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The Qur'an, Women and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's Hermeneutics: A Critical Reflection on the 'Women's Question Between the Hammer of Modernity and the Anvil of Traditions: A Study in the History of Texts'

Kur'an, Kadınlar ve Naṣr Ḥāmid Ebû Zeyd'in Hermenötiği: 'Kadın Meselesi: Modernite Çekici ile Gelenek Örsü Arasında - Metinlerin Tarihine Dair Bir Çalışma' Üzerine Eleştirel Bir İnceleme

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Abstract

While Abū Zayd's broader intellectual contributions are widely acknowledged, his extensive engagement with women and gender remains relatively underexplored. In addition to several papers, he authored two major volumes on the subject: *Al-mar'a fī khiṭāb al-azma (Women in the Discourse of Crisis,* 1994*)* and *Dawā'ir al-khawf: Qirā'a fī khiṭāb al-mar'a (Circles of Fear: A Reading of the Discourse on Women,* 2004*).* This article examines the intersection between Abū Zayd's hermeneutic project and the 'women's question' in his seminal 1999 study, *Qaḍiyyat al-mar'a bayn sindān al-ḥadātha wa miṭraqat al-taqālīd: Dirāsa fī tārīkh al-nuṣūṣ (The Question of Women Between the Anvil of Modernity and the Hammer of Tradition: A Study in the History of Texts)*[2]. It does so in conjunction with the English and Turkish translations of this study and their publication in the *Kadem Journal of Women's Studies.* By engaging with Abū Zayd's analysis of women's issues through the lens of his broader methodological framework, this article assesses the scope, constraints, and broader implications of his work for debates on the Qur'ān and women.

Keywords: Abu Zayd, Qur'an, Hermeneutics, Tradition, Women's Question.

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Öz

Abu Zayd'ın engin entelektüel katkıları geniş çapta kabul görürken, kadın ve toplumsal cinsiyetle olan derin ilişkisi nispeten daha az keşfedilmiştir. Birçok makalenin yanında bu konuda iki büyük ciltlik bir eser de kaleme almıştır: *Al-mar'a fī khiṭāb al-azma (Kriz Söyleminde Kadınlar,* 1994*)* ve *Dawā'ir al-khawf: Qirā'a fī khiṭāb al-mar'a (Korku Çemberleri: Kadın Söylemi Üzerine Bir Okuma,* 2004*)*. Bu makale Abu Zayd'in hermenötik projesi ile 1999 yılındaki *Qaḍiyyat al-mar'a bayn sindān al-ḥadātha wa miṭraqat al-taqālīd: Dirāsa fī tārīkh al-nuṣūṣ (Geleneğin Çekici ile Modernitenin Örsü Arasında Kadın Meselesi: Metinlerin Tarihi Üzerine Bir İnceleme*, 1999*)*[3] başlıklı son derece mühim çalışmasında 'kadın sorunu' arasındaki kesişimi incelemektedir. Bu incelemeyi, söz konusu çalışmanın İngilizce ve Türkçe çevirileri ve Kadem Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi'nde yayınlanmasıyla bağlantılı olarak yapmaktadır. Abu Zayd'in kadın meselelerine dair analizi yine kendisinin kapsamlı metodolojik çerçevesinden ele alınarak, bu makalede Kur'ân ve kadın tartışmalarındaki çalışmalarının kapsamı, sınırları ve daha geniş ölçekli çıkarımları değerlendirilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Abu Zayd, Kur'an, Hermenötiğin Geleneği, Kadın.

