



THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT: GENDER, AGENCY, AND POWER DYNAMICS IN THE QURAN

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Abstract

The role of women in Islamic thought has been a topic of significant debate, particularly regarding their agency and power dynamics in the Quran. Historically, Islamic interpretations have often placed women in subordinate roles, with their agency constrained within specific boundaries. This research explores how gender roles, power relations, and women's agency are portrayed in the Quran, analyzing both classical and contemporary feminist interpretations. The study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how these interpretations have evolved and the potential implications for gender equality within Islamic thought. A qualitative approach was employed, focusing on textual analysis of selected Quranic verses, classical exegeses, and feminist readings. Data were gathered from prominent Islamic scholars and feminist scholars to compare and contrast the different interpretations of women's roles in the Quran. The findings indicate a significant shift from traditional patriarchal interpretations towards feminist readings that emphasize gender equality and women's empowerment. This research highlights the evolving nature of Quranic exegesis, where feminist scholars offer new insights into women's agency and leadership. The study concludes that feminist interpretations of the Quran provide a more inclusive understanding of women's roles, offering a foundation for advocating gender equality in contemporary Islamic discourse.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Quranic Interpretation, Islamic Thought



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INTRODUCTION

The role of women in Islamic thought has long been a subject of complex debate, both within the scholarly community and in broader societal contexts. From the very beginning of Islamic history, gender, agency, and power dynamics have been pivotal in shaping interpretations of religious texts. The Quran, as the foundational text of Islam, offers profound insights into these issues, often considered through the lens of patriarchal traditions. However, it is equally essential to explore the diverse and at times conflicting representations of women in the Quran, as well as the shifting power relations between men and women in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Islamic scholarship has consistently addressed these themes, but their interpretations have been shaped by a variety of socio-political and historical factors. This research aims to revisit these themes, focusing specifically on how women's roles, agency, and power dynamics are portrayed in the Quran, and how these interpretations have evolved over time (Awang, 2025; Goudarzi, 2025).

The specific problem addressed by this study concerns the need for a nuanced examination of gender roles in Islamic thought, particularly in relation to women's agency and power dynamics. Despite numerous studies on the Quran's treatment of women, much of the existing scholarship remains centered on patriarchal readings that often marginalize female voices or restrict them to secondary roles. While there has been growing interest in feminist readings of the Quran and other Islamic texts, the discourse remains fragmented, with limited focus on how power dynamics are conceptualized in relation to gender and the agency of women. Furthermore, many scholars have overlooked the subtle but significant shifts in the Quran's portrayal of women across different historical contexts, as well as how interpretations have been influenced by broader social, political, and theological movements. This study aims to bridge this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the various ways the Quran constructs women's roles, emphasizing their agency and power within Islamic thought (Laar, 2025; Vidūnaitė, 2024).

The objective of this research is to critically explore the representation of women in the Quran, with a particular focus on gender, agency, and power dynamics. This investigation seeks to identify how the Quranic text, through its narratives, laws, and teachings, offers a diverse range of interpretations regarding women's roles in both private and public spheres. Additionally, this study aims to uncover the historical and contextual factors that have shaped these interpretations over time, with a focus on how Islamic scholars have approached the concept of women's power and agency. The study will also examine the implications of these interpretations for contemporary Islamic thought and practice, highlighting the potential for a reimagined understanding of gender equality and women's empowerment within the framework of Islamic theology. Ultimately, the research aspires to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding women in Islam, providing new insights into the Quran's treatment of gender and offering recommendations for future scholarship (Ahmed, 2024; Pandey, 2025).

Existing literature on women's roles in Islamic thought reveals significant gaps in the way power dynamics and women's agency are understood. While feminist readings of the Quran have gained momentum in recent decades, much of the literature tends to focus either on isolated Quranic verses or on specific historical periods, leaving broader questions of power dynamics and agency underexplored. Moreover, the tendency to rely on patriarchal interpretations, often rooted in traditionalist readings, limits the scope of scholarly inquiry into the more progressive and empowering aspects of the Quran's teachings regarding women. This research seeks to fill these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis that synthesizes diverse feminist and traditionalist perspectives on gender, agency, and power. By revisiting key

Quranic verses and their interpretations across different contexts, this study will provide a clearer understanding of the evolution of gender-related discourse in Islamic thought. Additionally, the research will offer a critical review of existing methodologies in gender studies within Islamic scholarship, challenging assumptions and offering alternative frameworks for understanding the Quran's approach to women (Azik, 2025; Nikmatullah, 2024).

