

Living Tafsir in Ponorogo Pesantren: Epistemic Typologies of Female Ulama on Gendered Scriptural Readings

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the living tafsir among female ulama in pesantren in Ponorogo and how they construct meaning from scriptural texts often considered gender-biased through the ethical framework of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law) and the methodology of mubāḍalah (mutuality). Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation in Qur'anic study sessions, and analysis of instructional tafsir (interpretation) materials. The findings identify two main typologies: an ethical,

conservative orientation that maintains textual fidelity while emphasizing relational moral reasoning to protect dignity, family, and social harmony; and a dialogical, transformational orientation that interprets texts contextually to affirm justice, shared responsibility, and women's participation in the public sphere without neglecting ethical decorum. The study shows that interpretive authority emerges not solely from textual mastery but from lived religious experience enacted repeatedly through pedagogical practice and social relations. Conceptually, the study positions living tafsir as a legitimate epistemic category in contemporary Qur'anic studies, with implications for Islamic education that promote moral sensitivity, critical reflection, and relational justice.

Keywords: living tafsir, female ulama, *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, *mubādalāh*, pesantren.

A. Introduction

The epistemic tradition of Qur'anic interpretation within Indonesian *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) has historically been shaped by male authority that privileges textual orthodoxy and rational formalism over lived spiritual experience. This configuration produces a hierarchical knowledge structure in which women are positioned primarily as moral subjects rather than as epistemic agents capable of generating religious meaning (Marhumah 2015; M. Abdullah 2017). Classical pedagogical methods such as *bandongan* (group learning) and *sorogan* (individual learning) further reinforce one-directional modes of transmission that prioritize obedience over dialogical engagement (Farida and Kasdi 2021). Consequently, verses and hadiths concerning women are often interpreted literally and detached from their socio-historical and ethical contexts, thereby sustaining gender bias not merely at the theological level but also as an epistemic problem concerning which religious experience is recognized as authoritative in *tafsir* (interpretation) (Anshori 2024; Shahin 2020).

In recent decades, the emergence of *Bu Nyai* (female division leader) as interpreters of religious texts within *pesantren* life signals a significant epistemic transformation in Islamic education. Through teaching, counselling, and community leadership, these women actively interpret the Qur'an in ways that integrate textual knowledge with lived religious experience, producing a dialogical form of *tafsir* grounded in care, reciprocity, and moral responsibility (Muafiah et al. 2024; Jannah 2019; Hasanatul Jannah; Rachmah Ida 2019; Labibah, Taufiq, and Alimi 2022). However, a paradox persists: while *pesantren* uphold the ideal of religious knowledge as lived and embodied, women's interpretive practices often remain marginalized within formal discourses of *tafsir* authority (Nuroniya 2023). This paradox renders female religious experience highly influential in practice yet weakly acknowledged as a legitimate source of Qur'anic knowledge.

Departing from the assumption that divine revelation engages human subjectivity through a dialogical interpretive process, this study employs the ethical frameworks of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law) and *mubādalah* (mutuality) to examine women's living interpretations as coherent forms of epistemic reasoning rather than merely social practice (Saeed 2006; Rafiq 2021; Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir 2019). Focusing on the *living tafsir* (study on how Quran serves) of female *ulama* (Islamic scholar) in Ponorogo Islamic boarding schools, this research seeks to demonstrate that *Bu Nyai* function as producers of religious meaning whose interpretations can be analytically mapped into distinct typologies. By doing so, the study aims to reframe *pesantren* as sites of epistemic transformation, where religious authority is continuously renegotiated through lived spirituality and ethical praxis. Therefore, this article is grounded in the central research question: How does the *living tafsir* of female *ulama* in *pesantren* Ponorogo construct meaning from scriptural texts perceived as gender biased through the ethical

framework of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and the methodology of *mubādalah* (mutuality)?

Previous studies on gender and *tafsir* in Indonesia have primarily examined textual methodologies, leaving unexplored the phenomenological dimension of women's interpretive agency. Most research has concentrated on scriptural hermeneutics or *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) discourse, without delving into how female scholars live their interpretations through social and pedagogical practices (Marhumah 2015; Muafiah et al. 2024). Few have considered how emotion, embodiment, and communal engagement shape interpretive meaning in *pesantren* contexts (Hasanatul Jannah; Rachmah Ida 2019; Fakhria, Afyuddin, and Alias 2023). This study aims to bridge that gap by interpreting *living tafsir* as both a hermeneutical process and a spiritual disposition that structures moral life. By doing so, it offers a dialogical perspective on how women's experiences become sources of epistemic renewal in Islam.

