

## METAPHORS IN THE QURAN: A THEMATIC CATEGORIZATION<sup>(\*)</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Muslims believe the Quran is a divine composition revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel over a 23-year period in the 6th century. Considering the vitality of Arab literary tradition at the time, it was necessary that the Quran be miraculous not only in its content, but also in its form. Part of what made the revelation inimitable is the Quran's eloquence, especially in its use of metaphors. This article looks into the different categories of Quranic metaphors and investigates their functions. Since the divine transcends the limited cognitive capabilities of human beings, and because literal language is insufficient to portray the existence and nature of the Divine, metaphoric expressions are essential to helping believers understand the elusive concept of 'God.' Additionally, another set of metaphors are used to explain the tenets Muslims must abide by in their quest to attain piety and be awarded when they meet their Lord on the Day of Judgment. Considering the importance of this 'quest' or 'journey,' which is repeatedly alluded to in the Quran, as one that moves through both 'time' and 'place,' temporal and spatial metaphors also fulfill an important function in the text.

**Keywords:** *Methaphor, Virtues, Divine metaphors, Arabic Literature.*

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Muhammad was born in 570 CE in Mecca, in the eastern Arabian Peninsula. Although the majority of Arabs then were polytheists, Christianity and Judaism were practiced by a few, the former in the northern part of the Peninsula, which was under Byzantine rule, and the latter in Yemen and in and around *Yāthrib*, later renamed Medina. Although at the time Arabs believed in Allah to be the creator and chief deity, they also worshipped celestial bodies like the moon and the sun, in addition to angels. Moreover, they believed they needed mediating lesser gods that would bring them closer to Allah. Hence, they carved and built a variety of these gods and housed them in the *Ka'aba*, the House of God, believed to have been erected by Prophet Ibrahim. The birth city of the Prophet of Islam attracted large numbers of people who used to visit it to perform pilgrimage and slaughter sacrifices for their idols and gods. In addition to its significant spiritual status, Mecca was also an important economic center because the trade caravans travelling to Al-sham, present day Syria, in the summer, and to Yemen originated there (Abdel Haleem, 2004).

Abdel Haleem (2004) points out the absence of a centralized government and adds that tribal and clan affiliations were the norm. There were constant inter-tribal feuds and conflicts, which often continued for a long period of time. The *Ḥarb Dāḥīs* and *Al-Ghabra* war, for instance, in which the tribes of Dhubyān and 'Abs fought against each other, continued for over 40 years. People then were involved in a perpetual cycle of vengeance that was often triggered by a trivial reason. The above-mentioned war, for instance, started as a result of a disputed race in which one of the two racing horses was ambushed and sabotaged. The *Jāhiliyya* period, or time of ignorance, as pre-Islamic times are often called, witnessed the widespread practice of infanticide. Many tribes used to bury newborn girls alive. The violence in Arabia then was also evident in many other medieval societies (Maddicott, 2001).

Into such a milieu Muhammad was born. Dissatisfied with the belief and moral systems of his people, he used to retreat to a cave in *Ḥirā*, a mountain in the outskirts of Mecca, for meditation. During one of these mediatory seclusions, he had his first encounter with the Archangel Gabriel who revealed to him the first verses of the Quran: "*Read in the name of your Lord*" (Q. 96:1). The revelation of the Quran continued for over 23 years, from when the Prophet was 40 years old until shortly before his passing away at the age of 63 (Abdel Halleem, 2004). The Quran is so eloquent that, when challenged, the Arabs failed to compose a text similar to it despite their strong literary tradition. An integral part of the eloquence of the Quran is its use of figurative language, especially

metaphors. To fully understand the nature of metaphors in the Quran, it is important to know pre-Islamic Arabia and be introduced to its people, their languages, and literary traditions.

### 1.1 Pre-Islamic Arabia: People, Languages and Literature

Hitti (1968) states that the Arabian Peninsula, a natural extension of the Sahara Desert, is the largest peninsula in the world. It is a harsh terrain that receives very little rain. The Arab Historian, Ibn Khaldūn (quoted in Gabrieli 1963, p. 2), distinguishes between Bedouins, *ahl al-badw*, and town people, *ahl al-ḥaḍar*. The Bedouins still live in tents like their pre-Islamic ancestors, and they rely on livestock raising and limited hunting for their subsistence, whereas town inhabitants also practice farming and trade. The desolate terrain and harsh climate in which the Bedouin lived had a profound impact on shaping his character, which is distinguished by “an unrestrained individualism, a proud consciousness of oneself, and an aversion of every authority” (Gabrieli, 1963, p.5).

Tribal affiliations, however, were very strong. In a society where conflicts and blood feuds were a way of life, as alluded to in the introduction, the Bedouin relied heavily on the support and protection of his clan and tribe. Moreover, clans and tribes were also held responsible for any wrong doings their members might commit. Underscoring the significance of tribal affiliation, Hitti (1968) argues that a Bedouin losing his tribal affiliation is a helpless individual whose status “is that of an outlaw beyond pale of protection and safety” (p. 14). Nevertheless, Bedouins in pre-Islamic Arabia also possessed magnanimous virtues, including generosity and *murwwa*, or supporting the weak and providing sanctuary for the needy.

Literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia was limited and confined to the extreme northern and southern fringes of the peninsula. The scanty inscriptions and graffiti that have been studied date back to a century before Islam. Prior to that “philologists knew nothing” about the linguistic features of Arabic (Beeston, 1981, p. 178). Although literacy was limited and confined to a few pockets in the peninsula, pre-Islamic Arabs had a strong oral literary tradition. Mumayiz (2010) argues that both the harshness of the terrain and the durability of the language provided Arabs in pre-Islamic times with a strong yearning for self-expression. Not only were they artful composers of poetry, most of which was extemporised, but they were also endowed with a great sense of appreciation for oral poetry. For Pre-Islamic Arabs, the *qasīda*, or poem, “was a tool as essential as a spear or a digging stick [*sic*], and the ability to compose it a skill as essential as the ability

to handle a bow or ride a camel” (McDonald, 1978, p. 15). Arguing that such sense of appreciation is not restricted to earlier Arab generations, Hitti (1968) states “No people in the world has such enthusiastic admiration for literary expression and is so moved by the word, spoken or written, as the Arabs. Hardly any language seems capable of exercising over the minds of its users such irresistible influence as Arabic” (p. 20).

Consequently, the poet had a high, esteemed status in the tribal hierarchy. Poetry was composed to celebrate the virtues of the tribe, defend its honor, arouse the consciousness of its members, and stir their emotions. To honor their poets, Arabs hung the texts of the most revered poems in the *ka'aba*, the House of God, to which multitudes of people made their annual pilgrimage. These poems, ranging from seven to ten, are called the *mu'allaqat*, the ‘suspended’, and to this day they constitute an integral part of Arabic literature courses the world over because they are considered to be the masterpieces of Old Arabic Literature. Growing up in Sudan, I had to memorize all 103 verses of *Tarfa Ibn al-'abd's* *mu'allaqat*, the ‘suspended’ poem of *Tarfa Ibn al-'abd*, in preparation for taking the Sudan School Certificate Examination.

## 1.2 The Quran: Its compilation History and Inimitability

The Quran was revealed over a 23-year period. Whenever Gabriel related a portion of it to the prophet, the prophet would in turn recite it to his companions who would memorize it. A few of them were literate; consequently, they were able to write it down. Since the order of the revelation differed from the order of the compilation of the *mushaf*, the written version of the Quran, the prophet would indicate to his companions where each and every verse belonged. The majority of the companions of Prophet Muhammad were illiterate; however, memorizing the Quran came as a second nature to them as a result of their belonging to “a cultural background that had a long-standing tradition of memorizing literature, history, and genealogy” (Abdel Haleem, 2010, p. xvi).

Muslims believe that the Quran is the word of God and their reverence for it is boundless. Tens of thousands of them, the majority of whom are non-Arabic speakers, memorize it by heart. Listening to Qur'anic recitation is a heart-warming, touching experience for Muslims and, occasionally, non-Muslims. Jane McAuliffe (2003) relates such an experience: “Muslims worldwide revere and cherish the sounds of the Quran. Again, I offer a personal testimony: on trips to the Middle East and southeast Asia I have often heard wonderful recitation and, even as a non-Muslim, it never fails to affect me profoundly” (p. 340). In addition

to reciting and interpreting the Quran, scholars have also studied its revelation, collection, order and arrangement, how it was written down, the reasons and occasions of revelation, what is revealed in Mecca and in Medina, the abrogating and abrogated verses, and its methods of explanation.

Another aspect of the Quran that contributes to its i'jāz or inimitability, is its eloquence of expression. Since it was revealed to a society with a strong oral tradition, it had to be sententious and articulate. Several verses of the Quran challenge Quraysh to compose a similar discourse: "If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to our servant, then produce a single *sura* like it – enlist any supporters you have other than God – if you truly think you can" (Q. 2:23). Nevertheless, approaching the study of the Quran from a literary perspective and analyzing its linguistic characteristics have remained contentious issues for a considerable amount of time.

Tracing the different approaches to the study of the Quran, Abu-Zayd (2003) argues the debate concerning adopting a literary approach to the study of the Quran between traditionalists and modernists is an important one. He concludes that while Islamic theology had been rigid, textual analytical sciences have made significant advances in "disciplines such as semantics, semiotics and hermeneutics" (p. 40). To keep up with these developments, a new analytical framework needs to be adopted.

Before looking into metaphors in the Quran, I would like to point out that the approach used in the following analysis is that proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who assert metaphors constitute the foundation of our conceptual system and influence our thoughts, actions and communication. Then they proceed to identify a variety of figures of speech and classify them as metaphoric in nature. Since 'metaphor' can be identified as "a figure of speech in which a term that is usually associated with a certain entity can be used to describe another" (Elhindi, 2003, p. 131), metonyms, similes and personifications will be considered metaphoric.

