



the | inimitable | qur'an

The Qur'an's Unique Literary Form

By Hamza Andreas Tzortzis

1. Introduction

“Read in the Name of your Lord”.¹ These were the first few words of the Qur’an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over fourteen hundred years ago. Muhammad, who was known to have been in retreat and meditation in a cave outside Mecca², had received the first few words of a book that would have a tremendous impact on the world of Arabic literature.³ Not being known to have composed any piece of poetry and not having any special rhetorical gifts,⁴ Muhammad had just received the beginning of a book that would deal with matters of belief, law, politics, ritual, spirituality, and economics⁵ in an ‘entirely new literary form’. The popular historian Karen Armstrong states,

“It is as though Muhammad had created an entirely new literary form... Without this experience of the Koran, it is extremely unlikely that Islam would have taken root.”⁶

This unique literary form 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 Medina.⁷ This new form of speech, the Qur’an, became the sole source of the new civilisation’s political, philosophical, and spiritual outlook.⁸

The Qur’an’s Challenge

The unique literary form forms the backdrop to the doctrine of I’jaz al-Quran, the inimitability of the Qur’an, which lies at the heart of the Qur’an’s claim to being of divine origin. 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”⁹

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.”¹⁰

According Qur’anic Exegetes¹¹ these verses issue a challenge to produce a chapter (surah) that imitates the Qur’an’s unique literary form. 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 Arabic language and that of the Qur’an.¹²

The inability of any person to produce anything like the Qur'an, due to its unique literary form, is the essence of the Qur'anic miracle. A miracle is defined as "events which lie outside the productive capacity of nature".¹³ The argument posed by Muslim Theologians and Philosophers is that if, with the finite set of Arabic linguistic tools at humanity's disposal, there is no effective challenge; then providing a naturalistic explanation for the Qur'an's uniqueness is incoherent and doesn't explain its inimitability. This is because the natural capacity of the text producer, or author, is able to produce the known literary forms in the Arabic language. The development of an entirely unique literary form is beyond the scope of the productive nature any author, hence a supernatural entity, God, is the only sufficient comprehensive explanation.¹⁴

It is the purpose of this article to explain how the Qur'an achieves this unique literary form thereby explaining the miracle of its inimitability.

2. Arabic Literary Forms

According to Muslim and Non-Muslim scholarship, the Qur'an cannot be described as any of the known forms of Arabic speech; namely poetry and prose.¹⁵ Taha Husayn,¹⁶ a prominent Egyptian Litterateur, during the course of a public lecture summarised how the Qur'an achieves this unique form:

"But you know that the Qur'an is not prose and that it is not verse either. It is rather Qur'an, and it cannot be called by any other name but this. It is not verse, and that is clear; for it does not bind itself to the bonds of verse. And it is not prose, for it is bound by bonds peculiar to itself, not found elsewhere; some of the binds are related to the endings of its verses and some to that musical sound which is all its own. It is therefore neither verse nor prose, but it is "a Book whose verses have been perfected the expounded, from One Who is Wise, All-Aware." We cannot therefore say its prose, and its text itself is not verse. It has been one of a kind, and nothing like it has ever preceded or followed it."¹⁷

Every expression of the Arabic language falls into the literary forms of Prose and Poetry. There are other 'sub' forms that fall into the above categories such as Kahin; a sub-form of rhymed prose. However all literary forms can be categorised as prose or poetry.

What is Arabic Poetry?

Arabic poetry (ash-shi`ru 'l-`arabiy) is a form of metrical speech with a rhyme.¹⁸ The rhyme (qafiyah) in Arabic poetry is achieved by every line of the poem ending upon a specific letter.¹⁹ The metrical aspect of Arabic poetry is due to its rhythmical pattern (arud). Arabic poetry has sixteen rhythmical patterns called 'al-Bihar', literally meaning 'The Seas' in Arabic. This term has been used to describe the rhythmical divisions as a result of the way the poem moves according to its rhythm, just like the waves in the sea.

The following is a list of the rhythmical patterns, which all of Arabic poetry adhere too or are loosely based upon;

1. at-Tawîl
2. al-Bassit
3. al-Wafir
4. al-Kamil
5. ar-Rajs
6. al-Khafif
7. al-Hazaj
8. al-Muttakarib
9. al-Munsarih
10. al-Muktatab
11. al-Muktadarak
12. al-Madid
13. al-Mujtath
14. al-Ramel
15. al-Khabab
16. as-Saria'

Each one of the al-Bihar have a unique rhythmical pattern.²⁰ The al-Bihar were first codified in the 8th century by al-Khalil bin Ahmad and have changed little since. The al-Bihar are based on the length of syllables. A short syllable is a consonant followed by a short vowel. A long syllable is a vowelised letter followed by either an unvowelled consonant or a long vowel. A nunation sign at the end of a word also makes the final syllable long. In Arabic poetry each line is divided into two halves.

Below are basic scansions of the rhythmical patterns commonly found in Arabic poetry, showing long (—) and short (^) syllables. They represent pairs of half-lines and should be read from left to right. The patterns are not rigidly followed; two short syllables may be substituted for a long one.

