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Gendered Moral Agency and Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Sexuality: A Ma'na-cum-Maghza Reading on the Story of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā

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Abstract

This article investigates the gendered ethics of sexuality in Q.S. Yūsuf [12]:23–24 through Sahiron Syamsuddin's ma'na-cum-maghza hermeneutical framework, which integrates textual meaning with evolving ethical significance. Contemporary social discourses frequently construct sexuality as a burden borne by women, casting them as primary sexual objects and assigning responsibility for sexual misconduct to their bodies and behavior. Traditional interpretations of the Yūsuf–Zulaykhā episode have often reinforced this imbalance by foregrounding female desire while minimizing male sexual agency. Through a linguistic, contextual, and intratextual analysis (ma'na), followed by an exploration of historical, contemporary, and ideal significances (maghza), this study argues that the Qur'anic narrative actually affirms a more equitable ethical vision. The text acknowledges both Yūsuf and Zulaykhā as sexual subjects possessing desire and moral agency, while distinguishing them based on the ethical management of that desire rather than on gender. The findings demonstrate that: (1) sexual inclination is a universal human condition rooted in fiṭrah; (2) moral accountability applies equally to men and women; and (3) wrongdoing arises not from sexuality itself, but from its coercive or unjust enactment. Thus, the narrative offers a Qur'anic foundation for gender-equitable sexual ethics, challenging patriarchal interpretations that stigmatize female desire and absolve male responsibility.

Keywords: *Yūsuf narrative; Zulaykhā; ma'na-cum-maghza; sexuality; gender justice.*

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Introduction

The issue of female sexuality has drawn renewed public attention in Indonesia, particularly following the prolonged delay in the ratification of the *RUU Penghapusan Kekerasan Seksual* (Bill on the Elimination of Sexual Violence). This legislative initiative, designed to protect women's rights and impose penalties on perpetrators of sexual violence, reflects a broader struggle among women to safeguard their bodily and moral integrity. Yet, within dominant cultural and religious narratives, women continue to be positioned as the primary culprits in matters of sexuality. The enduring assumption that women are sexual objects has led to the persistent victim-blaming logic in which acts of sexual violence are attributed to women's appearance or behavior – perceived as provoking male desire. Such views indicate that patriarchal values remain deeply embedded in the fabric of society, despite the widespread discourse on gender equality in contemporary times.

Religious texts, which function as both moral guidance and legal reference, are often misinterpreted through the lens of gender bias. Qur'anic narratives, particularly those recounting the lives of prophets, contain profound moral lessons that call for renewed interpretive attention in today's socio-ethical context. One of the most frequently cited stories used to legitimize the perception of women as sources of sexual temptation is the story of Prophet Yūsuf and Zulaykhā.

In this narrative, as told in Sūrat Yūsuf, Zulaykhā – the wife of the Egyptian official (al-ʿAzīz) – is portrayed as attempting to seduce Yūsuf to fulfill her desires. This episode, vividly described in Q.S. Yūsuf [12]:23–24, has long shaped the negative perception of Zulaykhā as a lustful and manipulative woman. Such portrayals have contributed to the belief that women are inherently the source of moral disorder, while simultaneously neglecting their right to sexual subjectivity and human agency. Moreover, exegetical attention has often been disproportionately focused on Yūsuf's moral virtue and resistance, with limited exploration of the story's broader gendered dynamics. This imbalance reflects how patriarchal readings have historically influenced the construction of sexuality in Qur'anic interpretation, often marginalizing women's perspectives and experiences.

The interpretive discourse surrounding the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā, as well as the *ma'na-cum-maghza* hermeneutical approach, is not entirely new within the field of Qur'anic studies. A number of scholars have attempted to apply this method in their exegetical analyses, such as Abdul Muiz Amir[1], M. Dani Habibi[2], Muhammad Alwi H.S. and Iin Parningsih[3], Siti Robikah[4], Adi Fadilah[5], and Faisal Haitomi[6]. Likewise, several studies have explored the narrative of Sūrat Yūsuf from various interpretive and thematic perspectives,

including works by Ali Mursyid and Zidna Khaira Amalia [7], as well as Nurwijayanti et.al [8], among others.

While these studies provide valuable contributions, a review of the literature reveals that discussions on the figure of Zulaykhā – particularly in Q.S. Yūsuf [12]:23–24 – remain largely underexplored through the *ma'na-cum-maghza* framework. Most existing works tend to emphasize Yūsuf's moral integrity and virtue while portraying Zulaykhā as a symbol of temptation and moral weakness. This asymmetry has perpetuated a gendered bias that obscures the complex ethical and psychological dimensions of the story.

Therefore, this article seeks to uncover an alternative reading of the Yūsuf-Zulaykhā narrative by re-examining their interaction in Q.S. Yūsuf [12]:23–24 through the *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach. By placing both characters on equal interpretive ground, this study aims to reconstruct the negative stigma traditionally attached to Zulaykhā and to reveal the deeper message of gender equality embedded within the verses.

