

Deconstruction of Patriarchal Interpretation of the Concept of *Nafsin Wahidah* in Surah An-Nisa: An Analysis of the Hermeneutics of Tauhid Asma Barlas' Perspective on Gender Equality

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Abstract

This research examines the concept of *nafsin wahidah* in Surah An-Nisa verse 1 through Asma Barlas's anti-patriarchal theological perspective to address the dominance of classical exegesis that exhibits gender bias. This verse is often used to justify gender hierarchy through the narrative of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, despite the Qur'an not explicitly mentioning this. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to deconstruct the patriarchal legacy within the exegetical tradition that has resulted in social and legal inequalities against Muslim women. This research employs a qualitative approach with text analysis methods based on Asma Barlas's hermeneutics of tauhid, involving linguistic and historical analysis of QS. An-Nisa verse 1, as well as comparisons between classical exegesis and Barlas's approach in *Believing Women in Islam*. The analysis reveals that *Nafsin Wahidah* refers to the non-gendered and equal essence of humanity, rather than representing Adam as a superior male. Barlas dismantles patriarchal assumptions in classical exegesis by demonstrating that the concept of *zanjaba* emphasizes mutuality, not subordination. The hermeneutics of tauhid developed by Barlas positions the principle of God's oneness as the ethical and theological foundation for understanding gender equality. This research affirms that the Qur'an, when read contextually and justly, supports egalitarian relations between men and women. It is recommended that the hermeneutics of tauhid approach be applied more broadly in exegetical studies to build an inclusive and gender-just Islamic theology.

Nafsin wahidah, Asma Barlas, Gender Equality, Hermeneutics of Tauhid

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji konsep *nafsin wahidah* dalam Surah An-Nisa ayat 1 melalui perspektif teologis anti-patriarki Asma Barlas untuk menanggapi dominasi tafsir klasik yang menunjukkan bias gender. Ayat ini sering digunakan untuk membenarkan hierarki gender melalui narasi penciptaan Hawa dari tulang rusuk Adam, meskipun Al-Qur'an tidak secara eksplisit menyebutkan hal tersebut. Signifikansi penelitian ini terletak pada upayanya untuk mendekonstruksi warisan patriarkal dalam tradisi tafsir yang telah menyebabkan ketidaksetaraan sosial dan hukum terhadap perempuan Muslim. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode analisis teks berdasarkan hermeneutika tauhid Asma Barlas, melibatkan analisis linguistik dan historis terhadap QS. An-Nisa ayat 1, serta perbandingan antara tafsir klasik dan pendekatan Barlas dalam *Believing Women in Islam*. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa *nafsin wahidah* merujuk pada esensi manusia yang tidak berjenis kelamin dan setara, bukan sebagai representasi Adam sebagai laki-laki yang superior. Barlas membongkar asumsi patriarkal dalam tafsir klasik dengan menunjukkan bahwa konsep *zanjaba* menekankan kesetaraan, bukan subordinasi. Hermeneutika tauhid yang dikembangkan oleh Barlas menempatkan prinsip kesatuan Allah sebagai landasan etis dan teologis untuk memahami kesetaraan gender. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa Al-Qur'an, ketika dibaca secara kontekstual dan adil, mendukung hubungan yang setara antara pria dan

wanita. Disarankan agar pendekatan hermeneutika tauhid diterapkan secara lebih luas dalam studi tafsir untuk membangun teologi Islam yang inklusif dan adil gender.

Kata Kunci: *nafsin wāḥidah*; Asma Barlas; Kesenjangan Gender, Hermeneutika Tauhid

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* in Surah An-Nisa verse 1 is one of the important theological foundations in the discourse of gender equality in Islam. This verse affirms that all human beings were created from one soul, which in traditional interpretations is often identified as Adam, and from him Eve was created as his partner (Humairoh & Nasrullah, 2025). However, classical interpretations of this verse have historically emphasized patriarchal hierarchy in gender relations, which in turn legitimizes a social system that places men in a dominant position (Spierings, 2014). As a consequence, this verse is often understood in a biased manner and used to justify the marginalization of women in various aspects of social and religious life.

