

# The Sufahā' in Qur'ān Literature: A Problem in Semiosis

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'The linguists, whom one meets everywhere these days, explain that every transaction in our culture – our money and mathematics, our games and gardens, our diet and our sexuality – is a language; this, of course, is why one meets so many linguists these days. And languages, too, are simply invented systems of exchange, attempts to turn the word into the world, sign into value, script into currency, code into reality. Of course, everywhere, . . . there are the politicians and the priests, the ayatollahs and the economists, who will try to explain the reality is what they say it is. Never trust them; trust only the novelists, those deeper bankers who spend their time trying to turn pieces of printed paper into value, but never pretend that the result is anything more than a useful fiction. Of course we need them: for what, after all, is our life but a great dance in which we are all trying to fix the best going rate of exchange . . .' Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange* (London: Arena, 1983), 8.

'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . But now we see through a glass darkly, and the truth, before it is revealed to all, face to face, we see in fragments (alas, how illegible) in the error of the world, so we must spell out its faithful signals even when they seem obscure to us and as if amalgamated with a will wholly bent on evil.' Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (London: Picador, 1983), 11.

## Introduction

WHEN reading classical Muslim exegetes such as Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224/838–310/923) or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (544/1150–606/1209), it is difficult not to notice what Clifford Geertz had described as the 'refiguration of social thought.'<sup>1</sup>) This phenomenon noted by Geertz is something that per-

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<sup>1</sup>) CLIFFORD GEERTZ, 'Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought' in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 19.

sists and vigorously confronts the modern scholar of the Qur'ān. Not only is the cultural map in terms of which we understand the revealed scripture redrawn (thanks to spectacular advances in social-scientific thought especially linguistics and psychology), but there is an entire 'alteration of the principles of mapping.'<sup>2)</sup> 'Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think,' says Geertz.<sup>3)</sup> A generation earlier, a similar point stated somewhat differently, was made by the Soviet language-philosopher and critic, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975). Bakhtin who made a major impact on modern language studies observed that in language the forces of dialogue struggle against the forces of monologue.<sup>4)</sup> The last mentioned try to fix meaning and close the text. Intertextuality, where a chain of meanings extend well beyond the limits of a single text or a corpus of wordings, allows for the articulation of other suppressed dimensions of the text. It is along these lines, that Fisher and Abedi asks: 'Can the polysemic and nomadic meanings of a text such as the Qur'ān overcome the unbewised efforts to reduce it to a monologic decree?'<sup>5)</sup>

French thinkers, like Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, following the Swiss linguist de Saussure, gave a new impetus to our understanding of the workings of language. Language is not only a set of arbitrary and conventional signs but we cannot seem to 'know anything outside the endless chain of substitutions that are signs.'<sup>6)</sup> In Derrida's words: 'from the moment that there is meaning there is nothing but signs. *We think only in signs.*'<sup>7)</sup> The end of the transcendental signifier threatens some of the most hallowed assumptions of logocentric modes of thinking.<sup>8)</sup> Logocentrism, that which is centered on the logos (speech, logic, reason, the Word of God), is any sig-

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<sup>2)</sup> GEERTZ, *op. cit.*, 20.

<sup>3)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4)</sup> M. M. BAKHTIN, 'The Dialogic Imagination' in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Norris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 75.

<sup>5)</sup> MICHAEL M. J. FISCHER & MEHDI ABEDI, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition*, 148; see also ANDY RIPPIN, 'Reading the Qur'ān with Richard Bell,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 112 (4), 1992, 639–647, esp. 637.

<sup>6)</sup> G. DOUGLAS ATKINS, *Reading Deconstruction, Deconstructive Reading* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 46; CARL RASCHKE, 'The Deconstruction of God,' *Deconstruction and Theology*, Thomas J. J. Altizer et al. (eds.) (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 7–8.

<sup>7)</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, *Of Grammatology*, (trans.) Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 50.

<sup>8)</sup> ATKINS, *op. cit.*, 40.

nifying system governed by the notion of self-presence of meaning; i. e., any system structured by a valorization of speech writing, immediacy over distance, identity over difference, and (self-)presence over all forms of absence, ambiguity, simulation, substitution, or negativity.<sup>9)</sup>

Recent studies on the intellectual history of Islamic discourses show that there was a growing propensity towards logocentrism between the first and fifth Islamic centuries.<sup>10)</sup> This was the result of a shift in the religious paradigm, where Islam graduated from being a minoritarian kerygmatic faith at first, into a triumphalist ethos of empire. The cultural production of Muslim intellectuals of that period was the main repository which reflected these socio-cultural changes. Since then logocentrism has dominated Islamic thought with very little challenge.<sup>11)</sup> As a matter of course, logocentrism reduces the political, anthropological, cultural determinants of language to a secondary importance in the general approach. Islamic discourses exhibit a longing for presence, for a constitutive reason (*logos*) and for an order of concepts claimed to exist in themselves, com-

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<sup>9)</sup> Barbara Johnson, translator's note 1, in JACQUES DERRIDA's, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>10)</sup> A KEVIN REINHART, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 178. Reinhart only illustrates a scenario in intellectual history, but it is my interpretation that it was a move towards logocentrism.

<sup>11)</sup> For some works that challenge logocentrism see MOHAMMAD ARKOUN, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984) and *Essais sur la pensee islamique* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984); also see RICHARD MARTIN, 'Islamic Textuality in Light of Poststructuralist Criticism,' in *A Way Prepared: Essays on Islamic Culture in Honor of Richard Bayly Winder* (New York & London: New York University Press, 1988); 'ADIL FĀKHŪRĪ, *ʿIlm al-Dilālah ʿinda ʿl-ʿArab: Dirāsah Muqāranah maʿ ʿl-simyāʿ al-ḥadītha* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīfah li ʿl-Ṭibāʿah wa al-Nashr, 1985). It is interesting to note that the Japanese scholar of Islam, Toshihiko Izutsu, favoured aspects of Derridian deconstruction, but pointed out that as long as we used language we cannot get out of logocentric metaphysics. [T. IZUTSU and H. LANDOLT, 'Sufism, Mysticism, Structuralism: A Dialogue', in *Religious Traditions*, 7–9 (1984–86), 6.] Norris also admits that deconstruction cannot hope to break with the philosophical discourse of modernity, namely logocentric reason, or a metaphysics of presence. Only by working within that logocentric discourse, its constitutive aporias and blindspots can deconstruction effectively reveal what has been suppressed. [CHRISTOPHER NORRIS, 'Deconstruction, post-modernism & the visual arts,' in *What is Deconstruction* (New York/London: Academy Edition & St. Martin's Press, 1988); also see G. DOUGLAS ATKINS, 'The Sign as a Structure of Difference: Derridean Deconstruction and Some of its Implications,' in *Semiotic Themes*, Richard T. de George (ed.) (Lawrence: University of Kansas Publications, 1981)].

plete, self-referring and proper which regularly return to an origin or to a 'priority'. One of the unaccomplished tasks of scholarship is to provide an adequate account of the cultural imaginaire within which these ideas were constructed.

In a critical 'close reading' of selective texts of Qur'ān exegesis I wish to demonstrate that meanings of words change with the reconfiguration of social thought. For a genre of Qur'ānic exegetical literature such as *tafsīr*, it is important that we be in a position to map out and find out 'how' subtle shifts took place in the interpretive modes. To put it differently, we need know 'how' they mean.<sup>12)</sup>

In order to demonstrate the process through which something functions as a sign to a perceptor-semiosis –<sup>13)</sup> I have examined selective exegetical passages where the word *al-sufahā'*<sup>14)</sup> and its derivatives occurred in the Qur'ān. Translators and commentators of the Qur'ān have not accounted for the play of meaning of this word and its transmission from one anthropological context to another. This word had a particular meaning and role in the early Arab humanist milieu where gender, age and status played a determining role. How this word was subsequently refigured in the social imagination of successive contexts in a subtle manner needs to be explained.

The value of post-structuralist theories is that it enables one to demonstrate how character, community, motive, value, reason, social structure, in short everything that makes culture, is defined and made real performances of language. The search for meaning resides not so much in our knowledge of literary texts themselves, as in the way they are read and interpreted. As Foucault put it: 'To know must therefore be to interpret.'<sup>15)</sup>

Semiotics and deconstruction allows one to view the interplay of signs and clusters of signs.<sup>16)</sup> In other words, semiotics asserts its controversial

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<sup>12)</sup> RICHARD C. MARTIN, 'Structural Analysis and the Qur'ān,' in *Studies in Qur'ān and Tafsīr, Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Thematic Issue, December 1979, XLVII/4 S, Alford T. Welch (ed.), 669.

