

Textual analysis of Quran

The Textual Analysis of The Qur'an

Ehsan Butt, PhD*, President Daira Tadabbur Canada

Introduction

Arthur John Arberry (1905-1969) a respected and one of the most prolific scholars of Arabic, and Islamic studies, Head of the Department of Classics at Cairo University in Egypt and Sir Thomas Adams's Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University was unique in his realization of a textual harmony in the Qur'an. He stated that he is "wishing to show each Sura(chapter) as an artistic whole, its often incongruous parts constituting a rich and admirable pattern"¹. Arberry pointed out the weaknesses in the method and general approach of western scholars towards understanding the Qur'an. He wrote "the disciples of the Higher Criticism, having watched with fascinated admiration how their masters played havoc with the traditional sacrosanctity of the Bible, threw themselves with brisk enthusiasm into the congenial task of demolishing the Koran". Arberry then gives some examples of the inconclusive work of the prominent western Quranic scholars and comments "Such is the position which champions of the Higher Criticism of the Koran eventually reach. It is against this excess of anatomical mincing that I argue the unity of the sura and the Koran;" *ibid.* Vol. 2, p 10, 12.

Thematic coherence and unity of the Quran has recently become more recognized after a number of studies positively identified it at almost all places where focus happened to fall. A search for coherence takes direct analytical and open deliberation approach that initially assumes that it was the same text that spellbound all Arabia and its scholar's contemporary to Prophet Mohammad, why not? All earliest to modern Muslim Quranic exegetes believe in an inherent thematic unity and deeper organization, they call, *Nazm*. However it has been scarcely explicitly explained in the Muslim literature if ever to any satisfactory level. Modern scholars of Quranic textual studies focused on its exploratory and were very successful. Numerous studies describe a design in Quran that how every word, verse and sura seems to be embedded in a meaningful structure e.g. series of minor topics develop into a compelling major theme which makes a perfect match with other local and global major themes. The *Nazm*, can thus be taken as the context and relationship among topics of different parts which highlights several aspects of the meaning of a part with the help of another. Muslim scholars of all ages have been unanimous that the true meaning of the Quranic text must be completely consistent with not only the local context but also the Qur'an as a whole. Incidentally the *Nazm*, which helps determine the true meaning, also unravels the beauties of expression concealed in the text.

Progress

Many scholars worked on the ideas similar to Arberry's and concluded effectiveness of textual analysis in discovering consistent thematic interrelationships. However the two scholars of South East Asia particularly produced most exhaustive works focused on the textual analysis of the Qur'an. They are Farahi(1863-1930) a renowned scholar of Arabic and Islam who promoted similar studies of the text of the Qur'an and his famous student Amin Ahsan Islahi(1904-1997) who continued Farahi's investigations. Their voluminous works describe how they arrive at their postulates about the precise theme of a particular sura and how the theme beautifully unites all contents of the sura rendering it as a series of well focused literary dialogues. Islahi completed a full commentary of Qur'an explaining the basis of his exegetical principles, methods and results. Many scholars who have reviewed his works agree that he is amazingly successful in exposing the hidden system of themes. He aims to show how every Sura of the Quran is characteristically a focused thesis hammering a point of wisdom with the flavor of some super Arabic Ode(Moallaqa). The work of both scholars covers around 100 years of continuous academic research. Islahi believes that the principles elaborated by him in his commentary are scientific, rational, and based on common sense, without which the true message and beauty of the Qur'an cannot be understood or appreciated. For English readers an introduction to the Farahi and Islahi work is included in the Ph.D. thesis² of Mustansir Mir with Professor James A. Bellamy at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor as supervisors. The thesis concluded: "Islahi has convincingly shown... that the Qur'an has design and method. He has shown that individual surahs revolve around specific central themes, an essential complementary nature exists between members of the pairs of surahs, and that larger set of surahs, he calls groups, display identifiable patterns of *nazm*. A study of Tadabbur-I Qur'an is bound to leave one with the impression that, contrary to the usually held view, the Qur'an is a well ordered book". Other major sources on contributions of Farahi & Islahi works in English language include Professor Neal Robinson's work "Discovering The Qur'an"³ and a volume of Islahi's work translated in to English⁴. However a vast majority of their work still remains un-translated in Urdu or Arabic. Most unfortunately, now after them there seem to be no major initiatives in the academic circles of the world to keep this

knowledge alive. Rather there are several examples that due to the all pervasive ignorance about their work some people begin in this field and start reinventing the wheel.

