

## Shihab's Persona in the Field of Arabic

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### Abstract

M. Quraish Shihab is among the greatest Indonesian exegetes in the Malay Archipelago who contributed considerably to Qur'anic exegetical work. Due to the extremely close relationship between Qur'anic exegesis and Arabic, he is also considered by many as being highly skilled in Arabic and its various branches. In fact, numerous studies have resulted from Shihab's immensely rich contributions. Thus, this study elaborates on Shihab's contributions towards advancing the Arabic language in Indonesia. To identify this objective in more compactly, the document analysis method was applied by adopting his works in the field of Arabic as the main source of study. From the analysis, the research concludes that Shihab's parents were instrumental in shaping his interest and passion of the Qur'an and Arabic. His persona shines brightly in Arabic linguistics with quality works appreciated by many. Furthermore, Shihab was committed to ensuring Arabic proficiency to produce qualified prospective Qur'anic exegetes in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Shihab, Arabic, Indonesia, exegete, contribution

### 1. Introduction

Preserving and protecting the Qur'an seeks not only to ensure against its words from being misappropriated, exchanged, exaggerated or minimized, it includes the preservation of linguistic meanings and the associated guidance, as the Qur'an is essentially composed of words and meanings (al-Shāyī<sup>c</sup>, 1993). To fulfil these demands, the mastery of Arabic knowledge is necessary for those who want to wade the deep of Qur'anic exegesis. Thus, Muslim scholars have agreed that the Arabic language constitutes the primary source to understanding the meaning of the Qur'an, appreciate the secrets of linguistic eloquence and emphasize its miracles (Ibn Ya'īsh, n. d.). Put differently, advancing knowledge of the Arabic language is the central requirement enabling a person to interpret the Qur'an.

Accordingly, this article describes Shihab's persona as a famous exegete in the Malay Archipelago, and focuses on his contributions in promoting the Arabic language in Indonesia, to enable him to produce a credible exegetical work that was accepted by society. The elaboration begins with his family's educational background, which instilled in him a passion for the Arabic language via his early introduction to Arabic in the *pesantren* 'Islamic boarding school' through to university. This research examines Shihab's penchant to mingle with foreign students, especially those from the Middle East. Moreover, his frequency of discussions and exchanging ideas with the lecturers while studying at al-Azhar, Egypt is also explained.

By doing so, this article describes the importance of mastering Arabic to understand the Qur'anic verses and its relationship to Shihab's scientific works in Arabic. This approach is necessary to ensure the validity of the research conclusions.

### 2. Shihab: A Great Indonesian Exegete

Shihab (1992) was born in Rappang, South Sulawesi on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1944. His early education was obtained from his father, Abdulrahman Shihab. His love towards the Qur'an blossomed from the age of six. As a son of a famous exegete, he was often brought by his mother to attend religious classes given by his father. His mother also sparked his interest, as her constant encouragements and guidance resulted in his decision to further his studies in the same field (Naja, 2007). Hence, the parental involvement through discussion, custody and communication had a positive relationship with Shihab's academic achievement. The study found that Shihab's parents exerted a significant influence on his academic achievement (Hamid et al., 2011), as manifested in

Shihab's many academic achievements and advanced studies (Subhan, 1993).

Other than his parents' early involvements at home, Shihab (2011) also studied at Pondok Pesantren Darul Hadith al-Faqihyyah, Malang. Soon after, in 1958 the state of Sulawesi awarded him a scholarship to study at al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt, and he was accepted to move up to secondary two '*thanawiyah*'. His academic journey later took him to the Department of Theology, University of al-Azhar majoring in *Tafsir* and *Hadith*, where he completed his bachelor degree in 1967. Two years later in 1969, he managed to obtain a master degree in the same field.

Like other scholarship recipients, Shihab lived in austere and moderate life in Egypt. This lifestyle facilitated his socialisation with other students. Although he was little involved in the activities of student organizations, he was nevertheless active in interacting with students from other countries (Zakiar, 2003). This exposed him to a broad range of cultures and presented him opportunities to practice and develop his Arabic language capabilities.

However, despite his limited involvement in student activities, Shihab appeared to have successfully compiled a database of sorts of those students from Sulawesi, Indonesia. He would collect information concerning their personal details, educational background and employment. This practice was subsequently practiced by later generations of Indonesian students (Mona, 1999).

Two years later in 1969, Shihab (2011) managed to obtain a master degree in the same field with a dissertation entitled *al-Fjāz al-Tashrī li al-Qurān al-Karīm* 'An Inimitability of Legislative towards the Holy Qur'an'. The thesis analysed the social realities of society's that failed to differentiate between miracle '*mu'jizah*' and peculiarity.

