

## **Hermeneutics and the Qur’anic Texts in the Intellectual Linguistic Context**

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### **Abstract**

Hermeneutical approach in dealing with the Qur’an as the holy book of Islam is wanted to be adopted by Muslims. Indeed, the issue of Qur’anic hermeneutics can illustrate this dimension of the meaning of hermeneia. The Qur’an was revealed in Arabic language onto the Prophet (PBWH), who was an inhabitant of a specific spacio-temporal world constituting its own social, cultural and historical horizon. The language of the Qur’an probably is the most important of its miraculous aspects and its distinct language in many verses. When scholars studied the Qur’an as a miracle however, its language and the style occupied the highest position in their studies. In early stages of Islam, scholars who dealt with the Qur’an and its interpretation considered it as a supernatural phenomenon and dealt with it from this perspective. Thus, this article attempts to discuss its definition, concept and principle from the views of prominent Muslim and Western Scholars such as Hamidu’l-Din Farahi, Amin Ahsan Islahi, Muhammad Arkoun, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and F. A. Wolf in order to comprehend further about their philosophy of thought on the issues. Hermeneutics in global context seems a theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning. In this sense, there are threefold meaning might be used to display hermeneutics like ‘Hermeneutic as saying’, ‘Hermeneutic as explanation’ and ‘Hermeneutic as translation’ that describe the intellectual linguistic context of Qur’anic hermeneutics.

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### *Definition of Hermeneutics*

Part of problem of the modern concepts that it very difficult to set up a commonly definition. Even hermeneutics is not far from this obstacle. Being a Greek term could help to realize the reason for this difficulty. Nonetheless in quest of a good definition of the term hermeneutics there are many statements trying to define the term, for example it can be defined as;

‘(1) the theory of biblical exegesis; or (2) general philological methodology; or (3) the science of all linguistic understanding; or (4) the methodological foundation of Geisteswissenschaften; or (5) the phenomenology of Dasein and of existential understanding; or (6) the systems of interpretation, both re-collective and iconoclastic, used by man to reach the meaning behind myths and symbols or (7) finally ‘as theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning’ (Joseph Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 1, and Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1969.

However these definitions have no common thread as a defining character or a fixed essence of the term hermeneutics except for the last definition which would not be comprehensive therefore not appropriate definition. The better way of grasping this complex term is to consider, in detail, the specific arguments and theories of the major thinkers who build up the tradition of hermeneutics.

In this device, a text is brought to the understanding as a ‘whole in relation to which individual parts acquire their meaning’ and vice versa (Bleicher 1980, pp. 2, 13, 258) It reminds us of the basic doctrine of *Farahi’s* school of thought concerning Qur’anic hermeneutics. Although *Farahi* had no acquaintance with Flacius’ work and he had not as well to react against any ‘Church’. But like Flacius, who played a vital role in working out new theories for biblical interpretation, he laid a new foundation for the development of Qur’anic *hermeneutics*. He opined that the Qur’an is not a set of discrete verses; instead it is an organic whole wherein the verses are integrally connected. Furthermore, a verse should be interpreted in the nexus of the

other verses, that is to say, the Qur'an should be interpreted in the light of its own rather than by any other external authority (See Hamidu'l-Din Farahi, *Majmu'a Tafasir-i-Farahi*, Urdu tr. *Amin Ahsan Islahi*, Lahore, Faran Foundation, 1991, pp. 27-34)

According to F. A. Wolf (1759-1824), interpretation is a kind of dialogue between the author and the interpreter and the dialogue takes place at the spiritual level. So the interpreter must have a talent of 'entering into the mental world' of the author, as without it the explanation of the text is not possible. It means that the grasping of a text is characterized by a twofold enterprise: first, the interpreter has to understand the text by a dialogical process at the spiritual level and second, he has to explain his understanding to others (R. E. Palmer (1969), pp. 81-82).

### ***Two Dimensional Interpretation***

Schleiermacher's hermeneutical philosophy is characterized by an amalgamation of the hermeneutical theories before him with a touch of his own creative approach.<sup>3</sup> He defines hermeneutics as an 'art of understanding'<sup>4</sup>, i.e., it is something to deal with the possibilities of understanding a text and its modes of interpretation. He considers a text as an utterance whether spoken or written. Furthermore, an act of speaking is only an outer side of thinking so 'hermeneutics is a part of the art of thinking', and is, therefore, philosophical in nature. There are two dimensions of interpretation namely grammatical and psychological; grammatical because the text is an act of speaking which is always expressed through language, and psychological because it is a manifestation of the speaker's [the author's] thought.

