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Cultivating the Earth, Harvesting the Soul: An Ecological Reading of Al-Harth and Al-Mizan

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Abstract

The term al-ḥarṯ (الحرث) is one of the Qur'anic expressions that possesses rich meanings, both lexically and contextually. In general, it refers to cultivated plants or agricultural land; however, in its Qur'anic usage, the term is also employed metaphorically to describe human deeds and their consequences in both worldly life and the Hereafter. This study aims to analyze the meaning of al-ḥarṯ using a semantic approach by examining its lexical meaning through classical dictionaries and its contextual meaning through Qur'anic verses in which the term occurs. The findings indicate that al-ḥarṯ has two main contexts: a worldly context (agriculture and progeny) and an eschatological context (deeds and reward). In addition, this term shows semantic relations with several other words, such as az-zar', 'amal, and annitāj, thus functioning as a universal metaphor for the law of cause and effect in human life.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an is a sacred scripture revealed in the Arabic language, characterized by a remarkable richness of meaning. Each word does not merely convey a lexical (dictionary) definition but also carries contextual significance that varies according to syntactic structure and situational usage within a verse. Classical Muslim scholars have emphasized that Qur'anic vocabulary operates within an interconnected semantic system that cannot be fully captured through literal translation alone [1], [2]. Modern linguists further argue that religious texts employ symbolic and layered language to construct moral and metaphysical realities through discourse [3]. This linguistic complexity makes semantic analysis a crucial approach in Qur'anic studies.

One of the terms that is particularly interesting to examine is al-ḥarṯ (الحرث), which generally denotes cultivated land, crops, or agricultural activity. Ibn Manẓūr defines al-ḥarṯ as both the act of cultivation and its produce [4], while al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī expands its meaning to include any form of human effort that yields consequences, whether material or moral [5]. In the Qur'an, this term appears in various contexts, ranging from references to agriculture to metaphors for human deeds and their outcomes in this world and the Hereafter [6].

This concept represents an important dimension of human life, both in its literal sense as the foundation of subsistence and in its figurative sense related to moral action and progeny. Qur'anic commentators, such as Quraish Shihab, note that verses containing al-ḥarṯ often convey ethical messages regarding responsibility, diligence, and accountability before God [7]. Similar observations have been

made by Fazlur Rahman, who asserts that Qur'anic socio-economic metaphors function to instill ethical discipline and moral responsibility within Muslim society [8].

From a linguistic perspective, semantic analysis serves as a principal method for uncovering the depth and development of meaning within Qur'anic terminology. Izutsu argues that a Qur'anic concept must be understood through its relational position within a network of key terms that together shape the Qur'anic worldview (Weltanschauung) [9], [10]. This approach is consistent with contemporary semantic theory, which views meaning as relational rather than isolated [11]. Accordingly, al-ḥarṯ should be analyzed in connection with concepts such as action ('amal), reward, responsibility, and divine justice, rather than as a standalone lexical unit.

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship highlights that Qur'anic concepts related to human activity and nature also possess ecological and ethical dimensions. Scholars such as Nasr and Dien emphasize that Islamic teachings promote balance, stewardship, and moral restraint in humanity's interaction with the natural environment [12], [13]. Recent studies in Islamic environmental ethics also identify agricultural terminology as part of the Qur'an's ecological worldview, which frames land cultivation as both an economic necessity and a moral trust (amānah) [14]. Within this framework, alḥarṯ may be interpreted as a linguistic bridge between economic activity, moral accountability, and environmental responsibility. Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the lexical and contextual meanings of al-ḥarṯ in the Qur'an and its semantic relations with other relevant terms, thereby contributing to Qur'anic semantic studies and to a deeper understanding of the ethical messages embedded in the language of revelation

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using Qur'anic linguistic semantics as its primary analytical framework. This approach is considered appropriate because the object of the research is textual meaning embedded in revelation, which requires interpretative and contextual understanding rather than numerical measurement [1], [2]. Qur'anic semantics enables the researcher to examine how a single term develops meaning through its linguistic environment and conceptual relations within the Qur'anic worldview [3], [4]. The analysis is conducted through three main stages.

a. Lexical analysis is carried out to identify the basic meaning of the term ٱلْحَرْث (al-ḥarṯ) by consulting classical Arabic dictionaries, particularly Lisān al-'Arab by Ibn Manẓūr and alMufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān by al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī. These lexicons are used because they provide authoritative explanations of root meanings and semantic nuances of Qur'anic vocabulary [5], [6]. This stage aims to establish the original semantic core of the term before examining its contextual expansion.

