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# Between Respect and Gender Bias: A Contextual Interpretation of *"Paradise Lies Beneath the Feet of Mothers"*

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***Abstract***

*The expression al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt ("Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers") has long served as a normative foundation for fostering veneration toward mothers; however, its literal interpretation often generates critical debates regarding gender relations and authority within Islamic domestic structures. This study aims to analyze the contextual meaning of the expression through Quranic hermeneutics and classical-contemporary exegesis to elucidate its underlying ethical imperatives and social implications. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive methodology grounded in extensive literature review, this research systematically examines relevant Quranic verses concerning filial piety—specifically Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, Surah Luqman: 14, and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15—alongside authoritative exegetical works. The findings reveal that the spiritual preeminence of mothers in Islamic tradition is fundamentally rooted in their profound biological, psychological, and social sacrifices affirmed by divine revelation, rather than functioning as a tool for female subordination or male marginalization. Contextual interpretation frames this prophetic expression as an enduring moral obligation emphasizing filial devotion, mutual respect, and compassionate responsibility toward mothers without diminishing the complementary status and duties of fathers. Ultimately, adopting a nuanced, contextual understanding of this tradition effectively eliminates gender-based biases, reconciles perceived tensions between tradition and modern gender dynamics, and reinforces equity and justice in contemporary Islamic family relations.*

***Keywords:*** *Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers, gender bias, literal interpretation.*

## INTRODUCTION

The expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* ("Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers")(An-Nasa'i, 2008; At-Thabrani, 1994) represents one of the most widely referenced religious narratives in Muslim societies. This maxim serves not only as a moral doctrine emphasizing filial piety toward mothers, but also as a cultural cornerstone that shapes social

constructs surrounding parent-child dynamics. In practice, public understanding of this narrative is often accepted normatively without sufficient critical inquiry into its theological context and underlying ethical dimensions. However, the Quran primarily emphasizes the overarching principle of parental reverence across numerous verses—such as Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, which explicitly prohibits harsh speech toward parents and commands an attitude of profound compassion within family relationships. According to Ibn Kathīr, these verses demonstrate that *birr al-wālidayn* (filial piety) constitutes a primary duty second only to *tauhid* (monotheism) (Ibn Kathīr, 2003). Echoing this view, Al-Thabari asserts that honoring parents represents a manifestation of devotion to Allah that encompasses simultaneous social and spiritual dimensions (Al-Thabari, 2010). Therefore, understanding the preeminence of mothers necessitates positioning it within a more comprehensive and contextual Quranic framework.

The evolution of gender studies in contemporary Islamic scholarship has spurred ongoing debates regarding how narratives of maternal preeminence ought to be interpreted. While some scholars view the expression "Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers" as an extraordinary elevation of women, others contend that unproportional interpretations risk producing bias regarding the status and role of fathers within the family unit. This discourse becomes increasingly pertinent when examined alongside Surah Luqman: 14, which explicitly highlights the physical burdens of pregnancy and weaning as rationale for venerating mothers. According to Quraish Shihab, the Quranic emphasis on a mother's struggle is not intended to diminish the status of the father, but rather serves as a recognition of biological and emotional burdens that men do not experience equally (Shihab, 2005). A similar perspective is articulated by Wadud, who emphasizes that Quranic verses pertaining to family structures must be read through the lens of equity and shared responsibility, rather than as a hierarchy or status competition between men and women (Wadud, 1999). Consequently, examining this expression demands an exegetical approach capable of bridging normative religious values with evolving social realities.

In addition to Surah Al-Isra': 23–24 and Surah Luqman: 14, the Quran further reinforces filial devotion to mothers in Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15, which vividly depicts the arduous processes of gestation and childbirth. This verse illustrates that maternal reverence is grounded in the recognition of tangible sacrifices, rather than mere emotional symbolism. In classical exegetical literature, Al-Qurthubi interprets this verse as an ethical foundation

obligating children to reciprocate parental care through genuine respect and service (Al-Qurthubi, 2006). Meanwhile, Fazlur Rahman underscores that the overarching ethos of the Quran centers on establishing a socially just moral order, requiring that every textual reference be understood in light of its ultimate ethical objectives (Rahman, 1982). Furthermore, recent scholarly research highlights that literalist readings of religious texts frequently lead to reductionist interpretations that fail to align with the complexities of modern society (Abdullah, 2022; Saeed, 2006). Therefore, a reinterpretation of the expression "Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers" is crucial to uncovering its broader moral imperatives—namely, the veneration of sacrifice, family responsibility, and relational justice—which form the core spirit of Quranic teachings.

