

## Application of Barthes's "Death of the Author" to Qur'an: Possible or Impossible?

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**ABSTRACT.** Qur'an as the sacred book of Muslims has been subjected to different types of interpretations from the beginning of its revelations, approximately from 1400 years ago. All the Islamic theology scholars, even unmuslims, tried to make a contribution as the best of their abilities to its understanding. By the advent of new post-structuralist approaches of textual analysis techniques in West, the possibility of interpreting this holy book has obsessed the modern textual analysts all over the world. This article tried to investigate the possibility of Barthes' "Death of the Author" as one of the most controversial theories of modern text analysis. Considering the fact that, the author of Qur'an has not been a human to compose the text based on the dominant social, cultural and economical context of that time, the application of Barthes' "Death of the Author" to the Qur'anic interpretation seems to be logically impossible. Furthermore, as the Qur'anic verses are classified into two categories of "Mohkamaat" and "Motashabeaat" based on Quran itself, this theory of text analysis can be utmost be applied to the latter in order to offer a better comprehension of the "Mohkamaat" as there are various interpretations of these "ayahs" in Islamic literature.

### 1- INTRODUCTION

The **Qur'an** (pronounced [qur'ʔa:n]; Arabic: القرآن *al-qur'ān*, literally "the recitation") is the central religious verbal text of Islam, also sometimes transliterated as **Quran**, **Qur'ān**, **Koran**, **Al-Coran** or **Al-Qur'ān**. Muslims believe Qur'an to be the verbal book of divine guidance and direction for mankind, and consider the original Arabic verbal text to be the final revelation of God.

Islamic tradition relates that during one of our prophet's isolated retreats to the mountains, he received his first revelation in the Cave of Hira. Thereafter, he received revelations over a period of twenty-three years. According to "hadith" and Islamic traditional sources, after prophet Mohammad (PBUH) emigrated to Medina and formed an independent Muslim community; he ordered a considerable number of the companions (*sahaba*) to recite Qur'an and to learn and teach the laws, which were revealed daily. Companions who engaged in the recitation of Qur'an were called *qurra'*. Since most *sahaba* were unable to read or write, they were ordered to learn from the prisoners-of-war the simple writing of the time. Thus, a group of *sahaba* gradually became literate. As it was initially spoken, Qur'an was recorded on tablets, bones and the wide, flat ends of date palm fronds. Most chapters were in use amongst early Muslims since they are mentioned in numerous sayings by both Sunni and Shia sources, relating the prophet's use of Qur'an as a call to Islam, the making of prayer and the manner of recitation. However, Qur'an did not exist in book form at the time of Muhammad's (PBUH) death in 632 A.D.

Muslims regard Qur'an as the main miracle of Muhammad, as proof of his prophethood, and as the culmination of a series of divine messages. These started, according to Islamic beliefs, with the messages revealed to Adam, regarded in Islam as the first prophet, and continued with the *Suhuf Ibrahim* (Scrolls of Abraham), the *Tawrat* (Torah or Pentateuch), the *Zabur* (*Tehillim* or Book of Psalms), and the *Injil* (Evangel). Qur'an assumes familiarity with major narratives recounted in Jewish and Christian scriptures, summarizing some, dwelling at length on others, and, in some cases, presenting alternative accounts and interpretations of events. Qur'an describes itself as a book

of guidance, sometimes offering detailed accounts of specific historical events, and often emphasizing the moral significance of an event over its narrative sequence.

Qur'an states that Muhammad was *ummi*, interpreted as illiterate in Arabic tradition. According to Watt (2001), the meaning of the Qur'anic term *ummi* is *unscriptured* rather than illiterate. Watt argued that a certain amount of writing was necessary for the prophet to perform his commercial duties though it seems certain that he had not read any scriptures.

Qur'an has many other names. Among those found in the text itself are *al-furqan* ("discernment" or "criterion"), *al-huda* ("the guide"), *dhikrallah* ("the remembrance of God"), *al-hikmah* ("the wisdom"), and *kalamallah* ("the word of God"). Another term is *al-kitāb* ("the book"), though it is also used in the Arabic language for other scriptures, such as the Torah and the Gospels. The term *mus'haf* ("written work") is often used to refer to particular Qur'anic manuscripts but is also used in Qur'an to identify earlier revealed books.

"Wahy" in Islamic and Qur'anic concept means the act of God addressing an individual, conveying a message for a greater number of recipients. The process by which the divine message comes to the heart of a messenger of God is *tanzil* (to send down) or *nuzul* (to come down). As the Qur'an says,

***"With the truth we (God) have sent it down and with the truth it has come down."***  
***Qur'an 2:23–4***

It designates positive religion, the letter of the revelation dictated by the angel to the prophet. It means to cause this revelation to descend from the higher world. According to "hadith", the verses were sent down in special circumstances known as *asbab al-nuzul*. However, in this view God himself is never the subject of coming down. Qur'an frequently asserts in its text that it is divinely ordained, an assertion that Muslims believe. Qur'an\_ often referring to its own textual nature and reflecting constantly on its divine origin \_ is the most meta-textual, self-referential religious text. Qur'an refers to a written pre-text that records God's declaration even before it was sent down (Wild, 1996. p. 140).