The urgency of this study lies in the fact that biased interpretations of *nafsin wāḥidah* have long shaped Muslim society, reinforcing hierarchical structures that are detrimental to women. These interpretations are not only theological in nature, but also have implications for social and legal systems that perpetuate inequality (Hardy, n.d.). Therefore, reinterpretation is important for building a more just and inclusive Muslim community. Asma Barlas, through the hermeneutics of tauhid, asserts that the Qur'an must be read consistently with the principle of the oneness of God, which rejects all forms of domination, including male domination over women (Fidhayanti et al., 2024). This perspective highlights the importance of revisiting the meaning of *nafsin wāḥidah* and deconstructing patriarchal assumptions that are deeply rooted in classical interpretive traditions.

This verse states, "O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul" (Q.S. An-Nisa: 1). Traditional interpretations often emphasize the aspect of human creation from one soul (Adam) and then his partner (Eve), which is implicitly used as a basis to legitimize the patriarchal structure in Muslim society (Barlas, 2002). However, Asma Barlas, a Muslim feminist thinker, offers an alternative perspective by reading this verse through anti-patriarchal theology. She asserts that *nafsin wāḥidah* actually implies ontological equality between men and women (Barlas, 2002).

The main problem that arises is how classical interpretations of Qur'anic verses are often gender biased and perpetuate a social hierarchy that places men as superior. This has an impact on the construction of laws and social norms that discriminate against women. Asma Barlas challenges this narrative by developing a hermeneutics of liberation that emphasizes the principle of tauhid as the foundation of human equality, including in gender relations (Moos & Shaikh, 2024). This approach not only criticizes patriarchal interpretations, but also opens up space for a more inclusive reading of religious texts.

Based on an analysis of a number of studies, it can be concluded that gender constructs in Islam in Indonesia are still largely influenced by patriarchal thinking that places men in a dominant position (Luthfiyah, 2015). Biased understanding within Muslim communities contributes to injustice in both the public and domestic spheres. (Sakina & A., 2017) Also emphasize that patriarchal culture is a challenge in the implementation of Islamic teachings, which should support gender equality. More specifically, the concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* has been examined by several

contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Amina Wadud (1999) in *Qur'an and Woman*, who emphasizes inclusive interpretation to support equality between men and women in creation. However, studies that specifically highlight the relationship between the concept of *nafsin wahidah* and Asma Barlas' anti-patriarchal theological framework are still very limited.

Thus, this study aims to fill this gap through a critical reading of the concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* in Surah An-Nisa verse 1 using Asma Barlas' hermeneutics of tauhid perspective. This study aims to analyze how gender bias is formed in classical interpretations, while offering alternative readings that are more fair, egalitarian, and consistent with the principle of the oneness of God. With a qualitative approach based on literature study, this study is expected to contribute to the development of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation discourse and serve as a foundation for efforts to achieve gender justice in Muslim society.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a library research method that is descriptive and analytical in nature. The research design is structured to analyze the concept of *nafsin wahidah* through the lens of Asma Barlas' anti-patriarchal theology using a critical hermeneutical approach. The population of the study encompasses all literature discussing the concept of *nafsin wahidah* in the Qur'an and its interpretations. The research sample, selected through purposive sampling, includes classical tafsir works (Tafsir al-Thabari and al-Qurtubi), Asma Barlas' seminal work *Believing Women in Islam*, academic literature on Qur'anic hermeneutics, gender theology, Islamic feminist studies, as well as previous research on gender equality in Islam.

Data collection techniques were carried out through documentation of primary sources from the Qur'an (Q.S. al-Nisa: 1) and classical tafsir, literature study with an in-depth review of Asma Barlas' works and relevant secondary literature, as well as content analysis of gender-biased interpretations. The research instrument consists of a textual analysis matrix that identifies patriarchal elements in classical interpretations, the hermeneutics of tauḥīd as formulated by Asma Barlas, and indicators of gender equality in the Qur'anic text.

Data analysis employs critical hermeneutical techniques with several stages: deconstruction, to uncover gender bias in traditional interpretations of *nafsin wāḥidah* reconstruction, to develop alternative understandings through Asma Barlas' tauḥīd based hermeneutics; theoretical triangulation, by comparing Asma Barlas' perspective with other scholars such as Amina Wadud; and contextual interpretation, to situate the findings within the framework of gender justice and inclusive theology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of *Nafsin wāḥidah* and Its Implications for Gender Equality

The interpretation of the term *nafsin wāḥidah* in Surah An-Nisa verse 1 has become a significant subject of debate in gender theology discourse. Linguistically, *nafsin wāḥidah* refers to a single soul or a living entity, which in the context of this verse is understood as the origin of human creation (Khalishah & Rosyid, 2023). Classical interpretations, such as Al-Tabari and Al-Qurtubi, generally interpret *nafsin wahidah* as Adam, the first man, while his partner *zawjahā* is interpreted

as Eve created from Adam's rib. This interpretation is often used to build the narrative that Adam had a preeminent position because Eve came from him (Alfani et al., 2025).

