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*Sexual Violence
in Muslim
Communities*

Towards Awareness
and Accountability

Edited by Samah Choudhury and Juliane Hammer

Foreword by Kecia Ali

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The Case of Sexual Assault in Sūra 12: Yūsuf and Zulayḥā in Premodern Qur'anic Exegesis

Botaina Azouaghe

Abstract

This study explores the theme of sexual violence within the Islamic tradition, specifically through the lens of premodern Qur'anic exegesis concerning the narrative of Yūsuf and Zulayḥā in Sūra 12. While the Qur'ān does not explicitly depict sexual violence, the attempted seduction by Zulayḥā provides a narrative framework to examine gender dynamics, power structures, and the implications of sexual coercion. By analyzing the interpretations of key premodern Sunni exegetes such as Ṭabarī, Zamahṣarī, Rāzī, Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kaṭīr, this study reveals the nuanced approaches these scholars take in addressing Zulayḥā's actions, often downplaying or reframing them within the context of female seduction and the preservation of Yūsuf's prophetic integrity. The analysis underscores the discursive gap in classical exegesis regarding sexual assault, highlighting how patriarchal interpretations may have led to a misrepresentation of sexual violence by equating it with consensual acts of zinā (adultery). This study aims to bridge this gap by situating the narrative within contemporary discussions of sexual violence, providing a basis for a more nuanced understanding of how religious discourse can shape perceptions of gender and power within Muslim communities.

Introduction

Addressing the issue of sexual violence within Muslim communities can present significant challenges due to the complex interplay of deeply rooted cultural norms, stigmas, and religious taboos surrounding the discussion of sexuality. However, this multifaceted issue can be approached from a theological perspective that explores the foundational texts of the Islamic tradition, notably the Qur'ān and ḥadīṭ, since these texts serve as ethical compasses, shaping behavior and societal norms within Muslim societies. Muslim feminist theology seeks to address the historical and systemic oppression of women within religious contexts and to analyze how the interpretation of religious texts can shape understandings of gender roles, power dynamics, and responses to instances of sexual violence. When it comes to exploring how the Qur'ān depicts sexual violence, it is worth noting that: "The Qur'an does not narrate any explicit episode of sexual violence against women. It does, however, narrate two instances of attempted assault, including a sexual assault by a woman on a prophet of God."¹ One such narrative is in verses 23–29 of sūra 12, which tells the tale of how Zulayḥā, the wife of Yūsuf's master, attempts to seduce

¹ Ibrahim 2017, 80.

him. This seems to depict a straightforward yet also unique instance of when a woman makes sexual advances toward a man.

This analysis aims to shed light on how premodern Qur'anic exegesis discusses the narrative of attempted seduction in sūra 12 and the character of Zulayḥā with regard to the theme of sexual assault. By examining how premodern exegetes treat the character of Zulayḥā, the analysis seeks to uncover underlying assumptions and implications for contemporary discussions of gender-based violence. This exploration is crucial as it provides a basis for understanding how themes of sexual violence and its intersection with women are discussed within religious discourse, and how exegesis can influence the understanding of this issue. Before beginning the analysis, I will provide an overview of the tale's context and background.

Contextualizing the Story of Yūsuf and Zulayḥā in Sūra 12

The twelfth sūra of the Qur'ān, known as sūra Yūsuf, comprises 111 verses. Sūra Yūsuf is distinctive for its narrative continuity since it presents the life story of the prophet Yūsuf sequentially and coherently. It commences with verse 3, which promises the most beautiful of stories, thus imbuing the narrative with significance and profundity.

Yūsuf is introduced as one of the twelve sons of Ya'qūb. His journey is spurred by the jealousy of his brothers, who throw him into a well from where he is eventually saved and sold as a slave to Potiphar, a nobleman in Egypt, referred to in the Qur'ān as al-'Azīz. In verse 21, al-'Azīz proposes to his wife, who is referred to in the Qur'ān as Imra'at al-'Azīz but is commonly known as Zulayḥā in premodern interpretations, to take Yūsuf into their home, suggesting that he may become useful to them.

