

A Critical Review of Safūra’s Personality in *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretations* by Barbara Stowasser

Batool S. Arastu

Jamiat Al-Zahra

Abstract

Barbara Stowasser, while introducing Safūra (a.s.)—the wife of Mūsā (a.s.)—in her book *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretations* has created doubts in the mind of the reader by mentioning that Safūra (a.s.) was standing away from the shepherds as she had no strength to push them aside and no one except Mūsā (a.s.) could move the heavy stone which covered the well. Further doubt is raised by the claim that women can work in Islam only if there is a “need,” and while mentioning her “bashful gait” she comes to the conclusion that this demeanour separated her from a slave in the past and at present from her modernist sister who tries to behave like a man. These doubts have been cleared in this paper by stating that Safūra (a.s.) stood away from the men because of her modesty, and the stone that Mūsā moved single handedly used to be moved by ten men. Further, the present work argues that a woman can work in Islam as long as she abides by the rules laid down by Islam, and that Stowasser’s conclusion on Safūra’s bashful walk was an error as it was based on invalid comparison; rather, the Qur’ānic verse had mentioned it to emphasise and appreciate her modesty.

1. Introduction

The Qur’ān has given an exceptional status to women by mentioning

them as mothers, wives and daughters of Prophets and other dignitaries. Some women—including Safūra (a.s.), the wife of Prophet Mūsā (a.s.)—have been praised in the Qur'ān. Considering the status of women in the Qur'ān and their role in Islamic society, Islamic and non-Islamic researchers have conducted research in this field. However, Barbara F. Stowasser, in her book *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation* has created doubts in the mind of the reader by stating that Safūra and her sister could not water their flock because shepherds had placed a large stone on the well which only Mūsā could remove; or else, they lacked the strength to drive the shepherds away, hence standing away from them. She adds another doubt by stating that in Islam, women can work only if there is a “need,” implying that women cannot have a career. Furthermore, regarding Safūra's “bashful walk,” she criticises this description by stating that Safūra walked like a true female and did not behave like a man, which in turn separates her from a slave, as well as from her modernist sister who tries to behave like a man.

Stowasser's book has been analysed, and reports have been written by Kathryn Kueny, Amina Wadud—Muhsin and Deb Sugars. None, however, have referred to the story of Safūra (a.s.) mentioned in her book. The aim of the present work is to answer the doubts raised by Stowasser in her description of Safūra with the help of Qur'ān and traditions.¹ This research is of utmost importance as it can defend the role of women in the Qur'ān and assert that women are not weak creatures and can have a role in society so long as it is within the framework of Islam.

Key Shī'ī sources used for this article include *Tafsīr-i Nimūna*, *Tafsīr al-mīzān*, *Majma' al-bayān*, *Jawāmi' al-jāmi'*, *Tafsīr nūr al-thaqalayn* and *Tafsīr al-Qummī*. Some important Sunnī sources used include *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm wa-l-sab' al-mathānī*, *Mafātīḥ al-*

¹ A greater endeavor would be to study all the women that are mentioned in Stowasser's book; due to constraints, this has not been possible.

*ghayb, Jāmi‘ al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qur’ān.*²

The paper has been divided into three sections as follows:

1. Misconception 1: Modesty or weakness?
2. Misconception 2: Need or freedom?
3. Misconception 3: “Bashful gait.”

The Author: Barbara F. Stowasser is a researcher in the field of “Women in Islam.” She was born in 1935 in Germany. She studied at the University of Muenster, Germany and received her M.A. in 1959 from UCLA and her Ph.D. in 1961 from the University of Muenster, Germany. She passed away in 2012. Stowasser was a member of the faculty at Georgetown University, where she was also holder of the Sultanate of Oman Chair in Arabic and Islamic Literature, a core member of the faculty of Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS) and thrice director of the Center. She has many publications, most notably, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation* (1994), *The Islamic Impulse* (1987) and *Islamic Law and the Challenges of Modernity* (2004).

The book *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation* is a study on the women of Islamic sacred history. It narrates their stories in Qur’ān and interpretation and traditions. The current paper has examined the wife of Mūsā—Safūra—in classical exegesis (*tafāsīr*).

2. Misconception 1: Modesty or Weakness?

According to *tafāsīr*, Safūrā³ or Safūra⁴ or Safra⁵ or Safūrya⁶—who has

² The Qur’ānic commentaries listed were accessed mostly through the software *Jāmi‘ Tafāsīr Noor*.

