

Engaging with the Qur'an

Religious Practice and Daily Life of Selected Muslim Women in Finland and Egypt

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 VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
PEER-REVIEWED
www.tsv.fi/tunus

In this article, I examine what selected Muslim women in Finland and Egypt do with the Qur'an in their daily lives. I shed light on their modes of engagement with the Qur'an (spiritual, emotional, intellectual, communal). I analyse how their relationship with the Qur'an is shaped and changes over the course of their life. I pay attention to the interplay between the women's daily lives and the ways in which they experience, learn from, grapple with, and interpret the text. My overall aim is twofold: to contribute to research-based understanding of the Qur'an as daily religious practice that in many ways involves learning both about God and about the complex circumstances of personal life, and to unpack the layered and shifting meanings of this practice in the context of the women's lives. My analysis is informed by life-story interviews with six women in Helsinki and Cairo (three in each country).

Introduction

In Islamic theology, the Qur'an is considered the inerrant and sacred word of God. It is the primary source for Islamic law (Hallaq 2005). It is present in the daily lives of Muslims as they recite some of its passages in daily prayers, decorate their homes with wall hangings that have Qur'anic verses carved in them, wear lockets with words and verses from the text etc. Scholars argue that contemporary Muslims are ever more engaged in the Qur'an with a focus on its role as guidance (Pink 2019; Saleh

2020). In particular, the memorization and recitation of the Qur'an is a religious practice that has a long history in Muslim communities and is still alive and significant (Gade 2004; Mattson 2013). These studies have also shown the learning skills that can be acquired from the practice of memorization and recitation of the Qur'an, which have been further facilitated with advancement in technological tools such as smart phones and computer applications.

Research has also shown that the expansion and diversification of sources and modes of Islamic religious learning in modern times have resulted in lay Muslims' wide access to religious knowledge (Peter 2006; Mandaville 2007; Eickelman and Johnson 2016). These processes have also led to the decentring of religious authority, where it is no longer confined to traditional religious institutions. Many Muslim women and men are now able to exercise agency in seeking, transmitting, and making sense of religious knowledge acquired in mosques, online, printed books, and various phone apps.

Since the middle of the last decade of last century, and with the seminal ethnography of Saba Mahmood, there has been burgeoning scholarship on contemporary Muslim women's pursuits of religious

knowledge and their daily practices of piety both in Muslim majority and minority contexts (Mahmood 2005; Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006; Liberatore 2016; Al-Sharmani 2015, 2017b, 2018). These studies have shown the diverse motivations that drive women's pursuits of religious knowledge and piety as well as the mixed and complex outcomes. For example, the claim to religious knowledge and roles lead some women to affirm patriarchal interpretations and gender roles, while others as a result of this acquired religious knowledge and agency undertake a double critique of religious and community patriarchy and the racism and marginalization they encounter in the larger society. A number of studies have also analysed the new forms of religious leadership assumed by women, some of which are still based on gendered notions of women and men's roles, whilst others combine the women's professional and religious roles (Kloos 2016; Liberatore 2019).

A common theme that connects these studies is the active role that the women play in acquiring religious knowledge, interpreting religious texts, and partaking in religious practices in dynamic and diverse ways. This study is informed by the above scholarship. The analysis sheds light on religious practices of Muslim women in Finland and Egypt that centre on the Qur'an. I argue that while these practices are all focused on the Qur'an, they are diverse and have multiple purposes and meanings, some of which also shift in the life course of the women. I contend there is interplay between women's life experiences, challenges, and evolving self-knowledge on the one hand and their modes of engagement of the Qur'an on the other hand.

Methodology and research data

Research sites

I conducted qualitative research with women in Finland and Egypt. There are several factors for my choice of the two contexts. Finland is a country where most Muslims are of migrant background and constitute a religious minority, where Islam and Muslims are either othered in public discourses or overdetermined (Sakaranaho, Aarveaara and Konttori 2020). Egypt, on the other hand, is a Muslim-majority context but also a migratory context hosting many Muslim and non-Muslim refugees, many of whom are of African background. In both countries, additionally, women's active pursuits of Islamic religious knowledge and pious life have been documented in past research (Mahmood 2005; Hafez 2011; Al-Sharmani 2015, 2017a, 2018). Also, drawing on my long-term professional and personal networks established through previous research projects in both countries, I interviewed for this article selected women who are similar in two important ways. Their engagement with the Qur'an has spanned across different junctures in their life. Furthermore, this relationship with the Qur'an has not remained the same but evolved and changed from their childhood to adulthood. Additionally, the women in both contexts encountered similar challenges, notwithstanding the distinct context-based forms that these challenges took. These challenges concerned migration, the vulnerabilities arising from living as a refugee, transnational family obligations and relations, racism, abusive and failed marriages, gender-based inequalities, and loss of immediate family members. These challenges influenced how the women related to and engaged with the Qur'an.

