



The Narrative Structure and Rhetorical Elements in *The Companions of Cave*

Muzammir Anas (Corresponding author)

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia

E-mail: muzammir@unisza.edu.my

Nur Salina Ismail

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia

E-mail: nursalina@unisza.edu.my

Radzuwan Ab Rashid

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia

E-mail: radzuwanrashid@unisza.edu.my

Zulazhan Ab Halim

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia

E-mail: zulazhan@unisza.edu.my

Badri Najib Zubir

Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia

Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Malaysia

E-mail: badri@iiu.edu.my

Received: 01-04-2016

Accepted: 13-06-2016

Advance Access Published: July 2016

Published: 01-09-2016

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.5p.70

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.5p.70>

Abstract

This paper discusses the structural narrative and rhetorical aspects as well as the correlation found between the two elements in the English version of the story 'The Companions of Cave'. This story is unfolded in *Surah al-Kahf* (The Cave) in the Qur'an. It aims to reveal various aspects of rhetorical styles used in the story. In addition, the narrative structure for each plot is further examined, and the rhetorical elements are explored to reveal its beauty, refinement and subtlety, as well as its function and role in supporting the narrative structure. To achieve these objectives, the study deliberated both its linguistic and situational contexts to reveal its congruency within the narrative elements, and offer explanation on why it appears to be so in the Qur'an.

Keywords: narrative, rhetoric, linguistic, *Ashab al-Kahf*, The Companions of Cave

1. Introduction

The Companions of Cave (*Ashab al-Kahf*) is a story about a group of youths who fled into a cave with their pet dog. This was an attempt to escape from a despotic ruler who wanted to execute them because of their faith in Allah. Inside the cave, they underwent a miraculous process of hibernation and slept for 309 years. Their bodies were preserved and upon waking up, they neither aged nor were ill. It was as though they had fallen asleep for a short while. They remained unaware of their situation until one of the youths went to a nearby town in search of food. The story of these youths has since become a widely held discussion among people and remains so to this day.

The story presented in the Qur'an begins with the basic question to arouse the readers' interest with *Have you thought*. This reminds the reader that the story is a sign of the power of Allah (Al-Khalidi, 1989, p.34) that sheds the truth of the message and the prophethood of Muhammad (As-Suyuti, 2002, p. 168).

Or have you thought that the companions of the cave and the inscription were, among Our signs, a wonder?

The story ends with a conclusion that retains its theme on divinity and its objectives and purpose of the story, which is the unwavering belief towards the might of Allah who gives life to His creations.

Say, " Allah is most knowing of how long they remained. He has [knowledge of] the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and the earth. How Seeing is He and how Hearing! They have not besides Him any protector, and He shares not His legislation with anyone."

2. The Chronological Structure of the Narrative

The narrative structure of the story is discussed in the following paragraphs.

The plot begins with the fleeing of the youths towards a cave where they assembled while praying to God.

Or have you thought that the companions of the cave and the inscription were, among Our signs, a wonder? [Mention] when the youths retreated to the cave and said, "Our Lord, grant us from Yourself mercy and prepare for us from our affair right guidance." (Source: Sahih International, 2016)

This is followed by a brief narrative describing their deep slumber in the cave and their righteousness is a trial in this world.

So We cast [a cover of sleep] over their ears within the cave for a number of years. Then We awakened them that We might show which of the two factions was most precise in calculating what [extent] they had remained in time. It is We who relate to you, [O Muhammad], their story in truth. Indeed, they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance. (Source: Sahih International, 2016)

After that, the flashback scenes of past incidents that caused them to flee into the cave is narrated.

And We made firm their hearts when they stood up and said, "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never will we invoke besides Him any deity. We would have certainly spoken, then, an excessive transgression. These, our people, have taken besides Him deities. Why do they not bring for [worship of] them a clear authority? And who is more unjust than one who invents about Allah a lie?" [The youths said to one another], "And when you have withdrawn from them and that which they worship other than Allah, retreat to the cave. Your Lord will spread out for you of His mercy and will prepare for you from your affair facility." (Source: Sahih International, 2016)

This is followed by another flashback scene, which is the incidents that occurred while they slept in the cave.

And [had you been present], you would see the sun when it rose, inclining away from their cave on the right, and when it set, passing away from them on the left, while they were [laying] within an open space thereof. That was from the signs of Allah. He whom Allah guides is the [rightly] guided, but he whom He leaves astray - never will you find for him a protecting guide. And you would think them awake, while they were asleep. And We turned them to the right and to the left, while their dog stretched his forelegs at the entrance. If you had looked at them, you would have turned from them in flight and been filled by them with terror. (Source: Sahih International, 2016)

The readers are then brought to present by the narration about their restoration from a long sleep.