The text of Qur'an consists of 114 chapters of varying lengths, each known as a *sura*. Chapters are classed as Meccan or Medinan, depending on where the verses were revealed. Chapter titles are derived from a name or quality discussed in the text, or from the first letters or words of the *sura*. Muslims believe that their prophet, on God's command, gave the chapters their names (Nasr, 2007). Generally, longer chapters appear earlier in Qur'an, while the shorter ones appear later. The chapter arrangement is thus not connected to the sequence of revelation. Each *sura* except the ninth starts with the *Basmalaah*, an Arabic phrase meaning ("In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful"). There are, however, still 114 occurrences of the *Basmalaah* in Qur'an, due to its presence in verse 27:30 as the opening of Solomon's letter to the Queen of Sheba (Allen, 2000).

Each *sura* is formed from several *ayah* (verses), which originally means a sign or portent sent by God. The number of verses differs from chapter to chapter. An individual verse may be just a few letters or several lines. The verses are unlike the highly refined poetry of the pre-Islamic Arabs in their content and distinctive rhymes and rhythms, being more akin to the prophetic utterances marked by inspired discontinuities found in the sacred scriptures of Judaism and Christianity.

The Qur'anic text seems to have no beginning, middle, or end, its nonlinear structure being akin to a web or net (Allen, 2000). The textual arrangement is sometimes considered to have lack of continuity, absence of any chronological or thematic order, and presence of repetition (Blomm & De Bary, 1990). Fourteen different Arabic letters form 14 different sets of "Qur'anic Initials" (the "Muqatta'at", such as A.L.M. of 2:1) and prefix 29 *suras* in the Qur'an. The meaning and interpretation of these initials is considered unknown to most Muslims. In 1974, Egyptian biochemist Khalifa claimed to have discovered a mathematical code based on the number 19 (Khalifa, 1982) which is mentioned in Qur'an (Qur'an 74:30).

## 2- TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF QUR'AN

There are two approaches to interpreting Qur'an, a) based on tradition and b) based on language, context and context of situation of the text. In the former approach there are four traditional sources for commentary of the Qur'an:

- Quran: The highest form of *tafsir* (interpretation) is when one verse of Quran is used to explain another.
- *Hadith*: the second highest grade of *tafsir* where the prophet commented on the meaning or virtues of particular verses of Quran and those statements have been passed down to the audience. Many of the great collections of *Hadith* have separate sections about *tafsir*.
- The reports of the *Ṣaḥābah*: The *Ṣaḥābah*, or companions of the prophet, also interpreted and taught Quran. If nothing is found in Quran or the *Hadith*, the commentator has recourse to what the *Ṣaḥābah* reported about various verses.
- The reports of the *Ṭabi'ūn*, the next generation who learned from the *Ṣaḥābah*: these people grew up with people who had enjoyed everyday interaction with the prophet, and had often asked about the meanings of verses or circumstances of their revelation.

The classical Arabic poetry and the text of Qur'an are two resources which can be used as foundational reference in ascertaining the meaning and signification of the remaining literal and figurative diction of Qur'an and its style of expression. Many of the words of Qur'an have remained in continuous usage from the time of its revelation to this day. This makes them known to all. It needs to be appreciated that in this approach all the sources of Qur'an interpretation are to be used in the light of the principles of coherence in Qur'an. This approach was introduced and attracted scholars in the last century especially in Indian sub-continent and Egypt.

Qur'an's message is conveyed with various literary structures and devices. In the original Arabic, the chapters and verses employ phonetic and thematic structures that assist the audience's efforts to recall the message of the text. There is consensus among Muslim scholars to use Qur'an as a standard by which other Arabic literature should be measured. They asserted (according to Qur'an itself) that Qur'anic content and style is inimitable. For Qur'anic interpretations the following critical notions are worth noting; *tafsir*, *ta'wil*, *meaning levels* and *recitation*.

**Tafsir**— Qur'an has sparked a huge body of commentary and explication (*tafsir*), aimed at explaining the "meanings of the Qur'anic verses, clarifying their import and finding out their significance". Tafsir is one of the earliest academic activities of Muslims. According to Qur'an, the prophet was the first person who described the meanings of verses for early Muslims (Qur'an 2:151). Other early exegetes included a few Companions of the prophet, like *Ali ibn Abi Talib*, *Abdullah ibn Abbas*, *Abdullah ibn Umar* and *Ubayy ibn Kab*. Exegesis in those days was confined to the explanation of literary aspects of the verse, the background of its revelation and, occasionally, interpretation of one verse with the help of the other.

