

A STUDY OF ASYNONYMY: MUHAMMAD SHAHRUR'S ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF QS. AL-NŪR (24): 3

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Abstract: *This study examines the principle of asynonymy—the idea that every word in the Quran possesses a distinct and non-interchangeable meaning—within the hermeneutical framework of Muhammad Shahrur, a contemporary Islamic thinker known for his reformist and modernist approach to Quranic interpretation. The focal point of this research is QS. al-Nūr (24): 3, exploring how Shahrur's semantic method offers a significantly different reading from traditional exegetical understandings. While classical interpretations often view this verse as a moral and legal prohibition against marriage between fornicators and polytheists, Shahrur reinterprets the terms *zānī*, *zāniyah*, and *mushrik* as having specific, non-synonymous meanings. He argues that these terms reflect broader ethical concerns such as mutual consent, human dignity, and interpersonal integrity, rather than rigid legal or theological classifications. This reinterpretation carries far-reaching implications for Islamic ethics, particularly in the realms of sexual conduct, social justice, and gender equality. By engaging in a critical dialogue between classical tradition and contemporary thought, this study demonstrates how linguistic precision can open new pathways for understanding the Quran in ways that are socially and ethically relevant in the modern context.*

Keywords: *Asynonymy; Muhammad Shahrur; Quranic Interpretation; QS. al-Nūr (24): 3.*

Abstrak: Studi ini mengkaji prinsip asinonimitas—yakni keyakinan bahwa tidak ada dua kata dalam Al-Quran yang benar-benar bersinonim—dalam kerangka hermeneutika Muhammad Shahrur, seorang pemikir Islam kontemporer yang dikenal dengan pendekatan reformis terhadap penafsiran Al-Quran. Dengan berfokus pada QS. al-Nūr (24): 3, penelitian ini menelusuri bagaimana metodologi semantik Shahrur menghasilkan pembacaan yang berbeda dari tafsir klasik. Ayat yang secara tradisional dipahami sebagai larangan hukum dan moral terhadap pernikahan antara pezina dan musyrik, ditafsirkan ulang oleh Shahrur melalui pendekatan linguistik dan etis. Ia berpendapat bahwa istilah *zānī*, *zāniyah*, dan *mushrik* memiliki makna yang spesifik dan tidak tumpang tindih, yang mencerminkan perhatian lebih besar terhadap isu konsensus, martabat, dan relasi antarmanusia, bukan sekadar klasifikasi hukum atau agama. Penafsiran ulang ini memiliki implikasi mendalam bagi etika Islam, terutama terkait perilaku seksual, keadilan sosial, dan hak-hak gender. Dengan menggabungkan perspektif tradisional dan modern secara kritis, studi ini menunjukkan potensi transformatif dari presisi linguistik dalam penafsiran Al-Quran serta relevansinya bagi masyarakat Muslim masa kini.

Kata Kunci: Asinonimitas; Muhammad Shahrur; Tafsir Al-Quran; QS. al-Nūr (24): 3.

Introduction

The practice of Quranic interpretation requires new methodologies and approaches that align with the conditions and transformations of the times. Although the Quran was revealed in the past amid specific social contexts, it embodies universal values that remain relevant across all times and places (*Shālih li kulli Zamān wa Makān*). Hence, it is natural that the Quran be interpreted within contemporary social and cultural frameworks, taking into account scientific advancements and human civilization.¹

Historically, interpretations of the Quranic text have existed since its initial revelation, yet fresh insights continue to emerge from the depths of this divine revelation. The diversity of approaches and methods used in interpreting the Quran correlates with the variety of understandings produced. Whether in the form of *tafsīr*, *ta'wīl*, interpretation, or translation, all Quranic textual analyses fall within the wide domain of hermeneutics, which remains open to renewal and reinterpretation.²

This raises an important question: how can we produce critical, dialectical, transformative, and reformative interpretations that are meaningful in addressing the challenges faced by humanity? Modern Muslim intellectuals such as Fazlur Rahman, Abdullah Ahmed al-Na'im, Asghar Ali Engineer, Muhammad Arkoun, Hassan Hanafi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Muhammad Shahrur appear to be motivated by this concern. They seek to deconstruct and reconstruct interpretive approaches that are more comprehensive, enabling the Quran to respond effectively to contemporary needs and directions.³

This has sparked a renewed enthusiasm (*ghirah*) among a new generation of Muslim scholars who aim to interpret the Quran using slightly different formats and approaches, combining Orientalist methodologies with those rooted in the Islamic tradition.⁴ Among these efforts is the linguistic analysis of the Quran—an inheritance from early scholars—such as the work of Abū Muslim al-Aṣṣihānī in “*Mufaradat li Gharibi al-Quran*”, which became a standard reference for Quranic lexical analysis.⁵ Despite the significant contributions of classical scholars in philological and linguistic analysis of the Quran, there remains a risk of semantic reductionism that could lead to fragmented or partial understandings of the Quran. Such readings may fail to reflect the integrated and holistic essence of the text.⁶

One of the most prominent contemporary Muslim thinkers in this domain is Muhammad Shahrur, a controversial liberal scholar from Syria, often dubbed the “Immanuel Kant of the Arab world” and the “Martin Luther of Islam.” Originally trained as a civil engineer, Shahrur completed his primary and secondary education in Damascus before pursuing technical studies in Moscow, where he became familiar with Marxist thought—an influence that later shaped his Islamic thinking. He earned his master’s and doctoral degrees at University College Dublin, Ireland.⁷