Method

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutical approach with a focus on textual analysis grounded in Sahiron Syamsuddin's *ma'na-cum-maghza* method of Qur'anic interpretation. The research proceeds through three methodological phases. First, the study examines the linguistic and intratextual dimensions of Q.S. Yūsuf 12:23–24. This includes an analysis of key terms, particularly *rāwadat-hu* and *hamm*, through classical lexicons and comparative usage across Qur'anic discourse. Contextual relationships within Sūrat Yūsuf are analyzed to understand how spatial structures, narrative sequencing, and character dynamics contribute to the moral tension embedded in the episode. Second, the study utilizes historical contextualization, exploring the socio-religious environment of the revelation period to uncover the *phenomenal-historical significance* of the narrative. This phase draws on established works of *asbāb al-nuzūl* and classical tafsīr to identify how the episode served as a rhetorical and psychological reinforcement for the Prophet Muḥammad and the early Muslim community. Third, the research engages in a normative-ethical reinterpretation consistent with the *maghza* framework. This stage involves relating the narrative's moral implications to contemporary concerns surrounding sexuality, consent, and gender justice in Muslim societies. Through this process, the study identifies the *phenomenal-dynamic* and *ideal-eschatological* layers of significance, allowing the text to speak meaningfully to modern ethical discourse while remaining grounded in Qur'anic epistemology. Through these stages, the *ma'na-cum-maghza* method enables this study not only to explore the textual structure and narrative logic of the Zulaykhā episode but also to uncover its broader

relevance for rethinking gendered moral agency and sexual ethics in contemporary Muslim contexts.

Results and Discussion

Conceptual Structure of Ma‘na-cum-Maghza

The *Ma‘na-cum-Maghza* approach was formulated by Sahiron Syamsuddin as a contemporary hermeneutical framework for interpreting the Qur’an. Drawing upon both classical exegetical principles and modern hermeneutical theory, Syamsuddin situates his method within the broader discourse of meaning (*ma‘na*) and significance (*maghza*). He begins by classifying hermeneutical thought according to how meaning is ascribed to the object of interpretation. He identifies three major currents: *objectivist*, *subjectivist*, and *objectivist-cum-subjectivist* [9].

The objectivist school emphasizes recovering the original intention of the author or creator of a text, whether written, spoken, or expressed through symbols or human behavior. Interpretation, in this sense, is a process of reconstructing what the author meant. Classical figures such as Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey are commonly associated with this orientation. In contrast, the subjectivist school centers the interpreter or reader as the principal producer of meaning. Within this current, Syamsuddin distinguishes several degrees of subjectivity [9]: the highly subjectivist forms of *deconstruction* and *reader-response criticism*; moderately subjectivist trends such as *post-structuralism*; and the less subjectivist orientation of *structuralism*. The objectivist-cum-subjectivist school, represented by thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jorge J. E. Gracia, seeks to harmonize these two poles by emphasizing the dialogical relationship between text and interpreter. Meaning emerges not solely from the author or the reader but from the fusion of their horizons [9, p. 26].

Building upon these philosophical foundations, Syamsuddin applies this tripartite classification to the field of contemporary Qur’anic interpretation, formulating three corresponding typologies: first, the quasi-objectivist traditionalist view, which holds that Qur’anic teachings must be understood, interpreted, and applied exactly as they were by the earliest Muslim community. For this group – including movements such as *Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* and *Salafism* – the divine message is confined to its literal expression, which is to be universally and timelessly applied. Second, the quasi-objectivist modernist view, which regards the literal or historical meaning (*al-ma‘nā al-aṣlī*) as the initial foundation for discerning the deeper, universal message behind the text. This inner message, rather than the literal form, should be implemented in contemporary and future

contexts. Scholars exemplifying this orientation include Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and Muḥammad al-Ṭālibī. Third, the subjectivist view, which asserts that all interpretation is inherently shaped by the interpreter's subjectivity and that interpretive truth is therefore relative. According to this perspective, each generation possesses the right to reinterpret the Qur'an in light of its intellectual, cultural, and historical experiences—a position exemplified by Muḥammad Shahrūr [9, pp. 73–76].

Among these typologies, Syamsuddin advocates for the quasi-objectivist modernist stance, which he considers to embody a “*hermeneutical equilibrium*” — an interpretive posture that gives due attention to both the original literal meaning (*al-ma'nā al-aṣlī*) and the overarching moral-theological message (*maghza*) of the text [9]. The synthesis of these two layers of understanding is what he terms a *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* reading. While this method bears resemblance to Fazlur Rahman's *double-movement* theory and Abdullah Saeed's *contextualist* approach — both of which emphasize movement between the historical and the contemporary contexts — Syamsuddin extends their insights further [10]. Unlike Rahman and Saeed, whose models primarily address legal or ethical verses, the *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* framework aspires to embrace the entire Qur'anic discourse, enabling dynamic yet disciplined interpretation across thematic, narrative, and theological domains alike [11].

In Syamsuddin's conception, the *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* approach consists of two interdependent interpretive dimensions. The first is *ma'na* — the original or literal meaning understood by the Qur'an's first recipients within its historical and linguistic context. The second is *maghza* — the significance or overarching message that extends beyond the immediate historical situation and speaks to broader, enduring human realities [9].

In this framework, the literal or historical meaning serves as the starting point for uncovering the deeper significance that transcends the immediate context of revelation. The dynamic element of interpretation, therefore, does not lie in the literal meaning itself but in how the significance of the text is continually re-articulated across time and civilization. As Syamsuddin explains, the *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* approach bridges the horizon of the text and that of the interpreter, harmonizing past and present, and balancing the Divine dimension of revelation with the human dimension of understanding. This “balanced hermeneutics” enables interpreters to remain faithful to the Qur'an's historical context while engaging with contemporary moral and social realities [12].

