The Similarities and Differences Between Mu'ātāzila and Neo-Muʿātāzila Literary Approaches to the Qurʾān

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Received: June 12, 2020 ; Revised: June 28, 2020 ; Accepted: August 9, 2020
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Abstract
Muʿatāzila and neo-Muʿatāzila are two rationalist intellectual movements that have paid a special attention to the literary interpretation of the Qurʾān. The Muʿatāzila literary approach to the interpretation of the Qurʾān derived from their theological thought. Teachings such as the belief in the createdness of the Qurʾān, the existence of figurative expressions in the Qurʾān and the applicability of the esoteric interpretation to it, and the belief in the miraculousness of the Qurʾān had an essential role in the formation of the Muʿatāzila literary attitude to the interpretation of the Qurʾān. Nonetheless, these factors were part of the superficial issues in the neo-Muʿatāzila literary approach to the interpretation of the Qurʾān, and this approach followed Western literary criticism methods rather than the theological and doctrinal discussions to evaluate texts. Due to the use of the intellectual sources and principles of various theological sects and the consideration of thoughts based on their effectiveness in answering challenges, the neo-Muʿatāzilaists could not create a robust intellectual system like that of the Muʿatāzilaists that could be used to organize essentially their stances to various issues – including the literary approach to the Qurʾān.

Keywords: Miraculousness, Esoteric interpretation, Createdness, Qurʾān, Muʿatāzila, Neo-Muʿatāzila.

Introduction

The Muʿatāzila was a Sunnī rationalist sect whose prominence lasted from the third to the fifth century LH, but were defeated by the fundamentalists and the circulation of their viewpoints was banned (Shahristānī, 2008: 36-38; Schmidtke, 2011: 8 & 12), in a way that only part of their publications were remained among the Zaydiyya of Yemen and the Egyptians (Schmidtke, 2011: 13-14).1

The banning of the Muʿatāzila activities did not put an end to their thoughts. The Muʿatāzila thoughts and their effects on the Islamic thought can be found in the works of different Islamic sects in the ensuing eras (q.v. ‘Alī Murād: 2013). With the advent of a rationalist movement in the 14th century LH, the Muʿatāzila thought was revived. This way, a group was formed in the Muslim societies that revitalized some Muʿatāzila thoughts. This group was called the neo-Muʿatāzila (Bū ‘Imrān, 2003: 399-409).

Although the neo-Muʿatāzila movement is not as organized as the former sects and its principles and method are vague, it demonstrates a spectrum of contemporary Muslim thinkers who rely on the rationalist heritage to prove the importance of rationalism in the modern discourse (Schmidtke, 2011: 8). With its new viewpoint to religion, this intellectual

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1. Some of the manuscripts include 14 volumes (out of the original 20 volumes) of the book Al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-Tawhīd wa al-ʿadl by Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār Hamidānī found in Egypt and Taʾlīqa ʿalā Sharḥ ʿusūl khamsā (i.e., a criticism of the book ʿUsūl Khamsā by Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār) in Yemen (Schmidtke, 2011: 13).
movement wanted to give religion a new function to overcome the problems and challenges of the contemporary world and to introduce Islam as the only salvation path. It seems that the Mu'tazilaists sleeping in the history have awakened in the face of new crises, including issues such as the colonization of Islamic countries, the spread of modernism, and the doubts casted by the orientalists (Datlı, 2008: 33-43; Waṣfī, 2008: 11). The neo-Mu'tazila thought wants to bring intellect foreground along with the Qur'ān and the Islamic traditions and to find a relationship between sunna and modernism and connect the two (Waṣfī, 2008: 5-7).

One of the texts that has been specially considered by both Mu'tazila and the neo-Mu'tazila has been the Qur'ān, and their view to its interpretation is limited to a specific approach called literary interpretation.

The Mu'tazila rationalists set out to give in a rationalist interpretation of Islam and its sources, especially the Qur'ān. Before Mu'tazila, the interpretation of the Qur'ān was based on the reports from the early Muslims and narrations (Ibn Khaldūn, 1966, vol. 2: 891-893). However, the Mu'tazilaists relied on intellect to interpret the Qur'ānic text, as it was deeply related to rhetoric (Ghura, 2009: 145-146), and paid a special attention to linguistic discussions as well as the rhetoric and its effects on understanding the miraculousness of the Qur'ān (Ibn Khaldūn, 1966, vol. 2: 1173). Although most of their publications on the Qur'ān is not available today, a reference to the exegetic books of the Ash'arītes and the Shī'a – which are published after the Mu'tazila – shows that the Mu'tazila exegetic tradition has influenced these books and has been accepted in them (‘Alī Murād, 2013: 5-15).

