

Women and Gender in the Qur'an

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CELENE IBRAHIM

Women and Gender in the Qur'an by Celene Ibrahim focuses on women's voices, presence, and roles found within the Qur'an. Ibrahim situates her work as part of the *tafsir* tradition by presenting herself as "*the tentative mufassira*" (8). Given that there are few known classical Islamic writings from female exegetes, it is intriguing to see a modern work from a female author claiming a place within the *tafsir* tradition, which holds significant weight due to its role in understanding the meanings of the Qur'an. Though one may point to other authors such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas for their previous work on similar themes, it is important to note that the former two spend far more time asserting and defining their own *Weltanschauung* than engaging in close readings. To her credit, Ibrahim embodies the classical *tafsir* ethos by centering Qur'anic language itself as the basis for her conclusions.

Ibrahim's work ties together a compelling variety of topics, from female sexuality to familial relationships, women's speech in the Qur'an, and female figures used as examples – for better or for worse – to the audience of the Qur'an. She concludes the monograph with an invitation for readers to dive deeper into Qur'anic, Hadith, and even Biblical scholarship for more answers to the many questions raised within, and

by, her own work. This book succeeds in encouraging readers from all backgrounds to adopt a gender-focused methodology in reading the Qur'an and works about the Qur'an. Ibrahim discloses her Muslim identity and assumes that her audience will also include "believing women," whom she specifically calls upon "to pursue Qur'anic scholarship so as to keep alive the heritage of our foremothers" (Preface, XIV).

Ibrahim lays the foundation for her book in "Muslima theology and feminist Quranic exegesis," which she defines in the endnotes of her introduction as "a branch of theological studies that... offers an intellectual platform to advance female-centric contemplations of piety, female-centric modes of leadership, and female-centric epistemological authority" (10). Despite this explicit assertion of genre, I would caution her readers not to expect the thoroughness or methodology of classical *tafsīr* works. For example, Ibrahim almost entirely avoids referencing *aḥādīth* to explain Qur'anic language or meaning, and similarly almost never references other existing *tafsīr* works regarding the verses that she engages. This book, therefore, is more akin to a thematic analysis of the Qur'an rather than a straightforward book of either theology or *tafsīr*. From an academic perspective, this may not be an issue; for readers coming to Ibrahim's work with a particular expectation of what a *tafsīr* book should look like, this may well be seen as a detracting factor.

Chapter 1 cuts to the chase with its title "Female Sex and Sexuality." What other authors have dedicated entire books to, Ibrahim condenses into a single chapter, signifying that women and gender in the Qur'an have much bigger scopes than sex and sexuality. She uses the chapter as a broad umbrella to cover not just the act of intercourse and its legal rulings, but to include a discussion of morality, perspectives of the female body as desired object, women as desiring of sexual intimacy (whether licitly or otherwise), and sex-as-reward in the Islamic Afterlife. On the purpose of sexual intercourse, for example, Ibrahim collects multiple Qur'anic verses about the creation of human beings and the biological imperative. She asserts that despite the mention of the act of procreation, there is no corresponding Qur'anic *command* of an obligation to procreate. However, one could argue against this claim by pointing to the Hadith literature, which *does* denote a strong emphasis on having

children, if not a technical obligation. This immediately brings to question the strength of Ibrahim's arguments to readers with a background in Islamic texts, as her conclusion contradicts extra-Qur'anic texts and established stances within Islamic orthodoxy.

Ibrahim then engages in the common *tafsīr* practice of reflecting upon the literary and metaphysical parallels of Qur'anic verses. She elegantly connects verses that talk about both the creation and procreation of humankind in relation to "waters" – that is, the waters of "the two seas" (25:53), and the "water" from which humans are created (i.e., "the sexual fluids of the female and the male in sexual union" (21). She relates this to an exploration of other dualities spoken of in the Qur'an, such as the heavens and the earth, and more relevantly, the "single soul" and its spouse, as described in Qur'an 7:189. Ibrahim pauses to argue for a gender-neutral translation interpretation of the term '*azwāj*', rather than "imposing an androcentric bias" (21) upon the word by understanding it as 'female spouses', and thus impacting the meanings of other Qur'anic verses such as Qur'an 30:21. Moving on from elucidating upon the metaphysical and linguistic inferences related to the concept of intercourse, Ibrahim spends some time on the topic of licit versus illicit sexual relationships, and even sexual assault and redemption in the context of sexual misconduct (specifically, the story of Prophet Yusuf and the viceroy's wife). In general, Ibrahim's approach clusters multiple tangential topics under one broad sub-heading, more or less linked together, without necessarily coming to one major conclusion. This flow of information can appear somewhat nebulous at times, but at other times brings out interesting parallels between the Qur'anic narratives she discusses.

