

***Muqābalah* in Surah Al-Lail: A Study of Semantic Aesthetics and Qur'anic Rhetoric**

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Abstract

This article examines *muqābalah* in Surah Al-Lail as a semantic-aesthetic and rhetorical mechanism that organizes Qur'anic meaning through structured opposition. The study responds to the tendency to treat *muqābalah* merely as a formal ornament within *badī*, whereas in Surah Al-Lail contrast functions as an interpretive principle that shapes the chapter's moral and theological argument. The objective of the study is to identify the major patterns of semantic opposition in Surah Al-Lail, analyze their contribution to the surah's rhetorical coherence, and clarify their ethical and theological functions in relation to human striving, divine guidance, and eschatological recompense. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative textual-hermeneutical design supported by semantic-rhetorical analysis and limited corpus-assisted verification. The Arabic text of Surah Al-Lail is examined through close reading, classical *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, discourse analysis, and lexical verification. The findings show that *muqābalah* structures the surah through a progressive sequence of contrasts: cosmic polarity, human differentiation, ethical opposition, rhetorical persuasion, and final consequence. The oppositions between night and day, giving and withholding, God-consciousness and self-sufficiency, affirmation and denial, ease and hardship, and salvation and punishment form a coherent semantic field. The study contributes theoretically by reframing *muqābalah* as semantic architecture rather than simple antithesis, demonstrating that Qur'anic aesthetic form actively produces moral reasoning, theological meaning, and persuasive force.

Keywords: *muqābalah, surah al-lail, qur'anic rhetoric, semantic aesthetics, balāghah*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji *muqābalah* dalam Surah Al-Lail sebagai mekanisme semantik-estetik dan retorik yang mengorganisasi makna Al-Qur'an melalui oposisi yang terstruktur. Kajian ini berangkat dari kecenderungan untuk memahami *muqābalah* hanya sebagai hiasan formal dalam *badī*, padahal dalam Surah Al-Lail, kontras berfungsi sebagai prinsip interpretatif yang membentuk argumen moral dan teologis surah. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah mengidentifikasi pola-pola utama oposisi semantik dalam Surah Al-Lail, menganalisis kontribusinya terhadap koherensi retorik surah, serta menjelaskan fungsi etis dan teologisnya dalam kaitannya dengan ikhtiar manusia, hidayah Ilahi, dan balasan eskatologis. Secara metodologis, penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif tekstual-hermeneutis yang didukung oleh analisis semantik-retorik dan verifikasi terbatas berbasis korpus. Teks Arab Surah Al-Lail dianalisis melalui pembacaan dekat, teori *balāghah* klasik, semantik Al-Qur'an, analisis wacana, dan verifikasi leksikal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *muqābalah* menyusun Surah Al-Lail melalui rangkaian kontras yang progresif: polaritas kosmik, diferensiasi manusia, oposisi etis, persuasi retorik, dan konsekuensi akhir. Oposisi antara malam dan siang, memberi dan menahan, ketakwaan dan merasa cukup, membenaran dan pendustaan, kemudahan dan kesulitan, serta keselamatan dan hukuman membentuk medan semantik yang koheren. Kontribusi teoretis artikel ini terletak pada upaya mereformulasi *muqābalah* sebagai arsitektur semantik, bukan sekadar antitesis, dengan menunjukkan bahwa bentuk estetis Al-Qur'an secara aktif menghasilkan penalaran moral, makna teologis, dan daya persuasi.

Kata kunci: *muqābalah, surah al-lail, retorika al-qur'an, estetika semantik, balāghah*



Introduction

The Qur'an occupies a central position in Islamic intellectual life not only as scripture, but also as a text whose linguistic form has shaped theology, ethics, devotion, education, and interpretive authority across Muslim societies. In contemporary Islamic Studies, the study of Qur'anic rhetoric has gained renewed significance because the Qur'an is increasingly read through intersecting approaches: classical *balāghah*, philology, discourse analysis, semantics, translation studies, and digital humanities. This development is not merely an internal academic trend. It is connected to a wider socio-intellectual reality in which Muslim communities, now representing a major and growing proportion of the global religious population, continue to negotiate Qur'anic meaning across multilingual, pedagogical, and public contexts.¹ Within this setting, rhetorical analysis remains crucial because the Qur'an's communicative force does not rest only on what is stated, but also on how meaning is arranged, contrasted, intensified, and ethically directed through language.

Among the rhetorical devices discussed in Arabic *balāghah*, *muqābalah* occupies an important position because it organizes meaning through structured opposition. While *ṭibāq* usually refers to the juxtaposition of two opposing terms, *muqābalah* involves a broader pattern in which two or more meanings are placed in parallel contrast, producing semantic balance and argumentative clarity. In Qur'anic discourse, this device is not reducible to stylistic symmetry. It often functions as a moral and theological framework through which human choices, divine guidance, reward, punishment, generosity, miserliness, illumination, and concealment are arranged into meaningful oppositional structures. This is especially evident in Surah Al-Lail, a short Meccan chapter whose rhetorical force depends on a series of contrasts: night and day, male and female, giving and withholding, piety and self-sufficiency, truthfulness and denial, ease and hardship, salvation and blazing punishment. The surah's brevity intensifies rather than limits its rhetorical power, making it a valuable case for examining how semantic aesthetics and Qur'anic rhetoric operate in a compact textual unit.

