

Shah WaliAllah's *Al Fauz al-Kabir fi usul al-tafsir* and other writings: A study of the Quranic sciences

*Syed Munir Wasti**

Shah WaliAllah [1703-1763] was the greatest scholar of Islam produced by the South Asian subcontinent. His writings span the gamut of the Islamic sciences and indicate that he was a polymath in every sense of the word. In this essay, it is proposed to examine his well-known introduction to the science of Quran elucidation – titled *Al Fauz al-Kabir fi usul al-tafsir* – as well as his other major contributions to Quranic studies.

After the death of Aurengzebe Alamgir [r. 1657-1707], the Moghul Empire rapidly declined and this was further accelerated by the accession of incompetent weaklings to the throne as well as foreign invasions such as those of Nadir Shah and the rise of feuding groups of potentates who tore the vast empire into shreds.

This was a time of decline and decay and intellectual stagnation. Shah WaliAllah was a living witness to the whole bloody saga unfolding before his eyes. The Muslims were the worst sufferers of all. Shah WaliAllah attempted to arrest the moral and military degeneration of the Muslims by bringing them closer to the primary source of Islam viz. the Quran. He translated the Quran into Persian - the language of educated Muslims and the masses – so as to bring the Muslims close to the source of enlightenment and guidance. After the completion of his studies in the Hejaz, Shah WaliAllah returned to Delhi and began the translation of the Quran into Persian. This task was completed in two years in the face of ignorant opposition of pseudo-scholars who felt that this was objectionable. Undeterred by such ignorant prejudice, Shah WaliAllah continued and completed his task. His translation created a revolution in Muslim society [1]. It made the meaning of the Quran accessible to all classes of Muslims and available in every home. His translation was the initial seeding of a

* *ex-Chairman. Department of English, University of Karachi*

revolutionary movement that had 'Back to the Quran' as its rallying call. This movement stabilized the disease of degeneration and deterioration among the Muslims and re-acquainted them with the divine message of the Quran. Indeed, it instilled a spiritual rejuvenation among them and directed them towards new religio-political goals. A sense of dedication to the axial mission of his life propelled Shah Wali Allah towards his goal. All his preparation had been for the fulfilment of this objective. He was the translator, the exegete of the Quran, an expert on all related sciences and, in addition, fully familiar with the ramifications of the Shari'ah. This translation was followed by the brief essay on the Quranic sciences that we shall now examine. This essay was originally written in Persian for wider diffusion but was put into Arabic as the use of Persian declined as a medium of religious instruction. A Persian copy is hard to find even nowadays.

Shah WaliAllah was a profound scholar of the Quran and its commentaries [*tafsir*] and perfectly familiar of the great Arabic *tafsirs* of the *mufassirin* [exegetes]. His essay captures the meaning and essence of the previous commentators and presents it in a compact format coupled with original ideas and sidelights.

Shah WaliAllah begins by stating that the Quran comprises five-fold branches of knowledge. These are:

- i. *Ilm al-ahkam*: dealing with the lawful and the unlawful matters;
- ii. *Ilm al-mukhasima*: dealing with interaction with people of other religions such as Jews, Christians and others and discussing and debating the differences between Islam and other faiths;
- iii. *Ilm tadhkir bi-ala Allah*: concerning the various divine favours that man has received from Allah right from the creation of the universe to the instinctive propensity towards good;
- iv. *Ilm tadhkir bi-ayyam Allah*: comprising the knowledge of previous Prophets and their peoples and their responses to divine guidance and their resultant fate;
- v. *Ilm tadhkir bi al-maut*: concerning death and matters dealing with the life after death and the resurrection.

Shah WaliAllah makes a pertinent observation by stating that the Arabs of the time of the Quranic revelation were living in a culture of orality and writing was neglected. As such, the later tomes of Arabic rhetoric need not be applied to the Quran which preceded their composition. The Quran uses

such language and vocabulary that promotes understanding in its audience/readership and does not confuse by stating rules of eloquence and their requirements.

Shah WaliAllah enumerates certain *tafsirs* currently studied by Muslims – such as those by Tabari, Ibn Kathir, Ghazzali and Ibn Arabi. He states that all these are of value and eminence. Certain exegetes attach an incident to a verse and cite it as being the ‘reason of revelation’ [*sabab al-nuzul*]. He opines that it is better to spread the application of Quranic verses and not confine them to particular instances.

