

QUR'ANIC SUBTLE PATRIARCHY (PRE-CANONICAL READING TO WOMEN-MENTIONING QUR'ANIC VERSES)

Muhammad Dluha Luthfillah
State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta
dluhaluthfi@gmail.com

Abstract

According to narratology, to name something is to grant it an identity. While Qur'an is unnamng women figures engaged in its narratives, one could uncover the worldview underlying its decision to use such linguistic expression. In so doing, the paper adopts a method developed by Angelika Neuwirth, commonly referred to as pre-canonical reading. It initially compiles Qur'anic verses mentioning women figures either by name, allusion, or only stating certain historical event typical of them. It then puts them in their chronological order according to Noledke's notion (commonly known as *tartib nuzuli* in Islamic scholars). This paper then discerns the textual context and role which each verse plays in their *sura* of origin. At this point, this paper divides each *sura* of origin into some parts according to the verses' grammatical structure and thematic content. Qur'an's referentiality, in Neuwirth's term, to verses preceding and coming after the woman-mentioning verse, *sura* revealed before and after the 'home' *sura*, and historical realities surrounding them is the next point to discuss. The paper discerns sub-textual (to the panegyric pre-Islamic ode) as well as the intertextual relation; delving its self-referentiality and extra-textual referentiality. Having done all these, the paper shows that Qur'an endows women with agencies, but stops endowing in fundamental level. In that level women are subordinated. Added to that, scholars either in Muslim and non-Muslim could not hitherto provide us with historical data saying that the ways in which Qur'an addresses women are those used to address them respectfully.

Keywords: Women, Qur'anic Verses, Pre-canonical Reading, (un)Naming.

Introduction

Qur'anic worldview on women is of the core of Muslim feminists' struggles. The very fact they have to deal with primarily is that Qur'an never, excluding the case of Maryam, mentioned women figures by name. Such fact is urgent to discern provided that naming person is granting her/him with personal identity and acknowledgement of her/his existence (Abboud, 2014, p. 115; Stetkevych, 1989, p. 75), as narratology theory confirms (Hadi-Tabassum, 2006, pp. 178–92; Harasym, 1998, p. 146). Hence, unraveling the sexual-textual politics underlying the issue of unnamng in Qur'an is an urgent need, deserving reconsideration (Abboud, 2014, p. 52).

Many scholars have produced works on the subject (Adnan, 2004; Ali, 2015; Barlas, 2002; Engineer, 2003; Hassan, 1985; Neuwirth, 2009; Stowasser, 1994; Umar, 2001; Wadud, 1992). However they omitted the above fact and discussed other Qur'an-women elements instead. Hosn Abboud is hitherto the only scholar to discuss the issue pretty closely. Abboud is aware of different expressions being used for biblical women and those contemporary to Muhammad, let alone the only named woman in the Qur'an *Maryam*, Mary. Having been in this point, Abboud came to conclusion that the namelessness is of expressing Qur'an's

unconcern with details of factual history. Women figures are thus not identified as individuals (Abboud, 2014, p. 52; Donner, 1998a, 1998b, p. 84) and unnamed, while men acting as co-participant (even not contributing actor) are still named. In addition to neglecting women alluded only with *allati* and *niswa*, she overlooked the dynamic of the expressions and historical stages, including the appearance of the word *zawj* only in later Meccan and Medinan verses, the usage of *allati* for both one biblical woman and two contemporaries of Muhammad, either in Medinan and even early Meccan.

Barbara Stowasser touched only relatives of prophets, confirming that “women associated with Qur’anic prophets from Adam to Jesus are a living part of the Qur’anic worldview” (Stowasser, 1994, p. 3). Instead of discerning the Qur’an, Asma Barlas’ *Believing Women in Islam* is more focusing on interpretation (Barlas, 2002, pp. 129–67). “Why Qur’an never named women, while naming other men figures (ex. *Zayd*, *Luqman*, *Imran*)” is the core question of this paper. She stops at the point saying that Qur’an, especially verses relating story about women to be tested (*al-mumtahana*), leads us to think that women could speak for themselves, and the oath they pled does not specify the obedience to husbands (Barlas, 2002, p. 49).

