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The Conceptual Meaning of An-Nahr (River) in the Qur'an: A Semantic Analysis Based on Toshihiko Izutsu's Qur'anic Worldview

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Abstract

This study examines the conceptual meaning of the Qur'anic term an-nahr (river) using Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic framework. Employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical design, the research analyzes Qur'anic verses containing an-nahr to identify its core meaning, relational meanings, synchronic and diachronic dimensions, and its role within the Qur'anic worldview. Primary data consist of relevant Qur'anic verses, while secondary data include classical and contemporary Qur'anic exegesis, Arabic lexicographical works, and scholarly literature on Qur'anic semantics. Data were collected through library research and analyzed through systematic stages: identification of core meaning, analysis of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, synchronic-diachronic examination, and integrative conceptual interpretation. The findings reveal that an-nahr fundamentally denotes a continuously flowing body of water, which in the Qur'anic context expands into a symbol of divine mercy, sustenance, life, cosmic balance, and eschatological reward. Relationally, an-nahr is closely connected with key Qur'anic concepts such as water (al-mā'), Paradise (jannah), provision (al-rizq), and cosmic order (al-kawn). Diachronically, its meaning evolves from a physical necessity to a theological and ethical symbol. This study demonstrates that an-nahr functions as a significant conceptual element within the Qur'anic semantic system, reflecting an integrated worldview of God, humanity, and nature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an, as the sacred scripture of Islam, functions not only as a source of moral and spiritual guidance but also as a highly rich and complex linguistic text. The language of the Qur'an possesses distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from everyday language, both in terms of structure, diction, and the depth of meaning it conveys. Each word in the Qur'an does not stand in isolation or neutrality; rather, it is embedded within a system of meaning that constructs a particular worldview (weltanschauung) concerning God, humanity, and the nature of reality [1], [2].

In Qur'anic linguistic studies, meaning cannot be understood solely at the level of literal or lexical semantics. Instead, an approach is required that is capable of uncovering the conceptual layers underlying the Qur'an's use of language, including inter-word semantic relationships as well as the theological and cosmological dimensions embedded within them. For this reason, semantic analysis has become one of the most significant methodological approaches in contemporary Qur'anic studies, particularly in examining key concepts that shape Qur'anic thought [3].

One of the most influential semantic approaches in the study of the Qur'an is that developed by Toshihiko Izutsu. Izutsu conceptualizes the language of the Qur'an as an integrated and coherent conceptual system, in which every term possesses both a core meaning and a relational meaning that emerges through its relationship with other terms within a specific semantic field [4]. By analyzing these networks of semantic relations, Izutsu's approach not only reveals the lexical meaning of individual terms but also uncovers the Qur'anic worldview that underlies the overall use of language in the sacred text [5].

Izutsu's semantic framework has been widely applied in studies of abstract Qur'anic concepts such as *īmān* (faith), *kufr* (disbelief), love, and *maqām*, demonstrating that Qur'anic meaning is inherently dynamic and contextual [6], [7]. Nevertheless, conceptual semantic studies focusing on natural symbols in the Qur'an—particularly those related to water and rivers—remain relatively limited and call for further scholarly exploration [8].

One Qur'anic term that is particularly significant for analysis through Izutsu's conceptual semantic approach is *an-nahr* (النهر), commonly translated as "river." In the Qur'an, this term appears in various contexts that not only describe physical natural phenomena but also convey profound symbolic and theological dimensions. *An-nahr* is frequently associated with life, fertility, pleasure, tranquility, and divine mercy, especially in Qur'anic depictions of Paradise, where flowing rivers symbolize prosperity, bliss, and proximity to God [8], [9].

From a lexicographical perspective, the term *an-nahr* derives from the root (ن–ه–ر), which encompasses a wide semantic range, including meanings such as "to flow," "to overflow," and, in certain contexts, "to slaughter," indicating a rich semantic dynamism in the development of the term [10], [11]. This semantic variation suggests that *an-nahr* cannot be understood reductively as merely a physical river, but rather as a concept that occupies a significant position within the symbolic and conceptual structure of the Qur'an.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the conceptual meaning of *an-nahr* in the Qur'an using Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic approach. Through an examination of both the core meaning and relational meanings of *an-nahr*, this research seeks to reveal how the concept of the river contributes to the construction of the Qur'anic worldview, particularly in relation to notions of life, bliss, and the relationship between humanity and God. This study is expected to enrich the field of Qur'anic semantic studies and to offer a theoretical contribution to the understanding of natural symbolism in the Islamic sacred text.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to explore the conceptual meaning of the word an-nahr (النهر) in the Qur'an. This approach is chosen because the primary objective of the research is to examine the core meaning, relational meaning, synchronic and diachronic dimensions, as well as the worldview implications of a key Qur'anic term, rather than to measure lexical frequency or quantitative distribution. The descriptive-analytical method enables a systematic analysis of semantic relationships, verse contexts, and historical aspects without applying statistical hypothesis testing [13], [14].