Amidst this discussion of sexuality and sexual conduct, Ibrahim directs her readers to "contemplate the Qur'an's depiction of physical attractiveness" (39). She contends that the Qur'an presents beauty as a moral virtue rather than a pure aesthetic value – a claim that will cause a careful reader to take pause. Referencing the Qur'anic descriptions of Maryam and even the Prophet Muhammad – which utilizes the word '*ḥasana*' in relation to them – she asserts that "Such verses extend the concept of beauty beyond aesthetics to a moral plane" (39). She then

presses forward saying, “From the Qur’anic depictions of human beauty, we see that this is not primarily an aesthetic quality; rather, it relates, in a fundamental way, to virtue... The viceroy’s wife and the group of women surrounding Joseph are enraptured by an angelic quality about him,... even sexual appeal... is articulated in terms of character, not aesthetic appearance” (39). Despite Ibrahim’s attempt to link the “beautiful acceptance” of Maryam and the “beautiful example” of Prophet Muhammad to physical beauty, it is a tenuous linguistic connection at best. The *hasan* qualities ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad and to Maryam are not about physical beauty in any way. The word *hasan* in the contexts provided (Maryam’s “*qabūlⁱⁿ ḥasanⁱⁿ”* and Prophet Muhammad’s “*uswat^{un} ḥasana*”) do not translate solely to ‘beauty,’ but rather to a metaphysical completion or state of perfection. Indeed, the “*qabūlⁱⁿ ḥasanⁱⁿ”* does not come from Maryam, but from God: it is God who accepts with “*qabūlⁱⁿ ḥasanⁱⁿ”* a beautiful, or perfect acceptance of her piety. The above merely underscores how unfortunately, the lack of *ḥadīth* references here undermines her argument: the *ḥadīth* of the Israa’ and Mi’raaj, recorded in Sahih Muslim, wherein the Prophet Muhammad describes his ascension to the seven heavens and specifically says, “I saw Yusuf, who had been given half of beauty” (*huwa qad u’ṭiya shaṭr al-ḥusn*)¹ makes it obvious that the beauty of the Prophet Yusuf, which drove the viceroy’s wife nearly mad with lust, and which distracted her peers such that they cut off their own hands at witnessing him, was indeed an explicitly physical beauty. To put it more bluntly, there is no textual indication that Prophet Yusuf’s beautiful *character* aroused the viceroy’s wife’s interest or drove her to irrational and dramatic measures: she desired him primarily for his physical body. In this case, it is a collapse of the range of meanings of *ḥasana* that results in erroneous connotations. It is clear that the verses in the case of Maryam and the Prophet Muhammad do not relate to physical beauty, which do support her argument, but in the case of the Prophet Yusuf, it is not tenable as a generalization.

Further examples of the weakness of Ibrahim’s Qur’an-only approach can be found when she broaches metaphysical topics of angels and their manifested bodies in the earthly realm and the *Ḥūr al-‘Ayn* of Paradise. With regard to angels, she says: “It is unclear if they come embodied

as fully sexed beings, or if they occasionally assume some distinctive features that signify a male identity” (40). Though her footnote does reference verses 51:26-28 and 11:70, in which the angelic messengers to the Prophet Ibrahim refuse food, she could have answered (at least part of) her own question by acknowledging the many *aḥādīth* in which angels met with the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions in the form of men, and particularly in the form of Diḥya al-Kalbī. Additionally, Maryam herself sought refuge in God when she was approached by the angel who came to her in the form of *basharan sawiyyā* (a well-proportioned man) in Qur’an 19:17-18!

