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Was Woman Created for the Sake of Man? A Study of Philosophical, Feminist and Islamic Discourses

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Abstract

The question of whether woman was created "for the sake of man" has persisted as a central theme in religious, philosophical, and cultural thought. This article investigates the evolution of this idea across three major traditions: Greek philosophy, Christian theology, and Islamic philosophy and exegesis, with attention also to contemporary feminist reinterpretations. In Greek philosophy, Plato's ambivalent account and Aristotle's essentialist biology laid the foundations for centuries of hierarchical interpretations of gender, where woman was positioned as derivative of man. Christian theologians such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas further systematized this hierarchy by synthesizing biblical exegesis with Aristotelian natural philosophy, affirming spiritual equality but enforcing temporal subordination. In the Islamic context, Avicenna perpetuated Aristotelian views of biological inferiority, while Ibn Rushd revived Plato's more egalitarian vision, though his perspective remained marginal. Finally, Muslim feminist thinkers, including Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, and Ayesha Chaudhry, offer alternative hermeneutical frameworks that challenge patriarchal readings of creation and argue for the Qurʾānic affirmation of equality between man and woman. By tracing these trajectories, the article demonstrates how the question of woman's creation has been shaped by intersecting metaphysical, theological, and exegetical frameworks, and how contemporary feminist scholarship reclaims interpretive space for gender justice.

Keywords: *Gender; Creation; Woman; Aristotle; Plato; Augustine; Thomas Aquinas; Ibn Sīnā; Ibn Rushd; Islamic exegesis; Qurʾān; Feminist hermeneutics; Amina Wadud; Asma Barlas; Riffat Hassan; Ayesha Chaudhry.*

Introduction

The question of woman's creation and her relation to man has occupied a central place in philosophical, theological, and exegetical debates across civilizations. From antiquity to modernity, thinkers have wrestled with the issue of whether

woman was created in her own right or merely for the sake of man. This inquiry is not only metaphysical but also normative, shaping cultural, legal, and social attitudes toward gender roles. The persistence of this question across traditions attests to its profound influence on the construction of gender hierarchies.

In Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle provided contrasting but influential models of gender ontology. Plato, in his Republic, envisioned a form of equality grounded in rational capacity, while in the Timaeus he relegated women to a metaphysically inferior status. Aristotle, by contrast, codified a biological essentialism in which woman was a "defective male," suited only for reproduction and domestic subordination. These frameworks profoundly shaped later Christian and Islamic thought.

In Christian theology, the Genesis narrative became the foundation for discussions of woman's purpose. Augustine emphasized woman's spiritual equality but temporal subordination, while Thomas Aquinas synthesized biblical exegesis with Aristotelian biology to present woman as both necessary for reproduction and ontologically inferior. Similarly, in Islamic philosophy and Qurʾānic exegesis, Avicenna absorbed Aristotelian biology, affirming woman's secondary creation, while Ibn Rushd offered a rare rebuttal by recovering Plato's egalitarian strand.

Literature Review

Scholarship on whether woman was created *"for the sake of man"* spans several disciplines: ancient philosophy, patristic theology, Islamic philosophy, Qurʾānic exegesis, and contemporary feminist hermeneutics. These works both document the historical dominance of hierarchical readings and provide resources for critical reinterpretation.

In classical philosophy, scholars have shown how Greek ideas shaped enduring concepts of sexual difference. G. E. R. Lloyd demonstrates how the Greek tradition constructed reason as masculine and subordinated the feminine, linking this directly to the legacy of Aristotle's biology.[1] Marguerite Deslauriers reconstructs Aristotle's view of sexual difference, showing how his theory of female "matter" and male "form" provided a metaphysical grounding for hierarchy.[2] Julia Annas emphasizes Plato's ambivalence: while the *Republic* allows women guardians equal status, other dialogues reinforce metaphysical subordination.[3] These philosophical genealogies frame the later reception in Christian and Islamic thought.

Christian theology developed this inheritance in distinct ways. Kari Elisabeth Børresen highlights Augustine's nuanced anthropology: woman was spiritually equal, yet socially subordinated, a paradox resolved through typological readings

of Eve as both subordinate to Adam and as figure of the Church.[4] Thomas Aquinas, synthesizing Aristotle and Augustine, affirmed equality of souls but subordinated women in social and natural function.[5] These interpretations secured a theological foundation for hierarchy within Latin Christianity.

Islamic philosophy and exegesis also engaged Greek categories. Majid Fakhry traces how Avicenna imported Aristotelian biology into his *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ*, portraying women as colder and weaker, assigned primarily reproductive roles.[6] In contrast, Ibn Rushd sided with Plato's egalitarianism, arguing in his *Commentary on the Republic* that women could share in intellectual and political life if educated equally.[7] Though his position was marginal, it reveals an alternative within Islamic philosophy.

