

The Qur'anic Stories in Surah Al-Kahf: A Rhetorical and Semantic Approach in Light of Human Trials

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Abstract

This study examines the Qur'anic stories in Surah Al-Kahf from a rhetorical and semantic perspective, aiming to uncover the artistic and rhetorical methods employed by the Qur'anic text to construct meaning and guide humans toward steadfastness in faith and dealing with worldly trials. The research focuses on the four main stories in the surah: the People of the Cave, the Owner of the Two Gardens, Moses and Khidr, and Dhul-Qarnayn, analyzing rhetorical expressions such as metaphor, simile, dialogue, and repetition, as well as studying the symbolic semantic meanings carried by these stories. The study concludes that the Qur'anic stories combine artistic creativity with deep semantic significance and offer a comprehensive model for confronting human trials: religion, wealth, knowledge, and power. This makes Surah Al-Kahf a complete educational discourse capable of guiding humans in facing life's challenges.

Introduction

The Noble Qur'an is widely recognized for its linguistic and rhetorical excellence, which constitutes one of the essential aspects of its miraculous nature. Its language is characterized by aesthetic beauty, stylistic diversity, and a distinctive mode of expression that engages both the intellect and emotions of the reader or listener. Rather than merely transmitting doctrinal content, the Qur'anic discourse aims to shape human consciousness by integrating rational argumentation with emotional appeal.

Scholars have emphasized that the Qur'an addresses human beings through a dual communicative strategy. Al-Badawi argues that Qur'anic discourse simultaneously appeals to the cognitive and emotional dimensions, presenting divine ideas through logical reasoning while employing eloquent language capable of stirring the soul (al-Badawi, n.d.). Similarly, Sayyid Qutb highlights the role of Qur'anic narratives as a form of *da'wah* that influences both the mind and emotions through their artistic construction, narrative sequencing, and expressive language (Qutb, 1972). These perspectives underscore the pedagogical and persuasive functions embedded within Qur'anic storytelling.

Narratives constitute a central component of the Qur'anic discourse, serving not only aesthetic purposes but also educational, moral, and argumentative functions. Among the Qur'anic chapters, Surah al-Kahf is particularly notable for the richness of its narratives and the coherence of their thematic structure. The four major stories presented in this surah address different forms of trials (*fitan*) encountered by human beings, including challenges related to faith, wealth, knowledge, and authority. Despite the extensive scholarship on Qur'anic narratives in general, studies that integrate rhetorical analysis with semantic interpretation to explain how these narratives function collectively as an educational response to *fitan* remain relatively limited.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the rhetorical and semantic structures employed in the narratives of Surah al-Kahf and by demonstrating how these structures contribute to the surah's educational and faith-enhancing objectives. Specifically, the research aims to identify the dominant rhetorical devices used in the four narratives, analyze the semantic layers and ethical implications of each story, and reveal the thematic unity that connects them as a multidimensional treatment of trials. By doing so, the study offers a more integrated understanding of how Qur'anic narratives function as a coherent pedagogical discourse.

From a theoretical perspective, this research draws upon classical and contemporary approaches to Qur'anic rhetoric and semantics. Al-Jurjānī's concept of *nazm*, which locates eloquence in the relational organization of words and meanings, provides a foundational framework for analyzing rhetorical structure (al-Jurjānī, 1954). This framework is complemented by modern views that regard the Qur'anic text as an open semantic system in which aesthetic form and communicative purpose are closely intertwined (Faḍl, 2002; Abū Mūsā, 2007). In addition, semantic studies that emphasize the interaction between syntactic structure, context, and intended meaning inform the analytical approach of this research (Ḥassān & 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, 2008; Ḥallī, 2020).

