

Published:
January 20, 2026

Feminist Approach to Quranic Interpretation: A Research Study of Kecia Ali's Methodology

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Abstract

This study explores Kecia Ali's feminist approach that she employs while interpreting the Quran, which sets her work at the hub of classical Islamic doctrine and the present-day ethical challenges. Ali's approach highlights a historically framed study of the Quran and Hadith, prioritizing factors like human dignity, justice, and gender equity. She analyzes the subjects of marriage, sexual ethics, polygamy, and female autonomy while critically employing conventional juristic texts to emphasize the way ethical reasoning can reinforce textual exegesis. This research reviews Kecia Ali's methodological framework that embodies textual analysis, historical contextualization, and contemporary feminist ethics to perceive her strategy of addressing the conflict between classical Islamic principles and the futuristic moral necessities. With a comprehensive analysis of Ali's methodology, this research adds to the extended discussion on female hermeneutics, interpretative ethics, and the growing role of the feminine perspective in Islamic scholarship. A qualitative and descriptive approach is adopted with a primary focus on the book *Sexual Ethics in Islam* by Kecia Ali, along with some other library resources.

Keywords: Kecia Ali, Feminist Methodology, Quranic Interpretation, Gender Equity, Sexual Ethics, Historical Contextualization

Published:
January 20, 2026

Introduction

American Islamic scholar Kecia Ali was born in 1972 and specializes in the study of Islamic law, ethics, women and gender. She presently teaches religion at Boston University. She formerly served as a research associate and postdoctoral researcher at Harvard Divinity School and Brandeis University and also served as president of the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics. Additionally, she collaborated with the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at the University¹. In 1993, Ali graduated with a BA in History and Feminist Studies, and then graduated from Duke University with an M.A. in religion in 2000 and a PhD in religion in 2002. She converted to Islam during her college years. Her major works include: *Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (2006), *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (2010), *Imam Shafi': Scholar and Saint* (2011), and *The Lives of Muhammad* (2014)².

Currently, there are no precise literary discussions or works specifically addressing the subject of sexual ethics in Islam and the role of women; however, there is a greater number of works that touch on the ideas of feminism and gender equality.

Some of the relevant publications include Aysha A. Hidayatullah – *Critique of Ali's feminist hermeneutics and ethical assumptions in Qur'anic interpretation* – 2014, Sherman: *A Response to Professor Kecia Ali*, Dr Mufti Kifayat Ullah and Maryam Noreen wrote *The Thoughts of Muslim Feminists, (Theologians)* Amina Wadud and Kecia Ali: *A Comparative Review*- 2024, Ziba Mir-Hosseini - "Muslim Legal Tradition and the Challenge of Gender Reform" (In this work, Mir-Hosseini discusses Islamic feminist scholars—including Kecia Ali— and critically examines the idea that Islamic legal tradition is uniformly and structurally androcentric.)– 2014, Hala Khoury-Bisharat – *Critique of feminist Qur'anic hermeneutics regarding interpretive authority* – 2012 and Abbas -in *Islamic perspectives on women's rights and the Quran, Hadith* -2025.

Published:
January 20, 2026

Kecia Ali's Methodology to Interpret the Quran

1. Historical Contextualization

Kecia Ali emphasizes understanding the injunctions of the Quran and Islamic jurisprudence in the context of historical circumstances, social structures, and human relations of that time. According to her, many injunctions were linked to specific social contexts that no longer exist. Therefore, it is important to keep the original content and historical background in mind when interpreting the Quran. She says, "Scripture emerged from particular social conditions³". According to her, jurisprudential principles are not always a direct interpretation of the text, but are also influenced by the needs and values of the society in which jurisprudence emerged. Therefore, jurisprudential rulings should not be read as sacred as the text itself. Rather, they should be viewed in conjunction with historical politics and social structures. Through this approach, she examines many rulings from a moral perspective. In her book, Kecia Ali, while mentioning seventh-century Arab society, says that society was based on tribes, patriarchy, and slavery. The legal status of women was limited. The rules of sex and marriage were tied to power structures. Therefore, she considers it an academic error to apply the same rulings to current Muslim society as they are. Allah Almighty says:

"أَلَا عَلَىٰ أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ"⁴

"Except with their wives or those 'bondwomen' in their possession, for then they are free from blame"

Quoting this verse as an example quoting this verse as an example, she claims that Malik al-Yaman (slavery) was lawful during that time but is now illegal. In this context, she references the marriage of Hazrat Aisha (may Allah be delighted with her). She situates this incident within the framework of Arab society in the seventh century⁵. Age was not an indicator of puberty during that time. Keeping this in mind, she regards child marriage as illegal.

