

Pre Modern and Critical Progressive Methodologies of Interpretation of the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*¹

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Abstract

In this article I will identify and discuss the interpretational assumptions of two contemporary interpretational approaches to the interpretation of the Qur'ān and *Sunna* that I refer to as pre-modern and critical progressive and explain their interpretational assumptions and implications. I will then discuss how these differences in interpretational mechanisms result in very different interpretations of Qur'ānic verses pertaining to husband's unilateral right to divorce.

Keywords: Salafi and Progressive, textual and contextual interpretation, discover and retrieve meaning, produce and create meaning

Introduction: Normative Sources of the Islamic Worldview and the Nature of Islamic Law

Muslims have always felt the need, and still do so today, to be 'guided' by God in their everyday lives including in the sphere of law. For the vast majority of Muslims the primary source of this guidance are the Islam's Holy Book, the Qur'ān and the Prophet's embodiment of its message, the *Sunna* however differently they may be conceptualised and interpreted. The Qur'ān as 'text' is a complex phenomenon and, for reasons we cannot discuss here, to understand and appreciate its structure, language and content requires a mastery in a number of different sciences. The Islamic tradition has recognised very early on that Qur'ānic content is often in need of commentary, elucidation and explanation. The Islamic tradition, basing itself on some verses in the Qur'ān, developed a doctrine of the religious obligation to follow the Prophet's

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Muhammad's embodiment of the Qur'ānic guidance, through whom the Revelation was revealed to humanity. This explanation and elucidation of the Qur'ānic message was termed *sunna*, a term which existed in pre-Islamic Arabia designating exemplary conduct of an influential individual worthy of tribe's emulation. According to this traditional Islamic doctrine Prophet Muhammad as the recipient of the Qur'ānic revelation is considered to be best 'qualified' or the most authoritative person to interpret, comment on and elucidate the Qur'ānic message in order to provide guidance for the believers. The concept of *sunna* and its meaning evolved over a period of some 150 year or so before it became more or less coterminous with the concept of ḥadīth. I will explain shortly what is meant by this.

In addition to the doctrine of *sunna* there are other concepts and principals which have a direct bearing upon the nature of Islamic law and its interpretation. I will discuss them later on in the article. At this stage I would like to just point out that in Sunni Islam, the most statistically representative branch of Islam in terms of Muslim numbers, the idea of the normative interpretational authoritativeness of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ*'s (generally understood to be the first three generations of righteous Muslims) interpretation/understanding of the Qur'ān and *sunna* arose according to which the temporal proximity of these generations of Muslims to the time of revelation and the Prophet Muhammad and their (perceived) immense contribution on Islam means that their (methods of) interpretation of the Qur'ān and *sunna*, if evaluated as being authentically originating from them, are to be privileged over those of later Muslims. In Shi'ism, the second most representative branch of Islam, this interpretational precedence was bestowed on the Prophet's grandsons and their progeny (known as imams or religious leaders of the Muslim community).

Now going back to the concept of *sunna* mentioned earlier it is important to bear in mind that to some Muslims the concept of *sunna* found its expression in the numerous oral reports later put down in writing, known as the ḥadīth, that have been collected over the period of the first two to three centuries of Islamic history which contain information transmitted through a chain of transmitters reportedly going back to the Prophet himself about what he said, did or tacitly approved of. In a similar fashion to Sunni ḥadīth there are Shi'i ḥadīth that report, again thought a chain of transmitters considered authentic, what the Prophet or the Imams might have said, done or tacitly approved of. Now because some relatively small sections of the Qur'ān contain matters of legal import and because Prophet Muhammad (and the Prophets' most notable

