



## Reinterpreting *Nushūz* beyond Patriarchal Exegesis: An Ethical-Humanistic Analysis of Laleh Bakhtiar's Interpretation of Qur'an 4:34

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**ABSTRACT**

Interpretations of Qur'anic discourse on marital relations, particularly QS al-Nisā' [4]:34, have largely been framed within legalistic paradigms that normalize hierarchical authority and, in some readings, the permissibility of domestic violence. While feminist exegetes have critically engaged these interpretations, much of the existing scholarship remains descriptive and has not sufficiently articulated alternative conceptual models for resolving *nushūz*. This article re-examines the concept of *nushūz* through Laleh Bakhtiar's reinterpretation of the term *daraba* in *The Sublime Qur'an*, positioning her reading not merely as a linguistic deviation from classical consensus but as an ethical-relational framework for addressing marital conflict. Employing qualitative library research and gender-oriented hermeneutical analysis, this study places Bakhtiar's interpretation in critical dialogue with classical and modern *tafsir* traditions to examine its methodological foundations and ethical implications. The analysis demonstrates that Bakhtiar's approach represents a paradigmatic shift from disciplinary and legalistic models toward a non-violent, ethically grounded understanding rooted in Qur'anic principles of justice, compassion, and human dignity. Although often criticized for prioritizing ethical considerations over established exegetical authority, this study argues that such prioritization constitutes a productive intervention that reopens the discourse on *nushūz* to normative ethical critique. By framing Bakhtiar's interpretation as an ethical intervention rather than a merely feminist reinterpretation, this article contributes to the development of a more relational, context-sensitive, and socially responsive paradigm in contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** Laleh Bakhtiar; *Nushūz*; QS al-Nisā' [4]:34; Feminist *Tafsir*; Ethical Hermeneutics

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## INTRODUCTION

Issues surrounding gender relations within Muslim families continue to generate sustained debate, both at the level of social practice and within academic discourse. One of the most contentious points in this debate concerns the concept of *nushūz* as articulated in QS al-Nisā' [4]:34, particularly the phrase *wa-dribūhunna*, which is frequently rendered in literal translations as “beat them” (Chaudhry, n.d.; Dunn, 2016). Such literalist readings not only symbolically legitimize unequal power relations between husbands and wives (Darzi et al., 2021, p. 8), but are also often invoked as normative justifications for domestic violence in contemporary Muslim societies (Ghafournia, 2017; Isgandarova, 2017; Rabaan et al., 2018). What is at stake here is not merely a question of translation accuracy, but the broader ethical authority of Qur'anic interpretation in shaping lived marital norms. Within the broader social context, this issue can no longer be regarded as merely theological; rather, it has evolved into an ethical, legal, and humanitarian concern that necessitates a critical re-engagement with religious texts (Birkel, 2014; Mohases, 2021a; Rabaan et al., 2018).

Academically, QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 has been one of the most frequently examined verses in the literature on gender-related Qur'anic interpretation (Haleem, 2021). Classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, and Ibn Kathīr generally situate this verse within a framework of male leadership (*qiwāmah*), which entails disciplinary authority over wives deemed to be engaging in *nushūz*, including the permissibility of physical punishment (Bakhshizadeh, 2018; Hussain, 2021). In contrast, modern exegetes, including Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Quraish Shihab, have adopted more contextual readings by restricting the meaning of “beating” to symbolic or educational measures rather than physical violence (Bakhshizadeh, 2018; Zulkarnaini et al., 2023). However, despite their reformist intent, these contextual approaches often remain conceptually tethered to the disciplinary logic inherited from classical exegesis, thereby leaving unresolved ethical ambiguities, especially when confronted with the empirical persistence of gender-based violence (Birkel, 2014; Isgandarova, 2017). Criticism has also been directed at interpretations of *qiwāmah* that emphasize hierarchical authority while marginalizing its ethical dimensions, such as reciprocal responsibility, care, and relational justice within marriage (Hussain, 2021).

Over the past two decades, the discourse of Islamic feminist exegesis has developed as a critical response to patriarchal biases embedded within the Qur'anic interpretive tradition (Ali, 2018; Hesová, 2019; Wadud, 2021). Scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Laleh Bakhtiar have advanced hermeneutical approaches that foreground gender justice, ethical relationality, and the principle of non-violence as foundational values in reading the Qur'an (Riyani, 2017b). Among these figures, Laleh Bakhtiar occupies a distinctive position due to her explicit re-interpretation of the term *daraba* in QS al-Nisā' [4]:34, rendering it not as “to beat” but as “to go away” or “to separate” (Abdul-Raof, 2013; Cervantes-Altamirano, 2011; Lamrabet, 2016). This move represents not only a semantic departure from dominant translations, but also a direct challenge to the disciplinary paradigm that has historically framed marital conflict

resolution in Islamic jurisprudence. Consequently, Bakhtiar's interpretation has provoked intense debate regarding the limits and legitimacy of feminist hermeneutics in engaging sacred texts (Barlas, 2016).

