Contemporary Muslim Intellectuals Who Publish *Tafsīr* Works in English: The Authority of Interpreters of the Qur’ān

Reiko OKAWA
An increasing amount of tafsīr literature has been published during the past few decades in Muslim minority countries such as the United States and South Africa. This paper focuses on some of the interpretations of the Qur’ān that are written in English by contemporary authors of Muslim minority origin. These authors include Amina Wadud, a female African-American convert who wrote Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective; Farid Esack, a male South African who studied in Pakistan and wrote Qur’ān, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression; and Bilal Philips, a male convert to Islam who is Canadian with Jamaican origins, has written commentaries on some chapters of the Qur’ān, mainly based in Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

This survey focuses on how these writers consider the authority of the mufassir, someone who interprets the scripture, in the framework of history of tafsīr from the classical period onward. This study will begin by discussing the traditional theory of the authority of the mufassir in the field of ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān, in both Arabic and English. It will go on to investigate the attitudes of these three mufassirs regarding the authority of the status of a mufassir, by examining issues of “identity” and “authority.” I will also focus on the three authors’ interpretations of Q.49:13, which concerns taqwā and pluralism. Based on the discussion of the issues of identity and authority, the view will also consider the transformation of the mufassir in Muslim society in this era of globalization, focusing on their common use of ra’y, or personal opinion, in their tafsīr works, although the ‘ulamā’ have traditionally rejected this as a method of interpreting the Qur’ān.

Keywords: Qur’ān, tafsīr, interpretation, Amina Wadud, Farid Esack

I. Introduction

During the past few decades, an increasing amount of tafsīr literature has been published, not only in Muslim majority countries such as in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, but also in Muslim minority countries such as the United States and South Africa. This is a major change in the history of tafsīr, or the Muslim interpretation of the Qur’ān. An interesting feature of this new trend is the fact that many of the interpretations are written in English, published in Muslim minority countries, and read by Muslims living across the world. This paper focuses on some of those interpretations of the Qur’ān that are written in English by contemporary Muslim authors.

*Associate Professor, Meiji Gakuin University

1 Taji-Farouki (2005) provides the most comprehensive survey on this issue.
These authors include Amina Wadud, a female African-American convert who wrote *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (1999); Farid Esack, a male South African who studied in Pakistan and wrote *Qur’ān, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (1997); and Bilal Philips, a male convert to Islam who is Canadian with Jamaican origins, and has been based in Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and written commentaries on some chapters of the Qur’ān. All of these works are widely read and are having an impact, whether favorable or otherwise, on Muslims even outside the authors’ own countries. All of these authors are from the marginal areas when the Middle East is seen as the center of Islam. This has led them to create unique new interpretations of the scripture.

This paper surveys the views of these contemporary English-based interpreters on the authority of a *mufassir* (someone who interprets scripture) in the framework of the history of *tafsīr* (the interpretation of scripture) from the classical period onward. Their views on the “authority of a *mufassir*” will also be linked to their self-recognition as *mufassir*, a part of their own identity. As Hammer suggests (Hammer 2008), these two concepts of “authority” and “identity” are essential in understanding the trend of contemporary interpretation of the Qur’ān in English. Looking at both how these authors define themselves as qualified *mufassir*, and how they evaluate other *mufassirs’* works, can help us to analyze how these authors conceptualize the authority of *mufassir*, or judge who can be a *mufassir*. As Esack insists, Muslims are confronted with urgent questions such as “What is an ‘authentic’ appreciation of the qur’anic message today?”, “What makes and shapes ‘authenticity’?”, and “How legitimate is it to produce meaning, rather than extracting meaning, from qur’anic texts?” (Esack 1997, 13). These questions both ask how scripture should be interpreted and by whom: when new scholars introduce doubts about methods of interpreting scripture, this in turn leads to doubt about the interpretations that the traditional *mufassirs* among the ‘*ulamā’* — the group of Muslim religious intellectuals whose method of education and judgments based on this education are recognized by the society — have provided.

Views on the authority of *mufassir* have been changing drastically since the modern period began. In general, *mufassirs* were among the most respected of the ‘*ulamā’* while *fuqahā’* (jurists) were respected because of their relationship with a power. This implies that only prestigious scholars, whose scholarship was clearly recognized by their societal contemporaries, were allowed to interpret the Qur’ān. Generally speaking, the interpreter of the Qur’ān has been required first to pursue various religious disciplines. The role of *mufassir* has been discussed in the field of the traditional Qur’ānic sciences, ‘*Ulūm al-Qur’ān*.

---

2 See Philips 2005a; Philips 2006; Philips 2007; and Philips 2008.
3 Research on these interpretations has mainly focused on the contents, although Hammer discusses “identity” or views on “authority,” comparing Wadud and other female Muslim interpreters of the Qur’ān (Hammer 2008). Regarding the studies discussing contemporary interpreters mentioned in this paper, see the following: Barlas 2004; Chaudhry 2006; Saeed 2008; Gade 2010; Campanini 2011; and Hammer 2012. These studies are useful for briefly looking at these interpreters’ ideas and positions; they also show that Wadud and Esack are among the most important and striking interpreters of the present day, introducing the “hermeneutics of liberation” in the realm of *tafsīr*.
4 The term ‘*ulamā’* is the plural form of ‘*ālim*, but is usually used to imply both “an intellectual man” and “intellectual people.” In this paper, I have used the term “*ʻulamā’s*” to refer to “intellectual men.”
However, since the modern period began, many lay Muslims, who cannot be described as ‘ulamā’, have begun to write their tafsīrs; not only do they refuse to follow, but they also criticize the tradition of the ‘ulamā’ tafsīr. When the modern period began, traditional Muslim society, from Africa to Asia, came under the influence of the west, with no one immune to it. Since tafsīr is the most important of the traditional religious disciplines in Islam, it has been impacted vastly by the changes in society, and has become a focal point for Muslim scholars, who have been trying to establish and verify a new theory defending Islam against Western criticism and advocate its value. Muḥammad ʻAbduh, a prominent Egyptian reformist ‘ulamā’ of the eighteenth century and the author of a very well-known tafsīr, Manār al-Tafsīr, was the first person to publish a different sort of interpretation from the prevailing scholarly style. He inspired many other interpretations of the Qur’ān globally, written by both Arabic and non-Arabic speaking Muslims. As Roded points out, after works like Maḥmūd ‘Abbās al-‘Aqqād’s al-Mar’a fi’l-Qur’ān (Woman in the Qur’ān) (‘Aqqād 1976?), “Muslim writers who did not have formal, systematic religious training” or “Muslim lay thinkers” began to interpret the scripture themselves (Roded 2006, 537).

Moreover, Western or Muslim minority societies have begun to see the increasing Muslim influence in their own areas, especially in recent decades due to the globalization of information and the fact people are much more mobile. The number of immigrant Muslims has been increasing, and many people have converted to Islam in non-Muslim majority countries, such as the US and European counties. Converts such as Wadud and Philips have published plenty of books and articles and made statements on various kinds of themes concerning Islam in English. Meanwhile, there also many Muslims, such as Esack, who were born and grew up as minority Muslims, and who have published influential books in English or other European languages.

