

The Meanings of *Zawj* and *Imra'ah* in the Qur'ān: A Lexico-Statistical Analysis

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Abstract: The Qur'ān's deliberate selectivity in its lexical choices stands as one of its remarkable linguistic features. A detailed examination of individual words used in varied contexts is essential for an accurate interpretation of its meanings. This study focuses on two pivotal Qur'ānic terms: *zawj* and *imra'ah*. Despite their frequent appearance, comprehensive lexico-statistical analyses of these terms remain unexplored. This paper addresses this gap by (1) contextualising *zawj* and *imra'ah* within their Qur'ānic occurrences, (2) critically reviewing traditional and contemporary scholarly interpretations, (3) systematically cataloguing their morphological derivatives in both nominal and verbal forms, and (4) differentiating between their broad and specific semantic roles throughout the text. This multifaceted approach reveals subtle but significant semantic distinctions between *zawj*—often denoting pairs or companions—and *imra'ah*—primarily referring to women, particularly in individualised social and legal contexts—thus enriching our understanding of their nuanced usage in the Qur'ān.

Keyword: *Imra'ah*, Lexical Distinctions, Miraculous Usages, Nominal and Verbal Derivatives, Semantics, *Wujūh wa Nazā'ir* (Forms and Parallels), *Zawj*

Abstrak: Bahasa merupakan aspek yang paling menonjol dari kemukjizatan Al-Qur'an melalui pemilihan kosa kata dan makna yang dimunculkannya. Analisis mendalam terhadap kata-kata yang digunakan dalam konteks yang beragam sangat penting untuk interpretasi yang akurat terhadap maknanya. Studi ini berfokus pada dua istilah Qur'āni yang penting: *zawj* dan *imra'ah*. Meskipun kedua kata tersebut sering muncul, analisis leksiko-statistik komprehensif terhadap istilah-istilah ini masih belum dieksplorasi. Penelitian ini berusaha untuk menganalisis dua kosa kata ini dengan berusaha (1) menempatkan *zawj* dan *imra'ah* dalam konteks kemunculannya di dalam Al-Qur'an, (2) meninjau secara kritis interpretasi dari mufassir tradisional dan kontemporer, (3) mendokumentasikan secara sistematis turunan morfologisnya dalam bentuk nomina dan verba, serta (4) membedakan peran semantik secara umum dan spesifik dari kedua kosa kata ini. Pendekatan dari beragam aspek ini mengungkapkan perbedaan semantik yang signifikan antara *zawj*—sering kali merujuk pada pasangan atau teman—and *imra'ah*—merujuk pada perempuan, terutama dalam konteks sosial dan hukum individual—sehingga memperkaya pemahaman kita tentang penggunaannya dalam Al-Qur'an.

Kata Kunci: *Imra'ah*, Perbedaan Leksikal, Penggunaan yang Ajaib, Turunan Nominal dan Verbal, Semantik, *Wujūh wa Nazā'ir* (Bentuk dan Paralel), *Zawj*

1. Introduction

A semantic examination of a text and the analytical study of its vocabulary constitute fundamental methods for arriving at the precise intent and meaning intended by the speaker. Such an approach to

the Qur'ān—given its role as a guide to human felicity and perfection—holds special significance. From a linguistic perspective, semantics is the discipline that investigates meaning or, more precisely, the branch that examines the necessary conditions of a sign so that it can carry meaning ('Umar, 2006, p. 19).

Attention to Qur'ānic context (*sīāq*) in understanding the Divine Word has long been a focal point for lexicographers. Imam al-Ṭabarī is among the exegetes who devoted considerable attention to this method (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000, p. 122). Similarly, Raghib al-Isfahānī's *Mufradāt* elucidates word meanings through contextual analysis (Zarkashī, 1956, p. 291). Works on *wujūh wa-naẓā'ir* (forms and parallels) likewise have relied on this approach to derive precise lexical significations.

The Qur'ān frequently endows its vocabulary with context-bound meanings, and at times a word cannot be understood apart from its *sīāq*. Among the terms the Qur'ān employs are *zawj* and *imra'ah*, both of which, in certain verses, denote "a man's spouse." However, the Qur'ān sometimes uses *zawj* and elsewhere *imra'ah* for this same referent. While many scholars have treated these two words as synonymous, a careful contextual analysis suggests that their Qur'ānic usages convey distinct semantic nuances.

Several scholarly investigations have examined the terms *zawj* and *imra'ah* within the Qur'ān. Sharīfī and Ṣalīḥī (2017) conducted a semantic study that initially explores the lexical meanings of *zawj* and *imra'ah*, followed by an analysis of their diverse senses in the Qur'ānic text. Their study further examines the criteria for recognising two individuals as spouses (*itlāq al-zawjīyah*) from a Qur'ānic perspective, the conditions that annul this spousal relationship, the interaction between *zawj* and *imra'ah*, and the semantic distinctions between these terms.

Anṣārīān (2017) investigates the occurrences of *zawj* and *imra'ah* in the Qur'ān and addresses related controversies. The research defines their lexical semantics, catalogs their Qur'ānic utilisations, analyses co-occurring words with *zawj*, and evaluates whether the two terms are interchangeable in the Qur'ānic context. The study also discusses the conceptualisation of *zawjīyah* as both a natural (*takwīnī*) and a legislated (*taṣrī'i*) institution, providing a critique of Bint Shāṭī's theory.

