Revealing gender discourses in the Qurʾān: An integrative, dynamic and complex approach

This study examines the Qurʾān’s view towards gender and argues that all three masculine, feminine and egalitarian (gender-inclusive) discourses exist in its text, and that these discourses do not follow a simple and linear model but rather a nonlinear and complex one. It also provides evidence, showing that gender equality in the Qurʾān is achieved in two ways: firstly, through linguistic devices that are devoid of gender distinctions, and secondly, through concurrent use of masculine and feminine gender markers in one context. The masculine discourse is, however, more prominent in the verses of this book and manifests itself to varying degrees in three ways: (1) in some verses, only masculine indicators are used but it can be inferred based on the (Taghil) principle that both men and women are the intended addressees; (2) in some verses, rules regarding women are stipulated, whilst men are, in fact, the main addressees and (3) in verses that state rules on reciprocal issues such as divorce and marriage but these rules are addressed to only men. The feminine discourse is also present in the Qurʾān and can be seen in verses that address women.

Contribution: Revealing gender discourses in the Qurʾān requires not only a historical but also an integrative and holistic understanding of its text. This study attempts to identify the relation of the Qurʾān to the three gender discourses based on the linguistic elements of the text and their classification.

Keywords: the Qurʾān; discourse; text analysis; gender equality; feminine; masculine.

Introduction

Text analysis is one of the most effective methods for studying gender discourse(s) (West, Lazar & Kramarae 1997:119) in a text. The three gendered discourses in this area that researchers are generally interested in are masculine, feminine and egalitarian (gender-inclusive). Societies, indeed, play an important role in constructing and directing the use of these gender discourses within a text (West et al. 1997:119). However, gender relations are complex, and their emergence is not necessarily discernible in a linear fashion, particularly in a text such as the Qurʾān, which was revealed to Muhammad over a period of 23 years and has witnessed tumultuous times. For this reason, a discourse analysis of its text would help better clarify its gender relations, as it is a research method that allows examination and evaluation of different applications of linguistic elements in written or spoken texts and their relation to the social context (Paltridge 2012:1; Tannen 1994:74). Therefore, one should observe and evaluate various aspects of the Qurʾān’s language regarding the gender.

A large volume of works on the issue of gender representation in the Qurʾān thus far have been published. One of the most relevant of these works is a book by Naima Dib (2009) D’un islam textuel vers un islam contextuel: la traduction du Coran et la construction de L’image de la femme. The author depicts the social representations in the form of ideologies, which occupy the minds of the Qurʾān translators. She believes that views on women in the Qurʾān are not truly associated with the Qurʾān but are generally derived from the visions dominating the minds of the Qurʾān translators and commentators. She extracts two basic perspectives based on this hypothesis: firstly, the fundamentalist movement of Mohammad Abduh who was a critic of polygamy, and secondly, a perspective that is founded on the historicity of the Qurʾānic text. These perspectives generally offer modern readings according to human rights values. What is important about the approach taken by this feminist Qurʾānic researcher is her belief that the translators of the Qurʾān are generally and subconsciously male dominated (Dib 2009). It is obvious that Dib has sought to extract the gendered discourse associated with the Qurʾān, but her attempt was to discover the type of discourse that governs the minds of the Qurʾānic translators, not the discourse that can be derived from all Qurʾānic propositions.
Similar to Dib, Barlas (2001) focused on the influence of the male-dominant discourse on the commentators’ minds, and their masculine interpretations and readings of the Qur’ān. According to her research, women, just as men, have the right to read the Qur’ān with their feminist values. She ultimately seeks to establish a liberal and non-gendered reading of the Qur’ān; however, like Dib, she does it before attempting to identify the discourse present in the Qur’ān. In her other work, Barlas stated that the anti-women verses in the Qur’ān are relatively limited but the dominant discourse of the Qur’ān is masculine (2006:255–273). She seeks to explain the relationship between the text of the Qur’ān and patriarchy (Rahmatulla 2017:161). To do this, she provides examples for the anti-patriarchal foundation of the Muslim holy text (Qur’ān), claiming that these examples are incompatible with both traditional and modern understanding of the patriarchy (Rahmatulla 2017:161). The monotheism of God is the most important theological paradigm on which her work is based.

Having the Qur’ānic discourse in mind, Wadud-Muhsin (1995–1996) also sought a new and feminine reading of the Qur’ān. The hermeneutic approach of Amina Wadud is completely linear, meaning that her liberal interpretation of the Qur’ān is made based on specific verses, which have been interpreted in a way to portray the female gender as the oppressed one (Rahmatulla 2017:96). Furthermore, ‘gender’ is reduced to ‘female gender’; the ‘gender justice’ she seeks is somewhat imperfect and unfair (Hidayatullullah 2014:29). Wadud has only paid attention to the propositions and phrases in the Qur’ān from which the reading of gender injustice against women may be derived or it may prove gender justice towards women. Therefore, she has considered various themes from the story of Creation to the Day of Judgement, and she used text analysis and historical critique to do that. Meanwhile, some researchers (e.g. Milot 2009) sought to prove that the Qur’ān has an impartial approach towards male and female genders. It is clear that these researchers have not paid enough attention to the complexity of gender discourses in the book. It is important then that before forming any kind of judgment, we first identify the social relationships and discourses that exist in the Qur’ān, and then proceed to study the influence of the discourses on the minds of the translators and commentators of the book, a research endeavour that very few studies have sought to undertake.