Upon completing his graduate studies in just four years, Shahrur returned to Syria in 1972 and joined the University of Damascus while also working with a civil engineering firm. He was never affiliated with any formal Islamic institution nor did he receive traditional training or credentials in Islamic sciences.⁸ This unconventional background led many to question his authority in engaging seriously with Islamic thought, particularly Qur’anic exegesis. As a civil engineer by profession, critics often dismissed his qualifications to speak authoritatively on Islamic interpretation.⁹

In the foreword to his controversial book *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur’ān: Qir’ah Mu’āṣirah* (1992), Dr. Ja’far Dikk al-Bab explains that Shahrur employs a hermeneutical approach based on linguistic forms, which he calls *Manhāj at-Tārikhīy*. He synthesizes linguistic theories from Abu al-Fārisi, Ibn Jinni, and Abdul Qāhir al-Jurjāni, ultimately concluding that synonymity does not exist in the Arabic language.¹⁰

Among Shahrur’s interpretive theories is the Theory of Asynonymy, which asserts that no two words in the Quran are perfectly synonymous. He aligns with Ibn Fāris’s view that every word in Arabic possesses a unique meaning. Even when a word seems to have only one possible meaning, its contextual placement can yield multiple interpretations. Thus, context is paramount in determining the most accurate meaning of a term.¹¹

Based on this view, Shahrur presents new semantic interpretations of the Quran,¹² particularly when interpreting the terms *zānī* and *mushrik* in QS. al-Nūr (24): 3

الرَّانِي لَا يَنْكِحُ إِلَّا زَانِيَةً أَوْ مُشْرِكَةً وَالزَّانِيَةُ لَا يَنْكِحُهَا إِلَّا زَانٍ أَوْ مُشْرِكٌ وَحُرِّمَ ذَلِكَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

“The male fornicator shall marry none but a female fornicator or an idolatress, and the female fornicator shall marry none but a male fornicator or an idolater. Such a thing is forbidden to the believers.”

In interpreting this verse, Shahrur diverges sharply from classical and even many contemporary scholars. Classical commentators such as Ibn Kathīr, Al-Qurṭubī, Al-Ṭabarī, Al-Jurjānī, Jalāluddīn Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāluddin Al-Maḥallī, and Sheikh Ahmad ibn Muhammad Al-Ṣāwī Al-Miṣrī generally interpret the verse as stating that a woman guilty of fornication may only marry a man who is either likewise guilty of fornication or a disbeliever who deems fornication permissible, and vice versa. For them, *al-zānī* denotes one who commits unlawful sexual intercourse, while *mushrik* refers to those who disbelieve in Allah.

Likewise, contemporary scholars such as Hamka, Wahbah al-Zuhayli, Al-Shawkani, Sayyid Qutb, Ali al-Shabuni, Teungku Hasbi ash-Shiddieqy, and Quraish Shihab hold that *zīna* is the sexual union between two individuals without the bond of marriage, and not due to any legal ambiguity (*shubḥah*). Accordingly, *al-zānī* and *al-zāniyah* are individuals who commit such acts, while *mushrik* and *mushrikah* refer to male and female disbelievers.¹³

Shahrur, however, reinterprets these terms through his theory of Asynonymy. He argues that *zānī* and *zāniyah* refer to individuals engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage. Meanwhile, *mushrik* in this verse refers to a man who engages in sexual relations with a woman who is not his wife, treating her as though she were. *Mushrikah* is a woman who does the same with a man who is not her husband. Thus, Shahrur detaches the term *shirk* from its traditional theological meaning of associating partners with God, and redefines it as a form of relational transgression.¹⁴

It is this unique interpretation that inspired the present study, aiming to explore Shahrur's thought due to its divergence from mainstream scholarly views and its potential to offer new semantic insights into Qur'anic interpretation, particularly regarding the concepts of *zīnā* and *mushrik*. The author posits that Shahrur's theory can be harmonized with present-day contexts, especially given the growing prevalence of sexual misconduct. As Wael B. Hallaq notes, Shahrur's methodological framework for Quranic

interpretation is arguably more compatible with a contemporary Islamic epistemology.

Definition of *Asynonymy*

In Arabic, *asynonymy* can be referred to as *ghayr al-tarāduf* or *inkār al-tarāduf*.¹⁵ According to Tha‘labi, what has previously been assumed in linguistic studies as synonymous words are, in fact, expressions that carry distinct meanings.¹⁶ The theory of *lā tarādufī al-Qur’ān* (non-synonymity in the Quran) emphasizes the miraculous nature (*i’jāz*) of the Quran, asserting that not a single word within the Quran is truly synonymous with another—even if such words are commonly perceived as having similar meanings.¹⁷

The concept of *asynonymy* emerged as a response to the ongoing scholarly debate among Muslim scholars and Arab linguists concerning the existence of synonyms in the Arabic language. These debates are often rooted in transmitted reports and scholarly opinions that challenge the notion of synonymity. Based on these reports, scholars have attempted to demonstrate the semantic distinctions between words that have been traditionally viewed as interchangeable.¹⁸