Ḥusaynī and Anṣārīān (2018) examine *imra'ah*, *zawj*, and *nisā'* comparatively, focusing on their Qur'ānic applications and semantic differences. Their research explores related marital injunctions, behaviors of the Prophet's wives, spiritual interpretations of *zawj*, and the Qur'ānic emphasis on family procreation.

The present study differs from the works cited above in several respects. Beyond delineating the lexical distinctions between "zawj" and "imra'ah", it systematically examines their general and specific senses as well as their nominal and verbal derivatives. It draws not only on the primary Sunni exegetical tradition but also—where relevant—on Christian sources. Seven leading scholars of 'wujūh wa-naẓā'ir' have been selected as focal points. Through a lexico-statistical analysis grounded in their opinions, the study extracts all relevant nominal and verbal derivatives and identifies each term's specific and general meanings. Furthermore, by engaging both classical and contemporary specialist commentators, it explicates the Qur'ānic usage of "zawj" and "imra'ah" in depth.

Relying on the total corpus of occurrences for each word, this paper offers a precise semantic comparison. This study commences with a precise definition of the terms "zawj" and "imra'ah" as delineated by classical lexicographers, establishing a rigorous linguistic framework. Subsequently, it systematically catalogs and examines all nominal and verbal derivatives of these terms within the Qur'ān, thus providing a thorough lexical analysis. The inquiry then evaluates the importance of the discipline of *wujūh wa-naẓā'ir* and critically reviews the interpretations of these terms by its preeminent scholars. Finally, the research elucidates the Qur'ānic applications of "zawj" and "imra'ah", articulating their semantic distinctions with scholarly precision. What remains implicit, however, is how these distinctions were subsequently absorbed into the exegetical tradition and made to bear theological and social significance.

2. The Lexical Meaning of *Zawj* (زوج) and *Imra'ah* (امرأة) According to Lexicographers

In this section, the lexical meanings of the two terms *zawj* (زوج) and *imra'ah* (امرأة) are examined according to classical Arabic lexicographers and linguistic dictionaries.

Lexical Definition of "Zawj"

The term *zawj* functions as the antonym of *fard* ("single"). In its primary denotation, it signifies a counterpart, companion, or associate (Manzūr, n.d.). It also refers to each individual of a male or female pair among animals, collectively termed *zawjān* (Al-Farāhīdī, n.d.).

Classical lexicographers maintain that the root meaning of *zawj* is simply "juxtaposition" or "proximity," applicable to both men and women; however, when it occurs alongside *ba'l* ("husband") or another explicitly masculine noun, it specifically denotes the husband's spouse (Fāris, 2008). Additionally, *zawj* is applied to any member of a matched pair regardless of gender—such as a shoe and its sole—and more broadly to any two entities conjoined or associated, whether similar or contrasting.

Moreover, the term *zawj* extends to certain material objects: it denotes the *namat*, a multicolored canopy placed over a palanquin, and pairs of colored hangings used as curtains (Al-İsfahānī, 1412) (Raghib al-İsfahānī 1412 AH: 384; al-Zabīdī 1205 AH: 6:21–22).

Lexical Definition of "Imra'ah"

Classical lexicographers assert that the root noun *mar'* denotes "man," whereas *imra'ah* signifies "woman," and that *imra'ah* is employed exclusively for human beings—analogous to how *muru'a* connotes "manliness" or "humanity" (Al-İsfahānī, 1412). Regarding *imra'ah*, derived from the root *m-r'*, lexica describe it as the feminine form of *mar'* (Al-Zabīdī, 1205).

Some scholars further explain that *mar'* refers to a man characterised by qualities such as striving (*jihād*), endurance, and steadfastness; and that when *imra'ah* appears in the singular without accompaniment by a masculine name, it likewise carries these attributes (Muṣṭafawī, n.d.). Moreover, the terms *nisā'*, *niswān*, and *niswa*—all broken plurals meaning "women"—lack a dedicated singular form, which necessitates the use of *imra'ah* as the singular equivalent (Al-Fayyūmī, n.d.).

3. Importance of Recognizing Qur'ānic *Wujūh* and *Nazā'ir*

Prior to examining the *wujūh*-related dimensions of *zawj* and *imra'ah*, it is necessary to introduce the terminology of this discipline and underscore its significance. In the Qur'ān, *wujūh* ("faces" or "senses") and *nazā'ir* ("parallels") denote that a single lexical form may assume different meanings according to its various textual contexts. *Nazā'ir* refers to the repetition of a word across multiple passages, while *wujūh* indicates the multiple senses that the repeated word acquires in those contexts (Al-İsfahānī, 1412).

Al-Suyūtī defines *wujūh* as a shared lexical form—such as *al-ummah*—that is employed with several distinct meanings, whereas *nazā'ir* comprises those instances in which the form retains a uniform sense. He explains that *nazā'ir* pertains to the word itself, whereas *wujūh* pertains to its manifold meanings (Suyūtī, 1974).

