A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FEMINIST AND TRADITIONAL SHI‘I APPROACHES TO QUR’ANIC EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT
A thorough understanding of feminist exegetical approaches is not possible without examining the ideas of contextualists such as Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the impact they had on modern Muslim feminist scholars of the Qur’an. This paper, in its endeavours to first examine feminist approaches to Qur’anic exegesis and to then compare them with traditional Shi‘i approaches, will begin with an overview of the main concepts in contextualist theory. Then, feminist interpretations will be discussed with particular reference to two fundamental feminist exegetical methods: the historical contextualisation method and the intratextual method. This will be followed by a critique of contextualist theory in general. The paper will next turn its focus to textualist theory; here, traditional Shia Usuli thought will be reviewed. Finally, a comparative analysis of the feminist and traditional Shi‘i approaches will be presented within the framework of the ‘mega-method’. Throughout the paper, verse 34 of chapter 4 of the Qur’an will be used as the standard reference point for illustrating how the methods and approaches under consideration are applied by their advocates.

Keywords: contextualist; feminist; historical contextualization; intratextual; textualist; Usuli; mega-method; traditional Shi‘i; Qur’anic exegesis

1. The Contextualist Approach

Contextualists maintain that Qur’anic teachings, especially those that concern ethical, social, or legal matters,¹ are context-specific. They advocate a reinterpretation of Qur’anic injunctions to make them applicable to the present day. Qur’anic rulings are based on certain principles and ideals, such as justice, equality, and public interest, but a ruling which was just, equitable, or in the public interest at the time of Prophet Muhammad might not be so today.

¹ Saeed (2014, p.6) terms this category as ‘ethico-legal texts’.
According to Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), perhaps the most prominent advocate of the contextualist approach, a double movement is required if the Qur’an is to be relevant today: first, Muslim scholars must analyse the Qur’an to establish the ideals of Islam; then, they must present these ideals in a new form that is suitable for the present time:

In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a twofold movement. First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Quran—taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account—to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining. (1982, p.5)

Rahman’s approach has had a considerable influence on modern interpreters of the Qur’an. In his book Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach (2014), Abdullah Saeed asserts that this approach was employed as early as the first century after the death of Prophet Muhammad:

Umar b. Khattab (d. 23/664), the second caliph, interpreted a range of Qur’anic texts in a manner that could be considered “contextualist”. Umar understood Qur’anic revelations in terms of their fundamental principles or objectives and, critically, his understanding was highly contextual. (p.4)

Saeed describes ‘context’ as a broad concept, which may include, for example, the ‘linguistic context’ – referred to as siyāq in Arabic exegetical works – i.e. the way a particular phrase or short text is situated within a larger text. Usually, the linguistic context will be what immediately precedes or follows the text under consideration. Although contextualists consider the linguistic context to be important, they place more emphasis on the ‘macro context’, i.e. the ‘social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual settings of the Qur’anic text under consideration’ (p.5). Saeed uses the terms ‘macro context 1’ and ‘macro context 2’ to further explain the contextualist approach: ‘macro context 1’ is the setting in which the original Qur’anic text was revealed, whereas ‘macro context 2’ is the setting of the present period. Both macro contexts must be carefully compared; then, the meaning of the Qur’anic text is translated from macro context 1 to macro context 2 while bearing in mind the context of the intervening periods, or the ‘connector context’. The connector context ‘demonstrates how successive generations of Muslims have applied the Qur’anic text and its norms to their values.’ (p.5)

Like Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) was also a strong advocate of the contextualist approach, although Abu Zayd developed his approach on the view that the Qur’an should be analysed as a historical text. He asserted that even though the Qur’an is the speech of God, it was spoken and written down in a specific historical situation, and therefore, only on the basis of

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2 Later in his book, Saeed examines several examples of Umar b. Khattab’s approach, such as the caliph’s interpretation of 9:60 concerning the recipients of zakat, and his treatment of 8:1-2 and 59:7 concerning the distribution of war booty (pp.26-37).
comprehensive historical knowledge can one interpret the Qur’an correctly. Once the core message, which transcends its historical context, is attained, Muslims can determine what the Qur’an means for them today:

One cannot find the meaning of a religion in the text but in the interaction between the text and the historical process, in the interaction between the believer(s)/the communities with their holy texts. Of course that does not mean that one cannot speak of religion in a normative sense. But this normative sense is historically determined, and is, thus, changeable. It is normative according to the specific milieu paradigm; any paradigm-change leads to norms-change. (2010, n.p.)