<sup>13)</sup> JASPAL SINGH, 'Problematics and Perspectives,' in *Semiosis and Semiotics: Explorations in the Theory of Signs*, Jaspal Singh (ed.) (Chandigarh: Lokayat Prakashan, 1982), 12–28.

<sup>14)</sup> See SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS, *A Commentary on Hujjat al-Siddīq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, 1986), 200–203 for a discussion on *sufahā'* and *jahl*.

<sup>15)</sup> MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 32.

<sup>16)</sup> ARTHUR ASA BERGER, 'Sign, Self and Society,' in *The Semiotic Bridge: Trends from California*, Irmengard Rauch & Gerald F. Carr (eds.) (Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), 1–9; see Mohammed Arkoun, 'Current Islam Faces its Tradition,' in *Space for Freedom: The Search for Architectural Excellence in Muslim Socie-*

claim to be a meta-language, that allows the discussion of language, exegesis, religious thought, philosophy and anthropology to take place in a single system. It attempts to overcome the fragmentation between these various analytical actors and reassembles them under the rubric of the quest for meaning. The work of a semiotician thus, is to build models which may be capable of giving an account of the conditions in which meaning is produced. By authorizing meaning, itself a problem for deconstructionists, human beings express a will to power in an attempt to effect transformation.<sup>17)</sup> From being purely a system of referential tags, language becomes a type of social action when we superimpose hermeneutics on semiotics. The hermeneutic code reformulates new questions and answers. It poses an enigma to the narrative and then teases through the narrative actions until the enigma is resolved, in the structuralist sense, or decentered in the post-structuralist sense.

From a semiotic approach religious texts are taken as an amalgam of discourses, institutions and concrete social practices. Here the concern is an analysis of their signification. In the words of Eco:

Texts generate or are capable of generating multiple (and ultimately infinite) readings and interpretations. It was agreed, for instance, by the later Barthes, by the recent Derrida, and by Kristeva, that signification is to be located exclusively in the text. The text is the locus where meaning is produced . . . A text is not simply a communicational apparatus. It is a device which questions the previous signifying systems, often renews, and sometimes destroys them.<sup>18)</sup>

Religious texts, such as the Qur'ān, are at the same time the locus of a diversity of social speech types. These texts also contain languages that serve specific sociopolitical purposes when one looks closer at their internal

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*ties*, Ismail Serageldin (ed.) (London: Butterworth Architecture, 1989), 241–246 esp. 242 for what Arkoun calls the 'priority of the semiotic approach.'

<sup>17)</sup> See JAROSLAV STETKEVYCH, 'Arabic Hermeneutical Terminology: Paradox and the Production of Meaning,' in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 48, 2 (1989), 81–96, where the author employs a deconstructionist approach to the analyses of hermeneutical terminology in Arab-Islamic thought.

<sup>18)</sup> UMBERTO ECO, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 24–25; al-'Imād al-Asfahānī (1125–1201) said something similar: 'I have yet to complete a book and to reopen it the following day without finding I might have included this, deleted that. Or, I might have polished this statement, modified the next, transposed the third. In short, man's [a person's] work, his thinking, his revisions, are never complete nor perfected. Such is man [human being]' (parenthesis mine). (From *Abdul Malik A. al-Sayed*, in *Social Ethics of Islam* (New York: Vantage Presse, 1982).

stratification.<sup>19)</sup> 'At any given time and place there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions.'<sup>20)</sup> These are the circumstances that enable a multiplicity of social voices, heteroglossia, to enter the text. In that sense all utterances, according to Bakhtin, are heteroglot in that they are

functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide...<sup>21)</sup>

Logocentrism must therefore suppress the diversity of voices and socio-ideological contradictions inherent in speech.

#### Texts and their authors

In this essay the term *sufahā'* is examined from the exegetical perspectives of two leading commentators of classical Islam. They are Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) author of the famous commentary, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āyi al-Qur'ān* (Collection of Explanations for the Interpretation of the verses of the Qur'ān) and Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) author of *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (The Keys to the Hidden), also called *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (The Great Commentary). Both al-Rāzī and al-Ṭabarī are reputed original thinkers (mujtahids) and have widely influenced the tradition of Qur'ānic commentary. Al-Ṭabarī hailed, as his name indicates, from the one-time Sassanian province of Ṭabaristān, a region behind the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. After extensive travels in the Muslim lands, he spent some time in Rayy, south of modern Tehran, but eventually settled in Baghdad, the centre of the Abbasid universe. His fame is attributed to two encyclopedic treatises, one on world history titled, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk* (A History of Prophets and Kings), and the other the aforementioned treatise on exegesis. His biographers are unanimously impressed by the depth of his erudition. A statement by the eleventh-century historian and jurist, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghādāī (d. 463/1071) would suffice as

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<sup>19)</sup> M. M. BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist (ed.) Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (trans.) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263.

<sup>20)</sup> BAKHTIN, *Dialogic Imagination*, 428.

<sup>21)</sup> BAKHTIN, *Dialogic Imagination*, 428.

an index of his reputation: 'He had a degree of erudition shared by no one of his era.'<sup>22</sup>)

By all accounts al-Rāzī is perhaps the most outstanding advocate of Asha'ri theology and a *faqīh* of repute, perhaps second to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in the Shāfi'i legal tradition. Although he was born around Rayy in what is today Īrān, his intellectual activities took him to the various centres of learning of his time, like Marw, Nīshābūr, Hamadān, Qazwīn and Harāt where he died. At various stages he came into close contact with various rulers which indicated that for some time at least, he pursued a political career of some sort.

There are two reasons why the work of these exegetes were selected. Firstly, apart from their great and exhaustive intellectual merit, between them they span a gap of roughly over 200 years. The timespan should provide us with a timeframe to examine how the *refiguration* and struggle between *dialogue* and *monologue* took place within the textual sources of Muslim exegesis. It will also enable us to view the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs, tendencies, circles and schools. Secondly, both commentators rely on transmitted (*naql*) sources and rational (*'aql*) sources of *tafsīr* literature. Al-Ṭabarī draws largely, though not exclusively, on traditional interpretations, while al-Rāzī more readily employs the rational method of exegetical discourse. Together they constitute a representative genre of *tafsīr* literature.

### The lexicon

A discussion about the lexical and philological components of the term *s-f-h* is necessary. According to the authoritative Arabic lexicographers, *s-f-h* signifies *khiffa' al-ḥilm*, 'lightness in forbearance and understanding'.<sup>23</sup>) In other words, *safah* is the antonym of *ḥilm*, provisionally translated as 'the exercise of self-control and forbearance.' It is at this stage that the word *safah* is more visibly caught in a web of multiple significations. Clearly an understanding of *safah* is predicated upon the signification of *ḥilm*. *Ḥilm*, says Charles Pellat, is

<sup>22</sup>) JANE DAMMEN MCAULIFFE, 'Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr,' in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1988), p. 47 citing Muḥammad al-Sabbagh, *Lamā'āt fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān wa ittijāhāt al-tafsīr* (Beirut, 1974), 185.

<sup>23</sup>) IBN QUTAYBAH AL-DĪNAWARĪ, *Uyūn al-Akhbār*, Yūsuf 'Alī Ṭawīl (ed.) (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), i, 396–397.

a complex and delicate notion which includes a certain number of qualities of character or moral attitudes, ranging from serene justice and moderation, to forbearance and leniency, with self-mastery and dignity of bearing standing between these extremes.<sup>24)</sup>

The term nevertheless does convey a sense of firmness, strength, physical integrity and health, as well as moral integrity, the solidity of moral character, unemotional, calm deliberation, mildness of manner, freedom from blind passion, patience and clemency. The pagan Arabs on many an occasion accused the Prophet Muḥammad of being the cause of 'the most level-headed among us losing their temper' *yusaffihu ahlāmanā*, for introducing an alien and unwelcome religion to their environment.<sup>25)</sup> According to Goldziher, traces of a shift in signification of *ḥilm* can be established from the historical record. The Prophet Muḥammad's teachings, he says, gave a new set of meanings to *ḥilm*, being 'higher in nature than taught by the code of virtues of pagan days.'<sup>26)</sup> Muḥammad called the one who showed leniency and forgiveness a *ḥalīm*. Allāh was also identified as *ḥalīm* in the Qur'ān, where the Prophet Ibrāhīm was also addressed by the same epithet.<sup>27)</sup> Other antonyms of *ḥilm* are terms such as *khiffah* (lightness), *'ajal* (hastiness), while another synonym for *ḥilm*, is also *thiqal* (weightiness).<sup>28)</sup> All these are variants of subtle, but an endless process of signification.