In the Qur'anic narrative, the theme of sexual violence is touched upon through the attempt of Zulayḥā to seduce Yūsuf. This episode is significant "as it speaks to a case in which a survivor comes forward alleging sexual assault."² It is crucial to note that the narrative of the attempted seduction contains no physical assault in the sense of rape. The text points to Yūsuf's desire for the woman, but he nonetheless resists her advances. He assumes a defensive posture and asserts his boundaries. Subsequently, she falsely accuses Yūsuf of assaulting her and threatens to have him imprisoned. Following this incident, Zulayḥā arranges a banquet for the women of the city, where she presents Yūsuf before her guests and aims to intimidate and pressure him into complying with her demands (verses 30–34). After Yūsuf's subsequent imprisonment, the sūra takes a thematic pause until verses 51 to 53, where the issue of who attempted to seduce whom is resolved. This section depicts the scenario, with the women of the city affirming Yūsuf's innocence before the king and with Zulayḥā expressing remorse for her actions: "Said the 'Aziz's wife: 'Now is the truth manifest: it was I who sought to seduce him from his self: He is indeed of those who are true'"³. While these verses provide a sense of closure regarding the resolution of the attempted seduction narrative, they are secondary to the primary focus of this analysis, which is concerned with verses 23–29.

The following section provides an overview of premodern interpretations of the narrative of Zulayḥā and Yūsuf and aims to illuminate the historical reception and

² Ibrahim 2017, 81.

³ Q 12:51; The translation of the Quranic verses in this chapter follows the translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (2000).

interpretation of the female character in this narrative. Emphasis is placed on whether and how premodern Sunni exegesis discusses the theme of sexual violence in conjunction with power structures and gender dynamics with regard to the portrayal of the female figure. This will serve as a starting point for a discussion of how the premodern Qurʾān interpretations might influence contemporary discussions of sexual violence in Muslim communities. I will focus primarily on the exegetical works of Abū Ġaʿfar aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH/923 CE), Abū l-Qāsim b. ʿUmar az-Zamaḥṣarī (d. 538 AH/1144 CE), Faḥraddīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606 AH/1209 CE), Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH/1272 CE) and ʿImādaddīn Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 774 AH/1373 CE).⁴

Interpreting Zulayḥā: Premodern Exegesis and the Question of Sexual Assault

Verse 23 of sūra 12 reads: “But she in whose house he was, sought to seduce him from his (true) self: she fastened the doors and said: ‘Now come, thou (dear one)!’ He said: ‘God forbid! Truly (thy husband) is my lord! He made my sojourn agreeable! Truly to no good come those who do wrong!’” The verse delineates the scene where Zulayḥā attempts to seduce Yūsuf. This constitutes a pivotal point in exegesis, with a broad consensus among the exegetes regarding the intensity of Zulayḥā’s desire for Yūsuf. Ṭabarī’s commentary, which attempts to explore the deeper motivations behind the woman’s actions, serves as a representative example. According to Ṭabarī, Zulayḥā was captivated by Yūsuf’s outstanding qualities, such as his beauty, moral integrity, and extraordinary purity. As described in verse 22 of sūra 12, these were bestowed upon him when he attained full manhood, judgment, and knowledge from God.⁵ By tying her infatuation to Yūsuf’s beauty, Ṭabarī foreshadows a detail that becomes only fully clarified in the subsequent (verses 30–34) scene of the narrative. He perceives this as indicating that the Qurʾān itself does not depict the woman’s actions toward Yūsuf as a classic case of sexual violence, but instead presents them in a more complex manner. One could argue that Zulayḥā’s action, as interpreted by Ṭabarī, has a more multifaceted motivation and is not rooted solely in sexual desire but also has a romantic or emotional aspect. Thus, Zulayḥā’s behavior is relativized and gains a more nuanced interpretation, one that also considers the emotional aspects of the relationship between the two. Ṭabarī’s interpretation might evoke some form of sympathy for Zulayḥā and portray her as a character driven by her inner conflicts and desires. However, it is essential to note that this does not necessarily mean that Ṭabarī views Zulayḥā’s advances as unproblematic. Rather, his interpretation indicates that he considers her action within a broader context and recognizes the complexity of her personality, potentially rationalizing or justifying her behavior.