Tawil

^ — — ^ — — ^ — — ^ — —

^ — — ^ — — ^ — — ^ — —

Kamil

^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ —

^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ —

Wafir

^ — ^ ^ — ^ — ^ ^ — ^ — —

^ _ ^ ^ _ ^ _ ^ ^ _ ^ _ _

Rajs

_ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _

_ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _

Hazaj

^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ _

^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ _

Basit

_ _ ^ _ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ ^ _

_ _ ^ _ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ ^ _

Khafif

_ ^ _ _ _ _ ^ _ _ ^ _ _

_ ^ _ _ _ _ ^ _ _ ^ _ _

Saria'

_ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ ^ _

_ _ ^ _ _ _ ^ _ _ ^ _

An example of Arabic poetry is the ancient Arabian poem called 'Abu-l-'Ata of Sind':

Of thee did I dream,
while spears between us were quivering
and sooth of our blood full drop had drunken the tawny shafts
I know not, by heaven I swear
and true is the word I say this pang
is it love sickness or a spell from thee
If it be a spell,
then grant me grace of my love-longing
If the other the sickness be
then none is the guilt of thine.²¹

This poem, in the original Arabic, falls into the rhythmical pattern of at-Tawil, one of the al-Bihar shown above.²² A literary analysis on any Arabic Poem will conclude that it adheres too or is based upon the rhythmical patterns. This is supported by Louis Cheikho who collected pre-Islamic and post-Islamic poetry and concluded that all of the poems conformed and were based upon the al-Bihar.²³

In summary the definition of Arabic poetry is that it has a,

- End Rhyme
- Syllabic Rhythmical Pattern (al-Bihar)

What is Arabic Prose?

Arabic Prose can be described as non-metrical speech, meaning it does not have a consistent rhythmical pattern like poetry mentioned above. Arabic prose can be further divided into two categories; saj' which is rhymed prose and Mursal which is straight prose or what some may call 'normal speech'.²⁴

Saj'

Von Denffer in his book 'Ulum al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an' provides the following description:

"A literary form with some emphasis on rhythm and rhyme, but distinct from poetry. Saj' is not really as sophisticated as poetry, but has been employed by Arab poets, and is the best known of the pre-Islamic Arab prosodies. It is distinct from poetry in its lack of metre, i.e. it has not consistent rhythmical pattern, and it shares with poetry the element of rhyme, though in many cases some what irregularly employed."²⁵

Although saj' differs from poetry in that it lacks a consistent rhythmical pattern, there is some form of pattern based upon the accent in each division of saj'.²⁶ Accent based rhythmical patterns are based upon stresses rather than the number of syllables.

Accent based rhythmical patterns are exhibited in Nursery Rhymes in the English Language. The following poem, 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', has two stresses (shown in Bold) in each line, but with a varying number of syllables.

Baa, baa, **black** sheep,
Have you any **wool**?
Yes sir, **yes** sir,
Three bags **full**;
One for the **mas**-ter,
 And **one** for the **dame**,
 And **one** for the **lit**-tle boy
 Who **lives** down the **lane**

Additionally saj' is distinct from poetry and other forms of Arabic speech due to its concentrated use of rhetorical features. Rhetorical features are literary and linguistic devices intended to please or persuade, that differ from

normal speech. Examples of rhetoric include sound, rhythm, ellipsis and grammatical shift (iltifaat). Devin J. Stewart in the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an highlights this feature of saj',

“In addition, saj' regularly involves the concentrated use of syntactic and semantic parallelism, alliteration, paronomasia and other rhetorical figures.”²⁷

In summary the definition of saj' is that it has a,

- Accentual rhythmical pattern
- End rhyme
- Concentrated use of rhetorical features

Mursal

Mursal can be defined as a literary form that goes on, but is continued straight throughout without any divisions, either of rhyme or of anything else. Mursal is meant as a way of expression close to the everyday spoken language, examples can be seen in speeches and prayers intended to encourage or motivate the masses.

In summary the definition of Mursal is that it has,

- No rhythmical pattern
- No rhyme
- A resemblance to straight forward speech

3. What is the Qur'an's Literary Form?

The Qur'an has its own unique form. It cannot be described as any of the known literary forms.²⁸ However due to similarities between saj' and early Meccan chapters, some Western Scholars describe the Qur'an's literary form as saj'. Angelika Neuwirth states,

“Saj' is given up completely in the later suras where the rhyme makes use of a simple –un/-in – scheme to mark the end of rather long and syntactically complex verse....saj' style is thus exclusively characteristic of the early suras”²⁹

These scholars who categorise the Qur'an as saj' do so on the basis that the Qur'an's uniqueness is acknowledged. To illustrate this R. A. Nicholson in his book 'Literary History of the Arabs' states,

“Thus, as regards its external features, the style of the Koran is modelled upon saj’, or rhymed prose...but with such freedom that it may fairly be described as original.”³⁰

Although there is an attempt to try to describe the Qur’an as rhymed prose, western scholars concluded that it is a unique or an original form of saj’, thus supporting our hypothesis. To highlight this fact Bruce Lawrence states,

“Those passages from the Qur’an that approach saj’ still elude all procrustean efforts to reduce them to an alternative form of saj’.”³¹

There are three major opinions based upon modern and classical scholarship on how the Qur’an achieves this unique literary form and this unique form of saj’. The following is a summary of the opinions which will be explained in detail later in this article.

i. Unique fusion of Metrical and Non Metrical Speech

The Qur’an achieves this unique literary form by fusing metrical and non-Metrical speech. This fusion of metrical and non-metrical composition is present throughout the whole of the Qur’an and cannot be found in any Arabic text, past or present.

ii. Qur’anic Saj’

The Qur’an shares similar features with saj’, specifically in the early Meccan surahs, but it completely transcends many aspects of what defines saj’, hence western scholars describing the Qur’anic form as ‘Quranic saj’. What makes the Quran unique in this context is,

