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Interpretation of the Verses on Ẓihār in the Qur'an: An Analysis of Tafsīr al-Marāghī on Q.S. al-Mujādilah, Verses 1–4

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ABSTRACT

Ẓihār a husband's statement likening his wife to a woman permanently prohibited to him is a family-law issue addressed in Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4. Although ẓihār has been widely studied, much of the previous literature has focused on normative and formalistic jurisprudential analysis, overlooking gender-responsive considerations, the ethical education of speech, and the social significance underlying its legal sanctions. This study analyzes Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī's interpretation of Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4, including its legal implications, the mechanism of expiation (kaffārah), and the wisdom behind its legislation. The study employs library research with a descriptive-analytical approach. The findings indicate that, according to al-Marāghī, ẓihār is an objectionable and false statement that does not dissolve the marriage bond, but prohibits marital relations until expiation has been completed in the prescribed sequence: freeing an enslaved person, fasting for two consecutive months, or feeding sixty poor people. The study's specific contribution is to demonstrate that al-Marāghī's interpretation transforms a rigid jurisprudential doctrine into an ethical-reformative framework. Expiation functions not only as atonement for sin but also as an instrument for educating speech, psychologically protecting a wife's dignity from a husband's arbitrary conduct, and fulfilling social responsibility.

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Introduction

Marriage is one of the forms of divine law established by Allah for men and women as a sacred bond intended to build a family characterized by sakīnah (tranquility), mawaddah (affection), and raḥmah (mercy). In Islam, marriage is not merely a means of fulfilling human nature; it is also an act of worship that holds an honored status. Therefore, husbands and wives are required to fulfill their rights and obligations in accordance with Islamic law in order to establish a harmonious and loving household (Syarifuddin, 2014; Ghozali, 2010).

Nevertheless, the dynamics of family life do not always proceed smoothly. Internal conflicts arising from an inability to control emotions often trigger actions or words that undermine a spouse's dignity. In pre-Islamic Arabia, one practice that disadvantaged women within marriage was ẓihār namely, a husband's statement likening his wife to a woman permanently prohibited to him, such as his mother, in order to prohibit marital

intimacy without formally divorcing her. This exploitative practice was fundamentally corrected through Allah's revelation in Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4 (Al-Maraghi, 1993).

In the contemporary era, the study of ẓihār has considerable contextual significance. Although the term "ẓihār" is rarely used literally in modern everyday speech, its underlying features verbal abuse, the degradation of women's physical appearance or status, and psychological manipulation (gaslighting) by husbands that demeans their wives are increasingly evident in current family problems. A contemporary understanding of Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4, is therefore no longer limited to classical jurisprudential rules; it can also provide a foundation for protecting women's rights, promoting ethical communication in public and domestic settings, and advancing gender justice within the family (Mustaqim, 2010).

For this reason, Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī's interpretation in Tafsīr al-Marāghī is important to examine. Al-Marāghī is known as a modern exegete who combines linguistic analysis, Islamic jurisprudence, and a social-literary approach (adabī ijtimāʿī). His interpretation of Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4, addresses not only the legal requirements of expiation (kaffārah), but also the psychological protection of wives and the need to reform husbands' verbal ethics (Izzan, 2014).

A review of previous studies shows that several researchers have examined ẓihār from the perspective of Qur'anic exegesis. Mulia Lisa Ariani (2024) comparatively examined interpretations of ẓihār in Tafsir al-Mishbah and Tafsir al-Marāghī, focusing on similarities and differences in their legal doctrines. Arif Munandar and Muslim Djuned (2018), meanwhile, studied ẓihār in Tafsir Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'an and Tafsir al-Mishbah using a comparative mawḍūʿī method.

This review reveals a clear research gap. Previous studies have focused on comparisons among exegetes and have tended to map textual and doctrinal similarities and differences. No monographic study has specifically explored how Tafsir al-Marāghī constructs ẓihār not merely as a rigid legal norm, but also as a defense of women's dignity and a social critique of rigid patriarchal culture.

To address this gap, the novelty of this study lies in its monographic and contextual analysis of Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī's interpretation of Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4. It examines how al-Marāghī positions the asbāb al-nuzūl (the complaint of Khaulah bint Thaʿlabah) as a moment of legal transformation that protects women's rights, and how the expiation mechanism serves as an instrument for educating ethical speech and promoting social responsibility. Accordingly, this study contributes to the development of research on legal verses (āyāt al-aḥkām) and Islamic family law (aḥwāl al-syakhṣiyyah) in the modern era.

Method

Research requires specific methods or stages to address research problems and obtain data from the object under study in accordance with the researcher's objectives. This study employs a descriptive-analytical method.