Although studies concerning *birr al-wālidayn*, women in Islam, and gender relations are well-established, research specifically examining the contextualization of the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* through the integration of Quranic studies and exegesis remains relatively limited. Existing literature tends to focus either on the normative aspects of maternal reverence or exclusively on gender issues without deeply linking them to the argumentative structure of the Quran. Consequently, two equally problematic tendencies emerge: a literalist reading that positions the mother as the sole central figure of domestic veneration, or conversely, an overly critical reading that overlooks the ethical foundations emphasized by religious texts. In this context, a contextual exegetical approach becomes imperative, as it allows textual interpretation grounded in underlying moral objectives and socio-historical realities. According to Abū Zayd, religious meaning continuously interacts with the historical realities of its audience, thus requiring a dynamic reading (Abū Zayd, 2006). A similar framework is advanced by Saeed, who underscores the necessity of extracting the universal values of the Quran beyond its textual phrasing (Saeed, 2006). Therefore, this study seeks to fill this academic gap by providing a balanced reading that connects sacred texts, exegesis, and contemporary social realities.

To address this gap, this study aims to analyze the contextual meaning of the expression *"Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers"* through a detailed examination of Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, Surah Luqman: 14, and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15, alongside classical and contemporary exegetical works within Islamic tradition. This research advances the central thesis that the preeminence of mothers in the Quran is not intended to legitimize gender superiority, but rather serves as an ethical recognition of the unique sacrifices and

responsibilities inherent in motherhood. The primary novelty of this study lies in its systematic deconstruction of literalist understandings, moving toward an interpretive paradigm that situates maternal reverence within relational justice and shared domestic responsibility. Rather than treating filial piety as a zero-sum dynamic between parents, this research demonstrates that honoring mothers and recognizing the role of fathers are complementary components of the familial ethos taught by the Quran. Accordingly, this inquiry not only elucidates the theological foundations of honoring mothers but also identifies ethical imperatives relevant to modern Muslim societies, providing a balanced interpretive bridge between classical textual authority and contemporary domestic realities without distorting the core Quranic ethos.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a library research design to thoroughly examine the contextual meaning of the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* from the perspective of the Quran and exegesis. A qualitative descriptive framework was selected as it enables an in-depth understanding of the meanings, values, and conceptual constructs embedded within religious texts without relying on statistical measurements (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Sugiyono, 2013). Primary data sources comprise Quranic verses pertaining to filial piety-specifically Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, Surah Luqman: 14, and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15-alongside relevant Hadith compilations, including Sunan an-Nasa'i and Al-Tabarani's Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir, as well as key exegetical works addressing this theme (An-Nasa'i, 2008; At-Thabrani, 1994). Secondary data sources encompass books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and academic literature discussing *birr al-wālidayn*, gender in Islam, Quranic hermeneutics, and contextual exegesis. Source selection was conducted purposively based on thematic relevance, academic credibility, and overall contribution to the discussion. Consequently, this methodology aims to foster a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between maternal veneration, Quranic moral imperatives, and evolving interpretive dynamics in contemporary Muslim societies.

Data collection was carried out through documentation analysis, involving the systematic review, identification, and categorization of relevant literature. The gathered data were subsequently analyzed using content analysis combined with a contextual exegetical approach to uncover the relationships between text, context, and the underlying ethical objectives of the Quranic verses (Krippendorff, 2019). The analytical process followed several stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretive analysis, and inductive

conclusion drawing, following qualitative research conventions (Miles et al., 2014; Moleong, 2018). During the interpretive phase, the perspectives of classical and contemporary exegetes were comparatively examined to identify continuity and shifts in meaning surrounding the expression *"Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers."* Furthermore, the analysis evaluated whether prevalent interpretations exhibit gender bias or reflect the principles of relational justice taught by the Quran. Through these procedures, this study delivers a systematic, critical, and contextual reading of the subject matter.

