

And Not the Word of a Poet: Unraveling the Quranic Assertion of Transcendental Authorship

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Abstract

This study explores the Quranic declaration that its discourse is not of human, particularly poetic, origin, but is a divine revelation unmatched by any creation. Based on Islamic belief, this proclamation highlights the Quran's unique status among texts, both religious and literary. Through a scrupulous comparative analysis, this research attempts to describe the distinctive features of the Quran that excels traditional Arabic poetic forms, thereby emphasizing its claim of divine authorship. The analysis consists of uncovering the uniqueness of Quran in terms of its language, style, and matchless use of imagery, similes, metaphors and symbolism. Moreover, it also includes the opinions of a few popular Arab and other experts regarding the language of Quran. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the Quran's unmatched linguistic structure, its innovative use of Arabic language, and the thematic gravity that sets it apart from the poetic conventions of its time. The findings reveal that the Quran's linguistic complexity, thematic coherence, and its function as a source of guidance clearly contrast with the aesthetic and often transient concerns of poetry. By reiterating the Quran's assertion of transcendental authorship, this research underlines the significance of approaching the Quran not just as a text, but as a phenomenon that challenges the boundaries between divine and human expression.

Key words: Qur'an, divine authorship, unmatched linguistic structure, thematic coherence

Introduction.

The phrase "not the words of a poet" is a significant statement in Islamic belief and practice. It appears in the Quran as a rejection of the claims of poets and soothsayers who sought to compete with the message of Islam. The phrase emphasizes the divine origin and authority of the Quran and underscores the importance of seeking guidance from Allah. The phrase "not the words of a poet" appears in several verses of the Quran, including Surah Al-Haqqah and Surah Al-Tur. In Surah Al-Haqqah, the Quran states, "This is not the utterance of a poet; little is it that ye believe! Nor is it the utterance of a soothsayer, little admonition it is ye receive" (69:41-42). This verse emphasizes the divine origin and authority of the Quran and underscores the importance of seeking guidance from Allah. Similarly, in Surah Al-Tur (52:33-34), the Quran states, "And if they say, 'He has invented it,' say, 'Then bring ten surahs like it that have been invented and call upon [for assistance] whomever you can besides Allah, if you should be truthful". This verse challenges the claims of those who sought to discredit the Quran and emphasizes the uniqueness and distinctiveness of its message.

Significance of the Study

The phrase "not the words of a poet" is significant in Islamic belief and practice for several reasons. First, it emphasizes the divine origin and authority of the Quran and underscores the importance of seeking guidance from Allah. By rejecting the claims of poets and soothsayers, the Quran emphasizes the importance of avoiding the pitfalls of human invention and speculation. Another reason of the importance of the phrase "not the words of a poet" is in the context of Islamic theology and spirituality. The Quran is seen as a source of guidance and spiritual wisdom, and it is believed to contain the answers to life's most pressing questions. By emphasizing the uniqueness of the Quranic message, the phrase "not the words of a poet" reinforces the importance of understanding its teachings in their authentic form. Finally, the phrase "not the words of a poet" is significant in the context of Muslim identity and representation. The Quran is seen as the ultimate source of Islamic teachings and beliefs, and it is believed to be the best guide for Muslims in their daily lives.

Literature Review

The phrase “not the words of a poet” is an essential statement in Islam both in terms of belief and practice, emphasizing the matchless nature of the Quranic message. It highlights the linguistic and literary excellence of the Qur’an. Moreover, it also emphasizes the eloquence of its style, the beauty of its expressions which have captivated readers and listeners for centuries. Commentators and scholars have admired the use of figurative language, such as metaphor, simile and symbolism. Moreover, its literary excellence also lies in its beautiful use of rhetorical devices, such as repetition and parallelism.

The question of whether Quran is a poetic text or not has been a topic of a long debate among scholars for centuries. Some argue that the Quran is primarily a prose text, while others argue that it is a highly poetic work, with the elements of prose. One of the earliest works to address this question was Ubaida (d. 824 CE). He argues that the Quran is primarily a prose text, but he also acknowledges that there are poetic elements in the Quran. He identifies certain chapters, such as Surah Yusuf and Surah al-Baqarah, as being highly poetic in nature. However, he ultimately concludes that the Quran is not a work of poetry. Another important work on this topic is Al-Tabari (d. 923 CE). In this work, he argues that the Quran is primarily a prose text, but he also acknowledges that it contains poetic elements. He identifies certain chapters, such as Surah Ya Sin and Surah al-Rahman, as being highly poetic. However, like 'Ubaida, he ultimately concludes that the Quran is not a work of poetry.

