

DECONSTRUCTING SEMITIC RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: CONFRONTING HERMENEUTICAL DRIFT AND RESTORING EPISTEMIC INTEGRITY IN QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATION^(*)

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ABSTRACT

For Qur'anic studies, Michel Cuypers' Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) has been positively received as the first providing a structural approach to the harmony of the verses. However, as it comes from a Biblical tradition, it has had problems from an epistemological perspective within the confines of Islamic exegesis. This article considers these problems in the SRA vis-a-vis the Islamic epistemology which is anchored within nubuwwah and revelation. This work involves, as it is set out, a qualitative and conceptual-critical engagement with SRA along with classical Islamic tradition structural exegesis, in this case, al-Biqā'ī's *Nazm al-Durar*. This speaks to the theological and ontological aspects which underlie Islamic interpretative epistemology, particularly ontological dimensions. SRA's lack of appreciation of prophetic authority, the *riwāyāt*, and the context of revelation risks treating the Qur'an as if it were a mere linguistic text in isolation. It is fundamental to devise an interpretative epistemology that is based on revelation, *maqāṣid*, and the integrative tradition of Islamic scholarship to respond to the impact of Western hermeneutical traditions.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The growing specialization focuses on specific areas such as the Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) approach championed by Michel Cuypers within the broader field of Qur'an interpretation. A specific approach within the broader field of textual interpretation that has recently drawn scholarly interest is Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) introduced by Michel Cuypers. He claims to capture the cohesive character of individual Qur'anic surahs by rhetorical patterns such as parallelism, concentricity, and mirror structure, and formerly Biblical studies (Cuypers, 2009). For Cuypers, the primary focus of his analysis is structural coherence within the Qur'an, attempting to classify it through various rhetorical conventions.

More broadly, scholars have stated that contemporary Qur'anic interpretation, including the SRA model, is most of the time driven by structural or Western paradigms. In general, such paradigms attempt, in a formalistic manner, to reconstruct the form, structure, and rhetoric of the Qur'anic text by performing a linguistic analysis of the text and its constituent parts and focusing on the interrelations of the various parts. This contrasts with the methods of traditional expository interpretation that prioritizes more the historical narrative and the classical jurisprudential (fiqh) framework. In addition, this approach stems from the wish to discern the inner unity and rhetorical cohesion of a sacred text, together with a systematic and critical evaluative approach of the structure and communicative function of its verses (Syafaq et al., 2023).

Regarding its Developing Qur'anic structural studies, the SRA approach has been a huge contribution because it helps scholars understand the rhetorical structures underlying the conveyance of the Qur'an and integrates disjointed forms of meaning and elements of the Qur'an that seemingly are treated as separate in classical approaches to interpretation of the Qur'an (Syafaq et al., 2023). Such integration opens advanced studies on the compositional unity of the surahs as well as the logic that governs each surah and offers new studies on the Qur'anic themes and the artistry of prose in the Qur'an. Thus, SRA advances textual studies and calls for the revision of prior studies on the internal

consistency and communicative techniques of the Qur'an. On the other hand, well-founded criticism has been advanced on the approach for failing to address the socio-historical context of the revealed text, such as *asbāb al-nuzūl*, which are critical in placing Qur'anic material for interpretation (Syeed & El-Muhammady, 2024). This problem demonstrates the challenge of maintaining contextual relevance of the Qur'an within the lived religious and socio-historical context of its revelation.

Discussion on the presence of Cuypers and the employment of the SRA method in the literature centers on the possibility that this method functions as a new paradigm in the contemporary approach to the Qur'an. It is within this context that Cuypers is acknowledged as having assumed a pioneering role in the introduction of structural analysis to the Qur'an, while the SRA method represents another level of development in the study of the Qur'an's rhetorical dimensions in a more integrated and comprehensive way (Zacky & Moniruzzaman, 2023). He initiated a transformative approach to Qur'anic exegesis that hinged on the idea of form as a principal carrier of meaning, thus situating Qur'anic studies within close proximity to literatures and linguistics. It is, however, the reductionist potential of the method that sustains critique namely, the focus on symmetry in the language, parallelism, and structuralism, thereby ignoring the Qur'an's normative and theological rhythms (Koca, 2020). SRA's growing body of literature, however, considers SRA to bridge the gap between classical *tafsīr* and contemporary reinterpretation of the Qur'an, particularly in interdisciplinary studies. SRA's technical sophistication, coupled with the ability to critique classical *tafsīr*, positions SRA as a challenge and counterpart to traditional hermeneutics, compelling the integration of a more nuanced, contextual approach to the study of the Qur'an as a message (Syeed & El-Muhammady, 2024).

Thus, some scholars seem to have, at the same time, a modern structural and rhetorical approach, and consider the SRA an innovative method to approach the various layers of the Qur'anic text, while also cautioning the spiritual, traditional foundational aspects, and classical contextual interpretation of the text might be sidelined if excessive weight is placed on its structure and rhetoric (Ahmad, 2023). This, to some degree, exemplifies the contention of innovation and continuity, and hermeneutics of the Qur'anic text. Advocates of SRA claim that its in-depth analysis of rhetoric, coherence, and the texts literary

form on the surface is adjacent of meaning that traditional exegesis, and thus, new avenues of interpretation opens up.

As a text of divine guidance, the Qur'an must be approached in a contextual manner, especially its historical, revelatory, and contextual surroundings which inform its theology and normative value. The Qur'an's consideration of other scriptures, particularly the Torah and the Gospel, illustrates this particularly well. The Qur'an, while praising their divine revelation, also critiques some of the interpretative excesses within the Jewish and Christian traditions. These critiques inform the intertextuality of the Qur'an and expresses a particular prophetic theology, placing the Qur'an within the context of ushered prophetic revelations and legitimizing its position within interreligious discourse in the Abrahamic traditions.

