Journal of Interdisciplinary Qur'anic Studies

Journal of Interdisciplinary Qur'anic Studies Vol.3, Issue 1, June 2024

Translating the Qur'anic Hypotext into a Religious Dramatic Hypertext: A Case Study of the TV Series Sahebdelan (2006) [The Spiritualists]

Leila Niknasab [1]

Faculty Member, Department of English Translation, Hazrat-e Masoumeh University, Qom, Iran

Article History: Received 22 January 2024; Accepted 19 April 2024

ABSTRACT:

Original Paper

The concept of translation encompasses a broad spectrum, including various forms of textual adaptation and adjustment that occur across languages and cultures. Within this spectrum, adaptation and imitation are also considered as part of the translation family. This study, conducted using a comparative, descriptive-analytical method, seeks to explore the issue of adapting a contemporary religious drama from Qur'anic narratives, employing Gérard Genette's theory of hypertextuality. It examines the structural and thematic aspects of the hypertext in question—the television series *Sahebdelan* (*The Spiritualists*), directed by Mohammad Hossein Latifi (2006)—and its relation to its hypotext, the narratives of the Qur'an. The aim is to determine the extent and manner of the Qur'an's influence on the adapted hypertext and to analyze the types of transformations that have occurred.

The findings reveal that, based on Genette's categorization of transtextual relationships, this form of translation from hypotext to hypertext constitutes a recreation of parts of the lives of certain prophets in the Qur'an in the format of a television drama. This recreation—shaped by filmmaking motives, media constraints, target audience, and the purpose of the series—has involved substantial changes to narrative elements such as characters, events, time and space of narration, and intertextual connections. These transformations have enabled the transmission of Qur'anic themes and messages in a contemporary and accessible language for today's viewers.

1. Corresponding Author. Email Address: l.niknasab@hmu.ac.ir
http://dx.doi.org/10.37264/JIQS.V3I1.10

The impact of Qur'anic narratives in shaping the content and themes of this dramatic work has been significant, making it a prominent example of religious adaptation.

KEYWORDS: Qur'anic narratives, The Qur'an and dramatic arts, Hypertext, Hypotext, Transtextual relationship, Adaptation, Transformation, Stories of the Prophets

1. Introduction

Translation is no longer seen merely as the interlingual transfer of a text from one language to another (Birsanu 2010). Even-Zohar (1990) regards translation as a form of transfer within a polysystem, emphasizing the role of transfer in cultural and literary functions. The concept of translation is highly expansive and encompasses a wide range of textual modifications that occur between languages and cultures. Within this framework, adaptation is not simple reproduction, but rather a creative and interpretive act of translation across media, genres, or cultures. This act of translation involves recontextualization and transformation, situating adaptation firmly within the realm of translation studies (Hutcheon 2006; Chan 2020).

Eco (2004) argues that adaptation falls under the category of intersemiotic translation, since in this type of translation, the previous text is often radically transformed, necessitating the clarification of implicit elements and their depiction in visual form. In intersemiotic translation, there is interaction between visual arts, such as painting, and other non-visual semiotic systems. In the case of cinema, for example, translation occurs from the semiotic system of literature to that of film; Pasolini's film serves as a case in point, representing a translation of sacred texts from a verbal semiotic system to a verbal-visual filmic semiotic system. The Bible functions as the hypotext, which is translated into Pasolini's film as the hypertext. Intertextual relations—and more specifically, hypertextual relations—are no longer confined to the realm of literature. Today, borrowing and adaptations have become prevalent in the form of intercontextual appropriations.

This research aims to conduct a comparative study of the adapted screenplay of the television series namely *Sahebdelan* (*The Spiritualists*), directed by Mohammad Hossein Latifi (2006), with its source text (hypotext), the Holy Qur'an, and to analyze the process of narrative, conceptual, and thematic transformation from the hypotext to the hypertext. The series follows the life of an elderly bookbinder named Khalil who, upon receiving a Qur'an for binding, embarks—with his granddaughter Dina—on adventures inspired by the stories of the prophets in the Qur'an. While

this adapted work retains nearly all foundational elements of the hypotext in many instances, it produces a novel creation. The screenwriter, has transitioned from one semiotic system to another, from a verbal medium to an audio-visual medium. Consequently, it has been necessary to reconstruct the hypertext through modifications in characterization, plot events, time, place, gender, symbols, and other narrative elements to effectively engage the contemporary audience. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the extent and manner of the hypotext's influence on the hypertext? What types of alterations are observed during this translation from the Qur'anic hypotext to the *Sahebdelan* TV series hypertext?

2. Theoretical Framework

According to intertextual theory, texts have historically borrowed from and influenced one another over time. From a structuralist standpoint, Gérard Genette (1997) addresses intertextual relations and identifies them as one of five types of transtextuality. He defines transtextuality as any element that links a text to other texts, either explicitly or implicitly. Genette's framework can be categorized as follows:

- The first category, intertextuality, refers to the co-presence of two or more texts, defined as the explicit presence of one text within another. Examples include quotations and allusions in literary texts.
- The second category, paratextuality, encompasses those elements situated at the threshold of a text. This includes intratextual components such as titles, prefaces, and notes, as well as extratextual components like interviews, reviews, and editorial commentary.
- The third category, metatextuality, denotes the relationship whereby one text critiques or comments on another without necessarily naming it. It connects critical or interpretive discourse with the text under consideration.
- The fourth category, hypertextuality, describes the relationship between a literary work and a preceding one.
- The fifth category, architextuality, relates to the expectations readers have of a work based on its genre, thereby shaping its reception. This involves the relationship between a text and the generic conventions to which it adheres.