In the modern era, a number of scholars have revisited this question. One of the most significant works in this regard is Elshinawy (n.d) who focuses on the inimitability of the Holy Quran. He states that The Qur’an presents itself as the literal speech of God and asserts that nothing like it will ever be produced (p.2). Elshinawy (n.d.) cites Arberry (1969) who states that “the rhetoric and rhythm of the Quran are so characteristic, so powerful, so highly emotive, that any version whatsoever is bound in the nature of things to be but a poor copy of the glittering splendour of the original” (p.3). Another notable work in this regard is regarding the structure of the Qur'an is Neuwirth (1998). Neuwirth argues that the Quran is a highly structured work, with both prose and poetic elements. She identifies certain chapters, such as Surah al-Baqarah and Surah al-Nahl, as having a particularly complex structure that incorporates both prose and

poetry. Neuwirth's work has been influential in shaping the field of Quranic studies, and her ideas continue to be discussed and debated by scholars today. In her next work Neuwirth (2003) argues that the message of Quran is not restricted to specific time, but “the eternal quality of its message had become its brand” (p. 2).

Another aspect of this debate is the question of whether the poetry in the Quran should be understood as a purely aesthetic feature, or whether it has deeper religious significance. Some scholars argue that poetry in the Quran serves primarily as an aesthetic function, while others argue that it plays an important role in conveying religious meaning and spiritual insight. Similarly, a related issue is the question of whether the poetic language of the Quran is intended to be taken literally, or whether it should be understood metaphorically or symbolically. This is a complex question that needs a detailed examination of the Quranic text and its explanatory traditions, and scholars continue to offer varied and sometimes, conflicting viewpoints on this issue.

For example, Martin (2005) argues that the Quran is a highly poetic work that uses language in a unique and profound way to convey religious meaning and experience. Similarly, Wild (1996) offers a detailed analysis of the literary structure and linguistic features of the Quran, arguing that it is a highly sophisticated and carefully crafted work that employs both poetic and prose elements. Another significant study was conducted by McAuliffe (2006). This is a collection of essays which includes contributions from a range of scholars who offer diverse perspectives on the literary and linguistic features of the Quran, including its use of poetry and prose. Similarly, Hawting (1993) examines a range of different approaches to the Quran, including literary and linguistic analysis, and considers the ways in which these approaches can shed light on the question of whether the Quran is a poetic text or not.

These works represent some scholarly contributions that have been made to the ongoing debate over whether the Quran is a poetic text or not. The present research focuses on the technical aspects of Arabic poetry

Al-Jallad (2019) provides a detailed analysis of the syntax of the verb in classical Arabic prose, including the Quran, and argues that the language of the Quran is highly sophisticated and complex. Another significant study was conducted by Abu-Alabbas (2015) that focuses on the

linguistic features of the Quran, including its vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, and includes discussions of its historical and cultural context. Similarly, Wansbrough (2004) also examines the linguistic and literary features of the Quran, including its use of rhetoric, and he argues that the Quran should be understood in its historical and cultural context. El-Badawi (2013) analyses the linguistic and literary connections between the Quran and the Aramaic Gospel traditions, and he claims that the Quranic language is highly influenced by Aramaic.

These works, along with others, have contributed to the ongoing study of the linguistics of the Quran, and have helped to shed light on the unique linguistic features of this important religious text.

One perspective that has been offered by some scholars is that the Quran cannot be easily categorized as either purely poetic or purely prose. Rather, they argue that The Book represents a unique genre of its own, which incorporates both poetic and prose elements in a highly structured manner. This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of understanding the Quran as a work that defies easy categorization.

Al Ajmi (2019) conducted his study on the use of conceptual metaphors used in the Qur'an, particularly focusing on the abstract concepts, such as, "humility, hypocrisy and arrogance". She found that metaphors in the Holy Book are required to be understood linguistically as well as conceptually.

Data Analysis

The analysis consists of two parts. Part -1 covers the uniqueness of Quran in terms of its language, style, and matchless use of imagery, similes, metaphors and symbolism. Part-II focuses on the opinions of a few popular Arab and other experts regarding the language of Quran.

The assertion that Quran is not a word of a poet has several reasons. Firstly, the language of Quran transcends the classical Arabic poetry models, featuring a distinctive

balance of syntax, semantics, and phonetics that defy the conservative categories of Arabic literature. This is evident from the Quran where Allah Almighty challenges those who have doubts about its uniqueness or who think it has similarity with texts produced by other human authors.

