



PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF MISCONCEPTION REGARDING GENDERED DISPARITY IN ISLAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *SURAH NISA VERSE 34*

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ABSTRACT:

This study is aimed at analyzing misconceptions regarding gendered disparity in Islam with special reference to Surah Nisa, Verse 34, by applying Yule's theory of pragmatics. This approach has been used as a qualitative research in order to interpret, analyze and obtain data on the verse under study. Islam is a complete code of life. It ensures the smooth functioning of the society. In order to do that, it provides complete guidelines for the whole family and particularly, for the couple: husband and wife. The concept of equality in Islam is based on equity and justice, not on sameness. However, in patriarchal settings, the differences between responsibilities and duties of husband and wife are misinterpreted to ensure the submissiveness of woman to man. This article highlights a particular verse from *Surah Nisa* that is quoted by many far-right men as a license to beat their wives and treat them whatever way they like. The aim of this article is to present facts against the misconceptions regarding gender-based superiority. Furthermore, it explores that no human being is privileged, owing to his/her sex or gender. It is to inform the readers that in many cases, Islam raises the status of women by providing them complete protection rather than relegating them. By shedding off gender-based misconception about the teachings of Islam, it reveals a positive image of Islam through pragmatic analysis of the verse under investigation.

Key Words: Qawwam, Beating Women, Women Rights, Gender Roles in Islam, Marriage

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1. Introduction

In Islam, the subject of marriage is given detailed treatment as it is highly revered. According to the Holy Quran, it is a sacred covenant¹ for which the simile of garment² is also used. The unique husband/wife relationship is the basis of a family – the most important unit of any society. Since the couple of Adam and Eve, this relation is considered a divine establishment. In order to build a healthy society, it is imperative to build a healthy relationship which Islam has pointed out. They are considered as a set of principles and are based on love, care and compassion to ensure the relationship. The principles are binding on both the husband and wife. These principles are formulated in a legal binding, *Nikah*³, between a man and a woman. For the smooth functioning of society, Islam distributes rights and responsibilities, based on equity and justice. The Islamic concept of gender equality is based on equity as it accords preferences and rights according to their (man or woman) sexual and emotional settings i.e. Islam takes in the psychological state and emotional needs of each gender to ensure that there is no mental deprivation. This view differs from the modern concept of equality which sees both men and women as identical and same, negating their emotional and empirical differences.

Certain modern human rights activists base their view on the Quranic verse 4:34, claiming that Islam creates discrimination against women and gives much power to man. Surely, this verse depicts male superiority, but the term ‘superiority’ has a different connotation here (that is discussed in data analysis). Moreover, this verse does not impose male domination. The rights and responsibilities that Islam grants are similar to the separation of power in governmental bodies to ensure the smooth functioning in hierarchical order. It appeals to common sense that two heads in the same family can lead to conflicts (imagine two Presidents governing the same country). As for equality, both men and women are equally responsible for their duties and deeds: “Every soul will be held in pledge for its deeds”⁴. Note that the word *soul* denotes gender neutrality and is sexless. In terms of superiority, the Quran specifies only one criterion that is “righteousness”. The present research is much important as it sheds off misconception of gender disparity in Islam as per the Surah under present analysis. It presents positive image of Islam before the skeptics.

2. Literature Review

The patriarchal interpretation of the Quran is not new in the Muslim World, especially in South Asia. There is a belief that men are in charge of finance and outdoor labour, their women should be absolutely obedient to them. This belief stems from the same verse under consideration as it goes on to say, ‘Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient’⁶. The word ‘obedience’ is mistranslated in most of the patriarchal setups as being obedient to husbands. But this refers to the obedience to God. Since men are in charge and maintainers of their family, they could demand unquestionable obedience from their women. But here, Allah SWT states that the unquestioned obedience is due only to Allah. This does not mean that a woman should not pay any heed to husband’s instructions. It, simply, means that if there is a conflict between husband’s demand and commands of Allah, the wife is to follow the commands of Allah Almighty.

