'She Who Disputes': A Qur`anic Precedent for Sacral Interlocution

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Abstract

Despite enduring differences between the Abrahamic traditions Islam, Christianity and Judaism, women of these faiths have a shared experience of exclusion from institutional theological enterprises, where women are depicted as silent subjects of faith. This thesis considers women as speaking subjects in the Qur`an within a literary reading to explore an Abrahamic interfeminist dialogue. The thesis compares how women's subjectivity has been interpreted historically in traditional Islamic scholarship with modern feminist deconstruction of androcentric language, in order to consider how women are presented as addressees of the text. Female speaking roles are explored through the language of dispute (*jadala*) as a thematic feature of the Qur`an, with the surah-title *al-mujādilah*, 'she who disputes', as pivotal character. The thesis draws on recent literary scholarship that has called for a canonical understanding of the text, whereby the Qur`an is viewed as a literary unit wherein formal structure is seen to have religious significance. The Qur`anic terms of gender and debate are read as part of an internal Qur`anic semiology that develops from the earlier to the later Qur`anic chapters through the expression of Qur`anic Sign. The chronological consideration of the Qur`an's terms of debate presented a model that critiques women's exclusion from the theological process as revealed knowledge while affirming their inclusion in the revelatory scheme not only for the Muslim addressee of Scripture, but for her Jewish and Christian counterparts as well. The thesis thus presents a novel approach of reading biblical texts in light of a Qur`anic model as an Abrahamic theology of women who speak.

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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

AJISS	American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences
AJSL	American Journal of Semitic Languages
ALUP	*Arabic Literature to the End of the Ummayyad Period*
ASQ	Arab Studies Quarterly
BAIYS	Bulletin of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies
BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
CUP	Cambridge University Press
Edebiyat	Edebiyat: Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures
EQ	*Encyclopaedia of the Qur`an*
EWIC	*Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*
FI	Feminist Issues
FS	Feminist Studies
FT	Feminist Theology
HUP	Harvard University Press
ICMR	Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations
JAL	Journal of Arabic Literature
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JFSR	Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JQS	Journal of Qur`anic Studies
JRE	Journal of Religious Ethics
JRR	Journal of Research in Reading
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSNTS	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOTS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
JSR	Journal of Scriptural Reasoning
JSRF	Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum
JSS	Journal of Semitic Studies
MEJ	Middle East Journal, The

MHASF	*Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach*
MW	Muslim World, The
NIV	New International Version
OBS	Oxford Bible Series
OUP	Oxford University Press
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLF	Society of Biblical Literature Forum
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SI	Studia Islamica
TCS	Theory, Culture & Society
TDR	The Drama Review
UTTPSS	University of Texas Press Slavic Series
WMEH	*Women in Middle Eastern History*
YUP	Yale University Press

Editions of Scriptures

Bible	New International Version (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996)
Qur`an	Unless stated otherwise, Yusuf 'Ali's *The Holy Qur`an: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1975). Citation from Ali do not follow his use of archaic English and capitalisation exactly.

List of Tables

List of Figures

Transliteration of Arabic names and words

The transliteration of Arabic names and words in this thesis did not use an alternate font. In general, Arabic names that have become part of everyday language such as Hadith, Qur`an and Ummah, and Arabic names whose holder have a preferred spelling (e.g. Al-Ahram, Nasr Abu Zayd) have been written as such. The preferred transliteration of some recurrent Arabic words has been retained, such as ayāt, Jāhiliyya, surah, tawhīd, Muhammad. The English equivalent of the names of biblical characters in the Qur`an have been retained throughout (e.g. Abraham instead of Ibrahim, Mary instead of Maryam, Gabriel instead of Jibril, and Noah instead of Nuh)

For the Roman transliteration of Arabic words, consonants have been transliterated to their nearest Latin equivalent. The emphatic consonants are presented with a dot underneath (e.g. ṣ for ص, ḍ for ض), and the fricative ḥ for ح. The glottal stop ء is transliterated as ` (e.g. Qur`an) and the pharyngeal fricative ع as ' (e.g. A'isha). Short vowels are a, e, i, o and u while long vowels are transcribed with a line on top (e.g. ā, ī, ū). The noun and feminine ending are transcribed as –ah (e.g. mujādilah). Attached pronouns and prepositions are written together with the word they modify with the exception of the connecting particle 'and' which is transcribed with a hyphen as *wa-*. The article is always transcribed as *al-*, even when followed by a 'sun letter' (e.g. *al-shams*). Where the root of declined Arabic words are discussed, the transcription presents the root in bold while the remaining letters are in regular font (e.g. *jadala*). Reference to the traditions of the Qur`an are capitalised as Hadith when referring to the material as a whole and not capitalised (hadith) when referring to a specific tradition.

Preface

The 'Woman Question' in Islam

Islamic feminist discourse may be said to have two epistemological foundations: Some draw on the encounter with modernity and its concept of equality while others deny that Islamic feminism should be a response to modern emancipatory processes in Western societies and rather seek the origins of female emancipation in the religious texts of Islamic tradition. Others argue, from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds, that Islam and feminism are incompatible, citing Muslim practices such as veiling and institutional segregation as inherently oppressive. These topics often form part of a discourse about Islam and Modernism wherein the two worldviews are usually presented as an oppositional dichotomy.[1] Women's role and status have been presented within this larger polemic as a socio-political debate between the West and Islam, with some expressing the view that it is the litmus test of modernity in Islam.[2]

However, the simplistic reduction of women's status and roles to a supposed hostility between modernism and traditionalism belies a far more complex question. Feminist activism in Islamic contexts has been part of, and instrumental to, the questioning not only of Islam's response to modernity, but of the representation of non-Western subjects that formed part of the demise of colonialism in Middle Eastern countries:

> The postcolonialist Muslim debate on the structure, functions, and
> goals of Islam in the contemporary world is a complex debate whose

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[1] For example Samuel Huntington's article 'Islam and the Clash of Civilisations', *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (1993), provided an evocative title that has shaped many discourses about interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim societies as a clash.

[2] Amirpur, K., 'Islamic Feminism in the Islamic Republic of Iran', trans. by Christine White, *Orient*, 40 (1999), <http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-307/_nr-9/_p-4/i.html>[accessed 28 January 2004] (para. 8 of 9).

many participants formulate contradictory assessments and plans for action, often in tones of mutual animosity. What unites their voices is a shared vision of Islam's contemporary situation as one of crisis, and also the conviction that Islam is an important – for many the most important or even only legitimate – force of solidarity and cohesion in today's world, and one that is now called upon to overcome the traumatic experience of Western colonialism and its legacy.[3]

Edward Said, the most prominent author in English to articulate Middle Eastern experience of colonialism, pointed out the unreflexive and unilateral construction of non-Western subjects in colonialist thinking in his book *Orientalism* (1978). Said contended that the production of knowledge about the Orient was formed by, and remains, a colonialist project. Some feminist scholars argue that the question of gender and sexuality is underexamined in Said's work. For example, Meyda Yegenoglu points out the latent Orientalism present in the images of Oriental women and sexuality, which, Yegenoglu argues, is central to, and not only a sub-category of colonial discourse.[4] Far from being abolished, images of Muslim women remain present and function as potent signifiers of discourse. Jasmin Zine points out recurring tendencies of some feminist writing and popular culture that reproduce colonial motifs of Muslim women as secluded, veiled and disenfranchised.[5] On the other hand, Islamist discourse also attaches symbolic value to the selfsame images of women in the equivalent process as that of the Orientalist project, namely geopolitical repositioning.[6] Meryem Ouedghiri argues that women are likewise central to radical Islamist positioning:

Nowhere have the Islamic fundamentalists been more vocal than in their explicit views about women who have come to constitute the

[3] Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur`an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (OUP, 1994), p. 5.

[4] See Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Toward a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (CUP, 1998) and the review article by Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies', *FS*, 27 (2001), 101-114.

[5] Jasmin Zine, 'Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation', *AJISS*, Special Issue: Islam and Women, 19 (2003), 1-22 (p. 2).

[6] In extreme interpretations, sometimes termed Talibanised Islam, it includes the removal of a visual female presence from all public spaces as seen in the practice, mostly in Afghanistan and North-West Pakistan, of defacing images of women, for example on billboards or other advertisements. The images are vandalised by cutting out their faces or covering pictures of women's faces in black paint.

foundational pillars of the fundamentalist narrative and whose bodies are singled out for the reordering of society.[7]

Ouedghiri suggests that, where the Orientalist project aims at presenting alien Otherness, political Islamist discourse aims to articulate an authentic Arab-Muslim identity through the othering of women as a representation of worldview.[8]

In addition to these external cultural influences typified as Orientalist and Islamist discourse respectively, there is internal Muslim debate. Opinion is strongly divided within Muslim communities on the validity of such practices as women's seclusion and the wearing of the veil. The point is illustrated well by a public row over whether to veil or not between two prominent feminists from Muslim background, Nawal El-Saadawi and Rayda Jacobs, titled 'Bitter Battle of the Burqa' by a newspaper article at the time.[9] Muslim men often join the debate. For example, Farid Esack, a Muslim activist against Apartheid, campaigns against gender oppression in Islam from the point of view of his involvement in the struggle against Apartheid. He points out that many Muslims view women as ontologically derivative, with pre-determined segregation and roles due to their sex, in the same way that Apartheid racialised social functions.[10] However, most are agreed that at the core of these arguments are the religious texts and their justification, or not, of exclusionary practices.

Muslim discourse that emphasises segregation or predetermined life possibilities for women invariably selects role models from the religious texts that affirm the exclusion of

[7] Meryem Ouedghiri, 'Writing Women's Bodies on the Palimpsest of Islamic History', *Cultural Dynamics*, 14 (2002), 41-64 (p. 45).
[8] See Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur`an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), pp. xii-xiii.
[9] Bongani Madondo, 'Bitter Battle of the Burqa', *Sunday Times* (South Africa), 17 April 2005 <http://www.sundaytimes.co.za/PrintMail/FinishPrint.aspx?ID=ST6A116034> [Accessed 21 April 2005].
[10] Farid Esack, *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), p. 113. For the variety of views that inform discourses on sex or gender in Arab society that include, but are not limited to, religious categories in Islam, see As'ad Abu Khalil, 'Gender Boundaries and Sexual Categories in the Arab World', *FI*, 15 (1997), 91-105.

women from public participation, while Orientalist discourse presents segregation in Muslim society in contrast to Western social practices. Certain feminist works have expressed dismay at the continuing presence of exegesis of the Qur`anic basis for Islamic practice and doctrine in feminist discourses.[11] Nevertheless, sociological and political developments since the turn of the twenty-first century have made clear that the question turns on the theological and philosophical reasoning underpinning both the variety of views within diverse Muslim communities and the intercommunal dialogue of Muslims with other religions.

The portrayal of women as tropes by both Orientalist and Islamist discourses present two extremes on the continuum of the topic of women in Islam and it is clear that any discussion, particularly from a non-Muslim point of view, is fraught with pitfalls on either side. Moreover, the activities that stem from a feminist consciousness are as diverse in Islam as the geographic locations wherein they are set. In the first instance, Islamic feminist discourse spans all categories of difference that manifest in general feminism, drawing from Marxism, to secularism, to religious principle.[12] It is evident that Islamic feminism is neither homogeneous nor does it understand liberation in solely political terms. Secondly, Islamic feminist discourse, despite engaging in female activism, often does not want to be labelled as 'feminist'. Those working with the Qur`an often emphasise their dissociation with many of the practices and ideological positions of political feminism that is seen as 'Western', and therefore assumed to be against scriptural traditions as a valid category of

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[11] See critique with full bibliographical references by Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective', in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (hereafter referred to as *WMEH*), ed. by Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (London: YUP, 1991), pp. 23-44 (p. 23).
[12] An example of a politically libertarian Islamic feminism that draws on a diversity of discourses is that manifested in the Iranian Revolution of the 1970's. For which see Rokhsareh S. Shoaee, 'The Mujahid Women of Iran: Reconciling "Culture" and "Gender"', *MEJ*, 41 (1987), 519-537.

subject-formation.[13] These epistemological, moral and political issues are some of the sources of contention for Islamic feminism and posit the question of how a valid reading of female subjectivity in an Islamic context is to be structured.[14]

Margot Badran points out the emergence of feminisms globally as localised movements that defy characterisation of these activities as 'Western'.[15] For Badran, the distinction is between Islamic feminism as an explicitly declared project and Islamic feminism as a term of identity, which includes "so-called religious Muslims (by which is meant the religiously observant), so-called secular Muslims (whose ways of being Muslim may be less publicly evident), and non-Muslims".[16] She points to the possibilities of commonality that Islamic feminism makes available by transcending polarities of difference, such as 'religious' and 'secular', 'East' and West', or 'Third World' and 'First World':

> [Islamic feminist discourse] closes gaps and demonstrates common
> concerns and goals, starting with the basic affirmation of gender
> equality and social justice. Suggestions or allegations of a supposed
> 'clash' between 'secular feminism' and 'religious feminism' may either
> be the product of lack of historical knowledge or, as in many cases, a
> politically motivated attempt to hinder broader solidarities among
> women.[17]

One way that Islamic feminism transcends polarities of difference is by repositioning women as shapers of Islamic history, providing theoretical frameworks for re-evaluating women's authority in the other Abrahamic traditions.[18] Islamic feminism also points out the

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[13] See Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. viii.

[14] For a discussion of women in political authority, see As'ad Abu Khalil, 'Toward the Study of Women and Politics in the Arab World: The Debate and the Reality', *FI*, 13 (1993), 20-23.

[15] See also Nikki Keddie's assessment of South Arabian and other women's uncharacteristic independence of views and actions "that seem to owe nothing to Westernization", in 'Introduction: Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History', in *WMEH*, (fn. 13), p. 21.

[16] Margot Badran, 'Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?', *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 17-23 (2002), <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm> [Accessed 29 January 2004] (para 6 of 29).

[17] Badran, *Al-Ahram*, (para. 10 of 29).

[18] Badran identifies a drift towards a universal Islamic feminist discourse circulating on the Internet that does not present the variety that is present within Islamic feminist activism. Azza Basarudin, 'Islam and Feminism:

common processes of androcentric historiography that erase women as authorities in the respective traditions. Fundamentally, Islamic feminism articulates commonality of experience across faiths by its rejection of the artificial division of 'the secular' as opposed to 'the religious' spheres of life. The absolute distinction made by some between the 'spiritual' and 'worldly' activities of life is a concern shared with other faith traditions such as Christianity.

This is how I, as a Christian woman from the Reformed Christian tradition, find myself studying the Qur'an to explore the relationship between women and Divine communication. My own Reformed denomination included women early on as deacons and as leaders in missionary activity, later to include women as ministers. Yet my understanding of women's role and status in Christian traditions was equally formed by my experiences as part of a research team of the then Potchefstroom University of Christian Higher Education. The research team, including both female and male researchers, reported to the Synod of Reformed Churches in South Africa (2001) on scriptural evidence for the inclusion of women in leadership positions in the Church.[19] One of the proof texts compiled by the research team was a video presentation of testimonies by women who had studied Theology but were subsequently not allowed 'onto the pulpit', called "Hear Her Voice". Neither the video nor women representatives were allowed at the final hearings, where it was decided against the inclusion of women in primary leadership positions. The main arguments against women's inclusion as leaders came from the selfsame Scripture that the research teams had scrutinised to come to a different conclusion. My background in Islamic studies prompted me to question in what way this exclusion was similar or different to the

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An Interview with Margot Badran', *UCLA Newsletter* <http://www.women.ucla.edu/Newsletter/Badran.htm> [Accessed 08 March 2004], (para. 12 of 14).

[19] Note that the Reformed Church (*Gereformeerde Kerk*) and the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk*) of which I am a member, are viewed as distinct denominations in South Africa.

13

widely assumed exclusion of women in Islamic traditions as well as urging me to further consideration of the relationship between religion and the silencing of women.

The present thesis therefore works within the religious text as a site of engagement with feminists who address the text as epistemological basis of women's subjectivity. The aim is not to assert that the Qur'anic basis is the only ideological terrain on which to debate women's issues for Islamic feminism. Rather, it suggests that re-interpreting the foundational texts of gender discourses is seen as part of the processes leading to legal and other societal reform that shape female subjectivity. It has almost become a refrain of the twenty-first century that in a pluralistic world the consideration of identity and relationships between sites of identity cannot be reasoned from traditions in isolation, but is rather shaped in a dialectic with the Other. The assumption is that reading of the Other's tradition constitutes a resource for the understanding of Self as much as it may open possibilities of understanding for the Other. In this thesis therefore I am reading the Qur'an in engaging with issues of women's subjectivity in the religious text of a tradition that is regarded generally as excluding women's voices from public expression. My reading of the Qur'an is not only done to become more informed about the Islamic tradition, but to return to my own tradition in the light of Qur'anic injunction for or against the silence of women in their engagement with the Divine, and therewith to evaluate the assumptions in Abrahamic religious traditions about the relationship between God's Word and women's word.

Chapter One

Introduction: Women's Voice and the Public Space

Women's struggle for recognition in the public sphere of the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is often expressed by referring to the presence or absence of women's voices. This may be seen in the numerous publications with titles that refer to women's voices or silence. The book by Yvonne Yazbeck and John Esposito, *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (2001), is premised on the common experience of women in these three monotheistic faiths of struggling to have their voices heard. According to this work, the absence of women's voices is centrally representative of the religious oppression of women that has been "one of the great flaws of monotheism" (p. vii). Debates about women's role in the public arena of these traditions revolve around questions such as whether women should worship alongside men, or whether women should provide theological leadership in the spaces that men and women share.[1] However, conclusions to these debates are foreclosed by the sheer weight of androcentric interpretation of female characters in the foundational texts of all three Abrahamic traditions, one consequence of which is often the silencing of women even before they can respond to these arguments.

The question of the authority of women's voices in communities of faith rests on what the foundational texts, or Scriptures, say about women and whether women appear as

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[1] We would do well to remember that the prescription of silence for women is not the sole prerogative of religion in general or monotheism in particular. In the fifth century BCE Sophocles stated: "Silence is an ornament for women". For a discussion of silence as a construct in the classical Greek tradition see Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

mediators of sacred knowledge therein.[2] The interpretation of scriptural female characters is further refracted through the prism of a-contextual 'one-liners', such as that women must "learn in silence" (1 Timothy 2:11-14), or that "men are the maintainers of women" (Q 4:34), restricting women's subjectivity and voice beyond the limits of context and time.[3] Yusuf Qaradawi, an Egyptian Muslim scholar and head of the Dublin-based *European Council for Fatwa and Research* suggests that a misogynistic hermeneutic lies at the base of Islamic rulings against female speech in the public arena:

> The promotion of [...] negativity against women has led many 'scholars' and 'imams' to make the unsubstantiated ruling about female speech. They claim that women should lower their voice to whispers or even silence, except when she speaks to her husband, her guardian, or other females. The female act of communication has become to some a source of temptation and allurement.[4]

Women's speech, in both the Christian and Islamic texts, is connected to an apparent ontological tendency to depravity and assumed as a source of religious corruption by interpretations of the Scriptures that have historically been in male hands. Furthermore, matters of women's participation and authority in these religious traditions are generally explored in terms of institutionalised hierarchies that license members to speak, such as the titles prophet, imam, minister or deacon. Other times women's roles are derived from

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[2] See Shlomo Biderman, *Scripture and Knowledge: An Essay on Religious Epistemology* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1995), p. 11, for an explication of the term 'scripture' as a term not particular to any one religious tradition, but as a *sui generis* term for a text representing revelation that has meaning for the life of humankind, and therefore serving an epistemological function.

[3] Asma Barlas describes the selectivity of androcentric interpretation as ironic when she purports that only six hadith out of 70,000 reliable hadith have a misogynistic import, but it is those six that are most often cited against sexual equality in Islamic interpretation, in *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 46. For a concise overview of the debate about the role of Christian women in relation to texts from 1 Timothy, see Richard Briggs, *Gender and the New Testament: Six Proposals for Interpretation* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001).

[4] Yusuf Qaradawi, 'The Voice of a Woman in Islam', *Discover Islam*, <http://www.beconvinced.com/en//article.php?articleid=0106&catid=10&subcatnane=Woman%20In%20Isla m> [accessed 13 February 2007] (para. 4 of 12). For an exposition of misogynistic notions in the New Testament citation, see Mieke Bal, 'Sexuality, Sin, and Sorrow: The Emergence of Female Character (A Reading of Genesis 1-3)', in *The Female Body in Western Culture. Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by S.R. Suleiman (London: Harvard University Press, 1985) hereafter referred to as *The Female Body*, pp. 317-338.

16

scriptural role models that are defined in terms of feminine ideals. Mostly the traditions conclude that the Word of God precludes the word of woman.

Muslim feminist activists such as Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud contend that women's silence is the epitome of a general disregard of women's experiences in Islamic interpretive history. They argue that this is as a result of the male-centred hermeneutics that authorise interpretations of the text rather than that misogyny is a natural effect of Scripture.[5] Silence in the public spheres of the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, therefore, describes the varying degrees to which the subjectivity of women has been constrained by traditional teachings of these faiths that read the Scriptures a-contextually. Women's voices are erased from sacred texts without registering the misogyny that formed the exegetical structures through centuries wherein women were culturally Othered. The question is raised to what degree these discourses of women's exclusion are constituted by Scripture itself: If Scripture represents prophetic discourse, that is, the mediation of Divine justice in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, how is it that the apparent misogynistic text has secured the adherence of women to this day? Is it valid to say that women should and have had no voice? And if women do have a voice, how is it authorised and where is it heard? In terms of the communal response to Divine revelation, the question is: How does the community deliberate justice? Do women voice common causes and if so, how? These questions shape the current thesis in exploring an Abrahamic interfeminist dialogue.

The thesis considers the female characters of the Qur'an in the exploration of voice to see if women's silence is prescribed by the sacred text or whether the sacred text in fact guides women's engagement with the Divine discourse. This is done in a dialogue with my own

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[5] Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 9.

Christian tradition and the reading of my own text, the Bible. Therefore the present introduction describes the debates that surround and shape interfeminist and interfaith dialogue in exploring ways of engaging with the world for common causes. It discusses the differences amongst feminists, such as religious and non-religious feminisms over and against Islamic feminisms. These discussions both describe and explore the terms of engagement in interfeminist debates about faith, such as women's subjectivity and concepts of freedom that are at the core of feminist understanding. The conclusion of this chapter sets out the structure of the present thesis.

1.1   Theology of Religions and Interfeminist Dialogue

Though women share the experiences of exclusion and silence across lines of faith, this common ground has, however, proved sterile in many cases of women's interaction. Postcolonial theorising in particular has foregrounded difference rather than equality as the central concept for exploration of cultural feminism. Such movements have problematised feminist discourse, not only in relation to men, but also amongst women themselves.[6] For instance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza finds that, far from promoting understanding of others, difference has produced "feminist exclusions and divisions".[7] These divisions are lamented and much of current feminist theory reiterates a need for consensus based on female experience. Rita M. Gross accedes that some of these divisions are due to a lack of diversity in religions within feminist dialogue and argues that there is a need for the development of conceptual tools to enhance mutual understanding and relationship within diversity. Furthermore, Gross argues, together with Ursula King, that feminism is the

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[6] Christina Hughes, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p. 62.
[7] Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, 'Thinking and Working Across Borders', *JFSR*, 18 (2002), 71-74 (p. 71).

missing dimension in the dialogue of religions that is wrestling with the challenge of religious pluralism.[8]

Gross suggests that inclusivity still lies at the heart of feminist theology and what is needed to promote that inclusivity is a widening of the canon available to feminist theology.[9] However, Gross stresses that this inclusivity is not to lead to relativism. Rather, she finds that the value of including a variety of religious traditions is in promoting ethical behaviour and providing the possibility of learning more about oneself when learning about another: "For theological reflection, feminist or otherwise, nothing is so useful as becoming a phenomenon to oneself because in that process, we see and understand ourselves much more clearly".[10] What Gross is arguing for is the broadening of the symbolic repertoire available to women. She concedes that these are to be sourced from established 'patriarchies' (as there is "little place else to go for alternatives with which to imagine religion anew"), but that "unfamiliar patriarchies" might yield some inspiration:

> The benefits of finding a really useful and interesting symbol, concept or practice are greater than the discomfort generated by encountering patriarchy in unfamiliar places.[11]

That Gross's suggestion has, in fact been taken up is evidenced in the recent proliferation of comparative feminist literature that point out female characters common to the Abrahamic traditions. For example, the latest work by Phyllis Trible is *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (2006). These comparisons make valuable contributions to the development of established knowledge across the faiths while pointing out possible areas of cooperation amongst feminists of the three monotheisms. Yet the question remains whether expanding the symbolic repertoire available to diverse

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[8] Rita M. Gross, 'Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions', *FT*, 26 (2001), 83-101 (p. 84).
[9] Gross, p. 87.
[10] Gross, p. 92.
[11] Gross, p. 93.

traditions truly reflects a holistic encounter with the religious Other – an encounter that is characterised by honest conversation that does not aim to submerge differences, but to develop new knowledge of Self and Other through an understanding of different viewpoints and methods. Such a relational pragmatic of dialogue requires that feminist enquiry does not stop at assessing the undervalued contribution of women, but asks *how* women's efforts may indeed be valorised, both within the religious systems from which women derive meaningful existence and possibly as a narrative wherein women outside of those systems may recognise themselves.

1.1.1 Difference as Resource for Interfeminist Dialogue

Christina Hughes presents feminist theorising about difference with a basic perspective, namely that we all are not equal *but* different, rather as co-religionists, we are equal *and* different.[12] Yet, Adriana Cavarero expands the notion of equality in difference as a critique of individualist theory, which dissolves, or "flattens out" the uniqueness of the individual, into the political principle of equality.[13] She finds that human community is a given and that the relationships that make up that community are intrinsic to existence. The following quote from Cavarero worth citing at length, not only sets out her critique of basic modern philosophy of individuality, but also explains her understanding of *relationship*, instead of 'the individual', as the basis of humanity:

> Within the individualist horizon, the other – different or equal is ... someone who is before us and with whom we must establish rules for living together. He or she never embodies the constitutive relationship of our insubstitutible identity. The other is rather someone who *is also there* and occupies, more or less peacefully, the same territory. In fact, according to the doctrine of natural law, in the classical formulation of individualism, *residing together* [*stare insieme*] – rendered possible

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[12] Hughes, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory*, p. 62.
[13] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000), p. ix.

and disciplined by politics – is the 'artificial' result of an agreement, not the founding condition of humans, in so far as they are constituted by a *being together* [*essere insieme*], which, within the plural space of appearance, shows their uniqueness and guarantees their reality. It is hardly necessary to refer to Hobbes, and to his famous theory of the war of all against all, in order to take note of the constitutive relation of the self *with* the other. *Ut singuli*, in Hobbes' radical formulation, but, nonetheless, separable – indeed, originally separated from one another – the individuals of the modern doctrine are sources of values and rights for themselves. Their greatest burden is that they must take account of others – they must negotiate rules, accept limits, make compromises.[14]

Cavarero therefore points out the exposure of the self to the other as constitutive of the self in some respects, which is the basic premise of one of the most influential feminist writers, Judith Butler. However, while Butler points out the disjunction between discourse and life (the difference between the terms we have been called and what we are), as possibilities for agency, Cavarero defines that exposure in terms of relationship, asserting that each of us desires our life-story to be told, and as such the self is narratable by another.[15] Cavarero's understanding of uniqueness qualifies the conceptions of 'self' and 'other' as radically different, so that it does not end up in the same categorisation of 'us' and 'them' of modern political doctrines: "Uniqueness is an absolute difference", so that the ontological status of the *who* (self or other) is totally external.[16]

Difference is therefore not something that needs to be purged in consensus making, rather consensus is constituted by difference in the collaboration of making meaning. The objective is the collaborative project and not explaining the differences amongst the collaborators. In this way, interfeminist dialogue may benefit from difference as a resource in exploring traditional understandings of scriptural authority. However, traditions are not naturally given to incorporating the views of others as authority in their own subjectivity,

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[14] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 88.
[15] See the comparison of Cavarero and Butler's work by Paul A. Kottman in the introduction to *Relating Narratives*, pp. xi-xxiii.
[16] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 89.

and particularities in the sacred text may undermine more general consensus. Certainly the distinct features of each religion – the Christocentrism of the Christian, the exclusivity of election for Judaism and the absolute monotheism of Islam – seem insurmountable preconditions for exploring commonality.[17] Yet our shared human situation requires a consideration of our common and broader humanity that goes beyond the differences of religion. Jacques Waardenburg argues that the global ecology demands a broader responsibility than for the sake of the own community; a responsibility that demands a commitment to norms such as dignity, justice, peace and respect. Yet at the base of these negotiations lie the acknowledgement that people of other religions "are not merely products of the religion but responsible agents".[18] The question is therefore: If the natural impulse of tradition is self-preservation that resists encounter with the Other, how is the myopia of one's own tradition to be avoided? Furthermore, in traditions that proclaim knowledge of the Sacred as revealed in historical space and time - as reflected in their respective scriptures - how are we to reach a place of understanding in light of the particularities of the once-revealed text? These questions require a close consideration of the mechanisms of dialogue, if the conversation is not to disintegrate into irreconcilable differences.

One of the philosophers of dialogue, Hans Georg Gadamer, points out a basic foundation of dialogue namely that the leading Platonic principle of conversation is *eumenes elenchoi* – 'the interlocutor could be right'.[19] This statement indicates that the Self must be available to the risk of being antagonised by the Other if it seeks to broaden its one-sided view to a true community of minds by including pluralism and destabilisation. On the other hand, it has

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[17] For a discussion of principle differences between the three religions, see Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), p. 43-44.
[18] Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others*, p. 51.
[19] *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*, ed. and trans. by Richard E. Palmer, (London: YUP, 2001), p. 11.

been suggested that any discourse, of necessity, degenerates into dialogue because the speaker has to prove contested points, apprise herself for her interlocutor's resistance, and thoroughly understand the interlocutor's objections.[20] It seems therefore that antagonism is to be expected and indeed forms an essential part of consensus making between dialogic partners who seek cooperative justice. Yet, antagonism is not devoid of mechanisms and it is those procedures of engagement that determine the constructive or destructive outcome of dialogic encounter. But how to structure dialogic encounter that accommodates partners with apparently irreconcilable worldviews?

1.1.2 Scriptural Reasoning

The approach of the present thesis is based on the principle of scriptural reasoning, which is an emerging practice among and between Christians, Jews and Muslims of reading their sacred Scriptures together and reasoning amongst each other on particular issues.[21] The concept of scriptural reasoning stems from the shared sense that all three Abrahamic religions claim revelation as the highest good and that this revelation is linked to canonised scripture for all three.[22] The practice was articulated and defined principally by Peter Ochs at the University of Virginia who, together with Daniel Hardy and David Ford, established the *Forum for Scriptural Reasoning*. Scriptural reasoning provides opportunity for debates of contemporary issues amongst members of the Abrahamic traditions but is grounded in the respective religious texts of the participants. It is not a reductionist exercise in contrast to older interfaith action that views different religions as distinct expressions of the same entity, or to smooth over differences for the sake of interaction. Rather, the participants are

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[20] CH. Perelman & L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969, repr. 2000), p. 35.
[21] For an overview of the aims and practices of Scriptural Reasoning, see the summary by Steven Kepnes, 'A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning', *JSRF*
<http//:etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/KepHand.html> [accessed 15 February 2007].
[22] Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others*, p. 44.

encouraged to be both self-critical and deeply rooted in their commitment to their own particular faith in search of a common language with which to understand and engage with difference. The assumption is that the reading of the Other's scripture may provide profound insight on the structure or content of the own tradition. The reading together of scriptures around either a shared literary character, such as Adam or Hagar, or another contemporary issue, results in the growth of friendships while preserving differences of scriptural and historical hermeneutics.[23] In this sense, scriptural reasoning has been described as a radical tradition that is 'postcritical' or 'post-liberal'. In terms of specific methodology then, scriptural reasoning presents a reading from scripture(s) that collects, summarises and organises the insights, rather than forming a systematic philosophy or theological treatise.

A parallel, but more particularly delimited movement, is the research project of the working group *Modernity and Islam* at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin that was initiated by Almut Bruckstein and Navid Kermani, currently directed by Bruckstein and Angelika Neuwirth. This project considers Islamic and Jewish hermeneutics that are critical of the appropriation of religious sources by movements who seek political gain in these two traditions. The group brings together thinkers who are not simply reinterpreting religious sources to correspond to the needs and exigencies of current issues, but, in the manner of the literary cultures of the Middle Ages and late antiquity, cross the boundaries of their own literary traditions in critiquing the culture of their day:

> Thus, the work on traditional religious texts loses its apologetic
> impetus and distinguishes itself equally from fundamentalist and from

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[23] For an exposition of the Qur'an as biblically related literature, see John C. Reeves, 'The Flowing Stream: Qur'anic Interpretations and the Bible', *SBLF* <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=58> [accessed 13 January 2004]. Also D. J. Halperin, 'The Hidden made Manifest: Muslim Traditions and the "Latent Content" of Biblical and Rabbinic Stories', in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells. Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. by D.P. Wright, D.N. Freedman, and A. Hurvitz, (Indiana: Eisenbraums, 1995), pp. 581-594.

> earlier reformist thought: the aim is no longer to legitimate the texts in relation to the extra-textual demands of the hour, but to bring their intellectual, philosophical, and aesthetic richness into play, providing the general public with new access to the literary sources and with new ways of reading the tradition.[24]

The work of the Berlin project therefore may be seen to resort under the approaches and criteria of scriptural reasoning with the provision that the product of reasoning from the religious text of each tradition is prioritised over, albeit in the light of, the pressures of socio-historical issues.

These interpretive programs are especially valid for interfaith feminist discourse that seems to have ground to a stalemate in the light of clarifying epistemologies of feminism between Islamic, Christian, Jewish and secular feminists. The present thesis' reading of the Qur`an's female characters in search of the presence of female voice therefore aims to release the power inherent in the text. The feminist exploration of a female voice in the Qur`an presented here does not aim to comment on current socio-political issues, but seeks the terms of relationship firstly, between the female voice and other scriptural features, and secondly, between the variant Scriptures as literatures of faith. This may find correspondence with non-Western feminism's critique of the inherent colonial and Eurocentric logic of Western philosophical traditions, though the aim is not to present a critique of these traditions but to show how the boundaries between literatures, and therefore between people as subjects of those literatures, are blurred.

1.1.3 Scholarship on Women in Islamic Scripture

Typical Muslim interpretation of women in the sacred texts of Islam manifest in the description of female role models that represent qualities to imitate or to avoid. The

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[24] 'Islamic and Jewish Hermeneutics as Cultural Criticism', Plan of the working group *Modernity and Islam*, <http://www.wiko-berlin.de> [Accessed 27 May 2005] (para. 7 of 13).

Qur'anic female figures are most often constituted as 'lessons of warning or guidance' in Muslim teaching on social relationships that do not only derive from the text of the Qur'an, but are extracted and constructed from the traditional materials of Hadith (transmitted traditions) and *tafsīr* (scholarly interpretation). Drawing from the work of such Muslim women as Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1987), these role models have been read in the light of feminist criticisms, deconstructing the discourses and power relations that have shaped the memory of the female characters from the religious texts of Islam. Mernissi's work constitutes a double-edged project, namely to critically reassess misogynist and falsified hadiths, while at the same time recovering paradoxical elements within those selfsame hadiths that reprove the misogynist traditions. Following from Mernissi's and others' deconstructive work, Barbara Freyer Stowasser's book *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (1994) discusses female characters, or groups of female characters, that feature in the Qur'an and are presented as role models in traditional exegesis. These women are mostly known in terms of their deployment as role models in discourses of Muslim piety and Stowasser demonstrates how the female characters are traditionally constructed through, for instance, their traditionally named persona. Stowasser's investigation features Qur'anically unnamed characters such as 'Eve', 'Zulaykha', and 'Bilqis' - the Queen of Sheba, while she refers to others by their Qur'anic epithet, for example 'the women of Noah, Lot, and Abraham', or 'women in the life of Moses', and the 'mothers of the believers'.

One character that receives continual attention is A'isha, the favourite wife of Muhammad and authority on the transmission of Hadith. Although A'isha is not named as a character in the Qur'an, she resides under the category of 'mothers of the believers' as a member of the Prophet's household. In the same year as Stowasser's seminal work that pointed to the

variant images of women in Islamic scripture and Islamic tradition, Denise A. Spellberg presented a comprehensive reading of the way A'isha's legacy developed as historical persona within discourses of power and sectarianism, such as the distinction between Sunni and Shi'ah.[25] Spellberg pointed out how the female character of A'isha was central to the exposition of and contrasting between the worldviews of Sunnis and Shi'ahs.

These feminist deconstructions of historical Islamic texts were supplemented by feminist readings of the Qur`an. For example, Amina Wadud paid particular attention to the text of the Qur`an in terms of a feminist hermeneutics, that is, woman as a category of thought and not "just a subject for discourse".[26] Wadud states that women have been excluded from the paradigmatic discourses of meaning in Islam, and have been a subject with no agency. Wadud's book claims to validate the female voice in the Qur`an, which, as a program of Qur`anic exegesis, her work certainly does.[27] Yet her discussion explores traditional discourses of ontology and status connected to the Creation accounts and social injunctions in the Qur`an, never developing the notion of the female voice as a presence in the Qur`an. Wadud does, however, produce an extended list of female characters that point out figures not included in Stowasser's work. (The comparison between these two works is in their selection of characters and not in the nature of their work; Stowasser's book is unsurpassed in breadth and depth of research into original materials).

Asma Barlas consolidates the works of Mernissi, Stowasser, Spellberg, Wadud and others, articulating a feminist hermeneutic for an egalitarian reading of the Qur`an. Her feminist hermeneutic is premised on criticism of patriarchy as a culture and discourse that excludes female authority. Barlas demonstrates that oppressive readings are a product of existing

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[25] Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of `A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
[26] Amina Wadud, *Qur`an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, (OUP, 1999), p. xi.
[27] See back cover to *Qur`an and Woman*.

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religious and social structures, and that the Qur'an can be read to affirm egalitarian visions of gender with which to theorise sexual equality from within the Qur'an's own teachings. Barlas allusively comments on women's voice in the text, through citing Wadud's remarks on voice and other historical studies that describe women's participation in the creation of religious knowledge.[28] However, her conception of a female voice in the text does not go beyond a discussion of the conservatism of formal scholarly procedures in *tafsīr*, such as *ijmā* (consensus) and *ijtihād* (critical reasoning), from which women are excluded.[29] Nevertheless, Barlas makes a significant observation that Islamic epistemology and methodology are based on a view of prophetic praxis, or Sunnah, as revelation, instead of the Qur'an as revelation.[30] As Barlas explains, Islamic tradition locates hermeneutic meaning less in discourses examining the authorial intent of the Qur'an, than in communal interpretive practices that gave the Sunnah its content in the first place. However, those interpretive practices are read through the lens of later classical Islamic scholarship that shaped the memory of women in Islamic historiography while excluding them from the interpretive enterprise. The work of Barlas following Wadud therefore makes clear that it is crucial to distinguish between exclusively Qur'anic content and traditional content when considering the images and characterisation of Qur'anic women. However, presenting an exclusively Qur'anic reading is not without its own complications.

Angelika Neuwirth, who is not a feminist scholar, but is a woman who reads the Qur'an from a literary-critical point of view, has pointed out a hermeneutic peculiarity of the Qur'an: That the form of the Qur'an gives as much clue to its meaning as to the authorial

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[28] *"Believing Women"*, p. 9.
[29] *"Believing Women"*, p. 88.
[30] *"Believing Women"*, p. 88.

intention of its function.[31] Neuwirth's lasting contribution to Qur'anic studies is in recognising the various literary schemes and semantic content in the Qur'an as elements of a recitation text (*Recitationstext*). The recited text constitutes Divine pronouncement mediated in the genre 'surah' or revelatory unit, that is the constituent of both content and origin of the Qur'an.[32] Neuwirth points out that the literary features of the Qur'an present the Qur'an's internal awareness of its canonization as a result of an extended process of communal interaction. The way the Qur'an does this is mainly in terms of a two-fold self-referential terminology: The revelatory surahs initially refer to themselves as *qur'ān* (recital/pronouncement) and eventually as *kitāb* (book).[33] Neuwirth argues that the initial '*qur'ān*-phase' denotes a horizontal communication dynamic between audience and mediator, whereas the '*kitāb*-phase' emphasises a vertical relationship between transcendent text and the reader/worshipper. Although Neuwirth never relates her form-critical reasoning to the aspect of gender either in the Qur'an or as part of its formative community, her pre-canonical approach to the Qur'an, in combination with feminist exegesis of the Qur'an as egalitarian text, facilitate an enquiry into the interactive processes that shaped the Qur'an and the role of gender in that interaction. Neuwirth's work raises the questions firstly, how the communication models in the text are constitutive of prophetic interaction and, secondly, how gender is embodied within these communication models.

1.2   Female Subjectivity in Qur'anic Composition

The present thesis researches women's voices in the sacred text as formative of the female subject in Islamic religious texts, focussing primarily on the Qur'an. In essence, the thesis

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[31] Angelika Neuwirth, 'Negotiating Justice: A Pre-Canonical Reading of the Qur'anic Creation Accounts (Part 1)', *JQS* 2 (2000), 25-41 (p. 26).
[32] Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1981), p. 1.
[33] Neuwirth, 'Negotiating Justice', p. 26.

explores the validity of Islamic instructions to women to be silent in the realm of the Divine and by inference, in the presence of males. It does so by asking whether women speak in the Qur`an and if so, how do they speak. Although the enquiry may be seen to lie simply in the two aspects of agency and embodiment, the response requires a threefold analysis: Firstly, that of feminist theory, which derives from the analytical category of gender. Secondly, that of Islamic discourse which postulates its own anthropological subjectivity in terms of submission (*islām*) and unity of the community (Ummah) and thirdly, in terms of an exclusively Qur`anic presentation of female subjectivity. The thesis assumes that the production of the embodied gendered voice in the Qur`an reflects literary design that both illustrates and comments on female subjectivity and women's authority in voicing Divine mediation. This means that the texts' structuring of the female voice as participant in mechanisms that make it known is indicative that the embodied female voice should be included as authority of the text. It is this relation, or not, between Qur`anic female subjectivity and Islamic practices of women's subjectivity that presents the Abrahamic feminists with a shared deliberation of whether practices of silence are scriptural or not. The exclusion of women from the 'shared spaces of appearance' may then be assessed within each of the traditions in terms of their divergence from, or convergence with, scriptural description of women's role.[34]

As the Preface has pointed out, reading the Islamic text to yield an understanding of Abrahamic revelation as the basis for a feminist theological dialogue necessitates the consideration of differences among feminists firstly, in terms of general feminist theorising and secondly, in terms of categorical disagreements between Islamic feminist activists. Islamic feminism is furthermore part of poststructuralist feminist discourse, which has

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[34] The phrase 'shared space of appearance' is borrowed from Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 25

questioned the assumptions of the unified, essential female subject as well as the activity of resistance as a primary indicator of women's agency. The following section therefore explicates critiques of, and suggestions for, gendered subjectivity in feminist theory in general and in Islamic contexts in particular. These discourses re-interpret resistance in terms of the production of the gendered voice in Islamic religious text, positing questions about the sources of authority for women's subjectivity.

1.2.1   Female Subjectivity: The Rational Gendered Subject

The humanist notion of agency that is expressed in terms of freedom and rational choice has been problematised in poststructuralist theory.[35] Feminist theorists, initially from disparate backgrounds such as Africana Womanism, Latino and Continental Feminism, (sometimes referred to as Second or Third Wave feminists), critiqued notions of female subjectivity as defined by humanist libertarian ideals that located female expression in autonomy and non-compliance with, or resistance to, systems that do not promote female subjectivity.[36] These critiques question the presuppositional terms of feminist theory, finding the early suffragist feminist phraseology of 'sisterhood' and 'victimisation' as likewise simplistic or unhelpful and instead have focussed on descriptions of the socially constructed Self and the processes that impact on that Self. In terms of the wider feminist poststructuralist discourse, differences between feminists are addressed as component parts of a project that is still unified by the pragmatic goal to improve women's lives, even if these improvements include contradictory modes of expression. For instance, Zillah Eisenstein argues for a polyversal, as opposed to 'universal', feminism, which encourages a

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[35] For an overview of literature on the humanist subject in poststructuralism, see Bronwyn Davies and others, 'The Humanist Subject in Feminism', *Feminism and Psychology*, 16 (2006), 87-103.

[36] Ellen T. Armour posits that there is an essential liberal humanist subject at work in "whitefeminist texts", which closes them off to women's diversity, in *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide*, Series: Religion and Postmodernism, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 102.

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radical pluralism rather than a liberal pluralism.[37] I understand Eisenstein's proposal of a radical pluralism as an exchange of ideas between a diversity of secure, albeit fluid, identities that endeavours to provide a space for all possibilities of expression, instead of a feminist proposition to secure adherence to a unilaterally defined libertarian ideal. Eisenstein therefore envisions a feminist activism in terms of women's potential humanity: "When women are subordinated and not allowed the lives they wish to live, they respond with resistance. The plural acts of resistance are neither western [n]or non-western. They are what women do to survive and thrive in polyversal fashion".[38] Eisenstein makes clear that the problem of subject-formation - understanding the self in relation to others - is a central issue in feminism, while asserting that interfeminist conversation should continue across boundaries of difference. However, it is the nature of conversation and relation to others that prove difficult when seeking to put the ideals of engagement into practice.

The most prominent articulation of the formation of the poststructuralist female subject has been the work of Judith Butler who posited in her first major work *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender is a performance ritualised through constant repetition (iterability). The performance is based on the exclusion or repudiation of an outside, or relationship with a necessary other, through which the subject emerges. This work was itself occasionally criticised for giving too much autonomy to the subject. For example, Terry Lovell reviews Butler's politics of the performative finding the individualism of the concept limited in relation to particular moments of transformation.[39] Lovell suggests that a focus on the social relations and specific historical conditions of particular social transformations should

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[37] Zillah Eisenstein, 'What's in A Name? Seeing Feminism, Universalism, and Modernity', excerpted from *Against Empire, Feminisms, Racism and Fictions of "The West"* (Zed Press, 2004) in *wag.a.du: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 1 (2004) <http://web.cortland.edu/wagadu/issue1/universe.html> [Accessed 22 April 2005], p. 18.
[38] Eisenstein, p. 3.
[39] Terry Lovell, 'Resisting with Authority: Historical Specificity, Agency and the Performative Self', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20 (2003), 1-17 (p. 1).

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be incorporated into Butler's exposition of performativity as effective agency to avoid the slippage of 'self' into 'the individual human agent'. Lovell's suggestion leads to the recognition that agency is a function of ensemble performances "often with a very large cast of others".[40] Lovell's point is illustrated by some aspects of Muslim women's behaviour that pose difficulties for feminist analysis, such as their active support for socio-religious movements that seemingly inscribe and enforce their subordination. This paradox is visually evident in the practices of veiling where the political context as much determines the intent as does the religious context, giving credence to an observation about transformative action by Terry Lovell that "pure acts of resistance are as rare as unequivocal acts of submission".[41] Butler therefore recently followed up her thesis of gendered performance with *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), wherein she refines the formation of the subject as a relation to the social community and others beyond the control of the subject. Butler's work has been taken up by political feminist theory as will be seen in Saba Mahmood's interpretation of a Muslim female subjectivity below.

1.2.2 Islamic Female Subjectivity

Saba Mahmood is from a progressive leftist background and she interprets these paradoxes of Muslim women's behaviour as an Islamic critique of the liberal humanist subject.[42] She argues for a rethinking of secular-liberal principles of analysis when trying to locate agency and resistance. Mahmood poses the question whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts outside of the ethical and political context within which those selfsame acts acquire their significance (p. 9). Her proposition of ethical context as prime

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[40] Lovell, p. 2.
[41] Lovell, p. 12.
[42] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 5. Further references to this book are in parentheses after citations in the text of this section.

consideration of actions coincides with Scriptural Reasoning's rootedness in religious texts as well as coinciding with other Islamic anthropological theorists who point to the centrality of the doctrine of stewardship (*khilāfa*) in the formation of Islamic subjectivity. Two authors who argue for *khilāfa* as anthropological principle are Meryl Wyn-Davies and Sachiko Murata. Both authors posit that *khilāfa* endows Muslim humanity with divinely ordained agency in the structuring of individual and communal purposes. Meryl Wyn-Davies sees *khilāfa* as an anthropological category of analysis for both female and male behaviour that replaces Western models of anthropology in Muslim societies.[43] Sachiko Murata points out the metaphysical relationships embedded in the term *khilāfa* as constitutive of the relational aspect of both humans with each other as female and male, and humans and the Divine as the ultimate Self and Other.[44] These (female) authors raise the question whether actions can even begin to be described or defined from outside an in-depth and participative understanding of the traditions that inform those actions.

1.2.3 Qur`anic Female Subjectivity

Mahmood supports the poststructuralist feminist critique of secular-liberal analytical categories such as 'freedom' and 'individual autonomy'. She argues that female desire and ethical practice should rather be considered as parts of specific discursive traditions for which she likewise draws on the work of Judith Butler (pp. 15-17). Mahmood finds Butler's main contribution to feminist theory to be her identification of the discourse on gender that both refers to and constitutes the gendered body. Butler focuses on the analysis

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[43] Meryl Wyn-Davies, *Knowing One Another: Shaping an Islamic Anthropology* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1988), p. 88.

[44] Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 15. Other discussions expounding Islamic texts as conceptual framework for identity formation include *Social and Natural Sciences: The Islamic Perspective*, ed. by R.I. Al-Faruqi & A.O. Nasseef (Jeddah: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981); and John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (CUP, 1970), p. 99. For a comparative analysis of assumptions that inform Christian and Islamic worldviews in dialogue, see Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), p. 230.

of language as a system of signification "through which subjects are produced and interpolated", and through which the subject is realised and enacts her agency understood as 'performativity' (pp. 18-19). Most importantly, Butler's description of performativity includes agency within the structures of power although she points out that "the reiterative structure of norms serves not only to *consolidate* a particular regime of discourse/power but also provides the means for its *destabilisation*" (p. 20). For Mahmood, Butler focuses on effective agency meaning that her understanding of performances append agency to actions that have no prior authorisation in social norms, but transform society with authority nevertheless.[45] The actions of women must therefore be viewed within an understanding of the relationships between words, concepts and practices of a discursive tradition. These terms not only describe and elaborate each other but are also highlighted in contrast within one text, as it were forming a grammar of concepts.

Butler's 'effective agency' means for a scripturally reasoned interfeminist dialogue, that the actions and words, if any, of women in the Qur'an are to be related firstly in terms of the language and concepts of the Qur'an, then to traditions that shape the discursive traditions of Islam, and then to a comparison with texts from other traditions. Mahmood therefore expands Butler's suggestion of the role of norms in the formation of subjectivity, not only as an imposition on the subject but also as constitutive of the internalised value of the self in its daily performance (p. 23). In Muslim societies, Islamic scripture in its broadest sense is assumed as epistemology and social authority for Muslim women's behaviour. Based primarily on the Qur'an and Sunnah - the model behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad - Islam operates legal codes that are derived from interpretation of the behaviour of Qur'anic characters and the first Islamic community as models for emulation in the here and now. In

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[45] For an overview of Butler's understanding of the possibility of transgression as implicit in speech acts exemplified by the case of Rosa Parks in the American Civil Rights Campaign, see Lovell, p. 4.

this way, Islam is a tradition of discipline that instructs its members through a discourse of embodied practices visibly illustrated in such practices as the prayer positions of *salāt*, or clothing for the comportment of *ihrām* (state of purity during the period of pilgrimage). In the same way, Muslim women's activities are inspired by and negotiated through exemplary models enshrined in female figures of the Qur`an and Sunnah. In these texts women, such as the wives of Muhammad, or 'Mothers of the Believers' as they are called in the Qur`an, bridge the divide between Divine principle and pragmatic effect:

> [J]ust as God's last prophet Muhammad begins a new chapter of sacred history so do his consorts signify a new beginning of the female example in Islam. As historical figures whose lives yield examples for the righteous, their Islamic importance eclipses that of even the most unblemished of women of the Qur`an-recorded past, and it was their precedent that served as a foundation of later *shari'a* legal structures".[46]

The textual female figures are therefore not merely figurative examples, but are paradigmatic for Muslim women and the normative aspects of women's practices are reasoned primarily from the scriptures of Islam, albeit with differing emphasis among liberal and conservative, or other divisional Muslim interpretations. For instance, Mahmood's ethnographic account of female communities in Egyptian Muslim society points out the differing interpretations within a single community of the Islamic virtue of female modesty as, on the one hand, requiring its expression as embodied behaviour (wearing a veil) and on the other hand, as an equal aspect of character that does not require a specific external expression (pp. 23-24).

1.2.4 Scriptural Speech Acts and Female Subjectivity

In the light of feminist critique of ethnological method demonstrated by Mahmood, this thesis argues that Qur`anic understanding is foregrounded for any Muslim action, and that

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[46] Stowasser, *Women in the Qur`an*, pp. 85-86.

the understanding of gender in the Qur'an is therefore of vital importance to a feminist exploration of women's Islamic subjectivity. The argument is that it is these texts that form decisions by and for women in reality and given the polemical situation between Islamic and Western models of emancipation, it is pertinent to consider gender dynamics within the Qur'an as particularly important.[47] The central point raised by Muslim critique of feminist theory that is relevant to this thesis, is that the humanist subject in feminist thought is an exhausted narrative mould that is unable "to envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a [unilaterally defined] progressive imaginary" (p. 155). Mahmood shows how women resist oppression and thrive individually as Islamic subjects, embedding themselves even deeper within the norms of their discursive tradition through education and becoming fully conversant in the texts that seemingly inscribe their oppression. Mahmood therefore echoes Cavarero in arguing for different imaginaries of personal and collective subjectivity that presuppose different relations to forms of social authority (whether enshrined in scripture, national citizenship, or exemplary models), as opposed to normative liberal conceptions of politics through the humanist ethics in its Kantian formulation (pp. 119-122). Mahmood articulates a methodology that is particularly useful to Scriptural Reasoning, namely that she does not propose a theory of agency with which to analyse women's actions but to view their actions within a "grammar of concepts" in which particular affect, meaning and form resides.[48] The female role models from the Qur'an may therefore be understood as paradigmatic for Muslim women within the grammar of concepts that inform Islamic discourse on gender in interpretive traditions and the Qur'an

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[47] Michael Sells terms the gender polemic as one between "Islamic and anti-Islamic militants" that is based on gender stereotypes, in 'A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Suras of the Qur'ān: Spirit, Gender and Aural Intertextuality', in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning*, ed. by Issa J. Boullata (Surrey, Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 3-25 (p. 13).
[48] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 188.

respectively, while comparison to female characters of other religious texts needs to be understood within the grammar of concepts particular to the texts of that tradition.

1.2.5 Women and Revelation

The traditional material of the Hadith contain a genre of reports referred to as the 'occasions of revelation', or *asbāb al-nuzūl*. These reports are the primary interpretive material of the Qur'an in that they explain the circumstances of Qur'anic revelation. The *asbāb al-nuzūl* describe the scenes and identify characters that are referenced in the Qur'anic text. These reports often speak of female characters that approach the Prophet with questions or deliberation that leads to a revelation. One such report seen by feminists as a proof-text for a feminist hermeneutic of the Qur'an is a hadith that may be called 'Umm Salama's question'.[49] Umm Salama was a wife in the Prophet's household (*ahl al-bayt*) who confronted him about the Divine revelations only addressing men, asking: "Why are men mentioned in the Qur'an and we are not?" The *asbāb al-nuzūl* explains that the Prophet received revelations subsequently addressing both men and women, and the hadith is also the traditional account for Q 33.35, on which exegetic comment relies:

> For Muslim men and women; for believing men and women; for devout men and women, for true men and women; for men and women who are patient and constant; for men and women who humble themselves; for men and women who give in charity; for men and women who fast; for men and women who guard their chastity; and for men and women who engage much in God's praise – for them has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward.

