

RECONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL RIGHTS IN ISLAM BASED ON QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATION: A PARADIGM SHIFT FROM PATRIARCHY TO EGALITARIAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

This study explores sexual rights in Islam, which have long been dominated by patriarchal approaches rooted in classical fiqh (jurisprudence) and tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis). The research aims to compare classical and contemporary Qur'anic interpretations of sexual rights using qualitative analysis and thematic exegesis (tafsir maudhu'i). The findings reveal a paradigm shift from a wife's obligation-centered framework to a sexual relationship based on mutual respect and consent. The study highlights the development of a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of sexual rights. Additionally, it identifies a research gap in the form of insufficient attention to spiritual and psychological aspects within Qur'anic exegesis discussions on sexual rights.

Keywords: *sexual rights; Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir); patriarchy; reciprocal relations; thematic exegesis (tafsir maudhu'i)*

Introduction

The discourse on sexual rights within Islamic frameworks has garnered significant momentum in contemporary academic circles,¹ a development that runs parallel to the global and local ascendancy of movements advocating for gender justice within both family life and broader societal structures. For centuries, the ontological and epistemological foundations of discussions on sexuality in Islam have been almost exclusively anchored in classical fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and traditional tafsir (exegesis) approaches. These dominant paradigms, products of their specific socio-historical milieus, have largely constructed marital relations within a rigid patriarchal framework that implicitly and explicitly privileges male agency and authority. Within this constructed narrative, sexual intimacy is predominantly framed as the wife's religious obligation (ḥaqq al-zawj) to her husband, a duty integral to maintaining marital harmony and preventing moral transgression. Conversely, the wife's reciprocal right to sexual fulfillment, emotional satisfaction, and bodily autonomy is seldom emphasized with equivalent theological vigor or legal enforceability. This profound interpretative imbalance does not merely exist as an academic abstraction; it perpetuates tangible gender inequality, fostering environments where female desire is silenced, consent is assumed rather than negotiated, and injustices within the

¹ Sherly Dwi Agustin, "WACANA MISOGINIS DALAM DISKURSUS TAFSIR AKADEMIS : KAJIAN EPISTEMOLOGIS ATAS JURNAL TAHUN 2010-2019 Sherly Dwi Agustin UIN Sunan Kalijaga , Yogyakarta," *Mushaf: Jurnal Tafsir Berwawasan Keindonesiaan* 1, no. 1 (2020): 27.

most private spheres of marital relationships are normalized, thereby reinforcing broader, oppressive social structures and power dynamics.

This patriarchal hegemony is deeply embedded in the classical tafsir tradition, which for generations has served as the primary authoritative source for understanding the Qur'an's teachings on marriage and intimacy. Seminal works by esteemed scholars such as al-Ṭabarī², al-Qurṭubī³, and Ibn Kathīr⁴, while monumental in their historical and linguistic contributions, typically approach verses concerning marital relations through a normative and hierarchically stratified lens. A quintessential example is the exegesis of QS. an-Nisā' [4]:34, a verse frequently interpreted as ontologically legitimizing male superiority (qawwāmūna) and female subordination, extending this dominance unequivocally into the sexual domain. Within this traditional interpretive model, sexual relations are positioned primarily as a wifely duty to satiate the husband's biological urges, a perspective that often marginalizes critical considerations such as the wife's enthusiastic consent, her spiritual connection during the act, and her psychological well-being. The wife's subjectivity is effectively erased, reducing her role to that of a passive participant in a divinely sanctioned transaction. This reductionist view has had a lasting legacy, shaping Islamic legal manuals and popular religious discourse for centuries, and continues to inform the attitudes and expectations of many Muslim

² Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān Fī Ta'wīl Al-Qur'ān*, ed. Mahmud Shakir, vol. 5 (Kairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.).

³ Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' Li-Aḥkām Al-Qur'ān Jilid 1* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2006).

⁴ Ismail bin Umar bin Katsir al-Qursyi ad-Damasyqi, *Tafsir Al-Qur'ān Al-Adzhīm* (Kairo: al-Maktabah al-Islamiyah, 2017).

communities today, creating a significant rift between lived experiences and the evolving principles of justice (al-‘adl) and compassion (rahmah) that are central to the Islamic worldview.