Although feminist interpretations of QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 have been widely discussed, existing scholarship can be broadly categorized into two dominant strands. First, a substantial body of studies focuses on descriptive mapping of feminist exegetes' perspectives, examining how figures such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Laleh Bakhtiar critique patriarchal readings of the verse and reinterpret key concepts related to gender and authority (Cervantes-Altamirano, 2011, p. 9). Second, another strand adopts a normative-apologetic orientation, aiming primarily to defend the Qur'an against accusations of misogyny by emphasizing its ethical ideals, without systematically interrogating how specific reinterpretations transform the conceptual framework of marital relations.

What remains insufficiently explored, however, is how feminist reinterpretations, particularly Laleh Bakhtiar's re-reading of *daraba*, operate as theoretical interventions that actively reconfigure the ethical architecture of marital conflict resolution, rather than merely offering alternative semantic or ideological readings. While several studies acknowledge Bakhtiar's translation of *daraba* as "to go away" or "to separate," they tend to treat it as an isolated linguistic choice or as part of a broader feminist critique, without examining its implications as a coherent ethical-relational model for addressing *nushūz* within Muslim family life (Flotow, 2017; Wardatun & Smith, 2020). In other words, the missing link in the literature lies in the absence of an analytical framework that positions Bakhtiar's interpretation as a problem-solving paradigm that shifts the discourse from disciplinary legality to ethical relationality and non-violent conflict resolution. In order to bridge this gap, this study places Bakhtiar's reinterpretation of *daraba* not only within the discourse of feminist exegesis, but also as a substantial ethical intervention that challenges the normalization of violence and offers an alternative conceptual model based on justice, compassion, and gender equality.

Moreover, relatively few studies have critically examined how Bakhtiar's reinterpretation of *daraba* contributes to a paradigm shift from a legal-formal approach toward an ethical-relational framework in resolving conflicts within Muslim families (Sidik & Imaduddin, 2022; Wardatun & Smith, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2020). This gap is particularly significant given feminist exegetical arguments that conceptualize *nushūz* as a reciprocal phenomenon involving both spouses, thereby demanding a relational rather than punitive model of conflict resolution.

Building on this scholarly gap, this article re-examines the concept of *nushūz* through Laleh Bakhtiar's feminist exegetical approach, emphasizing an ethical framework grounded in non-violence and relational justice. Feminism is not treated as an external ideology imposed upon the Qur'anic text, but as a hermeneutical tool for uncovering the Qur'an's internal ethical values, particularly *rahmah*, justice, and respect for human dignity (Hesová, 2019; Wadud, 2021). In this sense, feminist hermeneutics is

mobilized as a critical mode of interpretation that interrogates inherited exegetical assumptions rather than opposing the Islamic tradition itself.

Based on this background, this study addresses the central question of how the concept of *nushūz* in QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 is reinterpreted within Laleh Bakhtiar's hermeneutical framework, and to what extent this interpretation offers an ethical response to domestic conflict in contemporary Muslim societies. This inquiry is significant, as interpretations of *nushūz* extend beyond exegetical discourse and directly shape social practices, Islamic family law, and efforts to prevent gender-based violence.

This study aims to analyze the concept of *nushūz* in QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 through the feminist exegetical perspective of Laleh Bakhtiar, to reassess the meaning of *daraba* as an ethical, non-violent approach to marital conflict resolution, and to highlight the contribution of feminist tafsir in advancing a gender-just and socially relevant paradigm of Qur'anic interpretation. Employing a critical library-based methodology with thematic tafsir and gender-oriented hermeneutical analysis, this research seeks to offer both theoretical contributions to contemporary Qur'anic studies and practical insights for strengthening gender justice within Muslim family life.