Asma Barlas finds this text as evidence of a proto-feminist consciousness in the foundational history of Islam, and indeed that women are explicit subjects of Divine discourse, saying that "long before we came to study the relationship between language and

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[49] For a description of this hadith, see Fatima Memissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland, (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 118.

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forms of human subjectivity, some pre-modern, illiterate Muslim women were thinking critically about the role of language in shaping their sense of self".[50]

In addition to such egalitarian practices in the traditional accounts, are female characters of prominence such as A'isha, the favourite wife of Muhammad. A'isha's main legacy in Islamic (mainly Sunni) history is that she is one of the most trusted transmitters of Hadith; chains of transmission (*isnād*) often lead back to A'isha as source. Part of her uniqueness in relation to other women is her repeated involvement in revelatory episodes: Spellberg argues that A'isha's legacy has the effect of affirming the faith of the community, while at the same time enhancing her status through her witness of the angel Gabriel and thus her proximity to the Divine.[51] Yet, while traditionalist scholarship acknowledges and cites her as an authority of Islamic knowledge, their estimation of her as shaper of Islamic history never goes beyond viewing her as mouthpiece of the orations of men. A'isha's presence, however, creates a permanent tension for later interpreters of early Islamic history. This tension is not only in terms of the public role A'isha fulfilled in the foundation of Islamic history, but as presence in the most sacred of moments of communication between her husband and the Divine.

Studies of A'isha and other women of the early Islamic community point out an inclusive and unitary understanding of the revelatory process that situates female protagonists not only as deliberators of social justice for the fledgling community, but also as originators of theological or ethical questions that receive Divine comment. Women may therefore be said to shape Qur'anic revelation in the Hadith. For instance, Sa'diyya Shaikh presents a reading of female characterisation in Hadith that denies the hierarchical constructions of gender in Islam and indeed leads her to posit an alternative and liberating anthropology

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[50] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 20.
[51] Spellberg, *Politics and Gender*, p. 47.

within Islam.[52] Shaikh explores the exclusion of women from the productions of knowledge in Islam, again pointing out the traditional association between the female and bodily decadence, immorality and disruption which makes the exclusion of women a given.[53] Shaikh deconstructs the misogynistic Hadith through alternative readings and juxtaposition of different traditional versions of the same narrative. For instance, Shaikh relates a hadith about the inquisitive nature of A'isha who would "ask again until she understood completely", and who had no hesitation in interrogating the highest authority of the Qur'an, namely the Prophet. She furthermore points out that A'isha's knowledge of the Qur'an informs her questions and reads these interactions within the wider narrative of A'isha's life with Muhammad. Shaikh concludes that the Hadith reflects a counter-literature of women, pointing out the proximity of A'isha to revelatory events and the interrogation of knowledge as a subversive discourse that constitutes a feminist hermeneutics in the founding texts of Islam.[54] Ashley M. Walker and Michael Sells develop A'isha as protagonist of knowledge and revelation more comprehensively in their exposition of the Hadith of the Slander (discussed more fully below) in terms of the story of Joseph in the Qur'an, although they do not present it as a feminist reading. Their reading likewise points to A'isha's Qur'anic knowledge in presenting her defence as portrayed in the Hadith and conclude that there are indeed intertextual references between A'isha's 'defence statement' and Joseph's proclamation of innocence in Q 12.

The two readings by Shaikh and Walker et al of A'isha as producer of Islamic knowledge together with the narrative of Umm Salama's question about the status of women as addressees of the revelatory text, show women as 'instigators' of revelation, not only in

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[52] Sa'diyya Shaikh, 'Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadīth: A Feminist Interpretation', *ICMR*, 15 (2004), 99-108 (p. 106).
[53] Shaikh, p. 101.
[54] Shaikh, p. 107.

exceptional circumstances, but indeed as a method of Hadith narration. The Hadith therefore presents women as eschatological agents of meaning in the narrative of revelation that shapes the Divine/prophetic communication in the Qur'an. However, their participation has never been identified as producers of *qur'ān*, but only as producers of *hadīth*. This thesis therefore aims to identify women's voices in the Qur'an as embodied speech acts that subvert the institutional norm of silencing women. The subversion by these female voices is located firstly, in their authority as gendered protagonists in the sacred text. Secondly, the subversion is located in their performance as interlocutors that oppose or interrupt the (male) Divine designate in deliberative justice. These acts not only serve to destabilise the normative but envision new thinking about revelation as encounter between the Self and Other. In other words, female speaking activity in Divine discourse comments on the traditional Islamic narrative of prophethood that views the Qur'an as a Divine monologue, and instead presents revelation (as mode of prophetic discourse) partly as being shaped by human/female interlocution.

The institutionalised silence of women may therefore be considered in terms of the traditional female role models to locate the female voice in religious texts. The female voice in the Qur'an as formative of female subjectivity primarily shifts the focus from particular persona, as well as the symbolic articulation of the feminine sedimented in tradition through such figures as Sara, Hagar and Mary to those registers of corporeality that often escape the logic of representation. Exploring women's voice may also open up different modalities of agency that consider protagonists around the mediator of Divine knowledge with whom he interacts and on whose behalf he mediates revelation to be co-producers of Divine knowledge.

1.2.6   Rationale and Methodology of Thesis

Comparative studies have recently shifted their focus from pointing out contrasts between the content of the Bible and the Qur`an and rather emphasise the process of revelation, in addition to the content of revelation, as a fruitful area for understanding similarities, 'disproportions' and 'unique categories' in each tradition.[55] This thesis argues, in light of the description of women as originators of revealed knowledge, for a revisiting of the mechanisms of revelatory encounter that arise from interlocution, designated by such terms as 'dispute', 'disagreement', 'argument', 'questioning' and so forth. These seemingly oppositional terms are not to place differences such as female and male in opposing categories, but to point out differing relationships with the Divine that bring a variety of human qualities into existence.[56] While institutional normativity discourages speaking for females, the thesis asks in Sachiko Murata's words how humans are "the mediating reality in existence, the place where God interacts with the cosmos in a direct manner" and more specifically, how does gender feature in that process?[57]

The present thesis therefore offers a reading of a Qur`anic instance of gendered locution in terms of the Qur`an's grammar of concepts wherein the action of interlocution/argument is structurally significant as a mechanism of revelation. The focus is specifically on the role of the gendered voice in a traditional Islamic understanding of the text as revealed on historical occasions during the career of the prophet Muhammad and more specifically as represented in Q 58, the surah of *al-mujādilah*, revelatory chapter of 'the woman who disputes'. The narrative background of the surah is structured as a moment of disagreement,

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[55] Bernard S. Jackson, 'Comparing Jewish and Islamic Law', *JSS*, XLVIII/1 (2003), 109-121, pp. 110 and 117. See also Basit Bilal Koshul, 'The Semiotics of Ayah: A Comparative Introduction', *JSR Forum* http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/KosSemi.html [accessed 13 March 2006].
[56] Murata explains the Islamic worldview as consisting of dualisms that are polar aspects of singular entities, similar to the idea of Yin and Yang in the Chinese Tao. She argues that the aspects are defined by relationship rather than contrasting dualism, in *The Tao of Islam*, p. 74.
[57] Murata, p. 15.

or argument, between a woman and Muhammad that leads to revelation. This thesis aims to show how interlocution displays a partnership in producing new knowledge, not only between the Self and the Other as human agents, but a partnership that is inscribed in the Scriptures as a mechanism for engaging with the Ultimate Other – the Divine.

However, in light of the critique of feminist readings of the subjectivity of women in Islamic traditions, the reading of gender in the Qur'an in this thesis is not to measure to what degree the textual reference presents or contrasts to humanist libertarian ideals that advocate rational choice of the individual. Rather, the reading explores to what extent the functionary role of the female character meets the criteria for effective feminist agency, that is the *doing* of feminism "in such a way that it challenges and changes hegemonic institutional practices", as presented in the text.[58] Such a feminist agency does not derive from political motives of power, but reflects a purposeful choice for ethical care and justice as objective of the Divine text. The thesis therefore focuses on scriptural processes that lead to Divine disclosure, that is, how the text portrays its own genesis, and the role of gender and speaking in the processes that formed the text.[59] The feminist hermeneutic in this reading of the Qur'an draws from the Qur'an's language of Sign (*ayāt*) similar to that of other feminist readings, for example Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas. This thesis attempts an exclusively Qur'anic reading by distinguishing between elements from the Qur'an and extra-Qur'anic elements from the Hadith. Therefore the present thesis explores *ayāt* as structural theme of the Qur'an in order to distinguish a closer thematic categorisation of Sign with which to explore gender as element of the Qur'an's anthropology. The present thesis therefore develops a categorisation of types of Sign in the Qur'an in relation to the index of surah-titles that enables a more precise reference to signs in the Qur'an than the

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[58] Christina Hughes, *Key Concepts*, p. 123.
[59] As an aside it may be pointed out that, although the thesis is from a feminist perspective, it does not preclude these categories of agency for males.

43

general typology of Sign described in Qur'anic studies thus far. The taxonomy of Sign developed in this way contains aspects of gender that are not reliant on historical descriptions of female characters in the Qur'an.

The present thesis is a collation of the explicit narrative of prophethood as presented in Hadith with the implied narrative of revelation presented in the Qur'an. However, the interfeminist and interreligious, character of this thesis then revisits the Scriptures of my own tradition to read gendered participation in biblical revelation in the light of the Qur'anic model in the seminal moments of revelation for Judaism at Sinai (Numbers 27.1-11) and in the Gospels during the mission of Jesus (Mark 7.24-30). In this way, the thesis hopes to present an Abrahamic reading of a gendered action of speaking as part of Divine revelation in a scripturally reasoned manner.

1.3   Structure of Thesis

After this introduction, Chapter Two presents an overview of scholarship on female characters in the Qur'an, setting out how these characters have been comprehended traditionally and how feminist scholarship has deconstructed traditional views of, and commentary on, women. The chapter analyses the legacy of three Qur'anic women, namely Eve, Khadijah, and A'isha in terms of the religio-political dialectic that shaped their memory in Islamic traditions. This dialectic has been identified through feminist deconstruction of each woman's characterisation in Islamic tradition compared to her Qur'anic citation. Eve's character (or Hawwa as she is known in Islamic tradition) is explained in terms of her intertextual significance for all three Abrahamic faiths as first female of Creation. The exposition of Eve's character draws on the work of Kvam, Schearing and Ziegler in *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on*

Genesis and Gender (1999), to present a comparative consideration of the ontological female character of Creation that makes clear the commonality of male-centred interpretive processes.[60] The second female character is Khadijah, the first wife of Muhammad, who is described as the first Muslim convert and has therefore often been emblematic of the founding history of Islam in contrast to pre-Islamic pagan society. Khadijah's character is therefore measured for the degree to which she plays a part in constructing the idea of Jāhiliyya in Islamic tradition. The third female character, A'isha, represents a prominent Muslim woman from the centre of Islamic authority, yet she is also an icon of the major division in Islam between Sunni and Shi'ah. Denise Spellberg's book *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (1994) points out the socio-political aspects of subject-formation through the characterisation of A'isha in the diverging Islamic traditions of Sunnism and Shi'ism.

The interpretation and understanding of these three women show how external processes described these female characters as role models for women in developing the Islamic female ideal, most often based on feminine biology. The ideal of biological femininity overrides all other aspects of agency in traditional discussion, as can be seen in Ibn Hazm's eleventh-century consideration of the prophethood of women. On the other hand, such ideas are still predominant in traditional views of women as seen in the consideration of Shi'ah conceptions of Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad. In contrast, the synopsis of women's lives in Islamic tradition compared to their Qur`anic citation, together with the traditional descriptions of women presented in Chapter Two, raises the question how women are conceptualised not only as subjects *in* the text, but as subjects *of* the text, that is, as addressees of the Qur`an. The chapter then compares the female characters presented in the

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[60] *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, ed. by K. E. Kvam, L.S. Schearing, & V.H. Ziegler (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

two main authorities on women in the Qur'an, namely Barbara Freyer Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (1994) and Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1992, repr. 1999). The comparison finds that Stowasser presents an in-depth analysis of female figures in the Qur'an though identifies fewer characters than Wadud, while Wadud presents a more complete listing, yet less thorough explication of female characters in the Qur'an.

Following from the synopsis of the Islamic female ideal, Chapter Three considers feminist hermeneutics as articulated by Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, as corrective to the traditional Islamic reading of female characters in the Qur'an. Both authors point to the hermeneutic of the reader as central problem of the interpretation of women as subject of the Qur'an, referred to by some as 'Wadudian Hermeneutics'. However, contrasting views by Wadud and Barlas identify some difficulties related to their assumptions on the origins and transmission of the Qur'an. These difficulties necessitate the discussion of traditional views of the Qur'an in order to understand the variances of interplay between Islamic historiography and scripting of Divine revelation in traditional Muslim understanding. The traditional understanding of Qur'anic transmission is articulated through the doctrine of the inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an. However, historical-critical studies compare the traditional understanding of inimitability of the Qur'an's internal indication of transmission to the variant traditions and find paradoxical views, as seen in William Graham's investigation of the conception of Divine Hadith in *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam: A Reconsideration of the Sources, with Special Reference to the Divine Saying or Hadith Qudsi* (1977). Chapter Three then suggests a feminist literary approach to the Qur'an that considers the relationship between female characters, such as A'isha, and moments of revelation in the Hadith as part of the Islamic narrative of Muhammad's

prophethood. The chapter concludes that female characters often feature as interlocutors and initiators of revelation that shape the mediation of revelation as well as the content of revelation, restating the question why it is that women remain absent from the interpretive corps of traditional Islam. The remainder of Chapter Three then explores the removal of the female voice and presence through the relational theory of Adriana Cavarero, who argues that women and silence have been conflated in the dichotomous androcentric worldview. Cavarero's relational theory assists the scripturally reasoned account of female agency in terms of disclosing the Divine. This is achieved from the philosophical perspective of the embodied voice, as opposed to the non-material semantic of classical philosophy. In Cavarero's work translated by Paul Kottman as *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005), she refines Hannah Arendt's radical phenomenology of political speech, pointing to the singularity of the speaker's voice as embodied singularity in relation to others. Most importantly for understanding the omission of the speaking female characters in the Qur'an as role models in Islamic tradition, Cavarero explores how the evasion of embodied uniqueness removed the role of voice from reason as the 'devocalization of Logos'. Cavarero points out the dichotomous association of the female with all things 'illogical' in traditional philosophy and argues for the re-embodiment of voice in reasoning. Cavarero's exposition thus facilitates an Abrahamic understanding of Scripture as the Word of God through the reasoning of the embodied gendered voice in those Scriptures. The discussion concludes that a gendered hermeneutic requires understanding of the text as a sign-system wherein the gendered categories of femininity and maleness serve signifying functions.

The understanding of the religious text as sign-system is not foreign to the Qur'an and is indeed an integral theme of the Qur'an. Chapter Four explores the Qur'an's language of

Sign and the relationship between the form of the Qur'an and its terminology of Sign found in the description of its verses as individual signs (ayāt). Chapter Four presents an overview of the theme Sign in Qur'anic scholarship and examines the ideas and vocabulary that characterise Sign in the Qur'an in terms of imagery and formulae. The approach of Chapter Four draws on the work of literary theorists Angelika Neuwirth, Issa J. Boullata and Mustansir Mir. These Qur'anic scholars advocate a literary approach to the Qur'an that understands its aesthetic in terms of the way in which the Qur'an develops meaning in its final literary structure as an explicit unity (as found in Mustansir Mir's explanation of the literary unity of the Qur'an in *Coherence in the Qur'an* [1986]). However, Neuwirth's work assists in identifying the formulaic presentation of Sign found in oath-passages and rhetorical questions of the early Makkan period of revelation. The analysis finds the textual development from the Makkan to the Madinan era of crucial importance, both to the understanding of Sign as Qur'anic theology, as well as the role of gender in developing the Qur'an's language of Sign. The analysis of the language of Sign in the Qur'an makes clear that gender is not only an item in the Qur'an's grammar of concepts, but must also be considered for its role in *developing* the Qur'an's grammar of concepts. The Qur'anic language of Sign is furthermore found to resemble the Johannine application of the concept of Sign (*semeia*) in terms of imagery and characterisation of belief and unbelief in response to the work of the Prophet. The literary analysis also found an enduring relationship between the formal structure of the early (Makkan) revelations and that of the later (Madinan) revelations in the form of a noticeable connection between the introductory sections of the surahs and titles of the surahs. This analysis sets up a literary developmental model that takes into account how themes and vocabulary are deployed and developed within a historically situated literary composition, (as opposed to a historical-critical enquiry into the composition of the text). The reading of themes and terminology in the

48

Qur'an therefore assumes a peculiarity of the text that reads developments 'back-to-front' in the current compilation of the Qur'an, reading from Q 114 to Q 2 as a general reflection on the work and person of Muhammad.

The fifth chapter continues to explore the relationship between the introductory sections of the Qur'an and the language of Sign leading to a detailed categorisation of typologies of Sign in the Qur'an in terms of the index of titles to surahs. The analysis finds a twofold categorisation of Sign, namely general prophetic logia and unparalleled Islamic phenomena. The general prophetic logia consist of character-types and imagery that is characteristic of the other Abrahamic scriptures as firstly, eschatology (creation, apocalyptic and Judgement Day), theonomy (Divine legal ruling) and providence (making known of Divine will). Secondly, the general category includes naturalistic entities that point to Divine ordinance or design and thirdly, human groups or individuals that signify belief and unbelief respectively. The unparalleled Islamic phenomena consist of descriptors explicating the historiography of Muhammad on the one hand, and the Mystery Letters of the Qur'an on the other. The typology 'Qur'anic anthropology' enables female characters as text markers independently of their selection in traditional readings. This analysis identifies two female characters in the Qur'an that do not feature in the usual lists of female models for Muslim women, namely *al-mujādilah*, 'the woman who disputes' (Q 58) and *al-mumtahinah*, 'the women who are tested' (Q 60). These characters derive from the title-index of surahs of the Qur'an, and are selected for their designation of speaking activity by women in the sacred text.

Chapter Six surveys speaking activity by female characters in the Qur'an with specific focus on terms of disagreement, debate or questioning. The exploration into the polemical language of the Qur'an follows from the designation of a woman as disputant and from

scholarly consensus that the Qur'an is in large part a polemical document. The description of classical scholarship on debate in the Qur'an, is presented by Jane Dammen McAuliffe in '"Debate with Them in a Better Way": The Construction of a Qur'anic Commonplace', in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature*, ed. by Angelika Neuwirth and others (1999), (hereafter abbreviated as MHASF). This follows a traditional method in Qur'anic studies of presenting Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) based on classical Islamic scholarship. However, Chapter Six develops an exclusively Qur'anic view of dispute (*jadala*), understanding the Qur'an's language of Sign as collocational cluster by contrasting the root form of mujādilah (*jadala*) with quasi-synonyms and identifying prominent characters, such as Abraham and Noah, as subjects of *jadala*. The discussion concludes that interlocution, or debate, is central to the development of Qur'anic theology and finds the surah of the mujādilah to be a pivotal moment in this development.

Chapter Seven presents an exposition of the mujādilah, 'the woman who disputes', in terms of a narratological approach. The analysis compares the Qur'an's description of the woman-disputant with her characterisation and depiction in the traditional hadith, where the woman is named as Khaula and the circumstances of the event explained. The traditions are likewise read and interpreted through feminist literary approaches to the text, such as that of Fatima Mernissi and Denise Spellberg, together with feminist literary approaches to the Bible, that point out male-centred processes in the presentation of women in traditional material. The exposition of the traditional mujādilah includes an alternative hadith, authored by myself to illustrate assumptions prevalent in the traditional hadith of Khaula. This exposition is compared and contrasted to two modern interpretations of the surah of the mujādilah, namely that of Mohja Kahf and Salah El-Sheikh respectively.

Chapter Eight presents the mujādilah as a trope for interfeminist dialogue. The chapter applies the mujādilah as a model for the exploration of women's interlocution in Divine text. The model provides a scripturally reasoned tool to read two incidents from Jewish and Christian Scripture respectively as mujādilah-types, namely Numbers 27.1-11 and Mark 7.24-30. The chapter concludes that women are indeed present as speaking characters in the Abrahamic religious texts and that they furthermore are crucial to the envisioning of prophetic/revelatory activity in each scriptural community. The conclusion addresses those who silence women in the Abrahamic public space, pointing out the extraordinary and tremendous opportunities that debate holds as a meeting of the Self and the Other. The inscription of dialogue in the revealed text, even as argument or disagreement, impresses upon Abrahamic believers that dialogue with the Other - Muslim, Christian, or Jew, male or female - is constitutive of Theology.

Chapter Nine thus concludes the thesis by considering the questions raised in the introduction whether women are represented as speaking subjects in the Scriptures of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The conclusion infers that, in light of the Qur'anic model of the mujādilah, women are authorised to speak, and indeed have a responsibility to do so, not only to the males with whom they share communal spaces, but with each other.

Chapter Two

Interpreting Women in Islamic History

Women are often described as invisible in the public life of Islamic communities, yet Middle Eastern and Islamic history is replete with interesting, bold, authoritative and often controversial female characters that ruled as queens, sang the triumphs of their tribes as poets, and fought alongside their warriors or nursed the wounded in battle. There was the Muslim 'Florence Nightingale' at the Battle of Khaybar, Umm Sinān al-Aslamiyya, who implored Muhammad for permission to tend to the wounded. Sukeyna, the daughter of Husayn (grandson of the Prophet) is venerated alongside Fatimah for her piety and courage. The birthday of Sitt Nafisa (d. 824CE) was celebrated during the thirteenth century by the Mamluk sultans.[1] Along with the great Sufi masters, such as Rabi'ah, are the pious women of Sufism, such as Achi, the Shawl-Wearer, or Umm Ahmad, the Midwife.[2] Women also had their own places of respite such as convents in Cairo, each led by a *shaykha*, where women could spend time after a divorce or the death of a husband and participate in prayer, Qur'an recital or religious poetry.[3] Women as political leaders of Muslim societies were also not uncommon. Razia Sultana reigned in Delhi from 1236-40 and Shajarat ad-Durr in Egypt (1246-50).[4] The Begums of Bhopal were a female dynasty of four Muslim women who ruled during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[5] Some of these women were

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[1] Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 198.

[2] Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women* (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1983).

[3] Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs*, p. 199.

[4] For a comprehensive overview of women in Fatimid Egypt, see Delia Cortese & Simonetta Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

[5] See Shaharyar M. Khan, *The Begums of Bhopal: A History of the Princely State of Bhopal* (London: IB Tauris, 2000). For a general overview of female roles, such as petty trader, marriage-broker, prostitute etc. from early Islam to Medieval times, see Shirley Guthrie, *Arab Women in the Middle Ages: Private Lives and Public Roles* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), pp. 162-209.

exceptional characters or invested with power due to their relationship with authoritative males. Yet many, particularly in the early Islamic community, were women not noted for any exceptional quality other than their allegiance to, or support of, the Qur'anic vision of community.

These are just a sampling of the public tasks fulfilled by female figures after the rise of Islam. Feminist scholars argue that many of the intellectual freedoms and practical movements of women were in direct relation to their specific position in society, and therefore doubt their significance for feminist discourse today.[6] Amira Sonbol argues that this is mainly the result of a hermeneutic of rights-based discourses that views the actions of the historic female figures via the question whether Islam elevated or repressed women's status, often basing their assumptions on antiquated constructions of anthropology:

> They use pre-Islamic Arabia and the life of Bedouin women as a 'takeoff' point for the evolution of Islamic societies and as the social basis of gender. Tribal habits and traditions continue to form the model for social and gender relations even though Islam has expanded and developed and exists today in highly urbanised communities with direct impact on gender.[7]

Debates range between Muhammad as a reformer who changed views on women as chattel to persons with legal and economic status, to viewing Islam as a repressive force for women in public institutions.[8] The answer to the question whether Islam elevated or repressed women's rights often falls along the fault lines of reformist, over against conservative, worldviews of cultural identity. The strength of reformist or conservative argument for or against women's rights then often provides the basis for reform by

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[6] See *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, ed. by Manuela Marín and Randi Deguilhem, (London: IB Tauris, 2002), p. xvi.
[7] Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, 'Rethinking Women and Islam', in *Daughters of Abraham*, p. 110.
[8] Denise A. Spellberg, 'Political Action and Public Example: 'A'isha and the Battle of the Camel', in *WMEH*, 45-57, (p. 45). Alfons Teipen presents a still current similar review of the scholarly issues in his article eleven years later '*Jāhilite* and Muslim Women: Questions of Continuity and Communal Identity', *MW* 92 (2002), 437-459, (pp. 438-439).

governments or individual groups.[9] The majority of Islamic feminist discourse therefore

centres on the legal rights and responsibilities, or status of women as described in the

various schools of Shari'ah.[10] These discourses in turn identify the socio-political factors

that informed and produced the legalistic exclusion of women from Islamic public space

and much of current Islamic feminist scholarship is concerned with deconstructing the

socio-political posturing present in classical Islamic commentaries and exegesis.[11]

However, women remain present and represented from early Islamic through medieval

times, whether expressed by men or by the women themselves. Marín and Deguilhem argue

that it is up to the historian to understand and interpret the different representations of

women in these texts.[12]

In the view of some, this variety in discourses on Muslim cultural identity has resulted in

'fundamentally different Islams' with regard to women.[13] However, the differences would

be seen more accurately as differences between interpretive communities and the way they

read the Qur'an with the female figures of the Qur'an and their traditional interpretation at

the centre of all these discourses. Barbara Stowasser asserts that the female is a symbol for

Islamic formulation of self-identity and that the Qur'anic female figures serve as

representations of worldview and identity.[14] The female role models derived from the

Qur'an are therefore not only central to religious discourse on women but constitute

[9] Sonbol, p. 110. See also Hoda Elsadda, 'Discourses on Women's Biographies and Cultural Identity: Twentieth-Century Representations of the Life of 'Aisha Bint Abi Bakr', *FS*, 27 (2001), 37-65 <www.ebsco.co.za>, (para. 56 of 61).
[10] A selection of representative titles containing full bibliographies are *Women in Muslim Family Law*, ed. by John Esposito with Natana DeLong-Bas, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001); *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qur'an and Hadiths*, trans. and ed. by Nicholas Awde, (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000); and *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic* History, ed. by Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996).
[11] For a more specified discussion of the relation between political expression and women's legal status, see the article by Bruce B. Lawrence discussing the cases of Shah Bano in India and Safia Bibi in Pakistan, in 'Woman as Subject/Woman as Symbol: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Status of Women', *JRE* (2001), 163-185.
[12] Marín, *Writing the Feminine*, p. xvii.
[13] Barlas, *"Believing Women in Islam"*, p. 4.
[14] Stowasser, p. 9.

reiterative performances for the formation of women's subjectivity. Feminists therefore contend that women's role and status in Muslim society is substantially constructed through the hagiographic personae of female Qur'anic characters.

However, feminist deconstruction has demonstrated that these rhetorical images were shaped, more often than not, by the androcentric readings of men who held the interpretive power in the community.[15] Even where androcentric reasoning concedes the agency of prominent female members in the founding history, the contributions by women are always interpreted in terms of Islamic doctrines centred on male icons and male agency. In this way, female subjectivity forms a constitutive part of discourses on male authority as will be seen in the feminist descriptions of the legacy of Eve, Khadijah and A'isha. In contrast to feminist readings of women's participation in producing Islamic knowledge, traditional Islamic discussion of female agency reveal how women's legacy are likewise brought into line with androcentric projects. This is evident from traditional discourses of agency such as whether women may be prophets or mediators of Divine knowledge.

2.1   Classical Discussion of Female Agency

The broad consensus on the origins of gender categories in Islam is that the Qur'an by and large relates an egalitarian view of women in terms of their spirituality, but that later Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) has elaborated on, and incorporated medieval misogyny into Islamic tradition. Islamic feminists have made the charge that the egalitarian ethic of the Qur'an has been obscured by hierarchical gender relations in Islam that were mostly laid

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[15] See the review of Wadud's work by Barlas, ''Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: Women Rereading Sacred Texts', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki, (OUP, 2004), pp. 97-123 (p. 104).

down in the interpretive enterprises of the classical period.[16] The classical period, approximately three centuries after the events of the Qur'an, is characterised by Abbasid learning which saw itself as a reformation of a corrupt Umayyad dynasty. Abbasid exegesis of the Qur'an and historiography of the early period of Islam were therefore done in a dialectic with a repudiated Islamic culture, the Umayyad, while founding an imperial law and jurisprudence for the conquered territories of Islam. It was in this milieu that discourses on women received their narrative and jurisprudic function as markers of communal identity. Although legal practice did not always mean isolation and segregation, or the complete removal of women from public presence, religious discourses continued to emphasise the difference of women in relation to men. Ultimately, the medievally constructed Islamic ideal of femininity expressed gender differences in apocalyptic terms, where the ability of women to tempt men leads not only to social destruction (fitnah), but also to men's final downfall. As such, women are also the main symbols of the Islamic apocalyptic when the End Times are characterised by an upside down world wherein women have the upper hand over men.[17]

Women's Islamic status derived from male icons in the traditions or otherwise from isolated Qur'anic female characters legitimised through their relationship to males as wives, daughters or mothers.[18] These ideals of womanhood were often viewed in contrast to less desirable or avoidable characteristics associated with antithetical female characters in the Qur'an. Undesirable characteristics, like the desirable ones, derive from elliptical description in the Qur'an of such characters as 'the wife of the Pharaoh's nobleman', who

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[16] See Stowasser, p. 118; Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (London: YUP, 1992), p. 99-100 and also Nayyar Javed, 'Gender Identity and Muslim Women: Tool of Oppression turned into Empowerment', *Convergence*, 27 (1994), 58-68, and Riffat Hassan, 'Women in Islam: Body, Mind and Spirit', *Christian Social Action,* (2000) <http://www.umc-gbcs.org/csamay2_jun2000.htm> [accessed 18 June 2001].
[17] See Walid Saleh, 'The Woman as a Locus of Apocalyptic Anxiety in Medieval Sunnī Islam', in *MHASF*, ed. by Angelika Neuwirth and others (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), pp. 123-145.
[18] Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, p. 114.

tries to seduce Joseph, or women who rebel against God and Prophet, like 'the women of Noah and Lot' in Q 66. In the Qur`an, these characters all incur Hell as punishment for their acts of betrayal and concomitantly serve as eternally valid lessons for disobedience.[19] The commentaries then incorporate the general folklore that surrounds these anti-heroic characters and they are named and elaborated alongside the heroines of faith, becoming Zulaykha, the temptress of Joseph, Waligha and Waliha, wives of Noah and Lot who suffer violent deaths while their righteous husbands save themselves and their righteous communities.[20] Women were therefore not only considered in terms of Islamic doctrine but became moral signifiers of Islamic doctrines.

The present chapter describes Qur`anic women's historical characterisation in Islamic interpretive history as a hagiography of women who were part of the founding history of Islam. The appraisal of traditional character constructions for the women in the Qur`an simultaneously explains the feminist terms of evaluation of the historical processes for the present thesis and reviews the role of Hadith as primary interpretive contextualisation of the Qur`an. Feminist critique not only questions the text, but queries the way we read the sacred text and makes explicit the questions we bring to bear on the text. The analysis of the Qur`anic female characters therefore ask what are the characteristics of the Qur`anic woman that makes her suitable or unsuitable as role model and who decides her worth? The discussion considers how female characters in the Qur`an were historically constituted as rhetorical images for Islamic identity in dialectic with surrounding communities, such as pre-Islamic paganism, Judaism and Christianity, and internecine sectarian divisions. The chapter selects modern scholarship that has read between the lines of classical Islamic commentary to point out the power relations that shaped memories of Qur`anic women into

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[19] Stowasser, pp. 39-40.
[20] Stowasser, p. 41.

typological categories. The question further arises of what images of Qur'anic women existed for the construction of sectarian worldviews and what role did existing images of women play in advancing the projection of sectarian worldviews. In other words, how did Qur'anic women mark power relations between pre-Islamic idolatry and Islamic monotheism, or variance with Jewish and Christian theology, or inter-communal division between such groups as Sunni, Shi'ah and Sufi.[21]

In order to illustrate the contrastive dialectic of traditional Islamic commentary and exegesis, three Qur'anic women are selected. These women are 'Eve', the first woman in Creation; Khadijah, the first wife of Muhammad and A'isha, the favourite wife of Muhammad. In the first instance, the enculturation of other religions such as Judaism or Christianity into Islamic societies brought recognition of a shared symbolic stock as well as distinctive significance, as seen in the exegesis of the character, Hawwa or Eve. Secondly, Khadijah, first wife of the Prophet serves as example of distinction between Islam and the pre-Islamic society it replaces. In the third place, the Islamic schism between Sunni and Shi'ah presents the utilisation of female characters as icon of division, seen in the life-history of A'isha, one of the 'Mothers of the Believers' in the Qur'an and authority of Hadith transmission, but generally known as the favourite wife of the Prophet.

2.2   Women in Classical Islamic History: Discourses on Eve

One evident example of the divergence between the portrayal of women in the Qur'an and later Islamic interpretation, is the description of the arch-female in Creation, Eve. Her role is seen mainly in terms of the narrative, central to all three Abrahamic traditions, of human

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[21] For a discussion on differences in Qur'anic texts, such as the Uthmanic and Kufan text as well as an historical overview of differing interpretive communities in her chapter on founding discourses, see Leila Ahmed, pp. 79-101.

error that caused humankind to be in eternal need of restitution with God (e.g. Q 20.115-121). The Qur`anic narrative of Creation explains the origins of humankind as two humans created from a single soul (Q 4.1):

> O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person (*nafs*). Created of like nature its mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence God, through Whom ye demand mutual (rights) and (reverence) the wombs that bore you: for God ever watches over you.[22]

This Qur`anic summary of Creation does not indicate any difference in the mechanism or nature of the creation of woman and man in contrast to the descriptions in Genesis 1-2 where the woman may be construed as derivative from the man. The woman is never named in the Qur`an but called 'spouse of Adam'.[23] The story of Creation is furthermore, not found as a whole within one surah but occurs in several, each time with differing emphasis on human fallibility or, more often, the deceiving role of Iblis (Satan) as obstructing human obedience to God.[24] The depictions particularly in Q 20 and Q 7 show contrasting features concerning the role of man and woman. Although both Adam and his spouse are given the freedom of the Garden, Adam is the main addressee of God's warning that Iblis seeks to tempt them (Q 20:117), as he is also the addressee of Satan's whispers of temptation (Q 20:120). Yet, in Q 7 both man and woman are addressed by Satan (Q 7:20-22) and both repent (Q 7:23).

Stowasser finds that the presentation of gender gradually develops throughout the Qur`anic Creation account, but that gender remains "a mere detail that bears no importance for the

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[22] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur`an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1975), p. 178

[23] Amina Wadud finds the term *zawj*, 'spouse' to be the contingent dualistic element of all created beings that are in essence equal, in *Qur`an and Woman*, p. 21. Another egalitarian reading of the Creation account is that by Riffat Hassan, 'Women in Islam: Body, Mind and Spirit' *Christian Social Action*, (June 2000).

[24] For expositions of Islamic theodicy, the role of Satan as deceiver and the nature of human disobedience in Islam, see Whitney S. Bodman, 'Stalking Iblīs: In Search of an Islamic Theodicy', in *MHASF*, ed. by Angelika Neuwirth and others (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), pp. 247-270. Also Angelika Neuwirth, 'Negotiating Justice: A Pre-Canonical Reading of the Qur`anic Creation Accounts', *JQS*, 2 (2000), Part 1 (pp. 25-41) and Part 2 (pp. 1-18).

drama".[25] Modern exegesis of the Creation account in the Qur'an corroborate this conclusion yet find that the female character in the Qur'anic account is elaborated in traditional literature in accordance with contemporary medieval descriptions of the biblical female character, 'Eve'. The character Eve has both informed and been formed by, assumptions of an archetypal female and the inherent value of the feminine. Kvam and others group the extra-Qur'anic writings on the first woman of Creation, reflecting non-Qur'anic assumptions of gender, into three interpretive genres: formal exegetical commentary, folklore, and mystical contemplation. All three interpretive strands present interpretations of the Creation event that "probe, amplify, and also obscure many of the Qur'an's distinctive renderings of Eve".[26]

It is in the interpretation of Adam's spouse in the Qur'an that the blurring of literary boundaries between the Abrahamic religions in the classical period of Islam is most evident. The spouse is named as Hawwa, the Arabic rendition of Eve, and her Creation is stipulated as originating from Adam's rib, which some, such as the renowned chronicler Bukhari (d. 869CE/247AH), interpret as evidence of 'women's crooked nature'.[27] She is also accused of tempting Adam to disobedience of God's commands.[28] Most of the traditions brought together by Tabari (d. 923CE/301AH) blame the woman for the human error "as it was the majority opinion of theological experts by Tabari's time that it was only through the woman's weakness and guile that Satan could bring about Adam's downfall".[29] By the time of the eleventh century CE, nearly four hundred years after the Hijrah (the Islamic lunar calendar starts from this event in 622CE), the traditions about Eve contain

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[25] Stowasser, p. 27.

[26] Kvam and others, p. 158.

[27] Stowasser, p. 32. For more contemporary interpretation of the 'rib myth' by such discourses as 'Talibanised Islam', see Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, p. 111-112.

[28] Stowasser, p. 28-38.

[29] Stowasser, p. 29.

legends of popular culture rather than from scholastic literature.[30] These traditions report Adam at his moment of disobedience as being either under the influence of wine given to him by Eve, or sexual desire for her, or being commanded by her.[31] In this way, a dichotomy of gender is developed wherein the feminine is grammatically equated with the lower self (*nafs*) and the world (*dunya*), as opposed to the higher aspirations of the male associated with the transcendental aspect of spirit.[32]

Mystical contemplation, in contrast to mainstream classical works, does not view human qualities as absolutes. Rather, the dualistic qualities of female and male are reflections of the essential attributes of God as the Ultimate Reality and that it is rather differing relationships that bring male and female aspects to the fore.[33] The mystical tradition therefore does not assign femaleness to the order of depravity or mortality and instead finds the Creation account to present feminine dimensions of the Divine. For instance, the Andalusian, Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240CE/618AH) interprets Adam as the first *female* in that Eve was born from his side. Furthermore, Ibn al-Arabi links the female to the image of God, saying God brought forth from Adam - a being in his own image - therefore man longs for her as something that yearns to be reunited with itself.[34] However, the pivotal biblical thought of humankind created in 'the image of God', does not figure explicitly in the Qur'an. As Kenneth Cragg says: "'After Our likeness' is language which Islam

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[30] Kvam and others, p. 159.
[31] Stowasser, p. 29.
[32] Schimmel introducing Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, p. ix.
[33] Murata, p. 74.
[34] Leila Ahmed, p. 100.

instinctively avoids".[35] Therefore, Ibn al-Arabi was often seen as heretical and persecuted as such.[36]

Neither the portrayal of the Creation of 'Eve' as secondary to Adam nor the woman's responsibility for human straying has any basis in the Qur'an and modernist Islamic commentary has embarked on a wholesale rejection of these traditions as influence from biblical sources that are thus non-Qur'anic. However, commentators still find support in the Creation accounts for dichotomous gender arrangements whereby men are ordained to public toil and women are commanded to fulfil their wifely duties in motherhood, even while their equal standing before God is continuously emphasised. Amina Wadud points out that the Qur'anic Creation account is devoid of an essentialist anthropology because the dualism inherent in Creation depends on mutuality between the genders. She finds that, although the Qur'an refers to the biological function of women as mothers, it does not comment on the "psychological and cultural perceptions of 'mothering'".[37] Some Islamic revivalist discourse takes the supposed equality between the genders to encourage female action with language traditionally associated with that of the male prerogative. For instance, Sayyid Qutb calls both male and female to be warriors in the way of God, waging war against Satan's temptation. Even so, he holds to traditional conservative views on women's public activity and he advocates women's domesticity.[38]

The elaboration of Adam's spouse in the Qur'an in terms of medieval Jewish and Christian Eve's character in Islamic tradition demonstrates how Jewish and Christian referents were incorporated into Islamic understanding, pointing to a dialectic relationship with the pre-

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[35] Kenneth Cragg, *The Privilege of Man: A Theme in Judaism, Islam and Christianity* (London: Athlone Press, 1968), p. 42.
[36] Schimmel opines: "That [Ibn al-Arabi] was accused of a predilection for 'parasexual symbolism' is an understandable reaction from traditionalist circles", in *Deciphering the Signs of God*, p. 201.
[37] Wadud, p. 22.
[38] See Lamia R. Shehadeh, 'Women in the Discourse of Sayyid Qutb', *ASQ*, 22 (2000), 45-56.

Qur`anic communities and their Scriptures. Current endeavour by conservative traditionist Muslims to remove the biblicist referents as foreign to the Qur`an emphasise the supercessionary nature of Islam as an Abrahamic tradition and, although not drawing on the characterization of the first woman as Eve, still utilize women as topoi for communal identity. This is especially evident in the explication of Islam as social reformation of the pagan pre-Islamic era, known as Jāhiliyya.

2.2.1   Constructing Jāhiliyya: Women in Pre-Islamic Arabia

The status of pre-Islamic women and the history of which they form part remains speculative in nature due to a lack of archaeological evidence. We know that Arabia was not isolated from the movements of empires across the ages, even though its interior lands were not easily penetrated by invaders. Its geographical position placed it central to North-South relations between Mesopotamia and Egypt, East-West relations between India and North Africa or the Mediterranean, and its own relationship with the land of Punt – the horn of Africa. There were distinct internal developments between northern and southern regions, distinguishing between the indigenous peoples of the South and the naturalised peoples of the North that is reflected in Arabian genealogies.[39] The South Arabians, or Yamanites, rose to prominence before their northern counterparts due to their central role in the gold and spice trade. The South Arabians are more generally known as the Sabaean civilisation.

In many of these ancient societies, women are an illustrious feature. There is evidence of Arabia, or rather parts of it, being governed by queens, though it is not certain whether they ruled only in the absence of males. For instance, Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727BCE) exacted tribute from Zabibi, the queen of 'aribi' land, in the third year of his reign as later from

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[39] Phillip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 10th ed., (London: Macmillan Education, 14th repr. 1991), pp. 30-32.

another queen, Samsi.[40] The most prominent of these queens is perhaps the Queen of Sheba, known in the Qur'an as Bilqis, Queen of Saba (Q 27.22, 23). Furthermore, goddess-worship seems to have been widespread in the religion of southern Arabia, which consisted of an astral pantheon headed by the moon-god Sinn and his female consort, Shams, the sun.[41] The northern territories, today famed as the main localities of the Prophet's activity, produced the Nabataean civilisation of Petra. The Petran religion featured a female deity, Al-lat, identified by Herodotus with Aphrodite Urania.[42] There are also depictions of the veneration of Kutba, goddess of writing and wisdom, on structural edifices and other artefacts in the Nabataean locality of Qasrawet.[43]

Some archaeological evidence suggests that Arabian women played an active role in the public sphere at various stages during pre-Islamic times.[44] For instance, the funerary customs of Nabataeans reflect reverence for, and participation by, women of various social classes.[45] Warburton cites a dispute about whether figurines on various stelae from southern sites depict goddesses or priestesses.[46] Furthermore, there are indications that women paid for religious edifices out of their own means.[47] Most telling perhaps is the Nabataean inscription giving thanks to Ashtar for the birth of a daughter.[48] Women were also part of the priestly order of priests, or kahins (fem. kahina), and many Islamic traditions report kahina activity such as the accounts of the poetess Hind's initial opposition to Muhammad.

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[40] Hitti, p. 37.
[41] Hitti, p. 60.
[42] Hitti, p. 73.
[43] Ephraim Stern, ed. *The New Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, The Israel Exploration Society and Carta, vol. 4, (London: Simon and Schuster, 1993), p. 1213 and p. 1215.
[44] Warburton, D.A. 'Women in Ancient Yemen (Yemen Update)', *BAIYS* 36:23, 33 (1995) <http://www.aiys.org/webdate/warwo.html> [accessed 28 January 2004].
[45] Stern, *Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations*, p. 1192.
[46] Warburton, para. 3 of 6.
[47] Warburton, para. 4 of 6.
[48] Warburton, para. 5 of 6.

The Qur'an itself makes mention of some kind of goddess-worship that has been the main source of reference about pre-Islamic religious practices. Q 53.19-22 mentions the goddesses al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat, generally known as the daughters of God.[49] This has been a source of controversy over the ages and traditional scholarship explains the inclusion of reference to these female deities in the Qur'an as part of surahs that are abrogated by later revelations. Nevertheless, these Qur'anic citations witness to a tradition of goddesses worship alongside male deities in the pre-Islamic pantheon.[50] However, the connection between goddess worship and women's power in society has, not been established, even if some of these societies were matrifocal.[51] It is likely that women may have had a higher status because of association with the sacred, but it has also been argued that sacred designation incurs taboo and isolation.

Scholarship on women's pre-Islamic status is therefore mostly reliant on descriptions of women's societal roles and status from the poetry of the Jāhiliyya. Many scholars argue that most of these poems were recorded during the second and third centuries of the Hijrah, at the same time being brought into line with the spirit of Islam.[52] Others contend that the Jāhiliyya was valorised at certain times as an icon of Arab ethnic identity and that pre-Islamic poetry was therefore highly regarded as Arabic literature that precedes the Qur'an.[53] Even so, the abrogation of Jāhiliyya became a hermeneutic lens for Qur'anic

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[49] Adam McLean refers to these three names as an example of his theory of a trinity of the one desert goddess, appearing under various names in the ancient Near East, such as Astarte, Isis, Asherah, etc. in *The Triple Goddess. An Exploration of the Archetypal Feminine* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1989), p. 80.
[50] Ahmed, p. 48.
[51] See Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy. Discourse on the Goddess*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 94-96. Also Anne C. Klein, 'Primordial Purity and Everyday Life: Exalted Female Symbols and the Women of Tibet', in *Immaculate and Powerful*, ed. by Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 111-138.
[52] Hitti, p. 92.
[53] Rina Drory, 'The Abbasid Construction of the Jāhiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making', *SI*, 1 (1996), 33-49.

commentary and Islamic theology that has been emphasised differently during different historical periods.

2.2.2 Jāhiliyya as the Time of Ignorance

The term Jāhiliyya is found in the Qurˋan in a few references to the rituals of the former community where the Qurˋan criticises the worship of the moon (Q 6.76) and sun (Q 6.77), dedication of stones (Q 5.3, 90), and divination by arrows (Q 5.93).[54] These activities combined with the Qurˋan's renunciation of certain practices such as the killing of female babies (Q 16:58-61) forms a literary image of jahilite society as morally corrupt. Yet, there is only one instance in the Qurˋan where Jāhiliyya society by name forms the backdrop to ethical precedent for the new religious community. In Q 33.33, women are taught the moral conduct of exemplary Muslim women in contrast to the practices of jahilite society:

> And stay quietly in your houses. And do not make a dazzling display like that of the former Jāhiliyyah. And establish regular prayer, and give regular charity, and obey God and his Apostle. For God wants to remove all abomination from you, the members of the family [of the Prophet] and to make you pure and spotless.[55]

Compared to the more prevalent contrast with the practice of Jews and Christians (e.g. Q 6.146), the distinctions drawn between Jāhiliyya and Qurˋanic practices seem far less consequential.[56] However, for women this verse is of substantial significance since the addressees of this injunction are the wives of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) and is therefore considered the teaching of fundamental principles. Here the wives of Muhammad become emblems of the exemplary household, while at the same time signifying contrast to jahilite

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[54] See A.G. Don, 'Some Aspects of Jahiliyah's Religious Life: Qur'anic Brief Description', in *Hamdard Islamicus*, 23 (2000), 65-69.
[55] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qurˋan*, p. 1115
[56] See Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam. From Polemic to History*, (CUP, 1999), for the premise that the dialectical environment of Qurˋanic formation is monotheistic rather than the pre-Islamic paganism that is portrayed in the traditional accounts of the pre-Islamic time designated as Jāhiliyya.

moral corruption.[57] This verse has indeed been interpreted in modern times to justify either

total segregation and/or complete covering of the female body in public by such political

theorists as Abu al-A`la al-Mawdudi:

> Mawdudi's Islamic formula to avoid the tragic societal consequences
> of the secularisation of culture as it had occurred in the West lay in the
> preventive measures of the established, that is, traditional Islamic
> system, of which women's segregation was the main feature.
> According to Mawdudi, the Qur'anic injunction of Surah 33:33 and 53,
> even though addressed to the Prophet's wives, were and are binding on
> all Muslim females.[58]

Amina Wadud points out that this verse has been used to restrict women from going out

altogether and is appropriated furthermore to characterise women with a tendency towards

wanton display, which is the characteristic of a godless society such as the Jāhiliyya.[59]

Evidently, the description of any concept as Jāhiliyya invokes an immediate dichotomy

between righteous (Islamic) conduct and unrighteous (jahilite) conduct. Exegetic comment

could therefore contrast the new Islamic order to the Jāhiliyya in terms of a total social

discontinuity whereby Islam is presented as the force that removes social decay and

reinstitutes the worship of One True God. The prophetic mission of Muhammad is therefore

not only viewed as change in religious allegiance, but is seen as a radical departure from

the religious and social mores of pre-Islamic Arabia. Alfons Teipen argues that religious

literature in general uses social upheaval as a model to demonstrate the scope of Divine

activity in human record:

> In religious literature, discontinuities and ruptures oftentimes function
> as a topos that posits Divine intervention in human history. The
> affirmation of both a new era (Islam) and a new community (umma),
> combined with the abrogation of Jāhiliyya, is thus a theologically

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[57] The Hadith reports that two of Muhammad's wives, Sawda bint Zama`a and Zaynab bint Jahsh chose
"complete confinement and immobility" after Q 33:33 was commanded, and even more so after Muhammad's
death, Stowasser, p. 116.
[58] Stowasser, p. 127.
[59] Wadud, p. 98.

charged claim, resting on the presupposition of God's agency within space and time.[60]

Islamic portrayal of the difference between pre-Islamic times and the Islamic epoch may therefore be likened to the biblical Creation account of Genesis where pre-Created time and space is described as darkness that is "formless and empty" (Genesis 1:2) before the ordering of Creation by God. The dichotomous presentation of Islam in relation to the community that it replaced also set the polemical character of Islamic commentary in, and for, future pluralistic societies. Thus, one of the concerns of the early Islamic commentators was to accentuate the discontinuity between Jāhiliyya society and the Islamic community (Ummah). Such constructions found gender roles to be its most potent vehicle for carrying meaning, deriving from depictions of the prophet's household as in Q 33:33 set out above. The description of the female character and role is therefore often dichotomously constituted as an Islamic cultural construct over and against Others.

The dichotomous presentation of kin and Other is made explicit in Q 60, although the term 'Jāhiliyya' does not occur in this passage. The women to be tested, 'al mumtahinah' (Q 60), refers to 'believing women' who seek refuge with the Prophet's community, for whom the revelation instructs that they should be tested about their sincerity by the form of their allegiance sworn to the Prophet. The names and characters of these women are copiously documented and described in the Hadith as women who came from the main enemies of Muhammad as well as their allies, during the time of conflict between Madinah and Makkah. According to Islamic historiography, Muhammad had signed a treaty with these enemy groups just before the women's arrival at his camp, called the treaty of Hudaibiyya. Under this treaty, any person that absconds from either side is to be returned to their kin. In the Hadith these women assert that they are committed to Muhammad's cause due to their

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[60] Teipen, p. 440.

conviction of his Qur'anic message and ask that they not be sent back to a situation that hinders their practice of faith. The women who swore allegiance became known as part of the *ṣaḥāba*, or the companions of the Prophet, who distinguished themselves with acts of valour and bravery. For instance, Umm Ayman who nursed wounded during battle, and Umm Khultum bint Aqaba who is said by some to be the one on whose account the revelation of Q 60 descended, and so forth.

The legacies of these women have undergone similar reconstruction in interpretive history as has the character of Eve. Asma Afsaruddin compares the depiction of these women in several classical biographies, such as Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/844-5) and Ibn Hajar (d. 852/1449).[61] Reading the contributions of women and men to the early Islamic community, she finds that both are endowed with independence and moral agency in the prominent roles they fulfil in their society. Nevertheless, later copies of the early traditions show that the medieval conception of societal roles for genders reflected in subtle "and not-so-subtle" narrations of the lives of the first Ummah that obscured the independence and individuality of characters around the Prophet:

> Although never erasing mention of women's participation in the building of the early Muslim community and frequently paying handsome homage to them, later narratives nevertheless, in tandem with socio-cultural developments of the period, attenuate to a certain extent the public, vital roles of these women and the full range of their activities, particularly in the religious sphere.[62]

One character, who not only signifies the shift from pre-Islamic times to the Islamic era, but also the kinship relations of the new moral order, is Khadijah bint Khuwaylid.

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[61] Asma Afsaruddin, 'Reconstituting Women's Lives: Gender and the Poetics of Narrative in Medieval Biographical Collections', *MW* 92 (2002), 461-479.
[62] Afsaruddin, p. 477.

2.3   Khadijah: Emblem of Two Eras

Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid's life represents the possibilities for

women in both pre-Islamic times and within Islam respectively. Islamic tradition knows

Khadijah as a merchant woman of wealth who appoints Muhammad as a trader long before

his prophetic mission began and eventually proposes marriage to him. She is credited with

a profound insight into the events of her husband's initial call to prophethood as she

comforts and directs Muhammad after his first revelation. Khadijah suggests a visit to her

cousin Waraqah, the one 'who knows the Scriptures', for confirmation of his Divine

calling.[63] According to a hadith, Khadijah was informed of the coming of a Divine

messenger by a pagan oracle before she was aware of Muhammad's mission, situating her

explicitly as participant in the religion of Jāhiliyya culture.[64] Nevertheless, Khadijah takes

her place as an *awā'il* (traditions of companions of Muhammad who are first to make some

exceptional contribution to the emerging Islamic Ummah), being the first convert to

Islam.[65]

Although Khadijah is not mentioned by name in the Qurʼan, exegetic material find implicit

links between her and female characters of the Qurʼan, most specifically as part of the *ahl*

al-bayt, household of the Prophet, or implicated in the term 'mothers of the believers', a

honorific title revealed in a late Madinan verse (Q 33:6). This title bestowed on the women

of Muhammad's household not only a special dignity, but also specific obligations as

examples of conduct befitting the new moral order of Islamic revelation:

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[63] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison Wesley, 1991), pp. 102-103, surmising: "This is the way Islam began, in the arms of a loving woman".
[64] Stowasser, p. 113.
[65] Teipen, p. 443. For a description of Khadijah's role in the events of Muhammad's first calling, see Mernissi, pp. 102-103.

Numerous Divine reprimands addressed to Muhammad's wives in the Qur'an establish their responsibility to overcome human frailties and ensure their individual worthiness. In this manner the Prophet's wives emerge within Qur'anic context as models of the principle of ethical individualism.[66]

Khadijah is thus viewed as example of someone who supports and comforts her husband and believes in him when no one else does. She is an archetype of Muslim female righteousness for which she is rewarded as one of the female rulers alongside the Prophet in the Afterlife.[67] She is also revered as the mother of Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah, who became a model of piety herself in later tradition.