Through the study of these women's modes of engagements with the Qur'an,

I seek a research-based nuanced understanding of not only their religious practices and knowledge but also their pursuit of self-knowledge, spiritual strength, comfort, and more meaningful life. I also seek an understanding of the multidimensional role of the Qur'an in their lives.

Method of data collection and analysis

I conducted life-story interviews with ten women in total (five in each country). However, because of the scope of this article, I focus on six in my analysis. I conducted the interviews over the course of three years (2020–23). I had a series of interviews with each woman. The structure of the interview was semi-structured. It traced the life trajectory of each interlocutor using specific thematic prompting words such as childhood, education, daily practices, family, marriage, aspirations, challenges, religious knowledge, the Qur'an. In particular, we delved into the practices of the women that centred on the Qur'an, how these practices were conducted, how the women experienced them, what meanings they attached to them, and how the practices and their meanings may have changed or evolved across time.

I have a strong rapport and relationship of trust with the interlocutors. I met most of them a decade and a half ago while I was conducting previous ethnographic research in their local communities. I also interviewed some of these women in previous research projects that focused on Islamic law and marriage and divorce practices. This was helpful since on the one hand I was already well-informed about the context and some of the significant life experiences of the women, and on the other hand the present study allowed the interlocutors and me to reflect on some of their past life experiences and current life through a new lens that focused on their relationship

with the Qur'an. I met the remaining few seven years ago through professional networks and personal contacts, and have also been able to establish a relationship of trust with them. And from their end, the interlocutors also got to know me not only as a researcher but also as a friend, a Muslim woman of migratory background who, like them, has aspirations and challenges and tries to navigate life's trials.

I recorded and transcribed the first interview with each interlocutor, while taking notes for the subsequent follow-up interviews. I used a thematic approach in the analysis. I conducted a three-tier analysis. The first tier consisted of categorizing and analysing the Qur'an-centred practices of the women under the following themes: the type of practice and how it is carried out, women's experiences of the practices, the purpose it fulfils according to the women; the changes in practices (and their meanings) across women's life trajectories. In the second tier of analysis, I mapped out the women's pathways to religious knowledge since their childhood and in their adulthood: the sources of this knowledge such as individual religion teachers, mosques, institutions; the internet, books; the types of knowledge such as different knowledges related to Qur'an; Hadith; Islamic jurisprudence; and how they made sense of this knowledge. The third tier of analysis involved categorizing and examining women's life aspirations, challenges, daily practices, and the development of their sense of self and their worldview over time. I then juxtaposed the emerging findings from each tier and examined them in relation to one another. The argument presented in this article will not cover all the findings. It will focus on 1. the multidimensionality and dynamism of the women's Qur'an-centred religious practices, and 2. how during

women's engagements of the Qur'an, reflective learning takes place that is shaped by the interplay between their understandings and experience of the Qur'an and their own life experiences.

Profile of the interlocutors

The interlocutors for this research were women who all believed in the Qur'an as the word of God and inerrant and had been engaging with it through different practices since childhood. In their adulthood and at different junctures in their lives, these women's relationship with the Qur'an became more significant but also multi-dimensional and dynamic. They sought religious knowledge in various ways and for different purposes. Not all prayed the five daily prayers regularly, but all fasted in Ramadan. Some wore the hijab, some did not. They observed religious norms such as not drinking alcohol or eating pork. They also enjoyed music, wearing make-up, watching movies and going to weddings, and they did not consider gender segregation in social events a religious obligation.

I call the women from Finland whom I discuss in my analysis Mona, Selima, and Youssra. Mona and Selima were of African descent and moved to Finland as refugees. Mona was in her early forties. She moved to Finland with her refugee family when she was fourteen. She was divorced with several children. She worked in the health-care sector. She took active part in the social and religious activities organized by the mosque in her neighbourhood. One of her children had chronic health issues. Mona is sociable and loves travelling.

