A STUDY ON THE SUFI INTERPRETATION OF QUR’ĀN AND THE THEORY OF HERMENEUTIC

Maryam Musharraf

Abstract

Sufism was emerged due to an introspective approach to religion, which sought a strong emotive impulse in the relation between God and Human Being. With such an outlook, sufis started interpreting Qur’ān according to their religious experience, and created a special discourse which unveiled their state of mind in their relationship with God. Called as “the Language of Truth”, this interpretative discourse was mainly based upon individual and subjective aspects that could even sound provocative to many of formal clerics. However, sufis’ peculiar subjective methods of interpreting Qur’ān, find compatibility with the Hermeneutic science of modern time in many ways. Discovering the liberalizing instruments of language is a common feature of great masters of old times, al-Hallaj and al-Tirmidhi, etc., and prominent figures of our time, Ricoeur and Husserl.

Keywords: Qur’ān, Sufi commentary of Qur’ān, Hermeneutic

Sufism, dating back to the second century, is an important Islamic movement which roots can be sought in Prophet’s closest people lifestyles and approaches. That is why great thinkers could not entirely dismiss the appeal of this rich and powerful movement and many scholars have even admired it. However, a large group of Islamic scholars have rejected ‘Sufism’ over the centuries.

Sufi mystical approach towards religion and the Qur'ān could not be sanctioned and supported by all official scholars those who summarized Islam in religious duties performance. Regarding Sufism,
faith is like a seed kernel and Islam (Shari'a implementation) as its skin. Giving originality to Qur'an's inner did not cause Sufism to be oblivious to Sharia or religion appearance. Sufism tried to prove the compatibility of its attitudes and thoughts with Prophet Muhammad thoughts and Qur'an's content. In their view, implementation of Shari'a and religious rules in life is the first step to reach the faith’. Faith, called inner by Sufis, is the essence of religion. Sufis were not convinced by the apparent meaning (al-Zahir) of the verses, but they sought to discover the hidden meanings of the Qur'an's phrases. So we are dealing with two different thinking: inner method and outer method of interpretation and explaining of religion.1

This confrontation is reflected in two different approaches towards the interpretation of the Qur'an; although exoteric clerics could not deny the underlying layers of the Qur'an pertaining to meaning, they were arguing with Gnostics over how to interpret it. According to the clerics, interpretation is not a personal matter, and the reader's mindset should not interfere with how the Qur'an is explained; therefore, the approach of exoteric knowledge experts towards the meaning of a verse was purely objective. They either tried to explain lexical and linguistic issues of the scriptures or explained the historical context of the revelation of a verse. Hence, their focus was mainly on the scripture objectivity and the historical and objective references apparent from the verse. Gnostics had a personal approach to the Qur'an, and added an esoteric dimension to the interpretation which arose from neither the historical outward of matters nor signification reasons; in fact, it was the outcome of personal and inward experiences. It was rather an epistemological and purely inward approach that left Islamic experts in a fury because, as

1 For more detailed explanation refer to:

A Study on the Sufi Interpretation of Qur’ān and The Theory of Hermeneutic

the most credible authorities on the Qur’ān, they felt alarmed to see such spiritual power.

For example, the reference of the verse “and strengthened him with forces you could not see” (Q 9:40) is purely objective and historical according to exoteric experts’ view. They think that this verse refers to the confrontation between the Prophet and his enemies. They believe that because Prophet Muḥammad hid with Abu Bakr in a cave, God sent angels to help them. It is also referring to the angels that helped Muslims in the Battle of Badr and led to the defeat of the non-believers.

Nonetheless, according to the Gnostics, this unseen army is God’s latent help to Gnostics to prevent them from losing their mystical path. Like an army of Ṣabr (patience) and Tawakkul (trust and dependence) as well as granting stamina to the Prophet in times of epiphany it seems as if the Gnostic is having a battle with sins, temptations and enthusiasms and he might be defeated, so God sends spiritual forces to support him.

In exoteric and historical interpretations, events are presented in a sequential order, which yields a narrative structure for speech as a result of the rational cohesion of matters. We can see such a system in Qur’ānic stories (qiṣṣā). The development of events puts them into a continuum; each link, episode or part of the structure is complementary to the rest. There is such a state in Tafsir-al-Māthār, which more or less deals with the historical dimension of the verses, the reason for their revelation and their historical backgrounds, adding a dimension of historical realism to scriptures.

