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Gender Biased Interpretation of the Quran:

Contextualizing Q 4:5 and the *sufahā'*

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Gender Biased Interpretation of the Quran:
Contextualizing 4:5 and the Meaning of the Term “*Sufahā*’”

by

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Dedication

To my parents, Ibrahim Fazaga and Hawa Mussa.

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Abstract

Gender Biased Interpretation of the Quran: Contextualizing 4:5 and the *sufahā*'

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In medieval and modern writings about Islam, significant attention has been given to women and women-related issues in the Quran and the Quranic interpretations of verses. People, especially women, find some of these elucidations sexist and biased, and say that they do not accurately portray the intention of Islam or the Quran for women in society. Specifically, when scholars deem women *sufahā*', or "weak-minded," they leave women out of the conversation and subject women to patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations of their place in society. This thesis will investigate the trends within the schools of exegesis to determine how the scholars talk about the Quran 4:5 and the term *sufahā*' within it. I examine different interpretations of this verse, both medieval and modern, in order to assess the extent to which exegetes identified women with the *sufahā*', and if so, then by what reasoning.

I argue that misogynistic/gender-biased interpretations of Q 4:5 are not the majority voices within the scholarship, and instead the patriarchy and misogynistic tendencies of the modern discussion have been projected back to earlier opinions. In this re-writing of the

past, prominent scholars' voices have been lost as certain modern scholars have disseminated marginal voices and presented them as the majority. In order to demonstrate my findings, first, I contextualize the verse and the *surah* where the verse is found. Second, I survey the positioning of medieval and modern *tafsīr* by examining prominent books of Muslim scholars that are still referenced today, and look specifically at their interpretations of Quran 4:5 and the logic they used to determine who the *sufahā'* were. These writings demonstrate that the majority of exegetes and jurists discuss the *sufahā'* as both men and women, and not solely women as some modern and medieval presented it many times. I conclude that historically some scholars have interpreted *sufahā'* to be solely women, but the majority of prominent scholars, like al-Ṭabarī, define *sufahā'* based on behavior and not on gender.

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Introduction

I am a practicing psychotherapist, awaiting my licensing exam, and an Imam by training. Part of what I enjoy doing is the promotion of mental health so that people do not suffer in silence. To better reach the Muslim community, I include religious material in my presentations. In one of my lectures, I made a reference to Quran 4:5 as the verse that summarizes Islam's attitudes towards the mentally ill. The verse, Q 4:5, reads,

وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمُ الَّتِي جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَمًا وَارْزُقُوهُمْ فِيهَا وَاكْسُوهُمْ وَقُولُوا لَهُمْ قَوْلًا مَعْرُوفًا ﴿٥ النساء﴾
To those “*sufahā*” (weak of understanding) make not over your property which Allah hath made a means of support for you but feed and clothe them therewith and speak to them words of kindness and justice.¹

According to Islamic law, the mentally ill are considered unfit to manage property, but must be treated humanely and be kept under care by a guardian. I argued in my lecture that it was this positive neuroethical understanding of mental health that consequently led to the establishment of mental hospitals in the medieval Islamic world from the 8th century. It also led to an early scientific understanding of neuroscience and psychology by medieval Muslim physicians and psychological thinkers, who discovered that mental disorders are caused by dysfunctions in the brain.²

I argue this verse demonstrates the Quran’s validation and acceptance of those who are mentally ill. They may be troubled in their mind and unable to handle a financial transaction, but that is no excuse or license to abuse or exploit them. The Quran instructs to care for their physical wellbeing by feeding and clothing them, and not to ostracize them.

¹ “Al - Quran Translation | Surah 4. An-Nisaa - Yusuf Ali Translation | Alim.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://www.alim.org/library/quran/surah/english/4/YAT#5>.

² Michael W Dols and Diana E Immisch, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1992).

The assumption here is that if you are feeding and clothing them, they are living with you so that you can assist them. The Quran further commands Muslims to pay heed to the *sufahā*'s emotional needs by speaking to them in kind words.

However, some community members objected to this interpretation that the *sufahā*' refers to the mentally ill, and instead insisted that the "weak of understanding" in this verse referred solely to women. In making their claim, they cited classical Islamic scholars. On the other hand, many in the audience were offended by such interpretation and considered it sexist and unfair. I promised to do further research to find out more, and that research forms the basis of this study. It turns out that although some classical scholars interpreted this verse as referring solely to women, the majority did not. In fact, it seems that these few community members were describing a minority opinion, even though they proclaimed it as a majority opinion.

Upon further reading, I came across many interpretations in classical *tafsīr* that qualify as sexist and gender-biased. The cases and examples of this gender biased interpretation from both modern and medieval scholarship are easy to find. These are the interpretations that are prevalent in the media and discussions of Islam. These kinds of interpretations diffuse people's faith, cause them to give up, create anger and unfounded doubts, and are the source of cognitive dissonance in the community. These interpretations deny women the ability to have a loving, personal relationship with God, which is what most people aspire to in religion. Most importantly, this kind of interpretation is in clear violation of the Quranic principle that male-female equality is divinely ordained. This

principle is detailed repeatedly in the Quran, with the most referenced verse Quran 49:13, which reads:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ (الحجرات ١٣)

Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).³

The Quran declares that all mankind is created in the same manner. Nobility and honor in the estimation of God, are bestowed upon people not because of their gender, but because of their righteousness. Men and women are equally responsible and capable of this.

Muslim women in the past, and in recent times, have pointed out Quranic interpretation that illustrates gender bias. For example, in the introduction of her book, Janān al-Tamīmī, a Saudi linguist and author, dedicates her book to the Muslim woman “who is drowning in insults from history.”⁴ Al- Tamīmī attempts to reassure the Muslim woman that “your Lord from above seven heavens Has been fair to you but the exegetes have wronged and oppressed you.”⁵ In other words, the text didn’t wrong you, it is the interpreters who did. Her work is an elaborate illustration of a well-documented, explicit and sexist interpretation of the Quran.

³ “Al - Quran Translation | Surah 49. Āl-Hujurat - Yusuf Ali Translation | Alim.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://www.alim.org/library/quran/surah/english/49/YAT#13>.

⁴ Jinan al Tamimi. *Mafhom al mara byn nas al tanzeel wa tawil al mufasireen*, pg 1, Arabic linguistics network 2009

⁵ Ibid

In this study, I examine different interpretations to Quran 4:5 to investigate the potential for gender-biased *tafsīr* that might exist in Quranic interpretations in some medieval and modern works. I argue that the opinions that say that solely women are *sufahā'*, are not the majority voices found in the writings on this verse, but instead that the patriarchal and misogynistic tendencies of the modern discussion have been projected back to earlier opinions. In this re-writing of the past, prominent scholars' voices have been lost as certain modern scholars have disseminated marginal voices and presented them as the majority. In the first chapter, I contextualize the verse and its uses. The second and third chapters examines the positioning of medieval and modern *tafsīr*. I examine prominent books of Muslim scholars that are still referenced today and look specifically at their interpretations of Quran 4:5 and the logic they used to determine who the *sufahā'* are. These chapters demonstrate that the majority of jurists discuss the *sufahā'* as both men and women, and not solely women, as it is sometimes presented today.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

For this study, I present some of the most influential classical and modern *muffasirs* and *fuqahā'*. For *tafsīr*, I consider the work of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH/922 AD), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH/1144 AD), al-Rāzī (d. 606 AH/1209 AD), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH/1272 AD), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 AH/1371 AD) and others. I reference their works because of their historical setting, wide reach, acceptance, fame, credibility, availability, and influence. I also examine a few jurists like Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 204 AH/820 AD) and Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH/1064 AD) for similar reasons as the exegetes. My work on

the jurists is not elaborate, because I focus on the exegetes in this study; however, I have included them for reference. I examine both Sunni and Shia sources. For the Shia school, I will refer to al-Tabarsi and the Ja‘fari school whenever applicable.

By using this methodology, this study seeks to establish several aspects of gender bias in Quranic exegesis. First, I illustrate that gender-biased interpretation has taken place in classical works and continues in modern ones as well but does not constitute the majority of opinions. Second, I demonstrate that this bias was recognized from the beginning and certain scholars strove to acknowledge it. Third, I investigate how earlier Muslim scholarship reacted to this type of interpretation. Fourth, I demonstrate that it is possible to open doors to allow for new reinterpretation of the Quran by giving visibility to classical work in order to recover principles of male-female equality that are inherent to it, and to affirm that the text is not sexist, but rather the interpretation is.

In Chapter One, I introduce the concepts of *tafsīr*, Quranic exegesis, and Quranic contextualization, in order to better theorize and introduce the topic and the verse. I discuss the importance of content and context, historical background of the circumstances during which the verse was revealed, and an overall introduction to the *surah* (chapter) in which this verse is found. I then offer a detailed meaning of what the term *safīh* means.

In Chapter Two, I investigate what and how some major *muffasirs* have understood this usage of the word to be a reference to children and women. I present the different opinions held by al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, al-Zamkhsharī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī, and some additional authorities. I start with the earliest work available to trace when this

interpretation began and how long it lasted. I then offer a brief summary of the reports and narrators that have promoted this interpretation.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I examine modern *tafsīr* work as offered by Maḥmūd al-Alūsī, al-Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, Muḥammad Metwallī al-Sha‘rāwī, and Muḥammed Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, among others. The purpose of examining modern *tafsīrs* is to investigate the still prominent narratives and reactions to the previous interpretations. I also consider English *tafsīr* to see how the term *sufahā’* has been treated across language barriers. I present translations of the Qur’an by Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asad, Abu’l-A‘lā al-Maudūdī among others. After that, I present a few jurists’ view on the similar topics, since the verse is the main authority or evidence used for introducing *ḥajr* or interdiction in Islamic jurisprudence. I then propose an explanation of why this gender biased interpretation survived for so long.

Two modern scholars have reviewed the exegesis of Q 4:5 before: Oussama Arabi⁶ and Ebrahim Moosa.⁷ Moosa examines the term *sufahā’* from the exegetical perspectives of two leading commentators of classical Islam, al- Ṭabarī and Fakhr al- Din al-Rāzī. His main focus is “to demonstrate that meanings of words change with the reconfiguration of social thought.”⁸ In addition, Arabi’s main focus is centered on the relationship between a *mubbadhir* (spendthrift) and a *saḥīh* according to the jurists and its connection to human

⁶ Oussama Arabi, “The Interdiction of the Spendthrift (Āl-Saḥīh): A Human Rights Debate in Classical Fiqh,” *Islamic Law and Society* 7, no. 3 (2000): 300–324.

⁷ Ebrahim Moosa, “The ‘Sufaha’” in “Quran” Literature: A Problem in Semiosis,” *Der Islam; Zeitschrift Für Geschichte Und Kultur Des Islamischen Orients; Berlin [Etc.]* 75 (January 1, 1998): 1–27.

⁸ Ebrahim Moosa, “The ‘Sufaha’” in “Quran” Literature: A Problem in Semiosis,” 4.

rights and limits of personal freedom. His concentration is “the two Quranic terms, *safah* and *rushd*, by means of their semantic opposition, set the stage for a critical debate on the legal autonomy of the squanderer,” which he later termed a debate between human rights vs human interest.⁹ Moosa and Arabi both are specific in what they are investigating, which is the change in language through time and legal practical implications on the interdiction of a sane adult respectively.

My work seeks to expand our knowledge on this topic in several ways. First, I examine more classical works in exegesis beyond al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī as Ebrahim Moosa did. As important as these two scholars are, I think it is imperative to see how others have interpreted and reacted to this verse. I engage al-Zamkhsharī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī, for example. Second, I also bring in modern exegesis to see if scholars adopted this view themselves or simply kept this for historical accuracy and documentation. I begin with Maḥmūd al-Alūsī (d.1802), who lived about 700 years after al-Rāzī and a thousand years after the medieval scholars to examine and compare changes. Third, I also engage two female scholars who have found this interpretation offensive, repugnant, and hurtful. Janān al-Tamīmī, a Saudi author quoted earlier, and the renowned Moroccan sociologist Fatima el- Mernissi. Fourth, even though my focus compares the *muffasirs* (exegetes) through history, I include some *fuqahā'* (jurists) in the conversation. I do so because *fiqh* developed much earlier than *tafsīr* and I wanted to see how the debate went among the jurists. Fifth, I offer an informed analysis of the different reports that held the view that *sufahā'* are solely

⁹ Oussama Arabi, “The Interdiction of the Spendthrift (Āl-Safīh): A Human Rights Debate in Classical Fiqh,” 322.

women and the people who reported them. There are close to 30 different narrations and about 14 different narrators quoted by al Ṭabarī in his *tafsīr*. I take a closer look at them and their proximity to the Prophet Mohammed and what they said. Finally, I offer an explanation of the survival and the endurance of this interpretation for so long. Few scholars from the past have held the view that *sufahā'* are exclusively women. Their number does not warrant the survival of this opinion. Yet this opinion survived, and it is worth exploring why this might be.

Chapter 1: Contextualization

To properly understand the Quran, through the process of *tafsīr*, one has to pay special attention to both the text, *al-naṣṣ*, and the context surrounding the text, *al-siyāq*. In this chapter, I first define and introduce the science of *tafsīr*, then present the debate among Muslim exegetes and its implication about the text and context in reading and interpreting this verse of the Quran. I have a general introduction to Chapter Five where this verse is found. I then introduce the verses preceding and following verse number five. To further enhance the understanding of this verse, I offer a clear analysis and definition of the term *sufahā*. I follow that by presenting the eleven different Quranic usages of this term. I argue that the debate does not only revolve around language, but also about conceptualization. One cannot easily identify who the *sufahā* are without establishing first who the Quran is addressing, which is an issue of context and conceptualization.

