
\(^{414}\) \textit{Qur’an}, 33:33: “Do not covet those things in which God has bestowed His gifts More freely on some of you than on others: To men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn: But ask God of His bounty. For God has full knowledge of all things.” A modification of Yūsuf Ṭūfī’s translation.
\(^{415}\) Quṭb, 2:645.
\(^{416}\) Ibid.
\(^{417}\) ʿAbdul-Wāḥid Wāfī, \textit{Ḥuqūq al-Insān}, quoted in Quṭb, 2:646.
\(^{418}\) Ibid.
\(^{419}\) Ibid.
identity. Quoting Wāfī, Ḥāfīẓ writes that, accordingly, it is very strange that some Muslim women blindly imitate western women and reduce themselves to such a status.\footnote{Ibid.}

Quṭb reflects the mixed position of many Islamists as he attempts, on one hand, to absolve Islam of the critique that it is unfair towards women, and on the other hand, resist and counter liberal, feminist trends that he regards as destructive to family life and as part of a secular agenda to move Egypt farther from Islam. This tension between his positions makes Quṭb’s \textit{tafsīr} most paradoxical when it comes to gender issues in the Qur’an. On certain critical gender concepts, such as the notion of men’s degree over women in verse 2:228, he takes the most women-friendly interpretation of all the exegetes examined (both pre-modern and modern) and emphatically argues that this \textit{daraja} is absolutely limited to the context of divorce and cannot be extended to apply to men and women on a broader level.

These gender-friendly positions, however, are not consistent throughout Quṭb’s \textit{tafsīr}. In certain verses, specifically those dealing with women in the public space, Quṭb takes a rather defensive stance, condemning the liberal direction in which Egyptian society is moving. For example, he writes in his \textit{tafsīr} of verse 33:33,\footnote{Qur’an, 33:33: “And abide quietly in your homes, and do not flaunt your charms as they used to flaunt them in the old days of pagan ignorance; and be constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and pay heed unto God and His Apostle: for God only wants to remove from you all that might be loathsome, O you members of the [Prophet’s] household, and to purify you to utmost purity.” Muḥammad Asad’s translation.}

Women leaving the home to work is a catastrophe for the home, although necessity permits it. As for people volunteering to do so [i.e. women working outside the home] even though they are able to avoid it, then this is the curse that afflicts the souls, conscience and minds in the ages of regression, evil, and misguidance. As for women leaving the home for other than work, such as intermingling and to engage in amusement and to idle about in associations and clubs (\textit{nawādī}), then this is a reversion which takes human beings back to the stages of animals.\footnote{Quṭb, 5:2860.}
Although verse 33:33 specifically addresses the wives of the Prophet, Quṭb gives a long diatribe regarding the dilemma of Egyptian women working outside the home. These women, he states, only bring instability to their home and wreak havoc on their family life.\(^{423}\) It is clear that his strong condemnation of women’s work outside the home stems from the cultural and societal changes that Egypt was undergoing at that time, with greater interaction between the genders, Western-style dress (i.e. removing the \textit{ḥijāb}), and public entertainment involving women (i.e. dancers, singers, etc.).

\section*{F. Ibn ʿĀshūr on Gender}

Unlike ʿAbduh and Quṭb, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s discourse on gender issues cannot be confined to a specific type of discourse, such as modernist or Islamist. In general, however, he reflects an internalization of modern notions regarding women’s equality and rights. He stresses the equality of men and women in those verses dealing with human creation. He argues that Islam is the first religion to establish rights for women within a marriage, whereas in previous centuries, the fate of women was subject to the character of the men they married.\(^{424}\) His interpretations of verses 4:3 and 4:34 reflect his concern for men’s abuse against women. Yet his \textit{tafsīr} is void of the passionate and polemical tone that underlies the \textit{tafsīrs} of ʿAbduh and Quṭb on most gender issues. As Nafi eloquently describes, “He [Ibn ʿĀshūr] was no doubt deeply touched by the currents of the modern times, but modernity for him, or whatever traces of it he absorbed, was no longer an externalised object from which he could choose to incorporate or reject (as it was for ʿAbduh, fifty years earlier), but rather an internalised influence submerged in his subconscious.”\(^{425}\)

\begin{itemize}
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\item \(^{423}\) Ibid.
\item \(^{424}\) Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2:398.
\item \(^{425}\) Nafi, “Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr: The Career and Thought of a Modern Reformist ʿĀlim, with Special Reference to His Work of Tafsīr,” 20. The parenthetical insertion is Nafi’s.
\end{itemize}
III. Verse 4:3: A New Discourse on Polygyny

And if you have reason to fear that you might not act equitably towards orphans, then marry from among women who are lawful to you—[even] two, or three, or four: but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with justice, then marry one—or those whom you rightfully possess. Thus, it will be more likely that you will not do injustice.⁴²⁶

In the modern period, there arises a need to explain the institution of polygyny in a way that classical, pre-modern exegetes did not have to. All three modern exegetes attempt to rationally explain this institution and reconcile it with modern notions of gender justice and marriage as monogamous. In their interpretation of verse 4:3, which sanctions a man marrying up to four women, all three exegetes point out that this verse came as a remedy to a social ailment that existed in 7th century Arabia, which was injustice to orphans and women in various forms. By pointing out the verse’s objective, they all affirm that the verse did not institute polygyny, which existed prior to Islam, but imposed limits and restrictions upon this pre-existing institution.

Unlike pre-modern exegetes, Riḍā, in his fatwa in *Tafsīr al-Manār*, as well as Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr, attempt to identify the rationale for why God allows this institution to exist. Their justification is grounded in the needs and benefits of human beings and societies overall, not in Qur’anic evidence. Nonetheless, Quṭb, Ibn ʿĀshūr, ‘Abduh, and Riḍā point to the inherent restrictions of this license, based on the wording of the verse itself. For example, all three argue that marriage to one is superior if there is any fear of injustice. Their rationalization of this verse, however, varies considerably. Of all the exegetes, ‘Abduh is the only one who attempts to restrict the practice of polygyny in the modern period, by pointing to its destructive and harmful effects. Therefore, he calls into question the utility of this institution to modern-day Egyptian society.

⁴²⁶ Qur’an, 4:3. This translation is an edited version of Muhammad Asad’s translation for the most part and Pickthall’s translation for the last clause. I omitted most of Asad’s parenthetical insertions, which were more interpretive than literal.
ʿAbduh’s position on this issue was not mere rhetoric; in 1927, the cabinet approved draft legislation based on ʿAbduh’s views for reforming the law on polygyny and divorce, but these were rejected by King Fuʿād.427 In order to illustrate the significance of the three modern exegetes’ approaches, I will briefly summarize pre-modern exegetical views on the topic.

IV. Pre-Modern Exegesis on Verse 4:3

The pre-modern exegetes showed no discomfort with the institution of polygyny as expressed by verse 4:3. Unlike the three modern exegetes, there is no attempt among pre-modern exegetes to justify the institution of polygyny or to identify its advantages over monogamous marriages as the ideal standard of marriage. Rather, the pre-modern exegetes sought to explain why God restricts the number of wives a man could have to four, not why He permits it. The primary concern for pre-modern exegetes is to, first, identify the exact correlation between the “fear of being unfair to orphans,” as expressed at the beginning of the verse, and the statement “then, marry women who are lawful to you, in twos, threes, or fours.” Second, the pre-modern exegetes display an interest in the legal and linguistic issues that stem from various interpretations of this verse. Their engagement with these issues is not always interpretive on purpose, but responsive, in order to either affirm or refute pre-existing interpretations regarding this verse.

The issues which preoccupied the pre-modern exegetes like al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī have nothing to do with the institution of polygyny itself. The issues that rise to importance in their respective tafsīr are primarily linguistic and legal ones. For example, one linguistic issue to which all three exegetes pay attention is the characterization of lawful women

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427 Ahmed, 175.
with the demonstrative pronoun “mā” (that) rather than the object pronoun “man” (whom).\textsuperscript{428} Further, they demonstrate why the numbers, two, three, and four are expressed as mathnā, thulāth and rubā’, based on the patterns of maf‘al and fu‘āl, and the implications of using this expression.\textsuperscript{429}

The primary concern of pre-modern exegetes in their interpretations of Q. 4:3 was to establish the correlation between the first and second parts of the conditional clause. The verse begins with a dependent clause expressing a condition, the protasis (sharṭ): “And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with orphans.” A second clause expressing the consequence, the apodosis (jawāb al-sharṭ), follows: “then marry those women made lawful to you, in twos, threes, or fours.” Hence any interpretation needed to take into account the syntactical structure of the verse.

Among the many legal issues they engage is whether the permission to marry up to four applies to male slaves as well\textsuperscript{430} and whether the imperative verb, “then marry” (fa-nkīhū) reflects a legal obligation to marry.\textsuperscript{431} According to al-Rāzī, the Šāhirīs took the position that the imperative verb “marry” indicates a legal obligation to get married.\textsuperscript{432} Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī seek to refute this argument and leverage different pieces of evidence to do so. In response to the Šāhirī position, al-Rāzī cites al-Shāfi‘ī’s counterargument in which he refers to verse 4:25.\textsuperscript{433} This verse gives permission for men who cannot afford to marry free, believing women to marry

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{429} Al-Ṭabarī, 2:498-9; al-Zamakhsharī, 1:360; al-Rāzī, 5:9:141.\textsuperscript{430}
\item \textsuperscript{430} Al-Rāzī, 5:9:141-2.
\item \textsuperscript{431} Al-Ṭabarī, 2:500; al-Rāzī, 5:9:140.
\item \textsuperscript{432} Al-Rāzī, 5:9:140.
\item \textsuperscript{433} The pertinent part of this verse is “And whoso is not able to afford to marry free, believing women, let them marry from the believing maids whom your right hands possess…But to have patience [in abstaining from marriage] would be better for you. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” Maḥmūd Pikthall translation.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
their slave-women instead. At the end of the verse, however, it states that it is better for one to be patient rather than conduct such marriages. Al-Rāzī states that this verse is evidence that marriage is not *mandūb*, a recommended act, let alone a legal obligation (*wājib*) (“*wa dhālika yadull ‘alā annahu laysa bi-mandūb, faḍlan ‘an an yuqāl innahu wājib*”). Al-Ṭabarī, whose *tafsīr* is argued to be one of the first extant in the genre of *tafsīr*, applies a certain methodology of citing all possible given interpretations of a text and the authorities who adopt those interpretations. While this leads to a multiplicity of meaning, al-Ṭabarī usually champions one of those multiple interpretations at the end. In al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* on verse 4:3, he cites three possible interpretations. Both al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī cite at least two of these interpretations.

The first opinion al-Ṭabarī cites is that this verse is a prohibition for legal guardians from marrying orphans under their care due to potential injustice that might ensue therefrom. Rather, they should marry other women who are lawful to them, up to four; yet if they fear doing injustice, then they should only marry one or what their right hand possesses. Based on al-Ṭabarī’s characteristic of citing interpretive reports with strict attention to isnād (chain of transmission), he cites all the chains of transmission for the authorities who have adopted this interpretation. This interpretation is based on a ḥadīth by the Prophet’s wife ʿĀʾisha, which is

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434 Al-Rāzī, 5.9:140.
436 For more information on al-Ṭabarī’s methodology, see Calder, 103-109.
437 Al-Ṭabarī, 2:494-5.
439 The entire text of the tradition in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* is as follows: Narrated by ʿUrwa ibn Al-Zubayr that he asked ʿĀʾisha regarding God’s Statement: "If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan girls..." (4.3) So she said, “O son of my sister! This is an orphan girl who is under the care of a guardian with whom she shares property. Her guardian, being attracted by her wealth and beauty, would intend to marry her without giving her a just *mahr*; he does not give her the same amount of *mahr* that another man would give her. So such guardians were forbidden to do that unless they did justice to their female wards and gave them the highest *mahr* their peers might get. They were ordered to marry women of their choice other than those orphan girls.” ʿĀʾishah added, “The
cited by all the pre-modern and modern exegetes I examine here. According to this narration, this verse was revealed in regards to men who are legal guardians for orphans under their care when the legal guardian is attracted to the orphan due to her wealth and beauty and wants to marry her without giving her the due *mahr* that another man would pay her. Accordingly, God forbade these men from marrying those orphans under their care, unless they could be just and give them the maximum *mahr* due to them. Rather, these legal guardians are given the option to marry other women, who are made lawful to them, up to four.440

The second interpretation that al-Ṭabarī cites is that the objective of this verse is to limit men from marrying more than four women. The reason for this is because men from the Quraysh tribe would marry ten women, or more or less, and then use the wealth of the orphans under their care to financially support these multiple marriages.441 Or they would use the orphan’s wealth to get married (i.e. pay the dower). Hence, this interpretation is about restricting the number of marriages that a man could have in order to eliminate his need or desire to use the wealth of orphans under his care.442 Al-Ṭabarī concisely mentions a third interpretation, which is that this verse was precautioning men against illicit sex. He writes, “Some have said that the verse’s meaning is ‘just as you fear [injustice] regarding orphans, so likewise fear having illicit sex with women; rather marry women who are made lawful to you.’”443

people asked God’s Messenger his instructions after the revelation of this Divine Verse whereupon Allah revealed: ‘They ask your instruction regarding women’ (4:127) ʿĀ’ishah further said, “And God’s statement: ‘And yet whom you desire to marry,’ (4:127) as anyone of you refrains from marrying an orphan girl (under his guardianship) when she is lacking in property and beauty.” ʿĀ’ishah added, “So they were forbidden to marry those orphan girls for whose wealth and beauty they had a desire unless with justice, and that was because they would refrain from marrying them if they were lacking in property and beauty,” *Sahih al-Bukhārī*, vol. 6, book 60, no. 98. [http://sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_6_60.php](http://sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_6_60.php)

440 Al-Ṭabarī, 2:495. Al-Ṭabarī only cites a shorter version of the *ḥadīth* by ʿĀ’ishah
441 Al-Ṭabarī, 2:495-6.
442 Ibid.
443 Ibid., 2:496.
The fourth interpretation, which al-Ṭabarî champions, is that Arab men of Quraysh did in fact refrain from being unjust with orphans’ wealth, but they did not exhibit that same level of restraint towards being unjust to women they married. For al-Ṭabarî, this correlation between the protasis and apodosis at the beginning of the verse is not in the legality of marrying orphans versus non-orphans. The correlation between these two topics in the level of concern one should have towards both subjects, women and orphans. Al-Ṭabarî argues that since 4:2, the preceding verse, warns against unjustly appropriating orphans’ wealth, then verse 4:3 commands men to fear being unjust towards women they marry just as they fear being unjust towards orphan. He writes,

Just as you fear being unjust with orphans, likewise fear being unjust to women, so do not marry of them except one to four, and do not exceed this; and if you still fear that you will not be just with more than one woman, then do not marry except that [number] in which you do not fear being unjust, from one to what your right hand possesses.  

Al-Zamakhsharî agrees with this opinion cited by al-Ṭabarî. To this interpretation, he adds the following analysis:

if you fear being unjust with the rights of orphans and therefore, refrain from it [being unjust], so likewise, fear being unjust to women, so reduce the number of women you marry, because whoever refrains from one sin or repents for it, while committing another sin, is neither abstinent [from sin] nor repentant … because repugnance exists in every sin.

Al-Zamakhsharî identifies two other possible interpretations. The second interpretation, which he considers weak, is that the Arab men would not refrain from illicit sex (zinâ) although they would refrain from being the guardians of orphans due to fear of being unjust or unfair in upholding their rights. Accordingly, just as they fear committing this sin towards orphans, they

444 Ibid., 2:496.
446 Ibid.
447 Ibid.
should fear committing the sin of illicit sex. The objective of this verse then is to order men to marry women who have been made lawful to them, rather than engage in illicit sex. The third interpretation that al-Zamakhsharī offers parallels the first interpretation that al-Ṭabarī provides. Although al-Zamakhsharī does not cite ‘Ā’ishah’s ḥadīth, he paraphrases its content.448

Like al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī’s primary concern is to identify the correlation between the two clauses at the beginning of the verse. Al-Rāzī cites four possible interpretations. The first interpretation is based on the ḥadīth by ‘Ā’ishah and therefore, parallels al-Ṭabarī’s first interpretation. Accordingly, this verse is meant to deter men from marrying orphans under their legal care and instead, to marry other women who are lawful to them. This is because, based on the ḥadīth, the guardian is attracted to the orphan’s wealth and beauty and desires to marry her, but he does not treat her well “because he knows that she has no one to defend her and protect her from that husband’s evil,” al-Rāzī writes.449

The second interpretation that al-Rāzī cites is the one that al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī both believe to be the correct interpretation. Al-Rāzī’s wording of this interpretation very closely resembles al-Zamakhsharī’s wording that the correlation between the two clauses is to fear being unjust to women just as one fears being unjust to orphans.450. According to this interpretation, after the revelation of 4:2 warning against the illicit consumption of orphans’ wealth, men feared being unjust to orphans and refrained from being their legal guardians, but did not refrain from being unjust to women. The third interpretation that al-Rāzī cites is also cited by al-Zamakhsharī, which is that men are being told to fear zinā just as they fear being unjust to orphans, as both are

448 Ibid.
449 Al-Rāzī, 5.9:139.
450 Al-Rāzī, 5.9:140.
Therefore, the objective of the apodosis, *jawāb al-sharṭ*, in the verse, “then marry women who are lawful to you,” is to order men to get married rather than have illicit sex.

The fourth opinion that al-Rāzī cites is the one that he favors. Based on a report by ‘Ikrima, a man would have many wives. At the same time, the man would have orphans under his legal care. After spending all of his money on his wives, he would have nothing left and be in need. He would then use the orphans’ wealth to financially support his wives. According to this interpretation, the correlation between having fear of injustice to orphans and marrying up to four women is in its inverse relationship. Marrying more than four women could lead to a financial burden and greater temptation to use the wealth of orphans under one’s care. Therefore, if one fears being unjust to orphans’ wealth, according to al-Rāzī’s reading, then one should decrease the number of women one marries. The implication of this interpretation is that the objective of the Qur’anic verse, “then marry women who are made lawful to you, in twos, threes or fours,” is to restrict the number of marriages one could have.

The pre-modern exegetes, such as the three mentioned above, displayed no reservations with regards to the institution of polygyny as expressed in this verse, nor did they feel a need to defend or justify its sanction by the Qur’an. Rather, as demonstrated, the focus of their interpretations was to explain the correlation between the issues of orphans and marriage in the verse. Further, the exegetes sought to explain why God was restricting the number of marriages a man could have to four. What needed explanation to the pre-modern exegetes was not why God allowed up to four wives for one man, but rather, why God had limited the number of wives a man could have. Subtle differences in the various interpretations aside, for all three of these pre-

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451 Ibid.
452 Ibid.
453 Ibid.
modern exegetes, the objective of this verse was to either prevent injustice to orphans or prevent injustice to women themselves.

V. Modern Exegetes on Verse 4:3

A. ʿAbduh on polygyny

While historians of the Arab world have paid much attention to ʿAbduh’s legal reforms to outlaw polygyny in Egypt, I have yet to find an analysis of ʿAbduh’s tafsīr on verse 4:3, which allows for a man’s marriage of up to four women, and how he reconciles this verse with his position on banning polygyny. ʿAbduh’s position on the institution of polygyny is that its need and benefits are restricted to the early Islamic historical period, in which certain conditions existed that made such an institution feasible and even necessary at times. However, in late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century Egypt, the effects of polygyny were destructive to family life and harmful to the welfare of society, ʿAbduh believed.

There are two sections in Tafsīr al-Manār on verse 4:3. The first section consists of two sermons that ʿAbduh gave on the verse, according to Riḍā’s notes. This section is a straightforward interpretation of the verse which ends with an appeal to Ḥanafī jurists to change the laws regarding this institution. The second section is a fatwa that Riḍā gave on polygyny in response to a Muslim medical student’s question in the U.S. The tone and arguments are decisively different in each of these two sections. In the first section, ʿAbduh laments the destructive and ill effects of polygyny and ultimately, calls upon jurists to look into repealing this issue for the general welfare (maṣlaha) of society. In the second, Riḍā’s tone takes a sharp turn from the tone

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454 See for example, Leila Ahmed, 140, 175; Yvonne Haddad, “Muhummad ʿAbduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform,” 57; Barbara Stowasser, 121; and Margot Badran, “The Feminist Vision in the Writings of Three Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Women,” 12.

455 Al-Manār, 4:349.
set by ‘Abduh on the topic, and instead, he begins to justify the historic and human need for this institution, based on various scenarios that could arise.

The reason for this marked difference between the two sections, I argue, is partially due to the differences between both authors and partially due to the fact that the fatwa’s petitioner lives in U.S. The petitioner of the fatwa, a Muslim medical student in the U.S., asks Riḍā how one should explain 4:3 to those in the West who are bewildered by it. The question itself, therefore, elicits a response that addresses Western criticism of the practice, which explains Riḍā’s defense of the institution. In addition, what is clearly different between both sections are the authors’ views on women in general. Whereas most of ‘Abduh’s writing on women is consistent with his views of gender equality, Riḍā’s fatwa on polygyny regurgitates patriarchal views of women as being mentally less capable than men and the need to gear them towards their “natural work,” \textsuperscript{456} child-rearing.

The significant differences between these two sections yield two important points of analysis. The first is that Islamic modernist discourse on gender issues was not monolithic. Despite the commonality of modernists’ views on certain objectives of Islamic reform, they may have differed in their views on gender and women’s role in society. Second, it re-affirms what many historians have noted about ‘Abduh, which is that his views on gender were significant and relatively revolutionary in relation to the cacophony of voices that spoke out on the subject in the early and middle twentieth-century Arab world.\textsuperscript{457}

\textsuperscript{456} \textit{Tafsīr al-Manār}, 4:354. The original fatwa was published in the journal, \textit{al-Manār} 7, issue 6 (Rabī’ al-‘Awwal 16, 1322 – June 1, 1904): 231-238.

As with most of *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Riḍā as the editor indicates, for the most part, which words are his and which parts of the commentary belong to his teacher and “imām.” The exception to this, as I’ve indicated earlier, is the second sūra immediately after ʿAbduh’s death. Riḍā also tends to indicate where ʿAbduh’s words represent a new sermon, especially when the sermon is a continuation of a previous sermon on the same verse. The beginning of the *tafsīr* on verse 4:3 is traditional in form, conforming to most pre-modern and modern exegesis on this verse, and reflects Riḍā’s interjections. Riḍā’s edits in this *tafsīr* are evidential by the thorough citation of various narrations regarding the occasion of the verse’s revelation. The sources of these narrations include canonical ḥadīth collections (Bukhārī, Muslim, and Sunan al-Nasāʾī) as well as the exegeses of al-Ṭabarī, Abū Bakr ibn al-Mundhir al-Naysaburī (d. 930) and Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 938).

In fact, the next few pages are a discussion of al-Ṭabarī’s various citations on this verse and the range of possible interpretations that al-Ṭabarī offers. This dialectic with al-Ṭabarī is most indicative of Riḍā’s work, as ʿAbduh scantly, if ever, cited previous exegetes in his commentary, although he did cite prophetic traditions. Riḍā delves into much detail on al-Ṭabarī’s multiple interpretations, mentioning the interpretations themselves, the various pieces of evidence that al-Ṭabarī presents, and the named authorities who took this position. It is clear that Riḍā actually prefers the opinion that al-Ṭabarī championed as the correct one, rather than the one that ʿAbduh believed to be correct. As mentioned earlier, al-Ṭabarī believed that verse 4:3 called upon men to fear being unjust to women just as they fear being unjust to orphans. This is because the preceding verse, 4:2, heeded men against consuming orphans’ wealth illegally; therefore, the precedent for fearing being unjust to orphans had already been established.

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458 Riḍā usually commences ʿAbduh’s words with “Our teacher, the imām, said…”
459 See my discussions on this in chapters three and six.
way to be just towards women is by not marrying more than the number with which one can guarantee fairness, al-Ṭabarī had argued.\textsuperscript{461} Riḍā states, however, that ‘Abduh had chosen the interpretation that ‘Āʾishah narrates in the hadith.\textsuperscript{462}

He then clarifies the different implications of these positions. If one adopts the position that al-Ṭabarī had championed, then this means the objective of the verse is to be just to women by reducing the number of women one marries until one can guarantee the ability to be just.

“And this best fits the issue at hand because it is one of the most important social issues and is most appropriate to be [discussed] at the beginning of the sūra named Sūrat al-Nisā’ [the chapter of women],” Riḍā writes.\textsuperscript{463} On the other hand, based on the interpretation that ‘Abduh chooses, the issue of marrying more than one woman came as a subsequent issue, not as the original aim, Riḍā illustrates.\textsuperscript{464} In other words, polygyny was not the original aim of this verse, but it came as a response to the issue of injustice to orphans.\textsuperscript{465} The primary intent of the verse is to prevent men from marrying orphans under their legal care, if they fear being unjust.

Whereas the commentary began as a technical summary of traditions and their explanation, it abruptly takes a more opinionated tone, which is the delineation between Riḍā’s and ‘Abduh’s words. Riḍā prefaches ‘Abduh’s words here with “al-ustādh al-imām:” ‘Abduh demonstrates that the license to marry more than one is hinged upon the second conditional clause, “if you fear that you will not be able to do justice, then marry one or what your right hand possesses; that is more likely that you will not do injustice.” ‘Abduh argues that the notion of fear mentioned in this verse is enough to be a doubt, suspicion or mere illusion that one will not uphold justice if married to more than one woman. Therefore, this permission to marry more

\textsuperscript{461} Tafsīr al-Manār, 4:347; Al-Ṭabarī, 2:496.
\textsuperscript{462} Tafsīr al-Manār, 4:347. See footnote no. 91 for the full text of the ḥadīth.
\textsuperscript{463} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{464} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{465} Ibid.
than one is for the individual who has full confidence that he will be just towards his wives and has no hesitation in this regards, ‘Abduh states.  

1. ‘Abduh’s Plea Against Polygny

‘Abduh arrives at his conclusion on the evils of polygyny rather gradually. He first points out the inherent restrictions in the verse itself, such as the mandate to be just and the verse’s suggestion that marrying one will make it more likely to be just. Second, he mentions another verse in relation to this one, verse 4:129: “You are never able to be fair and just between women, even if it is your ardent desire: But turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air). If you come to a friendly understanding, and practice self-restraint, God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.”  

‘Abduh then emphatically states that if we take both these verses into consideration, it will become apparent that the permissibility of polygyny in Islam is restricted to the utmost degree, as if it is only a necessity (darūra) for those who in fact have a need for it, and only with the condition of upholding justice and safety from the absence of injustice.  

By the end of his sermon, which comes right before Riḍā’s fatwa in the tafsīr, ‘Abduh makes a strong case for the repeal of polygyny in modern-day society. The fact that this part comes at the very end of his first sermon may be a result of a conscious decision to only gradually introduce the idea. On the other hand, it may be more of a reflection of Riḍā’s edits in the text, rather than a particular sequence in ‘Abduh’s delivery of his interpretation. ‘Abduh’s strong views against polygyny may have developed at a very early stage in his life due to his own personal experience with its ill effects. ‘Abduh’s father had two wives and he grew up at a young age experiencing first-hand “the difficulties of living in a polygamous family,” as Haddad

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466 Ibid., 4:348.  
467 Yusuf ’Ali translation.  
However, based on ʿAbduh’s own commentary in his *tafsīr*, it appears that his experience as a judge in Egypt’s native courts and as a muftī most shaped his views on the evils of polygyny, as he describes them. Nonetheless, there is no question that his own childhood experiences would have also influenced his views, despite the fact that ʿAbduh refrains from bringing up his personal life in his commentary.

Reflecting the idea that society is ultimately comprised of families, ʿAbduh argues that it is impossible to raise an *umma* or community in which the practice of polygyny is prevalent. There can be no sense of order in a family in which there are two wives, ʿAbduh argues. In fact, the husband will cooperate with his wives in corrupting his own family, as if each of the family members is an enemy to the other. The children then adopt this animosity towards each other, which transfers from individuals to families and from families to society.

It is the animosity and hatred borne out of polygyny that ʿAbduh finds to be the most destructive of its ill effects. His career as a judge and mufti had given him a unique ‘insider’ perspective and disclosure of the details that happen in families due to polygyny. He lists the following types of cases that he has seen and heard of in courts due to polygyny: theft, lies, betrayal, forgery, adultery, and even murder. These types of cases have all actually occurred and are documented in the courts, he states. The types of murder include a son killing his father, a father killing his son, a husband killing his wife, and a wife killing her husband. All these cases resulting from polygyny would “make the skin of the believers shrivel,” he writes.

ʿAbduh then comes to his justification for the modern repeal of this institution. At the beginning of Islam, there were certain benefits to polygyny that no longer exist, and it did not

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470 *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 4:349.
471 Ibid.
472 This expression is similar to “sent chills down one’s spine.”
473 *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 4:349.
produce the harm that currently exists, 'Abduh states.\textsuperscript{474} In the past, the harm that a co-wife afflicted would only reach the other co-wife, whereas today it spreads to the rest of society. She breeds hatred of the other woman (and her children) into her own children, the father and the rest of the family. She convinces her husband to deprive the children of the other wife from their due rights and he obeys her “because of his stupidity,”\textsuperscript{475} 'Abduh argues.

Ironically, it appears as though 'Abduh puts most of the blame on the co-wife for the evils of polygyny. It is possible that 'Abduh’s passionate plea against the evils of polygyny and his diatribe against the ignorance of the co-wife partially stem from his own personal experiences with his mother’s co-wife and her children, as his reasoning evinces a subjective position. His diatribe on the co-wife emphasizes her ignorance of religious teachings, as she “knows nothing of the religion except for superstitions and misinformation, which she gets from others like her. Every book that has been revealed and every messenger that has been sent is disowned of her.\textsuperscript{476} This vehement railing against co-wives departs from 'Abduh’s general tone on gender.

This section ends with a plea to the Ḥanafī jurists to examine the problem of polygyny, because they possess legal authority and the laws of the land are according to their legal school, he says.\textsuperscript{477} To argue for the repeal of this institution, 'Abduh utilizes the classical legal concept of maṣlaḥa. 'Abduh is known for having revived the concept of maṣlaḥa as the legal basis for modern legal reforms.\textsuperscript{478} In his tafsīr of Q. 4:3, he writes that the Ḥanafī jurists cannot deny that the religion was sent for the welfare of people (li-маṣлаḥат al-nās) and that of its basic principles

\textsuperscript{474} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{475} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{476} Ibid. “منها يبرأ”
\textsuperscript{477} Ibid., 4:349-350.
is the prevention of harm and its reciprocation. He invokes the legal principle that averting corruption takes precedence over bringing benefit. When it becomes clear that a certain practice causes harm and corruption in a certain time period, which was not the case in an earlier time period, then “there is no doubt that it is obligatory to change the law and its implementation based on the current reality.”

Further, ‘Abduh states, when there is a reason to fear being unjust, then marrying more than one woman is absolutely prohibited (muḥarram qaṭ’ an).

2. Riḍā’s Fatwa

Riḍā includes two texts which he had previously written on the subject of polygyny in the Tafsīr al-Manār commentary on 4:3. The first of these texts is his response to a fatwa, and the second of these is a direct response to Lord Cromer, who brought up the issue of polygyny in an article published in the pro-British newspaper, al-Muqatṭam. Cromer’s article appears in al-Muqatṭam in 1906, a year after ‘Abduh’s death. Riḍā publishes Cromer’s entire article and his response to it in the tenth volume of al-Manār’s journal. The tone and reasoning of Riḍā’s attitude towards polygyny in his fatwa drastically differs from ‘Abduh’s tafsīr on polygyny.

The title of the fatwa itself is telling: “The Wisdom of Polygyny (Ḥikmat Taʿ addud al-Zawjāt).” As mentioned earlier, the petitioner of the fatwa is a Muslim medical student in the U.S., who frames his question in terms of a response to a Western audience. He writes, “Many American doctors and others ask me about this noble verse [4:3] … and they ask me, ‘How can a Muslim marry four women?’ I have responded to them to the extent of my understanding of this verse, in defense of my religion.” Riḍā turns ‘Abduh’s plea against polygyny to a defense of

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479 Tafsīr al-Manār, 4:350.
480 Ibid.
481 Ibid.
482 Al-Manār 10, issue 3 (May 1, 1907 – Rabīʾ al-ʾAwwal 12, 1325): 214-226.
483 Tafsīr al-Manār, 4:351.
484 Ibid., cited as originally published in vol. 7 of al-Manār Journal.
this institution, although he concludes with same premise that polygyny has brought much corruption to modern Muslim societies. Riḍā is well-aware of Western critiques of this practice, as he makes clear at the beginning of his response: “the majority of French find polygyny to be the greatest detraction [qādih] from Islam.” Therefore, he frames the discussion on polygyny in terms of its history and utility from the perspective of humanity, irrespective of religion.

The fatwa itself is eight pages long and goes into a long diatribe on the history of polygyny before Islam, the ‘nature’ of men and women, and women and men’s differing levels of independence and need for each other, among other issues. Interestingly, nearly six decades later, Quṭb mentions almost the same reasons that Riḍā cites here for the human need of polygyny. Riḍā provides six reasons that explicate the human need for and benefits of polygyny. First, he delves into the different nature of both sexes, about which “you who are working in the medical sciences are most aware.” He asserts that men and women have a different level of need for each other. There are few men who do not desire women, whereas there are many women who do not have a desire for men. If it were not for her desire for romance and to be loved, then she would not get married in the first place.

Second, he writes, the divine wisdom for each sex’s desire for the other is to preserve the human race, because it results in procreation. Assuming that both men and women marry at a similar age, an average of fifty years would be lost in which a woman could no longer bear children, if the husband could not marry a second wife. Riḍā’s tone in this section is very formulaic, devoid of the passion and opinion we witnessed in the first section of his tafsīr. He writes,

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485 Ibid.
486 Ibid.
If a man is not allowed to marry more than one woman, half of this man’s average lifetime in the *umma* is interrupted from procreation, which is the objective of marriage; [this is] if we suppose that the man marries a woman similar in age to him. And some men would lose more than fifty years [of procreation] if he marries someone who is older than him, and lived an average lifetime. Similarly, some men would lose less than that [fifty years] if he married someone younger than him. No matter the case, however, a portion of his lifetime would be lost [from the potential to procreate], even if he got married at the age of fifty to a woman who is fifteen years old, he would lose twenty five years [from procreation].

Indicative of Riḍā’s formulaic tone in this section, in which he engages in dialectic on the logical utility of polygyny from a subjective perspective, is the following observation that he provides. He writes that French scientists have made the observation that if we were to leave one hundred women with one man for only one year, it is possible for one hundred children to be born from one single lineage; however if were to leave one hundred men with one woman for a year, the greatest possible number of children that could be born from their lineage is only one child. It is even more probable that the woman bears no children since each man would corrupt the “harvest” of the other, he writes.

The third need for polygyny arises due to the fact that more female infants than male are born, on average, and that many men die due to wars. Societies then are afflicted with the problem of unmarried women who are unable to fulfill their natural desire to get married. This results in many social ills, which include women’s mental and health issues, their vulnerability in society, and their potential subjection to corruption and even prostitution. Riḍā continues to write that this problem of single women (due to a shortage of eligible men) has afflicted French society to the point that a group of researchers decided to look into this issue. It became clear to them that the only possible remedy for this social problem is allowing men to marry more than

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488 Ibid.
489 Ibid., 4:353.
490 Ibid.
one woman. What is rather astonishing, he writes, is that a few English female writers advocated this position in their articles. This is surprising, Riḍā states, because women have a natural aversion to polygamy and are more prone to “judging matters according to emotions and conscience rather than benefit (maṣlaḥa) and evidence (burḥān).”

As with the third reason, Riḍā offers a fourth explanation that attempts to disclose benefits for polygyny from a woman’s perspective. Let us imagine that each home is a small kingdom, he writes, and that the combination of homes comprises the larger kingdom. Women are administrators of these small kingdoms because “it is of the natural order (niẓām al-fiṭra) that women be in charge of their homes and that their work be confined to it, due to their natural weakness from doing other work and due to what hinders them [from such work], such as pregnancy, labor and raising children.” Therefore, women are financially dependent on men and also in need of domestic help in their homes. It is for women’s benefit, then, that there be many women in a home helping to maintain and cultivate it, Riḍā writes. He posits, “Should not human social systems, then, allow for men to marry more than one woman when the need arises and especially during times of war, which need men and leave many women without a [financial] patron or advocate?”

In providing a fifth reason for polygyny, Riḍā delves into the evolution of sexual relations in human history. There were no bonds of marriage that confined a single man to a single woman in early human history, he writes. Only as societies evolved, did humans slowly begin to impose certain restrictions on the relations between men and women. This began with

491 Ibid.
492 Ibid. Also, Riḍā mentions that he previously wrote about these English female writers’ positions in the journal, al-Manār, 4: 741. He also identifies these women in his response to Cromer in the journal, al-Manār 10, issue 3 (May 1907): 225.
494 Ibid., 4:354.
495 Ibid.
confining women of a tribe to the men of that tribe. Then it confined many women to one man, without limit to the number of women a man could take. Societies then evolved into another stage, in which the father became the pillar of the household and family. Accordingly, Riḍā writes, the French claim that the highest level of civilization is when one man became limited to one woman in the bonds of marriage. Although Riḍā concedes that this should be the natural state in marriage, he insists that the need for polygyny cannot be eradicated from societies. This stands in sharp contrast to ʿAbduh, who believed that the harm of polygyny clearly outweighed any benefit it could bring to modern society. Riḍā questions that a society could exist without needing polygyny in certain cases. He writes, “Let them [the French] then inform us, have men been satisfied with this specification to one woman and have they been convinced of monogamous marriages in any nation of nations that have existed until today? Does there exist in every 100,000 men in Europe, one man who does not have a sexual affair?”

