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Toshihiko Izutsu's Semantic Analysis of the Term "العَالَمِيْنَ" (al'Alamin) from the Perspective of Quranic Ecology

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Abstract

The term al-'ālamīn (العالمين) is one of the fundamental concepts in the Qur'an that represents the totality of God's creation and the ontological relationship between God, human beings, and the universe. This article aims to analyze the meaning of this term using Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic approach, with particular emphasis on its ecological implications. The method employed consists of lexical, contextual, and relational analysis within the semantic field of the Qur'an. The findings indicate that al-'ālamīn (العالمين) does not merely refer to the human world, but encompasses the entire system of life as a divine sign (āyah), governed by the principles of balance (mīzān) and human trusteeship (khilāfah). These results affirm that environmental preservation in Islam has a strong theological and ethical foundation rooted in the concepts of tawḥīd and the rubūbiyyah of God as the Lord of all worlds.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an is a sacred scripture that regulates not only the relationship between human beings and God (ḥabl min Allāh), but also the relationship between humans and the entirety of His creation (ḥabl min al-'ālam). One of the key concepts that affirms this interconnectedness is the term al-'ālamīn (العالمين), as stated in the verse " الْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ رَبِّ الْعٰلَمِيْنَ " (QS. al-Fatihah :2). This term constitutes a theological foundation that portrays God as Rabb, the Sustainer and Preserver of all systems of life, including human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate elements of nature [1]. In the contemporary context, this meaning has strong relevance to ecological issues, particularly awareness of order, balance, and the sustainability of environmental systems as part of sunnatullāh (divine law) [2].

Etymologically, the word al-'ālamīn in the Qur'an is derived from the root '-l-m ('alama), which signifies a sign or an indication. Accordingly, al-'ālam (the world or the universe) refers to everything other than God that serves as a sign of His existence, greatness, and sovereign power [3]. This lexical explanation is further reinforced by classical Qur'anic lexicographers, who emphasize that the plurality form al-'ālamīn denotes the multiplicity and diversity of created realms [4].

In many verses, such as in Sūrat al-Fātiḥah (1:2), " الْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ رَبِّ الْعٰلَمِيْنَ " this term depicts the totality of creation, both living and non-living, visible and invisible, all of which are subject to an orderly system and the laws of sunnatullāh [5]. From an ecological perspective, the term al-'ālamīn does not refer solely to human beings, but also encompasses the entire ecosystem of life: animals, plants, water, soil, air, and all microscopic organisms that interact with one another to form cosmic equilibrium. Accordingly, the meaning of Rabb al-'Ālamīn (the Lord of all worlds) signifies that God is the Sustainer

and Regulator of the universal ecosystem, not merely the God of humanity. This view constitutes the foundation of Islamic environmental ethics, namely that human beings are not the owners of nature, but khalīfah (trustees or stewards) within it as part of al-'ālamīn [6].

The human task is therefore not to exploit nature, but to preserve ecological balance (mīzān), as emphasized in Sūrat al-Raḥmān (55:7–9). Environmental degradation, in this context, represents a form of ingratitude and a betrayal of the trust (amānah) bestowed upon humanity as God's vicegerent [7]. When the Qur'an refers to God as Rabb al-'Ālamīn, it simultaneously reminds humankind that the entire universe exists within a sacred and interconnected web of life under the divine lordship (rubūbiyyah) of God. To protect nature is thus to honor the divine order itself, whereas to damage it is to oppose the structure that God has established for the continuity of all worlds (al-'ālamīn) [8]. Accordingly, the concept of al-'ālamīn from an ecological perspective instills a form of cosmic consciousness, namely that nature is not a lifeless object to be exploited, but a living spiritual subject that submits to and glorifies God (QS. Al-Isra':44). Islamic environmental ethics therefore fundamentally originates from the understanding of tawḥīd: acknowledging God as the Lord of all beings and recognizing human beings as only a small part of the vast network of life governed by His will.