Published:
January 20, 2026

2. Ethical Hermeneutics

In her assessment of the Quran, she places a high value on ethics, and it wouldn't be unreasonable to state that her approach is founded on ethics. "Ethics must guide interpretation⁶". The author states at the outset of her book *Sexual Ethics and Islam* that she is not an interpreter, but she portrays herself as a critical ethicist, and she appears to emphasize ethical interpretation throughout. She perceives the Quran as a dialogical work that serves as a "moral divine address". It calls on man to fulfil his moral obligations. As a result, the criterion for each interpretation is whether it improves the interpretations of justice, mercy, and human dignity or not. She evaluates the Sharia's goals from a human and moral standpoint. For her, that is what the goals entail: 1. Human dignity should be maintained. 2. Power should not be exploited. 3. Justice and mercy should be prioritized⁷. According to her, sexual and family laws cannot be properly understood without moral principles such as justice, mutual tolerance, and responsibility. As an example, she cites the verse of the Quran,⁸ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ عَاشِرُوهُنَّ وَ and which, according to the classical interpretation, refers to maintenance and financial aid. However, she believes that a marriage ought to be based on love, consent, non-coercion, and dignity. Kecia Ali primarily uses Sharia as a moral framework, asserting that an old ruling must be modified or a new interpretation must be introduced if it does not satisfy modern norms of justice.

3. Purposive Interpretation

According to Kecia Ali, the significance behind the verses in the Quran is more significant than their literal injunctions: "Meaning goes beyond literal text⁹". She views the Quran's teachings as balanced and comprehensive, where men's and women's rights are comparable. Furthermore, all forms of cruelty must be viewed as being at odds with the general precepts of the Quran. She places a strong emphasis on comprehending the Quran's fundamental spirit. Any jurisprudential interpretation that violates these moral ideals cannot be referred to as Islamic. This approach provides her with a basis for criticizing the gender inequality within jurisprudence. She believes that

Published:
January 20, 2026

the moral spirit, values, and objectives of the Quran serve as the primary source of knowledge rather than perusing it word for word. She says: "The Quran's moral vision maintains balance and justice between genders emphasizing compassion and equity"¹⁰,

"فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنً وَ ثُلَّةً وَ رُبْعًا"
"فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْوِلُوا"¹¹

"So marry women of your choice, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly, then (marry) only one or (provide for) the slave girls whom your right hands possess. That is closer to not being wronged."

According to her, this verse perfectly captures the idea of treating women with utmost compassion. However, traditional interpreters believe that allowing four weddings and being financially just are obligations¹². However, when one looks at it, the context of the verse was the equal treatment and rights of orphans rather than the desires of men. According to Kecia Ali, Wahidah (one wife) is the stated purpose of the Quran. Jurisprudence states that the husband cannot keep the inclination of the heart unbiased, but he would undoubtedly part with the financial and physical aspects. However, this equality has never been demonstrated in truth.

4. Critical Perspective on Hadith & Fiqh

Kecia Ali examines the historical development of the hadith collection, the gender biases found in it, and the social foundations of jurisprudential opinions, in addition to using conventional hadith material to interpret the Quran. She argues that hadith and jurisprudence should not be regarded as uncritical sources. She acknowledges that hadiths can be a source of guidance, but she places a high value on their historical context. Furthermore, she asserts that hadiths go through a variety of political, social, and legal channels. Rather than being the product of pure revelation, many gender related norms are the outcome of various historical processes. She views hadith as both historically layered and sacred. She states: **"Classical jurisprudence often prioritized legal consistency over ethical ideals; its conclusions were shaped by the social hierarchies in which jurists lived."**¹³ According to her, the Islamic legal tradition is a historical

Published:
January 20, 2026

activity that is descriptive rather than normative. She challenges hadith conventions that restrict or belittle women's rights. By analyzing their historical context, textual validity, and chain of transmission, she questions their interpretations. In her view, interpreters and their authoritative opinions are subjective decisions rather than universal ones.