## DISCUSSION

### Quranic Foundations of Filial Piety: A Contextual Exegetical Analysis

Filial piety towards parents constitutes a fundamental moral principle within Quranic teachings, consistently placed immediately following the commandment of monotheism (*tauhid*). This intrinsic link is clearly evident in Surah Al-Isra': 23, which decrees that humanity must worship none but Allah while simultaneously demonstrating benevolence (*ihsan*) toward parents. Positioning these two doctrines within the same structural framework underscores the exceptionally elevated status of parental veneration in Islamic ethical hierarchy. According to Al-Thabari, the juxtaposition of monotheism and *birr al-wālidayn* conveys that spiritual piety cannot be compartmentalized from domestic social responsibility (Al-Thabari, 2010). Echoing this view, Ibn Kathīr asserts that devotion to parents represents a manifestation of gratitude for the worldly vessel through which Allah bestows life upon humanity (Ibn Kathīr, 2003). Within contemporary exegetical perspectives, Quraish Shihab elucidates that this verse embodies universal values extending beyond individual obligations, constructing a foundation for social ethics that preserves intergenerational cohesion (Shihab, 2005). Consequently, filial piety in the Quran transcends mere formal compliance; it represents an embodiment of moral duty encompassing simultaneous spiritual, social, and humanistic dimensions.

The dimension of parental reverence in Surah Al-Isra': 23–24 is articulated not only through concrete actions but also via the regulation of linguistic conduct and emotional disposition. The Quran explicitly forbids children from uttering even the mildest word of contempt ("*uff*") toward their parents—an expression understood by exegetes as symbolic of any form of rejection, annoyance, or disrespect, no matter how minor. Al-Qurthubi emphasizes that this prohibition demonstrates the necessity of preserving parental dignity

even in the most basic interactions (Al-Qurthubi, 2006). The subsequent verse commands children to lower the wing of humility out of mercy and to supplicate for their parents, recalling how they nurtured them during infancy. Within Quranic ethical framework, reverence extends beyond outward behaviors to encompass an affective dimension reflected in spoken discourse and emotional expression. Rahman notes that the primary aim of these verses is character formation grounded in empathy and gratitude (Rahman, 1982). Therefore, filial piety should not be interpreted as a rigid hierarchical relation demanding absolute, unconditional submission, but rather as an ethical relationship built upon mutual awareness of parental sacrifice, devotion, and compassion spanning a lifetime.

Beyond Surah Al-Isra', the Quran pays specific attention to the role of the mother in Surah Luqman: 14. This verse underscores that a mother bears her child through weakness upon weakness (*wahnan 'alā wahn*) and suckles him over a two-year period. This explicit emphasis on biological experience demonstrates that maternal veneration is deeply rooted in empirical human realities. According to Al-Rāzī, highlighting the hardships of gestation and lactation aims to cultivate a child's moral consciousness regarding sacrifices that often remain invisible (Al-Rāzī, 2012). Nevertheless, the verse concludes with a dual commandment of gratitude toward both Allah and one's parents, illustrating that the Quran does not detach maternal reverence from paternal honor. In a contextual reading, Saeed explains that highlighting the maternal experience must be understood as an acknowledgment of biological burdens uniquely borne by women, rather than a legitimation of gender superiority (Saeed, 2006). Thus, Surah Luqman: 14 offers a crucial foundation for understanding that the heightened honor accorded to mothers stems from recognizing concrete physical sacrifice, rather than establishing a value hierarchy between men and women.

The affirmation of parental reverence is further reinforced in Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15, which depicts a mother's arduous journey through pregnancy and childbirth. The verse specifies that the combined period of gestation and weaning spans thirty months—a detail revealing Quranic sensitivity toward the biological and psychological realities of women. In classical exegesis, Ibn ʿĀshūr explains that detailing the maternal experience serves to heighten the child's ethical awareness, ensuring that a mother's sacrifice is not taken for granted (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2021). Meanwhile, Al-Zuḥaylī (2009) maintains that honoring mothers in this context does not exist in isolation, but rather forms part of a broader system of family

reverence (Al-Zuḥaylī, 2009). From a contextual exegetical stance, this verse demonstrates how the Quran acknowledges concrete human experiences as grounds for establishing moral values. Abdullah Saeed describes this framework as a reading oriented toward the ethical objectives of the text (Saeed, 2006, 2014). Consequently, Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 speaks not only to filial duties toward mothers but also teaches the critical importance of empathy, gratitude, and the recognition of caregiving labor that is often marginalized in broader social discourse.

