



Semiotic-Sufistic Interpretation of Imam Al-Ghazali: A Case Study of The Verses of Light in the Holy Qur'an

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Abstract

This study delves into the significance of symbols in conveying the spiritual experiences of Sufis. Describing their mystical journeys has proven challenging, as these transcend the conventional realm of human comprehension and are only accessible to those with pure hearts and the knowledge of *kashf*, a state of religious epiphany granted by God. The research focuses on analyzing Imam Al-Ghazali's semiotic-sufistic discourse in his work "Mishkat al-Anwar," specifically his interpretation of "The Verses of Light" (found in the Holy Qur'an, Surah An-Nur, Verse No. 35). It examines the semiotic structure of the Qur'an and Al-Ghazali's interpretation, which is replete with cryptic symbolic and esoteric messages. The findings reveal that Al-Ghazali employed symbols to express his 'irfan knowledge, given the challenge of articulating spiritual experiences in empirical terms. Symbols proved to be the most effective means to decode messages acquired through *kashf*. Al-Ghazali's understanding of *makna batin*, the profound messages, can only be interpreted by Sufi scholars specializing in mystical intuition. Through this method, they gain insight into the deep messages within the realm of *al-Malakut*, the unseen, as they diligently adhere to Islamic teachings to please the Almighty God.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali, Sufistic, Semiotics, The Verses of Light.

Introduction

The Qur'an as a holy scripture which is considered as *authenticum dei verbum*¹ has always become a fascinating center of study for both insiders and outsiders.² One of the interesting discourses in the modern interpretation of the Qur'an is semiotics. Semiotic approach is a linguistic approach which has the same level of significance as hermeneutic approach which has recently been gaining popularity among contemporary muslim scholars.³ Semiotics deals with the analysis of signs and anything related to signs, such as the system and the use of signs. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a founding father and expert in modern linguistics, signs always cover two aspects: material and mental aspects. The relationship of both aspects gives birth to signs. Meanings behind the signs can be revealed if both the aspects are intertwined so that signification can be formed, as Roland Barthes said.⁴ The combination of these components is called semiotics.⁵ Its main purpose is to understand the signs that exist around the humans.

In line with the explanation above, the verses of Allah contain many signs, just like one of His verses, "How many signs in the heavens and the

¹ The term "text" (al-Qur'an) in the Islamic thinking tradition was first introduced by Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid in his work "Mafhum an-Nas: Dirasah fi Ulum al-Qur'an". Read: Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, "Mafhum an-Nas: Dirasah fi Ulum al-Qur'an" (Beirut: Markaz ats-Tsaqafi Dar al-Bayda' al-Magrib, 2000), p. 9.

² This can be observed from various works written by Muslim scholars and Western scholars alike, addressing both the internal aspects of the Qur'an itself and its external aspects.

³ The idea of the necessity for the application of hermeneutics in the study of the Qur'an is becoming more widespread. This opinion is simultaneously voiced by contemporary Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Syahrur, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Hassan Hanafi, Asghar Ali Engineer, Riffat Hasan, Amina Wadud, and others. See Adian Husaini and Abdurrahman al-Baghdadi, *Hermeneutika dan Tafsir Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2007), p.2; see also Adian Husaini, *Hegemoni Kristen-Barat dalam Studi Islam di Perguruan Tinggi* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2006), p.134, 142.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Element of Semiology*, Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p.48.

⁵ Semiotics is a branch of knowledge that deals with the study of signs and everything related to signs, such as sign systems and the processes that apply to their use. See Art Van Zuest, *Semiotics about how signs work and what we do with them*. Ani Sekowati, Trans. (Jakarta: Yayasan Sumber Agung, 1993), p.1.

earth do they pass by with indifference!" (Qur'an Surah Yusuf [12]: 105). This verse indicates that Allah often sends signs in the heavens and the earth to the humans so that they can take lessons from those signs. The verses made by Allah are categorized into two different types. Firstly, linguistic or *qauliyah* verses which refer to the signs found in the Qur'an. Secondly, non-linguistic or *kauniah* verses which refer to the signs found in the nature. Quantitatively, non-linguistic signs are unlimited⁶, while linguistic signs are limited and constant because nothing is added or removed from it except the interpretations made by humans about it. Those signs are given so that humans are able to think and contemplate the mightiness of Allah. In the Qur'an, such signs and symbols are called *ayat*.⁷ Eventhough the Qur'an's revelation process is already completed,⁸ Muhammad Arkoun viewed that the Qur'an is still dynamic in the sense that there are possibilities for new reinterpretations.⁹

The Qur'an, which is written in Arabic, has an interesting system of signs. Some experts believe that the Qur'an is a world of signs. Therefore, an analysis is required in order to discover the meanings and significances within the Qur'an. The concepts behind the Qur'anic sign system are found by studying the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In Arkoun's perspective, the Qur'an is a corpus of affirmations written in Arabic which is both limited and limitless. It also contains potential

⁶ The Quran often mentions non-verbal signs (verses) in various forms. This can be observed from several verses of the Quran such as QS. Yunus [10]: 92, QS. Ali Imran [3]: 49, QS. Yunus [12]: 105, QS. An-Nahl [16]: 11-12, QS. An-Nahl [16]: 68-69, QS. al-Israa' [17]: 12, QS. Yasin [36]: 33, QS. al-Baqarah [2]: 266, QS. Ali Imran [3]: 190, dan QS. al-Baqarah [7]: 133, and many more.

⁷ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Relasi Tuhan dan Manusia: Pendekatan Semantik terhadap al-Qur'an*, Agus Facri Husain et al, Trans. (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 1997), p.46.

⁸ It is called "official" because the compilation of the Quran into a *Mushaf* was decided by the decree of Caliph Uthman ibn Affan. It's called "closed" because after the formalization of this compilation into the *Uthmani Mushaf*, there should no longer be any intervention from anyone in the writing and reading of the *Mushaf*. See Muhammed Arkoun, *Pemikiran Arab*, Yudian Wahyudi Asmin, Trans. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1996), p.65.