Needs

The significance of the textual analysis, that naturally aids building academic consensus on the Quranic interpretations, can not be overestimated. An empathetic attention to Qur'anic studies, which is the first principal in Quranic textual studies, in mainstream western educational systems will send clear signals in the media and the hearts of Muslim countries effectively countering notions of the clash of civilizations. A wider access to education in the textual analysis of the Qur'an, which in a sense takes it as an important human heritage can also provide an opportunity for an on-going multicultural communication. There is a crucial need for such communications to eliminate countless potential risks of local and global conflicts arising from interpretations of the Qur'an where they originate from circles of vested interests as against scholarly investigations for seeking the truth. Anybody having doubts about the increased multicultural harmony that can be realized from more deeper & coherent understanding of the book must remember two things

One, that it is a consensus view of Muslims that during the time of the past glories of Muslim civilization they had a better awareness of the original message of the Qur'an than they have today. Two, the historical accounts abundantly confirm that the past Muslim civilization with a better mass education on the Qur'an at its zenith demonstrated the highest degree of culture and religious toleration. Recently Gary Brown⁵ brought to light some peculiar instances. E.g. he mentioned that the Muslim policy of toleration and the persistent intolerance of many Christian factions had important consequences, strikingly illustrated by the words of no less a personage than the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, around 1173. Addressing the Byzantine Mutual Misperceptions

The Historical Context of Muslim-Western Relations Emperor Manuel I, who was contemplating a religious union with the western Church of Rome, the Patriarch said: "Let the Muslim be my master in outward things rather than the Latin dominate me in matters of the spirit. For if I am subject to the Muslim, at least he will not force me to share his faith. But if I have to be ... united with the Roman Church, I may have to separate myself from my God."

Opportunities

The above provides enough evidence to establish a case for promoting education and studies relating to the textual analysis of the Qur'an. The academic exercise could greatly help answering many questions about how Qur'an played its constructive role in the historical development of first Islamic communities and later during global Islamic civilization. In addition such studies can provide some more tangible and current benefits. For instance, a wider access to education about Qur'anic interpretation based on principles of textual coherence and examinations of contexts can provide Muslims quality education about their heritage and an alternative to the separate Islamic institutes that mostly run to perpetuate Muslim sectarian Madrassa beliefs and by the same people.

Some Activities To Promote Education, Studies and general Awareness about Textual Analysis of the Qur'an

- Introduction to the textual analysis approach, its methods, results in comparison with traditional and modern modes of Quranic interpretation
- Critical analysis of Farahi-Islahi works
- Textual studies focused on legislative Quranic verses
- Comparative study of Quranic historical accounts with other historical & archeological resources e.g Biblical. The author has been working on the textual analysis of Quranic verses relating to the history of Bani Israel, children of Israel.

Education relating to textual analysis of Quran can take different forms: • can be included as a part, or a project in the regular courses where relevant • At separate regular course level, where opportunities exist • As a continuing education course • As a masters or PhD studies topic, for some thorough and fresh critical examination of previous works and making further progress

This author has been delivering 60-90 minutes seminars with Q&A sessions aimed at exposing the coherence, organization of themes discovered in the first sura, Fatiha, of Quran. Intricate textual structures in Fatiha carry themes of higher morals, historical nature, wisdom and philosophical connotations, which are so systematically arranged, that they not only create a literary masterpiece but also a compelling motivational effect.

