

## Literary and Linguistic Excellence of the Qur'an: A Systematic Review

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### ABSTRACT

The text of the Qur'an appears to many to be desperately muddled and lacking any coherence. The Composition of the Qur'an provides a systematic presentation of the writing processes (or rhetoric) and argues that there is indeed a coherence to the Qur'anic text. The knowledge of the rhetorical code allows for a radically new analysis of the structure and rhetoric of the Qur'an. The Composition of the Qur'an provides a new theoretical synthesis of Qur'anic rhetoric as well as a methodology for their application in further exegesis and many historians, scholars, and writers do not contend that the Qur'an has had a huge impact on history - just as it does in global politics today, being an authority for billions of Muslims - and so the reason for this timeless influence should be understood. It is the purpose of this paper to show how the Qur'an can be described as a new genre of speech and literary masterpiece. Rational arguments that substantiate this and the Qur'an's inimitability are presented by Muslims to argue the conclusiveness of their beliefs to a world in constant need of proof. This paper intends to contribute to the growing interest in the Qur'an's message as well as its literary power and will highlight the Qur'an's ability to convey key concepts and messages in the most profound way, a way that is described by the most experienced Arabic litterateurs as inimitable and unmatched throughout history.

**Keywords:** Quran,  
Rhetorical code,  
Rational Arguments,  
Quran's message,  
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## Introduction

The book *The Heart of the Qur'an* by Lex Hixon projected to encourage the western reader to return to the Qur'an, the book of the Muslims, with a sense of openness, clarity and new inspiration. The Qur'an has undoubtedly had a gigantic impact on global politics as well as the lives of millions of individuals and arguably, its impact has been unparalleled. Its contents range from addressing questions of individual spirituality to articulating intricate systems of governance and society. Significantly, the Qur'an presents what can only be described as a unique paradigm of social and political thought that was previously unknown. Linguistically the word 'Qur'an' means 'reading' and came to be referred to as 'the text which is read'. The Qur'an also calls itself 'al-kitab', which lexically refers to a written book. Thus the significance of writing, reading and reflecting upon the Qur'an has been emphasised from the very beginning of Islam. The Quranic material is divided into 'surahs' or 'chapters'. According to Phillip Hitti, the collected written text of the Qur'an was the first book in the Arabic language. It is the supreme authority in Islam being a fundamental and essential source of the Islamic creed, ethics, laws, and guidance. For Muslims, the Qur'an is of divine origin; not the word of

the Prophet Mohammed but the speech of the Creator revealed to him (and through him to mankind) in word and meaning. "Read in the Name of your Lord". These were the first few words of the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over 1400 years ago. Muhammed, who was known to have been in seclusion meditating in a cave outside Mecca, had received the first few words of a book that would have a tremendous impact on the world we live in today. Not being known to have composed any piece of poetry nor having had any special rhetorical gifts, the message Muhammad had been inspired with would deal with matters of belief, legislation, international law, politics, rituals, spirituality, and economics in an 'entirely new literary form'. Armstrong states, "It is as though Muhammad had created an entirely new literary form that some people were not ready for but which thrilled others. Without this experience of the Quran, it is extremely unlikely that Islam would have taken root." This unique style was the cause of the dramatic intellectual revival of desert Arabs, and after thirteen years of the first revelation, it became the only reference for a new state in the city of Medina. This new genre of speech, the Qur'an, became the sole source of the new civilisation's political,



philosophical, and spiritual outlook. Steingass states, “Here, therefore, its merits as a literary production should perhaps not be measured by some preconceived maxims of subjective and aesthetic taste, but by the effects which it produced in Muhammad’s contemporaries and fellow countrymen. If it spoke so powerfully and convincingly to the hearts of his hearers as to weld hitherto centrifugal and antagonistic elements into one compact and well-organised body, animated by ideas far beyond those which had until now ruled the Arabian mind, then its eloquence was perfect, simply because it created a civilized nation out of savage tribes...” Many historians, scholars, and writers do not contend that the Qur’an has had a huge impact on history - just as it does in global politics today, being an authority for billions of Muslims - and so the reason for this timeless influence should be understood. It is the purpose of this article to show how the Qur’an can be described as a new genre of speech and literary masterpiece. Rational arguments that substantiate this and the Qur’an’s inimitability are presented by Muslims to argue the conclusiveness of their beliefs to a world in constant need of proof.