The use of the term *asynonymy* in the Indonesian academic context was pioneered by scholars at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, notably Abdul Mustaqim and Yusron. Initially, the concept of the absence of synonymity in the Quran was translated as *anti-synonymy*. Mustaqim employed both terms, *synonymy* and *anti-synonymy*, to represent the divergent scholarly views regarding whether each word in the Quran possesses unique meaning or shares it with others. This discourse is especially relevant in the context of Muhammad Shahrur’s hermeneutics. Influenced by the thought of Ibn Fāris, Shahrur inclined toward the position that there are no true synonyms in the Quran. From this premise, he constructed a distinction between *al-Kitāb* and *al-Qur’ān*.¹⁹

The emergence of *asynonymy* is influenced by various methodological approaches, inclinations, and backgrounds adopted by scholars. Several factors can be identified as the driving forces behind the development of this theory:²⁰

1. The existence of scholarly groups who reject the idea of synonymity in the Quran.
2. A rebuttal of the notion that synonymity exists in the Quran, which is viewed as diminishing the Quran’s linguistic precision and divine wisdom; it is argued that it is inconceivable for Allah to use multiple terms or symbols to denote a single meaning.

3. The belief that every word or phrase in the Quran possesses its own distinct meaning or even multiple layers of meaning.²¹

Furthermore, Western linguistic thought has also challenged the notion of synonymy. In his *Introduction to Semantics*, Johnson asserts that “true synonyms do not exist.” Bloomfield likewise posits that “every linguistic form has a constant and specific meaning. If linguistic forms differ phonemically, it can be assumed that their meanings also differ.” Earlier than Bloomfield, Bréal had already addressed the “law of distribution” in language. According to this principle, “words that are presumed to be synonymous—and which may have been so in earlier usage—originally carried different meanings and cannot be substituted for one another.”²²

Biography of Muhammad Shahrur

Muhammad Shahrur ibn Dayb, a controversial figure who once shook the foundations of Islamic thought, was born on April 11, 1938, in the Shalhiyyah district of Damascus, Syria, during a period when the country was still under French colonial rule, albeit having attained a semi-autonomous status. His father was Dayb ibn Dayb Shahrur, and his mother was Siddiqah bint Salih Filyun. Shahrur was the fifth child in a family whose patriarch worked as a traditional fabric dyer. He was married to Azizah, with whom he had five children: Tariq, al-Lais, Basul, Masul, and Rima²³

Shahrur began his formal education at elementary and secondary schools in the al-Midan neighborhood, located in southern Damascus. In 1957, he was sent to Saratov, near Moscow, to study civil engineering, a program he completed in 1964. A decade later, in 1968, he pursued further studies abroad, enrolling at University College Dublin in Ireland, where he earned his MA and Ph.D. in soil mechanics and foundation engineering by 1972.²⁴ Along with several colleagues from the Faculty of Engineering, he co-founded a civil engineering consultancy. He also served as a technical expert for Al-Saud Consult in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1982–1983). Shahrur later held a professorship in civil engineering at the University of Damascus from 1972 to 1999.²⁵

In addition to his native Arabic, Muhammad Shahrur was fluent in both English and Russian. His trilingual proficiency contributed significantly to his intellectual breadth and enabled him to actively participate in international academic forums. This global engagement is exemplified by his invitation to speak at the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in 1988.²⁶

A pivotal figure in Shahrur’s intellectual development was Ja’far Dakk

al-Bab, a close friend and mentor. Their acquaintance began during their student years in the Soviet Union—Shahrur in civil engineering and Ja'far in linguistics—between 1958 and 1964. Though their academic paths diverged after graduation, their early collaboration played a vital role in shaping Shahrur's later ideas.

This formative experience culminated in Shahrur's seminal and highly controversial work, *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āsirah*.²⁷ The book proposed bold and unprecedented interpretations that reverberated across the Middle East. It is evident that his formal training in engineering strongly influenced his analytical approach—especially his methods of textual analysis, which he borrowed from the natural sciences, particularly mathematics and physics. As such, his project represents a distinctive contribution to the reinterpretation of the Quran and Sunnah, as well as to the broader system of Islamic legal theory.²⁸

Shahrur's new hermeneutical reading of Islamic texts rests upon several foundational principles:²⁹

1. A comprehensive and in-depth study of the Arabic language (*al-lisān al-'arabī*), rooted in the linguistic methods of Abū 'Alī al-Fārisi, and reflected in the perspectives of two of his most prominent students, Ibn Jinni and 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī—alongside references to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (*al-shi'r al-jāhili*).
2. Engagement with modern linguistic theories, particularly those which challenge the existence of true synonymy in language. Shahrur emphasized that a single word can evolve, disappear, or acquire new meanings over time. He regarded *Mu'jam Maqāyīs al-Lughah* by Ibn Fāris as the most suitable lexicographic reference due to Ibn Fāris's rejection of synonymity within Arabic.
3. The belief that Islam remains valid for all times and places (*ṣāliḥ li-kulli zamān wa makān*), which requires contemporary Muslims to approach the Quran as though it were freshly revealed and to engage with it as if the Prophet Muhammad had just passed away. This methodological stance fosters contextual and relevant interpretations of the sacred text in every circumstance. In line with this approach, Muslims are encouraged to “de-sacralize” historical tafsir traditions, maintaining that only the divine text itself is sacred, while all human interpretations are open to critical reassessment.