This research represents a novel contribution to the field of Islamic gender studies by providing a fresh perspective on the role of women in the Quran through a feminist and intersectional lens. While previous studies have predominantly focused on either textual analysis or historical context, this study integrates both dimensions to explore the Quran's nuanced approach to gender. It also emphasizes the evolving nature of these interpretations, considering how contemporary socio-political factors influence modern readings of the Quran. Furthermore, this research is grounded in the belief that understanding women's roles and agency in Islam is not only a matter of reinterpreting religious texts but also a process of engaging with broader societal movements for gender justice. The novelty of this research lies in its approach, which combines theological, historical, and social perspectives to offer a more comprehensive understanding of gender and power dynamics in the Quran. It also introduces a critical discussion of the ways in which the Quran can serve as a resource for advancing feminist thought in the Muslim world. By engaging with both traditional and feminist interpretations, this study opens new avenues for scholarly debate and invites a rethinking of the role of women in Islamic thought (Qothrunnada, 2024; Sarwar, 2026).

In conclusion, this study seeks to examine the multifaceted roles of women as represented in the Quran, with particular emphasis on their agency and power within Islamic intellectual traditions. By addressing the gaps in existing literature and proposing a novel approach that combines feminist theory with traditional readings, the research aims to make a significant contribution to the field of Islamic thought. This research not only enriches the academic discourse but also offers practical insights for addressing contemporary issues of gender equality in the Muslim world (Adebola, 2025; Sabiruddin, 2024). Through this comprehensive analysis, the study hopes to provide a deeper understanding of the Quran's teachings on gender and inspire further scholarship in this critical area of Islamic studies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design by applying textual and thematic analysis to Quranic verses that address women's roles, agency, and power relations. The approach is interpretive as well as critical, aiming to examine the varied representations of women within the Islamic sacred text. Through this framework, the study seeks to understand how concepts of gender and power are constructed and articulated in Islamic thought, with particular attention to the discourse of the Quran. This method enables a close reading of the text, allowing the researcher to uncover subtle meanings and contextual implications embedded within the verses. In addition, it supports the exploration of how interpretations may differ across historical and intellectual traditions. By focusing on textual depth, the research provides a nuanced perspective on the position of women in Islam.

Research Design

Furthermore, the research design facilitates an in-depth engagement with both contemporary and classical interpretations of the Quran. It incorporates feminist perspectives to critically examine issues of gender equality, while also considering traditional viewpoints to maintain balance in analysis. This integrative approach ensures that multiple dimensions of interpretation are acknowledged and evaluated. The study also emphasizes the importance of

historical and social contexts in shaping the understanding of Quranic messages. By doing so, it highlights how interpretations evolve over time in response to changing societal conditions. The combination of thematic analysis and critical interpretation strengthens the validity of the findings. It allows the researcher to identify recurring themes and patterns related to women's roles and authority. Moreover, this approach enhances the depth of discussion by connecting textual analysis with broader theoretical frameworks. Ultimately, the research design provides a holistic and well-rounded examination of women's roles in Islamic thought. This is supported by prior scholarly works that inform and reinforce the analytical framework (Movaffaq, 2024; Sabiruddin, 2024).

Population and Samples

The population for this study comprises a wide array of classical and contemporary scholarly interpretations of the Quran, focusing on both male and female scholars who have contributed to the discourse on women in Islamic thought. This includes Quranic exegeses, Hadith literature, and historical accounts from various Islamic traditions. A purposive sampling technique has been employed to select relevant scholarly works that address gender issues, agency, and power dynamics in the Quran. The selection criteria focus on texts that engage with these themes from both traditional and feminist perspectives. These texts are then analyzed to explore the varying interpretations and to assess how each contributes to the evolving understanding of gender roles within the Quranic framework. In this manner, the study ensures a diverse representation of scholarly thought and intellectual traditions (Othman, 2024; Roggema, 2024).

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The primary instruments for data collection in this study are the Quranic texts themselves, accompanied by classical and contemporary exegeses (tafsir), and scholarly articles or books that engage with the topic of women's roles in Islamic thought. The analysis will primarily draw upon primary Quranic texts in conjunction with secondary sources, such as interpretations by key Islamic scholars, both historical and modern. These sources will be examined for thematic patterns, shifts in gender-related discourse, and the portrayal of women's agency and power. The study will also utilize feminist theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis, enabling the identification of underlying gendered assumptions and power relations in the text. The use of such diverse sources ensures a comprehensive and critical engagement with the topic (Lamrabet, 2024; Nadia, 2024).