As it was noted earlier, Rahman’s views have had a considerable impact on Muslim modernists and authors who adopt a contextualist approach in their work. I shall now focus my attention on one such group of authors: Muslim feminist scholars of the Qur’an. Perhaps the most famous of these scholars is Amina Wadud. In her book Qur’an and Woman (1999, p.3) she states:

Thus, I attempt to use the method of Qur’anic interpretation proposed by Fazlur Rahman. He suggests that all Qur’anic passages, revealed as they were in a specific time in history and within certain general and particular circumstances, were given expression relative to those circumstances. However, the message is not limited to the time or those circumstances historically. A reader must understand the implications of the Qur’anic expressions during the time in which they were expressed in order to determine their proper meaning. That meaning gives the intention of the rulings or principles in the particular verse.

2. Feminist approaches
In Feminist Edges of the Qur’an (2014), Aysha Hidayatullah describes three methods used by feminist scholars of the Qur’an: 1) the historical contextualisation method; 2) the intratextual method; and 3) the tawhidic paradigm. Saeed (2014, pp.43-47), on the other hand, prefers to analyse feminist approaches in terms of what he calls ‘key ideas and principles’: an emphasis on the macro context; an emphasis on justice and fairness; an emphasis on non-patriarchal readings; looking closely at the language of the text; and reading the Qur’an holistically and intra-textually. On closer examination, all of these key ideas and principles can be placed under two of the methods identified by Hidayatullah, i.e. the historical contextualisation method and the intratextual method. As for the ‘tawhidic paradigm’, Hidayatullah posits that feminist authors understand this to mean two things: 1) that sexism is a type of idolatry as it attributes a God-like role to men over women; and 2) that one can never claim a final interpretation of the Qur’an as this would amount to claiming to have God’s knowledge and placing oneself in the role of God (p.110). However, it may be contended that the tawhidic paradigm is not, strictly speaking, a ‘method’, and that it does not concur with her use of the word ‘method’ when she refers to the historical contextualisation and intratextual methods. Rather, the tawhidic paradigm is more akin to one of the central Qur’anic principles that feminist authors emphasise a great deal on, such as justice and equality. In light of these observations, this

3 The phrase ‘tawhidic paradigm’ was coined by Amina Wadud in Inside the Gender Jihad (2006, p.24).
paper will focus its attention on examining 1) the historical contextualisation method, and 2) the intratextual method.

3. The historical contextualisation method

Scholars employing this method usually start by researching the reason for a verse’s revelation (sabab al-nuzūl). They distinguish between ‘descriptive’ verses, which are those verses that describe the practices of the seventh-century Arabian audience, and ‘prescriptive’ verses, i.e. those that prescribe practices to all audiences. They also distinguish between ‘universal’ verses, which are those that apply to all human beings, and ‘particular’ verses, i.e. those that apply only in specific situations. Furthermore, these scholars identify historical situations that shaped the context of revelation in Arabia at that time and later exegeses (Hidayatullah, 2014, pp.65-66).

Using this method, feminist authors read the Qur’an historically, derive universal principles, and then apply those principles to new situations. In the words of Barlas (2002), this requires ‘reading behind the text’, i.e. ‘to reconstruct the historical context from which the text emerged’, and ‘reading in front of the text’, i.e. ‘to re-contextualise the text in light of present needs’ (p.62 and pp.200-203). In this way, the writers assert that the Qur’an is not restricted in its ability to provide universal guidance in all times and places. According to Wadud (1999, p.100), the historical context of a verse is particularly important to recognise when examining verses that concern gender-related issues as the ‘attitudes towards women at the time and place of the revelation helped to shape the particular expressions in the Qur’an.’