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how female ulama construct living interpretations of gendered Qur'anic and Hadith texts in *pesantren* contexts. IPA is selected to capture interpretive meaning as it emerges from lived spiritual and social experience rather than solely from textual exegesis. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participatory observation of Qur'anic teaching sessions, and analysis of instructional *tafsir* materials. Analysis involved phenomenological reduction, thematic synthesis, and hermeneutic interpretation, using *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and *mubādalah* as ethical analytical lenses to interpret justice, reciprocity, and moral responsibility, enabling linkage between empirical experience and normative ethical reasoning (Cresswell 2017; Nikmatullah 2024).

The selection of Bu Nyai Ida from *pesantren* Al-Barokah and Bu Nyai Faiza from *pesantren* Al-Muqorrobin was guided by methodological and substantive considerations aligned

with the research object. In this study, *living tafsir* functions as the formal object, serving as an analytical framework to examine interpretation as a lived, ethical, and pedagogical practice. The material object consists of the understandings, interpretations, and enacted *tafsir* of the two *Bu Nyai* as expressed through teaching, decision-making, and social engagement within *pesantren* life. Both figures were selected because they exercise sustained pedagogical authority and actively teach *tafsir*, positioning them as key agents in the production of religious meaning. This selection accords with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which prioritizes analytical depth over numerical representation. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and ethical approval with informed consent. Concretely, this research offers an empirically grounded model for gender-responsive Islamic education and provides practical ethical guidance for *pesantren* educators in addressing gender-biased interpretations through dialogical and just pedagogical practice.

B. Discussion

1. *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*-based *Mubādalah* Approach

The *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*-based *mubādalah* approach situates Qur'anic interpretation within an ethical framework oriented toward the realization of *maṣlaḥah* (benefit) and justice rather than formalistic textual compliance (Auda 2011). In the context of *living tafsir* among female *ulama* (Islamic scholar) in Ponorogo, *maqāṣid* functions as a moral orientation that guides interpretation toward balance, compassion, and relational responsibility. *Hifẓ al-naḥs* (protection of life), *ḥifẓ al-'aql* (protection of intellect), *ḥifẓ al-nasl* (protection of lineage), and *ḥifẓ al-'ird* (protection of honour) become ethical axis through which gendered Qur'anic verses are engaged. Within this framework,

interpretation emerges as a dialogical encounter between revelation and lived experience, allowing *tafsir* to operate as a moral practice embedded in social life rather than as a rigid doctrinal exercise.

The concept of *mubāḍalah* (mutuality), developed by Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir (2021), advances a hermeneutic of reciprocity that challenges hierarchical gender assumptions by emphasizing mutual responsibility and ethical symmetry. When integrated with *maqāṣid* reasoning, *mubāḍalah* produces a theological-ethical synthesis that prioritizes substantive justice over numerical equality. In the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) setting of Ponorogo, this integration enables the Qur'an to be read as a living moral discourse that responds to concrete social realities. Female *ulama* such as Bu Nyai Ida and Bu Nyai Faiza enact this approach by interpreting scripture through empathy, experiential knowledge, and communal care, transforming exegesis into a reflective practice that aligns divine intention with everyday moral concerns (Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir 2019).

Epistemologically, this approach reconfigures interpretive authority by recognizing women's lived experiences as valid sources of religious knowledge. Within the broader framework of the Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) or Indonesian Female Islamic Scholars Congress, *maqāṣid cum-mubāḍalah* operates as a mode of ethical reasoning that integrates the normative aims of *Shari'ah* with social responsibility and care (Faqihuddin et al. 2024). In this sense, *living tafsir* is not merely a contextual reading but an enactment of interpretation through repeated moral decisions, pedagogical practices, and social mediation. Interpretation becomes "living" when it governs action, shapes ethical judgment, and sustains credibility within communal life.

