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## Literary Approaches Towards The Qur'ān: The Case Study Of An Egyptian Exegete

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Quran is the central religious text of Islam and, thus, is considered a sacred scripture among the Muslims across the world, on the one hand. On the other, it is also considered as the most reliable resource of the classical Arabic literature. The Muslims exegetes have observed different approaches towards the Quran in order to reach the true meanings of this divine text. One of them is the literary approach adopted by several scholars of the Quran throughout the Islamic centuries. This paper, however, examines the literary approach introduced by an Egyptian scholar Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966) and later on extended by his student and wife, 'Āisha bint 'Abd al-Rahmān (d. 1998) through her scholarly works.

**Keywords:** Amīn al-Khūlī, 'Āisha Bint al-Shāṭi, literary approach, literary text, Qur'ān, Qur'ānic exegesis, Tafsīr.

### **Introduction**

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‘Āisha bint ‘Abd al-Rahmān, better known by her nickname ‘Bint al-Shāṭi’ (Daughter of the Shore),<sup>(1)</sup> was born in 1913, in the town Dimyat (Damietta) which was considered as declining port, an significant port that was later overshadowed by the Suez Canal cities, having not more than thirty thousand population.<sup>(2)</sup> Her father was a conservative and traditionalist religious scholar/Sheikh of al-Azhar.<sup>(3)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi’, according to Gabriel Baer (d.1982), is an integrated part of a long tradition, went back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century at least, of Egyptian scholars who originally come from the rural areas.<sup>(4)</sup> Since she belongs to a religiously conservative family, her father preferred to supervisor her early religious education at home, instead of sending her to any available modern secular education institutes. Despite of her father’s resistance against education at the modern institutions, she was supported by her mother and grandfather in attending such schools.<sup>(5)</sup>

At the age of thirteen, she took initiative to contribute articles in the local newspapers under the pen name Bint al-Shāṭi’. At the age of twenty-third she started to write for a then well-known newspaper of Egypt titled al-Ahrām and continued her scholarly contribution till the last year of her life. In 1932, she moved on to Cairo University, where she received her first degree in Arabic Language and Literature (1939), completed her MA (1941) with a thesis on the medieval poet Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri, and wrote her PhD (1950) on the same subject,<sup>(6)</sup> and she was the second Ph.D

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(1) Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'an Exegesis: A Study of Bint al-Shāṭi's Method", *The Muslim World*, 64 (1974), p. 103.

(2) Gabriel Baer, *The Beginnings of Urbanization, Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 133-148.

(3) C. Kooij, "Bint al-Shāṭi: A Suitable Case for Biography"?, *The Challenge of the Middle East*, ed. Al-El-Shaikh et al (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1982), p. 67.

(4) Gabriel Baer, 'Fellah and Townsman in Ottoman Egypt?' *A Study of Shirbini's Hazz al-Quhuf Asian and African Studies* 8 (1972), pp. 221-256

(5) C. Kooij, "Bint al-Shāṭi: A Suitable Case for Biography"?, p. 67.

(6) See: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0154.xml>

holders amongst the female candidates of this university. She served as a professor of Arabic Literature at Ain Shams University.<sup>(7)</sup> After retirement, she joined al-Qarawiyyin University (Morocco) as a professor of Qur'anic Studies.<sup>(8)</sup> She earned her fame as an Islamic scholar and Egyptian author who originally comes from the rural areas. She also gained honor as being the first Muslim woman exegete of the Quran in Egypt.<sup>(9)</sup> She had an impressive list of numerous articles and scholarly books which deal with the classical Arabic literature and the Quranic sciences.<sup>(10)</sup> She was conferred upon with the King Faisal Award, the most prestigious awards in the Muslim world, in 1993 for her intellectual contributions.<sup>(11)</sup>

