

# Maryam a.s/Mary and The Alienation of the Female Body: An Existentialist Feminist Analysis of Pregnancy in Sacred Narratives

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**Abstract:** This article investigates how the female voice and body are constructed in the annunciation and pregnancy narratives of Maryam in the Qur'an (QS Maryam: 19–20) and Mary in the Gospel of Luke (1:34). The research aims to examine how these sacred texts reflect women's experiences of alienation and agency in relation to pregnancy, situated within the tension between divine will, patriarchal norms, and autonomy. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative literature-based approach combined with feminist critical discourse analysis, grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and supported by gender-sensitive hermeneutics. Classical tafsir and biblical commentaries are re-read alongside contemporary feminist theological and philosophical literature to trace how religious authority and cultural expectations shape the meaning of pregnancy. The analysis demonstrates that the narratives of Maryam/Mary encode a recurrent pattern of alienation of the female body: pregnancy appears as something that "happens" to women, their honour is tied to sexual purity, and their consent is articulated within heavily gendered structures. At the same time, the figures of Maryam and Mary retain elements of questioning, resistance, and spiritual strength that disrupt purely passive portrayals. The main contribution of this study lies in proposing an alternative reading of Maryam/Mary as symbols of transcendent, spiritual resistance rather than merely immanent reproductive roles. By highlighting alienation, bounded agency, and embodied subjectivity, the article expands feminist theological discourse. It offers a critical framework for rethinking motherhood, consent, and women's bodily autonomy in contemporary Muslim and Christian contexts.

**Keywords:** Alienation; Feminism; Gender; Pregnancy; Spirituality

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana suara dan tubuh perempuan dibangun dalam narasi pengumuman dan kehamilan Maryam dalam Al-Qur'an (QS Maryam: 19–20) dan Maria dalam Injil Lukas (1:34). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana teks-teks suci tersebut mencerminkan pengalaman perempuan dalam hal alienasi dan agensi dalam kaitannya dengan kehamilan, yang berada dalam ketegangan antara kehendak ilahi, norma patriarki, dan otonomi. Secara metodologis, studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis literatur yang dikombinasikan dengan analisis wacana kritis feminis, didasarkan pada feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir dan didukung oleh hermeneutika sensitif gender. Tafsir klasik dan komentar Alkitab dibaca ulang bersama literatur teologis dan filosofis feminis kontemporer untuk melacak bagaimana otoritas agama dan ekspektasi budaya membentuk makna kehamilan. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa narasi Maryam/Mary mengkodekan pola berulang alienasi tubuh perempuan: kehamilan tampak sebagai sesuatu yang "terjadi" pada perempuan, kehormatan mereka terikat pada kemurnian seksual, dan persetujuan mereka diungkapkan dalam struktur gender yang kuat. Pada saat yang sama, figur Maryam dan Mary mempertahankan unsur-unsur pertanyaan, perlawanan, dan

kekuatan spiritual yang mengganggu penggambaran pasif murni. Kontribusi utama studi ini terletak pada usulan pembacaan alternatif terhadap Maryam/Mary sebagai simbol perlawanan spiritual yang transenden, bukan sekadar peran reproduktif yang imanen. Dengan menyoroti alienasi, agen yang terbatas, dan subjektivitas yang terwujud dalam tubuh, artikel ini memperluas diskursus teologis feminis. Ia menawarkan kerangka kritis untuk mempertimbangkan ulang ibu, persetujuan, dan otonomi tubuh perempuan dalam konteks Muslim dan Kristen kontemporer.

**Kata kunci:** Alienasi; Feminisme; Gender; Kehamilan; Spiritualitas

## 1. Introduction

The female body serves as a conduit for internalised patriarchal practices within a social system. Pregnancy and the preparation for motherhood represent complex embodied experiences, as women navigate traditional values, modern economic pressures, and prevailing social norms. These processes influence women's self perception, their relationship to their bodies, and the meanings they attribution to maternal roles.

The discourse on motherhood in Indonesia generally emphasises the mother's responsibility for the upbringing and success of her children. Research indicates that Islamic values significantly influence parenting practices and prioritise the protection and nurturing of children, as outlined in Law No. 35 of 2014 (Puspitasari, Herlambang, Abidin, & Zabihullah, 2024). This religious view is reinforced through a wealth of Islamic literature aimed at millennial women that seeks to align motherhood practices with conservative Islamic values (Siregar, 2020). Until the contemporary era, religious interpretations of the role of mothers in Indonesia have tended to be more patriarchal and exclusive, despite the Qur'an presenting a more inclusive and egalitarian picture of mothers in its original texts (Kusmana, 2015).

Radical-cultural feminists distinguish between "motherhood" as a patriarchal institution and "mothering" as women's lived, self-defined parenting experience (O'Reilly, 2019). While the biological ability to bear children is natural, societal expectations around motherhood are socially constructed and historically situated. Religion plays a significant role in shaping social expectations, particularly around reproduction. In Islam, traditional interpretations often emphasise procreation as the primary purpose of marriage, aligning with the *maqāṣid al-shari'ah* that prioritise family and lineage (Alkausar & Kusumawati, 2023).

The Qur'an links women to the biological function of childbirth but does not define child-rearing as an inherent female trait (Wadud, 1999). It emphasises biological motherhood without confining women to culturally constructed roles. Barlas (2019) argues that Maryam's story honours the biological role of women without reducing it to a gendered identity. The narrative portrays her pregnancy alongside her reception of divine revelation, which aligns her with the prophetic tradition. Scholars including Quraish Shihab, Ibn Hazm, al-Ash'arī, Ibn Ḥajar, and al-Qurṭubī affirm that Maryam may be regarded as a prophet. They base this view on her receipt of divine revelation from an angel, which aligns with the established pattern of prophethood (Sulaeman, 2024). However, classical tafsir reflects a divide. Andalusian scholars accepted her prophethood, while Eastern Sunni and Shia scholars largely rejected it, influenced by patriarchal conceptions of prophecy (Abboud, 2014).

Maryam in Islamic texts and Mary in Christian texts shape social norms around motherhood, especially in Indonesia, where religious narratives heavily influence gender roles. Maryam symbolises spiritual strength and patience in the face of reproductive struggles (Mutmainnah & Afiyanti, 2019), while Mary in the Gospel is idealised as mother and wife because of her humility and obedience (Laurencia & Nassa, 2021). However, these interpretations raise critical questions: do they empower women's subjectivity, or do they instead reinforce norms that limit reproductive rights?

Maryam's body becomes a tangible site for the manifestation of God's Word. In Christian theology, this is understood as the Incarnation, when Mary's body becomes the vessel through which God takes

on flesh in the person of Jesus, affirming Christ's divinity. In Islamic tradition, however, Maryam's bodily role signifies God's miraculous creative power, where Jesus is born through divine command. Although Maryam/Mary was more than just a body or womb, religious traditions have often reduced her to symbols of virginity and motherhood. These patriarchal ideals confine women within moral and social boundaries, as if a woman's worth can only be measured by her status as a "pure" virgin or a "chaste" mother (Buisson, 2016).

