

Tashbih in the Qur'an: An Analysis of Its Rhetorical Structure and Semantic Functions

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Abstract

This article examines *tashbīh* in the Qur'an as a semantic-rhetorical structure through which comparison organizes meaning, shapes perception, and strengthens theological and moral communication. The study addresses the tendency to treat *tashbīh* either as an ornamental category of Arabic *balāghah* or as a simple explanatory device, without sufficient attention to its internal rhetorical architecture and wider semantic functions. Using a qualitative textual-hermeneutical method, the article analyses selected Qur'anic passages containing explicit and implicit forms of *tashbīh*, with attention to the relationship between *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, and *adāt al-tashbīh*. The analysis combines classical Arabic rhetoric, Qur'anic stylistics, and modern semantic theory. The findings show that Qur'anic *tashbīh* operates first as a structured rhetorical architecture that connects abstract realities with concrete images. Second, it functions as semantic concretization, making theological and eschatological meanings perceptible through images such as vegetation, dust, light, darkness, fire, water, storms, and fragile dwellings. Third, *tashbīh* works as argumentative rhetoric by transforming comparison into persuasion, warning, and moral evaluation. Finally, the study demonstrates that Qur'anic *tashbīh* should be understood beyond ornamentation as a semantic-rhetorical method that links eloquence, cognition, and revelation. The article contributes to Qur'anic Studies, Arabic rhetoric, Ushuluddin, and Islamic literary hermeneutics by offering an integrated model for reading Qur'anic comparison as a dynamic mode of meaning-making.

Keywords: *tashbīh*, Qur'anic rhetoric, semantic functions, Arabic *balāghah*, Qur'anic studies

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji *tashbīh* dalam Al-Qur'an sebagai struktur semantik-retoris yang berfungsi mengorganisasi makna, membentuk persepsi, serta memperkuat komunikasi teologis dan moral. Kajian ini berangkat dari kecenderungan untuk memandang *tashbīh* hanya sebagai ornamen dalam *balāghah* Arab atau sebagai perangkat penjelas sederhana, tanpa memperhatikan secara memadai arsitektur retoris internal dan fungsi semantiknya dalam wacana Qur'ani. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif tekstual-hermeneutis, artikel ini menganalisis ayat-ayat pilihan yang memuat bentuk *tashbīh* eksplisit maupun implisit, dengan perhatian khusus pada hubungan antara *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, dan *adāt al-tashbīh*. Analisis dilakukan dengan memadukan retorika Arab klasik, stilistika Al-Qur'an, dan teori semantik modern. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *tashbīh* Qur'ani pertama-tama bekerja sebagai arsitektur retoris yang terstruktur dalam menghubungkan realitas abstrak dengan citra konkret. Kedua, *tashbīh* berfungsi sebagai konkretisasi semantik yang membuat makna teologis dan eskatologis dapat dipersepsi melalui citra tanaman, debu, cahaya, kegelapan, api, air, badai, dan bangunan rapuh. Ketiga, *tashbīh* beroperasi sebagai retorika argumentatif yang mengubah perbandingan menjadi persuasi, peringatan, dan evaluasi moral. Artikel ini menegaskan bahwa *tashbīh* Qur'ani perlu dipahami melampaui fungsi ornamentatif, yaitu sebagai metode semantik-retoris yang mempertemukan kefasihan, kognisi, dan wahyu.

Kata kunci: *tashbīh*, retorika Qur'ani, fungsi semantik, *balāghah* Arab, studi al-Qur'an



Introduction

The Qur'an has long occupied a central position not only as a sacred text for Muslim belief and ritual life, but also as a linguistic, rhetorical, and interpretive corpus that continues to shape Islamic intellectual traditions across the world. In contemporary global society, where Muslims constitute one of the largest religious communities, the study of Qur'anic language remains academically significant because the Qur'an functions simultaneously as scripture, moral discourse, legal source, devotional recitation, and literary text. Within Ushuluddin and Islamic Studies, this multidimensional status requires scholars to examine not only what the Qur'an says, but also how it says it. The Qur'an's persuasive force is not reducible to doctrinal content alone; it is carried through arrangement, imagery, rhythm, contrast, comparison, semantic layering, and the careful selection of rhetorical forms.¹ Among these forms, *tashbīh* occupies a particularly important place because it allows the Qur'an to relate abstract truths to perceptible realities, transforming metaphysical, ethical, eschatological, and social ideas into images that can be contemplated by human audiences.

In the Arabic rhetorical tradition, *tashbīh* is usually defined as comparison between two entities that share a particular point of resemblance, commonly structured through the elements of *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, and *adāt al-tashbīh*. Yet Qur'anic *tashbīh* cannot be adequately understood as a mechanical figure of comparison. It is a semantic and rhetorical operation through which the Qur'an organizes perception, guides moral judgement, and deepens theological reflection. When the Qur'an compares worldly life to rain-fed vegetation, hypocrites to those who kindle fire or stand beneath a storm, human actions to scattered dust, or divine guidance to light, the comparison does not merely illustrate an idea already complete in abstract form. It generates meaning by making the unseen intelligible through the seen, the moral through the sensory, and the eschatological through the familiar. This makes *tashbīh* central to the study of Qur'anic rhetoric, Qur'anic semantics, and the pedagogical force of revelation.