## 2 -DIVINE METAPHORS

Eve Sweetser (this volume) argues that many disciplines consider literal language to be the primary explanatory and analytical tool, whereas figurative expressions are regarded as being secondary. However, there are certain situations where the reverse is true. One of these situations is when language is about the Divine. This, she adds, is the result of our inability to comprehend such a complex

concept that transcends the limits of both our thoughts and expressive abilities. To resolve this, we turn to figurative language. Another vital role that metaphors play in theological discourse is their ability to express parables whose significance is partially the result of “that basic movement by indirection from the known to the unknown – the heart of metaphor” (McFague, 1982, p. 31).

The Quran affirms, “*There is nothing like Him (the Lord): He is the All Hearing, the All Seeing*” (Q. 42:12). The majority of Islamic scholars agree that thinking about the embodiment of Allah, or envisioning a form or shape for Him, is strictly prohibited. To support their fatwa, or religious judgment, they quote the above verse and a ḥadīth, a saying of the Prophet, narrated by Ibn Umar and reported in *Al-Ṭabarāni*, an authentic collection of prophetic sayings. In it, the Prophet says: “Reflect on the bounties of Allah and do not contemplate Him” (*Markaz Al-Fatwa*), meaning do not think about what the Divine looks like.

Researching the fatwa concerning visualizing the Divine form, I came across the question of whether it is permissible for the Muslim to imagine the image of God. The answer given by the sheikhs, or Muslim scholars in charge of the website *Markaz Al-Fatwa*, was a resounding ‘no.’ According to the fatwa, Muslims are not allowed to do so because discerning something and judging it can be achieved through two means: First, by watching and observing it; and this is impossible as far as Allah is concerned because the Quran affirms: “No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things” (Q. 6:103). Second, by observing something similar to the Lord and then describing Him by comparison or analogy. This is also out of the question because there is nothing like Him: “*There is nothing like Him: He is the All Hearing, the All Seeing*” (Q. 42:12). The fatwa encourages Muslims to get to know the Lord through his creation and attributes. It concludes by strongly warning against envisioning Allah. If that happens, the fatwa says, one should seek refuge from Satan by making supplication to Allah and declaring his oneness.

However, several verses from the Quran and many ḥadīth *qudsi* (Divine sayings) make reference to Allah’s hands, face, and other body parts: “*We feed you seeking Allah’s face. We wish for no reward, nor thanks from you*” (Q. 76:9). “In the day of resurrection, the whole earth will be in His grip. The heavens will be rolled up in His right hand – Glory be to Him! He is far above the partners they ascribe to Him” (Q. 39:67). One school of thought argues the ‘face’ and ‘hands’ mentioned in these verses are metaphors. They believe ‘face’ is a reference to Allah’s ‘essence’ or ‘sake,’ while ‘hand’ is a metonym for ‘power.’ Another group of scholars assert these are ‘true’ body parts, but they are unlike any other.

To support their position, this group cites religious texts implying bodily movement or motion, like the following hadith narrated by Abu Hurayra, Allah's Apostle, who said, "Every night when it is the last third of the night, our Lord, the Superior, the Blessed, descends to the nearest heaven and says: Is there anyone to invoke Me that I may respond to his invocation? Is there anyone to ask Me so that I may grant him his request? Is there anyone asking My forgiveness so that I may forgive him?" (Sahih al-Bukhari, p. 264). Since rising from the throne and descending to the heavens implies motion, it is argued that the divine has a physical form.

As Muslims are encouraged to think about the attributes of the Divine and not his image, they are cognizant of the 99 names of Allah, which many commit to memory. These names, denoting Allah's attributes, frequently occur in the Qur'an, especially at the end of verses. The most consecutive occurrences, however, are included in the *Surat Al-Hashr*, the Gathering:

*He is God: there is no god other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy One, Source of Peace, Granter of Security, Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, the Truly Great; God is far above anything they consider to be His partner. He is God: the Creator, the Originator, the Shaper. The best names belong to Him. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him: He is the Almighty, the Wise. (Q. 59:22-24)*

Metaphoric expressions in the Quran denoting the Creator and His attributes are abundant; however, I would like to quote a few. The first occurs in *Surat Al-Baqara*, the Cow chapter:

*God! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who can intercede in His presence except as He permits? He knows what appears to his creatures before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He wills. His Throne does extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, The Supreme in glory. (Q. 2:255)*

This verse is called *Ayat Al-Kursi*, the Verse of the Throne, and it is probably the most recited, memorized, and commented on verse in the Quran. In it, metaphoric expressions, many of which are not rendered by the English translation, are used to denote the attributes of the Creator and His capabilities. Commenting on this verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1938), whose English translation and commentary on the Qur'an is considered by many to be the best, gives the following remark about *Ayat Al-Kursi*: "Who can translate its glorious meaning,

or reproduce the rhythm of its well-chosen words? Even in the original Arabic the meaning seems to be greater than can be expressed in words” (p. 102).