Those interpreters born in Muslim minority countries tend to choose methods of scriptural interpretation which are different from the traditional techniques used in Arabic and (or) Muslim majority countries. These minority interpreters are attempting in their interpretations of the Qur’ān to establish a new understanding of Islam based on their own environments. Their distance from the traditional tafsīr varies considerably, both in terms of interpretative style and technique and the resulting interpretation, depending on their stances as mufassirs. However, they have two major things in common: Arabic is not their mother tongue, and they lack the special training they would have needed to become traditional ‘ulamā’ in a very traditional way.

Thus, this study surveys the traditional theory of the authority of mufassir in the field of ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān, in both Arabic and English (Chapter II). Based on these accounts, I will examine the issues of identity and authority regarding Muslim recognition of mufassir, through three distinctive mufassirs (Chapter III-V). The section on identity will focus on the interpreters’ self-recognition as mufassirs, examining their views concerning what qualifies people to be

5 See for example, Taj-Farouki 2004, 12-21. The same tendency also can be seen in the field of dāʾī, or where a preacher issues a summons; for example, concerning the phenomenon of lay preachers becoming influential in Egypt, see Yagi 2011.
7 Tafsīr works written by immigrants to the US include, for example, Barlas 2002 and Barazanghi 2004, which are discussed in Hammer 2008 and Hammer 2012.
mufassirs. Regarding the section of authority, I will analyze what kind of references, or sources, these authors use in interpreting the Qur’an. This will help us to investigate the influences on these authors and their relationships to previous interpreters. In addition, the three mufassirs’ interpretations of Q.49:13, concerning taqwā and pluralism, which they all consider, will be also looked at. Based on this discussion of these issues of identity and authority, I will consider the transformation of the mufassir in Muslim society during this era of modernization and globalization.

II. The Qualifications of a Mufassir in the Field of ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān

1. Literature in the Classical Period

Texts related to ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān, the Sciences of the Qur’ān, which is a traditional academic field focusing on some subjects related to the Qur’ān, have often included a chapter discussing the qualifications for being a mufassir. Examining these descriptions chronologically will shed light on Muslims’ views regarding the authority of mufassirs. There is no doubt that the two most important works of this genre in the premodern period are al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān (Proof in the Sciences of the Qur’ān) by Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (n.d.) who died in 1392 (C.E.) and al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān (Mastery in the Sciences of the Qur’ān) by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (1991) who died in 1505. Al-Zarkashī does not devote a specific chapter to this topic, but al-Suyūṭī does, and quotes al-Zarkashī’s work several times in the process.

In the chapter “On the qualifications and morals of a mufassir (fī ma’rifat shurūṭ al-mufassir wa-ādābihi),” al-Suyūṭī discusses this topic from various aspects, quoting many sayings of previous authoritative ‘ulamā’, including al-Shāfi’ī (d.820), al-Zamakhsharī (d.1144), and al-Zarkashī (Suyūṭī 1991, Vol. 2, 387-409). According to his writing, a mufassir must be superior in terms of both ethics and scholarship; a mufassir should have good beliefs and intentions as well as profound knowledge. Along with stating the importance of having knowledge of the Hadīth and ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān, al-Suyūṭī puts a great premium on the importance of having deep, adequate and authentic knowledge in the Arabic language, including philology, syntax conjugation, figures of speech, and so on.

2. Literature in the Modern Period

In recent times, two prominent Arabic scholars have discussed this topic on the prerequisite qualifications for being a mufassir: Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Aẓīm al-Zarqānī in his Manāhil al-‘Irūfān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān (Springs in the Sciences of the Qur’ān) (1998), and Mannā’ al-Qaṭṭān in his Mabāhith fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān (Researches in the Sciences of the Qur’ān) (1998). While al-Zarqānī does not devote a specific chapter to this issue, he does consider it under the title “the fields which a mufassir needs” (al-‘ulūm allatī yaḥtāju-hā al-mufassir) (Zarqānī 1998, 61-62). This is discussed in the midst of the question of whether or not al-tafsīr bi’l-ra’y, or the interpretation of the Qur’ān using the interpreter’s own opinion instead of depending on Hadīth, is permitted. al-Zarqānī concludes that al-tafsīr bi’l-ra’y is not permitted (Zarqānī 1998, 59-69). From this context, we can deduce that he raises this issue of a mufassir’s necessary qualifications in order to criticize the practice of al-tafsīr bi’l-ra’y. According to him, the higher level of tafsīr must meet the conditions (shurūṭ) of various traditional subjects, including philology, syntax,
etymology, rhetoric, ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān, and so on. He regards the meaning of the Qur’ān that ordinary Arabic-speaking people are able to understand as the lower-level tafsīr. However, he emphasizes the importance of the knowledge of classical and authentic Arabic to be a high-level mufassir creating a high-level tafsīr. This implies that a mufassir must be from among the ‘ulamā’.

In contrast to al-Zarqānī, al-Qaṭṭān creates a specific chapter called “the qualifications and morals of mufassir (shurūṭ al-mufassir wa-ādābihi).” He lists some points, adding some explanations concerning the necessary qualifications and morals. According to him, the following are the qualifications required: (1) righteousness of belief; (2) dependence from a specific school sect; (3) starting an interpretation of the Qur’ān from the Qur’ān itself; (4) if more information is needed, looking at the Sunna to interpret the Qur’ān; (5) if even more information is needed, observing the sayings of the al-Šaḥāba, the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad; (6) if yet more information is required, observing the sayings of al-Tābi‘īn, those who were born after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad but were contemporaries of al-Šaḥāba; (7) knowledge concerning the Arabic language and related subjects; (8) knowledge concerning the principle of fields related to the Qur’ān; and (9) accuracy of understanding (Qaṭṭān 1998, 329-331). After these points, al-Qaṭṭān lists eleven requirements for a mufassir in terms of morals such as goodness of intentions and the healthiness of aims, goodness of character, humility, and so on (Qaṭṭān 1998, 331-332).

Some contemporary Muslim scholars have published books inheriting the tradition of ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān not only in Arabic, but also in English. Some of these works include a chapter related to the qualifications needed for being a mufassir: here we see the works of authors such as ‘Abd al-Rahmān I. Doi (1998), Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips (1997) and Abu Ammar Yasir Qadhi (also known as Yasir Kazi8) (1999). Their descriptions follow the same route as the Arabic works by the ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān. In particular, these works all focus on typical topics from this field, such as the revelation of the Qur’ān, the collection of the Qur’ān, the comparison between the Maccan and Medinan revelations, and tafsīr.

Doi puts a section of the “Qualifications of a Mufassir” in his chapter “Commentaries of the Qur’aan” (Doi 1998, 59-62). He lists fifteen “criteria” as “the required qualifications of a mufassir.” Seven of these criteria are subjects related to the Arabic language, including philology, syntax, etymology, and so on, and he insists that mastery over rhetoric is essential. He also adds eight more subjects, such as ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān and Ḥadīth, as well as mawhiba, talent given by God.

