

**ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (Bint al-Shāṭiʿ) (d.1998) and her approach to *tafsīr*:
The journey of an Egyptian exegete from hermeneutics to humanity***

Shuruq Naguib

1 Modern literary *tafsīr* and Bint al-Shāṭiʿ¹

Well-known by the pseudonym Bint al-Shāṭiʿ,² ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān is one of the twentieth century Muslim intellectuals who left an indelible mark on modern literary exegesis of the Qurʾan. She advocated and applied an approach developed by her teacher and husband Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966), who had a path-breaking influence on her academic and intellectual journey. Her published studies of the Qurʾan were all dedicated to al-Khūlī during his life as well as posthumously. Her introductions to these studies and their re-prints, without exception, acknowledge her indebtedness and conformity to his academic method and literary approach to *tafsīr*, perhaps far beyond a student’s sense of duty and gratitude. But then she was, as al-Khūlī himself described her, ‘a disciple of a literary school to which he belonged and the lady of a house in which he resided.’³

This literary school, which emerged in Egypt and the Arab world in the twentieth century, has roots in a pre-modern sub-tradition of Muslim Qurʾan hermeneutics that paid special attention to the rhetoric (*balāgha*) of the Qurʾan and contributed to evolving a concept of the Qurʾan’s linguistic inimitability.⁴ In this sub-tradition, the disciplines of language, rhetoric and Qurʾan exegesis were all interconnected. With the advent of the modern university and its secular disciplinary paradigms, the Qurʾan was excluded from the study of literature and relegated to the ‘class of traditional exegesis.’⁵

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During his years as Professor of Arabic language and literature at King Fuʿād I University (now the University of Cairo), the thrust of al-Khūlī's literary project was to reinstate the Qur'an as the greatest book of Arabic literature (*kitāb al-ʿarabiyya al-akbar*) at the heart of modern Egyptian literary studies.⁶ The project was carried forward by Bint al-Shāṭiʿ and some of his other students like Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallah (*Al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fi'l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, 1953) and Shukrī ʿAyyād (*Yawm al-dīn wa'l-ḥisāb fi'l-Qurʾān*, M.A. Thesis, n.d.),⁷ and continued in the following generation of Arabic studies, mainly by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.⁸

The literary school of tafsīr and Amīn al-Khūlī

The beginnings of modern literary *tafsīr* have been traced back to Muḥammad ʿAbduh's (d.1905) publication of the first critical edition of *Dalāʾil al-iʿjāz* and *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, the two major works of the classical philologist and rhetorician ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078).⁹ ʿAbduh criticized the post-classical fixation on poetic form and stylistic craft which dominated Arabic literary studies until the nineteenth century. His publication of al-Jurjānī's works was intended to revive the classical emphasis on an idea of taste based on a sound sense of Arabic for an appreciation of the Qur'an's eloquence (*bayān*). The aim of this aesthetic would be to understand the psychological and intellectual impact of this ethically infused eloquent language on its hearers – which transformed the Arabs from warring tribes to a great and dominant civilization. This, for ʿAbduh, required the cultivation of a literary taste (*dhawq*) through the diligent study of al-Jurjānī, in addition to constant engagement with the finest works of Arabic literature, prior to embarking on any exegetical activity.¹⁰

The foregrounding of the literary aspect of exegesis is ʿAbduh’s main contribution to the literary school. The direct influence of his ideas can also be traced in both al-Khūlī and Bint al-Shāṭiʿ. In al-Khūlī, it is expressly manifest in a sustained attention to psychological impact, which becomes elaborated into a concept of contextuality: the historical and cultural background of the text’s first hearers is examined to discover what it meant in their context, in order to assess its impact on them.¹¹ In Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, ʿAbduh’s idea of cultivating a literary taste for the Arabic language appears to have marked her work and career. It is evident not only in her defence of taste as a hermeneutic principle,¹² but also in her choice to study in her doctoral thesis (1941-1950) one of the most complex classical Arab poets, Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058). The fact that her *tafsīr* came out after two decades of writing literature, practising literary criticism and teaching the Arabic language, thereby realising the type of exegete ʿAbduh had envisioned, is crucial to Bint al-Shāṭiʿ’s perception of her own credentials as a literary exegete of the Qur’an.¹³ But the main intellectual stimulus to her work comes from al-Khūlī’s elaboration of ʿAbduh’s rudimentary ideas on the relation between *tafsīr* and literature into an exegetical approach to the Qur’an, for which he coined the term *al-tafsīr al-adabī*.¹⁴

Al-Khūlī’s approach to the Qur’an as ‘the greatest book of the Arabic language’ must not however be seen as circumscribed within a purely literary framework. Rather, it was part of a larger Islamic programme of renewal which attributed to the Qur’an transformative potential for culture and society. What gives the literary approach priority in this programme is the fact that the first Arabs accepted Islam ‘on the basis of evaluating the Qur’an as a literary text that surpasses all human production.’¹⁵ The purposes (*maqāṣid*) of this text can be fathomed only if its style and meaning are

soundly comprehended in the same way that it had been by its first Arab hearers.¹⁶ The literary study, therefore, ‘precedes any other juristic, social or poetic investigation of the Qur’an.’¹⁷ It should be premised, al-Khūlī maintained, on a distinction between the text (*al-naṣṣ*) and that which surrounds it (*mā ḥawl al-naṣṣ*), giving primacy to the study of this latter aspect. This entails, first and foremost, the study of i) the world in which the Qur’an was revealed, specifically the cultural, political and social history of ancient Arabs until the time of revelation; and ii) the historical formation of the Qur’an, mainly the chronology and circumstances of its revelation and the history of its compilation and recension.¹⁸

The knowledge rendered by studying the Qur’an’s historical context (*mā ḥawl al-naṣṣ*) would provide the grounds for the subsequent linguistic investigation of the text (*al-naṣṣ*). However, this enquiry too was perceived by al-Khūlī to be historical in the first place. Its principle aim is to establish the emergence and development of word meanings (*tārīkh zuhūr al-ma‘ānī*), by applying the methods of historical philology. Al-Khūlī even attempted, with limited success, to produce a lexicon that dates Arabic and Qur’anic connotations, taking into consideration the different periods of revelation.¹⁹ Echoing ‘Abduh, he emphasised that the ensuing analysis of grammatical, stylistic and poetic structures should focus on the meanings and their effect, and not on grammatical or artistic craft. The study of any of these linguistic aspects must be conducted empirically by undertaking a topical analysis of all the relevant Qur’anic occurrences according to the circumstances and the chronological order of the Qur’an’s descent (*inzāl*).²⁰

Al-Khūlī’s modern literary *tafsīr* was dominated first and foremost by historicist

concerns, which led him to formulate a historical concept of revelation as descent (*inzāl*). Applying his own method to the term *inzāl* in the Qur'an, he concluded that it describes the bringing of God's inner speech from one place to another 'in a metaphorical sense intended to [indicate] its coming into existence amongst people and its formation in the world.'²¹ Influenced by Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorans*, al-Khūlī thus attempted to historicise the Qur'an without negating its divine origin, a line of thinking that has reverberated since then in Abū Zayd's notion of *inzāl* as transformation of the Qur'an from divine revelation to a human text.²²

It is in light of these historicist considerations that al-Khūlī's preoccupation with the Qur'an's history can be understood. In addition to his historical lexicon, he embarked on a comprehensive critical history of the Qur'an entitled *Tārīkh al-Qur'ān*, which aimed at explaining how the text's historical unfolding shaped its form and content.²³ He viewed these historical studies, which remain incomplete and in manuscript form,²⁴ as groundwork for a literary *tafsīr* of the Qur'anic text that was yet to be completed; given their substantial length, his engagement in them could be the reason why he never came to author any substantial work of *tafsīr adabī*.

Al-Khūlī's literary approach represents one strand in the response of reformist Muslim scholars of the early twentieth century to the challenge of nineteenth century historicism, principally encountered in orientalism's historical criticism of the Qur'an. This response, as exemplified by al-Khūlī, was focused on two major points. First, he recognised that the credibility of the Qur'an would be undermined if its narratives were subjected to the historical method, but this outcome could be counterbalanced based on the argument that, in coming into the world, it has taken a poetic form. Its narratives

should then be treated as literary devices and not as historical accounts. It is for this reason that al-Khūlī often asserted that the contemporary study of the Qur'an should be 'purely and exclusively literary, unaffected by any consideration beyond that (*ghayr muta'aththir bi-ayy i'tibār warā' dhālik*)',²⁵ an idea that is reprehensible, for certain, to more conservative Muslim scholars.²⁶ Second, a true understanding of the Qur'an as literary text is possible only through the application of the historicist principle according to which the meaning of a text is totally dependent on its history; hence al-Khūlī's life-time study of the historical context of the Qur'an.

Although al-Khūlī expressed his awareness of the effect of history on reading the Qur'an when interpreters extend their personalities, prejudices and other interests onto the text,²⁷ he expected his own approach to render a 'true' reading. Underlying this there is a positivist supposition that the scholar can be emancipated from historicity if s/he seeks 'truth as it is, as it is reached and as it comes and not as he wants it, or desires it, or is prejudiced toward it.'²⁸ Al-Khūlī calls this 'the liberation of methods' (*tahrīr al-manāhij*),²⁹ which is only possible through a rigorous and systematic

...compilation of all traditions and information about the subject of enquiry...and the critical examination of this vast corpus to purge it of the illusions of the infatuated, the grudges of the detesters, and the lies of the fabricators...which are rampant with prejudices.³⁰

The basic problem that al-Khūlī attempts to address in his work is a methodological one. To the end of salvaging Islamic thought, he dedicated his entire career to reconstructing a Muslim methodology upon scientific reasoning in order to minimise errors in understanding the truth of the Islamic message that was to be gleaned from the Qur'an. If the problem of the historical truth of Qur'anic narratives is precluded by giving primacy to the literary concern, then the application of a systematic literary

method, purged of ‘religious prejudice’ and taking into account the historicity of the Qur’an itself, can produce accurate knowledge about its moral content. Equating truth with knowledge verified by a systematic method, al-Khūlī considered the readings resulting from the application of past non-empirical exegetical methods to be flawed and prejudiced. Although he insisted on the importance of ‘*qaṭl al-qadīm baḥthan*’³¹ as the first step in any programme of renewal, the literal meaning ‘killing the old [tradition] by research’ is not without resonance in this case.

The methodological approach to renewal and to *al-tafsīr al-adabī* proposed by al-Khūlī is representative of the appropriation in Muslim modernist thought both of the Enlightenment ideal of detached reason and its later tensions with historicism, i.e. the idea that understanding is conditioned by historical context. His proposed methodologies are clearly caught up in the broader nineteenth century project to resolve this tension by extending the model of the sciences to the humanities, giving rise to literary historicism in modern literary studies. But whereas his work may be seen in the final analysis as epitomising a theologically-motivated effort to overcome and transcend historicity by reifying method, the work of the contemporary proponent of *al-tafsīr al-adabī* Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd represents the reification of historicity itself and the total surrender to it; this is the opposite end of the scale, where the interpretation of the Qur’an cannot transcend its historical and cultural determinedness.³²

Bint al-Shāṭi’s place on this trajectory has been harder to determine, and her approach has been deemed anything from modern to anti-modernist. Her *tafsīr* work is the most extensive produced by any member of this literary school and has come to represent the

realisation of al-Khūlī's *tafsīr* methodology. In looking at her life and *tafsīr*, her contribution and place as a twentieth century literary exegete will be reconsidered.

Bint al-Shāṭi's journey to Amīn al-Khūlī

Both Bint al-Shāṭi³³ and Amīn al-Khūlī continued 'Abduh's reformism, which endeavoured to rework Islamic thought in relation to modernity by reviving an Islamic principle of rationality as the basis of knowledge within the framework of faith.³⁴ Yet Bint al-Shāṭi³ was unique, as a woman of the first generation of an emerging tradition of Arab women academics and intellectuals. Unlike many of her female peers, however, her intellectualism was not primarily formed within the secular educational system that was beginning to open up for girls at the time. Due to her lineage to a milieu of *Azharī* Shaykhs and instructors including the fifteenth Shaykh of al-Azhar, Aḥmad al-Damhūjī,³⁵ Bint al-Shāṭi³ was trained at home in the traditional religious and linguistic sciences from a very early age. She memorised the Qur'an at the local Qur'an school or *kuttāb* before the age of ten, and spent much of her childhood in dedicated home study under the guidance of her father in the provincial Nile town Dimyāṭ. It is against this background that Bint al-Shāṭi³ was uniquely positioned to become the first Arab Muslim woman writer to venture into Qur'anic and religious scholarship before al-Azhar opened its doors to women in 1962.

Despite her father's opposition to secular female education outside the home, Bint al-Shāṭi³ aspired to formal qualifications and pursued her education, but not without some tragic consequences within her family. After completing foundation-level teacher training, she went on to obtain a teacher's proficiency certificate in 1928, with the

highest distinction at national level, from the advanced Teachers' College (*madrasat al-mu'allimāt*) in Manṣūra, only to discover afterwards that her teacher training did not qualify her to join the university, and that she had been trapped within a bifurcated educational system engendered by social and gender discrimination. Impelled toward the university, she laboured for seven years (1928-1935) as a full-time elementary teacher and distance-learning student, and succeeded in obtaining the equivalent certificates for primary and secondary education in a remarkable three years (1929-1932). She was delayed from proceeding for a further three years, as university regulations prohibited distance-study, which she insisted upon out of fear of her father. A compromise was informally reached with the university, and in 1935 Bint al-Shāṭi' started a BA degree in Arabic.

