

## The Similarities and Differences Between Mu‘tazila and Neo-Mu‘tazila Literary Approaches to the Qur’ān

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### Abstract

Mu‘tazila and neo-Mu‘tazila are two rationalist intellectual movements that have paid a special attention to the literary interpretation of the Qur’ān. The Mu‘tazila literary approach to the interpretation of the Qur’ān derived from their theological thought. Teachings such as the belief in the createdness of the Qur’ān, the existence of figurative expressions in the Qur’ān and the applicability of the esoteric interpretation to it, and the belief in the miraculousness of the Qur’ān had an essential role in the formation of the Mu‘tazila literary attitude to the interpretation of the Qur’ān. Nonetheless, these factors were part of the superficial issues in the neo-Mu‘tazila literary approach to the interpretation of the Qur’ān, 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-Mu‘tazilaists could not create a robust intellectual system like that of the Mu‘tazilaists that could be used to organize essentially their stances to various issues – including the literary approach to the Qur’ān.

**Keywords:** Miraculousness, Esoteric interpretation, Createdness, Qur’ān, Mu‘tazila, Neo-Mu‘tazila.

### Introduction

The Mu‘tazila 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)<sup>1</sup>.

The banning of the Mu‘tazila activities did not put an end to their thoughts. The Mu‘tazila 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 14<sup>th</sup> century LH, the Mu‘tazila thought was revived. This way, a group was formed in the Muslim societies that revitalized some Mu‘tazila thoughts. This group was called the neo-Mu‘tazila (Bū ‘Imrān, 2003: 399-409).

Although the neo-Mu‘tazila 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-Tawḥīd wa al-‘adl* by Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār Hamidānī found in Egypt and *Ta’līqā ‘alā Sharḥ uṣūl khamsā* (i.e., a criticism of the book *Uṣūl Khamsā* by Qāḍī ‘Abd 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 orientalist (Datlū, 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, Jāhīz, 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 (Nafīsī, 2000: 105-108). This method was established by Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh, who founded some principles for the interpretation of the Qur’ān<sup>1</sup>. 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 Amīn Khulī (Wielandt, 2004: 8).

Influenced by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s<sup>2</sup> stance and the context created by ‘Abduh<sup>3</sup>, Amīn Khulī established a new literary interpretation method (Abū Zayd, 2010: 37-38). He took the Qur’ān

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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-Rāḥīm, n.d.: 189-319; Shuhāta, 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 Riḍā, 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 Khulī has grabbed the attention of contemporary scholars such as Muḥammad Khalafullāh, Shukrī 'Ayād, 'A'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān bint al-Shāṭī (Rūmī, 1994, vol. 3: 867-982) and Naṣr Ḥāmid 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 Ḥazm, 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; Malāḥimī 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-Ḥadīd, 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 (Malāḥimī 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 (Malāḥimī Khārazmī, 2007: 180).

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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 (Ṭayyib Ḥusaynī, 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 ‘Abd 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 have not 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‘tazilism. 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 Jāḥiẓ as the opposite of truth and its co-hyponym (ibid: 150; Jāḥiẓ, 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 *Ma‘ānī 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 *Ma‘ānī 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 Jāḥiẓ and Qāḍī ‘Abd 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-Uslūb 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 (Ḥimsī, 1980: 57; Ṭabarī, 1973: 98). Moreover, there are other reports that confirm the existence of opposing movements in this era (Ḥimsī, 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 ‘Abd al-Jabbār considered it be true for both the content and the words of the Qur’ān (Qāḍī ‘Abd 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 Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār used the term *fiṣāḥa* (euphony) to talk about the miraculousness of the Qur’ān, he emphasized the miraculousness of the qur’ānic words, because the euphony revolves around the words<sup>1</sup> and terminological miraculousness agreed more with the euphony than with the rhetoric (Zarrūq, 2013: 78). Consequently, Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār defended the prioritization of form over meaning by the Mu‘tazila.

This theory, which was based on the Mu‘tazilaist theological reasons, is more evident in the viewpoints of Jāḥiẓ and Qāḍī ‘Abd 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 Qur’ān on theological stances, its nature and features were different for Ash‘arītes, because unlike the Mu‘tazilaists, they considered the Qur’ān to be eternal and regarded a divine origin for the language. Accordingly, they believed in the rhetorical miraculousness of the Qur’ān 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 Mu‘tazilaist-like terms about the miraculousness of the Qur’ān, used those words and phrases in meanings different from Mu‘tazila and based on the Ash‘arīte viewpoints due to his different theological principles<sup>2</sup>.

Some Mu‘tazilaists came to believe in the Ṣarfa theory and took the miraculousness of the Qur’ān as the result of the divine potency (Ibn Ḥazm, n.d., vol. 3: 29; Shahrīstānī, 2008: 58). However, this viewpoint did not get popular among the Mu‘tazilaists, because in the Ṣarfa theory, the main and miraculous feature of the Qur’ān lied in its concepts (Āsh‘arī, 1980: 225). This contradicted the concept of divine justice (as one of the main teachings of Mu‘tazilaism), 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 Mu‘tazilaists’ belief in the miraculousness of the Qur’ān was completely compatible with their theological viewpoint, and when they talked about the verbal miraculousness and the rhetoric of the Qur’ān, they needed to pay special attention to the literary discussions of the Qur’ān and the literary interpretation of it.

### *The reasons for the inclination of the neo-Mu‘tazila to literary exegesis*

The literary aspects of the Qur’ān 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 qur’ānic studies that was called the Literary Approach or Literary School. In order to understand the neo-Mu‘tazilaists’ tendency to literary interpretation of the Qur’ān, it is necessary to compare the reasons for the inclination of the Mu‘tazila to the literary interpretation with those of the neo-Mu‘tazila.

### *The createdness of the Qur’ān*

Similar to Mu‘tazila, the neo-Mu‘tazila believes in the createdness and contingency of the Qur’ān (Waṣfī, 2008: 19). ‘Abduh talks about the createdness of the Qur’ān in his *Risāla al-*

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 ‘Abd 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 Mu‘tazila’s viewpoint and definition of order with his definition (Zarrūq, 2-13: 105).

*tawhīd* (‘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 Qur’ān was not surprising. Talking about the createdness of the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān in the coming printing of *Risāla al-tawhīd* (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 Qur’ān, 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 Qur’ān, 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān that talked about the historical origination of the Qur’ān (Waṣfī, 2008: 37). Accordingly, although the neo-Mu‘tazilaists’ attitude and their support for the createdness of the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān and maintained that the words of the Qur’ān were human-made and ascribed sacredness only to its meanings (Fāḍil, 2008: 184 & 364).

#### *Esoteric interpretation and figurative speech in the Qur’ān*

Adopting esoteric interpretation, tending to believe in the existence of figurative speech in the Qur’ān, 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 Qur’ān 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). Tāhā Ḥusayn emphasized analyzing the Qur’ān 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 tidings 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 the 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. 17: 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 Angels 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 miraculouness 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, Ṭāhā 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-naḥwī 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<sup>1</sup> 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-Shāfī: 1997). Nonetheless, this stance that adopted various Islamic and Western 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'tazilaist 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'tazilaism does not mean that we fanatically accept all its thoughts; rather, we defend Mu'tazilaism 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'tazilaism 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'tazilaists' rationalist viewpoint has a pseudo-Mu'tazilaist structure, it is affected by the conditions of the modern life much more than the theological attitude of Mu'tazilaism.

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'tazilaists' 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.

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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 Taftāzānī (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-‘Ulūm, 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 Ṭāḥā 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

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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