As for Philips, he also offers a section the “Conditions for a Mufassir” as part of the chapter “Tafseer of the Qur’aan” (Philips 1997, 48-50). He regards the following three conditions as necessary “for the achievement of an authentic tafseer of Qur’aan” (Philips 1997, 48): correct belief, correct methodology, and correct knowledge. Regarding the last point, he specifies that “the mufassir must have working knowledge of classical Arabic, its grammatical constructions, and its figures of speech, because this is the language of the Qur’aan” (Philips 1997, 49-50). His overall picture is very similar to al-Qaṭṭān’s: and he also admits al-Qaṭṭān’s impact on his work directly by referring to his Mabāthīth.

Qadhi’s work An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’aan is the most comprehensive

---

of these three works. He also has a section on “the Qualifications of a Mufassir” in the chapter “the Interpretation of the Qur’aan — Tafseer” (Qadhi 1999, 324-327). At first, he insists that people are not able to interpret the “Book of Allaah” unless they meet certain conditions and qualifications. He lists nineteen points here; the first four are “inherent qualities that are essential in a mufassir,” such as the proper intentions and the correct beliefs. The other qualities are “external and acquired”: most of them are subjects related to Arabic, ‘Ulūm al-Qur'ān, Ḥadīth, and so on. He also places a great emphasis on the knowledge of Arabic, insisting that “not everyone is qualified to pick up the Qur’aan and start interpreting it, in particular if he is not even familiar with Arabic!” In addition to these points, he ends this section by describing “a divine endowment,” which could be thought of as a mawhiba.

3. Importance of personality and scholarship in Arabic as a mufassir

Therefore, these discussions on the necessary qualifications for being a mufassir, which are part of the ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān discipline, lead us to think that authors approach the subject in a traditional way, even though in the contemporary period, emphasize the importance of both personality and scholarship if one is to become a mufassir. In terms of “personality,” a mufassir must be sound and righteous, far from any heresy, which could imply that a mufassir should not use the ra’y to interpret the Qur’ān. As for “scholarship,” knowledge of the Arabic language is regarded as the most crucial element: some authors in particular listed various detailed subjects related to the Arabic language. This implies that, even if Arabic is not a mufassir’s mother tongue, a very high level of Arabic knowledge is needed.

This focus on Arabic scholarship actually triggered a controversy between Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd (d.2009) and Bint al-Shāṭi’ (‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, d.1998) in Egypt. Maḥmūd published successive articles of a tafsīr in a newspaper between 1969 and 1970, but he was attacked because “he dared to invade one of the most exclusive domains of ‘ulamā’”s competencies.” Bint al-Shāṭi’ was his most emphatic critic, insisting that “he lacked the training and skills (in literary Arabic, grammar, rhetoric, jurisprudence, etc.) to venture into such a project” (Salvatore 2001, 216). At that time, she had published her famous tafsīr, Tafsīr al-Bayānī lil-Qur’ān al-Karīm (Rhetorical Interpretation of the Noble Qur’ān) (Bint al-Shāṭi’1962, 1969), which focused on linguistic aspects of scripture, and built her reputation as a female mufassir or mufassira: although she was not an ‘ulamā’ along with Maḥmūd, she was a professor of Arabic literature at Ain Shams University. Accordingly, it can be assumed that she thought a good working ability in Arabic was a more important quality for a mufassir than being an ‘ulamā’.

III. Amina Wadud
1. Life and Work

Amina Wadud’s Qur’an and Woman has been examined by studies such as Barlas 2004, Hammer 2008, Okawa 2009, and Hammer 2012; Wadud herself discusses the interpretation of the Qur’ān in Wadud 1995/6 and Wadud 2000.
Islam. Berg, however, questions whether he can be called a *mufassir* (Berg 1998): this implies the difficulty of defining him as a *mufassir*. In contrast to this, Wadud obviously identifies herself as a *mufassir*, insisting that her work *Qur'an and Woman* belongs in the ranks of *tafsīr* (Wadud 1999, xv-xvi). Unlike Elijah Muhammad’s work, Wadud’s work has had a great impact outside the African-American Muslim community: this is because, although she is in touch with her own identity as an African-American, her perspective is much wider than this, whereas Elijah Muhammad’s concern was directed only to the identity of a black American. The fact that Wadud interprets the Qur’ān from the perspective of gender equality, sometimes also mentioning race equality, means that her work goes beyond the limits of being for black Americans, and means that it speaks to people even outside the USA.10

Wadud is not the first female *mufassira*, but can reasonably be regarded as the second; the first one was Bint al-Shāṭi’, who focused on literary analysis of the text, but did not mention any gender issues. Wadud seems to have inspired other female American Muslim scholars, such as Asma Barlas and Nimat Hafez Barazangi, to interpret the Qur’ān from a woman’s viewpoint. It is natural that the influence of Wadud’s *tafsīr* led to other works focusing on gender: the fact of being a woman and the ability of discussing gender issues seems to be the central motivation of her *tafsīr*.

Wadud is not the first convert author of a *tafsīr*, although before she wrote there had not previously been many published works by converts. For example, Maurice Bucaille, a French physician, published *The Bible, the Qur’an and Science: The Holy Scriptures* examining the Qur’ān in the light of modern science in the 1970s.11 This can be categorized as a “scientific *tafsīr*.”12 Besides this, Philips and Elijah Muhammad were both also Muslim convert authors of *tafsīr*. One obvious reason that there are so few convert *mufassirs* could be their ability in the Arabic language and their knowledge of traditional Islamic scholarship.

After being converted during her college days in 1972 (Wadud 2006, 9), Wadud earned her Ph.D. degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan. Her *Qur’an and Woman* was based on her Ph.D. thesis and first published in Malaysia in 1992 (Wadud 1999, xvi).13 She seems to have sympathy for and closeness to non-Arab Muslims such as Malaysian Muslims; she worked in Malaysia as a university teacher and had “one of the most unique and fortuitous opportunities” of her life with a Malaysian NGO, *Sisters in Islam*.14 In fact, about two years after she converted to Islam, she moved to Libya for two years, but found herself “in the middle of a struggle for more gender-egalitarian concepts of Islamic identity and practice,” and found the need to become involved in more gender-equal theories and activities (Wadud 2006, 3). This may mean that she was unable to meet a group that satisfied her wish for a gender-equal

---

10 Needless to say, there are large gaps in the US between the periods of Elijah Muhammad and Wadud, in terms of knowledge on Islam, access to the Islamic original sources, and ways of conveying information.


13 On the page of the dedication in *Qur’an and Woman*, the following words are written “this book is dedicated to all who struggle to hear the voice of their faith expressed by the Qur’an – especially the Sisters in Islam.”

Muslim society in an Arab country. When she later encountered *Sisters in Islam* in Malaysia, this satisfied her. This experience may have negatively influenced her view of Arab countries, as shall be discussed later. Thus, she is clearly unique as a *mufassir*, because traditionally and even today, most of *mufassirs* are male, Muslim-born, and have a high level of ability in the Arabic Language, as Pink shows (Pink 2010).

2. Self-Recognition: Identity as *Mufassir*

Wadud classifies previous interpretations of woman in the Qur’ān into three categories: “traditional,” “reactive,” and “holistic.” She insists that her work belongs to the third category, criticizing the *tafsīr* works that belong to the first two categories, especially those she seems to be “traditional.” According to her, the “traditional” *tafsīrs* tend to be similar in their “atomic,” word-by-word interpretation of the Qur’ān, in which “little or no effort is made to recognize themes and to discuss the relationship of the Qur’an to itself, thematically” (Wadud 1999, 2).