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[2] Abū Zayd, N. H. (1999). Women's Question Between the Hammer of Modernity and the Anvil of Traditions: A Study in the History of Texts. *Journal of Comparative Poetics, 19,* 29-65. https://www.jstor.org/stable/521927

[3] Abu-Zeid, N. H. (2024). Women's Question Between the Hammer of Modernity and the Anvil of Traditions: A Study in the History of Texts / Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd. (F. N. Oruç, Ed). *KADEM Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi, 10*(2), 689-740. (Orjinal eserin yayın tarihi 1999). https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/kademkad/issue/89755/1579654

Introduction

Abū Zayd's lifework has drawn considerable attention for its ambitious effort to reconstruct Qur'anic hermeneutics, a project that was both deeply intellectual in scope and focus, and explicitly political in its aims. Motivated by a profound sense of cultural urgency, his scholarship sought to counter the rising tide of puritanical conservatism shaping both academia and society. Navigating the ideological divides of the 1980s and 1990s —between 'secularist' and 'Islamist' currents—Abū Zayd critically engaged the Islamic intellectual tradition with nuance and care, refusing to be confined by polarized narratives and entrenched binaries.

All his writings unapologetically outline the societal and political challenges of his time, with a particular focus on exposing the reductive tendencies of contemporary religious discourse in Egyptian and Arab societies. This reductionism, he contended, was especially evident in debates surrounding women's roles and rights. Abū Zayd's broader intellectual contributions are widely recognized, his extensive work on women's issues remains underexplored. He authored several studies on the topic, including dedicated articles and two volumes that collect his studies on women's issues: *Al-Mar'a fī khiṭāb al-azma* (*Women in the Discourse of Crisis*, 1994) and *Dawā'ir al-khawf: Qirā'a fī khiṭāb al-mar'a* (*Circles of Fear: A Reading of the Discourse on Women*, 2004).

The paper under discussion, *Qaḍiyya(t) al-mar'a bayn sindān al-ḥadātha wa miṭraqa(t) al-taqālīd: dirāsa fī tarīkh al-nuṣūṣ* (1999), was reprinted in Abū Zayd's 2004 book *Circles of Fear* and has now been translated by the *KADEM Journal of Women's Studies* into Turkish and English. This paper is his first and most comprehensive study on women's issues in the Qur'an, marking a pivotal consolidation of the 'women's question' as a key topic in his Qur'an hermeneutics project. Abū Zayd has been described posthumously as leaving "a lasting legacy on the Qur'an... in its history, its meaning, and its reception." (Tayob, 2011). This legacy is inextricably linked to his "radical critique of the highly politicized religious discourse in Egypt and other Arab countries, as well as his penetrating insights into Islamic culture" (Tamer, 2011).

Abū Zayd's intellectual activism emerged from his personal social and political struggles. Born into a peasant family in a small Delta village in 1943, his first formal education consisted of Qur'an memorization. Financial hardship limited his schooling to a technical college, which typically barred students from university admission. For nearly a decade, he worked as a telecommunication technician while pursuing a general education certificate, eventually gaining entry into Cairo University.

In 1972, at the age of twenty-nine, Abū Zayd began his BA in Arabic Studies, graduating with the highest distinction in the Faculty of Arts. Following his graduation, his academic career nearly came to a halt as he was unjustly denied a junior university appointment to which he was legally entitled, given his exceptional academic achievement. Despite initial misgivings about the risks of doing Qur'anic studies, his postgraduate research focused on Qur'an hermeneutics, laying the foundation for his intellectual project with an MA dissertation in 1979 on rationalist trends in Qur'an exegesis in Mu'tazilī thought. This became his inaugural book in 1982, establishing his reputation as a serious scholar of the historical intersections between the Arabic literary tradition and Qur'anic disciplines. His doctorate followed soon after in 1981 with a substantially in-depth thesis on Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy. It was later revised for publication with a sharpened focus on the problematic of interpretation (*ta'wīl*).

A two-year fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania (1978-79) and an invited teaching post at Osaka University introduced Abū Zayd to modern philosophical hermeneutics, linguistics, and semiotics. Particularly influential was the work of Russian semiotician Yuri M. Lotman who was formative in shaping Abū Zayd's understanding of revelation (and hence the Qur'an) as a communicative process. While his exposure to academic Islamic studies abroad enriched his engagement with the Islamic tradition through new theoretical and philosophical perspectives, his thought and conceptual language remained deeply rooted in the intellectual terrain of Islamic thought.