Critiquing highly gendered religious understanding, an existentialist feminist perspective can help explain how Maryam a.s. or Mary experienced alienation from her body and psychological experience. In this context, the mothering experience can be interpreted as a process of restoring women's subjectivity and not simply the fulfilment of patriarchal expectations about motherhood. This perspective opens space to rethink religious narratives in ways that recognise women's autonomy and lived realities.

Maryam's story reflects the concept of alienation; despite her miraculous pregnancy, she faced social pressure, much like women today under cultural control. A 2020 study found that while women's household autonomy improved antenatal care use, it had little impact on decisions about childbirth, which remained influenced by family and cultural norms (Rizkianti, Afifah, Saptarini, & Rakhmadi, 2020). It reflects how deeply rooted norms can limit women's control over their reproductive health, shaping women's alienation from their bodies and reproductive experiences.

By examining the discourse on Maryam in the Qur'an, specifically QS Maryam: 19–20, and in the Gospel of Luke 1:34 in the context of female embodiment, this article aims to offer a reinterpretation of the model of maternal experience in the Qur'an by using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist perspective and alienation as a theoretical framework. It offers a critical framework for understanding women's autonomy within religious narratives. The critique of the legitimacy of motherhood is not a rejection of the maternal experience itself, but rather an attempt to dismantle the mechanism of alienation that renders the maternal experience an instrument of social control over women.

This article employs a qualitative approach utilising a literature study method and feminist existentialist critical discourse analysis to reveal how language in sacred texts constructs gendered power dynamics. The integration of Beauvoir's theory sharpens this critique by highlighting pregnancy as a site of bodily alienation, where autonomy and subjectivity are compromised and caught in the tension between divine will, patriarchal norms, and autonomy. The main focus lies on the interpretation of the experience of pregnancy as a site of bodily alienation, with particular attention to QS Maryam: 19–20 and Luke 1:34. These verses are significant entry points for critiquing theological pregnancy narratives because they capture moments of shock, questioning, and existential uncertainty in response to divinely announced pregnancies.

Data collection for this study involves a critical examination of both classical Islamic exegesis and biblical commentaries, as well as contemporary feminist theological scholarship. Key Islamic sources include *Lafa'if al-Isyarat* by al-Qushayri and *Al-Tibyan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by al-Tusi, which offer classical exegetical interpretations of Qur'anic verses. Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* provides a foundational feminist rereading of the Qur'an, centring women's perspectives and experiences. From the Christian tradition, Origen of Alexandria's *Homilies on Luke*, as interpreted through the contextual analysis of Julia Kelto Lillis, sheds light on early theological views of Mary's virginity. Further feminist critiques, such as Jane Schaberg's *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* and Jennifer Weaver's thesis "Could Mary Have Said 'No'?", interrogate the Annunciation narrative by re-examining themes of consent, subjectivity, and power in representations of Mary, contributing to a deeper understanding of gendered dynamics in sacred texts. By combining textual analysis and feminist critique, this method seeks to uncover the layers of patriarchal power in the interpretation of Mary or Maryam.

## 2. Mother's Alienation: An Existentialist Feminist Framework

Patriarchal societies often glorify pregnancy while neglecting women's lived experiences. Pressures to conceive, stigma surrounding miscarriage, coerced or forced childbirth, weak maternal rights, and unequal parenting roles all emerge within this context. These conditions are shaped by

biased religious understandings that normalise women's suffering by blaming them or interpreting their pain as a logical and inevitable consequence of being women. In *The Second Sex* (1956), Simone de Beauvoir offers a harrowing account of women who seek to end unwanted pregnancies. She illustrates how the criminalisation of reproductive autonomy produces conditions of physical danger, social shame, and existential despair for women. De Beauvoir writes:

"Pain, illness, and death take on the appearance of a chastisement: we know how great is the difference between suffering and torture, accident and punishment; through all the risks she takes, the woman feels herself to be blameworthy, and it is this interpretation of anguish and transgression that is peculiarly painful" (de Beauvoir, 1956).

Within an existentialist feminist framework, pain in pregnancy and childbirth functions as a mechanism of legitimisation. In a patriarchal society, a woman's body is not merely biological; it becomes an entity expected to endure pain and suffering as a natural part of her reproductive role. Beauvoir points out a deep inner conflict in women's experience of pregnancy. Since childhood, many women have been socialised to believe that motherhood constitutes their primary calling and source of fulfilment. However, when confronted with the physical and emotional realities of pregnancy, women often feel burdened and even tormented, yet still compelled to continue because social and moral pressures have been internalised from an early age (Finlay & Payman, 2013).

This religious moralisation of pain mirrors the existential tension that Beauvoir identifies. A woman's decision to have a caesarean delivery, for example, is often perceived as a form of "weakness", and some communities consider a woman a "true" mother only if she sacrifices herself to the pain of vaginal childbirth, regardless of medical risk or personal preference. In several religious contexts, the pain of childbirth is tied to divine wisdom or framed as a test of piety, reinforcing the idea that women should not seek to avoid it. In the Christian tradition, this view is rooted in Genesis 3:16, where God tells Eve, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth", a verse that has historically been interpreted as a moral consequence of original sin and a symbol of redemptive suffering (Freese, 2022). In Islamic discourse, although pain is not framed as punishment, scholars have frequently emphasised the spiritual reward of enduring childbirth pain, such as the notion that a woman who dies with a child in her womb attains the status of a *shaheed* (martyr) (HR. Imaam Ahmad, 5/315). Interpretations of these sacred narratives tend to naturalise women's suffering as a moral obligation. In a system where pain becomes moralised rather than merely physical, women who undergo caesarean sections can face subtle social or spiritual delegitimisation, as they are perceived to have bypassed the "true" or "authentic" experience of motherhood.

Internalised guilt operates as a powerful mechanism of control, compelling women to accept suffering passively. During pregnancy, women's subjectivity is often displaced as their bodies are perceived as instruments for the continuation of others' lives. Beauvoir describes pregnancy as a dramatic tension between creation and self-loss. While pregnancy can be experienced as a profound act of creation, it simultaneously represents a loss of autonomy, unlike creative processes in which the creator maintains control over their work. Pregnant women thus inhabit a condition in which the boundary between subject (self) and object (foetus) becomes blurred and unstable.

From this, BeaDe Beauvoir underscores this ambiguity:

"The transcendence of the artisan, of the man of action, contains the element of subjectivity, but in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist, she and the child with whom she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair overwhelmed by life" (de Beauvoir, 1956).

During pregnancy, a woman is no longer perceived solely as an individual; she is also constructed as a "container" for another life. In a patriarchal system, this situation often leads to her being viewed as a reproductive instrument rather than as a female subject with the right to choose and to decide.