Modern feminist Qurʾānic hermeneutics have mounted substantial critiques. Riffat Hassan identifies how traditional exegesis misreads *nafs wāḥida* to subordinate woman, stressing the Qurʾān's linguistic neutrality.[8] Amina Wadud reinterprets Qurʾānic gender relations by situating verses in their larger thematic context, rejecting patriarchal extrapolations.[9] Asma Barlas advances a theological hermeneutic centered on *tawḥīd*, arguing that patriarchy contradicts the Qurʾān's divine unity and justice.[10] Leila Ahmed contextualizes patriarchal readings historically, showing how male-dominated exegetical institutions shaped interpretive traditions.[11] Fatima Mernissi emphasizes the socio-political deployment of hadith and tafsīr to curtail women's authority.[12]

Recent scholarship has expanded methodological horizons. Ayesha Chaudhry calls for "historical honesty" in acknowledging pre-modern allowances for wife-beating, while advocating ethical reinterpretation grounded in contemporary understandings of justice.[13] Saʿdiyya Shaikh demonstrates how Sufi metaphysics and hermeneutics offer a model of spiritual equality that destabilizes patriarchal readings.[14] Collectively, these studies show both the genealogical weight of Greek and medieval interpretations and the critical resources available for reconstructing egalitarian readings today.

Research Gap

While much scholarship has examined either biblical or Qurʾānic interpretations of woman's creation, few studies integrate Greek, Christian, and Islamic traditions within a comparative framework. Moreover, the contributions of modern Muslim feminist scholars—who critique patriarchal readings of the Qurʾān and argue for gender equality—have yet to be fully situated within this broader intellectual history.

Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Trace the development of the idea that woman was created "for the sake of man" across Greek philosophy, Christian theology, and Islamic philosophy/exegesis.
2. Highlight the continuities and transformations of this idea as Aristotelian essentialism and Platonic ambivalence were integrated into Christian and Islamic thought.
3. Examine how contemporary Muslim feminist thinkers (e.g., Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Ayesha Chaudhry) reinterpret the Qurʾānic discourse to challenge hierarchical readings of creation.

Methodology

The article employs a comparative historical-analytical method**,** examining primary texts (Plato's Republic and Timaeus, Aristotle's Generation of Animals and Politics, Augustine's De Genesi ad Litteram, Aquinas's Summa Theologica, Avicenna's al-Shifāʾ, Ibn Rushd's Commentary on Plato's Republic, and selected Qurʾānic verses with exegetical traditions). These are analyzed alongside secondary scholarship in feminist theology and philosophy. The study adopts an interdisciplinary lens, integrating philosophical, theological, and feminist hermeneutical approaches to provide a comprehensive account of how the discourse on woman's creation has evolved and been contested.

Section One: Greek Philosophy

1.1- Socrates: The Foundations of the Debate

Socrates (469–399 BCE), although leaving no writings of his own, occupies a foundational place in the history of Western philosophy. His views on women must be reconstructed from the dialogues of his students, chiefly Plato and Xenophon. In these accounts, Socrates emerges as a figure who simultaneously challenges and reproduces the gender norms of classical Athens. On the one hand, in Plato's *Republic* (Book V), Socrates is depicted arguing that women, if given the same education as men, are capable of serving as guardians and rulers, since the distinction between the sexes lies in bodily function, not in the soul's rational capacity.[15] On the other hand, in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Socrates describes the wife's role as confined to domestic management, reflecting the conventional subordination of women in Athenian society.[16]

Thus, Socrates represents the earliest stage of a debate that would later be given systematic philosophical articulation: expanded toward proto-egalitarianism by Plato and ultimately constrained by Aristotle's biological essentialism.

1.2- Socrates in Plato's Dialogues

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates is the principal speaker, and it is through his voice that one of the most strikingly egalitarian claims of antiquity is articulated. In Book V, Socrates argues that women should be eligible to serve as guardians and rulers of the city if they possess the same natural capacities and receive the same education as men.[17] While he acknowledges that women are generally weaker in physical strength, he insists that the difference in sex is irrelevant when it comes to intellectual and moral excellence.[18] For Socrates, the decisive criterion is not gender but the ability to grasp truth and pursue virtue. This claim, radical in the context of 5th-century BCE Athens, undermines the prevailing belief that political life was the exclusive domain of men.

At the same time, the Republic does not erase all differences between the sexes. Socrates' proposal for shared education and communal life among male and female guardians highlights functional equality, but still frames women as part of a collective rather than as independent agents.[19] Equality, in this sense, is justified for the sake of the city's harmony, not necessarily as a recognition of women's autonomous worth.

1.3 - Socrates in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*

A rather different picture emerges in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, where Socrates converses with Ischomachus about household management. Here, Socrates appears to endorse traditional Athenian gender roles, portraying the household as a partnership in which the husband's role is to manage the external affairs while the wife supervises domestic duties such as food preparation, textile work, and child-rearing.[20] Although Socrates emphasizes the importance of the wife's contribution to the household economy, the framework assumes her subordination and domestic confinement.[21] This contrast with Plato's Socrates suggests either that Xenophon preserved a more conservative strand of his thought or that he adapted Socratic teaching to validate conventional Athenian norms.

1.4 - Ambiguity and Legacy

The tension between these accounts reveals the difficulty of pinning down Socrates' actual position. On the one hand, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates seems to advance one of the earliest arguments for women's intellectual equality, at least within the context of an ideal political order. On the other hand, Xenophon presents him as reinforcing traditional domestic roles. Modern scholars disagree on whether

Socrates himself held progressive views on women or whether his students projected their own philosophical concerns onto his character.[22]

What can be said with confidence is that Socrates initiated a discourse in which women's nature became philosophically relevant. By introducing the possibility that rationality, not sex, should determine one's role in society, he opened the door to a debate that his successors, Plato and Aristotle, would develop in profoundly different directions—Plato with ambivalence, and Aristotle with systematic subordination.

