

Workshop

“Women’s Knowledge Production in Qur’anic Exegesis”

Abstracts

Qur’an Copies, and Qur’an Parts Penned by Women: Evidence of Women’s Participation in Knowledge Production from the Islamic Material Culture

Dr. Yasmin Amin (Orient Institut Beirut, Cairo)

*Yasmin Amin is the Representative of the Orient-Institut Beirut (Max-Weber-Stiftung) in Cairo. She is an Egyptian-German who holds a BA in Business Administration, a PGD and an MA in Islamic Studies, all three from the American University in Cairo. She received her PhD in Islamic Studies from Exeter University’s Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies researching ‘Humour and Laughter in the Ḥadīth’. Her research covers various aspects of gender issues, early Muslim society and culture, as well as the original texts of Islamic history, law and Hadith. She is co-translator (with Nesrin Amin) of *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* (Edinburgh University Press/AKU-ISMC 2018), and co-editor (with Nevin Reda) of *Islamic Interpretive Tradition and Gender Justice: Processes of Canonization, Subversion and Change* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2020). She has published extensively and her next book is a translation of Nazira Zeineddine’s books with Edinburgh University Press/AKU-ISMC (forthcoming 2025).*

Abstract:

Islamic literature, specifically biographical dictionaries and historical annals and chronicles preserve names of and information about *warraqāt* or *muwarriqāt* (‘paper-ologist’),¹ *nāsikhāt* (scribes, copyists), *khaṭṭaṭāt* (calligraphers) and *munammimāt* or *munammiqāt* (illuminists), many of whom worked on entire Qur’an manuscripts or a Qur’anic juz’ (parts) out of piety and seeking *baraka* (blessings). While women were known to be patrons, some have argued that knowledge production was a traditionally male enterprise, the evidence in the literature suggests otherwise. Being a *muwarriqah* with all its sub-professions is a profession that suits women well, as it allows them to work from home and according to their own schedules. Yet this topic remains understudied, though not for the lack of such learned and talented women.

There are three groups of such *muwarriqāt*: the first group are those whose names are mentioned in the literature that preserves anecdotes about them and their work; the second group are those whose manuscripts are extant and displayed in museums or in the archives, yet whose names are not mentioned in the literature; the last group are those whose manuscripts are extant and whose names are found in the literature. Unfortunately, they are still the smallest group so far, but hopefully more will emerge.

This introduction to an ongoing research project will provide examples of all three groups to highlight women artisans and their work. This paper will show examples from fourteenth century Mamluk Egypt, seventeenth century Safavid Iran and China, eighteenth century

¹ See Gacek, Adam. 2012. *Arabic manuscripts : a vademecum for readers*. Leiden: Brill, 238.

Ottoman Turkey and Bosnia and nineteenth century Palestine, as well as a fascinating work from twentieth century Morocco, to show the various styles and techniques used.

The scope of the project has been deliberately kept wide and broad, to cover different geographical regions in the Islamic Empire, as well as different eras and time spans to enable the discovery of as many female *muwarriqāt* as possible. The information found in the colophons together with the information provided in the biographical dictionaries will be combined to produce a social codicology of these talented women to determine if there are any distinguishing features or common characteristics and what we can learn about knowledgeable women and artisans to enable a generalisation from the findings.

Contemporary Female Exegesis in Turkey

Hüda Nur Ateş, M.A. (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

Hüda Nur Ateş finished her master's degree at the Department of Islamic Studies at the Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg. She is a research assistant and Ph.D. student at the Chair of Islamic Textual Studies (Qur'an and Hadith) at the Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research focuses on female exegesis of the Qur'an in the past and present.

Abstract:

Feminist exegesis of the Qur'ān has attracted the interest of numerous researchers in recent years, whereas female exegesis, in general, remains a widely undiscovered field. Until the 20th century, only a handful of women have written works of *tafāsīr* that mainly exist as manuscripts or have been lost altogether. Beginning in the 20th century, however, more and more women have started to write and publish Qur'ān commentaries such as Nusrat Amīn (d. 1983) in Iran or 'Ā'īša 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Bint aš-Šāṭi' (d. 1998) in Egypt. Especially 'Ā'īša 'Abd ar-Raḥmān, whose work represents an essential contribution to the literary exegesis of the Qur'ān, has been – even though historically inaccurately – labeled as the first female exegete. Also, at the end of the 20th century, several Turkish women published Qur'ān commentaries. Until today, seven women have published complete or partial works of *tafsīr* in Turkey. The educational backgrounds of these women vary drastically. Whereas some studied theology at the university or in a madrasah, others are autodidacts with little to no knowledge of the Arabic language.