From this analysis, Beauvoir argues that when society conceptualises women's bodies as fundamentally passive, it hinders their freedom and individuality, rendering them subordinate to the demands of nature. Unlike the male body, which is generally perceived as free and transcendent, the

female body is more often perceived as bound and limited, trapped in immanence (Mackenzie, 2024). Beauvoir's notion of the "dark side" of pregnancy reflects an existential anxiety concerning the loss of individual freedom and control. As the boundary between subject and object dissolves, pregnancy no longer appears primarily as a source of happiness but as a site where female subjectivity wanes. Beauvoir's rather bleak view of pregnancy as a process that negates women's agency demonstrates her insistence on the concept of the fully sovereign individual (Zerilli, 1992).

This framework resonates with the experiences of Maryam and Mary, whose pregnancies are simultaneously miraculous and imposed. The Qur'anic narrative emphasises Maryam's isolation, shame, and physical anguish, culminating in her desperate wish for death during labour: "So she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a distant place. The pains of labor drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, 'Oh, if only I had died before this and been forgotten, utterly forgotten!'" (Qur'an 19:22-23). By contrast, Luke's Gospel depicts Mary as obedient and spiritually accepting: "Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" (Luke 1:38). Nevertheless, Mary remains surrounded by confusion and vulnerability during the Roman census, giving birth amid displacement and lack of shelter (Luke 2:1-7).

Across both the Qur'anic and Gospel narratives, Maryam and Mary embody the paradox of divine motherhood: they are exalted as pure and chosen, yet they are simultaneously subjected to physical suffering and social risk. These narratives illuminate a broader philosophical tension between sanctified maternity and the struggle for subjecthood. This conflict continues to shape cultural constructions of womanhood, motherhood, and the female body in contemporary religious societies.

Beauvoir asserts that the alienation of the body arises because women cannot fully claim their subjectivity within the experience of pregnancy. Alienation thus reflects how, in a patriarchal system, the female body functions as a tool for social interests rather than a space for individual freedom. In a society that idealises the reproductive role as the primary purpose of women's lives, the experience of pregnancy becomes detached from free will and personal choice. Women internalise the idea that their self-worth depends on their ability to perform this biological role. With her ego surrendered and her body and social dignity alienated, "the mother enjoys the comforting illusion of feeling that she is a human being in herself, a value" (de Beauvoir, 1956). This illusion conceals the structural forces that primarily define her through reproduction.

In parallel with this discussion, Maryam and Mary's sanctity does not erase the existential weight of embodiment or the loss of agency. Their idealisation as mothers, shaped by patriarchal narratives, often masks their autonomy by valuing submission over personal subjectivity. The female body becomes a space of potential transcendence while simultaneously serving as a source of alienation. Despite the symbolic power attached to motherhood, most women remain socially powerless and structurally marginalised.

Unlike creative acts that stem from freedom, such as art or philosophy, pregnancy is a biological process that unfolds within a woman's body and does not necessarily result from her free and deliberate choice. Therefore, although motherhood may appear to offer self-fulfilment, in reality, many women remain trapped in socially assigned roles that limit their opportunities for transcendence as free individuals. De Beauvoir writes:

"For she does not really make the baby; it makes itself within her, her flesh engenders flesh only, and she is quite incapable of establishing an existence that will have to establish itself. Creative acts originating in liberty establish the object as value and give it the quality of the essential" (de Beauvoir, 1956).

Beauvoir seeks to understand how the fantasy of controlling pregnancy helps women cope with their conflicting feelings about it. She does not treat this fantasy as childish; rather, she regards it as a serious political issue. In a society that refuses to recognise women as independent subjects, it is unsurprising that a mother may feel that she alone has created her baby, even though this belief reflects a deeper political and existential problem. The central question, as Zerilli (1992) suggests, concerns how

to challenge this false sense of subjectivity and how to create conditions in which women can be recognised as individuals with full freedom, not merely as figures defined by their reproductive role.

Although societies frequently praise women for their role in pregnancy, they often simultaneously strip them of agency in shaping social structures. Historically, men have been constructed as the creators of culture, politics, and intellectual life, whereas women have been restricted to repeating life rather than shaping its meaning (de Beauvoir, 1956). Women are considered "sufficient" as long as they fulfil their reproductive functions. However, from an existentialist perspective, creativity is not merely about biological production but about acting with freedom, intention, and choice. Since pregnancy often unfolds as a biological imperative rather than as a consciously chosen project, it does not qualify as a creative act that affirms women's subjectivity. Instead, it risks reinforcing their position as immanent beings, confined to roles prescribed by others rather than defined by their own freedom.

### 3. Mother and the Blurring of Subjectivity

In Beauvoir's existentialist feminist perspective, pregnancy can be interpreted as a condition in which the boundary between the woman as a subject and the foetus as an object becomes increasingly blurred. The pregnant woman no longer experiences her body as entirely her own, as it becomes the site of another life that both depends on her and alters her sense of self. This blurring generates a persistent ambiguity: she is simultaneously an acting subject and a living environment for another being, which complicates her claim to full autonomy. In line with Beauvoir's thought, the narrative of Maryam/Mary as a woman who undergoes pregnancy and alienation while standing outside the norms of her society reflects how women are positioned in moral ambiguity when their reproductive roles do not match social expectations.

The Qur'an provides a detailed depiction of Maryam's experience, casting her into moral and social ambiguity when her reproductive role deviates from societal norms and expectations. One striking moment occurs in QS Maryam:23, where Maryam, overwhelmed by the physical and emotional burden of her pregnancy, cries out "Would that I had died before this, and had been forgotten and out of sight!" This expression captures not only her shame and fear but also her estrangement from her own body and social world.

Another illustrative passage appears in QS Maryam: 16–22, where the narrative emphasises her isolation and the intensity of divine intervention: "She withdrew in seclusion from her family to a place facing east..." Her withdrawal and the miraculous conception place her outside the normative social order. Despite divine favour, she becomes morally ambiguous in the eyes of her society, mirroring Beauvoir's observation that women who are pregnant outside accepted roles, timing, or marital structures are often socially othered and regarded as morally suspect. In this sense, the scriptural portrayal of Maryam/Mary anticipates contemporary experiences in which women's pregnancies are scrutinised as moral events rather than respected as personal, embodied realities.

### 4. A Paradox in Patriarchal Narratives of the Female Body

Women experience their bodies as bound and limited (immanent) because society frequently considers women's bodies less valuable than men's bodies (Mackenzie, 2024). The historical and theological construction of the figure of Maryam a.s. reveals the paradox of patriarchal narratives about women's bodies: while she is venerated for her purity and miraculous conception, this veneration is simultaneously coupled with the restriction of her autonomy. In the Qur'an, Maryam is mentioned as a saintly figure who possesses spiritual virtues: "(Remember) when the Angel (Gabriel) said, 'O Maryam, surely Allah has chosen you, purified you, and preferred you above all the women of the universe (at that time)'" (QS Ali Imran: 42). This verse elevates her status, yet later interpretations often attach conditions to this elevation that constrain rather than expand women's spiritual and bodily agency.