1.5 - Aristotle and the Teleology of Subordination

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), often regarded as the foundational figure of ancient natural philosophy, situates his anthropology within a teleological framework that ranks beings according to their inherent purposes . In the *Generation of Animals*, he describes the female as "a mutilated male" or "a misbegotten male", whose role in reproduction is restricted to supplying matter, while the male alone provides the form, principle, and rational soul.[23] In this schema, woman is not a fully realized being but a deviation from the male norm, a necessary yet deficient counterpart required for the continuation of the species.

This naturalized inferiority extends into Aristotle's political philosophy. In *Politics* I.13, he affirms that "the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; the one rules, the other is ruled."[24] For Aristotle, such subordination is not accidental but essential: just as reason rules appetite within the soul, so too does the man rule the woman within the household. The relationship between male and female is embedded in the cosmic order itself, where beings exist for their proper ends. Hence, woman's creation and existence are not for her own sake but for the sake of man—reproduction, domestic management, and the continuity of the *polis*.

By grounding gender hierarchy in biology and teleology, Aristotle transformed cultural assumptions into philosophical necessity. Unlike the sophists, who had occasionally questioned the naturalness of hierarchy, Aristotle gave patriarchy both metaphysical and scientific justification.[25] His philosophy codified the notion that woman's nature is derivative and instrumental, a framework that would influence subsequent antiquity and persist through late classical and medieval thought.

1.6 - Plato: Between Equality and Inferiority

Plato (427–347 BCE), Aristotle's teacher, offers a more ambivalent and internally conflicted account of woman's nature. In the *Republic*, particularly Book V, he envisions an ideal society in which women can serve as guardians and even rulers, provided they receive the same philosophical and physical education as men.[26] For Plato, the decisive criterion for political participation is rational capacity (*logos*),

not biological sex. This opens a proto-egalitarian vision in which the female is not excluded from the highest functions of the *polis*, so long as she demonstrates the same intellectual excellence.[27]

Yet, in other works, Plato reasserts woman's inferiority. In the *Timaeus* (42a–d), he suggests that women originate as reincarnated men who failed in their previous moral and intellectual lives.[28] The female form thus appears as a degraded or secondary manifestation, ontologically dependent upon male failure. Similarly, in the *Laws* and other dialogues, women are often treated as weaker in body and soul, more prone to disorder, and requiring male governance.[29]

This tension reflects dual strands in Plato's thought. On the one hand, rationality—accessible to both sexes—creates space for equality in education and governance. On the other hand, his metaphysical cosmology subordinates woman to man as a derivative or fallen form. The ambivalence of this framework left an enduring legacy. Later Christian and Islamic thinkers would selectively appropriate Plato's thought, generally emphasizing metaphysical inferiority over rational equality, thereby reinforcing hierarchical gender roles rather than dismantling them.

Section Two: Medieval Philosphy

2.1- Augustine: Spiritual Equality, Temporal Subordination

In Christian theology, the interpretation of the Genesis creation narrative became the decisive site for articulating woman's purpose and relation to man. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), one of the most formative figures of Latin Christianity, devoted sustained attention to this theme in his *De Genesi ad Litteram* (Literal Commentary on Genesis). In Book IX, he interprets the creation of Eve from Adam's rib (Gen. 2:21–23) as signifying her role as a helper to man. Yet Augustine carefully circumscribes the scope of this assistance: woman is not created as a partner in intellectual or civic life, but primarily as a collaborator in the work of procreation.[30]

For Augustine, man could engage in the higher pursuits of rational contemplation, governance, and even friendship without the presence of woman. But in the realm of reproduction—essential to the continuity of the human race—he required her.[31] This view restricted woman's raison d'être to biological and familial functions, thereby grounding her creation "for the sake of man" within a theological anthropology that emphasized the primacy of male rationality.

At the same time, Augustine draws a distinction between spiritual and temporal realities. In the realm of the soul, both male and female are equally created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), possessing the same spiritual destiny and capacity for salvation.[32] But in the temporal order—the embodied and social life—woman is subordinated to man, her existence oriented toward his needs. This "dual-level"

anthropology allowed Augustine to affirm spiritual equality while maintaining temporal subordination, thus avoiding outright ontological inferiority but reinforcing gender hierarchy in practice.

2.2 - Eve as a Figure of the Church

Beyond her role in procreation, Augustine also employed allegorical interpretations of Eve. In several sermons and exegetical writings, Eve is presented as a type of the Church, taken from the side of Christ just as she was taken from the side of Adam.[33] This typology draws on the Johannine image of Christ's side being pierced on the cross (John 19:34), from which blood and water—symbols of baptism and the Eucharist—flowed. For Augustine, this parallel underscores that woman's creation, while subordinated temporally, also bears profound spiritual meaning. Eve becomes both a literal companion to Adam and a mystical prefiguration of the redeemed community.

This allegorical use, however, does not erase subordination. Instead, it integrates woman into salvation history by analogy, without granting her independent theological agency. Eve represents the Church as receptive bride, while Adam prefigures Christ as authoritative head.

2.3 - Adam's Headship and Pauline Theology

Augustine further anchors his reading of woman's subordination in Pauline theology. Drawing on 1 Corinthians 11:3 ("the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God"), he develops the doctrine of male headship. For Augustine, this hierarchy does not negate woman's spiritual dignity, but it orders the temporal community in a divinely sanctioned structure.[34] Just as Christ's submission to the Father does not diminish his divinity, woman's subordination to man does not erase her humanity.