In an article, Abbas (2013) interprets the same idea/concept of obedience. In Pakistan, it is openly propagated that a woman is subordinate to her husband and man can treat her in any manner he likes. It is a prevalent thought that man has all the rights in a marriage contract and he





has privilege over his wife. For this reason, it is easy to assume why the human rights representatives consider the legislature of Muslim states as a threat to women's safety. However, the true teachings of Islam are contrary to this.

Omar (2014) also in her article states that Islam not only protects women from worldly troubles, but also it commands men to fulfill their worldly necessities and act as their maintainers. In this discussion, the verse is considered very important to draw out arguments from verse 34 of *Surah Nisa* – a chapter that deals with duties, rights and responsibilities, and gender roles. The problem arises when the reader or the interpreter acts as a textualist, rather than a contextualist. When we place this Surah, and particularly this verse in its wide contextual place, it is easier to understand the Islamic concept of equality (based on equity) and it helps pointing out several misconceptions and mistranslations. People believe that men are superior to women and consider them inferior. It is only a major misinterpretation that men have been given a higher status in family as well as in society.

Sodhar (2015) mentions in his article that Allah (SWT) has made men and women as equal human beings, but the difference lies only in the assigned duties. There lies no competition between men and women; rather both perform their assigned duties. Islam is a religion that covers the complete code of life. It does not only deal with the mainstream people i.e. the people at the center, but also the people at the periphery of the circle. *Surah Nisa* has a number of legal instructions. It talks about such subjects such as polygamy, inheritance laws, punishment of adultery, and many unusual cases. It contains cases that are rare and hard to witness in normal circumstances. For example, there is a verse that forbids a man from marrying his own mother or sister⁶. At another place, there is a case of four orphan girls: 'if you are raising four girls as orphans, and they have gained a certain age, you are allowed to marry them if they are not *mahram*'⁷. These cases and most of the other cases in *Surah Nisa* have one thing in common is that they are unusual. So, it must be understood that verse 34 also deals with an exceptional case, which is beating wives.

Alim (2017) analyzes in his article that the main instruction of this Surah is the building of a strong Islamic community. Guidelines are provided to the Muslims for uniting their ranks to be firm and strong. Instructions are given to stabilize the family structure, which is the nucleus of a strong community. Muslims are urged to prepare themselves for defense and to be the torchbearers of Islam. The importance of having a high moral character in building a strong community is emphasized. Guidelines for the smooth running of family life are provided and methods to settle family disputes are taught. Rules for marriage are prescribed and rights of wife and husband are assigned fairly and equitably. The status of women in the society is determined and the declaration about the rights of orphans is made. Laws and regulations are laid down for the distribution of inheritance. Instructions are given to reform the economic system. The foundation of criminal laws is laid down. Drinking is prohibited. Instructions are given for cleanliness and purification. The Muslims are taught what kind of relations they should have with their Rabb and with their fellow human beings. Instructions are given for the maintenance of discipline in the Muslim community. The moral and religious condition of the People of the Book is reviewed to teach lessons to the Muslims, and a warning is given to refrain from following in their footsteps. The distinctive features of hypocrisy and true faith are clearly marked for easy identification between the two. The setback in the Battle of Uhud had enabled the mushrik Arab clans, the neighboring Jews, and the hypocrites in Al-Madinah to threaten the Muslims from all sides. At this critical stage, Allah's grace filled the Muslims with courage and gave them the necessary instructions during that period. In order to counteract the fearful rumors that were being spread by the hypocrites, they were asked





to make a thorough inquiry about their accuracy and then inform the appropriate leadership. Muslims were experiencing difficulties in offering their Salah during the expeditions when water was not available to perform ablution. In such circumstances Allah granted a permission to make Tayammum (purification with clean earth), and to shorten the Salah or to offer the "Salat-ul-Khauf," when they were faced with danger. Instructions were also given to those Muslims who were living in the enemy camps that they should migrate to Al-Madinah, the Islamic State. Clear instructions are also given regarding the hypocrites and nonbelligerent clans. On one hand, the superiority of Islamic morality and culture is established over that of the Jews, Christians and mushrikin; on the other hand, their incorrect religious concepts, immorality, and evil actions are criticized to prepare the ground for inviting them to the Right W

The aforementioned researchers have contributed a lot in presenting positive image of the Surah under present investigation. Their scholarly findings are much important as their researches have presented soft image of the Quranic verses regarding gender roles in society. However, they have not made pragmatic analysis of the Surah's verse under present research regarding misconception regarding gender disparity by striking women in Islam. Hence, the present article fulfills the research gap by analyzing it through George Yule's theory of pragmatics and misconception about women's role in society.

