

Sufi Feminist Hermeneutics in Ibn 'Ajibah's Tafsir on the Discourse of Gender-Related Verses

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Abstract

This study seeks to analyze the construction of meanings in gender-related verses within al-Bahr al-Madid, a Qur'anic exegesis authored by Ibn 'Ajibah, through the lens of feminist hermeneutics. The research is motivated by the paucity of scholarship that bridges Sufi epistemology and Islamic feminist discourse, particularly in exploring the interplay between zāhir (literal) and bātin (inner) meanings in Sufi interpretations of verses addressing relations between men and women. Utilizing a qualitative-descriptive methodology with a textual analysis approach, this study examines Ibn 'Ajibah's interpretive framework alongside the epistemological foundations underpinning his exegetical method. The analysis centers on the influence of Sufi spiritual values – such as spiritual equality, purification of the soul, and respect for human dignity – in shaping the interpretation of gender-related verses and their potential to facilitate more inclusive readings concerning women's rights. The findings reveal that the ishāri approach employed by Ibn 'Ajibah foregrounds ethical and spiritual dimensions that enable non-hierarchical reinterpretations of gender-related verses. Nonetheless, these interpretations remain engaged with zāhir meanings, which are informed by the social context and scholarly traditions of his era. This study demonstrates that Sufi exegesis constitutes a significant alternative framework for advancing gender equality discourse within Qur'anic studies, while simultaneously broadening the scope of Islamic feminism to encompass Sufi spirituality.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis konstruksi pemaknaan ayat-ayat gender dalam tafsir al-Bahr al-Madid karya Ibn 'Ajibah melalui perspektif hermeneutika feminis. Kajian ini berangkat dari minimnya penelitian yang mengaitkan epistemologi sufistik dengan wacana feminism Islam, khususnya dalam menelaah relasi antara makna zāhir dan bātin dalam tafsir sufistik terhadap ayat-ayat yang berkaitan dengan relasi laki-laki dan perempuan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif-deskriptif dengan pendekatan analisis teks untuk menelusuri cara kerja penafsiran Ibn 'Ajibah serta kerangka epistemologis yang melandasinya. Fokus analisis diarahkan pada peran nilai-nilai spiritualitas sufi, seperti kesetaraan spiritual, penyucian jiwa, dan penghormatan terhadap martabat manusia dalam membentuk pemaknaan ayat-ayat gender serta potensinya dalam membuka ruang pembacaan yang lebih inklusif terhadap hak-hak perempuan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan isyāri yang digunakan Ibn 'Ajibah menekankan dimensi etis dan spiritual yang memungkinkan reinterpretasi non-hierarkis terhadap ayat-ayat gender. Namun demikian, penafsiran tersebut tetap berinteraksi dengan makna zāhir yang dipengaruhi oleh konteks sosial dan tradisi keilmuan pada masanya. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa tafsir sufistik memiliki kontribusi signifikan sebagai rujukan alternatif dalam pengembangan wacana kesetaraan gender dalam studi Al-Qur'an, sekaligus memperluas horizon feminism Islam ke dalam ranah spiritualitas sufistik.

Keywords:

Sufi Exegesis;
Feminist
Hermeneutics;
Gender-Related
Verses

Kata kunci:

Tafsir Sufistik;
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Feminis; Ayat
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Introduction

The issue of gender equality within contemporary Islamic discourse remains a significant concern, particularly in the realm of Qur'anic interpretation, where patriarchal biases persistently manifest in numerous classical exegetical traditions.¹ Several Muslim feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, and Fatima Mernissi as well as Indonesian academics including Nasaruddin Umar and Zaitunah Subhan, have demonstrated that the predominance of male perspectives throughout the history of Qur'anic exegesis has contributed to the marginalisation of women's experiences and religious authority.² This critique is especially apparent in interpretations of gender-related verses such as Q. al-Nisā' /4:1, Q. al-Nisā' /4:34, and Q. al-Baqarah/2:228, which are frequently understood through patriarchal social frameworks, despite the Qur'an's normative affirmation of spiritual and social equality between men and women, as reflected in Q. al-Hujurāt/49:13, Q. al-Nisā' /4:124, and Q. al-Āhzāb/33:35.³ The divergence between the Qur'an's egalitarian message and its interpretive practice has given rise to feminist hermeneutics, which concentrate on analysing social context, language, and patriarchal power relations.⁴ Nevertheless, Islamic feminist scholarship has predominantly emphasised socio-critical dimensions, often paying comparatively limited attention to spiritual and esoteric aspects. In this regard, a Sufi approach highlighting inner purification, ontological equality, and spiritual quality as the measure of human dignity offers an alternative perspective with the potential to enrich gender-related interpretations in a more holistic and inclusive manner.⁵

Research on gender-related verses in the Qur'an has advanced considerably through feminist hermeneutical approaches that aim to reconstruct religious interpretations in a manner more attuned to gender equality. Numerous studies affirm that feminist hermeneutics serves as a critical methodology for deconstructing patriarchal biases inherent in classical *tafsīr* and for aligning Qur'anic exegesis with contemporary social realities.⁶ This approach is further supported by Amina Wadud's

¹ Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

² Shinta Nuraini, "Al-Quran Dan Penciptaan Perempuan Dalam Tafsir Feminis," *HERMENEUTIK: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 12, no. 1 (2018): 71-95, <https://doi.org/10.21043/hermeneutik.v12i1.6023>.