5 Mīybulī, ibīd.
which are rooted in real events in the world and are a combination and companion of narrative elements. In this case, the interpreter faces a horizontal structure and contributes to the creation of such structure.

In mystical interpretation the exegete is not trying to discover and explain the relation between the Scripture and the real world. He is not concerned with the continuum of events and or putting them together; however, he endeavors to explain the meaning of the verse based on his own religious and inward experiences. For example, there are lots of cases for the interpretation of verses 1 to 10 of sura al-Najm, and a critical question in this verse has been the meaning of the "Star" in it. As Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d.148/765) [the sixth Imam of Shi'i] said, that 'Star' is the place for revelation and camouflage in insightful hearts.

Therefore, interpretation would bear a non-realistic and meta(beyond)-historical aspect. Cutting off realistic links to the external world would let the Mystic freely articulate, and if we consider the scripture as a system of signs, the Gnostics would like to search for signified signs inside words regardless of considering objective references. Hence, there is no fixed meaning, for the inner layer of interpretation coupled with the signification of the sign, which is the essence of the verse, could vary based on the Gnostic’s experience. By reducing realism, the interpreter enters a surreal arena in which he is able to contribute to creating meaning or he can even create it altogether.

Unlike exoteric legalists, Gnostics not only seek inner meaning but also explain that inner meaning with a language different from exoteric experts. They interpreted this new language as the "Language of Truth". From their point of view, providing literal accounts and lexical meaning and background of verses might be fruitful for the public, but it would not satisfy the elite (al-Khawāṣ).

---

But what caused the fury of exoteric scholars? Is it because these inner accounts are reminders of non-Muslim approaches such as Philo’ making them feel threatened? No, because Muslims have utilized Jewish and Christian commentaries to interpret the Qur’ān’s scriptures and narratives, which was not forbidden. What feared exoteric experts more than the influence of the interpretations of Christians and Jews and even Zoroaster (zirādusht) and Manichaeism (mānuwiyah) was their power being at stake. They wanted to assign exoteric experts as the sole heirs of the Prophet’s tradition and as the sole intercessor between God and people after the Prophet’s era. As the most credited and exclusive experts in Qur’ānic knowledge, they felt threatened by the advent of these new interpreters.

Gnostics added a personal aspect to exoteric interpretation. Personalizing interpretation would bring freedom and subjectivity to the realm of interpretation, and that is what feared experts and still fears them. Therefore, we have two language approaches for the Qur’ān. These two interpretive approaches had highly affected each other, for example, the Sunni commentary. of Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm by Ḩāfīz ʿAlī (d. 1270/1854) and the Shi`ite exegesis of al-Mizān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān byMuhammad Ḥusayn Taḥātabā’ī (d.1321/1981), both important and valid non-mystic tafsīrs, have been highly influenced by Sufis. In particular, Shi`a tafsīrs were far affected by the spirit of mystical commentaries. A prominent example is the great commentary of al-Muḥīṭ al-‘Azām by Ḥeydar ‘Amuli (b.720/1320), a medium between Ibn ‘Arabī Sufism and Shi`ite thought. However, this intermixture does not preclude us to consider the two methods and two interpretive languages as two different facts and attempt to encounter with each of them through a certain way.

Exoteric approach explains the signs of the scripture by considering the objectivity of the scriptures and external references. Furthermore, esoteric approach is formed based on the mindset of the interpreter, which is the fruit of divine inspirations.