Selima was in her late forties and divorced with children. She also worked in the health-care sector. She moved to Finland in her twenties. She had lots of difficulties in her marriage, and also had a child with chronic health problems. Her

uncle, who was a religious scholar, was an influential figure in her life and encouraged her to seek religious knowledge and speak her mind. She had questions about many dominant interpretations and doctrines in Islamic textual tradition which she heard from scholars since her days in refugee camp in East Africa. The quest for answers to these questions became even more important after she moved to Finland.

Lastly Youssra, who was in her early thirties, was the only non-Finnish national. She was from a Middle Eastern background and came to the country to study. She was in an abusive marriage and her ex-husband took their daughter forcibly when they were in her home country. Youssra lived in other European countries for the purpose of studies. Since her childhood, her grandmother, who was very close to her, instilled in her the love of the Qur'an. She memorized many chapters and verses when she was a teenager living in another European country. She felt proud of being able to recite beautifully.

I call the three women from Cairo whom I discuss in the article Nadia, Alia, and Zeinab. Nadia and Alia were Egyptians, while Zeinab was a refugee. Nadia was in her mid-fifties. She was divorced. She held a university degree and used to work as a teacher. She was currently the caretaker of her invalid mother. When her marriage broke down, she travelled to the Gulf to work and raise her only son. Her ex-husband never paid any child alimony nor was he involved in their son's life. A few years ago, she lost her son in a car accident. Her elderly mother in Egypt fell very ill, and her other married siblings urged her to come home and become the caretaker. Nadia loved watching Turkish and Indian soap operas. Alia, also an Egyptian, was in her mid-fifties. She was married with a daughter and son. She was in an

unhappy marriage where she felt emotionally abused, to an Egyptian migrant in the Gulf. She loved going to religion classes in her mosque and Zumba classes in a nearby gym. She had been thinking for many years of getting divorced, but she was hesitant. Alia had a university degree but was never employed. She married right after college, and her husband was the breadwinner of the family. Alia's parents also divorced when she was young, and that experience was very difficult for her. Zeinab was a refugee who had been living in Egypt for a decade. She was literate in her native language and could speak Arabic, but she did not receive any formal education. She was in her late thirties, married and a mother of five. She was a domestic worker. She loved wearing make-up and taking care of her skin. Zeinab's husband was in their home-country, and she complained that he was a deadbeat father who flirted with diasporic women from her country living in North America on social media.

Engaging with the Qur'an: religious practice and daily life

In this section, I examine the different practices undertaken by the interlocutors and which centred on the Qur'an. I focus on three broad practices and their (shifting) purposes, and meanings in the lives of the women. They are: 1. memorization and recitation of the Qur'an as a regular systematic practice, 2. making supplication (*du'ā'*) through different modes of engagement that involve recitation and reading, and 3. reflective reading of the text for the purpose of interpretation. I shed light on what the women did in these practices, how they experienced them, and what meanings they take on. I also examine the shifts that happened in the meanings of these practices during their lives. I show that these practices derived their significance not only

from their being centred on the Qur'an but also because they were situated within and shaped by the women's lived realities.

Memorizing and reciting the Qur'an

In my analysis of this practice, I focus on Mona and Alia, who were from Finland and Egypt, respectively. Both experienced abusive marriages. While Mona's marriage ended in divorce, Alia was still reluctant to end hers both for emotional and financial reasons. Both Mona and Alia regularly memorized and recited the Qur'an, and they did so as part of a community. When Mona was a child, her relationship with the Qur'an was one that brought her a sense of pride and joy. She and her siblings were raised to value the practice of memorization and reciting the Qur'an. Mona recounted the beginning of her relationship with the Qur'an when she was a small child in their country of origin, eager to join her siblings in this practice.

I was a child in [her country of origin]

I was younger than my four brothers, and they used to go to... [religion school]. I got jealous that my brothers were learning the Qur'an. They used tablets to write the verses. I had no tablet. I would go with them and just listen and memorize. When the Egyptian teacher came to give exams to my brothers, I went along with them. My brothers made mistakes in the recitation. I recited the verses, and I did it perfectly. The teacher praised me. I was very happy and proud.¹

1 All translations from the original languages of interview data in Arabic and Somali are made by the author.

As a teenager living in Finland, memorizing and reciting the Qur'an acquired an additional meaning for Mona. It became a weekly ritual that brought her mother and siblings together and created a sense of family bond. Mona recounts it as follows.

Every Wednesday my mother would have us recite the Qur'an all of us our siblings. She would make cake and drinks and then she would have us recite the Qur'an, and then give us cake.