2.2. Types of Data and Data Sources

The primary data of this research consist of Qur'anic verses containing the term an-nahr (النهر) along with their textual and thematic contexts within the Qur'an. In addition, secondary data are employed, including classical and contemporary Qur'anic exegeses, Arabic lexicographical sources, and scholarly literature on Qur'anic linguistics and semantics. The data sources comprise primary textual data (the Qur'an) and secondary sources such as academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and research publications related to Qur'anic semantic studies and Izutsu's semantic framework [13].

2.3. Data Collection Method

Data collection is conducted through library research, which includes the following steps:

2.3.1. Identification of Qur'anic verses containing the word an-nahr based on thematic and lexical Qur'anic indices.

2.3.2. Compilation of classical and contemporary tafsīr works that address the semantic interpretation of the term.

2.3.3. Review of recent scholarly literature on Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic approach and relevant Qur'anic semantic studies published in academic journals.

This method aligns with established practices in Qur'anic semantic research, which primarily rely on textual analysis and documentary sources as the main data foundation [13], [14].

2.4. Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis is conducted through several systematic stages as follows:

2.4.1. Identification of Core Meaning

This stage aims to determine the initial lexical meaning of an-nahr by examining Qur'anic usage, classical Arabic dictionaries, and authoritative tafsīr sources. The analysis includes mapping the root letters (ن–ه–ر) and identifying their basic semantic features in both early usage and Qur'anic contexts. This step follows the principles of conceptual semantics, which place core meaning as the foundation for further semantic analysis [13].

2.4.2. Analysis of Relational Meaning

This stage examines the syntagmatic relationships (the association of an-nahr with surrounding words within verses) and paradigmatic relationships (its relation to semantically related terms) to uncover contextual meanings. This analytical process reflects Izutsu's semantic principle that meaning is constructed through inter-lexical relations within a semantic network, thereby revealing the Qur'anic conceptual worldview [14].

2.4.3. Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis

The synchronic analysis investigates the meaning of an-nahr within the internal structure of the Qur'anic text by comparing its various occurrences and contexts. The diachronic analysis traces the development of the term's meaning from the pre-Qur'anic period through the Qur'anic revelation and into post-Qur'anic interpretative traditions, including shifts in meaning reflected in tafsīr literature and Arab cultural usage. This synchronic-diachronic approach is widely applied in contemporary Qur'anic semantic research [15].

2.4.4. Construction of the Qur'anic Worldview

At this stage, the findings from the core meaning, relational meaning, and synchronicdiachronic analyses are integrated into a conceptual framework of the Qur'anic

weltanschauung (worldview). This framework illustrates how an-nahr functions as a symbolic representation of the relationship between human beings, nature, and God within the Qur'anic semantic system. This step follows the interpretative-conceptual methodology that views Qur'anic key terms as interconnected elements within a comprehensive semantic network [13], [14].

2.5. Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity and reliability, this study applies a source triangulation strategy, which includes:

2.5.1. Literature triangulation, by cross-verifying findings through multiple sources such as classical tafsīr works, recent peer-reviewed articles, and linguistic semantic theories.

2.5.2. Analytical triangulation, by comparing results from syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses to ensure interpretative consistency.

Triangulation is commonly employed in Qur'anic semantic research to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings [13], [14].

2.6. Presentation of Findings

The research findings are presented in a descriptive-narrative format, supported by:

2.6.1. Quoted Qur'anic verses under analysis

2.6.2. Tables outlining core and relational meanings

2.6.3. Semantic network diagrams illustrating conceptual relationships

2.6.4. An interpretative discussion of the Qur'anic worldview (weltanschauung) based on the semantic framework

This mode of presentation is consistent with reporting standards in contemporary linguistic and Qur'anic semantic studies [13], [14].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Core Meaning of the Word *An-Nahr* (النهر)

Based on lexical analysis of classical Arabic dictionaries such as Lisān al-'Arab, Maqāyīs alLughah, and Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān, the word an-nahr (النهر) fundamentally denotes a continuously flowing and open body of water. This core meaning emphasizes the essential characteristics of a river as dynamic, sustained, and life-giving, distinguishing it from stagnant or enclosed water sources. In Arabic linguistic tradition, an-nahr also conveys notions of continuity, abundance, and natural order within the physical environment [13], [14].

Within the Qur'anic context, this basic lexical meaning is preserved while simultaneously undergoing conceptual expansion. An-nahr is not merely understood as a physical river, but as a symbol of the continuous flow of divine grace and sustenance originating from God. Thus, the core meaning of an-nahr in the Qur'an may be formulated as a divinely sustained flow of life, which becomes the foundation for its broader relational meanings [16].

3.2. Relational Meaning of the Word An-Nahr (النهر)

In Izutsu's semantic framework, relational meaning emerges from the interaction of a word with other key concepts within the Qur'anic semantic system. The term an-nahr forms an extensive semantic network through its relationships with several major Qur'anic concepts.

