

## A Paratextual Reading of Qur'anic Ornaments Based on Gérard Genette's Theory of Paratextuality

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### Introduction

Qur'anic manuscripts, as sacred texts, not only transmit the divine word but also bear witness to the art, culture, and intellectual traditions of different historical periods. Paratextuality, one of the core concepts of the French theorist Gérard Genette's theory, emphasizes the external and threshold relationships between a text and its audience, encompassing the space that readers encounter before entering the main text. In the Qur'an, this space includes ornaments, illuminations, verse division markers, and similar features. These ornaments are both decorative and communicative, mediating between the text and its readers. Focusing on Qur'anic ornaments, this article examines them as paratexts which, over time, have served not only decorative purposes but also facilitated the reading, teaching, and spiritual experience of the Qur'an. The study thus seeks, within the framework of Genette's paratextuality, to provide a contemporary account of the reciprocal relationship between the Qur'anic text and its paratexts within the historical context of Iranian culture.

### Methodology

The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach within a historical framework, with data collected through library sources and examination of Qur'anic manuscripts. Purposefully selected samples consist of manuscripts produced within the Persianate cultural sphere across different periods of Islamic history. The analysis focuses on paratexts such as frontispieces, opening pages, verse division markers, prostration signs, and takhmīs and ta'shīr notations, which are categorized, analyzed, and evaluated through Genette's paratextual framework. Since Genette originally based his theory on printed literary works, this study applies and adapts his framework creatively to Qur'anic manuscripts. The objective is to extract semantic, functional, and communicative patterns of ornaments as paratextual elements mediating between the Qur'an and its readers.

### Findings

The findings show that, according to Genette's theory, Qur'anic ornaments occupy a paratextual position of the peritext type—that is, they are physically embedded within the book's structure, surrounding the text and functioning as its threshold. Analysis reveals that these elements are not merely visual embellishments; rather, they perform clear communicative, educational, and functional roles. Genette structures paratextuality around spatial, temporal, modal, relational, and functional dimensions, and Qur'anic ornaments can be grouped accordingly: (1) purely decorative and honorific elements (such as opening pages, frontispieces, and inscriptions); (2) dual-purpose elements with both decorative and functional roles (e.g., takhmīs and ta'shīr signs, prostration markers, and verse endings, which both beautify and guide recitation); and (3) codicological and



structural elements (such as tables, pagination, and indices) that organize the manuscript's layout and shape the reading experience. Some ornaments, like the use of abjad letters to indicate verse groupings, functioned as symbolic codes that engaged readers directly.

The study further shows that, while early ornaments carried symbolic and esoteric meanings, over time—with the spread of literacy, the rise of scribes and illuminators, and the increasing prestige of manuscripts—they evolved into more elaborate yet more widely accessible forms. Historically, these ornaments played a central role in facilitating the reading and teaching of the Qur'an, especially in societies where Qur'an recitation was integral to religious education. Prostration markers and verse division signs, originally pedagogical tools, continue to function in modified forms today. The findings also highlight the contributions of Iranian illuminators and calligraphers to the development of decorative patterns, where ornaments served not only aesthetic purposes but also as symbolic codes mediating between the text and its readers, structuring their encounter with the sacred word.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that Qur'anic ornaments can be considered paratexts of the peritext type: they signify form and convey meaning simultaneously. Illuminations and markers are not merely decorative but play fundamental roles in facilitating recitation, instruction, and the transmission of sacred meaning. According to Genette, paratexts act as mediators between text and audience; in the Qur'an, this mediation is carried out by ornaments that surround the text, shaping its form and providing cues for reader engagement. Many ornaments, particularly those marking divisions, were originally designed to serve the text's practical needs, but over time became sophisticated artistic forms reflecting broader social and cultural changes. This transition mirrors the Qur'an's movement from private to public reading contexts and the evolving media environment of Islamic societies. Thus, Qur'anic ornaments must be understood not merely as embellishments but as communicative phenomena that define reading as both an individual act and a collective, cultural practice. Ultimately, they constitute an inseparable part of the Qur'anic experience, framing the text visually and guiding the audience toward engagement with its sacred content.

### **Keywords**

Paratextuality, Gérard Genette, Qur'an, ornamentation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

#### **Compliance with research ethics.**

This research has received the ethics code number 1014800672322131401162597929 from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch.

The authors observed the ethical principles in conducting and publishing this scholarly research, and this is confirmed by all of them.

### **Author Contributions**

Contributions to the article derived from the thesis:

- **First author:** Azarm Markazi
- **Second and corresponding author (thesis supervisor):** Dr. Mohammadreza Sharifzadeh
- **Third author (thesis advisor):** Dr. Mohammad Aref

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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