



THE WAYS TO REFLECT AFFECTIVE EMOTIONS IN LITERARY TEXTS, IN THE QUR'AN

Tursunxo'jayev Jahongir Jovdatovich

English teacher Uzbekistan state word language university

Ergasheva Guli Buranovna

Masters of Linguistics at Uzbekistan state word language university

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the nature of emotions, in order to get a sense of the object of study. What can we identify in the text as an emotion, how is it expressed, and what does it mean in its context? It explains the division between constructivist and universalist approaches to the study of the history of emotions, and describe how these approaches have been reconciled by scholars who recognise that emotions have certain universal elements, but also that we cannot assume knowledge of how emotions will manifest, how they are understood, and what triggers them. Recent historical work has, moreover, shed light on the social function of emotion. It gives a broad overview of the ways in which emotions function in the Qur'an as a part of its overall eschatological message. The emotional ties between the believers and God are an example of the structures of power in their relationship. God shows mercy/compassion to the believers and anger towards those who go astray, while ideal believers are portrayed as being fearful of God. Believers must control their natural emotions, and reconfigure their emotional attachments in this world, in order to prioritise an emotional attachment to God. Proper feeling is thus a part of the practices which make someone a true believer.

Introduction

Despite a huge surge in interest and production in the field of Qur'anic studies, very little has been said about emotion in the Qur'an. While some authors have commented on the text's emotive power,¹ and entries in the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an include certain prominent emotions such as 'love', 'fear', and 'joy and misery', to my knowledge nobody has undertaken a study of emotions as such. The studies that do acknowledge the power of emotion tend to concentrate on emotion as a response to the text's aesthetics. There can be no doubt that

hearing the recited Qur'an can be moving. Yet an exclusive focus on aesthetics sidelines the emotional impact of the content of the text, which seems to be what is important to the listeners at Q. 5:83, When they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, their eyes fill with tears because of the truth that they recognise. In this and other instances, an emotional reaction to the Qur'an is portrayed as natural. And at least some early believers exhibited fear of God, an emotion that is also encouraged in the text. In this article, I present a preliminary study of emotion in the Qur'an. I argue that there are two aspects of emotion in the text. First, the Qur'anic message encourages the believers to cultivate specific emotional attachments and understanding. Thus, emotional practices are akin to other ritualistic practices, such as praying or fasting. Second, the Qur'an is meant to have an emotional impact on the listener. Units of text, stories, and even whole suras are conveyed in a manner that follows an emotional trajectory as the emotional tension rises and falls, and emotion words create resonance between different, seemingly unconnected, parts of the Qur'an. Thus emotion is a unifying element in this synoptic text.

The Qur'an contains many words that modern, Western, readers might consider to express emotion. 'Love', 'happiness', 'joy', 'hatred', 'anger', 'pain', 'grief', 'fear', 'shame'; each of these terms appears many times in the text, sometimes in several different ways. This list of words gives us some indication of the general emotional tone of the

Qur'an: overall, while fear is very important (and due to the number of 'fear' words, the exact number of occurrences of 'fear' is somewhat underestimated above), this is balanced by the emotions of compassion, happiness, and love; positive words generally outnumber negative ones. The physical expression of emotions does not appear to be very frequent, if weeping and laughter are anything to go by: they occur only 7 and 6 times, respectively.

But how do we know that this list is complete (in fact, it is not), or that the items I have included are emotions, rather than something else? (for example does compassion belong on this list?) In short, how do we define emotions? Are they related to cognitive processes, are they physical responses, or both? And do they remain constant across time and culture?

The simple answer is that there is no consensus on these questions. There is no agreed-upon academic definition of what an emotion is, and there is no scholarly consensus about how to define emotions. One problem with defining this term is that simple definitions are circular: the Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, defines 'emotion' as 'a strong feeling deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationship with others'. 'Feeling' in turn yields 'an emotional state or reaction'. Another problem is that, until the advent of neuroscience, it was difficult to measure feelings in any scientific way. In 1968, Paul Ekman conducted an experiment in which people from across different cultures were shown pictures of people making faces that corresponded to eight 'basic' emotions (pleasure, disgust, anger, fear, sadness, surprise, contempt, and shame/guilt). The test subjects had to match the pictures with the given words. He argued from this that the eight facial expressions corresponding to these emotions were universally recognisable, across cultures. His effort, however, was almost immediately criticised because the pictures did not show emotions at all, but rather a simulation of emotion, like a theatre mask; a more recent critique states that his thesis is 'bankrupt' from the standpoint of the natural sciences: the methods were hardly scientific.