Among the five transtextual relationships introduced by Genette,

adaptive works fall under the category of hypertextuality. Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (hypertext) to an earlier text A (hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a way that is not commentative. A hypertext derives from a hypotext through a process of transformation, wherein text B evokes text A without necessarily referring to it directly (Genette 1997). Hypertextuality entails a derivative relationship that includes both imitation and transformation. In imitation, the hypertext typically recreates the hypotext by maintaining its structure, language, and content, but in a new form. In other words, it involves the near-complete preservation of the hypotext within the hypertext, without major alterations. In contrast, transformation introduces changes ranging from minor modifications to profound shifts, often impacting the text's semiotic system (Namvar Motlagh & Fakharizadeh 2014; Azar 2016). Simply put, the presence of one text in the creation of another—such that the second would not exist without the first—is referred to as hypertextuality. It can be argued that the most effective form of a "second-degree text" is embodied in the relationship between hypertext and hypotext. Thus, hypertextuality is a deliberate and derivative connection that allows the hypertext to be formed based on the hypotext (Namvar Motlagh 2007). This derivation can manifest in various forms: within imitation, forms such as pastiche, charge, and forgery, and within transformation, forms such as parody, travesty, and transposition (Genette 1997; Azhari & Namvar Motlagh 2022).

Parody is primarily intended for mockery and humor, using satire to ridicule or critique the hypotext and often serving a playful function. Travesty, on the other hand, is a form of exaggerated or distorted imitation with a humorous effect. Transposition involves a shift in medium or structural features and is often associated with a more serious tone (Genette 1997; Allen 2000; Hutcheon 2006). Transposition consists in a change of the signifying system or medium—for example, a novel adapted into a film (Genette 1997). Adaptation is a creative and interpretive act of appropriation aimed at bringing a work from one cultural or artistic context or medium into another (Hutcheon 2006).

Considering the nature of the work under study and the importance of transitional shifts from one semiotic system to another (from the verbal sign system of the Qur'an to the audio-visual/verbal sign system of the series), the main focus of this research is on the transformative aspect, particularly the concept of transposition. In fact, adaptation can be seen as a form of transposition, where the hypotext is not merely translated linguistically but is reconfigured into a new form and semiotic system. This process typically involves changes in content, narrative, and aesthetics (Stam & Raengo 2004). These changes are essential to sustain the connection between

hypertext and hypotext while simultaneously resonating with contemporary audiences.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a comparative, descriptive-analytical approach rooted in intertextual and adaptation theory. The primary aim is to investigate the transtextual relationship between the Qur'anic narratives (hypotext) and the television series *Sahebdelan* (hypertext), directed by Mohammad-Hossein Latifi. The series, produced by Reza Joudi and written by Alireza Talebzadeh, was first broadcast on IRIB1 in 2006. Drawing on Gérard Genette's theory of hypertextuality, the research analyzes how core narrative elements—such as plot, characterization, setting, themes, and symbols—have been transformed during the adaptation process from a sacred textual tradition into an audiovisual medium.

The analysis is conducted through a close reading of selected episodes and scenes of *Sahebdelan*, identifying narrative parallels and symbolic reinterpretations of specific Qur'anic stories, including those of Prophets Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and Noah. These are then compared with the corresponding Qur'anic verses to assess the nature and extent of adaptation. Emphasis is placed on identifying modes of transposition and transformation, as well as the cultural and communicative functions these adaptations serve for contemporary audiences. This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of how intersemiotic translation mediates between textual fidelity and creative reinterpretation in the context of religious media.

4. Literature Review

Literary adaptation in cinema refers to the transformation of a story, novel, play, or other literary form into a cinematic work, ensuring compatibility with the unique demands of the film medium. Although adaptation extends beyond literature, it remains its most common source. Early theories emphasized absolute fidelity to the source text, but later approaches classified adaptation into three categories: transposition (minimal alteration), commentary (moderate modifications), and analogy (significant creative departure) (Ghahramani & Samini 2000). Giannetti (2008) similarly categorizes film adaptations as loose, faithful, and literal. Loose adaptation uses only elements like an idea or character to create a new narrative, while faithful adaptation closely follows the source, preserving

key characters and tone. Literal adaptation, exemplified by theatrical plays, involves direct transfer with minimal changes. Adaptations often modify aspects such as characterization, staging, discourse emphasis, and audiovisual techniques to suit the new medium (Rezapour & Anushiravani 2021). Overall, most cinematic adaptations are either loose or faithful, as literal adaptations are rare.

In the realm of adapting the Qur'an into visual and broadcast media, several prominent productions can be noted from the outset: the TV series *The Men of Angelos* (*Mardan-e Anjelos*), directed by Salahshour (1997), based on the story of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (the People of the Cave); the film *Saint Mary* (*Maryam-e Moghaddas*), directed by Bahrani (2000), depicting the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, based on the Qur'an; the film *The Kingdom of Solomon* (*Molk-e Soleyman*), also directed by Bahrani (2010), based on the story of Prophet Solomon in the Qur'an; and the TV series *Prophet Joseph* (*Yusuf-e Payambar*), directed by Salahshour (2008), based on the story of Prophet Joseph in the Qur'an. As the titles of these productions suggest, viewers can clearly identify the Qur'anic source texts being adapted. These works aim to portray the corresponding Qur'anic narratives almost in their entirety.

However, in the case study examined in this research, the TV series *Sahebdelan* (2006), the title and storyline do not explicitly indicate the Qur'anic source, making it less apparent to an average viewer. Thus, identifying this work within a framework of hypertextual relationships with the Qur'an increases its appeal and encourages deeper viewer engagement. It is important to note that no prior research has been conducted in this specific area, and to the best of the author's knowledge, no single artistic production has been created with such extensive performative adaptation of the Qur'anic text and its esteemed narratives.

Furthermore, studies have also explored the adaptation of the Qur'an. Mohammadi Vashnuh (2022), in a thesis on the principles and methods of intersemiotic translation, argue that the Qur'an, given its rich cultural, artistic, and literary context, offers significant potential for intersemiotic translation. The target medium of such translation is typically a form of art, such as film, which is facilitated by various artistic methods and tools. Zibaeenejad (2018) categorizes adaptation of the Qur'an into two types: first, where a poet uses a verse with the same intended meaning as in the Qur'an; and second, where a poet transfers the verse into a different context, diverging significantly from its original meaning. Asadi (2017) emphasizes that the Qur'an is an independent revelatory text, not derived from any prior source. Many Qur'anic verses have specific occasions of revelation, which limits the possibility of adaptation. Moreover, the Qur'an and the Bible

differ profoundly in semantics, language, and narrative style, including contradictions and fundamental inconsistencies between their teachings. Sabbaghi (2016) examines Qur'anic adaptations from the perspectives of traditional rhetoric and modern literary theory. He concludes that adaptation may sometimes function as a literary device indicating influence from the Qur'an and narrations, or alternatively, may be viewed as a form of plagiarism. However, according to intertextual theory, adaptation is understood as an artistic ability to evoke a previous text and demonstrate the adapter's creative capacity in recontextualization.