Companions and Imams) are reported to have adjudicated upon legal matters that have arisen during his twenty or so years of Prophethood, Muslims, over time, developed a body of knowledge which deals with the methodology of interpretation of the Qur'ān and *sunna* for the purposes of explicating laws for the benefit of guidance of the believers in their daily lives. In the early Muslim history this body of knowledge was known as *fiqh*, a word connoting human understanding of the evidence that could be found and deduced in the Qur'ān and *sunna* on a particular matter of legal import. Over time a number of Islamic schools of law and sophisticated legal theories were developed which interpreted the Qur'ān and the *Sunna*. From then on every new generation of Muslims approached the interpretation of the Qur'ān and *Sunna* in following ways: 1. By engaging them in the light of previously established legal theories rather than directly. This method is known as *taqlidi* method. It has given rise to this what is here termed scholastic traditionalism and is the most representative method among traditionally educated Muslim scholars; 2. By largely circumventing the *taqlidi* method and insisting on a methodology which engages the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* texts directly in addition to the (supposed interpretational) consensus of the early generations of Muslims. This method branches into two distinct approaches, namely the one which prioritises the Qur'ān and its reason based interpretation for purposes of law explication and has a relatively critical stance towards the authenticity of the majority of *ḥadīth* texts (we term this approach here modernist) and another one which prioritises *ḥadīth* based interpretation of Qur'ān and *Sunna* over that of reason and reason dependent interpretational principles and applies it to the realm of Islamic law. ; 3. By discarding the *ḥadīth* all together (but not necessarily the concept of *Sunna*) and base Islamic Law entirely on the Qur'ān. This is the least representative method. ; 4. By combining 1. and 2 in addition to interpreting the Qur'ān and *Sunna* in light of contemporary knowledge in humanities and social sciences. We refer to this approach as critical-progressive. Although today this is a minority approach today I have firm reasons to believe that it is a growing one nonetheless. It is also important to note that the first three approaches, *in terms of their sources of and the manner of authenticating of knowledge*, are entirely pre-modern and are governed by pre-modern traditional sciences developed by Muslim scholars.

Now, having said this it is essential to understand (and keep in mind) that the idea of *fiqh* or Islamic law is an entirely interpretative endeavour. By this I mean that every understanding of Islamic Law is a result of human interpretation of the Qur'ān and the *Sunna*. These interpretations are based

upon certain interpretational assumptions. What I would like to discuss next are the methodologies of interpretation, their interpretational assumptions and implications as evident in critical-progressive and traditional approaches to interpretation of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*.

Analysis of the Differences in Methodologies of Interpretation

The differences in methodologies of interpretation relate to many factors and are based on certain interpretational assumptions. Here we can address only the most important ones at a general level. We will compare the differences between the pre-modern and critical-progressive approaches and their interpretational implications as they relate to: i) View of the function and the nature of language in Qur'ānic text and the nature of revelation itself; ii) the process of how meaning is determined; iii) the extent to which texts are contextualised and the relationship between text and context; iv) the extent to which texts are interpreted as one unified, coherent whole ; v) the role of reason in interpretation of Qur'ān and ḥadīth texts; vi) the extent to which texts are interpreted to embody certain values and principles as the main objectives of their message vii) the extent to which the concepts of *sunna* and ḥadīth are considered to be independent of each other.

a. View of the Function and the Nature of Language in Qur'ānic and Ḥadīth Texts and the Nature of Revelation

The pre-modern approaches to interpretation of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth texts are heavily philologically oriented. That is to mean that their interpretation is largely restricted to observable features of language. In other words according to this methodology one arrives at meaning of a text through an exercise of simple retrieval of meaning which is accessible by following the rules of Arabic grammar, syntax and morphology. Additionally, the Qur'ānic language as the *verbatim* Word of God is conceptualised as being entirely different from that of human language. It is considered to be operating outside history and that it is not in its entirety subject to rational human methods of analysis. Finally, the nature of Revelation according to the pre-modern approaches to interpretation is such that it is completely divorced from the mind or the psychological make-up of the Prophet and entirely unaffected by it.

There are two main interpretational implications of these interpretational assumptions. Firstly, they contribute to the idea of fixity of meaning of the texts and secondly they marginalise the historical dimension of texts and their meanings i.e. their quality of contextuality.