The attempt to establish Arabian women's status in jahilite society compared to that of members of the early Islamic community is far from clear. Khadijah's life, as presented in Islamic tradition, often contradicts Islamic depiction of women as oppressed in Jāhiliyya. For instance, Khadijah's autonomous actions in arranging her own marriage and directing the start of Muhammad's prophetic career refute many assumptions of jahilite mistreatment of women.[68] Khadijah's apparent independence indicates that women in the Jāhiliyya could trade, or obtain and manage their own wealth, and initiate a relationship with a man, that is without assistance from the tribal elders. Khadijah is therefore proof to some of Islam's curtailing of women's jahilite autonomy and public participation and in particular, when her biography is compared to the lot of the later wives of Muhammad.[69] Stowasser concludes that the Qur'an's concern with righteous institution over individual aspirations leads to "increasing restraint, not increasing 'liberation' of the Prophet's wives" in Qur'anic legislation of Muhammad's domestic affairs.[70] It seems the relationship between Jāhiliyya

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[66] Stowasser, p. 85.
[67] Stowasser, p. 80.
[68] See Stowasser, pp. 43, 46 and 59-60
[69] Ahmed, pp. 42-43.
[70] Stowasser, p. 102.

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and the early Islamic community is more nuanced than the image of a comprehensive break with the past that emerges from the later religious literature.

The differing understandings of Khadijah's role seem to fall into two basic categories: The first of which I term conservative doctrinal role-modelling whereby Qur'anic female figures are read in support of Islamic legal doctrine such as gender segregation, veiling, the primacy of the family and the basic female role of motherhood. Khadijah is often called 'the best of her women' together with Mary, mother of Jesus binding them together as superior exemplars of faith.[71] These views are often repeated from classical Islamic texts compiled in the medieval period and reproduced as contemporary advice to Muslim communities, often in the form of informal media such as tracts and internet discussions. The second train of thought constitutes feminist critique of Islamic practices or doctrine in light of intratextual literary analysis of women in the Qur'an that finds extra-Qur'anic accretions in classical Muslim interpretation, as found in the work of, amongst others, Fatima Mernissi, Barbara Stowasser and Denise Spellberg. The distinction between the two interpretive groups seems to centre on contextualisation: Conservative doctrinal role-modelling argues for the retention of practices in their literal form on the basis of Sunnah (following the example of the Prophet as practised historically in seventh century Arabia), while feminist critique of the female role models argue that the Prophet's practices are figurative of Qur'anic theology and ethos, and that these practices are open to interpretation on principle. What is clear from both modern and classical literature is that a wife of Muhammad, as a member of the Prophet's family living intimately with him in his daily life and to all intents and purposes being chosen by him, both signifies ideal Islamic

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[71] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, p. 155.

femaleness as well as being in the position to report practice worthy of emulation for the community as a whole:

> By virtue of being a woman she not only had access to information about the Prophet that none of the male companions had, but she could also serve as a model of behaviour for things specific to women that the Prophet could not possibly personify.[72]

Furthermore, later Islamic interpretation and conceptualisation of the wives of Muhammad as 'Mothers of the Believers' often demarcates the fault lines of differing theological positions within Muslim communities. For example, before Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi reformation of the 1700's prohibited veneration of tombs, Makkans used to go to the mausoleum of Khadijah to ask for help *bi-barakat sittinā*, 'by the blessing of our lady'.[73] The most enduring schism in Islam, that between Sunni and Shi'ah, is apparent in a consideration of the Islamic memory of another of Muhammad's wives, A'isha.

2.4   A'isha: Icon of Communal Strife

A'isha is presented in Islamic tradition as one of the most prominent figures in the early Islamic community. Her importance is due to her relationship with the prophet of Islam in a variety of ways that relate to her genealogy, proximity to the Prophet and presence during the final days of his life – A'isha's house is said to be the site where Muhammad died and was buried.[74] Biographers of A'isha list nineteen attributes that define her importance in Islamic memory, such as that she is an authority on contextualising Muhammad's teaching, particularly in relation to aspects of her married life and the demonstration of Divine intervention in her presence, or on her behalf.

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[72] Jamal J. Elias, 'The *Ḥadīth* Traditions of ʿĀ'isha as Prototypes of Self-Narrative', *Edebiyat: JMEL*, 7 (1997), 215-233 (p. 226).
[73] Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*, p. 198.
[74] Spellberg gives various hadith reports that list attributes describing A'isha's exceptional qualities, in *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, pp. 30-31.

A'isha was the daughter of Umm Rūmān and Abu Bakr, successor to Muhammad and first caliph of the Islamic community.[75] In contrast to Khadijah, A'isha is immersed in Islamic history. Her mother and father were amongst the first converts to Islam and she is reported to have said that she could not remember a time when both her parents were not Muslims and when the Prophet did not visit her home at least once a day.[76] She was very young when betrothed to the Prophet and the only virgin he married.[77] As part actor in the biography of the early Islamic community, A'isha presents a complex character somewhat out of proportion with the other figures. We know intimate details about A'isha and the Prophet's marriage, such as that they would bathe from one basin after sexual contact.[78] Her feelings about other members of their polygynous family are documented, for example her jealousy of the beautiful Zaynab. One report has A'isha plotting against Muhammad spending more time with Zaynab, telling the other wives to say that he had bad breath after eating the honey that Zaynab had given him.[79] These accounts are reported through A'isha as first person narrator in the Hadith for which she is also viewed as the highest authority. However, some aspects of her authority and legacy are controversial within the Muslim community and she is often emblematic of the deep-seated divide between Sunni and Shi'ah.

2.4.1 A'isha in Shi'ah Memory

The Sunni-Shi'ah schism is Islam's most painful and enduring division that has become evermore amplified in contemporary politics since the Iranian (Shi'ah) Revolution in 1979.

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[75] Elias, 'The Hadīth Traditions of `Ā'isha', p. 216.

[76] Elias, p. 219.

[77] For a list of names for the Prophet's wives that all Hadith agree on, see Stowasser, p. 87. For the affinities between A'isha and Mary in terms of their virginity, practices of seclusion and as objects of gossip in the community, see Neal Robinson, 'Jesus and Mary in the Qur`ān: Some Neglected Affinities', in The Qur`an: Style and Contents, ed. by Andrew Rippin (Aldershot, USA: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 21-36 (pp. 168-169).

[78] See Mernissi, p. 73 and Elias, p. 225.

[79] Some reports replace Zaynab with Umm Salama in these narratives. See Elias, p. 220 and Stowasser, p. 100.

A'isha's responsibility for the discord among Muslims varies in Sunni and Shi'ah accounts: On the one hand she is praised as wife of the Prophet that campaigns for justice and on the other, she is criticised for abusing her honoured position to draw Muslims into battle with each other. Muhammad's death in 632CE/10AH ignited tribal rivalries that had fizzled out under his leadership, and shored up newfound alliances in disputes over succession. The dividing lines were between those in support of electives, which came to be associated with the Sunnis, and those who championed the prophetic office as an inheritance of the bloodline of the Prophet, for whom the Shi'ah, or the party of Ali, became known. The key events that led to the complete break between these rival groups in the early Muslim community are two battles for which two women became emblematic: A'isha, for the Battle of the Camel (656CE/36AH), wherein she was one of the leaders opposing Ali, and Fatimah, for the final deciding conflict at Kerbala (680CE/58AH) as the wife of Ali and mother of the martyred Husayn. The Battle of the Camel was the first full scale military encounter in the first 'civil war' of Islam. A'isha and two male allies Talha ibn Ubayd and al-Zubayr were defeated by Ali thirty-six years after the Hijrah (AH in the Islamic calendar). The Battle of the Camel is so-called because of the camel on which A'isha rode.[80]

In Shi'ah understanding of the split, the memories of A'isha and Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet, are pitted against each other. While A'isha is held responsible for the conspiracies that led to the rift, the suffering Fatimah is held up as the ultimate victim of A'isha's actions. Despite Fatimah's death before the concluding events at Kerbala, she has become

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[80] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, p. 149. See also Fatima Mernissi's application of A'isha's public role as raison d'être for her own work, *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Note the summative feminist comment on the historical title of the battle: "The historians called this confrontation 'The Battle of the Camel', referring to the camel ridden by A'isha, thereby avoiding linking in the memory of little Muslim girls the name of a woman with the name of a battle", p. 5.

associated with perceived Sunni injustice against the Shi'ah and Divine retribution that

would ultimately be meted out on behalf of the Shi'ah:

> "[Fatimah's] suffering takes largely the form of her abject poverty both
> before and after her marriage, her weak constitution, the rejection of
> her claim to inheritance upon her father's death, and the rejection of the
> community to uphold her claim that her husband was the rightful leader
> of the community. Outweighing all of these, according to the
> hagiographical literature, the greatest suffering she bears is the
> martyrdom of her husband and sons to the Shi'ite cause, specifically
> the martyrdom of Husayn at Kerbala.[81]

Spellberg's analysis of the divergence between Sunni and Shi'ah traditions on A'isha is that

her role constitutes a political legacy that either blames A'isha exclusively for inciting civil

strife, as in the Shi'ah case, or in Sunni tradition attempts to downplay her role in the

events.[82] However, Spellberg argues that both Sunni and Shi'ah agree on one point: A'isha

is an example of communal regression when women get involved in public affairs. For both

traditions, A'isha became a flawed ideal of femininity. Her involvement in the schism of

Islam made her an example of women who destroy the political order with their public

activity. The point of commonality for Sunni and Shi'ah, although they disagreed about

A'isha's responsibility and culpability in the first civil war, is an agreement fundamentally

about her potential as negative example for all women who aspire to political leadership in

Islamic communities.[83]

2.4.2   Gossip and Communal Alignment: The Story of the Slander

These points of divergence and convergence on the character of A'isha and traditional

assumptions of a flawed potential of women are also evident in Sunni and Shi'ah exegesis

of the Qur'an. A'isha is traditionally understood to be the subject of a scandalous event

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[81] Kassam-Hann, 'Transcendence and the Body: Fatimah as a Paradigmatic Model', *FT*, 30 (2002), 77-93 (p. 83).

[82] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, p. 132.

[83] See Fatima Mernissi's discussion of the relation between women and politics in hadith and Muslim interpretation with specific reference to A'isha's role in the Battle of the Camel, in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, pp. 1-6.

referred to in Q 24:11-26. The text repudiates a group of believers for lending their ears out

to a lie that is not in keeping with the new Qur'anic mindset, in vv. 12-13:

12.   Why did the believing men and women – when you heard of the affair – not
        put the best construction on it in their minds, and say 'This (charge) is an
        obvious lie'?
13.   Why did they not bring four witnesses to prove it? If they do not bring
        witnesses, such people are themselves liars in the sight of God.[84]

These verses have been explained and become known in exegetical literature as the Story of

the Slander, or *hadith al-ifk*. The accepted Sunni tradition recounts that Muhammad

undertook a campaign against an enemy tribe, the Banu Mustaliq, with A'isha and Umm

Salama accompanying him. The hadith is framed in A'isha's own description of the events,

saying that the troupe stopped along the way back. A'isha relates that she lost her necklace

while heeding the call of nature, which caused her to delay and she subsequently missed the

departure of the group. While waiting at the deserted site, Safwan ibn al-Mu'attal arrived

and escorted her back to Madinah. Soon after their return, a campaign of gossip started

wherein A'isha was accused of committing adultery with Safwan. The main instigator of

the accusation was Abdallah ibn Ubayy but Ali, Muhammad's cousin and later caliph, was

also involved, testifying against A'isha's credibility. A'isha maintained her innocence

throughout, even when being banished to her parents house and facing blame from both her

parents and her husband. A'isha is finally exonerated by Muhammad receiving the

revelation of Q 24:11-26, which established A'isha's innocence and criticised those who

perpetrated the slander. The surah thereby announced penalties for bringing false

accusations against women and established the legal principle that four witnesses are

required to bring a case of adultery against someone. In the hadith, A'isha expresses her

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[84] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 899.

gratitude to those who defended her and explicitly praises Allah as her vindicator, not the messenger, her husband.[85]

Since the Qur'anic verses against slander do not name A'isha specifically, their import was open to debate and Shi'ah exegetical comment came to disagree with the Sunni tradition that A'isha was the object of the accusation. Shi'ah difference of interpretation is first noted around three hundred years AH, when al-Qummi, a Twelver Shi'ite, refutes Sunni Hadith. Al-Qummi suggests that the Qur'anic revelation against slander was revealed on behalf of Muhammad's concubine, Maryam the Copt.[86] Later Shi'ah exegesis could then suggest that it was A'isha herself that brought the slander against Maryam and in this way make her the perpetrator of lies instead of the exonerated subject of the lie.[87] At the heart of the divergence between Sunni and Shi'ah tradition lie not so much their different understandings of the role of the female characters in the Story of the Slander but the links between gender and moral reasoning.

The differing versions of the Story of the Slander in Sunni and Shi'ah tradition reveal religious and historical disagreements, and the realigning of the social and moral order. A'isha's legacy as part of medieval religio-politics demonstrates how gender is relevant to political positioning and particularly in terms of sectarian debate. The function of A'isha's character in the Shi'ah tradition serves to enhance their partisan propaganda and by implicating the daughter of Abu Bakr, the first caliph of the Sunni order, Shi'ah

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[85] For an exposition of the intertextuality of false accusation of adultery in the Hadith and the Qur'anic story of Joseph, see Ashley Manjarrez Walker and Michael A. Sells, 'The Wiles of Women and Performative Intertextuality: A'isha, the Hadith of the Slander, and the *Sūra* of Yusuf', *JAL* 30 (1999), 55-77.

[86] The degree to which this alternative tradition did the rounds in oral transmission, and for how long, seems beyond resolution.

[87] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, p. 81.

interpretation struck at the heart of Sunni legitimacy.[88] In terms of feminist enquiry into the subjectivity of female characters in religious texts, Denise Spellberg finds that, although the hadith-narrative is crafted through A'isha's own observation as first person narrator, her role and reactions were constructed much later in line with established principles such as male control of female chastity.[89] Even though A'isha is eventually vindicated, the hadith also points out that her testimony by itself does not exonerate her and she is reduced to passivity while the prominent males of the community debate her lot.[90] Spellberg describes A'isha's role in the Story of the Slander as the static object of Divine intervention and summarises the power relations at play in the Hadith as issues of male honour and religio-political control.[91]

Nevertheless, Ashley Walker and Michael Sells present a reading of A'isha's narration of the Hadith of the Slander that focuses on the intertextual relationship between A'isha's defence of her actions and the Qur`anic account of Joseph's seduction.[92] Walker and Sells deconstruct the Hadith of the Slander by paying attention to the subtext of the Qur`an's description of Joseph's defence against slander in Q 12:18. They find an elision between A'isha's position and that of both Joseph and his father Jacob in anticipating justice from God. The authors argue that A'isha's strategic use of language, as both character and narrator of the Hadith, breaks down the narrowly defined and negative gendered conceptions of morality. Their reading asserts that not only are gendered actions and roles put in a new light, but points out the theological implications of the narration, saying

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[88] For a contemporary study of the function of gender in community disputes, see Elizabeth H. Stokoe, 'Mothers, Single Women and Sluts: Gender, Morality and Membership Categorization in Neighbour Disputes', *Feminism and Psychology*, 13 (2003), 317-344.
[89] For a converse study on Hadith as reflection of A'isha's self-narrated biography, see Elias, 'The Hadith Traditions of A'isha'.
[90] See Spellberg's comparison with the Apocrypha in the tale of Susannah who is likewise accused of adultery, but exonerated with the help of a male mediator, Daniel, in *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, pp. 74-80.
[91] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, p. 73.
[92] Walker & Sells, 'The Wiles of Women', p. 56.

"Divine intervention is tied to human acts of language and acts of patience".[93] Their reading makes clear not only that variant readings of Islamic women's texts have always been possible, but also that readings of gender in the religious texts are determined by the hermeneutic of gender employed in obtaining meaning from the text:

> What appear to be essentialized and fixed structures of gender relations are open to reconsideration and an appeal to reconsideration from the very canonical sources that had been used to justify the stereotypes in the first place.[94]

The reading by Walker and Sells therefore confirms that the very sources that inscribe women's oppression may provide the possibilities for their revisioning in a liberatory way. Their reading furthermore establishes a Qur`anic critique of the hadith that does not rely solely on external historical-critical method, but derives from the Islamically authoritative text of the Qur`an. The Hadith therefore need not necessarily be discarded but, critically considered, may lead to novel insights in the Qur`anic text and vice versa. It is evident that liberatory exegesis depends on the hermeneutic of the reading.

2.5   The Development of the Islamic Female Ideal

Viewing the Islamic traditions of the Qur`anic women, Eve, Khadijah and A'isha, in terms of feminist deconstruction of these traditions, it becomes evident how the rich diversity of women's personality and experiences were hagiographically subsumed into the moral categories of the new Islamic order and restructured to conform to medieval androcentric ideals of purity, chastity, and submission. The feminist considerations of socio-historical processes and historiographic representation describe how classical Islamic scholarship developed the Qur`an's female characters as rhetorical images to illustrate desirable and

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[93] Walker & Sells, p. 72.
[94] Walker & Sells, p. 77.

undesirable characteristics that demarcate the new religio-political order. In reviewing literature on the role models of Islamic tradition we begin to see how it is that the principal character in the Fall could become the Hawwa of the Qur`an, how independent entrepreneur, Khadijah, became a mother of the believers, and how A'isha became emblematic of women's defective leadership. Yet it is clear that these androcentric texts could not eliminate the tensions caused by the presence of these women in the foundational texts. It is likewise evident that the androcentric process understood that silencing the female voice completely would mean the loss of their own legitimacy. Walker and Sells's exposition of the hadith of the slander point out how liberatory readings of apparently androcentric texts are possible depending on the questions we bring to bear on the script. Their reading furthermore makes clear that the exploration of Qur`anic characters need not disregard the extra-Qur`anic construction of events and confirms that the very Hadith that have been utilised to exclude women from Islamic knowledge production may contain traces of women's knowledge that could lead to their restitution. Not only do these Hadith contain traces of women's experiences but they also envision women as speaking subjects in religious texts. As actors in the literary foundations of Islam, they are therefore counterparts of the male speakers. The question is whether they qualify as mediators of Divine revelation. This tension between women as speaking subjects in the religious texts and the exclusion of women from the interpretive enterprise of Islam has historically raised the question of women's mediating ability, addressed in debates about female agency and the prophetic office.

2.5.1. Ibn Hazm and the Prophethood of Women

The classical Andalusian scholar, Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) wrote a monologue on women's subjectivity as mediators of revelation called *Nubuwwa al-Nisa'i* (The prophethood of

women).[95] This particular topic was an issue of debate that raged, according to the author, in no other place than Cordoba and only in his time, which perhaps demonstrates how boundaries were blurred in the multifaith society of Moorish Andalusia.[96] Ibn Hazm's text is not only classical in its origination from the classical Islamic period, but also in its timeless citation on an Internet website for Muslim women as a current authority. The text is cited and celebrated on the website, perhaps more because of the fact of the debate, than for its conclusions (see Appendix).[97] For the authors of the website the text is an unexpected sign that women's status, at least as functionaries in religion if not in society at large, was a point of discussion in the Muslim-Spanish medieval community of the eleventh century. However, Ibn Hazm's text speaks directly to the present discussion of women's subjectivity in Qur'anic characterisation and discusses women's agency in the light of Qur'anic proof texts. Surprisingly, Ibn Hazm argues in favour of women's prophethood, based on the inclusion of Maryam (Mary, mother of Jesus) in a list of prophets in Q 19 and the mother of Moses and the wife of Abraham who receive Divine communication in other Qur'anic narratives.[98] However, Ibn Hazm distinguishes between *nubūwwa* (prophethood), which is the receipt of Divine inspiration that both men and women can obtain, and *risālah* (messengership), which is open to men only. Ibn Hazm therefore concludes that prophetic agency is a possibility for women as receivers of revelation but his distinction between *risālah* and *nubuwah* makes women's agency conditional and ultimately prohibits them from dispensing revelation. Women therefore

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[95] See Stowasser's brief discussion of views on prophetic possibilities for women according to classical scholarship, p. 77.

[96] Maribel Fierro finds no evidence that women occupied a higher position in Andalusian society than their counterparts elsewhere in the Islamic world, in 'Women as Prophets in Islam', in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, ed. by Marín and others, (London: IB Tauris, 2002), pp. 183-198 (p. 193).

[97] http://www.jannah.org/sisters/nubuwwa.html

[98] Michael Sells finds the link between the inbreathing of spirit and prophecy in Q 19:16-27 to be central to the intertextual resonances of texts concerned with prophecy in the Qur'an, in 'A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Sūras' of the Qur'an: Spirit, Gender, and Aural Intertextuality', in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning*, ed. by Issa J. Boullata, (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 3-25 (p. 6).

have the capacity to prophethood but are excluded from its execution in Ibn Hazm's opinion.

Stowasser recognises Ibn Hazm's treatise as controversial because Sunni theologians rejected it. They classified Ibn Hazm's treatise as heretical innovation (*bid'a*) on the authority of Q 12.109 and 16.43 ("We sent not before you other than men whom We inspired") but added the legalist notion of purity as an absolute proof that women could not, and never will, be able to belong to the circle of prophets:

> Critical to the argumentation was the consideration of "purity" as aspect of *'isma* ("innate quality of immunity from sin and error of prophets"). In orthodox definition, purity includes (constant) physical purity, a state unattainable to women because of menstruation. This legalistic notion has informed scripturalist interpretation of the issue of Mary's prophethood and also the definition of Mary's Qur'an-proclaimed purity.[99]

Maribel Fierro finds that the discussion of the women's agency did not necessarily arise from a concern about the position of women regarding men in the multifaith society of Andalusia, but rather from a preoccupation about the integrity of prophecy in relation to discourses on the miracles of saints.[100] Nevertheless, Fierro finds that this question concurs with the highpoint of Christian conversion to Islam in Andalusia and wonders whether the text of Ibn Hazm represents an attempt to elevate the position of Mary within an Islamic context.[101] Regardless of the issues informing the debate on women's prophethood and despite acknowledgement that the religious text indicates spiritual equality of the genders, both Ibn Hazm and his detractors demonstrate that biological differences between women and men have the final say in determining women's agency in traditional reasoning.

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[99] Stowasser, p. 77.
[100] Fierro, 'Women as Prophets', p. 193.
[101] Fierro, p. 194.

2.5.2 Shi'ah Understanding of 'Fatimah's Light'

As seen in the discussion of A'isha's legacy for the Sunni and Shi'ah traditions, the biological argument is not limited to Sunni discourse but is shared in the Shi'ah tradition as well. The paradigmatic positive female character for the Shi'ah is Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad. Fatimah has many merits for the Shi'ah community, amongst others that Divine favour is bestowed on her as blood-relative of the Prophet and she is therefore associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her personal piety and her family's suffering at the hands of the warring factions in the first schism of Islam between Sunni and Shi'ah have formed an image of her as *mater dolorosa* in the Shi'ah tradition and she is believed to intercede on behalf of those who weep for her son Husayn.[102] Her honorific titles include 'the virgin', 'the chaste', and 'the radiant'.[103] Zaya Kassam-Hann states that Fatimah is esteemed so highly that her hagiography includes possession of the Divine light that elected Muhammad as prophet of Islam. As 'the radiant', or 'resplendent' *al-zuhra'*, Fatimah is a creature of God's own light and therefore to be trusted with revelation. She is reported to have conversed with the angel Gabriel and received revelation that was written down by 'Ali, her husband and fourth caliph of Islam, as the *mushaf fatimah*.[104] The Divine light is also part of the imams, or spiritual successors to Muhammad, of the Shi'ah tradition. Kassam-Hann therefore gives her the title of 'revelatrix', yet, points out how classical Shi'ah scholarship has made this attribute conditional because of Fatimah's gender. Whereas the men who are spiritually enlightened are endowed with interpretive faculties to guide the community, in Fatimah's case, she is only a channel of light. As the 'mother of the imams', Fatimah passes on the light of revelation without the capacity to be an imam herself.

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[102] Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*, p. 126.
[103] Spellberg, *Politics of Gender*, p. 182.
[104] Kassam-Hann, p. 89.

2.6   Listing of Female Characters in the Qur'an

The biological arguments that permeate the characterisation as well as discussions of agency in Hadith and *tafsīr* (Islamic exegesis) are the focus of critical regard in feminist readings of women in the Islamic tradition. Feminist scholars argue that classical Islamic scholarship has obscured the role of women in the founding history of Islam. However, they also find that classical Islamic attempts to explain the presence of women in the religious texts have retained a remnant history of women's participation in Islamic history. This remnant history has been opened up by feminist scholarship and socio-historic deconstruction of traditional texts. The critical consideration of the tradition has therefore often led to the question of what the Qur'an's exclusive view on women might be. The two main works that have dealt with this question is Stowasser's contrast between Qur'anic characters and their characterisation in Hadith and *tafsīr*, and Amina Wadud's reading of female characterisation in the Qur'an in terms of equality and gender parity.[105] While both these works are from a feminist point of view and aimed at elucidating an exclusively Qur'anic view on women in the religious texts of Islam, a comparison of the female characters they select reveals a discrepancy between the numbers and descriptions of women in the Qur'an.

2.6.1   Wadud's List

Wadud claims to explore gender in the Qur'an from an exclusively Qur'anic point of view, that is, without reflection on traditional explanations and comments on the female presences in the text.[106] Wadud therefore furnishes the reader with a list of female

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[105] Hibba Abugideiri, 'Hagar: A Historical Model for "Gender Jihad"', in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), pp. 81-107 (p. 90). See also Barlas, 'Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics', pp. 97-123.
[106] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. xvii.

characters in the Qur'an as an appendix to her study stating that there are so few female individuals in the Qur'an that is possible to include a complete list.[107] Yet Wadud's list often contains unnamed women in the Qur'an described in terms of their traditionally associated names or contexts. For example, A'isha is cited as a character in Q 24:11-12 but, as seen above, there is no explicit reference to A'isha in this section. There is only a reference to 'the affair' and 'the lie'. The female character 'A'isha' is therefore inferred from the hadith that explains the circumstances of revelation and not from the Qur'an itself. Likewise, Hannah, Anna or Anne is cited as character reference for 'the woman of Imra'a' (Q 3:35), Umm Jamil bint Harb is named as the allusive feminine pronoun *imra'ah* in 111:4-5, who are both characters named in the traditions but not in the Qur'an. The analyses of the Qur'anic women 'Eve', 'Khadijah' and 'A'isha', demonstrated that the very naming of unnamed female characters in the text tie them to an identity and placement that may or may not be intended by the Qur'anic text. Indeed, their naming often obscures the significance they have as literary elements of the Qur'an.

A further inclusion by Wadud is a surah-title in her list of female characters, namely al-Muhajirat 'the women refugees' of Q 60:10. Yet Q 60 is titled by some Qur'an indexes as *al-mumtahinah* 'the women to be tested/who swear allegiance', which characterises the women in a particular way. Wadud's choice of *muhajirat* for Q 60 points to a form of selectivity that is not specified anywhere and eliminates a Qur'anic depiction of women's action that achieves a less comprehensive listing. Wadud references a traditional source for the names, namely Al-Zamakhshari, not clarifying the relationship between the traditional names and their Qur'anic reference. Wadud's list therefore results in an obfuscation of the Qur'an's literary allusiveness while overlooking her own critique of traditional material.

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[107] Wadud, p. 106.

Ironically, Wadud's exploration of women's agency in the Qur'an features the convolution of reference between Qur'anic and extra-Qur'anic content for which she criticises traditional *tafsīr*. The complexity of presenting an exclusively Qur'anic reading uninformed by Islamic doctrine or tradition is therefore illustrated in her collection and categorisation of women in the Qur'an.[108]

Wadud's classification is most problematic when she categorises the Qur'an's women according to their "religious significance" or none. She finds two categories of female characters on three different levels according to the degree of agency they present. The first group "only help[s] to make a story coherent, because they do not speak or perform any actions".[109] Her categorisation of the second group of female characters is reasoned as follows:

> These women demonstrate no explicit religious significance. The absence of religious significance in some of these specific details confirms the humanness of the individuals and the prophets with whom they were narrated. They have been related to us in human terms involved in natural human circumstances and facing unprophetic crises in their lives and with regard to their families.[110]

The implications of such a categorisation are manifold, but mainly in terms of the theological statement she makes about women's subjectivity in the sacred text: What are the terms of reference for the phrase 'religious significance'? Is it in terms of the Qur'an's internal development as a faith system? Does such a Qur'anic faith system include the traditional understanding of Muhammad's career as interpretive context? Or is the religious significance of these female characters associated with their meaning in the religious life of post-Qur'anic Muslims? Ultimately the question is how can the depiction in a prophetic text (in its mediated sense) of women facing crises in their lives, be described as

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[108] Wadud, p. 106-108.
[109] Wadud, p. 106.
[110] Wadud, p. 107.

'unprophetic'? Despite these reservations about Wadud's analysis, her list remains significant in that it selects female characters based on feminine pronouns and allusions to female figures that do not always feature in traditional Islamic scholarship and therefore she provides a stimulus to further excursion into featured characters.

2.6.2 Stowasser's List

Barbara Freyer Stowasser's listing of women in the Qur'an, on the other hand, presents a systematic examination of female figures in the Qur'an distinguished from their traditional significance in Islamic exegesis. Stowasser cites each occurrence of a selected female figure in the Qur'an thematically and then expounds the interpretation of these characters in Islamic tradition from the earliest times to the present. She presents named figures, for example Mary, mother of Jesus, unnamed individuals such as the wife of the Pharaoh, as well as individuals within broader Qur'anic categories such as 'the women of Noah, Lot and Abraham' or the 'Mothers of the Believers'. Stowasser's work is indeed unsurpassed in scope and attention to detail and has generally been viewed as authoritative since its publication, supplying a comprehensive bibliography on the topic of women in classical Islamic scholarship. Furthermore, Stowasser points out the relevance of these female characters to Islamic discourse in the modern era, establishing the link between the female figure as cultural symbol and Islamic self-perception.

The comprehensive nature of Stowasser's work suggests that her book is an exhaustive register of all female characters in the Qur'an. Yet, when compared with Amina Wadud's catalogue of female characters, Stowasser's work appears to exclude a number of women, such as 'Umm Jamil bint Harb', the wife of Abu Lahab in Q 111.4 and 5; 'Raytah bint Sa'd', she who untwists the thread in Q 16.92, Khawlah bint Tha'labah, the woman who disputes in Q 58.1 and al-Muhājirat/al-Mumtahinah, women refugees in Q 60.10. The

reason for this omission is straightforward but points to an underlying judgment in the selection of role models for women in Islam: Stowasser's female figures in the Qur'an takes its cue from traditional Islamic scholarship that decided the significance of the Qur'an's women in the religio-political rationale of men. Stowasser's omissions are therefore as enlightening as her exposition of the traditional role models for Muslim women. Linking the omissions of Stowasser's register and the limited exposition of Wadud's more complete listing, the question is raised how a valid selection and reading of the female characters in the Qur'an is to be achieved. Stowasser presented a thorough, yet incomplete consideration of the relationship between sacred text and tradition in describing female role models, while Wadud found some women of 'no religious significance' in her more comprehensive listing of women in the Qur'an. How are women to make sense then of female presence in the Qur'an even before considering women's voice?

In the same vein, discussions of female agency in the mediation of Divine communication as prophet or revelatrix, related only to the male icons of Islam. While the question of female mediation demonstrates an underlying tension between the legacy of women as founders of Islam and women as the signifiers of otherness, these expositions ultimately demonstrate how the logics of androcentric reasoning obscure women as protagonists in the narrative of Islamic prophethood.[111] The question is raised to what extent women feature in the Qur'an as narrative of Islamic revelation and how to read for female action in the Qur'an: How is an exclusively Qur'anic reading of female characters to be achieved and to what extent is the remnant history of women in the Hadith to be incorporated into a

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[111] The Christian tradition reflects similar commentary and exegesis of women in religious texts with scholarship only recently focusing on an analysis of women in the text itself. For instance, Susan Miller states that feminist scholarship has developed a variety of approaches that include recovery of narratives featuring women and the position of women in specified historical contexts that constructed gender in Christian doctrine. However, as in the case of the Gospel of Mark, there has been no analysis of female characters within the Markan world-view. See *Women in Mark's Gospel*, (London: T & T Clark, 2004), p. 1.

Qur`anic reading of female characters? These questions inform the discussion of a gendered

hermeneutic for the Qur`an in Chapter Two that explores the subjectivity of women in the

sacred text in terms of women as addressee of the text.

Chapter Three

Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutic for Gendered Reading

Amina Wadud is seen as a pioneer in Islamic feminism as her work on the conceptualisation of woman in the Qur'an was among the first to establish an egalitarian reading of the Qur'an for an English readership, most notably her book, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1992). Wadud's work raised questions firstly, about the exclusion of women from the 'official' interpretive community of the Qur'an and secondly, about gendered language in the sacred text. Wadud's work therefore follows on the earlier feminist writings of such authors as Mernissi who commented on Islamic religious texts in the light of contemporary Muslim practice.

3.1   Wadudian Hermeneutics

Wadud challenges hierarchical gender arrangements in Islam from a Qur'anic perspective which she interprets in terms of egalitarian ideals.[1] Her reading of the Qur'an as a discursive unity, that is, paying attention to both the historical contexts of its teaching as well as to its internal structures, contrasts to traditional modes that read the Qur'an piecemeal and acontextually, or following an "atomistic methodology".[2] Although Wadud frames her discussion in terms of egalitarian language, she suggests a basic Islamic doctrine

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[1] See Hibba Abugideiri's assessment of 'Wadudian Hermeneutics', in 'Hagar: A Historical Model for "Gender Jihad"', pp. 90-93.

[2] Wadud, p. 2. Annabel Keeler argues that this methodology was laid down by Tabari's (d. 310/923) *Jāmi' al-bayān* whereby the conventional exegesis of the Qur'an became a verse-by-verse commentary treating the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), abrogating and abrogated verses (*al-nāsikh wa'l-mansukh*), variant readings (*qirā'āt*), stories of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*), clear and ambiguous verses (*al-muḥkam wa'l-mutashābih*), questions of lexicography and grammar, and matters of law. She comments that this methodology became most widely accepted because it could be adapted "according to the sectarian or theological persuasion of the commentator", in *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī*, (London: OUP in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006), p. 9.

91

as hermeneutic, namely *tawhīd* (unity). This unity, Wadud suggests, is the underlying principle for understanding the roles of the dual genders and the references to their roles in the Qur'an as a unified text.[3] She also understands this unity as methodological approach to the text. Wadud asserts that parts of the text must be understood against the whole, which is concerned with presentation of a unified ethical vision of justice, equality and dignity as the God-given right of every human being.[4]

3.1.1 Asma Barlas's Semiological Reading of the Qur'an

Wadud's work was taken up by amongst other, Asma Barlas in her book *"Believing Women in Islam": Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002), who presented an analysis of the Qur'an denying its patriarchal consequence. Barlas draws on Qur'anic terminology for her feminist articulation, applying the Qur'anic phrase 'believing woman' (Q 33.35) as rationale of her enquiry. Barlas's hermeneutic is thus, similarly to Wadud, based on Islamic doctrine albeit derived from a Qur'anic phrase. Barlas considers the terminology that describes the relationship between the Divine origins of the Qur'an and its literary form as her philosophy of reasoning about the Qur'an. Barlas finds this relationship rooted in the conception of *ayāt*, or Signs.[5] The term *ayāt* is the term for the literary division of the verse in the Qur'an that literally means 'sign'. Barlas takes this term as conception of authorial intent in the Qur'an that reflects the understanding of the Qur'an as a collection of individual revelations delivered by Muhammad of which each verse is a miraculous sign. She therefore presents a semiological reading of gender in the Qur'an. However, Barlas does not develop a Qur'anic theory of the Signs, that is, she does not look at the development of the terminology and imagery of Sign in the Qur'an, but instead

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[3] Wadud, pp. 25-26.
[4] Wadud, p. xii.
[5] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 19-20.

applies general semiotic theory in exploring the masculine language that refers to God in the Qur'an.[6] Barlas thus concludes that the Qur'an is an egalitarian text that is even critical of patriarchal institution.

Barlas affirms Wadud's critique of traditional exegesis, stressing that the problem with traditional interpretation of Qur'anic texts about women is a tendency to generalise the particular in an ahistorical view of the origins of the Qur'an. Both authors are agreed firstly, that interpretive communities have instituted interpretive authority (*tafsir*) over revelation and secondly, that Qur'anic exegesis should be shorn of the intertextual traditions on which traditional *tafsir* relies, that is, reading the Qur'an in light of its traditional understanding expressed in Hadith.[7] Both Wadud and Barlas are agreed with modernist approaches to the Qur'an, that explore the text in the light of humanist principles and contemporary debates.[8] For instance, Barlas reads the injunction on veiling as a Qur'anic indictment of sexual abuse and patriarchal hierarchy in the light of the Qur'an's teaching in general about chastity for believers.[9] Barlas expands Wadud's egalitarian reading to contend that the gendered language referring to God linguistically 'masculinises' God and forms a patriarchal text. Barlas draws on the Islamic doctrine of *shirk* (blasphemy) to refute the view that the Qur'an is a patriarchal text. Masculinising God, Barlas says, goes against Qur'anic injunction to liken God to any Created thing.[10] Barlas asserts that literalistic readings are based on a confusion of 'Divine Discourse' with the interpretation of that discourse in human terms, which is fundamentally un-Islamic:

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[6] Barlas contradicts certain Islamic studies when she says that Islamic theology anthropomorphised God. See her dialectic with Netton, in *"Believing Women"*, pp. 103-104.

[7] Barlas, 'Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics', p. 106.

[8] See the exposition of Mohamed Talbi's interpretation of Q 3.34 that refers to wife beating. Ronald L. Nettler, 'Mohamed Talbi on understanding the Qur'an', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki (London: OUP, 2004), pp. 225-239 (p. 228).

[9] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, pp. 157-160.

[10] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 94.

> Collapsing God's Words with our interpretation of those Words not only violates the distinction Muslim theology has always made between Divine Speech and its 'earthly realisation', but it also ignores the Qur'an's warning not to confuse it with its readings (Q 39:18).[11]

It is debatable whether Wadud endorses Barlas's conclusion of an unpatriarchal nature of the Qur'an to the extent that it is presented in Barlas's review of Wadud's work.[12] Barlas states that Wadud is most probably "unaware that her own work helps to establish the Qur'an's *anti*patriarchal episteme".[13] Wadud is indeed not so much concerned with masculine language in the Qur'an as pointing out the theological principles of which both genders are subjects in the Qur'an. In fact, Wadud asserts that the Qur'an takes account of the patriarchy present in the receiving community which it is trying to persuade.[14] Wadud therefore retains functional distinctions in her Qur'anic anthropology, albeit that she does not view these distinctions as inherent value of the text, but that the distinctions are based on the comprehension of the society that receives the text.[15]

Both Barlas and Wadud conclude, although with slightly different emphasis, that the Qur'an as a unified text does not essentialise distinctions between women and men: "[The Qur'an does not] propose or support a singular role or single definition of a set of roles, exclusively for each gender across every culture".[16] Therefore both these authors presume the agency of women in mediating Divine text to add the female voice to the interpretive community of the Qur'an. Both authors find the neutral and unified origin of woman and man, Qur'anically defined as human trusteeship (*khilāfa*), to signify complete equality in spiritual responsibility and status.[17] Thus the feminist hermeneutic, interpretive methodology and contextual exposition of both Barlas and Wadud remain centred on the

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[11] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 10.
[12] Barlas, 'Amina Wadud's Hermeneturics', p. 104.
[13] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 11.
[14] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 54.
[15] Wadud, p. 67.
[16] Barlas, 'Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics', p. 113.
[17] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. xi.

ethics of reading, pointing out that readings of male superiority are not just hermeneutic failures, but theological failures and thereby arguing for the possibility of including the female voice as a Qur'anic enterprise.[18] The most prominent convergence between Barlas and Wadud is that the Qur'an encourages women's inclusion in the interpretive enterprise of the Qur'an:

> In challenging the traditional paradigm, [Wadud] reimbues woman with her full humanity and moral agency as God-appointed vicegerent (khalifah) – as is directly stated in the Qur'an – while she creates a niche for a female interpretive presence.[19]

3.1.2 Hermeneutic Difficulties in Wadudian Hermeneutics

Although both these writers have raised valid challenges about the way gendered language is interpreted in the Qur'an and demonstrated how the hermeneutics of the reader shapes the outcome of interpretation, their conclusions present a twofold problematic. Firstly, their assertion that sex/gender is not a meaningful category in the Qur'an is unsustainable and secondly, their explication of the Qur'an as Divine discourse seems to differ from each other, which raises the question how to understand the female voice as constituent of the text. Barlas declares that one of Wadud's most profound insights is that the Qur'an does not use 'the category of sex/gender' to differentiate between humans:

> Indeed, there is no 'concept of woman' or of 'gendered man' in the Qur'an. Hence, while the Qur'an recognises 'anatomical' (sexual/biological) differences, it does not endow these differences, or sex itself, with symbolic meaning (it does not confuse sex with gender, as this author has argued elsewhere).

Their description of the Qur'anic construction of gender is however, practically incomprehensible given that both these authors deal extensively with the 'difficult' verses and phraseology of the Qur'an that are flagged up by feminist readers as source texts for

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[18] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 12.
[19] Hibba Abugideiri, 'Hagar', p. 92.

misogyny, such as 'men are the maintainers of women' (Q 4.34), or 'God has given men a degree above women' (Q 2.228), or the degrees of punishment to be meted out to women who are suspected of infidelity that includes beating (Q 4.34), and so forth.[20] Both authors present readings of these verses in the light of Islamic theology and Qur'anic semiology to point out the principle at stake as reflections of *khilāfa* (human trusteeship) and indeed, effectively undermine assumptions of inherent inequality in these verses. However, other feminist writers have pointed out alternative anthropological motifs in Islam that affirm a positive value of sexuality that has its base in Qur'anic renderings.[21] It stands to reason that the Qur'an cannot both ignore sex/gender as a category while affirming gendered roles as an aspect of Islamic anthropology.

Possibly because of their suppositions of the Qur'an as technically an a-gendered text, both Wadud and Barlas have found themselves outside the Islamic Pale of even liberal interpretation at times.[22] The present thesis thus critiques Islamic feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an while concurring with their premise that understanding the characterisation of females in the Qur'an remains key to gender discourse in Islam.[23] The thesis argues, together with Wadud, that the female characters of the Qur'an are not merely foils for the actions of men but are constitutive of the Qur'anic vision for society as a new order inaugurated by revelation that includes women. It therefore assumes that the portrayal of women in the transformative text determines the place of women in the theological community, which in its turn derives from the selection and description of female 'role models'. Therefore, far from ignoring gender as a meaningful category, gender is a

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[20] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 65-91; and Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, pp. 184-197.

[21] See Sa'diyya Shaikh, 'Knowledge, Women, and Gender in the Hadith', p. 102.

[22] See Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2003), p. 33-35 for a critique of readings of the Qur'an that find it unequivocally egalitarian. See also a report on Muslim response to Amina Wadud's public speaking in a mosque in South Africa, in Esack, pp. 118-125 and the review article of Asma Barlas's book by Jane I. Smith in *MW*, 92 (2002), 481-483.

[23] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. xi.

constituent category of social reformation in the Qur'an. 'Wadudian Hermeneutics' therefore present a threefold problem for an exclusively Qur'anic interpretion of the female characters of the Qur'an.

3.1.2.1 Problem 1: Significance of Gender

The central problematic with the conclusions of Wadud and Barlas is the significance of gender in the Qur'an on the one hand, and the nature of the Qur'an as sacred text mediated in historical circumstance. Although their feminist interpretation of the text coheres with historical-critical method, their argument that human 'anatomical differences' are not endowed with symbolic meaning represents an ahistorical reading of the role and function of the Qur'an as a sacred text, much as done by the traditionalists whom they criticise. Both perspectives read the Qur'an as a set of disembodied propositions in which references to humanity are generalised in equal application to all human beings, or the two genders respectively. In a general sense, the very function of sacred texts constitutes the human embodiment of 'Divine will' in which all aspects of human nature and action serve a signifying function.[24] In a more specific Qur'anic sense, the Qur'an expresses itself systematically as pointing out the symbolic value of every Created aspect, including embodied gender relations, encapsulated in Q 30.21:

> And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them. And He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): Verily in that are Signs for those who reflect.[25]

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[24] See Kate Zebiri's reference to Clifford Geertz's semiology of religions, in 'Towards a Rhetorical Criticism of the Qur'an', *JQS*, 5 (2), (2003), 95-120 (p. 99).

[25] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1056.

3.1.2.2 Problem 2: Female Voice in the Qur'an

The second problematic for feminist hermeneutics arises when Wadud's book comments that her work validates the female voice in the Qur'an. Yet *Qur'an and Woman* does not demonstrate how or where a female voice is constituted in the Qur'an except when Wadud the commentator is seen as part of the Qur'anic community.[26] Barlas notes as an aside that she fails to comprehend Wadud's apparent exploration of female voice in the Qur'an both as a *part of the text* and in response to it. Barlas makes the observation in a footnote:

> Wadud does not fully explain, or perhaps I do not fully understand what she means by [the female voice as] 'part of the text' inasmuch as the Qur'an is not a dual-gendered text, i.e. it does not have female and male voices in it since it was not written by humans. It does seem the case, of course, that women and men tend to read it differently.[27]

While raising the question of a female voice in the Qur'an, the apparent divergence between Barlas and Wadud about the constitution of a female voice in the Qur'an further reveals a fundamental difference in their understanding of the Qur'an as Divine discourse and the symbolism it employs.

3.1.2.3 Problem 3: Historical Context of the Revelatory Text

Amina Wadud views the Qur'anic text as a reflection of, and commentary on, the normative structures of its first audience that includes gender and historical development.[28] For example, Wadud explains the Qur'anic reward of female companions for men in the Hereafter (*ḥūrī*) as an enigmatic Qur'anic sensual depiction reflecting the aspirations and desires of its first hearers. This imagery is then abrogated and replaced by later Qur'anic images of spousal companions in the Afterlife, presumably when the Qur'anic audience has

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[26] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. xi.
[27] Barlas, 'Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics', fn. 42 (p. 120).
[28] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 54.

adapted their views in light of the previous revelations.[29] Wadud therefore considers the development of Qur`anic symbolism as reflective of the spiritual development of its first audience.

Asma Barlas applies a similar historical-critical interpretation to Wadud, though she never quite spells out the relationship between revelation and its historic context, despite criticising traditional conceptions of the occasions of revelation that provide the *Sitz im Leben* of the individual revelations.[30] She indicates her understanding of the origins and nature of the Qur`an, referring to the mechanism of the revelatory process, understood in the traditional way as a metaphysical distinction between God's speech and its created form as written word.[31] Her understanding therefore seems to disregard the religious text as literary product although she acknowledges a historical setting for each revelation. Barlas's understanding of the relationship between the historical text and its Divine authorship is therefore unclear. The apparent divergence between these two authors means that feminist readings of the Qur`an need to stipulate their understanding of the nature of the Qur`an before any question of gender or methodology of reading is elaborated.

3.1.3 Understanding the Prophetic Text

While Islamic feminists contend that the Qur`an's interpretive history has been exclusively in the hands of males, authors such as Leila Ahmed and Annemarie Schimmel point out that alternative readings, stemming from less androcentric or less misogynistic societies, have always occurred to a lesser or larger degree.[32] Studies such as the ethnographic description of Saba Mahmood demonstrate that women continue to extract practicable

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[29] Wadud, *Qur`an and Woman*, pp. 54-55.

[30] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 51.

[31] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, pp. 32-34.

[32] Leila Ahmed, 'Early Islam and the Position of Women: The Problem of Interpretation', in *WMEH* (London: YUP, 1991), p. 62. Schimmel emphasises the divergence between legalistic and popular mystical interpretations in *Deciphering the Signs of God*, p. xiv.

solutions, and form advocating communities, based on Qur'anic interpretation. There are also organisations based on women's interpretation of the Qur'an, including NACMW, the National American Council for Muslim Women, formed in 1983 or WISE, the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, a project that promotes women interpreting Qur'an for legislation. These organisations are, in addition to the individual women and women's groups who work towards social justice in their respective communities, all based on the premise of women's authority in mediating both the Scriptures and Laws that inform their lives and, moreover seek to educate women in deeper Islamic knowledge.[33] Feminist interpretation is therefore generally agreed, whether in theory or practice, that the Qur'an does not advocate the exclusion of women from its interpretive community.

However, the seeming ambivalence about the historicity of the text raises questions whether a feminist reading of the Qur'an is achievable through gender as primary analytical lens on the text. Wadud premises that a feminist reading consists of woman as a category of thought, the question is, what is the thought of which she is a category? Obviously, a feminist exegetical exploration asks how is woman a category in the Qur'an. Yet the entity Qur'an may be seen to refer to manifold significance that is approached variantly as sacred text for a particular community with at least three points of reference: as Divine communication to humankind, as mediated text produced within a historical time and space, and as literature that displays a unique composition. This complexity is reflected differently by traditional and modern scholars with controversies that mark Qur'anic exegesis and commentary. Feminist interpretation on its turn reflects all these interpretive movements and the divergence in hermeneutics between the two Islamic feminist authors, Wadud and Barlas, are mirrored in contemporary literary approaches to the Qur'an.

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[33] Abugideiri, 'Hagar', p. 97; and Saba Mahmood's exposition of 'mosque movements' in *Politics of Piety*, pp. 40-43.

Nevertheless, the presence of women as subjects of the Qur'an together with the discussion of human agency in mediating the Divine text, wherein women have traditionally been seen to hold no part, raises the question whether the Qur'an reflects on how women have heard the text. That is, are women's responses to the Divine communication a subject of the revelation itself? Do women speak about, and to, the revelation in the Qur'an and how are we to search for a woman's voice in a seeming monologue from God to a man.

3.2 Qur'anic Interpretation and the Nature of Revelation

The idea of the Qur'an as one-sided Divine communication lies at the heart of the understanding that the Qur'an is the word of God, to the extent that tradition sees the Qur'an as a copy of an original heavenly tablet. The Qur'an, at least in its skeletal consonantal form, is the realization of Divine speech, or "the 'trace' which was left on earth by the non-material speech of God".[34] The relationship between the materiality of the Qur'an and the uncreatedness of God's speech is reflected in, but also complicates, the discussion of the Qur'an as literature as seen in the Islamic idea of the uniqueness, or inimitability, of the Qur'an (i'jaz). However, the discussion of women and their relation to revelation demonstrated that the Hadith contains reports explaining the circumstances of revelation, including interaction between the Prophet and the community. The asbāb al-nuzūl seems to indicate that the earliest transmitters of Hadith had a different view on the life and work of Muhammad that assumed the participation of the audience in production of the text, which was seen as mediated in the first place, by the primary messenger, the angel

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[34] Josef van Ess, 'Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology', in *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. by Stefan Wild (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1996), pp. 177-194 (p. 180). Arabic, like the other Semitic languages does not require vowels in its written form to be understood. The Qur'an was likewise assembled in this consonantal form which gave rise to the practice of seven readings (qirā'at) of the Qur'an.

Gabriel.[35] A further genre of the Hadith that corroborates this view is the *hadith qudsī*, or sacred traditions. These traditional conceptions attempt an explication of the dynamics of revelation and the role of Muhammad as mediator of revelation. In classical Islamic views the role of Muhammad has been described mainly in terms of two models: to prove revelation as either a mechanistic process wherein the personality and verbal skills of the Prophet play no part, or a dynamic process that responds to human circumstance.

3.2.1 The Inimitability of the Qurʾan (*iʿjaz*)

The Qurʾan's influence from early on was understood as the result of a unique literary production, presented to a people who highly valued literary composition. The Arabs were renowned for their literary accomplishment in oral culture and the Qurʾan often identifies itself as an Arabic product that stands in line with the literary productions of the Arabs, but is without equal. Islamic studies generally agree that the science of *balāgha*, or Arabic rhetoric, developed as an appreciation of the aesthetic character of the Qurʾan.[36] However, these studies often developed in terms of the understanding that the Qurʾan is a copy of a non-human literary form that was presented to Muhammad piecemeal over the time span of his career. The Islamic prophet's task has thus come to be understood through his most common epithet in the Qurʾan of *rasūl Allā*, mostly expressed in the statement of faith: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" (Q 7:158). The designation of Muhammad as 'messenger' has been developed by some into a mechanistic model of revelation, which excludes any human participation in the wording of revelation, and that views Muhammad purely as a vessel of the Divine discourse contained in the

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[35] See Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970) pp. 17-39. For a comparative approach between biblical prophethood and Islamic prophethood see Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an: Islam in its Scripture* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp. 25-39.
[36] See Zebiri, 'Rhetorical Criticism', p. 104.

102

Qur'an.[37] Such conceptions of the Qur'an as literal 'Word of God' often circumscribed the description of the Qur'an in literary-scientific terms and these problematics remain at the heart of Qur'anic interpretation to this day.[38] These divergences are even apparent in discussions of the Qur'an's style from seemingly comparable traditions. For example, the style of the Qur'an is discussed by Muhammed Abdel Haleem and Shah Waliyullah respectively. Both are conservative scholars on the style of the Qur'an, yet their premises and taxonomies lead to divergent conclusions. The following discussion of the conception of *i'jaz* therefore sets out conservative understanding of the literary nature of the Qur'an and by implication its origins and the history of the Qur'an's composition. The aim of this discussion is to point out the traditional views on revelation and mediation of Divine word and the role of the Qur'anic audience in mediating its meaning in relation to exegetic genres such as the *asbāb al-nuzūl* and *hadith qudsī*.

3.2.1.1 I'jaz in the Understanding of Abdel Haleem

Muhammad Abdel Haleem attempts a synthesis of the ahistorical view of the Qur'an with literary stylistics in *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (2001). He maintains that the Qur'an was addressed to the Prophet, but that the linguistic authorship of the text was 'outside' Muhammad: "This mode is maintained throughout the Qur'an. It talks to the Prophet or talks about him and does not allow him to speak for himself. The Qur'an describes itself as a book which God 'sent down' to the Prophet".[39] Haleem sees no difficulty in describing this Divine message in terms of (human) stylistic conventions

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[37] See Shabbir Akhtar, 'An Islamic Model of Revelation', *ICMR*, 2 (1991) 95-105.

[38] Nasr Abu-Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', *Alif*, 23 (2003), 8-47. See also the preface to *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. by Stefan Wild (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1996), p. xi and his article in the same book 'We have sent down to thee a book', p. 149-150 as well as the article in the same edition by Rotraud Wielandt, 'Wurzeln der Schwierigkeit innerislamischen Gesprächs über neue hermeneutische Zugänge zum Korantext', pp. 257-282.

