



Feminist Perspective in Laleh Bakhtiar's Translation of the Holy Qur'an

Dr. Abida Bokhari

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Islamic Studies, Government Islamia Graduate College (W) Cooper Road, Lahore. Email: bokharysyed112@gmail.com

Dr. Sadia Jawaid

Lecturer, Dept. of Islamic Studies, Government Islamia Graduate College (W) Cooper Road, Lahore/Director, Bakhtawar Girls College, Chiniot. Email:

sadia.javaid241@gmail.com

For almost fourteen centuries, Muslims have believed that lightly beating one's disobedient wife is a permissible act in Islam and is based on Qur'anic verse 4:34. Various interpretations of this verse have caused a great deal of controversy among scholars. Recently, some modern scholars and feminists have also tried to come up with a modern interpretation of this verse. According to the Islamic feminist group, the text of this verse is used by Muslim men as an excuse for domestic violence. Laleh Bakhtiar, who translated the Qur'an into English, has been criticized for interpreting the verse in the same way as feminists, while Bakhtiar does not accept the criticism. The purpose of this article is to find out whether Bakhtiar's gender influences her translation. Especially how she translates verse 4:34 of the Holy Qur'an. Does she adopt a feminist approach to the interpretation of this verse?

Keywords: Holy Qur'an, Translation, Laleh Bakhtiar, Feminist, Gender equality, Wife-Beating.

Introduction:

Laleh Bakhtiar (1938-2020) was born in Tehran. Her American mother, Helen Jeffreys, was a Christian, and her Iranian father, Abol Ghassem Bakhtiar, was a Muslim. Due to her mother's divorce, she was raised as a Christian in Los Angeles and



Journament



اشاره
 ابرو جرائد



Washington.¹ Like her mother, Bakhtiar also married an Iranian architect and moved to Iran with him and two daughters. There she studied Islam at the behest of Dr. Seyyed Hossain Nasr and finally converted to Islam in 1964.² After the divorce, she returned to the United States and did a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology.³ As well as being a professional psychotherapist, she “also taught courses on Islam at the University of Chicago.”⁴ She wrote more than twenty books on various topics and translated more than twenty-five books on Islam. She produced an English translation of the Holy Qur'ān entitled “*The Sublime Quran*” which was published in the United States in 2007.

Bakhtiar, in the preface to the translation, focuses particularly on her position as a woman translator and on gender issues in Islam. She distinguishes herself from other contemporary English translators and their translations by asserting that she is the first American woman who translated the Holy Qur'ān in English and her translation is the first critical English translation of the Holy Qur'ān by a woman who includes the view of women in the verses wherever relevant. She observes that previous translators had been paying insufficient attention to women's perspectives so, she discusses, in a big part of the introduction, the women's position in Islam.

“Just as I found a lack of internal consistency in previous English translations, I also found that little attention had been given to the woman's point of view.”⁵

Bakhtiar criticizes not only male translators but also female translators Saffarzadeh and Umm Muhammad for not speaking for women in their translations. She objects that they both have not challenged the interpretations of men but have supported them by writing translations like men. She writes:

“These women did not challenge the over 1,400 years of male interpretations of the Quran. Therefore, in key passages, their translations read exactly as the translation by a male. In other words, they do not represent

¹ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2012), xx.

² Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xx.

³ Garbi Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 150.

⁴ To the Interfaith Observer, “Laleh Bakhtiar”, accessed 06-10-2020, <https://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/contributors/?offset=1467435600619>.

⁵ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xix.

the prophetic voice of speaking out against wrongdoing but instead, support the status quo.”⁶

She identifies that women's point of view is difficult to trace until the history of the English translation of the Holy Qur’ān since its beginning. Though she acknowledges those men who support the view of women as the accomplishment of their human unity, she criticizes men who conflict with the Holy Qur’ān and Sunnah’s inclusiveness.