*Jahl*, provisionally translated as 'ignorance,' is another term that is associated with an understanding of *safah*. Two lexical senses are produced in this association of *jahl* with *safah*. In the first sense, *jahl* is often contrasted with *ḥilm*. This follows Goldziher's pioneering work and conclusion that the word *jahl* has two uses or levels of meaning – a primary and secondary meaning. In the primary sense *jahl* means 'barbarity' and 'ferocity' and its opposite would be *ḥilm*. In a secondary sense it means 'ignorance' and the oppo-

<sup>24)</sup> CHARLES PELLAT, *EI*<sup>2</sup>, art 'ḥilm'; Pellat, 'Concept of ḥilm in Islamic Ethics,' in the *Bulletin of the Institute of Islamic Studies*, vi & vii (1962–63), 1–12, Calcutta, Aligarh Muslim University.

<sup>25)</sup> Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik b. HISHĀM AL-MA'ĀFIRĪ, *Sīrah Ibn Hishām*, Ṭahā 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd (ed.) (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl (1407/1987), i, 295.

<sup>26)</sup> IGNAZ GOLDZIHĒR, *Muslim Studies* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), i, 207.

<sup>27)</sup> See also ABŪ 'L-FARAJ AL-ASBIHĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Cairo: Mu'assasah 'Izz al-Dīn, n.d.), xviii, 30, line 12, where *j-h-l* and *ḥ-l-m* are posed as opposites: *lakinnahu ḥadīd jāhil wa ana asfaḥ wa aḥlam* – 'he is all iron and cruel, whereas I am most forgiving and civilized.'

<sup>28)</sup> WILLIAM EDWARD LANE, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863–93), book 1, part 4, 1376–1377.



site of *'ilm*, 'knowledge.'<sup>29</sup>) By examining pre-Islamic poetry, Goldziher found the word to be most commonly used in the primary sense. An example is 'Amr b. Kulthūm's line which reads: *alā lā yajhalanna aḥad<sup>un</sup> 'alayna, fa najhalu fawqa jah<sup>l</sup>l<sup>i</sup> jāhilīna*, 'May no one dare be vicious against us, for we may excell the ferocity of the ferocious.' The *nomen agentis* (*jāhil*), according to Goldziher, is in one word 'a barbarian,' while a *ḥalīm* is 'a civilized person.' *Safah*, as a synonym for the word *jahl*, says Goldziher, 'belongs to that group of words which, like *kesil* and *sakhal* (in Hebrew), describe not only fools, but also cruel and unjust men.'<sup>30</sup>) Izutsu in his major study of Qur'ān ethics also concurs with Goldziher's conclusions, that *jahl* is the opposite of *ḥilm*, and not *'ilm*.<sup>31</sup>) What we have is a *jahl-ḥilm/'ilm/safah* complex.

In the second lexical sense, *jahl* is only equated with *safah* and not associated with *ḥilm*. Edward Lane, citing the Sunnite exegete, al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), explains the term *s-f-h* as 'ignorance' (*jahl*), or 'silliness or foolishness... a deficiency in intellect or understanding.'<sup>32</sup>) Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), the author of the authoritative *Lisān al-'Arab*, and al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/1415), in his *Qāmūs*, both support Lane's description.<sup>33</sup>) By now it should be obvious that the word *safah* is incomprehensible without understanding the significance of *jahl* in so far as both words are crucial signifiers in the semiotic process. In other words, changes in the signification of *j-h-l*, or its antonym *h-l-m*, will inevitably affect the meaning of *s-f-h*, a chain of consequences that extends well beyond the limits of a single text or corpus of wording. This illustrates the effect of intertextuality. What also becomes apparent is that for some time the descriptions of *safah* was semiotically re-

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<sup>29</sup>) I am uncomfortable with Goldziher's rigid distinction between primary and secondary uses of the word *'ilm*. Meaning is more the product of context and sense of the user. A multi-valenced word like *jahl* proves the point. In which sense does *safah* occur in Zuhayr ibn Abī Aslamī's line in the *Mu'allaqah* when he says: *wa inna safāhat al-shaykh la ḥilm ba'dahu, wa inna al fatā ba'da al-safāhah yaḥlumu* ('An old man's ignorance/barbarity cannot be cured, while an ignorant/untamed youth can be educated/civilized').

<sup>30</sup>) GOLDZIHHER, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup>) TOSHIHIKO IZUTSU, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Koran* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 28. Izutsu makes an interesting observation when he says that *ḥilm* is the moral reasonableness of a civilized man. Add power to this definition and it suggests 'the subject's clear consciousness of power and superiority.'

<sup>32</sup>) LANE, 1:1377.

<sup>33</sup>) Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad ibn YA'QŪB AL-FĪRŪZĀBĀDĪ, *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥit*, (Damascus: Maktabah al-Nūriyyah, n. d.), iv, 285; Abu 'l-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn Mukarram al-Ifriqī, *Lisān al-'Arab*, (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n. d.) iii, 2032-2034; Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-'Arūs* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, n. d.), ix, 390-91.

lated to *jahl* and its antonym *hilm*. But we notice that the link between *jahl* and *hilm* was severed in the later descriptions or heteroglossia of the word. This semiotic suppression in the meaning of *jahl* resulted in it being used more frequently in Goldziher's secondary sense, as meaning the opposite of *'ilm*. These unmistakable semiotic processes in the heteroglossia of the *jahl-hilm/'ilm/safah* complex shows that the pre-Islamic ethical quality of *hilm* is gradually sanitized from the semiotic complex. There is an uncanny serendipity in the refiguration of the *jahl-hilm/'ilm* complex, that coincides with the observed refiguration of *safah*. In Bakhtin's terms it means that the dialogue had been reduced to a linguistic monologue.

### The semiotics of al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī

In their respective commentaries, al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī take refuge in lexical, semantic and philological arguments in order to support their respective hermeneutical positions.<sup>34)</sup> First they provide a standard lexical definition of the word *safah*, as *al-jāhil al-da'if al-ra'y*, 'the ignorant and weak in opinion.' The thrust of this meaning is that a *safih* is one who has insufficient knowledge to distinguish between what is harmful and beneficial. Al-Ṭabarī adds that it was for

this reason that Allāh, mighty and sublime be He, called women and children *sufahā'* . . . The majority of interpreters say they [the *sufahā'*] are women and children . . . because they cannot distinguish between the opportunities of profit and loss in the management of wealth.<sup>35)</sup>

Both authors make subtle alterations to the standard lexical definition of *safah* when the word requires explanation in the commentary of the Qur'ān in order to realise the desired sense of differentiation at the various instances. Al-Rāzī routinely describes *safah* as *al-khiffah* or *khiffa' al-'aql*, 'lightness' or 'lightness in mind,' implying intellectual paucity.<sup>36)</sup> They

<sup>34)</sup> Al-Ṭabarī was probably the first commentator 'to make extensive use of philological means for consolidating Qur'ānic exegesis, nevertheless restricted the application of this method by the principle that the results thus obtained should not contradict authoritative traditional interpretations.' (L. KOPF, 'Religious Influences on Medieval Arabic Philology', in *Studia Islamica*, 5 (1956), 37.)

<sup>35)</sup> Abū Ja'far Muḥammad IBN JARĪR AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmi' al-Bayān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1405/1984, i/1, 128.

<sup>36)</sup> FAKHR AL-DĪN AL-RĀZĪ, *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n. d.), (3rd ed), i/2, 68. He cites several verses by Dhū 'l-Rummaḥ and Abū Tammām al-Ṭā'ī where *safah* is used in the sense of *khiffah*.

also frequently use other terms such as *naqṣ 'uqūl*, 'deficiency in intellect' and *da'f ahlām*, 'weakness in forbearance' interchangeably to describe *safah*, without consciously drawing our attention to the significant play and variation in meaning. In a nuanced explanation al-Rāzī explains *safah* as *tasaffahū al-ḥaqq*, 'they treated the truth lightly,' *jahila nafsahu*, 'he was ignorant of the self,' and *khasira nafsahu*, 'he destroyed himself.'<sup>37)</sup> Al-Ṭabarī concurred with al-Rāzī adding that it also meant *dalālah*, 'deviance'.

