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العرفان

The Linguistic and Legal Implications of ‘Wadribūhunna’ in Sūra al-Nisā’ (4:34)

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a thorough examination of the word ‘darb’ within the context of marital relations as depicted in verse 34 of Sura al-Nisa’. While traditionally translated as ‘strike them’, this study explores an alternative rendering as ‘turn them away’, as proposed in The Manifest Qur’an, aligning with Islamic principles of marital reconciliation and equitable treatment of women. The analysis encompasses various linguistic nuances of ‘darb’ in classical Arabic, tracing its etymological roots and lexical meanings. Furthermore, it evaluates the chosen translation’s congruence with the Qur’ānic approach to resolving marital discord, incorporating insights from Prophetic teachings found in the Sunna regarding the physical ‘disciplining’ of women. Additionally, the abstract addresses potential misunderstandings arising from certain narratives about hitting, offering a nuanced understanding grounded in both linguistic and religious contexts. This comprehensive exploration sheds light on the intricate interplay between language, culture and religious interpretation within Islamic jurisprudence.

Keywords:

Qur’an, women, darb, wadribuhunna, striking, separation.

1. Introduction

Nothing about the Divine Word is accidental. The most cursory glance at the works of Qur'ānic exegesis reveals the richness of meaning embedded in every letter and word. From word choice to the arrangement and structuring of chapters and verses, everything lends itself to the riveting process of uncovering vaster and deeper meanings. Thus, the great Companion and exegete, 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd **g** would say:

مَنْ أَرَادَ الْعِلْمَ فَلْيَثُورِ الْقُرْآنَ، فَإِنَّ فِيهِ عِلْمَ الْأَوَّلِينَ وَالْآخِرِينَ.

Whosoever seeks knowledge, let him diligently examine the Qur'ān. For therein is the knowledge of those who came before and those who shall come later.(1)

This appendix offers a comprehensive legal and linguistic study of the word '*darb*', often translated as 'strike them' (i.e. hit them lightly) in the Qur'ān (4:34). This article explains the rationale behind translating the imperative command '*waḍribūhunna*', as '*turn them away*' in *The Manifest Qur'ān*, according to Islamic teachings on marital reconciliation and the just treatment of women.

The analysis relates to verse 34 of *Sūra al-Nisā*:

﴿وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَأَهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَأَضْرِبُوهُنَّ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا﴾

“As for those (wives) you fear rebellious conduct on their part, (first) advise them, and (if ineffective) leave them alone in their beds, and (as a last resort) turn them away (from yourselves, striking a temporary separation). Then, if they cooperate with you, do not seek any course (of action) against them.”

This appendix provides:

1. A survey of the multifarious linguistic implications of the word '*darb*' in classical Arabic.
2. The etymological and lexical basis of the meaning of the word '*darb*' as rendered in *The Manifest Qur'ān*.
3. An analysis of how the chosen translation aligns with the step-by-step resolution process for marital discord outlined in the verse.
4. An exploration of Prophetic teachings encapsulated within the Sunna to determine its position on the physical 'disciplining' of women.
5. Addressing potential misconceptions arising from certain narrations about hitting.

(1) Set forth by al-Ṭabarānī in *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr*, 9:136 §8666.

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2. A Detailed Lexical Survey of the Word ‘*Ḍarb*’

The word ‘*wadribūhunna*’ in the verse above encompasses a range of meanings, including but not limited to ‘to turn away’, ‘to strike’, ‘to travel’ and ‘to cut off’. ‘*Wadribūhunna*’ is a derivative of the root letters ‘*ḍ-r-b*’, the root word being ‘*ḍarb*’. However, the common interpretation of ‘*ḍarb*’ as ‘to strike’ or ‘to hit,’ is neither derived from its root meaning nor is its only meaning; rather it is one of its many usages. According to lexicographers, the scope of the word ‘*ḍarb*’ is so broad that it virtually applies to all actions; thus, its exact implication will vary depending on the textual context and the mode of its usage.

An examination of its various root meanings reveals two underlying themes that are common therein: movement (*taḥarruk*) and change (*taghayyur*). Every usage of the word ‘*ḍarb*’, or one of its cognates, comprises an element of movement, change or both for instance. Implications such as transitioning from one location to another, travelling, forsaking, distancing, separating and severing ties comprise various types and degrees of movement (*taḥarruk*). In contrast, using it to imply, for instance, the occurrence of events, a shift in quality, dissociation, turning one’s attention away from something, altered circumstances, placing a distance between two things or abstaining from something—all connote various types and degrees of change (*taghayyur*).