This implies that the traditional interpretations lack the view to understand the overall or holistic concept of the Qur’ān. Looking at the *tafsīrs* discussed in this paper, Wadud and Esack both interpret thematically, while Philips follows a literally word-by-word interpretation, based on the prevailing method of the traditional *mufassirs*. Wadud also criticizes the “traditional” *tafsīrs* for being “exclusively written by males. This means that men and men’s experiences were included, while women and women’s experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male perspective of the “desire, or needs of woman,” without any actual participation of women (Wadud 1999, 1-2). This can be seen as a criticism against ‘ulamā’s who are male and interpret the Qur’ān literally using mainly *Ḥadīth*, and understand each verse separately, or in an “atomic” manner. As Pinks points out, most *tafsīrs* are still written in this way today (Pink 2010).

After this, Wadud demonstrates her method of “holistic” interpretation: this “relatively new” method is to focus on “various modern social, moral, economic, and political concerns — including the issue of woman” (Wadud 1999, 3), which means to interpret the Qur’ān thematically, rather than “atomically.” She states that she reads the Qur’ān “from within the female experience and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations” (Wadud 1999, 3). Therefore, what makes her *tafsīr* different is that it is written by a female interpreter (a *mufassira*), based on her own situation, and seeking a comprehensive view of the Qur’ān instead of commenting on each verse in order.15

Wadud’s description of writing “from within the female experience” suggests that she puts an premium on “her own” experience and personal contribution, like “one’s self” of Esack and the “opinion” of Philips, as will be discussed later. As I have noted previously (Okawa 2009, 39), Wadud uses the concept of “prior text” to introduce one’s own experience into the activity of the *tafsīr*. Wadud defines “prior text” as “the perspectives, circumstances and background of

---

15 She describes her method of interpreting the Qur’ān as “*tafsir al Qur’an bi al Qur’an* (an interpretation of the Qur’an based on the Qur’an itself),” which is a basic description that matches many traditional *mufassirs*. However, she uses the following concepts in this interpretation: “its context”; “the context of discussions on similar topics in the Qur’an”; “similar language and syntactical structures used elsewhere in the Qur’an”; “overriding Qur’anic principles”; and “the context of the Qur’anic Weltanschauung, or world-view” (Wadud 1999, 5). The last two concepts seem to be a new aspect she introduces into her *tafsīr*, which enable her to interpret the Qur’an in a holistic way.
the individual” (Wadud 1999, 12), and states that “every ‘reading’ reflects, in part, the intentions of the text, as well as the ‘prior text’ of the one who makes the ‘reading’” and “No method of Qur’anic exegesis is fully objective. Each exegete makes some subjective choices” (Wadud 1999, 1). This is an idea obviously opposed to the traditional conservative perspective that ra’y must be kept out of a tafsīr. However, she cannot help using it because her activity of interpreting the Qur’ān starts with her own experience as an African-American Muslim woman.

Furthermore, she also recognizes herself as a researcher of the Qur’ān who is “unfettered by centuries of historical androcentric reading and Arabo-Islamic cultural predilections” (Wadud 1999, ix). She sees her tafsīr as overriding the centricity of Arab culture in Islam, as well as its male centricity. She criticizes the Arabic language, although it is the language of the Qur’ān or God, and has historically been regarded as the most important and essential language for Muslims. She defines Arabic as a “gender specific language” because of “the absence of an Arabic neuter” (Wadud 1999, 6): it makes people choose masculine and feminine forms, which greatly influence one’s interpretation of the text (Wadud 1999, 5). She tries to limit Arabic to being one “prior text,” insisting that it is necessary to “overcome the natural restrictions of the language of human communication” regarding the Qur’ān (Wadud 1999, 7). Thus, Wadud does not see Arabic as a sacred and undeniable language, but as a language that limits the possibility of understanding the Qur’ān.

This relativization of Arabic is strongly connected to the importance of pluralism in her tafsīr: she states that her work “Qur’an and Woman contributes its own voice to global pluralist discourse” (Wadud 1999, xvii). According to her, “the Qur’an must be flexible enough to accommodate innumerable cultural situations because of its claims to be universally beneficial to those who believe” (Wadud 1999, 6). This means that the Qur’ān must not be interpreted from one exclusive cultural point of view, or “prior text,” but should be understand in pluralistic ways, or from various “prior texts.” As she defines “plurality” as acknowledging and engaging differences without an attempt to impose hegemony (Wadud 2003, 282), she does not see an Arabic “prior text” as superior to other “prior texts”: rather, she seeks equality between various “prior texts” of Muslims, leading to diversity or plurality among Muslims. Thus, her notion of equally valid “prior texts” enables her to adopt her own identity as the basis of a tafsīr, and to accept the identities of others at the same time.

3. References as Authority

Wadud, who criticizes the classical tafsīrs written in Arabic by male ‘ulamā’, refers to a very few such works, and no Ḥadīths, not even from the two most authoritative Ḥadīth collections, the Ṣaḥīḥs of Muslim and al-Bukhārī. The tafsīrs in Arabic that Wadud references most often are al-Zamakhshāri’s (d. 1144) al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq al-Tanzīl (Discloser of the Revealed Truths) and Sayyid Quṭb’s (d.1966) Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur’ān (In the Shade of the Qur’ān).16 She also uses Abū al-A’lā al-Maudūdī’s (d.1979) The Meaning of the Qur’an because, although this is not an Arabic work, she sees it as one of those tafsīrs written by a male ‘ulamā’, that she ought to oppose. Wadud does not reject the value of all these books: she largely admits and follows Quṭb’s

16 She also often refers to al-‘Aqqād’s al-Mar’a fi’l-Qur’ān, and severely criticizes the strong misogyny tendency of this work.
interpretation, but she criticizes al-Zamakhsharī and al-Maudūdī very strongly. This can be seen, for example, in her interpretation of Q. 49:13, which she translates as follows:

We created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Inna akrama-kum ‘inda Allah atqa-kum. [Indeed the most noble of you from Allah’s perspective is whoever (he or she) has the most taqwa] (Wadud 1999, 36).

According to Wadud’s interpretation, this verse means “Allah does not distinguish on the basis of wealth, nationality, sex, or historical context, but on the basis of taqwa.” On interpreting this verse along with the well-known verses Q. 49:11-12, which talk about admonishing mocking, defaming and backbiting among Muslims, Wadud refers directly to the three mufassirs mentioned above. She states:

Only Sayyid Qutb acknowledges that gender is used as a basis for mockery and defamation, which then must be denounced as a false, worldly aspect of superiority. He states that the verses are inclusive of all the variations among humankind: gender, color, etc., ‘because all will return to single scale, that of taqwa’ (Wadud 1999, 37-38).

Thus, she provides a similar idea to a so-called Islamic Fundamentalist, or a famous Islamist ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, in terms of a gender-equal interpretation of the Qur’ān. However, she does not appreciate the interpretation of the other two mufassirs, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Maudūdī, as they do not admit that this passage in the Qur’ān is an explicit denial of gender discrimination (Wadud 1999, 38).