Arguing that the Qur’ān mainly has a masculine discourse, Šadr sought to explain the philosophy and the reasons for such a discourse (Šadr 2001:112–131). From the author’s point of view, the strong social participation of men during Muhammad’s time is the main reason why Qur’ānic verses follow the male discourse (Šadr 2001:112–131). Smith and Haddad (1982:135–144) conducted one of the most important studies in this domain, focussing on the Qur’ān and Sunnah discourses regarding afterlife rewards for women and men. The researchers argued that there is a fundamental distinction between the Qur’ān and Sunnah approaches towards women and their afterlife rewards. They maintained that despite the egalitarian views of the Qur’ān, male-oriented views dominate the Sunnah. In their viewpoint, in the Sunnah, women actions are largely dependent on the quality of their relationship with their husbands, and the degree of allegiance to their husbands defines their afterlife bliss. However, the case is different for men, where the quality of their relationship with God is the criterion for their everlasting prosperity. Such an approach is not observed in the Qur’ān, considering its heavy presence in the Sunnah. It is also noteworthy that Smith and Haddad’s research centres on the content rather than on the linguistic indicators of gender, a shortcoming that our research tries to avoid by focusing on the linguistic indicators of gender.

We hasten to add that although there are already many works trying to demonstrate the Qur’ānic discourse on gender or the status of women in the Qur’ān (for some examples, see Awde 2000; Fārūqi 1984:36–49; Lamchichi 1995:97–111); the main emphasis of those studies has generally been on the prevalent masculine readings of the Qur’ān and not what the text of the Qur’ān indicates.

Amongst the works that can be considered as background to this article, there are two important books that analyse and evaluate feminist studies pertaining to the Qur’ān and the methodologies that those studies adopt. These works are important because they can show the methodological differences between this article and the previous prominent works. Aysha Hidayatullah (2014) presented the first comprehensive analysis of contemporary feminist interpretations of the Qur’ān. Combining the prominent late 20th-century feminist readings of the Qur’ān in the United States of America, she provides a fundamental introduction to this nascent field of Qur’ānic studies. Focusing on the feminist dilemmas in the Qur’ān, she argues that many feminist commentators have relied on claims about feminist justice that are not fully supported by the Qur’ānic text. She, therefore, proposes a fundamental overhaul of their interpretive foundations.

Rahmatulla (2017) dealt with the important issue of ‘liberation theology and gender justice in Islam’, and tried to review and evaluate the readings of contemporary Qur’ānic scholars. In two parts of the book, he specifically deals with two prominent feminist Qur’ānic scholars: Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas. Rahmatulla has called Wadud and Barlas’ interpretations of the Qur’ān as ‘[w]omen’s gender egalitarian readings of the Qur’ān’. He believes that these two researchers, rather than trying to draw a paradigm or describe the gender discourses of the Qur’ān, seek to present a different and feminine reading of the book, which is different from the common and masculine reading of the commentators. Rahmatulla (2017), therefore, provides cogent arguments, which show the difference between the present article and the works that have been published before, especially the works of Wadud and Barlas.

It should be noted that all the works that have been written so far about the Qur’ān and gender introduce ‘historical
Gender indicators in the Arabic language

Languages differ greatly in their use of gender attributes. Some languages, such as Persian, demonstrate the least gender differentiation; masculinity and femininity are not defined in names and verbs, nor are the pronouns in this language marked for gender. For instance, the subject pronoun ‘ως’ (s/he) at the beginning of a sentence is used for both males and females alike.1 In contrast, other languages, such as German and French, heavily use gender indicators. In German, all names are categorized into three main classes: masculine, feminine, and neutral, and an appropriate article is required for each of these genders.2 Even the possessive pronouns change according to the gender of the noun in the sentence. The difference between the two phrases ‘er ist mein Bruder’ versus ‘sie ist meine Schwester’3 is observed; apart from the verb ‘ist’, the rest of the sentences are different according to their masculine or feminine gender. In English, the differences are more subtle, and the possessive pronouns are often masculine or feminine alike. Increased use of these words in Arabic can be observed; apart from their gender. However, we will face a wider variety of forms, irregular plural nouns can be mentioned as an example. Irregular plural nouns contrast with regular plural nouns, which have both masculine and feminine forms.8 Irregular nouns, however, are defined without any gender indicators and use a range of formats for compliance. The speaker’s use of an irregular plural form rather than a regular one can serve the gender impartiality in their speech. As an example, instead of using the regular plural form ‘er ist mein Bruder’ ( ‘er ist mein Bruder’) and ‘sie ist meine Schwester’ ( ‘sie ist meine Schwester’), we can use its irregular form ‘er ist mein Bruder’ ( ‘er ist mein Bruder’) and ‘sie ist meine Schwester’ ( ‘sie ist meine Schwester’).9 It is clear that in Arabic, there exist no other differences between these two plural classes, except their gender. However, we will face a wider variety of words in the realm of singular nouns. Words such as ‘man’, ‘mā’ (mā), ‘kāli’ (kāli) and ‘nafs’ (nafs) do not have any gender specifications and are used for masculine and feminine alike. Increased use of these words in Arabic can reduce the level of gender orientation in the language and strengthen the egalitarian approach in the text. Considering the above points, we try to provide an analysis of the Qur’ān’s gender discourses.