Results and Discussion

1. Interpretation Of The Verses On Ẓihār According To Tafsīr Al-Marāghī

Ẓihār is an issue related to marital relations that is specifically addressed in the Qur'an. The discussion of ẓihār appears in Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4 (Pentashihan, 2019). These four verses form a connected passage explaining the incident of ẓihār, Allah's response to a woman's complaint, and the expiation required of those who practice ẓihār. **(Pentashihan, 2019)**

a. Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4:

قَدْ سَمِعَ اللّٰهُ قَوْلَ الَّتِيْ تُجَادِلُكَ فِيْ زَوْجِهَا وَتَشْتَكِيْٓ اِلَى اللّٰهِ ۖوَاللّٰهُ يَسْمَعُ تَحَاوُرَكُمَا ۗاِنَّ اللّٰهَ سَمِيْعٌۢ بَصِيْرٌ ١
اَلَّذِيْنَ يُظٰهِرُوْنَ مِنْكُمْ مِّنْ نِّسَاۤىِٕهِمْ مَّا هُنَّ اُمَّهٰتِهِمْ ۗاِنْ اُمَّهٰتُهُمْ اِلَّا اللّٰۤـِٔيْ وَلَدْنَهُمْ ۗوَاِنَّهُمْ لَيَقُوْلُوْنَ مُنْكَرًا
مِّنَ الْقَوْلِ وَزُوْرًا ۗوَاِنَّ اللّٰهَ لَعَفُوٌّ غَفُوْرٌ ٢ وَالَّذِيْنَ يُظٰهِرُوْنَ مِنْ نِّسَاۤىِٕهِمْ ثُمَّ يَعُوْدُوْنَ لِمَا قَالُوْا فَتَحْرِيْرُ رَقَبَةٍ
مِّنْ قَبْلِ اَنْ يَّتَمَاۤسَّا ۗذٰلِكُمْ تُوْعَظُوْنَ بِهٖ ۗوَاللّٰهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُوْنَ خَبِيْرٌ ٣ فَمَنْ لَّمْ يَجِدْ فَصِيَامُ شَهْرَيْنِ
مُتَتَابِعَيْنِ مِنْ قَبْلِ اَنْ يَّتَمَاۤسَّا ۗفَمَنْ لَّمْ يَسْتَطِعْ فَاِطْعَامُ سِتِّيْنَ مِسْكِيْنًا ۗذٰلِكَ لِتُؤْمِنُوْا بِاللّٰهِ وَرَسُوْلِهٖ ۗوَتِلْكَ حُدُوْدُ
اللّٰهِ ۗوَلِلْكٰفِرِيْنَ عَذَابٌ اَلِيْمٌ

Translation: "Allah has indeed heard the words of the woman who pleads with you [Prophet Muhammad] concerning her husband and complains to Allah, while Allah hears the dialogue between you. Indeed, Allah is All-Hearing, All-Seeing. Those among you who declare their wives to be like their mothers their wives are not their mothers. Their mothers are only those who gave birth to them. They indeed utter an objectionable statement and a falsehood. Yet Allah is surely Pardoning and Forgiving. Those who declare their wives to be like their mothers and then wish to retract what they said must free an enslaved person before the two of them touch one another. This is an admonition for you, and Allah is fully aware of what you do. Whoever cannot find an enslaved person must fast for two consecutive months before the two of them touch one another. Whoever is unable to do so must feed sixty poor people. This is so that you may believe in Allah and His Messenger. These are the limits set by Allah, and the disbelievers will have a painful punishment" (Pentashihan, 2019). (Pentashihan, 2019)

b. Asbāb al-Nuzūl

These verses were revealed in connection with the complaint of a woman named Khaulah bint Thaʿlabah, who stated that her husband, Aus ibn al-Ṣāmit, had subjected her to ẓihār. She recounted that after she had performed the prayer, her husband asked her to fulfill her marital duties. Khaulah refused, and her husband became angry and pronounced ẓihār. She then went to the Prophet to report what had happened, saying, "Aus married me when I was young and desirable to people. But when I grew older, he declared ẓihār against me," likening her to his mother, with whom marital relations were prohibited. After hearing Khaulah's complaint, the Messenger of Allah replied, "I have received no instruction concerning this matter; in my view, you have become prohibited to your husband." Khaulah disputed this response and complained to Allah because she feared that the situation would separate her from her husband and children. Then this verse and the three verses that follow were revealed (Shihab, 2017). (Shihab, 2017)

c. Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī's Interpretation of Q.S. al-Mujādilah, Verses 1–4