Imposing monogamy on all men requires a certain level of discipline from the man, Riḍā describes, because it demands that the man be patient on many days in which his one wife cannot satisfy his sexual need. These days in which she cannot meet his sexual needs are the days of her menstruation, the days of heavy pregnancy, and post-natal bleeding. The least of these days are the days in which she is breast-feeding and the first and last days of her purity (non-menstrual cycle). It is unclear why Riḍā adds the days of breast-feeding and the beginning and end of her purity, but this could be due to many reasons, one of which is his own presumption that women are not interested in sexual relations during the days of breast-feeding, either due to fatigue, a low libido, or pre-occupation with her child. As for the beginning and ending days of her period,

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496 Ibid., 4:355.
497 Ibid., 4:356.
this could be due to the level of uncertainty involved in most legal definitions of ḥayḍ (menstruation), which vary according to schools and also vary from one cycle to the other.

The sixth reason Riḍā provides for the need of polygyny is the culmination of all the factors mentioned above. He places Islam’s qualified permission of polygyny in historical context. In pre-Islamic history, Riḍā writes, a man could marry many women without limit or restriction of fairness. Further, a man could have illicit sex with any slave woman and, rarely, with a free woman as well, if her husband gives her permission.⁴⁹⁸ Islam’s legislation forbade illicit sex upon men, women and even slaves. Therefore, it would be very difficult for men to accept Islam, considering this history, if they were not allowed to marry more than one wife, Riḍā reasons. Otherwise, illicit sex would have become permissible in Muslim lands, as it is currently allowed in French lands.⁴⁹⁹ A common line of argumentation in both modernist and Islamist discourse on polygyny is to assess the Islamic legislation on this institution in comparison to the free and unrestricted reality that existed prior to Islam.

Despite all of these needs, the height of civilization in societies is for marriages to be monogamous, Riḍā writes.⁵⁰⁰ For the sake of families’ happiness, monogamy is the ideal, as each spouse should offer the other the best one has to give, with sincerity, love, and harmony, he concludes. It is clear that Riḍā’s explanation of the logic of polygyny is framed as a response to Western criticism of the institution. This is one factor for the change in tone between the two sections. However, as illustrated earlier, Riḍā’s attitudes towards women clearly differed from ʿAbduh’s, which can best be characterized as sympathetic.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.
⁴⁹⁹ Tafsīr al-Manār, 3rd edition, ed. Rashīd Riḍā (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1368 AH/1948 CE), 4:357. The original fatwa was published in the monthly publication, al-Manār 7, issue 6 (Rabiʿ al-ʿAwwal 16, 1322- June 1, 1904): 231-238.
B. Quṭb: A Utilitarian Approach to polygyny

In sharp contrast to ʿAbduh, Quṭb’s tafsīr of verse 4:3 comes as a response to Muslim critics of the institution of polygyny. Unlike Riḍā, Quṭb’s discourse is not directed at Western criticism of Islam regarding polygyny, but rather, at Muslims who advocate its repeal or abolition. He writes,

It is important to explain the wisdom (ḥikma) and benefit of this license (polygyny) because in this day of ours, people think they know more than their Lord who created them, and claim for themselves insight into man’s life, his nature (fitra) and benefit (maṣlaḥa) above the insight of their Creator. They base their judgment in this matter and others according to their whims, desires, ignorance and blindness. As if the necessities and circumstances of today, which they realize and take into consideration, were not taken into consideration or calculation by God—His Majesty—when He legislated for mankind these legislations.  

By the time Quṭb was writing his tafsīr in the 1960s, the historical context had changed from what it was in the early twentieth century during ʿAbduh’s time, in that the earlier colonial critique of Islam’s positions on gender treatment had become internalized by many Arab, secular voices, especially among the modern-educated, upper-middle classes. Haddad describes the changing conditions of Arab societies regarding gender advocacy as follows:

Advocacy of Western values and norms became so pervasive that it fostered an atmosphere among elites in various Arab countries in which whatever pertained in [to] the West was perceived as superior to its Islamic counterpart. The ‘sorry state’ of Muslim countries and particularly the ‘unfortunate’ circumstances for women have been portrayed as due directly to the religion of Islam itself.  

Quṭb, then, is directly responding to these changing circumstances in Arab society, as he expresses dismay and alarm towards the internal critique of religion he witnesses around him. He writes that those who question the practicality or need of God’s legislation combine ignorance with impudence towards God, which amount to disbelief and misguidance. He then concludes

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501 Quṭb, Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur’ān, 1:578.
that those who slander God and his *manhaj* (system) in this way receive their wages from those who are most concerned with conspiring against this religion.\textsuperscript{503} Although it is unclear against whom in specific he directs his attack, he seems to be addressing the state-appointed muftīs, who have been viewed by Islamists as co-opted by the regime. There is no need to be apologetic about this, but instead, one needs to explain this license by God with clarity, ease and decisiveness, Quṭb writes.\textsuperscript{504}

Quṭb explains how this verse came as a restriction to existing practices. Islam did not institute this practice, Quṭb argues, but rather imposed constraints on it. To defend this position, he narrates three prophetic traditions in which the Prophet ordered two different men to choose four women of the many they had married and leave the rest. In one tradition, the man is identified as Ghaylān ibn Salama al-Thaqafī. When he became Muslim, he tells the Prophet he is married to ten women, to which the Prophet responds to choose only four. In the second tradition, the man, identified as ʿUmayra al-Asadī, became Muslim and mentioned to the Prophet that he was married to eighty women, and the Prophet gave the same response. In addition to restricting the number of women a man could marry at the same time, God also applied the condition of equal and just treatment, Quṭb argues; otherwise, one should marry only one.\textsuperscript{505}

Throughout his *tafsīr*, Quṭb refers to polygyny as a *rukḥṣa*, a concession or dispensation. Like Riḍā, he attempts to explain why the Qurʾan sanctioned such an institution as polygyny despite the restrictions it imposed on it. What is most interesting about Quṭb’s defense of this institution is that he proceeds to explain it on the basis of real-life biological and societal needs that exist, not on the basis that God allows it and that is enough for us. This seems to contradict, to some extent, earlier arguments made in *Milestones* that the human utility of God’s laws are

\textsuperscript{503} Quṭb, *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qurʾān*, 1:578.

\textsuperscript{504} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{505} Ibid.
irrelevant.\footnote{His writing in *Milestones* reflects his conviction in the futility of reasoned argumentation with those who are not already convinced. He writes: “Although it may seem very attractive to us to keep expounding on the beauties of the Islamic beliefs and system, we should not forget this fact: that Islam can never become a practical way of life or a dynamic movement through these means. We should also realize that this way of presenting Islam does not benefit anyone except those who are working for the Islamic movement, and even this group can benefit from it only to such an extent as corresponds with its stage of development” (*Milestones*, [Lahore: Kazi Publications, 2007], 41).} If God commanded or allowed for something to exist, that should be a sufficient reason to adhere to it. However, in his interpretation of verse 4:3, he seems to depart from that very argument he put forth earlier and argues for the qualified existence of polygyny on the basis of human and societal needs. He interprets this through the central framework of his *tafṣīr*, which is that Islam is a complete and perfect system in total sync with human nature. It does not legislate based on the conditions of a certain historical period, but legislates for all time periods, geographies, and people.\footnote{Quṭb, *Fī Žilāl al-Qurān*, 1:579.}

He identifies three different benefits of this institution. First, Quṭb notes that in many societies, past and present, there exist situations in which the number of women who are eligible for marriage exceeds the number of men in that category. Despite the variation in this gender disproportion in different societies, the ratio never exceeds four women to one man, Quṭb asserts. How then does society deal with this imbalance? Does it simply ignore and overlook it?\footnote{Ibid.} Quṭb then provides three possible scenarios in which societies could deal with the situation. First, each eligible man could marry one eligible woman. As for those women who cannot find partners, they will spend their lives never knowing a man. Second, each man could marry one woman in a healthy legitimate relationship, but then has an affair or short-term relationship with one or more woman who does not have a spouse. Third, either some or all of the righteous men, marry more
than one wife in broad daylight, not as a mistress or occasional partner in darkness and prohibition, he writes.\textsuperscript{509} He then continues to assess each of these scenarios.

Interestingly, in assessing the first possible scenario, in which some women will remain single their entire lives, Quṭb reflects a level of gender-consciousness or fluency with feminist discourse on such controversial issues. Women’s need for men, he acknowledges, is not necessarily financial. This stands in sharp contrast to the classical, pre-modern exegetical conception of marriage as a transaction of wealth for sex between a man and woman.\textsuperscript{510} In contrast, Quṭb acknowledges that women have sexual, emotional or spiritual needs. A woman could work and earn her own living, but this does not mean she no longer has a need for a partner. He then points out that when men work and earn their own living, this does not negate their need for a partner in life, so why would it negate a woman’s need for a partner? “Men and women are alike in this regard, because they descend from a single soul,” he writes.\textsuperscript{511} Referring to those who critique Islam for permitting polygyny, he writes, “Therefore, the issue is much deeper than what those superficial, pretentious, extremist people who are ignorant of humans’ innate nature think.”\textsuperscript{512}

The second scenario, in which men take on mistresses, conflicts with Islam, which is a religion of purity and morality. The third scenario, in which some men marry more than one wife, is indeed the most practical way to deal with the situation, Quṭb argues.\textsuperscript{513} Interestingly, he does not describe this situation as ideal and argues that “shallow idealism” is not the way one

\textsuperscript{509} Ibid., 1:579-580.
\textsuperscript{511} Quṭb, \textit{Fī Zīlā\textasciiacute;l al-Qur’ān}, 1:580.
\textsuperscript{512} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{513} Ibid.
deals with this type of social predicament. In this case, he presents Islam as a religion of practicality that deals with “man as he is, taking full account of his changing circumstances.”  

Like Riḍā’s fatwa, Quṭb identifies procreation as the second important reason for the restricted application of polygyny. In a very similar argument to Riḍā’s, he writes that a man’s fertility could extend to the age of 70, whereas a woman’s fertility usually ends around the age of 50. He then deduces that there is an average of twenty years in which a man can have children but his wife cannot have children. One of the purposes of marriage is “to promote life through procreation” and therefore, it would be unnatural to “prevent humanity from making use of man’s longer period of fertility.” Unlike the fatwa by Riḍā, though, Quṭb does not take into consideration the age difference that could exist between the husband and wife, which would presumably change the number of fertility years that would be wasted in a marriage. His argument also does not take into consideration the fact that many men die before women, thereby rendering men’s prolonged fertility irrelevant. Further, the argument rests on another faulty premise, which presumes that those men who have, presumably, been married to one woman for a number of years and who would have presumably begotten many children, will want to continue having children even after their wife reaches menopause.

In addition to the lost years of procreation, Quṭb describes a third and fourth situation related to procreation which could result in the need for polygyny. In the third situation, a wife might not be able to fulfill her husband’s sexual desire either due to illness or age. Interestingly, Quṭb does not resort to Riḍā’s argument that a woman’s libido is lower than a man’s and therefore he might need more than one woman to quench his desire. In this case of a woman’s illness or age, the husband and spouse do not want to divorce or separate. How then

514 Ibid.
515 Ibid.
516 Ibid.
should we deal with this situation, Quṭb questions? Again, he puts forth three possible scenarios, the first in which a man is rebuked for seeking to satisfy his “natural desires … We say to him: ‘Shame on you. This is unbefitting and does not accord with your wife’s rights and dignity.”517 In the second scenario, we let this man have illegitimate relationships with other women. In the third scenario, “which is the only one that satisfies the needs of human nature and fits with Islam’s moral code,” we allow him to marry another woman, without having to divorce his first wife.518

The third and last situation that Quṭb describes in which polygyny fulfills a human benefit is when a woman is barren. Interestingly, in this case, Quṭb poses only two possible scenarios, neither of which foresees the man as remaining with only his barren wife and coming to terms with not having children. In the two scenarios he describes, the first is that the husband divorces his barren wife to marry another one. The second is that he “maintains the companionship”519 of his first wife, and marries a second wife. In both situations, Quṭb attempts to assess the situation from the wife’s perspective. The first scenario, in which the husband divorces his barren wife for another woman, would be unfair to the first wife because “it is extremely unlikely that a woman known to be barren will find another husband.”520 In the second scenario, in which the man marries a second wife, Quṭb writes that “it is more likely that the barren wife will find fondness and comfort in [the presence of] young children, born to her husband by his second wife, who will fill the home with energy and delight, even though she may have some sadness because of her personal deprivation [i.e. not having children].”521

517 Ibid., 1:581.
518 Ibid.
519 Ibid.
520 Ibid.
521 Ibid.
Again, Quṭb attempts to assess the situation from the vantage point of the first wife, irrespective of the accuracy of this assessment. This stands in sharp contrast to most pre-modern classical exegesis on gender issues, which rarely, if ever, attempt to take the women’s perspective. As evident in his commentary on verse 2:228, Quṭb continues this thread throughout his *tafsīr*. This reflects what Haddad describes as Islamists’ head-on engagement with feminist discourse, in their effort to represent Islam as the best champion for women’s needs and rights. As Haddad writes,

> Islamism is represented as a divine system designed out of God’s mercy and compassion for women, with arguments similar to the following … whereas women in the West are cast away when their husbands seek mistresses or divorce them to marry new wives, Muslim women in polygamous marriage are guaranteed respect, equal treatment in love, as well as material support.522

This point also distinguishes Quṭb’s explanation of the limited necessity for polygyny from Riḍā’s explanation, in that Quṭb attempts to frame the license as one that is to women’s advantage, not necessarily to men’s. Whereas Riḍā finds polygyny to be a legitimate need when a man’s wife is unable to sustain his sexual appetite, Quṭb does not recognize an unfulfilled sexual appetite to be a legitimate reason for polygyny and instead, blames those men who use the license to seek sexual pleasure.

In contrast to ‘Abduh’s characterization of polygyny as one that ultimately brings harm and chaos to the family, Quṭb’s assessment of polygyny most echoes Riḍā’s fatwa. The qualified allowance for polygyny is the best guarantee to protect women’s rights in those scenarios that Quṭb describes. He writes, “The concession [of polygyny] fulfills the reality of the *fitra* and the reality of life and protects society from delinquencies … and the restriction [to be fair] protects

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522 Haddad, “Islam and Gender,” 22. Haddad’s use of the term Islamism in this context is not fully accurate, as Islamists represent Islam, not Islamism, as a divine system that is merciful to women. Further, while her description of their argument regarding polygamy is correct overall, they do not claim that men must treat them equally in his “love” for them. In fact, based on verse 4:129, they all argue that it is impossible to love both equally, but that one should treat them equally in all other things.
married life from chaos and disintegration and protects the women from oppression and injustice … and guarantees that justice be carried forth in necessary situations and difficult circumstances.”

Whereas ‘Abduh emphasizes the destructive and destabilizing effects of polygyny to a marriage, family and society overall, in Quṭb’s defense of the institution in certain circumstances, polygyny renders the exact opposite: justice and stability.

Nonetheless, Quṭb is well-aware of the destructive potential of polygyny and blames this on Muslim men’s abuse of this license. The blame should not be placed on Islam’s doorstep, Quṭb argues. “Anyone who realizes the spirit of Islam and its orientation would not say that polygyny is mandated for its own sake or that it is recommended; rather, it is justified due to human or social necessities, and must not be an incentive for animalistic pleasure,” Quṭb writes. Quṭb instead rebukes those men who abuse this “license” to satisfy their carnal desires and to move from one woman to the other the way a lover moves between mistresses. They create a harem out of this license, but this is not Islam’s problem nor do these people represent Islam, Quṭb writes. The real problem is that these people have become so distant from the religion and have not felt its pure and dignified breeze. The only remedy to the abuse of this license, then, is to call people to re-adopt Islam, its legislation and entire system. This is the only path towards reform, “not just in this aspect of life, but in its entire system,” Quṭb asserts, “because Islam is a complete system and does not function except as a comprehensive and complete system.”

Throughout Quṭb’s tafsīr is a diagnosis of society as having become distant from Islam’s pure teachings. While this may appear to resemble ‘Abduh’s arguments, there is an important

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523 Ibid., 1:581.
524 Ibid., 1:581-582.
525 Ibid., 1:582.
526 Ibid.
difference between them. This difference lies in Quṭb’s idealistic perception of what would ensue from a proper implementation of Islam as a complete system, whereas ʿAbduh reflects the realism of a jurist and judge who understands the inherent human limitations that would ensue from the implementation of a ‘divine’ system. The heights of perfection and civility to which Islam could carry human beings, in Quṭb’s eloquent description, become, in ʿAbduh’s thought, inevitably impeded by man’s imperfections in understanding and application. This streak of realism clearly distinguishes the two exegetes’ attitude in the way they assign blame to fellow Muslims.

C. Ibn ʿĀshūr: A Non-Polemical Approach to Polygyny

This scholar’s attitude and personal thoughts on polygyny remain an enigma. In 1956, when Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba signed into law the most radical family law reforms in the Arab world, Ibn ʿĀshūr stood by his side. One would imagine, then, that Ibn ʿĀshūr endorsed Bourguiba’s legal reforms, which outlawed polygyny among other measures. Nonetheless, unlike ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s exegesis on verse 4:3 reveals no attempt to establish the antiquity of polygyny and its potential harm or to call for its repeal. Rather, the tone of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s exegesis on this verse is tempered. It reveals no distress in respect to the existence of this institution or this verse. Whereas ʿAbduh argues against the modern application of polygyny due to the harm it yields, and Quṭb scathingly rebukes those who attempt to abolish polygyny, Ibn ʿĀshūr is thoroughly non-polemical in his approach to the issue of polygyny. As Basheer Nafi succinctly describes, in contrast to other influential exegetical works in the modern period,

528 Nafi, 12.
529 Article 18 of Tunisia’s 1956 Personal Status Law reads: “1) Polygyny is prohibited; 2) Any man who marries while he is already married before the bond of his previous marriage is dissolved shall be punished by one year in jail and by a fine in the amount of 240,000 francs or by one of the two penalties. This shall apply even if the new marriage is not contracted in accordance with the provisions of the law” (Welchman, 170).
**al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr** stands out as “one of the least ideologically constructed works of *tafsīr* in the twentieth century.” Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tempered exegesis on verse 4:3 in the midst of a climactic controversy on polygyny in Tunisia is one of the best examples of his *tafsīr*’s non-ideological commitment. It is for this reason that Ibn ʿĀshūr has been described as “a non-activist reformer, a somewhat detached intellectual.”

Some scholars have attempted to reconcile the seeming contradictions between Ibn ʿĀshūr’s political position as arguably one of Tunisia’s most influential scholars, and his intellectual thought. Nafi explains that Ibn ʿĀshūr’s “politically cautious and socially ambivalent” attitude is a result of the three spheres of influence which Ibn ʿĀshūr had to carefully navigate. These spheres of influence were the Zaytūna University, the institution of Tunisian ʿulama with which he associated until his last days; his family’s status and social prestige; “and the turbulent times of imperialism, modernisation and national independence.”

The Ibn ʿĀshūrs were “a highly privileged family whose social status and ties to the ʿulamā class were intertwined.” According to Nafi, although his privileged family background helped shape his career, it also limited his political choices, because maintaining these family privileges meant cooperating with the authorities in power, be they Ottoman, French, or Tunisian.

A more important reason for his implicit endorsement of controversial policies or reforms, such as the 1956 Personal Status Laws, I believe, was his national commitment to Tunisian autonomy. As J. N. D Anderson demonstrates, despite the controversy of the 1956 Personal Status Laws, scholars who endorsed this legislation, such as Ibn ʿĀshūr, recognized that

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530 Nafi, 20.
531 Ibid., 9.
532 Ibid.
533 Ibid., 24.
534 Ibid., 25.
535 Ibid.
it would unify the national courts in a way that would eliminate the colonial justification to intervene in the courts. Therefore, the context of colonialism and nationalism had a strong influence on Ibn ʿĀshūr’s political stances, in my assessment. His primary motive for cooperating with the political establishment was to safeguard the role of Sharīʿa as a source of legislation and litigation in Tunisia.

While this may explain his “politically cautious” positions, it does not explain his approach to Qur’anic exegesis, which is non-ideological, tempered and thoroughly grounded in the intellectual disciplines that, he believes, should be the ground spring of tafsīr proper. Rather, his intellectual thought, and specifically his approach to tafsīr, could best be understood as a reflection of an uninterrupted, continuous tradition of which Ibn ʿĀshūr is both an heir and transmitter, as elaborated on below in my analysis of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr of verse 4:3.

Produced at the end of his life, during which he had lost hope in the political and social aspirations of Islamic reform, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr reflects the vindication of classical, medieval methodological approaches to exegesis. It is an attempt, in my assessment, to counter the rupture of intellectual thought that Ibn ʿĀshūr witnessed over the course of the twentieth century. His long and productive life of ninety-four years gave him the advantage of hindsight unavailable to his reformist contemporaries such as Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935) and ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn Bādīs (1889-1940), a leader of the Islamic reform movement in Algeria and founder of the Association of Algerian Muslim ‘Ulama. As Nafi writes, Bourguiba’s radical reforms against Zaytūna University and certain Islamic precepts (i.e. fasting and ḥijāb) rendered “the whole reformist project in Tunisia … meaningless.” By the 1960s, in the last decade of his life, Ibn ʿĀshūr avoided all types of public involvement and instead, focused on writing and responding to

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537 Nafi, 12.
inquiries from within and outside Tunisia. As I submit in the previous chapter, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s retreating to the pen is an attempt to rise above existing conditions in his view that knowledge is the only medium that could rise above the confines of historical contingencies.

Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafsīr* of verse 4:3 brings renewed life to legal and philological debates that were presumably exhausted in the pre-modern period. As an example, he gives particular attention to an unresolved medieval debate as to whether the license to marry four is applicable to slave men or not. Ibn ʿĀshūr is well aware of the irrelevance of this debate to the modern Muslim world, which had officially banned slavery by the first half of the century. The importance of this question to Ibn ʿĀshūr lies in its methodological significance in principles of jurisprudence. The Ḥanafīs and Shāfīʿīs both took the position that slaves could not marry more than two women at most, whereas the Mālikīs saw in verse 4:3 a general ruling that applied equally to slave and free men. Ibn ʿĀshūr specifically engages al-Rāzī, who defends the Shāfīʿī position against the Mālikī position in his interpretation of this verse. The issue boils down to a methodological difference on whether the generality or specificity of a statement takes precedence. The Shāfīʿī is believed that the generality of a statement is not a proof in itself. When a contradiction occurs between a general statement and specific one, the latter takes precedence. Accordingly, the Shāfīʿīs took the position that since the latter part of verse 4:3 (“*but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with justice, then marry one—or those whom you rightfully possess*”) applies only to free men, then the rest of the verse equally applies only to free men. This is because a slave man cannot marry without the permission of his

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538 Ibid.
540 Al-Rāzī, 5:142.
master, and he does not have slave girls. The Mālikī response to this is that if there are two general independent clauses, then a restriction to the second clause does not apply to the first clause. Al-Rāzī goes on to explain the Shāfi‘ī response, which is that this verse came down in one mode or sequence (nasq). Therefore, when it becomes known that part of the verse is specific to free men, then it becomes clear that all of the verse must follow suit.541

Ibn ʿĀshūr does not mention this detail; rather, he suffices with mentioning the names of the Companions, Successors, and legal schools who took each of the two juristic positions.542 As with most of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s legal and theological engagements, he does not delve into the technicalities of the arguments or provide any context of the debate. His writing presumes the reader’s high level of acquired knowledge and familiarity with these issues. Due to the brevity of information he provides, it is clear that the significance of certain interjections will be lost upon some of his readers at various points, but Ibn ʿĀshūr’s objective is not to address the lowest common ratio of Muslim society. Rather, he viewed the objective of tafsīr as a purely intellectual endeavor at the highest caliber. In contrast to both ʿAbduh and Quṭb, Ibn ʿĀshūr is not writing his tafsīr for the masses, but for those who are specialized in its sciences.

As part of his partaking in an intellectual tradition, Ibn ʿĀshūr engages in other points of debate that one may argue are irrelevant or obsolete to the time period in which he lived. For example, he renews the medieval debate on whether the imperative verb “marry” in the verse indicates that marriage is mandatory upon Muslims. Al-Rāzī writes in his tafsīr that some jurists of the Ẓāhirī school took the position that marriage is mandatory based upon this verse. As I

541 Ibid.
542 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 4:226.
demonstrated above, by referencing al-Shāfiʿī’s counterargument to this, al-Rāzī concludes that getting married is not **mandūb**, a recommended act, let alone an obligatory one.\(^{543}\)

Ibn ʿĀshūr briefly brings up this issue, by writing that the imperative “marry” in verse 4:3 is not prescribing marriage because the verb is connected to the condition of fearing being unjust to orphans. Rather, Islam confirmed the pre-Islamic permissibility (**ibāḥa**) of marriage, with some restrictions, such as the restriction against marrying more than four, marrying women who were breastfed by the same wet-nurse or mother as the man, or not giving women their marital dower among others.\(^{544}\) Again, his attention to grammar has an important hermeneutic effect. Further, Ibn ʿĀshūr follows in the footsteps of other exegetical heavyweights like al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī to reject a deviant position in exegetical history which read in this verse a license to marry up to nine wives, by adding up the adjectives two, three, and four together and by rendering the conjunction “wa” to mean “and” instead of “or.”\(^{545}\) Those who advocated this opinion also pointed to the fact that the Prophet had married nine women as further evidence. Ibn ʿĀshūr displays great shock at this deviant interpretation and calls it an abominable ignorance of the Arabic language.\(^{546}\)

1. **Philology and the Meaning of Verse 4:3 for Ibn ʿĀshūr**

For Ibn ʿĀshūr, the deduction of the Qurʾan’s meaning must be governed by the dictates of philology. As such, Ibn ʿĀshūr interprets verse 4:3 within its syntactical structure. As mentioned earlier, the verse first begins with a dependent clause expressing a condition, the protasis (**ṣharṭ**), and then follows with a clause expressing the consequence, the apodosis (**jawāb**

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\(^{543}\) Al-Rāzī, 5.9:140.

\(^{544}\) Ibn ʿĀshūr, 4:224.

\(^{545}\) In response to those who consider the **wāw** to mean “and,” al-Rāzī responds, “the truth is that adding these numbers would amount to 18 [as opposed to 9], because God’s word **mathnā** does not only express the number two, but is an expression of two, two, and the same applies for the rest of the numbers,” (al-Rāzī, 5:142). See also al-Ṭabarī, 2:499-500.

\(^{546}\) Ibn ʿĀshūr, 4:225.
While there could be multiple meanings for this verse, those meanings must be consistent with its syntactical structure, Ibn Ṭāḥīth al-Bukhārī insists. There is a necessary relationship between fear of being unjust to orphans and the imperative to marry women, he writes. He points out that many scholars of the umma have failed to recognize the connection between these two clauses.

Of the four plausible interpretations that Ibn Ṭāḥīth mentions, he champions the meaning that he believes best strengthens the correlation between the dependent clause and its apodosis. This is the opinion that Ḥārithah provides in a narration from Sahih al-Bukhārī. Although she does not attribute this tradition to the Prophet, Ibn Ṭāḥīth writes that the context of her words indicate that this tradition is mawqūf; it stops short of the Prophet. Nonetheless, Ḥārithah would only have stated this based on her cognizance of the occasion of its revelation, Ibn Ṭāḥīth writes, which is why Bukhārī cites this tradition under marfu‘ ahādīth in his chapter on Tafsīr Sūrat al-Nisā’. In his introduction to this sūra, Ibn Ṭāḥīth cites a tradition from Ḥārithah in which she says, “Sūrat al-Baqara and Sūrat al-Nisā’ were not revealed except when I was with him [the Prophet].”

According to Ḥārithah’s narration on the meaning of verse 4:3, which I have previously discussed in the section on pre-modern exegetes, this verse addressed the legal guardians of orphans who were tempted to marry the orphans under their care due to their wealth and beauty, but were not willing to pay her a dower equal to what other men would pay her. Therefore, this verse indicates that these guardians should not marry those orphans and instead marry other

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547 The protasis is “If you fear being unjust towards orphans,” and the apodosis is “then marry those women made lawful to you, in twos, threes, or fours.”
548 Ibn Ṭāḥīth, 4:222.
549 See footnote no. 91 for the full text of the hadīth.
550 Ibn Ṭāḥīth, 4:222-3.
551 A narration attributed specifically to the Prophet (مَرْفُوْع)
552 Ibn Ṭāḥīth, 4:211.
women made lawful to them, as long as they can guarantee justice. The best meaning of this
verse is what ‘Ā’isha narrates in this tradition, Ibn ‘Āshūr writes. According to the
interpretation ‘Ā’isha provides, the connection between the conditional clause and its apodosis is
strongest. This meaning also illustrates the connection between this verse and the preceding
verse, both of which are safeguarding the financial rights of orphans, Ibn ‘Āshūr notes.
Whereas verse 4:2 protects orphan’s inheritance, verse 4:3 protects female orphans’ right to a
marital dowry equal to that of their peers. Interestingly, while the three pre-modern exegetes I
examined also connect verses 4:2 and 4:3, none of them connect them the way Ibn ‘Āshūr does,
which reflects his acumen and attention to detail.

Ultimately, Ibn ‘Āshūr writes that this verse is a warning to men not to use their blood
relations (with orphans) as an excuse to not give the full marital dowry they owe, just as they did
not use their blood relations as an excuse to marry them when they did not find them appealing
(due to little wealth or beauty). He bases this on the rest of the tradition by ‘Ā’isha, in which
she explains the occasion of revelation for verse 4:127. In this tradition, she states that God
forbade legal guardians from marrying orphans under their care when they are attracted to their
wealth and beauty due to the fact that they were disinclined to marry them when they were of
little wealth and beauty.

By paying attention to the function of the term “dhālika” at the end of verse 4:3, Ibn
‘Āshūr makes an indirect case for monogamy. This argument is completely grounded in the rules
of philology and is totally divorced of the passion and logical argumentation made by ‘Abduh

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553 Ibid., 4:223.
554 Ibid.
555 Ibid.
556 Ibn ‘Āshūr, 4:222.
seven decades earlier. Ibn ʿĀshūr pays considerable attention to the last phrase of the verse, “that will make it more likely that you do not commit injustice.” Ibn ʿĀshūr notes that the demonstrative pronoun, “that” (ism al-ishāra, “dhālika”), in this verse could refer to one of two phrases. It could either refer to the conditional clause, “if you fear that you will not be just to orphans,” or it could refer to the ruling, “therefore marry one or what your right hand possesses.” If it refers to the former, this means that the man should continue to decrease the number of women he marries until he no longer fears doing injustice to them.

However, if the pronoun “that” in the final phrase, “that will make it more likely that you do not commit injustice,” actually refers to “then marry one or what your right hand possesses,” then we have a strong case for monogamy here. While Ibn ʿĀshūr does not explicitly put it in these terms, he makes an argument that in the second position, this means that marrying one woman (or what your right hand possesses) will make it more likely that you do not commit injustice. He writes “this is because polygyny exposes men to committing injustice, no matter how much they attempt to be fair, because the soul has desires and faults.” Based on this meaning, this final statement then “makes desirable that men suffice with marrying one woman or have multiple female slaves, because it prevents the harm of injustice.” Here, Ibn ʿĀshūr specifically employs the legal concept of sadd al-dharīʿa, the notion of preventing the means to illegals ends. In this case, the prevention of harm would be in marrying one woman only or, as an alternative, have multiple slave women. For Ibn ʿĀshūr, the option between these two choices is mutually exclusive. One should either marry one wife or have slave women, but not both.

557 “ذَلِكَ أَدْنََ أَلاَّ تَعُولُواْ”
558 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 4:228.
559 Ibid.
560 Ibid.
2. Engaging with Modernity

Despite Ibn ʿĀshūr’s adherence to pre-modern classical exegetical methodologies, he in no way confines himself to the meanings produced by his predecessors. In one important departure from pre-modern exegetes, Ibn ʿĀshūr attempts to provide a utilitarian purpose to the Qur’an’s qualified sanction of polygyny. By looking for underlying reasons for this legislation, it is one of the few subtle reflections of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s engagement with the modern controversy regarding polygyny. On one of the rare occasions when Ibn ʿĀshūr appears to respond to critics of Islam, he writes,

There has never been in previous legislations or pre-Islamic Arabia a limit to the number of wives one could have. It has not been proven that Jesus had come with a limitation on marriages [one can enter], even if this is the illusion of some of our scholars like al-Qarāfī, and I do not consider it to be correct. Rather, it is Islam that imposed a limit [on simultaneous marriages one can enter].

A symptom of modern discourse on the practice of polygyny is the attempt to establish reasons for its permission in Islam, from the perspective of human welfare. Ibn ʿĀshūr reflects a limited engagement with modern discourse on the practice by attempting to find a taʿlīl for polygyny, which he identifies in terms of its overall benefit to society. This is not about individual cases, but about society as a whole. God has legislated polygamous marriage to the capable and just person for multiple benefits, he writes. He notes four of these benefits (maṣāliḥ): 1) it increases the size of the umma by increasing the number of infants born in it, because more marriages equal more children; 2) it enables society to financially maintain women whose population “is greater than the population of men in every nation,” a phenomenon he attributes to three reasons, which he identifies as 2a) a greater number of female births than male

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562 Ibid., 4:227.
563 Ibid., 4:226.
564 Ibid.
births, and 2b) men are exposed to wars and difficulties to which women are not, and 2c) women usually live longer than men; 3) since the sharīʿa forbids illicit sex, it offsets this restriction by allowing polygyny for those men who are naturally inclined to it (i.e. having multiple partners); and lastly, 4) it helps avoid divorce except if necessary.

Like both Riḍā and Quṭb, Ibn ṬĀshūr views procreation as an important reason for marriage that yields an ultimate benefit to society. This view on the importance of procreation leads Riḍā and Quṭb to argue that polygynous marriages are sometimes necessary due to the years of wasted fertility that would ensue after a man’s first wife reaches menopause. Ibn ṬĀshūr, however, makes no mention of a man’s lost years of fertility. Rather, in each contingency that Ibn ṬĀshūr identifies, he attempts to be as broad as possible so as to encapsulate what he considers to be the most probable cases.

As for the second reason he gives, this is about offsetting the male gender gap in society. Riḍā and Quṭb, like Ibn ṬĀshūr, also note that disproportionate number of women in Muslim societies in comparison to men. All three seem to take it for granted that Muslim societies have more women than men. Yet this assumption falters when tested against demographic data.

According to the UN Population Division, the human sex ratio (number of males per 100 females) in North Africa has been, on average, 100.75 between 1950-2005. This reflects an almost equal sex ratio, with the number of males actually slightly exceeding the number of females. This range has varied from 100.4, at its lowest peak in 2005 to 101.3 at its highest peak

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565 This includes Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, and the Western Sahara.
In 1990. It is interesting to note that in five and a half decades, this ratio never fell below 100.00.\textsuperscript{567}

Ibn ʿĀshūr’s third reason seems to echo Riḍā’s reasoning on men’s greater sexual propensity than women. In the fifth reason that Riḍā provides, which traces the evolution of human beings’ sexual and marital relations, he argues that it would have been very difficult for men to accept Islam, considering the lack of legislative restrictions on polygamy or illicit sex (zinā) in human history.\textsuperscript{568} While this may appear to mirror Ibn ʿĀshūr’s statement, Riḍā’s argument departs from Ibn ʿĀshūr’s in the way he continues to frame the argument. Riḍā considers the need for multiple partners from the perspective of individual males, who must patiently endure “winter days” while their wife goes through her menstrual cycle, labor, post-partum bleeding, and breastfeeding. On the other hand, Ibn ʿĀshūr considers this issue from the perspective of legislation’s function vis-à-vis society and the check-and-balance that religious legislation attempts to maintain between the restrictions and permissions that it imposes.

As for the last reason that Ibn ʿĀshūr identifies, one benefit of polygyny to human beings is that it comes as an alternative to divorce.\textsuperscript{569} As a jurist and muftī, Ibn ʿĀshūr was well aware of the harm that arbitrary divorce inflicted upon women. One of the important measures of the 1956 Personal Status Law, which Ibn ʿĀshūr appeared to endorse, was not just the outlawing of polygyny but restrictions on the practice of divorce. According to these reforms, men had to petition the court for a divorce, just as women did, and also had to pay compensation to their

\textsuperscript{567} Ibid. In the Middle East, between 1950-2005, the average sex ratio (male population per 100 female) has been 121.4, ranging from the lowest average of 98.2 in Turkey and highest average of 180.9 in Qatar (\textit{United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division}).

\textsuperscript{568} Riḍā, \textit{Tafsīr al-Manār}, 4:357. The original fatwa was published in the monthly publication, \textit{al-Manār} 7, issue 6 (Rabīʿ al-ʾAwwal 16, 1322- June 1, 1904): 231-238.

\textsuperscript{569} Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2:226.
wife for injury arising from the divorce.\textsuperscript{570} Although Ibn ʿĀshūr’s \textit{tafṣīr} of this verse avoids any
detail regarding the injuries of divorce, and he does not identify in which cases polygyny would
be a superior alternative, he finds polygyny to be a better than divorce in certain cases. Quṭb has
a similar argument, except that he specifically identifies these cases as being when a woman is
infertile or when she is unable to satisfy her husband’s desire due to illness or old age.\textsuperscript{571}

\section{VI. Conclusion}

For pre-modern exegetes, the central theme of verse 4:3 was about justice, based on the
wording of the verse. Despite the various interpretations that pre-modern exegetes like al-Ṭabarī,
al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Rāzī championed, they emphatically stated that verse 4:3, in one way or
another, mandated justice. According to al-Rāzī, it mandates justice by limiting the number of
wives a man could have until he could be certain that he will not be unjust to the orphans under
his care or to his wives.\textsuperscript{572} For al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī, this verse mandated men to fear
being unjust to women, just as they fear being unjust to orphans.\textsuperscript{573} The ability to carry out
justice rested upon individuals’ capacities; therefore, for some men, marrying only one wife or
sufficing with slave women was the only way they could be just. For other men, their ability to
be just was capped at two wives, for others, three, and for others, four.\textsuperscript{574} Four wives, however,
was the utmost limit one could have and still fulfill the mandate to be just. None of the pre-
modern exegetes entertained the idea that the institution of polygyny itself, under any
circumstance, could be unjust. A man’s simultaneous marriage to more than one woman was not

\begin{footnotes}
\item[570] Welchman, 186, 189.
\item[571] Quṭb, 1:580-581.
\item[572] Al-Rāzī, 5:9:140.
\item[573] Al-Ṭabarī, 2:497; al-Zamakhsharī, 1:361. Al-Zamakhsharī writes at the end of his interpretation of Q. 4:3, “فان الأمر
كله يدور مع العدل ، فانما وحده العدل يعليكم به” (“In fact, the entire matter revolves around justice, so wherever you
find justice, then you are enjoined to follow it”) (1:361).
\item[574] Al-Ṭabarī writes, “Marry either two if you can be safe from being unjust towards them in the rights that God has
given them upon you, or [marry] three, if you do not fear that, or [marry] four, if you are safe from this towards
them…and if you fear that you will not be just with one woman, then from what your right hand possesses,” (2:499-
500).
\end{footnotes}
inherently just or unjust; it all boiled down to individuals’ capacities and circumstances. Unlike the three modern exegetes, the pre-modern exegetes felt no need to defend or justify the existence of the institution of polygyny. This was, simply, a non-issue. Rather, the focus of their interpretations rested on the reasons that God limited the number of simultaneous marriages one could have to between one and four, not on why God allowed this practice to exist. This is entirely different than the way modern exegetes approached this verse.