By extension, the word ‘*ḍarb*’ used to mean ‘striking’ or ‘hitting’ also comprises some degree of bodily motion. It incorporates the element of ‘movement’ (*taḥarruk*) in the meaning or entails an emotional or mental shift in the one struck, which draws on the aspect of ‘change’ (*taghayyur*) in the root meaning. However, the discussion below will illustrate that given the broad spectrum of its usage, one cannot limit the meaning of the word ‘*ḍarb*’ to just physically striking or hitting. Some lexicographers have suggested that the word ‘*ḍarb*’ can be applied to all actions, bar a few. Therefore, precise signification in any given instance of its usage will depend on the context and manner in which it is used.

Below, drawing from classical lexicons, we will list a few examples of the sheer breadth of its usage whilst also explaining the rationale behind the translation selected for 4:34 in *The Manifest Qur’ān*:

MU’JAM AL-LUGHHA AL-‘ARABIYYA AL-MU’ĀṢARA MENTIONS:

1. *Ḍaraba ābāṭ al-umūr* (He acquired a deep understanding of the inner workings of a matter): It implies that he attained extensive knowledge of something by thoroughly investigating and reflecting on it.
2. *Ḍaraba al-aruzz* (He separated the husk from the grain of the rice): It signifies the separation of one thing from another.
3. *Ḍaraba al-jaras* (He rang the bell): It indicates a shift from a state of silence to a state of sound or noise.
4. *Ḍaraba al-qalb* (The heart pulsated): It indicates the heart’s constant state of movement.

5. *Ḍaraba raqabatahū – aw – ‘unuqahū*(3) (He struck off his head or neck): It denotes the separation of one part of the body from the other.

AL-MU‘JAM AL-WASĪṬ MENTIONS:

6. ‘*Ḍaraba al-shay’ ḍarban wa ḍarabānā*’(4) (The thing moved vehemently or forcefully).

AL-MAJMŪ‘ AL-MUGHĪṬH FĪ GHARĪBAY AL-QUR’ĀN WA AL-ḤADĪṬH STATES IN ITS ENTRY ON ‘ḌARB’:

7. ‘*Ḍaraba al-‘irq ḍarban wa ḍarabānā: taḥarraka bi quwwa*’(5) (The pulse bounded, i.e. it moved with vigour or force). Here again, the root meaning of ‘change’ (*taghayyur*) is operational in that the pulse transitioned from one state to another.

8. ‘*Ḍaraba yaḍribu*’ also indicates travelling, i.e. ‘*ḍaraba fī al-arḍ*’: *ay dhahaba wa ab‘ada*’ (He travelled in the land, i.e. he left and went far away). In verse 20 of *Sūra al-Muzzammil*, Allah ﷻ says:

﴿وَعَاخِرُونَ يَصْرُبُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ﴾

“... while others will travel in the land...”

Here the word *yaḍribūna* means travelling in the land, which refers to moving from one place to another.

Similarly, verse 94 of *Sūra al-Nisā*’ states:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِذَا صَرَبْتُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ﴾

“O believers! When you are travelling on the path of Allah...”

Once again, *ḍarabtum* refers to moving from one place to another.

Likewise, verse 101 of *Sūra al-Nisā*’ states:

﴿وَإِذَا صَرَبْتُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ﴾

“When you are travelling through the land...”

Here, the word *ḍarabtum* also refers to distancing yourself from one place to another.

One of the objections to the translation adopted by *The Manifest Qur’ān* as ‘turn them away’ can be that the meaning of travelling or distancing can only be established if the particle ‘*fī*’ or another similar particle with the word ‘*ḍarb*’ is used. However, the word ‘*ḍarb*’ in all the Qur’ānic verses mentioned above inherently possesses the meaning of

(3) Aḥmad Mukhtār ‘Umar, *Mu‘jam al-Lughā al-‘Arabiyya al-Mu‘āṣara*, p. 1352.

(4) *al-Mu‘jam al-Wasīṭ*, 1:536.

(5) Abū Mūsā al-Madīnī (d. 581 AH), *al-Majmū‘ al-Mughīṭh fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān wa al-Ḥadīṭh*, 2:317.

travelling, distancing and departing from one's home or city to another. Thus, the particle 'fī', in the above-mentioned verse (*al-Nisā*: 101), has not created the meaning of 'separation' or 'distance'. Rather the meaning of separation or distance is implicit within the word 'ḍarabtum' itself.

The purpose of this expression through the particle 'fī' is only to specify the locus of travel, i.e. that the travelling occurred on the land, not in the air or sea. The particle 'fī' here is being used adverbially (*ẓarf*) in relation to time or place, not as a determiner of the meaning of 'ḍarb'. This, as will become manifest in section two below, is of profound consequence for the rendition of

'waḍribūhunna' chosen in *The Manifest Qur'ān*. The word 'ḍarb' does not depend on the presence of additional particles to denote any of its aforementioned meanings.

9. Likewise, the phrase 'ḍaraba fī al-mā' (he swam in water) entails traversing through water from one point to another, and, as established above, the meaning of travelling or swimming is not inferred from the particle 'fī' (in); it is inherently present in the word 'ḍarb'. For this reason, dictionaries mention 'movement' as one of its foundational meanings without the prepositional 'fī'. The 'fī', as set forth earlier, is to designate the locus of the movement.