### **Qur’an and Literature:**

“In making the present attempt to improve on the performance of predecessors, and to produce something which might be accepted as echoing however faintly the sublime rhetoric of the Arabic Koran, I have been at pain to study the intricate and richly varied rhythms which – apart from the message itself - constitutes the Koran’s undeniable claim to rank amongst the greatest literary masterpieces of mankind.” Coming from a prominent Orientalist and litterateur deeply conversant with Arabic, this excerpt from A.J. Arberry’s translation of the Qur’an highlights its literary excellence. However it should be noted that the literary merit, which is ascribed to the Qur’an here, is based on its ‘sublime rhetoric’ and its ‘richly varied rhythms’. With regard to the Quran’s rhetoric, there are volumes of work from classical as well as contemporary literary scholars on the subject. Concerning the Quran’s rhythm, its impact has been noted by litterateurs throughout history, many times being described as beautiful and unique. This reference to the Qur’an is just a small part of its literary power, which cannot be ignored. However, literary structures are not limited to the two elements that Arberry referred to. Many Orientalists and linguists highlight how the Qur’anic discourse is a unique and sensitive



genre that exemplifies the peak of literary beauty. The linguistic environment of the Qur'an is such that a change in the word order will lead to a change in its communicative effect and the meaning it intends to portray. This can also disfigure the Qur'anic stylistic effect and can disturb the harmony of semantic cohesion throughout the book. The Qur'an not only situates words to produce the desired communicative result, but it also does this to set up rhythms and sounds in order to heighten the impact of the message and enhance the psychological effect. The rhetoric and rhythm of the Arabic of the Koran are so characteristic, so powerful, so highly emotive, that any version whatsoever is bound in the nature of things to be but a poor copy of the glittering splendour of the original."Furthermore, the Qur'anic use of rhetoric and eloquence is arguably unparalleled in the Arabic language. The language of the Qur'an is precise and accurate in both meaning and expression; each letter and word has its place while the language is free from fault. Another feature of the Qur'an, which is responsible for its dynamic style, is its sudden change of person and number. This feature, also known as a grammatical shift, plays a rhetorical role as the sudden changes are perfectly logical and are used to enhance expression. "The Koran is the

earliest and by far the finest work of Classical Arabic prose... It is acknowledged that the Koran is not only one of the most influential books of prophetic literature but also a literary masterpiece in its own right... translations have, in my opinion, practically failed to convey both the meaning and the rhetorical grandeur of the original." Literary structures are composed of many elements that are too numerous to be discussed in detail in this article. They include diction, phonology, rhetoric, composition, morphology, syntax, architecture, rhythm, and style, in addition to matters related to tone, voice, orality, imagery, symbolism, allegory, genre, point of view, intertextuality, intratextual resonance, and other literary aspects - all of which are set within a historical, cultural, intellectual, and psychological context. These elements combine with each other in the Qur'an in myriad ways that produce the Qur'an's unique character. The Qur'an states, "If you are in doubt of what We have revealed to Our messenger, then produce one chapter like it. Call upon all your helpers, besides Allah, if you are truthful" [Qur'an 2: 23] And "Or do they say he fabricated the message? Nay, they have no faith. Let them produce a recital like it, if they speak the truth." [Qur'an 52: 33-4] In these verses, the Qur'an issues a challenge to



produce a chapter that resembles its literary power and excellence. It is to demonstrate that its claim to divine authorship can be debated by producing what amounts to three lines of Arabic (its shortest chapter) that are grammatically correct, unique in style and employ various literary structures to its high standard. The tools needed to meet this challenge are the finite grammatical rules and the twenty eight letters that make-up the Arabic language; these are independent and objective measures available to all. The fact that it has not been matched since it emerged to this day does not surprise most scholars familiar with the language Arabic and that of the Qur'an, as Palmer explains: "That the best of Arab writers has never succeeded in producing anything equal in merit to the Qur'an itself is not surprising." Due to the depth and scope of literary devices in the Qur'an this article will introduce selected literary structures that have been summarised above; sound, unique genre, dynamic style and its aesthetic elements. These features have been appropriately described by Hirschfield, "The Qur'an is unapproachable as regards convincing power eloquence and even composition."