This demonstrates that there is a particularity to modern exegetical approaches to gender issues in the Qur’an. The changes unleashed by modernity made gender, among other issues, of theoretical significance in Islamic discourse in a way that is not true of the pre-modern period. This finding bolsters the argument made by certain scholars like Aysha Hidayatullah that modern feminist criticism of the pre-modern exegetical tradition is flawed in that it projects “a historically specific (and at the same time theoretically unclear) sense of ‘gender justice’ onto the text … (and the exegetical tradition).”575 This is partly due to the fluidity of the term “gender justice,” which has evolved over time and continues to evolve. What constitutes justice? When does a certain practice or norm lend itself to justice or injustice? Both pre-modern and modern exegetes saw justice as the primary focus of verse 4:3. For pre-modern exegetes, justice was broadly defined as the fulfillment of an individual’s rights. If a man could fulfill the rights of the orphans under his legal care, he was just; if he could fulfill the rights of his wives, then he was just. If not, then he was unjust. The rights of each individual over another were pre-defined by Islamic law at this time, despite the diversity of legal opinions.

The modern period signals an important change in the way exegetes approached gender and specifically the issue of polygyny. In the modern exegetes’ interpretation of verse 4:3, they all point out that this verse came as a remedy to a social ailment that existed in 7th century

575 Hidayatullah, Feminist Edges of the Qur’an, 150. Parenthetical citations are hers.
Arabia, which was injustice to orphans and women in various forms. By pointing out the verse’s objective, they all affirm that the verse did not institute polygyny, which existed prior to Islam, but imposed limits and restrictions upon this pre-existing institution. All three modern exegetes attempt to demonstrate why the Qur’an’s sanction of polygyny, under certain conditions, can be of utilitarian and human benefit to society. In specific, Riḍā, Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr provide reasons or scenarios for which polygyny yields certain advantages over monogamy. These advantages are not identified through Qur’anic evidence, but rather, through their employment of both logic and personal opinion. Therefore, while modern exegetes also subscribed to the pre-modern conception of justice as a fulfillment of one’s rights, they were also partially informed by their own sensibilities of justice. The reasons they each identify for the “benefit” or “wisdom” of polygyny underscores their belief that polygyny is a truer fulfillment of justice than monogamy in these cases.

Writing in the early twentieth century at the height of colonial criticism against Islam’s position on gender, ʿAbduh takes a strong stance against polygyny. He does so not by arguing that this institution is ancient or out of sync with modernity, but by arguing that it inflicts harm upon individuals, families and society at large, which was not the case in early Islam. By the end of his tafsīr on verse 4:3, ʿAbduh calls upon contemporaneous Ḥanafī jurists to look into reforming the laws on polygyny. There were definite attempts to reform the law after ʿAbduh’s death, based on his recommendations, but these efforts did not succeed. Interestingly, Riḍā, the editor and co-author of Tafsīr al-Manār, decides to affix his fatwa on polygyny to the tafsīr of verse 4:3. For the most part, his eight-page fatwa is a defense of the institution and points out six reasons for the benefit of polygyny, under certain circumstances, for human society.

576 Ahmed, 175.
Although he ultimately states that monogamy should be the standard, his fatwa appears to overturn ‘Abduh’s position on the issue.

By the mid-twentieth century, during the period in which Quṭb was writing, secular, indigenous voices had internalized much of the earlier colonial rhetoric on gender, which depicted Muslim society’s advancement through the abandonment of religious traditions. Quṭb therefore is responding to indigenous secular criticism of polygyny, which he sees as an attack against Islam and Divine legislation. Therefore, although Quṭb does not promote polygyny, he attempts, like Riḍā before him, to establish reasons for the necessities and benefits of polygyny. These benefits are not based on Qur’anic evidence, but based on arguments of human welfare and societies’ needs. Unlike Riḍā, however, Quṭb frames the reasons that necessitate polygyny as ultimately to women’s advantage. In most of the reasons he identifies, he argues that polygyny is the better alternative for women, not for men, in certain scenarios. This reflects what historians like Yvonne Haddad have noted to be Islamists’ “head-on” confrontation with feminist discourse, in which they depict Islam as a better fulfillment of feminist aspiration than man-made ideologies.

Whereas ‘Abduh and Quṭb both take a strong polemical stance in regards to polygyny, Ibn ʿĀshūr displays an impassioned, tempered analysis of this verse that is primarily based on philological and legal arguments. However, Ibn ʿĀshūr displays a limited engagement with modern discourse on the practice by affirming that Islam is the first legislation to impose any limitations and restrictions on the practice of polygyny. No previous legislation before Islam had imposed a limit on polygyny, he argues. Second, he attempts to establish reasons for the necessity of this institution that are based on human welfare and needs. These reasons are

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577 Ibid., 128-129.
578 Haddad, 20-23.
579 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 4:227.
described in broad and general terms, reflecting that Islam’s allowance of the practice takes into consideration societies overall. His approach to this verse is consistent with his approach throughout his *tafṣīr*, which is that meanings are ultimately deduced by language, its sciences and its subtleties. Therefore, the syntactical structure of the verse naturally imposes restrictions on the types of meanings one could deduce from this verse. Further, the last phrase in the verse is an indicant to Ibn ʿĀshūr that marriage to one woman or having slave women is the best way to ensure that injustice is not committed towards women. As Nafī writes,

> If the *Tafsīr al-Manār* of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā, published early in the twentieth century, was the first significant work of *tafṣīr* to reflect the impact of modernity on Muslim comprehension of the Qur'an, *al-Taḥrīr wa'l-tanwīr* represents the persistence of classicism, but is at the same time both an internalisation of, and response to, modernity.\(^\text{580}\)

Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafṣīr* straddles a nuanced position between engaging modernity to some extent, yet being firmly grounded in classical methodologies of *tafṣīr*.

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CHAPTER FIVE: PRE-MODERN AND MODERN EXEGESIS OF VERSE 4:34

I. Verse 4:34

“Men are [qawwāmūn] over women with what God has favored some over others and with what they (men) spend out of their wealth. Therefore, righteous women are devoted and guard the unseen as God has guarded (it). As for those (women) whose nushūz you fear, admonish them, avoid them in their beds and hit them. But if they obey you, then seek nothing against them. Behold, God is most High and Great.”

This verse establishes a procedure of conflict resolution within a marriage, when the cause of discord is specifically a wife’s nushūz. The first part of the verse consists of two descriptive statements, whereas the second part consists of two prescriptive statements. The first descriptive statement is that men are qawwāmūn over women due to [bi-mā]: 1) with what [bi-mā] God prefers some over others, and 2) what men spend of their wealth. Although the attached pronoun suffixes in first part of the verse are gender-neutral, all the pre-modern exegetes interpreted this phrase as gender specific. As I demonstrate below, some exegetes contemplated why this phrase was left gender-neutral when it applied specifically to men’s faḍl over women (based on their preferred interpretation). They concluded that God left this phrase gender-neutral to match the gender-neutrality of the phrase in verse 4:32, which ordains men and women not to covet those things with which God has “preferred some of you over others of you.”

The second descriptive statement is that righteous women are qānitāt and guard the unseen as God has guarded it. I leave the term qānitāt here in its Arabic original, due to the interpretive choice that would underlie any translation. As Chaudhry demonstrates, for the most

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581 Qur’an, 4:34. Author’s translation.
582 I leave this term in the Arabic form due to the difference of opinion on its meaning, which would render any translation to inevitably become an interpretation.
583 ِ"ما فَضَّلَ اللّهُ بِهِ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ" َ ʿAbduh makes this point (Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:68). Al-Rāzī and Ibn ʿĀshūr, among others, view verse 4:34 as an extension of verse 4:32 with the same occasion of revelation. Al-Rāzī clarifies that accordingly, God’s preference of some over others refers to men’s greater share in inheritance, but this is due to the fact that they pay woman their mahr and financial provisions, so the inequality balances out to the point that “it is as if there is no faḍl whatsoever” (Al-Rāzī, [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990], 5:71).
part, pre-modern exegetes defined *qānitāt* as women who are obedient to God and their husbands. Hence, in exegetical commentary, this definition of righteous women became juxtaposed with women guilty of *nushūz*. If righteous women are obedient to their husbands, then *nāshiz* women are therefore disobedient to their husbands. The division of women into these two categories, righteous versus *nāshiz*, continued into the modern period. The precise definition of *nushūz*, however, changed slightly with modern exegetes.

The first prescriptive statement in the verse establishes a procedure for dealing with wives in a state of *nushūz*. According to a face-value interpretation, husbands are first advised to counsel their wives, then to abandon them sexually and third, to “hit them.” The second prescriptive statement is a conditional one, ordering men *not* to take a means against women (to hurt them) if they comply.

This chapter primarily focuses on the range of exegetical interpretations on men’s *qiwāma*, women’s *nushūz* and the imperative statement “hit them” (with an attached feminine suffix – *damīr mu’annath muttaṣil*). I maintain the Arabic wording of the terms *qiwāma* and *nushūz* because of the controversy and variations of the precise meaning of those terms. As for hitting women, I translate this term because none of the exegetes examined produce a different lexical meaning than the obvious one; instead they imposed limits and constraints to this procedure as I describe below.

My selection verse of 4:34 was motivated by two factors. First, it is relevant to the primary question that underlies modern debates on gender and Islam, which is whether the Qur’an is a patriarchal or egalitarian text. This verse has come to occupy central importance, among other verses, in the modern debate on this question. For example, Kecia Ali writes that

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584 Ayesha Siddiqua Chaudhry, “Wife-Beating in the Pre-Modern Islamic Tradition: An Inter-Disciplinary Study of Ḥadīth, Qur’anic Exegesis and Islamic Jurisprudence” (Phd Diss., New York University, 2009), 171, 185.
verses 4:34 and 2:228 are “notoriously difficult verses for exegetes concerned with gender justice and equality.” As my chapter will demonstrate, the “difficulty” of dealing with this verse is particular to the modern period, in which religious texts are measured against modern notions of gender equality and gender justice that are lacking in preciseness. As Hidayatullah mentions, what gender justice constitutes is still vaguely defined, and evolving over time. Does sexual differentiation mean inequality? How does one understand the Qur’an’s prescription of different treatment for men and women in certain cases? Verse 4:34 becomes central in this discussion because of the concepts it introduces regarding a husband’s qiwāma over his wife, the rights entailed with qiwāma, a wife’s nushūz and the steps a husband should take to rectify his wife’s nushūz, which suggests “hitting” as a last resort.

Second, the verse itself leaves the notion of men’s qiwāma and the preference of “some over others” as unspecific. One function of exegesis as a genre, then, was to add flesh to the barebones of the verse, by making specific what was left as unspecific. Exegetes’ attempts to identify the reasons for men’s qiwāma, and the indicators of men’s preference over women naturally lent itself towards an exegesis that was partially informed by the exegetes’ own sensibilities and conceptions of gender differences. Whereas pre-modern exegesis took on a more legalistic tone with verses that were more legalistic in nature, such as verse 4:35, they took on a more instinctive tone with verses on social gender roles. This observation reflects the facts that one’s selection of verses to examine will affect the interpretive results one finds, and also that there is a life-relation between the exegete and the subject matter of the text. As Asma

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585 Kecia Ali, Sexual Ethics and Islam, 123.
586 Aysha Hidayatullah, Feminist Edges of the Qur’an, 151.
Barlas notes, “it … is impossible not to bring to one’s reading sensibilities shaped by existing ideas, debates, concerns and anxieties.”

The hermeneuts agree that the exegete is not a tabula rasa. He brings with him a whole set of pre-understandings and pre-suppositions to the text. According to Netton, interpretive differences demonstrate that texts “can be read differently according to the different conditioning and cultures of authors or readers, not to mention differences in education, prejudice and a vast variety of other areas.” The new ways in which modern exegetes interpret verse 4:34 in comparison to pre-modern exegetes evince the influence of their socio-cultural and political realities on their interpretations, just as it did for pre-modern exegetes. As mentioned earlier, the question of gender in the modern Muslim world was reflective of a larger ideological debate on the intrinsic merits of Islam and its compatibility with modernity. Barlas’ proposed method of examining the extra-textual context of Qur’anic interpretation, then, is critical for a better understanding of the various interpretations rendered by different scholars in different social, historical and theological milieus.

II. Significance of Qiwāma, Nushūz, and Wa-ḍribūhunna

The concept of qiwāma takes central importance in modern scholarship on the Qur’an’s gender paradigm. Most pre-modern exegetes defined qiwāma as men’s leadership and authority in the family. Embedded in this definition among pre-modern exegetes was the husband’s right to be obeyed. This is where the modern exegetes signaled a departure from

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590 A thorough discussion on pre-modern exegetical interpretations of qiwāma can be found in the third chapter of Karen Bauer’s dissertation, “Room for Interpretation.”
591 Chaudhry, 125, 147-8,
classical interpretations. The discourse on men’s right to be obeyed is diminished or eliminated among the three modern exegetes in their interpretations of qiwâma.

Since the three steps outlined in verse 4:34 are to be applied to a wife only in a state of nushūz, how, then, an exegete defined nushūz was critical for the restriction or expansion of the verse’s application. As I will demonstrate below, exegetes derived a broad range of meanings for the term nushūz. For the most part, women’s nushūz is grounded in the concept of spousal defiance or disobedience for pre-modern exegetes.592 Men’s nushūz, which is mentioned in the same sūra (4:128), is instead interpreted as hatred, cruelty, or the sexual abandonment of women. The notion of men’s defiance or disobedience makes no appearance in the pre-modern exegesis on 4:128 and this meaning is instead applied exclusively to women’s nushūz.

Among the three modern exegetes I compare, nushūz takes on a different meaning. Interestingly, Ibn ʿĀshūr is the only exegete of all the pre-modern and modern exegetes analyzed who applies a consistent interpretation of nushūz for men and women. He takes the most gender-neutral position by defining women’s nushūz similarly to how exegetes interpreted men’s nushūz in verse 4:128, which is as hatred or repulsion towards the other spouse. Ibn ʿĀshūr further notes that women could manifest nushūz for many reasons, one of which is the husband’s bad character towards his wife, an all too common phenomenon, he writes.593 ʿAbduh and Quṭb’s concepts of nushūz are based on the idea of a woman’s disobedience of her husband, but Quṭb adds a psychological dimension to the definition of nushūz by viewing it as a form of psychological or mental perversion, without specifying what this perversion might look like. Aside from this perspective, there is not much new in Quṭb’s interpretation of the concepts in this verse. What renders his tafsîr unique is rather the commentary that surrounds his

592 Chaudhry, 172.
593 Ibn ʿĀshūr, al-Taḥrîr wal-Tanwîr, 5:41.
interpretation of the actual verse. He explains at length the institution of family in Islam, and
interprets the legislation in 4:34 as part of the constitution that governs the Islamic family, which
he regards as the most critical institution of those that exist, because it ultimately produces
human beings.\textsuperscript{594}

As early as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), pre-modern exegetes reflected a general discomfort
with the idea that a man could hit his wife without any restriction or qualification. Most pre-
modern exegetes attempted to qualify the verse’s third injunction ‘to hit’ women who were in a
state of nushūz. As Ayesha Chaudhry demonstrates in her exhaustive analysis of pre-modern
exegeses of Q. 4:34, pre-modern exegetes in general attempted to mitigate the husband’s alleged
right to beat his nāšīz wife by imposing a set of criteria and procedural limitations.\textsuperscript{595} While
none of the classical exegetes argued that it was impermissible for a husband to discipline his
wife, a few of them argued that it was preferred that a husband not hit his wife. According to
Chaudhry, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was one of the major proponents for this position, which he
based on al-Shāfiʿī’s legal opinion that although hitting was permitted, it was not preferred.\textsuperscript{596}
The earlier Mālikī exegete Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148) also took this position, but
based his opinion on that of ʿAṭāʿ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 115/733), who determined that disciplining
wives, even when they are guilty of nushūz, is reprehensible (makrūh).\textsuperscript{597} This statement by
ʿAṭāʿ emerges in the modern period as the basis for new interpretation in Ibn ʿĀshūr’s tafsīr.

In the modern period, exegetes advance the restrictive interpretation of the injunction to
hit. Ibn ʿĀshūr, who comes out strongest in this interpretation, relies on both ʿAṭāʿ’ s statement as
well as grammatical analysis to establish that men should not hit their wives. While Ibn ʿĀshūr’s

\textsuperscript{594} Quṭb, ʿīlāl al-Qurʾān, 2:650.
\textsuperscript{595} Chaudhry, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{596} Ibid., 281.
\textsuperscript{597} Ibid., 287-289.
exegesis reflects a measured and tempered tone, he clearly attempts to reconcile the outward
meaning of the phrase “wa-dribūhunna” with what he believes is its true intent. He suggests that
this injunction does not address husbands, but, in fact, addresses the legal authorities (wulāt al-
umūr).

ʿAbduh and Riḍā’s exegesis on verse 4:34 also advances this restrictive interpretation
by stating that men should refrain from hitting their wives, because the best of men do not hit
their wives, regardless of the situation.

III. Development of the Concept of Qiwāma Among Pre-Modern Exegetes

The gradual expansion of the concept of “qiwāma” becomes most evident through a
chronological reading of the classical exegeses. Although Karen Bauer’s dissertation offers the
most thorough analysis of pre-modern exegetes on qiwāma, I suffice here with my analysis of
five important classical exegetes: al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143), al-Rāzī
(d. 606/1209), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), al-Bayḍāwī (d. 691/1292), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 773/1371).

I briefly cite these classical exegetical positions only to demonstrate how and where ʿAbduh,
Riḍā, Ibn ʿĀshūr and Quṭb’s works signal a variation or continuation of pre-modern exegetical
commentary. Due to the modern exegetical focus of this chapter, I cannot conduct as
comprehensive a critique of pre-modern exegeses as a more exhaustive project would allow, but
I will suffice with briefly illustrating the general dilemmas they create. The trends I identify
among these five exegetes are consistent with Bauer’s and Chaudhry’s findings across the
historical spectrum, except where otherwise noted.

A careful examination of al-Ṭabarī’s language reveals that his interpretation of qiwāma is
embedded in legal concepts. For example, he identifies three responsibilities in return for which
men are given qiwāma, all of which are women’s legal rights in a marriage: 1) men pay their

598 He concedes that the addressee (mukhāṭab) could be the husband in all the injunctions of the verse, but leans
towards the opinion that it does not exclusively address the husband. It is for this latter opinion that he provides the
most evidence.
marriage dower, 2) men provide financial maintenance, and 3) men fulfill women’s provisions. He then writes, “For this reason, they became protectors over them, commanding them in their [wives’] matters that God has relegated to the husbands (wa-li-dhālika šārū qawwāman ‘alayhinna, nāfidhi al-amr ‘alayhinna fī ma ja‘ala Allāhu ilayhim min umūrihinna).”599 Al-Ṭabarī constricts a husband’s authority to the rights that God grants a husband over a wife, which Islamic jurisprudence had delineated by this time, and nothing more. It becomes implicit in al-Ṭabarī’s language that a wife’s obedience to her husband is in the realm of her legal responsibilities to him. Thus for al-Ṭabarī, the function of qiwāma is the husband’s authority to force his wife to fulfill her responsibilities to him.

In defining the concept of qiwāma, al-Zamakhsharī eliminates al-Ṭabarī’s constriction that qiwāma is enforceable in matters of legal rights and responsibilities. Al-Zamakhsharī writes that a husband’s authority over his wife is similar to that of a governor over his subjects.600 He commands and prohibits. Men have this authority, according to al-Zamakhsharī, because God has given them merit over women. For al-Zamakhsharī, this is evidence that leadership is earned by merit, not taken by force or subjugation (qahr).601

Al-Rāzī, who represents Ash’arism, the mainstream opposition to al-Zamakhsharī’s Muʿtazili thought, also expands the definition of qiwāma relative to al-Ṭabarī. Whereas al-Ṭabarī had stated that men’s leadership over their wives was confined to the realm of men’s legal rights over women, for al-Rāzī, men’s leadership is broader. He writes, “It is as if God made the man a leader or commander (amīr) over his wife and the executor of her rights.”602 On one hand, al-

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600 Al-Zamakhsharī, 1:390.
601 Ibid.
Rāzī views the function of *qiwāma* as men’s fulfillment of women’s rights, rather than the opposite. On the other hand, he also sees this *qiwāma* as men’s authority to discipline and reprimand their wives.\(^{603}\)

Ibn Kathīr’s interpretation represents the apex of the concept of *qiwāma* in the spectrum of exegetical positions surveyed. Besides summarizing the views of his colleagues that a husband holds the authority to lead, discipline, and preside over his wife, he introduces the idea that men are ontologically better than women. It is no longer a matter of God preferring one over the other in certain respects, but a matter of one sex being innately better than the other. In his interpretation of “with what God has preferred some over others (*bi-mā faḍḍala Allāhu baʿḍahum ṣalā baʿd*),” he writes, “This is because men are preferable [afḍal]\(^{604}\) to women, and the man is better [khayr] than the woman.”\(^{605}\) Further, he writes, “For the man is better than the woman in his essence [*fal-rajul afḍal min al-marʿa fī nafsihi*]”.\(^{606}\) For Ibn Kathīr, men’s greater virtue or preference over women is the reason that men have been chosen over women to be prophets and lead nations.\(^{607}\) To support this, he inserts a prophetic tradition that a people ruled by a woman will never succeed, thereby creating a link between a wife’s role to be led in the domestic sphere and her role to be led in the public sphere.\(^{608}\) Despite Ibn Kathīr’s introduction of men’s innate preference over women, like al-Ṭabarī, he still confines women’s obedience to men to the realm of her legal responsibilities. He writes, “She should obey him in whichever

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\(^{603}\) Ibid.

\(^{604}\) He could also mean *afḍal* as men having more virtues than women.

\(^{605}\) Ibn Kathīr, 1:653.

\(^{606}\) Ibid.

\(^{607}\) Ibid.

\(^{608}\) Ibid. Ibn Kathīr cites the *ḥadīth* as from al-Bukhārī, on the authority of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakra from his father, “*lan yaflaḥ qawmun walaū amrahum imraʿ tan*” (1:653).
matters that God has commanded her to obey him. And her obedience to him is to be good to his family and guard his wealth.”

Al-Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, and al-Rāzī all attempt to explain why God gave men guardianship over women. As the Qurʾan itself does not disclose any reasons beyond “due to that which God has favored some more than others and because they (men) spend out of their wealth,” the exegetes provide justifications based on their own reasoning. These justifications are primarily a combination of physical qualities and legal distinctions that the Sharīʿa makes between men and women. By pointing to legal distinctions between men and women as a sign of men’s preference over women, they conferred upon these legal rulings a gender bias that is not inherent to the ruling itself. This step, taken by these three pre-modern exegetes, reinforced a paradigm of male preference as the basis for these rulings. For example, al-Zamakhsharī writes,

“And it has been mentioned that [the reasons] for men’s favoring are [as follows]: intellect, determination, resolve, strength, writing—for the majority—, chivalry, and archery; further, among them are prophets and scholars; the great imāmate [head of state] and small imāmate [leader of prayer], jihād, adhān [call to prayer], the Friday sermon, iʿtikāf [spending a continuous number of days in seclusion at the mosque], takbīrāt al-tashrīq [chanting ‘God is Great’ during ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā prayers], witnessing in cases of hudūd [fixed penalties] and qisāṣ [retribution], a prerogative and increase in inheritance, beauty, dividing the war booty, guardianship in marriage, divorce and the right to return, 610 polygyny, and to men belongs the family name; and they are the ones with beards and turbans.”

Interestingly, although al-Zamakhsharī does not cite any named authorities to support his position, al-Bayḍāwī and al-Rāzī reproduce his reasoning by specifying the same qualities as indicators of God’s favoring men over women. Al-Bayḍāwī adds to these reasons men’s “perfect

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609 Ibn Kathīr, 1:653.
610 A husband can take his wife back during her waiting period after he divorces her, unless it is the third consecutive divorce.
611 Al-Zamakhsharī, 1:390-1.
mind and good management skills." Similarly, al-Rāzī lists the same attributes al-Zamakhshārī mentions verbatim and adds to it:

And know that men’s favoring over women occurs through several facets; some are real qualities (ṣifāt ḥaqīqīyya), and some are religious mandates. As for the real qualities, know that real merits can be traced to two matters: knowledge and ability. And there is no doubt that men’s intellect and knowledge is greater and there is no doubt that their ability to perform arduous tasks is more complete.⁶¹³

In deducing these reasons for men’s preference over women, the exegetes do not cite any evidence for their conclusions. In their attempt to find reasons for men’s qiwāma over women, beyond what the verse explicitly stated, the exegetes clearly evinced their own reasoning as to why and how men are qawwamūn over women. This illustrates the fact that, in certain respects, pre-modern exegetes were influenced by their own socio-cultural understanding of gender and gender roles in their interpretation of this verse.

IV. Modern Exegesis on Qiwāma

A. ‘Abduh and Riḍā

Throughout Tafsīr al-Manār, Riḍā supplements ‘Abduh’s words with thorough citations, clarifications, and his own exegetical commentary. When it comes to gender issues, Riḍā appears at times to take his teacher’s discourse on women in a different direction. The difference between ‘Abduh and Riḍā’s thought is a product of at least two factors, namely their overall approaches

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⁶¹² al-Bayḍāwī, Anwār Al-Tanzīl Wa-Asrār Al-Ta’wil, 1:213.
⁶¹³ Al-Rāzī continues to write, “And for these two reasons, men have an advantage over women in rationality (‘aql), prudence (ḥazm), strength (quwwa), writing (in the majority of cases - horseback riding, shooting, in that men are prophets and are learned (‘ulamā’), in that they have the greater and lesser imamate, jihād, calling to prayer, delivering the Friday sermon, spending the night in the mosque, witnessing in cases of ḥudūd and qiṣāṣ, maintenance in marriages according to Shāfi’, more of a share in inheritance and more men inherit than women do, in the blood price in cases of murder and crimes, in shares, governance in marriage, divorce, return, number of wives, and that lineage passes through the male line. All of these factors indicate men’s advantage over women,” (al-Rāzī, 5.10:71-72). I use Karen Bauer’s translation for this paragraph. See Bauer, 139.
to the modern challenges facing Muslim society, and the influence of each exegete’s own paradigm on gender issues.

‘Abduh and Riḍā present distinct perspectives on how to reconcile Islam with the demands of modernity. ‘Abduh, for the most part, wants to demonstrate that Islam intrinsically possesses the principles and values that are characteristic of modern civilization, whereas Riḍā’s discourse may be seen as more defensive. In his apologetics regarding these practices, Riḍā usually concludes with a statement to the effect of, “Don’t tell me that what you practice in Europe is superior to Islam,” and points to injustices in Europe, whether it be domestic violence or illicit extra-marital affairs. Instead of attempting to clarify those seemingly controversial aspects of the Qur’ān related to women, such as polygyny and wife-beating, Riḍā’s discourse ends up being a defense of these institutions. Whether Riḍā personally believed in the efficacy of these practices or whether he took this defensive position as a result of Western criticism is a question that requires further research.

The two exegetes also diverge in their terminology and ideas on gender. ‘Abduh tends to take a more nuanced approach to gender matters, stressing the fact that men and women share the same origin, are created for the same purpose, and are equally rewarded and punished before God. He also tends to emphasize gentle and fair treatment to women. Riḍā appears to focus more on the differences between men and women, not their similarities. When it comes to verse 4:34, however, both exegetes tend to describe men and women’s differences as innate, not only functional. Riḍā still takes a more conservative position than his teacher regarding women’s role in the public sphere. He refers to pregnancy, labor, and child-rearing as women’s “natural work” in his interpretations of verses 4:34 and 4:3 on polygyny. He further describes women’s subservience to men as part of their fitra. Yet these traditional and conservative views are
packaged in terminology that is unique to the modern period, in their characterization as beneficial to women.

Despite the repetition of certain pre-modern exegetical interpretations, Riḍā and ‘Abduh’s definition of *qwāma* is most notably different from pre-modern exegetes in its lack of reference to women’s obedience to men. Riḍā defines *qwāma* as “men’s *qiyyām* over women to protect, take care of, and be a guardian to them and fulfill their needs.”⁶¹⁴ ‘Abduh’s commentary on *qwāma* reflects careful and deliberate wording to preempt abuse against women. ‘Abduh defines *qwāma* as men’s leadership over women in such a way that women still possess their own agency and free will. He clearly states, “This does not mean that the one being led (*al-marūs*) is forced and deprived of will or that she does not take action except by the leader’s direction.”⁶¹⁵ Reflecting a legalistic approach, he writes that, rather, this means the women take care of the home and do not leave their husbands except with their approval, even if it is to visit relatives. It also means that the husband spends on his wife and provides for her an allowance, be it daily, monthly or annually.⁶¹⁶

Riḍā and ‘Abduh’s attitudes on gender converge and diverge in certain respects. For the most part, ‘Abduh and Riḍā both held that the reasons for men’s *qwāma* over women falls under two categories: 1) intrinsic and 2) acquired. The emphasis for both, however, is on men’s intrinsic qualifications to be the leader of the household. From the moment of creation, men were preferred over women by having greater capacity and strength, Riḍā writes. Therefore, the variation in men and women’s responsibilities and in legal rulings pertaining to them is due to the variation in their capacities and capabilities.⁶¹⁷ Despite ‘Abduh’s earlier legalistic

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⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 5:68.
⁶¹⁶ Ibid.
⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 5:67.
introduction to qiwāma, his discourse shifts when he goes on to explain how God has preferred men over women. In all creation, even animals, the male species is more complete, stronger, and more beautiful. Commenting on his own statement, ʿAbduh writes, “one might find it strange that I refer to the man as more beautiful than the woman, but by this I mean, he is more beautiful because he is of greater perfection and completion in his creation.”⁶¹⁸ He then refers to those animals in which the male species is better, such as the rooster and hen, the ram and the ewe, and the lion and lioness. An outgrowth of men’s perfection in creation is a strong intellect and a precision in analyzing issues and their purposes [ghāyātiḥā]. Their beards and moustaches are indications of the beauty and perfection of their creation, ʿAbduh writes, which is why the bald man is considered deficient in creation and he wishes that a remedy existed to treat his baldness.⁶¹⁹

Like some pre-modern exegetes and his teacher, Riḍā asserts that men’s preference over women is intrinsic to their fiṭra. However, he takes issue with pre-modern exegetes’ depiction of legal rulings as indicators of men’s preference or superiority. Whereas some exegetes, like al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī, viewed male-specific legal rulings as a sign of men’s tafḍīl, Riḍā argues that this is not the case. Riḍā writes, “the first thing which the majority of well-known exegetes mention regarding this tafḍīl is [men’s] prophethood, the greater imāmate [of a state] and smaller imāmate [of prayer], and the implementation of rituals like adhān [call to prayer], iqāma [second call to prayer moments after the adhān], Friday sermon, and others.”⁶²⁰ The reason men have these legal responsibilities is because they have a greater capacity to fulfill

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⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 5:69.
⁶¹⁹ Ibid.
⁶²⁰ Ibid., 5:70.
them and because they do not have other work that could pose a distraction, Riḍā writes. Yet these are not the reasons for men’s qiwāma, Riḍā contends, because even if God were to make these legal rituals applicable to women as well, this would not preclude men from being qawwāmūn over women. If women were to lead the Friday sermon, call the adhān, and lead the prayer, this would not negate men’s qiwāma over them, according to Riḍā.

Further, Riḍā states that verse 4:34 differs from 4:32 in that the terms “men” and “women” refer to the general sex and does not apply to every single man and every single woman. This is clear because one may find a woman who surpasses her husband in knowledge, work, physical composition, and capacity to earn, Riḍā writes. ‘Abduh and Riḍā agree that the second reason for men’s qiwāma over women, based on a direct reading of the verse, is due to what they spend of their wealth on women. Men’s fiṭra makes them more suited at earning than women and therefore, they are the ones ordained with the responsibility to spend on women, ‘Abduh writes.

A characteristic of modernist discourse is the attempt to couch one’s terminology in egalitarian and progressive language. ‘Abduh and Riḍā’s discourse on gender, in some cases implicitly and others explicitly, serves to offset Western criticism of Islam’s treatment of women, which had reached a climax in early twentieth century Egyptian society. ‘Abduh takes note of the gender-neutrality of the Qur’anic expression “ba’ḍahum ‘alā ba’ḍ,” which could have been gender-specific, he writes, such as “bi-ma faḍallahun ‘alayhinna” or “bi-tafdīlihim ‘alayhinna.” The reason this expression is left as gender-neutral, as is the case with 4:32, is to

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621 He most likely is juxtaposing this to women’s potential distractions such as pregnancy, labor, child-rearing and menstruation.
622 Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:70.
623 Ibid.
624 Ibid., 5:69.
625 Ibid., 5:70.
indicate that men and women are of one essence. He writes that men are from women just as women are from men in that they constitute parts of one body. The husband is like the head to the body, whereas the wife is like the rest of the body, ʿAbduh states.\textsuperscript{626} Riḍā adds to this that this does not mean that the husband can wrong his wife due to the fadl of his strength, nor should the woman feel that her husband’s fadl is a burden \emph{[an tastathqil faḍlāhu]} or diminishes her ability, because it is not shameful if a person’s head is preferable to his hand or that his heart is more honorable than his stomach.\textsuperscript{627} He continues with the metaphor of the body to describe men’s \textit{qiwāma} as beneficial to both genders. When certain parts of the body are preferred and are made to lead other parts, this is for the ultimate benefit of the entire body and yields no harm to any part of it, Riḍā describes.\textsuperscript{628}

ʿAbduh and Riḍā’s discussion of men’s \textit{qiwāma} is ultimately packaged as beneficial to women and society at large. This ‘packaging’ is where their commentary most differs from pre-modern exegetical commentary on the verse. The Sharīʿa honors women and holds them in high esteem, Riḍā argues, which is why it grants women financial compensation for men’s \textit{qiwāma} over them, whereas in other countries, women do not receive financial compensation but rather, give the man a marital gift in order to be under his wing of leadership. The fact that God compensates women financially for being under the wing of men’s leadership is a testimony to the Sharīʿa’s honoring of women, Riḍā writes.\textsuperscript{629} ʿAbduh and Riḍā’s exegesis on \textit{qiwāma} clearly reflects a level of gender-consciousness not present among pre-modern exegetes. The particularity of this discourse to the modern period demonstrates how the issue of gender in the Qur’an took on a new level of significance among modern exegetes.

\textsuperscript{626} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{627} Ibid., 5:68-69.
\textsuperscript{628} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{629} Ibid., 5:67-68.
B. Quṭb on Qiwāma

Whereas the pre-modern exegetes conceived of marriage in terms of a contractual relationship between a man and woman, in the modern period, exegetes like Quṭb interpret the verses on marriage through the lens of the family as the basic, social unit of society. The term ‘āʿila does not make one appearance in the Qurʾan’s 6,236 verses, yet Quṭb proceeds to interpret verses on marriage through this conception of the “family” as the basic unit of society. Verses on marriage coalesce together in Quṭb’s tafsīr to form the Islamic concept of al-nizām al-ʿāʿilī, the familial system. There is genealogy to this discourse in the modern period, as Mervat Hatem illustrates. Islamist figures like Zaynab al-Ghāzalī (1917-2005) and Shaykh Muḥammad Metwalī al-Shaʿrawī (1911-1998) began a conscious use of the family institution to redefine the private and public roles of men and women.630 As Hatem describes, they sought to make the very modern (middle-class) nuclear family also Islamic.

Quṭb interprets the concept of qiwāma through the prism of the “institution of the family” in Islam. The constitution for this family institution is based on specific Qurʾānic legislation on marriage, which Quṭb identifies as verses in chapters 2, 4, 24, 33, 65 and 66.631 In Quṭb’s framing of this family institution, God distributes the responsibilities in life based on each of the sex’s capabilities and natural dispositions. According to the Islamic order, each human being is created with certain natural capacities, qualifications and predispositions, which differ for men and women, Quṭb describes.632 These differences lie in men and women’s impulses and dispositions. He describes women as being of gentle nature, quick to react, and instinctively

631 Quṭb, 2:649.
632 Ibid., 2:650.
responsive to children’s needs without needing much thought or deliberation. These intrinsic qualities make her fit for a certain role in life, Quṭb describes, which is that of a caretaker. On the other hand, he describes men as rough and slower to react. They reflect and deliberate before acting and responding, unlike women. From the beginning of human history, when men needed to hunt, to the ever-present need to fight to protect their wife and children, men needed to deliberate every step they took, he writes.

Like ʿAbduh and Riḍā, the concept of fiṭra takes central importance in Quṭb’s interpretation of qiwāma. For the most part, Quṭb spends considerable effort explaining why God gave men qiwāma, rather than actually explaining what this qiwāma means or entails. While the fiṭra becomes the basis for why God delegates qiwāma to men, Quṭb’s description of this fiṭra is clearly based on his own attitudes and beliefs on gender, rather than any concrete Qur’anic, legal or scientific evidence. There is a certain subjectivity to the notion that men have qiwāma because they are more “reflective,” while women are more “impulsive.” As was the case with pre-modern exegetes, the attempt by modern exegetes such as ʿAbduh, Riḍā, and Quṭb to explain why men have been given qiwāma leads to a rather subjective analysis of gender.