Notwithstanding his success and rise as an academic, Abū Zayd's academic career was defined by the controversy surrounding his promotion. When

he insisted on exposing the ideological motivations behind the rejection of his application for full professorship, a major public and legal controversy erupted around allegations of his apostasy against Islam. A lawsuit was filed to dissolve his marriage on the grounds of apostasy. This brought international attention to his scholarship as well as threats to his life and annulment of his marriage to his wife Ibtihāl Yūnus, centring the question of women and Islamic family law in his project. Abū Zayd eventually chose self-exile in the Netherlands, where he held several visiting academic positions, culminating in his appointment as the Ibn Rushd (Averroes) Chair at Utrecht University for Humanistics (2003 to 2008).[1]

Abū Zayd's Hermeneutic Trilogy and the Women's Question

As articulated in many of his works, Abū Zayd sought to chart a way forward beyond the presumed closure of independent reasoning in the historical Islamic tradition and the reductionism of contemporary religious discourse. His primary strategy was to painstakingly interrogate the conceptual foundations that shaped the major intellectual currents of the Islamic tradition –rationalism, Sufism, and Sunnism. Through this intellectual excavation, he aimed to deconstruct the absolutism of religious discourse, exposing instances of the conflation between human interpretation with divine revelation.

To confront the pervasiveness of such conflation, which fosters accusations of disbelief and apostasy as mechanisms for socio-political regulation, Abū Zayd endeavored to reconceptualize the human dimension—and thereby the historicity—of interpretation. Yet, in the face of these very accusations levelled against him, he consistently and repeatedly affirmed in his writings and public speeches the conviction that the Qur'an is divine in its revelatory origin but human in its interpretation (*ilāhīyun tanzīlan, bashariyyun ta'wīlan*). Highlighting the historicity of interpretation is, of course, a key idea in the literary school of *tafsīr* pioneered by Shaykh Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966) whose debt Abū Zayd acknowledges frequently in his work.

[1] For an extended biography, see Carool Kersten's Introduction to the English translation of Abū Zayd's *Critique of Religious Discourse* (2018).

Abū Zayd, however, did not construct a simple binary between divine text and human interpretation. What is radical about Abū Zayd's proposal is his argument that the human dimension extends to the text itself. He contends that, since the Qur'an descended in Arabic, its language employs modes of human expression specific to Arab culture at the moment of revelation. In turn, the centrality of the Qur'an in Muslim history generated a rich linguistic and literary tradition, the intellectual significance of which was solidified through the concept of the Qur'an's linguistic miracle (*iʿjāz al-Qur'ān*).[2] This placed theories of language at the core of the epistemic and ontological foundations of all Muslim hermeneutics which, according to Abū Zayd, encompass every Islamic discipline, as all have engaged with the meaning of the Qur'an.

This breadth explains why the scope of Abū Zayd's oeuvre encompasses diverse strands of Muslim thought. A unifying thread, however, is his critical examination of the hermeneutic problem of interpretation, particularly the dialectic between text and context/reality, whether in his consideration of classical Islamic thought, contemporary religious discourse, women and gender, or his own personal crisis. Enfolded within this examination is his historical study of continuities and ruptures in how Muslims conceive of and practice interpretation (*tafsīr*/*ta'wīl*). This formed his intellectual response to the utilitarian weaponization of Qur'anic passages in the cultural sphere by both conservative and reformist hermeneutics alike, which he viewed as engendering polemics and apologia (2004b).

In the first decade of his career, Abū Zayd devoted his attention primarily to intellectual history, adopting a historicist lens and combining classical and modern linguistic approaches—mainly semantics and semiotics—as his core analytical tools. But language was not just a medium of analysis; it became a central topic in all his inquiries. Abū Zayd's aim was not merely to historicize Muslim theories of language, but also to integrate and expand upon them within his own hermeneutic framework.