- Greater tendency to mono-rhyme,
- Inexact rhyme,
- Greater range of saj’ phrases
- Higher frequency of rhetorical features.

iii. Qur’an bound stylistic variations

Theologians and Arab Linguists such as al-Ash’ari, al-Rummani and al-Baqillani held that the Qur’an does not contain saj’ and is unique to all types of saj’. Their reasoning is that in the Qur’an, the use of language is semantically orientated and its literary structure is distinct, whereas in saj’, conformity to style is a primary objective. Furthermore the Qur’an uses literary and linguistic devices in such a way that has not been used before and achieves an unparalleled communicative effect.³² This use of language, called stylistic variation or stylistic differences, includes, but is not limited to,

- Semantically driven assonance and rhyme,
- Grammatical shifts (iltifaat, in Arabic),
- Interrelation between sound, structure and meaning,
- Choice of Words,
- Unique linguistic genre,
- Word order.

4. Is the Qur'an Poetry?

The Qur'an is not poetry because the totality of each surah does not conform to any of the al-Bihar and in many places exhibits inexact and irregular rhyme. Surah al-Kawthar (The Abundance) is a good example to show that it is not Arabic poetry,

Inna aAtayna kal kawthar
 Fasalli li rabbika wanhar
 Inna shani-aka huwal abtar

— — — — — ^
 — — ^ ^ — ^ ^ — —
 — ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ — — ^

As can be seen by scanning the above surah [showing long (—) and short (^) syllables, should be read from left to right], the syllables do not correspond to any pattern similar to the al-Bihar of Arabic poetry. In fact there is no syllabic rhythmical pattern in this surah. Mohammad Khalifa in his article “The Authorship of the Qur'an” correctly concludes,

“Readers familiar with Arabic Poetry realize that it has long been distinguished by its wazn, bahr, ‘arud and qafiya – exact measures of syllabic sounds and rhymes, which have to be strictly adhered to even at the expense of grammar and shade of meaning at times. All this is categorically different from Qur’anic literary style.”³³

5. Is the Qur'an Mursal?

The Qur'an is not straight forward speech. This is due to the use of rhyme, rhythm and unique stylistic features abundant in the Qur'anic discourse. Mursal is just normal speech that doesn't employ any of the above features. A superficial analysis on surah al-Kawthar will conclude that it can not be described as normal speech.

Inna aAtayna **ka**l kaw**thar**
Fasalli li rabbika wan**har**
Inna shani-**aka** huwal ab**tar**

This chapter employs an end rhyme as can be seen by the end letters in bold and the repetition of the 'ka' (you) is responsible for the chapters rhythm; which differs from any of the al-Bihar. Just by highlighting this surah's rhyme and rhythm clearly shows that it is not straight forward speech.

6. Is the Qur'an Saj'?

i. Unique fusion of Metrical and Non Metrical Speech

Some parts of the Qur'an follow the rules of poetry, that is, some verses can be described as one of the al-Bihar.³⁴ However, when the totality of a Qur'anic Chapter, that contains some of these poetic verses is analysed, it is not possible to distinguish its literary form. This is reflected in the book 'Arabic Literature to the End of the Ummayad Period',

"The Qur'an is not verse, but it is rhythmic. The rhythm of some verses resemble the regularity of saj'...But it was recognized by Quraysh critics to belong to neither one nor the other category."³⁵

The Qur'an achieves this unique literary form by fusing metrical and non-metrical speech in such a way that the difference can not be perceived.³⁶ This intermingling of metrical and non-metrical composition is present throughout the whole of the Qur'an. The following examples illustrate this,

"But the righteous will be in Gardens with Springs – 'Enter in Peace and Safety!' – and We shall remove any bitterness from their hearts: [they will be like] brothers, sitting on couches, face to face. No weariness will ever touch them there, nor will they ever be expelled. [Prophet] tell My servants that I am the Forgiving, the Merciful, but My torment is the truly painful one. Tell them too about Abraham's guests: when they came to him and said "Peace," he said, 'We are afraid of you'"³⁷

When reading the original Arabic of the above verse the reader moves from metric composition to prose with out experiencing the slightest change of style or mode.³⁸ The same mingling of metrical and non-metrical composition can be observed in the following verse from Chapter 12 of the Qur'an.

"When she heard their malicious talk, she prepared a banquet and sent for them, giving each of them a knife. She said Joseph, 'Come out and show yourself to them!' and when the women saw him, they were stunned by his beauty, and cut their hands, exclaiming, 'Great God! He cannot be mortal! He must be a precious angel!' She

said, ‘This is the one you blamed me for. I tried to seduce him and he wanted to remain chaste, but if he does not do what I command now, he will be put in prison and degraded.’”³⁹

The phrase “This is the one you blamed me for” in Arabic is poetic. It has a metrical structure in which the rules of Arabic poetry are observed,⁴⁰ commenting on this feature Mitwalli al-Sharawi states,

“It is almost impossible for the listener to detect the shift from one form to the other, nor does this exquisite mingling impinge on the fluidity of expression or impair its meaning.”⁴¹

The Qur’an is truly unique in composition. It is neither prose nor poetry. An aspect of this unique form is achieved by fusing metrical and non-metrical composition. This view is also supported by the famous Arabic Literary scholar Arthur J. Arberry,

“For the Koran is neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both”⁴²

ii. Qur’anic saj’

