An Analysis of Surah Al-Fil Through the Lens of Russian Formalism

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Abstract

The Holy Quran, as an eternal miracle, has been extensively studied from various literary perspectives. Russian Formalism, a prominent text-centered theory, examines how internal textual elements create conflict, tension, and ultimately achieve unity and coherence through "defamiliarization." This process elevates language from everyday usage to literary art. While Formalist principles have been applied to other Quranic surahs, a comprehensive analysis focusing on the interplay of tension, defamiliarization, and form-content harmony in Surah Al-Fil remains underexplored. This article bridges this gap by exploring these aspects in Surah Al-Fil (The Elephant). Utilizing a descriptive-analytical method, involving close textual reading and interpretation of formal devices, the study concludes that, despite its conciseness, the Surah employs various defamiliarization techniques. These include the rhetorical questioning in "أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحابِ الْفِيلِ" which compels reflection, an unconventional narrative structure beginning with the outcome to emphasize divine agency, and vivid linguistic imagery like "فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكول" that viscerally depicts annihilation. The striking contrast between Abraha's overwhelming army and the seemingly weak birds, culminating in divine triumph, demonstrates how formal elements profoundly amplify the core theological message, indicating a profound harmony between form and content.

Keywords: Holy Quran, Surah Al-Fil, Russian Formalism, Defamiliarization, Tension and contrast, Form and content.

1. Introduction

The 20th century marked the beginning of various theories regarding the examination and analysis of literary texts. With the onset of this century, Formalism emerged as an independent school in the realm of Russian literary research. Its foundational principles, articulated by figures like Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, emphasized the autonomy of literary studies and the distinct nature of literary language. Formalists asserted that for analyzing literary texts, what should be at the center of researchers' attention is the text itself, while other matters outside the text fall outside the realm of literary studies (Makaryk, 2009: 199). Consequently, they focused on studying literary devices and techniques to such an extent that they regarded literature as a special use of language, distinguishing it from practical (everyday) language through deviation from standard language and its disruption (Selden Widdowson, 2021: 57). Thus, formalist criticism falls under text-centered criticism, where literary researchers concentrate their investigations on the text itself (Shamisa, 2022: 184).

According to formalist perspectives, a literary text consists of scattered and unrelated thoughts, ideas, images, and linguistic expressions that the author has arranged together to create an organic unity among these initially disjointed elements. Therefore, a literary text is a cohesive whole composed of components that may initially seem incoherent (Payandeh, 2022: 34). Consequently, content is one of the elements forming the overall structure of a text; thus, "form" in formalist theory encompasses content as well since form is a system resulting from the intertwining of all elements used in the text. As mentioned earlier, one of the fundamental elements of a text is its content (Moran, 2023: 194-195).

A core tenet of Russian Formalism is the concept of "defamiliarization" (also known as "estrangement" or "ostranenie"). This principle posits that the function of literature is to make everyday linguistic matters—which have become repetitive due to habit—strange and unfamiliar for their audiences through artistic creativity (Shafiei Kadkani, 2019: 72; Moghadadi, 2019: 340). Russian Formalists believe that literature distinguishes its language from non-literary language by extensively utilizing estranging devices and employing various forms of defamiliarization, thereby forcing the reader to perceive objects and ideas anew.

This study seeks to apply these foundational principles of Russian Formalism to Surah Al-Fil (The Elephant). Despite its brevity, Surah Al-Fil presents a narrative rich in literary devices that merit a formalist examination. This analysis aims to demonstrate how the Surah's linguistic choices, narrative

structure, and inherent tensions contribute to its literary effectiveness and profound theological message, viewed through the lens of defamiliarization and the harmony of form and content.

2. Research Methodology and Questions

The Holy Quran, as the miracle of the final Prophet, has always been the focus of various scholars in different dimensions, including linguistic and literary aspects. In this study, we aim to analyze a Surah from the Quran based on the fundamental components of Russian Formalism using a descriptive-analytical method. This method involves a close textual reading of Surah Al-Fil, identifying its formal devices, and interpreting their effect on meaning and reader perception, all within the theoretical framework of Russian Formalism. For this purpose, we have selected Surah Al-Fil to examine whether this Surah can be analyzed through the principles of Russian Formalism. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do specific Formalist concepts, such as defamiliarization, tension, and the interplay of form and content, manifest within the linguistic and narrative structure of Surah Al-Fil?
2. What tensions and contrasts can be observed in this Surah, and how do these contrasts lead to unity and coherence?
3. How is defamiliarization achieved in the text of the Surah, and through what specific methods and examples?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs Russian Formalism as its primary theoretical lens to analyze Surah Al-Fil. Emerging in the early 20th century, Russian Formalism, spearheaded by figures such as Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, championed the autonomy of literary studies and emphasized the distinct nature of literary language. Formalists asserted that the literary text itself should be the central focus of analysis, rather than external factors such as the author's biography or historical context. A cornerstone of Russian Formalism is the concept of "defamiliarization" (also known as "estrangement" or "ostranenie"). This principle, famously articulated by Viktor Shklovsky, posits that the function of art is to make familiar things strange, thereby disrupting automatic perception and compelling a conscious, renewed engagement with objects and their contexts. In literature, this involves "resurrecting words" that have become automatized in everyday language, forcing the reader to perceive them anew through altered vocabulary, meaning, and form. Literature distinguishes its language from non-literary