As a reminder, Quran 4:5 reads,

وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمُ الَّتِي جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَمًا وَارْزُقُوهُمْ فِيهَا وَاكْسُوهُمْ وَقُولُوا لَهُمْ قَوْلًا مَعْرُوفًا ﴿٥ النساء﴾
To those “*sufahā*” (weak of understanding) make not over your property which Allah hath made a means of support for you but feed and clothe them therewith and speak to them words of kindness and justice.¹⁰

¹⁰ “Al - Quran Translation | Surah 4. An-Nisaa - Yusuf Ali Translation | Alim.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://www.alim.org/library/quran/surah/english/4/YAT#5>.

WHAT IS *TAFSĪR*?

The meaning of any text is determined by analyzing its content. In this effort different analytical tools such as content analysis, analysis of linguistic forms, genre, text organization, rhetoric, discourse, lexicography, structure and the cultural role of the text, can be used. The Muslim technical term for this effort is called *tafsīr al-naṣṣ*, or “exegesis.” *Tafsīr*, or exegesis, is an attempt to understand the true, or intended, meaning of the Quran.¹¹ It is the human endeavor to elucidate and clarify the meaning of the text, in particular a holy text. The one who exercises or practices this attempt is called a *muffasir*, or someone who does *tafsīr*. Throughout the premodern era, written Quranic *tafsīr* production was an effort, and a privilege, reserved for major Muslim theologians and jurists—in other words, it was largely a male prerogative. Medieval *tafsīr* was solely written by men. This raises the question of whether the gender of the writer had an impact on his *tafsīr* (interpretation).

By virtue of being the work of humans, no system of Quranic exegesis is completely unbiased. Each exegete made some personal choices. Some details of their interpretations reflect their subjective choices and not necessarily the intent of the text, no matter how good their intentions may have been. This sexist or biased interpretation reflects the interpreter and not the book, yet the two are commonly regarded as one. An

¹¹ Burge, S.R. “The Search for Meaning: ‘Tafsīr’, Hermeneutics, and Theories of Reading.” *Arabica* 62, no. 1 (2015): 53–73.

interpretation is the product of an exegete who is influenced by his place, time, personal biases, political atmosphere, culture and environment among other factors. Unlike the Quran, these interpretations are neither eternal, nor infallible. As a result, we find that some interpretations are sexist, and others are egalitarian. Yet, often, laymen do not make a distinction between the text and its interpretation. Most Muslims take the classical Quranic exegesis for granted and hold the belief that it cannot be examined or challenged.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

To clarify, *al- naṣṣ*, text, refers to the words which are written, while *al-siyāq*, context, is the surroundings of the text, which include the circumstances of its later interpretations. There are four main types of contexts used to interpret the Quran: textual, socio-historical, political, cultural and situational contexts, in addition to others. Quran commentators pay special attention to several contexts when interpreting a verse in order to fully grasp the meaning of the verse. The context of the *surah* or chapter, the segment where the verse is located within the chapter, and the verse itself are all considered, along with non-textual contexts.

In addition, commentators take several steps in the process of *tafsīr*. First, they consider the meaning of the word or words in that verse. Secondly, they examine the historical setting during which the event(s) in which the words were used. Third, they decide to whom the words are addressed. Fourth, they inspect the linguistic context of the time and investigate how these words were understood at that time, the grammatical

structure – of the passage and synthesis, and then move on to compare it with other passages in the Quran to gain a fuller meaning.

In classical *tafsīr*, this emphasis on socio-historical context was considered important, particularly in the interpretation of the ethico-legal texts. Scholars had to be aware of the social, political, and cultural situation of the Quran's revelation as well as that of the place and time in which it was interpreted. In addition, scholars also demanded that the one engaged in this endeavor must also be aware of *asbāb al-Nuzūl* , i.e. the occasions, reasons or causes that led to the specific revelation. Disregarding context, textual or otherwise, can seriously damage the understanding and possibly results in misrepresentation of the Quran's message.

ASBĀB AL-NUZŪL

Quran experts agree that the revelations of the Quran can be divided into two broad types. The first type includes passages of the Quran revealed in response to specific events, incidents, or questions put forward to the Prophet. The second type includes verses of the Quran not directed responses to any historical or social development in the life of the Muslim community. A thorough understanding and full appreciation of the scope of the first type of Quranic passages, therefore, depend on knowing the circumstances, facts and details of the events. Such knowledge is an invaluable tool for grasping the meanings of this type of Quranic verse. Knowledge of the occasions about how each particular Quranic passage was revealed also helps in understanding the

reasoning or wisdom behind the legislation of certain rulings. However, it should be noted that for most of the Quran, the exact occasions and contexts of revelation were not preserved in the historical record. So, for those who interpret the Quran, the original context of the revelation of a particular verse of the Quran aids the reader in better understanding the historical context of the revelation and the issues that confronted the Prophet Muhammad and the emerging Muslim community.

I believe it is best to provide an example to better illustrate this point. The verse 2:115 in the Quran reads, “To God belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is the presence of God, for God is all-pervading, all-knowing.” Without knowing the *sabab* (reason), one might easily conclude that this revelation permits the Muslim to face any direction other than Mecca when performing prayer, since, according to this verse, whether you face east or west, there is the presence of God. While it is well known that a Muslims must face the *qibla* (direction of Mecca) to pray, most Muslims do not discuss the circumstance during which the verse was revealed. The circumstances in which this revelation occurred explains its implications. According to al-Wāhidī (d. 468 AH/1075 CE), a group of Muslims travelled on a dark night and they did not know where the *qibla* was, so they later realized that they had prayed in the wrong direction. They asked the Prophet about it and he kept silent until the above verse was revealed. Taking into account this reason for the revelation, one cannot come to the wrong conclusion that it is unimportant where to turn in prayer. The scholars say however, that this verse excuses the mistake of those who unwillingly, and under adverse circumstances, fail to

observe the correct *qibla*.¹² This example demonstrates the importance of contextual analysis to understand the importance of the Quran and what it reveals for Muslims.

CONTEXT OF THE SURAH AND SEGMENT

The verse Q 4:5 is at the beginning of the 4th *surah*, chapter, of the Quran titled *al-Nisa*’, the women. Consisting of 176 verses, it was most likely revealed around 4-5 AH in Medina.¹³ Its contents invite non-Muslims to the faith, presents concepts of justice, takes examples from the nations of the past, breaks the ties of friendship with the enemies of Allah, and advises support of orphans. In addition, it addresses subjects such as marriage, equitable distribution of property after death, the necessity of obeying the prophet, immigration, Jihad in the way of Allah, and so on. This *surah* is entitled *al-Nisa*’, most likely due to the fact that the first thirty-five verses of it are about women and family affairs.

I now consider the immediate segment where the verse is placed. There are four verses preceding this one and they read as follow:

{1} O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord Who created you from a single person created of like nature his mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; reverence Allah through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights) and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you. {2} To orphans restore their property (when they reach their age) nor substitute (your) worthless things for (their) good ones; and devour not

¹² Ali ibn Ahmed Al Wāhidī, “Asbab Āl-Nuzul”. Translation by Mokrane Guezzou accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=86&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=6&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

¹³ Al Tahir Ibn Ashour, “Al Tahrir Wa Al Tanweer,” accessed April 11, 2019, https://islamweb.net/ar/library/index.php?page=bookcontents&ID=1&idfrom=1&idto=4690&bk_no=61.

their substance (by mixing it up) with your own. For this is indeed a great sin. {3} If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans marry women of your choice two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable to prevent you from doing injustice. {4} And give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift; but if they of their own good pleasure remit any part of it to you take it and enjoy it with right good cheer.¹⁴

From the verses preceding verse 5, we are generally able to infer the following issues:

respect for the ties of familial relationship,¹⁵ care of orphans' property,¹⁶ permission and limitation of polygamy,¹⁷ warnings against embezzlement of orphans' property,¹⁸ declarations of sin,¹⁹ and establishment of female rights to dowry, including property, and the disposable thereof as they please. Then verse 5 states: "To those *sufahā'* (feeble-minded), make not over your property which Allah hath made a means of support for you but feed and clothe them therewith and speak to them words of kindness and justice."²⁰ In this verse, the Quran instructs Muslims to not hand over wealth to people who are unable to manage it properly, the *sufahā'*. The Quran does not specify who the feeble-minded are, however, regardless of who they are, the Quran commands the readers to feed, clothe, and speak to them with kindness. Our pursuit in this paper, as stated earlier, is to investigate what was said about who the *sufahā'* are, and as demonstrated, the context does not give a clear meaning of the term.

¹⁴ "Al - Quran Translation | Surah 4. An-Nisaa - Yusuf Ali Translation | Alim." Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://www.alim.org/library/quran/surah/english/4/YAT#5>.

¹⁵ Quran 4:1

¹⁶ Quran 4:2

¹⁷ Quran 4:3

¹⁸ Quran 4:4

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Quran 4:5

The verse following continues along the same theme of further protecting the property of the orphans. It states:

Make trial of orphans until they reach the age of marriage; if then ye find sound judgment in them release their property to them; but consume it not wastefully nor in haste against their growing up. If the guardian is well-off let him claim no remuneration but if he is poor let him have for himself what is just and reasonable. When ye release their property to them take witnesses in their presence: but all-sufficient is Allah in taking account.²¹

From this verse we are able to deduce that orphans who have money may not be entitled to it until they are of age, and at that point, their property is to be surrendered back to them. Their wealth is not to be devoured in haste as they are growing up.

To further situate and contextualize these verses, let us consider some of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the circumstances or occasions during which these verses were revealed. *Asbāb al-nuzūl* are reports by the people who witnessed these circumstances. Many books are devoted to this subject. I will mainly present the work of al-Wāhidī (d.468 AH/1075 CE). I draw attention to al-Wāhidī because ‘Āli ibn Āḥmad al-Wāhidī’s *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* is the earliest and best-known representative work of this genre.²² In this, al-Wāhidī stated:

(Give unto orphans their wealth...) [4:2]. “This was revealed about a man from Ghatafan (tribe) who had in his possession an abundant fortune which belonged to his orphaned nephew. When this orphan reached the age of puberty, he claimed this fortune but his uncle refused to give it to him. As a result, they took their dispute to the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, and then this verse was revealed. When the uncle heard this verse, he said: ‘We obey Allah

²¹ Quran 4:6

²² Al Wāhidī, Ali ibn Ahmed. “Asbab Al Nuzul.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=86&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=2&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

and we obey His Messenger; we seek refuge in Allah from the great peril', and he handed the wealth over to his nephew.²³

From this, we learn that there was an attempt to devour an orphan's property by an uncle, during which these verses were revealed. He then reported the circumstances during which verse n.3 was revealed:

People used to be wary of the wealth of orphans but took liberty with women and married whoever they liked. And sometimes they were fair to them and sometimes they were not. So, when they asked about the orphans and the verse (Give unto orphans their wealth), regarding the orphans, was revealed, Allah, exalted is He, also revealed (And if ye fear that ye will not deal fairly by the orphans). He says here: 'Just as you fear that you will not deal fairly by the orphan, so should you fear that you do not deal fairly by women. Therefore, marry only as many as you can fulfil their rights, for women are like orphans as far as weakness and incapacity are concerned'. This is the opinion of Ibn 'Abbās according to the narration of al-Wālibi.²⁴

Again, we see here the promotion of the rights of those who were deprived by some members of their society. They included women and orphans. Al-Wāhidī continued his report on the sixth verse about the context of the verse. He stated:

This was revealed about Thābit ibn Rifā'ah and his uncle. Rifā'ah died when his son Thābit was very young. The uncle of Thābit went to the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, and said: "The son of my brother is an orphan under my care, what is lawful for me from his wealth? And when should I give him back his wealth?" And so Allah, exalted is He, revealed this verse.²⁵

The circumstances in v.6 also involve an orphan who is under the care of his uncle who happen to be inquiring what is allowed and what is not allowed regarding the fortune of the orphan. The Quran instructs Muslims that if the guardian is well-off, let him claim no

²³ Āl-Wāhidī, Asbab Āl-Nuzul

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

remuneration, but if he, the guardian, is poor, let him have for himself what is just and reasonable.

Furthermore, in other instances of this genre, other prominent scholars added to the contextual understanding of this verse. In his commentary of v.4, Ibn ‘Abbās reported that “before Islam, men used to marry without giving any dowry to their wives.”²⁶ Al-Ṭabarī referred to the socio-historical context prior to his interpretation of v.4. He told of the tradition that the guardian of women would take the dowry granted to her upon her marriage. So, Allah forbade this kind of practice. He then detailed another practice where a man would marry a woman then offer his own sister in marriage to his brother in-law, and this way neither of them has to pay real dowry, or they would only pay a very small amount.²⁷ Al-Rāzī related similar practices surrounding these verses. He said that upon the marriage of his daughter, a father is congratulated by other men saying “good cheers, your camels are about to increase in numbers” in reference to the dowry of his daughter that he will take.²⁸ The Quran then instructs Muslims to give the women (upon marriage) their dower as a free gift, to them alone and not anyone else.

²⁶ Muhammad ibn Ya‘qub āl-Firuzabadi, “*Tanwīr Āl-Miqbās Min Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās*,” accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=4&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

²⁷ Jāmi‘ āl-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy āl-Qur’ān, Al Ṭabarī, Ibn Jarir. “*Tafsīr Al Ṭabarī*.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=4&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

²⁸ Razi, Fakhr āl-Din āl-. “Mafatih Āl-Ghayb.” Altafsir.com - The Tafsirs - التفاسير. Accessed April 11, 2019. <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=4&tSoraNo=42&tAyahNo=49&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

These stories tell us that there was a level of exploitation that the Quran deemed unethical and unacceptable. Practices such as devouring an orphan's wealth or depriving a woman of her dowry was no longer allowed.

