“Be Silent in that Solitude”: Women and the Subversion of Silence in Surah “Al-Mujadilah” and Poe’s “Ligeia”

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ABSTRACT

This essay probes the notion of silence and women’s acoustic subversion in Surah “Al-Mujadilah” in the Holy Qur’an and Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia.” In the Islamic tradition and Poe’s literary texts, women’s voices and subjectivity are limited due to their conventional, hermeneutical association with the presumed hidden fear of corruption and violation in androcentric societies. The essay not only points to the Qur’anic influence on Poe’s treatment of women as silent and submissive, but also seeks to position Poe’s female characters in relation to the Qur’anic model of subversive femininity. Within both narratives, women are traditionally designated to play specific role models that seem to idealize them as passive linguistic constructs in their communities. The essay, however, reconsiders the orthodox patriarchal representation of women in the Qur’anic chapter and Poe’s text and rather suggests a rereading of their silence as a subversive speech-act whereby they question and reevaluate the ontological tendency to view them as acoustic objects to male authority.

But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,

And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore?”

— Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven” (1845)

In his book Mohomet and his Successors (1849), Washington Irving wrote that “much of the Koran may be traced to the Bible, the Mishnu and the Talmud of the Jews, especially with its wild though often beautiful traditions concerning the angels,
the prophets, the patriarchs, and the good and evil genii” (40). Irving’s statement, on the one hand, expresses the principle of universal deity that is shared by all religious scriptures. On the other hand, this statement leaves no doubt that the Holy Qur’ān had an influence on nineteenth-century American writers who appropriated its scriptural discourse for various purposes, one of which is the demarcation of America’s new cultural and national identity. Jacob Berman suggests that American identity is conceptualized upon the fantastical narration of the other. By employing fantasy to portray the other – here Qur’ānic scripture and Arab oriental culture – American writers mediate a symbolic image of their nation that excludes “racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural difference[s]” (Berman 4). The Qur’ānic language and oriental images of Arabs are thus employed as an imagined affirmation of America’s national identification. This mode of self-identification was dominant in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries during which time European imperialist expansion increased. Nineteenth-century American authors began to understand and position Islam and Arab culture as other or “orient,” thus differentiating it from its counterpart “the occident” (Said 2). However, it is significant to point out here that some of these American writers were not fully ready to compromise the textual exploration and appropriation of the orient at the expense of complete dedication to America’s national literature and self-image. Among the writers who embraced the “orient” as a subversive response to superior national aspirations is Edgar Allan Poe.

Contrary to other contemporary writers such as James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) and John Neal (1793–1876),1 Poe associated “the Orient with aesthetic excellence and wisdom while denigrating Occidental pretensions to cultural superiority” (Montgomery 54).2 For Poe, the orient represents an excellent locale for imaginative inspiration. James Hutchisson affirms that Poe’s employment of Eastern narratives and his imagination of oriental geographies do not “serve hegemonic ends” (38). The Middle East, on the contrary, was a site of wide-ranging materials that Poe connected “to the authority of storytelling and its reciprocal relationship with death” (Hutchisson 38). Travis Montgomery argues that the orient features in Poe’s texts as “an imagined space [rather] than a geographic place, and this universe of the mind had textual origins that merit further study” (54). Montgomery here links Poe’s fascination with the orient and his imaginative creativity to the availability of oriental textual origins in nineteenth-century America. Some of these cultural materials include Islamic motifs and famous Arabian stories, notably Arabian Nights which was translated into French as Mille et une Nuit by Antoine Galland in 1704 before it appeared in later English translations. In these Eastern folkloric tales, Scheherazade, the heroine of the nights, marries the famous Arabian sultan Shahryar who avenges his first wife’s unfaithfulness by marrying his virgin female subjects everyday only to behead them the next day. He had killed one thousand and one women by the time he met Scheherazade who succeeded to put off her fatal end by weaving together imaginary tales which she told to the sultan to interrupt his killings. Like Scheherazade, many of Poe’s women such as Ligeia are modeled around this famous Arabian female heroine who uncurbs the sultan’s excessive display of masculine violence and power by exemplifying a unique ability to initiate stories and control language throughout the text. Scheherazade and Ligeia are similarly exceptional women who epitomize the power of female knowledge and agency as their husbands become objectified by their active voices.
The early translation of the Qurʾān influenced Poe’s writing and imaginative poetic experience in particular. L. Moffitt Cecil suggests that Poe’s knowledge of the Qurʾān probably comes from his reading of George Sale’s English version. Cecil continues to argue that Sale’s translation is interesting because it includes a “lengthy preface or ‘Preliminary Discourse’ and the elaborate notes throughout, for these Sale brought the results of a vast knowledge of Eastern lore and legend” (59). Sale (1697–1736), who was an English orientalist scholar and translator, published his translation of the Qurʾān in 1734 in which his translated text was frequently read by the most prominent Americans throughout the eighteenth century. Before he composed the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson purchased a copy of the Qurʾān in 1765, a year which signals America’s “complex relationship with Islam and its adherents” (Spellberg 3). In the following century, Poe cultivated a deep interest in the Qurʾānic Scripture and the poetic appropriation of Sale’s English edition (Montgomery 54). The use of Qurʾānic language and imagery, for example, dominates Poe’s “Al Aaraaf” (1829) which borrows “the very title of a sura for its own, sharing the name of the Qurʾān’s seventh chapter (Einboden 7). Poe refers to the story of Al Aaraaf in the Qurʾān as the borderline between heaven and hell, a limbo-like site whose occupants were incapable of being principally evil or morally good in life. In a letter to Isaac Lea, dated May 27 1829, Poe explained that Al Aaraaf is “a medium between Heaven and Hell where men suffer no punishment, yet do not attain that tranquil or even happiness which they suppose to be characteristic of heavenly enjoyment (qtd. in Quinn 156). Poe encapsulates Al Aaraaf into his poem as mythical or imagined space that has its origin in the oriental Qurʾānic scripture.