Ultimately, the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*-based *mubādalāh* approach represents a synthesis between the theology of welfare and the ethics of reciprocity. It affirms women and men as moral agents jointly responsible for realizing justice and compassion in everyday contexts. Through *living tafsir*, Qur'anic interpretation evolves into a transformative process that integrates spiritual reflection with social engagement, addressing contemporary issues such as women's dignity, family justice, and social vulnerability. *Tafsir* thus functions not only as an intellectual endeavour but as a lived moral practice grounded in justice, care, and shared humanity.

2. Female *Ulama's* Understanding of Gender-Biased Scriptural Texts

Before examining specific verses, it is essential to note that these passages were selected because they represent key loci of gender interpretation in Islam. Verses such as QS. Al-Nisā' [4]:34, QS. Al-Aḥzāb [33]:33, QS. Al-Ḥujurāt [49]:13, and QS. Al-Nisā' [4]:11, 176 have long been central to debates on women's roles and authority (Barlas 2019; Wadud 2021b). Historically read through patriarchal frameworks, these texts are reinterpreted by female *ulama* in Ponorogo through the ethical lenses of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and *mubādalāh*. Their interpretations shift the discourse from hierarchical power toward moral reciprocity and justice (Faqihuddin et al. 2024). In this way, the pesantren emerges as a living space where scriptural understanding and social ethics mutually inform one another.

a. Male Leadership (QS. Al-Nisā' [4]:34)

The interpretation of *ar-rijālu qawwāmūna 'ala an-nisā'* (men are the protector for women) by female *ulama* in Ponorogo demonstrates a dialogical engagement between normative scripture and lived social realities within the

pesantren milieu. Bu Nyai Ida conceptualizes *qiwāmah* (concept of men's responsibility) not as male dominance, but as a moral trust and spiritual responsibility oriented toward balance, dignity, and harmony within the family. Grounded in a *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* perspective, leadership is framed as ethical accountability oriented toward *jalb al-maṣlahah* (promoting welfare) and *ḥifẓ al-'ird* (protection of dignity), not as a hierarchical privilege. This reading resists patriarchal interpretations that equate leadership with power and control (Auda 2011; Barlas 2019).

“...*Ar-rijālu qawwāmūna ‘ala an-nisā’* means that men are given the responsibility to lead ... Leadership is not about power, but about carrying a trust ... If it is misused, it loses its meaning.” (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

In everyday practice, this interpretation takes shape through relational ethics rooted in *adab* (good manners), *mīzān* (balance), and mutual care. While Bu Nyai Ida acknowledges male leadership as a normative principle, she allows contextual flexibility when moral responsibility is not fulfilled. In such situations, women may assume leadership roles to ensure family stability and well-being. Leadership, therefore, functions as a moral compass guiding family relations, *pesantren* pedagogy, and communal ethics rather than as a fixed legal rule.

“Yes, a husband is a leader, but leadership means responsibility ... If he cannot carry that responsibility, then the wife may take over so that the family continues to function.” (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

Bu Nyai Faiza offers a more dialogical reading by situating *qiwāmah* within shared social responsibility. Although she recognizes male leadership within the family, she firmly rejects interpretations that deny women agency in public life. Drawing on a *maqāsid cum-mubādalāh* (modern methodological framework in Islamic law) framework, leadership is understood as a collaborative and communicative process grounded in *musyawarah* (consensus), reciprocity, and collective welfare (Faqihuddin et al. 2024). Her *living tafsir* manifests in daily practice as a *pesantren* leader who actively engages in public life while maintaining ethical integrity in domestic life.

“Men may be leaders in the family, but that should never mean women cannot be visible or succeed ... Leadership must never be used as an excuse to suppress women.”(Interview Bu Nyai, Sayyidah Faizatul Fitriati 2025)

In Bu Nyai Faiza’s enactment of *tafsir*, the domestic and public spheres are not oppositional but interdependent. Leadership is practiced as a shared moral endeavor in which men and women contribute according to context and capacity. This understanding reflects *qiwāmah* as an open ethical mandate rather than a closed hierarchy, where scriptural meaning is continuously negotiated within lived realities and social participation.