Discussing the various repeated accounts of different Prophets in the Quran such as Adam and Moses, Shah WaliAllah says that the purpose of this is to highlight how different Prophets responded at the issue of polytheism [*shirk*] which was chief common problem faced by all Prophets at different times and how Muslims could benefit from their reactions in similar situations.

Further, Shah WaliAllah describes the nuances of the Arabic language and states that lack of familiarity may cause a reader to misunderstand or misinterpret the Quran. He gives examples from the unique usage of the Quran in relation to *hadhf* [elision], *abdal* [change], *taqdim* [precedence] and *ta'akkhur* [subsequence].

Writing on the style of the Quran, Shah WaliAllah states that one aspect of this is the imperial mode of address – as in chapters which begin with praise of Allah. He then refers to Arabic odes [qasidas] that were popular then. These generally described a ruined habitation where the poet shed tears remembering the past and its associations. This is the *nasib* or periphrastic ingress to the main body of the poem. Shah WaliAllah states that various Quranic surahs begin with oaths and afterwards come to the main argument. But Shah WaliAllah observes that while poetry can be changed and parts of it can be omitted or replaced by better vocabulary, in case of the Quran this is impossible because of its innate perfection.

Shah WaliAllah next raises the question as to why the five-fold division of the Quranic sciences is not done uniformly but is spread over the entire Quran with some overlapping. The answer is that the knowledge relating to the previous Prophets and that relating to the Afterlife are repeated so as

to continuously warn man to take heed whereas the parts relating to law were not required to be spelt out repeatedly. Besides, the Arabs did not possess a Book human or divine – so they accepted the Quran as it was without superimposing later prose criteria on it. The Quran avoids the strictures of poetry because it was meant as a Book of Guidance and not as a model of superlative poetry. If it were to be treated just as a book of poetry, then no guidance could be derived from it.

Shah WaliAllah proceeds to the doctrine of the I'jaz al-Quran or the inimitability of the Quran. The reasons he gives in support of this doctrine are as follows:

1. Unique style: Shah WaliAllah writes that in the Age of Ignorance, the Arabs excelled in four areas ; *qasida* [odes], *khutbat* [oratory], *rasa'il* [letters], and *muhavirat* [idiomatic usage]. He then demonstrates how the Quran excels in all four areas.
2. Information about past religious communities;
3. Information about future events;
4. Unrivalled eloquence: the earliest Muslims took the exalted discourse of the Quran for granted as inimitable. Later generations, living in different conditions, had to compile books on the I'jaz to understand it better. This *I'jaz* was solely derived from the Quran and no other book.
5. The style of the Quran changes as it deals with the five-fold division. According to the nature and content of the five-fold division, the change in style and mode of address is clearly visible. Shah WaliAllah cites the difference in the two in the Quranic surahs '*Hud*' and *Al-Zariat*.
6. The initial audience of the Quran – both ignorant and literate – were emotionally stirred on hearing the Quran. The reaction of both groups was one of admiration and wonder though the reasons were different. The more learned one was, the more accessible the literary beauties of the Quran would be to him.
7. Just as a reader of the medical text '*Al Qamun*' can deduce that the writer [Ibn Sina] was truly a genius, a reader of the Quran can understand that the Quran is surely divine and not of human composition.

Shah WaliAllah then describes the various varieties of tafsir such as:

1. Tafsir – according to the Hadith;
2. Tafsir – according to the mutakallimun [scholastic theologians];
3. Tafsir – according to the fuqaha [jurists];
4. Tafsir – according to the nahviyin [grammarians];

5. Tafsir – according to the adiba' [literati];
6. Tafsir – according to the qurra' [Quran readers];
7. Tafsir – according to the sufis [mystics].

Towards the end of his exposition, Shah WaliAllah discusses the disjointed letters [*huruf al-muqatta'aat*] and their possible explanations. This completes the four chapters of the extended essay.

The fifth chapter that now begins is also called '*Fath al-Khabir*' as it is often separated from the preceding chapters and issued separately. In this chapter, Shah WaliAllah begins with Chapter 1 of the Quran, *Al Fatiha*, and goes to the last chapter, No. 114 *Al Nas*. In this chapter, Shah WaliAllah examines the presence and impact of the Quran's unique vocabulary and its implications and ramifications based on its usage and placement of words. It is a very erudite and original exposition that is not derived from any exegetical literature but is the gift of the author's powerful insight into the multi-layered meaning of the Quran.