And similarly, We awakened them that they might question one another. Said a speaker from among them, "How long have you remained [here]?" They said, "We have remained a day or part of a day." They said, "Your Lord is most knowing of how long you remained. So send one of you with this silver coin of yours to the city and let him look to which is the best of food and bring you provision from it and let him be cautious. And let no one be aware of you. Indeed, if they come to know of you, they will stone you or return you to their religion. And never would you succeed, then - ever." (Source: Sahih International, 2016)

This is followed by the scene involving the generation after the incident, the stir and debate that came after.

And similarly, We caused them to be found that they [who found them] would know that the promise of Allah is truth and that of the Hour there is no doubt. [That was] when they disputed among themselves about their affair and [then] said, "Construct over them a structure. Their Lord is most knowing about them." Said those who prevailed in the matter, "We will surely take [for ourselves] over them a masjid." They will say there were three, the fourth of them being their dog; and they will say there were five, the sixth of them being their dog - guessing at the unseen; and they will say there were seven, and the eighth of them was their dog. Say, [O Muhammad], "My Lord is most knowing of their number. None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them except with an obvious argument and do not inquire about them among [the speculators] from anyone." (Source: Sahih International, 2016)

The story ends with the revelation concerning the duration of their slumber in the cave.

And never say of anything, "Indeed, I will do that tomorrow," Except [when adding], "If Allah wills." And remember your Lord when you forget [it] and say, "Perhaps my Lord will guide me to what is nearer than this to right conduct." And they remained in their cave for three hundred years and exceeded by nine. Say, "Allah is most knowing of how long they remained. He has [knowledge of] the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and the earth. How Seeing is He and how Hearing! They have not besides Him any protector, and He shares not His legislation with anyone." (Source: Sahih International, 2016)

The narrative structure discussed above is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Chronological Structure of the Narrative

<i>Ashab al-Kahf</i> (Mystery, Flashback and Suspense)					Community's Debate (Conflict and Action)	Narrator (Solution)
1 st plot	2 nd Plot	3 rd Plot	4 th Plot	5 th Plot	6 th Plot	7 th Plot
The fleeing of the youths towards a cave where they assembled while praying to God.	A brief narrative describing their deep slumber in the cave and their righteousness is a trial in this world.	The flashback scenes of past incidents that caused them to flee into the cave.	A flashback scene of the incidents that occurred while they slept in the cave.	Their restoration from a long sleep.	The scene involving the generation after the incident and the stir and debate that came after.	The revelation concerning the duration of their slumber in the cave.

3. The Rhetorical (Balaghah) Strategies in the Narrative

There are 17 rhetorical elements found in the story. The first one is the use of specific words to highlight the main characters. For instance, the word *youth* is used to refer to their age and this enables readers to discern their status. If *a group of youths* is replaced with *they* instead, readers would not be able to distinguish their age and might misconstrue the characters as being old, or middle-aged, teens or children. Therefore, when the Qur'an made a clear pronouncement of their age, it is also consistent with the lessons for youths: the lesson is to appreciate the depth of their courage against threats that could also bring death. It shows the correlation between the concept of courage and the young age. With the youth's firm principles to uphold truth and justice, and their mental and physical strength, they were able to stand up for the sake of the *ummah* (Muslim community) and the world. It is the youth's burning desire that contemporary youths should emulate. Therefore, the Qur'anic use of *a group of youths* to refer to the character of the *Ashab al-Kahf* is timely and consistent with the context of the narrative.

In addition, *the cave* is presented as a foil to the characters although the Qur'an could also use *the mountain* or *the valley* as foils. What is the significance of the cave to the youths? We argue that *the cave* carries its own symbolic meaning such as perseverance against all hardships. This comes with the decision to part with all comforts and loved ones. Thus, *the cave* is a significant and timely symbol of sacrifice for the sake of God. This is an example of a trial that a believer can use to measure the strength of his faith to Allah.

The second rhetorical strategy is excluding particular words to create subtlety in language. This strategy is also used in the contemporary discourse in the politic of self-presentation (see Rashid, Rahman and Rahman, 2016; Rashid et al., 2016). In the phrase *They said: Our Lord!*, the Quran did not mention the use of the interjection *Oh*. This demonstrates the subtleness of the language adopted by a person who is speaking to God. In this context, it also depicts their anxiety and panic as they made their journey to the cave. Even readers who know that none except Allah can provide assistance share in their anxiety, hence their direct prayer to God (*Our Lord!*). Perhaps the Qur'an is teaching humans that Allah wants His creations to make a direct plea to God ('Utayyah, 1997, p.277). Perhaps the youths' exclamation for God, without using other interjections or phrases, is the most appropriate reaction in such a circumstance. It also depicts how much their hearts and souls are closely linked to Allah.

