

# Male Authority and Wife-Beating through the Lenses of Feminists: An Analysis of Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics

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## Abstract

This paper examines verses related to male authority and wife-beating as reinterpreted by feminist scholars, with particular reference to Amina Wadud. The aim of the paper is to analyse to what extent Wadud's perception of gender equality shaped her reading of Quran, 4:34]. Over the last two decades, *tafsir* has gained a new momentum with the emergence of Muslim feminist hermeneutics, an exegetical method used by feminists to reread the Qur'ân to advance gender equality within an Islamic paradigm. This is particularly true for Wadud who argues that classical exegetes manipulated *tafsir* to oppress women and preserve 'male-centric' authority. Hence, contextualization of the Qur'ân by adopting a new gender-sensitive approach is necessary to ensure women's active participation in *tafsir*. Using this approach, Wadud develops her own reading to deconstruct specific verses and discredit what she calls a patriarchal fallacy. While mainstream *tafsir* relies heavily on using *hadith* for the most authentic interpretation, Wadud has disregarded its authority, arguing that hadith-based Qur'ânic hermeneutics should end. This paper analyses Wadud's hermeneutics in relation to male authority and wife-beating and evaluates the extent to which she breaks with mainstream *tafsir*. In the course of engagement with Wadud, the study adopts a comparative exegetical approach (*al-Tafsir al-Muqâran*), making special reference to some classical exegetes and modern Qur'ânic scholars. The study has found that Wadud's methodology in reading of Quran, 4: 34 is faulty in that it disregards authentic sources of *tafsir* and deviates from its principles and for forcing her own reading into the Qur'ân. It concludes that revitalisation in *tafsir* is essential in light of modern challenges but it has to be based on sound principles of interpretation.

**Keywords:** *tafsir*, Muslim feminist, gender equality, Quranic hermeneutics, patriarchy, Islamic feminism.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, *tafsir* (Qur'ânic exegesis) has experienced a revolutionary breakthrough with the emergence of Muslim feminist hermeneutics, an exegetical method used by Muslim feminist scholars to re-read the Qur'ânic text to

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advance gender equality and discredit what they call oppressive patriarchal structures of interpretation (Abu-Lughod, 2001; Badran, 2002; Wadud, 2006). Although some of these women scholars have willingly allowed themselves to be categorized as "feminists," others have remained ambivalent about the term (Barlas, 2002; Abu-Odeh, 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Using this interpretive methodology, Amina Wadud adopted a new hermeneutical approach vis-à-vis gender-sensitive verses in the Qur'ân to present what she calls an 'anti-patriarchal rereading' of the Qur'ân. Similarly, she claims the right to engage in *ijtihad* (independent interpretive reasoning of Islamic law), including the right to lead congregational prayers. This new discourse opened up a debate over the definition of identity in feminist circles that has continued up to the present time.

Wadud was greatly inspired by the progressive/liberalist approach of exegesis advanced by Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), who argued that the Qur'ân must be contextualized to demonstrate the viability of Islam to the modern period (Taji-Farouqi, 2006). For Rahman, the correct method of interpreting the Qur'ân is essential, since "the basic questions of method and hermeneutics were not squarely addressed by Muslims" (Rahman, 1980: 1). Moreover, since a systematic framework for interpreting ethico-legal contents of the Qur'ân had ceased to exist in the past, "Muslims in the modern period are in urgent need of one" (Saeed, 2006: 44).

Having been greatly influenced by Rahman's hermeneutical approach, Wadud makes the Qur'ân's conceptualisation of gender relationships her most consistent theme of exploration while challenging what she considers the patriarchal nature of text interpretation. For this reason, she dedicated her major work, *Qur'ân and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999), to exploring Qur'ânîc gender-sensitive verses and applying her hermeneutical approach to rereading them in light of Islamic feminist discourse.

