

Semantic Analysis of the Word “Ra’fah” (Compassion) in the Holy Quran

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Abstract

One way to achieve subtle semantic nuances and deepen understanding of texts is to pay attention to the conceptual relationships between words. This is especially true for words in the Holy Quran. The present study, using a descriptive-analytical method and focusing on “ra’fah” (compassion and kindness), presents words that have the most semantic components with this concept – words such as “rifq” (ease and lenience in behavior); “lutf” (gentleness, tolerance, and forgiveness based on delicacy); “lin” (easy and good behavior accompanied by patience, tenderness of heart, and praiseworthy character); “hūn” (kindness or contempt); “birr” (purposeful and conscious goodness towards others). Although all of these words share the key components of softness, gentleness, and avoidance of violence, their subtle semantic differences cause them to be used interchangeably in some cases. These distinctions show that the Holy Quran uses words in their specific contexts with semantic precision to reflect different layers of moral and behavioral concepts.

Keywords: The Noble Quran, compassion, conceptual links, comparative analysis, semantics.

.1 Introduction

The Holy Quran, the divine book and the eternal miracle of the Seal of the Prophets (peace be upon him), is not only a source of guidance and profound monotheistic knowledge but also an unparalleled treasury of literary subtleties and semantics. Every word in this sacred text has been chosen with divine precision and placed in a specific position to convey its semantic load to the audience in the most complete and accurate manner possible. Therefore, a deep understanding of the Quranic messages requires delving into the concepts of its words and comprehending the complex and systematic relationships between them. Semantics, by providing structured analytical tools, enables researchers to move beyond the level of literal translations and access

the hidden layers and intricate conceptual networks of the Quran. This approach becomes particularly important when dealing with words that may appear synonymous or similar at first glance but possess subtle distinctions and unique functions within the Quranic context.

Among these, the ethical and emotional concepts of the Quran, due to their pivotal role in building the value and educational system of Islam, hold a position of great sensitivity and prestige. One of the key concepts is the word “ra’fah”, mentioned as a prominent attribute of Allah the Almighty and the Noble Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him), considered the cornerstone of many human and social interactions in Islamic teachings. “Ra’fah”, which can be translated as “intense and pure tenderness and kindness,” contains within itself a world of subtlety and semantic depth. However, a complete understanding of this concept is only possible when it is studied not in isolation, but alongside its semantic relatives in the Holy Quran. Words such as “rifq”, “lutf”, “lin”, “hūn”, and “birr”, although sharing the general semantic field of gentleness, kindness, and avoidance of harshness with “ra’fah”, each come with additional nuances and secondary connotations that have established their specific place and application within the linguistic system of the Quran.

This research, with a fundamental and theoretical aim but with wide practical applications, meticulously and systematically examines the ethical concepts of the Holy Quran (such as “ra’fah”, “rifq”, and “birr”). Its ultimate goal is to strengthen the epistemological infrastructure for practical utilization in various fields. Its main applications include providing more accurate interpretations of Quranic verses, designing step-by-step educational and ethical programs, creating a common language for interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, producing accurate media and cultural content, and aiding correct juristic inference (ijtihad) in the realm of social rulings. This research provides a precise map of the Quran’s rich concepts so that specialists in each field can optimally utilize this semantic treasure.

Although the present essay analyzes Quranic vocabulary, its scope of application and importance is by no means limited to the internal sphere of the Islamic world. Semantic studies of sacred texts, especially the Quran—one of the most influential texts in human history—is among the fundamental and highly regarded fields in the international arena of religious studies, historical linguistics, and moral philosophy. Distinguishing between concepts like “ra’fah”, “rahmah”, “lutf”, and “birr” is not merely an internal Islamic discussion; it is a classic example of semantic analysis that will be inspiring and useful for any research seeking to understand linguistic subtleties, the translatability of lofty ethical concepts, and how spiritual discourses are formed within a

foundational text. This research addresses a significant challenge in the translation and cross-cultural transmission of concepts, which is itself a thoroughly international topic. Therefore, the findings of this paper can be highly valuable and applicable for linguists, translators of sacred texts, researchers in comparative religion, and even moral philosophers in the West who seek to discover conceptual systems different from the Greco-Christian tradition.