The narrative that elevates Maryam as a sacred and holy figure is frequently interpreted by emphasising aspects of purity that are synonymous with the elimination or denial of her biological functions, thereby ignoring women's embodied experiences. This tendency includes the construction

of the holy woman as a woman without menstruation, rooted in a culture that considers menstruation something dirty or polluting. It is not surprising that some interpreters argue that Maryam did not experience menstruation (Umairah, 2009). Some medieval scholars even assumed that Maryam's chastity referred to physical purity (*taharah*), meaning the absence of menstrual blood or postpartum bleeding (Hoover, 2022). Such views transform holiness into a state of disembodiment, implicitly suggesting that the closer a woman is to the sacred, the further she must be from her own bodily processes.

Al-Tusi and Al-Qurtubi interpret the diction "purify you" in QS Ali Imran: 42 in two ways, namely being purified from disbelief and being purified from all forms of impurity, such as menstruation or the postpartum period (Al-Qurtubi & Al-Ansari, 1937; Tusi & ibn Hassan, 1989). In Surah Ali Imran, Maryam is also commanded to "bow with those who bow" (QS Ali Imran: 43). Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi interprets this verse as indicating that Maryam was qualified to lead worship. However, this role does not apply generally and cannot be extended to other women due to biological reasons such as menstruation and other conditions associated with womanhood (Wadud, 1999). This interpretation suggests that the function of a woman's body diminishes her spiritual value (Wadud, 1999). It reflects a contradiction in the patriarchal view that creates a disconnection between the female body and its social dignity. On the one hand, the female body is revered for its ability to give birth; on the other hand, the biological aspects of womanhood are considered unclean or inferior.

In line with this, in the Catholic tradition, Mary is depicted as an eternal virgin. Early Catholic theologians argued that Mary was free from sin and experienced a painless childbirth, even without any physical damage. Figures such as Ambrose, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria believed that Mary's hymen remained intact and that Jesus was born miraculously, affirming her perpetual virginity (Leu, 2022). Thus, Mary's virginity became a complex theological issue: how can Mary still be considered a virgin if a natural birth altered her physical integrity (such as the hymen)? To resolve this, virginity must be understood as a spiritual and relational condition, not merely a biological one. This shift in understanding prompts a reevaluation of theological narratives that have long burdened women with narrow and inaccurate physical definitions, equating moral worth with bodily intactness.

The Qur'anic and Christian depictions of Maryam/Mary reveal how patriarchal theology sanctifies women by disembodying them. By idealising purity as separation from the physical body, these traditions construct holiness in opposition to women's lived, biological realities. The result is a paradoxical image of womanhood: exalted yet silenced, sacred yet stripped of agency, honoured yet disconnected from the ordinary experiences of menstruation, reproduction, and vulnerability. A feminist reading must therefore reclaim Maryam not as a disembodied ideal but as a figure whose holiness coexists with, rather than denies, her embodied womanhood. In many religious and cultural contexts, this patriarchal logic has led to the moralisation of women's reproductive roles, the stigmatisation of menstruation, and the idealisation of suffering as a mark of virtue, all of which reinforce the alienation of women from their own bodies and spiritual authority.

## 5. Reconstructing Virginity: Historical Anatomy and Theology

In the context of ancient Mediterranean anatomical understanding, people did not conceptualise the virgin body as a sealed or permanently closed body. Instead, they understood it as a body that could open and close naturally without losing its spiritual or moral status. Origen of Alexandria, a third-century Christian thinker, was one of the earliest figures to offer a different perspective on Mary's virginity. In Origen's view, Mary's virginity did not depend on the intactness of her hymen but rather on the fact that she had never engaged in sexual intercourse. This view marked an important critique of popular and medical understandings that, for centuries, equated virginity with a woman's physical state, particularly the presence of an intact hymen. In this framework, Jesus' birth came from a woman who was fertile but had not had sexual relations, a concept that separates fertility from sexual experience (Lillis, 2020).

In the Qur'an, Maryam appears as a woman with a fully embodied reproductive reality who experiences pregnancy and the pain of natural childbirth. The Qur'an explicitly expresses Allah's sympathy for her predicament (QS 19:24, 26). Wadud (Wadud, 1999) highlights how the Qur'an elevates childbirth, presenting it as a spiritual and human experience rather than a purely biological event. Such details indicate that the saving of the child must always be understood in relation to care for the mother, who suffers emotionally and physically. In other words, the maternal body occupies a central place in the divine narrative, rather than serving merely as a background to the child's destiny.

Some interpretations of Maryam's withdrawal to a secluded place in the east (QS Maryam: 16) understand this act as a symbol of physical modesty. For instance, Khattab in Rawwas (1999) claims that Maryam wore a face veil due to her exceptional beauty and sought solitude in the eastern part of the temple to protect herself from the male gaze. However, the Qur'an emphasises Maryam's spiritual purity and inner virtue (QS 3:37), not her physical appearance. When interpreters shift the focus from spiritual agency to physical modesty, they reinforce the idea that women's piety is defined by silence, obedience, and bodily concealment. In such readings, Maryam's bodily experience is reduced to a didactic model that validates women's piety only through silence, obedience, and physical modesty. This reduction has tangible consequences, as women are often celebrated as moral guardians of the family and the nation yet denied full authority over their own bodies and choices.

Maryam a.s. functions as a universal symbol for all believers, beyond gender, culture, or social norms. Asma Lamrabet (2016) highlights her not only as spiritually devoted but also as intellectually courageous. When Maryam is told that she will conceive (QS 19:17-21), she questions the angel, a response that demonstrates both faith and critical thought. She does not appear as a merely passive recipient of revelation but as a model of reasoned engagement and moral strength (Lamrabet, 2016). This portrayal opens interpretive space in which Maryam's virginity and motherhood can be understood without erasing her embodied experience, her questioning, and her agency.

### *The Masculinisation of Maryam*

Another paradox emerges in the way Maryam is elevated as a woman who is so exceptional that some commentators consider her "not a woman" in the conventional social sense. This paradox is evident in her description, where the masculine plural *qānītīn* is used in QS 66:12. In many traditional interpretations, her spiritual greatness is implicitly equated with masculinity, suggesting that a woman must transcend the limitations associated with her gender to attain such a high level of piety and divine favour. This framing reinforces the notion that spiritual excellence is primarily associated with a male domain (Barlas, 2019) and that Maryam's uniqueness stems from her departure from normative femininity. Rather than affirming the spiritual potential of all women, this interpretive pattern reinscribes patriarchal boundaries by defining holiness in terms that implicitly exclude female embodiment.