⁹ Muhammed Arkoun, *Berbagai Pembacaan al-Qur'an*, Machasin, Trans. (Jakarta: INIS, 1997), p.135.

meanings proposed by God to the humans.¹⁰ According to Arkoun, The Qur'anic verses function as symbols, signs, and signals.¹¹ In the Qur'an, the word *ayat* (sign/s) is repeated so many times. Even the shortest verses¹² and markers used to indicate breaks between sentences are also considered as *ayat*. For instance, the *waqafs* in *tajweed* (A set of rules and principles on how to read the Arabic text of the Qur'an correctly and accurately) are categorized based on its function, such as *lam* (لا)¹³, *mim* (م)¹⁴, *sad* (ص)¹⁵, *sad-lam-ya'* (صلى)¹⁶, *qaf* (ق)¹⁷, *sin* (س)¹⁸, *tho* (ط)¹⁹, *jim* (ج)²⁰, *zha* (ظ)²¹. Other signs that fall within the field of Qur'anic semiotics include *muqhata'ah* (opening) letters such as أ، ب، ج، د، هـ، و، ز، ح، ط، ي، ك، هـ، ع، ف، ق، ص، ي، س، ع، سق، طه، طسم، كهيعص، ألمر، ألم، ألمص، أئر، all have mysteries that are difficult to understand, so much so that scholars like as-Suyuti in *tafsir Jalalain* said, "only Allah who understands its meanings"²²

Based on the explanation above, this study intends to study the semiotic interpretation discourse of the Qur'an by Imam Al-Ghazali (1057-1111 AD), one of the most influential sufi scholars who had a significant

¹⁰ Muhammed Arkoun, *Nalar Modern: Berbagai tantangan dan jalan baru*, Rahayu S. Hidayat, Trans. (Jakarta: INIS, 1994), p.194

¹¹ Musthofa Basyir Rasad, "Menggagas Semiotika al-Qur'an" in KOMPAS, 16 Nov 2001, p.4.

¹² Farid Esack, *The Qur'an; A Short Introduction* (England: One World Oxford, 2002), p.57. Hans Wehr defined *ayat* as "sign," "takon," "model," "exemplar." See Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Beirut:Libeirie du Liban/London, MacDonald & Evants, 1980), p.36.

¹³ This sign means "do not stop reciting"

¹⁴ Also named *Waqaf Lazim*, this means "stop in the end of the sentence"

¹⁵ Also named *Waqaf Murakkhas*, this means that it is better not to stop, but stopping is allowed in cases of necessity without altering the meaning.

¹⁶ The abbreviation of *Al-wasl Awlaa*, which means "continuation or connecting the recitation is better,"

¹⁷ It is permissible to stop reciting in the previous *waqqaf*

¹⁸ The symbol "Saktah" (سكتة) indicates a momentary pause without taking a breath.

¹⁹ The sigh for *Waqaf Mutlaq*, this means that one must stop reciting upon meeting this sign.

²⁰ This sign means "It is permissible to pause or to continue."

²¹ This sign means "It is better not to stop"

²² Jalaluddin as-Syuyuthi and Jalaluddin Al-Mahally, *Tafsîru Al-jalâlaimi*, (Kairo: Dâr el-Hadits, cet 3, 1999), p.3.

contribution to the formulation of classical interpretation of the Qur'an.²³ Two of his works, *Jawahir al-Qur'an* and *Misykat al-Anwar*, specifically reflected Al-Ghazali's ideas in interpreting the Qur'an semiotically. In most interpretations, metaphors usually refer to words that cannot be applied literally. Therefore, Al-Ghazali believed that the use of metaphors can help in understanding the God's will. One of the dimensions in Al-Ghazali's semiotic interpretation is the essence of meanings behind the texts can only be understood through mystical rather than categoric intuition. As a result, those who do not possess the mystical intuition will have problems in interpreting the Qur'an.²⁴ In other words, only individuals or sufis who go through *ma'rifat* (a deep, spiritual understanding of Allah) will obtain the mystical intuition. With this intuition, they can unveil the essence of spiritual meanings behind the texts and be one step closer towards what the God intends.²⁵

Through his two works, Al-Ghazali tended to use metaphorical-personificative languages which are abundant in semiotic elements like the signified and the signifiers. This can be observed from his classification of the content of the Qur'an into two categories : *jawahir* ("pearls") and *durar* ("jewels"). The former is related with keys of *ma'rifat* towards Allah,²⁶ while the latter refers to the straight and clear path to Allah.²⁷ Both also have different levels of values²⁸ just like the levels of knowledge in the Qur'an,

²³ Habib and Muslich Shabir, *Al-Ghazālī's Qur'anic Sufi Hermeneutics: Case Study on the Story of Abraham in Search of God*, KALAM, Volume 15, No. 02, (2021),pp.121-144.

²⁴ Muhammad Kamal, "Al-Ghazālī's Hermeneutics Phenomenology," *Religion East & West: Journal of the Institute for World Religions*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (2004): pp.77-89.

²⁵ Habib dan Muslich Shabir, *Al-Ghazālī's Qur'anic Sufi Hermeneutics*,p.125.

²⁶ Al-Ghazali mentioned that there are 760 verses categorized as "pearls". See Al-Ghazali, *Jawa>hir Al-Qur'a>n*, (Beirut: Dar Ih}ya>'il Ulum, 1990).p.86.

²⁷ As for the "jewel" verses, there are 741 verses. *Ibid*.p.147.

²⁸ Al-Ghazali argued that the verses and chapters of the Quran are layered according to the levels of their content. For example, *Surah al-Fatihah* is the most essential verses, *Ayat al-Kursi* is the leader of the Qur'an, *Surah Yasin* is the heart of the Qur'an, and *Surah al-Ikhlās* is equivalent to one-third of the Qur'an.

namely “surface knowledge”²⁹ and “core knowledge”.³⁰ However, Al-Ghozali said that although the surface knowledge has low value, it is important because it acts as the path towards the core knowledge.³¹ When discussing about the lower levels of core knowledge, Al-Ghazali utilized terms such as *Kibrit ahmar* (red sulfur), *yaqut*, *durar* (pearls), *zabarjud* (ruby), *anbar* (fragrant oil), *ud* (agarwood), and *tiryaaq* (antidote). The use of these metaphors points directly towards the essence of the Qur’an, while the signs embedded within the material and worldly objects are indirect, representative signs.

Such dualism has an implication towards interpretation, where signs are categorized into *zahir*³² and *batin*.³³ The main principle outlined in the semiotic interpretation is that the external/*zahir* meanings of the text cannot be separated with its internal/*batin* meanings.³⁴ Therefore, in his work

²⁹ Al-Ghazali divided the outer layer of knowledge into five categories: first, *makharij al-huruf* (phonology), second, the knowledge of the language of the Qur’an, third, *i’rab al-Qur’an* (grammatical analysis), fourth, *qira’at* (recitation variations), and fifth, *tafsir* (interpretation). This systematic arrangement of knowledge is initiated with *makharij al-huruf* and concluded with *tafsir*. Ibid. p.35.

³⁰ Al-Ghazali classified the core knowledge into two categories: first, the upper core knowledge, including *ma’rifatullah* (knowledge about the essence of Allah and His attributes), knowledge about purifying the heart as a path to Allah, and knowledge about rewards and punishments. Second, the lower core knowledge, consists of *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), *ilmu kalam* (theology), and the stories of the Quran. Ibid. p.28-29.