Mona remembered how she enjoyed those family gatherings where the pleasure of eating her mother's home-baked cake and spending time with her family were intertwined with her reciting the Qur'an and feeling proud to have such knowledge. When recounting those memories, Mona did not talk or emphasize the meanings of what she was reciting. It was the ability and discipline to memorize, remember, and recite verses from a text which she considered sacred and to do so in social contexts that were important to her.

As an adult and a single mother, Mona took her children diligently to her local mosque in Helsinki so that they would learn the memorization and recitation of the Qur'an. She also participated in Qur'an classes offered by the mosque to the women. Additionally, Mona and her children also attended the workshops offered by the mosque on family wellbeing, parenting skills, and youth education. I note the additional meanings that Mona's relationship with the Qur'an took on in this juncture of her life, as a black single mother of teenage sons. Engaging with the Qur'an was no longer only an act of piety or a practice that brought her extended family together. It became also part of her efforts to navigate the realities of her daily life a member

of racialized and marginalized religious minority. Mona recounted the frequent experiences of racism and Islamophobia that she and her children encountered. She was particularly pre-occupied with how best to shield her sons from police harassment and gang violence and help them succeed in the larger society. These new meanings that the role of the Qur'an acquired were also situated within the context of the different activities that were being organized by her mosque to promote learned confident and engaging Muslim subjectivity (Al-Sharmani 2019).

Alia's relationship with the Qur'an, like Mona's, started in childhood and was intertwined with her daily life with its trials and joys. Yet, it was a different relationship from Mona's. Alia studied the Qur'an in school as part of compulsory subject titled Islamic education. In these classes, she and her classmates memorized some chapters from the Qur'an, some Prophetic hadith, learned about religious rituals, history of early Muslim communities, etc. During those years, the Qur'an was simply part of a school subject that she had to study. She said, "I did not think much about it. It was just something I had to do at school." Unlike Mona, practices around the Qur'an were not part of her family life. However, this relationship changed in her adulthood and through the course of her marriage. During the first few years of her marriage, Mona lived with her husband and their two children in the Gulf country where he worked. Her marriage was an unhappy one where her husband was domineering and dismissive. He constantly put her down and controlled her movement and interactions with her family and friends. Therefore, when her husband could not renew her residence and that of the children in the Gulf country, she was relieved and happily returned to Cairo with her children. In

the subsequent years, she and her children lived in Cairo while the husband visited them during the holidays. Away from her husband, Alia started building a life for herself. Her daily life became structured as follows: she attended to her children's needs and sent them off to school. Then she would go to the local mosque in her neighbourhood for Qur'an classes three times a week. A female teacher taught her and the other women Qur'anic recitation as well as *tafsīr* (exegesis). Alia went diligently to the class. Since attending these classes, Alia noticed that she became reflective when she read the Qur'an. She had a routine. After the class, she would spend time chatting with the other women from the class in the mosque garden. Occasionally, she and some of the other women would also enjoy smoking a cigarette in the garden and chat about their lives. Smoking was something she could not do in front of her husband, who considered it immoral for women to do so. Through some of the friends from the Qur'an class, she got to know about a nearby gym where they went to work out and took part in Zumba classes. Alia went along one day and enjoyed it tremendously. She joined the gym and had been going regularly to the Zumba class for years.

Alia's marital challenges were shaped by a dominant gendered model of marriage in a Muslim majority society, in this case Egypt, where husbands had claim to authority over their wives on the basis of their being male providers (Al-Sharmani 2017b). Another relevant contextual factor was how gender dynamics in marriage were complicated by Egyptian labour migration. Past and present studies have shown that male labour migration in fact has resulted, particularly among middle class families, in the re-enforcement of traditional hierarchical gender roles (Hoodfar 1996; Samari 2022). Alia did not have a paying

job and hence depended financially on her husband. Her husband, as a labour migrant in a Gulf country, encountered discriminatory work practices and insufficient legal protection. According to Alia, his sense of unhappiness as a result of his migrant life was also exacerbated by his being physically away from the family most of the year. This led her husband, in her view, to becoming more authoritarian and domineering in their relationship. It was this complex context that shed light on the significance of the small supportive community that Alia formed through learning Qur'an together with other women in the mosque and her further strengthening this sense of community through their Zumba classes and time spent together in the gym. In this community, she felt confident, spiritually strong and happy; she was not the abused wife.