Nonetheless, as with most of Quṭb’s discourse on gender, the delegation of qiwāma to men is depicted as ultimately for the benefit of women and humanity. He writes, “God, glorified be He, does not wish any injustice to any of His creation. He prepares and makes one qualified for a specific task, and endows one with the necessary qualifications to excel in this task.” Accordingly, Quṭb argues it would be unfair and unjust to burden one of two people with a task they are unprepared or unqualified to perform. Since women are the only ones who can bear

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633 Ibid.
634 Ibid., 2:651.
635 Ibid.
636 Ibid., 2:650-1.
637 Ibid., 2:650.
children, it would be unfair to also task them with being in charge of the family household. He writes,

> If institutions which are of much less significance and value, like financial, trade or manufacturing institutions, delegate their affairs to the more qualified of potential candidates, then it is of greater priority for the family institution to follow this principle, as it produces the most valuable components of this universe, the human component.⁶³⁸

Most of Quṭb’s commentary on this first descriptive statement functions as a justification for why God delegated *qiwāma* to men, *rather* than an explanation of what *qiwāma* actually means. His commentary on *qiwāma* is void of technicalities and what it mandates for each spouse in terms of rights and responsibilities in a marriage. When Quṭb defines *qiwāma*, he does so in very elusive terms. He describes men’s *qiwāma* as “being in charge of the family,” running its affairs, earning a living for the family, taking care of family finances and having “overall authority.”⁶³⁹ Whether or not Quṭb intends this, the contours of *qiwāma* are so elusively drawn that its specific shapes and shades are left open to the reader to decide and implement. What does it mean for a husband to be “in charge” of his family? Does it mean he makes all decisions on the family’s behalf? Does it mean he makes decisions that immediately affect the family’s well-being and future? What are the boundaries of men’s *qiwāma* over women? Does the husband have the right to prevent his wife from pursuing an education or working outside the home, or even deciding which places she frequents? These questions are left unanswered in Quṭb’s *tafsīr*, which describes the Qur’ān’s treatment of gender in euphemistic terms.

An underlying principle in Quṭb’s *tafsīr* is that Islam represents a divine system unrivaled by any man-made system. As mentioned in chapter two, the tragedy that has befallen Muslims in the modern period is their failure to implement this divine system in its entirety, according to

⁶³⁸ Ibid.
⁶³⁹ Ibid., 2:651.
Quṭb, and therefore has steeped it into a jāhiliyya worse than pre-Islamic jāhiliyya. This underlying aspect of Quṭb’s thought also informs his approach to verse 4:34. Ultimately, regardless of the justifications he makes for men’s qiwāma, in his view, this division of roles according to each sex’s natural disposition and qualifications is reflective of a divine plan. He writes,

This is a very serious matter that cannot be left to human beings to determine according to their whims or to arbitrarily decide. When is it left to them and their whims [to determine] in old and modern jāhiliyyas, humanity itself is threatened at its core and in the survival of its human qualities upon which life proceeds and which distinguishes human beings [from other species].”

C. Ibn ‘Āshūr on Qiwāma

While consistent in form with pre-modern exegetical commentaries of the likes of al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī, the exegesis of Ibn ‘Āshūr reflects a significant difference in content. Ibn ‘Āshūr structures his interpretation in the same fashion as philology-based exegeses by first mentioning the etymological roots of a word, its morphological structure, and its historical usage by citing poetry for evidence where appropriate, and then pointing out the grammatical possibilities of a word and the variations in meaning that these grammatical possibilities could render. Yet in content, as we will see in his analysis of verse 4:34, Ibn ‘Āshūr’s tafsīr marks an original and unique approach in the meanings it conveys.

In a sharp departure from the pre-modern exegetes, Ibn ‘Āshūr interprets qiwāma as men’s functional role, not as their ontological superiority. Similarly, he does not read into this verse an explanation for why certain legal rulings apply to men to the exclusion of women. Rather, he interprets qiwāma as men’s responsibility to protect women, defend them, and provide for them financially. Men’s tafḍīl (preference) over women, writes Ibn ‘Āshūr, are those

640 Ibid.
natural qualities men possess that establish women’s need for men to defend and protect them for their own survival. Based on Ibn ʿĀshūr’s assessment, these natural qualities appear to be expressions of men’s biological strength. Further, in contrast to ʿAbduh and Riḍā, Ibn ʿĀshūr does not view men’s ability to make a living as based on ontological sexual differences or because men are better suited to provide, but rather, because this has become the historical norm for societies across the centuries. From early history, men earned through hunting, agriculture, raids, and war booty. In the modern period, men’s sources of earning have expanded to include commerce, real-estate, and construction, among others. Women may earn a living or be independently wealthy, but this is rare, at least relative to men’s work, Ibn ʿĀshūr writes. Interestingly, Ibn ʿĀshūr makes no value judgment on women working outside the home, as Quṭb does in his exegesis of 33:33, nor does he make a polemical argument regarding men’s innate ability to earn a living, as do ʿAbduh and Riḍā. Rather, he writes that men’s financial maintenance of women is a historical norm that has been established throughout generations, which is why the verse puts the verb in past tense, “wa-bi-mā anfaqū min amwālihim” (“and due to what they spent of their wealth”).

V. A Righteous Woman versus A Nāshiz Woman

Pre-modern exegetes read in verse 4:34 a description of two types of wives. Wives were either righteous or nāshiz. The two key qualities of righteous women, based on the Qur’anic text, is that they be “qānitāt” and “protectors of what God would have them protect in the absence [of their husbands] (ḥāfiẓāt li-l-ghayb bi-mā ḥafiza Allāh).” As Ayesha Chaudhry illustrates in her pre-modern exegetical analysis of this verse, there tended to be a range of interpretive meaning.

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642 Ibid., 39.
643 Ibid.
644 Quṭb, 5:2860.
645 Ibn ʿAshūr, 5:38.
regarding the definition of qānitāt. While all pre-modern exegetes defined qānitāt as obedient, there was some discrepancy regarding to whom this obedience was owed. While the earliest exegetes limited this obedience to God, exegetes after al-Ṭabarī expanded its meaning to apply to husbands. As Chaudhry writes,

Exegetes made the need for wives to be obedient to their husbands a corollary of husbands’ qiwāmah over their wives … Wifely obedience to God and husbands was so intertwined that some exegetes described wifely obedience as ‘obedience to God with respect to their husbands (al-maṭī‘at li-llāh fī azwājihinna).’

Among the modern exegetes, Riḍā, in his edits to Tafsīr al-Manār, is the only one who contends that qānitāt means obedience to God and husbands. In a similar vein to his exegesis on 2:228, he qualifies women’s obedience to men as bil-ma rūf. He does not elaborate on what this qualification implies in his tafsīr of this verse; however, in his tafsīr of Q. 2:228, he defines bil-ma rūf as being according to societal norms and customs, as long as they do not clash with the restrictions and obligations of Sharī’a. Accordingly, even if jurists do not consider housework her legal responsibility, she should do this according to customs and norms, and can request domestic help if necessary, Riḍā writes.

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646 As examples of this, Chaudhry cites, “Al-Bayḍāwī (d. 691/1292) characterized wifely obedience as “qānitāt: obedient to God by upholding the rights of husbands (muṭī‘at li-llāh qāʾimāt bi-ḥuqūq l-azwāj),” (Chaudhry, 264). Emphasizing the importance of wives being obedient to their husbands, Ibn Kathīr wrote, When a woman obeys her husband in everything that he desires from her, from that which is permitted from him by God, then he should not find a means against her, he should not hit her or abandon her,” (Chaudhry, 151, citing Al-Bayḍāwī, Anwār, 1:85 and Ibn Kathīr, al-Tafsīr al-ʿAzīm, 1:601-603).


648 While it is possible that these may be ‘Abduh’s words, they appear more likely to be Riḍā’s edits, due to the citation of aḥādīth and exegeses that directly follow this opinion. Second, ‘Abduh’s words are usually prefaced with “qāla al-ustādh al-imām,” which is not the case in this example. Third, this position is consistent with Riḍā’s tafsīr of verse 2:228.

649 Tafsīr al-Manār, 2:378. He writes, “...والآية تدل على اعتبار الدين في حقوق كل من الزوجين على الآخر ما لم يحل العرف حراماً أو ..."”

650 After citing a hadīth in which the Prophet instructed his daughter Fāṭima to serve her home (“فإن النبي صلى الله عليه ‘..."” Abduh then writes, this is the division of labor according to the fiṭra, that the wife
to whom this obedience is owed. Based on the rest of his commentary, however, it appears most likely that this obedience is due to husbands. He defines qānitāt as obedient (muṭīʿāt) and argues that the point is not to be resentfully obedient, but to be willfully obedient out of love, desire and guidance. Both ʿAbduh and Quṭb point out that husbands have no right to discipline righteous wives, a position held by some previous exegetes.

Ibn ʿĀshūr, on the other hand, in a decisive stroke, interprets qānitāt as obedient to God. In a sharp departure from the exegetical norm, which Chaudhry describes, Ibn ʿĀshūr rejects the idea that qunūt signals obedience to husbands by constricting the definitions of qānitāt as “obedient to God” and qunūt as “worshipping God.” By disentangling obedience to God from obedience to husbands, Ibn ʿĀshūr appears to revive a rare opinion in the history of the genre. Chaudhry identifies only one rare opinion in the pre-modern exegetical tradition in which qunūt was described as devoutness in prayer. While this varies from Ibn ʿĀshūr’s interpretation of qunūt as the worship of God, both interpretations reinforce the idea that qunūt signals devotion to God, not husbands. This is an opinion that Ibn ʿAtiyya had attributed to al-Zajjāj. According to Ibn ʿAtiyya, al-Zajjāj interpreted “qānitāt” as women who were “devout in prayer.” He cites this opinion only to reject it and affirm that qānitāt “referred to wives who were ‘obedient to their husbands or to God with respect to their husbands’.” As Chaudhry points out, al-Zajjāj

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651 Quṭb, 2:652.
652 In regards to the Qur’anic phrase “And if they obey you, do not seek a way against them,” ʿAbduh writes “it is understood from this that men have no authority over righteous women even in terms of giving guidance or admonishing (waʿz), which is even more so the case regarding sexual abandonment (hajr) and hitting,” v. 5, 76.
653 As an example, Ibn Kathīr wrote, “When a woman obeys her husband in everything that he desires from her, from that which is permitted from him by God, then he should not find a means against her, he should not hit her or abandon her,” (al-Tafsīr al-ʿAzīm, 1:655). He mentions this in his exegesis of the last portion of Q. 4:34 which reads, “If they obey you, do not seek a means against them.” See Chaudhry, 151.
654 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 5:40.
655 Chaudhry, 158.
656 Ibid.
did not actually take this position in his *tafsīr, Maʿānī l-Qurʾān*, in which case, it is possible that Ibn ʿAṭiyyah was referring to a work by al-Zajjāj that is no longer extant.  

VI. Pre-Modern Exegesis on “And those [fem.] whose *nushūz* you fear”

There were four primary meanings that pre-modern exegetes deduced for women’s *nushūz*. The most common primary meaning was disobedience to the husband. This interpretation was based on reports by Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d.150/767), Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687-8), and presumably, ‘Aṭā’ b. Abī Rabāḥ (d. 115/733) and al-Suddī (d. 127-8/744-5). Exegetes who took this position were al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), al-Rāzī, al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480), Ibn Kathīr, al-Khāzin al-Baghdādī (d. 741/1341), and others. Since righteous women are obedient to their husbands, at least in regards to their legal responsibilities at minimum, it logically followed that women who were *nāshiz* were disobedient to their husbands, according to most pre-modern exegetes. As Chaudhry discusses,

> Although Q. 4:34 did not define the specific characteristics of recalcitrant wives, exegetes used the definition of righteous wives as a negative definition for recalcitrant wives. Since righteous wives were characterized by their obedience to their husbands when their husbands were present, recalcitrant wives were broadly defined as wives who were disobedient.

The three other most commonly cited opinions were that *nushūz* amounted to rising above the husband, sexual disobedience, or hatred towards the husbands. In most instances, however,

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657 Ibid. She writes, Al-Zajjāj actually took a position similar to the larger interpretive tradition in that righteous women are *qānitāt* who “uphold the rights of their husbands” (Al-Zajjāj, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, 2:48).

658 Bauer, *Room for Interpretation*, 155-156; Chaudhry, 180. Chaudhry writes, “Some exegetes used “disobedience” as a general synonym for *nushūz*, without specifying particular acts of disobedience that could qualify as *nushūz*. Such exegetes simply replaced ‘*nushūzahunna*’ with ‘*ʿisyānahunna*’” (188-9).

659 Chaudhry writes that “Al-Jaṣṣāṣ noted that this was also the definition of *nushūz* according to ‘Aṭā’ b. Abī Rabāḥ (d. 115/733) and al-Suddī (d. 127-8/744-5)” (189).

660 Chaudhry, 171.
exegetes correlated these first two opinions with the notion of a wife’s disobedience to her husband.\footnote{Ibid., 193. She explains how many exegetes, such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Sulamī, al-Bayḍāwī and al-Nasafī (d. 710/1310) connected the idea of a wife’s disobedience to her rising against her husband.}

It was only the last opinion, the idea of a wife hating or detesting her husband, which offered a gender-neutral interpretation that could balance the gender hierarchy, as Chaudhry also deduces.\footnote{“The interpretation of nushūz as hate seems inherently to open the possibility of a gender-neutral interpretation since hatred is not, by definition, hierarchical,” Chaudhry writes (196).} The interpretation of women’s nushūz as hatred or repugnance towards the other spouse is significant because it parallels a common exegetical interpretation for men’s nushūz, mentioned in the same chapter, ninety-four verses later. Therefore, it is the only interpretation of those cited by pre-modern exegetes regarding women’s nushūz that equally applied to men in their interpretations of verse 4:128. In contrast, disobedience and sexual disobedience make no appearance as possible meanings for men’s nushūz. The most commonly cited definitions for men’s nushūz were 1) acting superior to the wife, 2) treating the wife with cruelty or hatred, or 3) abandoning her physically or financially.\footnote{Al-Ṭabarī, 3:44. Al-Ṭabarī mentions all three reasons. Al-Zamakhsharī defines men’s nushūz as being harsh towards his wife by depriving her of sexual intercourse, financial provision, love and mercy, which should be between a man and woman, and that he harms her for a reason or hits her (1:442). For al-Rāzī, “a man’s nushūz against his wife’s rights is that he abandons her [yuʿrid anhā], frowns in her face, does not have intercourse with her and behaves ill towards her [yusīʿushratahā]” (6.11:52). Ibn Kathīr defines men’s nushūz as his repulsion from his wife (1:747).} Although the notion of a man acting superior to his wife parallels the pre-modern exegetical notion of a woman rising against husband [iḥrifā′], the difference is that the latter opinion was grounded in the idea of wifely disobedience, as Chaudhry illustrates.\footnote{Chaudhry, 211.}

The interpretation of men’s nushūz as sexually abandoning his wife seems to correspond to the interpretation of women’s nushūz as her refusal to have sexual intercourse with her husband. The fundamental difference, however, is in the terminology used to express both
actions. For the pre-modern exegetes, a woman’s refusal to have sexual relations with her husband amounts to disobedience on her part.\textsuperscript{665} However, a man’s refusal to have sexual relations with his wife amounts to cruelty and a negligence of her rights on his part.\textsuperscript{666} The same action is an act of disobedience for one spouse, but an act of cruelty or abandonment by the other. It is most plausible that what underlies this discrepancy in meaning is the legal opinion held by jurists that it is a wife’s legal responsibility not to sexually refuse her husband.

The significance of the meaning that exegetes gave to nushūz lies in its rendering applicable the disciplinary measures ordained in this verse. Exegetes agreed that only nāshiz women could be disciplined accordingly, based on the direct wording of the text. Therefore, the meanings rendered for nushūz either broadened or narrowed the applicability of this verse. Most definitions of women’s nushūz offered by pre-modern and modern exegetes were rather broad. It was in jurists’ legal discussions that specific manifestations of nushūz and legal consequences were identified. More significant is Chaudhry’s finding that in contrast to the exegetical literature, legal texts (specifically Ḥanafī) discussed women’s nushūz in correlation to men’s nushūz. Unlike the majority of exegetes, jurists considered verses 4:34 and 4:128 in tandem when establishing the definitions of nushūz.\textsuperscript{667} As many of the exegetes were also jurists, one reason for this difference could be the different nature and function of each genre. Whereas one objective of jurists is to establish legal definitions in concrete terms, the objective of exegetes, on the other hand, is to explicate the meaning of terms as they relate to the verse at hand.

\textsuperscript{665} Ibid., 193. She cites al-Ṭabarī as one of the exegetes for whom “the two notions of a wife rising against her husband and rising against him in bed were intertwined.”
\textsuperscript{666} Al-Zamakhsharī, 1:432-3; al-Rāzī, 6.11:52.
\textsuperscript{667} Chaudhry, 314.
VII. Modern Exegetes on Nushūz

Consistent with pre-modern exegetes, ‘Abduh defines nushūz as elevation, *irtifā’*. One of its indicators is a woman’s negligence of her husband’s rights, because in doing so, she has elevated herself above him and attempted to rise above her leader, ‘Abduh writes.\(^{668}\) While this definition of nushūz reflects a form of wifely disobedience, it is constricted to the legal sphere. ‘Abduh clearly indicates that this negligence is towards the husband’s rights over his wife. This parallels a report that al-Ṭabarī cites by Ibn ‘Abbās, in which he describes a woman’s nushūz as “reneging on her husband’s rights.”\(^{669}\) ‘Abduh, like Quṭb later, explains that nushūz signals a deviation from the *fitra* and the natural order of things.\(^{670}\)

Quṭb elusively defines nushūz as disobedience and rebellion, without specifying the object of the disobedience or its precise manifestations. Rather, Quṭb spends greater effort establishing the dangers that nushūz poses to the family system and the reasons it must be nipped in the bud. He writes,

> The Islamic order (*manhaj*) does not wait for nushūz to actually occur and to wave the banner of rebellion and to topple down the high esteem of *qiwāma* and to split the [family] institution into two camps. When matters reach this state of affairs, the remedy will rarely be effective. The starting points (*mabādi’*) of nushūz must be treated before they gain momentum because it will lead this critical institution towards corruption, with which there will be no peace or comfort and it will not be suitable for raising children … it [nushūz] will then lead to a split, collapse and destruction of the family institution overall.\(^{671}\)

Nushūz destabilizes the institution of the family, and for this reason, it is a dangerous matter, Quṭb writes. Children who grow up in this atmosphere will have psychological, neurological and physical ailments, he writes, which will lead to perversions.\(^{672}\)

\(^{668}\) *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 5:72.
\(^{670}\) Quṭb, 5:653
\(^{671}\) Ibid.
\(^{672}\) Ibid.
children will be affected, though, Quṭb writes. Beyond establishing nushūz as a deviation from the fiṭra, like ‘Abduh, Quṭb also views it as a psychological or mental perversion of its own, and indicates that it reflects a disorder. Quṭb seeks to emphasize that nushūz is not just a simple act of disobedience or stubbornness, but a more serious psychological problem.

Ibn ‘Āshūr’s definition of nushūz reflects a decisiveness that is absent in both ‘Abduh and Quṭb’s tafsīrs. Nushūz is a woman’s repulsion or hatred of her husband (karāhiyya), an opinion mentioned by some pre-modern exegetes. The significance in Ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation of nushūz in verse 4:34 lies in its consistency with most exegetes’ interpretation of men’s nushūz in Q. 4:128. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation of women’s nushūz as hatred towards the spouse reflects a consistency in methodology that was not characteristic of most pre-modern exegetes when it came to gender issues. In contrast to most pre-modern and modern exegetes, Ibn ‘Āshūr interprets the verses on men’s and women’s nushūz in tandem. In his exegesis of verse 4:128, Ibn ‘Āshūr explicitly cites verse 4:34. He identifies 4:128 as a continuation of the legislation introduced in verse 4:34, as each pertain to the nushūz of one of the two spouses. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation of nushūz is legalistic in tone. His interpretation of nushūz most reflects the characteristics of the juristic discussions on nushūz by considering men and women’s nushūz in tandem, and establishing the fact that nushūz has different manifestations with different consequences. In his tafsīr of Q. 4:128, he writes that the manifestations of nushūz could vary, as could its consequences and the paths towards reconciliation.

In contrast to most pre-exegetical commentaries, Ibn ‘Āshūr restricts the meaning of women’s nushūz. This phrase “and those whose nushūz you fear” means that nushūz has actually

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673 Ibid.
674 Chaudhry, 195-199.
675 Ibn ‘Āshūr, 5:214.
taken place and one fears its negative consequences.\textsuperscript{676} This is not a matter of being angry at the wife or her lack of obedience, Ibn ‘Āshūr writes,\textsuperscript{677} because both men and women could become defiant and angry with each other. This interpretation of \textit{nushūz} is the most gender-neutral of the modern and pre-modern exegetical interpretations in this study, as it applies an equal standard of behavior for both partners in a marriage.

\textbf{VIII. “Hajr”: Abstain From Them or Tie Them Up?}

In the pre-exegetical commentary, exegetes cited a rare opinion by al-Ṭabarī on \textit{hajr}, but only to critique and rebuke it. Whereas most exegetes had interpreted \textit{hajr} as avoiding, ostracizing or sexually abandoning one’s wife by sleeping in separate beds, al-Ṭabarī’s infamous interpretation pointed to the complete opposite meaning. He argued that \textit{hajr} actually meant tying women to the beds or constraining them to the beds in order to have sex with them.\textsuperscript{678} He deduced this meaning based on both logic and language. If one symptom of \textit{nushūz} is a woman’s refusal to have sexual relations with her husband, then how could his sexual abstinence from her logically be a punishment for her?\textsuperscript{679} This is what she desires in the first place. Further, al-Ṭabarī derives this meaning based on a linguistic analysis, as one meaning for \textit{hajr} is to tie up one’s animal (\textit{hajr al-ba’īr}).\textsuperscript{680} As Karen Bauer demonstrates, this “deviant” opinion made a frequent appearance in the pre-modern exegetical commentary, as one exegete after the other exhausted some effort to refute or counter this interpretation by al-Ṭabarī. The fact that later exegetes rejected this interpretation proffered by al-Ṭabarī demonstrates the “limits on interpretation, at least according to pre-modern exegetes.”\textsuperscript{681} Commenting on Bauer’s analysis, Chaudhry

\textsuperscript{676} Ibid., 5:43.  
\textsuperscript{677} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{678} Al- Ṭabarī, 8:306-309.  
\textsuperscript{679} Ibid., 8:308  
\textsuperscript{680} Ibid., 8:309.  
\textsuperscript{681} Bauer, 165.
underscores that “[p]re-modern exegetes were selective in what interpretations they accepted or rejected from their predecessors. In this light, their interpretive choice to uphold the tradition of exegetical commentary or deviate from it reflected independent legal exegetical reasoning.”

There are two reasons why this analysis is relevant here. Firstly, although exegetes are bound to certain principles of interpretation, the fact that most exegetes after al-Ṭabarī opined an interpretation opposite to his reflects the range of choice that exegetes could exercise in making an argument for a certain interpretation. Secondly, this rejection of al-Ṭabarī’s ‘deviant’ opinion makes a comeback in Tafsīr al-Manār in the twentieth century, as Riḍā re-explains al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation only to characterize it as distorted. This is important because it reflects Tafsīr al-Manār’s selective engagement with the exegetical tradition, as is true of most modern exegeses examined here. Al-Ṭabarī is one of the few exegetes whom Riḍā cites, but his reference to al-Ṭabarī is selective and in no way exhaustive.

This selectivity is true of pre-modern exegetes as well. Despite the fact that many pre-modern exegetes, specifically Ibn al-ʿArabī, went out of their way to cite al-Ṭabarī’s opinion on “hajr” in order to then disagree with it, they did not consistently apply this approach to al-Ṭabarī’s other opinions. To be specific, al-Ṭabarī promoted the most unique and gender-friendly interpretation of verse 2:228, which none of the succeeding exegetes I examine bother to mention, even though they cite others of al-Ṭabarī’s opinions on the same verse. For pre-modern and modern exegetes alike, what are the criteria that determine their selective engagement with the exegetical tradition? Why is it that one opinion, which was considered deviant and subsequently rejected, was kept alive in the exegetical literature, while another opinion was left to burn to the ground?

682 Chaudhry, 262.
683 Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:72.
In line with pre-modern exegetes, Riḍā also brings attention to al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of *hajr* as tying the woman to her bed or constraining to her bed. After pointing out al-Ṭabarī’s line of reasoning, Riḍā refutes it and writes, “The correct meaning is that which comes to your mind, O reader, and what comes to the mind of every person who understands these words from the language.” He takes a jab at al-Ṭabarī by mentioning that ʿAbdūh did not even mention the meaning *al-hajr fil-madāji‘* because its meaning is self-evident to any lay average person.

Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr do not mention this interpretation of *hajr*. In fact, Ibn ʿĀshūr interestingly gives no specific interpretation of *hajr*, beyond mentioning the obligation of applying the three measures sequentially. Quṭb’s commentary surrounding the reasons for *hajr* is rather unique and interesting. A *nāshiz* woman reaches the peak of her authority and control in bed, the site of seduction and attraction, Quṭb writes. When a man is able to suppress his own urges of temptation, he takes away the woman’s “sharpest weapon that she treasures.” When she realizes she has lost this power over him and recognizes the extent of his self-control and will power, she will become more inclined to come back to him, Quṭb writes. However, this *hajr* cannot take place in any location other than the couple’s bedroom. It should not occur in front of the children or strangers, for this will only humiliate the woman, corrupt the children, and increase her *nushūz*, he writes.

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685 *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 5:73.
686 Ibid.
687 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 5:42. He writes that when conjoining with *wāw* [*al-ʿaff bil-wāw*], the primary and most obvious function is *tartīb*, which establishes a sequence or order.
688 Quṭb, 2:654.
689 Ibid.
IX. Restricting the Imperative, “Hit Them”

A. Pre-Modern Exegetes

All pre-modern exegetes attempted to restrict the third imperative injunction to “hit them” in one form or another. As Chaudhry illustrates in her analysis of pre-modern exegesis of Q. 4:34:

None of the exegetes considered in this study left the prescription for the physical discipline of wives unqualified. The difference in the exegetical approaches to wife-beating lay in how exegetes qualified this prescription, rather than in various lexical interpretations of this command. Some exegetes qualified it minimally by saying that the beating should not be extreme. Others added it should not break bones or cause wounds. The weapon used to physically discipline a wife came under discussion. Were husbands permitted to punch or kick their wives? Should they hit them with whips and rods, or should they limit themselves to using a folded handkerchief? Exegetes deliberated about whether it was preferable for a husband to refrain from hitting his wife when confronted with wifely nushūz. They also sought to restrict or expand husbands’ disciplinary power over wives by stipulating whether the three prescriptions in Q. 4:34—admonishment, abandonment and hitting—were to be followed simultaneously or sequentially. Finally, exegetes considered the liability of husbands if their beating lead to death or serious injury of their wives.⁶⁹⁰

My own analysis of five pre-modern exegetes also finds that a sense of ambiguity regarding ‘wife beating’ permeates the exegetes’ language, as they narrate contradicting reports that allow it, restrict it or rebuke it. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, cites eighteen different reports that place conditions on wife-beating so that it is not harmful or does not leave marks. The most frequent opinion of those eighteen citations is that hitting must be non-injurious (ghayr mubarrīḥ). Two other terms used to describe this non-injurious type of hitting was ghayr shā ’in, non-disfiguring, and ghayr mu’ aththir, not leaving marks or traces.⁶⁹¹ In three of the eighteen reports, ‘Aṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ seeks more information on the meaning of ghayr mubarrīḥ from

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⁶⁹⁰ Chaudhry, 263.
⁶⁹¹ Al- Ṭabarī, 8:314-5. See reports #9385 and #9389.
Ibn ʿAbbās, who clarifies that it means to hit with a siwāk⁶⁹² or a similar object.⁶⁹³ Al-Ṭabarī’s insertion of these citations seeks to restrict or diminish the effect of the hitting, although not eliminate it.

The most common qualifier of “hitting” for pre-modern exegetes was that it cannot be injurious or leave marks.⁶⁹⁴ Al-Rāzī comes out strongest in this regard as he immediately follows the sanction on beating with al-Shāfīʿī’s quote that it is preferable to refrain from beating.⁶⁹⁵ For al-Shāfīʿī, this verse indicated the ibāḥa of hitting a nāshīz wife, as a third step, but that it was preferable not to hit (“wa tarkhu ḥaḏal”).⁶⁹⁶ Al-Shāfīʿī based this opinion on an authentic Prophetic tradition, which ended with the statement, “Certainly those [who beat] are not the best among you.”⁶⁹⁷ In his tafsīr, al-Rāzī cites the entire tradition and al-Shāfīʿī’s commentary on it.⁶⁹⁸ He adds to this other citations that impose other conditions on hitting, such as not using a folded handkerchief and not using a stick or whip.⁶⁹⁹ Al-Razi concludes that the sequence of the three steps in this verse “is a clear indication that one must suffice with the minimum step that will fulfill his objective [of ending a woman’s nushūz] and it is not allowed to move to a more

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⁶⁹² A small twig of the arak tree, traditionally used as a toothbrush and recommended for hygienic use by the Prophet. It is also referred to as miswāk.
⁶⁹³ Al-Ṭabarī, 8:314-5. See reports #9368, #9387 and #9388. In the last one, ʿAṭāʾ does not identify Ibn ʿAbbās as the source of this information.
⁶⁹⁴ Chaudhry, 264.
⁶⁹⁵ Al-Rāzī, 5.10:73.
⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.
⁶⁹⁷ Chaudhry’s translation (282).
⁶⁹⁸ Al-Rāzī, 5.10:73.
⁶⁹⁹ Al-Rāzī, 5.10:73.
difficult step [al-ṭarīq al-ashaq], and God knows best.” The effect of both al-Ṭabarī’s and al-Razi’s commentary is to restrict the imperative of hitting.

B. ‘Abduh and Riḍā on “Wa-ḍribūhunna”

‘Abduh’s and Riḍā’s commentary on the ‘hitting’ injunction of verse 4:34 is most reflective of an important difference in their approach to controversial gender issues. Whereas ‘Abduh turns the critical eye inward and blames Muslims for their misapplication or “ignorance” of Islam’s teachings, Riḍā’s discourse reflects a level of defensiveness regarding these matters. Although ‘Abduh and Riḍā both ultimately reach the same conclusion that one should refrain from hitting his wife, Riḍā precedes this conclusion with a defense of the idea that men may hit nāshiz women. This is rather ironic considering his conclusion that the best of men should refrain from hitting their wives. Riḍā’s justification of the idea of hitting a nāshiz wife is, in my assessment, a response to Western criticism of Islam’s position on gender. The implication of this criticism, as Riḍā saw it, is that there is something inherently deficient in Islam because of its position on gender, which is reflected in the verses on polygyny and hitting, among others. Therefore, after mentioning the occasion for the verse’s revelation, Riḍā delves into a diatribe on why hitting a nāshiz woman is justified. He writes,

Those who imitate the French in their mannerisms are baffled by our legitimating the hitting of a nāshiz woman, but they are not baffled by a woman committing nushūz and rising over him [her husband], making him, the leader of the house, become a subject [marʿūs] or rather, humiliated. And she insists on her nushūz and does not incline towards his guidance or advice, and does not care if he abandons her [hijr]. I do not understand how they treat these nawāshiz women and what advice they give to husbands in dealing with them. Perhaps they imagine that the woman is weak, thin, polite, and well-mannered, while the mean, harsh husband transgresses over her, feeding his whip from her tender flesh and letting it drink from her fresh blood, while claiming that God allows him to hit her

700 He writes muqalladat al-īfranj, meaning those who admire and emulate the French in their ways.
like this … Far be it from God (ḥāsha li-llāh) that he allow injustice like this or approve of it.\(^{701}\)

Although Riḍā consistently argues against abuse, he insists that nāshiz women are nothing of the sort described above, nor is the hitting described in this verse anything like this type of beating. Rather the nawāshiz [pl. of nāshiz] are loose women, who detest their husbands, deny any good the husbands do, burden them beyond their capacity, and stubbornly persist in their nushūz.\(^{702}\) Riḍā then sarcastically poses,

So what corruption will occur on earth if the dignified and righteous man is permitted to reduce the insolence of this type of woman, and topple her from the arrogance of her nushūz with a siwāk with which he hits her hand or with a handkerchief that he fans over her neck? And if permitting this is difficult for their manners to accept, then they should know that their manners [the French] are gentle until they snap and that many of the French leaders hit their women, the educated and well-mannered ones, the ones that dress skimpy and nude, and the ones inclined [to heed advice]. Their politicians, scholars, kings and leaders all act like this, as it [hitting] is a necessity that even those who exaggerate in honoring educated women do not refrain from, so how do you denounce its permissibility for [the sake of] necessity in a religion revealed for all types of people, the peasant and the civilized?\(^{703}\)

Riḍā’s discourse here, which appears at the beginning of the interpretation on wa-ḍribūhunna, appears inconsistent with Riḍā’s later statements that the best of men should refrain from hitting women. Nonetheless, his language here is characteristic of his general defensive discourse on controversial aspects of gender-related verses. Although significantly different from Quṭb’s language, Riḍā’s discourse resembles Quṭb in that they both attempt to counter the prominent strain of secular indigenous discourse that considered Europe the model to which Muslims should look to in their reforms, and most specifically, gender reform. Throughout their exegesis on Qur’anic verses that became the target of much controversy, such as those on

\(^{701}\) Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:74.
\(^{702}\) Ibid., 5:74-75.
\(^{703}\) Ibid., 5:75.
polygamy and wife-beating, Riḍā and Quṭb both argue that these injunctions, in their limited use during necessary times, are superior to anything practiced in the West.

C. ʿAbduh and Riḍā: ‘The best of you don’t hit their women’

Among all four modern exegetes, there is a tendency to strengthen the exegetical interpretation to restrict the application of hitting wives. ʿAbduh and Riḍā emphasize an oft-cited opinion in pre-modern exegesis that the three injunctions must be applied in sequence, not simultaneously. Therefore, if the first step achieves the desired effect of stopping the nushūz, then one must stop there and so on with the next step. Although the conjunction wāw does not usually indicate chronology, Riḍā writes, in this case, context and logical reasoning are sufficient proof for the necessity of a sequential application of the three disciplinary steps.704 The opinion that the steps were to be applied in sequence was the norm among pre-modern exegetes.705

ʿAbduh and Riḍā ultimately take the position that the best option is for one to refrain from hitting, even after the first two measures fail. Even if a wife persists in her nushūz after the first steps, “he should not hit [her], because the best of men do not hit women even if this was permitted to them by necessity,” Riḍā concludes.706 Rather, in this instance, the best of men should “separate from their wives according to maʿrūf and relinquish her with kindness, unless he desires to reconcile with her according to the arbitration indicated in this verse [4:35].”707 As evidence of this restrictive application of the last disciplinary step, Riḍā cites two prophetic traditions. The first prophetic tradition he cites indicates the repugnance of hitting, Riḍā writes.708 According to the tradition, cited in both al-Bukhārī and Muslim, “the Prophet (peace be upon him) stated, ‘Would one of you hit his wife like he hits his slave and then sleep with her at

704 Ibid., 5:76.
705 Chaudhry, 290.
706 Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:76.
707 Ibid.
708 Ibid., 5:75.
the end of the day?”. Riḍā cites a similar tradition by ʿĀʾisha cited in ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī’s hadīth collection: “Is one of you not embarrassed to hit his wife as he hits his slave in the beginning of the day and then try to sleep with her at the end of it?” Riḍā then describes the intimacy of sexual relations between spouses as “the strongest and firmest connection that can occur between two human beings.” If a man has a need for this kind of intimacy with his wife, how, then, could he bring himself to humiliate her like a slave by hitting her with a whip or his hand, Riḍā questions?

The second prophetic tradition he cites is an abbreviated version of a hadīth cited by many of the exegetes. In this tradition, Umm Kulthūm bint Abī Bakr states that men were prohibited from hitting their wives, but when they complained to the Prophet (peace be upon him) about this matter, he allowed them to hit, but then said “The best of you will never hit [their women] (lan yaḍrib khiyārükum).” Riḍā then states that this prophetic tradition reflects that the dispensation to hit is actually closer to a prohibition, adding, “It is a bitter remedy from which the best of free men refrain.”

Similarly, ʿAbduh emphasizes the restrictive nature of this injunction. This disciplinary measure is permissible only if the husband thinks it will be effective, ʿAbduh writes. In other
words, he should resort to it only if he can guarantee that his wife will stop her nushūz after it. If the first two disciplinary measures suffice, a man should refrain from hitting his wife.\footnote{Ibid., 5:76.}

Regardless of the situation, we are mandated [by God] to deal with women with gentleness and to avoid injustice, ‘Abduh writes. In reference to Qur’anic verse 2:229,\footnote{“Divorce is only permissible twice: after that, the parties should either hold Together on equitable terms, or separate with kindness….” Only partially cited here.} ‘Abduh then comments that one should either keep his wife with goodwill or let her go with kindness.\footnote{Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:75.} In doing so, ‘Abduh appears to suggest that divorce is a better option than cruelty or abuse.

‘Abduh’s interpretation of the last phrase of Q. 4:34, “Indeed God is most High, Great” (inna Allāha kāna ‘alīyīyan kabīra), best underscores his exegetical approach as a means to broader social reform. As mentioned in chapter three, ‘Abduh’s main objective in his tafsīr was to restore the Qur’an’s relevance to the lives of the people to whom it was revealed. His commentaries were delivered as public sermons. He regarded the Qur’an and its tafsīr as a mean for larger societal reform, for which he believed the Muslim world was so desperately in need.\footnote{Al-Manār 1, issue 1 (1315 AH): 9. This is clearly evident in articles written by ‘Abduh and Riḍā in al-Manār’s journal, telling Muslims to wake up from their deep slumber.}

In his commentary on this last phrase of Q. 4:34, ‘Abduh writes, “When a man transgresses over his wife, it is because he feels superior to her, and is stronger and larger than her. This is why God reminds him of His Greatness, Highness [kibrīyā īhi] and Power, so that he [the husband] may take heed, fear God and be upright.”\footnote{Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:77.} ‘Abduh implies that injustice in the family home yields greater social and political consequences. Those men that try to be masters in their homes by oppressing women are only breeding slaves to others, ‘Abduh writes.\footnote{Ibid.} “[When] children
grow up in an environment of injustice, they will be like humiliated slaves to those who need to live with them.”