Classical scholars like al-'Attar viewed women who reach elevated spiritual levels as "men," presuming that such heights are unattainable within the natural limits of womanhood. Al-'Attar states that "the first male to enter heaven was Mary, the mother of Isa a.s." (Hoover, 2022). This statement implies that spiritual greatness is equated with masculinity and reinforces a gendered hierarchy in which male traits are considered superior or more divine. Such a perspective undermines the inclusive potential of Maryam's story, which could have served as a powerful model for women to exercise spiritual authority without relinquishing their gender identity. Instead, it suggests that women must symbolically "become men" to be recognised as fully pious subjects.

In the Qur'an, the mention of Maryam as *qānītīn* (66:12), "the devoutly obedient ones", does indeed use the masculine plural. According to Wadud (Wadud, 1999), the text could have used the feminine plural form, yet the choice of the masculine form indicates that Maryam's example operates across gender boundaries. In line with this, Ali (2019) argues that the story of Maryam in the Qur'an not only affirms differences between men and women but also unsettles and destabilises rigid gender dichotomies. The assertion that "men are not like women" is challenged by Maryam's narration, which

exhibits traits of femininity as well as prophetic and pious qualities typically associated with male figures. Throughout the Qur'an, Maryam a.s. shifts between being a peer to male figures and being singled out as uniquely female. She stands both among and apart from "the women of the worlds" (QS 3:42). Her story is "queer" in "the broad sense of challenging the stability of all sexual" or, more particularly, sex/gender "identities, and, beyond that, insisting on the fluidity of all seemingly fixed boundaries" (Ali, 2019).

This paradoxical interpretation of Maryam a.s. as a "female body that must resemble a man" resonates with broader patterns in which women are forced to conform to restrictive moral standards, whether in relation to their bodies, domestic roles, or social status. Women's social dignity often depends on the extent to which they conform to established norms, rather than on their freedom to determine the meaning of their own existence. Alienation of women's bodies occurs when they cannot exercise complete control over themselves or their life choices. This analysis raises a critical question: how can Maryam's experience of divine pregnancy be reread as an existential act of meaning-making rather than a passive acceptance of patriarchal virtue? Reframing her story in this way would enable Maryam to stand as a model of embodied subjectivity and freedom, rather than serving only as an instrument through which patriarchal ideals are affirmed.

#### *Maryam's Pregnancy and Alienation in Qur'an Interpretation*

When women lack the freedom to choose pregnancy because of social, cultural, or legal pressures, they experience bodily alienation, which Beauvoir identifies as a form of dehumanisation. Women's reproductive roles are often socially imposed rather than freely chosen, so their value is reduced to their capacity for childbearing. One psychological manifestation of this "alienation from the body and social dignity" appears in the way Maryam a.s. accepts a pregnancy that does not arise from her own choice or plan. In many cultures, women face unplanned pregnancies or intense pressure to conceive, and their situations echo Maryam's predicament in different yet structurally similar ways.

In particular, Maryam a.s. does not choose her pregnancy; God bestows it upon her. In line with Beauvoir's perspective, pregnancy is something that happens to women rather than something they fully control, and this undermines their status as autonomous subjects (de Beauvoir, 1956). In Maryam's case, her alienation reflects the contradiction between her transcendence as a holy figure and her immanence as a woman who lacks control over her own body. Her sanctity does not shield her from the experience of being acted upon, which sharpens the tension between divine agency and female subjectivity.

The Qur'an narrates this moment of confrontation with divine decree: "He (Gabriel) said, 'Verily I am but a messenger of your Lord to bestow upon you the gift of a pure son.' She (Maryam) said, 'How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me and I am not a prostitute?'" (Maryam: 19–20, see also Ali Imran: 47). This dialogue captures Maryam's attempt to negotiate her identity, her bodily integrity, and her social reputation in the face of an unexpected and unchosen pregnancy.

Behind the miracle she experiences, Maryam faces profound alienation at bodily, spiritual, social, and existential levels. Pregnancy, which many women receive as joyful news, becomes a source of intense tension for Maryam. She loses control over her own body because the pregnancy she undergoes does not result from her own will but from a divine decision. This situation generates theological debates in which Maryam a.s., despite her faithful and obedient character, appears to doubt God's power momentarily. According to al-Tabarsi, however, Maryam does not pose her question as a form of rejection or disbelief, but rather as an effort to seek understanding and as an expression of admiration for God's power (Tabarsi, 1993). This question thus reflects existential astonishment rather than theological resistance.

In this context, alienation occurs on multiple levels. Theologically, alienation emerges because Maryam a.s. dares to question the announcement of her pregnancy, even though she remains within the bounds of faith. Socially, alienation arises because her community does not believe in her chastity and instead imposes moral condemnation upon her. Al-Tusi notes that Maryam not only questions

how her pregnancy could occur, but also shows awareness of and sensitivity to the community that will inevitably accuse and judge her (Tusi & ibn Hassan, 1989). Her concern reveals a clear understanding of how patriarchal societies police women's bodies and honour.

Maryam a.s. appears as spiritually *muharrar* (one consecrated to God's service), a woman who has long embodied spiritual freedom through her life in the mihrab and the miracles that surround her. Yet, paradoxically, the same divine election that elevates her sanctity also exposes her to social judgement. Maryam a.s. accepts God's decree with faith, but her elevated spiritual status does not diminish the social consequences imposed on her as a woman. Divine selection does not exempt her from patriarchal structures; rather, it situates her within them and transforms her experience into an enduring testimony to the reality of women who face social judgement and moral scrutiny in relation to pregnancy.

Women often experience a tension between fantasies shaped by social expectations and the realities of their lives. This tension reflects the existential conflict between attachment and freedom, between ownership and loss of control (de Beauvoir, 1956). In Maryam's case, this dilemma becomes particularly intense. She recognises the astonishing reality of pregnancy without any sexual contact with a man, yet this miracle is accompanied by responsibility and severe social consequences. Her experience encapsulates the paradox in which divine favour does not erase human structures of control but instead exposes their violence more clearly.

### *Negotiating Identity*

Maryam a.s. also voices her concern about the new status that automatically associates her with the roles of mother and, implicitly, wife. When she asks, "How can I have a son?", she expresses her confusion about how she could become a mother at all. Her further statement, "Whereas no man has ever touched me", alludes to the social assumption that motherhood implies a prior status as wife. In a patriarchal culture, these labels of wife and mother are often accompanied by expectations of domestic responsibility that can alter and restrict the dynamics of freedom Maryam has previously enjoyed. Her question, therefore, signals an awareness of the social and relational frameworks that pregnancy will impose upon her.

A more serious implication in the situation of Maryam a.s.'s pregnancy appears in interpretations that link her identity as the mother of the "son of God" with the notion that she could be construed as the wife of God. Al-Qushayri interprets her anxiety in this direction, suggesting that she fears people might call Isa the son of God and the son of Mary, with the blasphemous implication that Mary is the wife of God (al-Qusyayri, 1970). This possibility illustrates how theological misreadings can intensify the moral stakes of her pregnancy and identity, making her body the site of potential doctrinal error as well as social scandal.