Recent scholarship on Surah al-Kahf suggests that the surah exhibits a unified rhetorical design that integrates dialogue, repetition, rhythm, and imagery to cultivate awareness in confronting trials (al-Jubūrī & Ḥasan, 2021). Building on these studies, the present research contributes to international Qur'anic studies by offering a focused rhetorical-semantic reading of Surah al-Kahf that highlights its relevance as an educational model for addressing enduring human challenges. The findings are expected to enrich discussions on Qur'anic discourse, narrative pedagogy, and the application of classical rhetorical theory in contemporary textual analysis.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical design based on textual analysis to examine the narratives of Surah al-Kahf as a unified discourse addressing the concept of *fitnah* (trial). The analysis integrates rhetorical, semantic, and thematic approaches to explore the interaction between linguistic form, meaning construction, and thematic coherence. Rhetorical analysis is used to identify key devices such as metaphor, simile, dialogue, repetition, and narrative sequencing, while semantic analysis examines multiple layers of meaning—explicit, implicit, and symbolic—in order to uncover the ethical, educational, and faith-oriented messages conveyed by the text.

The thematic approach links individual narratives to the overall structure of Surah al-Kahf and its central theme of *fitnah*, demonstrating the internal coherence of the four major stories related to faith, wealth, knowledge, and authority. The primary data source is the text of the Holy Qur'an, specifically Surah al-Kahf, supported by classical tafsīr works, Arabic rhetorical references, and contemporary studies on Qur'anic narrative and discourse. The research procedure involves a contextual reading of narrative and dialogic passages, systematic identification of rhetorical patterns, and interpretive analysis of their semantic and ethical implications within the surah's thematic framework.

Results and Discussion

Rhetorical and Semantic Analysis of the Four Narratives in Surah al-Kahf

The rhetorical and semantic analysis of the four major narratives in Surah al-Kahf demonstrates that the surah functions as a coherent pedagogical discourse addressing different forms of human trials (*fitan*). This finding is consistent with Qutb's view that

Qur'anic narratives are not merely historical accounts but powerful instruments of moral and spiritual formation that address both emotion and intellect (Qutb, 1972). However, this study extends previous scholarship by showing how rhetorical devices and semantic structures operate collectively across the four narratives to construct a unified educational framework.

The narrative of the Companions of the Cave (Q. 18:9–26) illustrates the trial of faith through layered metaphors of divine power and protection. Classical exegetes have long emphasized the prolonged sleep of the youths as evidence of God's omnipotence; from a rhetorical–semantic perspective, this episode also functions as a pedagogical metaphor that reassures believers of divine care during periods of vulnerability (al-Badawi, n.d.). The cave, often interpreted as a physical refuge in traditional tafsīr, emerges here as a symbol of spiritual shelter that protects faith from ideological and social pressures. This interpretation aligns with modern rhetorical studies that view Qur'anic imagery as a means of shaping ethical awareness rather than merely conveying miraculous events (Faḍl, 2002).

The story of the Owner of the Two Gardens (Q. 18:32–44) represents the trial of wealth through vivid material imagery and sharp moral contrast. Previous studies on Qur'anic moral discourse have highlighted the ethical dangers of affluence when detached from gratitude and humility (Abū Mūsā, 2007). Building on these insights, the present analysis demonstrates how spatial imagery—the lush gardens and the flowing river—constructs a semantic field of abundance that intensifies the moral collapse of the arrogant owner. In contrast, the poor believing companion exemplifies spiritual richness, reinforcing what contemporary scholars describe as the Qur'anic inversion of worldly values, whereby material deprivation coexists with moral superiority (Ḥallī, 2020).

The narrative of Moses and al-Khiḍr (Q. 18:60–82) has been widely discussed in relation to Qur'anic epistemology and the limits of human knowledge (Ḥassān & 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, 2008). While earlier scholarship tends to emphasize its theological dimensions, this study adds a rhetorical–semantic reading by analyzing the sequence of al-Khiḍr's actions—damaging the ship, killing the boy, and repairing the wall—as metaphors for intellectual trials. In line with discourse-based semantic theories, these episodes highlight patience, humility, and trust in divine wisdom as essential epistemic virtues, reframing the narrative as an educational model for ethical learning rather than a purely doctrinal lesson (Faḍl, 2002).