Taking into consideration Qur’an’s nature of being communication devices in the communication process between the bearer of the message (Muhammad) and the recipients (Hijaz/Meccan-Medinan people of 7th CE) and thus historical-literary text, this paper is an extension of Abboud’s research. Hence, this paper has the very stance with Abboud’s and covers the historical development of the text and its usage of expressions beyond that utilizing marital, maternal, and filial status. Having all these in mind, the paper employs Angelika Neuwirth’s analysis called pre-canonical reading of the Qur’an.

Method

Neuwirth’s pre-canonical reading is taking into consideration the Qur’an’s capacity as literary and historical text (Luthfillah, 2015; Madigan, 2001; Robinson, 2000, 2003). Employing the method, this paper is initially compiling Qur’anic verses mentioning women figures either by name, allusion, or only stating certain historical event typical of them. It then puts them in their *chronological order* according to Noldeke’s notion (Noldeke, n.d.; Nöldeke, Schwally, Bergsträßer, & Pretzl, 2013)—commonly known as *tartīb nuzūli* in Islamic scholars. As did Abboud’s work and that of Jardim (Jardim, 2014), this paper discerns the textual context and role which each verse plays in their *sura* of origin. In this point, I do what Neuwirth termed the microscopic analysis on the *sura*, in that I divide a *sura* into some parts according to the verses’ grammatical structure and thematic content.

Qur’an’s referentiality, in Neuwirth’s term, to verses preceding and coming after the woman-mentioning verse, *sura* revealed before and after the ‘home’ *sura*, and historical realities surrounding them is the next point to discuss (Lien Iffah Naf’atu Fina, 2014; Neuwirth, 2009). At this point, the paper would discern sub-textual (to the panegyric pre-Islamic ode) as well as the intertextual relation. In her work Lien Iffah Naf’atu Fina (Lien Iffah Nafatu Fina, 2011) acknowledges that Neuwirth proves Qur’anic coherence and puts it in life (Lien Iffah Naf’atu Fina, 2014, p. 293). Approaching to the end, the paper provides us with microscopic literary analysis on the ‘women-mentioning’ verses having been compiled and put in the chronological order. In the ending section, the so-called referentiality to both aspects mentioned already. The method is hoped helping to test whether the Qur’an provides us with literary elements that are presented equally (Jardim, 2014, p. 152).

Result and Discussion

The table of verses I use here is that published in my previous work (Luthfillah, 2017), plus two verses (Q 21.91 and 60.12) in which Mary is referred to as *allati ahsanat farjaha* (woman who guarded her chastity). Thus there are twenty-one (21) *suras* of origin of forty-five (45) verses accounted mentioning women; al-Masad (Q 111), al-Zariyat (Q 51), Taha (Q 20), al-Hijr (Q 15), Maryam (Q 19), al-Anbiya' (Q 21), al-Naml (Q 27), al-Nahl (Q 16), Hud (Q 11), Yusuf (Q 12), al-Qasas (Q 28), al-'Ankabut (Q 29), al-A'raf (Q 7), al-Baqara (Q 2), Al Imran (Q 3), al-Nisa (Q 4), al-Ahzab (Q 33), al-Nur (Q 24), al-Mujadila (Q 58), al-Tahrim (Q 66), and al-Mumtahana (Q 60). Having in mind Nöldeke's notion of Meccan-Medinan *sura* (Sirry, 2015, pp. 170–175), we could soon see that first thirteen *suras* are Meccan (early, middle, and late), and the rests are Medinan. This point is what Wadud's analysis, unfortunately, lacks.