Poe’s literary relationship with the Qurʾān goes further than a certain interest in imaginative story telling, the fantastical description of angels and the afterlife, and the heliocentric positioning of Al Aaraaf as the ideal of esthetics, beauty and morality. I argue that the Qurʾānic influence on Poe’s writing is not merely limited to cosmology and metaphysical knowledge. Indeed, Poe was also generally influenced by a certain Qurʾānic representation of women as beautiful and silent servants to the household patriarchs. In “Ligeia,” Poe refers to Ligeia as possessing “the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk (Poe 257). In the Qurʾān, the word houriyya, the singular form of hours (الحوراء), is rooted in the classical Arabic language as a sign of charming eyes. Kevin Hayes writes that “a houri is a voluptuous young woman, especially one of the virginal maidens who await devout Muslim men in Paradise,” a woman whose dazzling beauty and gazelle eyes are meant to serve the good “individual [Muslim] admirers” in silence (68). Poe’s choice of the word “Houri” shows that he was influenced by the Qurʾān and more importantly by the symbolic meaning of “Houri” as a young beautiful woman who occupies celestial spheres beyond the grasp of human materialistic desires. This meaning is artistically well fitted into the inner structure and ethereal description of the unattainable “Ligeia.” Poe’s description, I suggest, not only offers a gendered reevaluation of Qurʾānic women who are thus read out of the context of their patriarchal representation in Islamic communities, but also suggests that Poe employs this specific Qurʾānic model of femininity in his fiction to subvert the conventional depiction of women as inactive and speechless. It is true that Poe’s women are generally denied access to the world of masculine language, yet their actions problematize the nineteenth-century representation of ideal femininity. Their speechless yet physically active roles in Poe’s
texts can influence or determine the plot structure and direct the reader into a world of desire and subjectivity that lies beyond the peripheries of masculine order.

This paper will comparatively analyze “Al-Mujādilah” from the Holy Qur’ān alongside Poe’s short story, “Ligeia” (1838). In fact, the Qur’ān is replete with references to women’s silence, which is best exemplified in the story of Mary and Jesus. In the chapter of “Mary,” the mother of Jesus is only invited to embrace the miracle of God without necessarily using words to question it. Even though baby Jesus speaks on behalf of his mother after she arrives in her Jewish tribe, her silence is not to be understood as a sign of weakness; it can only be viewed as a symbol of strong faith. This article, however, specifically compares between “Al-Mujādilah” and Poe’s “Ligeia” as they powerfully speak to each other in terms of conjugal relations and the suppression of wives’ voices within the domestic sphere. This comparison finally aims at rethinking traditional masculine order and women’s voices in the Holy Qur’ān and Poe. In so doing, the paper employs a hermeneutical feminist perspective that calls for the reinterpretation of readers’ gendered understanding the Qur’ān and Poe’s texts. Feminist hermeneutics resists the fundamental knowledge of men and women whose differences have brought about a set of assumptions that are “reflected in creation, capacity and function in society, accessibility to guidance [. . .]” (Wadud-Muhsin 7). Amina Wadud-Muhsin argues that hermeneutics banishes male attempts to “reduce the Qur’an from a universal text to a culturally specific text – a claim that many have erroneously made” (9). A hermeneutical reading, here, undoes social behaviors and cultural conceptions that are imposed on either the Qur’ān or Poe’s story. Doing justice to femininity and women’s textual presence in both narratives emerges from within silence that develops as an acoustic effect and a powerful action such as that of Lenore’s in “The Raven.”

Lenore, as shown in the introductory lines in “The Raven,” takes no part in the male speaker’s conversation with the raven; she is dead and silent. The bird, which is “at times treated as a messenger who bears the truth” or the messenger of the dead female lover in the poem (Pennel 49), utters nothing but “nevermore” (Poe 69). To the male speaker, this utterance stresses the finality of Lenore’s death and the definitive absence of her linguistic interaction. Even though the speaker admits that silence is dominant and “unbroken,” the bird’s utterance of “nevermore” and the poetic persona’s voicing of “Lenore” resonate at the end of each stanza, and this seems to create an acoustic subversion of the complete presumed absence of the othered woman. Lenore is an absent-present figure who is capable of outreaching place and language from beyond the grave. Lenore’s representation here does not necessarily mean that Poe’s women are completely powerless, in the sense that she returns as a prophetic bird to subvert the rhythmic sequence of the male speaker. Despite the fact that the raven and the poetic persona only say “nevermore” and “Lenore” respectively, the syllables are enough to subvert the oneness, measurement and sequence of the speaker’s auto-conversation. If the male speaker dominates earthly or domestic spaces of communication, “Lenore” transforms into a spiritualized presence and assumes the supernatural voice of truth in the afterlife.

Not unlike Lenore, who typifies the silent virginal maiden in Poe’s literary tradition, Qur’ānic women are also capable of subverting their textual and social association with silence, vulnerability and dependence. Silence is traditionally defined as a patriarchal mechanism of objectification of female bodies and voices, which effectively seeks to impose on women a state of linguistic subordination or even utter denial, and thus subsequent
withdrawal from social conversations of power. Georgina Jardim asserts that “questions about the authority of women’s voices in communities of faith rest on what the foundational texts, or scriptures, say about women and whether women appear as mediators of sacred knowledge therein” (2). What Jardim suggests here is that women’s speech, social roles and choices are very limited within the scriptural discourse that predefines them as ideal so long as they often tend “to be silent” (2). The meaning and practice of silence, therefore, is key to the formation of feminine idealism that best fits into the desired structure of “communities of faith.” In the Islamic scripture, women are strictly defined by a set of male-oriented hermeneutical interpretations that position them as secondary within the patriarchal scriptural order. Their speech can easily be displayed as a sign of “temptation and allurement” (Qaradawi, “The Voice of a Woman”), and must thus be subject to firm social surveillance. Despite the blatant inflexible ban on women’s communication, they can still attain agency via their subversive speechless actions.

1. Khawlah and Ligeia as hermeneutical others

Marriage in Islamic societies is principally conducted in accordance with fixed religious and legal laws and is thus taken for granted as a basis for healthy conjugal relationships and familial stability. The notion of stability here implies that marriage has at its roots not only social commitment and production by having children and providing for them but also the establishment of equality between husbands and wives. Asma Barlas writes that “marriage in Islam is based in a social contract that takes the legal equality of both spouses as a given [...] the very idea of making the marriage contractual was, at least in theory, to give women equality” (182). However, inequality in Islamic espousal relationships practically emanates from a patriarchal misreading of social roles and domestic codes in the Holy Scripture. The fact that the roles of fathers and husbands are conflated within the family circle as a consequence of misinterpretation creates an authoritative position of the father-husband and bestows on him a “nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse” (Millett 33; qtd in Barlas 167). With the misinterpretation of the scriptural language, men assume the highest form of authority, which obviously occludes women’s share of power, communication and linguistic subjectivity. If we pay particular attention to linguistic division within the domestic sphere of seventh-century and even contemporary Muslim families, we find that the patriarchs throughout history are associated with speech and action whilst women with silence and subservience. This division is rooted in an orthodox, culture-based patriarchal hermeneutics of the Holy Qurʾān, which generates an imbalance of power distribution and a breakdown of gender codes which must theoretically be protected and sustained in marriage, eventually leading to the presumed and necessary silencing of women.