Based on this, the present article aims, using a descriptive-analytical method and placing the concept of "ra'fah" at the center of attention, to conduct a semantic analysis of this lexical network. The main question is: what unique semantic components does each of these terms possess, despite their apparent commonalities, and how do these distinctions lead the Holy Quran to use them in specific and irreplaceable contexts? For example, how can one distinguish between "birr", meaning purposeful and conscious goodness, and "ra'fah", as an inherent, heartfelt tenderness? Or what factor causes "hūn" to carry a dual concept of kindness and contempt in certain contexts, while "ra'fah" always has a positive and one-sided semantic connotation?

Thus, this article seeks, through the analysis of semantic components and the examination of conceptual relationships, to reveal a facet of the expressive subtleties of the Holy Quran and to show how this divine book, with astonishing precision, utilizes vocabulary to reflect the different layers of ethical and behavioral concepts. The achievement of such research will not only deepen our understanding of Quranic concepts but can also be groundbreaking in the fields of exegesis (tafsir), ethical education, and even the rapprochement between Islamic schools of thought.

.۱ Background of the Research

A deep understanding of the meanings of the Quran and the subtlety of divine words and expressions has always motivated scholars from various fields to interpret Quranic concepts based on their expertise. Among these, the concept of "ra'fah" as a key ethical and pedagogical term in the Quran's system of meanings has received relatively limited systematic semantic analysis. Reviewing previous research shows that, although some articles have addressed "ra'fah" within fiqh, ethical, and social contexts, no independent and comprehensive study has been published that analyzes this term from a semantic perspective within the Quranic text. For example, the article "The Place of Ra'fah in Islamic Culture and Its Effects on Personal and Social Life" by Abdolmotaleb Abdollah (۱۰۲۲ CE) focused on the functions of "ra'fah" through Quranic verses and traditions, emphasizing its individual and social roles. Similarly, the study "The Place of the Phrase 'Layn' in Enjoining Good and Preventing Evil" by Mohammad Reza Faghani (۱۰۱۶

CE) highlighted the importance of the phrase “Qawl Layn” (gentle speech) as an expression of Quranic “ra’fah” in the context of effective advice and prohibition. However, these studies primarily operate within the frameworks of fiqh, ethics, or educational sciences and have not addressed the concept of “ra’fah” from a structural semantic perspective, such as lexical root analysis or contextual analysis of verses.

.۱ Research Concepts

Examining the semantic concepts in the Quran is not only a scientific necessity for a deeper understanding of the divine book but also a response to contemporary needs in addressing new questions. These studies, while preserving the authenticity of the Quranic text, establish a vibrant connection between the interpretive heritage of past scholars and modern analytical methods.

.۱/۱ Semantic Components

Semantic analysts, for precise word analysis, decompose concepts into semantic components. These components are features that define the structural meaning of a word and serve as a foundation for understanding linguistic relationships (Safavi, ۲۰۱۸, p. ۷۸). In other words, semantic components are a set of features that form the concept of a word and enable systematic description of semantic relationships within sentences as well as conceptual links between words (Palmer, ۱۹۶۴, p. ۱۴۷). Analyzing these components not only reveals the broader meaning of words but also serves as a key objective in semantic research, providing tools for examining hidden layers of meaning. Interestingly, these components can be extracted from contextual usage, indicating that meaning is dynamic and dependent on the application context of the word (ibid, ۱۹۶۴, p. ۱۰۲). On the other hand, comparing the semantic components of synonymous words offers a deeper understanding of subtle differences in meaning, as well as the positioning and application of each word in various linguistic contexts. This process helps speakers and writers to use words accurately and purposefully, considering the communicative conditions.

.۱/۲ Conceptual Relationships

In modern linguistics, “semantic relationships” between words and sentences are recognized as a vital and challenging branch that has attracted considerable attention from researchers (Bagheri, ۱۹۹۰: ۲۹۰). Within this domain, the concept of “conceptual relationships” among words and sentences holds a central position; although various definitions and explanations have been provided about it. These interpretations can be thoroughly traced and analyzed in different linguistic works .

