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Literary Approach and the Construction of Meaning in Contemporary Qur'anic Exegesis: A Comparative Study of the Thought of Bint al-Shati and Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to compare the mechanisms of meaning construction developed by Bint al-Shati and Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah in contemporary literary Qur'anic exegesis and to formulate an analytical typology that explains their differing epistemological assumptions regarding the location of interpretive authority. **Design/methods/approach** – This research employs a qualitative-comparative design based on library research using the *muqāran* (comparative) method of Qur'anic exegesis. The primary sources comprise *al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī* and *al-I'jāz al-Bayānī* by Bint al-Shati, together with *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah. Data validity is strengthened through source triangulation and comparative textual analysis. **Findings** – The study demonstrates that Bint al-Shati locates meaning within the linguistic structure of the Qur'anic text, producing a model of linguistic stability grounded in the principle of anti-synonymity. By contrast, Khalafallah understands meaning as emerging through the interaction between Qur'anic narrative and its audience, resulting in a model of narrative functionalism that emphasizes the pedagogical effectiveness of revelation. Rather than constituting a rigid dichotomy, these models represent two poles of a broader hermeneutical spectrum between textual stability and contextual interpretation. The resulting typology provides a systematic framework for classifying literary approaches to Qur'anic exegesis according to where interpretive authority is located. **Research implications/limitations** – The study is limited to two exegetes within the intellectual tradition of the Amin al-Khuli School. Future research should test the proposed typology against other literary exegetes and explore hybrid approaches that combine linguistic and narrative strategies. **Originality/value** – This study offers an original analytical typology of contemporary literary Qur'anic exegesis by distinguishing the models of linguistic stability and narrative functionalism based on a single epistemological variable – the location of interpretive authority – thereby extending existing classifications beyond methodological differences and providing a systematic framework for comparative hermeneutical analysis.

Keywords: Literary Exegesis; Construction of Meaning; Bint al-Shati'; Khalafallah; Muqāranah.

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Introduction

The debate over whether the meaning of the Qur'an is inherent within the text or constructed through the process of interpretation constitutes a fundamental epistemic problem in contemporary Qur'anic exegesis [1]. This issue is not merely a matter of linguistic technique; rather, it concerns the very nature of hermeneutics: whether the task of the exegete is to uncover an objective meaning embedded within the structure of the text or to construct meaning through the dialectical interaction between text, context, and reader. Within the landscape of contemporary tafsir, a significant paradigmatic shift has occurred from interpretations grounded in traditional authority toward more critical and interdisciplinary modes of exegesis [2]. This phenomenon necessitates methodological clarity regarding how Qur'anic meaning is constructed in order to address the increasingly complex challenges of modernity.

Such transformations became particularly evident from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, when Muslim exegetes began confronting the forces of modernization and socio-political reform. In this context, approaches to tafsir evolved by accommodating the concerns of modern science and societal dynamics, thereby giving rise to more rational and scientific methodological tendencies in understanding the Qur'an [3]. As with all exegetical works, each tafsir possesses distinct methods, patterns, and interpretive techniques, including differences in systematic arrangement and linguistic style employed by the exegetes [4].

Within the tradition of the literary approach to the Qur'an, this epistemic tension is sharply manifested in the thought of two major figures from the intellectual school of Amin al-Khuli, namely Bint al-Shati and Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah [5]. Although both emerged from the same intellectual roots, they proposed fundamentally different mechanisms of meaning-making in Qur'anic interpretation.

Bint al-Shati' represents the position in which meaning is regarded as an entity that must be excavated directly from the text (*text-driven meaning*) [6]. Through the principle that "*the Qur'an explains itself*," [7] she emphasizes that the construction of meaning must remain free from ideological, sectarian, and external interventions such as *Isrā'iliyyāt* traditions. For Bint al-Shati', meaning is discovered through rigorous inductive-linguistic analysis, whereby each lexical item is mapped chronologically and semantically across Qur'anic verses in order to capture the original message of the text [8]. She further maintains that there is no synonymy within the Qur'an; every lexical choice possesses a distinctive, stable, and inherent meaning embedded in its structure [9]. In contrast, Khalafallah positions meaning as something constructed through narrative and

psychological interaction (constructed meaning) [10]. He argues that the narratives of the Qur'an are not positivistic historical records demanding factual verification, but rather aesthetic-literary constructions designed to generate particular moral and spiritual effects upon their audience [11]. In his view, the truth of the Qur'an (*al-haqq*) resides in its communicative purpose and pedagogical impact rather than in its historical correspondence [12]. Consequently, meaning is constructed through rhetorical function and narrative dramaturgy that transcend the literal boundaries of the text [13].

Although the contributions of these two figures have been discussed extensively in partial studies, no research has yet systematically compared their respective mechanisms of meaning construction within literary exegesis. Most previous studies have focused primarily on methodological typologies or debates surrounding the historicity of Qur'anic narratives, while neglecting to map the internal logic through which each thinker constructs structures of meaning.