## 1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Amina Wadud is probably the most outspoken Muslim feminist in critiquing the methodology of traditional exegetes. Her central argument is that the principle of the equality of all human beings are enshrined in the Qur'ân, though practising this equality has been obstructed by what she claims to be patriarchal readings of biased and manipulative interpreters.

This new feminist hermeneutics, however, has created many problems that must

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<sup>1</sup> Wadud, for example, has no problem with the term "feminist." For her, identity really does not matter as long as she succeeds in her discourse of text rereading. Barlas, on the hand, is very sensitive to the term because she does not like to be identified as feminist. She has chosen to be feminist by practice without shouting slogans. Perhaps, this explains why she prefers to be called a "believing woman" (Barlas, 2002).

be addressed. First, it may be a great disservice to Islam and a denial of its heritage. Second, there is a strong possibility that it contains many theoretical and theological contradictions in struggling to reform Qur'anic interpretation within secular structures.

Ostensibly, Wadud claims to offer readings that recover the egalitarian message of the Qur'ân. Nevertheless, she ends up making bizarre interpretations that lead to rebellion against the Qur'ân and sound Islamic tradition. Conceptually, her enterprise of rereading is a replica of the Christian feminist theology that reinterpreted the Gospel under the premise that it had been manipulated. This is evident in the way Wadud's readings focus more on the text itself rather than on the context of the revelation or on extra-Qur'anic considerations and interpretation beyond the text. In this perspective, her readings of the Qur'ân differ from the approaches of other intellectuals who are often qualified as liberals, modernists, or progressives. Hence, her rereadings constitute a mere subjective projection of a previous Christian feminists' ideology/hermeneutics on the Qur'anic text.

## **2 WADUD'S HERMENEUTICAL FRAMEWORK**

Wadud distinguishes three categories of Qur'anic interpretation: the traditional, the reactive, and the holistic. For her, "traditional" exegesis is erroneous and faulty because it is based on atomistic methodology that failed to examine the Qur'ân's structure of thematic unity. This stems from the fact that all traditional Qur'anic exegesis was written by men. The "reactive" interpretation is largely adopted by Muslim feminist scholars and other ideologically motivated individuals who "vindicate the position of women on grounds entirely incongruous with the Qur'ân's position on women" (Wadud, 1999: 1-4). Finally, the holistic gender-sensitive approach, (adopted by Wadud herself) ostensibly involves critical examination of the context of a Qur'anic revelation, and the grammatical and semantic analysis of its textual composition as well as its overall worldview (Wadud, 1999: 1-4).

## **3 QIWÓMAH (MALE AUTHORITY/SUPERIORITY): A FEMINIST READING**

Having articulated her methodology, Wadud turns to the debate vis-à-vis the position of women in the Qur'ân. Applying her hermeneutics, Wadud offers a new reading of one of the most contentious verses in the Qur'ân, 4:34. Arguably, the verse is incredibly critical to any debate concerning the position of women in Islam and essentially represents the most important aspect of feminist discourse as it focuses on two separate but intrinsically connected issues. One relates to the debate regarding the authority of men over women. The other relates to the question of whether or not it is legally acceptable to take disciplinary action against defiant women. The verse reads thus:

Men are the protectors and maintainers (*qawwâmûn*) of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part you fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for God is Most High, Great (above you all) (Qur'ân, *al-Nisâ'*:34).

While the interpretation of the verse in question remains contentious, the majority of exegetes in the past and present consider the two parts of the verse as organically and thematically linked. Debate on the verse has tended to focus on the term *qawwâmûn*, however. Critical examination of the phrase "qawwâmûna 'alâ" is necessary to make a distinction between men and women and define their role in family management in Islam.

According to Wadud, the term *qawwâmûn* is usually misread to infer the superiority of men over women by giving them authority over them; hence, the parameters of its application should be examined. Rejecting the traditional interpretation of the term, Wadud argues that the term does not indicate that men have authority over women or that they are superior to them. For her, male exegetes have used this passage to exercise absolute authority over women, noting that the traditional interpretation of the term *qawwâmûn* as "protectors" or "maintainers" is not quite accurate since man and woman are equal in every respect (Wadud, 1999: 72).