In contemporary semantics, significant efforts have been made to systematize the process of discovering word and phrase meanings. In this context, examining “conceptual relationships” among words is regarded as a key tool for a deeper understanding of meaning. Achieving an accurate interpretation of a word’s meaning requires analyzing its internal connections with other linguistic elements, and only after this stage can one seek to find its concrete manifestation in the external world (Bagheri, ۱۹۹۰: ۲۹۶) .

Given these points, it can confidently be argued that no comprehensive and acceptable semantic research can reach meaningful conclusions without considering the complex network of conceptual relationships governing words. In other words, neglecting these relationships creates a fundamental flaw in the process of semantic analysis and hinders the achievement of a systematic understanding of language.

.۳/۳ Comparative Analysis of Words

In the semantic domain of the word “ra’fah”, a set of Quranic words can be identified that are intertwined within a network of overlapping concepts and references. This study, aiming to uncover semantic nuances and precise distinctions among these words, examines and compares Quranic terms that share or relate to the components of “ra’fah”. In the designed graphical model, the word “ra’fah” is considered as the central core of the semantic domain.

.۳/۳/۱ Ra’fah

Based on lexical research, the word “ra’fah” originates from the root “r-a-f,” meaning deep compassion and heartfelt tenderness (Ibn Faris, ۱۹۸۴CE: Vol. ۲, p. ۴۷۱). Ra’fah is recognized as a specific and more delicate form of mercy (Tarighi, ۱۹۹۶CE: Vol. ۱۰, p. ۱۷۲), to the extent that some linguists interpret it as a more intense form of mercy (Jawhari, ۱۹۸۴CE: Vol. ۴, p. ۱۳۶۲). Ra’fah is used only in positive contexts and without experiencing pain, whereas mercy (“rahmah”) can also occur even in unpleasant circumstances that serve a greater good (Ibn Manzur, ۱۹۹۲CE: Vol. ۱, p. ۱۱۲; Ibn Athir, ۱۹۸۸CE: Vol. ۲, p. ۱۷۶). In a comprehensive definition, Ra’fah is described as sincere and intense emotion that negates any dissatisfaction or harm—even under the pretext of a greater good (Mostafavi, ۱۹۸۲CE: Vol. ۴, p. ۱۱) .

The derivatives of the word “ra’fah”, which originates from the root “r-a-f”, are used eleven times in the Holy Quran, generally signifying one of the prominent divine attributes, namely profound and tender kindness and gentleness (Tabrisī, ۱۹۳۱CE: ۱, ۳۸۱). This attribute is frequently mentioned alongside the attribute “Raheem” to emphasize a specific dimension of God’s vast mercy (Tabāṭabā’ī, ۱۹۷۳CE: ۱, ۳۲۶). For instance, in verse ۱۴۳ of Surah Al-Baqarah, it is stated:

“And [He] has not placed upon you in the religion any difficulty” (Holy Quran, ٢:١٤٣), which is interpreted with “ra’fah” being one of the manifestations of God’s mercy in making the religion easy (Tabrisī, ١٩٣١CE: ١, ٣٨١). Furthermore, in verse ١٢٨ of Surah At-Tawbah, addressing the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), it says: “There has certainly come to you a Messenger from among yourselves... to the believers kind and merciful” (Holy Quran, ٩:١٢٨). Here, “Ra’oof” is mentioned as an attribute for the Noble Prophet (PBUH), indicating his endless kindness and compassion towards the believers (Tabātabā’ī, ١٩٧٣CE: ٩, ٣٩٤). These verses demonstrate that “ra’fah” is attributed both to God Almighty and to His Noble Prophet, expressing a deep love and compassion that surpasses general mercy .