The novelty of this article lies in positioning Laleh Bakhtiar's interpretation not merely as an alternative linguistic reading of the term *daraba*, but as an ethical-relational model for resolving *nushūz* that challenges the legitimization of violence within traditional exegetical frameworks. Accordingly, this study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic exegesis by fostering critical dialogue between the sacred text, Islamic ethics, and gender justice.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in critical library research, with a particular emphasis on textual analysis and gender hermeneutics (Hasan et al., 2022; Putri & Poerwandari, 2023). This methodological framework is adopted to critically explore and reinterpret the concept of *nushūz* in QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 through the feminist exegetical perspective developed by Laleh Bakhtiar. Gender hermeneutics is used as an analytical lens to examine patriarchal assumptions embedded in dominant Qur'anic interpretations, while also identifying ethical principles of justice and non-violence inherent in the Qur'anic discourse (Isqndarova, 2023; Zulaiha, 2017).

The research data consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary data comprise the Qur'anic text of QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 and Laleh Bakhtiar's interpretation of the verse as presented in *The Sublime Qur'an* (Bakhtiar, 2011). Secondary data include classical and contemporary Qur'anic exegetical works, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly books relevant to the themes of *nushūz*, *daraba*, gender relations, and Islamic feminist hermeneutics (Bakhtiar, 2011). Secondary data include classical and contemporary Qur'anic exegetical works, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly books relevant to the themes of *nushūz*, *daraba*, gender relations, and Islamic feminist hermeneutics.

To ensure methodological rigor, the selection of secondary literature followed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) scholarly works that directly discuss QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 or the concept of *nushūz*; (2) studies addressing the semantic range of the root *q-r-b* within Qur'anic or classical Arabic usage; (3) publications that engage with gender, feminist, or ethical approaches to Qur'anic interpretation; and (4) sources published in reputable academic outlets, including indexed journals and recognized academic publishers. Conversely, literature was excluded if it lacked clear methodological grounding, did not engage substantively with the verse under study, or merely repeated normative positions without critical analysis. Data were collected through systematic documentation of relevant sources accessed via major academic databases.

Data analysis was conducted through several stages. First, a textual-linguistic analysis of QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 was undertaken to explore the range of possible meanings of the phrase *wa-dribūhunna*, based on Arabic grammatical structures and a comprehensive Qur'anic contextual framework (Mohases, 2021). Second, a comparative thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in both classical and modern interpretations of the *nushūz* verse, including the arguments advanced to justify or reject the permissibility of physical discipline (Muqtada et al., 2024). Third, the core of the analysis focused on a gender-oriented hermeneutical examination of Laleh Bakhtiar's interpretation, particularly her methodological approach in reinterpreting the term *qaraba* as "to go away," as well as the theological, ethical, and social implications of this reading for spousal relations and the resolution of domestic conflict (EL-Naggar, 2018, p. 381-382). This analysis also considers how Bakhtiar's interpretation engages with principles of gender justice and non-violence as articulated within Islamic feminist discourse (Isgandarova, 2017; Zulaiha, 2017).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Concept of Nushūz in the View of Mufasir

Before reviewing how exegetes interpret the verse about *nushūz*, we will first examine the terminology related to the meaning of the word. Etymologically, the term *nushuz* is an Arabic word, derived from the word "*nasyaza-yansyuzu-nusyuzan*," making *nushuz* the mashdar of the first word. The word *nushūz* means to sit and then stand up, to stand up from, to stand out, to oppose, or to be disobedient (Munawir, 1997, p. 1517).

In terms of terminology, Imam ar-Razi explains that *nushūz* is the emergence of mutual indifference and hatred between husband and wife, resulting in separation and discord (Ar-Rāzi, 1981, p. 66). Meanwhile, Sheikh Kamil Muhammad Uwaidah adds that *nushūz* is an action taken by one of the parties between husband and wife by abandoning something that has become their respective obligations (Uwaidah, 2013, p. 441). Based on the two views above, understand that *nushūz* is defined as deviant behavior in the form of abandoning the obligations that should be fulfilled by a person towards their spouse on the basis of hatred, arrogance, or selfishness on the part of one

of the parties. g by abandoning the obligations that should be fulfilled by a person towards their spouse on the basis of hatred and arrogance or selfishness on the part of one party.

In the context of marital relations within the bond of marriage, the term *nushūz* is mentioned in the Qur'an in the following two verses:

الرَّجَالُ قَوَامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَلَ اللَّهُ بَعْصَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَغْفَوْا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ ۝ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ حَافِظَاتٌ  
لِلْعَيْبِ بِمَا حَفَظَ اللَّهُ ۝ وَاللَّاتِي تَحَافُونَ شُوَّرٌ هُنَّ فَعُظُوْهُنَّ وَاهْجُرُوْهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاضْرِبُوْهُنَّ ۝ فَإِنْ أَطْعَنُكُمْ فَلَا  
تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا ۝ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْهِ كَبِيرًا (٣٤) وَإِنْ جَهْنُمْ شَقَاقٌ بَيْنَهُمَا فَابْعُثُوا حَكَمًا مِنْ أَهْلِهِ وَحَكَمًا مِنْ أَهْلَهُمَا إِنْ  
يُرِيدَا إِصْلَاحًا يُوَفِّقَ اللَّهُ بَيْنَهُمَا ۝ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْهِمَا حَبِيرًا (٣٥)