³ Nāṣir Makārim-Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr-i Nimūna* (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya: 1995), 16:69.

⁴ Ibid.; Faḍl b. Ḥasan Ṭabarsī, *Majma‘ al-bayān*, (Farāḥānī: 1981), 18:186.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Shihāb al-Dīn Mahmūd b. ‘Abdullāh al-Ālusī, *Rūh al-ma‘ānī fi tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm wa-l sab‘ al-mathānī* (Jāmi‘ Tafāsīr: 1853), 10:269.

been referred to in the Qur'an in *Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ*—was the daughter of Prophet Shoab (a.s.). Stowasser has referred to her father as the “shepherd” in her book, likely as there is a controversy in the *tafāsīr* with regard to his identity.⁷ Upon analysis of Shī'ī and Sunnī *tafāsīr*, a difference of opinion can be seen. Some say that Shoab passed away before Safūra's encounter with Mūsā (a.s.); others posit that Safūra's father was the nephew of Shoab. However, the majority of commentators believe that her father was indeed Prophet Shoab.⁸

The story begins when she and her younger sister Liy'a⁹ are waiting with their flock of sheep near the well, which was likely situated near the outskirts of Madyan. Mūsā (a.s.), after fleeing from Egypt, has just reached Madyan. Madyan.¹⁰ He notices a group of shepherds competing with each other to water their flocks of sheep or their camels.¹¹ A little away from them, on the slope¹² he notices two young girls holding back their flock.¹³ This is described in Q 28:23–24 as follows:

﴿وَلَمَّا وَرَدَ مَاءَ مَدْيَنَ وَجَدَ عَلَيْهِ أُمَّةٌ مِّنَ النَّاسِ يَسْكُفُونَ وَوَجَدَ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ امْرَأَتَيْنِ

⁷ Stowasser has referred to her father as the “shepherd” in her book, likely as there is a controversy in the *tafāsīr* in regard to his identity; see Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press: 1994), 60.

⁸ Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 18:183; Muḥammad b. Hasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Dār al-Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabiyya: n.d.), 8:143.

⁹ Liy'a or Safūra; see Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 18:186.

¹⁰ Midian: Midian was in the “northwest Arabian Peninsula, on the east shore of the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea”: see “Midian,” *Wikipedia*, <https://bit.ly/3lLuNS7/>; Makārim-Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr-i Nimūna*, 9:200; “Madyan,” *Wikishia*, <https://bit.ly/31gbGsg>.

¹¹ Al-Ālusī, *Rūh al-ma'āī*, 10:269.

¹² Faḍl b. Ḥasan Ṭabarsī, *Jawāmi' al-jāmi'*, Persian translation (Jāmi' Tafāsīr Noor: n.d.), 4:519.

¹³ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-mizān*, Persian translation (Daftar-i Intishārāt-i Islāmī-yi Jāmi'a-yi Muḥaddisīn-i Hawza-yi 'Ilmiyya-yi Qom: 1995), 16:33.

تَذُودَانِ قَالَ مَا حَطْبُكُمْمَا قَالَتَا لَا نَسْقِي حَتَّى يُصْدِرَ الرِّعَاءُ وَأَبُونَا شَيْخٌ كَبِيرٌ
فَسَقَى لَهُمَا

When he arrived at the well of Madyan, he found there a throng of people watering [their flocks], and he found, besides them, two women holding back (*tadhūdān*) [their flock]. He said, “What is your business?” They said, “We do not water [our flock] until the shepherds have driven out [their flocks], and our father is an aged man.” So he watered [their flock] for them.

Regarding why the girls were holding back their flock, Ṭabāṭabāʾī writes that *tadhūdān* in the above verse is derived from the word *dha-wa-da* which means to stop or to block. This implies that the girls were stopping their sheep from going towards the water, or that they were stopping them from mingling with other flocks.¹⁴ Ṭabarsī similarly writes that the two women held their flocks back either because they did not want people to get closer to their flock, they were not strong enough to pull the water from the well, or they did not want their flock to mingle with others,¹⁵ whereas Rāzī and Ṭabāṭabāʾī posit that it was out of modesty, i.e., in order to avoid mingling with the men watering their flocks.¹⁶ Stowasser’s view that they did not come forward and approach the shepherds because they had no strength to jostle or to shove aside the male crowd is not found in the *tafāsīr*; instead, the *tafāsīr* mention they had no strength to pull the water out of the well.