In 1980, Shihab furthered his Ph.D. in al-Azhar. He completed his study in two years and obtained *mumtāz ma'a martabah al-sharaf al-ulā* grade 'an exemplary scholar with outstanding performance' with his Thesis entitled *Kitāb Nazm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Ayāt wa al-Suwar li Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Biqā'ī (809-885H): Taḥqīq wa Dirāsah (al-An'am, al-A'rāf, al-Anfāl)*. His outstanding results qualified him as the first South East Asian student to obtain a Ph.D. in Qur'anic sciences from al-Azhar University (Subhan, 1993). His research comprised of 1336 pages, written in three volumes which measured the validity of *Tafsīr al-Biqā'ī* through a comparative analysis with other exegetes. His thesis was supervised by 'Abd al-Basī Ibrāhīm Bulbul (Wardani, 2009). Hence, the process of intellectual growth experienced by Shihab for 13 years at the University of al-Azhar shaped his thought. In addition, Shihab is also known as a religious figure and educator with his own publication house, Lentera Hati Publisher.

Upon completing his studies in 1982, Shihab returned to Indonesia and began teaching again in IAIN Alauddin, Ujung Pandang. After two years in 1984, he was transferred from IAIN Ujung Pandang to the Department of Theology IAIN, Jakarta. He became active teaching in the field of interpretation and Qur'anic knowledge until 1998 (Zakiar, 2003). Other than his responsibility as a lecturer, he also held a post as the Rector of IAIN, Jakarta for two terms (1992-1996 and 1997-1998), as well as the Minister of Religion in early 1998 until finally being appointed as a Foreign Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia for the Republic of Egypt together with the Republic of Djibouti in Cairo (Nata, 2005).

### 3. The Importance of Arabic in Understanding the Qur'an

Allah chose Arabic as the language of the Qur'an; a language that it meant to be studied and understood as evidenced in *sura Yusuf* (12, Joseph) verse 2 (Note 1). Doubtless, Allah has a specific purpose for selecting Arabic to express His guidance. Furthermore, the practical explanation and physical implementation of the Qur'an is found in the example of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), which is expressed in Arabic (Ibrahim & Usman, 2013b). As such, for Muslims, learning Arabic is not only encouraged, it is a duty commanded by Islam. In addition to constituting a book of divine guidance, the Qur'an is a linguistic masterpiece. To comprehend its content, all Muslims are required to learn the Arabic language (al-Sharabāsī, 1980).

Al-Tha'ālabī (1994) states that whoever loves God then he must necessarily love the Prophet (pbuh), and anyone who loves him, loves the Arabs. Naturally this breeds a love for Arabic in which the most glorious book was revealed. Essentially, Arabic is central to understanding Islam and to achieve goodness in this life and the hereafter.

The neglect of the linguistics aspect in the interpretation of the Qur'an can be disastrous. As such, Muslim scholars unanimously prescribe that exegetes must master the Arabic language as well as the core sciences related to the field of interpretation (Ibrahim & Usman, 2013c). Unfortunately, there are few who became involved in Qur'anic interpretation void of a background in Arabic (Gusmian, 2003), namely HB. Jassin and M. Dawam Rahardjo.

Jassin (1995) employs existing translations of the Qur'an to interpret the Qur'an based on the literary sciences, while Rahardjo (2002) employs the same method by introducing social sciences theories to interpret the Qur'an. It comes as no surprise then that the works of these two scholars have been subject to criticism. The criticism extends from their lack of mastery of the Arabic language. By doing so, the importance of mastering the Arabic language is very important to avoid any confusion in understanding the meaning of the verses.

#### 4. Shihab's Contributions in Dignifying the Arabic Language

The Arabic language was introduced into the Malay Archipelago with the coming of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century AD by Muslim Arab and Persian traders. Accordingly, it has been present in the region for 12 centuries. Within this time, it has undergone a development process in accordance with the laws of history. At the beginning, Arabic was used for religious studies, reading the Qur'an, reading of the prayer, and to understand classical Muslim texts. Arabic instruction was in the mosque, home or school. It has exerted a significant influence on various cultural expressions, particularly in Indonesia. In addition, the Arabic alphabet has also played an important role more so than Latin in the writing tradition in Indonesia. However, Arabic instruction suffered a setback during Dutch colonial rule who strove to replace the Arabic alphabet with Latin. During the colonial period, the Arabic language was only taught in the traditional *pesantren*. However, changes started to take place in the 1930s, whereby Arabic slowly began to develop into a lingua franca, especially among the religious class (Muhaiban, 2006).

