Hadia Mubarak, *Rebellious Wives, Neglectful Husbands: Controversies in Modern Qur’anic Commentaries*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022. 352 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-755330-5.

Hadia Mubarak’s explicit aim in this book is “to bring into conversation the distinct fields of *tafsīr* studies and gender studies” (p. 7). She examines three major twentieth-century Qurʾānic commentaries from Egypt and Tunisia and situates their interpretations of four verses on marriage and gender hierarchies in the Qurʾān both in their contemporaneous social and political context and the *tafsīr* tradition. She analyzes the *Tafsīr al-Manār*, written by Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1860–1935) and incorporating exegetical material from Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905); *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān* by Sayyid Quṭb (1906–66); and *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr* by Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. ʿĀshūr (1879–1973). These works are read in comparison with seven premodern Qurʾānic commentaries from the period between al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373). Mubarak explains her choice of the modern commentaries by arguing that they both represent different intellectual orientations while engaging with modern gender discourses and have also exerted a substantial influence on later exegetes. While this is a convincing argument, the author’s attempt to bolster it with reference to the North African geographical context that supposedly connects the four exegetes is less plausible and it might have made more sense for her to omit it and simply point to the common language, Arabic, they used. But this is just a side note, since the geography of her case studies does not feature prominently in her book.

The succinct introduction offers a good and concise overview both of the debates on gender in the Qurʾān and of some tendencies of contemporary *tafsīr* studies. One of Mubarak’s core aims is an exploration of the way in which an exegete’s context influenced his exegetical activity (her sample consists of men only – a choice she accounts for with sensitivity and pragmatism). The Qurʾānic commentaries she examines are well suited to this endeavor as all of them responded to a changing socio-political context and participated in contemporaneous debates about the status of women in Islam. However, quite a bit has already been written on the socio-political circumstances and agendas surrounding the production of these three works of *tafsīr* and they way they are expressed in them, especially with regard to *Tafsīr al-Manār* and *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān*. The fact that they responded to contemporaneous concerns is not an entirely novel insight. Another line of inquiry on gender issues might have held more promise: Mubarak aptly surmises that the authors’ personal experiences played a significant role in their positions on gender roles in marriage. Unfortunately, this is an area in which the lack of sources on the exegetes’ domestic lives seems to prevent us from gaining new insights.

Another aim of Mubarak’s book is the exploration of the relationship between methods, meaning, and interpretive authority in *tafsīr*. How does change come about in a “genealogical tradition”? How and why are new interpretations introduced and existing ones rejected? Is this due to the exegete’s innovative methods or can new and distinctive outcomes be produced with conventional methods? And what effect do continuities and ruptures, both with regard to methods and outcomes, have on an exegete’s interpretive authority? These are intriguing questions that Mubarak’s book provides some answers to.

Mubarak’s book not only contributes to the field of *tafsīr* studies but also intervenes in the controversy on gender hierarchies in the Qurʾān. The thorny question of whether the Qurʾān is a patriarchal and androcentric text has been the subject of controversy for several decades now. While some prominent Muslim feminists argue that the Qurʾān is a fundamentally egalitarian text and the Muslim scholarly tradition is solely to blame for interpreting it in a way that favors men, other scholars argue that the text of the Qurʾān itself contains gendered hierarchies and androcentric structures; whether it merely reflects them or actually endorses them is the subject of another debate. Mubarak succinctly and fairly summarizes this controversy and situates herself within it. She points out that both camps tend to neglect the polysemy of the Qurʾānic text, which sets no inherent boundaries to its interpretive possibilities. However, there is a “hegemonic power” to the communal understanding of the Qurʾān (p. 9). To escape from this dilemma, Mubarak points to the potential of the *tafsīr* tradition that lies in its polyvocality. She argues that *tafsīr* is governed more by its methods than by its conclusions which, in her opinion, guarantees its potential to bring new interpretations to the debate on the Qurʾān and gender. These interpretations have the advantage of being grounded in the tradition of Muslim scholarship, which bolsters their claim to interpretive authority.