THE MEANING OF *SUFAHĀ'*

Knowing the meaning of words is significant. Every word in the text has a specific meaning intended based on the multiple contexts of the verse and event(s) as discussed. This is not a conclusion of exegesis, but rather its assumption. Due to the fact that this analysis is not about a typical text, each word carries a lot of potential meaning. And the more privileged the text, the more important each word. With a text such as the Quran, it would be inconceivable that even a simple adverbial particle not be the result of a divine decree. For this reason, exegetes seek to comment on everything, even words that appear to be simple or easily understood.

To this end, the term *sufahā'* in this verse is an important term to define. Within the context of Arabic linguistics, the term *sufahā'* is nominative masculine plural of *safīh*, and both are derived from the root verb s-f-h. In Arabic, the term *safah* has a primarily moral and spiritual connotation, relating to ignorance (*jahl*), shallowness (*khiffa*), and lack of depth and understanding (*naqṣ al-'aql*).²⁹

²⁹ Moosa, *The "Sufahā'" in "Quran" Literature*, 3.

Although the above definitions and linguistic terminology might simplify the argument, Arabic linguists and interpreters debate the gender of the term. This section surveys a number of prominent scholars' understanding of the term *sufahā'*. While scholars recognized that this term could include women, the majority of scholars recognized that others can be included in this term.

To begin, Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711 AH/1312 AD), the famous Tunisian lexicographer, offers several meanings to *safīh*, such as,

السفه والسفاه والسفاهة خفة الحلم وقيل نقیض الحلم وأصله الخفة والحركة وقيل الجهل.
Safah and *safa'a* indicate *khiffa*, shallowness or lack of forbearance, and the root of it is in *khiffa*, shallowness, and movement, and it was also suggested as *jahl*, ignorance.³⁰

Similarly, al-Jāhiz (d. 254 AH/868 AD), the Arab prose writer, defines *safah* as the opposite of forbearance *nāqid al-hilm*. It is haste to anger, impulsiveness by little irritancies.³¹ In addition, al-Jurjānī (d. 470 AH/1078 AD), the renowned Persian scholar, defines it as *khiffa*, shallowness, that is overwhelming in times of *farah*, joy, or *gadhab*, anger, during which a person behaves contrary to reason or religion.³² Finally, Abu al-Bāgā al-Kāfāwe (d. 1094 AH/1683 AD), the Hanafi jurist, penned the most elaborate definition. He said,

ظاهر الجهل، عديم العقل، خفيف اللب، ضعيف الرأي، ردي الفهم، مستخف القدر، سريع الذنب، حقير النفس، مخدوع الشيطان، أسير الطغيان، ملازم الكفران، لا يبالي بما كان، ولا بما هو كائن أو سوف يكون.
Safīh is one whose ignorance is apparent, lacks intellect, shallow-minded, weak-minded, poor of understanding, taken lightly by others, quick to sin, despicable,

³⁰ Muhammad Ibn Mandhur, "Lisan Al 'Arab," accessed April 11, 2019, <https://al-maktaba.org/book/34077/7058#p1>.

³¹ Salih bin Humaid, "Rawdat Al Na'eem," accessed April 11, 2019, http://www.archive.org/stream/FPmnmnn_201411/mnn02-11#page/n4634/mode/2up.

³² Ibid.

deceived by Satan, captive of transgression, clinging to ingratitude, indifferent to what happened or what is happening or what will happen.³³

The final definition I will use as evidence is from a dictionary. Using a dictionary definition provides a meaning somewhat distant from the religious context of the other examples. The most common modern dictionary to translate Arabic to English is the Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Arabic, which defines the word *safih* as follows,

1. To be stupid, silly, foolish, to be impudent, insolent
 1. To call someone foolish or stupid, to declare legally incompetent, to depreciate, put down as inferior
 2. To show, expose, as a fool, bring someone in discredit, to disgrace, to dishonor
2. To pretend to be stupid or foolish³⁴

All of these men, and the dictionary, described the *sufahā'* negatively. Some of the terms differ in their exact negative tone, but they illustrated a person who cannot be trusted and does not have the ability to judge what is good or right.

A repeated notion is that *safah* is the antithesis of *hilm*, forbearance. To appreciate the previous definition of al-Kāfāwe , it is helpful to define *hilm*: a complex and delicate notion which includes a certain number of qualities of character or moral attitudes, ranging from serene justice and moderation, to forbearance and leniency, with self-mastery and dignity of bearing standing between these extremes.³⁵ The usage of *hilm* to define *sufahā'* further demonstrates the complexity of both the original term and the terms that they use to add detail.

³³ Abul Baqa Āl-Kufi, "Āl-Kulliyat," accessed April 11, 2019, <http://shamela.ws/browse.php/book-7037#page-496>.

³⁴ Hans Wehr dictionary of modern written Arabic

³⁵ Moosa, *The "Sufahā'" in "Quran" Literature*, 5.

We can infer from these definitions that *safah* is not a virtue and it would be offensive to call someone a *safih*. *Safih* is either a state of being or self-inflicted vice. It is a trait that entails foolishness, stupidity, feeble-mindedness, and shallowness. Linguistically speaking, the term *sufahā'* itself is neither ambiguous nor confusing. The Quran translators were right in capturing the overall meaning of the term *sufahā'* by suggesting “foolish”, “feeble-minded” or “weak of understanding” as possible translations. The jurists defined *safah* in legal terms later on, which I will explore later. At this point, I am only considering the linguistic and moral meaning of the word.

THE USAGE OF *SUFAHĀ'* IN THE QURAN

Now that I have illustrated the complexity of the term *sufahā'* generally, let us now shift attention to where else this term was used in the Quran. This investigation follows a similar pattern as a jurist or interpreter might take. First, I examined the general meaning of the term, without any context required to delve into the Quran. This section will demonstrate the context given to the term once the reader explores the other usages of the term *sufahā'* in the Quran.

The term appears in the Quran 11 times detailed below:

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ آمِنُوا كَمَا آمَنَ السُّفَهَاءُ ۖ أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ السُّفَهَاءُ وَلَكِنْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾
(البقرة)

When it is said to them: "Believe as the others believe" they say: "Shall we believe as the fools believe?" nay of a surety they are the fools but they do not know. (Quran 2:13)

سَيَقُولُ السُّفَهَاءُ مِنَ النَّاسِ مَا وَلَّاهُمْ عَنْ قِبْلَتِهِمُ الَّتِي كَانُوا عَلَيْهَا قُلْ لِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿١٤٢ البقرة﴾

The fools among the people will say: "What hath turned them from the *Qiblah* to which they were used?" Say: To Allah belong both East and West; He guideth whom He will to a Way that is straight. (Quran 2:142)

وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمُ الَّتِي جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَامًا ﴿٥ النساء﴾

To those weak of understanding make not over your property which Allah hath made a means of support for you but feed and clothe them therewith and speak to them words of kindness and justice. (Quran 4:5)

وَإِخْتَارَ مُوسَى قَوْمَهُ سَبْعِينَ رَجُلًا لِمِيقَاتِنَا فَلَمَّا أَخَذَتْهُمُ الرَّجْفَةُ قَالَ رَبِّ لَوْ شِئْتَ أَهْلَكْتَهُم مِّن قَبْلُ وَإِيَّايَ أَتُهْلِكُنَا بِمَا فَعَلَ السُّفَهَاءُ مِنَّا إِنَّ هِيَ إِلَّا فِتْنَتُكَ تُضِلُّ بِهَا مَن تَشَاءُ وَتَهْدِي مَن تَشَاءُ أَنْتَ وَلِيُّنَا فَاغْفِرْ لَنَا وَارْحَمْنَا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الْغَافِرِينَ ﴿١٥٥ الأعراف﴾

And Moses chose seventy of his people for Our place of meeting: when they were seized with violent quaking he prayed: "O my Lord! if it had been Thy will Thou couldst have destroyed long before both them and me: wouldst Thou destroy us for the deeds of the foolish one among us? This is no more than Thy trial: by it Thou causest whom Thou wilt to stray and Thou leadest whom Thou wilt into the right path. Thou art our protector: so forgive us and give us Thy mercy; for Thou art the best of those who forgive. (Quran 7:155)

وَمَنْ يَرْغَبْ عَن مِّلَّةِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِلَّا مَن سَفِهَ نَفْسَهُ ﴿١٣٠ البقرة﴾

And who turns away from the religion of Abraham but such as debase their souls with folly? Him We chose and rendered pure in this world: and he will be in the Hereafter in the ranks of the righteous. (Quran 2:130)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا تَدَايَنْتُمْ بِدِينٍ إِلَى أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى فَاكْتُبُوهُ وَلْيَكُنْ بِبَيْنِكُمْ كَاتِبٌ بِالْعَدْلِ وَلَا يَأْبَ كَاتِبٌ أَنْ يَكْتُبَ كَمَا عَلَّمَهُ اللَّهُ فَلْيَكْتُبْ وَلْيُمْلِلِ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِ الْحَقُّ وَلْيَتَّقِ اللَّهَ رَبَّهُ وَلَا يَخْسِ مِنْهُ شَيْئًا فَإِن كَانَ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِ الْحَقُّ سَفِيهًا أَوْ ضَعِيفًا أَوْ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُ أَنْ يُمْلَ هُوَ فَلْيُمْلِلْ وَلِيُّهُ بِالْعَدْلِ ﴿٢٨٢ البقرة﴾

O ye who believe! when ye deal with each other in transactions involving future obligations in a fixed period of time reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties: let not the scribe refuse to write as Allah has taught him so let him write. Let him who incurs the liability dictate but let him fear his Lord Allah and not diminish aught of what he owes. If the party liable is mentally deficient or weak or unable himself to dictate let his guardian dictate faithfully. (Quran 2:282)

قَدْ خَسِرَ الَّذِينَ قَتَلُوا أَوْلَادَهُمْ سَفَهًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَحَرَّمُوا مَا رَزَقَهُمُ اللَّهُ افْتِرَاءً عَلَى اللَّهِ قَدْ ضَلُّوا وَمَا كَانُوا مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٤٠ الأنعام﴾

Lost are those who slay their children from folly without knowledge and forbid food which Allah hath provided for them inventing (lies) against Allah. They have indeed gone astray and heeded no guidance. (Quran 6:140)

قَالَ الْمَلَأُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَوْمِهِ إِنَّا لَنَرَاكَ فِي سَفَاهَةٍ (٦٦ الأعراف)

The leaders of the unbelievers among his people said: "Ah! we see thou art an imbecile!" and "we think thou art a liar!" (Quran 7:66)

قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ لَيْسَ بِي سَفَاهَةٌ وَلَكِنِّي رَسُولٌ مِنْ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ (٦٧ الأعراف)

He said: "O my people! I am not imbecile but (I am) an apostle from the Lord and Cherisher of the worlds! (Quran 7:67)

وَأَنَّهُ كَانَ يَفُولُ سَفِيهًا عَلَى اللَّهِ شَطَطًا (٤ الجن)

There were some foolish ones among us who used to utter extravagant lies against Allah (Quran 72:4)³⁶

Based on this usage in the Quran, I believe, as presented by Ebrahim Moosa, that Fakhr al-Din Razi in his *tafsīr*, recognizes that the word *sufahā* ' is used variously, referring to both 'insiders' and 'outsiders.' The 'insiders' can be believers and the 'outsiders' can be unbelievers. Sometimes, the Quran employs the term *sufahā* ' to separate believers from sinners, hypocrites, unbelievers, polytheists, Jews and Christians. At other times, *sufahā* ' also serves as a marker to differentiate age (adults and children), mental disability, (retarded or weak persons) status (orphans and non-orphans). It is important to point out that none of these usages were gender-specific.

WHO IS THE QURAN ADDRESSING IN Q 4:5?

Quran commentators debated the issue of audience heavily. The debate revolved around the grammatical structures that the term *sufahā* ' interacts with in the verse. While context regarding the whole verse is necessary, I believe that the framing of the verse

³⁶ All translation is of Yousif Ali

itself, including the words that surround it provide important information to our understanding. First, who is the Quran addressing when it commands not give your wealth to the feeble-minded? The general command is “وَلَا تُؤْتُوا” “*Wala tu'too*” “do not give” or “hand over” or “entrust” your property to the feeble-minded. The command is clear, but who is being commanded?

When one considers the verses in this segment, one can observe that there are two kinds of people mentioned, women and orphans. Second, one also observes two transactions: dowry to women and release of property back to orphans after reaching a certain age and fulfilling other conditions. Then this verse instructs Muslims not to hand wealth over to the *sufahā*. Is the verse addressing husbands? Guardians of orphans? Parents of children? Or authorities?