An important point to emphasize in this critical reflection, which contextualizes Abū Zayd's paper "The Women's Question" within his

[2] See for, example, Abū Zayd's article (2003), The dilemma of the literary approach to the Qur'an. *Journal of Comparative Poetics, 23*, 8–47.

larger project and introduces its translation into Turkish and English for a wider audience, is that the paper represents a significant instance of Abū Zayd's application of the hermeneutic framework he had developed by the late 1990s. Moreover, as discussed below, the paper complements this project by providing a succinct outline of his analytical apparatus, which evolved from this framework and was foundational to his first three books.

Published between 1982 and 1990, these books constitute a coherent project of hermeneutic reconstruction. Each provides a historical case study examining the problematic of interpretation (*ta'wīl*) in a distinct strand of premodern Muslim hermeneutics. Each pursues a different inquiry into the interpretative process, collectively offering the formative insights that underpin his subsequent critique of contemporary religious discourse, including discourse on women and gender.

The first inquiry, explored in *Al-Ittijāh al-'aqlī fī'l-tafsīr* (*The Rationalist Approach in Tafsīr,* 1982)*,* examines the impact of context on text: how the interpreter's *a priori* conceptions of knowledge, the world and God shape the interpretive approach and its outcome. The Mu'tazilī application of *ta'wīl majāzī* (figurative interpretation) to verses that conflicted with their anti-anthropomorphic or anti-predestinarian stances provides a compelling example of how the Qur'anic text is reconciled with external epistemic and ontological formulations that developed in response to the turbulent political conflicts of the formative and early classical periods of Islam. This insight runs throughout Abū Zayd's historical-critical studies on both premodern and contemporary Muslim hermeneutics, enabling him to illustrate the effect of history on interpretation.

Another significant outcome of engaging with Mu'tazilī thought is the retrieval of a largely forgotten theological distinction between eternal divine speech (*kalām nafsī*) and temporal material speech (*kalām ḥissī/ lafẓī*) which is spoken, written or memorized by people. Whether the Qur'an consists of both, or of *kalām ḥissī* only, became the subject of intellectual debate between Mu'tazilīs, Ash'arī and others in relation to the question of Qur'an's createdness (Abū Zayd, 1982/2003). Tracing the interreligious encounters that sparked the question of the Qur'an's

createdness, as well as the enduring conceptual nomenclature generated by the debate on God's speech across various schools, reveals a complexity and plurality that starkly contrasts with the oversimplified views of the Qur'an in contemporary religious discourse.

In addition, studying classical considerations of the eternal/temporal, and the mental/verbal dimensions of the text, provided a precedent for Abū Zayd's own reconceptualization of the historical and thus human dimensions of the Qur'an's textuality, albeit on different theoretical grounds. His overarching insight, however, is that Muslim conceptions of the Qur'an, like the concept of its createdness, which he has sometimes been accused of espousing, are historical constructs.

This is evident in the "Women's Question," where Abū Zayd's critique of the received meaning of *qiwāmah* as a historical construct of male superiority is based on interrogating the context of revelation and initial reception. He argues that the paganistic cosmology of Arab culture in the seventh century denigrated femininity and adhered to attitudes of male preference. The Qur'an's polemic against this cosmology for attributing only daughters to God, was received in the Muslim interpretative tradition as denouncing the pagan doctrine of divine daughters but not condemning the normativity of male preference. The Qur'an's potential to dismantle this sexism was obstructed through the transference of male preference onto the Qur'anic notion of *qiwāmah* in Q. 4:34, thereby misreading the verse as a prescriptive legislation rather than a description of a mutable social reality (See Section E). Within a religious discourse that makes no distinction between the divine meaning, its material expression, and human understanding, *qiwāmah* becomes an absolute divine decree.