The specific problem addressed in this article is the tendency to treat *tashbīh* either as an ornamental feature of *balāghah* or as a simple device for explanation, without fully analysing its rhetorical structure and semantic functions within Qur'anic discourse. Classical Arabic rhetoric offers a sophisticated taxonomy of comparison, but modern studies often reproduce these categories descriptively without asking how Qur'anic similes produce theological, ethical, and argumentative effects in context. Conversely, modern approaches to metaphor, cognition, and discourse have shown that figurative language is not secondary to meaning but central to how human beings conceptualize experience.² The tension, therefore, lies between the traditional classification of *tashbīh* as a rhetorical figure and the broader semantic question of how comparison functions as a Qur'anic mode of meaning-making.

Previous scholarship provides important foundations for this study. Works on Arabic rhetoric have clarified the conceptual architecture of *balāghah*, including

¹ Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2001); Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis* (Routledge, 2006), [https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Arabic Rhetoric A Pragmatic Analysis Abdul-Raof; Angelika Neuwirth, The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage \(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019\); M Shah and MA 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](https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Arabic+Rhetoric+A+Pragmatic+Analysis+Abdul-Raof;+Angelika+Neuwirth,+The+Qur'+an+and+Late+Antiquity:+A+Shared+Heritage+(Oxford:+Oxford+University+Press,+2019);+M+Shah+and+MA+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).

² Gerard J Steen, "Deliberate Metaphor Theory: Basic Assumptions, Main Tenets, Urgent Issues," *Intercultural Pragmatics* 14, no. 1 (2017): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2017-0001>.

the relationship between form, meaning, eloquence, and audience effect.³ Studies of Qur'anic stylistics and discourse have demonstrated that the Qur'an's linguistic force depends on textual coherence, lexical precision, sound patterning, and semantic density rather than isolated vocabulary alone.⁴ Literary and historical approaches to Qur'anic Studies have further shown that Qur'anic meaning emerges within a complex field of structure, address, reception, intertextuality, and late antique discourse.⁵ More recent contributions have expanded attention to Qur'anic narrative, key terms, and rhetorical address, emphasizing the need to read Qur'anic language through conceptual networks rather than through one-dimensional translation.⁶

Despite these contributions, three gaps remain. Conceptually, *tashbīh* is often studied as a category within Arabic rhetoric but not sufficiently theorized as a semantic mechanism that structures Qur'anic perception and argument. Methodologically, many studies identify examples of simile in the Qur'an without systematically examining their internal components, textual placement, and communicative function. Interpretively, scholarship has not yet fully explained how *tashbīh* contributes differently across Qur'anic themes such as faith and disbelief, worldly life, divine guidance, eschatological warning, human weakness, and moral accountability. These gaps justify a focused study of *tashbīh* that moves beyond listing examples toward analysing how rhetorical structure produces semantic and theological force.⁷

Accordingly, this article asks three main questions. First, how is *tashbīh* structurally organized in selected Qur'anic passages through the relationship between the compared object, the comparative image, the point of resemblance, and the marker of comparison? Second, what semantic functions does *tashbīh* perform in Qur'anic discourse, particularly in clarifying abstract meanings, intensifying moral persuasion, and shaping theological imagination? Third, how does the Qur'an's use of *tashbīh* refine classical Arabic rhetorical theory when examined through modern semantic and stylistic approaches? The objectives of the study are to analyse the rhetorical structure of Qur'anic *tashbīh*, to explain its semantic functions across selected thematic contexts, and to demonstrate how comparison operates as a major strategy of Qur'anic communication.

The theoretical framework of this study combines classical Arabic rhetoric, Qur'anic stylistics, and modern semantic theory. Classical rhetoric provides the analytical vocabulary for identifying the elements and forms of *tashbīh*. Qur'anic

³ 'Abd al-Qāhir Al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il Al-I'jāz Fī Al-Qur'ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr (Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2004), <https://search.worldcat.org/search?q=Dalail+al-Ijaz+al-Jurjani+Mahmud+Muhammad+Shakir>; Jalāl al-Dīn Al-Qazwīnī, *Al-Īdāh Fī 'ulūm Al-Balāgha: Al-Ma'ānī, Al-Bayān, Wa-Al-Badī'*, ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2023), <https://www.al-ilmiyah.com/search?search=الإيضاح في علوم البلاغة>.

⁴ Hussein Abdul-Raof, *New Horizons in Qur'anic Linguistics: A Syntactic, Semantic and Stylistic Analysis* (Routledge, 2017), <https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=New Horizons in Qur%27anic Linguistics 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>; Elsaid M Badawi and M A S Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Brill, 2008), <https://brill.com/display/title/12559>.

⁵ Mehdi Azaiez et al., eds., "The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages" (De Gruyter, 2016).

⁶ George Archer, Henry Bainbridge, and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, eds., *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an* (Routledge, 2021), <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-the-Quran/Archer-Bainbridge-Amir-Moezzi/p/book/9781138350867>; Leyla Ozgur Alhassen, *How the Qur'an Works: Reading Sacred Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://global.oup.com/academic/search?q=How the Qur%27an Works Reading Sacred Narrative Alhassen>; 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>.