Perhaps the most discussed verse by feminist authors is verse 34 of al-Nisāʾ (chapter 4):

Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, care-taking in the absence [of their husbands] of what Allah has enjoined [them] to guard. As for those [wives] whose misconduct you fear, [first] advise them, and [if ineffective] keep away from them in the bed, and [as the last resort] beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course [of action] against them. Indeed Allah is All-Exalted, All-Great.¹

Wadud argues that this verse is limited to a particular, not universal, situation; i.e. the verse is saying that the husband is the financial provider for his family on two conditions: 1) God has preferred him with regard to financial inheritance; i.e. he has benefitted from the double inheritance that men receive; and 2) he financially supports his family from his earnings. Wadud further argues that the use of the word ‘some’ (baʿḍ) in this verse is another indication that it is not an absolute, generalised statement about all men and women. She goes on to posit that a contextually relevant reading of the verse today would involve broadening the male responsibility to a social responsibility of

¹ All translations of Qur’anic passages in this paper are from Ali Quli Qara’i’s The Qur’an: With a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation (London: ICAS Press, 2005).
supporting child-bearing women, not only materially but in everything needed by them to fulfil their primary responsibility (pp.70-74).

In her interpretation of this verse, Azizah al-Hibri (2000, p.64) pays particular attention to the historical context at the time of its revelation; she writes, ‘Because the Qur’an was revealed in a world that was and continues to be highly patriarchal, it engaged in affirmative action to protect women against poverty.’ At the same time, the verse also places restrictions on the extent of the man’s qiwāmah⁵ at that time. Therefore, without bearing in mind the historical context, she argues, the verse could be interpreted very broadly as a general statement of men’s qiwāmah over women.

With regard to the part about being obedient to husbands (‘Then if they obey you’), Wadud maintains that this is merely describing the marital norm in seventh century Arabia, when marriage of subjugation was prevalent and wives did obey their husbands; the verse is not prescribing that model of marriage.

As for ‘beat them’ (iḍribūhunna), al-Hibri posits that this must be read in light of the Qur’anic ‘philosophy of gradualism’ – i.e. that the Qur’an gradually alleviates the problem of domestic violence that was prevalent at the time by presenting a three-step model for conflict resolution: first verbal communication, then physical separation, and finally physical admonishment.

4. The intratextual method
This method involves comparing related verses and terms of the Qur’an to one another, as opposed to reading them in isolation. It also involves reading verses in light of certain concepts, which, according to feminist interpreters, are principally advocated by the Qur’an; concepts such as justice and equality for all human beings. This method, which is usually referred to as ‘exegesis of the Qur’an by the Qur’an’ (tafsīr al-qurʾān bil-qurʾān), is one of the oldest methods of Qur’anic exegesis, dating back to the beginning of Islam.

Using intratextual strategies with reference to 4:34, Wadud (1999, p.73) states, ‘For simple balance and justice in creation, and to avoid oppression, his responsibility must be equally significant to the continuation of the human race.’ Al-Hibri (2000, pp.227-8) refers to what she terms the ‘Equality Principle’ of 30:21⁶ and argues that this principle takes priority over any interpretation that appears to conflict it.

With regard to the word ‘obedient’, (qānit), Wadud (p.74) points out that this word is used for both males (2:238, 3:17, 33:35) and for females (4:34, 33:34, 66:5, 66:12), and therefore, it refers to a trait of believers towards God, not a trait of wives towards their husbands. The word ‘misconduct’ (nushūz), like qānit, is also used for both for males (4:128) and for women (4:34), and it therefore refers to marital disharmony, not disobedience of a wife.

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5 Qiwāmah has been translated in a number of ways, the most common being ‘management’, ‘maintenance’, ‘protection’, and ‘guardianship’.