By distinguishing these concepts, scholars can trace how the Qur'ān's miraculous eloquence derives in part from its strategic deployment of polysemy and parallelism—a methodological foundation for our subsequent analysis of *zawj* and *imra'ah*. It is noteworthy that the study of *wujūh* (senses) and *nazā'ir* (parallels) in semantic analysis is essential for uncovering the objectives of the Qur'ānic verses and apprehending God's intended meanings. These investigations hold great significance because they offer a direct, field-based study of the Qur'ānic text by systematically examining the multiple semantic meanings that a single lexical item can take on in different contexts (Suyūtī, 1974). This area of study is closely connected with various Islamic sciences and did not develop

as an isolated discipline; instead, it evolved through the combined efforts of scholars specializing in lexicon, exegesis, and *uṣūl* (principles of jurisprudence) (Juzayy, 1984). Such analyses clarify the specific purposes and subtle intentions a term adopts across diverse textual settings, since if a word had only one fixed meaning in every context, it would create obvious contradictions—something the Book of God completely avoids (Various Authors, 2002, p. 602).

Furthermore, although early scholars did not originally ascribe a dedicated technical term to this field, it nonetheless represents a deeply rooted science within the broader Qur'ānic studies tradition. It is also noteworthy that some scholars trace the emergence of this discipline to the Prophet's own era, others to the Companions, and still others to the generation of the *Tābi'īn* (Ken'ānī, 2013). In this context, numerous authorities have engaged with *wujūh wa-naṣā'ir* both theoretically and comparatively, including Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, Ibn Zāghūnī, Abū al-Faraj ibn Juzayy, Dāmīghānī, and Abū al-Ḥusayn ibn Farīs (Zarkashī, 1956), as well as Abū al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Samad al-Miṣrī (Suyūtī, 1974). Later scholars such as Ṣalīḥ al-Qar'awī have likewise contributed works in this field (Qa'rūāy, n.d.).

In both cases, “purified spouses” translates *azwāj muṭahhara*, illustrating the nominal use of *zawj* in a Qur'ānic paradise context.

4. Nominal and Verbal Derivatives of “Zawj” in the Qur'ān: A Morphological and Semantic Analysis

This section provides a thorough examination of the derivatives of the Arabic root ز-و-ج (z-w-j) as attested in the Qur'ānic corpus, utilising authoritative Qur'ānic lexicons and concordance data to elucidate the morphological patterns and semantic ranges of these derivatives. The analysis contributes to an enhanced understanding of Qur'ānic vocabulary derivation, which is essential for philological and linguistic studies in the field of Qur'ānic Arabic (Hefny et al., 2022).

Occurrences and Morphological Classification

A corpus-based concordance study indicates that derivatives of the root ز-و-ج occur a total of 81 times in the Qur'ān, demonstrating a predominance of nominal forms (76 instances) over verbal forms (5 instances) (Zakī, 2012).

Nominal Forms

The nominal derivatives primarily include the singular (زوج) (*zawj*) and its plural (أزواج) (*azwāj*). The plural form often designates “spouses” or “pairs” and carries significant theological and eschatological implications in the Qur'ānic context. For example:

In Qur'ān 2:25, the phrase “وَلَمْ فِيهَا أَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ” (*wa lahum fihā azwāj muṭahhara*) is translated as “and they will have therein purified spouses” illustrating the eschatological promise of purified partners in Paradise. Similarly, Qur'ān 3:15 reiterates this motif of purified companions in the divine gardens.

Singular nominal usage, as seen in (زوج) (*zawj*), denotes “pair” or “spouse,” and is employed to describe both human relationships, e.g., Qur'ān 4:20 concerning marriage and dowry regulations, as well as broader natural phenomena, such as in Qur'ān 22:5 referring to pairs across creation (“مِنْ كُلِّ زَوْجٍ بَاهِيٍّ”) (*min kulli zawjin bahī*) (Zakī, 2012).

Verbal Forms

Verbal derivatives of the root ز-و-ج in the intensive morphological pattern (تفعيل / *tufa 'il*) appear both in perfect and imperfect forms. These verbs convey the action of pairing or coupling and are integral in narrating matrimonial acts within Qur'ānic discourse: Qur'ān 33:37 uses the verb (“زَوْجَنَاكَ”) (*zawwajnāka*), meaning “we married you,” reflecting divine agency in matchmaking. Meanwhile,

Qur'an 42:50 exemplifies the active verbal form ("يُزَوْجُهُمْ") (*yuzawwijuhum*) meaning "he marries them off," describing divine control over pairing of males and females.

This morphological and syntactic versatility underscores the lexical richness of the root and its theological nuances within the text (Zakī, 2012; Hefny et al., 2022).

Nominal Derivatives of "Imra'ah" in the Qur'an: Exclusive Nominal Usage

In contrast to the root زوج (zawj), the term (إِمْرَأَةٌ) (*imra'ah*) is exclusively attested as a nominal form in the Qur'an, with no verbal derivatives recorded (Zakī, 2012). The noun occurs 38 times and is consistently used to denote "woman" within a variety of scriptural contexts: Qur'an 7:83 describes the wife of Prophet Lot who remains behind in disobedience. Qur'an 19:28 addresses Mary as "O sister of Aaron," with explicit familial and nuancing significance. Qur'an 4:176 features the term in legal and inheritance discourses.