⁷ Al Fiqri Ardiansyah and Marhamah Annazah Tambunan, "From Normative Citation to Critical Analysis: Evaluating Methodological Problems in Contemporary Indonesian Qur'anic Scholarship," *Dialogues in Qur'anic and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 1–26, <https://journal.bahsisfikir.or.id/index.php/DQHS/article/view/12>.

stylistics allows the study to examine how comparison works within the arrangement, rhythm, thematic sequence, and argumentative movement of the verse. Modern semantic and cognitive approaches help clarify why comparison is not merely decorative, but conceptually productive: it allows one domain of meaning to be understood through another, making abstract realities more cognitively and ethically available to the reader.⁸ This integrated framework is necessary because Qur'anic *tashbīh* belongs simultaneously to the science of *balāghah*, the discourse of revelation, and the broader human capacity to understand meaning through relational imagery.

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to reposition *tashbīh* as a Qur'anic semantic-rhetorical structure rather than as a merely ornamental figure. By examining both its internal rhetorical components and its wider semantic functions, the article contributes to ongoing discussions in Ushuluddin, Qur'anic Studies, Arabic rhetoric, and Islamic literary hermeneutics. It argues that Qur'anic *tashbīh* does not simply beautify meaning; it organizes thought, directs interpretation, and enables the Qur'an to communicate complex theological and moral truths through vivid comparative form. This study therefore offers an integrated model for reading Qur'anic comparison as a site where eloquence, cognition, and revelation converge.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual-hermeneutical design to analyse *tashbīh* in the Qur'an as a rhetorical and semantic phenomenon. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study does not aim to measure the frequency of similes statistically, but to interpret how Qur'anic comparisons generate meaning, organize perception, and support theological, ethical, and argumentative discourse. Textual-hermeneutical analysis allows the research to move between the linguistic structure of selected verses, the rhetorical tradition of Arabic *balāghah*, and the wider semantic function of comparison within Qur'anic discourse.⁹ This approach is also suitable because *tashbīh* is not merely a formal ornament; it operates through relation, resemblance, imagery, context, and audience recognition.

The primary source of this study is the Arabic text of the Qur'an, with particular attention to selected verses containing explicit or implicit forms of *tashbīh*. The textual units are selected from Qur'anic passages where comparison plays a significant role in communicating theological, moral, eschatological, social, or existential meanings. Examples include comparisons involving worldly life, divine guidance, disbelief, hypocrisy, human deeds, resurrection, nature, light, darkness, fire, water, and vegetation. These examples are not selected randomly, but through purposive and criterion-based sampling. A verse is included when it fulfils three criteria: first, it contains a recognizable comparative structure; second, the comparison contributes significantly to the meaning of the verse; and third, the expression can be analysed through the categories of Arabic rhetoric and semantic function.

The study also uses selected secondary sources to support interpretation. Classical Arabic rhetorical works are consulted to define *tashbīh* and its structural

⁸ Elena Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/metaphor-in-discourse/>; Zoltán Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/extended-conceptual-metaphor-theory/>.

⁹ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (Sage Publications, 2018); Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (Sage, 2012).

elements, especially the categories of *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, and *adāt al-tashbīh*. These categories provide the basic analytical vocabulary for identifying how comparison is formed and how resemblance is constructed in Qur'anic discourse.¹⁰ Modern works in Qur'anic linguistics, Qur'anic stylistics, and Qur'anic semantics are used to examine how figurative language operates within textual arrangement, semantic density, lexical selection, and rhetorical sequence. In addition, studies of metaphor and semantic theory are used to clarify how figurative comparison enables abstract meanings to be understood through concrete domains of experience.

The analytical framework consists of three interconnected layers. The first layer is classical Arabic rhetorical analysis, which identifies the formal structure of *tashbīh*: the compared subject, the comparative image, the point of resemblance, and the comparative marker. This layer is necessary to avoid treating Qur'anic comparison as a loose metaphorical impression without technical precision. The second layer is Qur'anic stylistic analysis, which examines how *tashbīh* functions within the arrangement of the verse, the thematic movement of the passage, and the broader rhetorical strategy of the Qur'an. This layer allows the analysis to consider whether a comparison intensifies warning, clarifies doctrine, evokes reflection, dramatizes moral contrast, or strengthens persuasion. The third layer is semantic interpretation, which analyses the conceptual function of comparison in transferring meaning from a familiar domain to a more abstract or unseen domain.

The interpretive procedure is conducted in five stages. The first stage is textual identification, in which Qur'anic verses containing explicit or implicit *tashbīh* are identified and grouped according to thematic relevance. The second stage is rhetorical classification, in which each selected verse is analysed according to the elements of *tashbīh*: *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, and *adāt al-tashbīh*. The third stage is contextual reading, in which each comparison is examined within its immediate verse, surrounding passage, and broader Qur'anic theme. The fourth stage is semantic analysis, in which the study identifies the function performed by the comparison, such as clarification, intensification, moral evaluation, cognitive concretization, eschatological visualization, or argumentative reinforcement. The fifth stage is synthetic interpretation, in which the findings are organized into broader patterns of Qur'anic rhetorical structure and semantic function.