“The criticism women have is towards those men who are not open to this understanding, who are exclusive in opposition to the Quran and Sunnah’s inclusiveness. Clearly the intention of the Quran is to see man and woman as complements of one another, not as superior-inferior.”⁷

Bakhtiar uses the letter (f) in the target text to ensure feminine visibility. In the preface, she introduces this strategy. She states as follows:

“When words in a verse refer directly to a woman or women or wife or wives and the corresponding pronouns such as (they, them, those), I have placed an (f) after the word to indicate the word refers to the feminine gender specifically. Otherwise, in the Arabic language (as in Spanish), the masculine pronoun may be used generically to include both male and female human beings.”⁸

Bakhtiar highlights the need to reconsider gender relations in Islam. Her interpretation of verse 4:34 caused much criticism and controversy over her translation. According to her, women are considered inferior when husbands are allowed to beat their wives. Therefore, by devoting a major part of the introduction, she discusses one of the most controversial and debated verses in the Holy Qur’ān. She writes:

“I address a main criticism of Islam in regard to the inferiority of women, namely, that a husband can beat his wife (4:34) after two stages of trying to discipline her.”⁹

وَاللَّاتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ¹⁰

⁶ Laleh Bakhtiar, xxiii.

⁷ Laleh Bakhtiar, xix.

⁸ Laleh Bakhtiar, xix.

⁹ Laleh Bakhtiar, xix.

¹⁰ Al-Qur’ān, Al-Nisā 4:34.

LB: "And those females whose resistance you fear, then admonish them (f) and abandon them (f) in their sleeping places and go away from them (f)."

This verse describes how to deal with a "disobedient" wife. Most translations and exegeses of the Holy Qur'ān explain that the 'disobedient' wife should be admonished by the husband first, but if she does not correct the attitude, then he should leave her alone in bed. Still, if she does not stop, the last resort is to beat her lightly. The majority of Muslim translators render the term "*idrib*" as "beat"; they understand it as a symbolic beating, i.e. very slight beating that does not break a bone or leave a mark. However, Bakhtiar translates the word "*idribūhunna*" as "go away from them." She is not in favor of interpreting it as physical punishment. She interprets this verse as opposed to the interpretations of old traditional scholars as well as contemporary scholars. She presents a non-physical resolution for the interpretation of the term. She devotes a major part of the 'introduction' to her translation to discuss this verse. She gives a detailed explanation for her translation of the term "*idrib*." She considered her interpretation a blessing. She also welcomed the scholarly discussion on her interpretation. She said "I just hope we keep the dialogue going so that one less Muslim woman is beaten in the name of God. That's my prayer, to get more women aware that there is an alternative. This has not been sanctioned by God; it's a criminal act."¹¹ She challenges the translation of this term traditionally translated as "beat," which according to feminists has been used to justify the exploitation of women. Therefore, various scholars look at Bakhtiar as a feminist translator of the Holy Qur'ān. Muhammad Ashraf, Secretary-General "of the Islamic Society of North America, ISNA-Canada" even thought of banning Bakhtiar's translation because she was not trained in a recognized institution in the Muslim world. He told *The Toronto Star* that "our bookstore would not allow this kind of translation. I will consider banning it. ... This woman-friendly translation will be out of line and will not fly too far. Women have been given a very good place in Islam."¹² Walid Saleh, "an Associate Professor of Religion at the *University of Toronto*" comments that Bakhtiar "belongs to a long line of Muslim feminists, since the late 19th century, who have been attempting to make the Qur'an and Islam far more, in a sense,

¹¹ Al-Qur'ān, Al-Nisā 4:34.

¹² Omar Hussein Ibrahim, *The Myth of the 'Islamic' Headscarf* (Lulu.com, 2020), 346.

gender-equal than people think it is.”¹³ Ali Eteraz also describes her work as the first feminist translation of the Holy Qur’ān. He writes:

“In 1999 an important book was published by Amina Wadud, called *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. In 2005 Wadud led the first publicly-held, mixed gender, Friday sermon and prayer in history. Wadud's book and leadership opened the door to the first feminist translation of the Quran, by a woman named Laleh Bakhtiar, which removed the permission for wife-beating from the translation by choosing one of the alternative meanings of an Arabic verb. It would appear that Wadud had quite an impact.”¹⁴

A newspaper reported that when Bakhtiar published her translation she was criticized for translating some Qur’ānic verses from a feminine perspective while departing from traditional and patriarchal interpretations of these verses. She was also criticized for having no reputation as an Islamic scholar. Her critics cited that three years of studying classic Arabic is not enough to translate the Holy Qur’ān. Bakhtiar rejected all these criticisms. She clarified that many other translators were not Islamic scholars, so why were they not criticized? Even those translators did not know much Arabic. She was being criticized only because she was a woman.¹⁵ She also refers to some male scholars and jurists, such as Abdul Hamid A. Abu Sulayman, the former head of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and Ayatullah Makarim Shirazi, who agree to interpret *idrib* as “to separate” or “to go away” instead of “to beat.”¹⁶

Islamic Feminist, Asma Barlas defines Islamic feminism as:

“Islamic feminism is a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.”¹⁷

¹³ Leslie Schrivener, "Furor over a five-letter word," *Toronto Star*, 2007-OCT-21, A21. Online at: <http://www.thestar.com/>.