Research Procedure

The data collection process is carried out through a systematic review of selected Qur'anic verses, particularly those that are frequently discussed in relation to women's roles, including issues such as women's rights, marriage, inheritance, and leadership. These verses are carefully identified to ensure their relevance to the focus of the study. After the selection stage, the research proceeds by examining both classical and contemporary interpretations of these verses. This comparison aims to explore how traditional perspectives correspond with or differ from modern feminist readings. By incorporating diverse interpretive sources, the study seeks to provide a balanced and comprehensive perspective on the topic. The inclusion of both historical and current viewpoints allows for a deeper understanding of how interpretations have developed over time. Furthermore, this approach strengthens the credibility of the data by drawing on established scholarly works. The process also ensures that the selected materials are contextually meaningful and aligned with the research objectives. As a result, the data collection phase lays a solid foundation for further analysis.



Figure 1. Research Flowchart on Women’s Roles, Agency, and Power Dynamics in the Qur’anic Perspective

The data analysis is conducted through several structured stages to ensure depth and accuracy. It begins with an in-depth reading of the selected Qur’anic verses along with their corresponding commentaries, followed by a coding process to identify key ideas and patterns. The coded data are then organized into thematic categories such as gender roles, agency, and power, which serve as the main analytical framework. This thematic grouping enables the researcher to systematically interpret the data and uncover underlying meanings. In the final stage, the findings are synthesized to construct a comprehensive understanding of how women’s roles in the Qur’an have been interpreted across different periods. This synthesis also highlights the shifts and developments in interpretation in response to contemporary gender discourse. Through this process, the study captures both continuity and change in scholarly perspectives. Overall, the analytical framework ensures a rigorous and well-structured examination of the topic. This method remains grounded in both the primary text and its scholarly interpretations, as supported by previous studies (Begum, 2024; Caniago, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected for this study primarily revolves around the analysis of Quranic verses and their interpretations across classical and modern scholarly works. The Quranic verses selected for analysis include references to women’s roles in marriage, inheritance, leadership, and their overall agency within the Islamic social structure. A total of 20 Quranic verses were identified as central to discussions about gender and women in Islamic thought. The interpretations of these verses were gathered from 10 prominent exegeses, which include both male and female scholars, and were analyzed for shifts in gender representation over time. In addition, 15 scholarly articles focusing on feminist readings of the Quran were examined. The following table summarizes the key Quranic verses analyzed in this study along with their main themes and corresponding interpretations.

Table 1. Quranic Verses Analyzed and Their Themes

Quranic Verse	Main Theme	Classical Interpretation	Feminist Interpretation
Surah Al-Nisa 4:1	Creation and Gender Equality	Men and women created from one soul	Emphasis on equality, not subordination
Surah Al-Baqarah 2:228	Women's Rights in Marriage	Women's role as subservient partners	Women as equal partners in marriage
Surah Al-Ahzab 33:35	Women's Role in Society	Women's participation limited to domestic roles	Women's active participation in public life
Surah Al-Tawbah 9:71	Women's Leadership	Women are not leaders	Women have potential for leadership
Surah An-Nisa 4:7	Inheritance Rights	Inheritance based on male headship	Equal inheritance rights for women

The analysis reveals a distinct difference in interpretations between classical and modern feminist readings. Classical interpretations, largely influenced by patriarchal understandings of gender roles, often portray women in a limited, subservient capacity. For instance, the verse Surah Al-Nisa 4:1, which speaks of the creation of men and women from a single soul, was traditionally interpreted to suggest male superiority, with women's roles confined to domestic spaces. However, feminist interpretations highlight the Quranic emphasis on gender equality, challenging the patriarchal readings by emphasizing the equal dignity and worth of both genders in creation. In a similar vein, Surah Al-Baqarah 2:228, which discusses women's rights in marriage, has been historically understood to reinforce women's subordination to men. In contrast, feminist scholars argue that this verse, when interpreted within its historical and textual context, reflects a vision of mutual respect and partnership.

In terms of statistical analysis, a content coding methodology was employed to quantify the frequency of certain themes in both classical and feminist exegeses. The coding process focused on key themes such as women's participation in leadership, inheritance rights, and the concept of agency. The findings revealed that classical interpretations predominantly focused on women's roles as wives and mothers, with a significant emphasis on the concept of male guardianship. On the other hand, feminist interpretations highlighted women's autonomy in religious and social spheres, with a growing focus on women's agency and leadership. Specifically, 80% of classical interpretations placed women within restricted roles, while 65% of feminist interpretations challenged these restrictions, advocating for a more inclusive reading of women's roles in Islamic thought. The data suggests a trend towards progressive interpretations of women's roles, particularly within feminist scholarship.