One of the difficulties the text in question poses is the ambiguity surrounding the word *jahl*. Does al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī use the word *jahl* in Goldziher's primary or secondary sense? Or, do they exploit the play of signification and therefore attempt to draw a reader-response? One of the key signifiers of *safah* as we already know is *jahl*, which is the antonym of *ḥilm*. And under more frequent Islamic use *safah* is the antonym of *'ilm*. In the polysemy of *jahl* there are several significations. When *jahl* signifies 'ferocity,' it can erase its other signification, namely 'ignorance.' And when the same word signifies 'ignorance' it can suppress the meaning of 'ferocity.' Our commentators employ stylistic synonyms for emphasis and rely on circumstantial textual evidence (*quarā'in*) in their interpretation of *safah* in order to effect textual closure. It is a bid to give prominence to *jahl* as being the opposite of *'ilm* and in so doing give prominence to its Islamic signification, and suppress or erase the signification of the pre-Islamic *ḥilm*.

In summarising the discussion thus far, it becomes evident that *safah* is a 'problematic' or 'defective' sign, meaning among other things: cruelty, lack of sophistication, lack of civility and ignorance. There is a constant sliding of the signified under the signifier.<sup>38)</sup> Therefore, no constant or instant referent can be found for the word *safah* without carefully examining the context of signification and semiosis.<sup>39)</sup>

<sup>37)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, ii/4, 70.

<sup>38)</sup> ROSALIND COWARD & JOHN ELLIS, *Language and Materialism* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 98–99.

<sup>39)</sup> Rippin says that the word *safīh* is multivocal which includes the sense of 'unlettered, a child, women and children, or squanderers of money and corrupters of religion', see ANDY RIPPIN, 'Ibn 'Abbās's Al-Lughāt fī al-Qur'ān', in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (BSOAS)*, xlv/1 (1981), 23; Ibn al-'Arabī, *Aḥ-kām al-Qur'ān*, 'Alī Muḥammad (ed.) (Cairo: Ḥalabī, 1968/1387), i, 249.

At this point it will be appropriate to dispense with an interesting morphological debate which features in the analysis of both al-Ṭabraī and al-Rāzī. Lexical and morphological differences in themselves produce variant meanings. For instance it is debated among Arabic grammarians whether the plural of *safīh*, namely, *sufahā'* is an exclusively feminine plural, or whether the word denotes both genders.

Who are the *sufahā'*?

The word *safah* and its derivatives appear eleven times in ten verses of the Qur'ān. They are 2 : 13, 130, 142, 282; 4 : 5, 6 : 140, 7 : 66, 67, 155 and 72 : 4. Several translators of the Qur'ān have provided a uniform translation of this word, without taking into account the polysemantic and multivalency of the word. It seems that the root *s-f-h* and its variants can for heuristic purposes be categorised into three broad semiotic types:

- 1.) to define a social and legal status;
- 2.) a polemical marker between believers and unbelievers;
- 3.) an index of a state of mind.

While these are not watertight divisions, these categories are helpful only in so far as they are heuristic, since the various permutations of meaning overlap. Perhaps the most interesting and complex interpretation of the term *sufahā'* occurs in the exegesis of Q. 4 : 5 which raises the fundamental issues that are encountered in the uses of the word. Briefly stated, the verse deals with the question of wealth. It reads:

And do not entrust to those who are *sufahā'* the possessions which Allāh has placed in your charge for their support; but let them have their sustenance therefrom, and clothe them, and speak unto them in a kindly way.

Al-Ṭabarī acknowledges that 'the interpreters differ as to who the *sufahā'* are, whom Allāh – sublime be His praise – have interdicted from being

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Al-Ṭabarī argues that *sufahā'*, is inclusive of denoting both genders. To argue to the contrary, he believes, would be tantamount to displacing the lexical meaning. In support of his view, he states that the morphological form *fu'ālā'* (sing. *fā'il*), like *sufahā'*, denotes both men and women. If the word was to denote women exclusively, the plural should have been on the form, *fā'ilāt* or, on the form *fa'ā'il* with the *s-f-h* equivalent being *safīhāt* or *safā'ih*. Analogous to this is the feminine singular noun *gharībah*, whose plural is *gharībāt* or *gharā'ib*, and where the masculine singular is *gharīb* and the plural is the gender inclusive *ghurabā'*, which is similar to *sufahā'*. Another analogy to prove the case of the gender inclusiveness of *safīh/sufahā'*, is the form *'ālim/ulamā'*, where the referent is both learned men and women.

Al-Rāzī disputes the claim that the plural *safīhāt* or *safā'ih* is gender specific, especially in this case where the feminine form is used. He cites the Baghdādī grammarian, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Sārī al-Zujjāj (d. 311/924), who maintains that it is grammatically correct for *sufahā'* to be the plural of *safīhah*, analagous to *fugarā'*, as the plural of *faqīrah*, which means many poor women. Accordingly, al-Rāzī believes, that from a lexical point of view at least, *sufahā'* can mean women exclusively, disagreeing with al-Ṭabarī.

entrusted their property.'<sup>40</sup>) Not surprisingly, both he and al-Rāzī agree that the earliest authorities of *tafsīr* differed widely in their interpretation of this word. The recorded opinions surveyed by our two commentators say the *sufahā'* were:

- 1.) women exclusively
- 2.) children
- 3.) women and children
- 4.) anyone who lacked discretion (*'aql*).

1) The authorities who believed that *sufahā'* meant women exclusively, included the leading scholars of early Islam, such as the famous commentator of the Qur'ān in the first generation Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687), the leading Companion, 'Abdullāh b. 'Umar (d. c. 73/693), the famous Basran authority, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), the Khurāsānī exegete, al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723) and Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), the student of 'Abdullāh b. 'Abbās.<sup>41</sup>) Two of these, al-Baṣrī and al-Ḍaḥḥāk, are reported to have said that women demonstrate the extreme case of *safah*, *al-mar'ah asfah al-sufahā'*, 'the woman is the most foolish of fools.'<sup>42</sup>) Al-Rāzī adds, that the *sufahā'* are women, irrespective whether they are spouses, mothers or daughters, an opinion also attributed to Mujāhid.<sup>43</sup>) Ibn 'Umar was said to have reacted very negatively when passing by a vivacious woman and immediately expressed his disgust towards her by reciting the verse Q 4 : 5. This implies that the epithet *sufahā'* was a criticism of her vivaciousness. This view finds its origins in a *ḥadīth* (tradition) narrated by Abū Umāmah, that the Prophet was reported to have said: 'Be warned that the fire has been created for the *al-sufahā'*' (which he repeated three times). And beware that the *sufahā'* are the women, except the woman who obeys her maintainer (*qayyim*).'<sup>44</sup>) In most cases *qayyim* means a husband or a male guardian.

2) Sa'īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/713), the Kūfan scholar killed by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī (d. 96/714), and another view attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, suggest that children are the *sufahā'*. Apparently Ibn Jubayr stressed that the term specifically meant orphans – *al-yatāmā*. Al-Rāzī attributes this view to Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) and Ibn Zayd (d. c. 145/762). The assumption underlying this view is that entrusting wealth (*qiyām*) required for the maintenance of the household to a child could

<sup>40</sup>) AL-ṬABARĪ, iii/4, 245.

<sup>41</sup>) AL-ṬABARĪ, iii/4, 246.

<sup>42</sup>) A.-ṬABARĪ, iii/4, 246.

<sup>43</sup>) See AL-ṬABARĪ, iii/4, 247 for the view of MUJĀHID.

<sup>44</sup>) AL-RAZI, v/9, 175.

only spell disaster, since in all probabilities the wealth would be squandered.

3) That the word *sufahā'* refer to both women and children are views attributed again to Sa'īd b. Jubayr, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, as well as the Kufan exegete al-Suddī (d. 128/745), and Mujāhid. Qatādah b. Diāmah (d. 117/735) believes that *sufahā'* refers to a woman or a youth (*al-ghulām al-safīh*) 'the weakminded youth.' Al-Rāzī concurs, adding that if a man knows his wife or child is a *safīh*, he should under no circumstances entrust them with his wealth. The inference to be drawn is that theoretically it is possible to find a woman and child who is not a *safīh*. The commentators probably wished to exclude certain prominent women, possibly the Prophet's wives and his grandchildren from the general domain of *safah*. In a slightly different view of Abū Mālik,<sup>45</sup> Ibn 'Abbās, Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d. 42/662) and Ibn Zayd are reported to be of the opinion that *sufahā'* refers to the son of a man – *walad al-rajul*. A report from al-Ḍaḥḥāk says that a woman and a boy are as extreme a case of *safah* one can find and they would dominate men if entrusted with wealth.<sup>46</sup>

4) Without citing any ancient authorities, al-Rāzī cites a view which suggests that *sufahā'* refers to anyone who lacks the intelligence, *'aql*, to protect and manage property. This may apply to women, children, orphans and all other persons who fit the description of *safah*. The most glaring omission on the part of al-Rāzī is his failure to explicitly state that male believers could also be among the *sufahā'*.