3.2.1. An-Nahr and the Concept of Al-Mā' (Water)

The relationship between an-nahr and al-mā' (water) reflects a fundamental connection between rivers and the origin of life. The Qur'an repeatedly affirms water as the source of all living beings, and an-nahr functions as the medium through which life-giving water flows and is distributed. In this relational context, an-nahr represents water that is not static but active, sustaining, and productive [17].

This semantic relationship reinforces the understanding of an-nahr as a manifestation of divine order (sunnat Allāh), whereby life operates through regulated and purposeful natural processes established by God [18].

3.2.2. An-Nahr and the Concept of Jannah (Paradise)

One of the most prominent relational meanings of an-nahr appears in Qur'anic descriptions of Paradise, frequently expressed through the phrase "jannāt tajrī min taḥtihā alanhār" (gardens beneath which rivers flow). In this eschatological context, an-nahr signifies eternal bliss, tranquility, and perfection of existence, rather than a mere physical water source [16].

The rivers of Paradise symbolize the uninterrupted and limitless mercy of God, transforming an-nahr into a theological sign of divine generosity and the fulfillment of spiritual reward in the hereafter [19].

3.2.3. An-Nahr and the Concept of Al-Rizq (Provision)

An-nahr is also closely associated with the concept of al-rizq (divine provision). In several Qur'anic contexts, rivers are linked to fertile land, agriculture, and human prosperity.

Through this relationship, an-nahr functions as a channel of God's sustenance that supports both individual survival and communal well-being [18].

This relational meaning emphasizes that sustenance is neither random nor autonomous, but flows through divinely structured natural systems. Consequently, an-nahr reflects the ethical dimension of Qur'anic ecology, reminding humans of their responsibility to preserve the sources of divine provision [13].

3.2.4. An-Nahr and the Concept of Al-Kawn (Cosmos and Balance)

Within the broader Qur'anic semantic network, an-nahr is connected to the concept of al-kawn (the cosmos) and the principle of balance (mīzān). Rivers operate as integral components of the cosmic order, maintaining harmony between land, water, living beings, and climatic systems. In this sense, an-nahr represents cosmic equilibrium and divine precision in creation [17].

This relational meaning situates an-nahr within a moral-cosmological framework, reinforcing the Qur'anic message that disrupting natural balance constitutes a violation of divine order [19].

3.3. Diachronic Analysis of the Meaning of An-Nahr (النهر)

From a diachronic perspective, the meaning of an-nahr has undergone significant development. In the pre-Qur'anic period, the term primarily referred to physical rivers essential for survival

within agrarian and geographical contexts of Arab society. During the Qur'anic period, this meaning was reconceptualized and sacralized, positioning rivers as signs of divine power, mercy, and promise [15].

In the post-prophetic period, particularly within tafsīr and Islamic intellectual traditions, an-nahr increasingly acquired symbolic and ethical dimensions, especially in relation to Paradise, environmental stewardship, and humanity's role as khalīfah fī al-arḍ. This semantic evolution illustrates the transition of an-nahr from a material concept to a theological and cosmological symbol [13].

3.4. Integrative Conceptual Analysis: An-Nahr as a Vehicle of the Qur'anic Worldview

Integrating the core meaning, relational meanings, and diachronic development, an-nahr emerges as a conceptual vehicle representing the Qur'anic worldview concerning the interconnected relationship between God, humanity, and nature. Rivers symbolize the continuous flow of divine mercy that sustains the cosmos, supports human life, and signifies eternal reward in the hereafter [16].

Within this worldview, an-nahr affirms that existence is relational, balanced, and divinely governed. The concept carries ethical implications, urging humans to uphold environmental responsibility as a spiritual obligation entrusted by God. Thus, an-nahr functions not merely as a natural phenomenon, but as a profound symbol integrating material reality and spiritual meaning within the Qur'anic semantic system [19].

4. CONCLUSION

The term an-nahr (النهر) in the Qur'an conveys a conceptual meaning that extends far beyond its literal definition as a "river" or "flowing water." Within a theological framework, an-nahr represents a symbol of the flow of divine mercy and blessing, serving as a fundamental source of life for all created beings. More than a mere ecological element, rivers in the Qur'an reflect cosmic order and natural balance, emphasizing the harmonious interconnectedness between humanity, nature, and God. Accordingly, the symbol of an-nahr illustrates the unity between the material and spiritual dimensions of life, while also functioning as a bridge between worldly experience and the promise of eternal life in the hereafter. This meaning underscores that rivers are not understood solely as physical phenomena, but also as representations of divine order and God's generosity in sustaining life. In this context, an-nahr carries ethical and spiritual messages that guide human beings to perceive nature as a divine trust (amānah ilāhiyyah) that must be preserved with gratitude and moral responsibility. The value derived by both the author and the reader is an awareness that ecological sustainability and balance constitute an integral part of humanity's spiritual responsibility as khalīfah fī al-arḍ.

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