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<sup>3</sup> In the background of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, Dilthey included Winkelmann's interpretation of works of art, Herder's congenial empathy into the spirit of ages and people as well as the philology of Herder's, Heyne's and Wolf's. Along with all of these, the traditions of romanticism and of German transcendental philosophy were also combined to constitute Schleiermacher's thought. See W. Dilthey (trans. H. P. Rickman, 1976), pp.246-263; K. M-Vollmer (1985), pp. 8-12; R. E. Palmer (1969), p. 75

<sup>4</sup> The first book concerning Schleiermacher's hermeneutics was published posthumously in 1838 by one of his students, F. Lucke. This book called 'Hermeneutics and Criticism' was composed of notes taken by the students who attended Schleiermacher's lectures and of his own notes and outlines. In 1958, Schleiermacher's manuscripts were published for the first time by one of Gadamer's students, H. Kimmerle. This study concerning Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is based upon K. M-Vollmer's selections from the English translation by J. Duke and J. Forstman of the Kimmerle edition. These selections comprise the 'Introduction', 'Part I: Grammatical Interpretation' and 'Part II: Technical Interpretation' of Schleiermacher's compendium of 1819, together with his marginal notes 1828. See K. M-Vollmer (1985), pp. 72-97

For Schleiermacher, understanding a speech [text] always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities, and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker [the author]. Understanding a text depends upon the coherence of the two moments discussed above and neither of the two dimensions is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ in terms of its importance rather both are equally crucial. Both of the dimensions should be applied simultaneously on the text to understand it. Keeping in mind this task, the interpreter should be competent linguistically, on one hand, and able enough to know people psychologically, on the other.

### ***A. The Grammatical Interpretation***

Schleiermacher’s notion of the grammatical interpretation is based upon the two canons as follows: 1. ‘A more precise determination of any point in a given text must be decided on the basis of the use of language common to the author and his original public<sup>5</sup>. 2. ‘The meaning of each word of a passage must be determined by the context in which it occurs.’ The first canon can be grasped by making a distinction between meaning (Bedeutung) and sense (Sinn) of a word. Bedeutung, for Schleiermacher, is something ‘what a word is thought to mean ‘in and of itself’, while Sinn is something ‘what the word is thought to mean in a given context’. So having a single meaning a word could acquire a range (Cyclus) of the various senses. In the interpretation of a text, the meaning of a word should be determined by the sense in which the author used the word in the language shared by him with his original public. In order to achieve the task of the grammatical interpretation, the interpreter should be very well equipped with the comprehensive knowledge of the language shared by the author and his public. This kind of knowledge can be obtained if an interpreter grasps an author’s linguistic ‘sphere’ which is constituted by the various factors of the author’s life and his age. ‘The statement that interpreter must consciously grasp an author’s linguistic sphere in contrast to other organic aspects of his

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<sup>5</sup> This canon of Schleiermacher’s is very much similar to one of the principles of reflection on the *Qur’an* presented by both *Farahi* and *Islahi* According to the principle, the meaning of a word used in the *Qur’an* should be determined in the perspective of the language shared by the Prophet (PBWH) and the people he addressed. Therefore, in order to understand the *Qur’an* one should have a thorough knowledge of that language. Furthermore, being an interpreter of the *Qur’an* one should study the whole literature of that time including *Khutbat* (elocutions) so deeply that one could become capable enough of interpreting the *Qur’an* in the nexus of the language shared by the Prophet (PBWH) and his original public. See *Farahi* (Urdu trans. *Islahi*, 1991), pp. 27-66 and also see the Introduction of *Islahi, Tadabbur-i-Qur’an*, Lahore, Faran Foundation, 1994, Vol. 1-9.

language implies that someone understand the author better than he understood himself.’ It is so as, at times, when someone interprets a text, he confronts certain difficulties and problems; and when he attempts to solve that problems he ‘become aware of many things of which the author himself was unaware’.

According to the second canon, a passage in which a word occurs constitutes a ‘determinative linguistic sphere’ as a context within which the meaning of the word is to be determined. Likewise, the whole of the text is a context in which a passage of it can be understood. It may be that one moves, in order to decipher an appropriate meaning of a word, from the second canon to the first. When the context of a passage is not sufficient to explain the meaning of a word, ‘one must turn to other passages where these same words occur, and under certain conditions, to other works of the author or even to works written by others in which these words appear. But one must always remain within the same linguistic sphere’.