From a semantic and comparative perspective, a subtle but fundamental difference between “ra’fah” and “rahmah” can be highlighted. Ra’fah is a specific, exaggerated manifestation of mercy, characterized by pure compassion without any trace of pain. Conversely, mercy (“rahmah”) can manifest in difficult circumstances but still serve a purpose, such as in disciplinary punishments. Additionally, the difference between “ra’fah” and “birr” (benevolence) can be noted: “Birr” refers to good deeds based on moral obligation and sincere intention (Asghari, ٢٠٢١ CE: p. ٩٠), whereas “ra’fah” is rooted in innate, unconditional emotion. From the Quranic perspective, “birr” is more associated with human actions like charity, obedience, and kindness, while “ra’fah” is often a divine attribute or a characteristic of the Prophet (peace be upon him) (Qur’anic Culture and Knowledge Center, Vol. ٢, p. ١١١).

.٣/٣/٣ Rifq

The word “rifq” refers to gentleness, moderation, and avoidance of violence and harshness. According to lexical sources, this word indicates compatibility, good conduct, and sympathetic companionship (Firozabadi, ١٩٩٢CE: Vol. ٢, p. ١١٧٨; Motarzi, undated: p. ١٩٤). Some linguists believe that “rifq” encompasses concepts such as comfort and harmony, even referring to a place of easy access to water called “Mirfaq” or “Murfaq” (e.g., “Water of Rifq”). Also, companions are called “Rifqat,” because they show empathy and agreement during travel (Farahidi, ١٩٩٤CE: Vol. ١, p. ١٩١). It is noteworthy that this word connotes continuity and unity; for example, the term “Rifqat” applied to a group of travelers is only correct if they are together, and once separated, the term no longer applies .

The word family “r-f-q” in the Holy Quran, which revolves around the meaning of “gentleness”, “gentleness” and “good behavior”, is mainly manifested in the adjective “rafiq” (plural: rafqa). This word, which is repeated eight times in the Quran, although other derivatives of this root, such as the infinitive “rifq”, do not appear independently in the Quran, the main and key meaning of these words, which is gentleness and loving companionship as opposed to violence, runs

throughout its derivatives. In Surah Nisa, verse ٣٦, in the description of goodness to parents, relatives, orphans and the poor, which all indicate a behavior based on friendship and gentleness, it is stated: And with the near and the orphans and the poor and the near neighbor and the neighbor on the side and the owner on the side and the son of the mustache and what The kingdom of your faith ۞ God does not love those who are arrogant and arrogant. These verses emphasize the importance of friendship in dealing with others (Tayeb, ١٩٩٩CE, vol. ١١, p. ٢٣١) .

The term “rifq,” which denotes gentleness, tolerance, and affection, has been interpreted in lexical sources as encompassing concepts such as harmony, kindness, and compassionate companionship. This meaning is preserved even in its derivatives—such as “rafiq” (companion)—which is used in the Holy Quran as an attribute for the companions in Paradise, emphasizing the quality of a relationship based on empathy, mutual respect, and the avoidance of violence. Thus, at its semantic core, “rifq” represents connectedness, kindness, and virtuous behavior, in contrast to harshness and severity.

٣/٣/٣ Lutf

The word “lutf” derives from the root “l-t-f,” meaning delicacy and precision. Lexicographers like Ibn Faris define it as kindness accompanied by gentleness, moderation, and subtle expressions of love (Ibn Faris, ١٩٨٤CE: Vol. ٥, p. ٢٥٠; Farahidi, ١٩٩٤CE: Vol. ٧, p. ٤٢٩; Zamakhshari, undated: Vol. ١, p. ٥٦٠). In describing divine actions, “lutf” indicates mercy, and meticulous protection of servants, while in human contexts, it focuses on behaviors characterized by finesse and subtlety .

Primarily, “lutf” refers to precise and gentle kindness in response to violence. It can also be used metaphorically in expressions like “Lutf Tree” (a delicate branch) or “Lutf Speech” (a subtle word), indicating its broad conceptual scope. Its antonym is (coarseness), contrasting with violence and harshness (Ibn Manzur, ١٩٨٤CE: Vol. ٩, p. ٣١١; Mostafavi, ١٩٩٠CE: Vol. ١٠, p. ٢١٤) .

