

Stylistic Analysis of the Surah *Al-Asr* and its Thematic Implication

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Abstract

Stylistics is a multidisciplinary approach that aims to foreground the peculiar properties of texts on the basis of language and derive hidden and in depth meanings to figure out major and minor themes. The evident fact that makes Stylistic a multidisciplinary approach is its retrievable, rigorous and replicable principles. The present study aims to explore the stylistic features of the Surah *Al Asr* from the Holy Quran at various levels. Surah *Al Asr* is the most comprehensive Surah of the Holy Quran that is composed of only three verses yet the strongest one in its influence and themes. Al-Shafi said, "If the people were to reflect upon Surat al-‘Asr, it would be enough for them",¹ Stylistics as a scientific discipline is helping to interpret literary text logically based on linguistic evidence. The Surah has been analyzed on different levels of stylistics: Graphological, Phonological, Morphological, Semantic, Pragmatics and Discourse level. The connotative and denotative meanings of the surah have been explored to get the complete understanding of the poem. The stylistic analysis of the surah reflects the main idea that is the transiency of human life and permanency of good deeds. This study strengthens the belief that the study of stylistics is beneficial for the thorough understanding of any text.

Keywords: Stylistic analysis, Surah Al Asr, Loss, Humankind, Salvation

Introduction

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the stylistic features of the Surah *Al Asar* and to elaborate its thematic interpretation. Although Arabic is a complex language yet its significance is valuable as it is being used in twenty four countries and being taught as a compulsory subject especially in Muslim countries ². The significance of Arabic language in contemporary times definitely cannot be cut off from its position as the language of Al-Qur'an or a sacred language. Furthermore, Arabic is in practice as the national language in more than twenty countries including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Eritrea, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Palestine ³. Arabic

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language has an old and affluent history. It is one of the official languages of United Nations .⁴

The importance and recognition of Arabic language is noteworthy as the language of Afro Asiatic family being the larger community. Post 9/11 era and particularly American President George Bush's initiative of motivating Americans to learn Arabic language to cope up with critical situation also accelerated the importance of Arabic language in recent times and many people are learning Arabic language for practical and utilitarian goals .⁵ On the other hand, it would be not wrong to say that the Arabs and their language Arabic have been the part of their consideration since the first ever altercation of Europeans with Arabs .⁶ The Muslims around the globe use Arabic for religious rituals and recitation other than using it as a mode of communication. The Arab Nationalists considers Arabic language as a symbol of their identity, part of their faith, reason behind their unity and brotherhood besides a mode of communication and interaction⁷.

The place of the Arabic language in an ordinary Muslim's life is of paramount importance as he offers obligatory Salat (Prayer) five times during a day that can be performed only in Arabic. Likewise, all Muslim community greets one another using Arabic words and call for prayer (Adhan) is also called only in Arabic. The attachment to and sanctity of Arabic language become indispensable and natural for a common Muslim as the day s/he is born, s/he hears the words of Adhan and the s/he leaves the world with rituals in Arabic in funerals⁸. The followers of the religion Islam consider reciting the Holy Quran in Arabic as their obligation and part of their firm belief. So for thorough comprehension of the Holy Quran, the knowledge of Arabic language becomes inevitable. Variations and differences in pronunciation may lead to wrong perception of meaning. One must have command over the phonetics and phonology and principles of tajweed in Arabic language as the revelation of the Holy Quran is no less than a great blessing of Allah Almighty. The Holy Quran is a thorough guidance for leading a blessed and pious life. Allah (SAW) commands to read the Holy Quran with Tartil⁹, as is quoted in the Surah Al-Muzzamil, verse 4:

اَوْدُ عَلَيْهِ وَرَّكِلَ الْقُرْآنَ تَرْتِيلًا¹⁰

“Or add to it, and recite Al-Quran with measured recitation (Tartil)”. Likewise, Stylistics is the study of a language at all levels.