References:

The text version of the Qurán considered here is the one that 99.999999% of muslims use for reading and 100% use for learning by heart. This version was previously known as Qiratul Aamma, or Mushaf ul Umma in e.g in Bukhari, and was considered transmitted by whole muslim ummah and never associated with any one person. It is a relatively recent phenomenon that some people started to associate it with somebody Hafis Bin Asim. This actually goes against the consensus view of Twatar in Quran transmission and reduces it to a mere single report termed as Khabri-Wahid. Khabri-Wahid is a type of reported tradition which at any time was only known to one single reporter and thus is considered a weak report.

1 The Koran Interpreted, Translation of Qur'an, by Arthur John Arberry, Touchstone, Rockefeller Center, 1230 Avenue of Americas, New York, NY 10020, ISBN 0-684-8250, Vol.1 p 25 (1996)

2 Coherence in the Qur'an : A Study of Islahi's Concept of Nazm in Tadabbur-i Qur'an by Mustansir Mir , American Trust Publications, 125

3 Discovering the Quran: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text by Neal Robinson, Publisher: Georgetown University Press; 2 edition (February 28, 2004) English, ISBN-13: 978-1589010246

4 TADABBUR-E-QUR'AN - PONDERING OVER THE QURAN by Amin Ahsan Islahi, translated in English by Mohammad Saleem Kayani <http://www.ibtbooks.com/>

5 Mutual Misperceptions: The Historical Context of Muslim-Western Relations, by Gary Brown, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Commonwealth of Australia, Current Issues Brief No. 7 2001-02, Foreign Affairs, ISSN 1440-2009 (<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/CIB/2001-02/02cib07.pdf>)

Profile Ehsan Butt, PhD

President, Daira Tadabbur Mississauga, ON L5K 1B5, Canada Tel: 905 919 9930, Fax: 905 403 9548
ehsan.tadabbur@gmail.com

Ehsan studied at the Idara-i-Tadabbur-i-Qur'an-u-Hadith Lahore, Pakistan which was founded by Amin Ahsan Islahi. The Idara was established to promote awareness about the methods and discoveries related to their beneficial textual investigations. It remained the centre of Islahi's intellectual activities until his death (15th December 1997).

Ehsan studied Arabic grammar, literature, styles of Quran, Farahi & Islahi's discoveries on thematic relationships, Methods of Quranic textual analysis, Interpretation of the Quran using the textual analysis method, Hadith Sahih Muslim, Buthari and Muatta Imam Malik, selected Pre-Islamic poetry: Hamasa Abu-Tamam and critical analysis of the stands of major philosophical schools. Allama Khalid Masud (1935 - 2003) who was Islahi's most famous student contributed in management of Idara. Khalid relieved Islahi from teaching new students. Ehsan learned most of the subjects from Allama Khalid Masud. Ehsan took special interest in learning the skill of identifying the thematic systems of ayats within Suras and suras within the Quran as a whole.

He remained a regular participant in lectures, discussions meetings with Amin Ahsan Islahi for several years. Being a founding member he participated in the meetings of Idara-i-Tadabbur-i-Qur'an-u-Hadith. His Urdu language proficiency afforded him the study of almost all Islahi books. Afterwards he:

- Taught Arabic grammar courses, and selections of Tafseer elucidating methods of identifying thematic systems
- Offered Seminars on selections of Islahi's Tafseer, Tadabbur
- Contributed in the series publication, Tadabbur, Urdu published by Idara Tadabbur-i-Quran o Hadith under the patronage of Amin Ahsan Islahi
- Translated in English selections from Urdu works of Amin Ahsan Islahi
- Established Dairatadabbur Canada and currently teaching Arabic grammar and Tafseer, Tadabbur i Quran based on Coherence in the Quran.

- Study sessions for Farahi's Arabic works and Arabic poetry , Moallaqat

- For two new books "Quranic History and Thematic Structure" and "How Quran Created Our Modern World" continuing to collect material, its study, analysis and draft writing

- Manager of web group Scientific Religion <http://groups.msn.com/scientificreligion> which has about 200 members

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