¹⁴ Ali Eteraz, "Beyond Islamic Enlightenment," *The Guardian*. October 11, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/oct/11/beyondislamicenlightenment>.

¹⁵ Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, "A new look at a holy text," April 10, 2017, Accessed April 10, 2019. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2007-04-10-0704100141-story.html>.

¹⁶ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xli.

¹⁷ Asma Barlas, *The Qur'an, Sexual Equality, and Feminism* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), 1.

However, Bakhtiar distinguishes herself from feminists who raise issues regarding gender inequities and equal rights for women as she does not deal with such issues. In the preface to her translation and an interview, she gives much importance to mentioning that she should not be seen as a feminist, which she is not. She presents herself as “a spiritual warrior (*fatat*)” as she emphasizes ethics and morality in her life at a high level. She explains that after studying her arguments a reader will realize what is relevant in her interpretation is the use of intellectual effort, not her gender. She writes:

“However, that does not necessarily make this a feminist translation. The Sublime Quran is the translation of a person who practices spiritual integrity (*futuwwa*) or spiritual chivalry as it is sometimes called. It should also be noted that none of the reasons given as to how this translation differs from all other English translations has anything to do with my being a woman. They are all indications of gender-free intellectual reasoning.”¹⁸

She then reveals the purpose and the original contribution of her work which is the equality of both genders:

“Let us also be said that this translation was undertaken by a woman to bring both men and women to equity so that the message of fairness and justice between the sexes can be accepted in Truth by both genders.”¹⁹

She argues that in the Middle East, women are not allowed to recite the Arabic Qur'ān publically but no such *fatwa* has been given regarding a female reciting a Qur'ān's translation. To this end, she just recited her English translation of the Holy Qur'ān which is available in the format of.mp3.²⁰

In the researchers' view, whether Bakhtiar does not accept it, she is consciously or unconsciously influenced by feminist ideology as Fairclough writes “ideologies built into conventions may be more or less naturalized and automatized.”²¹ It means “people may not recognize that they have been affected by their ideologies. That is to say, ideology is something inherited in the unconscious part of one's personality, so a person

¹⁸ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xix.

¹⁹ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxi.

²⁰ Laleh Bakhtiar, *Concordance of the Sublime Quran* (Library of Islam, 2011), lxvi.

²¹ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 90.

reacts to responses in an automated way.”²² Bakhtiar’s deliberations about Muslim women in the paratexts resemble her with feminist translators. It looks as if she conforms feminist ‘prefacing’ strategy. She gives special attention to her gendered identity with the aim of preparing her readers to accept an altered interpretation of the sacred text from a female point of view. She apprises the readers that former English translators of the Holy Qur’ān have ignored women’s viewpoints while she is retrieving their right to explain their view of the Qur’ānic text.

Wife beating under limited circumstances and without causing harm is permitted by classical and modern (neo-) traditionalist scholars. Mohamed Mahmoud calls this “limitation strategy.”²³ On the other side, it is argued by Muslim feminist scholars that wife-beating cannot be condoned under any circumstances. Mahmoud calls this ‘virtual abrogation strategy.’²⁴ However, to accomplish this virtual abrogation, these feminist scholars are divided into two groups with two different approaches. The first approach demonstrates that to interpret “*idribūhunna*” as “beat them” is wrong and they propose a new meaning of the word. The second approach acknowledges that though the Qur’ānic text permits wife-beating, it does not permit it in today’s context.²⁵ These two approaches are usually known as progressive/idealistic and reformist respectively.²⁶ Scholars who support the progressive or idealist paradigm are Asma Barlas (2002), Al-Hibri (2003), Hadia Mubarak (2004), Sa’diyya Shaikh (2007), and Laleh Bakhtiar (2011). It is argued by Idealists that “the Qur’anic text itself is not patriarchal and/or misogynist, but rather that misogyny and patriarchy were read into the Qur’an by exe-

²² Ahmad Mohammad Al-Harashseh, “Translation of Islamic Texts and Ideology,” *Arab World English Journal* Special issue on Translation, no. 2 (2013): 109.