The Foundations of Muhammad Shahrur's Theory of Asynonymy

Muhammad Shahrur's academic background in the sciences significantly influenced the epistemological orientation of his Quranic hermeneutics,

particularly in prioritizing empirical, rational, and scientific principles. In its simplest form, Shahrur's method can be characterized as a form of linguistic analysis, focusing on the lexical and syntactical structure of language. He refers to this as the "historical-scientific linguistic method" (*al-manhaj al-tārikhī al-ilmī fī al-dirāsah al-lughawiyyah*). Within this framework, the meaning of a word is established through its relationship to other proximate or antonymous terms. For Shahrur, words do not possess true synonyms (*murādifāt*); rather, each lexical item carries a unique semantic value, which may include multiple contextual meanings. The precise determination of a word's meaning is highly dependent on its logical context within a sentence (*ṣiyāq al-kalām*). In other words, semantic meaning is shaped by the linear relationship a word maintains with other surrounding terms.³⁰

Put differently, Shahrur approaches the Quran using a form of the philosophy of language. He conducts in-depth investigations into key lexical items found within thematic units of the Quran, employing both paradigmatic and syntagmatic analytical methods.³¹ The *paradigmatic approach* maintains that the semantic scope of a specific term cannot be understood comprehensively without situating it within a network of other terms—especially those that are either semantically adjacent or antithetical.³² The *syntagmatic approach*, by contrast, asserts that a word's meaning is influenced by its position relative to preceding and succeeding words within a given utterance. This method allows for the detection of conceptual meanings within religious terminology by examining the immediate linguistic context in which a term appears.³³

Shahrur's serious engagement with Quranic hermeneutics began during his academic years in the Soviet Union, particularly after he met his mentor, Ja'far Dakk al-Bab. Under Dakk al-Bab's guidance, Shahrur delved into linguistic studies and was introduced to various linguistic theories. These included the diachronic perspectives of al-Farrā',³⁴ Abū 'Alī al-Fārisī,³⁵ and Ibn Jinnī³⁶ (*al-dirāsah al-taṭawwuriyyah*), as well as the synchronic perspectives of 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (*al-waṣf al-taẓāmunī*). One of the most influential figures in shaping Shahrur's linguistic views was Ibn Fāris, a classical Arab philologist and a student of Tha'lab, who categorically rejected synonymy. Ibn Fāris's position, often cited by Shahrur, is encapsulated in his assertion: *mā yudhann fī al-dirāsah al-lughawiyyah min al-mutarādifāt huwa min al-mutabāyināt*—what is presumed to be synonymous in linguistic studies is, in fact, composed of distinct terms with differentiated semantic nuances.

Muhammad Shahrur's Interpretation on *Zinā* and *Mushrik* in QS. al-Nūr (24): 3

In interpreting QS. al-Nūr: 3, Muhammad Shahrur employs the method of *tartil*. *Tartil* refers to a reading approach aimed at uncovering new meanings by establishing thematic interconnections between related verses in order to derive a more comprehensive understanding. The steps taken by Shahrur are as follows:

Explaining the Meaning of QS. al-Nūr

Surah al-Nūr contains legal verses (*āyāt al-aḥkām*) and clear, unambiguous statements (*bayyināt*). All the laws embedded within it are categorized as *far'īd*—obligatory rulings ordained by God for His servants, intended to alleviate hardship, difficulty, and constraint, and to offer relief.³⁷ This is affirmed in QS. al-Nūr verse 1:

سُورَةٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهَا وَفَرَضْنَاهَا وَأَنْزَلْنَا فِيهَا آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

“A surah which We have sent down and made obligatory; and in it We have sent down clear signs, so that you may take heed.”

Ibn Kathīr explains that this verse serves as a warning and a call for careful attention, though it does not negate the significance of other surah. This emphasis is due to the fact that Surah al-Nūr contains numerous discussions on what is lawful and unlawful, divine commands and prohibitions, as well as *ḥudūd* (prescribed legal penalties).³⁸

Collecting Verses (Munāsabah al-Āyāt): An Analysis through Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations

QS. al-Nūr (24): 2–3 begin with a discussion of the punishment for *zinā* (fornication or adultery). Allah says:

الرَّانِيَةُ وَالرَّانِي فَاجْلِدُوا كُلَّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا مِائَةَ جَلْدَةٍ وَلَا تَأْخُذْكُمْ بِهِمَا رَأْفَةٌ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَلْيَشْهَدْ عَذَابَهُمَا طَائِفَةٌ مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ. الرَّانِي لَا يَنْكِحُ إِلَّا زَانِيَةً أَوْ مُشْرِكَةً وَالرَّانِيَةُ لَا يَنْكِحُهَا إِلَّا زَانٍ أَوْ مُشْرِكٌ وَحُرْمٌ ذَلِكَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ.

“The woman and the man guilty of fornication, flog each one of them with a hundred lashes, and let not compassion for them prevent you from carrying out Allah’s law, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of the believers witness their punishment. A fornicator shall marry none but a fornicatress or an idolatress; and a fornicatress shall marry none but a fornicator or an idolater. Such a thing is forbidden for the believers.”