³¹ The *hakikat* (essence) cannot be attained except by shedding the surface layer to reach the core, which involves transitioning from this empirical world, a world of darkness, to the realm of *malakut*, a world of light and essence. See Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Teks Otoritas Kebenaran*, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003), p.237; The question now is how humans can penetrate the boundaries of the surface to reach the essence. Al-Ghazali’s answer is through consistent adherence to the straight path in pursuing the spiritual journey towards Allah, which involves continuous remembrance (*zikir*) and detachment from the world and all that preoccupy us with it. Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Tekstualitas Al-Qur’an Kritik terhadap Uloom Qur’an*, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2001), p.366.

³² The “*zahir*” is the house and the surface, which is the language that presents the text to our understanding and intellect.

³³ The “*batin*” is the secrets and pearls, which are the inner realities contained within the text as its essence.

³⁴ Several terms are used to denote the meaning of *Zahir* (literal, external, exoteric) and *Batin* (internal, esoteric, metaphorical). Mogamat Mahgadien Hendricks stated that the exoteric meaning is more accessible to humans, while the esoteric meaning is fully known only by God. Meanwhile, the *batin* (inner meaning) is connected to individuals who possess

*Jawahir al-Qur'an*³⁵, Al-Ghazali attempted to achieve balance between the literal and metaphoric meanings of the Qur'an.³⁶ Another dimension of his semiotic interpretation theory is that each text has references³⁷ based on either the *lafaz* (expression) and meaning.³⁸ Literal meanings represent words from *alam syahadah* (the realm of the living), while metaphorical meanings represent words from *alam malakut* (the realm of the unseen),³⁹ and the community of interpreters which is divided into the sufis (who master the knowledge of *hakikat*) and the ordinary people.⁴⁰ The former acts as the

spirituality and divine truth (*hakikat*). See Mogamat Mahgadien Hendricks, *The Qur'anic Sufi Hermeneutics of Shakh Mustafa al-'Alawi: A critical study of his Lubab al-'ilm Fi Surah al-Najm*. (Cape: University of Western Cape, 2018), p.17.

³⁵ "Jawahirul Qur'an" is an important work that discusses Al-Ghazali's methodological steps in interpreting the Qur'an, which is the subject of analysis in the author's article.

³⁶ Muhammad Kamal, "Al-Ghazali's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology." pp.77-89.

³⁷ "Reference" is understood as something that refers (back and forth) to something else. See M.Nur Kholis Setiawan, *Al-Qur'an Kitab Sastra Terbesar* (Yogyakarta: eLSAQ Press, 2005), p.92-93; Compare it with another definition which is something that is the target of the wording and the meaning of the verse. See Aksin Wijaya, *Menafsir Kalam Tuhan* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2021), p.148.

³⁸ Al-Ghazali outlined five hierarchical levels of existence: 1) *Wujud al-Zati* (essential existence): This is the actual existence, truly independent, beyond sensation and reason; 2) *Wujud al-Hissi* (sensory existence): Something that exists within the reach of visual perception; 3) *Wujud al-Khayali* (imaginary existence): The mental representation of things that can be sensed as existing when the image is absent from your perception; 4) *Wujud al-'Aqli* (rational existence): Something that has meanings; 5) *Wujud al-Syibhi* (similitudinal existence): Something whose existence cannot be captured in image or essence, whether in sensory perception, imagination, or reason. See Al-Ghazali, "Faysal al-Tafriqah Bayna al-Islam wa Zindiqah", in *Majmu'ah Rasail al-Imam al-Ghazali* (Kairo: Maktabah Taufiqiyah, 2006), p.28-31; 33-38; compare with Al-Ghazali, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (New York: Oxford University, 2002), p.94-96; 96-100.

³⁹ Al-Ghazali formulated the relationship between these two worlds as a contradiction through vocabularies. *alam malakut* (spiritual realm) is depicted through terms like "*al-Lubab*" (essence), "*ar-ruh*" (soul), and "*an-nur*" (light), while the vocabularies of *alam asy-syahadah* includes terms like "*Al-qasyr*" (shortcomings), "*Ash-shurah*" (doubt), and "*Azh-zhulmah*" (darkness). See Nasr Hamid, *Teks Otoritas Kebenaran*, p.237.

⁴⁰ In his work "*Al-Iljam al-'Awam 'an Ilmi al-Kalam*," Al-Ghazali divided the society into two groups: the common people and the intellectuals. The common people includes experts in philology, linguistics, hadith scholars, interpreters of the Quran, and theologians. Meanwhile, the group of the intellectuals consists of scholars of *ma'rifat* (spiritual knowledge) who dedicate themselves to learning how to swim in the ocean of spiritual knowledge. See

“active communicator” (subject I), while the latter acts as the “passive communicant” (subject II) of the interpretation. The question is, how does these elements operate and relate with each other? To answer this, the author took an example of the implementation of the sufistic-semiotic interpretation theory in the Holy Qur’an, Surah An-Nur (24): 35 in his book *Mishkat al-Anwar*.⁴¹

Al-Ghazali and Sufistic Symbols: between *Ad-Dall* (the Signified) and *Al-Madlul* (the Signifier)

Symbols play an important role in conveying the sufis’ spiritual experience. Such mystical journey is beyond any linguistic realms because it occurs outside human’s rational thinking.⁴² Thus, this study will discuss three important aspects of Al-Ghazali’s semiotic discourse. However, it is important to first discuss about the intellectual sketch of Imam Ghazali (1058-1111). He was an influential sufi scholar who lived in the 5th century. He was nicknamed *Hujjat al-Islam* (Defender of Islam) or *al-Mujaddid* (the Reformer) by his commenters.⁴³ They would even glorify him to the point that they said, “If there were a prophet that came after Muhammad, then Al-Ghazali would be the next prophet.”⁴⁴ From an outsider’s perspective, Montgomery Watt said. “*Al-Ghazali is the best mind ever produced in Islam after the Prophet himself*”.⁴⁵ According to him, al-Ghazali is a phenomenal figure that has been

Al-Ghazali, *A Return to Purity In Creed*, Translated by Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, (Philadelphia:Lampost, Productions,2008),p.42.

⁴¹ “Mishkat al-Anwar” is a book that specifically focuses its discussion on the verses of light and a hadith about the veil which presents Al-Ghazali’s theological and Sufistic thoughts. See Salahudin Sopus, *Misykât Al-Anwâr Karya Al-Ghazali: Sekelumit Catatan Kontroversi Dan Teologi Pencerahan Sufistiknya*, MADANIA Vol. 20, No. 2, (Desember 2006),p.151.

⁴² Mazlina Parman, Nurasmallail Marni, sufi symbols in Poems of Ibn ‘Arabi and Hamzah Fansuri, *UMRAN – International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies*. vol. 8, no.2 (2021),pp.25

⁴³ M. Saeed Sheikh, “Al-Ghazâlî Metaphysics,” in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *History of Muslim Philosophy*, (Pakistan: Royal Book Company, 1983), vol. 1,p.581.