In contrast, Modern Critical exegesis, particularly within the western school, focuses predominantly on the structures and the language of the text. These form-focused approaches, while offering their fair share of understanding toward the text's rhetorical and literary coherence, tend to gloss over the normative and theological aspects of the Qur'an (Rachel Friedman, 2012). For instance, Qur'anic structuralist studies, which partition the text into rigid, balanced, and symmetrical chunks, may overlook the document's revelational character and its deep abiding essences. An ontologically significant text may lose much of its value with such structuralist and reductionist approaches. Separating form and function, and revelation and meaning, have raised much concern in scholarly circles.

To address such concerns, many other scholars propose integrative approaches that incorporate technical literary analysis with grounded theological and Qur'anic concerns. One such approach focuses on intratextuality within the Qur'an. It studies the verses and the chapters of the text to elucidate its doctrinal frameworks (Abdorahimzadeh, 2023). Moreover, the practice of *ijtihad*, in contemporary discussions of Qur'anic teachings, upholds constitutional principles of Islamic jurisprudence and addresses contemporary social and ethical issues such as human rights, gender equality, and the encroachment of rights on the environment (Ichwan et al., 2025).

There are many challenging yet fruitful ways to combine classical and modern hermeneutics. Traditional exegesis focused almost exclusively on prescriptive rulings and ritual obligations. Currently, there is a growing

engagement with the Qur'an, as a source of existential philosophy, moral philosophy, and ethical contemplation (Abdelnour, 2023). This change entails a more purposeful engagement with the text, moving beyond a focus primarily oriented towards rituals and prescriptions

Combining modern and traditional analytical methods provides a deeper appreciation for the Islamic interpretative tradition and what it can offer to contemporary thought (Syed & El-Muhammady, 2024). This collaborative framework does not consider classical exegetical discourse as an approach to be opposed to contemporary discourse, but rather regards it as one approach among others to enhance the richness and pertinence of the modern interpretation of the Qur'an. Modern rhetorical analysis of the Qur'an can be supplemented with normative, spiritually oriented classical tafsīr.

This approach addresses the need to construct interpretations that are academically sound, spiritually satisfying, and socially relevant. The integrated framework synthesis is vital to produce interpretations that are academically sound, spiritually satisfying, and socially relevant.

With this in mind, this paper aims to critique the SRA approach due to the infiltration of hermeneutics into the Qur'an. The critique addresses the epistemological, methodological, and theological framework of Cuypers, using al Biqā'ī *Nazm al Durar* as a counterpoint. Al Biqā'ī, a classical ninth century H scholar, indicates the focus of his studies on the significance of the coherence of verses and the surahs. His works illustrate how Western structuralism, particularly the elements of structuralism composition focusses on the Qur'an as it was part of the Islamic interpretative legacy all along (Al-Biqā'ī, 1995).

2.0 METHOD

This study aims to identify and critically evaluate the key elements of the Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) constructed by Michel Cuypers through the lens of Islamic epistemology by employing a qualitative-normative and conceptual critical methodology. The study is not supported by empirical field data. Instead, the study relies on theory and comparative textual analysis by attempting to juxtapose Cuypers' structuralist analysis of the Qur'ān with classical tafsīr analysis, specifically al-Biqā'ī's tafsīr entitled *Nazm al-Durar*. The analysis is centred on the explanatory assumptions, interpretative strategies, and the SRA's

grounding theology, in contradistinction to Islamic hermeneutics and, more specifically, the theology of nubuwwah, the theology of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the theology of *riwāyah*, and the theology of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*.

In constructing a robust normative critique, the study employs classical *tafsīr* literature, *uṣūl al-tafsīr* texts, and works of al-Ghazālī, al-Syāṭibī, and al-Zarkashī, among others. The methodology is predicated on four primary components: the *tawqīfī* (prescriptive) nature of the Qur'ān's arrangement, the prophetic personage as the primary locus of interpretation, the context of revelation as a part of the intrinsic meaning, and the aims of the revelation that are ethical and regulatory. Such an approach enables the researcher to evaluate SRA's methodological and theological adequacy from an Islamic perspective and to articulate an integrative framework that marries structural components to revelatory epistemology.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Anchoring Interpretation in Islamic Epistemology

This research utilizes a normative-critical approach through Islamic epistemology, particularly classical *tafsīr* (*uṣūl al-tafsīr*) and critical conceptualization of the imported Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) model. In an attempt to move away from abstract references to Islamic epistemology, this section attempts to describe the operational parameters of Islamic epistemology as a stated practice. The methodological framework is built upon the following four pillars:

a. *Tawqīfī* (Divine Restriction)

the chronology and structure of the Qur'ān is not a product of human editing, but a revelation that was completed during the lifetime of the Prophet. This principle confirms the divinely inspired ordering of the verses and, to an extent, wards off reconstruction tendencies associated with SRA (al-Biqā'ī, 1995).

b. *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* and *Riwāyāt* (Revelatory Context and Transmission)

The focus of this analysis is history and revelation. Al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī state that the science of *asbāb al-nuzūl* attributes the best form

of interpretation to the Prophet and the contextualization of the verses. The *ḥadīth* and the sanad system (the authentic chain of transmission) and the reports of the revelation (*al-Ma'ānīl*) are not secondary. These require an authentic approach to the Qur'an (Jalal al-Din, 1974).

c. *Nubuwwah* as Epistemic Authority

The Prophet ﷺ is not a mere transmitter; he is the first interpreter of the Qur'an. The Prophetic function is, by itself, essential for the understanding of the revelation (*ma'nā ladunī*). Al-Ghazālī in *al-Mustaṣfā* mentions that reason by itself leads to inconclusive and hypothetical results (Al-Ghazali, 2007). In contrast, the revelation through Prophethood does provide the complete epistemic circle and authentic interpretation.

d. *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (Objectives of Revelation)

Any interpretation of the Qur'an must be consistent with the objectives of the Sharī'ah such as justice, mercy, and the common good (*maṣlaḥah*). Al-Syāṭibī developed this as one of the guiding principles for the legal and moral implications of *tafsīr* (Al-Shathibi, 2004). In modern times, Auda reinforces this by stating that the analysis of the structure and grammar of the Qur'an must be mediated by the Qur'an's moral objectives (Auda, 2008).