This study modifies conventional qualitative content analysis by integrating it with Arabic rhetorical and semantic-hermeneutical analysis. Conventional qualitative content analysis is useful for identifying, coding, and organizing textual patterns, but it is insufficient on its own for studying Qur'anic *tashbīh*, because Qur'anic comparison is not simply a textual category to be counted or classified. It is a rhetorical act embedded in revelation, interpretation, and theological communication. Therefore, the analysis does not stop at identifying the presence of comparison; it examines how comparison works, why a particular image is chosen, and what semantic effect it produces in context. This methodological modification is justified because the object of study requires attention to both formal rhetorical structure and conceptual meaning.¹¹

¹⁰ Al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il Al-I'jāz Fī Al-Qur'ān*; Al-Qazwīnī, *Al-Īdāh Fī 'ulūm Al-Balāgha: Al-Ma'ānī, Al-Bayān, Wa-Al-Badī'*.

¹¹ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>; Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2019).

To ensure methodological transparency, the study applies a consistent coding structure to each selected verse. The coding categories include: Qur'anic reference, Arabic expression, type of *tashbīh*, *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, comparative marker, immediate context, semantic function, rhetorical effect, and interpretive implication. This structure helps prevent impressionistic interpretation and allows the analysis to remain systematic and academically evaluable. For example, a verse comparing worldly life to vegetation is not only classified as *tashbīh*, but also analysed in terms of how the image of growth, beauty, fragility, and disappearance contributes to the Qur'anic critique of worldly attachment. In this way, the study treats each comparison as a meaningful rhetorical-semantic unit rather than an isolated stylistic feature.

Because this is a textual study, it does not involve field participants, interviews, surveys, or experimental procedures. The validity of the analysis is maintained through textual triangulation, conceptual triangulation, and interpretive consistency. Textual triangulation is achieved by comparing the Qur'anic wording, classical rhetorical categories, and selected exegetical or linguistic interpretations. Conceptual triangulation is achieved by combining Arabic *balāghah*, Qur'anic stylistics, and modern semantic theory. Interpretive consistency is maintained by applying the same analytical sequence to all selected examples and by distinguishing clearly between rhetorical description, semantic analysis, and theological interpretation. Through this method, the study provides an academically transparent way to examine *tashbīh* as a Qur'anic rhetorical structure that does not merely beautify discourse, but actively shapes meaning, perception, and moral understanding.

Results and Discussion

The Rhetorical Architecture of Qur'anic *Tashbīh*: Components, Patterns, and Comparative Markers

The principal finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *tashbīh* operates as a structured rhetorical architecture rather than as a simple decorative comparison. Its force does not lie merely in placing one object beside another, but in arranging the compared subject, comparative image, point of resemblance, and marker of comparison within a meaningful textual environment. In Qur'anic discourse, the elements of *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, and *adāt al-tashbīh* rarely function as isolated technical units. They work together as a semantic structure through which the Qur'an connects visible experience with theological, ethical, and eschatological meaning. This finding refines traditional classifications of *tashbīh* by showing that its structure must be read through context, thematic movement, and audience effect.

The textual evidence can be observed in Qur'anic passages where comparison is explicitly marked and semantically dense. In Q. 2:17–20, the condition of hypocrites is presented through images of fire, darkness, rainstorm, thunder, lightning, and fear. The comparisons do not simply describe hypocrisy; they construct a layered scene of unstable perception, temporary illumination, anxiety, and spiritual exposure. In Q. 14:24–26, the “good word” is compared to a good tree with firm roots and fruitful branches, while the “bad word” is compared to an uprooted tree without stability. The comparative pattern here is highly ordered: the *mushabbah* is moral speech, the *mushabbah bih* is arboreal imagery, and the *wajh al-shabah* concerns rootedness, productivity, and endurance. These examples show that Qur'anic *tashbīh* is not a loose analogy but a carefully framed interpretive structure.

This structural density supports recent scholarship that emphasizes the Qur'an's compositional and rhetorical coherence. Cuypers' rhetorical analysis argues that Qur'anic passages often display carefully arranged internal patterns rather than random or merely associative movement.¹² Neuwirth likewise stresses that Qur'anic meaning emerges through proclamation, sequence, and the interaction of form and audience within late antique discourse.¹³ Applied to *tashbīh*, these insights suggest that comparison should not be extracted from the verse as a detachable figure. Its rhetorical function depends on where it appears, how it is introduced, and how it redirects the listener's perception of the subject under discussion.

The architecture of *tashbīh* also becomes clearer when examined through the semantic relationship between the familiar and the unseen. The Qur'an frequently selects concrete images—trees, dust, light, darkness, water, fire, animals, or cultivated land—not because they are merely vivid, but because they carry experiential familiarity for the audience. In Q. 57:20, worldly life is compared to vegetation that delights its cultivators before drying and becoming debris. The comparison compresses beauty, growth, pride, decline, and disappearance into a single semantic movement. This confirms that the comparative image in Qur'anic *tashbīh* is not passive illustration; it is the vehicle through which moral meaning becomes perceptible. Studies of Qur'anic interpretation similarly show that Qur'anic vocabulary and imagery generate meaning through networks of association rather than through isolated lexical equivalence.¹⁴

This finding also engages modern studies of simile and metaphor. Recent work on simile interpretation has shown that a simile depends on the recognition of shared properties between two domains, not merely on the presence of a comparative marker such as "like" or "as".¹⁵ Relation-level studies of metaphor likewise emphasize that figurative meaning emerges from the interaction between components and context, not from a single word alone.¹⁶ Although these studies are not concerned with Qur'anic Arabic directly, they help clarify why the fourfold structure of *tashbīh* must be interpreted dynamically. The *adāt al-tashbīh* may signal comparison, but the semantic work is carried by the relationship among the elements and by the context that activates the intended resemblance.

