



The Role of Arabism in the Literary Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an: A Critical Study of Amīn al-Khūlī, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and Mohammed Arkoun

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to examine the position of Arabism in the interpretive encounter with the Holy Qur'an in contemporary Islamic thought by focusing on three prominent thinkers in this field. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical method. The literary approach to Qur'anic interpretation represents one of the most influential intellectual movements in contemporary Arab thought. This approach was pioneered by thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh, Taha Hussein, Amin al-Khouli, Shukri Muhammad Ayyad, Bint al-Shati, and later developed by their students, including Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah, Mahdi Allam, and Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd. The central claim of this movement is that the Qur'an is the greatest literary work that has immortalized the Arabic language. Consequently, the primary purpose of Qur'anic interpretation should not be viewed as the pursuit of understanding, guidance, or divine mercy for humanity. Rather, the Qur'an should be approached as a cultural phenomenon. This perspective reduces the status of the Holy Qur'an from a revealed book—traditionally regarded in Islamic civilization as an active guide for realizing humanity's divine potential—to a cultural artifact that merely reflects the characteristics of Arab-Islamic civilization. It suggests that the study of this divine book is not a matter of faith, but rather a literary endeavor open to any Arabic speaker or anyone interested in the Arabic language. Accordingly, individuals are free to approach the Qur'an from their own standpoint and pursue their personal intellectual purposes. The main objective of this article is to explore the role of the cultural features of Arabism in the interpretive engagement with the Holy Qur'an and to critically assess the implications of such an approach.

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1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Within Islamic civilization, Arabic culture has continually occupied a central position due to its role as the locus in which divine revelation was realized in human history, and because the Arabic language—serving as a universally comprehensible instrument—functions as the linguistic medium of the Holy Qur'an. However, the encounter of Islamic societies with the sweeping transformations of Western civilization, which reshaped the logic of their interaction with the non-Western world, led to profound developments in both thought and practice. One of these was the Arab Renaissance (al-Nahḍa), which became the source of significant intellectual change within Arab-Islamic societies. Its influence extended beyond the social, political, and economic spheres to bring about deeper theoretical transformations.

A renewed connection was established between literary sciences—particularly those addressing the aesthetic dimensions of texts and their interpretation—and literary criticism within rhetorical studies. This revival, emerging after the Arab Renaissance, was advanced by Muslim intellectuals such as Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asadābādī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, and Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, who sought to reread the textual heritage of the Islamic world. Foundational works such as 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's *Asrār al-Balāgha* and *Dalā'il al-I'jāz* were once again adopted as core texts in the Arab Maghreb.

Literary exegesis (al-tafsīr al-adabī), according to Ibn Khaldūn, stands in contrast to narrative and transmitted exegesis (al-tafsīr al-riwāyī wa al-naqlī) (Ibn Khaldūn, 1988: 407). In this approach, literary and linguistic sciences constitute the primary foundations for interpretation. Compared with other exegetical approaches—such as theological or narrative ones—this perspective places less emphasis on faith in the sacredness of the text. The Qur'an, in this view, must first be approached as a cultural product and an Arabic text, rather than as a divine guide for humanity (al-Khūlī, 1933: 365–366). The principal aim of exegesis, therefore, is said to arise from a purely literary interpretation, unbound by external theological or doctrinal commitments (al-Khūlī, 1933: 367). Some scholars employed this method to pursue “an understanding and discernment of the rational, emotional, and artistic values present within the text that the author did not explicitly articulate” (Khalaf Allāh, 1999: 45). This orientation focuses primarily on the linguistic and human aspects of the Qur'anic text. The doctrine of Qur'anic inimitability (i'jāz) is emphasized in its earthly and human dimensions—especially in the eloquence and aesthetic excellence of its Arabic expression—presented as the foundation of Arab cultural identity.

Pioneers of this movement criticized what they perceived as a pathology among many exegetes who, according to some thinkers, “have neglected the primary purpose of the Qur'an—guidance—and have instead preoccupied themselves with peripheral matters such as grammar, rhetoric, and theological or jurisprudential disputes” (Rashīd Riḍā, Vol. 1: 17–18, cited in Karīmīniyā, 2005: 54). In response, figures such as al-Khūlī proposed a distinct method that centered on the Qur'an's literary dimensions. Al-Khūlī argued that “the literary study of the Qur'an is the first duty of any Qur'anic researcher—even if their opinions oppose the Qur'an or they do not seek guidance from it. A genuine Arab recognizes the Qur'an as the greatest Arabic book (kitāb al-'arabiyya al-akbar) without necessarily grasping its meanings or believing in it” (al-Khūlī, 1949).

2. Methodology

Since the central aim of this study is to examine the status of Arabness (al-'urūba)—and specifically the Arabic language—within the contemporary exegetical engagement with the Holy Qur'an, and to assess the implications of such an approach through critical evaluation, data were collected using a documentary research method. The data were then analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach.

3. Findings

This study has explored the role of Arab identity (al-‘urūba) within the literary approach to interpreting the Holy Qur’an in contemporary Islamic thought. It examined the ideas of Amīn al-Khūlī, as a pioneer in this field, alongside Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and Mohammed Arkoun, who each sought to reinterpret the Qur’an through the lens of its Arab identity and the Lebenswelt (lifeworld) of its revelation, emphasizing its cultural and linguistic dimensions.