6 ‘And of His signs is that He created for you mates from your own selves that you may take comfort in them, and He ordained affection and mercy between you. There are indeed signs in that for a people who reflect.’
Regarding the phrase ‘beat them’, al-Hibri refers to verse 44 in chapter 38 (Ṣād):

[We told him:] ‘Take a bundle of twigs in your hand and then strike [your wife] with it, but do not break [your] oath.’ Indeed We found him to be patient. What an excellent servant! Indeed he was a penitent [soul].

She argues that just as Prophet Job was instructed to use a bundle of twigs in a mild or symbolic way to strike his wife with, the ‘striking’ in 4:34 must also carry the same meaning; anything that is more severe than this would go against the Qur’an’s overall advocacy of marital harmony and sexual equality:

The Qur’an is internally consistent because it is a divine revelation. The Qur’an repeatedly describes the relationship between husband and wife as one of tranquility, affection, and mercy. Further, it enjoins husbands to live with their wives in kindness or leave them amicably (2:229). Domestic violence is diametrically opposed to each of these Qur’anic views and ideals expressed in the various verses. Because of its internal consistency, the Qur’an could not be exhorting one ideal and enjoining the related conduct in some passages, and its opposite in another one. (2003, p.204)

5. A critique of the contextualist approach

In support of their views, both Rahman and Abu Zayd adopt the Mu’tazili view on the non-eternal (ḥādith) nature of the Qur’an. The discussion about whether the Qur’an is eternal (ṣadīm) or not was hotly debated by the two Sunni theological schools – the Ash’arites and the Mu’tazilites – in the second century AH/eighth century CE. The Ash’arites, like the Ahl al-Hadīth, held that the Qur’an is eternal, basing their view on the belief that speech (kalām) is one of the attributes of the divine essence, which is eternal. Mu’tazilites, on the other hand, maintained that the Qur’an is originated (muḥdath) and non-eternal, because in their opinion, speech is an attribute of divine action and non-eternal. According to Rahman and Abu Zayd, because the Qur’an is non-eternal, its laws are historical and not fixed.

However, as Elmi (2014) points out, there is no connection between the Qur’an being eternal or temporal on the one hand, and its injunctions being universal or historical on the other:

One can accept the views of the Asha’irah and also be a contextualist, or one can accept the temporality of the attributes of speech and be a universalist. For the eternity or temporality is about the ontological aspect of the Qur’an and how it had come to existence and not the content of the Qur’an. It is quite possible that the content of the Qur’an may be universal or contextual while the Qur’an itself may be eternal or temporal. Therefore, it can be seen that while Shi’a scholars assert the temporality of the attribute of speech, they maintain the universality of the Qur’anic rulings. (p.278)

* Qara’i’s translation of this verse has been slightly amended here.
Elsewhere, Elmi (2007) suggests that the mistake of linking the two sides of the discussion has its origin in the opinions of some early sunni jurists, such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), on the issue of whether the Qur’an can be abrogated by the sunna or not. These jurists maintained that it could not, and it seems that one of their reasons for holding this opinion was their belief in the Qur’an being eternal. This reasoning continued to be adopted over the centuries and has also been employed by modernists such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (p.103).

Moreover, although Rahman aims to modernise the method of jurisprudence for the social laws that are mentioned in the Qur’an, Elmi argues that Rahman’s proposed method would have general applicability and not be limited to social laws. For example, his method could just as well be applied to the law requiring Muslims to perform prayers in Arabic; in this case, why could it not be argued that this requirement is also a product of the society in which Prophet Muhammad lived? If the Prophet had been sent to a different society, he would have performed prayers in the language of that people, and therefore, the law that requires Muslims to perform their prayers in Arabic should also be regarded as being historical and temporary; and as there are practicing Muslims all over the world today, it should not be necessary for them all to perform their prayers in Arabic, as the aim of performing religious acts of worship is to express one’s servitude to God, which can be done in any language. The same argument could be applied to other Islamic laws, and as a result, all Islamic laws would become historical. Not only would this not rejuvenate Islamic jurisprudence, it would reduce it to a set of rational or human-nature laws (pp.107-8).