To refine this concept, Syamsuddin distinguishes between two types of significance (*maghza*) [13, p. 106]:

1. Phenomenal significance, which refers to the contextual and dynamic moral message as understood and applied through history. This type is divided into:

- a) *Phenomenal-historical significance*: the primary message as comprehended and practiced during the Prophet's time. Understanding this requires a grasp of both the macro-social and micro-religious contexts of revelation, often informed by *asbāb al-nuzūl* and early Islamic history.
 - b) *Phenomenal-dynamic significance*: the message as interpreted and implemented in later periods, shaped by evolving thought and the *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age).
2. Ideal significance, which represents the ultimate accumulation and perfection of human understanding of the Qur'an's message—an eschatological ideal reflecting God's intended telos for human civilization.

From this framework, dynamic interpretation is not the textual meaning itself but the human effort to continuously uncover and recontextualize the *significance* of the text. The *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach seeks a balance between historical faithfulness and contextual transformation, enabling the Qur'an to remain both textually rooted and ethically alive in every generation.

Methodological Application of the Ma'na-cum-Maghza Approach

In practical terms, the *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* approach involves several interrelated methodological steps designed to balance textual analysis with contextual interpretation.

First, the interpreter begins with a linguistic analysis of the Qur'anic text. It is crucial to recognize that the Qur'an employs seventh-century Arabic, a language marked by distinctive lexical, semantic, and syntactic characteristics. A nuanced understanding of this linguistic system enables the interpreter to grasp the original sense of the text as understood by its earliest audience [12]. To refine this analysis, Syamsuddin emphasizes the importance of intra-textual analysis—that is, comparing the usage of a given term across various Qur'anic contexts to discern its semantic range and relational meaning. This method rests on the hermeneutical assumption that every textual interpretation begins with a historical meaning, which serves as the foundation for subsequent interpretive developments. The Qur'an's universal truth unfolds through this ongoing process of reinterpretation, grounded in the recognition that language, including Qur'anic Arabic, possesses both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. The synchronic aspect refers to linguistic structures that remain stable, while the diachronic dimension reflects the dynamic shifts in meaning that occur over time [11].

Second, the interpreter must consider the historical context of revelation, both at the macro and micro levels. The macro-historical context encompasses

the broader socio-cultural and political conditions of Arabian society during the time of revelation, while the micro-historical context refers to the specific circumstances surrounding the revelation of a verse, commonly known as *asbāb al-nuzūl*. These two contextual layers provide essential insights for reconstructing the communicative situation in which the text originally functioned, allowing for a more accurate understanding of its initial meaning (*al-ma'nā al-aṣlī*) [12].

Third, the interpreter proceeds to explore the *maqṣad* or *maghza* of the verse – that is, the underlying purpose, significance, or moral message intended by the text. This can be discerned through careful attention to both linguistic expression and historical context, including the symbolic dimensions embedded within the Qur'anic discourse. The ultimate goal of this step is to contextualize the *maghza* – to translate the ethical and theological significance of the verse into contemporary frameworks without undermining its textual integrity [12].

Through these stages, the *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* approach establishes a dynamic interpretive process: beginning from the textual-linguistic layer, moving through historical reconstruction, and culminating in contextual application. This movement reflects the balance between historical faithfulness and present-day relevance, ensuring that the Qur'an's message remains both anchored in revelation and responsive to human experience across time.

The Story of Zulaykhā in Q.S. Yūsuf [12]: 23–24 in Classical and Modern Tafsīr

Before approaching the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā in Q.S. Yūsuf [12]:23–24 through the *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* framework, it is necessary to first review how this episode has been interpreted in both classical and modern Qur'anic commentaries. Such a review is essential to understand the exegetical dynamics surrounding the narrative, particularly regarding the terms *rāwada* and *hamm*, which form the analytical focus of this study.

Among classical exegetes, al-Ṭabarī begins his interpretation of verse 23 by examining the term *rāwadat-hu* (“she sought to seduce him”), citing several reports (*riwāyāt*) to support his reading. Quoting Abū Ja'far, al-Ṭabarī explains that God revealed this verse concerning “the wife of al-'Azīz – the master's wife – who sought to seduce Yūsuf so that he might lie with her,” a view corroborated by the traditions of Ibn Ḥumayd, Ibn Wakī', and Ibn Ḥātim [14]. His explanation is concise, similar to that of Ibn Kathīr, who notes that the Egyptian woman's actions stemmed from her overwhelming passion for Yūsuf [15].

By contrast, al-Qurṭubī offers a more detailed linguistic analysis, explaining that *al-murāwadah*, the verbal noun of *rāwada*, means “to invite or entice someone into physical intimacy or seduction.” Some commentators, he notes, relate the word to *ruwaidun*, meaning “to request gently” [16]. Similarly, al-Zamakhsharī

interprets *rāwada* as an act of persuasion and deception, wherein Zulaykhā attempted to subdue Yūsuf through manipulative enticement—a calculated scheme to entrap him [17].

