

Hadia Mubarak. *Rebellious Wives, Neglectful Husbands: Controversies in Modern Qur'anic Commentaries*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022.

The contours of Muslim feminism emerged in Egypt during the late 19th century, subsequently filling out and culminating in a rapid rise of Muslim feminist thought near the end of the 20th century and into present day. As Muslims grappled with a changing moral landscape in modernity, scholars began to question some of the defining features of gender relations in Islam, particularly if they stood in contrast with modern ideals of gender equality and individual autonomy. A handful of Qur'anic verses – 4:3, 4:34, 4:128, and 2:228 – were extricated and closely examined because their apparent meanings were felt to be in tension with modern values.

This, at least, is *a* reading of the history of Muslim feminist thought in Islamic studies circles. A widely held belief in this field is that only with the advent of modernity did Muslim scholars view these verses through the lens of gender-balancedness. Scholars prior to this, it is said, accepted – and insisted upon – misogynistic, or at least patriarchal, ideas regarding women, reinforced by these four verses.

Hadia Mubarak contends with these claims in *Rebellious Wives, Neglectful Husbands: Controversies in Modern Qur'anic Commentaries* (2022), where she engages with two subfields of Islamic studies: *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegetical studies) and gender in the Islamic tradition. Mubarak examines four modern Sunni exegetes – Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), Rashīd Riḍa (d. 1935), Syed Qutb (d. 1966), and Ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973) – and compares them with seven well-known pre-modern exegetes. Through this process, she attempts to answer three questions: (1) is the Qur'ān – or the exegetical tradition – monolithically patriarchal, (2) how do the modern exegetes' social milieus and their own beliefs and personalities influence their engagement with the textual sources, and (3) how have modern exegetes posited new interpretations while at the same time grounding themselves in the tradition?

Mubarak's primary goal is to demonstrate the folly of starting with a fixed premise of either egalitarianism, patriarchy, or misogyny when examining the Qur'ān and its exegetical tradition. We say, she argues, that the *tafsīr* tradition is “decidedly misogynistic,” and yet there has been no “substantive engagement” with it for us to know this (p. 4). Analyzing four verses dealing with polygyny, husbandly *nushūz*, wifely *nushūz*, and men's “degree” over women, Mubarak outlines differences in interpretations between the eleven Sunni exegetes, exploring how some of their interpretations were gender-balanced, perhaps even pro-women, and how others were patriarchal or even misogynistic.

This exercise reveals the complexity inherent in the *tafsīr* tradition, as well as the complexity of labeling an individual exegete as either gender-balanced or patriarchal, as they posited varyingly egalitarian, balanced, patriarchal, or misogynistic interpretations for different verses. Both premodern and modern exegetes, Mubarak proposes, advanced exegetical interpretations that ran along this spectrum and were rarely uniformly gender-balanced or gender-imbalanced even within their own exegeses.

An assistant professor of religion at Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina, Mubarak has studied and taught gender and exegetical studies for many years. Her research deals with Islamic feminism, gender reform in the modern Muslim world, and modern and classical Qur'ānic exegesis. In *Rebellious Wives*, she brings these themes together, showing how the exegetical tradition was shaped by debates on gender reform in the modern Muslim world. Modernity unleashed “gender consciousness,” and Muslim scholars engaged with these new debates within and outside of their exegetical work (p. 2). Only in modern times, for instance, has the idea of wifely obedience been removed from interpretations of *qawwāmūn* in Qur'ān 4:34, which states that men are *qawwāmūn* over women. Similarly, all four of the modern scholars studied in her book emphasize the idea that polygyny is a restriction to four wives while making a case for monogamy as being the ideal. The question being asked in modernity is why polygyny is allowed, even as a restriction, whereas premodern scholars considered more the question of why God had *restricted* polygyny, without feeling compelled to justify its permissibility.

In the Sunni exegetical tradition, according to some scholars such as Aysha Hidayatullah, authority works backward. We cannot, therefore, ground new interpretations in past scholarly authority, as “interpretive authority...is predicated on reaching the same conclusions as previous exegetes” (p. 4). In other words, modern scholars cannot radically subvert the premodern *tafsīr* tradition and its findings. Mubarak shows this belief to be false by using the evidence of Ibn ‘Āshūr and his understanding of Qur'ān 4:34, which calls for the husband to implement a three-step process of speaking to his wife, leaving her bedside, and striking her – in the case of her engaging in adulterous behavior, provided that he wants to remain married to her. In such a case, when the marriage is at a critical juncture, if the wife will not commit to ending the behavior(s) that infringes upon her husband's rights in the marriage, and the husband wants to save his marriage, he is given permission to strike her in a manner that does not leave a mark.