[39] Abdel Haleem, p. 2. For the remainder of this section cited in parentheses.

stating: "The Qur'an couches legal matters in language that appeals to the emotions, conscience and belief in God" (p. 12). Furthermore, he employs literary devices when describing the style of the Qur'an, such as contrast (p. 10), dialogue (p. 12), rhyme (p. 23, particularly p. 163), and 'powerful language' (p. 41). In a comparison between the biblical narrative of Creation and the Qur'an's rendition he describes some stylistic features as 'figurative' (p. 128), and pronounces that 'in the Qur'an God is the narrator' (p. 128). Haleem argues that the actions ascribed to God in the Bible have allowed Christians to conceive of God in anthropomorphic terms, whereas the Qur'an does not (p. 136). However, in the following sentence Haleem ascribes verbs to God, even describing an aspect of dualistic forces in the universe in terms of God's 'liberal method of government' (p. 136) that seemingly contradict his denial of anthropomorphism in the Qur'an. Although employing literary terminology for stylistic features of the Qur'an, it is clear that Haleem remains uncomfortable with it. He describes the narrative technique of the Joseph story in the Qur'an cautiously, expressing a desire to use literary terminology but not wanting to claim it as such: "The Qur'an uses a different technique [to the Bible] for telling the story, which has been called 'dramatic'" (p. 153). Haleem's book therefore demonstrates some of the difficulties with reconciling a mechanistic view of revelation that stands outside the bounds of historical time and place with the historical event of mediating a revelatory text.

3.2.1.2 I'jaz in the Understanding of Waliyullah

By contrast, Shah Waliyullah expresses no hesitation in describing the Qur'an's stylistic qualities in his equally mechanistic view of the Qur'an as products of human expression. He goes so far as to suggest that God couched Divine language in the forms of Arabic poetry developed in pre-Islamic times. For instance, he compares the rhetorical devices of the pre-Islamic odes directly with the Divine language expressed in the Qur'an:

The most eloquent expressions of the Arabs were their odes. While singing the amatory verses, in the beginning they would narrate the occasions of wonder and the events of Terror. This was their old practice. The same style, namely the narration of the events of wonder and terror, has been chosen in some chapters of the Qur'an as well. God says "By those who arrange themselves in ranks, and so are strong in repelling [evil]" (37.1-2) [...] Just as they used to end their letters with some comprehensive words, strange bequests, an emphasis upon following the preceding orders and holding out the threat to one who disobeys that , in the like manner, God has also completed His chapters with comprehensive words, with strong emphasis upon the obedience of His orders and holding out threat to the disobedient.[40]

He furthermore asserts that a number of Qur'anic verses are in the same stylistic format of pre-Islamic literature and concludes that 'God's practice' is to apply human conventions when delivering communication:

Just as the odes are divided into couplets, similarly many of the chapters have been divided into verses. This has been the practice of God, but there is a difference between couplets and the (Qur'anic) verses.[41]

Shah Waliyullah's method relies on removing the mediation of Muhammad from the production of the text altogether and putting forward the direct authorship of God for the Qur'an, albeit expressed in the literary form of pre-Islamic Arabs whereby the Qur'an is at once sacred as well as contextualised in a human life situation. The two accounts of the literary style of the Qur'an by Abdel Haleem and Waliyullah respectively may be termed mechanistic models of revelation, although they diverge in terms of their descriptions of that style.[42]

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[40] Shah Waliyullah, *Al-Fauz Al-Kabir Fī Usūl Al-Tafsīr* (The Principles of Qur'an Commentary) (Islamabad, National Hijra Council, 1985), p. 52.

[41] Waliyullah, p. 53.

[42] It is difficult to determine whether literary approaches are becoming more acceptable within establishment Islam, such as the seminaries and universities of the Middle East. In 1947 Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah presented a thesis to a board of examiners that sought to evaluate traditional accounts at variance with those of biblical tradition in terms of their literary distinctiveness, which would have had to acknowledge genres of the Qur'an. The thesis was denied, although it was published later and several successive editions occurred. However, recent attitudes seem more hostile to the idea of literary features of the Qur'an. Examples of sanction on Muslims who have attempted a literary approach to the Scripture of Islam are the execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha of Sudan in January 1985 and the apostacy case against Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd in

3.2.2 Revelation in Real Time: The *asbāb al-nuzūl*

Despite traditionalist misgivings about historical description of the Qur'an, Islamic scholars

early on appreciated the historical significance behind revelations as an important part of

the meaning. The *asbāb al-nuzūl* are a genre of Hadith that attest to a type of historical-

critical method used by the early Muslim community to situate the revealed text in its *Sitz*

im Leben. However, various questions about the origins of traditional material and the time-

lapse between the revelation and the compilation of its circumstance have prompted critical

considerations of the Hadith and Qur'anic contextualization in the *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

Contenders of a late compilation of the Qur'anic corpus advocate that the *asbāb al-nuzūl*

were compiled even later as part of the legislative complex of the Islamic empire. John

Wansborough explains that more than one sixth of the Qur'an is concerned with regulative

content, that, due to the allusive style of the Qur'an's poetics, contains hardly any explicitly

stated historical context. Wansborough therefore finds that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* function

primarily aetiologically and finds their historical application very limited in this regard.[43]

For R. Marston Speight, the way the Hadith was used in exegesis explains their function.[44]

The *asbāb al-nuzūl* is found to either cite the cause of a revelation, or more ambiguously,

the circumstances a verse of the Qur'an is applicable to.[45] The Hadith is therefore a

prototype of historical criticism. The Hadith also have a rhetorical function to explain

polemic that is only allusively treated in the Qur'an. Marston Speight finds the Hadith to

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Egypt in 1995 that led to his eventual exile. See Jacques Jomier, 'Aspects of the Qur'an Today', in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. by A.F.L. Beeston, and others, (CUP, 1983), pp. 260-269 (p. 267) and the Preface to *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. by Stefan Wild, p. xi.

[43] John Wansborough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, foreword, trans., and expanded notes by Andrew Rippin (New York: Prometheus, 2004), p. 178-179.

[44] Speight, 'The Function of Hadith as Commentary on the Qur'ān, as Seen in the Six Authoritative Collections', in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. by Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 63-81.

[45] Speight, 'The Function of Hadith', p. 69.

106

comply with the rhetoric devices of the Greek *chreia*.[46] On this basis, he argues that nearly all Hadith are epideictic that is, serving to display the ethos of Muhammad as 'prophet, governor, judge, and honoured leader'.[47] The reporting of the Prophet's actions, which include his interaction with the audience, is seen as articulating the variance of the character of the new religious community replacing the old order. And so the Hadith presents the Prophet and the community he inaugurates together as an embodiment of the new Qur'anic community in the reports of their actions and interactions. But to what extent is there a unity between the Qur'anic audience and the Divine discourse reflected in the Qur'an?

3.2.3 Hadith Qudsi and the Revelatory Process

William A. Graham, in his book *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (1977), has shown that early Muslim understanding of Muhammad's prophetic activity did not so much distinguish between Divine word and prophetic Hadith, but took the complexities of the occasion into account in a unified view of the meaning of Muhammad's life. Graham argues that later theological doctrines such as *i'jaz* represent an attempt to preserve the uniqueness of the text and reinforce the transcendent aspect of revelation by even insisting that the Qur'an is an eternal uncreated script.[48] Yet many Islamic traditions point to much more fluid boundaries between revelation and the words and actions of a submitting audience. Graham points to the oral nature of the pre-compositional, or pre-canonical, revelations and the unity between the Prophet's guidance and the community that witnessed to his mission (p. 15). He also cites some examples from the Hadith that affirm extra-Qur'anic revelation as well as persons other than Muhammad that were granted revelation,

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[46] Speight, 'Rhetorical Argumentation', p. 76.
[47] Speight, Rhetorical Argumentation, p. 77.
[48] Graham, p. 14. Hereafter cited in parentheses in this section.

such as Hassan ibn Thabit, the poet (p. 37). Graham posits that it is this question of continuing revelation, or infallible guidance after the death of Muhammad, that lies at the heart of the schism between Sunni and Shi'ah in Islam (p. 38).

The clearest evidence for a more open understanding of revelation Graham finds in a genre of extra-Qur'anic revelations taken up in the Hadith, known as the *hadith qudsī*, or 'sacred sayings'. The *hadith qudsī* are a group of sayings, described as the direct speech of God, that do not occur in the Qur'an but in the Hadith. Muslims distinguish between 'ordinary' hadiths and the *hadith qudsī* on the basis that the hadiths are a record of the inspired Prophet's sayings, whereas the *hadith qudsī* are God's directives but put into Muhammad's own words. This is in contrast to the Qur'an, which is viewed as words directly from God with no input by Muhammad.

Although largely celebrated by Sufis and part of popular piety that are seen to be later developments in Islam, the *hadith qudsī* appear in the very earliest and classical collections of Hadith (p. 39). It is in this unified approach of the early Muslim community to the Divine word and prophetic word that Graham posits an understanding of the revelatory process of the Qur'an:

> If too mechanical a line is drawn between verbatim Qur'anic revelation communicated through Muhammad and implicit, non-Qur'anic revelation and inspiration granted him as a function of his prophethood, the early Community's essentially unitive understanding of God's activity in the sending of His Apostle is distorted. The 'pre-theological' Muslim understanding of revelation was focussed not solely upon a scriptural revelation, but upon a revelatory event in which scriptural revelation was the principal, but not the only aspect of God's revelatory activity (p. 19).

Thus Graham contends that the early Muslim community, contrary to later theological distinctions between Divine words and human words, was able to view the Qur'an both as the word of God and as the word of Muhammad, reflecting a "human history in the text of

the Qur'an" (p. 29). The unitive perspective provided by both the *asbāb al-nuzūl* and *hadith qudsī* on the interactive nature of the Qur'an's revelatory text therefore provides the framework in which to view both the interactive reports in the Hadith as narrative of Islamic prophethood and the Qur'an as literary aim of the interaction between Muhammad and the wider community as ultimate addressee of the text.

3.2.4   Literary Approaches to the Qur'an

The unity between Divine scripture and the prophetic life characterises modern literary approaches to the Qur'an, yet with an emphasis on the unified message of the complete text. Muslim scholars such as Mustansir Mir, Issa J. Boullata and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd consistently argue for a literary approach to the Qur'an.[49] In *Coherence in the Qur'an* (1986), Mir puts forward the ideas of a contemporary Pakistani scholar, Amin Ahsan Islahi's exegetic principle of *nazm*, which assumes the thematic and structural cohesion of the Qur'an.[50] His article 'The *surah* as Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Qur'an Exegesis' (1993) reflects a directional change in Muslim Qur'anic studies that breaks with the convention of dealing with the content of the Qur'an on a verse-by-verse basis. Mir states that his holistic view of the text is contrary to traditional methodology, but affirms that it remains indigenous to the Muslim world.[51] Both Mir and Boullata frame their work

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[49] Mustansir Mir, 'The Qur'ān as Literature', *Religion and Literature*, 20 (1988), 49-64. Often cited on Islamic web pages such as <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Q_Studies/Mirliter.html and http://www.quranicstudies.com/article34.html>. Also *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, ed. by Issa J. Boullata (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000); and the review article of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's work by Navid Kermani, 'From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur'an', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki (London: OUP, 2004), 169-192.

[50] In a later article Mir discusses classical Islamic attempts at recognition of the purposeful arrangement of the Qur'an, such as that of Zarkashi (745-794/1344-1391) and Suyuti (d. 911/1505), as well as modern exegetes such as Ashraf 'Ali Thanavi (1280-1362/1863-1943) and Sayyid Qutb (1324-1386/1906-1966), in 'The *surah* as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Qur'ān exegesis', in *Approaches to the Qur' ān*, ed. by G.R. Hawting and others, (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 211-224.

[51] Mir, 'The *surah* as Unity', p. 218. See also the introductory remarks on Mir's work by A.H. Mathias Zahniser, 'Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisā'*, in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, ed. by Issa J. Boullata (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 26-55 (p. 27).

comparatively with work in biblical studies such as Robert Alter and Frank Kermode's *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987) together with other Muslim approaches as precursor to their own studies.[52] Likewise, Mir accedes that modernity may have created the conditions under which a literary approach to the Qur'an became possible, or even necessary.

Mir's literary approach considers the Qur'an's use and development of language intratextually as well as comparatively with that of classical Arabic poetry. He advocates viewing the text as an organic whole with the development of meaning reflected in its language. The operating principle is to focus on the language of the Qur'an in its poetic environment. Mir thus presents a critique of traditional methods of exegesis that treat the text atomistically (verse-by-verse instead of contextually).[53] He contends that traditionalist exegesis treats the text piecemeal without consideration of the received arrangement of both the verses and chapters.[54] Mir points out that there are many Arabic works that deal with the literary qualities of the Qur'an, but these remain works of theology in premise and structure.[55] Mir's exegesis of the Qur'an relies more on a comparison with the language of classical Arabic poetry than on the lexicographical and exegetical corpora of Islamic tradition, which in his opinion "are works of interpretation and need to be used with critical care".[56] Nevertheless, Mustansir Mir is convinced that the literary aspects of the Qur'an may be appreciated by anyone no matter what their stand on the origins of the Qur'an.[57]

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[52] Mir, 'The Qur'an as Literature', p. 49 and Boullatta, *Literary Structures*, p. xii.
[53] Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an*, p. 1.
[54] This criticism is also voiced by feminist authors such as Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 2.
[55] Mir, 'The Qur'an as Literature', p. 49.
[56] Mir, *Verbal Idioms of the Qur'ān* (Ann Arbor: Centre for Near Eastern and North African Studies, 1989), p. 9.
[57] Mir, 'The Qur'an as Literature', p. 51.

Thus, a literary-critical approach enquires about meaning from the text in its final form, the so-called *textus receptus*.[58] It is less concerned with the historical facticity of a text's genesis and subsequent development, except where it is at issue in the text itself.[59] Rather, the literary-critical reader explores the structure of the text to elucidate meaning from the received corpus as a communication process, with questions of origin and intention interpolating the discussion.[60] However, as Issa Boullata points out in the introduction to his book *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (2000), it is the religious meaning that comes into focus from a literary analysis of the Qur'an (p. x). This assertion indicates that the messages gleaned from readings of sacred texts do not only bring aesthetic or historical possibilities to the fore but holds meaning for ethical relationships. Wadudian hermeneutics assert that the religious meaning has a further implication for the gender of the reader. Wadud and Barlas argue that meaning requires the acknowledgement that sacred texts serve an epistemic role in human life as Divine knowledge, which helps the believer to understand her and his role and function in life in a specific way and which forms the subjectivity of the reader in terms of the text.[61]

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[58] Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an, rev. and enlarged by W. Montgomery Watt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 40-56. Bell and Watt's articulation of the various traditions of compilation and its critiques has as yet not been superceded.

[59] For example Fazlur Rahman in *MajorThemes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), pp. 133-134, points to the Qur'an's indications of the historical religious milieu of Muhammad's prophethood as that of an inclination toward the Judeo-Christian ideas that had penetrated into the Arabian peninsula, manifesting as a desire for a new Arab prophet (Q 37.168-170, 35.42). Such an approach is also evident for the Hadith due to its positioning as historiography of the revelation. See also R. Marston Speight, 'Rhetorical Argumentation in the Hadith Literature of Islam', *Semeia*, 64 (1994), 73-92.

[60] The problematics associated with viewing Scripture as literature are not limited to the Islamic tradition, but also occur within biblical scholarship, for example Eugene Botha's observations in *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Speech Act Reading of John 4:1-42* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1991), p. 55.

[61] See also Eric J. Lott, *Vision, Tradition, Interpretation: Theology, Religion, and the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), p. 36. For the epistemic nature of Scripture as foundation of method, see Biderman, pp. 102-103.

3.3 A Hermeneutic of Pre-Canonical Reading

A literary appreciation of the Qur'an therefore understands its stylistic and formalistic

qualities in terms of a unity of purpose that is related to historical events connected with the

Prophet of Islam. One study that has pointed out the relationship between Qur'anic

signification and Muhammad's prophetic career, is M. Causse's discussion of the

similarities between traditional narrations of Muhammad's career and Qur'anic portrayal of

the prophetic mission of such characters as Abraham and Moses.[62] Causse finds that the

figures of Abraham and Moses in particular, present literary types against which the

prophetic career of Muhammad may be measured. Causse relates the portrayal of Moses in

the Qur'an to events in the historiography of Muhammad, that, in the first place, relate to

the distinction between the Makkan and Madinan phases of Muhammad's career. Causse

points to the similarities between the descriptions of Moses' prophethood and

Muhammad's prophetic witness such as their instantaneous conversion by a vision, their

warnings against rebellion, or their origins as practically orphaned from birth.[63]

However, the relation between women and the mediation of revelation in the Hadith

described above, indicate a further dynamic reflected in the Qur'an, namely an interactive

process between Divine communication, the prophet as mediator and the interlocuting

community as form-givers to the text. The Qur'an may therefore be viewed as the

documenting of 'a canon-in-process'. Such a view then asks how the Prophet is part of a

formative community that develops the canon Qur'an while both the text and addressees

are being transformed and moulded through revelation. Any discussion of a Qur'anic theme

therefore presumes a hermeneutic triangle of a text (the Qur'an), a communicative event

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[62] M. Causse, 'The Theology of Separation and the Theology of Community: A Study of the Prophetic Career
of Moses According to the Qur'an', in *The Qur'an: Style and Content*, ed. by Andrew Rippin, pp. 37-60.
[63] Causse, pp. 43-45.

(revelation) and a life-context, or specific circumstance in the life of the addressees (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). A gendered reading therefore enquires after the interpretive role of gender as part of any of the three aspects of this hermeneutic triangle, that is, a female presence in either the Qur'anic text, in the communicative event or as subject of a specific circumstance. If a feminist reading is not to end up being a mere gender-friendly gloss to the Qur'an, the understanding of the role of female characters in the Qur'an has to be viewed as part of its structure and as reflection of the ethics of interaction between the Prophet and his community transmitted in Hadith. The reading of the present thesis therefore considers texts where the subject of women speaking shape the prophetic, or revelatory, language.

3.3.1 From Polemics to Polyvocalics

Many point out the polemical character of the Qur'an, indicating that the Qur'an spoke as much to the life situations and questions of its audience as its discourse was shaped by that audience. Kate Zebiri finds that the Qur'an is ideally suited to a rhetorical analysis as the style of the Qur'an is mostly persuasive or polemical and the Qur'an is unique in that it reflects the circumstances of its original hearing, "even to the point of responding to specific questions asked by Muhammad's contemporaries".[64] The polemical style and theme of the Qur'an has therefore often led to suggestions that the Qur'an be understood in terms of opposition or recalcitrance towards Muhammad.[65]

Angelika Neuwirth recommends an approach that requires the contextualizing of single sections within the larger polemic-apologetic discourse of which they form part, paying specific attention to the "subtle self-referential traces of [the Qur'an's] process of

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[64] Zebiri, 'Rhetorical Criticism', p. 96.
[65] For a full overview of English scholarship on polemics in the Qur'an, see Zebiri, 'Rhetorical Criticism', pp. 96-97.

emergence as Scripture of a community".[66] This means that the Qur'an is viewed as a unified text, or canon, yet the individual parts are viewed as a part of a process of revelation. Such an approach specifically requires a consideration of selected texts within the function they held as documents of a historically situated sequence of communications between a speaker and an audience in the process of growing together as a community. The result is that the form of the Qur'an is not viewed as the end-product of religio-political measures, but is seen as reflecting an extended process of communal interaction that in itself becomes a dimension of the meaning of the Qur'an.[67]

Neuwirth's suggestion is not only made in the light of contemporaneous movements in theological studies, such as the canonical approach of biblical studies, but she points to the 'canonical consciousness' implicit in the Qur'an when it refers to itself initially as 'recitation' (qur'an) evolving later into the term kitāb, 'book'. These phases are distinctly marked by language and verse structure, so that scholars have divided Qur'anic development into two distinct phases: the 'qur'an'-phase and the 'kitāb'-phase. The self-referential naming of its nature is furthermore part of the Qur'an's documentation of interaction between Muhammad and a growing number of followers over and against various factions of opposition, also noted by the Islamic chronology of the first Makkan phase of Muhammad's career and the second Madinan phase. Neuwirth posits that the interactive dialectic that shaped the Qur'an is reflected when "the Believers among whom, i.e. the community, even step into the text, not only as protagonists in new scenarios of salvation history but as conscious voices in an ongoing debate".[68] She terms readings that take account of this interactive dialectic 'pre-canonical' readings, meaning that individual

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[66] Angelika Neuwirth, 'Negotiating Justice', (Part 1), p. 26.
[67] Neuwirth, 'Negotiating Justice', (Part 1), p. 26.
[68] Neuwirth, 'Negotiating Justice', (Part 1), p. 27.

114

passages are seen as part of a developmental process that eventually produced the canon Qur`an.

A female voice in the Qur`an may therefore be explored as a part of the documentation of the polemical character of the Qur`an and the literary structures that point out the development of Qur`anic theology over the twofold chronology of Muhammad's career reflected in the Qur`an. A feminist pre-canonical reading therefore considers interaction between mediator and audience in the text in terms of gender and in terms of sequential development of the text. A gendered approach to the Qur`an thus is not only reader-centred in the sense of the hermeneutics of the modern-day reader, but also listener-centred in terms of the implied first community of women and men that perceived the text according to the Islamic narrative of prophethood.

3.3.2   A Feminist Literary Approach to the Qur`an

Over and above literary approaches to the Qur`an, the present thesis also draws on the work of Mieke Bal and others who have presented feminist literary readings of sacred texts, albeit of the Bible.[69] In *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (1988), Bal explains that she sees the text as a figuration of the reality that brought it forth and to which it responded. Thus rather than seeing the text as literary in the aesthetic sense, as a fiction that has no connection to reality, Bal sets out to show how the literary and linguistic choices made in the text "represent a reality that they both hide and display".[70] In terms of the origins of the Bible, Bal assumes that, though the text may have been composed out of many sources, at the time of final redaction it was conceived of as one text (p. 4). This thesis takes a similar approach to the Qur`an, based on the Muslim

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[69] For an overview of the Islamic female in general literary motif, see Marcia K. Hermansen, 'The Female Hero in the Islamic Religious Tradition', *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*, Vol. 2, ed. by Arvind Sharma and Kathrine K. Young, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 111-143.
[70] Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, p. 3. Hereafter cited in parentheses in this section.

literary approaches that adhere to a standard text based on an Uthmannic recension, despite disagreements about the compilation.[71] Qur`anic composition is viewed as loosely reflecting the narrative of the life and career of Muhammad. The Hadith provides the Islamic understanding of specific events in the career of the Prophet that find reference in the Qur`an. In terms of the debates about the historicity of the Hadith, this thesis argues that ignoring the Hadith looses valuable historiographic data that explains the Qur`anic narrative of prophethood, although it must be read critically within the context of the narrators and the religio-political issues of their time. The unitive understanding of the Qur`an as a canonical process reflecting the Prophet's career implies that human situations are assumed to shape revelation. Such an understanding also suggests that, far more than the apparent legal or theological content of the Qur`an, it also reflects the social revolution that transforms kinship relations, that is between women and men as well as between the ˍcommunity and the Others against whom the Qur`anic community was in the process of distinguishing itself. The social revolution empowered an alliance of previously warring Arabian tribes to submit to a new code while it extended its influence beyond the borders of the Hijazi desert to become a world empire within a hundred and fifty years of the rise of its Prophet. The Qur`an indicates that it was also a social revolution that attracted women from hostile communities to form an alliance with Muhammad (Q 60). The question therefore is how is it that women were specifically drawn to the message and community of the Prophet? What life possibilities did he present that were not available to them in their previous contexts? In terms of their Qur`anic significance then, the question is how do women feature as a community interacting with the mediator of revelation?

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[71] For an overview of the various scholarly debates on the dating of the Qur`an's compilation, see Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

3.3.3   Women and Revelation in the *asbāb al-nuzūl*

Islamic feminism has made clear that the Hadith contains various reports of interactions

between the Prophet and the community wherein women are central. However, it has also

been shown that Islamic feminism invariably stops short of positing a female voice as part

of the revelations that constituted the Qur'an. This was apparent in the work of Wadud and

Barlas who read female characterization in the Qur'an in terms of Islamic doctrines. To this

may be added Fatima Mernissi's argument that part of Muhammad's mission was to

inaugurate an egalitarian project. Mernissi understands this project to have started with the

question by Umm Salama why the revelations only addressed men, to which the Prophet

received a message affirming the inclusion of women as addressees of the revelations.

Mernissi states that "the answer of the Muslim God to Umm Salama was very clear: Allah

spoke of the two sexes in terms of total equality as believers, that is, as members of the

community".[72] Mernissi goes on to argue that these *asbāb al-nuzūl* are indicative of an

actual protest movement by women that led to numerous revelations on their behalf.[73]

Although Mernissi's application questions traditional assumptions of gender in the

founding history of Islam, her acceptance of traditional dichotomies, such as between

Jāhiliyya and the new Islamic community also hinders her from engaging the literal

significance of the female characters that figure as active subjects, or agents.[74]

Islamic feminist interpretation has therefore sometimes worked within the traditional

constructions of agency and subjectivity that reads women's role as foil to the actions of the

male agent. However, when the perspective is shifted to the audience instead of the

mediator of revelation, women are seen as active subjects that question and expand the

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[72] Mernissi, p. 118.
[73] Mernissi, pp. 120-125.
[74] See the critique of Islamic theology's dichotomy between Jāhiliyya and Islam as lens that diverts Leila Ahmed's discussion of women in the pre-Islamic period, by Teipen, p. 440.

Divine communication. Yet their presence and their voices have been obscured to the extent that silence is now often understood to be an Islamic prerogative for women. How has it come to such a point and how are we to recuperate women's voice in the Qur`an?

3.3.3.1 Human Voice within God's Word

Literary criticism in general and feminist philosophy in particular, has postulated voice as a consciousness that operates within a concrete environment and that this environment is furthermore relational. In other words, meaning is constructed socially through the interaction of a variety of people, or multiple voices that represent a variety of viewpoints. Mieke Bal pointed out that the text (even the sacred text), is a register of the physical world that shapes those viewpoints, such as the gendered body, geographic setting, political time, and so forth. In terms of traditional understanding of the revelatory process of the Qur`an, as a sequence of communications revealed to Muhammad, the nature of 'voice' in the Qur`an is assumed to reflect a male voice. That is, as the voice of Muhammad it is masculine in sonority while the logic behind the voice is God's, which is male in character or attributes, if not in biological fact. The question then is, does the Qur`an reflect only masculine logic, or does it include feminine reasoning?

3.3.3.2 Feminist Voice

Adriana Cavarero, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and others, argues that Western philosophy has lost sight of the material body of the speaker in its elevation of speech above sound, and of the semantic above the writing.[75] (In denoting the philosophical base of this dichotomy as 'Western', Cavarero does not exclude Islamic philosophy. We are

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[75] Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of vocal Expression* trans. by Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Hereafter cited in parentheses in this section.

reminded that classical Abbasid scholarly enterprises translated Greek texts from the libraries of Persia and Alexandria into Arabic and passed this Graeco-Arabic synthesis on to medieval Europe through the work of, amongst others, Averroes [Ibn Rushd] and Avicenna [Ibn Sina]).[76]

The scholars of voice have an interest in how the actions of human beings are related to the articulation of thought, or to put it differently, how registers of corporeality relate to the logic of representation. Whereas Judith Butler emphasized that subjectivity is constituted by the contrastive relationship with others, Cavarero points out how shared public discourse, such as politics and philosophy, tends to deny the materiality of the speaker for the sake of rationality, or 'logos': "[Philosophical thinking] always seeks to simplify and classify so that it rarely pays attention to the unique voice" (p. 3). Furthermore, Cavarero finds that the natural relationality of the speaking voice is neutralised in a process of self-referential meaning formation wherein the physical voice is silenced and the voice of the Other thereby eliminated (p. 46). She therefore concludes that philosophical rationality, or 'logos' has been depersonalized and devocalized and argues that the polyphony, or community of voices, in the canons of Western thought needs to be reinstated.

In a scripturally reasoned way (without presenting it as such), Cavarero illustrates the differentiation between the sonority of voice and the deliberation of speech by pointing to the origins of the Abrahamic scriptures as sonorous events. Cavarero equates the voice/sound of God, as contained in the Hebrew word *qol* with the breath (*ruah*) that gave life to Creation (Genesis 1). Drawing on the work of Frans Rosenzweig and Gershom

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[76] See *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. by Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (CUP, 2005) and Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998). For specific works on Avicenna and Averroes, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1988) and A.F. El-Ehwany, 'Ibn Rushd', in *History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. by M.M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harasowitz, 1963), 540-64.

Scholem, Cavarero explains the origins of the Word of God and its relationship to the voice of the prophet as a mediating process:

> For the most ancient phase of the Hebrew religion, God is voice, or also breath, not speech. Speech, according to the ritual formula 'word of God', is what God becomes through the prophets who lend him their mouths, in such a way that the Divine qol is made articulate language, or the language of Israel. The prophet 'does not make God speak, but at the moment in which he opens his mouth, God speaks'. The word of God thus makes itself 'perceptible in the *medium* of human language' (p. 21).

Cavarero finds the importance of the sound still reflected in the name of the Hebrew Bible as *miqra*, a recitation event that is combined with bodily movements. This is co-terminous with Neuwirth's understanding of the Qur'an as a recitation-text and the Muslim practice of prayer positions (*salah*). In contrast, the Christian tradition materializes meaning in writing, as demonstrated in the Greek name *biblion*, 'writings', and a procedure of reading that is silent and immobile (p. 22).

Cavarero argues that philosophical thinking closes its ears to the materiality of voice in order to extract the rational logic of the semantic by way of a dialectical process that links the female with the singing voice and the male with the thinking process. She demonstrates this dialectical process in her analyses of Greek mythology where she finds that the masculine sphere represents the rational semantic while the feminine sphere, often represented by singing "becomes secondary, ephemeral, and inessential" (p. 6). These activities of voice are moreover often pitted against each other as antagonists. In Muslim life, the dichotomous construction that links singing with the feminine, and therefore with corruption of the social order (*fitnah*), is particularly visible where Islamist politics gain ascendancy, as in North-West Pakistan, Afghanistan and post-Sadam Hussein Iraq, where the first token of Islamist presence is to remove singing as well as visual images of women

from public spaces. The shared spaces of community as a polyphony of voices and sounds must only reverberate with the monologue of austere Talibanised/Wahhabi monotheism.[77]

Cavarero posits that any activity of the voice, whether singing or speaking, is relational. When the voice is removed as a matter for reflection, logos, or reasoning gravitates towards the depersonalized universal and the saying becomes an anonymous code or system (p. 43). In her reading of Emmanuel Levinas's radical ethics of responsibility, Cavarero reviews his resolution of the question of speech to be found in the face, the visual, instead of the voice. In examining the role of the interlocutor in speech, Cavarero posits that every face is unique as a matter of fact, but that it is the voice that transcends the plane of speech and manifests the uniqueness of the other (p. 27).[78] Nevertheless, Cavarero draws from Levinas the conclusion that the act of communication precedes the process of signification and that meaning will be recuperated from a consideration of the sayings, or singular voices, of unique speakers (p. 29).

3.3.3.3 Cavarero and the Inimitability of the Qur`an

Cavarero's understanding of revelation, and indeed Creation, as sonorous events that find human expression through the mouth of the prophet is in accord with literary approaches that describe the Qur`an as the material trace of God's speech on earth. Her supposition of the materiality of voice, and specifically the gendered voice, as remnant in philosophical discourse posits the exploration of the feminine as an activity of speech in the discourses of rationality. On the surface, one could argue that the Islamic tradition has endeavoured to do

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[77] See television documentaries by director Layth Abdul Amir for Zarafa Films, 'Iraq: The Song of the Missing Men', (released as 'Irak, le chant des absents, 2006) and Sharmeen Obaid, 'Reinventing the Taliban' (2003).
[78] To make this point clearer we may think of regional dialects: Often the voice of a person whom we do not know is more telling of their origins than their facial features. Also note the development of vocal forensics as part of criminal investigation where voice recordings often identify particular individuals.

exactly what Cavarero suggests in supplying names and characters for female presences in religious texts through the exegetic descriptions of the occasions of revelation. However, in Chapter Two, I argued that classical Islamic scholarship subsumed women's agency and speaking activity into the rationalisations of Islamic doctrine. It was shown that the subjectivity of women demonstrated the depersonalised logic of the androcentric universe even where religious agency for women, such as the function of *nubuwah* (prophethood) or revelatrix, was the aim of discussion.

Exploration of feminine reasoning in the Qur'an therefore needs to distinguish between the inscribing of a persona that informs the text and the woman as addressor or addressee to the text. Exposition of the gendered vocal expression in the revealed text contrasts with the Hadith as historical background to the text, asking what role the female played in the interaction between historical circumstance and Divine revelation. The historical background is attained through a critical and likewise literary consideration of the Hadith that describes the event of revelation and the circumstances that it is speaking to. Yet both the text and its background are to be seen as presentations of meaning in progress. The relationship between the Divine communication as text and the life-context that illustrates the development of both the community and the canon may be illustrated in Figure 1:
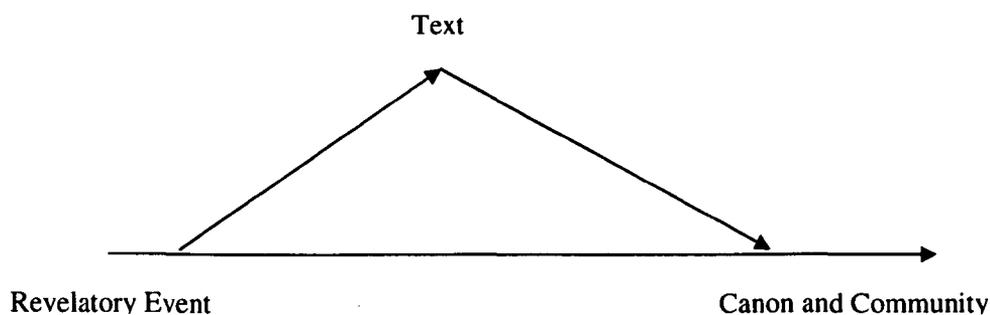
Figure 1   Hermeneutic Triangle of text, life context and canonical growth

The question then is how does the text signify Divine communication in relation to gender. How are women part of the revelatory event to which the text refers and how does the text assert women as part of the community that is edified by the text? More simply put, how does God talk to and about women in the Qur'an and does the Qur'an describe women talking to God? These questions on their part require an understanding of the text as a system of signification from which women draw their relevance in relation to the authority of the text. In the Qur'an, this signification is made explicit by the Qur'an's description of itself as a revealed text that is a sign (*ayāt*) and it is this notion of Sign that has provided many Qur'anic scholars with a thematic framework for exploring particular notions in Qur'anic discourse. For instance, Barlas's methodology of a Qur'anic hermeneutic for her feminist reading of the Qur'an relies on a Qur'anic instruction to decipher its *ayāt* or signs.[79] The following chapter therefore explicates the notion of Sign in the Qur'an in terms of its development from the Makkan period to the Madinan, as well as in terms of the language of Sign seen principally in the term *ayāt*. The discussion of Sign diverts momentarily from the consideration of gender in order to make clear the exclusively Qur'anic conceptualisation of the relation between form and meaning for thinking about themes such as gender in the Qur'an.

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[79] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 20.

123

Chapter Four

Sign as Qur'anic Hermeneutic

Scholars of Scriptural Reasoning invariably point to the centrality of Sign as a hermeneutic key to the Qur'an and the term *ayāt*, which is simultaneously the term for 'sign' and the formal verse in the Qur'an. It is often presented as key to making meaning of the text as exemplified in the title to Annemarie Schimmel's book *Deciphering the Signs of God*. Yet the conceptualisation of Sign as thematic instrument of the Qur'an has not received comprehensive treatment as formal structure of the Qur'an. Basit Bilal Koshul identified *ayāt* as the 'kerygmatic' theme of the Qur'an. Koshul explains the language of Sign in the Qur'an by contrasting the work of the Western semiotician, Paul Ricoeur, and Muhammad Iqbal, an Islamic philosopher, with particular focus on modern and pre-modern understandings of the relationship between nature and the Divine. Koshul refutes the dichotomy between Divine and secular realms that characterises both Western and Islamic philosophical traditions by pointing to Sign in the Qur'an.[1] He argues that the Qur'an is able to reinvest meaning and significance in the empirical, sensual domain as manifestation or symbol of the sacred, and he demonstrates how the Qur'an's *ayāt* articulate the reality of Creation as pointers to the Creator in terms of a relation between transcendence and immanence:

> The Qur'an does not make divinity imminent in nature, history or the self, but at the same time it does not make divinity irrevocably transcendent above nature, history and the self. The Qur'anic narrative links the empirical realm with the supra-empirical realm by asserting that the empirical is a sign, token, marker, symbol (an ayā) of the

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[1] Basit B. Koshul, 'The Semiotics of Ayah: A Comparative Introduction', *JSR Forum*, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/KosSemi.html> [Accessed 15 March 2006].

supra-empirical, with the supra-empirical in its turn affirming the reality and goodness of the empirical.[2]

Koshul identifies a threefold typology of the Qur'an's signs, namely as a) the world of nature, b) the 'self' of the human being, and c) the unfolding historical process. However, Koshul makes a categorical distinction between *ayāt* in the Qur'an, that is *ayāt* as formal verse/signs of the Qur'an and those "external to the Qur'an", namely the phenomena that are referred to in the Qur'an. This means in effect that the Qur'an's *ayāt* form a fourth and separate category to the natural and anthropological types of Sign in Koshul's analysis. Koshul therefore does not relate the materiality of a phenomenon to its Qur'anic citation. Thus, although Koshul echoes Islamic feminist critique of the dichotomous divisions between the sacred and profane spheres of life that disregard the materiality of existence, he stops short of considering the implications of the Qur'an's semiology for a gendered reading.

Koshul relates humanity, as members of the profane sphere, to the symbolism of the natural order.[3] He cites Q 30:20-23 as proof-text and finds that these verses addresses all manner of diversity amongst humanity, whether gendered, ethnic or economic:

20. And among His signs is this: He creates you out of dust and then, lo! you become human beings ranging far and wide!

21. And among His signs is this: He creates for you mates out of your own selves so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are ayāt for people who think!

22. And among His wonders (*ayāt*) is the creation of the heaven and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours: for in this, behold! there are *ayāt* for all who have knowledge.

23. And among His wonder (*ayāt*) is your sleep at night, and in daytime, as well as your [ability to go about in] quest of some of His bounties: in this, behold, there are *ayāt* for people who [are willing to] listen![4]

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[2] Koshul, (para. 45 of 112).
[3] Koshul, (para. 89 of 112).
[4] Koshul, (para. 90 of 112).

Koshul finds these Qur'anic descriptions of human diversity to typify Qur'anic anthropology in terms of the philosophical categories of 'the physical self', 'individual', or humans as 'ego' that reflects the 'Ultimate Ego'. He does not address gender, except for a sideways remark about clothing that may be seen as a comment on gender as clothing is such a contentious topic in Muslim discourse on gender.[5] Koshul explicates *ayāt* as a Qur'anic term and semiology from a philosophical point of view that provides a hermeneutic from which to derive gendered categories of anthropology in the Qur'an, yet his work also raises the question how to negotiate between metaphysical symbolism and the materiality of existence in understanding what the *ayāt* of the Qur'an means for the women and men who read the Qur'an.

Sachiko Murata, on the other hand, relates the *ayāt* directly to Qur'anic anthropology based on metaphysical relations between the sacred and the profane realms. Murata is likewise convinced that the Qur'an itself encourages interpretation "going beyond the merely phenomenal level", finding Sign to be the originating impulse of Islam:

> The great message that begins Islam in the specific historical sense, the Koran, is a collection of God's signs.[6]

Murata posits that Sign is one of the recurring themes of the Qur'an and in contrast to Koshul, finds it more often associated with a sense of Divine revelation than with natural phenomena. Murata therefore does not distinguish between Qur'anic and extra-Qur'anic signs but defines *ayāt* as 'any phenomenon that gives news of God'.[7] In terms of a typology of the Qur'anic signs, Murata makes the general observation that a sign may be "a prophet, a prophetic message, a prophetic miracle, or simply the things of the natural world".[8]

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[5] Koshul, (para. 93 of 112).
[6] Murata, p. 27.
[7] Murata, p. 23.
[8] Murata, p. 23.

Murata likewise does not develop a typological categorisation of the *ayāt*, but she interprets the perceived Qur'anic anthropology in the Qur'an's language of Sign in terms of a human role in Divine communication that may either refer to the person (prophet) or the activities of the person (prophetic message/prophetic miracle). The questions are how are Koshul's 'ayah of self and human identity' constitutive of a Qur'anic anthropology? And how are the role models and female figures of Stowasser and Wadud's lists part of the anthropological elements of Sign as a prophetic activity?

The remaining discussion in this chapter therefore draws on the expositions of Koshul and Murata above to explore a more closely defined conception of Sign in the Qur'an. The discussion and analysis present an inclusive and overall consideration of a taxonomy of Sign as applying literary scholarship that has demonstrated the relation between formal stylistics and meaning in the Qur'an. Once identified, the typological categories of Sign in the Qur'an may be explored in terms of gender.

4.1 Meaning and Form in Qur'anic Scholarship

The term Qur'an means recitation, however, the term as such does not occur in the text but is derived from a sense of the prophetic mission that started with the emphatic *'iqra'*: "Recite!". The command to the Prophet to recite the Divine pronouncement in Q 96.1 is understood to be the prototype of each revelatory unit of the Qur'an. The Qur'an may therefore be viewed more accurately as a collection of recitals, or revelatory events that individually are called 'surah'. The origins of this word in Arabic are debated. For instance, Bell and Watt argue that the word surah may be related to the Syriac *sūrṭā* that has the

sense of 'writing', or Scripture.[9] There are 114 surahs in the final edition of the Qur'an that start with the Opening, *al-fātihā* and are ordered, according to traditional scholarship, roughly in terms of length from longer more prosaic passages to shorter poetic passages. Each surah has a title or name, and it is this name that is normally used by Muslims to refer to the surah rather than the number. Further to the name, each title contains the place and timing of origin as either during the pre-Hijrah Makkan phase, or post-Hijrah Madinan phase, although Muslim scholars readily admit that the surahs are composite and that certain sections of Madinan surahs may contain Makkan material, and vice versa.[10] A further part of the heading, except for one surah (Q 9), is the *bismillāhi*-formula, consisting of the phrase *bismillāhi al-rahmāni al-rahīmi*, 'In the name of God most beneficent Merciful'. The heading as a whole may therefore be considered a piece of scholarly commentary by the most authoritative Muslim scholars and do not belong to the revelatory content itself.[11]

The Qur'an contains a further feature of individual letters, or groups of letters, at the beginning of certain surahs that are called the 'Mysterious Letters'. The mysterious letters are single, or groups of, thirteen letters of the Arabic alphabet in eleven different combinations, for example *hā-mīm* (H-M), *alif-lām-rā* (A-L-R), *alif-lām-mīm* (A-L-M) following the *bismillāhi*-formula of twenty-nine of the surahs; a rather substantial portion of the Qur'an. They have not been satisfactorily explained although certain combinations have been retained in blocks of surahs in the compilation of the Qur'an. Yusuf 'Ali gives a complete list of the groups of letters and suggests a correlation between the surahs with

[9] Bell & Watt, p. 58.
[10] See Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996), p. 73, for a detailed description of insertions according to traditional scholarship.
[11] Bell & Watt, p. 59.

mysterious letters and the message of the Qur'an as revealed sign.[12] These alphabetic

symbols form the title of five surah-titles (Q 20, 36, 38, 41, and 50) and originate in the

earlier Makkan period except for Q 41, which is from a later Makkan phase (distinctions

explained below in discussion of chronology).[13]

The surahs are themselves divided into *ayāt*, generally translated as 'verses' based on

rhyme divisions in the text. The origins of the term *ayāt* are uncertain. It is understood

literally as 'sign' and the term occurs in the text, although it is mainly in passages of a later

date that it contains some sense of verse "if at all".[14] Most explanations relate *ayāt*

comparatively and etymologically to the other Semitic languages, such as the Hebrew `oth`

and Syriac `atha`, which all represent Sign.[15]

4.1.1 Scholarship on Qur'anic Sign

Formal scholarship on the function of Sign in the Qur'an has not moved far beyond

describing the structure of Sign and its expression in the Qur'an, though it seemed to be an

aspect that perplexed Western Qur'anic scholars. For instance, John Wansborough

recognised that Sign is one of the main themes of the Qur'an and a valid point of enquiry

into a thematic approach to the Qur'an.[16] Wansborough finds even the narrative sections of

the Qur'an in the service of iconic signalling:

> [Qur'anic narratives] consist in fact not so much of narrative as of
> *exempla*, of the sort alluded to in the Qur'ān itself as 'signs' (*āyāt*), and

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[12] Yusuf `Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, 3rd ed. 1938 (London: Pitman Press, 1975), (Appendix 1), p. 118-120.
[13] See Bell & Watt, pp. 61-65. Here a view is mentioned that the letters are mystical symbols suggesting that the Muslims have God's help in times of need, by Alan Jones. 'The mystical letters of the Qur'an' *Studia Islamica*, 16 (1962), 5-11.
[14] Bell & Watt, p. 60.
[15] See the explanation of the term *ayā* as foreign vocabulary in the Qur'an suggested as Syriac or Aramaean in origin, in Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Hertford, Oriental Institute: 1938), p. 72. Jeffery notes that the term does occur in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry e.g. that of Imru-l Qays, however its Qur'anic application denotes a specified meaning.
[16] Wansborough, *Qur'anic Studies*, pp. 5-7

hardly qualify even for the epithet 'legend'. Exhibiting a limited number of themes, the *exempla* achieve a kind of stylistic uniformity by resort to a scarcely varied stock of rhetorical convention.[17]

However, Wansborough related questions of style and form in the Qur'an mainly to historical-critical assessments of the composition of the Qur'an and the historical veracity of Islamic accounts of the Prophet's career. Wansborough compared Islamic exegetic processes to that of the Judeo-Christian tradition concluding that the Qur'an drew from a "traditional stock" of imagery adapted as reference for its own "schemata of revelation".[18] Wansborough did not relate the imagery and stylistic form of the Qur'an to any internal Qur'anic hermeneutic, although his description of literary style and the thematic feature of Sign in the Qur'an remains valid.

Wansborough classified Sign as one of four characteristics of Islamic theodicy in the Qur'an: retribution, sign, exile, and covenant.[19] While these four characteristics certainly reflect themes of the Qur'an, it is not clear how Wansborough arrived at the exclusion of these four, except for his assumption that they are 'components of earlier established literary types' and constitute 'the major part of the Qur'anic message'.[20] Moreover, he does not indicate any prominence or priority among these four themes. One may conclude that he arranged them in order of importance, perhaps drawing on such works as C. Snouck Hurgronje, Tor Andrae and other's work that found Judgement Day and its terrors as the prime motivation behind Muhammad's mission.[21] A more recent work on Qur'anic form is Neal Robinson's *Discovering the Qur'an* (1996). In terms of the theme of Sign in the Qur'an, Robinson recognises what he terms 'signs sections' in fifteen of the 'early Makkan' surahs, but does not draw any further structural or hermeneutical conclusions from his

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[17] Wansborough, p. 18.
[18] Wansborough, p. 1.
[19] Wansborough, p. 2.
[20] Wansborough, p. 1-2.
[21] See summary in Bell & Watt, p. 115.

form-critical analysis.[22] He therefore does not relate these signs-sections lexically or intratextually to further content of the Qur'an.

One of the most enduring works on the forms and functions of the Qur'an is W. Montgomery Watt's revision of the work of Richard Bell, known as Bell and Watt's *Introduction to the Qur'an* (1970). This work recognised that Sign is one of the terms that suggests "further lines of investigation and further problems".[23] The most comprehensive discussion of the of *ayāt* remains Watt's recognition of Sign as a premise of the Qur'an that is both part of its structure as well as a description of its function. He finds four applications of the term in the Qur'an:

a) natural phenomena which are signs of God's power and bounty;
b) events or objects associated with the work of a messenger of God and tending to confirm the truth of the message;
c) signs which are recited by a messenger;
d) signs that are [a formal] part of the Qur'an or the Book.[24]

They further assert that the Qur'an describes itself as a sign following the demand of Muhammad's opponents that he produce a miracle as proof of his mission (Q 6.37; 13.7,8; 21.5). Bell and Watt conclude that "it was probably this demand for a sign during the Makkan period that led to the shift of meaning of the word *ayāt* to something like 'revealed message'".[25] Bell and Watt's analysis therefore distinguishes between the different senses in which the literal terminology of Sign is related to the semiology of the text. Yet their categorisation remains descriptive and their linking of a singular historiographic event to the terminology of Sign, namely the request for a miracle, seems to distract from the

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[22] Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, p. 109.
[23] Bell & Watt, p. 121.
[24] Bell & Watt, p. 121-127.
[25] Bell & Watt, p. 125.

literary coherence others have found in Sign as a theme of the Qur'an. The question

therefore is how is Sign part of the structure of the Qur'an?

4.2   Form Critical Themes

Scholarship on the Qur'an has mostly aimed at an historical-critical assessment of

Muhammad's career for which the Qur'an's literary style and vocabulary serves as proof-

text of historical events and not so much as evidence of conceptual or thematic

development in the Qur'an as a literature.[26] It is widely accepted by both Muslim and non-

Muslim scholarship that the themes and style of the Qur'an correlate with events in the

Prophet's career, most visibly in terms of a distinction between two phases described in

Islamic historiography as the earlier Makkan phase and the later Madinan phase. Consensus

amongst Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship is that the Qur'an assumes a progressive

alteration of style from lofty, but short, poetical passages associated with the Makkan

period to the elongated prosaic oratory of the later Madinan epoch. Many attempts have

been made to correlate the revelations with a chronology of *ayāt*-verses in the Qur'an.

4.2.1   Chronology of Revelations

The most influential work in Western scholarship for most of the twentieth century was

Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorāns* first published in 1860. Friedrich Schwally

revised and enlarged this work, so that their chronology is now known as the Nöldeke-

Schwally classification of the surahs.[27] Nöldeke distinguishes thematic and structural

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[26] See Bell & Watt, pp. 50-53 on discussions of authenticity of the Qur'an in Western scholarship.
[27] See Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, p. 76.

developments within the main periods of Makkan and Madinan, as seen from a discussion of three periods within the Makkan phase:[28]

a) First Makkan: the surahs and *ayāt* are short, the language rhythmic and full of imagery and are introduced by oaths;

b) Second Makkan: fundamental teaching is elaborated and illustrated from nature and history. Discussion of doctrinal points combined with new modes of speech. For example, formal introductions are added or longer format, and God is often referred to as *al-raḥmān* 'the Merciful or Beneficent';

c) Third Makkan: the use of *al-raḥmān* as a proper name for God ceases and other characteristics of the second period are intensified.

Several criticisms have been raised against this chronology. Some argue that it is too reliant on style, that the steady progress in style and doctrinal development cannot be assumed and doubts are raised whether the name *ar-raḥmān* for God can be restricted to a few years.[29] Bell and Watt's main criticism is that Nöldeke treats the surahs as unities, for which subsequent scholars, such as Hirschfeld and Bell allowed intrusion of later into earlier passages.[30]

4.2.2 Themes of Revelation

Hubert Grimme analysed the development of certain themes and re-arranged the surahs based on thematic divisions. Grimme's two thematic divisions of the Makkan surahs are that the Makkan phase mainly proclaims typical monotheistic themes, such as Resurrection, Judgement and a future life without the troubles of the here and now. In this phase, Muhammad is spoken of only as preacher. In the second phase, God's mercy is related to

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[28] Descriptions from Bell & Watt, p. 110.
[29] See Bell & Watt, p. 111 and Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, p. 92.
[30] Discussion in Bell & Watt, p. 111. See Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, p. 76-78 for categories of surahs and insertions and additions of Makkan sections into Madinan and *vice versa*.

the revelation of 'the Book' and stories of former recipients are recounted.[31] Watt's

judgement of this study is that it is right in looking for a sequence of ideas "but must be

combined with others".[32]

Nöldeke and Grimme's arrangements reflected on the sequence in which Qurʾanic ideas

developed, however their work was primarily still concerned with the historical-critical

understanding of Muhammad's changing role from prophet to politico-prophetic leader.

Fazlur Rahman has shown that there is no evidence for an ideological break between the

Makkan and Madinan periods, despite such an event as the change of prayer direction

(*qibla*) from Jerusalem to Makkah, which indicates, for most historical-critical scholars, a

clear ideological rupture between the two periods. Rather, Rahman is convinced of a

gradual development and transition between the two periods.[33] In a similar way, Richard

Bell recognised an inherent semiotic at work and pointed out the relationship between

empirical observation and theological significance in the Qurʾan. For instance, Bell argued,

in contrast to suggestions that Muhammad was a socialistic or religious reformer driven by

thoughts of Judgement Day and its terrors, that the early revelations are rather an appeal to

humanity to recognise the Divine origin of Creation:

> Bell admitted that the idea of Judgement was in some sense present
> from the first, but maintained that the descriptions of terrors of Hell
> came only later, and indeed after accounts of special punishments on
> those who disbelieved in prophets".[34]

Signalling the link between earthly reality and a theology of Creation and Eschaton

therefore seems the primary function of the early Makkan surahs, and indeed of

Muhammad's call to prophethood. Jacques Waardenburg demonstrates the association

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[31] Bell & Watt, p. 112.
[32] Bell & Watt, p. 112.
[33] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, pp. 132-149. Note a mistake on p. 133 wherein Rahman erroneously refers to the Makkan phase as 'later' and the Madinan phase as 'earlier'. However, the remainder of his discussion is clear in placing the Makkan phase before the Madinan.
[34] Bell & Watt, p. 155.

between the prophetic mission, culminating in the Qur'an, and social reform by pointing out the interaction between Muhammad and other communities. Waardenburg finds that Muhammad's public activity developed a prophetical message into a fully-fledged religion, "both as a social and historical reality and according to the inspirations of the prophet himself".[35] The implicit sense of the Qur'an and its contents as Sign also provided the basis of classical Islamic reasoning and empirical studies. Salah El Sheikh argues that the procedures and terminology of Islamic logic, that is, reflecting on the empirical world as a sign, derived directly from the Qur'an.[36] El Sheikh points out how the Qur'anic understanding of itself as a proof text for reasoning has been ignored in modern scholarship, citing sources that point out the Greek/Stoic elements in Islamic scholarship without referring to the Qur'an. El Sheikh likewise indicates that Sign has been applied as a hermeneutic of the Qur'an, without Sign being developed as such.

It is clear that scholarly hermeneutics have led to diverging perspectives on Sign in the Qur'an and that both historical-critical approaches and traditional approaches often view the Qur'an purely as arche-text of the Prophet's career. Furthermore, form-critical reasoning, in terms of generally observed categories of prophetic literature, presented more problems than any resolution of rhetorical development and thematic questions such as Sign in the Qur'an.[37] Both classical Islamic commentary and modern historical-critical approaches emphasise the chronology of revelation as veracity, or not, of the Muhammadan mission. John Wansborough effectively denies the originality of the Qur'an and furthermore surmises that the Qur'an does not develop its own prophetic expressions:

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[35] Waarenburg (sic), 'Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam', in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, ed. by Andrew Rippin, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 113.
[36] Salah El Sheikh, 'Al-Mujādalah and Al-Mujādilah Then and Now: Kalām, Dialectical Argument and Practical Reason in the Qur'an', *MW*, 93 (2003), 1-50 (p. 13).
[37] See Neal Robinson's consideration of both traditional Muslim and Western scholarly attempts at dating of the suras, that is, synchronising the literary scripting of revelatory events with historiography of the Prophet's career, in *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 60-95.