Ibn Kaṭīr’s interpretation introduces a broader dynamic, depicting Zulayḥā’s love as arising from a deeper connection, perhaps even an obsessive attachment to Yūsuf. His characterization implies a more selfish and power-oriented motivation behind the woman’s action, focusing on her desire for control and dominance over Yūsuf. Ibn Kaṭīr’s commentary implies that Zulayḥā’ exploited her social and economic power to acquire Yūsuf when he was at the slave market with the ultimate intention of creating the

⁴ Throughout the chapter, the names of the exegetes are referenced as follows: Ṭabarī, Zamaḥṣarī, Rāzī, Qurṭubī und Ibn Kaṭīr.

⁵ Qurʾān 12:22 reads: “When Joseph attained full manhood, We gave him power and knowledge: thus do We reward those who do right”; Ṭabarī, 2001, vol. 13, 70, 123; Zamaḥṣarī 2009, 509; Rāzī 1981, vol. 12, 112; Qurṭubī 2006, vol. 11, 304.

opportunity to make sexual advances toward him.⁶ Although Ibn Kaṭīr does not explicitly categorize her actions as sexual coercion or exploitation, his commentary hints at these dynamics.

The commentaries of Zamaḥṣarī and Rāzī assert that Zulayḥā used deception or cunning in her attempt to seduce Yūsuf, suggesting a deliberate effort on her part to initiate a sexual relationship.⁷ Qurṭubī's interpretation of verse 23 adds another layer by proposing that Zulayḥā's advances toward Yūsuf were characterized by tenderness and sensitivity.⁸ These perspectives reflect misogynistic interpretations prevalent in premodern commentaries, which are tied to the concept of *kayd*. This term denotes a perceived inherent inability of women to control their sexual desires, framing women's actions as inherently deceptive and portraying men as passive victims of female allure.⁹

One might expect that the exegetes would address the evident power dynamics in the relationship between Zulayḥā and Yūsuf. However, premodern exegeses do not explicitly discuss this aspect. For example, Daniela Feichtinger explores this dimension in the context of the biblical narrative of the seduction story and argues that, as Potiphar's wife, Zulayḥā has a higher status within this patriarchal household than Yūsuf and demonstrates her power over him through her advances.¹⁰ Yūsuf becomes the object of her advances, which she demonstrates by summoning him to her. This act of summoning represents a reversal of traditional roles since Zulayḥā behaves in a manner typically associated with male authority. Thus, by assuming a dominant role and commanding Yūsuf like a mistress commands a slave, she subverts the usual norm.¹¹ It is worth noting that all five premodern exegetes discuss the precarious situation Yūsuf faces mainly in the context of the general obstacles in his life. They do not explicitly address the breach of trust that occurs when Zulayḥā attempts to seduce Yūsuf within the household of al-'Azīz, where Yūsuf's initial admission was intended to ensure his safety and security.

In verse 24, the Qur'ān indicates a mutual desire between Yūsuf and Zulayḥā by using the Arabic term *hammat* to describe both their desires for each other. This mutual desire is evident up until the verse notes that Yūsuf no longer desires Zulayḥā, signifying a shift in his internal state. The verse states: "And with passion did she desire him (arab. *hammat bihī*), and he would have desired her (arab. *hammat bihā*), but that he saw the evidence of his Lord: thus that We might turn away from him (all) evil and shameful deeds: For he was one of Our servants, sincere and purified." It is crucial to recognize that this explicit shift – where Yūsuf's desire for Zulayḥā ceases – marks a clear boundary in the narrative. At this point, Zulayḥā's continued and unilateral advances can be interpreted as sexual coercion or harassment, reflecting a modern understanding of sexual assault.

The exegetes' works, however, focus less on the issue of sexual coercion and more on differentiating between the desire of the two characters in order to protect and uphold Yūsuf's role as a prophet. For instance, Ṭabarī emphasizes that Zulayḥā's desire for Yūsuf is significantly stronger than his desire for her:

⁶ Ibn Kaṭīr 1997, vol. 4, 381.

⁷ Zamaḥṣarī 2009, 509; Rāzī 1981, vol. 12, 120.

⁸ Qurṭubī 2006, vol. 11, 324.

⁹ Malti-Douglas 1991, 32; Merguerian & Najmabadi 1997; Qurṭubī 2006, vol. 11, 324.