1. Masculine and feminine.
2. Singular, dual and plural.
3. Singular and plural first person.
4. Masculine regular plural noun is formed by adding the suffix ‘-ān’ (unah) and ‘-ān’ (nāf) to the noun and the feminine regular plural noun is formed by adding the suffix ‘-ān’ (unah) and ‘-ān’ (nāf) to the word’s end.
5. The underlined parts do not change with the changes in gender: ‘ks’ (ابن) versus ‘ks’ (ابن).
6. The two articles, die – das – der, have been considered for this purpose.
7. The underlined parts do not change with the changes in gender: ‘ή’ (his) and ‘ή’ (her) versus ‘ή’ (his) and ‘ή’ (her).
8. The underlined parts do not change with the changes in gender: ‘ή’ (his) and ‘ή’ (her) versus ‘ή’ (his) and ‘ή’ (her).
9. The word ‘nafs’ (nafs) does not contain any gender indications. There are other meters in irregular plural form, which do not contain any gender signs, such as ‘al-‘a’ al-‘ān’ (al-‘a’ al-‘ān’), ‘al-‘ān’ (al-‘ān’), ‘al-‘a’ al-‘ān’ (al-‘a’ al-‘ān’) and ‘al-‘a’ al-‘ān’ (al-‘a’ al-‘ān’).
As mentioned in the previous section, Arabic language contains gender indicators, and gender plays a crucial role in conjugation of its verbs and declension of the nouns. Nevertheless, strategies exist to maintain gender equality when using the language. In this regard and considering that language users are also able to reduce excessive dominance of male or female gender discourse and adopt a more gender-balanced approach in their language production, we have identified gender propositions in the Qur’an and have categorised them into three discourses: masculine, feminine and egalitarian. We introduce more detailed subcategories, as well as various types of each of these discourses later on in this article. This classification will show the extent to which the Qur’an pays attention to each of these three discourses and the quality in which each is addressed. Furthermore, we try to identify the approaches of the Qur’an in order to realise gender equality in the application of language. Content analysis was used as a research method to analyse the data in this study because it is a ‘method that can be applied to written or visual materials for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material [which can be] textbooks, newspapers, web pages, speeches, television programs, advertisements, musical compositions’ (ed. Ary 2014:488).

Content analysis, which can be performed qualitatively (Schreier 2014) as well as quantitatively (Krippendorff 1989), is a widely used method (Hsieh & Shannon 2005) to examine issues from the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts to deep individual or collective structures, such as values, intentions, attitudes and cognition. There are usually two general categories of content analysis: conceptual analysis and relational analysis (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe 2010). Conceptual analysis can be defined as considering the existence and frequency of concepts in a text. For instance, if a researcher wants to examine feminism in the poems of a favourite poet, he or she should find words related to feminism and their frequency. Nevertheless, relational analysis, which was applied in the current study, goes deeper by identifying the relationships amongst concepts in a text, for instance, by examining what comes before or after. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) described content analysis as the process of four Cs, that is, coding, categorising, comparing and concluding. Coding is used to organise and reduce the data, and look for specific patterns within the data in order to connect them to broader concepts. Categorising is the process in which researchers try to group patterns observed in the data into meaningful categories. Comparing means establishing connections between categories. Finally, concluding stands for drawing theoretical considerations on the basis of the text and the results of the analysis (see Cohen et al. 2007).

A widely recognised benefit of content analysis for the researchers is the permission-free characteristic of the method, meaning that the researcher does not need to obtain permission from any participants or corporations (ed. Ary 2014). Using the method, the researchers went through the verses in the Qur’an one by one and classified them based on their linguistic features into three categories: masculine, feminine and egalitarian. Each category was further divided into subcategories, given the genderedness of the verses. The method allowed the researchers to demonstrate not only the three gender discourses in the Qur’an but also the degree of genderedness of those discourses.

**Egalitarian (gender-inclusive) approach in the Qur’an**

From a gender perspective, an egalitarian approach in the language is achieved either by application of non-gendered devices or by equal use of both masculine and feminine gender indicators. Therefore, the examination of linguistic indicators associated with the egalitarian approach presents us with two different patterns: (1) application of gender-free devices such as ٠ (man), ٠ (Mā), ٠ (kullu), ٠ (af‘al) and (2) concurrent use of male and female gender indicators within one context, an approach to gender that has been used extensively in the Qur’an’s text. The two patterns are elaborated in the following sections.

**Application of gender-free devices**

One of the solutions to promote justice and gender equality in Arabic language is using words without gender indicators, which can be employed for both masculine and feminine genders. The devices include ٠ (man), ٠ (Mā), ٠ (kullu), ٠ (Naf‘al) and the majority of the irregular plural forms. Applying such words when their gendered equivalents are also applicable can indicate the conscious effort of the speaker to achieve gender equality. We encounter two types of language use: Type 1 when gender-free language devices are applied from the beginning of speech, and Type 2 when the speech is initially dominated by a gendered approach, generally masculine, but is replaced by the gender-free language devices when the main statement is made. The second type is known as gender grammatical shift (Ilīfāt al-jinn). Gender grammatical shift is a technique that has been extensively applied in the Qur’an and in presentation of gender equality can be more prominent than the first type, as it implies a greater emphasis on gender equality in the language. Haleem (1992) wrote in detail about this literary feature and its use in the Qur’an (see more in Haleem 1992:407–432). In the following, we present examples of both types.

**Type 1: Application of gender-free devices and gender equality in the language of the Qur’an**

Relative pronouns, such as ٠ [who] and ٠ [what/whatever], are amongst the most widely used gender-free devices in the Qur’an. The following sentence is a small example of these instances. In verse 3:126, Allah uses the relative pronoun ٠ [what/whatever] to declare his rule over the heavens and earth. ٠ [whatever], with its gender-neutral character, emphasises more on such a declaration rather than words and devices that possess specific gender characteristics. Furthermore, in this verse, the words ٠ [things] and ٠
[of all] are devoid of gender indicators and support the mentioned declaration of that rule.