To conclude, the contexts and the specific life circumstances of Mona and Alia shaped the meanings they attached to their Qur'an-centred practices. These meanings also shifted and acquired new layers at different junctures in their lives. For both, the practice of memorization and recitation of the Qur'an in their current adult lives was not simply a religious ritual that was carried out as an act of piety. They were also part of their daily practices to navigate different challenges and trials, to seek a spiritually strong Muslim selfhood, and to create and enjoy supportive community, etc.

Making *du'ā's* through the Qur'an

In my discussions with the interlocutors, Qur'an-based supplications were a frequent topic that they brought up. The interlocutors mentioned that making supplications (*du'ā's*) was a common and regular part of their daily lives. These practices took two forms: reciting supplications from the Qur'an and reading certain chapters

as forms of supplication on specific occasions. In this section, I examine how the interlocutors engage in and experience each practice. *Du‘a*’s are supplications that Muslims recite on different occasions. As a form of religious ritual, they are meant to help the believer to be in constant remembrance of the Creator, acknowledge and praise the power and benevolence of God and seek God’s support. Qur’anic verse 2:186 reminds believers that God is near and answers the supplication of the believer who seeks Him.² There is also a hadith *qudsī*, i.e. hadith that conveys a direct message from God but in the words of the Prophet Muhammad, which underscores that when believers seek God’s closeness and support, God is eager to reciprocate even more.³ There are diverse types of supplications: some attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, and others are Qur’an-based. The latter can be divided into three kinds. One kind is phrases that are taken from the Qur’an. One popular example is “God give us in this world goodness and beauty and protect us in the afterworld from hell”.⁴

- 2 The verse says: “And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me – indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided.” Sahih international translation. tanzil.net.
- 3 The hadith says: “The Prophet peace upon him said, ‘My Lord says, “If My slave comes nearer to me for a span, I go nearer to him for a cubit; and if he comes nearer to Me for a cubit, I go nearer to him for the span of outstretched arms; and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running.”’” Sahih al-Bukhari, 7536, in-book reference, Book 97, Hadith 161 Sunnah.com.
- 4 The supplication comes from Qur’an 2:201. It says in Arabic: “Rabānā ātinā fī al-dunyā ḥasna wa fī ākhiratī ḥasna wa qinā ‘adhāb al-nār.”

Another kind is supplication that was made by past prophets as narrated in the Qur’an. One well-known one was uttered by the Prophet Jonah when he was in the belly of the whale, “There is No God but You, Exalted are You, I was among the wrong doers”.⁵ Another popular supplication is the one spoken by the Prophet Moses when God sent him to Pharaoh to preach the new monotheistic religion. The supplication says, “God expand my chest, make my business easy, and loosen my tongue so that they can understand my speech”.⁶ A third Qur’an-centred supplication entails reciting or reading certain chapters to seek different forms of support and protection from God for oneself or a loved one. For example, chapters 113 and 114, which are known as *al-ma‘uthatayn*, i.e. those recited to invoke God’s protection from different forms of ill-will and harm including envy and jealousy. Verse 2:255, known as the throne verse (*al-kursī*), is recited before sleep to seek God’s protection until the person wakes up. It is also recited when one is about to travel. Chapter 67 is read before going to bed as a way of seeking forgiveness from God should one die and must take accountability for one’s deeds in front of the Creator. The knowledge of the spiritual significance of different verses and chapters in the Qur’an is based on Prophetic traditions recorded in authoritative hadith compilations, in the chapter known as the virtues of the Qur’an / *faḍa’il il Qur’an* (Saleh 2010).

These different types of Qur’anic supplications were part of the daily lives of my

- 5 The supplication occurs in Qur’an 21:87. It says in Arabic: “Lā ilāha illā ant subḥānak inī kuntū min al-zālimīn.”
- 6 The supplication occurs in 20:25–28. It says in Arabic: “Rabi ishrah li şadri, wa yasr li amri wa uhlal ‘ uqdata lisāni yafqahū qawli.”

interlocutors. They are very much interwoven with the women's efforts to navigate on-going life challenges, deal with particular times of distress, or create a daily space of spiritual and emotional refuge. For example, all the interlocutors read certain verses/chapters as a form of supplication. Alia regularly read chapter 67 as she was taught in her mosque class, before she went to bed, seeking divine forgiveness and protection should she not live another day. Whenever Mona experienced physical pain or emotional distress, she read 2:286 and then the first chapter in the Qur'an seven times. Verse 2:286 is a supplication where believers ask God to forgive them for their errors and omissions, and not to burden them with what they cannot bear. The first chapter is also a supplication that first acknowledges the power and compassion of God and then asks for guidance on the straight path. Interestingly, while Mona knew the blessings of the recitation of different verses from Prophetic tradition, she learned to recite these verses in particular because of a dream she had three times. In the dream, a voice told her to recite these verses to seek God's protection from physical pain and distress. This happened in her twenties. She rarely read or listened to the Qur'an, and did the daily prayers sporadically, and she would get physical pains and felt a sense of loss. Mona believed that the dream was a reminder to her to maintain her relationship with the Qur'an.