Because Qur'an is spoken in classical Arabic, many of the later converts to Islam (mostly non-Arabs) did not always understand the Qur'anic Arabic, they did not catch allusions that were clear to early Muslims fluent in Arabic and they were concerned with reconciling apparent conflict of themes in Qur'an. Commentators erudite in Arabic explained the allusions, and perhaps most importantly, explained which Qur'anic verses had been revealed early in Muhammad's prophetic career, as being appropriate to the very earliest Muslim community, and which had been revealed later, canceling out or "abrogating" (*nāsikh*) the earlier text (*mansukh*). Memories of the *occasions of revelation* (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the circumstances under which the prophet spoke as he did, were also collected, as they were believed to explain some apparent obscurities.

**Ta'wil**— Corbin (1993, p. 56) defined *ta'wil* as "to lead back or to bring something back to its origin or archetype". It is a science whose pivot is a spiritual direction and a divine inspiration, while the *tafsir* is the literal exegesis of the letter; its pivot is the canonical Islamic sciences (Corbin, 1993, p. 9). Tabatabaei (1988) expressed that according to the

popular explanation among the later exegetes, *ta'wil* indicates the particular meaning a verse is directed towards. The meaning of revelation (*tanzil*), as opposed to *ta'wil*, is clear in its accordance to the obvious meaning of the words as they were revealed. But this explanation has become so widespread that, at present, it has become the primary meaning of *ta'wil*, which originally meant "to return" or "the returning place". In Tabatabaei's view, what has been rightly called *ta'wil*, or hermeneutic interpretation of Qur'an, is not concerned simply with the denotation of words. Rather, it is concerned with certain truths and realities that transcend the comprehension of the common run of men; yet it is from these truths and realities that the principles of doctrine and the practical injunctions of the Qur'an issue forth. Interpretation is not the meaning of the verse; rather it transpires through that meaning – a special sort of transpiration. There is a spiritual reality, which is the main objective of ordaining a law, or the basic aim in describing a divine attribute—and there is an actual significance a Qur'anic story refers to (Qur'an 3:7).

According to Tabatabaei (1988), there are acceptable and unacceptable esoteric interpretations. Acceptable *ta'wil* refers to the meaning of a verse beyond its literal meaning; rather the implicit meaning, which ultimately is known only to God and can not be comprehended directly through human thought alone. The verses in question here refer to the human qualities of coming, going, sitting, satisfaction, anger, and sorrow, which are apparently attributed to God. Unacceptable *ta'wil* is where one "transfers" the apparent meaning of a verse to a different meaning by means of a proof; this method is not without obvious inconsistencies. Although this unacceptable *ta'wil* has gained considerable acceptance, it is incorrect and cannot be applied to the Qur'anic verses. The correct interpretation is that reality a verse refers to. It is found in all verses, the decisive and the ambiguous alike; it is not a sort of a meaning of the word; it is a fact that is too sublime for words. God has dressed them with words to bring them a bit nearer to our minds; in this respect they are like proverbs that are used to create a picture in the mind, and thus help the hearer to clearly grasp the intended idea (Tabatabaei, 1988, pp. 37–45).

**Levels of meaning** "Qur'an possesses an external appearance and a hidden depth, an exoteric meaning and an esoteric meaning. This esoteric meaning in turn conceals an esoteric meaning (this depth possesses a depth, after the image of the celestial Spheres, which are enclosed within each other). So it goes on for seven esoteric meanings (seven depths of hidden depth)" (Corbin, 1993, p.7). According to this view, it has also become evident that the inner meaning of Qur'an does not eradicate or invalidate its outward meaning. Rather, it is like the soul, which gives life to the body (Corbin, 1993, p.13). On this viewpoint, Corbin considered Qur'an to play a part in Islamic philosophy, because gnosiology itself goes hand in hand with prophetology. However, clearly those who don't believe in the divine origin of the Qur'an or any kind of sacred or spiritual existence completely oppose any inward Qur'anic aspect.

Commentaries dealing with the *zahir* (outward aspects) of the text are called *tafsir*, and hermeneutic and esoteric commentaries dealing with the *batin* are called *ta'wil* ("interpretation" or "explanation"), which involves taking the text back to its beginning. Commentators with an esoteric slant believe that the ultimate meaning of Qur'an is known only to God (Nasr, 2007). In contrast, Qur'anic literalism, followed by "Salafis" and "Zahiris", is the belief that the Qur'an should only be taken at its apparent meaning. This includes, for example, the belief that God literally has appendages such as hands as stated in the Qur'an.

**Recitation** One meaning of Qur'an is "recitation", Qur'an itself outlining the general method of how it is to be recited; slowly and in rhythmic tones. *Tajwid* is the term for techniques of recitation, and assessed in terms of how accessible the recitation is to those intent on concentrating on the words.