In *Kitāb al-Af'āl*, under his entry on the word 'ḍaraba', Imam Abū al-Qāsim 'Alī b. Ja'far b. 'Alī al-Sa'dī, known as Ibn Qaṭṭā' al-Ṣaḡallī states: *Ḍaraba* (without 'fī') means: 'he swam.'⁽⁶⁾ Again, the meanings of movement, distance and separation are inherent implications of the word 'ḍarb'; they are not engendered by the prepositional 'fī' or any other particle.

10. According to *al-Mufradāt*(7), *Lisān al-'Arab*(8) and *Tāj al-'Urūs*(9), when the word 'ḍarb' is used on the verbal pattern 'taf'īl' (i.e. *tadrīb*), it signifies inciting hatred among people, creating distance between them, cutting off family ties and breaking relationships. This is also known as *taqlīb al-umūr*, i.e. changing a state of peace and tranquillity to one of turmoil or supplanting bonds of friendship with enmity. Ibn Manẓūr has included this as a meaning of 'ḍarb' in its basic tri-literal form instead of the enhanced 'taf'īl' (i.e. *tadrīb*) pattern.

11. *Tahdhīb al-Lughā* and others relate that Abū 'Ubayda, the great lexicologist said: '*Ḍaraba al-dahr baynanā: ay ba'ada mā baynanā*'(10) (Time has created distance between us). Again, the meaning of 'ḍarb' here pertains to a change in circumstances, implying that people who were once close have drifted apart now.

(6) Ibn Qaṭṭā' al-Ṣaḡallī, *Kitāb al-Af'āl*, 2:266.

(7) al-Rāghib al-Asfahānī, *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur'ān*, p. 295.

(8) Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 1:548.

(9) al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-'Urūs*, 3:240.

(10) Abū Manẓūr al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb al-Lughā*, 12:18.

12. ‘*Darb*’ is also used for giving/striking an example, or drawing a comparison. For instance, in the Qur’ān, in *Sūra al-Nahl* verse 74, Allah ﷻ says:

﴿فَلَا تَضْرِبُوا لِلَّهِ الْأَمْثَالَ﴾

“So do not draw comparisons for Allah.”

Here, the word ‘*lā taḍribū*’ means do not draw comparisons for Allah ﷻ, because drawing comparisons for Allah ﷻ will take you far from glorifying Allah’s attributes.

13. The lexicologists have also used the word ‘*ḍarb*’ in the enhanced form pattern ‘*if’āl*’ (i.e. *idrāb*), meaning ‘to avoid’, ‘turn away’, ‘keep a distance’, ‘escape’, ‘refrain’ or ‘abstain from’. For example, the word ‘*al-iḍrāb* ‘*an al-ṭa’ām*’ means to abstain or turn away from food. Similarly, the word ‘*al-iḍrāb* ‘*an al-’amal*’ means to go on strike or boycott. This usage is also mentioned in *Lisān al-’Arab* stating: ‘*aḍrabbtu* ‘*an al-shay*’: *kafaftu wa a’raḍtu*’(11) (I turned away from such and such thing, i.e. I abstained from it and avoided it).

This is also illustrated in *Sūra al-Zukhruf*, verse 5:

﴿أَفَنَضْرِبُ عَنْكُمُ الذِّكْرَ صَفْحًا﴾

“Shall We withhold the Reminder from you altogether?”

Here, the word ‘*ḍarb*’ again signifies averting or turning away from something.

14. The Arab poets have also used the active particle ‘*mudrib*’ to mean the one who refrained, stopped, turned away and disassociated from something. This can be understood from the following line of poetry:

مُضْرِبًا	الْمَعِيشَةَ	طَلَبِ	عَنْ	أَصْبَحْتُ
مَالِي	مَالِكَ	بِأَنَّ	وَرِثْتُ	لَمَّا

I became one who refrains from seeking a livelihood, when I was convinced that your wealth is my wealth.(12)

Here, the word ‘*mudrib*’ has been used for the one who refrains from seeking his livelihood.

(11) Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-’Arab*, 1:547.

(12) al-Farāhīdī, *al-’Ayn*, 7:31; Abū Manṣūr al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb al-Lughā*, 12:15; and al-Zubaydī, *Tāj al-’Urūs*, 3:242.

3. The Meaning of ‘Wadribūhunna’

The preceding discourse on the multifarious meanings and usages of the word ‘*darb*’ and its lexical cognates, clearly demonstrate that it primarily refers to a change in circumstance, or distancing oneself from something, or becoming indifferent towards something or turning away from someone. Thus, in any given instance of its usage, one of these primary meanings must be adopted and operationalised based on a careful consideration of the context. Giving preference to one of its meanings and restricting to its widespread customary usage demands an extraneous indicator more profound than the context in which the word is being used, which is absent in our discussion of the verse. Therefore, confining the meaning of the word ‘*wadribūhunna*’ to hitting or striking is not possible unless there is extra textual or contextual evidence supporting it.