We could now turn to the development of expressions used in Qur'an. In early Meccan *suras* it only uses *imra'a* to refer to the wife of Abraham (Sarah) and the wife of Abu Lahab (Umm Jamil bint Harb). In middle Meccan, it starts using *umm* and *ukht* in Moses' story and *Maryam* and *allati ahsanat farjaha*, in addition to *imra'a* which refers to the wife of Lot, Zechariah (Isya, Elizabeth), and Queen of Sheba (Balqis). Some expressions only appeared in late Meccan, i.e., *banati* (daughters, of Lot), *zawj-k* (spouse, Eve), *allati* (referring to Raytah bint Sa'd (Jardim, 2014, p. 69; Zamakhsyari, n.d., p. 426) and Zulaikha, wife of *al-Aziz/Potiphar*), and Medinan cluster, i.e., *azwaj*, *nisa' al-nabiy*, *ifk* and *al-muhajirat*. In Medinan, women who are contemporary to Muhammad are referred to, such as Khawlah bint Tha'laba (with *allati*) (Zamakhsyari, n.d., p. 69), Aisha, Hafsa, and other wives of Muhammad (with *azwaj* and *nisa' al-nabiy*). It is in this period as well that Qur'an recalls the expression to refer to Mary, *allati ahsanat farjaha*. In a glance, this dynamic confirms the Nöldeke's notion on dynamic of Qur'an's linguistic style (Sirry, 2015, pp. 169–71).

Bearing these all in mind, one could ask which role does the woman play in the *suras*? Is there any text, or part of it, that could be attributed to woman? Does the text reflect women's experience, and if so, to what extent? Do these women constitute "a female voice in the Qur'an" (Jardim, 2014, p. 151) and how?

It is said that in Q 111, the text mirrors equality men and women share, for they both get punished severely (Jardim, 2014, p. 154). However, such way of thinking should lead one to think of why the man is named while the woman is not, if they are to be treated equally. The case gets more complex when it comes to the stories of Zechariah, especially in Q 19, 28, and 3. Feminist and analyst of Qur'an say that albeit the one who prays God for descendant is Zechariah, the verse implies the righteousness of all members of his family (Jardim, 2014, p. 152; Robinson, 2004).

The story of Al Imran even makes all the complication much more complex. There is very small part of the Qur'an (if there is any) that relates the story of *Imran* himself. Rather, Qur'an talks more about his wife and his House (*Al*). The wife, named Hanna/Anna/Anne in post-Qur'anic sources (Stowasser, 1994), has enough power to name her child and dedicate the child, who happened to be woman, to temple service. This very point also surprises many, for at that time woman was not considered that 'pure' to do any temple services. Yet, even so, Qur'an blurs the wife of Amram's name. The name Mary, *Maryam*, is mentioned probably because she has no husband, to fulfill God's plan in giving His sign to human. Should she has one, it makes sense that she is referred to as her husband's wife. Furthermore,

she is named in the Qur'an more often "to define her son than in her own right (Jardim, 2014, p. 157).

There are some reasons to make a statement that the independence of Mary's mother, wife of Amram, in the birth narrative is a counterbalance as for the biblical birth narrative, of Samuel and Samson for example, and for Abraham's wife, even for Mary. It is her faith and piety that grant her with such a great power of naming (Barazangi, 2004; Jardim, 2014, pp. 156–7). This narrative also confirms that woman's action might "precede" and, for some reasons, "initiate" God's verdict (Spellberg, 1996). Still, she is unnamed, and the question about it is left for us to answer.

Many argued that Qur'an's "internal textual setting" (in spite of the existence of words grammatically feminine) posit men and women in the same level. 'Men and women who believe' (Q 71.28; 40.8; 33.73; 47.19), as contrasted to 'hypocrites, men and women' and 'unbelievers, men and women' (Q 33.73) and to 'wrongdoers and their wives' (Q 37.22) are some examples. They are considered neutral expressions and thus treat men and women equally in literary realm (Jardim, 2014, pp. 154–5; Sells, 1991, 1993). Viewing this more closely, one would soon realize that these are the discussion about divine and not-earthly stuff. It is all the more when one compares with 'earthly stuff' such as marriage, inheritance, testimony/witness, and so forth. It is likely that Qur'an draws a limit-line that it will not go beyond. It is still men who believe who married to (*tankihū*) women and make women who believe married to men (*tunkihū*) in Q 2.221. The social realignment as the goal of the advent of Islam (Jardim, 2014, p. 153) is thus limited and not that emancipating.