The word *rāwadat-hu* is directly connected to the phrase *hayta laka* (“come to me”), in which Zulaykhā acts as the grammatical subject. Al-Ṭabarī interprets this as meaning, “I have prepared myself for you,” citing multiple *riwāyāt* in keeping with his *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* methodology. Al-Qurṭubī also repeats this view but highlights Yūsuf's invocation of divine protection at the moment of temptation. In contrast, al-Zamakhsharī takes *hayta laka* as equivalent to an invitation to sin (*zulm*), suggesting that Zulaykhā's act was self-destructive and led to moral corruption [17].

Regarding verse 24 and the term *hamm*, al-Ṭabarī interprets it as an indication that the woman sought to attract Yūsuf's attention through temptation, to which he momentarily responded. He includes several *isrā'iliyyāt* reports depicting their interaction in sexually charged terms. Scholars then differ on how to understand Yūsuf's *hamm*. Some interpret it as a test of the Prophet's human nature—an impulse restrained by divine intervention—while others see it as an occasion for moral exemplarity, showing how God's chosen servants resist desire [14]. Al-Qurṭubī likewise focuses on Yūsuf's ethical integrity, while al-Zamakhsharī maintains that a mere *hamm*—a passing thought—is blameless unless it evolves into a deliberate act [16]. Citing Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, he notes that Yūsuf “saw a sign from his Lord that deterred him from what he intended,” whereas Ibn Kathīr affirms that Yūsuf, being among God's purified servants (*mukhlaṣīn*), was divinely protected from sin [15].

Overall, classical exegetes tend to center their interpretations on Yūsuf's moral steadfastness, portraying *hamm* as a test of prophetic virtue. In contrast, Zulaykhā's *hamm* is largely treated as a narrative device illustrating Yūsuf's trial rather than her own agency or subjectivity.

Modern exegetes such as Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, M. Quraish Shihab, and Hamka reinterpret the verses with greater attention to psychological and socio-cultural contexts. They begin verse 23 by considering the circumstances that led the wife of al-‘Azīz to seduce Yūsuf. Quraish Shihab reads *rāwadat-hu* in light of these conditions, suggesting that the Egyptian noblewoman may have been emotionally unfulfilled in her marriage or that her husband was physically incapable [18].

Hamka, in his *Tafsīr al-Azhar*, describes this episode as Yūsuf's second major trial. Drawing on Ibn Ishāq's reports, he notes that al-‘Azīz and his wife had been childless for years, which motivated their adoption of Yūsuf. Hamka attributes Zulaykhā's seduction to her inability to restrain her desires for a young and attractive man. While initially contextual, Hamka later adopts a more essentialist tone, suggesting that experienced women often find it difficult to control

themselves when confronted with beauty, implying a generalization about female nature [19]. Quraish Shihab, on the other hand, emphasizes the power asymmetry between Zulaykhā and Yūsuf. As the wife of his master, she wielded authority over him and exploited this position in repeated, deliberate attempts at seduction. He interprets *rāwada* as “to request something gently but persistently,” implying a repeated act of persuasion designed to elicit compliance [18]. Similarly, al-Marāghī interprets the phrase *rāwadat-hu allatī fī baytihā* (“the one in whose house he lived sought to seduce him”) as an attempt by al-‘Azīz’s wife to deceive Yūsuf into submission. He draws upon al-Zamakhsharī’s understanding that such seduction involves coercion and deceit, likening it to the act of seizing something from a victim.

Turning to verse 24, al-Marāghī adopts a gendered stance, suggesting that the term *hamm* cannot denote sexual intention because the subject in question is a woman. For him, the act of initiating sexual desire belongs to men, while women merely respond. This interpretation implicitly reaffirms male dominance in sexual agency [20]. By contrast, *Hamka* views *hamm* as an “inner emotional stir” (*gelora jiwa*) rather than a concrete act [19]. He interprets it as a natural impulse consistent with human psychology and biology—particularly for men—but insists that Yūsuf’s exceptional piety and spiritual vigilance (*ihsān* and *ikhhlāṣ*) allowed him to resist temptation [19]. *Hamka* ultimately sides with *al-Baghawī*, reasoning that Yūsuf’s restraint illustrates a model of moral health and divine protection [19]. While Quraish Shihab adopts a more neutral tone, acknowledging that even prophets possess human desire but remain under divine guidance [18].

A comparative reading of both classical and modern exegeses reveals three major tendencies. First, both classical and modern commentators frequently reproduce gender-biased interpretations, emphasizing Yūsuf’s moral fortitude while reducing Zulaykhā to an emblem of temptation. The sexual symbolism of *rāwadat-hu* and *hamm* is rarely treated reciprocally between male and female figures [21]. Second, the meaning of these key terms cannot be divorced from their linguistic and historical contexts, which condition their semantic and moral implications. Third, classical exegetes tend to remain within a literal-linguistic framework, while modern commentators begin to incorporate insights from other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology. Consequently, the story of Zulaykhā calls for renewed examination through the *Ma'na-cum-Maghza* lens—one that reconsiders both the literal meaning (*ma'na*) and the significance (*maghza*) of the text to uncover its deeper message regarding gender relations, human desire, and moral agency.