"And this Quran is not such as could ever be produced by other than Allah (Lord of the heavens and the earth), but it is a confirmation of (the revelation) which was before it [i.e., the Torah, and the Gospel, etc.], and a full explanation of the Book - wherein there is no doubt from the Lord of the 'Alamin (mankind, jinn, and all that exists)." (Quran 10:37)

Likewise, the following verse also emphasizes Quran's linguistic miracle and offers the challenge to produce anything like the Quran.

"And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down upon Our Servant [Muhammad], then produce a surah the like thereof and call upon your witnesses other than Allah, if you should be truthful." (Quran 2:23).

Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad, (may God's prayers and peace be upon him) was not a poet. In Quran Allah says: "A poet so little do you believe, nor a soothsayer so little remember, a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds (Al-Haqqa :38-43).

Secondly, the style of Quran is unique unlike the Arabic poetry which strictly follows rhythm and rhyme in certain Arud and Qafiya pattern. Quranic style, on the other hand, is dynamic and flexible that accommodates diverse themes and messages. This fact is reiterated in the Quran in different places, two of which are given below:-

"It is Allah who has sent down the best statement: a consistent Book wherein is reiteration. The skins shiver therefrom of those who fear their Lord; then their skins and their hearts relax at the remembrance of Allah..." (Quran 39:23).

This verse demonstrates the Quran's unique stylistic feature of combining beauty with a profound impact on its listeners.

Similarly, the divine origin of Quran with its distinctive style that sets it apart from human poetry is also apparent from the following verse.

"Or do they say: 'He (Muhammad) has forged it?' Say: 'Bring then a Surah (chapter) like unto it, and call upon whomsoever you can, besides Allah, if you are truthful!'"
(Al-Baqarah 2:23)

Thirdly, whereas pre Islamic poetry is limited in its range of topics that mainly includes, love, mourning, valor and nature; Quran's themes are widespread. It encompasses personal conduct, societal laws, philosophical considerations and stories of the previous prophets and their Ummahs. This is evident from the following verse (translated).

"Shall I seek other than Allah as a judge when it is He who has revealed to you the Book fully detailed?" Al-An'am (6:114).

The language of Quran is recognized for its exquisite use of imagery and literary devices such as similes metaphors and symbolism to convey the complex spiritual truths and moral teachings that make it easily understandable to the human mind. To start with, the vivid use of imagery thoroughly engages the mind while drawing on natural and cosmic phenomenon. These include, rain revitalizing the earth causing the growth of various plants. In the same way, all the human beings will come to life on the day of resurrection.

At another place, the spider's web is used as a metaphor that represents the fragility and weakness of those who seek their protectors other than Allah.

"The example of those who take allies other than Allah is like that of the spider who takes a home. And indeed, the weakest of homes is the home of the spider, if they only knew." Al-Ankabut (29:41)

Similarly, Quran also makes frequent use of comparisons as a rhetorical device to explain the various moral, physical, and spiritual realities guidance clearer and more relatable to human experience. One of the most recurring and powerful comparison is that of light and darkness which represent faith and disbelief darkness in Surah Al Baqarah.

"Allah is the ally of those who believe. He brings them out from darkness into the light. But those who disbelieve - their allies are *Taghut*. They take them out of the light into darkness. Those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide eternally therein." (Al-Baqarah.2:57).

Another characteristic of Quranic narrative is the use of symbolism. Symbolism in Quran helps bridge the gap between the tangible, physical world and the abstract, spiritual realities, making them familiar and more relevant to human experience. One such example is the Light of Allah that provides guidance to the believers and takes them to the path of righteousness. Allah says:

"Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light that He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah knows of all things" (Surah Alnoor).

The above verse is rich in symbolic imagery, portraying Allah's guidance as light that brightens the darkness of the world and heart of the believers.

Another example is the use of the word *qalm* (pen) that symbolizes knowledge, wisdom and the act of creation. Allah says: "Nun. By the pen and what they inscribe". This highlights the importance of writing and recording which are considered as means of preserving knowledge and wisdom.

The translations of above verses show that Quran provides guidance and present diverse themes of both moral and spiritual guidance that surpasses the usual subjects of poetry.

View of Arab Experts and other Scholars

There are some prominent figures among Arabs who acknowledged that Qur'an is not poetry. A few of them are mentioned below

Abu al-Walid Utbah bin Rabia:

Ibn Ishaq reported a story from Muhammad bin Ka'b Al-Qurazi. Utbah bin Rabi'ah, a respected figure among the Quraysh, suggested one day at the Quraysh assembly that he should go and talk to the Prophet Muhammad while He was alone in the mosque. Utbah proposed offering Muhammad various incentives to make him stop preaching. This occurred around the time when Hamza, a prominent figure, embraced Islam, and the followers of the Prophet were increasing in numbers.