Keeping this in mind, let us now turn to understand the implication of the word ‘*wadribūhunna*’ in verse 4:34. Allah ﷻ states:

﴿وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَأَهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَأَصْرِبُوهُنَّ ۖ فَإِنْ أَطَعْتُم فَلَائِي تَتَّبَعُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا﴾

“As for those (wives) you fear rebellious conduct on their part, (first) advise them, and (if ineffective) leave them alone in their beds, and (as a last resort) turn them away (from yourselves, striking a temporary separation). Then, if they cooperate with you, do not seek any course (of action) against them.”

In what follows, we will closely read the verse, using the literary context of the word ‘*wadribūhunna*’ and its intended function to elucidate the meaning selected for translation in *The Manifest Qur’ān*. It will become apparent that the word ‘*wadribūhunna*’ in verse 4:34 is an injunction to solve the marital conflict. Thus, the husband has been advised to cut ties with his wife temporarily and place a distance between them, as opposed to physically striking her and blocking any chance of reconciliation.

The full verse begins by articulating the normative structure of the spousal relationship, stipulating, in turn, the positions and roles of each spouse. It then introduces an extreme case of marital discord arising from the wife’s ‘rebellious conduct’ (*nushūz*), laying out a three-step reconciliatory process.

The initial directive is to advise them, attempting to dissuade them from persisting in their *nushūz*. If this proves ineffective, husbands are instructed to abandon the marital bed. The separation here specifically relates to the marital bed; that is to abstain from sexual relations with them, as evidenced by the expression ‘*fī al-maḍāji*’ (in the beds). The particle ‘*fī*’, as discussed earlier, determines and restricts the place and occasion of separation in this second stage, implying that it is not forbidden, for example, to eat and drink together during the day, to sit together or to talk to each other.

If this also proves ineffective, the third step is to strike a temporary separation between the two parties, encapsulated in the words '*waḍribūhunna*'. Note that the directive in this third stage is to completely separate all one's daily affairs from the wife for a period of time, distinguishing it from the second stage, where the separation was restricted to the marital bed. The very next words in the verse, '*fa in aṭa 'nakum*' (then, if they cooperate with you), accentuate the underlying spirit and higher objective of the process outlined in the verse.

These Qur'ānic injunctions intend to reharmonise relations between spouses and restore the natural equilibrium. Cooperation and obedience cannot be forced through physically striking or hitting but can only be brought through prudence, wisdom and tactfulness. As such, the very next verse (4:35) goes on to provide yet another stratagem for reconciliation, through the intervention of arbiters representing both parties. Interpreting '*waḍribūhunna*' as physically striking or hitting the spouse would appear to clash with the essential spirit of the passage. Moreover, such a reading is antithetical to the continuum of Qur'ānic teachings on interpersonal relations and the well-established Prophetic ethics in that regard. This broader conceptual context will be explored below.

Upon close scrutiny, it becomes clear that the very wisdom behind the sequentiality of the reconciliation process outlined in the verse is to create the time and space necessary for reharmonisation without precipitating further harm.

Thus, the first step is to advise the wife in a way that creates the possibility of reconciliation. This implies that the manner and contents of the advice must be free of spite and malice, for that would defy the purpose. If it is unsuccessful, then the second step is to abandon the marital bed as a means of protecting her from any possible verbal abuse she may be subject to from her husband due to her stubborn insistence upon misconduct.

The second step also serves to gauge whether the wife comprehends the significance of the marital bed and the husband's leaving thereof. The second step is, in effect, a protective measure taken to prevent the possibility of the advising in step one from becoming hurtful or altogether abusive. The mere proposition that a law that seeks to prevent even the possibility of verbal abuse would condone, let alone command, physical abuse is utterly absurd. Following the failure of this specific separation of the marital bed, the verse instructs the statement of a complete temporary separation between the spouses. The wisdom of doing this at this juncture is that the physical change of environment and the physical distance from the perceived source of one's distress may enable the wife to see other perspectives and reassess the situation. This space had not been afforded in step two, where, although the beds had been separated, the spouses were still living their day-to-day lives together.

Read in this way, with a close eye on the literary context and the conciliatory ethos being espoused by the verse[s], it is evident that the verse is not an instruction to hit or

strike, even if it be ‘lightly’. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, such an interpretation is incongruent with the teachings of the Prophet **a**, as we will illustrate in the section below. We assert that the rendition of ‘*wadribūhunna*’ as ‘*turn them away (from yourselves, striking a temporary separation)*’ not only coheres with the semantic origin of the word but is also in perfect harmony with the literary context of the verse, as well as the general ethics of Islam.

