Decoding the Egalitarianism of the Qur'an: Retrieving Lost Voices on Gender. Abla Hasan. Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. 182.

Navid Kermani once asserted that "Arabic is [...] an extreme example of the way sacred languages are intentionally kept static and, although they do not completely stop the natural evolution of language, can slow it considerably."[1] Clifford Geertz when commenting on the nature of the Arabic language went so far as to remark on "the famous linguistic schizophrenia of Arabic-speaking people" which he argued rests on "the existence and continuing validity of the 'classical' (*muḏarī*) or 'pure' (*faṣīh*) Arabic, on the one hand, and the continuous evolution and diversification of the unwritten dialects, called 'vulgar' (*āmmīya*) or 'common' (*dārija*), on the other."[2] However, if we take seriously the assertion that the Qur'an is the divine revelation of God, as delivered by his messenger the Prophet Muhammad, then the text of the Qur'an exhibits timeless qualities of divination as expressed in the "semantic completeness of the Qur'anic language" (3).

The expressed goal of Abla Hasan's monograph, *Decoding the Egalitarianism of the Qur'an: Retrieving Lost Voices on Gender*, is to recognize the perfection of Qur'anic Arabic and the vicissitude of its particular diction within a methodological framework that uses "the Qur'an to interpret the Qur'an" (3). Hasan deploys this methodology throughout her work in order to provide "strong linguistic evidence to support the existence of a lost gender egalitarian voice in the Qur'an ... that has been both deliberately and unintentionally defaced in the history of overt exegetical[ly] biased studies of the Qur'an" (4). In a manner similar to Geertz's assertion that contemporary dialects have tarnished the

1. Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 83.
2. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 83.

perfection of Qur'anic Arabic, Hasan ardently asserts that the "excessive exegetical narrativization" in the commentaries, *tafsīr*, *sīra*, and *ḥādīth*, "fill in details that are absent from the Qur'anic narratives [and] was extended to cover specific issues related to Qur'anic teachings of duties and obligations" (8). Moreover, this "excessive exegetical narrativization undoubtedly formed a departure from th[e] well-established Islamic theological argument that the Qur'an is a universal revelation" (95). In remaining faithful to this approach, Hasan asserts that the focus of her project is to spur "religious reform, not legal reform ... [and she] argue[s] in favor of the advancement of women's status in the context of religious reform, by identifying the gender-egalitarian message in the Qur'an" (95).

With the above in mind, a pressing concern for Hasan, adherents, and Islamic Studies as a field, is the growth of "*tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* (heritage-based interpretation) schools of exegeses and Islamic jurisprudence[,]" aided by the availability of online Islamic influencers, who privilege Islamic source texts (such as the *tafsīr*, *sīra*, and *ḥādīth*) often at the condescension of the Qur'anic text (152). Hasan posits that we should recognize that the "appeal to authority logical fallacy and ignorance of the fact that these scholars' formulations and interpretations must be seen in the sociological perspective of their time" (19). Put differently, generations of Islamic commentators have offered a wide range of scholarly opinions, all of which retain the sociological artifacts of the eras in which they were created. Being aware of these artifacts, biases, and implicit sexist readings of the Qur'an allows for contemporary female scholars to engage in *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) in "rethinking [of] the Qur'an as a gender-egalitarian book" (154).

Hasan's text is divided into five chapters, each of which features a range of Qur'anic case studies where past scholars of repute have passed judgments that Hasan feels are at odds with "the clear gender-egalitarian message in the Qur'anic [narratives]" (132). Given Hasan's ardent belief

that "the abstract open-ended textual style of the Qur'an does not allow for narrowly constructed cultural normativity ... [and therefore] [t]he semantic style of the Qur'an is purposefully structured to allow for an open-ended interpretive capacity" (10), each of her case studies is, then, a chance to take to task these detrimental assertions of past scholars. Consequently, the first chapter focuses on decoding the egalitarianism present in the Qur'an by calling into question a range of deficiencies, specifically: excessive exegetical narrativization of the Qur'an, which calls into question the validity of utilizing Qur'anic commentaries, *tafsīr*, *sīra*, and *ḥādīth*, in place of utilizing the Qur'an directly (11).