³ Abdul Mustaqim, *Paradigma Tafsir Feminis* (Yogyakarta: Logung Pustaka, 2008), 23.

⁴ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Second Edition, Second Edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1; Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

⁵ Courtney W. Howland, ed., *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230107380>.

⁶ Sayyaf Nasrul Islami, "Hermeneutika Feminis Terhadap Wacana Kesetaraan Gender: Sebuah Studi Literatur," *Jurnal Hawa: Studi Pengaruh Utamaan Gender Dan Anak* 4, no. 2 (December 2022): 115, <https://doi.org/10.29300/hawapsga.v4i2.4723>; Saeful Anwar, M.Irfan Rosfiana, and Sukma Hendrian, "Gender Approach In Islamic Views," *Asian Journal of Social and Humanities* 1, no. 05 (February 2023): 192-200, <https://doi.org/10.59888/ajosh.v1i05.112>.



advocacy for a holistic reading of the Qur'an, which integrates principles of social justice and gender equality, alongside critiques of traditional interpretations that often legitimise gender-based violence.⁷ Concurrently, scholarship on Sufi feminism has emerged, emphasising the spiritual dimension as an alternative framework for understanding gender relations. As articulated by Hassan, Sufism offers a space for affirming moral and spiritual equality between men and women.⁸ Several studies have also connected Sufi values to gender justice within Qur'anic interpretation, highlighting the significance of socio-historical context and spiritual ethics in the exegesis of legal verses.⁹ Moreover, comparative analyses of feminist *tafsir* reveal methodological divergences in interpreting gender-related verses, shaped by the social and ideological backgrounds of the exegetes.¹⁰ Nonetheless, despite the concurrent development of feminist hermeneutics and Sufism, research explicitly integrating feminist hermeneutics with Sufi *tafsir* particularly in the works of Ibn 'Ajibah remains scarce. This lacuna presents a valuable opportunity to explore how the synthesis of exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bātin*) meanings in Sufi interpretation might contribute to the advancement of gender equality discourse within contemporary Qur'anic studies.

This research addresses a significant gap between the normative principle of equality affirmed in the Qur'an and interpretative practices that remain heavily influenced by gender bias. While the Qur'an upholds spiritual and moral equality between men and women, classical exegetical traditions frequently advance hierarchical interpretations that marginalise women's experiences. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how a Sufi feminist approach may be employed to reinterpret gender-related verses in Ibn 'Ajibah's *tafsir*, with particular focus on those concerning human creation in Q. al-Nisā' /4:1 and leadership in Q. al-Nisā' /4:34. The central research question considers the extent to which the exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bātin*) meanings in Ibn 'Ajibah's *tafsir* embody principles of spiritual equality between men and women. This inquiry is especially pertinent given that classical *tafsir* tends to prioritise outward and social meanings, whereas contemporary feminist interpretations often concentrate on social critique without integrating spiritual and inner dimensions. Consequently, this study seeks to provide a more holistic reading of gender-related verses through the synthesis of Islamic feminism and the Sufi tradition.

⁷ Afifatul Ifa and Akbar Akbar, "Decolonizing Patriarchal Readings: Badriyah Fayumi's Feminist Interpretation of the Biased Verses on Domestic and Sexual Violence in the Qur'an," *Al-Izzah: Jurnal Hasil Penelitian*, November 29, 2025, 107–18, <https://doi.org/10.31332/ai.vi.13117>.

⁸ Moch Sya'roni Hasan and Mar'atul Azizah, "Reconstructing the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum with a Bullying Prevention Perspective," *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 3, no. 2 (December 2022): 287–97, <https://doi.org/10.31538/tjje.v3i2.1702>.

⁹ Fuad Fansuri, Mursalim, and Miftahul Ramadhan, "Reinterpreting Islamic Inheritance Law For SDGs: A Comparative Analysis of Ibn Kathir and Amina Wadud on Gender Justice," *Profetika: Jurnal Studi Islam* 25, no. 02 (January 2025): 471–86, <https://doi.org/10.23917/profetika.v25i02.7887>.

¹⁰ MIsa RizkyRahman, Hidayatullah Ismail, and Ali Akbar, "Feminist Tafsir: A Comparative Study of Zainab al-Ghazali and Amina Wadud's Thoughts on Gender Verses," *Khulasah: Islamic Studies Journal* 7, no. 2 (June 2025): 28–62, <https://doi.org/10.55656/kisj.v7i2.347>.



The principal argument of this study is predicated on the premise that the interrelationship between Qur'anic interpretation, Sufism, and Islamic feminism has not yet been comprehensively examined in an integrative fashion within contemporary *tafsīr* scholarship. On one hand, Qur'anic exegesis plays a pivotal role in shaping socio-religious constructions of gender relations; on the other, the Sufi tradition underscores the ontological equality of all human beings before God, privileging spiritual qualities over biological distinctions.¹¹ The integration of these two domains holds considerable potential to enrich Islamic feminist discourse, particularly through the re-evaluation of verses traditionally interpreted in a hierarchical manner. Ibn 'Ajibah, a distinguished Moroccan Sufi exegete, made a notable contribution through his *tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Madīd*, which synthesises exoteric and allusive (*ishārī*) interpretative approaches. Although his work has been extensively studied with regard to Sufi epistemology, exegetical methodology, and spiritual ethics, research specifically addressing the implications of his Sufi hermeneutics for gender issues remains comparatively limited. Nevertheless, the structure of his *tafsīr*, which integrates both outward and inward meanings, offers a significant opportunity to reassess constructions of male–female relations in the Qur'an in a more comprehensive and justice-oriented manner.

