

Concretizing the Abstract: Conceptual Metaphors in the Holy Qur'an

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the intersection of religious discourse and figurative expressions. Religious texts being discourses that are intended to appeal to the people's sense of reasoning rather than their emotions tend to be couched in abstractions. These abstractions however can be concretized through the use of figures of expressions such as Metaphor, Simile, Synecdoche, and Metonymy, to mention a few examples. In this respect, the present paper focuses on how Metaphors are used to explain otherwise difficult eschatological concepts such as the Hereafter, Life after death, Day of judgement, Paradise, Hell, The Scale, etc. in the Qur'an. The paper reveals that Metaphor is widely employed as a rhetorical device in the Qur'an for the purpose of drawing similitude between such concepts and activities happening in the physical world. The paper concludes that the language of the Qur'an is highly rhetorical because of its appropriation of such figures of expression as the Metaphor.

Key words: Metaphor, abstraction, concrete, religious discourse.

1. Introduction

One of the salient features of the language of religious discourse is the use of figurative expressions. When we examine

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this kind of discourse we discover metaphor par excellence. This is confirmed in some Qur'anic verses such as (39:23) and (3:7). As a matter of fact, Qur'anic passages artistically employ metaphorical expressions due to the fact that they are meant for human understanding. The reason is that human beings cannot comprehend or grasp ideas or concepts which have no equivalence in the physical world. This is the reason why metaphorical illustrations are employed to map the real or physical features of what we know or experience into abstract ideas by means of comparison to make them understandable to our mind. Thus, metaphor is a figure of speech that strongly depends on comparison to achieve its effect whereby one thing is compared to another by stating that one is the other as in the sentence 'he is a lion'. Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it: "metaphor is a type of speech that implies comparison between two unlike entities, as distinguished from simile, an explicit comparison signalled by the words 'like' or 'as". Metaphor is used to achieve some artistic and rhetorical effect.

Zoltán (2002) identifies five accepted features of metaphor. First, metaphor is a property of words; it is a linguistic phenomenon. For instance, in the sentence, 'Adam is a lion', the metaphorical use of a lion is a characteristic of linguistic expression of the word 'lion'. Second, metaphor is used for some artistic and rhetorical purpose, for instance Shakespeare used metaphorical expression when he wrote "all the world's a stage". Third, metaphor is based on a resemblance between the two entities that are compared and identified. Adam shares some characteristics with lions, hence the use of the word 'lion' to describe him. Fourth, metaphor is a conscious and deliberate use of words which requires talent for someone to use it well. Fifth, metaphor is a figure of speech that we cannot do away with because it is part of human thought and reasoning. Thus (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) demonstrated convincingly that metaphor is so pervasive in our thought and daily communication.

Qur'an was a contemporary scripture; its language and style, its eloquence and rationale, its idiom and metaphor, its symbol and parables, its moment and events were ingeniously rooted in its own setting. Abdelwali (2007) posits that for a better understanding of a text, one needs to understand the rich metaphors that enhance the Qur'anic message. When we deal with the language of religious discourse, we encounter metaphor per excellence. Given the nature of its narrative technique, the plot of its narration is ingeniously metaphorical. This is confirmed in some Qur'anic verses such as Qur'an 39: 23...

As a matter of fact, Qur'anic passages artistically employ metaphorical expressions because they are meant for human understanding. The reason is that human beings cannot comprehend or grasp ideas or concepts which have no equivalence with physical and socio-cultural world. The other world (the hereafter) is a realm which is completely incomparable to our present world. It involves what the eye has never seen or the ear has ever heard, or the mind has ever conceived. For us to understand the reality of this kind of a world there is a need for a figurative use of language including metaphor so as to enable us visualize and come to terms with the other world which lies beyond our palpable realm of experience. This paper therefore exploits concrete domains that are metaphorically constructed and employed in the holy Qur'an as a viable means of meaning-making aimed at enhancing human understanding of complex and abstract events through strong comparison to the corresponding source domain in our real world.