By reviewing these arguments, it is apparent that Wadud has advanced two arguments to challenge traditional interpretations that establish men's authority. First, a husband has no authority over his wife since they are equal. Second, God has never preferred one gender over the other. Each of these arguments, however, is seriously flawed. Concerning the first argument, it is not correct to assert that a husband has absolutely no authority over his wife since they are equal human beings. The weakness of Wadud's argument lies in her failure to recognize the *maqâlid al-Qur'ân* (Qur'anic objective/intent) of the verse. The verse was never meant to establish gender equality but to outline formidable structure of harmonious relations between husband and wife. Consequently, it addresses both husband and wife based on their respective social and biological roles in the family. Men deserve authority/superiority because they generally possess certain intrinsic qualities such as physical and intellectual strengths, sound reasoning and managerial skills, while women are naturally weak. For this reason, men are in charge (Abû 'Hayyân, 2001: 162; Ibn al-'Arabî, 2003: 530-531;). Thus, the authority of the husband is not an absolute right to dictate his will over his wife but an obligation that entails the burden of domestic responsibility/leadership.

An additional weakness of Wadud's arguments lies in her failure to acknowledge that males have authority over females for two fundamental reasons: first, because

Allah has essentially preferred men and made them superior to women; second, men use their wealth to provide food, shelter, and protection for their wives. This argument is advanced by *al-Mubara'a*, who observes that men are the protectors and guardians of women because they regulate their affairs and guide them to what is beneficial to them. This is understood from the phrase "bimâ Faḍḍala" which infers the preference of men over women for giving them a dowry, and providing them with shelter and protection; this is why they are given authority over women (al-Mubara'a, 1972: 290). This argument is further expanded by al-Qurtubî who insists that a husband has authority over his wife in order to preserve and protect her rights and manage her affairs (al-Qurtubî, 1986: 169).

Like most classical scholars, Abû 'Hayyân also interprets *qawwâmûn* to mean that "men are in charge of the affairs of women" based on certain traits of inherent superiority. He further uses logic to express how the preference for men is divinely justified by providing a long list of qualities and prerogatives that make men superior to women, such as ('*aql*), far-sightedness ('*azm*), firm will/determination ('*azm*), and physical strength (*quwwa*). Indeed, Abû 'Hayyân's categorization portrays how systematic he was in articulating the medieval perspective of his era. Further, it reveals the extent to which he perceived the concept of male superiority vis-à-vis women (Abû 'Hayyân, 2001: 249).

In modern times, 'Abduh and Riḍâ, however, found no problem in using verse 4:34 to reconcile the controversy generated by the medieval reading that denotes the preference of men over women. For them, *qawwamah* presupposes a relative privilege of man over woman, but their role are, of course, complimentary. A husband is like the "head" of the family while the wife represents the "body" that regulates the affairs of the family. Thus, their relationship is symbiotic, hence, indispensable (Mahmoud, 2006: 545).

According to 'Abduh, men are given authority because they are naturally endowed with more mature disposition (*mizâf*) and high level of thinking and intellectual capacity; they possess a high degree of resourcefulness in earning a living, providing family protection, and using managerial skills. Consequently, they are given the leadership position. That is why the dowry is prescribed to be an exclusive right of women because, by accepting it, they voluntarily accepted the husband's leadership. Both 'Abduh and Riḍâ, however, are conspicuously silent on the socio-economic role of woman in the family when she becomes financially independent, its legal implications, and the extent to which men's *qiwamah* will be contested in these circumstances.

Of course, a husband has authority over his wife as long as he provides shelter and protection for her. However, if he fails to do that, he loses his authority. Al-Qurtubî even goes further, arguing that a husband's *qawwamah* is connected to his capacity to provide for his wife, and once he fails to do that he automatically loses that authority. In that

case, the marriage should be terminated because the husband will never be respected. Needless to say, full authority and respect are core components of a successful marriage (al-Qurtubî, 1986; 119).