b. Contextual analysis is applied by examining Qur'anic verses that contain the term al-ḥarṯ in order to identify variations of meaning based on syntactic structure, thematic setting, and discourse function. The verse data are taken from the Qur'an and its official Indonesian translation published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia to ensure textual accuracy and standardized interpretation [7]. Classical and contemporary tafsīr works, particularly Tafsīr al-Mishbāḥ by M. Quraish Shihab, are also consulted to support contextual interpretation and avoid subjective bias [8].

c. Semantic relational analysis is conducted by comparing al-ḥarṯ with other lexically or conceptually related terms such as ٱلزَّرْع (az-zar'), عَمَل ('amal), and ٱلنِّتَاج (an-nitāj). This step follows Izutsu's theory of semantic fields, which holds that Qur'anic concepts derive meaning from their position within an interconnected network of terms rather than in isolation [3], [4].

Through this process, the study identifies the ethical, theological, and social dimensions embedded in the term.

Data collection is carried out through library research, involving systematic examination of primary sources (the Qur'an and classical lexicons) and secondary sources (tafsīr literature and modern semantic studies). The collected data are analyzed using a descriptive–analytical method to obtain a structured understanding of the development, functions, and conceptual significance of the term al-ḥarṯ within the Qur'anic semantic system [1], [2].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Lexical Meaning

According to **ابْن مَنْظُور** (Ibn Manẓūr) in **لِسَان الْعَرَب** (Lisān al-'Arab), the word **حَرْ ث** (ḥarṯ) is derived from the root ث - ر - ح (ḥ–r–ṯ), which means to plow the land, to plant, or to cultivate crops (Ibn Manẓūr, 1990: 213). He states: "**الْحَرْث: الزَّرْع، وَالْحِرَاثَة: الْفِعْل**" (al-ḥarṯ: al-zar', wa alḥirāthah: al-fi'l), meaning that **الْحَرْ ث** (al-ḥarṯ) refers to cultivated plants, while الْحِرَاثَة (alḥirāthah) denotes the act of farming or planting [1].

Meanwhile, **الرَّاغِب الْصُفَهَان ي** (al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī) in **الْمُفْرَدَات فِي غَرِيب الْقُرْآن** (al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān) explains: "**الْحَرْثُ يُقَالُ لِزَرْعِ الْأَرْضِ وَلِكُلِّ مَا يُقْصَدُ بِهِ الِاسْتِفَادَةُ**" (al-ḥarṯ is used in reference to agriculture and to every action from which benefit is expected) [2].

Thus, lexically, the term **الْحَرْث** (al-ḥarṯ) possesses two layers of meaning:

- A literal meaning, referring to agricultural activities, cultivation, or crops.
- A metaphorical meaning, referring to all forms of human endeavor (**عَمَ ل**) that produce either good or bad outcomes.

b. Contextual Meaning

The word **الْحَرْث** (al-ḥarṯ) appears in several verses of the Qur'an, including:

a. QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:223 — "**نِسَاؤُكُمْ حَرْ ث لكُّمْ**" (Your wives are a place of cultivation for you). Contextual meaning: a place for raising descendants [3].

b. QS. Asy-Syūrā [42]:20 — "**مَن كَانَ يرُيدُ حَرْثَ الْأخِرَةِ نَزِدْ لهُ فِي حَرْثِهِ...**" (Whoever desires the harvest of the Hereafter, We increase for him in his harvest…). Contextual meaning: deeds that result in rewards in the Hereafter [3].

c. QS. Āli 'Imrān [3]:14 — "**...وَالْأنْعَامِ وَالْحَرْثِ...**" (…and livestock and cultivated land…). Contextual meaning: agricultural crops as worldly blessings [3].

d. QS. Al-An'ām [6]:141 — "**...وَهُوَ الذِّي أنْشَأَ جَنَّاتٍ مَعْرُوشَاتٍ وَغَيْرَ مَعْرُوشَا تٍ**" (And He it is who causes gardens to grow, trellised and untrellised…). Contextual meaning: agriculture as a sign of Allah's power [3].

