

Repetition as Rhetorical Strategy in the English Translation of Surah Al-Mursalat: A Stylistic and Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the rhetorical and discourse functions of repetition in the English translation of Surah Al-Mursalat by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, focusing on the refrain “Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth.” Using a qualitative descriptive method grounded in stylistics and discourse analysis, the study explores how this fixed phrase, repeated ten times across the chapter, operates at multiple linguistic levels. The analysis reveals that the refrain serves three interrelated functions: stylistically, it foregrounds divine warning and creates rhythmic cohesion; structurally, it segments the surah into thematic units and signals discourse boundaries; rhetorically, it intensifies condemnation and engages the reader emotionally through cumulative repetition. Abdel Haleem’s consistent rendering of the refrain retains these functions effectively, unlike other translations that introduce lexical variation. The findings demonstrate that repetition in Qur’anic translation is not merely ornamental but performs essential linguistic and communicative roles. This study contributes to Qur’anic stylistics, translation studies, and discourse analysis by showing that sacred texts, when translated with rhetorical sensitivity, can preserve the stylistic integrity of the original.

Keywords: Qur’anic stylistics, repetition, discourse analysis, translation, Surah Al-Mursalat



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INTRODUCTION

Repetition is a pervasive rhetorical and stylistic device found across sacred texts and oral traditions worldwide. From the Psalms and the Bhagavad Gita to Buddhist sutras and the Qur’an, repetition serves not only as a mnemonic aid but also as a tool to intensify meaning, assert authority, and shape the emotional tone of the message. Tannen (1989) identifies repetition as central to both oral and written discourse, functioning cognitively, stylistically, and socially to build cohesion and resonance. In literary texts, repetition often reflects a “foregrounding” strategy that draws attention to specific meanings or themes (Leech & Short, 1981).

In the Qur’an, repetition performs a range of communicative functions, from theological emphasis and pedagogical instruction to literary embellishment. This feature is not confined to word-level reiteration but extends to the repetition of entire phrases and rhetorical structures, which often function as thematic signposts and discursive refrains (Mir, 1989). Repetition thus becomes a major contributor to the Qur’an’s stylistic identity and its oral-performative character. Abdel Haleem (1999) emphasizes that the Qur’an’s rhythmic and repetitive structure enhances its memorability and rhetorical force, especially when addressing themes of divine justice, reward, and punishment.

One of the most striking examples of repetitive rhetoric in the Qur’an is found in Surah Al-Mursalat, a chapter composed of 50 short, rhythmically constructed verses. Within this surah, the phrase “Woe, on that

Day to those who denied the truth!” is repeated ten times, functioning both as a refrain and as a structural device that segments the chapter into thematic sections. Each recurrence of the phrase follows a vivid series of eschatological warnings, serving to anchor and punctuate the divine threats with rhetorical gravity. The repetition does not appear randomly; rather, it mirrors the progression of argumentation within the chapter, marking transitions from cosmological affirmations to moral judgments and finally to descriptions of divine retribution (Mustafa, 2020).

Previous studies on Surah Al-Mursalat have typically concentrated on its Arabic rhetorical structure, examining sound patterns, rhyming endings (*saj'*), and lexical density. For instance, Rezaei and Forghani (2023) analyze the surah's linguistic features through classical Arabic stylistics, focusing on phonological harmony, morphological coherence, and rhetorical devices in the original Arabic. While such studies provide valuable insights into the literary sophistication of Qur'anic Arabic, they often overlook how these stylistic features — particularly repetition — are rendered and function in English translations, especially from a discourse and stylistic perspective.

This gap is significant considering that Qur'anic translations play a vital role in shaping the understanding and perception of the text among non-Arabic speaking audiences. As noted by Baker (2006), translated religious texts become independent discursive constructs, subject to their own rhetorical effects. Therefore, it becomes relevant to explore whether and how core stylistic features such as repetition survive translation and what functions they serve in a new linguistic context.

This study seeks to explore the stylistic and discourse function of repetition in Surah Al-Mursalat, as rendered in M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's English translation (Oxford University Press, 2004). Specifically, it investigates how the repeated refrain **“Woe, on that Day to those who denied the truth!”** contributes to thematic segmentation, rhetorical emphasis, and reader engagement. Unlike previous studies rooted in Arabic stylistics or tafsir-based analysis, this study approaches the surah as a linguistic object within a translated discourse, employing modern tools from stylistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis.