We may now formulate an appraisal of the said essay viz. *Al Fauz al-Kabir*. We observe that its title indicates that its central focus is on *usul al-tafsir* but our study amply indicates that this is no strait-laced essay concentrating on *tafsir* and its *usul*. It is far more broad-based and comprehensive a survey taking as its purview the current and previous literature on the subject and providing an abundant store of insightful information on the Quranic sciences going backwards to the debates on epistemology and the divine origin of the Quran. It has as its unique quality of being *mukhtasar* [brief] but also being *jami'* [comprehensive] as well. It leaves no aspect untouched though the amount of discussion may vary according to the writer's judgement on its importance and relevance. No wonder that it is the most popular text that initially introduces the sciences of the Quran to all students in *madressahs* [Islamic schools]. It makes the student independent of other books on the subject. At the same time, the familiarity of the writer with the traditional Islamic sciences related to the Quran is so overwhelmingly obvious. No wonder that it has never been replaced since it was composed and it has generated scores of *shuruh* [commentaries] by learned scholars. [2]

After an examination of his essay, *Al Fauz al-Kabir*, we shall study his preface [*muqaddimah*] to the Quran in which he stated the relevant points

of his Quran study intending it to be a companion to his Quran translation. It was meant to give an overview of the various issues dealing with Quran in a lucid and explanatory manner.[3 –see below]

Shah WaliAllah's translation was titled '*Fath al-Rahman fi tarjuma al-Quran*'. Apart from a simple translation in clear language with the use of familiar vocabulary, it contained a brief commentary as well. This compact commentary, coming from such a great scholar, is remarkable for its brevity, its avoidance of controversial matter and its liberating the reader from referring to lengthy Arabic *tafsirs* for further clarification. [4]. Not only did it make the Quranic message comprehensible but it also broke the hold of sterile philosophical debates that were current in those intellectually stagnant times. It restored pure *Tawhid* and removed all polytheistic accretions.[5]. The Rector of the *Al Nadva* seminary in Lucknow, the famous Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi in his essay titled '*ShahWaliAllah ba haysiyyat musannif*' writes: 'If a history of Quran exegetes were to be written, Shah Wali Allah, on account of his unique interpretation and firm argumentation would be given a prominent place in it.' [6]

The scholarly preface [*muqaddimah*] to Shah Wali Allah's Persian translation was printed with Persian text and Urdu translation in the journal **Burhan** [Delhi] in two issues viz. October & November 1945. Recently, the Quran translation has been reprinted by the International Islamic University, Islamabad. [7].

Shah WaliAllah begins his preface thus:

Mutarajjimin dar tarjama navisi turuq mukhtalifa darand...

Translation:

Translators while translating use different approaches...

He then states that one approach is to give the meaning word-for-word writing it below the text [thus making a literal translation]. The other approach is to ponder over the entire text and reproduce the summarized content of its meaning. Shah WaliAllah then elucidates the advantages of both approaches or methods. He refers to the basic difficulty of transfer of meaning from one language to another with differences of idiom, syntax and grammar.

Shah Wali Allah then states that the acquisition of a knowledge of Arabic is vital for the Muslims as the Quran was revealed in Arabic. A person

who is ignorant of Arabic is thus not to be counted among human beings or, indeed, among living creatures. He should be taken to be stock and stone. The reason is that the recitation of the Quran, the prayers, the *khutba* of Friday and Id is not permissible in a non-Arabic tongue. The translation of the Quran will help a person not knowing Arabic in following the purpose of the Quran.

Shah WaliAllah then describes the peculiar usages of the Arabic language and its variations of tense, person, agents and referents ---which are not found in other languages.

Thus a brief and informative conspectus has been provided by Shah WaliAllah relating to the difficulties of translation and the knowledge required by the translator.