In the verse, Maryam a.s. explicitly defends her identity and honour by stating that she is not a prostitute. The word "prostitute" (*baghiyya*) in this context carries a dense moral construction that distinguishes "respectable" women from deviant women. This linguistic framing reflects broader societal patterns in which women's honour is tethered to notions of sexual purity and obedience. Across many cultural contexts, these expectations manifest in the regulation of women's behaviour, often upheld through mechanisms of shame, surveillance, and even violence. Honour-related crimes represent a stark expression of these patriarchal norms, in which women may face severe punishment, ostracisation, or death for alleged moral transgressions (Singh & Pandey, 2025).

Maryam a.s.'s response demonstrates her sensitivity to these social norms, which judge women not only according to their actions but also according to societal perceptions of their bodies and sexuality. Despite her own chastity and virtue, Maryam's pregnancy renders her vulnerable to society's harsh judgement, so that she can easily be labelled as a sinner. Her need to deny being a *baghiyya* shows how deeply embedded these dichotomies of honour and shame are in the moral vocabulary available to women.

In Beauvoir's analysis, women typically develop the "illusion" that they are the subjects of the baby's life in their womb. This illusion functions as a form of psychological compensation for the alienation women experience in patriarchal societies (de Beauvoir, 1956). Maryam a.s., however, does not undergo this illusion in the same way. She clearly recognises that her pregnancy does not result from her own will or creativity but instead manifests God's divine power. Maryam thus remains a transcendent subject, because her sense of self does not depend primarily on her biological role as mother but on her spiritual relationship with God and her full existential awareness. Her identity is grounded in devotion and consciousness rather than in reproductive function alone.

It can be said that in QS 19:20 Maryam a.s. negotiates with a system that alienates the female body as an object of moral judgement, positioning her between multiple possible identities: a single mother, a wife without a husband, and a prostitute. In this control mechanism, women are judged according to the extent to which they conform to social norms and stereotypes. Maryam's narrative reveals how a woman can resist complete objectification by articulating her innocence and appealing to divine authority, yet remain entangled in structures that define her primarily through her body and its moral interpretation.

## 6. Reading Mary's Alienation in Biblical Tradition

One of the major debates in theology and biblical interpretation regarding the Annunciation concerns the meaning of Mary's question, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man (since I am a virgin)?" (Luke 1:34) and the angel's answer in the following verse (Luke 1:35). At first glance, this question seems inappropriate coming from a woman who is engaged and, within the Jewish culture of the time, would soon be living with her husband and having sexual relations. It raises a critical question: why would Mary question the possibility of pregnancy if she knew that her marriage to Joseph was imminent? Why did Mary not simply assume that she would become pregnant naturally once she began living with Joseph?

The Annunciation in Luke's Gospel can be understood as an act that subtly challenges the patriarchal cultural norms of its context. In this narrative, Joseph, Mary's fiancé, is neither present nor asked for consent, even though culturally decisions regarding pregnancy and reproduction often fall under the control of men or the wider family structure. Mary, by accepting the divine pregnancy on her own, takes an enormous risk, as she could be considered adulterous and face social punishment, even death (Weaver, 2023). She does not passively accept the divine message, but actively seeks to understand its meaning and consequences, an act of spiritual courage that conservative interpretations often overlook (Nnaemeka Ali, 2024).

Mary consciously and voluntarily enters into a relationship with the divine. In one strand of interpretation, Mary's choice to become a mother is not a form of subjugation to male power, but an agential act that grants her a distinctive authority over her role as the mother of Jesus and as a symbol of motherhood within the church (Weaver, 2023). The claim that Mary consciously and voluntarily chose her role as the mother of Jesus, however, deserves deeper analysis. The aim is not to deny Mary's agency, but to interrogate the extent to which that agency can be considered truly free and authentic within the patriarchal structure that envelops the narrative and conditions her possibilities.

Within this framework, Mary appears to exercise agency when she declares, "I am the Lord's servant," and then adds, "May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). Although God holds an immeasurable degree of divine power in contrast to a human agent like Mary, the interaction portrayed in the narrative can be read not as a scene of one-sided domination, but as a moment of non-competitive mutuality. Collaboration, rather than hierarchy, becomes the theological ground on which consent and divine embodiment coexist. Mary chooses God, just as God chooses Mary. Together, they participate in the decision for the incarnation of Christ (Weaver, 2023). At the same time, this very collaboration must be evaluated within the constraints of a gendered world in which divine command and social expectation can blur the boundaries between genuine consent and acquiescence to a role already prescribed.

### *Consent and Divine Expectation*

Mary's choice takes place within a framework of religious discourse that has long foretold and idealised the role of women as vessels, mothers, and symbols of purity. Her agency is therefore bound to an idealised feminine position that the tradition has prepared for her in advance. It raises a critical question about whether such consent can truly be considered "free". In gendered contexts, some expressions of consent function as performances of social expectation rather than as expressions of autonomous will. Particularly within private spheres, where structural inequalities frequently remain unchallenged, consent is commonly presumed. As MacKinnon in Tirosh (2024) observes, "In private, consent tends to be presumed", not to dismantle inequality but to obscure and sustain it.

In religious discourse, expressions of consent may thus represent not fully autonomous decision-making, but performative conformity to theological and cultural expectations. The narrative of the Annunciation operates through a literary logic in which Mary's dialogue is shaped to fulfil specific theological aims rather than to portray a fully self-determined subject in a modern existential sense. Her words are crafted to reveal the identity of the child and the nature of God's action, which can overshadow her own interior complexity and existential struggle.

Scholars such as Fitzmyer and Brown adopt a literary approach to this passage. They argue that Mary's question is not an expression of genuine confusion or objection, but a narrative device that allows the angel to explain the special identity of the child rather than the biological process of conception. In other words, Luke uses Mary as a rhetorical figure to emphasise the uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God (Landry, 1995). Under this interpretation, representations of Mary are shaped to reinforce the myth of womanhood, an idealised construct that equates female virtue with purity, obedience, maternal devotion, and silent suffering (de Beauvoir, 1956). This model forces women into roles of chastity, submission, and sacrifice, limiting them to reproductive and spiritual functions that stifle existential growth. It alienates women by reducing their bodies to symbols of revelation and by ignoring their personal experiences, dilemmas, and struggles. Motherhood, a complex and ambivalent experience, is simplified into a conflict-free and purely holy moment.

This literary approach, which ultimately overemphasises Mary as an object within a theological project, receives strong criticism from Schaberg, who offers a more radical and critical reading of the narrative logic. According to Schaberg, an engaged woman would not ordinarily question the possibility of pregnancy unless there was an ulterior concern, such as the suspicion that the pregnancy did not derive from her fiancé (Nnaemeka Ali, 2024). This reading alerts us to the social and moral stakes encoded in Mary's question.