This article seeks to fill this scholarly gap by proposing a model or typology of meaning construction in contemporary literary exegesis. Through a *muqāranah* (comparative) study, this research aims to reveal how the differing epistemological orientations of linguistic stability (Bint al-Shatī') and narrative functionalism (Khalafallah) generate distinct implications for textual authority and interpretive flexibility. The formulation of this model is expected to provide a new theoretical framework capable of enriching exegetical methodology, one that not only captures the "spirit" of the Qur'an but also maintains strong academic accountability in the modern era.

To situate this study within wider academic debates on textual meaning and interpretation, it is useful to position the linguistic-stability and narrative-functionalism typology against modern hermeneutical thought more broadly. Bint al-Shatī's confidence that meaning resides within the text itself resonates with the hermeneutical concern for the "text-in-itself" associated with Paul Ricoeur's notion of textual autonomy [14],[15], even though her method remains philologically rather than philosophically grounded. Khalafallah's emphasis on the interaction between text, audience, and effect, by contrast, parallels the fusion-of-horizons logic developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer [16], in which meaning is realized only in the encounter between text and interpreter. Within the field of Qur'anic studies specifically, this same tension has been elaborated by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd [17], who treats the Qur'an as a "living text" shaped by its historical and linguistic context, and by Fazlur Rahman [18], whose double-movement theory seeks to move from the specific circumstances of revelation to general ethical principles applicable to the present. Abdullah Saeed's contextualist approach [19], which distinguishes between obligatory and

contextually contingent elements of Qur'anic meaning, offers a further point of comparison, since it likewise attempts to reconcile textual authority with interpretive flexibility. Reading Bint al-Shati' and Khalafallah alongside these thinkers clarifies that the linguistic-stability/narrative-functionalism typology proposed in this study is not a wholly free-standing invention but a regionally specific instantiation of a broader hermeneutical debate between text-centered and reader-centered theories of meaning; the contribution of this article lies in showing how that debate plays out concretely within the literary tafsir tradition rather than in claiming to have discovered the debate itself.

The novelty of the proposed typology should also be stated more explicitly. Existing classifications of literary tafsir have generally distinguished exegetes according to their primary method (linguistic, thematic, or narrative) or according to their stance on the historicity of Qur'anic stories, without offering an integrated framework that connects epistemological assumptions about the source of meaning to their practical exegetical consequences. The Linguistic Stability and Narrative Functionalism models advanced here differ from these prior classifications in that they are organized around a single underlying variable—where meaning is located and how it is authorized—rather than around methodological technique alone. This reframing allows the typology to travel beyond the two figures examined here and to function as an analytical lens for classifying other literary exegetes according to the degree to which they treat Qur'anic meaning as textually fixed or contextually constructed, which is the specific sense in which this study claims originality.

Method

This study constitutes a qualitative library research focusing on the analysis of intellectual thought within contemporary Qur'anic exegesis. A qualitative approach is employed because it enables an in-depth exploration of meaning and interpretive processes that cannot be measured quantitatively, but rather understood through textual and contextual interpretation. In the study of religion, such an approach is inherently interpretative and contextual, making it particularly relevant for examining the construction of meaning in Qur'anic exegesis [20].

Methodologically, this research adopts the *muqāran* tafsir (comparative exegesis) approach, namely a method that systematically compares interpretive thoughts and approaches in order to identify similarities and differences. This approach is commonly employed in tafsir studies because it facilitates a more comprehensive analysis of diverse exegetical perspectives [21].

The primary data sources of this study consist of the major works of Bint al-Shati, particularly *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* and *Al-I'jāz al-*

Bayānī li al-Qurʾān, as well as the work of Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah, namely *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*. These works were selected because they represent the literary approach to Qurʾanic exegesis and provide the foundational framework for analyzing the construction of meaning formulated by each scholar.

The units of analysis comprise: (1) the explicit methodological statements of both scholars regarding interpretive principles; (2) representative exegetical examples demonstrating the application of those principles; and (3) the epistemological arguments concerning the source and nature of meaning. These units guided the selection of relevant quotations and paraphrases from the primary texts.

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the literary approaches of each scholar were identified by examining their primary works to determine their methodological principles, linguistic assumptions, and epistemological orientations, which were then organized into predetermined analytical dimensions. Second, the construction of meaning was analyzed by tracing the sources of meaning, the interpretive processes through which meaning is generated, and the character of the resulting meaning, as reflected in concrete exegetical examples. Third, the findings were compared systematically to identify similarities, differences, and epistemological tensions in their respective constructions of meaning.

To enhance methodological transparency, Bint al-Shatī' and Khalafallah were selected because they represent the two most contrasting developments within the literary school of Amin al-Khulī: the former emphasizing linguistic-philological analysis and the latter historical-narrative interpretation. The *muqāran* procedure employed paired reading of parallel passages addressing comparable interpretive issues, enabling direct comparison across the same analytical dimensions. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation by cross-checking the primary texts with the authors' methodological writings, relevant secondary scholarship, and the Qurʾanic passages under discussion. The analytical dimensions were established from each scholar's explicit methodological framework and refined inductively during analysis to accommodate emerging sub-categories while preserving methodological consistency.