Al- Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH/1144 AD), the medieval Muslim scholar of Persian origin, in his influential work *al- Kashshāf*, states that the Quran here is “addressing the guardians regarding the property of the orphans.”³⁷ Similar to al- Zamakhsharī, the Iranian Sunni theologian, Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī, agreed with this initial assessment. He then adds a supportive element to this view appealing to context. He writes: “And the evidence that this is addressing the guardians is Him saying “but feed and clothe them therewith.”³⁸ In other words, guardians are addressed here since the Quran holds them responsible for the feeding and clothing of the *sufahā*. Al-Rāzī further appeals to

³⁷ Jarrallah Āl-Zamakhshari, “Āl-Kashshaaf (‘The Revealer’) By,” *Altafsīr.com* - The *Tafsīrs* - التفسير, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=2&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

³⁸ Q 4:5

context, observing that when Allah says “and speak to them words of kindness and justice,”³⁹ He must be talking about orphans. Al-Rāzī insists that “there is no doubt that injunction is more befitting to orphans” because a man “is naturally inclined with kindness towards his own child.”⁴⁰

Other jurists raised this question as well, thus demonstrating the importance of the question. Ibn al Jawzī (d. 596 AH/1200 AD), the theologian and Hanbalite jurist, indicates that there are two opinions regarding this point of whose wealth it is: وفي قوله: {أموالكم} قولان. أحدهما: إنه أموال اليتامى. والثاني: أموال السفهاء. It is the money of the orphans or the money of the *sufahā*, the feeble-minded.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I introduced and identified what is meant by *tafsīr*, the science of interpreting the Quran. I presented the importance of considering both the text and the context in the interpretation of the Quran. In addition, I presented the beginning of *surah* 4 and the overall themes of that chapter such as the name, number of verses and location in the Quran to demonstrate the importance of the general context of the chapter where the verse appears. Then, I introduced the general segment within the Surah where the

³⁹ Razi, Fakhr āl-Din āl-. “Mafatih Āl-Ghayb.” Accessed April 13, 2019.
<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=4&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁴⁰ Fakhr āl-Din āl-Rāzī, “Mafatih Āl-Ghayb,” accessed April 13, 2019,
<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=4&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁴¹ Abu’l-Faraj Ibn āl-Jawzī, “*Zaadu-l-Maseer Fee Ilmu-t-Tafseer*,” accessed April 13, 2019,
<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=15&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

verse is located. The four verses that precede Quran 4:5 implore believers to render rights to the people that these rights are due to them such as orphans and women. Finally, referencing the verse itself, I presented a detailed analysis of the meaning of *sufahā'* and other textually problematic issues arising as a result of this. In addition to that, I quoted all eleven different places where this term appeared, and the context added from that.

In addition to the textual contexts, it is also important to pay attention to the socio-historical, political, cultural context during which the Quranic verses were revealed. This type of context is known as *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the circumstances or occasions during which these verses were revealed as reports by the people who witnessed these circumstances. I have provided several reports that acquaint the reader with what was happening when these verses were revealed.

Finally, in this chapter I demonstrated that the debate about *sufahā'* is not only linguistic, but rather contextual as well. The more important part of this debate is determining the audience of the Quran in this verse. The scholars disagreed about whether the verse is addressing husbands? Guardians? Or parents? However, they all seem to be in agreement that the verse is addressing only men.

Chapter 2: Medieval Tafsīr

In this Chapter, I explore the various opinions of the medieval Quran commentators regarding the verse Q 4:5. I present how scholars dealt with this verse in the greater context of Quran commentary, instead of linguistic analysis. I draw attention to any explanation given by the scholar discussed and if he offers any reasoning for his views. I also focus on how the scholar refers, refutes, acknowledges, supports, or dismiss previous opinions. Prior to discussing the opinion of the scholar, I offer a very brief introduction of that scholar, including the name of the work, place, and relevant dates. In addition to that, I give brief summary of the narrators and narrations of the different views, paying special attention to those who believe women to be solely the *sufahā*. I prove that this opinion is the minority opinion and that most medieval scholars do not subscribe to this view. I also demonstrate that this view was rejected from the very beginning on several grounds, despite the reemergence of this opinion in the contemporary period.

Once again, the verse in question is Q 4:5 which reads “To those *sufahā*’ make not over your property which Allah hath made a means of support for you but feed and clothe them therewith and speak to them words of kindness and justice.”⁴²

One of the earliest reports attributed the “solely women” opinion to Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68 AH/687 AD), the famous companion of the Prophet Mohammed, in his work *Tanwīr al-Miqbās fī tafsīr ibn ‘Abbās*,

{وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ} لَا تَعْطُوا الْجُهَالَ بِمَوْضِعِ الْحَقِّ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ.

⁴² Quran 4:5

“(Give not unto the foolish) do not give to those who are ignorant of the rights amongst women and children.”⁴³ Ibn ‘Abbās did mention women along with children as those who are *sufahā*’ or fools, however, he did not necessarily deem them *sufahā*’ because they are innately or intrinsically *sufahā*’. He seemed to suggest they are *sufahā*’ because they don’t know, or they financially illiterate. In addition, he also made the assumption that the Quran is addressing men only and not all believers which would include women. This implies that Ibn ‘Abbās did not consider women part of the original audience, thus placing them in the second group that was talked about in the Quran. More concerning though, is that Ibn ‘Abbās did not entertain the possibility that men can also be *sufahā*’. Ibn ‘Abbās considered men the stronger group and refused to view them as potentially part of the seemingly weaker group. Finally, Ibn ‘Abbās did not explain why he thinks the verse refers to women and children only. His thoughts are crucial though because of his historical proximity to the Prophet Mohammed and also because of his standing as a leading companion.

Later, Muqātil b. Sulaymān’s (d. 150 AH/767 AD)⁴⁴ suggested that the *sufahā*’ are women and children. His work is the oldest surviving exegesis that comments on the entire Qur’ān from the beginning to the end.⁴⁵ He stated:

⁴³ Ibn ‘Abbas, Abdullah. “Tanwīr Āl-Miqbās Min Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbā.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=4&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

⁴⁴ Muqātil is a controversial figure. His opponents came from both rationalist and traditionalist camps. The rationalists had accused him of crude anthropomorphism in understanding divine attributes. Yet the traditionalists had accused him of unreliability that Muqātil was not credible to participate in religious knowledge transmission, especially *ḥadīth*.

⁴⁵ Mehmet Akif Koç, “A Comparison of the References to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (150/767) in the Exegesis of Āl-Tha ‘labī (427/1036) with Muqātil’s Own Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 53, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 69–101, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jss/fgm045>.

{ وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ } ، يعنى الجهال بموضع الحق فى الأموال، يعنى لا تعطوا نساءكم وأولادكم { أَمْوَالَكُمْ } الَّتِي جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَاماً } ، يعنى قواماً لمعاشكم، فإنهن سفهاء، يعنى جهالاً بالحق، نظيرها فى البقرة: { سَفِيهًا أَوْ ضَعِيفًا } [البقرة: 282]، ولا يدرى الصغير ما عليه من الحق فى ماله.

The verse means those who are ignorant about financial rights, in other words do not give your women and children your wealth that God has given you for sustenance, for they are *sufahā*, meaning ignorant about rights. A child is unaware of obligations in wealth.⁴⁶

Like Ibn ‘Abbās, Muqatil uses the same logic: language and assumption; they are *sufahā* because they don’t have the knowledge of the world like others generally do.

A hundred and fifty years later, Ibn Jārir al-Ṭabarī (d. 303 AH/923 AD) authored one of the most influential *tafsīr* works to date. He was an early Muslim historian, collector of hadith, shariah scholar, and jurist. He also inspired a short-lived school of Islamic law named after him. He wrote a substantial commentary on the Quran, collecting the chief interpretations and offering his own perspective. Being one of the earliest complete Quran commentary, it contained "the compilation and material arrangement of the first two centuries and a half of Muslim exegesis."⁴⁷ His work remains one of the most quoted. In fact, one of the titles referring to him is *shaikh al mufasssirīn*, the shāikh of the *muffasirs*.

After an elaborate display of 29 different reports with its chain of narrators by the *mufasssirīn* (commentators) concerning this verse, including the view that interpreters *sufahā* as women, al-Ṭabarī stated his own opinion:

والصواب من القول في تأويل ذلك عندنا أن الله جلّ ثناؤه عمّ بقوله { وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمْ } فلم يخص سفياً دون سفيه، فغير جائز لأحد أن يؤتي سفيهاً ماله صبيهاً صغيراً كان أو رجلاً كبيراً ذكراً كان أو أنثى، والسفيه الذي لا يجوز لوليه أن يؤتيه ماله، هو المستحقّ الحبر بتضييعه ماله وفساده

⁴⁶ Muqatil Ibn Sulayman, “*Tafsīr Muqatil*,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=67&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁴⁷ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “Sūrat Āl-Rūm: A Study of the Exegetical Literature,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 3 (1998): 356–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/606064>.

وإفساده وسوء تدبيره ذلك. وأما قول من قال عنى بالسفهاء النساء خاصة، فإنه جعل اللغة على غير وجهها.

The correct view concerning the meaning of this verse in our opinion is that the meaning of this phrase, “And give not unto the foolish your property”, is general, and Allah did not single out any one kind of foolish person. So, it is not permissible for anyone to give a foolish person his wealth, whether he is a young boy or an old man, male or female. The foolish person to whom it is not permissible for his guardian to give him his wealth is the one who deserves to be prevented from disposing of his own affairs because his behavior of wasting his wealth and not handling it properly. As for the view of those who say that *sufahā*’ (the foolish) refers specifically to women, he is interpreting the language inappropriately.⁴⁸

al-Ṭabarī faithfully presented other scholars’ interpretations, then refuted them using both the Quran and linguistic analysis. He was explicit, clear, and unapologetic. Al-Ṭabarī acknowledges the existence of the opinion that suggests women to be solely the *sufahā*’ but does not accept it and step by step refuted it.

Many *mufasssirīn* followed the practice that includes a summation of previous opinions assumed by earlier and contemporary scholars. These summaries sometimes were in agreement and other times in opposition to his own views. The summation may not be an outline of the entire previous works, but it tells us who the scholar was familiar with, which writings survived, and which work was the most quoted. Through this process we can also guess when a particular opinion emerged and how soon, or late, scholars responded to it.

For example, I consider the Arab, Hanbali, historian, and jurist Abd al-Rahman Ali Ibn al- Jawzī (d. 597 AH/1200 AD) in his work, *Zād al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr* (The

⁴⁸ Al Tabari, Ibn Jarir. “Tafsir Al Tabari.” Accessed May 3, 2019.
<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=4&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>. Translation of Ebrahim Moosa, The Sufaha in the Quran, 5

Provision of the One Who is Going to Study the Knowledge of Tafsir) He offered a summary of the various opinions up to his time. He stated:

المراد بالسفهاء خمسة أقوال.
أحدها: أنهم النساء، قاله ابن عمر.
والثاني: النساء والصبيان، قاله سعيد بن جبیر، وقتادة، والضحاك، ومقاتل، والفراء، وابن قتيبة، وعن الحسن ومجاهد كالقولين.
والثالث: الأولاد، قاله أبو مالك. وهذه الأقوال الثلاثة مروية عن ابن عباس، وروى عن الحسن، قال: هم الأولاد الصغار.
والرابع: البتامة، قاله عكرمة، وسعيد بن جبیر في رواية.
والخامس: أن القول على إطلاقه، والمراد به كل سفيه يستحق الحجر عليه، ذكره ابن جرير، وأبو سليمان الدمشقي، وغيرهما، وهو ظاهر الآية.

There are five opinions regarding *sufahā*:

First, Exclusively women, the opinion of Ibn Omar⁴⁹

Second, Women and children.

Third, Exclusively.

Fourth, Orphans.

Fifth, *Sufahā* is a general term that is meant to include everyone who deserves to be interdicted.

Ibn al- Jawzī was well acquainted with the prevailing opinions up to his time and situated his analysis within the discussions of his contemporaries. He also offered the names of the authorities who held these different opinions. He concluded by supporting the opinion that suggests *sufahā* is a general term that include anyone who deserves to be interdicted. This tactic of detailing all the opinions should not be confused with him supporting all of these opinions.

When we turn our attention to the famous Mu'tazilite scholar, Abu'l-Qasim Mahmud Ibn 'Umar al-Zamkhsharī (d 538AH/1144AD) in his work *al-Kashshāf*, which is one of the well-known books of *tafsīr*. This work followed a mu'tazilite approach and is considered to be the standard work of mu'tazila *tafsīr*, which placed emphasis on Arabic

⁴⁹ The famous companion of the prophet Mohammed.

grammar and lexicography as a means of interpretation, with less attention given to *sanad*, chain of narrators. We find that he dedicated one sentence to identify who the *sufahā'* are. He stated: “*sufahā'* are those who squander their wealth, spending it inappropriately.”⁵⁰ What is striking about al-Zamkhsharī is that he did not cite any previous authority or offer any other views on the matter. He based his opinion exclusively on context.

Considering the lesser known work by Abu al-Lāith al-Samārqandi (d. 373 AH/983 AD) entitled *Bahr al-'Uloom* has many reports from the companions and their students, but without chain of narrators. He supported this “solely women” view stating, “referring to women and young children ... those who are ignorant of the rulings (regarding wealth).”⁵¹ He then cited another opinion that has not gained much popularity.

ويقال: لا تدفعوا إلى الكفار، ولهذا كره علمائنا أن يوكل المسلم ذمياً [بالبائع والشرء] أو يدفع إليه مضاربة.

“It is also said: do not give it (money) to the unbelievers; and that is why our scholars disliked for a Muslim to appoint a *dhimmi*⁵² for (buying and selling) or to assign him an investment.”⁵³ Al- Samārqandi did not cite whose opinion he was referring to. He only identified them as “our teachers.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Zamkhshari, Jarrallah al. “Tafsir Al Kashaf.” Accessed May 3, 2019.

<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=2&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁵¹ Abul-Layth Āl-Samarqandi, “Bahr Āl-'ulum,” accessed April 13, 2019,

<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=11&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁵² This refers to a non-Muslim under protection of Muslim law.

⁵³ Qurtubi, Muhammad āl-. “Āl-Jami' Li-Ahkam Āl-Qur'an (The Collection of Qur'anic Injunctions).”

Altafsir.com - The Tafsirs - التفاسير. Accessed April 9, 2019.