The attention paid by the Mu'tazila and its scholars to the literary arts of the Qur'ān have turned them into outstanding figures in the literary and rhetorical sciences. Exceptional names such as Abū Hudhayl, Jāḥiz, Bashr b. al-Mu'tamar, Wāṣil, ‘Amru b. ‘Ubyd and their exegetic books clearly pinpoint the literary stance of this sect to the interpretation of the Qur'ān (Balba‘, n.d.: 176 & 179-196).

In the 14th century LH, the reformist movement in the Arab world adopted a rationalist stance to the interpretation of the Qur'ān, and dared to examine the Qur'ānic verses based on the intellect and free from the opinions and narrations of the past figures (Nafisi, 2000: 105-108). This method was established by Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh, who founded some principles for the interpretation of the Qur'ān. The new methods for the interpretation of the Qur'ān that appeared after him are indebted to him (‘Abd al-Raḥīm, n.d.: 319-414). This way, an exegetic school was formed based on the viewpoint of ‘Abduh that gave in a new product every day. One of these was the literary interpretation, also known as expressive interpretation, which got famous due to the efforts of ʿAmin Khuḷī (Wielandt, 2004: 8).

Influenced by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s stance and the context created by ‘Abduh, ʿAmin Khuḷī established a new literary interpretation method (Abū Zayd, 2010: 37-38). He took the Qur'ān

1. ‘Abduh’s principles for the interpretation of the Qur'ān can be summarized as the thematic unity of the verses of every Qur'ānic chapter, understanding the language of the Qur'ān based on the main meanings of the words and their combinations, understanding the specific, miraculous styles of the Qur'ān and their differences with the ordinary texts, knowing the features of the Qur'ān that make it as the guide of all humanity, using the scientific thought and method in the discussion, trusting intellect in understanding the Qur'ān due to the lack of conflict between intellect and divine revelation, avoiding imitation in the exegetic discussions and looking for exegetic investigation and understanding that are based on the terminology and culture of Arabs of the revelation era, refusal to use Isrā‘īliyyāt to complete what is expressed in the Qur'ān ambiguously, the exact use of narrations in the interpretation, and the extraction of scientific and social principles of the Qur'ān as a message with uses for today’s life (‘Abd al-Raḥīm, n.d.: 189-319; Shuhāṭa, 1962: 33-193).

2. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn believes that similar to the works of Homer, Shakespeare, and Goethe, the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic Scriptures belong to the literary heritage of all humans, and suggests Muslims to start studying the Qur'ān as a book entailing literary texts and use new literary findings in its analysis (Ḥusayn, 1974, vol. 14: 215-219).

3. The expressive interpretation method was based on ‘Abduh’s exegetic principles such as understanding the meaning of the statements based on the way Arabs use the words, understanding the Qur'ānic style through the constant attention to rhetorical language, and extensive studying of them (Rashīd Rīḍā, 1993, vol. 1: 21-
as the biggest literary work in the Arabic language that should be viewed primarily as an Arabic literary work. He also deemed that although guidance by the Qur’ān is a huge intention, the religious view to the Qur’ān should come after its pure literary analysis (Shantāwī, 1933, vol. 5: 365).

The literary method of Amīn Khūlī has grabbed the attention of contemporary scholars such as Muḥammad Khalafullāh, Shukrī ‘Ayād, ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Rahmān bint al-Shāṭī (Rūmī, 1994, vol. 3: 867-982) and Naṣr Ἃḥmīd Abū Zayd.

It is tried in this article to both express the reasons for the inclination of the Mu’tazila and the neo-Mu’tazila to the literary interpretation of the Qur’ān as well as the similarities and differences of their literary interpretation.

The reasons for the inclination of the Mu’tazila to the literary interpretation

The literary interpretation of the Mu’tazila was a rationalist interpretation of the Qur’ān, which was based on their intellectual and doctrinal principles. The belief in the createdness of the Qur’ān, the existence of figurative speech in it, and the literary miraculousness of the Qur’ān had a more vivid and influential role in the formation of the Mu’tazilaists’ literary view to interpretation.

The creation of the Qur’ān

One of the important and extensive discussions of the Mu’tazilaists about the Qur’ān is their belief in its createdness (q.v. Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1965: vol. 7). The spread of this belief in the Islamic society was the result of the encounter between Muslims’ viewpoints and the opinions of the Judaist and Christian thinkers, as well as the extension of the Islamic territory to lands such as the Levant that led Muslims to encounter with the Greek philosophy (Subḥānī, 1994, vol. 4: 87-88).

At this time, the discussion on the createdness/eternity of the Qur’ān got heated, because one of the thoughts that were suggested by the priests was the eternity of the word Allāh (Wolfson, 1989: 255). Although this viewpoint relied on a kind of sophistry that took Jesus (which was introduced as Kalimatullāh in the Qur’ān) and the Qur’ān (as viewed by Muslims as the referent of Kalimatullāh) to be the same, it affected the Islamic society in a way that the discussion on the createdness or eternity of the Qur’ān got spread throughout the Islamic society, and Muslims came to be divided in believing in the createdness and eternity of the Qur’ān (Ibn Nadīm, 1978: 255; Ibn Ἂazi, n.d., vol. 3: 11; Wolfson, 1989: 261; Subḥānī, 1994, vol. 2: 206).