The scope of the study is confined to the linguistic form and function of repetition in translation. It does not seek to interpret theological or doctrinal meaning, nor does it engage with hermeneutical traditions. Instead, it treats the English text as a self-contained narrative that can be examined through the lens of general linguistics. This is in line with approaches in literary stylistics, which prioritize language patterning and textual structure over exegesis (Simpson, 2004).

The following research questions guide this investigation:

- How is repetition employed in the English translation of Surah Al-Mursalat?
- What rhetorical and stylistic functions does the repeated refrain serve in the translated text?
- To what extent does the repetition structure the discourse and influence reader perception?

By focusing on how repetition functions in an English-language rendering of a Qur'anic chapter, this study contributes to an emerging field of Qur'anic stylistics that considers not only the aesthetic features of the original Arabic but also how those features are carried into translated discourse. This paper thus offers both a methodological contribution — by applying stylistic tools to translated sacred text — and a thematic insight into the rhetorical logic of one of the Qur'an's most structurally disciplined surahs.

Repetition in Stylistic and Discourse Perspectives

Repetition is one of the most widely studied phenomena in stylistics and discourse analysis. As a rhetorical device, it enhances emphasis, draws attention, and reinforces thematic focus. Leech and Short (1981) classify repetition under the broader category of *foregrounding*, where certain linguistic forms are highlighted to break expectations and produce stylistic effect. Types of repetition such as anaphora (repetition at the beginning of a clause), epiphora (at the end), and parallelism (recurrence of structure) are commonly observed in religious, poetic, and political discourse, where persuasion and rhythm are central.

Tannen (1989) emphasizes that repetition is not merely a surface ornament but performs multiple discourse functions simultaneously — referential, structural, stylistic, and interactional. Especially in oral traditions, repetition serves to build rhythm, retain information, and engage the audience cognitively and emotionally. Simpson (2004) also notes that repetition is a marker of style that can influence tone, pace, and interpretive emphasis in literary texts.

From a discourse perspective, repetition contributes significantly to textual cohesion and thematic segmentation (Brown & Yule, 1983). Recurrent phrases often signal boundaries between narrative episodes, shifts in argumentative focus, or emotional escalation. In sacred texts, this function is especially pronounced as repetition marks transitions between themes of mercy and judgment, command and encouragement, or threat and hope.

Repetition as Rhetoric in the Qur'an

The Qur'an is renowned for its distinctive linguistic style, with repetition as one of its central rhetorical features. Mir (1989) and Abdel Haleem (1999) observe that repetition in the Qur'an is never random or redundant; rather, it performs critical communicative functions such as emphasizing divine attributes, reinforcing moral guidance, structuring discourse, and enhancing memorability. The Qur'an's oral-recitative nature further elevates the role of repetition as a device for both thematic development and rhythmic performance.

Different forms of repetition can be found throughout the Qur'anic text, including repetition of words, phrases, syntactic structures, and entire verses. In particular, the use of fixed refrains — repeated verbatim phrases that occur at regular intervals — is a distinctive feature of several surahs. Among these, Surah Al-Mursalat stands out for its tenfold repetition of the phrase: “Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth” (Abdel Haleem, 2004). This refrain appears after major thematic blocks within the surah, serving to segment the discourse, intensify the emotional tone, and maintain rhetorical continuity across diverse scenes of divine warning.

Classical Arabic scholars have long examined such patterns through the lens of *balāghah*, exploring how sound patterns, rhyme, and repetition contribute to the Qur'an's unique aesthetic. Modern linguists such as Mustafa (2020) have begun to analyze these structures from discourse and thematic perspectives, showing how refrains structure Qur'anic arguments and direct the reader's interpretive flow. A recent stylistic study by Rezaei and Forghani (2023), focusing on the Arabic of Surah Al-Mursalat, highlights the rhetorical power of phonetic symmetry and recurring warnings. However, such studies remain limited to the original Arabic, with little attention to how repetition functions in translated texts.

Translating Repetition and Style in Religious Texts

Translating repetition, especially in sacred texts, presents unique challenges. Unlike technical repetition used in instructions or expository texts, repetition in sacred discourse is deeply embedded in rhetorical tradition, sound patterning, and audience response. As Baker (2006) notes, translated texts are narrative reconstructions, and stylistic devices such as repetition may lose, gain, or shift function depending on how they are rendered in the target language.