Critical-progressive approaches argue that for the purposes of its interpretation the Qur'anic text is, despite its Divine origins and status, basically a text specific to a time, place and culture. This approach is also premised upon the idea that Qur'anic language is also socio-culturally produced, i.e. it is an outcome of human convention and not of Divine designation. Furthermore, the meaning of God's speech is considered *by necessity* to operate within the framework of human rational methods of analysis. Thus the nature of Qur'anic text as God speech is such that for all interpretational purposes it is to be considered as entirely human. The concept of the nature of revelation, moreover, is predicated on the idea that Revelation is closely intertwined with the mind and the psychological make-up of its direct recipient, Prophet Muhammad.

The interpretational implications of these assumptions would include the idea that the sacred texts have a historical dimension, that the content and meaning of the sacred texts is historically conditioned and affected by socio-cultural context in which they were revealed and that in order to interpret them correctly one needs to pay close attention to this. I will have more to say on this later.

b. The Process of How Meaning is Determined

When one interprets a piece of text one can form the view that the reader's understanding of the meaning of that text is primarily determined either by the author of the text (and her intention), the text itself or by that of the reader. Furthermore, the reader can believe that she is either in position to *in principle* discover by the author *intended, objective* meaning of the text or not to discover it but only to be able to continually better approximate this intended meaning. The pre modern approaches largely consider that *in principle* they can discover the objective meaning of the text and that its meaning is primarily determined by the author which the reader can simply and objectively retrieve.

The interpretational implications of these assumptions is that the role of the reader in determining or influencing meaning is minimal further contributing to the idea of fixity of meaning of text. The belief in the objective existence of meaning in the mind of the author which is readily accessible again in an objective fashion to that of the reader also contributes to the idea of fixity of meaning of the text and the idea that there exists only one correct interpretation of a piece of text.

The critical progressive approach, in the light of modern theories on interpretation, maintains that meaning is not simply recovered and that the reader is *in principle* not in a position to discover the intended meaning of the author in an objective fashion. Instead they emphasise that role of the reader, her socio-cultural background, education, sense of morality etc., in helping *produce* or *create* meaning and believe that the reader can only ever better approximate the intended meaning of the author but never completely and objectively capture it.

One interpretational implication of this assumption is that although a text can be fixed in terms of its wording it can sustain a large number of interpretations which are only ever going to be its approximations. This also means that there can be a number of valid interpretations of texts and that meaning is not objectively fixed in the mind of the author and in this form accessible to the reader. However, critical –progressive approach does not accept the idea that each and every meaning is equally legitimate. To do so they talk about the concept of ‘communities of interpretation’ that is, a group of readers who share similar interpretive principles such as similar educational backgrounds, sense of morality and basic values. These communities of interpretation impose some reading uniformity in what is otherwise considered to be an inherently divergent process of meaning derivation, thus curbing and narrowing down alternative unreasonable readings.

c. The extent to which texts are contextualised and the relationship between text and context

I have already outlined earlier that the pre-modern philologically oriented approach to interpretation and its view of the nature of Qur’ānic language and revelation significantly marginalises its historical dimension. By doing so pre modern approaches do not fully evaluate the contextual dimension of the texts for the purpose of their interpretation. In other words they do not readily recognise that the historical context in which the texts were revealed significantly shaped the nature of their injunctions, including the legal. Although pre-modern approaches did recognise elements of historical character of the revealed texts they did not translate them into concrete interpretational models which would utilise them to a full extent.

The interpretational implications of this interpretational aspect of the pre-modern embedded approaches are three-fold. Firstly, it is not capable of distinguishing, in a systematic manner, between the non contextually (or universal) and contextually contingent elements of the texts. Secondly, this

approach considers what the critical progressive approach would view as the historically contingent dimension of Revelation as part of its universal dimension.

Critical progressive approach is premised on the idea that the historical context in which the texts were revealed significantly influenced their content, including the injunctions having legal import. It considers that the cultural and societal norms, laws, customs, manners, institutions and values prevalent at the time of revelation were absorbed by the texts and that these texts initially operated within these premises. The critical-progressive approach therefore strongly emphasises the role of historical context in the formulation of the revelatory content and the nature of its legal injunctions and employ this in their interpretation of the texts.

d. The extent to which texts are interpreted thematically or as a one unified, coherent whole