Moreover, they all contribute to the exegesis of the Qur'ān in contemporary times and are thus worth investigating further. In my presentation, I will give an overview of contemporary female exegesis in Turkey and introduce the relevant authors and their works in this field. Thereby, I will raise awareness for a topic that holds great potential to be further explored and contribute to the discussion about the role of women in Islam, especially as scholars.

Gender as a Problem in Islamic Theology and Qur'anic Tafsir

Prof. Dr. Asma Barlas (Ithaca College, New York)

*Asma Barlas is Professor Emerita of Politics in Ithaca College, New York. She has written about Qur'anic hermeneutics, Muslim women's rights and Western attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. Her best-known book is *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Texas University, 2019; 2002). In 2008, she became the first*

Muslim to hold the Spinoza Chair in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. She was born and raised in Pakistan and has lived in the U.S. since 1983, where she was granted political asylum. She has a Ph.D. in International Studies, an M.A. in Journalism and a B.A. in English Literature and Philosophy. <http://faculty.ithaca.edu/abarlas/>.

Abstract:

A time-honored convention in Islamic theology and Qur'anic tafsir is to assign a male sex/gender to God while also claiming that the Qur'an favors men and discriminates against women because of their sex/gender. While Muslims universally accept the idea that God "Himself" has mandated this gender hierarchy, a new generation of Muslim scholars, especially some secularly inclined feminists, take this as a reason to question whether the Qur'an is, in fact, "divine."

This talk recaps some of my earlier work which explains why the first practice violates the theologeme of divine incomparability (the Qur'an's avowal that God is unlike all that exists and thus beyond comparisons), while the second ignores the fact that, although some verses speak to seventh-century gender hierarchies and practices, the Qur'an doesn't advocate a view of gender itself. As for the idea that women's gender makes them better readers of the Qur'an, it is misguided at best, as is the belief that the Qur'an's sacrality derives from how it is read. To the contrary, it is a function of the Qur'an's status as God's speech. In short, then, it is problematic to read gender into the Qur'an or to assume that it necessarily produces liberatory readings of the text.

The First Mufassirāt? The Role of Early Muslim Women in Interpreting the Qur'an

Prof. Dr. Doris Decker (University of Zürich)

Doris Decker is Assistant Professor at the Chair for History of Religions / Comparative Religion at the Department of Religious Studies at University of Zürich. She received her habilitation in religious studies from Philipps University of Marburg in 2024 with a project about gender and sexuality in contemporary Shi'ite Islam using the example of the opus of Grand Ayatollah as-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh. Her PhD thesis "Frauen als Trägerinnen religiösen Wissens. Konzeptionen von Frauenbildern in frühislamischen Überlieferungen bis zum 9. Jahrhundert" (Women as bearers of religious knowledge. Conceptions of women's images in early Islamic traditions up to the 9th century) focused on the depiction of women in Early Islamic sources. Her main research areas are Islamic religious history, early Islamic history and literature, sexuality and religion and gender related topics. Her studies and research took her to Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

Abstract:

In my lecture I will examine the role that women at the time of the Prophet played in interpreting the Qur'an. More specifically, I will ask whether the first *mufassirāt* (female exegetes) can be found among them. Therefore, we are looking at the early 7th century on the Arabian Peninsula - a time when there was no Islamic teaching system with *mufassirūn* (exegetes). The corpus of sources that I have considered for the chronological review consists of five compilations (The Kitāb Sīra Rasūl Allāh by Ibn Ishāq, edited by Ibn Hišām, The Kitāb al-Mağāzī by al-Wāqidī, The Kitāb aṭ-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr by Ibn Sa'd, al-Ġāmi' aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥ by al-Buḥārī, and the Ta'rīḥ ar-rusul wal-mulūk wal-ḥulafā' by aṭ-Ṭabarī). The source material on early Islam presents

difficulties. The texts have a complex history of origin. The texts are characterized by the time gap between the beginning of Islam in the early 7th century and the first written texts about it - the oldest are attributed to scholars of the 8th and 9th centuries. In Islamic and religious studies, it is no longer assumed that the texts on early Islam provide historical facts, but rather reconstruct the events of early Islam based on their own specific historical perspective. Due to this uncertain source situation, I will take the texts at face-value, asking what the texts report (i.e. the statements of the texts) and not question their authenticity or historicity. According to the texts women played important roles in the formation and transmission process of Islam. Their focus was particularly on revelation, which I would like to explain systematically here using nine points. It is about texts in which women relate to Qur'anic verses or revelation, namely learning Qur'anic verses, demanding a revelation, complaining about the lack of revelation, commenting on or criticizing Qur'anic verses, teaching the Qur'an, as well as texts in which women quote Qur'anic verses for specific reasons, namely: referring to them in the context of certain situations, using them as arguments, boasting about them, and/or explaining them. The last point is particularly interesting, but the other points also show that women had a certain understanding of Qur'anic verses.