Stylistics is the study of literary discourse from a linguistic perspective as it investigates the basic components of a language: Grammar, expressions and vocabulary¹¹. Stylistics is empirical and scientific in nature that approves and investigates the content on the basis of linguistic evidence. Stylistics is the thorough study of textual analysis in which the foremost consideration is given to language¹². It gives various interpretations of the text along with the better insight for the style of the author. Stylistics as a method demands objectivity rather than involving personal perceptions and subjective interpretations and aims in stylistics can only be achieved when one has basic comprehensions of all peculiarities of general linguistics¹³.

The notion that Stylistics deals mainly with literary texts has been denied by many linguists who are of the view that any language can be the subject of investigation in Stylistics to interpret and explore the unique characteristics of that specific language¹⁴. Stylistic analysis of any piece of literature also helps in better understanding of the language¹⁵. Stylistics is a medium to relate other subjects and disciplines and in itself it is not autonomous¹⁶. Likewise, it links language with Literature. The researches in the field of Stylistics have made it more influential and Corpus stylistics, Feminist stylistics and Discourse stylistics are the most sought out areas in contemporary times¹⁷. Stylistic analysis of the Holy Quran for teaching and research purposes proves Stylistics as multidisciplinary discipline. It is bridging the gaps among various languages and language speakers by identifying certain similarities and variations at phonological, morphological, and syntactical levels of languages. The computational systems are being introduced at morphological levels for the better understanding of the Holy Quran¹⁸. The Pragma-stylistics assessment of the Holy Quran enhances the necessity of complete comprehension of Arabic script and constituents of Arabic language as like any other language, Arabic language also follows a sound system and the language of the Holy Quran has a unique style that is matchless as it is heavenly revelation¹⁹.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the stylistic features of Surah *Al-Asr*. The Surah has been analyzed on different levels of stylistics: Graphological, Phonological, Morphological, Syntactical, Pragmatics and Discourse. The connotative and denotative meanings have been explored to get the complete understanding of the surah and to relate how such stylistics

features add to the meaning, impact and interpretation. The Surah was revealed on the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in Mecca during the early days of the revelation of the Quran. There are three verses (ayats) in the surah. The stylistic features of the surah have been investigated on the basis of following levels and devices of stylistics.

Stylistics

Stylistics is the branch of linguistics that studies the literary texts to see how linguistic devices have been employed. Hence, it is application of linguistics to study literature²⁰

Levels of Stylistic Analysis

Graphological Level	This level examines the structure and pattern of investigating text, the use of punctuation and systematic structure of sentences, etc.
Phonological	This level examines the sound patterns of the given language, pronunciation, rhyming patterns, etc. The phonological devices that normally get attention are rhyming scheme, alliteration, assonance and consonance.
Grammatical Level	This level examines the structure of sentences and clauses in the piece of work. The diction used, the patterns of used vocabulary, the use of verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs, foregrounding and deviations are also investigated.
Lexico-Syntax Level	This level keeps the sentence structure, use of words, omission of certain parts in a sentence and unusual use of words.
Pragmatic and Discourse Level	This level involves the context in which particular language is used. The investigation how linguistic choices and particular style of the poet contributes towards the pragmatic and discourse level is discussed at this level. The style of the poet becomes a major assistance in getting the connotative meanings of the work. It helps in making the meanings explicit.

Stylistic Devices	The stylistic devices discussed in the poem are Imagery, Irony, Symbolism, rhetoric expressions and Allusion.
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Data Presentation

وَالْعَصْرِ. إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ. إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ²¹

Translation

1. By Time
2. Indeed, mankind is in loss.
3. Except those who believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience.

Analysis and Interpretation

Title of the Surah

The title of the surah “Al Asr” has symbolic connotations. This one word title is significant enough to highlight the subject matter of the surah. All of the verses’ constituent clauses are connected grammatically to the very title of the surah, ‘*Al Asr*’. The word ‘Asr’ apparently is used in the meaning of time but it has deep meanings as compared to other Arabic word ‘Dahr’ that is also used in the context of time. ‘Asar’ is used in context of limited time and at linguistic level the word ‘Asar’ means something that is squeezed and compressed. The very word “Asr” demonstrates a strong image of declining day when the sun is going to set and day’s activities to wind up. The connotative meaning exaggerates the themes of the surah artistically as there is no ambiguity in the ultimate end of human life. Man’s life span is for a brief time likewise every rise has a fall. The time spent in uselessness will bring sense of loss and humankind will suffer from dissatisfaction and depravity. As the end of day is marked with death and inactivity likewise the wasting time marks ruin and loss.