The prescribed punishment for those guilty of *zinā*—whether male or female, single or unmarried—is one hundred lashes. When Muhammad Shahrur was asked whether this punishment contained any form of leniency, concession, or mitigation, he answered affirmatively. According to him, the element of leniency lies in the stringent procedural conditions for establishing the *ḥadd* (legal punishment), which require the testimony of four eyewitnesses—a condition that is nearly impossible to fulfill. If only three individuals come forward to swear that they witnessed the illicit act between a man and a woman, the punishment is reduced to 83 lashes under the ruling of *qadhaf al-i'rād* (false accusation of unchastity).³⁹ According to Tafsīr al-Jalālayn, there exists a minority opinion that accepts the testimony of three witnesses.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the majority of scholars unanimously agree (*ijmāʿ*) that the offense of *zinā* cannot be legally proven except through the testimony of four male witnesses. These witnesses must fulfill specific criteria: they must be adult, sane, possess good memory (*ḥifẓ*), articulate, have clear eyesight, be upright in character (*ʿadl*), and be Muslims.⁴¹ The punishment is thus limited to instances of blatant, public indecency, corroborated by four qualified witnesses.⁴²

In Shahrur's interpretation, immoral sexual conduct between a man and a woman does not constitute *zinā* unless it is accompanied by the legal requirement of four witnesses. He distinguishes *zinā* from *fāḥishah* in the following way. First, a sexual relationship between a man and a woman that is not religiously valid is referred to as *fāḥishah* (an immoral act). And second, a sexual relationship between a man and a woman that is not religiously valid and is witnessed by four individuals then becomes classified as *zinā*.⁴³

Therefore, it is impermissible to ascribe the label (*zānī*)—whether male or female—except to those whose immoral act has been witnessed by four individuals. The designation of someone as a fornicator necessarily entails the implementation of legal punishment. Hence, Allah declares, “...and do not let compassion for them prevent you” Any immoral act (*fāḥishah*) not meeting the evidentiary requirements for *zinā* is instead referred to as *sūʾ al-sabīl* (a reprehensible path). As stated in the Quran:

وَلَا تَقْرُبُوا الزَّانِيَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَاحِشَةً وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا

“Do not approach adultery. It is truly a shameful deed and an evil way.”

(QS. al-Isrāʾ [17]: 32)

Thus, *zinā* refers specifically to an immoral act between a man and a woman that has been witnessed by four individuals, warranting the

punishment of flogging (*sāʿa sabīlā*). When the act is committed privately, it remains a transgression against God. However, when it is done openly, it becomes a public offense, warranting societal retribution through corporal punishment.

The word *yankihu* in QS. al-Nūr 3 derives from the trilateral Arabic root *nakaha–yankihu–nikāḥan*, which, in classical Arabic, denotes a singular meaning: sexual activity. Such activity can occur through a marital contract or through a *milk al-yamīn* arrangement, both of which render the relationship licit. As Allah states:

“...then marry those [other] women who seem good to you—two, three, or four. But if you fear that you cannot be just, then marry only one, or those your right hands possess. That is more likely to prevent you from doing injustice.” (QS. al-Nisā’ [4]: 3)

Sexual activity may also occur without a marital agreement through a *milk al-yamīn* arrangement, in which case it is classified as *fāḥishah* (an immoral act). The phrase *fa-ankihū* implies the performance of sexual activity via a formal agreement or contract, which is the essence of a valid marriage. If the contract is valid but the marriage fails to be consummated, the contract is rendered void—since the contract is a prerequisite for the legal enactment of the marriage.⁴⁴

A man who sleeps with a woman without a legal contract, and in the presence of witnesses, has essentially engaged in *nikāḥ* in the sexual sense of the term. Such an act constitutes *zinā* only when accompanied by four witnesses. It is at this juncture that a sexual act becomes either a prohibited and immoral union or a legitimate and lawful marriage. If the illicit act is committed openly—evidenced by four witnesses—it qualifies as *zinā*.

In Surah al-Nūr, the term *zānī* does not derive from the root *nakaha*, but rather follows the morphological pattern of the active participle (*ism fāʿil*), similar to words like *sāriq* (thief) or *kātib* (writer). The term *zānī* originates from the verb *zanā*, as in the expression *zanā al-zanbūr* (the bee copulated). This implies that the fornicator is overpowered by lust to the point that fear of God and social accountability have dissipated. The absence of fear of God renders the act *fāḥishah*, while the absence of social restraint renders it public. Hence, the perpetrator is labeled *zānī* (a fornicator—one who commits an immoral act publicly), and society is entitled to carry out corporal punishment.

This is comparable to the story of Prophet Yusuf (Joseph), in which the Quran states *ṣarafa ‘anhu al-fāḥishah* (He diverted from him the immoral act), rather than *ṣarafa ‘anhu al-zinā*. At that moment, Yusuf was alone with the wife of the Egyptian official—there were no witnesses present.

