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This book is a welcome addition to an increasing body of work that deals with gender in the Qur’ān. The book’s focus, spread over four chapters, is to map out all the female figures in the Qur’ān and examine themes relating to biological sex, female sexuality, voices, and identity. In this respect, the work is not dissimilar to Barbara Stowasser’s earlier work, although the approaches of the two are markedly different. While Stowasser makes use of exegesis and the narrative literature, such elements are absent in Ibrahim’s work. This decision makes this work unique and allows it to emphasise unique structural and literary insights. The focus is invariably on the text of the Qur’ān itself and the interrelation and positioning of its verses. The focus on the text of the Qur’ān also circumvents conversations surrounding issues of subjectivity in the exegesis by other scholars in this area. This work can be viewed under the rubric of “Muslima theology”, which the author herself acknowledges. However, she is careful to state that the work is “female-centric” instead of being “feminist” to avoid alienating potential readers.

Ibrahim estimates there to be 300 references to women. This includes figures in sacred history and contemporary figures linked to the Qur’ān’s immediate audience. References range from specific women such as Mary and the Queen of Sheba, to more general references to women, such as when the families of prophets are mentioned. These references are viewed from an affective and didactic lens to a potential listener, of which the primary listener would be a believer, something Ibrahim is careful to acknowledge from the very beginning, “my work is grounded in the awareness that no small number of human beings orient themselves, their actions, their understanding of the world, and their most intimate selves vis-à-vis the Qur’ān” (9). This orientation allows a particular strength of the work to shine through as it highlights the contemporary significance of various verses.

The first chapter, also the longest, begins with a discussion on female sex and sexuality. From the outset, the chapter clarifies that regulating sexuality is one of the primary tropes of the Qur’ān. At the same time, duality, the pairing or coupling of humanity, is a part of God’s creation. In examining the origin of humanity, Ibrahim provides a more gender-sensitive translation, a feature that is common throughout the book. For example, a common translation of Q 39:6 is “He created you from a single soul and created from *it*. . .” However, Ibrahim is careful to adopt the feminine pronoun for soul: “He created you from a single soul and created from *her*. . .”

Ibrahim critiques the notion of Eve being created for Adam for him to find rest in her. Rather she argues that the verse should be read as spouses finding rest in her.
each other. Her methodology of focusing solely on the Qur’ān, and putting aside exegesis, give greater room for such interpretation. Many exegetes did indeed uphold the position of the spouse of Adam being created for his comfort, an interpretation influenced by the Isra‘īliyāt. However, by putting aside such auxiliary sources, other interpretations are allowed greater prominence. Ibrahim highlights the context of the verse. For example, this verse is preceded by verses that refer to human beings in general: “God created you (plural) from dust as humans ranging far and wide”. This is then followed by God creating you (plural) from yourself (anfusikum) spouses to find rest. Her contention is to not exclude women from object of anfusikum. This is further supported she argues by other verses in the Qur’ān that show a more reciprocated reading of relations, such as when men and women are described as garments of each other.

However, in adopting such interpretations, some interpretive liberties are taken. For instance, the interaction between the women of Midian and Moses is read as a subtle reference to “female desire and pursuit” (33). For Ibrahim, one of the women is attracted to Moses and hence encourages her father to hire him. However, this is not unambiguous from the verses themselves. This is not to dismiss such an interpretation but to note that such positions are not explicit in the text of the Qur’ān. In fact, it is equally possible to read this passage as demonstrating a lack of female agency since the father offers one of his daughters in marriage without any consultation. This lack of agency can perhaps be read similarly in the narrative of Lot, where Lot purportedly offers his daughters. However, here Ibrahim reads this act as “rhetorical mockery” and not a serious offer of marriage. Her views are not dissimilar to the position that Kugle adopts in relation to this passage. This is not to dismiss such alternative interpretations, but to note an element of subjectivity in choosing a specific position. Saying this, Ibrahim does in each case attempt to substantiate her positions with structural evidence from the Qur’ān. For example, in relation to the people of Lot, they themselves confirm that they have no “right” to his daughters, potentially supporting the lack of seriousness in Lot’s offer (79).