As corrective principles, these would constrain formalist hermeneutics. For example, the absence of the text's revelatory source, prophetic source, or the Qur'an as a source of beauty, gives a structure, then such an interpretation loses the core and the principles of Islamic interpretation. This framework, therefore, enables one to engage with structure criticism, particularly the SRA, within the context of Islamic interpretation integrity.

3.2 *Application of Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA)*

Cuypers elaborates the Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) method looking at the text's internal architecture through parallelism, concentricity, and mirror frameworks. Concerning *al Mā'idah*, he allocates the verses into blocks of text which he refers to as "rhetorical segments"; he then identifies symmetrical patterns and articulates coherence among those segments (Cuypers, 2015). Most

studies, as a result, suggest that the SRA approach is working synchronically and syntagmatically and has, certainly, succeeded in fleshing out a number of *munāṣabah* (inter-verse relations) spatially throughout the *surah*. Asnawi recorded this in 2021.

Cuypers employs the SRA method due to his careful consideration of the inner structure of the verses in the Qur'an. This method improves the insight on internal order and systematics within the order of verses by concentrating on the identification of syntax, rhetorical patterns, and thematic interrelation. In this regard, he contends that the internal design of the Qur'an demonstrates a systematic construction, order and design, which highlights the possibility of a cohesive divine matrix rather than a mere coincidence of randomness.

Additionally, the application of SRA shows that one can appreciate the ordered arrangement of the verses in the Qur'an by means of textual compositional analysis, which in turn clarifies the relationship of the verses with respect to thematic and narrative coherence (Attallah, 2018). Contemporary scholarship on the Qur'an composition has shown that internal patterns of the *surah* are rhetorical structures which serve interpretive functions that enhance understanding of the *surah's* theological and practical content (Attallah, 2018). As for *Surah al Mā'idah*, SRA illuminates the interrelation of themes, particularly the verses that contain legal stipulations, ethics, and religious teachings, which brings about an integrated interpretive framework, where the coherence of the Qur'an's purpose.

Not all scholars have accepted this interpretation. For instance, critiques of SRA's employing structural analysis on particular verses argue that while the structural approach might highlight some of the bigger patterns, it will not flesh out the nuanced interrelationship of verses that have contextual or historical significance (Attallah, 2018). The mechanical use of structural balance might obscure the historical and revelatory realities that meanings emerge from (Hassanein, 2023). This critique suggests the SRA should be used in conjunction with contextual approaches to ensure that Qur'anic exegesis accounts for all the dimensions of the revelatory message including the importance of structural beauty and the socio-spiritual context.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Cuypers, through his works *The Banquet* and *The Composition of the Qur'an*, Cuypers attempted to show that the Qur'an has a systematic structure with parallel, concentric, and mirror patterns, similar to the structure of Sacred Scriptures in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Cuypers, 2009). Despite helping develop the academic appreciation of the structure of the Qur'an, this approach has drawn some criticism from within Muslim scholars. Mun'im Sirry noted that this method of analysis unconsciously dissociates the interpretation from the *maqāsid al sharī'ah*, thereby suggesting that the Qur'an is to be approached merely as a literary work, to be rhetorically reconstructed, and detached from the revelatory essence (Sirry, 2019).

Islamisation of Knowledge offers insights into understanding the meaning of epistemology in modern Islam. Ismā'īl al Fārūqī, Syed Naquib al Attas, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr were pivotal in the development of the interplay between the structure of a text and its history, a text's metaphysical aspects, and the evolution of methodologies pertaining to meaning that move beyond formalism into the realm of the theology (Saif, 2024).

Furthermore, criticisms of structural methods unrooted in Islamic tradition have been widely raised by Muslim scholars. They assess that pure adoption of structural approaches, particularly those referencing Western paradigms, tends to neglect important aspects of classical hermeneutics such as the concept of *sanad* (chain of narrators) and *maqāsid* (objectives of sharia) (Sinai, 2020). These criticisms demonstrate that methods like SRA eliminate spiritual dimension and the continuity of the interpretative tradition that has been formed through Islamic scholarly practice over centuries (Zacky & Moniruzzaman, 2023).

In response to such criticisms, a number of alternative interpretative approaches have emerged, specifically those that aim to maintain linkage with the Islamic scholarly heritage through integration of spiritual aspects, *maqāsid*, and *sanad* (Zacky & Moniruzzaman, 2023). Within the paradigm of Islamisation of Knowledge, these approaches not only emphasise structural analysis but also return interpretation to the normative and spiritual values that are the primary features of Islamic interpretation (Ḥanafī, 2021).

In this context, the interpretation of al-Biqā'ī becomes highly relevant as a comparator. His *Nazm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar* demonstrates how the Islamic interpretative tradition has long emphasised structure, but on fundamentally different principles. al-Biqā'ī not only observes structural continuity, but also connects it with the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *i'jāz*, and the divine meaning of the revelation itself (Al-Biqā'ī, 1995). This shows that the Qur'anic structure is not a new phenomenon, and does not require rhetorical tools from outside Islam in order to explain it.

The Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) and classical Islamic *tafsīr* disagree in methodologies most clearly in the case of the Qur'an 5:3 and its explanatory comments: "*This day I have perfected for you your religion...*". In *The Banquet*, Cuypers places this verse in a concentric rhetorical structure, regarding it as the literary peak of a legal-administrative block. For SRA, the verse is impressive in that it is a potential pivot for the internal structure of the text, indicating closure on the internal textual mechanics, though not on the theological aspects. It is treated as a legal verse, as it is positioned alongside other legal verses, and the primary focus is on the rhetorical symmetry, parallelism, and structure (Cuypers, 2009). This approach regards this verse as a structural constituent that adds clarity to the text and does not refer to the verse's context of revelation, the Prophet's Final Pilgrimage (*Ḥajj al-Wadā'*) to which it is closely associated, and its importance in Islamic ontological beliefs.