Barlas argues that the Holy Qurʾān does not mention or perpetuate patriarchal ideologies, practices and beliefs. She writes, “the Qurʾān teaches that all authority and power are a trust from God and not a sign of human sovereignty” (172). Thus the traditional gendered division of linguistic attributes into speech or silence or the dichotomization of ideal spatiality into male publicity and female privacy “would be greatly diminished” (Barlas 172). The language used to describe, teach and advise humankind in the Qurʾān is comprehensive and unbiased:
Of his signs one is, that he hath created you of dust; and behold, ye are become men, spread over the face of the earth. And of his signs another is, that he hath created of you, out of yourselves, wives, that ye may cohabit with them; and hath put love and compassion between you: verily herein are signs unto people who consider. (Sale, The Koran 30: 20–21; emphasis in original)

In this chapter entitled “Women,” love and marriage between husbands and wives are not radically gendered in the sense that the Qur’anic verses do not prioritize one party over the other, viz. men over women. On the contrary, these verses distinguish “the Qur’ân from the contexts not only of its own times but also from those of ours, given both ancient and modern views of sex and gender that preclude the possibility of genuine love between women and men by Otherizing women” (Barlas 183). Marriage is not presented in the Qur’ân as a discriminatory contract or a religious practice where husbands dominate and control their wives; it is rather an expressive ability of “love and compassion” that men and women equally share “as a function both of their similar natures and of Divine Will” (Barlas 183). A patriarchal misreading of these verses would argue that man was God’s first creation out of whom woman came into being. Yet this reading repudiates the primary and most significant purpose of God’s creation here; that is cohabitation on the basis of “love and compassion.” The fact that patriarchs, however, misread this sign within an orientalist culture that pushes women to secondary positions reinforces men’s association with speech and their female dependents with silence.

One Qur’anic chapter that typifies the conflict between husbands’ speech and wives’ silence is “Al-Mujâdilah” which, as reported by Ā’ishah and narrated later in Ibn Kathir’s traditions of Taṣfîr and ‘Asbâb an-nuẓûl, tells the story of Khawlah bint Thâ’laba who complains to Prophet Muhammad about her husband’s treatment and desertion of his marital commitment and duty. Ā’ishah, the Prophet’s wife and the mother of all believers in Islam, narrates that Khawlah came to protest and complain to Prophet Muhammad after she was offended by her husband who compared her to his own mother. The husband’s comparison of his wife Khawlah to “the back of his mother,” which is a common linguistic practice in seventh-century pagan Arab societies, technically functions as a divorce by “render[ing] the woman forbidden for life to her husband, and yet did not allow her to dispose of herself freely, nor even to remarry” (Lamrabet 131). “Al-Mujâdilah” opens with the wife’s private communication with Prophet Muhammad about her husband’s unjust desertion of their marriage:

Now hath God heard the speech of her who disputed with thee concerning her husband, and made her complaint unto God; and God hath heard your mutual discourse; for God both heareth and seeth. As to those among you who divorce their wives by declaring that they will thereafter regard them as their mothers; let them know that they are not their mothers. (Sale, The Koran 58: 1–2; emphasis in original)

Here, God sends a strong message to those who compare their wives to their mothers: “let them know that they are not their mothers,” by which He dislocates a prevalent sexual masculine rhetoric that can easily alienate female bodies. It is obvious that God’s Word, which is mediated via the Prophet Muhammad, becomes the supreme or dominant discourse to which all conflicting male and female voices must refer and receive final judgment. However, what appeals to critical attention in the introductory verses of this chapter is the rise of mother-becoming wife’s voice and the significant value given to it
within a seventh-century oriental context. Even though this chapter opens with the wife’s implicit speech and draws direct links between her voice, God’s hearing, and thus social justice and gender equality, patriarchal hermeneutics clusters the wife in an inferior category; Khawlah is a vulnerable sexual entity to be contained within the misinterpreted Qur’ānic Scripture. Critics such as Asma Lamrabet, Asma Barlas and Barbara Stowasser suggest that speech is centralized within patriarchal hermeneutics as a masculine quality and property, and this masculinized centrality of speech implies women’s association with silence and corporeal vulnerability. Lamrabet suggests that the Qur’ān’s message is “egalitarian,” in that it supports women and speaks of their sociopolitical participation, “of demanding rights, of freedom of speech . . . [even though] today, the bulk of the discourse of women in Islamic rhetoric is focused on abstract and very infantilising moralising concepts” (162). Likewise, Barlas reads the Qur’ān’s voice as “egalitarian” because it is “God’s speech and not the work of human authors, and God is beyond sex/gender” (21). Barlas’s reading here is based on the fact that the Qur’ān’s interpretation follows a historical approach, and it thus becomes easy to discern prejudices and biases in its exegesis due to male and even female gendered interpretations.

Likewise, Stowasser emphasizes that the Islamic institution has censored its people and coerced a strict gender code on “any form of female ‘presence’ in relation to strangers. Forbidden, then, were sight (hence, female segregation in the home and veiling when abroad); speech; the jingling of hidden jewelry; and also scent” (152). In light of this traditional perception of espousal relations, the previous introductory verses of “Al-Mujādilah” can be interpreted as an allusion to women’s forbidden direct communication with husbands over physical and domestic rights. Khawlah’s communion with God remains a matter of privacy and seclusion, an act which undermines the presence and speech of women in public spaces where the patriarchs rule, even in the husband’s presence. Patriarchal hermeneutics also insists that public speech is detrimental to a woman’s image in her society: the fact that Khawlah’s words are insinuated and not directly spoken in the Qur’ānic verses implies the necessity of her silence. Yet, we are not told about the genuine nature and causes of Khawlah’s domestic conflict with her husband. The speech of the husband is unheard in the Scriptural narrative too, meaning that the patriarchal discourse he represents is invalid and decentralized. What matters, however, is the deep sense that Khawlah’s pride and moral well-being have been damaged, hence God’s intervention. The first line opens with “Now hath God heard,” which is a direct declaration of God’s omnipotence in the domain of acoustic knowledge and justice. One can notice that the act of hearing and its connection to God’s unfailing power of reception is given more importance than speaking. The act of hearing evolves as a discursive mechanism, which subverts male objectification of female dependents, a topic that I shall examine in the next section. In “Al-Mujādilah,” the presence of God’s acoustic power at the very beginning as the final point of judgment and justice points to Khawlah’s suffering and lack of linguistic agency in the domestic sphere of an early oriental culture. The fact that the act of hearing is repeated twice in the first verse highlights the centrality of the female subject in the holy text. This repetition, in other words, repudiates the myth of the hermeneutical other as Khawlah is directly brought into immediate conversations of power, agency and social representation via God’s voice. If hearing, at first glance, shows the husband’s inclination to govern language and domestic space by instigating disputations with the wife and dismantling conjugal
communication, it recurs as a means to affirm the shifting of discursive authority to the realm of God. Not unlike Khawlah’s dilemma, Poe fashions a female character, Ligeia, who is pushed into marginal spaces of otherness by a means of denial and death: she dies after an unspecified time of marriage with the unnamed husband/narrator. Nevertheless, Ligeia continues to overshadow that text as a very passionate, pretty, and intelligent woman. Following Ligeia’s death, the narrator goes into a second loveless marriage with “the fair-haired and blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine” (Poe 262). Yet, this marriage also ends tragically with the death of Lady Rowena whose body at the end of the story transforms and assumes the shape of Ligeia.