The absence of verbal derivatives for زوجة highlights its specialized lexical function and its gendered nominal specificity within the Qur'anic lexicon, marking a divergent morphological pattern from "zawj" (Zakī, 2012)

5. General and Specific Meanings of "Zawj" and "Imra'ah"

This section analyse the meanings of the terms *zawj* (spouse) and *imra'ah* (woman), as delineated by scholars specializing in *wujūh wa-naṣā'ir*, the semantic study of Qur'anic terminology exhibiting multiple contextual interpretations. The subsequent categorization of these meanings is based on the following scholarly criterion (see table 3 in the appendix).

General meanings denote interpretations endorsed by a consensus of more than two distinguished scholars within the field. Specific meanings refer to those interpretations upheld by only one or two scholars. This classification facilitates a systematic understanding of the semantic range of these terms, grounded in authoritative academic consensus.

General Meanings of the Term Zawj

A thorough review of the scholarly discourse within the field of *wujūh wa-naṣā'ir* (semantic equivalents and multi-faceted terms in the Qur'an) reveals a consensus among numerous scholars regarding the term *zawj*. These scholars consistently recognise several predominant connotations attributed to this term. In this article, such recurrent interpretations are designated as general meanings, encompassing the following categories:

a) *Halā'il* (Lawful Spouses)

One of the most frequently mentioned meanings of *zawj* in the Qur'an is *halā'il*, denoting lawful spouses. This can be observed in verses such as:

"or they are given things in similitude; and they have therein companions (pure and holy); and they abide therein (for ever)..." (Qur'an 2:25)

"In what your wives leave your share is a half if they leave no child..." (Qur'an 4:12).

Several prominent scholars specialising in *wujūh wa-naṣā'ir*, including Qur'āwī, al-Dāmighānī, Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī, Hārūn, and Behrooz, support this interpretation (Al-'Askarī, 2007, p. 243; Behrooz, 1987, p. 394; Dāmighānī, 2003, p. 248; Hārūn, 1988, p. 297; Qar'āwī, 1990, p. 325).

b) *Aṣnāf* (Categories or Kinds)

Another well-known meaning of زوج is أصناف, which refers to categories or types. This meaning is found in the following Qur'anic verses: "That has created pairs In all things..." (Qur'an 43:12). Also

"...And it puts forth every kind Of beautiful growth (in pairs)" (Qur'an 22:5). Again, this interpretation is consistently cited by the same group of scholars (Al-'Askarī, 2007, p. 243; Behrooz, 1987, p. 394; Dāmighānī, 2003, p. 248; Hārūn, 1988, p. 297; Qar'āwī, 1990, p. 325).

c) *Qaranā'* (Companions or Associates)

The term *zawj* can also carry the meaning of *qaranā'* (companions or associates), as seen in the following verse: "Bring ye up", It shall be said, " The wrong-doers And their wives..." (Qur'an 37:22). This meaning is also confirmed by the scholars mentioned earlier (Al-'Askarī, 2007, p. 243; Behrooz, 1987, p. 394; Dāmighānī, 2003, p. 248; Hārūn, 1988, p. 297; Qar'āwī, 1990, p. 325).

Specific Meanings of the Term Zawj

After identifying the general meanings of the term *zawj*—which have been categorized under three main concepts (*halā'il* [lawful spouses], *aṣnāf* [categories/kinds], and *qaranā'* [companions/associates])—this section examines its specific meanings. As noted earlier, the term *specific meanings* here refer to those interpretations of *zawj* which are supported by fewer than three scholars of *wujūh wa-nazā'ir*.

Upon a meticulous review of the major works on *wujūh wa-nazā'ir*, it becomes evident that only two specific meanings have been identified for this term. These are *zawjāt* (wives) and *ḥūr al-īn* (heavenly maidens with wide eyes). These meanings were explicitly mentioned by only two scholars in this field: Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Hīrī. Both scholars have classified *zawj* in certain Qur'anic contexts as referring to *zawjāt* and *ḥūr al-īn*. For example, God Almighty states: "We said: "O Adam! dwell thou and thy wife in the garden..." (Qur'an 2:35). This interpretation is supported by Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Hīrī (Al-Hīrī, 1995, p. 40; Al-Jawzī, 1984, p. 337).

Therefore, the specific meanings associated with the word *zawj* according to these scholars are limited to the two concepts of *zawjāt* (wives) and *ḥūr al-īn* (heavenly companions) (see table 5 in the appendix).

Specific Meanings of the Term Imra'a

This study previously established criteria to differentiate between general and specific meanings of terms. In this section, we concentrate on the specific meanings of the term امرأة as found in the Qur'an. These specific instances include:

The Arabic term *imra'a*, meaning woman, holds multiple specific referents in the Qur'anic text, each illustrating distinct female figures of religious and historical significance. For instance, (1) Zuleikha, the wife of the Egyptian governor known as 'Azīz, is identified by this term in the context of her unsuccessful attempt to seduce Prophet Joseph, as indicated in the verse: "Said the 'Aziz's wife : "Now is the truth manifest (To all) : it was I Who sought to seduce him From his (true) self : He is indeed of those Who are (ever) true (and virtuous)" (Qur'an 12:51).