As one of the intellectual groups in the Islamic world, the Mu’tazila defended the createdness of the Qur’ān (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1965, vol. 7: 56; Malāḥīmī Khārazmī, 2007: 179; Subḥānī, 1994, vol. 4: 87-88). Relying on intellectual reasons such as the Qur’ān’s lack of analogy to God with regard to time (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1965, vol. 7: 549) and attributes (Ibn Abī al-Hadīd, 2004, vol. 13: 86), they tried to show the eternity of the Qur’ān as unreasonable and contrary to the Divine Oneness, and to introduce the createdness of the Qur’ān as the viewpoint confirmed by the Islamic traditions, as they believed that God’s descriptions of the Qur’ān (Malāḥīmī Khārazmī, 2007: 181) and His promise to protect it (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1965, vol. 7: 531-532) could be compatible with its createdness.

The consideration of the Qur’ān as a created phenomenon got so renowned among the Mu’tazila that some of them took it as an axiomatic issue that did not need any proof (Malāḥīmī Khārazmī, 2007: 180).

24). Emphasizing the existence of allegory in the Qur’ān and the use of rhetorical instances in it (ibid: 399), he revived the literary approach to the analysis and understanding of the Qur’ān, although this method was not called the literary exegesis (Ṭayyyib Ἂsunī, 2010, vol. 8: 155).
The Mu’tazila belief in the createdness of the Qur’ān and the Ash’arītes’ belief in its eternity that stemmed from their different theological stances toward the divine names and attributes – especially His Speaking attribute – (Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, 1965, vol. 7: 92 & 136) led them to have different theories about the creation of the words and language. Unlike the Ash’arītes’, the Mu’tazilaists took the human as the creator of words, because from their viewpoint, creation and sensible indication are two related issues, and the attribution of sensible indication to God is not permissible; therefore, the language could not have been created by God, and is rather a human matter (Abū Zayd, 2008: 88-104).

The man-made nature of the language and its use by God to develop a divine book called the Qur’ān in line with the challenge made by the Qur’ān to bring a text like it led the Mu’tazilaists to pay specific attention to the literary discussions of the Qur’ān. Their reason was that God had expressed a speech using a man-made language that could not be outmatched by anyone.

Esoteric interpretation and figurative speech in the Qur’ān

The rationalist Mu’tazilaists faced religious propositions whose outer interpretation was harshly against the theological principles of Mu’tazilaism. To overcome this challenge, they used ta’wīl (esoteric interpretation) and tried to give in meanings beyond the outer meaning of the words. The most needed element in the esoteric interpretation was majāz (figurative speech). As a result, the Mu’tazila paid special attention to the figurative expressions in the Qur’ān.

The term majāz was first used by Jāḥiz as the opposite of truth and its co-hyponym (ibid: 150; Jāḥiz, 1998: 117; id., 2002: 207). This meaning of majāz did not appear suddenly, but rather, the grounds for such a discussion had been set much earlier. The book Al-Ashbāh wa al-naẓā’ir fī al-Qur’ān al-karīm by Muqātil b. Sulaymān, which discussed the multiplicity of the implications of a word in various contexts and applications (Muqātil b. Sulaymān, 2002: 110-111 & 199), as well as the books Majāz al-Qur’ān by Mu’mar b. Mathnāy and Maʿānī al-Qur’ān by Farrā’ paved the way for the appearance of the discussion on the figurative expressions of the Qur’ān (Martin, 2008: 274).

Majāz al-Qur’ān and Maʿānī al-Qur’ān were authored in an atmosphere in which the non-Arab rulers had difficulty understanding the Qur’ān and even reading it. Therefore, these books set out to both examine the meanings of the qur’ānic words and the grammar of the qur’ānic text (Abū Zayd, 2008: 126). In that era, grammar was not limited to the specification of the diacritics or the word endings. It also included the way the intention of the speaker was interpreted as well as some actions such as bringing to front, sending back, or deleting some elements of the sentences (Marāghī, 1950: 409). As a result, these books were full of rhetorical issues and Mu’mar made giant strides in this regard through reflection on the instances of the verses and considering them as figurative expression, although the meaning of figurative speech for him (i.e., any type of style change) was a little different from the one currently common (Abū Zayd, 2008: 127). Likewise, Farrā’ suggested the term Tajawwuz, which meant making figurative expressions (Farrā’, 1980, vol. 1: 325, vol. 2: 223, 278, & 296; vol. 3: 225, 245). The existence of these discussions made it easier for scholars such as Jāḥiz and Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār to talk about the existence of figurative speech in the Qur’ān.