¹⁰ Feichtinger 2014, 41.

¹¹ Feichtinger 2014, 69-70; Greenough 2021, 42. 2

She overpowered him, i.e., the woman. Sometimes, she desired him sensually; at other times, she instilled fear in him. She invited him to indulge in the pleasures of manhood with her beauty, excellence, and wealth. And he is a young man in the prime of life. In him was found what is found in a man of sexual desire. She persisted until he gave in. When he felt her love, he began to fear her.¹²

The concept of “overpowering” in this interpretation initially suggests a more forceful approach in her advance. However, in the context of the descriptions of her beauty and wealth, Ṭabarī interprets the sexual advances as being instances of how a woman uses her allure to exert power over a man. Conversely, the commentaries of Rāzī, Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kaṭīr focus on preserving Yūsuf’s prophetic integrity by portraying his desire as controlled and limited. They maintain that at no point did Yūsuf feel any sexual desire for Zulayḥā; he only wished for her to leave him alone.¹³ This focus on maintaining Yūsuf’s prophetic purity leads the exegetes to underexplore the theme of boundary transgression, which is central to understanding the dynamics of power and consent in the narrative. Furthermore, this neglect is compounded by their interpretations, which increasingly extrapolate from the story to portray female cunning and sensual seduction as inherent dangers posed by women in general. Their commentaries tend to frame the narrative within the context of *zinā* (adultery), emphasizing Yūsuf’s immunity to any implications of extramarital sexuality and reinforcing the sanctity of his prophethood.

In verse 25, Yūsuf is depicted as fleeing from Zulayḥā’s pursuit while she chases after him, tearing his shirt from the back as she grasps it to impede his escape.¹⁴ When they reach the door, they encounter al-‘Azīz and a “witness,” who is interpreted by the exegetes as a family member or someone close to the household, assuming a quasi-judicial role.¹⁵ At that moment, Zulayḥā immediately accuses Yūsuf of attempting to seduce her. In verses 26 and 27, the “witness” states that, if the garment is torn from the front, then this indicates Yūsuf’s deceit and the woman’s integrity. Conversely, if it is torn from the back, then this indicates Yūsuf’s integrity and the woman’s deceit. In verses 28 and 29, the situation is resolved when al-‘Azīz observes that the garment is torn from the back, confirming Yūsuf’s innocence. Subsequently, he admonishes both Yūsuf and Zulayḥā, instructing them to separate and avoid further involvement with each other. While all five premodern exegetes recognize the woman’s deceit and her use of marital authority to substantiate her false accusation against Yūsuf, they do not thoroughly examine the complex dynamics between victim and perpetrator, nor do they critically address the ways in which perpetrators might exploit their positions of power to discredit victims and present themselves as credible. Instead, they frame Zulayḥā’s deceit within broader stereotypes of female cunning, thereby reinforcing gender biases and aligning with patriarchal attitudes that portray women as inherently manipulative. The core issue, the emotional harm depicted in the narrative – stemming from false accusations and the difficulty victims face in being believed – is once again primarily discussed in the context

¹² Ṭabarī 2001, vol. 13, 81.

¹³ Rāzī 1981, vol. 12, 120; Qurṭubī 2006, vol. 11, 311–313; Ibn Kaṭīr 1997, vol. 4, 381.

¹⁴ Q 12:25 “ So they both raced each other to the door, and she tore his shirt from the back. They both found their lord near the door. She said: “What is the (fitting) punishment for one who formed an evil design against thy wife, but prison or a grievous chastisement ?”; Ṭabarī 2001, vol. 13, 102; Qurṭubī 2006, vol. 11, 320; Ibn Kaṭīr 1997, vol. 4, 383.

¹⁵ Ṭabarī 2001, vol. 13, 105.

of restoring Yūsuf's prophetic integrity. In contrast, the broader emotional and social implications, such as the trauma experienced by victims of sexual assault in general and the challenges they face, receive only limited attention.