Similarly, (2) Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, is represented by *imra'a* in the verse noting her regal authority and grandeur: "I found (there) a woman Ruling over them and provided With every requisite ; and she Has a magnificent throne." (Qur'an 27:23). Another key figure is (3) Asiya, the wife of Pharaoh, who is held up as an exemplar of faith and virtue despite her husband's tyranny. As recounted in the Qur'an, she rescued the infant Moses and said, "The wife of Pharaoh said, '[This child] will be a comfort to my eyes and yours. Do not kill him; perhaps he may benefit us or we may adopt him as a son'" (Qur'an 28:9). Asiya's story is further distinguished by her defiant faith in God, even under persecution by Pharaoh, and she is extolled as one of the noblest women in Islam, revered for her courage and steadfastness.

Other women referenced by *imra'a* include (4) Sarah, wife of Ibrahim, who is mentioned in the context of receiving glad tidings of Isaac and Jacob (Qur'an 11:71); also to (5) Hannah, wife of 'Imrān

and mother of Mary, who dedicated her unborn child to God's service (Qur'an 3:35); and (6) the wives of Prophets Lot and Noah, both referenced in narratives of divine judgment and faithlessness (Qur'an 29:33; 66:10). The term also extends to figures such as (7) Umm Jamīl, wife of Abū Lahab, known for her hostility to the Prophet Muhammad (Qur'an 111:4), and (8) Maymūna, one of the wives of Prophet Muhammad himself (Qur'an 33:50). Moreover, *imra'a* is sometimes used in a more general, unspecified sense for women, as in legal contexts concerning testimony (Qur'an 2:282).

These various applications of *imra'a* underscore a rich tapestry of female identities in Qur'anic exegesis, documented by scholars like al-Ḥīrī and Bahruz, highlighting the term's range from specific historical personalities to broader societal roles. Notably, the figure of Asiya exemplifies the virtuous woman who, despite her husband's oppressive rule, maintains her faith and moral integrity, a narrative lauded throughout Islamic tradition for its spiritual and ethical implications. This multifaceted usage of *imra'a* reveals the Qur'an's nuanced engagement with women's roles across a spectrum of religious, familial, and social contexts (Al-Ḥīrī, 1995, p. 57; Bahruz, 1987, p. 60).

General Meanings of the Term Imra'a

After a thorough examination and analysis of the major works on *wujūh wa naṣā'ir* (semantic fields and lexical analogues), it appears that no general meaning can be consistently assigned to the term *imra'a*.

6. Qur'anic Application of *Zawj* and *Imra'a*

An in-depth analysis of the meanings of *zawj* and *imra'a* in lexical sources and exegetical works demonstrates that most lexicographers do not make a significant distinction between these two terms—apart from the differences previously mentioned. However, within the Qur'anic context, there exists a clear distinction in their application, a point occasionally noted in certain exegetical works regarding specific cases.

This study seeks to explore the semantic distinction between these two terms by analyzing their Qur'anic contexts. For instance, the term *zawj* in the Qur'an frequently appears in contexts associated with mercy (*rahma*), blessings (*ni'ma*), harmony, and positive companionship. Examples of such usage include the following verses:

"But give glad tidings to those who believe and work righteousness that their portion is Gardens beneath which rivers flow. Every time they are fed with fruits therefrom they say: 'Why this is what we were fed with before' for they are given things in similitude; and they have therein companions (pure and holy); and they abide therein (for ever)" (Qur'an 2:25).

Similarly, in the verse: "We said: "O Adam! dwell thou and thy wife in the garden.." (Qur'an 2:35), and in the verse: "The Prophet is closer To the Believers than Their own selves, And his wives are Their mothers" (Qur'an 33:6).

As observed in the aforementioned three verses, the term *zawj* denotes spouses who are virtuous, faithful, and obedient. The first verse refers to the *azwāj muṭahhara* (purified spouses) promised to the believers in Paradise. The second verse refers to the primordial marital relationship between Adam and his spouse, Hawwā' (Eve), the mother of humankind. In the third verse, *azwāj* is employed in reference to the noble, purified wives of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him).

In each of these instances, the term *zawj* conveys a sense of companionship, mutual association, and intimate partnership. Consequently, God employs this term to describe these harmonious and revered marital relationships (Dawud, 2008, p. 279).

Upon a careful inductive analysis of the Qur'ān, it becomes evident that the term *zawj* is employed when the concept of complete marital partnership (*zawjiyyah*) is established between a man and a woman. This completeness encompasses mutual companionship, harmony, cohesion, and the absence

of any religious, physical, or psychological conflict between the spouses. However, when such harmony and cohesion are absent—due to religious, physical, or psychological differences—the Qur'ān uses the term *imra'ah* instead of *zawj*.

For instance, the Qur'ān uses *zawj* in contexts that highlight marital tranquility, affection, and mercy, as seen in the following verses: “*And among His Signs Is this, that He created For you mates from among Yourselves, that ye may Dwell in tranquillity with them, And He has put love And mercy between your (hearts) : Verily in that are Signs For those who reflect.*” (al-Rūm 30:21), and “*And those who pray, “ Our Lord! Grant unto us Wives and offspring who will be The comfort of our eyes, And give us (the grace) To lead the righteous.*” (al-Furqān 25:74) (Al-Khālidī, 2016, p. 283).