In the light of this position, it is clear that men have authority over women, which is by no means absolute. In other words, the men's role is supervisory in nature; women as subordinates have their fair share of relevant power. Moreover, the divine preference for men operates on the level of the collective class of men as opposed to the collective class of women since there are individual women who are superior to individual men. Having said that, if the wife becomes financially independent or the husband fails to discharge his financial obligations, then he may lose his authority over her. This, however, has a negative effect because a father's capacity to control his children usually diminishes in a home where the wife has full financial control. In these circumstances, the husband not only loses his fatherly role but also loses the respect of his wife and children (Maryam Jamilah, 1983: 76).

In response to the second argument, that men are not preferred over women, this argument is also fundamentally flawed due to Wadud's failure to take grammatical function of the terms *faḍḍala* and *ba'd* into consideration. It is simply inaccurate to assume that the term *faḍḍala* signifies conditional "preference." On the contrary, it infers an unconditional preference of men over women, husband over wife. This is arguably evident by examining the first segment of the verse: *Men are [qawwamūna alâ] women, [on the basis] of what Allah has [preferred] (Faḍḍala) some of them over others, and [on the basis] of what they spend of their property (for the support of women) (al-Nisâ':34).*

Reviewing the grammatical function of *mâ* in the phrase *bimâ Faḍḍallâhu ba'dahum alâ ba'd* reveals that *mâ*, in this context, can either be a *masdariyyah* (verbal noun) or a *mau'ûlah* (reflexive pronoun). If it is contextualized as a *masdariyyah*, the rendering is "because of the God's preference of men over women and their providing of shelter and food." Whereas understanding *mâ* as a *mau'ûlah*, according to Ibn 'ÔshÛr, indicates God's preference of some men over some women and the wealth they use to feed them (Ibn 'ÔshÛr, 2001: 407). Moreover, the pronoun (*damîr*) in *Faḍḍallâhu ba'dahum* refers to men as clearly understood from the 'atf (conjunction) *wa bimâ anfaqu min amwâlihîm*, because the pronoun in the phrase is reflexive and refers here to men.

The "preference/superiority" in question therefore represents the intrinsic virtues (*mazâyâ jabaliyyah*) that essentially drive women to men to seek protection and shelter. Additionally, the phrase *bimâ anfaqu* clearly indicates that men are the providers of shelter, food, and protection for their families and this is a tradition that has been well-established in human societies over the centuries of human civilization. For this reason, wealth is phonologically ascribed to the pronoun of men and not women *min amwâlihîm* (Ibn al-'Arabî, 2001: 530-531; Ibn Kathîr, 1968: 498). This is

why Ibn 'Ashûr, asserts that this (verse) is legal proof vis-à-vis superiority of men over women. And certainly, based on this, women will continue to remain dependent on men in this regard (matrimonial affairs), albeit in varying degree; the strength of this dependency, however, will be high at one point while low at another (Ibn 'Ashur, 2001: 406).

The evidence from this study demonstrates that man is given authority over women not to act as a tyrant or to be aggressive but to maintain the cohesion of the family and cement its structure. Indeed, men are entitled to this authority to fully care for women because of the nature of their strength and financial support.

Nevertheless, the fact that men have been given that full control does not limit the prerogative of a mother in relation to her caring and decision-making for younger children as well as her exclusive right to manage and dispose of her personal property. In this respect, it is worthy to note that this absolute right of woman's ownership and full control of her property is something that she has enjoyed for over 1400 years. This is quite understandably ironic, given the fact that most European women have been given the right to administer their property without their husbands only since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, if at all.

In the light of the foregoing, Wadud's argument is baseless and unsubstantiated, given that the evidence she presented has failed to support her position on men's authority. The fact remains, however, that men are superior to women and have authority over them.