Despite her initial disillusionment with university education, which she considered unchallenging and fragmented compared to the epistemologically integrated religious sciences, her decision to withdraw was reversed after her first lecture with Amīn al-Khūlī. The encounter left her with a sense of the 'real' import of the modern concept of 'methodology' which, until then, she had understood as *madhhab* (a school of thought), a term which had become associated with ideology and prejudice in reformist Muslim discourse. From then on Bint al-Shāṭi' became the most devoted advocate of al-Khūlī's application of a modern methodology in literary studies. Due to university politics, however, she was prevented from studying under his supervision for her doctoral degree. Instead, she completed her thesis with the Egyptian thinker and academic Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (d. 1973), known as the Dean of Arabic Letters. She was awarded a doctorate with distinction in 1950 for her dissertation entitled *Risalāt al-ghufrān li-Abī al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī* (*The Epistle of Forgiveness by Abī al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī*). In 1952, she

resumed the university career she had given up due to family reasons in 1944, taking up positions in Egypt and other Arab countries and eventually holding two prestigious chairs, first as Professor of Arabic at ʿAyn Shams University (1962-1970), and then as Professor of *Tafsīr* and Advanced Studies at Qarawyyīn University in Morocco from 1970 until the early 1990s.

Her writings

Bint al-Shāṭiʿs professional writing career began in women's magazines in the early 1930s, as the editor of *Al-Nahḍa al-nisāʿiyya* (*Women's Renaissance*),³⁶ then as a contributor to the feminist magazine *al-Miṣriyya* (*The Egyptian Woman*) and a columnist in *al-Ahrām* newspaper for the rest of her life. She had a distinct style and an independent character which marked her writings, as well as her fierce intellectual debates with some of Egypt's influential thinkers like ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (d. 1964)³⁷ and Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd (d. 2009).³⁸ Her early writings in *al-Ahrām* were marked by an engagement with social issues.³⁹ Informed by her rural background, her first two books *al-Rīf al-Miṣrī* (*The Egyptian Countryside*, 1936) and *Qaḍiyyat al-fallāḥ* (*The Peasant Question*, 1939) decried the poor conditions of Egyptian peasantry and the need for a state programme of reform and education appropriate to the rural context.⁴⁰ These writings brought her to the fore of public debates on social issues of the time, earning her in 1936 the State Prize in the Social Sciences (for *al-Rīf al-Miṣrī*),⁴¹ and an offer to work in the Egyptian Ministry of Social Affairs.⁴²

Despite the rapid fame her social commentary brought her, Bint al-Shāṭiʿs dedication to academic research was affirmed after her encounter with al-Khūlī. He inspired her to direct her efforts during the 1940s to the study of Arabic literature as a prerequisite for a

literary appreciation of the Qur'an, culminating in her award-winning edition of Ma'arrī's *Risālat al-ghufrān* in 1950. Themes of peasant exploitation and social injustice recurred in her literary output of those years but with a strong focus on gender. Her 1942 novel, *Sayyid al-ʿizba: Qiṣṣat imraʾa khāṭiʾa* (*Lord of the Manor: The Story of a Sinful Woman*) and her *al-Hilāl* periodical short stories, collected in 1952 in *Sirr al-Shāṭiʾ* (*The Secret of the Shore*), deal with gender injustice, religious hypocrisy and moral corruption in Egyptian society.

In the following decade, drawing upon her training in textual analysis of Islamic sources, her literary talent, and her interest in gender, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ produced a widely acclaimed series of biographies of early Muslim women, especially women of the Prophet's household (*Tarājim sayyidāt bayt al-nubuwwa*):⁴³ *Nisāʾ al-nabiyy* (*Wives of the Prophet*, 1954), *Banāt al-nabiyy* (*Daughters of the Prophet*, 1956), *Baṭalat Karbalāʾ* (*The Heroine of Karbalāʾ*, 1956), *Umm al-nabiyy* (*Mother of the Prophet*, 1956). She also worked on the biographies and literary trajectories of *Sukayna bint al-Ḥusayn* (n.d.), a poet and literary critic from the Prophet's family, *al-Khansāʾ* (1957), a poet and companion of the Prophet Muḥammad, and *Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya* (1962), a famous Muslim ascetic and poet of the eighth century. These three later biographies shift the interest from women related to the Prophet to women associated with Arabic literature, shedding a contemporary light on the history of early Muslim women's contribution to the formation of the Arabic language, and the intersection of their religious and literary identities in a way that seems to set precedent to Bint al-Shāṭiʾs own career.

This biographical series became remarkably popular⁴⁴ and firmly established Bint al-Shāṭiʾ as a prominent Islamic scholar and writer in the Arab world, before she

proceeded in the 1960s to publish her famous studies of the Qur'an: *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī li'l-Qur'ān al-karīm (The Literary Interpretation of the Qur'an)* in two volumes (1962; 1968) and *al-I'jāz al-bayānī li'l-Qur'ān wa-masā'il Nafi' ibn al-Azraq (The Qur'an's Rhetorical Inimitability and the Questions of Nafi' ibn al-Azraq [the seventh century Khārijī leader who interrorgated the early exegete Ibn 'Abbās on Qur'an exegesis], 1971)*. It is in these works that Bint al-Shāṭi' presented to a wider audience an application of al-Khūlī's *tafsīr* methodology; this earned her an unprecedented place in Islamic studies in general and as the first *mufasssira* in the *tafsīr* genre.⁴⁵

Bint al-Shāṭi''s writings covered a broad range of literary, social and linguistic studies across more than sixty publications;⁴⁶ those mentioned here are only the landmarks of her career. Including her *tafsīr*, they addressed the major questions occupying Arab and Muslim intellectuals of the twentieth century. Her early work resonated with a rising feminist movement with which she had sympathies, though she never proclaimed herself a feminist. The 'woman' question remained an undercurrent in a great deal of her literary output, her biographical works, and even her *tafsīr* studies, such as her excursus on the creation story in *Maqāl fi'l-insān (A Treatise on the Human Being, 1969)*, where she rejected the view of male precedence in creation based on reading the Qur'an as emphasising the single origin of men and women,⁴⁷ a reading that would become significant for later Muslim feminist hermeneutics.⁴⁸ Her gender interest is also more directly addressed in two short treatises: *al-Mar'a al-muslima ams wa'l-yawm (The Muslim Woman, Yesterday and Today, 1960?)* and *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī li-tahrīr al-mar'a (The Islamic Concept of Women's Liberation, 1967)*.⁴⁹

Bint al-Shāṭi's work was also framed by other pressing issues of her time. Her writings on the Arabic language, for example, reflect an intellectual agenda seeking cultural authenticity and continuity with the past. This agenda acquired a nationalist tone during her years as Chair of Arabic at 'Ayn Shams University, which coincided with the height of the post-colonial Arab nationalism of the 1960s.⁵⁰ The nationalist agenda coloured some of her other studies as well: in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*, for example, al-Khūlī's notion of the Qur'an as '*kitāb al-ʿarabiyya al-akbar*' takes on a new meaning as the locus of the linguistic and cultural unity of the Arabs and the source of 'key solutions to many of the questions of our nationalist existence'.⁵¹ Bint al-Shāṭi's unmistakable Arab and Islamic identity may suggest that her thought is bounded by intellectual and religious conservatism. In her writings, however, she emerges as a thinker with a complex message on the relation between modernity, the contemporary era and tradition; this is a message that is far more concerned with an intellectual originality rooted in tradition than with conserving the past for the sake of authenticity. The relation between past and present, exemplified in works such as *Turāthunā bayn māḍīn wa-ḥāḍir* (1967), is perhaps the most pervasive theme in all her writings, not least in her *tafsīr* work, as demonstrated below.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is 'the first ever to be written by a woman',⁵² and that it has gained a wide readership,⁵³ Bint al-Shāṭi's *tafsīr* has not received the same attention in recent scholarship as other, more controversial, works of Qur'an interpretation. Her exegetical endeavour is often deemed to conform to al-Khūlī's approach,⁵⁴ offering 'a reliable picture of what a Koran commentary by Amīn al-Khūlī would have looked like.'⁵⁵ This view may be justifiable in light of her own proclamations in this respect, but it is, nevertheless, an overestimation, that ignores the

personal and poetic in her relationship with al-Khūlī as teacher and beloved husband.⁵⁶ Apart from a few brief published studies⁵⁷ interested mainly in the methodical dimension of her *tafsīr* (such as thematic and cross-referential techniques of interpretation), the degree of redirection and/or any creative shifts of emphases in her adaptation of al-Khūlī's method are yet to be fully investigated.

In what follows some light will be shed on this issue. Three hermeneutic questions that arise in any process of interpretation, viz. authority, understanding and application, will be considered in relation to Bint al-Shāṭi's *tafsīr* work, in light of other intersecting questions about tradition, language and gender. It is important to note that Bint al-Shāṭi only very briefly outlines her approach in her introductions to the two volumes of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*. However, when read alongside her exegesis, and against some of her other writings, genuine hermeneutic insights related to these three questions can be traced in these introductory expositions. To situate the discussion in her own *tafsīr* work, the following sections focus on her treatment of two verses from the first volume of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*, Q. 102:8 and Q. 90:4 (Bint al-Shāṭi preserves the ancient structure of verse-by-verse interpretation in her treatment of each of the fourteen Meccan suras in the two volumes of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*).⁵⁸

2 Authority and tradition in Bint al-Shāṭi's *tafsīr*

Then, on that day, you will be asked concerning na^cīm. (thumma la-tus²alunna yawma²iẓin ^can al-na^cīm, Q. 102:8)

Bint al-Shāṭi begins by outlining the exegetical disagreement on 'the question concerning *na^cīm*' in this verse. She finds the preoccupation of past exegetes with the speaker (or questioner), addressee, and location of the question subversive to the

explicit intention of the Qur'an on this occasion, deflecting attention from the questioner to the question itself.⁵⁹ The word *na'īm*, she notes, has given rise to multiple interpretations. Citing al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d.606/1209), she lists nine possible readings:

The least of which is [the pleasure of] having slippers, and the highest is the Prophet...and between the two come the alleviation of [the strictness of] divine laws; the giving of the Qur'an; sustenance, drink and dwelling; soundness of body, hearing and sight; the cool shade; leisure, safety and comfort; the pleasure of slumber; affluence, and good looks.⁶⁰

Bint al-Shāṭi' cites extensively the evidence which past exegetes garnered from the Qur'an, Ḥadīth and authoritative exegetical traditions. She examines the Arabic lexicons, concluding that *na'īm* does, in fact, signify various meanings, such as leisurely living, wealth, generosity, and the splendour of gardens.⁶¹ This last meaning, she believes, could be its original one, given that the first form of the verb *na'ima*, in reference to a wooden branch, indicates its becoming green. *Na'īm* could also be used metonymically to signify religion, guidance, shade, wellbeing, and slumber.

Although Bint al-Shāṭi' concedes that *na'īm* may be polysemic and thus accepts its semantic variance, which is attested by extra-Qur'anic textual and lexical evidence, she is concerned that the specific Qur'anic context cannot possibly permit these irreconcilable meanings. Critical of past exegetes' inattentiveness to this problem, she asks disparagingly: 'But could the elevated phrasing of the Qur'an sustain such variety in one context?'⁶² Her concern does not arise because of the polysemy of the word *na'īm* or an absence of exegetical preference, however, for she goes on to record several exegetical decisions on this word. For example, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922) preferred to restrict it to worldly pleasures, al-Rāzī extended it to all blessings and bounties, arguing that its grammatical definiteness indicates inclusivity (*lām al-istighrāq*), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) narrowly defined it as the fulfillment of physical desires (reading the

verse as addressing one who devotes himself to such pleasures), and lastly al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108) paraphrased *na^cīm* as ‘plentiful bounties’.⁶³

This exegetical polyvalence is not in itself problematic; for Bint al-Shāṭi³ it is rather the wide discrepancy between the available readings, inadvertently obscuring and fragmenting the meaning of the Qur’anic text, that demands attention. In order to reclaim the ‘true’ meaning, she proposes to reinstate the text as the final authority attesting its own meaning: ‘In the face of such variance...such inconsistency whereby the word *na^cīm* is interpreted once as the slippers or the shade, another time as the Prophet, and a third time as all the bounties of this world...we seek refuge in the Qur’an and judgment from it concerning that on which they disagree.’⁶⁴

The judgement of the Qur’an is then elicited by cross-referencing all nominal derivatives of *N^c-M* occurring in the Qur’an (i.e. *ni^cma*, *ni^cmā³*, *an^cum*, and *ni^cam*), demonstrating that, at all times, they signify the bounties of this world. The consequent investigation of *na^cīm* reveals that its other fifteen occurrences specifically refer to the Hereafter often in the formula ‘the pleasure of paradise’ (*jannat al- na^cīm*).⁶⁵ In contrast to the disagreement among past exegetes and the disparity of their readings, the Qur’an thus determinedly and consistently specifies *na^cīm* as ‘the pleasures of the Hereafter’;⁶⁶ as Bint al-Shāṭi³ observes, this is the only meaning they never mentioned.