Another illustrative example is Qur’ān 57:4 where the use of the relative pronoun ‘us’ has created a type of alliteration in the text, and the relatively meaningful distinction of the first four ‘us’s in the beginning, and the ‘āl that is finally added to ‘uq‘ brings a special form of Qur’ānic punning to mind.\textsuperscript{10} However, what is specifically desirable here is the generalisation that has emerged using the gender-neutral ‘āl statements. The repetition of this non-gendered term in the text represents an egalitarian view, addressing all the creatures of God and suggesting that all creatures are equal in the eyes of God.

An alliteration similar to what we saw with the use of the word ‘مَن’ [interrogative who] is also seen when using the word ‘نَاس’ [people] in Qur’ān 10:31. In this verse, the similarity of sounds between ‘نَاس’ /[who] and ‘نَاس’ /from] is well applied, and with its repeated use in one sentence, much more emphasis on and exaggeration for the word ‘نَاس’ has been created. The generality of this term is amplified by the absence of gender indicators. Words such as ‘مَن’ [all], ‘نَاس’ [people], ‘شِيئ’ [thing], ‘قُوم’ [folk] and ‘عَزْم’ [power] are also amongst gender-neutral language devices, which are applied in the Qur’ān. In Qur’ān 3:26, Allah, in order to illustrate the dominance of death, uses the words ‘مَن’ and ‘نَاس’ together. Moreover, the use of the word ‘نَاس’ in this verse also emphasises gender neutrality and encompasses both male and female gender. In Qur’ān 4:126, as discussed earlier, in addition to the word ‘مَن’, the two words ‘مَن’ and ‘شِيئ’ were used together, which also depict the use of devices that are gender neutral.

Investigating the Qur’ānic samples presents the researchers with a large volume of these applications, which increases the egalitarian polarity of the Qur’ānic discourse, but the gender grammatical shift more significantly denotes the conscious use of equality in the gendered application of the speech and has led to the distinctive prominence of the egalitarian approach within the text of the Qur’ān.

Type 2: Gender grammatical shift and gender equality in the language of the Qur’ān

Gender grammatical shift is a change from a certain gender indicator to another within a single linguistic context. What we mean by the gender grammatical shift in the Qur’ān is the transformation of male gender devices into gender-free devices. In traditional topics, such a shift also implies the generalisation and deliverance of judgements (see Suyuti 2000:2/123–124). However, what matters most to us is the prominence of the egalitarian discourse. Qur’ān 2:108 and 2:212 begin with the plural masculine forms ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ [those who disbelieve] – ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ [you intend] but near to the end and when God’s command is declared to the people, ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ is applied. As mentioned before, ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ is amongst the non-gender-based devices. Therefore, here, a gender grammatical shift and transition from plural masculine to gender neutral has occurred. This gender grammatical shift not only allows the verdict of the verse to more explicitly encompass both men and women but also enables gender equity to manifest itself more noticeably in the application of the language. We should not fail to mention that whilst examples like the above are abundant in the Qur’ān, this form of gender grammatical shift has scarcely occurred in other contemporary texts of the Qur’ān or later works. This gender grammatical shift is clearly observable in Qur’ān 2:80–81.

In Qur’ān 2:80, God uses the verb ‘قُولُوا’ [they say] in a masculine plural form up to the end of the verse. In verse 2:81, which a generalised rule applying to both men and women, the pronoun ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ is used. This shift from a masculine plural form to a singular genderless form is an important gender shift. A similar example can be seen in Qur’ān 3:196, which begins with ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ – the third person masculine plural – but when the general law is stated, the word ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ is applied. Other similar instances can be seen in Qur’ān 16:105–106. Shifting from gendered verb forms to neutral verb forms is amongst the prominent features of the Qur’ānic language. Verse 3:191 is a good example of such a transition; in this verse, we observe the transition from the third person plural ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ [who give thought] and ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ [who remember] to the first person plural ‘ذَیِلَانَا’ [our God]. This is a transition not only in number (third person plural to first person) but also in gender as the first person plural (pronoun ‘ذَیِلَانَا’) is devoid of any gender indicators. Therefore, the gendered view is dominant in the beginning of the verse but the view is egalitarian in the continuation and towards the end.

It is apparent that grammatical gender shift plays an important role in establishing gender equality in the language of the Qur’ān. In other words, God does not necessarily follow the common rules of the Arabic language, where it is customary for male singular and plural pronouns to represent both male and female genders. Therefore, masculine pronouns can be used generically to refer to both sexes, but the gender grammatical shift makes a fundamental difference in this regard, that is, it adds to the generalisation and weakens male gender dominance through introducing gender-neutral devices in the male-dominated context. Another important type of language use found in egalitarian discourse, which is more prominent, is the concurrent use of male and female gender indicators within the same context, a topic that will be dealt with below.

Concurrent use of male and female gender indicators within the same context

Another important linguistic feature employed in the Qur’ān is the concurrent use of male and female gender indicators in a linguistic expression. To do lingual justice to both genders, application of this feature is much more important than the previous one (i.e. gender grammatical shift), as it shows the conscious application of an egalitarian approach through the use of female indicators alongside the male

\textsuperscript{10}To find more about the art of making puns in the Qur’ān and familiarisation to view similar instances, see Rippin (1994:193–207).
In this statement, it is stressed that women should be included along with men. In the following verses, the words related to male and female gender have occurred together to represent the unethical subjects and social pathologies, such as stealing, hypocrisy and theft:

وَالسّارِقُ وَالسّارِقَةُ ثَلَاثَةُ جَلْدَةٍ مِّنْ أَيْدِيْهِمَا حَسْبًا وَلَهُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلِيلٌ

Translation: [As for] the thief, the male and the female, amputate their hands in recompense for what they committed as a deterrent [punishment] from Allah. And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise. (5:38)

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الْمُسْتَضْعَفِينَ وَالْمُتَكَفِّرَينَ نَارَ جَهَنَّمَ خَالِدِینَ فِیهَا هِیَ حَسْبُهُمْ وَلَعَنَهُمُ اللَّهُ وَلَهُمْ خَاتِمَةٌ مُّكْرَمَةٌ

Translation: Allah has promised the hypocrite men and hypocrite women and the disbelievers the fire of Hell, wherein they will abide eternally. It is sufficient for them. And Allah has cursed them, and for them is an enduring punishment (9:68).