It is well known that the Qur'an was revealed over a period of over two decades. As mentioned above the process of collecting ḥadīth texts took several centuries and the process of authentication is still ongoing. Both the Qur'an and the ḥadīth were primarily conceived as oral rather than written discourses. The traditional division of the Qur'an into a particular sequence of *surahs* (Qur'anic chapters) was neither chronologically nor thematically ordered. The *nature* of the Qur'anic discourse, however, was such that the concepts, ideas and the moral and ethical lessons internal to the Qur'an were dispersed throughout the Scripture and are often repeated. This nature of the Qur'anic discourse has been traced to the specific linguistic-cultural characteristics/requirements of its first recipients to ensure Qur'an's comprehensibility and optimize in what in essence was/is the ethico-religious and didactic nature of its message. The premodern Qur'anic interpretation mainly adopted a *lemma plus comment* exegesis, that is, a word for word, verse-by-verse, *surah* by *surah*, linear, segmental analysis of the Qur'anic text.

This interpretational technique has certain interpretational implications. Firstly, it is unable to interpretationally take into account the Qur'an's thematic coherence and underlying unity of the revelatory message and thus is not conducive to the development of a (more) holistic approach to Qur'anic interpretation. Secondly, it is not capable to capture the very gist or spirit of Revelation to which one arrives on the basis of a thematico-holistic interpretation of the Qur'an.

Critical progressive Muslims approach recognises the internal inter-connectivity of Qur'ānic concepts for a systematic, thematico-holistic and corroborative inductive approach to interpretation of Qur'ānic content based on not only the insights stemming from the traditional Islamic scholarship referred to as *al-munasaba* (i. e conceptual and textual chaining in the Qur'ān) and *istiqra'* (corroborative induction) but also on that of modern textual linguistics that enable the reader to discover Qur'ān's textual coherence, sequentiality and progression. This approach is based on the premise that a proper understanding of a Qur'ānic concept is gained only if all the relevant texts dealing with that concept are analysed and subsequently synthesised into a larger framework of its interpretation by means of a corroborative induction. According to this view the text is conceived as being web-like within which ideas are interlaced and the task of reading is to uncover "the comprehensive constant" as the ultimate aim or the objective of the reading /interpreting process.

e. The role of reason in interpretation of Qur'ān and ḥadīth texts

The pre-modern approaches heavily restrict the role of reason in interpretation of texts. They allow it to function primarily in its analogical or derivative form. By this we mean that all interpretation must be interpretationally linked to a textual source of evidence and should there be no *direct* textual evidence available every effort is made to employ what is considered to be a related textual source of evidence with the similar underlying principle and apply it to the new case rather than just relying on pure reason. Similarly, pre-modern approaches are largely based on the assumption that in order to know what is ethically right, humans must always rely only on revelation and revelation derived sources and can *never* know what is ethically right by independent reason. Therefore, according to this view the Divine Will, as embodied in the normative texts, was considered by the majority of pre modern legal philosophers as the only determinant in the realm of law and no concept of human reason as being author of ultimate source of law or ethics was developed.

These interpretational assumptions also have important interpretational implications. Firstly, they infuse the Revelation with a comprehensive legalistic *ethos* and marginalises of some of its other dimensions such as those which could be broadly termed ethico-religious in nature. Secondly, and closely related to the first, these interpretational assumptions also imply a *legalistic* expression of the Will of God which can only be known from commands and prohibitions. This means that certain Qur'ānic injunctions that could be seen as

merely ethical or didactic are refashioned into positive legal injunctions and are incorporated into positive Islamic Law.

Critical -progressive approaches, on the other hand, emphasise the importance of reason in interpretation and consider both Qur'an and *Sunna* to be constitutive of reason. They believe that reason can independently make value judgements about what is ethically right or wrong and that the function of revelation in that regard is to merely to 'remind' humanity of their ethical obligations. This approach also rejects the legalistic expression of the Divine Will and considers that the main Message of Revelation is ethico-religious in nature, that the legal aspects of revelation are peripheral to it and are subject to change as society changes. In other words, this approach gives precedence to reason- based religious ethics over positive law. It insists that law must be in constant service of reason based religious ethics and that law ought to evolve with evolving ideas about ethics as developed by humanity. This view also considers that in the post-revelatory period this evolution of ethics is exclusively driven by reason/intellect. This reason based religious ethics is, however, firmly anchored in the Qur'anic religious cosmology.