The main finding of the research is that the linguistic and human capacities of the Arabic language have become central to contemporary engagements with the Qur’an. Through the revival of language-based cultural identity, modern Arab thinkers have sought to distinguish their exegetical efforts from those of non-Arab Muslims. In doing so, they have first divested the Qur’an of its epistemic authority, and subsequently treated it as a mirror reflecting the culture of the Arab era of revelation, arguing that its epistemic centrality cannot extend beyond that historical and linguistic context.

Key similarities and differences among the three thinkers include:

Linguistic Emphasis: All three recognized the significance of Arabic in Qur’anic interpretation, though their methodological applications differ.

Historical Context: Abū Zayd and Arkoun emphasized the historical circumstances of revelation, with Arkoun adopting a more radical stance that questions the divine nature of the text.

Reform and Tradition: While al-Khūlī leaned toward a traditionalist respect for the Qur’an’s literary heritage, Abū Zayd and Arkoun pursued reform and critical analysis, challenging conventional hermeneutics. From a critical standpoint, the role of Arab identity within the literary approach to Qur’anic interpretation reveals several challenges:

Diminishment of Spiritual Values: This approach risks reducing emphasis on the Qur’an’s spiritual and theological dimensions by focusing predominantly on linguistic beauty and literary structure.

Neglect of Circumstances of Revelation: Literary criticism may overlook the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), thereby neglecting the social and ethical context essential to understanding the Qur’an’s message.

Humanization and Relativization of the Qur’an: This method may render the Qur’an a human cultural text, challenging its sanctity and its transhistorical and transcultural universality.

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the literary approach to Qur’anic interpretation, as developed by modern Arab intellectuals such as Amīn al-Khūlī, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and Mohammed Arkoun, represents both an intellectual renewal and a methodological rupture within Islamic thought. By emphasizing the linguistic and aesthetic dimensions of the Qur’an, these thinkers sought to reassert the role of al-‘urūba (Arabness) and the Arabic language as central elements of cultural identity in the modern Arab world. However, this revival came at a significant cost: the reduction of the Qur’an’s transcendent and revelatory character to a purely human and historical artifact. While such an approach contributed to the development of new hermeneutical tools, it simultaneously risked detaching the Qur’an from its spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical purposes. The study thus concludes that although the literary method enriches our understanding of the Qur’an’s linguistic structure and its aesthetic miracles, it must remain integrated with theological, moral, and historical dimensions to preserve the text’s universal and divine authority. A balanced hermeneutic—one that harmonizes literary insight with faith-based understanding—offers the most promising path for engaging the Qur’an in both its human and sacred aspects.

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اطلاعات مقاله	چکیده
نوع مقاله: مقاله پژوهشی	مقاله حاضر درصدد بررسی «جایگاه عرب‌گرایی در مواجهه تفسیری با قرآن کریم در فکر معاصر اسلامی» با تمرکز بر سه اندیشمند عرب در این زمینه است. روش تحقیق به شیوه توصیفی - تحلیلی خواهد بود. رویکرد ادبی به تفسیر قرآن یکی از پرنفوذترین جریان‌های فکری در فکر معاصر عربی به پیش‌گامی اندیشمندانی نظیر محمد عبده، طه حسین، امین الخولی، شکری محمد عیاد، بنت الشاطی و شاگردان آنها نظیر محمد احمد خلف الله، مهدی علام و نصر حامد ابوزید است. مهم‌ترین ادعای این جریان، آن است که قرآن، عظیم‌ترین اثر ادبی است که زبان عربی را جاودانه ساخته، از این رو نباید نخستین و مهم‌ترین غرض تفسیر قرآن را فهم، هدایت و رحمت الهی نسبت به بشر تلقی کرد، بلکه قرآن را باید به‌مثابه یک امر فرهنگی (The Cultural) شناخت. این رویکرد، قرآن کریم را از یک کتاب وحیانی که همواره در تمدن اسلامی به‌عنوان راهنمای فعالی در تحقق ظرفیت‌های الهی انسان شناخته می‌شد، به ابژه‌ای برای مطالعه خصلت‌های فرهنگی تمدنی نظیر تمدن عربی - اسلامی تقلیل داده و چنین می‌نمایاند که مطالعه این کتاب الهی مسئله‌ای ایمانی نیست و هر عرب زبان و یا علاقه‌مند به زبان عربی لازم است به مطالعه ادبی این کتاب بزرگ عربی روی آورد و پس از آن، هر کس برای هر مقصودی که دارد می‌تواند به قرآن مراجعه و مقصود خود را دنبال کند. مسئله اصلی در مقاله آن است که مکان تفسیر خصلت‌های فرهنگی «عروبه» (عرب‌گرایی) در مواجهه تفسیری با قرآن کریم را مورد تأمل قرار دهد و با اعمال ارزیابی انتقادی، پیامدهای چنین رویکردی را بررسی نماید.

کلیدواژه‌ها:

امین الخولی، تفسیر قرآن، رویکرد ادبی، زبان عربی، محمد ارکون، نصر حامد ابوزید.

استناد: طاهری کل کشوندی، مسلم؛ کشاورز، زهرا سادات (۱۴۰۴). جایگاه عرب‌گرایی در مواجهه تفسیری با قرآن کریم در دوره معاصر؛ مورد مطالعه امین الخولی، نصر حامد ابوزید و محمد ارکون. نظریه‌های اجتماعی متفکران مسلمان، ۱۵ (۳): ۱۳۱ - ۱۵۰.

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