Utbah spoke to Muhammad, acknowledging his status within the tribe and clan, and the significant impact he had made by challenging their traditions, beliefs, and ancestors' religion. Utbah suggested that perhaps Muhammad might accept some compromise. In response, the Prophet conveyed a message from God, emphasizing his role as a warner and stating that most people turn away. He recited verses from Surah Fussilat (41:1-5).

As Utbah listened to these verses, he was visibly moved and placed his hands behind his back to better concentrate. After hearing the message, Utbah returned to his companions with a transformed demeanour. They noticed a change in him and asked what had happened. Utbah expressed that he had heard something unlike anything he had encountered before—neither in poetry, magic, nor soothsaying. He believed that if Muhammad's message prevailed, they would benefit from it, and if the Arabs rejected him, they could protect him from others. This marked a pivotal moment, and Utbah's perspective had shifted after hearing the Quranic verses from the Prophet.

It was narrated by Al-Bayhaqi in “Dala'il Al-Nubuwwah” (2/205) and Abu Na'im in “Al-Dala'il.(304/1) ”

2. The poet Anis Al-Ghafari:

Abu Dharr narrated how he and his brother Anis became Muslims. Anis had some business to attend to in Makkah, so he left, telling Abu Dharr that he would take care of the matter and asked him to stay with their mother. After completing his business in Makkah, Anis returned, and Abu Dharr inquired about his trip.

Anis shared that while he was in Makkah, he encountered a man who adhered to the same faith as them and claimed to be a prophet sent by God. Anis, who had previously been familiar with the sayings of priests and had also compared these sayings to the art of poetry, concluded that what this man (referring to Prophet Muhammad) was saying could not be considered poetry. He firmly believed that the Prophet's words were truthful, dismissing the claims of others who labeled them as lies. Anis expressed his conviction by swearing that the Prophet's message was indeed true and that those who accused it of being mere poetry were wrong.

This story highlights the moment of realization and the beginning of Abu Dharr and his brother Anis's journey into embracing Islam, driven by Anis's encounter with the Prophet Muhammad in Makkah and his subsequent reflection on the Prophet's message (Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 2473).

Abu al-Abbas al-Qurtubi - may God have mercy on him - said:

The fact of the matter is that after examining the Quran and comparing it to different types of poetry, I have reached at the conclusion it does not fit into any poetic category. Consequently, he firmly declared that it is not accurate to describe the Quran as poetry (Al-Mufhim Lama Takhlis Sahih Muslim.39/6)

This distinction leads to the question of whether the Quran can then be considered prose, to which the answer is also no. In fact, the unique nature of the text of Quran neither fits the category of poetry nor prose, as affirmed by God Almighty, poets, and linguistic experts. The Quran is presented as a distinct form of speech in the Arabic language, a perspective supported by renowned writers of both past and present. An important testimony highlighted in the text is from Taha Hussein, a prominent figure in literature and law. He asserts that the Quran is neither prose nor poetry but occupies a unique category of its own, subject to its own specific

constraints not applicable to other forms of writing. Taha Hussein's view emphasizes the Quran's unparalleled nature, its perfection and detailed explanation by one who is wise and well-acquainted. The text concludes by noting the Quran's unmatched status, its challenge to others to produce something similar, and the warning of their inevitable failure to do so, showcasing its singular place in literature and spiritual discourse Al-Ammari, A. H. (1394 AH).

What Dr. Al-Fadel said

Dr. Al-Fadel discusses the unique nature of the Quran and addresses the claims made by the Arab polytheists who labeled the Quran as either poetry or the words of soothsayers. He explains that the Quran's resemblance to poetry or soothsaying, as perceived by some, is actually a misconception. Instead, the Quran represents a distinct category of speech. It differs from the conventional speech of the Arabs in its style, delivery, and overall structure, despite using the same language and grammatical structures familiar to them.

Dr. Al-Fadel cites Issa bin Ali al-Rumani, who highlighted in his work "An-Nukat fi Miracles of the Quran" that the Quran introduced a novel style of expression. It broke away from the traditional forms of Arabic speech, which included poetry, prose, sermons, and letters, among others. Al-Rumani emphasized that the Quran established a unique method that surpassed the known genres in its excellence and impact.