²³ Mohamed Mahmoud, “To Beat or Not to Beat: On the Exegetical Dilemmas over Qur’ān 4:34,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126, no. 4 (2006): 544.

²⁴ Mohamed Mahmoud, “To Beat or Not to Beat: On the Exegetical Dilemmas over Qur’ān 4:34, 545.

²⁵ Mohamed Mahmoud, “To Beat or Not to Beat: On the Exegetical Dilemmas over Qur’ān 4:34, 537-550.

²⁶ Ayesha S. Chaudhry, “The Problems of Conscience and Hermeneutics: A Few Contemporary Approaches,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2006): 157-70.

Ayesha. S Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law, and the Muslim Discourse on Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

getes.”²⁷ So, they challenge the patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'ānic text, not the text itself.²⁸

The word “*nushūz*” in the discussed verse is generally interpreted by classical exegetes as “rebellion” or “disobedience” toward the husband. However, these interpretations are challenged by feminist scholars. They remark that the Holy Qur'ān has used *nushūz* for both men and women yet exegetes have defined it differently.²⁹ Bakhtiar writes:

“If *nushūz* is interpreted as meaning disobedient then it must apply in both cases, a disobedient wife and/or a disobedient husband!”³⁰

Therefore, intending to have a gender-egalitarian reading Wadud interprets “*nushūz*” as “marital disharmony”³¹ and Bakhtiar as “resistance.” Bakhtiar “understands the word ‘*nushūz*’ not as an ill-conduct or sexual betrayal but as resistance in the sense that can lead to a domestic dispute. She believes that it is only in this sense that the verb ‘*idrib*’ can be meaningful.”³²

Amina Wadud criticizes that the Holy Qur'ān is read in a verse-by-verse way by traditional exegetes and “little or no effort is made to recognize themes and to discuss the relationship of the Qur'an to itself, thematically”³³ while, a contextual reading of verse 4:34 is necessary. According to Mubarak, exegetes must read this verse in the light of the principles expressed throughout the Qur'ān, especially within the “paradigm of gender relations established by the Qur'an”.³⁴

Bakhtiar also attempts to interpret the verse on the basis of an intratextual interpretation of the Holy Quran. She writes:

²⁷ Ayesha S. Chaudhry, “The Problems of Conscience”, 160.

²⁸ Rachel M. “A Contextual Approach to Women's Rights in the Qur'ān: Readings of 4:34,” *The Muslim World* 99, no. 1 (2009): 60.

²⁹ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 74.

³⁰ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxxvi.

³¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 75.

³² Alavi, “Translation of Modernity,” 128.

³³ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 2.

³⁴ Hadia Mubarak, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-examination of verse 4:34,” *Hawwa* 2, no. 3 (2004): 274.

“The most conclusive arguments in Islamic tradition to prove or disprove something is to use the Quran to prove another point in the Quran. The method is called *tafsīr al-qurʾān bi-l- qurʾān*. This I will do. I will show how the present erroneous interpretation of 4:34 and the verb *idribūhu* creates a contradiction not in the Quran itself and denies, at least in two cases, rights that the Quran clearly gives to women.”³⁵

According to progressive scholars, patriarchal interpretations are responsible for the lack of gender equality while the holy Qurʾān provides the principles of justice and egalitarianism. So, the progressive scholars challenge the patriarchal interpretations, not the Qurʾānic text itself. Barlas writes that it is “exegesis that reads sexual inequality and husband privilege into the Qurʾan.”³⁶ Saʿdiyya Shaikh critiques in her old work³⁷ that classical exegetes interpreted verse 4:34 to legitimate physical violence against wives while this verse does not sanction any violence. She argues if this verse is interpreted to allow violence it “reflects a decontextualized and simplistic interpretation of the text.”³⁸ However, instead of re-translating the verse she asserts that the imperative to ‘beat’ wives is descriptive of its seventh-century context rather than prescriptive.³⁹ Bakhtiar writes that the “present erroneous interpretation of *idribu* creates a contradiction not in the Qurʾan itself.”⁴⁰ She blames the commentators for misinterpreting this verse, not the Arabic of the Holy Qurʾān. She writes:

“The misinterpretation is not in the Arabic of the Quran, the eternal Word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad, peace and the mercy of God be upon him, but it is how commentators over the centuries have interpreted the Word of God that is at issue”.⁴¹

³⁵ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxvii.