Revelation Context: Macro and Micro Dimensions

Sūrat Yūsuf is a uniquely structured chapter of the Qur'an [22]. It presents a continuous and coherent narrative centered on a single main character – Prophet Yūsuf – unfolding across multiple interconnected episodes [23]. This stands in contrast to many other Qur'anic narratives, where the story of a figure is usually dispersed across various sūrahs and appears only in selected episodes rather than as a complete narrative unit, as is the case here. This distinctive narrative unity is one of the reasons why a number of scholars have regarded the story in this sūrah as *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ* ("the best of stories") [24]. In addition to its rich moral, spiritual, and ethical content, the narrative offers vivid depictions of emotional and psychological states: the inner turmoil of a young man, the seductive strategies of a woman, patience in the face of trial, the pain of separation, and the enduring love and compassion of a father [25]. The story also contains imaginative and evocative scenes, providing both explicit and implicit information about past events and social realities, thereby inviting readers to reflect on the historical, psychological, and relational dimensions embedded in the narrative [18].

Sūrat Yūsuf was revealed in Mecca before the Prophet Muḥammad migrated to Madinah. The socio-religious climate of the revelation resembled that of Sūrat Yūnus – marked by a state of crisis and intense opposition to the Prophet's mission. This period followed the event of the *Isrā'*–*Mi'rāj*, which many skeptics viewed with suspicion. Even some among the newly converted began to waver in their faith, and cases of apostasy were reported. Additionally, the Prophet himself was enduring profound personal grief due to the recent passing of his beloved wife Khadijah and his protective uncle Abū Ṭālib. It was under these circumstances that Sūrat Yūsuf was revealed to console and strengthen the Prophet's heart [18].

Within this sūrah, Prophet Yūsuf is presented as a figure of exceptional integrity and spiritual excellence, confronted with multiple trials across different stages of life. The narrative recounts his suffering at the hands of his own brothers, his abandonment in a well, which caused separation from his father, the seduction of a powerful and wealthy woman during the prime of his youth – at a moment when natural desires would be at their peak – and later his unjust imprisonment [26]. His eventual rise to honor illustrates the fruits of steadfastness (*istikāmah*) and patience (*ṣabr*) in the face of adversity [18].

In *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, al-Suyūṭī cites Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, who narrates from Ibn 'Abbās that the Companions asked the Prophet, "O Messenger of God, could you narrate to us a story?" Thereupon, verse Q.S. Yūsuf [12]:3 was revealed. Al-Qurṭubī offers a slightly different context, noting that a group from among the Jews requested that the Prophet recount the story of Yūsuf, which led

to the revelation of this passage [27]. From these reports, it becomes evident that the macro-context of the sūrah centers on strengthening the Prophet's resolve while confronting communal rejection and personal hardship. Meanwhile, the micro-context reflects the Qur'an's intention to present this narrative as the "best of stories," full of lessons and moral exemplars for believers across time.

The *Ma'na* (Literal Meaning) of the Zulaykhā Episode

In this narrative, Yusuf is not the only prominent figure; the Qur'an also centers the role of a woman, the wife of al-'Azīz, who becomes the other key agent in the unfolding drama. This female figure, later widely identified as Zulaykhā, has often been framed as the seductress who attempted to compromise the prophetic integrity of Yūsuf. The Qur'an vividly depicts how she initiated and escalated the confrontation, particularly through the wording employed in Sūrat Yūsuf [12]:23–24. The linguistic fabric of these verses provides the primary textual cues for interpreting agency, desire, and moral accountability in the Zulaykhā episode. Her portrayal in the exegetical tradition has frequently been framed through a gender-biased lens, positioning her primarily as a seductress [28]. This article argues that a closer reading of Q.S. Yūsuf 12:23–24, however, reveals a far more complex discourse surrounding agency, desire, and moral responsibility, while at the same time acknowledging Yūsuf's human susceptibility within a morally complex scenario.

The first critical expression is: *wa-rāwadat-hu allatī huwa fī baytihā 'an nafsihī* "and the one in whose house he lived tried to seduce him away from himself." The verb *rāwadat-hu* is derived from the root *r-w-d*, which denotes *a gentle yet persistent attempt to obtain something that is initially refused*. The verbal form used here indicates repetition, suggesting continuous attempts by the wife of al-'Azīz to persuade Yūsuf despite his resistance. The prepositional phrase *'an nafsihī* is especially significant. It does not merely indicate that she attempted to have intercourse with him; rather, it signals that the seduction sought to separate Yūsuf from his moral selfhood, from his identity grounded in divine consciousness. Thus, the seduction is both physical and existential [29].

The verbal form *rāwadat-hu* (Form III), as many classical grammarians note, denotes linguistic features and their implications [30], such as repetitive action, which means repeated attempts despite rejection, a reciprocity marker meaning one party trying to influence the will of another, and negotiation through affection implying emotional manipulation embedded in a request [31]. Al-Biqā'ī's observation that the root *r-w-d* relates to *circular movement* reinforces this interpretation: Zulaykhā constructs a strategic emotional encirclement, not a single impulsive act. She plans the encounter and moves the structure of the narrative around her intentions [31].

This is heightened by: *wa-ghallaqat al-abwāb* “and she locked the doors.” This clause shows intentional physical measures taken to overpower Yūsuf’s agency. The plural *abwāb* signals a systematic elimination of escape routes, that all possible exits were sealed to isolate Yūsuf, constructing an environment of entrapment. The narrative space becomes a closed system, as an extension of her persuasive strategy, intensifying the psychological and theatrically staging of Yūsuf’s moral confrontation [31]. The physical setting thus becomes symbolic communication: seduction through restriction. The statement *hayta laka* further intensifies the scene – conveying an imperative meaning “Come to me,” spoken with immediacy and assertive authority. Some exegetes note tones of enticement mixed with command embedded within this brief expression. The (according to al-Qurṭubī, al-Zamakhsharī) masculine object suffix *-ka* highlights direct address of a subordinate male, reinforcing power asymmetry [32].