### **Literary contributions of Bint al-Shāṭi**

Bint al-Shāṭi started her professional career as a writer and editor of the different women's magazines after 1930. She was honored with the editorship of Al-Nahḍa al-Nisā'iyya,<sup>(12)</sup> to which she contributed several editorial pages on behalf of the publisher.<sup>(13)</sup> Besides, she contributed several literary articles and papers to al-Nisa al-Miṣriyya and al-Ahram. The latter was one of the most famous Egyptian newspaper of which she remained a regular writer from 1935 to 1952. Her writing style was distinctive and her debates with several famous Egyptian thinkers of the time

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<sup>(7)</sup> It was the third Egyptian university established in 1950 that was earlier named as "Ibrahim Pasha University". See: <http://www.asu.edu.eg/> (access date: 25.10.2019)

<sup>(8)</sup> Valerie J. Hoffman-Ladd, "Abd al-Rahman, 'A'ishah", The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Volume 1, Issue 4.

<sup>(9)</sup> Ruth Roded, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections From Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

<sup>(10)</sup> Mostly information about the biographical life of Bint al-Shāṭi' is derived from, 'Alajisr: ustur al zaman, her autobiography, that is published in 1967 by Al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Ama lil-Kitab, Cairo.

<sup>(11)</sup> See: <https://kingfaisalprize.org/professor-aisha-abd-al-rahman-bint-ash-shati/>

<sup>(12)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi, Ala al-Jisr, p. 59.

<sup>(13)</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

such as Abbas Mahmūd al-Aqqad <sup>(14)</sup> and Muṣṭafa Mahmūd were regarded as highly academic.<sup>(15)</sup> Focusing on the educational reforms and development of the people of the rural areas from which she herself came, she authored two works: Qaḍiyyat al-Fallaḥ (1939) and Al-Rif Al-Misri (1936), which led her to get the State Prize <sup>(16)</sup> as well as a job in the Egyptian Ministry of Social Affairs.<sup>(17)</sup>

Bint al-Shāṭi brought up in a Sufi atmosphere where the recitation of the Quran was one of the important rituals. Therefore, instead of playing with her age fellows, she used to go with her father to his study circle in order to listen the verses of the Qur'ān recited by her father and his colleagues and thus she enabled herself to memorize some short chapters of the Qur'ān.<sup>(18)</sup> The study of the Qur'ān remained very imperative in her life as all the members of her family remained connected with the Qur'ān in one way or the other. When she was 9 years old, she saw a dream in which she saw herself sitting at the study table in her bedroom. Suddenly, an angel appeared and gave her a gift wrapped in a green cover. When she opened it she found an awesome copy of the Qur'ān which was never seen by her before.<sup>(19)</sup> After the dream, she became proactive in following the path of her father and studying the Qur'ān.

To quench her thrust for knowledge of the Quran, she showed a great interest in the related courses taught by Amin al-Khuli at

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<sup>(14)</sup> In the beginning of 1960, Bint al-Shāṭi wrote a critical review on the writing of al-Aqqad regarding misogynistic study of Woman in the reference of Holy Qur'an. See Sana al-Bisi, 'Bint al-Shāṭi, al-Ahram, on April 5, 2008.

<sup>(15)</sup> She produced a critical review of Muṣṭafa Mahmūd in her book Al-Quran wa'l-tafsir al-aṣri (Cairo: Dār al-Maārif, 1970) regarding his scientific interpretation of the Qur'an.

<sup>(16)</sup> al-Ghazli, Bint al- Shāṭi: Rihla fi amwaj al-haya (Cairo: Kitab al-yawm, 1999), p. 124.

<sup>(17)</sup> Margot Badran, Feminists, Islam and the Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 119

<sup>(18)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi, 'Ala al-Jisr (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah li al-Kitab, 1986) p. 24.