The word majāz had not been used in the Qur’ān, but the word “mathal” had been used frequently in it, which meant the speaker did not intend the real meaning of the word. This provided the Mu’tazila with a means to legitimize the discussion for the existence of figurative speech in the Qur’ān. This issue and the concept of the ambiguous and unambiguous verses of the Qur’ān were used to confirm the acceptability of esoteric interpretation. They also allowed the Mu’tazilaists to consider the verses that did not agree
with their theological viewpoints such as the Divine Unity and Divine Justice as ambiguous, and interpret them esoterically.

This way, the Mu'tazilaists discussed figurative speech and its aspects in the Qur'ān to show esoteric interpretation, and adopted a completely literary method to interpret the Qur'ān; this stemmed from the theological beliefs of the Mu'tazila.

The miraculousness of the Qur'ān

At the first glance, it might seem that the suggestion of the concept of the miraculousness of the Qur'ān followed the challenge by the Qur'ān and the revelation of the related verses. However, its lack of popularity among the Muslims of the early centuries casts doubt on this viewpoint. There were no sign of the formation and specification of the miraculousness theory in the first two centuries, and there could not be found any serious discussion about the miraculousness of the Qur'ān in the scientific Islamic texts up until the third century LH. In the third century, a book was written in this arena in the title of which the term Al-Ūslāb wa al-balāgha (style and rhetoric) was used instead of I'jāz (miraculousness). The discussion of the miraculousness of the Qur'ān and the authoring of books with suchlike titles gradually became prominent, in a way that the use of this word soared from the fourth century LH onward, and it gradually turned into a state of the art topic in the fifth century LH (Karīmīniyā, 2013: 115).

The appearance of a novel theory about a text that has been popular in the Islamic society for a long time was a new challenge that needed efforts to be handled. The challenge was the result of the expansion of the Islamic territory, the inclusion of the Christians in the Arabian Peninsula, the appearance of various translations during the Abbasid dynasty, and the intellectual freedom that appeared in the society. The first person to pay attention to this issue and write a book on the miraculousness of the Qur'ān was ‘Alī b. Raban Ṭabarī who came from a Christian background. In his book, he talks about the Christians belief that the Qur'ān is not a miracle (Ḥimṣī, 1980: 57; Ṭabarī, 1973: 98). Moreover, there are other reports that confirm the existence of opposing movements in this era (Ḥimṣī, 1980: 39; Ibn Qutaybā, 2006: 81).

Therefore, the suggestion of the miraculousness of the Qur'ān discussion as a distinctive issue did not stem from the Qur'ānic text, but rather, it was a response to the oppositions that came from the non-Muslim world and derived from the theological debates of Islam with other religions such as Judaism and Christianity (Karīmīniyā, 2013: 115).

All Islamic groups started to answer these doubts in order to defend Islam. However, the textualist movement, which relied on canonical evidence in its argumentations, could not provide appropriate responses in this regard because the Christian and Judaist thinkers essentially rejected the religious scripture of Islam and the prophethood of its prophet,. But the Mu'tazilaists, who were equipped with intellect, were more successful in this regard. As a result, the first books that evidently use the term I'jāz as well as the most outstanding works in this domain have been authored by the Mu'tazilaists.

On the other hand, the discussion of the miraculousness of the Qur'ān and the belief in its features had some roots in the creation of language and the createdness of the Qur'ān. The Mu'tazilaists, who deemed a human origin for the language, should answer the question that which quality in the divine speech distinguished it from the works of the men of letters and poets. Although this belief varied to some extents – as Jāḥiẓ excluded the content of the Qur'ān from the miraculousness discussion and limited the miraculousness of the Qur'ān to its words (Jāḥiẓ, n.d., vol. 1: 383) but Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār considered it be true for both the content and the words of the Qur'ān (Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, 1965, vol. 16: 197 & 224) – it seems that the miraculousness of the Qur'ān for the Mu'tazilaists is more a terminological issue than a thematic one. In fact, all of them prioritized the terminological miraculousness,
and even when Qādī ʿAbd al-Jabbār used the term fiṣāḥa (euphony) to talk about the miraculousness of the Qurʾān, he emphasized the miraculousness of the qurʾānic words, because the euphony revolves around the words and terminological miraculousness agreed more with the euphony than with the rhetoric (Zarrūq, 2013: 78). Consequently, Qādī ʿAbd al-Jabbār defended the prioritization of form over meaning by the Muʿtazila.

This theory, which was based on the Muʿtazilaist theological reasons, is more evident in the viewpoints of Jāḥiẓ and Qādī ʿAbd al-Jabbār who have a more distinctive theological method than Rummānī who is less concerned with the theological discussions (ibid: 79).