....and recite the *Quran* in slow, and measured rhythmic tone. (*Quran*, 7:34).

There are several schools of Qur'anic recitation; seven reliable, three permissible and (at least) four uncanonical. A canonical recitation must satisfy three conditions (Tamara, 2006):

- It must match the *rasm*, letter for letter.
- It must conform to the syntactic rules of the Arabic language.
- It must have a continuous *isnad* to Muhammad through *tawatur*, meaning that it has to be related by a large group of people to another down the *isnad* chain.

However, the discussion of the priority of one or the other recitation is unnecessary since it is a consensus of knowledgeable people that all seven recitations of Qur'an are acceptable and valid for recitation in the prayer. Moreover, non-canonical recitations that are narrated from some of the Companions, that do not conform to the Uthmani copy of Qur'an, are not legitimate for recitation in the prayer, but knowledge of them can legitimately be used in the *tafsir* of the Qur'an (not as a proof but as a valid argument for an explanation of an *ayah*).

Muslims believe that it is prohibited to perform Qur'anic interpretation using solely one's own opinion. This, they base on an authenticated *hadith* of our prophet Muhammad which states that it is prohibited.

Imam al-Ghazali qualified this tradition, with the following understanding,

The truth is that prophetic Traditions (akhbar) and statements of the Prophet's companions and of other pious Muslims in early Islam (athar) prove that 'for men of understanding there is wide scope in the meanings of the Qur'an'. If there is no meaning other than that which is related [from Ibn 'Abbas and other exegetes] what is that understanding of the Qur'an [which is bestowed upon a man]? The Prophet (PBUH) said, 'Surely the Qur'an has an outward aspect, an inward aspect, a limit and a prelude.' This is also related by Ibn Mas'ud on his own authority and he is one of the scholars of Qur'anic interpretation. [If there are no meanings of the Qur'an besides the outward ones], what is the meaning of its outward aspect, inward aspect, limit and prelude? every Qur'anic verse there are sixty thousand understandings [comprehensible to man]. The understandings of it which remain [incomprehensible to man] are even more than these in number. (Quasem, 1996).

### 3- QUR'AN AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Sells (1999, p. 132), citing the work of the critic Brown (1983), acknowledged Brown's observation that the seeming "disorganization" of Qur'anic literary expression \_ its "scattered or fragmented mode of composition," in Sells's phrase \_ is in fact a literary device capable of delivering profound effects \_ as if the intensity of the prophetic message were shattering the vehicle of human language in which it was being communicated. Sells (1999) also addressed the much-discussed "repetitiveness" of Qur'an as a literary text.

The words of the Qur'an are of four classes: *Khass*, *'Amm*, *Mushtarak*, and *Mu'awwal*.

- (1) ***Khass*** Words used in a special sense. This specialty of sense is of three kinds: Khususu'l-jins, Specialty of genus, e.g. mankind; Khususu 'n-nau', Specialty of species, e.g. a man; khususu'l '-ain, Specialty of an individual, e.g. Muhammad.
- (2) ***'Amm*** Collective or common, which embrace many individuals or things, e.g. people.
- (3) ***Mushtarak or Complex words*** which have several signification e.g. 'ain', a word which signifies an Eye, a Fountain, the Knee, or the Sun.
- (4.) ***Mu'awwal*** words which have several significations, all of which are possible, and so a special explanation is required.

The Sentences of the Qur'an are either *Zahir* or *Khafi*, i.e. either Obvious or Hidden. Obvious sentences are of four classes: *Zahir*, *Nass*, *Mufassar*, *Muhkam*.

- (1) ***Zahir***\_ those sentences, the meaning of which is obvious or clear, without any assistance from the context (*qarinah*).

(2) *Nass*, a word commonly used for a text of the Qur'an, but in its technical meaning here expressing what is meant by a sentence, the meaning of which is made clear by some word which occurs in it. The following sentence illustrates both *Zahir* and *Nass*: "Take in marriage of such other women as please you, two, three, four wives." This sentence is *Zahir*, because marriage is here declared lawful; it is *Nass*, because the words "one, two, three, four," which occur in the sentence, show the unlawfulness of having more than four wives.

(3) ***Mufassar or explained*** is a sentence which needs some word in it to explain it and make it clear. Thus: "And the angels prostrated themselves, all of them with one accord, save Iblis (Satan)." Here the words "save Iblis" show that he did not prostrate himself. This kind of sentence may be abrogated.

(4) ***Mukham or perspicuous*** is a sentence as to the meaning of which there can be no doubt, and which cannot be controverted, thus: "God knoweth all things." This kind of sentence cannot be abrogated. To act on such sentences without departing from the literal sense is the highest degree of obedience to God's command.