<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=5&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁵⁴ Abul-Layth Āl-Samarqandi, “Bahr Āl-'ulum,” accessed April 13, 2019,

<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=11&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

Now I turn to al-Qurtubi (d.1273), the famous Andalusian Maliki jurist and his popular work, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*. He was known for his discussions on linguistic, causes of revelations, definitions of difficult words, hadith and words of previous authorities. He stated:

وَأَخْتَلَفَ الْعُلَمَاءُ فِي هَؤُلَاءِ السَّفَهَاءِ، مَنْ هُمْ؟ فَرَوَى سَالِمُ الْأَفْطُسُ عَنْ سَعِيدِ بْنِ جَبْرِ قَالَ: هُمُ الْيَتَامَى لَا تُؤْتُوهُمْ أَمْوَالَكُمْ. قَالَ النَّحَاسُ: وَهَذَا مِنْ أَحْسَنِ مَا قِيلَ فِي الْآيَةِ. وَرَوَى إِسْمَاعِيلُ بْنُ أَبِي خَالِدٍ عَنْ أَبِي مَالِكٍ قَالَ: هُمُ الْأَوْلَادُ الصَّغَارُ، لَا تَعْطُوهُمْ أَمْوَالَكُمْ فَيَفْسُدُوهَا وَتَبْقُوا بِلا شَيْءٍ. وَرَوَى سَفْيَانُ عَنْ حُمَيْدِ الْأَعْرَجِ عَنْ مُجَاهِدٍ قَالَ: هُمُ النِّسَاءُ. قَالَ النَّحَاسُ وَغَيْرُهُ وَهَذَا الْقَوْلُ لَا يَصِحُّ.

The scholars differed concerning who these *suḥafā'* (the foolish) are. It was narrated that Sa'eed ibn Jubayr said: They are the orphans; do not give them your wealth. Al-Nahhas said: This is one of the best suggestions concerning this verse. Ismaa'eel ibn Abi Khaalid narrated that Abu Maalik said: They are young children; do not give them your wealth lest they waste it and you are left with nothing. Sufyaan narrated from Humayd al-A'raj that Mujaahid said: They are women. Al-Nahhaas and others said: This view is not valid, rather the Arabs describe (foolish) women as *safaa'ih* or *safeehaat*... Abu Moosa al-Ash'ari (may Allah be pleased with him) said: *Sufahā'* here refers to everyone who deserves to be prevented from disposing of his own affairs.⁵⁵

Āl Qurtubi was quoting authorities who refused to accept the previous interpretation that women are solely *sufahā'*. He seems to support the opinion that keeps the term general and is applicable to all those who deserve to be interdicted.

The next major classical scholar to be examined is Ibn Kathūr (d. 774 AH/1373 AD), a Syrian historian, traditionalist, and Quran exegete, who was known for his conservative approach strongly dependent on past authorities. His *tafsīr al-Quran al-Adhzim* accepted the principle that the Quran is best interpreted by itself and next by the

⁵⁵ Muhammad āl-Qurtubi, "Āl-Jami' Li-Ahkām Āl-Qur'an (The Collection of Qur'anic Injunctions)," *Altafsīr.com* - The *Tafsīrs* - التفسير, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=5&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>. 5/28

Prophet as reported by his Companions and their followers.⁵⁶ He did something similar to al-Ṭabarī. He was aware of the different opinions and chose to hold a different view. However, unlike al-Ṭabarī who presented his opinion last, he stated his opinion first, then proceeded to present the others.

ومن ههنا يؤخذ الحجر على السفهاء، وهم أقسام فتارة يكون الحجر للصغير فإن الصغير مسلوب العبارة، وتارة يكون الحجر للجنون، وتارة لسوء التصرف لنقص العقل أو الدين، وتارة للفلس، وهو ما إذا أحاطت الديون برجل، وضاق ماله عن وفائها،

This ruling of interdiction sometimes is applied because of childhood, as young children are incapable of making wise decisions. It also applies in cases of insanity, erratic behavior and having a weak intellect or religious practice. It applies in cases of bankruptcy, when the debtors ask that the property of a bankrupt person be put in escrow, when his debts cannot be paid off with his money.⁵⁷

He then cited different authorities who suggested that the *sufahā* are women and children.

He stated:

{ وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمُ } قال هم بنوك، والنساء، وكذا قال ابن مسعود والحكم بن عيينة والحسن والضحاك هم النساء والصبيان، وقال سعيد بن جبیر هم اليتامى، وقال مجاهد وعكرمة وقتادة هم النساء... (And give not unto the unwise your property) refers to children and women. Similar was also said by Ibn Mas`ud, Al-Hakam bin `Uyaynah, Al-Hasan and Ad-Dahhak: "Women and boys." Sa`id bin Jubayr said that 'the unwise' refers to the orphans. Mujahid, `Ikrimah and Qatadah said; "They are women."⁵⁸

Ibn Kathīr made a distinction between the practical application of interdiction and who the *sufahā* are. In that way, Ibn Kathīr is confusing; we can't definitively tell what his opinion is. He mentioned the reasons for interdiction and then cites authorities without explicitly stating where he stands. However, if we consider his opinion at the very beginning of the

⁵⁶ Younus Y. Mirza, "Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373): His Intellectual Circle, Major Works and Qur'anic Exegesis" (Ph.D., Georgetown University, 2012), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1013842911/abstract/A2846FA51DA1428APQ/1>.

⁵⁷ Imad ad-Din Ibn Kathir, "Tafsīr Al Quran Al Adhim," accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁵⁸ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr al Quran al Adhim*, Q 2:13

Quran where this word, *sufahā*’ first appears in Q 2:13, he was more explicit and clearer.

He stated the following:

السفيه هو الجاهل الضعيف الرأي القليل المعرفة بمواضع المصالح والمضار ، ولهذا سمي الله النساء والصبيان سفهاء في قوله تعالى { وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمُ الَّتِي جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَمًا } النساء قال عامة علماء التفسير هم النساء والصبيان.

Safih is the one who is feeble-minded, weak of judgement, of little awareness regarding harm and benefit, and that is why Allah calls women and children *sufahā*’ in 4:5. The majority of *Mufasssir* are of the opinion that this refers to women and children.⁵⁹

In the English translation of Ibn Kathīr , “women” are not mentioned. I am not sure if this was intentional or mistakenly done. The English translation reads:

'The fool' is the ignorant, simple-minded person who has little knowledge in areas of benefit and harm. This is why, according to the majority of the scholars, Allah used the term foolish to include children, when He said, (And do not give your property, which Allah has made a means of support for you, to the foolish). (4:5)⁶⁰

It is well known that Ibn Kathīr is one of the most influential *tafsīr* out there, so it is surprising that there is such an alteration between his Arabic and translated English book.

Another observation regarding Ibn Kathīr concerns his comment that the “majority” of scholars believed the verse refers to women and children. Al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamkhsharī, al-Rāzī, al-Baydāwī, Ibn al-Jawzī amongst others have all opposed this view. This raises the question as to which scholars is Ibn Kathīr referring to when he said that the majority of scholars are of this opinion? Perhaps he is referring to the scholars he is familiar with. However, this statement demonstrates purposefully or not, that certain medieval scholars

⁵⁹ Imad ad-Din Ibn Kathir, “*Tafsīr Al Quran*,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.alfsīr.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsīrNo=7&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=13&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁶⁰ “Al - Quran Tafsir | Tafsir Ibn Kathir- Surah4.An-Nisaa, Ayaat5To6 | Alim.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://www.alim.org/library/quran/AlQuran-tafsir/TIK/4/5>.

claimed that the majority opinion stated that women were solely *sufahā'*, thus confusing the narrative until today.

One of the most popularly used *tafsīr* is the *Tafsīr* al-Jalālayn. It is one of the most significant *tafsīrs* for the study of the Quran. Composed by the two “Jalāls” - Jalāl al-Dīn al-Mahālli (d. 864/1459) and, his pupil, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyutī (d. 911/1505), *Tafsīr* al-Jalālayn is generally regarded as one of the most easily accessible works of Quranic exegesis because of its simple style and one volume length.⁶¹ They stated:

{ أَلْسَفَهُاءُ { الْمُبَذِّرِينَ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ وَالنِّسَاءِ وَالصِّبْيَانِ

“But do not O guardians give to the foolish the squanderers men, women and children.”⁶² In other words, the most used *tafsīr* does not support the view that women are solely *sufahā'*. He explicitly states that *sufahā'* are the squanderers men, women and children.

The above discussion is not exhaustive of all medieval opinions, however, most of them revolve around the same notion. *Sufahā'* are either children, orphans, women, or anyone, including men, who are wasteful of his or her wealth.

If we turn our attention to Shi'a scholars, we find the same thing. They quote previous authorities and then present their own conclusion. For example, the famous Iranian scholar, Abū Naṣr al-Ḥasan b. al-Faḍl al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548AH/1153AD) in his popular

⁶¹ Jalalayn, “*Tafsīrs* Āl-Jalalayn,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

⁶² al Jalalayn. “*Tafsīr Al Jalalayn*.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>. Translation of Feras Hamza

work, *Majma' al-bayān* (Compendium of Elucidations on the Exegesis of the Quran) states his own opinion as

أنها عام في كل سفیه من صبي أو مجنون أو محجور عليه للتبذير وقريب منه ما روي عن أبي عبد الله (ع) أنه قال: إن السفیه شارب الخمر ومن جرى مجراه

“This is a general term that would encompass all children, the insane, or those who have been interdicted due to wastefulness. Similar to this, is the opinion of Imam Ja’afar who included the alcoholic and those with similar habits”⁶³

Similar views are held by al al-Tūsī, who is best known for his *Al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. He specifically indicates that the verse is general and should not be limited to just women in any way.⁶⁴

NARRATIONS AND NARRATORS

As stated earlier, Muslim exegetes have a tendency to summarize and recall previous authorities and their opinions. This is mainly done to support their own views or to cite precedent for their beliefs. The more prominent the authority, the more validity and weight is added to the subsequent argument.

⁶³ Tabrasi, al Fadl al. “*Majma’āl-Bayān* (Compendium of Elucidations on the Exegesis of the Quran).”

Accessed May 3, 2019.

<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=4&tTafsirNo=3&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&Page=2&Size=1&LanguageId=1>.

⁶⁴ Al Tusi, Shaykh. “*Āl-Tibbyan Fi Tafsir Āl-Quran*.” Accessed May 3, 2019.

<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=4&tTafsirNo=39&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

I examined the authorities and their narrations that were furnished by Al-Ṭabarī. He cited three different opinions producing a total of 29 reports made up of 14 reporters.⁶⁵

- 1- 14 reports supposing *sufahā'* to be women and children. The authorities are
 - a. Sa'id b. Jubayr (d. 95/713), the Kufan scholar
 - b. al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728), the famous Basran authority,
 - c. 'Abdullah b. Omar (d. c. 73/693), the leading Companion,
 - d. As Sudi, was a popular preacher in Kūfa, who is said to have died in 127/745. His reputation as a transmitter of prophetic traditions was a matter of dispute.
 - e. al-Dahhak b. Muzahim (d. 105/723), the exegete. Born in Balkh and died in Khurasan
 - f. Mujahid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), the student of 'Abdullah b. 'Abbās
 - g. Al Hakam
 - h. Qatadah b. Diamah (d. 117/735). He lived in Basra
 - i. Abu Malik
 - j. Ibn 'Abbas (d. 68/687),
- 2- 8 reports supposing *sufahā'* to be exclusively women. The authorities are
 - a. Al Mo'atmr ibn Suliman
 - b. Mujahid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), the student of 'Abdullah b. 'Abbās
 - c. al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728), the famous Basran authority,

⁶⁵ Al Tabari, Ibn Jarir. "Tafsir Al Tabari." Accessed May 3, 2019.
<https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

- d. al-Dahhak b. Muzahim (d. 105/723), the exegete who was born in Balkh and died in Khurasan
- e. 'Abdullah b. Omar (d. c. 73/693), the leading Companion,

3 reports supposing *sufahā'* to be exclusively orphans. The authorities are

- a. Sa'id b. Jubayr (d. 95/713), the Kufan scholar killed by al Hajjaj
- b. al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728), the famous Basran authority,

4- 4 reports supposing the *sufahā'* to be a man's own children - *walad al-rajul*- not orphans. The authorities are

- a. Ibn Malik
- b. Ibn 'Abbas (d. 68/687), the leading companion of the prophet Mohammed
- c. Ibn Zayd (d. c. 145/762)
- d. Abu Musa al-Asha'ari (d. 42/662), the famous companion of the prophet Mohammed

As a trained Imam, I am able to make several observations from this list. First, it includes only three companions of the Prophet Mohammed: Ibn Omar, Ibn 'Abbās, and Abu Musa al-Asha'ari. Second, none of them attributed his opinion or interpretation to the Prophet Mohammed. Third, none of them offered an explanation or a source for their opinion, thus weakening their argumentation.

DEBATE OF LANGUAGE

I now like to focus on the counter argument presented by al-Ṭabarī and others, like Egyptian scholar of grammar and Quranic exegete al-Nahhas, who argued on the basis of linguistic analysis to reject the interpretation that *sufahā'* are exclusively women.

فأما من حمل الآية على النساء خاصة، فقله ليس بصحيح، لأن فعيلة لا يجمع فعلاء، وإنما يجمع فعائل وفعيلات، كغريبة وغرايب وغريبات، وقد جاء: فقيرة وفقراء، ذكره الرماني. فأما الغرباء فجمع غريب. As for those who assumed the *sufahā'* to be exclusively women, his opinion is not sound. Because the plural of فعيلة f-a-‘-l-a (nominative feminine plural of *safīh*) is not pluralized as فعلاء f-u-a-‘-a-l-a but is pluralized (as) فعائل f-‘-a-i-l and فاعلات f-‘-l-a-t.⁶⁶

They argued that that *sufahā'* سفهاء is inclusive of representing both genders. To argue to the contrary, they believed, would be equivalent to displacing the lexical meaning. In support of their view, they stated that the morphological form *fu'ala'* فعلاء (sing. fa'il) فاعل, like *sufahā'* سفهاء denotes both men and women. If the word was to denote women exclusively, the plural should have been on the form, *fa'ilat* فاعلات or, on the form *faa'il* فاعل with the s-f-h سفية equivalent being *safīhiat* سفهيات or *safa'i* سفائه. Analogous to this is the feminine singular noun *gar'ibah*, غريبة whose plural is *gharibat* غريبات or *ghara'ib* غرائب, and where the masculine singular is *ghar'ib* غريب and the plural is the gender inclusive *goraba'* غرباء, which is similar to *sufahā'* سفهاء. Another analogy to prove the case of the gender inclusiveness of *safīh/sufahā'*, is the form *'alim/ 'ulama'*, علماء where the reference is both learned men and women.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Al Tabari, Ibn Jarir. "Tafsir Al Tabari." Accessed May 3, 2019. <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁶⁷ Moosa, *Sufahā' in the Quran*, 8.