The Discursive Gap in Classical Exegesis Regarding Sexual Assault: Understanding the Findings

Premodern interpretations of the narrative of the attempted seduction in sūra 12 contain scattered elements that can be used to discuss the theme of sexual assault in a contemporary context. It is important to acknowledge that the explicit concepts of sexual assault or coercion as we understand them today did not exist in the premodern exegesis. While these modern terminologies are absent, the phenomenon itself was not unknown to premodern societies, even if it was understood and described differently. For instance, the exegetes incorporate elements into their interpretations that point to the phenomenon of sexual assault. They highlight that the advances were one-sided, that Yūsuf did not welcome Zulayḥā's advances, and that the woman harassed him in different ways, tried to persuade him, and used tools of seduction to entice him. Yet instead of framing these actions within the context of sexual assault, the exegetes tend to explain the woman's actions by bringing out the element of the woman's love for Yūsuf or by expanding the aspect of female seduction, thereby reconfiguring the narrative. The exegetes do not thoroughly explore the impact of the attempted seduction on Yūsuf's life, nor do they draw on Qur'anic sources, ethical principles, or considerations of interpersonal responsibility to provide a comprehensive analysis of the traumatic dimension of the narrative. They only address the potential sexual transgression perpetrated by Zulayḥā and Yūsuf within the legal concept of *zinā*, which, since *zinā* and sexual assault are different concepts, leads to a devastating misinterpretation:

The act of zina (premarital sex/sex outside of marriage) is the act of engaging in extramarital consensual intercourse, while sexual assault is where consent is inherently absent, and one individual is forced to have sex against their will. Therefore, to place sexual violence in the same category as consensual sexual acts shows ignorance of Islamic law, in addition to being an injustice to victims.¹⁶

By embedding sexual assault within theological reflections on the concept of *zinā*, the exegetes suppress the severe implications of sexual assault and misrepresent it as a form of consensual behavior. This approach fails to adequately address the crucial elements of consent and breach of trust, which become apparent when the narrative shifts from mutual desire to the violation of personal boundaries. Furthermore, their adherence to patriarchal thinking about sexual violence is reflected in their approach to the story of Yūsuf and Zulayḥā. In a patriarchal context, sexual assault against men is perceived as a contradiction of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁷ In a society characterized by hegemonic masculinity, men are expected to be strong, dominant, and invulnerable. Victims of sexual assault, especially male victims, may be seen as not conforming to expectations, which contradicts the traditional notion of masculinity. "In the patriarchal

¹⁶ HEART, 2020. *Facts About Sexual Violence Within Muslim Communities*. online: <https://hearttogrow.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Facts-about-sexual-violence-HEART-1.pdf> [06.02.2024].

¹⁷ Greenough 2021, 14.

symbolic system,” writes Joachim Kügler, “the sexual assault enacted by the master-wife causes a ‘de-masculinization’ of Joseph and puts him in the situation of threatened sexual integrity defined as ‘typically female.’”¹⁸ In light of these considerations, the extended comments that the exegetes make with regard to Yūsuf’s refusal to engage in the unwanted act appear primarily as an attempt to preserve or restore his masculinity. The emphasis on Yūsuf’s masculinity, including his potential sexual arousal in response to the woman’s seduction, suggests that the exegetes are reluctant to acknowledge the woman’s role in her sexual assault on Yūsuf. This is an example of cognitive dissonance, where the exegetes struggle to reconcile the reality of the depiction of a man as a victim of sexual assault with their beliefs and gender norms influenced by their socio-cultural and historical background.

One of the other myths surrounding male rape is that a man is ‘lucky’ to receive even unwanted sexual attention from women, and if he does not respond to this, then his heterosexuality and masculinity are questionable. Sexual experiences with girls and women, especially older women, serve to bolster a man’s status as a ‘real’ man.¹⁹

Their preconceived notions shape how they see Zulayḥā: namely, as a seductive and cunning figure who is a threat to male integrity. By emphasizing her supposed sexual allure, the exegetes reinforce gendered stereotypes and contribute to a culture that supports the objectification of women. In particular, the extension of the *kayd* concept to women in general can have serious implications for the discussion of sexual violence. These interpretations can contribute to a narrative framework in which men are portrayed as passive victims of female seduction. Such an interpretation poses a particular danger when women become victims of sexual violence or assault by men. Blaming the woman’s behavior in such a situation blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator. Consequently, such interpretations trivialize the severity of sexual assault and distort society’s perception of both victims and perpetrators. Additionally, focusing solely on the woman’s seductive actions risks perpetuating the harmful notion that women can only commit sexual assault through seduction or expressing sexual desire, disregarding other power dynamics at play. This oversight can lead to dangerous or problematic situations where a woman is not perceived as a perpetrator simply because of the prevailing belief that women only act as seductresses. It underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing power dynamics in all forms of sexual violence, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator.