Similarly, the story of Dhul-Qarnayn (Q. 18:83–101) has frequently been examined in studies on power, leadership, and justice in the Qur'an. Recent research suggests that Surah al-Kahf is structured upon a unified rhetorical framework that integrates ethical consciousness with narrative form (al-Jubūrī & Ḥasan, 2021). Building on this argument, the present study demonstrates that Dhul-Qarnayn functions as a metaphor for divinely guided authority. His journeys to the East and West symbolize human achievement bounded by moral responsibility, while the construction of the barrier against Gog and Magog represents the containment of chaos through justice and cooperation under divine guidance.

Semantic and Rhetorical Dimensions in Comparative Perspective

From a semantic perspective, the findings support the argument that meaning in the Qur'an emerges from the interaction between narrative structure, rhetorical devices, and thematic unity rather than from isolated verses (al-Jurjānī, 1954; Faḍl, 2002). Each narrative in Surah al-Kahf offers a practical and imitable model for confronting a specific type of trial: steadfast faith in the story of the Companions of the Cave, moral failure and awareness in the trial of wealth, intellectual humility in the pursuit of knowledge, and ethical responsibility in the exercise of power. This multidimensional treatment of *fitan*

extends earlier thematic studies by demonstrating how these narratives collectively address individuals, communities, and leaders within a single pedagogical discourse.

Rhetorically, the study confirms previous findings that Qur'anic rhetoric functions as a communicative strategy rather than decorative language (Abū Mūsā, 2007). Repetition reinforces key meanings and encourages reflection, dialogue animates moral tension and clarifies ethical choices, and metaphor translates abstract theological concepts into accessible experiential imagery. By explicitly linking rhetorical form to semantic function, this research strengthens its position within international Qur'anic studies and contributes to broader discussions on narrative-based pedagogy and ethical discourse.

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Qur'anic narratives in Surah al-Kahf form a coherent thematic unity centered on addressing the major types of trials faced by human beings, namely trials related to faith, wealth, knowledge, and authority. Through the strategic use of rhetorical devices such as sensory imagery, repetition, dialogue, and contrast, the Qur'an conveys profound educational, moral, and faith-oriented meanings. These rhetorical structures are not employed for aesthetic purposes alone; rather, they function as effective communicative tools that guide interpretation, stimulate reflection, and shape ethical awareness. The narratives of Surah al-Kahf thus exhibit a high degree of artistic refinement while simultaneously fulfilling clear pedagogical and moral objectives.

This study confirms that Qur'anic storytelling should be understood not merely as rhetorical narration or historical recounting, but as a practical educational medium designed to cultivate faith, moral character, and resilience in the face of recurring worldly trials. By presenting concrete and imitable narrative models, Surah al-Kahf offers guidance that remains relevant across social, ethical, and political contexts, including personal conduct, communal values, and principles of just governance. The integration of rhetorical and semantic analysis in this research further highlights the effectiveness of Qur'anic discourse in harmonizing form and meaning to achieve its educational aims.

In light of these findings, future research may benefit from adopting a comparative approach that examines Surah al-Kahf alongside other Qur'anic chapters that address similar themes of trial, such as Surah al-Kāfirūn or Surah al-Anbiyā', in order to explore broader patterns of thematic interconnection within the Qur'anic corpus. Further studies may also investigate the pedagogical implications of Surah al-Kahf in contemporary educational settings by analyzing its recitation and thematic integration within modern religious curricula. Additionally, more detailed rhetorical analyses at the syntactic and structural levels could be conducted to identify specific rhetorical mechanisms—such as ellipsis, antithesis, and conjunction patterns—and to clarify their role in reinforcing meaning and enhancing the persuasive power of Qur'anic narratives.

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