The Ideological Implications of Laleh Bakhtiar's Hermeneutics on Qur'anic Exegesis and Translation

Sheam Khan, M.A. (Cardiff University)

Sheam Khan is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Cardiff University's Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK, researching Qur'anic Exegesis and Translation. Sheam obtained her M.A. in Qur'anic Exegesis from Qatar University and is also a graduate of Islamic Studies from Princess Noura University, Riyadh. Her Ph.D thesis is researching the influence of the Qur'an translator's ideology on the message of the Qur'an. The thesis compares a dictionary-based translation methodology with an exegesis-based translation methodology to explore the impact of each methodology in terms of ideological influence on the translation of the Qur'an. The study is using Nuh Ha Mim Keller's and Laleh Bakhtiar's Qur'an translations as case studies.

Abstract:

This paper explores Laleh Bakhtiar's methodological approach in constructing the 'Concordance of the Sublime Qur'an' which she utilised to compile her Qur'an translation published in 2007. In her autobiographical works, Bakhtiar presents herself as the first American woman to translate the Qur'an, emphasising the female perspective by distancing her translation from the entire corpus of premodern exegetical literature. By basing her translation entirely on entries from the concordance that she compiled, Bakhtiar was able to assert her ideological neutrality and claim that her work was the first Qur'an translation to not be marred by ideological, theological, or sectarian bias. The study explores the utilization of a concordance-based Qur'an translation methodology as a mechanism for embedding the ideological readings of a translator into the target text, whilst ideological-neutrality is presupposed by the target audience, leaving them susceptible to unperceived ideological influences. This paper examines Bakhtiar's hermeneutics and deconstructs her methodology in translating the Qur'an, examining the effects of her methodological approach on the meaning presented therein. It further explores several theological positions that are espoused in the translation, tracing them back to either the explicit, or implicit ideological positions held by the

translator, or to methodological choices made by her with causal sequence, which the paper terms as ‘accidental ideology’. In the instances where ideology is identified, it is determined whether it is explicit, in that the ideological interpolation of the target text was intended by the translator, implicit, where it was subconscious, or accidental, where it was an unintended consequence of methodological translation choices. The study is situated within the hermeneutical debates that Professor Johanna Pink alludes to regarding ‘postmodern perspectives’ on the Qur’anic text, where emphasis is on the role of the reader, (and by extension the translator), who generates meaning from the text, vs modernist perspectives, where there is a clear and definite meaning which can be mined from the text. Bakhtiar’s arguments align with modernist thought, and her claims to present only the meanings ‘intended by God,’ indicate belief in a realm of divine intention and definite meanings inherent in the text. The theoretical framework established in the paper seeks to create a typology by identifying ideological positionality and codifying it into three defined models which can be utilised for other Qur’an translations with minimal adaptation.

Sumayya ‘Afifi: Egyptian Qur’an Translator of Russian Tafsīr al-Muntakhab

Elvira Kulieva, M.A. (University of Freiburg)

Elvira Kulieva is a Ph.D. student at the University of Freiburg, where she is working on her dissertation about the social history of Qur’an translations made by Muslims after the fall of the USSR. She holds Master's degrees in Islamic Studies from Hamad Bin Khalifa University (Doha) and in Civilization Studies from Ibn Haldun University (Istanbul). Her primary interests include Qur’an interpretation, Orientalism, and modern Sufism. She has published several articles and is a regular contributor to the Global Qur’an Research blog.