Al-Rāzī disputed the claim that the plural *safīhat* سفیهات or *safa'ih* سفاهه is gender specific, especially in this case where the feminine form is used. He cited the Baghdadi grammarian, al-Zajjaj who maintains that it is grammatically correct for *sufahā'* to be the plural of *safīhah*, analogous to *fuqara'* فقراء, as the plural of *faqirah* فقيرة, which means many poor women. Accordingly, al-Rāzī believed, that from a lexical point of view at least, *sufahā'* can mean women exclusive disagreeing with al-Ṭabarī.

Finally, in addition to language-related arguments, another approach to overcome this controversy was applied by al-Rāzī. He did not believe that calling women *sufahā'* is a problem. Ebrahim Moosa observed that al-Rāzī goes to extreme apologetics to overcome the problem of women and *safah*, which seems to be embarrassing by his standards.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the major interpretations of the medieval scholars regarding Q 4:5. Their opinions varied. Individuals are deemed *sufahā'* due to: irrational behavior, waste of money, lack of intellectual abilities; underage orphans; children who may not be orphans; women, or unbelievers. I also argued that the opinion that *sufahā'* are exclusively women was widely known, but not accepted. The earliest of such opinion can be traced back to Ibn 'Abbās the companion of the Prophet Mohammed, and some of his students. It was also endorsed by the first complete Quran commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d.150 AH/767 AD).

This opinion survived because scholars would give an overview of how previous authorities have interpreted this verse. In addition, it was also the opinion of Ibn 'Abbās the well-known companion of the prophet. However, it was mostly quoted for historical

documentation and academic honesty. It was rejected and counter-argued from the very beginning. The counter arguments were based on language and the absence of reasons for specificity.

I also examined the narrations and narrators of earlier reports as produced by al-Ṭabarī since it was the most comprehensive. Out of the 29 reports, I concluded that there were only three companions of the Prophet Mohammed on the list and none of them have claimed that their opinion is rooted in prophetic teachings. Also, none of them had offered any reason or justification for their opinions.

I also demonstrated that many of those who believed that the *sufahā'* are women, had qualifiers for their opinion. In other words, women were not deemed to be intrinsically *sufahā'*. It is their *jahl*, ignorance, financial illiteracy or unawareness that makes them *sufahā'*, but this does not occur all of the time. Possibly an expression of the cultural context of the place and time of the commentator who held this view.

All commentators unanimously agree that the Quran is addressing guardians of some kind in this verse, parents, husbands or guardians of orphans, however, they also all assumed that the guardians are all men.

Now, despite the fact that this opinion was reject by the medieval scholars, it remains problematic that there was no condemnation of this interpretation. The arguments used to refute it revolve around two points: language and specificity. No authority came out stating for example that Khadija, the wife of the Prophet Mohammed, was a successful businesswoman. They did not reject it on basis of humanity, equality or any other principle.

Chapter 3: Modern Tafsīr

After shedding some light on the medieval Quran commentators, in this chapter, I focus on recent Quran commentators and authorities. The purpose of this is to trace any changes to the interpretation of Q 4:5. I investigate and report how modern commentators responded to the previous interpretation that solely women are *sufahā'*. Moreover, I examine if new interpretation came up. Finally, I detail the impact of time and cultural context in modern *tafsīr* regarding Q 4:5. I argue that, like medieval scholars, the opinion that women are solely *sufahā'*, is not, and was not, the dominant opinion.

Similar to the attitude of *tafsīr* writing in medieval times, the motivation in modern *tafsīr* has remained the same; to make the text understandable and relevant. In addition, there is a tendency to make use of the scientific miracles of the Quran. Although the aim did not change; however, five other kinds of changes took place. First, there was a new challenge to the traditional assumptions. In other words, just because something has been said in the past, people no longer feel obligated to accept and follow it. Secondly, there was an increased emphasis on reason as a result of the first changes, and less reliance on narrations and past opinion and more application of reason. Thirdly, scholars began to call for new ways to look at the Quran. For example, Ismā'il al Fārouqi (1921-1986), who was the first and foremost Muslim scholar to engage in the area of modern academic study, teaching and research of religion in the

modern age.⁶⁸ He stated, “the problem the modern Muslim faces is not one of whether or not he ought to observe ‘that which God sent down,’ but of finding out and understanding ‘that which God sent down.’”⁶⁹ The fourth change offered a critique of the reduction of the Quran to its legal content. Legal content of the Quran is the least mentioned, however, legal approach to Islam has reduced the Quran to a legal text only. Finally, several attempts have been made in recent years to make the Quran more accessible to contemporary Muslims.

I will now introduce and investigate some modern authorities of Quranic interpreters. The first authority I consider is Maḥmūd al-Alūsī (1802-1854). The Iraqi scholar, who is popular for his work *Ruh al Ma’ āni*. He was one of the most prominent ‘*ulama* of mid-19th century Baghdad.⁷⁰ His writings on the *sufahā*’ stated:

وقد فسر السفهاء بالمبذرين بالفعل من اليتامى وإلى تفسير الآية بما ذكرنا ذهب الكثير من المتأخرين

“and *sufahā*’ has been interpreted as squanderers, a behavior associated with the orphans. Such interpretation is held by many later authorities.”⁷¹ Al- Ālusi reported a shift in interpretation among later authorities. He then continued to state previous opinions:

⁶⁸ Intiyaz Yusuf, “Ismail Āl-Faruqī’s Contribution to the Academic Study of Religion,” *Islamic Studies* 53, no. 1/2 (2014): 99–115.

⁶⁹ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’ān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Abingdon [England] ; New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁷⁰ Basheer M. Nafi, “Salafism Revived: Nu’mān Āl-Alūsī and the Trial of Two Aḥmads,” *Die Welt Des Islams* 49, no. 1 (2009): 49–97.

⁷¹ Mahmud āl-Alusi, *Ruh Āl-Ma’ āni* (“The Spirit of Meanings on the Exegesis of the Sublime Qur’an), accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=52&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&Page=2&Size=1&LanguageId=1>.

وروي عن ابن عباس وابن مسعود وغيرهما أن المراد بالسفهاء النساء والصبيان، والخطاب لكل أحد كائناً من كان، والمراد نهيه عن إيتاء ماله من لا رشد له من هؤلاء.

And it has been narrated on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Maso’ud and others that the meaning of *sufahā*’ here is women and children. The text is (general) addressing all, regardless of who they are. It means to forbid the giving of wealth to those who lack discernment.⁷²

In this, al- Ālusi broke away from earlier traditions. The fact that the opinion was attributed to the companions of the Prophet did not concern him much. He either didn’t deem it to be authentic since he used the passive form روي “it was narrated” or he simply didn’t feel compelled to accept it. It was their opinion, and not a single statement is attributed to the Prophet himself. He also added another observation when he said that later authorities believe that this particular verse was talking about orphans. He didn’t explain why or who amongst later authorities hold this opinion though.

The second authority I focus on is Mohammed al-Shawkāni (d.1834), the Yemeni scholar who is considered as one of the most influential jurists of recent times.⁷³ In his very popular work *Fath al-qadīr al-jāmi‘ bayna fannay al-riwāyah wa-al-dirāyah min ‘ilm al-tafsīr*, in considering both narrations and analysis in the Science of *tafsīr*, al-Shawkāni started traditionally by informing the reader with what has been said about this verse in the past:

واختلف أهل العلم في هؤلاء السفهاء من هم؟ فقال سعيد بن جبير هم اليتامى لا تؤتوهم أموالكم. قال النحاس، وهذا من أحسن ما قيل في الآية. وقال مالك هم الأولاد الصغار لا تعطوهم أموالكم، فيفسدوها، وتبقوا بلا شيء. وقال مجاهد هم النساء. قال النحاس، وغيره وهذا القول لا يصح إنما تقول العرب سفاته أو سفيهات.

⁷² Mahmud āl-Alusi, *Ruh Āl-Ma’ani* ("The Spirit of Meanings on the Exegesis of the Sublime Qur’an), accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=52&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&Page=2&Size=1&LanguageId=1>.

⁷³ Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad Āl-Shawkānī*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

The scholars have differed who the *sufahā* ' are? Said b Jubair said they are the orphans and you shouldn't give them your wealth. Al-Nahhās said: this is the best opinion (orphans) concerning this verse. Malik said these are young children. Do not give them your money lest they ruin it and you be left with nothing. Mujahid said they are women. Al-Nahhās pointed that such a statement is incorrect. The Arabs say “sfa'ih” or *safīhat*.⁷⁴

As stated earlier, al- Shawkāni took the traditional path of reproducing previously held opinions, seemingly favoring the opinion of al-Nahhas, the famous Egyptian grammarian, but then later gave the impression that women and children are not good in handling of money. He wrote:

والمراد النهي عن دفعها إلى من لا يحسن تدبيرها كالنساء، والصبيان، ومن هو ضعيف الإدراك لا يهتدي إلى وجوه النفع التي تصلح المال، ولا يتجنب، وجوه الضرر التي تهلكه، وتذهب به

What is meant here is forbidding the giving of money to those who are unable to manage the money properly such as women, children and all those who are weak of understanding and are unable to direct their wealth towards profitable transactions, or unable to avert harm that would consume it.⁷⁵

Al-Shawkāni seemed to suggest that women are potential *sufahā* ' because of their financial illiteracy and inability to manage property.

The third authority is Muḥammad b. Yusuf al-Wāhbi ' Aṭfāyyish (d.1914), and his 13 volumes work of *Tafsīr al-Quran: Himyan al-Zad ila Dar al-Ma'ad*. He was from Algeria and an Ibādī.⁷⁶ In his work, Ibn ' Aṭfāyyish is very emphatic and straight forward. He stated:

⁷⁴ Muhammad āl-Shawkani, “Fath Āl-Qadir,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=9&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibadism, a distinct sect of Islam that is neither Sunni nor Shi'i, exists mainly in Oman, East Africa, the Mزاب valley of Algeria where Aṭfāyyish is from, the Nafus mountains of Libya, and the island of Jerba in Tunisia. The sect developed out of the seventh-century Islamic sect known as the Khawarij, and shares with that group the desire to found a righteous Muslim society and the belief that true Muslims are only to be found in their own sect. Valerie Hoffman, *The Essentials of Ibadi Islam* (Syracuse University Press, 2012).

السفهاء اليتامى الأطفال ومن كان يتيماً ثم بلغ، ولما يؤنس رشده، والنساء اللاتي لا يحفظن المال، والرجال الذين يضيعون أموالهم،

Sufahā', are young orphans and orphans who are of age, but their maturity has not been sensed. They are also women who are unable to guard money and men who waste their wealth.⁷⁷

Ibn Atfāyyish made no reference to previous authority. He was very upfront with his thoughts. He went on to add:

والسفه فى ذلك قلة العقل مع تضييع المال، ومن تضييعه صرفه فى المعاصى وصارفه فيها لا عقل كسبى له، ،.....، والخطاب لأولياء هؤلاء، والمال لهؤلاء لا للأولياء.

The meaning of Safah is the (combination) of weak understanding and the wasting of money. Wasting it by spending it on vices. The one who spends it this way does not have acquired intellect. The Quran is addressing their guardians and the money belongs to the orphans and not to the guardians.⁷⁸

Ibn Atfāyyish did not single out women. To him, *sufahā'* are both adult men and women, children, orphans or not. He also did not cite any previous opinions or authorities.

The next scholar I bring to light is Mohammed Rashid Rida (1865-1935), the renowned Salafi Lebanese scholar who studied under the famous Egyptian scholar Mohammed Abdu. He stated:

فالسفهاء هنا هم المبذرون أموالهم الذين ينفقونها فيما لا ينبغي ويسئون التصرف بإنمائها وتثميرها

⁷⁷ Muḥammad b. Yusuf al-Wahbi 'Atfayyish, "Himyan Al-Zad Ila Dar Al-Ma'ad.," accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=49&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁷⁸ Muḥammad b. Yusuf al-Wahbi 'Atfayyish, "Himyan Al-Zad Ila Dar Al-Ma'ad.," accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=49&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

“*Sufahā*’ in this verse refers to those who are wasteful and squander their money. They spend it inappropriately, neither in growth nor investment.”⁷⁹ Rashid Rida is considered to be a reformist. He yearned for the unadulterated Islam of the first generations, the righteous ancestors (*salaf*),⁸⁰ yet he made no mention of previous opinions and no quotations of other authorities. He rendered the term based on context and language.