Ekman's was not the first list of emotions. Lists of emotions have been produced since ancient times, and have recently become fodder for historical study. Most studies now do not

attempt to define emotions. However, since the idea of studying emotions is new to Qur'anic studies and to the study of Islamic history, a definition could be useful (even if only for future debate). Therefore, in the remainder of this section, I will review current scholarship on emotions and compare this to what we find in the Qur'an in order to propose a tentative working definition, which will apply to the study of emotion in the Qur'an and early Islamic writings. I begin with a question that is related to the idea of 'basic' emotions, namely, which aspects of emotions are universal, and which are learned?

Historian of emotions Barbara Rosenwein opens her most recent book with the simple question 'How can there be a history of emotions?' Emotions historians were, in the past, generally divided into two camps regarding the nature of emotions: universalists and constructivists. Universalists believed that emotions are innate and essentially the same through time (though their expression might differ), whereas constructivists believed that they are historically contingent and culturally specific: emotions themselves change according to time and culture. Universalism was a trend in early theories of emotions; subsequent studies in emotions history and in anthropology argued that there were significant differences in actual emotions from one society to the next. These studies gave fuel to the constructivists, and for some time constructivism was the dominant trend in the field of Emotions History.

In contrast, universalism has always prevailed in the life sciences. Emotions historians have sought varying degrees of engagement with these scientific findings. In his 2015 overview of emotions history *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* Jan Plamper focuses an entire section of 101 pages on the historical approaches to emotion in the life sciences. He does not, however, take a firm stance on constructivism versus universalism. Rosenwein's 2016 *Generations of Feeling*

also refers to recent work in the field of neuroscience: 'Some neuroscientists today think that emotions are as much products of top-down processing (in which case they depend on cognitive work) as of bottom-up (in which case they are connected to precognitive, automatic biological responses).' She concludes from this that people have always felt emotions, but that 'what those emotions are, what they are called, how they are evaluated and felt, and how they are expressed (or not)— all of these are shaped by "emotional communities"'. While seeming to acknowledge scientific findings, this statement essentially amounts to a fairly strong constructivist conclusion, one that I am not certain is supported by the studies she cites. This leaves the question of whether the constructivist-universalist binary is useful at all. Following the groundbreaking work of William Reddy, it seems that most historians now see emotions on a continuum ranging from elements of emotion that are constructed through cultural and social forces, to those that exist innately. Some in the study of the history of emotions have become so frustrated with this debate that they have questioned whether it is even worth investigating the nature of emotions. As one author has asked, 'Do historians need to know— at all—what emotions actually are?...If the goal is to show not only how emotions have a history, but make history, then "emotion" is only a short-hand label that gives way to the language of the past as we find and reconstruct it. It is true that in textual studies we examine the language of the past. But there is some value in attempting to understand the nature of what is being described by that language. Recognising the scientific findings on the pre-cognitive, universal elements of emotion, and the physicality of emotional response, can confirm our interpretation of physical manifestations of emotion when they occur (weeping

and laughing are the most obvious), or help us to interpret what can be classified as 'emotional'. For instance, I shall argue below that the repeated threats of destruction and damnation in the Qur'an are meant to inspire fear. If there were no universalism in emotion, I would have very little basis for that argument. The Qur'an has an appeal across linguistic, cultural, and temporal divides precisely because it conveys its message in a way that people can relate to on a basic, universal level, and this is true of the emotional content of its message as much as, or perhaps more than, the other content. That is not to say that the religion is understood and expressed the same way everywhere: such an argument would be absurd. Rather, my point is that if the text had no universal emotional resonance, it would not make sense to people from so many different cultures, across time. Its author may originally have intended to create a new emotional community. But the Qur'an appeals to people from various emotional communities, separated by time, space, and social class. A text documenting people who did not feel as we feel would have no resonance in these diverse societies. A text using emotional exhortation to convince people of its message would have little success if its emotional aspects were alien to them.

However, it is also important to recognise that many of the expressions of, triggers for, and meanings attached to emotion are historically constructed. What might cause shame, for instance, and the manifestations of shame, are not necessarily obvious from a perspective outside of particular cultures. In all cultures people feel shame about something, and to say that someone has no shame is an insult in many, but the exact trigger for shame varies widely. This learned aspect of emotional experience and response is what some modern authors refer to as the 'cognitive' or 'top-down' element of emotion. This is not cognitive in the same sense as a considered, rational, argument, but nevertheless it is learned, it is cultural, and it is behavioural, rather than biological and innate.