2. Literature Review

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the metaphors in the Holy Qur'an. Several attempts have been made to explore the metaphorical expressions that occur in the

Qur'an. For instance, Kermani (2004) analysed the linguistic norms and metaphors in the translation of the Qur'an. He posits that the metaphors of the Qur'an were constructed from social reality and the literary canon of its place and time. However, his analysis would have been more comprehensible if he had incorporated a theoretical framework of analyzing the metaphors

Berrada (2002) studied the limitations of the standard theories of metaphors in the interpretations of the Qur'an. He maintains that for a real and constructive translation, the metaphors should be interpreted from the conceptualist alternative. Al-Wadhaf and Omar (2007) focused on the use of metaphors in the translation of the Qur'an. They opine that for the enhancement of the field of Qur'an translation, one need to understand how the metaphors are used to convey social realities because the narrative technique involves frequent use of such metaphors especially in describing complex and abstract issues and events.

Eweida (2007) examined the realization of time metaphors and the cultural implications whereby he analyzed the English Qur'anic translation. His findings provide a basis of comparison between the English usages of time metaphors and that of the Qur'an. He observed that human thoughts work metaphorically, in other words humans easily grasp what they experience from the social realities surrounding them.

In another research, Yahya (2003) explored different domains of metaphors in the Qur'an that employ the use of natural phenomenon to demonstrate the reality of life and complex ideas. These include the water cycle, the developmental stages of human beings, the mountains, oceans, wind and many more. These domains make up our experience of nature; as such, they are used as source domains that trigger our sense of perceptions to understand their corresponding target domains such as the reality of death and life.

Tabataba'i (1987) studied the impact and influence of the Qur'an on the life of Muslims. He posits that God talks of metaphor in the Qur'an as a means of expression through which ideas, parables and beliefs are conveyed for the enhancement of proper understanding of such ideas.

Despite the considerable research on metaphors, yet there is a gap on how metaphors are conceptually applied to guide our understanding of the complex and abstract ideas and beliefs such as spiritual development, the Hell and Paradise as well as the final day, the day of Resurrection etc. Thus, this study attempts to fill in this gap by demonstrating the cognitive function of metaphors in concretizing abstract ideas.

2.1 The Cognitive Perspective of Metaphor

Cognitive approach to metaphor was widely recognized and accepted in the 1980s through the contributions of Lakoff and Johnson in their work *'Metaphors We Live By'*. The main claim made by these researchers was that metaphorical language is pervasive and universal. It is not arbitrary but remarkably systematic. Their argument was based on the fact that people's ordinary conceptual system is metaphorically structured helping them to comprehend complex or abstract experiences in terms of concrete concepts which they are more familiar with. From this perspective, cognitive metaphor is the term used to refer to the understanding of a particular idea; that is the conceptual domain in terms of concrete or real experience. Thus, metaphor has been defined as "understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain" (Zoltán, 2002 p.4). Similarly, these sets of mapping between a more concrete or physical source domain and a more abstract domain form the cognitive perspective of metaphor (Zoltán, 2002). The underlying conceptualization of metaphor shapes and outline the way people look at things and how they think and act; and this enhance effective communication.

Taking into account the nature of divine scriptures like the holy Qur'an that convey beliefs about this world and the life after death in the Hereafter, there is a need for a rhetorical device such as metaphor to make these beliefs concrete and comprehensible to the readers, especially the believers of the scripture. Thus, the cognitive model of metaphor is operationalized to construct realities through metaphors by connecting the abstract beliefs about people and events into textual and factual realities that reflect the life of people and govern their practices in society. Thus metaphors are employed to effectively communicate the history of the previous generations, reward and punishment, and the nature of this world and the Hereafter. Through these metaphorical depictions, the Qur'anic verses creatively utilize cognitive process as a means of enhancing better understanding of the messages related to people, and their respective destinies. The cognitive theory of metaphor can be applied to analyze how these extreme abstract beliefs, eternity, life after death and other events that involve the conceptualization of such notions which are necessarily metaphorical, for the fact that we have no experience of them are relayed concretely to make them convincingly appeal to our intellect.