The third strategy is preceding a particular phrase to demonstrate purity and priority. The Quran had preceded *from Yourself* before the words *mercy* and *guidance* which reinforces the aesthetics of the text. This approach purifies their request, as if they are praying: *We do not seek mercy and leadership for our safety, unless it comes from You, O Lord of*

the Worlds. Such eloquence is very effective in capturing their fear and reliance on Allah. This Qur'anic style illustrates the various forms of dialogues used to capture the mood of the story, and further enhancing the storytelling technique.

A close analysis reveals that the Qur'an has also used the word *mercy* because it is the beginning of all forms of peace and blessings on this earth. Mercy is a source of blessing, where life continues to exist and flourishes (Al-Khalidi, 1989, p.64). It is by Allah's mercy and guidance that the youths were led into safety. Hence, from this perspective, the Qur'an clearly demonstrates the importance of His mercy to the readers. It is for this reason that the youths are glorified as His servants. This argument is reinforced in verse 13 where the Qur'an began with *who believed* before *guidance* because it is through faith that Allah's guidance is sent and grows in manifold over time.

The fourth strategy is preceding a particular phrase to show recognition and respect. In verse 13, the Qur'an structured the verse by bestowing special recognition and respect for the Prophet Muhammad. This is evident in the phrase *to you* that precedes *their story* in *We who relate to you their story*. A normal structure would be *We relate their story on to you* (Abdul Rahman, 2006, p.97). We argue that this style is used to acknowledge and pay respect to the Prophet Muhammad who, at the time, was saddened when the disbelievers refused to believe in the message. The story of *Ashab al-Kahf* was revealed to boost morale to the Prophet, and the story of the youth's struggle against injustice became a medium of communication between the Prophet and Allah. It is to show that youths, who are neither prophets nor apostles, had the determination to create change and awareness to form a society who believed in the Oneness of God. It is a story that can be emulated by all followers and can help the Prophet to formulate effective strategies to convey Islam.

Further analysis reveals the beauty of its composition: the arrangement of the word *We* to refer to God, and *to you* to refer to the Prophet, and *their story* to refer to the *Ashab al-Kahf*, carries a symbol of respect and esteem as previously mentioned. In fact, the repetition of the phrase *a group of youths* in verses 10 and 13 is a symbol of distinction and honour for them (Hawa, 1999, p.3166).

The fifth strategy is the use of precise words to describe patience. In verse 14, it is found that the phrase *And We made firm their hearts* is used to convey how Allah has strengthened their hearts with forbearance and faith. This illustrates their clear stance towards the Oneness of Allah and their perseverance in upholding their principles. Hence, the use of the word *firm* shows their will and spiritual strength to uphold their responsibility as believers.

The sixth strategy is the use of masculine plural pronoun to show solidarity. It is clearly illustrated in the surah, through the phrase *they all said* which indicates that there are more than two individuals in the group. This illustrates their solidarity in upholding their faith, truth and justice, so much so that their hearts, bodies, and thoughts have become one. There would be a change in meaning if the Qur'an had used *said one individual from among them*, or *said one of them* instead.

The seventh strategy is preceding specific phrases to show the consequences of transgressing limits. Undoubtedly, it is believed that the Quran has placed the phrase *invent things about Allah* before the phrase *a lie* to show that the Qur'an condemns all kinds of lies against Allah. The act is a sin more grievous than lying to humans or other creations. This is accentuated by the use of the words *more unjust than* to describe the attitude of the *kuffar* who transgressed the limits by lying to Allah.

The eighth strategy is the use of conditional phrase to answer questions. The use of the phrase *your Lord will spread for you* is the answer to the imperative phrase *then go to* where it was presumed that they were about to embark to an isolated place without any contact with the outside world and to bear the challenges and struggles. However, such fears are alleviated when the Qur'an guarantees that the youths will be given His mercy, and will be bestowed with comfort and security.

The ninth strategy is the use of specific descriptions given through the imperfect verbs to indicate movement. Verse 17 describes the movement of the sun outside the cave where it rises in the morning and sets in the evening. This is indicated with the imperfect continuous verb. The Quran explains that when the sun rises, the light goes to the right of the cave and when it sets, the light moves to the left of the cave (Khudar, 2004, p.133) as if the movement is happening at this very moment where readers are witnesses to it.