In contrast, classical exegetes, such as al-Biqā'ī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, anchor the verse in the instance of its revelation and its prophetic function. Al-Biqā'ī considers the verse as a statement of theology in the sense that it marks the closure of divine legislation and the finality of *nubuwwah*, while also maintaining the *tawqīfī* order of the Qur'ān. He relates it to the Prophet's actual declaration and highlights its alignment with the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (Al-Biqā'ī, 1995). Al-Rāzī, like others, associates the verse with the prophet's eschatological finality, which is, to him, supported by *riwāyāt* and *asbāb al-nuzūl*, and presents it as a climax of theological discourse and not mere rhetorical formalism (Al-Razi, 2000). The reading of these parallels shows that, in SRA, the absence of the prophetic and revelatory dimensions not only changes the direction of interpretation but also changes the very purpose Qur'anic verses are ascribed to. This is the epistemological gap; while classical *tafsīr* seeks to explain the meaning of the verse in consonance with divine will and the prophetic discourse, SRA disconnects the verse from its ontological and normative foundations.

The origins of the SRA method can be traced back to Biblical Studies, particularly the structural analyses of the Gospels and the Old Testament (Brodie, 2004). This indicates that the SRA method's epistemological base does not stem from the classical sciences of the Qur'an, but from the Biblical philology and rhetoric focused on symmetry and form and literary structure (Cuypers, 2015). In the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis, the engagement with the Qur'an is, of course, not merely as a linguistic text, but as a revelation that is spiritual as well as legal and social in nature and scope.

Scholarship on Reformation hermeneutics, particularly, shows how a self-interpretative principle dominant in Biblical criticism replaced conventional authorities and promoted more contextual and human centered interpretations of the text (Wang, 2024). This brings us to the question of whether SRA is adaptable to Islamic epistemology. Certain studies advocate for a measure of flexibility given that an integrating current approaches, in a critical way, of the older interpretive frameworks. Research drawing on the hermeneutical parameter of *ijtihād*, particularly Ichwan et al. , posits that modern constructive approaches, in conjunction with Islamic hermeneutics, may be justified only in the context of *tafsīr* and the interpretive authority order of *ijtihād* (*waḥy*, *nubuwwah*, *riwāyāt*, and *ijmā'*), with *asbāb al-nuzūl*, and the preference of *al-ma'nā* over *al-dalāla*. (Ichwan et al., 2025). It can be argued that SRA, as a method of systematic analysis, may also be in compatibility with Islamic epistemology, provided there is a critical recalibration and synthesis of dialogue between the contemporary and classical (Ichwan et al., 2025).

That being said, the advent of Western hermeneutics introduces foundational challenges to the study of Islamic interpretation. Western hermeneutics undoubtedly brings in certain positive innovations, particularly around historical critique and psychological dimensions; yet it also has the potential to erode the epistemic scaffolding that interpreters and scholars of the text have relied on for decades (ÖZAKTAN, 2022). The Western hermeneutical paradigm that solely focuses on the deconstruction of the text, interpretative relativism, and the erasure of origins poses a danger to Islamic interpretation that may result in a methodological fragmentation that has historically relied on the *sanad* and *maqāṣid*.

The aforementioned challenges based on Western hermeneutical principles, such as reliance on the autonomy of the text, the meaning being

defined by the reader, and the sidelining of the revelatory context, become even more pronounced when SRA is used on specific exegetical texts. One such case is SRA's application to Q. 5:3, which shows that the structural centrality approach might eclipse Prophetic exegesis and *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

Thus, the Western hermeneutics influence on the modern interpretation may arguably be a double-edged sword. It offers innovation, yet it also threatens the over a millennia structured Islamic interpretative system.

4.1 Methodological Critique of SRA

Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA), as introduced by Michel Cuypers, represents a significant methodological shift in the study of the Qur'an by emphasizing rhetorical coherence and structural symmetry through principles rooted in Semitic literary tradition such as parallelism, concentric structures, and mirror symmetry (Cuypers, 2015). This method has been further developed and applied in contemporary Qur'anic studies, notably in the analyses of Surah al-'Alaq and QS Al-Mā'idah, which reveal intricate layers of textual cohesion and rhetorical depth (Asnawi et al., 2021, 2022). One of the key strengths of SRA lies in its ability to uncover textual coherence often overlooked by traditional exegesis and to offer novel interpretative frameworks that challenge established theological positions (Asnawi, 2021). However, these strengths are accompanied by certain limitations. For instance, while SRA's interpretations can offer fresh insights, they may also raise methodological concerns and scientific inconsistencies that necessitate further scrutiny and critical re-analysis (Asnawi, 2021). Furthermore, the foundational concept of textual cohesiveness, although central to SRA, is sometimes insufficiently articulated in practical application (Asnawi et al., 2022).

These dynamics stand in contrast with classical exegetical traditions, which tend to emphasize literalism and textualism focusing on syntax, grammar, legal derivations, and theology, yet often struggle to address contemporary epistemological and ethical challenges (Aras, 2024; Saeed & Akbar, 2021). In response, modern Islamic scholarship has begun incorporating more integrative and responsive methodologies. The contextualist approach, for instance, prioritizes ethical engagement with the Qur'an by accounting for socio-historical realities, allowing for interpretations that resonate with present-day moral expectations while preserving foundational religious values (Saeed & Akbar, 2021). Meanwhile, the *maqashid*-based framework combines classical Islamic

objectives with modern imperatives such as gender justice and digital literacy, thereby creating a more inclusive hermeneutic paradigm(Said et al., 2025).