However, this kind of reading is actually more influenced by the Biblical narrative (the creation story in the Old Testament) than by the explicit explanation of the Qur'an itself. On the other hand, interpretations with a gender perspective offer different understandings. They argue that the Qur'an never explicitly states that Eve was created from Adam's rib. *Khalaqa Minhā ṣanjabā* actually emphasizes the equality of creation's origin, not gender hierarchy. That is, men and women come from the same source (Khairuddin et al., 2024).

This interpretation is supported by other verses, such as QS. Al-Hujurat verse 13, which affirms that human glory in the sight of Allah is determined by piety, not gender. This emphasis on these same origins became the theological basis for rejecting patriarchal claims that placed men as superior. If men and women are created from the same entity, then there is no theological reason to justify the subordination of either gender ("Quran and Gender Equality," 2023).

The classical interpretation that associates *nafsin wāḥidah* with Adam and uses it as the basis for male domination ultimately ignores the universal message of the Qur'an regarding human equality before God. Such interpretations tend to create a hierarchical narrative between men and women by placing women as secondary beings (Fidhayanti et al., 2024). In contrast, contemporary approaches such as those put forward by Asma Barlas emphasize that this verse never mentions the names of Adam or Eve, so there is no textual basis for placing men at the center of creation.

According to Barlas, the phrase *khalaqa minhā ṣanjabā* emphasizes reciprocity and equality, that men and women originate from the same ontological substance (Barlas, 2019). Thus, there is no theological justification for placing one gender in a superior position. The theological implication is that Islam fundamentally rejects patriarchal views that demean women and instead affirms the ontological equality between the two. Awareness of this common origin also provides a normative basis for the development of fair and egalitarian gender relations in line with the principle of tauhid, which rejects all forms of gender based hierarchy (Firdausiyah, n.d.).

Deconstruction of Patriarchy in the Classical Interpretation of An-Nisa verse 1

The classical interpretation of the concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* in QS. An-Nisa verse 1 by classical mufasssirs such as Ath-Thabari, Al-Qurtubi, and Ibn-Katsir shows a strong tendency to construct patriarchal narratives through certain hermeneutical approaches. The majority of classical mufasssirs understand *nafsin wāḥidah* literally as referring exclusively to Adam as the prototype of the first male man, while placing Eve as a secondary entity created through the process of derivation from Adam's ribs (Qurniawan, 2025).

Ath-Thabari in his work *Jāmi' al-Bayān* explicitly corroborates this view by asserting that Eve was created from the body parts of Adam (al-Ṭabarī, 2022), an interpretation that later became mainstream in the classical tradition of interpretation. This pattern of interpretation gives birth to hierarchical constructions that have profound theological implications, where men are placed in primordial and ontological positions that are more important than women (Ismail et al., 2024).

Al-Qurtubi in *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* actually provides a more inclusive space for interpretation when it mentions the possibility that *nafsin wāḥidah* can refer to the type of human beings in general, not specifically to Adam as an individual. However, this potential alternative

reading did not develop into the mainstream because it was suppressed by the dominant narrative that preferred a literalistic and hierarchical interpretation (Al-Qurthubi, 2020). This deconstruction of traditional interpretations reveals how the relationship of power and knowledge contributes to shaping gender-biased religious understandings.

The theological and social implications of this interpretation are very significant. First, it gives rise to the doctrine of female derivation, which provides religious legitimacy for gender inequality. Second, it naturalizes the relationship between male and female power as something divine and unchangeable. Third, it marginalizes alternative interpretations that are actually more in line with the spirit of egalitarianism contained in the Qur'an (Rani, 2021). Furthermore, this literal interpretation also reinforces the patriarchal social structure in classical Muslim societies, where religious and social authorities prioritize male experiences and perspectives.

This creates a cycle of androcentric knowledge reproduction, where sacred texts are used as tools to reinforce gender domination rather than as sources of equality. This finding clearly shows that patriarchy in interpretation is not a logical consequence or inevitability of the sacred text itself, but rather a social construct formed through various factors (Supriani, 2025). The selection of uncritical and biased sources of interpretation, androcentric scientific epistemology, and the patriarchal socio-cultural context at the time of the formation of classical interpretations played a major role in shaping hierarchical patterns of interpretation. This analysis opens up the possibility of a more egalitarian re-reading by returning the text to its basic message of human unity and equality, which is, in fact, the main spirit of the verse.