Abstract:

This paper explores women’s involvement in Russian Qur’an translations, focusing on the Qur’an tafsīr-translation al-Muntakhab, which was published in 2000. This collaborative work, associated with Egypt’s al-Azhar University and Egypt’s Ministry of Endowments featured Egyptian scholar Sumayya ‘Afifi (1935-2005) as a main translator and gained recognition in post-Soviet countries through local Islamic institutions and grassroots efforts. ‘Afifi’s career began during Gamal Abdel Nasser’s presidency, a period marked by extensive cooperation between Egypt and the USSR. Paradoxically, initiatives by Nasserist and Communist governments enabled individuals like ‘Afifi—educated in the ultra-secular environment of the USSR—to later engage in Egyptian *da‘wa* activism in post-Soviet countries. This paper presents al-Muntakhab as a case study to explore ‘Afifi’s role and agency within the male-dominated field of Qur’an translation. Drawing on Arabic print and video sources, personal testimonies, and an analysis of her specific translation strategies, a contrasting narrative emerges: while Arabic media celebrated ‘Afifi as a national heroine, her contributions are rarely discussed in the target language context, where the focus shifted to the institutional authority of al-Azhar University. This narrative, framed within the broader context of Egyptian Islamic revival (al-*Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya*), facilitated women’s ‘pious’ involvement in Qur’an translation and *tafsīr*, contrasting with the later feminist hermeneutical ‘resistance.’ The presentation provides insights into the political contexts of the USSR and Nasserist Egypt, tracing ‘Afifi’s intellectual journey and examining her agency in the al-Muntakhab project, highlighting both the limits and opportunities within these socio-political frameworks.

(Derivative) Female Agency in Tafsīr and Qur'an Translation

Prof. Dr. Johanna Pink (University of Freiburg)

Johanna Pink is professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany. She taught at Freie Universität Berlin and the University of Tübingen. Her main fields of interest are the transregional history of tafsīr in the modern period and Qur'an translations, with a particular focus on transregional dynamics. She is the Principal Investigator of the research project "GloQur – The Global Qur'an" and general editor of the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān Online. Her most recent monograph is entitled "Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today" (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019).

Abstract:

This talk is based on a broad survey of modern and contemporary Qur'an translations and commentaries from all over the world, very few of which have been written by Muslim women. The main reason for this is the fact that the authority to interpret the Qur'an is typically attributed to men. Women rarely receive the kind of training that would embolden them to claim exegetical authority and because of this, they frequently either assume that they lack the skill required to interpret the Qur'an or that they will lack credibility as an exegete in the eyes of other Muslims.

Focusing on the outliers, i.e., Qur'anic commentaries and Qur'an translations written by women, allows us to gain insights into their agency, the sources of their authority and the strategies they use to negotiate and frame their gender.

One such strategy is related to the conditions and context in which their exegetical works are produced. Some of them originate from within a specific community that lends them their support, such as the Ahmadiyya or the Murabitun. In other cases, they were commissioned by an established publisher, which ensures a certain distribution.

A different type of strategy is the involvement and foregrounding of male authority, for example through co-producing the translation or *tafsīr* together with male exegetes. Alternatively, or in addition to this, some female exegetes downplay their agency by framing her work as a mere translation or a summary of a man's exegetical effort. On a different level, some works are positioned as literary endeavors, sidestepping the question of exegetical authority by focusing on artistic skill.

Furthermore, there are certain niches in which women's exegetical activity is more frequent and visible than others. The most conspicuous of these is the field of pedagogy; women are commonly seen producing exegetical works that specifically target children or families. Another such niche is Sufism, where authority rests on different sources than a traditional training as a scholar of Islam.

Finally, we see some exegetes and translators who outright defy conventional authority structures, often based on a Qur'anist approach, rejecting the legitimacy of hadiths and of the entire exegetical tradition. In this regard, being an Arab can be framed as particularly advantageous because it supposedly gives the translator privileged access to the source text. This strategy frees the translator of the need to prove their scholarly credentials.

Women's Knowledge Production in Qur'anic Exegesis: Discovering a Marginalised Discourse

Prof. Dr. Nimet Şeker (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

Nimet Şeker is Professor of Islamic Textual Studies (Qur'an and Hadith) at the Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She holds a Ph.D. in Qur'anic hermeneutics from the Goethe Universität Frankfurt a. M. She has held several visiting professorships in Switzerland and interim professorships, including at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research focuses on Qur'anic exegesis and hermeneutics, gender in the Qur'an, and new approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. Her recent monograph is "‘Das Männliche ist nicht wie das Weibliche’ (Sure 3:36): Differenz und Hierarchie der Geschlechter in geschlechtersensiblen Beiträgen zur Exegese und Hermeneutik des Korans" (Baden-Baden: Karl Alber, 2024). She is associate editor of the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an Online and co-editor of the series "Religion-Gender-Bodies".