Bint al-Shāṭi³ describes the reading rendered by this systematic review of *na^cīm* in its various Qur’anic contexts as ‘*ḥukm al-Qur’ān*’ (the judgment of the Qur’an),⁶⁷ before which the exegete, she argues, is no longer free to choose between other lexical or metonymical possibilities. Any disparity or uncertainty about the meaning of *na^cīm* is

henceforth resolved by the Qur'an's adjudication: 'In the light of the Qur'an's guidance, which strictly uses the word form *na'īm* exclusively to refer to the Hereafter, and not *ni'ma*, *ni'mā'*, *an'um*, or *ni'am*, we can only understand the divine question in Q. 102:8 as concerning the pleasures of the Hereafter.'⁶⁸

The meaning of *na'īm* now pinned down, Bint al-Shāṭi' immediately turns her attention to the thematic linkages between this final verse of *Sūrat al-Takāthur* and the earlier verses. She sees here an opportune moment to examine such 'mysteries of the Qur'an's eloquence'⁶⁹. The primary theme uniting the whole sura⁷⁰ can be summed up as follows: those engrossed in multiplying their material gain and transient worldly pleasures (Q. 102:1) will be asked in the Hereafter, when they have seen Hellfire and become certain of it (Q. 102:2-7), about the real and lasting pleasure (Q. 102:8). The eloquence of expression in Q. 102:8, Bint al-Shāṭi' explains, is that the question concerning the 'true' pleasure of paradise occurs only in the Hereafter, when indubitable knowledge and certainty are possible. The warning in this question is therefore perfectly fitting to the tone of admonition that dominates the whole sura.⁷¹ Bint al-Shāṭi' concludes that with this understanding of Q. 102:8, the interconnectedness and coherence of the sura's verses is revealed, and past interpretations which have obfuscated the exegetes' grasp of 'the secrets of expression in this lasting literary miracle' can finally be set aside.⁷²

If from the outset Bint al-Shāṭi' had aimed to set aside past interpretations, why are they discussed at such length in her interpretation of Q. 102:8, as elsewhere in her *tafsīr*?

Past tafsīr and the formation of authority

The place of tradition in Bint al-Shāṭi's *tafsīr* has been the subject of cursory explanations in recent scholarship, where it is often reiterated that she aimed at discounting the interpretations of past exegetes on literary grounds,⁷³ by subjecting them to a 'rigorous analysis' in light of the findings of her deductive method.⁷⁴ Considering Bint al-Shāṭi's pronounced critique of the exegetical tradition's 'juxtaposition of mutually exclusive meanings',⁷⁵ exemplified in her interpretation of Q. 102:8, it is not implausible to see her engagement with it as a strategy to clear the way for a true and unclouded understanding of the Qur'an, and establish her own exegetical authority. In a textual religious tradition like Islam the acquisition of interpretative authority is crucial if a new reading of the founding text is to gain a place in the community. In the *tafsīr* genre, authority is traditionally acquired through expression of belonging to the historical interpretative community in the form of citations of available interpretations of past generations. The citation process, however, does not entail agreeing with the past. In the first place, it is a declaration of allegiance to the predecessors. Through the 'selection, presentation, and organisation of citations', old readings continue to re-surface, ensuring variety while at the same time allowing the exegete to exercise creativity.⁷⁶ The legitimacy and authority of an exegetical work does not depend only on loyalty to past opinions, but is also derived from the exegete's engagement with the sanctioned linguistic and theological disciplines. Through their demonstration of knowledge and hermeneutic perceptiveness in applying these disciplines to the Qur'anic text the individual exegete's contribution becomes authorised as 'new', rather than being a mere repetition of past opinions. At the same time, along with past readings, the religious disciplines constitute the boundaries of every new reading.⁷⁷

Bint al-Shāṭi's treatment of Q. 102:8 is illustrative of how she establishes her authority as an exegete along these familiar lines. Like her predecessors who authored traditional works of *tafsīr*, she continues to incorporate past interpretations through a process of citations and the naming of authorities, from the earliest to the most recent generations. Even though she singles out one reading as the most sound, other readings are still cited in her work. Through her attention to and representation of traditional exegesis, Bint al-Shāṭi³ thus derives authority, as earlier exegetes did, by demonstrating erudite knowledge and exercising selection and reorganisation of the tradition's detail and variety. Yet as she pays allegiance to the past in this way, she does not remain in awe of its authority.⁷⁸ For although like her predecessors she emphasises that the Qur'an must be read with the assistance of language, grammar and rhetoric,⁷⁹ unlike them, she excludes the more theologically-oriented disciplines (of *kalām*, *fiqh* and *taṣawwuf*), and applies her linguistic knowledge with careful and marked determination to delineate the limitations of the exegetical tradition's readings of the Qur'an.

In her introduction to the third edition of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, Bint al-Shāṭi³ suggests that the *ad seriatum* hermeneutical form which the tradition followed unquestioningly in its treatment of the Qur'an in fact hindered achievement of a more coherent elucidation of its meaning. In contrast to this decontextualised, piecemeal approach, she describes her own *tafsīr* as being based on al-Khūlī's thematic method; this investigates the meaning of a Qur'anic word or expression by excavating its earliest connotation (*al-dalāla al-lughawiyya al-aṣīla*), which is then measured against Qur'anic usage, both in the immediate context of the verse and sura under consideration and in the larger context of the whole Qur'an, by cross-examining all its occurrences therein.⁸⁰ This hermeneutic indeed diverges from and rejects the longstanding and well-established

verse-by-verse approach. It relies on a contemporary literary and linguistic method rather than on past readings, and is, therefore, ‘entirely different from the established way’.⁸¹ In her view, the established way is beset by a flawed method that has permitted sectarian sensibilities and extraneous material, such as the *isrāʿīliyyāt*, to direct Qurʾanic interpretation. In the absence of a sound method past exegetes, according to Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, could not overcome the constraints resulting from:

...variation in their tastes, mentalities, milieus and personalities in the wide Islamic world extending from China and India in the far East to Marrakech and Andalusia in the far West, a world divided by doctrinal, political and sectarian intolerance. This has inevitably led to diverse nations and sects reflecting on Islam’s religious book [the Qurʾan] in light of their own specific circumstances and settings. Those among them who interpreted it did so in a manner which, more often than not, lacked a sound sense of the Arabic language and its essential rules and structures.⁸²

Methodologically, Bint al-Shāṭiʿ distanciates her approach from that of traditional *tafsīr*, yet textually she continues to re-engage with it throughout the two volumes of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*, where almost on every page there appears the name of a classical exegete, grammarian, and/or rhetorician. The sustained intensity of this textual representation exceeds considerations of ‘tactical necessity’⁸³ or the requirements of authority formation. Despite the overt critique, the degree and scope of engagement imply a profound sense of the tradition’s significance. Bint al-Shāṭiʿ hints at her complex relation with traditional *tafsīr* in her preliminary affirmation in the first volume that ‘No fair-minded [reader/interpreter] dares to be ungrateful to the contribution of any one of all those [past authorities] who exerted great efforts in the service of the Qurʾan and left their legacies for the nurture of generations.’⁸⁴

Published five years after *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*, her autobiography ‘*Ala al-Jisr* (1967) is revealing on this point. For the most part, it is a self-reflective account of her journey to

the university and modern academia, in which themes of identity preservation, commitment to the past, and the pressures of change predominate. Here Bint al-Shāṭi³ depicts her persistent efforts to overcome her cultural and intellectual alienation, as she reluctantly relocated from rural Egypt to urban and class-prejudiced Cairene society to pursue higher education at King Fu³ād I University during the early 1930s.⁸⁵ She recounts that her early ambivalence toward the ‘modern methods’ imparted at the university was due to her fear of becoming estranged from the past authorities of the hermeneutic and linguistic traditions often referred to in her account as the family and kin whose company she had kept since her early days at her father’s religious seminary.⁸⁶ It is not until the encounter with al-Khūlī that her ambivalence gives way to confidence in the new systematic method of reading, which would open up her horizons beyond the ‘insular walls’ of her previous epistemological stance,⁸⁷ according to which she had deemed the tradition to be the epitome of all knowledge: ‘And so did the University give me of her new ways [*jadīdahā*] what I had never imagined. And the old [*al-qadīm*] that I brought her began to be polished [when subjected to] the methodology of Professor al-Khūlī.’⁸⁸

This message concerning the importance of tradition is re-expressed soon after in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II* (1968). Here Bint al-Shāṭi³ stresses at the outset that her systematic method of reading the Qur’an continues to benefit from her reading of past exegetes.⁸⁹ Yet her recognition of their worth does not preclude a critical analysis, which often reveals the inadequacies of these efforts for a contemporary understanding of the Qur’an. Nor does her critique presuppose the obliteration of this tradition as its outcome. Quite the contrary, her reading of the Qur’an is invigorated by an ongoing dialogue with the *tafsīr* tradition, whereby she reconsiders ‘the exegetes’ efforts in light

of the Qur'an, accepting [the opinion] that is textually and contextually sustainable, then recording all the other opinions that the text rejects, drawing attention to their inconsistency, contrivance, or arbitrariness.⁹⁰ This dialogue with the tradition is, perhaps, the most noticeable discursive feature of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*. It follows a rhythmic pattern of climaxing toward dismantling the past interpretive tradition prior to presenting her own reading (as discussed above in the case of Q. 102:8, for example), only to climb down again and foreground that very tradition as the terrain from which she begins her treatment of the following verse or sura. In this process the dialogue becomes a constitutive structure of the reading itself, a point pursued further below.

Construed through a Gadamerian lens, this dialogue discloses a consciousness of the hermeneutic process not far from Gadamer's insight that 'Even where life changes violently, as in the ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the transformation of everything than anyone knows, and combines with the new to create a new value'.⁹¹ Tradition is, in this sense, always constitutive of the prior knowledge an exegete brings to a hermeneutic situation. It is the place where an exegete already stands. To recognise this locatedness is neither regression to the past nor self-subjection to something other or alien, but a *choice*, and hence 'an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one',⁹² to recognise that the language we speak is already constituted by tradition. This recognition is not an opposition to change but an understanding of tradition as a field where knowledge, identity and authority intersect in their process of formation.⁹³

In this light, Bint al-Shāṭi's contemporary *tafsīr* which begins from the terrain of the tradition represents a hermeneutic choice not to premise her reading on obliteration but on recognition of the *tafsīr* tradition as the primary source for her cultural and intellectual formation, and hence as the place where she stood prior to approaching the Qur'an with new ways of understanding. Not only so, but her competence in understanding the language of tradition, which she deemed the grounds for her authority⁹⁴ and the very mark of her distinctness amongst her contemporaries,⁹⁵ enabled her to engender a dialogue between past (readings) and present (ways of reading). This dialogical hermeneutic of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī* consequently allows the presence of the past to be textually represented and hence symbolically re-affirmed, while at the same time intellectually re-evaluated. In this manner, Bint al-Shāṭi neither abandons past authorities (as she once feared),⁹⁶ nor does she waste the moment of the new reading.

Transcending the tradition

Key to the double movement of reaffirmation and re-evaluation of tradition is the role of the Qur'an as adjudicator, a role which is made possible by Bint al-Shāṭi's commitment to applying an old hermeneutic principle, 'the Qur'an interprets itself (*al-Qur'ān yufassiru ba^cduhu ba^cdan*)'; a principle developed but never fulfilled by past authorities because of their piecemeal approach to the Qur'an.⁹⁷ The case of *na^cīm* in Q. 102:8 demonstrates how she transforms this principle into a framework for the cross-examination of intertextual (across suras) and intratextual (within a particular sura) relations by means of which the Qur'an's judgment can be elicited against the variant and inconsistent readings offered by the tradition. The ensuing reading, presented as the Qur'an's judgement (*ḥukm al-Qur'ān*), is legitimated by invoking the authority of the divine text itself. In the concise exposition of her approach in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, she

defines her whole endeavour as directed by ‘Seeking judgement [*muḥtakima*] from it alone... guided by the meticulous examination of its lexicon, thoughtful consideration of its context, and contemplative listening to the intimations of expression in this unique type of inimitable eloquence.’⁹⁸ In the introduction of the third edition Bint al-Shāṭi³ again sums up this approach, as follows:

In understanding the secrets of its expression we seek judgment (*naḥtakimu*) on the basis of the textual context, complying by what its text and spirit can sustain. We lay before it the opinions of the exegetes, accepting what the text accepts and avoiding what has been imposed in *tafsīr* books of the intrusive *isrā’iliyyāt* [material] and sectarian interpretations.