Shia scholars argue that because of their access to the vast corpus of traditions of the Shia Imams and the flexibility that their jurisprudence provides, they are able to tackle contemporary socio-legal matters in a very different way to contextualists. A case in point is the change in Islamic law in Iran that allows for conditions to be stipulated by either the man or the woman in their marriage contract. Shia scholars assert that not only is referring to the Qur’an and the sunna not ineffective for finding answers to new challenges, it is the most effective and assured way of bringing about change in the law.

6. The textualist approach
Traditional Shia scholars give primary importance to the ‘literal’ or ‘apparent meaning’ (ẓāhir) of the Qur’an in the process of acquiring the meaning of the Qur’an. Gleave (2013, p.1) writes that the literal meaning is ‘the meaning the text is believed to have “in itself” solely by virtue of the words used and the rules of the language in which the text is written.’ It is regarded by Usulis – i.e. scholars of the Islamic science known as the ‘principles of jurisprudence’ (usūl al-fiqh), which discusses Islamic legal theory – as having a higher level of certainty and epistemological security than other interpretations. This is a major point of contention between contextualists and textualists.
The meaning of a word is treated as being static. This approach is based on the idea that the fixed meanings allow the reader to remain faithful to the text and eschew any subjectivity that they may otherwise bring into the interpretation of the text...

However, a dictionary may not fully explain how the words are used in each and every context. Furthermore, language and the meaning of words are highly fluid, ahead of the codifying practices of lexicography. (Saeed, 2014, p.20)

Traditional Shia exegetes who adopt an Usuli approach in their work maintain that there is a congruence between the language of the Qur’an and commonly accepted modes of human communication; when people seek to understand each other, the approach they usually take is to rely upon the apparent meaning of what is being said or written. As al-Mużaffar (1994, p.136), a contemporary Shia Usuli scholar, explains:

The Holy Legislator [God] has definitely not used in his communication and usage of words to explain his aims, any other method than the one being used by the wise. This is because He is one of the wise and moreover is the Chief of All the Wise (ra’īs al-uqalā’). Consequently, His method is the same as theirs [in communication]. There is no obstacle to this conception for that and nor is there is any evidence from Him against this point.

Usulis present a number of arguments in support of their position on the authority (al-hujjah) of the literal meaning of verses. Firstly, they argue that the Qur’an itself implies this when it engages in discourse with different groups of people or with mankind in general. For example, the Qur’an challenges those who doubt in its being the word of God to produce something similar to it.⁸ Here, Usulis posit that if people could not fathom in ordinary ways what the Qur’an was actually saying, it would be pointless to challenge non-believers to bring something like something that they could not even understand (Tabaṭabā’ī, 1987, p.27). The Qur’an also invites people to contemplate upon its meaning,⁹ and describes itself as ‘guidance’ and ‘advice’.¹⁰ Usulis argue that something can only be reflected upon, or considered guidance and advice, if that thing could be understood in ordinary ways in the first place.

Usulis take a textualist approach to the interpretation of the Qur’an and advocate for the universality and trans-historicity of Qur’anic teachings. They maintain that the meaning of a verse is valid for every place and time unless proven otherwise; although the Qur’an was revealed in Arabia fourteen centuries ago, its teachings have absolute authority in different circumstances from the

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⁸ Al-Isrā’ 17:88: “Say, ‘Should all humans and jinn rally to bring the like of this Qur’an, they will not bring the like of it, even if they assisted one another.’” Al-Baqarah 2:23: “And if you are in doubt concerning what We have sent down to Our servant, then bring a surah like it, and invoke your helpers besides Allah, should you be truthful.” Hūd 11:13: “Do they say, ‘He has fabricated it?’ Say, ‘Then bring ten surahs like it, fabricated, and invoke whomever you can, besides Allah, should you be truthful.’”

⁹ Al-Nisā’ 4:82: “Do they not contemplate the Qur’an? Had it been from *someone+ other than Allah, they would have surely found much discrepancy in it.” Muḥammad 47:24: “Do they not contemplate the Qur’an, or are there locks on the hearts?” Sād 38:29: “[It is] a blessed Book that We have sent down to you, so that they may contemplate its signs, and that those who possess intellect may take admonition.”