The deduction of arguments, as expressed in the Qur'an, is divided into four sections: *Ibarah*, *Isharah*, *Dalalah*, and *Iqtiza*.

(1) ***Ibarah***, or the plain sentence.

***"Mothers, after they are divorced, shall give suck unto their children two full years, and the father shall be obliged to maintain them and clothe them according to that which is reasonable." (Qur'an 2: 233).***

From this verse two deductions are made. First, from the fact that the word "them" is in the feminine plural, it must refer to the mothers and not to the children; secondly, as the duty of supporting the mother is incumbent on the father, it shows that the relationship of the child is closer with the father than with the mother. Penal laws may be based on a deduction of this kind.

(2) ***Ishirah***, that is, a sign or hint which may be given from the order in which the words are placed; e.g. "Born of him," meaning, of course, the father.

(3) ***Dalalah***, or the argument which may be deducted from the use of some special word in the verse, as:

***"say not to your parents, 'Fie! (Arabic, uff)." (Qur'an 17: 23).***

From the use of the word *uff*, it is argued that children may not beat or abuse their parents. Penal laws may be based on *dalalah*, thus:

***"And they strive after violence on the earth; but God loveth not the abettors of violence." (Qur'an, 5: 69).***

The word translated "strive" is in Arabic literally *yas'auna*, "they run". From this the argument is deduced that as highwaymen wander about, they are included amongst those whom "God loveth not," and that, therefore, the severest punishment may be given to them, for any deduction that comes under the head of *dalalah* is a sufficient basis for the formation of the severest penal laws.

(4) ***Iqtiza***. This is a deduction which demands certain conditions:

***"Whosoever killeth a believer by mischance, shall be bound to free a believer from slavery." (Quran, 4: 94).***

As a man has no authority to free his neighbor's slave, the condition here required, though not expressed, is that the slave should be his own property.

#### 4- MODERN TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In the recent years, discourse analysis has been one of the most popular subjects in linguistic sciences. In order to realize and understand the differences and cohesions of text and context in different discourse, discourse analysis have provided the better understanding, accurate study and different discourse details by scientific framework and procedure. Modern textual analysis owes its

theoretical foundations to post-structuralism; great figures such as Barthes (1974), Derrida (1973) and Foucault (1977) paved the ground for the advent of a new trend in textual analysis. On the common logic of the sign which Barthes (1974) invoked, is that, the work is primary, the text is secondary. To him, the text exists to give stability to something which is presumed to come before it; writing merely helps the thought of the author to gain permanence. To call the text a "servant" of the work's "spiritual glory" is, no doubt intentionally, to portray the relationship between the two, and thus the relation of signified to signifier, in a manner reminiscent of the bourgeois household: writing here takes the position of the 'servant' whose primary function is "correctness", whilst the signified of that writing, the work, takes the place of patriarch, "original, univocal, and definitive".

The signified/work has priority, in the sense of firstness but also of authority and agency, over the signifier/text. Writing, home of the material signifier, is the signified's servant/slave; it follows the orders and at the same time protects and preserves the "transcendental signified", which Derrida and Barthes both gloss in terms of "God, Law and Father".

Throughout Western philosophical tradition, as Derrida argued in a series of ground-breaking works in the late 1960s, this hierarchical division of the sign has been affirmed. It constitutes the basis of notions of meaning, of communication, but also of the self-presence of the human subject. In a manner encapsulated in the seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes's famous phrase 'I think, therefore I am', the subject declares its existence, its self-presence, by proving that its thoughts and its speech occur simultaneously. In that phrase the subject combines the signifier (thought, speech) with the signified (the existence of the thinker) and by so doing proves its ability to produce meaning, and thus proves the uniqueness and the presence in the world of its meaning-making consciousness. Notions of unity, presence, autonomy, originality and Being, notions which can apply to the work, the sign and to the human speaker/thinker, all depend upon this hierarchy. Derrida (1973) studied this tradition particularly in terms of the hierarchy established between speech and writing.

In Barthes's (1981) account the traditional terms "work" and "text" are given new definitions. The term "work" now stands where "text" once stood, as the material book offering up the possibility of meaning, of closure and thus of interpretation. The term "text" now stands for the play of the signifier within the work, its unleashing of the disruptive and yet playful force of writing. Text and work should not be confused, Barthes (1981) wrote:

A work is a finished object, something computable, which can occupy a physical space (take its place, for example, on the shelves of a library); the text is a methodological field. One cannot, therefore, count up texts, at least not in any regular way; all one can say is that in such and such a work, there is, or there isn't, some text. The work is held in the hand, the text in language. (p. 39)

Barthes (1976) distinguished between two kinds of readers: "consumers" who read the work for stable meaning, and "readers" of the text who are productive in their reading, or, to put it in Barthes's terms, are themselves "writers" of the text. Barthes styled this second kind of reading "textual analysis" and contrasts it to more traditional "criticism". He wrote, "Textual analysis is pluralist", 'there are no more critics, only writers" (p. 43-44).