The Qur'anic use of comparative markers also shows significant variation. Some passages make comparison explicit through recognizable markers, while others approach *tashbīh tamthīlī*, in which an entire scene functions as the comparative structure. Q. 62:5, for instance, compares those who were entrusted with scripture but failed to bear its meaning to a donkey carrying books. The comparison is not based on external similarity alone; it exposes the contradiction between possession and understanding. The *wajh al-shabah* is therefore intellectual and moral, not physical. This confirms that Qur'anic *tashbīh* often shifts from surface resemblance to evaluative resemblance. It teaches the audience

¹² 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>.

¹³ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*.

¹⁴ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Shah and Haleem, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*.

¹⁵ Tuhin Chakrabarty, Smaranda Muresan, and Nanyun Peng, "Generating Similes Effortlessly Like a Pro: A Style Transfer Approach for Simile Generation," *ArXiv*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2009.08942>; Qianyu He et al., "Can Pre-Trained Language Models Interpret Similes as Smart as Human?," *ArXiv*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2203.08452>.

¹⁶ Omnia Zayed, John P McCrae, and Paul Buitelaar, "Contextual Modulation for Relation-Level Metaphor Identification," *ArXiv*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2010.05633>.

how to judge a condition by making that condition visible through a striking comparative image.

The theoretical implication is that Qur'anic *tashbih* should be understood as a form of semantic architecture. Its components provide the formal structure, but its meaning emerges through textual placement, conceptual transfer, and rhetorical pressure. Methodologically, this requires researchers to move beyond merely identifying whether a verse contains comparison. Each example must be analysed according to its internal elements, thematic context, semantic function, and interpretive effect. Academically, this subsection contributes to Qur'anic rhetoric by demonstrating that *tashbih* is not an ornamental device added to meaning, but one of the Qur'an's major strategies for structuring thought, directing moral perception, and making abstract realities intelligible through disciplined comparative form.

Making the Unseen Visible: *Tashbih* as Semantic Concretization of Theological and Eschatological Meaning

The principal finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *tashbih* functions as a semantic mechanism for rendering unseen, abstract, and eschatological realities perceptible to human imagination. The Qur'an does not present theology only through doctrinal statement; it repeatedly translates faith, disbelief, guidance, loss, resurrection, judgement, and worldly impermanence into images drawn from lived experience. Natural phenomena, light, darkness, fire, water, dust, trees, cultivated fields, collapsing houses, and storm scenes become rhetorical instruments through which metaphysical meaning enters the horizon of sensory understanding. In this sense, *tashbih* is not an auxiliary ornament of Qur'anic style but a mode of semantic concretization that enables the unseen to be grasped through the visible.

The textual evidence is especially clear in passages where abstract moral conditions are expressed through concrete images. In Q. 14:18, the deeds of those who reject faith are compared to ashes violently scattered by the wind on a stormy day. The image does not merely say that such deeds are worthless; it makes their fragility, dispersion, and irreversible loss imaginable. In Q. 10:24 and Q. 57:20, worldly life is compared to vegetation nourished by rain, admired in its flourishing, then reduced to dry remnants. These comparisons compress the entire arc of worldly attachment—growth, beauty, pride, decline, and disappearance—into a single visual sequence. The *mushabbah* is an existential condition, while the *mushabbah bih* is a familiar natural process. The *wajh al-shabah* lies not in surface similarity, but in the shared pattern of temporary splendour and eventual collapse.

This finding refines studies of Qur'anic eschatology by showing that eschatological imagination in the Qur'an is often built through comparative imagery rather than abstract speculation. Discussions of paradise, hell, resurrection, and judgement in Islamic tradition show that Qur'anic discourse relies heavily on sensory and spatial language to communicate realities beyond ordinary human access.¹⁷ Yet *tashbih* adds a distinctive rhetorical movement to this discourse: it does not simply describe the unseen, but moves from the known world to the unknown world through structured resemblance. The reader is asked

¹⁷ 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>.

to think from rain to resurrection, from fire to punishment, from darkness to misguidance, and from light to divine guidance.

The verse of light, Q. 24:35, demonstrates how a sensory image may carry theological density. The imagery of niche, lamp, glass, blessed tree, and luminous oil does not reduce divine guidance to physical brightness; rather, it allows the mind to approach the intelligibility, radiance, and layered mediation of guidance through the experience of light. Lawson's reading of the Qur'an as epic and apocalyptic is useful here because it emphasizes the Qur'an's capacity to stage ultimate realities through vivid scenes and intensified symbolic language.¹⁸ Reynolds' work on Qur'anic theology likewise shows that Qur'anic discourse often communicates divine realities through relational and scriptural patterns rather than abstract philosophical definition alone.