3. Methods and Analysis

The Qur'anic verses form the unit of analysis upon which the translated versions are analyzed based on cognitive theory of metaphor. The conceptual metaphors are grouped into the concept or metaphors of light and darkness; life is race metaphor and plant metaphor.

The first verse induces Muslims to compete with one another through righteous deeds so as to attain blissful and everlasting gardens of paradise in heavens. To actualize this, the Qur'an employs a concept of life is a race metaphor:

Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord And for a Garden whose width is that of the heavens and the earth prepared for the righteous. (Q33:133)

Conceptually, the source domain is the race as mentioned in the verse whereas the target domain is the striving and competing nature of attaining success in life. Similarly another source domain is the garden while the target domain is the paradise where such gardens are prepared for the believers.

Life and death metaphor is also used conceptually in the Qur'an as stated in chapter 10:24 where its translation reads:

The likeness of the life of the present is as the rain which We send down from the skies: by its mingling arises the produce of the earth which provides food for men and animals. (It grows) till the earth is clad with its golden ornament and is decked out (in beauty). The people to whom it belongs think they have all powers of disposal over it: there reaches it Our command by night or day and We make it like a harvest clean-mown as it had not flourished the day before!...

Using Lakoff's (1999) conceptualization of plants as social organization, Allah, the Almighty in this verse has set an example of the similitude of the life of this world, its glitters and the swiftness of its passage comparing it to the plant and vegetation that He brings out from the earth. This plant grows from the water that comes down from the sky. These plants are food for people. Metaphorically, the plant is the social life, its germination is the emergence of life. It becomes good by what grows on its hills hence, the development of the social organization; its blooming flowers of different shapes and colours stand for the ornaments. The flowering stage is equals to the best or the most successful stage in life. The perishing moment of the plant is the exit or the end of life. Metaphorically, the verse gives a succinct depiction of the real nature of this present life which passes different stages until it reaches its climax and then comes to an end.

The Qur'an employs metaphor of life to refer to complex events such as resurrection by using the analogy of the earth coming back to life after it has perished.

In another verse, Allah says in chapter 35:9

And it is Allah Who sends the winds, so that they raise up the clouds, and

We drive them to a dead land, and revive therewith the earth after its death.

As such (will be) the Resurrection. (chapter 35:9)

The rain serves as the source domain which signifies life as its target domain; while dry or dead land signifies death. The earth signifies creatures and the analogy implies the continuous process of water cycle as that of the resurrection. Through this concrete experience of reviving the dead land back to life, Allah makes visible His signature on earth to let mankind understand that the resurrection is quite accessible and will come to stand/pass one day.

Also, the verse contains life and death metaphors; life and death are concepts that are extremely metaphorical in nature. Their metaphorical conceptualization is pervasive in our experience and present everywhere in both language and literary works. Life is understood as a journey to some destination. Here the journey is expressed metaphorically through the time of rainy season where plants grow to reach the level of harvest. As soon as the season elapses, the lands upon which the plants grow perish as if no rain has ever fallen on it. The rain constitutes the source or concrete domain corresponding to life as its target or abstract domain; where the earth and its produce form other source domains and the social organizations as the target domain. The harvest, clean-mown, serves as the source domain corresponding to death as the target domain.

Belief and disbelief metaphor are also conceptual metaphors used in the Qur'an to reflect religious experiences

that need conceptualization for their understanding. These metaphors are demonstrated in chapter 14: 25-26:

See you not how Allah sets forth a parable? A goodly word as a goodly tree whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the sky giving its fruit at all times, by the leave of its Lord, and Allah sets parable for mankind in order that they may remember (14:25).

And the parable of an evil word is that of an evil tree uprooted from the surface of earth having no stability (14: 26)

In this metaphorical expression the source domain is the goodly word and the target domain is the divine word of belief, whereas goodly tree is another source domain corresponding to the believer as the target domain. Goodly word is usually interpreted as the Divine word, divine message or divine religion (Ali, 1977). Kathir and al-Fida'Isma'il (1990) interpreted the Devine word as [la'ilaha illallah, (none has the right to be worshipped but Allah)]. The expression *whose root is firmly fixed* signifies (none has the right to be worshipped but Allah) is firm in the hearts of the believers; and its branches (reach to the sky) indicates how the believer's deeds are ascended to heaven (Ibn, 2000).