4. The Prophetic Paradigm of Inter-Spousal Relations

The translation of ‘*wadribūhunna*’ as set forth in *The Manifest Qur’ān* perfectly aligns with the teachings of the Prophet **a**, who explicitly prohibited the physical striking of women. He has commanded men to honour women and engage them with respect and kindness.

The following Prophetic traditions powerfully establish and reinforce this as the normative ethic of Islam.

1. In the following agreed-upon (*muttafaq ‘alayh*) narration, it is reported from ‘Abd Allāh b. Zam‘a **g** that during a sermon, he heard the Holy Prophet **a** mentioning the she-camel of Ṣāliḥ **e** and the one who hamstrung it, and thereafter, the Holy Prophet **a** said:

«يَعْمِدُ أَحَدُكُمْ، يَجْلِدُ امْرَأَتَهُ جَلْدَ الْعَبْدِ، فَلَعَلَّهُ يُضَاجِعُهَا مِنْ آخِرِ يَوْمِهِ».

One of you goes forth and lashes his wife like a slave, and then perhaps he might [even] sleep with her the same evening.(13)

In this hadith, the Holy Prophet **a** conveys a powerful message. He **a** juxtaposes the case of a husband who beats his wife with the narrative of defiant disbelievers who harmed Allah’s she-camel in flagrant disobedience to Him, and were thus subjected to divine retribution. This strong condemnation by reference to the Qur’ānic narrative is further emphasized by the Prophet **a**, portraying the vileness and utter shamelessness of a man who would strike his wife by day and then seek intimacy with her by night.

2. In the following narration, the Holy Prophet **a** categorically prohibited hitting wives. Abū Dāwūd reports from Mu‘āwiya b. Ḥayda al-Qushayrī **g** that he asked the Holy Prophet **a**, ‘What do you say about our womenfolk?’, and the Holy Prophet **a** replied:

(13) Set forth by al-Bukhārī in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-Tafsīr* [The Book of Exegesis], chapter: ‘The exegesis of *Sūra al-Shams*’, 4:1888 §4658; Muslim in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-Janna* [The Book of Paradise], chapter: ‘The tyrants will enter the Hellfire and the oppressed will enter Paradise’, 4:2191 §2855; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in *al-Musnad*, 4:17 §§16267–16268; al-Tirmidhī in *al-Sunan: Kitāb Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* [The Book of the Exegesis of the Qur’ān], chapter: ‘The exegesis of *Sūra al-Shams*’, 5:440 §3343; and Ibn Mājah in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Nikāḥ* [The Book of Marital Contract], chapter: ‘On hitting women’, 1:638 §1983.

«أَطْعِمُوهُنَّ مِمَّا تَأْكُلُونَ، وَاكْسُوهُنَّ مِمَّا تَكْتَسُونَ، وَلَا تَضْرِبُوهُنَّ، وَلَا تَقْبَحُوهُنَّ».

Feed them from what you eat, and clothe them from where you clothe yourselves, and do not hit them, and do not revile them.(14)

Here the Holy Prophet **a** has categorically prohibited men from physically hitting and abusing their wives.

3. According to another narration reported by Iyās b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Abū Dhubāb **g** the Holy Prophet **a** said:

«لَا تَضْرِبْنَ إِمَاءَ اللَّهِ».

Do not hit the female slaves of Allah.(15)

This hadith does not merely prohibit hitting women, but also greatly elevates their honour and dignity by calling them ‘slaves of Allah’.

4. In another narration, Umm Kulthūm **j** bint Abū Bakr **g** reported that the Holy Prophet **a** prohibited men from hitting their wives, saying:

«لَنْ يَضْرِبَ خِيَارُكُمْ».

The best of you will never hit (them).(16)

This statement of the Holy Prophet **a** clarifies that striking women is against the virtue and moral goodness of a man.

5. This notion is further crystallised in another narration reported by Ibn Abī Shayba and al-Bayhaqī. Laqīṭ b. Ṣabira **g** related that the Holy Prophet **a** said:

«لَا تَضْرِبَنَّ ظِعَيْتَكَ ضَرْبَ أَمْتِكَ».

Do not hit your wife as you would do with your slave girl.(17)

(14) Set forth by Abū Dāwūd in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Nikāh* [The Book of Marital Contract], chapter: ‘The wife’s right over the husband’, 2:245 §2144; al-Nasā’ī in *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 5:363 §9151; and al-Bayhaqī in *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 7:295 §14503.

(15) Set forth by Ibn Mājah in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Nikāh* [The Book of Marital Contract], chapter: ‘On hitting women’, 1:638 §1985; and al-Bayhaqī in *Ma’rifat al-Sunan wa al-Āthār*, 5:434 §4387.

(16) Set forth by al-Ḥākim in *al-Mustadrak*, 2:208 §2775; and al-Bayhaqī in *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 7:304 §14553.