The specific problem addressed in this study concerns the tendency to treat *muqābalah* as a formal ornament within *badī'* rather than as an interpretive mechanism that shapes Qur'anic argumentation. In many introductory treatments of Arabic rhetoric, *muqābalah* is defined primarily as balanced antithesis or semantic contrast. Such a definition is useful, but insufficient for Qur'anic analysis. In Surah Al-Lail, contrast is not merely decorative; it structures the entire moral logic of the chapter. The surah begins with cosmic polarity—night when it covers and day when it reveals—then moves toward anthropological differentiation and ethical divergence: “your striving is surely diverse” (Q. 92:4). The rhetorical tension, therefore, lies in whether *muqābalah* should be read as a surface-level aesthetic device or as a semantic architecture that organizes the surah's theology of human action and consequence. This problem is significant for Ushuluddin because it concerns how Qur'anic language constructs moral reasoning, divine justice, and human accountability through rhetorical form.

Previous scholarship on Qur'anic rhetoric may be grouped into several major trajectories. The first consists of studies on Arabic rhetoric and Qur'anic stylistics, which emphasize the role of *balāghah* in explaining eloquence, pragmatic force,

¹ Pew Research Center, “How the Global Religious Landscape Changed from 2010 to 2020” (Pew Research Center, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020/>.

and rhetorical effectiveness in the Qur'an.² The second trajectory focuses on Qur'anic coherence and textual relations, showing that individual verses often gain meaning through their placement within larger structures of thematic progression and discourse organization.³ The third trajectory includes semantic and lexicographical studies that examine Qur'anic vocabulary, lexical fields, root meanings, and context-dependent interpretation.⁴ A fourth body of scholarship, represented by contemporary Qur'anic studies, has examined the Qur'an as a text situated within literary, historical, and theological debates, while also paying attention to its rhetorical form and reception.⁵ These studies provide a strong foundation, but they do not yet sufficiently explain how *muqābalah* in a specific short surah such as Al-Lail functions simultaneously as semantic pattern, aesthetic arrangement, and moral argument.

The research gap is therefore conceptual, methodological, and textual. Conceptually, *muqābalah* remains underdeveloped as a category of semantic aesthetics in Qur'anic studies because it is often absorbed into general discussions of antithesis, opposition, or parallelism. Methodologically, many treatments identify rhetorical figures in the Qur'an without explaining how those figures shape the movement of argument within a surah. Textually, Surah Al-Lail has often been discussed in relation to its ethical message, eschatological warning, or Meccan character, but less attention has been given to the way its oppositional structure produces meaning through a sustained rhetorical sequence. This study addresses that gap by examining *muqābalah* not as an isolated ornament, but as the organizing principle through which Surah Al-Lail moves from cosmic imagery to moral classification and eschatological consequence.

Accordingly, this article is guided by three research questions. First, how is *muqābalah* semantically structured in Surah Al-Lail? Second, how do the oppositional pairs in the surah interact with its thematic progression and rhetorical coherence? Third, what theological and ethical functions does *muqābalah* perform in shaping the surah's message about human striving, divine guidance, and ultimate recompense? The objectives of the study are to identify the major patterns of semantic opposition in Surah Al-Lail, to analyze how these patterns contribute to the surah's rhetorical architecture, and to clarify how

² Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis* (Routledge, 2006), <https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Arabic Rhetoric A Pragmatic Analysis Abdul-Raof; H Abdul-Raof, Text Linguistics of Qur'anic Discourse: An Analysis, Text Linguistics of Qur'anic Discourse: An Analysis, 2018, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315670942>.

³ Salwa M S El-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'an: Relevance, Coherence and Structure* (Routledge, 2005), [https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Textual Relations in the Qur'an El-Awa; M Cuypers, The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis, The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis, 2015, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85049160610&partnerID=40&md5=aa8750643913d2761fa34e5097f48c07; Raymond Farrin, Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text \(White Cloud Press, 2014\), https://search.worldcat.org/search?q=Structure+and+Quranic+Interpretation+Raymond+Farrin](https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Textual Relations in the Qur'an El-Awa; M Cuypers, The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis, The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis, 2015, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85049160610&partnerID=40&md5=aa8750643913d2761fa34e5097f48c07; Raymond Farrin, Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text (White Cloud Press, 2014), https://search.worldcat.org/search?q=Structure+and+Quranic+Interpretation+Raymond+Farrin).

⁴ Elsaïd M Badawi and M A S Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Brill, 2008), <https://brill.com/display/title/12559>; Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qur'anic Semantics: Corpus and Lexical Behavior* (Routledge, 2023), <https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Qur'anic Semantics Corpus and Lexical Behavior Abdul-Raof>.

⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); N Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction, The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction: The Qur'an*, 2017, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85212730983&partnerID=40&md5=a21fde1ceb5ab73c4440175a64fcdac>; M Shah and M A Haleem, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies, The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.001.0001>.

muqābalaḥ functions as a mode of Qur'anic persuasion rather than a merely aesthetic feature.