¹⁰ Āli ‘Imrān 3:138: “This is an explanation for mankind, and a guidance and advice for the Godwary.”
time of the Prophet, and all the Qur’anic decrees are universal. Whenever it is unclear whether a ruling is context-specific or universal, the ‘primary principle’ (al-asl al-awwaliyyah) is that the ruling must be presumed as universal (Elmi, p.271).

In support of their view, Usuli scholars refer to both verses of the Qur’an and traditions. With regard to the former, they point to verses that begin with the invocation ‘O believers’ or ‘O people’. Such statements, they argue, are general, universal, and include all people in different places and times. Furthermore, verse 19 of chapter 6 (al-An’ām) says, ‘and this Qur’an has been revealed to me, that with it I may warn you and whomsoever it reaches.’ Here, Usulis argue that the present tense is used (liundhirakum – ‘I may warn you’) to address the absent because they are the same in kind to those present; i.e. the Qur’an’s message is a universal one, whether people hear it from the Prophet directly or from others after him (Ṭabatabā’ī, 1996, vol. 14, p.339). Furthermore, if God intends for any injunction in the Qur’an to be context-specific, He expresses it as such. If He uses a word in a general sense, it is universally applicable to all times, places, and situations.

Therefore, to restrict the verses of the Qur’an to a particular time or place, we need some extra evidence; and in the absence of such evidence, there would be no choice except to understand Qur’anic statements as they are and with their universal implications. (Elmi, 2014 p.272)

As for traditions, it will be sufficient for the purposes of this paper to quote two hadith of the sixth Shia Imam, Ja’far al-Sādiq:

The lawful [ḥalāl] of Muhammad is lawful forever until the Day of Resurrection, and the unlawful [ḥarām] of him is unlawful forever until the Day of Resurrection. It [i.e. the truth of religion] is nothing but this and nothing can replace it. [As Imam] ‘Ali said, ‘Nobody invented an [unlawful religious] innovation except by abandoning a sunna.’ (Al-Kāfī, vol. 1, p.58)

God’s rulings for the first and later generations are the same. Except for a particular reason or event, the first and later generations are also associated in terms of prohibition of some actions. Their duties are the same and the later generations will be questioned about the performance of duties as the first generation will be questioned, and they [the later generations] will be accounted for their performance as the first generation will be. (Al-Kāfī, vol. 5, p.17)

7. The mega-method

The modern era has seen a significant development of a particular exegetical method used by Shia exegetes; this method is referred to as the kāmil wa jāmiʿ method, which I have translated as the ‘mega-method’. It is the most prevalent method used in Shia exegesis today. Riḍā’ī Isfihānī (2010)

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11 See, for example, Riḍā’ī Isfihānī (2010, p.323), and ʿAlawī-Mihr (2002, p.195).
12 Ṭabatabā’ī’s Tafsīr al-Mīzān, Makārim Shirāzī’s Tafsīr-i Nimūnīh, and Jawādī Āmulī’s Tasnīm are some contemporary exegetical works that employ the mega-method.
defines the mega-method as one that ‘employs all the valid methods [namely exegesis of the Qur’an by the Qur’an, exegesis of the Qur’an by the sunna, scientific exegesis of the Qur’an, exegesis of the Qur’an by allusion, and rational exegesis of the Qur’an] so that the meaning of verses from all angles is attained’ (p.31). Later in the same work, he adds that various ‘approaches’ – such as juristic, theological, philosophical, linguistic, and social approaches – must also be utilised in the mega-method as and when it is useful to do so (p.324). In the past, Shia exegetical works tended to be the product of one scholar’s endeavours, or perhaps one scholar with the assistance of a few of his students; but nowadays, it is becoming more and more common for specialists in different fields to work together on Qur’anic exegesis.

What follows is an examination of prominent Shia exegetical works that employ the mega-method in their interpretation of 4:34.