Thus, Mubarak’s book is part of a growing trend among Muslim academics to look at the scholarly tradition as a resource for the development of egalitarian and liberal approaches to Islam. Rather than break with it completely or accept it as an unquestionably authoritative source, the proponents of this trend consider it a multifaceted, heterogeneous, and evolving corpus that offers a wide range of methods and allows for considerable flexibility and development. What Mubarak hopes to achieve with her examination of these three works of *tafsīr* is, in part, to show a way out of the impasse that Aysha A. Hidayatullah has described in her *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an*, where the affirmation of the egalitarianism of the Qurʾānic text appears just as problematic as the complete deconstruction of the authority that the text exerts.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Rebellious Wives, Neglectful Husbands* is extremely clearly structured, enabling its readers to either follow the author’s argument throughout or to identify sections of particular interest to them. The first three chapters discuss the twentieth-century Qurʾānic commentaries Mubarak studies and illuminate their context, the debates on women in Islam that they responded to, and their exegetical strategies. The subsequent four chapters analyze these commentaries’ treatment of four verses central to the debate on gendered hierarchies in the Qurʾān against the background of interpretations delivered in selected premodern Qurʾānic commentaries.

The first chapter gives a concise overview of the biographies and thoughts of Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Rashīd Riḍā, Sayyid Quṭb, and Ibn ʿĀshūr. It is not quite clear why they are not discussed in chronological order; Sayyid Quṭb comes in between Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā. Riḍā is also described as having founded *al-Manār* “with ʿAbduh’s and al-Afghānī’s collaboration” (p. 39), but al-Afghānī passed away in Istanbul in the year *al-Manār* was started and Rashīd Riḍā never had a chance to meet him. Such minor inaccuracies are rare, however. Overall, Mubarak demonstrates admirable skill in summarizing complex debates with just the right level of detail. This is evident, for example, in her nuanced discussion and treatment of categories and intellectual labels such as “Salafi” and “Islamist,” which is short enough to keep the readers’ focus on the exegetes themselves but long enough to allow them to situate their intellectual contributions. She also convincingly places the exegetes in two distinctive contexts that shape their discourse: ʿAbduh and Riḍā in a colonial or quasi-colonial setting, Quṭb and Ibn ʿĀshūr in an independent nation-state with a secular project that they became increasingly disenchanted with.

The second chapter describes the ways in which emerging discourses on women’s rights are reflected in the three Qurʾānic commentaries, both through their attempt to refute Western critiques and through the denunciation of what the exegetes perceived as bad practice on the part of Muslims. Either way, Muslim institutions and norms were constantly measured against an imagined or real European standard and a certain degree of gender-consciousness became inevitable, which is, as Mubarak clarifies, not necessarily the same thing as a feminist engagement with the Qurʾān. She furthermore rightly points out the dilemmas and contradictions resulting from approaches such as Quṭb’s who, on the one hand, claimed superiority for Islam in terms of women’s rights and, on the other hand, rejected liberalism and egalitarianism as alien concepts that were destroying families. Maybe the temporal dimension could have been made a bit clearer here because, in the decades between Muḥammad ʿAbduh’s exegetical lectures and Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafsīr*, the status of women in Arab societies had changed significantly and notions of women’s rights had changed accordingly, as they had everywhere in the world. Mubarak is, of course, aware of this, but what this means for the topics and concerns discussed in the Qurʾānic commentaries might have been made more explicit.

By this point in the book, the reader cannot fail to have observed the outstanding sophistication of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s scholarship. For example, he was the only one among the exegetes studied here who did not buy into the apologetic backstory that pre-Islamic Arab women had no rights and were treated like cattle, one designed to highlight the revolutionary improvement Islam brought for women but based on little evidence. Generally, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s Qurʾānic commentary frequently emerges as the most interesting of the works analyzed in the book.