The theoretical framework of this study combines classical Arabic rhetoric with semantic and discourse-oriented analysis. From *balāghah*, the study adopts the concept of *muqābalaḥ* as a form of *muḥassināt ma'nawīyyah* that creates meaning through structured contrast. From semantics, it examines lexical opposition, semantic fields, and contextual relations among key terms. From discourse analysis, it considers how the surah's sequence of oaths, moral distinctions, and eschatological outcomes produces coherence. Corpus-assisted resources such as the Qur'anic Arabic Corpus and QuranMorph may support the study by helping verify morphological forms, lexical distribution, and usage patterns, although interpretation remains dependent on close reading and rhetorical reasoning.⁶

The novelty of this study lies in reframing *muqābalaḥ* in Surah Al-Lail as a semantic-aesthetic mechanism that organizes the surah's moral worldview. Rather than treating contrast as a decorative arrangement of opposites, the article argues that *muqābalaḥ* functions as the surah's rhetorical engine: it moves the reader from observable polarity in the created order to ethical polarity in human conduct and, finally, to eschatological polarity in divine recompense. This contribution is academically significant because it strengthens the bridge between classical *balāghah* and contemporary Qur'anic discourse analysis, while also offering a focused model for reading short Meccan surahs as tightly structured semantic arguments. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on Qur'anic rhetoric, semantic aesthetics, and the role of linguistic form in producing theological meaning.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual-hermeneutical design supported by semantic-rhetorical and limited corpus-assisted analysis. This design is appropriate because the research object is not a social behavior to be measured quantitatively, but a Qur'anic textual unit whose meaning must be examined through language, structure, rhetoric, and interpretation. Qualitative textual inquiry allows the study to analyze how *muqābalaḥ* operates as a semantic-aesthetic device in Surah Al-Lail, while hermeneutical analysis enables attention to the interaction between lexical meaning, rhetorical arrangement, and theological implication. In this respect, the study follows the logic of interpretive qualitative research, in which meaning is examined through close reading, contextual explanation, and theoretically guided analysis rather than through statistical generalization.⁷ Since the focus is Qur'anic rhetoric, the method is also

⁶ Kais Dukes, "The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus: Annotated Linguistic Resource for the Holy Qur'an," *Language Resources and Evaluation* 47 (2013): 123–55; Diyam Akra, Tymaa Hammouda, and Mustafa Jarrar, "QuranMorph: Morphologically Annotated Quranic Corpus" (arXiv, 2025), <https://arxiv.org/abs/2506.18148>.

⁷ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (Sage Publications, 2018); Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 6th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2018), <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/an-introduction-to-qualitative-research/book261109>; Sarah J Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Qualitative+Research+Methods%3A+Collecting+Evidence%2C+Crafting+Analysis%2C+Communicating+Impact%2C+2nd+Edition-p-9781119390787>.

grounded in Arabic *balāghah* and Qur'anic discourse studies, which treat linguistic form as integral to communicative and theological meaning.⁸

The primary source of this study is the Arabic text of Surah Al-Lail, the ninety-second chapter of the Qur'an. This surah is selected purposively because it contains a dense structure of contrastive meanings that makes it especially suitable for studying *muqābalaḥ*. The chapter opens with cosmic oppositions, such as night and day, and then moves toward anthropological, ethical, and eschatological contrasts. These include concealment and manifestation, giving and withholding, piety and self-sufficiency, affirmation and denial, ease and hardship, salvation and punishment. The selection of Surah Al-Lail is therefore based on textual relevance rather than convenience. Its compact structure enables the study to examine how semantic opposition works not only at the level of individual words, but also at the level of thematic progression and surah-wide rhetorical coherence.

The secondary sources consist of works on Arabic rhetoric, Qur'anic stylistics, Qur'anic semantics, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and Arabic linguistic structure. Classical *balāghah* provides the conceptual foundation for understanding *muqābalaḥ* as a form of *muḥassināt ma'nawiyah*, namely a semantic ornament that produces beauty through the organized arrangement of opposing meanings. Modern Qur'anic studies are used to explain how rhetorical form contributes to coherence, persuasion, and theological meaning within the Qur'anic. Lexical and semantic references are used to examine the semantic range of key Qur'anic terms and to prevent the analysis from relying on impressionistic interpretation alone. Works on Arabic grammar and morphology are also used because the interpretation of Qur'anic contrast depends partly on syntactic arrangement, word formation, and the semantic function of grammatical relations.⁹

The analytical framework integrates three levels of analysis. The first is rhetorical analysis, which identifies the forms of *muqābalaḥ* in Surah Al-Lail and examines how opposing meanings are arranged through lexical pairing, syntactic parallelism, and thematic contrast. The second is semantic analysis, which examines lexical opposition, semantic field relations, contextual meaning, and the contribution of key terms to the moral vocabulary of the surah. The third is discourse analysis, which investigates how the sequence of contrasts develops the surah's argument from cosmic signs to human striving and final recompense. This layered framework is necessary because *muqābalaḥ* in Surah Al-Lail does not merely place opposite words side by side; it produces a progressive rhetorical movement that links creation, ethical action, divine guidance, and eschatological outcome.¹⁰

The data collection procedure consists of four stages. First, the Arabic text of Surah Al-Lail is read closely to identify expressions that display semantic opposition, parallel contrast, or thematic polarity. Second, the identified expressions are categorized according to their dominant rhetorical domain: cosmic contrast, human differentiation, ethical opposition, and eschatological

⁸ Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis*; Abdul-Raof, *Text Linguistics of Qur'anic Discourse: An Analysis*.

⁹ Nizar Y Habash, *Introduction to Arabic Natural Language Processing* (Morgan & Claypool Publishers, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.2200/S00277ED1V01Y201008HLT010>; Karin C Ryding, *A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486975>; Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-the-arabic-language.html>.