<sup>(19)</sup> Ala al-Jisr, p.39

University of Cairo.<sup>(20)</sup> Although Bint al-Shāṭi became an independent and prolific writer in the field of Arabic literature comparatively at her young age, her excellent academic career as an Islamic scholar and exegete of the Quran started after she met with Amīn al-Khūlī (d.1966). Al-Khūlī, who developed the theory of a literary Tafsir of the Qur'an (al-tafsir al-adabi li al-Quran), was her most favorite teacher and later on she married him. <sup>(21)</sup> He encouraged and motivated her to study the Arabic literature as it was the necessary requirement to learn the literary approach of the Quran. When she got expertise in literary writing, she produced a highly praised series of early Muslim women's biographies, especially the biographies of the Prophet's household women <sup>(22)</sup> such as Nisa al-Nabiyyi (1954), Binat al-Nabiyyi (1956), Batalat Karbala (1956) and Umm al-Nabiyyi (1956). She also wrote the biographies of some other notable women such as al-Khansa (1957) and Rabia al-Adawiyya (1962). The series of such biographies paved for her the way to international fame as a literary writer and scholar, particularly in the Arab World.<sup>(23)</sup>

Al-Khūlī inserted a great influence on her academic writings and even she further articulated the literary approach adopted by Al-Khūlī and employed it in her most important literary work "al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm".<sup>(24)</sup>

This of her most famous literary work appeared in two volumes which were published in 1962 and 1968 respectively and followed

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<sup>(20)</sup> Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 120

<sup>(21)</sup> His theories on Qur'anic Tafsir are primarily found in his compilation, "Manahij tajdid fi al-nahw wa al-balagha wa al-tafsir wa al-adab (Cairo, 1961)", particularly in the chapter of "al-Tafsir Ma'alim hayatihi - manhajuhu al-yawm".

<sup>(22)</sup> Ruth Roded, 'Bint al-Shāṭi's Wives of the Prophet: Feminist or Feminine?', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 33:1 (2006), p. 61

<sup>(23)</sup> These biographies were reprinted, edited and translated after their publication. Nisa al-Nabiyyi was reprinted 12 times in Beirut and Cairo.

<sup>(24)</sup> These principles, according to her, are the summary of Amīn al-Khūlī's literary work. See: Amīn al-Khūlī, *Manāhij al-Tajdīd fi al-Nahw wa al-Balāghah wa al-Tafsīr wa al-Adab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1961), pp. 302-14.

by her another remarkable work in the field of Quranic literature titled, *al-Ijāz al-bayāni li'l-Qurān wa-masāil Nafi ibn al-Azraq*, first published in 1971. Because of the latter two scholarly works in the discipline of the Quranic literature, she earned an extraordinary reputation in the Arab world and thus considered as the first women exegete of the Quran.<sup>(25)</sup> We have introduced just some of her prominent books, while she left behind more than sixty works.<sup>(26)</sup>

### **Literary Approach of Bint al-Shāṭi**

The last two centuries witnessed several methodological approaches to the interpretation of the Quran introduced by the Islamic scholars across the Muslim world. The development of modern literary tafsīr got its path back to Muḥammad Abduhu's (d.1905) publication, the first critical edition of *Ijāz al-Qur'ān* and *Dalāil al-ijāz*, the two main writings of the classical rhetorician and philologist Abd al-Qāhir Abdul Rehman al-Jurjānī (d.1078).<sup>(27)</sup> Muḥammad Abduhu censured the post-classical obsession on stylistic craft and poetic form which subjugated the literary studies of Arabic language until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main purpose that convinced him to publish al-Jurjānī's work was to restore the classical importance on an idea of interest supported with a sound logic of Arabic for a positive reception of the eloquent (*bayān*) of the Qur'an. This work enables to comprehend and realize the intellectual and psychological impact of this eloquent language on the hearts as it changed the Arabs' militaristic nature to a civilized one.<sup>(28)</sup> The aforementioned writings of Abduhu influenced the modern literary approach observed by Amīn al-Khūlī, a 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>(25)</sup> Radwa Ashour et al., ed., *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2008), p. 341

<sup>(26)</sup> al-Ghazli, *Bint al-Shāṭi*, pp. 91-99

<sup>(27)</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 23 (2003), p. 18.