---

7 Philo of Alexandria(d.50 CE), he used allegory to harmonize Greek philosophy with Jewish tradition.
8 Author of tafsīr
9 Shi`i Sufi and Mufassir
Gnostics did not content themselves to pray in seclusion. They- at least among some intellect segment of the society (and not the public)- intended to propagate this esoteric language which was dubbed as the language of truth. They started a language reform to break the exclusive power of legalists, and decreed that those who understand the unique ration of Sufism are the true experts who truly understand the Qur’ān. Thus, Sufism language became a war machine against outward limitations and scholastic power by deconstructing grammatical paradigms. This was the kind of interpretation that was named deduction (al-Istinbat) by Ja’far al-Ṣādiq; it meant extracting water from a spring, or eliciting truth from the Gnostic’s heart. But it was in the late third century when Abu ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulami (d.412/1021) authored and compiled the first collection of mystical interpretations based on passages by hundred well-known Gnostics’. During these 200 years, many Gnostics were tortured and accused of blasphemy or insanity or even lost their lives for the utilization of the unique language of the Gnostics. Al-Sulami named his interpretational compilation as Ḥaqāiq al-Tafsir. He officially spoke of the language of truth against the language of clericalism in the introduction and regarded those who speak this language at superior ranks compared to exoteric experts and traditional high level interpreters. Maybe that is why Ibn Taymiyyah (d.728/1328) considered reading his book as an act of blasphemy. However, this new language was gradually welcomed by some layers of the religious society because there was a rational link between the semantic layers of this interpretation and the Qur’ān’s scripture.

Another example would clarify. This one is related to the time when God spoke to Moses (Q 17:18) and asked him, “What do you have in your hand?” “This is my stick which I rely on,” answers Moses. What is interesting is the question posed by God. Does not he know what he has in his hand? Most interpreters have given accounts of this matter; majorly, they consider this as eloquence and have reasons for the manner of God’s communication. For instance, al-Tabarî (d. 310/923) stated that God wanted to remove Moses’ fear. But Gnostics provide different account for these verses. They

say that Moses' stick is a sign for relying on another. In mystical interpretations, Moses, himself, is the symbol of the perfect human being and God's saint. Mansūr al-Ḥallāj (d.309/922) says that God wanted to notify Moses of the risk of relying on others and shows him that any support except upon God is fake and dangerous in essence and therefore, manifested the stick as a snake upon him. Later, however, God gave him assurance, asking him not to fear it and pick it up. This account implies an indirect critic against scholars' reliance on their knowledge and the pride that they feel because of that.

Mystical interpreters utilized an approach that is more or less like the coded and metaphorical interpretations customary of the Bible. In this approach, it is common to use polysemic characteristics of the words, as well as metaphors to widen the semantic horizon. In this case, a word becomes a sign for something else based on its similarity. Or, different implications of the word are used; an approach that was observed by Mu'tazilites. Nonetheless, mystical interpretation has input a huge illustrative power into interpretive studies. Temperate Gnostics like Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (1072/465), on the other hand, have based their mystical interpretation on implications based on similarity or pun or synecdoche. So it would be easier to comprehend. It is more possible to explain the difference between historical interpretation and linguistic interpretation considering the hermeneutic theory of Ḥākīm al-Tirmidhī11 (300/912) and ʿAbd al-Qahir al-Jurjānī12 (471/1078). Jurjānī proposed the theory of semantic dimensions and polysemy (i.e. using words which are written the same but mean different), paving the way for something more than historical interpretation in Qur'ānic knowledge. Tirmidhī showed that any word could possess multiple meanings; taking the polysemic character of the words into consideration adds to the richness of interpretative texts13. For example, the word al-
\textbf{nūr} (light) has been used in the Qur’an with different meanings such as God’s words, the existence of God, the Prophet, wisdom or Gabriel. In \textit{Tafsir Kashf al-Asnār}, 18 different meanings for the word “\textit{al-nūr}” have been introduced, all of which are credible. Tirmidhī wrote a book on this matter and tried to prove that the interpreter travels from the surface layer to different significations of the word and prefers one meaning considering the context of the word and his personal status. Therefore, his journey is from surface to essence and vice versa. Besides, ‘\textit{Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī} highlighted the importance of context in determining the signified and proved that metaphors should be decoded only by considering the whole scripture, as a painting is a combination of lines and colors and the integrity of the painting is the result of interactions among painting elements. By proposing the theory of \textit{al-Nizām} (coherence) and \textit{al-Sitāgah} (Texture), Jurjānī shed light on the structure and meaning of the text of Qur’an and highlighted the importance of context in metaphorical and polysemic interpretation of Qur’an. His ideas brought incredible changes in Islamic hermeneutics because he stressed that we cannot assess a word separate from its context and text.