⁴⁴ Al-Subkî, *Thabaqât al-Syâfi’iyyah al-Kubrâ*, (Kairo: Mathba’ah al-Bâbî al-Halabî, 1964/1976), volume 4,p. 101.

⁴⁵ Nurcholis Madjid, “*Tasawuf Sebagai Inti Keberagamaan*” dalam *Pesantren*, No.3/Vol.II. (1985),p.7-8.

acknowledged by both Muslim and European scholars.⁴⁶ This is proven by his figure and his works that have gained a significant amount of attention from researchers to this day. Margaret Smith in *Al-Ghazaly The Mystic* stated that Al-Ghazali's thoughts had influenced a renowned Christian scholar named St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and even a Jewish scholar named Maimonides who conducted many studies on al-Ghazali's works.⁴⁷

Al-Ghazali's works always become an interesting source of research for both Eastern and Western scholars. For instance, the semiotic discourses with sufistic nuances in two of his works *Jawahir al-Qur'an* and *Misykat al-Anwar* which has not been discussed much by researchers. In these works, al-Ghazali's concept of sufistic semiotics lies on duality between *the signifier* and *the signified*, from symbols to the objects being symbolized. Such duality can be observed from his use of key symbols in *tasawuf* discourses, like between *hakikat* and *majaz*, the *jewel* and *pearl* verses, *al-zahir* and *al-batin* meanings, *al-malakut* (the realm of the unseen) and *asy-syahadah* (the realm of the living). The knowledge of *hakikat* is related to matters of divine, high beings, while *majaz* is related to matters of low beings and decline. *Majaz* is like the "surface" (*al-qasyr*), whereas *hakikat* is like the "core" (*al-lubab*). *Hakikat* is within the ontological dimension, while *majaz* is within the epistemological dimension. The ontological dimension manifests in the relationship between *hakikat* and *al-malakut* (spirits, lights, and ideas), while *majaz* becomes a part of our material world and the darkness.⁴⁸

The secret of symbols behind the "Pearl" and "Jewel" verses.

Imam Ghazali gave an analogy that the Qur'an is like a vast ocean. Its coasts are the surface knowledge, while its depth is the highest level of

⁴⁶ W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Theology and Philosophy an Extended Survey*, (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1985),p.85.

⁴⁷ See Margaret Smith, *Al-Ghazali The Mystic*, (Lahore:Hijra International Publisher, 1983). 'Abd al-Rahmân Badawî in "Mu'allafât al-Ghazâlî" (al-Ghazâlî's works), mentioned that al-Ghazâlî had 72 original works. See 'Abd al-Rahmân Badawî, *Mu'allafât al-Ghazâlî*, (Kairo: al-Dâr al-Mishriyyah li al-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjamah, 1961),p.2; However, his most powerful work is "Ihya 'Ulum al-Din", in which some of its parts had been translated to various languages.

⁴⁸ Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Teks Otoritas Kebenaran*,p.237.

the core knowledge. In the coast, there are only quiet snail shells and sands, while the ocean is full of jewels and pearls. The more someone dive deep into the depths of this ocean, the more jewels and pearls that he/she will obtain. Thus, readers who only pay attention to the surface knowledge is like people who only travel on the beaches without gaining anything valuable. Therefore, al-Ghazali's goal was to wake the readers up from their "sleep".

"I am just waking you up from your slumbers, O people who just read, who make the study of the Qur'an as a mere profession, who only digest its literal and global meanings. Untill when will you go around the beaches while ignoring the unknown things? Why don't you ride the ocean's waves to see its miracles, sail through its islands to grab its precious resources, explore through its depths so that you can get its pearls? Why don't you scold yourself who are unable to reach those treasures simply because of your affinity towards the mere coasts and its views? Or could it be that you do not know that the Qur'an is like a vast ocean. From there, knowledge from the first to the last generation flows like a river? Or, do not you want to be like people who had dived into the depth of the sea and got rubies, pearls, emeralds, and then they went into the beaches and obtained fresh fragrant oils, and agarwoods. They traveled through its islands and they retrieved many cures from its animals, as well as really fragrant perfumes."⁴⁹

From the excerpts above, we are faced with a layered portrayal of al-Ghazali's concept regarding the Qur'an and its knowledge. Al-Ghazali used the duality of the surface and the core or snail shells and pearls, classified the Qur'anic knowledge literally and metaphorically through semantic inversions using symbols and metaphors such as Kibrit ahmar (red sulfur), yaqut, durar (pearls), zabarjud (ruby), anbar (fragrant oil), ud (agarwood), tiryaq (antidote), and misik (perfume). All these metaphors directly refer to the essence of the Qur'an, while the signs found in the objects' material value

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazali, *The Jewel of the Qur'an*, Translated by Muhammad Abul Qoasem (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1977),p.19-20.

are indirect representative signs.

The series of metaphors created by al-Ghazali represent the relationship between *ad-dall/the signified* and *al-madlul/the signifier* which applies in our languages as metaphorical reflection. He revealed that those metaphors are not only means of expression which show the signs behind it, but what it actually meant is its literal meaning.⁵⁰ For example, when al-Ghazali discussed about knowledge within the Qur'an, he used words such as *al-kibrit al-ahmar* (red sulfur) to indicate knowledge related to Allah. Those words are used not in metaphorical, but in literal sense, while viewing it as a core meaning. When al-Ghazali compared the meaning of *al-kibrit al-ahmar* in the realm of the living (*'alam asy-syahadah*) with the realm of the unseen (*al-malakut*), he concluded that the knowledge of Allah is the core meaning or more proper to be the core meaning proven by the repeated use of the term *al-aula* (more significant or important).⁵¹

If *kibrit ahmar* is the knowledge about Allah, there are also other terms referring to the branches of knowledge about Allah such as *yaqut ahmar* (knowledge of Allah's being), *yaqut akhab* (knowledge of Allah's traits), and *yaqut asfar* (knowledge of Allah's actions), all of which are the first part of the Qur'an. Then, the second part is "an introduction on how to walk towards Allah" which is marked with the term *Durr Azhar*. The third part which specifically discuss about conditions to achieve the second part is called *Zamrud akhdar*. If all these three knowledge are important basic principals, then it is no surprise that *kibrit ahmar*, *yaqut*, *durar*, and *zabarjud* is located at the core of the ocean that is the Qur'an which has neither coasts nor lands.⁵² Al-Ghazali then explored the meaning of *tiryak akbar* (the great antidote) as a symbol for referring *kalam* (the art of using rational arguments to prove God's existence) which is the fifth part of the Qur'an. Verses that fall under *kalam* are meant to protect the *akidah* (conviction) of the Muslims from attacks made by the disbelievers and perpetrators of *bid'ah* (religious