One can establish links between the Qur’ānic Khawlah and Poe’s Ligeia in many respects. From an orientalist point of view, it is significant to point out that Lady Ligeia’s origins are sometimes attributed to oriental lineage. John Gruesser suggests that Poe orientalizes Ligeia who “represents all the mysteries and taboos associated with the Oriental female and the Orient as female: usual beauty, extensive and forbidden knowledge, idolatrous love, and the ability to transcend death” (149).13 The scene of the transcendence and return of Ligeia to the chamber, where “some few ottomans and golden candelabra, of Eastern figure, were in various stations about” (Poe 263), happens in a typical “harem” Scheherazadean setting which is full of memory and peculiarity (261). This setting is also characteristic of seventh-century Arab culture in which “large harems and widespread sex-slavery […] clearly prove the amoral nature of their sex culture” (Khan 176). The narrator finds Ligeia’s cultural origins peculiar and states that he “tried in vain to detect the irregularity and to trace home my own perception of the ‘strange’” (Poe 257). This failure to trace home the origin of Ligeia foregrounds her orientalism and poses questions over Poe’s imagination, which perhaps derives from multiple oriental texts, among which is the Qur’ān and ancient Arab philosophy and literature. What must be noted here is the textual and thematic correspondence between Qur’ānic structure in “Al-Mujādilah” and Poe’s “Ligeia” in terms of bringing into public discourse notions of femininity, domesticity and espousal miscommunication, and most importantly hermeneutical othering of female dependents. In other words, the terms of marriage and the nature of husband-wife relationship and conjugal communication seem to define both narratives. Indeed, husbands in both “Al-Mujādilah” and “Ligeia” share the experience of misreading their wives as hermeneutical others, or to be more exact as desired mothers. Whilst Khawlah’s husband renders his marriage illegal by comparing his wife to “the back of his mother,” the husband in Poe’s story develops a motherly relationship with Ligeia:

I saw not then what I now clearly perceive, that the acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding; yet I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage. (Poe 259)

The narrator clearly expresses a common failure of understanding or perceiving his beloved wife’s “gigantic” power in the realm of knowledge and scientific “acquisitions.” Jenny Webb writes that Poe’s narrators “constantly misread” their loved ones and in doing so fail to understand them in any significant way” (216; emphasis in original). Indeed, it is the frustration and non-fulfillment of reading, defining or communicating with the feminine other, according to Yonjae Jung, that eventually causes this disruption between Poe’s male
protagonists and their female lovers. Jung argues that these protagonists, such as the unnamed narrator of “Ligeia,” mostly strive in vain “to name, define, and describe something that cannot be adequately represented” (58). Ligeia, indeed, stands as an oriental coded woman who must be brought back to the house of androcentric hermeneutics. The mystery of Ligeia, in other words, lies in her rebellion against silence, a process by which she is forced into estrangement and withdrawal from patriarchal systems of signs and meanings due to her difference. In fact, Ligeia resists her silencing when she commanded her husband to “repeat certain verses composed by herself not many days before” (Poe 260). At the end of the husband’s repetition, Ligeia shrieked “Oh God! O Divine Father! – shall these things be undeviatingly so? […]” (Poe 261). Not unlike Khawlah who breaks silence by addressing God forthwith in “Al-Mujādilah,” Ligeia directs her words to God who sees and understands: “Are we not part and parcel in Thee?” (Poe 262). On the other hand, the dilemma of the narrating husband here lies in his inability to understand domestic relations with Lady Ligeia and in his failure to include her within a cultural hermeneutical context. By doing so, Ligeia’s husband remains resistant to any possible shifts of signs, submission to other meanings, or transformation of conventional gender codes in nineteenth-century American society. However, the fact that he conflates the conjugal and cultural identities of his two wives adds salt to injury. The husband is keen on dividing and categorizing attachments to both wives; whilst Ligeia emerges as a symbol of the lost mother, Lady Rowena is assigned the role of undesired substitute wife.

The narrator in the previous quotation reveals his “child-like” willingness to “resign myself” to the supreme power and presence of Ligeia, who is positioned in the text as the mother queen of knowledge. Yet it is this complete resignation that induces the husband’s discomfort and threatens to alienate him perpetually. The husband’s fear, indeed, can be traced in the wider cultural fear of hermeneutical loss, meaning that Ligeia escapes patriarchal desire for control and domination through her absence, death and/or threatening silence. Even though the husband seems to offer readers an honest emotional experience with Ligeia, his pure feelings turn into a perversive form of love due to his absolute, “irreplaceable” yielding to his mother-like wife” (Huckvale 95–101). Carrie Zlotnick-Woldenberg stresses that the narrator suffers from an “intrapsychic split” by which the two women in the story, Ligeia and Rowena, become important sites of projection. Whereas Ligeia “is associated with the nurturing mother,” Rowena becomes “likened to the withholding, rejecting mother” (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 406). I, however, believe that Ligeia is more symbolic of the motherly role she plays in the story than her counterpart, Rowena. The textual space Ligeia occupies in Poe’s story takes on radical overtones, in that she overshadows the narrative and controls the narrator’s infantile desires whether they be psychical or mental. Zlotnick-Woldenberg believes that the husband’s complete submission to Ligeia’s superiority proves that she is a “good mother […] she teaches him and serves as a source of his inspiration. In fact, at times the highly spiritual Ligeia seems to be associated with the Virgin Mary, the quintessential good mother” (407). Even though Ligeia disappears quickly from the narrator’s life, she continues to exist and overwhelm the text as the unrelenting spirit of goodness, but more significantly as the disputing encoded other.
2. Wives dispute . . . one hears!