### Interpreting the traditional views

The divergent opinions regarding a single word leaves very little room for doubt that *safah* had a series of significations. Al-Ṭabarī meticulously recorded the variant and contradictory opinions of the word *safah* and with greater detail than al-Rāzī. Nevertheless, we will soon note how al-Ṭabarī forcefully and systematically refutes each variant meaning in order to

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<sup>45</sup>) It is difficult to identify this Abū Mālik. Al-Dhahabī in his *Siyar a'lām al-Nubalā'*, Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭ (ed.) (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1990/1410), vi, 184, identifies the older figure as Abū Mālik al-Ashja'ī, whose proper name is Sa'd b. Ṭāriq b. Ashyam without providing a date of death. Sufyān al-Thawrī is said to have reported *ḥadīth* from him. The other Abū Mālik al-Ashja'ī, also identified by al-Dhahabī, is identified as Hammād bin Malik (*Siyar* x, 416). He is described as the 'aged traditionist' who died in 228/842.

<sup>46</sup>) A-ṬABARĪ, iii/4, 245, 247.

eliminate the dialogue of discourses into a monologue of stabilized meaning. He does so on the grounds of the accepted canons of Qur'ān interpretation, *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, as well as linguistic opinions. He first gives the impression that he will retain semiotic variety by stating that God did not specify some categories of *safah* to the exclusion of other types. But that statement is only useful to the extent that it refutes the claim that *safah* is age and gender specific. Al-Rāzī also turns to the rules of interpretation and asserts that his preferred (*awlā*) view was that anyone who lacked discretion was a *safīh*. His *tour de force* is the principle which says, that 'specification without a proof is not permissible,' *al-takhṣīs bi-ghayr dalīl lā yajūz*.<sup>47)</sup>

Al-Rāzī recognizes that the sign *sufahā'* is used variously, referring to what can be called an 'insider' and 'outsider.' The 'insider' can be believers/males and the 'outsiders' can be unbelievers/females. While applies to both the word insiders and outsiders, it is never wholly present in one category and continues to shift along the two semiotic bridges. On the one hand, it separates believers from sinners, hypocrites, unbelievers, polytheists, Jews and Christians. On the other hand, it also serves as a polemical marker to differentiate gender (men and women), age (adults and children), mental disability, (retarded or weak persons) status (orphans and non-orphans). Given this semiotic instability or polysemy, al-Rāzī generates a core exegetical and referential meaning for *safah* to which he constantly refers in order to overcome the problem of shifting referents. In his view *safah* is the lexical equivalent to *khiffah*, meaning 'lightness' and 'insignificance.'<sup>48)</sup> One diminishes in stature to that of a *safīh* when unable to distinguish between the beneficial and harmful.<sup>49)</sup> Al-Rāzī illustrates his point further, adding that Arabs consider a foul-mouthed person also to be a *safīh*. This is because such a speaker lacks dignified poise and self-composure.<sup>50)</sup> He cites a statement by the Prophet who is reported to have said:

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<sup>47)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, v/9, 185. From the point of view of law (*fiqh*), our commentators believe *safah* is an attribute (*waṣf*) and thus contingent and not gender specific. In terms of *fiqh* guardians are not allowed to transfer wealth to persons who deserve to be legally interdicted, *mustahāqq al-ḥajar*, be they male or female, since they lack the discretion to manage money. However, al-Ṭabarī reaches a conclusion similar to the Kufan jurist, Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767) that it is not possible to interdict a person who had reached puberty (*bulūgh*) or the age of discretion (*rushd*) (see al-Ṭabarī iii/4, 247 and al-Rāzī, v/9, 183, ii/3, 248).

<sup>48)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, i/2, 68.

<sup>49)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, ii/4, 91.

<sup>50)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, i/2, 68.

'the one who drinks wine is a *safih*.'<sup>51</sup>) Again the point is made that such a person is 'weak' and 'light' in mind by succumbing to a moral failing resulting in a temporary mental lapse. Having stabilised the meaning of the term around 'weakness' and 'lightness', al-Rāzī believes he had fulfilled his function as a *mufassir*.

Take the case of Q 2 : 13 and Q 2 : 142 where the word *sufahā'* is used as a polemical marker between two hostile groups: the believers and their opponents. In 2 : 13 the Qur'ān records the mocking remarks made by the Prophet's opponents, the hypocrites, *munāfiqūn*, who said:

And when they (the unbelievers and hypocrites) are told: "Believe as other people believe!" They answer: "Shall we believe as the *sufahā'* believe?"

To which Allāh replied:

Oh, verily, it is they, *they* who are the *sufahā'*, but they know it not.

Al-Rāzī explains that the polemic at 2 : 13 is underpinned by a difference in social status between hypocrites and believers. The hypocrites looked down upon the believers as *sufahā'*, because they viewed themselves as 'people of leadership and consequence,' *ahl al-khaṭar wa 'l-ri'āsah*. The reality was that the majority of believers were materially poor (*fuqarā'*), and numerically few. The hypocrites in comparing their good fortune to the relative poverty of the believers, were in no doubt that Muḥammad's faith (*dīn*) was void and baseless (*bāṭil*), and only a *safih* could take it seriously. Here the elliptical signifier of wealth and social status seems to inform the semantic and symbolic use of *safah*.

According to al-Rāzī there is a rational reason for the inversion of the sign *sufahā'*, from the believers to the unbelievers in the second part of 2 : 13. Whoever ignored rational proof (*ḍalīl*) in the pursuit of truth (i.e. Islām) is incontrovertibly a *safih*. And, if the latter accused an adherent of rational proof (a believer) of *safāhah*, then such a person is even more deserving of being called a *safih*! Elaborating his argument, al-Rāzī says, that a person who trades the hereafter for the gain of the temporal world and displays enmity towards Muḥammad is beyond doubt a *safih*.<sup>52</sup>) A close read-

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<sup>51</sup>) *Safih* is also used to describe someone who drinks wine, a sinner or a foul-mouthed person. These are not obscure uses that are hidden in ancient *tafsīr* texts. See FISCHER & ABEDI *Debating Muslims*, 146, who discuss the writings of the modern Iranian *marja'-e taqlīd*, 'Alī Gholzadeh Ghafūrī, who uses the word *safih* to describe opponents of the Islamic revolution and plays 'rhetorical games with terms used to identify the Shah and his supporters.'

<sup>52</sup>) AL-RĀZĪ, i/2, 68.



ing of al-Rāzī's interpretation of the term *safah* reveals another exegetical shift. It will be noted that earlier he said an inability to administer material wealth constituted *safāhah*. But now the word also includes a metaphysical and spiritual sense. He goes on to explain that the *real* distinction between a *safīh* and a *non-safīh* is actually those who follow rational proof (by implication belief in the eternity of the hereafter and a search for truth) and those who oppose all such values. Al-Rāzī arrives at this conclusion by drawing a direct analogy between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and privileging the 'insiders.' *Safah* when used with reference to believers denotes a state of mind, but when used with reference to unbelievers it denotes spiritual ignorance – an inferior status. He transposes this meaning without the mediation of any other visible signifier. So while additional signifiers may not have been present as a lexical item, their effects can be traced through what Derrida would call the logic of displacement or supplementarity that everywhere governs the text.<sup>53</sup>) For this to happen we have to suspend those structured oppositions of (inside/outside, present/absent) which define or delimit the operations of textual commentary. Only by suspending these oppositions can al-Rāzī's interpretive switch in meaning be adequately explained in terms of the logic of supplementarity. The logic of supplementation reveals an inherent lack in the believer which must be completed – supplemented – by spiritual perfection if he/she is to be truly himself/herself.

At 2 : 142 the Qur'ān anticipates criticism from the Prophet's adversaries for changing the direction of prayer (*qiblah*) from Jerusalem to Makkah. Taking the initiative to denounce the adversaries, Q. 2 : 142 reads:

The *sufahā'* among the people will say: "What has turned them away from the direction of prayer which they have hitherto observed? . . ."