This appeal to Pauline hierarchy allowed Augustine to present gender asymmetry as part of the divine economy rather than a product of social convention. The "headship" of Adam over Eve thus becomes both natural and theological, embedding patriarchy into the very structure of Christian anthropology.

2.4 - Lasting Impact

The consequences of Augustine's framework were profound. His interpretation established a theological precedent that endured throughout the Middle Ages: woman's creation was justified as instrumental to man's temporal ends, while her spiritual equality was recognized only in an eschatological sense. This synthesis of equality and subordination became a cornerstone for later thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, who codified Augustine's insights into scholastic theology.[35]

2.5 - Thomas Aquinas: Scholastic Synthesis of Aristotle and Augustine

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), the foremost scholastic theologian of the thirteenth century, provided the most systematic Christian account of woman's creation in his *Summa Theologica*. In Part I, Question 92, he explicitly asks: *"Whether the woman should have been made in the first production of things?"*[36] Aquinas answers that woman was indeed necessary, but her necessity was strictly delimited. She was created primarily as a helper in procreation and domestic life, not as a partner in the works of reason or civic order, for which man alone suffices.[37]

Aquinas's position is a deliberate synthesis of two traditions: the biological essentialism of Aristotle and the theological anthropology of Augustine. From Aristotle, Aquinas adopts the language of deficiency: woman is described as a "defective" or "misbegotten male," whose matter is determined by the formative principle of the male seed.[38] This Aristotelian biology framed woman not as an autonomous realization of human nature but as a deviation from the masculine norm.

From Augustine, however, Aquinas receives the distinction between spiritual and temporal realities. Spiritually, woman shares equally in the *imago Dei*—the image of God—and possesses the same rational soul as man.[39] Temporally, however, her role is subordinated to man's authority, justified not only by Scripture (Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:3) but also by the natural order discerned through Aristotelian philosophy. Aquinas thus fuses the two into a coherent scholastic synthesis: woman is ontologically equal in soul yet functionally inferior in body and social role.

Aquinas extends this synthesis by explicitly denying that woman was created "for her own sake." Instead, she was created "for the sake of man," oriented toward his ends of procreation, companionship within the household, and the continuation of the human race. While her existence is willed by God and thus not accidental, it is fundamentally teleological, lacking autonomous justification apart from man's needs.[40]

This scholastic framework proved enormously influential. By integrating Aristotle's natural philosophy into Christian theology, Aquinas elevated the notion of woman's subordination into both a metaphysical axiom and a theological doctrine. For centuries in Catholic thought, canon law, and pastoral teaching, the claim that woman was created "for" man became naturalized, defended simultaneously by divine revelation and philosophical reasoning.

Section Three: Islamic Philosophy and Exegesis

3.1 - Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā): Aristotelian Continuity

In the Islamic philosophical tradition, Aristotle's legacy was mediated primarily through Arabic translations and the synthetic works of thinkers such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, 980–1037). Avicenna stands out for integrating

Aristotelian natural philosophy with his own metaphysical system in the *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ* and *al-Najāt*. His treatment of gender and the creation of woman is deeply shaped by Aristotle's biological essentialism.

Avicenna argued that the female body was marked by a deficiency of "heat" compared to the male, which rendered women weaker, colder, and less perfect in both physiology and rational faculty. In this schema, woman's role was primarily reproductive: she supplied matter for the offspring, while man provided the formative principle. Thus, woman's very biology was framed as secondary and instrumental, existing in relation to man's generative capacity.[41]

Yet, Avicenna did not entirely collapse woman's status into utility. In his ethical writings, particularly in *al-Shifāʾ* (Book of Ethics), he recognized the necessity of domestic partnership. Marriage, for Avicenna, was part of the natural order (*nizām al-ṭabīʿa*), ensuring the continuation of the species and the maintenance of household harmony. However, this partnership was hierarchical: the husband was the rational head, while the wife's duties were largely confined to childbearing and managing the home.[42]

Avicenna's framework, therefore, represents a continuation of Aristotle's essentialist biology rather than a theological commentary on Qurʾānic creation narratives. He rarely engaged directly with exegetical traditions about Adam and Eve, preferring to situate woman's inferiority within the broader metaphysical structure of form and matter. Still, his philosophy reinforced patriarchal currents in Islamic thought by naturalizing gender inequality within a rational-scientific paradigm.

His influence was enduring: later theologians and philosophers—including al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī—absorbed aspects of his natural philosophy, even while critiquing his metaphysics. In legal and ethical discourse, Avicenna's Aristotelianized view of woman as biologically and rationally subordinate lent intellectual support to exegetical interpretations that emphasized woman's creation "for" man.

3.2 - Ibn Rushd (Averroes): A Philosophical Rebuttal

Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198), the celebrated Andalusian philosopher and jurist, occupies a unique place in Islamic intellectual history for his rigorous commentaries on Aristotle and his engagement with Plato. Unlike most Islamic philosophers, who absorbed Aristotle's biological essentialism uncritically, Ibn Rushd articulated a strikingly different perspective in his *Talkhīs Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya* (Commentary on Plato's *Republic*).