language by extensively utilizing these estranging devices. Formalism also views a literary text as a cohesive whole, where initially disparate thoughts, ideas, images, and linguistic expressions are meticulously arranged by the author to achieve an organic unity. In this framework, "form" is not merely superficial but encompasses content, as it is a system resulting from the intertwining of all textual elements. Furthermore, "tension" and "conflict" are central to formalist critique. Formalists argue that the literary quality of a text is a product of the artistic balance achieved among these conflicting elements, which ultimately resolve into unity and harmony. A primary task for a formalist critic is to identify these internal tensions and clarify how such divergences contribute to the overall organic unity and structure of the text. This study will specifically explore how defamiliarization, tension, and the interplay of form and content manifest within the linguistic and narrative structure of Surah Al-Fil.

4. Literature Review

Literary readings of the verses of the Holy Quran using contemporary literary criticism theories have gained momentum in recent years, with Russian Formalism being one of these theories upon which various studies have been conducted. While these studies affirm the applicability of Formalist approaches to the Quran, a detailed and comprehensive Formalist analysis specifically of Surah Al-Fil, focusing on its unique narrative tension and defamiliarization techniques, remains underexplored. Below are some of these studies, and how the current research builds upon them:

Nazemian, in his article "The Link Between Form and Structure with Content in Surah Al-Takwir," aimed to analyze the form and structure of Surah Al-Takwir and examine their relationship with the content and theme of the Surah. He analyzed the verbal and musical structures of this Surah and illustrated them in linear and columnar diagrams, concluding that the topics discussed in the Surah are presented according to coherent and consistent principles, with noticeable emphasis on phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features. This study, while focusing on a different Surah, demonstrates the value of analyzing the interplay between formal elements and content in Quranic texts, a principle that this current paper extends to Surah Al-Fil by examining how its specific structure and linguistic choices convey its unique message (Nazemian, 2013).

In another article titled "Defamiliarization and Foregrounding in Surah Al-Waqi'a," Nazemian explored two fundamental principles of Formalism—defamiliarization and foregrounding—in Surah Al-Waqi'a, demonstrating various instances of defamiliarization and foregrounding within this Surah

(Nazemian, 2014). This work is foundational in establishing the presence of defamiliarization in Quranic discourse. Our study builds on this by providing a focused and in-depth analysis of how defamiliarization functions within the concise narrative of Surah Al-Fil, linking specific linguistic choices to the overall defamiliarizing effect.

Babazadeh Aghdam and his colleagues, in their article "A Formalist Analysis of Surah Al-Qamar," applied the principles of Formalism to analyze Surah Al-Qamar, concluding that since the prevailing atmosphere of this Surah is entirely about the confrontation between the camp of truth and that of falsehood, it necessitates using elements such as power, speed, continuity, repetition, emphasis, and similar concepts to depict this atmosphere effectively. Therefore, the words and sentences in this Surah are constructed in a way that conveys these concepts well (Babazadeh Aghdam et al., 2018). This study's emphasis on conflict and its formal manifestation resonates with our analysis of the tension between opposing forces in Surah Al-Fil and how linguistic choices amplify this conflict.

Hasan Majidi and Zahra Golmohammadi, in their article "Foregrounding in Surah Al-Nur from a Formalist Perspective," extracted various forms of "foregrounding" present in Surah Al-Nur (Majidi & Golmohammadi, 2021). Similarly, Dena Talebpour also examined aspects of foregrounding in Surah Al-Mu'minun based on norm-breaking and norm-enhancing techniques used by Formalists in her article "Foregrounding Techniques in Surah Al-Mu'minun." She aimed to display the harmonies between form and meaning within this Surah. According to her, foregrounding in this Surah causes deviations in letters and words from their original forms, and this deviation not only does not harm the meaning of the phrases but also enhances the beauty of the verses (Talebpour, 2021). These studies highlight the importance of foregrounding in enhancing meaning and aesthetics in Quranic texts. Our paper contributes by meticulously detailing how specific foregrounding techniques in Surah Al-Fil (like rhetorical questions and unusual imagery) achieve defamiliarization, thereby deepening the reader's engagement with the Surah's core message.