When examined holistically, Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, Surah Luqman: 14, and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 construct a unified ethical framework that underpins the narrative of maternal preeminence within the Islamic tradition. Although the phrase *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* does not explicitly appear in the textual wording of the Quran, its core moral substance remains intimately connected to Quranic teachings regarding filial piety, particularly toward mothers. Quraish Shihab explains that the Quran consistently positions the mother as a figure deserving exceptional honor due to her extensive sacrifices throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and early childhood education (Shihab, 2005). However, this special status does not erase the role of the father, who is likewise designated in numerous verses as a primary subject of filial devotion. In the study of Quranic hermeneutics, Rahman asserts that the moral ethos of a text must be comprehended through its broader social objectives rather than strictly through its literal formulation (Rahman, 1982). Consequently, verses pertaining to parental reverence ought to be understood as instruments for building family structures grounded in compassion, responsibility, and relational justice, rather than tools for creating a artificial dichotomy between honoring the mother and honoring the father.

A contextual reading of these parental reverence verses demonstrates that the Quran does not merely deliver normative commands, but also fosters an ethical consciousness rooted in human experience. Within this framework, the pronounced emphasis on maternal honor in Surah Luqman: 14 and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 can be understood as an explicit recognition of the reproductive and caregiving burdens uniquely borne by women. Amina Wadud emphasizes that Quranic attention to female experience must be interpreted as an affirmation of women's contributions to social life, rather than a mechanism for establishing gender inequality (Wadud, 1999). This perspective aligns with the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, which posits human welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), justice, and human dignity as the paramount objectives of Islamic law. Within this context, maternal honor is not derived merely from

biological identity, but from the sacrifices, responsibilities, and enduring affection rendered to children. Therefore, the meaning embedded in these verses extends beyond individual devotion, evolving into a broader social ethic that champions the valuation of caregiving labor, familial solidarity, and intergenerational responsibility in contemporary Muslim societies.

Based on the analysis of Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, Surah Luqman: 14, and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15, it is evident that the Quranic foundation of filial piety is built upon an integration of monotheistic devotion (*tauhid*), gratitude, compassion, and the recognition of domestic sacrifices. The greater emphasis placed on mothers across several verses does not signify discriminatory gender preference; rather, it reflects empirical realities regarding the strenuous processes of gestation, childbirth, and nurturing undertaken by women. In a contextual exegetical framework, the central message of these verses is the cultivation of a moral consciousness that inspires children to respect both parents proportionally, in accordance with their respective contributions and sacrifices. As Saeed argues, the meaning of Quranic texts must be understood through the ethical objectives they aim to fulfill within human life (Saeed, 2006, 2014). Thus, this Quranic foundation offers a vital interpretative framework for understanding the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* more comprehensively. This framework serves as a springboard for further analysis into how the narrative of maternal preeminence is understood within classical and contemporary exegetical traditions, and to what extent developing interpretations may foster—or conversely, mitigate—gender bias in Muslim communities.

## Exegesis of Maternal Preeminence and the Meaning of "Paradise Lies Beneath the Feet of Mothers

The expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* represents one of the most influential narratives in shaping Muslim perceptions regarding the status of mothers. Although this adage is widely recognized through the Hadith tradition rather than as a direct Quranic phrasing, its substantive meaning is intimately aligned with Quranic passages emphasizing filial piety, particularly toward mothers. Surah Luqman: 14 and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 explicitly remind humanity of the physical burdens of gestation, labor, and weaning borne by mothers. In classical exegesis, Al-Thabari explains that highlighting these biological experiences serves

as a moral argument designed to cultivate a profound child consciousness regarding a mother's devotion and sacrifice (Al-Thabari, 2010). Therefore, maternal veneration is not merely a social construct; rather, it is anchored in divine revelation that acknowledges women's tangible sacrifices in sustaining human life. From an exegetical standpoint, the phrase *"Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers"* functions as a symbol denoting filial devotion to mothers as a pathway toward Divine pleasure (*ridha*). Consequently, its core significance resides in profound reverence and service, rather than an exaggerated cult of personality surrounding the maternal figure.