In this work, he criticizes contemporary Muslim societies for relegating women to domestic and reproductive functions, arguing that such confinement was not rooted in nature but in custom and prejudice. For Ibn Rushd, women were fully capable of participating in the same intellectual, political, and even military activities as men—provided they received equal education and training.[43] He laments that by excluding women from public life, societies effectively waste "half of the population," thereby impoverishing their collective strength and prosperity.[44]

What is striking is Ibn Rushd's selective appropriation of the Greek legacy. As a faithful Aristotelian in metaphysics and natural philosophy, one might have expected him to endorse Aristotle's view of women as "deficient males." Yet here he chose to side with Plato's more egalitarian vision, as expressed in the *Republic*, where women could serve as philosopher-rulers and guardians.[45] This divergence reflects Ibn Rushd's pragmatic concern with social utility: he saw no rational basis for excluding women from contributing to the flourishing of the *polis* (or *madīna*). In this sense, Ibn Rushd represents a rare counter-voice within the Islamic philosophical canon. He suggests that woman was not created merely "for" man but for her own rational and social fulfillment. Nonetheless, his position remained largely marginal, overshadowed by the dominance of Aristotelian essentialism (via Avicenna) and traditional Qurʾānic exegesis, which often emphasized hierarchical gender roles. Later Islamic jurists did not incorporate his egalitarian claims into mainstream legal or theological discourse, though modern scholars and reformists have frequently invoked his vision as an early precedent for gender equality.[46]

Section Four: Critical Feminist Reinterpretations

4.1 - Riffat Hassan on the Concept of *Nafs* in Eve's Creation

Riffat Hassan critiques the classical exegetical tradition for treating certain interpretations of woman's creation as unquestioned assumptions, rather than as conclusions derived from well-established authorities. She argues that Qurʾānic verses often cited to justify male preference over woman—such as *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (4:1), *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* (7:189), and *Sūrat Ṣād* (38:6)—have been consistently read in ways that privilege men.

Central to her critique is the interpretation of the Qurʾānic term *nafs* ("soul/self"), which recurs in these passages and has generated a variety of exegetical opinions. Hassan underscores that *nafs* should not be reduced to a material or biological category, as many exegetes have assumed, but rather carries a broader ontological and spiritual meaning. She raises particular concern about the grammatical gender of the word *nafs*, which is feminine in Arabic, even when referring to Adam.

For example, in the verse *"He created you from a single soul (min nafsin wāḥidatin)"* (*Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* 4:1), the term *nafs* is grammatically feminine. Yet,

traditional interpreters have often rendered it in a masculine sense to align it with Adam. This linguistic shift, according to Hassan, reflects not the neutrality of the Qurʾānic language, but rather the interpretive biases of exegetes who sought to reinforce male authority. By highlighting the feminine grammatical structure of *nafs*, she challenges androcentric readings and argues for a more egalitarian understanding of human creation in the Qurʾān.[47]

4.2 - Riffat Hassan on Gendered Translation and the Term *Zawj*

In another instance, Riffat Hassan examines the Qurʾānic phrase *"khalaqa minhā zawjahā"* (*He created from it its mate*), which appears in *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (4:1). Literally, the phrase may be rendered as "from her, her mate." However, most English translations shift the pronouns to the masculine, rendering it as "from him, his mate." Hassan highlights this as a striking example of how translators and exegetes impose androcentric assumptions upon the Qurʾānic text.

She notes that exegetes "have no difficulty at all" in reading *Adam* as male and *Adam's zawj* as female, even though the grammatical structures of *nafs e wāḥida* ("single soul") and *zawj* do not necessitate this interpretation. Hassan questions whether this interpretive pattern reflects a deep-seated psychological orientation: "Are they so conditioned, so filled with preconceived perceptions, that they cannot imagine the first creation—whether designated as *Adam, al-insān, al-bashar, or nafs wāḥida*—as anything other than male?"[48]

In posing this question, she challenges the traditional assumption that masculinity is the default form of primordial humanity. She further critiques male exegetes for their reluctance to adopt an alternative interpretation that might suggest the feminine as primordial, which would invert the gender hierarchy they were eager to preserve. According to Hassan, this reluctance betrays a deliberate tendency to read *nafs wāḥida* as Adam, thereby portraying man as the first and primary creation. Nevertheless, she concedes that her alternative reading lacks direct Qurʾānic contextual support. While she proposes that a more accurate translation of *nafs wāḥida* could open the possibility of reading creation in feminine terms, she ultimately acknowledges that the Qurʾān does not explicitly prioritize the feminine in the order of creation. As a result, she refrains from interpreting Adam as a feminine creation, but insists that the gender-neutral or feminine grammatical markers in the Qurʾānic language have been systematically overlooked by classical exegetes in favor of patriarchal readings.[49]

4.3 - Misrepresentation of Feminine Terms and the Question of *Qawwāmūn*

In the light of *Sūrat al-Qiyāmah* (75:36–39), the expression *nafs wāḥida* alludes to the creation of all humankind from a single and unique source, without alteration

or variability in its course. Riffat Hassan laments that, despite this universalist vision, male interpreters have persistently misrepresented feminine or gender-neutral Qurʾānic terms, ultimately forcing them into masculine frames of reference. After identifying these deviations in interpretation, she turns her attention to three other Qurʾānic terms—*qawwāmūn*, *ḍaraba*, and *al-darajah*—which, she argues, have been consistently colored by patriarchal exegesis to support notions of male superiority over women.

Discussing *qawwāmūn* (Sūrat al-Nisāʾ 4:34), Hassan observes that "it is difficult to overstate the negative impact which the popular Muslim understanding of this verse has had on the lives of Muslim women."[50] In dominant exegesis, the word has often been rendered as *ḥākim* (rulers, governors) over women, reinforcing a hierarchical structure. Yet, linguistically, *qawwāmūn* more plausibly conveys the responsibility of maintaining and providing—particularly in relation to economic and social support within the household and community.