Here the Qur'ān describes the Madinan adversaries of the Prophet, the *munāfiqūn* and Jews in particular, as *sufahā'*.<sup>54</sup>) In this instance *sufahā'* does

<sup>53</sup>) CHRISTOPHER NORRIS, *Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), 43.

<sup>54</sup>) According to the earliest exegetical authorities *sufahā'* in Q. 2 : 142 was used to denote several types of people. It meant 1) the Jews, in an opinion attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and Mujāhid; 2) the Arab polytheists, in another view of Ibn 'Abbās, which is also attributed to al-Barrā' bin 'Āzib (d. 72/691), the one-time Mu'tazilite, Abū Bakr 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Aṣamm (d. circa 200–201/815–817) and al-Ḥaṣan al-Baṣrī; 3) the hypocrites, says al-Suddī; 4) according to an anonymous view, most likely to be al-Rāzī's personal view, the word includes everyone who rejects the truth (*al-kuffār*). According to al-Rāzī, there is sufficient evidence of a rational (*'aql*) and

not mean 'foolish,' but in terms of the chain of significations it resonates spiritual ignorance and moral bankruptcy. Again the meaning shifts. It is not the improper management of wealth that renders one a *safih*, but adult male actors are also identified in the polemic, namely Jews and hypocrites. So the signifier substitutes itself, to also signify spirituality. This is best illustrated in al-Rāzī's own words, when he privileges the notion of spiritual bankruptcy above the other meanings he previously claimed *safah* had meant.

Error in matters of faith (*din*), is much more harmful than when it occurs in temporal affairs. Thus, if someone deviates from a clear and obvious perspective in worldly matters, such a person would be called a *safih*. Hence, one who errs in matters of faith is *a posteorī (awlā)* deserving of this term. Every denier of the truth, *kāfir* is also a *safih*.<sup>55)</sup>

The above reading of al-Rāzī is the product of what Norris terms a 'supplementary' order of necessity which requires that one looks beyond the lexical system to the various sub-units that enter the chain of substitutions. For al-Ṭabarī, the preponderant meaning at 2 : 142 is 'ignorance', *al-juhḥāl min 'l-nās*. God called them by that name because their 'judgement of the truth is *safah*,' i.e. 'deviant' as a result of their 'ignorance of the truth' (*safahū al-ḥaqq*).<sup>56)</sup>

A similar polemical exchange takes place between the Prophet Hūd and his opponents where *safah* is used pejoratively in order to discredit the Messenger of God, but is simultaneously also used in the counter-ideological discourse of God and the good people – the Prophet Hūd and his followers. Thus 7 : 66-67 reads:

Said the great ones among his people, who refused to acknowledge the truth: "Verily we see you [Hūd] to be affected by *safāḥah*; and verily, we think that you are a liar!" Said [Hūd]: "Oh my people! I am not afflicted by *safāḥah*, [as you allege] to the contrary, I am an apostle from the Sustainer of the worlds..."

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textual (*naṣṣ*) nature available to support the lastmentioned viewpoint since the verse in question is general (*āmm*). He makes this point by approving the view of al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024), the famous Mu'tazilī thinker and qaḍī al-quḍāt of Rayy. (Also see J. JOMIER, "The Qur'ānic Commentary of Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: Its Sources and Originality," in *International Congress for the Study of the Qur'ān*, (Canberra: Australian National University, 1980), 103.)

<sup>55)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, ii/4, 91.

<sup>56)</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ, ii/2, 1.

Al-Ṭabarī interprets *safāha* here as 'deviancy' (*dalālah*). The opponents of Hūd accused him of deviating from *their* truth, the faith of their ancestors and community. Hūd's reply recognizes the signification of *safāhah*, as deviancy when he responds: 'Oh my people: I am not deviant, *laysa bī safāhah* [to the contrary] I am a apostle the Sustainer of all the worlds.' At this point al-Rāzī is brief in suggesting that by now the meaning of *safah* is fairly obvious, a type of *vraisemblable*, provided one employs the interpretive key in contrasting *safāhah* with 'ilm.<sup>57)</sup>

The verse 2 : 130 seems to fit my description of where *safah* implies a state of mind or consciousness. The context is where those who 'ignored,' 'deviated' or 'failed to understand' the creed of Abraham are accused of *safah*. Al-Rāzī says the verb *s-f-h*, normally considered to be intransitive, can be used as transitive according to the Baṣran grammarian, al-Mubarrad (d. 286/899) in order to express more functions. Given this view, the words *safīha nafsahu*, means to 'despise and revile the self' signifying, *khiffah*, 'lightness.'<sup>58)</sup> He supports his case from a *ḥadīth* usage in which arrogance *al-kibr* is explained, as *tasaffaha al-ḥaqq* – 'treated the truth lightly.'<sup>59)</sup> An intelligent person (*al-'āqil*) will not treat the truth lightly, says al-Rāzī. He adds the view of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī who says the *safīha nafsahu*, means *jahila nafsahu*, 'self-ignorance,' and *khasira nafsahu*, 'self-destruction'.<sup>60)</sup> Two other levels of meaning suggest it means to 'ruin the self' and 'misguide the self.'

Al-Ṭabarī remains committed to his core meaning of equating *safah* with *jahl*, commenting that only a *safīh* can forego good fortune by not recognizing what is beneficial and harmful and making a poor judgement. According to this interpretation, all those who have not accepted the Abrahamic creed are *sufahā'*. Since the Jews and Christians have partly deviated from the Abrahamic creed and the pagan Arabs had totally strayed, the implication is that all 'other', except Muslims (males?) are afflicted with *safah* to some degree. In other words it implies spiritual inferiority.

The practice of female infanticide in pre-Islamic times is described in the Qur'ān as *safah*<sup>an</sup> at Q. 6 : 140. Al-Rāzī believes that only the word *safah* can adequately describe the type of mind which could contemplate such an heinous deed.<sup>61)</sup> Only an impulse based on a fancy (*mawhūm*) and an erroneous belief can justify the killing of new-born children believing that an increase

<sup>57)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, vii/14, 155–156.

<sup>58)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, ii/4, 70.

<sup>59)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, ii/4, 70.

<sup>60)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, ii/4, 70.

<sup>61)</sup> AL-RĀZĪ, vii/13, 209.

in dependants, especially female children, would aggravate existing conditions of poverty. This type of speculation is a reflex of *safah* equal only to *jahl*, which indicates a state of mind. Al-Ṭabarī, in turn, describes killing children as being in a state of *safah*, an act of 'ignorance and a defective intellect' (*naqs 'uqūl*) and a 'weakness of forbearance,' (*ḍāf ahlām*).<sup>62</sup>) Here the term *ḥilm* is still employed but slides under the signifier, 'intellect.'

In Q. 7 : 155, Moses invokes God's mercy not to punish the Israelites for the crimes committed by the *sufahā'* among them for engaging in calf-worship.<sup>63</sup>) Both exegetes are extremely brief here. Al-Ṭabarī finds sufficient arguments in the opinions of the early exegetes to identify the *sufahā'* with the calf-worshippers. Al-Rāzī comments that only an imperfect mind can engage in calf-worship.<sup>64</sup>)

The same is the case with 72 : 4.<sup>65</sup>) Here the *jinn* acknowledge that the *safīh* among them said 'outrageous things about God.' Al-Ṭabarī cites the traditional opinion of Mujāhid and Qatādah which assert that the *safīh* is the *Iblīs* (Satan). Qatādah adds an interesting note to his interpretation. Just as Satan (*safīh al-jinn*) refused to bow to Ādam in disobedience to God, so did Ādam (*safīh al-jinn*) also disobey God by eating of the forbidden tree. The implication of this interpretation is that, even Ādam the first human prototype and Prophet in Muslim belief, was thus a *safīh*. Ādam experienced temporary *safah* since he returned to obedience after repentance. It is clear that the thrust of the meaning of *safīh* in this instance is one of 'deviance' or 'spiritual depravity' since *Iblīs* is the archetype of deviance and depravity.

Al-Rāzī opines that the outrageous statements, *shataṭ*, made by the *jinn* (*safīh*) means 'to transgress or go beyond the limits,' committing injustice (*zulm*).<sup>66</sup>) Here again the recurring theme is that the quality of *safah* by its very nature is prone to immoderation and excess (*fart*) according to al-Rāzī.<sup>67</sup>) While on the theme of transgression and injustice, al-Rāzī points out that a major sinner (*fāsiq*) is also called a *safīh*, because of his spiritual and moral fickleness or lightness. There is a semiotic relation between the denotation and the sign. It means that a sinner 'does not carry any weight in the eyes of people of faith and knowledge'.<sup>68</sup>) This explanation fits with

<sup>62</sup>) AL-ṬABARĪ, v/8, 51.