Biblical studies scholars have tended to focus less than historians on scientific debates about the nature of emotions. Nevertheless, recent work in the field of Biblical studies supports the approach of understanding emotions in context. One of the prominent trends in the field is to examine the emotions in their historical context, for instance New Testament emotions in the context of Greek and Roman emotions.

Like historians, Bible scholars recognise that emotions are conceptualised differently in the Bible than we might imagine them today. Françoise Mirguet points out that general terms such as 'emotion', or the verb 'to feel' have no equivalent in the Hebrew Bible, and argues that the way that we conceptualise 'emotions' does not fit the way they are conceptualised in the Hebrew Bible. Mirguet asserts that certain terms from the Hebrew Bible 'are not limited to the expression of what we call emotions; rather, they also include actions, movements, ritual gestures, and physical sensations, without strict dissociation among these different dimensions'. She gives examples of lists which include items that contemporary Western readers would likely see as unrelated, such as in 1 Sam. 18:6, 'with tambourines, with joy, and with musical instruments', and shows that the expression of emotions may not depend on emotion words. Emotions may be distinguished by their physical manifestations, such as shaking in the body. She argues that, in these cases, there is no need to name the emotion; the physical manifestation is the emotion, because Biblical Hebrew does not distinguish between bodily sensations and emotions.

Rosenwein and others have noted that emotions come in context: they rarely come out of the blue and are not disconnected from each other. Rosenwein describes emotional 'sequences', because 'emotional episodes often consist in a variety of emotions and emotional gestures, one after the other'. So, for instance, someone might feel desire, and then shame for feeling that desire. The analysis of emotional sequences can help to define a society's attitude towards particular emotions. Mirguet speaks of 'clusters of responses' to particular emotional scenarios; the idea of clusters of responses allows for a different response to the same emotional scenario. However, emotional plots are different from the emotional sequences described by Rosenwein or the clusters of responses described by Mirguet, because an emotional plot is an abstraction. Whereas the study of emotional sequences is the study of specific emotion words and how they appear together, an emotional plot—a journey from despair to hope, for instance—does not require the same vocabulary each time. An emotional journey from despair to hope, or hope to despair, can be the same no matter whether the scenario uses the terms 'hope' or 'despair' at all, no matter what the specifics of the story. Gade has characterised emotions in the Qur'an as ultimately 'transformative'. Examining emotional plots in the Qur'an enables us to understand the frequency of the transformative moments for the believing auditor, and thereby to understand the rhythm of individual suras in a different way from those previously posited by scholars.

There are two main emotional plots in the Qur'anic suras that I have analysed: the plot that passes through fear or despair and ends in mercy, vindication, or salvation, and the plot that takes the opposite journey, passing through arrogance, disdain, or any of a number of emotions, and ending in destruction or damnation. The plots thus connect with the findings about individual emotion words and the overall emotional message of the Qur'an described above. As I have mentioned above, God's love and Emotion in the Qur'an compassion/mercy are not unconditional. Believers must live in a state of Godfearingness and they must earn God's compassion and love through their beliefs and deeds. The emotional plot of a passage describes the arc of feelings in the believer who is being threatened with damnation, promised great reward, exhorted to do the right thing, or told a story of past peoples whose fates were either salvation or damnation. Plots may be long or short, and may follow a complex trajectory or a simple one. A sura can contain a number of plots; in some cases, an entire sura may be plotted, with many ups and downs on the way.

This leads me to two points. The first is that, since some elements of the basic emotional message are common, it becomes important to think about what specifically in the emotional message of the Qur'an is different from that of the Bible, and also how this is conveyed in a way that is Qur'anic, rather than Biblical or more generically 'scriptural'. Though that task is beyond this paper, it would be interesting to investigate, for instance, whether God's love in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament shares the characteristics noted above in the Qur'an. My second point is that there may be new modes of analysis that would enable us to refine our understanding of how this general message is conveyed in particular texts.

Conclusion

It is possible that the poetic, synoptic nature of this resonance is typical of the Qur'an, and sets it apart from the more narratively cohesive Biblical use of emotion. In the Qur'an, all parts presume all other parts and this is obvious when one considers how the emotional content is

delivered in the different suras, with evocations in passages that otherwise seem to have little in common. A further investigation of the way in which emotion words, emotional plots, and emotional tension function in the suras may shed new light on issues of structure and coherence within suras, as well as shedding light on their ultimate message. How believers find cohesion in this fragmentary, synoptic, text may not be immediately obvious to outsiders. But the study of emotional plots and of the resonance created by emotion words shows that, far from being a hindrance to emotive experience, the synoptic nature of the Qur'an may actually increase its emotional resonance for the believer.

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