The second chapter features Qur'anic case studies designed to demonstrate gender egalitarianism in the Qur'an by challenging existing commentaries. An example of this can be found in her critique of *sūrat an-Nisā'* (4:32) which is often cited as a verse that "is addressed to women and commands them not to envy men for their divinely granted superiority" (45). Hasan asserts that reading this verse with the "male addressee fallacy [in mind] is the key to unlocking the semantic mystery of [the verse]" (46). The concept of the "male addressee fallacy" is central to Hasan's work; she argues that the presumption that Qur'anic *sūrat* are addressed to men alone fosters a "misunderstanding of the identity of addressees (an issue that plays an essential role in the interpretation of any verse) [and] fundamentally changes our understanding of the Qur'anic message," which her work is attempting to challenge (92). Hasan uses this case study to argue that this verse is not directed to women exclusively, as both men and women are referenced in this *āya* (verse), which Hasan posits as an "assurance of God's inclusive justice and not God's support of male superiority" (46).

However, Hasan's case study around *sūrat an-Nisā'* (4:34), which is often cited as a justification for domestic violence, is truly ground-breaking. There, she provides clear justification that this *āya* does not refer specifically to marital conflicts, but the breaking of social

mores within the community at large. Hasan even goes so far as to provide an updated translation of the *āya* predicated on her findings and methodology which offers a dramatically different reading of Q4:34:

> Men are financial guardians of women, those men whom God has favoured some of them to others, and those who spend from their money. Righteous women are devout, they guard what God asked to be guarded, even when [they are] unseen. Those women among you [believers] whom you fear high-handedness, admonish them, and place them in house arrest, and strike them. If they obey you seek no more correction. God is most high and great (85).

This *āya* addresses the "community with ways to punish women who violate laws; it is not related to the resolution of marriage conflicts" and therefore the verse has more to do with the maintenance of social cohesion, and not the prescribed method for resolving individual disputes (78). Moreover, this reading of the *āya* is more in line with the tradition of the prophet who "according to all narrations, the Prophet never applied any of these ... correction with any of his wives" and therefore presents an "apparent contradiction between the Prophet's behavior and the criterion that traditional exegetes extrapolate from Q4:34 constitutes another reason to question the traditional understanding of this verse" (80).

This is followed by the third chapter, where careful and deeply personal attention on the part of Hasan is given to how marriage is characterized in the Qur'an as a "solemn pledge" (*mīthāq*) (Q4:21) which supersedes the pre-Islamic conception of marriage that did not recognize the agency of women, and the equality engendered to them within Islam (62). Additionally, there is some interesting attention paid to what Hasan characterizes as clear Qur'anic guidance for foreplay, and the need to equally fulfill both partners' needs in intimate relationships (63–64). The fourth chapter focuses on female body-ownership with a specific discussion concerning the wearing of *hijāb* and the social politics of

modesty. By drawing attention to *sūrat an-Nūr* (24:31), the verse which is often cited as the justification for public modesty, Hasan focuses in on a specific statement "[t]hey should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms" (118). Within this section of the *āya*, Hasan makes an impassioned argument for *hijāb* as an external tool to fight the internal desire for male objectification – specifically by eliciting the male gaze by the stamping of feet, which is an allusion to the pre-Islamic method to gain male attention (76). This is then followed by the fifth chapter which discusses women's agency in the Qur'an, then followed by the conclusion.

Hasan's work is as much a product of her impassioned desire to excavate the lost gender egalitarianism present in the Qur'an, as it is also her range of innovative methodological approaches to reach these ends. Her "holistic hermeneutical approach that reconnects individual verses with the general construction of the Qur'anic text proves more effective, in terms of rethinking" the meaning of these verses, and it is this approach which avoids the mistake of "'exegetical contextomy fallacy' which is commonly seen in many Qur'anic interpretations" (76). At the same time, Hasan's methodology although compelling, does present challenges as her approach is predicated on viewing the Qur'an as both divine, and grammatically perfect, but equally open to interpretation. This approach does not lend itself well to an attempt at objective analysis, and does not offer the reader space to come to their own conclusions as it presumes they share her stance. For Hasan, the Qur'an offers a clear narrative by which all humans are equal under God, regardless of gender, and may be the best way to see that is to ignore the hefty tomes authored by commentators from the past, and instead reach directly for the Qur'an to ask the question, "Is God just? Or is he gender biased?" (154).

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