Shihab was born during this second development. His interaction with the Arabic language was taught to him at a young age through his father, Abdulrahman Shihab. The seeds of love for Arabic and the Qur'an began to take fruit in his soul, as he was invited by his father to regularly attend the religious classes (Naja, 2007). According to Muhamad et al. (2013) there are several factors that can be used as a reference for one's attitude towards language learning, among them passion, determination, achievement and motivation. Motivational factors associated with interest are defined as the desire of students to learn a language. Interest in learning and studying Arabic is caused by factors such as religion to understand the Qur'an, the language of Islamic civilization, and the language to understand the sources of Islam.

Apart from his parental upbringing, Shihab also studied at Pondok Pesantren Darul Hadith al-Faqihyyah in Malang. In the Indonesian Muslim community, education is done in two stages, namely Qur'anic learning as early education and *pesantren* as higher education (Huda, 2007). Formally, according to Departemen Agama (1986), the education system in *pesantren* does not introduce a class division. The students are divided into three groups based on the texts being taught. The students on the first level learn the basic books and focus on understanding its linguistics theories or content. In the second level, the students learn sciences such as syntax, morphology, rhetoric and other Arabic linguistics as requirement for the third level. During this stage, students are taught topics regarding jurisprudence and its principles, exegesis, prophetic tradition, and mysticism among others. Shihab's persistence and patience in *pesantren* allowed him to master the Arabic language in only two years (Zakiar, 2003).

These skills were obtained by Shihab through private instruction with his teacher. He visited the teacher who taught him Qur'anic exegesis or other Arabic books, which are translated and explained in Indonesian. Shihab then repeated his lessons. This method is very effective to ensure the students become intelligent. It will also enable the teacher to monitor, assess and guide them in mastering the Arabic language (Dhofier, 1990). This led to the formation of a close relationship with his teachers, particularly al-Habib °Abd al-Qadir bin Ahmad Bilfaqih who is regarded by Shihab as a spiritual teacher (Shihab, 2005). Education in *pesantren* prefers to fill the knowledge than developing it. This is caused by its main function which emphasizes on three aspects, namely to spread Islamic science, preserve the Islamic tradition, and develop potential scholars (Azra, 1998).

For the students who come from a religious educational background, they already have a solid linguistic foundation. This basic knowledge gives them the advantage of a wider vocabulary than non-religious students. This advantage can assist them in speaking Arabic in daily conversation. Moreover, the findings showed that the students with basic Arabic language, at the secondary level assume that the Arabic verbal skills are easy, while those without such basics find it difficult (Yusri et al., 2010). As such, it is apparent that basic Arabic language enhances the confidence levels of students when communicating in Arabic. Failure to place an importance on Arabic during early education means increased difficulty for students at the tertiary level (Daud & Pisal, 2014).

Language connects people. It helps people express their thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions to others. Speaking and writing are important linguistic skills. Illiterate people do not find any other means to convey and transfer their ideas except through speaking, as they are naturally unable to write (Salem & al Dyiar, 2014). Indeed, Shihab was very interested in the Arabic language and Qur'anic exegesis. He was ready to extend his

studies in order to master both sciences, because at that time (in 1963), his Arabic marks were unsatisfactory. However, after some improvement, he was unable to proceed his study in the Department of *Tafsir* and *Hadith*, University of al-Azhar, although the University of Cairo and Dar al-<sup>U</sup>lum also offered him acceptance (Zakiar, 2003).

With respect to his teachers, Shihab studied with many scholars in Indonesia and Egypt. Specifically, he mentions two of his most efficient teachers, namely al-Habib and Shaykh <sup>U</sup>Abd al-Halim Mahmud. According to Stapa et al. (2012), the teachers who are caring and efficiently manage teaching and learning activities in the classroom will produce students who are knowledgeable, competent, honourable, responsible and capable of achieving well-being and contribute to the harmony and prosperity for the country. The school climate that is conducive and equipped with teaching facilities also helps the development of cognitive, effective and psychomotor students. Expectations of teachers can influence student performance. In psychology, it is referred as the 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