Conversely, the term *imra'ah* is employed in the Qur'ān in cases where such qualities are absent from the marital relationship. For example, it is used for women who are disbelievers or whose marriages lack full cohesion. This usage appears in the verse: “*And God sets forth, As an example To those who believe, The wife of Pharaoh : Behold she said : “ O my Lord ! build For me, in nearness To Thee, a mansion In the Garden, And save me from Pharaoh And his doings And save me from Those that do wrong*” (al-Tāhrīm 66:11), and in another verse: “*His wife shall carry The (crackling) wood –As fuel!*” (al-Masad 111:4).

In these cases, the Qur'ān intentionally refrains from using *zawj*, as it connotes companionship and mutual harmony. Instead, it uses *imra'ah*, which merely denotes femininity, emphasizing that no spiritual or moral concord exists between the spouses. The term is employed here solely to describe the biological gender, particularly when highlighting the moral divergence between believers and disbelievers.

Thus, when cohesion, harmony, and mutual agreement between a man and a woman are disrupted due to certain obstacles, the Qur'ān employs the term *imra'ah* instead of *zawj*. This distinction is evident in the previously mentioned verses as well, where God refers to the wives of Noah and Lot using the term *imra'ah*:

“*God sets forth, For an example To the Unbelievers, the wife of Noah And the wife of Lūt : They were (respectively) Under two of Our righteous Servants, but they were False to their (husbands), And they profited nothing Before God on their account, But were told : “ Enter ye The Fire along with (Others) that enter !*” (al-Tāhrīm 66:10).

Despite being married to prophets, both women are described using *imra'ah* because their disbelief prevented any spiritual harmony or cohesion with their prophet-husbands. Therefore, they are not referred to as *zawj*—a term connoting companionship and mutual harmony—but rather as *imra'ah*, which merely denotes a biological or legal female status without implying spiritual or relational unity (Al-Khālidī, 2016, p. 284).

Moreover, in another verse, the Qur'ān uses the term *imra'ah* for the wife of Abū Lahab (Umm Jamīl), because both she and her husband were among the disbelievers. God says: “*His wife shall carry The (crackling) wood –As fuel !*” (al-Masad 111:4) (Dawood, 2008, p. 281).

Ibn 'Āshūr points out that the Qur'ān's use of *imra'ah* in this verse is due to the fact that she not only shared the same religion as her husband but also actively assisted him in harming the Prophet Muḥammad, thus functioning as his associate and partner in enmity. Therefore, *imra'ah* was employed instead of *zawj*, which implies companionship and harmony ('Āshūr, 1984, p. 602).

It is also noteworthy that other Qur'ānic verses further support the theoretical framework proposed in this study, highlighting the remarkable precision of Qur'ānic expressions. A prominent example is found in the narrative of Prophet Zakariyyā, where God employs both terms *imra'ah* and *zawj* for his wife in different contexts.

In Sūrat Maryam (19:5), Zakariyyā says: “*Now I fear (what) My relatives (and colleagues) (Will do) after me : But my wife is barren : So give me an heir As from Thyself.*” Here, the term *imra'ah* is used because his wife was afflicted with barrenness, which prevented the fulfillment of the core purpose of marital

union—procreation. Thus, the term reflects the lack of full conjugal function: “*But my wife is barren*” (*wa-kānat imra’atī ‘āqiran*) (Maryam 19:5).

However, in *Sūrat al-Anbiyā’* (21:90), when God grants Zakariyyā’s supplication, the term *zawj* is used, reflecting the restoration of full marital union through the removal of the barrenness. The Qur’ān states: “*So We listened to him : And We granted him Yaḥyā : We cured his wife’s (Barrenness) for him,..*” (*al-Anbiyā’* 21:90).

This subtle variation in word choice showcases the Qur’ān’s eloquence and precision in using *imra’ah* and *zawj* according to context. When sterility was present, *imra’ah* was used to indicate the deficiency in conjugal function. After God’s intervention and the restoration of her fertility, *zawj* was used to denote the complete marital bond (Al-Khālidī & Ahmād, 2016, p. 285).

Thus, it may be concluded that although Zakariyyā was a prophet and his wife was a believer—both being fully united in faith and religion—the absence of full marital concord in terms of procreation (i.e., the continuation of offspring) led to the initial use of the term *imra’ah*. However, after the removal of this barrier, the Qur’ān employed the term *zawj* to describe their relationship.

Ibn ‘Āshūr comments that in *Sūrat Maryam*, the reason for using the word *imra’ah* lies in Zakariyyā’s belief that the cause of their inability to bear children was his wife’s condition (‘Āshūr, 1984). Similarly, al-Zamakhsharī explains that the use of *imra’ah* was due to her description as barren and unable to conceive (Zamakhsharī, 1407).