(17) Set forth by al-Ḥākim in *al-Mustadrak*, 1:248 §524; Ibn Ḥibbān in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 3:333 §1054; Ibn Abī Shayba in *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 5:223 §25460; al-Ṭāhāwī in *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*, 6:341; and al-Bayhaqī in *al-Sunan al-Ṣuḡhrā*, 6:289–290 §2623.

6. Sayyiduna ‘Alī **g** relates that the Holy Prophet **a** said:

«خَيْرُكُمْ خَيْرُكُمْ لِأَهْلِهِ وَأَنَا خَيْرُكُمْ لِأَهْلِي، مَا أَكْرَمَ النِّسَاءَ إِلَّا كَرِيمٌ وَلَا أَهَانَهُنَّ إِلَّا لَيْئِمٌ».

The best of you is the one who is best to his family, and I am the best of you to my family. Only a nobleman will honour women, whereas only a vile man will dishonour them.(18)

7. According to a report narrated by Imam Muslim and Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the Holy Prophet **a** advised a female Companion not to marry a man solely on the grounds of his harsh treatment of women, indicating the gravity and utter unacceptability of such conduct to the Holy Prophet **a**. It is related that Fāṭima bint Qays **j** received marriage proposals from Mu‘āwiya and Abū Jahm **g**, and the Holy Prophet **a** said:

«إِنَّ مَعَاوِيَةَ تَرِبُّ، خَفِيفُ الْحَالِ، وَأَبُو الْجَهْمِ مِنْهُ شِدَّةٌ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ أَوْ يَضْرِبُ النِّسَاءَ أَوْ نَحْوَ هَذَا، وَلَكِنْ عَلَيْكَ بِأَسَامَةَ بْنِ زَيْدٍ».

Mu‘āwiya is a poor man, not very well off, while Abū Jahm is harsh towards women, or (he said that he) hits women or the like. Instead, you should marry Usāma b. Zayd.(19)

8. The preceding narrations addressed the prohibition of hitting one’s wife, whereas the following narration concerns an incident involving a slave girl. Hadith-scholars have narrated an incident where a Companion slapped his female slave. This incident appears in several hadith compilations with varying degrees of detail. The variant below is from *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*. In this narration, Mu‘āwiya b. al-Ḥakam al-Sulamī **g** states:

كَانَتْ لِي جَارِيَةٌ تَرَعَى غَنَمًا لِي قَبْلَ أُحُدٍ وَالْجَوَانِيَّةِ، فَاطَّلَعْتُ ذَاتَ يَوْمٍ فَإِذَا الدَّيْبُ قَدْ ذَهَبَ بِشَاةٍ مِنْ غَنَمِهَا، وَأَنَا رَجُلٌ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ، آسَفُ كَمَا يَأْسِفُونَ، لَكِنِّي صَكَّكْتُهَا صَكَّةً، فَاتَّيْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ **a** فَعَظَّمْ ذَلِكَ عَلَيَّ، قُلْتُ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ! أَفَلَا أُعْتِقُهَا؟ قَالَ: «اتَّبَنِي بِهَا». فَاتَّيْتُ بِهَا، فَقَالَ لَهَا: «أَيْنَ اللَّهُ؟» قَالَتْ: فِي السَّمَاءِ، قَالَ: «مَنْ أَنَا؟» قَالَتْ: أَنْتَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ. قَالَ: «أَعْتِقْهَا، فَإِنَّهَا مُؤَمِّنَةٌ».

(18) Set forth by Ibn ‘Asākir in *Tārīkh Madīna Dimashq*, 13:313 §1392; and al-Hindī in *Kanz al-‘Ummāl*, 16:155 §44943.

(19) Set forth by Muslim in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-Ṭalāq* [The Book of Divorce], chapter: ‘There is no maintenance for the one divorced three times’, 2:1119 §1480; and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in *al-Musnad*, 6:411 §27361.

I had a slave girl who was herding my sheep towards Uhud and al-Jawwāniyya. One day, I found out that a wolf had taken one of our sheep. Now, I am a man who becomes annoyed just as others do, but I slapped her and then went to Allah's Messenger **a**. He deemed my offence serious, so I asked him, 'Should I free her, O Messenger of Allah?' But he told me to bring her, and when I did so, he asked her: 'Where is Allah?' And she replied: 'In heaven.' He asked her: 'Who am I?' And she replied: 'You are Allah's Messenger.' He then said (to me): 'Free her (as an expiation), for she is a believer.'(20)

This hadith illustrates the complete abhorrence towards the physical abuse of women. Here, the Prophet **a** prohibited physical harm or violence even against a slave, directing the man to free his slave girl as mentioned in the hadith. Ownership of a slave, involves specific rights, responsibilities and authority over his slave. If physical reprimand is forbidden against a slave, then it logically follows that there is no legitimate justification for such actions against a wife, as the rights of wives are similar to those of husbands.