The use of the phrase *you would see*, with its imperfect continuous verb, is worth mentioning considering that the story had occurred in the past. This structure illustrates the uniqueness of the Qur'an because it describes the event to the Prophet Muhammad as if he was a witness to it. In this verse, the use of the demonstrative pronoun that indicates distance is a symbol of respect that captures the magnitude of the event.

The tenth strategy is the description of sleep and continuous movement with the use of the duplicated verb patterns to evoke a mood. Verse 18 refers to a flashback narrative to refer to verses 11 and 12. Flashback is another technique employed in contemporary discourse to attract readers' attention (Rashid, 2016). It tells the story of the sleeping youths in the cave, which was formerly mentioned in verse 11 and 12. Yet, in verse 18, it is repeated again. Their slumber depicts the might of Allah who controls every movement and development of the story, beginning from the sleep that spanned hundreds of years to their reawakening. The Qur'an describes in detail how their bodies tossed right and left whilst they slept. It tries to picture the idea of sleeping as if it is happening at that very moment. This assertion is illustrated with the use of the words *sleep*, which shows that they slept for hundreds of years. The phrase *We turned them*, and the use of the duplicated verbs (to show repeated and prolonged movements), indicates that their body were consistently moving. This is also narrated as if it was occurring in front of the readers. This style is also consistent with

the Quran's goal, which is to tell this story so that the readers are immersed fully, and that lessons are derived, not only from the characters in the story, but also through the accurate selection words and phrases.

The eleventh strategy relates to the treatments for paralysis and coma. It must be reminded that even in the absence of body movements, Allah had preserved and protected their bodies from pests and deterioration. However, it is clear that - *We turned them to the right and to the left* - illustrates the occurrence of continuous movement that has contributed to their survival. According to medical science, when the human body is paralysed or in a state of comatose, it may cause damage to the blood stream and weaken the bones and muscles (Walter, 2008, p.5).

The twelfth strategy is the removal of accusative of specification to evoke suspense. The Qur'an has removed a phrase after the phrase *how long* - *How long have you remained [here]?* - which refers to the accusative of specification that evokes suspense in the narrative. This invites several questions, such as: "how many hours? Or how many days? Or how many months? Or how many years have we slept? (This matter was discussed by Abdul Rahman, 2006, p.109). In this context, the analysis reveals that the person inquiring is unable to ascertain what is being experienced and was questioning his friend. In addition, the Qur'an invites the readers to appreciate the youths' belief in the unseen.

The thirteenth strategy is the special use of the definite noun to indicate certainty. The Qur'an used the definite noun to the word *the city*. From a linguistics standpoint, *the city* refers to a civilization centre, industrial centre, and the social hub. In this verse, the Qur'an adopted the definite noun to the word *city* to refer to a city that was familiar to them. At the same time, the Qur'an was also demonstrating to the readers that the youths truly did not know what has happened to them.

The fourteenth strategy is the use of the present continuous verbs to highlight on-going conflicts. In verse 21, the Qur'an used the phrase [*That was*] *when they disputed among themselves* in a present continuous verb pattern instead of the past tense verb even though the event had occurred in the past. It is believed that this is to illustrate that the conflict is still occurring until today.

The fifteenth strategy is the removing the subject as the main character in a narrative to evoke mystery and surprise. The Qur'an mentions that there is an on-going interest in the story of the youths. Interestingly, the Qur'an has also used a narrative structure to highlight the characters by removing the subject (they) to refer to the youths. It should be *They (the people) will say, "they (the number of youths) were three, ... they were five ..., they were seven..."* ('Atiq, 1974, p.134). Thus, eliminating the subject enhances the language and evokes a sense of mystery and surprise. If -they- was used instead, it may reduce the aesthetics value of the language. (Matlub, 1980, p.161) The Qur'an also uses the future verb in *They will say* to indicate the people's continuous and persistent fascination in the matter. Evidently, within the present society, some are still questioning the number of youths in the cave rather than the deriving lessons from the story.

The sixteenth strategy is the use of pronouns to refer to the future. In verse 23, the Qur'an uses the pronouns indicating distance *that*, which refers to the future, which is tomorrow. It is believed that the future (tomorrow) refers to a future that is known only by Allah. This coincides with the background of the story that discusses matters of faith and belief in the unseen. If men are expected to reap benefits in the future, then he must place his hope onto Allah and ask Him, the way that the youths did.