5. Research Findings

The Qur'an is replete with narratives—stories that are meant to come to life in the heart of performance. The television series *Sahebdelan* (*The Spiritualists*)—as an artistic-spiritual work—effectively draws on some of these narratives. Its themes resonate with contemporary societal issues, presenting valuable Qur'anic concepts through original storytelling and short narratives, thereby avoiding conventional clichéd. Through a strategy of defamiliarization, the series fosters a deeper engagement with Qur'anic concepts. The following section examines each adaptation in this series based on Qur'anic stories.

5.1. The Story of Prophet Abraham

The central character in the narrative is a faithful man named Khalil. The events of the story revolve around him, his beliefs, and convictions. His name evokes the title *Khalīl Allāh* (Friend of God), associated with Prophet Abraham (Ibrāhīm) (Q. 4:125), and elements of his life are adapted from this prophet's biography. For example, Ibrāhīm had no children from his wife Sārah, and in old age, God granted him offspring. In this series, Khalil's second wife, Akram, is likewise childless and repeatedly pleads with him to pray to God for a child. Like Ibrāhīm, Khalil must destroy not only external idols—representing worldly attachments—but also internal ones—symbolizing egotism. Regarding Abraham, God states:

وَ إِذِ ابْتَلى إِبْراهيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِماتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ قالَ إِنِّي جاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِماماً ... (البقرة/124)

And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them, He said," I am making you the Imam of mankind ... (Q. 2:124)

This verse refers to God granting him the status of Imam (leader), which occurred later in his life. The word *ibtilāʾ* (trial) refers to a test meant to

reveal inner attributes such as obedience, courage, generosity, chastity, knowledge, and loyalty (Tabataba'i 1996, 1: 40). It is narrated that God first took Ibrāhīm as His servant before making him a prophet; He made him a prophet before a messenger; and He made him a messenger before appointing him as His friend (*Khalīl*); then He made him an imam (al-ʿArūsī 1994, 1: 121). The word *kalimāt* (words) refer to a dream in which Ibrāhīm was commanded to sacrifice his son Ismāʿīl, a task he undertook with determination. Thereafter, God said to him, "Indeed, I will make you a leader for the people" (al-Ṭabrisī 1993, 2: 107). The Qur'an affirms that some dreams reflect future events (Makarem 1995, 9: 311).

Khalil also experiences a significant dream. He sees himself shackled, interpreting it as a sign of divine punishment due to his people's persistence in sin and injustice. For salvation, he must fulfill his mission: guiding a community mired in various transgressions. Much like Ibrāhīm, Khalil must undergo a trial to attain a higher rank. Though already a "messenger" in the story, his mission must be completed before he may be admitted to the rank of the Sahebdelan—those with enlightened hearts. Notably, Khalil, like Ibrāhīm, is portrayed in his old age.

5.2. The story of Moses and Pharaoh

The character Jalil, the brother of Khalil, serves as a symbolic embodiment of Pharaoh's delusional might and ostentatious wealth. The choice of his name reflects this representation. Jalil ridicules belief in the unseen and mocks the faith of his brother and like-minded individuals. His ego is so inflated that he even opposes his own wife—who is devout and God-fearing—and prevents her from practicing religious obligations like prayer and fasting in his home. In various scenes, particularly during the month of Ramadan, the show portrays the blatant breaking of fast in corporate gatherings hosted by Jalil. When discussions of faith and piety arise, he scoffs in a Pharaonic manner, denying all and responding with sarcastic laughter. One notable scene that exemplifies Jalil's audacity toward religious beliefs is when he arrogantly tells Khalil: "How much for the entire hereafter, with all its luxuries, written out in a check?" This clearly echoes the Qur'anic portrayal of Pharaoh:

مِنْ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُ كانَ عالِياً مِنَ الْمُسْرِفِينَ (الدخان/31)

From Pharaoh. Indeed he was a tyrant among the profligates (Q. 44:31).

That is, Pharaoh was arrogant, seeking superiority, and was among the transgressors whose rebellion and defiance had exceeded all bounds (al-Ṭabrisī 1993, 22: 309).

The character of Jalil's wife mirrors Asiya, the wife of Pharaoh, who is upheld in the Qur'an as a model of the faithful. She lived in Pharaoh's palace, surrounded by idolatry and religious oppression, yet she remained firm in her belief in the One God. Upon witnessing Moses' miracles, she believed in him. In the series, the character Ahdiyah appears to be a symbolic Asiya of her time. Her name—phonetically close to Asiya—suggests her steadfastness in keeping her covenant with God, despite the denial of faith by her family. The sin-filled environment has no effect on her—just as Pharaoh's tyranny could not deter Asiya, who stood firm in faith until her death. The series frequently makes direct references to Qur'anic stories. For instance, in one scene, Akram calls Ahdiyah and says, "Hello Asiya—oops, sorry, I mean Ahdiyah."

Ahdiyah is physically paralyzed and unable to move, symbolizing Asiya's captivity in Pharaoh's palace. She implores Khalil to pray for her recovery—from her illness and the metaphorical Pharaoh's house of Jalil.

وَ ضَـرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلاً لِلَّذينَ آمَنُوا امْرَأَتَ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قالَتْ رَبِّ ابْنِ لي عِنْدَكَ بَيْتاً فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَ نَجِّني مِنْ فِرْعَوْنَ وَ عَمَلِهِ وَ نَجِّني مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمينَ(التحريم/11)

Allah draws an [other]example for those who have faith: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said," My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct, and deliver me from the wrongdoing lot (Q. 66:11).

In this verse, God transmits her supplication, which reflects her high status in servitude. Despite the palace's temptations and worldly pleasures, she renounced them for her faith (Tabataba'i 1996, 19:344).