The Tone and Major Themes of the Poem

There are three verses in the *surah* and only 16 words. This surah is the second shortest surah of the Holy Quran. The surah highlights the general tragedy of human beings and then presents the solution of that problem in no time. The surah reflects how man is responsible of having either success or failure in his short span of life. The lexical choices

have played a very important role in enhancing underlying major or minor themes. The rhetorical start of the Surah with the oath of the Allah Almighty Himself astounds one's mind and warns one to ponder over cautious steps to save oneself of permanent loss and ruin. The direct opening arrests the attention of the reader at once. Every verse of the surah reflects the tormented soul of the man and his deep sense of loss. The lexical choices aptly disclose the causes behind restlessness of the humankind. The tone of the surah is evocative yet optimistic. This loss is of paramount nature; however, the good deeds, faith in Allah and devotion to truthfulness with patience can cause the salvation of man.

The second line of Surah begins with the word "Verily". Allah says that there is no doubt that Mankind suffers loss. This statement not only informs the mankind that they are suffering loss but also makes it clear that Allah knows His creation very well. Although the third verse of the Surah differentiates between the believers and the non-believers, the righteous and the evil-doers, those who advise others to be patient and those who do not, and those who advise others to the right path and those who do not, yet the second verse rings the alarm bells for the mankind. It sets the tone for the third verse, which is the largest in terms of words. The second is also significant because it reveals the greatest secret of human life. Humans strive throughout their life and it all comes to nothing in the form of death. Whatever one earns during life is left behind in this world, and s/he departs to the next world. Life in this world is just a trial. Those who fail in it suffer a huge loss. It can also be taken to mean that since Allah has done the greatest favor to mankind by first bestowing on them with life and then making them the crown of creation, it is the responsibility of the mankind to obey the commandments of Allah. Those who do not do that suffer the loss. Their lives end in miseries because they die without faith.

However, the faithful as well as the faithless die. What is then the significance of the second verse when the third verse says that those who are faithful are not suffering a loss? In fact, the real loss is that of the faith. If one lives and dies on his/her faith in Allah, one does not suffer a loss. However, those who do not have faith in Him, live in die while suffering loss. At another level, though, one may find the same theme of transitory of world and human life when one links the second verse with the first one. Allah Almighty proclaims that mankind is in a state of suffering because it does not utilize its time for worshipping Allah and

acting in accordance with His commands.

There is a beautiful and sudden shift in the third verse. It heralds good news for the faithful. However, it also makes it clear that the believers also do righteous deeds and enjoin others to patience and enjoin others to the righteous path. Faith without action might prove to be meaningless. If someone professes something and does the opposite of righteous deeds, s/he will suffer the loss because faith is best expressed through actions. If someone professes faith in Allah and does not advise others to be patient and does not advise others to be on the right path, s/he will also face the same the same end. Not only does this line herald good news for the faithful but it also means that those go to the contrary path will have to suffer the loss.

Moreover, the third verse of this Surah also presents the perfect way of *dawa* or preaching. It all starts with belief and faith in oneness of God. This is followed by doing the righteous deed. One cannot enjoin others to do good if one is oneself immersed in evil or wrongdoings. The last part of the verse takes it the sublime level of advising others to be patient and to the righteous path. Hence, the last verse of the Surah has great pedagogical implication as well, informing the righteous and faithful Muslims how they should lead their lives in order to avoid loss.