⁴⁵ When someone argues, “There are millions of immoral acts occurring daily between men and women, yet no punishment is applied,” Shahrur responds, “That is because such acts are *fāḥishah*, not *zinā*.” In such cases, Allah commands the perpetrator to repent and seek forgiveness, as stated:

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا فَاحِشَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَغْفِرِ
الذَّنْبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَلَمْ يَصِرُوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلُوا وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ٥٣١

“Those who, when they commit an immoral act or wrong themselves, remember Allah and seek forgiveness for their sins—and who forgives sins except Allah?—and they do not persist in what they have done while they know [it is wrong].” (QS. Āli ‘Imrān [3]: 135)

In accordance with the definitions of *zānī* (male fornicator) and *zāniyah* (female fornicator), when an illicit sexual act occurs between a man and a woman outside the bounds of marriage, both are labeled as fornicators (*zānī/zāniyah*)—namely, when the act is committed openly. This differs from the designation of someone as a *mushrik* (male polytheist) or *mushrikah* (female polytheist).⁴⁶

The act (*al-fiʿl*) referred to in QS. al-Nūr [24]:3 pertains to the act of *nikāḥ* (sexual engagement), which is categorized into four possibilities: *zānī* (male fornicator), *mushrik* (male polytheist), *zāniyah* (female fornicator), and *mushrikah* (female polytheist). The verse discusses conjugal relationships between men and women, excluding homosexual acts such as sodomy or lesbianism. This classification may be outlined as follows: 1) a *zānī* marrying a *zāniyah* constitutes a *fāḥishah ʿalāniyyah* (openly shameful act), 2) a *mushrik* marrying a *mushrikah*, 3) a *zānī* marrying a *mushrikah*, and 4) a *mushrik* marrying a *zāniyah*.

How, then, can one *distinguish* between a *zānī* and a *mushrik*, or between a *zāniyah* and a *mushrikah*? The distinction lies in the contextual harmony (*munāsabah*) of Quranic verses that discuss shirk (polytheism). The term *shirk* is elaborated upon in several verses of the Qurʾān. The first is QS. Luqmān [31]: 13. Allah Says, “And [mention] when Luqman said to his son while he was instructing him, ‘O my son, do not associate [anything] with Allah. Indeed, association [with Him] is great injustice.’”

Muhammad Shahrur interprets the term *shirk* in this verse as referring to associating partners with Allah. The verse contains a pedagogical message, emphasizing the importance of *tawḥīd* (monotheism) in child-rearing, instructing the younger generation to avoid idolatry or polytheism. The imperative “*lā tushrik billāh*” indicates a clear prohibition against theological *shirk*.⁴⁷ This interpretation is supported by M. Quraish Shihab, who explains that this verse serves both as an example and a directive for

parents to instill proper ‘aqidah and monotheism in their children. He further notes that the word “*ya’izuhu*” in the verse denotes a form of gentle, yet firm, admonition filled with affection and care.⁴⁸

Then, in QS. al-Baqarah [2]:221 Allah also says, “*do not marry polytheistic women until they believe. A believing slave woman is better than a polytheist, even though she might please you. And do not give your women in marriage to polytheistic men until they believe. A believing slave is better than a polytheist, even though he might please you.*”⁴⁹ Muhammad Shahrur interprets *mushrik* and *mushrikah* here as those who commit shirk against Allah and do not believe in Him. According to Ibn Kathīr, this verse prohibits Muslim men from marrying polytheistic women, especially idolaters. If the interpretation is generalized, it may include women from among the People of the Book or idol-worshippers.⁵⁰

In QS. Tāhā [20]:31–32, Allah said “*strengthen through him my back. And let him share my task.*” According to Shahrur, the term *ishrāk* (to share) in this context refers to a cooperative partnership in handling matters, particularly prophethood, and does not imply theological polytheism. Also when Quran said, “*And they say, ‘What is in the wombs of such and such cattle is exclusively for our males and forbidden to our females. But if it is born dead, they all have shares therein.’ He will punish them for their attribution. Indeed, He is Wise and Knowing.*” (QS. al-An’ām [6]:139). Shahrur asserts that the term *shurakā’* in this verse pertains to shared rights over the wombs of livestock. The verse critiques the polytheists for making arbitrary rulings on what is permissible or forbidden without divine authorization.⁵¹ Sharur also giving some explanation on QS. al-Rūm [30]:28, “*He presents to you an example from yourselves: Do you have among those your right hands possess any partners in what We have provided for you such that you are equal therein and fear them as you fear each other?*”⁵² Here, *shurakā’* relates to the concept of shared ownership and is used as an analogy for the irrationality of associating partners with God in divine matters.⁵³

Producing a More Comprehensive Conclusion and Explaining the Legal Rulings Contained Therein

According to Muhammad Shahrur, the term *mushrik* in Surah al-Nūr 3 refers to a married man who engages in sexual intercourse with a woman who is not his lawful wife, imitating a conjugal relationship. He marries such a woman despite the relationship being unlawful. Conversely, a *mushrikah* refers to a married woman who engages in sexual acts with a man who is not her husband. In this context, *shirk* cannot be interpreted as associating partners with Allah, as some scholars suggest. Interpreting

shirk here as theological polytheism or disbelief renders the application of the legal implications of the verse in real life implausible. However, if understood as described above, five categories of meaning can be derived:⁵⁴

1. *Zānī* and *Zāniyah*: Explicit fornication between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman.
2. *Mushrik* and *Mushrikah*: A married man and a married woman engaging in illicit sexual acts without witnesses.
3. *Zānī* and *Mushrikah*: An unmarried man committing fornication with a married woman, even in the absence of witnesses. Material evidence is sufficient to establish the punishment of flogging.
4. *Mushrik* and *Zāniyah*: A married man having illicit relations with an unmarried woman. The woman is deemed a *zāniyah* despite the absence of witnesses, based on other forms of evidence.
5. *Mushrik-Zānī* and *Mushrikah-Zāniyah*: Open and illicit sexual activity between a married man and a married woman. Both are labeled as having committed *zinā* (fornication) and shirk (in the social/legal sense).