Similarly, just as Moses was commanded to go to Pharaoh with his brother Hārūn, Khalil enters Jalil's house accompanied by an old Qur'an, symbolizing the staff of Moses. Dina, akin to Hārūn, accompanies him. They are mocked and rejected by Jalil and his family. Eventually, Khalil is beaten and thrown out.

ثُمَّ أَرْسَـلْنا مُوسـى وَ أَخاهُ هارُونَ بِآياتِنا وَ سُـلْطانٍ مُبينٍ إِلى فِرْعَوْنَ وَ مَلائِهِ فَاسْـتَكْبَرُوا وَ كانُوا قَوْماً عالينَ (المومنون/46-45)

Then We sent Moses and Aaron, his brother, with Our signs and a manifest authority, to Pharaoh and his elites; but they acted arrogantly and they were a tyrannical lot (Q. 23:45-46).

Karimi (2006) states that Jalil is a symbolic Pharaoh, while the character "Doctor"— Jalil's son in laws—is both a representation of modern rationalism and a deceiver. He who mockingly called "Doki" in the show

blurs the lines between good and evil, reward and punishment, magic and miracle. His tools are metaphorical snakes—doubt and pragmatism—that block faith. Khalil's faith, however, surpasses the Doctor's intellect. The inclusion of Akram alongside Khalil highlights the distinction between divine miracle and human illusion.

5.3. The Story of Moses and Khiḍr

Among the many Qur'anic narratives subtly reimagined in the series, the story of Moses' journey with Khiḍr—centered on divine wisdom hidden behind seemingly unjust actions—receives a particularly creative adaptation. In one scene, while Khalil is prostrating, verse 61 from Surah al-Kahf, which relates to the story of Khiḍr and Moses and the story of the fish returning to the water, is recited (Figure 1). Subsequently, a mystical vision occurs to Khalil.

فَلَمَّا بَلَغا مَجْمَعَ بَيْنِهِما نَسِيا حُوتَهُما فَاتَّخَذَ سَبيلَهُ فِي الْبَحْرِ سَرَباً (الكهف/61)

So when they reached the confluence between them, they forgot their fish, which found its way into the sea, sneaking away (Q. 18:61).

Figure 1. Recreation of the story of the fish returning to the water (Latifi 2006).

In his mystical vision, Khalil is led through the streets at night by a man (the same individual who brought the Qur'an for repair in the opening episode). The man engages in strange, seemingly immoral acts. Khalil, disturbed, repeatedly asks for explanations, but the man conditions their journey on Khalil's silence, threatening to reclaim the Qur'an if he asks further. First, he gives money to an addicted man. Khalil is surprised that he is aiding the promotion of immorality and corruption. Then, they approach a car parked on a street corner, and the man breaks the car window. Next, they go to a bus stop where a man is crossing the street, and the guide pushes him into the street.

Later in the story, the mystery behind these events is revealed. The car belongs to a man whose only source of income is this vehicle, and the guide

explains to Khalil that thieves had intended to steal the car that night but would fail because of this action. The addicted man was planning to trade his daughter to a wealthy and corrupt old man. His daughter works and has been repaying his debts, but this month she would receive her salary later than usual. By helping him, the guide indirectly assists the daughter. The man who was pushed into the street had planned to murder someone that night. As a result of this push, his leg was broken and he is now bedridden; otherwise, he would have been imprisoned, leaving his family destitute.

This extended allegory closely reflects verses Q.18:60–82, particularly in the narrative structure and moral resolution of each event, reinforcing the scriptural themes of divine wisdom behind seemingly unjust acts:

> *He said," If you follow me, do not question me concerning anything until I [myself] make a mention of it to you." So they went on. When they boarded the boat, he made a hole in it. He said," Did you make a hole in it to drown its people? You have certainly done a monstrous thing!" He said," Did I not say, indeed you cannot have patience with me?" He said," Do not take me to task for my forgetting, and do not be hard upon me." So they went on. When they encountered a boy, he slew him. He said," Did you slay an innocent soul, without [his having slain] anyone? You have certainly done a dire thing!" He said," Did I not tell you, indeed you cannot have patience with me?" ... So they went on. When they came to the people of a town, they asked its people for food, but they refused to extend them any hospitality. There they found a wall which was about to collapse, so he erected it. He said," Had you wished, you could have taken a wage for it." He said, "This is where you and I shall part. I will inform you about the interpretation of that over which you could not maintain patience. As for the boat, it belonged to some poor people who work on the sea. I wanted to make it defective, for behind them was a king seizing every ship usurpingly. As for the boy, his parents were faithful [persons], and We feared he would overwhelm them with rebellion and unfaith. So We desired that their Lord should give them in exchange one better than him in respect of purity and closer in mercy. As for the wall, it belonged to two boy orphans in the city. Under it there was a treasure belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man. So your Lord desired that they should come of age and take out their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. I did not do that out of my own accord. This is the interpretation of that over which you could not maintain patience (Q. 18:70-82).*

5.4. The Story of the Sons of Adam

The characters Shahin and Ramin, sons of Jalil, are introduced in *Sahebdelan* as symbolic representations of the Qur'anic pair Qābīl and Hābīl (Cain and Abel). Their names echo the rhythmic pairing of the original figures and signal to the viewer the thematic duality of virtue and vice. Among the two, Ramin—following in the footsteps of his devout mother—

is portrayed as the morally upright son, deeply concerned with religious teachings. His ethical stance often puts him at odds with his brother Shahin.