This study utilises a qualitative-descriptive methodology, employing a feminist hermeneutical approach to analyse Ibn 'Ajibah's "*tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Madīd*". This approach is selected as it facilitates a critical engagement with exegetical texts by considering social context, language, and power relations, while simultaneously allowing for the incorporation of spiritual and esoteric dimensions. The analysis centres on Qur'anic verses pertaining to gender issues, specifically Q. al-Nisā' /4:1 and Q. al-Nisā' /4:34, through an examination of two interpretative layers: the exoteric (*zāhir*) and the esoteric (*bātin*). By applying a feminist hermeneutical reading to these layers, the study endeavours to reveal the potential of "Sufi *tafsīr*" to provide more inclusive interpretations regarding the status and roles of women. This methodology transcends legalistic or purely normative frameworks by adopting a Sufi spiritual paradigm that recognises women as autonomous spiritual agents possessing equal capacity, rights, and responsibilities to comprehend, interpret, and actualise the messages of the Qur'an. In doing so, the research aims to contribute both methodologically and conceptually to the advancement of gender equality discourse within contemporary Qur'anic interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The Intellectual Biography of Ibn 'Ajibah and His Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd

Ibn 'Ajibah's full name was Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn al-Mahdī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ajibah al-Ḥujūjī al-Ḥasanī. He is predominantly known as Ibn 'Ajibah

¹¹ Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender: Perspektif Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2001), 1.



and held the honorific title *Abū al-'Abbās*. Additionally, he was identified by several nisbahs, including *al-Anjarī*, *al-Tantāwī*, and *al-Ḥujūjī*. *Ibn 'Ajibah* was born in 1160 or 1161 H (1747/1748 CE) in the village of 'Ajabāshī, which belonged to the *Anjarī* tribe of Tetouan. He died on 7 Shawwāl 1224 H (1803 CE) while visiting the tomb of his spiritual master, *al-Būzidī*, having contracted the plague (*ṭā'ūn*). He passed away in his teacher's village and was subsequently returned to Tetouan for burial.¹²

Ibn 'Ajibah was a distinguished scholar renowned for his perseverance and dedication in the pursuit of knowledge, garnering widespread acclaim from numerous contemporaneous scholars. In *Tariqah al-Shādhiliyyah al-Kubrā*, he is portrayed as a man of noble lineage, metaphorically described as a spring of divine realities, a master of the Sufi path endowed with considerable spiritual authority, and a saint of God recognised for his assistance to others.¹³ During the twelfth century of the Hijri calendar, *Ibn 'Ajibah*'s place of birth was afflicted by significant political turmoil under the reign of Sultan *Ismā'īl*, characterised by interregional conflicts arising from colonial incursions. At the age of six, *Ibn 'Ajibah* is reported to have been drawn to assist his teacher, *Ibn 'Arabī al-Darqāwī*, in addressing the sociopolitical challenges confronting the region. Despite residing in a context of political instability, these circumstances appear to have had little impact on his scholarly productivity, as few of his extant works suggest direct engagement with political matters.¹⁴

Ibn 'Ajibah's *tafsīr* comprises eight volumes, commencing with *Sūrat al-Fātihah* and concluding with *Sūrat al-Nās*, in accordance with the conventional arrangement of the Qur'anic *muṣḥaf*. His exegetical methodology integrates *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*, *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*, and *tafsīr ishārī*. He adopts a multidimensional scholarly approach that encompasses jurisprudence (*fiqh*), rhetoric (*balāghah*), Sufism, and theology. In his application of *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*, he initiates the commentary by elucidating the surah's background, including its occasion of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the number of verses, any variations in verse enumeration where relevant, its thematic relationship (*munāsabah*) with preceding or subsequent surahs, and its virtues, where such reports are available.

In the introduction to *al-Bahr al-Madīd*, *Ibn 'Ajibah* systematically delineates his exegetical methodology. He commences the interpretation of each *sūrah* by: (a) determining whether it is Makkan or Madinan; (b) specifying the number of its verses; (c) addressing any discrepancies concerning verse enumeration; (d) elucidating its relationship with the preceding *sūrah*; (e) indicating its occasion of revelation, where available; (f) outlining its merits; and (g) providing a general overview of its thematic content. Subsequently, he interprets the verses individually through the following procedures:

¹² Moh Azwar Hairul, *Mengkaji Tafsir Sufi Karya Ibnu 'Ajibah* (Tangerang Selatan: YPM, 2017).

¹³ Hairul, *Mengkaji Tafsir Sufi Karya Ibnu 'Ajibah*.

¹⁴ Hairul, *Mengkaji Tafsir Sufi Karya Ibnu 'Ajibah*.



