Ayesha S. Chaudhry


Few are the scholars who are able to admit upfront how their identity and personal experience contribute to shaping their approach towards certain topics. Born in Canada to a Pakistani immigrant and conservative Muslim family, Ayesha S. Chaudhry points out that, out of her desire to save Islam’s image, she was troubled by Q. 4:34: “Men are *qawwāmūn* (protectors and maintainers?) of women, because Allah has given the one more [strength?] than the other [*faḍḍala*], and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in (the husband’s) absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part you fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them, and refuse to share their beds, and *iḍribūhunna* (beat them?) …” Chaudhry’s trouble progressed from defensiveness to alarm to finally reach the point where she was unable to accept any interpretation of the verse that would allow any kind of wife-beating, whatever the circumstances or the restrictions on the practice may be. In this view, any interpretation of the verse that does not reject wife-beating outright is violent because any form of hitting, no matter how “regulated” it may be, is necessarily violent.

Starting from history, Chaudhry points out that despite their disagreements on details and perhaps their obvious inclination to mitigate what they regarded as its “plain-sense meaning,” all “pre-colonial” exegetes interpreted Q. 3:34 according to one patriarchal cosmology where men are ranked below God but over women. They even discuss men’s relationship with women using the same language they use to describe God’s lordship over humanity (p. 41). This argument is supported by references to both exegetical literature on Q. 3:34 (chapter 2), and to discussions in the four major Sunni legal schools that “institutionalized” the exegetes’ cosmology by rendering wife-beating a disciplinary means of returning rebellious women to their right place in that cosmology (chapter 3). Not only did these scholars rank women below men, but their discussions demonstrate, in Chaudhry’s view, that they were not concerned for the “welfare, security, or protection” of women (p. 39, where Chaudhry examines reports about a woman who was beaten by her husband in the Prophet’s time, prompting the revelation of Q. 3:34).

Chaudhry’s research in “pre-colonial” sources indicates that unlike Hanafi scholars who were primarily concerned with protecting a husband exercising his right to physically discipline his wife, Malikis sought to restrain husbands who might abuse that right. For their part, seeking to reconcile various
pieces of evidence on the issue, Shafi’i jurists interpreted the imperative wa-ḍribūhunna to be a permission that should be morally avoided rather than a command that must be legally followed. As expected, the approach of Hanbali scholars to the issue was “an amalgamation of the positions of earlier schools” (p. 125). These differences notwithstanding, Chaudhry believes that the case of Q. 4:34 demonstrates that the “Islamic tradition” is not “complex, multivalent, and pluralistic” (p. 7) as is generally assumed, particularly when it deals with issues of gender. In these issues, that tradition is “monolithic, unvaried, and largely unimaginative” (p. 222) because it is based on the same patriarchal cosmology that now hinders the emergence of an egalitarian Islamic cosmology.

Relying on written and electronic sources in English, Arabic, and Urdu, Chaudhry distinguishes four trends related to the question of wife-beating in modern Muslim scholarship (chapter 4). Unlike their pre-colonial counterparts, modern scholars do not necessarily receive formal training in religious sciences and have to address common people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, rather than their own peers. The dilemma that these scholars regularly face is that they have to choose to either rely on a patriarchal tradition to justify a modern, egalitarian cosmology, or ignore that tradition and lose credibility in their societies. The traditionalists and neo-traditionalists among them, on the one hand, agree on the centrality of the Islamic tradition, which they regard as a true reflection of Islam’s values. However, whereas the former trend shuns modernity completely as being incompatible with these values, the latter seeks to demonstrate that these values do not contradict modern egalitarian views. On the other hand, whereas reformist and progressive scholars agree on their acceptance of the modern, egalitarian cosmology, the former seek to demonstrate that their views are inherent in the cosmology of the Islamic tradition, whereas the latter reject the necessity of “authenticating” (this reviewer’s word) their views by reference to that tradition.

What is common to both the second and the third trends here is their use of “hermeneutical acrobatics” (p. 140) in their attempt to anchor their views in the “competing cosmologies” (p. 136) of the Islamic tradition and modernity. Arguing against a patriarchal cosmology by relying on a tradition that is based on that very cosmology leads these trends to inevitable inconsistencies. It is not uncommon that in that process, these trends may misrepresent the Islamic tradition or compromise their egalitarian views (p. 140). That misrepresentation takes various forms, such as presenting marginal views as having been dominant in the tradition, falsely attributing views to it, speaking vaguely or misleadingly about its diversity, or softening some of its common beliefs. What the first and last trends have in common despite their sharp contradiction,
however, is that they “see no reason to be ashamed of their own historical mo-
ment and its attendant subjectivities” (p. 185). The historical moment of the
first trend (the traditionalist) is obviously that of early, pristine Islam.