D. Quṭb on “Wa-ḍribūhunna”: A Last Resort to Save the Family Institution

A sense of relativism underlies Quṭb’s approach to interpreting the concept of “hitting” one’s wife, as it does with his approach to polygyny. In his interpretation of verse 4:3, he viewed polygyny as the better alternative to men’s desertion of barren women, or conducting sexual affairs. Similarly, in his commentary on verse 4:34, Quṭb depicts this last measure as the better alternative than the demise of the entire family institution due to nushūz. If the first two steps fail, “do you just leave the [family] institution to become destroyed?” Quṭb rhetorically asks. Like ‘Abduh, he affirms that this measure cannot be used in a healthy relationship.

What is most unique about Quṭb’s tafsīr in this verse is his identification of nushūz as a form of pathological perversion or sickness. If a nāshīz woman is not responsive to advice or to sexual abandonment, “then this [nushūz] must definitely be a perversion of some kind,” Quṭb writes. In this case, when the two first measures fail, then perhaps this third step will succeed. Citing a psychological study by Dr. Alexis Carrel (1873-1944), Quṭb writes that a type of woman exists who cannot accept a man as qayyim [in charge of her] and as her husband, unless he physically overpowers her. According to observations based on psychology and reality, then, this last measure of hitting is most appropriate to rectify and satisfy this type of pathology.

723 Ibid.
724 Quṭb, 2:653.
725 Ibid., 2:654.
726 Ibid.
727 The study to which Quṭb is most likely referring to is L’Homme, cet inconnu (Man, the Unknown), published in 1935. Carrel was the recipient of the 1912 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine. According to Andres Horacio Reggiani, Carrel “stigmatized the ‘modern woman’ for the decreasing birth rate and for yielding ‘inferior products’ and blamed her defection … on feminism, education and a ‘short-sighted selfishness,’” (“Alexis Carrel, the Unknown: Eugenics and Population Research under Vichy,” French Historical Studies 25:2 (Spring 2002): 337.
728 Quṭb, 2:654.
Quṭb argues. By no means are all women like this, but he asserts that this type of woman exists.

Quṭb’s commentary focuses on the aims behind the disciplinary measures of this verse. This stands in contrast to pre-modern exegetes, who were primarily focused on legally qualifying the imperative “hit them,” as Chaudhry establishes. Some did so by qualifying its degree as non-extreme (ghayr mubarriḥ). Others discussed the object that husbands were allowed to use. They discussed whether husbands were limited to using a folded handkerchief or siwāk. They also discussed whether the husbands would be legally liable if he seriously injured his wife. Quṭb’s commentary instead focuses on the objectives of this injunction. Quṭb writes, this hitting cannot be a form of seeking revenge or venting one’s anger. It cannot be to humiliate or debase a woman, or to force her to live in a way she does not accept. Rather, this hitting is disciplinary, accompanied with sympathy by the one enacting the discipline, just as a father does with his children or a teacher with his students, Quṭb writes. Once the objective of the measures is reached, one should stop at that, Quṭb warns. The objective, he describes in rather utopian terms, is “willful obedience, not forced obedience.” This is because a functional family institution cannot operate based on a partner’s forced obedience, he writes. Quṭb warns against abuse by citing four prophetic traditions that either restrict or denounce hitting. Most of these aḥādīth are the same ones cited by pre-modern exegetes, as well as Riḍā. The fourth hadīth, which I have

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729 Ibid.
730 Ibid.
731 Chaudhry, 262-263.
732 Quṭb, 2:654.
733 Ibid.
734 Ibid., 2:655.
735 The first hadīth is: Muʿāwiya Ibn Ḥīda al-Qushayrī asked the Prophet: “What are the rights of our wives over us?” He replied, “That you feed her when you eat, and clothe her as you clothe yourself, and do not hit her in the face, do not disfigure her and do not abandon her except in the house.”
not seen cited previously in reference to Q. 4:34, is, “The best of you is the best to his family. And I am the best of you to my family.”

What is most evident in Ḥuṭb’s commentary is a response to secular criticism of this verse. One should not blame God’s order (manhaj) for people’s misunderstandings, Ḥuṭb writes, such as when a man uses the religion as a pretext to be abusive, or when a woman becomes like a prisoner in the name of religion. After justifying why hitting is appropriate as the last resort to treat a certain kind of pathology, Ḥuṭb argues that

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\text{[e]ither way, the One who established these measures is the One who Created. He has greater knowledge of His creation. All debates after the decree of the Knowing and All-Aware is mere bickering. And every defiance [tamarrud] and lack of submission to God’s decision is an opening [mafadd] to rejecting faith all together.}\]

This is reflective of Ḥuṭb’s ideological stance, which was most pronounced at the end of his career, to reject any compromise or reconciliation with what he perceived to be man-made ideologies. His tafsīr represents this last phase of his own religious and political development, as Ḥuṭb rejected the premise of his previous work, Social Justice in Islam, which was subsequently edited seven times. Accordingly, Ḥuṭb believed that Muslims’ acceptance of Islamic rulings should not be premised on their human utility or perceived benefit, but based on the fact that God ordained them.

Nonetheless, this concept is not consistently applied in Ḥuṭb’s interpretations. As we see in his interpretation of the following verse, 4:35, Ḥuṭb reads this verse as a potential alternative to applying the three disciplinary measures outlined in Q. 4:34. If the nushūz has already become

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736 Sunan al-Tirmidhī 5, no. 3985, quoted in Ḥuṭb, 2:655.
737 Ḥuṭb, 2:655.
738 Ibid.
evident, or if one feels like these disciplinary measures will not work or they will lead to greater harm, then in that case, the couple should proceed according to Q. 4:35, which reads:

And if you fear that a breach might occur between a couple, appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people; if they both seek reconciliation, God will facilitate matters between them. God is indeed All-Knowing, Aware.

One should instead resort to arbitration, Quṭb writes, when one believes that the nushūz will worsen if disciplinary measures are taken. This is also the case if it will further tear away the remaining threads between the man and woman, because the ultimate goal is to preserve the marriage and valuable family institution.  

E. Ibn ʿĀshūr: An Attempt to Involve Legal Authorities

Of all modern and pre-modern exegetes examined in this study, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s interpretation of wa-ḍribūhunna stands out as most unique and significant. Ibn ʿĀshūr’s background as a muftī and jurist comes to bear in his analysis of the injunction wa-ḍribūhunna.

Ibn ʿĀshūr attempts to restrict the applicability of these three disciplinary measures and to restrain the husband’s authority to implement the last measure. First, he restricts the applicability of the verse by interpreting a woman’s nushūz as harm which proceeds from a women’s persistence in nushūz, not simply her disobedience or defiance.  

Second, he suggests that the addressee (al-mukhāṭab) of this verse oscillates between the husband and legal authorities (wulāt al-umūr).  

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740 Quṭb, 2:656.
741 Ibn ʿĀshūr writes, “And the meaning of ‘takhāfūna nushūzuhunna’ is fearing its ill-effects. The meaning is that nushūz has actually occurred with characteristics of the intention of defiance and persistence in it, not merely being angry with each other or an absence of obedience, because it is rare that spouses not go through that state [of anger and disobedience], and because both men and women are exposed to being angry and defiant to each other…which is why it remains that the meaning of fear is real with an expectation of harm occurring,” (5:43).
742 Although the term wulāt al-umūr could refer to either legal guardians or legal authorities, such as judges, my close reading of his tafsīr leads me to believe that Ibn ʿĀshūr intends the legal authorities, as he takes a legal approach to this matter all together. The evidence for this is that Ibn ʿĀshūr writes that nushūz would have been taken up to the legal authorities (rafiʿa ilayhim bi-shikāyat al-azwāj). He also writes that the wulāt al-umūr could
Ibn ʿĀshūr introduces the involvement of legal authorities in the implementation of this verse. He does so by suggesting that the addressee of the phrase “those whose nushūz you fear” might not be the husbands, but rather the legal authorities who would determine whether or not nushūz has actually occurred. This is because cases of nushūz would presumably be taken to the courts for judges to resolve.\(^743\) This underscores Ibn ʿĀshūr’s restrictive interpretation of nushūz as a grave or serious matter.

He cites two pieces of evidence for this possible interpretation. The first piece of evidence he cites for this is a grammatical one, with two Qur’anic precedents. He demonstrates how a single verse could have more than one addressee. As an example, he cites al-Zamakhshari’s interpretation that verse 2:229\(^744\) addresses two different parties, the husbands and the legal authorities.\(^745\) As a second Qur’anic precedent for this principle, he cites verses 61:11-13,\(^746\) in which the addressees throughout the three verses are in plural form, except for the last phrase in verse 61:13, “and give [sing.] glad-tidings to the believers (wa-bashshir al-muʾminin).” According to the exegetes, the Prophet is the address of the last phrase, whereas the

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\(^743\) As mentioned above, he writes that nushūz would have been taken up to the legal authorities; “rufiʿa ilayhim bi-shikāyat al-azwāj,” (5:43).

\(^744\) “A divorce is only permissible twice: after that, the parties should either hold Together on equitable terms, or separate with kindness. It is not lawful for you, (Men), to take back any of your gifts (from your wives), except when both parties fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allāh. If ye (judges) do indeed fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allāh, there is no blame on either of them if she give something for her freedom. These are the limits ordained by Allāh. So do not transgress them if any do transgress the limits ordained by Allāh, such persons wrong (themselves as well as others).” Yūsuf ʿAlī translation.

\(^745\) Ibn ʿĀshūr, 5:43.

\(^746\) In the Arabic text, all verbs in the three verses are in plural form, with the exception of the last phrase “give thou glad tidings to all who believe.” Muhammad Asad’s translation of 61:11-13 is as follows: “You are to believe in God and His Apostle, and to strive hard in God’s cause with your possessions and your lives: this is for your own good - if you but knew it! [If you do so,] He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in (those) gardens of perpetual bliss: that [will be] the triumph supreme! And [withal, He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: succour from God [in this world], and a victory soon to come: and [thereof, O Prophet,] give thou a glad tiding to all who believe.”
believers are addressed in the previous phrases.\footnote{Ibn ʿĀshūr, 5:43.} Ibn ʿĀshūr uses this evidence to suggest that this verse may not be addressing the husbands when it states “and those whose *nushūz* you fear.” According to this interpretation, the legal authorities would be the ones to apply the various steps in order, with the exception of *hajr*, since it makes sense that only husbands be the ones to sexually abstain from their wives.\footnote{Ibid.}

The second piece of evidence that Ibn ʿĀshūr introduces to restrict the implementation of hitting is a statement by Ṭāṭāʾ b. Abī Rabāḥ, who said, “The husband does not hit his wife, but gets angry with her.”\footnote{Ibid.} Therefore, the injunction to hit is actually telling men not to hit their wives. It takes the ruling of *karāhiyya* (disliked matter) rather than *ibāḥa* (permissibility).

Reflecting his legal consciousness, Ibn ʿĀshūr writes that this indicates that these measures are implemented according to the strength of evidence provided.\footnote{Ibid.} Therefore, *hajr* and *darb* cannot be applied without proving that *nushūz* has occurred, Ibn ʿĀshūr states.\footnote{Ibid., 5:44.} By suggesting the involvement of legal authorities in one way or another, Ibn ʿĀshūr attempts to restrict men’s authority to physically discipline their wives. He writes:

> Hitting is a dangerous matter … a limit must be applied in this [matter], which jurisprudence clarifies, because if the husbands are allowed to administer this, and while they are venting their anger, then it is expected that they will transgress the limits. For it is rare that one punishes commensurate to the sin. Further, the basis of jurisprudential principles does not permit for one to adjudicate for himself (*an yaqḍī aḥad li-nafsihi*), unless there is a necessity (*darūra*).\footnote{Ibid.}

Ibn ʿĀshūr’s solution for this is to involve legal authorities. They should punish those men who exceed the limits and do not carefully apply the disciplinary measures with goodwill, he advocates. When the legal authorities become aware that transgressions occur, they should
announce to men that whoever hits his wife will be punished, Ibn ʿĀshūr states. Based on Chaudhry’s exhaustive survey of pre-modern exegeses on this verse, no other exegete came to such a conclusion. This is just one example of many that reflects how Ibn ʿĀshūr employs classical methodologies to yield new meanings.

Before he comes to his own position, however, he clarifies that the *ahadīth* that appear to allow a man to hit his wife were an accommodation of the customs of certain types of people, such as tribal people. Not all people are the same, he argues, and among the Bedouin, there are both men and women who do not consider hitting women an act of aggression. In other words, Ibn ʿĀshūr makes a distinction between the religion’s acknowledgement of patriarchy and establishing it as the norm. By accommodating the customs of certain types of people, these *ahadīth* were acknowledging the reality of patriarchy and its customs.

Unlike ʿAbduh or Quṭb, there is no indication of a polemical or advocacy tone in Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafsīr*. Even when he does take a rather unique position, as in his interpretation of verse 4:34, he treads carefully and cautiously as one treading on water. A sense of ambivalence permeates his language and he only clarifies his position at the very end of his commentary on the verse. The reason for this, I believe, is his personal characteristics of non-confrontation and social “ambivalence,” which had characterized Ibn ʿĀshūr’s career as a religious scholar and person of great influence in Tunisian politics. As Nafi writes, Ibn ʿĀshūr was a “non-activist

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753 Ibid.
754 Chaudhry, 281.
756 Barlas also argues in *Believing Women* that the *Qurʾan*’s acknowledgement of patriarchy is not the same as advocating it. She writes, “At a time when men did not need permission to abuse women, this Ayah simply could not have functioned as a license; in such a context, it could only have been a restriction insofar as the *Qurʾan* made *daraba* the last measure of last, not the first, or even the second, resort,” (Barlas, 188).
757 Nafi writes of Ibn ʿĀshūr, “His balancing act marked his outlook with a sense of ambivalence and intellectual uncertainty” (“Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr: The Career and Thought of a Modern Reformist ʿālim,” 25).
His middle-of-the-road religious decrees and positions on the most polarizing issues in Tunisian political life reflect this non-confrontational nature. Although Nafi also labels him as a “somewhat detached intellectual,” quite the contrary is true. A nuanced and thorough investigation of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s scholarly works reflects an intellectual thoroughly engaged with the most pertinent issues of his time whose conclusions lead to significant, albeit gradual, change.

X. Conclusion

In the modern Muslim world, the debate on gender in Islam becomes ideologically charged and loaded with other implications. The colonial narrative on Islam as the fatal roadblock to women’s progress created a highly charged discourse on the question of Islam’s treatment of women, and by extension, its compatibility with modern society. This narrative was internalized and repeated, to some extent, by indigenous secular voices in the Muslim world, specifically on issues of women’s dress, polygyny and other matters.

Of the four modern exegetes, Riḍā and Quṭb without question are responding to this narrative on Islam’s treatment of women, which had become prominent in Egypt in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. They both seek to justify the prescription of “hitting” in response to what they regard to be the onslaught on Islam. Riḍā’s commentary specifically addresses Western critics and their “imitators,” as he describes the French as inferior in their treatment of women. Quṭb’s commentary addresses those who question the wisdom of this injunction, concluding that those who reject this measure have rejected faith all together.

Overall, significant threads of continuity and change emerge among modern exegetes’ interpretation of Q. 4:34 in comparison to pre-modern exegetes. Like pre-modern exegetes, the

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758 Nafi, 9.
759 Ibid.
760 Tafsīr al-Manār, 5:74.
761 Quṭb, 2:655.
modern exegetes surveyed also restricted the imperative of hitting one’s nāshiz wife. They also did so in similar ways. Like pre-modern exegetes, for example, all four modern exegetes imposed a sequential application of the three measures prescribed for treating a woman’s nushūz. They also cited prophetic traditions that deterred against abuse. Nonetheless, what is most different in the modern commentaries on this verse is the exegetes’ attempts to reconcile the outward meaning of this verse with notions of justice and gender egalitarianism. Although the pre-modern exegetes also imposed restrictions on wa-dribūhunna in verse 4:34, they did not attempt to justify it nor demonstrate its necessity in certain circumstances, which Riḍā, ʿAbduh and Quṭb do.

Further, Ibn ʿĀshūr is the only exegete who brings new meaning to bear on the interpretation of this verse. Despite his employment of pre-modern, philology-based methodologies, his interpretive position is original and unique in the exegetical tradition. He attempts to mitigate the husband’s overall authority over his wife by introducing the involvement of legal authorities. Consistent with his overall methodology, he makes this argument by pointing to grammatical evidence based on previous Qur’anic precedents, in which the attached subject or object of various verbs in the same verse oscillates to represent different people. His ability to use a pre-modern exegetical method of grammatical and legal analysis to deduce an interpretation that no previous exegete had reached is, for Ibn ʿĀshūr, evidence of the tradition’s capacity to respond to its changing environment.

These findings force us to re-examine how we measure progress and intellectual acumen in the field of tafsīr. Do methodological approaches that signal a break with the pre-modern tradition necessarily represent a higher form of intellectual development than those that signal methodological continuity with the tradition? When we situate modern exegetical approaches
within the broader intellectual developments of *tafsīr* as a genre, from its early stages until the modern period, we gain a more accurate understanding of how certain forms of continuity can also be markers of change.
CHAPTER SIX: PRE-MODERN AND MODERN EXEGESIS ON VERSE 2:228

I. Verse 2:228

“And divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three cycles [qurūʾ], and they are not permitted to conceal what God has created in their wombs if they believe in God and the Day of Judgment, and their husbands have a greater right to take them back if they desire reconciliation, and they [women] have rights like the rights upon them, according to what is equitable [bil-maʾrūf] and men have a degree [daraja] over them, and God is powerful and wise.”

This verse is one of the 350-500 legal verses in the Qurʾan of over 6,000 verses. It establishes the legal process following a man’s pronouncement of divorce and indicates the regulations that should govern this legal process. More specifically, it establishes the waiting period of a woman whose husband has pronounced a single, unilateral divorce; it also establishes the man’s right to take back his wife during this waiting period and women’s obligation to disclose their pregnancies or menstrual cycles during this period. The second part of this verse states that women have rights like or equal to the rights of men over women, and that men have a degree over them. This chapter is primarily interested in the way exegetes dealt with this latter part of the verse. Although the context of this verse specifically deals with divorce, the last part

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762 The ways in which the Qurʾanic phrase “wa lahunna mithlu lladhī ʿalayhinna” has been translated reflects the diversity of how this verse has been understood. While some scholars have translated the word mithl as equal to, such as Asghar Engineer, others have translated it as “like” or “just as.” Bauer writes, “The latter understanding, ‘just as’ is by far the more prevalent in the sources, although in this dissertation I use the literal translation ‘like’ for the sake of clarity,” (“Room for Interpretation,” 59). Kecia ʿAlī states that a literal translation of this phrase would be “To them (fem. plural) like due from them (fem. plural),” (Sexual Ethics and Islam, 123).

763 This term, bil-maʾrūf, has also been interpreted in many different ways in exegetical history. According to Bauer’s study of pre-modern exegetes on 2:228, the sense in which the exegetes interpret the term bil-maʾrūf is “as enjoying friendly companionship” with one’s spouse (Bauer, 20). Bauer points out that its literal meaning, however, is “according to what is known” or “according to custom” (20). I take issue with the translation of bil-maʾrūf as according to custom, because there is a difference between ʿurf (custom) and maʾrūf. Hans Wehr provides 19 meanings for the term maʾrūf, and none of these are “custom.” As Hans Wehr correctly notes, the most common meanings of the term maʾrūf are “well-known,” “universally accepted,” “generally recognized,” and “that which is good, beneficial or fitting.” While ʿurf plays a role in determining what is generally recognized or what is good or fitting, it is not the same as functioning as the very meaning of bil-maʾrūf. As Bauer herself points out, a rare opinion by al-Zamakhsharī, interprets bil-maʾrūf as according to the customs of people, which gives custom some authoritative weight in determining the nature of responsibilities that men and women should fulfill. This interpretation resurfaces in ʿAbduh’s tafsīr, as I illustrate in the chapter. Bauer chooses to translate bil-maʾrūf as “in kindness” (20).
of the verse was interpreted by most pre-modern exegetes to be a general description of men’s hierarchy or privilege over women.\textsuperscript{764}

In pre-modern exegesis, there is a tendency to interpret the phrase regarding women and men’s mutual rights in light of the succeeding phrase that men have a degree over women.\textsuperscript{765} The interpretations that pre-modern exegetes championed regarding men and women’s mutual rights oscillated between equal rights and reciprocal but unequal rights.\textsuperscript{766} As I demonstrate below, some pre-modern exegetes were inclined to interpret women and men’s reciprocal rights in light of men’s degree over women. Accordingly, women’s rights over their husbands are financial maintenance and benevolent companionship while men’s right over their wives is that the latter obey the husband. Some exegetes, like al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī, restricted this obedience to those matters that God ordained, while other exegetes like al-Rāzī and al-Bayḍāwī, left this obedience open-ended.

A heightened level of gender consciousness in the modern period has led to new ways in which scholars and some exegetes approach verse 2:228. As Kecia Ali argues, verse 2:228 and 4:43 are both “crucial for those concerned with gender equality or equity, and the ways that they have been treated illustrate both the significant insights of feminist scholarship as well as the limitations of certain approaches to the Qur’an.”\textsuperscript{767} In modern Islamic discourse, this verse has been used in two diametric ways: as evidence for Islam’s equal treatment of women and as


\textsuperscript{765} I demonstrate this below, based on my readings of six pre-modern exegetes. Bauer’s far more expansive analysis of the pre-modern exegetical tradition confirms these findings. See Bauer, Room for Interpretation, 105-6.

\textsuperscript{766} Bauer writes, “The most widely cited early explanation of this verse, in several different wordings, was that there should be a friendly relationship between the spouses (ḥusn alṣuḥba, ‘ishra, ḥusn mu ’āshara). Twenty-three later works, or 41% of the total studied here, mentioned that there should be companionable spousal relations. Other prominent themes to be carried into later generations are: men’s advantage in rights (in 34% of later exegeses), the quotation of verse 4:34 in order to explain this verse (in 23% of later exegeses), and women’s obedience (in 20% of later exegeses). A correlate of the latter explanation, which is that men’s degree consists of women’s obedience, was cited in 18% of exegeses,” (Bauer, 62).

\textsuperscript{767} Ali, Sexual Ethics and Islam, 117.
evidence for Islam’s endorsement or establishing a male hierarchy in families and society at large.\textsuperscript{768} According to Ali, modernist Islamic discourse has sometimes selectively cited the Qur’anic statement that women have rights equal to the rights against them as evidence for gender equality in Islam.\textsuperscript{769} These conversations often leave out the succeeding statement, which is that men have a degree over women, due to the difficulty of reconciling that statement with the notion of gender equality.

The notion of “women’s rights” and “gender equality” become prevalent in the exegeses of all three modern exegetes I compare in their commentary on this verse. Both ‘Abduh and Ibn ‘Āshūr read this verse as the Qur’an’s explicit declaration of women’s rights. For ‘Abduh, the phrase regarding women’s rights is proof of gender equality (\textit{musāwā} in Islam. Ibn ‘Āshūr argues, whereas men’s rights have been established throughout human history, societies have paid no regard to women’s rights, which is why this verse first mentions women’s rights over men as opposed to men’s rights (i.e. \textit{lahunna}).\textsuperscript{770} After affirming the equality of men and women, how do they reconcile that with the literal text: “And men have a degree over them?”

My comparison of modern and pre-modern exegetes on this verse adds to the scholarly conversation on two important concepts. The first is whether or not differentiation between sexes in the Qur’an necessarily yields gender inequality. This has been an ongoing debate between scholars in this field, such as Asma Barlas and Kecia Ali. In my examination of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s \textit{tafsīr}, which clearly interprets men and women’s reciprocal rights as different, this does not necessarily yield a hierarchy between men and women. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation of men and

\textsuperscript{768} Ali briefly discusses the problematic ways in which Q. 2:228 has been approached in \textit{Sexual Ethics in Islam}, 123-126.
\textsuperscript{769} Kecia Ali cites as an example Asghar Ali Engineer’s approach to this verse, which she describes as “the most common modernist way of dealing with the issues involved, including a significant proportion of apologetic” (123). Engineer cites only the portion of the verse that states “women have rights like the rights against them”.
\textsuperscript{770} Ibn ‘Āshūr, 2:398.
women’s rights as reciprocal, but unequal, resembles pre-modern exegetes on this verse, but differs in a significant way. Unlike some pre-modern exegetes, for Ibn ʿĀshūr, the fact that men and women have different duties does not engender a hierarchal relationship in which the husband enjoys a superiority over the wife.

My analysis also brings into question the notion that intra-textual readings necessarily yield more egalitarian interpretations of the Qur’an. Mustansir Mir, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have argued that most Muslim exegetes “have relied on a ‘linear-atomistic’ method that takes a ‘verse by verse approach to the Qur’an.’”\footnote{Barlas, ‘Believing Women,’ 8, partially quoting Mir, Coherence in the Qur’an: A Study of Islāhī’s Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i-Qur’ān (Plainfield, Indiana, 1986), 1; Wadud, Qur’an and Women, 2.} According to Barlas, this method is partially to blame for patriarchal or misogynistic interpretations of the text.\footnote{Barlas, 9. Wadud argues that traditional exegetes’ methodology for linking verses together is “haphazard with no underlying hermeneutical principle applied” (2).} My own findings on Q. 2:228 undermine the notion that intra-textual readings are necessarily more gender-friendly ones. Al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr and Riḍā refer to verse 4:34 to interpret this verse, which only reinforces the interpretation of male privilege, due to their patriarchal interpretation of qiwāma in Q. 4:34.

Although the focus of this chapter is on ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr and Quṭb, I briefly cite the opinions of six pre-modern exegetes to demonstrate how the three modern exegetes signal a continuation or change of pre-modern exegetical commentary on the issues that arise in this verse. The six classical exegetes\footnote{These are almost the same compared in chapter four except that I add al-Qurṭubī in this chapter because he adds to the variety of interpretations on this verse.} I compare in this chapter all divided their commentaries on this verse using nearly the same pattern of segmentation: 1) “and divorced women shall wait concerning themselves” 2) the meaning of three qurū’ and establishing its legal implications, 3) what is meant by “what God has created in their wombs,” 4) what is meant by “their husbands
have a greater right to take them back if they intend reconciliation,” 5) the mutual rights and responsibilities of men and women, and 6) the degree that men have over women.

Despite the similar segmentation used by all classical exegetes, they did not pay equal attention to each segment of the verse. For example, al-Rāzī’s commentary on the third and fourth segments is incredibly short in comparison to other exegetes’ commentary on the same segments. On the other hand, al-Rāzī’s commentary on the first two segments of the verse are the most detailed and thorough of all six classical exegetes; he spends 4.5 pages just on the meaning of qurū’ in the second segment.

This variation in emphasis reflects the exegete’s own interests and hermeneutics. Certain debates and issues are either brought to life or left to the wayside, depending on the exegete’s own methodology. Those who utilize philology and logic as primary sources of interpretation, such as al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī, are naturally inclined to point out those issues that arise from an application of those disciplines. On the other hand, exegetes like Ibn Kathīr, who rely on a particular hierarchy of ḥadīth narrations, also emphasize those issues that arise from privileging ḥadīth over other sources of interpretation; the meanings deduced are also impacted by his selection of certain ḥadīth narrations as more authentic over other narrations of the same ḥadīth that have been cited by previous exegetes. For the purposes of this chapter, I compare the exegetes’ commentary on the last two segments of the verse: “women have rights [over men] like men’s rights [over women] bil-ma’rūf” and “men have a degree over them [women].”

II. Pre-Modern Exegetes: Reciprocal, but Unequal Rights

“… and women shall have rights like the rights against them, according to what is equitable …”

Pre-modern exegetical commentaries on this Qur’anic phrase oscillated between viewing men and women’s rights as equal or as reciprocal, but unequal. For the most part, however, pre-
modern exegetes interpret this Qur’anic phrase in a way that suggests that although men and women may have reciprocal rights, these rights are not the same. Initially, the exegetes’ terminology acknowledges that the aim or objective of husbands and wives’ reciprocal rights are the same (i.e. to provide companionship, not to harm the other), but as they elaborate on how each gender should fulfill those objectives, it becomes clear that each spouse has a very linear, gender-specific role to play. For example, in one of the earliest published Qur’anic exegesis, al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) cites three possible interpretations for this section of verse 2:228:

1. Men have the duty to provide benevolent friendship and companionship, while women should obey husbands as it relates to issues in which God has ordered her obedience.

2. Both spouses should attempt to look pleasing to the other; as evidence, he cites a report by 'Abdullāh Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687), “I like to adorn myself for my wife, just as I like her to adorn herself for me, because God said “wa lahunna mithlu lādhī 'alayhinna bil-ma'rūf.”

3. Men should not take back their divorcees (during the waiting period) unless they intend reconciliation and do not wish to harm them, while women should not conceal their pregnancies with the intention of harming their husbands if their husbands decide to take them back (during the waiting period).  

In this first opinion, al-Ṭabarī qualifies the obedience that women owe men by confining it to the realm of legal responsibilities, which some later exegetes expand unconditionally. This opinion qualifies women’s obedience to their husbands “in those issues in which God has

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ordered her obedience [fi-mā awjaba Allāhu ʿalayhā].”775 According to this interpretation, it is not necessary for her to obey the husband in everything, but rather, to obey him if he asks her to fulfill her legal responsibilities to him. This distinction is very important, because it does not imply unconditional obedience to the husband, an interpretation which later exegetes implied by un-qualifying the duty of obedience.

Al-Ṭabarī champions the third interpretation regarding the Qur’anic phrase “lahunna mithlu lladhī ʿalayhinna bil-ma rūf;” hence, bringing the discussion back to the legal context of divorce. For al-Ṭabarī, the reciprocal right that women and men presumably enjoy is the right not to be harmed by one’s spouse during the process of divorce. Both spouses have an equal right to be safe from the other spouse. Yet the ways in which each spouse could inflict harm upon the other differs based on the wording of this verse, which is also the basis for the legal rulings on this issue. Because men possess the prerogative for divorce in Islamic law and the right to take back their divorcees during their three-cycle776 waiting period, then the way men harm their wives is by taking back their wives them without any intent of reconciliation, but simply to harm them. Women, who uniquely possess the capacity for reproduction, inflict harm upon their husbands by concealing their pregnancies, or lack thereof, from them.

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775 Ibid.
776 There is a difference of opinion among the legal schools regarding whether three qurū’ means three cycles of purity or menstruation. The Mālikī and Shāfi‘ī position is that qur’ (sing.) is a cycle of purity, whereas the Ḥanbalīs and Ḥanafīs argued that qur’ is a menstrual cycle. Al-Rāzī is most explicit in recognizing the practical implications of how one interprets this term, as defining it one way or another changes the duration of the divorcee’s waiting period. If one defines qurū’ as menstrual cycles, then a woman’s waiting period is not complete until the end of her third period, whereas if one defines qurū’ as purity, her waiting period is complete at the start of her third period, which reduces the duration of her ‘idda, (3.6:77). Al-Ṭabarī indicates how defining it one way or another carries significance in other legal spheres beyond divorce. He cites a report in which the husband of a divorced woman dies while the woman is in the third menstrual cycle of her waiting period. The fifth Caliph, Mu‘āwiya, inquires whether this woman can inherit from her deceased husband or not. When no one knows, he rides to Zayd ibn Thābit, who says, “She does not inherit from him and if she had died, he would not inherit from her,” (al-Ṭabarī, 2:6). By defining the term qurū’ as purity, this woman was not allowed to inherit from her deceased ex-husband, whereas she would have inherited if the term was defined as menstrual cycle.
With some exception, the concept of complementary, but different rights continues to permeate the exegetical interpretation of the Qur’anic phrase, “...and women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable...” This is most evident in the exegesis of al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī (d. 1209) and al-Baydāwī (d. 1286), whose exegeses were separated by at least a half century. Al-Zamakhsharī affirms that the meaning of women and men’s reciprocal rights is regarding the obligation to fulfill them, not the type or substance of rights (lā fī jins al-ḥīl). “If she washes his clothes or bakes bread for him, this does not mean he is obliged to do the same,” al-Zamakhsharī writes. The objective of mumāthala in this verse is that each spouse should reciprocate good deeds to the other, because fulfilling a right is a good deed (ḥasana), he states.

For al-Rāzī, the purpose of marriage cannot be achieved unless each spouse considers the right of the other. The substance of these rights, however, considerably varies, with the exception of the “adornment” example he provides. Like al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī cites three examples of these reciprocal rights, although he writes that there are many more reciprocal rights. Al-Rāzī’s second and third examples are exactly the same as al-Ṭabarī’s second and third examples, indicating a reliance on the same sources or partial reliance on al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr:

1) The husband is like the leader (amīr) and the shepherd, while the wife is like the follower and the flock (al-raʾiyya). Because of his leadership, the man is mandated to fulfill her rights and interests (an yaqūm bi-ḥaqiqah wa maṣālīhah) and she, in turn, is mandated to manifest restraint and obedience to the husband.

777 Al-Zamakhsharī, 1:200.
778 Ibid.
779 Al-Rāzī, 3.6:81.
780 Stowasser writes regarding al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr, “The first complete “traditionist” (tradition-based) tafsīr still extent was authored by Ṭabarī (d. 923), on whose work all later exegeses of the same genre have heavily relied,” (Stowasser, “Gender Issues and Contemporary Qur’an Interpretation,” in Islam, Gender and Social Change, 32).
781 Al-Rāzī, 3.6:81.
2) Both genders should adorn themselves in order to look pleasing to the other; and
3) Men should not take back their divorcees (during their waiting period) unless they intend reconciliation and women should not conceal their pregnancies during their waiting period.  

While al-Rāzī’s first example bears resemblance to al-Ṭabarī’s first example, al-Rāzī removes the constriction that al-Ṭabarī imposed on women’s obedience to men; it is no longer confined to her legal responsibilities Although al-Rāzī does not regard this first interpretation to be the strongest, its terminology introduces the concept of a hierarchal relationship between men and women, in which women should display obedience to their husbands. However, the opinion that al-Rāzī believes to be the strongest is the third, because this is connected to the context of the first half of the verse. In the context of a woman’s waiting period after a man’s pronouncement of divorce, the mutual rights that spouses have over each other is that men intend reconciliation and not harm in taking back their wives (during this period) and that women not conceal what is in their wombs, according to al-Rāzī. Al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī both interpret the Qur’anic statement on reciprocal rights as linked to the context of the waiting period established by this verse.

Al-Bayḍāwī’s interpretation is void of references to wifely obedience, but upholds the notion of reciprocal, but different rights. Al-Bayḍāwī is explicit that men and women’s rights are not the same. Like al-Zamakhsharī, he writes, “Women have rights like men’s rights in terms of the necessity [for men] to fulfill them and women’s right to demand them [their rights], but not...

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782 Ibid.
783 Men have the duty to provide benevolent friendship and companionship, while women should obey husbands as it relates to issues in which God has ordered her obedience,” (Ṭabarī, 2:11).
784 Al-Rāzī, 3.6:81.
In his interpretation of “but men have a degree over them,” he elaborates what he means by the ‘different type of rights’ that each gender possesses. He explains that husbands’ rights are over the bodies of their wives (“fī anfusihinna”), presumably meaning that women be sexually available and not leave their homes without their husbands’ permission. Al-Bayḍāwī elaborates that women’s rights are that their husbands pay them a dower, financially support them, abstain from harming them, and similar rights. For al-Bayḍāwī and al-Zamakhsharī, the interpretations they put forth are not restricted to the legal context of this verse, but more broadly denote men and women’s mutual rights in a marriage.

Al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) returns to al-Ṭabarī’s initial restriction of wifely obedience to the domain of legal responsibilities. Further, three of the four mutual rights he lists equally apply to both spouses. In other words, his interpretation comes closest to rendering these rights as equal rather than merely reciprocal. The first reciprocal right, according to al-Qurṭubī, is that both spouses should attempt to look pleasing to the other. He later elaborates extensively on the ways in which men can adorn themselves, concluding that if men are unable to fulfill their wives’ sexual rights, they should resort to medicine to “strengthen their desire … in order to protect their wives [from pursuing sexual affairs with other men].” In this way, al-Qurṭubī’s exegesis is unique in acknowledging men’s sexual responsibilities towards their wives. Writing about al-Qurṭubī’s opinion in this matter, Bauer writes, “He further breaks with the pattern seen in other musalsal works of his age by focusing on men’s duty to women, especially in his emphasis on

\[\text{785} \text{ My emphasis. He writes “lā fil-jins” (al-Bayḍāwī, 1:122).} \]
\[\text{786} \text{ Ibid.} \]
men’s satisfying women sexually and keeping them happy, so that they remain with their husbands and do not go to other men.”

The second reciprocal right that al-Qurṭubī cites diverges from an understanding of equal rights for spouses, as he mentions that men should provide benevolent friendship and companionship to their wives, while women should obey their husbands in those matters that God has ordained for women to obey them. Like al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī constricts wifely obedience to the realm of legal responsibilities, rather than leaving it open-ended. The third and fourth reciprocal right of both spouses is not to harm the other and to be mindful of God in how they treat one another.

Ibn Kathīr’s strong ḥadīth orientation manifests itself in his interpretation of 2:228. For Ibn Kathīr, the ḥadīth stands as the best interpreter of the Qurʾan. In the presence of a ḥadīth, there is little else to say, according to his ḥadīth-oriented methodology. Therefore, he provides a minimal interpretation that “women have rights over men like men have rights over them, so each of them should fulfill one’s responsibilities towards the other.” Instead, Ibn Kathīr relies on two prophetic ḥadīth and one quotation from Ibn ʿAbbās to provide the commentary on “lahunna mithlu lladhī ‘alayhinna bil-maʿrūf.” This first prophetic tradition is part of the Prophet’s last Ḥajj sermon (khūṭbat al-wadā’). Although “the ḥadīth itself does not seem to have any exegetical element,” Chaudhry writes, it was generally cited by pre-modern exegetes in their

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788 Bauer, 96-97.
789 Al-Qurṭubī, 3:124. He cites al-Ṭabarī as the source of the third opinion, that both should refrain from harming the other. He does not include the specific ways in which men and women hurt each other in this context, which Al-Ṭabarī brings back to the context of the divorcee’s waiting period.
interpretation of Q. 4:34 as legitimating a man’s right to physically discipline his wife.  