Therefore, Wadud does refer to very few texts in Arabic in her tafsīr, but does refer to many texts in English, most of which are academic works written by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. The author she refers to most is Fazlur Rahman, whose works such as Islam and Modernity and Major Themes in the Qur’ān (Rahman 1984, 1994) play a prominent role for her. As I have stated previously (Okawa 2009), the methodology of scripture interpretation that Wadud adopts in Qur’an and Woman is significantly impacted by Rahman’s theory of interpreting the Qur’ān, which is generally known as “Double Movement Theory.” Wadud also often refers to Rahman’s ideas. For example, when she discusses the equality of individual responsibility between man and woman, she cites his words “the Qur’ān states repeatedly that every man and woman individually… is alone responsible for what they do” (Wadud 1999, 25). Therefore, her tafsīr depends significantly on Rahman’s view on how to interpret and understand the Qur’ān. She criticizes the traditional history of tafsīr produced by traditional male Muslim intellectuals, or ‘ulamā’ s who use Arabic. She chooses Rahman and Qutb as examples of effective mufassirs. These authors are both males, but they depart far away from the convention she is criticizing, since one is a modernist Muslim scholar who moved from Pakistan to the USA and the other is an Islamist idealist who struggled in Egypt.

---

17 Wadud calls it “Double Movement Methodology” (Wadud 1999, 13).
IV. Farid Esack
1. Life and Work

Esack is a native Muslim but grew up as part of a Muslim minority of Indian origin in South Africa in the era of apartheid. He might be the first South African who wrote a book of tafsīr, although some people who belonged to a group called the Arabic Study Circle had made activities to interpret the Qur’ān before his work was published (Esack 2002, 25-27). Like Wadud, Esack’s motivation to engage in tafsīr was based on his own arduous experience due to race discrimination and the poverty of his family: he describes his early life as one of a “victim of apartheid and poverty” (Esack 1997, 2). His work Qur’ān, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression tries to interpret the Qur’ān from the viewpoint of “religious pluralism for liberation” (Esack 1997, 13). This, of course, is also connected to combating apartheid and freeing people from any kind of oppression through understanding others better. He states “In order to relate qur’anic meaning to the South African crucible, the progressive Islamists were compelled to relate it from some historical moment” (Esack 1997, 49). This suggests that Esack identifies himself as a progressive Muslim who needed to interpret the Qur’ān to seek some solutions in it in the middle of the hardship he was facing in South Africa.

Esack began his Islamic education in Arabic and the Qur’ān in a madrasa, a traditional college for higher Islamic education, in South Africa when he was a child, already having a deep respect for Arabic and the Qur’ān (Esack 2002, 13-14). At the age of nine, he joined the Tablīghī Jamā'āt, an international Muslim revivalist movement founded in India. Afterwards, he received a scholarship and went to Pakistan for his theological training at a madrasa which is “a frightfully conservative institute where everything ‘this-worldly’ was frowned upon” (Esack 1997, 4). Although he came to love Pakistan, he also noticed several important social problems there: specifically, the persecution of religious minorities such as Christian and Hindus, and the oppression of woman, which he saw similar to that of “Blacks in apartheid South Africa” (Esack 1997, 5). Thus, for him, Pakistan was a Muslim majority country from which he had a lot to learn, but it was also a country where pluralism, which he strongly believed in, was not accepted.

In Qur’ān, Liberation & Pluralism, Esack mentions Wadud several times. At the time his work was published in 1997, Wadud’s Qur’ān and Woman was not yet published, but she visited South Africa and performed ṣalāt (prayer) as an imām, the person who leads prayer in front of the people. Esack regards Wadud as someone “who has a similar frame of reference,” in terms that interpreting the Qur’ān for justice and religious pluralism (Esack 1997, 13-14). She also mentions him sympathetically in the context of her imām performance in South Africa (Wadud 2006, 166, 173). These two mufassirs are referred to as “Progressive Muslims” and their works are included in the category of “hermeneutics of liberation” by Campanini (Campanini 2011, 105-122). Therefore, they stand close together in a new category of Muslim scholars who

---

18 See for example, Safi (ed.) 2003. Wadud’s description of “progressive Muslims” or “progressive intellectuals” is “thinkers who will intentionally grapple with the complexity of preserving the integrity of the Islamic tradition… combining it in a dynamic way with what it means to encounter all of these complexities of modernity or postmodernity,” in “Interviews – Amina Wadud,” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/muslims/interviews/wadud.html (last accessed August 7, 2012).
interpret the Qur’ān.

Esack, like Wadud, puts a great emphasis on his own situation: he suffered from race discrimination and poverty from his childhood onward, in the same way as she suffered in her childhood. His experience and struggle is the basis of his *tafsīr*: he started from his own environment, as he states, “My present search for a South African Qur’ānic hermeneutic of pluralism for liberation was rooted in the fusion of our nation’s crucible and in my own commitment to comprehensive justice” (Esack 1997, 9). Moreover, the connection between his status and his *tafsīr* is strongly supported by his idea that “the meaning assigned to a text by any exegete cannot exist independently of his or her personality and environment” (Esack 1997, 62). Therefore, Esack, like Wadud, is a *mufassir* who recognizes the importance of embracing one’s self or personal opinion in an interpretation of the Qur’ān: he states that “one’s self and the conditions where in that self is located” is the starting point for approaching the Qur’ān and the Prophet’s conduct, or the *Sunna* (Esack 1997, 75).

Esack’s emphasis on oneself leads to respect for individual opinion and for the other. He criticizes both traditionalism and fundamentalism: according to him, the people who belong to these trends “deny any personal or historical frame of reference” and limit the reference for *tafsīr* only to the Qur’ān and the *Sunna*, implying an objectively correct understanding (Esack 1997, 75). He insists on the necessity of breaking the ‘ulamā’”s monopoly on the interpretation of the Qur’ān and liberating it to non-‘ulamā’ Muslims. And this make possible to admit the other’s interpretation, which is the acceptance of plurality. He says “I have already indicated how a denial of the link between preunderstanding and interpretation is to reject the other’s interpretation as eisegetical flights of imagination and accept one’s own as the ‘uncovering of truth’ ” (Esack 1997, 78).

Here he uses terms of hermeneutic such as “preunderstanding” and “eisegetical” derived from “eisegesis.” Both terms seem to be used here to imply almost the same meaning as the understanding of a text based on preconceived personal opinions. He considers that using one’s own opinion makes multiple interpretations of the Qur’ān possible, enabling one to accept the other and solve certain social problems. What should be noted here is the similarity between Esack’s “preunderstanding” and Wadud’s “prior text.” These authors are both aiming at the same goal using similar concepts; that is what we can be describes as “personal opinion” based on one’s own experience.

2. Self-Recognition: Identity as *Mufassir*
As Esack uses hermeneutic terms, he recognizes that he belongs to the group of *mufassirs* who are on the hermeneutic stage. This includes scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, and Mohammed Arkoun, who have departed from the traditional *mufassirs*. Esack classifies the history of *tafsīr* into three categories: exegesis of transmission (*Tafsīr bi’l-riwāyah*), exegesis by opinion/reason (*Tafsīr bi’l-ra’ y*), and exegesis by indication (*Tafsīr bi’l-ishārah*) (Esack 2002, 131-135).