In response to these entrenched traditional readings, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed a transformative shift catalyzed by the advancement of gender studies and the innovative application of contextual and thematic (maudhū‘ī) interpretation methods within Islamic scholarship. This progressive movement seeks to re-examine the Qur’anic text through hermeneutic lenses that prioritize its ethical, social, historical, and humanistic dimensions, aiming to align contemporary understandings with the scripture’s overarching mission of establishing justice. Pioneering thinkers such as Amina Wadud⁵, through her groundbreaking hermeneutics of tawhīd (divine unity), Asma Barlas⁶, with her incisive work on antipatriarchal Qur’anic readings, and Riffat Hassan⁷, through her theological exploration of woman-man equality, have deconstructed patriarchal assumptions in tafsir and established robust frameworks that center women’s experiences and agency. Their work has been instrumental in challenging the dogmatic acceptance of classical interpretations, arguing for a reading that distinguishes between the Qur’an’s eternal principles and the time-bound, male-centric understandings of early

⁵ Yusdani Yusdani and Januariansyah Arfaizar, “Re-Interpretasi Teks Al-Qur’an Dalam Budaya Patriarkhi Telisik Epistemologi Feminis Egaliterianisme Asma Barlas,” *Jurnal Semiotika-Q: Kajian Ilmu Al-Quran Dan Tafsir* 2, no. 2 (January 1, 1970): 160–81, <https://doi.org/10.19109/jsq.v2i2.13955>.

⁶ Riffat Hassan, *Women’s Studies in Religion, Feminist Theory*, vol. 9 (Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315662244>.

⁷ Hassan.

interpreters. This global scholarship has found a strong resonance in Indonesia, where influential scholars like Musdah Mulia, with her comprehensive critique of patriarchal Islamic jurisprudence, Lies Marcoes, through her work on women's bodies and fiqh, and Nur Rofiah, with her nuanced concept of "nego-suffering" in gendered interpretation, have made substantial contributions to developing localized, gender-equitable perspectives in tafsir that are sensitive to the Indonesian socio-cultural context.⁸

Despite these courageous and intellectually rigorous efforts, a critical lacuna persists within the existing body of literature. Discussions on sexual rights within Qur'anic exegesis remain disproportionately limited, often circumscribed to legalistic (fiqh) debates about permissibility and prohibition or normative discussions on obligation. There is a conspicuous lack of deep, systematic exploration that holistically integrates the spiritual (e.g., sexual intimacy as a form of mutual worship and means of attaining spiritual tranquility/sakinah), psychological (e.g., its impact on self-esteem, mental health, and emotional bonding), and humanistic dimensions (e.g., mutual pleasure, affection, and recognition of personhood) of marital intimacy within an egalitarian Qur'anic framework. Most studies, even those advocating for gender justice, tend to focus on broader issues of inheritance, testimony, or political leadership, leaving the intimate sphere relatively underexplored. Furthermore, while

⁸ Shinta Nuraini, "Al-Quran Dan Penciptaan Perempuan Dalam Tafsir Feminis," *Hermeneutik* 12, no. 1 (2019): 71, <https://doi.org/10.21043/hermeneutik.v12i1.6023>.

comparative analyses of classical and modern interpretations exist, few meticulously trace the hermeneutic trajectory and concrete paradigm shift from a model of patriarchal domination toward one of mutual interdependence specifically in the context of sexuality. It is precisely within this scholarly gap that the present article positions itself, seeking to make a distinct and meaningful contribution.

Therefore, this research aims to systematically address this identified gap by undertaking a comprehensive reconstruction of the concept of sexual rights through a dedicated thematic (*maudhū'ī*) interpretation of the Qur'an. The study is guided by two central, interconnected research questions: First, why have discourses on sexual rights in Islam historically been and continue to be framed predominantly as one-sided obligations toward the husband, and what socio-historical and epistemological factors sustain this framing? Second, how can the Qur'anic text itself, when engaged through a conscientious and contextualized interpretive methodology, provide the foundation for a more balanced, reciprocal, and egalitarian paradigm of marital sexuality? These questions are not merely academic; they address fundamental aspects of Muslim marital life that have profound implications for individual well-being, family harmony, and the evolution of more just socio-cultural constructs. In an era of rapid social change and increasing awareness of gender justice, reinterpreting religious teachings is an urgent imperative to prevent systemic inequality and intimate injustice from being perpetuated in the name of divine doctrine.