Ibn ‘Āshūr, the most traditionally trained of the four modern scholars, anchors himself in traditional exegetical methodology to conclude that, of the three steps outlined in this verse, only one – that of leaving her alone in her bed – applies to the husband, and that the other two steps – speaking with her and striking her – apply to the legal authorities. In fact, he is the only scholar in both the classical and the modern traditions to come to this conclusion. He is able to do this, Mubarak argues, because *tafsīr* is a rule-governed enterprise that allows for polyvalent and even conflicting interpretations of the Qur'ān to be passed on throughout the centuries; it is not determined by its conclusions. Mubarak shows us how Muḥammad ‘Abduh likewise argues against polygyny through the traditional concept of *maṣlaḥa* (public interest) and maintains that *maṣlaḥa* should be the basis for modern legal reform. He argues that preventing harm should take precedence over securing benefits. As with the other three modern scholars, ‘Abduh believes that monogamy is the ideal form of marriage and that polygyny is a necessary, though harmful, act that should be severely curtailed and permitted only in times of need, such as during war when women greatly outnumber men.

On Qur'ān 2:228, which speaks of a “degree” that men have over women, Syed Qutb similarly departs from traditional interpretations that view this degree either as men's ontological, physical, social, or legal superiority over women, or as a divine preference for

men overall. Instead, Qutb focuses on this verse's legal aspect and states that men's degree is in this legal process, where the husband may take back his wife once he has initiated the divorce process but her waiting period ('*iddah*) has not yet ended. This understanding of men's degree as being limited to the legal field is unprecedented up until Qutb, portraying once again, Mubarak contends, the dynamism of the *tafsīr* tradition.

The genius of Mubarak's book lies not in her simply going through the *tafsīr* tradition to pick out gender-balanced interpretations, but in her analysis of those interpretations within both the pre-modern and modern traditions. Verses 4:34 and 4:128, for instance, speak about the steps to take when a spouse engages in *nāshiz* behavior. Verse 4:34 speaks of a wife's *nushūz*, while 4:128 speaks of a husband's *nushūz*. Premodern exegetes understood *nushūz* to mean arrogance or haughtiness, where one spouse engages in behavior that deprives the other of their marital rights. Premodern exegetes reasoned through a husband's *nāshiz* behavior, considering many reasons why he may act in this manner, some of them having to do with the wife's unpleasantness or lack of good looks, and some of them having to do with the husband's behavior, such as his attraction to another woman.

In the case of a woman being *nāshiz*, however, premodern exegetes did not deliberate upon potential causes of her behavior. Mubarak points out that, while seemingly misogynistic, this may have been a way in which premodern exegetes were looking out for wives' welfare. In a society where wives were financially fully dependent on their husbands, and in which the societal structure did not enable them to either have a job or to easily find one with which they could support themselves, remaining married to a husband who may no longer be sexually attracted to them may have been the best avenue for them to ensure their safety and security. Where a husband was not dependent on his wife for his own security, the wife's reasonings for being *nushūz* did not matter and therefore did not need to be deliberated upon. It is not, then, that premodern exegetes were misogynistic, but that they exhibited a concern for women based on their own historical realities and presumptions of how life played out for women and men in their times.

In *Rebellious Wives*, Mubarak engages with modern exegetes with sufficient depth to portray the polyvalence that she claims is central to the *tafsīr* tradition. The fact that Ibn 'Āshūr and Syed Qutb are able to expound never-before-held-interpretations, while at the same time doing so *through* the *tafsīr* tradition, is proof of this claim. Ibn 'Āshūr in particular, Mubarak points out, revives the concept of the *maqāṣid* (the aims of the *sharī'a*) in order to use legal reasoning and philology to create new understandings of the Qur'ān. At the same time, he uses classical reasonings to push back against classical interpretations within Qur'ānic exegesis. Without the classical tradition upon which Ibn 'Āshūr, 'Abduh, Qutb, and Riḍa stood, Mubarak argues, they not only could not have arrived at their new conclusions, but they also would not be considered authoritative.