In addition, we seek judgement (*naḥtakimu*) from our greatest Book to direct the analysis of its syntax and the subtleties of its eloquence. We measure the rules of the grammarians and rhetoricians against the Book, but we do not measure the Book against such rules, which were set by scholars the majority of whom were new to the Arabic language and did not acquire its [native] taste and spontaneity, even though they may have mastered the knowledge and artistry of the language.⁹⁹

The choice of the term *iḥtikām* by an attentive philologist like Bint al-Shāṭi³ to describe the direction of her cross-referential method cannot be random. The term, which originally signifies seeking the judgment of a ruler or arbitrator, articulates a message considerably different from that of the old principle of the Qur’an interpreting itself. Bint al-Shāṭi³’s consistent recourse to *al-iḥtikām ila’l-Qur’ān* transforms the Qur’an’s place in the hermeneutic process from being, in the first place, an ‘object of interpretation’ and, in the second, one of several competing interpretative resources, into the *sole adjudicator* of its own meaning and *the horizon* for re-evaluating the tradition. It is also through the process of *iḥtikām* that Bint al-Shāṭi³ opens up the tradition for critical assessment in light of the reading indicated by the Qur’an itself, so as to transcend its limitations without bringing about a total rupture.

For an exegete whose self-authentication is premised upon a sense of belonging to past generations of the interpretative community,¹⁰⁰ moving beyond the boundaries and authority of their permitted readings requires a manner of legitimization that would be meaningful to those who belong to the tradition, thereby permitting its expansion to incorporate the new reading. Bint al-Shāṭi³ therefore deliberately eschews laying claim to an individually generated contemporary reading that breaks from and attempts to substitute for the experiences of past generations. Instead, she becomes the conduit and facilitator for the Qur'an's agency as the ultimate interpretive authority for i) measuring the efforts of the tradition in grasping Qur'anic meaning, and ii) generating a new reading when the tradition's failure is demonstrated. Only thus can the authority of the past readings be overshadowed. At the same time the method of *ihtikām*, itself rooted in the *tafsīr* tradition, maintains continuity, as it presupposes the presence of tradition for re-evaluation. Hence the tradition's meta-message about the significance of the literary engagement with generations of exegetes is also re-articulated, while the potential for transcending their definition of the Qur'an's meaning is effected.

Further, by rooting the legitimacy of the new reading in the authority of the Qur'an, Bint al-Shāṭi³ circumvents the risk to her own identity, authority and standing as a modern exegete grounded in tradition. She also carves out a space for herself as the first woman exegete (*mufassira*) to author a *tafsīr* – and, to date, one of few modern exegetes and the only *mufassira* to have acquired exegetical authority recognized in the Muslim world.

Bint al-Shāṭi³'s place as the first *mufassira* calls for some consideration here before it receives further attention below, since the gender dimension illuminates certain aspects

of her endeavour to assist the Qur'an's agency within the *tafsīr* tradition, where women's exegetical agency was on the whole constrained, particularly in its written articulation. Salient in her application of *ih̥tikām* is her avoidance of the term *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), a term which acquired much currency in twentieth century Muslim discourses on the necessity to bracket and/or discard tradition to achieve a rational subjectivity. In contradistinction to *ijtihād* in its modern rendition as a concept privileging the exegete as the autonomous rational subject on the one hand, and the text as the object of interpretation on the other,¹⁰¹ *al-ih̥tikām ila 'l-Qur'ān* is suggestive of a reciprocal agency, whereby the exegete surrenders herself to the text and the text, in return, surrenders its meaning to her.¹⁰² The outcome is that the interpretive agency of the text and that of the 'receiving' *mufasssira* are empowered in a way unprecedented in the tradition.¹⁰³

The terms of reference for the process of *ih̥tikām* attest to this understanding. Bint al-Shāṭi' does not subject 'the Book' to the opinions and rules set by the (male) exegetes. As a corollary, neither is her reading subjected to their authority and knowledge, though it is grounded in them. Her reading is the outcome of her commitment to 'contemplative listening to the intimations of [the Qur'an's] expression', thus allowing the text itself to speak,¹⁰⁴ and to present its meaning as its 'gift' (*'aṭā'ih*) to the receiving *mufasssira*.¹⁰⁵ A sense of fluid and reciprocated agency is also implicit in Bint al-Shāṭi''s use of the term *istiqrā'* (literally, denoting a request for a reading) to refer to the cross-examination of Qur'anic terms, expressions and stylistic phenomena which she employs to systematise *al-ih̥tikām*.¹⁰⁶ But the ultimate outcome of this intimate conversation with the Qur'an, the text that transcends all exegetical texts in that it is also the horizon of meaning toward which the *tafsīr* tradition moves, is that Bint al-Shāṭi' too, the female

subject in this conversation, transcends the historical horizon of this tradition and the condition of women's constrained presence in it.

3 Understanding, language and humanity in Bint al-Shāṭi's *tafsīr*

We have created the human being [al-insān] in kabad. (laqad khalaqnā al-insān fī kabad, Q 90:4)

In dealing with this verse, Bint al-Shāṭi³ sets out two queries: the referent of *al-insān*, and the precise signification of *kabad*, a word which presents a special hermeneutic challenge to her cross-referential method since it does not occur elsewhere in the Qur'an, neither in this form nor in a derivative one. *Insān*, on the other hand, occurs sixty five times, and establishing its reference to humankind in general becomes the way by which Bint al-Shāṭi³ produces a certain contextual understanding of the Qur'an's unique usage of *kabad*.

Bint al-Shāṭi³ adduces support for her reading of the Qur'anic usage of *insān* as representing a concept of humanity by citing Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī's (d. 745/1344) report of the majority agreement that *al-insān* (sing.) refers to humankind. Though the contextual reading may suggest it, and the tradition supports it, there is no evident textual proof for this meaning in contrast to the case of the word *na'im*, where Qur'anic usage indicated its referentiality to paradise. The inductive reading (*istiqrā'*) of *al-insān* as humankind hinges upon her further grammatical analysis: The definite article *al*, which has several grammatical functions, defines genus in Q. 90:4, as in the other sixty three Qur'anic occurrences of *al-insān*. The exceptional occurrence in the indefinite form *insān* (in Q. 17:13 'And every human being's destiny have We tied to his neck')

still implies the inclusivity of genus due to the preceding *kull* (every).¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, Bint al-Shāṭi' rejects¹⁰⁸ dissenting interpretations which restrict the referent of *al-insān* to only those afflicted with a disease of the heart amongst the children of Adam (because of *al-insān*'s occurrence with the word *kabad* signifying pain or disease) (al-Zamakhsharī) or to Adam himself (°Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Zayd [d. 182/798]).¹⁰⁹

Summing up several concurrent studies, Bint al-Shāṭi' then offers a compressed treatment of all sixty-five instances of *insān*,¹¹⁰ referring the reader to her detailed discussion in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*.¹¹¹ Here she insists that the humanity signified by *al-insān* is quite distinct from that signified by other, overlapping, Qur'anic terms, such as *ādamiyya* and *insiyya*. Rather, *al-insān* denotes a higher mode of existence that qualifies the human being for his/her role as God's vicegerent:

The inductive reading of all the verses of *insān* in the noble Qur'an shows that the sense of humanness it signifies is more specific than the meaning of an Adamic species (*ādamiyya*) or non-savagery (*insiyya*).¹¹² The human being is uniquely endowed with the abilities of clarification (*bayān*) and argumentation,¹¹³ taking on the obligatory responsibilities,¹¹⁴ the vicegerency,¹¹⁵ the covenant and entrustment,¹¹⁶ the trials of good and evil¹¹⁷ and exposure to temptation,¹¹⁸ not to mention the arrogance, tyranny and sense of self-sufficiency¹¹⁹ that are part of the human condition.¹²⁰

Turning her attention to the etymology of *kabad*, which means pain (originally from *kabid*, liver pain), Bint al-Shāṭi' confirms that it came to connote hardship and difficulty in general.¹²¹ On this too, she states, exegetes are in agreement, but they diverge beyond this point of consensus on the nature of the hardship that humankind has to bear. In her measured consideration of both the exegetical discourse and Qur'anic context, Bint al-Shāṭi' listens carefully to possible cues, which signal her subsequent conclusion that 'The meaning of *kabad* we prefer is that of bearing the responsibility and difficulty of choosing between good and evil, for which the human being is innately prepared.'¹²²

Guided toward this meaning by her understanding of *al-insān* as humankind, and of *kabad* as primarily signifying hardship, Bint al-Shāṭi⁹ contends with al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation, which arises from his Mu^ctazilī position against a predestinarian literal reading of Q. 90:4 where *kabad* is taken to mean disease. Such a reading would be used as evidence that humankind is predestined to suffer because of an innate corruption. As a theological counter, al-Zamakhsharī⁷ restricts the referent of the verse to those human beings God already knew would choose not to be good.¹²³ Although Bint al-Shāṭi⁹ concludes in the end that the Qur'an is supportive of the principle of freewill, she is critical of how al-Zamakhsharī's ideological horizon thwarts the meaning of the text:

Al-Zamakhsharī, directed by his Mu^ctazilism, claims that it means: 'we have created the human being [afflicted with] disease; that is [moral] disease in the heart and inner corruption.' He then realises that this interpretation provokes the question of accountability and recompense...since the creator here is God, then it is He who created the human being with sickness in the heart and inner corruption. So [al-Zamakhsharī] pre-emptively states: '[God]...is referring to those He already knew, when He created them, would not believe or do good deeds.' According to this the definite article *al* in *al-insān* is for designation, and not for the all-inclusiveness of genus [a meaning] endorsed by the context of the verse and corroborated by the Qur'anic usage of the word *al-insān* in the generic sense of humankind, upon which the majority of exegetes [agree], as Abū Ḥayyān explicitly states in *al-Baḥr* [*al-muḥīṭ*].¹²⁴

The removal of the tradition's ideologically-framed reading of *kabad*, represented by al-Zamakhsharī, is effected not by reading *kabad* itself, a word which has no other Qur'anic occurrence, but by the intersection Bint al-Shāṭi⁹ skilfully constructs here between the Qur'an's generic usage of *insān* and the interpretation of it as signifying genus, which she casts as the 'general agreement' within the tradition. The tradition in this case complements the procedure of inductive cross-referencing (*istiqrā'*); the majority reading of *al-insān* (as humankind) is employed in eliminating the minority

(Mu^ctazilī) reading of *kabad* (as the moral disease of some human beings). Even the tradition's variant readings of *kabad*, presented thereafter, are incorporated with the purpose of grounding her final reading of the verse as referring to human responsibility:

And in *al-Tibyān* [*fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by Abū Ja^cfar al-Ṭūsī d. 460/1067]: 'Of all that God created, none suffer like the children of Adam...On the authority of Sa^cīd b. Abī al-Ḥasan¹²⁵: [the human being] suffers the adversities of life and the hardships of the Hereafter.'

Also in *al-Tibyān*: 'on the authority of Ibn ^cAbbās, the meaning intended in *kabad* is [the condition of] being conceived, born, breastfed and weaned; and then enduring teething, living, subsisting and dying, all of which are hardships. Ibn al-Qayyim [al-Jawziyya d. 751/1350]¹²⁶ further explicated that: 'The human being is created in hardship; that is his being in the womb, then [as an infant] in the swaddle then in the straps. ***He then encounters great danger once he reaches the age of accountability and suffers the hardships of living and upholding [God's] commands and prohibitions.*** (Emphasis added) Then he endures death, the waiting in the grave, the rising on Judgement Day and the torment of the Hellfire. There is no solace but in paradise.'

Shaykh Muḥammad ^cAbduh said 'He [the human being] toils as he exerts his energies at work. [He] even toils when he eats, drinks or protects his family amongst his group.'¹²⁷

The inclusion of opinions from Ibn ^cAbbās to ^cAbduh suggests coverage of the full spectrum of meanings, from the earliest to the most recent exegetes. Yet a closer look shows that these variant interpretations of *kabad*, some of which are cited from less commonly-used *tafsīrs* such as that of Ibn al-Qayyim, are purposefully selected by Bint al-Shāṭi³ to pinpoint a consensus on i) the idea that the hardship intended by the word *kabad* is specific to being human, and that the majority link it with ii) the Hereafter. This account of 'possible interpretations' implies a convergence toward Bint al-Shāṭi³'s own reading of *kabad* as signifying the human being's responsibility of choosing between good and evil, which has a bearing on his/her final place in the Hereafter, a reading already prefigured, though not fully developed, in almost similar terms by Ibn al-Qayyim (see emphasis above).

The effect of this is that Bint al-Shāṭi's interpretation of *kabad*, which anchors her understanding of human ontology in the Qur'an, is presented not as alien to the history of *tafsīr*, but as the culmination of a reading that has long been in the process of formation. A further effect of this intricate imbrication of her interpretation in the *tafsīr* tradition is that the tradition emerges as having been partially successful in listening to 'the intimations of the Qur'an', in so far as it has attended to the smaller constituents of the verse, such as the words *al-insān* and *kabad*. What was never successfully addressed, in her view, is the intra-textual connection between Q. 90:4 and the rest of the sura. In the final part of her discussion she throws the following question at the tradition: 'What then is the linkage between the oath by the city [Q. 90:1-2 'No! I swear by this city, the city in which you dwell'] and the begetter and what he begot [Q. 90:3], and by the hardship in which the human being was created and his inevitable suffering from his birth hour to Judgement Day [Q. 90:4]?'¹²⁸ The only answer she hears back is one attempted at the dawn of the tradition's encounter with modernity, by °Abduh. However, in her assessment, °Abduh's answer is inadequate.