³⁶ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qurʾan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 189.

³⁷ Saʿdiyya Shaikh, “Exegetical Violence: Nushuz in Qurʾanic Gender Ideology,” *Journal for Islamic Studies* 17 (1997): 49-73.

³⁸ Saʿdiyya Shaikh, “A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community,” In *Violence Against Women: Roots and Cures in World Religions*, ed. Saʿdiyyah Shaikh and Dan Maguire (Ohio: Pilgrim, 2007), 5.

³⁹ Saʿdiyya Shaikh, “A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community,” In *Violence Against Women: Roots and Cures in World Religions*, 4.

⁴⁰ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxxi.

⁴¹ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxxi.

Progressive scholars conclude after analyzing some Qur'ānic verses that men and women are equal on an ethico-religious level.⁴² According to Barlas, the Holy Qur'ān does not assign any gender role. Though the biological difference between men and women is acknowledged by the Holy Qur'ān and they are treated differently regarding some issues, for instance, inheritance, this does not imply sexual inequality between them.⁴³ Siel Devos writes about progressive scholars who “have proposed a methodology of exegesis based on classical hermeneutical principles, to examine Qur'an verse 4:34 and the issue of wife-beating in particular. By analyzing the purpose of this verse, the socio-historical context in which this verse was revealed, the prophet's conscientious struggle regarding the husband's right to physically discipline his wife as well as by invoking human responsibility, Muslim feminists argue that a gender-egalitarian reading of 4:34, which invalidates the injunction of wife-beating, is not only possible but also valid within the Islamic tradition.”⁴⁴ Sa'diyya Shaikh, in her recent work, has introduced the idea of a “*tafsīr* of praxis”⁴⁵ in which “the community engaging with the Qur'anic text—specifically abused women—plays a central role in interpreting Q 4:34.”⁴⁶ She suggests that Qur'ānic hermeneutics should “consciously reflect...real-life experiences of Muslim women.” Ayesha Chaudhry comments “The idea that she proposes of hermeneutics reflecting the lived experience of Muslim women is one that many contemporary idealist and reformist scholars share. This approach provides an important opening for increased community responsibility for the interpretation of the Qur'anic text.”⁴⁷

Bakhtiar gives the reason why she deals with the issue of Qur'ānic verse 4:34 because it is “frequently mobilized in support of attempts to render women subservient to men on the one hand and, on the other, as a major criticism of Islam on the grounds that it is against human rights and is sexist. This verse is frequently interpreted as say-

⁴² Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 100.

⁴³ Barlas, *Believing Women*, 152.

⁴⁴ Siel Devos, “The feminist challenge of Qur'an verse 4:34: An analysis of progressive and reformist approaches and their impact in British Muslim communities,” (M.A diss., University of London, 2015), 13.

⁴⁵ Shaikh, *A Tafsir of Praxis*, 12.

⁴⁶ Ayesha. S Chaudhry, “The Problems of Conscience,” 160.

⁴⁷ Ayesha. S Chaudhry, “The Problems of Conscience,” 160.

ing that a husband can beat his wife after two stages of trying to discipline her.”⁴⁸ She says that this interpretation of the verse causes domestic violence. Husbands beat their wives in the name of God. It is “supposed to beat lightly, with a small stick or a handkerchief” but “there’s no way to limit that at the moment of anger.” She has “counseled Muslim couples in America where Qur’anic interpretation has been a real issue. The husband thinks he is superior to his wife. In many cases, he was staying at home, and the wife was working, and doing all the housework, and everything else...and he still thought he had the right to beat her.”⁴⁹ According to her, most men agree that the meaning of verse 4:34 will return to the way it was interpreted by the Prophet (peace be upon him) to whom it was revealed. Nevertheless, a number of ladies, especially in Islamic countries, believe that it is God's will to beat them or live under the threat of being beaten in their marriage. She writes:

“I am not advocating that husbands are being allowed to ‘beat’ their wives because of gender inequity, nor am I advocating equal rights for women to be allowed to beat their husbands. Rather, it is that fairness and justice of the Quranic message need to be restored to its rightful place in the interpretation of the Quran.”⁵⁰