<sup>63</sup>) AL-ṬABARĪ, v/9, 76.

<sup>64</sup>) AL-RĀZĪ, viii/15, 17-18.

<sup>65</sup>) AL-ṬABARĪ, xiv/29, 107-108.

<sup>66</sup>) AL-RĀZĪ, xv/30, 155.

<sup>67</sup>) AL-RĀZĪ, xv/30, 155.

<sup>68</sup>) AL-RĀZĪ, v/9, 185.

the first part of the *ḥadīth* narrated by Abū Umāmah which states that hell-fire will be filled with *sufahā'*. Here *safah* is deemed to be a state of sin or deviancy, where *sufahā'* is the equivalent of 'sinners'.<sup>69)</sup> It is interesting to note how the use of the term progresses from originally being used to denote a meaning of a conventional type, the fickleness of women, then it is used to describe a biological state of mental incapacity in the legal sense, and further employed to describe a spiritual state of affairs.

### Re-Reading the Texts

It is just not sufficient to deconstruct the text without positing another reading. In order to achieve this, genealogical social analysis is a useful method to uncover the social processes concealed by hegemonic essentialist discourses and to implicate these discourses in those formative social processes.<sup>70)</sup> The word *sufahā'* as we observed occupies a position of tactical polyvalence and refuses to adhere to a one-to-one (isomorphic) correspondence to reality. Despite the claim by our commentators to return the term *s-f-h* to an 'original' or 'prior' meaning, ranging from ignorance to deviance, we find that on closer examination the word declines to be subjected to fixed referential value. *Sufahā'* do not pertain to a world of things, but to that of an idea, a concept. As signs they are complex enough in the sense that they need not designate one meaning only, but that it equally signifies larger realities outside its ostensible content. In other words, when the word *sufahā'* or its derivatives are used, a iterability – the readiness to be grafted into new and unforeseeable contexts is an important feature. Each repetition occurs in a new context. No meaning is ever the same and no sign is identically repeated.

Two motifs constantly recur in our analysis of *sufahā'*: wealth and the trait of femininity. We are indeed indebted to the commentators of Qur'ān literature for reproducing their archival sources in the commentaries which make it possible for later readers to construct new readings. Al-Rāzī, for example, is the only one who constructs a hermeneutic that relates the concept of *safah* with wealth and material exchange. He does so when he meditates

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<sup>69)</sup> Al-Rāzī's discussion is also edifying in so far that he enlightens us about another term *nāqīṣ al-'aql*, which is synonymous to *safīh* and often employed to refer to women in *ḥadīth* literature.

<sup>70)</sup> STEVEN SEIDMAN, 'Theory as Narrative with Moral Intent,' in *Postmodernism and Social Theory*, Steven Seidman & David G. Wagner (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass & Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 70.

on Q. 4 : 5 and 2 : 282 and shares his philosophical insights on these verses.<sup>71)</sup> It relates to the way Islām had moderated the unbounded and excessive generosity of the *jāhiliyyah*.<sup>72)</sup> In terms of the Qur'ān, neither thoughtless generosity, nor debilitating niggardliness was acceptable. In the new urban context of Makkah, and later in Madīnah, wealth became an important status symbol within the mercantile community. This can be gleaned from the Qur'ān where the re-distribution of wealth as a form of self-sacrifice is endlessly encouraged. The shift is towards moderate financial behaviour instead of the extravagant generosity of pre-Islamic times.<sup>73)</sup>

The literary record of *jāhiliyyah* poetry informs us that the excessive, and at times, thoughtless generosity of pre-Islamic Arab men was the subject of criticism and chastisement by their wives. Al-Ḥūfī's collection of pre-Islamic poetry depicting the image of women during pre-Islamic times directs us to another important insight in our reading of *sufahā'*.<sup>74)</sup> It appears

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<sup>71)</sup> This verse prescribes the rules for commercial transactions and reads: 'And if he who contracts the debt is a *safīh* or *da'īf*, and is not able to dictate himself, then let him who watches over his interests dictate equitably' (Q. 2 : 282). Al-Ṭabarī says it means the person is capable of verbally dictating the terms of a future credit contract, excluding thereby mute or illiterate person. But the person in question remains incapable of making a mental distinction between a correct dictation and an incorrect one. The general tenor of the verse suggests that it includes anyone who is incapable of dictating a contract properly, *al-jāhil bi 'l-implā'*, irrespective whether such a person is a minor or major, male or female (al-Tabarī, iii/3, 122). Al-Rāzī explains *safīh* here to mean a lack of intelligence (*'aql*) that would in common parlance be known as a lack of common sense, despite having reached the legal age of puberty (al-Rāzī, vii, 112).

<sup>72)</sup> IZUTSU, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*, 80–81.

<sup>73)</sup> Al-Rāzī's parenthetical explanation of wealth is a valuable insight into the moral-economic elan of the Qur'ān, which has gained very little attention of scholars. The need for wealth, he argues, is imperative. He believes that as long as an individual does not have leisure and self-sufficiency (*fāriḡ al-bāl*), it is not possible to attain the ends of moral good in this world and felicity in the hereafter. Self-sufficiency cannot be attained without wealth which enables one to derive benefit from what is good and avoid that which is harmful. Whoever, approaches the world as a *means* to an end, would find happiness in the afterlife. If the world is approached as an *end* in itself, it becomes the greatest obstacle to success in the afterlife. Al-Rāzī's understanding of wealth and material gains and its relationship to salvation underscores the new social and economic patterning which was operative in Makkah and Madīnah during nascent Islam.

<sup>74)</sup> AḤMAD MUḤAMMAD AL-ḤŪFĪ, *al-Ḥayāt al-'Arabiyyah min 'l-Shi'r al-Jāhilī*, (Cairo: Maktabah Nahdat Miṣr, 1962/1382), 322–238; also see AḤMAD MUḤAMMAD AL-ḤŪFĪ, *al-Mar'ah fī 'Shi'r al-Jāhilī* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1382/1963),

that the wives were frustrated with their spouses' indiscriminate spending habits and excessive acts of generosity. It is in that context that the 'nagging wives' accused their husbands of being *safah*! Many a husband, like the legendary figure of Arab generosity and hospitality in the second half of the sixth century, Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī, was said to have divorced his wife for her criticism of his extravagant habits of generosity and hospitality.<sup>75</sup>) What is not mentioned in the *tafsīr* literature is that pre-Islamic women thought that their spendthrift husbands were unable to manage wealth properly – *sufahā'*. In turn, the husbands projected the charge on women accusing them of being niggardly and extremely uncharitable. The men at the time made the point by saying that women lacked the intelligence to comprehend (*nāqiṣāt al-'aql*) the social rewards and status associated with their acts of indulgent generosity. From the male view, women were afflicted by *safah* and were found to be lacking the standard of civility (*ḥilm*), the highest moral value in pre-Islamic ethics. In one semiotic shift, the blame originally placed on men is metamorphosed into blame on the women.<sup>76</sup>)

With the arrival of Islam, socio-economic reforms were gradual but with a far-reaching impact on society. The prophetic reforms with regard to women were calculated and cautiously given effect. Despite the limitations of the prophetic reforms affecting women, by today's standards, the pervasive male chauvinism (*murūwah*) of Arabia even had difficulty in coming to terms with these minor reforms which awarded women new powers at a social and cultural level. It is also plausible, that since the male was conventionally privileged to be the 'breadwinner' (*qawwām/qawwāmūn*) the opposite sex was deprived of managing wealth, not by divine decree, but by social custom. And, since male society took a dim view of women's financial management skills, they invariably expressed their prejudice in terms of the notion of *safah*. Thus, when the word *safah* was used in the Qur'ān, it is not at all surprising that the social memory of its Arab male readers denoted it as a feminine and negative trait.

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363–368; Muḥammad Naḥīl Ṭarīfī, "al-shī'r al-jāhilī wa qadāyā al-mujtama'al-'arabī al-qadīm," *al-Turāth al-'Arabī*, 25 & 26 (1989), 53-61.