### ***b. The Psychological or Technical Interpretation***

As stated earlier a text is, for Schleiermacher, an act of speaking, that is, a linguistic manifestation of an author’s thought. So the meaning of the text is grounded upon the primordial speech act of a speaker [author]. And an author is not merely an ego, having the label of Romantic subjectivism, as a fixed substance as little as the ‘I’ in Fichte’s science of knowledge, instead, as M-Vollmer put it, ‘he must be seen in the context of linguisticity as something fluid and dynamic, something mediated, an act from which the text originates(K. M-Vollmer (1985), p. 11) This speech act of an author amalgamates the two aspects of his personality: the inner system of his thought, and the system of language as its outer expression. Therefore, both grammatical and psychological (technical) interpretations are applicable on the text at the same time. ‘But in the technical [psychological] interpretation the unity of the work [text], its theme, is viewed as the dynamic principle impelling the author, and the basic features of the composition are viewed as his distinctive nature, revealing itself in that movement’.

### ***The Threefold Meaning Of Hermeneuein-Hermeneia***

Regarding their ancient usage, the Greek word hermeneuein and hermeneia have a threefold meaning depending upon the three-dimensional role Hermes played mediating between god and

man by bringing messages from the former to the latter. These three dimensions of meaning of the verb *hermeneuein* are: '(1) to express aloud in words, that is, 'to say'; (2) to explain, as in explaining a situation; and (3) to translate, as in the translation of a foreign tongue'.(Richard E. Palmer (1969), p. 13) They can be understood with respect to the threefold role Hermes played as an interpreter, that is, he, first, had to utter the messages of the gods in front of the mortals; second, he had to explain the messages in order to make the mortals understand them; and third, the utterance and the explanation both cannot be complete until and unless the messages have not been translated from the divine and the extra-mundane language to the mundane one of the mortals.

#### **a. 'Hermeneia' as Saying**

Being a mediator between the gods and the mortals, the basic job of Hermes was to say or to express what the gods told him for the mortals. So the first primary dimension of the noun *hermeneia* is 'saying' or 'expressing'. How can 'interpreting' be identified, though partially, with 'saying' or 'expressing'? This identification may be understood by viewing the definition of 'spoken words' given in Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias* (On Interpretation) which states: 'spoken words are the symbols of mental experience'. (Aristotle, On Interpretation, Part 1, Section 16a of *Organon*, ed. R. Mckeeon (1941)). It implies that when someone speaks something, he not merely express what he has in our own mind by producing certain sounds rather, at the same time, he interprets our mental experiences through certain words manifested as symbolic sounds. So speaking itself is a process of interpretation. The role of spoken words is very significant in those religions, which are text-based like Islam. The message of Islam was oral as in the Bultmanian theology in which the scriptures are considered to be 'kerygma, a message to be proclaimed' (Richard E. Palmer (1969), p. 19).

The message of Islam was, first, orally given from God, through Gabriel, to the Prophet, and then from the Prophet to all human beings. The foremost purpose of the message is to be preached and communicated to every corner of the world. This task can only be achieved through spoken language, as Palmer put it (though Palmer said these words concerning Christian theology; but they are equally applicable on Muslim theology as well): 'Certainly the task of

theology is to explain the Word in the language and context of each age, but it also must express and proclaim the Word in the vocabulary of the age.’ (Ibid, p.19).

Interpretation, as an oral expression, reminds us of the significance of oral recitation of the Qur’an which is very popular an activity in our religious culture. The Qur’an derives much of its dynamism and impact from the strength of the spoken words. It was the miraculous power of the spoken words that the understanding of the message was to be communicated with such a great pace throughout the Arab Peninsula. Again it was the miraculous power of the spoken words that the Prophet and his Companions were that much successful, as the interpreters of the Qur’an, in transforming the human situation of their day from undeveloped to civilize in religious, political and social terms. But unfortunately our present day religious scenario is deprived of that extraordinary power of the message as the oral recitation of the Qur’an is absolutely devoid of any sense of understanding or interpretation.

Today, the overall approach of Muslims to the Word of God is not interpretative or understanding oriented instead very superficial and pragmatic. People recite the Qur’an, as *Islahi* put it, ‘to transfer the reward of its recital to their dear departed ones as well as for softening the agony of death’. (Amin Ahsan Islahi, *Understanding the Qur’an: Some Initial Conditions (chapter 1), Principles of Reflection on the Qur’an* , trans. A.R. Afaki; see the Renaissance, Lahore, Oct. 1999, Vol. 9: No. 10, p. 15).