Structural analysis tends to dispense with the question of the meaning of texts in favor of an assessment of the text's relation to the system out of which it is presumed to have been produced. The theory of the text refocused attention on meaning. As opposed to the traditional search for a final meaning, however, Barthes's textual analysis seeks to trace the manner in which the text "explodes and disperses" (1981, p. 135).

## 5- DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

The fact that the theory of intertextuality propounded by Barthes caused what he, in an essay of 1968, famously styled "the death of the Author" (p.142-148) is perhaps one of the more widely known features of intertextual theory. As an event, the "death of the author" has been much bemoaned by those wishing to hold on to the idea that human beings retain a degree of agency, of choice, or at least rational thought in history and society. It is an event, however, which has

frequently been misunderstood, and which needs to be understood within the context of Barthes's characteristic disturbance of apparently "natural" ideas. In an argument bearing many similarities to the one made by Foucault, also in 1968, in his *What is an Author?* (Foucault, 1977, p. 113-138 & 1979, p. 141-160), Barthes demonstrated that the figure of the author is a modern one, in fact a capitalist one, which serves to commodify works by attaching them to a name.

In pre-capitalist eras writing was not attached to the name of the author in the manner that it has been in the "modern" period. The "author function", to employ Foucault's phrase, has a history, and changes as one epoch follows another. The author might seem an unquestionable or even a "natural" figure; Barthes, like Foucault, however, argued that the author is anything but unquestionable or natural.

In the modern market system, the name of the author allows the work to be an item of exchange value, but it also, Barthes (1977) argued, promotes a view of interpretation, and of the relationship between author, work and the reader-critic, in which reading is a form of consumption. The author places meaning in the work, so traditional accounts argue, and the reader-critic consumes that meaning; once this process has been accomplished the reader is free to move on to the next work. This process of interpretation as it is normally understood fosters the capitalist market system because it encourages us to view works as disposable, or at least finite, commodities.

The ideology of the author, that which argues that the author's dominance over the text is unquestionable, depends upon the same kind of logic which we have already seen Barthes attacking with regard to the idea of the "work". Notions of paternity, of authority, of filiation -fathership, ownership, giving birth, familial power – all attach themselves to the name of the author in order to endorse it at the same moment as they express through it dominant social structures of power. Barthes (1977) wrote:

The author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. (p. 145)

Barthes's use of textual and intertextual theory destroyed, therefore, the "myth of filiation": the idea that meaning *comes from* and is, metaphorically at least, the *property of* the individual authorial consciousness. The modern scribe, when s/he writes, is always already in a process of reading and of re-writing. Meaning comes not from the author but from language viewed intertextually. As Barthes (1977) put it in "death of the author":

In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in all its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realistic novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, "performs", and not "me". (p. 143)

Clearly the "death of the author" does not murder all forms of authorial agency, and Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* even wrote of a certain desire *for* the author (p. 27). The intertextual nature of writing and of the text turns both terms of the traditional model, author and critic, into readers. As Barthes (1977) asserted at the conclusion of 'The Death of the Author',

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted ... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (p. 148)



## 6- DEATH OF THE AUTHOR AND QUR'AN

### 6-1-Did Muhammad Author the Quran?

Who authored the Qur'an? Someone must have produced it! After all, how many desert men have stood up in the history of man and given the world a book like the Qur'an? The book has amazing details of past nations, prophets, and religions as well as accurate scientific information unavailable at the time. A brief response from God is:

***“And they say, ‘Legends of the former peoples which he has written down, and they are dictated to him morning and afternoon.’ Say, [O Muhammad], ‘It has been revealed by He who knows [every] secret within the heavens and the earth. Indeed, He is ever Forgiving and Merciful.’”***  
(Quran 25:5-6)

It was well known to his detractors that Muhammad, who was raised among them, never learned how to read or write from the time of his birth. They knew whom he befriended and where he had traveled; they acknowledged his integrity and honesty by calling him ‘Al-Ameen,’ the Reliable, the Trustworthy, the Honest. Only in their revulsion against his preaching did they accuse him – and then it was anything they could dream up: He was accused of being a sorcerer, a poet and even an imposter! They could not make up their minds. God says:

***“Look how they strike for you comparisons; but they have strayed, so they cannot [find] a way.”***  
(Quran 17:47)

It is impossible that Muhammad could have authored Qur'an due to the following reasons:

- First, several occasions presented themselves where he could have fabricated revelation. For example, after the first revelation came, people waited to hear more, but the Prophet did not receive anything new for months. The Meccans began making fun of him, "His Lord has abandoned him!" This continued until the 93rd chapter, Ad-Doha, was revealed. The Prophet could have compiled something and presented it as the latest revelation to end the mockery, but he did not. Also, at one point during his prophethood, some of the hypocrites accused his beloved wife Aisha of being unchaste. The Prophet could have easily fabricated something to free her of blame, but he waited for many excruciating days, all spent in pain, mockery, and anguish, until revelation came from God freeing her from the accusation.
- Second, there is internal evidence within Qur'an that Muhammad was not its author. Several verses criticized him, and were on occasion strongly worded. How can an imposter prophet blame himself when it may run him into the danger of losing the respect, perhaps following, of his followers? Here are some examples:

***“O Prophet! Why do you prohibit [yourself from] what God has made lawful for you, seeking the approval of your wives? And God is Forgiving and Merciful.”*** (Quran66:1)

***“...while you concealed within yourself that which God is to disclose and you feared the people, while God has more right that you fear Him..”*** (Quran 33:43)

***“It is not for the Prophet and those who have believed to ask forgiveness for the polytheists, even if they were relatives, after it has become clear to them that they are companions of Hellfire.”***  
(Quran 9:113)

***“But as for he who came to you striving [for knowledge] while he fears [God], from him you are distracted. No! Indeed, they [these verses] are a reminder.”*** (Quran 80:8-11)

If Muhammad himself authored Qur'an, thus, being a lying imposter, he would have made sure that there was nothing in existence which could jeopardize the gaining of followers and supporters. The fact that Qur'an, on various occasions, reprimands the Prophet in certain issues in which he had made in incorrect judgment is in itself a proof that it was not authored by him. The only allegation ever recorded, was made by the Pagan Arabs, that the Prophet was uttering Qur'an after having been tutored by a man, Christian slave working as blacksmith, called Jabir, or whatever name he had. This is clearly false and irrational based on the following points:

- The fact that the Pagan Arabs claimed the source of Qur'an was a third person called Jabir, actually proves my argument that the pagan Arabs themselves concluded definitely Muhammad could not have produced Qur'an alone.
- Some people suggested that the pagan Arabs were actually attributing the words in Qur'an to Muhammad (PBUH) but not the ideas! In fact, it is almost the opposite. The reason why the Pagan Arabs were amazed is mainly due to the formulation of the words in Qur'an and not just their plain meaning. As we know tales of the old Prophets could be conveyed by storytellers, rules can be pronounced by judges and wise men. But it was not this, rather its entire Arabic composition, especially as Muhammad (PBUH) was not known to be one of the men of poetry, rhetoric or particular eloquence out of the ordinary. This sudden production of this material shocked the Pagan Arabs. They would secretly approach the houses of some Muslims to listen to Qur'an. In one reported occasion two of the pagan leaders bumped into each other and they both said they were mesmerised by some demonic force or witchcraft. They swore to each other never to do it again; such was their rejection of Islam, yet amazement at Qur'an.
- Subsequently, when the Pagan Arabs started to oppose Muhammad (PBUH) and launch a vicious campaign against him in Mecca, in which some of his followers were martyred, why did they not simply go after this "Jabir", if he was the source of Qur'an? That would have ended Muhammad's (PBUH) mission and solved all their problems? In fact nothing, more was ever heard about this man, who is supposed to have inspired Qur'an, if he ever existed. Such allegations are necessarily baseless, absurd and irrational.
- Also, the Quran answered the allegations; the Pagan Arabs did not challenge this position after the Quran asserted that Jabir, being of non-Arabic origin, did not speak clear Arabic. Hence, he could not have had any influence in producing Qur'an.
- There is a clear distinction between *Hadiths* (literal words and composition of the Prophet, but the meaning and the ideas have been divinely inspired) and Qur'an. The recognition of the distinction from the very beginning, in fact, when one of the Arabs tried to compose a verse like Qur'an, he was laughed at by the rest of the Pagan Arabs. There were no reports of the people being awed by the *Hadiths* but only by Qur'an. They were the experts on this field of the language. The decisive text in Arabic clearly shows that the wording, composition and styles of *Hadiths* and Qur'an are fundamentally too distinct as to be from the same author.

## 6-2 Literary Characteristics of the Quran

A systematic literary study of Qur'an should be conducted in accordance with the principles of literary criticism and independently of theological considerations. The issue of the relationship between the theological and the literary aspects of a scripture is a difficult one. The two aspects are linked, but not integrally, which makes it possible or even desirable, to study them independently of each other. That they are linked is obvious from the fact that Qur'an makes use of literary techniques and devices to present its message: it tells stories, cites parables, uses figures of speech, and draws character sketches, for example. That they are not linked integrally needs a little explanation.