Result and Discussion

A. The Literary Approach of Bint al-Shati

Bint al-Shati, whose real name was Aisha Abd al-Rahman, was a contemporary intellectual figure who made a revolutionary contribution to Qur'anic studies through the literary approach (*tafsīr bayānī*) [22]. As the first female exegete to systematically compose a work of Qur'anic exegesis, her work *al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* represents the most comprehensive embodiment of the methodology formulated by her teacher and husband, Amin al-Khuli [23]. This approach is founded upon the fundamental thesis that the Qur'an is "the Greatest Book of the Arabic Language" (*Kitāb al-'Arabiyyah al-Akbar*) as well as a supreme literary masterpiece. Consequently, in order to grasp the eternal divine message, one must approach the text through sophisticated linguistic and literary-aesthetic analytical tools [24].

Broadly speaking, Bint al-Shati's literary approach may be elaborated into three principal dimensions: the linguistic dimension, the textual dimension, and the dimension of language structure.

1. Linguistic Dimension: The Theory of Anti-Synonymity

The most crucial foundation of Bint al-Shati's linguistic methodology is her firm rejection of synonymity (*tarāduf*) within the Qur'an [25]. She maintains that each word in the Qur'an possesses only one distinctive meaning within its specific context, and that no other word could replace it without diminishing its effectiveness, aesthetic quality, and essential significance [9]. For her, synonymity is incompatible with the elevated literary style of the Qur'an as the highest form of Arabic expression.

In applying this theory, Bint al-Shati traces meaning through several analytical stages:

- a. The Search for Original Lexical Meaning: Bint al-Shati traces the original root of a particular expression through classical Arabic dictionaries in order to uncover the authentic linguistic "sense" embedded within early Arab usage, both in its literal and figurative (*majāz*) dimensions [26]. By returning to the original lexical meaning, Bint al-Shati seeks to avoid interpreting Qur'anic vocabulary through later theological or exegetical assumptions. Instead, she argues that the primary sense of a word should first be established based on its root and its usage in classical Arabic before examining its contextual meaning in

the Qur'an. This method enables a more precise understanding of the semantic development of Qur'anic terms while preserving the integrity of their original linguistic function.

- b. Analysis of Qur'anic Usage: After identifying the original linguistic meaning, she compiles all occurrences and variations of the term throughout the Qur'an in order to examine how the sacred text itself employs the word across different contexts [23]. Through this comprehensive examination, Bint al-Shati argues that the meaning of a Qur'anic term should be derived from its internal usage rather than imposed from external sources. By comparing every occurrence of the word in different verses, she identifies recurring semantic patterns, contextual nuances, and shifts in meaning. This intratextual approach allows the Qur'an to explain its own vocabulary, ensuring that interpretation remains grounded in the text's linguistic and thematic coherence.

A well-known example of this approach is Bint al-Shati's distinction between the Qur'anic terms *aqsama* (أقسم) and *ḥalafa* (حلف). Although both denote an oath, she argues that the Qur'an employs them with distinct semantic functions. *Aqsama* (أقسم) refers to sincere oaths that are not intended to be broken and is frequently associated with Allah, whereas *ḥalafa* (حلف) denotes false or violable oaths, often describing the behavior of hypocrites. This distinction illustrates that the Qur'an's lexical choices are deliberate and semantically meaningful rather than arbitrary. [27].

Another example may be observed in the distinction between *ru'yā* (a dream as truthful inspiration) and *ḥulm* (a confused or illusory dream). For Bint al-Shati, such precision in lexical selection constitutes one of the proofs of the Qur'an's bayānī inimitability. The terms *al-ḥulm* (الحلم) and *al-ru'yā* (الرؤيا) are frequently treated in many Arabic lexicons as synonymous expressions meaning "dream." However, within the Qur'an, *al-ḥulm* demonstrates a range of meanings depending on the context, including dream, thought, maturity (*bulūgh*), and gentleness. In *I'jāz Bayānī li al-Qur'ān*, Bint al-Shati explains that through related expressions such as *al-mashwayah*, *al-hawājis*, and *al-mukhtaliṭah*, *al-ḥulm* refers to dreams that are mixed, disordered, and influenced by emotional and psychological conditions, thereby approximating the concept of *adghāth al-aḥlām* ("confused dreams" or "idle dreams"). By contrast, *al-ru'yā* appears repeatedly in Qur'anic contexts that signify true and clear visions

(*ru'yā ṣādiqah*), whether experienced by prophets such as Prophet Abraham, Prophet Joseph, and Prophet Muhammad, or by rulers as a form of divine inspiration. Accordingly, it may be concluded that *al-ru'yā* refers to dreams that are truthful, lucid, and imbued with divine significance, whereas *al-ḥulm* denotes dreams that are confused and unstable, as elaborated by Bint al-Shatī' [28].