8. Exegesis of the Qur’an by the Qur’an (intratextual method)
One of the most prominent Shia exegetes today, Jawādī Āmulī, is a strong adherent of the intratextual method. For example, by referring to the very next verse (4:35), Jawādī Āmulī asserts that verse 4:34 is about husbands and wives, not men and women in general.13 4:35 begins with the following words, ‘And if you fear separation (šiqāq) between the two of them…’; Jawādī Āmulī argues that it makes no sense to talk about separation between a man and a woman; this statement can only refer to a husband and wife. As 4:35 is clearly continuing the discourse of 4:34, it follows then that 4:34 must also be about husband and wives.

With regard to hitting a wife for being recalcitrant, he posits that this does not mean physically hurting her; rather, it refers to expressing dislike for her actions, just as is the case with Prophet Job in verse 44 of chapter 38 (Ṣād). As we saw earlier, al-Hibri makes the same point.

9. Exegesis of the Qur’an by the sunna
Shia exegetes who adopt the mega-method give considerable importance to the traditions of the Prophet and his Household, the Ahl al-Bayt, being of the belief that they are Infallible and the best interpreters of God’s word. They readily acknowledge, however, that many traditions that exist in the vast corpus of Shi‘i traditions cannot be relied upon, and they try to sift out the inauthentic ones by using principles of hadith authentication and biographical analysis of reporters.

With reference to 4:34, Shia exegetes are unanimous that even when a husband exercises his right to physically admonish his wife, the admonishment must not be extreme; i.e. it must not cause wounding, breakage of bones, or bruising. This opinion is largely based on traditions from the

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13 Jawādī Āmulī’s view here is significant, not least because it is contrary to the view of perhaps the most famous Shia exegete, his teacher Ṭabaṭabā’ī (d. 1981).
Shia Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, who is reported to have stated that the hitting must ‘not wound’\textsuperscript{14} and that it should be done with ‘a toothstick (siwāk).’\textsuperscript{15}

Scholars of feminist exegesis sometimes use traditions as well, particularly when they apply the historical contextualisation method; however, as Hidayatullah (2014, p.81) notes, they do so with ‘marked ambivalence’ and ‘methodological inconsistencies.’ She posits that sometimes feminist authors will use hadiths to support their views without scrutinising their authenticity; other times, they will reject hadiths that do not fit neatly into their theories on the grounds that they are inauthentic, even though the authors may have applied inconsistent criteria for testing the reliability of the reports; and on many other occasions, they will not refer to hadiths at all for their interpretations.

10. Juristic / Usuli approach
Jawādī Amulī examines the three stages of admonishing a recalcitrant wife mentioned in the verse by referring to Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). He explains that the three stages are the same as those mentioned in the laws pertaining to enjoining good and forbidding evil (al-amr bil-maʿrūf wa al-nahī ‘an al-munkar). The main difference is that in the laws of enjoining good and forbidding evil, permission from a fully qualified jurist (al-hākim al-sharī) is required before one is permitted to implement the third stage, whereas in a marriage relationship, no such permission is required for the husband. When a wife has sinned by being recalcitrant, it is better, he argues, that such matters are resolved within the privacy of the home rather than for a stranger to be asked to intervene; in other words, her husband is the most suitable person to enjoin her to do good and to forbid her from doing evil. Jawādī Amulī is quick to point out though that in such cases, it is a matter of the husband upholding the law of God with respect to his wife, not that men are in charge of women; hence, a husband can only resort to stage three in this situation, not in any other cases (2014, p.309).

Furthermore, Jawādī Amulī makes the distinction between ‘rights’ and ‘laws’ and asserts that ‘hitting’ in this context is a right of the husband, not a law; husbands are not being commanded to hit their wives, and it could well be that they find other, more effective ways (2014, p.328).

