



The Neglected Verse: Potentialities of Al-Rāzī's Reading of 4:128

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Abstract: This study examines the interpretive potential of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's exegesis of Qur'anic verse 4:128, which addresses marital discord arising from a husband's *nushūz* (recalcitrance) or *i'rāḍ* (estrangement). Challenging the tendency to regard classical Qur'anic exegesis as an exclusively patriarchal interpretive tradition, the article argues that its internal methodological resources can provide a sound basis for fresh readings responsive to contemporary concerns. Employing descriptive and analytical methodologies, the study investigates al-Rāzī's treatment of the principal interpretive questions surrounding the verse, particularly the distinction between *nushūz* and *i'rāḍ*, the implications of *khawf* (apprehension), and the nature of *ṣulḥ* (reconciliation). The analysis demonstrates that al-Rāzī conceptualizes these terms as distinct yet related expressions of marital discord, recognizes a woman's capacity to respond to indications of impending estrangement, and presents reconciliation as a negotiated arrangement rather than an exclusively unilateral concession by the wife. Furthermore, his interpretation extends the ethical and interpretive implications of verse 4:128 to the husband's response to a wife's *nushūz* or *i'rāḍ*, thereby establishing a significant connection with Qur'anic verse 4:34. His discussion also raises important questions concerning conjugal rights, mutual accommodation, and the role of mediators in resolving marital conflict. The study concludes that al-Rāzī's exegetical method reveals underexplored possibilities within the classical *tafsīr* tradition.

Keywords: Qur'anic Exegesis, Islamic Hermeneutics, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nushūz*, *I'rāḍ*, *Ṣulḥ*, Marital Discord, Gender and Qur'anic Interpretation.

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Introduction

A significant factor that bars modern Qur'anic readings from drawing on the rich hermeneutical tradition of Tafsīr is the sociopolitical baggage that is inherent to this tradition, especially when it comes to verses that address gender-related and matrimonial concerns in the Qur'an. The softest of critiques of the Tafsīr tradition acknowledge its 'contextual misogyny', and how that has been conflated with the text of the Qur'an itself². However, to dismiss the entire Tafsīr tradition as inherently patriarchal and therefore of no use for novel readings is to relinquish a valuable grounding resource for fresh interpretive arcs. There is much implicit within the Tafsīr tradition that can be tapped into and rendered explicit to reveal fertile ground for fresh readings which cannot be accused of emerging in intellectual vacuums, divorced from the expansive Islamic intellectual tradition.

In this article, I argue – through a particular case study – that traditional hermeneutics provides modern readers with implicit spaces which can ground novel interpretations of the Qur'an which are all the more potent because of their being grounded firmly within the traditional framework, instead of emerging in a vacuum that confines their relevance to contemporary societies.

As a case study of the implicit resources of traditional Qur'anic exegesis, I have chosen Al-Rāzi's interpretation of 4:128, an often cursorily interpreted verse about a wife sustaining a marriage in the face of a husband wishing to end it.

The study employs a descriptive and analytical methodology, taking up Al-Rāzi's interpretation of al-Qur'an 4:128 and probing it for space to ground fresh interpretations of the verse. The study responds to the following questions:

- a. How does Al-Rāzi define key Qur'anic terms in 4:128?
- b. What are the implicit methodological spaces in Al-Rāzi's hermeneutics (of 4:128) that can be occupied by modern readers & interpreters to ground a novel interpretation of the verse?
- c. What are the implications of Al-Rāzi's exegeses of 4:128 for its Qur'anic counterpart 4:34?

² Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34," *Hawwa* 2, no. 3 (2004): 262.



Abu ‘Abdullah Fakhreddin al-Rāzi’s (d. 1210) title of *al-Imam al-Mufasssir*³ or the “Exegete Imam” indicates the significance of his religious scholarship in the Islamic tradition. Born and raised in Rayy⁴, his key exegetical work *Mafatih-ul-Ghayb* or ‘Keys of the Unseen’ is perhaps one of the most expansive tafasīr in the Muslim exegetical tradition; a single lifespan did not suffice al-Rāzi in his interpretive journey, and so his tafsīr was completed by successors posthumously⁵. His hermeneutics draws inspiration from monumental exegetical works but his own is far from being a mere repetition of his predecessors. His tafsīr resists simplistic categorization, and the critique on him – that ‘his tafsīr contains all *but* tafsīr’⁶ – actually reflects the divergence of his approach to the Qur’an. He does not suffice with transmitted materials, combining them instead with rational analyses and theological reflections, occasionally digressing from received opinions to novel interpretive arcs that provide fertile ground to succeeding engagements with the Qur’an.