According to the hermeneutic theory of this era, the difference between historical - lexical interpretation; and metaphorical - polysemic interpretation, i.e. two different and prominent interpretative approaches, could be highlighted. The interpretative theory bears a lot of similarity to the hermeneutic ideas of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (d. 2005).

The hermeneutic theory presented by Ricoeur bears a lot of similarities to Jurjānī’s exegetical ideas. According to Ricoeur, the most fundamental provision for creativity in sentences is the utilization of polysemic character of the words. Through the semiology of a sign, the limitations of the word could be determined. The semiology of a sign determines the dimension of the word and its domain. In fact, it determines the semantic feature of the word in the language system.

\footnote{Miybadi, ibid. Vol.2, p. 786-787.}

But he believes, as Jurjānī does, that a word cannot be decoded unless it is put in the syntactic combination of a sentence, and in general, in the whole context. A new meaning in context is the product of the interaction of semantic realms. In other words, it is as if a semantic realm in a whole text substitutes another realm. In the Moses example, his stick in the realm of traditional interpretation, with its semi-historical context, is recounting of the fact that Moses is a shepherd and also refers to his incident with sorcerers. In the second realm, Moses is the code for any saint who gradually reduces his materialistic dependencies on his spiritual path. Therefore, a set of signs replaces another in order to create a new semantic context. In the first semantic context, Moses’s stick is for the fear of sorcerers, and in the second context it is for Moses’s fear itself.

In the above interpretation, we were separated from the historical aspects of the narrative and ignored the time and location and other objective references and entered a subjective realm for interpretation. Yet, it is still possible to explain the link between objective and subjective realms by means of a rational approach. We could find similarities between the stick and any kind of support via rational interaction.

In this kind of interpretation, we still rely on analogy and similarity which acts as a clue and leads us to the desired meaning. As we saw, the stick was a sign of support for anything except God. Yet, this method does not suffice to express and transfer religious experience; a kind of experience which seems difficult and rather impossible to convey to others, because it reflects the inward status of individuals. Figurative language could not solely be enough for this purpose. We do not mean to downplay the power of illustrative and metaphorical interpretations of the Qur’ān and its important role in the development of Qur’ānic knowledge. But in the realm of spiritual experience, relying on similarity and theories of analogy seems inadequate. Because these theories still possess the viewpoints of rationality and objectivity, and therefore, do not leave any chance for the reader’s mind to explore. Sufism breaks the rules of language based on rationality and tradition and tries to create a more flexible and passionate dialogue.

It takes a series of discourses to analyze all linguistic tropes
and elegances that they used to break the habitual language, but as an example, we shall study the interpretation of land and sea in following verse:

“Allah is the One Who enables you to travel through the land and the sea” (Q 10:22)

In mystical interpretations, land refers to works of devotion and worship, while the sea is a symbol of rapture and ecstasy and refers to higher levels of mystical experience.

Gnostics have put a higher level of essentially unexplainable spiritual experience in the context of language and have widened the language domain extensively. In reading the Qur’an, a Gnostic accesses deeper semantic layers of the scripture that is inaccessible via rational thought because this realm is of different dimensions of perception and is a product of revelation and contemplation. In this case, he not only did not use metaphors or puns intentionally, but he also did not cross from sign to what is signified or from scripture to perception of meaning by means of similarity. The meaning of the scripture has been revealed to him through a vision and in an uncanny way.

There are numerous examples of such mystical interpretations in those made of disconnected letters seen at the beginnings of sūras in the Qur’an. We see an absolute floating of meanings and, as language articulation is the product of the Gnostic’s condition, perceiving his interpretation itself therefore requires a hermeneutic cycle – a kind of cycle that makes it impossible to replicate his experience except the way he did. The intention and purpose of the Gnostic as the person reading and interpreting it is a fixed one, but it is impossible for us to attain that. Therefore, the interpretation and perception of such sophisticated texts are possible only if we ignore the intention of the author and try to play our role in this creative game.