Further, Abu Bakr Al-Baqillani, another scholar is mentioned for elaborating on this concept. He argued that the Quran's composition is unlike any conventional arrangement in Arabic speech, differing from the usual discourse methods. He addressed the claims of the Quraysh polytheists and others who attempted to categorize the Quran as poetry or as possessing poetic qualities. Al-Baqillani clarified that the Quran transcends such classifications, offering a form of eloquence and rhythmic beauty unmatched by traditional poetry or prose, thereby setting it apart from the customary discourse familiar to the Arabs.

In essence, Dr. Al-Fadel underscores the Quran's distinctiveness, affirming that its divine eloquence and structure cannot be confined to the known literary categories of poetry or soothsaying, marking it as a unique revelation in the Arabic language.

Foregoing in view, it is argued that the Qur'an is definitively the word of God with the perfection of its verses, detailed explanations, the clarity of its expression in Arabic language that distinguishing it from traditional Arabic poetry and prose. Therefore, it clearly addresses certain doubts about Islam, specifically the claim that verses from Surat Al-Qamar were borrowed from the poetry of Imru' al-Qais. This idea is firmly rejected for several reasons:

1. **Mismatch with Arabic Poetry:** The claim that these verses are from pre-Islamic poetry is incorrect because they do not conform to the traditional metrics of Arabic poetry. This suggests a misunderstanding or ignorance on the part of those who propose such a theory.
2. **Historical Context:** Surat Al-Qamar is a Meccan surah, meaning it was revealed in Mecca at a time when Prophet Muhammad faced significant opposition. Despite the scrutiny from the Quraysh tribe, who were eager to discredit him, they never made such an accusation. This absence of accusation from contemporaries who were deeply familiar with Arabic poetry and keen to challenge the Prophet supports the uniqueness of the Qur'an.
3. **Acknowledgement of the Qur'an's Eloquence:** Even those who were critical of the Prophet recognized the Qur'an's unmatched eloquence and divine inspiration. They admitted their inability to produce anything comparable, despite the Qur'an's open challenge to do so.
4. **Linguistic Uniqueness of the Arabic Language:** The Arabic language's unique characteristics make it exceptionally suited for the profound and nuanced meanings found in the Qur'an. Its flexibility, richness, and the beauty of its composition set it apart from other languages and texts, underscoring the divine origin of the Qur'an.

In summary, the text argues against the skepticism concerning the Qur'an's originality, reinforcing its divine source, unparalleled linguistic beauty, and the historical evidence of its acceptance even among critics.

Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis decisively affirms that the Qur'an cannot be attributed to human authorship, particularly not to that of a poet, due to several compelling reasons. Firstly, its language and structure transcend the known conventions of Arabic poetry, presenting a unique blend of eloquence, thematic depth, and linguistic innovation that sets it apart from the poetic

and prosaic forms familiar to Arab linguistics. The Qur'an's challenge to produce a text of similar stature, which remains unmet, underscores its divine origin and unparalleled nature.

Secondly, the testimony of Arab experts and scholars, both historical figures and contemporary intellectuals, further validates the Qur'an's distinction from poetry. Notable instances, such as the transformative impact of its verses on skeptics like Utbah bin Rabia and the recognition by the poet Anis Al-Ghafari, illustrate the profound effect of the Qur'an's eloquence and its clear deviation from conventional poetry. Moreover, the thematic breadth of the Qur'an, covering a wide spectrum of moral, spiritual, and societal guidance, alongside its use of vivid imagery, metaphors, and symbolism, exceeds the scope and function of traditional poetry. This thematic diversity and depth reinforce the Qur'an's role as a comprehensive guide for humanity, rather than a collection of poetic compositions.

The scholarly discourse, including the insights of Abu al-Abbas al-Qurtubi, Taha Hussein, and Dr. Al-Fadel, converges on the conclusion that the Qur'an occupies a unique literary and spiritual category. It neither conforms to the strict metrics of poetry nor fits neatly into the prose category, instead representing a divine form of communication unmatched in its clarity, wisdom, and impact.

In light of these considerations, the analysis categorically rejects the notion that the Qur'an shares its origin with poetry or that its verses could be the work of a human poet. The evidence, both textual and testimonial, firmly positions the Qur'an as a miraculous revelation from God, characterized by its unmatched eloquence, profound thematic depth, and transformative power. The claim regarding the similarity of certain verses to pre-Islamic poetry is thoroughly refuted, highlighting the Qur'an's divine uniqueness and its foundational role in Islamic faith and practice.

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