### **Sound:**

The Qur'an enhances its expression by the use of sounds by employing various phonetic features that have an aesthetic and communicative effect. These features include the lengthening and modification of sounds so that words and letters become similar to an adjacent or nearby sound, and nasalization (ikhfaa'). This unique feature can be found throughout the whole of the Quranic discourse. The Qur'an is abundant with these phonetic devices which construct an emotive and powerful image. This is done by the selection of the most apt word to portray the intended meaning while producing semantically orientated sounds. The Quranic choice of words coupled with the power of sound conveys meanings in a unique way, whereby the Qur'an produces images and describes events as though they were happening in front of the reader. Johns explains, "It is the language itself which constitutes the iconic tradition. Not a single word can be taken or heard in isolation. All represent nuclei of meaning that are cumulative and cohere, serving as triggers to activate the profoundest depths of religious consciousness." The use of delicate sounds in the following example exhibits the Qur'an's ability to express meaning via the sound of its text: "And by the



Night when it is still.” [Qur’an 93: 2] ‘Wal layli itha sajaa’ The way the Qur’an uses the word ‘when it is still’ produces a tranquil tone and a smooth sound. This indicates the peace, stillness and serenity that night time provides. The Qur’an also uses sound to build intense images, for example, “And the producers of sparks striking” [Qur’an 100: 2] ‘Fal mu ri yaati qadhan’ The word for sparks striking, ‘qadhan’, that is used here emits a sound that develops the sense of this image, the proximity of the Arabic letters ‘daal’ and the ‘ha’ is responsible for this sound. In another example: “Stirring up thereby clouds of dust.” [Qur’an 100: 4] ‘Fa atharna bihi naq’an’ The use of the word ‘atharna’ in this verse, with its series of vowels emits a sound of splat-tering and scattering, which expresses the image of the drama. The utilisation of sounds in the Qur’an also plays a rhetorical role. For example, in the verse below the Qur’an uses words that imitate the sound they denote. This rhetorical device called onomatopoeia is widely used throughout the Qur’anic discourse, “At length when there is a deafening noise” [Qur’an 80: 33] ‘Fa itha jaaa’ atis saaaaaakhah’ The word for ‘deafening noise’, ‘asaaaaakhah,’ chosen here produces a sound eluding to its meaning. The Arabic letters ‘asaaaaa’ which lead to sharp guttural ‘khah’ emanate harsh sounds which

conform to the meaning of the text. Sounds in the Qur’an are employed to increase the effect of its message. The Arabic language has many words for a single meaning, but yet the Qur’an selects and arranges the words to portray the intended meaning in addition to create sounds to conform to the image, scene and message the book conveys. This is not only done by selecting the right words but also arranging them in a specific way to develop sounds and rhythms.

#### **Unique Genre:**

“As a literary monument the Quran thus stands by itself, a production unique to the Arabic literature, having neither forerunners nor successors in its own idiom. Muslims of all ages are united in proclaiming the inimitability not only of its contents but also of its style... and in forcing the High Arabic idiom into the expression of new ranges of thought the Koran develops a bold and strikingly effective rhetorical prose in which all the resources of syntactical modulation are exploited with great freedom and originality.” This statement coming from the famous Arab grammarian H. Gibb, is an apt description of the Quranic style, but this genre is not simply a subjective conclusion, it is a reality based upon the use of features that are abundant in all languages.