According to the shorter narration of the ḥadīth, the Prophet said:

Fear God concerning women, indeed you take them as a trust from God, and intercourse with them has been made permissible for you by God’s word. Your rights over them are that they do not give your beds to anyone that you dislike. If they do this, then hit them in a non-injurious manner (ghayr mubarrih). Their rights over you are that you feed them and clothe them in a manner that is according to proper standards (bil-ma’rūf).  

While this hadīth is often cited in regards to Q. 4:34, Ibn Kathīr is the first of the six exegetes to cite this tradition in his exegetical commentary on Q. 2:228. The second hadīth he cites is the following:

On the authority of Ḥakīm b. Mu‘āwiya, on the authority of his father, [who said that] he came to the Prophet, peace be upon him, and said, What is one of our wives’ rights over us? The Prophet responded, ‘That he feeds her, clothes her, does not hit her face, does not insult her, and does not ostracize her except in the house’ (lā tahjur ʾillā fī al-bayt).  

Both traditions support the exegetical interpretation of Q. 2:228 to mean that spouses owe each other reciprocal, but different rights. It is only Ibn Kathīr’s last citation of Ibn ʿAbbās that supports the notion that women and men have equal rights: Men should adorn themselves in order to look pleasing to their wives, just like they expect their wives to do the same for them. This mutual right, mentioned by al-Ṭabarī and reiterated by later exegetes, seems to undermine the notion of unequal rights between spouses.

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92 Chaudhry, “Wife-Beating in the Pre-Modern Islamic Tradition,” 52. Chaudhry mentions that some pre-modern exegetes, like al-Qurṭubī and Abū Bakr ʿArābī cited the Ḥajj ḥadīth when interpreting the meaning of nushūz in 4:34, while other exegetes, such as Ibn Qudāmah cited this ḥadīth to qualify that hitting one’s wife must be ghayr mubarrih (266-7; 391).
93 With the exception of “proper standards,” and “non-injurious” the rest of this is Chaudhry’s translation (53). Chaudhry translates ghayr mubarrih as non-extreme, whereas I consider non-injurious to be a more precise translate. She also translates bil-ma’rūf as “according to custom,” which I find problematic because it was not the mainstream or majority interpretation. Bauer writes that “according to custom” is a literal translation but does not “bring(s) out the real sense of the phrase,” (20). Elsewhere, Bauer notes that interpreting bil-ma’rūf as ‘according to custom’ was a minority exegetical position (87).
94 Bauer’s translation, 168. Also see Chaudhry, 260.
95 Ibn Kathīr, 1:365.
The reciprocity of men and women’s rights is a central theme to all six pre-modern exegetes. For some exegetes, al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī, the mention of women and men’s reciprocal rights in this verse was linked to the context of a woman’s waiting period after the pronouncement of divorce. Therefore, these reciprocal rights are equal in their intent, which is to prevent each spouse from inflicting harm upon the other. The substance of these rights, however, differs because men and women harm each other in different ways, particularly in the context of this waiting period. For other exegetes, like al-Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, and Ibn Kathīr, the reciprocity of men and women’s rights mentioned in this verse have broader application and are not limited to the context of divorce. Rather, they interpret these rights as the rights that each spouse has within a marriage. For al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī, the reciprocity of women’s rights lies in the obligation to fulfill each other’s rights, but not in the substance of rights. Of all six exegetes, al-Qurṭubī brings the focus the most on men’s duty to sexually gratify their wives, although he notes that the obligation to please each other is mutual. He bases this position on Ibn ’Abbās’ interpretation regarding the obligation of both spouses to adorn themselves to each other. Al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī and Ibn Kathir all cite this same narration by Ibn ’Abbās’, but none develop it to the level that al-Qurṭubī does.

III. Modern Exegetes on Spouses’ Reciprocal Rights

A. ʿAbduh

1. Proponent of Women’s Rights

Historians have identified ʿAbduh as “one of the most influential thinkers on reforms with respect to women.” ʿAbduh viewed the education and liberation of women as essential to

796 Qurṭubī, 3:124.
797 Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, 138. Yvonne Haddad writes, for “Modernists such as Muhammad ṬAbduh...change in the role of women was from the beginning among the most important concerns, especially in areas of education, seclusion, polygyny and divorce,” (“Islam and Gender: Dilemmas in the Changing Arab World,”
the moral rebirth of a Muslim society. His conception of women’s liberation, however, strongly departs from a western feminist paradigm in that he maintained certain conservative views regarding women’s role. Specifically, he upheld the “traditional” idea that men should be the leaders of women in the household. Still, what one reads in ʿAbduh’s *tafsīr* is without question some of the most enlightened, gender-progress and original views that one can find in pre-modern and modern exegeses on gender issues.

His *tafsīr* on Q. 2:228 reflects the ways in which ʿAbduh’s commentary on women represents a new approach and signals a critique of previous exegetes’ positions on gender. The Qur’anic phrase that “women have rights like the rights against them [i.e. responsibilities]” in Q. 2:228 is evidence for ʿAbduh of the Qur’an’s equal treatment of women and men. ʿAbduh turns this evidence into an opportunity to refute Western criticism of Islam’s treatment of women. In doing so, however, ʿAbduh often points to Muslims’ own shortcomings in respect to the principles established by their religion. His commentary functions as a response to colonialist rhetoric on Islam and gender as well as an internal critique of Muslims’ treatment of women.

In many ways, ʿAbduh’s *tafsīr* also functions as a critique of the pre-modern exegetical tradition as a whole. He believed that exegetes had become too engrossed in linguistic and legal technicalities at the expense of conveying the general meaning of the Qur’an’s words and awakening the text’s relevance to society. Consciously eschewing most of the debates that preoccupied pre-modern exegetes, ʿAbduh instead turns his *tafsīr* into a platform to educate the public about the Qur’an’s teachings. Nonetheless, one finds in *Tafsīr al-Manār* a selective engagement with the exegetical tradition through Riḍā’s edits to ʿAbduh’s *tafsīr*.

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3-4). Barbara Stowasser, argues that ʿAbduh “identified women’s liberation from male oppression…as an essential precondition for the building of a virtuous society,” (Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 6).

798 Stowasser, 6.
2. Qualified Gender Equality

ʿAbduh’s interpretation of the Qur’anic phrase “and women have rights like the rights against them” signals a new approach in comparison to pre-modern exegetes. Pre-modern exegetes believed that this Qur’anic phrase reflects only a reciprocity of rights between men and women, not necessarily an equality of rights. Whereas al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī had both argued, for example, that the reciprocity between men and women’s rights is not in the type of rights (lā fil-jins), ʿAbduh specifically refutes this by establishing that men and women have rights that are equal in type, fil-jins, even if those rights are not identical. For ʿAbduh, this verse establishes gender equality in all matters except for one, which he identifies as family leadership. In departure from pre-modern exegetes, ʿAbduh specifically uses the term musāwā, equality.

Commenting on “and women have rights like the rights against them,” ʿAbduh writes:

This is a comprehensive principle which expresses that a woman is equal [musāwiya] to a man in all rights except for one matter, which is expressed in God’s statement ‘and men have a degree over them.’

ʿAbduh also affirms that men and women are similar in their ontology (al-dhāt), feelings, sentiment, and mind, which stands in contrast to certain pre-modern exegetical depictions of men and women as ontologically different. ʿAbduh writes, “Each of them [man and woman] is a complete human being with a mind that thinks about its interests, with a heart that loves what is agreeable to one and makes one happy, and hates that which is disagreeable to one and repels one.” As further evidence that Islam treats women and men equally, ʿAbduh adds to this interpretation,

800 Tafsīr al-Manār, 2:375.
801 Ibn Kathīr’s opinion in this regards is strongest and comes through clearly in his commentary of Q. 4:34 and Q. 2:228.
802 Tafsīr al-Manār, 2:375.
God addresses women as He does men in regards to beliefs, knowledge, and righteous deeds in worship [ʿibādāt] and social interactions [muʿāmalāt]. He made women’s rights upon men equal to men’s rights upon women. In many verses, God pairs women’s names with men’s names.⁸⁰³ The Prophet peace be upon him took an oath of allegiance from the female believers, just as he took an oath of allegiance [bāyaʿa] from male believers. He also ordered women to learn the Qurʾan and ḥikma, as he ordered men. And there is a consensus among the entire umma, based on the Qurʾan and sunna, that women are rewarded for their deeds in this world and the next.⁸⁰⁴

ʿAbduh’s emphasis on woman’s equality to man is also true in his commentary on other verses. For example, Stowasser illustrates that in ʿAbduh’s Qurʾanic commentary on Eve, “ʿAbduh places great importance on the notions of woman’s full humanity and equality with the man before God, both because they are Qurʾanic in origin and also because they are, in his opinion, indispensible in shaping a truly moral society.”⁸⁰⁵

3. *Tafsīr Al-Manār*: Intersection of Qurʾanic Commentary and Historical Context

The intersection of Qurʾanic commentary and historical context manifests in ʿAbduh’s commentary of verse 2:228. As discussed in chapter three, ʿAbduh represents one of the earliest responses to western critiques of Islam’s treatment of women. He reads into this verse evidence that Islam’s treatment of women is not only just, but far surpasses women’s treatment in European or other nations. He was one of the first intellectuals to articulate the idea that it was Islam, and not the West, “that first recognized the full and equal humanity of women.”⁸⁰⁶ In his *tafsīr* of Q. 2:228, he depicts Islam as a champion of women’s rights in human history. He writes,

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⁸⁰³ The most evident and referenced verse in this regards is 33:35: “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 Allah’s praise, - for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward” (Yūsuf ‘Alī’s translation). Other verses that address male and female believers in pair include 9:71-72, 24:12, 33:58, 33:73, 48:5, 37:12, among many others.
⁸⁰⁵ Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾan*, 34.
⁸⁰⁶ Ahmed, 139.
This status to which women have been elevated [in Islam] has not been realized by any previous religion or any legal system. In fact, no nation of nations before Islam or after it [have granted women this status]. And these European nations, which, as a result of their progress, have boasted of the dignity and respect they pay to women, and have attended to women’s education in the sciences and arts, still remain short of the status that Islam gave to women. They deny women the right to freely act with their own wealth without their husbands’ permission, and other such rights that Islam granted women nearly three hundred and fifty years ago…and these French, whose civility is short of our Sharī’ā in its elevation of women, have become boastful over us. In fact, they accuse us of savagery in our treatment of women. And those who are ignorant of Islam among them think that our current conditions are the result of our religion.\textsuperscript{807}

Western criticism of Islam is due to a combination of ignorance and a distortion between Islam and Muslims’ behavior, according to ‘Abduh. The problem is that Muslims do not live up to the ideals and principles that Islam established regarding women’s fair treatment, according to ‘Abduh. In fact, the treatment of women by men at large is an indication of how distant Muslims have become from their religion, Abduh believes. “If you want to know the distance between the actions of most Muslims and their own beliefs about their religion, just look to their treatment of women,” he writes.\textsuperscript{808}

A wide gulf separates theory and reality in terms of women’s treatment. He writes, if you ask men about their rights over women, they repeat what most jurists have stated: they (women) do not have to serve the home nor cook, clean, wash laundry, breastfeed children, raise children or even supervise the servants that we hire for them. Rather, men’s rights over them are simply that they not leave the home without their permission and not refuse their husbands sexually.\textsuperscript{809}

This is the ideal which most men describe, according to ‘Abduh, yet the reality of what most men demand is a stark contrast to this. Rather, you will find that they oppress their women,

\textsuperscript{807} Tafsīr Al-Manār, 2:376.
\textsuperscript{808} Ibid., 2:379.
\textsuperscript{809} Ibid., 2:379-380.
burden them beyond their capacity and constantly complain about their shortcomings, ‘Abduh writes.  

Throughout his commentary on Q. 2:228, ‘Abduh stresses the need for female education. Regarding the Qur’anic statement that women must not conceal what is in their wombs, during their waiting period, “if they believe in God and the last Day,” ‘Abduh writes this can only be realized if women have true faith. Yet Muslims have failed to instill the fundamentals of faith in the hearts of women and men, he laments. “Who among us cares to teach girls the precepts of faith or to raise them according to those deeds that will instill these principles [of faith] in their minds and hearts?”

Indicating that men are also in need of religious education, he then poses, And which man will do this when men themselves are not taught the religion except for a few of them? And these men consider women as entertainment not humans like them, so they leave them and their affairs [their education] and do not consider the ill-effects that will ensue from girls being neglected and the vices [that will proceed] of their [girls’] ignorance.

‘Abduh’s focus on education was not only rhetorical, but put into practice. The reform and rebirth that ‘Abduh envisioned for Muslim societies could only be realized through education, he believed. Education was a means to empowerment and advancement. As Ahmed describes, “In response to the pressing demand for education and to the British curbs on attaining it, such figures as Muhammad ‘Abdu founded Muslim benevolent societies and private committees for the purpose of establishing schools.” These societies also fulfilled the need for primary girls’ education by enrolling 1,164 girls in schools by 1897 and much more by 1909.

In making a case for women’s fair treatment and education in verse 2:228, ‘Abduh frames this as for society’s interest at large. Women must be educated in order to fulfill their

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810 Ibid., 2:379.  
811 Ibid., 2:373.  
812 Ibid., 2:373-4.  
813 Ahmed, 138.  
814 Ibid.
obligations, for it is impossible for a person who is ignorant of one’s responsibilities to fulfill them. Men are the ones responsible for educating women, according to ’Abduh, as this falls under their degree of leadership over women.\textsuperscript{815} This fulfills a societal interest because a society cannot advance in this world or the hereafter when half of its population is like animals, not fulfilling their duties to God, themselves, their families or people, and the second half of its population is close to this because they also do not fulfill their duties, except minimally.\textsuperscript{816}

Circumstances have changed and people must expand their knowledge to include new sciences and disciplines, according to ’Abduh. Interestingly, he mentions that women should gain a certain level of medical knowledge. Again, this fulfills a general societal interest for at least two reasons. The first reason he mentions is for propriety. “Which is of the two scenarios does Islam regard as superior, that a wife tends to her husband when he gets sick, or that a foreign nurse tends to him, seeing his private parts and the secrets of his home?”\textsuperscript{817} The second reason is to avert serious harm. If women are ignorant in the basics of this science, they could inadvertently kill the sick in their family by over-dosing them on certain harmful drugs or mistakenly giving the wrong drug, ’Abduh writes.\textsuperscript{818}

4. Critique of Exegetical Tradition

Despite \textit{Tafsīr al-Manār}’s sparse citation of some previous exegetes, such as al-Ṭabarī and Ibn al-Mundhir al-Naysābūrī, in many respects, it signals a critique of the pre-modern exegetical tradition. ’Abduh and Riḍā both reserve much criticism of certain exegetical methodologies, specifically pre-modern exegetes’ preoccupation with philological issues and

\textsuperscript{815} \textit{Tafsīr Al-Manār}, 2:377.
\textsuperscript{816} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{817} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{818} Ibid., 2:378.
These debates, ʿAbduh felt, only detracted from the Qurʾan’s main message and its intent to be a source of guidance. This criticism comes to bear in ʿAbduh’s interpretation of verse 2:228. Whereas pre-modern exegetes each brought forth an arsenal of etymology, poetry, grammar, prophetic ḥadīth, reports by Companions, law, logic and philosophy to determine the meaning of qurūʾ and establish its legal implications, among other issues in this verse, ʿAbduh simply explains that the term qurūʾ could mean either of these two meanings: menstruation or purity. It is not that ʿAbduh and Riḍā are not aware of the pre-modern debate surrounding the term qurūʾ, but they consciously eschew the legal and philological controversy. Riḍā writes, “The exegetes dragged on in determining and championing between the two meanings of [qar’].” Each group has its linguistic evidence, he writes, after which he quickly summarizes the positions according to legal schools. Reflecting ʿAbduh’s tendency to diminish minute legal differences, he states that both opinions fulfill the objective of determining whether or not the divorcee is pregnant during this waiting period. Whether she undergoes three menstrual cycles or three cycles of purity [in between menstruations], in both circumstances, it provide evidence whether or not she is pregnant. “It is easy to argue the opposing position,” he states.

In Q. 2:228, ʿAbduh also criticizes taqlīd and the regurgitation of views when it comes to women’s issues in specific. One of the issues that arise in pre-modern exegetical commentaries on this verse is why God adds the preposition and noun “bi-anfusihinna” after ordering women to withhold themselves during their waiting period. The phrase reads: “al-muṭallaqāt

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819 See for his example his criticism of exegetes’ reliance on poetry to justify the Qurʾan’s syntax in certain verses or the meanings of words. In his commentary on Q. 2:200, ʿAbduh writes that the Qurʾan should be the basis of linguistic reform, not the other way around. Rather than interpret the Qurʾan through poetry, the Qurʾan itself functions as the arbiter of meaning and becomes a primary source through which to understand the Arabic language (Tafsīr Al-Manār, 2:235-6)

820 Tafsīr Al-Manār, 2:381.

821 Ibid.
yatarabbaṣna bi-anfusihinna [divorced women shall wait concerning themselves]”. Some exegetes took this opportunity to dwell on the nature of women, stating that women naturally desire and yearn for men, which is why God orders them to withhold themselves from remarrying until the end of the three-cycle waiting period. Among the exegetes who say this are al-Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, and al-Rāzī. Regarding why God mentions the word anfus in this clause, al-Rāzī repeats al-Zamakhsharī’s words verbatim, “that is because women’s anfus 822 are desirous of men, so God wanted them to suppress themselves, overcome their desires and force restraint upon it.” 823

ʿAbduh and Riḍā both find the exegetes’ speculation of women’s desires totally inappropriate to this verse and lacking in accuracy or meaning. ʿAbduh states, “some people have claimed that al-tarabbuṣ bil-anfus here means her [the divorcee’s] constraint and preventing her from falling into a deluge of illicit desire, and they reasoned this (ʿallalū dhālika) by [stating that] women are greater in desire than men.” 824 He then goes on to critique this explanation as the by-product of regurgitating opinions without proof or knowledge. This judgment on women’s nature and emotions has no basis, according to ʿAbduh. He states, “Rather, men are the ones who used to, and continue [wa mā zālū], to seek and desire women. Then they oppress women even in their judgment of women’s natures and sentiments. Each of them take this from the other by submission and taqlīd.” 825

822 The term anfus could refer to a number of meanings, such as souls, spirit, desires, bodies, nature, etc. In the context of these exegetes’ commentaries who adopt the position that women are desirous of men, they most likely use the term anfus to denote women’s nature or spirit.

823 823 “وذلك أن أنفس النساء طوامح إلى الرجال ، فأمرن أن يقمعن أنفسهن ويغلبنها على الطموح ويجبرنها على التربص (al-Zamakhsharī, 1:206; al-Rāzī, 3:75). Reflective of al-Bayḍāwī’s terse style, he abbreviates al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī’s phrases and writes, “women’s spirits are desirous of men so God ordered them to suppress it and make it [their nafs] wait,” (1:121).

824 Taṣfīr al-Manār, 2:372.

825 I refrain from translating the term taqlīd in this dissertation due to the scholarly disagreement on its precise meaning, as mentioned in chapter two. In this instance, it is clear that ʿAbduh means taqlīd as imitation, but to consistently translate taqlīd as imitation or blind imitation is problematic, especially in the legal realm. For a
Despite the fact that ‘Abduh also maintains some of the exegetes’ conservative views (specifically with men’s leadership over women), he consciously takes a line of critique towards previous exegetes’ commentary on women issues. For ‘Abduh, the prevalence of misunderstanding and injustice towards women is due to the fact that people regurgitate what they hear without any deliberation. While one cannot label ‘Abduh’s commentary a feminist reading of the Qur’an, there is no question that his commentary on women signals a new approach and a conscious rejection of patriarchal and gender-unfriendly interpretations of the Qur’an.

5. Expanding the Meaning of “Bil-Maʿrūf”

Before examining the issue of “bil-maʿrūf,” it is important to note that there is a difficulty in fully ascertaining whether Riḍā or ‘Abduh is speaking in certain parts of Tafsīr al-Manār in the second sūra, whereas this is not the case in the fourth sūra. Based on my analysis of Tafsīr al-Manār on the fourth sūra, I have found that it is quite easy and straight-forward to distinguish between ‘Abduh and Riḍā’s words in that chapter. This distinction is not as easy to make in Tafsīr al-Manār in the second sūra. The reason for this particularity in the second sūra is due to the following factors, in my assessment. First, a significant development occurs in Riḍā’s edits to ‘Abduh’s tafsīr at verse 2:228 in specific. According to Riḍā’s notes, his teacher had just passed away at writing the tafsīr of verse 2:228. Second, based on Jansen’s sources,

criticism of viewing taqlīd as imitation, see Sherman Jackson who argues that it is inaccurate to view taqlīd as a more primitive stage of legal development. Demonstrating the centrality of “legal scaffolding” to taqlīd, Jackson argues that “it is in this very process of legal scaffolding that a legal tradition reaches the height of innovative acumen,” (Islamic Law and the State: The Constitutional Jurisprudence of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996], 99).

826 Tafsīr al-Manār, 2:372.
827 Ibid.
828 “…Kāna ‘inda kitābat tafsīr al-āya qad tuwufiyya…” (Tafsīr al-Manār, 2:370n1).
Riḍā had shown drafts of the *tafsīr* to ṬAbduh before they were published.\(^{829}\) This would mean that prior to verse 2:228, Riḍā would have presumably consulted with ṬAbduh directly and not felt a pressing need to clearly distinguish his own words from his teacher’s. Prior to this, Riḍā indicated for the most part his teacher’s words, but not always his own edits. After ṬAbduh’s death, however, Riḍā gradually begins to formulate a method for clearly and consistently distinguishing ṬAbduh’s commentary from his own views.

The reason this is significant in this section is because the distinction between Riḍā and ṬAbduh’s words is rather blurred in the commentary on “*bil-maʿrūf*” in this verse. However, my close analysis of their views in other parts of *Tafsīr al-Manār*, where the delineation between their views is sharper, leads to me believe that the views on “*bil-maʿrūf*” belong to Riḍā. While this cannot be ascertained without doubt, there are some indications that strongly suggest these words belong to Riḍā. First, he cites other exegetical and juristic works, which is peculiar to Riḍā as opposed to ṬAbduh. Second, the conservatism of these views leads me to believe this is Riḍā speaking, as my analysis of their clearly-distinguished views in chapter four has illustrated that Riḍā takes a more conservative position than ṬAbduh on gender matters. I discuss this in greater detail in chapters three and four.

The *tafsīr* on this section appears to take the gender discourse a step backwards in its expansion of the meaning of “*bil-maʿrūf*” to accommodate the *ʿurf* or customs of people. Accordingly, Riḍā makes a case for including housework under women’s duties. While he admits that legal schools do not oblige women to do domestic housework, he argues that based on a consideration of *ʿurf*, a woman should fulfill this type of work due to the interests of her family. There is one exegetical precedent for this, based on Bauer’s research, in al-

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\(^{829}\) Citing Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, 199, Jansen quotes, “Rashīd Riḍā attended these lectures and took notes, which he afterwards revised and enlarged. The result was shown to Muhammad ṬAbduh who approved or corrected as necessary…” (Jansen, 24).
Zamakhshari's *tafsīr*. Bauer notes that this opinion was also peculiar at the time he writes this.

According to Bauer,

> Al-Zamakhshari takes this discourse [of regulating women] to a new level by actually recommending different household chores for each spouse, which earlier exegeses never do. I argue that exegesis develops according to current societal norms and mores; al-Zamakhshari is a good example of an exegete who directly states that social practice can affect interpretation. He does so by interpreting the term *bi'l-*ma'rūf differently from any other exegete: he says it is a reference to people’s customs, not to kindness.  

Although there is no precedent for al-Zamakhshari’s interpretation of “*bil-*ma’ruf” as an accommodation of custom, it is cited by some of the exegetes that follow him, according to Bauer. This uncommon interpretation makes a re-appearance in *Tafsīr al-Manār* in the twentieth century, oddly enough. Riḍā writes, “The verse indicates that *ʿurf* should be taken into consideration in [delineating] the rights of each spouse over the other, as long as the *ʿurf* does not permit something prohibited [in the religion] or prohibit what is made permissible and the *ʿurf* changes according to the changes of people and time." Whereas what women need to know in terms of theology and *ʿibādāt* (acts of worship) is fixed, women’s duties regarding house management, child rearing and other matters that fall under the rulings of *muʿāmalāt* (interactions), change according to the changes in time, place and circumstance, he states.

Recognizing that an argument for domestic chores as a woman’s responsibility defies the legal schools’ dominant opinion, Riḍā lays out a rebuttal. He first notes that most of the legal schools state that a woman’s responsibility to her husband is not to sexually refuse him. “They state that she does not have to knead dough, bake bread, cook, or [fulfill] other matters related to the interests of his home, money and property. Yet what is closer to the guidance of this verse is

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830 My own insertion, based on Bauer’s previous sentence.
831 Bauer, 97.
832 Ibid.
834 Ibid., 2:377.
what was stated by some muḥaddithūn and Ḥanbalī jurists,” Riḍā writes. He cites the opinion of the Ḥanbali legal text Ḥāshiyat al-Muṣnī, by Muwaffaq al-Dīn ’Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223), that women are not obliged to do housework. As a rebuttal to this, however, he cites two other opinions who state that women are indeed obliged to do housework. Their evidence for this is the prophetic tradition in which the Prophet, peace be upon him, requested that his daughter Fāṭima do housework, Riḍā states. Interestingly, Riḍā does not cite the tradition, but only references it. Riḍā’s omission of this ḥadīth is rather interesting, because the ḥadīth does not actually impose housework upon Fāṭima or women, in general. Rather, the ḥadīth deals with a specific situation in which Fāṭima went to her father’s home to complain of what has become of her hands due to milling (i.e. the difficulties of her house chores) and to request a servant. When Prophet Muḥammad heard of Fāṭima’s complaint from Aisha, he went to both Fāṭima and Ali and offered them a prayer that would fulfill their needs more than a servant would. According to the ḥadīth, when they retire to bed, they should say “Subḥān-Allāh,” “Al-ḥamdulillāh” and “Allāhu Akbar” thirty three times each.

Riḍā’s reliance on a ḥadīth to counter the dominant positions of the four legal schools, in my opinion, is a reflection of his later salafī tendencies, which have been established by many scholars. As Nafi writes, after World War I, Riḍā “became associated with Saudi-Wahhābī circles and his salafī convictions became more pronounced.” Riḍā concludes that women are to administer their homes and do the housework, while the husbands are to earn a living outside,

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835 Ibid., 2:379. These opinions belong to Abū Bakr ibn Abī Shayba and Al-Jawzījānī.
836 The famous commentator of Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ibn Ḥajr al-ʿAsqalānī, writes in Fath al-Bārī regarding this ḥadīth, “من أعظم قوة يعطي الله ذكرك ل_PHASE_ أنت، وكما سألتما على ما أكلهما بنو داود أنت الذي يلزم نكر الله بعشي أعظم من، عليه بحيث يكون تعالى أسوأ من تاعطي الخادم لها، فإذا استثمر بعضهم من الحديث، والذي يظهر أن المراد أن تعن التسبيح مختص بالدار بالآخرة وتعن الخادم مختص بالدار الدنيا، والأخيرة خير وأبقى”
Riḍā writes.\textsuperscript{839} This division of labor accords with human *fiṭra* and fulfills societal interests. This is the meaning of men and women’s *mumāthala*, reciprocity of rights, according to Riḍā. This does not preclude each from helping the other in times of necessity or from using the aid of a servant or helper if there is a need, he states.\textsuperscript{840} On one hand Riḍā’s expansion of the meaning of *bil-maʿrūf* to accommodate customary norms, according to which women must fulfill housework, seems to be a step backwards for women relative to legal opinions that she is not obliged to do housework. On the other hand, it is also a way for Riḍā to argue for the legal accommodation of changes in societal circumstances and customs. If the Qur’anic phrase *bil-maʿrūf* means ‘according to custom,’ then it allows a level of flexibility in applying rules according to the norms and customs of a society.

**B. Ibn ʿAshūr**

1. Qur’anic Reform of Gender Abuse

The themes that arise in *al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr* regarding verse 2:228 are: 1) this verse is a declaration of women’s rights and 2) Islam came to abolish existing injustices against women, 3) men and women’s rights are reciprocal but not equal. These first two themes are very similar to what one finds in *Tafsīr al-Manār* with subtle differences, which I will point out. First, a prevalent theme in Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafsīr* on this verse is the notion that the Qur’an initiated the reform of gender injustices that existed in pre-Islamic society. Unlike ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr makes this argument based on a linguistic and grammatical analysis of the Qur’anic text. As illustrated in chapter two, the placement of every single word and letter in the Qur’an has significance for Ibn ʿĀshūr. Nothing is arbitrarily placed. The order of verses, the positioning of subjects in

\textsuperscript{839} *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2:379.

\textsuperscript{840} Ibid.
relation to predicates, the unique placement of prepositions and conjunctions, among countless other linguistic devices, all serve to create internal coherence and enhance meaning.

Ibn `Āshūr makes his argument by paying attention to the Qur’an’s use of linguistic and rhetorical devices. First, consistent with his philological focus, he brings attention to the fact that women’s rights are mentioned before men’s rights in the verse. In the Arabic structure of the clause, lahunna mithlu lladhī `alayhinna, the prepositional phrase841 lahunna, functions as a predicate. Yet this predicate precedes the subject “mithl” and the prepositional statement “‘alayhinna,” Ibn ‘Āshūr notes.842 The reason for this is to bring attention to the importance of the predicate, khabar, he writes,

because it is of the akhbār843 that the listeners do not expect, so it was brought forward (fa-qudima) in order for the listeners to pay attention to the subject,844 as opposed to what it would be if it [the khabar] was delayed and it was said, ‘like the rights that men have, women have’ (mithlu lladhī ‘alayhinna lahunna). And in this [expression, as it is] is a declaration of women’s rights, and an explicit proclamation and praise of it [women’s rights] … and for this reason, it occupies a place of importance.”845

The reason God brings forth the predicate lahunna, “unto women” in this clause is to bring attention to the fact that women have rights, just as men have rights, Ibn ‘Āshūr affirms. Whereas men’s rights over women have been recognized and granted to them from the earliest centuries of human existence, women’s rights on the other hand have not been duly recognized, he states. Rather, women’s rights have been neglected and left at the mercy of the husband to whom she is married, “until Islam came to uphold women’s rights,” Ibn ‘Āshūr declares.846 He

841 شبه جملة
842 Ibn ‘Āshūr, 2:397.
843 This is a play on words here, which is common in Ibn ‘Āshūr’s tafsīr. Grammatically speaking, khabar means predicate, but in this clause, he uses the plural form of khabar to mean news or reports.
844 When the subject is delayed and the predicate is brought forth, the listener has to wait to find out who or what the subject is. For example, if one compares the two sentences, it becomes clear how the former sentence creates more suspense than the latter: A. After years of hard work, he failed. B. He failed after years of hard work.
845 Ibn ‘Āshūr, 2:397.
846 Ibid., 2:396.
follows this with two reports, one from ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (narrated in Ṣaḥīḥ Būkharī) and one from Ibn ʿAbbās, which both indicate that the advent of Islam and the hijra to Medina served to elevate women’s status at the time.847

Unlike ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr does not address colonial criticism of Islam directly. Yet his discourse on Islam’s championing of women’s rights in this verse is evidence of his attempt to engage and counter western and secular criticism of women’s treatment in Islam. Ibn ʿĀshūr puts the Qur’an in historical context and argues that it unquestionably improved women’s lot in society. He describes the ways in which women’s rights were abused and neglected in pre-Islamic jāhiliyya. During pre-Islamic jāhiliyya, when a woman’s husband died, she was inherited by his male heirs. If they wished, they would marry her, if she was lawful to them, and if not, they married her to whomever they sought or kept her with them, he describes.848 This is why God revealed verse 4:19.849 He also describes an incident immediately after the Hijra in which an Anṣār (resident of Medina) offered to relinquish his wife to one of the muhājirīn (migrants from Mecca). These incidents, among others that Ibn ʿĀshūr mentions, all serve to demonstrate the ways in which women were mistreated. In this context, the Qur’an’s reformist objective sought to eliminate abuses against women, Ibn ʿĀshūr argues:850

When Islam came with [the aim of] reform, among the matters which it rectified for all states of human creation is the delineation of spousal rights in a way that did not allow room for their violation, as God established arbitration even for those unknown matters as in [verse 4:35]851 and this never existed in previous legislations [i.e. religions]. And the first declaration of this justice between

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847 Ibid., 2:397.
848 Ibid., 2:398.
849 “O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness, that ye may Take away part of the dower ye have given them,-except where they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If ye take a dislike to them it may be that ye dislike a thing, and Allah brings about through it a great deal of good.” Yūsuf ʿAlī translation.
850 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2:398.
851 “And if you have reason to fear that a breach might occur between a [married] couple, appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people; if they both want to set things aright, God may bring about their reconciliation. Behold, God is indeed all-knowing, aware.” Muḥammad Asad translation.
spouses in their [mutual] rights is this great verse, as it was one of the first verses revealed in Islam.\textsuperscript{852}

Although Ibn ʿĀshūr cites historical evidence to bolster his general argument, his analysis remains grounded in the rules of linguistic disciplines, through which he deduces the meaning of Qur’anic texts. Ibn ʿĀshūr provides a second linguistic analysis to demonstrate how this verse functions as a reform of pre-existing abuses against women. Ibn ʿĀshūr notes that verse 2:228 commences with the conjunction “and,” which indicates that it must be connected to a previous clause. Ibn ʿĀshūr argues that this previous clause to which 2:228 is linked is verse 2:226, because of the logical connection between both verses regarding the theme of “women’s waiting periods.”\textsuperscript{853} Verse 2:226 establishes the waiting period of those women whose husbands have practiced īlāʾ, a pre-Islamic custom in which a man takes an oath that his wife is to him as his mother and sexually abstains from her, but does not give her the freedom of divorce.

Although the Qur’an abolishes this practice in a different chapter, \textit{sūrat al-mujādila},\textsuperscript{854} verse 2:226 establishes the waiting period for these women as four months, until either the husbands take back their wives or divorce them (verse 2:227). There is a shared context between 2:226 and 2:228 in that both establishes legislation regarding the length of waiting period(s) for women who fall into two different categories. The length of the waiting period differs for each group of women. According to Ibn ʿĀshūr, the sequence of verses follows a natural logic based on “occasions of transition” between the verses.\textsuperscript{855} It reflects the Qur’an’s internal coherence; each verse is complementary to the preceding or following one.

\textsuperscript{852} Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2: 398.
\textsuperscript{853} Ibid., 2:388.
\textsuperscript{854} Verse 58:2 abolishes the practice of īlāʾ and verses 58:3-4 establish consequences for those make such an oath to their wives.
\textsuperscript{855} Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2:388.
Ibn ʿĀshūr then derives another connection between verse 2:226, which seeks to end the practice of īlāʾ, and the Qur'anic statement that women have rights like men have rights (lahunna mithlu lladhī ʿalayhinna) in verse 2:228. The way he makes this argument reflects his ingenious logic and mastery of linguistic disciplines. First he notes that the prepositional statement lahunna mentions only the feminine pronoun, hunna, not the noun representing women. It is not possible that this pronoun refers back to the last-mentioned feminine noun in the verse, al-muṭallaqāt (divorcees), because the marital relationship between a divorced couple has ceased and there could be no reciprocal rights between them. Therefore, this pronoun hunna must refer to those women whose husbands have taken them back during the ʿidda (waiting period), Ibn ʿĀshūr establishes. It is also possible that the pronoun hunna refers back to those women mentioned in Q. 2:226 who have been the victims of īlāʾ. As Ibn ʿĀshūr has already established a linguistic connection between 2:226 and 2:228 through the conjunction “and,” his suggestion is certainly plausible.

Why would the statement lahunna mithlu lladhī ʿalayhinna refer back to women who have been the victim of īlāʾ? What is the connection between them? Ibn ʿĀshūr argues, this is because the practice of īlāʾ to be a clear violation of women’s rights. For this reason, it was appropriate for men to be reminded that women have rights just like men have rights, he states. Again, for Ibn ʿĀshūr, linguistic connections are not random, but convey meaning and significance.

2. Mumāthala between Men and Women

Unlike ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr shies away from using the term equality and instead, uses the term “mumāthala,” the comparability or analogousness, of men and women. In the details of his

856 Ibid., 2:396.
857 Ibid.
interpretation, it is evident that he is engaging the arguments of pre-modern exegetes regarding
the reciprocity, but inequality, of men and women’s rights, which is perhaps the reason for his
usage of the word, “mumāṭhala.” Ibn ʿĀshūr writes that the comparability between two things
could be a comparability of all their qualities or just some of their qualities. Yet in the specific
context of comparing men and women’s rights, it is clear that this reciprocity of rights does not
mean identical rights between men and women, “because the necessities of creation, the function
of genders, and Sharīʿa leads to differentiation between men and women in many cases.” In
general, there should be reciprocity between what women do for men and vice versa, he
illustrates. These reciprocal rights could be concrete or in their general aim. This reciprocity
exists legally as well in general interaction. In the case of the latter, if a woman takes care of her
husband’s home and prepares his food, then he should protect his family home and bring her the
dough-maker and sieve. Just as she takes care of his child, he should sufficiently provide for
them financially. Some of men and women’s reciprocal rights have been legislated, writes Ibn
ʿĀshūr, such as the mandate to provide good companionship or the mandate to both believing
men and women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. Further, both have the reciprocal
right for an arbitrator from their family, to be shepherds in their families, and to consult each
other regarding breastfeeding their child (al-riḍāʿa).