He divides his interpretation of each verse into scholastic questions⁷ or masā’il which address varying aspects of the verse. He establishes ‘associations’ or Munasabāt between different verses and chapters of the Qur’an, thus contributing to developing the inherent coherence in the Qur’an⁸. Showing clear dialectic leanings, al-Rāzi engages with different theological schools of thought by listing their deductions from Qur’anic verses and countering them. In juristic verses, al-Rāzi prefers the Shāfi’ite school but lists the madhāhib of all four primary Sunni schools of thought⁹.

This informed divergence of thought and method can be traced in his interpretation of 4:128, an interesting verse in the Chapter of the Women that often recedes into the long shadows cast by what is perceived as its Qur’anic counterpart or ‘sister verse’, 4:34. The two verses discuss nushūz which can be loosely rendered as ‘marital discord or conflict’, with 4:34 detailing the response to a wife’s nushūz, and 4:128’s, addressing a husband’s.

³ Khayr-ul-Dīn bin Maḥmūd Al-Zarkali, *Al-A’lām*, 15th ed., vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār-ul-Ilm Lil Malāyīn, 2002), 313.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Claude Gilliot, “Exegesis of the Qur’ān : Classical and Medieval,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, 2002, 13.

⁶ Shahabuddin al-Ḥamwī, *Irshād-Ul-Arīb Ilā Ma’rafat-Il-Adīb*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās, 1st ed., vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār-ul-Gharb al-Islamī, 1993), 2589.

⁷ Gilliot, “Exegesis of the Qur’ān : Classical and Medieval,” 13.

⁸ Muḥammad al-Zāhabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wal-Mufasssirūn*, vol. 1 (Egypt: Maktabah Wahba, 2000), 209.

⁹ Ibid., 1:210.



The Qur'anic rendering of 4:34 is so intense – with contested prescriptions of abandonment and physical disciplining – that 4:128, a comparatively tamer verse about peacemaking to retain a disinterested spouse, ends up in footnotes in modern critiques which take issue with the jurisprudence of 4:34.

In Al-Qur'ān 4:128, the Divine Speaker says,

*And if a woman apprehends **refractoriness** (nushūz) or estrangement (i'rād) from her husband, it shall be no blame on the pair if they effect between them a reconciliation, and reconciliation is always good. And souls are engrained with greed. And if you act kindly and fear Him, then verily Allah is Ever Aware of what you do.*¹⁰

Al-Rāzi quotes three commonly cited reasons for the verse's revelation¹¹ without commenting on their validity; all of these are narrations concerning wives whose husbands considered divorcing them, and who wished to retain the marriage and did so by ceding marital rights – it is significant to note that one of these couples¹² was the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his elderly wife Sawdah bint Zama'a¹³, who gave up her 'turn' with him to her co-wife 'Ayesha¹⁴. This occasion for the verse's revelation situates this verse within a very specific domestic negotiation – but the verse's exegetical potential remains unexhausted, and the exegete has much more to glean from it.

There are three main cruxes to 4:128 that any exegete engaging with it must contend with:

1. What is the husband's nushūz and how is it distinguished from his i'rād?
2. What are the implications of the verb khāfat (literally meaning 'she fears')? Can a woman act upon prediction alone, or does the verb actually entail absolute knowledge of the husband's intentions?
3. What is peacemaking or ṣulḥ in this marital conflict, and what does it entail for the two parties involved?

¹⁰ 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi, *Tafsir-ul-Qur'an*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (India: Academy of Islamic Research & Publications, 2007), 181.

¹¹ Fakhreddin al-Rāzi, *Mafāṭih Al-Ghayb*, vol. 11 (Beirut: Dār Ihyā-il-Turāth al-ʿArabi, 1999), 235.

¹² Abūbākr Aḥmed ibn Al-Ḥossein ibn ʿAlī Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Sunan Al-Kubrā*, ed. Moḥammed ʿAbdul Qader Aṭa, Third Edition, vol. 7 (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar-ul-Kutub Al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), 118.