Another verse that employs an extended metaphor to depict the attributes of Allah occurs in *Surat Al-Nūr* or Light:

*God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is as if there were a Niche, and within it a lamp: The lamp enclosed in glass: The glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East, nor the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! God does guide whom He will to His Light: God does set forth parables for people: And God does know all things. (Q. 24:35)*

Employing the ‘guidance as light’ metaphor, this verse paints a vivid picture of a room that has a small hallow that is placed high in the wall to ensure the utmost dissemination of illumination of a lamp within which it is housed. The lamp is fueled by oil from an olive tree that had grown in a moderate climate, resulting in oil so pure that it almost emits illumination without kindling.

Moreover, the following verse from the sixth chapter depicts Allah’s all-encompassing knowledge:

Nothing escapes the Lord’s knowledge, no matter how minute or insignificant it might seem. Everything is inscribed in what Abdullah Ali (1938) refers to as the mystic Record. God also has the keys to the unseen, future happenings and realms beyond the knowledge of all creatures.

## 2.1 Spatial and Temporal Metaphors

First, it is important to underscore the significance of the ‘journey’ in the Quran because it is the concept that triggers the majority of both spatial and temporal metaphors. Al Wakeel (2006) states the ‘journey’ in the Quran has spatial and temporal dimensions in addition to specific spiritual and cognitive goals (p. 159). This ‘journey’ has been alluded to time and again in the Quran. For instance, “O mankind, indeed you are toiling laboriously toward your Lord and will meet Him” (Q. 84:6). The extended metaphor in this verse is an indication of the nature of the quest of human beings to meet their Lord. It is a quest that is full of trials and tribulations, indirectly alluded to by the adverb of manner ‘laboriously.’ And as in all ‘journeys,’ the dimensions of time and place are essential elements of the quest.



Another spatial metaphor is the 'straight path.' It constitutes the essence of Islamic belief. This metaphor, which occurs multiple times in the Quran, first appears in *Surat Al-Fātiḥa*, the opening chapter: "Guide us to the straight path: The path of those you have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray" (Q. 1:6). Muslims pray five times a day and recite this metaphor 17 times, once in every *rak'a*, prostration or bow, a constant supplication to their Lord to help them stay constant on the righteous path by following his orders and avoiding his prohibitions.

A similar metaphor is used in *Surat Al-An'am*, Livestock Chapter: "Verily, this is My Way, leading straight. Follow it: Follow not other paths. They will scatter you about from His path. Thus doth He command you that ye may be righteous" (Q. 6:153). The consequences of following the righteous path are unity and righteousness, whereas crooked ways lead to conflict and baseness. In addition to encouraging adherence to the way of Allah, the Quran also uses spatial metaphors to discourage going down the wrong path. *Surat Al-A'raf*, the Heights, relates the advice Moses gave to his brother, Aaron: "Act for me amongst my people. Do right and follow not the way of those who do mischief" (Q. 7:142).

The Quran also uses metaphoric expressions that associate 'light' with 'guidance' and 'darkness' with 'disbelief.' Here are examples of this dual light-darkness metaphor:

*"God is the protector of those who have faith: From the depths of darkness He will lead them forth into light. Of those who reject faith the patrons are the evil ones: from light they will lead them forth into the depths of darkness" (Q. 2:257).*

*"There hath come to you from God a light and a perspicuous Book, wherewith God guides all who seek His good pleasure to ways of peace and safety, and leads them out of darkness, by His will unto the light, guides them to a path that is straight" (Q. 5:17-18).*

*"A book which we have revealed unto thee, in order that thou might lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light – by the leave of their Lord – to the way of (Him) the Exalted in power, worthy of all praise" (Q. 14:1).*

*"He it is who sends blessings on you, as do His angels, that He may bring you out from the depths of darkness into light: And he is full of mercy to the believers" (Q. 43:33).*

*“He is the one who sends to His servant manifest signs, that he may lead you from the depths of darkness into the light. And verily, God is to you most kind and merciful” (Q. 57:9).*

*“An Apostle, who rehearses to you the signs of God containing clear explanations, that he may lead forth those who believe and do righteous deeds from the depths of darkness into light” (Q. 11:65).*

Citing the examples above, Al-Iskandar (2008) argues each temporal metaphor has six different dimensions: a temporal dimension, a dynamic dimension, a cosmic dimension, a chromatic dimension, a sensory dimension, and an epistemic or cognitive dimension. The temporal dimension is associated with ‘day’ and ‘night’, the times associated with ‘light’ and ‘darkness.’ Temporal metaphors are discussed in the following section. The dynamic dimension is closely related to the temporal one, and it denotes the succession of night and day and the physical forces behind the motion. As for the cosmic dimension, it is an indication of the ‘sun’ and the ‘moon,’ the celestial bodies marking the time units of day and night. The chromatic dimension is a reference to the color ‘white’, denoting ‘day’ and ‘black,’ denoting ‘night.’ The sensory dimension alludes to light and darkness perceived during these times. Finally, the epistemic or cognitive dimension is reference to discernment and foresight, qualities that are more valued than the sense of sight: *“It’s not people’s eyes that are blind, but their hearts within their breasts” (Q. 22:46).*