#### **4. WADUD AND WIFE-BEATING: SOME CONTROVERSIES**

Wadud extends her argument on male's authority to the issue of legitimacy of taking disciplinary measures against a recalcitrant wife. Her central argument is that since men and women are equal, a wife is not obliged to obey her husband and if she commits disobedience (*nushûz*), he has no right to beat her. Wadud maintains that the term *nushûz* refers to marital discord, not to a wife's disobedience against her husband as traditional exegetes interpret. Therefore, even if *nushûz* originates from the wife, argues Wadud, it does not follow that the Qur'ân enjoins obedience to the husband because a wife is not under any obligation whatsoever to obey him.

Wadud's argument is predicated on the assumption that the concept of disobedience has a strong correlation with the word *qânitât* in the verse. For her, the term *qânitât*, which is used in the verse to describe "good" women, is too often mistakenly interpreted to mean 'obedient', and then assumed to mean "obedient to the husband" (Wadud, 1999: 70). "The Qur'ân," Wadud insists (1999), "never orders a woman to obey her husband." Nevertheless, in marriages where wives are subjugated,

she claims, wives are usually compelled to obey their husbands, believing that a husband, who materially maintains his family, including the wife, deserves obedience.

To support her argument, Wadud links her hermeneutical approach with a linguistic analysis of the term *ḍaraba*, a verb used to justify domestic violence. She argues that *ḍaraba* has multiple meanings, including not only "to strike" but also to "set as an example" and "to separate." Moreover, it is not the same as *ḍaraba* which means to strike repeatedly or intensely. She further contends that the Qur'ân deliberately uses the first form of the verb *ḍaraba* (to hit) instead of the second form of the verb *ḍarraba* (to hit repeatedly or intensely) not to justify wife-beating but to reflect the reality of excessive violence and reprehensible practices women were exposed to in pre-Islamic Arabia (Wadud, 1999: 76).

However, Wadud (1999: 78) concedes that "to strike" could be another possible suggestion for the term *ḍaraba* which the Qur'ân uses to suggest constraints on the actions of the husband with regard to his wife. Wadud's thesis, however, lacks objectivity and value. For one, while she is reluctant to admit that wife-beating is permissible she tries to lessen its severity by juxtaposing it with her feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'ân.

Wadud's refusal to interpret *ḍaraba* in 4:34 to imply the permissibility of wife-beating is shared by other liberal gender advocates, including Fatima Mernissi, a feminist and sociologist, and Muhammad al-Thalbi (b. 1921), a Tunisian historian and feminist. Mernissi condemns wife-beating but adopts her own feminist hermeneutics to provide another explanation for the verse. Unlike Wadud, who claims that there is no reference to the wife's obedience in the verse, Mernissi concedes that *nushuz* refers to wife's insubordination against her husband (Mernissi, 1991: 155).

Mernissi claimed that the verse in question was revealed at a time when Medina was not stable, and the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) had to deal with serious military problems. Unfortunately though, when he returned home, instead of finding rest, "he was harassed by hordes of women and men who came to consult him about their conflicts at his door" (Mernissi, 1991: 154) Moreover, despite the fact that Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) had egalitarian inclination and abhorred injustice, he was influenced by 'Umar to allow violence towards women (Mernissi, 1991: 159-60).

Mernissi however has failed to resolve the implications of her argument. Her assertion that the verse was a response to chaos in Medina was baseless. Had this been true, then of course God could have revealed another verse as soon as the period of that instability was over before the Prophet's death. Having said that, Mernissi needs a stronger argument and more compelling grounds to establish her assumption that the revelation of the verse was simply a temporary measure taken to avoid internal strife.