The next scholar is the former grand mufti of Tunisia, Muhammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr (1879 -1973). A scholar who is best known for his work, *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanweer, The Verification and Enlightenment*. Ibn Ashur stated two different interpretation as a possibility:

والسفهاء يجوز أن يراد به اليتامى، لأنّ الصغر هو حالة السفه الغالبة،

“It is possible that what is meant by *Sufahā*’ are orphans, for childhood is the stage where most likely *safah*, foolishness is present.”⁸¹ He then stated his own personal preferred interpretation,

ويجوز أن يراد به مطلق من ثبت له السفه، سواء كان عن صغر أم عن اختلال تصرف، فتكون الآية قد تعرّضت للحجر على السفه الكبير استطراداً للمناسبة، وهذا هو الأظهر لأنّه أوفر معنى وأوسع تشريعاً. It is also possible that what is meant is all kind of “*safah*” be it due to childhood or any other irregular behavior. The verse is also proposing, by means of digression, interdiction against the *safīh* adults. This seems to be the most apparent meaning; for it is richer in meaning and offers wider (opportunity) for legislation.⁸²

⁷⁹ Rashid Rida, “*Tafsīr Al Manar*,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=103&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁸⁰ Ana Belén Soage, “Rashid Rida’s Legacy,” *The Muslim World; Hartford* 98, no. 1 (January 2008): 1–23.

⁸¹ āl-Tahir ibn ‘Ashur, “*Al Tahrir Wa Al Tanweer*,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=7&tTafsirNo=54&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁸² āl-Tahir ibn ‘Ashur, “*Al Tahrir Wa Al Tanweer*,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=7&tTafsirNo=54&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

Again, Ibn Ashur made no reference to women. He kept the term general and did not see the need for specificity. Similar to most modern scholars so far, he moved away from gender-based designation of *sufahā'* to behavior-based classification.

The next authority I consult is the very popular Egyptian Quran commentator, known for his weekly explanation of the Quran show, Mohammed M. al-Sha'arawi. Similar to the approach of both Ibn Aṭṭāyish and Ibn Ashur, al-Sha'arawi didn't make a mention of previous interpretations. He defined *safīh* as follows:

وَمَنْ هُوَ السَّفِيه؟ إِنَّهُ الَّذِي لَا صَلَاحَ لَهُ فِي عَقْلٍ وَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُ أَنْ يَصْرِفَ مَالَهُ بِالْحِكْمَةِ

“And who is the *safīh*? He is the one who has no rectitude in intellect and is unable to dispose of his wealth wisely.”⁸³ Al-Sha'arawi questioned the intellectual ability of the *sufahā'* as *the* determining criteria and not gender.

Another modern scholar is Muhammed Sayyed Tantāwy (d.1431AH/1999AD), the former grand Mufti of Egypt. He asserted that *sufahā'* are those who,

are unable to guard their wealth due to childhood, weak-mindedness or misconduct be they orphans or others. Giving priority to asserting the generality of a statement, -when there is no reason to specify- is more meaningful and offers broader opportunity for legislation.⁸⁴

Thus, Tantāwy used the same expression as ibn 'Āshūr did. There was no need to specify based on gender or anything else. The generality of the term offers flexibility.

⁸³ Muhammad Mutawalli āl-Sharawi, “Khawatir (Reflections) on the Quran,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.alfafsiir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=7&tTafsirNo=76&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁸⁴ M Sayyed Tantawy, “Al Waseet Fi Tafsiir Al Quran,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.alfafsiir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=7&tTafsirNo=57&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

The next authority is Syrian scholar Jamal al-Din al-Qāsimi (1866-1914). He was considered as the most prominent religious reformer in late Ottoman Syria.⁸⁵ In his work *tafsīr mahasin al-ta'wil*, al-Qāsimi took the traditional path by mentioning previous opinions. He listed the possibilities of the *sufahā*’ being children, women and orphans. However, he finally stated where he personally stands:

أن يراد بالسفهاء كل من لم يكن له عقل يفى بحفظ المال، فيدخل فيه النساء والصبيان والأيتام كل من كان موصوفاً بهذه الصفة.

“*Sufahā*’ are those who don’t have the intellectual ability to safeguard wealth. That would include women, children, orphans, and all those who would fall under this definition.”⁸⁶ The trend continued with al-Qāsimi, after making a mention of previous interpretations, he chose a definition of *sufahā*’ that is more general and is behavior-based rather than gender-based.

I now consider Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sa’di (d.1956), a contemporary scholar from Saudi. His work on Quran, titled *Taysir al-Karim al-Rahman fi Tafsīr Kalam al-Mannan*, is widely celebrated in conservative circles. Regarding this verse, he said,

السفهاء، جمع " سفيه " وهو مَنْ لا يحسن التصرف في المال، إما لعدم عقله كالمجنون والمعتوه، ونحوهما، وإما لعدم رشده كالصغير وغير الرشيد. فنهى الله الأولياء أن يؤثروا هؤلاء أموالهم، خشية إفسادها وإتلافها،

Sufahā” is the plural of *safeeh* and refers to one who does not deal with money properly, either because he is of unsound mind, like one who is insane or feeble-minded, etc, or because he is immature, like a young child. Allah has forbidden

⁸⁵ Mun'im Sirry, “Jamāl Āl-Dīn Āl-Qāsimī and the Salafī Approach to Sufism,” *Die Welt Des Islams* 51, no. 1 (2011): 75–108.

⁸⁶ Jamal āl-Din Āl-Qasimi, “Mahasin Āl-Ta’wil,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.atafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=102&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yess&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

guardians to give these people their wealth lest they spoil it or waste it, because Allah has made this wealth a means of looking after their spiritual and worldly interests, and these people cannot take good care of it.⁸⁷

Al-Sa'di's opinion is very important. He was conservative, traditionalist, and used narration-based approach of the Quran. However, in this case, he did not make mention of any previously held opinions. He focused, like others, on the intellectual ability and rationality of behavior as the main distinguishing features of the *sufahā'*.

I now turn to examine a contemporary Shia scholar, Muhammad al-Tabataba'i (1892-1981), who is considered to be one of the most prominent Shia scholars and philosophers. His Quran exegesis work is 27 volumes long and took eighteen years to finish (1954 – 1972). He began by contextualizing the verse then proceeded to identify the *sufahā'*. In his opinion, they are the orphans and the wealth belongs to them. He then made an observation:

وإن كان ولا بد من دلالة الآية على أمر سائر السفهاء غير اليتامى فالمراد بالسفهاء ما يعم اليتيم وغير اليتيم لكن الأول أرجح.

“If it is a must to designate the *sufahā'* other than the orphans, then it would include orphans and non-orphans, however, the former is more likely.”⁸⁸ Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī approached his analysis similarly to the previously presented Sunni scholars. He did not make a reference to earlier interpretation. He applied linguistic analysis to the term

⁸⁷ Abd ar-Rahman ibn Nasir As-Sa'di, “Taysir Āl-Karim Ar-Rahman Fee *Tafsīr* Āl-Quran,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.alfsīr.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsīrNo=98&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁸⁸ Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, “*Tafsīr* Al Mizan,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.alfsīr.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=4&tTafsīrNo=56&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

sufahā’ and proceeded accordingly. He made no reference to women. He believed the verse is addressing the guardians of orphans. To him, *sufahā*’ is solely age and maturity-based.

The last authority to be presented is the Egyptian scholar Mohammed Abu Zahra. Abu Zahra was a prolific author, writing no less than 34 books on a wide variety of issues. His publishers called him an Imam, a title indicative of high academic accomplishment. In his *tafsīr* titled *Zahrat al Tafasir*, he said:

والسفهاء هنا هم الذين لا يحسنون تدبير الأموال إما لصغر سنهم، وإما لنقص عقولهم، وإما لسوء تدبيرهم..... وعلى هذا التفسير يكون معنى السفاء شاملا لكل العاجزين عن تدبير المال أيا كان سبب العجز.

Sufahā’ are those who are unable to properly manage wealth, either because of young age, deficiency in their intellect, or because of mismanagement. Based on this, *sufahā*’ is inclusive of all those incapable of managing wealth regardless of the reason for their inability.⁸⁹

Abu Zahra was an accomplished jurist. His understanding of *sufahā*’ was based on maturity, rationality, and mismanagement. A term applied to all those who lack the ability to do good with their money regardless of the reason.

To summarize, we can clearly see that modern Quran commentators are almost all in agreement that *sufahā*’ is not a gender-based designation. They offered various possibilities: immaturity, age, intellectual inability, vices, and orphanage. They are in line and hold similar positions as most medieval Quran commentators.

⁸⁹ Muhammad Abu Zahra, “Zahrat Āl-Tafasir,” accessed April 13, 2019, <http://shamela.ws/browse.php/book-37071#page-2041>.

TAFSĪR IN ENGLISH

Lastly, I would like to focus on English *tafsīrs*. All the scholars I examined for the medieval and modern *tafsīr* have been Arabs or wrote in Arabic. The purpose is to see if this issue came up and how these scholars have dealt with it. I also want to compare Arabs vs non-Arabs scholars. I will prove that, similar to most medieval and modern Quran commentators, English-speaking scholars' comparable views.

I begin with Abul A'la al- Mawdūdī (d. 1979) who is regarded as "one of the most influential and prolific of contemporary Muslim thinkers" whose "interpretive reading of Islam has contributed greatly to the articulation of Islamic revivalist thought and influenced Muslim thinkers and activists from Morocco to Indonesia."⁹⁰ His work *Tafhim al Quran*, Understanding the Quran, is a six-volume commentary on the Quran and his magnum opus.

Al- Mawdūdī , like many of the translators of the Quran, adhered to the linguistic meaning of the term *sufahā'*. He first situated the verse and then contextualized it, stating,

This verse covers a very wide spectrum of meaning. It emphasizes to the community of believers that wealth is one of the main supports of human life. It should not be left, therefore, at the mercy of those who are incompetent to handle it properly.⁹¹

⁹⁰ M. Kamal Hassan, "The Influence of Mawdudi's Thought on Muslims in Southeast Asia: A Brief Survey," *The Muslim World; Hartford* 93, no. 3/4 (October 2003): 429–64.

⁹¹ Abul A'la Āl-Maududi, "Surah An-Nisa 4:1-10 - Towards Understanding the Quran - Quran Translation Commentary - Tafheem Ul Quran," accessed April 13, 2019, <http://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=4&verse=1>.

He believed the verse is addressing all believers, not only guardians, husbands or fathers. He stated,

This verse is very comprehensive in meaning. It teaches the Muslim 'Community the lesson that in no case should wealth, which is so important for the maintenance of life, be entrusted to such people as are feeble-minded and incapable of using or managing it properly, for they might, by its wrong use, spoil its cultural and economic system and, in the long run, its moral system as well.⁹²

To al-Mawdūdī, the verse is addressing the community, not just the guardians or parents of children. He made no mention of previous opinions and did not make any reference or suggestion that the verse singles women out as *sufahā'*.

Second example I use is from *Ma'aruf al-Quran* by Mufti Muhammad Shāfi (1897-1976), a Pakistani, traditional, and Sunni scholar. In his actual translation of the verse, Mufti Sharif translated *sufahā'* as “feeble-minded,” however, in his *tafsīr*, he made a reference to both Ibn ‘Abbās and Abu Musa, the companions of the Prophet Mohammed. He stated:

The most revered exegete of the Holy Quran, Sayyidna (our teacher) 'Abdullah ibn ‘Abbās says: 'The guidance the Holy Quran gives in this verse is: Do not, by handing over all your property to feeble-minded children and women, become dependent on them.⁹³

He then continued,

based on this *tafsīr* of Sayyidna 'Abdullah ibn ‘Abbās, the sense of the verse covers all women, children and others who are feeble-minded and inexperienced, to whom it is dangerous to hand over properties since it may result in their loss, irrespective of the fact that they may be one's own children, or orphans, or the fact be that the property

⁹² Abul A'la Āl-Maudūdī, “Surah An-Nisa 4:1-10 - Towards Understanding the Quran - Quran Translation Commentary - Tafheem Ul Quran,” accessed April 13, 2019, <http://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=4&verse=1>.

⁹³ MUFTI MUHAMMAD SHAFI, “Full Text of ‘Maariful Quran English by Mufti Shafi Sb.’” accessed April 13, 2019, https://archive.org/stream/MaarifulQuranEng/Maariful%20Quran-7-Eng.p842_djvu.txt.

may belong to such children and orphans themselves, or to the guardians. The same *tafsīr* has been reported from Sayyidna Abu Musa al-Ash'ari and the renowned *mufasssīr*, al-Ṭabarī has also adopted the same view.⁹⁴

Mufti Shafi quoted Ibn ‘Abbās but did not fully endorse what he says. He attempted to include him in this opinion by means of extension only.

Another example is that of Mohammed Asad (d.1992). The Jewish-born Austro-Hungarian scholar of Islam, who is becoming popular in the English-speaking world due to his simpler language and rational approach. In his *The Message of the Quran*, Asad translated *sufahā’* as “weak of judgement” and he then added a footnote stating, “the context makes it obvious that this relates to the property of orphans who have not yet reached the age of discretion and are, therefore, "weak of judgment" (lit., "weak-minded.")”⁹⁵ Asad did two things: used language in his translation and context in his interpretation. He made his conclusion effortlessly; as the context made it obvious.

Similarly, Yusuf ‘Ali (1953), the British-Indian translator of the Quran, in his *The Meaning of the Quran*, translated *sufahā’* as “weak of understanding.” He then reflected on the same verse and offered the following comment, “this applies to orphans, but the wording is perfectly general, and defines principles like those of Chancery in English Law and the Court of Wards in Indian Law.”⁹⁶ ‘Ali was drawing similarities between Quranic injunction and the British law. He stated,

⁹⁴ MUFTI MUHAMMAD SHAFI, “Full Text of ‘Maariful Quran English by Mufti Shafi Sb,”” accessed April 13, 2019, https://archive.org/stream/MaarifulQuranEng/Maariful%20Quran-7-Eng.p842_djvu.txt.

⁹⁵ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’ān: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration*, Complete ed (Bitton, Bristol, England: Book Foundation, 2003).