From these verses, it can be concluded that the usage of the word **الْحَرْث** (al-ḥarṯ) in the Qur'an is divided into two primary contexts: worldly (agriculture and physical cultivation) and otherworldly (deeds and their spiritual outcomes).

c. Relational Analysis / Comparison of Terms

The term **الْحَرْث** (al-ḥarṯ) has semantic relationships with several other words in the Qur'an, including:

a. **الزَّرْع** (az-zar'): This term refers to plants that grow from seeds, whereas **الْحَرْث** (al-ḥarṯ) encompasses both the act of planting and the resulting yield simultaneously. According to

الرَّاغِب الْصُفْهَانِي (al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī), the distinction lies in the broader scope of الْحَرْ ث (al-ḥarṯ) which includes the human effort involved [2].

b. الْعمَ ل (‘amal): In a metaphorical sense, الْحَرْ ث (al-ḥarṯ) is identical to human deeds or actions, as both produce "fruit"—whether in the form of spiritual rewards or worldly consequences [5].

c. النِ تاَج (an-nitāj): This signifies a result, outcome, or offspring, which runs parallel to the meaning of الْحَرْث (al-ḥarṯ) as a source of yield derived from human endeavor.

Accordingly, الْحَرْث (al-ḥarṯ) functions as a universal metaphor for productive endeavor, representing the Qur’anic principle that every action constitutes a form of “cultivation” whose fruits will inevitably be harvested, either in this world or in the Hereafter [5], [6].

4. CONCLUSION

a. Theological Values

The term al-ḥarṯ (الْحَرْث) embodies a profound theological doctrine concerning divine justice (عَدْل) and human accountability (مَسْؤُولِيَّة). Through this concept, the Qur’an articulates the operation of سُنَّةُ الله (divine law of causality), according to which every consequence— whether material or spiritual—is inseparable from human action (عَمَ ل) [5], [6]. The metaphor of cultivation illustrates that moral outcomes are not arbitrary but arise from deliberate choices and efforts. In this framework, Allah is portrayed as رَبَّ الْعَالَمِيْنَ, the Sustainer who provides the existential “field” in which life unfolds, while human beings act as moral agents responsible for determining the quality and direction of their cultivation [4]. Thus, al-ḥarṯ functions as a theological instrument that integrates divine sovereignty with ethical responsibility, reinforcing the Qur’anic worldview of purposeful creation and moral order [6].

b. Author’s Conclusion

Linguistically derived from the root ḥ–r–ṯ (ح– ر –ث), the concept of الْحَرْ ث (al-ḥarṯ) transcends its agricultural origin to become a comprehensive metaphor for the human condition as a continuous process of “sowing and reaping.” As explained by الرَّاغِب الْصُفْهَانِي (al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī),, the Qur’an extends this term to encompass every intentional action directed toward benefit or consequence [1]. By employing agrarian imagery—deeply familiar to its first audience—the Qur’an constructs a semantic bridge between tangible labor on the earth (أَرُ ض) and intangible spiritual recompense in the hereafter [6]. Consequently, al-ḥarṯ does not merely denote physical cultivation but symbolizes the ethical structure of life itself, where effort, intention, and responsibility determine existential outcomes [3], [5]. This semantic expansion confirms that Qur’anic language operates not only descriptively but also normatively, shaping moral consciousness through symbolic expression [6].

c. Correlation with Modern Times: Sustainability and Ethics

In contemporary discourse, الْحَرْث (al-ḥarṯ) acquires renewed relevance as a conceptual foundation for productivity, ethical labor, and environmental sustainability. Within the framework of Qur’anic ecology, this term is inseparable from the principle of الْمِيزَان (cosmic balance), which governs both natural systems and moral order [8], [9].

- Sustainability: To prevent environmental corruption (الْفَسَا د) and destruction (هَلَ كَ), human "cultivation" must respect the natural limits set by the Creator[8].
- Moral Productivity: Modern humanity is called to "plant" moral and spiritual values (نِعْمَة) so that the world remains fertile and productive for future generations [5], [6].

- Ecological Stewardship: The role of humans as خَلِيفَةً (Khalīfah) implies an أَمَانَةً (Amanah) or trust to manage the world's resources without causing transgression in the balance [9].

Accordingly, the concept of الْحَرْث (al-ḥarṯ) provides a unified ethical paradigm in which spiritual accountability, social responsibility, and environmental care converge. Environmental preservation, therefore, is not merely a technical or economic necessity, but a manifestation of obedience to divine order and a concrete expression of Qur'anic moral philosophy [8], [9].

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