Graphological Level

This *surah* is arranged in three verses. The repetition of the title of the surah in the very first verse foregrounds the central theme that is the mortality of human existence. The verse that is in the middle of first and third verse is actually of innermost significance. This verse elaborates the illusion of man's life and his loss in materialistic pursuits. The third verse of the surah is a kind of resolution that gives man an exemption or a sense of relief by bringing him out of the awe of rhetorical spell of Allah's oath. The beauty of the surah is in parting the concepts of reward and punishment. The juxtaposition of cause-effect relationship is weaved step by step in successive verses.

Phonological Level

The analysis of the surah at phonological level reaffirms the truth about the lyricism and beauty of the language of the Holy Quran that is neither prose nor poetry yet soothes the heart and refurbishes the faith²². The repetition of 'r' sound at the end of every verse creates rhyme and rhythm in the surah. The Words such as *asr*, *khusr*, and *sabr* describe the

poetic attribute of the *surah* and convey the message emphatically. Every verse of the *surah* is ending with a double consonant ‘r’. The use of assonance: repetition of vowel sounds in the Arabic words ‘*Amanu*’ and ‘*Amilu*’ add to the musicality and rhythm of the *surah* as well as adds to the meaning of consistency and forbearance in the path of righteousness. It is this vitality that justifies the reactions that describes the effects of the *surah*.

Lexical Level

The lexical level gives an insight toward the word choices made in any target text. The use of vocabulary or the diction used in the *surah* is strong and direct. The major themes of the *surah* are enigma of recognition, transitory of life, disillusionment, reward of patience and good deeds. The choice of vocabulary is equating with the major themes as the words ‘*Asar*’, ‘*khusar*’, ‘*sabar*’, ‘*haq*’, etc are highlighting the key themes. The used vocabulary is vivid and concrete. The verbs used are mostly action verbs like “*Aamano*” and “*Aamalo*” that demonstrate the practicality and utility of using time wisely. The lexical choices are in fact vivid images that strongly portray havocs of wasting time and blessings of virtuous and right deeds.

Grammatical Level

The *surah* is having simple sentence structure. There is no complexity at sentence level but the simple sentence structure is quite complex semantically as there are jumbled thoughts. The *surah* consists of three sentences. The parallel is built in the last verse:

وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ. وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ²³

This thematic parallel clearly foregrounds the object lost and gained in the course of life. Three verses are integrated syntactically that brings thematic coherence.

Pragmatic and Discourse Level

The *surah* is rich semantically and pragmatically. The *surah* has different layers of meanings that are apt in context and giving multiple interpretations. The impact of the title at surface and symbolic level succeeds in weaving its impact throughout the *surah*. The message of the *surah* is relatable to every context and every religion as time is short and man is mortal. The stylistic features of the *surah* deny the interpretation of time as absolute fact and proves that time is a relative perception. Man is collecting material capital that will decline gradually with every

passing day. The permanent felicity is in facing the trails of life patiently and leading life on fair grounds having strong faith in Allah Almighty.

Stylistics Devices Used in the Surah

The thorough analysis of the surah also helps in exploring the other stylistics features. The surah has stylistic devices as use of symbols, imagery, rhetorical devices and assonance. Symbolization is a tool to imply the meaning and the readers perceive the connotative meanings that involve a certain context and situation. *Asr* and *Khusar* are symbolizing the reality of life and vanity of time. The expression ‘*Khusar*’ symbolizes the commercialization of life. A man has to pay a heavy price of his pursuit of materialistic desires.

Conclusion

Quran is the best source of knowledge for humans in all times to come. Its subject matter is mankind and how mankind should lead their lives in order to win the pleasure of Allah. It is rich in meaning, and the language used by Allah is beautiful as well as didactic, which is a very rare combination. This study is stylistic analysis of the surah ‘*Al Asr*’ from the Holy Quran. The stylistic analysis of the surah has demonstrated the unique style and structure of Arabic language. The style of surah is simple but rich in symbolic and rhetorical expressions. This study strengthens the belief that the study of stylistics is beneficial for the thorough understanding of not only literature and language but also of religious scriptures, especially The Glorious Quran. This study will be helpful for future researches related to stylistic analysis.

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