¹⁰ El-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'an: Relevance, Coherence and Structure*; Abdul-Raof, *Text Linguistics of Qur'anic Discourse: An Analysis*.

consequence. Third, the lexical meanings of the relevant terms are examined through Qur'anic lexicography and semantic references to determine whether the contrast is lexical, conceptual, thematic, or discourse-based. Fourth, each contrastive unit is placed back into the sequential structure of the surah in order to determine how it contributes to the chapter's overall rhetorical argument. This procedure follows the principle that meaning in Qur'anic discourse should be examined through textual relation and structural coherence rather than isolated word analysis.¹¹

The interpretive procedure follows a close-reading model with contextual control. Each instance of *muqābalaḥ* is analyzed by identifying the opposing terms or semantic units, examining their lexical meaning, observing their syntactic relation, and explaining their rhetorical function within the surah. The analysis then evaluates whether the contrast contributes to aesthetic balance, moral clarification, persuasive force, theological emphasis, or eschatological warning. For example, the contrast between night and day is not treated simply as natural imagery, but as the opening polarity that prepares the reader for later contrasts between divergent human actions and their consequences. In this way, the method avoids treating *muqābalaḥ* as a static ornamental category and instead examines it as a dynamic structure of Qur'anic meaning.

To improve methodological transparency, the study uses an analytical matrix for each major instance of contrast. The matrix records the Qur'anic expression, type of opposition, semantic field, rhetorical function, position within the surah, and interpretive implication. This matrix is important because not every pair of different words automatically qualifies as *muqābalaḥ*. A contrast is classified as *muqābalaḥ* only when it participates in an organized rhetorical structure and contributes to the surah's semantic progression. This procedure makes the analytical process more explicit and allows the interpretation to be evaluated academically. It also aligns with qualitative standards that emphasize transparency, coherence between research questions and data analysis, and disciplined interpretation.¹²

Although the study is primarily textual and hermeneutical, limited corpus-assisted verification is used to support lexical observation. Digital resources such as the Qur'anic Arabic Corpus and QuranMorph can assist in checking morphological forms, lemma distribution, and repeated Qur'anic usage of key terms. The use of corpus support is also informed by broader corpus-linguistic methodology, which regards corpus evidence as a tool for making linguistic claims more observable and verifiable.¹³ However, the corpus component remains supplementary. It is used to verify forms and patterns, not to determine theological or rhetorical meaning independently. Interpretation remains grounded in close reading, *balāghah*, semantic reasoning, and discourse coherence.

¹¹ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*.

¹² Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*; Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*; Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*.

¹³ Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad, and Randi Reppen, *Corpus Linguistics: Investigating Language Structure and Use* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804489>; Elena Tognini-Bonelli, *Corpus Linguistics at Work* (John Benjamins, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1075/sc1.6>; John Sinclair, *Trust the Text: Language, Corpus and Discourse* (Routledge, 2004), <https://www.routledge.com/Trust-the-Text-Language-Corpus-and-Discourse/Sinclair/p/book/9780415317684>; Tony McEnery and Andrew Hardie, *Corpus Linguistics: Method, Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511981395>.

The validity of the study is maintained through triangulation and contextual consistency. Source triangulation is applied by comparing Arabic rhetorical theory, Qur'anic lexicography, discourse-oriented Qur'anic studies, Arabic linguistic references, and corpus-assisted data. Contextual consistency is maintained by interpreting each contrast within its immediate verse, its relation to surrounding verses, and its function in the whole surah. This reduces the risk of overreading and prevents rhetorical classification from becoming arbitrary. Since the study deals with a sacred and rhetorically dense text, its aim is not to claim exhaustive finality, but to provide a disciplined, transparent, and evidence-based interpretation of how *muqābalaḥ* functions in Surah Al-Lail.

This methodological design is appropriate for addressing the research objectives because it enables the study to explain how *muqābalaḥ* is semantically structured, how contrastive meanings contribute to the coherence of Surah Al-Lail, and how rhetorical opposition shapes its theological and ethical message. By combining classical *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, discourse analysis, Arabic linguistic verification, and limited corpus-assisted support, the study offers a systematic model for reading Surah Al-Lail as a compact rhetorical unit in which semantic aesthetics and Qur'anic argumentation are inseparable.

Results and Discussion

Oppositional Architecture in Surah Al-Lail: From Cosmic Polarity to Ethical Differentiation

The principal finding of this subsection is that *muqābalaḥ* in Surah Al-Lail functions as an oppositional architecture that governs the semantic movement of the entire chapter, not merely as an ornamental pairing of contrasting words. The surah opens with three oath-formulas: “By the night when it covers,” “by the day when it appears,” and “by the creation of male and female” (Q. 92:1–3). These opening contrasts establish a rhetorical field in which existence itself is presented through polarity: concealment and disclosure, darkness and visibility, differentiation and complementarity. The statement that follows, *inna sa'yakum la-shattā* “indeed, your striving is diverse” (Q. 92:4), shifts the contrast from the cosmic order to the moral order. The result is a tightly organized rhetorical movement: the created world displays difference, and human action is then judged through differentiated ethical trajectories. This finding supports approaches that read short Qur'anic surahs as coherent compositions rather than as collections of isolated moral statements.¹⁴

The initial opposition between night and day is not simply descriptive imagery. In the surah's rhetorical economy, the night that “covers” and the day that “appears” prepare the reader for a larger contrast between concealment and disclosure in human conduct. The verb associated with night evokes veiling and enclosure, while the day introduces manifestation and exposure. This polarity is then echoed in the moral contrast between the one who gives and is mindful of God, and the one who withholds and considers himself self-sufficient (Q. 92:5–8). The textual sequence suggests that the surah's ethical distinctions are not abruptly introduced; they are rhetorically grounded in an observable order of contrasts. The cosmos becomes a prelude to moral intelligibility. This reading resonates with studies that emphasize how Qur'anic discourse frequently uses

