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Research Article

Qur'an as Script: Dramatic Engagement and Spiritual Transformation in Sūrat Yūsuf

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Abstract. This study examines Sūrat Yūsuf (Qur'an 12) as a divinely orchestrated dramatic narrative that transforms reading into participatory spiritual experience. Integrating Reader-Response Criticism with Sayyid Qutb's concept of *al-taṣwīr al-fannī* (artistic depiction), it demonstrates how dramatic form—dialogue, suspense, irony, and symbolic staging—facilitates the surah's pedagogical and spiritual function. Using Aristotelian principles of catharsis, peripeteia (reversal), and anagnorisis (recognition), the paper argues that the surah's aesthetics are inseparable from its revelatory purpose: to awaken moral consciousness through active engagement. Sūrat Yūsuf thus functions not merely as a sacred narrative but as a divine script performed within the believer's consciousness—an ongoing enactment of revelation that unites aesthetic pleasure with spiritual transformation.

Keywords: Qur'anic narrative; Sūrat Yūsuf; Reader-Response Criticism; *al-taṣwīr al-fannī*; dramatic art

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an unites divine revelation with literary artistry, blending narrative, exhortation, and imagery to translate moral insight into lived experience. Among its narratives, Sūrat Yūsuf (Q.12) stands uniquely complete in plot and structure, narrating Yūsuf's journey from innocence through betrayal and temptation to reconciliation and redemption. Its opening verse— "We relate to you the most beautiful of stories" (12:3)—invites readers not merely to observe but to inhabit the surah's moral universe.

Traditionally admired for theological and linguistic excellence, Sūrat Yūsuf has not often been studied as a dramatic composition. This paper approaches it as a "divine drama," combining Qur'anic exegesis, Reader-Response theory, and Qutbian aesthetics to reveal how literary form becomes a mechanism of spiritual pedagogy. Through narrative gaps, rhythmic dialogue, and dramatic symmetry, the surah transforms the believer from observer to participant in revelation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classical Approaches: Eloquence and Inimitability

Classical scholars such as al-Jurjānī and al-Zamakhsharī founded the science of *i'jāz al-Qur'ān*, emphasizing linguistic harmony (*naẓm*) and eloquence (*balāghah*). Al-Jurjānī showed that meaning arises from relational structure rather than isolated words. Yet classical exegesis focused on theological and rhetorical analysis rather than the reader's experiential and emotional response¹.

Modern Scholarship: Artistry and Coherence

Contemporary studies introduced aesthetic and narrative perspectives. Angelika Neuwirth reframed the Qur'an as a performative composition designed for communal recitation, showing how Sūrat Yūsuf's dialogue and scene structure generate tension and affect². Mustansir Mir identified its structural unity through recurring motifs—dreams, recognition, providence, and reunion—revealing symmetrical design and emotional rhythm³. Navid Kermani explored the Qur'an's affective power, recovering classical terms like *ta'thīr* (impact), *dhawq* (taste), and *wajd* (ecstatic rapture) to describe the spiritual efficacy of beauty⁴.

These contributions established that Sūrat Yūsuf displays dramatic coherence (Neuwirth), compositional artistry (Mir), and transformative aesthetics (Kermani).

¹Classical tafsīr such as al-Zamakhsharī's *Al-Kashshāf* (The Revealer of Truths) and al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* concentrated on theological meanings, lexical analysis, and Qur'anic cross-references rather than aesthetic or Experience dimensions.

²Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010).

³Mustansir Mir, "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters," *The Muslim World* 76, no. 1 (1986): 1–15. and Mustansir Mir, "Irony in the Qur'an: A Study of the Story of Joseph," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 173–187.

⁴Kermani, *The Aesthetic Reception of the Qur'an*, 71–146, 229–288. For Kermani's discussion of classical aesthetic concepts (*ta'thīr*, *dhawq*, *wajd*) and their relation to Qur'anic transformation, see especially chapters 3–4

What remains to be fully developed is an integrated framework explaining how these features function together to shape moral and spiritual transformation. This study offers that synthesis through Reader-Response theory and *al-taṣwīr al-fannī*.

METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

Reader-Response Criticism and Qur'anic Hermeneutics

Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological model posits meaning as a transaction between text and reader. Textual structures—narrative gaps (*Leerstellen*)—invite imaginative participation, compelling readers to actualize the work's potential meaning⁵.

The Qur'an masterfully employs such interpretive spaces through rhetorical concision (*ijāz*) and omission (*ḥadhf*). When Yūsuf is cast into the well, the narrative compresses his inner anguish into brief revelation (12:15), inviting readers to imagine his state⁶. Ya'qūb's phrase *sabrun jamīl* (12:18) likewise encapsulates profound faith through minimal expression.

Unlike secular literature, Qur'anic reader engagement operates within divine guidance (*hudā*). The imaginative act is disciplined contemplation (*tadabbur*), not free invention. Doctrine remains fixed, while experience unfolds through active reception.

Sayyid Qutb and the Aesthetics of al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī

Sayyid Qutb's *al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān* presents revelation as a form of artistic depiction, dramatizing spiritual realities through vivid imagery and emotional rhythm⁷. Through *taṣwīr ḥissī* (sensory portrayal) and *tajsīm* (embodiment), abstract truths become perceptible scenes. For Qutb, aesthetics and truth are inseparable—the Qur'an does not merely tell moral lessons; it shows them as living images⁸.

His framework extends al-Jurjānī's *naẓm* to narrative drama: beauty (*jamāl*) becomes the means by which truth (*ḥaqiq*) transforms consciousness.

Dramatic Form and Spiritual Function

Sūrat Yūsuf's structure parallels classical dramatic principles. Through *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *peripeteia* (reversal), characters and readers undergo transformation—betrayal leads to repentance, blindness to sight, and despair to reunion. These narrative turns evoke *ta'thīr* (emotional impact) and *infi'āl* (spiritual responsiveness), forming a distinctly Qur'anic catharsis that renews faith and humility.

⁵Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 20-21: "The phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text.

⁶ See Safi, Omid. "Dramatic Narrative Techniques in the Qur'an: The Case of Surah Yusuf", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 2001.

⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*, Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1945. Analysis and impact in Qur'anic aesthetics and poetics.

⁸ Qutb, *al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī*, 77-118. See also Qutb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1972), especially his introduction to Sūrat Yūsuf (vol. 4, 1909-1915 in the standard edition)

By integrating Reader-Response theory, Qutb's aesthetics, and Aristotelian poetics, this study views the surah as a participatory revelation in which narrative, image, and rhythm converge to awaken spiritual perception.

Analysis: The Dramatic Architecture of Sūrat Yūsuf Dream and Narrative Framing

The opening dream—celestial bodies bowing to Yūsuf (12:4)—serves as divine stage direction. It establishes both plot and hermeneutic key: meaning lies beneath surface events. The reader, possessing prophetic foreknowledge denied to other characters, perceives irony when the brothers' envy furthers the very destiny they seek to prevent. The dream thus initiates both dramatic irony and spiritual pedagogy, teaching perception of divine purpose within apparent misfortune.

Betrayal and Suspense

The brothers' plot—"Kill Joseph, or cast him away" (12:9)—is rendered with compressed dialogue that heightens moral tension. The blood-stained shirt becomes a symbolic prop demanding interpretation: a false sign of death. Ya 'qūb's "beautiful patience" contrasts the brothers' deceit, establishing moral counterpoints that train readers to discern virtue through emotional resonance.

Through deliberate compression and evocative imagery, the surah manipulates reader anticipation and sympathy: shock, sorrow, faith. This emotional oscillation engages the reader, preparing the ground for moral and spiritual reflection.