Schaberg interprets the question as an expression of moral and social anxiety, suggesting that Mary may fear conceiving the child of God in a way that would appear socially illegitimate, that is, outside of marriage, which would expose her to disrepute and suspicion. From this interpretation, Schaberg translates the Greek phrase *andra ou ginosko* not as "I have not had intercourse with a man", but as "I am not related to my husband", implying that the child would be conceived independently of Joseph (Landry, 1995). In this reading, God's grace to Mary represents a reversal of an unjust social order, elevating a young, poor woman to the center of the work (Nnaemeka Ali, 2024).

The anxiety reflected in Mary's words is therefore not only spiritual unease, but also the existential experience of a subject facing the risk of being reduced to an object in the eyes of society and religious authority. Schaberg's emphasis on Mary's moral and social anxieties suggests that women's bodies are never neutral or free in a patriarchal system. Instead, they always function as sites of judgement, condemnation, and control. Mary's concern that she might become pregnant "outside of marriage" reflects the strength of the normative order that makes the perceived sanctity of the female body a condition for social acceptance. Mary recognises that even if the unborn child is the "Son of God", her body will still be interpreted through structures of masculine control, including laws, customs, and public morality.

Mary's question in Luke 1:34 thus opens up complex layers of meaning and cannot be simply summarised as innocent and uncomplicated consent to God's will. Mary, as a poor and relatively powerless female figure who faces a major divine event, inhabits a position of social, gendered, and

reproductive vulnerability (Landry, 1995). Through this interpretive lens, the Annunciation is not only a miracle story of faith, but also a subversive narrative that challenges patriarchal social order and elevates the female body as an ambiguous yet revolutionary site of divine revelation.

## 7. Maryam/Mary, Pregnancy, and the Alienation of the Female Body

This study has examined how the annunciation and pregnancy narratives of Maryam in the Qur'an and Mary in the Gospel of Luke reflect women's experiences of alienation and agency through Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework. The analysis has shown that pregnancy in these sacred narratives does not appear as a neutral biological event, but as a site where divine initiative, social control, and embodied subjectivity intersect. Maryam a.s., though spiritually elevated and described as muharrar and *qānītīn*, voices fear, shame, and social anxiety in the face of an imposed pregnancy, which underscores her alienation from her body and dignity. Mary in Luke, while presented as more overtly accepting of the divine message, exercises agency within theological and cultural expectations that cast her as the ideal obedient woman. In both cases, motherhood is narrated not primarily as an act of existential choice, but as a function of divine will mediated through patriarchal structures that moralise women's bodies and reproductive capacities.

Placed in conversation with earlier feminist readings, these findings both converge with and deepen existing scholarship. Muslim feminist exegetes such as Wadud (1999), Barlas (2019), and Lamrabet (2016) have emphasised Maryam as a figure of spiritual authority who challenges patriarchal *tafsir* and opens interpretive space for women's subjectivity. Christian feminist theologians, including those discussed by Landry (1995), Schaberg in Ali (2024), and more recently Weaver (2023), have similarly questioned idealised images of Mary which reduce her to a submissive icon of purity and maternal devotion. This study affirms those critiques and adds an explicitly existentialist layer by foregrounding alienation, immanence, and transcendence in the context of pregnancy. In line with Beauvoir's analysis of pregnancy as something that "happens" to women rather than as a fully controlled project (de Beauvoir, 1956), Maryam's and Mary's stories expose the structural processes through which women shift from subjects to objects in both the narratives and their reception.

Recent interreligious work further supports this result. Ghazal and Middleton (2024) show, in a comparative study of Muslim-Christian Marian texts, that God reveals the divine presence through the embodied experience of pregnancy, emphasising its relational and theological significance rather than treating it as mere biology. It resonates with the present argument that Maryam's and Mary's pregnancies function as sites of encounter with God and others, even as they become occasions of alienation. Shabot (2017), drawing on Beauvoir, describes childbirth as an embodied convergence of immanence and transcendence and as a potential "project of subjectivity". Her perspective stands in productive tension with this article's emphasis on alienation. While childbirth can indeed empower women as embodied subjects, patriarchal interpretations may simultaneously appropriate these experiences to reinforce obedience and sacrifice.

Theologically, this study complicates traditional notions of virginity and holiness. Origen's separation of virginity from hymenal intactness and the wider ancient Mediterranean understanding of a non-sealed virgin body disrupt narrow anatomical definitions (Lillis, 2020). Nevertheless, later Christian and Muslim interpretations tend to reassert bodily ideals by portraying Mary/Maryam as exempt from menstruation, labour pain, or physical damage from childbirth (Hoover, 2022; Leu, 2022; Umairah, 2009). Andal's analysis (2021) of Marian pregnancy in late medieval European visual culture conceptualises the maternal body as a liminal "space" for spiritual interaction, which parallels this study's claim that Maryam's and Mary's bodies are treated as thresholds between divine and human, public and private. Yet when holiness is constructed in opposition to ordinary female bodily processes, women's spiritual value becomes tied to an impossible ideal of disembodied purity. The result is a persistent separation between "holy womanhood" and real women's lives, which functions as a mechanism of control over female bodies.

The masculinisation of Maryam intensifies this paradox. Exegetical traditions that describe her with the masculine plural *qānītīn* and that conceptualise spiritually elevated women as "men"

effectively code spiritual excellence as masculine (Barlas, 2019; Hoover, 2022). Such readings suggest that women must symbolically exit womanhood to become fully recognised religious subjects. In contrast, feminist interpretations highlight Maryam's critical questioning, her capacity for worship leadership, and her intellectual courage (Ali, 2019; Lamrabet, 2016; Wadud, 1999), which challenge rigid gender dichotomies. In a similar vein, Palacios and Morillo (2022) reinterpret Mary of Nazareth as a historical woman and leader rather than a static ideal of submissive motherhood. Read through an existential lens, Maryam's and Mary's holiness does not negate their gendered embodiment; rather, it exposes the instability of fixed sex/gender boundaries and gestures towards more fluid, inclusive models of spiritual authority.

Consent emerges as a crucial site for analysing the ambivalent agency of both figures. On one level, Mary's "May it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) and Maryam's acceptance of divine decree can be read as acts of spiritual courage and consent (Weaver, 2023). On another level, these responses occur within religious discourses that have already scripted women as vessels, mothers, and symbols of purity. MacKinnon's critique of consent, as discussed by Tirosh (2024), highlights how in gendered and unequal contexts consent is often presumed and performed in ways that sustain, rather than dismantle, structural inequalities. Literary approaches that treat Mary's question in Luke 1:34 merely as a narrative device designed to highlight the child's divine identity risk reducing her to a rhetorical tool (Landry, 1995). By contrast, Schaberg's reading, as reported by Nnaemeka Ali (2024), foregrounds Mary's moral and social anxiety about conceiving outside socially recognised marital norms. This interpretation closely parallels the present study's argument that women's bodies in patriarchal contexts are never neutral but always sites of judgement, condemnation, and control.