In contrast, in *Sūrat al-Anbiyā’*, the Qur’ān uses *zawj* in reference to Zakariyyā’s wife. Qur’ānic exegetes explain that this shift occurred after God granted them offspring, removing her barrenness. Some exegetes have suggested that Zakariyyā’s wife previously had a sharp tongue and bad manners, and God corrected her disposition along with her fertility. However, al-Ṭabarī affirms that the primary meaning here concerns the removal of her barrenness, stating that her inability to conceive was resolved by God’s decree (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

Ibn Kathīr, relying on narrations from Ibn ‘Abbās, Mujaḥid, and Sa’īd ibn Jubayr, states that Zakariyyā’s wife was barren and unable to bear children; however, God removed this impediment and granted her fertility. Another group of scholars, such as ‘Atā’, believed that Zakariyyā’s wife had a harsh tongue and bad manners, which God corrected. Nevertheless, Ibn Kathīr prefers the first opinion, asserting that her barrenness was the issue, which God rectified (Kathīr, 1999). Ibn ‘Āshūr also concurs with al-Ṭabarī’s view, maintaining that Zakariyyā’s wife was initially barren, but God restored her fertility and blessed her with a child (‘Āshūr, 1984).

By examining all the cases previously identified in the statistical study of the term *imra’ā* in the Qur’ān, it becomes evident that the same theory can be generalized. For instance, the use of the term *imra’ā* for Zulaykhā, the wife of the Egyptian governor (*al-‘Azīz*), is due to the moral transgression she committed, leading to the use of *imra’ā* instead of *zawj*. God says: “...*Said the ‘Aziz’s wife : “ Now is the truth manifest (To all) : it was I Who sought to seduce him From his (true) self : He is indeed of those Who are (ever) true (and virtuous)*” (Qur’ān 12:51). The principle here is that a chaste married woman should not violate the sanctity of her marital bond.

Similarly, the Qur’ān uses *imra’ā* to refer to Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, because of her association with polytheism and her lack of a marital relationship with any man. God states: “*I found (there) a woman Ruling over them and provided With every requisite ; and she Has a magnificent throne.*” (Qur’ān 27:23).

Furthermore, the application of the term *imra’ā* for Sarah, the wife of Abraham (‘Ibrāhīm), indicates her initial inability to conceive, as God uses the term *imra’ā* for her. God Almighty says: “*And his wife was standing (There), and she laughed : But We gave her Glad tidings of Isaac, And after him, of Jacob*” (Qur’ān 11:71).

In another remarkable expression, God uses the term *imra’ā* for Ḥannah, daughter of Fāqud ibn Qatīl (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000), the wife of ‘Imrān ibn Yashḥām ibn Amūn ibn Munshā ibn Ḥizqiyā (ibid). This raises the question: Was the marital relationship (*zawjiyyah*) between Mary’s mother and her husband

not fully established? Was there some deficiency either emotional or spiritual that led God to use *imra'a* in her case? Or, alternatively, are the findings and hypothesis of the present research incomplete?

It is observed in Islamic sources that, according to 'Ikrimah, Mary's mother was initially barren and had become old, unable to conceive (Al-Tabarī, 2000). Moreover, her father 'Imran was killed before the birth of Mary (Al-Tabarī, 2000).

This claim is also mentioned in the scriptures of the People of the Book. Although the story of Mary's mother does not appear in the Bible, it is referenced in the Apocrypha. The story of Mary's mother resembles that of the Prophet Samuel, whose mother, Hannah, was also childless (Nixon, 2004).

Therefore, it is widely recognized that the precise and thoughtful use of language within the Qur'anic discourse represents one of the remarkable miracles of this sacred text. The specific application of the term امرأة (*imra'ah*) to describe the daughter of Muhammad ibn Musaylimah in the context of marital discord and the absence of fully realized زوجيّة (*zawjiyyah*) exemplifies the Qur'an's careful and nuanced use of terminology. Allah states:

"If a wife fears cruelty or desertion on her husband's part there is no blame on them if they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves; and such settlement is best; even though men's souls are swayed by greed. But if ye do good and practice self-restraint God is well-acquainted with all that ye do." (Qur'an 4:128)

Similarly, the use of امرأة to refer to the two daughters of the people of Midian, as in

"And besides them he found Two women who were keeping Back (their flocks) " (Qur'an 28:23), to the believing wife of the Prophet Maimunah; "...And any believing woman Who dedicates her soul To the Prophet if the Prophet Wishes to wed her..." (Qur'an 33:50), and to two unnamed women mentioned in a legal context; "if there are not two men then a man and two women..." (Qur'an 2:282), demonstrates the Qur'an's intentional and context-sensitive deployment of the term across diverse social and juridical situations. This careful selection enhances readers' understanding and reflects the text's sophisticated linguistic precision.

This balanced approach—combining clear, accessible language with academic rigor—not only preserves the depth of analysis but also ensures the material remains approachable to a broader scholarly audience by organising ideas logically and using precise yet comprehensible terminology.

7. Conclusion

The investigation of the terms *zawj* (زوج) and *imra'ah* (امرأة) reveals that from the perspective of linguists, *zawj* signifies conjunction, companionship, closeness, pairing, opposition to singularity, and the marital relationship between husband and wife. The term *al-mar'* (المرء) refers to a man characterized by chivalry, firmness, and independence. When this term appears in the feminine form without being paired with *al-mar'*, it adopts the attributes of *mar'*, but in opposition to a man, it denotes a general reference to womanhood. The nominal and verbal derivatives of the word *zawj* occur 81 times in the Qur'an, with 76 instances as nominal derivatives and 5 as verbal derivatives.