The second inquiry in *Falsafa(t) al-ta'wīl* (*The Philosophy of Interpretation,* 1983) inverts the emphasis from a context-to-text dynamic to a text-to-context one to examine whether text is always constrained by the context of its interpretation, or if the text possesses the capacity to direct and shape the interpretative process. In Ibn 'Arabī, Abū Zayd identifies a case where the Qur'an's content extensively constitutes the interpreter's concepts and terminology (1983). This is why in this second instalment of his trilogy, Abū Zayd reorients the methodological

scope from historical criticism to hermeneutic philosophy, to examine the Ṣūfī iteration of it. He delivers a tour de force study in the ontological, epistemological and, by extension, the linguistic basis of this example of a Muslim hermeneutic.

Unlike Mu'tazilīs and their interlocutors, Abū Zayd argues that Ibn 'Arabī does not subordinate the Qur'an to a specific, preconceived hermeneutic stance to resolve any presumed contradiction within it (1983). Rather, Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutic provides an innovative synthesis of different intellectual traditions, guided by the deeper meaning of the text. This synthesis advances a metaphysical phenomenology that maintains the oneness of truth with the variability of its manifestations and, hence, the multiplicity of human conceptions of it. This enables Abū Zayd to critique, from within the broader Islamic tradition, the perceived definitiveness and universality of transmitted interpretations, while reconstructing a hermeneutic that humanizes and relativizes reason without denying the existence and possibility of experiencing universal truth.

At the core of this hermeneutic openness, as Abū Zayd emphasizes, is Ibn 'Arabī's dual conception of existence: the *ẓāhir* (apparent), which is determinable and perceptible, and the *bāṭin* (inner), a deep, spiritual dimension. The *ẓāhir/bāṭin* duality of existence is reflected in the linguistic structure of the revelatory text itself (1983). Interpreting the text, therefore, necessitates a movement from the apparent level of the text—encompassing grammatical and linguistic expressions (*'ibāra*)—to its deeper meaning for which the linguistic expression is a signal (*ishāra*).

This allows for the transcending and integration of the conventional *tafsīr/ta'wīl* binary by recognizing the layered nature of the text and framing interpretation as a journey from outward to inward. Importantly, it is not a unidirectional movement: true knowledge requires avoidance of exclusive reliance on either side of the text. For Abū Zayd, Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutic lesson is that knowledge is inherently relative. In other words, while truth itself is not relative, its manifestations are contingent upon the time, place, and context in which it is pursued.

The influence of Ibn 'Arabī on Abū Zayd's hermeneutic framework, despite its importance, has often been overshadowed by the more prominent focus on *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* (The Concept of Text), in which Abū Zayd presents his most radical ideas about the Qur'an and its language. Suffice it to underscore here that Abū Zayd draws upon Ibn 'Arabī to reclaim the concept of *ta'wīl* for reconstructing an open and non-absolutist contemporary Muslim hermeneutic. He also sets forth the groundwork for establishing the relativity of human interpretation, not only on the basis of historicity, but also on the basis of a philosophical account of truth and knowledge. This makes it possible to argue that the transmitted exegetical and juristic traditions, often regarded as capturing the objective meaning of the apparent text, represent only one side of the text (i.e., the *ẓāhir* or apparent side) rather than the totality of its true meaning. Far worse, as he maintains, scholars who have adhered rigidly to the apparent, refusing to contemplate the deeper meanings of the text, have the mind of a child, and often misrepresent the apparent level of the text.

A cogent example of such misrepresentation, which Ibn 'Arabī notes, is leveraged by Abū Zayd in his discussion of the hijab in the "Women's Question." Ibn 'Arabī considers the juristic view that the female body is all '*awra* to be unsubstantiated by the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. Rather, this meaning of female '*awra* is produced by legalistic modes of reasoning which re-entrenched the very customs that the Qur'an aimed to change. Taking direction from Ibn 'Arabī's notion of a multi-layered text, Abū Zayd's approach to verses on women and gender seeks to reveal "deeper and more complex levels in the divine discourse" as he points out in Section D of the paper.