Thus, by means of language articulation and interpretation, Sufism played a dangerous game that ultimately led to the most sophisticated and complex kind of Qur’an commentary. The language of such exegeses paved the way for creations such as works

\[16\] Al-Sulamī, Ḥaqa‘iq al-Tafsīr, vol. 1, 298; vol. 2, 126.
of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (d. 672/1273) and Ibn al-ʿArabī (d.638/1240). They owe a huge amount of their terminology to mystical interpretations of the Qurʾān and Gnostics’ writings in the past. For example, in interpreting the first letter (al-Aʾlīf) in the word Allāh (God), Ibn al-ʿArabī states that it is a symbol of God’s independency and non-attachment, because it is not attached to any other letter in the word. Therefore, Ibn al-ʿArabī proposes that al-ʾAlīf is a symbol of God’s richness; He does not depend on any other creature, while every other thing depends on Him. This idea is essentially from Hallâj’s interpretation of “Bism Allāh” or in the name of God which appeared in al-Sulami’s Ḥaqīq al-Tafsīr.

So far, three approaches to interpretation have been introduced: (a) the objective and historical approach (b) the linguistic and metaphorical approach; and (c) a purely subjective and personal approach. Although the characteristics of mystical interpretation are mainly considered in the third approach, all three approaches are utilized for mystical commentaries of the Qurʾān. Each one of these highlights a unique realm of perception. In the first two, we are seeking explanation, whereas the third approach is related to understanding. Many years ago, late in the nineteenth century, German philosophers Schleiermacher (d.1834) and Dilthey (d.1911) addressed the differences between explanation and understanding in hermeneutic approaches. According to Dilthey, explaining a text (i.e., describing what is said) is different from understanding a text (that it, what is intended by the author). He argues that understanding is related to the individual’s spiritual aspects. Schleiermacher and Dilthey have contributed by adding subjective and personal factors to hermeneutic sciences. Nonetheless, they did not deny the historical knowledge. However, it was Husserl (German philosopher, d. 1938) who took epistemology to a whole new level by adding pure subjective dimensions.

According to his work, hermeneutics does intend not to explain...
objective facts, but rather idealize interpretations according to the interpreters’ state of mind. He argues that explaining a text is only one way of giving an account of the world and giving discipline to the chaotic stream of experiences. Explanation is necessary to get familiar with a text. Yet, the mindset of the interpreter (the reader of the text) is missing here, and the interpreter has to bind to objective facts. Therefore, he cannot separate from the time and place of the text origins. According to Husserl, explaining a text only leads to the diminution of the comprehension of the text and therefore, is harmful for understanding. In this kind of interpretation, a non-humanistic account is given for something that is humanistic and the reader of the interpretation cannot study himself and achieve a deeper realization of the Self – a kind of experience that is the goal of any interpretation: understanding of the self. In his famous lecture in Vienna (1935), Husserl argues that the world (lebenswelt) is a spiritual structure inside our historical existence and life. Therefore, it is useless for someone focusing on the soul (al-Rūḥ) to seek anything further than a spiritual account; it would thus be useless to provide an accurate explanation.\footnote{See Gary Brent Madison, \textit{The Hermeneutics of post modernity studies in phenomenology and existential philosophy}, (Indiana: University Press, 1990), p.10-16.}

This viewpoint is valid for all kind of arts. For instance, by listening to the Passion of Saint John by Bach, we can realize ourselves in it. We can replicate our joys and pains and experiences in it and that is the value of masterpieces – they help us to figure ourselves out and thus achieve a higher understanding of ourselves through someone else’s experience. It is fine to have more historical and narrative details on the story of Christ and his crucifixion (ṣalb al-Maṣīh); however, these all merely set the background for understanding Bach’s masterpiece and bear no more value. These are all necessary for introduction, but not enough to perceive Bach’s work. If it were enough, everyone should have a fixed understanding of Bach’s masterpiece, yet we see quite the contrary. They deeper their spiritual experience, the deeper the can relate to Bach’s art and it would be more joyful as well. This experience of history and understanding is what Husserl phrased as \textit{lebenswelt}, or the dynamic world. Even understanding the differences, distance and strangeness
A Study on the Sufi Interpretation of Qur'an and The Theory of Hermeneutic

towards a masterpiece would bring about a deeper understanding of the self and it is the interpreter's task to deepen this aspect of understanding.