This observation raises the question of to what extent *Tafsīr al-Manār* and *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān* should even be considered works of *tafsīr* as a distinctive genre of Islamic scholarship. Quṭb explicitly decided against calling his work a *tafsīr* and ʿAbduh was not interested in being associated with conventional exegetical practice either. The third chapter, which is devoted to the interpretive approach of the three modern Qurʾānic commentaries, would have been the place to discuss this, and it does mention the genre question in passing, but – maybe because the chapter wants to achieve too much – the treatment of the issue is superficial. Mubarak does distinguish between Qurʾānic interpretations that are produced inside and outside of “the genre” (p. 127) but nowhere does she define “the genre” and its place in her analysis. And while she acknowledges that Quṭb’s interpretations were later absorbed into the *tafsīr* genre despite the fact that he was no trained scholar(p. 96), she does not discuss the reasons for this in any depth. His choice to comment on the Qurʾān in its canonical arrangement, rather than aiming for a thematic or chronological interpretation, might have played a big role here and this would warrant further discussion.

Another aspect of the third chapter that is not entirely convincing is the use of the distinction between *tafsīr bi-l-raʾy* and *tafsīr bi-l-maʾthūr* (e.g., p. 73). Mubarak is aware that the analytical value of this distinction has been criticized and its polemical function highlighted, for example by Walid Saleh,[[2]](#footnote-2) but she still employs it – possibly under the influence of Ibn ʿĀshūr, who makes much of it – to argue that the three modern commentaries all blur the boundaries between the two categories. But would this be any different with any premodern Qurʾānic commentary, except maybe for al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Durr al-manthūr*, which limits itself to quoting *ḥadīth*s? What, then, is the explanatory value of using these categories?

Apart from these criticisms, which might be partly due to the otherwise commendable succinctness of the book, the chapter delivers an excellent summary of the main features and approach of each of the commentaries. Mubarak concludes that scholars who work within the *tafsīr* tradition do not simply retrieve it from the past but rather contribute to reconstructing it, which means that they are perfectly able to come up with novel interpretations, while the attempt to break with the tradition and use novel methods does not necessarily lead to innovative opinions. She furthermore argues that the use of traditional methods may help exegetes gain interpretive authority which, in turn, might embolden them to bring about interpretive change. This argument works better for *al-Tafsīr wa-l-tanwīr* than for the other two commentaries because Ibn ʿĀshūr is the only exegete studied in the book who works clearly within the *tafsīr* tradition.

Mubarak undergirds her central arguments by analyzing, in Chapters 4–7, the exegetes’ treatment of four Qurʾānic verses that are central to debates on gender hierarchy: Q 4:128, 4:34, 4:3 and 2:228. The discussion of Q 4:128 in Chapter Four is a good starting point and offers interesting insights because, as Mubarak rightly points out, the verse is often overlooked. Moreover, it complements Q 4:34, which is typically read as pertaining to women who violate her marital obligations, whereas Q 4:128 focuses on husbands. The two verses use the same term to describe the violation of marital obligations, namely, *nushūz*. Nevertheless, Q 4:128 has not been as excessively discussed as Q 4:34 by far and the two verses are rarely read as paralleling each other. Mubarak shows that this is precisely Ibn ʿĀshūr’s achievement: He is the only exegete among those she studies who reads the two verses together and strives to find a coherent definition of *nushūz* that describes both male and female behavior.

The subsequent chapter tackles Q 4:34, a verse on which abundant scholarship exists to the extent that it seems next to impossible to say anything original about it. As Mubarak points out, the verse has become a litmus test of whether the Qurʾān can be read as an egalitarian or inherently patriarchal and androcentric text. Nevertheless – and this must have been no easy feat – she manages to limit her discussion to certain key points and focus on the most contested expressions, *nushūz*, *wa-ḍribūhunna* and *qawwāmūn*. Again, Ibn ʿĀshūr’s take on the issue of wife beating might be the most innovative, since he considers it possible that the verse addresses the state authorities rather than the husband and that the intention is to limit the husband’s power over his wife. One wonders whether this was a solution to a problem that Ibn ʿĀshūr obviously felt uncomfortable with or merely a strategy to somewhat soften the notion that a husband has disciplinary authority over his wife.

Chapter Six is devoted to a discussion of polygyny that centers on Q 4:3. Again, Mubarak masters the art of summarizing the core arguments of this vast and complex debate without getting lost in the details. The insights to be gained from this chapter, however, do not seem to be overly surprising. Maybe this partly because Muḥammad ʿAbduh’s and Rashīd Riḍā’s treatment of the verse has already been translated in 1971 by Helmut Gätje[[3]](#footnote-3) and Mubarak’s finding that there are significant differences in their respective outlooks is therefore not entirely novel.