The story continues: Mūsā (a.s.) becomes curious. He approaches the girls to ask what has stopped them from watering their flock. They

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, 18:181.

¹⁶ Ibid.; Fakhrudīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Dār al-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabiyya: 1999), 24:588; Hossein Nasr, *The Study Qurʾān* (Harper Collins: 2015), 951.

reply that they were waiting for the others to leave,¹⁷ at which point they would allow their sheep to drink from the water remaining in the troughs as they themselves had no strength to pull the water from the well.¹⁸

It was also obvious that these girls were avoiding confronting the shepherds out of their sense of modesty. Before the question could arise of the possibility of help from their father or a brother, it appears they—pre-emptively—informed Musa (a.s.) that their father was an old man¹⁹ and was not fit to take care of the sheep; it can also be assumed they had no brother,²⁰ thus being compelled to do the job themselves.²¹ Working as a shepherdess was not a dishonor for them; perhaps interacting with the male shepherds was.²²

Mūsā is upset to hear of this discriminatory state of affairs—where the women had to wait until the men left to water their sheep.²³ Some commentaries mention that he then approaches the shepherds and moves them aside,²⁴ alerting them to their selfish and discriminatory

¹⁷ Q 28:23.

¹⁸ Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 18:181. In those times they had stone troughs near the well where they would pour the water in it from the well to water their flock. Julye Bidmead, "Women and wells in the Hebrew Bible," *Bible Odyssey*. Accessed March 2020, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/women-and-wells-in-the-hebrew-bible>.

¹⁹ Q 28:23.

²⁰ 'Abdullāh Jawādī Āmulī, "Dars-i Tafsīr-i Ayatollah Jawādī, Āyāt-i 22 tā 24 Sūra-yi Qaṣaṣ", *Madrassa-yi Fiqāhat*. Accessed 11th November 2021, <https://eshia.ir/feqh/archive/text/javadi/tafsir/91/910711>.

²¹ Nāṣir Makārim-Shīrāzī, *Qiṣṣa-hāyi Qur'ān* (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya: 2003), 238; idem., *Tafsīr-i Nimūna*, 16:56.

²² Āmulī, "Dars-i Tafsīr."

²³ Makārim-Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr-i Nimūna*, 16:57.

²⁴ Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 18:181.

approach to obtaining water.²⁵ In any case, the narrative continues that the shepherds give Mūsā (a.s.) the bucket—heavy enough to require ten men to pull²⁶ from the well—and deliberately do not offer him help to humiliate him. Mūsā (a.s.) throws the bucket in the well, drains the water singlehandedly²⁷ and waters the flock. Being a stranger in the land—tired and hungry from his journey—does not stop him from helping the oppressed.²⁸ This displays his physical strength as well as his spiritual strength.

It is likely that in this era, shepherds covered their wells with large stones to keep dirt, dust and contamination out; both humans and animals consumed the same water. Other explanations for the use of these stones include: preventing the lambs of the flock from being drowned in it, securing a scarce water supply; protecting the well from receiving damage from the heat of the sun, or preventing sand from filling up the well.²⁹ The stone was usually heavy—needing a few men to move it—to prevent it from being moved by the wind.

Stowasser in *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation* creates doubts in the mind of the reader by saying that Safūra (a.s.) and her sister could not water their flock because the shepherds had placed a large stone on the well, which only Mūsā (a.s.) could remove; or else, they lacked the strength to drive the shepherds away and that is why they were standing away from them. She writes in this regard:

²⁵ Makārim-Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr-i Nimūna*, 16:57. On the contrary, other commentators suggest that history has not recorded the approach he took to convince the shepherds to give him the bucket; see Āmulī, “Dars-i Tafsīr.”

²⁶ ‘Abd ‘Alī b. Jum‘a al-‘Arūsī al-Ḥuwayzī, *Tafsīr nūr al-thaqalayn* (Ismā‘ilyān: 1994), 4:121; ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī* (Jāmi‘ Tafāsīr Noor: n.d.), 2:138.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Makārim-Shīrāzī, *Qiṣṣa-hāyi Qur‘ān*, 238; Makārim-Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr-i Nimūna*, 16:57.