Combining a juristic / Usuli approach with a linguistic one, Jawādī Amulī maintains that there are two reasons why husbands are managers of wives: firstly, ‘because of the advantage God has granted some of them [baʿḍahum] over others [baʿḍ].’ God has favoured men; the first ‘some’ (baʿḍ) refers to men, and the second to women. Crucially, God did not say bimā faddalahum ‘alayhinna (‘because of the advantage God has granted them [male plural pronoun] over them [female plural pronoun]’), as it is not true of all men and of all women. The bāʾ (in bimā) is of the type that assigns a reason (taʾlīliyyah); i.e. as long as the reasoning holds true, the statement applies. Therefore, if a wife managed the home better than her husband, then the husband would not be regarded as the manager of his wife. The second reason is stated in the verse as follows: ‘and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth’. The same logic that applied to the first reason applies here as well; i.e.

\textsuperscript{14} Tafsīr al-Qummī, vol. 1, p.137.
\textsuperscript{15} Al-Burhān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān, vol. 2, pp.74-5.
if a wife has greater economic power than her husband, then again there would be no reason for the husband to be the manager in the home.

11. Linguistic approach
Jawādī Āmulī argues that, based on a particular linguistic quality that the word qawwām has, God attaches great importance to the role of husbands in relation to their wives. God does not simply describe husbands as qāʾim (someone who ‘stands for’, or ‘establishes’), a word that God uses in the Qur’an to explain what a person’s duty is with regard to a particular task. Rather, He uses the intensive form qawwām, which is used for very important and sensitive matters, such as maintaining justice, as mentioned in al-Nisā’ 4:135 and in al-Mā’idah 5:8. Jawādī Āmulī quotes a well-known Qur’anic lexicon in support of this view:

Qawwām is an intensive form (ṣīghah mubālighah)... it refers to someone who does his utmost in being independent and standing on his own feet in his actions without relying on anyone else; and he oversees the management of his wife’s affairs and meets her needs. The noble verse points to a distinction he has over her from this perspective, that is, from the perspective of him being heedful of her affairs and overseeing and managing them, in addition to him giving from his wealth and her maintenance being in his hands; this necessitates that the overseeing and management be in his hands. (Muṣṭafawi, 2008, vol. 9, p.383)

Feminist authors also closely examine the linguistic aspects of the text. For example, Wadud (1999, p.76), having referred to Lisān al-ʿArab and Lane’s Lexicon on the meaning of the word ḍarb, asserts that it is very different to ḍarrāba, which means to strike repeatedly or intensely. She concludes that ‘this verse should be taken as prohibiting unchecked violence against females. Thus, this is not permission, but a severe restriction of existing practices.’

12. Socio-historical approach
With regard to hitting a recalcitrant wife, Jawādī Āmulī says that hitting women in the Age of Ignorance was prevalent among Arabs and it was the first point of recourse for a husband; Islam moderated this with the revelation of this verse by stipulating that hitting must be the last resort. The approach here is similar to the historical contextualisation method used by feminist authors.

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16 ‘O you who have faith! Be maintainers [qawwām] of justice and witnesses for the sake of Allah...’
17 ‘O you who have faith! Be maintainers [qawwām], as witnesses for the sake of Allah, of justice...’
13. Conclusion

Traditional Shia Usuli scholars present a credible critique of contextualist theory. Additionally, they offer strong arguments in support of the textualist approach to Qur’anic exegesis. The methods and approaches used by feminist writers on the Qur’an are also used by traditional Shi’i authors, albeit in different degrees and with differing levels of sophistication; for example, feminist writers place more emphasis on the historical contextualisation method whereas the juristic / Usuli approach is far more developed in the works of traditional Shia authors. Exegesis of the Qur’an by the sunna plays a more prominent role and is used in a more consistent manner in Shia exegetical works. The wide-ranging scope of the mega-method to include all relevant methods and approaches, the flexibility afforded by Shi’i jurisprudence, and the vast corpus of traditions from the Ahl al-Bayt, enable Shia exegetes to interpret verses and to modify laws, when required, in a way that is more effective for meeting the needs of an ever-changing world while ensuring that they remain faithful to the divine texts and practices that form the basis of the religion.
References