Another feature of the metaphoric expressions in the above examples is that each one of them employs a spatial metaphor that depicts a deep, dark hole. The word ‘depth’ is implied in example two and used in all the other five. These are directional metaphors in which ‘down’ is characterized as an unfavorable position and ‘up’ as a favorable one. When used in conjunction with the light-dark metaphor, the picture that emerges is a vivid one in which ‘misguided’ people are in a deep, dark hole out of which they are led to embrace light and guidance.

Temporal metaphors, on the other hand, are closely associated with spatial ones. Azab (1989) states that while the Quran uses the terms *hīn* (period of time) and *dahr* (long period of time), it does not employ the term *zaman* (time). After citing the numerical occurrences of *hīn* and *dahr*, which are thirty-four and two, respectively, he asserts that the Quran uses a variety of other words referring to specific durations of time, e.g. day and year. Azab adds that Aramaic, a Semitic language like Arabic, uses the word ‘*zammen*’ for a specific time or place. The Aramaic version of the Old Testament, he argues, uses this term only

four times (p. 143). After discussing how the morphological form of the verb tense in Semitic languages does not always match the time at which the action denoted by the verb occurs, Azab concludes time, or tense, is indicated by the aspectual properties of the verb and the rich contextual inferences, which characterized both the Quran and the Old Testament (Azab, 1989, p. 153).

To fully appreciate the category of temporal metaphors discussed in this section, it is important to understand the significance of 'knowledge' in Islam. The first revelation of the Quran, which is "Read in the name of thy Lord" (Q. 96:1), is an indication of how the religion values knowledge and learning. The Prophet encouraged Muslims to pursue knowledge and learning from the cradle to the grave, even if that required traveling to remote and faraway places. Knowledge in Islam is considered to be the gateway to grasping the concept of the Creator and fear Him: "It is those of His servants who have knowledge who stand in true awe of God" (Q. 35:28). Although we are born with no form of knowledge, Allah provides each one of us with the tools necessary for learning: "It is God who brought you out of your mothers' wombs knowing nothing, and gave you hearing and sight and minds, so that you might be thankful" (Q. 16:78).

In addition to endowing human beings with the ability to learn, the Lord also created the universe in which we live, full of signs indicative of His existence. A Bedouin was asked how he knew the Lord exists; he responded, "dung signifies an animal and tracks denote a traverser; doesn't this universe signal the existence of a creator"? It is this instinct and natural disposition the Quran appeals to when it asks people to speculate, ponder, and think:

*There are truly signs in the creation of the heavens and earth, and in the alternation of night and day, for those with understanding, who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down, who reflect on the creation of heavens and earth: 'Our Lord you have not created this without purpose – You are far above that! – so protect us from the torment of fire. (Q. 3:190-192)*

Another set of temporal metaphors occur in Surat Yasīn: "And a sign for them is the Night: We withdraw there from the Day, and behold they are plunged in darkness" (Q. 36:37). Abdullah Ali (1938) gives the following comment on this verse: "withdrawing the day from the night" is a striking phrase and very apt. The day or the Light is the positive thing. The Night or darkness is merely negative. We cannot withdraw the negative. But if we withdraw the real thing, the positive, which filled the void, nothing is left but the void (p.1178). Extending the metaphor, the following verses state: "The sun, too, runs its course: this is determined by the Almighty, The All-Knowing. And We have determined

*phases for the moon until finally it becomes like an old-date stalk. The sun cannot overtake the moon, nor can the night outrun the day: each floats in [its own] orbit” (Q. 36:38-40).*

These lucid verses, often quoted as evidence of the scientific miraculous nature of the Quran, describe the succession of night and day, the separate orbits of the moon and the sun, and the lunar mansions, or 28 divisions of the Zodiac. All of this is accomplished using language and similes people at the time could relate to and understand, e.g. ‘an old-date stalk.’

I would like to conclude this section by quoting a couple of beautiful metaphors that describe the succession and attributes of night and day. Allah says: “*By the night as it conceals, and the day as it appears in glory*” (Q. 92:1-2). Since the darkness of the night covers up and obscures everything, Allah designated the day as a time for seeking sustenance and the night as a time for rest: “*And made the night as a covering. And made the day as a means of subsistence*” (Q. 78:10-11). Finally, *Surat Al-Takwīr*, or the Folding Up, gives the following description of night and day at dawn: “*And the Night as it dissipates; and the Dawn that softly breathes*” (Q. 81:17-18). The dissipating night is depicted here as a huge beast kneeling on the day. As it lifts its weight, dawn gently breathes.