²⁹ Joseph Benson, “Genesis 29, Benson Commentary,” *Bible Hub*. <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/genesis/29.htm>.

Of Moses' wife the Qur'ān only tells that she was an old Madynite shepherder's daughter. In some *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, she is identified as Zippora [Safura] ... The story has also been embellished with some further details. It is said that the shepherder's daughters could not water their small flock because the shepherds had placed a large stone on the well, which only Moses could remove. Else, they lacked the strength to jostle the male crowd.³⁰

She narrates that Safūra (a.s.) and her sister Liya could not water their small flock because of one of the two following reasons:

1. The shepherds had placed a large stone on the well, which only Moses could remove.
2. They lacked the strength to push or shove the male crowd.

The first consideration assumes that no one else could remove the large stone on the well. If this was the case, why did the shepherds place a stone on the well in the knowledge that they could not remove it? Were they not there to water their flocks too? If they were there to water their flocks then how did they do it when the well was covered? Or did they cover the well after they watered their flocks to tease the girls and not allow them to access the water? Did they want the girls to plead them to remove the stone?

Stowasser further suggests that nobody could remove the stone except Mūsā (a.s.).³¹ This then begs the question; how did the shepherds place the stone in the first place if none was strong enough to remove it? Moreover, if they did not have the strength to remove it, did they not worry about how they would draw the water the following days? How did the girls water their flock before Mūsā (a.s.) entered the scene? If they had no strength to remove the stone, then did they have no access to the water before Mūsā's advent? There must then have

³⁰ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 60.

³¹ Ibid.

been another way with which they quenched the thirst of their flock.

Stowasser further posits that the second reason that did not allow them to water their flocks was that they lacked the strength to push through the male crowd. This implies that if they had the physical strength, they certainly would have pushed the shepherds aside—who were all male—and made their way to the well. Another possible implication of a “lack of strength” is that they did not have the courage to approach the shepherds and demand their right, and thus avoided them; had they the courage, they would have elbowed the shepherds aside and drawn the water for their flock.

It could be that Stowasser was influenced by the Bible; the Bible narrates that the girls were at the well to draw water but the shepherds showed up and drove them away. This implies that the girls were weak and did not have the courage to stand up for their right.³² Another important point to be noted is that Stowasser’s main sources are mostly the *qiṣaṣ* (Qur’ānic stories) and not the *tafāsīr* (interpretations, exegesis); the latter being a more authentic and reliable source.

3. Misconception 2: Need or Freedom?

Stowasser suggests that in Islam, women can work only if there is a “need,” implying that woman cannot have a career. She writes in this regard:

This Qur’ānic story, then, here serves as scripturalist proof that Muslim women’s work outside of the home is religiously ac-

³² Related verses from the Bible are as follows: (1) Exodus, Chapter 2, verse 15: ... *but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well*; (2) Exodus, Chapter 2, verse 6: *Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father’s flock*. (3) Exodus, Chapter 2, verse 17: *Some shepherds came along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock*.

ceptable only as long as it is truly unavoidable Muslim society, be it the immediate neighbourhood or society at large, must take cognizance when a woman is compelled by circumstances to leave her "natural arena" to work elsewhere, and it must help her out so that she may safely return to her home. As for the woman, she must strive with all her might to settle the contingency at the earliest moment possible ... They had not worked outside of the home because of preference but because of need; and they eliminated this need at the earliest possibility. This, then, presents a model to be followed by all believing Muslim women.³³

According to Stowasser, a Muslim woman can work outside the house only under the condition that there is a "need" for her. If she is working outside the house, she should keep looking for opportunities to eliminate the need so that she can return home. In addition, society needs to help the woman so that she can return home.

However, there is no Qur'anic evidence to back up this view. If anything, the verses under discussion (Q 28:23-4) actually demonstrate that a woman can work outside the house. If it was against the law then Allāh would not have mentioned the story of Safūra (a.s.) and her sister Liya playing the role of shepherdess, working outside. In addition, when looking into the traditions, it can be seen that women worked outside the house at the time of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) with his tacit approval, i.e., without objection. For example, Hawlā' used to sell perfume as noted in the following tradition:

مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَحْيَى، عَنْ أَحْمَدَ بْنِ مُحَمَّدٍ، عَنْ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنِ أَبِي نَجْرَانَ، عَنْ
صَفْوَانَ، عَنْ خَلْفِ بْنِ حَمَّادٍ، عَنِ الْحُسَيْنِ بْنِ زَيْدِ الْهَاشِمِيِّ، عَنْ أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ
(ع)، قَالَ: جَاءَتْ زَيْنَبُ الْعَطَّارَةُ الْخَوْلَاءُ إِلَى نِسَاءِ النَّبِيِّ (ص) وَبَنَاتِهِ، وَكَانَتْ
تَبِيعُ مِنْهُنَّ الْعِطْرَ. فَجَاءَ النَّبِيُّ (ص) وَهِيَ عِنْدَهُنَّ، فَقَالَ: إِذَا أَتَيْتِنَا طَابَتْ

³³ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 61.

بُيُوتُنَا. فَقَالَتْ: بُيُوتُكَ بِرِيحِكَ أَطْيِبُ، يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ. قَالَ: إِذَا بَعْتِ فَأَحْسِنِي،
وَلَا تَعُشِّي فَإِنَّهُ أَتَقَى وَأَبْقَى لِلْمَالِ ...

Zaynab al-‘Aṭṭāra al-Hawlā’ used to come to the wives and daughters of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and sell them perfume. The Prophet (s.a.w.) came while she was in their house, and he said, “When you come to us, our houses become sweet smelling.” al-Hawlā’ said, “Your houses are sweet smelling because of you, O Messenger of God.”³⁴

In continuation of this conversation between the Messenger of God (s.a.w.) and al-Hawlā’, it is written that the Prophet said, “Whenever you sell perfume, sell correctly and do not be fraudulent. Do not mix the perfume with anything, because piety is better and keeps the wealth more.”³⁵

Other women were also known to have businesses at the time of our Prophet (s.a.w.). The famous among them was his first wife Khadīja (a.s.),³⁶ whose business flourished to neighboring countries. Businesswomen would also visit our Prophet and ask him regarding Islamic law. For example, Umm Anmār was a businesswoman who came to the Prophet and he taught her to refrain from deceiving during trade.³⁷ It is clear that Prophet knew of these instances and did not

³⁴ Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi* (Jāmi‘ al-Ḥadīth Noor: n.d.) 8:153, *ḥadīth* 143.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya li-Ibn Hishām* (Dār al-Qalam: n.d.), 1:199

³⁷ Nāhīd Ṭayyibī, *Gūna-Shināsī-yi raftār-i Payāmbār-i A‘zam bā Zanān* (Ṭāhā: 1963), 83. Other examples can be found in the traditions. Umm Mubashshir Anṣārī owned a garden of date-trees outside Medina and would manage its affairs. She was advised to stop working there by her nephew Jābir b. ‘Abdullāh as she was in her *‘idda* (the waiting period for

object or stop them; he even advised and guided them when they came to him with questions.

Thus, contrary to Stowasser's claim, Islam does not stop women from working outside the home. In fact, according to Islamic tradition, if she works, the money that she earns is her own to do as she pleases; it is man who is responsible for her—and the family's—expenses (extending to food, clothing and a comfortable home), a concept referred to in the tradition as *nafaqa*. She is not forced to work; it is her choice.

a wife after the death of her husband). However, the Prophet (s.a.w.) encouraged her, telling her that it might help her in giving charity; see *ibid.*, 85; Muḥsin Sa'īdzādi, "Mashāghil-i Zanān dar Aṣr-i Risālat-1," *Tibyān*. Accessed 8th December 2023, <https://library.tebyan.net/fa/Viewer/Text/78198/1>. Similarly, Zaynab bt. Jaḥsh—the wife of the Prophet (s.a.w.)—would treat animal skin and make leather to sew products such as water bags; selling these, she would give her income to charity; see Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, trans. Maḥmūd Maḥdawī Damghānī (Farhang Wa Andīsha: 1995), 8:111. 'Ā'isha would spin thread and weave cloth. She believed, "A spindle in a woman's hand is better than a spear in a warrior's hand." (Sa'īdzādi, "Mashāghil-i Zanān.") Zamīda was talented in surgery and took care of Sa'd Ma'ādh—great companion of the Prophet (s.a.w.)—who was shot by an arrow; see Ja'far Subhānī, *Furūgh-i Abadiyyat*. Būstān-i Kitāb: 1929. Ku'ayba bt. Sa'd was a doctor and had set up a tent in the Prophet's mosque to cure the sick. (Ṭayyibī, *Gūneshināsī*, 84.) Shifā was a learned teacher who taught the Prophet's wife writing and medicine at his request; the Prophet (s.a.w.) would respect her and visit her, an indication of her approval; see *ibid.*, 83; Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, 8:280. Umm Ra'la was a hairdresser and would help women beautify themselves for their husbands. She asked Prophet (s.a.w.) about her work, and he encouraged her to continue it. (*Ibid.*). Women who had migrated to Ethiopia learnt carpentering and medicine there; Asmā' made a coffin for Fāṭima (a.s.); see 'Abbās al-Qummī, *House of Sorrows* (Islamic Publishing House: 2010), 204; Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*, 8:293.