In one of the most evocative scenes, Shahin, driven by jealousy or frustration, lures his elder brother to a garden under false pretenses. Their conversation escalates into a confrontation, culminating in Shahin striking Ramin violently (Figure 2). As Ramin lies unconscious, Shahin is visibly distraught and unsure how to proceed. Ultimately, he abandons the scene, leaving his brother in the garden. This sequence echoes the Qur'anic narrative of the sons of Adam, reimagined for a contemporary religious drama. The Qur'an recounts:

> *Relate to them truly the account of Adam's two sons. When the two of them offered an offering, it was accepted from one of them and not accepted from the other. [One of them said,] "Surely I will kill you." [The other one] said, "Allah accepts only from the God wary. … So his soul prompted him to kill his brother, and he killed him, and thus became one of the losers. Then Allah sent a crow, exploring in the ground, to show him how to bury the corpse of his brother. He said," Woe to me! Am I unable to be [even] like this crow and bury my brother's corpse?" Thus he became regretful (Q. 5:27, 30-31).*

After committing the murder, Qābīl became distressed and fearful that others might discover his crime. God then sent a raven to teach him how to bury his brother's body. This part of the narrative is mirrored in *Sahebdelan* in a subtle yet artistically meaningful way. As Ramin lies motionless, Shahin gazes toward the sky, overwhelmed by uncertainty. Rather than a literal raven, the series employs the sound and flight of crows to symbolically reference the Qur'anic verse.

Figure 2. Argument between the brothers: a reinterpretation of the story of Adam's sons (Latifi 2006)

This scene illustrates how the Qur'anic tale is contextualized in a modern setting through symbolic and emotional cues, preserving its theological and moral undertones.

5.5. The Story of Prophet Joseph

Another significant narrative adapted in the series is the story of Prophet Joseph (Yūsuf), creatively reimagined through the experiences of the character Dina, Khalil's granddaughter. Dina, the female counterpart of Joseph in this narrative, is assaulted by her uncle—who, like Joseph's brothers, is envious of her and continually seeks to eliminate her. Just as Joseph's brothers did to him by casting him into a well (Q. 12:10), Dina's uncle strikes her and abandons her unconscious in a well. When she is eventually rescued from the well, she is injured and has lost her memory. The well is located in the garden of a wealthy household named the Heshmatian—a name that itself symbolizes grandeur, magnificence, and affluence. In this way, Dina is discovered and enters the household, paralleling Joseph's arrival at the palace of the ʿAzīz of Egypt. Dina loses her memory as a result of the incident, and she is unable to explain how she ended up in the well. It is as though, upon emerging from the well, she assumes a new identity—just as Joseph did when he was brought out of the well and entered the palace of the ʿAzīz of Egypt. The difference, however, is that while Joseph did not disclose his true identity, he did not suffer from amnesia.

Within this new environment, Dina encounters numerous challenges. The lady of the house is a woman obsessed with luxury, behaving like aristocrats do—mirroring Zulaykhā in the story of Joseph. Upon seeing Dina, she assigns her the name Kamelya, a name meant to reflect high social status—just as Zulaykhā assigns Joseph the name Yūzārsīf, which she deems more suitable for the Egyptian court. Eventually, the lady decides to marry Dina off to her hedonistic son who lives abroad, has been previously married, and already has a child. This narrative development is a reinterpretation of Zulaykhā's desire to seduce Joseph (Q. 12:31). The woman organizes a party to introduce Kamelya to her friends as a prospective bride for her son. During the gathering, she asks Kamelya to dress beautifully and appear before the guests. The guests, much like the women of Zulaykhā's court, are enchanted by her appearance (Figure 3). Dina's reluctant compliance with this demand reflects the Qur'anic narrative.

فَلَمَّا سَمِعَتْ بِمَكْرِهِنَّ أَرْسَلَتْ إِلَيْهِنَّ وَ أَعْتَدَتْ لَهُنَّ مُتَّكَأً وَ آتَتْ كُلَّ واحِدَةٍ مِنْهُنَّ سِكِّيناً وَ قالَتِ اخْرُجْ عَلَيْهِنَّ فَلَمَّا رَأَيْنَهُ أَكْبَرْنَهُ وَ قَطَّعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ وَ قُلْنَ حاشَ لِلَّهِ ما هذا بَشَراً إِنْ هذا إِلاَّ مَلَكٌ كَرِيمٌ (يوسف/31)

When she heard of their machinations, she sent for them and arranged a repast, and gave each of them a knife, and said [to Joseph], "Come out before them." So when they saw him, they marveled at him and cut their hands [absent-mindedly], and they

said," Good heavens! This is not a human being! This is but a noble angel!" (Q. 12:31).

Figure 3. The lavish gathering at the Heshmatian residence, where Dina is invited to join the guests (Latifi 2006)

The accusation leveled against Joseph (Q. 12:35) is also addressed by the scriptwriter and reinterpreted according to the structure and content of the narrative. Dina decides to leave the household, and as a result, she is accused of insubordination and fleeing from the home of those who ostensibly offered her shelter. Law enforcement officers find her in a park, and on suspicion of having fled the household and possibly engaged in immoral behavior, she is taken into custody. Thus, she becomes imprisoned for a crime she did not commit. In a direct allusion to the Qur'anic account, the characters portraying her cellmates mention the dream interpretation episode involving two prisoners and the ʿAzīz of Egypt's dream about seven fat and lean cows (Q. 12:43–44). Now, with trust in God, she must find deliverance.

When one of the inmates is about to be released, she asks Dina whether she can provide the name and address of a relative so that help can be sent. Dina initially attempts to recall and provide her grandfather's phone number, which she now remembers, but then changes her mind and says, "Now is not the time. I must wait until the Heshmatian family comes for me." In this segment, her story diverges slightly from that of Joseph. When one of Joseph's fellow inmates was released, Joseph requested that he speak of his innocence to the ʿAzīz of Egypt so that he might be freed (Q. 12:42). Joseph later regretted having asked anyone but God for assistance and spent his days and nights repenting. When he was summoned to interpret the ʿAzīz's dream, he refused to leave prison until his innocence was proven before the ʿAzīz himself (Q. 12:50).

Like Joseph, Dina had to be separated from her Jacob figure—here, Khalil—and enter the palace of the ʿAzīz. She had to endure many trials in order to be prepared for understanding the Qur'an that she had originally brought to her grandfather for binding. She had to be spiritually refined

through patience so that she might eventually be counted among the Sahebdelan (the spiritualists). As portrayed in the film, once she regains her memory and returns from the Heshmatian household, Dina is no longer the same person; she has attained a higher level of maturity, wisdom, and moral clarity.