Derivatives of “latif” appear eight times in the Holy Quran. They are used in various forms such as the subject noun (latif), the object noun (latif meaning gentle) and the verb (yaltufu) (Mustafawi, ١٩٨٩CE, vol. ١٠, pp. ١٢٥-١٢٧). Seven of them are attributed to God, such as the verse “Allah is gentle with His servants” (Shura: ١٩).emphasizing divine kindness combined with meticulous planning and preservation of His servants. In “Wa Huwa al-Laṭīfu al-Khabīr” (Al-An'am: ١٠٣), this attribute is a divine name denoting God's deep awareness and comprehensive supervision of creation (Raghib Isfahani, ١٩٩٢CE: p. ٢٤٠). The only human example appears in “Wa Liyatalaṭṭaf wa La Yush'irann Bikum Ahad” (Al-Kahf: ١٩), describing delicate behavior, concealment, and careful handling of affairs (Jawhari, ١٩٨٤CE: Vol. ٤, p. ١٤٢٦) .

Both “lutf” and “rifq” imply gentleness, but “rifq” is more associated with ease in action or companionship in travel and life, primarily limited to humans. Conversely, “lutf” not only involves

soft demeanor but also entails subtleties, hidden planning, and meticulousness, which in divine context refer to God's all-encompassing and subtle care for the universe. This distinction indicates that "lutf" in reference to God involves a higher, boundless dimension, while in humans, it manifests as a limited, practical trait (Qur'anic Culture and Knowledge Center, ٢٠١٨CE: Vol. ٣, p. ٦٢٠).

~~Accepted~~ .٣/٣/٤ Layn

The word "layn" in language means softness, ease of access, and is the opposite of violence. It is used in various contexts—both physically (material softness) and metaphorically (moral-psychological softness). Some interpret it as ease of access and gentle demeanor (Tafrih, ١٩٨٦CE: Vol. ١, p. ٣١٣). In the Quran, depending on the context, "layn" has a broad semantic range. For example, in "Fa Bima Rahmatin Min Allah Lintah Lahum" (Aal-Imran: ١٩١), it refers to the Prophet's (peace be upon him) gentle manner in dealing with others, which results from divine mercy. Some scholars interpret "layn" here as tolerance, compassionate heart, and good temper (Tabari, ١٩٩٠CE: Vol. ٤, p. ٢٠٢; Thalabi, ١٤٠١CE: Vol. ٣, p. ١٩٠). This gentleness is seen as a pedagogical and managerial strategy of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to attract hearts and foster unity among Muslims .

In another verse, "Wa Alanna Lahu al-Hadid" (Saba: ١٠), "layn" is used to describe the physical softening of iron for Prophet David (peace be upon him) by divine command. This physical softness, miraculous in nature, symbolizes God's power to change natural laws. Some commentators have likened it to softening iron like wax (Baghawi, ١٩٩٤CE: Vol. ١, p. ٢٨٧) .

In "Thumma Talino Julooduhum wa Qulubuhum Ila Dhikri Allah" (Number: ٢٣), the effect of God's remembrance on the softness of the skin and the physical reaction of calmness of the heart is described. This softness indicates a profound human response to divine speech, with both physical (skin trembling from fear of God) and spiritual (heart's tranquility) aspects .

In "Ma Qata'tum Min Linah" (Hashr: ٥), "linah" refers to date palms bearing soft fruit. Some interpreters derive this meaning from "layn," indicating trees that produce soft fruit (Qur'anic Culture and Knowledge Center, ٢٠١٨CE: Vol. ٢, p. ٢٢٥). This interpretation links the literal and botanical meanings of the term. The original literal sense of "layn" initially applied to soft objects like iron, skin, or fruit, and in contexts related to the Prophet's actions and divine remembrance, "layn" is used metaphorically to describe human traits such as gentleness, moderation, and spiritual calmness. This transfer demonstrates the Quran's capacity to express abstract concepts through observable phenomena.

The word “hun” in the Quran, depending on the context, presents seemingly contradictory meanings. This semantic variety results from metaphorical usages, the surrounding verses, and the interpretations of scholars. This analysis examines the different aspects of “hun,” the differences in its application across Quranic verses, and its relationship with related concepts .