Due to the dependence of the miraculousness of the Qurʾān on theological stances, its nature and features were different for Ashʿarītes, because unlike the Muʿtazilaists, they considered the Qurʾān to be eternal and regarded a divine origin for the language. Accordingly, they believed in the rhetorical miraculousness of the Qurʾān and took its language a specific literary type that was neither poetry nor prose but included aspects such as the reports from the Unseen world (Bāqilānī, n.d.: 33, 158, & 260). Even Jurjānī, who used Muʿtazilaist-like terms about the miraculousness of the Qurʾān, used those words and phrases in meanings different from Muʿtazila and based on the Ashʿarīte viewpoints due to his different theological principles.

Some Muʿtazilaists came to believe in the Ṣarfa theory and took the miraculousness of the Qurʾān as the result of the divine potency (Ibn Ḥazm, n.d., vol. 3: 29; Shahristānī, 2008: 58). However, this viewpoint did not get popular among the Muʿtazilaists, because in the Ṣarfa theory, the main and miraculous feature of the Qurʾān lied in its concepts (Ashʿarī, 1980; 225). This contradicted the concept of divine justice (as one of the main teachings of Muʿtazilaism), because according to the divine justice principle, the only permissible challenge is one which is within the human capability, and since Arabs were excellent in poetry and rhetoric, it was necessary for the Islamic miracle to at least entail this aspect (Abū Zayd, 2013: 17-30).

Accordingly, the Muʿtazilaists’ belief in the miraculousness of the Qurʾān was completely compatible with their theological viewpoint, and when they talked about the verbal miraculousness and the rhetoric of the Qurʾān, they needed to pay special attention to the literary discussions of the Qurʾān and the literary interpretation of it.

The reasons for the inclination of the neo-Muʿtazila to literary exegesis

The literary aspects of the Qurʾān once again grabbed the attention of contemporary scholars, but this time in the modern era. This view was clearly embodied in an Egyptian reformist movement about the qurʾānic studies that was called the Literary Approach or Literary School. In order to understand the neo-Muʿtazilaists’ tendency to literary interpretation of the Qurʾān, it is necessary to compare the reasons for the inclination of the Muʿtazila to the literary interpretation with those of the neo-Muʿtazila.

The createdness of the Qurʾān

Similar to Muʿtazila, the neo-Muʿtazila believes in the createdness and contingency of the Qurʾān (Waṣfī, 2008: 19). ‘Abduh talks about the createdness of the Qurʾān in his Risāla al-

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1. Fiṣāḥa (euphony) is limited to words, while bilāgha (rhetoric) involves words and meanings; any eloquent text is euphonious, too, but not any euphonious text is eloquent (Khafājī, 1994: 55-56).
2. Similar to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, Jurjānī talks about the miraculousness of the euphony and order, but he also gives in a definition for euphony and order that is more related to the meaning than the form; he provides a definition for order that revolves around grammar. He replaces the Muʿtazila’s viewpoint and definition of order with his definition (Zarrūq, 2-13: 105).
tawḥīd (‘Abduh, 2005: 53). This belief derived from his stances to Divine Unity and the divine attributes. ‘Abduh’s definition of Divine Unity was similar to that of the Mu’tazilaists (Sharqa, 2014: 257). Therefore, his belief in the createdness of the Qurʾān was not surprising. Talking about the createdness of the Qurʾān posed a great challenge in a society permeated by the Ash’arīte thought. Due to the ensuing reactions, ‘Abduh deleted his discussion for the createdness of the Qurʾān in the coming printing of Risāla al-tawḥīd (Abū Zayd, 1995: 302).

Although thinkers after ‘Abduh such as Aḥmad Amīn (Amīn, 1964, vol. 3: 68) and Muḥammad ‘Amāra (Madanī, 1972: 87-89) discussed the createdness of the Qurʾān, too, it seems that this viewpoint did not turn into a principal and effective basis in the neo-Mu’tazilaist thought. Rather, its results were taken into account.

In the light of its belief in the createdness of the Qurʾān, the neo-Mu’tazilaist attitude paid attention to the relationship of the revealed verses and concepts with the needs of the society onto which the Qurʾān was revealed, and came to believe that the qur’ānic content should match the needs of its audience. This opinion set the grounds for a new discussion on the Qurʾān that talked about the historical origination of the Qurʾān (Waṣфи, 2008: 37). Accordingly, although the neo-Mu’tazilaists’ attitude and their support for the createdness of the Qurʾān agreed with their intellectual principles, their special attention to it and its requirements was more because of the spread of modern linguistics and the congruence of the theory of the createdness of the Qurʾān with the Western attitudes toward the Testaments than the neo-Mu’tazilaists’ doctrinal attitude, in way that some reformists relied on the theory of the createdness of the Qurʾān and maintained that the words of the Qurʾān were human-made and ascribed sacredness only to its meanings (Fāḍil, 2008: 184 & 364).