1. Clarifying difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary;
2. Analysing grammatical aspects (*i'rāb*); and
3. Explicating the intended meaning by reference to the Qur'ān, prophetic traditions, transmitted reports (*āthār*), and the views of earlier exegetes.¹⁵

The Sufi character of Ibn 'Ajibah's *tafsīr* is particularly pronounced, as evidenced by his interpretative methodology. He references the interpretation of Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, who asserts that Sufi *tafsīr* is distinguished by an *ishārī* nature—that is, it endeavours to reveal concealed allusions within Qur'anic verses that transcend their apparent meanings. According to this perspective, such interpretation is accessible solely to those who have undertaken the spiritual journey of Sufism and have internalised the precepts of Islamic law in their conduct. These subtle indications can only be apprehended by individuals who perceive realities beyond the confines of rational cognition. The means by which such understanding is attained is through *tawātur al-nuqūl*, understood as an elevated spiritual awareness intimately connected to God, the Exalted.¹⁶

The Concept of Sufi Feminism

To this day, the definition of feminism remains a contested topic among scholars. There is no singular, definitive definition, as each feminist thinker articulates the concept according to her own perspectives and arguments. Nonetheless, feminism can be broadly understood as an awareness of the systemic injustices experienced by women globally.¹⁷ The term feminism derives from the Latin word *femina*, which subsequently entered English as *feminine*, denoting the possession of female characteristics or qualities. Generally, feminism is recognised as a movement advocating for equality of rights between women and men.¹⁸ Terminologically, feminism refers to 'having the qualities of females', and the term emerged to supplant 'womanism', which first appeared in the 1880s.¹⁹

Etymologically, the term 'feminist' is derived from the French word 'femme', meaning woman. A distinction is often drawn between male and female, which pertains to biological sex, and masculine and feminine, which relates to gender differences. Feminism primarily concerns the latter category, that is, gender. Consequently, feminism can be defined as a social movement aimed at achieving gender equality. More broadly, feminism is understood as a women's movement that

¹⁵ Ibn 'Ajibah, *Al-Bahr al-Madid Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Majid* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 1.

¹⁶ Muhammad Ulil Abshor, "Dzikir Dalam Tafsir Sufi Ibnu 'Ajibah (al-Bahr al-Madid Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Madid)," *Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Ushuluddin* 19, no. 1 (June 2020): 41–55, <https://doi.org/10.18592/jiiu.v19i1.3587>.

¹⁷ Rizem Aizid, *Pengantar Feminisme* (Anak Hebat Indonesia, 2024).

¹⁸ Amin Bendar, "Feminisme Dan Gerakan Sosial," *Al-Wardah* 13, no. 1 (2020): 25, <https://doi.org/10.46339/al-wardah.v13i1.156>.

¹⁹ Arimbi dan R. Valentina Heroepoetri, *Percakapan Tentang Feminisme vs Neoliberalisme* (Jakarta: debtWatch Indonesia, 2004).



endeavours to secure women's rights within social structures, with the objective of attaining equal status with men across various domains of life.²⁰

The primary objective of Sufism is the attainment of divine reality, conceived as a direct, experiential encounter with God. Central to this spiritual journey is love (maḥabbah or 'ishq) for God, as emphasised by eminent figures such as Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah and al-Ḥallāj. Nevertheless, the historiography of Sufism has frequently prioritised male figures, thereby marginalising the contributions of women. Consequently, any comprehensive understanding of Sufism remains incomplete without recognising the experiences and roles of women. Numerous influential female Sufis have played significant roles throughout Islamic history. Notably, 'Ā'ishah al-Bā'uniyyah, one of the most prolific female mystical writers of the premodern (Mamluk) period, exemplifies women's intellectual capacity in the production of Sufi knowledge. Similarly, Jahan Ara Begum, daughter of a Mughal emperor, served both as a political authority and as an author of spiritual treatises, thereby illustrating the interrelation between Sufism and power structures.

Another prominent figure is Nana Asma'u, a Qadiriyyah Sufi from West Africa and a pioneer of women's education, whose work exemplifies the transformative role of women within Muslim communities. The contributions of female Sufis illustrate women's epistemic, political, and spiritual agency within the mystical Islamic tradition. This recognition arises not from a rejection of religion, but rather from a renewed engagement with the Sufi intellectual heritage, which has long been constrained by patriarchal narratives. Female Sufis were influential not merely due to their association with male figures—as wives or daughters of scholars—but were acknowledged as autonomous individuals possessing their own religious and intellectual authority. Their presence enriches our understanding of women's roles in Islamic history, encompassing both mystical and socio-political domains.²¹

Scholars have proposed various definitions of what it means to be a Sufi. In "Mawsū'at al-Kasnazān fīmā Istalaha 'alayhi Ahl al-Taṣawwuf wa al-'Irfān", several such definitions are articulated:²²

Shaykh 'Abd al-Wāhid ibn Zayd al-Baṣrī characterised Sufis as those who employ reason to comprehend the Sunnah, internalise it within their hearts, and steadfastly adhere to their Lord (God) while restraining their lower selves from evil. Shaykh Bishr al-Ḥāfi described the Sufi as one whose heart is purified solely for God. Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Warrāq regarded Sufis as individuals who place complete reliance upon God (tawakkul), rather than pursuing worldly gain through religion. Meanwhile, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī defined the Sufi as one whose speech reveals the secrets of the inner self,

²⁰ Sofiatin et al., *Tinjauan Feminisme: Citra Tokoh Perempuan Dalam Novel Terbaik Angkatan 2000* (Tasikmalaya: Langgam Pustaka, 2023).