Meanwhile, the word *imra'ah* appears only as a nominal derivative and occurs 38 times in the Qur'an. The common and general meanings of the root *zawj* include *hala'il* (legal spouses), *asnaf* (categories or kinds), and *qurana'* (companions). Its specific meanings refer to the wives of men and the *hur al-'ayn* (pure companions in Paradise). A detailed analysis of the usage of *zawj* and *imra'ah* in the Qur'an shows that *zawj* is employed for spouses whose marital relationship is complete, encompassing piety, tranquility, and fertility. Conversely, the term *imra'ah* is used when some criterion of the marital bond is violated or compromised.

8. References

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Appendix

Morphological Pattern	Derivatives	Frequency
Af'āl (Plural Forms)	أَزْوَاجًا (14), أَزْوَاجُكُمْ (4), أَزْوَاجٌ (3), أَزْوَاجٌ (3), أَزْوَاجَهُمْ (2), وَأَزْوَاجُكُمْ (2), وَأَزْوَاجُهُمْ (2), الْأَزْوَاج (2), لِأَزْوَاجِكَ (2), أَزْوَاجُكُمْ (1), أَزْوَاجَهُمْ (1), أَزْوَاجَهُمْ (1), أَزْوَاجُكُمْ (1), أَزْوَاجُهُمْ (1), أَزْوَاجَكَ (1), أَزْوَاجِهِ (1), لِأَزْوَاجِهِمْ (1), وَأَزْوَاجٌ (1), وَأَزْوَاجُهُمْ (1), وَأَزْوَاجُهُمْ (1), وَأَزْوَاجُهُمْ (1))	53
Fa'īl (Singular & Dual Forms)	(زَوْجٌ) (6), زَوْجَهَا (3), زَوْجَانِ (1), زَوْجَكَ (1), زَوْجِهِ (1), زَوْجَهَا (1)	14
Fa'lāyīn (Dual Forms)	(زَوْجَيْنِ) (6), الْزَّوْجَيْنِ (2)	8
Total Occurrences		75

Table 1: Nominal Derivatives of the Word *Zawj* (زوج) in the Qur'an

Morphological Pattern	Derivatives	Frequency
Form II (فُعْل)	Zawwajnākahā (زَوْجَنَكُهَا), Zawwajnāhum (زَوْجَنَهُمْ) (2] occurrences], Zuwijat (زُوْجَتْ)	4
Form II Present Tense (بِفُعْل)	Yuzawwiju-hum (زُوْجُهُمْ)	1
Total occurrences		5

Table 2: Verbal Derivatives of the Word *Zawj* (زوج) in the Qur'an

Meaning Category	Qur'āwī	Dāmghānī	Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī	Hārūn	Behrouz	Ibn al-Jawzī	al-Hayrī
General Meanings							
<i>Halā'il</i> (lawful wives/forbidden relations)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
<i>Aṣnāf</i> (categories/types)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Qurānā'</i> (companions/partners)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Specific Meanings							
<i>Zawjāt</i> (wives)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
<i>Hūr al-Īn</i> (heavenly wide-eyed spouses)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

Table 3: General and Specific Semantic Fields of the Derivatives of the Word *Zawj* (زوج) in the Works of Selected Scholars

Legend:

✓ = Meaning mentioned by the scholar

✗ = Meaning not mentioned by the scholar

Pattern (Wazn)	Derivatives	Frequency
<i>If'ala</i> (افعل)	<i>Imra 'a</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'ata</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'ah</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atu</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atuhu</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atū</i> (امرأة)	1
<i>If'alat</i> , <i>If'ul</i> , <i>If'il</i> (افعلت / افعلاً / افعل)	<i>Imra 'atuhu</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atū</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atī</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atī</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atayn</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atīn</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atān</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'atīhi</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'ah</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'ah</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'ah</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'ah</i> (امرأة) <i>Imra 'ah</i> (امرأة)	26
<i>If'ul</i> (افعل)	<i>Imru 'un</i> (امرأة)	1
<i>If'il</i> (افعل)	<i>Imri 'in</i> (امرأة)	5
<i>Fa 'l</i> (فتل)	<i>al-Mar'u</i> (المرأة) <i>al-Mar'i</i> (المرأة)	4
<i>Fa 'il</i> (فعتل)	<i>Mari'an</i> (مرأة)	1
Total		38

Table 4: Nominal Derivatives of the Word *Imra'ah* (امرأة) in the Qur'an

Pattern (Wazn)	Hayrī	Behrouz
Specific Meaning		
Zuleikha (Wife of al-'Azīz of Egypt)	+	+
Bilqīs (Queen of Sheba)	+	+
Āsiyah (Wife of Pharaoh)	+	+
Sarah (Wife of Abraham)	+	+
Hannah (Mother of Mary)	+	+
Wife of Lot	+	+
Wife of Noah	+	+
Umm Jamīl (Wife of Abū Lahab)	+	+
Daughter of Muḥammad ibn Maslamah	+	+
Daughters of Shu'ayb	+	+
Maymūnah (a believing woman who offered herself to the Prophet)	+	+
Unnamed Woman (General Reference)	+	+

Table 5: Specific Meanings of the Word *Imra'ah* (امرأة) in the Qur'an



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