Hassan argues that the Qurʾānic intent is not to enshrine male authority but to assign functional responsibilities according to biological and social realities. Men, by virtue of their physical capacity and social role, are charged with providing livelihood, while women are uniquely entrusted with the burden of childbearing and child-rearing—tasks that place immense physical and emotional demands upon them. Thus, the verse should be read as an exhortation for men to offer full support to women during this period, rather than as a divine mandate for male command or superiority.[51]

4.4 - The Terms *Ḍaraba* and *al-Darajah* in Qurʾānic Exegesis

The second contested term, *ḍaraba* (Sūrat al-Nisāʾ 4:34), has traditionally been understood by many exegetes as granting men the right to physically discipline their wives. This interpretation, Riffat Hassan argues, has generated one of the most harmful perceptions of gender relations in Islam: the legitimization of domestic violence as a means of male control.[52] She stresses that such a reading contradicts the Qurʾān's overarching principles of compassion (*raḥma*) and mutual respect between spouses. Nevertheless, she controversially concedes that certain societies have normalized the notion of disciplining women in cases where they resist socially ascribed roles such as childbearing. While acknowledging this societal view, Hassan maintains a critical distance from it, underscoring instead the urgent need to reformulate *daraba* in light of the Qurʾān's ethical framework, where the term can denote separation, withdrawal, or striking a metaphorical path rather than physical violence.[53]

The third term, *al-darajah* (Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:228), is equally prone to patriarchal misinterpretation. Many classical commentators have construed it as an ontological

or spiritual superiority granted to men over women. Hassan, however, interprets *al-darajah* in a more limited and functional sense, connected to the regulation of divorce. In her reading, this "degree" is not an indication of male dominance but rather a procedural privilege: men, unlike women, are not required to observe the waiting period (*ʿiddah*) following divorce.[54] In this context, *al-darajah* signifies a legal exemption rather than a hierarchical elevation of men above women.

Through her reexamination of *qawwāmūn*, *ḍaraba*, and *al-darajah*, Riffat Hassan demonstrates how deeply entrenched patriarchal assumptions have shaped exegetical traditions. She simultaneously highlights the Qurʾān's potential to be read in ways that uphold gender justice, provided interpreters remain faithful to its ethical and linguistic horizons rather than to inherited cultural biases.

Section Five: Other Feminist Perspectives beyond Riffat Hassan: Reinterpreting *Daraba*, *al-Darajah*, and *Nafs e wāḥida*

The feminist engagement with Qurʾānic verses concerning women—particularly *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (4:1, 4:34), *Sūrat al-Baqarah* (2:228), and *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* (7:189)—represents one of the most sustained challenges to patriarchal hermeneutics within Islamic thought. Scholars such as Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Azizah al-Hibri, Omaima Abou-Bakr, and Saʿdiyya Shaikh have re-examined how the exegetical tradition has historically deployed terms like *nafs wāḥida* ("a single soul"), *daraba* ("to strike / to separate"), and *al-darajah* ("a degree / rank") in ways that reinforced male authority.

5.1 - Amina Wadud: Semantic Reconsideration of *Daraba*

Amina Wadud extends this critique by focusing on the polyvalence of Qurʾānic vocabulary. In her reading of *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (4:34), she rejects the interpretation of *daraba* as a license to physically discipline women, noting that elsewhere in the Qurʾān, *daraba* means "to set forth" (e.g., *Sūrat al-Naḥl* 16:75) or "to part/separate" (e.g., *Sūrat al-Zukhruf* 43:5). For Wadud, in the marital context, the word indicates symbolic separation during conflict, rather than corporal punishment.[55] This interpretation reframes the verse from one of male authority to one of conflict management consistent with Qurʾānic principles of compassion (*raḥma*) and justice (*ʿadl*).

5.2 - Asma Barlas: Hermeneutics of Equality

Asma Barlas takes a more radical hermeneutical stance, contending that any reading of *daraba* that sanctions violence contradicts the Qurʾān's central prohibition of *ẓulm* (oppression).[56] She critiques the patriarchal tradition for universalizing male superiority, despite the Qurʾān's emphasis on reciprocity and equity. On *al-darajah* (2:228), she insists that the verse must be interpreted in light

of the Qurʾān's overarching affirmation of mutuality between spouses (e.g., *Sūrat al-Rūm* 30:21). To grant men an ontological "degree" over women is, for Barlas, a violation of both Qurʾānic logic and divine justice.

5.3 - Fatima Mernissi: Patriarchy and Power Structures

Fatima Mernissi shifts the debate to the socio-political. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she argues that the problem is not the Qurʾān but the patriarchal societies that monopolized its interpretation.[57] According to Mernissi, exegetes used verses such as 4:34 to justify pre-existing systems of male authority, often ignoring the Qurʾān's egalitarian ethos. She reads the focus on *daraba* as part of a broader historical project to discipline women, both in the household and in society, rather than as an authentic Qurʾānic command.

5.4 - Leila Ahmed: Historical Roots of Patriarchal Readings

Leila Ahmed similarly critiques the absorption of patriarchal assumptions into tafsīr. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, she shows how the medieval exegetical consensus that men are "rulers" (*qawwāmūn*) over women was shaped by cultural, not Qurʾānic, logic.[58] For her, verses such as *al-darajah* (2:228) were interpreted to secure male authority in marriage and divorce, despite the Qurʾān offering a framework of reciprocity. Ahmed emphasizes that the Qurʾān's ethical principles were muted by the dominant gender ideologies of the exegetes' time.