²¹ Minlib Dallh, *Sufi Women and Mystics: Models of Sainthood, Erudition and Political Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

²² Muhammad ibn 'Abdulkarīm al-Kasnazān al-Hasanī, *Mawsū'at al-Kasnazān Fīmā Ishthalaha 'alayhi Ahl at-Taṣawwuf Wa al-'Irfān, Cet. Pertama, Jil. 16*, ((Beirut: Dār Āyah, 2005).



and whose silence reflects spiritual poverty that is, total dependence upon God. According to him, a Sufi speaks only from an authentic spiritual state and remains silent when actions alone bear witness to the renunciation of worldly attachments for God's sake.

A careful analysis of these definitions demonstrates that Sufism is not confined to men alone; it is equally accessible to women. Sainthood and spiritual attainment are not contingent upon gender but rather on spiritual qualities. Consequently, attributes such as purity of heart, adherence to the Sunnah, sincere reliance upon God, and consistency between word and deed are not the sole preserve of men but are entirely attainable by women as well.

Sufi feminism, therefore, constitutes a synthesis of social and spiritual consciousness. It conceptualises resistance to patriarchy and capitalism not merely as social struggles but as integral components of the inner spiritual journey. From a Sufi standpoint, patriarchy is understood not only as an external structure of oppression but also as a manifestation of *nafs ammārah* the domineering impulse within the human self that seeks power and objectifies others. Consequently, Sufi feminism combines critical rigor with spiritual gentleness: it confronts injustice through compassion and pursues liberation through heightened consciousness. This perspective aligns with Ibn 'Arabī's teaching that true freedom cannot be attained without self-awareness, and that such awareness cannot arise without the courage to recognise the divine in the faces of the oppressed.²³

Drawing upon these theoretical foundations, Sufi feminism seeks to harmonise the relationship between God and humanity – encompassing both men and women – within a unified spiritual framework. Masculine and feminine qualities are conceptualised as mutually influential and complementary dimensions of gender relations, rather than as opposing or hierarchical categories. Murata, as cited by Shinta Nurani, posits that gender comprises qualities attributed to both men and women, reflecting their efforts to perfect themselves as God's vicegerents (*khulafa'*) on earth. Consequently, gender embodies a spiritual and dynamic dimension, as these qualities may be cultivated through a process of spiritual purification oriented towards God. In this regard, masculine and feminine qualities are intrinsically complementary, each mutually reinforcing the other in the pursuit of spiritual and ethical perfection.²⁴

Discourse on Gender-Related Verses in Al-Bahr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd

The Qur'an does not depict women as a derivative or subordinate subset of men within its principal themes. Men and women are regarded as two categories of the human species that receive equal consideration and are endowed with equal potential. Neither

²³ Ainun Nadzifah, "Feminisme Sufistik: Menemukan Ruang Tengah Antara Emansipasi Dan Spiritualitas," 2 November, 2025, <https://mubadalah.id/feminisme-sufistik-menemukan-ruang-tengah-antara-emansipasi-dan-spiritualitas/>.

²⁴ Shinta Nurani, *Hermeneutika Qur'an Ekofeminis*, ed. Luthfi Maulana (Surabaya: Pustaka Aksara, 2021)., 14.



is excluded from the fundamental purpose of the revelation, which is to guide humankind towards recognising and affirming certain truths. The Qur'an exhorts all believers—both men and women—to translate their faith into righteous action, promising immense reward for doing so. Consequently, the Qur'an does not distinguish between men and women in terms of their creation, the purpose of the revelation, or the reward it guarantees.²⁵

From an Islamic perspective, men and women are regarded as equal human beings. Citing Afriadi, who references Ibn Kathīr's commentary on Sūrat al-Nahl (16:97), God promises reward to all individuals who perform righteous deeds, irrespective of their gender. In this context, righteous deeds are defined as actions that align with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet, and are founded upon faith. For such individuals, God promises a good life in this world and a noble reward in the Hereafter. Within Islam, a person's honour whether male or female is not determined by lineage, wealth, or sex, but rather by the degree of faith and piety (taqwā) before God.²⁶ The question of human creation is frequently examined in feminist and gender debates, particularly when interpretations tend to associate Adam exclusively with "male." Feminists often contend that such interpretations contribute to misogyny by implying that women are subordinate beings created solely as complements to men.

Accordingly, the question arises as to whether Ibn 'Ajībah's interpretation—particularly the ishārī (allusive) dimension he provides—aligns with meanings akin to feminist interpretations, or whether it corresponds with classical exegetical traditions that feminists critique as patriarchal.

1. The Creation of Humankind (Qur'an, al-Nisā' 4:1)

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبِّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِّنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَهَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا ۚ ۱

O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord Who created you from a single person created of like nature his mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; reverence God through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights) and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for God ever watches over you. (Q. al-Nisā' /4:1).²⁷

²⁵ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Second Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Pres, 1999).