From the perspective of semantic theory, these examples confirm that Qur'anic *tashbih* operates through domain transfer. A concrete experiential domain is selected not randomly, but because it can carry a particular conceptual burden. Recent work in metaphor generation and interpretation has shown that figurative meaning depends on mapping relations between domains, especially when abstract concepts require more accessible structures of understanding.¹⁹ Although such studies are not concerned with Qur'anic Arabic directly, they help clarify why the Qur'an repeatedly draws from embodied and environmental experience. Water, fire, light, dust, vegetation, and architecture are cognitively available domains through which theological judgement becomes semantically forceful.

This analysis also challenges the assumption that concrete imagery merely simplifies difficult ideas for a non-specialist audience. In Q. 29:41, the comparison of false protectors to the house of a spider is not a simple illustration of weakness. It combines structure, fragility, misplaced trust, and existential exposure. The image becomes an argument: what appears to be shelter may in fact be the most fragile of dwellings. Similarly, the comparison of people entrusted with scripture but failing to carry its meaning to a donkey carrying books in Q. 62:5 transforms a legal-religious failure into an unforgettable moral scene. Such examples show that Qur'anic *tashbih* does not merely concretize meaning; it evaluates it.²⁰

The theoretical implication is that *tashbih* should be treated as a Qur'anic technology of theological visualization. It makes unseen realities thinkable without dissolving their transcendence, and it makes moral conditions visible without reducing them to ordinary experience. Methodologically, this requires analysis beyond identifying comparative markers. Researchers must examine how each image is chosen, what sensory field it activates, what abstract meaning it carries, and how it shapes the reader's judgement. Academically, this subsection contributes to Qur'anic rhetoric and semantic studies by demonstrating that *tashbih* is one of the Qur'an's central strategies for transforming doctrine into perception, eschatology into image, and moral truth into communicable form.

Persuasion, Warning, and Moral Evaluation: The Argumentative Force of Qur'anic *Tashbih*

¹⁸ Günther and Lawson, *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*.

¹⁹ M Ishii et al., "Abortion Education: Teaching the next Generation of Clinicians," *Discover Education* 2, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-023-00080-9>.

²⁰ Niswa Mawaddah, Hilya Mahfuza, Syifa Farizkha Indriani, and Dinda Silvani Paranginangin, "Hadith as an Epistemic Tradition: Toward a Dialogue Between Classical Criticism and Modern Academic Inquiry," *Dialogues in Qur'anic and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 50–76, <https://journal.bahsisfikir.or.id/index.php/DQHS/article/view/16>.

The principal finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *tashbih* functions as an argumentative device that transforms comparison into moral persuasion. It does not merely decorate theological statements with vivid imagery; it presses the audience toward judgement, recognition, and ethical response. Through carefully selected comparative images, the Qur'an turns abstract claims about faith, disbelief, worldly life, and accountability into scenes that can be evaluated almost immediately by the listener. This argumentative force emerges because *tashbih* joins three elements at once: an image that attracts attention, a moral contrast that sharpens evaluation, and an implied conclusion that directs the audience toward assent or warning.

The textual evidence is clear in Qur'anic comparisons that expose the futility of disbelief and the fragility of worldly attachment. In Q. 14:18, the deeds of those who reject their Lord are compared to ashes blown violently by the wind on a stormy day. The image does not simply explain loss; it argues for the complete collapse of deeds without faith. The listener is not given an abstract proposition about spiritual failure but is made to see dispersal, weightlessness, and irretrievability. Similarly, Q. 18:45 compares worldly life to rain-nourished vegetation that soon becomes dry fragments scattered by the wind. The comparison persuades by compressing an entire moral argument into a visual sequence: emergence, beauty, attachment, decline, and disappearance. The conclusion is not stated in philosophical language, yet it is rhetorically unavoidable.

This finding can be clarified through contemporary argumentation theory. Argumentation is not limited to formal proof; it also involves the strategic organization of discourse in order to make a standpoint acceptable to an audience. Pragma-dialectical approaches emphasize that argument must be understood as communicative action shaped by standpoint, audience, implicit premises, and presentational choices.²¹ Qur'anic *tashbih* works in this direction, but with a distinctive revelatory force. It does not argue by syllogism alone. It argues by making moral error visible and by causing the audience to recognize the weakness, instability, or danger of a condition through comparison.

The argumentative power of *tashbih* is also linked to audience reception. Tindale's work on argument and audience shows that persuasion depends not only on the internal validity of a claim but also on how an audience is invited to participate in meaning.²² Qur'anic *tashbih* is precisely participatory in this sense. The listener must infer the *wajh al-shabah*, connect the visible image to the moral condition, and complete the evaluative movement. When Q. 62:5 compares those who carry scripture without understanding it to a donkey carrying books, the argument is not merely that knowledge without comprehension is blameworthy. The image forces the audience to distinguish possession from understanding, burden from benefit, and external association from inward transformation.²³

This analysis also refines modern discussions of moral persuasion. Recent studies in computational argumentation show that persuasive force is strengthened when arguments address the beliefs, concerns, and moral values of

²¹ Frans H van Eemeren and A Francisca Snoeck Henkemans, *Argumentation: Analysis and Evaluation* (Routledge, 2017), [https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Argumentation Analysis and Evaluation van Eemeren Snoeck Henkemans](https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Argumentation+Analysis+and+Evaluation+van+Eemeren+Snoeck+Henkemans).