The technique by which a theme is repeatedly signalled but seldom developed may be observed from an examination in their Qur`anic form of those themes traditionally associated with literature of prophetical expression.[38]

Currently, literary studies have found that questions about chronology are subordinate to thematic discussion. Neal Robinson suggests that conclusions about the probable chronological order of the Qur`an is to be articulated by individual thematic studies.[39]

4.3   Synthesis of Historical-Critical and Traditional Approaches

Angelika Neuwirth expresses the divergence of approaches in Qur`anic studies as an impasse between the historical-critical approach that is sceptical of the Islamic tradition of the Qur`an's composition and traditionalist Islamic explanations of codification.[40] Neuwirth therefore departs from the Western emphasis on the text as historical-critical veracity of Muhammad's authenticity, and instead seeks to describe and explain the form of the Qur`an as literature in its function within Islamic praxis, which she describes as a 'recitation text' (*Recitationstext*).[41] Neuwirth approaches the relationship between Islamic prophethood and scriptural signification through a literary reading of the Qur`an, viewing the style and symbolic expression of the Qur`an against the poetics of its cultural background in Arabian literature, such as pre-Islamic kahin utterances and *saj* or *qasida* poetry. She furthermore places her work within the ambit of Scriptural Reasoning in drawing from the methods and developments in literary studies of sacred literatures, such as the canonical approach to

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[38] Wansborough, p. 1.

[39] Robinson, *Discovering the Qur`an*, p. 95.

[40] Neuwirth, 'Vom Rezitationstext', pp. 69-105 and p. 70-71.

[41] Neuwirth, 'Some Remarks on the Special Linguistic and Literary Character of the Qur`an', trans. by Gwendolin Goldbloom, in *The Qur`an: Style and Contents*, ed. by Andrew Rippin, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 253-257.

biblical studies and literary analysis of the Psalms, although Neuwirth does not name her work as such.[42]

The understanding of the Qur'an as recitation text underpinned Neuwirth's assessment of the earliest revelatory units of the Qur'an in *Studien zur Komposition der mekannischen Suren* (1981), wherein Neuwirth proposed the literary unit 'surah' as genre for the Qur'an.[43] Neuwirth does not question traditional Islamic notions about the compilation of the Qur'an, viewing the surahs as formal units of Muhammad's pronouncements, that underwent a redaction into the corpus 'Qur'an' under 'Uthmann (23-25AH).[44] This is not to suggest that Neuwirth accepts the verse divisions uncritically. Rather, she deliberates a holistic understanding of the surah as a legitimate unit, emphasising the poetic unit termed 'the recitation text' over and against 'atomised' divisions according to the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, or socio-historic grounding of the completed canon.[45] In this sense, Neuwirth finds that none of the traditional verse-numbering systems divides the verses accurately or consistently.[46]

4.3.1 Sequential Development in Qur'anic Revelation

Neuwirth identifies a sequential development of imagery and significance from the earlier to the later surahs, for which she finds Nöldeke's chronology to remain helpful. However, her development of Qur'anic expression does not rely exclusively on Nöldeke's arrangement and she often makes use of the canonical Islamic sequence, that is, as found in

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[42] Neuwirth, 'Some Remarks', p. 253.

[43] See review in Issa Boullata, 'The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: i'jāz and Related Topics', in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. by Andrew Rippin, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 139-157 (p. 156).

[44] Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 2.

[45] Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 1.

[46] Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 12.

copies of the standard Egyptian edition (1925).[47] Neuwirth identifies the various rhyme schemes of the earlier short verses and later more complex compositions. She identifies the clause-verse (*Klausel*), or 'clause-technique' as outstanding feature of the rhyme schemes, asserting the view that simply relating the clause to rhyme does not do justice to this feature.[48] Instead, Neuwirth illustrates how the 'clause-technique' constitutes framing elements of a surah. The sequential structuring of surahs together with formulaic expression highlight changes in form or content, and thus present shifts in focal points.[49] Neuwirth finds these framing features to function in terms of forward as well as backward referring.[50] For instance, comparing the style and imagery of the Qur'an to pre-Islamic kahin-sayings such as oaths, Neuwirth analyses the oath-clusters that introduce many of the earliest Makkan surahs. She finds that the oath-clusters build up, and later serve as, a 'matrix of images' (*Bildmatrix*) in all types of surahs.[51]

Her conclusions provide novel insights into the lexical development, not only of the language of the Qur'an, but of the imagery and typology that builds up the Qur'an's 'symbolic-communicative system'.[52] Neuwirth's sequential conception of the semiology of the Qur'an understands the Makkan phase of the Qur'an as having an enduring impact on the imagery and typology of later surahs, building up the syntactic and semantic elements from concise to complex syntagmen-verses, that supplement and emphasise preceding elements. Neuwirth furthermore finds an implicit link between the Islamic narrative of prophethood and language of 'canonisation' in the sequential development of Qur'anic

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[47] Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 2.
[48] Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 7.
[49] Neuwirth, 'Vom Rezitationstext', p. 97.
[50] Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 7.
[51] Neuwirth, 'Images and Metaphors in the Introductory Sections of the Makkan suras', in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. by G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, SOAS Series on Contemporary Politics and Culture in the Middle East (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 3-36 (p. 6).
[52] Armando Salvatore applies this term without explication in his article 'Beyond Orientalism? Max Weber and the Displacements of "Essentialism" in the Study of Islam', *Arabica*, 43 (1996), 457-485 (p. 9).

expression, as indeed does Jacques Waardenburg. Waardenburg finds the term *ayāt* to be

the link between the Qur'an and the distinct prophetic mission of Muhammad, compared to

the nature of other monotheistic prophets. Waardenburg concludes a similar unitive view of

the prophetic mission and Divine words as William A. Graham above, stating that

Muhammad's authority did not only derive from his words, "but also in his deeds, like

Moses and the patriarchs".[53] But more than reflecting the career of the Prophet, Neuwirth

finds the text to be the documentation of interaction between cultic praxis and Scripture as

Divine revelation. Cultural expression, such as pre-Islamic oratory or memorial sites such

as the Ka'bah, and Abrahamic motifs of sacrifice, are developed as religious signifiers of

the new Qur'anic order. Furthermore, cultic aspects of the community, such as the daily

prayer positions and Ka'bah as pilgrimage site, are seen as part of the cultural reminders

(*kulturellen Gedächtnisse*) that function as topographic texts, or 'mnemotopes', enscripted

in the Qur'an.[54] Neuwirth argues that the temporal and spatial settings of cultic practice and

the changes in significance of cultural reminders are presented in the Qur'an as a

canonisation of cultic pronouncement in the early Makkan phase.

Neuwirth therefore takes an interactive view of the documentation and compilation process

for which the focal shifts in the text are reflective of the progress of community formation.

The initial and early Makkan phase constitutes a focal shift in prophetic announcement,

while the middle- and late Makkan phase represent interactive identity-formation of a

community. By the time of the Madinan phase, the text reflects an established community

with communal rites and a personal history. The community thus constituted now has its

own 'Heilsgeschichte' to compare with the Abrahamic forebears: In prayer orientation, it

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[53] Waarenburg (sic), 'Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam', (pp. 96-97).
[54] Neuwirth, 'Vom Recitationstext', p. 84.

has its own *qiblā* and in the Ka`bah, its own Sinai.[55] In this way, the addressee, 'thou' of the early revelations, is not the privately accountable individual in a narrative of Muhammad's prophethood, but the Prophet *and* a group of listeners that are addressed and discussed as a collective identity.[56] The communal history is commemorated to script (*Festschreibung von Erinnerung*) that opens with the Islamic catechism in the Fatiha (Q 1), and ends with the emphatic pronouncement of the Judaic creed, Shema Yisra'el in Q 112: "Say, He is One God".[57] These works therefore intimate that the Qur`an's language of Sign expresses a relation between empirical experience and revelatory format that develops as a sequence while it articulates thematic categories such as cultic praxis and monotheistic relationship. However, these thematic categories do not explicate the role of the individuals or gender of the collective identity of the Qur`an's addressees.

Nevertheless, the developmental consideration presented by these authors finds a unity between the Islamic narrative of Muhammad's prophethood and the semiology of the text that not only transcends questions of authenticity, but facilitates a holistic approach to the Qur`an as the sacred history of a community. As such, the community of addressees may be explored for reflections on gender. For instance, Michael Sells finds that gender is vital to the expression of the Qur`an's revelatory aspect following from a sequential reading of the rhyme schemes of the early surahs. Sells bases his reading on the oral component of rhyme schemes in conjunction with semantic units and discovers that the Qur`an intertwines sound and meaning in a distinctive manner to form Qur`anic concepts, which he terms 'sound

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[55] Neuwirth, 'Vom Recitationstext', p. 83.
[56] See also discussion of early Islamic periodization in terms of relationships with other religions, by Jacques Waarenburg (sic), 'Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam according to its Relations with Other Religions', in *Qur`an: Style and Contents*, pp. 93-116.
[57] Neuwirth, 'Vom Recitationstext', p. 103.

figures'.[58] Sells furthermore explores gender as an aspect of these sound figures in conjunction with the notion of 'spirit' in the Qur'an and finds 'an extraordinary gender balance' in the rhyme scheme of the Qur'an:

> Like all sacred texts of the classical period of religious revelations, the Qur'ān was revealed in a society in which the public voice of leadership was largely male, and thus the social context of the revelation, as with the Bible or the Vedas, was largely a male domain. Yet the gender dynamic within the Qur'an is one of extraordinary gender balance, a balance constructed and modulated through sound figures. These patterns create partial personifications – of a woman giving birth, of a woman conceiving, suffering, experiencing peace, or grieving at the loss of her only child.[59]

Sells finds that these sound figures are lost in translations of the Qur'an and states that this is particularly damaging because of the way Islam has been caught up in stereotypes about gender and the role of women in society.[60] Sells therefore presents possibilities for exploring gender in the Qur'an through other than historical female characters and moreover links the Qur'an's language of Sign with gender.

The work of Sells corroborates Neuwirth's findings and not only develops the notion of canonical reading of the Qur'an in terms of earlier Makkan surahs to the later Madinan surahs, but also points out the development of the aspect of gender along with the 'chronological' development. Such an approach therefore does not have to rely solely on traditional explanations of obscure practices or meanings in the text that concern women as a legalistic category of Islamic marriage and divorce practices, or women's rights.[61] Sells remarks that polarities, such as feminine and masculine, or eternity and temporality, are

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[58] Michael Sells, 'A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Suras of the Qur'an: Spirit, Gender and Aural Intertextuality', in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning*, ed. by Issa J. Boulatta, pp. 3-25.
[59] Sells, p. 4.
[60] Sells, p. 5.
[61] See the discussion of marriage and divorce as only gendered theme in the Qur'an (apart from the comparison between the portrayal of Adam and Eve by the Qur'an and Bible respectively, pp. 123-137), by Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*, pp. 42-58.

141

transcended by the Qur'an's conception of Sign (*ayāt*).[62] The problematic of Qur'anic narrative may therefore be turned on its head by affirming that the sign *is* the theme; just as traditional Islam has always asserted that the Qur'an and its *ayāt* are the (miracle) signs delivered by Muhammad.

4.4 Qur'anic Figures of Sign

Sells and Neuwirth both allude to the centrality of Sign as literary and semantic unit, yet neither explicitly discuss the relation between the language of Sign in particular and the structure of the Qur'an. Neuwirth, for instance, seems to take the relationship for granted. Her editorial introduction to *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature* (1999) observes that the aim of a discussion of myth and symbolic archetype in Arabic literature is to point out subtexts, structures of interaction that allude to archetypal experiences, and mythico-archetypal codes that are discernible through the occurrence of allegories or particular symbols, that is "signs that call for decoding".[63]

This chapter therefore suggests that any thematic reading reflects on the sequential conceptual development of Sign in the Qur'an. Such an approach includes the consideration of the text in its final form with the addition of one peculiarity: A developmental reading necessitates a 'back-to-front' reading of the Qur'an as the text in its current form starts with mainly Madinan sections followed by the earlier-compiled Makkan sections. Reading for notions or concepts from the Makkan to the Madinan period, that is, from back-to-front, assuming a loosely earlier to later composition, seems the nearest form of a unitary reading that takes issues of canonisation and chronology into consideration. This reading features in the present thesis parenthetically in quotation marks as a 'chronological' reading in

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[62] Sells, p. 5.
[63] Neuwirth, *MHASF*, p. xxii.

recognition that it does not claim to present views on the chronology of historical origin, but a chronology of composition. Therefore citation and analysis of Qur`anic sections will likewise be referred to in quotation as 'earlier', 'later', 'first' or 'last'.[64] This thesis therefore argues that gender and voice can be understood as component parts of Sign in the Qur`an for which an understanding of the development of language and imagery precedes the analysis of the relation between gender and voice in the Qur`an. The discussion of the development of the language and imagery of Sign explains the development of theme in the Qur`an from physical/visual imagery to canonical/theological concept. This development on its turn, leads to a typological categorisation, or taxonomy, of Sign as formal feature of the Qur`an under which voice and gender resorts.

4.4.1 Imagery of Sign

Beginning with the imagery and poetic language of the early Makkan sections of the Qur`an, we find that a Qur`anic language of Sign develops by linking the phenomena of the natural world with Qur`anic moral and spiritual significance as eschatological figures of Qur`anic theology. For example, Q 105 asks 'Do you not see how thy Lord dealt with the people of the Elephant? Did he not make their treacherous plan go astray?' This incident recalls an incident from the history of the pre-Islamic era commentators explain as the invasion of Abraha from Abyssinia, who included elephants as vehicles for his troops and armour. The surah asks the addressees to reflect on ('look at') this incident in the light of Qur`anic revelation from the one God – the Orchestrator of history. Q 103 cites the tyranny

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[64] Two studies that apply a similar method without presenting it as such explicitly are M. Causse's comparison of Mosaic themes with events in Muhammad's career. He refers to the chronological arrangement of surahs by Regis Blachere into First Meccan, Second Meccan and Third Meccan Periods without explanation why he opts for this arrangement, in 'The Theology of Separation', p. 40. On the other hand, Jacques Waardenburg presents a chronological reading of the concept of religion in the Qur`an based on the chronology of Theodore Nöldeke, in 'Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam', p. 109.

of time as a reminder to humankind that their lives, though temporal, are of eternal

consequence:

> By [the sands in] the hourglass. Indeed, humankind is powerless except
> for those who have faith and do righteous deeds [...].[65]

The language and imagery of Sign thus established later incorporates the literal term 'sign'

(*ayāt*) as taxonomy of Qur'anic theology.[66] Q 6.95-99 presents a signs-list that illustrates

the development of Sign in the Qur'an as a corpus by its linking of imagery with stylistic

features and phrases. The imagery is vivid and contrastive providing models and anti-

models of response to the prophetic message, presented with explicit reference to 'sign':

95. It is God who causes the seed and the date-stone to split and sprout. He
causes the living to issue from the dead and He is the one to cause the dead
to issue from the living. It is God. How is it that you are deluded away from
the truth?

96. He it is that cleaves the daybreak. He makes the night for rest, and the sun
and moon for calculation [of time]. Such is the proposition of the Almighty,
the Omniscient.

97. And He is the One who makes the stars for you to guide you thereby through
the darkness on land and sea. We have detailed the **signs** (*ayāt*) for people
who know.

98. And He is the One who produced you from a single soul, with a point of
sojourn and a point of departure. We have detailed the **signs** for people who
comprehend.

99. And He is the One who sends rain down from the sky, and with it we
produce every kind of plant. From some we produce greens, out of which we
produce heaps of grain; out of the date-palm and its sheaths, clusters of dates
hang low and near. And gardens of grapes and olives and pomegranates,
each similar yet different when they begin to bear fruit. Feast your eyes with
the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! These things are as **signs** for
people who believe.[67]

In this passage, the natural elements are constantly explicated as a display of Divine action

in Creation and as disclosure of an attribute of God, here with emphasis on God's creative

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[65] Own translation.

[66] See Murata, p. 117 for an exposition of how the dualism present in the link between the natural world and spiritual signification functions in the Muslim sapiential tradition, expressed by Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī.

[67] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, pp. 316-317.

powers and omniscience. The refrain of verses 97-99 displays the expected progression in the comprehension of the audience: "We have detailed the signs for people who know" from scientific knowledge in verse 97, to comprehension of the significance of all life in verse 98: "We have detailed the signs for people who comprehend", to appreciation and conviction in verse 99: "These things are signs for people who believe". This formula is repeated elsewhere in the Qur`an, for instance in Q 30:20-23; Q 13:2-3; and Q 2:164. The images and phraseology of Sign are developed initially by focal shifts in traditional expressions linked explicitly and formulaically with new (Qur`anic) features. Two devices that make this method of signification clear are the oath-clusters of the early Makkan period and the development of the rhetorical question as stylistic feature of the Qur`an. These two devices form the basis of the Qur`an's taxonomy of Sign from which to derive a Qur`anic anthropology.

4.4.2 Oath as Foundation of Qur`anic Sign

Studies have found the feature of oath-formulas in the early Makkan passages to be related to pre-Islamic kahin expression.[68] It may therefore be assumed that focal shifts in Qur`anic prophetology were achieved in contrast to pre-Islamic oratory whereby the oath achieved signification of a new ethical vision. These oaths initially draw on a small inventory of natural elements such as the sun, daybreak, night and sky. Q 86.1-4 opens with a twofold oath-formula that imparts the natural entities with Divine significance. The point of the citation is that the heavenly entities are not fascinating phenomena in themselves, but symbols of an omniscient Protector for each person. The oath descriptor 'nocturnal visitor', *al-tāriq* is also the title to this surah:

1.   By the sky and the nocturnal visitor (*wa-l tariq*).

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[68] Neuwirth, 'Images and Metaphors', p. 3.

2. And what will explain to you what is 'the nocturnal visitor'?[69]
3. [It is] the star of piercing brightness:
4. there is not a soul, but has a protector over it[70]

These oath passages likewise display progression in imagery from physical or visual conceptualisation to the more abstract, or spiritual and moral. The naturalistic entities in later passages are enlarged by literary technique and expansion of significance. For instance, Q 89 'al-fajr' (the break of day), incorporates oath, contrast, explicit clarification of terminology through rhetorical questioning and citation of historiography. Once again, there is a relation between oath, title and introductory line. Note the four oaths introducing this passage are connected with the explicit term 'oath' in verse 5:

1. By the break of day (wa-l fajr),
2. by the nights twice five.
3. By the even and the odd,
4. and by the night when it passes away.
5. Are there not in these an **oath** for those with sense?
6. Do you not see how your Lord dealt with [the people of] `Ad
7. of [the city of] Iram, with the high pillars,
8. of which there is no equivalent in [all] the land?
9. And with the Thamud, who cut out rocks in the valley?
10. And with Pharaoh, lord of the palisades?
11. [All] these transgressed in the lands
12. And increased wickedness therein.
13. Therefore your Lord poured over them various punishments.
14. Verily, your Lord is in the watch-tower[71]

The question of verse 5 invites natural phenomena as oath, in the sense of proof, indicating symbol and contract. Contextualised against pre-Islamic models, such as kahin-expression or legal format, these oaths provide the original illustration of Islamic monotheism. The

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[69] Neuwirth translates al-tariq as 'meteor', in 'Images and Metaphors', p. 24.
[70] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, The Holy Qur`an, p. 1719.
[71] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, The Holy Qur`an, p.1731-1732. For Neuwirth's discussion of the oaths in this passage, see 'Images and Metaphors', pp. 23-24.

context here, preceding the punishment of ignorant people, signals that it is not the natural elements themselves that indemnify the oath, but the Creator of those elements – 'your Lord' (verse 6). The Qur'anic strategy presents natural element and Divine attribute in combination to form an impression, to which humankind must respond:

> Whereas a crude paganism, such as that which all the prophets from Abraham to Muhammad reproached, divinizes phenomena themselves, Qur'anic theism teaches a unity of Divine will and mercy behind all plural things and so directs all instinct of dependence, wonder, praise and reliance towards that one centre of a right adoration.[72]

The oaths therefore form a basis of iconic signalling as stylistic feature of revelatory Divine language for the Qur'an from which the icons of faith are drawn. However, these icons are never to become the aim of worship, but remain pointers to a deeper reality to which humankind must respond. In the development of Qur'anic discourse this response itself becomes part of the Signs that demonstrate belief or unbelief and shape the polemical style of the Qur'an. The Qur'an therefore develops an iconography of Sign that reflect not only the development of Muhammad's prophetic career but also the development in the Qur'an's audience that respond by questioning the Prophet about the revelations.

4.4.3 Rhetorical Questioning as Expressed Focalisation

The early Makkan oath-passages are often expressly clarified by the rhetorical question 'what will explain to you what is…' (*mā adrāka mā al-…*), as in Q 86.1-4 above. This rhetorical question is found in the first Makkan period of Nöldeke: "what will explain to you what is" 'the breaker into pieces' *al-khutama* (104.5), 'the striking hour' *al-qāri'a* (101.3), 'the night of power' *al-qadr* (97.2), 'the steep path' *al-aqaba* (90.12), 'the nocturnal visitor' *al-tāriq* (86.2), "Illiyun' *al-illīyun* (83.19) and 'Sijjin' *al-sijjīn* (83.8),

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[72] Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian: A Question of Response*, (London: Longman, Darton & Todd, 1984), p. 108.

'the Day of Judgement' *yaum al-dīn* (82.17,18), 'the day of sorting out' *yaum al-fasl* (77.14), 'Hell-fire' *al-saqar* (74.77), 'the sure reality' *al-haqq* (69.3). This clarifying rhetorical question is found exclusively in the 'early' Makkan surahs, indicating that the Qur'an is introducing novel concepts to its hearers or imbuing established images with novel content. As such, the rhetorical question explicitly focalises the meaning of symbols to form the Qur'an's language of Sign and presents a marked strategy in early Qur'anic iconology. In this way both the imagery and language of 'oath', didactically becomes the synonym for 'sign' (*ayāt*) in the oath clusters of the Qur'an. For instance, Q 90, *al-balād* 'the city', combines the phraseology of oath (verse 1), the rhetorical question '*mā adrāka mā al-...*' (verse 12) and the term 'sign' (*ayā*), (verse 19) encountered here in Q90 for the first time in a 'chronological' reading:

1. I **swear** by this city (*al-balād*)–
2. and you are a freeman of this city-
3. and a parent and not a child [anymore].
4. Verily, we have created humankind in hardship,
5. does he think that no one has power over him?
6. He may say: 'Wealth have I squandered in abundance'
7. Does he think that no one sees him?[73]
8. Did we not make for him two eyes –
9. and a tongue, and a pair of lips,
10. and shown him the two ways?
11. But he does not haste to the steep path.
12. And what will explain to you what is 'the steep path'?
13. Freedom of the bondman –
14. or the giving of food on the day of need
15. to the orphan who claims relationship,
16. or to the destitute in the dust.

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[73] For a comparison of the imaging strategy of prophetic speech see Isaiah 40.27 for the application of this phrase in a setting of prophetic literature.

17. Then he is of those who believe and enjoins patience and deeds of kindness and compassion –

18. These are the companions of the right hand.

19. But those who reject our **signs**, they are the companions of the left hand

20. on whom is the domed Fire.[74]

In this surah, we find a combination of oath and title, or introductory line (verse 1) with metonymy. The 'steep path' represents the principle of righteousness (verse 12-17) and 'signs' is the collective term for all the unbelievers reject, of sign and principle (verse 19). It indicates a Qur'anic technique of imagery, namely to progress from the physical/visual, in this case social phenomenon ('this city', verse 1), to the theological concept, here the 'Originator of humankind' (verses 4, 8, 9, 10). Consequently human response is categorised as either heeding or rejecting Divine injunction, presented in a chiastic antithetic parallelism as wrong (left hand) or right (right hand)[75]:

'squander wealth'   'steep path'
    (6-11)   (12-17)

right hand   left hand
   (18)   (19-20)
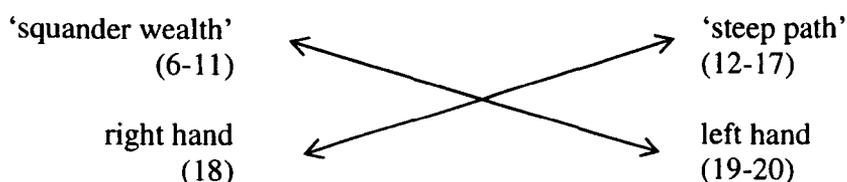
Q 90 illustrates how the metonymic progression of imagery develops as macrostructural coherence in the Qur'an.

4.5   Taxonomies of Sign in the Qur'an

The oath-clusters, rhetorical question and language of Sign form a nucleus of images and metaphors within the early Makkan surahs that establishes the Qur'an's iconography. These icons form the basis of metaphorical language in the Qur'an that is expressed evermore in terms of the interaction between the growing Islamic community and its opponents, as well

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[74] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, pp. 1737-1740.
[75] For an exposition of an Islamic understanding of qualities associated with the directions 'right' and 'left' derived from the Qur'an, see Murata, pp. 82-84.

as the community itself seeking to clarify misunderstanding. Neuwirth terms this iconography a 'matrix of images' (*Bildmatrix*) that proves productive in various types of surahs so that the images do not have to be explained over and over again but become instant icons of meaning:

> Not merely by coincidence, the standard *incipit* characteristic of so many later *suras* emerges from one of these types of introductory oaths clusters. In the end, the image of the book, of *al-kitāb*, alone remains in use, the most abstract of all the different symbols used, essentially no more than a mere sign. 'The book' is thus the only relic from among a complex ensemble of manifold 'accessories of revelation', originally comprising cosmic, vegetative, topographic, cultic and social elements. The book as the symbol of revelation *par excellence* thus acquires even in early Makkan times the dignity, which it has preserved until the present day: to represent the noblest emblem of Islamic religion.[76]

Neuwirth makes this observation only in terms of the oath-clusters and does not connect these figures of speech to the terminology of Sign in the Qur`an. I find Neuwirth's description of the signalling process to be precisely the building up of the literal term 'sign'.[77] Therefore, Neuwirth finds this revelatory scheme to end in one image, namely that of *al-kitāb* 'the Book' as proof of deity and prophet, yet in terms of my semiological reading *al-kitāb* constitutes a climax of signalling.[78]

4.5.1   Sign and Introduction in the Qur`an

Neuwirth relates the images and metaphors that are the foundation of the Qur`an's matrix of images specifically to the introductory sections of surahs and argues that introductory sections of literary compositions often carry significance beyond their 'merely informational value'. Classical Arabic literature, in particular, has always understood introduction as such. The Arabic poetic form *qasida* in particular has a rather stereotypical

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[76] Neuwirth, 'Images and Metaphors', p. 31.

[77] Sells, p. 11 says of the oath-images that they are signs "just as the verses of the Qur`an are signs" by pointing to the spiritual relationship between the natural entities as symbols and a reality that cannot be directly expressed.

[78] Neuwirth, 'Images and Metaphors', p. 6.

introductory format, termed *nāsib* that has been studied in detail.[79] The *nāsib* is considered

an opening of the text and gives an indication both of the main purpose or scope of content

as well as outlining the main topic of the text.[80] Neuwirth cites a psychological study of

poetics that found understanding the introductory section to Arabic poetics of utmost

importance "since it represents, more than any other part of the *qasida*, a poetical

expression of both the psychical condition of the ancient Arabian poet as well as of his (sic)

audience and their spatial and temporal localization".[81] The *nāsib* and its occurrence in the

Qur'an has also led to speculation about forms of kahin-expression and hypotheses about

Muhammad's style of prophethood. Neuwirth argues that the relationship between kahin-

utterance and Qur'anic style have not been methodically examined and presents her study

of the images and metaphors of introductory sections as preliminary to further such

investigation.[82]

The iconic images of the Qur'an are therefore derived from a relationship between imagery

and poetic structuring through such devices as introduction (*nāsib*), oath, rhetorical

questioning and the term *ayāt* as sign of revelation that is applied evermore to the Qur'an as

canon. Qur'anic prophetology thus presents faith in terms of icons of belief and unbelief for

which the Qur'an is the ultimate Sign of the manifestation of the deity and 'credential of the

prophet'.[83] Jacques Jomier argues that the word 'sacred' only appears rarely in connection

with liturgy, observances, prayer and places in the Qur'an. However, the reality that these

sacred aspects represent is always present in the text in the language of Sign. For example,

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[79] Neuwirth, 'Images and Metaphors', p. 3.
[80] Abdulla el-Tayib, 'Pre-Islamic Poetry', in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. by Beeston and others, p. 46.
[81] Neuwirth, 'Images and Metaphors', p. 3.
[82] 'Images and Metaphors', p. 3.
[83] Wansborough, p. 5.

the Qur'an is not called a sacred book but 'the book of God' and the Ka'bah is not a sacred

temple, but 'the house of God'.[84]

The Qur'anic *ayāt* is therefore a literary unit that recalls the work of the Prophet in

producing the miracle of the Qur'an. In light of the polemical character of parts of the

Qur'an, Binyamin Abrahamov connects the different terms for sign, not only the Arabic

term *ayāt*, but the other synonyms *mathal*, *burhān* and *dālil* in the Qur'an, with the notions

of argument and proof.[85] The Qur'an therefore not only describes the tokens of meaning, or

signals of the sacred in reality, but the reactions to those signals as belief and unbelief. The

polemical response is reflected in the Qur'anic text together with the diverging

consequences that will follow for both belief and unbelief. Sign is therefore not only the

term for linguistic communication in the Qur'an, but the Qur'an's styling of the relation

between empirical (human) knowledge and the manifestation of the sacred on Earth.

Qur'anic Sign may therefore be viewed as parallel to the Johannine conception of Sign

(*semeia*) that makes the work and person of Christ central to belief or unbelief. In the

Gospel of John, the miracles of Christ are not so much acts of power as signs of the

Christological mission.[86] Johannine structuring therefore presents the miracles as proof

texts for faith deliberated in terms of response by the audience.[87] In the Qur'an, the signs

are presented in nature, history and scripture, both as product and as aim of the Prophet's

work, that is to provide proof-texts for belief. Response to the prophetic message is

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[84] Jacques Jomier, *The Great Themes of the Qur'an*, tr. by Zoe Hersov from the French *Les grands thèmes du Coran*, 1978 (London: SCM Press, 1997), p. 113.

[85] 'Signs', in *EQ, Vol 5*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 2-11 (p. 3).

[86] See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 525-532.

[87] The literary strategy of the Johannine Gospel is generally in terms of three types of response from the audience: misunderstanding, unbelief or belief. Firstly, the misunderstandings result from misperceptions of the person Jesus or the aim of his actions. These misunderstandings are then presented in Johannine discourse as opportunities for theological clarification in the form of dialogues or trials between Jesus and his interlocutors. The response that rejects such proof texts is then described in terms of unbelief while those who accept the proof texts are designators of belief.

registered within the revelatory text as the naming of believers, '*al-mu'minūn/al-mu'mināt*' (believing men/believing women), or those who reject the message '*al-munafiqūn/al-munafiqāt*' (hypocritical men/hypocritical women) or '*al-mushrikūn/al-mushrikāt*' (unbelieving men/unbelieving women).[88]

Yet the descriptions of Sign in the works of among others Koshul, Murata and Neuwirth remain general and have not been systematically discussed in terms of Qur'anic form or assessed in terms of typological categories. The signs are either discussed in terms of broad-spectrum categories, such as Neuwirth's 'complex ensemble of accessories of revelation' (from quote above), or as 'cosmic, vegetative, topographic, cultic and social elements'. These categories are viewed as literary types *per se* and Neuwirth does not attempt to explain these elements in terms of her 'pre-canonical' reading whereby the signs would show development in the same way that she has shown literary and cultic features to develop from the Makkan to Madinan period. The question is to what degree the polemical nature of later surahs is related to the development of Qur'anic imagery and interaction with the growing audience of the Qur'an. In terms of a gendered reading, the question is how the language of Sign reflects on the relationship between women and revelation pointed out above: Where the *asbāb al-nuzūl* explores female characters in the Qur'an as historiographic personae, the language of Sign asks how women are signs in, and of, the revealed text. The disregard of the language of Sign as hermeneutic frame of the Qur'an may therefore be seen as part of the reason why female characters of the Qur'an depend on named characters from the foundational history of Islam or the biblical traditions.

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[88] For example Q 33.73.

Chapter Five

From Signs, to Titles, to Women

The previous chapter explored the relationship between the metaphorical language of the Qur'an and its technical application of the terminology of Sign. The discussion found that notions such as Sign and typologies of sign develop throughout the Qur'an and specifically in terms of a sequential accumulation of the Qur'an's language of Sign. The early prophetic pronouncements were found to be related to pre-Islamic oratory and poetics, demonstrating how the Qur'an develops its own style and imagery as seen, for instance in the deployment of oath-clusters and rhetorical questions. Our analysis pointed out that the oath-clusters of the initial phase develop in terms of both metaphorical language as well as the technical term Sign to form a matrix of images. However, Neuwirth finds this imaging strategy specifically related to the introductory passages of the early surahs, or *nāsib*. Our analysis of metaphor and terminology of Sign then found a further relationship between the introductory sections and the title of the surahs, revealing that the titles of surahs often derive from imagery contained in the *nāsib*. A further exploration of the titles in an index of the Qur'an pointed out various female characters as title-subjects. It may thus be assumed that the titles are one of the expressions of Sign in the Qur'an and that female characters are part of the core structure and language of the Qur'an. Yet the surah-titles have never been viewed as anything more than structural markers of the composition of the Qur'an. The present chapter therefore further explores the relationship between the surah-titles and the mediation of meaning as structural component of Qur'anic semiology. As the significance of introductory sections for Arabic poetics has been pointed out previously, this chapter considers the role of titles in terms of general literary scholarship before relating the titles

specifically to Qur'anic themes. This exploration enables the categorisation of the Qur'anic theme of Sign in terms of a taxonomy of Sign contained in an index of surah-titles. This taxonomy on its part enables the exploration of women's presence in the Qur'an's language of Sign and furthers the search for women's voice in an exclusively Qur'anic reading of gender.

5.1   Titles in Literary Scholarship

As seen in the relationship between the Qur'an's oath-clusters and pre-Islamic kahin expression, formal characteristics in a text primarily assist meaning by providing familiar models of coherence.[1] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, drawing on Jonathan Culler and Menakhem Perry, argues that the 'reading' process (or 'hearing process' for an oral community) is a construction of hypotheses related to the integration of data for which "'models of coherence' can derive from 'reality' or from literature" (p. 124). The title of a literary work is just one such formal text characteristic, though it has become so institutionalized as to be taken for granted and disregarded in favour of other elements such as characters and events in narratological analysis. It is therefore not only the Qur'an's surah-titles that are ignored but also titles in general.

Hao Zhang and Rumjahn Hoosain of the Department of Psychology at the University of Hong Kong have conducted a general study on the influence of text characteristics - such as a title - not as content stated explicitly, but on thematic inference during the reading process - also finding that the role of the title has been disregarded:

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[1] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics. Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of* Literature (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 159, quoted in Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 123. Hereafter cited in parentheses in this section.

> [T]he effect of a title on text processing occurs in the course of comprehension of the text, and often after a relevant schema is activated. This active schema facilitates text comprehension and text recall. In this way, the presence of an appropriate title facilitates comprehension and memory of explicit contents of a text [cites examples of studies over period 1972-1992]. However, the question of whether the title influences information stated *implicitly*[2] in a text, such as in thematic inference, has received little attention.[3]

Zhang and Hoosain's study asserts that more than aiding retention and reconstruction of narrative, the title assists in the inference of a thematic schema and that the wording of different titles facilitates various cognitive processes.[4] The schema's influence was found to take place as much during the reading process as during text recall in connecting propositions in the text.[5] Zhang and Hoosain conclude, with more relevance to this study than initially anticipated, that the title, 'particularly a meaningful one *incorporating a substantive verb*,[6] might form the foundation for comprehension of the text that follows'.[7] The title is the explicit beginning and therefore mediates the entrance to a text, or stated differently, provides a perspective on the text. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan terms this perspective 'focalisation' and views it as integral part of the mediation of meaning in a text.

5.1.1   Titles and the Mediation of Meaning

Focalisation is a technical term, first applied by Gérard Genette in *Figures III* (1972) as a distinction between the narrator and the perspective of a text. In short, focalisation may be defined as the point of view of the narrator. However, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan opts for the term 'focalisation' instead of 'point of view' due to connotations of 'point of view' with

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[2] Emphasis added.

[3] Zhang, H. & R. Hoosain, 'The Influence of Narrative Text Characteristics on Thematic Inference during Reading', *Journal of Research in Reading*, 24 (2001), 173-186 (p. 175).

[4] Zhang and others, p. 180.

[5] Smith, E.E. & Swinney, D.A. 'The Role of Schemas in Reading Text: A Real-time Examination', *Discourse Processes*, 15, 303-316 in Zhang and others, p. 175.

[6] Emphasis added. The grammatical forms of the titles and relation to their often verbal forms in the Qur'anic text will be explored below.

[7] Zhang and others, p. 184.

156

visuality that might not be apparent to all: "The story is presented in the text through the mediation of some 'prism', 'perspective', angle of vision', verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his (sic)" (p. 71). Rimmon-Kenan broadens the application of the visual sense of the term to include cognitive, emotive, and ideological orientation, at the same time restricting the application of focalisation to the distinction between the perspective of narrator and that of the text (p. 72). Rimmon-Kenan concludes that narration and focalisation are 'distinct activities' (p. 73). Focalisation may be explicit, that is, perspectives such as the ideological or historical aim of the text may be stated outright (usually associated with the first-person narrator), or focalisation may be implicit, 'inside the represented events', and therefore needs to be deduced from, for instance, language, characterization, or thematic development throughout the narrative (p. 74). It is important to relate that in itself focalisation is non-verbal "however, like everything else in the text, it is expressed by language":

> The overall language of a text is that of the narrator, but focalisation can 'colour' it in a way, which makes it appear as a transposition of the perceptions of a separate agent. Thus, both the presence of a focalizer other than the narrator and the shift from one focalizer to another may be signalled by the language. An interesting example of such signalling is naming (p. 82).

In terms of focalisation in the Qur'an, we have already observed explicit focalisation by means of the rhetorical question: "What will explain to you what is..." to present concepts in terms of a new theological meaning. When it comes to assigning titles to sections of text, it is none other than naming the essence of the text and setting up the terms of inference within a given passage. We may therefore surmise that a title is an invitation to discern the function of the title-subject in a text. For the Qur'an then, the titles of the surahs, as units of revelation, name the aspect of the Divine communication at hand. In this way, the titles act as focalisers of the content of the revelation.

5.2 Titles and Introductory Forms in Arabic Poetics

The title is the explicit beginning and therefore mediates our entrance to a text, or stated differently, focalises our expectations of the text. Together with the introductory section, the title gives a clue towards an adequate understanding of the content of the text. However, the previous chapter found the relationship between the imagery of the *nāsib* to be the foundation of the Qur'an's language of Sign. The surah-titles on their part were often found to be constituted by the metaphorical image central to the *nāsib*. The question is whether the title may likewise be considered as the focaliser of the revelatory unit termed surah.

The introduction, or first line of surahs often, and almost exclusively in the first Makkan phase, contain a single figure of speech that forms and informs the Qur'anic theological discourse. Most early surahs therefore are structured by an introductory figure of speech, such as metaphor or oath-cluster, followed by theological pronouncement in rhymed prose. These figures of speech consist of such imagery as natural entities, for example 'dawn' (Q113), 'running steeds' (Q100), 'the constellations' (Q85); or apocalyptic, for instance 'earthquake' (Q99), 'the day of calamity' (Q 101), or 'the overwhelming event' (Q 88), and eschatology, such as 'the heavenly fount' (Q 108), 'the most high' (Q 87), and 'the hypocrites' (Q 63). These figures of speech or visual images also constitute the titles of the surahs in most cases. The relationship between the introductory sections and the titles of surahs raise the question to what degree the title of a surah, as a formal characteristic of the Qur'an, constructs Qur'anic semiology and following from this, to what extent the titles as signs contain a Qur'anic anthropology of which gender is a feature. As pointed out above, an index of the surah-titles reveals female figures such as *al-mumtahinah* 'the woman to be tested' (Q 60), *al-mujādilah* ' the woman who disputes' (Q 58) and *al-nisā'a* 'the women' (Q 4).

5.2.1   Titles in Qur'anic Form-criticism

It is commonly held that the surah-titles were not part of the original revelations, but were introduced during the compilation process as a means of reference. Scholars East and West have maintained that the titles of the surahs are not necessarily related to the content or form of the Qur'an other than serving as markers to identify episodes of revelation. Structural text characteristics, such as the titles and order of arrangement of the surahs, are still bound up with the debate about the compilation and date of codification of the Qur'an. Thus, the titles of the surahs are often mentioned in works explaining the relationship between the Qur'an's style and content but have not elicited a further observation since Bell and Watt's explanation of the titles as text markers.[8] For example, Neal Robinson notes the headings of surahs in the standard Egyptian edition as editorial markers without any further comment.[9] However, two points are important in understanding the role of the surah-titles: Muslim scholarship and general reference to the surahs by Muslims do not make use of the numerical reference but use the title when referring to surahs. Such a practice is of even greater significance in oral transmission as is the case for both contemporary recitation and for the Qur'an's earliest compilation. It means that the theological proposition of the text is inferred and focalised through the subject-matter of the title. Secondly, the surah-titles are already present in the earliest extant manuscripts of the Qur'an, such as the eleventh or twelfth century (fourth or fifth century AH) manuscript of Eastern Kufic script.[10] We are left with the questions of what, if any, are the embedded editorial clues in the surah-titles of which female images are a part.

[8] Bell & Watt, p. 58-59.
[9] Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 72-73.
[10] MS 4594, Q 45:19-37 and the heading for Q 46, (London: Sam Fogg Rare Books Ltd.), <http://www.schoyencollection.com/arabic.htm#4.7.2> [Accessed 25 July 2007].

To my knowledge, a detailed analysis of the surah-titles and their relationship to the content of the Qur'an has not been undertaken. Bell and Watt's suggestion that the arrangement of the surahs, by implication the compilation of the Qur'an and its titles, might have more to do with Muhammad than the traditional account allows, has not been rejected out of hand.[11] Still, judgement about Qur'anic titles rests with another of their observations that the titles were most probably introduced by later redactors or editors "for convenience of reference".[12] This argument contends that the titles of the surahs do not refer to the subject matter, but is taken from some prominent or unusual word that is "sufficiently striking to serve as a means of identification".[13] However, for a literary consideration, this statement is ambiguous because it does not give an indication of what constitutes a 'striking' word and why it is striking in the Qur'anic context.

The supposition seems to be that the titles reflect singular instances of subject matter that do not occur elsewhere in the Qur'an, like surah *al-nahl* 'the bee' (Q 16) or words that are *hapax legomena*, that is, words that occur only once in a text. Yet many of the titles do not match up to this explanation. In fact, more often than not the titles reflect subject matter that occurs repeatedly in other surahs. For instance, *al-nisā* 'the women' (Q 4), *al-rahmān* 'the Beneficent' (Q 55), *al-anbiyā* 'the prophets' (Q21), *al-mu'minūn* 'the believers' (Q 23), *al-munāfiqūn* 'the hypocrites' (Q 63); nearly all the personal nouns like *ibrahīm* 'Abraham' (Q 14), *maryam* 'Mary' (Q19), *nūh* 'Noah' (Q 71) and natural elements like *al-nūr* 'the light' (Q 24), *al-shams* 'the sun' (Q 91) and *al-layla* 'the night' (Q 92) are frequent subjects in the Qur'an as a whole.

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[11] Bell & Watt, p. 58.
[12] Bell & Watt, p. 59.
[13] Bell & Watt, p. 59. See Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, p. 257-258 for the latest expression of this view of the sura-titles.

Understanding the titles as focalisers means that a specific perspective is placed on a subject when it is placed as a title at the head of a surah; or conversely, a topic is focalised by its Qur'anic title. The significance of the Qur'an's titles become apparent when compared to those of the Bible, which is a corpus of titled books. It becomes specifically evident when we compare the structure of the Qur'an to the book of Psalms. The Masoretic text of the Book of Psalms does not contain titles pertaining to the content of the individual Psalms, apart from naming an author (for example, 'psalm of David', *mizmōr l'david*) or providing a further setting, often liturgical (for example, 'for the choirmaster', *lam'natseach*). Yet many English translations provide titles seeming to encapsulate the essence of the Psalm. One instance is Psalm 9-10, an acrostic, which is reduced in English translation to 'God strikes the wicked and saves the humble' for a title.[14] The question is on what grounds were these titles chosen? In other words, do these titles not reflect editorial comment?

In terms of the Qur'an it may be asked how the Qur'an's titles can be discarded as later additions, especially as we cannot construe their moment of origin. At a minimum, they reflect very early, possibly Muhammad's, editorial comment preserved in the text of the Qur'an. Yet the sole significance commentators and critics alike assign to the titles of the Qur'an is related to their conception of the composition of the Qur'an with the effect that the titles of the surahs are de-signated purely as evidence of redaction history and thereby disregarded as focalisers of the content of Scripture.

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[14] *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), p. 822.

5.3 Surah-titles in Qur'anic Structure

An overall comparison of the 114 surahs of the standard Uthmannic codex and their titles, as per the translation and commentary of Yusuf 'Ali, indicate that seventy-four, or sixty-five percent, of all the titles are derived from words occurring in the introductory sections, or *nāsib*, to be exact the first two verses, of the surahs they head (see Table 1). Of the remaining forty, fifteen titles are found in *nāsib* of internal sections of the surah, increasing the congruence between title and some form of introduction to seventy-eight percent. The remaining twenty-five titles include five titles consisting of the mysterious letters that, strictly speaking, do not relate to content yet represent the first linguistic markers of the surah in question. This leaves twenty titles, or eighteen percent, of the current standard codex not appropriated from introductory sections.

Description of relation between title and content	Number of surahs 114	Percentage of relation
Titles related to topic in first two verses of surah	**74**	**65%**
Titles related to topic in internal introductory section	**15**	**13%**
Titles are the Mysterious Letters which are the opening linguistic feature of surah	**5**	**4%**
Titles not related to introductory section	**20**	**18%**

Table 1 Analysis of relation between title and introductory sections

It is therefore clear that the surah titles are most often related to the *nāsib*, or introductory section of surahs.[15] A 'chronological' comparison of the titles to the main periods of revelation, that is, Makkan (Q 114-51) and Madinan (Q 50-2), indicates an even sharper distinction between the congruence of title and introductory content (see Table 2).

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[15] The relationship between the title and first line of poetic literature is evident even today when anthologies of poems by an assortment of authors have indexes indicating the titles of poems and the first line of the poem respectively. 'First line titles' appear to present more effective mnemonic devices than generalised abstractions.

Relation between Titles and Main Chronological Periods	Makkan (114-51)	Madinan (50-2)
Total amount of surahs per period	63	49
Amount of titles related to *nāsib* of the surah	55	12
Percentage of titles related to introductory section	87%	24.5%

Table 2 Chronological decrease of relation between title and introduction

In the earlier Makkan surah-titles, fifty-five cases out of sixty-three, or eighty-seven percent relate to the introductory sections. In the later surahs, (Q 2-50) the titles are related to the introduction to the surah in twelve out of forty-nine instances, or twenty-four-and-a-half percent, and seem to reflect established theonomic concepts.[16]

The generalised consideration of the relationship between titles and subject-content in terms of a 'chronological' composition, indicates a development in the role of thematic titles in Qur'anic codification wherein the congruence between the title and the *nāsib* shows a decrease from the Makkan expression to the Madinan period. The non-uniform application of the introduction-as-title rule in the Qur'an, especially in the later Madinan period raises two questions: To what extent does the development of the title as a literary text characteristic indicate thematic development in Qur'anic thought to incorporate gender, and how does understanding the titles as focalisers relate to the language of Sign and gender in the Qur'an.

5.3.1 Title and Sign in the Madinan period

The later Madinan period does not consistently link its titles to introduction, begging the question how titles are discerned for the remaining surahs. Congruence between title and

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[16] As previously mentioned, the simplistic division between Makkan and Madinan passages do not reflect the complex composition of surahs, which may include sections from the other period, such as Madinan sections within Makkan surahs e.g. Q 6.91-94. However, the amount of internal additions are so small that the conclusions about overall literary development between the two periods are not significantly altered. Neither does this division imply that Qur'anic style evolved in a consistent way, which the general nature of the analysis here hopefully reflects. For a comprehensive presentation of the classification of surahs, the reader is again referred to Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 76-96.

topical content of the later (mainly Madinan) period may be illustrated through two methods of correlation: Firstly, by relating the surah-title to descriptions of topical content and conversely, by relating topical content to the title of a surah.

5.3.1.1 Relating Title to Topic

In the first instance, we consider the title of Q 2, *al-baqara* 'the heifer'. This surah is the largest surah-unit in the Qur'an consisting of 286 verses wherein biblical narrative often forms the parable for the Islamic community to distinguish between Truth and Error. The content of the surah as a whole is concerned with many aspects of Islamic society, including legislation for equitable divorce, and is quite possibly the most discussed surah of the Qur'an. Mustansir Mir reads six thematic divisions in this surah:

1.	Introduction	vv. 1-39
2.	Address to the Israelites	vv. 40-121
3.	The Abrahamic Legacy	vv. 122-162
4.	The Shari'ah or Law	vv. 163-242
5.	Liberation of the Ka'bah	vv. 243-283
6.	Conclusion	vv. 284-286[17]

Mir finds the core theme of this surah to be the liberation of the Ka'bah. The preceding discussion of biblical traditions preceding the reclaiming of the Islamic cultic centre is therefore placed firmly within the prophetic and cultic traditions of the other scriptural communities while setting out the Islamic law in comparison with the biblical descriptions. The heifer features as late as verse 67 in the Qur'anic narration of sacrificial regulation for the Jewish tradition:

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[17] In A.H. Mathias Zahniser, 'Major Transitions', p. 28.

164

And remember Moses said to his people: 'God commands you to sacrifice a heifer'. But they said: 'Are you making a laughing stock of us?' He said: 'God save me from being one of the ignorant (al-jāhili)'.[18]

The ensuing verses depict Israel as the 'people of Moses' who eventually comply with the injunction to sacrifice. Yet they questioned the order repeatedly and did not execute it with 'good-will' (2.71). This section therefore presents an example from a preceding religious community on the attitude believers should have towards Divine regulation. The title of 'the heifer' for Q 2 is a symbol associated with the religion of a preceding scriptural community (2.63), not only signalling practice, but assuming a matrix of meaning containing Covenant (2.40-41), Exile (2.49-50), Sinai and Torah (2.51-54) combined with rebellion of the people against their agent, Moses (2.55-61). The first section of Q 2 may be seen as an allusion to the biblical description of the episode of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32.1-6) conflated with laws of sacrifice.

If titles were to be chosen based on literary profundity, some image from Q 2.164, singing the glory of Creation, would be much more suitable:

> Indeed, in the Creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation between night and day; in the sailing of ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain that God sends down from the skies and the life He gives along with it to an earth that is dead; in the beasts that He scatters throughout the earth; in the change of winds and the clouds that they trail like their slaves – Between the sky and the earth are signs for a people that are wise.

Yusuf 'Ali comments in his translation of this passage: "This magnificent Nature passage [in Q 2.164] stands out like a hill in a landscape, enhancing the beauty of our view, and preparing us for the every-day laws and ordinances which follow".[19] Robinson finds a better guide to the content of Q 2 to be "the reference to the Muslims as a 'middle nation',

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[18] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur`an*, p. 35.
[19] Yusuf 'Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 64, fn 166.

165

ummatan wasatan, which occurs in verse 143 at the numerical centre of the surah. The

traditional context of this verse is the change in the direction of prayer, which marked the

Muslims off as a separate community distinct from the Jews and Christians".[20] Yet it is the

heifer that is the title to this surah and not *al-fulkī,* the ocean-faring vessels or *al-ummatan*

wasatan. It is apparent that the title of Q 2 is neither based on stylistic prominence nor

thematic dominance, but on an iconic image. It is therefore evident in the case of Q 2 that

the relationship between title and subject-matter is not so much dependent on the *nāsib* or

the explicit terminology of Sign but is rather connected to the language and imagery of the

heifer as sign of submission to Torah-law, and then as example to the Qur'anic community.

5.3.1.2 Relating Topical Content to a Qur'anic Title

The occurrences of the thematic character Saba, 'the Sabaeans, or Sheba', is a well-known

literary figure that should certainly have held some currency amongst the first audiences of

the Qur'an due at least, to the proximity of the Sabaeans (Yemen) to the Hijaz. Q 27

contains the Qur'anic version of Solomon's encounter with the ruler of Saba (the queen of

Sheba) in Q 27.22-44. To my mind, this section presents a memorable comment about the

region because of the imagery conjectured by the meeting between the two illustrious

sovereigns and its connection with 'archetypal' monotheistic logia, or traditional biblical

lore. Yet, this surah is titled *al-naml* 'the ant' that occurs in verse 18:

> 18. Eventually, when they came to a valley of ants, one of the ants
> said: 'O you ants, get into your nests, in case Solomon and his
> hosts crush you without knowing it'
> 19. So he [Solomon] smiled amused at her speech, and he said: 'O my
> Lord, so order me that I may be grateful for thy favours, which
> thou has bestowed on me and on my parents and that I may work

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[20] Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an,* p. 201

the righteousness that will please thee. And admit me, by thy grace,
to the ranks of thy righteous servants'.[21]

The text presents the (speaking) ant as a sign to Solomon of his mission and station in life

and exhorts him to a prayerful attitude in the presence of Creation. The title of Q 27 is

therefore related to an icon that tells of the insignificance of stature while it is effective in

production, as a sign.[22]

Instead, the title that refers to Sheba, *al-saba* belongs to Q 34 where the subject is raised in

verse15:

> There was for Saba aforetime a sign in their homeland – two gardens,
> to the right and to the left: 'Eat of the sustenance (provided) by your
> Lord, and be grateful to Him: (for) a territory fair and happy, and an
> often forgiving Lord.[23]

In this instance, the topic of the title is explicitly connected to the term sign by geographical

locations, that is to say two gardens on either side. However, these locations are not

mentioned in terms of historic events but rather as physical signs of spiritual significance.

They are described as a place of abundant provision 'a territory fair and happy' serving as

metonymic device to signal God's bounty and blessing[24].

In both approaches of relating a title to subject-content and conversely relating a topic to a

Qur'anic title of the later Qur'anic surahs, it becomes apparent that the referring section is

concerned implicitly or explicitly with signalling the Divine and describing human

response. In *al-naml* (Q 27) the title-subject ('the ant') indicates how Creation signals the

sacred and how humankind should respond in faith, prompted by something apparently as

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[21] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 982.

[22] The same symbolism is associated with the ant in the Bible, Proverbs 6:6: 'Go to the ant you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest'.

[23] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1138.

[24] The connotation with the classical designation of southern Arabia as Arabia Felix ('happy Arabia') raises interesting lines of further investigation. For a preliminary discussion with detailed bibliography of Arabia in classical writing see Hitti, p. 44.

inconsequential as an ant. The ant therefore functions as a sign, not only to Solomon, but also to all who observe how ants work together and provide for their colonies without strategic intelligence and then, in Qur'anic context, providing the opportunity to reflect on the spiritual and moral significance of order in Creation. The same was seen to be true of the language of Sign in *al-saba* (Q 34) where natural abundance is related to Divine provision. The same focalising process was seen to be present in *al-baqara* (Q 2), where the history of a community is symbolised by the sacrificial heifer as a sign to warn of Divine retribution for non-compliance with Divine regulation.