Ultimately, through Ibn 'Arabī, Abū Zayd illustrates the text's active role in shaping the philosophical outlook of the interpreter. This provides the underpinning for his nuanced hermeneutic stance of non-absolutist relativism, which rejects the notion of conceiving relativism as the only absolute. What he draws from Ibn 'Arabī is that interpretation is relative, but the text, like existence, is not without an inner truth, and that a hermeneutic approach that excavates its deeper meaning is possible.

The third inquiry in *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* (*The Concept of Text,* 1990) foregrounds the study of the Qur'an itself, particularly conceptions of its textuality within the traditional Qur'anic sciences (*'ulūm al-Qur'an*).

Having examined how context determines interpretation (in the case of the Mu'tazilīs), which led to the question of whether the text has influence on the direction of the interpreter's reading (in the case of Ibn 'Arabī), Abū Zayd proceeds to closely interrogate how the Qur'an reflects the culture of its first recipients (Part I), the meaning-making mechanisms arising from it (e.g., the distinction between Meccan/Medinan, Part II), and how Muslim orthodoxy has subverted the role and potential of the Qur'an (Part III).

It is noteworthy that in each of his three studies Abū Zayd reworks his methodological emphasis, depending on the question being asked. In *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, he moves away from modern hermeneutic philosophy, which he sees as overemphasizing the role of the interpreter and diminishing that of the text. He expands his semiotic and semantic analysis to consider the communicative structure of the Qur'an's language in terms of sender-message-recipient relations. This is exemplified in his interrogation of *waḥy* (revelation) and prophecy as interactive processes of communication. Two interrelated propositions are entailed in this semiotic analysis: i) The Qur'an is communicated in Arabic, a human language, making use of its linguistic conventions and cultural codes in order for it to be comprehensible by its first Arab recipients; ii) the recipients and their Arab culture have played an important role in the cultural production of the Qur'an's meaning.[3] This makes it necessary for any interpretative endeavor to examine the language and culture of its seventh century Arab context.

Overall, *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* consolidates Abū Zayd's hermeneutic theory of the Qur'an as consisting of two interlinked aspects: textuality and contextuality. It is a 'linguistic text' (*naṣṣ lughawī*) bound by the language in which it is expressed and, therefore, a product of the pre-Islamic cultural system within which it emerged. The first proposition is not too far removed from classical Muslim theories regarding linguistic conventions (*waḍ'*), which posit that words and meanings are established through conventions and agreed upon by people. It is the second proposition, however, that has been characterized as a secularization of the Qur'an and, hence, blasphemous in the view of his opponents.

[3] This articulation of the Qur'an's textuality and (historical-cultural) contextuality recurs throughout *Mahfūm al-naṣṣ*. See, for example, p. 24, p.34, p. 59, p. 66, p. 67, p. 117, p. 120, and p. 134.

Reading *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* in light of his earlier work on Ibn 'Arabī, *Falsafa(t) al-ta'wīl* helps to clarify Abū Zayd's insistence that it is possible to hold together a theory of language/text as both completely subject to the rules of human signification and also signaling a divine meaning, without severing the connection between the Qur'an as text and its divine source. Human signification depends on linguistic conventions that undergo change, whereas divine signification does not rely on any convention, and its meaning is fixed in God's eternal knowledge. To sum up, if, for Ibn 'Arabī, only the spiritually realized (the perfect human being or *al-insān al-kāmil*) can grasp something of the true inner meaning of God's words, Abū Zayd, in *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, considers semiotics to be the path toward understanding the connection between the surface and deeper levels of meaning in the Qur'an's message. Where *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* departs unequivocally as an interpretative framework of *ta'wīl* from Ibn 'Arabī is in the ontological direction it takes. Abū Zayd did not seek transcendence; he actively sought to change social reality.