¹³ Sawdah bint Zama'a (d. 674 CE) is the second wife of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Khayr-ul-Dīn bin Maḥmūd Al-Zarkālī, *Al-A'lām*, Fifteenth Edition, vol. 7 (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār-ul-ʿIlm Lil Malāyīn, 2002), 145.

¹⁴ Mother of the believers, 'Ayesha bint Abi Bakr (d. 677 C.E.) was the wife of the Prophet ﷺ who narrated nearly two thousand and ten Ahadith directly from him ﷺ. Muḥammad Muḥammad Abu Zahū, *Al-Ḥadith wal Muḥaddithūn*, Second Edition (Cairo, Egypt: Dār-ul-Fikr Al-ʿArabi, 1958), 138.



Al-Rāzi is one of the few exegetes¹⁵ who have defined a husband's nushūz as distinct from his i'rād, situating the behavior of a husband unwilling to stay in a marriage on a spectrum ranging from active harshness by word or deed (nushūz) to passive indifference in matters pertaining to the wife (i'rād).¹⁶

This definitive distinction enables one to identify the conditions which:

- a. Indicate explicitly a husband's disinterest in sustaining a marriage (through i'rād); and,
- b. Indicate implicitly the *furthest tolerable limit* to which a husband can materially exhibit this disinterest (through nushūz).

This distinction by Al-Rāzi can be employed to specify that anything beyond nushūz is no longer something that a Muslim wife should continue entertaining merely to sustain the marital bond even if she wishes to.

Navigating 'her fear' of nushūz from her husband, al-Rāzi characteristically refuses to digress from the text: 'to say that fear entails *absolute knowledge of, or the concrete concern of* his nushūz is to stray unnecessarily from the text (*tark lil-zāhir*)'. For him, fear is exactly that: 'fear that is fueled by material signs that solidify it' (*al-khawfu la yuḥṣalu illa 'inda zuhūr il-amarāt al-dallah 'alā wuqū' il-khawf*)¹⁷. In the context of nushūz, al-Rāzi elaborates, her fear could stem from his explicit statements regarding her old age or her undesirability, or his desire to marry someone else.

The significance of his methodological choice to not 'stray from the text' is evident in the implication of a wife perceiving a husband's potential disinterest and acting in advance based on her fear: predicting the breakdown of the marital bond, she can choose which aspects of the marital bond she does not necessarily require from her husband, and compromises on those to retain the benefits from it that she does not wish to live without. While the husband is still navigating his own feelings, a wife is already in the social terrain of the marriage contract, retaining a degree of agency even while navigating its constraints.

As far as the ṣulḥ is concerned, for al-Rāzi it does not appear to be a one-sided affair requiring only feminine compromise. He underscores that the majority have read the verse as

¹⁵ Most exegetes tend to lump nushūz and i'rād together into a behaviour pattern that indicates a husband's negligence toward a wife. See: Aḥmad bin Moḥammad al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf Wal-Bayān 'an Tafsīr-Il-Qur'an*, ed. Abū Muḥammad bin 'Ashūr (Dār Iḥyā-il-Turāth al-ʿArabi, 2002), 3:395; Abul Fidā' Ismā'il Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr-Ul-Qur'an-Il-Azeem*, ed. Sāmi Bin Moḥammad Salāma (Dār Ṭayyibah lil Nashr wal-Tawzee', 1999), 2:430.

¹⁶ al-Rāzi, *Maḥāṭib Al-Ghayb*, 11:235.

¹⁷ Ibid.



‘an yaṣṣālaha’¹⁸, with the verb denoting peacemaking belonging to the sixth form – Tafā’ala – of Arabic verb categories, which indicates two people participating in an act or reciprocating it (mushārahah)¹⁹. This transforms peacemaking from a wife’s concession to a negotiated settlement.

This also serves as his segue into the question of what ṣulḥ entails; for him, it means the giving up (on the wife’s part) of marital rights like the mahr²⁰, nafaqah²¹ or qasm²². In return, the husband must consent to remaining in the marriage which can now be sustained on easier, more convenient terms for him.

Significantly, al-Rāzi claims that a marital right is anything that a wife is entitled to demand from a husband, and cannot include intimacy, which a spouse is not entitled to demand from a partner (*al-zawju la yujbaru ‘ala al-waṭ’i*)²³.