Despite the various efforts of feminist exegesis to advance a nuanced view of gender representation in the Qur’anic narrative and to present a new reading of this narrative that emphasizes the profound complexity of the female figure, Zulayḥā’s behavior toward Yūsuf remains problematic. More discussion is needed to consider the implications of her behavior. This Qur’anic scenario involves a case where a person, despite clear signs of rejection, makes sexual advances toward another person and even resorts to coercion, threats, and intimidation. Celene Ibrahim shows that the Qur’anic narrative takes a particular perspective and argues that:

it is not sufficient to simply discuss sexual violence in terms of male assaults against females. As a former slave, as a youth, as a victim of familial

¹⁸ Kügler 2017.

¹⁹ Greenough 2021, 44.

violence, and a member of an oppressed social group, at this stage in his life, Joseph, when read through a feminist lens, can represent the intersections of several socially disadvantaged groups that would make him particularly vulnerable to sexual assault and subsequent mistreatment.²⁰

Ibrahim emphasizes the profound relevance of the story of Yūsuf and Zulayḥā to the issue of sexual assault, highlighting the importance of considering why this narrative is included in the Qur'ān. When viewed beyond gender-specific dynamics, the narrative offers a framework for addressing and reflecting on a socially relevant issue, with Yūsuf and Zulayḥā serving as symbolic figures in confronting the problem of sexual assault. Embedding this theme in a religious context, therefore, lends additional meaning to this narrative and enables people to reflect profoundly on themes of sexual violence and to consider the emotional and psychological effects on victims. In their interpretations of the seduction narrative, the premodern exegetes neglect to analyze the power that Zulayḥā has over Yūsuf, even though it is an essential part of the dynamic. "The story confirms that sexual abuse is about abuse of power," says Johanna Siebert, "be this physical or social power."²¹

The narrative serves as a powerful reminder of the pervasive nature of sexual assaults in private settings and the challenges that victims face when they have such experiences. Thus, the narrative highlights the inequalities in how sexual abuse is dealt with and the tendency to downplay or ignore the experiences of those who have less power.²²

Conclusion

Constrained by gender stereotypes prevalent during the period when classical exegesis was produced, the interpretations of surah Yūsuf often struggle to acknowledge the full gravity of sexual assault. The classical works tend to contextualize incidents in the narrative, such as sexual assault, within traditional frameworks, thereby overlooking the broader implications and injustices faced by victims.

Gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in religious interpretations and can affect perceptions and discussions surrounding sexual violence. By challenging these traditional norms and promoting gender-sensitive interpretations, we can foster more inclusive discussions on sexual violence within Muslim communities. Failure to do so perpetuates the taboo nature of the topic, hindering progress toward creating safer and more supportive environments where survivors feel empowered to speak out and seek justice.

Botaina Azouaghe, M.A., is a research associate and doctoral candidate at the Center for Islamic Theology at the University of Münster. With a specialization in Intercultural Religious Education, she explores the intersection of Islam, gender, and education. She holds a Master's degree in Islamic Theology from the same institution on the portrayal

²⁰ Ibrahim 2017, 81.

²¹ Siebert 2019.

²² Siebert 2019, 105; Ibrahim 2017, 82.

of women in the Qur'an. Botaina's research interests encompass gender-equitable theology and approach to the Qur'an, Qur'anic classical exegesis, Islamic feminism, feminist Qur'anic exegesis, and interreligious and intercultural dialogue. As a member of the Center for Islamic Theology's Intercultural Religious Education department, she actively contributes to the development of inclusive and diverse perspectives within Islamic education. Botaina is dedicated to advancing a comprehensive understanding of women's roles and representations in the Qur'an, promoting gender equality and social justice within Islamic discourse. Her work aims to facilitate dialogue, critical engagement, and positive transformations within religious communities.

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