Table 1. The Difference in the Usage of the Terms *ḥalafa* and *aqsama* in the Qur'an

Term	Verse	Figure/Context	Meaning
<i>al-ru'yā</i> (الرؤيا)	Q. Yūsuf: 5	Prophet Joseph	A truthful dream (divine inspiration)
<i>al-ru'yā</i> (الرؤيا)	Q. Yūsuf: 100	Prophet Joseph	The fulfillment of the dream
<i>al-ru'yā</i> (الرؤيا)	Q. al-Ṣāffāt: 105	Prophet Abraham	A dream affirmed by Allah
<i>al-ru'yā</i> (الرؤيا)	Q. al-Faḥ: 27	Prophet Muhammad	A truthful vision (the conquest of Mecca)
<i>al-ru'yā</i> (الرؤيا)	Q. Yūsuf: 43	The King of Egypt	A clear dream requiring interpretation
<i>al-aḥlām</i> (الأحلام)	Q. Yūsuf: 44	Egyptian nobles	Confused dreams
<i>al-aḥlām</i> (الأحلام)	Q. al-Anbiyā': 5	The polytheists	Unclear dreams (<i>aḡḥāth al-aḥlām</i>)

2. Textual Dimension: The Qur'an as an Organic Unity

From a textual perspective, Bint al-Shatī' views the Qur'an as an integrated and organic whole in which every verse and chapter are interconnected and mutually explanatory (*al-Qur'ān yufassiru ba'ḍuhu ba'dan*) [27]. She criticizes the traditional *taḥlīlī* method of exegesis, which interprets verses atomistically or in isolation, arguing that such an approach detaches verses from their broader context and risks introducing the subjective ideas of the exegete into the interpretation [29].

The textual characteristics of her approach include the following:

- Thematic Method (*Mawḍū'ī*):** Rather than interpreting the Qur'an according to the sequential order of the *muṣḥaf*, she gathers all verses related to a particular theme and studies them as a unified entity. This method is intended to grant the Qur'an autonomy in explaining itself [30].
- Chronological Consideration (*Tartīb al-Nuzūl*):** In order to understand a particular concept contextually, Bint al-Shatī' arranges the verses according to the chronological order of revelation. This approach is considered essential for understanding the historical development and situational background surrounding the text [27].

- c. Relegation of External Materials: She adopts a highly cautious stance toward the use of sources external to the Qur'an. She subtly rejects *Isrā'iliyyāt* narratives, irrelevant prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), and scientific exegesis (*tafsīr 'ilmī*), which she regards as imposing external meanings upon the original aesthetic beauty of the text. For her, the concept of *asbāb al-nuzūl* merely refers to the external circumstances of revelation rather than constituting the ultimate cause or objective of the universal divine message [31].

3. Dimension of Language Structure: *Balāghah* and Aesthetics

In Bint al-Shatī's perspective, the structure of language encompasses the analysis of stylistics (*uslūb*), rhetoric (*balāghah*), and rhythmic harmony [29]. She maintains that no element within the structure of the Qur'an—including the selection of letters and the placement of words—occurs accidentally or merely for the sake of phonetic aesthetics.

Several important aspects of her analysis of linguistic structure may be highlighted as follows:

- a. Semantic Function in Rhythm: Bint al-Shatī asserts that the use of words at the endings of verses (*fawāṣil*) is always determined by semantic considerations rather than solely by the preservation of rhyme or rhythm. For instance, in Sūrat al-Ḍuḥā verse 3, the omission of the pronoun *أنا/ka* ("you") in the expression *qalā* ("to detest") is not intended merely to maintain the rhyme of the preceding verses. Rather, it reflects a spiritual and rhetorical subtlety, demonstrating divine gentleness toward the Prophet Muhammad by avoiding the explicit expression "He detests you." [32].
- b. The Rhetorical Power of Oaths (*Qasam*): She analyzes the use of the particle *wāw* in Qur'anic oaths not as a form of glorification of the object of the oath (*muqṣam bihi*), but rather as a rhetorical device intended to draw human attention toward tangible natural phenomena associated with human suffering and responsibility [33].
- c. Syntactic Structure and the Secrets of Expression: Bint al-Shatī examines how the Qur'an combines lexical units into syntactic structures [34]. She argues that grammar (*naḥw*) and rhetoric in the Qur'an should function as the standard by which linguistic

rules formulated by grammarians are evaluated, rather than the reverse [32]. For example, passive constructions in depictions of the Day of Judgment are interpreted as reflecting the obedience and submission of the universe to the conditions of that event [35].

Through the integration of these three dimensions—precise linguistics, holistic textuality, and aesthetic language structure—Bint al-Shati successfully formulates a construction of meaning that is both lyrical and metaphorical. Her approach seeks not merely to uncover the outward meaning of the text, but also to penetrate the “secrets of expression” (*asrār al-ta’bīr*) in order to grasp the guidance of the Qur’an objectively and profoundly for humanity in the modern era [36].