f. The extent to which texts are interpreted to embody certain values and principles as the main objectives of their message

All of the above discussed interpretational assumptions of the pre-modern approaches have contributed to a conceptualisation of the nature of Qur'an-*Sunna* that their teachings and message were neither seen as *essentially* and *principally* aiming to interpretationally give precedence to certain ethico-religious values such as justice or equality nor as the embodiment of certain underlying objectives in form of some ethico-religious principles such as the idea of texts facilitating public welfare or what is commonly known to be good. Instead, like any other non textual source the interpretational force was heavily limited in these pre-modern approaches.

All of the principles of the critical-progressive approaches elaborated upon above, are based upon a broader interpretational assumption that the actual nature and character of the texts seek to realise and reach an underlying objective in form of certain ethico-religious values and principles such as the idea of justice and equality as understood today in this era of human rights or the facilitation of public welfare which considered as fundamental principles of the Message of the Qur'an and *Sunna*.

g. The extent to which the concepts of *sunna* and ḥadīth are considered to be independent of each other

Pre-modern approaches concept of *sunna* is based on the assumption that the early ḥadīth sciences which were developed by Muslim scholars are completely adequate to authenticate ḥadīth and thus incorporate them into *sunna*. This concept of *Sunna* is based upon a number of assumptions two of which are particularly significant. Firstly, it assumes that the scope of *Sunna* is epistemologically dependent upon and constrained by ḥadīth, i.e. that it's epistemological value is the same as that of each "authentic" ḥadīth and that the existent 'authentic' ḥadīth body of literature is the sole depository of *Sunna* and it only vehicle of perpetuation. Secondly, it assumes that *Sunna* is methodologically dependent upon ḥadīth. By methodologically dependent on ḥadīth it is meant that the *Sunna* compliance (or otherwise) of certain (legal, ethical or theological) practices or principles, is and can only be determined by sifting through numerous narratives reportedly going back to Prophet Muhammad via an authentic chain of narrators (*isnad*). The interpretational implication of this is that if a ḥadīth is found to be authentic according to traditional Muslim sciences the value of *Sunna* and is to be considered part of Islamic law.

Critical progressive approaches, in line with how the concept of *Sunna* was conceptualised in early Islam, do not conflate *Sunna* and ḥadīth. Instead, in addition to applying pre-modern ḥadīth sciences, they have developed or draw upon several additional methodological mechanisms which are employed to distinguish between *Sunna* and ḥadīth which need not concern us here.

Now let us examine how these interpretational differences result in very different interpretations of Qur'ānic verses pertaining to the issue of divorce.

The Interpretational Assumptions and the Case of Men's Unilateral Divorce

A good example where interpretational assumptions governing the pre-modern and critical progressive approaches bring about very different interpretations of the Qur'ān and *Sunna* are in the context of divorce. Namely, the pre-modern understanding of Islamic law grants men a unilateral right to divorce without there being any need to justify such an act by a juridical process or by means of other forms of arbitration. Women, on the other hand, are only permitted to seek divorce through a juridical process and on very strict grounds which vary from one pre-modern school of thought to another.

If we examine the Qur'ānic verses in matters pertaining to divorce and marriage we discover that indeed these are exclusively directed at men. For

example, Qur'an (65: 1-2)³ instructs the Prophet that if the *men* divorce (ṭallaqtumū) their women they should allow women to reside in their marital home during their *'idda* (waiting period) and then instructs *men* to keep or stay with their *wives* in dignity or you divorce them in kindness and dignity.

Qur'an (2:230)⁴ stipulates that if a *man* divorces (ṭallaqahā) a woman irrevocably, a man cannot remarry her until she is married to another. Again, in 33:49⁵ the *male* believers are told that if they married believing women and then divorced them (*thumma ṭallaqtumūhunna*) before touching them, they do not need to count the *'idda*. Similarly, in 2:236-237 *men* are, in case of divorcing (ṭallaqtumū) women before consummating marriage, told to bestow gifts upon them.