¹⁴ Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003).

natural signs not as decorative scenery, but as arguments that train perception and direct moral judgment.¹⁵

The phrase *inna sa'yakum la-shattā* is the structural hinge of the surah. It does not merely state that human efforts are different; it authorizes the contrastive arrangement that follows. After this verse, the surah divides human striving into two opposing patterns. The first pattern is marked by giving, God-consciousness, and affirmation of *al-ḥusnā*; the second is marked by withholding, arrogance, and denial. This shows that *muqābalah* works at the level of moral syntax: verbs, dispositions, and consequences are aligned into two coherent ethical paths. The contrast is not symmetrical in a neutral sense, because each side carries a distinct evaluative weight. One direction opens toward *al-yusrā*, while the other moves toward *al-'usrā*. In this sense, opposition becomes a mode of moral classification. It separates not only words, but orientations of life, forms of agency, and final outcomes.

This finding refines earlier discussions of Qur'anic coherence by showing that opposition in Surah Al-Lail is both local and cumulative. Locally, individual pairs such as night/day and giving/withholding produce semantic balance. Cumulatively, the sequence of contrasts builds a complete moral argument. The surah begins with polarity in creation, moves to plurality in human effort, and ends with divergent eschatological consequences. Such movement confirms that Qur'anic rhetoric is often progressive: meaning develops through a sequence of relations rather than through isolated rhetorical figures. Studies of Qur'anic structure have noted the importance of ring composition, parallelism, and thematic progression in Qur'anic discourse, but the case of Surah Al-Lail shows that *muqābalah* can operate as the primary engine of coherence in a short Meccan chapter.¹⁶

The theoretical implication of this analysis is that *muqābalah* should be understood as semantic architecture rather than simple antithesis. Classical *balāghah* identifies *muqābalah* as a device of meaning-based embellishment, but Surah Al-Lail demonstrates that such embellishment has an interpretive function. The contrastive structure allows the surah to organize theological anthropology: human beings do not merely act differently; their actions disclose opposed spiritual orientations. The opposition between generosity and withholding, trust and denial, ease and hardship, does not function as abstract moral taxonomy. It becomes a rhetorical means of showing that divine guidance and recompense correspond to the direction of human striving.

Methodologically, this finding also justifies a surah-level reading of *muqābalah*. If the analysis were limited to identifying isolated pairs of opposites, the rhetorical force of Surah Al-Lail would be reduced to a catalogue of stylistic examples. A discourse-sensitive approach reveals instead that the surah's contrasts are sequential, hierarchical, and cumulative. They move the reader from perception of the created order to recognition of moral divergence and finally to

¹⁵ Michael A Sells, "Approaching the Qur'an: Sound, Spirit, and Gender in Surat Al-Qadr," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 141–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521831601.008>; Z A Rahman, "Takaful: Potential Demand and Growth," *Journal of King Abdulaziz University, Islamic Economics*, no. 1 (2009): 53–70, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-77952835217&partnerID=40&md5=e79ca7df1cd1492ac3525a223a31b90f>.

¹⁶ Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text*; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Beyond Islam vs Feminism," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (2011): 67–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00201.x>.

awareness of ultimate consequence. The academic contribution of this subsection therefore lies in showing that *muqābalah* in Surah Al-Lail is not merely a feature of lexical opposition, but a structural principle through which the Qur'an transforms semantic contrast into ethical reasoning and theological persuasion.

Semantic Aesthetics of *Muqābalah*: Lexical Opposition and Moral Value Formation

The main finding of this subsection is that the semantic beauty of *muqābalah* in Surah Al-Lail is produced not by verbal symmetry alone, but by the formation of a moral field through carefully arranged lexical oppositions. The surah does not merely contrast words; it contrasts ethical dispositions. After the opening oaths and the declaration that human striving is diverse, the text presents two opposed moral profiles: *fa-ammā man a'ṭā wa-ttaqā wa-ṣaddaqa bi-l-ḥusnā* “as for the one who gives, is mindful, and affirms the good” (Q. 92:5–6), and *wa-ammā man bakhila wa-staghna wa-kadhdhaba bi-l-ḥusnā* “as for the one who withholds, considers himself self-sufficient, and denies the good” (Q. 92:8–9). These two sequences show that *muqābalah* operates as a semantic system in which verbs, attitudes, and theological commitments are distributed across two opposing trajectories. The aesthetic force of the passage lies in the precision with which moral life is condensed into contrastive lexical clusters.

The first moral trajectory begins with *a'ṭā*, an act of giving that signals openness toward others and toward God. This is followed by *ittaqa*, which moves the meaning from external action to inner consciousness, and then by *ṣaddaqa bi-l-ḥusnā*, which links moral action to the affirmation of ultimate good. The second trajectory reverses this structure. *Bakhila* marks refusal or withholding, *istaghna* indicates a posture of self-sufficiency, and *kadhdhaba bi-l-ḥusnā* expresses rejection of the good. The opposition is therefore not random. Giving is paired with withholding, God-consciousness with self-sufficiency, and affirmation with denial. Such arrangement supports Izutsu's view that Qur'anic ethical language forms networks of meaning in which concepts acquire value through relation and opposition rather than through isolated definition.¹⁷ It also resonates with Draz's account of Qur'anic morality as a system in which inward disposition and outward action remain inseparable.