“Al-Mujādilah” and “Ligeia” offer examples of wives who are turned into mothers and who become sites of projection and conflict with their husbands-as-sons. This conflict arises from the husband’s and/or son’s recognition of the fear of failing masculinity and self-perception which increases his desire for return to power and domination. A major part of the failing sense of husband’s or son’s social identity is the mystery of the disputing wife’s and/or mother’s desire which becomes the unknown other. To Jacque Lacan, the mother is the wanted object of the child’s own desires, but this motherly desire “always goes beyond the child: there is something about her desire which escapes the child, which is beyond its control” (Fink 59). The mother as a site of otherness, Lacan suggests, thus becoming an imaginary thing that “is lacking but desired abstract” (Gunder and Hillier 26). This desire of the m/other causes a split in the son’s perception of his being yet produces his subjective human presence; by signifying an absent other, mother’s desire eventually comes to form the human subject, or the son’s realization of his place in the world. In the Qur’ānic and Poe’s texts, the husband, who changes into the desiring son, re-imagines the wife as mother because he misunderstands the wife’s desire as an object that must be re-claimed and re-controlled. In re-naming the wife as mother, the husband wishes to return to that Lacanian lost site, which is the mother as an object of desire that husbands in “Al-Mujādilah” and “Ligeia” misunderstand.

The husbands’ egoistic desires as well as misunderstanding of the female other instigates feelings of insufficiency and causes violent reactions in the form of physical withdrawal and linguistic violence. If Khawlah’s husband’s act of zihar, in which a man’s wife is compared to his mother, entails the alienation and de-sexualization of his wife’s body by linguistically abandoning yet enslaving her as mother, the husband in Poe’s text grows a sense of hatred of his wife as he misunderstands the wife’s desire as an object that must be re-claimed and re-controlled. In re-naming the wife as mother, the husband wishes to return to that Lacanian lost site, which is the mother as an object of desire that husbands in “Al-Mujādilah” and “Ligeia” misunderstand.

To put it differently, the husband in “Al-Mujādilah” brings verbal and physical violence upon his wife by dislocating her in the name of mother; the unnamed narrator in “Ligeia” abhors his wife who stands as a terrifying, encoded object of desire. It is through this language of distancing and dislocation, however, that wives/mothers come back at male figures as revengeful subjects who may even bring about their mental breakdown, notably the narrator of “Ligeia.” Nonetheless, the means by which these female subjects return to the heart of social discourse and the representation of power are noteworthy. In both texts, wives/mothers return as acoustic agents who bring into question speaking patriarchy and its common conjugal discourse that sees women in passive roles. Whilst God’s hearing in “Al-Mujādilah” turns into a conduit of female voice and agency which are socially alienated and silenced, Ligeia subverts her husband’s desire of overpowering her by also addressing God and then coming back as a silent presence from beyond the grave.

Hearing in “Al-Mujādilah” is an acoustic medium, which directly challenges patriarchal speech and hermeneutics of the holy text and generates a subversion of men’s domination of women’s voices and language by creating immediate links with God’s acoustic power. In fact, hearing is a passive activity that is different from the process of listening. In hearing, the human brain registers all types of sounds whereas the process of listening implies making sense of these sounds and converting them into intelligible meanings. Hearing in “Al-Mujādilah” does not become a passive process, however. It signifies that God cannot
only hear everything that produces sounds but it also means that he is focused on Khawlah’s pleas. The word heard in this Qur’anic verse, in particular, lends itself to the active process of listening to Khawlah’s complaint. God’s hearing, in other words, has a double function, as He is attentive to all produced sounds in the universe as well as to Khawlah’s emotional request at the same time. The final voice of God in the first verse can be read as an invitation to women’s entry into a wider social discourse beyond masculine control, thus functioning as the vessel of Khawlah’s suppressed agency in the Qur’ān. Again, it is important to mention here that this immediate emphasis on the sense of hearing in relation to God in the first verse of the Qur’anic chapter throws light on gender inequality and thus Khawlah’s loss of power and conjugal rights owing to her fall from the grace of linguistic communication with her husband and participation in social life. The struggle to have female voices heard reflects a traditional discourse of subjection and enslavement of women, which has always been “one of the great flaws of monotheism” (Haddad and Esposito vii). The gift of monotheism, Jardim writes, is placed in the hands of men whose readings of the holy text has created an androcentric socio-religious culture in which women are silenced “even before they can respond to these [male] arguments.” Jardim continues to suggest that the portrayal of women as silenced objects that are to be maintained by the speaking patriarchs restricts “women’s subjectivity and voice beyond the limits of context and time” (2). The silencing of women, as mentioned earlier, is not a natural effect of God’s scripture but a consequence of gendered patriarchal hermeneutics of Qur’anic meaning. The famous Egyptian Muslim scholar, Yusuf Qaradawi, interprets the Qur’ān, for example, in a way that guarantees patriarchal authority over women’s speech and creates a culture of fear of the public woman. Therefore, patriarchy in faith communities – here Islam – delimits and censors the image of women speaking in public, and labels them as a negative category:

Negativity against women has led many ‘scholars’ and ‘imams’ to make the unsubstantiated ruling about female speech. They claim that women should lower their voice to whispers or even silence, except when she speaks to her husband, her guardian, or other females. The female act of communication has become to some a source of temptation and allurement. (Qaradawi, “The Voice of a Woman”)

It is thus obvious that women in the Islamic tradition are perceived as ideal agents so long as they remain silent participants in a wider patriarchal discourse. However, what seems to be at stake in “Al-Mujādilah” is the male failure of listening and underestimating female silence. The opening lines of surah “Al-Mujādilah” view silence as a symbolic tool that unveils what Norman Denzin terms the “unsaid, the assumed.” Denzin suggests, “the silences in any discourse provide [...] the backdrop against which meaning is established” (38). Silence, in this sense, cannot only be taken as a sign of consent in the Islamic legal traditions of marriage and conjugal duties but also as a highly advanced mechanism of resistance, subversion and opposition; silence points to its other opposite. It is a mistake, suggests Wadud, to associate the lack of women’s audio-presence in “the basic paradigms through which we examine and discuss the Qur’ān and Qur’ānic interpretation” in chapters such as “Al-Mujādilah” with “voicelessness in text itself.” In fact, the husband in this case is the one who becomes the topic or the object of the action. Jardim writes that the discourse of hearing in “Al-Mujādilah” shows that “the maleness of both prophet and husband are emphasized in opposition to the woman in
their inability to hear” (186). Hearing, in other words, is centralized in Khawlah’s communication with the prophet as a pivotal space of feminine agency and representation in her community of faith. It is only through the significance of what Lamrabet calls the “sympathetic ear” of God (133), the One who hears all, that Khawlah becomes closely tied to the epicenter of divine revelation.