As pointed out at the outset, Chaudhry begins the book with her own per-
sonal experience with Q. 3:34. This may not be to the liking of some readers,
but for others it may make the book authentic and engaging. But even these
latter readers may not be able to resist the feeling that her passion has influ-
enced how Chaudhry tackled medieval and modern interpretations of Q. 3:34.
It is not clear whether Chaudhry uses pre-colonial interpretations of that and
other Qur’anic verses to map out their cosmology, or uses what she believes
was their cosmology to interpret their dealing with these verses. At times,
Chaudhry does not seem able to set aside her personal views on the subject
when she is supposed to offer an objective analysis of some medieval and
modern views. At one point, for instance, she wonders how a report (that she
obviously does not like) from a person who admits having forgotten part of
what he transmitted can be accepted (p. 218) without entertaining the view
that this very admission may in fact be a good evidence of the trustworthiness
of that person. But most evident of all, Chaudhry is not able to entertain the
possibility that the cosmology which she believes dictated the attitude of the
Islamic tradition on her subject may be a true reflection of the Qur’an’s own
cosmology.

Perhaps it is her passion and stated desire to find someone who would tell
her that the Qur’an does not allow wife-beating what led to Chaudhry’s most
serious argument in this book, namely, “In the business of Qur’an interpre-
tation, what readers expect from the text is more important than what the text
actually says” (p. 204). Given the overall context of this book, this does not
seem to be a mere descriptive statement. It obviously is based on other views
that Chaudhry states, such as her belief that, for each text, “there are multiple,
sometimes competing, plain-sense meanings” (p. 195). Some readers, includ-
ing the present reviewer, may agree with Chaudhry that the notion of “plain-
sense,” “literal” or “lexical” meaning (p. 135) may be fictitious. Saying this is
one thing, but arguing that all readings of the same text are equally valid is a
completely different thing. One can reject the notion of literal meaning but
still find some readings of certain texts uncompelling, or even absurd or simply
wrong. In this latter view, Chaudhry cannot be justified when, without dwell-
ing much on whatever explanations they have, she describes certain readings
of 
wa-ḍribūhunna

in Q. 3:34 as displaying “a great deal of creativity and her-
meneutical ingenuity” (p. 136) that “enrich the Islamic tradition by uncovering
the polysemic nature of the Qur’anic text in areas where the tradition failed to
recognize diversity” (195). These readings include interpreting *wa-ḍribūhunna* to mean such things as “to have sex with,” “turn away from,” “make an impression upon,” or “mingle with” wives (p. 182, or to “cite’ them to an authority,” p. 190). These and similar interpretations obviously require more than just “a little bit of hermeneutic maneuvering” (p. 53).

Remarkably, however, Chaudhry does not hold that there is no such thing as literal meaning. She argues that “scriptural texts have numerous plain-sense meanings that are deeply influenced by the cosmology and expectations of their readers” (p. 28; emphasis added). It is not clear why this applies specifically to scriptural texts, but it does not seem to be consistent with a distinction that Chaudhry makes between “exegesis”—deriving meaning from a text—and “eisegesis,” to read meaning into a text (p. 56). A logical conclusion of Chaudhry’s hermeneutic theory would be that exegesis is only a myth. But based on this theory, Chaudhry describes the traditional interpretation of Q. 3:34 (according to which men are allowed to hit their wives) as the “pre-colonial plain-sense” meaning of the verse. Modern interpretations of the same verse, and irrespective of their pre-set desire to prove that wife-beating “in all circumstances is unjust, immoral, and unethical” (p. 138), are based on other, but equally valid, plain-sense meanings of the same verse. The justification given for this exercise is that modern Muslim scholars are reading the Qur’an against the backdrop of their values just as their medieval counterparts did. In all this, Chaudhry speaks about readings that she believes contradict the “lexical wording of the text” (p. 135), a contention that only stands if we believe in the presence of the so-called literal meaning.

A few final remarks can be made. Chaudhry’s Introduction almost exhausts her ideas in the book. It is true that in the rest of the monograph she provides more extensive discussions and the evidence for which scholars and learned readers look, but readers will experience many moments of “déjà lu” in this book. Finally, there are a few issues with transliteration (e.g., *wārithatu* for “warathatu” on p. 7; Sa’ad for Sa’d on p. 32 and elsewhere; *kirāha* for *karāha* on p. 63; and *mulāl* for *malāl* on p. 64) that nonetheless do not diminish the value of this book as a good, interesting read that should be accessible even to general readers and students. Chaudhry’s discussion of what she calls the “public relations” image of Islam and how it does more harm than good to contemporary Muslim communities (p. 19) is insightful. And so are some of her other conclusions, including her observation that, contrary to what is generally assumed, progressive and reformist commentaries of the Qur’an are in fact more “atomistic” than their pre-colonial counterparts (p. 203) in the sense that they, too, interpret verses of the Qur’an as if they were separate units on their own, not as parts of a larger whole.
Amr Osman (PhD Princeton University, 2010) is Associate Professor of Islamic History in the Department of Humanities at Qatar University. His research interests include the intellectual history of Islam as well as modern and contemporary Arab politics and thought.

Amr Osman
Qatar University, Doha, Qatar
aosman@qu.edu.qa