

The Literary Form of the Qur'an & A Philosophical Perspective on Divine Authorship

Journey Through the Qur'an: Seminar
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Introduction

- “Read in the name of your Lord who created”
- “The Koran [sic] admittedly occupies an important position among the great religious books of the world...it yields to hardly any in the wonderful effect which it has produced on large masses of men. It has created an all but new phase of human thought and a fresh type of character. It first transformed a number of heterogeneous desert tribes of the Arabian peninsula into a nation of heroes, and then proceeded to create the vast politico-religious organizations of the Muhammadan world which are one of the great forces with which Europe and the East have to reckon today.” *G. Margoliouth.*
- The Qur’an engages the inner dispositions of man

The Challenge

- The Qur'an challenges mankind
- "...and bring a single chapter like it..."
- According Qur'anic Exegetes (*mufasiroon*) these verses issue a challenge to produce a chapter (*surah*) that imitates the Qur'an's style, structure, nature and linguistic features.
- Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qurtubi, Tafsir al-Jalalayn and Ma'riful Qur'an.

Major Arguments

- Eloquence
- Rhetoric
- Unique Linguistic Genre
- Arrangement
- Unique Literary Form

Unique Literary Form

- Taha Husayn, a prominent Egyptian Litterateur summarised how the Qur'an achieves this unique form:
- “But you know that the Qur'an is not prose and that it is not verse either. It is rather Qur'an, and it cannot be called by any other name but this. It is not verse, and that is clear; for it does not bind itself to the bonds of verse. And it is not prose, for it is bound by bonds peculiar to itself, not found elsewhere; some of the binds are related to the endings of its verses and some to that musical sound which is all its own. It is therefore neither verse nor prose, but it is “a Book whose verses have been perfected the expounded, from One Who is Wise, All-Aware.” We cannot therefore say its prose, and its text itself is not verse. It has been one of a kind, and nothing like it has ever preceded or followed it.”

The Arabic Literary Forms

- Every expression of the Arabic language falls into the literary forms of Prose and Poetry.
- There are other 'sub' forms that fall into the above categories such as Kahin; a sub-form of rhymed prose.
- However all literary forms can be categorised as prose or poetry.

What is Arabic Poetry?

- The definition of Arabic poetry is that it has a:
 - a. End Rhyme (*qafiyah*)
 - b. Syllabic Rhythmical Pattern (*al-Bihar*)
- It is a metrical form of speech

al-Bihar

- Arabic poetry has sixteen rhythmical patterns called 'al-Bihar', literally meaning 'The Seas' in Arabic.

1. at-Tawîl
2. al-Bassit
3. al-Wafir
4. al-Kamil
5. ar-Rajs
6. al-Khafif
7. al-Hazaj
8. al-Muttakarib
9. al-Munsarih
10. al-Muktatab
11. al-Muktadarak
12. al-Madid
13. al-Mujtath
14. al-Ramel
15. al-Khabab
16. as-Saria'

Scansions

- The al-Bihar were first codified in the 8th century by al-Khalil bin Ahmad and have changed little since.
- Showing long (—) and short (^) syllables. They represent pairs of half-lines and should be read from left to right.

Tawil

^ — — ^ — — ^ — — ^ — —
^ — — ^ — — ^ — — ^ — —

Kamil

^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ —
^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ —

What is Arabic Prose?

- Arabic Prose can be described as non-metrical speech, meaning it does not have a consistent rhythmical pattern like poetry mentioned above.
- Arabic prose can be further divided into two categories:
 - *Saj* which is rhymed prose
 - *Mursal* which is straight prose or what some may call 'normal speech'.

Saj (Rhymed Prose)

- The definition of *saj* is that it has a:
 - a. Accentual rhythmical pattern
 - b. End rhyme
 - c. Concentrated use of rhetorical features
- It is non-metrical speech

Accent Based Pattern

- Accent based rhythmical patterns are exhibited in Nursery Rhymes in the English Language. The following poem, 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', has two stresses (shown in Bold) in each line, but with a varying number of syllables.

Baa, baa, **black** sheep,
Have you any **wool**?
Yes sir, **yes** sir,
Three bags **full**;
One for the **mas**-ter,
And **one** for the **dame**,
And **one** for the **lit**-tle boy
Who **lives** down the **lane**

Concentrated Use of Rhetoric

- Additionally *saj* is distinct from poetry and other forms of Arabic speech due to its concentrated use of rhetorical features.
- Rhetorical features are literary and linguistic devices intended to please or persuade, that differ from normal speech.
- Devin J. Stewart in the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an highlights this feature of *saj*, "In addition, *saj* regularly involves the concentrated use of syntactic and semantic parallelism, alliteration, paronomasia and other rhetorical figures."