“When I am outside, I may have a public role, but at home I remain a wife and a mother ... What matters is maintaining *adab* and responsibility in both spaces.”(Interview Bu Nyai, Sayyidah Faizatul Fitriati 2025)

Through these lived interpretations, *qiwāmah* emerges not as a doctrine of domination but as an ethical relationship anchored in responsibility, balance, and justice. Bu Nyai Ida emphasizes moral discipline and spiritual order, while Bu Nyai Faiza foregrounds dialogical collaboration and social engagement. Both demonstrate how leadership in QS. Al-Nisā' [4]:34 is continuously negotiated through lived experience rather than imposed as a rigid hierarchy (Qibtiyah 2019; Junaidi 2023).

b. Domestic and Public Spheres (QS. Al-Aḥzāb [33]:33)

The verse *wa qarna fi buyūtikunna* (settling in own home) is frequently interpreted as a normative instruction that confines women to the domestic sphere. Within the *pesantren* context, however, female ulama approach this verse through an ethical rather than restrictive lens. The home is not understood as a space of seclusion, but as a moral center from which spiritual discipline and social responsibility extend. Meaning emerges through the interplay of scripture, lived experience, and ethical practice, allowing interpretation to remain responsive to everyday realities (Faqihuddin et al. 2024; Qibtiyah 2019).

“A woman should indeed guard herself at home, but that does not mean she cannot go out ... What matters is observing proper *adab* ... If she goes out to teach or help others, that is also an act of worship.” (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

Bu Nyai Ida frames the home as a sacred pedagogical space where *ḥifẓ al-usrah* (protection of family) and *ḥifẓ al-dīn* (protection of religion) are cultivated through care, discipline, and moral transmission. Her reading

emphasizes *Maqāṣid al-Raḥmah* (objectives of mercy), positioning domestic responsibility as the ethical ground that sustains engagement beyond the household. In practice, this understanding is embodied in *pesantren* pedagogy that stresses balance between devotion at home and contribution to society, redefining piety as moral equilibrium rather than physical confinement (Auda 2011; Mustaqim 2020).

“If a woman is too busy outside while her home lacks religious values ... the home is the first school of education, and it must be preserved.” (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

Bu Nyai Faiza interprets *wa qarna fī buyūtikunna* as an ethical orientation guiding women’s participation in the public sphere. She challenges readings that equate piety with invisibility and instead presents public engagement as part of a spiritual vocation. Drawing on a *maqāṣid cum-mubādalāh* perspective, activities such as teaching, leadership, and community service are seen as fulfilling *ḥifẓ al-‘aql* (protection of intellect) and *ḥifẓ al-māl* (protection of property), provided that intention and *adab* are maintained (Isnaini et al. 2023; Arifin et al. 2024). This interpretation is lived through *pesantren* practices that nurture ethical confidence and participatory leadership among female students.

“A woman may appear in public as long as her intention is pure ... If her purpose is for God and the good of the community that too is a form of *jihad* (struggle).” (Interview Bu Nyai, Sayyidah Faizatul Fitriati 2025)

In Bu Nyai Faiza’s practice, domestic and public spheres are ethically interconnected rather than

oppositional. Values cultivated within the home, such as discipline, sincerity, and care, are translated into public conduct, turning social engagement into *'amal ṣāliḥ* (good deed). This enactment of *tafsir* demonstrates how scriptural meaning is lived as ethical action rather than confined to spatial divisions (Ismah 2023; Ka'baty 2024).

"What matters is not whether she is at home or outside ... If the intention is good, both are acts of worship." (Interview Bu Nyai, Sayyidah Faizatul Fitriati 2025)

Through these lived interpretations, *wa qarna fi buyūtikunna* is not treated as a command of withdrawal but as a call to ethical balance and intentional responsibility. The home becomes a site of moral formation, while the public sphere offers a space for the social enactment of faith. In this way, *living tafsir* integrates domestic commitment and public participation within a single moral horizon shaped by justice, care, and reciprocity (Basid and Jazila 2023; Junaidi 2023).

c. Spiritual Equality (QS. Al-Ḥujurāt [49]:13)

QS. Al-Ḥujurāt [49]:13 functions as a central ethical foundation for female *ulama* (Islamic scholar) in articulating spiritual equality. Bu Nyai Ida and Bu Nyai Faiza interpret the verse as a rejection of all forms of superiority based on gender, lineage, or social status, grounding equality in *taqwā* (piety) as the sole moral criterion. Their readings are anchored in the frameworks of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and *mubādalah*, where *ta'āruḥ* (introduction to know one another) is understood as reciprocal ethical engagement aimed at social harmony and collective welfare (Auda 2011; F A Kodir 2021; Qibtiyah 2019).