Bakhtiar indicates in her translation that the protection of men over women does not essentially relate to every man or woman because “excellence” or “advantage” are attributes that are independent of gender. However, the primary distinction in her translation is how the Arabic term “*idribuhunna*” has been translated by her. According to her, the term has more than twenty meanings including “beating,” “turning away,” “separating,” “leaving,” and “going away,” so the choice of word for translation may be influenced by personal biases of the scholars. However, it is strange that Bakhtiar’s own translation of the term “*idrib*” is influenced by her ideological bias. Though she claims that her translation is free from any denominational or doctrinal bias, a sentence spoken by her in an interview does not support her claim. She says:

⁴⁸ Bakhtiar, “The Sublime Quran: The misinterpretation of Chapter 4 Verse 34,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 18, no. 4 (2011): 432.

⁴⁹ Beliefnet, “Does the Qur’an Tolerate Domestic Abuse?” Accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/islam/2007/07/does-the-quran-tolerate-domestic-abuse.aspx>.

⁵⁰ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xl.

"I decided it [the word d-r-b] either has to have a different meaning or I can't keep translating."⁵¹

This reveals that Bakhtiar's translation depends on her preconceived ideological bias. She questions why translators choose to translate the term as "to beat" when it can also mean "to go away."

An in-depth analysis of verses containing "*darba*" and their translations has been done in an article entitled "Beat your Wives or 'Separate from Them'?" In this article, the apologetic claim that the word *idribūhunna* in verse 4:34 means "separate from them" or to "strike them out" rather than 'beat them' is analyzed. This article ends with the conclusion that all the verses that use "*darb*" against a human are comprehended to signify 'strike' or 'beat' that humans, by their context. And these obscure modern translations are agreed on this so why do they take verse 4:34 as a special case and render "*darb*" to denote "separate from them"?⁵² So, "if the apologists are to be believed, their arguments only prove the extreme vagueness of the Qur'an, to the extent that the credibility and works of its finest scholars are called into question. And that the Arabic language is deficient, in the sense that it could not present the Qur'an's teachings in a clear and understandable manner."⁵³

The article further elaborates:

"*Idribūhunna*, 'hit them', does not mean 'go away from them' because the latter in Arabic would be *idribūanhunna*, using the preposition *an* (from) and the pronoun *hunna* (them). In addition, the context and the chronological order of the phrase *idribūhunna* could not mean 'go away from them' because it implies repetition; the second step for solving the problem of a discordant women is to leave her bed, while the third step is for the husband to leave her again! The third step was meant to be an

⁵¹The New York Times, "New Translation Prompts Debate on Islamic," <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/us/25koran.html?ei=5088&en=835924e5b6d16c52&ex=1332475200&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&pagewanted=all>.

⁵²"Beat your Wives or Separate from Them - Quran 4-34," Accessed June 12, 2020, https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Beat_your_Wives_or_Separate_from_Them_-_Quran_4-34.

⁵³"Beat your Wives or Separate from Them - Quran 4-34," Accessed June 12, 2020, https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Beat_your_Wives_or_Separate_from_Them_-_Quran_4-34.

escalation of one's reaction, and therefore the other interpretation is illogical."⁵⁴

Bakhtiar raises many grammatical and syntactic issues, however, she focuses on two points mainly. First, the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The Holy Prophet never beat his wives because he did not consider this verse as beating but as a command for husbands to 'go away from them' or 'leave them,' if they could not reconcile after separation. Therefore, when the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) disagreed with his wives he removed himself from them instead of beating them. She writes,

"It is the misinterpretation of the word *idribūhu* in 4:34 that this translation challenges and emphasizes that this misinterpretation must revert back to the way the Prophet understood it through his behavior when facing the exact same situation."⁵⁵