Hermeneutics of Tauhid as the Theological Foundation of Asma Barlas' Anti-Patriarchal Thought

Asma Barlas builds her anti-patriarchal thinking on a solid theological foundation by making the principle of tauhid the main axis of her hermeneutics of the Qur'an (Barlas, 2008). In her view, tauhid is not only an acknowledgment of the oneness of God but also a theological paradigm that affirms universal justice and equality, thereby rejecting all forms of social hierarchy, including patriarchy, as it contradicts the fundamental Islamic principle of the unity of creation. Barlas even considers the patriarchal system that perpetuates gender inequality to be a form of social shirk, because it gives men a superior position over women (Putri & Poerwandari, 2024).

Barlas's thinking about *nafsin wāḥidah* in QS. An-Nisa verse 1 is a concrete example of how he constructs anti-patriarchal theological arguments. He rejects the classical narrative that Eve was created from Adam's rib and instead asserts that the phrase *kbalaqa minhā ẓanjahā* is an affirmation of the ontological equality between men and women (Barlas, 2002). Within this framework, Barlas introduces tauhid hermeneutics as a methodology of interpretation that dismantles patriarchal structures in classical interpretations. Tauhid hermeneutics is based on the fundamental Islamic principle that absolute authority belongs only to Allah, while all humans are equal before him (Barlas, 2002).

This principle serves as a critical analytical tool for examining gender-biased interpretations, including in understanding the concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* in QS. An-Nisa verse 1. According to Barlas, this verse not only explains the origins of human creation but also serves as a theological foundation for rejecting all forms of gender hierarchy. However, patriarchal interpretations often ignore this profound meaning and instead absolutize gender roles as a legitimization of male

domination. This is where tauhid hermeneutics plays an important role, because by placing the oneness of Allah at the center of interpretation, every claim to human authority must submit to the principles of an inclusive and egalitarian divinity.

Barlas highlights the issue of interpretive authority, which has been monopolized by men, thereby ignoring the voices and experiences of women. Tauhid hermeneutics, with its emphasis on equality before God, demands inclusivity in the production of religious knowledge. Women must be given space as subjects of interpretation, not merely objects of biased interpretation (Ni'ami & Irfan, 2023). Within this framework, the concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* is understood as an affirmation of equal rights and human dignity, as well as a normative basis for rejecting patriarchal practices such as unfair polygamy, the prohibition of women's leadership, or restrictions on women's access to education. All of these practices contradict the universal message of the Qur'an regarding justice and equality (Khalishah & Rosyid, 2023).

Thus, Asma Barlas' hermeneutics of tauhid not only presents a critique of injustice in classical interpretations, but also offers an alternative reading that liberates. In the context of QS. An-Nisa verse 1, this approach restores the meaning of *nafsin wāḥidah* as an affirmation of gender equality and a critique of all forms of oppression in the name of religion (Barlas, 2008). This shows that Islam, when read with a pure tauhid paradigm, actually contains a message of liberation for all of humanity without gender discrimination.

Methodological Comparison of Gender Interpretation: The Concept of *Nafsin wāḥidah* in the Classical Perspective and Hermeneutics of Tauhid Asma Barlas

In an effort to interpret verses related to gender relations, such as the concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* in QS. In An-Nisā' verse 1, there is a significant methodological difference between the classical interpretation approach and the hermeneutic approach of tauhid offered by Asma Barlas. Classical mufassir generally relied on a textual-literal approach, based on the authority of history and scholarly consensus, which often resulted in a hierarchical and patriarchal interpretation of the relationship between men and women.

In the context of this verse, the majority of classical mufassir understand *nafsin wāḥidah* as referring to the Prophet Adam, and the creation of Eve as a derivative of man, thus containing theological and social implications that women are subordinate second creations (Nurani, 2016). In understanding the concept of *nafsin wāḥidah* in Surah an-Nisa verse 1, Asma Barlas emphasizes the ontological unity of human beings who do not recognize hierarchical differentiation based on gender. Barlas interprets *nafsin wāḥidah* as an indication of fundamental equality between men and women, where both come from the same substance and have identical dignity before God. This perspective rejects any form of ontological superiority of one gender over another (Barlas, 2002).