The discussion on the *Ḥūr al-‘Ayn* continues in this same vein. It is true that Ibrahim is not unique in her undertaking to explain away the explicitly female, sexual nature of the *Ḥūr al-‘Ayn* (see the notorious ‘white grapes’ interpretation provided by Christoph Luxenberg in his *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*). However, her insistence that “no Qur’anic verses specifically address sex in paradise” and that “the beings in paradise may be aesthetically pleasing but potentially do not have teleological purpose of bringing inhabitants sexual pleasure” (45) truly strain credulity, given that even Ibrahim acknowledges that “the sensuality in the description of paradise is ostensibly intended to motivate pious action” (45). To provide sensual motivation with no follow-through, as it were, seems inconsistent with Qur’anic promises of somatic rewards. Ibrahim attempts to justify this by pointing to the lack of “need for reproduction, and hence no need for reproductive organs” (45) and deflects from deeper consideration of the sexual capabilities of *Ḥūr al-‘Ayn*. Ibrahim’s avoidance of referencing classical *tafāsīr* is perhaps understandable here, given that notable *tafsīr* scholars such as Ibn ‘Abbas and Ibn Mas‘ud (amongst others), explicitly interpreted Qur’anic verses discussing the rewards of paradise in explicitly sexual terms, using *aḥādīth* evidence that counter her own argument. The Qur’an may not explicitly lay out details of sexual intercourse in Paradise, but there are implicit descriptions of the *Ḥūr al-‘Ayn* such that they are not meant merely for aesthetics, but for physical fulfillment. Ibrahim also takes the unusual position of positing that the *Ḥūr al-‘Ayn* and the *Qāṣirāt al-Ṭarf* are two different creations, rather than one and the same; she also tries

to make the argument that *wildān mukhalladun* includes “former human beings in a transformed state” (46), which is a proposal unique in her work. Overall, Chapter 1 of *Women and Gender in the Qur’ān* contains the weakest arguments, evidence, and conclusions of the book – ranging from far-fetched linguistic interpretations to glaring omissions in source material. This will be a disappointment to readers whose first taste of Ibrahim’s Qur’anic analysis will not engender trust in future chapters, undermining the overall strength of her work.

Chapter 2, “Female Kin, Procreation, and Parenting” is a marked improvement in Ibrahim’s work due to her focus on drawing out lessons of “kinship ethics” (64) from the Qur’an’s verses regarding female figures, their connections to the Prophets, and their roles in these Prophets’ journeys. She opens this chapter by pointing out that “For all the main figures considered “messengers” (*rusul*, singl. *rasūl*), at least one female figure is associated with that messenger (and sometimes more)” (64). She delves into the many ways that the Qur’an speaks of and honours family relationships; in particular, matriarchal figures (both Maryam, mother of Jesus, and Maryam’s own mother), and sister figures (the sister of Musa, the two sisters of Midyan). Ibrahim points out that “the Qur’an never depicts theologically or ethically corrupt daughters or sisters [of Prophets], whereas it does present narratives involving corrupt sons and brothers” (85). While Ibrahim continues to avoid explicitly referencing *aḥadīth* or *tafsīr* in the main text of her work her endnotes, specifically for the story of the Prophet Ayyub, do direct readers to an academic work which *does* engage with later exegetical traditions (88). This leads readers to question this selective engagement, which is repeated with relation to Hajar, whom she does not name as a “Qur’anic matriarch” (74), but again directs readers to an academic resource (90). One wonders why she consistently avoids engaging with primary source material from the exegetical tradition, while sourcing academic literature that does engage with exegesis.

The star of *Women and Gender in the Qur’an* is Chapter 3: “Women Speakers and Interlocutors.” In this chapter, Ibrahim delves into the details of women’s speech in the Qur’an: “When, where, how, and to whom do women and girls speak?” (95). Masterfully, she draws parallels between

the ant and the Queen of Sheba in their interactions with the Prophet Sulayman; both are feminine voices of leaders who seek to protect their people. In the stories of Maryam and the Prophet Musa, Ibrahim notes "...the command of God is manifest through communication to, and through the actions of, a woman and a girl" (102). She highlights that God listens to women's grievances and recognizes women's piety, and that – perhaps most importantly – that God speaks directly *to* women: the first woman (known, through *aḥadīth*, as Hawwa') and the women of the Prophet Muhammad's family. Ibrahim's concluding words on the affective dimensions of female speech are particularly insightful: "...the performance of gender, through the re-enactment of Qur'anic speech, adds another interpretative layer to the ways in which gender is inscribed... The act of regularly revisiting such [Qur'anic] speech... Bring[s] about an increase in empathy in that individual toward women..." (117). Truly, this chapter shines as a powerful starting point for believers to revisit the Qur'an's messaging and ponder its centering of female figures, especially as examples of piety for all humankind.

It is definitely worth taking the time to read through the endnotes of this chapter in particular, which yield valuable further details – often elaborating by mentioning classical *tafsīr* opinions that are not mentioned in the main text. Of course, had many of these references been mentioned in the body of the monograph, they could have strengthened Ibrahim's arguments. Their conspicuous absence leaves the Islamically-literate reader disappointed at the exclusion of such valuable texts, resigned to endnotes. It is unclear throughout what the benefit is in singling out the Qur'anic text alone, when Muslim scholarship has always included *aḥadīth* as part of the scriptural canon to help make sense of opaque language in the Qur'an itself. Indeed, this chapter felt all too brief. The stories of Maryam and the Queen of Sheba in particular are elaborated on in great detail by *tafsīr* commentaries, and one wonders what unique gems have been left out due to the author's choice of methodology. Nonetheless, Chapter 3 introduces a valuable perspective and focus on female speech in the Qur'an, in a way that connects the reader to the Qur'anic narratives of these female figures in a deeply spiritual context.