5. Ethical Interpretation of Marriage & Sexuality

Kecia Ali challenges the conceptions of marriage and sexuality found in classical jurisprudence and hadith traditions. The subsequent lines address them.

(i) Marriage as an "Ownership Model"

According to Kecia Ali, marriage was viewed as a type of proprietary right in traditional Islamic law. It was thought of as a contract. The husband's right encompassed the wife's sexual availability.

"إِذَا دَعَا الرَّجُلُ امْرَأَتَهُ إِلَى فِرَاشِهِ فَلَمْ تَأْتِهِ، فَبَاتَ غَضَبَانَ عَلَيْهَا، لَعَنَّتُهَا الْمَلَائِكَةُ حَتَّى تُصْبِحَ 14"

According to this renowned hadith, if a wife refuses to engage in intercourse with her husband, the angels will curse her. She claims that jurists have effectively used this hadith to defend sexual coercion. This custom, according to Ali, is at odds with the moral understanding of consent that exists today. It was employed as a legal mechanism against the wife by the jurisprudence. According to Ali, it was not considered "unusual" in jurisprudence for a man to have multiple wives, as the wife was included in the husband's property. A man can have four wives and even concubines. There was no such right for a woman — it is a gross inequality. Ali puts the marital relationship in the context of the man's ownership.

(ii) Rights of Sexual Access:

According to Ali, various hadiths in conventional jurisprudence were regarded as implying that the husband's sexual right to the wife remains obligatory. The wife will be referred to as "nushuz نشوز" (disobedient) if she disagrees.

"وَإِذَا امْتَنَعَتْ مِنَ الْوِطْءِ بِلَا عَذْرِ كَانَتْ نَاشِزًا، وَسَقَطَتْ نَفَقَتُهَا. 15"

Published:
January 20, 2026

(iii) "Nushuz نشوز (Disobedience):

Ali says that according to the jurists, nushuz is mostly committed by the woman. They have discussed very little about the man's nushuz (e.g., distance from his wife, injustice). According to classical jurisprudence, a woman's dowry and maintenance, and even her residence, can be withheld as a result of her sexual intercourse. For example, Sexual compliance was regarded as a right and refusal as nushuz by the Hanafi school of thought¹⁶. And because of this, it was said that mehr and maintenance should also be abolished. The Hanbalis believed that a woman's primary responsibility was to "اجابته" (fulfill her husband's desires)¹⁷. Dower and maintenance are unattainable without penetration and tamkeen.

امام نووی: "النشوز: مخالفة المرأة لزوجها فيما يجب عليها من الطاعة. 18."

Nushūz refers to the deliberate disobedience of a spouse that violates the marital rights of the other partner. According to her, the implementation of hadith turns sexual interactions into a "sexual entitlement" rather than mutual consent. She says that the interpretation of the hadith and jurisprudence has linked "nushuz" to "sexual denial", which is an undue pressure on the woman. This is at odds with 21st-century moral standards.

(iv) Concubines (ملك يمين) :

According to Ali, Jurisprudence considered sexual intercourse with a slave woman to be a "right." Consent and marriage were not necessary. The whole concept is based on "ownership", not on morality. The Hanbali link sexual access to a concubine with the principles of gift (هبه) or sale¹⁹ (بيع). The relationship of a concubine is purely proprietary—sexual access allowed.

امام نووی: "ويجوز الوطء بملك اليمين بلا نكاح ولا إذن... 20"

A slave woman's sexual autonomy is not addressed in any of the hadiths or jurisprudential judgments. She refers to it as a "sexual hierarchy" system. —where the slave girl is at the bottom, the free woman is beneath him, and the man is at the top. Additionally, she admits that it is permitted under the phrase "أَيَّمَانُكُمْ مَلَكَتْ مَا" in both the Quran and the Sunnah.

Published:
January 20, 2026

(v) Wife Beating (واضربوهن):

In the Holy Quran's verse, "وَ اهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَ اضْرِبُوهُنَّ"²¹, Kecia Ali criticizes the interpretation of the word "وَ اضْرِبُوهُنَّ". All four schools of jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali) accept the word "ضرب" (to beat), but with strict restrictions, meaning "a light, harmless, symbolic beating". Their argument is this hadith: "فَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ ضَرْبًا غَيْرَ مُبْرِحٍ"²²: If they clearly disobey, then beat them with a beating that is not painful. Kecia Ali argues that this verse is connected to the historical and social context in which patriarchy was the norm. Therefore, the meaning of the word was influenced by this social structure. She accepts many modern interpretations according to which ضرب means separation or removal rather than hitting and violence. She considers these modern interpretations to be a moral evolution. Ali says that the traditions in which the husband is allowed to inflict "disciplinary beatings" have created a serious inequality on a moral and ethical level. She further says that these hadiths and jurisprudential interpretations give rise to a serious moral and ethical inequality. The jurists incorporated it into the marital system, which further weakened women.