Table 2. Profile of Bint al-Shati’s Model of Meaning Construction (Linguistic Stability)

Dimension	Indicator	Characteristics
Source of meaning	Linguistic text (lexeme)	Meaning is inherent in the structure of words and does not depend on external context
Core principle	Anti-synonymity	Each Qur’anic lexical item possesses a unique meaning that cannot be substituted
Method of analysis	Linguistic-inductive approach	Systematic tracing of all occurrences of a lexical item across the Qur’an, often in a chronological framework
Nature of meaning	Stable and absolute-textual	Meaning does not change according to audience or social context
Textual authority	Autonomous and self-sufficient	The Qur’an explains itself (al-Qur’ān yufassiru ba’ḍuhu ba’ḍan)

B. The Literary Approach of Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah

The literary approach developed by Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah constitutes one of the most significant and, at the same time, controversial methodological breakthroughs in modern Qur’anic studies. Through his monumental work *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, Khalafallah formulated a theory of Qur’anic narrative that shifted the focus from historical validation toward aesthetic appreciation and the effectiveness of moral communication [37].

1. Historical-Literary Approach

Khalafallah’s approach is deeply rooted in the thought of his teacher, Amin al-Khuli, who emphasized that the Qur’an emerged within a dialectical relationship between revelation and the social reality of its first audience [11]. Khalafallah systematically applied this methodology in analyzing Qur’anic narratives through five principal stages:

- a. Collection of Texts (*Jam' al-Nuṣūṣ*): Gathering all verses related to a particular theme or figure as the object of study [38].
- b. Historical Arrangement of the Texts (*al-Tartīb al-Tārīkhī*): Organizing the narratives according to the chronological order of revelation (*tartīb nuzūlī*) [38]. This step is crucial for identifying the relationship between the narratives and the development of the Prophet Muhammad's mission, as well as the psychological condition of the Muslim community at the time.
- c. Interpretation of the Texts (*Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ*): This stage involves two levels of understanding: textual-linguistic analysis (semantics, syntax, and historical context) and literary understanding (appreciation of psychological, logical, and artistic dimensions) [38].
- d. Classification and Organization of Chapters: Grouping the texts according to logical dimensions (historical, social, and moral values) and artistic dimensions (characters, plot, and dialogue) [38].
- e. Analysis of Originality and Imitation: Tracing narrative elements in order to distinguish between the original creativity of the revealed text and inherited narrative traditions already existing within Arab culture or the traditions of the People of the Book [38].

This approach divides Qur'anic studies into two major domains: *Dirāsah mā ḥawla al-Qur'ān* (studies surrounding the Qur'an, such as the sociological and anthropological background of Arab society) and *Dirāsah fī al-Qur'ān* (internal studies of Qur'anic vocabulary and aesthetic textual composition). Its principal focus is the uncovering of *munāsabah nafsīyyah* (psychological coherence), namely the relationship between the emotional atmosphere of the narrative and the actual situations faced by the Prophet and his followers [39].

2. Critique of Literal Understanding and Absolute Historicity

Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah directs his sharp criticism toward classical and traditional exegetes whom he considers trapped within a framework of literal historicity [40]. According to Khalafallah, earlier exegetes were excessively preoccupied with seeking archaeological evidence or chronological details for every narrated event, which ultimately led them to neglect the essential message or moral lesson (*'ibrah*) underlying the narratives themselves [41].

Khalafallah argues that Qur'anic narratives frequently obscure details of time, place, and character intentionally [42]. As an example, in the story of the Companions of the Cave (*Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*), the Qur'an presents multiple opinions regarding the number of youths and the duration of their stay in the cave without providing a definitive historical answer [43]. This, according to Khalafallah, demonstrates that the Qur'an does not aim to provide a technical historical report; rather, it employs fragments of history as a medium through which the truth of the message (*al-ḥaqq*) is conveyed.

3. Khalafallah's Critique: Major Points

Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah's critique encompasses several important points:

- a. **Redefinition of Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*):** In Qur'anic narratives, truth does not merely signify factual correspondence with empirical historical data; rather, it refers to the truth of purpose (*ḥaqīqah ma'nawīyyah*) and the capacity of the narrative to cultivate moral consciousness and strengthen faith [44].
- b. **Failure to Grasp Literary Beauty:** An excessively literal understanding, according to Khalafallah, diminishes the artistic value of the Qur'an. By treating Qur'anic narratives solely as historical data, exegetes encounter interpretive dead ends when confronting the repetition of stories that appear in varying versions across different chapters. For Khalafallah, these variations do not represent historical contradictions; instead, they constitute aesthetic variations adapted to the psychological needs of the audience within differing contexts of revelation [37].

4. The Construction of Meaning in Qur'anic Narratives

In constructing meaning, Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah employs the theory of narrative art (*al-fann al-qaṣaṣī*) to demonstrate how the Qur'an communicates values through dramatic and symbolic narrative structures [45]. He classifies Qur'anic narratives into three major categories:

- a. **Historical-Literary Narratives (*al-Qaṣaṣ al-Tārīkhiyyah*):** These are narratives derived from historical figures, such as the prophets, yet presented through a selective literary style of description. Their purpose is not to record chronology, but rather to evoke the emotional sensibilities of the audience through psychological and spiritual resonance [43].