In Hadith literature, the maxim concerning Paradise lying beneath the feet of mothers is frequently understood alongside traditions that accord mothers a threefold preeminence over fathers in receiving filial devotion (Lestari, 2016; Nisa, 2025). Transmitted across various canonical Hadith collections, these traditions serve as a primary normative foundation for explaining the elevated standing of mothers in Islam. According to Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, repeating the designation of the mother three times does not diminish the dignity of the father; instead, it underscores the arduous responsibilities uniquely sustained by the mother from gestation through early caregiving (Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, 2005). This interpretation aligns seamlessly with Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15, which accords special attention to biological processes not experienced by men. Within a broader context, the Quran consistently commands reverence toward both parents, as reiterated in Surah Al-Isra': 23–24. Thus, maternal preeminence must be understood as an appreciation for specific modes of sacrifice, rather than as a justification for establishing an absolute hierarchy within the household. Such a reading enables a balanced, proportional understanding between maternal honor and the recognition of paternal roles within Islamic domestic structures.

Classical exegetes generally comprehended maternal preeminence through a framework centered on the empirical human experiences highlighted in the Quran. Al-Qurthubi notes that the tribulations endured during pregnancy and childbirth constitute the primary rationale behind the Quran's explicit emphasis on honoring mothers (Al-Qurthubi, 2006). Echoing this view, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī asserts that a mother's contribution is not merely biological, but encompasses extended emotional and educational dimensions over time (Al-Rāzī, 2012). Within this perspective, the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* is interpreted as a religious metaphor encouraging children to prioritize filial devotion to

mothers as a paramount moral imperative. Crucially, classical exegetes did not utilize maternal preeminence to negate or marginalize the standing of fathers. On the contrary, they maintained both parents within the unified framework of *birr al-wālidayn*, which remains a central doctrine of Islamic ethics. Thus, classical exegesis demonstrates that maternal veneration is an integral part of a comprehensive family ethics system. This understanding serves as an essential starting point for re-reading the maxim within modern Muslim societies facing shifting gender and familial dynamics.

The development of contemporary Quranic studies offers a more contextual perspective for understanding maternal preeminence. While classical exegesis heavily emphasized biological sacrifice as the foundation for reverence, contemporary exegetes seek to situate this message within a broader socio-ethical framework. Quraish Shihab explains that a mother's special status in the Quran pertains not only to gestation and childbirth, but also to ongoing caregiving responsibilities essential to character formation (Shihab, 2005). Therefore, honoring mothers must be conceptualized as an acknowledgment of their tangible contributions to family life. This approach resonates with Surah Luqman: 14, which connects the experience of pregnancy to the dual obligation of gratitude toward Allah and one's parents. In contemporary readings, this verse is not intended to erect power hierarchies between men and women, but to strengthen moral awareness regarding the value of caregiving labor. Consequently, *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* can be understood as a symbol of respect for the sacrifice and compassion that serve as the bedrock of family life in Islamic teachings.

Hermeneutical approaches to the Quran also provide critical insights into interpreting *"Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers."* Fazlur Rahman posits that every religious text must be engaged through a "double movement"—first, comprehending the historical context of the revelation's origin, and second, projecting its moral essence to address modern societal needs (Rahman, 1982). Within this framework, Quranic attention toward mothers can be understood as a moral correction against historical social conditions that frequently marginalized women's domestic contributions. Through Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 and Surah Luqman: 14, the Quran restores moral equilibrium by asserting the intrinsic value of maternal sacrifice. Abdullah Saeed adds that the primary goal of these verses is to build ethical consciousness, rather than establishing ontological superiority of one gender over another (Saeed, 2006, 2014). Therefore, "Paradise" in this expression need not be read literally as an

exclusive reward accessible solely through the mother, but as a metaphor for Divine grace achieved through honoring family duties. This interpretive path creates space for a reading that is relevant to contemporary social realities while remaining anchored in Quranic normativity.