---

19 Esack states that “any reading of the Qur’an is eisegetical before it is exegetical: eisegesis is really the flip side of exegesis rather than a distortion thereof” (Esack 2002, 145).
This classification is traditionally typical, but Esack adds the caveats that “subjectivity cannot be avoided” and “any commentator cannot exist independently of his or her personality and environment” (Esack 2002, 136-137). Therefore, he insists that his idea of one’s self or personality is neither new nor completely alien in the field of tafsīr. This proves his respect for the traditional history of tafsīr, while he tries to move beyond it; this is different from Wadud’s complete negativity toward the traditional tafsīrs.

It is natural for Esack to situate his own position as mufassir as part of the intellectual genealogy of Muslim scholars including Rahman, Abū Zayd, and Arkoun, who also take the idea of “oneself” of an interpreter into consideration. Esack’s stance as a tafsīr is strongly influenced by hermeneutics developed in the West, and he addresses the need of introducing hermeneutics into tafsīr, discussing in detail both what hermeneutics is and how he has adopted it for his tafsīr (Esack 1997, 49-111; Esack 2002, 142-145). He explains that hermeneutics is a discipline which deals with “the nature of a text”; “what it means to understand a text”; and “how understanding and interpretation are determined by the presuppositions and assumptions (the horizon) of both the interpreter and the audience to which the text is being interpreted.” This last strand of his definition is closely related to his concept of “one’s self.” He does not think that the idea of a hermeneutic is completely alien in the history of tafsīr, because every mufassir should have been influenced by their environment more or less, but most of them have not been conscious about the relationship between the text, i.e., the Qur’ān, and the interpreter, or mufassir. However, Rahman, Abū Zayd, and Arkoun are the “rare exceptions who deal with hermeneutics” because they call for the need to take account of a mufassir’s context (Esack 2002, 143).

Like Wadud, Esack criticizes the traditional ‘ulamā’ and their way of interpreting the Qur’ān. However, he approaches the issue from another point of view, probably based on his experiences. According to Esack, during his studies at the madrasa in Pakistan, while the ‘ulamā’ “regard the pursuit of understanding the Qur’an to be their function exclusively,” “few, if any, among them, however, would claim for themselves any kind of thorough understanding of the Qur’an, nor would they be engaged in a systematic and ongoing study of it.” This is because of the heavy emphasis on memorizing the Qur’ān for students in madrasa, instead of leading them to reflect on its content. This situation means that ‘ulamā’ do not make a satisfactory response to what Western-educated Muslims actually need: “religiously based contemporary answers to the issues facing an unjust society felt” (Esack 2002, 23-24). Esack, rather, insists that many young non-‘ulamā’ professionals and intellectuals throughout the Muslim world have started to struggle to understand the contents of the Qur’an directly, although they face “immense opposition from the traditional ‘ulamā’.” The ‘ulamā’ in South Africa threatened the activity of interpreting the Qur’ān with a Qur’ān study group of young lay Muslims, called Arabic Study Circle, announcing that everyone who tried to study the Qur’ān without “the guidance of a qualified Ustaaz,” or “teacher” in Arabic (Esack 2002, 25-26) would go to hell. Esack criticizes those ‘ulamā’s who refuse others the right or authority of interpreting the Qur’ān, without providing any useful

---

20 Esack and Abū Zayd have very similar ideas here, because Abū Zayd argued that the ‘ulamā’ caste had a power to interpret, which they desired to defend, but he insisted on “hermeneutic pluralism,” which implies that the reader of Scripture could draw the text to his own reality (Campanini 2011, 57).
suggestions from it for confused Muslim youngsters.

In contrast to Wadud’s attitude, Esack, who began his study of Arabic in his childhood, admits the centrality of Arabic as sacred “for Muslims and a part of our identity,” clearly demonstrating his respect and affection to the language (Esack 2002, 15). At the same time, he has an academic attitude concerning Arabic as the language of the Qur’ān, accepting the possibility that it contains some foreign words (although traditional Muslim scholars tend to deny this), and insisting that this does not limit the all-powerfulness of God (Esack 2002, 67-69). Therefore, Esack’s has a modern and moderate view on Arabic as the language of the Qur’ān.

3. References as Authority
On interpreting the Qur’ān, Esack refers to many Arabic tafsīr works, and sometimes uses English academic books. The tafsīrs he refers to include al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1209), Rashīd Riḍā (d.1935), and Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d.1981). These are generally seen as the important tafsīrs, both by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Esack’s use of these tafsīrs demonstrates his adequate and deep-grounded knowledge in tafsīr, as well as in Arabic. He analyses this literature objectively as a base of his discussion. This clearly indicates that he does not deny the tradition of tafsīr at all, but rather tries to develop his own interpretation based on that tradition. However, he does not refer to Ḥadīth literature, which is traditionally thought of as the second resource for interpreting the Qur’ān.

Esack, like Wadud, deals with Q. 49:13 in the context of discussing the taqwā, which he defines as “heeding the voice of one’s conscience in the awareness that one is accountable to God.” He also cites this verse to show that the term taqwā embraces “both responsibility to God and to humankind” (Esack 1997, 87), but he does not enter into a detailed interpretation of this verse here. In another place, where he discusses the Qur’ānic response to religious diversity, he mentions Q.49:13 again (Esack 1997, 171) during his interpretation of Q.2:148, which he relates to Q.5:48, stating that it indicates “various shari‘ahs and minhaj” (various paths and ways) (Esack 1997, 166-170). Here is his translation of Q.2:148:

And each one has a goal towards which he [or she] strives/direction to which he [or she] turns (li kulli wijhah huwa muwalliha); so compete with one another in righteous deed. Wherever you are, Allah will bring you all together. Surely Allah is able to do all things.

First, he analyzes the tafsīr works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Rashīd Riḍā and Ṭabāṭabā’ī, focusing on the term “competing righteousness,” which is also included in Q.5:48. Then, he argues, “the metaphor of competition in righteousness is not regarded seriously in exegesis”: only Rashīd Riḍā and Ṭabāṭabā’ī include “the Other,” which is Esack’s key term for discussing pluralism. However, Esack insists that the inclusion of the concept is inescapable from the context of the verse, and adds Q.49:13 as evidence of the fact that “righteous deeds that are recognized and rewarded are not the monopoly of any single competitor” (Esack 1997, 171). Therefore, while Esack does not focus on Q.49:13 in the same way as Wadud, he, too, interprets it as evidence of plurality in the Qur’ān.
V. Bilal Philips
1. Life and Work  
Philips is often identified as “Islamist preacher/radical Muslim preacher” or “Wahhabi/Salafi.” He is also alleged to have links to Muslim extremists or terrorists. This view is supported by his alleged statement that “Western culture, led by the United States, is the enemy of Islam.” However, Philips denies saying this. According to an interview with him when he was a college student in Canada, where he grew up after moving from Jamaica because of his parents’ jobs as teachers, he “had become aware of oppression in America” concerning the radical decrease in the numbers of native American Indians and the “slavery of blacks.” From this point on, he started exploring his faith, and finally, via communism, reached Islam. In 1972, he converted to Islam from Christianity, because Islam convinced him that it could “offer the best solution for human need.” This, and his Jamaican background, explains the convert-rooted motivation of Philips’ anger against the oppression of non-white people.