- b. Parabolic Narratives (*al-Qaṣaṣ al-Mathaliyyah*): These narratives function as parables or metaphors. Their events do not necessarily correspond to historical reality; instead, they serve as symbolic instruments for conveying moral principles and ethical values, such as the story of the people who fled from death in Q. al-Baqarah: 243 [46].
- c. Mythological Narratives (*al-Qaṣaṣ al-Usthuriyyah*): Khalafallah boldly argues that the Qur'an occasionally incorporates allegories or mythological motifs already familiar within Arab society of the time. Such mythical elements are employed not as ends in themselves, but as communicative instruments enabling the revelatory message to be more readily understood by the logic and imagination of seventh-century audiences [46].

Khalafallah's construction of meaning relies heavily upon the concept of imagination (*al-khayāl*) [47]. He argues that God employs imagination as a medium of communication because it represents the most effective human means for expressing abstract emotions and ideas.[48] Consequently, the narrative meaning of the Qur'an is constructed through the power of dialogue and the atmosphere of mystery deliberately created to shape religious consciousness [49].

As an example, in the narrative of Prophet Lot, Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah does not dwell upon debates concerning the specific substance cast down from the sky (*sijjīl*). Instead, he analyzes the progression of the story through several psychological phases in order to illustrate the inner turmoil experienced by Prophet Lot in confronting his people. The meaning constructed from the narrative thus becomes a source of motivation for the Prophet Muhammad, affirming that Allah would likewise grant him assistance amid the pressures imposed by his opponents in Mecca [39].

In conclusion, Khalafallah's theory of narrative offers a new paradigm that views the Qur'an not as a rigid historical document, but as a living and transformative revelation. Although his ideas generated theological controversy concerning the authority of the text, his contribution successfully opened new horizons for understanding how the Qur'an employs linguistic beauty and narrative depth to convey eternal divine messages. Through this approach, the Qur'an remains a relevant book of guidance because its meaning is no longer confined to the past, but continues to engage in dialogue with the social and spiritual realities of modern humanity.

Table 3. *Profile of Khalafallah's Model of Meaning Construction (Narrative Functionalism)*

Dimension	Indicator	Characteristics
Source of meaning	Narrative and psychological interaction	Meaning is constructed through the impact of narrative on the audience's psyche (al-athar al-nafsi)
Core principle	Narrative functionalism	The truth of the Qur'an (al-ḥaqq) lies in its pedagogical effectiveness, not in historical correspondence
Method of analysis	Historical-literary approach	Five stages: text collection → chronological arrangement of revelation → textual-literary interpretation → thematic classification → analysis of originality
Nature of meaning	Dynamic and relative-contextual	Meaning shifts according to the psychological needs of the audience and the revelatory context
Textual authority	Instrumental and communicative	The text functions as a mediator of moral meaning, not as a factual historical report

C. Comparative Analysis (*Muqāranah*)

The emergence of the literary approach within twentieth-century Qur'anic exegesis marked a fundamental epistemological shift in the intellectual history of Islam. This phenomenon was not merely a replacement of methodological instruments, but rather a philosophical reorientation concerning how revelation should be positioned within the cultural and linguistic sphere of humanity. At the heart of this transformation was an effort to liberate the Qur'anic text from the constraints of atomistic interpretation, which tended to fragment verses into isolated legal or theological units, and to move instead toward a holistic and organic understanding through the lens of aesthetics [50]. This paradigm is rooted in the premise that the Qur'an, prior to becoming a source of law (*kitāb al-tashrī'*) or moral guidance (*kitāb al-hidāyah*), is fundamentally a linguistic and literary phenomenon emerging within a highly sophisticated Arabic tradition [51]. Consequently, in order to grasp the transcendental divine message, the exegete must first submit to the principles of linguistic beauty and narrative structure that constitute the medium of revelation itself.

A comparative analysis between the thought of Bint al-Shati and Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah becomes especially significant because both figures represent the principal exponents of the intellectual school of Amin al-Khuli at the University of Cairo. Amin al-Khuli promoted the provocative slogan, "*awwal al-tajdīd qatl al-qadīm fahman*" ("the beginning of renewal is the dismantling of old understandings"), aiming to reconstruct traditional exegetical methodologies that had become

stagnant and repetitive [52]. Although both scholars emerged from the same intellectual milieu, their methodological applications developed along fundamentally divergent trajectories, producing a spectrum of literary interpretation that ranges from linguistic conservatism on one side to narrative radicalism on the other. Bint al-Shati' concentrated on semantic precision and a rigorous principle of anti-synonymity, whereas Khalafallah explored the psychological and artistic dimensions of Qur'anic narratives, at times setting aside historical factuality in favor of deeper moral significance.

A deeper examination of these two thinkers reveals a productive tension within contemporary exegesis: between the text as an autonomous linguistic entity and the text as a dynamic instrument of communication. Bint al-Shati sought to preserve the sanctity of the text through the rigidity of linguistic analysis in order to demonstrate the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jāz*) within every lexical choice [53]. By contrast, Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah undertook a deconstruction of historical narrative, proposing that the Qur'an employs symbolism and literary techniques in order to shape the consciousness of its audience [54]. This divergence carries profound implications for the construction of textual authority: whether meaning is absolute and textually grounded, or relative and contextually constructed. This analysis therefore seeks to examine how these methodological similarities and differences shape the character of modern exegesis in reconstructing the meaning of revelation for contemporary audiences. Most fundamentally, the method derived from divine revelation—together with the worldview and patterns of thought formed by it—originates from the highest authority. Such a method is accepted by the human soul because it corresponds to the *fitrah* implanted by Allah within humanity. From this point emerges a fundamental transformation, constituting even the beginning of humanity's rebirth in both worldview and mode of life [55].