⁹⁶ “Al - Quran Translation | Surah 4. An-Nisaa - Yusuf Ali Translation | Alim.” Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://www.alim.org/library/quran/surah/english/4/YAT#5>.

property has not only its rights but also its responsibilities. The owner may not do just what he likes absolutely; his right is limited by the good of his family of which he is a member, and if he is incapable of understanding it, his control should be removed.⁹⁷

‘Ali did not explicitly say it, but he implied inability as a factor for interdiction. In addition to that, he also universalized the teaching by drawing similarities between the British and Islamic systems.

My last example is the famous Moroccan female Muslim scholar, Fatima el-Mernissi (1940-2015). El- Mernissi wrote variously as a sociologist and a historian, a literary scholar and a novelist. Her expansive interdisciplinarity, willingness to challenge taboos wherever she found them, and a real gift for narrative writing together allowed her to make significant contributions in multiple fields. Regarding the interpretation of this verse, she said, “the ambiguous word ‘*al-sufahā*’ (the foolish), means ‘persons incapable of managing their fortune, who might squander their assets.’”⁹⁸ The meaning of the verse, she stated, is “one should not hand over to a foolish person his or her fortune, whatever that person’s age or sex.”⁹⁹ The person, she argued, “must be put under guardianship with the guardian controlling the usage of the assets.”¹⁰⁰ El- Mernissi did not agree to limit the controversial meaning to one precise category of foolish people. She stated that it “is wrong to specify it only to one gender, which does not exist in the text of the Quran.”¹⁰¹ She charged, “those who say that in

⁹⁷ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qurʾān*,

⁹⁸ Md Yousuf Ali, “A Contextual Approach to the Views of Muslim Feminist Interpretation of the Quran Regarding Women and Their Rights,” 2010.

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Ibid

this verse ‘*sufahā*’ specifically designates women are simply distorting the language.”¹⁰² Al- Mernissi is right. She sounds like the medieval and modern commentators of the Quran. She suggests that the term is vague, there should be no one single designation, and it is not just women.

To further minimize and curtail and prove that this opinion has always been a minority opinion, I explore some of the opinions of the jurists regarding this issue. It is important to point out that jurisprudence was developed much earlier than *tafsīr*, exegesis. I consider few different examples of jurists belonging to different schools of jurisprudence and different times as well.

Imam al-Shafi’i (d. 205 AH/820 AD), was the founder of the *Shafi’i* school of jurisprudence. He was also the author of the *Risāla*, which reportedly was the first work written on legal theory to be designated as *usul al-fiqh*, principles of Islamic jurisprudence, a compound term which appeared much later.¹⁰³ In addition, he also authored *al-Umm*. In it he stated:

ولا يختلف أحد من أهل العلم علمته أن الرجل والمرأة إذا صار كل واحد منهما إلى أن يجمع البلوغ والرشد سواء في دفع أموالهما إليهما ; لأنهما من اليتامى فإذا صارا إلى أن يخرجوا من الولاية فهما كغيرهما يجوز لكل واحد منهما في ماله ما يجوز لكل من لا يولى عليه غيره.

None of the jurists whom I have known have differed in opinion on the fact that both man and woman upon their attainment of the age of puberty and maturity are alike in their ability to conduct their financial affairs by themselves.¹⁰⁴

He further said:

¹⁰² Md Yousuf Ali, “A Contextual Approach”

¹⁰³ Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Uṣūl Āl-Fiqh* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ Arabi, *Interdiction of the Spendthrift*, 11.

فإن قال قائل: المرأة ذات الزوج مفارقة للرجل لا تعطي المرأة من مالها بغير إذن زوجها قيل له كتاب الله - عز وجل - في أمره بالدفع إلى اليتامى إذا بلغوا الرشد يدل على خلاف ما قلت؛ لأن من أخرج الله - عز وجل - من الولاية لم يكن لأحد أن يلي عليه إلا بحال يحدث له من سفه وفساد.

If someone says that the woman who has a husband cannot be given her properties unless upon permission from her husband, the answer, which refutes such a contention, will be that the word *yatama* [orphans] as mentioned in the Quran denotes that it excludes both men and women from the institution of *wilayah* [guardianship] upon satisfying the stated criteria. And that who is excluded by God Almighty from the institutions of *wilayah* must not be subject to any form of guardianship except if there is an impediment such as spend thriftiness or mental defect.¹⁰⁵

According to al-Shafi'i, once orphans attain maturity, males and females, their right to do with their wealth as they wish is immediately granted.

The second example comes from Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH/1064 AD), who was a prolific and controversial Andalusian litterateur, theologian, philosopher, religious polemicist, and legal scholar. He was the prime representative of Zāhiri school of jurisprudence.¹⁰⁶ In his book, he stated,

كتاب الحجر 1394 - مسألة : لا يجوز الحجر على أحد في ماله إلا على من لم يبلغ أو على مجنون في حال جنونه - : فهذان خاصة لا ينفذ لهما أمر في مالهما ، فإذا بلغ الصغير ، وأفاق المجنون جاز أمرهما في مالهما كغيرهما ولا فرق ، سواء في ذلك كله الحر ، والعبد ، والذكر ، والأنثى ، والبكر ذات الأب وغير ذات الأب ، وذات الزوج ، والتي لا زوج لها ، فعل كل ما ذكرنا في أموالهم من عتق ، أو هبة ، أو بيع ، أو غير ذلك : نافذ إذا وافق الحق من الواجب ، أو المباح - ومردود فعل كل أحد في ماله إذا خالف المباح ، أو الواجب ، ولا فرق ، ولا اعتراض لأب ، ولا لزوج ، ولا لحاكم في شيء من ذلك إلا ما كان معصية لله تعالى فهو باطل مردود .

Book of interdiction 1394: it is not permitted to interdict anyone in their wealth unless they be under age or insane during their (episode) of insanity. For these two specifically, can't have any of their decisions regarding their wealth carried out. However, if the young becomes of age and sanity is regained then their decisions are enforceable like others with no difference. All are equal in this be they: the free, the slave, the male, the female, the unmarried with a father or

¹⁰⁵ Arabi, *Interdiction of the Spendthrift*, 11

¹⁰⁶ David R. Vishanoff, "Camilla Adang, Maribel Fierro, and Sabine Schmidtke (Eds.) Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba: The Life and Works of a Controversial Thinker. Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 1, The Near and Middle East, Ed. Maribel Fierro, M. Şükrü-Hanioglu, and Kees Versteegh, No. 103. Leiden: Brill, 2013. Pp. Xxii + 804. Hardback. ISBN: 9789004234246. €237 / \$329." *Islamic Law and Society* 21, no. 4 (September 22, 2014): 453–59, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685195-00214p05>.

without a father, the one with a husband, and the one with no husband. All the aforementioned can do with their wealth what they like be it: free the slaves, gifting, selling or any other than that, all is enforceable if it corresponds to carrying out an obligation or doing that which is permissible. And everyone's actions are rejected if they oppose that which is allowed or obligation. There is no difference and no one can object be they a father, husband or ruler to any of this expect be it an act of disobedience to Allah, then it is null and rejected.¹⁰⁷

Ibn Hazm was clear, emphatic and unapologetic. He was answering those who have put restrictions either due to slavery, marital status or absence or presence of a father. His emphasis on the females was admirable.

CONCLUSION AND OBSERVATIONS

In this chapter, I presented several opinions and thoughts of modern Muslim exegetes attempting to interpret Q 4:5. I have also stated that the attitude in *tafsīr* has not changed compared to medieval *tafsīr* writings. It remains an endeavor to elucidate and explain the meaning of the Quran. Digital age, geopolitical, migration, and more contact with the West have had an impact on Quranic exegesis that required more attention to context in understanding the Quran. Some of the changes included: challenges to traditional assumptions, emphasis on reason, the need for new ways to look at the Quran, critique of the reduction of the Quran to its legal content and attempts to making the Quran more accessible to contemporary Muslims.

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Hazm Al Andalusi, "Al Muhalla, The Adorned Treatise," accessed April 13, 2019, <http://shamela.ws/browse.php/book-767#page-2753>.

I presented a diverse group of authorities in this chapter. I referenced Sunni Arab scholars who wrote in Arabic, Shia scholar who also wrote in Arabic, English scholars from the sub-continent, Ibadi scholar from Africa, European scholar from Jewish background, and a female scholar. All of the scholars I presented did not hold the view that identifies women as exclusively the *sufahā'* or feebleminded. They moved away from this interpretation to indicate or identify *sufahā'* as behavior-based and not gender-based. They may have acknowledged that such an interpretation exists though, but they do not adhere to it. Like the medieval scholars, modern commentators who rejected this view appealed to context, linguistic analysis, and the generality of Quranic term. However, one issue remains; there was no condemnation to this interpretation on the basis that it is sexist, gender biased, or unfair.

Conclusion

I started this research anticipating that I would find ample evidence of gender biased interpretation of the Quran regarding Q 4:5. I thought that the books of *tafsīr* would be full of this opinion along with senseless justifications for it. My initial readings of al-Ṭabarī confirmed my initial thoughts. Al-Ṭabarī listed over 15 different reports stating that the *sufahā'* are women and children. However, when I read his own opinion, I was surprised. He is in total disagreement with this interpretation. The more I read, the less common and the more rejected this opinion became.

The interpretation that women are exclusively *sufahā'*, or “feeble minded,” was an opinion of few individuals, who were neither the companions of nor have they met with the Prophet Mohammed. However, they were students of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed. Others suggested that the *sufahā'* are women and children, not the Quran or the prophet. This opinion is attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, one of the leading companions of the Prophet Mohammed. He did not, as stated earlier, believe that women were intrinsically *sufahā'*. He qualified this with statements such as lack of experience, financial illiteracy, or the creation of undue financial dependency on her by her husband. Whatever the case, Ibn ‘Abbās did not tell us why or where he got this opinion from.

Upon examining some of the most influential medieval and modern *tafsīr*, that included Sunni, Arabs, Shia’a, Ibadi, non-Arab, English, and Indian scholars, I can most emphatically ascertain that this opinion was always a minority opinion. These scholars are in agreement that *sufahā'* is not gender-based designation, but rather behavior-based classification. A position that all Muslim jurists assumed consistently.

This opinion survived because it is the opinion of Ibn ‘Abbās. There is great admiration and respect for the companions of Prophet Mohammed in the Muslim community. Their opinions are given priority and held in high regard. For example, Ibn Kathīr , the famous exegete of the Quran, believes that the best *tafsīr* is,

that the Quran be explained by the Quran for that which is mentioned ambiguously in a place is explained in another. And if you are unable to do that, then you must resort to the Sunnah. If we do not find the explanation in the Quran, or the Sunna then we must resort to the opinions of the companions; they are more knowledgeable of it, and they witnessed the contexts and circumstances to which it pertains. If you do not find the explanation in the Quran or the Sunna or from the companions, then their successors should be resorted to.¹⁰⁸

We thus see that most of the *tafsīrs* under consideration, more or less, agree that the authorities of interpretation should be the Prophet, his Companions, or the Successors; in that order. However, this order is a problem.

Al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 AD) and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH/1272 AD), both stated that it is not true that everything the companions narrated in the field of *tafsīr* comes from the Prophet for two reasons. The first reason is that the Prophet provided an interpretation for a limited number of verses only. Secondly, the companions differ in their interpretations of the verses.¹⁰⁹ A blind reliance on the reports by the successors of the companions is actually a barrier to deeper understanding of the Quran. Again, al-Ghazālī stated, “to assume that no further meaning could be added to the *tafsīr* of a verse beyond what Ibn

¹⁰⁸ Ismail Lala, “An Analysis of the Sources of Interpretation in the Commentaries of Āl-Tabari, Āl-Zamakhshari, Āl-Rāzī, Āl-Qurtubi and Ibn Katthir,” *QURANICA - International Journal of Quranic Research* 2, no. 1 (June 1, 2012): 17–48.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

‘Abbās or Mujāhid stated, and to disregard everything after them is among the great impediments [to understanding the Quran].”¹¹⁰

The aim of *tafsīr* is to provide an interpretation or an elucidation of what the Quran means. However, the meaning of the Quran provided in a *tafsīr* is highly personal to that exegete: it is no longer the meaning of the Quran, it is the exegete’s own meaning of the Quran. A distinction must be made between what Allah said and what people think Allah said. A sexist, racist, gender-biased interpretation, is a barrier between the Quran and its readers as I have experienced as an Imam.

In order to avoid this type of interpretation, fundamental values and principles of the Quran such as equality and justice, must be viewed as principles that are eternal and must be applied in all social contexts. *Tafsīr*, is also very dependent on one’s own perceptions, world-view, experiences and the sociocultural background and where he/she lives. Thus, a ‘pure’ interpretation of the Quran is not possible; it is always influenced by sociological circumstances and no one can be free of such influences. In addition, the meaning of the Quranic verses unfolds with time, therefore, the interpretations of classical scholars can be radically different from the interpretation of modern scholars. This is because Quranic verses often use symbolic or metaphorical language that is ambiguous in meaning. This ambiguity serves to promote flexibility and creative change. In this case for example, the ambiguity in understanding who the *sufahā’* are opens doors for a variety of legislations as many have suggested; wage garnishment of irresponsible parents, addicts

¹¹⁰ H. Mubarak, *Ibn Ashour* Introduction to his *tafsīr*

who have lost controls, or bipolar patients who are going through a manic episode and so on.

My conclusion in this paper should not be taken that I am devaluing the tradition and legacy of *tafsīr*. I believe that we need to respect that heritage, learn from it and use what is relevant and beneficial to our contemporary concerns. I do not accept the idea that somehow Muslims in the past, including the companions of the Prophet Mohammed, reached the zenith of intellectual achievement in the area of *tafsīr*. This would literally make the Quran a book of history, where we are constantly searching for how it was understood instead of it says. We are to be engaged in a continuous process of refinement, improvement, change and addition to the existing body of *tafsīr*.

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