3. Research Statement

Even a bird's eye of Surah Nissa is enough to indicate a strong impression that this Surah can be analyzed through the eye of Yule's theory of pragmatics regarding gender role in Islam.

4. Research Questions

- Q. How does pragmatic analysis of Surah Nissa's Verse-34 ward off misconception about gender-based disparity in Islam?
- Q. How does pragmatic study of the present Verse present positive image of Islam on gender based issues?

5. Research Methodology

In order to obtain qualitative data regarding the verse under study, technique of Pragmatic analysis has been used. Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as 'the study of 'invisible' meaning or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actually said or written" (p.38). To collect data, the researcher has gone through many Hadiths, Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad SAW and different interpretations of the verse under consideration by different scholars. This article is based mostly on interpretation of the selected verse.

The purpose of this research is to clear some misconceptions regarding gender roles and the case of striking women in Islam. It is intended that this research helps individuals to understand selected verse of the Holy Quran (4:34) in its contextual form.

6. Data Analysis:





الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ
أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَأَلْصَقَتْ قَوْنِنُهَا حَفِظَتْ لِلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ وَاللَّي تَخَافُونَ
نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَأَهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَأَضْرِبُوهُنَّ فَإِنْ أَطَعَكُمْ
فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا كَبِيرًا

‘Men are in charge [caretakers] of women by [right of] what Allah has given one [some preference] over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand.’⁸

Let us take the words: ‘Men...women...’ The word *Qawwam* means “caretaker”. It is the same word that shares root with the name of Allah ‘Qayoom,’ (Allah is the caretaker of everything.) One cannot imagine striking and hitting as part of Allah’s care. Allah is regarded as *Rehman and Raheem*. The word ‘care’ or ‘caretaker’ lies far away from the thought and connotation of striking/hitting. So ‘to strike’ is already negated as the verse begins.

‘The verse ‘...by..... Wealth’ states that Allah has given one (preference) over the other’ and not ‘has given men preference of women’. This is important as Allah could have said that men are preferred to women if that were the case. This means that women have certain things in which they have preference. So Allah has given them certain benefits, and men have their certain benefits (according to their preferences). This delineates that no gender is better/superior/privileged only because of his/her sex or biology. This segment of the verse is also concordant with another verse that states that the only criterion of superiority is righteousness⁹.

In the case under consideration, men have been given the responsibility of maintaining women. ‘...So..... guard’ is also interpreted falsely to support patriarchy. Basically, ‘to Allah’ is added in the above verse to clear a misconception. Everywhere in the Quran, the word ‘Qonoot’ is used for Allah. What to guard is open to many interpretations. However, the most important and agreed upon are dignity, chastity, and faith.

The traits of righteous and good women are mentioned in this segment. Firstly, they are devoutly obedient. It is important to note that this obedience is due only to Allah. In many places, this segment is interpreted as ‘obedient to husband’. But the word ‘Qonoot’ is used for Allah everywhere else in the Quran. There are more chances that this word is being used here for Allah as well rather than being used for husband. This segment explains that because a man is a woman’s caretaker, she should listen to him in most deeds. However, if there is a conflict between the husband’s demand and Allah’s command, the wife should definitely conform to Allah’s commands because absolute and devout obedience is due only to Allah. This negates the thoughts of many women who do certain bad things on the order of their husbands, saying that they are only doing this because their husband has told them so. Also, good women guard their privates, their chastity and the chastity of their marriage. It encompasses intangible and emotional things such as the secrets of husband etc.