Yousra, the graduate student from the Middle East who lived in Finland, had mastered the memorization and recitation of many chapters and verses in the Qur'an since her teenage years. This helped her to have a wide knowledge of many Qur'anic supplications that she was able to easily and beautifully recite in different situations in her life. Her favourite is the one that says, "For whoever is conscious of God, God will

make a way out".⁷ She recited that whenever her heart became heavy with grief because she was not able to secure the custody of her daughter, who was taken from her by force by her ex-husband. Yousra also read chapter 2 every day. She started this practice after she learned the Prophetic tradition that said, "Reading it is a blessing and leaving it is a regret."⁸

In difficult situations in their lives, some interlocutors resorted to the supplications made by past prophets in times of distress. These supplications, for the women, derived their spiritual and emotive power from the ways they had been used by these prophets in times of need. The women felt affinity with those prophets' sense of vulnerability in their times of trial and suffering and yet their trust in the power of divine support. This practice was particularly popular with Zeinab, an African refugee who had been living in Cairo with her children. Zeinab never went to school in her home country. She did not go to Qur'anic school. Her family was very poor and from an early age she started working as a street vendor. She memorized some verses from the Qur'an as her grandfather and grandmother always recited the Qur'an at home. She learned spoken Arabic when she moved to Egypt. Her children, on the other hand, were fluent in Arabic, which they learnt at the Al-Azhar-run schools.⁹ Zeinab had no time to go to any Qur'an classes in the mosque since she worked as domestic worker six days a week from 8 to 4 pm. Zeinab's relationship with the Qur'an

7 This supplication occurs in Qur'an 65:2. It says in Arabic: "wa man yataqī Allāhū yaj'al lahū makhrajān."

8 Sahih Muslim, 804. The hadith says in Arabic: "Akhdhuhā baraka wa tarkuhā ḥasra."

9 Al-Azhar is the oldest Sunni religious education institution.

particularly became vivid and meaningful when she recited Qur'anic supplications, particularly in difficult and anxiety-filled situations. Her favourite supplication was that of the Prophet Jonah. This particular one became an important source of spiritual and psychological strength for her as she tried to confront the challenges of refugee life. While Egypt is signatory to the 1952 refugee convention, it has relegated to the UNHCR office in the country the task of asylum determination. Additionally, Egypt put several reservations on the conventions, resulting among other things in denying refugees the right to employment, permanent residence, and other social services (Norman 2016). African refugees, like Zeinab, confronted legal, economic, and racial marginalization (Mohamad 2020). She and her children were only entitled to a six-month renewable residence. The process of getting and renewing the residence was extremely difficult. The governmental office where the issuing and renewal of residence was handled was extremely crowded. Overworked and underpaid employees in the office were often impatient, unfriendly, and unhelpful, particularly with refugees.¹⁰ Renewing the residence was highly stressful but a necessary task which Zeinab had to do every six months. In the following quotation, Zeinab described how she went about this task and how the recitation of the Prophet Jonah's supplication was an important resource.

I usually take that day off from work. I wake up very early and take two public transportation buses. I make sure to get there (the office) at 6:30 am. You

10 I have been to this office numerous times over the years since 2001 and have witnessed these challenges.

have to make sure to be among the first people to get in when they open at 8:30. It is a sea of people there. In the winter, it is cold, and I have to stand outside for a while in the cold. The night before I prepare all the papers that I need. My older daughter helps me. The most important thing is I have to say my *du'ā'* while I am waiting, I repeat it over and over. I keep saying "Lā ilāha ilā ant subhānak inī kuntū min al-ẓālimīn." When I am at the window in front of the lady working on my paper, I say it quietly to myself over and over. I remember the fear that Nabi Younis (the Prophet Jonah) felt while he was inside the belly of the whale. I feel the same fear in front of this lady, praying that I get the residence. It calms me. It takes time to get the residence of course. And I have to go back several times.