In modern academic discourse, a number of scholars emphasize that maternal preeminence in Islam must be interpreted comprehensively to avoid falling into a mere romanticization of motherhood. Barlas asserts that the Quran fundamentally does not construct hierarchies based on gender, but rather on *taqwā* (piety) and moral responsibility (Barlas, 2019). Consequently, venerating mothers should be understood as an appreciation of the functions and sacrifices performed, rather than a justification for gendered stereotypes regarding women. Contemporary journal literature on the Muslim family further demonstrates that successful child-rearing results from mutually supportive interactions among mothers, fathers, and the broader social environment (Handayani, 2021; Rahmadannia et al., 2025). Within this context, the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* serves as a moral strategy to cultivate children's awareness regarding often invisible maternal labor. Nevertheless, this reverence must remain situated within a family framework that values the contributions of all its members. Thus, contemporary exegesis does not reject maternal preeminence; rather, it aims to expand its meaning to align with Quranic principles of justice, shared responsibility, and relational equilibrium.

When critically compared, classical and contemporary exegetical traditions share a fundamental point of convergence in explaining maternal preeminence. Both acknowledge that the special status accorded to mothers is rooted in the sacrifices explicit in the Quran, particularly in Surah Luqman: 14 and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15. The distinction lies primarily in analytical emphasis: classical exegesis concentrates heavily on normative duties and filial obligations, whereas contemporary exegesis seeks to connect these religious imperatives to evolving social issues in modern society. According to Ibn ʿĀshūr, the detail given to gestation and childbirth is the Quran's method of constructing ethical consciousness through concrete human experience (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2021). Meanwhile, Saeed frames these verses as representations of the Quran's moral objectives, which emphasize honoring whichever party bears the heavier burden in a given relationship (Saeed, 2006). Therefore, the phrase *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* functions as an intersection between Islam's normative and ethical

dimensions. Maternal preeminence stands not as an isolated doctrine, but as a moral expression born out of reverence for the sacrifices, affection, and responsibilities fulfilled by mothers within family life.

The concept of "Paradise" within the maxim *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* also warrants a deeper hermeneutical reading beyond mere literalism. In Islamic scholarly traditions, Paradise is understood not solely as an eschatological reward in the hereafter, but also as a symbol of Divine pleasure (*ridha*), worldly blessing, and moral perfection achieved through righteous action. Al-Ghazali explains that the intrinsic value of an act in Islam depends on its capacity to draw an individual closer to Allah while strengthening positive social bonds. In this light, devotion to one's mother becomes a primary avenue for cultivating a compassionate, humble, and responsible character (Al-Ghazali, 2005). Surah Al-Isra': 24 reinforces this symbolic understanding by commanding children to pray for both parents with profound humility. Hence, "Paradise" in this expression can be interpreted as a metaphor for moral realization attained through maternal reverence as an integral component of overall parental devotion. Such a symbolic reading allows the Hadith's message to remain vital across diverse social contexts without relinquishing its grounding in core Quranic tenets.

Based on the overall analysis, the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* represents a Quranic value system that positions maternal reverence as a crucial pillar in domestic ethics. Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, Surah Luqman: 14, and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 demonstrate that honoring mothers is rooted in acknowledging their physical sacrifices, affection, and responsibilities in human life. Both classical and contemporary exegetes agree that maternal preeminence is not intended to negate the father's status or induce relational imbalance within the family unit. Rather, the heightened honor accorded to mothers reflects a moral equity that accounts for the specific burdens borne by women. From a contextual exegetical stance, the primary significance of the adage lies in prompting ethical consciousness, gratitude, and reverence for parental sacrifice. However, in modern social practice, overly literal interpretations sometimes generate reductionist views of family dynamics. Consequently, further inquiry is required to examine how narratives of maternal preeminence can be understood proportionally to prevent gender bias—a topic that forms the focus of the subsequent section.

**Deconstructing Gender Bias in Contextual Exegesis of Maternal Preeminence**

The discourse surrounding maternal preeminence in Islam frequently unfolds along two distinct trajectories. On one hand, the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* is understood as an extraordinary elevation of maternal honor. On the other hand, an overly literal reading of the maxim occasionally fosters the perception that Islam accords mothers a vastly superior position over fathers across all dimensions of family life. From a contextual exegetical standpoint, such tendencies warrant critical scrutiny to prevent interpretations that overshoot the core Quranic ethos. Examining Surah Al-Isra': 23–24 reveals that the Quran consistently employs the dual term *al-wālidayn* (both parents) rather than referring exclusively to the mother. This phrasing demonstrates that filial piety represents a joint obligation encompassing both father and mother equally. According to Quraish Shihab, the special attention accorded to mothers in select verses is not intended to institute an absolute hierarchy, but rather to highlight specific modes of sacrifice unexperienced by fathers (Shihab, 2005). Consequently, deconstructing literalist interpretations becomes imperative to ensure that maternal veneration remains grounded in the Quranic framework of relational domestic equity.