This study's primary contribution lies in its specific, focused excavation of the sexual dimension within marital relations, moving beyond broader discussions of gender equality to concentrate on this intimate yet critically important domain. While building upon the foundational work of scholars like Wadud and Barlas, this article differentiates itself by synthesizing their hermeneutic, contextual, and feminist approaches and applying them concentratedly to verses directly and indirectly related to sexuality, such as those discussing *libās* (garment), *tarāḍīn* (mutual consent), and the concept of *majānīb* (enjoyment). Furthermore, it seeks to bridge the existing gap by integrating spiritual, psychological, and humanistic perspectives into the core of the tafsir analysis, arguing that an egalitarian sexual relationship is a Qur'anic ideal that fulfills biological, emotional, and spiritual needs simultaneously. The research employs a qualitative design centered on thematic tafsir analysis, meticulously examining relevant Qur'anic verses holistically while critically engaging with their socio-historical contexts and the evolution of their interpretations from the classical period to the most contemporary contributions from the last decade.⁹ This methodological rigor is expected to yield significant theoretical contributions to the field of gender-just tafsir studies and offer practical, theologically-grounded insights for educators, religious leaders, and communities striving to foster more equitable, fulfilling, and harmonious marital relationships in the Muslim world. The discussion will unfold by first exploring the classical concept of sexual

⁹ YUSDANI and ARFAIZAR, "Re-Interpretasi Teks Al-Qur'an Dalam Budaya Patriarkhi Telisik Epistemologi Feminis Egaliterianisme Asma Barlas."

rights, followed by a detailed analysis of both traditional and contemporary exegeses, examining the evident paradigm shift, and culminating in a proposed reconstruction of sexual relations based on the core Qur'anic values of equality, reciprocity, and mutual dignity.

Method

This research is a qualitative study in the form of library research, with a primary approach of thematic interpretation (*tafsīr maudhūī*).¹⁰ The locus of the research centers on primary and secondary texts, making the "field" digital and physical libraries. Data collection was conducted intensively over a six-month period, from January to June 2024. The subjects of this research are classical and contemporary books of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and academic works that discuss the issue of sexual rights in marriage from an Islamic perspective. Primary data for the research includes authoritative classical exegesis works, such as *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* by Imām Abū Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* by Abū 'Abdullāh Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, and *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* by Ismā'īl bin 'Umar Ibn Kathīr. Primary data from the contemporary period includes the works of scholars employing feminist and contextual hermeneutical approaches, such as *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* by Amina Wadud and "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal*

¹⁰ Abū Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, "Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy Al-Qur'ān," ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr dan Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr, vol. 4 (Kairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1954), 65.

Interpretations of the Qur'an by Asma Barlas. Secondary data was obtained from relevant books, scholarly journals, conference articles, and dissertations published within the last 10 years (2014-2024) to ensure the topicality and relevance of the discussion.

The data collection method was carried out through documentation techniques, involving the tracing, gathering, selection, and categorization of these primary and secondary sources.¹¹ This process involved close reading and note-taking on Qur'anic verses related to spousal relations and sexuality, such as QS. al-Baqarah [2]:187, QS. an-Nisā' [4]:19, QS. ar-Rūm [30]:21, as well as the interpretation of these verses across various exegesis works.¹² The collected data was then organized based on periodization (classical-contemporary) and interpretive approach (textual-contextual) to facilitate comparative analysis.

The data analysis methods used are content analysis and hermeneutic analysis. The categorized data was analyzed in the following steps: first, describing the classical and contemporary interpretations of the relevant verses. Second, analyzing the differences in the approaches and assumptions underlying the two models of interpretation. Third, reinterpreting the meaning of these verses using a hermeneutic framework that considers the socio-historical context of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the context of contemporary society, and

¹¹ Sugiyono, *Metodologi Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif Dan R & D* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2020).