Here, Zeinab recounts in detail the strategies she employed for the necessary goal of renewing residence: arranging to take the day off, getting to the office very early in the morning, etc. Her daughter's knowledge of Arabic was also a useful resource that Zeinab uses. But another important emotive resource was the Qur'an and specifically this particular supplication. She carefully chose to recite it, relating to the intense fear that the Prophet Jonah must have felt while in the belly of the whale, and at the same time tapping into what she believed to be his utter faith in God's support and protection.

Teemu Pauha in his study of Finnish Shia youth's relationship with the Qur'an, argued that it functions as a "symbolic resource" that "regulates the emotions" of his interlocutors (Pauha 2022, 210). The youth in Pauha's study also had favourite verses which they recited to provide them

with comfort and support. The Qur'anic supplications served a similar function for the interlocutors in this study. Additionally, the supplications in this study, while all generally acting as a source of comfort for the women, individually served specific and different purposes from one another. This perhaps was due to the women's knowledge of relevant Prophetic traditions that assigned spiritual significance to different verses. In particular, the women's lived realities were an important experiential knowledge that they brought back to their engagement with the Qur'an and in the process took on an active role in the shaping and the shifting of the meanings and significance of these supplications.

Reflective reading and the labour of interpretation

The scholar Sadiyya Shaikh studied South African women who suffered from domestic violence and who were seeking to make sense of the religious and cultural norms that sanctioned this violence (2007). Shaikh described these women's interpretative labour as *tafsir of praxis*. The women's lived realities functioned as the lens through which they critically engaged with and evaluated religious and cultural teachings. Some of Shaikh's interlocutors rejected spousal violence and the religious arguments that were used to justify it, while others acknowledged this injustice inflicted upon them but also invoked the norm of *ṣabr* (patience and forbearance) which is hailed in their local communities as a virtue for women. Some of my interlocutors in this study also undertook a *tafsir of praxis* in their reading of the Qur'an. It was a reading in which they assumed the role of exegete (*mufasssira*), not only interpreting the Qur'an but also making sense of experiences and issues in their lives through a dialectic process of meaning making involv-

ing both the text and their lived realities. I examine this mode of engagement with the Qur'an through the reading practices of Nadia and Selima.

Nadia, an Egyptian divorced woman, lived with and took care of her invalid mother. Nadia explains that her relationship with the Qur'an changed after the death of her teenage son in a car accident while they were living in the Gulf where she was working as a teacher. Her reading of the Qur'an before that life-changing experience, she pointed out, was formulaic and without contemplation.

My relationship with the Qur'an changed after the death of... [her son]. Before, I just prayed, fasted, but did not really read the Qur'an, I did not think about it. I pay more attention now to Allah in the Qur'an telling me "Why don't you reason? Why don't you reflect?" I question myself more. When I read *surat al-qiyamah* [75], it is like a real drama in front of me. It is so vivid. I really remember the truth of death. It is so powerful.

Here, Nadia explains how the experience of her son changed her mode of engagement with the Qur'an. Her reading of the text became motivated by the purpose of reflection and contemplation. She notes that the Qur'an itself urges one to read for that purpose. She recites the Qur'anic terms that urge believers to reason and reflect, using rhetorical questions such as "Don't you reason / *ala ta'qilūn?*" She said that she learned to listen, to see, to reflect. Nadia noted the Qur'an's reference to those who lose their way for they do not see or hear (Qur'an 7:179). Nadia's changed approach towards the Qur'an is similar to Johanna Christiansen's description of the text as having an educational role, aiming

to teach its audience using different discursive strategies (Christiansen 2019, 551). In her contemplative reading of chapter 75, for example, which depicts the day of reckoning after death, Nadia reported experiencing intense feelings and a greater sense of awareness. She likened the experience to watching a dramatic movie that is meant to awaken and teach her. At the same time, this new contemplative engagement with the Qur'an also enabled her to have a new perspective of the loss of her son and the new responsibility of caring for her mother. She was more at peace with it. In other words, her new engagement with the Qur'an was enabled by a certain spiritual growth and self-knowledge that she gained through her life trails. At the same time, it was also her new approach towards the Qur'an that made it possible for her to make sense of and cope with these life trails.

Selima, on the other hand, from her young days in her country of origin and later on in a refugee camp in Africa, had a relationship with the Qur'an and Islam in general that was motivated by a quest to question and understand why certain forms of gender-based injustice are justified by religious teachings. It was her uncle, a traditional religious scholar, who encouraged her to ask questions, notwithstanding his patriarchal views. After moving to Finland, and particularly when she got divorced from her domineering and abusive husband, Selima started reading the Qur'an with a critical eye, seeking answers. She explained this new engagement as follows:

I used to think of the Qur'an as this big thing I cannot talk about. It was mostly a relationship of fear. I had questions, doubts. ... I understand the Qur'an now in different way.