These lines are also misjudged as: ‘...But....strike them.’ Arrogance is also translated as uprising. The uprising or arrogance here refers to cheating on the husband. The question about *Nushoozis* about its meaning. It is to inquire about the actual usage of this word. Note that this arrogance/uprising is also used later in this chapter when a man is abusive to his wife i.e. hurting her, hitting her, or going against her in some aggressive way. It is called *Nushooz*¹¹. So *Nushooz* is a relative term whose criteria vary from person to person. In this verse, there is a contrast. The last segment deals with the traits of righteous women. In contrast, this uprising is the opposite behavior of those righteous women. Good women are subservient to Allah. So the women who commit *Nushooz* are those who defy Allah. Good women are loyal to their husbands. So *Nushooz* is cheating on their husbands.

Another point is an element of fear. Note that the wife has not done anything, yet the husband is only developing a fear at the moment. When the fear continues to grow, Allah says ‘advise them’. That means inquire with them, discuss with them, and command them to be righteous. If the uprising persists and your fear is growing persistently (you have not witnessed anything yet), Allah commands man to leave the bed. Then, in the worst case, the husband has actually caught her wife in the act. Now, he knows for certain that her wife is not loyal to him. Take in consideration the human circumstances here. Normally, a person would lose his mind. In such an unusual and exceptional case, Allah has granted a license to man to hit his woman (wife). So, this verse and this segment in particular is not permissible in tone, but quite the opposite. It is restricted. Striking a woman is restricted only in a case of (repeated) infidelity. So, this permission is not a norm. To use it as a norm can be regarded as a sin.

If we look at the words as: ‘...But... Grand. Obey here means that the wife comes back to you i.e. she refrains herself from more infidelity. Nothing should be kept against them. The husband is not to hurt her by this incident, not even mentally, or emotionally. In any case, one must not refrain from Allah’s commandments and one must follow the pattern established by Allah as He is ultimately high.

This is the way of reconciliation. Not every case of such uprising can be dealt with separation. Often, there are emotions involved, there are kids and families involved, and there is also the question of dignity and respect for the house. So, if the wife is ashamed of and asks for forgiveness, and the husband wants to let it go and move on, Allah says, ‘seek no means against them’. Start over and do not bring that up again. The end of the verse is a sort of repeated reminder that Allah is the Greatest. It is like putting a man in his place. A man should follow these patterns and commandments ordained down by Allah, and should not take matters into his own hands for his own sake.

7. Conclusion

The present research article substantiates that Surah Nisa’s verse 34 has been misinterpreted at different times. This research falls in line with Yule’s theory of pragmatics which advocates stress on contextual meanings and clears all misconception about gender inequity by Islam and presents case of striking women in Islam. By digging deep into the intended meanings of the said verse, it clarifies that instead of corporeal punishment, this verse is about protecting the fidelity and loyalty inside a matrimonial relationship. Again, note the use of word ‘fear’. If we are to consider *Nushoozas* something different from infidelity, let’s say not obeying husband in household chores. The word ‘fear’ does not add up as the husband would not be scared/afraid in such a scenario (you cannot be afraid that your wife would leave the door open). In the end, some Hadiths are noted that clearly condemn striking: “Never beat God’s handmaidens.” (Narrated by





Abu Dawud, Nasa'i, IbnMajah, Ahmad bin Hanbal, Ibn Hibban and Hakim.) On the authority of 'Abdallah bin Zam'a, the Prophet (PBUH) asked, "Could any of you beat your wife as he would a slave, and then lie with her in the evening?" (Narrated by Bukhari (vol. 6, p. 153), Muslim and other authorities. On the authority of Iyasibn Abdullah ibn Abi Dhi'b, it was reported to the Prophet (PBUH) that some of his Companions beat their wives, whereupon he said, "Certainly those are not the best among you." (Classified as Sahih. Narrated by Ahmad, Abu Dawud, Al-Nasai, Ibn Hibban and al-Hakim. See Mausū'at al-Sunnah, "Abu Dawud," Vol. 8, no. 2146. (Tunis: D (Omar, 2014) Dar al-Sahnun and Dar al-Dawah, 1992), 608.) On the authority of Aisha (RA), "The Prophet did not hit any of his wives and servants. It is a fact that he never even strikes anything with his hand but if he were to struggle in the cause of God..." (Fath al-Bari Vol. 9, p. 249.

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