The classical mufassirs, while acknowledging the unity of creation's origin, tend to interpret this verse by emphasizing the creation of Eve from Adam's rib as narrated in authentic hadiths. This interpretation, according to Barlas, has been contaminated with the Judeo-Christian narrative (*isra'iliyyat*) that positions women as secondary beings created to serve men (Hidayah, 2020). Ath-Thabari, for example, in his commentary explicitly states that Eve was created from Adam's body parts, which were then used to legitimize female subordination.

This research reveals a fundamental difference in the approach to gender interpretation between classical mufasir and Asma Barlas. Classical scholars such as Al-Tabari and Al-Qurtubi base their interpretation on the principle of social hierarchy as part of the divine order, in which gender relations are understood in the framework of a complementary but hierarchical division of roles. On the contrary, Asma Barlas builds her hermeneutic framework on the foundation of monotheism that emphasizes the principle of fundamental equality between men and women as God's created beings.

In terms of authoritative sources, classical mufasir tends to equate the position of the Qur'an, hadith, and ijma' of scholars as references that have equal authority (Hadi, 2021). This approach differs significantly from Barlas's methodology, which critically places the Qur'an as a primary source while the hadith is positioned as a secondary source that must go through a filtering process to ensure its alignment with the main message of the Qur'an. This difference in approach to authoritative sources results in very different readings of religious texts, especially those related to gender issues.

Barlas offers an alternative approach by making a clear distinction between the universal principles of the Qur'an and its temporal historical application. This methodological difference is clearly seen in the interpretation of the concept of *nafsin wabidah*. Fundamental differences are also seen in attitudes towards patriarchal structures. Classical mufasir tends to affirm patriarchy as part of divine design, while Barlas critically views patriarchy as a historically formed cultural construct and therefore should be criticized. These differences of view have implications for the contemporary relevance of each approach.

Classical interpretive methods tend to maintain the status quo, while Barlas's hermeneutics offers a more adaptive approach to the development and needs of modern society. This comparison shows how different epistemological frameworks can produce very different meanings of the same text, especially in the issue of gender relations in Islam (Barlas, 2022). Classical interpretation methodologies, on the other hand, tend to maintain established interpretations and regard attempts at reinterpretation as a form of heresy or deviation from a widely accepted understanding.

This results in the standardization of interpretations that support patriarchal structures as part of the irreversible teachings of Islam. This comparison of methodologies shows that differences in hermeneutic approaches can result in very different understandings of fundamental issues in Islam. While classical methodology offers continuity with tradition, Barlas's monotheistic hermeneutics offers the possibility of a transformation of understanding that is more in line with the demands of contemporary justice.

Future prospects allow for a creative synthesis between the two approaches, in which the authority of tradition is respected but does not preclude efforts to reformulate a more equitable and equal interpretation. Constructive methodological dialogue between various hermeneutic tauhid can enrich the treasures of contemporary Islamic thought and pave the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of Islam.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the concept of *nafsin wahidah* in QS. An-Nisa verse 1 has very significant implications for the understanding of gender in the Islamic perspective. The main findings reveal a sharp methodological difference between classical exegesis and Asma Barlas's hermeneutics of tauhid. Classical exegesis, such as that of Al-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, emphasizes a literal and historical approach, interpreting *nafsin wahidah* as Adam and placing Eve as his derivative. This approach gives rise to a patriarchal construct that reinforces gender hierarchy, normalizes male domination, and disregards the possibility of more egalitarian alternative readings.

In contrast, Asma Barlas' hermeneutics of tauhid emphasizes the principles of unity and ontological equality of humans, rejecting the view that men have a superior position in creation. Barlas asserts that *khalafa minha zanjaba* indicates fundamental equality between men and women, while also highlighting the importance of inclusivity in the production of religious knowledge. Another interesting finding is that classical interpretations are not entirely sourced from the Qur'anic text, but are also influenced by Isra'iliyyat narratives, which place women as secondary entities. Meanwhile, Barlas's approach shows that separating authoritative sources can change the understanding of the text so that it is more in line with the principles of justice and equality.

This study has limitations because it is theoretical and literature-based, and focuses on QS. An-Nisa verse 1 without covering other verses relevant to the issue of gender equality. As a recommendation, further studies could expand the analysis by examining other verses related to gender and conducting a methodological dialogue between classical interpretation and modern hermeneutics. This would enable the creation of a more inclusive, egalitarian, and contextual interpretive synthesis, so that the interpretation of the Qur'an could be more in line with the principles of justice and equality in contemporary society.

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