This different engagement with the Qur'an was enabled by Selima's becoming a community leader and advocate for families of immigrant background in her neighbourhood. She became more confident in rejecting patriarchal interpretations and reading the Qur'an in a different way. She started seeking exegetical knowledge from female scholars on YouTube. She rejected unequal gender norms such as polygyny by attributing it to the exegetical tradition and not the Qur'an itself. This, interestingly, was a different perspective and approach from that of Nadia, who saw herself as a human being incapable of understanding all of God's wisdom (*ḥikma*) and thus did not focus on the verses that can lend themselves to patriarchal interpretations.

Another noteworthy observation is Selima's intertwined spiritual engagement with the Qur'an and nature. She loved nature and took long walks on a daily basis. These walks gave her a sense of peace. Selima's spiritual experience of Qur'anic verses on nature became more heightened because of these walks. At the same time, her reflective reading of these verses also sharpened her experience of the walks. In other words, both the Qur'anic verses on nature and nature itself became sites where she felt the presence and power of God intensely. Her spiritual experience through nature was notably enabled by her living in Finland, where the practice and discourse of sacralization of nature has also been reported in other studies (Utraiainen and Pesonen 2012).

In short, both Nadia and Selima's contemplative reading of the Qur'an was a distinct type of practice in which they undertook the role of an exegete (*mufasssira*) in search of meaning and lessons to be learned. But the search for meaning and interpretation was not confined to the Qur'an; it is integrally connected to their lives and experiences.

Conclusion

I conclude with two main reflections. The first is about the interlocutors in this study. This research focused on selected Muslim women in two contexts as religious practitioners. Their religious practices, which focused on the Qur'an, can be read on one level as acts of piety. The women listened to, memorized, recited, and read the Qur'an because they believed it to be the word of God and to have spiritual significance. They learned as Muslims from their families, religious scholars, and Islamic texts such as hadith compilations that such practices are religiously significant. However, what the women did with the Qur'an, how they experienced it, and what they learned in the process could not be understood simply as acts of piety. The women's lived realities, their challenges, aspirations, and coping mechanisms were an integral part of how they became, acted, and evolved as religious practitioners. I contend these women engaged in dynamic and layered process of learning where they brought to the Qur'an their life experiences and what they learned from these experiences, their ethical questions and challenges, other forms of religious knowledge (for example the hadith), and other important norms and values in their lives. Examples of the latter included the right to safety and work as a refugee, egalitarian and fulfilling marriage, love of nature, the right to equal membership in a society where the women live as a minority, etc. The women's daily life with its different norms and experiences were resources that they drew on as they engaged with the Qur'an. Furthermore, through their practices with the Qur'an, the women not only learned about God, faith, death, but also reflected on their lives as mothers, wives, daughters, refugees, human beings aspiring to be strong, with self-knowledge, and became more accepting of and content with

their lives. What the women did with the Qur'an and what they learned are also differentiated by their varied life trajectories and unequal access to different resources such as knowledge, time, a supportive community, and their own personal aspirations and endeavours.

My second reflection has to do with the Qur'an. I underscore the multidimensionality and dynamism of the functions and meanings of the Qur'an in the lives of these women. The Qur'an, in both abstract and concrete terms was a source of authority for the women. However, it would be inaccurate to view it as a top-down single authority that dictated to them in a straightforward manner obligations and prohibitions. The Qur'an, rather, is authoritative because it is the word of God that the women continuously and dynamically needed to decipher and make sense of in the context of their lives with their ups and downs and their varied experiences. The Qur'an also functioned as emotive and spiritual resource which helped the women learn how to cope with challenges, how to build real and symbolic communities, and structure and punctuate their daily life in a way that is safe and meaningful. In this aspect, the women's practices with the Qur'an function, in a Foucauldian sense, as a mechanism, a technology of self that enables them to work on themselves cognitively, emotionally, and physically (Foucault 1988). These distinct functions and meanings of the Qur'an, notably, were actualized in specific practices. ■



Mulki Al-Sharmani is Associate Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Helsinki. She works on gender in Islamic jurisprudence

and modern Muslim family laws; Quranic ethics and feminist hermeneutics; Islamic feminism; Muslim marriage norms and practices in Muslim majority and minority contexts with focus on Egypt and Finland; modern Muslim diasporas and transnational families.

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