One of God’s names or attributes in Islam is the all-hearing. To Zulfiqar Ali Shah, this attribute does not mean that God shares the ability of hearing with his creations in its material or physical sense. One must remember here that “God was hearing and living long before the existence of creatures and He will be so eternally; therefore, the names and qualities ascribed to him were ‘realities about God without any of the creatures having any share of them, and without any doubt of resemblance or comparability’” (Shah 579). The fact that God’s unique ability of hearing has been aligned to the suppressed voice of Khawlah bestows on the later a special place within Divine Discourse. Lamrabet’s suggestion that God has simply “listened and attributed importance to the concerns of this woman who had come to confide her intimate problems to the Prophet” re-includes women in communities of faith on the basis of equality. In such case, God’s voice manifests the inner being of a suffering woman through the embodiment of her suppressed speech. Walter Ong suggests that hearing “can register interiority without violating it.” If sounds embody the internal structure of objects, it is then fair to say, “the human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice’s resonances” (Ong 70). What makes the sense of hearing special is the fact that it “pours into the hearer,” meaning that it is an internal experience of being, selfhood, and faith as sounds come from all directions. In sight, however, there is only one direction. Therefore, hearing implies the enveloping of the human self, incorporating it, or putting it together. Hearing, according to Ong, situates the hearer in the center of existence, experience, and the “auditory world” (70). Through hearing, Khawlah is reproduced or re-incorporated as a central social subject in her Islamic community, and this happens against the basic indoctrinations of the Islamic exegesis that pushes her to the margins of representation.

Even though Khawlah appears as a disputant wife who relies on speech for the sake of argument, we do not see her speaking. It is as if she becomes enveloped in the overwhelming discourse of divine hearing in which all disputing voices must seek final destination. Readers of the Holy Qur’an only hear Khawlah’s disputes via God’s language and hence become members of a divine community of the ear or sharers of the ever-dominant discourse of hearing. Not only does God hear the words of the inflicted Khawlah through Prophet Muhammad, who turns into an acoustic channel of communication, but also readers who must turn into judges based on their pure hearing abilities and true beliefs. In fact, God does not only hear Khawlah’s qawl to Prophet Muhammad in “Al-Mujādilah,” but He hears her in all time and knows her complaint as He is attributed with an all-hearing power in Islam as noted previously. However, the fact that Khawlah’s words made their way to the generous ears of God in this particular circumstance means that she is capable of the free practice of speech. Thus, Khawlah represents women of her time as the word qawl transcends her very individual situation to become a collective presence and/or voice which not only stands for the female but also for the oppressed as a whole. More importantly, it signifies that she has knowledge that precedes her spoken utterances. Jardim believes that the Arabic term qawl in the first verse of “Al-Mujādilah,” which means “word,” “speech,” “report” or “teaching,” shows
that Khawlah is knowledgeable. In Jardim’s view, Khawlah “displays an acute sense of justice and knowledge of the ultimate dispenser of justice, God” (186–87). Since Khawlah speaks with confidence and faith about the topic in question, she becomes a valuable source of knowledge, which increases her presence as an authoritative voice in the realm of word, meaning and acoustics.

Because knowledge is closely tied to the human ability to hear, it becomes a silent form of authority which precedes speech. Before one speaks, s/he must have knowledge, which is made available via silence and hearing. To reuse Ong’s argument here, the discourse of knowledge is an accumulative, internal experience of the act of hearing that is multidimensional, i.e. that “pours into the hearer” from all directions (70). In his discussion of the value of hearing in the Qur’ān, Dr. Muhammad Madlul also suggests that the ear in the Qur’ān is the first and primary tool of learning because it functions as a direct access to knowledge and unconditioned recognition. In hearing, Madlul argues, “the six directions of light and darkness can be recognized, whereas in sight, only the opposite direction can be recognized through” (47–49). The manifold sense of hearing, which entails silence that precedes speech, evolves as an early mechanism and a main site of human recognition and learning. Now, the Qur’ānic ties between female figures, hearing and knowledge imply how women can be leading figures in their androcentric communities of faith. Robin Wright believes that the Holy Qur’ān “honors female leadership” (152). It is this leadership, however, that Poe’s narrator hates due to its association with the prospect of dangerous female knowledge.

Ligeia reappears as a phantasmal body of knowledge that threatens the mental integrity of the male narrator. To Elizabeth Roudinesco, the dead female subject returns as a “ghost” or a “black shadow” to disrupt mascinel symbolic constructions of power and knowledge (217). Ligeia’s scientific acquisitions are described by the husband as “immense – such as I have never known in woman” (Poe 259). Even though the narrating husband seems to venerate the intellectual faculties of Ligeia, he also takes pride in his own intellectual authority and superiority. In fact, the husband’s psychological tragedy lies in his double sense of failure; he not only recognizes Ligeia’s mental powers in the domain of knowledge or the science of man but also realizes his constant frustration of reading or understanding her. The husband declares that he perpetually falls prey to the victimizing eyes of Ligeia: “The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! […] What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover” (Poe 258). The husband’s desire to penetrate into and discover the recesses of Ligeia is a consequence of overwrought feelings of wanting to know. D. H. Lawrence links Ligeia’s disappearance with the death of the unknowable object:

To know a living thing is to kill it. You have to kill a thing to know it satisfactorily. One should be sufficiently intelligent and interested to know a great deal about any person one comes into close contact with. About her. Or about him. But to try to know any living being is to try to suck the life out of that being. (76)

The husband’s passion to murder Ligeia emanates from his fear of the very possible destructive force of knowledge. Terence Matheson holds that due to Ligeia’s unbearable wealth in knowledge and learning, the husband poisons her as he subsequently poisons Rowena (289). Despite the fact that Poe’s women are overwhelmingly beautiful, they change into terrifying and destructive subjects who “resist the male
narrators’ efforts to objectify or ‘contain’ them,” and if male narrators insist on killing them, tragedies happen (Carter 47). This male insistence on the act of killing or suppressing the female other arises from an internal sense of insufficiency. To Ligeia’s husband, the wife stands as an unwelcome reminder of his disgraceful insufficiency in the realm of knowledge. Male narrators, in other words, seek perfect representations in androcentric societies through the medium of the female body. Joseph Moldenhauer writes that Poe’s male narrators seek “their perfection as objets de virtu” (284–97), and this takes place at the expense of killing lovely, and mostly strong, women. Yet this masculine desire for perfection becomes problematic in the presence of these resolute, formidable women. In his famous monograph Aesthetic Headaches, Leland Person believes that it is through the presence of strong women such as Ligeia that Poe questions the spaces of “conventional masculinity by demonstrating its weakness or impotence” in the face of audacious female action (175). This weakness is born out of the narrator’s crudeness in the realm of knowledge. His desire for the pursuit of knowing Ligeia problematizes his position too much as the speaking agent.