²⁶ Afriadi Putra, Khairunnas Jamal, and Nasrul Fatah, "Offside Kesetaraan Gender (Kritik Terhadap Liberasi Kesetaraan Gender Perspektif Al-Qur'an)," *An-Nida'* 43, no. 1 (2019): 35, <https://doi.org/10.24014/an-nida.v43i1.12313>.

²⁷ This verse asserts that the Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) and Eve were not created through a process of biological evolution akin to that of other living organisms, but rather through a unique mode of creation: Adam was created individually, followed by the creation of his mate from him. The mechanism underlying this creation cannot be elucidated by scientific methods. Subsequently, their descendants were brought into existence through biological reproduction in pairs, in accordance with the will of God.



In Ibn 'Ajibah's *tafsīr*, the phrase *min nafsin wāhidah* ("from a single soul") is interpreted as referring to the Prophet Adam (peace be upon him). God subsequently created his mate, Eve (Hawwā'), from one of his ribs. From these two – originating from that single soul – God propagated numerous sons and daughters.²⁸ Abū Ḥayyān explains that *min nafsin wāhidah* signifies that God brought humanity forth from a single soul attributed to Adam; although descendants are not directly derived from his person, they originate from the semen produced by his progeny, whose ultimate source is Adam. Al-Asamm contends that reason alone does not demonstrate that creation arose from a single soul; rather, such knowledge is acquired through revelation. Given that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was *ummī* (unlettered), the verse "He created you" serves as evidence of divine oneness (*tawhīd*), while "from a single soul" serves as evidence of prophethood.²⁹ The expression *min nafsin wāhidah* also functions as a moral admonition against pride, as God reminds humanity of their common origin. Furthermore, it signifies the reality of resurrection: the One who can bring forth diverse individuals from a single origin is surely capable of restoring them to life.

The phrase *wa khalaqa minhā zawjahā* ("and created from it its mate") refers to Eve. On a superficial level, this indicates that Adam is the origin of creation and that Eve was derived from Adam. This interpretation is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, and al-Suddī. Qatādah explains that God created Adam alone in Paradise; subsequently, Adam slept, and God removed one of his short ribs from his left side – though some suggest it was from his right side and created Eve from it.

This discussion integrates both a literal interpretation namely, that Eve was created from Adam's rib and a symbolic interpretation, viewing the narrative as a parable concerning human character, particularly the qualities traditionally ascribed to women and the broader theme of human impulsiveness. The subsequent injunction to remain mindful of God follows this account because it contains indications of God's extraordinary power, which ought to inspire reverent fear, as well as evidence of God's immense blessing, which should encourage obedience.³⁰ Furthermore, the verse commands mindfulness and prohibits the severing of kinship ties, warning that those who sever family relations will be "cut off" from divine mercy, whereas those who maintain such ties will be sustained by God. An additional interpretation suggests that individuals invoke God and kinship bonds when making requests of one another, for example, by saying, "I ask you by the blood relation between us."³¹

God cautions against negligence in the observance of these commands, emphasising that He is ever watchful, all-knowing, and a witness to all conditions. In contrast, feminist exegetes such as Riffat Hassan interpret the term *nafsin wāhidah* as signifying "from one source," suggesting that God created human beings without

²⁸ Ibnu 'Ajibah, *al-Bahr al-Madīd fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majid*, jilid 1, ..., 459.

²⁹ Muhammad bin Yusuf Abu Ḥayyān, *al-Bahr al-Mulīth fi at-Tafsīr*, juz 3, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1420, 494.

³⁰ Ibnu 'Ajibah, *al-Bahr al-Madīd fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majid* Jilid 1, ..., 459.

³¹ Ibnu 'Ajibah, *al-Bahr al-Madīd fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majid* Jilid 1, ..., 459.



privileging either male or female; the origin is singular and not specified as male or female. Indeed, Hassan contends that *nafsin wāḥidah* may even refer more closely to the female than the male. From this perspective, the Qur'an presents creation in an equitable manner by employing both feminine and masculine terminology and by utilising metaphors that depict humanity as emerging from a single source.³² Ibn 'Arabī, meanwhile, cautions against the ego and the lower self taking credit for goodness that arises internally. Instead, one should seek refuge in God's attributes whenever goodness manifests, recognising that all causality ultimately returns to the All-Powerful, who created humanity from a single soul namely, the universal rational soul (*al-nafs al-nātiqah al-kulliyah*), which constitutes the heart of the cosmos and the true Adam.³³

From that singular soul, its "mate" is created—specifically, the animal soul derived therefrom. Some scholars contend that the mate was fashioned from the left rib, the side oriented towards the material world (the realm of becoming), as this side is considered weaker than the side directed towards God. It is argued that, without the mate, Adam would not have descended into the world. It is widely acknowledged that Iblīs first tempted the mate (Eve) and subsequently utilised that temptation as a means to lead Adam astray. In this perspective, physical attachment occurs solely through the mediation of the mate (the animal soul).³⁴