This pattern shows that *muqābalah* functions as moral semantics. The surah constructs two modes of existence: one grounded in generosity, reverence, and trust; the other shaped by possessiveness, autonomy, and rejection. The contrast between *al-yusrā* and *al-'usrā* (Q. 92:7, 10) then gives these moral orientations an eschatological direction. Ease and hardship are not presented as accidental conditions; they emerge as consequences aligned with ethical orientation. This supports Rahman's argument that Qur'anic ethics is teleological, since human actions are repeatedly placed within a broader horizon of accountability, guidance, and final consequence.¹⁸ At the same time, the surah's rhetoric avoids abstract moral philosophy. It persuades through compact verbal sequencing, allowing the reader to perceive ethical difference through contrastive verbal movement.

The semantic aesthetics of the passage also depend on the repetition of syntactic pattern. The formula *fa-ammā man* and *wa-ammā man* creates balance, but the meaning that fills each structure moves in sharply different directions. This is where *muqābalah* exceeds simple parallelism. Parallel structure provides formal stability, while lexical opposition supplies moral differentiation. The

¹⁷ T Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Rahman, “Takaful: Potential Demand and Growth.”

resulting aesthetic is not decorative in a superficial sense; it is cognitive and evaluative. It enables the reader to recognize that the beauty of the passage lies in the clarity with which two moral worlds are set against each other. Gwynne's study of Qur'anic argumentation is useful here because it shows that Qur'anic rhetoric frequently persuades by arranging premises, contrasts, and consequences into recognizable patterns of reasoning. In Surah Al-Lail, opposition itself becomes a form of argument.

This finding also refines semantic approaches to the Qur'an. Lexical items such as giving, withholding, piety, self-sufficiency, affirmation, and denial are not simply ethical terms; they become relational signs inside a structured field. Their meaning is sharpened because each term is placed against its opposite. Qur'anic concordance and lexicographical tools may help trace these terms across the wider Qur'anic corpus, but the decisive meaning in Surah Al-Lail is generated by their local arrangement within the surah.¹⁹ This means that semantic analysis must attend simultaneously to individual words and to the rhetorical environment that gives them evaluative force.

The theoretical implication of this analysis is that *muqābalaḥ* should be read as a mechanism of value formation. It does not merely make the passage elegant; it constructs a moral map. The surah teaches by dividing the field of human action into two ethically charged directions, each with its own inner logic and final outcome. This contributes to Qur'anic rhetorical studies by showing that semantic aesthetics and moral instruction are not separate dimensions of the text. In Surah Al-Lail, beauty is produced through the disciplined arrangement of ethical contrasts, and that beauty becomes the medium through which the Qur'an clarifies human responsibility.

***Muqābalaḥ* as Rhetorical Persuasion: Contrast, Rhythm, and Communicative Force**

The principal finding of this subsection is that *muqābalaḥ* in Surah Al-Lail operates as a persuasive rhetorical strategy by combining contrastive meaning, rhythmic compression, and progressive communicative force. The surah does not persuade through extended exposition, but through a sequence of sharply arranged contrasts that move the listener from perception to judgment. Its rhetorical power begins with the oath structure in Q. 92:1–3, where night, day, and the creation of male and female establish a patterned field of difference. This opening rhythm prepares the audience for the central claim: *inna sa 'yakum la-shattā* "indeed, your striving is diverse" (Q. 92:4). From this point onward, contrast becomes argument. The surah persuades by making moral divergence audible, memorable, and semantically unavoidable.

The contrastive pairs in Q. 92:5–10 show how *muqābalaḥ* produces persuasion through cumulative verbal pressure. The first sequence—giving, God-consciousness, and affirmation of *al-ḥusnā*—moves toward facilitation: *fā-sanu-yassiruhu li-l-yusrā* "We shall ease him toward ease." The second sequence—withholding, self-sufficiency, and denial—moves toward difficulty: *fā-sanu-yassiruhu li-l-'usrā* "We shall ease him toward hardship." The rhetorical effect lies in the paradoxical repetition of *nuyassiruhu*: both ethical paths are "made easy," but toward opposite destinations. This repetition sharpens persuasion because it denies moral neutrality. Human striving does not remain suspended; it moves toward an outcome that corresponds to its orientation. Such compact

¹⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Qur'an* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

argumentative sequencing reflects the Qur'an's broader tendency to persuade through patterned discourse rather than abstract moral explanation.²⁰

Rhythm intensifies this persuasive structure. Surah Al-Lail is short, but its clauses are arranged with strong phonetic closure, syntactic balance, and rapid semantic movement. The recurrence of concise verbal forms—*aṭā, ittaqā, ṣaddaqa, bakhila, istaghna, kadhhaba*—creates a rhythm of moral classification. The listener does not merely encounter two sets of meanings; the listener hears two opposed patterns of life unfolding through compressed verbal cadence. This is particularly important for a Meccan surah, where proclamation, warning, and moral awakening are often conveyed through powerful sound-patterns and tightly organized imagery. Recent work on Qur'anic recitation and multimodal Qur'anic datasets further confirms that the Qur'an's communicative force cannot be separated from its sonic and performative dimensions, even when the primary analysis remains textual.²¹

The rhetorical function of *muqābalaḥ* in this surah also depends on the movement from cosmic contrast to existential decision. The night and day are not merely atmospheric images; they establish a perceptual model for understanding moral opposition. Once the audience has been placed within a world structured by alternation and differentiation, the surah turns that perception inward: human striving, too, is divided. This movement gives the chapter persuasive force because it links the visible order of creation to the invisible order of moral accountability. In this sense, *muqābalaḥ* becomes more than a device of clarity; it becomes a means of transferring the audience from observation to self-implication. Contemporary studies of Qur'anic discourse have emphasized that the Qur'an frequently persuades through dialogic, counter-discursive, and rhetorically staged forms of address rather than through linear exposition alone.²²