1. Similarities: Literary Approach and the Rejection of Narrow Literalism

Despite the sharp operational differences between them, there exists a foundational agreement that unites both scholars within the same literary school of exegesis:

- a. The Literary Approach as the Basis of Exegesis: Both scholars position the Qur'an as the greatest literary text in the Arabic language (*Kitāb al-'Arabiyyah al-Akbar*). Understanding the divine message therefore requires a profound comprehension of the "garment" of that message, namely the Arabic language itself. Both

adopt the principle of Amin al-Khuli, which prioritizes the internal study of the text before external analysis.[25]

- b. Rejection of Narrow Literalistic Approaches: Both reject the method of classical exegetes who interpreted Qur'anic verses in a fragmented or atomistic manner without considering the broader context of the sūrah as an integrated whole. They argue that the Qur'an should be allowed to explain itself through its own structure (*al-Qur'ān yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan*), while employing the critical analytical tools of literary studies [56],[57].
- c. Thematic Method (*Mawḍū'ī*): Both scholars employ the method of collecting all verses related to the same theme or lexical root (*jam' al-nuṣūṣ*) in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of meaning that corresponds to the "internal logic" of the Qur'an [58],[22].
- d. Textual Objectivity and the Rejection of Reductionism: Both are committed to distinguishing the truth of the Qur'an from the temporary truths of science. Bint al-Shati firmly maintains that the Qur'an is not a scientific textbook [59]. Similarly, Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah argues that excessive focus on scientific proof or historical factuality obscures the primary function of Qur'anic narratives as mediators of spiritual messages [60]. Both scholars likewise agree in rejecting *Isrā'īliyyāt* traditions, which they regard as undermining the purity of the Qur'an's literary structure.

2. Differences: Methodology and Epistemology

The major divergence between the two scholars emerges when they proceed to the stage of textual analysis:

- a. Methodological Focus (Microscopy of Language vs. Macroscopy of Narrative):
 - 1) Bint al-Shati applies what may be termed a "linguistic microscopy," focusing on vocabulary (*lafẓ*) and sentence structure (*uslūb*) [61]. She reinforces the theory of anti-synonymity; for instance, the term *al-insān* cannot be replaced by *al-bashar* or *al-nās*, since each term possesses its own unique semantic precision.
 - 2) Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah, by contrast, concentrates on the "architecture of narrative" (*al-fann al-qaṣaṣī*). He examines dramatic elements such as plot, characterization,

and psychological atmosphere, arguing that the Qur'an employs literary techniques—such as ellipsis—to emphasize moral messages rather than to provide complete historical data [38].

b. Orientation of Meaning (Linguistic-Bayānī vs. Narrative-Contextual):

- 1) For Bint al-Shatī', meaning is inherent and objective within the linguistic structure of the text and is discovered through rigorous linguistic deduction.
- 2) For Khalafallah, meaning is contextual and psychological, discovered through the impact produced upon the soul of the listener (*al-athar al-nafsi*) via the interaction between the text and the socio-psychological context of its audience.

Table 4. *Typology of Meaning Construction in Contemporary Literary Qur'anic Exegesis*

Dimension of Comparison	Linguistic Stability Model (Bint al-Shatī')	Narrative Functionalism Model (Khalafallah)
Ontological status of meaning	Meaning is inherent and already embedded within the linguistic structure of the text	Meaning is constructed through the interaction between the text and the psychological context of the audience
Primary unit of analysis	Lexemes (words) and <i>uslūb</i> (syntactic structure)	Narrative elements (plot, characters, dialogue, psychological atmosphere)
Epistemic principle	Anti-synonymity: each lexical item possesses a unique and irreplaceable meaning	Functionalism: truth (<i>al-ḥaqq</i>) is measured by pedagogical and moral effectiveness
Methodological approach	Linguistic-inductive: collecting all occurrences of a lexical item in the Qur'an and analyzing them systematically	Historical-literary: examining psychological coherence (<i>munāsabah nafsiyyah</i>) between narrative and the socio-psychological context of the audience
Treatment of historical context	Chronology of revelation is used to trace the development of linguistic meaning	Chronology of revelation is used to understand the psychological needs of the original audience
Nature of meaning produced	Stable, absolute-textual, and universally applicable across time	Dynamic, relative-contextual, and responsive to socio-psychological conditions
Use of external materials	Rejected (e.g., <i>Isrā'iliyyāt</i> , scientific exegesis, and irrelevant reports) to preserve textual purity	Critically filtered; historical-anthropological context is utilized to understand audience reception
Implications for textual authority	Textual authority is autonomous: meaning is independent of the reader	Textual authority is relational: meaning is completed through interaction with the reader
Epistemic risk	Linguistic reductionism: moral and theological messages may be reduced to lexical analysis	Hermeneutical relativism: meaning may lose stable textual grounding