According to Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verse 1, explains that Allah received a woman's complaint to the Messenger of Allah concerning her marital problem, which she then brought before her Lord. Allah knows every condition of His servants and had therefore heard the woman's conversation. He revealed guidance concerning her situation to ease her suffering, remove her distress, bring her comfort, and return her children to her embrace the children who were a source of sorrow and for whose sake she had brought her complaint to the Messenger of Allah (Al-Maragi, 1986). (Al-Maragi, 1986)

In explaining the second verse, al-Marāghī describes the legal details revealed by Allah in response to this incident and similar cases. When a man declares ẓihār against his wife by saying, for example, "You are to me like my mother's back," he means, "You are forbidden to me just as my mother is forbidden to me." This is an error. Allah clarifies that their wives are not their biological mothers. How, then, can they treat their wives as mothers? Their mothers are the women who gave birth to them. Comparing one's wife to one's mother is therefore an improper act for a husband to commit (Al-Maraghi, 1993). (Al-Maraghi, 1993)

Allah then explains the seriousness of this act. Such men have uttered a statement that is prohibited under Islamic law, irrational, and contrary to the natural order. How can a woman whom a man loves and who loves him in return, with whom he shares mutual affection as a married couple and a relationship unlike that between a mother and child, be equated with his mother? The mother–child relationship is marked by honor, reverence, and profound love. Moreover, a husband has responsibilities within the marital relationship, including guiding his wife when necessary. Such responsibilities do not apply to the relationship between a child and his mother. Therefore, likening one's wife to one's mother is a grave falsehood. If a husband utters such words, it is an abhorrent act; he should repent for the sin he has committed (Al-Maraghi, 1993). (Al-Maraghi, 1993)

Verses 3 and 4 explain the expiation required of a person who commits ẓihār. Al-Marāghī states that anyone who has uttered a statement of ẓihār and then wishes to resume marital relations must first fulfill the required expiation. This expiation atones for the objectionable statement and helps prevent the person from repeating the act.

a. a. Those who utter this objectionable statement, later recognize their mistake, and wish to retract it must free an enslaved person male or female before resuming marital relations, if they are able to do so. The law of expiation is prescribed to deter them from wrongdoing. Thus, expiation prevents sin. Allah knows all that people do; nothing is hidden from Him, and He will recompense their actions. Therefore, they must refrain from objectionable speech, observe the limits established by Him, and not transgress them.
b. b. If they cannot find an enslaved person or cannot afford one, they must fast for two consecutive months before resuming marital relations. If the

continuity of the fast is interrupted even near the end of the period, including because of an excuse or travel the fast must be restarted from the beginning, because the requirement of consecutive fasting has been broken.

c. c. If a person is unable to fast for two consecutive months because of old age or an illness that cannot be cured, the person must feed sixty poor people, providing each with half a ṣāʿ of wheat or one ṣāʿ of barley or dates (Al-Maraghi, 1993). (Al-Maraghi, 1993)

2. Analysis Of The Interpretation Of The Verses On Ẓihār

a. Legal Analysis

Based on Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī's interpretation of Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4, the researcher understands ẓihār to be an act prohibited in Islam. It involves a husband likening his wife to his mother or to another woman whom he is permanently forbidden to marry. Such a statement is described as objectionable and false because it does not correspond to reality (Al-Maragi, 1986). (Al-Maragi, 1986)

Al-Marāghī's interpretation indicates that ẓihār cannot be equated with ṭalāq (divorce). Divorce ends the marital relationship in accordance with the applicable rules, whereas ẓihār does not automatically dissolve the marriage. The woman remains her husband's wife and does not become his mother merely because he has uttered a statement of ẓihār. However, a husband who has committed ẓihār may not resume marital relations with his wife before completing the required expiation (Al-Maraghi, 1993). (Al-Maraghi, 1993)

This provision demonstrates a balance between imposing legal consequences and allowing an opportunity to correct a mistake. Islam does not immediately terminate a marriage because of an improper statement; instead, it gives the person an opportunity to recognize and rectify the mistake by performing the expiation. Thus, the law of ẓihār not only establishes consequences for an act but also serves an educative function, encouraging husbands to be more careful in the words they use toward their wives.

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Furthermore, the prohibition of ẓihār is related to respect for women within family life. A wife must not be treated or described in words that degrade her status. The rules concerning ẓihār can therefore be understood as a form of protection for a wife's dignity under Islamic law. They also teach that the marital relationship should be built on respect, responsibility, and the use of appropriate language.

b. Expiation (Kaffārah)

Al-Marāghī's interpretation suggests that expiation for ẓihār is a form of a husband's accountability for the words he has uttered. Expiation does not merely atone for the mistake; it also has an educational value, encouraging a person not to repeat the statement of ẓihār.