⁵⁰ Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Teks Otoritas Kebenaran*, p.241.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.241-242

⁵² Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Tekstualitas al-Qur'an*, p.379-380.

innovation).⁵³

Next, al-Ghazali compared *fiqih* (Islamic jurisprudence) with the term *misik azfar* (a fragrant perfume). He only view the function of this knowledge as far as the rewards obtained by people who master it. Then, stories about people who drifted away from the right path are compared like agarwoods. Although such stories were useless for him, but it is very useful as lessons and warnings for others.⁵⁴

The duality between the surface and the core is not applied only in its classification into words and meanings, but it is also applicable in the classification of internal texts.⁵⁵ Al-Ghazali categorized the verses in the Qur'an into *jawahir* (pearls) and *durar* (jewels), in hierarchical order. Verses about Allah's knowledge fall within *jawahir* category, followed by *durar* verses which are mostly about *shiratal mustaqim* (the right path). The explanation regarding this categorization is based on the core principles of al-Ghazali's system of epistemology.⁵⁶ The "pearls" of the Qur'an is utilized to obtain the lights of *makrifat*, while the "jewels" is to make sure that we stand in the right path through our deeds. The first part is scientific, while the second part is practical, since it is well-known that the foundation of faith is knowledge and deeds.⁵⁷

The internal classification of text is fundamentally not based of the length of sentences, nor is it about the quantity of sentences. Instead, what is considered is the content expressed by the sentences. This is due to many long verses and many surahs with numerous verses, yet short verses and short chapters could potentially hold more values in terms of their content.⁵⁸ Al-Ghazali mentioned two important reasons regarding the classification of verses that fall into "pearls" and "gems": firstly, the groups of other verses are boundless in number. Secondly, because both groups (pearls and gems)

⁵³ Ibid.p.380

⁵⁴ Ibid.p.380-381

⁵⁵ Ibid.p.394

⁵⁶ Ibid.p.391

⁵⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Jawahir Al-Qur'an*,p.85

⁵⁸ Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Tekstualitas al-Qur'an*,p.394

are, in his view, significant groups, there are no other alternatives. Hence, Al-Ghazali argued that if only humans were to pay attention to these two groups of verses, they would have attained the pinnacle of happiness.⁵⁹

The classification of verses into *jawahir* and *durar* in which some are considered more important and hold higher value than others. For instance, Surah Al-Fatihah is the "most essential" verses, Ayat al-Kursi is the "leader" of the Qur'an, Surah Yasin is the "heart" of the Qur'an, and Qul Huwa Allah Ahad is equivalent to "one-third" of the Qur'an.⁶⁰ The use of terms like "most important," "leader," "heart," and "one-third" is not meant literally, but rather these are metaphorical terms used to encourage people to read them.

The term *alam al-Malakut* (the realm of the unseen) Vs *alam asy-Syahadah* (the realm of the living)

Hakikat can only be obtained by stripping away the surface layers until reaching the core. This is achieved by transitioning from this empirical world, a surface world of darkness, towards *alam malakut*, a core world of light. Al-Ghazali formulated the relationship between these two worlds as contradictions in the form of metaphors. In the excerpts below, *Alam malakut* represents the vocabulary of the right column, while the left column represents the vocabulary of the material world.⁶¹

Terms in <i>alam al-Malakut</i>	Terms in <i>alam asy-Syahadah</i>
<i>Al-qasyr</i>	<i>Al-lubab</i>
<i>Ash-shurah</i>	<i>Ar-ruh</i>
<i>Azh-zhulmah</i>	<i>An-nur</i>
<i>As-sufla</i>	<i>Al-'ulw</i>
<i>Azh-zhill</i>	<i>Asy-syakhsy</i>
<i>Ats-tsamrah</i>	<i>Al-mutsmir</i>
<i>Al-musabbab</i>	<i>As-sabab</i>
<i>Al-muhakah</i>	<i>Al-ashl.</i>

The Exoteric and Esoteric interpretations in understanding the outer and

⁵⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Jawahir Al-Qur'an*, p.211

⁶⁰ Ibid. p.62-63

⁶¹ Ibid. p.62-63

inner meanings

In the context of exoteric interpretation, mastery of linguistic aspects is crucial for a commentator (*muawwil*), especially when examining what they refer to as *gara'ib al-Qur'an*, which are the uncommon words found throughout the Quran. Such interpretation, as emphasized by Al-Ghazali, requires a deep knowledge of the Arabic language in its original form during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, including the specific usage of ambiguous and interchangeable words (*al-alfaz al-mubhamah wa al-mubdalah*), abbreviations (*al-ikhtisar*), deletions (*al-hazf*), removal of words (*al-idmar*), rearrangements and conclusions (*at-taqdim wa at-ta'hir*), conveying the opposite (*al-manqul al-munqalib*), repetition that disrupts the continuity of speech (*al-mukarrar al-qati' li-wasl al-kalam*), and the gradual explanation of stages (*at-tadrij fi al-bayan*).⁶²

In each of the aforementioned topics, Al-Ghazali provides examples from both the Quran and hadiths. For instance, the term "*al-umma*" is explored, which has eight different meanings. The word "*al-umma*" can mean: (1) A group of people (Q.S. Al-Qashas [28]:23); (2) The followers of a prophet; (3) A man endowed with all forms of goodness and followed by others (Q.S. An-Nahl [16]:120); (4) Religion (Q.S. Az-Zukhruf [43]:22); (5) Time and period (Q.S. Hud [11]:8); (6) The stature or appearance of a man; (7) A man (Zayd Ibn 'Amr Ibn Nufayl) who follows the religion alone without a companion and will be resurrected alone as *an ummah*; (8) Mother (Zayd's mother).⁶³

Al-Ghazali explained that the understanding of the language use in *gara'ib al-Qur'an* can only be achieved through a mastery of the Arabic language as it existed during the time of Prophet Muhammad.⁶⁴ This understanding, especially for *mu'awwils*, is considered very significant. Al-Ghazali even emphasized this point in his work *Faishal al-Tafriqah baina al-*

⁶² Nicholas Heer & William C. Chittick, *Tafsir Esoterik Gazali dan Sam'an*, , Ribut Wahyudi. Trans. (Yogyakarta:Pustaka Sufi, 2003),p.9-10.

⁶³ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Vol.1 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, t.th),292; see also Muhammad Abul Qasem, *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur'an Al-Ghazali's Theory* (Kuala Lumpur: the University of Malaya Press, 1979),p.99-100.