After his conversion, he left Canada and started his study and educational activities in the Middle East. He earned his BA in Islamic Studies from the Islamic University of Medina and his MA in Islamic Theology (‘aqīda) from King Saud University in Riyadh. He also taught Arabic and Islamic Studies in a high school in Riyadh and a university in Dubai. Although he completed his Ph.D. in Islamic Theology from the University of Wales, he has been based in the Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar, where he has taught and managed programs or institutions for Islamic education. While he usually writes and speaks in English, his ability in Arabic can be assumed to be at a very high level, because of his degrees from Saudi universities, his career as a teacher of Arabic, and his publications about the Arabic language.

Philips’s tafsīr is not complete, but has been published in a way that is divided into sūras (i.e., chapters of the Qur’ān), which so far include Sūra al-Ḥujurāt (Chapter 49), Sūra al-Naṣr (Chapter 110), and so on. These sūras were mostly revealed during the Meccan era, which means that they are chronologically earlier, stylistically composed of short verses, and thematically apocalyptic, as compared with the Medinan sūras. The first and longest of Philips’ tafsīrs is Tafseer Soorah al-Ḥujurāt: A Commentary on the Forty-Ninth Chapter of the Qur’ān, which was published in 1989 based on his lecture at the “Imams’ Training Course” in Trinidad in 1981 for “Muslim communities throughout the West Indies and Central America as well as the United States” (Philips 2006, 13). This implies that Philips’ work, like Wadud and Esack’s, was produced in a very local context far from the Middle East.

Philips is a follower of traditional literalist interpretation of the Qur’ān. His methodology of interpretation is based on that “used in the classical works of Tafseer relying first on the Tafseer of the Qur’an by the Qur’an itself whenever possible, then on explanations found in the

---

21 His official website is http://www.bilalphilips.com/ (last accessed July 31, 2012).
25 See his official website for more details.
26 For example, see Philips 2005b.
Sunnah…and related incidents which occurred at the time of the revelation of its verse” (Philips 2006, 13). In order to interpret a verse, Philips uses verses of the Qur’ān and Ḥadīths relating to the meaning of the verse or the “reason of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl).” This is a basic and conservative method of interpreting the Qur’ān, which is used by traditionalist Muslim scholars such as Ibn Kathīr (d.1373) whose Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʻAẓīm (The Interpretation of the Holy Qur’ān) has been highly acclaimed. After these primary sources, Philips insists that he relies on the interpretation of the sahāba (the companions of the Prophet Muhammad) and the grammatical explanation given in the classical books of tafsīr (Philips 2006, 13-14). This also highlights his dependence on the Islamic tradition of tafsīr in the pre-modern era. He does not criticize this tradition at all, but rather accepts and tries to inherit it.

Instead, Philips criticizes those who interpret the Qur’ān and the Sunna “as they feel.” He also insists that “the wide-spread practice among Muslims of free interpretation of the Qur’ān, which has, at times, led to confusion and distortion of the Qur’ān’s message” should be remedied (Philips 2006, 14). According to him, the “deviant Tafseers” are by the Sufi, the Shi‘ite, the Qadiyanī sect (also called the Ahmadiya sect), and Elijah Muḥammad of the Nation of Islam (Philips 2006, 39-44). It also can be assumed that, from Philips’ point of view, the tafsīrs of Wadud and Esack, which do not use the methodology that Philips insists on, belong to this category that he describes as “interpret it as they feel.” He simply insists that Muslims should rely on the Qur’ān and Sunnah in the way the Prophet Muhammad, the sahāba and the generation that immediately followed them (the ṭābi‘ūn) understood them: this is, he argues, what has been inherited by “the leading scholars of Islam,” by which he may mean the ‘ulamā’. Therefore, Philips’ stance concerning tafsīr is very salafi, in the sense that the Salafis are literalists and traditionalists.

However, there is one thing in common between Philips and the “progressive mufassirs” such as Wadud and Esack: they use or mention the environment or society they live in to interpret the scripture, while traditional mufassirs generally do not. Philips says, “wherever possible, I have tried to apply the derived meanings of the verses to the problem of our times” (Philips 2006, 14), or “opinions based on a careful study of the first four steps can be considered valid as long as they do not contradict any of those steps” (Philips 1997, 41). This tendency implies that these mufassirs intend to solve social problems and improve the difficult situation of their environments through their interpretation of the Qur’ān. They believe that the scripture

27 “An Interview with Dr. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips by Iesha Javed,”

28 Regarding his criticism against sects such as the Mu’tazila, the Baha’i, Timothy Drew of the Moorish Science Temple of America, and so on, see also Philips 2006, 228-229.

29 “An Interview with Dr. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips by Iesha Javed,”


31 The contemporary mufassirs who are more traditional tend not to pay attention to social issues; see Pink 2010.

32 The first step is to interpret the Qur’ān by the Qur’ān, and the second by the Sunnah, the third by “Aathaar” (the sayings of the sahāba), and the fourth by “Language” (Philips 1997, 32-41).
can answer their questions concerning their problems and guide them on the right way to go. Therefore, the fact that they ask questions leading out of the oppression they faced means that their interpretation includes more personal descriptions about their own experiences, such as gender discrimination by Wadud, the apartheid by Esack, and race discrimination by Philips. In this sense, it can be said that Philips also belongs to the category of modern mufassirs.

2. Self-Recognition: Identity as Mufassir

Philips’s description about the history of tafsīr strengthens the view that he is a traditional mufassir. He discusses twenty-three tafsīrs and their mufassirs under the title of “Books of Tafseer,” dividing them into two categories, “tafsīr bir-riwaayah or tafseer bil-ma’thoor (tafsīr relying on transmission)” and “tafsīr bid-diraayah or tafseer bir-ra’y (tafsīr relying on opinion).” However, it is worth noting that he does not mention any mufassirs who have appeared during the modern period. The oldest mufassir he deals with is al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), which is quite usual when discussing the history of tafsīr; but the most recent mufassir is al-Alūsī (d. 1854), which means that he does not pay attention to modern or contemporary mufassirs (Philips 1997, 51-71), although other contemporary authors do mention modern and contemporary mufassirs.33 Thus, Philips does not admit modern and contemporary mufassirs as his predecessors or his basis.

It is obvious that Philips places a great premium on the Arabic language, because, as seen above, he regards ability in Arabic as one of the conditions for being a mufassir, insisting that “the mufassir must have working knowledge of classical Arabic, its grammatical constructions, and its figures of speech, because this is the language of the Qur’aan. Any tafseer which is based solely on a translation of some of the meanings of the Qur’aan will be liable to distortion” (Philips 1997, 49-50). In terms of his methodology of interpretation, he also considers “Tafseer of Qur’aan by Language” as the fourth step, following on from referring to the Qur’ān, the Ḥadīth, and the sayings of the ṣaḥāba (Aathaar) (Philips 1997, 39-41). The objection of this linguistic step is to explain “the Qur’ānic words according to their literal and grammatical meanings,” which of course requires mufassir to have adequate knowledge of classical Arabic.