This may seem strange that the Qur'an has developed its own style by using current literary elements. However, it should be noted that the Qur'anic discourse uses these common elements of language in a way that has never been used before. The Qur'an is an independent genre in its own right. Its unique style is realised through two inseparable elements; rhetorical and cohesive elements. From a linguistic point of view rhetoric can be defined as the use of language to please or persuade. From a linguistic point of view the Qur'an employs various rhetorical features such as the use of rhythm, figures of speech, similes, metaphors, and rhetorical questions. Additionally, the use of irony and the repetition of words are a just a small part of the Qur'an's repertoire of rhetorical devices. Its cohesiveness includes various methods such as parallel structures, phrasal ties, substitution, reference and lexical cohesion. These features provide the bedrock and hang together to create the Qur'an's unique style. The style of the Koran is generally beautiful and fluent... and in many places, especially where the majesty and attributes of God are described, sublime and magnificent... He succeeded so well, and so strangely captivated the minds of his audience, that several of his opponents thought it the effect of witchcraft and enchantment."

Professor Philip H. Hitti says: "The style of the Koran is Gods' style. It is different, incomparable and inimitable. This is basically what constitutes the 'miraculous character' (i'jaz) of the Koran. Of all miracles, it is the greatest: if all men and jinn were to collaborate, they could not produce its like.

### **Dynamic Style:**

The dynamic style of the Qur'anic discourse occurs as a result of the use of grammatical shifts. This is an accepted rhetorical practice that has been termed the "Daring nature of Arabic". This rhetorical device is called 'iltifat, in English it literally means 'turning' from one thing to another. Orientalists in the past such as Noldeke stated that some of these changes in person and number occur abruptly. This misconception has been shown to be a superficial understanding of classical Arabic. The changes that are made in the Quranic discourse are made according to an effective pattern. The Arab scholars in the past, such as Suyuti, alZarkashi and al-Athir, unanimously agreed that this use of Arabic was part of the science of rhetoric. Furthermore they stated that rather than being a peculiarity of the Arabic language, it is an effective rhetorical tool. The Qur'an is the only form of Arabic prose to have used this rhetorical device in an



extensive and complex manner. Haleem states: “...it employs this feature far more extensively and in more variations than does Arabic poetry. It is, therefore, natural to find...no one seems to quote references in prose other than from the Qur’an.” One example of this complex rhetorical feature is in the following verse where it changes to talking about God, in the third person, to God Himself speaking in the first person plural of majesty: “There is no good in most of their secret talk, only in commanding charity, or good, or reconciliation between people. To anyone who does these things, seeking to please God, We shall give a rich reward.” [Qur’an 4:114] Instead of saying “He will give him...” God in this example speaks in the plural of majesty to give His personal guarantee of reward for those who do the positive actions mentioned in the above verse. Another example of this sudden change in person and number is exhibited in the following verses:

“He it is who makes you travel by land and sea; until when you are in the ships and they sail on with them in a pleasant breeze, and they rejoice, a violent wind overtakes them and the billows surge in on them from all sides, and they become certain that they are encompassed about, they pray to Allah, being sincere to Him in obedience: ‘If Thou dost deliver us from

this, we shall most certainly be of the grateful ones.’ But when He delivers them, lo! they are unjustly rebellious in the earth. O humankind! your rebellion is against your own souls - provision of this world’s life - then to Us shall be your return, so We shall inform you of what you did” [Qur’an 10:22] Neal Robinson in his book “Discovering the Qur’an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text” explains this verse in context of its rhetoric: “At first sight it may appear hopelessly garbled, but the three consecutive pronominal shifts are all perfectly logical. The shift from the second person plural to the third person plural objectifies the addressees and enables them to see themselves as God sees them, and to recognize how ridiculous and hypocritical their behaviour is. The shift back to the second person plural marks God’s turning to admonish them. Finally the speaker’s shift from the third person singular to the first person plural expresses His majesty and power, which is appropriate in view of the allusion to the resurrection and judgment.” The dynamic style of the Qur’an is an obvious stylistic feature and an accepted rhetorical practice. The Qur’an uses this feature in such a way that conforms to the theme of the text while enhancing the impact of the message it conveys. The complex manner in which the Qur’an uses this feature





provides a dynamic expressive text, which was unknown to Arabists in the past. It is not surprising that Neal Robinson concluded that the grammatical shifts used in the Qur'an: "...are a very effective rhetorical device."