In much the same vein, al-Thalbi argues that it is wrong to assume that 4:34 legalizes wife-beating when principles of justice in Islam prove the contrary. For him, it was misogynic interpretation of the medieval jurists, not God, that made wife-beating

permissible (al-Thalbi, 1996: 128). Following closely in the footsteps of Wadud and Mernissi, al-Thalbi links the occasion of the revelation of the verse to the socio-political setting of Medina at that particular period. According to him, wife-beating was prevalent in Mecca because the wives accepted it and never complained to the Prophet (P.B.U.H) (al-Thalbi, 1996: 119). As a result, the trend was allowed to go unchallenged. After migration to Medina, however, the Meccan women felt that wife-beating must stop since the Medinans did not beat their women, seeing it as an attack on their dignity. This clash of cultures, claims al-Thalbi, encouraged Umm Salamah to form a feminist movement that speaks on behalf of women that later received the Prophet's support. On the other hand, 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab led the anti-feminist movement to confront women's new-found boldness and independence. Consequently, Muslim society then was sharply divided between these two movements (al-Thalbi, 1996: 122-4).

Al-Thalbi further contends that verse 4:34 was revealed at a critical moment in the history of the Muslim *ummah* when it was surrounded by internal and external enemies. God decided to consolidate the power of the Muslim community and cement any internal rift. Further, to avert internal division, God revealed the verse in question and gave precedence to "the most important over the important" since the quick establishment of the most preferable social order was something not only difficult but impossible to achieve (al-Thalbi, 1996: 125). While Mernissi was more reluctant to read the text contextually, al-Thalbi argues that a contextual approach is necessary to ascertain the true "intentions of the lawgiver" (al-Thalbi, 1996: 126). Understandably, this led him to conclude that God universally condones the beating of women.

The problem with al-Thalbi's theory, however, is that since his conclusion is based solely on *ijtihad* and a distortion of historical fact, another scholar could employ his independent judgement and come to a totally different interpretation and eventually the opposite conclusion. While al-Thalbi is correct in his attempt to establish a judgement based on hermeneutical method and the contextual approach to reading, the foundation of his analysis, however, suffers serious limitation. It is correct that God condones wife-beating. It is also true that Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) improved the rights of women in line with the principles of justice in Islam, but to describe him as a "feminist" sounds anachronistic. Further, using a modern concept like "feminism" vis-à-vis Prophet raised serious questions concerning al-Thalbi's scholarly ability. And, of course, this reveals the level of extrapolated interpretation used by feminist scholars, including al-Thalbi, in their engagement with traditional texts. Still, even Western readers may disagree with al-Thalbi's theory as there are clear texts that presuppose that Prophet Muhammad's (P.B.U.H) society and indeed his marital affairs were fundamentally patriarchal. For instance, he engaged in polygyny, something that no feminist accepts.

The main question that needs to be asked, however, is whether or not wife-beating

is permissible. A critical examination of the arguments reveals that Wadud and other feminists advanced one major argument to weaken the authority of men and challenge the legitimacy of wife-beating. The argument is that obedience is not part of marriage requirement, and therefore a husband is not authorized to beat his wife if she disobeys him. Wadud's argument is weak because she fails to provide convincing evidence to establish the illegality of the wife-beating measure. It is erroneous to assume that wife-beating is illegal – to do so contradicts something established by Islamic scholars of the past and present. Her conclusion would have been different if she had examined the historical context of the revelation of 4:34.

In his *Jâmi'ul Bayân fî ta'wil Âyil Qur'ân*, for example, al-Tabarî (1992: 60-61) provides six different accounts that highlight the circumstances surrounding the revelation of the verse. The most remarkable of all is the one attributed to Ibn Juraij, "A man slapped his wife. The Prophet wanted [to apply] *qisâs* (retaliation). The verse was revealed because they were in this situation," According to another account attributed to *al-Suddâ'*, however, the Prophet (P.B.U.H) recited the same verse to the aggrieved woman's family when they forwarded their complaint to him. Technically, this suggests that that particular incident was not an "occasion of revelation" for the verse but rather an occasion through which the verse gained wider currency because it had already been revealed (*al-'ibrah bi 'umûm al-lafz lâ bi khusûs al-sabab*). This possibility, however, is challenged by the fact that it is highly probable that the Muslim community of Medîna must have known that the verse was of such critical significance for gender relations. Thus, the explanation of the Prophet (P.B.U.H) in that case is just another confirmation of the previously prescribed ruling.