It has already been discussed above that some scholars describe the Qur’an’s language as rhymed prose due to similarities between saj’ and early Meccan surahs. However, it is evident that these scholars still distinguish the Qur’an as a unique form of rhymed prose. Devin J. Stewart who is one of the only western scholars to discuss the literary form of the Qur’an and highlight the formal differences between saj’ and, what he calls, “Qur’anic saj’” concludes,

“The analysis undertaken in this study makes possible some preliminary observations on the formal differences between Qur’anic saj’...”⁴³

The features that render the Qur’an unique, in the context of the discussion of saj’, are,

a. Greater tendency to mono-rhyme

The Qur’an differs from saj’ due to its use of mono-rhyme, meaning that it’s rhyming scheme conforms to a few rhymes rather than a selection of many rhymes. According to one analysis just over 50% of the whole Qur’an ends with the same letter⁴⁴. This particular use of rhyme, in a text the size of the Qur’an, has not been replicated in any Arabic text. Devin J. Stewart states:

“Qur’anic saj’ has a much greater tendency to mono-rhyme than does later saj’. A small number of rhymes...are predominant in the Qur’an whereas rhyme in later saj’ shows greater variation.”⁴⁵

b. Inexact rhyme

The general description of saj' is that it has an end rhyme. However the Qur'an does not conform to a constant or consistent rhyme, which reflects the work of ar-Rummani⁴⁶ who states that the Qur'ans use of language is semantically orientated and does not conform to a particular style. This is also reflected Devin J Stewart's analysis, he states,

“The Qur'an allows inexact rhymes which are not found in later saj'”⁴⁷

c. Greater range of saj' phrases

The divisions of saj' or single phrases of saj' are called saj'aat⁴⁸. The Qur'an differs from normal saj' as it has a greater range of short and long saj'aat. Devin J Stewart states,

“Both in the Qur'an and in later saj' we see that shorter saj' is much more common, but the range in the Qur'an is greater.”⁴⁹

d. Higher frequency of rhetorical features

The Qur'an is a 'sea of rhetoric'. The Qur'an exhibits an unparalleled frequency of rhetorical features, surpassing any other Arabic text, classical or modern⁵⁰. The use of rhetoric in the Quran stands out from any type of discourse⁵¹.

A close up analysis of the Quran can highlight a wide range and frequency of rhetorical features. This is a comprehensive subject that requires further analysis, however to highlight the Qur'ans uniqueness, the following list has been provided to show that the Qur'an employs more rhetorical features than any other rhymed prose; past or present.

- Analogy (For example see Qur'an 88:15-16 & 93:9-10)
- Alliteration (For example see Qur'an 33:71 & 77:20)
- Antiphrasis (For example see Qur'an 44:49)
- Antithesis (For example see Qur'an 35:7 & 9:82)
- Asyndeton (For example see Qur'an 13:2)
- Assonance (For example see Qur'an 88:25-26 & 88:14-15)
- Cadence - This is present in the whole Qur'an, it is a major rhetorical feature which is an inimitable feature of the Quran. The Quranic discourse uses assonance to deliver all the rhetorical features while employing the use of many phonetic features such as assimilation, nasalisation, etc. No other text has done this before, especially in such frequency.

- Chiasmus (See for example Qur'an 3:27)
- Epizeuxis (See for example Qur'an 94:5-6)
- Equivoque (See for example Qur'an 24:43)
- Homonymy (See for example Qur'an 2:14-15 & 3:54)
- Hyperbole (See for example Qur'an 7:40, 33:10 & 39:71-72)
- Isocolon (See for example 65:7-10)
- Metaphor (See for example 19:4 & 21:18)
- Metonymy (See for example 54:13 & 6:127)
- Parenthesis (See for example Qur'an 7:42 & 4:73)
- Polypton (See for example Qur'an 80:25-26)
- Rhetorical Questions (See for example Qur'an 55:60 & 37:91-92)
- Stress (See for example Qur'an 29:62 & 3:92)
- Synecdoche (See for example Q:90:12-13)

Saj' has been characterised with a concentrated use of rhetorical features, due to the range and frequency of these features in the Qur'an, it differs completely from saj'.

7. Qur'an bound stylistic variations

What Does Stylistic Variations Mean?

Stylistics is a branch of linguistics which studies the features of the varieties of language within a given situation, context and meaning. Stylistics also tries to develop principles to explain the particular choices made by the author.⁵²

Stylistic variation is the use of different features of language in a myriad of ways. To illustrate this take the following two Qur'anic verses which are structurally identical but stylistically distinct,

"These are the limits set by God, so do not approach them"⁵³

"These are the limits set by God, so do not transgress them"⁵⁴

The first verb "approach" occurs in the context of the following very serious prohibition in the previous,

"...but do not associate with your wives while you are in spiritual retreat in the mosques."⁵⁵

The second verb “transgress” of the second verse entails flexibility signified by the conjunctions in the previous phrases "either" and "or"⁵⁶,

“A divorce is only permissible twice: after that, the parties should **either** hold Together on equitable terms, **or** separate with kindness.”

In the context of stylistic variation the above example can provide empirical evidence for the view that the Qur’an uses words and phrases specifically to provide an accurate and intended meaning.

How are these stylistic variations unique to the Qur’an?