## 2.2 Metaphors of Virtues

Islam stresses morals and good conduct. The Prophet of Islam is addressed by the Quran as being of an exemplary character: “*And though (stands) on an exalted standard of character*” (Q. 68:4). In *Surat Al-‘imrān*, the Family of Imran, the Quran states, “*Out of mercy from God, you [Prophet] were gentle in your dealing with them – had you been harsh, or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed and left you*” (Q. 3:159). An authentic saying of the prophet asserts he had been sent to perfect manners. The antitheses of these good manners are metaphorically alluded to as ‘diseases of the heart’. Occurring 137 times in the Quran, the heart is a metaphor for discernment and consciousness in Islamic thought. God gives the following characterization of those who reject faith: “*God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil; great is the penalty they incur*” (Q. 2:7). The same sura gives the following description of the hypocrites: “*In their hearts is a disease; and God has increased their disease; and grievous is the penalty they incur because they are false to themselves*” (Q. 2:10).

These diseases of the hearts are not restricted to disbelief and hypocrisy; they also include arrogance and disrespectfulness. The Quran relates the story of Luqman, the Wise, advising his son. After preaching to him not to reject faith in Allah and be good to his parents, Luqman exhorts: *“Ad swell not thy cheek, nor walk in insolence through the earth, for God loves not any arrogant boaster. And be moderate in thy pace, and lower thy voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass”* (Q. 31: 18-19).

This metaphoric sermon advising against several undesirable qualities stresses the necessity of moderation in all acts and behavior, a theme reiterated time and again in the Quran because Allah designates the Muslim Nation as moderate: *“Thus have We made of you a nation justly balanced”* (Q. 2:143).

Metaphors are also used in the Quran in conjunction with a variety of moral standards. One of these is *infāq*, or giving. Helping the needy and giving the poor are fundamental Islamic tenets. *Zakā*, or alms giving, is one of the five pillars of Islam. Allah says, *“And in their wealth and possessions (was remembered) the right of the needy. Him who asked, and him who (for some reason) was prevented (from asking)”* (Q. 51:19). The specific portion of the wealth that is designated as being ‘the right of the Needy’ in this verse is the *zakā*, or obligatory alms giving. In addition to *zakā*, the Quran also encourages spending and promises great rewards for those who give: *“The parable of those who spend their substance in the way of God is that of a seed: It grows seven years, and each ear has a hundred grains, God gives manifold increase to whom He pleases: And God cares for all and He knows all things”* (Q. 2:261).

Another disease of the heart that the Quran warns against is miserliness. Allah says: *“And spend in charity for the benefit of your own souls. Those who are saved from their own stinginess, they are the ones who achieve prosperity”* (Q. 64:16). The Arabic word *Yuwaqqa*, translated as ‘saved’ in the above verse usually collocates with disease and is often used in the context of protection from an illness. This metaphoric verse also asserts that ‘giving’ results in an increase of wealth and prosperity, which might sound like an oxymoron. However, Muslims firmly believe that giving is rewarded by an increase of wealth. The Arabic word *zakat* (alms giving) is derived from a root that means growth. So just as pruning promotes the growth of plants, giving results in prosperity. The Prophet had been repeatedly quoted as asserting that giving does not decrease one’s wealth. However, the Quran instructs that moderation should be followed when charity is given: *“Make not thy hand tied (like a niggard’s) to thy neck, not stretch it most to its utmost reach, so that though become blameworthy and destitute”* (Q.17:29).

Philanthropists who spend in charity are promised great rewards. This is underscored by the following extended metaphor from *Surat Al-Baqara*, The Cow:

*Those who spend their wealth in God's cause are like a seed that produces seven ears, each bearing a hundred grains. God gives multiple increase to whoever He wishes: He is limitless and all knowing. Those who spend their substance in the cause of God, and follow not up their gifts with reminders of their generosity or with injury, for them their reward is with their Lord: On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Q. 2:261-262).*

Ali (1938) comments that these verses set a very high standard for giving. First, the giver should spend in the 'way of Allah,' meaning any cause that might be beneficial to an individual or a society. Second, the person who gives shouldn't expect any rewards in this world. Oftentimes people spend to promote their own image and satisfy their greed for recognition and praise. Third, charity should not be followed by any act that might 'injure' the recipient, like boasting, or any reminder that the receiver is inferior to the giver.

Then the sura proceeds to sketch two contrastive metaphors depicting those who spend in the way of Allah and those spend to be seen by other people. The second group is described by the following: "O ye who believe! Cancel not your charity by reminders of your generosity or by injury – like those who spend their substance to be seen of men, but believe neither in God nor in the Last day. They are in parable like a hard, barren rock, on which is a little soil: On it falls heavy rain, which leaves it a bare stone" (Q. 2:264).

The pretentious givers are compared to a solid rock that has little soil on it; heavy rain falls, exposing its nakedness and infertility. On the other hand, those who spend for the sake of Allah are positively portrayed: "And the likeness of those who spend their substance, seeking to please God and strengthen their souls, is as a garden, high and fertile: heavy rain falls on it but makes it yield a double increase of harvest, and if it receives not heavy rain, light moisture suffices it. God sees well whatever you do" (Q. 2:265).