Another significant contribution is the critical dialectical method, which engages with biblical narratives to reconstruct a layered Qur'anic hermeneutics grounded in intertextual and comparative theology(Hurnawijaya et al., 2025). Finally, the digital transformation of Qur'anic interpretation introduces both opportunities and challenges, enhancing accessibility and interactivity, while simultaneously raising concerns regarding authenticity, interpretative authority, and methodological consistency(Ali Sati et al., 2025). As an example, classical scholars, such as those referred to in the introduction to *Muqaddima fi uṣūl al tafsīr* by Ibn Taymiyya, constructed methodologies of interpretation that integrated the linguistic dimensions with the contextual historical, legal, and theological components to expose meanings that are fundamentally layered(Mirza, 2023).

SRA, in respect to these approaches, devotes particular attention to rhetorical structure, thus, arguably, limiting contextual and semantic tracing. This point of contention may explain the critical stance towards SRA in contrast to classical interpretation, which incorporates a broader range of scholarship and disciplines(Çonkor, 2024). Although Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) is designed as an objective approach to analyzing textual structures, it remains susceptible to the problem of subjectivity. The interpretation of rhetorical patterns such as parallelism and concentric structures is often influenced by the analyst's intellectual framework, epistemological orientation, and personal predispositions. For example, Michel Cuypers' application of SRA to Surah Al-Mā'idah reveals multiple layers of cohesion through lexical and grammatical structures. However, the interpretation of this cohesion is ultimately shaped by the interpreter's perspective(Asnawi et al., 2022).

This issue becomes even more evident in the analysis of Surah al-'Alaq, where Cuypers' method results in readings that diverge from traditional Muslim interpretations, highlighting the underlying influence of subjective frameworks(Asnawi, 2021). Moreover, the challenge of objectivity is not limited to religious texts but also extends to the broader field of linguistic analysis, particularly in sentiment and subjectivity research within natural language processing. Analyses in this domain have shown that the expression of opinions and emotions inherently involves subjectivity, making truly objective

interpretation difficult to attain (Abdul-Mageed et al., 2011; Bjerva et al., 2020; Chifu & Fournier, 2023).

Similar tendencies are observed in the interpretation of other Semitic literature, such as biblical texts. For instance, the reading of Isaiah 46:1–4 heavily depends on how Hebrew terms often semantically diverse are translated and understood, which in turn reflects the interpreter's cultural and historical background (Schoening, 2022). As demonstrated in previous studies, presuppositions of the interpreter are a key factor that determine the results of a structurally based analysis (Iqbal et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, Asnawi and colleagues attribute the results to the scientific approach of the interpreter while the processes involved seem to be systematic. Asnawi (2021) cites subjectivity as an intractable aspect of contemporary scholarship on the sacred texts. Yet, in the Islamic scholarly tradition, the additional dimensions, besides the linguistic and rhetorical, are the moral, legal, and historical aspects of a revelation. Research on the practice of scholarly interpretation in Indonesia shows that the integration of *maqāṣid*, *sanad*, and contextualisation in interpretive methods creates an authoritative interpretive framework (Asnawi, 2021).

For instance, Ebū'l Hasan el Âmirî, one of the classical scholars, promoted the unification of the textual approaches with the principles of Islam. Such more comprehensive approaches are preferred over SRA, which is more inclined to formal logic and structural aesthetics (Çonkor, 2024). Methodological SRA critiques, therefore, not only address gaps in SRA's comprehensiveness, but also draw attention to other interpretive methods in the Islamic tradition that are more substantive and epistemologically richer.

4.2 Theological Critique of Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA)

A key criticism in theology regarding SRA concerns the results of the method's design. SRA originates from the biblical tradition of textual criticism and treats the biblical text exclusively as a literary work to be dissected with complete aesthetic structural analytic tools (Cuyppers, 2015).

With regard to the Qur'an, such a position may be at odds with the belief of many Muslims who regard the Qur'an as a revelation from God that has not only been in error, but contains normative elements that

cannot be captured textually. In classical exegetical traditions, revelation was not regarded as a text of language alone, but as a document that contained guiding principles of a normative and spiritual order that transcend the text (Rahman, 2009). In this view, the disregard of the historical context of revelation (*asbāb al nuzūl*), the variant readings (*qirā'āt*), and *hadith al tafsīr* surrounding passages of the Qur'an would expose the structural approach to the criticism of arguing that one has emptied the Qur'an of its normative substance and reduced it to a text to be appreciated and analyzed as a purely literary work (Zacky & Moniruzzaman, 2023).

Critiques of Cuypers' scholarship further elucidate troubling tendencies, such as his claim of a post-Prophetic re-structuring of the Quranic text. Cuypers may suggest, albeit implicitly, that verse units may have been re-organized after the Prophet's ﷺ death (Cuypers, 2015). This, of course, is theologically problematic in light of the finality and the authenticity of the Uthmānic mushaf as a central tenet of Muslim belief (Syafaq et al., 2023).

Beyond this, the stark dissociation of form and meaning in SRA raises pivotal issues regarding the status of revelation. When the structure and rhetoric of a text takes precedence, normative facets of the text, such as ethics (*akhlaq*), law (*sharī'ah*), and monotheism (*tawhīd*), may risk marginalization in the discourse. This, in turn, raises concerns regarding the possible dissociation of the meaning of revelation from its sacred origin (Syeed & El-Muhammady, 2024). The Qur'an has value and order. From the positioning value as order perspective, the ethical transcendental purpose of the revelation may become obfuscated (Auda, 2008). This obfuscation of the ethical transcendental purpose of revelation accounts for the lack of theological critique of SRA and the critique's absence accounts for the lack of obfuscation.

4.3 *Ontological-Theological Dimensions of Prophethood (Nubuwwah) in Qur'anic Exegesis*

For a full understanding of prophetic service, it is necessary to go beyond the historical period of the prophetic mission to what nubuwwah is, an existential ontological reality. This pertains to the prophetic function of being the point of intersection between divine reality (al-ḥaqq) and human reality (Nasr, 2006). This is especially the case concerning Qur'anic exegesis; each meaning structure that the Qur'an embodies is contingent upon the Prophet being present as a mediator of the revelation and the foremost interpretive authority. The Prophet, therefore, was not merely a witness to the revelation (*shāhid al-waḥy*). He was an ontological medium through which divine meaning was articulated in text and action (GÜR & ÇELİK, 2023).