These two verses broadly discuss the subject of a wife's disobedience. The discussion of a husband's disobedience is found in QS. [4]: 128 as follows:

وَإِنْ أَمْرَأٌ حَافَتْ مِنْ بَعْلِهَا شُوَّرًا أَوْ إِعْرَاضًا فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا أَنْ يُصْلِحَا بَيْنَهُمَا صُلْحًا ۝ وَالصُّلْحُ خَيْرٌ ۝  
وَأَحْسِرَتِ الْأَنْفُسُ النُّشُّورَ ۝ وَإِنْ تُحْسِنُوْا وَتَنْقُوا ۝ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ حَبِيرًا (١٢٨)

Based on the terminology and context of the above verses, *nushūz* is understood as a relational phenomenon that can be carried out by both parties in marriage, namely the wife (QS. an-Nisā' [4]: 34) and the husband (QS. an-Nisā' [4]: 128). Classical exegetes explain that *nushūz* by the wife refers to an attitude of defiance towards a legitimate domestic relationship, which manifests itself in arrogance, opposition to the rights and will of the husband, and an attitude of turning away based on conflict and hatred. Al-Tabarī emphasizes the dimension of a wife's rejection of her husband's relational authority (Al-Tabarī, 2000, p. 697), while Ibn Kathīr simplifies it as a form of sin and conflict resulting from arrogance (Katsir, 1999, p. 294). Meanwhile, contemporary exegetes, such as Quraish Shihab, interpret it as neglect of the husband's rights within the framework of marriage (Shihab, 2002).

Conversely, *nushūz* by the husband is understood as a relational deviation reflected in attitudes of belittling, harassing, and turning away from the wife, as well as neglecting basic obligations as a life partner. Al-Tabarī views it as an act of belittling the wife based on selfishness and hatred (Al-Tabarī, 2000b, p. 548), while Ibn Kathīr emphasizes neglect of financial support and material rights, and Quraish Shihab highlights arrogance and indifference that prevent the fulfillment of a wife's rights (Katsir, 1999, p. 427). This framework is in line with the views of contemporary feminist exegetes such as Amina Wadud. She asserts that *nushūz* in the Qur'an is reciprocal and not exclusive to one party, so that the husband-wife relationship must be understood in the perspective of ethical justice and shared responsibility (Bakar, 2018, p. 182).

The study of QS. an-Nisā' [4]: 34 has become a central point in the discourse on gender relations in Islam, especially when linked to the issue of *nushūz* and the phrase *wa-ḍribūhunna* as the focus of this discussion. This verse is generally understood as guidance for husbands in dealing with wives who show *nushūz*, which is traditionally interpreted as rebellion or disobedience on the part of the wife. The implications of this interpretation are crucial, because for a long time Muslims have believed, or been led to

believe, that this verse is the root of the validity of beating wives as a disciplinary measure.

### **1. Classical Interpretation: Hierarchical Domination and the Legitimization of Violence**

In pre-modern exegetical traditions and classical Islamic legal discourse, QS. al-Nisā' [4]:34 is predominantly interpreted within a hierarchical framework that positions husbands as *qawwāmūn*, guardians or authorities, over their wives. Within this paradigm, *nushūz* is generally construed as a wife's disobedience or rebellion against legitimate marital authority, thereby justifying a sequence of corrective measures culminating in the permissibility of *ḍarb* (Hussain, 2021; Riyani, 2017). This interpretive structure reflects not merely a linguistic choice but a broader socio-legal worldview in which marital relations are asymmetrical and discipline is embedded within male authority (Aryasatya et al., 2025, p. 6198).

However, a closer examination of classical exegetical discourse reveals an underlying tension rather than a monolithic endorsement of violence. While many classical *mufassirūn* acknowledge the permissibility of physical discipline, they often do so with explicit discomfort, imposing restrictive conditions such as non-injurious or symbolic beating (Hussain, 2021). This ambivalence suggests that classical interpreters were not entirely indifferent to the ethical implications of the verse; rather, they operated within inherited juridical and patriarchal assumptions that limited their interpretive horizons. The persistence of *ḍarb* as a disciplinary option thus reflects the normative dominance of patriarchal legal reasoning rather than an uncontested ethical mandate of the Qur'anic text itself (Aryasatya et al., 2025).