On the other hand, one must reconsider the status of Ligeia as the silent woman. William Grisman dethrones most arguments that seem to gag Ligeia from beginning to end. It is “a mistake,” he argues, to position Ligeia as a silent object because she “makes no attempt to talk” (Grisman 69). Due to her confusing silence, Ligeia challenges “any one-sided reading” and thus obliterates the boundaries separating the “one or the other, victim or victimizer” (Grisman 71). Ligeia is an unpronounceable letter in the patriarchal alphabet of her time. She, in fact, “remains a hermeneutic obstacle, an unresolvable enigma that is nevertheless associated with concrete material technologies of illusion” (Mücke 56). Not unlike Grisman, Dorothea von Mücke writes that Ligeia provides a multiplicity of possible hermeneutics, and this stems from the “wondrously enjoyable realm of the senses” with which she becomes associated (56). The name “Ligeia” is not only the title of the story but also the name of an acoustically coded, oriental woman, just like the coded woman of the Qur’ānic “Al-Mujādilah.” Mücke suggests that “this name does not come from a mortal woman but from a dryad, a tree nymph in Virgil’s Georgics”; a name which signifies “the medium of sound” in Greek (58). This medium is also invoked in Poe’s “Al Aaraaf” as Ligeia is equated with music and “melody”: “Ligeia! Ligeia!/My beautiful one!, Whose harshest idea/Will to melody run” (Poe 31). If Khawlah in “Al-Mujādilah” is situated between the world of speaking men and the Hearing God, Ligeia is also positioned as the technologized medium between the material sphere of the narrator and the divine space of justice, or between the material and immaterial.

Ligeia rises as an acoustic figure whose silence brings about the ignominious defeatism of her husband. The dilemma of Ligeia’s husband lies in his subjugation and surrender to the language he speaks; a language that displays his one-sided traditional thinking and inability to draw conclusions of his wife’s silence. The husband, put more simply, fails to meet a meaningful reading of Ligeia’s silence, which enfolds an illusory, inscrutable structure of sounds:
I was a second time aware of some vague sound issuing from the region of the bed. I listened – in extremity of horror. The sound came again – it was a sigh. Rushing to the corpse, I saw – [...] that my reason wandered. (Poe 266)

The hypersensitive ears of Poe’s male narrator transform into eternal sites of terror and self-guilt. Whenever the narrator attempts to break free the prison-house of sound, he finds himself pulled again into an unfathomable acoustic system: “the sound came again.” If the Qur’ānic “Al-Mujādilah” marks the significance of female silence and God’s power in the realm of hearing in Islamic oriental cultures, the narrator’s hearing of strange sounds in Poe’s “Ligeia” affirms women’s acoustic presence in androcentric societies and the fact that “the [female] dead do not die. They will not stay buried” (Dayan 244). The spectral subversive return of Ligeia as an acoustic subject is an act of performing power through the male sense of hearing. According to Ong, “sound cannot be sounding without the use of power [...] all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is ‘dynamic’” (32). Ligeia’s acoustic return cannot then be experienced as fixed; it is indeed a dynamic act that unsettles the masculine narrative and repudiates the social process of de-voicing and de-sexing the female subject.

What is unique about Ligeia’s return is its silent ability to suspend the narrator’s speech and to unravel the interior order of her patriarchal society. Ligeia, in such case, is the immaterial substance or the spiritual essence of matter from which the husband tries to seek refuge. However, the husband confesses that he lost control and his “reason wandered,” meaning that his inner thoughts, actions and speech are projections of Ligeia’s unspoken or unsaid presence and language. In fact, Ligeia’s husband’s language is nothing but what Brice Parain calls “the threshold of silence” (qtd in Steiner 78). This implies that the silence of Ligeia, the dead subject, occupies the sphere that reigns around the husband’s kingdom of speech, knowledge, and the entire system of social communication. In The Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre goes even further to suggest that spoken language is not only fortified by silence but also a system whose letters, images, words, or sounds become “harbingers of death” (134). If language or speech reveals anything at all, it only reveals fatal threats, warnings and dangers. According to Lefebvre, “all signs are bad signs” as they make manifest the liability of the human conscious self to act violently and costly (134). The signs of Ligeia’s silent return unravel the connection between the husband’s conscious drive to move toward neuroses and death. The sign, to Lefebvre, has “the power to move us emotionally, to cause frustration, to engender neuroses” (134). The intellectually humiliated husband of Ligeia is finally met with frustration of the coded invisibility of his wife, an invisibility that resists the temptation of interpretation. Poe’s Ligeia becomes an invisible double – of life, husband and/or speech – who returns to assail the visible world of speaking patriarchs. The power of Ligeia is thus an extended sign of knowledge that is capable of instigating action and embodying what Hegel terms the oblique “power of negativity” (qtd in Lefebvre 134).

The feminine other comes back as a negative force against life and social order. In the eyes of her society, it is considered negative as it pinpoints the patriarchal flaws in the very system where Ligeia, the exotic woman, exists. The narrator of “Ligeia” negatively describes his last night before he concludes the story as “unspeakable,” a night in which “each agony wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe” (Poe 267). The narrator, in other words, brings the conversation with the invisible other to end as he
becomes subsumed by a powerful, unspeakable enemy called silent revenge. Ligeia’s husband urges all readers to “hurry to a conclusion” until he eventually sees the absent other that has been the source of his pain: “I shrieked aloud [...] of the LADY LIGEIA.”” Ligeia’s silence is concluded with the terrifying sight of the uncanny feminine other. Ligeia, here, becomes an acoustic-becoming-visual presence, a sequence which also takes place in all verses in the Holy Qur’ān and which also characterizes Khawlah’s private communication. Khawlah-God’s correspondence shows that hearing not only preludes seeing but also encodes original signs of knowledge and power.