This is particularly relevant in Qur'anic translation, where stylistic integrity is often sacrificed for clarity or naturalness. However, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's translation (2004) has been widely praised for preserving the rhetorical logic and rhythm of the original text while using accessible, idiomatic English. Abdel Haleem (1999) emphasizes that Qur'anic repetition is part of its overall structural design and moral instruction, and therefore must be retained where possible in translation.

In Surah Al-Mursalat, his choice to render وَيَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ (Wailun yawma'idhin lil-mukadzdhibin) consistently as “Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth” across all ten occurrences reflects an effort to retain the rhetorical force of the refrain. While some translations vary the phrase to avoid redundancy, Abdel Haleem's consistency enhances the stylistic and discursive impact for the reader, maintaining the sense of divine warning and thematic coherence.

Translation theorists such as Boase-Beier (2006) and Hermans (1999) argue that style is translatable, but requires sensitive handling of form, function, and reader effect. In the case of Qur'anic English, analyzing how repetition is preserved or transformed can reveal both the translator's strategies and the reader's interpretive experience.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, employing methods from stylistic analysis and discourse analysis to investigate the function of repetition in the English translation of *Surah Al-Mursalat*. The objective is not to interpret theological meaning, but rather to analyze how the repeated refrain functions as a rhetorical and structural device in the translated text. This means the unit of analysis is linguistic, not doctrinal, and the data are treated as discourse objects — that is, as structured texts that reflect rhetorical intention, linguistic patterning, and reader-oriented effects. As Simpson (2004) and Short (1996) emphasize, stylistic analysis in religious texts can reveal how language forms encode discourse strategies, particularly when dealing with repetition, parallelism, and foregrounding. The methodology is thus firmly situated within the domain of general linguistics, with particular attention to stylistic patterning and discourse organization.

Data Source

The primary data for this study consist of the English translation of *Surah Al-Mursalat* by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, published by Oxford University Press (2004). This translation was chosen because:

1. It is widely respected for its clarity, idiomatic fluency, and sensitivity to rhetorical patterns.
2. The translator explicitly aims to preserve the rhetorical function of repetition and refrain in the Qur'an (Abdel Haleem, 1999).
3. It is frequently cited in academic contexts, making it a reliable source for linguistic analysis.

The analysis is limited to one chapter (*Surah Al-Mursalat*, verses 1–50), with a particular focus on the repeated phrase, namely “Woe, on that Day to those who denied the truth!” which occurs ten times (in verses 15, 19, 24, 28, 34, 37, 40, 45, 47, and 49). This repetition is examined in relation to the thematic structure and rhetorical organization of the surah.

Analytical Framework

The analysis combines two interrelated frameworks:

1. Stylistic Analysis

Drawing from Leech and Short (1981), and Simpson (2004), the study explores:

- The linguistic form of the repetition: syntactic, lexical, and semantic patterning
- The stylistic effect of repetition: emphasis, rhythm, and aesthetic foregrounding
- The interaction between form and function, particularly how repetition creates rhetorical force

2. Discourse Analysis

Building on Brown and Yule (1983) and Tannen (1989), the study examines:

- How the repeated refrain segments the discourse into thematic units
- The function of repetition as a discourse marker signaling transitions, escalation, or closure
- The possible reader effects: anticipation, reflection, emotional resonance

The combination of these frameworks allows for a multi-level analysis, where linguistic form is considered alongside discourse function, without assuming theological or exegetical interpretation.

Procedure of Analysis

The analytical steps are as follows:

1. Identification of Repetition
The ten occurrences of the repeated phrase are identified and located within the structural flow of the surah.
2. Segmentation Mapping
The text is divided into thematic blocks based on the placement of the refrain. Each segment is analyzed for its dominant content (e.g., oaths, cosmology, judgment, reward/punishment).
3. Stylistic Annotation
Each instance of the refrain is examined in terms of:

- Lexical consistency
 - Syntactic parallelism
 - Role in rhythm and structure
4. Discourse Function Analysis
The rhetorical role of each repetition is described:
 - As a climax, closure, or warning
 - As a cohesive device across otherwise diverse content
 5. Interpretive Summary
The functions and patterns are synthesized into a general description of how repetition organizes and intensifies the surah in translation.