Similarly, in Qur’an 24:2, God says:

الرِّجَالِ وَالنِّسَاءِ وَالْوِلْدَانِ... 

Translation: The [unmarried] woman or [unmarried] man found guilty of sexual intercourse – lash each one of them with a 100 lashes…

In these cases, in contrast to the dominant masculine approach in which the inclusion of the feminine gender is only based on the domination principle, there is an emphasis on the female gender. In the first two verses, firstly the masculine and then the feminine gender have been presented – the male thief and the female thief. In these cases, in contrast to the dominant approach of the masculine domination. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the male language approach prevails in the Qur’an. At this point, in order to form a better judgement, we also illustrate the cases of masculine approach in the Qur’an.

**Masculine approach in the Qur’an**

Another category of verses the linguistic examination of which shows a gendered approach includes those verses that have a male-dominant approach. These verses constitute a
large volume of the Qurʾān. Assessment and analysis of the
most important verses of this category present us with four
different approaches: (1) verses that have a masculine
approach and also include women, following the ‘Taghlīb’
[domination] principle, (2) verses that explain the rules that
are related to women but whose addressees are men and use
a masculine texture to present them (i.e. the rules), (3) verses
in the form of statements that have a dual nature but are only
directed to men and expressed in a masculine form and (4)
verses that adopt a humiliating and at times offensive
approach towards the female gender.

The first category of the verses that are noteworthy within the
masculine approach in the Qurʾān includes those that
express a general verdict for both genders through male
pronouns and verbs. Such a practice is generally justified by
the principle of ‘الْعَتْبَة’ [domination], which is defined by the
Qurʾānic scholars as the transfer of a rule from one entity
to another. In other words, it is the preference of one of the
dominated over another and the application of the term
‘الْدَرَجَة’ to both objects (al-Zarkashī 1984:vol. 3:369; Ibn
al-Athīr 1933/2/4; Suyūṭī 2000:vol. 3:253–259). It should be
noted that ‘domination’ is a common thread in the Qurʾān.
The extent of the use of such domination in the Qurʾān is
because of the conformity between the Qurʾānic language
and the essence of the Arabic language, as such a domination is
very common in the Arabic language (Abūzayd 2000:30–31).
According to Abūzayd, the principle of domination, through
which male gender linguistic devices are used to refer to
female gender as well as to refer to issues related to both men
and women, is widely used in the Arabic language. This
feature of the language cannot be considered a shortcoming
of the Qurʾān.

In most of the Qurʾānic cases, a verdict, which is generalised
to all human beings, is made through the use of male
pronouns as the generic. Two of these numerous examples
include the use of masculine gender indicator ﷺ to refer to
the children of Adam (a) in Qurʾān 7:27: General rules
such as the one on charity in Qurʾān 2:271, which is explained
via a masculine approach, are also worth mentioning:
إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِینَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَعِیمٍ
وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِیرٌ.

Translation: If you disclose your charitable expenditures, they are
good; but if you conceal them and give them to the poor, it is
better for you… .

One of the most challenging of these dominant generalisations
can be seen in the verses where God speaks of the believers’
rewards and introduces descriptions of heavenly blessings.
In such verses, the gender is generally masculine and the
promised rewards are meaningful for men. These verses
usually begin with the dominant Qurʾānic approach
the masculine approach, but with the possibility of
generalisation to both genders: ﴿إِنْ تُبْدُوا الصَّدَقَاتِ فَنِعِمَّا﴾
[indeed, the righteous will be in gardens and pleasure] (Qurʾān 52:17).

However, in the following, the conditions give rise to the
suspicion that the blessings are specific to men:
مَنْثَّكِينَ عَلَیْ مَرْصَعٍ مَّعْصِفَةٍ وَزَوَّجْنَاهُمْ بِحُورٍ عَیْنٍ
(they will be reclining on thrones lined up, and we will marry them to fair women
with large, [beautiful] eyes) (Qurʾān 52:20). Other similar
verses in the Qurʾān provide stronger evidence for such an
assignment of rewards. Examples of such include verses
(Qurʾān 56:35–37) that describe the rewards of the believers
to be maiden women. In order to introduce these maidens,
examples of such verses with their masculine approach
constitute a large portion of the Qurʾān. The generalisation
and domination can be observed in most of them.

The second category of the Qurʾānic verses that portrays the
masculine approach includes those that state the rules related
to women, whilst, in fact, those rules are addressed to men.
Given that women have been addressed in the Qurʾān in
numerous instances, it is meaningless to assume that God has
not addressed the women in order to protect their dignity in
these verses. There is no doubt that respect to women has
been given the highest possible degree in the Qurʾān, but
justification of the uses of the abovementioned category of
verses cannot be only based on the respectfulness hypothesis.
In Qurʾān 2:222, which specifies the rules about women’s
menstruation, Allah declares in a purely masculine style to
say how men must withdraw from women and not have
sexual intercourse with them. In this verse, without specifying
what those women should do, the verdict addresses the men.
The only other verse in which the rules about menstruation
have been mentioned is Qurʾān 65:4, in which the main issues
are the period [٠] for specific women, menopause and
pregnancy, at the time of their divorce. Interestingly, in
these verses, there is also a conditional clause the grammatical
gender of which is masculine, ‘if you doubt’ ﴿إِنْ ارْتَثَّنَّكُمْ﴾
and presents a male discourse.