Zulaykhā is not merely a woman driven by passion; she is a figure of social supremacy utilizing sexual power, spatial control, and institutional authority [32]. These features indicate that moral responsibility in the episode is inseparable from gendered power dynamics. Yūsuf’s response is equally terse yet theologically charged: *qāla ma ‘ādhā Allāh* “he said, I seek refuge in God.” Here, the divine name appears in the first line of his response, foregrounding theocentric consciousness as his primary defense. There is no hesitation, no negotiation, no explanation tied to social fear. Yūsuf’s identity is anchored in *taqwā* before social hierarchy [33]. Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī remarks that Yūsuf’s refusal is grounded solely in divine consciousness, not fear of human consequences. The narrative thus presents two contrasting moral postures within one scene: coercive desire and prophetic restraint.

Verse 24 presents the most interpretively contested expression: *wa-laqad hammath-bihī wa-hammā bihā lawlā an ra`ā burhāna rabbihi* “she certainly desired him, and he would have desired her, had he not seen the proof of his Lord.” The perfect tense *hammath* indicates that Zulaykhā’s desire was fully formed, her intention translated into planned and enacted seduction[16]. In contrast, *hammā bihā* is grammatically conditional, and the divine sign interrupts development from impulse, intention, and action [21, p. 115]. This creates a linguistic-ethical distinction:

Table 1. Linguistic-Ethical Distinction

Dimension	Zulaykhā	Yūsuf
Linguistic form	<i>hammath-bihī</i>	<i>hammā bihā</i> (conditional)
Impulse	Active	Affected
Intention	Active	Interrupted
Action	Attempted	Rejected
Moral valence	Volitional desire	Prevented by <i>burhān</i>

Outcome	Attempted seduction	No enactment
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The *burhān rabbihī* functions narratively as immediate divine intervention and theologically as authentication of prophethood. Thus, from a *ma'na* perspective, both are capable of sexual desire (recognition of shared humanity), and only Yūsuf's desire is interrupted before moral compromise. This suggests that desire itself is not condemned; its governance is what determines virtue. Classical scholars such as al-Zamakhsharī argue that *hamm* can refer to a *passing inclination*—a natural human response—rather than a committed intention. Reports attributed to Ibn 'Abbās also acknowledge the existence of human desire in Yūsuf but highlight that divine insight halted any progression toward sin [34]. Thus, his *hamm* indicates inner vulnerability rather than moral failure. The narrative affirms his status as one of God's *mukhlaṣīn*—those purified and protected by divine will.

This linguistic-intratextual analysis highlights several important points: first, gendered asymmetry in exegetical tradition: classical commentators often intensify Zulaykhā's seduction while spiritualizing Yūsuf's role, leading to interpretive imbalance [32]. Second, *rāwadat-hu* and *hamm* must be interpreted within their textual and narrative environment, rather than isolated moral assumptions. Third, the Qur'anic discourse shows both characters as sexual subjects, though differentiated by moral outcomes and divine protection. These findings underscore the necessity of a *ma'na-cum-maghza* rereading to recover the ethical significance of the episode—particularly regarding gender agency and moral responsibility.

The *Maghza* of the Zulaykhā Narrative: Gendered Moral Agency and Qur'anic Sexual Ethics

Having reconstructed the *ma'na* of Q.S. Yūsuf [12]:23–24 through linguistic and historical analysis, this section explores the *maghza*—the ethical significance—embedded in the narrative. Within the *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach, the Qur'anic meaning (*ma'na*) is anchored in the historical-linguistic structure of the text, while the ethical significance (*maghza*) unfolds across time and contexts. Thus, the narrative of Yūsuf and the wife of al-'Azīz in Q.S. Yūsuf 12:23–24 should not be confined to a textual reconstruction of a past event, but instead viewed as a dynamic ethical discourse extending into contemporary and future realities.

The story's phenomenal-historical significance first emerges within the context of early Meccan Islam, where the Prophet Muḥammad faced heightened doubt, public ridicule, and profound personal grief. The Qur'an presents Yūsuf's

firm refusal – *qāla ma ‘ādha Allāh* – as an exemplar of moral resilience rooted in unwavering faith. In a period when the Prophet was questioned and tempted to despair, Yūsuf’s triumph over seduction and injustice functioned as a narrative reassurance that steadfastness, not immunity from desire or hardship, marks true prophethood [24].

In the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā, the markers of sexuality are articulated through the terms *rāwadat-hu* and *hamm*, each enacted by its respective subject. Traditional exegetical accounts often portray women as aggressors and men as passive victims, yet the Qur’an deploys parallel verbal constructions – *wa-laqaḍ hammath-bihī* and *wa-hammā bihā* – to indicate that both characters possess desire and agency. This linguistic symmetry reveals that erotic initiative is not gender-exclusive; rather, sexual potential is a shared human capacity. Desire (*hamm*) is acknowledged as a human inclination rather than a feminine flaw or masculine privilege. What distinguishes Yūsuf is not the absence of desire, but the presence of *taqwā* that governs and directs it. Thus, the ethical distinction is not gendered but anchored in the level of faith and the ability to regulate desire [35].