In the era of the global environmental crisis, religious studies concerning the relationship between human beings and nature have become increasingly relevant. The Qur'an, as the epistemic source of Islamic thought, contains conceptual frameworks that can serve as foundations for ecological ethics. One of the key terms that plays a central role in depicting the totality of creation is al-'ālamīn (العالمين). This term does not merely refer to the "world" in a narrow sense, but rather denotes the entirety of the universe as a sign of the greatness of the Creator. This study aims to apply Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic methodology to analyze the meaning of the term al-'ālamīn, with particular emphasis on its ecological implications. Izutsu's method situates Qur'anic concepts within relational networks of meaning (semantic fields), highlighting oppositions, connotations, and the conceptual structures underlying the use of terms in revelation [9], [10]. Through this approach, the study seeks to reveal how the Qur'an constructs a worldview that interconnects God, nature, and humanity, as well as the ethical consequences of this worldview for environmental preservation.

2. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative library-based approach using Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic method as the primary analytical framework. According to Izutsu, the meaning of a Qur'anic concept cannot be understood solely through dictionary definitions, but must be derived from its relational position within a network of concepts known as a semantic field [9], [10]. This approach allows Qur'anic terminology to be examined not only linguistically but also conceptually, revealing how theological, ethical, and cosmological meanings are constructed within the Qur'anic worldview.

The study adopts a descriptive–analytical design commonly applied in Qur'anic linguistic research and qualitative textual studies [11]. The primary data consist of Qur'anic verses containing the term al-'ālamīn (العالمين), while secondary data are drawn from classical Arabic lexicons, classical and modern tafsīr works, and scholarly studies on Qur'anic semantics and Islamic theology [3], [1]. The stages of analysis include:

2.1 Lexical analysis, This stage examines the root meaning and semantic development of al-'ālamīn based on its triliteral root (ʿ–l–m). Classical dictionaries such as Lisān al-'Arab by Ibn Manẓūr and Mufradāt Alfāẓ al-Qur'ān by al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī are used to identify its denotative meaning, connotations, and conceptual implications as "sign," "creation," and "cosmic order" [3], [4].

2.2 Contextual analysis, Qur'anic verses containing al-'ālamīn are analyzed in their syntactic and thematic contexts, particularly in verses such as al-Fātiḥah (1:2), al-Anbiyā' (21:107), and alRaḥmān (55:7–9). Classical exegetical works by Ibn Kathīr and al-Ṭabarī, as well as modern interpretation by M. Quraish Shihab, are employed to ensure interpretive reliability and theological coherence [6], [1].

2.3 Relational analysis, Following Izutsu's framework, al-'ālamīn is positioned within a network of related Qur'anic concepts such as Allāh, Rabb, mīzān (balance), fasād (corruption), raḥmah (mercy), and khalīfah (vicegerent). This step identifies conceptual oppositions, hierarchies, and ethical orientations that define the Qur'anic vision of the relationship between God, humanity, and nature [9], [10].

2.4 Conceptual synthesis, The results of the lexical, contextual, and relational analyses are synthesized into three levels of propositions:

a. Ontological (nature of creation),
b. Teleological (purpose of existence), and
c. Axiological (ethical responsibility toward the environment).

This synthesis enables the formulation of a coherent Qur'anic worldview (weltanschauung) in which nature is understood as a sacred system under divine governance and human stewardship [1], [2]. To enhance validity, this study applies source triangulation by comparing multiple lexicons and tafsīr traditions, and theoretical triangulation by integrating semantic theory with Islamic theology and environmental ethics [11], [2].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Lexical Meaning of al-'Ālamīn

Etymologically, the term al-'ālamīn (العالمين) derives from the root '-l-m, which is associated with the notions of knowledge and signification. In the classical dictionary Lisān al'Arab, Ibn Manẓūr provides a definition that emphasizes the broad scope of this term:

»العالَ مَ :الخَلْ قَ كلهُ ، و س مِيَ عَالَمًا لأنهَّ عَلَمَةَ عَلَى الخَالِقِ«

This explanation indicates two essential dimensions of meaning: (1) a referential dimension, namely that the term refers to the totality of created beings, and (2) a semiotic–ethical dimension, in which creation functions as a sign ('alāmah) that directs human consciousness toward recognition of the Creator.

Al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī, in Mufradāt Alfāẓ al-Qur'ān, further expands the lexical meaning of the term: **«العالَ مَ اسْ مَ لك لِ جمل ةَ مَنَ أجناسِ الخَلْقِ فيقال عَال مَ الإنسِ وعَال مَ الحيوانِ وعَال مَ النباتِ».** This indicates that the term 'ālam can be used collectively to refer to specific groups of creatures (the human world, the animal world, and the plant world), so that the plural form al-'ālamīn signifies the multiplicity of types or realms of existence.