¹² Seun Kim, Jeffrey G. Nelson, and R. Stanley Williams, *Mixed-Basis Band-Structure Interpolation Scheme Applied to the Fluorite-Structure Compounds NiSi₂, AuAl₂, AuGa₂, and AuIn₂*, *Physical Review B*, vol. 31, 1985, <https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevB.31.3460>.

the universal objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), particularly the principle of justice (*'adl*).¹² This analysis aims to trace the paradigm shift from patriarchal interpretations towards a model of relation based on mutual equality and interdependence.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a profound and dynamic evolution in the Islamic discourse on sexual rights, moving from historically patriarchal interpretations toward a framework grounded in reciprocity, justice, and holistic well-being. This discussion synthesizes these findings, analyzes them against the backdrop of existing scholarship, evaluates the contributions and limitations of this research, and proposes avenues for future inquiry.¹³

The central thesis that emerges is that the Qur'anic foundation for marital relations is inherently reciprocal and balanced,¹⁴ as powerfully illustrated by the metaphor of spouses being "garments" (*libās*) for one another (QS. al-Baqarah [2]:187).¹⁵ This metaphor, as analyzed by Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002), signifies mutual protection, intimacy, comfort, and concealment of imperfections, establishing a paradigm of equality. However, as our exploration confirms, classical exegesis (*tafsīr*) was significantly shaped by the patriarchal socio-cultural

¹³ Samsul Bahri, "Kewajiban Nafkah Dalam Keluarga (Studi Komparatif Hukum Islam Dan Undang – Undang Di Indonesia Terhadap Istri Yang Mencari Nafkah)," *Jurnal Hukum Dan Hukum Islam* 11, no. 1 (2024): 63–80.

¹⁴ Neng Hannah, "Seksualitas Dalam Alquran, Hadis Dan Fikih: Mengimbangi Wacana Patriarki," *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya* 2, no. 1 (2017): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jw.v2i1.795>.

¹⁵ Al-Imam Abul Husain Muslim bin al-Hajjaj al-Qusyairi an-Naisaburi, *Shahih Muslim Bi Syarhi An-Nawawi*, *Juz 5*, n.d.

contexts of its early interpreters (mufassirūn), such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī (Abou El Fadl, 2001). Their readings of pivotal verses like QS. an-Nisā' [4]:34 often emphasized male authority (qiwāmah) and female obedience (ṭā'ah) in a unilateral manner, reducing sexual relations to a husband's right and a wife's duty (ḥaqq al-zawj). This historical dominance of androcentric fiqh has perpetuated a hierarchical model that neglects the woman's agency, desire, and right to mutual satisfaction, creating a significant gap between the Qur'an's ethical vision and its traditional legal implementation.¹⁶

This study aligns with and extends the work of contemporary feminist scholars who are deconstructing these patriarchal narratives. The transformative methodologies pioneered by Wadud (1999),¹⁷ Barlas (2002), and Hassan (1996) are not merely academic exercises but are crucial projects of socio-religious reconstruction. Their hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval successfully demonstrate that the Qur'an's core principles of justice (‘adl), compassion (raḥmah), and ontological equality (from a single soul, nafs wāḥidah) are fundamentally incompatible with systemic gender oppression. Our analysis strongly supports their argument that patriarchal interpretations are cultural artifacts, not divine mandates. The reevaluation of qiwāmah not as a license for domination but as a moral

¹⁶ Iswadi Bahardur, "Maskulinitas Laki-Laki Minangkabau Dalam Novel Perempuan Batih Karya A.R. Rizal: Tinjauan Rewyn Connel," *Humanika* 30, no. 2 (2024): 179, <https://doi.org/10.14710/humanika.v30i2.59788>.

¹⁷ Aidatul Fitriyah and Gohar Rahman, "Reinterpreting Gender in the Qur'an: Realizing Inclusive Interpretation in the Modern Era" 17, no. 2 (2024): 101–16, <https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v17i2.303>.

and financial responsibility to be exercised with justice, as proposed by Wadud (1999), provides a theologically robust alternative that is far more consistent with the Qur'an's holistic worldview.

Furthermore, this research highlights the significant contribution of Indonesian scholars like Musdah Mulia (2005), Lies Marcoes, and Nur Rofiah, who enrich the global discourse by grounding it in local contexts. They advocate for a substantive justice approach that integrates sociological and psychological dimensions, arguing that interpretations divorced from women's lived experiences become sources of structural injustice. Their work, alongside the global scholars, confirms that the paradigm shift in tafsīr is not a Western imposition but an internal, global Muslim movement to reclaim the text's egalitarian spirit.

A critical methodological contribution of this study is its application of thematic interpretation (tafsīr maudhū'ī) to reconstruct sexual rights. By holistically analyzing verses such as QS. al-Baqarah [2]:187 (libās), QS. al-Rūm [30]:21 (sakīnah, mawaddah, raḥmah), and QS. an-Nisā' [4]:34 (qiwāmah) in concert, a more coherent and ethical narrative emerges. This synthesis reveals that marital intimacy is envisioned as a multidimensional bond encompassing emotional tranquility (sakīnah), affectionate love (mawaddah), and compassionate mercy (raḥmah), all protected within a framework of mutual responsibility. This approach effectively challenges reductivist, legalistic readings that focus solely on permissibility and obligation, instead foregrounding the relational and spiritual objectives of marriage.