### **Aesthetic Reception:**

The Egyptian Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafi'i states: "Anyone who heard it had no option but to surrender to the Qur'an... every single part of his mind was touched by the pure sound of the languages music, and portion by portion, note by note, he embraced its harmony, the perfection of its pattern, its formal completion. It was not much as if something was recited to him by rather as if something had burned itself into him." The aesthetic reception of the Qur'an is not a literary device as such, but it is a manifestation of its literary beauty on the human psyche. This aesthetic element may seem subjective but it highlights all the other objective literary structures and places them in the context of life, experience and humanity; thus making the Qur'an real. Goethe summarizes the aesthetic elements of the Qur'anic discourse. "However often we turn to it [the Qur'an]... it soon attracts, astounds, and in the end enforces our reverence... Its style, in accordance with its contents and aim is stern, grand, terrible-ever and anon truly sublime-

Thus this book will go on exercising through all ages a most potent influence." Such reactions and experiences upon hearing the Qur'an have indeed been witnessed throughout history, an early example of which is described by the following episode taken from Kermani's article The Aesthetic Reception of the Qur'an as reflected in Early Muslim History. "Abu Ubaid, a companion of the prophet mentions that a Bedouin listened to a man reciting 'so shalt that thou art commanded'. After this he threw himself to the ground worshipping and said, 'I threw myself down for the eloquence of this speech'." Another example of the aesthetic nature of the Qur'an is demonstrated by the conversion of great companion of the Prophet Mohammed, Umar, as handed down by the famous Islamic historians, Ibn Hisham and Ibn Kathir. On the very day he had intended to kill the Prophet he had heard that his sister Fatima and her husband had converted into the religion of Islam, infuriated he went to their house. "What is this balderdash I have heard?" Umar screamed, "You have not heard anything." Fatima and her husband tried to calm him down. Umar, however, already regretted his behaviour and asked to read the scriptures she had tried to hide away. Umar started to read surah Taha and after only a few verses he stopped and cried "How beautiful and noble is



this speech!” Umar, the second Caliph of Islam had converted to the religion of Muhammad. Guillame suggests the reason for the Qur’an’s aesthetic qualities, “It has a rhythm of peculiar beauty and a cadence that charms the ear. Many Christian Arabs speak of its style with warm admiration, and most Arabists acknowledge its excellence. When it is read aloud or recited it has an almost hypnotic effect...” This effect of the Qur’an was changing the hearts and minds of many Arabs at the time of revelation. Non-Muslim Arabs at that time had realized its power and some had tried to lessen the effect by shouting, clapping, singing and loud chatter while it was recited. Abu-Zahra comments on this reality, “The greatest among Muhammad’s enemies feared that the Qur’an would have a strong effect on them, while they preferred lack of faith to faith and aberration to right guidance. Thus, they agreed not to listen to this Qur’an. They knew that everyone listening was moved by its solemn expressive force that exceeded human strength. They saw that the people – even great personalities, the notables and mighty - one after another believed it, that Islam grew stronger, that the faithful became more numerous, polytheism became weaker, and their supporters became less.” To truly appreciate the point, however, it is crucial to

note the historical context in which the Quran emerged. The Arabs considered themselves, while still being considered by historians and linguists up until this day masters of the Arabic language who took great pride in its mastery; tremendous social status was granted to all those who did. In particular, formulating innovative and inspiring poetry was a great pastime and a source of intense social rivalry. The following quotation from Ibn Rashid illustrates the importance attached to language at the time. He writes, “Whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, other tribes would come to congratulate, feasts would be prepared, the women would join together on lutes as they do at weddings, and old and young men would all rejoice at the good news. The Arabs used to congratulate each other only on the birth of a child and when a poet rose among them.” Ibn Khaldun, a notable scholar of the fourteenth century, remarked on the importance of poetry in Arab life, “It should be known that Arabs thought highly of poetry as a form of speech. Therefore, they made it the archives of their history, the evidence for what they considered right and wrong, and the principal basis of reference for most of their sciences and wisdom.” An earlier scholar Ibn Faris elaborated on the same theme, but went further to comment on the quality of the poetry



that was composed during the pre-Islamic era, “Poetry is the archive of the Arabs; in it their genealogies have been preserved; it sheds light on the darkest and strangest things found in the Book of God and in the tradition of God’s apostle and that of his companions.