Chapter 4, “Women Exemplars for an Emerging Polity,” examines how the Qur’an presents exemplary pious and sinful female personalities to “define female virtue and vice against the background of the emerging Muslim polity” (127). Ibrahim brings forth these examples in chronological order of revelation (as opposed to the order of their appearance in the Qur’an), utilizing a heuristic technique used in Qur’anic studies (127). She begins with the wife of Abu Lahab in *Sūrah al-Masad* and the reference to the sorceresses in *Sūrah al-Falaq* as illustrations of blameworthy behaviour. When discussing other women who incurred God’s wrath, Ibrahim mentions verse 10 of *Sūrah Taḥrīm*, where the wives of the Prophets Nuh and Lut are singled out for condemnation, and draws a connection between these verses and the opening verses of the *sūrah*, where God rebukes two of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad for their plotting. Ibrahim concludes that “these verses... function as reminders... of the two of the Prophet Muhammad’s wives whom God chides...” (p.g. 131). She does not clarify what kind of reminder this is meant to function as, whether it is meant to warn the Prophet Muhammad’s wives of their possible futures should they persist in their ways, or for some other purpose that is not articulated. The implication of Ibrahim’s phrasing is that it is meant to be the former. While there is some element of parallel in the beginning and ending of the *sūrah*, there is a vast difference between the two wives who are reprimanded and the two wives who were explicitly called disbelievers for betraying their husband’s divine mission. It seems much more likely that including both stories in the same *sūrah* is meant to show the (d)evolution of wifely behavior rather than a bluntly explicit comparison. Shifting focus to more positive portrayals of figures such as the Queen of Sheba and Maryam, Ibrahim’s work regains strength with her observations of the ways in which these two stories reflect the necessity of female figures in supporting the divine missions of their eras, with the Queen of Sheba representing the political power of women (132), and Maryam symbolizing the dialogue between Muslims, Jews, and Christians (134). This particular insight yields a starting point for future conversations on the role of Muslim women within their religious and social communities.

The second part of Chapter 4 focuses on women, law, and the polity. Ibrahim notes that “new norms serve to distinguish the developing Muslim polity by correcting or reforming a practice or social custom that was disadvantageous to women” (136). Here, she is continuing the chronological argument that she introduced at the beginning of the chapter, using a historical technique that she does not draw upon elsewhere in the book. The developing Muslim polity she is referring to is the early Muslim community of Makkah, the context in which these verses are said to have been revealed, although she also provides examples of reformation and correction that extend into the Madinan era. She demonstrates how the Qur’an does this by providing the examples of *Sūrah al-Mujādilah*, which abolished the practice of *zihār*; the ‘test’ of *Sūrah al-Mumtahina*, which provided an equitable solution for both fleeing believing women and their abandoned disbelieving husbands; and the establishment of punishment for those who slander chaste women, as exemplified by the story of *al-Ifk*. Here, it is worth noting that Ibrahim is forced to rely upon extra-Qur’anic literature about “the lie” in Qur’an 24:11 being specific to A’ishah and the involvement of Hamnah bint Jahsh. In the endnotes provided, Ibrahim once again does not refer to primary sources of Qur’anic exegesis or *aḥadīth*, but to the work of another academic (143). Unfortunately, Ibrahim never provides an explanation for this, demonstrating once again the difficulty (and questionable value) in discussing the Qur’an without drawing upon exegetical literature. Ibrahim ends this chapter by summarizing the chronological appearance of women in the Qur’an as a method of defining both sinful and virtuous behaviour to early Muslims, and closes by emphasizing that women’s concerns played an influential role in the Qur’an’s establishing of both legal rulings and Islamic ethical mores. This sudden shift to historical framing is done without clear purpose. Perhaps the majority of female figures and depictions in previous chapters had to do with historical women (Maryam, etc.) as opposed to the women around the Prophet Muhammad she addresses in this chapter. For this reason, her Qur’an-only methodology does not suffice because most of the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad are not addressed explicitly in the Qur’an, as the *meaning* given to these verses has always been derived from *aḥadīth*.