²² Christopher W Tindale, *The Philosophy of Argument and Audience Reception* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), [https://www.cambridge.org/core/search?q=The Philosophy of Argument and Audience Reception Tindale](https://www.cambridge.org/core/search?q=The+Philosophy+of+Argument+and+Audience+Reception+Tindale).

²³ Al Fiqri Ardiansyah, "Kritik terhadap Hermeneutika dalam Tafsir Al-Qur'an: Perspektif Ulama Tradisional dan Kontemporer," *Al-Muhith: Jurnal Ilmu Qur'an dan Hadits* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1. <https://doi.org/10.35931/am.v4i1.4232>

the audience rather than presenting neutral information alone.²⁴ Although these studies operate in a different disciplinary field, they illuminate an important feature of Qur'anic *tashbīh*: its images are not morally neutral. Fire, dust, storm, vegetation, darkness, and collapse are selected because they carry affective and evaluative weight. They do not only help the audience understand a claim; they move the audience toward a position.

The Qur'anic comparison between false protectors and the spider's house in Q. 29:41 further demonstrates this point. The verse does not simply assert that misplaced reliance is weak. It presents an image of shelter that is structurally fragile despite appearing to be a dwelling. The argument operates through reversal: what is taken as protection is revealed as exposure. This kind of *tashbīh* challenges the audience's assumptions and reorders perception. It supports the claim that Qur'anic rhetoric often persuades by exposing the mismatch between appearance and reality, confidence and vulnerability, possession and meaning, or action and consequence.

The theoretical implication is that Qur'anic *tashbīh* should be read as argumentative rhetoric, not merely figurative description. Its semantic function is inseparable from its persuasive force. Methodologically, this requires researchers to examine not only the formal elements of comparison, but also the evaluative conclusion generated by the image. Each instance of *tashbīh* should be analysed by asking what standpoint it advances, what moral contrast it constructs, what audience response it seeks, and how its imagery strengthens the Qur'an's warning or invitation. Academically, this subsection contributes to Qur'anic rhetorical studies by showing that *tashbīh* is one of the Qur'an's major techniques for converting imagery into judgement, perception into persuasion, and comparison into moral argument.

Beyond Ornamentation: *Tashbīh* as a Qur'anic Semantic-Rhetorical Method

The principal finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *tashbīh* should be understood as a semantic-rhetorical method, not as a decorative feature added to an already complete meaning. Across the Qur'an, comparison does more than beautify expression. It organizes perception, shapes theological understanding, evaluates human conduct, and directs interpretation through carefully constructed images. The study's previous analyses show that *tashbīh* works structurally, semantically, and argumentatively: it arranges elements of resemblance, makes abstract realities visible, and turns imagery into moral judgement. This final subsection synthesizes those findings by arguing that *tashbīh* is one of the Qur'an's major strategies for producing meaning through the interaction of form, image, and interpretation.

The textual evidence supports this claim. Qur'anic comparisons of worldly life to vegetation, false reliance to a spider's house, rejected deeds to scattered ashes, and guidance to light do not merely illustrate doctrines in simpler language. They create interpretive scenes in which the reader is invited to see a condition differently. Worldly attachment becomes visible as growth followed by disappearance; false security becomes visible as fragile architecture; spiritual failure becomes visible as matter dispersed beyond recovery. In each case, the comparison does not stand outside the message. It is the very means through which

²⁴ Emmanuel Hadoux, Anthony Hunter, and Sylwia Polberg, "Strategic Argumentation Dialogues for Persuasion: Framework and Experiments Based on Modelling the Beliefs and Concerns of the Persuadee," *ArXiv*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2101.11870>; Esin Durmus, "Towards Understanding Persuasion in Computational Argumentation," *ArXiv*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2110.01078>; Milad Alshomary et al., "The Moral Debater: A Study on the Computational Generation of Morally Framed Arguments," *ArXiv*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2203.14563>.

the message becomes perceptible and persuasive. This indicates that *tashbīh* functions as a mode of Qur'anic thought, not simply as an embellishment of Qur'anic speech.

This finding challenges a narrow ornamental reading of Arabic rhetoric. Classical *balāghah* provides essential categories for identifying the structure of *tashbīh*, but Qur'anic usage shows that these categories must be read dynamically. The relationship between *mushabbah* and *mushabbah bih* is not only formal; it produces a semantic transfer that reshapes how the audience understands the subject. Contemporary work in cognitive and discourse-oriented approaches to figurative language confirms that comparison and metaphor are not secondary to meaning but participate in the way concepts are formed, communicated, and emotionally received.²⁵ Qur'anic *tashbīh* strengthens this point within a scriptural context: comparison becomes a disciplined way of guiding the mind from image to judgement.

The synthesis also refines Qur'anic Studies by showing that rhetorical form and theological meaning cannot be separated. Modern commentarial and literary approaches to the Qur'an emphasize that Qur'anic meaning emerges through textual arrangement, imagery, cross-reference, and reception, not through isolated lexical meaning alone.²⁶ This insight is crucial for the analysis of *tashbīh*. A comparison in the Qur'an must be read within its immediate verse, its thematic sequence, and its broader scriptural pattern of signs, warnings, promises, and moral contrasts. When examined in this way, *tashbīh* becomes an interpretive method that links rhetoric to theology, not a literary excess that can be separated from doctrine.