5.3.2   Titles and the Hermeneutic of Sign

The terminology of Sign in the Qur'an therefore develops as a complex construct of empirical experience, Divine signification and historiography of the Islamic narrative of prophethood. This construct of Qur'anic iconology is over and above the technical application of *ayāt* as descriptor of structure (verse divisions) of the Qur'an. This threefold complex is encapsulated in a singular entity or icon in a semiological construct (Figure 2) that equals the hermeneutic triangle between Divine communication, text and life context illustrated above (Figure 1):

Divine Signification

Empirical sense   Icon of prophetic message
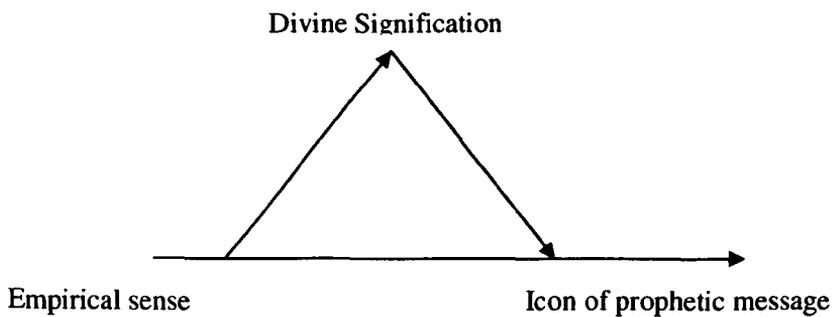
Figure 2   The hermeneutic triangle of Sign in the Qur'an

The tripartite hermeneutic of Sign in the Qur'an is particularly visible in the titles that consist of substantivised verbs. The Arabic verbal noun, or participle, eases the succinct

168

reference to a complex notion by encapsulating multiple references in a single term. For instance, Q 84 introduces the surah with the phrase "When the Heavens are rent asunder". The title to the surah is 'the rending asunder', which in Arabic is rendered by one term *al-inshiqāq*. Likewise, Q 83 presents the title in English as 'those who deal in fraud' that translates as *al-mutafifin*, 'those who drag forth the souls' are *al-naziat* (Q 79) and 'the winds set forth' are *al-mursalat* (Q 77). The complexity of reference becomes more pronounced in instances that allude to the Islamic narrative of prophethood. For example, Q 74, *al-muddathir* is 'the one who is wrapped in blankets'. This is generally understood to refer to the Prophet's first calling when he rushed home in fear of the vision he had received and covered himself in blankets before Khadijah found him and reassured him. In the same vein, *al-muzzamil*, 'the one cloaked in garments' refers to the cloak of the Prophet who, as it were, received the mantle of prophethood. The most complex substantivised verb is most probably Q 17, *al-isra* 'the night journey' that is derived from verse 1, which states:

> Glory to him who took his servant for a journey by night from the
> sacred mosque to the farthest mosque – whose precincts we did bless –
> in order that we may show him some of our signs; for he is the one who
> hears and sees all things.[25]

This allusive text is interpreted in Islamic tradition to refer to a defining moment in Muhammad's career when he received a vision of a night journey travelling from Makkah to Jerusalem in a single night on the heavenly creature Al-Buraq. This is known in tradition as 'the night of ascent' or *laylat ul-mi'rāj*. Muhammad is reported to have ascended through the Seven Heavens in a vision that confirmed his ministry at a time when he encountered resistance to his mission as well as the personal tragedies of losing his wife, Khadijah, and uncle, Abu Talib, who had been a father figure in his life.

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[25] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 693.

The feature of substantivisation in the Arabic language illustrates the findings by Hao Zhang and Rumjahn Hoosain discussed above that a title consisting of a substantive verb is especially suited to thematic inference within a text, by drawing multiple references into a single designation. A related rhetoric figure is found in Hebrew poetry in antanaclasis:

> "In expressing diverse activities with a single word, they are implying a connecting web among those activities. Whatever those connections, even though they may not be immediately obvious, the mysterious pattern of which they are part is at least pointed toward by the oneness of the word used to express the diverse actions. The reader or listener is invited to probe that pattern further".[26]

Many of the surah-titles follow this pattern including *al-takathur* 'the piling up' (Q 102), *al-infitār* 'the cleaving asunder' (Q 82), *al-tahrim* 'the banning' (Q 66), *al-mumtahinah* 'the woman to be examined' (Q 60) and *al-mujādilah* 'the woman who disputes' (Q 58).

The hermeneutic triangle between the empirical sense of the icon as Divine signification presented in the surah-titles is most evident in the five surah-titles that consist of the Mysterious Letters, or Abbreviated Letters (*al-muqatta`āt*): Q 20 is titled *ṭā-hā* (ṭ-h); Q 36, *yā-sīn* (y-s); Q 38, *ṣad* (ṣ); Q 41, *hā-mim* (h-m); and Q 50 *qaf* (q). They are all found in early Makkan passages and correspond to Nöldeke's second Makkan period except for Q 41, which is from Nöldeke's third Makkan phase. The general conclusion in Qur`anic scholarship is that the letters are mystical symbols which have been connected by one study to Divine assistance.[27] Yusuf `Ali finds links between these mystical letters and descriptors of the Qur`an as a book or written code that is a Divine signal to humanity.[28] The most recent discussion of the Mystery Letters is that by Keith Massey, who suggests that the letters are a code of abbreviated letters for a variety of sources/codexes from which the

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[26] Anthony Ceresko, *Psalmists and Sages: Studies in the Old Testament Poetry and Religion* Indian Theological Studies Supplements-2 (Bangalore: St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, 1994), p. 73
[27] Alan Jones, 'The Mystical Letters of the Qur'an', *Studia Islamica*, 16 (1962), 5-11, cited in Bell & Watt, pp. 61-65.
[28] `Ali, *The Holy Qur`an*, p. 118-120.

170

Qur`an was compiled.[29] However, Cragg warns that modern Western utilitarian concepts, such as abbreviation, may not necessarily cohere with ancient linguistic or literary models.[30]

Whatever their origins, these Mystery Letters are the ultimate manifestation of Islamic revelation as 'sign' being a symbol invested with spiritual and moral meaning: "They imply a sort of drastic reduction to the essentials of the business of script and meaning".[31] They constitute a demonstration of the language of Sign in the Qur`an that serve as markers of the Divine origins of the Qur`an in the same way that glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, are evidence of Divine communication for many. In terms of the Qur`an's language of Sign, the function of some of these letters as titles to surahs points to a further relationship between sign and title in the Qur`an that confirms Sign as a hermeneutic of the Qur`an within which to read the Qur`an's portrayal of gender.

5.3.3 Surah-Titles as Qur`anic Signs

As an alternative to chronological evidence of redaction, the present enquiry has reflected on the purpose of surah-titles in the Qur`an and found that the structural characteristic of titles are linked through the Arabic literary form of *nāsib* to the language of Sign in the Qur`an. It is clear that the titles of the surahs do not reflect the most colourful literary imagery; neither does it display the dominant theme of the surah. We have seen how introductory structuring in most cases presents an image or concept that focalises the discourse for the rest of the surah. Furthermore, the types of sign evolve chronologically from physical imagery to abstract conceptualisation, exemplified in the mysterious letters and substantive verbs of some of the later titles. It is therefore possible to suggest that the

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[29] Massey 'A New Investigation into the "Mystery Letters" of the Qur'an', *Arabica*, 43 (1996), 497-501.
[30] Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 51.
[31] Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an*, p. 50.

surah-titles, or rather an index of surah-titles, provide an entrance to discerning significant figures of speech and themes in the Qur'an and further, that gender may be explored as part of this system of signification.

We may therefore conclude that the surah-titles in the Qur'an are metonymic devices inviting the reader to enquire from the text about the content of the figure of speech as it relates to Qur'anic theological discourse. The dogma of the Qur'an as Muhammad's miracle may therefore be made more precise by stating that the Qur'an is an inventory of 'miracles'; each episode of revelation, or surah, amounting to Divine meaning signalled in a revealed word. Conversely, it would mean that the titles focalise Qur'anic theology in relation to the signs: people, historical events and natural objects are spiritual types on which the hearer/reader should meditate and observe how they point to God. We can therefore agree with Sachiko Murata's understanding of Sign as a Qur'anic hermeneutic:

> The verses of the Koran, after all, are God's "signs", just as the phenomena of nature and the soul are God's signs. Every verse that mentions a phenomenon gives to it a linguistic valuation that ties it to God. The thing is a sign, the revealed word that refers to it is a sign, and our understanding of the revealed word is a sign made possible by the very sign within us.[32]

However, the question remains how the two female characters identified earlier as part of the index of surah-titles, the 'women being tested' (Q 60) and the 'woman disputing' (Q 58) are signs of the revealed Word.

5.4 Categories of Qur'anic semiology

Analysis of the titles of the surahs as occurring in an index of the Qur'an point towards two major thematic categories of titles in the Qur'an (see Table 3): Firstly, a grouping which

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[32] Murata, p. 227.

may be termed general prophetic logia and secondly, a selection of Islamically specific characteristics. The first general category entails what may be termed traditional concepts of monotheism that form part of Abrahamic prophetic discourse. These are figures of speech that illustrate the Qur'an's theology in imagery and terminology that occur generally, or at least in part, in other revelatory discourses, such as the warnings of eschatological catastrophe in the Hebrew prophets and book of Revelation, or metaphors of light and darkness in Johannine and Qumran literature. The second grouping of surah-titles point out imagery and allusions that are Islamically specific in that they are understood in terms of events that occurred in the Prophet's life, such as Q 17 the 'Night of Ascendency', *al-isra*, or his trepidation at his first experience of revelation in '*al-muddathir*', (Q 74). The further category in the Islamically specific group comprises the Mystery Letters as definitive symbols of Qur'anic revelation.[33]

The taxonomy presented here is by no means exhaustive or in its most sophisticated format. For instance, many characters in the category 'Qur'anic anthropology' could perhaps better have resorted under Muhammadan historiography as they consist of figures that played a prominent role in early Islamic history, such as Abu Lahab (Q 111) and the Quraish (Q 106). However, the general nature of the thematic division of surah-titles is designed as heuristic for the sake of further investigation and specification in other thematic studies. In the case of the present study, the focus is ultimately on elements in Qur'anic anthropology, and more precisely on the female characters in Qur'anic anthropology and their speaking actions whereby all human characters were sorted under the category 'anthropology'.

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[33] A further category could have been added pointing out the Qur'anic perspective on pre-Islamic legends and traditions such as 'the spread table' Q 5. This title refers to a miracle performed by Jesus of having a spread table descending from heaven for the disciples, which show affinities between Qur'anic revelations and miracles as signs 'sent down'. For examples of Qur'anic perspective based on, but diverging from, biblical accounts, such as the Qur'anic understanding of Enoch as Idris in Q 19:56-57 and the affinity between the Qur'an and rabbinic legends of the creation of Adam, see Reeves, 'The Flowing Stream'.

General Prophetic Logia			Unparalelled Islamic Phenomena	
1. Eschatology, Theonomy and Providence	2. Naturalistic Elements	3. Qur`anic Anthropology	4. Muhammadan Historiography	5. Mystery Letters
1. The Opening (Introduction)	2. The (sacrificial) heifer	3. House of `Imran (Mary's clan)	17. Night Journey	20. Ta-ha
8. Spoils of War	5. The spread table	4. Women	48. The conquest	36. Ya-sin
9. Repentance	6. Cattle	10. Jonah	59. Exile (of Banu Nadhir)	38. Sad
22. Pilgrimage	7. The heights	11. Hud	73. The one wrapped in blankets	41. Ha-mim/ Explanation
25. The criterion	13. Thunder	12. Joseph	74. The cloaked one	50. Qaf
28. Narratives	16. The bee	14. Abraham	80. He frowned	
32. Prostration	24. Light	15. The City of Rock	97. The (night of) power	
35. The Originator/Angels	27. The (speaking) ant	18. The cave		
42. Consultation	29. The spider	19. Mary		
43. Wealth	44. The smoke	21. Prophets		
45. Bowing the Knee	46. The winding sands	23. Believers		
49. Private Chambers	51. Scattering winds	26. Poets		
55. The Beneficent	52. The mountain	30. The Roman Empire		
56. The Event	53. The star	31. Luqman		
62. Assembly to Prayer	54. The moon	33. The Confederates		
64. The Disillusion	57. Iron	34. Saba		
65. Divorce	68. The pen	37. The Battle-ready		
66. Prohibition	72. The jinn	39. The Crowds		
67. The Sovereignty	77. The winds sent forth	40. The Forgiver/believer		
69. The Sure Reality	79. Those who tear out	47. Muhammad		
70. Ascending Stairway	85. The constellations	58. The Woman who Disputes		
75. Resurrection	86. The nocturnal visitor	60. The Woman to be Examined		
76. Mankind	89. Daybreak	61. Battle Ranks		
78. The Message	91. The sun	63. Hypocrites		
81. The Folding Up	92. The night	71. Noah		
82. The Cleaving Asunder	93. Morning light	83. Cheats		
84. The Rending Asunder	95. The fig	90. The City		
87. The Most High	96. The embryo	104. The Scandal-Monger		
88. The Overwhelming Event	99. Earthquake	105. (People of) the elephant		
94. Relief	100. Running (steeds)	106. The Quraish		
98. The Clear Evidence	103. Time	107. Neighbourly needs		
101. Day of Calamity	113. Dawn	109. Rejecters of faith		
102. Piling up (wealth)		111. The flame / (Abu) Lahab		
108. The (heavenly) Fount		114. Humankind		
110. Help				
112. Purest (faith) /Sincerity				

Table 3   Thematic division of surah titles

5.4.1 Interpretation of the Thematic Division of Surah-Titles

The two categories 'general prophetic logia' and 'unparalleled Islamic prophetology' were applied to my thematic investigation of the surah-titles (Table 3). The categories do not always make for neat division as some titles could fit into more than one category. My aim was to stay as close as possible to the context wherein the title-subject is mentioned, for example, Q 105 is titled 'the elephant' - clearly a naturalistic entity. However, the context reads: "Do you not see how your Lord dealt with the people (lit. *ashāb*, 'companions') of the elephant?" (Q 105. 1), bringing it closer to Qur`anic anthropology. The context of these surahs therefore relies to a certain extent on extra-Qur`anic traditions that detracts from the essentially literal categorisation of these figures. As their categorisation aimed at a literary understanding of these figures rather than their traditional interpretation, their designation is in terms of literary context except where no clear understanding is possible without extra-Qur`anic understanding. The same comments apply to the surah-titles 'Quraish' (Q 106), 'hypocrites' (Q 63) and 'the scandalmonger' (Q 104). On the other hand, items from Qur`anic anthropology could as well have fitted into other groups. For instance, *al-nisā*, 'women' (Q 4) contains mostly injunctions on gender relations and could perhaps better have sorted under theonomy (Group 1).

5.4.1.1 General Prophetic Logia

Conceptualisation of the first category of 'General Prophetic Logia' falls into three broad types, namely Group 1, consisting of elements that figure Eschatology, Theonomy and

Providence as witnessed in the Qur'anic attributes of God and their Qur'anic manifestation.[1]

Eschatological items are not only in terms of apocalyptic, or end-of-days terminology, but also in the broadest sense of the ultimate ideal Islamic community. It is unequivocally described in terms of the Last Day (*yaumul akhri*), referenced by various other terms such as 'Day of Calamity' *al-qāri`a* (Q 101.1), 'the Resurrection' *al-qiyāma* (Q 75.1) and overall Judgement; the end of time indicated by 'the Folding Up' [of creation] (Q 81.1), 'Cleaving Asunder' (Q 82.1) and 'Rending Asunder' of the heavens (Q 84.1). These items are synthetically built up through contrast, such as between 'the Overwhelming Event' (Q 88.1) and the 'stairway to heaven' *al-mārij* (Q 70.3).

Theonomy, or the ethical consequence of Qur'anic theology, is witnessed in directives on social activity, exegetically developed as Shari'ah law. It deals with ritual obligation (*halāl*) and prohibition (*harām*), such as 'repentance' (Q 9.5), 'pilgrimage' (Q 22.26-30), 'prostration', *al-sajda* (Q 32.15) and 'assembly to prayer' (Q 62.9). These purely cultic terms extend to socio-political ordering, such as distribution of spoils of war (Q 8.1), [mutual] consultation (Q 42.38), privacy (Q 49.4), and divorce (Q 65.1).

Providence is an expansive term for Divine attributes and the role of the Qur'an as sign of Providence in the life of the community. The Qur'an is the ultimate witness to the overarching attributes of God as 'Originator', *al-fātir* (Q 35.1), 'Beneficent', *al-rahmān* (Q

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[1] My division follows Wansborough's assessment of the Qur'an's schemata of revelation: "The imagery and lexicon of Muslim scripture are almost exclusively archetypal and suggest, if they do not presuppose, some contact between literary precursors. The dichotomy postulated between 'borrowing' and 'traditional language' is possibly misleading and certainly an oversimplification: like most linguistic expression the structure of monotheistic revelation contains very little that is not 'traditional language'", in *Quranic Studies*, p. 48. My categorisation attempts to reconcile Bell & Watt's five broad categories of doctrines of the Qur'an: God, other spiritual beings (angels and jinn), prophethood/other religions, Last Judgement, and regulations for the life of the community, pp. 148-166, with Neal Robinson's formal elements of the early suras i.e. oaths, eschatological, narrative, signs, revelation, polemical, didactic, messenger, and miscellaneous sections, in *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 99-124.

55.1) and 'Omnipotent', or 'Most High', *al-ʿalā* (Q 87.1). The Qurʾan makes its own role

clear as criterion of Judgement, *al-furqān* (Q 25.1), and 'the message', *al-naba* (Q 78.2).

The eschatological concepts make up the largest portion of titles referring to general

prophetic logia. This grouping resembles a closed corpus with a marked beginning (*al-*

fātiha, Q 1) and end (*al-ikhlās*, Q 112). The *fātiha* is the most important Islamic liturgical

unit recited in every daily prayer and furthermore marks the moments of birth and death in

Muslim life:

1. Praise be to God, cherisher and sustainer of the worlds,

2. most gracious, most merciful,

3. master of the Day of Judgement,

4. Thee do we worship and Thine aid do we seek.

5. Show us the straight way –

6. The way of those on whom thou has bestowed thy grace,

7. those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.[2]

The *ikhlās* (Q 112:1-4) is an expression of the fundamental doctrine of Islam that is the

unity of God (*tawhīd*).[3] It is closely related to the *shahādda* (proclamation of faith) 'there is

no god but God and Muhammad is the apostle of God', regarded as one of the pillars of

Islam:

1. Say: He is the One God,

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[2] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qurʾan*, p. 14. For a comparative understanding of the role of the opening surah see recent studies on the Psalter and views on the introductory placement of Psalm 1, and even Psalm 2, at the head of the Psalter, for example Ceresko, *Psalmists and Sages*, p. 218. Note also the remarkable similarities between Psalm 1 and Surah 1, for example the themes of 'the straight way' (Q 1.5) compared to 'the way of the righteous' (Ps 1.6) and between 'the way of the wicked' (Ps 1.6) and 'those whose (portion) is not wrath and who go not astray' (Q 1.7).

[3] Richard Bell, *The Qurʾan: Translated with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs Vol. II* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1937, reprint 1960), p. 685, deems this surah as Madinan on the basis that it reflects repudiation of Christian doctrine and therefore indicates dating after the break with Christianity. However, it may also be argued that it combats pagan pantheistic ideas and especially refers to the 'daughters of God', which could indicate an earlier dating.

2. the Eternal God.

3. He begetteth not, nor is He begotten

4. and there is none like unto Him.[4]

Both the titles of these two units are abstractions that do not occur as expressed terms within the content of the surah. Rather, the titles display the liturgical use of these two surahs. These two headings are also the only instances in the index of titles where the title has been given in such a way. All the other titles are either nouns or deductions of verbs that occur within the content of the surahs. This indicates the specialised role of these two sections in Muslim liturgy. They also suggest the possibility of corpuses in the compilation of the Qur`an, which is not further developed in this study. The rest of the titles in the first group contain social/ritual aspects intertwined with attributes of God both in the titles and in the content of the surahs. In terms of the Qur`an's language of Sign, these titles are the icons that signal Qur`anic understanding of general theological themes understood as cultic expression in the Hajj (Q 22), Divine injunction for human relationships as in divorce (Q 65) or the relationship between Creator and created encapsulated in the title 'bowing the knee' (Q 45). These signs may be explored in terms of themes of the Qur`an and their development can be charted throughout the Qur`an.

5.4.1.2 Naturalistic and Anthropological Elements: Group 2 and 3

The subsequent two categories of naturalistic elements and Qur`anic anthropology are still part of the general prophetic logia in that other prophetic literatures apply the same figures of speech. The naturalistic elements represent the graphic Qur`anic illustration of monotheistic exempla as signposts to their Divine origins, one could say they are the archetypal imagery of monotheism. These are the fundamental signs of Creation either in

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[4] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur`an*, p. 1806.

their intricacy, 'the bee' (Q 16), 'the spider' (Q 29) or 'the constellations' (Q 85); their

unequalled faculty, such as 'the moon' (Q 54), 'the sun' (Q 91), or 'the embryo' (Q 96); or

in their power to alter the Created habitat itself – 'the scattering winds' (Q 51) and 'the

earthquake' (Q 99). The anthropology consists of literary personae that characterise

theological narrative and depict response to the prophetic message, either as positive

response that embraces and personifies belief, such as the 'house of ʿImrān' (Q 3), 'Joseph'

(Q 12), 'Abraham' (Q 14) or negative response that rejects or disparages the Prophet's

proclamations, such as 'the hypocrites' (Q 63), 'the scandal-monger' (Q 104) and *al-

kāfirun*, 'rejecters of faith' (Q 109).

5.4.1.3 Unparalleled Islamic Phenomena: Group 4 and 5

The monotheistic theology encountered in the first category of titles is quantified through

the second category in a scheme that displays sources specific to the Islamic tradition.[5] This

section is further divided into two types: a) Muhammadan historiography, and b)

Mysterious letters.

Muhammadan historiography refers to events that must have been known to the first

hearers as their allusive treatment in the Qurʾan does not make their meaning immediately

clear. These sections are mainly understood through Islamic tradition of the Sunnah, the life

of the Prophet as seen in the discussion of 'the night journey', *al-isra* (Q 17) above.

Similarly, a number of the figures in other titles rely solely on Islamic historiography for

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[5] See Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment. The Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University, 1925* (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1926, new impression 1968), p. 109-112, for a view of the development of biblical themes replacing Arabian ones in the Qurʾan related to Muhammad's increasing exposure to and knowledge of Judaism and Christianity, with which I do not concur. Furthermore, the assertion that the Islamic accounts do not have parallels in the Bible text does not imply that there are no such parallels in biblical traditions. As we cannot ascertain with certainty the Qurʾan's sources for these materials, I maintain that they are unparalleled in their Islamic application though not necessarily unparalleled in their nature or form.

explanation, for instance, battles and conquests in the early Islamic period in *al-fatḥ*, 'the conquest' (Q 48) and the expulsion of the Banu Nadhir tribe in *al-hashr*, 'the exile' (Q 59). On the other hand, the mysterious letters (Group 5) present the relationship between title and the language of Sign in the most succinct way, viewed as a trace of transcendental Divine speech that is unrepresentable in human language, as seen above.

5.5   A Trace of Qurʾanic Women

The thematic division of surah-titles considered the structural feature of surah-titles as Qurʾanic conceptualisation of Sign throughout the Qurʾan as canon. The analysis related figures of speech to the literary style of the *nāsib* in combination with the terminology for sign (*ayāt*) to show that an index of surah-titles represents the language of Sign in the Qurʾan. The taxonomical classification related the Qurʾan's language of Sign to the formal style and thematic development of the text as a canonical unit, and found that the surah-titles describe the elements of Qurʾanic semiology, and particularly the elements that designate anthropology, and therefore gender. The discussion will now turn to the category of anthropology with a view to exploring the signification of gender in the Qurʾan and how women form part of the signs (*ayāt*) of anthropology in the Qurʾan.

The anthropological classification of surah-titles also revealed female figures that are perhaps less known in traditional Islamic discourse. As such, the inventory of signs presents a heuristic device to expand the female characters of Islamic traditions, or such listings as those of Stowasser and Wadud. The surahs that allude to female presence in the Qurʾan may be explored for the extent that they represent women's texts in the Qurʾan,

following Fokkelien van Dijk Hemmes' classification of women's texts.[6] Her classification asks whether the woman plays a dominant role in the surah, and whether the text, or part of it can be attributed to a woman and further, to what extent does this text reflect women's experience? Most pointedly in terms of the aims of this thesis, the question is how do these women constitute a female voice in the Qurʾan?

5.5.1 Feminist Literary Readings of Scripture

The Qurʾanic hermeneutic of Sign presented above assists a feminist reading of the text in that it supplies the framework for evaluating the characterisation and action of the Qurʾan's portrayal of female characters in a literary approach. Literary readings, such as that proposed by feminists in biblical studies, present all human categories on the same level and illustrate how both women and men are explicit subjects of the text on equal terms. The equality is not in terms of religious practice or doctrinal standing, but for a literary reading, it is the literary elements that are presented equally. The hermeneutic of Sign requires the reader to ask how the human characters function as signifiers of Qurʾanic theology. For example, the surah of the prophets 'al-anbiyā' (Q 21), contains a list of iconic prophets starting with Abraham and ending with a reference to Mary and 'her son' (Q 21.51-93). As seen in Ibn Hazm's consideration of the prophethood of women, a doctrinal reading found the inclusion of Mary in this list to be on a different level to that of the male prophets through consideration of the doctrinal formulation of the concept of prophethood (*risalah*). However, a literary reading considers the actions and events that describe each prophet. For instance, the significance of each prophet is narrated in terms of a trial whereby each is tested, such as Noah and his family who were delivered from great distress and who were helped 'against people who rejected the signs' (verse 77). Each trial on its part constitutes

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[6] In Mieke Bal & A. Brenner, 'In Memoriam Dr. Fokkelien van Dijk Hemmes 1943-1994', *JSOTS*, 63 (1994), 35-37 (p. 36).

an opportunity to witness that is termed a Qur'anic sign. In the instance of 'Mary' and her

son, they themselves constitute the sign 'for all peoples' (verse 91):

> And (remember) her who guarded her chastity: We breathed into her of
> our Spirit, and we made her and her son a Sign for all peoples.[7]

Both the male and female are equal protagonists of Divine signification in this verse, as is

the mention of Zachariah and his wife in the preceding verse. Even though it is Zachariah

who prays for a descendant, the text makes explicit that it is the whole family, Zachariah,

his wife, and son, John (Ar. Yahyā), who excel in good works (verse 90). Likewise, in Q

23, the surah of the believers 'al-mu'minūn', Divine provision for Mary and her son is a

sign (verse 50). Barlas concludes from such texts that the Qur'an does not distinguish

between the moral and social praxis of men and women and instead "holds them to the

same standards, and judges them on the basis of the same criteria".[8]

The literary approach therefore does not consider the statistical value of women's figuration

in the Qur'an. Rather the approach of the literary reading is to read elements in the text that

may be considered of minor importance, or an irrelevant detail, as relevant within a

canonical unit.[9] Such an approach therefore finds women as historically and theologically

relevant as protagonists in the religious texts, especially when read in the context of social

realignment that characterised the establishment of Islamic society over-and-against a pre-

Islamic era. We may therefore proceed to ask how women address and are addressed by the

transformative text by exploring the surah-titles for signs of women who speak. Our

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[7] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 843.
[8] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 143.
[9] Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry. The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 17. Michael Sells presents a similar even-handedness in the Qur'an's treatment of gender by considering grammatical gender in the Qur'an as recitation, which he terms 'sound figures' in *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: Whitecloud Press, 1999). See particularly his chapter 'Sound, Spirit, and Gender in the Qur'an, pp. 199-223.

selection of female characters is based on the explicit mention of women in the title and specifically whether they are presented as speaking subjects.

5.5.2 Female Figures in Surah-Titles

Female figures in the surah-titles are not always immediately apparent but may often be more evident from the internal textual setting (apart from words that are grammatically feminine). For instance, Q 111 is titled Abu Lahab, which literally means 'the father of flame', and tells about punishment for a man, Abu Lahab and his wife. Within the surah Abu Lahab's wife is described as co-agent with her husband who, with a cord tied around her neck, carries the wood as fuel for the fire that will consume her own husband (Q 111.4-3). The female character is on an equal level with the male, albeit that both will be punished severely. Islamic tradition identified these two characters as Abu Lahab and Umm Jamil bint Harb, a prominent Makkan couple in opposition to Muhammad.[10]

Other figures, of a more general nature in the Qur`anic anthropology, are 'believers', 'rejecters', 'hypocrites' and 'unbelievers'. Although not identified with specific women or men, these types are precisely the descriptors of belief or unbelief in the Prophet's mission. These surahs contain portrayals that specify the roles of men and women as subjects of faith co-terminously. For example, 'men and women who believe', (Q 71.28; 47.19; 40.8; 33.73); 'wrongdoers and their wives', (Q 37.22); 'hypocrites, men and women' and 'unbelievers, men and women', (Q 33.73). These inclusive phrases imply a further presence of women in the neutral expressions that refer to whole groups and assumes the inclusion of both sexes as subjects of belief and unbelief, generally referred to as 'rejection', such as the demonstrative pronoun 'those who' (*aladī*), the collective term 'humankind' or 'people' (*insān*), and the grammatically feminine term 'every soul' (*nafs*). For instance, Michael

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[10] See Wadud, *Qur`an and Woman*, p. 106.

Sells has developed the notion of grammatical and literary devices, such as personification to read Q 97, 'the surah of destiny' as a partially developed personification of the night as a woman.[11] However, the present analysis will focus purely on explicit mention of females while acknowledging that it is possible to identify even more female characterisations through literary readings.

No.	Surah-title	Description in context	Speaking role
3	House of ʿImran	The 'house of ʿImran' is a term that refers to Mary's family. In 3.35-36, the focus is on Mary's mother, called 'one of the women of ʿImran', who dedicates the child Mary before and after birth to temple service.	Yes, includes words as direct speech
4	Women	Mainly injunction in matters of social justice, does not contain narrative as such. Affirms the solidarity and equality of the sexes in their Creation (4.1); argues for equitable dealings in polygynous families (4.3); sets out inheritance divisions between the sexes (4.11); prescribes punishment for adultery (4.15); institutes prohibited and permitted marriages (4.19-25); limits the ill-treatment of wives (4.34-35); states that both sexes are rewarded for righteousness (4.124); reinforces divorce settlements (4.127-130)	No
19	Mary	Narrative of the conception and birth of Jesus (19.16-33); includes Mary among the list of prophets (19.58)	Yes, includes words as direct speech
58	The Woman Who Disputes	Affirmation of a statement by a woman who disputed with 'Muhammad' about her husband (58.1). Leads to abolishment of pre-Islamic divorce practice and distortions of gender relationships (58.2-6)	Yes, does not include direct speech
60	The Woman to be Examined	Women who join the believing community must be tested about their faith (60.10), rules about marriage between the opposing groups (60.10-11), believing women who take the oath of allegiance (60.12)	Yes, does not include direct speech

Table 4   Female figures represented by surah-titles in the category 'anthropology'

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[11] Sells, 'Sound, Spirit, and Gender in Surat al-Qadr', *JAOS*, 111 (1991), 239-259.

5.5.2.1 The House of Imran

The mother of Mary, referred to as a woman of `Imran in Q 3 consecrates the child to be born to her to 'the special service' of her Lord (verses 35 and 36): "Behold, a woman of `Imran said: My Lord, verily I dedicate to Thee what is in my womb as a special service. So accept it from me – verily, you are the hearing Knower". The reference to the female character is allusive without any further narrative settings than describing her as part of the household of a righteous man. As a literary character she may be read in comparison with other birth narratives both in the Qur`an and the Bible.

The independence of this woman is rather extraordinary in comparison to biblical birth narratives of Samuel and Samson or, in the Qur`an, that of Abraham's wife (Q 51.24-30; 11.73) or Mary.[12] Firstly, the mother's dedication of the child is not conditional as a result of extraordinary circumstances of conception, neither is there a hint at annunciation foreshadowing the pregnancy that would indicate any special nature of this conception to alert the mother about the status of her unborn child. Rather, the dedication is presented as a result of the mother's own piety and faith. Secondly, the text comments unequivocally on the link between gender and Divine vocation: The mother notes after the delivery, that the baby is a daughter and that it is thus predestined by God: "When she was delivered she said: Verily, I have been delivered of a baby girl and God knows what I have delivered – a male is not like a female. I have called her Mary and I entrust her and her offspring to you from Satan, the rejected". The woman names the daughter single-handedly and offers another dedication of both her daughter and her daughter's offspring that testifies to a degree of independence and sense of righteousness not connected to her status as the wife of a righteous husband. The text expresses an explicit gender consciousness and makes the

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[12] Biblical birth narratives for comparison are Manoah's wife/Samson (Judges 13.1-25), Hannah/Samuel (1 Samuel 1.1-2.11), Sarah/Isaac (Genesis 18.1-15 and 21.1-7) and Mary/Jesus (Luke 1.26-2.7).

point that Divine blessing is not reserved for males, or retracted when female subjectivity converges with Divine vocation. Rather, the narrated excerpt, as part of the larger surah, illustrates the actions of a woman that precedes those of the Divine: A mother requests blessing upon her child and the request is Divinely honoured.

Islamic tradition names the mother of Mary, known as 'the woman of `Imran' in the Qur`an, as Hannah, Anna, or Anne respectively.[13] The mother's piety and agency in dedicating her daughter becomes subsumed into descriptions of the childhood of her iconic daughter. The consecration of Mary is extended hagiographically by the traditional material, adding substantial roles for men in the exegesis of this text. For instance, Hannah, the mother, is said to be barren and entreats her husband to pray for a child after she was moved to tears when she saw a bird tend its young. After the husband's prayer Hannah conceives and on the death of `Imran, the guardianship of Mary falls on the shoulders of Zachariah, keeper of the temple. There is considerable exegetic debate about the consecration of Mary to temple service in the light of Jewish purity laws that exclude women due to menstruation. Islamic exegesis concludes that Mary must have been exempt from menstruation and could therefore serve in the temple.[14] This selfsame reasoning settled the debate about exclusion of women from other Islamic religious and public activities due to similarly formulated discourses of purity.[15]

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[13] For discussion of hagiographic exegesis including doctrinal issues in the Qur`anic revelations about Mary that includes full bibliographic details, see Stowasser, pp. 73-81.
[14] Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad, also retains characteristics of eternal virginity and purity in some traditions on the basis of her association with Mary in Islamic exegesis. See Zaya Kassam-Hann, p. 87 and Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, pp. 156-161 for general Shi'ah descriptions of Fatimah.
[15] Women are prohibited from participating in obligatory prayer (*salāt*), fasting (obligatory and optional fasts), or the circumambulation (*tawāf*) of the Ka'bah during pilgrimage, or attending the mosque when they menstruate. See information booklet on the status of female discharge by Mohammad Saleh Al-Utheimeen, 'Natural Blood of Women', transl. by Saleh As-Saleh (Riyadh: Islamic Propagation Office, 1993).

5.5.2.2 Mary

The narrative of Mary in Q 19, in contrast to that of her own birth, provides more detail about the birth of her iconic son, Jesus, or ʿIsa in the Qurʾan. Although Mary is mentioned more often in the Qurʾan than in the Bible, the emphasis in both Scriptures are to portray Mary with humble acceptance of the role God assigned to her: "prostrate thyself (Q 3.38), and 'Behold the servant of the Lord' (Luke 1.38)".[16] Nevertheless, the Qurʾanic story of the birth of Jesus invests Mary with a considerable amount of agency. She withdraws from her family before conception of the child (verse 16) and sets up a screen between them (verse 17). She is therefore portrayed as protagonist of the action and not as voluntary co-participant with others. When an angel appears before her, she draws on her own faith and invokes God's protection at the sight of the angel (verse 18): "She said: Verily, I seek refuge with the Beneficent from you, [go away] if you fear God".[17] Mary disputes the possibility of bearing a child on the basis that she has not had contact with a man (verse 20): "She said: How shall I have a son when flesh has not touched me and I am not unchaste?"

During childbirth, Mary expresses her anguish as a wish to have died before the event (verse 23): "And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palmtree. She cried: Would that I had died before this and that I was a thing forgotten and out of sight". Mary receives a revelation about provision, including an instruction to take a vow of silence when she returns to her family (verse 24-27), after which Mary's infant son witnesses to her family on their return that his birth is a blessing and that he is Divinely ordained. This

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[16] Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qurʾan* (London: Sheldon Press, 1965), p. 61.
[17] Michael Sells finds Mary's response to the angel to be the reaction of a woman in the presence of a male outside of social propriety, in 'A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Sūras', (p. 6). Neal Robinson points to similarities between the portrayal of Muhammad and Mary as both facing accusations by their communities, receiving revelation through the angel Gabriel who appears in human form to both, and the call to provide evidence of their mission, in 'Jesus and Mary', pp. 29-30.

Providence is invoked in Q 66.12 as a sign to believers. Stowasser points out that passages in Q 4 and 5 emphasise the humanity of both Mary and Jesus as a reproach to Christian trinitarianism, such as in Q 4.171 and 5.75.[18] Viewing the speech action of Mary in this context as a very human response to wish for death during intense physical pain, may likewise be intended to stress her humanity and disprove the notion that Mary and Jesus were part of a trinity. On the other hand, the birth narrative may be read as an archetype of female suffering.[19] These Marian texts evidently raised questions about the agency of women, yet, despite the presence of some debate about the significance of the inclusion of Mary in prophetic 'signs lists', neither consensus-based mainstream doctrine, nor popular piety affirmed Mary as a prophet.[20]

5.5.2.3 The Woman to Be Examined

The last two entries of women who signify speaking activity are not those of named women, nor do they belong to familiar categories of Qur'anic discourse, such as prophets, believers, or rejecters. Rather, these two roles in the surah-titles explicitly note women as subjects. Moreover, they are subjects of speaking activities. The 'woman to be examined' (Q 60) expresses a passive sense that the women are to be interrogated as to their faith. However, the context of verse 12 explains the circumstances of the testing when women joined the community of believers out of their own accord (in Wadud's description they were refugees, al-muhājirat), and were to be tested by taking an oath of allegiance.[21]

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[18] Stowasser, p. 71. The trinitarianism criticised by the Qur'an may be understood in terms of pre-Islamic Arabian paganism that venerated Allat as mother goddess of the Semitic pantheon and as wife of the head of the pantheon. See Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. by Theophil Menzel (London: Harper Torchbook, 1960), p. 17. For a more general introduction to the background of deities and names, see Alfred Guillaume, *Islam* (London: Penguin, 1954, repr. 1999), pp. 6-9.

[19] See Nancy Huston, 'Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes', in *The Female Body*, ed. by Susan R. Suleiman, pp. 119-136.

[20] Stowasser, p. 69.

[21] See p. 87 and p. 89 above.

Verses 10-11 commands that women should be allowed to join the believing community and illustrates the magnanimity of the Islamic community in that the women's families should be compensated for the loss of dower arrangements.

Islamic tradition explains this surah as a clarification concerning women who independently left Makkah to join the Prophet's community in Madinah after the Hijrah, despite opposition from their families. The families sought their return according to the terms of the treaty of Hudaibiyya. However, the Hadith relates that the revelation of Q 60 was received in response to the women's plea not to be returned.[22] These women, together with illustrious men in the early Islamic community, became known in Islamic legend as 'companions of the Prophet' and a part of those 'with whom God is well pleased'. Asma Barlas comments on two aspects that are relevant to feminist understanding of these texts. Firstly, that these texts indicate that women could speak for themselves, they did not require the mediation of men for public address, and that the oath does not specify the obedience to husbands, but rather emphasizes commitment to justice, expressed as "obedience to the prophet in what is 'right'".[23] Haifaa Jawad finds evidence in this example, amongst other figures from the traditional material, that women were an integral part of the new political order of Madinah by challenging the old systems and participating in *shura*, or mutual consultation, on all levels. Jawad therefore argues that political action is a duty on Muslim women.[24]

In terms of the language of Sign in the Qurʾan, these women become an iconic image, or type, that is contained within one substantivised verb in the Arabic: *al-mumtahinā*, 'the women-to-be tested'. The term recalls women who act independently and display valour in

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[22] For discussion of this event in terms of the characterisation of an individual woman, Umm Khultum bint ʿAqaba, see Afsaruddin, 'Reconstituting Women's Lives', pp. 462-463.
[23] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 149.
[24] Haifaa A. Jawad, *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 84.

the face of persecution to join the Muslim community. They are not only tested, but present their own case without male mediators and fulfil the conditions for 'office' by taking the oath of allegiance.[25]

5.5.2.4 The Woman Who Disputes

The 'woman who disputes', *al-mujādilah* (Q 58) is likewise designated specifically as a speaking subject in the Qur'an. She is said to have disputed with a second person addressee who, in terms of the Islamic narrative of Qur'anic revelation, is invariably the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, these few lines in the Qur'an present us with an extraordinary view on a female voice structured as opposition to, but converging with, the activities of the Prophet and confirming the truth of the message. Firstly, assessing the translations of the title gives us an insight into the line of reasoning not only about issues regarding translation, but also about gender in Islamic discourses. As the text is originally unvowelled, the title is either read as 'the woman who disputes' (*al-mujādilah*) or 'the dispute' (*al-mujādalah*). A sampling of some well-known English translations of the Qur'an point out a degree of diversity in rendering the Arabic noun form: Yusuf Ali translates the title 'The Woman who Pleads',[26] Arthur J. Arberry translates it as 'The Disputer',[27] Richard Bell renders it 'The Disputant',[28] while Marmaduke Pickthall reads

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[25] The extraordinary female agency referenced in this section must have been recognised by early commentators as much of the commentary of classical Islamic scholarship is concerned with whether the Prophet touched the women's hands or not in terms of customary practice. Such discussions seem to be aimed at a subversion of, or at least diversion from, the Qur'an's equitable portrayal of women in this section. See Asma Afsaruddin's discussion of this detail as additional material in later traditions, in 'Reconstituting Women's Lives, p. 469.

[26] Yususf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1975), p. 1510.

[27] Arberry, A.J. *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Allen Unwin, 1955), p. 263.

[28] Richard Bell, *The Qur'an Translated with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs, Vol 2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937, repr. 1960), p. 563.

'She that Disputeth'.[29] Some indexes of the Qur'an opt for a combination giving the translation as 'She that Disputeth/The Pleading Woman'.[30] Other translations opt for the gender-neutral term 'The Pleading', for example Muhammad Asad.[31]

The differences between these translations illustrate concerns about the viewpoint of the translator as interpreter of the text. In the first place, many translations assume the reading *mujādilah*, making the involvement of a woman in the dispute explicit. The text makes a woman as the disputant clear; the verb being in the third person feminine singular with the second person masculine pronominal suffix (*tujādiluka*). The alternative reading of *mujādalah* mutes the involvement of a woman, and we are reminded about Fatima Mernissi's comment on the name of the Battle of the Camel that was seemingly chosen to obscure the involvement of a woman.[32] Also, the difference in meaning between the translations 'dispute' and 'plead' point to a hermeneutic tension between text and translator: why is *jadala*, consistently rendered as 'dispute'- indicating equality in opposition and argument - translated as 'plead', placing the arguers semantically in a hierarchical position?

Nevertheless, in the light of the hermeneutic of Sign in the Qur'an and the relationship of titles to Sign, we may surmise that the 'mujādilah' – the questioning, arguing woman – is a sign to the Qur'anic audience. Her significance is firstly related to an exclusively Qur'anic context, where the action of dispute or debate is read firstly, as an aspect within the Qur'an's compositional development and secondly, as an anthropological characteristic that defines, and is defined by, other noteworthy characters in Qur'anic discourse. The

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[29] Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*
<http://wings.buffalo.edu/sa/muslim/quran/pickthall/> [Date accessed 10 December 2004].
[30] <http://web.umr.edu/~msaumr/Quran/> [Date accessed 10 December 2004].
[31] Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al Andalus Limited, 1980), p.843.
[32] See above, p. 75, fn. 30.

following chapter is therefore an exposition of this character in terms of a Qur`anic

grammar of disputation.

Chapter Six

Prophetic Disagreement in the Qur'an

The Qur'an contains numerous terms of disagreement that have led to comments that the Qur'an is a product of polemical encounter with a variety of creeds and beliefs.[1] For instance, Jacques Jomier argues that the theme of argument and persuasion is a continual aspect of the Qur'an, both as doctrinal content and as stylistic quality of the text. Jomier finds a combination between the simplicity of argument and a vivid, concrete character to be the defining nature of persuasion in the Qur'an.[2] Fazlur Rahman likewise asserts that the Qur'an often speaks about confrontation.[3] In the chapter of the *mujādilah* the Qur'an presents such a moment of a literal argument wherein a woman questions the practices of the community as it relates to her understanding of the justice of the Qur'anic message. The verbal root denoting this event is *jadala* which occurs twenty nine times in the Qur'an in the third conjugation. Etymologically it is connected to the action of 'twisting', or 'braiding', though the third conjugation, which is the conjugation applied throughout, denotes the specific connotation of argument and contestation.[4] It is usually translated as 'dispute' or 'debate', therefore, as a communicative event, *jadala* is a denomination of disagreement or opposition between a speaker and an interlocutor (Speaker and interlocutor are not necessarily fixed positions but interchangeable in the process of debate).

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[1] Bell & Watt discuss how the theme of opposition points to a chronological consideration for the surahs in, p.118-120. Also Jacques Waardenburg, 'Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam according to its Relations with Other Religions', in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, pp. 93-116. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe's comment: "If Islam was conceived in prayer [...] it was nurtured in debate", in 'Debate with Them in the Better Way', in *MHASF*, p. 163. Kate Zebiri likewise notes that the prevalence of polemic and argumentation in the Qur'an gives the impression that it came into existence "against the backdrop of various types of opposition or recalcitrance against Muhammad and his message", in 'Rhetorical Criticism', (p. 96).
[2] Jacques Jomier, *The Great Themes of the Qur'an*, p. 109.
[3] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, p. 80.
[4] Jane Dammen McAuliffe in 'Debate with Them', p. 164, fn. 5 notes that classical works frequently reflect the etymological association between 'twisting' and 'disputation'.

193

In Q 58, the disagreement provides a self-reflexive postulation of encounter with an Other that leads to theodical revaluation. Thus the Qur`an is simultaneously formed by the participation of the audience as well as addressing them. The Qur`an may therefore be explored in terms of the traces of interaction that constitutes its compilation. Neuwirth is convinced that the Qur`an preserves traces of its organic growth in its final form, not as a linear movement from speaker to addressee, but "as a communication between a larger number of *dramatis personae* involved in the process of the emergence of a community".[5] These personalities, whom we term interlocutors, show development in the same way that the main chronological periods of Makkan to Madinan show development in conceptual expansion, suggesting that the interlocution changes both in nature and characterisation as Qur`anic theology develops. For instance, the earliest interlocutors and addressees are mainly constituted as a general/universal audience, sometimes characterised as polytheists (*mushrikūn*), whereas later revelation addresses other communities, such as Jews and Christians with questions from the Prophet's community in between. Jacques Waardenburg finds, in considering the prevalent ideas at the time of Muhammad, that the rhetorical power of the Qur`anic message must be located in the interaction between Muhammad and these various audiences:

> [How] did this religious movement become a religion on a par with the great religions which existed in the Middle East at the time? Our hypothesis is that the key to solving this problem lies in the interaction which took place between the prophetic leader with his community on the one hand, and the existing communities on the other.[6]

Reading dispute in the Qur`an from back-to-front then reflects a 'chronological' development in the characters that dispute and the topics they dispute or debate about in

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[5] Neuwirth, 'Referentiality and Textuality in *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*. Some Observations on the Qur`anic "Canonical Process" and the Emergence of a Community', in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning*, ed. by Issa J. Boulatta (Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 143-172 (pp. 143-147). See also the in depth discussion of the proposed canonical process in 'Vom Rezitationstext', pp. 76-78.

[6] Jacques Waardenburg, 'Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam', (p. 95).

their search for clarification. As pointed out previously, such an approach does not disregard the historical-critical problematic of Qur'anic studies that has revolved around the Nöldeke-Schwally classification of surahs.[7] It rather seeks to build on the broad consensus about chronological grouping of surahs within a literary approach. It views the structuring of the Qur'an as a work of religious fidelity with coherent unity both of individual surahs and chronological categories of surah as early or late, designating conceptual development from the one period to the other. Therefore the two main premises informing the rhetorical reading of the Qur'an presented here, are firstly, that the Qur'an consists of a unified semantic structure and secondly, that this structure is developed along the main historical phases in the career of the Prophet, grouped by and large as Makkan and Madinan respectively.

Within a developmental model, such as the Makkan to Madinan epoch suggested above for the Qur'an, the links between words are not only based on syntactic meaning, but derivation and accumulation and, in the case of an oral text, such mnemonic features as homophony and homonymy. Therefore, this reading aims to discern the distinctive qualities of the term *jadala*, juxtaposed with equivalent terminology, or quasi-synonyms, and contrasted with antonymic subjects and characters. Such an internally comparative analysis of the structure of argumentation of the Qur'an simultaneously reveals traces of growth and compilation of the text, while demonstrating distinctions in the semantic fields of terminology as they progress throughout the Qur'an.[8]

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[7] Bell & Watt, pp. 114-115 compare various proponents of diachronic and synchronic approaches respectively, commenting that traditional Islamic scholarship does not accede to any development of thought in the Qur'an as God is eternal and unchanging and therefore his thought cannot change. Nevertheless, this same traditional scholarship suggest a chronology of surahs, although often with the aim to align the revelations with Islamic historiography of the Prophet's career.

[8] Afnan Fatani proposes a translation method which views single words as generic terms "with a single denotative/dictionary meaning and a range of collocational clusters that can all be activated simultaneously", in 'The Lexical Transfer of Arabic Non-Core Lexicon: *Sūra* 113 of the Qur'an – Al-Falaq (the Splitting)',

This methodology is supplementary to Jane Dammen McAuliffe's syntactical analysis of

jadala as Qur'anic term of dispute *par excellence*.[9] McAuliffe's syntactic analysis of *jadala*

together with its equivalents in the Qur'an (of which she briefly discusses *khaṣama*)

concludes that disputatious conduct in the Qur'an is "overwhelmingly a worldly activity,

one most frequently associated with deliberate disavowal of God's 'signs'".[10] McAuliffe

views the first occurrence of *jadala* as that in *surattul baqarā* (Q 2.197) and the last

occurrence "appropriately enough" in *surattul mujādilah* (Q 58.1).[11] McAuliffe therefore

bases her comment on a reading of the Qur'an in its final format without taking

chronological development into account. McAuliffe explicitly relates this linear reading of

jadala in the Qur'an to the way that *jadala* has been viewed in Islamic tradition material in

terms of 'commendable' and 'reprehensible *jadal*'.[12] Such categorisation was mostly

applied in the commentary and practices of *fiqh*, or jurisprudence and *kalām*, or dialectical

theology and we call to mind El Sheikh's opinion that the idea of 'reprehensible' dispute

stems from the anguish with which Islam views the schism between Sunni and Shi'ah in its

early history. Furthermore, an important exegetical principle in traditional interpretation is

the notion of abrogation whereby verses were often contrasted as abrogating (*nasikh*) or

abrogated (*mansukh*) that has resulted in the elevation of the Madinan surahs over the

Makkan in traditional Muslim scholarship.

McAuliffe's analysis makes clear how traditional exegetical methodology, which reads

earlier ('Makkan') occurrences of terminology through their accumulatively developed

latter ('Madinan') referrals, leads to an overall negative understanding of disputation in the

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JQS, 4 (2) (2002), 61-81 (p. 62). The collocational clusters are related to the 'sound figures of Michael Sells that are likewise based on the connections between acoustical features and lexical features of the Qur'an, 'A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Suras', p. 22.
[9] McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them', p. 165. See also her similar classification of oppositional discourse in the Qur'an in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* vol. 1, ed. by McAuliffe, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 511-514.
[10] McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them', p. 165.
[11] McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them', p. 164-165.
[12] 'Debate with Them', p. 170.

Qur'an. Despite the concession of a few occurrences of commendable dispute, the traditional evaluation of *jadala* in the Qur'an concludes that "the predominant Qur'anic usage of *jadala* and its cognates is negative, as signalled by its very first textual occurrence. Therefore when the Qur'an, disclosing a key element of its anthropology, states *wa-kāna l-insānu akthara shay'in jadalan* ["but humankind is contentious in most things"], (Q 18.54), it is not conveying a compliment or highlighting a human virtue".[13]

However, a canonical reading of the terminology of dispute considers chronological development together with an understanding of the accumulative semiology of the Qur'an. Such a procedure prevents a seamless overall value of an individual term throughout the text. The hermeneutic of Sign as 'sound figure' or *Bildmatrix* addressed in this thesis asks that the accumulative paronomasia of the Qur'an consider the context of *ayāt* in each instance. That is, each occurrence must be guided by the question of 'what is being signified on this occasion', while bringing together every previous mention and context of the term.

6.1   The Terminology of Argumentation in the Qur'an

A canonical analysis of *jadala* in the Qur'an develops dispute in terms of its subjects, that is a) dispute as an activity, b) the issues raised, and c) in the protagonists of dispute, with *surattul mujādilah* seemingly as a pivot. The term does not occur before Q 58 in a 'chronological' reading of the Qur'an, that is no form of *jadala* is found from Q 114 to Q 59. The appearance of *jadala* in Q 58 introduces an innovative Qur'anic concept not only of opposition, but as an explicatory procedure for the audience from this point forward which

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[13] 'Debate with Them', p. 168.

becomes clear when considering the anthropological and topical subjects at stake in the semantic fields, or collocational cluster, of *jadala*.

6.1.1 Equivalents of *jadala*: *kadhaba*

Despite the absence of *jadala* in the early stage, the Qur'an registers opposition in a variety of ways. In Q 95.7, we come across a notion of opposition, framed in a question: "And what can contradict (*kadhaba*) you about this judgement?" followed by the rhetorical question, which ends the surah on the theodical question: "Is God not the wisest of judges?"[14] Then in Q 92.16, we come across *kadhaba* again, however, this time it signifies refuting/lying, grammatically in the second stem formation. Hereafter the term *kadhaba* and *kafira* are labels of those who reject the Qur'anic message, for example in Q 84.22; 83.17; and 80.42. The early application of these terms is totalled in Q 69.49-50 as an anthropological class distinguished, but equated as the damnable activities of 'deniers' (*mukadhdhibīna*) and 'rejecters' (*al-kafirīna*).

The root *kadhaba* is prolific in the Qur'an and is found in the majority of surahs. In *al-rahmān* (Q 55), the notion of *kadhaba* as denial of truth is enforced with the occurrence of *kadhaba* in nearly every second line with the phrase: "Then which of the favours of your Lord will you deny (VI *kadhaba*)".[15] In *al-a'rāf* (Q 7) and *al-an'ām* (Q 6) the term is once again plentiful denoting the sense of rejecting the Signs of God as well as inventing lies against God as illustrated in Q 7.37: "Who is more unjust than one who invents a lie (noun *kadhīban*) against God or rejects (*kadhaba*) His Signs?[16] The imagery associated with *kadhaba* is built up anthropologically with characters who rejected the Signs brought by

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[14] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1759.
[15] Other ocurrences of *kadhaba* in Q 55 are in verses 13, 16, 18, 21, 23, 25, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 43, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53, 55, 57, 59, 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 73, 75, 77.
[16] Other ocurrences of *kadhaba* in Q 7 are in verses 36, 37, 40, 64, 66, 72, 89, 92, 96, 101, 136, 146, 147, 176, 177, 182. For Q 6 the verses are 5, 11, 21, 24, 27, 31, 33, 34, 39, 49, 57, 66, 93, 144, 147, 148, 150, 157.