In fact, by invariably referring to the wife as 'zawj', literally 'one of an equal pair', and not as *zawja*, the Qur'ān has declared the wife an equal partner in the marital union. It is also noteworthy here that the Qur'ān does not annex the 'tā' of femininity to the word 'zawj' when using it for the wife. This *tā*, often annexed to nouns in Arabic to render them feminine, can also imply a degree of diminution in meaning or value. The Qur'ān, therefore, consistently uses the word gender-neutrally, referring to both husband and wife as 'zawj'. The Qur'ān states in verse 228 of *Sūra al-Baqara*:

﴿وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ﴾

"The wives shall (with justice) have rights similar to the obligations upon them."

To explore this theme further, see, for instance, Qur'ān 2:35, 2:102, 4:1, 4:20, 7:19, among several others.

9. Imam Muslim, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Abī Shayba and al-Dārimī all narrate the following report from the mother of the believers 'Ā'isha **j**, who said:

مَا ضَرَبَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ **a** شَيْئًا قَطُّ بِيَدِهِ وَلَا امْرَأَةً وَلَا خَادِمًا إِلَّا أَنْ يُجَاهِدَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ.

(20) Set forth by Muslim in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-Ṣalā wa Mawāḍi' al-Ṣalā* [The Book of Prayer and the Places of Prayer], chapter: 'The prohibition of speaking during the prayer and the abrogation of its permission', 1:381 §537; and Abū Dāwūd in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Ṣalā* [The Book of Prayer], chapter: 'Replying to the sneezing person during the prayer', 1:244 §930, and also in *Kitāb al-Aymān wa al-Nudhūr* [The Book of Oaths and Vows], chapter: 'Freeing a believing slave (as expiation)', 3:230 §3282.

Allah's Messenger **a** never struck anything with his hand, neither a woman nor a servant, except (on the battlefield) when fighting in the way of Allah.(21)

The import of such narrations on the personal practice of the Holy Prophet **a** is unambiguously clear; the use of physical force against women, servants, or any other living being, except when fighting in self-defence, is an aberration from his blessed norm.

10. There is another tradition where the Holy Prophet **a** has specifically prohibited the striking of women on the face. Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī, 'Abd al-Razzāq and al-Ṭabarānī record the following report on the authority of Mu'āwiya b. Ḥayda al-Qushayrī **g**, who narrates:

قُلْتُ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، مَا حَقُّ زَوْجَةِ أَحَدِنَا عَلَيْهِ؟ قَالَ: «أَنْ تُطْعِمَهَا إِذَا طَعِمْتَ، وَتَكْسُوَهَا إِذَا اكْتَسَيْتَ أَوْ اكْتَسَبْتَ، وَلَا تَضْرِبَ الْوَجْهَ، وَلَا تُبْخِحَ، وَلَا تَهْجُرَ إِلَّا فِي الْبَيْتِ».

I asked, 'O Allah's Messenger, what is the right of the wife over the husband?' He replied, 'That you should give her food when you eat, and clothe her when you clothe yourself (or earn), and do not strike her on the face and do not revile her, and do not separate from her except in the home.'(22)

11. This same meaning has been narrated by Ibn Mājah, al-Ḥākim and Ibn Ḥibbān from Mu'āwiya b. Ḥayda al-Qushayrī **a** with different words. He reports that a person asked the Prophet Muhammad **a** about the rights of a wife over her husband, and he said:

«أَنْ يُطْعِمَهَا إِذَا طَعِمَ، وَأَنْ يَكْسُوَهَا إِذَا اكْتَسَى، وَلَا يَضْرِبَ الْوَجْهَ، وَلَا يُبْخِحَ، وَلَا يَهْجُرَ إِلَّا فِي الْبَيْتِ».

That he feeds her when he feeds himself; and clothes her when he clothes himself; and that he does not strike her face, nor speak ill of her, nor separate from

(21) Set forth by Muslim in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-Faḍā'il* [The Book of Virtues], chapter: 'His avoidance of sin, his choosing the easier of permissible things, and his vengeance for the sake of Allah if his sacred limits were transgressed', 4:1814 §2328; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in *al-Musnad*, 6:31, 206 §§24080, 25756; Abū Dāwūd in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Adab* [The Book of Noble Conduct], chapter: 'Exceeding limits in matters', 4:250 §4786, and the wording is his; Ibn Mājah in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Nikāḥ* [The Book of Marital Contract], chapter: 'On hitting women', 1:638 §1984; al-Nasā'ī in *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 5:371 §9165; Ibn Ḥibbān in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 2:240 §488; Ibn Abī Shayba in *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 5:223 §25459; al-Dārimī in *al-Sunan*, 2:198 §2218; and al-Ṭabarānī in *al-Mu'jam al-Awsaṭ*, 7:333 §7651.