3. Conclusion

Khawlah in the Qur’ānic surah “Al-Mujādilah” and Ligeia in Poe’s story are not only immune to the patriarchal system of interpretation but also capable of subverting the law of hermeneutics via acoustic return which is an immaterialized spirit of power that one must listen to. Hearing in both texts evolves as a force of subversion that brings the female question to the fore by emphasizing the impossibility of denying women’s rights of speech and action. Through the emphasis on the sense of hearing at the beginning of “Al-Mujādilah” and throughout the story of “Ligeia,” we are assured that silence is not only socially subverted by these resisting women but is also manifested as a second story of the language of self-wealth and internal power, a language which is incorporated in the hearing of Khawlah’s and Ligeia’s stories. Lefebvre writes that “silence itself, in a place of worship, has its music” (Lefebvre 225). The fact that Khawlah’s husband in the Islamic story and Ligeia’s husband in Poe’s text finally see or recognize their wives as denied identities yet powerful absences ensures that women’s silence reforms itself as the music of rebellion and justice.

Notes

1. James Fenimore Cooper and John Neal were proponents of cultural and literary nationalism. Matthew Wynn Sivils and Joseph Letter argue that both Cooper and Neal created social consciousness of a national literary tradition by combining American natural terrains with social mythology. See Matthew Wynn Sivils, “‘The Herbage of Death’: Haunted Environments in John Neal and James Fenimore Cooper.” John Neal and Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture. Ed. Edward Watts and David J. Carlson. Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2012. 39–57; Joseph J. Letter, “Past Presentisms: Suffering Soldiers, Benjaminian Ruins, and the Discursive Foundations of Early U.S. Historical Novels,” American Literature 82 (2010): 29–55.

2. Other American writers who also share Poe’s enthusiasm for Qur’ānic knowledge and commitment to the writing of Arab culture include Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Washington Irving (1783–1859).

3. Other sources that might have influenced Poe’s orientalist fiction include British literature such as Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas (1759) and George Gordon Byron’s “The Giaour” (1813), interest in Egyptology which “stemmed from Napoleon’s 1789 invasion,” travel writing best exemplified by John Lloyd Stephen’s Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land (1837), and war narratives, especially “American accounts of the Barbary Wars” (1801–1815) (Montgomery 53–60).

4. See also Arthur Hobson Quinn. Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography. New York: Appleton-Century, 1941. 156.
5. It is important to note here that this characterization of the “medium” is itself published as part of “Al Aaraaf.” On a different note, the name “Ligeia” appears in Poe’s “Al Aaraaf” as a woman who represents “the idea of musical (or poetic) creativity.” To Poe, this poetic creativity is a significant source of joy, security, and blissful existence. See Eric W. Carlson. “Tales of Psychical Conflict: ‘Berenice,’ ‘Morella,’ ‘Ligeia.’” A Companion to Poe Studies. Ed. Eric W. Carlson. Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1996. 168–188.

6. Montagu Slater believes that the East represented a wonderful curiosity for Poe, “avid as he was for details about physics, about ciphers, about astronomy, about physiology, mesmerism, magnetism, etc.” Qtd. in Adnan M. Wazzan. “Islamic Elements in Poe’s Poems ‘Al-Aaraaf’ and ‘Israfil.’” Islamic Studies 27 (1988): 222.

7. “Al-Mujădilah” is translated into English by George Sale as The Woman Who Disputed. This chapter in the Qur’ān describes the story of Khawlah bint Tha’labah who complained to Prophet Muhammad about her husband who compared her to “the back of his mother.” This expression, which is also known as zihar, “was widely used by the pagan Arabs who, in order to divorce, compared their wives to ‘the back of their mothers.’” Khawlah complains to Prophet Muhammad about her husband’s action, which renders her forbidden to him forever. Following her complaint to the prophet, the latter received the revelation of “Al-Mujădilah” as a response to the injustice that befalls Khawlah. See Asma Lamrabet. Women in the Qur’an: An Emancipatory Reading. Trans. Myriam Francois-Cerrah. Markfield, Leicestershire: Kube Publishing Ltd, 2016. 131. “Al-Mujădilah” is translated in George Sale’s version as “The Woman Who Disputed,” but I will use the Arabic transliterated form of the title, “Al-Mujădilah,” hereafter.

8. Contrary to cultural beliefs and social practices of traditional patriarchy, the Qur’ān in fact “privileges mothers while dis-placing the thematic of father’s rule, thus also challenging the way patriarchies treat both mothers and fathers” (Barlas 172–73).

9. The Holy Qur’ān was fully received in the seventh century, beginning in c.610, when the prophet Muhammad was 40, and concluding in 632, the year of his death. See Mary Pat Fisher. An Encyclopaedia of the World’s Faiths: Living Religions. London, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997. 332.

10. The tradition of ‘Asbāb an-nuzūl refers to the historical context of the revelation of Qur’ānic verses and the circumstances that led to their revelation. However, ‘Asbāb an-nuzūl discusses the exegetical rather than the historiographical nature of the Qur’ānic revelation as it focuses on the study of common situations in Muslims’ everyday life rather than specific historical events. See, for example, Ibn Kathir, Ismā’il ibn ‘Umar, Ṣā‘ī al-Raḥmān Mubārkfūrī, and Ismā’il ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathir. Tafsīr Ibn Kathir: (abridged). Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000.

11. Speaking of the exegetical renditions of the Qur’ān, all of the italicized material is, of course, interpretively added to the Qur’ānic original.

12. As regards the notion of “mediation” here, the essay does not imply human participation in the construction of the Qur’ānic text, a view that accords with many nineteenth-century American approaches to the Qur’ān. The essay suggests that the Qur’ān is solely God’s creation, which is communicated to humankind via the Prophet Muhammad. In the view of the normative, faith-based receptions of the Qur’ān, Prophet Muhammad is a messenger who only functions as a vehicle or channel of communication of God’s Word.

13. See also Malini Johar Schueller who suggests, “Ligeia clearly represents an Oriental sexuality and knowledge.” To Schueller, the story of “Ligeia” captures its readers in a “dreamlike state, which for Near East Orientalist writers would increasingly signify the East or the harem which was a metonym for the East.” In Schueller. “Harems, Orientalist Subversions, and the Crisis of Nationalism: The Case of Edgar Allan Poe and ‘Ligeia.’” Criticism (Fall 1995): 608.

14. Lamrabet supports Wadud’s claims against the prejudiced patriarchal interpretation of women’s place and freedom in the Qur’ān by referring to Mary’s fasting or sawm (the Islamic practice of fasting). In Islamic exegesis, Mary’s act of fasting, which was “part of the fasting ritual of the Jews,” is also understood as a blatant “divine command that Mary should leave the word, e. the defense of her innocence, to her son Jesus.” Mary’s departure
from the word implies that she has to leave the word and pass it to a better “spokesman”; Jesus is clearly more fit to speak truth and maintain language whereas she remains as the silent hidden woman in the presence of holy men. (see Lamrabet 156).

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