According to Aladdin (2012), among the most significant problems faced by students when communicating in Arabic orally is they are often unable to utter a word or make a grammatical sentence correctly. This occurs when students forget their lexical tenses or appropriate vocabulary and expression in Arabic. As an effect, the students feel upset, lack confidence, and are ashamed to make a mistake while conversing in Arabic. However, this did not happen to Shihab. The frequency of exchanging thoughts with his teacher (<sup>U</sup>Abd al-Halim Mahmud) on Islamic issues that seemed obscure in his mind, helped improve his fluency in reading and speaking Arabic. As an example, his teacher will ask Shihab to read several parts of the books that he did not understand, and then give him a chance to describe the important points based on his reading comprehension. Even if what he understood differed from the teacher, he did not hesitate to ask for a reasonable explanation, all of which occurred in Arabic. Such communication requires high language skills, including paralinguistic and discourse. Addressers must not only be skilled in forming the correct sentences and following a grammatical system, but they should also have the sociolinguistics, discourse and strategy skills (Mohamad, 2009).

Other than his dissertation and thesis which was written in Arabic, Shihab (2005) produced several works in Arabic while in Egypt, such as *al-Khawatir*. Shihab's reputation in Arabic is evidenced by his *al-Khawatir*. When he visited his teacher Shaykh <sup>U</sup>Abd al-Halim Mahmud to discuss a book he was impressed with, namely *This is Islam*, written in Indonesian, Shihab translated the book into Arabic in order to facilitate the discussion. Rarely did Shihab argue with his teachers because of differences in views. In addition, it should also be emphasized here that Shihab wrote the *al-Khawatir* without any assistance. It is a pure product of his Arabic skills in syntax, morphology, and rhetoric.

*Al-Khawatir* was published as a book by the publisher Lentera Hati in October 2005. The title translates to *The Logic of Religion: The Position of Revelation and The Limitations of Common Sense in Islam*. The book elaborates on the connection between religion and reason. Moreover, it should be noted herein regarding the real publication year of this work, as the study suspects that an error in another of his book, entitled *Part Two of Grounding the Holy Qur'an: The function of Revelation in Society*. In this book, it is stated clearly that *al-Khawatir* was written while Shihab was in the second year in Al-Azhar (Shihab, 2011). When scrutinized as a whole, his work was written while he was studying in the third year (a year before earning a bachelor) in Faculty of Theology. This was written in his own handwriting on paper dated July 16, 1966 with sixty pages (Shihab, 2005). As known, Shihab completed his bachelor in 1967, which also proves that it was written while he was studying in the third year.

### 5. Shihab's Arabic and Linguistics Works

Shihab produced authored books related to the superiority of Arabic as the language of the Qur'an and translated several Arabic books into Indonesian. According to Sjahrony and Ahmad (2013), translators have bilingual skills and are aware of the associated cultures. Al-Darrāz (1991) stated that a scholarly work could not escape seven points, namely, a totally new article, completing the incomplete, explaining the vague and difficult, summarizing the long, updating the mixed, purifying the wrong and collecting the scattered. According to Ibrahim and Usman (2013a), Shihab did all these things well, and overcomes the limitations that occur when clarifying the terms of Islamic scholarship in Arabic into Indonesian. For this reason among others, Shihab is credible a respected expert in Qur'anic exegesis. Among his works are:

1) *Mukjizat al-Qur'an Ditinjau dari Aspek Kebahasaan, Isyarat Ilmiah dan Pemberitaan Gaib* [Miracles of the Qur'an: From the Aspect of Linguistics, Science and an Occult Viewed]

The book was composed due to a request from one of Shihab's companions to produce a relevant work on the miracles and privileges of the Qur'an in an accessible language. His work began when Shihab was

commissioned to undertake further studies and strategic management training in early 1995 for ten weeks in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA. Nevertheless, being away from home did not weaken his impetus to write, even using very limited reference material only, which a Pocket of the Qur'an equipped with *Jalalayn* interpretation, the reasons of revelation and an encyclopaedia of the verses. Two years later in 1997, this book was published, despite being very busy with his daily activities (Shihab, 2007b).

The book contains 11 chapters. Chapters 1 and 11 are the introduction and conclusion, while chapters 2 and 3 describe the miracles of the Qur'an. In other chapters, Shihab discusses the notion of *al-sarfah* (Note 2), the Qur'anic scientific signals and other evidence regarding miracles. His mastery of the Arabic language as the language of the Qur'an is proved in his commentary on chapters 4 and 5. For the most part, the book focuses on the miraculous features on the Arabic language as expressed by the Qur'an. In addition, the privileges Arabic of was studied by him is also seen in terms of declension '*i'rab*' (Note 3) that can be influence the meaning.