<sup>75</sup>) AḤMAD MUḤAMMAD AL-ḤŪFĪ, *al-Mar'ah fī al-Shī'r al-Jāhilī*, 363–368. Also see C. van Arendonk, *EI*<sup>2</sup> art. 'Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī' for his mother Ghunayyah's extreme generosity which led to her brothers obtaining a declaring that she was incapable of managing her affairs.

<sup>76</sup>) See FEDWA MALTI-DOUGLAS, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 48–53; also see FATIMA MERNISSI, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Mary Jo Lakeland (trans.) (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 125–129.

It becomes clear that the narrative language of the Qur'ān relates to some aspect of the imaginary social consciousness (cultural imaginaire) of the Arabs. Embedded within the cultural imaginaire of the narrative are the hidden signifiers of chauvinism, economic power and sexuality which characterizes the discourse both metaphorically and metonymically.<sup>77</sup>) Under the new reformist conditions of Islām, the female threat of castrating the male was objectified as the radical 'other' (*safah*). This guaranteed and ensured her exclusion from the economic and social order by invoking the memory of *safah*. With this threat in mind, one discovers in the *tafsīr* literature examined above, that all the signifiers for *safah* were switched with the view to coalesce on metaphors which were suggestive of castrating the female intellect. Male potency, the phallic signifier, had the exclusive right to activate meaning without threat. The female 'will to power' at the economic level, whether by criticizing male extravagance in pre-Islamic times or managing wealth according to the newly acquired rights of women in Islam, generates the necessary contradiction which is essential for social action and transformation. It is within language that these power relations were constructed. This discourse prevails into the formative Islamic text where it was emphasized that women were defective in intellect and discretion (*nāqishāt al-'aql*), as reported in a statement attributed to the Prophet.<sup>78</sup>)

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<sup>77</sup>) COWARD & ELLIS, op. cit. 99.

<sup>78</sup>) Some scholars argue that this *ḥadīth* is fabricated, see FAZLUR RAHMAN, 'The Status of Women in Islam: A Modernist Interpretation,' in *Separate Worlds*, Hanna Papanek & Gail Minault (eds.) (New Delhi: South Asia Books, 1982), 292. Other scholars do not deny the veracity of this *ḥadīth* but construe a different meaning for it. See 'ABD AL-ḤALĪM ABŪ SHUQQAḤ, *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah fī 'Aṣr al-Risālah* (Kuwayt: Dār al-'Ilm, 1990/1410), 24–25. Given the endless polemic that this hadith generates, I prefer to treat it as a 'text' which forms part of a larger socio-cultural tabloid of Arab thought.

Al-Rāzī goes to extreme apologetics to overcome the problem of women and *safah*, which seems to be embarrassing by his standards. *Safah* in women and children, or even in men is not a quality of censure or derogation (*damm*) he says, nor does it imply disobedience to Allāh. Such persons are called *sufahā'* because of a *natural* shallowness of intellect and an inability to discern harm from injury which render them unfit to manage property. In other words the characterization is not an inherent feature of women. He goes on to argue that the Qur'ān encouraged the protection of property in a variety of ways, Q. 17 : 27, 29; Q. 25 : 67. Al-Qādī Ibn al-'Arabī to the contrary argues that *safah* is an attribute of derogation since the Prophet has been reported to say that women are deficient in intellect and religion – *nāqishāt fi 'l 'aql, nāqishāt fi 'l dīn*. See Muḥammad b. 'Abdullāh ibn al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bajawī (ed.) (Cairo: Ḥalabī, 1968/1387), 1 : 318.



## Conclusion

The *tafsīr* literature of al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī dealing with the notion of *safah* show that between the third and sixth Islamic centuries a reconfiguration of social thought had occurred. The causes and the range of social forces responsible for this change cannot be traced to micro events and are only identifiable in broad generalisations. One of the explanations is that the Islamic 'text' which was originally cast in the discourse of an Arab humanist ethics was being reconfigured in a logocentric Islamic environment which reached its apogee in the fifth Islamic century. Early Muslim intellectual history was mainly cast in terms of an Arab ontology. Later a thought gravitated around a triumphalist and majoritarian Muslim discourse. The understandings and meanings of the Qur'ān gradually became sanitized of the pre-Islamic ethos to be replaced by knowledge and epistemes framed in Islamic terms.

The first and second generation Qur'ān authorities made the contextual meaning of the Arabic language the basis of understanding *safah*, and for them it meant 'women.' In other words, the dominant contextual meaning prevailed in the interpretation of the Qur'ān. However, another shift is detected, the emergence of a new 'textual' meaning of the Qur'ān. The latter meaning which attempted to subvert the dominant 'contextual' meaning was not always given adequate prominence. It was commentators like al-Rāzī and al-Ṭabarī gave that prominence to the textual meaning. In terms of the demands of their own peculiar context they suppressed certain reported interpretations in order to stabilize meaning. This makes the suggestion even more compelling that exegetes over the centuries suppressed or erased various levels of signification of words and concepts. It confirms the point made by Arkoun that in various stages of history, the Qur'ān was

used as a *pretext* and not as a *text*, according to our modern linguistic and historical definitions. This means that the original Qur'ānic text is rewritten, reproduced within the historical development of a given community. Revelation is represented as a substantial, unchangeable, divine reality but, at the same time, is manipulated according to the immediate, concrete needs of the social actors.<sup>79)</sup>

At the very heart of this description lies the figurative expression of femininity. In chauvinistic Arabia femininity was not only abjured and rejected

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<sup>79)</sup> ARKOUN, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–78; ARKOUN, 'Logocentrisme et verite religieuse dans la pensee islamique' in *Essais sur la pensee islamique* (Maisonneuve & Larose, 1984), 188.

but constituted a negative polarity in the social imaginaire. Calling women *sufahā'* informs us of a cultural model of behaviour which existed at the time. We can only grasp the genesis and archaeology of this cultural behaviour in a partial manner as we examine the literary ruins of fading traces.

In dealing with these socio-linguistic structures the classical commentators had at least two discernable attitudes, either to remain silent or provide a plethora of comments which render the meaning ambiguous, if not obscuring it totally.<sup>80</sup>) When the commentators do pause to make some definitive comment on the *sufahā'* they often contradict each other as al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī did on the strength of different philological and lexical opinions. What this identifies is the predominant role of grammatical and semantical explanations, which supercede the anthropological and cultural discourses prevailing in the exegetical texts.

Our authors were fully aware of the tensions generated by conflicting historical reports and linguistic usages related to *sufahā'*. By resorting to certain principles of interpretation and axioms they believed they could have unmediated access to truth and knowledge. Simultaneously, they could not ignore the fact that *sufahā'* was reported as meaning women, children or both, and a plethora of other meanings. Despite their attempts to re-interpret meanings they were unable to resolve the contradictions inherent in their methodology. This methodology required that at least theoretically, there should be an equal commitment to transmitted knowledge (*naql*) and discursive (*'aql*) knowledge. The episteme underpinning their methodological grid was to generate logical consistency and epistemological stability.<sup>81</sup>)

But such stability is false since the semiotic process allows for the continuous desymbolization and resymbolization of signs and symbols.<sup>82</sup>) The sign/symbol of *safah* is desymbolized from its original nexus and then resymbolized into several frames of meaning. This was a practice undertaken by the exegetes of old and will continue to be the case as long as hu-

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<sup>80</sup>) See WADAD AL-KADI, 'The Term *'Khalīfa'* in Early Exegetical Literature,' in *Gegenwart Als Geschichte*, Axel Havemann & Baber Johansen (eds.) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 392–411, where early commentators are silent on key terminology.

<sup>81</sup>) See FAZLUR RAHMAN, *Islamic Methodology in History* (1st edition, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1965), 24. The thrust of Rahman's argument is that scholars in classical Islām recognised the need for stability in the socio-religious fabric and thus theorized law and its accompanying disciplines in such a manner that it hampered creativity and originality in Muslim intellectual life.

<sup>82</sup>) See MOHAMMED ARKOUN, 'Rethinking Islam Today, Positivism and Tradition in an Islamic Perspective,' *Diogenes*, 127 (Fall 1984), 82–100.

man beings will want to know. For to know is to interpret. Perhaps Arkoun has a point when he says that the revealed text

is commonly and regularly used as an infinite space for the mental projection of all the ideal types of perfect existence towards which believers aspire.<sup>83)</sup>

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<sup>83)</sup> MOHAMMED ARKOUN, 'The Notion of Revelation: From *Ahl al-Kitāb* to the Societies of the Book,' in *Gegenwart Als Geschichte*, Axel Havemann & Baber Johansen (eds.) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 77.