The lexical chain of antonyms: *earth* and *rock*, *fertile* and *barren*, and *high* and *low* reinforces the contrast between the two groups, accentuating the differences between them.

Moreover, stipulations regarding charity in Islam include giving even if one is poor and giving out of the best. The first is underscored by a verse from *Surat Al-Hashr*, the Gathering or Banishments: "But those who before them had homes [in Medina], and had adopted the Faith, show their affection to such as

came to them for refuge, and entertain no desire in their hearts for things given to the [latter], but give them preference over themselves, even though poverty was their own lot" (Q. 29:9).

This was revealed when the supporters of the Prophet in Medina shared everything they had with the migrants who left their homes and possessions in Mecca. The Quran also urges giving what is valuable and good as charity:

*Ye who believe. Give of the good things ye have honorably earned, and of the fruits of the earth which we have produced for you, and do not aim at getting anything which is bad, in order that out of it ye may give away something, when you yourselves would not receive it except with closed eyes. And know that God is free of all wants, and worthy of all praise. (Q. 2:267)*

This verse asserts charity should be given out of what has been legally, or honorably, acquired. Another condition for giving included in the verse is that we should give what is good. This is stated in a lucid metaphor not captured by the English translation. The phrase 'with closed eyes' should not be interpreted as literary because it denotes a situation where someone is cheated. For instance, if someone buys a box of tomatoes and realizes, after getting home, that the ones in the bottom are rotten, then that is a 'closed eyes' situation. Hence, giving what is not good is compared to this transaction in which the buyer is cheated.

Other desirable qualities in Islam are patience and forgiveness. Several of the 99 names, or attributes, of Allah denote these characteristics, e.g. *Al-Rahmān*: the Most Merciful, *Al-Raḥīm*: the Compassionate, *Al-Ghafūr*: the Most forgiving, and *Al-Ḥalīm*: the Clement. Numerous Qur'anic verses preach suppressing anger, being patient, and forgiving. Allah says, "And do thou be patient, for thy patience is but from God; nor grieve over them: and distress not thyself because of their plots" (Q. 16:127). The feeling translated as 'distressed' is metaphorically expressed as *dhīq* in Arabic, meaning 'tightness'. This seems to confirm the claim made by Kövecses (2005), who argues certain metaphors of emotions are similar across many cultures and languages because humans undergo similar physiological changes experiencing these emotions. Since anger clouds the ability to think or behave rationally, Islamic discourse repeatedly remind Muslims to control their anger. The Quran relates, "When Moses' anger abated, he picked up the Tablets, on which were inscribed guidance and mercy for those who stood in awe of their Lord" (Q. 7.154). Again, the English meaning translation of the verse fails to capture the essence of the metaphor in which 'anger' is depicted as a raging person commanding Moses to pull his brother by the hair, throw down the tablets, and roughly pull Aaron towards him.

'*Walamma sakata,*' when the raging metaphoric person became silent, Moses calmed down, regained his composure and picked up the Tablets.

Likewise, the Quran says, "*Nor can Goodness and Evil be equal. Repel Evil with what is better: Then will he between whom and thee was hatred becomes as it were thy friend and intimate! And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint, none but persons of the greatest good fortune*" (Q. 41:34-35). In this metaphor, good deeds are depicted as driving away evil and keeping it at bay. The verse also indirectly alludes to the benefits reaped by both the individual and the society when such a conduct is observed. Individuals achieve psychological well-being and societies become harmonious and balanced.

### 2.3 Metaphors of Bounty

Metaphors are also used in the Quran in reference to the countless favors and graces the Creator bestowed on people. One of these is the creation of the two sexes: "*And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts: Verily in that are signs for those who reflect*" (Q. 2:21). This metaphor is about the creation of men and women and how they bond together in the union of marriage. The verse emphasizes the love and tranquility that arise as a result of this relationship by using *litaskunu*, a word whose root also means to live, dwell, calm down, and be intimate. Commentators on the Holy Quran argue this verse describes the relationship between husband and wife as one that results in rest for the body and soul, stability, tranquility, intimacy, and peacefulness.

Similarly, the Quran uses another metaphor to describe the relationship between husbands and wives: "*They (your wives) are your garments and you are their garments*" (Q. 2:187). Abdullah Ali (1938) offers the following comment on this verse: "*Men and women are each other's garments: i.e. they are for mutual support, mutual comfort, and mutual protection, fitting into each other as a garment fits the body*" (p. 74). Interpreters of the Quran have also added 'garment' is a metaphor for ornament, closeness and pleasure. A similar verse which describes how the intimate act of love between husbands and wives results in procreation, is the following: "*It is He who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her in love. When they are united, she bears a light burden and carries it about, unnoticed. When she grows heavy, they both pray to God their Lord, 'If thou gives us a*



*godly child, we vow we shall ever be grateful*" (Q. 7:189). Sexual intercourse is euphemistically referred to as *taghashsha*, translated as 'united' above. It means 'cover up' or 'envelop,' a metaphor for making love.