The third group of male-oriented verses relates to the laws in
the Qurʾān, which have a reciprocal nature but proceeds by
addressing only the men. Interestingly, many Islamic jurists
(see Jāsās 1984:1/190; Mohaghigh Helli 1987:3/3; Zahili
1988:9/6877), given the masculine gender of the addressees,
do not believe that these verses can be generalised to include
the female gender. The issue of divorce and marriage is one
of the most important subjects that fall under this category.
Although these two important social issues are reciprocal
in nature, with the authority of both men and women involved,
in the Qurʾān they are presented with a focus on male
audience. In verse 33:53, the ban on marriage with Prophet
Mohammad’s wives is mentioned. Here, marriage is
presented in a unidirectional and masculine style too. In
verse 60:10, although there is a passing remark about the
dual nature of the marriage ﴿لَا هُمْ لَا عَبْرَةٌ لَّهُمْ وَلَا يَبْعْثُونَ نُعِیمًا﴾
[they are not lawful [wives] for them, nor are they lawful [husbands]
for them], much like the preceding verses, the masculine
discourse prevails.
The only part where the Qurʾān regards the marriage from the feminine point of view is on the subject of a woman marrying her former husband. In Qurʾān 2:232, Allah states that women should not be prevented from marrying their former husbands following their divorce and after the allocated time has passed. This is the only instance when the verb marriage is presented through the feminine approach (يَنكِحُونَ أُرواحَهنَّ), and shows women’s control and choice in marriage. This verse also begins with a masculine orientation (فَإِذَا طَلَّقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَبَلَغْنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ مَیْسَرَةً) and proximity of divorce and marriage can be a good introduction to the issue of divorce and the Qurʾān’s gender approach towards it. A similar approach towards divorce is also observable in Qurʾān 2:227, in which Allah mentions men as those possessing the intention and determination for divorce. In the same Surah, Qurʾān 2:229 confirms this approach after expressing the number of permitted divorces by using a masculine pattern. Moreover, in Qurʾān 2:230, the use of masculine pronouns and style leaves no doubt about the adoption of a masculine approach. The presence of the word تَسْرَى (he divorced her) confirms that the divorce takes place by the will of the man.

Despite what was mentioned about the reciprocal nature of divorce and marriage in this section, and the adoption of a one-sided, masculine approach by the Qurʾān in covering these issues, the various perspectives of the Qurʾān towards women make it really difficult to draw a firm conclusion on whether adopting a masculine approach in these verses means denying women the right to make their choice in divorce and marriage. The complexity of the Qurʾān’s language regarding the issue of gender makes it tricky to draw gendered and biased conclusions solely from the masculine or feminine use of the language. Our argument is whether the use of the domination principle and generalisation through this principle impact the verdict and make the verdict biased. A look at the uses of language in the Qurʾān shows that in many cases, the rulings based on domination are general and not biased. It is highly questionable, therefore, to assume that rulings regarding issues, such as divorce and marriage, which have been issued based on the principle of domination, are biased in favour of the masculine gender.

The fourth and the last category of the series of verses that has a masculine approach relates to verses that follow a humiliating and at times offensive approach towards the female gender. Many of these features that are discussed further are because of the masculine nature of the Arabic language, which the Qurʾān has also applied in its style of speech. As an example, in Arabic, certain forms that are frequently followed by feminine signs are used for humiliation, reduction and unification. Meters such as فَقَطُ (fa’lah) and فَعَّالُ (fa’elah) are applied for reduction and unification. Also, a mixture of indefinite and feminine is mostly used for humiliation. Such application is observable in Qurʾān 2:280 where we are confronted with words, such as تَسْرَى (postponement) and مِبَاسِرَة (ease). Both these words indicate paucity and shortage, and their feminine style plays an important role in this indication. Of course, as we mentioned, this is mostly rooted in the masculine nature of the Arabic language.

Adherence to the masculine discourse with a subordinate view towards the feminine gender has been taken more seriously in some verses of the Qurʾān. In Qurʾān 4:34, two successive phrases refer to the domination and dominance of men over women:

ترجمة: "أنت الذين لم تكن له لكم أخت أو ورث子里 من النساء..."

In the second part of this statement, men’s dominance over women is considered as a reason for the dominance of men towards women. The masculine severity in this phrase has led some to proceed with a feminine retrieval of the concept of ‘Qawāma’ and ‘the supremacy of the husband’. At the end of verse 4:34, hitting women in the event of her non-adherence to marriage "Nushūz" is mentioned. The image of women in this verse is such that she does not possess any rights for sexual intercourse, and to some extent, can be considered a ‘bondswoman’ or ‘sex slave’. It seems that the metaphor for ‘bondwoman’ and ‘captive’ is visible for women in some other verses.

There are numerous indications for this issue in Qurʾān 2:229, the beginning of which it is said that after a divorce, the man has the right to return to his wife and resume his life with her or release her "تَسْرَى بَعْضَاهَا، ثُمَّ نُشُوزَ (release [her] with good treatment). The phrase "تَسْرَى بَعْضَاهَا يَتَرَكْهَا (he divorced her) confirms and reproduces the humiliating look of the people of..."