The Qur’an achieves its unique literary form by transcending the use of language that is common to saj’. S. M. Hajjaji-Jarrah in her article “The Enchantment of Reading: Sound, Meaning, and Expression in Surat Al-Adiyat”, which discusses how the Qur’an achieves its uniqueness due to stylistic differences, states,

“...Qur’anic ‘Arabiyya brings forth a dazzling assembly of word meaning and sound defying the conventions of both the Arabian saj’ and the literary rules of classical Arabic literature”.⁵⁷

In her article she details how the Qur’an’s unique use of style, structure and sound places saj’ into a new literary context.⁵⁸ However the stylistic differences in the Qur’an are not limited to the elements she describes. There are many stylistic elements used in the Qur’an that are responsible for its uniqueness.⁵⁹ There are a myriad of ways the Qur’an uses language which is unknown in any Arabic discourse, some of these include,

- Semantically orientated assonance and rhyme⁶⁰
- Itifaat: Grammatical shifts⁶¹
- Interrelation between sound, structure and meaning⁶²
- Unique Linguistic Genre⁶³
- Word order

The following examples provide linguistic and literary evidence for the Qur’an’s stylistic distinction.

Example 1: Word Order, Sound & Meaning

The following sentence is an example of how the Qur’an combines words, sounds, meaning and order to achieve its communicative goal; the result of which is sublime rhetoric⁶⁴, unsurpassable eloquence and a unique literary form,

waanzala alttawrata waal-injeela min qablu hudan lilnnasi waanzala alfurqana

"He revealed the Torah and the Gospel, aforesaid, for guidance to mankind; and revealed the Criterion (i.e. the Qur'an)"⁶⁵

An alternative order is possible:

waanzala alttawrata waal-injeela waal-furqana min qablu hudan lilnnas

This alternative arrangement has some flaws. Firstly the second arrangement lacks rhythm, compared to the Qur'anic structure, and it is phonetically inferior. Secondly, this arrangement has led to a disturbance in the meaning. This is due to the fact that the key word "anzala" (revealed) has been taken out and the final word "alfurqana" (the Criterion), whose position has a crucial semantic value, has been placed in the middle of the sentence.

The repetition of the word "anzala" and the placement of "alfurqana" are essential devices employed to enhance the communicative, psycholinguistic and rhetorical effect. The repetition of the word "anzala" is to confirm the revelation of the Criterion and that it is indeed a divine scripture while the placement of the word "alfurqana" at the end of the sentence is to confirm that the Criterion is the last and final scripture.⁶⁶ Ata refers to examples like these as 'the chemical composition of the Qur'an'⁶⁷ which indicate the delicate and balanced stylistic variation in the Qur'an.⁶⁸

Example 2: Grammatical Shift (iltifaat)

Professor Abdel Haleem in his article 'Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes: Iltifat and Related Features in the Qur'an'⁶⁹ brought to attention, that another inimitable feature of the Qur'an, is the extensive use of grammatical shifts. This feature is an effective rhetorical device that enhances the texts literary expression and achieves the communicative goal;⁷⁰ it is an accepted, well researched part of Arabic rhetoric. One can find references in the books of balagha (Arabic Rhetoric) by al-Athir, Suyuti and Zarkashi.⁷¹

These grammatical shifts include changes in person, change in number, change in addressee, change in tense, change in case marker, using a noun in place of a pronoun and many other changes.⁷² An example of this complex rhetorical feature is exhibited in the following verse. 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."⁷³

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 verse:

“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”⁷⁴

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.”⁷⁵

These shifts contribute to dynamic style of the Qur'an. It 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 (semantically driven) while enhancing the impact of the message it conveys. It is not surprising that Neal Robinson concluded that the grammatical shifts used in the Qur'an,

"...are a very effective rhetorical device."⁷⁶

The Qur'an is the only form of Arabic prose to have used this rhetorical device in an extensive and complex manner. Abdel 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”⁷⁷

The Qur'an is stylistically distinct from any known form of Arabic speech. It uses linguistic and literary devices in such a way that has not been used before.

8. Conclusion

Is the Literary form based upon subjective criteria?

Some Qur'an critics often claim that the Qur'anic challenge is subjective and is based upon aesthetic criteria. This is a false accusation. The Qur'an can either be described as prose, poetry or unique. Literary forms are not based upon aesthetic criteria; they are based upon the structural features of a text. It can be clearly seen above that literary forms are defined and can be distinguished from one another.

The Qur'an is Unique

The Qur'an is a unique form of Arabic speech. The form of its language can not be described as prose or poetry. It achieves this unique literary form by,

- Intermingling metrical and non-metrical speech
- Transcending the defining features of sajd
- Using literary and linguistic devices that render it stylistically distinct

The totality of every chapter has a special character, with its own unique form, and its unique use of literary devices. These features of the Qur'an are part of the reason of why it has not been emulated to this day.⁷⁸ The highly acclaimed Professor and Arabist Hamilton Gibb states,

“...the Meccans still demanded of him a miracle, and with remarkable boldness and self confidence Muhammad appealed as a supreme confirmation of his mission to the Koran itself. Like all Arabs they were connoisseurs of language and rhetoric. Well, then if the Koran were his own composition other men could rival it. Let them produce ten verses like it. If they could not (and it is obvious that they could not), then let them accept the Koran as an outstanding evidential miracle”⁷⁹

There are many Muslim and Non-Muslim Scholars who testify that the Qur'an is indeed unique and inimitable. An interesting and useful analysis by Aisha Abd al-Rahman entitled “At-Tafsir al-Bayani li-Qur'an al-Karim”, which built upon the works of many Islamic Scholars throughout the decades, supports the conclusion voiced by Taha Hussein that ‘Arabic composition should be divided into three categories, prose, verse and Qur'an, sajd forming a part of prose but the Qur'an being a category of its own.’⁸⁰

As a result of researching Western and Muslim Scholarship it can be concluded that the Qur'an is a unique literary form. Further research into the references below will consolidate the points raised in this article and will provide the correct understanding on how no one has been able to produce anything like the Qur'anic discourse. Professor Bruce Lawrence correctly asserts,

“As tangible signs, Qur'anic verse are expressive of an inexhaustible truth, they signify meaning layered with meaning, light upon light, miracle after miracle.”⁸¹

¹ Qur'an Chapter 96 Verse 1. This verse is known to have been the first revelation, there is a consensus amongst the scholars on this issue.