Revelation in the form of messages, which Jibrīl the angel delivered to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, is described in the Islamic theological framework, where the Prophet was not a passive channel but an active recipient, interpreting, practicing, and enacting the message of God before it was passed on to the community. He was also described as al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥānī in *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān*, where he states "*al-nubuwwah hiya ta'rif min Allāh bi al-ghuyūb 'alā lisān rasūlihi*," meaning prophethood is the communication of the unseen knowledge from God through the speech of His messenger (al-Aṣḥānī, 2008).

In ontology, *nubuwwah* serves as a *wāṣilah*: a channel that connects divine wisdom with human reason (Al Mahmud, 2023). This consideration, also, must inform any valid Islamicate epistemology concerning the interpretation of texts. The meaning of the Qur'an, it must be emphasized, does not reside merely in the text itself, but also in the rūḥ al-waḥy (spirit of revelation), which can only be fully appreciated in the presence and enactment of prophethood. Because the Qur'an serves as a channel through which prophetic revelation is communicated and integrated into human experience, it must be understood that the Qur'anic text is not simply the result of linguistic decoding, but rather a reflection of ma' nā ladunī meaning the Prophet encapsulated and communicated (Al-Ghazālī, 2011).

Theologically, the *nubuwwah* has to relate to the pillars of faith (*arkān al-īmān*) in the present, not just in the historical sense. While the lack of emphasis on the Prophet's role in meaning the revelation may be interpreted as a disconnection between the inner and outer dimensions of religion, it must be

noted, as al-Ghazālī points out in al-Mustaṣfā, that reason, unaided, attains only a segment of the truth, while revelation is the means to completion and is the final say in the definitional meaning of religion (Al-Ghazālī, 2011). To interpret and not relate it to *nubuwwah* is to place reason as the highest epistemic authority, a position which, in Islamic thought, is recognized as a departure from the true epistemic source.

This position is also endorsed by al-Biqā'ī in *Naẓm al-Durar*, who, despite being known as a structural exegete of the tradition, maintains that the prophetic correlation, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, and sound stories must accompany the harmony of the verses and the placements of the *suwar* in their interpretation. He states in his interpretation's introduction, "*fa-lā ghinā fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān 'an al-tawqīf, wa-lā maṭma' fi nayl khayr kathīr min ghayr hādihā al-ṭarīq,*" which translates as, "There is no sufficiency in interpreting the Qur'an without reference to divine instruction, and no hope of attaining abundant good apart from this path" (Al-Biqā'ī, 1995).

Al-Biqā'ī contends that a consideration of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* along with the sequence of the verses and *suwar* indicates that the order is *tawqīfī* divinely mandated not a product of human design. He states: "*wa-man naẓara fi asbāb al-nuzul, wa-'tabara tartīb al-āyāt wa al-suwar, 'alima anna al-tartīb al-tawqīfī min 'ind al-ḥakīm al-'alīm, lā madkhal fīhi li al-hawā*". This implies that the focus of his examination was not a case of the arbitrary reconstruction of a structure; rather, it was a reconstruction of a structure that was guided by revelation and prophethood. Al-Biqā'ī explains, concerning Qur'an 2:2, that the Qur'anic guidance is riveted in the Prophet, and the Prophet alone: "*fa-lā yu'raf ḥaqq hudāhu illā bi al-talaqqī 'an al-muballigh, wa huwa al-rasūl*". This affirms that the meaning of the revelation stands, solely, with the prophetic chain (*sanad*).

Al-Biqā'ī exemplifies a tradition in scriptural commentary that is, above all else, structural and theocentric and prophetic in nature. He does not regard a meaning as a written entity on its own. He views it a divine trust (*amānah ilāhiyyah*) which demands elucidation as divine specification and prophetic guidance dictates. This suggests that any attempt in contextual interpretation of the Qur'anic text structure that lacks prophetic consideration is, in fact, a methodological error, even if such interpretation deploys advanced structural approaches. Theological critiques of SRA converge on the methodological,

theological, and ontological aspects of prophethood as illustrated in the following table.

Table 1

Key Dimensions of Critique of Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA)

Main Dimension	Subthemes/Core Focus
Theological Critique	Divine Revelation, Normative Dimensions, Historical Milieu, Finality of Uthmānic Muṣḥaf, Secularization of Understanding
Methodological Critique	Comprehensiveness, Epistemic and Substantive Approaches
Ontological-Theological Dimensions of Prophethood	Existential Reality, Prophet as Conduit, Active Recipient, Bridging Divine and Human Knowledge

4.4 Contemporary Interpretation Epistemologies: Islamization, Hermeneutics, and Integration

The beginnings of contemporary interpretation studies, from an epistemological point of view, communicate the current need to reengage intellectually with the Qur'an, as balancing out historical and contemporary demands of reinterpretation continues to consume scholarship (Ayash et al., 2025). Such scholarship tends to focus on three balancing demands: (a) the epistemology of the Islamization of knowledge; (b) the development and application of historical-critical approaches to Islamic texts; and (c) integrative frameworks that interlace traditional and contemporary approaches to Islamic texts.

- a. Islamization of Knowledge. The Islamization of Knowledge paradigm promoted by Ismā'īl Rājī al-Fārūqī, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and other advocates, emphasizes the need to view revelation as the primary, principal, and fundamental source of all knowledge in countering secular epistemologies of the West, wherein Western scholarship treats revelation as merely historical or cultural remnant to be discarded. Within the framework of interpretation, it should be held that the authority of interpretation stems from revelation, Prophethood, and transcendence, and all interpretive approaches that sever these core connections are ontologically and normatively violent to the Qur'an (Abbasi, 2021).