Like al-Zamakhshari, she argues, °Abduh imposes a restrictive horizon by interpreting the context of *kabad* on the basis of a possible historical allusion to the Meccans' violation of the sanctity of the Prophet in Q. 90:2. To support this interpretation, Q. 90:2 has to be read as 'the city in which you are [*hill*] violated', and not as 'the city in which you are [*hill*] dwelling'. Bint al-Shāṭi^o indeed accepts the possibility of an allusion to the Prophet's Meccan situation, but she is not the least persuaded by °Abduh's elaboration that the intention of the sura was to console the Prophet when he suffered abuse and rejection in Mecca, by reminding him that the violation endured by those elected to receive revelation (Q. 90:2) is a fate preordained for every newborn

since hardship (*kabad*) afflicts all begetters (to whom Q. 90:3 refers), including *al-insān* (Q. 90:4), in raising their offspring, and the offspring in reaching maturity.¹²⁹ Bint al-Shāṭi³ categorically rejects ʿAbduh’s narrow historical anchoring of the contextual meaning of *kabad*.

Just as she removed the ideological horizon imposed by al-Zamakhsharī on the words *insān* and *kabad*, she removes the historical horizon which ʿAbduh imposed on the context, by dismantling the logic of his reading:

The incongruity of this interpretation comes from equating the burdens of prophethood with the hardship an offspring endures in order to grow. The opinion we have reached is that the Imam [ʿAbduh], God’s mercy upon him, has gone too far in his generalisation, extending the phrase ‘what he begot’ in the verse [Q. 90:3] to include the offspring of man, animal and plant. Leaving aside [a comparison with] plant seeds and various species of animals and insects, can the great burdens of messengerhood actually be equated with what afflicts every human born?¹³⁰

For Bint al-Shāṭi, the failure of the tradition, including ʿAbduh, to attend appropriately to the textual context of this sura prevents the tradition from grasping the linguistic and theological consequences of understanding the hardship (*kabad*) humanity has to bear. This failure justifies, for Bint al-Shāṭi³, the rejection of any of the tradition’s further particularisations of the meaning of *kabad* as hardship, be that semantic (e.g. hardships of life and its different stages), ideological (moral corruption in some human beings), or historical (the hardships of the Prophet Muḥammad in Mecca). Hearing in the sura a more general discourse on humankind (strongly indicated in the following verses, which refer to the human being’s misguided arrogance [Q. 90:5-7] and to faculties of perception and discernment [Q. 90:8-9]), Bint al-Shāṭi³ prefers to understand *kabad* as bearing the difficult responsibility of choosing between good and evil. This is a reading which unmistakably resonates with a prevalent exegetical understanding of Q. 90:10:

‘and We guided him on the two paths [*al-najdayn*]’ as referring to the paths of good and evil.’

The answer Bint al-Shāṭiʿ provides to her earlier question regarding the linkage between creating humankind in hardship (Q. 90:4) and the oath of the preceding verses is that the oath demonstrates the enormity of the wrongs committed by the people of Mecca (Q. 90:1), one generation after the other (Q. 90:3),¹³¹ and that these wrongs, including their violation of the sanctity of the Prophet (Q. 90:2), are of their own choice, for which they will bear responsibility as all *humankind bears the difficult* responsibility of their choices (Q. 90:4).¹³²

Returning finally to the first word of Q. 90:4 ‘We have created [*khalaqnā*] the human being in hardship’, Bint al-Shāṭiʿ attempts to dispense with the spectre of the debate between the Muʿtazila and the Mujabbira, which tied the interpretation of the verse to two opposite theological positions on free will. Against this theological disagreement, which, in her view, hampered an understanding of the Qur’an’s perspective on human responsibility, Bint al-Shāṭiʿ advances a contextual reading of ‘created’ in hardship (*kabad*)’ as indicating our ‘innate preparedness’ to bear the responsibility of choosing between good and evil and not a condition of preordained suffering. In this way, the verse need not be restricted to those with ‘disease of the heart’ in order to assert freewill (the interpretation of the Muʿtazila), and its general linguistic meaning can prevail without lending support to the predestinarian (Mujabbira) interpretation:

As for God’s saying...‘We have created (*khalaqnā*)’ instead of ‘We have given/made (*jaʿalnā*)’, this indicates that the human being is created with an ***innate preparedness*** [emphasis added] for this hardship as understood in terms of enduring [human] responsibility and obligations, and the burden of choosing good or evil. There remains no need for the theological debates stirred by the Muʿtazila and the Mujabbira on responsibility and recompense. The verses that

follow thus clarify the hardship (*kabad*) in which the human being is created, and explain the faculties of guidance and discernment with which s/he is equipped [Q. 90:8-10].¹³³

Although Bint al-Shāṭi's strategy of *al-iḥtikām li'l-Qur'ān* demonstrated in light of her interpretation of Q. 102:8 stresses subjugation of the *tafsīr* tradition, her interpretation of Q. 90:4 reveals how the dialogue with this tradition is nevertheless fundamental to her interpretative effort. In its most basic definition this effort is 'no more than an endeavour for understanding (*muḥāwala li'l-fahm*)',¹³⁴ an endeavour that has been shown to take place within Bint al-Shāṭi's community of exegetes and through participation in a conversation that has already begun on the meaning of *insān* and the hardship (*kabad*) s/he bears. What these two terms do or do not signify is constituted as the conversation unfolds: supporting (e.g. *al-insān* as genus), implying (e.g. *kabad* as the hardship of human accountability and choice) and eliminating (ideological or historical) particularisations of meaning all take place within this conversation. Even where the pursuit of an interpretation of the textual context of Q. 90:4 is legitimated by the tradition's meagre contribution in this respect (only 'Abduh), the contextual reading at which Bint al-Shāṭi arrives is predicated as much on the cross-referential method as it is on the tradition's efforts at the lexical and grammatical levels of the key terms of the verse.

Bint al-Shāṭi's textual representation of her dialogue with the *tafsīr* tradition may be controlled and directed yet it also gestures at an extending conversation where the Qur'an is consciously established as the hermeneutic horizon for enquiry. Against this horizon, Bint al-Shāṭi brings about the fusion of tradition with contemporary method, to acquire a new understanding that develops from past understandings (of *al-insān*, for

example), and to remove unproductive horizons for enquiry, whether they be ideological formulations or intrusive historical material generated outside the world of the text.¹³⁵

Language and understanding

In these multiple textual conversations language, for Bint al-Shāṭi³, is at the core of the hermeneutic endeavour. The quest for ‘words that clarify by way of explication and approximation’ is the process whereby an understanding is achieved and articulated but also, because of which, this understanding remains inadequate.¹³⁶ It is this inadequacy that, in her view, incites further hermeneutic involvement and drives the continuing production of *tafsīr* works by successive generations of exegetes, who share the experience of striving to capture in words their understanding of the Qur’an.¹³⁷ For Bint al-Shāṭi³ the hermeneutic enquiry is fundamentally linguistic and must therefore be anchored in the text. The Qur’an’s basic linguistic constituents, i.e. words and styles, are the starting point for revealing its textual unity and distinctness which, though firmly rooted in the Arabic language, gave rise to linguistic conventions unique to the Qur’an.¹³⁸ The determination of the linguistic meaning is guided by the application of a cross-referential method (*istiqrā’*³) that analyses the internal linguistic convention of the Qur’an as a whole.¹³⁹

This signals an important shift from the way in which Amīn al-Khūlī had envisioned the literary *tafsīr* approach. Al-Khūlī accorded priority to the historical investigation of

what surrounds the text and its formation (*mā ḥawl al-naṣṣ*), relegating the study of the text (*al-naṣṣ*) to a secondary stage, for which the first is a prerequisite. Bint al-Shāṭi³ inverts this order, and gives precedence to the linguistic study or enquiry of the text. Even here, she departs from al-Khūlī's historical-philological concerns in favour of a systematic reading of the immediate and general textual context of a particular Qur'anic word or expression.¹⁴⁰ This inversion has considerable theoretical implications. Al-Khūlī's emphasis on the historicity of the text is displaced in Bint al-Shāṭi³ by a focus on its linguisticity. The relevance of any historical information such as the Qur'an's chronology, the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), or the earliest semantic connotation of an investigated word (e.g. *na^cīm* from *na^cima*, to become green) is subsidiary. Bint al-Shāṭi³ considers such information useful in supporting a general meaning that is not solely justifiable by the results of the linguistic method (e.g., *kabad*).

The relegation of the historical is most clearly expressed by Bint al-Shāṭi³ in relation to the occasions of revelation, which are traditionally perceived as pertinent to Qur'anic exegesis. She accepts that such 'occasions' could shed light on the historical context of a verse, but rejects their causative function (*^cilliyya*), insisting that they are to be strictly treated as accompanying circumstances of a verse's descent and not the reason for its revelation. Against the risk of closing down the Qur'an's meaning, Bint al-Shāṭi³ rejects the specificity of the occasion (*sabab*) or any historical allusion (the Meccan persecution of the Prophet in relation to Q. 90:4, for example) in favour of the general meaning of the Qur'an's wording: 'what must be taken into consideration is the general meaning of the wording and not the particular circumstance of its revelation' (*al-^cibra bi-^cumūm al-laḥẓ lā bi-khuṣūṣ al-sabab*).¹⁴¹

Al-Khūlī's historicist interest in pinning down what the Qur'an meant to its first hearers before its contemporary relevance might be explored is eclipsed by Bint al-Shāṭi's direct interest in what it might intimate linguistically to the contemporary reader. Instead of endeavouring to reclaim the 'original' meaning heard in the seventh century, she commits herself to discovering 'the secrets' of the new meanings that are yet to be heard, and which provide guidance on key contemporary questions concerning nationalism, language and literature.¹⁴² The upshot is that the horizon of the contemporary reading is not closed down by the historical meaning understood by the first Arab hearers, or any later generation. Paradoxically, as a result she appears far more historically conscious of the situatedness of her own reading than did al-Khūlī, for whom the historicist investigation was the means for liberating the exegete from temporality, and deriving a true and authenticated meaning. Al-Khūlī's confidence in method is mitigated in Bint al-Shati by a faith in the irreducibility of the Qur'an's truth to its historical or even textual interpretation, and her resignation to the finitude of her own hermeneutic endeavour and acceptance of the limited capacity of any individual exegete to grasp the totality of the Qur'an:

I am not ignorant of the fact that the extent I have reached in my endeavour is constrained by my capacity and effort. The field remains open for efforts other than mine, of the best of researchers and the succeeding generations who will contemplate our greatest Book, grasping what we have missed and aspiring to horizons our endeavours could not reach.¹⁴³

There is a genuine sense here of the finitude and temporality of any reading, past, present and future. There is also the possibility of transcending the finitude of understanding. This requires the continuous efforts of the future exegetical community and presupposes critical engagement with its past. Bint al-Shāṭi³ thus conceives of understanding as a cumulative effort; as such, it might be facilitated, but not achieved

by method. The dialogue with the tradition (on *kabad* and *insān*, for example) is what curtails repetition and permits expansion and transformation. The view conveyed through this dialogue is that past understandings can be transcended only when they constitute part of the new hermeneutic endeavour.

Since no reading can be definitive, Bint al-Shāṭiʿ sees interpretive multiplicity as inevitable if not necessary. There can never be a hermeneutic closure in her view. Her openness to multiplicity, nonetheless, neither binds the text to the polyvalent tradition nor exposes it to a relativist pluralism that denies the possibility of truth. On the bridge between the finite and the absolute, Bint al-Shāṭiʿ continues to have expectations of truth. In her interpretations of the two verses discussed above, there is a clearly identifiable commitment to arriving at a meaning that might justifiably be considered closer to truth even if truth, can never be fully grasped by the exegete. This is yet another departure from al-Khūlī's confidence in method as achieving and authenticating truth. It could be further argued that Bint al-Shāṭiʿ offsets al-Khūlī's reification of methodological objectivity by developing a subjective component through her notion of 'taste' (*dhawq*), that allows the aesthetic to guide the empirical.¹⁴⁴ Aesthetic induction in Bint al-Shāṭiʿ merits a separate study; suffice it to say here that it reorients al-Khūlī's emphasis on the detached study of the emotional and psychological impact of the aesthetic towards an engaged subjective involvement with the text that draws upon a cultivated consciousness of the essence of the Arabic language. It is this consciousness, according to Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, that guards against the dangers of linguistic misunderstanding, closure of the text, and ideological or cultural perspectivism, thereby enabling the exegete to hear unhindered the Qur'an's intimations and eloquence (*bayān*) in every generation.¹⁴⁵

Hermeneutics and humanity

Underlying Bint al-Shāṭi's interest in the Qur'an's eloquence (*bayān*) is an openly acknowledged ontological question. Her choice of the short Meccan suras anticipates her disclosure of 'the key fundamental principles (*al-uṣūl al-kubrā*) of the Islamic call'.¹⁴⁶ The term *uṣūl* expresses a reformist aspiration to reach the Qur'an's core message - its greater goals (*maqāṣid*), to use al-Khūlī's expression - which might transform the way in which the Qur'an is applied to more specific issues; this might explain why Bint al-Shāṭi eschews questions related to the immediately practicable in her *tafsīr*.¹⁴⁷

If Bint al-Shāṭi's reading is conditioned by the reformist search for the fundamental principles or the *maqāṣid* of the Qur'an, then her persistent exploration of human responsibility and human will in the context of several suras in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I-II* point towards a question concerning 'humanity'. Before long, her interest in this culminated in a separate thematic treatise on humankind (*Maqāl fi'l-insān, dirāsa Qur'āniyya*, 1969). Her interpretation of *insān* and *kabad*, where she sums up her understanding of the Qur'anic view of humankind, has been discussed above.¹⁴⁸ According to Bint al-Shāṭi's reading, humanity is a mode of existence higher than mere physicality (*bashariyya*) and non-savagery (*insiyya*); key to realisation of this humanity is an ethical responsibility, enabled by freewill, to act as God's vicegerent, in asserting good over evil in this world. Several of Bint al-Shāṭi's contemporaries advanced overlapping readings of humanity.¹⁴⁹ Hers is distinct in that it proceeds to develop a theology which grounds hermeneutics in a religious ontology on the basis of a single but crucial association of the words *bayān* and *insān* in Q 55:3-4: 'He created the human being and taught him *al-bayān*' (*khalaqa al-insān, °allamahu al-bayān*).