### **b. ‘Hermeneia’ as Explanation**

Interpretation is not merely ‘to say’ or ‘to express’ something rather it is far more than that. If Hermes was an interpreter, he was not merely to convey the message of the gods to the mortals rather he had ‘to explain’ the message as well to make the mortals understand it aptly. This aspect of Hermes’s job determines the second dimension of the meaning of the noun hermeneia that is explanation. In *Cratylus*, Plato equates ‘interpretation’ with ‘explanation’ while discussing the meaning and explanation of certain divine names.

In the dialogue, Socrates says that Hermes as an interpreter ‘has a great deal to do with language’ and that he is not only a speaker rather ‘the contriver of tales of speeches’. (Plato, *Cratylus*,

trans. Benjamin Jowett, Sections 406b-408b) It means that being an interpreter Hermes was not merely to convey the words of the gods to the mortals, but he was to make them grasp the words properly through certain explanations in the form of tales or speeches etc. That is to say, when someone has to ‘interpret’ some text whether it is a religious scripture, a social issue, a piece of art, or a literary work, he does not has to simply describe it but he should ‘explain’ it by giving some additional account as an elaboration of its meaning.

Since the interpretation of the text as an elaboration of its meaning is always to be linked with it in certain context, therefore, it makes us understand the text more clearly. So the explanation of a text is nothing but an extension of the meaning of the very text. In the light of this second dimension of the meaning of hermeneia’ it could be understood that the hermeneutical role of the Prophet as a mediator between God and the mortals. He was to be raised up among the mortals not only to deliver the message of God to them rather he had to explain it as well so that they could understand it clearly. In this regard, the *Sunnah* and the *Ahadith* of the Prophet are considered to be an extension of the meaning of the Word of God. Through the *Sunnah* and the *Ahadith*, he made his companions understand what was to be revealed on him from God and thereby he educated them in accordance with that very revelation. That is to say, the task of the Prophet was not only to deliver the Word of God, as it is, to human beings; rather he had to explain the same in order to educate them as well as to purify their souls, as the *Qur’an* says:

We sent a messenger from among you to convey our message to you and cleanse you, and  
teach you the Book and the Wisdom. (2:151 )<sup>6</sup>

In the nexus of this verse, the second dimension of the meaning of hermeneia, that is, ‘explanation’ is extremely important in the sense that being the educator and the purifier of soul the apostle could achieve his main purpose by ‘explaining’ the Word of God in his own words (*Ahadith*) as well as by his own actions (*Sunnah*).

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study concerning the Prophet’s role as an educator and a purifier of souls see *Amin Ahsan Islahi Tadhkiyah-i-Nafs*, 2 Vols. Vol. 1, Malik Sons Pub. Faisalabad, 1994 and Vol. 2, Faran Foundation, Lahore, 1994.



### c. 'Hermeneia' as Translation

Being an interpreter Hermes mediates between the two worlds namely the world of the gods and that of the mortals. To the mortals, the former is an alien, foreign, strange and un-intelligible world. The role of Hermes is to make that world intelligible for the mortals and to determine the third dimension of the meaning of the word hermeneia, which is 'translation'. (Richard E. Palmer (1969), p. 26). The translation of a text of a foreign language into one's own language is an attempt to render it understandable to one's original public. It is not only an 'act', as Palmer (Ibid., p. 27) put it 'of finding synonyms' and their juxtaposing in a particular manner rather by virtue of the translation one becomes able to have a meaningful view of the text in one's own language.

A good translator not only puts a particular synonym of his own language against a particular word of the text, but he coins certain composite terms or even long phrases as well to make his rendering as clear to his reader as possible. This aspect of 'translation' is one which makes it a hermeneutical activity as it is characterized by a touch of interpretation through the composite terms and the long phrases against a mere literal rendering of the text from one language into another by the juxtaposition of synonyms. Furthermore, the issue of Qur'anic hermeneutics can illustrate this dimension of the meaning of hermeneia. The Qur'an was revealed in a particular language (Arabic) onto the Prophet, who was an inhabitant of a specific spacio-temporal world constituting its own social, cultural and historical horizon. The task of the Prophet was not only to impart the message of God to human beings, but he had to educate them as well as to purify their souls, as the Qur'an says:

It is He Who raised among the children of Ismail a Messenger from amongst them, who recites His revelations to them, purifies them and teaches them the Book and the Wisdom, for before him they were clearly in error. (Qur'an, 62:2)

If a today's exegete, being an inhabitant of our own society, intends to translate the Qur'an into our own language, then he should not work out an interpretation of its text by juxtaposing the traditions concerned; instead he should interpret the Qur'an as a mediator between the two worlds. That is to say, his interpretation of the Qur'an should be characterized by the fusion of

the two horizons whereby he could make his readers understand the Word of God perfectly as well as it could help them in getting the right guidance in leading a good life in their own world.