### **Conclusion:**

The literary devices employed in the Qur’an are not ornamental elements such that they can be dispensed with, but rather they are part and parcel of its meaning and linguistic make up. Without them the Qur’an’s meaning and literary excellence is lost. The Quran, like all other great literary masterpieces, stands out because of its use of language to convey meaning. However, the Qur’an has remained in a unique position because of its particular use of literary devices. Irving explains: “The Qur’an is a magnificent document... because of its matchlessness or inimitability.” The Qur’an reaches, indeed defines, the peak of eloquence in the Arabic language The Qur’an stakes its claim to divine origin on the matter of its language, by issuing a challenge to rival even its shortest chapter. This has rested at the core of many historical studies of the Qur’an, as many have attempted to answer the central question of authorship. The above observation makes the hypothesis advanced by those who

see Muhammad as the author of the Qur’an untenable. How could a man, from being illiterate, become the most important author, in terms of literary merits, in the whole of Arabic literature? This article serves only as an introduction to the Qur’an’s literary excellence. It intends to provoke further questions and sufficiently stimulate the reader to research further, particularly the question of authorship. At the heart of that question lies only a limited set of possible answers. The Qur’an can only have come from an Arab, a non-Arab or the Prophet Mohammed – that is if you believe that he had a mastery of Arabic better than the Arabs of his time, or as Muslims suggest, the Creator, who only counts as a possible source if you believe in His existence (that is of course a subject unto itself but an important prerequisite). Discounting possible authors from the above evidence the Qur’an is acknowledged to be written with the utmost beauty and purity of Language. It is incontestably the standard of the Arabic tongue, inimitable by any human pen, and because it still exists today, is a permanent miracle sufficient to convince the world of its divine origin. If the Qur’an was written by Muhammad, why were not Arab scholars and linguists able to rival it? There are, however, many other questions that relate back to the



issue of authorship. To illustrate a vital point; How was it possible for an illiterate man to produce a unique style of the Arabic language and maintain that over a 23 year period, such that it has been collected to form a book, divided into chapters centered around major themes, but yet related to events that happened throughout that period and are specific to it? The following section taken from Draz's book *An Eternal Challenge* which probes this point further, "When we consider carefully the timing of the revelation of the Qur'anic passages and surahs and their arrangement, we are profoundly astonished. We almost believe what we see and hear. We then begin to ask ourselves for an explanation of this highly improbable phenomenon: is it not true that this new passage of revelation has just been heard as new, addressing a particular event which is its only concern? Yet it sounds as though it is neither new nor separate from the rest. It seems as if it has been, along with the rest of the Qur'an, perfectly impressed on this man's mind long before he has recited it to us... It has been fully engraved on his heart before its composition in the words he recites. How else can it unite so perfectly and harmoniously parts and pieces that do not naturally come together? Is it as result of an experiment that follows a spontaneous thought? That could not be the

case. When each part was put in its position, the one who placed them never had a new thought or introduced any modification or re-arrangement. How then could he have determined his plan? And how could he have made his intention so clear in advance?...When we consider such detailed instructions on the arrangement of passages and surahs we are bound to conclude that there is a complete and detailed plan assigning the position of each passage before they are all revealed. Indeed the arrangement is made before the reasons leading to the revelation of any passage occur, and even before the start of the preliminary causes of such events. To end, Rev. R. Bosworth Smith in his book *Muhammad and Muhammadanism* concludes that the Qur'an is: "...A miracle of purity of style, of wisdom and of truth. It is the one miracle claimed by Muhammad, his standing miracle, and a miracle indeed it is."



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