This typology reflects the reality observed globally, and no sixth type can be identified, which in turn attests to the truthfulness of the message in the *Tanzīl Ḥakīm* (Wise Revelation).⁵⁵

The punishment for fornicators (both male and female) is established in the verse as 100 lashes. The question then arises: What is the legal punishment for *mushrik* and *mushrikah*—that is, a married man and woman who engage in unlawful sexual acts? Classical Islamic jurists (*fuqahā'*) unanimously agree that the punishment is *rajm* (stoning to death). However, Shahrur rejects this view. He argues that the punishment of stoning for previously married adulterers was prescribed during the time of Prophet Moses but was subsequently abrogated in the *Tanzīl Ḥakīm*.

Furthermore, adhering to the classical ruling of stoning leads to a contradiction with the divine statement: "...and when they are taken in marriage, if they commit indecency (fornication), then their punishment is half of that for free women..." (QS. al-Nisā': 25). Based on this verse, how could one impose "half" of a death penalty?⁵⁶

According to Muhammad Shahrur, the appropriate punishment for *mushrik* and *mushrikah* is neither flogging nor death, but rather what is prescribed in the following two verses of the *Tanzīl Ḥakīm*:

"O Prophet, when you divorce women, divorce them at [the commencement of] their waiting period and keep count of the waiting period, and fear Allah, your Lord. Do not turn them out of their [husbands'] houses, nor should they leave [during that period], unless they are guilty of a clear immoral act (*fahishah mubayyinah*). These are the limits [set by] Allah,

and whoever transgresses Allah's limits has certainly wronged himself. You do not know; perhaps Allah will bring about after that a [different] matter."
(al-Talāq: 1)

According to this verse, the punishment for a *mushrikah* is immediate divorce, without the observance of a waiting period (*'iddah*), and expulsion from the home. This verse clearly addresses the matter of divorce—implying that such a punishment only applies to those within a lawful marital bond. The expression *faḥishah mubayyinah* (clear immoral act) is interpreted here as *ishrāk* (infidelity). The term also appears in the following verse:

"O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion. And do not make difficulties for them in order to take [back] part of what you gave them unless they commit a clear act of immorality (faḥishah mubayyinah). And live with them in kindness. For if you dislike them—perhaps you dislike a thing and Allah makes therein much good."
(QS. al-Nisā': 19)

These two verses complete the legal framework: divorce, immediate expulsion from the household, and forfeiture of material and social rights. This ruling applies to both the *mushrik* husband and the *mushrikah* wife. Thus, the punishment for those guilty of *faḥishah mubayyinah* may be established through the following four methods. First is expulsion of either spouse if one is caught red-handed committing the immoral act. Second is establishing the offense through indirect evidence (such as photographs or signs of pregnancy), especially when there is uncertainty or insufficient evidence for public accusation. Third is in both scenarios, the punishment of divorce and the loss of rights may be applied, even without four witnesses. If the offender is unmarried, they are classified as *zānī* or *zāniyah*, and if married, as *mushrik* or *mushrikah*, warranting the punishment for fornication. And the last one is establishing illicit conduct between a married man and a married woman (i.e., *mushrik-mushrikah*), in such cases, the punishment includes immediate divorce, forfeiture of rights, and flogging, as both carry the dual label of *zānī-mushrik* and *zāniyah-mushrikah*.⁵⁷

Muhammad Shahrur understands the concept of *farīdah* as Allah's effort to provide relief and ease for those entangled in distress. How then does *faḥishah* relate to sexual conduct? Sexuality, after all, is a natural disposition that can lead to goodness—such as procreation. Catching the offender in the act is extremely difficult, and the matter ultimately rests with Allah. For this reason, Allah has opened the door of repentance for those who commit such offenses, as conveyed in the verse:

"And those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember Allah and seek forgiveness for their sins—

and who can forgive sins except Allah?—and do not persist in what they have done while they know [it was wrong].” (QS. Āli ‘Imrān: 135)

Consequently, it is impermissible to accuse anyone of *zinā* or *shirk*—especially when committed publicly—without concrete evidence. Allah has promised severe consequences for those who falsely accuse:⁵⁸ *“Indeed, those who falsely accuse chaste, unsuspecting, believing women are cursed in this world and the Hereafter. And they will have a great punishment.”* (QS. al-Nūr: 23)

The Implications of Muhammad Shahrur’s Interpretation

Understanding the meanings of *zinā* and *mushrik* in QS. al-Nūr [24]: 3 through Muhammad Shahrur’s theory of asynonymy has resulted in several implications for Quranic interpretation. One of the significant implications of Shahrur’s hermeneutical approach lies in the autonomization of the text. First, Shahrur views language as a structural relation or a unique system that varies from one language to another. Thus, for him, the divine text is independent (autonomous), and the principles governing its interpretation are based solely on linguistic structure.⁵⁹ This can be observed in several of his interpretations of Quranic verses, such as those related to *zinā*, polygamy, clothing, and the concepts of *īmān* (faith) and *islām*.⁶⁰