² Please see Martin Lings. Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources. 1987. Inner Traditions; for a detailed account on the life of the Prophet Muhammad and details of the first revelation.

³ The Qur'an is undoubtedly the most influential book in Arabic literature. Non-Muslim and Muslim Scholars do not contend that the Qur'an is an authority in Arabic literature and has had an unparalleled influence. For example Chicago University Wadad Kadi and Mustansir Mir, Professor of Islamic studies at Youngstown State University state that:

"Although Arabic, as a language and a literary tradition, was quite well developed by the time of Muhammad's prophetic activity, it was only after the emergence of Islam, with its founding scripture in Arabic, that the language reached its utmost capacity of expression, and the literature its highest point of complexity and sophistication. Indeed, it probably is no exaggeration to say that the Qur'an was one of the most conspicuous forces in the making of classical and post-classical Arabic literature." Wadad Kadi and Mustansir Mir, Literature and the Qur'an, Encyclopedia of the Qur'an, vol. 3, pp. 213, 216

Please also see Muhammed Abdel Haleem. 1999. Understanding the Qur'an: Themes & Styles. I. B.Tauris Publishers, p. 1 – 4

⁴ Understanding the Qur'an: Themes & Styles, p. 1

⁵ The Qur'an is a book that gives guidance on all of life's affairs. This includes the personal and political sphere, for example the Qur'an details how treaties with other nations should be undertaken and how prisoners of war should be treated (Understanding the Qur'an: Themes & Styles, p. 66-67)

⁶ K. Armstrong. 1993. A History of God: the 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Vintage, p. 171

⁷ Part of the Qur'an's intellectual miracle is its literary form. God has challenged the whole of mankind to try and produce a single chapter like it (Qur'an 2:23). This challenge, which has remained unchallenged, is what captivated the minds of the Arabs at the time of revelation. They rationally assessed that if an Arab cannot challenge the Qur'an and a Non-Arab could not, then the only 'entity' that could have possibly produced the Qur'an is the Creator. Margoliouth explains the results of this intellectual revival,

"The Koran [sic] admittedly occupies an important position among the great religious books of the world. Though the youngest of the epoch-making works belonging to this class of literature, it yields to hardly any in the wonderful effect which it has produced on large masses of men. It has created an all but new phase of human thought and a fresh type of character. It first transformed a number of heterogeneous desert tribes of the Arabian peninsula into a nation of heroes, and then proceeded to create the vast politico-religious organizations of the Muhammadan world which are one of the great forces with which Europe and the East have to reckon today."

G. Margoliouth. 1977. Introduction to J.M. Rodwell's, The Koran. Everyman's Library, p. vii

⁸ To understand the functions and objectives of this state, and its impact on the modern world please see the very informative site www.caliphate.eu

⁹ Qur'an chapter 2 verse 23

¹⁰ Qur'an chapter 52 verses 33-34

¹¹ See Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Tafsir al-Qurtubi; Tafsir al-Jalalayn and Ma'riful Qur'an by Mufti Mualana Shafi.

¹² Please see The Encyclopedia Of Islam, 1971, Volume 3, E J Brill, Leiden, p. 1019; A F L Beeston, T M Johnstone, R B Serjeant and G R Smith (Ed.), Arabic Literature To The End Of The Umayyad Period, 1983, Cambridge University Press, p. 212 & 127-128; Gustave E Von Grunebaum, A Tenth-Century Document Of Arabic Literary Theory and Criticism, 1950, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. xiv; Abdul Aleem, I'jaz ul Qur'an, 1933, Islamic Culture, Volume VII, Hyderabad Deccan, p. 221 & 232; Ignaz Goldziher, Ed. S M Stern, Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien) II, 1971, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, pp. 363.

¹³ See Stephen S. Bilynskyj, 'God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle' (Ph.D. Diss.: Notre Dame, 1982) 10-42 and The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective. Dr. William Lane Craig. Available online. See Adam Deen, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Miracles. Can be found by clicking [here](#).

¹⁴ This will be discussed in detail in a forthcoming article. Additionally this argument depends on the understanding that a supernatural entity actually exists. The existence of God, or the cause of the universe, is a prerequisite to this discussion.

Please see William Lane Craig. *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*. Wipf and Stock Publishers; Alister McGrath. *The Dawkins Delusion*. SPCK; Alister McGrath. *The Twilight of Atheism*. Rider; William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. *God: A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist*. Oxford University Press and Keith Ward. *God, Chance and Necessity. One World*.