In the work *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan*, Al-Fārūqī describes tawḥīdic epistemology as a system in which revelation, reason, and empiricism cohere and fit within an ordered and divinely system (Al-Faruqi, 1982). This explanation places the demand of cohesive interpretative methodologies as needing to derive from *tafaqquh fi al-din* deep religious understanding and not from secular-liberal frameworks which detach the text from its sacredness and revelatory origins. This criticism is geared towards methodologies such as Semitic Rhetorical Analysis (SRA) and others derived from biblical studies. In the Islamic context, SRA is seen as epistemologically foreign, and worse, the uncritical adoption of SRA and other biblical studies methodologies may undermine Qur'anic meaning.

- b. Historical-Critical Hermeneutics. In the past twenty years, prominent Islamic scholars shaped and legitimized the sub-field of critical and contextualized Qur'anic studies. These scholars include Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Fazlur Rahman, and Muhammad Arkoun. In Quranic interpretation, he historian, sociologist, and legal scholars advanced contextual analyses to Islam and the Quran, and the deconstructive and historical frameworks to Qur'anic interpretation. While the model opens space to critique traditional interpretative frameworks which is a great development for Qur'anic studies, it does so by neglect the metaphysical dimension of revelation and Prophethood under the studies cited (Sinai, 2020).

Fazlur Rahman has suggested that one should view verses of a text in their historical contexts and then reapply their central moral

content to today's realities (Rahman, 1982). His theory seemingly affirms revelatory authority, but it also allows for rational re-interpretation that might disregard the normative interpretive function of the Prophet, especially when such approaches are taken by scholars who are weak on the Islamic theological and methodological framework.

SRA marks a more radical extension of the trend, focusing primarily on the rhetorical and structural aspects. It approaches the Qur'an as a literary artifact and considers the text without its revelatory context and without the chains of transmission (*sanad*), the circumstances of the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). Such an action essentially de-sacralizes the text by enhancing its epistemological position within the sphere of inter-textual discourse (Rystan et al., 2023)

- c. Integrative Model. The Integrative Model seeks to reconcile *turāth* text interpretive classifications. Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr, M. Quraish Shihab, and Amin Abdullah are scholars who construct interpretive frameworks and fill the boundaries of the Islamic scholarly tradition, complemented by insights from social sciences, contemporary hermeneutics, and the pragmatic interpretative tradition. This model does not entirely ignore the SRA; rather, it presents it as a secondary model as opposed to a primary epistemic model. For instance, Shihab appreciates the importance of *naẓm* textual coherence and the rhetorical structure, while also contending that these elements, together with the rhetorical structure, cannot unveil the Qur'anic and ethical discourse in its totality. He invokes the unrestricted goals (*maqāṣid*), ethical frameworks, and socio-historical contexts of the verses (Shihab & Ali-Fauzi, 1992).

This integrative model attempts to maintain contextual relevance as well as interpretive faithfulness. It appreciates the advances and methodological changes made in literary and linguistic analysis, and it expects the severance of meaning that lies at the core of Islamic epistemology.

Table 2

Critical Evaluation of the SRA (Semitic Rhetorical Analysis) Methodology within the Discipline of Islam Interpretation Epistemology.

Concept	Critique Domain	Critical Analysis	Corrective Approach
SRA (Semitic Rhetorical Analysis)	Epistemological	SRA originates from Biblical literary criticism rooted in Western secular traditions. This raises concerns as it lacks grounding in Islamic epistemology, which centers on revelation.	Requires epistemological adaptation, ensuring alignment with ijtihād and Islamic exegetical principles grounded in revelation.
SRA	Methodological	Focuses narrowly on rhetorical structures (e.g., parallelism, concentricity), while overlooking essential interpretation tools like sanad, maqāṣid, and asbāb al-nuzūl.	Should be complemented by a multidimensional interpretation methodology that includes legal, historical, and spiritual dimensions.
SRA	Theological	Tends to interpret the Qur'an as a purely human text subject to aesthetic analysis, neglecting its status as	Interpretation must be rooted in theological commitment to the sacredness of the Qur'an and the prophetic

		divine revelation with normative authority.	source of its meanings.
SRA	Ontological-Theological	<p> Ignores the ontological function of prophethood (<i>nubuwwah</i>) as the medium of divine meaning, detaching interpretation from the Prophet's authoritative role.</p>	<p> Interpretation should affirm that meaning is not autonomous in the text but transmitted through the Prophet's guidance.</p>
SRA	Structural Coherence	<p> SRA enables structural centers to bypass <i>sabab al-nuzūl</i>, <i>riwāyāt</i>, <i>ijmā'</i>, <i>tafsīr</i>, and even Prophetic explanation by aligning interpretive authority with structural patterns. This differs from al-Biqā'ī, who, while affirming textual coherence (<i>naẓm</i>), retains complete epistemic reliance on revelation and the transmitted.</p>	<p> Must uphold the <i>tawqīfī</i> (divinely ordained) structure of the Qur'an as preserved in the Uthmānic codex, as per Islamic tradition.</p>

4.5 Alternative Methodological Framework

No tafsīr model is valid if it does not recognize and affirm the Qur'an as a text of revelation, as a Prophetic discourse, and to what extent it mediates Prophethood.

Such principles of Prophethood and Tawqif are primary, and any model that does not include them is not a model of tafsīr. The analysis of al-Shāṭibī reflects that the Qur'an is a cohesive text that must be interpreted and understood on a continuum of the ethics inspired by its Divine Author and the objectives of Divinity and not on a plain, structural, and overtly lexical description (Al-Shathibi, 2004). His analysis contradicts the SRA model's literary reductionism and demonstrates the importance of a model that aligns with established epistemological principles.

The integrative model considers *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *riwāyāt*, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* as fixed points of reference for any interpretative exercise. Verses of the Qur'ān are examined beyond just the structural elements of language, but rather, the context of the revelation and the ethical-legal objectives that the particular verse aims at. This particular approach is faithful to the early scholars Al Suyūṭī, and al-Zarkashī, and builds a theological fence that restricts the exceedance of the abstract structural approach (Al-Zarkashi, 1971; Jalal al-Din, 1974).