Critically, the literal rendering of *wa-ḍribūhunna* as "beat them" has functioned less as a neutral exegetical conclusion and more as an epistemic anchor that legitimizes domestic violence within a religious framework. Even when framed as "light" or "non-harmful," such qualifications remain ethically problematic, as they normalize coercion and sustain power asymmetries within marriage (Ghafournia, 2017). From this perspective, the issue is not solely the semantic range of the verb *daraba*, but the interpretive authority that determines which meanings are prioritized and which ethical considerations are marginalized.

Several contemporary scholars argue that this interpretive trajectory exposes an epistemological problem within the classical tradition, namely, the privileging of male-centered authority and legal formalism over relational ethics and moral reciprocity (Aryasatya et al., 2025). Consequently, the legitimization of violence emerges not as an inevitable implication of the Qur'anic text, but as the outcome of historically situated interpretive choices shaped by patriarchal social structures. Recognizing this internal tension within classical exegesis is essential for reopening the verse to ethical critique and for questioning long-standing assumptions about obedience, authority, and discipline in Muslim marital relations.

## **2. Modern Interpretation: Efforts at Contextualization and Ethical Ambiguity**

Along with increasing awareness of the issue of violence against women and the need for gender justice, modern interpreters have begun to contextualize verses about women, particularly QS. an-Nisā' [4]: 34. There is a tendency among modernists to reject the idea of violence against women, especially as indicated by the phrase *wa-ḍribūhunna* (beat them), which they consider incompatible with contemporary practices (Sitanggang, 2017). In the contemporary approach, the verse is interpreted historically, or the word *ḍaraba* is translated with meanings other than “to beat” (Sevinç, 2023). Some exegetes and legal experts are of the view that beating a wife is permissible if she abandons her obligations (*nushūz*), provided that the beating is educational and does not cause injury. Other exegetes argue that the meaning of *ḍaraba* is metaphorical, meaning not a physical beating (Zulkarnaini et al., 2023).

However, although these efforts represent a progressive step away from literal interpretations that support violence, this modern approach still leaves significant ethical ambiguities. Efforts to contextualize or reinterpret the phrase reveal a reluctance in the modern exegesis tradition to accept a license for husbands to punish their wives (Hussain, 2021). Nevertheless, criticism of modern interpretations highlights that sometimes, despite good intentions, these interpretations are still influenced by traditional or contemporary prejudices (Sevinç, 2023). The restriction to “light beating” or “symbolic” beating still calls into question the framework in which violence, in any form, remains part of the permitted solution, albeit with restrictions.

This could potentially lead to abuse in the next phase and subtly legitimize patriarchal control, as it fails to fully address the root causes of gender inequality inherited from classical interpreters (Ghafournia, 2017). Interpretation, therefore, has not been able to provide a strong ethical framework to deal with the reality of increasing gender-based violence in contemporary Muslim societies. The ensuing debate shows that the meaning of this phrase is not the only issue in the verse, but also involves the traditional and contemporary assumptions underlying it.

### **Laleh Bakhtiar: Intellectual and Religious Background**

Laleh Bakhtiar (1938-2020) was a contemporary Muslim intellectual widely known for her contributions in the field of English translation and interpretation of the Qur'an, particularly from the perspective of ethics and gender justice. She was born in Los Angeles, United States, in 1938 and raised in the Catholic tradition, pursuing her early education in Western academic circles, particularly in Washington D.C. (Hammer, 2016). This socio-religious background shaped Bakhtiar's early thinking as an intellectual woman who was active in the discourse on feminism and humanitarian issues before interacting intensively with Islamic tradition.

Bakhtiar's interest in Islam developed gradually and reflectively. After a long process of intellectual and spiritual searching, he decided to convert to Islam in 1964, at

the age of 25 (Bakhtiar, 2011). After his conversion, he married an Iranian man and settled in Iran. During this phase, Bakhtiar began to study classical Islam more seriously. He studied classical Arabic and Islamic disciplines through private and academic channels, and interacted with the strong traditions of Islamic philosophy and Sufism in Iran. His mastery of philological tools, including *al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li Alfāz al-Qur'ān*, became an important foundation for his later textual works (Barlas, 2002).