In a final observation, we note that, for Shah Wali Allah, the Quran was the basic building block of Islam. The entire superstructure of all subsequent sciences [Hadith, law, politics, economics etc.] is based on this foundation which holds it together and saturates it with life. As such, its key importance for the successive generations of Muslims cannot be doubted. If Muslims are to survive in the world as a distinctive religious entity, this will necessitate a familiarity with the Quran. Shah Wali Allah lived and died at a time when the Muslims were facing a severe challenge to their existence and identity. They were surrounded by enemies – including those who professed to be Muslims. At a time fraught with the danger of annihilation such as this, it was vital for the Muslims to seek guidance and support from the Quran. This could only be done if they understood its meaning and message. It goes to the credit of Shah WaliAllah that he saved the Muslims from extinction in those dangerous times by working and familiarizing the countless Muslims with the contents of the Quran. It was his insistent emphasis on holding fast to the Quran that Muslims of the subcontinent survived the greatest threat to their existence. With the Elect in the heavens![8].

NOTES:

1. S.A.A. Rizvi, *Shah Wali Allah and his Times*, Canberra, 1980, p. 222
2. The following editions of *Al Fauz al-Kabir* were consulted in the preparation of this essay:
 - a. Said Ahmad Palanpuri [ed.], *Al fauz al Kabir fi usul al-tafsir*, [Arabic text], Karachi, n.d.

- b. Said Ahmad Palanpuri [ed.], *Al Khayr al-Kathir sharah Al Fauz al-Kabir* Arabic-Urdu], Karachi, 2007
 - c. Muhammad Salim Abdullah [tr.] *Al Fauz al-Kabir*, 1960 & 2012 editions [Urdu]
 - d. Rashid Ahmad [trans.], *Al Fauz al-Kabir* [Urdu], Karachi, n.d.
 - e. K.A. Qasmi [ed. & trans.] *Al Fauz al-Azim sharah Al Fauz al-Kabir* [Arabic-Urdu], Karachi, 2014
 - f. S.M. Mehdi al-Husni & H.R. Siddiqui, *Al Fauz al-Kabir & Fath al-Khabir* [Persian text with Urdu & Arabic translation], Karachi, n.d.
 - g. Muhammad Hanif Gangohi [ed.] *Al Rawd al-Nasir sharah Al Fauz al-Kabir*, Karachi, n.d. [Arabic-Urdu].
 - h. Abdul Hamid Khan Swati, *Awn al-Khabir sharah Al Fauz al-Kabir fi usul al-tafsir*, Gujranwala, 2008 [Arabic-Urdu]
 - i. A.A. Saleemi & A. Kanwal, *Al Fauz al-Kabir fi usul al-tafsir ka tehqiqi muta'lia*, Lahore, 2012
 - j. G.N. Jalbani [ed. & trans.], *Al Fauz al-Kabir fi usul al-Tafsir*, Islamabad, 1985, [English].
3. See text
 4. Rahim Bux Dehlavi, *Hayat-i-Wali*, Lahore, 1955, p. 545
 5. Rahim Bux, *ibid.*, p. 546-547
 6. Contributed to *Al Furqan*, Bareilly, 1360 AH
 7. The Holy Quran, translated by Shah WaliAllah [Persian], Islamabad, 1422 AH
 8. Books on Shah WaliAllah [apart from those referred to above]:
 - a. G.N. Jalbani, *Life of Shah Waliyullah* [sic], Lahore, 1993
 - b. G.N. Jalbani, *Teachings of Shah Waliyullah* [sic] of Delhi, Lahore, 1996
 - c. Mahmud Ahmad Barkati, *Shah WaliAllah aur unka khandan*, Lahore, 1976
 - d. Mahmud Ahmad Barkati, *Shah WaliAllah aur unke ashab*, Karach, 2004
 - e. J.M.S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shah WaliAllah Dihlawi*, Leiden, 1986
 - f. Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi, *Islamic Renaissance in South Asia 1707-1867: The role of Shah Wali Allah and his successors*, Islamabad, 2002
 - g. Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The socio-political thought of Shah Wali Allah*, Islamabad, 2001.

Abstract

This essay analyses the intelligent and incicise approach of the great scholar, ShahWaliAllah, towards the Quranic sciences and the urgent need of Muslims to study them in order to survive. It places within the contemporary perspective ShahWaliAllah's focus and stress on the Quran, its expository details and the principles of its elucidation of its translation and commentary. The vital importance of the understanding of the Quran in the turbulent times in which ShahWaliAllah livedand how this study protected the Muslims from religious extinction has been brought out.

Key words: Shah WaliAllah, Quran, tafsir, usul