2. **Qawwāmūna (Qur'an, al-Nisā' 4:34)**

In *Lisān al-'Arab*, the root *qāma* (to stand or rise) may also denote maintaining, guarding, and rectifying—that is, nurturing and administering. In Q. al-Nisā' 4:34, God states: *al-rijāl qawwāmūna 'alā al-nisā'* ("Men are *qawwāmūn* over women"). Some scholars contend that in certain contexts, *qayyim al-mar'ah* refers to "the husband," as he manages her affairs and fulfils her needs.³⁵ The phrase *qāma bi amri kadhā* signifies taking charge of a matter, while *qāma al-rajulu 'alā al-mar'ah* can mean protecting her. The expression *innahu la-qawwām(un) 'alayhā* indicates that he is her protector or caretaker. Thus, in the Noble Qur'an, *qawwāmūn* does not imply "standing" in a physical sense (as opposed to sitting), but rather conveys a figurative meaning, as in *qamtū bi amrik* ("I took care of your affair"). From this perspective, feminist scholars often regard many classical interpretations as flawed, arguing that they tend to privilege patriarchal readings that position men above women. Consequently, feminist exegetes seek to reinterpret passages that demean women. They maintain that the Qur'an was revealed to promote the well-being of all, rather than to degrade some and elevate others; therefore, the meanings of Q. al-Nisā' 4:34 should be re-examined carefully to derive ethical values beneficial to all human beings. According to this

³² Fatima Mernissi dan Riffat Hasan, *Setara di Hadapan Allah (Relasi Perempuan dan Laki-laki dalam Tradisi Islam Pasca Patriarkhi)*, ... 51.

³³ Muhammad bin 'Ali Ibnu 'Arabi, *Tafsīr Ibnu 'Arabiy*, jilid 1, ..., 137.

³⁴ Muhammad bin 'Ali Ibnu 'Arabi, *Tafsīr Ibnu 'Arabiy*, jilid 1, ..., 137.

³⁵ Muhammad bin Mukarram Ibnu Manzhār, *Lisan al-'Arab*, jilid 12, Beirut: Dār Sadīr, 1414, 497.

interpretation, men bear responsibility for women's affairs and are actively involved in their welfare.³⁶

﴿ الْرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ إِمَّا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَّإِمَّا أَنْفَعُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ فَالصِّلْحُ تَقْرِيبٌ لِّلْعَيْبِ إِمَّا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ بِهِ الْأَنْوَافُ فُسُوزُهُنَّ فَعَظُلُوهُنَّ وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنُكُمْ فَلَا تَبْعُدُوهُنَّ سَبِيلًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْهَا كَبِيرًا ۲۴ ﴾

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women³⁷ 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 ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct admonish them (first) (next) refuse to share their beds (and last) beat them (lightly);³⁸ but if they return to obedience seek not against them means (of annoyance): for God is Most High Great (above you all). (Q. al-Nisā' /4: 34).

Ibn 'Ajibah elucidates that the phrase "men are *qawwāmūn* over women" signifies that men bear comprehensive responsibility for women, analogous to the manner in which a ruler is accountable for their subjects, particularly in matters of education, provision, and guidance. He contends that this responsibility arises from men's superiority over women in two distinct respects: firstly, as a divine endowment (*wahbī*) granted by God, and secondly, as an acquired attribute (*kasbī*) resulting from men's efforts.³⁹ The *wahbī* dimension refers to God's favouring of men with intellectual completeness, enhanced administrative capacity, and greater strength in fulfilling tasks and acts of worship. Consequently, Ibn 'Ajibah asserts, men were uniquely designated for prophethood, leadership, governance, the implementation of legal rulings, testimony in significant cases, the obligation of jihad, participation in Friday prayer, entitlement to a larger share of inheritance, and the exclusive right of divorce (*ṭalāq*), which is vested entirely in men.⁴⁰

Men are thus regarded as the guardians of women, bearing responsibility for guardianship, issuing commands and prohibitions, and overseeing related matters. The use of a nominal form with emphatic intensity, it is suggested, signifies their established role and steadfastness in fulfilling the duties assigned to them. This perspective also elucidates why men receive a larger share of inheritance, as it symbolises the differing degrees of obligations and rights. It is argued that God

³⁶ Muhammad bin Mukarram Ibnu Manzhūr, *Lisan al-'Arab*, jilid 12,..., 497.

³⁷ The husband, as the head of the family, bears the responsibility of protecting, caring for, managing, and endeavouring to secure the welfare of the household.

³⁸ *Nushūz* denotes a wife's failure to fulfil her marital duties, exemplified by actions such as leaving the marital home without her husband's consent. (An-Nisā' /4:34)

³⁹ Ibnu 'Ajibah, *al-Bahr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majīd*, jilid 1, Kairo: Taba'a 'ala Nafāqahu Hasan Abbas Zaki, 1999, 498.