After his divorce in 1988, Bakhtiar returned to the United States and continued his formal education in history, psychology, and counseling. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Chatham College, Pennsylvania, then continued his master's and doctoral studies at the University of New Mexico with a focus on psychology and counseling (Hammer, 2016). This combination of a background in psychology, Islamic studies, and spiritual experience shaped Bakhtiar's interdisciplinary approach to reading the Qur'an, which is not only oriented towards textual aspects, but also the ethical and psychological dimensions of the message of revelation. He also obtained a license as a professional therapist in Illinois, founded the Institute of Traditional Psychology, and served as Scholar-in-Residence at Kazi Publications (Bakhtiar, 2011).

However, Bakhtiar's background as a Muslim convert raised in Western traditions has drawn criticism from a number of academics. This criticism is mainly directed at the hermeneutic orientation and ideological motives behind his translation and interpretation of the Qur'an. This debate reflects a broader discourse in contemporary Qur'anic studies, particularly regarding the authority of interpretation, the position of Muslim diaspora exegetes, and the relationship between the Western context and the Islamic sacred text (Safi, 2017). The controversy became even more prominent when Bakhtiar published *The Sublime Qur'an*, a translation of the Qur'an that explicitly offers a reinterpretation of verses related to gender relations and domestic violence, which have long been sensitive points in classical exegesis (Wadud, 2021).

As a prolific Muslim intellectual, Laleh Bakhtiar has written more than thirty works, both books and translations. Some of her works focus on Sufism and Islamic spirituality, such as *Sufi Expressions of the Mystic Quest* and *A Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, which demonstrate her interest in the aesthetic and mystical dimensions of Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 2018). Meanwhile, her works in the field of Qur'anic studies, including *The Concordance of the Sublime Qur'an*, demonstrate her expertise in textual and lexical studies of the Qur'an. Through these works, Bakhtiar has made a significant contribution to expanding Western readers' access to Islamic intellectual heritage while sparking critical debate in contemporary exegesis studies.

### **Nushūz in Laleh Bakhtiar's Interpretation Perspective**

The debate over the concept of nushūz in QS. al-Nisā' [4]: 34 is one of the most crucial issues in contemporary interpretive discourse, especially when the verse is linked to the power relationship between husband and wife. Historically, this verse has

often been used as normative legitimization for male superiority in the household, including justification for disciplinary actions against wives who are considered to have committed nushūz. Such interpretations cannot be separated from the patriarchal social context that influenced classical exegesis, in which the family structure was understood as hierarchical and centered on male authority.

In classical interpretations, as stated by al-Ṭabarī, the phrase *al-rijāl qawwāmūna 'ala al-nisā'* is understood as an affirmation of male leadership over women due to certain advantages bestowed by Allah and the economic responsibilities borne by husbands (Hidayatullah, 2014). The consequences of this leadership are then linked to the mechanism of handling *nushūz*, which in many interpretations is understood to include the act of *ḍarb* (beating), albeit with various normative restrictions. This pattern of interpretation then strengthened in the tradition of normative interpretation and family jurisprudence, thereby shaping the mainstream understanding of gender relations in Islam.

However, Laleh Bakhtiar strongly criticizes this interpretation. In The Sublime Qur'an, she argues that translating and interpreting the word *ḍaraba* as "to strike" is not only ethically problematic, but also linguistically and methodologically weak (Mir-Hosseini, 2018). According to Bakhtiar, the tendency of interpreters to choose the meaning "to hit" is the result of patriarchal social and cultural biases that are then projected onto the sacred text. He asserts that the Qur'an as a normative text cannot legitimize domestic violence, especially when linked to the basic Islamic principles of *rahmah*, justice, and human dignity (Bakhtiar, 2011).

Bakhtiar's approach is based on a semantic analysis of the root word *ḍaraba*, which is used in the Qur'an in various meanings, such as "to go," "to leave," or "to separate oneself," as in the expression *ḍaraba fi al-ard* (traveling on earth). On this basis, he proposes translating *ḍaraba* in QS. al-Nisā' [4]: 34 as "to go away" or "to leave," rather than "to strike" (Bakhtiar, 2011). This interpretation is intended as an effort to de-escalate domestic conflict, not as a form of physical punishment.

Furthermore, Bakhtiar linked his interpretation to the principle of intra-Qur'anic interpretation, which is understanding a verse by referring to other verses with similar themes. He links QS. al-Nisā' [4]: 34 with QS. al-Nahl [16]: 126, which emphasizes patience as the best response to conflict, as well as with verses on divorce that require *ma'rūf* and dignified treatment. In this framework, physical violence is not only contrary to the spirit of the Qur'an, but also inconsistent with the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who, according to various accounts, never committed violence against his wives.