Taken together, these results indicate that Maryam and Mary inhabit what may be termed "bounded agency": they act, choose, and speak, yet they do so within heavily gendered structures that constrain the range and meaning of their choices. Their narratives do not simply provide models of passive obedience; they reveal the cost of compliance and the risk of dissent for women whose bodies carry communal, theological, and political meanings. The existential vulnerability identified by Prinds et al. (2023) in contemporary transitions to parenthood – marked by changes in life meaning, relationships, and awareness of mortality – is already present in Maryam's wish for death during labour (Qur'an 19:22–23) and in Mary's anxiety at the Annunciation. O'Boyle and Brady (2019) similarly show that childbirth is experienced as a deeply spiritual and transformative process. These insights support the claim that Maryam's and Mary's pregnancies can be read as sites of existential struggle where women negotiate identity, honour, and faith under conditions that threaten to turn them into objects of doctrine and social judgement.

Seen in a wider perspective, the findings function as a sign of enduring structural patterns. They show how patriarchal theology sanctifies women by disembodying them, how religious language attaches honour and shame to reproductive roles, and how spiritual excellence is often coded as masculine. Krohn (2020) demonstrates that magisterial Catholic teaching on the "culture of life" and "new maternity" integrates maternal experience into ethical discourse, yet this integration can still idealise female sacrifice without fully addressing women's alienation or lack of genuine choice. The present study's reading of Maryam/Mary aligns more closely with this latter trajectory, suggesting that Marian narratives can serve not only as tools of discipline but also as resources for critique and reappropriation.

The implications of these findings are significant for feminist theology, hermeneutics, and contemporary debates on reproductive ethics. Interpreting Maryam and Mary as alienated yet agentive subjects, rather than as flawless icons of obedience, can help religious communities recognise the structural violence embedded in narratives that romanticise motherhood, purity, and suffering. The stories reveal that women's biological experiences, such as pregnancy and childbirth, are never purely "natural" but are also socially and theologically mediated. When communities attach women's value to ideals of purity, obedience, and sacrificial pain, motherhood becomes a site of reverence and regulation. A more honest engagement with Maryam's fear and isolation, as well as Mary's moral and

social vulnerability, can support theological and pastoral practices that affirm women's autonomy and complexity, rather than disciplining them into silence and self-negation.

The patterns identified in this study are not accidental. Historically, exegesis and theology developed within male-dominated institutions where men's experiences and anxieties shaped the reading of texts. It is therefore unsurprising that spiritual excellence became associated with masculinity, that Maryam's elevated status was described using masculine grammatical forms, and that women's menstrual and reproductive bodies were framed as impediments to spiritual leadership (Hoover, 2022; Mackenzie, 2024). Beauvoir's distinction between male transcendence and female immanence helps explain why pregnancy so easily appears as a site of alienation: in patriarchal systems, women are taught to understand their bodies as means for others, whereas men are authorised to understand theirs as instruments of creativity and self-project (de Beauvoir, 1956). Within such a framework, Maryam's and Mary's pregnancies are readily absorbed into a myth of womanhood that celebrates female suffering while obscuring female agency. The convergences with contemporary empirical findings on honour-based violence, constrained reproductive autonomy, and moral policing (Rizkianti et al., 2020; Singh & Pandey, 2025) indicate that these narrative patterns reinforce, and are reinforced by, broader social structures.

In light of these insights, several avenues for action and further reflection emerge. First, religious educators, preachers, and community leaders can present Maryam and Mary as complex, ambivalent subjects rather than one-dimensional icons. Emphasising their questions, fears, and negotiations with divine and social power would allow believers, especially women, to recognise their own struggles in sacred models instead of feeling compelled to emulate an unattainable ideal. Second, scholars of tafsir and biblical studies can continue to develop hermeneutical approaches that centre female embodiment and existential experience as primary sites of meaning, revisiting interpretations that erase menstruation, pain, or risk from Maryam's and Mary's stories and acknowledging these elements as theologically significant. Third, interdisciplinary dialogue between feminist theology, existential philosophy, and reproductive ethics can articulate theological positions that support women's bodily autonomy, including concerning antenatal care, childbirth choices (such as caesarean section), and resistance to honour-based violence.

Future research can extend this existentialist feminist framework to other female figures in Islamic and Christian scripture, investigate how Maryam and Mary are received in diverse cultural and legal contexts, and engage with queer and decolonial perspectives that further unsettle fixed categories of gender and sanctity. Through such ongoing work, Maryam and Mary can function not only as symbols of ideal womanhood but as critical interlocutors in contemporary struggles for women's dignity, freedom, and embodied subjectivity.

## 8. Conclusion

This study has examined how the annunciation and pregnancy narratives of Maryam in the Qur'an and Mary in the Gospel of Luke reflect women's experiences of alienation and agency through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework. The analysis has shown that although both figures are revered in their respective religious traditions, their pregnancies reveal deep tensions between spiritual elevation and patriarchal constraint. Maryam a.s., while maintaining spiritual integrity, voices fear, shame, and social anxiety in the face of an imposed pregnancy, which highlights her alienation from her body and social dignity. Similarly, Mary in Luke appears more rhetorically accepting, yet her agency emerges within theological and cultural expectations that position her as the ideal obedient woman. In both cases, the narratives elevate motherhood not primarily as an act of existential choice, but as a function of divine initiative that is interpreted and managed within patriarchal structures.

These findings underscore the importance of interpreting religious narratives with sustained attention to embodied female experiences and the sociocultural power relations that surround them. Women's biological experiences, such as pregnancy and childbirth, do not arise as purely "natural" events; they are also socially and theologically mediated. The stories of Maryam and Mary illuminate

how motherhood can become a site of both reverence and regulation, where communities attach women's value to ideals of purity, obedience, and sacrificial suffering. At the same time, the questioning, anxiety, and negotiations that both figures express show that even highly idealised maternal roles contain traces of resistance, ambivalence, and subjectivity that can serve as starting points for critical rereading.

This research contributes to feminist theological discourse by demonstrating how divine narratives, while empowering in some respects, can also perpetuate gendered alienation when they are interpreted in ways that marginalise women's autonomy and bodily integrity. An existentialist feminist lens reveals how sacred stories can both disclose and obscure women's status as full subjects, particularly when pregnancy is framed as something that "happens" to women rather than as an arena of negotiated meaning and choice. Future research may build on this analysis by examining the contemporary lived experiences of motherhood and spirituality among Muslim and Christian women in relation to Maryam and Mary, or by applying this framework to other female figures in sacred texts. Such work can further interrogate how religious narratives shape women's roles and autonomy in diverse cultural contexts, and can support the development of theological interpretations that affirm women not only as symbols of holiness but as agents of faith, freedom, and embodied existence.

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