<sup>(28)</sup> *Bint al-Shāṭi, al-Ijāz al-bayāni li'l-Quran* (Cairo: Dār al-Maārif, 1971), pp. 118-119.

century Egyptian exegete, and further described and exercised by Bint al-Shāṭi as it is evident by her writings and doctoral thesis.<sup>(29)</sup> Amīn al-Khūlī, due to her contribution to the literary approach of Arabic language, appraised her as a disciple of the literary school that he developed.<sup>(30)</sup> Her most famous literary writing titled *Tafsir Al-Bayani* appears after two decades of her doctorate. This literary approach of Bint al-Shāṭi, in fact, is the application of her husband Amīn al-Khūlī's rules of the literary tafsir especially in regard to the interpretation of the Qur'ān which he introduced during a series of lectures he delivered on the Egyptian Radio during 1941-42 and called them "an echo of literacy Tafsir".<sup>(31)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi's latter work actually reflects the literary approach of Amīn al-Khūlī and a successful attempt to put his theory into practice employing his proposed methods, for instance, to several chapters of the Qur'ān as she acknowledges.<sup>(32)</sup> Moreover, the title of her work also clearly indicates to the literary approach she has adopted for the interpretation of the Quran.<sup>(33)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi maintained that neither the Qur'ān is a book of science nor history, but it is a divine religious text possessing very distinctive qualities.<sup>(34)</sup> The literary approach of Bint al-Shāṭi, though acquired from her own husband Amīn al-Khūlī, consists of four integrated methods as follows.

**1.** The method of al-tafsir al-mawdui (i.e., the topic/subject-wise method of interpretation of the Quran) must be observed in order to reach the true meaning of the Qur'ān. All the verses, in this method, related to one topic are brought together in one place from the entire Qur'ān and then these are studied in a totality for

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<sup>(29)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi, *al-Tafsir al-bayāni*, v. I, p. 9.

<sup>(30)</sup> Amīn al-Khūlī, 'Introduction', in Bint al-Shāṭi, *Sukayna bint al-Ḥusayn* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, n.d.), p. 5.

<sup>(31)</sup> Amīn al-Khūlī, *Min Huda al-Qur'ān: al-Qada... al-Rusul*, 8. Sadd li tafsir al-adbi.

<sup>(32)</sup> Johannes J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), pp. 68-69

<sup>(33)</sup> G.E. Von Grunebaum, "Bayan", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. H.A.R. Gibb et al (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 1: 1114-1115.

<sup>(34)</sup> 'Aisha 'Abd al-Rahman, *al-Qur'dn wa'l-Tafstr al-'Asrt*, p. 16.

deriving a common understanding and to reach at a general meaning. One verse of the Qur'ān, according to her point of view, interprets and explains the others related to same topic and this method facilitates the readers to attain at the exact message of the Qur'ān. Talking about this method, she asserts: "to understand this theme in the Qur'ān, we cannot take some verses while ignoring others, but we have to produce an inclusive meaning resulting in an inductive understanding of every verse of the Qur'ān concerning that theme."<sup>(35)</sup>

2. To interpret the Quran, it is necessary to understand the context of revelation and to recognize the circumstances of both the place and time, for which she uses the famous concept of "Asbāb al-nuzūl" (occasions of the revelation) as the encouraging measures to reach the wisdom of the meaning of the Qur'ānic texts. In other words, in Bint al-Shāṭi's work, Ḥadīth, on the ground as asbāb al-nuzūl, is used to obtain that wisdom.<sup>(36)</sup> She was of the view that importance will be given to generality of words not to the specificity of occasions (al-ibratu bi amum al-lfz la bi khusus al-sabab). She does not allow specifying the historical reference or any occasion (sabab) for the generalization of the words of the Qur'an. According to her view, it is the general meaning of the words that must be taken into consideration, but not any specific condition.<sup>(37)</sup>

3. Arabic linguistic suggestions will be taken into serious consideration for recognizing the meaning of the Qur'ān. All forms of the word, in this method, are collected, their specific context in different verses and chapters, and their general context will be studied as a whole. This method helps us understand the certain words or concepts described in the specific verses as well as their general usage in the Qur'ān. For example, two words "bashaar and

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<sup>(35)</sup> A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman, Maqal fi al-Insan: Dirasah Qur'dniyyah, 117.