In *Maqāl fi'l-insān*, Bint al-Shāṭi³ investigates the other two Qur'anic instances of *al-bayān* (Q. 75:19 and Q. 3:138), as well as derivatives of the root *B-Y-N*, such as the word *bayyināt*, designating the Qur'an's verses as demonstrative proofs. She concludes that in Qur'anic usage words formed from *B-Y-N* always denote 'clarity' and 'revealing elucidation', a meaning different from that of *nuṭq*, which signifies both animal and human sound utterances. Adducing evidence from Arabic idiom, she maintains that speech utterance (*nuṭq*) can even be figuratively assigned to the non-living, yet the predication of *bayān* in Arabic is to human referents only, hence its technical usage as the art of speech, a uniquely human characteristic.¹⁵⁰

In Bint al-Shāṭi³'s view, humankind can be defined as more than a speaking animal species; core to humanity is the ability to perceive, discern and clarify meaning through language. The act of interpretation is hence central to being human. In this way language, understanding, and interpretation become theologically grounded in the Qur'an's concept of humanity. Explaining that eloquent articulations of meaning have come to be designated in Arabic as *bayān*, one of the attributes the Qur'an assigns to itself, Bint al-Shāṭi³ posits this twofold meaning as the point of connection between humanity and the Qur'an. The Qur'an is *bayān*, in that it embodies a linguistically perfect and beautiful articulation of guidance, which invites understanding and interpretation. Human interpretation of the Qur'an is also *bayān*, in that it achieves and communicates an understanding of that guidance and, in so doing, fulfils the Qur'an's expectation of humanity. The two forms of *bayān* (both text and interpretation) become fundamentally linked to each other and to the fulfilment of humanity's vicegerency. Implicit in this mutual concomitance is the human disposition to be moved and

influenced by eloquence, and the ability to aesthetically appreciate and comprehend how such eloquence affects and compels the human to interpret its meaning, thereby also signifying the transformative potential of language.¹⁵¹

Al-bayān, so conceived, can be said to stand for hermeneutics in its philosophical sense of the human endeavour to grasp and articulate meaning as encountered in texts/language. In specifically qualifying her literary approach as *tafsīr bayāni* - and not *tafsīr adabī* - Bint al-Shāṭi' can thus be seen to be doing more than reviving the classical Arabic term for the art of eloquent speech. She is encoding the rubric of her exegesis with a new understanding of the Qur'an's religious ontology, where a hermeneutics that incorporates the aesthetic is what the divine text expects of the human to realise his/her humanity.

4 Gender and hermeneutic application in Bint al-Shāṭi''s approach

Bint al-Shāṭi''s *tafsīr* is inaugurated by an expressed awareness of her context as a twentieth century exegete espousing a new approach to Qur'an interpretation, an approach that aims to renew Muslim religious thought and reinvigorate Arab culture and language in a post-colonial nationalist context. However, she does not refer to her unique position as the first female author-exegete in a male-dominated literary genre. It has repeatedly been noted that this silence is revealing of the fact that her gender had no bearing on her exegesis and that, in her main *tafsīr* works (*al-Tafsīr al-bayānī* and *al-ʿjāz al-bayānī*), she does not apply her linguistic analysis of the Qur'an in relation to women. This stands in stark contrast to Bint al-Shāṭi''s marked interest in the woman question in her fictional, biographical and socially-oriented literature. It runs contrary to her pronounced consciousness of her situation as a woman who, according to her self-

description, ‘belonged to a vanguard generation of women who made a journey from inside the walls of the harem to the farthest horizons of public life...[and] entered into three different but interconnected battles: to discard the veil, to be educated and to go out to work...the most crucial changes that oriental womanhood has ever seen.’¹⁵² This apparent exegetical silence has been interpreted as caution, disinterest or conservatism,¹⁵³ and, less negatively, as a careful strategy of a woman entering a male domain.¹⁵⁴

A more favourable assessment of Bint al-Shāṭi³ as a female exegete has focused on her semi-exegetical work *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī li-taḥrīr al-mar³a*, where she establishes a link between reaching the degree of humanity and transcending gender differentiation without eliminating sexual difference.¹⁵⁵ This essay has been noted for its attempt to exegetically ground gender equality in the original Qur’anic principle of the equal moral responsibility of all men and women in light of the unity of their human origin from a single soul (Q4:1).¹⁵⁶ In spite of this modern reading of the Qur’an’s message on gender, Bint al-Shāṭi³’s resistance to the hegemony of a western construction of feminism and her attempt to accommodate a modified right to *qiwāma* (male protection/guardianship on the basis of the Qur’anic statement ‘men are in charge of women’, Q. 4:34) as morally acquired instead of naturally possessed in the end make her insufficiently qualified for the label ‘feminist’.¹⁵⁷ In less sympathetic western feminist discourses, her female voice as exegete has been discredited as having uncritically reproduced patriarchy, and failed to challenge traditional assumptions of femininity or womanhood,¹⁵⁸ though some indebtedness to her critique of the ideological frameworks traditionally imposed upon the Qur’an is nevertheless admitted.¹⁵⁹ Despite raising some worthy questions, the assessment of the gender

dimension in Bint al-Shāṭi's exegesis has been constrained by a narrow notion of application; a broader view can better illuminate the link between her hermeneutic oeuvre and her position as the first woman exegete in the *tafsīr* genre.

The question of application remained external to modern philosophical hermeneutics until Gadamer pointed out its integrality to the hermeneutic process. It is to be understood not in terms of the technical, but in light of the situatedness of any hermeneutic act; that is to say, interpretation is not only a process of understanding, but also involves application, since a text is interpreted in relation to the interpreter's present situation.¹⁶⁰ In other words, it is 'neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but co-determines it as a whole from the beginning.'¹⁶¹ As such, the task of considering gender in Bint al-Shāṭi's *tafsīr* is concerned less with the applicability of her interpretations to concrete gender questions, and more with application as this pervasive aspect of the hermeneutic process, in other words, how the understanding she achieves is generated by and related to her situation as a woman exegete.

In her largely unknown essay *al-Marʿa al-muslima ams wa'l-yawm*, which predates *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī*,¹⁶² Bint al-Shāṭi emphatically states that the need is more urgent than ever for a new and liberated treatment of the 'woman question' in the Islamic tradition, in order to 'know the reality of our [women's] position in today's world and define our role in it...'¹⁶³ Like all Arab and Islamic questions that require understanding, the question of woman is of special importance because 'she is the origin of being, the maker of life and the pillar of society.'¹⁶⁴

Bint al-Shāṭi³ draws a revealing analogy between Qur'anic hermeneutics and the question of woman in this context. In the Islamic tradition a cooking metaphor is used to refer to three types of religious sciences: a science cooked and burnt, a science cooked but not burnt, and a science neither cooked nor burnt. Qur'anic exegesis is traditionally considered of the third type, and so, Bint al-Shāṭi³ suggests, should the woman question.¹⁶⁵ This is what justifies new thinking and authorises her contribution in both fields. The cooking analogy evokes a reality where exegesis (*tafsīr*) and women never held centre stage in the Islamic tradition. Read in light of her notion of *bayān* as connecting the Qur'an and humanity, Bint al-Shāṭi³ can be seen as working through structural marginalities within the literary and the lived Islamic tradition, both of which have been dominated by *fiqh* (Islamic law) and men. Her hermeneutic oeuvre can be seen in the final analysis as establishing the centrality of *tafsīr* to understanding the Qur'an, and reclaiming the place of women as equal members of humanity in the effort of Islamic reform.

In her later essay, *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī li-tahrīr al-mar'a*, Bint al-Shāṭi³ employs her concept of a humanity derived from the practice of hermeneutics to affirm more than the ontological equality between men and women on the basis of the unity of their origin. Her essay begins and ends with 'He created the human being and taught him *al-bayān*' (Q. 55:3-4). It grounds the liberation of women in reaching the degree of humanity by becoming interpreters. Bint al-Shāṭi³ is not simply asserting women's right to education but their original right to understanding, interpreting and explaining divine discourse, and contesting the meanings established by male interpreters. As in the historical examples she invokes of women overruling men's interpretations, the knowledge

produced is presented as offering a ‘woman perspective’ that is relevant to society at large.¹⁶⁶

Bint al-Shāṭi³ contended all her life with a restrictive gender dichotomy, and this struggle underpinned her thought and writings. Her broader goal, more explicitly expressed in *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī*, was not to transform the detail of the Islamic tradition in relation to gender, but to re-inscribe women’s role in knowledge production in a new ontology of humanity that could reform deeper structural inequalities within the Islamic tradition. She sought to achieve this by her own practice as a *mufasssira* and by her religious ontology of *al-bayān* as women’s original responsibility/right to engage, independently of men, with the divine discourse. In Bint al-Shāṭi³, the hermeneutic circle can be seen as complete: the first woman to write down a *tafsīr* work produces a *tafsīr* that results in a religious ontology which validates woman as a *mufasssira*.

¹ I am indebted to the biannual Qur’anic Studies Conference for inviting me to present this paper in 2005 (SOAS, London). I would also like to thank Suha Taji-Farouki for reading and commenting on an earlier draft in 2009.

² Bint al-Shāṭi³, *‘Ala al-jisr: usṭūrat al-zamān* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1967), p. 60. Not insignificantly, this emulates the *kunya*-formula of many great Muslim scholars of the past.

³ Amīn al-Khūlī, ‘Introduction’, in Bint al-Shāṭi³, *Sukayna bint al-Ḥusayn* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, n.d.), p. 5.

⁴ *al-I’jāz al-bayānī li’l-Qur’ān al-karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1971), p. 88 ff. In this section the modern literary enquiry into the inimitability of the Qur’an is introduced as having been preceded by a long history of rhetorical exegesis, through al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/998), al-Rummānī (d. 384/994), al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), al-Baqillānī

(d. 403/1013), al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078), Ibn Abī Iṣḥāq (d. 654/1256), al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) and al-Sakkākī (d. 626/1229), to Muḥammad ^cAbduh (d. 1323/1905).

⁵ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī li'l-Qur'ān al-karīm I*, 3rd edn (Cairo, 1968), p. 14. References are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

⁶ Amīn al-Khūlī, *Manāhij tajdīd fi'l-naḥw wa'l-balāgha wa'l-tafsīr wa'l-adab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma^crifa, 1961), p. 303.

⁷ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 23 (2003), pp. 8-47, p. 23.

⁸ Navid Kermani, 'Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur'an' in Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 169-192, p. 179; and Anouar Majid, *A Call For Heresy: Why dissent is vital to Islam and America* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 88.

⁹ Abu-Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach', p. 18.

¹⁰ ^cAbduh's full discussion is cited in *al-I^cjāz al-bayānī*, pp. 118-119.

¹¹ al-Khūlī, *Manāhij tajdīd*, p. 315. Bint al-Shāṭi³ also mentions that al-Khūlī devoted a study to this topic entitled *al-I^cjāz al-naḥw li'l-Qur'ān*: see *al-I^cjāz al-bayānī*, p. 120.

¹² Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 9.

¹³ See *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 15 where she speaks of how she acquired an appreciation of the Qur'an's eloquence after specialising in the study of literary texts and her contact with the greatest Arabic literature.

¹⁴ It has been suggested that the literary approach started with al-Khūlī's contemporary and colleague at Cairo University, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, who advanced an approach to the Qur'an as literature. See Stefan Wild, 'Political Interpretation of the Qur'an' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 284; cf. Rotraud Wielandt, 'Exegesis of the Qur'an: Early, Modern and Contemporary' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al., eds, *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 131. Though the discussion with Ḥusayn may have influenced al-Khūlī, literary *tafsīr* has earlier roots, as Abu Zayd and Bint al-Shāṭi³ confirm. Moreover, al-Khūlī's religious framework diverges from Ḥusayn's secularising outlook; the religious component of his literary methodology is particularly prominent in the prestigious *Majallat al-Adab* (*Journal of Literature*, 1956-

1966), which he established as the mouthpiece of his literary society, *al-Umanāʾ*. Cf. Elizabeth Kendall, 'The Marginal Voice: Journals and the Avant-garde in Egypt', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 8:2 (1997), pp. 216-238, pp. 227-8.