Mursal (Normal Speech)

- The definition of *Mursal* is that it has,
 - a. No rhythmical pattern
 - b. No rhyme
 - c. A resemblance to straight forward speech

What Form is the Qur'an?

- It is not poetry
- Its is not prose
- It is Qur'an

- Why?

The Qur'an is not Poetry

- The Qur'an is not poetry because the totality of each surah does not conform to any of the al-Bihar and in many places exhibits inexact and irregular rhyme.
 - i. Inna aAtayna kal kawthar
 - ii. Fasalli li rabbika wanhar
 - iii. Inna shani-aka huwal abtar
- Mohammad Khalifa in his article *The Authorship of the Qur'an* correctly concludes, "Readers familiar with Arabic Poetry realize that it has long been distinguished by its *wazn*, *bahr*, *'arud* and *qafiya* – exact measures of syllabic sounds and rhymes...all this is categorically different from Qur'anic literary style."

The Qur'an is not Mursal

- A superficial analysis on surah al-Kawthar will conclude that it can not be described as normal speech.
 - i. Inna aAtayna **ka**l kawthar
 - ii. Fasalli li rabbika wanhar
 - iii. Inna shani-aka huwal abtar
- This chapter employs an end rhyme as can be seen by the end letters in *red* and the repetition of the 'ka' (in blue) is responsible for the chapters rhythm; which differs from any of the al-Bihar.

The Qur'an is not Saj

- There are three main reasons
 - Unique fusion of metrical and non-metrical speech
 - Qur'anic saj
 - Stylistic variations

Unique Fusion

- The Qur'an achieves this unique literary form by fusing metrical and non-Metrical speech.
- Shaykh Mitwalli al-Sharawi states, "It is almost impossible for the listener to detect the shift from one form to the other, nor does this exquisite mingling impinge on the fluidity of expression or impair its meaning."
- This view is also supported by the famous Arabic Literary scholar Arthur J. Arberry, "For the Koran is neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both"
- *See handout for examples in Surah Yusuf*

Qur'anic Saj

- Devin J. Stewart who is one of the only western scholars to discuss the literary form of the Qur'an and highlight the formal differences between saj and, what he calls, *Qur'anic saj* concludes, "The analysis undertaken in this study makes possible some preliminary observations on the formal differences between Qur'anic saj..."
 - a. Greater tendency to mono-rhyme
 - b. Inexact rhyme
 - c. Greater range of saj phrases
 - d. Higher frequency of rhetorical features.

Stylistic Variations

- Stylistics is a branch of linguistics which studies the features of the varieties of language within a given situation, context and meaning. Stylistics also tries to develop principles to explain the particular choices made by the author.
- Stylistic variation is the use of different features of language in a myriad of ways.

Qur'an Bound Stylistics

- Theologians and Arab Linguists such as al-Ash'ari, al-Rummani and al-Baqillani held that the Qur'an does not contain saj and is unique to all types of saj. Their reasoning is that in the Qur'an, the use of language is semantically orientated and its literary structure is distinct, whereas in saj, conformity to style is a primary objective.
- Stylistic variation or stylistic differences, includes, but is not limited to:
 - a. Semantically driven assonance and rhyme
 - b. Grammatical shifts (iltifaat, in Arabic)
 - c. Interrelation between sound, structure and meaning
 - d. Choice of Words
 - e. Unique linguistic genre
 - f. Word order

Divine Authorship?

- Logical Deduction
- Philosophy of Miracles

Logical Deduction

- A thinking process where you draw conclusions from a universally accepted statement:
“The Arabs at the time of revelation failed to challenge the Qur’an”
- Possible sources:
 - Arab
 - Non-Arab
 - Muhammad (pbuh)
 - God
- Discussion point...

Philosophy of Miracles

- A coherent definition of a miracle is an “event which lie outside the productive capacity of nature”
- The argument posed by Muslim Theologians and Philosophers is that if, with the finite set of Arabic linguistic tools at humanity’s disposal, there is no effective challenge; then providing a naturalistic explanation for the Qur’an’s uniqueness is incoherent and doesn’t explain its inimitability. This is because the natural capacity of Arabic is only able to produce the known literary forms in the Arabic language.
- The development of an entirely unique literary form is beyond the scope of the productive nature of the Arabic language, hence a supernatural entity, God, is the only sufficient comprehensive explanation
- **Discussion point...**

Thank You

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