Second, she points out that the Holy Qur'ān gives instructions in verse 2:231 to husbands not to harm their wives who are to be divorced, and thus if the term "*idrib*" is rendered as "beat," it makes divorce more appealing than marriage. She gives harsh comments on Muslim translators and commentators who interpreted "*idribūhu*" as "beat" because in this way they are "commanding to *munkar* and prohibiting *ma'ruf*, commanding to immorality and prohibiting morality, the definition of a hypocrite in 9:67. They make it preferable to ask for a divorce because then she cannot be harmed instead of remaining married because remaining married is under the threat of being beaten."⁵⁶ She argues that since the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has to carry out all Qur'ānic commands offered in imperative forms of the verb, and "*idrib*" is the imperative form of *ḍ r b*, therefore, it becomes a command for the Prophet to must beat his wives. She writes, "As the Quran refers to the Prophet as a mercy to humanity and the model whose example should be followed, it is clear that he would have carried out any and all of the commands (imperative forms of the verb) in the Quran that related to his life (there are commands specific to other Prophets as well) yet we find an excep-

⁵⁴ Abdallah El-Khatib, "Lost in Translation: The Ideological Effects of the Translator and the Interpreter on the Qur'ānic Text," *Aligarh Journal of Quranic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 8.

⁵⁵ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxx-xxxix.

⁵⁶ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxxvii.

tion in *ḍ r b* according to the interpreters over the centuries.”⁵⁷ But, she continues, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) never beat his wives, therefore, we “have to ask ourselves, why did the Prophet not beat his wives even though it was a command in the Quran?”⁵⁸

This argument reveals that Bakhtiar has a poor grasp of the Arabic language and the principles of jurisprudence i.e. *Uṣūl al-fiqh*. Most of the scholars of the Arabic language agree that command in an imperative verb's form primarily indicates obligation. However, this form also denotes many other meanings which are inferred in the presence of a clear indication “*qarīnah*” or contextual evidence. According to scholars of the science of the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, the imperative forms indicate obligation, permission, and recommendation. They provided various examples of the Qur'ānic imperative verbs that imply other intended meanings instead of command.

As far as Bakhtiar's argument that translating the term “*idrib*” as “beat” fosters divorce, Maulana Maudūdī's commentary on this verse is sufficient to answer it. He indirectly sheds some light on the verse's societal context. He writes:

“Though these have been permitted, they are to be administered with a sense of proportion according to the nature and extent of the offence. If a mere light admonition proves effective, there is no need to resort to a severer step. As for beating, the Holy Prophet allowed it very reluctantly and even then did not like it. But the fact is that there are certain women who do not mend their ways without a beating. In such a case, the Holy Prophet has instructed that she would not be beaten on the face or cruelly, or with anything which might leave a mark on the body.”⁵⁹

It is clear from Maulānā Maudūdī explanation that the purpose of these steps is to help the marriage or prevent divorce, therefore, these steps must have the potential to achieve the aim of correcting the wife's behavior and preventing divorce. It is also clear from the verse itself that this permission is only in the circumstances when the woman reaches the point of rebellion to the extent that there is no other way to prevent it except for divorce. This level of rebellion is such that it threatens a decent and dignified woman to gain her own greatness. When a woman is subjected to such an act, the attitude of

⁵⁷ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxvii-xviii.

⁵⁸ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran*, xxxii.

⁵⁹ Maudūdī, S. Abū l A'la, *The Meaning of the Qur'ān*, trans. Muhammad Akbar (Lahore: Islamic Publications (Pvt.) Limited, 1993), 2: 33.

the woman not only causes discomfort for the man but can also cause her to change and be attracted to someone else. Such a stage is not only harmful to both of them but also affects the whole family and society. Thus, very slight physical punishment is allowed here for salvation from this evil.

Adam Stadheim explains that “disputing the value of this action in the modern world is not a reaction against the wisdom of the Quran, but conformity to the example of the Prophet.”⁶⁰ The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) never acts on this permission. “He allowed it only when it made sense within the context of his community, and even then He still discouraged it. Why would we seek to preserve what the Prophet didn’t see as an attribute of the best of his followers? Denying the current relevance of this permission in our modern context is far from a denial of the wisdom of the Quran and is closer to following the model of the Prophet. Denying the current value in the current context does not deny the fact that this conditional allowance may still be effective in parts of the world and cultures that operate differently from our own.”⁶¹

According to Bakhtiar, since the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) had not beaten his wives, the term “*idrib*” should not be translated as “beat.” While translating the verse, Bakhtiar also has to keep in mind the traditions in which he allowed non-severe striking. Explaining “*nushūz*” in his sermon, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

“Fear Allah concerning women! Verily you have taken them on the security of Allah, and intercourse with them has been made lawful unto you by words of Allah. You too have right over them, and that they should not allow anyone to sit on your bed whom you do not like. But if they do that, you can chastise them but not severely. Their rights upon you are that you should provide them with food and clothing in a fitting manner.”⁶²

Though in a few instances, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) allowed striking, he did so reluctantly and tried to restrict and discourage it. Imām Abū Dawūd nar-

⁶⁰ “Analysing the so-called ‘Wife Beating Verse’: 4:34 of the Holy Quran.” Accessed January 20, 2020, <https://themuslimvibe.com/faith-islam/in-practice/434-of-the-holy-quran-analysing-the-so-called-wife-beating-verse>.