⁶⁴ Ibid.p.100

Islâm wa al-Zandaqah, where he discussed the texts that can be interpreted and those that cannot, stating that it is not an easy task. Only a skilled, intelligent, and diligent interpreter who can trace the origin of words in the Arabic language and understands the traditions of the Arab people can be self-reliant and independent in this endeavor. Such knowledge needs to be supplemented with the study of *Balaghah* (rhetoric) to understand figurative speeches and metaphors, as well as the study of literature to comprehend the methods of creating and delivering *al-amtsal* (analogies).⁶⁵

However, according to Al-Ghazali, exoteric interpretation which relies solely on linguistic methods, is deemed inadequate to fully explain the various levels of meanings in the Qur'an that exist in *alam malakut* without diving into its inner meanings through esoteric interpretation. It is important to note that esoteric interpretation does not contradict exoteric interpretation. Instead, it serves as a complement by providing its deepest meanings.⁶⁶

The process of unveiling the hidden meanings behind the text is achieved through a *mi'raj* (spiritual ascent) from *'alam asy-syahadah* to the highest level known as the "Kingdom of Oneness". According to Al-Ghazali, the revelation of divine mysteries, including the concealed meanings within the texts of the Quran and Hadith, can only be attained by a Sufi (*salik*)⁶⁷ who adorns their heart with the light of truth and purifies their conscience from everything other than the divine truth.⁶⁸ These two aspects, as conveyed by Al-Ghazali to his disciples in *Mishkat al-Anwar*, helped them in preparing for the arduous journey of spiritual ascent fraught with various challenges. Al-Ghazali said the following:

"You have asked me, my brothers, may Allah guide you towards the highest

⁶⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Faishal al-Tafriqah baina al-Islâm wa al-Zandaqah*, Andalusia: Huquq At-Tiba' Mahfudzah, 1993..167

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*.p.347.

⁶⁷ A person who embarks on a spiritual journey is called a "salik," and according to Al-Ghazali, they are also referred to as "students," which means an individual who possesses the will (*iradah*) to follow the path of God. See H.M. Zurkani Jahja, *Teologi Al-Ghaza>li> Pendekatan Metodologi*. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2009),p.222.

⁶⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Mishkat al-Anwar*. Verified by Abu al-'Ila 'Afifi. (Kairo: Maktabah al-Arabiah li al-Turath, 1964),p.39.

and truest happiness, enroll you for the spiritual ascent to the loftiest peak, illuminate the visions of your heart with the light of truth, and purify your conscience from everything other than the divine truth. You have requested that I reveal to you the divine secrets along with the hidden meanings behind the literal interpretations of certain verses from the noble Qur'an that you have contemplated, as well as the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad that have been transmitted for generations."⁶⁹

Based on the excerpts above, the success of a *salik* (spiritual traveler) in undertaking their *suluk* (spiritual journey) depends on the chastity of their hearts (*al-qalb*). For Al-Ghazali, the heart is not only the vessel of knowledge within humans, but it also has the potential to attain mystical knowledge (*ilmu mukashafah*), much like the intellect (*al'aql*) can attain knowledge through reasoning. The chastity of the *salik's* heart, according to Al-Ghazali, plays a crucial role in relation to acquiring *ilmu mukashafah*. In the pursuit of *ilmu mukashafah*, if the conditions and state of the heart met certain prerequisites, then the individual can perceive what is inscribed in the *Luh Mahfuzh* (Preserved Tablet).⁷⁰ Another prerequisite is that the *salik* must possess *iradah* (determination) to undertake the spiritual journey. The presence of this determination is signaled by the individual's effort to remove barriers between him/herself and Allah, which include material possessions, status, blind imitation (*taqlid*), and disobedience (*maksiat*).⁷¹ The clearing of the barrier of material possessions involves giving away wealth from one's possession. Breaking the barrier of status means distancing oneself from places of status and honor. Overcoming the barrier of *taqlid* is achieved by renouncing fanaticism to specific sects he/she follows. Finally, the barrier of *maksiat* is lifted through sincere repentance.⁷²

Quoting from Wahyudi, Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri stated that there are three ways to express the meanings or inner dimensions obtained from *kashf* (spiritual unveiling). The first way is through *i'tibar* or *qiyas 'irfani*, which involves analogically relating the inner meanings perceived in *kashf*

⁶⁹ Ibid.p.39

⁷⁰ H.M. Zurkani Jahja, *Teologi Al-Ghaza>li> Pendekatan Metodologi*.p.223.

⁷¹ Ibid.p.223-224.

⁷² Ibid.p.224-225.

to the literal meanings present in the text. The second way is through spontaneously uttering a verbal expression about one's feelings (*al-wijdan*) due to the overflow of direct knowledge from its source. An example of this is Abu Yazid al-Bustami's statement "*Subhani*" (Glory to Me). The third way is by using symbols.⁷³ According to Wahyudi's assessment, Al-Ghazali employed symbolic language to explain the meanings acquired from *kashf*. This is because there might not be an exact equivalence between the spiritual experience and the material world. This is the reason behind Al-Ghazali's choice of using symbols to elucidate the meanings contained within the Qur'an.⁷⁴

In line with Al-Ghazali's perspective, Ibn 'Arabi believed that symbols are a means capable of unraveling and disclosing the ultimate reality related to fundamental concepts of truth, the universe, and humanity. The linguistic framework of symbols can be comprehended by certain individuals who possess pure and clear hearts. Ibn 'Arabi often used the term *isharat* (signs) rather than other terms like mystery and analogy. He states that *mukashafah* (spiritual unveiling) is the pathway of verification for these signs.⁷⁵ Consistent with this, Al-Ghazali stated that the unveiling of knowledge gained through *kashf* is not meant to be understood by ordinary people, since those without the appropriate knowledge and experience might easily encounter issues when attempting to interpret these symbols.

Interpretation of Sufistic-Semiotic Theory of Surah an-Nur: 35 in Misykat al-Anwar

In the first part of his work *Misykat al-Anwar*, we can observe Imam al-Ghazali's efforts to interpret the "verses of light" that is an-Nur (24):35. In

⁷³ Wahyudi, *Epistemologi Tafsir Sufi Al-Ghazali dan Pergeserannya*, *Theologia*, Vol 29, No1 (2018),p.85-108, 100; see also Wahyudi, *Interpretasi Komparatif ta'wil sufi Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali dan Ibn Arabi terhadap Ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an*, *Islamika Inside:Jurnal Keislaman dan Humaniora*, Vol 4, No 2, (Desember 2018),pp.179-200.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*,p.198

⁷⁵ Muhammad Ibrahim al-Fayumi, *Ibn 'Arabi: Menyingskap Kode dan Menguak Simbol di Balik Wihdah al-Wujud*, translated by Imam Ghazali Masykur (Jakarta:Gelora Aksara Pratama, 2007),p.84.

his attempt to interpret anthropomorphic verses, al-Ghazali justified the source of intuitive knowledge. This method is rooted in individual intuitive experiences which are not achieved through discursive reasoning. He assumed that intuitive knowledge will be able to holistically absorb objects of knowledge. The intuitive method considers language merely as a means for understanding. In this method, knowledge takes the form of individual feelings, often communicating theories through metaphors and analogies rather than precise linguistic mechanisms.⁷⁶ There are three ways of expressing meanings or inner dimensions obtained from *kashf* according to Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri. One of the ways is by using "symbols". For al-Ghazali, the unveiling of *'irfan* knowledge using these symbols is done due to the difficulty of explaining spiritual experiences to others that might not have parallels in the material world.⁷⁷ From al-Ghazali's perspective, symbols are the most suitable method for explaining the meanings acquired through *kashf*. This is due to the lack of direct equivalence between spiritual experiences and the empirical world. This is the reason why symbols were chosen by al-Ghazali to explain the meanings within the Qur'an.⁷⁸ Based on this, here are examples of metaphorical interpretations that showcase al-Ghazali's ideas about his Sufistic thoughts, utilizing linguistic symbols as the semantic field of his interpretations.