The Qur'an's comparative imagery also participates in a broader scriptural and late antique habit of reasoning through signs, nature, and symbolic scenes. Studies of Qur'anic cosmology and historical-literary context show that natural phenomena in the Qur'an often carry contemplative and theological significance rather than functioning as neutral background description. This is directly relevant to *tashbīh*, because Qur'anic comparisons often use elements of the created world—rain, plants, fire, light, dust, mountains, and dwellings—to make moral and metaphysical realities intelligible. The created world becomes a semantic field through which revelation trains perception.²⁷

This analysis also expands the methodological scope of *tashbīh* studies. A purely taxonomic approach can identify the parts of a comparison, but it cannot fully explain why a particular image matters or how it functions within Qur'anic discourse. A semantic-rhetorical method requires the researcher to ask how the comparison is built, what conceptual relation it establishes, what moral effect it produces, and how it contributes to the verse's larger argumentative movement. This approach allows *tashbīh* to be studied as a textual operation that integrates structure, meaning, affect, and interpretation.

²⁵ Barbara Dancygier, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/search?q=The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics Dancygier; Jeannette Littlemore, Metaphors in the Mind: Sources of Variation in Embodied Metaphor> (Cambridge University Press, 2019), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/search?q=Metaphors in the Mind Sources of Variation in Embodied Metaphor>.

²⁶ A Rippin and J Mojaddedi, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān, Second Edition, The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān, Second Edition*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118964873>; Mun'im Sirry, *The Quran with Cross-References* (De Gruyter, 2022), <https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9783110780004/html>; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Qur'an* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

²⁷ Al Fiqri Ardiansyah et al., "Qiwāmah and Epistemic Violence: A Critical Socio-Legal Analysis of Gendered Authority in Islamic Family Law," *Mawaddah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 3, no. 2 (2025): 605–626, <https://doi.org/10.52496/mjhki.v3i2.100>.

The theoretical implication is that Qur'anic *tashbīh* should be placed at the centre of Arabic rhetorical and Qur'anic semantic analysis. It is not merely a figure among figures, but a method through which revelation organizes the relation between the visible and the unseen, the concrete and the abstract, the aesthetic and the ethical. Academically, this subsection contributes to Ushuluddin, Qur'anic Studies, Arabic rhetoric, and Islamic literary hermeneutics by proposing an integrated model of *tashbīh* as semantic-rhetorical reasoning. Its novelty lies in showing that Qur'anic comparison is not only a way of explaining meaning, but a way of forming religious perception itself. By means of *tashbīh*, the Qur'an does not simply tell the reader what reality is; it teaches the reader how reality should be seen.

Conclusion

This study concludes that *tashbīh* in the Qur'an functions not merely as a rhetorical ornament, but as a semantic-rhetorical method through which revelation structures meaning, shapes perception, and guides moral understanding. The analysis answers the first research objective by showing that Qur'anic *tashbīh* is organized through a coherent relationship between *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bih*, *wajh al-shabah*, and *adāt al-tashbīh*. These elements do not operate as isolated technical categories; they form an integrated rhetorical architecture that connects abstract realities with sensory and experiential images.

The study also demonstrates that the semantic functions of *tashbīh* extend beyond illustration. Qur'anic comparisons make theological, ethical, and eschatological meanings more perceptible by translating unseen realities into concrete images such as vegetation, dust, light, darkness, fire, water, storms, and fragile dwellings. Through this process, *tashbīh* enables the Qur'an to communicate complex meanings in forms that are cognitively accessible and spiritually compelling. It makes doctrine visible, moral failure imaginable, worldly impermanence tangible, and divine guidance conceptually luminous.

In relation to persuasion and moral evaluation, the study finds that *tashbīh* operates as an argumentative device. Qur'anic comparisons do not simply beautify discourse; they invite the audience to judge, reflect, and respond. Images such as scattered ashes, withered vegetation, the spider's house, and the donkey carrying books transform abstract moral claims into vivid evaluative scenes. In this way, *tashbīh* joins imagination, ethical reasoning, and rhetorical pressure, allowing comparison to become a form of Qur'anic argument.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in repositioning *tashbīh* as a central mode of Qur'anic meaning-making. By integrating classical Arabic rhetoric, Qur'anic stylistics, and modern semantic theory, the article shows that *tashbīh* should not be reduced to taxonomy or literary decoration. Its significance lies in the way it produces semantic transfer, organizes theological perception, and links rhetorical form with interpretive force. This approach contributes to Ushuluddin, Qur'anic Studies, Arabic rhetoric, and Islamic literary hermeneutics by offering a model for reading Qur'anic comparison as a dynamic interaction between eloquence, cognition, and revelation.

The broader implication of this study is that Qur'anic figurative language must be read as part of the Qur'an's intellectual and spiritual method of communication. Future research may extend this framework to other rhetorical forms such as *isti'ārah*, *kināyah*, *majāz*, and *tamthīl*, or compare the use of *tashbīh* across different thematic clusters, including creation, prophecy, law, eschatology, and moral psychology. Such studies would further clarify how Qur'anic rhetoric shapes not only expression, but also the reader's way of seeing reality.

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