This finding refines earlier approaches to Qur'anic rhetoric by showing that contrast, rhythm, and persuasion should not be analyzed separately. A purely semantic reading may identify the oppositions, but it may miss the performative force created by their arrangement. Conversely, an exclusive focus on sound may overlook how rhythm carries moral argument. Surah Al-Lail demonstrates that the persuasive power of *muqābalaḥ* lies in the fusion of both. Semantic contrast gives the surah conceptual precision, while rhythm gives that precision affective pressure. The reader or listener is not simply informed that human efforts differ; the surah makes that difference felt through patterned opposition and recurring verbal movement.

The theoretical implication of this analysis is that *muqābalaḥ* should be understood as a rhetorical technology of persuasion. It organizes moral alternatives, intensifies the urgency of choice, and links ethical conduct to eschatological consequence. The methodological contribution is equally important: analysis of *muqābalaḥ* in short surahs should attend not only to lexical opposition,

²⁰ Mehdi Azaiez, *Le Contre-Discours Coranique* (De Gruyter, 2015), [https://www.degruyterbrill.com/search?query=Le contre-discours coranique Azaiez](https://www.degruyterbrill.com/search?query=Le+contre-discours+coranique+Azaiez); Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Nicolai Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary* (Princeton University Press, 2023), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691241319/key-terms-of-the-quran>.

²¹ Muhammad Umar Salman, Muhammad Ammar Qazi, and Muhammad Taimoor Alam, "Quran-MD: A Fine-Grained Multilingual Multimodal Dataset of the Quran" (arXiv, 2026), <https://arxiv.org/abs/2601.17880>.

²² Mehdi Azaiez et al., eds., "The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages" (De Gruyter, 2016); Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-vernacular-quran-9780198733331>.

but also to rhythm, sequencing, repetition, and oral reception. This approach expands the study of Qur'anic rhetoric by showing that semantic aesthetics and communicative force are mutually reinforcing. In Surah Al-Lail, beauty is not a secondary ornament attached to meaning; it is the very medium through which meaning persuades.

Theological Implications of Contrast: Divine Guidance, Human Striving, and Eschatological Consequence

The principal finding of this subsection is that *muqābalah* in Surah Al-Lail carries theological implications by transforming semantic contrast into a doctrine of moral direction, divine facilitation, and eschatological consequence. The surah does not present opposition simply as a stylistic arrangement between good and bad actions. Rather, it constructs two existential paths: one marked by giving, God-consciousness, and affirmation of *al-ḥusnā*; the other shaped by withholding, self-sufficiency, and denial. This contrast reaches its theological peak in the paired expressions *fa-sanu yassiruhu li-l-yusrā* and *fa-sanu yassiruhu li-l-'usrā* Q. 92:7, 10. The repetition of the same verbal form, *nuyassiru*, is striking because both paths are described through divine facilitation, yet they lead to opposite ends. The rhetorical effect is profound: the surah presents human agency as real and morally consequential, while also situating its outcome within divine governance.

The first path begins with human initiative: *a'tā*, *ittaqā*, and *ṣaddaqa bi-l-ḥusnā* Q. 92:5–6. These actions indicate that divine guidance is not detached from moral disposition. Giving is not merely economic generosity; it expresses openness to others and freedom from possessive self-enclosure. *Taqwā* then deepens this outward act into a God-oriented consciousness, while affirmation of *al-ḥusnā* links conduct to trust in the ultimate good. The second path reverses this pattern through *bakhila*, *istaghnā*, and *kadhhaba bi-l-ḥusnā* Q. 92:8–9. Withholding becomes the behavioral sign of spiritual closure, self-sufficiency becomes a theological illusion, and denial of the good becomes rejection of the moral order announced by revelation. This structure supports recent studies of Islamic theology that emphasize the enduring tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility as a central question in Muslim thought.²³

The contrast between *al-yusrā* and *al-'usrā* should therefore not be reduced to psychological ease and difficulty. In the surah's theological logic, ease and hardship are directional outcomes. The one who gives and affirms the good is made receptive to a path that corresponds to guidance, while the one who withholds and denies is enabled toward the consequences of his own chosen orientation. The passage does not describe divine action as arbitrary coercion; it presents divine facilitation as morally responsive. This is important because the surah avoids both fatalism and moral autonomy. Human striving is differentiated, but the unfolding of each path remains under divine command. In this respect, *muqābalah* becomes a rhetorical means of holding together two theological claims: human beings are accountable for their orientation, and God is the one who governs the final direction of that orientation.

The eschatological dimension of this contrast becomes explicit in the movement toward fire and salvation. Q. 92:14 warns of a blazing fire, while the later verses describe the most God-conscious person being distanced from it. The

²³ Sabine Schmidtke, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-islamic-theology-9780199696703>; Ramon Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-transcendent-god-rational-world.html>.

contrast is not merely punitive; it is revelatory. It discloses the final meaning of human action. In Islamic eschatological studies, paradise and hell are not simply future locations but theological expressions of divine justice, mercy, and moral disclosure.²⁴ Surah Al-Lail participates in this broader Qur'anic pattern by presenting the afterlife as the unveiling of trajectories already formed in worldly conduct. The generous person and the withholding person are not assigned to arbitrary destinations; their ends correspond to the moral direction of their striving.