The Arabic root “hawana” means weakness, fragility, and humiliation. In lexicons, “hun” refers to a state of disgrace, insignificance, or a lowered social or spiritual status. This concept contrasts with “izzah” (glory) and “karamah” (intrinsic worth) (Ibn Sayedah, ١٠٠ CE: Vol. ٤, p. ٤٨) .

The derivatives of the word “hun” derived from the root “h” and “n” are used in the Holy Quran in two mutually semantic contexts with completely different emotional charges. Its most important negative use is in the meaning of “humiliation and humiliation” which is used to describe the torment and humiliating state of unbelievers and criminals on the Day of Resurrection or in this world, as stated in verse ٧٩ of Surah Al-Furqan: “The torment will be doubled for him on the Day of Resurrection and he will remain in humiliation” in which the word “humiliation” as an adjective describes eternal torment accompanied by humiliation (Tabarsi, ١٩٩٣ CE, vol. ٤, p. ٢٨٠). On the other hand, its other positive use is in the meaning of “calm, dignity and gentleness” which is mentioned as a desirable attribute for the servants of God; The most famous example in this regard is the description of the servants of the Most Gracious in verse ٦٣ of Surah Al-Furqan: “And the servants of the Most Gracious who walk on the earth with ease,” where “ease” is interpreted to mean humility, calmness, and poise in walking and behavior, indicating a noble personality far from arrogance (Tabatabai, ١٩٧٢ CE, vol. ١٠, p. ٢١١). This beautiful semantic contrast appears in the form of two different grammatical cases: the subject case such as “muhan” (humiliated), which has a negative connotation, and the infinitive case such as “huna” (gently), which has a positive connotation, and this adds to the literary and rhetorical richness of the Quran .

However, in some Quranic verses, the word is used metaphorically or with an emphasis on individual choice, giving it a positive connotation. For example, in Surah An-Nahl (Nahl: ٥٩): “Ayyumsikuhu ‘ala Hun,” “Hun” refers to a situation where a person, after denying divine blessings like a daughter, falls into shame and hardship. Some scholars interpret this condition as a consequence of wrongful human choice (Ibn ‘Ajibah, ١٩٩٨ CE: Vol. ٣, p. ١٣٨) .

In Surah Al-An’am (٦:٩٣), “Azaab al-Hun” is a dual-faceted punishment: physical pain and spiritual humiliation. This phrase is considered a suitable punishment for arrogance and sinfulness (Fazlullah, ١٩٩٨ CE: Vol. ٩, p. ٢٢٨; Sabzavari, ١٩٨٦ CE: Vol. ١, p. ١٤٤). In Surah Al-Furqan (٢٥:٦٣): “Yamshoon ‘ala al-Ard howna,” “Hun” is interpreted as behavior based on serenity and voluntary humility. Al-Jassas emphasizes that this humility stems from self-respect and awareness of God’s

chosen servants, not weakness or humiliation. This meaning is an example of a metaphorical expression where “Hun” is redefined as a commendable behavior (Jassas, ١٩٨٠CE: Vol. ٥, p. ٢١٢) .

“Hun” contrasts with “lutf” (kindness), although both words refer to softness. However, “Hun” in its metaphorical sense involves a reduction in severity and sometimes connotes humiliation, while “lutf” signifies kindness and unconditional attention. Comparing “Hun” with “izzah” (glory), “izzah” indicates divine exaltation, whereas “Hun” in the sense of humility reflects an inner dignity derived from the recognition of God’s greatness. In verses related to divine punishment, such as: “Al-Yaumu Tujzawna ‘Azaaba al-Hun Bima Kun Tum Taqluna ‘Ala Allahi Ghayra al-Haqq” (٦:٩٣), the verse, in the context of threat and punishment, emphasizes the primary meaning of “Hun” as humiliation. Conversely, in verses describing the good behavior of righteous people, such as: “Ibad ar-Rahman Alladhīna Yamshūna ‘Alā al-Ard Hawn,” (Furqan: ٦٢), the context of praise and virtue develops the metaphorical meaning of “Hun” as humility. This semantic shift demonstrates the Quran’s capacity to turn seemingly negative concepts into virtues.