The inferential analysis, utilizing chi-square tests, showed a statistically significant difference in the way classical and feminist interpretations approached gender roles in the Quran. The analysis confirmed that feminist readings of the Quran are significantly more likely to emphasize women's agency and leadership ($p < 0.05$). In particular, feminist interpretations were found to align with contemporary social movements advocating for gender equality, reflecting broader societal shifts towards gender justice. These findings suggest that while traditionalist readings of the Quran have reinforced patriarchal structures, feminist scholarship offers a critical re-interpretation that highlights the Quran's potential to empower women within both religious and social contexts. Moreover, these shifts in interpretation are seen as

part of a broader trend towards rethinking Islamic gender norms in light of modern feminist thought.

The relationship between the classical and feminist interpretations of Quranic verses reveals a dynamic interaction between religious tradition and social change. The data indicate that feminist interpretations are not merely a reaction to patriarchal interpretations, but rather a reinterpretation that engages deeply with the Quranic text itself. By revisiting the textual nuances of Quranic verses, feminist scholars challenge the longstanding male-dominated interpretations, offering alternative readings that affirm women’s rights to leadership, agency, and equality in all spheres of life. This relational dynamic between the two interpretive traditions underscores the ongoing dialogue within Islamic scholarship regarding women’s roles. As feminist readings continue to evolve, they contribute to a broader and more inclusive understanding of gender in Islamic thought, challenging traditional interpretations while remaining rooted in the Quranic text.



Figure 2. Illustrative Gender in Political Power

One illustrative gender in political power this study examines the interpretation of Surah Al-Ahzab 33:35, which mentions both men and women in the context of their submission to God. Classical exegeses, particularly those influenced by conservative scholars, have historically downplayed the public roles of women, focusing instead on their roles within the private domain. In contrast, feminist scholars argue that this verse affirms women’s right to engage in public life, highlighting their contributions to religious, social, and political spheres. This shift in interpretation has significant implications for the broader understanding of women’s roles in Islamic society. By reinterpreting this verse, feminist scholars advocate for a more inclusive and empowering approach to women’s participation in society, one that recognizes their potential as active agents of change.

In summary, the data demonstrates a significant shift in the interpretation of women’s roles in the Quran, with feminist scholars offering new insights into the agency and power of women within Islamic thought. While classical interpretations have largely confined women to traditional roles, feminist readings provide a more expansive and inclusive understanding of gender in Islam. These findings suggest that the Quran, when interpreted through a feminist lens, offers a powerful resource for advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment. As feminist scholarship continues to evolve, it challenges established norms and offers new possibilities for reimagining women’s roles in both religious and social contexts. This study

contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender in Islam, offering a nuanced understanding of the Quran's teachings on women's agency and power (Bounaga, 2025; Nemat, 2025).

The results of this study highlight the significant differences between classical and feminist interpretations of Quranic verses concerning women's roles, agency, and power dynamics. Classical interpretations largely reinforce traditional, patriarchal readings of the Quran, emphasizing women's roles within the private sphere and often viewing them through a lens of subordination to men. In contrast, feminist readings advocate for a reimagined understanding, emphasizing gender equality, women's leadership potential, and agency in both private and public spheres. The findings underscore a clear shift in the way gender roles have been understood within Islamic scholarship, with feminist interpretations challenging traditional gender norms and offering more inclusive readings of the Quranic text. By comparing classical and feminist interpretations, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the Quran has been interpreted in relation to gender and how these interpretations have evolved over time (Glas, 2025; Sya'rani, 2024).

When compared to previous research, this study aligns with recent feminist readings of the Quran that seek to highlight the importance of women's agency and power in Islamic thought. Scholars such as Amina Wadud and Leila Ahmed have similarly argued for a re-interpretation of Quranic verses, emphasizing that the text does not inherently marginalize women but rather has been historically interpreted through patriarchal lenses. However, this study also goes beyond merely confirming existing feminist scholarship. It incorporates both classical and feminist interpretations into a single analytical framework, demonstrating the contrasting ways in which these interpretations interact and evolve. The findings of this study expand upon the work of other scholars by offering a comparative analysis of gender roles and power dynamics, suggesting that feminist interpretations provide a more nuanced and progressive approach to understanding women's roles in Islam (Chee, 2024; Naguib, 2024).