⁴⁰ Ibnu 'Ajibah, *al-Bahr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majīd*, jilid 1,... 498.



grounds this ruling in both *wahbī* and *kasbī* causes.⁴¹ The *wahbī* cause refers to God's gift that enables men to fulfil spousal responsibilities through counsel and a form of obedience directed towards God. The *kasbī* cause pertains to men's expenditure on women, including dowry (*mahr*), daily maintenance, and clothing. Consequently, a husband is required to act justly towards his wife or wives. Righteous women, in turn, are characterised by their obedience to their husbands and to God, and by their vigilance in guarding themselves during their husbands' absence—protecting property, honour, and marital confidentiality—under God's protection, whether through the trustworthiness instilled in them by God or through faith that binds their hearts.⁴²

If women uphold the rights ordained by God, they, in turn, receive divine protection, as reflected in the prophetic saying: "Guard God, and He will guard you."⁴³ When a woman embodies such virtues, it is incumbent upon her husband to treat her with kindness and reciprocate goodness with goodness. Ibn 'Ajībah recounts an incident involving the Companion Sa'd ibn Rabi' of the Anṣār, who struck his wife, Ḥabībah bint Zayd ibn Abī Zuhayr, due to her disobedience. Her father brought her before the Prophet (peace be upon him) and protested, "I gave my daughter to him, yet he struck her!" The Prophet affirmed that she was entitled to retaliate (*qīṣāṣ*). However, as they were about to proceed, the Prophet announced, "Return, for Gabriel has just revealed this verse: 'Men are *qawwāmūn* over women...'" He further stated, "We intended one thing, but God intended another, and what God intends is better," thereby cancelling the retaliation. Similar accounts of this event are also documented.⁴⁴

Ibn 'Ajībah's esoteric interpretation of the verse posits that the truly strong "men" are those who master and govern their lower selves (*nafs*) through the strength granted by God, achieved by exerting themselves through *mujāhadah* (struggle against the ego) and *riyādah* (spiritual discipline). Such individuals maintain constant vigilance over the self in all circumstances. When the self is obedient, it is treated with kindness and without harshness; however, if it rebels, it must be disciplined by distancing it from desire, from the bed, or by "striking" it in accordance with the degree of its obstinacy and negligence.⁴⁵ Within this discourse, Ibn 'Ajībah underscores that men ought to treat women well, while women should obey their husbands as an expression of obedience to God. The verse is intimately connected to marital relations within the household. The term *qawwāmūn*, as interpreted by Ibn 'Ajībah, implies that men serve as the providers for women's livelihood; if the husband—as the highest authority in the household—fulfils women's rights, including maintenance, adequate housing, and the best possible dowry, then the wife's duty is to obey him.

⁴¹ Mahmud bin Abdullah al-Alusi, *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-'Adzim wa al-Sab' al-Matsani*, jilid 3, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1415, 24.

⁴² Ibnu 'Ajībah, *al-Baḥr al-Madīd fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majīd*, jilid 1, ... 499.

⁴³ Imam Nawawi, *Matan Hadis Arba'in*, t.tp: Pustaka Umar, t.th, 30.

⁴⁴ Ibnu 'Ajībah, *al-Baḥr al-Madīd fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majīd*, jilid 1, ... 499-500.

⁴⁵ Ibnu 'Ajībah, *al-Baḥr al-Madīd fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-Majīd*, jilid 1, ... 500.

From a feminist standpoint, Ibn 'Ajibah's *tafsīr* may be categorised as "classical" and regarded as unsupportive of feminist interpretations, given its prioritisation of men over women. Men are depicted as possessing superior intellect, being selected for prophethood and leadership, and bearing responsibility for women's needs, whereas women are expected to obey their husbands provided that the husbands fulfil their obligations. Within this framework, gender equality is not evident. Nevertheless, the text also prompts a practical consideration: if women were required to be identical to men in all respects such as sharing equal responsibility for financial provision while simultaneously enduring pregnancy, breastfeeding, and associated burdens would this not impose additional hardship upon women? Patriarchal or misogynistic attitudes frequently manifest in societies that treat women as inferior, thereby restricting their access relative to men. However, the notion that men are "superior" may, in this context, be defended as a reflection of greater responsibility rather than a denigration of women; men are assigned heavier obligations, which might be interpreted as alleviating burdens for women and promoting social harmony.

Conclusion

A Sufi feminist reading of Ibn 'Ajibah's *tafsīr* concerning gender-related verses—particularly those addressing human creation (Q. al-Nisā' 4:1) and leadership (Q. al-Nisā' 4:34)—proposes that the spiritual equality of men and women is more robustly grounded when exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bātin*) interpretations are integrated. Ibn 'Ajibah's exegesis, which emphasises the inward dimension of the human spiritual journey, suggests that social hierarchies observable at the outward level do not necessarily reflect spiritual superiority of one gender over the other. Consequently, engaging with both *zāhir* and *bātin* layers in his *tafsīr* facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of gender one that reconciles social prescriptions with the principle of spiritual equality. This approach is particularly significant given that classical *tafsīr* frequently remains confined to outward meanings, while contemporary feminist interpretations often prioritise social aspects; thus, a Sufi methodology that synthesises both perspectives can overcome the limitations inherent in each and contribute to a more nuanced construction of gender equality within Qur'anic exegetical scholarship.

Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'anic teachings on equality constitutes a fundamental basis for the development of a humane civilisation, as the respect for women's dignity contributes to the maintenance of social equilibrium. Women are not merely objects of protection but are individuals endowed with intellectual, spiritual, and social capacities equal in value to those of men. By affirming the equal status of women, societies are able to foster harmonious relationships, enhance compassion, and cultivate a culture of peace that mitigates violence. This viewpoint also underpins the establishment of resilient communities, as the respect accorded to women reinforces the foundations of family life and civilisation. Ultimately, when the principle of equality is sincerely internalised, humanity can exist within a more just and peaceful environment, grounded in devotion (*taqwā*) to Allah, the Exalted.

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