However, this study identifies a significant research gap that persists even within progressive exegesis: the relative neglect of the spiritual and psychological dimensions of marital sexuality. While classical and modern fiqh often reduces sex to biology and law, and contemporary gender-focused tafsīr excellently addresses justice and rights, both can overlook the profound existential and emotional aspects. As this research argues, within the Qur'anic value system, sexual intimacy can be an act of worship (*ibādah*) and a means of soul purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), fostering a divine connection (*mahabbah*) between spouses. Factors such as sexual anxiety, trauma, emotional unreadiness, and the pursuit of mutual transcendental experience are rarely integrated into exegetical works. This constitutes a major limitation in the current literature that this study begins to address but cannot fully resolve.

Therefore, the primary contribution of this research is its interdisciplinary call to action. It contributes to Qur'anic hermeneutics by proposing a more humanistic framework centered on mutuality, bodily autonomy, and spirituality. To the discourse on gender justice, it positions sexual rights as fundamental human rights derived from Islamic values, crucial for the dignity of women, survivors of violence, and other marginalized groups. It offers a third way beyond the conservative-liberal binary, one that is textually grounded yet contextually sensitive.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. Its reliance on textual and scholarly analysis means its findings require further grounding in empirical sociological and psychological research within

diverse Muslim communities. The proposed interpretations, while theologically sound, face the practical challenge of gaining traction in mainstream religious institutions still dominated by traditional fiqh paradigms.

Based on these limitations, we suggest several directions for future research:

1. **Empirical Studies:** Conduct qualitative research to understand the lived experiences of Muslim couples regarding sexual intimacy, consent, and communication within religious frameworks.
2. **Psychological Integration:** Develop interdisciplinary studies that explicitly integrate principles of Islamic psychology and Sufi spirituality with contemporary understandings of sexual health and marital therapy.
3. **Pedagogical Reform:** Explore practical strategies for introducing these gender-inclusive and spiritually-oriented interpretations into curricula of Islamic schools, universities, and preacher training programs.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sexual rights in Islam, which have historically been framed within patriarchal structures and unilateral obligations, possess the potential for reinterpretation grounded in principles of justice, reciprocity, and spirituality. Through a thematic interpretation (*tafsir mawdu'i*) of Qur'anic verses concerning spousal relations, it becomes evident that the Qur'an does not inherently endorse male dominance over women. Rather, it presents a model of relationality based on complementarity and equality. This paradigm is

reflected in verses such as *Al-Baqarah* (2:187) and *Ar-Rūm* (30:21), which emphasize values of mutual affection (*mawaddah*), consent, and emotional intimacy.

Contemporary exegetical contributions by Muslim scholars—such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Musdah Mulia, and Nur Rofiah—bolster the argument that women's lived experiences must occupy a central role in the interpretive process, particularly in matters pertaining to bodily autonomy, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships. This research further affirms that the spiritual and psychological dimensions of sexual relations constitute critical yet underexplored aspects within classical exegetical discourse. Consequently, reconstructing sexual rights based on the Qur'an necessitates moving beyond purely legalistic and ethical frameworks, incorporating instead Sufistic and psychological approaches that engage with the holistic human experience.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its reinforcement of thematic tafsir as a methodological tool for deconstructing patriarchal narratives and cultivating a more humanistic, gender-inclusive hermeneutics. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for advancing Islamic thought that is equitable in its treatment of gender, as well as a reference for family education and progressive social policies. For further research, it is recommended that scholars conduct in-depth examinations of Muslim women's real-life experiences concerning sexual rights, employing interdisciplinary approaches that integrate tafsir, psychology, and sociology. Additionally, a Sufistic lens may offer valuable insights into sexuality as a form of spiritual

expression rather than mere biological function. In closing, the author extends gratitude to advisors, interviewees, and institutions that provided academic and moral support throughout this research. It is hoped that this study may contribute—however modestly—to the broader intellectual movement toward realizing equitable, harmonious (*sakinah*), and dignified marital relationships within Muslim households.

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