¹⁵ al-Khūlī in Abu Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', p. 8.

¹⁶ al-Khūlī in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 15.

¹⁷ al-Khūlī in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 15.

¹⁸ al-Khūlī in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 309-310.

¹⁹ Kāmil Saʿfān, *Amīn al-Khūlī fī manāhij tajdīdihī* (Cairo: Al-Majlis al-aʿlā li'l-funūn wa'l-ādāb wa'l-ʿulūm al-ijtimāʿiyya, 1970), pp. 238-9.

²⁰ al-Khūlī, *Manāhij tajdīd*, pp. 312-316.

²¹ al-Khūlī, *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān* (manuscript), cited in Saʿfān, *Amīn al-Khūlī*, p. 103.

²² For Abu Zayd's ideas on *inzāl*, see Kermani, 'Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd', p. 172.

²³ Saʿfān, *Amīn al-Khūlī*, p. 105.

²⁴ Saʿfān, *Amīn al-Khūlī*, p. 109.

²⁵ al-Khūlī, *Manāhij tajdīd*, p. 296.

²⁶ For traditionalist arguments against the treatment of Qur'anic accounts as literary narratives and the furore caused by Khalafallah's *Al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī'l-Qurʾān* during the 1940s, see Abu Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', pp. 8-9; pp. 23-24 respectively. For a study of Khalafallah's exegesis, see 'The Case of a Qur'anic Exegete' in Yvonne Haddad, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1982), pp. 46-53.

²⁷ al-Khūlī, *Manāhij tajdīd*, p. 296.

²⁸ al-Khūlī, 'Fī'l-adab al-Miṣrī', *al-Adab*, (January, 1963), in Saʿfān, *Amīn al-Khūlī*, p. 50.

²⁹ al-Khūlī, *Al-Mujaddidūn fī'l-Islām*, p. 31, in Saʿfān, *Amīn al-Khūlī*, p. 64.

³⁰ al-Khūlī, 'Fī'l-adab al-miṣrī', *al-Adab*, (January, 1963), in Saʿfān, *Amīn al-Khūlī*, pp. 51-2.

³¹ al-Khūlī, *Manāhij tajdīd*, pp. 127-128, 180.

³² See Kermani, 'Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd', p. 173; and Abu Zayd's explanation of his historicist perspective, in 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', p. 39.

³³ Information on Bint al-Shāṭi's early life is based mainly on her autobiographical account in *ʿAla al-Jisr*, and for her later life and career on Wafā' al-Ghazālī, *Bint al-*

*Shāṭi*²: *Rihla fī amwāj al-ḥayā* (Cairo: Kitāb al-yawm, 1999). Other detailed biographical accounts can be found in C. Kooji, 'Bint Al-Shati: A Suitable Case for Biography?' in Ibrahim A. El-Sheikh et al., eds., *The Challenge of the Middle East* (Amsterdam, 1982), pp. 67–72; Joyce Davis, 'Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Ahrām Newspaper, Egypt* in *Between Jihaad and Salaam: Profiles in Islam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 167-180; Radwa Ashour et al., ed., *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 340-2; Ruth Roded, 'Bint al-Shāṭi's Wives of the Prophet: Feminist or Feminine?', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 33:1 (2006), pp. 51-66, see p. 52. There are brief entries on her by Valerie Hoffman-Ladd in John Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 4-5; and by Paul Starkey in Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, ed., *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London: Routledge, 1998), vol. 1, p.18.

³⁴ See Basheer Nafi, 'The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and its Challenge to Traditional Islam,' in S. Taji-Farouki and B. M. Nafi, ed., *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 28-60, pp. 39 ff.

³⁵ The Ministry of Awqāf, *Al-Azhar: tārikhuhu wa-taṭawwuru* (Cairo, 1964).

³⁶ Bint al-Shāṭi², *Ala al-Jisr*, p. 59.

³⁷ In the early 1960s Bint al-Shāṭi² produced a critical review of al-^cAqqād's misogynistic study *Woman in the Noble Qur'an*, leading to a fierce exchange of articles. See Sanā² al-Bīsī, 'Bint al-Shāṭi²', *al-Ahrām*, 5/4/2008.

³⁸ Bint al-Shāṭi² critiqued Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd's scientific interpretation of the Qur'an in her book *Al-Qur'ān wa'l-tafsīr al-^caṣrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma^cārif, 1970). See also Armando Salvatore, *Muslim Traditions and Modern Techniques of Power, Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam*, 3 (Hamburg: Lit Verlag Munster, 2001), pp. 216 ff.

³⁹ Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and the Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 106.

⁴⁰ Roded, 'Bint al-Shāṭi's Wives of the Prophet', p. 58.

⁴¹ al-Ghazālī, *Bint al-Shāṭi²*, p. 124.

⁴² Badran, *Feminists, Islam and the Nation*, p. 119.

⁴³ Roded believes Bint al-Shāṭi² embarked on this series in 1959 (p. 61). However, earlier editions exist for all the biographies except for *Sukayna bint al-Ḥusyan*.

⁴⁴ There were numerous reprints, editions and translations of these biographies in the years following their publication. The most popular of these works has been *Nisā' al-nabiyy*, which had been reprinted twelve times in Cairo and Beirut by the time its new revised edition appeared (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-[°]arabī, 1979).

⁴⁵ Several scholars of Islamic studies from the prestigious Al-Azhar University and members of its Majma[°] al-buḥūth published obituaries or memorial articles in the leading Egyptian newspaper *al-Ahrām*. Many of these testify to her place in contemporary Islamic and Arab thought, acknowledging her as [°]*alima*, *shaykha*, and a great scholar of Islam. See for example Shaykh Maḥmūd Khidr of al-Azhar, *al-Badr fi'l-laylat al-ḡalmā' yuḡtaqadu*, 4/12/1998; Muṡṡafā al-Shak[°]a, [°]*Ālimat al-[°]usūr al-akhīra*, 6/12/1998, and Muḡammad [°]Abd al-Salām Kāmīl, *Kānat umma*, 21/12/2008. For a further collection of memorial articles on her, including one by the ex-Minister of Awqāf, Shaykh Maḥmūd Ḥamdī Zaḡzūq, see al-Ghazālī, *Bint al-Shāḡi'°*, pp. 131-142. For the prizes, medals, honorary certificates and memberships bestowed on her, see Radwa Ashour et al., *Arab Women Writers*, p. 341.

⁴⁶ To date, the most extensive bibliography of her works is offered in Arabic by al-Ghazālī, *Bint al-Shāḡi'°*, pp. 91-99. For an English list, see Ashour et al., *Arab Women Writers*, p. 341.

⁴⁷ Reprinted in *Al-Qur'[°]ān wa-qaḡāyā al-insān* (Beirut: Dār al-[°]ilm li'l-malāyyīn, 1982). The Cairo edition (Dār al-Ma[°]ārif, 1999) is used here, pp. 41-44.

⁴⁸ See Shuruq Naguib, 'Horizons and Limitations of Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics', in Pamela Sue Anderson, ed., *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Amsterdam and New York: Springer, 2009), pp. 33-49.

⁴⁹ Roxanne Marcotte offers a detailed analysis of *al-Maḡhūm al-islāmī li-taḡrīr al-mar'[°]a* but makes no reference to *al-Mar'[°]a al-muslima* in 'Émancipation de la Femme et Exégèse Qur'[°]anique chez Bint al-Shāḡi'° (1913-1998), *Studies in Religion*, 30 (2001), pp. 277- 292.

⁵⁰ See, for example, her volume *Lughatunā wa'l-ḡayā* (*Our Language and Life*), which includes a selection of her 1960s lectures on the conditions of the Arabic language (Cairo: Dār al-Ma[°]ārif, 1971).

⁵¹ Bint al-Shāḡi'°, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 9.

⁵² J.J. G. Jansen considered it a significant event in the history of *tafsīr* which merited writing *The Interpretation of the Qur'an in Modern Egypt*, (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. vi.

⁵³ See Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qur'an*, p. 69, and Issa Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 123.

⁵⁴ Issa Boullata, 'Modern Qur'an Exegesis: A Study of Bint al-Shāṭi's Method', *The Muslim World*, 64 (1974), pp. 103-113, p. 104; Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qur'an*, pp. 68-9; Muḥammad 'Atā' al-Sīd, *The Hermeneutical Problem of the Qur'an in Islamic History* (PhD Thesis, Temple University, 1975), p. 341, n. 4; Salahudin al-Kafrawi, 'Methods of Interpreting the Qur'an: A Comparison of Sayyid Qutb and Bint al-Shāṭi', *Islamic Studies*, 37:1 (1998), pp. 3-17, p. 7; Wielandt, 'Exegesis of the Qur'an', p. 132.

⁵⁵ Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qur'an*, p. 68.

⁵⁶ The title of her autobiography '*Ala al-Jisr*, written in the year following al-Khūlī's death, is a metaphor for crossing the bridge between life and death towards al-Khūlī. The autobiography begins and ends with two long elegies ('On the Bridge' and 'A Year After') on the same theme.

⁵⁷ In addition to the studies in n. 54, Kenneth Cragg has written a nuanced review in *The Mind of the Qur'an* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), pp. 70-74. Andrew Rippin has also briefly reviewed her work in *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practice*, 2, *The Contemporary Period* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 94 and in 'Tafsir', in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), p. 8956. See also Paul Starkey on her literary method, in 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān', p. 18. There are also two unpublished masters theses, produced under the supervision of Professor Issa Boullata at McGill University, by Muḥammad Amīn, 'A Study of Bint al-Shāṭi's Exegesis' (1992); and Sahiron Syamsuddin, 'An Examination of Bint al-Shāṭi's Method of Interpreting the Qur'an' (1998).

⁵⁸ In vol. I: Q. 93, Q. 94, Q. 99, Q. 100, Q. 79, Q. 90, and Q. 102, and in vol. II: Q. 96, Q. 68, Q. 103, Q. 92, Q. 89, Q. 104, and Q. 107.

⁵⁹ Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 218-220.

⁶⁰ Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 220.

⁶¹ Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 220-1

⁶² Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 221.

⁶³ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 221

⁶⁴ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 221-2.

⁶⁵ In the order in which she lists them, the verses where *al-naʿīm* occurs are: Q. 9:29, Q. 52:17, Q. 56:89, Q. 70:38, Q. 82:13, Q. 83:22, Q. 76:20, Q. 5:65, Q. 10: 9, Q. 22:56, Q. 37:43, Q. 56:12, Q. 31:8, Q. 26:85, Q. 68:34, and, finally, Q. 102:8. *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 222-3.

⁶⁶ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 223.

⁶⁷ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 223.

⁶⁸ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 224.

⁶⁹ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, P. 224

⁷⁰ Rivalry (in multiplying) diverts you, even till you visit the tombs. No indeed; but soon you shall know. Again, no indeed; but soon you shall know. No indeed; did you know with the knowledge of certainty, you shall surely see Hell; Again, you shall surely see it with the eye of certainty; Then, on that day, you will be asked concerning *al-naʿīm* (Q. 102: 1-8) (Several well-known translations of the Qurʾan have been used to render into English the passages and verses used in this chapter).

⁷¹ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ pursues the theme of admonition and chastisement in her discussion of all the verses preceding Q. 102:8, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 201 ff.

⁷² Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 224.

⁷³ Cragg, *The Mind of the Qurʾan*, p. 72.

⁷⁴ Boullata, ‘Modern Qurʾan Exegesis’, pp. 107-8.

⁷⁵ Cf. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qurʾan*, p. 72.

⁷⁶ Norman Calder’s work is illuminating on this point. See his discussion in ‘Tafsīr From Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham’, in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, eds, *Approaches to the Qurʾan* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 101-140, pp. 103-4.

⁷⁷ Calder, ‘Tafsīr From Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr’, pp. 105-6.

⁷⁸ Cragg sees the tradition as bondage and Bint al-Shāṭiʿ as freeing her reading from it. However, he suspects that her treatment of the tradition stayed in awe of the authority of the past. See idem., *The Mind of the Qurʾan*, p. 73.

⁷⁹ See for example the discussion of Bint al-Shāṭi's views on exegetical credentials in Boullata, 'Modern Qur'an Exegesis', p. 109. Cf. al-Sid, *The Hermeneutical Problem of the Qur'an*, p. 345.

⁸⁰ Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 18.

⁸¹ Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 18.

⁸² Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 16.

⁸³ Cragg is uncertain as to why Bint al-Shāṭi reviews 'the numerous intricacies of old commentaries', but suggests this may well be a strategy to avoid the rejection of her audience. *The Mind of the Qur'an*, pp. 72-3.

⁸⁴ Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 17. The same message is reiterated and confirmed in her later work, *al-I'jāz al-bayānī*, pp. 12, 265.

⁸⁵ Cf. Bint al-Shāṭi, *Ala al-Jisr*, pp. 75 ff.

⁸⁶ Cf. Bint al-Shāṭi, *Ala al-Jisr*, on the days of *majlis al-shuyūkh* (p.30). She speaks of rhetoricians al-Sakkākī, al-Quzwīnī, and al-Subkī and exegetes al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Qurṭubī as those whom she had long-accompanied before joining the university (p. 70). She recollects a stage of self-doubt halfway through her first degree, when she began to fear that her resilience would not hold in the face of the decadent city culture (p. 85) and the university's intellectual challenge, and anxiously wondered if the day might come when she would forsake the imams of the pious ancestors who filled her mind and soul (p. 89). Elsewhere she also refers to the works of the exegetical and linguistic traditions as '*kutub qawmī*' (the books of my people) (p. 105).