**Esoteric interpretation and figurative speech in the Qurʾān**

Adopting esoteric interpretation, tending to believe in the existence of figurative speech in the Qurʾān, and undertaking rhetorical and literary discussions got widespread among the neo-Mu’tazilaists. ‘Abduh reinvigorated the esoteric interpretation through his commentary on Taftāzānī’s book, and adopted esoteric interpretation further in a scope vaster than that of the Ash’arītes as a result of his intellectual tendencies (‘Abduh, 2005: 91). He referred to instances of the qur’ānic text that will lead to different possible outcomes if we consider only their outer appearance. In suchlike cases, he says, we should avoid interpreting based on the outer appearance of the statements. This opinion continued among the scholars after ‘Abduh, so that Muḥammad Ghazālī praised ‘Abduh’s esoteric interpretation of the divine attributes, and rejected many attributes ascribed to God such as feet (Ghazālī, 1985: 55) and calf id., (2005: 126).

They deemed the esoteric interpretation of the divine essence and the Unseen concepts to be not only necessary but also obligatory, because they believed that the meanings and words that are formed based on the worldly life do not satisfactorily demonstrate the concepts of the Unseen world and the divine essence, and so, the use of esoteric interpretation, metaphor, and figurative speech is inevitable (Banā, n.d.: 25).

The neo-Mu’tazilaists did not limit the use of figurative speech and esoteric interpretation to the divine attributes and theological issues, but rather, they deemed many issues that seemed to disagree with the intellect or science to be in need of esoteric interpretation (for more information, q.v. Nafīsī: 2000).

Although the neo-Mu’tazilaists’ interest in esoteric interpretation and figurative speech in the Qurʾān was rooted in their rationalism, it was more influenced by the new findings of literary studies and text criticism in the contemporary world (Zaghlūl, 2009: 29-30). Ṭāhā Ḥusayn emphasized analyzing the Qurʾān based on the new literary findings (Wielandt, 2004:
8), and Amīn Khūlī, the founder of the literary school, urged the use of Arabic rhetorical arts along with the new criteria of criticism (Zaghlūl, 2009: 31).

By that time, the West had examined the Bible historically and had casted serious doubts on the divinity of the Testaments. As a preventive measure, ‘Abduh tried to use the literary style to interpret the Qur’ān in order to preclude its comparison with historical facts. He introduced the qur’ānic stories as entailing a literary style that aimed at warning and glad tiding rather than expressing history (‘Abduh, 1972, vol. 5: 30). This opinion set the ground for the discussion of qur’ānic studies in the Khalafullāh’s book (q.v. Khalafullāh: 1999). Moreover, in response to the doubts casted about the incompatibility of the Qur’ān with science, ‘Abduh suggested that the qur’ānic concepts agree with the understanding of the Arabs of the revelation era and so, it is possible that some of them might not agree with the current scientific knowledge, and this does not damage the essence of the Qur’ān and its divinity (Abū Zayd, 2013: 22; Rashīd Riḍā, 1993, vol. 1: 19-21, 210-211, 215, 229-230, vol. 3: 47-48, vol. 4: 92-93). However, some of his followers who believed in the superiority of the Qur’ān to all human sciences used esoteric interpretation to show the compatibility of the qur’ānic concepts with the state of the art scientific findings (Ṭanṭāwī, 1992, vol. 14: 144-149, vol. 3: 167-170).

This way, the stylistic devices were recruited to provide rational explanations for the supernatural content of the Qur’ān, and the neo-Mu'tazilaists not only applied esoteric interpretation to the combinations of words, but also to the words themselves; they deemed concepts such as Angles and Devil to be figurative expressions and provided esoteric interpretations about them (Rashīd Riḍā, 1993, vol. 1: 267-269). This tendency to esoteric interpretation took a novel form due to the modern conditions, but it was not successful at establishing a specific system, and was person-centered rather than systematic.

The miraculousness of the Qur’ān

The miraculousness of the Qur’ān and its extraordinary aspects grabbed the attention of contemporary Muslim thinkers once again in the modern era. ‘Abduh tried to compromise the stances of the early scholars on the miraculousness of the Qur’ān and explained the miraculousness of the style, order, rhetoric, and effect of the Qur’ān on the hearts of its audience. Then, he introduced the miraculousness of the Qur’ān to be in issues such as providing reports about the Unseen world, being free from disagreement, involving religious knowledge and Islamic rules, and clarifying things that were unknown to people (ibid: 198).

This opinion, which was later reintroduced by other people as scientific miraculousness, was an attitude that tried to interpret the qur’ānic verses esoterically based on the novel scientific findings such as the discovery of atom, the law of universal gravitation, and the innovation of spaceship, and introduce the Qur’ān as the source of all sciences (Wielandt, 2004: 6-8).