In this verse, the woman is considered as a bondswoman or a commodity whose inheritance is possible by the heirs.

Another instance in the Qurʾān which can, on the surface, confirm and reproduce the humiliating look of the people of..."
the age of the Prophet Mohammad towards women is where God reprimands the non-believers’ idea that the angels are the daughters of God. These were the times when people preferred to have sons, and there existed a sort of hatred and disgust amongst them towards having a daughter. Based on this discriminatory belief, Qur'ān 53:21 states in a surprising statement: ‘[is] the male for you and for Him the female?’ In this passage, the discriminatory and inferior view towards women has been verified. However, another similar verse, verse 4:117, is more discriminatory with more precise and more direct definitions. Firstly, the concurrent use of woman (ʾāʾēṯan) and Satan (ʾāʾēṯan) is significant. Secondly, the phrase ‘They call upon instead of Him none but female [deities]’, rather looks down on the female gender. In verse 3:36, which describes Maryam (Mary)’s birth and her mother (Hannah)’s discomfort with having delivered a female child, one can also discern the same view. In the remainder of the verse, if we consider Maryam’s mother to be the narrator of the phrase ‘[and] the male is not like the female’, a rather unanimous belief on the part of the audience in superiority of the male over the female gender is evident.

A number of other verses that might seem to promote an insulting and inferior look towards women are those that allude to women’s soft upbringing and lack of strength in taking up social responsibilities. In verse 2:282, for instance, it is argued that the reason why the testimony of two women would equal that of one man is that in case the first woman forgets a fact, the other woman reminds her of it: ‘...aum ni ṣubba n ṣelle ṣiṣa yadda ṣiṣa yadda ’iṣ (so that if one of the women forgets, then the other can remind her). It is clear that ‘forgetfulness’ here is considered as a defect in women and has created a lower position for them than men. Verse 43:18 also mentions the flaws of women in arguments and discussions, through which an inferior view takes place: ‘وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لِرَبِّكِ يَا مَرْيَمُ - (so is one brought up in ornaments whilst being during conflict unevident [attributed to Allah]?)

The four different patterns of masculine approach in the Qur'ānic language and the effect of the male-dominated language do not reflect the unquestioning domination of this discourse on the language of the Qur’ān. The egalitarian approach discussed at the beginning of this article and the feminine approach that will be analysed further on constitute a significant number of the Qur’ānic verses. This reveals that gender-specific discourses have a complicated representation in the Qur’ān, and that we are faced with a combined application of discourses within its text. In the following section, we concentrate on the Qur’ānic verses in which the female approach is dominant. The third category, much like the first category, serves the egalitarian approach.

Qur’ānic verses with dominant feminine approach

The next gender-based linguistic pattern that can be observed in the Qur’ān is the feminine approach. These verses are amongst the most distinct Qur’ānic approaches, and this distinction is because of the fact that many similar compositions are not fundamentally consistent with this approach. These verses can be grouped into two categories: In the first category, women are addressed, and in the second category, we see women being cited as role models. The feminine models in these verses are not just for other women, but men can also consider them as their own model.

Direct addressing of the women in the Qur’ān

As mentioned in the previous section, addressing women is not a common strategy in the Qur’ān. As was mentioned, gender grammatical shift is a popular literary device in the Qur’ān, which prevents the direct addressing of women. In fact, in the cases that follow the grammatical shift, women’s verdict is mentioned through addressing the men. It is useful to regard this alongside the fact that such an approach happens even when it is possible to directly address the addressee. In one part of the Qur’ān 2:187 [... هَكَيْنِينِ (الله) مُلْلَاهُنَّ لَهُنَا أَنْ يَكُونُنَّ لَهُنَّ رَأْيَانِ!... (...they are clothing for you and you are clothing for them[... ]], we see that men are being directly addressed (الله), whilst it is possible to address the women as well; they (i.e. women) are mentioned in the third person (هن). We also see the same approach when the rules regarding the quality of mothers’ breastfeeding (رضاعة) are mentioned. Although it is possible to address the women directly, they are mostly mentioned in the third (absent) person. In addition to these instances, there are verses in the Qur’ān in which women are addressed directly. Allah addresses Maryam in one of the most prominent examples of this type:

Translation: O Mary, be devoutly obedient to your Lord and prostrate and bow with those who bow [in prayer]. (3:43)

Reflecting on the previous sections shows that the direct addressing of women in the Qur’ān is considered a rare and important event. Application of female verbs (أمَّاتِي أَطْلَقْتُ إِلَيْكَ ـ أَرْضِعِيه وَجَاعِلُوهُ مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ) [be obedient – prostrate – bow] in a succession has given a special weight to the female gender in this verse. Evidently, addressing of women is not limited to Maryam. Elsewhere in the Qur’ān 33:30, God addresses the Prophet Mohammad’s wives directly and warns them against the practice of sexual immorality. Also, in another important verse, God speaks of the revelation to the mother of Moses. In the following example, Allah narrates his discussion with her:

Translation: And We inspired to the mother of Moses, ‘[suckle him; but when you fear for him, cast him into the river and do not fear and do not grieve. Indeed, we will return him to you and will make him one of the messengers’. (28:7)

The revelation to a woman in the Qur’ānic discourse is so important that it has become the subject of specific studies by Islamic feminists (e.g. see Ismail 1999). The recurring use of the second person female verbs (آمَّاتِي إِلَى أَمْوَسِى أنْ أَرْضِعِيه) has created a lower position for them than men. Verse 43:18 states in a surprising statement: ‘أَنْ تَضِلَّ إِحْداهُما فَتُذَكِّرَ إِحْداهُمَا الُْخْرى’ (if one of the women forgets, then the other can remind her). It is clear that ‘forgetfulness’ here is considered as a defect in women and has created a lower position for them than men. Verse 43:18 also mentions the flaws of women in arguments and discussions, through which an inferior view takes place: ‘وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لِرَبِّكِ يَا مَرْيَمُ - (so is one brought up in ornaments whilst being during conflict unevident [attributed to Allah]?)

