

Omar Imady. *Divine Pronouns: Unlocking the Definitive Quran: Part 1: Principles*. Monee, Illinois: Self-published, 2024.

Reviewed by Nosheen Khan

Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them [first], [if they persist,] do not share their beds, [but if they still persist,] then strike them [gently]. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great. (Qur'ān 4:34, trans. *The Clear Quran*)

Qur'ānic chapter Al-Nisā verse 34 is considered one of the most highly scrutinized verses from the Qur'ān. Contemporary Muslim women's status in Islam seems to have been reduced to a few critical matters: the veil, polygamy, and a few Qur'ānic verses that are believed to stipulate female subordination to men. The range of ways in which its key provisions have been interpreted illustrates to many a presence of androcentrism and misogyny in some aspects of the Muslim tradition. At the same time, egalitarian readings of scripture have not been satisfyingly able to explain away the undeniable fact that the literal meaning of the word “*daraba*” from the verse is to hit, unless it is completely ignored or denied (pp. 4–6).

In *Divine Pronouns* (2024), Omar Imady introduces a new hermeneutical system for interpreting these uncomfortably sensitive verses without disregarding or rejecting them, a system which is “based on internal mechanisms and features of the Quran itself” (p. 8). He contends that the “principle underlying such context-bound verses should be identified and used as a foundation for discerning the ethical philosophy of the Quran; more specifically, distinguishing between what the Quran aspires to achieve and the context in which it was interacting” (p. 7). Imady proposes an original method in which the presence or absence of a divine pronoun and its type for each verse should be determined before realizing the verse's meaning and significance for law-making.

This book is exceptionally well written and is an undeniably important resource for anyone in pastoral care. Imady clarifies most of the Arabic terminology used in the book but does not do so in a few places, which may leave some readers desiring a more comprehensive explanation. The text is very well referenced and cited, reflecting a high level of academic rigor. It is targeted towards academics interested in Islamic studies, pastoral care providers, women and gender justice advocates, and anyone interested in a better understanding of the Qur'ān, notably those who feel alienated by their faith and/or communities. Some readers may find the technical discussion in Imady's methodology to be a bit challenging to understand, especially those without an Arabic (p. 25) or linguistic background. Despite this, the book's innovative hermeneutical framework is a valuable contribution to Qur'ānic interpretation and studies. The text spans almost 100 pages and

includes a preface, five chapters with subsections, a conclusion, appendices, and endnotes. However, the actual reading content is spread over about 72 pages, making it a concise read.

Omar Imady, an author of books on Syria and Islam, is an award-winning novelist and poet. He holds a BA in Islam and Middle Eastern studies from Macalester College and an MA and PhD in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Additionally, he studied under Sheikh Muhammad Bashir al-Bani, a distinguished Syrian Muslim scholar, judge, and Islamic Studies professor. Imady grabs the reader's attention from the very first page. He describes the intent of the book in the introduction and summarizes the modern and traditional Qur'ānic exegetical methods and approaches (pp. 2–16), while building a case for a new hermeneutical approach located from within the Qur'ānic textual mechanism—his novel approach for Qur'ānic interpretation.

Imady notes untenable statistical trends and broader societal concerns to highlight the real-world consequences of a perceived disconnection between the Qur'ān's teachings and modern sensibilities to reinforce the urgency of his method to help restore trust through a fresh and relatable way to engage with the Qur'ān while preserving its sacredness (pp. 2–8). He reasons that at the core of these trends and those leaving the faith is the increasing dissatisfaction and “a sense of alienation, not just from the Muslim communities but also from the sacred text that appears to be increasingly at odds with the current sensibilities, ethics, and principles” (p. 3). In a world where gender equality is increasingly recognized, the importance of this issue cannot be overstated. Imady uses verse 4:34 as an example to explain his methodology. However, he maintains that the same method can be utilized for other disputed and sensitive verses, such as “implementation of crucifixion and amputation as a form of legal justice (5:33)” (p. 3). Therefore, his method is a long-overdue and crucial framework to explain these verses, a framework that resonates with modern readers without compromising the eternalness or sacredness of the Qur'ān.

In comparison to classical exegetical works, which mainly relied upon interpretations of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān, Prophetic Sunna, explanations and opinions of his companions and their successors (the *tābi'īn*), among other things, Imady's goal is to establish a “first complete classification of the Quran according to the pre-existing categories existing within the text itself” (p. 1).