To propose a new conception of the text as a cultural product does not imply that the meaning of the Qur'an cannot transcend the historical moment of its inception. Rather, the text has a culturally formative role (Abū Zayd, 1990). In *Falsafa(t) al-ta'wīl,* an instance of classical reception brought to the fore the Qur'an's power to draw the interpreter's understanding to a new horizon that was extensively and firmly based on the text. In *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, the text, at the moment of its formation, is shown to not merely mirror the pre-Islamic cultural code; rather, the Qur'an's formation simultaneously involved a reformulation of that code, and the production of a new Arab culture. An illuminating example is his account of how the concept of *jinn* is dismantled and reconstituted in the Qur'an, demonstrating its role in transforming language and culture.[4]

This insight reverberates throughout the "Women's Question," especially Section F addressing women-related legislations. The broad scope of this section, covering polygamy, divorce, inheritance, modesty and the veil, endeavors to show that these different topics need to be considered collectively and within the Qur'an to trace the arc of the Qur'an's treatment of women in the text as a whole. *This approach aims*

[4] In *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, Abū Zayd devotes a full section to communication with *jinn* in his first chapter on *waḥy*.

to analyse the deeper structure of meaning (ma'nā) in relation to women, to reconstruct the implication (maghzā) of the Qur'an's message on women for the contemporary context. By engaging with these implications, the 'fixed' and 'variable' aspects of the Qur'an's guidance on women would become clearer.

Abū Zayd offers a working definition of *maghzā*, but he does not fully conceptualize it. What he does state is that it is only discernible as an outcome of a systematic investigation of the language of the text and its "historical connotations," i.e., how the Qur'an encodes and responds to seventh-century Arab gender norms. The *maghzā* represents a deeper level of the textual meaning that is linked to what the surface level of its language signifies.

Despite claims of Abū Zayd's secularity and modernism, this hermeneutic outlook bares a certain convergence with ūṣūlī thought in traditional legal hermeneutics in requiring an empirical basis for interpreting a Qur'anic text beyond its apparent meaning (what is technically called *qarīna* or textual evidence). Abū Zayd, however, critiques and diverges from the tradition's restrictive model of *tawīl*. Rather, he inverts the traditional model, emphasizing the necessity of '*tawīl*' in all engagement with the Qur'an to discover the non-apparent *maghzā*. *Maghzā* can, therefore, be conceived of as the direction of travel[5] —indicated by the text—for reconstructing norms in response to the current context in which it is read. This makes *maghzā* multivocal and open to change, yet not without solid links to the text itself.

The necessity for grounding the interpretation of *maghzā* in the text is evident in the methodological protocol Abū Zayd outlines in Section D, which explains how this direction can be determined. He identifies three text-critical procedures which he refers to as "The Contextual Reading Methodology." This is perhaps the most precise and lucid iteration of how Abū Zayd approaches textual/contextual analysis, making this paper particularly significant for anyone studying his hermeneutics. The method,

[5] The root of *maghzā, GH-Z-W* conveys the sense of pursuit, journey or expedition. The term which comes from the Arabic literary tradition is often used in the context of uncovering the meaning behind the words, sometimes overlapping with *maqṣad/maqṣid* (aim/place of arrival), but with a stronger emphasis on the hiddenness of meaning.

as he outlines it, combines (i) diachronic analysis (especially how the order of revelation has shaped the lexical meaning); and (ii) synchronic analysis, encompassing both the internal textual context —which he calls the context of "narrative" (the second level)— and the grammatical and syntactical structures of the text (the third level). [6]

By applying this protocol to core ontological and legislative gender questions of the Qur'an, he illustrates that equality is signaled in the Qur'an's developmental approach to changing norms. In some cases, the Qur'an accepted and developed pre-Islamic norms like the pilgrimage, while in others there was only partial acceptance, which 'implies' but does not spell out what further development is needed (e.g., slavery and gender equality). With this in mind, Abū Zayd's paper is perhaps best read as an exploration of what the Qur'an's message 'implies' in response to the politicized and polarized context of discussions on Shari'a and women's rights which he encountered.