Last but not least, the removal of the accusative of specification to evoke continuous suspense. The Qur'an informs the readers the duration of their sleep that was 309 years (based on the Islamic Hijrah calendar calculations whereby the 309 years is equivalent to 300 AD). The difference for every 100 years in the Hijrah calendar to the AD calendar is three years. Thus, it is clear that the Qur'an is informing the readers that they slept for 300 years and an additional of nine years (Az-Zuhaili, 2005, p.250). Therefore, the removal of the accusative of specification to refer to the *years* after the word *nine* is sufficient to mention only once after the words *300*. If the accusative of specification was not meant to refer to the years; or days or weeks, or months, then it would have been more specific and clear after the mention of the word *nine*. (Ben Salim, 2012: Personal Communication)

4. Conclusions

Surah al-Kahf contains four stories in which each containing its own lessons. One of the stories is about a group of youths who hid in a cave to escape from a despotic ruler. They then, by the will of Allah, fell asleep for 309 years. The story of the youths contains many lessons, and no doubt that the book is a revelation sent as guidance to humanity. Based on the study of the narrative and its rhetorical elements, we argue that the story is not only meant for reading or memorising, but it is a model of a storytelling technique; containing techniques comprise elements of suspense, conflict, mystery interwoven through tightly structured verses, which are itself aesthetically unique. Such technique would drive the interest of the readers not only to read the Quran but also to allow them to visualize the essence of the story.

The narrative structure and detail in each selected words are presented in a variety of techniques, and the Qur'an utilised a variety of them to accommodate the situations that evoke a particular mood for each scene. In addition, the youths' characters are also highlighted in the story. This is presented through a plot that transgresses man's imagination in order to illustrate an incident where there is a strong reliance on Allah and how importance the relationship is between the youths and Allah. In terms of time, the interweaving of verses and phrases, including its uses of flashbacks, illustrate the dynamic techniques are used to narrate the timeline of the story. This arouses readers' interest and sustains the momentum of the story. The story *The Companions of Cave* has its own uniqueness in the use and selection of the narrative structures and the rhetorical elements. In conclusion, the story has demonstrated the uniqueness in its use of implicit and explicit words, which all contributed to the preservation of the Qur'an's beauty.

Acknowledgement

This paper is part of an MA research that was sponsored by Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia.

References

- Atiq, A. A. (1974). *Ilmu Al-Ma'ani*. Cairo: Dar An-Nahdah Al-Misriyyah.
- Abdul Rahman, M.M.S. (2006). *Dirasah Uslubiyah Fi Surah Al-Kahfi*. Palestine: Jamiah An-Najah Al-Wataniyyah.09.
- Al-Khalidi, S.A.F. (1989). *Ma'a Qasas As-Sabiqin Fi Al-Quran, Durus Fi Al-Iman, Wa Ad-Dakwah, Wa Al-Jihad*. Damascus: Dar Al-Qalam.
- As-Suyuti, J. (2002). *Lubab An-Nuqul Fi Asbab An-Nuzul*. Beirut: Muassasah Al-Kutub Al-Taqaifiyyah.
- Az-Zuhaili, W. (2005). *At-Tafsir Al-Munir Fi Al-Akidah Wa Al-Syariah Wa Al-Manhaj*. Damascus: Dar Al-Fikr.
- Hawa, S. (1999). *Al-Asas Fi At-Tafsir*. Cairo: Dar As-Salam.
- Khudar, M.M. (2004). *Balaghah As-Sard Fi Al-Quran Al-Karim*. Cairo: Dar Al-'Awasim.
- Matlub, A. (1980). *Asalib Balaghiyyah*. Al-Kuwait: Wikalah Al-Matbu'at.
- Rashid, R.A. (2016). Topic continuation strategies employed by teachers in managing supportive conversations on Facebook Timeline. *Discourse Studies*, 18(2), 188-203.
- Rashid, R.A., Rahman, M.F., & Rahman S.B.A. (2016). Teachers' engagement in social support process on a networking site. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 1(1), 34-45.
- Rashid, R.A., Wahab, Z., Yunus, K., Ismail, N.S., Yusof, N., Syed Omar, SNM., & Latiff Azmi, M.N. (2016). English language teachers as a dissenter on a social networking site. *International Journal of Applied Linguistic and English Literature*, 5(4), 72-78.
- Sahih International. [Online] Available: <http://www.quran.com/18>. (April 26, 2016).
- Surah al-Kahf* (18:9-26). Al-Quran.
- Utayyah, M. (1997). *Al-Ijaz Fi Kalam Al-Arab Wa Nas Al-Ijaz*. Al-Iskandariyyah: Al-Azhar University.
- Walter O.S. (2008). Phase-specific wound management of decubitus ulcer. Germany: Paul Hartmann.