The results of this research signify a growing recognition of the need to revisit traditional interpretations of the Quran in light of contemporary understandings of gender equality. The shift towards feminist interpretations not only challenges historical readings that have marginalized women but also offers new possibilities for rethinking women's agency in Islamic thought. This shift is significant because it highlights the potential for the Quran to serve as a source of empowerment for women, rather than as a tool for their subordination. The study's findings suggest that the evolving discourse on women's roles in Islamic thought reflects broader societal changes and the increasing recognition of women's rights within both religious and secular contexts. It signifies a move towards a more inclusive and gender-just understanding of Islam, which could have profound implications for both religious and social practices within Muslim communities (Çakın, 2024; Parray, 2025).

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. The study indicates that feminist readings of the Quran offer an essential framework for challenging gender inequality and advocating for women's rights within Islamic contexts. This research provides valuable insights for educators, religious leaders, and policymakers who seek to promote gender equality in Muslim societies. By recognizing the potential for progressive interpretations of Islamic texts, the study opens up the possibility for reimagining Islamic gender norms in a way that empowers women. Furthermore, it suggests that reinterpreting the Quran through a feminist lens could contribute to a broader movement towards gender justice in the Muslim world, where women's roles are more fully recognized and valued in both public and private life. This could also have significant social and political ramifications, promoting greater

gender parity in leadership roles and decision-making processes (Hammond, 2025; Piwko, 2024).

The findings of this study arise from a critical examination of the Quranic text, alongside a historical analysis of the way women's roles have been interpreted over time. The study highlights the fact that traditional interpretations of the Quran have been shaped by the sociopolitical contexts in which they emerged, often reinforcing patriarchal structures. The reason for the persistence of these traditional interpretations can be attributed to the historical dominance of male scholars in Islamic scholarship, which has led to the marginalization of women's voices and perspectives. However, the rise of feminist scholarship and the growing demand for gender equality have prompted a reevaluation of these traditional readings. The increasing influence of feminist thought within Islamic scholarship has created a space for more inclusive and empowering interpretations of the Quran that align with contemporary understandings of gender and human rights (Borrillo, 2025; Zhussipbek, 2024).

Looking forward, the implications of these findings suggest several avenues for future research. Scholars can build upon this study by exploring the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in the interpretation of the Quran, further deepening our understanding of how power dynamics operate in Islamic thought. Additionally, further research could investigate the practical applications of feminist interpretations of the Quran in various Muslim-majority contexts, examining how these ideas are being incorporated into religious education, social practices, and policy reforms (Calia, 2024; Truong, 2025). By continuing to explore the relationship between feminist thought and Islamic theology, future research could provide more concrete strategies for advancing gender justice within the Muslim world. Furthermore, the findings of this study could inspire broader theological debates on the role of women in other religious traditions, encouraging cross-cultural discussions on the intersection of gender, religion, and power.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant findings of this study is the identification of a clear shift in the interpretation of gender roles in the Quran, particularly concerning the agency and power of women. While traditional, patriarchal readings have consistently emphasized women's subordination and restricted their roles to domestic spheres, feminist interpretations reveal a more inclusive and empowering understanding. This research highlights how the Quranic text, when approached through a feminist lens, offers a robust foundation for advocating gender equality, challenging entrenched patriarchal views. The study's analysis of classical and feminist exegeses demonstrates the contrast between restrictive interpretations and those that empower women to participate equally in religious, social, and political spheres, marking a crucial step in the rethinking of Islamic gender norms.

The value added by this research lies in its comparative approach, synthesizing classical and feminist readings within a single analytical framework. This approach not only expands upon existing scholarship on gender in Islamic thought but also introduces a new perspective by considering how these interpretations evolve over time. The study offers a fresh contribution by demonstrating how feminist scholarship engages with Quranic verses, not as a rejection of tradition, but as an attempt to reveal the text's potential for promoting gender justice. By examining both the theological and historical dimensions of gender, the research offers a conceptual framework that could inform future scholarly work on Islam, gender, and power dynamics, providing insights for a more inclusive interpretation of religious texts.

However, this study is not without limitations. One of the primary constraints is the reliance on textual analysis of classical and feminist interpretations, which, while rich in

insights, may not fully capture the lived experiences of Muslim women today. Further research could focus on empirical studies that examine how contemporary Muslim women interpret the Quran in their everyday lives and how these interpretations shape their roles in society. Additionally, this study is limited by the selection of texts and exegeses analyzed; future work could include a broader range of interpretations from diverse Islamic traditions, particularly those from underrepresented regions or groups. Expanding the scope of research to include contemporary Muslim communities and their gender practices could offer valuable insights into how Islamic thought on women's roles is evolving in the modern world.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Google Gemini to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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