This last point is where Mubarak's work stands on somewhat shaky ground. While *Rebellious Wives* does a fantastic job at portraying the *tafsīr* tradition's polysemous nature, particularly on issues related to gender, it falls short in its overarching theme of categorizing the different exegetes as standing on equal authoritative footing. Mubarak's argument that modern exegetes have used traditional methodologies to arrive at unique conclusions falls flat if the exegetes in question are not considered authoritative in

mainstream Sunni Muslim circles. Her reasoning behind studying these four modern figures' exegeses in particular is her assessment that they are "among the most influential works of Sunni tafsir in the 20th century" (p. 14). While this may be true, this says nothing about whether or not they hold religious scholarly legitimacy in the eyes of Sunni Muslims, as new conclusions mean little when coming from people not recognized as fully legitimate scholars.

The question of authority is a tricky one as it relates back to the fluid nature of this authority, similar to the fluid nature of the *tafsir* tradition as discussed by Mubarak. As she points out, there is no set of guidelines with which to judge a scholar's authoritativeness. Authority comes from the collective consensus of the scholarly community. Some scholars are considered fully authoritative, others are questioned on some of their theological and legal beliefs while still held to be authoritative, while others still are believed to hold too many beliefs antithetical to the tradition as a whole to be considered authoritative. There is no strict delineation between these boundaries, and some scholars may consider a particular scholar authoritative even while a majority of other scholars do not.

Regardless of this fluidity, however, it stands to reason that there are exegetes, both historically and currently, who hold scholarly weight by the consensus of the scholarly community. For scholars who do not hold such weight, such as 'Abduh, Riḍa, Qutb, and even Ibn 'Āshūr in some smaller circles, their conclusions, too, will naturally hold little weight.

This is the book's biggest weakness – all four modern exegetes are presented without a discussion of their authoritativeness within Sunni Muslim circles. Despite this flaw, however, Mubarak's analysis leaves much room for thought. In particular, the seven premodern exegetes and their interpretations of the four verses in question, many of which may be viewed as gender-balanced, pro-women, or even feminist, are solid evidence of the anti-misogynistic nature of the *tafsir* tradition that Mubarak wishes to convey. As many modern scholars have argued that the pre-modern *tafsir* tradition is fully misogynistic or, at a minimum, fully patriarchal, her book renders a valuable service to this discussion.

Mubarak's discussion on the *tafsir* tradition itself and the lack of consensus on what constitutes its boundaries is equally valuable. There seems to be an understanding, she contends, that scholars who use "innovative methods" in Qur'ānic exegesis bring forth new meanings, while those who do not are perpetually left with the same meanings (p. 72). Ibn 'Āshūr in particular, Mubarak argues, repositions this narrative by bringing back the centrality of *tafsir bi'l r'ay* (exegesis by reasoning) over the traditionally held centrality of *tafsir bi'l ma'thūr* (exegesis by tradition). By using philology to insist that exegeses based on reports by the Prophet's companions do not carry more authoritative weight than those by later scholars, and that the formers' reports are, in fact, *tafsir bi'l r'ay* themselves unless they are actually ḥadīth, Ibn 'Āshūr creates this change in the tradition through the tradition itself. While this point may be contested based on whether or not Ibn 'Āshūr is considered authoritative enough for his interpretation to be accepted, the fact remains that, to Mubarak's point, he was a traditionally trained Sunni scholar who did engage with the *tafsir* tradition in unique ways.

Rebellious Wives is an important read for anyone wishing to engage in *tafsir* studies, but, more importantly, for anyone involved in discussions on gender in the Islamic

tradition. Mubarak has beautifully portrayed the depth of the *tafsīr* tradition on women through her analysis of the exegeses on the four verses presented. The debate over exegetical authority and the correct methodology with which to interpret the Qur'ān may not be resolvable, but it is vital that we continue to engage in the kinds of conversations Mubarak opens up for us. We must engage not only with the exegeses that appeal to our modern, gender-egalitarian sensibilities, but also with those exegeses that give us pause. If Mubarak has shown us anything, it is that first glances do not give us the full picture; we must look a second time and yet again a third time in order to view more clearly the personal, social, and political environment that may have resulted in a particular exegesis. This method, Mubarak counsels, is how we can arrive at any just understanding of an exegete's misogyny or gender-balancedness and refrain from painting the entirety of the *tafsīr* tradition with one brush.

Review by Fatima Razvi

Fatima Razvi holds a Master's degree in Islamic Studies from The Islamic Seminary of America and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from The University of Houston. She is currently pursuing further graduate training in Middle Eastern Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Her academic interests lie at the intersection of theology, law, gender, and politics.