Gender bias in religious understanding often arises when a text is read in isolation from the broader corpus of Islamic teachings. In the context of maternal preeminence, public perception occasionally interprets "Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers" as a legitimation that all moral authority within the family resides solely with the mother. However, Surah Luqman: 14—frequently cited to justify maternal reverence—concludes with a dual imperative to express gratitude toward Allah and toward both parents (*al-wālidayn*). According to Abdullah Saeed, an ethical-objective reading of the Quran demands that exegetes examine textual interrelationships before deriving normative conclusions (Saeed, 2006). Through this framework, maternal preeminence is understood not as a devaluation of paternal standing, but as an explicit recognition of unique biological and emotional experiences borne by women. Amina Wadud similarly contends that the Quran does not construct gender superiority; rather, it establishes complementary dynamics of mutual responsibility (Wadud, 1999). Therefore, interpretations that position the mother as the sole source of domestic moral legitimacy require critical re-evaluation to avoid conflicting with the principle of equilibrium that characterizes Quranic ethics.

Deconstruction in Quranic studies does not imply a rejection of established religious meanings; rather, it involves re-examining the underlying assumptions that shape an interpretation to arrive at a reading more aligned with the text's ultimate objectives. Regarding the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt*, deconstruction targets the tendency to interpret maternal preeminence exclusively, detached from the overarching framework of Quranic doctrine. While Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 accords dedicated focus to a mother's struggles during gestation and childbirth, the verse does not imply that the father forfeits his moral standing within the household. According to Fazlur Rahman, the Quranic moral message must be grasped through the fundamental values it aims to realize, rather than strictly through the literal phrasing of a statement (Rahman, 1982). Thus, the core essence of these verses centers on appreciating sacrifice rather than constructing a gendered hierarchy. Such a reading enables Muslims to comprehend maternal preeminence proportionally—acknowledging it as a crucial teaching without utilizing it to relegate fathers to a diminished status within family dynamics or child-rearing.

A recurring issue in readings of maternal preeminence is the propensity to link religious texts directly to particular social constructs without considering historical context and underlying ethical aims. In some societies, the narrative "Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers" is leveraged to champion respect for women. In other contexts, however, the very same narrative is romanticized, effectively burdening mothers with sole responsibility for child care while diminishing paternal involvement in education and upbringing. Contextual exegesis posits that both tendencies risk oversimplifying the Quranic message. Surah Al-Isra': 23–24 affirms devotion toward both parents without imposing rigid role dichotomies. According to Ibn ʿĀshūr, the primary focus of these verses is the cultivation of a domestic ethic founded upon compassion and gratitude for parental service (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 2021). Therefore, utilizing expressions of maternal preeminence to justify unbalanced domestic roles is not fully aligned with the moral intent of the Quran. What remains paramount is how values of reverence, responsibility, and care are collectively realized within contemporary Muslim family life.

Contemporary gender scholarship in Islamic studies demonstrates that honoring mothers need not be set in opposition to the principle of moral equality between men and women. Asma Barlas asserts that the Quran does not support the formation of permanent

hierarchies based on gender; rather, it emphasizes justice and mutual responsibility as the foundational bedrock of social relations (Barlas, 2019). Within this conceptual framework, maternal preeminence can be understood as an explicit recognition of specific human experiences and sacrifices, rather than the institutionalization of superior gender status. This reading aligns directly with Surah Luqman: 14, which delineates the physical tribulations of pregnancy and weaning as rationale for heightened maternal reverence, while simultaneously maintaining devotion to both parents within a unified ethical mandate. According to Wadud, Quranic recognition of female-specific experience reflects divine sensitivity toward empirical human realities rather than the creation of absolute privilege (Wadud, 1999). Consequently, contextual exegesis helps dispel the misconception that maternal veneration equates to a reduction of paternal importance, offering instead a model for building more equitable and mutually appreciative family structures.