Delimitations and Ethical Positioning

This study does not attempt to offer theological interpretation or to analyze the Arabic grammar of the Qur'an. Instead, it limits itself to the textual behavior of repetition in English, acknowledging the translated text as a discursively valid object of study (Baker, 2006; Hermans, 1999). Furthermore, the researcher maintains an ethically neutral stance, treating the Qur'an respectfully as a religious text while analyzing it linguistically — without making judgments on its beliefs or dogmas.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of repetition in the English translation of *Surah Al-Mursalat* reveals a highly structured use of rhetorical refrain. The phrase “Woe, on that Day, to those who denied the truth” appears ten times in Abdel Haleem’s translation (2004), always in the exact same wording. Each occurrence follows a distinct thematic segment, marking the end of one discourse block and the transition to the next. This section presents the distribution of the repeated phrase, analyzes its stylistic and discourse functions, and assesses its rhetorical impact on the reader.

Distribution and Thematic Mapping of the Refrain

The following table shows the ten instances of the repeated phrase, the verse number in which it appears, the dominant theme preceding it, and the rhetorical function it performs within the discourse.

Table 1: Distribution of the Repeated Phrase in Surah Al-Mursalat (Abdel Haleem Translation)

No.	Verse	Repeated Phrase	Thematic Segment Preceding Refrain	Rhetorical Function
1	15	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	The coming of the day of Decision	Certainty
2	19	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Destruction of the arrogant and past nations	Warning of same fate for current deniers
3	24	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Creation of human beings	Rejection of divine design
4	28	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Blessings of earth and water	Ingratitude for divine favors
5	34	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Hellish punishment	Intensity of retribution
6	37	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Rejection of all Justification	Finality of judgement
7	40	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Divine challenge to plot against Allah	Helplessness intensification
8	45	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Reward for the righteous	Contrast
9	47	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Deniers enjoying worldly pleasure	False sense of security

10	49	Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth	Refusal to pray	Rebellion against divine commands
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The Stylistic Function of the Refrain

From a stylistic perspective, the exact repetition of the phrase performs several foregrounding functions. First, it creates a rhythmic and mnemonic pattern, reinforcing the severity and certainty of divine judgment. By preserving lexical and syntactic identity in each occurrence, the refrain achieves a chant-like resonance, echoing traditional oral structures.

According to Leech and Short (1981), such repetition constitutes foregrounded text, where deviation from expectation is replaced by patterned return — causing the repeated phrase to “stand out” in contrast to the variable content around it. Here, Abdel Haleem’s translation successfully retains this stylistic force, allowing the English reader to experience the same buildup of warning and moral gravity.

The repeated clause also serves as a verbal punctuation mark, segmenting the surah into rhetorical units. This function aligns with Simpson’s (2004) view of repetition as a stylistic device that shapes discourse pacing and thematic focus. Each block of verses builds tension, followed by the fixed clause that releases it with condemnation. This cycle then resets, creating a spiraling rhythm of thematic ascent and judgment.

Discourse Structure and Thematic Cohesion

Viewed through a discourse-analytic lens, the refrain functions as a discourse boundary marker, dividing the chapter into at least ten segments. These segments follow a sequence from the coming of the day of decision, to destruction of arrogant and past nation, to creation of human beings, blessings of earth and water, to hellish punishment, to rejection of all justification, to divine challenge to plot against Allah, to reward for the righteous, to deniers enjoying worldly pleasure, and finally to refusal of praying. Each thematic block ends with the refrain, forming a cohesive chain that maintains narrative momentum. (see Table 1)

Tannen (1989) argues that repetition can function dialogically even in monologic texts — by simulating response, echo, or refrain. In this case, the refrain offers quasi-dialogic emphasis, implicitly “responding” to each thematic development with the same divine warning.

In addition, the position of the refrain — always at the end of the segment, never at the beginning — gives it the force of closure, not introduction. It is retrospective in function, pushing the reader to re-evaluate what has just been read. This structure encourages reflective engagement, anchoring the previous message with judgment.

Reader Engagement and Rhetorical Impact

The cumulative effect of this repetition is a gradual intensification of emotional and moral tension. With each recurrence of the phrase, the reader is reminded of the consequence of denial, while being shown new contexts in which denial is manifested — cosmological, historical, moral, and existential. This supports Mir’s (1989) claim that Qur’anic repetition is structurally strategic rather than stylistically redundant.