5.5 - Azizah al-Hibri: Human Dignity and Legal Reform

Azizah al-Hibri brings a legal-philosophical dimension, arguing that Qurʾānic hermeneutics must be governed by the principle of *karāma* (human dignity).[59] She disputes translations of *daraba* as "to beat," contending that such a reading contradicts the Qurʾān's spirit and the Prophet's example. Instead, she advocates translating *daraba* as "to separate," an interpretation that preserves dignity while providing a non-violent mechanism for resolving marital discord. Al-Hibri also underscores the need for rethinking Islamic family law in light of egalitarian interpretations, a project that directly challenges centuries of male-centered jurisprudence.

5.6 - Omaima Abou-Bakr: Methodological Critique

Omaima Abou-Bakr stresses the methodological issue: patriarchal readings relied on selective literalism.[60] She argues that while exegetes interpreted *al-darajah* as male superiority, they ignored the Qurʾān's broader narrative of spiritual equality (e.g., *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* 33:35). Abou-Bakr maintains that *al-darajah* must be read contextually—as a technical legal allowance in divorce proceedings—rather than as a metaphysical assertion of gender hierarchy.

5.7 - Saʿdiyya Shaikh: Mystical Hermeneutics

Saʿdiyya Shaikh draws from Sufi hermeneutics to reimagine gender. She interprets *nafs wāḥida* as underscoring the unity of human origin, beyond gender binaries. For Shaikh, mystical readings challenge the patriarchal fixation on male dominance by situating men and women as equal participants in the spiritual journey. Her work highlights how Ibn ʿArabī, for instance, viewed the feminine as a manifestation of divine creativity, undermining rigid hierarchical gender models.[61]

5.8 - Ayesha S. Chaudhry: Hermeneutics of suspicion

Ayesha Chaudhry offers a different angle, emphasizing the need for intellectual honesty in acknowledging the patriarchal legacy of tafsīr. In her *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition*, she demonstrates that pre-modern exegetes—from al-Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr—almost unanimously understood *daraba* as "to strike," albeit with restrictions. She critiques modern apologetic readings that deny this history, arguing instead for a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. For Chaudhry, Muslims must confront the patriarchal origins of these interpretations and consciously re-read the text in light of Qurʾānic ethical principles such as justice (*ʿadl*) and compassion (*raḥma*). On *al-darajah* (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:228), she shows how it was historically tied to male economic provision, but insists that in modern contexts, where women also contribute economically, this hierarchy is no longer justified.[62]

Together, these feminist voices represent a spectrum: from Riffat's critique of distortion**,** to Wadud's linguistic re-reading**,** to Barlas's liberationist epistemology**,** and finally Chaudhry's call for ethical responsibility in re-interpretation**.** Despite their differences, all converge on the conviction that patriarchal interpretations of *daraba* and *al-darajah* are inconsistent with the Qurʾān's moral vision.

Section Six: Islamic Exegetical Perspectives

6.1 - Classical Tafsīr on Eve's Creation for the Sake of Man

The Qurʾān presents Adam and his spouse as the progenitors of humankind, yet it differs from later exegetical elaborations in the way it describes Eve's creation. In *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* (7:189), God declares that He "created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them," emphasizing companionship and mutuality rather than material derivation. This formulation opens an important theological and philosophical question: was woman created merely for the sake of man? Across Islamic exegesis, philosophical traditions, and contemporary feminist thought, interpretations of this verse have diverged sharply—some reinforcing hierarchical readings of gender, others stressing reciprocity and equality. This article critically examines these discourses, analyzing the interplay between scriptural hermeneutics, metaphysical reasoning, and feminist critique, in order to

reassess the theological and philosophical implications of woman's creation in Islamic thought.

Exegetes elaborated on these verses with varying emphases. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), in his commentary on Q. 4:1, explains that Eve (*Ḥawwāʾ*) was created after Adam, specifically for his sake, in order to complete his existence and provide companionship.[63] Qatāda (d. 117/735) and Mujāhid (d. 104/722) echo this interpretation, underscoring Adam's loneliness and his need for a partner, which justified Eve's creation.[64] While Mujāhid maintains that Eve was created from Adam's rib, he specifies that it was from the "shortest side of the rib," although al-Ṭabarī himself remains uncertain about which rib it was.[65] This interpretive move frames woman's primordial role as the establishment of affection and companionship with man.

Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), in his *Baḥr al-ʿUlūm*, stresses Eve's secondary status by arguing that her very name and substance derive from man, thereby symbolizing her dependence upon him.[66] Similarly, exegetes such as Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687–8) and Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938) cite traditions that support the notion of a wife's domesticity, connecting the story of Eve's derivation from Adam to the legal and ethical requirement that women remain under the authority of men within the household.[67] Al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), however, adds a more specific detail, asserting that Eve was created from Adam's "left rib, the most crooked one," a symbolic reading that later exegetes connected with women's supposed moral and physical deficiencies.[68]

At the same time, some exegetical voices tempered this hierarchical narrative. For instance, Maybudī (d. 520/1135), in his *Kashf al-Asrār*, though affirming Eve's secondary status, highlights Adam's affection, compassion, and love toward Eve, suggesting a more reciprocal understanding of their primordial relationship.[69] Nevertheless, the dominant strand within the Islamic exegetical tradition reinforced the theological assumption that woman was created *for* man, thereby legitimizing broader patriarchal structures within Islamic law and ethics.