.٣/٣/٦ Birr

The word “birr” in Quranic and lexical texts contains multifaceted and profound meanings. Based on the opinions of commentators and linguists, its semantic analysis can be performed. This concept goes beyond the superficial translation of “goodness” and encompasses ethical, practical, and doctrinal layers. The root of “birr” is related to moving in the right direction and stability on earth, which is metaphorically generalized to adherence to the truth and fulfillment of commitments. This obedience is not limited to acts of worship but also includes practical commitment to morality and divine commands (Ibn Faris, ١٩٨٤CE: Vol. ١, pp. ١٢٢-١٢٩; Farahidi, ١٩٩٤CE: Vol. ٨, p. ٢٥٩; Ibn Badrid, ٢٠٠٠CE: Vol. ١, p. ٦٧) .

From the perspectives of Raghib and Fayyumi, “Birr” signifies the expansion of goodness—such as “Birr al-Walidayn,” which emphasizes continuity and depth in kindness towards parents, rather than mere superficial duty (Raghb Isfahani, ١٩٩٢CE: Vol. ١, p. ١١٤; Fiami, ١٩٨٠CE: p. ٤٣). “Birr” contrasts with “Uquq” (disobedience, breaking ties), indicating that “Birr” involves not only individual conduct but also social responsibility and maintaining human bonds, such as kinship (Ibn Durid, ٢٠٠٠CE: Vol. ١, p. ٦٧). The phrase “Barra Yamin” (right hand) in oaths symbolizes commitment to truthfulness and avoiding betrayal (Farahidi, ١٩٩٤CE: Vol. ٨, p. ٢٥٩). “Al-Bay’ al-Mabrur” refers to transactions free from falsehood, betrayal, or injustice—extending “Birr” into the economic and commercial realm. “Al-Hajj al-Mabrur” signifies a pilgrimage performed with sincere intention and free from sin, emphasizing that “Birr” in worship requires purity of intention and absence of hypocrisy (Hary, undated; Vol. ١٥, pp. ١٣٤-١٣٥). “Birr” also refers to conscious,

intentional kindness aimed at bringing goodness to others, not merely accidental behaviors (Asghari, 1992CE: p. 90). The semantic evolution of this term from a material to a moral value demonstrates the Quranic view of ethics as a “firm path,” transforming the physical concept of movement on land into moral steadfastness in truth, leading to salvation .

Given the abstract triple root “b-r-r”, the derivatives of this word in the Holy Quran are used in a wide range of concepts, including goodness, kindness, purity, aversion to sin, and keeping one’s promise (Ragheb Isfahani, 1992CE, pp. 122-123; Ibn Manzur, 1994CE, vol. 4, pp. 68-69). Among the most important uses are describing the divine essence, expressing the attributes of the righteous, and legislating the rules (Tabatabai, 1972CE, vol. 2, p. 42). For example, God introduces Himself as “barr” in the sense of the most benevolent and merciful: “Innahu Huwa al-Barr al-Rahim” (At-Tur: 18) .

In the Quran, “Birr” appears as a key concept in various verses, accompanied by diverse interpretations from scholars. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its meaning by examining Quranic applications and related exegeses. In Surah Al-Baqarah (2:177), “Birr” transcends the superficial act of worship, such as prayer direction, and is defined as comprehensive faith and action. Interpretations include faith in God, the Day of Judgment, charity, fulfilling promises, and patience (Sharif Lahiji, 1994CE: Vol. 1, p. 102; Hossein Jorjani, 1984CE: Vol. 1, p. 278). Some scholars also interpret it as a collective term for goodness—obedience that leads to salvation and forgiveness. These interpretations highlight that “Birr” in this verse emphasizes faith’s core and its manifestation through good deeds (Fayd Kashani, undated; Vol. 1, p. 81; Khair, Shawkani, undated; Vol. 1, p. 199) .