“Allah created men and women to know one another, not to demean one another ... The only distinction is *taqwā*.” (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

In Bu Nyai Ida’s interpretation, *ta’āruf* functions as a moral and spiritual principle that structures egalitarian relations within family life and religious education. Equality is not understood as sameness of roles, but as the affirmation of dignity grounded in ethical consciousness and sincerity of intention. This reading reflects an ethical-spiritual *tafsir* that prioritizes *ḥifẓ al-‘ird* (protection of honor) and *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (protection of life), positioning equality as lived morality rather than an abstract theological assertion. Her *living tafsir* becomes visible through everyday practices of mutual counsel, shared worship, and reciprocal ethical responsibility that sustain the moral fabric of *pesantren* life.

“When husband and wife worship and advise each other sincerely, they are already living this verse ... What God sees is the heart.” (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

Bu Nyai Faiza extends *ta’āruf* into an epistemic principle for knowledge production. From a *maqāṣid cum-mubādalah* perspective, she frames equality as reciprocal participation in intellectual and moral agency, recognizing both men and women as *khalīfah* (successor) entrusted with the same divine mandate. Here, equality is not only moral but epistemic, aligned with *Maqāṣid al-‘Adl* (objectives of justice) and *Maqāṣid al-Raḥmah* (objectives of mercy), enabling dialogical engagement and shared authority in religious understanding (Arifin et al. 2024; Isnaini et al. 2023).

“*Li ta’ārafū* means understanding each other’s roles and responsibilities ... Both men and women are *khalīfah* with the same mission.” (Interview Bu Nyai, Sayyidah Faizatul Fitriati 2025)

This epistemic equality is realized through dialogical learning and reciprocal deliberation, where knowledge emerges from interaction rather than hierarchy. Such enactment transforms *pesantren* into a space of ethical participation rather than gendered segregation, shifting piety from spatial separation toward moral collaboration grounded in *hifẓ al-‘aql* (protection of intellect) and *hifẓ al-dīn* (protection of religion).

“When male and female students discuss together, it is not a violation of *adab* ... but a way of practicing *ta’āruf*.” (Interview Bu Nyai, Sayyidah Faizatul Fitriati 2025)

Through these lived interpretive practices, spiritual equality takes shape along two interconnected dimensions. Moral reciprocity is sustained through everyday ethical relations, while epistemic reciprocity is enacted through shared participation in meaning-making. Rather than positioning equality as a corrective to tradition, this *living tafsir* reconfigures *pesantren* hermeneutics from within, grounding justice, dignity, and shared responsibility in lived religious experience (Auda 2011; Qibtiyah 2019; Wadud 2021a).

d. Inheritance and Social Justice (QS. Al-Nisā’ [4]:11, 176)

The interpretations of QS. Al-Nisā’ [4]:11 and 176 by female *ulama* demonstrate how Qur’anic inheritance law can be reread within an inclusive moral and social framework. Bu Nyai Ida and Bu Nyai Faiza approach these

verses through the paradigms of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and *mubādalah*, emphasizing *al-'adl al-jinsī* (justice and equity) as relational justice rather than numerical hierarchy. For both, the two-to-one division is not a marker of male superiority but a contextual mechanism shaped by the socio-economic conditions of early Islam, particularly men's financial responsibility within the family (Auda 2011; Engineer 1990; Barlas 2019).

"The two-to-one division does not mean women are inferior ... Now that economic roles have changed, we must also rethink what justice means." (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

Bu Nyai Ida articulates a value-centered *maqāṣidiyyah* (higher objectives) exegesis, arguing that justice in inheritance lies in balancing responsibilities rather than enforcing rigid mathematical equality. In her view, *farā'id* (Islamic system of inheritance law) functions as a dynamic ethical system aimed at *jalb al-maṣlahah* (achieving public interest) and the preservation of family harmony, rather than as a fixed legal formula. As *living tafsir*, this interpretation is enacted through *musyawarah* (consensus), *ṣulh* (reconciliation), and *riqā* (approval), framing inheritance as an act of *ta'dīb* (process of educating, disciplining, and instilling good manners) that sustains kinship ties and moral responsibility.