Similarly, the literary school of Amīn Khūlī relied upon the literary miraculousness of the Qur’ān. As one of the most effective figures in this movement, Ṭāḥā Ḥusayn took the miraculousness of the Qur’ān to be in its stylistic aesthetics (Ḥusayn, 1996: 20-26) and talked about the psychological effects of its rhetorical arts. Amīn Khūlī wrote the book Risāla al-i'jāz al-nafṣī lil-Qur’ān in this regard, and asserted that since Arabs converted to Islam because they deemed the Qur’ān as the most superior literary text in the Arabic language, it is necessary to pay attention to its literary discussions to explain the miraculousness of the Qur’ān (Khūlī, 1995: 97-98 & 124-125).

The literary discussions that Amīn Khūlī talked about were not merely based on the old literary science, but rather, they also relied on the modern literary stances. He believed that if the old miraculousness theory had relied upon the old conceptualization of rhetoric, the new
theory in this regard should be based on the novel conceptualization of rhetoric\(^1\) that is related to literary criticism, and this is need of connecting with sciences such as psychology and aesthetics (ibid: 144, 175, 182, & 189). He also deemed that the miraculousness of the Qur’ān could be connected to the emotions of its audience only using this method (ibid: 203-204).

The new conceptualization of expressive miraculousness was discussed and examined by Amīn Khūlī’s pupils (q.v. Bint al-Shāṭī: 1997). Nonetheless, this stance that adopted various Islamic and Westerns factors from old and new sciences could not bind itself within a specific boundary, and in the eyes of numerous men of letters, it turned into a vague concept that evaded every effort to define and clarify it (Zarrūq, 2013: 22-23).

The analysis of the Mu’tazila and neo-Mu’tazila stances to the literary interpretation of the Qur’ān

Similar to the Mu’tazila, the neo-Mu’tazila movement has a special attention to the literary interpretation of the Qur’ān. Although this attitude to the Qur’ān and its interpretation seemingly reminds us of the Mu’tazilaist viewpoint, we might not consider it as completely Mu’tazilaist when we regard its themes, as some reformist rationalists do not believe in accepting all principles of Mu’tazilaism. Ḥasan Ḥanafī says in this regard, “Our inclination to Mu’tazilism does not mean that we fanatically accept all its thoughts; rather, we defend Mu’tazilism generally as a historical movement, but do not so with regard to the details of its stances” (Ḥanafī, 1998, vol. 1: 443).

There are numerous evidences that indicate the contemporary reformism has only a veneer of Mu’tazilism and does not follow its constituting elements and details. This is also evident in its literary stance to the Qur’ān, too. That is, although the neo-Mu’tazilists’ rationalist viewpoint has a pseudo-Mu’tazilist structure, it is affected by the conditions of the modern life much more than the theological attitude of Mu’tazilism.

The belief in the createdness of the Qur’ān was an essential and intellectual issue for the Mu’tazila, which was also used as the basis for their discussion of the creation of words. However, this opinion was not considered to be so essential by the neo-Mu’tazilaists. Although it was initially stipulated by people such as ‘Abduh, it was not clearly mentioned later; rather, the effects of the belief in the createdness of the Qur’ān and its historicalness (which was derived from modern ideas) were taken into account.

The belief in the esoteric interpretation and figurative speech in the Qur’ān grabbed the attention of the neo-Mu’tazilaists more than the createdness of the Qur’ān. The neo-Mu’tazilists’ tendency to esoteric interpretation as supported by rationalism caused them to use esoteric interpretation much vaster than the Ash’arīte. However, due to their lack of a strong theological background, this stance was afflicted with unsystematic esoteric interpretations such as science-orientedness and scientific interpretations in some eras or the rejection and justification of all Unseen and intangible matters in some others.

The miraculousness of the Qur’ān, which is an important viewpoint in the modern thought, was formed more through the effects of new sciences such psychology, sociology, and linguistics than the effects of rhetorical discussions or theological/literary structures.

A glance at the neo-Mu’tazilaist viewpoints reveals the reasons for these differences to be factors like eclectic resources and functionalism of the neo-Mu’tazilaism.

\(^1\) The modern rhetoric is focused on studying the literary style and the deep effect on the reader/listener, and aims at the consolidation of the aesthetic self-consciousness of the author and speaker; this concept can be better represented by the term “fann al-qawl” (rhetoric) (Khūlī, 1995: 185).
The eclectic resources

The neo-Mu'tazilaists did not stop at the Mu'tazilaist books and resources, and used the works of various theological sects. ‘Abduh used a book by Taftaāzānī (who was a Māturīdī scholar) (Sharqa, 2014: 265). Moreover, along with printing two books of Jurjānī, he analyzed and criticized them and used them as the textbooks for the “Arabic rhetoric” course at Dār al-‘Ulm, in a way that the effects of Jurjānī’s stances can be clearly seen in Tafsīr al-manār (Zaghlūl, 2009: 29; Abū Zayd, 2013: 21). This trend continued among the neo-Mu'tazilaists so that Khūlī and – especially – Bint al-Shāṭī founded their rhetorical stances based on the viewpoints of Bāqilānī and Jurjānī (Bint al-Shāṭī, 2004: 102, 140, & 286). Even the viewpoint of Ṭāḥah Ḥusayn, who deemed the special style of the Qur’ān as a specific literary genre and aesthetically unique (Ḥusayn, 1996: 20-26), had been already suggested by Bāqilānī (Bāqilānī, n.d.: 33, 158, & 260).