From a basic semantic perspective, two important aspects may be identified: (a) inclusivity, encompassing both animate and inanimate beings, and (b) the function as a sign, whereby the world is not merely material reality but also possesses a meaningful dimension that points to the Creator. These two aspects constitute the initial foundation for constructing a broader semantic field in accordance with Izutsu's approach [11].

3.2 Contextual Meaning in the Qur'an

The contextual approach requires an examination of all Qur'anic verses that contain the term al-'ālamīn (العالمين) in order to identify variations of meaning according to their respective contexts. In the Qur'an, this term appears in various rhetorical positions: as part of a formula of praise (Sūrat al-Fātiḥah), as an affirmation of divine mercy (Sūrat al-Anbiyā'), as an attribute expressing divine majesty (ta'ẓīm), and in other functions. The following are several key verses, along with their Arabic texts, that are subjected to analysis:

١. سورَةَ الْفَاتِحَةِ»: ﴿الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ﴾ «الفاتحَةَ :٢
٢. سورَةَ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ»: ﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِلْعَالَمِينَ﴾ «الأنبياء :١٠٧
٣. سورَةَ الرَّحْمَانِ»: ﴿وَوَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ﴾ «و» ﴿أَلَّا تَطْغَوْا فِي الْمِيزَانِ﴾)الرحمَنَ :٧-٩(.
٤. سورَةَ الإِسْرَاءِ»: ﴿ت سَ ب حَ لَهُ السَّمَاوَا تُ السَّبْ ع﴾ «الإسراَءَ :44.

Other Qur'anic contexts also indicate the existence of cosmic order [3], [4]. Contextual analysis reveals several patterns of meaning: (a) the universal rubūbiyyah of God as Rabb over all realms of existence (Sūrat al-Fātiḥah); (b) the universal mercy of prophethood, exalted as mercy for all creatures (Sūrat al-Anbiyā'); and (c) the existence of cosmic order and mīzān, namely a principle of balance that must be maintained (Sūrat al-Raḥmān). The different functions of the term as an object of praise, a marker of mercy, or a component of moral injunctions indicate that al-'ālamīn operates as a concept that bridges ontological and normative dimensions [11].

From an ecological perspective, these verses may be read as providing a normative foundation for environmental ethics. God is the Regulator of all order, the Prophet as mercy extends responsibility to all beings, and the balance of nature (mīzān) must be preserved in order to prevent corruption (fasād) [6].

3.3 Relational Semantic Analysis (Toshihiko Izutsu's Method)

Toshihiko Izutsu developed a distinctive semantic approach by constructing a map of Qur'anic concepts through relational analysis among key terms, identifying oppositions, hierarchies, and conceptual patterns that shape the Qur'anic worldview [11], [1]. According to Izutsu, the meaning of a term can only be properly understood through its position within a network of meanings: what stands in opposition to it, what functions as its paradigmatic synonym, and what axiological (value-related) implications it carries. With regard to the term al-'ālamīn (العالمين), Izutsu's approach encourages analysis on several levels:

1) Identification of the Semantic Field
   a. Creator–Creation

      The relationship between God (اللهَ) and العالمين; related terms include: رَبَ(Lord), خلَقَ(creation), and قادَرَ(All-Powerful).

   b. Balance and Corruption ميزان (balance), هلاك (destruction), فسادَ(corruption), and ارض (earth).
   c. Mercy and Punishment رحمَةَ(mercy), نعمَةَ(blessing), رحمن(the Most Merciful) versus عذاب(punishment) and هلاك(destruction).
   d. Vicegerency–Trust خليفة(vicegerent), أمانَةَ(trust), and مسؤوليَةَ(responsibility).
2) Analysis of Oppositions and Polarities

Izutsu typically situates Qur'anic concepts within pairs of oppositions that are axiologically charged. In this case, several major oppositions are particularly relevant: the Creator (اللهَ) versus creation (العالمين); order (mīzān) versus corruption (fasād); and preservation or divine governance (rubūbiyyah) versus neglect or destruction (talāffu). These oppositions contain moral evaluations and practical implications: to read nature as a divine sign is to incur a moral obligation to preserve it [11].