⁶¹ “Analysing the so-called ‘Wife Beating Verse’: 4:34 of the Holy Quran.” Accessed January 20, 2020, <https://themuslimvibe.com/faith-islam/in-practice/434-of-the-holy-quran-analysing-the-so-called-wife-beating-verse>.

⁶² *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, The book of pilgrimage, The Pilgrimage of Prophet, 1218.

rats that the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said “Do not beat Allah's handmaidens, but when Umar came to the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) and said: Women have become emboldened towards their husbands, he (the Prophet) permitted to beat them. Then many women came around the family of the Prophet (peace be upon him) complaining about their husbands. So the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: Many women have gone around Muhammad's family complaining against their husbands. They are not the best among you.”⁶³

The traditions that allow striking are less in number than those in which the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) prohibits striking. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said, “None of you should flog his wife as he flogs a slave and then has sexual intercourse with her in the last part of the day.”⁶⁴ He (peace be upon him) also said “Do not strike her on the face,”⁶⁵ “Do not revile her face.”⁶⁶ But even in these cases, a Muslim should consider the Prophet's saying, that those who act on this permission and beat their wives are not the best among you.

In short, the words “beat them” are not the permission of domestic violence rather they are subjected to many restrictions because beating must not cause harm. It should be effective to mend the relationship. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) in a few instances allowed a non-severe beating in a specific context but still, he did not like it and discouraged it. It is as if Allah has permitted divorce but strongly dislikes it. Though the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) advised avoiding beating morally, he did not unilaterally prohibit beating a wife mildly and considered the wife's physical disciplining as a husband's right. However, despite the Prophet's discouragement of beating, Bakhtiar's translation of the term “*Idrib*” cannot be considered correct. Actually, by changing the meaning of the verse, she wants to protect women from men who misunderstand this verse and freely interpret it without referring to the books of law and use it to justify unacceptably beating women. Islamic law has completely rejected this practice. Even though women's protection is essential, we cannot change the meaning of the words of God to meet our ends. According to Kecia Ali, “however convincing one finds the progressive arguments that a man's striking his wife is not permitted by Q.

⁶³ *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, Book of Marriage, Regarding Hitting Women, 2146.

⁶⁴ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, The book of Marriage, The beating of women is disapproved, 4908.

⁶⁵ *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, Book of Marriage, The Rights of Women Upon her Husband, 2142.

⁶⁶ *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, Book of Marriage, The Rights of Women Upon her Husband, 2143.

4:34, it is impossible to remove all difference or hierarchy from this verse without doing violence to the Qur’anic text itself.”⁶⁷ Therefore, Bakhtiar’s attempt to alter the traditional interpretation of the verse cannot be justified in any way. Traditional translators and commentators do not misinterpret this verse, but she misinterprets it.

Conclusion:

Laleh Bakhtiar tried her best to present herself as a woman translator of the Holy Qur’ān. She focused on her gender identity. She disagreed with the classical translators and commentators on the interpretation of verse 4:34 that allows beat (albeit lightly) to disobedient wives. Classical translators usually translate the term “*idrib*” literally as “beat” and “strike,” however, Bakhtiar opposed translating the term as physical punishment. She offered a non-physical resolution of the term by translating it as “go away.” She devoted the entire ‘Introduction’ of her translation to the discussion of the wife-beating issue. Most critics of Bakhtiar were of the opinion that she translated like a feminist, but Bakhtiar rejected this criticism. This paper concludes that Bakhtiar's interpretation of the verse is in fact very similar to the interpretation of feminists.

⁶⁷ Kecia Ali, “Understanding a Difficult Verse, Qur'an 4:34.” Revised February 11, 2003. <https://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/muslim/diff-verse.html>.