God's designate, such as 'the people of Noah' who did not believe Noah's warning of impending judgement in Q 40.5, and Pharaoh who mocked the signs of Moses, in Q 40.23-24, 28, 37. The summation in Q 40.69-70 juxtaposes the two terms *jadala* and *kadhaba*, drawing a distinction that illustrates the difference between these two root terms: *jadala* designates a neutral action of debate, while *kadhaba* specifies the overtly negative action of rejecting:

> Do you not see those that dispute (*yujādilūna*) about the signs of God, how they are turned away? Those who reject (*kadhdhabū*) the Book and that with which we sent our messengers, they shall soon know.[17]

The last 'chronological' occurrence of *kadhaba* is in Q 2.20, 39, 87 carrying the sense of propagating falsehood and is once again coupled with *kafira* (v. 39) as rejection of faith. It is clear that *kadhaba* eventually does not only denote contradiction, as it did in Q 95.7, but stands for the propagation of falsehood and is definitely a negative action, as it describes the anthropological category that is excluded from Qur'anic Grace. Michael Sells adds that the mukadhdhibūn are not only refusing to assent to Qur'anic understanding but "actively persecute those who do".[18]

6.1.2 Equivalents of *jadala: khaṣam*

Another term that is often translated in English as dispute, or debate in the Qur'an, is the root *khaṣam*. McAuliffe names it as an equivalent of *jadala* that "maintain[s] the connection of debate and disputation, as signalled by *ikhtaṣama* and its cognates, with eschatological events, with rejection of 'signs' and with the denigration or disregard of messengers".[19] While this is certainly true as a general overview, the distinctive application of these terms in the Qur'an begs the question why the Qur'an uses varying terminology if

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[17] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1281.
[18] *Approaching the Qur'an*, p. 36.
[19] McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them', pp. 168-169.

these terms were exact equivalents. Are the terms applied for poetic purposes, that is sound

and accent, or do the different terms denote specific qualities that need to be accounted for

both in translation and exegesis?

An analysis of *khaṣam*, which is less prolific in the Qur'an and only occurs

'chronologically' after Q 50.28, likewise carries no positive element and could be rendered

by the English terms 'quarrel' or 'bicker'. It is strongly advised against, as in Q 50.28 with

a clear prohibition not to 'quarrel' in God's presence. The contextual indicators seem to

point to sectarian strife as the object of disparity. The subjects of *khaṣam* often designate

sectarian opposition, for instance the tribes of Thamud and Salih who became two

quarrelling factions (Q 27.45), or 'the people around Mary' who had to decide her care with

the drawing of lots (Q 3.44). The sectarian feature of quarrelling is strengthened by the

vignette in Q 38.21-26, which relates a story of two quarrelling brothers (*khaṣmāni*) who

clambered over a wall into David's private chambers in order for him to resolve a dispute

about livestock. It is also juxtaposed with *kafira* in Q 22.19, where a distinction is made

between 'quarrelling' and 'rejecting': "These two antagonists (*khaṣmāni*) quarrel

(*ikhtaṣamū*) with each other about their Lord: but those who deny (*kafarū*) (their Lord), -

for them will be cut out a garment of fire; over their heads will be poured out boiling

water".[20] In Q 43.58, *khaṣam* and *jadala* are juxtaposed, evaluating the motivation for

debates between opposing religious groups as eristic competition: "And they say: 'Are our

gods best, or he?' This they say to you only for the sake of disputation (*jadalan*), they are

indeed a contentious (*khaṣimūna*) people".[21] Here, once again, *jadala* features as the

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[20] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 855. Other occurences of *kh-ṣ-m* are mostly in the first conjugation: Q 4.105; 16.4; 36.49, 77; 38.64, 69, compared to the already noted ocurrences which are in the eigth conjugation.
[21] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1336.

generic term for debate and the quasi-synonym *khaṣama* as qualifier of debate that rejects the Qur'anic message.

The next occurrence of *khaṣama* is in Q 43.18 where dispute is again figured as a human characteristic. This section has traditionally been interpreted in terms of gendered ontology and McAuliffe observes that it is disparaging towards women:

> When Q 43:16-18 chides the disbelievers for ascribing 'daughters' to God, although clearly the prized progeny are males, it also asks how could 'one who is raised with trinkets and is not clear in debate (*khiṣām*)' be associated with God? Certainly, the verse is no compliment to women but it softens, somewhat, the Qur'anic disparagement of disputation by making it a defining talent of masculinity.[22]

However, a literary reading points out that the verse itself contains no clear reference to women (the subject is referenced as third person masculine singular, *huwa fī-l-khiṣāmi ghairu mubīn*) and is situated in a rather obscure passage about ascribing gender to heavenly beings, which is a trait of those who are adamant in following the 'ways of their fathers' (Q 43.22).[23]

In sum, we may observe that the Qur'an contains numerous instances and various terms where it reflexively opens its message to deliberation, or "forensic activity".[24] As noted, these terms occur in contexts that point out the negative aspects of disagreement with the propositions of the text. However, the distinction remains that contending the issues raised in the text is not necessarily the same as rejecting the message, although the text clearly warns against arguing for the sake of eristic competition.

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[22] McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them', p. 169.

[23] 'Ali translates v. 19 as "they make into females angels who are themselves servants of the Merciful", p. 1327. However, this is not clear from the Arabic as the word for 'angels' (*malā'ikata*) is not necessarily intended to reflect the female gender but is the broken plural of *malak*, as applied elsewhere in the Qur'an e.g. Q 2.210.

[24] McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them', p. 164.

6.1.3 Equivalents of *jadala: sa'ala*

From the foregoing discussions of the modes of debate in the Qur'an, it is evident that the Qur'an contains much that is stylistically dialogic. These terms of contention are put side by side with the instruction to the speaker to answer interlocutors most clearly seen in the phrases introduced with the imperative *qul*, 'Say!'. This term occurs about 250 times throughout the Qur'an. The Qur'an observes time and again that questions arise: *yas'alūnaka* 'they ask you', upon which the command is *qul*, 'Say!', most evident in *al-baqara*, for instance Q 2.215:

> They ask you what they should spend in charity. Say: Whatever you spend for good, that is for parents and kindred and orphans and those in need and for wayfarers. And whatever you do that is good, God knows it well.[25]

Even God responds to the angels when they call into question the wisdom of creating humans, a creature that "spreads evil and sheds blood in the earth" (Q 2.30), although they acknowledge that God is "Perfect in knowledge and wisdom" (Q 2.32). The command is to the speaker to respond to questions raised by the audience. Therefore, the term *qul* (say) often introduces a rejoinder to the arguments of the Prophet's opponents, and clarification of his own position.[26] Yet, in Q 5.104 the Qur'anic understanding of the role of debate is set out explicitly as a theology of interlocution, 'to ask questions' in the light of Qur'anic revelation:

> Oh you who believe, do not ask questions (*lā tas'alū*) about things which, if they become clear to you may cause you trouble. But if you ask (*wa'in tas'alū*) about these things when the Qur'an is being revealed, they will be made plain to you. God will forgive those, because God is Forgiving and Patient.[27]

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[25] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 84.
[26] Bell & Watt, p. 75-76 discuss this term as stylistic indicator of a redaction history for the surahs.
[27] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p.274.

This theology of interlocution is emphasised when contrasted to the terms of disagreement as they develop throughout the Qur'an. It is evident that the terms *kadhaba* (to refute), *khaṣam* (to quarrel) and *saʿala* (to ask) are the semantic counterparts of *jadala* (to debate) in the Qur'an. These terms not only provide meaning in their individual citation but also convey distinction against a backdrop of vocabulary that was in a process of growth within an expanding corpus.

6.2 *Jadala* in the Qur'an

The equivalents of *jadala* and development of questioning or arguing from the earlier to later revelations point to an increasing distinction in the understanding of debate that differentiates between the debate of rejecters and the debate of those who reflect on the message of the Qur'an. Umeyye Yazicioglu opines in this regard that "the aim of the Qur'an is not to eradicate questioning but discipline it, and to teach us *how* to ask questions".[28]

A summary of its occurrences points out that *jadala* is used to describe the discursive actions of a variety of characters and topics. Taken 'chronologically', the first proponent of *jadala* is the woman of Q 58.1. The next instance (Q 43.58) is one of confrontation with the tenets of Christianity, contending about the nature of divinity, with the evaluation of the antagonists as a 'contentious people'. However, there is a distinction here between *jadala* and *khaṣam* as seen above, where bringing an argument is denoted as disputation and the contending people are designated as *khaṣimūna*. As seen from the general context, which indicates a negative value of *khaṣam* and its cognates, we may render *khaṣam* in this

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[28] Umeyye Yazicioglu, 'Learning to Ask Questions: The Cases of Abraham and Noah (p) in the Qur'an', *JSR*, 5.1 (April 2005), <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume5/number1/ssr05_01_e02.html> [Accessed 4 May 2006] (para. 2 of 39).

instance in English as 'contentious', in the sense of being divisive, as distinguished from producing a disputation, which is the requirement for applying justice in a legal context.

Q 40 follows with a mention of a category of disputants, 'those that dispute about the Signs' (*ladhīna yujādilūna fī 'ayātinā*), that is later elaborated in terms of the content of debate as well as the subjects that propagate dispute. This development occurs where the ones disputing about the Signs of God are those who reject (*ladhīna kafarū*) in 40.4 and their characters are profiled in 40.5:

> There were those before them who denied (*kadhabat*): the people of Noah and the Confederates (of Evil) after them and every people plotted against their prophet to seize him. And they disputed (*jādalū*) with vanities in order to condemn the truth [...].[29]

The distinction between appropriate dispute and inappropriate dispute is made in Q 40.35, where the conduct of those that dispute 'without any received authority' (*bighairi sultāni*) is condemned, with the added profile of an arrogant Pharaoh in vv. 36-37 and reinforced in vv. 56 and 69. The notion of those who dispute without authority is elaborated in the ensuing occurrence of *jadala* in Q 31.20 as people "without Knowledge and without Guidance and without a Book to enlighten them".

The next occurrence of *jadala* brings the descriptions of dispute up till now into focus in Q 29.46 by indicating that there are good and bad ways to exercise debate in matters of faith:

> And do not dispute with the People of the Book except in the better way, unless it is with those of them who do wrong, and say: 'We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you. Our God and your God is One and it is to Him we are in submission.[30]

The Qur'an assents that there will always be disagreement amongst people, while it spells out that those who dispute about God (in the sense of denying God's existence), are

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[29] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1263.
[30] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1041-1042.

followers of evil (Q 22.3). In Q 22.8 the Qur'an once again concurs that there are people who dispute no matter what proof is offered, and warns in v. 68 that regardless of the nature of the dispute, God will ultimately judge between the opposing parties.[31] The next occurrence of *jadala* in Q 18.54 acknowledges the tendency to argue as a trait of human behaviour as a thinking being, the ultimate characteristic of *homo sapiens*. The distinction is made once again two verses later, between debate in service of truth or for the sake of controversy, when the Qur'an juxtaposes the messengers with good news and warnings with unbelievers who dispute with vain arguments in order to weaken the truth (*liyudḥiḍū bihi 'lḥaqqa*). The ultimate form of dispute is on the Day of Judgement when each soul will have to be its own advocate, disputing on its own behalf (Q 16.111). This setting clearly invokes the legal procedure of stating or advocating a case for the sake of justice. Here then, it is the Ultimate Court, where all of life is called to justice. This is followed up with an imperative to debate in Q 16.125, recalling the injunction of Q 29.46 to debate 'in the better way' as well as underpinning a theology of interlocution:

> Invite all to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching
> and argue with them (*wajādilhum*) in ways that are the best, for your
> Lord knows better who has strayed from his Way and who is guided.[32]

These notions of debate are expounded in terms of such dualistic notions of debate as that which propagates truth in opposition to vain argument, which propagates falsehood in the ensuing chapters. Q 13.13 refers to those that deny the awesome nature of a thunderstorm to be the type who dispute about God. In Q 8.6, it is those who deny truth, while others debate on the grounds of the traditions of the ancients (Q7.71 and 6. 25).

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[31] The occurrence of *jadala* in Q 22.68 follows on the use of another term that may be considered a close equivalent of *jadala*, that is the root *n-z-'* in the third conjugation, which may be rendered as 'drawing out in a challenge', occurring in this sense in the sixth conjugation as well. See Q 20.62, 18.21, 8.46, 8.43, 4.59, 3.152.

[32] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 689.

In sum, the addition of *jadala* approximately halfway through the Qur'an in Q58 is a marked enlargement of the terms of disagreement in the Qur'an, inculcating a positive element to uphold a standpoint over and against 'rejecters' and 'unbelievers', who do not present any standpoint of their own while discarding the Qur'anic message. The association is further made with those who dispute legalities, for instance the prohibition of eating food over which God's name has not been pronounced (Q 6.121), with the final command not to enter into debate during the time of Pilgrimage (Q 2.197).

6.2.1   The Anthropological Profile of *jadala*

There is a further feature of *jadala* that distinguishes it from its equivalents: *jadala* is associated with the paradigmatic Qur'anic figures of Abraham and Noah. These paradigmatic figures likewise establish the difference between argument, that confirms revelation, as opposed to argument that opposes the Qur'anic message. The 'first' characterisation of hostile opposition to the Prophet is given in Q 112 with the allusive description of Abu Lahab and his wife. However, this opposition is developed in Q 96 as a rebuke of a 'self-sufficient man' who is condemned for his rejection of, and open hostility to, the prophetic message.[33] Yet *jadala* is presented as an 'oppositional' action that profiles Abraham in a unique way while at the same time imbuing *jadala* with a specific anthropological connotation.[34] The Qur'anic significance of Abraham is that he is held up as an example of outstanding excellence in faith throughout the Qur'an.[35] He is mostly viewed in terms of his status as *hanif*, or first monotheistic believer even before books of

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[33] See Jacques Jomier's commentary on Q 96.6-29 as well as Abu Lahab, in *The Great Themes of the Qur'an*, pp. 20-23.

[34] McAuliffe likewise recognises that the Qur'an creates a topos of prophets who debate from Noah to Muhammad, as authentication of prophets who will always encounter resistance to their message, in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, p. 513.

[35] See for example the study of Abraham in the Qur'an by Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran* (Paris, 1958).

revelation were made known (Q 2.135), a characteristic that is mostly developed in the Madinan phase of Qur'anic revelation.[36]

6.2.1.1 Abraham as Mujādil[37]

Abraham is 'first' mentioned in Q 87.19, where the fundamental tenets of Islamic faith, that is acknowledging the Creator and reward and punishment on Judgement Day, is synoptically described as the message contained in the earlier testaments of Abraham and Moses. From very early on Abraham is held up as a model, or 'excellent example' (`uswat ḥasanat) in Q 60.4, to follow, most notably in his rejection of the idols of his ancestors (Q 60.4, 43.26, 37.83-98, 26.70, 6.74), but also as one of the patriarchs of faith (Q 42.13, 38.45, 22.78, 21.51, 19.58, 12.6, 4.54, 2.133). Abraham is characterised as one who exemplifies the life of submission to the will of God, whether it was in receiving angelic messengers, whom he initially feared (Q 51.24, 29.31, 15.51, 11.69), or when willing to sacrifice his son (Q 37.100-106), or remaining steadfast in the face of persecution (Q 37.97-99). Features that characterise Abraham therefore, are that he is designated as host to heavenly messengers (Q 51.24, 29.31, 15.51, 11.69), his rejection of the traditional idolatrous religion of his father (Q 60.4, 43.26, 37.83, 16.123), and his role as a patriarch of faith communities (Q 87.19, 42.13, 38.45, 19.58, 12.38, 9.70).

However, the most distinctive characteristic of Abraham, in comparison to the other prophets with whom he is often listed, is his intercessory attitude as mediator of faith. This may be seen in the 'first' narrative about Abraham (Q 60.4), where Abraham proposes to pray for the forgiveness of his father after testifying to his family about the true faith. Q

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[36] For a fuller discussion of the concept ḥanif, see Bell & Watt, Annex B, p. 15. For a discussion of Abraham as prototype for Muhammad's prophetic mission, see Waarenburg (sic), 'Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam', (pp. 106-108).

[37] The Arabic feminine noun form is distinguished from the masculine noun form by the suffix –ah; 'mujādilah' therefore means a female disputant, while 'mujādil' means a male disputant.

60.4-5 relates what I would describe as the original Abrahamic prayer recorded in the Qur`an:

> [...] Our Lord, in Thee do we trust and to Thee do we turn in repentance, to Thee is our ultimate goal. Our Lord, make us not a trial for the unbelievers but forgive us, our Lord. For Thou art the Exalted in might, the Wise.[38]

This prayer of Abraham for forgiveness on behalf of his kindred is for the Qur`an one of the outstanding features of Abraham that would be evoked in the ensuing characterisation of Abraham as someone who pleads on behalf of others.[39] Abraham's actions are often described in terms of his exemplary personality for example that he 'approached the Lord with a sound heart' (Q 37.84), that he was righteous in conduct (Q 21.51) and that he was devoutly obedient and true in faith (Q 16.120).

In Q 11.74, this intercessory profile is further reinforced. Here Abraham receives the news of impending destruction of 'Lot's people' and intercedes on their behalf, for which he is described as 'patient' (*ḥalīm*), 'compassionate' (`wwāh) and 'repentant', or 'given to look to God' (*munīb*). The only other instance where Yusuf 'Ali translates *jadala* as plead (instead of 'dispute'), apart from Q 58.1, is when he translates this encounter of Abraham with the heavenly beings:

> When fear had passed from Abraham and after he had heard the glad tidings [of the birth of a child], he began to plead (*yujādilunā*) with us for Lot's people.[40]

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[38] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur`an*, p. 1533.

[39] Abraham's prayers are often recorded, such as his prayer for a son in Q 37.100 and his prayer of submission Q 27.83-87, as well as his prayer for peace in Q 14.35-41, recalled in Q 2.126. Another remarkable feature is the recording of his thoughts in Q 51.25 when he greeted his honoured guests and thought to himself that they were 'unusual people'.

[40] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur`an*, p. 534.

Although Abraham's speech, or pleading, is not recorded in this instance, the character of Abraham as intercessor, that is as one who takes a stand on truth together with prayerful compassion, is well established with the previous depictions of him in the Qur'anic text.

This Qur'anic portrayal of Abraham synchronises a biblical profile of Abraham as proto-prophetic intercessor, as one who both questions the theodicy of God as well as someone who stands in the breaches on behalf of others. For instance, in Genesis 18.22-33 the Bible describes Abraham's encounter with heavenly beings, recording Abraham's questions about the justification of destroying the whole city (Sodom). Abraham bargains with God about the destruction of the city for the sake of decreasing numbers of righteous people. When the Bible takes up Abraham's story again, it describes Abraham in the dream of Abimelech, the king of Gerar, as a prophet (in Hebrew, *nabī*, not mentioned heretofore) as well as someone who 'can intercede (Hebr. *yitpalel*) on your behalf for your life' (Genesis 20:7).

6.2.1.2 Noah as Mujādil

The Qur'anic notion of *jadala* imbues the biblical character of Noah with a description of character that is not recorded in the Bible's rendition of the tale of the Flood (Genesis 6.4-7.10). It is an embellishment of the Noahide character with the same intercessionary disputatious feature as Abraham, though not to the same degree. The Bible describes Noah as righteous in Genesis 6.9 with the explanation that "Noah walked with God". However, the Qur'an elaborates this phrase by relating Noah's interceding disputation with his people in order to warn them about the impending judgement over them by flood (Q 11.25-31). The people mock this as a drawn out argument (*`akthartạ jidālanā*), and challenge Noah to let judgement commence, if it is the truth (v.32). In contrast to the biblical account, not all

of Noah's family accompany him into the ark (Genesis 7.7). The Qur'an reports that

Noah's son separated himself from the group to ride out the storm on a mountain top

despite Noah's dire warning (Q 11.42-43). Noah's lamenting question after the death of his

son in v. 45 recalls the accusation of Abraham's question in Genesis 18.25 whether the

Judge of all the earth is not to act justly: "And Noah called upon his Lord and said: 'O my

Lord. Surely my son is part of my family and Thy promise is true and you are the Most Just

of judges". To which the Job-like reply is: "Noah, he is not of your family because his

conduct is unrighteous. So ask not of me that of which you have no knowledge. I advise

you so that you do not act like the ignorant (al-jahilī)" (Q 11.46).[41]

6.3   *Jadala* as Qur'anic Theology of Interlocution

Seen against the background of quasi-synonyms of disagreement, together with the

profiling of characters by these terms in the Qur'an, what may we conclude about the term

jadala as a denomination of disagreement in the Qur'anic text, the characters that profile it,

and in particular the woman who is the 'first' exponent of *jadala* in the Qur'an? McAuliffe

points out that despite the "overriding Qur'anic censure of *jadal*, [it] did not prevent its

subsequent technical refinement and eventual emergence as a powerful tool in fields such

as *fiqh* and *kalām*. In fact, the Qur'an, itself was soon used to prove both the efficacy and

the necessity of disputation".[42] It is evident that Islamic scholarship understood a

distinction in the Qur'an's sense of dispute as process of clarification, over and against

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[41] Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 526. Yazicioglu's article, 'Learning to Ask Questions', acknowledges the role of these two characters in the Qur'an's call to interlocution. The article is also concerned with the forms of debate and etiquette of questioning, being careful to point out that questioning is not necessarily a sign of rebellion.

[42] McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them', p. 169.

argument for the sake of competition.[43] It has been demonstrated how numerous Muslim scholars took up the various instances of *jadala* in the Qur'an as proof texts for legal disputation and its protocols, as did El Sheikh more recently.[44]

Our analysis pointed out how the quasi-synonyms of *jadala* in the early period developed distinct connotations with contention and the rejection of the message of the Qur'an. The semantic fields of *khaṣam, kadhaba,* and *kafara* become denominators of expressed unbelief. Against the backdrop of these shades of unbelief, *jadala* is introduced as challenge the Qur'anic message, but it is a challenge to prove itself right. The characters, Abraham and Noah, that profile *jadala* through their pleas, prayers and laments demonstrate a certain grasp of justice and moral consciousness, or wisdom (*hikmah*) that instils *jadala* with a prophetic character. It is the wisdom, or intellect, aroused by an appreciation of Divine justice that enables the prophetic character to point out injustice and warn against wrongdoing.[45]

6.3.1 The Mujadilah and Preceding Female Characters

The mujādilah introduced in Q 58 follows on earlier Qur'anic depictions of women as part of the anthropology of belief or unbelief/rejection. For instance, after the damnable activities of Abu Lahab and his wife in Q 111, Q 66 presents examples of righteous conduct by the wife of Pharaoh (66.11) and Mary (66.12) over and against the unrighteous actions of the wives of Noah and Lot (66.10). These are juxtaposed with gender discourse in the adjustment of divorce procedures in Q 65 that promotes even-handedness and care among partners. Q 60 '*al-mumtahinah*', holds up women who join the community independently

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[43] For comparative discussion of the various classical Muslim proponents of *jadala* with full bibliographic references see the full article of Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'Debate with Them'.
[44] Salah El-Sheikh, 'Al-Mujādalah', p. 32.
[45] On a comparative understanding of prophetic personality, see Cragg, *The Weight in the Word. Prophethood: Biblical and Qur'anic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press,1999), pp. 128-129.

from the fledgling Islamic community's enemies, as examples of righteousness. These mumtahinahs are to be tested as to their faith and commitment, yet it is the mujādilah that tests the faith and justice of the community two surahs later.

This 'chronological' reading seems to build up to the moment when a women responds to the revelatory lessons that she has heard and seen, and inaugurates a new mode of consciousness and procedure of clarification for her community. At the same time as the mujādilah presents a challenge to the Prophet, she also affirms his Divine message and mission. The revelation that she receives on behalf of her disputation shapes a theology of interlocution that both confirms the Prophet as mediator, while holding him to account in dispensing justice, and validating the interlocution of the community as protagonists of revelation.

In whichever terms one couches the interaction between the Prophet and the mujādilah - whether pleading or arguing or formally disputing before a *hakim* in an early Islamic court setting - the text states clearly that God has acted because of it. Thus, we encounter in the mujādilah not only a strand, which radically undermines traditional gender performances, but the irruption of Divine Justice through the expression of human consciousness. The interlocutor, presented in the text as a single hearer such as the mujādilah, or Abraham, or the soul that advocates on its own behalf, acts as heuristic dialogue in the text presenting specimens of particular audiences that execute Qurʾanic theodicy. The surah of the mujādilah as signatory title of the fifty-eighth chapter of the Qurʾan, embodies theological disagreement whereby she personifies the essence of interlocution as revelation.

Reading the Qurʾan 'chronologically' from the Makkan to Madinan period, the mujādilah names a dialectic introduced by Abraham's intercession for his family. Read linearly as it

stands in compilation today, the mujādilah is the culmination of dialectic theology that summons the audience to participate in making meaning of the text. The aesthetic quality of the Qur'an therefore, is not only in its beauty of form and incomparability of eloquence, but also in evoking deliberation in its audience to consider its meaning. Far from being a purely dictatorial literature (dictated by a Divine agent in a linear mode), the Qur'an reflects Divine response to the implications of Justice that perplexed its audience. In terms of the semiology of the Qur'an, the woman is a sign to the community of the nature of Qur'anic justice and the social reformation that it envisions. In the mujādilah's strife for justice (*jahada*), she is the role model who calls the community to account for the way it dispenses justice.

Chapter Seven

Narratological Analysis of the Mujādilah

The mujādilah, 'the woman who disputes', has been selected from a structural-semiotic approach to the Qur`an in line with questions raised about the subjectivity of women in the Qur`an and the inclusion of gendered speaking activity in the Qur`an's semiology, that is, in terms of a Qur`anic sign that presents a woman as speaking. Traditionally the mujādilah is explained and commented on in terms of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*-genre of Hadith that describe the contextual circumstances that caused the revelation.[1] This traditional explanation of the text is considered here in terms of a feminist narratological approach that explores the language of the Qur`an's text in comparison to the Hadith. The feminist reading also considers an alternative scenario for the events referred to in the Qur`an in pointing out the androcentric assumptions implicit in the hadith.

This chapter analyses the traditional exegesis of Q 58 based on interpretations in modern English scholarship. The analysis of the hadith is compared to two texts that have seen the mujādilah as noteworthy, namely the articles 'Braiding the Stories' by Mohja Kahf and 'Al-Mujādalah and Al-Mujādilah Then and Now' by Salah El Sheikh. Both these articles relate to the mujādilah in terms of Islamic rhetorical processes that inform traditional procedures of interpretation. The previous chapter's analysis of the 'sound figure', or *Bildmatrix* of the root of mujādilah (*jadala*) provided an understanding of the mujādilah in terms of a theology of speaking activity represented by *jadala* both in the sacred text and as a

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[1] Many commentaries do not cite the *asbāb al-nuzūl* or take note of the explicit reference gendered language in this surah, but relate it to the state of Madinan society as a whole and pre-Islamic forms of divorce that serve as background for Islamic rulings on divorce. For example Muhammad al-Ghazali, *A Journey through the Qur`an*, abridged by Abdalhaqq Bewley (London: Dar al Taqwa, 1998), p. 439.

narrative of Qurʿanic prophethood. The present chapter asks how the mujādilah is significant primarily in terms of the structure and meaning of the Qurʿan while the hadith is scrutinised for its comment on Qurʿanic prophethood as a communal enterprise.

7.1 The Qurʿanic Text of a Woman Who Disputes

Q 58.1-4 presents us with an allusive narrative and value-laden introduction to a revelatory event in the Qurʿan. My translation reads as follows:

1. God has indeed heard the statement of her who disputes with you concerning her husband. And she complains to God. And God hears both your arguments for God is a discerning listener (lit. 'seeing hearer').

2. Those of you who *ẓihār* from their wives: They are not their mothers. Truly, their mothers are none other than those who gave birth to them. And in fact, they speak the (most) reprehensible of arguments and falsehoods. And indeed, God is for a redeeming replacement.

3. And those who *ẓihār* from their wives: in that case (*thumma*) they shall go back on what has been said. Then they shall free a slave before the two of them touch each other again. This are you admonished by. And God, in all that you do, is knowing.

4. And whomsoever has not, shall fast for two consecutive months before the two of them touch each other again. And whomsoever is unable shall feed sixty beggars. This is so that you may show your faith in God and his apostle. And these are the limits (*ḥudūd* lit. 'boundaries') of God and for the ungrateful (*k-f-r*) is a grievous penalty.[2]

The characterisation in the text indicates three characters and actions that are all described in terms of speaking activities narrated by an implied speaker.[3] God, a woman and an addressee act by speaking and hearing. The action may be said to occur on two levels: Firstly, on the Divine level, the implied narrator speaks proposing that God hears and speaks. On the second human level, communication is inferred and specified as 'dispute',

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[2] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qurʿan*, pp. 1510-1511.
[3] See Robinson, *Discovering the Qurʿan*, pp. 225-229 for an explanation of the shifts in grammatical person in the Qurʿan which has the effect that the speaker and addressee are not always easily discernable in the Qurʿanic text. This work draws on studies by Muhammad Abdel Haleem, 'Grammatical Shift for the Rhetorical Purposes. *Iltifāt* and Related Features in the Qurʿān', *BSOAS*, 55 (1992) <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Grammar/iltifaat.html> [Date accessed 1 December 2003].

which means speaking and hearing in oppositional terms. The topic of dispute is the woman's husband. There is no explicit chronographic setting, rather, the allusion to a dispute between the woman and the addressee is the introduction for repudiation of, and rulings on, a gender-relational speech practice, termed *ẓihār*. Once again *ẓihār* presents a substantivised verb form that asks for multiple references. Islamic tradition explains the practice of *ẓihār* as when a husband says to his wife 'You are to me as my mother's back'. The procedure is referred to as *ẓihār*, meaning 'the back', and is referenced in the second verse of the surah as the verbal form 'those who *ẓihār'* (*yuẓāhirūna*) their wives.

The only explanation for *ẓihār* is found in Islamic tradition that describes it as a pre-Islamic divorce formula whereby the husband could pronounce the phrase 'you are to me as my mother's back' and thereby break relations with his wife. While divorce formulas abound in Ancient Near Eastern literature, the idea of the 'mother's back' seems unique to the pre-Islamic situation. The husband's pronouncement assimilates the wife into the category of sexually forbidden women but does not annul the marriage, so that the woman is left in a state of limbo where she may neither expect any support from her husband, nor divorce him or get married to another man.[4] The man however, under the ruling of polygynous marriages, may take another wife. The injustice of *ẓihār* is more severe than formal divorce, leaving the woman in a state of *persona non grata*: she becomes a non-person who cannot form any new relationships or take up her marriage relationship again. The woman is therefore completely reliant on the goodwill, or not, of her *ẓihār*-husband.[5] Although the

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[4] Paul R. Powers, *Intent in Islamic Law: Motive and Meaning in Medieval Sunni Fiqh* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 145.

[5] For a comparison with other divorce formulae in the Ancient Near East, see Victor H. Matthews, 'Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East', in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. by Ken M. Campbell (Intervarsity Press: Illinois, 2003).

Qur'an denounces the practice and it has been classified in Sunni law as a reprehensible act, the pronouncement has effect to this day and has not been forbidden outright in practice.[6]

In spite of the paucity of narrative text characteristics, these verses nevertheless lend themselves to a narratological approach in terms of the Islamic narrative of prophethood that explains the Qur'an as a series of communicative events pronounced by Muhammad. In Islamic historiography, this surah is situated as a revelatory event in the Madinan phase of Muhammad's career, that is, the time of community formation after the emigration, or Hijrah, from Makkah to Madinah. Mieke Bal's model for narratological analysis presents an approach with which to probe the process of communication that is implicit in an Islamic narrative of revelation and made explicit as feature of communication between actors in the text of the mujādilah.[7] Her analysis asks that the text be scrutinised for three aspects, namely language, vision and action. The questions that bring these three to the fore asks how the language characterises actions and gender in terms of hierarchy and agency. This is measured against the conception of the success of the action of speech: what does speech achieve and whose speech succeeds? In terms of the Qur'anic language of Sign, a successful utterance is one that constitutes revelation. The agency of a character is therefore measured in terms of the instigation of revelation through formative questioning and not in terms of 'official status' as the mouthpiece that receives or delivers the message.

The reading of gender in the Qur'an's text of the mujādilah considers the modes of feminist reading as suggested by Deborah F. Sawyer for reading gender in another sacred text, the Bible. Sawyer finds three positions within gender theory with which to read gender in religious texts:

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[6] For example in Shi'ah tradition *zihār* is still lawful in terms of permanent marriage, that is in *mut'a*, (temporary marriage) the husband may not make use of *zihar* to break relations with his temporary wife. See for example <www.al-islam.org/al-serat/muta/4.htm> [Accessed 22 October 2007].
[7] Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, Appendix 1.

First, there are texts which explicitly portray a hierarchical and patriarchal society. A radical reading could conclude that this is the socio-political agenda of the biblical meta-narrative. Secondly, there are texts which challenge, and imply the reformation of, such a society. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, there are texts which can be read in anarchic terms and which subvert and overturn expected societal norms represented by the previous two categories.[8]

The work of Wadud and Barlas have demonstrated that although the Qur'an portrays a hierarchical and patriarchal society, it is concerned with the reformation of that society, as is indeed implicit in the traditional Islamic conception of the Jāhiliyya. Therefore we may read the text of the mujādilah for the way that it challenges societal structures and perhaps subverts expected norms while establishing the Qur'anic reformation that replaced Jāhiliyya.

7.2   Exposition of the Qur'anic Mujādilah

Q 58.1 is a communicative event between a woman and an addressee wherein the mode of communication is a dispute and the issue at stake is 'her husband'. The text identifies God as the author of the action in this revelation by name and not by the often occurring first person plural pronominal suffix 'We', found in for instance Q 20.1; 24.1; 48.1; 71.1; 92.1; 94.1; 108.1, or third person masculine singular pronoun 'He', in Q 25.1 and 67.1. Yet, the addressee ('you') is not named and, likewise, needs to be deduced from Qur'anic usage in general whereby we may infer that the second-person addressee in the Qur'an is traditionally taken to be Muhammad. The woman is anonymous but personified as disputant. As such she represents a woman as rational gendered subject in opposition to the Prophet, the mediating agent, and therefore is a constituent of difference or Otherness in prophetic discourse.

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[8] Sawyer, D.F., 'Gender-Play and Sacred Text: A Scene from Jeremiah', *JSOTS*, 83 (1999), 99-111 (p. 100).

7.2.1 Chronology in the Qur'an

The chronology of actions is not in a clear linear format as parataxis in the Arabic rendition defies a set chronology and rather points to different processes running simultaneously:[9]

a)   God has heard (perf.) the statement (action antecedent to being heard)

b)   of the woman who disputes (imperf.) with you

c)   and she complains (imperf.)

d)   and God hears (imperf.)

e)   both your arguments (action concurrent with God hearing)

f)   truly God is a seeing (adjectival participle) hearer (adjectival participle)

The structuring of the verb order means the sequence of actions may logically be constructed as follows:

1)   The woman speaks/makes a statement

2)   God hears

3)   (Muhammad) and the woman argue

4)   God hears both sides

5)   (Muhammad disagrees) the woman calls on God to adjudicate

6)   (God/Gabriel) speaks the annunciation contained in Q 58

7)   (Muhammad hears)

8)   (Muhammad speaks)

The Prophet's actions in mediating the text are implicit and are deduced in terms of the Islamic narrative of prophethood that understands the prophet Muhammad as the only producer of Qur'anic surahs (received from the angel Gabriel) and is therefore the second person addressee.[10] The only expressed characterisation of the Prophet in this text is his opposition to a woman. The extraordinary effect in this sequence of actions is that the

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[9] Michael Sells observes that the Qur'an's shifts in tense destabilizes the normally mutually exclusive division between completed time and ongoing time, in 'A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Sūras', (p. 6).

[10] The verb *nzl* 'to send down', associated with the action of revelation, led to the development of the historiography of Muhammad's prophetology. For the mechanics of revelation see Stefan Wild, '"We have sent down...', pp. 137-153.

woman is honoured above the addressee as it is her speech that is heard by God and most importantly, she initiates the actions on both the human and the Divine levels.

7.2.2 Characterisation in the Qur'an

Apart from God who hears, all the characters in this section are characterised by their speech, that is, the subject either of their speech or their mode of speech. The human characters are perhaps contrastively characterised by their inability to hear. There are no proper names, no setting and no time indicators. The Prophet and the woman are portrayed by their oppositional mode of speech, while the husband is described as a topic of dispute. The husband therefore is the object of the actions, and the maleness of both Prophet and husband are emphasised in opposition to the woman. Although the husband is presented as an object of discourse it is his subjectivity as speaking agent that is focalised by the Divine discourse. The speech of the husband that precipitated the action of dispute is that he had spoken the *zihār*-formula. The human dispute therefore is about the husband's subjectivity in the actions that caused injustice to a woman, while the Divine discourse is about the subjectivity of the woman that addresses the injustice.

The woman's subjectivity may be inferred from descriptions of her actions in 58.1:

> a) she makes a statement (*qaula*).[11] The term *qaula* means a 'word' or 'utterance', 'declaration', 'report' or 'teaching'. As statement in a disputation it indicates that she had knowledge of formal argument. It is not necessarily indicative of a rhetorically fixed speech form (while the formal

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[11] It is interesting to note the homophony between *qaula* and *Khaula* that may indicate a pun of the Qur'anic language in the Hadith. However, the *qof* and *khaf*, with which these two words respectively start, are two distinct sounds in Arabic. Therefore it would be unjustified to infer any further comparisons between the two words. See Sells, (p. 9) for discussion of an implied pun between female personification and a woman's name in his construction of the Night of Destiny (Q 97) as female through the association between the word for 'night' (*layla*) and the Arabic name Layla.

nature of the statement is not excluded). The event certainly precludes the formalised practices of Shari'ah that was developed post-Qur'anically. In any event the woman presents her argument clearly and successfully. We may therefore infer that she has knowledge and faith;

b)   she disputes 'with you' (*tujādiluka*). The woman not only presents her argument but is also convinced about her case and speaks with authority and conviction. Her situation is dire and/or she is prepared to follow through on her action regardless of the consequence to her;

c)   it is about her spouse (*fī zauwjihā*). She is in some form of gendered partnership according to custom and is experiencing difficulty in this relationship to the extent that she is prepared to bring a personal matter into the public sphere. This indicates that she had exhausted all available private resources to amend her situation. She recognises the practice as an injustice in the light of previous revelation and her courage is fuelled by her experience of injustice;

d)   she complains to God (*tashtakiya 'ilā 'llāhi*). The woman displays an acute sense of justice and knowledge of the ultimate dispenser of justice, God, which she relates to the mediator of revelation. She may be assumed to be a loyal follower (*ṣaḥāba*) of the Prophet as she accepts his authority and that of his monotheistic deity, as opposed to that of the paganist Jāhiliyya. It is also possible to envisage the dispute in terms of Jāhiliyya practice where the woman could have presented her case to a traditional judge (*hakīm*).

Although the woman is anonymous in the Qur'an's text, in a hierarchy of actions she is not subordinate to the male characters in this text: neither the addressee nor the husband are

221

named and her actions precede those of God's (hearing and speaking). As a matter of fact, through the anonymity of the implied speaker, the woman is given equal participation in the production of the revelation.[12] The significance of the actions in this introduction then is that it comments on Muhammad's role as interpreter of the text, on women's role in the revelatory process and on interlocution or deliberation as theology of Qur'anic justice. The woman is not just an incidental prop for stating legalist notions of marriage or debate because the Qur'an's counter-argument against *zihār* (v. 2) presents us with two views on the woman: a theological perspective that views the woman 'through God's eyes' and the androcentric perspective of both the Divine mediator and the spouse.

7.2.3   Vision in the Qur'an

The husband is the reason for the complaint, although there is the implication of rebuke on the addressee (Muhammad) as opponent to the woman. Thus the characterisation is not according to expectation, heightening the aesthetic value of this text.[13] The characters and actions are juxtaposed in a tension that presents the woman as antagonist to the Prophet while being a protagonist to Divine action. The protagonists are the woman and the annunciator God/Gabriel and they are on the same side in opposition to the addressee (Muhammad) and the husband. However, when refracting the opposition through the Islamic narrative of prophethood whereby the addressee is the mediator of his rebuke, it presents a powerful illustration of a prophet's self-reflection and transformation through Divine revelation and so doing the woman and man become equal subjects of Divine revelation and transformation.

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[12] Muhammad Asad suggests that the 'unspecified reference' to a woman and her husband is an open discourse whereunder all difficulties between husbands and wives may resort, in *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 843, (footnote 1). For comparison with a similar characterisation in biblical narrative, see Adele Reinhartz, 'Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist', *JSOTS*, 55 (1992), 25-37, (p. 36). Reinhartz equates the anonymity of Samson's mother as symbolic of knowledge and the power which knowledge imparts.
[13] See Reinhartz, p. 25-26 for an exposition of contradiction as aesthetic value.

The topic of debate presented in Q 58.2 is extraordinary for its representation of, and comment on, the language of androcentrism and feminism respectively. This verse opens with a statement presenting the argument of dispute: "Those of you who *zihār* from their wives: They are not your mothers. Truly, their mothers are none other than those who gave birth to them". It is possible to infer that these words represent the mujādilah's *verbatim* argument as a summation of the dispute that followed the adjudication through revelation. The critique of the androcentric conflation of female roles seems to argue for hearing a woman's voice here: "They are not your mothers. Truly, their mothers are none other than those who gave birth to them". Firstly, there is an expectation of a woman's speech raised by the term *qaula* '(her) statement' in the first verse. Secondly, the repudiation of the practice of *zihār* represents an understanding of the materiality of womanhood that only a woman could voice: Equating a wife only with motherhood, and at that, being identified with her mother-in-law, constitutes the primary accusation by feminism against androcentrism - the impulsive equation between womanhood, wifehood and motherhood in religious discourses.[14] This is so revolutionary for the patriarchal setting of the seventh century CE Madinan community, that it can only be representative of a woman's voice.[15] The repudiation of androcentric language represents the essence of female materiality so that the males could not see the injustice of the action before it was divinely revealed to them.

[14] Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, p. 179. For other feminist deconstructions of the 'mother complex' see Atkinson, C, C. H. Buchanan, and M. R. Miles, eds. *Immaculate and Powerful. The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Great Britain: Crucible, 1987), Nancy Huston, 'Novels and Navels', *Critical Inquiry*, 21 (1995), 708-721, P.E. Klasses, 'Sacred Maternities and Postbiomedical Bodies: Religion and Nature in Contemporary Home Birth', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26 (2001), 775-810.
[15] Although some have suggested matriarchal social structures for the pre-Islamic era, the fragmentary evidence weighs in favour of viewing pre-Islamic society as male dominated with patriarchal lineage and inheritance systems. See Victor H. Matthews, *Marriage and the Family in the ANE*, p. 1.

The Qur'an gives its verdict on the argument used by men to break marital relations with their wives in Q 58.2 as the most reprehensible of arguments and falsehoods (*munkaran min al-qawli wa-zūran*). It states that men speak falsely when they relate their wives to mothers and that the practice of *ẓihār* is a misconstrual of both language and practices of gendered relationships. The revelation therefore takes to task, and indeed pronounces judgement on, the androcentric worldview that privileges males over females in total.[16] The Qur'an subsequently presents the penalty that abolishes the practice by freeing a slave (58.3), with extensions to those with less resources required to fast for two months (double the time of fasting during Ramadan) or feed sixty beggars (58.4) before the couple may touch each other again. The gravity of the judgement is enforced by a warning of punishment for those who do not comply, designating such recalcitrants as 'rejecters [of faith]' (58.4). The paronomasia of *ḥ-d-d*, 'setting boundaries' in the closing of verse 4 and opening of verse 5 ('overstep boundaries') presents a warning for people who go beyond this command:

4.   Truly those who contravene (*yuḥāddūna* lit. 'overstep the boundaries' of) God and his apostle will be crushed as those were crushed before them. And we have already sent down clear signs, so for the rejecters there is a humiliating penalty;

5.   a day when God will resurrect them all together then overwhelm them with their conduct. God has deliberated it while [they have] forgotten it. And God bears witness (*sh-h-d*) over everything.[17]

The synthetic parallelism that expands 'setting boundaries' and 'a penalty' in verse 4 to 'overstepping boundaries' and 'humiliating penalty' in verse 5 is extended to the ultimate Judgement on 'a day' (*yauma*) verse 6. This word is grammatically in the accusative case as

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[16] Muhammad Asad is the only commentator that points to a wider application of this surah to give women the authority to resist abuse by a spouse. However, he limits the woman's rights to divorce proceedings (*khul*) as developed in Shari'ah, in *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 843. Likewise, El Sheikh in 'Al-Mujadilah', notices the egalitarian presuppositions of the text, criticising interpretations of Q 4.34 that finds Qur'anic ranking to justify subordination of women. Yet, El Sheikh never develops an explicitly woman-inclusive interpretive methodology.

[17] Own translation.

it is an object of the previous verse. The penalty and humiliation is a simultaneous result of a Day of Judgement when God will bring testimony about all acts, even forgotten ones.

7.2.3.1 The Mujādilah: A Qur'anic Vision of Social Reformation

The legal language employed in this section leads one to speculate whether this dispute was perhaps a more formal one in a public setting. The debate initiated by the woman presents not only a shift in cultural tradition, but is a profound modification of the status of human relationships in terms of a new community.[18] The event of disagreement therefore becomes a generative event in its rupturing re-ordering of perspective, which leads to an adjustment of juridical categories.[19] The adjustment in relationship categories envisaged by the mujādilah is confirmed by the only other mention of ẓihār in the Qur'an in Q 33.4. This Qur'anic section likewise presents a powerful reformation of traditionally held or assumed conflations in relationships in the same vein as the surah of the mujādilah. Q 33.4 rearticulates cultural relationships in terms of the new kinships of faith, renouncing the ẓihār-formula as a distortion of justice while holding it up as an example of the injustice perpetrated in the name of traditional kinship bonds:[20]

4. God has not made for any man two hearts in his body. And nor has he made your wives the distortion (al-lā'yi)[21] 'you ẓihār your mothers'. And neither has he made your adopted sons your sons. This is your statement by your mouths. And God speaks the Truth and it is He showing the way.

5. Call them by [the names of] their fathers: that is more just in the sight of God. But if you do not know their father's [names, call them] your brothers

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[18] For a discussion of the status of objects of agreement in argument, see Perelman and others, p. 182.

[19] This view differs in nuance from Mohja Kahf's interpretive remarks about the significance of the mujādilah as pointing out the primacy of kin and emotional relationships "over the letter of the law", 'Braiding Stories', p. 158. The analysis here points out that the re-ordered kinship relations *are* 'the new law'.

[20] It is evident that Q 33 references the issue of ẓihār, whereas Q 58 provides the narrative of ẓihār, indicating that Q 58.1-6 precedes Q 33 in a sequence of revelation. This diverges from some exegetical opinion that Q 33 precedes Q 58.

[21] Yusuf Ali translates al-lā'yi as relative pronoun 'whom', however the Arabic script indicates the root l-w-y, which translates as 'distortion or perversion', *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 1103.

225

in faith, or your maula's.[22] And there is no blame on you if you make a mistake therein: [What counts is] the intention of your hearts. And God is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.

6.   The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own selves, and his wives are their mothers. Blood relations among each other have closer personal ties in the decree of God than [the brotherhood of] believers and emigrants. Nevertheless do you what is just to your closest friends. Such is the writing in the Decree.[23]

The Qur'anic injunction in Q 58 is therefore in line with other passages that ask the believer to consider relationships not in terms of cultural tradition but in terms of just practice and the kinship ties of a 'brotherhood' of faith (Ummah). Furthermore, the Qur'an re-orders gender relationships to their original intent: mothers are those women who have given birth to you (Q 58.2) and wives are the women men are related to by touching (Q 58.3-4). Note that the touching is not one-sided either, but mutual as the verb (*yatamāssā*) in the sixth conjugation designates mutuality.[24]

7.3   The Traditional Mujādilah: The Hadith of Khaula

Traditional exegesis (*tafsīr*) of this surah relies on a historical reconstruction of an event of dispute between the Prophet and one of his followers. This thesis' interpretation of the traditional account is based on the synthesis of *tafsir* by Ibn Sa`d, al-`Asqalani, Ibn abd al-Birr and Ibn al-Athir presented in the article by Mohja Kahf, 'Braiding the Stories' in part to demonstrate the most common interpretation of Q 58.[25] The woman is identified as Khaula (some versions have Khuwaila) bint Tha'laba. She is said to be a Madinan woman from the Khazraj tribe, who converted to Islam and presented her oath of allegiance to

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[22] Dignitary title meaning 'master' or 'lord'. See Cowan, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, p. 1101.
[23] Own translation based on Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, pp. 1103-1104.
[24] *m-s-s* in the first conjugation has the specific subjective connotation of touch, feel, handle, even violate and infringe.
[25] Kahf, p. 156. For application of the hadith, see Yusuf Ali commenting in his translation of and commentary on the Qur'an, (fn. 5330), p. 1510.

Muhammad.[26] The hadith names her husband as her paternal cousin Aus bin Samit. The matter of debate is that Aus had lost his temper and said the *zihār*-formula to Khaula during an argument. The Qur'anic narrative thus assumes a general knowledge of a closed formalised practice, though the exact formula is not stated explicitly in the Qur'an but is explained through traditional exegesis as a common pre-Qur'anic divorce formula. The hadith presents both husband and wife as being in a predicament and that neither of them know what to do about the situation. Khaula then approaches the Prophet, who at that time was in the house of A'isha. Ibn Sa'd's (d. 230/845) recollection of 'Imran ibn Abi's version of the hadith presents A'isha as narrator of the event where Khaula comes to lodge her complaint.

The hadith's portrayal of Aus emphasises frailties such as old age, poverty and physical weakness: "You know very well how he is beset with dotage and the loss of his faculties, with dwindling strength and garbling tongue".[27] The Prophet maintains that Aus has acted according to correct custom but Khaula persists in disputing the legality of *zihār* firstly, in terms of the inhumane consequences of the practice, and ultimately, in terms of the Qur'anic justice pronounced by Muhammad himself. When her plea to Muhammad fails, she calls on God which drove the whole company, including A'isha, to tears. Khaula's protest is related as follows: "O dear God, I complain unto you of the severity of my predicament and of the hardship of parting; oh dear God, reveal through the tongue of your Prophet something that will have comfort in it for us". The outcome is narrated by A'isha, saying that all waited anxiously for the Prophet's response until he returned with the

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[26] Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, tr. by Aisha Bewley, (London: TaHa Publishers, 1995), p. 252.

[27] Kahf, 'Braiding the Stories', p. 156. Bewley translates this term as 'crazy', in *The Women of Madina*, pp. 252-253.

revelation of surah 58.[28] The hadith then relates the penalties for abolishing *zihār* (Q 58.3-4) as a deliberation between the Prophet and the woman, with Khaula countering every penalty based on some lack in Aus: "He is too feeble to fast two months and too impoverished to feed dates to sixty poor people".[29] The Prophet is then presented as magnanimous arbiter, offering to donate half the dates while Khaula makes up the rest in order to relieve Aus of the dilemma he had got himself into. The hadith concludes by stating that Khaula leaves the Prophet justified and by complying with the rules to dissolve *zihār*, redeems her husband and restores her marriage. A'isha's tradition has it that Aus later said: "Were it not for Khaula, I would have been done for".[30]

The Hadith may be described as a proto-narratological approach to the sacred text with the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelations) addressing gaps in the Qur'anic narrative. The difficulty in the Qur'an's rendition of the dispute is that it alludes to a relationship between God and a woman, which must raise many a question for the androcentric societies that hear it. Hence the need to explain whom this woman is, what the practice of *zihār* entailed and how to explain the slight on the Prophet who opposes the woman. The overall impression created by the hadith is as a vignette in the Prophet's life of rather comical circumstances. However, our analysis will point out how, reading the text from the perspective of the materiality of gender, the hadith not only obscures the severe consequences of injustice for the woman, but also masks the social reformation envisaged by the sacred text. The implicit hierarchy of action whereby the woman is the successful communicator and therefore displays active authority is smoothed out through the language and characterisation of the hadith. And when considering the legal language of the Qur'anic

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[28] Richard Bell's historical-critical arrangement of the Qur'an suggests different times of origin for sections of this surah, for instance that vv. 1-6 take place after the return from Hudaibiyya, but that vv. 12-14 are probably much later, and so forth, in *The Qur'an Translated*, p. 563.
[29] Kahf, p. 157.
[30] Kahf, p. 157.

text the question is, did the later hadith try to downplay the potentially embarrassing debate between the Prophet and the woman in the very public Qur'an?

7.3.1. Chronology in the Hadith

There are no significant differences between the sequence of events portrayed in the Qur'an and that of the hadith. However, in terms of the lapse of time indicated by the hadith, the impression is of a short time span from the inception of events to their conclusion. The events could be construed from the hadith as occurring over a period of a day or two, with both the dispute between Khaula and the Prophet, as well as the resolution taking place in the house of A'isha. In this way any harsh circumstances effected by the injustices of *zihār* are diminished in that they were not exacerbated by a long-drawn-out process over a lengthy period of time.

7.3.2 Characterisation in the Hadith

The hadith is primarily concerned with detailing the topic of the debate – Khaula's husband, Aus. Aus's portrayal is mainly as a weakling. He is presented as poverty-stricken and feeble and not in full control of his faculties, with the result that he is portrayed as less accountable for his actions. He acts impetuously when he utters the *zihār*-formula, which is further mitigated by the circumstance of an argument: *zihār* is the result of the heat of the moment, not a cold and calculated abandoning of a woman.

The hadith conflates both roles of wife and mother into the one named individual Khaula who is identified more emphatically with motherhood in some versions by reference to children in her protest.[31] The hadith equalises the genders by placing the man and woman in equal predicament, inviting the listener to view their situation with pathos, instead of

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[31] See El Sheikh, p. 29.

indignation at the injustice perpetrated against the woman. In reality, the man is not in a dilemma at all but retains the agency to rectify or exacerbate the situation at his will. Yet by setting the debate in the house of A'isha, the injustice becomes a domestic affair where the husband-and-wife-team of Muhammad and A'isha are equal partners with the husband-and-wife-team of Aus and Khaula. Khaula's protest is therefore nuanced in terms of married couples seeking advice from each other and not as a legal dispute, which the Qur'an indicates.[32] The hadith therefore diminishes the severity of the practice as well as the Prophet's inability to arbitrate the situation. What if the dispute was a very public debate in a court setting or a topic of long running dispute from before the Hijrah?

The utterance that tore Aus's marriage apart is blamed on his impetuosity, or 'a crime of passion', with no blame for his accountability in destroying a marriage, or the impossible situation it creates for the woman. The hadith thus plays down the actions of the woman as protagonist to Qur'anic action and softens the judgement against men who act unjustly. The hadith constructs the woman in opposition to the men as simultaneously kin and Other. The portrayal of the Muslim man, Aus, is so weak that the authority of the Muslim woman who addresses the practice as a public issue, or the severity of abandoning a wife to non-status, is diminished. The Muslim woman's initiative is meaningful, however, juxtaposed against the weak Muslim man, Aus, her actions are mediated to the rather ordinary actions of expediency.[33] This portrayal detracts from the power of a Qur'anic statement about a woman who dared to cross the Prophet but was validated by God.