The idea of reciprocity between men and women’s rights appears to resemble classical
exegeses on the reciprocity of men and women’s rights. The fundamental difference between Ibn
ʿĀshūr and pre-modern exegetes in this concept, however, is that Ibn ʿĀshūr does not delineate a

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858 Ibid., 2:398.
859 Ibid.
860 Ibid., 2:399.
861 He does not state that men are shepherds over women, but rather than men are shepherds to their families just as
women as shepherds to the husband’s home (i.e. the family home).
862 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2:399.
hierarchy between men and women in the same way that some pre-modern exegetes do. For Ibn ʿĀshūr, the different duties of men and women do not engender a hierarchal relationship in which the husband enjoys privileges over the wife, which is not the case in many pre-modern exegeses. This touches upon an important debate in the current scholarship on gender and the Qurʾan, as to whether the existence of differentiation between genders necessarily represents an inequality between genders. Asma Barlas argues that differentiation between sexes does not necessarily mean inequality.\textsuperscript{863} Kecia Ali takes issue with Barlas’ conclusions that different treatment does not always imply inequality. She argues that while the existence of differences between genders does not necessarily mean injustice between genders, it does, however, mean inequality between genders. She notes that difference, in certain instances, “involves obvious inequality, though whether this inequality constitutes injustice is a separate and more complicated issue.”\textsuperscript{864} For Ibn ʿĀshūr and the pre-modern exegetes, men and women’s reciprocal rights are different. However, for Ibn ʿĀshūr, this difference does not engender inequality, unlike the case for those exegetes who view men’s difference as hierarchal. It is worth considering, then, how Ibn ʿĀshūr’s interpretation could contribute to new ways one can interpret sexual differentiation in the Qurʾan.

C. Quṭb

1. Contextualizes Women and Men’s Mutual Rights

Quṭb revives the opinions of al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī by also connecting the meaning of men and women’s mutual rights to the legal context of divorce. However, he departs from both pre-modern and modern exegetes by also restricting the interpretation of men’s ‘degree’ to this context. Of further interest is the contrast between Quṭb’s and pre-modern exegete’s approaches

\textsuperscript{863} Barlas, 199.
\textsuperscript{864} Ali, 115.
to the first and second half of this verse. Quṭb adds emotional and psychological dimensions to his analysis of the first part of verse 2:228, which primarily establishes a divorcee’s waiting period and each party’s responsibility during this period. In contrast, pre-modern exegesis on this first half of this verse was incredibly technical in its linguistic and legalistic analysis. Quṭb’s treatment of the second half of the verse in comparison to that of pre-modern exegetes is the converse of this. Quṭb puts forth a rather technical interpretation on the second half of verse 2:228, whereas it is in this section that many pre-modern exegetes took greater liberty in deducing meanings based on their own opinions of what constitutes men and women’s complementary rights.

Unlike ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr and most pre-modern exegetes, Quṭb believes that the Qur’anic statement “lahunna mithlu ladhi ʿalayhinna bil-maʿrūf,” refers to those divorced women awaiting the expiration of their waiting period and to the men who divorced them. As I mentioned earlier, Ibn ʿĀshūr specifically points out that the pronoun suffix hunna cannot refer to the divorcees mentioned at the start of this verse because the marital relationship has ceased to exist between them and their ex-husbands. He reasons accordingly that the women referred to in la-hunna must be those women whose husbands took them back during their waiting period.

Quṭb also recognizes the need to identify to whom the pronoun hunna refers. Unlike Ibn ʿĀshūr, Quṭb identifies the object of the pronoun in la-hunna to refer to divorced women. Accordingly, Quṭb writes,

In this state, divorced women have rights just as they have obligations upon them. They are obliged to withhold themselves (yataraṣṣa) and not to conceal what God creates in their wombs. Their husbands are obliged to have a pure intention in taking them back; that there be no harm upon her in this and no harm

865 Bauer also confirms this finding, who writes that “the exegetes’ individual judgment and the mores of their time carried a greater weight in determining exegesis than did the elements commonly considered to be its sources” (3).
reciprocated. And this is also in regards to the financial maintenance in return for her restraint.\textsuperscript{866}

Quṭb’s invocation of the legal maxim “lā ḏarar wa lā ḏirār” in his interpretation of this Qur’anic statement revives an interpretation made by al-Ṭabarī over 1,000 years earlier. Al-Ṭabarī championed the interpretation that men and women’s mutual rights were also particular to the specific legal context of divorce. In this case, a man would harm his wife by taking her back when he does not intend reconciliation, as taking her back is his prerogative. Similarly, a woman inflicts harm upon her husband by concealing her pregnancy or menstruation in order to make her husband forfeit his right to take her back or to extend the waiting period unnecessarily, during which he has to financially support her.\textsuperscript{867} Although al-Razi had advocated a similar interpretation, his focus was not on the theme of preventing harm, unlike the case for both al-Ṭabarī and Quṭb. Quṭb does not cite al-Ṭabarī, but reaches the exact same meaning as al-Ṭabarī by also constricting men and women’s mutual rights to the context specified in the verse. Because Quṭb advocates a particularized interpretation of this part of the verse, he consistently applies the same methodology to “and men have a degree over them,” which I demonstrate below. Quṭb is conscious that his analysis is not in line with most exegetical commentaries. He comments that the meaning of this latter half of the verse is confined to the context of this verse and “is not absolute in meaning, unlike how many understood it.”\textsuperscript{868}

\section*{2. Adding Psychological Insight to Women’s Tarabbuṣ}

There is a tendency in Quṭb’s \textit{tafsīr} to explore the psychological dimensions conveyed through the Qur’an’s content and form, specifically its use of \textit{tašwīr} or imagery. Quṭb’s interpretation in this verse brings new meaning to a century–old debate on why God expresses

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{866} Quṭb, \textit{Fī Ṣīlāl al-Qurʾān}, 1:246.
\item \textsuperscript{867} Al-Ṭabarī, 2:11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{868} Quṭb, 1:247.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
divorced women’s obligation to wait in this particular structure: “al-muṭallaqāt yatarabbaṣna bi-anfusihinna.” For the pre-modern exegetes, this was primarily a technical linguistic concern.

Why was the legal command that women withhold themselves phrased as a declarative or descriptive clause rather than an imperative one? Among the six pre-modern exegeses I examine, this issue first appears in al-Zamakhsharī’s tafsīr. Al-Rāzī and al-Bayḍāwī both cite Al-Zamakhsharī’s conclusion on this question. Al-Zamakhsharī, known for his astute linguistic analysis, concludes that God frames this clause, which is imperative in meaning, as descriptive in form for two reasons: 1) to emphasize its mandatory nature and 2) to impart the sense that one should quickly implement this command so that it becomes a reality to be described. 869 As proof of this, he cites a common prayer one makes in descriptive form with the intention of a request or beseeching of God: raḥimaka Allāhu (literally, God had mercy on you). Whereas the solicitor of the prayer intends to ask God to have mercy on the person, he/she frames “the prayer as descriptive to convey confidence in God’s answer to the prayer, as if the mercy is already there and one is simply describing it (yukhbir ‘anhā)”. 870 Al-Rāzī and al-Bayḍāwī both summarize Zamakhsharī’s argument. 871

Quṭb notes the unique structure of the legal command for divorced women to withhold themselves from re-marrying. But unlike pre-modern exegetes, his analysis of this structure delves into the imagery it creates. While the explicit meaning is that divorced women should wait three cycles before re-marrying, there is another dimension of meaning conveyed by the structure of this expression, Quṭb writes. 872 The descriptive expression of the verse, that women

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870 Al-Zamakhsharī, 1:205.

871 Al-Rāzī, 3.6:74; al-Bayḍāwī, 1:121.

872 Quṭb, 1:245.
withhold themselves, conveys a certain image to the listener, Quṭb contends. It is the image of a woman eagerly anticipating to start life afresh; it reflects her desire for a new marital right. Unlike some pre-modern exegetes, who judged women’s spirits (anfus) as being desirous of men, Quṭb introduces a psychological and emotional component to understanding a woman’s state while she is in her waiting period after she has been divorced by her husband. Her motivation to start a new marital life is natural, Quṭb writes.873 In this specific context, she is at the receiving end of the divorce, not the initiator of the divorce. It is natural for her to want “to prove to herself and to others that her lack of success in her marriage is not due to her own deficiency or failure … in this way, the Qur’an conveys the image of this psychological state through its expression.” 874

Whereas pre-modern exegetes all established that the aim of a woman’s waiting period (ʿidda) is to establish whether or not she is pregnant before she re-marries, Quṭb introduces another dimension to the wisdom behind a woman’s waiting period. Establishing whether or not a woman is pregnant is one reason for the waiting period, Quṭb concedes, but it is not the only reason. Another reason for this, Quṭb writes, is the fact that a couple needs a reasonable about of time to test the extent of their feelings for each other. Perhaps there are still remnants of love in their hearts that might be rekindled. Perhaps the reasons for their falling part were due to a flare-up, petty mistake, or arrogance, he writes.875 This waiting period allows time “for anger to subside, greed to be subdued and souls to become reassured,” 876 writes Quṭb, after which the couples may belittle the reasons for their break-up. This is because divorce is the most hateful of permissible actions to God and one should not resort to it until all other measures have failed, he

873 Ibid.
874 Ibid.
875 Quṭb, 1:246.
876 Ibid.
writes. The aim is to slow down the process of divorce, before it becomes effective. This is also the reason behind the arbitration process mentioned in the Qur’an and the requirement that a woman be in a non-menstrual state when a husband pronounces the divorce, Quṭb writes. Therefore, he must wait until she is in a state of purity, which also slows down the process of divorce. What is significantly new in Quṭb’s tafsīr in comparison to pre-modern exegesis is the attention he brings to the underlying wisdom for Qur’anic injunctions. His tone is far removed from that of pre-modern exegetes, who approached the first part of verse from a legal perspective, for the most part. Rather than view this verse as only drawing legal parameters, Quṭb views it as providing emotional and psychological insight into a woman’s state.

IV. Pre-Modern Exegetes on Men’s ‘Degree’

A chronological analysis of the six pre-modern exegesis on the phrase “and men have a degree over them (fem.)” yields significant insight into the process by which certain interpretations of this verse came to prevail. In departure from their standard methodologies, for the most part, the classical exegetes do not measure this verse against jurisprudence, grammar, ḥadīth or theology, but instead proceed to confer upon this verse a meaning that is largely derived from their own understanding of men’s preference or superiority to women. This is because, based on Bauer’s findings, exegetes in the 10th century and onwards felt the need to explain “why a given verse was revealed: understanding men’s innate qualities can explain why they have been put in a position of power over women, or why they have more rights than them.” Many of the reasons that exegetes gave for men’s degree in verse 2:228 converged with the reasons that they also gave for men’s qiwāma in verse 4:34.

877 Although Quṭb does not explicitly cite it, he is referring to the ḥadīth, “The most hateful of the halāl to God is divorce,” Sunan Abī Dawūd, no. 2178. Ed. Ḥabīb al-Ḥallāl and Abū Ḥasan Ahmad ibn Muḥammad. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1389 AH).
878 Quṭb, 1:246.
879 Bauer, “Room for Interpretation,” 59.
The most distinct pre-modern exegete in regards to this part of the verse is al-Ṭabarī, whose work is considered the first extant work in the genre.\(^\text{880}\) Consistent with al-Ṭabarī’s structural characteristic of citing named authorities and providing multiple interpretations, he cites five possible interpretations for “and men have a degree over them,” based upon the commentaries of various authorities. Four of these five possible interpretations advocate a meaning that establishes male authority and privilege over women. For the sake of demonstrating later exegetes’ reliance on these four misogynist citations, I list them here:

1) Men’s degree over women is the “preference” that God gave men over women in inheritance,\(^\text{881}\) the obligation to perform \(jihād\), and other preferences. As the source of this interpretation, al-Ṭabarī references a report from Mujāhid ibn Jabr [d. 722],\(^\text{882}\) a successor of the companions and prominent commentator of the Qur’an.\(^\text{883}\)

2) Men’s degree over women is the right to lead and be obeyed. Here, al-Ṭabarī cites a quote by Ibn Zayd\(^\text{884}\) that women must obey their husbands, while men do not have to obey their wives.\(^\text{885}\)

3) Men’s ‘degree’ is what they provide women of \(mahr\)\(^\text{886}\) and if they accuse their wives of adultery, they have the right to \(mulā’\text{āna}\),\(^\text{887}\) whereas if she accuses her husband of adultery, she would be flogged according to \(ḥadd\) \(al\)-\(qadhf\).\(^\text{888}\)

\(^{880}\) Stowasser, “Gender Issues and Contemporary Qur’an Interpretation,” 32.

\(^{881}\) When a father deceases, a brother receives twice the amount as his full sister, although males and females could inherit the same, depending on their relationship to the deceased. For example, a sister and brother inherit the same amount from their stepfather.

\(^{882}\) Claude Gilliot, “The Beginnings of Qur’anic Exegesis,” in *The Qur’an: Formative Interpretation*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999), 8. He was also a leading disciple of Ibn ‘Abbās. Ironically, however, his interpretation bears no resemblance to Ibn ‘Abbas’ opinion just a few lines down. This indicates disciples’ discretionary authority in Qur’anic interpretation.

\(^{883}\) Al-Ṭabarī, 2:12.

\(^{884}\) Abd al-Rahmān ibn Zayd ibn Aslam al-‘Adawi (d. 182 AH).

\(^{885}\) Al-Ṭabarī, 2:12.

\(^{886}\) Often referred to as a marital gift or bridal dower, this gift is usually a substantive amount of money that Islamic law obliges the husband to pay directly to his wife before the consummation of marriage.
4) “Others have said, the degree is man’s giving preference to his wife (ifḍāl al-rajul ‘alayhā),” fulfillment of his right to her, and pardoning her from her duties towards him, or from some of it.” He then quotes an opinion by Ibn ‘Abbās, who is considered the chief commentator of the Qur’ān in the early Islamic period, to support this interpretation: “I do not wish to exhaust all my rights from her because God said ‘and men have a degree over them.’”

5) Men’s degree is the beard that God gave men and of which He deprived women.

Al-Ṭabarī is explicit about which of the five interpretations he finds most accurate. He writes,

The preponderant opinion (al-rājiḥ) of the five aforementioned citations is the fourth one: to fulfill all of his wife’s rights and to relinquish some of his rights upon her, out of his generosity and graciousness. The degree which God mentions here is: that a man [should] pardon his wife from her responsibilities towards him, to overlook it, and [still] fulfill all of her rights over him.

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887 This is a legal procedure specific to spouses based on the Qur’anic verse 24:6-7, by which a husband who accuses his wife of adultery and lacks three credible witnesses (besides himself) resorts to taking four oaths that his wife committed adultery. In the fifth oath, he asks to incur God’s wrath if he is lying. The wife also has the right to take four oaths swearing her innocence, and a fifth oath that God’s wrath be upon her if she’s lying. Taking this oath is enough for her to avoid punishment.

888 Ḥadd al-qadhf is the Qur’anic prescription (verse 24:4) to flog a person 80 times if he/she accuses a chaste woman of adultery without producing four credible witnesses. What is most ironic about this interpretation is that the Qur’anic verse specifies this punishment for those who accuse chaste women, not men, of adultery.

889 Al-Ṭabarī’s use of the derivative ifḍāl here, as opposed to faḍl or tafḍīl, which most exegetes use, is significant. Ifḍāl is the masdar (verbal noun) of the fourth verbal form of f-ḍ-l. Accordingly, this form, when used with the preposition ‘alā, indicates conferring a favor or benefit upon someone. In al-Ṭabarī’s sentence, ifḍāl al-rajul ‘alayhā, the woman is the recipient of this favor or benefit, whereas the husband is the enactor or giver of this favor. Other exegetes instead use the term faḍl or tafḍīl, which are the verbal nouns of the first and second verb forms of the root word f-ḍ-l. Faḍl and tafḍīl both indicate a preference or high estimation of the subject.

890 Ṭabarī, 2:12.

891 Gilliot, 8.

892 Ṭabarī, 2:12.


894 Ṭabarī, 2:12.

895 Ibid., 2:12-3.
Al-Ṭabarī explicitly champions the most egalitarian interpretation of the five possible meanings and dismisses the four interpretations that appear to legitimize male superiority over women. Interestingly, this progressive interpretation which defines men’s degree as a privilege for women was somehow lost in the ashes of exegetical history. Although all of the five succeeding classical exegetes clearly rely on many of al-Ṭabarī’s sources and cite them directly, not a single one of them cite this possible meaning for the term “daraja.” In fact, most of them derive the complete opposite meaning of the one championed by al-Ṭabarī, arguing that this verse establishes the supremacy of a man’s right over his wife, or the husband’s right to be obeyed by his wife, as I demonstrate in detail below.

Karen Bauer also notes that al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr on men’s “daraja” signals a “new approach.” Although I agree with Bauer’s assessment that al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation “marks a significant departure” from pre-modern exegetes, I find the reason for this to be different than the reason she identifies. For Bauer, the significance of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation lies in the fact that he interprets men’s degree as “a prescription of how men should act,” rather than a “descriptive” statement. I find al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation to be significant, in the spectrum of exegetical opinions, because he ultimately champions an interpretation that favors women rather than one that privileges men as ontologically, morally and legally superior to women. Although he cites Ibn ‘Abbās as the source of this opinion, al-Ṭabarī “turns Ibn ‘Abbās’s view into interpretable text” and “give(s) it his own meaning,” as Bauer notes. The effect of this is to overturn later interpretations that regard men’s degree as establishing a gender hierarchy between men and women.

896 Bauer, 68.
897 Ibid., 70.
898 Ibid.
Although Bauer believes that al-Ṭabarī adds “an element of management” into his interpretation of “daraja,” I have a different take on this. Bauer deduces this “element of management” based on understanding al-Ṭabarī’s words “al-akhdh ‘alayhinna” to mean “managing women.” This is the context of al-Ṭabarī words:

and then God entrusted men to take their rights from women [al-akhdh ‘alayhinna] with graciousness, if they [fem.] neglect some of the duties towards their husbands, with which God obliged them, as God said, “And men have a degree over them [fem.]” by being kind to them [fem.] and pardon them [fem.] of some of their duties towards them [masc.]**.

Based on my own reading of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī does not add an element of management to his interpretation of men’s degree, but rather, interprets men’s degree as an obligation to be kind and forgiving to women.

Al-Zamakhsharī interprets men’s degree very concisely. This degree consists of men’s greater rights and virtue (faḍīla). He then cites an opinion he regards to be weak, indicated by using the passive form “it is said,” that women derive sexual gratification just as men do, or that men have an advantage in their qiwāma and financial maintenance of women. In contrast, al-Rāzī’s interpretation of men’s degree is more verbose and ambivalent. For al-Rāzī, there are two possible meanings for men’s degree, each of which contradicts the other.

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899 Ibid.
900 Based on a detailed linguistic analysis of the phrase akhada ‘ala in various Arabic dictionaries and hadīth usage, the most common usage of this phrase means “to take a covenant from someone.” In the context of al-Ṭabarī’s words “al-akhdh ‘alayhinna,” could mean, “to take from women the covenant of their duties.” This is based on my analysis of the following hadīth:

قَوْلُهُ (فَقَالَ فِيمَا أَخَذَ عَلَيْنَا) أُنَّى اْشْتَرَطَ عَلَيْنَا، وَيَسْلُّمُنِ مِنْ طَرِيقِ أَيُّهُ أَشْعَث عَنْ غَيْرِهِ، قَالَ: " أَخَذَ عَلَيْنَا رَسُول اللَّٰه صَلَّى اللَّٰه عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَمَا أَخَذَ إِسْرَائِيل عَلَى بَنِيهِ لَنِعْمَ خَيْرَ مَا مَسَّ رَسُول اللَّٰه صَلَّى اللَّٰه عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ بِيَدِهِ اِمْرَأَة قَطُّ، إِلاَّ أَنْ يَأْخُذ عَلَيْهَا فَإِذَا أَخَذَ عَلَيْهَا فَأَعْطَتْهُ قَالَ: اذْهَبِي فَقَدْ بَايَعْتُك أَخْرَجَهُ مُسْلِمَ مَنْ بَعَثَ اللَّٰه نَبِيهَا إِلَّا أَخَذَ لَئِنْ بُعِثَ مُحَمَّد وَهُوَ حَيّ لَيُؤْمِنُنَّ بِهِ وَلَيَنْصُرَنَّهُ عَمَّنْ يَأْتِيه بِالْخَبَرِ مِنْ السَّمَاء فَأَخَذَ عَلَيْهِمْ مَا أَخَذَ إِسْرَائِيل عَلَى بَنِيهِ مَنْ بَعَثَ اللَّٰه نَبِيهَا إِلَّا أَخَذَ لَئِنْ بُعِثَ مُحَمَّد وَهُوَ حَيّ لَيُؤْمِنُنَّ بِهِ وَلَيَنْصُرَنَّهُ عَمَّنْ يَأْتِيه بِالْخَبَرِ مِنْ السَّمَاء فَأَخَذَ عَلَيْهِمْ مَا أَخَذَ إِسْرَائِيل عَلَى بَنِيهِ، فَأَنْتُمْ تَرْكُنَّ عَنْ عِلْمِنَا حَتَّى يَأْخُذَ عَلَيْهَا، قَالَ: كَانَ فِيمَا أُخِذَ عَلَيْنَا أَنْ لا نَنُوح.

901 Al-Ṭabarī’s words:

902 I leave this term in its Arabic original due to the difference of opinion regarding its exact meaning. The general meaning in which exegetes use this term, however, is looking after women or being in charge of women.

903 Al-Zamakhsharī, 1:207.
904 Al-Zamakhsharī, 1:207.
men possess greater advantages than women and they should therefore take heed to be kind to their wives or the opposite: women possess greater rights in a marriage than men and they should therefore be dutiful to their husbands.\textsuperscript{906}

In the first of two possible interpretations, al-Rāzī lists eight reasons that give men merit or virtue (faḍīla)\textsuperscript{907} over women.\textsuperscript{908} It must be noted that the Qur’an itself does not disclose the reasons for men’s ‘degree’ over women, but al-Rāzī attempts to ascertain these reasons, most of which converge with the reasons he provides for men’s qiwāma in his tafsīr of Q. 4:34. As Bauer observes, this becomes a general trend in the 10th century, as exegetes attempted to identify the innate and legal advantages that men possess as a way to explain why God gave them “a position of power over women.”\textsuperscript{909} Al-Rāzī deduces:

If all these male prerogatives are proven, this would make women like feeble hostages in the hands of men. For this reason, the Prophet peace be upon him said, ‘take care of women for they are your captives (‘awān).’ … And the meaning of the verse is that due to the degree that God gave men over women in capability, they are entrusted with fulfilling more of women’s rights. Therefore, the mention of this is like a warning to men against encroaching upon women to harm or injure them.\textsuperscript{910}

Employing the method of dialectical argumentation, al-Rāzī first cites all the reasons for men’s supremacy over women, which leads him to the conclusion that men should therefore be more heedful of fulfilling their wives’ rights. Accordingly, God is pre-cautioning men against harming women because “the more privileges one possesses, the more repulsive their abuses [of

\textsuperscript{906} Al-Rāzī, 3.6:82.

\textsuperscript{907} Al-Rāzī’s statement that men are “azyad fī al-faḍīla” is a paraphrase of al-Zamakhsharī’s interpretation that men have a ziyāda fil haqq wal faḍīla. See Zamakhshari, 1:207.

\textsuperscript{908} Al-Rāzī cites the following eight reasons that give men an advantage over women (azyad fil faḍīla): 1) his mind, 2) the blood money to be paid to his family for his murder [which is supposedly less for a woman], 3) his share of inheritance, 4) his suitability to serve as an imam [leader of prayers], a judge and a witness, 5) he can marry another woman, have sexual relations with a concubine, while she cannot do so, 6) as a spouse, he will inherit more from her when she dies than she will inherit from him when he dies, 7) he has the right to divorce her and then bring her back [during the waiting period], whether or not she wants to return, whereas she doesn’t share this right, and 8) his share of war spoils is greater (3.6:82).

\textsuperscript{909} Bauer, 59.

\textsuperscript{910} Al-Rāzī, 3:82.
such privileges].”\textsuperscript{911} In this first interpretation, al-Rāzī arrives at a conclusion similar to that of al-Ṭabarī’s—that this ‘degree’ men possess over women ultimately means that men should fulfill more of women’s rights (than they should expect to be fulfilled).\textsuperscript{912} Unlike al-Ṭabarī, however, he does not explicitly state that women can get away with fulfilling less responsibilities than men, but simply concludes that “men should fulfill more of women’s rights”\textsuperscript{913} because of the extra privileges with which God has endowed them.

Al-Rāzī provides a second possible interpretation that leads to the polar opposite conclusion. According to al-Rāzī, it could be said that women possess greater rights in a marriage than men because God has assigned to men the duty of fulfilling specific responsibilities towards their wives, such as paying their \textit{mahr}, financially supporting them, defending them, looking out for their interests, and preventing them from places of harm.\textsuperscript{914} Al-Rāzī concludes that because women have a greater share of rights in marriage, they are ordered to be dutiful to their husbands, “as a matter of certain obligation.”\textsuperscript{915} As further evidence of women’s need to obey their husbands, he cites verse 4:34 and a prophetic tradition “if I were to order anyone to prostrate to one other than God, I would have ordered the woman to prostrate to her husband.”\textsuperscript{916}

As noted by western scholars, al-Bayḍāwī’s \textit{tafsīr} was a condensation of previous works; in specific, his \textit{tafsīr} was primarily a re-working of three commentaries: al-Zamakhsharī’s \textit{al-Kashshāf}, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s \textit{Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb} and the commentary\textsuperscript{917} of al-Rāghib al-

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\textsuperscript{911} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{912} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{913} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{914} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{915} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{916} Ibid. Different narrations of this ḥadīth exist in various collections, but this exact narration is found in \textit{Sunan al-Ṭirmidhī}, no. 1159 and is narrated by Abū Hurayra.
\textsuperscript{917} Regarding Iṣfahānī’s \textit{tafsīr}, Rowson writes, “al-Rāghib’s \textit{tafsīr}, of which only the initial sections are known to be extant in manuscript, is quoted in the \textit{tafsīrs} of al-Bayḍāwī (anonymously) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (explicitly). It
 Nonetheless, al-Bayḍāwī both summarized and expanded upon his predecessors’ works, yet with greater brevity, which is one reason for his popularity. Al-Bayḍāwī’s interpretation of Q. 2:228 is a clear condensation of al-Zamakhsharī’s and al-Rāzī’s interpretations. First, his words regarding men’s degree is identical to al-Zamakhsharī’s and a paraphrase of al-Rāzī’s: men’s degree is “greater rights (ziyāda fīl-ḥaqq) and virtue (wa faḍl fihi).” For al-Bayḍāwī, this is because men have rights over women’s bodies (fī anfusihinna), whereas women’s rights over men are mahr, financial maintenance, protection, and not harming them. Unlike men, women do not have rights over men’s bodies. Al-Bayḍāwī provides a second brief interpretation, which paraphrases al-Rāzī’s second interpretation. Accordingly, the degree is “men’s honor and virtue (faḍīla), because they have qiwāma over women, protect them, share with them the purpose of marriage, and because God has assigned men (yukhassūna) the virtue of looking after their wives (riʿāya) and supporting them financially.”

In his exegesis of Q. 2:228, al-Qurṭubī borrows from the exegeses of both al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī, although he does not cite them here; rather, he cites other exegetes such as the Mālikī Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), the Mālikī Ibn ʿAṭīyya (d. 546/1151) and al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), who was Shāfiʿī. First, in his linguistic foray on the meaning of the term rajul (man), his words...
are identical to al-Rāzī’s explanation, although he does not cite him.  

Second, he takes aspects of both al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī’s exegesis in defining men’s degree over women as an increase in “mind, strength, financial support, blood money, inheritance, and [the duty of] jiḥād.” All of these, except for jiḥād, appear in al-Rāzī’s exegesis as possible reasons for men’s degree over women. The last two, inheritance and jiḥād, are cited in al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis as the first possible meaning for ‘men’s degree over women.’ Despite the fact that al-Qurṭubī is obviously borrowing from al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī’s exegeses, or at least drawing on the same sources, he arrives at the polar opposite conclusion of both. While al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī had concluded (al-Rāzī, in his first interpretation) that men have a greater responsibility to fulfill their wives’ rights upon them, al-Qurṭubī concludes that “a woman should feel that her husband’s right upon her is more deserving of being fulfilled than her right upon him.” Like al-Rāzī, he cites the prostration ḥadīth as evidence. Al-Qurṭubī includes a statement by Ibn ʿAbbās to the effect that men should be kind to women and magnanimous to them with their money and character.

Ibn Kathīr intensifies the concept of male superiority to women, as he introduces an ontological component to men’s advantage over women. In his view, men’s ‘degree’ over women in this verse is “in their merit (fadīla), physical constitution (khalq), character (khuluq), status (manzila), the right to be obeyed (tāʿat al-amr), the responsibility of financial maintenance, overseeing women’s interests, and their preference in this world and the next (al-faḍl fil-dunya wal-ākhira).” In other words, men’s degree over women is their superiority in all these matters. Whereas exegetes like al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī confined the discussion of

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923 Whether this indicates a reliance on al-Rāzī’s tafsīr or a reliance on the same sources requires further research. Both state, “rajul bayna al-rajula, ay al-quwwa, wa huwa arjul al-rajulayn, ay aqwāhuma, wa faras rajīl, (ay) qawī… al-Rāzī, 3:81; al-Qurṭubī, 3:124-125.
924 Al-Qurṭubī, 3:125.
925 Al-Ṭabarī, 2:12.
926 Al-Qurṭubī, 3:125.
927 Ibid.
928 Ibn Kathīr, 1:271.


daraja to the fulfillment of rights by one party or the other, Ibn Kathīr takes the discussion outside the context of legal rights and responsibilities. Further, he conflates men’s rights and responsibilities as both proving male privilege over women. He turns women’s rights, such as the right of financial maintenance and fulfilling women’s interests, as an affirmation of men’s advantage over women. Ibn Kathīr, like al-Rāzī and ʿAbduh later, then cites verse 4:34, as a basis for the interpretation he provides. This limited intra-textual reading, however, imparts upon both verses a similar male-hierarchal interpretation.

The interpretations offered by the six pre-modern exegetes on men’s degree offer a spectrum of variety in interpretation and sources they cite. Even when exegetes borrow from each other, this rarely leads to the same conclusion. This demonstrates that although exegetes engage with each other’s works to build upon previous authorities, they exercise a wide range of choice in the meanings they ultimately deduce. This puts into question the generalization made by one scholar that interpretive authority is achieved by using the same methods and results as previous exegetes. My findings also undermine depictions of the pre-modern exegetical tradition as “monolithically patriarchal.” While most of the pre-modern exegetes understood men’s degree to offer men some forms of advantages over women, a few of them also underscored the notion that this means men should be kind to women or pardon women of some of their duties while still fulfilling all of women’s rights.

V. Modern Exegetes on Men’s ‘Degree’

A. ʿAbduh on Daraja

ʿAbduh’s tafsīr on Q. 2:228 signals a new approach to pre-modern exegetes by reading the statement preceding men’s daraja as a declaration of gender equality in the Qur’an. This

929 Aysha Hidayatullah, Feminist Edges of the Qur’an, 179. Italics are hers.
930 Ayesha Chaudhry, Domestic Violence in the Islamic Tradition, 40.
931 Al-Ṭabarī, 2:1; al-Rāzī, 3.6:82.
equality is not absolute, however, according to `Abduh and Riḍā. From the onset, they note an important qualification to men and women’s equality, which is men’s leadership over women. There are two important reasons for men’s leadership, according to `Abduh and Riḍā. The first is to preserve the interests of the family. The second is to prevent chaos and disunity. `Abduh argues that a family life represents a smaller unit of societal and organizational life. Every society or organization must have a leader because the people within it will inevitably disagree on a number of issues, and the decision must ultimately go back to the leader, according to `Abduh. Failure to have a leader will lead to disunity and division, which jeopardizes the communal interests. More specifically, it will lead to the dissolution of its unifying bond (al-‘urwa al-wāḥida al-jāmi‘a).932 The focus on disunity as an impediment to progress is very much reflective of `Abduh’s political stance regarding the need of the Muslim umma to unite, hence the title of his and Afghani’s first publication, al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā (The Firm [Reliable] Bond).

After making the case for the need of a leader, he then establishes why the husband is the most fit to be the family’s leader. There are two reasons for this: the first is fiṭrī (innate) and the second is sharī (legal). According to `Abduh, the leader must be the husband because he is the one who possesses greater knowledge of the family’s interests and is more capable to fulfill those interests due to his strength and wealth.933 This is the reason then that Islamic law gave men the duty to defend women and to spend on them financially.934 Interestingly, as in his commentary on men’s qiwāma in verse 4:34, Islamic legal rulings are based on the nature of human beings. The appeal to the “nature of things” as a justification for certain Qur’anic injunctions is prevalent in `Abduh and Riḍā’s exegesis. It reflects the Islamic modernist objective

932 Tafsīr al-Manār, 2:380.
933 Ibid.
934 Ibid.
of harmonizing between Islam and nature. Just as reason and revelation are harmonious, religion must also be thoroughly compatible with nature, because their Creator is one and the same.  

For Riḍā and ʿAbduh, Q. 4:34 provides the backdrop against which to understand men’s degree over women. Among the pre-modern exegetes, al-Rāzī and Ibn Kathir also reference Q. 4:34 in their interpretation of 2:228. According to Riḍā and ʿAbduh, Q. 4:34 defines the parameters of men’s leadership over women, as mentioned in Q. 2:228. Regarding verse 2:228, he writes, if a woman transgresses (nashazat), her husband has the right to discipline her by advising her, sexually abandoning her and hitting her without serious injury (darb ghayr mubarriḥ). These measures are permitted in order to preserve the family interest, but they are not permitted in order to overpower women, for revenge or venting one’s anger; otherwise, this falls under injustice, he states. Nonetheless, for ʿAbduh and Riḍā, the disciplinary measures mentioned in verse 4:34 define the male prerogatives meant by men’s degree in verse 2:228. This is interesting considering the entirely different contexts of both verses. In this intra-textual stroke, verse 2:228 reinforces the interpretation that exegetes provide for Q 4:34.

B. Ibn ʿĀshūr on Daraja

ʿAbduh’s influence on Ibn ʿĀshūr comes out most clearly in the latter’s interpretation of men’s daraja over women. Most biographers of Ibn ʿĀshūr have noted his admiration of ʿAbduh and he had endorsed the latter’s call for reform. As I pointed out in the second chapter of this dissertation, however, ʿAbduh’s influence on Ibn ʿĀshūr was rather limited. It appears to me that Ibn ʿĀshūr references ʿAbduh’s ideas most on issues that became controversial due to the

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935 Maḥmūd Shiḥāṭa, Manḥij al-Imām Muḥammad ʿAbduh fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm (Cairo, 1963), 83. See also Jansen, 23n20.
936 Tafsīr al-Manār, 2:380.
contingencies of modernity in the Muslim world. Despite the definitive originality of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s thought and methodology, he was influenced by ʿAbduh’s ideas on the need for reform, reconciling reason and revelation and creating a synthesis between the Islamic tradition and the needs of modernity. The attempt to reconcile men’s degree over women with the notion of gender equality is one area in which Ibn ʿĀshūr clearly refers to ʿAbduh’s ideas.

First, like ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr finds the latter part of verse 2:228 to be an explicit declaration of women’s rights in Islam. He writes, “The religion of Islam is intent in its concern to reform women’s status, and how could it not be, considering that she comprises half of the human species?”938 Interestingly, Ibn ʿĀshūr makes the argument that one reason for elevating women’s position was to prepare the umma for progress and global leadership.939 In this statement, Ibn ʿĀshūr implicitly makes the status of women in a society a measure of its progress. In other words, Ibn ʿĀshūr seems to argue that one reason for the greatness of Islam is its reform and improvement of women’s status, if put into historical perspective.

Nonetheless, like ʿAbduh, Ibn ʿĀshūr qualifies the reciprocity or equality of women’s rights. Men’s degree over women is not simply their right to be leaders in the family, as ʿAbduh states, but is also the preference that Sharīʿa gives them in certain rulings. Whereas men had absolute preference over women in pre-Islamic jāhiliyya, Ibn ʿĀshūr states, this verse gives them limited preference. In other words, they do not have privileges over women in all matters, but specific ones. Ibn ʿĀshūr proceeds to list these: 1) a man has the right to marry more than one woman, whereas the women does not have this right; 2) men have the right to initiate a divorce

938 Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2:400.
939 Ibid.
(al-ṭalāq bi-yad al-rajul); 3) men can take back their wives during their waiting periods; and 4) the man is the source of authority (marja’) when a disagreement arises in the family. ⁹⁴⁰

This is where Ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation begins to most resemble that of ‘Abduh. He uses ‘Abduh’s analogy between marital life and a society of people, which requires a leader to make a final decision. There are three important differences between Ibn ‘Āshūr’s and ‘Abduh use of this analogy. First, for Ibn ‘Āshūr, the husband is the decision maker when it comes to matters related to the household, whereas ‘Abduh does not make this kind of qualification. Second, unlike ‘Abduh, Ibn ‘Āshūr states that the husband is most fit to be this leader, not because of his greater knowledge of the family’s interest, but because the family was established through him and because his opinion is usually correct. ⁹⁴¹ Third, in an interesting twist to the analogy that Ibn ‘Āshūr borrows from ‘Abduh, Ibn ‘Āshūr acknowledges that differences arise in a meeting and in a family because of differing interests (ta’āruḍ al-maṣāliḥ) and that there must be one person who makes the final decision. Yet in ‘Abduh’s analogy between a meeting and a family, there is a presumption that the interest of the group or the family is always one and the same, whereas Ibn ‘Āshūr takes a more critical, and perhaps, honest position that the group’s interests and spouses’ interests will conflict.