The biggest exegetical mediation by Al-Rāzi occurs during his engagement with the final section of the verse: in *wa-inn tuḥsinū wa tattaqū* (And if you act kindly and fear Him), al-Rāzi explicitly explores the implications of 4:128 for the nushūz of the wife, saying that the final phrase addresses husbands who ‘witness nushūz and i’rāḍ from their wives, and that which results in pain and conflict’²⁴, and still choose to sustain the marital bond and remain with their wives.

This statement from an exegete of Al-Rāzi’s stature severely complicates the marital dynamic grounded in the assumption that 4:128 demands only feminine compromise, and this complication can be employed to subvert 4:128’s implications, exploring the verse from the point of view of a husband looking to retain a marital bond with a disinterested wife, and willing to cede fundamental conjugal rights to achieve that.

Moreover, his minor interjection about intimacy not being something which can be given on demand – coupled with his claim that 4:128 can be subverted to understand how a wife’s nushūz and i’rāḍ can be treated – stands in tension with a core interpretation of 4:34

¹⁸ Ibid., 11:236.

¹⁹ Uṭhmān bin ʿUmar al-Kurdī, *Al-Shāfiyah Fī ‘Ilm-Il-Taṣrīf*, ed. Ḥasan Aḥmad al-Uṭhmān (Mecca: al-Maktabah al-Malikiyyah, 1995), 22.

²⁰ The Dower fixed by an arrangement between the two parties in a Muslim marriage. Nanda Chiranjeevi Rao, “Marriage Agreements Under Muslim Law: A Weapon in the Hands of Muslim Women,” *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 55, no. 1 (2013): 101.

²¹ The financial support and maintenance stipulated by the wife in a Muslim marriage. Ibid., 97.

²² The share of a wife in the husband’s time and presence. ‘Abdul Raḥman al-Juzairī, *Al-Fiqh ‘Alā al-Madhāhib al-Arba’Ah*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār-ul-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003), 211.

²³ al-Rāzi, *Maḥāṭib Al-Ghayb*, 11:236.

²⁴ Ibid., 11:237.



proposed by some of his predecessors who maintain that a nāshizah wife can be forced into intimacy²⁵.

Al-Rāzi also proposes alternately that the phrase (And if you act kindly and fear Him) could address both spouses (encouraging them to display iḥsān in their behaviour towards each other and ‘avoid cruelty’), or neither (instead addressing the mediators in the marital conflict to remind them to deal justly without inclining toward either spouse²⁶). This latter alternative address to mediators implies that the wife negotiating to remain in a marriage does not do so without securing her interests through mediators who have been explicitly addressed in 4:128.

Some of Al-Rāzi’s key assertions that this study gleans from his interpretation of the verse in question are that:

- a. 4:128 employs nushūz and i’rād as gradations of the same behavior, and Al-Rāzi’s definition of nushūz limits the extent to which a husband can indicate his disinterest in sustaining a marriage by word or deed;
- b. 4:128 has the potential to address both spouses’ nushūz or i’rād;
- c. The spouse wishing to retain the marital contract does so with mediators securing his/her interest;
- d. Intimacy is not a part of the conjugal rights a spouse can demand from the other;
- e. The phrase *wa-inn tuḥsinū wa tattaqū* alternately addresses husbands of Nāshizah wives, or marital arbitrators.

These assertions – particularly the last three – call for vital juristic intervention that interrogates how these alternate interpretations would manifest practically in a Muslim marriage contract.

Al-Rāzi’s exegesis of 4:128 demonstrates that classical tafsīr – often dismissed as uniformly patriarchal – contains vital hermeneutical resources that resist this dismissal. His distinction between nushūz and i’rād, the latent potentiality in his remaining committed to the literal meaning of khawf, and above all his extension of the verse’s logic to the wife’s nushūz reveal an exegete attentive to the text’s internal possibilities.

More than that, these exegetical digressions reveal that classical tafsīr is more than a closed system. Its method creates intellectual spaces to generate readings that are responsive

²⁵ Abul Qāsim Maḥmūd bin ʿAmar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashāf ‘an Haqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ-al-Tanzīl*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār-ul-Kutub Al-ʿArabī, 1987), 507.

²⁶ al-Rāzi, *Maḥāṣin Al-Ghayb*, 11:237.



to modern concerns and sensibilities, and the possibility of occupying these spaces is what makes classical tafasīr a living resource worthy of modern engagement.