"If everyone agrees and the division strengthens family unity, that itself reflects justice." (Interview Bu Nyai Waridatus Sofiyah, 2025)

Bu Nyai Faiza advances a complementary approach by foregrounding the ethical space within *Sharī'ah* for negotiation and consensus. While maintaining the normative status of *farā'id*, she emphasizes its openness

to *ijtihād* (effort) when guided by *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. From a *mubādalāh* perspective, family consensus based on mutual consent represents a legitimate pathway to justice, aligning inheritance practice with *ḥifẓ al-usrah* (protection of family) and *ḥifẓ al-māl* (protection of property) (Basid and Jazila 2023; An Noor et al. 2024). Her *living tafsir* emerges in mediating inheritance disputes through dialogue rather than legal confrontation, translating juridical norms into social compassion.

“Allowing deliberation does not change God’s law ... it creates peace and preserves family bonds.”(Interview Bu Nyai, Sayyidah Faizatul Fitriati 2025)

Taken together, the interpretations of Bu Nyai Ida and Bu Nyai Faiza move beyond legal formalism toward an ethical and relational understanding of inheritance. Bu Nyai Ida emphasizes *maqāṣid*-based moral balance, while Bu Nyai Faiza highlights socially grounded reciprocity through *mubādalāh*. Their readings exemplify *living tafsir* that situates inheritance law as a moral guide responsive to lived realities, offering an epistemic renewal of Islamic jurisprudence grounded in justice, compassion, and *maṣlaḥah*, rather than patriarchal rigidity (Auda 2021; Wadud 2021a).

3. *Living Tafsir* Analysis: Two Typologies of Female Ulama’s Interpretation in Ponorogo

This section analyzes *living tafsir* as an interpretive process that operates not only at the level of meaning but also at the level of lived ethical orientation. The typological analysis of female *ulama* in Ponorogo reveals how Qur’anic interpretation becomes socially operative through repeated moral practice, relational decision-

making, and pedagogical enactment within *pesantren* life. Two dominant typologies emerge, each representing a distinct mode through which interpretation is internalized, enacted, and sustained as lived religious authority.

a. Ethical Conservative Typology (Bu Nyai Ida)

Bu Nyai Ida's *tafsir hayātī* represents an ethical, conservative typology characterized by fidelity to the text's normative structure, combined with moral reinterpretation grounded in *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. Her interpretive orientation prioritizes *ḥifẓ al-'ird* (protection of honor) and *ḥifẓ al-usrah* (protection of family) as ethical foundations for regulating gender relations. Rather than treating the Qur'an as a fixed legal code, she understands it as a moral horizon that guides balance, dignity, and reciprocal responsibility within family and *pesantren* life (Auda 2011).

At the level of interpretation, Bu Nyai Ida displays epistemic caution, particularly in reading verses on male leadership and inheritance. The two-to-one inheritance ratio is understood as a contextual regulation linked to historical responsibility rather than an ontological claim of male superiority. Justice, in her view, must therefore be read relationally and ethically rather than mathematically. This position reflects a pattern of internal ethical reconstruction that preserves textual legitimacy while reorienting its moral meaning (Nuroniya and Maula 2022; M. A. Abdullah 2017).

As *living tafsir*, Bu Nyai Ida's interpretation gains force through enactment rather than argumentation. Qur'anic meaning is continuously reproduced through every day moral decisions, such as mediating family

disputes, guiding inheritance deliberations, and shaping *pesantren* pedagogy. Interpretation functions as an internalized ethical compass that regulates action through *musyawarah*, *ṣulḥ*, and reciprocal counsel. In this sense, *tafsir* becomes “living” because it governs conduct, not merely belief. Authority is sustained through ethical consistency and social trust rather than textual assertion.

Epistemologically, this typology exemplifies an ethical hermeneutics of balance, where *ta’abbudī* (acts of worship accepted directly from the Quran or Sunnah) obedience and *ijtihādī* (effort) reasoning coexist in reflective equilibrium. The ethical conservative stance thus constitutes an internal critique of patriarchy from within tradition. It does not dismantle authority but transforms its moral orientation, positioning the female interpreter as a moral mediator who preserves the sanctity of the text while reclaiming its relational justice (Fakhria, Afyuddin, and Alias 2023).

b. Dialogical Transformational Typology (Bu Nyai Faiza)

Bu Nyai Faiza’s interpretive orientation represents a dialogical transformational typology grounded in *mubādalāh* epistemology and the *maqāṣid* principle of justice (*ḥifẓ al-’adl*). She approaches the Qur’an as a dialogical space in which revelation encounters lived experience, allowing meaning to unfold through contextual engagement. Gendered verses are interpreted through the ethical universality of the Qur’an, emphasizing reciprocity, agency, and social justice (Wadud 2021a; Barlas 2002).