Similarly, al-Zamakhsharî (d.1143) provides another seemingly different account noting that Sa'd b. Abdal-Rabî was one of the heads of the Aşâ'ir, whose wife, Habîba bint. Zaid Ibn Abû Zuhair, rebelled against him (*nashazat 'alaihi*) and so he slapped her. As a result, her father grew angry and took her to the Prophet (P.B.U.H) saying, "I gave him my noble daughter in marriage, and he slapped her." Regardless of the husband's political status, the Prophet (P.B.U.H) said, "She must be retaliated (*li-taqtassa*) by him." The verse was subsequently revealed. The Prophet (P.B.U.H) said, "We wished something and God wished something else. What God wishes is best. And the retaliation was revoked." This incident has generally been accepted by classical and modern exegetes as the direct "occasion of revelation" of the verse 4:34 (al-Baghawî, 1987: 422; al-Zamakhsharî, 1953: 67). This goes to show that wife-beating has historical antecedents that stretch all the way back to the Prophetic era. Thus, Wadud is wrong to challenge its legality.

Rather than questioning the permissibility of beating *per se*, the attention of the medieval and modern scholars, however, has tended to focus on minimizing its severity and examining the extent of its application. Both al-Tabarî and Ibn Kathîr, for example, emphasize that even if the husband resorts to beating his wife (as a last resort) it should

not be "severe" or "violent" to the extent of breaking her bones or hurting her flesh (al-Tabarî, 1992: 60; Ibn Kathîr, 1968: 446).

This goes to show that wife-beating, even though is not the best, is permissible as long as it does not inflict severe harm. This is because man's authority is divinely determined; hence, he must be obeyed as the head of the family. Moreover, a wife's *nushûz* represents a strong and formidable challenge against the authority of her husband. A woman is obedient by nature; thus, committing *nushûz*/disobedience against her husband represents a radical departure from her natural disposition (Ridâ, 1993: 75; al-Kalbi, 1996: 129; Mahmoud, 2006: 545). Consequently, a man may resort to beating his wife as a preventative measure if the situation is "unhealthy," in order to preserve the structure of the family (Qutb, 1982: 137).

This view is strongly supported by Yûsuf al-Qarḏâwî (b. 1926), a contemporary Islamic jurist who insists that a husband deserves the full obedience and cooperation of his wife. If she fails to do so, he can, as a last resort, strike her lightly but must avoid her face and "other sensitive areas" (al-Qarḏâwî, 2001: 200). For al-Maudûdî (d.1979), wife-beating is sometimes absolutely justifiable since there are certain women who do not mend their ways without a beating (al-Maudûdî, 1983: 121).

This goes to show that Wadud's reading of *nushûz* is unacceptable because it represents a radical departure from what both medieval and modern exegetes agreed upon: wife-beating is permissible. However, they disagree on determining the nature of this disobedience. For al-Tabarî, *nushûz* combines the element of haughty arrogance (*isti'lâ*) and hatred (*bughḏ*) on the wife's part. In addition, according to this interpretation, it involves the wife's sharp disagreement with her husband and her refusal to share the matrimonial bed with him. This view is supported by a tradition related to Mujâhid (al-Sabarî, 1992: 65).

An additional limitation of Wadud's arguments is her presumption that the *nushûz* in question is applied to both husband and wife. This results from her superficial reading of verse 4:34 which clearly indicates that *nushûz* is an act of disobedience by the wife. The verse, however, sets guidelines for resolving marital conflict amicably (*khul'*) if it originates with the man. This is further supported by the last segment of the verse "If they then obey you, look not for any way against them" (*fa-in ata'nakum falâ tabghû'alaihinna sabilâ*).