⁸⁷ Bint al-Shāṭi, *Ala al-Jisr*, on another occasion she describes her world before al-Khūlī as bounded by closed walls or barriers: cf. pp. 89-90.

⁸⁸ Bint al-Shāṭi, *Ala al-Jisr*, p. 105.

⁸⁹ See the introduction to *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī li'l-Qur'ān al-karīm II* (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1968) also appearing in the 2nd edn (1973), p. 8. References hereafter are to the 2nd edn.

⁹⁰ Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, pp. 8-9.

⁹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. and ed., Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), p. 250.

⁹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 250.

⁹³ This argument draws inspiration from Norman Calder, 'History and Nostalgia: Reflections on John Wansbrough's *The Sectarian Milieu*', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9:1 (1997), pp. 37-73. Here, Calder suggests an assessment of the Islamic tradition more positive than Wansbrough's view of it as expressing a backward orientation or nostalgia for the past. See p. 65.

⁹⁴ In *al-I'jāz al-bayānī*, p. 11, Bint al-Shāṭi' explicitly justifies her self-authorization to address the question of the Qur'an's literary inimitability in terms of its being derived from her noble lineage to the *shuyūkh* (*lawlā nasabun lī fī'l-shuyūkh 'arīq*). Cf. her printed lecture *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī li-tahrīr al-mar'a* (Umm Durman: Jāmi'at umm durmān), 1966/67, p. 16, where she uses the same formula to authorise her discussion of an Islamic perspective of women's liberation.

⁹⁵ Cf. *Ala al-Jisr*, p. 94.

⁹⁶ See n. 86.

⁹⁷ Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 11.

⁹⁸ Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 18. The full paragraph in which this quotation appears was reprinted on the back cover of the 5th edn of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I* (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1977).

⁹⁹ Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 10-11; see also *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 8 where she states that the principle defining her approach is to measure the opinions and rules of grammarians in light of the Qur'an, but not to subject the Qur'an to these criteria.

¹⁰⁰ See for example Bint al-Shāṭi''s elaboration on the question of roots in her 1995 interview with Joyce Davis in *Between Jihaad and Salaam*, p. 176 where she emphatically states: 'I can't cut my roots.'

¹⁰¹ Several modern Muslim intellectuals such as Fazlur Rahman and Muhammad Shahrour exemplify this approach. For studies of modern approaches to the Qur'an see Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*.

¹⁰² A case which Bint al-Shāṭi' considers representative of how *ih̥tikām* assists the Qur'an to speak is her cross-examination of *uqsimu* and *ahlifu*, revealing that the Qur'an does not accept their synonymy, but distinctly preserves *Q-S-M* for faithful oaths, with *uqsimu* always referring to God, and *H-L-F* for the violation of oaths where the subject in question is usually the hypocrites: see *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 172-4.

¹⁰³ Western feminist philosophy of religion has critiqued the objectification of texts as characteristic of a masculinist hermeneutic that pursues mastery and domination. See for example Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). Though not claiming that Bint al-Shāṭi³ had feminist motivations, it is noteworthy that she seems to embrace what can be described as a hermeneutic that befriends the text and avoids terms of mastery and objectification.

¹⁰⁴ Bint al-Shāṭi³ asserts that the ‘secrets of the Qur’an’s eloquence’ reveal themselves after years ‘in the service of the text’, listening to it while dedicated to contemplating its meaning. See *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 7. This perspective resonates with Gadamer’s view of hermeneutics as encouraging listening to one another.

¹⁰⁵ In the 5th edition of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 9, Bint al-Shāṭi³ states that the Qur’an’s ‘gift to me has been seven books in the library of Qur’anic Studies: *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī (I-II)*, *al-I’jāz al-bayānī li’l-Qur’ān al-karīm*; *al-Insān wa-qadāyā al-‘aṣr*; *al-Qur’ān wa’l-tafsīr al-‘aṣrī* [Cairo: Dār al-ma‘ārif, 1970], and *al-Shakhaṣiyya al-islāmiyya* [Beirut: Jāmi‘at bayrūt al-‘arabiyya, 1973]’.

¹⁰⁶ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 7, 9 and *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, pp. 7, 8. She also used the term twice more generally to refer to her approach as *al-manhaj al-istiqrā‘ī*. Cf. *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 15 and *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 183.

¹⁰⁸ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 183.

¹⁰⁹ The early exegete ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Zayd’s name is miscopied or misprinted as Abū Zayd’ in Bint al-Shāṭi³.

¹¹⁰ On cross-examining all the published works the extent of intertextuality suggests that Bint al-Shāṭi³ had more or less completed the bulk of her research on *insān* by 1962. This is plausible in light of her cross-referential method which would have required an investigation of *insān* when she encountered it in Q. 90:4 for her 1962 publication. Parts of this research were presented in two lectures in 1965 at the universities of Baghdad and Kuwait (respectively, ‘Al-Tafsīr al-manhajī li-sūrat al-‘aṣr’ addressing, among other topics, the question of human responsibility, and ‘Al-Insān wa-ḥurriyyat al-irāda’ on free will). See Introduction to 3rd edn, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 8. It is not clear why she deferred publication of her full discussion of this topic to 1969 (it may be that she

preferred to gauge the reception of her first volume before presenting the theological outcome of her *tafsīr* approach).

¹¹¹ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 183, n. 1, specifically draws attention to her discussion of *al-insān* in relation to Q. 96 (*al-^calaq*) and Q. 103 (*al-^caṣr*), where she refers the reader to yet another more detailed discussion of *al-insān* in her treatise *Maqāl fi 'l-insān: dirāsa Qur'³āniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma^cārif, 1969). For another example of the intertextuality and interreferentiality of her work on *insān*, see *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 82, n.2.

¹¹² In *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, pp. 81-82, Bint al-Shāṭi³ discusses the distinct connotation of *al-insān* as compared to *al-nās* and *al-ins*. She explains that although all three words are derived from related roots and hence share similar connotations, each also connotes a distinct meaning. *Nās* stands for the entirety of the Adamic species, as for example in Q. 49:13, Q. 13:17 and Q. 59:21. In contrast *ins* from ³-N-S collocates with *jinn* in its eighteen Qur'anic instances, where it signifies the opposite of wildness and the inclination to live in a group. In *Maqāl fi 'l-insān*, she further compares *al-insān* to the word *bashar*, which occurs thirty-five times in the Qur'an, signifying the physical aspect of humanity, in twenty-five of which asserting specifically the humanity of prophets in physical terms. See *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, pp. 15-17.

¹¹³ Cf. *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, pp. 23-24 on the distinct human ability to acquire and record knowledge in Q. 96:4-5, and *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, pp. 24, 41-51, and 55-9.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, pp. 63 ff.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, pp. 31 ff.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, p. 24.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, p. 25.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, p.25

¹¹⁹ Cf. *al-Qur'³ān wa-qadāyā al-insān*, pp. 22-3; and on tyranny specifically, see *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 25.

¹²⁰ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 183.

¹²¹ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 183-4.

¹²² Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 185.

¹²³ Bint al-Shāṭi³, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, P. 184.

- ¹²⁴ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, P. 184.
- ¹²⁵ Al-Ṭūsī cites the early exegete al-Ḥasan (al-Baṣrī?) and not Ibn Abī al-Ḥasan as in Bint al-Shāṭiʿ. This inaccurate citation, however, no longer appears in the more recent editions of *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I* (e.g. 7th edn, 1990). Cf. Al-Ṭūsī on Q. 90:4 (<http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?MadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=39&tSoraNo=90&tAyahNo=4&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>), accessed on October 20th 2011.
- ¹²⁶ Ibn al-Qayyim is not known to have produced a complete *tafsīr* but some of his interpretations were compiled and edited by Muḥammad Aways al-Nadwī under the title *al-Tafsīr al-Qayyim*, (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-sunna al-muḥammadiyya, 1368/1949).
- ¹²⁷ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 184-5.
- ¹²⁸ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 185.
- ¹²⁹ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 185.
- ¹³⁰ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 185.
- ¹³¹ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 182 ff. on the linkage of Q. 90.3 to the oath.
- ¹³² Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 185.
- ¹³³ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, pp. 185-6.
- ¹³⁴ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 9.
- ¹³⁵ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 269, on the idea of a hermeneutic horizon.
- ¹³⁶ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 9.
- ¹³⁷ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 9.
- ¹³⁸ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 7. Cf. *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 10 and p. 15.
- ¹³⁹ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 18.
- ¹⁴⁰ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 18. Cf. *Lughatunā wa'l-ḥayā*, p. 47, where she criticises the quest of historical philology to account for the origin of the Arabic language.
- ¹⁴¹ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 10. Cf. *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 9, where she reasserts that ‘what must be taken into consideration, in any case, is the general meaning of the wording understood from [the verse’s] plain text, and not the particular circumstances of its revelation (*al-ʿibra fī kull ḥāl bi-ʿumūm al-lafẓ al-mafhūm min ṣarīḥ naṣṣiha lā bi-khuṣūṣ al-sabab*).
- ¹⁴² Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 7.
- ¹⁴³ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Bint al-Shāṭi's description of her approach in terms of *al-tanāwul al-mawḍū'ī* in *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I* (p. 18) has been translated into 'objective treatment'. See, for example, Boullata, 'Modern Qur'an Exegesis', pp. 104-5; al-Sid, *The Hermeneutical Problem*, p. 342; Syamsuddin, 'An Examination of Bint al-Shāṭi's Method', p. 48. However, in light of her explanation that *mawḍū'ī* means 'directed to studying a single topic (*dirāsāt al-mawḍū'ī al-wāḥid*) within the Qur'an, the term *al-mawḍū'ī* should be read not as indicating objectivism, but as expressing her topical method.

¹⁴⁵ Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, pp. 16-17, 19.

¹⁴⁶ Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī II*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁷ Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qur'an in Modern Egypt*, p. 69, notes that Bint al-Shāṭi steers away from the legal material in order to draw attention to her method and Stefan Wild in McAulliffe, *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, p. 285, has recently suggested that dogmatic issues are not addressed in her *tafsīr* to avoid criticism from al-Azhar. However, the gender implications of her reading of humanity, particularly her rejection of Adam's precedence in the order of the creation, were not uncontroversial issues at the time.

¹⁴⁸ See n. 110 and n. 112 above.

¹⁴⁹ See for example Yudian Wahyudi, 'Ali Shari'ati and Bint al-Shati' On Free Will: A Comparison', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 9:1 (1998) pp. 35-45.

¹⁵⁰ Bint al-Shāṭi, *Maqāl fi 'l-insān*, pp. 55.

¹⁵¹ Bint al-Shāṭi, *Maqāl fi 'l-insān*, pp. 55 ff.

¹⁵² 'Islam and the New Woman', tr., Anthony Calderbank, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 19:20 (1999), pp. 194-202, p. 194.

¹⁵³ Marcotte, 'Émancipation de la Femme', p. 278.

¹⁵⁴ Roded, 'Bint al-Shāṭi's Wives of the Prophet', p. 57.

¹⁵⁵ Marcotte, 'Émancipation de la Femme', p. 280.

¹⁵⁶ Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī*, pp. 7-12. Cf. Marcotte, pp. 281-3.

¹⁵⁷ In 'Émancipation de la Femme', p. 288, Marcotte argued in conclusion that Bint al-Shāṭi appears conservative and puritanical in her gender approach and cannot be deemed a feminist.

¹⁵⁸ Anne Sofie Roald, 'Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought', in Karin Ask and

Marit Tjomsland, ed., *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), pp. 22-23.

¹⁵⁹ Nimat Barazangi, *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading*, (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2004), pp. 42-4.

¹⁶⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 274-5.

¹⁶¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 299.

¹⁶² 'Al-Marʿa al-muslima ams wa'l-yawm', in Ibrāhīm Salāma et al., ed., *al-Islām, al-yawm wa- ghad* (Cairo, 1960?), pp. 67-94. This essay is referenced in *al-Mafhūm al-islāmī li-taḥrīr al-marʿa* (1967), p. 4, n. 2 Other references in 'al-Marʿa al-muslima' to her *tafsīr* work suggest that it was written during the 1960s.

¹⁶³ Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, 'al-Marʿa al-muslima', p. 69.

¹⁶⁴ Her articulation of the urgency of the woman question echoes reformist views which internalised the orientalist emphasis on the status of women in Muslim society as the cause of its stagnation and regression, but there is no further elaboration of this in her later arguments in 'al-Marʿa al-muslima'.

¹⁶⁵ *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī I*, p. 17 and 'al-Marʿa al-muslima', pp. 68-69.

¹⁶⁶ In her essays on women and Islam, Bint al-Shāṭiʿ substantiates this with examples of female Muslim figures who objected to male interpretations or who trained in and taught the religious sciences. See, for example, 'al-Marʿa al-muslima', pp. 88-92. Cf. 'Hal tuṣbiḥ al-marʿa shaykha li'l-Azhar?', *al-Hilāl* (February, 1956), pp. 50-4.