Under Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 3–4, the expiation for ẓihār consists of stages to be completed according to the person's ability.

1. 1. Freeing an enslaved person. This requirement shows that a person who commits ẓihār must not take his words lightly. He must accept responsibility before resuming marital relations with his wife. In the social context in which this rule was revealed, freeing an enslaved person also had a social benefit by ending that person's status as enslaved.
2. 2. Fasting for two consecutive months. If the person who committed ẓihār is unable to free an enslaved person, he must fast for two consecutive months. This requirement has an educational value because fasting cultivates patience, self-control, and discipline. The person is required not only to acknowledge his mistake but also to engage in worship as a means of self-improvement.
3. 3. Feeding sixty poor people. If the person who committed ẓihār is unable to fast for two consecutive months, he must feed sixty poor people. This requirement demonstrates the social dimension of expiation for ẓihār. An individual mistake is redirected toward an action that benefits others, particularly members of society in need.

These three forms of expiation show that Islamic law establishes a sequence of obligations while taking the individual's ability into account. This reflects a balance between accountability for wrongdoing and a person's capacity to fulfill the obligation.

In addition to serving as accountability for a mistake, expiation also functions as a preventive measure. The obligation can encourage people to be more careful when using words concerning the marital relationship. Thus, expiation for ẓihār is not only a means of atonement but also a form of moral education that encourages people to guard their speech, exercise self-control, and avoid repeating the same act.

c. The Wisdom Behind the Legislation of Ẓihār

Based on Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī's interpretation of Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4, the legislation concerning ẓihār embodies several forms of wisdom related to family and social life.

1. Preserving the wife's dignity.
   Ẓihār is prohibited because a wife is not her husband's mother. Such a comparison is inconsistent with the respective status of the two relationships. The rule therefore teaches husbands to preserve their wives' honor and dignity. It demonstrates Islam's concern for women's position in family life and its prohibition of language that can demean their dignity.
2. Teaching husbands to guard their speech.
   The verses on ẓihār teach that words within family life must not be spoken carelessly. A husband's words can affect his relationship with his wife.

Husbands are therefore expected to speak appropriately and responsibly. The obligation of expiation shows that objectionable speech has consequences for which the speaker must be held accountable.

3. Preventing actions that harm the wife.
   The obligation of expiation can be understood as a preventive measure to ensure that ẓihār is not used carelessly in family life. The legal consequences require a husband to consider his words before uttering ẓihār. This provision can thus prevent the use of language that causes pressure or harm to the wife.
4. Providing an opportunity to correct mistakes.
   Ẓihār does not automatically bring the marriage to an end. The person who commits it is given an opportunity to correct his mistake by completing the expiation before resuming marital relations with his wife. This shows that Islamic law not only imposes consequences for wrongdoing but also provides a path toward correction and moral development.
5. Maintaining harmony in the household.
   The rules concerning ẓihār emphasize the importance of maintaining communication between husband and wife. Marriage requires not only the fulfillment of rights and obligations but also mutual respect in words and actions. The prohibition of ẓihār can therefore remind spouses to avoid statements that may damage their relationship and household harmony.
6. Fostering social concern.
   Expiation for ẓihār has a social dimension, particularly through the requirement to feed sixty poor people when a person is unable to perform the preceding forms of expiation. This provision shows that addressing an individual mistake can be directed toward an act that benefits others. Expiation therefore has not only a devotional and personal-accountability dimension but also embodies social concern.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī's interpretation of the verses on ẓihār in Q.S. al-Mujādilah, verses 1–4, this study draws three main conclusions in line with its objectives.

First, al-Marāghī interprets ẓihār as a husband's statement likening his wife to a woman whom he is permanently forbidden to marry, such as his mother. In light of the historical context (asbāb al-nuzūl) of Khaulah bint Thaʿlabah's complaint, al-Marāghī emphasizes that ẓihār is an objectionable and false statement. However, it does not automatically dissolve the marriage through divorce; rather, it prohibits marital relations until the required expiation has been fulfilled.

Second, in al-Marāghī's interpretation, the law and sanctions relating to ẓihār are implemented gradually (tadarruj) through three levels of expiation: freeing an enslaved person, fasting for two consecutive months, or feeding sixty poor people. Al-Marāghī emphasizes the dual function of this expiation: it serves as atonement

for sin (kaffārah) and as a means of self-education, helping husbands control their speech and behavior within the household.

Third, the wisdom behind the legislation of ẓihār encompasses both internal and social dimensions. Internally, the rules protect the wife's rights and dignity, prevent a husband's arbitrary conduct, and create room for repairing the marital relationship. Socially, the expiation mechanism of feeding the poor transforms a legal sanction into a tangible expression of social concern.

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