¹⁵ See 'Abd al-Jabbar. *I'jaz al-Qur'an*. Cairo. 1960, p. 224; Ali Ibn Isa al-Rummani. *Thalath Rasa'il Ijaz al-Qur'an*. Ed. M. Khalaf Allah & M. Sallam, Cairo. 1956, p. 97-98; Hamd Ibn Muhammad al-Khatibi. *Al-Bayan fi I'jaz al-Qur'an*. Ed. Dr 'Abd al-Alim, Muslim University, Aligarh, India. 1953, p. 36; Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Tayyib Baqillani. *Al-I'jaz al-Qur'an*. Ed. A. Saqr, Dar al-Ma'arif, Egypt pp 86-89; A'isha 'Abd Ar-Rahman Bint ash-Shati'. *At-Tafsir al-Bayani li-Qur'an al-Karim*, 3rd ed. Cairo, 1968; Arthur J Arberry. 1998. *The Koran*. Oxford University Press, p. x; Bruce Lawrence. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*. Vol VII, Issue I 2005. *Approximating Saj' in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Suran 93 (al-Duha) and the basmala* p. 64;

¹⁶ The influential Egyptian Litterateur born in 1889 and died in 1973.

¹⁷ Lecture entitled "Prose in the second and third centuries after the Hijra" delivered at the Geographical Society in Cairo 1930. Dar al Ma-arif.

¹⁸ Metrical speech is a form of speech that employs a strict rhythmical pattern, that is, it follows a type of poetic metre.

¹⁹ Sir Charles J. Lyall. 1930. *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry*. Columbia University Press, p. xlv

²⁰ Please see Sir Charles J. Lyall. *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry*, p. xlv-lix and William Wright. 1955 (1898). *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, Vol II, part 4. Cambridge University Press, p. 350-390 for more information on the poetic metres.

²¹ Sir Charles J. Lyall. *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry*, p 13.

²² Ibid

²³ See Louis Cheikho, *Shu'ara' al-Nasraniyah, 1890-1891*, Beirut.

²⁴ Devin J Stewart. *Saj' in the Qur'an: Prosody and Structure*, in *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*. Edited by Colin Turner, Vol. II.

²⁵ A. Von Denffer. 2003 (Revised Ed. 1994). *'Uloom al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an*. The Islamic Foundation, p. 75

²⁶ Devin J Stewart. *Saj' in the Qur'an: Prosody and Structure*.

²⁷ Stewart, Devin J. "Rhymed Prose". *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill, 2008

²⁸ See also Professor Abd al-Rahman Ali Muhammad Ibrahim. *The Literary Structure of the Qur'anic Verse*. Qur'anic Arabic Foundation. 2005.

²⁹ Neuwirth, Angelika. "Rhetoric and the Qur'an". *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill, 2008.

³⁰ R. A. Nicholson. 1930. *Literary History of the Arabs*. Cambridge University Press, p. 159

³¹ Bruce Lawrence. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*. Vol VII, Issue I 2005. *Approximating Saj' in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Suran 93 (al-Duha) and the basmala* p. 64

³² See 'Abd al-Jabbar. *I'jaz al-Qur'an*. Cairo. 1960, p. 224; Ali Ibn Isa al-Rummani. *Thalath Rasa'il Ijaz al-Qur'an*. Ed. M. Khalaf Allah & M. Sallam, Cairo. 1956, p. 97-98; Hamd Ibn Muhammad al-Khatibi. *Al-Bayan fi I'jaz al-Qur'an*. Ed. Dr 'Abd al-Alim, Muslim University, Aligarh, India. 1953, p. 36; Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Tayyib Baqillani. *Al-I'jaz al-Qur'an*. Ed. A. Saqr, Dar al-Ma'arif, Egypt pp 86-89; A'isha 'Abd Ar-Rahman Bint ash-Shati'. *At-Tafsir al-Bayani li-Qur'an al-Karim*, 3rd ed. Cairo, 1968.

³³ Mohammad Khalifa. *The Authorship of the Qur'an in The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*. Edited by Colin Turner, Vol. I, p.129

³⁴ Kristina Nelson. 1985 (2nd Print 2002). *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*. The American University in Cairo Press, p. 10

“Although some of the lines of the Qur’an may be scanned according to the Classical Arabic metres*, these are not as characteristic of Qur’anic syllabic rhythmic patterns as are the abrupt or progressive shifts in rhythmic patterns and length of line, and the shifts between regular and irregular patterns.”

* See al-Sa’id (1997: 324 – 25) and al-Suyuti (1910: I/96 – 105) for a list of some of these lines.

³⁵ A F L Beeston, T M Johnstone, R B Serjeant and G R Smith (Editors), *Arabic Literature To The End Of The Ummayad Period*, 1983, Cambridge University Press, p. 34.

³⁶ Mitwalli al-Sharawi, *The Miracles of the Qur’an*. Dar ul Taqwa, p. 31

³⁷ Qur’an Chapter 15 Verses 45-52

³⁸ *The Miracles of the Qur’an*, p. 31

³⁹ Qur’an Chapter 12 Verses 31-35

⁴⁰ *The Miracles of the Qur’an*, p. 31

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 32

⁴² Arthur J Arberry. 1998. *The Koran*. Oxford University Press, p. x

⁴³ Devin J Stewart. *Saj’ in the Qur’an: Prosody and Structure*, p.102

⁴⁴ Dr. Adel M. A. Abbas, Anne P. Fretwell, *Science Miracles, No Sticks or Snakes* (Beltsville, Maryland, USA: Amana Publications: 2000)

⁴⁵ Devin J Stewart. *Saj’ in the Qur’an: Prosody and Structure*, p.102

⁴⁶ Ali Ibn Isa al-Rummani. *Thalath Rasa’il Ijaz al-Qur’an*. Ed. M. Khalaf Allah & M. Sallam, Cairo. 1956, p. 97-98

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

⁴⁸ *Ibid* p. 84

⁴⁹ *Ibid* p. 90

⁵⁰ Please see H, Abdul-Raof. 2003. *Exploring the Qur’an*. Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press, p. 265-398; H. Abdul-Raof. 2000. *Qur’an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis*. Curzon Press, p 95-137; F Esack. 1993. *Qur’anic Hermeneutics: Problems and Prospects*. *The Muslim World*, Vol. 83, No. 2. p. 126 -128.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

⁵² Hussein Abdul-Raof. *Qur’anic Stylistics: A Linguistic Analysis*. Lincoln Europa. 2004, p. 9.