<sup>(36)</sup> For further discussion, see, 'A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman, al-Qur'an wa 'l-Tafsir al-'Asri, 66-79.

<sup>(37)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi, Lughatun wa al-Haya (Cairo: Dr al-Ma, 1971), p. 47.



ins/insan" are used in the Qur'ān to describe human beings, by having different importance. The word "basha" refers to the creatures having its organic performance and essential quality, similar to animals', in terms of, for instance, their need of sexual satisfaction and food. The word ins (s. insan) refers to the consciousness of human being and differentiates him from animals by reflection of human abilities to think, feel, and choose.<sup>(38)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi', in this context, defines ins/insan as the creature, though having highest level in creation, yet holds the potential to be wild like the jinn (giant and ghost). She opined that a cross-referential method (istiqrā) that examines the internal linguistic convention of the Qur'an as a whole, is applied to determine the linguistic meaning.<sup>(39)</sup>

4. The fourth method is to judge the way in which the text is expressed; in other words, the way that describes the meaning of certain words and concepts. This representational method is used to advocate the meaning of the text in the light of true spirit of the Qur'an.<sup>(40)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi', while interpreting surat al-'Adiyat,<sup>(41)</sup> explains first five verses of this chapter as a representational image of the approach of a major event i.e. qiyāmah. <sup>(42)</sup> She opines that there is no internal contradiction in the Qur'ān as being the Word of Allah. <sup>(43)</sup> According to her, the hermeneutic enquiry is basically related to language, so it must be attached to the text. The essential linguistic components of the Qur'an i.e. styles and words,

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<sup>(38)</sup> 'A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman, al-Tafsir al-Baydni li 'l-Qur'dn al-Karim, 1: 176-7; Ibid., 2: 79-82; and 'A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman, Muqaddimah fi'l Manhaj., 133-4; 'A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman, al-Qur'dn wa Qaddya 'l-Insdn, 17-19.

<sup>(39)</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi', al-Tafsir al-bayāni I, p. 18.

<sup>(40)</sup> 'A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman, al-Tafsir al-Baydni li 'l-Qur'dn al-Karim, 2: 11.

<sup>(41)</sup> Qur'an, 100: 1-11.

<sup>(42)</sup> 'A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman, al-Tafsir al-Baydni li'l-Qur'dn al-Karim, 2: 103-10.

<sup>(43)</sup> Helmut Gatje, The Qur'an and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations, tr. and ed. Alford T. Welch (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 31.

are those starting points that reveal its textual union and clarity which raise the linguistic conventions of the Qur'an.<sup>(44)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The 20th century Egypt witnessed several methodological approaches to the interpretation of the Quran including the literary approach which received its first blow during the life span of Amīn al-Khūlī. His legacy continued by his several competent disciples including Aysha Bint-e Shāti. She further developed and articulated the said approach focusing on the four integrated methods. The main focus of the said approach, however, is two folds: 1), the application of al-tafsir al-mawdui (i.e., the subject/topic-wise method of interpretation) of the Quran must be observed; and 2), since the Quran is revealed in the Arabic language, its linguistic dimension should be exhaustively followed in its interpretation, in particular, in case of disagreement of the exegetes, because it is the sole criterion to settle the disagreement. Thus, this approach argues that only the full command of Arabic language can guide the exegetes to reach the true and deeper meaning of the text of the Quran.

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<sup>(44)</sup> Bint al-Shāti, al-Tafsīr al-bayāni II, p. 7.