Another clear marker of ‘Abduh’s influence on Ibn ‘Āshūr is his attempt to reconcile religious legal rulings with nature. God consigned men with an increase in physical and mental strength, which is a reason for their daraja, Ibn ‘Āshūr writes. ⁹⁴² Unlike Riḍā and ‘Abduh, he does not use the term fiṭra, which was employed quite often in Tafsīr al-Manār’s explanation of gender difference in the Qur’an. An indication of an almost verbatim reliance on ‘Abduh’s tafsīr, Ibn ‘Āshūr uses the former’s analogy between male humans and male animals. There is near

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⁹⁴⁰ Ibn ‘Āshūr, 2:402.
⁹⁴¹ Ibid.
⁹⁴² Ibid., 2:401.
perfection in the constitution of male animals, writes Ibn ʿĀshūr. One finds that the male species in animals is smarter than the female and stronger in body and will.  

This is a nearly verbatim quotation of ʿAbduh’s reasoning for why men have been given qiwāma over women in verse 4:34. ʿAbduh had stated that in all creation, even animals, the male species is more complete, stronger, and more beautiful “because he is of greater perfection and completion in his creation.” ʿAbduh gives examples of those animals in which the male species is better, such as the rooster and hen, the ram and the ewe, and the lion and lioness. Ibn ʿĀshūr uses this analogy between male humans and animals to argue that there is a consistency between natural law and religious law. “Islamic legal rulings operate in accordance with the system of creation because the One who established the two [systems] is One.” Like ʿAbduh, there is an attempt to demonstrate religion as compatible with the natural law.

C. Quṭb on Daraja

Unlike both ʿAbduh and Ibn ʿĀshūr, Quṭb particularizes the application of both ‘men and women’s reciprocal rights’ and ‘men’s degree over women’ to the specific legal context of divorce. As stated earlier, in interpreting “women have rights similar to those rights against them,” Quṭb advocates an interpretation very similar to that of al-Ṭabarī’s by invoking the legal maxim “lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār,” that harm shall not be inflicted nor reciprocated by either man or women. In the context of this verse, which establishes the waiting period for divorced women, the husband would harm his wife by taking her back when he does not intend reconciliation, as taking her back is his prerogative. Similarly, the wife inflicts harm upon her husband by concealing her pregnancy or menstruation in order to make her husband forfeit his right to take

\[943\] Ibid.

\[944\] ʿAbduh’s reasoning for why men have been given qiwāma over women in verse 4:34.

\[945\] Like ʿAbduh, there is an attempt to demonstrate religion as compatible with the natural law.

\[945\] Like ʿAbduh, there is an attempt to demonstrate religion as compatible with the natural law.
her back or to extend the waiting period unnecessarily, during which he has to financially support her.

Because Quṭb advocates a particularized interpretation of this part of the verse, he consistently applies the same methodology to “and men have a degree over them.” He emphatically argues that this cannot denote a general precept but is a very specific rule due to the circumstances of the situation.\(^{946}\) In this specific legal context in which a woman is observing her waiting period, it is only the man who can take her back, while the woman must either wait for the waiting period to finish or return to her husband if he takes her back. In this way, Quṭb also connects the meaning of “daraja” with the superlative form “aḥaqq” when the verse states that men have the greater right to take them back. According to Quṭb, this is the degree that men have over women. Recognizing that he is going against the interpretive consensus, he writes, “the degree is constrained to this matter, and is not absolute in its implication as many have understood it to be, and have used it as evidence in the wrong places (wa yastashhadūna biḥā fī ghayr mawḍīʾiḥā).”\(^{947}\)

VI. Conclusion

The differences between the modern and pre-modern exegetes I compare stand out in their interpretations on the latter part of this verse, “and women have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable, and men have a degree over them.” In contrast to the way they approach the first half of verse, for the most part, the pre-modern exegetes do not measure the second part of the verse against jurisprudence, grammar, ḥadīth or theology, but instead proceed to confer upon this verse a meaning that is largely derived from their own reasoning. Despite this fact, the conclusions they reach on men’s daraja over women differ, with

\(^{946}\) Quṭb, 1:246.
\(^{947}\) Ibid., 1:247.
some pre-modern exegetes emphasizing women’s duty to obey their husbands, and other
exegetes emphasizing men’s responsibility to be kind and gracious towards their wives.
Nonetheless, their interpretations on the second part of this verse reflect, to some extent, the
influence of their cultural and social paradigm on their reasoning.

The most distinct pre-modern exegete in regards to the last part of the verse is al-Ṭabarī.
While mentioning five possible meanings for the degree men possess over women by citing
named authorities (four of them are successors and one of them a companion), al-Ṭabarī
explicitly champions the most egalitarian interpretation of the five possible meanings. He argues
that men’s degree over women is in fact their responsibility to pardon women for their
responsibilities while still fulfilling all of their wives’ rights. He cites a tradition from Ibn
ʿAbbās, a foremost authority on Qur’anic interpretation and the cousin of the Prophet to
legitimate this meaning. Although all of the five pre-modern exegetes clearly rely on many of al-
Ṭabarī’s sources and cite them directly, not a single one of them cite this possible meaning for
the term “daraja.” In fact, most of them derive the complete opposite meaning of the one
championed by al-Ṭabarī, arguing that this verse establishes the supremacy of a man’s right over
his wife, or the husband’s right to be obeyed by his wife. This gender-friendly interpretation
offered by al-Ṭabarī was lost in the ashes of exegetical history, as succeeding pre-modern and
modernist scholars failed to pick it up. Yet many of these exegetes relied on and built upon al-
Ṭabarī’s exegesis, so why is it that one interpretation is left to the wayside, while another is oft-
repeated and cited? The answer is not that they cited those opinions with which they agreed,
because in the al-Ṭabarī’s opinion on hajr in verse 4:34, one exegete after the other cited his
opinion only to then refute it. The answer to this lies outside the scope of this dissertation,
although my findings provide some starting points.
Among the modern exegetes, ʿAbduh and Ibn ʿĀshūr read verse 2:228 as proof that the Qurʾan promoted women’s rights and obliterated pre-existing abuses against women. For ʿAbduh, this is proof of gender equality in the Qurʾan; there is one exception to this, which is men’s leadership in the household. Ibn ʿĀshūr, on the other hand, shies away from using the term equality and interprets men’s and women’s rights as reciprocal. Still, the difference between men and women’s rights does not establish a strict gender hierarchy for Ibn ʿĀshūr, as it does with most pre-modern exegetes. Quṭb, in contrast to both ʿAbduh and Ibn ʿĀshūr, advances a constricted application of this verse to the context of a divorced woman’s waiting period.

In comparing ʿAbduh’s interpretation with that of Quṭb, the notion of intra-textual readings as always being a superior reading is undermined. Because ʿAbduh is attempting to derive larger principles of gender equality from “women have rights similar to those against them,” he also has to interpret the “daraja” part of the verse in a similar fashion, attempting to derive general principles from the verse. Hence, he interprets men’s degree over women as men’s right to lead women in both the household and society at large. Quṭb, on the other hand, particularizes the application of this verse to the specific legal context of divorce. In interpreting “women have rights similar to those against them,” Quṭb advocates an interpretation very similar to that of al-Ṭabarī’s, despite the span of over 1,000 years between them. Because Quṭb advances a particularized interpretation of this part of the verse, he consistently applies the same methodology to “and men have a degree over them.” He argues that this cannot denote a general precept but is a very specific rule due to the circumstances of the situation. In this specific legal context in which a woman is observing her waiting period, it is only the husband who can take her back, while the woman must either wait for the waiting period to finish or return to her husband if he takes her back. In this way, Quṭb also connects the meaning of “daraja” with the
superlative form “ḥaqq” regarding husbands’ rights in this context. This interpretation is thoroughly new in content but utilizes a rather classic method of contextualizing the meaning of a Qur’anic phrase.

My analysis of the exegeses of this verse demonstrates the need to define the scope of an intra-textual interpretation of the Qur’an. Gender-conscious or feminist scholars have argued that an intra-textual reading of the Qur’an would lead to more egalitarian or gender-friendly interpretations of the Qur’an, but my findings in this study undermines this argument. Ibn Kathīr, al-Rāzī and ʿAbduh refer to verse 4:34 to interpret verse 2:228, which in fact yields a more patriarchal interpretation because it expands the male prerogatives over women outside the narrow context of *nushūz* established in verse 4:34. These male prerogatives in verse 4:34 end up being evidence of men’s degree in verse 2:228.

There is a serious need in the scholarly field of Qur’anic studies to define the scope and process of intra-textuality and identify the specificities of this methodology. Against which verses to we read a particular verse? Do we read it against more general verses that establish general precepts or universal values? Or do we read it against a more specific verse that can particularize the application of a certain verse? As some verses include both general and specific precepts, such as verse 2:228 according to most pre-modern exegetes, in light of which aspects do we read our respective verse? How do we determine whether our respective verse should be read in light of another verse or whether it should be the basis upon which other verses are read? These are some of the questions with which feminist scholarship on the Qur’an must contend.

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948 Barlas, 8-9; 18.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

I. Modernity, Gender and the Qur’an

The history of colonialism and nationalism in the modern Muslim world created a context in which “gender” became representative of a larger ideological debate on Islam’s compatibility with modernity. Colonial administrators in late nineteenth and early twentieth Egypt made gender reform a marker of national progress. The colonial rhetoric on gender, which was internalized and then repeated by secular Arab intellectuals and feminists, viewed Islam as the “fatal obstacle” to women’s progress, and thus, national advancement. For the first time in Muslim societies, Islam’s treatment of women and its position on issues such as veiling, segregation, and polygyny became subject to open debate.\(^\text{949}\) This context imparted a new level of theoretical significance to the issue of gender in the modern Muslim world. It is against this historical backdrop that we must examine modern exegetical interpretations on gender.

The works of the three modern exegetes I examined all reflect a concern for gender issues and its implications for the ideological debate on whether or not Islam is fit for modern times. Although the exegetes represent significantly different orientations, they all believed that the Qur’an was the primary source that should inform Muslims’ perspectives and outlooks on the challenging issues facing Muslim societies. Each of these influential exegetes used the occasion of their *tafsīr* to articulate that it was Islam, not the West, that first established and protected women’s rights.\(^\text{950}\) On the institution of polygyny as expressed in verse 4:3, they each affirm that it was Islam that first imposed limits and conditions on the practice of polygyny, whereas previous cultures and religions had left the practice open-ended, and without the condition of justice. Similarly, other verses, such as 4:1 on human creation or 4:32 on men and women’s

\(^{949}\) Ahmed, 128.

\(^{950}\) Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2:398; *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, 2:376; Quṭb, 2:643-645
Of all three exegetes, ʿAbduh uses this evidence in particular to refute Western, Orientalist charges against Islam’s treatment of women. He encountered these accusations against Islam through his personal interaction with Europeans in Egypt and during his brief stay in Paris, as well as through Western literature on Islam, of which he was well abreast. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Egypt, British colonialists, well-meaning feminists, and Christian missionaries were all engaged in the discourse on gender in Islam. Despite the divergence of their aims, a salient thread tying together their narratives on women was the notion that Islam was inherently unjust towards women; therefore, women’s progress could only be achieved through the abandonment of native culture. This rhetoric of progress through the abandonment of religion framed subsequent debates on the issue, as Ahmed thoroughly documents.

ʿAbduh, more than any other exegete in his time, was determined to offset the charges against Islam’s treatment of women, and used the occasion of gender-related verses in his tafsīr to affirm Islam’s commitment to women’s equality and freedom. ʿAbduh placed the blame for women’s adverse status on the ignorant and backward ways of Muslims in his society. Unlike the colonialist rhetoric, ʿAbduh made a clear distinction between the teachings of Islam and the practice of Muslims, which he believed had become far removed from the essence of Islam and

951 Haddad mentions in her biographical survey of ʿAbduh how he “spent considerable time in seeking to refute the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, M. Gabriel Hanoteaux,” (Haddad, “Muhammad ʿAbduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform,” 37). In fact, his entire work, Risālat al-Tawḥīd and Al-Islām wa-l-Naṣrāniyya, could be argued to be a response to Western critiques against Islam that were most prominent during this time.

952 Ahmed, 150-4.
were the primary target of his reform project. The status of women in Egyptian society is dismal, argued ‘Abduh, but this is due to the ignorance of Muslims and not due to their religion. A pioneer of Islamic reform, ‘Abduh was one of the first Muslim intellectuals to emphasize the importance of female education and to introduce legal reforms to improve the lot of women.

As the co-author and editor of Tafsīr al-Manār, Riḍā adds to ‘Abduh’s words citations of ḥadīth or other exegetical works (primarily those of al-Ṭabarī [d. 310/923] and Ibn al-Mundhir al-Naysābūrī [d. 318/930]), clarifications and his own commentary. Despite the shared platform of Islamic reformist thought between ‘Abduh and Riḍā, I argue that there is a distinct difference between Riḍā’s and ‘Abduh’s discourse on gender issues. On gender issues in specific, Riḍā articulates a more conservative conception of gender issues, specifically women’s role in society and what he regards to be women’s “natural work.” The difference between ‘Abduh and Riḍā in their discourse on gender is a product of at least two factors: First, it represents a difference in their overall approach to the modern challenges facing Muslim society. ‘Abduh, for the most part, wants to demonstrate that Islam intrinsically possesses the principles and values that are characteristic of modern civilization. As such, ‘Abduh does not hesitate to critique Muslims for what he regards to be their abuses and injustices against women. On the other hand, Riḍā’s discourse on gender evinces a defensive tone that does not exist in ‘Abduh’s discourse on gender issues, in my assessment. For example, in Riḍā’s exegesis on polygyny in Q. 4:3 and the notion of “hitting” a nāshiz wife in Q. 4:34, he attempts to demonstrate how these practices are superior

953 Ahmed, 139.
956 Tafsīr al-Manār, 4:354. The original fatwa was published in the periodical, al-Manār 7 (17 Rabī’ al-‘Awwal 1322 – 1 June 1904): 231-238.
to what is practiced in Europe. While both ʿAbduh’s and Riḍā’s *tafsīr* on these issues often function as a response to western criticism of Islam, Riḍā tends to justify and defend certain institutions in a way that ʿAbduh does not. Therefore, in certain instances, ʿAbduh’s attempts to *reform* societal attitudes toward women turn into an *entrenchment* of these attitudes in Riḍā’s apologetics.

Second, the differences between the two exegetes in their terminology and ideas on gender best reflect the influence of the exegete’s own paradigm on these issues. ʿAbduh, for the most part, takes a nuanced approach to gender matters, stressing the fact that men and women share the same origin, are created for the same purpose and are equally rewarded and punished before God. He also tends to emphasize gentle and fair treatment to women. Riḍā, however, appears to take a more conservative take than his teacher regarding women’s role in the public sphere. He refers to pregnancy, labor and child-rearing as women’s “natural work” in his interpretations of verses 4:34 and 4:3 on polygyny. Yet Riḍā succeeds in packaging some of his conservative views in a terminology that depicts them as beneficial to women. This makes his discourse on gender unique to the modern period.

By the time Quṭb was writing his *tafsīr*, nearly six decades after ʿAbduh, the social and cultural climate of Egypt had considerably changed. The earlier rhetoric of colonial powers, which conceived of Muslim women’s liberation only through the abandonment of native customs and traditions, had become internalized by Arab intellectuals and upper-class, secular society to the extent that the colonial discourse on Islam’s treatment of women had now become entrenched in the popular, Egyptian discourse on Islam.957 Quṭb, therefore, uses the occasion of

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957 Yvonne Haddad writes, “Advocacy of Western values and norms became so pervasive that it fostered an atmosphere among elites in various Arab countries in which whatever pertained to the West was perceived as superior to its Islamic counterpart. The ‘sorry state’ of Muslim countries and particularly the ‘unfortunate’ circumstances for women have been portrayed as due directly to the religion of Islam itself,” (“Islam and Gender:
his *tafsīr* on gender verses, not to refute Western charges against Islam, but rather, to combat indigenous, secular criticism of Islam as regressive and repressive to women.

Quṭb best represents what Ahmed and Haddad describe as the resistance narrative to that offered by the west on women. Islamists’ position on gender in general is posited as the antithesis of the colonial narrative on women. Whereas adherence to religious practices such as veiling were regarded as regressive impediments to women’s progress in the eyes of colonial bureaucrats, in the Islamist narrative, adherence to religious traditions becomes a representation of dignity, honor, and resistance to the imposition of values that are ‘alien’ and ‘foreign’ to Muslim society. On the basis of this premise, Islamists as times proceed to resist certain gender reforms simply due to their presumed association with the West. Quṭb’s own discourse represents this duality of thought. While affirning, on one hand, Islam’s equal treatment of women, he denounces on the other hand, what he believes to be the excess of women’s liberation that he witnesses around him. He specifically derides the way Egyptian women in his time dressed and worked outside the house without necessity, and at the expense of their families’ welfare.

Ibn ‘Āshūr’s position on gender issues was also influenced by the climate of colonialism and nationalism in Tunisia, but in a way that is different from ‘Abduh and Quṭb. For the most part, Ibn ‘Āshūr is not concerned with refuting Western criticism of Islam, as much as safeguarding the role of Sharī‘a as a source of legislation and litigation in Tunisia. As J.N.D. Anderson demonstrates, despite the controversy of the 1956 Personal Status Laws, scholars who endorsed this legislation (such as Ibn ‘Āshūr) recognized that it would unify the national courts

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958 Haddad, “Islam and Gender: Dilemmas in the Changing Arab World,” 5-8; 19-23; Ahmed, 236-237.

959 Quṭb, 5:2860.
in a way that would eliminate the colonial justification to intervene in the courts.\textsuperscript{960} Therefore, despite the deep controversy of the Personal Status Laws, which banned polygamy and required men to petition the courts for a divorce (thereby eliminating men’s unilateral right to divorce),\textsuperscript{961} Ibn ʿĀshūr provided religious legitimacy to these laws and stood next to Habib Bourguiba when these were signed into law.\textsuperscript{962}

In his tafsīr, however, Ibn ʿĀshūr proceeds to interpret the verse on polygyny, 4:3, with no regard whatsoever for the heated, ideological debate surrounding this issue in his immediate environment. Despite his indirect role in providing legitimacy to the 1956 Personal Status Laws, Ibn ʿĀshūr makes no attempt in his tafsīr of 4:3 to advocate for the repeal or restriction of polygyny in the modern period. Rather, he imparts a non-polemical, technical, and linguistic tone in his interpretation of this verse. However, in other parts of his tafsīr, such as his interpretation of verse 4:34, Ibn ʿĀshūr appears to take a more partisan tone, ultimately suggesting that men do not have the authority to physically discipline their wives and that legal authorities should intervene in cases of nushūz. Such a tone, however, is not the norm for Ibn ʿĀshūr. While he clearly reflects a concern for protecting women’s rights and preventing abuse or injustice, he articulates his position in an analysis of the Qur’anic text that is primarily rooted in the disciplines of philology and law. As a result, his discourse on gender is generally void of the ideological and polemical tone that one can discern in the tafsīrs of ʿAbduh, Riḍā, and Quṭb.


\textsuperscript{961} Anderson, “The Tunisian Law of Personal Status,” 267, 271. Section 18 of the new code enacts that “Polygamy is prohibited,” and section 30 enacts that “Divorce outside a court of law is without legal effect.”

\textsuperscript{962} Nafi, ʿṬāhir ibn ʿĀshūr: The Career and Thought of a Modern Reformist ʿālim,” 12.
II. What is New in Modern Exegesis?

A. Contemporary Scholarly Assessments

The question as to whether or not modern exegesis has anything new to offer in the way of methodologies or interpretations has been a contested one. Scholars such as Rotraud Wielandt argue that most modern *tafāṣīr* have not necessarily added “anything substantially new to the already available interpretations.”963 Johanna Pink similarly writes that “*tafāṣīr* is a very traditional genre in the sense that it tends to rely to a large extent on Prophetic *aḥādīth* and on earlier exegetical authorities. This is true for recent Qur’an commentaries just as much as for premodern ones.”964 Both Pink and Wielandt note the existence of a few “innovative” trends in modern *tafāṣīr*, but they regard these as exceptions.

Some scholars, however, have been far more categorical in their contention that modern *tafāṣīr* repeats both the methodologies and interpretations of pre-modern *tafāṣīr*. Aysha Hidayatullah, for example, argues that “interpretive authority works ‘backward.’”965 Therefore, in order for modern interpretations to have legitimacy, they must repeat not only the methods of traditional exegesis, but also their content.966 Despite the theoretical brilliance of her work overall, the weakness in this particular argument is that it excludes the possibility of modern exegesis bringing new methods or interpretations while simultaneously being authoritative in the Muslim community.

Similarly, scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and others have been dismissive of modern exegeses’ potential to provide interpretations that are different from pre-modern ones

965 Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an*, 179.
966 Ibid.
in terms of being egalitarian or gender-friendly. Although Wadud singles out Quṭb’s *tafsīr* as an exception, she argues that traditional *tafāsīr* have employed an “atomistic methodology,” which was unable to produce gender-friendly interpretations because it failed to link together larger Qur’anic principles, themes and ideas.\(^{967}\) Similarly, Barlas depicts the exegetical tradition as consistently patriarchal. This is due to the exegetes’ “linear-atomistic” methodology, a term she borrows from Mustansir Mir, and also due to the misogyny of the classical period, which permeated the exegetical tradition.\(^{968}\)

In her examination of modern exegeses on gender in the Qur’an, Barbara Stowasser, however, concluded that modern exegetes attempted to give new meanings to the discussion of women in the Qur’an. In modernist and Islamist approaches to exegesis in specific, Stowasser found that they emphasized women’s “full humanity and equality with the man before God.”\(^{969}\) In a later work exploring family relations in the Qur’an, Stowasser noted the diversity and pluralism of “textual approaches and concomitant scripture-based paradigms on women’s issues.”\(^{970}\) The perplexing lack of consensus among contemporary scholars on the nature of modern exegesis and the extent of its relationship and reliance on pre-modern exegesis leaves much to ponder. Without substantively engaging both the modern and pre-modern exegetical tradition, any assessment in this matter is untenable.

**B. My Findings**

In my comparison of all three exegetes’ interpretations of three verses, all of which have elicited controversy in the modern period, I find that each exegete takes a relatively unique

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\(^{969}\) Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation*, 34, 66.

\(^{970}\) Stowasser, “Gender Issues and Contemporary Qur’an Interpretation,” 42.
interpretation on a particular verse, which challenges its dominant interpretation in the exegetical field. For Ṭāhir Ḥasan, his interpretation of Q. 4:3 is regarded by feminists as the most ‘progressive,’ and most contesting to dominant exegetical interpretations on gender. In this interpretation, Ṭāhir Ḥasan calls into question the modern-day practice of polygyny and urges jurists to consider its repeal, due to its harmful and destructive effects on families and society at large. For Quṭb, his most original interpretation on gender issues is his interpretation of Q. 2:228, in which he counters the dominant exegesis that daraja signals a man’s preference or superiority over his wife. Instead, Quṭb confines the meaning of daraja to the legal context of divorce, and argues that it is men’s prerogative to take back their wives during the latter’s waiting period. He further states that this daraja has no broad or general implication regarding men and women’s status, in contrast to what previous exegetes have stated.

For Ibn Ṭāhir, his most gender-friendly position of the ones I examined comes in his interpretation of Q. 4:34, another verse that has elicited much controversy among feminists and gender-conscious scholars. The outward meaning of this verse appears to suggest that a husband should physically discipline his nāshiz wife as a third step in a three-step process, but Ibn Ṭāhir instead argues, based in part on a grammatical premise, that husbands do not have the absolute right to discipline their wives. He suggests that this imperative ‘to hit’ does not address the husbands, but the legal authorities at large. He goes on to state that men who abuse their wives should be punished. In comparison to pre-modern exegetes who simply restricted the implementation of this verse, but did not question its implementation by the husband, Ibn Ṭāhir

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971 Stowasser writes, “’Abduh’s interpretation of the Qur’an’s social laws led him to some daringly innovative Qur’an interpretations and fatwas (legal opinions) on women’s issues, most prominent among them the practice of polygamy” (“Gender Issues and Contemporary Qu’ran Interpretation,” 34).
972 Ṭafsīr al-Manār, 4:350.
973 Quṭb, Fī Zīlāl al-Qur’ān, 1:246.
974 Ibid., 1:247,
ʿĀshūr’s position is rather original and egalitarian in its aim to protect women from abuse, which according to him could occur from a misunderstanding or mis-implementation of this verse.

The fact that one cannot single out one exegete as being the most ‘gender-friendly’ calls into question the validity of methodological approaches that focus on various exegetes’ interpretation of a single verse. While such an approach is useful for understanding the genesis and historical development of certain interpretations of one verse in particular, it is not a reliable method for assessing whether or not a certain exegete departs from or conforms to the dominant exegetical interpretation. If a comparative analysis of the modern and pre-modern exegetical tradition is limited to just one verse, it may very well lead to erroneous conclusions about a particular exegete’s position on gender issues. As I have demonstrated, one exegete might take a rather bold stance for gender egalitarianism in one interpretation, but take a rather traditional, conservative position in another. This underscores the difficulty of confining or labeling an exegete under a specific rubric on the scale of gender egalitarianism, such as conservative, progressive, or traditionalist.975 As my dissertation has demonstrated, an assessment of a particular exegete must not only consider his interpretation of a single verse, but multiple verses. More importantly, one must take into consideration an exegete’s particular methodology in context of larger intellectual developments in the exegetical field.

C. Continuities and Ruptures: Modern Exegetical Methodologies

Based on my assessment of ʿAbduh’s, Quṭb’s and Ibn ʿĀshūr’s exegeses, the continuity of tradition in the modern field of exegesis is the exception and not the norm. The genre of tafsīr underwent important methodological changes in the modern period that makes Ibn ʿĀshūr’s al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr stand out among the three modern exegetical approaches. More specifically,

975 In Domestic Violence in the Islamic Tradition, Chaudhry, for example, applies four such labels to scholars’ and activists’ approaches to Q. 4:34. These labels she uses are traditionalist, neo-traditionalist, progressive, and reformist.
'Abduh’s and Quṭb’s exegetical approaches signal a methodological break from the pre-modern exegetical tradition. They both do away with the formal characteristic of the pre-modern exegetical genre, as described by Calder, of applying a certain hierarchy of scholastic disciplines to interpret the Qur’anic text.  

Since the Qur’an’s function in human lives is to be a source of hidāya (guidance), ‘Abduh argued, then it follows that the objective of tafsīr is to make the Qur’an’s words meaningful and relevant to the lives of people. He believed that the pre-modern exegetical preoccupation with theological, legal, and linguistic debates was misplaced and he aimed, therefore, to make his tafsīr accessible to the average Muslim in its style and content. His exegetical approach was also informed by his belief in the harmony of reason and revelation. In order to grasp the meaning that God intends in the Qur’an, then one must use reason and revelation. By using revelation to understand God’s word, ‘Abduh employed the principle of the Qur’an as the best arbiter of its own meaning. Therefore, a peculiarity of his tafsīr was its attention to the literal meaning of the Qur’an and its context. Despite ‘Abduh’s decision to avoid the scholastic methodologies of tafsīr, he was still informed by them as a formally trained ‘ālim. Nonetheless, Riḍā’s edits to Tafsīr al-Manār signal a selective engagement with the exegetical tradition.

Quṭb, on the other hand, was not a traditionally trained scholar. Therefore, he replaces the hermeneutic tools of the pre-modern genre with new ones, namely the devices of literary criticism and a literary appreciation of the Qur’an. One of the most significant contributions of his tafsīr is his approach to each sūra as a unity, whereby he identifies the central thesis around which all the other topics in the sūra revolve. He also pays significant attention to the Qur’an’s

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976 Calder. 105-106.
977 Jansen, 25.
“artistic imagery,” which make his *tafsīr* literally-appealing and significant in the spectrum of modern exegeses. Despite Quṭb’s persistence that one must return to a “pure and unadulterated” Qur’an, he projects a modern ideology of Islam as a “system” onto the meanings he draws from the text. The effect of this is a discernible level of subjectivity in his *tafsīr*.

What sets Ibn ʿĀshūr apart from his modern counterparts, ʿAbduh and Quṭb, is his employment of pre-modern exegetical methodologies to reach, at points, new conclusions. Ibn ʿĀshūr consistently applies a certain hierarchy of related disciplines topped by the science of language to interpret the text of the Qur’an. In the context of larger developments in the modern field of exegesis, Ibn ʿĀshūr challenges the dominant Salafī exegetical paradigm, which viewed *tafsīr* bil-*maʿthūr* as the proper authentic mode of *tafsīr*. Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafsīr* revives the philological, *tafsīr* bil-*raʿy* tradition, in which he clearly grounds his work. Despite the pre-modern nature of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s methodologies, the content of his *tafsīr* is quite original.

**D. Significance**

These findings force us to question the correlation between meaning and methodology. Are “innovative trends” in *tafsīr* limited to methodological ones? What do we make of an exegete’s ability to employ existing methodologies to produce new meanings? I argue that the methodology represented by Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafsīr* reflects a higher level of intellectual complexity and innovation than those that discard pre-existing methodologies and start afresh. While the latter possess merit, the genius of tradition lies not in making new rules, but in demonstrating how conformity to a specific rule could lead to a different result than it previously has.

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978 Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Early Modern and Contemporary,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān.*
To understand how this process signals a development, it is most useful to consider Sherman Jackson’s use of the concept of “legal scaffolding” as it applies to law. This process, by which jurists expand the scope of existing rules to reach new interpretations, reflects “the height of innovative acumen” within a legal tradition. Similarly, in the genre of tafsīr, innovative brilliance is achieved by undergirding new interpretations with “recognizable form[s] of authority,” not by discarding them. These forms of authority, I argue, are the methodological precedents that have been established in the pre-modern exegetical tradition.

Therefore, Hidayatullah’s argument regarding interpretive authority is only half-correct, in my assessment. In her critique of feminist exegetical methods, Hidayatullah posed the argument that the authority of the exegetical tradition lies in both its interpretations and methods. Therefore, she argued, even if feminist exegetes ground their methods “in traditional exegetical methods,” they could not achieve legitimacy in the exegetical field because their interpretations subvert the exegetical tradition’s conclusions about gender issues. Her assessment is correct insofar as the notion that interpretive authority lies in its methodologies, yet is mistaken in its assertion that interpretive authority is contingent upon reaching the same conclusions.

Although exegetes are bound to certain principles of interpretation, my research demonstrates that exegetes exercised a wide range of choice in making an argument for a certain interpretation. For example, even when many exegetes rely upon or engage a particular exegete, they feel unconstrained to reject an interpretation of his that they regard to be deviant or even

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979 This term was first used by the legal historian Alan Wattson, to describe the process by which jurists seek adjustments to existing rules through new divisions, classifications, distinctions, and exceptions or by expanding or restricting the scope of existing rules (Wattson, *The Nature of Law* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977], 95, cited in Sherman Jackson, “Taqlīd, Legal Scaffolding and the Scope of Legal Injunctions in Post-Formative Theory: Muṭlaq and ʿĀmm in the Jurisprudence of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī,” *Islamic Law and Society* 3, no. 2 [1996], 167).
preposterous. For example, in the pre-exegetical commentary on Q. 4:34, exegetes cited a rare opinion by al-Ṭabarī on hajr, but only to then critique and rebuke it. Whereas most exegetes had interpreted hajr as avoiding, ostracizing, or sexually abandoning one’s wife by sleeping in separate beds, al-Ṭabarī contended that hajr actually meant tying women to the beds or constraining them to the beds. This “deviant” opinion made a frequent appearance in the pre-modern exegetical commentary and re-appears in Tafsīr al-Manār, as one exegete after the other exhausted some effort to refute this interpretation. While one may argue, as Karen Bauer does, that exegetes’ efforts to counter al-Ṭabarī’s conclusion reflect the “limits on interpretation … according to pre-modern exegetes,” I argue that this reflects a yet more significant fact. It illustrates that exegetical authority is achieved by grounding one’s work in a recognizable methodology of interpretation. This means that even when heavyweights like al-Ṭabarī reach conclusions that later exegetes find to be aberrant or even preposterous, this does not in any way undermine al-Ṭabarī’s general authority as an exegete or the legitimacy of his other interpretations. The problem, therefore, with feminist approaches to tafsīr is not that they reach different conclusions than most exegetes, but that they do not engage the exegetical literature on methodological grounds nor engage the sources upon which they based their interpretations. In order to “justify the project of egalitarian interpretation,” feminist scholars must not only bring an awareness of the subjectivity of their commitments, as Kecia Ali argues, but they must also begin to engage the exegetical tradition as a genre of its own with recognizable methodological boundaries.

984 Bauer, 176. She notes that “the most involved rebuttal of al-Ṭabarī comes from the Mālikī Ibn al-ʿArabī,” (176).
985 Bauer, 165.
986 Ali, Sexual Ethics and Islam, 133.
III. Limitations of Research

A. Pre-Modern Exegetes on Gender

My research on select pre-modern exegetical interpretations has led me to question the usefulness of applying a feminist critique to this pre-modern textual genre. Although feminist approaches have made immense contributions to the field of gender and the Qur’an, I believe that the usefulness of such an approach is limited when it comes to the pre-modern exegetical genre. There are many reasons for this limitation, some of which have been identified by Hidayatullah in *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an*. For one, it is “anachronistic”⁹⁸⁷ to impose our contemporary sensibilities upon a tradition that was informed by an entirely different paradigm and reality. Second, feminist approaches tend to measure exegetical interpretations against a “theoretically unclear” notion of “gender justice,”⁹⁸⁸ as feminists lack consensus over its precise meaning. What constitutes justice? When does a certain practice or norm lend itself to justice or injustice?

In my analysis of pre-modern exegeses of verses 4:3, 4:34, and 2:228, I have found that the theme of justice was central to their exegetical discussions. Pre-modern exegetes’ notion of justice, however, was predicated on their conception of legal rights. When legal rights were fulfilled, then justice was served; and when legal rights were neglected, then the conditions for justice were unfulfilled. In pre-modern exegesis on verse 4:3, exegetes regarded the application of justice to be the primary concern of this verse. According to al-Rāzī, the verse mandated justice by limiting the number of wives a man could have until he could be certain that he will not be unjust to the orphans under his care or to his wives.⁹⁸⁹ For al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī, this verse mandated men to fear being unjust to women, just as they fear being unjust to

⁹⁸⁷ Hidayatullah, 150.
⁹⁸⁸ Ibid.
⁹⁸⁹ Al-Rāzī, 5.9:140.
orphans.\textsuperscript{990} For all three pre-modern exegesists, the fulfillment of justice rested upon the fulfillment of rights and legal rights were defined according to the relationships between legal parties. In the case of exegeses on verse 4:3, as long as a man fulfilled the rights of the orphans under his care and the women to whom he was married, then justice was served.

The current scholarship on pre-modern exegesis on verse 4:34 unfortunately overlooks the centrality of this paradigm to exegetical interpretations on marital relations. For all the pre-modern exegesists I examined, the state of \textit{nushūz} signaled a state in which marital rights were unfulfilled. In the exegetical commentaries, unlike legal manuals, exegetes faced fewer constraints when interpreting the meanings of words. Whereas \textit{nushūz} was predicated upon the notion of refusing to fulfill rights, exegetes either broadened or restricted these rights in significant ways. For example, al-Ṭabarī constricts a wife’s obedience to her husband to the realm of her legal responsibilities to him, but other exegetes like al-Zamakhsharī expand this duty of obedience to be more absolute. Accordingly, for al-Ṭabarī, a woman’s refusal to have sexual intercourse with her husband amounted to \textit{nushūz}, not simply because it was an act of disobedience, but because it was a refusal to fulfill her husband’s right. Yet for exegetes who conceived women’s duty to be obedient more broadly, then an act of disobedience, without qualification, amounted to her negligence of his right to be obeyed. Central to the pre-modern exegesis on verse 4:34 is the notion that husbands and wives both have specific rights over each other, which is also supported by verse 2:228.

\subsection*{B. Future Research}

My findings strongly suggest that scholars should consider new ways of approaching pre-modern exegesis on gender. These approaches should situate exegetical texts in their historical context.

\textsuperscript{990} Al-Ṭabarī, 2:496; al-Zamakhsharī, 1:361. Al-Zamakhsharī writes at the end of his interpretation of Q. 4:3, \textit{“فإن الأمر كله يدور مع العدل، فأينما وجدهم العدل فعليكم به”} (In fact, the entire matter revolves around justice, so wherever you find justice, then you are enjoined to follow it" (1:361).
contexts and take into consideration the legal and ethical paradigms that informed their exegetical discussions. One area of future research in this field is to examine exegetical discussions on both genders in tandem. Scholarship in the field of gender in the Qurʾan disproportionately examines female concerns or issues to the exclusion of male ones. For example, this dissertation would have greatly benefitted from comparing verses 4:34 and 4:128, which discuss women’s and men’s nushūz, in tandem. Although I briefly examined definitions of nushūz in Q. 4:128 in relation to definitions of nushūz in Q. 4:34, a more thorough analysis of exegetical commentary on both verses would shed great insight on this concept. Based on my limited research on Q. 4:128, the theme of “rights” is also central to the exegetical commentary on this verse. Yet in this case, it is about the rights that men owe women, not what women owe men.

My selection of specific verses as the focus of analysis here is neither arbitrary nor inconsequential to my findings. In most of the current scholarship, there tends to be a disproportionate emphasis on Qurʾanic verses that elicit controversy at the expense of other verses that establish female rights over men or promote egalitarianism, kindness, mercy, and fair treatment. It is important to recognize that our disproportionate emphasis on Qurʾanic verses that are deemed as gender-controversial reflects our own times and intellectual priorities, rather than the nature of the text itself. There is a need to bring this level of awareness to our analysis and to broaden its scope to other areas that have not been as extensively examined. In the field of gender in the Qurʾan, these areas, as I have identified, are verses dealing with men and the rights they owe women, and verses establishing the ethical parameters of gender relations.

Modern exegesis is characterized by markers of both change and continuity with the pre-modern exegetical tradition. ʿAbduh and Riḍā’s *Tasfīr al-Manār*, Quṭbʾs *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān*, and
Ibn Ṭūnān’s al-Mawṣūʿat al-Muqaddasa and Ibn al-ʿĀshūr’s al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr illustrate the complex ways in which modern ṭafṣīr diverges from and converges with pre-modern ṭafṣīr. All of these scholars’ interpretations on gender in the Qurʾan, however, underscore the particularity of an exegetical gender-consciousness to the modern period.
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