However, if she does decide to do so, she must make sure that it is done so within the framework of Islam. Her first priority is her family; her husband and her children, and this should not be sacrificed. If the balance between family and work can be maintained, Islam has no objection. There are also three other conditions to be borne in mind:

1. She should not be isolated with non-*maḥram*³⁸ at work.
2. She should not mingle and be intimate with a non-*maḥram*.
3. A capable man should not be sitting idle at home while she is out working.³⁹

Similarly, Safūra (a.s.) was not isolated and was with her sister; they were not mingling nor intimate with men. Both the sisters were standing aside. They were simply out because their father was old and was not capable of taking care of the sheep.

Additionally, sometimes a woman may not “need” to work but society may need her. There are plenty of jobs that are more suitable for women than men. For example, society needs gynaecologists, proctologists, colorectal surgeons, nurses, mammogram technicians, midwives etc. A Muslim woman who observes *ḥijāb* (the Islamic dress code) will feel more comfortable seeing a female doctor than a male.⁴⁰ Thus,

³⁸ A man that is legal to marry according to Islamic law.

³⁹ Muḥsin Qarāʾatī, *Tafsīr-i Nūr* (Markaz-i Farhangī-yi Dars-hāyī az Qurʾān: 2004), 9:37.

⁴⁰ It is true that nowadays, pursuing a career is different from the era of the Prophet (s.a.w.), and working women face some issues that were not prevalent in his time. In the era of the Prophet (s.a.w.), many people were self-employed and fixed their work schedule according to their needs. They were not under a large employer system, pressured to fulfil its demands. They could work without stress and at their own leisure. At the time of the Prophet (s.a.w.), women could make their products at home, or they could work in an environment that did not require much interaction with men. In contrast, nowadays men and women work side by side,

it is clear that a Muslim woman is free to work as long as she maintains her modesty, and it does not interfere with her family affairs.

4. Misconception 3: “Bashful gait”

According to Shī'ī and Sunnī *tafāsīr*, the story continues as follows: After he waters their flock, Mūsā (a.s.) relaxes under the shade of a tree⁴¹ or a wall⁴² as it is a very hot⁴³ and sunny day.⁴⁴ He is tired from the long journey.⁴⁵ He is hungry⁴⁶ and has not had a proper meal for seven days⁴⁷; to survive the journey, he has filled his stomach with the herbs and leaves of trees on the way.⁴⁸ As he retires under the shade of the tree, he makes a silent prayer, saying, “*My Lord! I am indeed in need of any good You may send down to me.*”⁴⁹ Allāh—the Listener of prayers—answers his prayer in a beautiful manner in the events that follow.

Meanwhile, Safūra (a.s.) and Liya return home to their father,

and it is almost impossible to earn a degree without associating with the opposite gender.

⁴¹ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Jāmi' Tafāsīr Noor: n.d.), 20:37; Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, (Jāmi' Tafāsīr Noor: n.d.), 6:204; Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 18:182.

⁴² Al-Ālusī, *Rūh al-ma'ānī*, 10:273.

⁴³ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-mizān*, 16:34.

⁴⁴ Al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib*, 24:589.

⁴⁵ Muḥammad Muḥammadī Ishtihārdī, *Qiṣṣa-hāyi Qur'ān bi Qalam-i Ravān* (Mu'assisa-yi Inteshārāt-i Nabawī: 1999), 247; Rizwan Arastu, *God's Emissaries: Adam to Jesus* (I.M.A.M.: 2014), 350.

⁴⁶ Al-Ālusī, *Rūh al-ma'ānī*, 10:273; Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 18:182; al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, 2:138.