(vi) Consummation Narratives (اتمام نكاح):

Kecia Ali mentions the different discussions on the age of Hazrat Ayesha at the time of marriage. She does not object to the hadith explicitly, but she analyzes its jurisprudential and social implications critically.

She examines the moral, historical, and social ramifications of these hadiths rather than declaring them to be invalid. She notes that classical jurisprudence depended only on tradition and gave no consideration to puberty or physical suitability for marriage. Sexual activity has been seen in the hadiths as a key indicator of the "validity" of marriage. In the same context, she also notes in a chapter on dower (مهر) that the property that the husband receives in return for having sexual access to the woman's body is known as dower in jurisprudential texts²³. According to jurisprudence precedent, a woman's dower (Mehr) is a feeble right until she engages in sexual activity. According to her, this idea

Published:

January 20, 2026

turns marriage into a kind of trade or buy and sell. She goes on to say that penetration is a consequence of the woman's complete alimony payment, according to jurisprudential clarity. As though there is a lease rather than mutual consent in this connection. Furthermore, she claims that this interpretation diminishes a woman's human standing to nothing more than physical advantage and causes a dilemma for contemporary moral norms²⁴.

(vii) Women's Right to Divorce:

According to Kecia Ali, women's vulnerability and power disparity are reflected in men's essentially comprehensive divorce privileges under traditional jurisprudence. She cites the hadith of Thaabit ibn Qays²⁵ «تتلقه وتلقها الحديقة اقبل» on Khula and says that the jurists explain the hadith in such a way that it became a financial burden for a woman to end the marriage, while a man could divorce her without any penalty. According to her, this entire system turns marriage into a financial and sexual contract, in which the woman's consent and her autonomy become less important. She therefore examines the jurisprudential notion of a woman's right to divorce critically and feels compelled to rethink it in light of contemporary moral standards. According to Ali, the main ethical flaw in "gender asymmetry"²⁶ Jurisprudence is that it was founded on only a handful of hadith sections.

6. Gender Critical Approach:

Kecia Ali's interpretation prioritises contemporary social equality and realities. She argues that the views of veteran jurists are not gender balanced since they were all male. She adopt feminist critique to analyze conventional theological or jurisprudential viewpoints. She attempts to demonstrate how the male-dominated social society shaped its predominant interpretations. She claims that rather than being based on the moral precepts of the Quran, many of the rulings were construed in accordance with the sociocultural preferences of male scholars. "Patriarch shaped juristic reasoning"²⁷.

"الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ"²⁸

Published:
January 20, 2026

She questions the conventional understanding of Quran verse 4:34, which views the Qawamah as male power and superiority. She argues that rather than imposing authority or sovereignty, men are assigned the duty of keeping up with the family. In her book, she writes: The male authority in the household should be understood in light of the broader Qur'anic principles of justice and mutual care rather than as an absolute privilege²⁹. According to Kecia Ali, Qiwāma legitimizes male dominance and female subordination in marriage. In jurisprudence, the male's financial responsibility is made a source of authority, making marriage unequal and limiting the woman's autonomy. According to Ali, this system needs to be rethought in line with modern ethics and feminist standards.

Criticism of Kecia Ali's Methodology:

Several researchers, scholars, and critics have strongly opposed the broader discussion on Islamic feminist interpretation and the reinterpretation of the Quran, even though Kecia Ali herself is a critical analyst.

(i) Predominance of Ethical Modernism:

Kecia Ali's interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith is shaped by contemporary Western ethical perspectives, which influence her reading of the original historical context. This method of perception replaces the "masculine jurisprudential tradition" with a new intellectual monopoly³⁰. This point of view diverges from established jurisprudential norms.