From a hermeneutic perspective, Bakhtiar's approach can be interpreted in line with Fazlur Rahman's idea of double movement, which is an effort to understand verses in their historical context while extracting universal moral principles to be applied in a contemporary context (Rahman, 1982b). Thus, QS. al-Nisā' [4]: 34 is not understood as legitimizing violence, but rather as an ethical step to reduce domestic conflict in a society that was previously familiar with extreme violence against women.

However, Bakhtiar's interpretation has not been without criticism. Some scholars argue that his approach is too normative and based on a specific ethical agenda, thereby potentially ignoring the lexical consensus in the classical interpretation tradition. However, this is precisely where Bakhtiar's contribution is significant. He opens up space for critical readings of established interpretations and encourages a paradigm shift from legalistic interpretation to ethical-humanistic interpretation (Hakamah, 2019; Isna et al., 2021).

Thus, Laleh Bakhtiar's interpretation of the concept of *nushūz* and the meaning of *daraba* cannot be understood solely as an expression of modern feminism, but rather as a hermeneutic attempt to restore the message of the Qur'an to the values of justice, compassion, and respect for the dignity of women. In the context of contemporary Muslim society, especially in Western social spaces, this approach has significant relevance as an interpretive offering that is responsive to the problem of domestic violence without having to detach itself from the authority of the sacred text.

### **Laleh Bakhtiar's Position in the Map of Contemporary Islamic Feminist Interpretation**

In the discourse of contemporary feminist Islamic exegesis, Laleh Bakhtiar occupies a unique position when compared to leading feminist exegetes such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas. All three share a critique of patriarchal bias in classical interpretive traditions, particularly in the interpretation of verses on gender relations, but differ in their methodological focus, hermeneutic strategies, and practical orientation of interpretation (A. Wadud, 2015; Barlas, 2019).

Amina Wadud is known as a pioneer of feminist exegesis who developed a hermeneutic framework based on the principles of tawhid and ontological equality of human beings. In Qur'an and Woman and Inside the Gender Jihad, Wadud asserts that gender inequality in interpretation does not originate from the Qur'an, but rather from the masculine and exclusive epistemological structure of interpretation (A. Wadud, 2015). In interpreting QS. al-Nisā' [4]: 34, Wadud does not focus on replacing the lexical meaning of the word *daraba*, but rather on deconstructing normative assumptions about the absolute obedience of wives and the legitimacy of the coercive authority of husbands. Wadud's approach is normative-theological, focusing on the principles of justice ('*adl*), reciprocity, and relational ethics within the framework of tawhid.

Meanwhile, Asma Barlas developed a more epistemological and ideological feminist approach to interpretation. In Believing Women in Islam, Barlas rejects the notion that the Qur'an is patriarchal, and asserts that patriarchy is the result of historical readings produced by male political and social power relations (Barlas, 2002). In the context of the *nushūz* verse, Barlas does not specifically offer a linguistic reinterpretation of the word *daraba*, but rather criticizes the assumption that the Qur'an provides structural legitimacy for male domination and violence against women. Thus, Barlas' approach is deconstructive-critical, focusing on dismantling patriarchal

interpretive authority, but relatively minimal in offering operational alternative interpretations.

Unlike these two figures, Laleh Bakhtiar takes a more linguistic and practical hermeneutic approach. In *The Sublime Qur'an*, Bakhtiar explicitly reinterprets the word *daraba* in QS. al-Nisā' [4]: 34 as "to go away," not "to strike" (Bakhtiar, 2011). His approach is based on a semantic analysis of the use of the word *daraba* in various verses of the Qur'an that indicate non-physical meanings, such as "to go" or "to separate oneself." With this step, Bakhtiar not only criticizes patriarchal interpretations, but also intervenes directly at the translation level to prevent the legitimization of domestic violence.

Bakhtiar's approach is problem-solving oriented, namely using interpretation as an ethical instrument to respond to concrete social issues, particularly domestic violence. His background as a psychological therapist influences his interpretation, which emphasizes conflict de-escalation, introspection, and relationship restoration, rather than physical punishment (Hammer, 2016). In this case, Bakhtiar's interpretation can be read in line with Fazlur Rahman's double movement approach, which emphasizes the exploration of universal moral principles in the Qur'an to be applied in a contemporary context (Rahman, 1982a).

However, Bakhtiar's reinterpretation has not escaped criticism. A number of scholars argue that the replacement of the meaning of *daraba* has the potential to be considered linguistically selective and overly normative if it is not accompanied by a comprehensive historical reading (Hidayatullah, 2014). However, within the framework of feminist interpretation, this difference actually demonstrates the plurality of hermeneutic strategies in responding to sacred texts. While Wadud emphasizes theological reconstruction and Barlas focuses on epistemic criticism, Bakhtiar complements both with an applicative interpretation that directly targets the social impact of the interpretation of the *nushūz* verse.