Husserl's approach is most fitting for understanding mystical interpretations, because a Gnostic is trying to explain himself through the text. By reading a text, a Gnostic achieves an understanding that is the product of revelation and contemplation; a realm of understanding which is not accessible through pure reason. In such a case, a Gnostic is not only detached from his time and location, but he also goes beyond the understanding through polysemy and metaphors. Here, there is a complete floatation of meanings. Here, his interpretation is beyond the common ration of language, and that is why mystical interpretations and texts need explanation and interpretation themselves. Ibn 'Ata' al-Adami (309/921), a close friend of Hallâj, compares this kind of understanding to rain, which streams in all lands (i.e., all hearts) and every part of the soil is fertilized according to its capacity and spiritual understanding.23

According to Hirsch, the intent and deliberation of the Gnostic may be fixed for these complex texts, but reaching to and replicating that intuitive moment is impossible for a common reader. Therefore, we went beyond historical and metaphorical arenas and entered a subjective arena. In interpreting the Qur'anic primordial covenant, "Am I not your Creator and Nurturer? They replied yes." (Q7:172) Hallâj states, "He (God Himself) is both the speaker and the listener"24. Hallâj, in interpreting 'Bali' (Yes) in that same story, states, "The speaker is of you and separate from you and respondent is different from you"25.

In such interpretive accounts, we do not have a clue to exactly understand the speaker's experience. Therefore, we have to interpret his words once again for ourselves. In this manner, interpretation

is to appropriate an alien world. Interpretation is a battle against alienation. Text interpretation is synchronization of the intent of the text to here and now, and this intent is not necessarily for the writer but for anyone accompanying it. Text asks the reader to interfere, and considers the reader’s mindset as important. Therefore, this semantic understanding of the text is deep and dynamic, rather than static and defunct. Exoteric clerics are opposing Gnostics for this liberating interpretation.

Rüzbihan Baqâlî (606/1209), a famous Gnostic and author of a great commentary of the Qur’an in which he points out the explanations and interpretations of Gnostics’ words, the unique language of Gnostics and their ongoing battle with clerics on language. In the introductory of this commentary, he also explains that Sufism has always suffered the attacks of esoteric clericalism and their tortures and incarceration because in Rüzbihan’s view, clerics are not content to the domain of their own work. Meanwhile, they lack the capacity of higher levels of understanding; therefore, they feel threatened by Sufism. Hence, they have always opposed it.

Rüzbihan classifies Sufism writings into three distinct categories and names a unique language for each one of them. The first category are those related to customs of praying, which clerics approve because it is solely rooted in the Qur’an and Ḥadîth. The second category is the books and writings written in principles of Sufism; something between the Qur’an and Ḥadîth. This is clear for those who understand the truth. According to him, “these knowledge are obvious in the Qur’an and Ḥadîth, but they are just codes and signs; they are not known but to the faithful, because (such knowledge) is the essence of the Qur’an. Exoteric followers cannot seek anything more than Shari’a in it (the Qur’an) (i.e., they have solely become faithful, but are estranged to the truth of the religion). The third category, he says, is the writings of possessors of the knowledge (Ūlū al-ʿIlm). Rüzbihan says that “Ūlū al-ʿIlm” (Q 3:18) are the faithful (Sufism followers).

“Thus, they have three kinds of language: first is the language of soberness or the knowledge of sciences; the second is the language

---

Ricoeur, ibid. p.186.
of power, also called the knowledge of monotheism. The third is the language of intoxication or which is called the secret, hidden and paradox (Shatih). 27.

“The language of intoxication is strange for them; this third language is for the drunken followers of Sufism trying to see hidden obstacles, and if they speak of it, clerics would get furious and shout and attack Sufis.” 28

Therefore, Sufis were aware of the different realms of understanding and its liberating and flexible characteristics. In this case, interpretation is a struggle for freedom and a battle against alienation. Now we know why Gnostics insisted on mystical interpretation despite all struggles. Their approach towards Qur'anic scriptures leads to a hermeneutic cycle that eradicates the soulless univocalism; a battle that reduces the univocalism and ideological power of the clerics and brings polyphony to interpretation which is more liberating. Mystical hermeneutics is an effort to liberate the mind and language from self-centered and autocratic claims of those who only accept their own account of religious scriptures and recognize it as the sole savior; a battle which is still unfolding.

28 Râzbihân Bâlî, ibid.