One of the reasons for the neo-Mu'tazilaists’ use of these resources was the inaccessibility of the Mu'tazila books. However, this was not the only reason. The Ash'arīte intellectual atmosphere in which these scholars had been raised along with the public opinion that welcomed the Ash'arīte viewpoints had some role in their adoption of non-Mu'tazila resources.

The literary tendency of the neo-Mu'tazila was not only the result of their attention to the past scholars’ legacy, but rather, it also enjoyed the contemporary Western thoughts in textual criticism. They tried to examine the Arabic rhetoric in the light of ancient Greek literature (Zaghlūl, 2009: 31), and asked for the application of Western methods in the Arabic literature. They used new study lines in the humanities such as psychology, aesthetics, and art to undertake literary criticism (ibid: 29-30), and considered the proposal of a new understanding of the Qur’ān to be in need of hermeneutics, semantics, literary criticism, and anthropology (Waṣfī, 2008: 14).

This viewpoint (which was pseudo-Mu'tazilaist rationalism in generalities and was affected by Ash'arīte, Māturīdī, Western textual criticism, and other new sciences such as psychology and sociology directions) entangled the neo-Mu'tazilaism with many intellectual and foundational problems and gave it an unbalanced appearance as its different parts had been taken from different sources.

Functionalism

The topics in the interpretation of the Qur’ān that the neo-Mu'tazilaists wanted to address were more complex than issues such as the miraculousness of the Qur’ān. Examples include the compatibility of Islam and modernism, the possibility that a practicing Muslim can live in the modern world while maintaining his faith and identity, the solution of the conflict between divine laws and the human-made laws, and the question that whether institutions such as democracy and parliament are corroborated by Islam.

To answer these questions, ‘Abduh and the reformist thinkers after him combined traditional-Mu'tazilaist rationalism and sociopolitical awareness, and proposed a rational interpretation of the Qur’ān (Abū Zayd, 2013: 22). The biggest concern in this era was to meet the posed challenges. Therefore, the theological and foundational issues were not taken into account by the neo-Mu'tazilaists, and their literary stance to the Qur’ān was derived more from new literary criticism findings than from a theological background, in a way that the miraculousness of the Qur’ān and agreement/disagreement with it was no more a merely theological discussion (Zarrūq, 2013: 165:166). Unlike the past scholars, the neo-Mu'tazilaists did not take the miraculousness of the Qur’ān as a means to prove the
The prophethood of the Prophet (s), but rather, it turned into a means to understand the Qur’ān, i.e., the Qur’ān was not the means, but rather, it was the end (ibid: 166).

They emphasized the practical and applied issues of Islam in the personal, social, and political spheres of life (Waṣfī, 2008: 11). Their attention to the social and political issues was so great that when the discussions made by them benefited the anti-Islam and orientalist movements, they stopped presenting their scientific discussions (ibid: 20-21). Accordingly, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn deleted parts of the book *Fī shi’r al-jāhīlī* from the subsequent printing due to their agreement with the orientalists as well as the specific conditions of the Islamic world at the time (ibid).

This way, the neo-Mu'tazilaism, which had come to the scene to help revive Islam, paid its attention to functionalism more than anything else and did not heed the foundational and theological discussions so much.

**Conclusion**

The examination and comparison of the Mu'tazilaist and neo-Mu'tazilaist attitudes to the literary interpretation of the Qur’ān indicate the following results:

1. The literary attitude of Mu'tazilaism to the interpretation of the Qur’ān was completely based on their theological viewpoints such as the belief in the createdness of the Qur’ān, esoteric interpretation, and the miraculousness of the Qur’ān.
2. Although the literary attitude of neo-Mu'tazila has some seeming similarities to the Mu'tazilaist approach, it lacks robust theological principles and support, and it is influenced more by the literary criticism discussions popular in the West than the Islamic theological principles.
3. The neo-Mu'tazilaists could not create a genuine thought. They selected the most effective element of every intellectual school. However, this non-creative selection of the elements from various theological stances was done without considering the requirements of accepting a belief.
4. The neo-Mu'tazilaists' lack of a genuine intellectual basis led to their intellectual instability in various issues such as the literary interpretation of the Qur’ān. This depicted the movement as one that was based on the tastes of its thinkers rather than specific principles.
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