Her reading of QS. Al-Aḥzāb [33]:33 exemplifies this orientation. The phrase *qarna fī buyūtikunna* is not treated as a spatial restriction but as an ethical call to integrity

across contexts. Domestic and public spheres are both construed as arenas of *'ibādah* (acts of worship) when guided by justice, trust, and moral responsibility. This interpretive stance parallels contextual hermeneutics while remaining rooted within *pesantren* authority structures, embodying a form of faithful transformation rather than oppositional reform (Sahin 2018).

As *living tafsir*, Bu Nyai Faiza's interpretation is enacted through participatory practice and dialogical pedagogy. Qur'anic meaning becomes operative through repeated engagement in teaching, leadership, and social mediation. Interpretation lives in action when women are encouraged to speak, deliberate, and assume responsibility without abandoning ethical discipline. *Tafsir* here functions as existential *ijtihad*, where reflection translates into reform through lived consistency rather than ideological rupture.

Her authority emerges from embodied credibility rather than institutional activism. Interpretive meaning is stabilized through repetition in everyday practice, transforming *pesantren* into a space where epistemic equality and moral reciprocity are normalized. This enactment demonstrates that living interpretation is sustained through social participation and ethical visibility, not through abstract theorization.

c. *Living Tafsir* as Reflective Ethical Practice

The two typologies identified in Ponorogo occupy an intermediary position between moderate patriarchy and liberal feminist hermeneutics observed in previous studies (Nuroniya 2023; Sahin 2022). Bu Nyai Ida's ethical conservative model emphasizes internal moral reconstruction, while Bu Nyai Faiza's dialogical

transformational model foregrounds contextual engagement and ethical renewal. Both illustrate that *living tafsir* is not defined by ideological alignment but by how interpretation is embodied, repeated, and trusted in social life.

This study identifies reflective *living tafsir* as a distinct epistemic position in which interpretive renewal arises from sustained dialogue between text and lived experience. In both cases, Qur'anic interpretation becomes living when it regulates action, shapes moral judgment, and structures relational ethics. Justice emerges not through opposition to tradition, but through continual return to its ethical core (Rahman 1982; Qibtiyah 2019).

The originality of this finding lies in demonstrating that *pesantren* women's *tafsir* constructs a middle path between conformity and resistance. By integrating spirituality, ethical reasoning, and lived practice, *tafsir hayātī* functions as a dialogical ethic rather than a prescriptive code. Within this framework, gender justice is sustained through humility, reciprocity, and moral proportionality, allowing revelation to remain sacred while continually renewed through life.

Her hermeneutic practice reflects the lived agency of *pesantren* women who reinterpret scriptural authority through experiential knowledge. This mirrors patterns in the "Living Qur'an of Pesantren Women" research, which reveals that interpretive authority among female *ulama* arises from social participation and embodied reflection (Labibah, Taufiq, and Alimi 2022). However, Bu Nyai Faiza's distinctiveness lies in her contemplative mode of transformation. Rather than mobilizing activism, she performs hermeneutical introspection, turning reflection into reform. Her *tafsir* thus functions as existential *ijtihad*, an interpretive dialogue that integrates spiritual devotion

with ethical renewal within the symbolic structure of tradition.