Evaluating the results of this exploration and reconsidering the contribution his hermeneutic approach might offer to ongoing discussions on the Qur'an, women, and gender remains an important task. Highlighting this potential for scholarly engagement is one *maghzā*, as it were, of translating his paper and providing this accompanying critical reflection. A few observations on the paper are, nonetheless, worth noting.

Abū Zayd's actual application of his Contextual Reading Methodology involves a critical but quite an eclectic examination of the Sunnah and the exegetical and juristic sources. His textual investigation of the relevant Qur'anic passages does not provide as much in-depth semantic, semiotic, or historical-critical analysis of the Qur'an's language as seen in his earlier work *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*. Some parts of the discussion are mostly reiterative of reformist ideas, drawing mainly on the Egyptian reformer Imām Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and to a lesser extent on the Syrian intellectual and Qur'an scholar Muḥammad Shaḥrūr (d. 2019).

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[6] This protocol is an elaboration of Amīn al-Khūlī's method of literary exegesis of the Qur'an which introduced *mā ḥawl al-naṣṣ*, the world surrounding the text, especially its first reception, and *al-naṣṣ*, the text itself (See al-Khūlī, 1961). Abū Zayd's hermeneutic theorization, however, departs completely from al-Khūlī's progressive evolutionism (Naguib, 2019), and his scheme introduces a text-critical approach that draws on late 20th century structuralism.

The reader should bear in mind Abū Zayd's own historicity in this paper. At the time of its publication, the academic study of Islam and gender was in its early stages, and much of what has since become the canon of Islamic feminist scholarship had either only recently emerged or was still being developed. Moreover, the concept of 'gender' had not yet made a significant impact on the scholarly discourse in Arabic on women and equality. This period also marked the height of the Islamic revival and the growing participation of women in Islamic education and public expressions of piety.

Against this backdrop, the paper can be seen as offering a vision of the Qur'an to Muslim women that does not require their pursuit for Islamicity to result in self-subjugation to a discourse that promotes sexism and discrimination in the name of religion. It was a bold and urgent critical intervention at a time when Egyptian and Arab religious discourse was reconfiguring as Islamically authentic a contemporary (and modern) form of patriarchy engendered by authoritarian nation-states in the Arab world. Since then, post-colonial gender scholars have made significant strides in exposing this connection, particularly regarding how Islamic law has been codified and overlaid with secular patriarchal norms.[7]

Concluding Reflections

Toward the end of his career, Abū Zayd (2006) expressed disappointment in feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an. The reason for its stagnation, he argues, is that, like much Muslim hermeneutics —modernist and traditionalist— the main drive has been to stabilize the variations in the text by aligning them with a single principle (e.g., equality) that is arbitrarily deemed universal and foundational. This principle, however, is subject to the interpreter's ideology: "For a communist, the Qur'an would thus reveal communism; for a fundamentalist, it would be a highly fundamentalist text; for a feminist, it would be a feminist text, and so on" (2006).

[7] Amira Sonbol's lifelong scholarship has been illuminating on this point, but of particular note is her article (2005) on History of Marriage Contracts in Egypt in *Hawwa, 3*(2), 159–196.

The incisive point of Abū Zayd's critique; however, is that Islamic feminist hermeneutics has not succeeded in transcending the theoretical presuppositions and practices of male-dominated hermeneutics within the Islamic tradition. In other words, Islamic feminist hermeneutics lacks a hermeneutic theory, and like much modern hermeneutics, it uses historicity to invalidate past interpretations as relative, yet simultaneously privileges modern readings as 'more valid' (2006).

Abū Zayd's intellectual provocation to both traditional and modern hermeneutics on women and gender still stands. Whether a feminist theory of Qur'anic hermeneutics can evolve from current practices and applications remains to be seen. What this paper achieves is the initiation of an important and still-relevant interpretive direction—one that critically examines how the Islamic tradition has historically understood the Qur'an's message on women and gender across various contexts, while outlining the methodological questions and analytical tools necessary to engage with this message today.

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