The underlying metaphorical expression describes the real nature of the believer and his deeds which comprise good statements and actions. The believer is just like the beneficial date tree, always having good actions ascending all times by day and night. Ibn Kathir quoted Al-Bukhari saying that Abdullah bin Umar said, 'We were with the messenger of Allah when he asked: "Tell me about a tree that resembles the Muslim, the leaves of which do not fall in summer or winter and gives its fruit at all times by the leave of its Lord". Ibn Umar said "I thought of the date palm tree, but felt shy to answer when I saw that Abubakar and Umar did not talk. When they did not give an answer, the messenger of Allah said "It is the date palm tree... (Ibn, 2000)

In the preceding verse, *And the parable of an evil word is that of an evil tree*, describes the nature of disbelief of a disbeliever, which lacks basis or stability. It is similar to the colocynth tree (a very bitter unscented plant). (Attabari, 1984) mentioned that Su'bah narrated that Qurrah narrated that Anas bin Malik said that it is the colocynth. The phrase *uprooted* in the verse means the plant was cut off from its roots; from the surface... describes the futility of the disbeliever's deeds which will never ascend to heavens.

Metaphor of truth and falsehood

Truth and falsehood are part of moral categories such as good and bad, sincerity, honour and their opposites. These moral habits are largely understood by means of more concrete source concepts (Zoltán, 2002). This kind of metaphor is found in so many verses in the Qur'an. For instance, chapter 13: 17:

He sends down water from the sky, He sends rain and the valleys flow according to their measure. But the flood bears away the form that mounts up to the surface, and also from that (one) which they heat in the fire in order to make ornaments or utensils. Thus does Allah show forth truth and falsehood. Then for the form, it passes away as scum upon the banks while that which is for the good of mankind remains on the earth. Thus Allah sets forth parables (13:17)

In this verse human hearts are compared to valleys which contain and retain water each according to its capacity. Hearts also differ, for some can retain substantial knowledge while others cannot entertain knowledge, but rather are bothered by knowledge. Water in the verse is the source or concrete domain referring to the truth, the target domain whereas the foam serves as another source domain referring to the falsehood as its target domain. The metaphoric expressions enable readers to understand and appreciate the fact that truth stands clearly from falsehood, for it carries benefits to mankind; whereas

falsehood does not carry any benefit just like the foam which dissipates and scatters away on the banks of the valley. Similarly, the scum that rises on the surface of the gold, silver and copper ores as stated in the verse goes away and never return. Thus, water, gold and silver remain and are used to man's benefit; this is the truth.

On the contrary, the foam and scum dissipate and fade away as in the case of falsehood. The analogy behind this metaphoric expression is that Allah accepts truth and discards falsehood.

4. Conclusion

These findings provide overwhelming evidence that the mapping of conceptual metaphors from concrete (source) to abstract (source) domains where the most common source domains are concrete, while the most common targets are abstract concepts. In this dimension, conceptual metaphors can serve the purpose of understanding nonmaterial and difficult concepts, hence making the abstract concrete.

The paper demonstrates that Metaphor functions as a rhetorical device which is divinely used to provide a masterpiece of literary art that inspires the people of wisdom and knowledge towards understanding the nature of mankind, the present world and the hereafter. Further, metaphors provide a means for facilitating human cognitive abilities through which they comprehend complex and abstract ideas and events such as destiny, hell fire and paradise which they have not experienced before for the fact that metaphors provide model for human reasoning in the sense that people do understand what they experience. Finally, the paper illustrates the universal feature of metaphors which are found in all natural languages; as such they are pervasively used in the Qur'an that addresses the entire mankind. The cognitive framework of metaphor used to analyse the metaphorical

expressions narrated originally in Arabic language, the language of the Qur'an demonstrates the universality of metaphor in natural languages.

Thus further studies should look into the persuasive functions of metaphor in religious discourse as well as other rhetorical devices used in the Holy Scriptures to enhance inventiveness and literariness in our literary works.

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