⁵³ Qur’an Chapter 2 Verse 187

⁵⁴ Qur’an Chapter 2 Verse 229

⁵⁵ Qur’an Chapter 2 Verse 187

⁵⁶ Hussein Abdul-Raof. *Qur’anic Stylistics: A Linguistic Analysis*, p 91-92

⁵⁷ S. M. Hajjaji-Jarrah. 2000. *The Enchantment of Reading: Sound, Meaning, and Expression in Surat Al-Adiyat*. Curzon Press, p. 229

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 228

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- ⁵⁹ See Hussein Abdul-Raof. *Qur'anic Stylistics: A Linguistic Analysis*. Lincoln Europa. 2004; *The Qur'an: An Encyclopaedia*. Edited by Oliver Leaman. "Qur'anic Style". Routledge; and Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, *Three Lines that Changed the World: The Inimitability of the Surah al-Kawtar* (available from www.theinimitablequran.com) for a detailed analysis.
- ⁶⁰ See al-Hassan al-'Askari (ed. Mufid Qamima). 1981. *Kitab al-Sina-'atayn: al-Kitaba wa 'l-Shi'r*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, p. 285
- ⁶¹ Muhammed Abdel Haleem. 1999. *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes & Styles*. I. B.Tauris Publishers, p. 184-210 and Neal and Neal Robinson. 1996. *Discovering The Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach To A Veiled Text*. SCM Press Ltd., p. 245-252
- ⁶² Sayyid Qutb. 1966. *al-Taswir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, Sayyid Qutb. 1966. *Mashahid al-Qiyama fi 'l-Qur'an*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif., Michael Sells. 1991. *Sound Spirit and Gender in Surat al-Qadr*. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, 2 p. 239-259, M. Sells. *Sound and Meaning in Surat Al-Qariah in Arabica* Vol 40, and M. Sells. 2000. *A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Surahs of the Qur'an: Spirit, Gender and Aural Intertextuality*. Curzon Press, p. 3-25.
- ⁶³ Hamza Andreas Tzortzis. *The Unique Genre of the Qur'an*. Can be accessed from www.theinimitablequran.com.
- ⁶⁴ For more information on the Rhetorical Features in the Qur'anic discourse see H, Abdul-Raof. 2003. *Exploring the Qur'an*. Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press, p. 265-398; H. Abdul-Raof. 2000. *Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis*. Curzon Press, p 95-137; F Esack. 1993. *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Problems and Prospects*. *The Muslim World*, Vol. 83, No. 2. p. 126 -128.
- ⁶⁵ Qur'an Chapter 3 verses 3-4
- ⁶⁶ *The Linguistic Architecture of the Qur'an*. Hussein Abdul-Raof. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*. Vol. II, Issue II, 2000, p. 39
- ⁶⁷ 'Abd al-Qadir Ahmad 'Ata, 'Wujuh i'jaz al-Qur'an, in Mahmud ibn Hamza al-Karmani (ed.), *Asrar al-tikrar fi'l-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dar al-'Itisam, 1977), p. 243-63
- ⁶⁸ See also al-Suyuti, Abu 'l-Fadl Jalal al-Din, *Mu'tarak al-aqran fi i'jaz al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1988), Vol. 1 p 128ff
- ⁶⁹ Muhammed Abdel Haleem. 1999. *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes & Styles*. I. B.Tauris Publishers, p. 184-210
- ⁷⁰ Ibid. Please see H, Abdul-Raof. 2003. *Exploring the Qur'an*. Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press and H. Abdul-Raof. 2000. *Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis*. Curzon Press.
- ⁷¹ Muhammed Abdel Haleem. 1999. *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes & Styles*, p. 184-210
- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ Qur'an Chapter 4 verse 114
- ⁷⁴ Qur'an Chapter 10 verse 22
- ⁷⁵ Neal Robinson. 2004. *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*. Georgetown University Press.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Muhammed Abdel Haleem. 1999. *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes & Styles*, p. 184-210
- ⁷⁸ Please see *The Encyclopedia Of Islam*, 1971, Volume 3, E J Brill, Leiden, p. 1019; A F L Beeston, T M Johnstone, R B Serjeant and G R Smith (Ed.), *Arabic Literature To The End Of The Umayyad Period*, 1983, Cambridge University Press, p. 212 & 127-128; Gustave E Von Grunebaum, *A Tenth-Century Document Of Arabic Literary Theory and Criticism*, 1950, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. xiv; Abdul Aleem, *I'jaz ul Qur'an*, 1933, *Islamic Culture*, Volume VII, Hyderabad Deccan, p. 221 & 232; Ignaz Goldziher, Ed. S M Stern, *Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien) II*, 1971, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, pp. 363.
- ⁷⁹ H. A. R. Gibb. 1980. *Islam: A Historical Survey*. Oxford University Press, p. 28
- ⁸⁰ Saj' in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Surah 93 (al-Duha) and the basmala p. 64

⁸¹ Bruce Lawrence. *The Qur'an: A Biography*. Atlantic Books, p 8.