Interpretative choice can be seen from another perspective when more commonly held positions are dismissed. The figures of the hūr are read as potentially being “resurrected humans in a new state” (42) instead of, as commonly interpreted, heavenly partners. The depictions that are attributed to such creatures in the Qur’ān can be seen as alluding to some kind of sexual relations. However, Ibrahim argues that the depictions of the hūr do not have to relate to sexuality. Rather they can be seen as the virginial recreations of humans, being created anew and without any reference to sexuality: “without a need for reproduction, and hence no need for reproductive organs, perhaps the paradisal gardens, with their amenities, comforts and company, are pleasure enough without the need for somatic pleasure derived from sexual acts. In this case, the beings in paradise may
be aesthetically pleasing but potentially do not have a teleological purpose of bringing inhabitants pleasure” (45).

Chapter 2 looks at the concept of childbearing, childrearing, and kinship. The chapter demonstrates how female figures are not just secondary background figures in the narrative arcs but play an important role and “provide vital lifelines” (63). In fact, Ibrahim observes that every messenger is associated with at least one female figure. Female figures are used to show God’s wisdom, and their stories have affective power that provides guidance to the listener to inculcate piety. The chapter examines how the Qur’ān depicts families and children, the dynamics of childrearing, and how there is a material value placed on nursing in the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān celebrates motherhood by subsuming it as a concept to indicate grandeur. A chapter, for example, is referred to as “Umm al-kitāb”, and the holy city of Makkah is referred to as “Umm al-Qurā”.

Various mothers are mentioned in the Qur’ān, such as the wives of Abraham, Zachariah, and Imran, as well as Mary. Ibrahim notes that the Qur’ān never mentions an unscrupulous mother. This can be contrasted with fatherhood, such as with the father of Abraham, who is depicted as an enemy of God. Even though there are instances of corrupt women in the Qur’ān, such as the wives of Lot and Noah, they are never associated with motherhood. Sisters are also mentioned in the Qur’ān, and here their depiction is uniformly positive. The sister of Moses carries a crucial role in the events that reunite Moses with his mother. Similarly, the two sisters of Midian are not described in any negative sense. This is not the same with brothers, such as the brothers of Joseph who attempt to kill him. Even Moses, at one moment, opposes his brother by grabbing him by the head and beard.

Chapter 3 focuses on the speech of women in the Qur’ān and the didactic and affective dimensions of their speech. This affective dimension is argued to be important since it adds another layer of meaning. For example, the critical words spoken by Mary during childbirth are effective in invoking empathy for women in such situations. What is important is that empathy is not just restricted for women, but also men, with the immortalisation of her words, recited by men and women alike. In another passage, the wife of the Pharaoh prays to God for a house near him. Ibrahim argues that this can be seen as a metonym for security, safety, and freedom. The affective dimension would increase compassion for women who face oppression at home and provide solace in reminding them that God is all aware. In this example, among others, Ibrahim links the verses to their contemporary relevance.

Female speech, however, has greater potency in that there are multiple instances of prophetic resonances. The Queen of Sheba, for example, states, “surely I have wronged myself” in 27:44, to which we find direct parallels to Moses in 28:16. Furthermore, the most important formulation in the Qur’ān, the basmala, is solely
stated by a female figure, the Queen. In another example, Mary parallels the Prophet Joseph in that they both seek refuge in God, when they assume the sexual advances of another person. A further example is Moses’s mother who parallels the Prophet Abraham. Both share the same grievances of potentially losing a son, yet still acquiesce to God’s command. Furthermore, Moses’s mother is also directly given a prophecy that her son would one day be returned to her, much like prophets in general. Finally, Adam is inspired with “words from his Lord”. However, the only time he is directly quoted as speaking is in unison with his spouse. Hence, Ibrahim postulates that she too could be included in receiving words from God.

The final chapter considers women in the context of the Muslim community, in other words, in the Qur’ān’s historical context. Ibrahim argues that the narratives function as “case studies” to show correct social behavioural standards. The wife of Abu Lahab is one such figure who is indicative of transgressive behaviour. Passing references are also found to other more elusive female figures such as “sorceresses who blow” and the woman who would “unravel her yarn”. In addition, mention is made to the wives of Lot and Noah to remind the Prophet’s wives that these women were not saved by God’s mercy solely based on their relation to a Prophet. Contemporary events involving women are also discussed, such as the episode of slander and the Qur’ān’s insistence on justice. Ultimately, Ibrahim argues that there is a whole spectrum of female characters. Although most are good, some are also wicked and impious. However, what links them all is that they have the agency over their own decisions and actions.

Finally, the appendices at the end of the work will be of particular interest to both scholars and students alike. Here Ibrahim collates all instances of female figures as well as female speech in the Qur’ān, which will undoubtedly be a valuable asset to any scholar working in this field.