The Qur’anic narrative affirms that both men and women are sexual subjects and moral agents. The narrative underscores that human sexual disposition is universal and morally neutral. Zulaykhā’s *rāwadat-hu* demonstrates that women are sexual subjects, capable of initiating and expressing desire, while Yūsuf’s propensity toward *hamm* reveals that men are not exempt from erotic susceptibility [36]. Both Yūsuf and Zulaykhā experience sexual attraction, yet their responses diverge significantly. While Yūsuf restrains his desire through divine consciousness, Zulaykhā acts upon hers in a manner that misuses her social authority. The ethical distinction lies not in the presence of desire – since desire is a natural aspect of *fiṭrah* – but in how that desire is governed. Sexuality is not in itself sinful; rather, ethical judgment arises when desire is expressed through coercion or injustice. Thus, the Qur’an does not portray women as inherently dangerous nor men as inherently righteous. Instead, the story signals that harm emerges when power and unrestrained desire intersect.

Table 2. *Contrasting Ethical Responses to Desire*

Yusuf’s Agency	Zulaykhā’s Agency
Desire restrained	Desire enacted
Divine consciousness	Power misuse
Morally exemplary	Morally harmful

This episode, therefore, disrupts patriarchal assumptions by asserting that men and women stand equal before God in their capacity to obey or transgress [37]. Virtue lies not in bodily condition but in self-control rooted in *īmāni*. This

reorients Qur'anic sexual ethics toward equitable human accountability rather than gender-based suspicion [38]. This reading encourages a more equitable moral expectation, dismantling long-standing misogynistic interpretations that disproportionately place blame upon women [39]. When this narrative is read within contemporary contexts, a phenomenal-dynamic significance comes into view, particularly regarding gendered constructions of sexuality and moral responsibility [40]. The ethical imperative is not the suppression of sexuality nor the assignment of blame along gender lines, but the cultivation of self-control and responsible action. Through this lens, the *maghza* of the narrative corrects interpretive traditions that have monopolized sexual agency in male bodies and relegated temptation to female bodies.

Traditional tafsīr has often intensified the portrayal of the woman as the source of temptation while ennobling Yūsuf as morally invulnerable. Such interpretations mirror patriarchal assumptions rather than Qur'anic nuance [41]. This article argues that men and women both possess the capacity to be sexual subjects as well as sexual objects. Sexuality fundamentally expresses the human self and represents one of the most evident aspects of human existence. It is a social process through which desire is articulated and enacted, and can also be understood as an expression of erotic impulse that is socially constructed [42]. Human sexuality is transmitted from one generation to the next and is shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including politics, economics, cultural values, and religious teachings. As a manifestation of sexuality, sexual desire is a normal and natural experience that may arise in both men and women. One of the foundational principles of sexuality – indeed the reason it is considered a vital human need – is that sexuality is a healthy and natural dimension of human life [43].

Likewise, in verse 24, the term *hamm* attributed to Zulaykhā is met with *hamm* attributed to Yūsuf, although the conditions and outcomes differ significantly. The sexual desire experienced by Zulaykhā is, in essence, a recurring phenomenon inherent to human beings across generations. Modern studies indicate that endorphins stimulate or inhibit particular emotional responses, including sexual impulses [42]. While Zulaykhā's coercive attempt to seduce Yūsuf is clearly prohibited and morally unacceptable, the issue should not be placed on the mere presence of female desire – often treated as taboo – but rather on how sexual impulses are ethically governed. Although sexuality in Islam is understood as a natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) shared by both men and women, its expression must conform to established ethical norms and social values [43]. Consequently, both men and women are positioned equally as moral agents in matters of sexuality. The responsibility for sexual self-regulation is not imposed solely upon women; it is required also of men, particularly when sexual behavior risks becoming harmful or abusive.

In this sense, the ethical distinction drawn by the Qur'an is not based on gendered essentialism, but on the capacity to regulate desire according to divine guidance [40]. The moral crisis in this narrative arises not from sexuality itself – since sexual desire is part of human *fiṭrah* – but from the misuse of power and absence of consent when Zulaykhā exploits her social authority to entrap Yūsuf. This dynamic reading provides a robust Qur'anic basis for rejecting contemporary forms of victim-blaming, domestic patriarchy, and the stigmatization of female sexuality, while affirming gender equality in moral accountability [44, p. viii]. In modern legal contexts such as the discourse surrounding Indonesia's RUU P-KS, this *maghza* underscores the necessity of protecting sexual dignity regardless of gender and challenging social structures that normalize coercion [42].

Beyond these contextual layers, the narrative also gestures toward an ideal-eschatological significance in Syamsuddin's framework – an ultimate ethical horizon where human dignity and spiritual integrity constitute the highest goal of civilization. In this vision, sexuality is not a dangerous force to be policed disproportionately upon one gender, but a sacred trust requiring conscious governance by all. The Qur'an anticipates a society in which the moral evaluation of sexual behavior is based on justice (*'adl*), dignity (*karāmah*), and mutual responsibility, not on patriarchal suspicion of women's desires or moral double standards that exonerate men while condemning women [45].