(22) Set forth by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in *al-Musnad*, 4:447 §20027; Abū Dāwūd in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Nikāḥ* [The Book of Marital Contract], chapter: 'The wife's right over the husband', 2:244 §2142; al-Nasā'ī in *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 5:373 §9171; 'Abd al-Razzāq in *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 7:148 §12584; and al-Ṭabarānī in *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr*, 19:427 §1038.

her except in the home.(23)

There cannot be any contradiction between the two Prophetic commands. One has to be interpreted in consonance with others.

5. Text in Context: Understanding Hadith that ‘Permit’ Striking

There is a hadith, widely misunderstood because the command has been mistakenly taken out of context. Imam Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah relate from Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh **g** that the Holy Prophet **a** said in his Farewell Sermon:

«فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ فِي النِّسَاءِ، فَإِنَّكُمْ أَخَذْتُمُوهُنَّ بِأَمَانِ اللَّهِ وَاسْتَحْلَلْتُمْ فُرُوجَهُنَّ بِكَلِمَةِ اللَّهِ. وَلَكُمْ عَلَيْهِنَّ أَنْ لَا يُؤْطِئَنَّ فُرْشَكُمْ أَحَدًا تَكْرَهُوهُنَّ، فَإِنْ فَعَلْنَ ذَلِكَ فَاصْرِبُوهُنَّ صَرْبًا غَيْرَ مُبْرِحٍ، وَلَهُنَّ عَلَيْكُمْ رِزْقُهُنَّ وَكِسْوَتُهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ».

Fear Allah regarding women, for you have taken them under Allah’s security and have the right to intercourse with them by Allah’s word. They must not bring any man into your bed which you dislike, but if they do so, then ‘strike’ them in a way that does not hurt them. And they have the right over you that you provide them with good food and clothing according to their status in a fitting manner.(24)

This hadith mentions a special scenario, which states that a wife must not bring any man into her husband’s bed. This may cause a very extreme emotional reaction in which a man can resort to highly dangerous measures. In order to prevent the husband from taking an extreme reaction against his wife in this emotional situation, the condition of a non-harmful strike (*darb ghayr mubarriḥ*) has been imposed as the final limit that cannot be crossed by the husband even in this situation.

That is why, while describing this condition, Ibn ‘Abbās **g** states that only a *siwāk*, a small wooden toothbrush, can be used in such a shameful situation when somebody unwanted is found in your house with your wife. This hadith is not related to the situation of mutual disputes being discussed in *Sūra al-Nisā’* verse 34. Instead, it is exclusive to this

(23) Set forth by Ibn Mājah in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Nikāḥ* [The Book of Marital Contract], chapter: ‘The wife’s right over the husband’, 1:593 §1850; al-Ḥākim in *al-Mustadrak*, 2:204 §2764; and Ibn Ḥibbān in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 9:482 §4175.

(24) Set forth by Muslim in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-Ḥajj* [The Book of Pilgrimage], chapter: ‘The Prophet’s Pilgrimage’, 2:889–890 §1218; Abū Dāwūd in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Manāsik* [The Book of Hajj Rituals], chapter: ‘The description of the Prophet’s Hajj’, 2:185 §1905; Ibn Mājah in *al-Sunan: Kitāb al-Manāsik* [The Book of Hajj Rituals], chapter: ‘The Hajj of Allah’s Messenger **a**’, 2:1025 §3074; Ibn Ḥibbān in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 9:257 §3944; and al-Nasā’ī in *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 5:375 §9179.

extreme act of infidelity, which constitutes not only a betrayal of the husband's trust and a violation of his rights but also a shameless display of defiance to Allah's commands.

This context, together with the Prophet's statement, '*The best of you do not hit (their wives)*', and the plethora of hadith like it, make it abundantly clear that there is no general exception to the prohibition of striking, as sometimes misunderstood from the hadith in question. As noted earlier, the Holy Prophet ﷺ has tied a man's virtue and moral uprightness to *not* striking his wife. The reprehensibility of the use of physical force against one's spouse is evident from the Qur'ānic and Prophetic paradigm, as well as a matter of scholarly consensus.

The Qur'ānic paradigm of the marital bond is one of mutual love and kindness that procures tranquillity and secures attachment between spouses, forming a sound foundation for the cultivation of human civilisation. Any reading of scripture that insinuates otherwise is blind to the higher objectives of marriage in the grand scheme of the Shariah.

6. Summary

The extensive semantic analysis of the word *darb* in classical Arabic, synthesised with the broader context of Islamic teachings on the nature of marriage and interpersonal relations extrapolated from the Qur'ān and hadith, demonstrates that the expression '*wadribūhunna*' in verse 34 of *Sūra al-Nisā'*, does not mean 'beating', 'striking' or 'hitting'. Such a translation is incompatible with the Qur'ānic paradigm of marriage in general and the specific literary context of the expression. *The Manifest Qur'ān* renders the expression in a way that coheres with the spirit of the verse while not departing from its semantic basis in classical Arabic.