Imady adopts a layered approach for his methodology to create a Qur'ān-based classification system. Through a rigorous reading of the Arabic Qur'ān, he focuses on three aspects: 1) how the divine voice is employed throughout the Qur'ānic text (its presence or absence); 2) the target audience (specifically, if it is clearly defined, the Prophet, or general); and 3) rulings (whether the content was prescriptive or not while making a note of its place of revelation). Through his intensive study, Imady discovered that the divine voice in the first person—the “I” and “We” pronouns—appears in 1268 verses, accounting for 20.3% (p. 34) of the entire Qur'ān. Notably, 1061 (p. 39) of these verses had been revealed in the Meccan time frame. Imady concludes from his extensive breakdown that “none of the 1268 Divine first-person verses included rulings related to marriage, divorce, the relationship between the sexes, or punishments of any type” (p. 48).

The absence or presence of divine pronouns is both purposeful and significant and therefore can serve as an essential tool for pastoral caregivers to transform potentially

divisive verses into opportunities for spiritual growth, healing, and reaffirmation of faith. The absence of the divine first person voice does not diminish the value of the verse; rather, it may allow for its reading, understanding, and implementation from a different light, leading to uncovering the true intent of these verses rather than taking them to be unequivocal in both wording and command.

In verse 4:34, the absence of a divine voice, according to Imady, means that “it does not contain a timeless imperative at all; this verse represents a part of a strategy to move society away from the unethical practices towards behavior consistent with a divine system of beliefs and ethics” (p. 70). By emphasizing context-sensitive interpretation, as hitting wives was a predominant feature of seventh-century Arabia, this framework helps pastoral caregivers explain this verse and many others like it specific to historical circumstances without undermining their spiritual relevance. Imady’s attempt is a nuanced approach that establishes a principle leading a reader to conclude that traditional methods and interpretations should not always be regarded as the definitive and best interpretation of the fundamentals of Islam. Rather than understanding where the Qur’ānic verses wanted us to reach—equity and mercy—traditionally, the wording of these verses where “I” or “We” pronouns are missing was assumed as a conclusive terminus, even when the rules derived from these verses contradicted the spirit of the Prophetic example, which stood against violence against women, slavery, and injustice. Imady’s system should be taken in addition to the traditional scholarship engaging with the dynamics of the particular eras and not necessarily critiquing those methods.

Imady argues that in verses where the divine “I” or “We” pronouns are used, the Qur’ān is saying exactly what it is trying to achieve. The absence of the divine voice is the key to the context here (p. 69–72). Again, in this verse, the “I” and “We” pronouns are absent, and it is not directed towards the Prophet. Therefore, the essential objective and principle of this verse is to discourage domestic violence. Had verse 4:34 been in the “I” or “We” pronoun, it would have changed everything. But it is not, and nor are many similar verses; therefore, these verses must be contextualized and have underlying universal principles, essential meanings, and implications that must be identified and adhered to.

While this book is an excellent first step and very insightful and original, it may still be considered subjective and open to various interpretations and disagreements by others as it may lead to interpretations that can challenge all of the traditional exegetical corpus. Focusing exclusively on divine pronouns may confine the scope of understanding and overlook other significant linguistic and contextual clues within the Qur’ānic text. Thus, a more in-depth analysis of the many other verses, such as Qur’ān 11:114 and 4:103, where prayer is mandated but “He,” “I,” and “We” pronouns are missing, in addition to the interpretively sensitive verses, with a more robust interdisciplinary dialogue with scholars of linguistics, history, and other relevant disciplines, needs to be done to further support the book’s claims. Imady uses chapter Al-Nisā as the case study and notes that only 18.2% of the verses within this Qur’ānic chapter are in the first person voice (p. 41). However, he does not break the rest of these verses down, utilizing his three-layered methodology for a more in-depth analysis to further strengthen his approach.

Interpretively complex verses and sensitive passages such as verse 4:34 have troubled many hearts over time and may do so in the future as well. Imady believes all of

the Qur'ān is mandatory, no doubt. However, his methodology suggests that these certain verses are meant to be instructive (providing guidance or moral lessons) and not so much prescriptive (mandating specific actions or behaviors). By analyzing the use of divine pronouns, Imady therefore offers insights into the intended application of these verses, which can be particularly beneficial in pastoral care settings to address doubts and concerns. The way Islam is presented at times can make or break the faith for many. This understanding can bring peace to those who identify with Islam's eternal beauty and commitment to justice. Shifts between "We," "I," and "He" in verses about women might reveal nuances in divine compassion, empowerment, and justice, as the absence or presence of these pronouns is intentional and divinely momentous. This book is a must-read, and I am eagerly awaiting the next releases in the series.