Abstract:

The hypothesis that the contribution of women to the development and differentiation of the classical disciplines of Islamic theology in subjects such as Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith studies, Islamic law, Islamic systematic theology (*kalām*) and Islamic philosophy was negligible, especially in the pre-modern period, has persisted to this day. Even if this hypothesis appears to be correct at first glance, since women's names are rare or non-existent among the well-known pre-modern scholars, it has not yet been proven by research. Not only has there been no theological-historical examination of this thesis. Research has also not yet asked for what reasons and by what mechanisms women did not participate in the development of theological disciplines in the formative phase, or were excluded from these knowledge-forming processes altogether.

Previous studies, such as Ash Geissinger's *Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority. A Rereading of the Classical Genre of Qur'ān Commentary* (2015), have analysed the various mechanisms that led to the exclusion of female voices from the transhistorical exegetical community. It is not surprising, therefore, that no major or significant Qur'ānic commentaries by women are known from classical exegesis.

This changed only in the mid-20th century as a result of various social, cultural and political transformations. Women from various disciplines, such as Arabic studies and theology, began to enter the still male-dominated field of exegesis. Much of this contemporary development of exegesis and commentary culture is still completely unexplored. It is striking, for example, that even in Western feminist Qur'anic exegesis the work of a pioneer such as 'Āi'ṣa 'Abd ar-Raḥmān and other female exegetes has not been taken up.

But how can the contribution of women to the production of exegetical knowledge be analysed? This paper discusses the methodological proposal to reconsider the sole authorship of pre-modern Qur'anic commentaries and to develop approaches for the reconstruction of a collective authorship that allows for the contribution of women (and other marginalised groups) to pre-modern exegesis. Another aspect is the theoretical question of whether there is a specific female writing, a specific form of female knowledge in exegesis. To this end, the paper takes up the discussion of *écriture féminine* from literary theory and feminist philosophy and asks whether a form of 'women's writing' is reflected in the Qur'anic commentaries of women scholars.

Exploring Dr. Suhaila Zain al-Abidin's Exegesis in Saudi Arabia

Dr. Lana Sirri (University of Amsterdam)

Dr. Lana Sirri is a researcher and activist whose work focuses on the intersection of religion, gender, and sexuality, with a critical examination of Muslim feminist thought. Her book, "Islamic Feminism: Discourses on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Islam," was published in 2020 in Routledge Book Series "Critical Studies in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality." As knowledge valorization and societal outreach are indispensable to her academic journey, Lana also published a non-fiction book titled "Einführung in islamische Feminismen" in 2017 and 2020, which aims to make different perspectives of feminism accessible to lay readers. In 2021 she was awarded with the prestigious Dutch National Research Grant (NOW) that allows her to conduct a four-years research at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Sciences Research, in the Netherlands. Lana is an associated expert of the Centre for Intersectional Justice (CIJ) and co-founder of the Berlin Muslim feminists' group, an initiative committed to Muslim ethics and an intersectional feminism that is inclusive of all.

Abstract:

The concept of *Qiwamma*, deeply embedded in Islamic discourse on gender relations, has long challenged scholars, particularly those engaged in feminist interpretations of sacred texts. Feminist scholars have sought to critique patriarchal interpretations and advocate for a revision of gender power structures within Islam. One of the most influential feminist readings of *Qiwamma* is by the renowned U.S.-based scholar Amina Wadud, whose work has significantly shaped the field of Islamic feminism. However, despite its groundbreaking nature, Wadud's interpretation—along with others in the field—remains situated within the dominant frameworks of U.S. global imperialism, especially the imperialism of knowledge production. This positioning often marginalizes non-Western language sources and voices, leaving critical contributions from Muslim-majority societies overlooked. This presentation introduces the work of Dr. Suhaila Zein al Abadin Hammad, an Arabic-speaking scholar who, as early as the 1980s, proposed a revised interpretation of *Qiwamma* that aligns with women-friendly approaches within Islamic feminism. By focusing on Hammad's contributions, this presentation aims not to assert the superiority of one feminist interpretation over another—an approach that would contradict the fundamental principles of Islamic feminism, which calls for continuous reinterpretation and revision of Islamic texts. Instead, it seeks to foreground the significance of including marginalized voices and non-Western knowledge systems in global feminist discourse. Through the lens of Hammad's work, this presentation demonstrates the potential and power of integrating diverse voices from Muslim-majority societies into the broader framework of Islamic feminist methodology and theory. While my focus on Hammad and Arabic knowledge production stems from my linguistic access, the larger goal is to call for a more inclusive approach to Islamic feminist scholarship, one that welcomes contributions from across languages and cultures, ultimately strengthening and expanding the horizons of the field.