The differences between Philips and Wadud’s attitudes toward Arabic apparently relates to the way they interpret the Qur’ān. Philips is, like Wadud, a Muslim convert from Christianity and a critic of Western or US society. Unlike Wadud, who graduated from a US university and doubts the value of the Arabic language in terms of tafsīr, he studied in Arabic universities and has been deeply influenced by Muslim Arab countries. This means that he feels entirely comfortable with Arabic culture and can identify himself with it, while Wadud finds Arabic to be male-centered, and struggled to assimilate into an Arabic environment.34 Philips’s tafsīr is at root very traditional: he interprets the Qur’ān literally, namely āya (verse of the Qur’ān) by āya, which is exactly what Wadud criticizes as an “atomic” interpretation. He does not try to overcome or

34 He cites a Ḥadīth, narrating that the Prophet Muḥammad said, “there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab,” and comments that the reason Islam prefers an Arabic heritage is that “it was the vehicle for the expression of the final prophethood and the medium for the last divine message to mankind” (Philips 2006, 150). Thus, he admits that all races are equal, but at the same time, Arabic heritage is the most basic element in terms of the Qur’ān.
criticize the previous *tafsīr* s, but instead follows and cites them, which is also a very traditional attitude, seen in the pre-modern history of *tafsīr* literature.

### 3. Reference as Authority

Furthermore, Philips’s stance of following the traditional, pre-modern way of *tafsīr* can be clearly seen in what he refers to in his *tafsīr* work. In *Tafseer Soorah al-Ḥujurāt*, he always begins by referring to the verses of the Qur’ān that relate to the verse he is discussing, and then he refers to Ḥadīths, mostly from the six authentic Ḥadīth collections, the so called *al-Kutub al-Sitta*. After this, he sometimes refers to some Arabic classical literature in the field of ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān, such as al-Zarkashī’s *al-Burhān*, al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Itqān*, al-Qaṭṭān’s *Mabāḥith*, and *tafsīr* works such as Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm*, and al-Shawkānī’s (d.1834) *Fatḥ al-Qadīr*. These authentic sources correspond, as seen here before, with what Philips calls the four steps of interpreting the Qur’ān.

Interestingly, however, Philips also refers to some English works in some cases when discussion is necessary. One notable example here is that he refers to some books about African-American, so-called Black, Muslims in the US in several of his topics, but he is always critical. For example, he refers to a book by Wallace Deen Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad, while discussing the attributes of Allah, criticizing its view on “Allah’s nostrils.” In addition, he uses dictionaries, magazine articles, and academic books concerning Sufism that are written in English, criticizing color and race discrimination, which is a personal concern as a converted Muslim of Jamaican origin. He also criticizes sects in Islam, which is one of his big concerns as a salafi Muslim who studies in Saudi Arabia. This kind of reference is, needless to say, not seen in classical *tafsīr* literature, and it can be said that this is his contribution. By using these contemporary English references, he is able to go beyond the traditional level of interpreting the Qur’ān and connects his activity of *tafsīr* to his own identity; this is what he has in common with other, more progressive, *mufassir* s of the same period, such as Wadud and Esack.

As has been suggested, Philips also, interprets Q.49:13 in his *Tafseer Soorah al-Ḥujurāt*, which is the 49th chapter of the Qur’ān. He, too, discusses diversity or pluralism and *taqwā*, but in a different way from Wadud and Esack. His comment on this verse states that “in spite of the racial, colour or cultural differences now existing among mankind, their origin is one and the same” (Philips 2006, 149). It is worth noting here that “gender” is not mentioned. After this, he begins his discussion regarding the equality of men and women from an Islamic perspective. According to him, man and woman have an equal responsibility to worship God, but have different roles. Then, he cites a Ḥadīth where the Prophet Muḥammad says that a man is like a shepherd over his family and a woman is like a shepherdess over the husband’s house (Philips 2006, 150-152). He also interprets the latter half of this verse regarding *taqwā*, referring to a Ḥadīth about Bilāl, a black man, to whom the Prophet Muḥammad said “you are not better than a brown nor a black man except by having more *taqwā* (fear of Allah) than them” (Philips 2006, 159-161). Therefore, in terms of the interpretation of this verse, Philips’ concern about *taqwā* as a criterion of a good Muslim and a symbolic term to imply the plurality or equality between various Muslims mainly focuses on the issue of race or color.
VI. Conclusion
Since the modern period started with the great impact of the West, drastic changes in Muslim society have seen the authority of the ‘ulamā’ fade (Roy 2004, 158-164), and lay Muslim scholars have been emerging. The ‘ulamā’ have strongly insisted that a mufassir involved in tafsīr must be a great master of Arabic, but some tafsīr works written in English have begun to penetrate Muslim society. Moreover, the geographical expansion of “Muslim society” from the traditional Muslim-dominated areas such as the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, to the United States and Europe in particular, has triggered the necessity of pluralism or diversity. This has also led to the expansion of the identities of mufassir: from ‘ulamā’ to lay thinker; from man to woman; from born Muslim to convert Muslim; from Arabic to English; from majority Muslim to minority Muslim.

The three mufassirs examined here, Wadud, Esack and Philips, are different in terms of their stances as Muslims and their attitudes toward the ‘ulamā’ and Arabic. Wadud and Esack are sometimes called “progressive Muslims,” while Philips is called a “salafi Muslim” or traditional Islamist. Wadud completely rejects the traditional tafsīr by the ‘ulamā’ and the dominance of Arabic, while Philips completely assimilates these traditions. As for Esack, he treads a middle way, admitting the importance of the traditional tafsīr by the ‘ulamā’ and of Arabic, but trying to develop his tafsīr using a modern method and the English language. Therefore, these new mufassirs, who are of minority origin and mainly use English, have different directions based on their own interests and experience.

On the other hand, they also embrace common features as mufassirs. All of the three are from Muslim minority areas — the US, South Africa, and Canada, respectively. They have all experienced conflict with their native societies and their interpretations of the Qur’ān have been a way of struggling against problems from their own backgrounds. Therefore, they see the scripture from a globalized perspective and have used it to derive solutions for the problems in their societies. The methodology of their tafsīr also has something in common in that stands out — they introduced what is called ra’y into it, and even Philips admits this, despite being a salafi. Each of them describes their use of ra’y in different terms. Wadud calls it “prior text,” Esack calls it “eisegesis” or “preunderstanding,” and Philips refers to it as “opinion.” The degree of dependence on Ḥadīth varies, but the usage of ra’y, is like a yardstick of their modernity as mufassirs, because ra’y has traditionally been criticized by the ‘ulamā’.

Here, we can see a tendency that can be regarded as a phenomenon of the globalization of tafsīr, not only because these mufassirs use English, but because they also seem to be introducing individualism through their use of ra’y, though to a varying degree. Roy discusses this as one of the phenomena of “globalized Islam”: “to live as a minority means experiencing Islam as only a religion. Even if Islam is an all-encompassing religion for the believer, such an integrative view is not supported by social authority… the weakening religion’s social authority also entails a growing individualization of religious practices” (Roy 2004, 148). Roy’s analysis mainly considers minority Muslims in Europe, but these three mufassirs will have had similar experiences. In this sense, their emphasis on the “self” reconciles a “globalized Islam” to itself.

*This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 21720029.
References


Philips, B. 2005b: *Arabic Grammar Made Easy*, [n. p.].


