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## Book Review: Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition

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**Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition. By Ayesha S. Chaudhry.  
Oxford University Press, 2013. 288 pages. ISBN: 9780199640164**

Reviewed By: Esraa Osama

In her book *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition*, Ayesha Chaudry gives an extensive study of the Qur'anic verse (4:34) that describes the relationship between men and women with an explanation of the behavior of women in accordance to being good or bad, and how the husbands have the authority to discipline their wives. The verse says

*“Men are qawwamun (in authority) over women, because God has preferred some over others, and because they spend of their wealth (to maintain them). Righteous women are obedient and guard in (their husbands’) absence what God would have them guard. Concerning those women from whom you fear nushuz (disobedience/ rebellion), admonish them, and/or abandon them in bed, and/or wa-dribuhunna (hit them). If they obey you, do not seek a means against them, God is most high, great.” (Q4:34).*

Chaudhry's book is divided into two parts that consists of five chapters with an extensive description of the evolution of the interpretation of the verse in three contexts: textual, historical, and cosmological (patriarchal – egalitarian). She argues that the Qur'anic verse can be differently explained through the cosmology of the scholar and his/her inherited community/historical values. Therefore, there is no possible exact meaning that might be valued over the other.

In the first three chapters, Chaudhry demonstrates the traditional Islamic interpretation of the verse according to the 1) history of the revelation of the verse concerning two women: Umm Salama and Habiba, 2) possible textual meanings of the verse surrounding the words *admonishment*, *abandonment in bed*, and *beating*. She points out the selective meanings chosen by scholars in the traditional (pre-colonial) Islamic societies that is different from the post-colonial interpretations because of the difference in the cosmological backgrounds, 3) and then she examines the four major Sunni legal schools in the pre-colonial periods illustrating that despite the different motivations and the variety of concerns of the four legal schools, they agreed on the right of the husband to discipline his wife physically if she committed Nushuz (disobedience/rebellion); however, the beating ought to be “non-extreme” (not to break bones or cause open wounds). Chaudhry here raises the questions: didn't the Qur'an after all say “*The Human has nothing but what he/she strives for*” (Q 53:39) which means that men and women are equal before God. Most importantly, Prophet Muhammad “a walking Qur'an” never hit his wives, and Muslims were meant to follow his example. Why are men allowed to hit their wives at all; however lightly? Why is violence ever the correct answer to marital dispute? Actually, Chaudhry's questions are valid reasonably based on many verses in the Qura'an that state the equality of men and women before God. Also, it is valid that Chaudry brings the example of the prophet because he is supposed to be the live example that all Muslims should follow.

In the last two chapters, Chaudhry focuses more on the post-colonial Muslim scholarship that is based on a different historical context from that of the pre-colonial one. She divides them

in four categories: “Traditionalists”, “Neo-Traditionalists”, “Progressive”, and “Reformist”. The main problem that is faced by all contemporary scholars is balancing the traditional and the contemporary concerns facing the egalitarian-authoritative dilemma. Actually, the post-colonial scholars’ perspectives is so much diverse ranging from 1) permitting the husbands to hit their wives, 2) hitting the wife with restrictive reasons, 3) hitting the wife; however, lightly, 4) forbidding the beating of wives under any and all circumstances. Some other scholars promote a completely different meaning to the wording “hit them” such as: “have sexual intercourse with them”, “leave the marriage”, and “travel”. The diversity of interpretations also includes the diversity of the languages used to interpret the Qur’an today (English-Arabic-Urdu) with all media privileges that didn’t exist in the pre-colonial era. All of this has resulted in clashing and competing meanings that are shaped by the social and historical contexts, individual subjectivities, and idealized cosmologies of its readers who constantly shape the meaning of the interpreted texts. Besides, Chaudhry provides a comparative analysis of how religious scholars rationalize and defend the meanings they provide to the sacred text based on selective use of the sources.

Actually, Chaudhry’s book is unique in its approach. She tackles the Islamic intellectual evolution of gender relations dynamics by examining one verse of the Qur’an according to every possible understanding that could be related to the debate. As a Muslim and a woman, she doesn’t offer any apologetic interpretation to the meaning of the sacred text; rather, she clearly examines the patriarchal nature of what she called “Traditional Islamic interpretation” with all the reasons they have offered behind their reasoning that resulted in an uncomfortable finding that they support the husband’s right to discipline his wife physically without considering women’s position. Also, she examines the contemporary interpretations that try to tackle the text from the egalitarian cosmology that has a strong desire to remain rooted with the text’s authenticity; however, she doesn’t shy away to say that some of them try to entrench an egalitarian meaning to the sacred text either by depending on minority or imagined opinions, or by completely rejecting the Traditional approach of the text. Chaudhry did a comprehensive work to examine 1) the Arabic language in regards to the text, 2) the Hadith literature and the personality of the prophet, 3) two different historical worlds with two different cumulative events and societal divergent worldviews, and cosmologies (pre and post-colonial eras).

A possible criticism that would be taken against Chaudhry is her use of a personal struggle embodying multiple identities (Muslim-Canadian-Modern-Second generation-immigrant-Western-Pakistani-Female) as a basis of a legitimate investigation of a certain topic. However, I’d rather say that her personal struggle further raises the interest of the reader to know her findings on the topic, especially with the questions she offered in the introduction of the book that deals honestly with the sacred text without any sympathy towards a possible–desirable–meaning. On the other hand, I’d argue against her use of the specific words “pre-colonial” and “post-colonial” interpretations. Although she wants to give a chronological analysis of the historical context of the topic, the use of words gives the suggestion that the colonialism era initiated the egalitarian thoughts to Muslim scholars’ consciousness. In the contrary, the Westerns at that time haven’t had developed a feminist approach in their own societies yet. Finally, Chaudhry’s book uniqueness exists in its multidisciplinary approach without forcing a certain conclusion on the reader. She hands over all her findings with all possible understandings in regards with the complexity of the issue without a selective use of sources, leaving the reader free to choose to be convinced or not, or even for him/her to come up with a new finding by himself/herself.