## 2) *Ensiklopedia Al-Qur'an: Kajian Kosa Kata* [Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an: The Vocabulary Review]

This book is produced in an effort to explain the Qur'anic vocabulary and its guidance equipped with an explanation of semantic meanings. The book is based on the criticism of the Qur'anic experts who found an abundant confusion in the exegetical works made by the exegetes in understanding the Qur'anic vocabulary. The idea for this book was inspired in 1992 by Shihab as a reference for religious leaders, educators and scholars. To achieve these goals, the research team was formed comprising of a chief researcher and authors.

The chief researcher was selected from among the Qur'anic experts; in this case Shihab was elected to assume the position. The group of organizers were supervised by Abd. Hafizh Dasuki and assisted by Ahmad Thib Raya. The authors consisted of the lecturers in the Islamic State University and Higher Education Institution who were studying at the post-graduate level IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta and IAIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta.

In 1997, the trial edition of the Qur'anic Encyclopaedia was published, entitled *Ensiklopedi Al-Qur'an: Kajian Kosa kata dan Tafsirnya* [An Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an: Study of the Vocabulary and its Exegesis]. The book is dissected and studied extensively in an academic symposium to which the participants were invited. Many of the Qur'anic experts attended along with intellectuals and Islamic civil society activists. Through criticism and suggestions on the trial edition, a group of researchers sought to perfect the book. After a relatively long time as well as the addition of new titles, a new organizers group were formed to oversee the existing data and prepare for publication. Members of the group in question include Shihab (Chief), Nasaruddin Umar and Muchlis Hanafi (Vice Chairman), Sahabuddin, Yusuf Baihaqi, and Irfan Abdullah and Salim Masud Rusydi Cahyono (Members).

The result is a published on collaboration with the Lentera Hati publisher, the Centre of Qur'anic Study and Yayasan Paguyuban Ikhlas in 2007. An initial publication of 485 was increased to 1050 units. The book is arranged alphabetically by following the Indonesian language transliteration of the Arabic language. Whereas the form of the selected word is determined based on its usage in the Qur'an and not the original or root of the word (though the original word was deliberated and discussed with a variety of regular derivations). This method is selected for the convenience of readers not conversant with the changing form of words that commonly occur in Arabic grammar (Shihab et al., 2007).

## 3) *40 Hadis Qudsi Pilihan* [The Selection of 40 Hadith Qudsi]

This book is a translation made by Shihab (2002) of the *al-Arba'un al-Qudsiyyah*. It was printed for the first time in 2002 and has seen four reprints until 2010. The book is a group of selected *hadith*. Among the topics therein are the faith, worship and relationship with others.

Unfortunately, Shihab translated the book into Indonesian without commenting on the prophetic traditions. However, in some cases, he did comment on certain important points to ensure against misunderstanding. Such is a testimony to his Arabic skills and understanding of Islam.

## 6. Conclusion

Shihab is known as the greatest exegete in Indonesia. His passion for the Qur'an and its exegesis were initiated by his parents who later developed while studying at Pondok Darul Hadith al-Faqihyyah. His thirst for knowledge led him to pursue his studies at the University of al-Azhar, Egypt. He obtained his Ph.D. from the same university. He remained in al-Azhar for some 13 years acquiring and perfecting his knowledge.

Shihab's persona in Arabic is clearly evident from his teenage years. In al-Azhar he regularly practiced his Arabic skills by interacting with students from the Middle East. He was also diligent in committing his thought to paper as evidenced by his *al-Khawatir*. Both his master's dissertation and doctoral thesis were written in Arabic. In addition, he often visited his teacher to discuss current issues related to Islamic civilization. Shihab

regularly met with his teachers to discuss his understanding of Islamic texts. In such sittings, his teachers would correct Shihab's reading fluency and understanding. This was further reinforced with the production of his works in Arabic. By doing so, the study recognizes Shihab's persona in Arabic as the language of the Qur'an.

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## Notes

Note 1. Also see *sura al-Nahl* (The Bee) 16: 103, *Fussilat* (Explained in Detail) 41: 3, and *al-Shura* (The Consultation) 42: 7.

Note 2. *Al-Sarfah* means Allah has divert the humans from their efforts to create a kind of the Qur'an, and without this, then they will be able to make it. In other words, the supremacy of the Qur'an comes from external factors rather than from the Qur'an itself (Shihab, 2007b).

Note 3. *F'rab* means to use good Arabic style to express one's mind clearly to make known. It is also means to pronounce the final short vowelsof a word (Devenyi, 2007).

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