(ii) Intellectual Contradiction of Islamic Feminism:

According to some scholars, she presents a theoretical synthesis that attempts to reconcile the two distinct intellectual frameworks of Islam and feminism. This synthesis leaves some important intellectual contradictions unclear. Ali's Islamic feminism creates an unstable theory by combining the two distinct intellectual systems of Islam and Western feminism. In it, the sanctity of Sharia becomes merely "discursive"³¹. This approach deprives the texts of historical meaning.

Published:
January 20, 2026

(iii) Modern Interpretations of Sharia:

Ali judges jurisprudence and hadith by modern human rights standards, which is contrary to historical integrity. Interpreting ancient jurisprudential issues by contemporary moral standards distorts the context of the text. It weakens the scholarly complexities of jurisprudence³². Some scholars argue that the harmony that Kecia Ali seeks between “principles of Sharia” (or jurisprudential traditions) and modern “social realities/modern values” ignores the complexity and divergence of jurisprudential history and traditional interpretations. One argument, for instance, is that contemplating the Quran and Hadith only in terms of equality or contemporary human rights is a process of “contextualization,” yet this may result in the loss of the “transparency” that jurists have developed over time. Additionally, she standardize contemporary Western ethics and goes beyond the principles of jurisprudence.

(iv) Interpretation of the word Qawam:

Despite being linked to Ali's intellectual community, feminist researcher Aisha Chaudhry acknowledges that Ali has made several overgeneralized assumptions. Her views about verse 4:34 (“Qawameet”) in particular totally contradict several historical traditions³³. This disparity demonstrates how, even among feminist scholars, Ali's perspective is not universally accepted.

(v) Doubts Regarding Hadith:

Some of Ali's works have shown excessive queries regarding the Hadith assortment, according to renowned scholar Asma Barlas. According to her, although many of the obstacles are associated with “jurisprudential sociology,” Ali characterizes them as “textual corruption” issues. Ali attempts to simplify the complex moral, social, and normative tradition of jurisprudence and replace it with a “modern ethic of equal rights.” She calls this an “anachronistic reading,” that is, the error of reading an old text through the lens of a new ethic. Critics refer to it as an “anachronistic reading,” or an oversight of interpreting a classic text from the perspective of a modern morality. Kecia Ali has emphasized the need for ijtihad in jurisprudence and criticized the fact that ancient

Published:
January 20, 2026

interpretations of jurisprudence are not compatible with the requirements of the modern era. Some scholars have objected that her *ijtihad* is inconsistent with current jurisprudential traditions and may threaten the foundations of Islamic law.

Conclusion:

Kecia Ali's approach to interpretation is based primarily on a combination of ethical modernism, feminist thought, and textual criticism. She peruses the Quran, Hadith, and jurisprudence from a perspective that places contemporary moral and social queries at the centre. Following this approach, she partially challenges traditional jurisprudential structures, historical tradition, and principles of jurisprudence, and at times finds it necessary to reframe them in accordance with a new moral perspective. This discussion makes it clear that while her approach advocates questioning, calls for change, and the pursuit of moral fairness, however, such an approach brings about certain clear challenges and disadvantages.

The primary flaw is that she interprets plenty of subjects in an unbalanced historical fashion by excluding them from their historical context and viewing them in terms of contemporary morality. Another downside is that, in her reasoning, the classical scholarly tradition and jurisprudential principles are subjugated consequently the interpretation of the Sharia text sounds inadequate in the absence of those standards. Furthermore, Ali's approach also tends to be "overly critical" of traditional texts and to downplay the "diversity within the shari'ah tradition" at certain points. This leads to a generalization and one-sidedness in her interpretations. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that her work raises important questions about Islamic ethics, gender discourse, and jurisprudential tradition that are useful and necessary for contemporary scholarly discourse.

Suggestions & Recommendations:

1. To better understand the methodology of Kecia Ali, a comparative study of traditional and modern interpretations should be conducted. This will clarify the unique status of the ideas.
2. To effectively portray these insights in the context of current challenges, additional research must be done on the gender equality aspects of the Quran.

Published:
January 20, 2026

3. When critiquing Kecia Ali's approach, a fair viewpoint should be offered. This can provide a glimpse into women's difficulties, considering the universal nature of the Quran and Hadith.

4. To obtain a deeper grasp of the teachings of the Quran while eliminating disagreements, discussion of Kecia Ali's views and approach should be encouraged among various segments of the Muslim Ummah.

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