Qur'an claims to be inimitable and challenges its opponents to produce a work like it (e.g. 2:23; 11:13; 17:88; 52:33-34). The inimitability later came to be constructed essentially in literary terms, and the theologians made belief in the matchlessness of Qur'an part of a Muslim's faith. In its

historical exposition, the doctrine of inimitability made the literary study of Qur'an a handmaiden to the theological aspect of the scripture. But the doctrine overlooks a crucial fact. The Qur'anic challenge was addressed not to the believers but to the unbelievers, and was not simply denunciation of the unbelievers, but constituted an invitation to them to carefully examine Qur'an and see if it could have been, as they claimed it was, the product of the mind of a man possessed. Irrespective of what conclusion one reaches on the question of Qur'an's origins, one must agree that the underlying assumption of the challenge was that the merit and beauty of Qur'an could be appreciated even by those outside the fold of the faith. And if that is the case, then it would be possible to dissociate the literary study of Qur'an from the theological study of it. (Mustansir, 1986)

For certain purposes it may even be necessary to effect such a dissociation. Perhaps a basic difference between a literary and a theological-legal approach to scripture is that the former looks for continuities, the latter for discontinuities, in the text. Under the assumption of continuity, one looks for links and connections between verses and passages, and only upon failing to find any does one concede that the text is discontinuous. But a typical Muslim theologian or lawyer searches for theological or legal content in Qur'an, and, as soon as he find such content, focuses on it, often in disregard of the context. But in so doing he runs the risk of making serious errors of interpretation.

***This is a noble Qur'ān, [which originates] in a hidden [or well-protected] book, [and which] no one but the pure touch, [and which is] a revelation from the Lord of the universe.  
(Quran, 56:77-80)***

The Arabic language lends itself very readily to this species of composition, and the Arabs of the desert in the present day employ it to a great extent in their more formal orations, while the literary men of the towns adopt it as the recognized correct style, deliberately imitating Qur'an. That the best of Arab writers has never succeeded in producing anything equal in merit to Qur'an itself is not surprising.

Mohammed (PBUH), though, should have been able to challenge even his contemporaries to produce anything like Qur'an, "And if ye are in doubt of what we have revealed unto our servant, then bring a chapter like it. But if ye do it not, and ye surely shall do it not, . . ." is at first sight surprising, but, as Sells (1999) has pointed out, this challenge really refers much more to the subject than to the mere style, to the originality of the conception of the unity of God and of a revelation supposed to be couched in God's own words. The language has the ring of poetry, though no part of Qur'an complies with the demands of Arab meter. The sentences are short and full of half-restrained energy, yet with a musical cadence. The thought is often only half expressed; one feels the speaker has essayed a thing beyond words, and has suddenly discovered the impotence of language, and broken off with the sentence unfinished. There is the fascination of true poetry about these earliest *surahs*. The Qur'anic story moves your heart, fills your eyes with tears, and adds spiritual dimensions, set the best examples for the believers to follow when being confronted with hardships of life. The Qur'anic stories have their distinguishing character. The main purpose of the Quranic story is:

- Correcting the errors and adulteration in the Holy Book.
- Deeming the prophets high and exonerating them from what they were charged with.
- Giving the Moslems exemplars to follow.
- Teaching wisdom and moral lessons.
- Showing that it is only one God who revealed these holy Books.
- Setting the examples of the perished nations for the Moslem. So many could be said in this context, but for the sake of brevity.
- Enhancing and reinforcing the Moslems' will in face of hardships.

## 7- SUMMARY

In the face of all the facts that Qur'an provides, it is evident that it challenges human intellect and explanation and presents itself as a challenge to traditional religion and skeptical scientists. In the light of this, let us consider this claim that it makes:

***If all of humankind and the other intelligent life were to band together to produce the like of this Koran, they would not be able to, even if they backed up each other with help and support (Quran 17:89)***

Based on what was discussed, the possibility of analyzing Qur'an, as a literary text, by employing modern, post-structural methods of textual analysis is vivid. The application of Barthes' "Death of the Author" to Qur'an implicate that, it is authored by a person in a particular social, economic and cultural context. The possibility of Qur'an's authorship by the prophet is rejected logically, since the "Birth of the Reader", that is, the diversity of interpretation seems to be unappreciable.

Qur'an, as the greatest miracle of the prophet, is a sacred book which offers the life rules and programs for all the peoples of all the historical eras. Based on Qur'an itself, the *ayahs* can be classified into two major classes; "Mohkamaat" and "Motashbehat". "Mohkamaat" are those *ayahs* which express the main themes of Islam. They are quite direct and to-the-point and in their case diversity of interpretation is forbidden but analysis of "Motashbehat" is another story; they help the reader improve his perception of "Mohkamaat". In this respect, "Birth of the Reader" is applicable as there are various interpretations in the literature; *Tafsir-e-almizan and Tafsir-e-Nemuneh*. Hence, the application of Barthes' "Death of the Author" can utmost be applied to "Motashbehat" *ayahs* as peripheral to "Mohkamaat".

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