وَ لَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُ آتَيْناهُ حُكْماً وَ عِلْماً وَ كَذلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنينَ (یوسف/22)

When he came of age, We gave him judgement and [sacred] knowledge, and thus do We reward the virtuous (Q. 12:22).

This indicates that just as God rewarded Joseph for his patience, so too shall all who perform righteous deeds be similarly rewarded (al-Ṭabrisī 1993 12: 189). Likewise, Dina traverses difficult and dangerous paths, and her patience in pursuing righteousness is tested so that she may become worthy of accompanying the Sahebdelan (spritualists). As seen in the conclusion of the story, she too, like those whose names appear at the end of the Qur'an and who are recipients of divine grace, appears to have joined this spiritual path. She passes the Qur'an on to another Sahebdel, symbolically entrusting it to a kindred spirit.

5.6. Brief Allusions to Other Qur'anic Narratives

Some Qur'anic stories are narrated directly by the characters themselves. For instance, the story of Moses being placed in the river Nile at birth to save him from Pharaoh has been reimagined here. Just as Moses was drawn from the Nile, Dina too is rescued from water. The character playing the attorney of the Heshmatian family remarks, "In my opinion, anyone who is pulled from water should be named Nilu"—a name that might symbolically suggest "drawn from the Nile" (*Nīl*).

The prophet Jesus (ʿĪsā), healed the sick by his life-giving breath. In the story, Khalil is tasked with a similar role. He seeks to heal the paralyzed wife of his brother Jalil by the permission of God and aided by the Qur'an. Khalil and Dina enter Jalil's house together, carrying the old Qur'an, and their actions evoke the rites of *Laylah al-Qadr*. The Qur'an is raised above the head of Ahdiyah, and Khalil, with deep faith, begins to pray.

Moreover, Khalil's character can be compared with the Prophet Jacob (Yaʿqūb), who loses his beloved son due to the jealousy and deceit of his other sons, and mourns for years in his absence. Dina's character—whose name itself evokes Dinah, the sister of Joseph—serves as a feminine counterpart to Joseph. However, in this retelling, she is not cast into the well by her brothers but by her uncle, repeating the motif of betrayal by kin. The

setting of the well, unlike the desert context of the Joseph narrative, is transposed into a modern urban environment.

5.7. The story of Prophet Noah

The narrative also contains allusions to the story of the Prophet Noah (Nūḥ). The repeated references to building an ark of salvation are explicitly voiced by Mahmud, the misguided son of Khalil, who parallels Noah's disbelieving son. While Khalil is deeply devout and committed to divine truth, his son adopts a contrary stance, mocking his father and dismissing his actions as futile. Similarly, the people of Noah, rather than considering that his repeated warnings might be inspired by divine revelation or that the threat of a flood could be real, continued to ridicule and mock him. Despite this scorn, Noah persevered with extraordinary patience, born of deep faith. Undeterred by their mockery, he persisted with determination, and day by day, the frame of the Ark took shape. The Qur'an states:

وَ اصْنَعِ الْفُلْكَ بِأَعْيُنِنا وَ وَحْيِنا وَ لا تُخاطِبْنِي فِي الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا إِنَّهُمْ مُغْرَقُونَ وَ يَصْنَعُ الْفُلْكَ وَ كُلَّما مَرَّ عَلَيْهِ مَلَأٌ مِنْ قَوْمِهِ سَخِرُوا مِنْهُ …(هود/38-37)

Build the ark before Our eyes and by Our revelation, and do not plead with Me for those who are wrongdoers: they shall indeed be drowned. As he was building the ark, whenever the elders of his people passed by him, they would ridicule him ...(Q. 11:37-38)

In parallel fashion, following a visionary dream in which he is reminded of his mission to guide his people, Khalil begins constructing a vessel in the courtyard of his home. He gathers planks, tools, and nails, intending to build a salvific ark with his own hands. Yet, unlike the Qur'anic account, this Ark remains incomplete. In the final scenes, Khalil's lifeless body is shown lying upon the unfinished vessel. As Dina puts it, he has "begun the journey alone." The dialogue surrounding the Ark, the derision Khalil endures, his ominous proclamations of divine punishment—all echo the story of Noah. The series concludes with a heavy rain and surging floodwaters, evoking the image of the Qur'anic deluge and signaling the eschatological resonance of Noah's storm.

6. Discussion and Analysis

The guiding research questions for this study concerned the modes and degrees of influence from Qur'anic narratives in the television series, and the types of transformations introduced during their adaptation. The findings indicate that the greatest borrowings derive from the stories of the five great

prophets, whose miracles and aspects of their lives are presented in various episodes. The most explicit influences stem from the stories of Joseph and Moses, while references to Prophet Muhammad appear more subtly—most notably through the Qur'an itself, which is considered his enduring miracle. As the series title *Sahebdelan* (*The Spiritualists*) implies, these are people whose stories have already been recorded in the Qur'an. The sacred text thus serves as the narrative framework, recounting the struggles between good and evil through the lives of prophets and the righteous.

Significantly, the series begins with the arrival of the Qur'an during the holy month of Ramadan, and concludes with its re-binding and transmission to another character, symbolizing the completion of a full reading of the Qur'an. This motif implies that such stories and themes are intended to continue through future individuals and generations. In the final scene, verse Q. 2:2 is recited, directly referencing the theme of guidance central to the series' message:

ذلِكَ الْكِتابُ لا رَيْبَ فيهِ هُدىً لِلْمُتَّقينَ (البقرة/2)

This is the Book, there is no doubt in it, a guidance to the God wary (Q. 2:2).

Given the audiovisual and dialogical nature of the medium, the adaptation is a serious case of transformation, and intersemiotic translation inevitably involves significant modifications. The complete dramatization of every detail from the original Qur'anic narratives is neither feasible nor intended, considering the medium's constraints and its general audience. Instead, the series aims to convey the messages and values embedded in these stories in a way that resonates with contemporary viewers and encourages reflection. Thus, while inspired by the Qur'an, the narrative is not a literal retelling; dramatic elements have been selectively amplified or reduced, and certain elements have been omitted or reimagined altogether. The series draws from Qur'anic stories, yet reinterprets them through modernized characters, altered events, and updated messages. These transformations reflect a deliberate attempt to balance fidelity to Qur'anic meaning with artistic reinvention in a contemporary context. In general, the transformations that have occurred in the hypertext compared to the hypotext (the stories of the prophets) are as follows.