⁴⁷ Al-Ālusī, *Rūh al-Ma'ānī*, 10:273.

⁴⁸ Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 18:182; Hāshim b. Sulaymān al-Baḥrānī, *al-Burhān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Bunyād-i Be'that: n.d.), 4:262.

⁴⁹ Q 28:24.

whom the majority of commentators believe to be Shu‘ayb (a.s.).⁵⁰ Shu‘ayb (a.s.) is surprised to see his daughters earlier than usual.⁵¹ The girls begin to narrate what has happened, perhaps even before he asks. After they relay their experience, Shu‘ayb asks his older⁵² daughter Safūra to invite Mūsā to his house.⁵³ He believes the young man to be deserving of thanks and reward⁵⁴; moreover, he is a stranger in their land, and it is mandatory on them to make him feel welcome in their city.

While Mūsā (a.s.) rests under the tree he notices that one of the girls is walking towards him. Her modest walk⁵⁵ tells him that she belongs to a decent⁵⁶ family: she was taking little steps bashfully⁵⁷ towards him.

Here, Stowasser raises observations that she gleans from this “bashful walk.” She suggests that Safūra (a.s.) walked like a true female and did not behave like a man, which in turn separates her both from behaving as a slave and from her more modern sister who tries to behave like a man. She writes:

Greater emphasis is placed on the “bashful gait” ([Q] 28:25) of the Madyanite girl who returned to Moses still sitting at the well. “She walked in the manner that free [not slave] women walk,” to invite him to her father’s house ... Contemporary conservative teaching continues to find a second paradigm in this story

⁵⁰ Ṭabarsī, *Majma‘ al-bayān*, 18:182

⁵¹ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, 6:205.

⁵² Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Ḥayāt al-qulūb*, trans. Athar Husain S.H. Rizvi (Ansariyan: 2003), 1:303.

⁵³ Ishtehārdi, *Qiṣṣa-hāyi Qur’ān*, 248; Ṭabarsī, *Jawami‘ al-jāmi‘*, Persian translation (Jāmi‘ Tafāsīr Noor: n.d.), 4:521.

⁵⁴ Al-‘Arūsī, *Tafsīr nūr al-thaqalayn*, 4:122; al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, 2:138.

⁵⁵ Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, *Tafsīr al-mizān*, 16:35.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Q 28:25.

in the old shepherd's daughter's "bashful gait" when it emphasises that this young woman "walked like a true female, not trying to behave like a man ... Therein lies another lesson for the contemporary Muslim woman."⁵⁸ In the medieval model, the "bashful gait" separated the free-born (respectable) Muslim woman from the (not-so respectable) slave; at present, the "bashful gait" separates the traditional Muslim woman from her modernist sister who "tries to behave like a man."⁵⁹

She describes Safūra's walk in her footnotes stating:

"She walked in the manner that free [not slave] women walk" ... meant are the modest stride and downcast eyes of the paradigmatic⁶⁰ "free" (and by definition "respectable") Muslim woman as opposed to the expansive stride and roving eyes of the paradigmatic "slave woman."⁶¹

According to Stowasser, Safūra's bashful walk is the walk of:

- a. A free woman
- b. A true female
- c. A respectable woman.

Upon analysis of the related Qur'ānic verses, it can be found that none of these claims are true. The Qur'ān mentions "walking bashfully" without adding any details to it like "a true female" or "a free woman" or "a respectable woman."

The related verse is as follows:

﴿فَجَاءَتْهُ إِحْدَاهُمَا تَمْشِي عَلَى اسْتِحْيَاءٍ قَالَتْ إِنَّ أَبِي يَدْعُوكَ لِيَجْزِيَكَ أَجْرَ

⁵⁸ Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rawī, *Qaḍāyā al-mar'at al-muslima* (Dar al-Muslim: 1982), 22, cited in Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 61.

⁵⁹ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 61.

⁶⁰ Model, typical, exemplary.

⁶¹ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 61.