Another bounty associated with many metaphoric expressions in the Quran is water, a precious commodity, especially in a place like the Arabian Peninsula. The Quran states, "*We made from water every living thing*" (Q. 21:30). Not only does the Quran give an account of precipitation, but it also describes the formation of the clouds and the lightning and thunder associated with the rainfall. Allah says, "*It is He who does show you the lightning, both of fear and of hope: It is he who does raise up the clouds, heavy with fertilising rain. Nay, thunder repeats His praises, and so do the angels, with awe: He flings the loud-voiced thunder-bolts, and therewith He strikes whomsoever He will*" (Q. 13:12-13). This articulate metaphor renders a vivid picture of how clouds are constructed; it describes the lightning and thunder and the mixed feelings of those watching them, fearful of the thunderbolts and yet hoping for rain that would benefit them; the verse also states how both angels and thunder praise the Lord, and it concludes by asserting that none can escape His wrath.

A similar 'water' metaphor occurs in *Surat Al-Furqān*, the Criterion: "*And He it is who sends the winds as heralds of glad tidings, going before his mercy, and We send down pure water from the sky, that with it We may give life to a dead land, and slake the thirst of things we have created, cattle and men in great numbers*" (Q. 25:48-49). In this metaphor, the wind driving the clouds is a sign of the mercy that follows: rain giving life to earth, people, and animals. This image of the earth coming to life is reiterated several times in the Quran. *Surat Al-Hajj*, The Pilgrimage, states, "*And thou see the earth barren and lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it swells and produces every kind of joyous growth*" (Q. 22:5). A lifeless, bleak land is transformed into a colorful landscape that has all kinds of beautiful plants. The verse indicates that the earth '*ihazzat wa rabat*,' meaning 'vibrates or shakes up and swells,' an articulate reference to the germination that results in both movement and increase. The metaphor of giving earth life through rain is also used as a reminder of resurrection. Allah says, "*And among His signs is this: though see the earth barren and desolate; but when We send down rain on it, it is stirred to life and yields increase. Truly Who gives life to the earth can surely give life to the dead. For He has power over all things*" (Q. 41:39).

A live earth is vital for the subsistence of livestock, whose benefits to people are multiple as described by the following verse:

*And the cattle He has created for you: from them you derive warmth and numerous benefits and of their meat you eat. And you have a sense of pride and beauty in them as you drive them home in the evening, and as you lead them forth to pasture in the morning. And they carry your heavy loads to lands that you could not reach except with souls distressed: for your Lord is indeed Most Kind, Most Merciful. And horses, mules, and donkeys, for you to ride and use for show; and He has created other things of which you have no knowledge. (Q. 16:5-8)*

These four verses in “The Bee” chapter enumerate the benefits of these animals: we get warmth from the clothes we weave out of their wool and hair; we eat their meat and use them as beasts of burden and means of transportation; and we derive pleasure from seeing them at the beginning and end of the day. All these benefits expressed in lucid, figurative description. The evening and morning, for instance, are metonymically alluded to by ‘resting’ and ‘herding,’ respectively, while ‘warmth’ is employed to denote clothes woven from wool and hair.

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

I have tried to outline a thematic categorization of metaphors in the Quran by classifying them into four groups: 1) metaphors describing the attributes of the Lord, 2) spatial and temporal metaphors, 3) metaphors of virtues, and 4) metaphors about the bounties God bestowed upon His creation. The task was arduous. First, English translations of the Quran do not capture the essence of the original Arabic text, especially when what is translated is metaphoric or idiomatic. Second, the Quran is regarded to be the best composition, the very word of God revealed to His Apostle by Archangel Gabriel. It is miraculous and inimitable, not only in its content, but also in its form. Muslims, therefore, believe any linguistic analysis of it should be approached with extreme caution (Abu-Zayd, 2003). And third, the majority of the verses in the Quran are metaphoric; hence, this chapter has only scratched the surface of this important topic.

Moreover, the metaphoric analysis in this chapter is based on two interpretations of the Quran, both written by Sunnis. It is important to point out that there are other interpretations, especially those by the Shiite and Sufi. The first group uses an esoteric interpretation approach, which the majority of Muslims shun away from citing the verse, “But no one knows its (the Quran’s) hidden meaning except God” (Q. 3:7). The Sufis, on the other hand, follow a

metaphysical interpretation approach. Each is viable within its school of thought; however, the space does not allow a thorough discussion of either one of them.

Finally, the Quran was revealed into a society with strong oral literary traditions. Although the Arabs of the sixth century were mostly illiterate, poetry was a much appreciated verbal art. Metaphors and other forms of figurative language were common in their compositions. However, they have never experienced a text as eloquent as the Quran. As a matter of fact, it is widely believed that Quranic studies gave rise to several Arabic disciplines including literary criticism, rhetoric, and stylistics.

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