The pre-modern interpretational mechanisms which are responsible for granting husbands the right to unilateral divorce include the philologically oriented interpretation of individual Qur'anic verses, the lack of contextualization (for reasons outlined below) and a failure to develop an ethico-religious principles oriented Qur'an –*Sunna* interpretational method which would do justice to the spirit and the overall intention of the Qur'an-*Sunnah* teachings as they pertain to the relationship between husbands and wives.

Critical-progressive approach would interpret these verses by resorting to contextualization by pointing out that all of the above Qur'anic verses *pre-suppose* the existence of a social and cultural order which confers the right to entering into marriage [contract], divorce, even possession of women (as in case of slavery and concubinage) solely to men, the reality of which is assumed and acknowledged by the Qur'an. However, they would argue that this does this

³ Prophet, when any of you intend to divorce women, do so at a time when their prescribed waiting period can properly start, and calculate the period carefully: be mindful of God, your Lord. Do not drive them out of their homes—nor should they themselves leave—unless they commit a flagrant indecency. These are the limits set by God—whoever oversteps God's limits wrongs his own soul—for you cannot know what new situation God may perhaps bring about. 2 When they have completed their appointed term, either keep them honourably, or part with them honourably. Abdel Hallem's translation is used in this article. Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A Modern Translation* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2004), 378.

⁴ If a husband re-divorces his wife after the second divorce, she will not be lawful for him until she has taken another husband; if that one divorces her, there will be no blame if she and the first husband return to one another, provided they feel that they can keep within the bounds set by God. These are God's bounds, which He makes clear for those who know. Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 26.

⁵ Believers, you have no right to expect a waiting period when you marry believing women and then divorce them before you have touched them: make provision for them and release them in an honourable way. Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 270.

necessarily mean that Qur'ān endorses these powers to men as a matter of course. They would argue instead that if we examine carefully the above stated verses pertaining to divorce or marriage matters in general, we would find that they all were performing the function of protecting women from the power of men which they already possessed by the virtue of the customs and practices of the society in which Islam was revealed. Some critical progressive interpretation argue, again by taking recourse to contextualization, that based on the semantical and historical analyses of this verse it would be safe to assert that all the Qur'ānic injunction's pertaining to issue of marriage and divorce had the primary aim of limiting the rights of men that existed in the patriarchal and tribal-based social, economic, cultural and political reality of the Qur'ānic revelational milieu, rather than stipulating absolute and non-changing laws and regulations. Additionally, by adopting a thematic approach to the interpretation of the Qur'ān and including Qur'ānic verses such as 65:6, 4: 35, 2:229 into the overall interpretational framework critical progressives would forms the view that the Qur'ān injunctions in matters relation to marriage and divorce in actual fact had a mitigating effect of Qur'ānic injunctions. The same mitigating effect applies to the concept of *sunna* as based on a more thematic approach to ḥadīth evidence. They would argue that the Prophet's teachings are not correctly indicated by reified content of Islamic Law but rather by the direction of his reforms as indicated by the mitigating effect of the Qur'ānic injunctions which had certain underlying moral trajectories (ethic-religious principles and objectives based approach to interpretation) and which as the starting point envisaged and incremental increase in the power of women in matters pertaining to marriage and divorce paving the way towards complete equality in the legal sphere. Thus they would argue that the Qur'ān merely mirrored rather than endorsed patriarchal practices such as unilateral right of husbands to divorce their wives prevalent in its milieu. Critical progressive approaches would also go a step further and maintain that on the basis that if this Qur'ān mitigatory effect was recognised as a an legitimate interpretational mechanisms tool on the basis of which a moral trajectory could be extrapolated this would contribute towards the development of an ethico-religious values and purposive based Qur'ānic hermeneutic whose overriding interpretational principles would be Qur'ānic values such as justice and equality. The gender discriminatory legal injunctions mentioned in the Qur'ān as such ought not to be considered to actually be Qur'ānic. The only purely or solely Qur'ānic values would be those that have been *initiated* by the Qur'ān. They would also assert that the patriarchal constraints within which the Qur'ān initially operated was