When this theory is applied in interpretation, it leads to the unification of meaning—each Quranic term is treated as possessing a single, specific meaning. Accordingly, linguistic scholars who deny the existence of synonymy (*munkir al-tarāduf*) attempt to distinguish between words traditionally considered synonymous. To prove that each term carries its own distinct meaning, they seek nuances of semantic emphasis. As stated by M. Quraish Shihab, although terms may appear similar, the distinction lies in the depth of their semantic analysis.⁶¹

This tendency to unify word meanings has been well-received by Arabic linguists and even occupied the attention of several linguistic institutions, including the Cairo Linguistic Academy. One of its members even proposed the development of an Arabic lexicon aimed at eliminating synonymous redundancy—ensuring that each meaning corresponds to a single lexical item.⁶²

This approach also ensures that meanings assigned to Quranic terms are contextually relevant, derived through careful research and examination of the causal (‘illah) and contextual elements within the Quran. Studies on Quranic context have shown that the text is highly precise and disciplined in its word usage, making it difficult—if not impossible—to replace a

word with another without altering the intended meaning. This aligns with the assertion of the classical linguist Ibn Anbari, who emphasized the specificity of lexical selection in the Quran.⁶³

Shahrur's interpretative model fosters a more objective and rational understanding of the Quran. It predominantly employs the *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān* method, making the text more contextual and applicable to contemporary realities. The interpreter's reasoning plays a limited role in assigning meaning; their task is primarily to collect, analyze, and synthesize related verses to formulate conclusions. As Yusuf al-Qaradawi asserts, a more representative interpretation is one that views the Quran as a unified whole—each part clarifies and reinforces the other. Quranic verses must be cross-referenced to produce holistic and accessible interpretations.⁶⁴

Shahrur's unique and distinctive methodology, particularly his text-centered linguistic approach, becomes a considerable strength. While most linguistic-textual approaches often yield rigid and static interpretations, Shahrur's semantic approach allows greater flexibility in formulating divine laws. By focusing on semantics, he demonstrates to the intellectual public that grammatical analysis is a promising avenue for reinvigorating the words and sentences of the Quran.⁶⁵

Linguistic approaches, therefore, remain a viable means for producing progressive, liberative, and humanistic Islamic interpretations. Lexical inquiry should not be seen as taboo in efforts to formulate more liberal interpretations of Islam, and Shahrur has proven its potential. Moreover, his rejection of synonymy in the Quran presents a compelling perspective in unveiling the miraculous nature of the divine text. His approach offers a sophisticated explanation of the precision of revelation.⁶⁶ Shahrur also draws from the classical theory of *nazm* (composition) as developed by al-Jurjānī. This theory holds that even the smallest or seemingly insignificant linguistic elements must not be overlooked, as doing so could lead to critical misunderstandings of the text's structure and meaning. Hence, the most crucial consideration in interpreting the Quran lies in its linguistic structure.⁶⁷

In the author's view, Muhammad Shahrur's theory of asynonymy significantly contributes to the development of Quranic interpretive methodology, particularly in the domain of legal verses. First, the theory reveals that legal verses, traditionally regarded as *qat'i al-dalālah* (having definitive, unambiguous meaning), are in fact open to alternative interpretations. Shahrur successfully demonstrates this through a clear and methodical interpretive framework. Second, the theory enables interpreters to preserve the sanctity of the Quranic text while maintaining creative

agency through *ijtihād*, thus opening new possibilities for interpretation that remain within the boundaries of *hudūd* (divinely defined limits).

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Muhammad Shahrur's application of the theory of asynonymy to the interpretation of Quranic verse QS. al-Nūr (24): 3, several conclusions can be drawn: *First*, Shahrur applies the principle of asynonymy by asserting that each term in the Quran possesses a unique and non-interchangeable meaning. In this context, he differentiates clearly between the terms *zānī/zāniyah* and *mushrik/mushrikah*. According to his interpretation, *zānī* and *zāniyah* refer to unmarried men and women who engage in illicit sexual acts outside the bounds of marriage. On the other hand, *mushrik* and *mushrikah* denote married individuals who engage in sexual relations with someone other than their spouse in a manner resembling marital intercourse. Consequently, Shahrur limits the application of the term *zānī/zāniyah* to specific legal circumstances, namely when such indecent acts (*fāhishah*) are established through the testimony of four reliable witnesses. This restriction underscores his legal-ethical stance that labeling someone as a fornicator must be based on strict evidentiary standards due to the severe legal implications it entails.

Second, Shahrur's thought carries significant methodological implications for Quranic exegesis, particularly concerning the autonomy of the text. His theory of asynonymy challenges traditional interpretations that treat certain legal verses (*āyāt al-aḥkām*) as having unequivocal meanings (*qath'iy al-dalālah*), instead demonstrating the potential for alternative readings grounded in linguistic precision and contextual analysis. By doing so, Shahrur contributes to a paradigm in which exegetes can uphold the sanctity of the Quranic text while simultaneously engaging in creative and context-sensitive *ijtihād*. This methodological framework not only allows for the reinterpretation of legal verses in light of contemporary realities but also encourages a more dynamic and rational approach to Islamic jurisprudence. Hence, Shahrur's theory of asynonymy represents a valuable contribution to the development of modern tafsīr methodology and the broader discourse on reform in Islamic legal thought.

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