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche, in which there is a lamp, the lamp is enclosed in crystal, the crystal is of a starlike brilliance, it is lit with the olive oil from a blessed olive tree which is neither eastern nor western, its very oil would almost be luminous though no fire touched it - as though all the means of increasing Light upon Light are provided - Allah guides to His Light whom He pleases. Allah cites such parables to make His message clear to the people; and Allah has knowledge of everything. (QS.an-Nur [24]:35).⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Sibawaihi, *Eskatologi al-Ghazali dan Fazlur Rahman: Studi Komparatif Epistemologi Klasik-Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: Islamika, 2004), hlm.244; Wahyudi, Interpretasi Komparatif Ta'wil Sufi Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali dan Ibn 'Arabi terhadap Ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an, *ISLAMIKA INSIDE*, Vol.4, No.2, (Desember 2018), p.196.

⁷⁷ Wahyudi, *Epistemologi Tafsir Sufi Al-Ghazali dan Pergeserannya*. p.100-101.

⁷⁸ Wahyudi, *Interpretasi Komparatif Ta'wil Sufi*. p.198.

⁷⁹ Kementerian Agama RI, *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahnya*, (Tangerang : Samudera al-Qalam, 2013), p.354.

Some classic commentators from various schools of interpretation, such as ath-Thabari, al-Zamakhshari, and al-Razi, agreed that the fragment of the verse "Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth" (*Allah Nur as-Samawat Wa al-Ardh*) is a metaphorical expression.⁸⁰ They interpreted the word *Nur* as guidance, and "the heavens and the earth" is all creatures, including humans, who lived within them. Therefore, the meaning of the expression becomes: Allah gives guidance for all beings in the heavens and the earth. However, Al-Ghazali had a different interpretation from the aforementioned commentators. According to him, the phrase "Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth" is not a metaphor but rather a divine truth. He asserted that the phrase does not mean that Allah illuminates the heavens and the earth like the sun. Instead, God symbolizes the highest light, while the heavens and the earth symbolize darkness.⁸¹ In other words, the light of God is the true light, while other lights are metaphorical (*majazi*).⁸²

Al-Ghazali categorized the levels of light into two: First, the "low-level" lights, and second, the "high-level" lights. The first category refers to physical lights visible by normal human eye⁸³ and refer to something bright (*zhuhur*).⁸⁴ According to Al-Ghazali, this first level of light contains various flaws and is prone to many errors.⁸⁵ In contrast, the *akal* (heart) never makes

⁸⁰ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p.110-111.

⁸¹ Al-Ghazali, *Misykat al-Anwar*. p.50

⁸² Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*. p.113.

⁸³ "The light of the eyes" refers to what we observe in the sky, such as stars, the sun, and the moon. Similarly, the light that humans witness on the Earth includes the rays emitted from everything on the planet, creating various different colors.

⁸⁴ "Bright" in this context, according to Al-Ghazali, necessitates the presence of an additional factor that becomes visible due to the presence of other factors. When connected with the sense of sight, objects are divided into three types: first, objects that are not visible in themselves, like dark objects. Second, objects that are visible in themselves but do not make other objects visible, like luminous objects (certain types of animals and fire embers). Third, objects that cause other objects to become visible, such as the sun, the moon, a burning flame, and a lamp. See Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*. p.115.

⁸⁵ In his book "Misykat al-Anwar," Al-Ghazâlî mentioned seven limitations of the "physical eyes." First, the eyes cannot see themselves. Second, the eyes cannot see something that is too close or too far from them. Third, the physical eyes cannot see something behind a

mistakes. Therefore, al-Ghazali argued that *akal* deserves to be called *nur* than eyes.⁸⁶ He attributed this lowest category of light to the common people. As for the highest category, it is the soul (*ruh*). According to Al-Ghazali, the soul is at a higher level than eyes because it is through the the soul that knowledge is born.⁸⁷ Al-Ghazali referred to it as the "true light" (*al-nur al-haqq*) because it is the only light that doesn't borrow its radiance from something else. The use of the term "light" for anything other than this real light is a metaphor. God is the light, there is no light other than Him, and He is the universal light. In all matters in this universe, the God's light allows us to see, but God does not possess darkness; in contrast, there is no darkness mixed with His light.⁸⁸

The essence of light attributed to the group of *khawwash* (the chosen ones), and *khawwashul khawwash* (the chosen of the chosen ones), unveils all barriers so that they can witness Allah the Almighty God as the highest and the most distant light. When the essence of these lights is revealed, they will witness that He is the only true Light and has no partners.⁸⁹ The light of God is the ultimate light, as nothing can match His light. It doesn't exist only in Himself and illuminate Himself, but it also illuminates others. In other words, the existence of light other than Allah is borrowed existence, and therefore it doesn't have existence in itself, but it is due to something else. That is why Al-Ghazali began the first chapter of his book *Misykah al-Anwar* by explaining that the light of truth is Allah, and that other lights are purely metaphorical and not a reality.

veil or barrier. Fourth, the physical eyes can only perceive the outer and surface aspects of everything, without being able to discern deeper meanings. Fifth, the physical eyes can only see a small part of existence (everything that exists), as they are unable to perceive everything that is logically possible and the multitude of sensory things. Sixth, the eyes cannot see things that are boundless. Seventh, the physical eyes perceive something large as if it were small. For example, the sun appears as a ball, and the stars resemble scattered gold coins on a blue carpet. See Al-Ghazali, *Mishkat al-Anwar*.p.44-47.

⁸⁶ Ibid.p.47

⁸⁷ Ibid.p.48

⁸⁸ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*.p.116.

⁸⁹ Al-Ghazali,*Misykat al-Anwar*.p.41.