Furthermore, Wadud fails to recognize that wife disobedience is real, and, for this reason, the verse provides a definitive solution on how it should be rectified. The husband is enjoined to use those three specific recommendations given in verse 4:34 when his wife refuses to obey his command. Of course, medieval and modern exegetes concede that these three recommendations are sequentially coordinated to indicate that their implementation is not optional but has to be done progressively. This is understood by the way the Qur'ân use *Hurufal-'atf* (conjunctions) successively after the

recommendations to indicate the progressiveness of their execution. The first recommendation was followed by conjunction *fa* (and thereupon) while the second and third are connected by the conjunction *wa*. The distinction between the two conjunctions is very clear. First, *fa* signifies a husband's instant response to his wife's disobedience while *wa* expresses delay and painstaking reasoning in handling her defiance. That is to say, the aggrieved husband should start admonishing his wife, if she fails to comply then the next line of action is to stay away from her bed. If this does not work either, then he can finally resort to beating her as the last, inevitable option (Ibn al-'Arabî, 2003: 535; Ibn Kathîr, 1968: 498; Ibn 'Ashîr, 2001: 112).

Critical examination of these three recommendations opens up space for intellectual debate. While both medieval and modern exegetes agree that the implementation is to be done progressively, they urge the husband to choose the most effective way of addressing the problem of his rebellious wife. While mere admonishing is enough to influence some women to stop their rebellion, in the case of others however, the most effective way to stop them is by threatening them with sexual deprivation (Ibn al-'Arabî, 2003: 535; Ibn Kathîr, 1968: 498; Riđâ, 1947: 75).

However, the extent to which a disobedient wife will be influenced by this sexual deprivation and the manner of its implementation has remained a matter of debate among the exegetes. For one, if a wife despises or scorns her husband and consequently disobeys him repeatedly, depriving her of sexual relations will only compound her hatred since she does not love him in the first place. In other words, the husband's abstention will not work if the wife's disobedience stems from hatred. In fact, she will be pleased with the status quo (al-Tabarî, 1992: 66-67).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The interpretation of verse 4:34 has remained the most contentious and most troubling among past and present-day scholars of Qur'ânic exegesis. Since the verse is an integral part of the Qur'ânic text that cannot be removed under any circumstances, the next viable alternative is to reread it.

Wadud seems to have been more or less overly ambitious in forcing her reading into the Qur'ân to support her argument. In addition, her argument is somehow confusing and counterproductive. While she is reluctant to admit that wife beating is permissible, she still ends up in an intellectual dilemma since her reading does not resonate with her feminist hermeneutics that rejects any form of discrimination against women. Ostensibly, her focus on excessive violence rather than any form of violence may be understood as a withdrawal strategy, a position that no feminist will easily accept.

Of course, one will disagree with Wadud and find her argument not convincing. Nevertheless, the relevant question that still needs to be asked is why, of all the meanings of the word *daraba* traditional exegetes decided to pick the worst, beating?

If it is correct that the Qur'ân lends itself to multiple readings, then why did classical exegetes interpret verse 4:34 in a manner that condones wife-beating and establishes its permissibility?

Either way, the argument of Wadud is at best confusing because of her failure to substantiate her claim that the choice of the first form of the verb *ḍaraba* was deliberately done to justify wife beating. Her argument would have been persuasive if the choice of the first form of the verb *ḍaraba* was done out of context, but it was quite the opposite. In addition, her theory remains awkward and somehow misleading since the verse still permits husbands to beat their wives if the situation warrants it.

Having said that, it is safe to conclude that Wadud's argument vis-à-vis wife beating is not substantiated and is hence unreliable. Contrary to her claim that it is not obligatory for a wife to obey her husband, the evidence from this study demonstrates that taking disciplinary action against a recalcitrant wife is sometimes not only permissible but necessary. While Wadud rejects the permissibility of wife-beating, the mainstream interpretation of the verse clearly indicates that a husband has authority over his wife, who is expected to be obedient, and the last resort of "beating lightly" is legally justifiable in the event of her disobedience.

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