The last verse discussed in the book and the subject of the seventh chapter is Q 2:228, which says that men have a “degree” (*daraja*) over “them,” by which the Qurʾān means either women in general or wives specifically. This chapter, like that on Q 4:128, is particularly illuminating. In this case, it is Quṭb who comes up with the most radically innovative interpretation by limiting men’s “degree” strictly to the particular legal issue of retracting a repudiation that is mentioned previously in the verse rather than seeing it as an ontological quality of men in general or as a functional aspect of a husband’s role in marriage. The chapter also highlights, once again, the potential of Ibn ʿĀshūr’s approach, which focuses on reciprocity between husbands and wives. According to Mubarak, the notion of reciprocity might be a productive way forward, given the polarized debate on gender equality versus gender justice.

The four chapters on the interpretation of individual verses from the Qurʾān are informative individually, but also when read against each other. They support Mubarak’s argument that no exegete of the four she studies is clearly and exclusively either a progressive feminist or a patriarchal conservative. Nor do the outcomes of their interpretation follow on directly from their ideological orientation, methods, or use of sources. The degree of gender equality and/or women’s rights that each exegete endorses varies and depends on the nature of any given exegetical problem. This suggests that all of the exegetes are, at least to a certain extent, seriously engaging with the Qurʾānic text instead of reading preconceived notions into it and responding to their own contemporaneous context.

In her conclusion, Mubarak reaffirms the need to engage with the *tafsīr* tradition, rather than discard it as inherently patriarchal: “The fields of *tafsīr* studies and Qurʾānic studies, more broadly, warrant a reckoning that frees the field from a colonial epistemology that pits tradition against rationality and religious authority against a new secular authority” (p. 237). She underlines the flexibility that the *tafsīr* genre offers exegetes and expresses her hope that “a second reading within that tradition” (p. 249, quoting Shuruq Naguib) will allow contemporary exegetes to gain authority in a way that a radical rupture with the tradition would not and, at the same time, will enable them to bring new meanings to the Qurʾān.

This is a plausible argument, grounded in her explicit positionality as a Muslim American scholar. Still, her book raises the question as to whether there are limits to what a “second reading” of the *tafsīr* tradition can achieve, for example with regard to the general or at least conditional permissibility of striking a wife in a case of *nushūz*, however one might interpret this term. Clearly, the scholars she studies are uncomfortable with this notion for various reasons but equally clearly there are limits to how far they will stray from the established interpretations of the verse. This might or might not be an inevitable result of writing “from within the genre,” but, either way, it would have been helpful to discuss this question.

Occasional small mistakes and typos notwithstanding, the book is very well written and eminently readable. Mubarak excels at succinctly summarizing the state of the art, presenting her core findings and developing her conclusions with precision and clarity without getting lost in details. She guides the reader through each chapter by moving from a general overview to the specifics of her sources and back to general conclusions, which makes it easy to follow her argument even when it concerns complex and technical exegetical discussions.

*Rebellious Wives, Neglectful Husbands* is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on gender hierarchies in the Qurʾān, tackling some much-studied exegetical problems from a new perspective and introducing some genuinely new and intriguing topics and interpretations. It is to be hoped, however, that it will not be perceived as a work that is of interest to Islamic feminists and scholars in gender studies exclusively, a fate that, unfortunately, frequently befalls works that are seen as addressing “women’s issues.” Mubarak’s contribution to the field of *tafsīr* studies should not be overlooked. All of the *tafsīr*s that Mubarak analyzes have exerted a international influence and her analysis masterfully situates them in the premodern and modern development of the genre. Therefore, her book is indispensable reading for advanced students and scholars interested in modern developments in Qurʾānic exegesis worldwide.

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1. Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walid A. Saleh, “Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of *Tafsīr* in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach”, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 12 (2010), 6­­–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Helmut Gätje, *Koran und Koranexegese* (Zürich: Artemis, 1971), 324–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)