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[32] The Qur'an uses various legal terms in this section, that El Sheikh recognises as dispute procedure for Shari'ah, as will be seen below.

[33] For comparison see Athalya Brenner's description of the subvertive construction of Moab as kin and Other, in 'Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who's Afraid of biblical Humour? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible', *JSOTS*, 63 (1994), 38-55 (pp. 44-47).

7.3.3 An Alternative Mujādilah: Hadith of Nusayba

Let us imagine for a moment, a different scenario for Q58.1-6 where the woman and her husband are well-known heroic figures in Islamic tradition and the dispute is a bitter elongated and public process: Nusayba bint Ka'b, otherwise known as Umm Umara, was a woman warrior who fought alongside Muhammad together with her second husband, Ghaziyah ibn Amr. Nusayba is renowned in Islamic tradition as someone who saved the life of the Prophet during the battle of Uhud and is nicknamed 'the Prophet's Shield' on this account. Nusayba reportedly lost a hand during a later battle and Muhammad is said to have held her in high esteem, visiting her on a regular basis.[34] In a historiographic account about the conquest of Syria she is co-termed with Khalid al-Walid, 'the Sword of Islam', as the 'Lioness of Syria'. Nusayba is a woman of such heroism that she is present in many traditions at almost all the pivotal moments of the early community, such as the Battle of Uhud, Battle of Badr, signing of treaties and is even the interlocutor, in one report, that enquires why the revelations only address men to which the revelation of Q 33.35 was delivered. Nusayba is therefore a bold Muslim woman on all accounts.

In my imaginary hadith, Nusayba and Ghaziyah have settled down after their life together on the warpath for their Prophet. Nusayba has difficulty preparing Ghaziyah's meals and keeping their house. Tamim, their firstborn, is a poorly child and most of Nusayba's day is spent minding him. She is also expecting their second child and it is difficult to see to everything when you only have one hand. Ghaziyah's impatience is mounting. He is growing tired of the disorder of his household and somehow Nusayba does not seem to hold the same appeal for him with the one hand. But the Prophet's new rules of divorce have made it more difficult to get rid of unwanted wives. The revelation of *al-talaq* means

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[34] See Kahf, 'Braiding the Stories', p. 147.

that you have to make adequate provision for the wife and furthermore, you cannot put her out of the house while she is pregnant.

One evening, as Ghaziyah sits lost in thought waiting for his meal, he remembers how his uncle had once boasted at a dinner party that he had got out of a marriage without having to pay anything. He spoke of a word *zihār* that meant you were free of all obligation to your wife and you could enter a new marriage if you wanted to. When Nusayba brings Ghaziyah's dinner in to him the following evening, she is asked to sit down and Ghaziyah explains that he is going to *zihār* from her. Nusayba laughs at the idea that she makes her husband think of his mother's back. But she soon realises that Ghaziyah is serious and he is asking her to leave the following morning.

Nusayba rests her aching back against a dead palm tree. She is exhausted from a day's wandering in the rocky outcrops outside Madinah. She had walked out of the house after hours of argument with Ghaziyah but he was adamant. No matter how many times she asked him to think about their life together - remembering evenings around a fire in the desert, or the family feast for Tamim's birth, or the oath of allegiance that they both gave to the Prophet - he just repeated that it was in his right to leave her and that he now chose to do so. The frustration and humiliation drove her out of the house. Ignoring the inquisitive stares as she stormed out of town, she fixed her eyes on the hills where they had first stayed before they were given a place in Madinah. Those were times of community and harmony and whenever she had felt at odds she would go on to the roof terrace and face the shimmering blue hills in the distance.

But now she was alone and the wind wailed over the planes, plastering her face with sand. As Nusayba let her head fall back against the trunk a refrain started playing in her mind:

"*`uskinūhunna min ḥaythu sakantum man wujdikum...*". She wondered where she had heard it and then it struck her – it was part of the revelation the Prophet had recited for them in a gathering a few weeks ago. She repeated the surah to herself pondering on its meaning: "Let women live in the same style as you live according to your means. Do not trouble them to restrict them. And if they are pregnant then provide for them until they deliver and if they are suckling your children, give them their due. But take advice from each other as to what is just and reasonable".[35] That was it! Ghaziyah did not want to comply with *al-talaq*'s rules of divorce that required men to think divorce arrangements through with their wives and provide for them according to their needs. Nusayba fell down on the sand with a surge of joy and breathlessly uttered "Allah! You are indeed a God most compassionate and merciful", before she leapt and ran to find the Prophet. Surely he would vindicate her and show Ghaziyah how wrong he was to treat her in this way.

A few months later Nusayba stands in front of the window, holding tiny Khaula in her arms. From this new house she has a direct view on the hills. She picked this house on the outskirts of Madinah herself. It has not been the easiest of times since she ran out of the desert to find the Prophet. With a wry smile she remembers how outraged she had felt when the Prophet suggested that they find a tribal *hakim* to explain the terms of *zihār* to her. At least she had made a new friend in this time, Jamila, who herself had the Prophet intervene about her parent's choice of a marriage partner. Jamila had taken Nusayba into her house until the day when the Prophet came to their door. It is as vivid as if it happened yesterday: She remembers being called out of the house to see the Prophet standing in the courtyard together with some of their friends, Abu Bakr, Khalid and their other partners in battle. The sunlight was so bright that she had to shield her eyes to make out the Prophet's features.

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[35] Q 65.6, *at-talaq* 'the divorce'.

Her heart sank as she thought for a moment that they were coming to take Khaula but when the Prophet started by saying that he had to make an apology and then turned to the others and recited: "*qad sami'a llahu...* God had indeed heard the woman who disputes with thee about her husband. God hears both sides among you", her heart gave a leap and she can still feel Jamila's hand on her arm as tears of relief pricked her eyes.

7.3.3.1 Prophetic Mediation and Communal Interaction in Hadith

My feminist revisioning of the hadith above aimed to point out how a variety of scenarios may be envisioned by the text of the Qur'an and how all gendered interaction in the text is viewed against the wider development of Qur'anic ethical justice. Both the hadith and Qur'an re-emphasise the Prophet's very human aspect when he upholds the custom of *zihār* until the revelation alters his position. Both men in the hadith, Muhammad and Aus, come out all too human and not in touch with the justice of the newly proclaimed message of the Qur'an. In this instance, it seems the Prophet is the receptacle of revelation and not the annunciator, who is God/Gabriel. It is the woman who interprets the Qur'anic message of justice to dispute it with the Prophet. Her raising the practice of injustice and calling on God reverses the roles of prophet and disciple in this instance so that the woman takes on the predictive or prophetic role while the Prophet has to alter his position in light of revelation.

The hadith goes so far as to assume a mode of dialogue between the Divine agent and his follower as transmission of revelation in its attempt to scale down the implicit hierarchy of female over male in the Qur'anic account. The hadith's quibble between Khaula and the Prophet about the penalties that abolishes *zihār* assumes a communal dialogue as constituent of Divine revelation, and indeed of Divine judgement. The hadith therefore puts

a question mark over traditionalist understanding of the transmission of the Qur'an as the

conception of dialogue varies with the widely held Muslim understanding of the Qur'an as

a linear one directional Divine monologue (Fig. 3).

God

↓

(Gabriel)
Muhammad

↓

Community
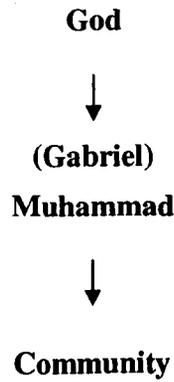
Figure 3   Traditional understanding of the transmission of the Qur'an

Despite conservative Muslim insistence on the Qur'an as *kalimat Allah*, the hadith does not

hesitate to present the Divine judgement in the revelation as a minor quibble between the

Prophet and one of his followers.[36] This means that the hadith reflects a more unitive

understanding of the Prophet's career and the production of Qur'an. The hadith of Khaula

vs. the Prophet therefore confirms a 'pre-canonical' understanding of the text as 'document

in transmission' that includes participation by the audience. It also affirms the view by

William A. Graham above that the early Muslim community did not make an absolute

distinction between the Qur'an as Word of God and the Prophet's role in producing it.

This is one reason why some have discredited the Hadith as a later accretion to sacred

Islamic literature.[37] However, this analysis points out that discarding the traditions would

mean losing valuable insights into the history of the Qur'an and in the instance of the

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[36] The scaling of penalties is also in keeping with graded regulations such as *hajj* (pilgrimage) in Q 2.196 or *zakat* (alms) in Q 73.2, with exemptions for circumstance of incapacity, such as ill-health.

[37] For an example of the elimination of all extraneous elements from an understanding of the Qur'an see Ismail K. Poonawala, 'Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza's Principles of Modern Exegesis: A Contribution toward Quranic Hermeneutics', in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, pp. 225-246. Poonawala cites Darwaza's refusal to consider the *asbab al-nuzūl* as cause or purpose of revelation, contending that the universality of meaning should be privileged above the specificity of circumstance (p. 239).

mujādilah, the hadith has proved a valuable resource for understanding the Qur`an in its development as Scripture.

7.3.3.2 Dispute and Divine Revelation in the Mujādilah

The surah of the mujādilah presents us with a female subjectivity that does not only act in the sacred text, but stands in opposition to the mediating agent as discourse of ethical reformation. While both the Qur`an and hadith maintain and reiterate the Prophet as mediator of revelation, the subjectivity of a woman, and a speaking one at that, contrasts to the religious understanding that women's contribution to the community should be made in silence. Instead the Qur`anic text presents Divine sanction of individual (opposing) views (tahāwurakumā) and affirms reasoning which on its part confirms the justice of the Qur`anic message, whether it originates with male or female. In terms of the Islamic narrative of prophethood, the mujādilah-text points out how the Qur`anic audience developed as a community of faith through the deliberation of transition from Jāhiliyya paganism to an Islamic Ummah.

However one views the transmission of the Qur`an, the text of the mujādilah is only comprehensible within an understanding of a polyvocal constitution of the Qur`anic text. The traditionalist Islamic linguistic communication model of the text as a monologue presented external to Muhammad is untenable in the light of the actions depicted in this surah. The revelatory ayāt of Q 58.1-6 are therefore not only a comment on gender relations but shape a theology of interlocution for the Qur`an. Indeed, it provides a narrative of revelation with the mujādilah, the woman who disputes, as central to the development of Qur`anic argument as a whole. Yet, the hadith does not describe how the Ummah is transformed through this event. Likewise, later interpretation is content in stating that zihār

is a redundant practice and, being repudiated, has no more consequence for the reader. Classical treatises do not discuss the positions and premises of the speakers in the text while developing complete methodologies based on the terms signalled in Qur'anic debate.[38] Most commentaries rush over 58.1-6, giving the hadith of Khaula as background and moving on to principles and praxis of doctrine in 58.7-22. However, there are exceptional scholars who have seen in the mujādilah more than an incidental setting for other more urgent theological substance.

7.4 Modern Interpretations of the Mujādilah

A review of scholarly articles available to an English readership on Qur'an commentary or gender in the Qur'an presented only two articles that feature the mujādilah as a subject of enquiry. Mohja Kahf's article in 'Braiding the Stories' in *Windows of Faith* (2000) and Salah El Sheikh's article 'Al-Mujādalah and Al-Mujādilah Then and Now' in the journal *Muslim World* (2003). Kahf's article is written from a feminist point of view, recognising in the mujādilah a female role model, while El Sheikh views the passage from a classical theological point of view to derive correct procedures for debate. El Sheikh is furthermore critical of Qur'an translations that mention the woman explicitly, as will be seen below.

7.4.1 Mohja Kahf's Braiding the Stories

Kahf recognised the mujādilah as a heuristic device for locating women's literary productions in Islamic history. She finds it particularly useful to probe women's eloquence aiming to retrieve a heritage of women's words in Islamic texts. Her method relies on the categories of classical Islamic scholarship that defined rhetorical eloquence as *balāgha* and

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[38] I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, who surveyed classical scholarship on debate in the Qur'an and confirmed in a personal communication that none of these classical scholars pay attention to the aspects of gender, and certainly none make anything of the woman in this text other than citing the hadith of Khaula as context of revelation.

she argues that these categories have to be widened to incorporate all discursive contributions, including those by women.[39] Kahf does not point out the significance of the mujādilah in terms of her Qur'anic citation but bases her analysis on the portrayal of Khaula in the hadith. Kahf draws on feminist discourse of interlocution and interruption to formulate the narration of Khaula as prototype of women's eloquence, with the etymology of the term 'mujādilah' as metaphor.[40] The etymological base of *jadala* means 'to braid' or 'weave', which Kahf considers a function of women's literary compositions in the texts of Islamic history.[41] She demonstrates how the Hadith-persona of Khaula expresses her situation and invites empathy from her audience through literary devices such as rhythmic prose (*saj*), which characterised pre-Islamic oratory. Kahf inverts the relationship between the signifying texts by presenting the Qur'an as backdrop to the hadith. She terms Khaula's problem and speech in the hadith as a drama in the Qur'anic society that was mid in a transition from a pre-Islamic to Islamic order.[42] Kahf concludes that the prototype of the mujādilah serves as a 'speaking posture' around which women's contributions to early Islamic literature may be clustered.[43]

Kahf's reading demonstrates how the Hadith may be seen as a repository of women's texts even though they were articulated by men:

> "[The mujādilah discourses] must not be dismissed as male appropriations of women's eloquence in the service of persecuted causes. It may be that when men try to appropriate women's voices, the process entails envisioning women as speaking subjects rather than as

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[39] Kahf, p. 149.

[40] Kahf, p. 155.

[41] Interestingly the metaphor of weaving has been a useful metaphor for feminism in general, and theological writings in particular, although it has been criticised at times for its spiritualisation of all female activities. See the debate between Carol P. Christ and Miriam Peskowitz: Carol P. Christ, 'Weaving the Fabric of Our Lives' (1997), pp. 34-39; Miriam Peskowitz, 'Unweaving: A Response to Carol P. Christ' (1997), pp. 40-45; and Christ, 'Reweaving' (2001), pp. 46-48, in Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader, ed. by Elizabeth A. Castelli with the assistance of Rosamund C. Rodman (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001).

[42] Kahf, p. 158.

[43] Kahf, p. 159.

silent submitters and can activate unintended challenges to the gender status quo".[44]

Kahf has therefore brought the mujādilah to the attention of the Qur'an's readers and pointed out her value to feminist discourse within a critical understanding of the traditions.

7.4.2   Salah El-Sheikh: Al-Mujādilah or Al-Mujādalah?

The second article on the mujādilah by Salah El Sheikh reads the complete surah in terms of classical Islamic dialectic (kalām). El Sheikh points out the troubled relationship between Islam and modernism and terms these two contending discourses as disputants in a current Islamic dialogue that represent competing claims by Rationalism and Traditionalism. El Sheikh presents the historical formulation of Islamic dialectic theology in terms of classical kalām developed as doctrine of the Qur'an on the one hand and the Qur'an's documentation of prophetic dialogues with Makkan and Madinan interlocutors as precursors to the modern debate on the other. El Sheikh's aim is to develop an Islamic methodology of debate in contrast to Greek philosophical thought.[45] In this El Sheikh is pointing to the problematic of the relationship, not only between Islam and the wider world, but to debates within the Islamic community that exclude partners in dialogue. As noted before, El Sheikh points out how Islamic scholarship views debate negatively because it traces the origins of theological conflict to the civil war (fitnah) that split Islam into Sunni and Shi'ah parties.[46] El Sheikh therefore sees in Q 58 a Qur'anic expression of theological conflict as a 'Divine formulation' that presents an Islamic commonplace for reasoning.

El Sheikh finds the origins of dialectical Islamic theology constituted by proof-texts for the legitimation of early leadership contenders. The caliph served as standard for the

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[44] Kahf, p. 159.
[45] El Sheikh, p. 4.
[46] El Sheikh, p. 5.

community with the result that dialogue and dialectic became an element of political rationalisation. El Sheikh's discussion of dialectic methodology includes the use of the Qur'an as proof text wherein the language and activity of Sign is taken as proof for forensic investigation of theological significance.[47] El Sheikh points out how some classical scholarship developed these forms of reasoning as a continuation of the Qur'anic dialogues concluding that the Qur'an instructs all members of the Islamic community to engage in debate in a democratic way.[48] El Sheikh interprets the 'mujādilah-section', that is the first six verses of Q 58, in terms firstly, of Islamic legal procedure of seeking council (*najwa*) and issuing ruling (*fatwa*) and secondly, of the hadith of Khaula and Aus. El Sheikh describes the interaction between the woman and the Prophet in purely legal terms. For instance, Khaula's petition is a private citizen's bill to outlaw an unjust practice addressed to the Prophet as judge. Muhammad rules that the practice of *zihār* is valid (El Sheikh terms it an unjust pagan method of divorce that seems to have "remained in vogue among new converts to Islam").[49] Khaula's continuing petition to God results in the 'Divine legislator' overruling the Prophet and, in El Sheikh's opinion, illustrates proper use of dialectical method. The revoking of *zihār* by emphasising the difference between a wife and a mother, El Sheikh terms 'rigorous concept analysis' that demonstrates logical form, namely *argumentum ad absurdum*.[50] Nevertheless, El Sheikh is ambivalent about the abolishment of *zihār* citing an apparent Qur'anic validation of the pagan practice. El Sheikh suggests that the practice was not so much renounced as that a set of procedures were put in place for those who wished to cancel the effects of the practice.[51] However, El Sheikh's article upholds a narrative of prophethood that accepts the Qur'an as a product of inter-

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[47] El Sheikh, p. 11.
[48] El Sheikh, p. 32.
[49] El Sheikh, p. 29.
[50] El Sheikh, p. 30.
[51] El Sheikh, p. 30.

communal dialogue. Furthermore, El Sheikh recognises gender as explicit aspect of the text and describes the affirmation of the woman's reasoning as "extraordinary and instructive".[52] He alludes to an implication of the mujādilah's inclusion for the Qurʾan's position on gender equality but does not develop any argument for the inclusion of women in the practices of Islamic reasoning. Neither does he comment on the literary significance of this woman in the text; he is even critical of translations that render the title with specific reference to the woman, *al-mujādilah*. Yet, he seems to present a subtle criticism of Islamic gendered practice when he asserts that this surah is a reminder to the Islamic community "of its past successes and its present failures, its phenomenal potentialities and its sad actualities".[53]

The two articles discussed above see in the mujādilah a prototype of woman's action, in Kahf's terms, and as Qurʾanic signifier of procedure in debate, in El Sheikh's terms. However, both these articles draw on extra-Qurʾanic premises and methodologies for their exposition of the mujādilah. My task is to show how the mujādilah is to be understood in terms of her Qurʾanic development: How the mujādilah is a Qurʾanic sign and how her debate is to be formulated as a theology of revelation in the Qurʾan. From an intratextual Qurʾanic point of view, the mujadilah made clear that argumentation (*jadala*) is one of the great themes of the Qurʾan. From a feminist perspective, the mujadilah showed that women together with men are, as phrased by Murata, "the mediating reality in existence, the place where God interacts with the cosmos in a direct manner".[54]

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[52] El Sheikh, p. 32.
[53] El Sheikh, p. 32.
[54] Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, p. 15.

Chapter Eight

The Mujādilah as Trope for Interfeminist Dialogue

It has been shown how, despite enduring differences between the Abrahamic traditions Islam, Christianity and Judaism, women of these faiths have a shared experience of exclusion from traditional institutional enterprises. It is also accepted that the debates about women's inclusion are informed by their respective religious texts. However, understanding gender as part of these texts within the world wherein they originate and the new world they envision presented us, in the case of the Qur'an with a model that speaks directly to women's exclusion from the social and theological processes. The model of the mujādilah is not only located in the language of debate but in the formal structure of the Qur'an: As a surah-title in the index of the Qur'an, the mujādilah presents the reader of the Qur'an with a sign of the prophetic criticism of the androcentric worldview. As a structural frame, or *nāsib*, to Q 58 she focalises the ruling against men's unjust practices. This thesis has therefore presented a woman not only as a speaking subject in the Qur'an, but as one that questioned its mediation and is, moreover, affirmed as shaper of Divine speech. And far from silence, the Qur'an makes a woman central to its production, not merely as a signatory of the female component of life, but in her materiality as a sexual, thinking being. This model connects with feminist discourse on so many levels that it is quite difficult to expound her meaning in any one direction. The immediate sense suggested by the mujādilah, both in her action of protest and in the language of debate, is that she presents a mode of prophetic discourse.

8.1   The Mujādilah as Prophetic Voice

Firstly, the woman is prophetic by pointing out what is wrong in the social fabric of her world while believing in a higher purpose for her community.[1] Secondly, by affirming the subjectivity of the mujādilah, this Qur'anic text is the epitome of feminist theology in Ruether's terms: "The critical principle of feminist theology is the affirmation and promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is therefore to be appraised as not redemptive".[2] As a theological endeavour, that is a discourse of faith from within the community that professes the faith, the mujādilah presents a woman as interpreter of the moments of disclosure that constitute the Divine Qur'anic revelation. Her actions constitute a feminist theology by a female subjectivity expressed firstly, in the disputer as a woman and secondly, in the comment that it makes on androcentrism with women's experience and reasoning as a source. The mujādilah points out how society and culture have distorted and diminished women's humanity in the practice of *zihār*. She critiques the Divine mediation through her understanding of the justice proclaimed by the Divine mediator himself and explicitly receives affirmation that she has acted correctly. In terms of the categories of insider and outsider to the redemptive community, the mujādilah establishes an insider voice of reflection that is thus prophetic.[3] The mujādilah illustrates how Divine mediation transforms both self and society: The woman is transformed by the Prophet's message to understand the injustice of *zihār*, whereupon her deliberation with the Prophet transforms his understanding as well as that of the Qur'anic community's. As a constituent of

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[1] See Rebecca T. Alpert, 'A Prophetic Voice for Truth', *JFSR*, 23 (1) (2007), 6-10.
[2] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation', in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. by Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 111-124 (p. 115).
[3] See Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

prophetic feminism, the mujādilah reminded people what the Qur'an is for, just as Islamic feminism is called to remind the world what Islam is for.[4]

The mujādilah has indeed been a source of inspiration for Muslim women who have acted upon her meaning without necessarily receiving institutional authorisation. Yasmin Busran-Lao, a Philippine Muslim woman founded the *Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation* (AMDF) in 1997 shortly after her attendance at the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. The reasoning behind the establishment of this organisation was Busran-Lao's realisation that many Islamic teachings on women do not have a basis in the Qur'an but are instead cultural interpretations of Islam.[5] This organisation is now recognised and supported by the United Nations Development Programme as a non-governmental organisation that has done much towards human development in the Philippines. Busran-Lao has also received numerous awards for her work in this regard, such as the David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award, Fellowships for Professional Development awards and she has further been recognised as one of the top 25 women of substance in 2007 by Marie Claire. She has moreover received numerous rewards from Philippine institutions, such as the Benigni S. Aquino Fellowship for public service.

Busran-Lao interprets the text of the mujādilah as an affirmation of those who seek justice and has dedicated her life to social justice in Mindanao by focussing on women's rights, good governance and peace building.[6] The Foundation aims to raise awareness amongst women and men of their rights and responsibilities under the Code of Muslim Personal Law and therefore organises regular teaching sessions to educate non-professionals in legal terminology and principles. Busran-Lao's biography shows that she was concerned with the

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[4] See Fawzia Afzal-Khan, 'Where are the Muslim Feminist Voices? A Question Asked in September 2001', *TDR*, 46 (2002), 5-9.
[5] Pennie Azarcon-dela Cruz, 'Yasmin Busran-Lao: 'She Who Seeks Justice', http://www.truthforce.info/?q=node/view/849 [Accessed 16 July 2007], (para. 12 of 24).
[6] Azarcon-dela Cruz, 'Yasmin Busran-Lao', (para. 15 of 24).

impact of discrimination on women's lives from an early age. She experienced

discrimination first-hand and, as a schoolgirl, acted on her sense of injustice against women

by bringing home women who had been left destitute by their husbands. Yasmin Busran-

Lao has therefore acted in the way of the mujādilah and found her actions affirmed in the

sacred text. She has made clear the true meaning of the mujādilah as a sign that performs

Divine justice and authorises women to reiterate that performance in the community.

8.2   The Mujādilah in Interfeminist Dialogue

I have read the mujādilah in the Qur'an from a non-confessional point of view seeking to

engage with the world in thinking about my own position in Protestant Christian faith. I

have engaged with the mujādilah as a 'thou' in thinking through the togetherness of 'us' in

the quest for a "global ethic for a global ecology".[7] The mujādilah has directed me to an

understanding of women in their faith who seek justice and in doing so speak out with

prophetic voices. Kahf's mujādilah is the interlocutor who braids together the history of

Islamic narrative, while El Sheikh's mujādilah performs the correct procedure of Islamic

dialectic. The Qur'an's sign of the mujādilah braids together vision, action and the

embodied life to reform and renew prophetic language and its scripture. She has prompted

me to search myself for speaking out against cultures of silence and to search my scriptures

for mujādilahs who do likewise.

A consideration of the mujādilah in terms of the Bible therefore demonstrates Scriptural

Reasoning in the following way: The mujādilah-model relies on a woman (for a non-

feminist consideration, it may be any voice considered to be marginal within the text such

as the poor, children, disabled and so forth), disputing a case with the Divine mediator of

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[7] Kenneth Cragg, *Faiths in Their Pronouns: Websites of Identity* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), p. 184.

sacred text, whereupon she receives Divine validation of both her action and her speech. This model is applied to my investigation of the biblical text and led me to the passages of Numbers 27.1-11 in the Hebrew Bible and Mark 7.24-30 in the Gospels.

8.2.1 Some Jewish Mujādilahs

In Numbers 27.1-11, a number of women take on the whole hierarchy of Judaism, that is, Moses, Eleazar the priest, the princes and the entire congregation (v.2) to argue their case. These were the daughters of Zelophehad: by name Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah (v.1).[8] They contested nothing less than Torah inheritance law. Their father had died without a male heir (v. 3-4), and thereby stood to be forgotten, as his property is handed on to another family member in a different male lineage, according to the inheritance laws set out in Numbers 26.53-56.[9] The male agent, Moses, does not adjudicate the case, but, most probably sensing the validity of their argument, refers it to YHWH (v.5). The Divine voice affirms the disputation of women, bringing their life experience to the practicalities of theology, saying: "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right: thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren; and thou shalt cause the inheritance of their father to pass unto them" (v.7). The term used for speaking is *doberōt*, equivalent to the Arabic *qaula*, and here again God affirms the argumentation of women and their role as interpreters of His justice over and against the male mediator.[10]

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[8] The daughters are named on four other occasions in the Bible, namely Numbers 26.33, 36.11 and Joshua 17.3. See Anke Schröder and Helmut Reich, 'Eve's RE, not Adam's: A Lesson about Zelophehad's Daughters', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21:2 (1999), 90-100, p. 93.

[9] Dean R. Ulrich argues in terms of the wider composition of the book of Numbers that the disappearance of Zelophehad's name struck at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant, which promised not only land but a continuing relationship of God with Abraham's descendants. The dispute by the daughters is therefore concerned with the essence of covenantal membership, in 'The Framing Function of the Narratives about Zelophehad's Daughters', *JETS*, 41 (4) (1998), 529-538, (p. 535).

[10] Emmanuel Nwaoru is of opinion that this biblical passage should serve as example of empowerment for African women contesting unjust inheritance customs but that African women need both the courage of the daughters of Zelophehad and their ability to argue their case, in 'The Case of the Daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1-11) and African Inheritance Rights', *Asia Journal of Theology*, 16 (2002), 49-65 (p. 65).

Ulrich argues that the daughters of Zelophehad serve a hortatory function that explicates the eschatological expectations of covenant for the second generation of Israelites emerging from the wilderness experience, looking back at God's "mighty deeds on behalf of his people (Numbers 33.1-49) and ahead to God's future activity".[11] Yet from a general feminist point of view, interpretation of the daughters of Zelophehad is not straightforward. Schröder and Reich found that the case of Zelophehad's daughters is at heart concerned with issues of identity and illustrate this with an example of research. They found that the daughters were considered to be role models by both an Israeli woman and a Palestinian Christian woman.[12] Schröder and Reich argue that this biblical passage not only empowers women but also counters an 'exaggerated feminism', by which they supposedly mean an externally imposed propositional feminism. They find the passage to be illustrative of a self-achieved identity that is arrived at through resolution of debate within the social context of the Self.

However, comment on this biblical passage also demonstrates how traditional commentary conflates female character and androcentric assumptions. Zvi Ron finds this passage to be exactly an example of (aggressive?) feminism, saying the daughters of Zelophehad were the first feminists *because they took on male roles*.[13] Ron cites the Talmudic discussions about the daughters that imparted these women with exceptional qualities such as wisdom, exegetical competence and virtuosity, to make them worthy of mention without connection to their husbands.[14] He finds that the combination of domestic excellence with astute knowledge in women must be of a miraculous order: "Miraculously, they were able to have

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[11] Ulrich, p. 537.
[12] Schröder and Reich, p. 94.
[13] Zvi Ron, 'The Daughters of Zelophehad', *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 26 (1998), 260-262, (pp. 260- 261).
[14] Ron, p. 261.

the best of both worlds – study and family".[15] He then delivers an indirect warning to women who tread on the supposedly male dominion of knowledge production, citing Michal (the wife of David) as an example of the dangers that may befall women who take on 'male' roles in a footnote:

> "It should be noted that Michal, who traditionally took upon herself the male obligation to wear *tefillin* (Eruvin 96a) never had children (2 Samuel 6:23)".[16]

Ron's reference is not related to any discussion in the body of the text apart from women's childbearing potential.

Katherine Doob Sakenfeld found this passage to be exactly illustrative of different feminist modes of interpretation that ranged from a literary approach celebrating women's independence and personhood, to the literary-cultural approach that limits the exuberance of the positive outcomes of the literary approach, to the historical-critical approach that highlights the historical position of women at any given time.[17] The different and numerous commentaries on the role of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah in Scripture nevertheless reiterate the argument made by Islamic feminists that the text produces multivalent meanings and that it is the task of feminism to present polyvalent readings that stem from women's subjectivity. Ankie Sterring points to a similarity between the position of Zelophehad's daughters and that of the mujādilah in their respective religious traditions:

> "Zelophehad's daughters do not belong to the dossier of biblical celebrities. They do not even belong to the collection of renowned biblical women. The story in which they feature has not captured the

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[15] Ron, p. 262.

[16] Ron, (fn. 3), p. 262. Eruvin 96a mentions that Michal, the daughter of King Saul, used to wear *tefillin* but adds "and the sages did not protest". See discussion of prominent women who wore *tefillin* by David Golinkin, 'May Women Wear *tefillin*?', *Conservative Judaism*, Fall (1997), 3-18. On Michal's barrenness, see some contradiction in 2 Samuel 21.8 where many Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint cite Michal as the daughter of Saul who bore five sons, instead of Merab.

[17] See the review of Sakenfeld's work by Tal Ilan, 'The Daughters of Zelophehad and Women's Inheritance: The Biblical Injunction and its Outcome', in *Exodus to Deuteronomy: A Feminist Companion to the Bible, 2nd Series*, ed. by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 176-186 (pp. 177-178).

imagination of the common reader [...] And yet this story, despite, or perhaps because, of its strikingly lacklustre ordinariness, is one of the most fascinating women's stories in the Bible".[18]

8.2.2   A Christian Mujādilah

The Gospel of Mark narrates an encounter between Jesus and a Syrophoenician woman in Tyre (Mark 7.24-30). The story follows a sequence introduced by Jesus' criticism of traditional practices that misconstrued Mosaic law and caused suffering for parents who required care. This is followed by a discussion between the disciples and Jesus on the origins of impurity, where Jesus explains that impurity does not originate with external entities, but comes from within the person in acting out immoral thoughts, such as sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, slander, arrogance and so forth. The story of the Syrophoenician woman starts with the observation that Jesus visited Tyre and hoped to remain unnoticed. The circumstances whereby the woman came to know of Jesus' presence is not recounted. It is merely said that she heard about him and came to fall at his feet.

The woman implores Jesus to cast out a malignant spirit from her daughter to which Jesus replies (v. 27): "Let the children first be filled for it is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs". Jesus as Divine mediator hereby absolves his responsibility to comply with her request in terms of the included and excluded intendents of his revelatory mission. The woman counters his reasoning (v. 28) saying: "Yea, Lord: even the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs", to which Jesus replies (v. 29): "For this saying (Greek, *logos*) go thy way; the demon is gone out of thy daughter". The argument of the woman, termed *logos* in the Greek text, is the equivalent of the Arabic *qaula*, and the Hebrew *doberōt*, being anything from 'a word', to 'a statement' or 'teaching'. Jesus thus specifies that it is because of the woman's argument or statement, that the miracle could

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[18] Ankie Sterring, 'The Will of the Daughters', in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 88-99, (p. 88). See also her citation of the value of this text for the American suffragette movement, among others, by *The Woman's Bible* (p. 98).

take place. The inclusion of the Syrophoenician woman in the Matthian narrative designates, amongst others, the inclusivity of the Christological mission to all peoples and not just the 'house of Israel' (Matt. 15.24).[19] However, the prominence of the dialogue in comparison with the sparse description of other features, such as the healing in the Markan version, have lead commentators to assume an interdependence between the miracle and the dialogue in this passage.[20]

M. Eugene Boring argues that the term 'saying' from the Greek *logos* is a substantial term in the Gospel of Mark that is used to describe amongst others the message of Jesus himself and for referring to the word of God. Boring asserts that in this instance the *logos* of the woman stands over and against that of Jesus "and he finally acknowledges that it is valid".[21] Boring further asserts that although this story features a healing or exorcism, its closest affinity is with dialogue or conflict stories that display persistent persuasion by the interlocutor of Jesus (for example in Matthew 8.5-13).[22] Indeed, Boring equates the woman with other biblical characters who, despite acknowledging the authority of God in Divine encounters, continues to argue her case: "[The Syrophoenician woman] does not merely acquiesce ('whatever you say,' 'the will of the Lord be done'), but like Abraham, Moses, Job, and the biblical psalmists, argues with the Lord".[23] Susan Miller, on the other hand, finds the portrayal of the woman 'striking' in its recollection of other persistent women who successfully debate with powerful men in narratives outside the text of the Gospels, such as 2 Samuel 14.1-20 and *b. Erub.* 53.[24] It is also this feature, argues Boring, that interests contemporary interpreters because it features "a plucky woman", though Boring

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[19] Spina, *Faith of the Outsider*, p. 138.

[20] See Robert A. Guelich, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 1-8.26* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989), p. 383.

[21] M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (London: John Knox Press, 2006), p. 208.

[22] Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 208.

[23] Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 214.

[24] Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 90.

asserts that it is the woman's non-Jewish racial attribute that stands to the fore in the Markan narrative.[25] By contrast, Miller finds that the Syrophoenician woman is significant for both her gender and her race as she responds to Jesus in faith and does not render him unclean, reinforcing the theme of the foregoing pericopes that it is not what is outside of the person that defiles them, but what emits from the person.[26]

Feminist commentators find that the role of the woman is to change Jesus' mind or challenge him to disregard social barriers and most credit her with courage, determination and independent action.[27] Ranjini Rebera finds the story as a whole to address issues of identity, power and inter-religious dialogue that makes the Christological mission clear.[28] Furthermore, Rebera finds that the Syrophoenician demonstrates voice as power pointing out that the Matthian narrative depicts this woman as shouting. Rebera concludes that the woman used all her means to confront and resolve her situation: "She claims her right to be heard, and she is heard".[29] Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan adds a further dimension to the nature of the woman's argumentation by pointing out that Jesus had gone into the foreign region not wanting anybody to know about his presence and that her interruption is therefore inopportune and inconvenient.[30] In any event, her argument is not a contestation of the program of salvation announced by the male mediator, but expands and extends the Divine plan beyond the original scheme:

> "She does not dispute the priority of Israel, but relativizes the diachronic scheme of 'first to the Jews, then to the Greeks' by positing a synchronic alternative or supplement to it: the 'dogs' do not *only* have

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[25] Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 206.
[26] Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 109.
[27] See Miller's overview of feminist evaluation of the Syrophoenician woman, p. 90.
[28] Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, 'The Syrophoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Prespective', in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 101-110 (p. 101).
[29] Rebera, p. 105.
[30] Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 87.

> to wait to be fed later ('not yet'), but *also* receive the overflow [...] of
> the messianic extravagance even now ('already')".[31]

Most importantly, Jesus reverses his original response and acts on the basis of what the

woman has said. Boring compares the version of this event with the portrayal in the Gospel

of Matthew and finds that her actions are interpreted as characteristic of faith in Matthew

whereas in Mark, the focus is on her *logos*. Miller argues that the woman acts as a model of

true discipleship in the Markan world-view in seeking Jesus out, acknowledging his

authority and making herself the least in order to help her daughter. However, she is also a

prophetic figure in foreshadowing the future sharing between Jews and Gentiles described

in Markan apocalyptic, as well as acting out perseverance and demonstrating hope in the

midst of despair: "[T]he Syrophoenician woman acts as a prophet, since her word looks

forward to the messianic feast which has abundant food for both Jews and Gentiles".[32]

In terms of the mujādilah's literal significance, it means that the Divine mediator depends

on the woman's interpretation of justice to adjust his mission of social reform, or in this

instance, healing. Yet it is not only in her gender and race that the woman transcends

division, but also in the skill of her argumentation when she transforms the imagery of

Jesus' parable with a parable of her own.[33] In terms of the larger Gospel narrative, the

Syrophoenician woman also presents a mechanism for the Divine mission to move beyond

the normative boundaries of Judaism, illustrated by geographic boundaries in this instance,

to foreshadow the new community that comes about through Jesus' ministry.[34]

> "[T]he divine plan is changed, the messianic secret is broken but not
> shattered or abandoned, and the mercy of God triumphs over any

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[31] Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 214.

[32] Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 107. See also dispute or debate as a form of prophetic speech termed *Streitgespräch* by Claus Westermann, in *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. by Hugh Clayton White (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1991), p. 201.

[33] See Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 111.

[34] For a discussion of conservative notions of Judaism in the Gospel of Mark and how Jesus moves beyond the norms of Jewish conservatism, see William Loader, 'Challenged at the Boundaries: A Conservative Jesus in Mark's Tradition', *JSNT*, 19 (63) (1997), 45-61.

theological expression of it. Here as elsewhere, Jesus functions in the role of divine Lord, and the woman represents suffering and imploring humanity. He is not forced against his will to deliver a girl from enslaving demonic power; he remains sovereign throughout. He is not 'bested' in an argument, does not 'capitulate,' but, like God, does reverse a previous decision. The encounter is ultimately not male / female or Jew / Gentile, but divine / human, in which deity ultimately – though not immediately – responds to human need".[35]

This event thus presents a mujādilah-type in the Gospel in that a woman, in this case a triple outsider (a Gentile/Greek woman, 'a Syrophoenician by race', living outside the main geographical focus of Jesus' mission in Tyre), countered Divine authority for the sake of someone in her care based on her grasp of Divine justice. Ringe describes her argumentation as the defining wisdom of the story presented as a tactic "that is the verbal form of the strategy in martial arts of meeting the opponent's attack by using its own force against the perpetrator".[36] The success of her utterance is acknowledged as a rationality (*logos*) of moral consciousness that adjusts the position of not only the Divine mediator, but also Divinity itself.

Yet the Syrophoenician woman does not only demonstrate faith but is of particular importance to interreligious dialogue. In contrast to the narrative of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4.1-42), the encounter between the Syrophoenician woman and Jesus does not reflect a purpose of control in the sense that the woman is required to convert or that she aimed to dominate Jesus. Rather, each challenged the other with the intention of understanding each other's positions, reflecting the aims and purposes of inclusive inter-religious dialogue in Scriptural Reasoning:

"The woman gave Jesus the power to recognize his ministry to the Gentile people. Jesus gave her the power of life by healing her

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[35] Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 214.
[36] Sharon H. Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story Revisited: Rereading Mark 7.24-31', in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, pp. 79-100 (p. 90).

daughter. There is a mutual ministry in this encounter that is often lost in its focus on what is clean and what is unclean".[37]

8.3 Demonstrating Interfeminist Interfaith Dialogue

The mujādilah has showed that differences of gender, culture or feminisms need not exclude or even diminish the potential of engagement with the Other. The mujādilah-model therefore does not propose a theory of agency, or evaluate women's agency from a single perspective but views actions within the grammar of concepts, namely female subjectivity in relation to Divine revelation in the distinct, yet Abrahamically related, religious texts of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. While the essential differences between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam remain, the scripturally reasoned mujādilah demonstrated the centrality of revelation, or Divine Communication, to all three the Abrahamic faiths and the role of Scripture in the interaction between believers and their Creator, and furthermore that women are central to this process. The mujādilahs also showed that women can actively explore possibilities of change as mujādilahs who embody the natural relationality of the speaking voice: Women can 'repersonalise' the 'logos' and reinstate the polyphony, or community of voices in theologies of Scripture. The point is that the mujādilahs did not argue from their (female) life experience only but made their case from the knowledge that Abrahamic revelation imparts.

Although it may be argued that the mujādilah is only spurred on by social injustice and representative of suffering, it is equally clear that the mujādilah multiplies theological revelation when women establish themselves in the spaces of knowledge production. By expanding the dialogue between God and males to a hermeneutic triangle of debate between God, women and men, the mujādilah consistently subverts androcentrism as norm

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[37] Rebera, 'The Syrophoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Prespective', p. 108.

and opens up possibilities of partnership with others. The mujādilah therefore demonstrates Butler's conception of effective agency, that is, to transform society with authority regardless of her prior authorisation. She also shows how a woman's reiteration of the religious structure of norms served to both consolidate and destabilise the androcentric regime of power. Indeed, the mujādilah provides a conceptual tool that enhances mutual understanding and relationship within diversity, whether of the gendered or ethnic or religious variety. As a sign of the Qurʾan, the mujādilah embodies a Divine principle of interlocution and so doing illustrates a form of solidarity in the engagement of women with theologies of Abrahamic revelation.

My reading of the mujādilah represents an attempt to communicate with others and establish a relationship with them by imagining myself and others in a new way through the reading of my own and others' Scripture. Reading the mujādilah as a trace of prophetic interaction in the development of a Qurʾanic canon and community provided a heuristic tool for articulating women's participation in revelation in Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Considering the mujādilah in Muslim life, it is evident that she is not only a symbol but also a practice for women that generates knowledge and community. All three mujādilahs – Muslim, Christian and Jewish – illustrate how the domestic and institutional intersect with the aim to achieve mutuality, not through control, but through effective authority in relationship with male agents. They describe a solidarity in authoritative subjectivity, which is both scriptural and feminist in that it constitutes a prophetic critique of their respective theologies. Moreover, all three mujādilahs are crucial to their texts' imagining of new forms of theological Justice, therefore all Abrahamic feminists may contend that women are scripturally invited to participate in theological endeavour as possibility of revelation. Who are we then to be silent?

Chapter 9

Conclusion

In response to the question about women's voice and silence in the monotheistic religions raised at the start of the present study, the mujādilah not only showed that women speak in the original sources but extend the Divine revelation on which these religions are founded. The Qur'an's figure of the 'woman who disputes' showed how the Divine word, or logos, is personalised in sacred moments through women's interlocution between God and the male agents of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The speaking role of the woman who disputes in the Scriptures presents a mode of relationship that transcends boundaries of Self and points out the commonality of female subjectivity that represents a prophetic voice from within the bounds of the text. Just as the Syrophoenician woman enacted true discipleship and expressed a prophetic voice, the mujādilah clarifies the character of the Muslim community over and against the practices and language of the Jāhiliyyah. She applies her wisdom and the moral consciousness of the inherent justice of the Qur'anic message to distinguish the moral categories of the new Islamic order. Just as the daughters of Zelophehad speak out with moral courage to show how Torah-justice is to be applied, so the mujādilah demonstrates the new relational order of the Ummah.

The mujādilah therefore points out that the assumed exclusionary relationship between God's word and woman's word is not so much the flaw of Divine revelation or monotheism, but more often it is the result of androcentric interpretive tradition: The mujādilah model demonstrates that instead of the female voice being a corruption, her voice is an interpretive one that mediates Divine justice. The mujādilah provides the common ground for interfeminist dialogue in celebrating both the uniqueness of each disputational

revelatory project as well as the commonality of female experience expressed in the modes of disputation. It is thus no small wonder that these Scriptures have secured the continuous adherence of women as it is in these very texts that women's voices were authorised. It is the Scriptures that retained a remnant theology of doing community in spite of the often overwhelming traditions of exclusion. The mujādilah is a source of values not only for Muslim women, but Jewish and Christian women with a common language and Divine example to speak out against injustice in their respective communities and engage with others for common causes. Despite feminist criticism's highlighting of divisions in feminist thinking, this feminist exposition of the mujādilah describes an interfeminist dialogue, which may promote ethical behaviour. The mujādilah makes clear how each female interlocutor is firmly based within her own textual community, yet the Muslim woman who disputes also provides a narrative wherein Christian and Jewish women may recognise themselves and relate their stories to each other in Cavarero's description of relationship as the basis of humanity and its politics. For instance, the Christian mujādilah does not deny the centrality of Christ in her disputation, neither does the Jewish mujādilah repudiate the election of her people, and nor does the Muslim mujādilah turn to another besides Allah. Yet they share a common humanity that demands a broader responsibility to dignity, justice and respect.

The mujādilah furthermore puts Scriptural Reasoning into practice by being rooted in her own tradition yet still providing terms for dialogue in common feminist and interfaith action. In this way the Muslim mujādilah became an authority in my Christian subjectivity without impinging on the authenticity of that Christian subjectivity. Though the Scriptures and their respective traditions retain authority, the common humanity of their subjects is emphasised through their telling about women who dispute. The mujādilah is therefore as

much a symbol as Eve, Khadijah, or A'isha, while she is also a trope for women to envision themselves as participants in community. How is it that the mujādilah was excluded from the examples of the Mother of the Believers that formed the precedent for later Shari'ah legal structure? Perhaps it was the mujādilah's predisposition to invite pluralism and dialogue as the mujādilah reveals how consensus can be constituted by difference when collaborating to make meaning.

In terms of Saba Mahmood's questioning of humanist notions of agency, the mujādilah presents an alternative female subjectivity, namely one that enacts responsible agency. Instead of measuring female subjectivity in terms of freedom and rational choice, the mujādilah asks how is the woman a responsible agent. That is, how does female subjectivity respond and take accountability for her actions, not necessarily for a unilateral ideal, but to improve women's lives nevertheless. The mujādilah shows that, though the ethical and political context may shape female subjectivity, there remain universal categories for common humanity. The quest need not be for individual autonomy or freedom for it to be considered as the enactment of agency, rather the agent acts responsibly: She responds to the need of care and transforms material existence. In this way the mujādilah demonstrated how the Butlerian reiterative structure is destabilised from within; Divine revelation was not only an imposition on women's subjectivity but in the imaginary of the mujādilah, Divine revelation constituted internalised values of self. Above all, this study found that women are not silent in Scripture and that their voices are furthermore formative, not only of female subjectivity, but of communal identity. Although the study has likewise pointed out the selectivity of androcentric reasoning in making only certain role models available to these scriptural communites, it can be stated unequivocally that generalised practices of silence prescribed for women are not scriptural.

Appendix

Copy of the discussion about the prophethood of women cited on a website about Internet resources for and about women, http://www.jannah.org/sisters/index.html

Abu Muhammad Ibn Hazm al-Andaluci

This is a glimpse into some of the intellectual debates Muslim scholars had in the past. This is a debate about the question of the prophethood of women, from Ibn Hazm's al-Milal wal-Nihal. Muslims debated this issue without fear of sanction, and without relying on accepted dogmas. Ibn Hazm (d. 456 Hijri) lived in the 11th century in Muslim Spain (Andalucia). This is a piece from that era. This is his position about this sensitive issue which is the Prophethood of women. He has a strong argument. What follows is his view and some other views of other Muslim scholars such as Qurtubi, Ibn Hajjar al-'Asqalani, Imam al-Nawawi and other Muslim scholars. This piece is very relevant as we try to find out the position of women in our society and under- stand the differences between what we inherited as customs and what the Shari'a wants from us.

<div align="center">

Nubuwwa (Prophethood) of Women
Volume V, pp 17-19
al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa-al-Ahwa'i wa-al-Nihal
By
Abu Muhammad Ali Ibn Ahmad Ibn Hazm al-Andaluci

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(Abu Muhammad said) This is an issue we know of no debate about it except here in Cordoba and in our time. A group of people went on and denied that Prophet- hood could not be for women and made everyone that claims as such an innovator (Mubtadi'). Another group said that Prophethood is possible for women. A third group abstained from discussing this issue. (Abu Muhammad said) We find no proof for those who claim that Prophethood is impossible for women other than that some of them denied it based on the Koranic verse:

" (O Muhammad!) Whenever we sent before you Messengers to whom we have revealed Our messages, they were but men." (1)

(Abu Muhammad said) This is a verse none can deny as nobody claimed that Allah (SWT) sent women Messengers. The issue here is about Prophethood (Nubuwwa) and not Messengership. Henceforth the need to understand the meaning of the word 'Prophethood' in the language in which Allah (SWT) spoke to us (i.e. Arabic). We find that this word is taken from Inba' (prophecy) which means I'lam (revelation). So whomever Allah (SWT) tells him about what will be before it comes to pass, or reveals to him informing him about a certain matter, then he is a Nabi (prophet) without any doubt.

This (Prophethood) should not be understood as Ilham (inspiration) which is natural as Allah said in Surah al-Nahl:

" And behold! Your Lord has inspired the bees with this: 'Build thy hives in the mountains, and the trees and the creepers over trellis, then drink nectar from every kind of fruit, and follow the ways made smooth by your Lord.' From its belly comes out a fluid of varying hues wherein is healing for mankind. Here is indeed a sign for those who ponder over it." (2)

It should neither be understood as doubt (Zann) or illusion which none would assure its truthfulness except an insane person (i.e. a crazy person would think illusion or Zann as part of what we commonly label as 'truth'). It neither should be understood as Kahana (sorcery) which is part of what the evil spirits (shayatin) try to get by listening to the heavens and as such get stricken by shooting stars. As Allah (SWT) says:

" And We have always set against every prophet enemies from among satans of men and satans of jinns who have been inspiring one another with charming things in order to delude the minds. But had your Lord willed, they would never have done so. So leave them alone to continue false allegations."(3)

Such sorcery was ended with the advent of the messenger of Allah (SWT), Muhammad (SAAW) (4). It is not part of Nujum (fortune telling), which can be learned. Nor is it part of dreams which none can assure their truthfulness or lies. Revelation which is Nubuwwa (Prophethood) is meant from Allah (SWT) to inform that to whom it was revealed of what Allah wants to tell him. This should be understood differently from all the previous cases.

Allah makes to whom it was revealed fully aware and fully knowledgeable of the truthfulness of what was revealed to him - (Exactly) like his knowledge of what he can sense and the (obvious) deductions of his brain - with no doubt in them. (This revelation) can be transmitted by one of either ways: through an angel that comes to him or through a message directly revealed to him and this is a knowledge from Allah (SWT) to whom He gives, with no transmitter or teacher. If they deny that this is the meaning of Prophethood then let them teach us its meaning for they will not bring any single proof.

Allah revealed in the Koran that He sent angels to women to deliver to them truthful revelations from Allah (SWT). They gave glad tidings to the mother of Isaac (Sarah) of Isaac. Allah says:

"...And his wife was standing by; hearing this, she laughed. Then we gave her the good news of Isaac, and after Isaac of Jacob. She said,' Woe be me! Shall I bear a child now when I have grown extremely old, and this husband of mine has also become old? This is indeed a strange thing.' The angels said,' What! Are you surprised at Allah's decree? O people of Abraham's household! Allah's mercy and blessing are upon you. Indeed, Allah is worthy of all praise and glory.'" (5)

This is a direct address from the angels to the mother of Isaac about the blessing Allah will bless her with -Isaac, then after Isaac Jacob - then their testimony about the power of Allah and her astonishment of the matter of how Allah (SWT) makes things possible. This could not be an address from an angel except to a prophet - in one way or another - we find also that Allah (SWT) sent Gabriel to Mary mother of 'Isa - Jesus - (AS) with a message and told her:

"...I am a mere messenger from your Lord and have been sent to give you a pure son." (6)

This is a true Nubuwwa with a true revelation and a (clear) message from Allah (SWT). Zacharias (AS) used to find with her Rizq (food) for this he asked Allah (SWT) to grant him a trustworthy son (7). We found also that Allah re- vealed to (Yukabid) mother of Moses that she shall throw her son into the Yam (river) and she shall neither worry or have grief and promised her He shall return Moses to her and make him a prophet and a messenger. With no doubt this is a true Nubuwwa (revelation) and a logical consequence of our premises.

If she was not sure of the revelation that Allah would return her son to her, either that this was a mere vision or a feeling she had, she would be - by throwing her son in the Yam - committing a crazy act and a heinous crime against herself. If one of us did such an act he would be an extreme trans- gressor or a crazy person that deserves the agony and the (psychological) consequences he has to go through - (probably) in a bimaristan (a mental institution).

Such logical analysis none could deny. Therefore it becomes - with assuredness - true that that which came to (Yukabid) - of throwing her son in the Yam - was a revelation, like that which was revealed to Ibrahim (AS) in his dream. He was ordered to slaughter his son. If Ibrahim (AS) was not a true prophet, and had he slaughtered his son for a dream he saw or a doubt he had in himself, it would be true that whoever does such an action would not be of the Prophets but an insane person. This nobody would doubt.

Hence their (the women's) Prophethood becomes obviously true. We find that Allah (SWT) while mentioning the prophets in Surah Mariam, He mentioned Mariam amongst them and then said:

" These are the Prophets on whom Allah bestowed His favors. They were from the descendants of Adam, and from the seed of those whom we carried in the Ark with Noah, and from the seed of Abraham and of Israel. They were from those whom we guided aright and made our chosen ones. They were tender-hearted that whenever the Revelations of the Merciful were recited to them, they would fall down pro- strate, weeping." (8)

This is a description of all of them. One should not single her out as a special case, to be treated separately. Now the saying 'and his mother a Siddiqa' (Koran) does not deny her the right to be a prophet as Allah said: 'Joseph, O Siddiq!'(9). and as is known he is a true prophet and a messenger; and this becomes now clear. From

Allah only one seeks guidance. We can also include along with them (Yukabid and Mariam) the wife of Pharao, as the prophet (SAAW) said:

" There are many persons amongst men who are quite perfect but there are not perfect amongst women except Mary, daughter of 'Imran, and Asiya, wife of Pharao." (10) or as the Messenger of Allah (SAAW) said.

Now perfectness (kamal) for men can only be for some messengers -for those who are 'less than them' are not perfect-. His (the Prophet's) particularization to Mariam and Asiya (the wife of Pharao) was a privilege for both of them over all those to whom Prophethood was given from amongst women - with no doubt -, as those who are a degree less than them are not perfect. Henceforth it is clear that these two women became perfect more than any other women and even if these women were prophets. From Koranic texts we find that Allah says:

" (O Muhammad) , most surely you are of those who have been sent as Messengers. Of these Messengers, We have raised some above others in rank." (11) So the perfect of his gender is the one who excels in his perfection and none of his gender can reach him. They are the messengers from amongst men, of whom we find our prophet Muhammad and Ibrahim (ASWS).

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