Al-Ghazali interpreted other terms besides "light," which he elaborated deeply. These terms include *misykat*, *mishbah*, *zujajah*, *syajarah mubâarakah*, *al-zayt*, and others. For Al-Ghazali, the aforementioned terms refer to the five spiritual faculties of humans that radiate lights (*al-arwah al-basyariyyah al-nuraniyyah*), namely the sensory soul (*hissi*), imagination (*khayali*), rational faculty (*'aqli*), reflective faculty (*fikri*), and the divine/prophetic faculty (*qudsi/nabawi*).⁹⁰

The following is Imam Al-Ghazali's interpretation concerning the levels of the human soul and the degrees of its lights.

Firstly, *misykat* (*hollow or cavity*). Al-Ghazali interprets *misykat* as the sensory faculties (*al-rûh al-hisâs*). If we observe the characteristics of these sensory faculties, we will find that their lights emanate from various openings, such as the two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and so on. According to Al-Ghazali, the most suitable analogy for the spiritual faculties in the material world is *misykat*. These faculties are the receivers of what the five senses of the human body provide. They are seen as the root and the initial manifestation of the animal soul, for through them, an animal becomes an animal.

Secondly, *mishbâh* (*lamp*). Al-Ghazali associated this term with the rational faculties (*al-rûh al-'aqlî*), which is where the perception of noble and divine knowledge occurs. The analogy of the rational faculty to a lamp becomes clear, as a lamp can spread its bright light to all corners of the world, just like the sun. Therefore, it is referred to as the "lamps that give light" (*al-sirâj al-munîr*), a title that had been attributed to the prophets.

Thirdly, *zujâjah* (*glass*). Al-Ghazali interpreted this term as the imaginative faculties (*al-rûh al-khayâlî*), which he saw as having three characteristics or attributes resembling mirrors. Firstly, its imaginative faculty is still connected to or originated from the solid materials of the human world. This is because the objects of imagination possess dimensions, shapes, directions, and distances. Secondly, when this murky imagination is

⁹⁰ Ibid.p.79

refined, purified, and polished, it becomes equivalent to the meanings and rational points that lead to their lights.

This refined imagination will not obstruct the light coming from the *mishbâh*, which represents the rational faculties. The third characteristic is that initially, imagination is greatly needed. Through imagination, a person can organize their rational knowledge so that it remains steady, unwavering, and coherent. According to Al-Ghazali, these three characteristics find their analogies in the material world exclusively in glass. Although glass is initially made from dense, murky materials, once it is purified and illuminated, it doesn't obstruct the light from the lamp. On the contrary, it can transmit the light in a good manner. Glass also protects the light from strong winds or rough movements that could extinguish it.

Fourth, *syajarah mubâraakah* (*the blessed tree*). According to Al-Ghazâlî, this is an analogy to the reflective soul (*al-rûh al-fikrî*). Similar to a tree, the reflective soul begins with a single root, and then branches emerge from it. From each branch, two more branches grow, and from each of those, two more, and so on, resulting in a multitude of branches of rational knowledge. However, why is this blessed tree referred to as an olive (*zaitun*) tree? According to Al-Ghazâlî, the olive tree is special because its essence lies in its oil, which can be used as fuel for lamps. Thus, the core of its fruit, the olive oil which is a key material to fuel the lamp (*mishbâh*). The term "blessed" (*mubarakah*) is applied to this tree because in Arab society, when pets or trees yield abundant offsprings or fruit, they are deemed "blessed." Therefore, it is fitting to describe a tree with limitless fruit-bearing capacity (reflective human faculties) as a "blessed tree." Furthermore, it's referred to as "neither of the East nor of the West (*lâ syarqiywatan wa-lâ gharbiyyatan*)" because pure rational thoughts cannot be assigned to a particular direction, nor can they be categorized as close or far. Hence, it is inappropriate to label them as East or West.

Fifth, "the (olive) oil that would glow even though it is not touched by fire" (*yakâdu zaitu-hû yudhî'u wa-law lam tamsashu nâr*). According to Al-Ghazâlî, this refers to the pure and prophetic faculties attributed to the saints (*wali*) when they reach their highest and purest level. The reflective faculty

is divided into two types. First, the type that requires teaching, awareness, and external assistance to continuously draw knowledge from various sources. The second type, on the other hand, is characterized by such intense purity that one becomes self-aware without external aid. The latter is what is deemed "the oil that would almost glow even though it is not touched by fire." Their chastity is so profound that, according to Al-Ghazâlî, there are several *wali* whose radiance shines so brightly that they do not require assistance from the Prophets. Similarly, among the Prophets, there are those who do not need assistance from the angels. If this oil is ignited by fire, then this is what described in the Quran as "the light above light" (*nûr 'alâ nûr*).

The metaphorical networks created by Al-Ghazali was inspired from a linguistic theory, specifically the relationship between the signified (*ad-dall*) and the signifier (*al-madlul*), which functions within our language as a metaphorical relation.⁹¹ The connection between the signified and the signifier is based on Al-Ghazali's belief that the Qur'an holds both literal and hidden meanings.⁹² Each verse has meanings representing both aspects and has multiple levels. The levels of the literal meanings are observable to everyone, unlike the hidden meanings which remains concealed from most people except by a selected few. The ability to comprehend both the literal and the hidden meanings varies among individuals according to their levels of knowledge and spiritual development. Those with advanced knowledge, nearing the understanding of the prophets, are capable of comprehending most of the hidden aspects of the Qur'an's.⁹³

Therefore, the endeavor to uncover the abundant mysteries of the inner meanings behind the text is not easy. A *mu'awwil* (interpreter) must navigate through various "barriers" that prevent them from passing through to the highest levels, as accomplished by Al-Ghazali.

⁹¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Teks Otoritas Kebenaran*.p.241

⁹² Al-Ghazali, *Mishkat al-Anwar*.p.73.

⁹³ Nicholas Heer & William C. Chittick, Heer, Nicholas & William C. Chittick, *Tafsir Esoterik Gazali dan Sam'an*, translated by Ribut Wahyudi. (Yogyakarta:Pustaka Sufi, 2003),p.40-41.

Conclusion

Based on the description above, several important points can be concluded: Firstly, the process of revealing religious spiritual experiences, including explaining the meanings contained within the Qur'an as carried out by Al-Ghazali, is intentionally performed using symbols present in the empirical world so that common people can understand it easily. Secondly, Al-Ghazali's concept of semiotic interpretation of the Qur'an is rooted in the fundamental principle that interpreting esoteric (core) meanings cannot be separated from exoteric (surface) meanings because he compared both of these to the relationship between the signified and the signifier in modern semiotic terms. Thirdly, Al-Ghazali's symbolic interpretation of the "Verses of Light" (QS.an-Nur [24]:35) resulted in findings distinctive from other commentators. This is because he approached the interpretation through the means of illumination (mystical intuition) via ruh-al-quds-al-Nabawi (the sacred prophetic spirit), allowing him to unveil the mysteries of meanings.

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