3) Analysis of the Network of Relations

This is where the strength of Izutsu's method becomes most apparent, namely in mapping how the term al-'ālamīn interacts with other key concepts across various Qur'anic verses. Some prominent conceptual relations include:

a. «الله رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ» This triadic structure affirms God's position as the universal Regulator and Sustainer. In many verses, these three concepts together emphasize the legitimacy of divine authority over nature.

b. «الْمِيزَانَ الْقِيَامَة الْفسَاد» The concept of balance is paired with warnings concerning corruption resulting from human actions.

c. «الرَّحْمَة الْأَمْر الن عِمَةَ» The interconnection between divine mercy and human responsibility to respect and protect blessings, including environmental blessings.

By mapping these relational patterns, it becomes evident that al-'ālamīn occupies a nodal position in meaning, bridging ontology (what exists), teleology (for what purpose existence is oriented), and axiology (how values ought to be applied). Furthermore, by employing Izutsu's method, several conceptual propositions may be formulated to demonstrate the position of al'ālamīn within the Qur'anic worldview:

a. Ontological Proposition
Nature (al-'ālamīn) is a reality created by God and therefore possesses an essential and intrinsic connection to the Creator.

b. Teleological Proposition:

Nature functions as an āyah (sign) that points to a divine purpose: guiding human beings toward recognition of divine unity (tawḥīd) and righteous action.

c. Axiological Proposition:

There exist ethical norms governing the relationship between human beings and nature, including the obligation to maintain balance (mīzān), to refrain from causing corruption (fasād), and to fulfill the trust of khilāfah (vicegerency).

Based on this conceptual mapping, the meaning of al-'ālamīn is not merely static; rather, it is dynamic and functions as a central axis of value orientation within the Qur'anic text [11]. This is directly relevant to the formation of ecological ethics, in which environmental preservation represents the practical realization of these propositions.

3.4 Semantic Implications for Ecological Ethics

Izutsu's semantic analysis leads to several practical and theoretical implications related to ecology:

a. Theological foundation of conservation: Since nature is part of Rabb al-'Ālamīn, environmental preservation constitutes a form of devotion and worship toward God [6].

b. Moral mandate of vicegerency: Human beings, as khalīfah, bear a moral responsibility to maintain mīzān (balance); failure to do so results in fasād (corruption), which is strongly condemned in the Qur'anic text [4].

c. Integration of science and revelation: Scientific interpretations of ecosystems may be enriched by semantic understandings that regard ecological phenomena as āyāt (divine signs). In this way, environmental science acquires a robust ethical dimension [2].

d. Religious ecological education: Understanding the meaning of al-'ālamīn within the Qur'anic network of meanings can be developed into curricular material to foster religiously grounded ecological awareness [6], [2].

4. CONCLUSION

Based on Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic analysis, the term al-'ālamīn (العالمين) occupies a central position within the Qur'anic network of meanings, connecting ontological, teleological, and axiological dimensions [9]. Lexically, it encompasses the totality of creation [3]; contextually, it functions to affirm the rubūbiyyah of God, to express prophetic mercy, and to remind human beings of the principle of balance (mīzān) [1], [6]. Through relational mapping, al-'ālamīn becomes a conceptual node that links such key notions as God, lordship (rabb), vicegerency (khalīfah), balance (mīzān), and corruption (fasād), forming a coherent ethical worldview within the Qur'anic semantic system [9].

The ecological implications of these findings are evident: environmental protection is not merely a matter of scientific concern or economic sustainability, but also a religious act grounded in faith. By understanding nature as an āyah (divine sign) and as part of al-'ālamīn, Muslims are provided with a conceptual framework for developing environmental ethics rooted in tawḥīd (divine unity) and amānah (trust) [1], [2]. This perspective strengthens the theological basis for environmental responsibility and situates ecological care within the domain of worship ('ibādah) and moral accountability [6].

As a practical recommendation, the findings of this study may be developed into religious education modules that integrate Qur'anic teachings with concrete practices of environmental preservation, such as waste management, water conservation, reforestation, and the formulation of policies based on Islamic values at the levels of local communities and educational institutions [2], [7]. In this way, semantic analysis not only contributes to theoretical Qur'anic studies but also offers an operational framework for addressing contemporary ecological crises through spiritually grounded ethical transformation.

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