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[suckle – cast him – do not fear – do not grieve] along with the female-connected second person pronoun « Physician » to you] has also given considerable weight to the female gender in this verse.

In all of the above examples, we observed that women are addressed by God. Addressing people directly conveys their importance to the speaker. Needless to say, this issue is rooted in the Arabic language. In this language, and also in many other languages, the present addressee (second person) has a much greater value than the absent (third person). Therefore, direct addressing of women can show the Qur’ān’s attention to feminine discourse. Nevertheless, attention to exemplar women shows the height of God’s commitment to women in the Qur’ān, a topic that will be dealt with below.

Role models and exemplar women in the Qur’ān

The second category in the Qur’ānic approach towards women is devoted to verses related to the theme of exemplar women. There is no doubt that the verses including these women create a great distance between Qur’ānic discourse and masculine approaches. In this regard, Maryam and the Pharaoh’s wife, Asia, have been mentioned as the role models. Once again, in an independent form, Maryam is considered as a role model. Apart from these applications, the Queen of Saba is also cited as an uncontested and powerful ruler in a celebrated style. In the Qur’ān 66:11, God first mentions Pharaoh’s wife and then introduces her as a role model for all believers, both men and women. Asia’s direct dialogue with God in this verse is noteworthy:

Translation: And Allah presents an example of those who believed: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, ‘[O] Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds and save me from the wrongdoing people.

In Qur’ān 66:12, Maryam is introduced as a criterion for chastity and honesty. What raises the gender perspective around Maryam is when the story of her service in the temple and her adoption by Zechariah is told. In this narrative, we witness the formation of certain of comparison between Zechariah and Maryam, especially when Zechariah enters the altar and feels surprised to see the food God has sent to Maryam. At this time, he takes Maryam for a model and asks God to give him a child. The confrontation between male and female genders and the relative prominence of Maryam over Zechariah in this Qur’ānic narration are, indeed, remarkable and thought-provoking. There is, however, another verse, Qur’ān 27:23, in the Qur’ān that does not have the ideological approach like the previous verses. It mentions the kingdom of Saba

and her authority within it. Surah Al-Naml speaks of Solomon’s confrontation with a great ruler who is accidentally a woman. When describing her, it is stated that the ruler of the tribe is the woman who possesses all the means and powers of an authoritative ruler. This encounter happens within a complementary context and without the slightest sign of any negative attitudes towards the ruling of a woman. Such verses might be considered as evidence demonstrating the Qur’ān’s confirmation of the issue of women leadership, and thus, provides us with evidence of its supportive approach towards the feminine discourse. More evidence is needed to verify the veracity of this claim.

Conclusion

One of the main merits of this study, which is different from previous related studies, is that it describes and evaluates gender discourses using gender-related linguistic indicators in the Qur’ān. More specifically, all the propositions that are somehow related to the three main gender discourses were extracted and classified into detailed subcategories, and the quality of these discourses and, more generally, the proportion of the use of each discourse type were described. Moreover, this study applied a rather novel method of investigation, that is, it used gender-related language indicators to determine the dominant discourse in the Qur’ān. The results indicated that the language of the Qur’ān towards human beings is significantly male oriented; yet, the existence of female-centred structures, as well as structures that present both female and male, makes Qur’ān’s gender approach to human beings varied. Therefore, all three masculine, feminine and egalitarian discourses are present in its text, and they follow a non-linear, complex model.

Accordingly, this detailed description showed that gender-related linguistic approaches of the Qur’ān are non-linear and complex. Non-linearity of these approaches refers to the variety of the application of gender-related propositions in different place, and their complexity is also because of this very non-linearity, which makes it difficult to understand the direct indications of the propositions. In other words, it is non-linear because the use of gender indicators belonging to a specific gender discourse does not necessarily limit its indication to that particular discourse. For example, the use of a proposition with linguistic indicators belonging to the masculine gender cannot restrict the meaning of that proposition to the same gender, but it can be generalised to both men and women by domination principle or by ‘gender consideration’.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The research followed a qualitative design, and future researchers can apply quantitative designs to depict a better gender landscape in the Qur’ān. Further quantitative
analysis of the gender differences in the language of the Qurʾān can lead to the discovery of gender-associated layers and different discursive levels. We believe probing Qurʾān’s gender discourses and the linguistic devices employed therein to construct those discourses and comparing with those that have been utilised in other religious and literary texts can reveal Qurʾān’s distinct and progressive language style.

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Competing interests

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Authors’ contributions

G.D. conceived the idea discussed in this article and proposed it to A.A. and M.N. G.D. and M.N. then suggested and wrote the framework based on which data analysis was conducted. Then, G.D. and M.N. A.A. reviewed and analysed the verses in the Qurʾān and wrote the article in Persian. A.A. and M.N. then translated the article into English, and M.N. and G.D. critically reviewed the translated draft multiple times in order to prepare a factually accurate and reader-friendly draft. M.N. proofread the entire article. G.D. formatted the article based on the journal style guide; G.D. also did all the corresponding with the journal.

Ethical consideration

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Data availability statement

The data were all extracted from the Qurʾān, which is a publicly accessible book.

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