6.1. Transformation of Characters

Characters undergo major changes in their development. Khalil, though portrayed as a devout and spiritually gifted man, remains a mortal figure with human shortcomings. Unlike the prophets, his flaws are visible, which

tempers the viewer's tendency to read him as a verbatim representation of a prophetic figure. Khalil is a man of faith and fear of God, but he is not infallible.

The spiritual guide—an anonymous man who performs strange, incomprehensible actions—is modelled after the figure of Khiḍr. Unlike Khiḍr who accompanies Moses extensively, this character withdraws quickly, showing frustration at Khalil's lack of restraint, thus indicating a more limited function.

Jalil, Khalil's brother, represents a modern incarnation of Pharaoh, characterized by arrogance, materialism, and religious denial. His behaviour—such as eating during Ramadan and opposing religious obligations—reinforce the symbolic connection. His household members serve as contemporary analogues to Pharaoh's court.

The character of Joseph is transformed into Dina, offering a gender-swapped reinterpretation of the narrative. As the story progresses, Dina undergoes intellectual and spiritual maturation, ultimately becoming one of the Sahebdelan. She embodies both a female Joseph and a female Aaron (Hārūn). The enmity and jealousy of Joseph's brothers are transferred to Dina's uncle, who throws her into a well, preserving the motif of familial betrayal.

The role of Zulaykhā is reimagined as a vain matriarch in the Heshmatian household, who introduces Dina as Kamelya and attempts to marry her off to her son. Unlike Zulaykhā, however, this character is not herself romantically involved but seeks to elevate her family's status by showcasing her "ideal" choice.

The role of Jacob, Joseph's father, is reassigned to Khalil, Dina's grandfather. Like Joseph, Dina is separated from him for a time, a journey that becomes essential for her spiritual growth.

Khalil's wife at times reflects the wife of Abraham (Ibrāhīm), while in other instances, she evokes the wife of Lot (Lūṭ), or transcends either typology entirely, serving a more symbolic function rather than a direct parallel.

6.2. Transformation of Symbols

Several core themes and concepts drawn from the Qur'an are conveyed in the series through transformed and updated symbols. These symbolic shifts not only modernize the narrative but also make it more relatable to contemporary audiences. Key examples include:

6.2.1. Jealousy and Sin

The theme of envy, as presented in the Qur'anic story of Qābīl and Hābīl (Cain and Abel), is reinterpreted through Shahin's jealousy toward Ramin, and through familial and moral disputes that echo those between Khalil and Jalil. The uncle's envy toward his niece Dina also echoes the jealousy of Joseph's brothers. These dynamics are relocated into more familiar family and social structures of modern life, enhancing the emotional immediacy of the story.

6.2.2. Repentance, Reliance on God, and Moral Return

In the Qur'an, Joseph expresses regret for seeking help from anyone other than God and returns to full trust in divine providence. In the series, Dina initially considers giving the authorities her grandfather's phone number in hopes of release from detention, but then repents and decides to remain patient, trusting that God will open a path for her. Similarly, Dina's uncle and Shahin—modern counterparts to Joseph's brothers and Qābīl—also come to regret their wrongdoing, although their remorse is presented in a differentiated narrative context. The series thus explores repentance as a deeply human, evolving process.

6.2.3. Divine Trials and Patience

Like Joseph, Dina must endure various tribulations, and her patience becomes the means through which she achieves spiritual growth and is ultimately recognized as one of the Sahebdelan (the spiritualists). Other characters—such as Khalil, Ahdiyah, and Ramin—each face trials that test their faith at different levels. The emphasis on divine wisdom, the necessity of patience, and trust in God is expressed across the narrative through contemporary and emotionally resonant portrayals that align with everyday experiences.

6.2.4. Guidance and Salvation of Others

Certain characters are cast in the metaphorical role of prophets within their communities, while others embody spiritual figures who seek to guide and redeem the lost among their family, kin, or acquaintances. These individuals face resistance, denial, and various difficulties in their mission, reminiscent of prophetic hardships but contextualized within a modern familial and societal framework. In each of these cases, Qur'anic meanings and messages are retained but delivered through novel, culturally relevant symbols. These adaptations allow the series to maintain theological depth while offering a renewed narrative accessible to a contemporary audience.

6.3. Transformation of Narrative Structure

The narrative structure in the series diverges significantly from its Qur'anic antecedents, particularly in its treatment of temporal and spatial dynamics.

Time is manipulated freely within the series. The destinies of multiple prophets unfold simultaneously or in parallel through the experiences of the main and supporting characters, irrespective of historical chronology. The narrative opens with a reference to the miracle of the Prophet Muhammad, while the story of Noah appears toward the conclusion, with interspersed allusions to the children of Adam and various other figures. Temporal shifts between past, present, and future occur without restriction, reflecting a non-linear storytelling approach that aligns with modern cinematic conventions.

The spatial setting has also been transformed. Events no longer unfold in the historical locations of the Qur'anic accounts but are instead rooted in modern-day Tehran and its surroundings—primarily in the homes of Khalil and Jalil or in their respective workplaces. Even multiple stories are narrated in a single location.

Because of these temporal and spatial relocations, other core elements of narrative structure—such as the introduction, climax, resolution, and dramatic tension—have been modified or deliberately reengineered. These adjustments enable the inclusion of subplots and newly created dramatic episodes, enhancing viewer engagement while integrating Qur'anic themes into a broader, fictional framework. Unlike the Qur'anic text—wherein the narrator is God—many of the series' events are conveyed through the speech of supporting characters or indirectly through visual storytelling. The frequent use of Qur'anic verses and Hadith in dialogues enriches the religious tone, although the linguistic style, tone, and diction have been altered to suit a contemporary audience and the demands of the dramatic medium.