### *Hermeneutics and the Qur'anic Text*

Hermeneutical approach in dealing with the Qur'an the holy book of Islam is wanted to be adopted by Muslims. In his Book *The Unthought-of in the Contemporary Islamic Thought* Mohammad Arkoun, aims to introduce a new problematisation of Revelation through the example of the Qur'an (Arkoun 2002, p. 30). In earlier work in French under the title of *Lectures du Coran*, Arkoun proposed a programme of research with the aim of opening a new field for a comparative study of Revelation as an historical, linguistic, cultural and anthropological articulation of thought common to the three 'revealed' religions (Arkoun, 1987, p. 246).

"my purpose, Arkoun says, was then to and still is, to reverse the approach of Revelation from the dogmatic theological systems developed by competing, opposed, self-promoting ethno-cultural groups during the middle ages, to the critical, deconstructive analysis of social sciences applied to the rich topic of religious phenomena (Arkoun 2002, p.30)

It is meant to be the first step towards modernity in the Muslim world. It is the reading which deals with the text as an independent fact. Independent from the author and from the every other fact (Harb, 1994, p. 34) and according to this view, all texts, literature, scientific philosophical or religious are the same and should be dealt with from the same viewpoint and by the same methodology. As in the end all texts are linguistic products and are subjects to the linguistic analysis. However, according to Abu Zaid the hermeneutical approach is the only correct method to deal with the Qur'an and it is the only *Qur'an* to come out with authentic reading and right conclusions (Abu Zaid, 2000, p.9).

But is it the right thing to deal with the text any text only from the linguistic point of view? Will it suffice to deal with any text from one-fold perspective? It is indeed going to be imperfect reading as it neglects important aspects of the text, historical, social and psychological. This reading will open the text, especially in the Arabic language, to many readings without indications of the weight opinion which will leave the reader confused and not capable to

distinguish these opinions. Also this reading opens the text to the reader to impose his own reading on the text even if the text does not carry this meaning.

It could be true as Ali Harb concludes that calling other methods for reading a text could cause some sort of difficulty and inconsistency if there is no proper link between these methods (Harb, 2005, p.15), but it is still valid to say that the unity of the subject of the text to be read is likely to be the assurance of the coherence of these methods. This could be called as 'multi-method' reading; it is a necessity for reading a text of an open language where it is impossible to read it in isolation of these methods. However, that in the case of hermeneutics it would never have meant to read the text in such isolation.

As for the Qur'an it is partly described as the greatest book of Arabic. The language of the Qur'an probably is the most important of its miraculous aspects. If people talk about the Qur'anic self image they would say that the Qur'an itself laid emphasis on this point; i.e., its distinct language in many verses. When scholars studied the Qur'an as a miracle however, its language and the style occupied the highest position in their studies. From early stages of Islam, scholars who dealt with the Qur'an and its interpretation considered it as a supernatural phenomenon and dealt with it from this perspective. They tried to bring to a close the distinguishing features of the Qur'an which made of it a miraculous text. They ended up with the result that the key characteristic is its divinity, holiness and sacredness. Any other feature to be mentioned would have sprung or branched from this main character.

### *Conclusion*

The conclusion could be drawn from this study is that certain doctrines of the Western hermeneutics are somewhat similar to that of Muslim hermeneutics. Hence, in order to work out an appropriate methodology for understanding the *Qur'an*, Muslim hermeneuticians or exegetes could benefit from the Western hermeneutics.

However bearing in mind the particularity of the Qur'an as a divine text and taking in consideration the historical background of the verses to be dealt with and the context they were revealed in.

It is crucial to understand, also that Muslim scholars have drawn some quid lines to those who approach the field of the Qur'anic interpretation. The understanding of the Qur'an requires certain preliminaries which are briefly described here.

The first essential condition necessary for the study of the Qur'an, is the knowledge of the Arabic language, such as for the understanding of Shakespeare it is impossible to get anywhere without the knowledge of the English language. In the same way, to acquaint oneself with the Qur'an without knowing the Arabic language is impossible.

The other essential condition is the knowledge of the history of Islam generally and the history of the Qur'an in particular; since, unlike the Bible and the Torah, this book was revealed gradually during a long period of twenty-three years of the Prophet's life, a tumultuous time in the history of Islam. It is on this account that many verses of the Qur'an are related to certain specific historical incident called *asbab al-Nuzul* or occasions of revelation which by itself does not restrict the meaning of the verses, but the knowledge of the particulars of revelation throws more light on the subject of the verses in an effective way.

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