Accordingly, Laleh Bakhtiar's position within the landscape of Islamic feminist exegesis can be understood as that of a *mufassir* situated at the intersection of ethical hermeneutics, linguistic analysis, and social praxis. Her interpretation expands the horizon of feminist *tafsir* beyond a mere critique of patriarchy toward the formulation of non-violent solutions that are relevant to contemporary Muslim societies, without relinquishing the normative authority of the Qur'an. At the same time, this approach challenges the methodological boundaries of classical exegesis, particularly with regard to lexical authority and exegetical consensus, thereby opening further scholarly debate on the legitimacy of ethical reinterpretation within the Islamic exegetical tradition. In this sense, Bakhtiar's contribution is not only corrective but also productive, fostering a more reflective and context-sensitive dynamic in Qur'anic interpretation.

### **Synthesis of Findings and Research Contributions**

Based on the foregoing analysis, this study identifies several key research findings that distinguish analytical results from descriptive information in the existing literature. First, this study finds that the dominant classical interpretation of *nushūz* in QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 is not merely a textual reading, but a historically contingent construction shaped by patriarchal legal authority, which systematically prioritizes hierarchical control over ethical relationality. While classical exegetes occasionally express moral discomfort with physical discipline, their interpretive framework ultimately normalizes coercion as a legitimate marital mechanism.

Second, this research finds that modern contextual interpretations, although successful in limiting overt violence, do not fully escape the disciplinary paradigm inherited from classical tafsir. By retaining *darb*, even in symbolic or pedagogical forms, as an acceptable response to *nushūz*, modern approaches continue to embed ethical ambiguity and fail to offer a comprehensive non-violent framework for resolving marital conflict. Thus, contextualization alone is insufficient to dismantle the structural logic of domination embedded in earlier interpretations.

Third, and most crucially, this study finds that Laleh Bakhtiar's reinterpretation of *daraba* constitutes an ethical-relational intervention rather than a purely linguistic alternative. Her translation of phrasa *wa-dribūhunna* means "to go away" reconfigures the handling of *nushūz* from a disciplinary act into a strategy of conflict de-escalation, temporary separation, and moral reflection. This finding demonstrates that Bakhtiar's approach functions as a problem-solving ethical model grounded in Qur'anic principles of *rahmah*, justice, and human dignity, rather than as a mere feminist critique of patriarchy.

Synthesizing these findings, this study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by demonstrating that debates on QS al-Nisā' [4]:34 cannot be resolved at the level of lexical meaning alone, but require a critical shift in the ethical framework that governs interpretation. The contribution of this research lies in repositioning feminist tafsir, specifically Bakhtiar's work, as a legitimate mode of ethical hermeneutics capable of transforming marital norms without detaching interpretation from the authority of the Qur'an.

Accordingly, this study offers a theoretical contribution by articulating an ethical-relational paradigm of *nushūz* that moves beyond legal-formal obedience toward reciprocal responsibility and non-violence. Practically, this paradigm provides an interpretive foundation for addressing domestic violence in Muslim societies through Qur'anic ethics rather than juridical coercion. In this sense, the findings of this research not only clarify interpretive tensions within classical and modern tafsir, but also advance a constructive and socially responsive model of Qur'anic interpretation.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that Laleh Bakhtiar's interpretation of QS al-Nisā' [4]: 34, particularly on the concept of *nushūz* and the meaning of *daraba*, represents an

important shift in contemporary interpretive discourse from a legalistic-normative approach to an ethical-humanistic approach. By interpreting *daraba* as a non-violent act, namely distancing oneself or leaving temporarily, Bakhtiar not only offers a linguistic alternative, but also constructs an interpretive framework that seeks to align with the principles of justice, compassion, and human dignity, which are the main spirit of Islamic teachings. This approach also criticizes classical interpretations that have often been legitimized to justify unequal power relations and violent practices in the household.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to enriching the map of feminist interpretations of the Qur'an by placing Laleh Bakhtiar as a figure who stands between the continuity of tradition and the courage of reinterpretation. Although her approach has been criticized for being normative and based on a specific ethical agenda, this is precisely where its scientific value lies: it opens up space for critical reflection on established interpretive authority and encourages a reading of the Qur'an that is more responsive to contemporary social realities without abandoning its textual roots. Thus, Bakhtiar's interpretation is not only relevant to the discourse on gender in Islam, but also important for the development of an interpretive methodology that positions the Qur'an as a source of universal ethical values that are alive and meaningful across time.

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