6.4. Transformation of Narrative Events

Although in some cases, similarities between the hypertext—namely, this television series—and the hypotext, the Qur'anic stories, can be observed, in general, the transformation of events is evident across all narratives derived from the Qur'an. The construction of the ark by Khalil, the incidents that occur during his journey with a guiding man—resembling Khiḍr—the separation between Khalil and his granddaughter Dina which leads to a reimagining of the story of Prophet Joseph and Dina's entrance

into the lavish house of the Heshmatian; the healing of Ahdiyah through the prayer of Khalil on the Night of Qadr, and simultaneously the effort to liberate her from Jalil's Pharaoh-like household akin to Asiya's story; the jealousy between the sons of Adam, and other secondary narratives—all have been reimagined through the replacement of elements with socially tangible and contemporary components, transforming the Qur'anic hypotext into a dramatic hypertext.

7. Conclusion

The Qur'an does not possess only a single face; it has a public face that is open to all, serving as a clear light and a guide for creation. Yet it also possesses other faces—faces which it reveals only to the contemplative, and to each person according to the measure of their being and their effort mingled with sincerity. The author of this article has, within the limits of his own understanding, attempted to interpret these manifest signs of the Qur'an in the language of contemporary drama. Translating a valuable hypotext such as the Qur'an is praiseworthy, yet extremely delicate and difficult—because the enduring concern remains how to render the Qur'anic narratives and exalted concepts in a way that is comprehensible to the recipients of the hypertext. This often necessitates a descent from the depth of meanings to a more accessible level of understanding.

The translation from a verbal hypotext to a visual-verbal hypertext involves a shift from one semiotic system to another. Therefore, such a process of transfer or adaptation—accompanied by a change in the communicative situation—requires measures that lead to a revision of structural and content dimensions such as plot, motifs, themes, characters, and other elements. As a result of these changes brought about by adaptation, the audience may be presented with a hypertext that, to varying degrees, diverges from the original text and establishes a new communicative situation for the recipients of the hypertext. Today, such Qur'anic adaptations attempt to forge connections between the contemporary human and Qur'anic characterizations and events, and through the narration of Qur'anic stories from a new perspective, guide the audience's minds toward deciphering the relationships between the original hypotext and the new hypertexts.

Acknowledgements

The author declares that there are no competing interests. This research did not receive any specific funding from any public, commercial, or nonprofit funding bodies.

References

Allen, G. (2000). *Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge.

Al-ʿArūsī, ʿAbd ʿAli ibn Jumʿah (1994). *Tafsīr Nūr al-Thaqalayn*. Qom: Ismāʿīliyān.

Al-Ṭabrisī, Faḍl ibn Ḥasan (1993). *Majmaʿ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Tehran: Nāṣir Khusru.

Asadi, A. (2017). A review and critique of the theory of the Qur'an's adaptation from the Bible (in Persian). *Ma`rifat-e Adyan*, 8(3), 29-46.

Azar, E. (2016). An analysis of Genette's theories of intertextuality (in Persian). *Journal of Literary Criticism and Stylistics Research*, 3(24), 11–31.

Azhari, F. & Namvar Motlagh, B. (2022). Intercultural adaptation in the two illustrated versions of the story of Heftavad and Kerm, using Gerard Genett's theory of Transtexualite (in Persian). *Journal of Fine Arts: Visual Arts*, 27(4), 75-86. https://doi.org/10.22059/jfava.2022.342009.666898

Birsanu, R. (2010). Intertextuality as translation in T.S. Eliot's the Waste Land. *Sendebar*, 21, 21-35.

Chan, L.T. (2020). *Western Theory in East Asian Contexts Translation and Transtextual Rewriting*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Eco, U. (2004). *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*. London: Phoenix.

Even-Zohar, I. (1990). The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem. *Poetics Today*, 11(1), 45-51.

Genette, G. (1997). *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Ghahramani, M. B., & Samini, N. (2000). Adapted cinema 1978–1998 (in Persian). *Fine Arts Journal*, 7, 115–119.

Giannetti, L. D. (2008). *Understanding Movies*. Pearson Prentice Hall.

Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203957721

Karimi, M. (2006). A review of old critiques of Sahebdelan Tv Series, directed by Mohammad Hossein Latifi: A flawless Qur'anic drama (in Persian). *Iran*

Newspaper. Retrieved from https://nama30.ir

Latifi, M. H. (Director). (2006). *Sahebdelan [TV series] (The Spiritualists)*. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB1). https://telewebion.com/program/0x1b2c3ac/archive

Makarem Shirazi, N. (1995). Tafsīr Nimūnah. Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyyah.

Mohammadi Vashnuh, M. R. (2022). *Principles and methods of intersemiotic translation of the Qur'an with an emphasis on visual translation (Case study: Verses of eschatological promise and threat)*. Meybod University, Yazd, Iran.

Namvar Motlagh, B. (2007). Transtextuality: A study of the relationship of a text with other texts (in Persian). *Humanities Research Journal*, 6, 83–98.

Namvar Motlagh, B., & Fakharizadeh, N. (2014). An intersemiotic reading of the illustrations of Gilgamesh with an emphasis on the study of the single myth in transtextual analysis (in Persian). *Kimiya-ye-Honar (The Quarterly Periodical of the Advanced Research Institute of the Arts)*, 12, 67–86.

Qarai, Ali Quli (2004). *Translation of the Holy Qur'an*. London: ICAS.

Rezapour, P. & Anushiravani, A. (2021). A Comparative Reading of Selected Cinematic Adaptations of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (in Persian). *Journal of Comparative Literature*, 12(23), 209-225. https://doi.org/10.22103/jcl.2021.15708.3046

Sabbaghi, A. (2016). A rhetorical critique and investigation of Adaptation of the holy Qur'an (in Persian). *Literary Qur'anic Researches*, 3(3), 48-62.

Stam, R. & Raengo, A. (2004). *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. Wiley.

Tabataba'i, M. H. (1996). *Al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, transl. Mousavi Hamedani. Qom: Entesharat Islami.

Zibaeenejad, M. (2018). The Boundary of Adaptation and Implication with the Approach of Effectiveness of the Qur'an (in Persian). *Journal of Literary Criticism and Rhetoric*, 7(1), 79-93. https://doi.org/10.22059/jlcr.2018.66403