Abdel Haleem’s consistency in rendering the phrase helps maintain this force in English. Other translations sometimes vary the wording to avoid redundancy, thereby weakening the impact. In contrast, Abdel Haleem’s fixed repetition respects the deliberate redundancy of the original, highlighting its non-linear, cyclical discourse logic.

Finally, from a reader-response perspective, the repetition serves as a point of resonance, allowing even non-Arabic readers to internalize the spiritual cadence of the text. The phrase becomes not just a sentence but a symbolic refrain, echoing throughout the surah as a moral heartbeat.

Summary of Findings

The repeated refrain in Surah Al-Mursalat performs **three intertwined functions** in the English translation:

1. **Stylistic:** It foregrounds divine warning, creates rhythm, and anchors attention.
2. **Structural:** It divides the discourse into segments, signals thematic transitions, and provides closure.

3. **Rhetorical:** It intensifies condemnation, reinforces judgment, and engages the reader emotionally.

Thus, the analysis confirms that repetition in the Qur'an — even in translation — can function as a strategic linguistic device, not merely a theological construct. The preservation of this repetition in Abdel Haleem's version ensures that its rhetorical force is retained, making it accessible for stylistic and discourse analysis.

Comparative Note: Translation Variation in Other Versions

While the present analysis focuses on Abdel Haleem's translation of *Surah Al-Mursalat*, it is instructive to briefly compare how other major English translations handle the same repeated phrase. In the Arabic text, the phrase "*Wailun yawma'idhin lil-mukadzdzibin*" appears ten times with identical wording. However, not all translators have chosen to render it consistently in English.

For instance, Pickthall (1930) translates the refrain variably as "*Woe unto the repudiators on that day!*" or "*Alas for the deniers on that day,*" while Yusuf Ali (1934) offers renderings such as "*Ah woe, that Day, to the Rejecters of Truth!*" In some versions, slight lexical shifts occur — e.g., using "*Rejecters*", "*Repudiators*", or "*Deniers*" interchangeably. Though semantically similar, these variations may diminish the effect of rhetorical sameness, especially when the surrounding text varies widely in content and theme.

By contrast, Abdel Haleem consistently translates the refrain as: "*Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth*" in all ten instances, preserving both lexical repetition and syntactic integrity. This enables the refrain to serve its stylistic and discourse function: to create rhythm, signal segmentation, and escalate rhetorical force. The consistency of his rendering allows for functional repetition, which aligns more closely with the Arabic source's intention and structure.

This comparative insight further justifies the methodological choice to use Abdel Haleem's version as the primary data source. His stylistic sensitivity makes it possible to conduct a linguistically grounded study of repetition in translation — a task that would be less feasible with translations that prioritize dynamic equivalence or poetic style over rhetorical fidelity.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the rhetorical and discourse function of repetition in the English translation of *Surah Al-Mursalat*, focusing on the refrain "*Woe on that Day to those who denied the truth*" as rendered consistently by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. The analysis shows that the repetition operates as a central stylistic and structural device, organizing the chapter into thematic segments, creating rhythmic intensity, and reinforcing moral condemnation.

Through stylistic and discourse-analytic tools, the study demonstrated that the refrain functions on at least three interrelated levels: foregrounding message emphasis, segmenting discourse progression, and engaging reader attention. Despite being a translation, the stylistic force of the original Arabic is retained through lexical consistency and syntactic symmetry. Abdel Haleem's translation proves particularly effective in preserving the rhetorical integrity of the source text, unlike other versions that vary the refrain or adapt it poetically.

These findings contribute to broader discussions in Qur'anic stylistics, translation studies, and discourse analysis, showing that translated sacred texts can be examined not only for their theological meaning but also for their linguistic and rhetorical construction. The study reinforces the view that translation does not necessarily dilute stylistic features; under the right conditions, it can maintain — and even illuminate — the rhetorical strategies of the original.

Future research may expand this approach by comparing multiple translations across different chapters, or by examining how readers respond to repeated refrains across languages and cultures. For now, this study affirms that repetition in Qur'anic translation is not merely redundant, but deliberately functional and stylistically potent, especially when preserved with care and linguistic insight.

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