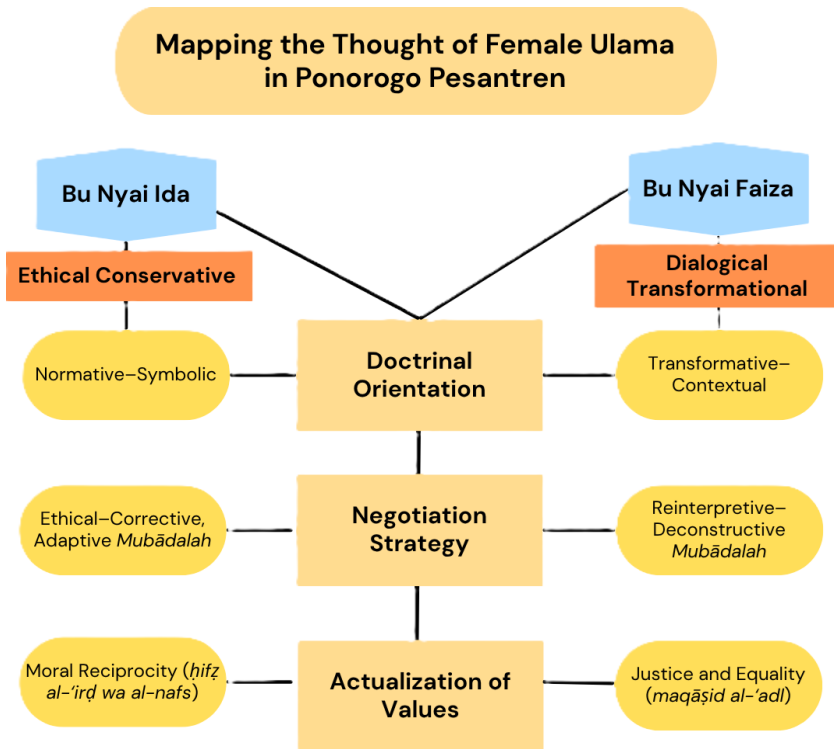


Figure 1: Mapping of Female *Ulama*'s Interpretive Typologies in Ponorogo Pesantren

The mapping (Figure 1) identifies two orientations of *living tafsir* among female *ulama* in Ponorogo. Bu Nyai Ida's ethical conservative typology emphasizes normative ethics, balance, and moral reciprocity within established interpretive boundaries, whereas Bu Nyai Faiza's dialogical transformational typology foregrounds contextual engagement and interpretive adjustment oriented toward justice and equality. Rather than representing opposing positions, these typologies

illustrate different modes through which Qur'anic interpretation is integrated into social reasoning via *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and *mubādalāh* frameworks.

Within the landscape of Indonesian studies on female religious interpretation, these typologies occupy an intermediary position between approaches that prioritize the internal reinterpretation of classical authority and those that emphasize reform through activist or institutional channels (Nuroniya 2023; Sahin 2022). Bu Nyai Ida's interpretive orientation aligns with studies highlighting ethical recalibration without rejecting normative structures (M. Abdullah 2017; Labibah, Taufiq, and Alimi 2022). By contrast, Bu Nyai Faiza's dialogical approach introduces contextual negotiation that challenges rigid domestication narratives while remaining embedded in *pesantren* authority. This study contributes to existing typologies by identifying reflective *living tafsir* as an interpretive position defined by sustained engagement between text and lived experience rather than ideological alignment.

The findings indicate that *tafsir ḥayātī* operates as a practical interpretive process through which Qur'anic ethics are translated into everyday moral judgment. Interpretation becomes "living" through repeated enactment in decision-making, pedagogy, and social mediation. Justice is approached as relational and context sensitive rather than formal or absolute, grounded in *tawḥīd* (monotheism) as an ethical orientation that allows distinction without hierarchy. Meaning is thus negotiated and maintained through practice rather than asserted as a fixed doctrinal outcome (Rahman 1982; Wadud 2021b; Mahmood 2019).

C. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *living tafsir* among female *ulama* in *pesantren* operates as an embodied ethical practice through which Qur'anic interpretation is continuously negotiated in relation to lived experience, moral judgment, and social responsibility. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the findings show that engagement with gender-related texts is guided by *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and *mubādalah*, positioning the Qur'an as a moral horizon rather than a fixed, prescriptive code. The ethical conservative orientation represented by Bu Nyai Ida emphasizes discipline, balance, and moral reciprocity within established norms, while Bu Nyai Faiza's dialogical transformational orientation foregrounds contextual reasoning and careful public engagement. Rather than functioning as opposing models, these orientations operate as interconnected modes through which *tafsir ḥayātī* becomes socially effective by regulating action and shaping pedagogy. Analytically, the study identifies reflective *living tafsir* as an interpretive position situated between textual rigidity and oppositional reform, showing that renewal can emerge from within tradition through sustained dialogue between text and lived reality.

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