In contemporary Muslim households, shifting social and economic structures have transformed how fathers and mothers fulfill their respective roles. Many modern families exhibit increasingly collaborative parenting patterns compared to traditional models. These evolving dynamics necessitate a more responsive reading of maternal preeminence narratives—one that remains relevant to modern contexts without sacrificing core moral substance. Empirical research on contemporary Muslim families indicates that active paternal involvement in child-rearing yields significant positive contributions to children's psychological and social development (Firdausi et al., 2025; Hasri, 2019). These findings do not contradict Quranic principles, as Surah Al-Isra': 23–24 and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15 fundamentally emphasize gratitude for sacrifice rather than rigid role restrictions based on sex. Therefore, a contextual exegetical framework can value maternal preeminence as an appreciation for a unique lived experience, while simultaneously affirming paternal contributions according to their executed responsibilities. This approach allows Quranic values to remain vital within changing societies while fostering participatory, harmonious, and welfare-oriented family relations.

Synthesizing these diverse exegetical insights, the formulation of a contextual reading of *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* must position maternal preeminence as an ethical recognition of sacrifice rather than an assertion of gender superiority. Within this paradigm, "Paradise" symbolizes Divine pleasure (*ridha*), attainable through honoring those who have rendered profound life-giving contributions. Surah Luqman: 14 and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15

demonstrate that the Quran's specialized attention to mothers is anchored in the physical and emotional burdens of gestation, labor, and caregiving. Crucially, however, Surah Al-Isra': 23–24 maintains filial piety toward both parents as an indivisible moral imperative. As Saeed emphasizes, textual meaning must be derived toward its ultimate ethical objectives to maintain relevance amidst societal transformation (Saeed, 2006). Through this lens, maternal honor functions not as a privilege that negates paternal agency, but as a moral reminder for society to accord proportional value to often-unseen caregiving labor—an interpretation fully congruent with the justice, balance, and human welfare (*maslaḥah*) that define Quranic ethics.

Analytical synthesis reveals that a contextual understanding of maternal preeminence safeguards Muslim thought from two equally problematic extremes. The first is a literalist reading that elevates the mother to a position that symbolically erases the father's essential role in the family. The second is an overcritical reading that dismisses the narrative of maternal preeminence entirely as an inherently gender-biased construct to be abandoned. Neither extreme faithfully reflects the true Quranic ethos. Quranic passages on parental devotion affirm that family relationships are built upon compassion, shared responsibility, and gratitude for the sacrifices made by each parent. Therefore, maternal preeminence does not infringe upon the standing of men or fathers; rather, it completes a holistic domestic ethical system that honors each member according to their contributions and duties. Within a contextual exegetical framework, the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* stands as an enduring moral message inspiring reverence for mothers without diminishing respect for fathers—remaining deeply relevant to modern Muslim families while upholding the relational justice taught by the Quran.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the expression *al-jannatu taḥta aqdām al-ummahāt* cannot be understood literally as an assertion of gender superiority; rather, it functions as an ethical expression deeply rooted in the Quran's recognition of maternal sacrifice and responsibility, as depicted in Surah Al-Isra': 23–24, Surah Luqman: 14, and Surah Al-Ahqaf: 15. An examination of classical and contemporary exegesis reveals that maternal preeminence constitutes an appreciation of distinct biological, psychological, and social experiences, without diminishing the status and role of fathers within the family structure. The novelty of

this research lies in its deconstruction of literalist tendencies in favor of a contextual interpretation that situates maternal reverence within a framework of relational justice and balanced domestic roles. These findings contribute to the advancement of Islamic gender studies by illustrating that Quranic values provide a foundation for family dynamics that are inclusive, equitable, and appreciative of all forms of caregiving. Practically, the outcomes of this study can serve as a reference for strengthening family education, child protection, and child welfare, as well as informing social policies that recognize care work, including support for vulnerable groups and persons with disabilities. Consequently, there is a vital need to foster contextual exegetical literacy, promote interdisciplinary research, and engage diverse stakeholders to construct a family culture that is just, inclusive, and civilized.

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