3. Examples of Interpretive Perspectives

a) Bint al-Shati on Sūrat al-Ḍuḥā

Bint al-Shati applies a rigorous linguistic method in interpreting the verse:

وَاللَّيْلُ إِذَا سَجَىٰ

She upholds the principle of anti-synonymity, namely that every word in the Qur'an possesses a unique meaning that cannot be replaced by another term. In her analysis, the phrase *idhā saajā* does not merely describe a natural phenomenon, but rather evokes an atmosphere of silence and inner tranquility analogous to the interruption of revelation (*fatrat al-wahy*). She rejects detailed narrations concerning the specific causes behind the interruption of revelation when they appear forced or speculative, preferring instead to interpret the phenomenon as a psychological calmness necessary for the Prophet Muhammad to prepare his heart for the next stage of revelation. For Bint al-Shati', the lexical choice of *sajā* demonstrates divine precision in constructing an emotional atmosphere that reinforces the consolatory message directed toward the Prophet, while simultaneously affirming the bayānī inimitability of the Qur'an [27].

b) Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah on the Story of Kan'ān (Q. Hūd: 42–46)

Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah analyzes the story of Kan'ān through the framework of *al-fann al-qaṣaṣī* (the art of storytelling), classifying it within the historical-literary (*adabī tārikhī*) model. He does not focus on technical aspects or historical factuality, such as the details of the ark or the magnitude of the flood. Instead, his attention centers upon the human drama between the compassion of a father—Prophet Noah—and the arrogance of his son, Kan'ān. Khalafallah interprets the expression *al-qaṣaṣ al-ḥaqq* ("the true narrative") not as empirical historical validation, but rather as the truth of the message's purpose (*ḥaqīqah ma'nawīyyah*) [36]. The moral lesson conveyed is that faith constitutes an individual responsibility that cannot simply be inherited through blood relations. Through literary techniques that foreground the psychological dimensions of its characters, the narrative functions as a powerful pedagogical instrument intended to awaken the emotional and moral consciousness of its audience.

Moving beyond description toward critical evaluation, each model carries distinct strengths and vulnerabilities that a purely comparative account risks leaving implicit. The strength of Bint al-Shatī's linguistic-stability model lies in its capacity to discipline interpretation against arbitrary or ideologically motivated readings, since every claim about meaning must be anchored in demonstrable patterns of Qur'anic usage; its limitation is that this same discipline can become rigid when applied to passages whose meaning plausibly depends on audience, occasion, or rhetorical purpose rather than lexical precision alone, and it offers little guidance for interpreting genuinely ambiguous or metaphorical expressions. The strength of Khalafallah's narrative-functionalism model lies in its ability to account for the moral and pedagogical effectiveness of Qur'anic narrative without becoming entangled in unresolvable historical verification; its limitation is that, by locating truth in pedagogical effect rather than textual or historical correspondence, it risks an interpretive relativism in which competing readings become difficult to adjudicate once the criterion of correspondence is set aside. Rather than treating linguistic stability and narrative functionalism as strict binary opposites, it is therefore more defensible to view them as anchoring two ends of a broader hermeneutical spectrum concerned with where interpretive authority is located—in the fixed structure of the text or in its communicative effect upon the reader—a spectrum along which most literary exegetes, including Bint al-Shatī and Khalafallah themselves in their less programmatic moments, in practice occupy intermediate positions.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that although Bint al-Shatī and Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah emerged from the same intellectual tradition of the Amin al-Khulī School, they developed two distinct models of meaning construction. Bint al-Shatī locates the meaning of the Qur'an within the text itself, making the exegete's task one of uncovering rather than constructing meaning. In contrast, Khalafallah argues that meaning is realized through the interaction between Qur'anic narrative and its audience, rendering meaning dynamic and contextual. Based on this distinction, the study proposes two analytical models—linguistic stability and narrative functionalism—organized around a single epistemological question: where does interpretive authority reside? These models not only explain the differences between the two scholars but also provide a systematic framework for classifying other literary approaches to Qur'anic exegesis along the spectrum between text-centered and reader-centered

interpretation. It should be noted, however, that this typology is derived from the intellectual tradition of the Amin al-Khuli School alone; its applicability to literary exegetes outside this tradition remains to be tested in future research.

The study further argues that these models should be understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. While linguistic stability safeguards textual integrity through semantic precision, narrative functionalism highlights the moral and pedagogical power of Qur'anic narratives. Accordingly, future developments in literary exegesis should integrate linguistic rigor with narrative sensitivity to balance textual authority and contextual relevance. The proposed typology also offers a useful framework for future research on other literary exegetes and on hybrid approaches that combine linguistic and narrative strategies within a single exegetical methodology.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest, whether financial, personal, or professional, that could be perceived as influencing the research process or the interpretation of findings presented in this manuscript. The study was conducted independently and objectively, without any external influence that could compromise academic integrity or research credibility.

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Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for language refinement and manuscript formatting purposes. The conceptual framework, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, and overall intellectual content of this study were conducted entirely by the author. Therefore, the author maintains full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and academic integrity of this manuscript.

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