Although the model does not accept the self-sufficiency of SRA, it permits the use of rhetorical analysis but only at a primary level, and as long it is subordinated to the structural framework, revelation based. Naẓm is position as a structural element but not a generator of meaning, rather it is a pathway to understanding the intergration of divine wisdom and textual syncretism. This is also evident in the works of Quraish Shihab (1996), where he retained the *maqāṣid* and the normative focus of the verses, while employing rhetorical analysis (Shihab, 1996).

The integrative spirit references Ṭahir ibn 'Āshūr and Quraish Shihab, who both aim to revitalize tafsīr by employing modern methodologies, while remaining committed to the Islamic framework. Ibn Āshūr argues tafsīr should harmonize *'aql* (reason), *naql* (transmission) and *maqasid* in a single hermeneutic (Auda, 2008). Thus, in Auda, one sees a proposal for a systems-oriented approach based in *maqasid*, which offers the possibility for constructive interaction with contemporary sciences. The subsequent table demonstrates the tafsīr dimensions of epistemic source, grounding in context, and ethics, operationalized and preserved within this framework.

Table 3

Classical Tafsīr Dimensions and Their Integrative Applications

Dimension	Classical Principle	Integrative Application
Epistemic Source	Revelation and Prophethood	Anchored in <i>wahy</i> and <i>nubuwwah</i>
Contextual Grounding	<i>Asbāb al-nuzūl</i> , <i>Sanad</i> , <i>Riwāyāt</i>	Essential for tafsīr legitimacy
Structural Awareness	Naẓm, coherence	Used secondarily to highlight divine order
Ethical Orientation	<i>Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah</i>	Guides interpretive priority and application
Methodological Guardrail	Classical <i>uṣūl al-tafsīr</i>	Prevents fragmentation and theological deviation

4.6 Limitations of the Study

The primary limitations of this study are as follows. To begin with, the research remains normative-critical purely on the basis of literature for the theoretical study, fieldwork, or interviews with contemporary exegetes, which would have provided empirical validation. Therefore, it, unfortunately, lacks the sociological dimension to evaluate the acceptance or rejection of SRA among Muslim scholars for the field research evaluation.

The study focuses on critiquing the epistemological, theological, and methodological aspects of SRA, especially in the context of comparative analysis with al-Biqā'ī and his classical framework, but does not engage with more contemporary interpretive models such as thematic exegesis, Islamic historical-critical approaches, or contextual readings by Quraish Shihab and Fazlur Rahman, or other contemporary scholars. As a result, SRA and the Islamic interpretive traditions remain unresolved within broader epistemological discourse.

The present study investigates a particular type of SRA and attempts to connect it with certain interpretive patterns within Western Hermeneutics with particular regard to Western emphasis on autonomy of the text and its structural configuration. SRA may still be a technical procedure, but the basic assumptions it makes regarding meaning and structure are similar to those found within the Western interpretive systems and, by extension, contemporary biblical criticism.

However, within its Islamic applications, rhetorical hermeneutics undergoes a transformation of its conceptual frameworks, exhibiting a pluralistic diversity. To treat SRA as a single, Western hermeneutic risks ignoring its underlying complexity and interpretive fluidity.

Fourth, translations in English, including those that are secondary and secondary analyses of Cuypers' writings, were relied on predominantly, which could mean that access to primary texts written in French or other languages may be impaired due to linguistic limitations.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study seeks to offer a critical assessment of SRA as applied to the Semitic Rhetorical Analysis in Qur'anic exegesis, particularly in the areas of epistemology, methodology, and theology. Even though SRA identifies the rhetorical structure of the Qur'an to some extent, which is indeed a crucial consideration, the Biblicalist framework which underlies SRA falls short concerning the principles of Islamic interpretation. SRA uncloisters *nubuwwah* from the text, fails to appreciate *riwāyāt* and the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and culminates in the reduction of *wahy*, or revelation, to a text.

Unlike modern approaches, classical Islamic exegesis texts like al-Biqā'ī's *Naẓm al-Durar* show that the coherence of the text (*naẓm*) may be determined structurally without losing the divine and prophetic revelation. Accordingly, SRA's critique echoes the need for an interpretive methodology that respects the Islamic framework of understanding, centred on divine revelation and prophethood. While mindful of the SRA's limitations, the equitable interpretive methodology must acknowledge the fact that the SRA, like the other structural methodologies, is not incorrect, but rather insufficient, as far as the claims of singularity or exclusivity are concerned. Within the context of the Islamic epistemological framework, any methodology that is purely structural is only permissible, or more appropriately, it is only defensible, when such a methodology is firmly shackled to the theological, the spiritual, and the ethical components, and in a sense subordinate to them. Such an epistemological critique, then, reinforces, or rather justifies, the deconstructive inclination of the

title, in showing that SRA falls short of the most basic and fundamental requirements in the practice of primary Qur'anic exegesis..

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

<i>Waḥy</i>	: Divine revelation communicated to the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ.
<i>Nubuwwah</i>	: Prophethood as an ontological authority for interpreting revelation.
<i>Tawqīf</i>	: Belief in the divinely fixed arrangement of the Qur'anic text.
<i>Asbāb al-nuzūl</i>	: Contextual circumstances surrounding the revelation of a verse.
<i>Riwāyāt</i>	: Transmitted narrations or reports, especially from the Prophet.
<i>Sanad</i>	: Chain of transmitters validating the authenticity of a narration.
<i>Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah</i>	: Higher objectives of Islamic law, including justice and public welfare.
<i>Nazm</i>	: Rhetorical and structural coherence in the Qur'anic composition.
SRA (Semitic Rhetorical Analysis)	: A structural method analyzing concentric and symmetrical patterns in the Qur'an, derived from biblical textual criticism.

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