مَا سَقَيْتَ لَنَا

Then one of the two women approached him, walking bashfully. She said, “Indeed my father invites you to pay you the wages for watering [our flock] for us.”⁶²

Here, the verse is highlighting Safūra’s modesty in a praiseworthy and admiring tone. Stowasser on the other hand, relying on Sunnī sources, appears to criticise her walk saying: “a second paradigm in this story in the old shepherd’s daughter’s ‘bashful gait’ when it emphasises that this young woman ‘walked like a true female, not trying to behave like a man ...”⁶³

In addition, upon perusal of the *Tafsīr* of Ibn Kathir, it can be seen that he writes:

“Then one of the two women approached him, walking bashfully” meaning, she was walking like a free woman, as it was narrated from the Commander of the faithful, ‘Umar: “She was covering herself from them with the folds of her garment.” Ibn Abī Hatim recorded that “Amr b. Maymūn said, ‘Umar said: “She came walking shyly, putting her garment over her face. She was not one of those audacious women who come and go as they please.” This chain of narrators is *ṣaḥīḥ*.⁶⁴

Comparison of the above passage with Stowasser’s observations seems to indicate that Stowasser has based her analysis on the *Tafsīr* of Ibn Kathīr, and took the phrase “free woman” from it. Based on a *ḥadīth* narrated from the second caliph, ‘Umar—which is not narrated from the Prophet (s.a.w.)—Stowasser comes to the conclusion that a slave woman is not respectable; as she writes: the “bashful gait” sepa-

⁶² Q 28:25.

⁶³ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 61.

⁶⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm*, 6:205.

rated the free-born (respectable) Muslim woman from the (not-so respectable) slave. This claim is not found in the Qur'an. There were many slaves who accepted Islam and were held in great esteem, and many Imams were the offspring of slave women who were married to the Imams; for example, Hamīda, the wife of Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.). Some prophets were also the children of slave women: for example, Hājar (a.s.) was the slave of Sāra (a.s.), who was gifted to Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.), and she gave birth to Prophet Ismail (a.s.).

As for Stowasser's phrase, walked like a true female, not trying to behave like a man,⁶⁵ similar phrasing can be seen in al-Sha'rawī's *Qaḍāyā*, which discusses Islamic laws regarding women. If Stowasser wanted to introduce women in the Qur'an it would have been more pertinent to look into the exegesis of the Qur'an, rather than a book of laws in which a scholar can give his personal opinion.

After comparing the free woman to a slave woman, Stowasser writes *at present, the "bashful gait" separates the traditional Muslim woman from her modernist sister who "tries to behave like a man."*⁶⁶ This claim is not found in the Qur'an. It is apparent that she weaved around the phrase that is taken from al-Sha'rawī's book: *walked like a true female, not trying to behave like a man*. However, al-Sha'rawī did not claim that the modernist sister behaves like a man. Stowasser comes to this conclusion as it was based on invalid comparison; she compares the *free-born respectable woman* to a *not-so respectable slave woman*⁶⁷, then she compared *a true female*⁶⁸ to a *true male and not trying to behave like a man*⁶⁹ to *trying to behave like a man*. The comparison is illogical but has led Stowasser to the conclusion that a modernist Muslim woman tries to behave like a man.

⁶⁵ Al-Sha'rawī, *Qaḍāyā*, 22.

⁶⁶ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 61.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Al-Sha'rawī, *Qaḍāyā*.22.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

5. Conclusion

Stowasser wished to introduce the women in the Qur'ān but has based her discussion mostly on *qiṣaṣ* instead of *tafāsīr*; the latter of which is regarded as more authentic and primary source.⁷⁰ She mostly uses *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, the named author of whom is more historian than *mufasssīr* (commentator).⁷¹ Ibn Kathīr has based his *Tafsīr* mostly on *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*. Moreover, Stowasser bases her discussion on some unauthentic traditions such as the narration from the second caliph, which is mostly found in Sunnī *tafāsīr*. Furthermore, she relies only on Sunnī literature and totally ignores Shī'ī books, which results in incorrect comparisons and conclusions.

A reader with little or no knowledge of Islam may take Stowasser's conclusions and perceive Islam as a biased religion which does not allow women to work, or a religion that has a class system of free and slave women; this may lead them to assume that women are weak and subordinate creatures compared to men.

It is hoped that the present article may serve as a stepping stone for which to study other women who have been discussed in Stowasser's work.

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⁷⁰ In fact, the *qiṣaṣ* are extracted from and are based on *tafāsīr*, not vice versa.

⁷¹ A *mufasssīr* (commentator) is a scholar who is an expert in Arabic grammar, the Qur'ānic science, the science of *hadith* (traditions), theology, jurisprudence, logic, history, background of revelations, philosophy, geography, sociology, and the different tools that are needed for a *mufasssīr*.

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