Temptation and Catharsis: Yūsuf and Zulaikha

The encounter with Zulaikha (12:23–34) forms the narrative's emotional and spiritual climax. The phrase "She desired him; he would have desired her had he not seen the proof of his Lord" (12:24) captures the authenticity of temptation and the miracle of restraint. The scene's spatial imagery—"She closed the doors" (*ghallaqat al-abwāb*)—suggests total enclosure, amplifying dramatic compression and symbolizing psychic entrapment.⁹

At the moment of ultimate vulnerability, divine illumination (*burhān rabbihi*) rescues Yūsuf internally. The torn shirt—now proof of innocence—reverses the earlier false evidence of guilt. This recognition transforms deceit into truth, tragedy into vindication. Yūsuf's prayer, "Prison is dearer to me than that to which they call me" (12:33), releases moral catharsis. The reader undergoes purification through empathic identification, witnessing the triumph of spiritual integrity over desire.

Dramatic Symmetry and Character Growth

The surah's structure reflects intentional symmetry and moral evolution across characters:

- The brothers move from envy to repentance.

⁹The linguistic analysis of "ghallaqat" in the permissive voice (*taf'īl*) as indicating emphatic and complete closure of all seven doors is a point of major tafsīrs. See al-Rāzī's *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (The Great Commentary), vol. 18, pp. 134–142.

- Zulaikha transforms from seducer to confessor (“Now truth is manifest,” 12:51).
- Ya‘qūb’s grief becomes joy.
- Yūsuf matures from dreamer to wise prophet.

Recurring motifs—dreams, garments, and recognition—mark this journey of purification. Every descent (well, slavery, prison) prefigures ascent, affirming divine order amid apparent chaos. The reader perceives that providence governs even betrayal.

The Divine Director: Irony, Foils, and Symbolic Space

Irony and Providence: Knowledge asymmetry between reader and characters generates continuous irony: the brothers’ scheme to erase Yūsuf secures his rise. Recognizing divine intention beneath human error educates spiritual vision.

Character Foils: Contrasting figures sharpen ethical contour—Ya‘qūb’s faith versus fraternal envy, Yūsuf’s chastity versus Zulaikha’s desire, the cupbearer’s forgetfulness versus prophetic trust. Each contrast enacts moral education through comparison.

Symbolic Space: Physical settings embody inner states.

- The well: abandonment and divine rescue.
- The palace: worldly allure and trial.
- The prison: purification and spiritual independence.

Objects carry semiotic function: the shirt mediates truth; the royal cup reveals hidden guilt. These material anchors make transcendent values visible.¹⁰

Dialogue and Speech Acts: Speech delineates character and spiritual condition. The brothers’ terse cruelty, Ya‘qūb’s measured hope, Yūsuf’s serene reasoning to fellow prisoners—all reveal moral disposition. Language becomes a spiritual mirror; attentive readers learn discernment through tone and rhythm.

Reader Engagement and Transformation

Affective Stylistics (Fish) clarifies how narrative pacing and imagery engage the reader’s emotional metabolism. Anticipation, frustration, and revelation generate internal motion analogous to spiritual struggle. By feeling grief, tension, and release alongside the characters, the reader rehearses faith, patience, and forgiveness.

Thus, the surah’s artistic design becomes a method of spiritual training: emotion educates conscience. Learning occurs not through abstraction but through dramatized empathy.

CONCLUSION

Sūrat Yūsuf exemplifies the Qur’an’s fusion of revelation and art, transforming divine speech into participatory performance. Through dialogue, suspense, and symbolic mise-en-scène, it invites readers into a living encounter with divine providence. Synthesizing Reader-Response theory, Qutb’s aesthetic vision, and

¹⁰The concept of “symbolic anchors” in relation to narrative objects (shirts, cup) is drawn from semiotics and applied to Qur’anic narrative in Toorawa’s and other contemporary analyses.

classical dramatic form shows that the surah operates as a divine mechanism of awakening. It not merely conveys truth but enacts it through aesthetic participation.

The Qur'an thus emerges as an interactive revelation—a script awaiting realization in consciousness. Each reader's engagement becomes a performance of faith, a reenactment of *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ* (“the most beautiful of stories”) in personal experience. Sūrat Yūsuf is not merely remembered; it is re-lived. Through its beauty, irony, and symmetry, the surah accomplishes its ultimate aim: to make divine knowledge felt, embodied, and spiritually transformative.

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