This finding refines the study of *muqābalah* by showing that contrast in Surah Al-Lail is not limited to semantic clarity or aesthetic balance. It functions as theological argument. The surah teaches that the human being stands between two possible directions, and that each direction is made intelligible through a sequence of contrasted terms. The theological force of the passage lies in its compression: a few short verses present an entire account of moral action, divine guidance, and eschatological recompense. Recent Qur'anic scholarship has increasingly emphasized that short Meccan surahs often communicate major theological claims through condensed rhetoric, oath structures, vivid antithesis, and eschatological.²⁵

The academic contribution of this subsection lies in demonstrating that *muqābalah* should be read as a theological structure, not only a rhetorical figure. Its function is to arrange human existence into morally opposed possibilities and to show that divine guidance and recompense respond to those possibilities with precision. Methodologically, this means that analysis of Qur'anic contrast must move beyond identifying opposite terms; it must ask how opposition produces doctrine, how rhetoric shapes moral cognition, and how aesthetic arrangement communicates theological judgment. In Surah Al-Lail, contrast becomes the language of accountability. Through *muqābalah*, the surah turns moral difference into a vision of divine justice, where human striving, guidance, and final consequence are bound together in one compact rhetorical design.

Conclusion

This study concludes that *muqābalah* in Surah Al-Lail functions not merely as a rhetorical ornament within *badī'*, but as a semantic-aesthetic mechanism that organizes the entire movement of the surah. The analysis has shown that the oppositional structure of the chapter begins with cosmic polarity, moves into human moral differentiation, and culminates in eschatological consequence. In this sequence, contrast is not incidental. It becomes the organizing principle through which the surah connects the created order, human striving, divine guidance, and ultimate recompense into a coherent rhetorical argument.

In response to the first research objective, the study finds that *muqābalah* in Surah Al-Lail is semantically structured through a series of interrelated oppositions: night and day, male and female, giving and withholding, God-

²⁴ Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/paradise-and-hell-in-islamic-traditions/8BB7A1813C0D2A172FF7DB22059C59E1>; Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, eds., *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol. 1–2 (Brill, 2017), <https://brill.com/display/title/31623>.

²⁵ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye, eds., *Le Coran Des Historiens*, vol. 1–3 (Éditions du Cerf, 2019), <https://www.editionsducerf.fr/librairie/livre/18851/le-coran-des-historiens>; Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today* (London: Routledge, 2019); Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an: Text and Commentary: Vol. 1. Early Meccan Surahs: Poetic Prophecy* (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://academic.oup.com/search-results?q=The+Qur%27an+Text+and+Commentary+Volume+1+Early+Meccan+Surahs>.

consciousness and self-sufficiency, affirmation and denial, ease and hardship, salvation and punishment. These oppositions do not function as isolated lexical pairs. They form a progressive semantic field in which each contrast prepares, intensifies, or clarifies the next. The phrase *inna sa'yakum la-shattā* operates as the central hinge of this structure because it transfers the logic of polarity from the cosmic realm to the ethical realm of human action.

In relation to the second objective, the study demonstrates that these oppositional pairs contribute directly to the rhetorical coherence of the surah. The chapter's structure is not fragmented, nor does it rely only on thematic repetition. Instead, its coherence is produced through a cumulative sequence of contrasts. The oath formulas establish a world marked by differentiation; the moral clauses classify human striving into two opposed orientations; and the final eschatological movement discloses the consequences of those orientations. This shows that *muqābalah* works at the level of discourse, not only at the level of individual words or clauses.

In response to the third objective, the study clarifies that *muqābalah* performs ethical and theological functions. Ethically, it constructs two moral profiles: one grounded in giving, reverence, and affirmation of the good, and another shaped by withholding, self-sufficiency, and denial. Theologically, it presents the relation between human agency and divine facilitation without reducing either dimension. The contrast between *al-yusrā* and *al-'usrā* shows that ease and hardship are not merely psychological states, but directional outcomes tied to moral orientation and divine governance. Thus, the surah frames accountability as a movement in which human striving and divine recompense are rhetorically bound together.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in reframing *muqābalah* as semantic architecture rather than simple antithesis. By integrating classical *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, discourse analysis, and limited corpus-assisted verification, the study offers a model for reading Qur'anic rhetorical devices as mechanisms of meaning production. This approach strengthens the bridge between traditional Arabic rhetorical theory and contemporary Qur'anic discourse analysis. It also shows that aesthetic form in the Qur'an is not separate from ethical and theological communication; rather, form is one of the means through which moral reasoning and theological meaning are generated.

Academically, this study contributes to the study of short Meccan surahs by showing that textual brevity does not imply rhetorical simplicity. Surah Al-Lail demonstrates how a compact chapter can construct a dense argument through contrast, rhythm, semantic progression, and theological closure. The broader implication is that Qur'anic rhetorical analysis should move beyond cataloguing figures of speech and toward examining how those figures organize argument, shape moral cognition, and produce interpretive coherence.

Future research may extend this model to other short surahs that display strong contrastive structures, especially those involving oath formulas, eschatological warning, and moral classification. Comparative studies between *muqābalah*, *ṭibāq*, and other forms of *muḥassināt ma'nawīyyah* may also clarify how different rhetorical devices contribute to Qur'anic persuasion. Further corpus-assisted studies could strengthen lexical and structural analysis, provided that digital verification remains integrated with close reading, rhetorical reasoning, and sensitivity to the surah's theological discourse.

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