That said, this framing, were it to include *aḥadīth* and *tafāsīr*, would make for a compelling and robust analysis of the development of Islamic law in the new polity and as it relates to women.

The book's conclusion is succinct: the Qur'an presents female figures, female speech, values associated with sex and sexuality, and familial relationships featuring women in order to improve the spiritual and social welfare of women and society at large. Ibrahim suggests the Qur'anic method of narrative vignettes is a tool of theological education, wherein women function as both ideal figures and as warnings to believers. Poignantly, Ibrahim underscores that "If there is one common element to these disparate figures, it is that the Qur'an depicts [women] with the agency and responsibility to shape their destinies, for better or for worse" (146). She notes here, too, that amongst this rich intra-Qur'anic discourse, there is no "single archetypal female figure in the Qur'an" (146). Women are not a monolith or homogeneous, nor are women commanded to conform to one specific, restrictive model of womanhood. Here Ibrahim morphs into a scholar-activist, bringing clear, general, public relevance to her book. She reminds readers that "renewed attention to Qur'anic stories involving female figures can inform contemporary Muslim conversations" (148) on various topics that are associated with gender, such as sexual assault, domestic violence, marriage, and more. She analyzes each subject and their subcomponents through Qur'anic narratives featuring women in a way that underscores the textual and extratextual implications of each story, bringing forth conversations relatable to the average Muslim reader as well as the academic.

Finally, Ibrahim is straightforward about the limitations of her present work. She admits that she has raised questions that she could not answer and acknowledges that her book has been intentionally focused on the Qur'an alone, without engaging Hadith narratives on the topic of female figures. Ibrahim does not articulate whether she considers a Qur'an-only approach to be a weakness, nor does she make a case for *why* it is a valuable approach. She does not specifically reference her avoidance of classical exegetical literature, although one does catch glimpses of her forced reliance upon external literature to fill in the blanks, most notably when she speaks of the story of A'ishah's

slander (34). Ibrahim's final call to arms will refresh the reader, who will come away with a deep sense of appreciation for the work that she has provided, as well as the many trajectories and opportunities she has offered for deeper research and discussion.

Ibrahim's book does not end with its conclusion: one of this work's most valuable resources lie in its final pages: the appendices. While they do not add to her arguments in and of themselves, they provide a concise visual representation of her references, and serve as beneficial reference materials. Appendix A provides a detailed list of female figures in the Qur'an, referenced alphabetically by their Qur'anic names or titles. Appendix B contains female figures and families in Qur'anic narratives, categorized by the Qur'anic terms used, the translation of those terms, and the verses where they are mentioned. Appendix C provides every Qur'anic verse featuring female speech and God's messages to women. Appendix D provides a list of female figures and their families, listed by their (approximate) revelatory sequence of *sūrah*s. Appendix E is shorter, and consists of select female relatives of the Prophet Muhammad. For anyone who is invested in the subject of female figures in the Qur'an, these appendices are a wonderful asset to others undertaking research on similar themes.

Celene Ibrahim's book is an exciting addition to the fairly broad genre of "Islam and women," which tends to narrowly focus on women as sexual objects and subjects. Aside from critiques of her methodological weaknesses, Ibrahim offers a perspective that rarely makes its way into Muslim academia: that of a self-proclaimed believing Muslim woman, approaching the Qur'an on its own terms, engaging with it not just as an academic, but as someone who participates in its community and derives genuine spiritual benefit from its intellectual engagement. The strongest element of Ibrahim's work is that she painstakingly examines each and every instance in which women feature within the Qur'an. Further, as Ibrahim herself is an interlocutor with other academics who have written on the topics covered within the book, she does not lose herself in arguing against or upholding their works. She appropriately relegates these to side discussions in the endnotes, while acknowledging their contributions, even as she subtly pushes back against them as in

her consideration of the story of the Prophet Lut and his daughters (79), in opposition to Farid Essack's interpretation in "Lot and His Offer." Her work is accessible to both the casual and academic reader, which makes it even more valuable to Muslims (male or female!) who seek to explore the subject of women in the Qur'an from a holistic perspective that is neither mired in intellectual jargon, nor situated within classical Muslim literature. Despite its methodological shortcomings, specifically with regards to her avoidance of direct engagement with Hadith and *tafsīr* literature, Ibrahim's book pushes readers to consider Qur'anic narratives of women not from the perspective of comparing men and women, but from the lens of what *all* readers of the Qur'an can internalize as moral instruction. This fresh viewpoint is a much-needed addition to the current works in the field of the Qur'an and women, and leaves readers excited for Ibrahim's future writing.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://sunnah.com/muslim:162a>