It is uncomfortable, as to me, that albeit women's pronouncements are quoted by the Qur'an (that of Pharaoh's wife wishing to be disassociated from her husband's action, Abraham's wife questioning the annunciation of her giving birth, of woman of Pharaoh delivering a plea for his life, of women at the well whom Moses assists, of Queen of Sheba about her independence decision-making, and wife of Potiphar admitting her attempts to seduce Joseph), they are not named by the Qur'an. They no longer play the role as co-participant. Rather, they are protagonist actresses, playing an important, determining role in the story (Jardim, 2014, pp. 157, 155). What is the impact of deploying such text characteristics (Zhang & Hoosain, 2001) is an important question to ask.

Al-Mujadila (the woman who disputes) and *al-Mumtahana* (the woman to be tested) are two *suras* entitled by feminine word, impressing the *sura* to be related to women issues. In the two *suras*, "women signify speaking activity," yet are not named, "nor do they belong to familiar categories of Qur'anic discourse (i.e., prophets, believers, or rejecters). They even are subjects of speaking activity (Jardim, 2014, p. 159). They are, as evidenced by the *suras*, "an integral part of the new political order of Madina" (Jardim, 2014, p. 160; Jawad, 1998). For the very reason, one could state that independence and moral agency in the prominent roles are characterizing the situation of men and women of the early Islamic community (Afsaruddin, 2002; Jardim, 2014, p. 160). However, it is not only medieval conception of societal roles for the gender that influence the nuance in narrations of lives of the early age of Islamic/Qur'anic community, but also the Qur'an itself likely confirms such narratives, in a subtle or not-so-subtle way.

Not only does it adopt Christianity tradition nomenclature as other Meccan *suras* do, chapter *Maryam* (Q 19) as *maryam's* (as a word) *sura* of origin, has a mixed literary type between Christian liturgical and Arabic poetry (pre-Islamic panegyric ode) forms (Abboud, 2014; Marshall, 2001). The tense kindled, and expressions chosen by the Qur'an had

everything to do with Muhammad's current relation with Medinan Jewish (Adnan, 2004, pp. 46–7). Being in this range of period, Qur'an, or Muhammad in a way, as Rudi Paret, via Gunawan Adnan (Paret, 1985), says, projects Beduin's worldview on women (Adnan, 2004, p. 46). Qur'an has Q 4 and Q 65, beside Q 58, Q 2, Q 60, and Q 66, the *suras* in which women are addressed intensely and thus not discriminated, let alone subordinated and alienated (Adnan, 2004, p. 41), but still the language demands women be involved in *jama' muḏakkar sālim* (Al-Zarkāsyī, 1957, pp. 154–62), plural form for men, rather than be their individuals.

The latter point leads us to engage with classical Islamic scholars on *ibham*, to let something ambiguous. Al-Zarkasyi (Al-Zarkāsyī, 1957, p. 155) revealed some reason for this; *first*, because Qur'an has explored that thing on other section (Al-Zarkāsyī, 1957, pp. 159–60), while Raytah and Khawlah, and other women figures as well, are not explored in any section. *Second*, because the person in question is commonly known in the community in which the text circulates—Raytah and Khawlah are not in that level. Furthermore, there are many figures that are not named even in post-Qur'anic books, i.e., books of commentary of the Qur'an, hadith compilation, etc. The figures are only named in Bible commentary.

The only reasoning left for us is that those women are not considered important (Al-Zarkāsyī, 1957, pp. 161–2), or the way it addresses these women is considered the way to address them respectfully (Wadud, 1992). Even if we avoid the former, we have no strong evidence leading us to the latter and thus claiming that the linguistic style (that of unnamng women and rather stating their marital, maternal and filial status to certain men) is praising women. The absence of such historical impression justifies the existence of what I term subtle patriarchy and attempt to preserve it as such. In other words, as Adnan says, the Qur'an is reflecting, if not preserving, to some extent in very fundamental level, Bedouin worldview to women (Adnan, 2004).

Conclusion

Concluding the paper, scholars could not hitherto provide us with historical data saying that such way used by Qur'an to address women is the way to address them respectfully. The dynamic of literary stile used to refer to women reflects Noldeke's notion on the development of Qur'anic literary tools from Meccan to Medinan. In spite of Qur'an emancipatory statements and concepts in many non-fundamental cases regarding woman, the Qur'an is reflecting, if not preserving, to some extent in very fundamental level and subtle way, Bedouin worldview to women.

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