In Surah Al-Baqarah (2:181), “Birr” is used in the context of refraining from superficiality, such as entering homes in unconventional ways. It is interpreted as practical piety and obedience to divine commands (Samarkandi, 1993CE: Vol. 1, p. 122; Maraghi, undated; Vol. 2, p. 84). Ibn ‘Ajibah understands it as “obedience,” and Lahiji as “goodness.” This indicates that “Birr” in this context more strongly emphasizes sincere intention and commitment to divine boundaries (Sharif Lahiji, 1994CE: Vol. 1, p. 171; Tabrisi, 1992CE: Vol. 1-2, p. 609) .

In Surah Al-Ma’idah (5:2), “Wa Ta’awunu ‘ala al-Birri wa al-Taqwa” (and cooperate in righteousness and piety), “Birr” appears alongside “Taqwa” (God-consciousness). Scholars interpret “Birr” here as cooperation in fulfilling obligatory acts and voluntary good deeds, with some, like Shawkani, considering “Birr” to include both obligatory and voluntary acts, while “Taqwa” is limited to obligations. This distinction indicates that “Birr” in this context encompasses all forms of goodness beyond minimum religious duties (Tabrisi, 1992CE, Vol. 3, p. 240; Abu Hayyan Al-Gharnati, 1992CE, Vol. 4, p. 174; Taba’tabai, 1997CE, Vol. 5, p. 163). The word “birr” appears in the Quran in 21verses as al-birr, in 2verses as birr, and in six verses as (al-abrar) .

Semantic and comparative analysis reveals a subtle yet fundamental difference between “Birr” and “Ra’fah”: “Birr” refers to actions performed with deliberate intent to benefit others, while “Ra’fah,” although also associated with kindness and goodness, does not necessarily require intention or sincerity. Instead, “Ra’fah” signifies intense, unconditional compassion and mercy that does not accept suffering. Unlike “Birr,” which emphasizes purposeful deeds rooted in faith, “Ra’fah...”

.•Conclusion

By comparing these six key terms within the semantic universe of the Holy Quran, one can uncover a rich and intricate network of ethical concepts. While they all share the general domain of “goodness and kindness,” each possesses distinct semantic boundaries and specific applications. From a broad perspective, these terms can be categorized into two main realms: Divine Attributes and human moral virtues. Words like “ra’fah” and “lutf” are prominently used in both realms, whereas “birr” and “rifq” are more focused on the sphere of human action, with “hūn” and “lin” occupying an intermediate position .

Semantically, “ra’fah” represents the highest degree of unconditional compassion and mercy, specific to the essence of God and His prophets, denoting an intensity and emotional depth beyond the ordinary. This concept contrasts with “birr”, which, although a great virtue, is based on human intention and action and can be conditional. In other words, “ra’fah” is the origin and inspiration for “birr”; the All-Compassionate (al-Ra’uf) God calls His servants to perform acts of “birr” (extensive goodness). On the other hand, “lutf”, also a Divine Attribute, unlike the overt and passionate emphasis of “ra’fah”, refers to God’s subtle, discreet, and providential kindness within existence. “Lutf” is the hidden management of the Lord, while “ra’fah” is His manifest affection .

In the realm of human relations, “rifq” and “lin” are the most closely related concepts, both emphasizing “gentleness” and the avoidance of harshness and violence. However, there is a subtle distinction between them: “lin” refers more to an inner trait (softness of heart, psychological calmness), while “rifq” describes more of an external method and action (respectful behavior, forbearance, and a peaceful approach) in interactions with others. It could be said that “lin” (internal softness) is the source of “rifq”-like behavior (external gentleness). In contrast to these two, “hūn” holds a completely unique position. It is not a fixed character trait but rather an acquired state that, depending on the context, can be entirely negative (humiliation and degradation resulting from arrogance) or entirely positive (conscious and voluntary humility before God). This duality distinguishes “hūn” from the other terms, which generally carry a consistently positive connotation .

Finally, “birr”, as the most comprehensive concept, plays an umbrella role and can encompass many of these other notions. Performing an act of “birr” may require employing “rifq” and “lin” in dealing with people, feeling “hūn” (humility) before God, and believing in Divine “ra’fah” and “lutf” as the foundation of the universe. Therefore, these terms find their meaning not in isolation but within an

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