The figure of Yūsuf as *mukhlāṣ* (divinely purified) underscores that ethical excellence arises through the harmonization of human desire with divine orientation. The figure of Zulaykhā – who is morally accountable not for her desire but for her coercive enactment of it – demonstrates that sin is rooted in power abuse rather than in sexuality itself [46]. This ideal significance, therefore, aims to cultivate a global sexual ethic that upholds consent, self-control, spiritual maturity, and equal protection of bodily autonomy.

A careful intratextual reading demonstrates that these verses must be understood in relation to their broader narrative environment [22]. Preceding the seduction scene, the Qur'an portrays a gradual development of Yūsuf's charisma, moral consciousness, and spiritual maturity. The events that follow – false accusation, imprisonment, and eventual political elevation – reveal a trajectory of institutional violence and later vindication [24]. Within the larger architecture of the *sūrah*, the story outlines a narrative arc grounded in vulnerability, displacement of power, and the eventual reversal of injustice through divine intervention [23]. Sexual desire, therefore, is not an isolated problem in this narrative, but is situated within a continuum of trials testing Yūsuf's integrity in multiple domains: familial love and betrayal, bodily autonomy, personal freedom, and social authority.

From this perspective, several interpretive implications emerge. First, the story affirms dual moral gender agency: both Yūsuf and Zulaykhā act with intention and will. This challenges exegetical traditions that depict women exclusively as seductresses and men as passive recipients of temptation. Second, the narrative highlights the significance of gendered power dynamics. Zulaykhā's social authority and positional dominance complicate any simplistic assignment of blame, directing ethical concern toward coercion and domination rather than desire alone [25]. Third, the conditional structure of the verse (*lowlā an ra'ā burhāna rabbihī*) underscores the humanity of prophethood. Yūsuf is not portrayed as an ascetic figure detached from embodied impulse, but as a human being whose moral triumph is achieved through divine guidance and personal restraint [37]. Finally, the Qur'an's literary style intentionally avoids erotic dramatization. Unlike certain post-biblical narrative elaborations that sensationalize the episode, the Qur'an remains focused on the ethical stakes rather than graphic details, emphasizing moral outcome over voyeuristic curiosity.

Seen through this tripartite lens, the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā emerges as a profound Qur'anic intervention in sexual ethics, dismantling interpretive traditions that pathologize women's sexuality and impose asymmetrical moral burdens. The Qur'an calls for a reevaluation of inherited gender norms and affirms that both men and women are fully sexual, fully responsible, and fully dignified beings before God [40]. In its ideal trajectory, the *maghza* of this narrative fosters a theologically grounded commitment to gender justice, reshaping how Muslim societies understand and legislate sexual relations. It urges the development of social conditions in which sexuality reflects mutual respect and divine purpose—rather than serving as a site of domination and harm. In this way, the Zulaykhā episode sustains ongoing ethical transformation, guiding contemporary Muslim engagement with issues of sexuality, consent, and gender equality within the overarching framework of Qur'anic moral vision.

Table 3. *Maghza Trajectory in the Zulaykhā Episode*

Interpretive Horizon	Maghza Outcome
Historical	Moral endurance of prophets; Console believers under trial
Contemporary	Sexual ethics grounded in gender equality and consent
Universal	Dignified human sexuality governed by <i>taqwā</i> and justice

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Q.S. Yūsuf 12:23–24, when read through Sahiron Syamsuddin's *ma'na-cum-maghza* hermeneutical framework, offers a corrective to gender-biased interpretations that have historically dominated the exegetical tradition. The literal, historical layer of the narrative (*ma'na*) reveals a moment of intense moral trial in the life of Yūsuf, functionally positioned to console the Prophet Muḥammad and strengthen the early Muslim community during a period of severe psychological and social crisis. Sexual desire (*hamm*) is portrayed not as a vice or weakness, but as an intrinsic human inclination experienced by both male and female figures. What distinguishes Yūsuf in this episode is not immunity from desire but his active moral governance, rooted in unwavering faith (*taqwā*).

When extended into contemporary contexts (*phenomenal-dynamic maghza*), this narrative challenges patriarchal assumptions that link sexuality exclusively with women and rational restraint with men. It affirms both genders as sexual subjects and moral agents, equally capable of desire and equally accountable for their actions. The Qur'an's critique is directed not at female sexuality *per se*, but at the abuse of power and violation of consent—ethical concerns that remain critically relevant today, particularly amid ongoing struggles against gender-based violence and the societal tendencies to blame women for sexual transgressions. In this respect, the ethical trajectory of this narrative lends strong support to legal and social reforms that uphold bodily autonomy, protect individuals from coercion, and ensure justice irrespective of gender.

Ultimately, the *ma'na-cum-maghza* reading of the Yūsuf–Zulaykhā narrative reveals the Qur'an as a text that not only recognizes and affirms the realities of human sexuality but also insists on ethical accountability and gender justice. It calls for a recalibration of inherited gender norms in Muslim thought and practice, urging believers to construct social relations in which both men and women are treated as fully responsible moral beings. Thus, this episode serves as a crucial Qur'anic paradigm for cultivating an equitable, dignified, and spiritually grounded sexual ethic—one that continues to speak powerfully to the ethical challenges faced by Muslim societies today.

Author Contributions

Siti Robikah designed the study and led the manuscript writing; **Izza Royyani** conducted the textual analysis and contributed to the interpretation; **Muhammad K. Ridwan** provided critical revisions and ensured overall coherence. All authors approved the final version of the article.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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