conditioned by the mentality of its immediate addressees so that they would 'get' or comprehend its ultimate message which is theological and moral in nature. Critical progressive approach considers that by endorsing the gender discriminatory practices embodied by the pre-modern understanding of Shariah law, such as that of husband's unilateral right to divorce, would imply the elevation of an historically contingent aspect of the Qur'an to that of divine status at the expense of the divine and perennial Qur'anic values such as justice which in turn would violate the actual Word of God. On the other hand critical progressive approach would insist that all the legal injunctions in the Qur'an are to be interpreted so that they are in accordance with the interpretationally most powerful *Qur'anic* values of justice, mercy and equality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the different interpretational assumptions give rise to different interpretational methodologies or approaches through which the Qur'an and *Sunna* are interpreted. In this article I have identified several interpretational assumptions governing what we have termed the pre-modern and critical-progressive interpretational approaches. I have established that the pre-modern approaches delineated by following interpretational assumptions : a strong philological interpretational orientation; a view of a meta-historical nature of Qur'anic text; a concept of revelation which insists on mechanically separating it from that of the mind of the Prophet; marginalisation of the importance of context in understanding the structure, language and content of Qur'anic revelation; the belief and commitment to an author focused derivation of meaning which is objectively accessible to the reader by a simple act of retrieval; a lack of a holistic and thematic approach to Qur'anic and ḥadīth texts; significant narrowing down of the legitimacy of the employment of reason in interpretation of texts, a reason whose function was restricted strictly to its analogical dimension and as a direct result of this a formulation of religious ethics which is entirely textually based; an interpretational methodology which does *not* conceptualise Qur'an and *Sunna* in such a way that their teachings are in principal understood to be facilitating certain principles or ethico-religious values that might not be explicitly found in the texts'; and lastly, an interpretational methodology which conceptually conflates the concepts of *Sunna* and authentic ḥadīth as largely defined by early Muslim ḥadīth scholarship. Furthermore, we have seen that these interpretational assumptions have significant interpretational implications when applied to the question of the role and status of women in Islam as exemplified in the case of

husband's unilateral prerogative for divorce. The pre-modern interpretational methodology upholds in principal the legitimacy of husbands to divorce their wives unilaterally without any juridical process and incorporates them into Islamic law.

Critical progressive approaches are founded on very different interpretational presuppositions. In relation to the nature of Qur'ānic language they view it as any other piece of text that is culturally produced without denying its Divine origin and status. The concept of Qur'ānic revelation is seen as being intimately linked to that of the mind of the prophet and its psychological make-up. With respect to derivation of meaning critical progressive approaches emphasise the role of the reader who is considered to actually help *produce* meaning. These approaches also emphasise the inherent subjectivity of the process of meaning derivation and endorse the idea of communities of interpretation which help narrow down reasonable interpretations of texts. Moreover, critical progressive Muslim approaches highlight the historical embeddedness of much of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth texts. They also insist on approaching the texts as one holistic, coherent whole and treat their interpretation in a thoroughly thematic manner based on the principle of inductive corroboration of textual evidence. Furthermore, critical progressive approaches consider that the Qur'ān and *Sunna* are constitutive of and interpretationally facilitative reason whose function in the process is not limited to its analogical dimension. Thus, according to this approach human are capable of making value judgments regarding what is ethically right or wrong, including in the sphere of law, independent of Qur'ān and ḥadīth texts. In addition, critical progressive approaches consider that the Qur'ān and *Sunna* teachings facilitate and embody certain ethico-religious values, principles and objectives as their interpretationally most powerful interpretational tools. Also, these approaches have developed a ḥadīth independant concept of *sunna*. Based on all of these interpretational assumptions the proponents of critical progressive approaches do not consider husbands' unilateral right to divorce as part of the universalist teachings of the Qur'ān and the *Sunna*.

Scholars of Islam argue that the future of Islam as far as Muslims go, for the next few generations will be defined by the two broadly defined approaches or schools we termed here pre-modern and critical progressive and that the question of interpretation of the Muslim sacred texts will play an increasingly important part in terms of which one of these will set root among the contemporary and future generations of Muslims.

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