6.2 - Exegetical-Philosophical Approaches to Woman's Nature

Some Muslim exegetes moved beyond mere narration and sought to employ methods from other disciplines, including philosophy, in order to determine the nature and status of woman. In this context, Abū Bakr ʿAtīq al-Sūrabādī (d. 494/1101), in his *Tafsīr*, explores the ontological and legal implications of Eve's creation. Reading *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (4:1) through the lens of jurisprudence and marital law, he poses a fundamental question: if Eve was created from Adam, what is the legal nature of their relationship? Would she be considered his relative, his progeny,

or an entirely new creation? This inquiry is not merely speculative, but relates directly to the permissibility of conjugal relations between Adam and Eve.
Sūrabādī identifies three possible doctrinal positions:
a) Eve was created *for* Adam (li-ajlihi);
b) Eve was created *from* Adam (minhu);
c) Eve was created as an entirely *new being* (mubtadaʿa jadīda).
According to him, the Qurʾān supports primarily the second view—that Eve was created *from* Adam—since the verse "He created you from a single soul and created from it its mate" *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (4:1) implies likeness and continuity.[70] This reasoning allows Eve to be understood as both connected to Adam and yet distinct enough to be legally permissible as his spouse. In his analysis, Sūrabādī thus attempts to resolve a theological and legal dilemma: how could Adam lawfully enter into a marital and sexual relationship with one derived from his own being? By proposing these three frameworks, he provided a philosophical-legal justification that reinforced the doctrine of woman's derivative but still independent status.

6.3 - Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Nature of Eve's Creation

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), in his *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, addresses two main exegetical accounts regarding Eve's creation: first, that she was created from Adam's rib; and second, that she was created as the same type (*min jinsihi*) as Adam. For the first account, al-Rāzī endorses the widespread narration that woman was created from a crooked rib, as transmitted in prophetic ḥadīth.[71] This interpretation underscores woman's ontological dependence upon man, while also carrying moral implications concerning her supposed natural inclination toward deviation, as suggested in the rib metaphor.
For the second account, however, al-Rāzī introduces the opinion of Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322/934), who argued that men and women were created as the same kind, rather than one being derived materially from the other.[72] This reading is supported by several Qurʾānic verses that employ the expression *min anfusikum* ("from yourselves"), such as in *Sūrat al-Naḥl* (16:72), *Sūrat al-Shūrā* (42:11), and *Sūrat al-Tawbah* (9:128), where the phrase does not imply derivation from a physical rib, but rather indicates sameness of species and kind.[73]
Al-Rāzī further develops this interpretation by addressing the philosophical implications of creation. If Eve were literally created from Adam's rib, the process would involve the transformation of a pre-existing part into a new being. By contrast, if she were created as his "type" (*jins*), this suggests creation from an existent category of being, rather than out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). He argues that the

notion of creation ex nihilo is impossible; thus the particle *min* in *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (4:1) should be understood as denoting *ibtidāʾ al-ghāya* ("the beginning of the process"), meaning that human creation as a species began with Adam.[74] Consequently, Eve's creation, while distinct, does not imply that humanity originated from two separate souls—an idea that would contradict the Qurʾānic emphasis on humanity's unity derived from a "single soul" (*nafs wāḥida*).[75]

In this way, al-Rāzī balances the literalist reading of the rib tradition with a more philosophical interpretation rooted in linguistic analysis and metaphysical reasoning. His approach exemplifies the integration of scriptural exegesis with philosophical theology, characteristic of his broader hermeneutical method.

Conclusion

The inquiry into whether woman was created for the sake of man reveals a persistent tension across philosophical, theological, and exegetical traditions. Within Greek philosophy, Plato's ambivalence between rational equality and ontological inferiority and Aristotle's teleological essentialism together provided a conceptual framework in which woman's being was defined in relation to man. Christian theology inherited and systematized these categories: Augustine's distinction between spiritual equality and temporal subordination, and Aquinas's synthesis of Aristotelian biology with scriptural exegesis, entrenched the notion of woman as an auxiliary creation whose purpose was oriented toward man's ends. Similarly, within Islamic intellectual history, Aristotelian categories mediated through Avicenna reinforced hierarchical constructions of gender, while Ibn Rushd's exceptional reliance on Platonic egalitarianism remained marginal in shaping the dominant tradition.

In contrast, contemporary Muslim feminist hermeneutics—exemplified by Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Ayesha Chaudhry—have destabilized these inherited frameworks by interrogating the exegetical and linguistic presumptions that facilitated male-centered interpretations of scripture. Their work reframes Qurʾānic discourse not as affirming male superiority but as inviting a relational model grounded in reciprocity, justice, and ethical accountability. In doing so, they highlight that interpretive traditions are not neutral reflections of divine intent but historically contingent readings shaped by androcentric epistemologies.

Thus, the history of this question demonstrates that woman's creation has been repeatedly construed through the prism of broader philosophical and theological structures of power. To re-examine these traditions today is not simply to trace an intellectual genealogy, but to confront the ethical stakes of interpretation itself. The debate remains alive, not as a speculative inquiry into origins, but as a normative

challenge to reconstruct theological anthropology in ways that resist subordination and affirm the full dignity of women as equal participants in the divine-human relationship.

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