Rouhollah Sayadi Nejad and his colleagues analyzed Surah Al-Fil based on structuralist thought (Sayadi et al., 2022). While structuralism shares some roots with Formalism (particularly through Roman Jakobson), it fundamentally differs in its emphasis on underlying systems and codes rather than the process of defamiliarization or the effect of formal devices on perception. Our article specifically applies Russian Formalism to Surah Al-Fil, providing a distinct perspective by focusing on how the Surah's linguistic

and narrative "form" makes the familiar historical event "strange" and compels a new way of perceiving divine power, a focus not explicitly central to structuralist analysis. This study, therefore, offers a novel and direct Formalist reading of Surah Al-Fil.

5. Discussion and Analysis

5.1. The Narrative of Surah Al-Fil

Surah Al-Fil is one of the Meccan surahs of the Quran that narrates the event of Abraha's attack on Mecca with the intention of destroying the Kaaba in five verses, with great brevity and conciseness. After Abraha and his elephant-riding troops entered Mecca, small birds attacked them in groups, dropping pebbles made of baked clay (sijjil) from their beaks and claws upon them. The massive elephants and soldiers of Abraha were crushed as if they were fodder being ground beneath the teeth of livestock (see: Razi, 1396: 220/400-441; Tabarsi, 2005: 10/442-446; Kashani, 1363: 10/345-354; Tabatabai, 1379: 20/509-512). This narrative, while historically known, is presented in a highly condensed and impactful manner that lends itself well to Formalist analysis.

5.2. Defamiliarization in Surah Al-Fil

Defamiliarization, a concept first articulated by Viktor Shklovsky, is central to understanding the artistic essence of literary texts. Shklovsky posited that art exists to make things strange, to present objects and their contexts in a new and unexpected way, thereby preventing automatic perception and compelling a conscious experience (Makarik, 1388: 13). In literature, this involves "resurrecting words" that have become automatized in everyday language, forcing the reader to engage with them anew through altered vocabulary, meaning, and form (Shafiei Kadkani, 1399: 5). Russian Formalists viewed defamiliarization as the essence of literature, focusing on how literary texts achieve this goal (Moran, 1402: 208-209).

In Surah Al-Fil, several instances of defamiliarization draw the audience's attention to the text and its profound themes:

One prominent example of verbal defamiliarization, evident throughout the Quran, including this surah, is the strategic use of rhymed words at the end of verses (faṣilah), which imparts a distinct musicality to the discourse. The words "فِيل" (elephant), "تَضْلِيل" (misguidance), "أَبَابِيل" (flocks), "سِجِّيل" (baked clay), and "مَأْكُول" (eaten), precisely placed at the end of each verse, create a rhythmic pattern that elevates the language from mere narration to a poetic and memorable experience. This consistent phonetic arrangement, beyond its semantic function, serves to foreground the text, drawing attention to its linguistic artistry and distinguishing it from ordinary prose.

The surah begins with a highly defamiliarizing rhetorical question: "أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحابِ الْفِيلِ" ("Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?"). The essence of interrogative sentences is to seek information. However, here, the question is not posed to elicit an answer, but to emphasize the certainty and undeniable nature of the event. This rhetorical function compels the listener or reader to acknowledge a self-evident truth, shifting the focus from the act of 'seeing' to the profound significance of 'what has been seen'. The address, directed at the Prophet (peace be upon him), and by extension to all humanity, uses the verb "رَأَى" (to see), which here implies a metaphorical "seeing" – a deep knowledge and certainty regarding God's decisive action against the companions of the elephant (Ibn Ashur, 1984: 30/544).

Furthermore, the choice of the interrogative adverb "كَيْفَ" (how) instead of a more common interrogative or relative pronoun like "مَا" (what) or "الَّذِي" (which/that) further enhances the defamiliarization. By asking "how" rather than "what," the Surah subtly directs attention not just to the outcome of the event, but to the manner of its occurrence – its astonishing and miraculous nature (Ibn Ashur, 1984: 30/545). This linguistic deviation from ordinary usage to describe the event of the companions of the elephant constitutes a significant instance of defamiliarization. It forces the audience to ponder the unconventional way God dealt with the army, thereby drawing greater attention to the wonder and significance of what occurred and making the strange and astonishing details of the story more tangible and comprehensible.

In subsequent verses, the Surah employs vivid and unusual imagery, further serving as instances of defamiliarization. The depiction of small birds ("طَيْرًا أَبابِيلَ") and attacking Abraha's carrying pebbles ("حِجَارَةٍ مِنْ سِجِّيلٍ") formidable elephant-riding troops in organized flocks is inherently astonishing and defies natural expectations. This image presents a divine miracle intended to protect the Kaaba, but within the text, its sheer unexpectedness and visual incongruity serve as a powerful defamiliarizing device, compelling the audience to perceive divine power operating through seemingly insignificant means.

Finally, the concluding verse provides a stark and impactful image of the defeated soldiers: "فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكُولٍ" (turning them into chewed-up straw). This comparison transforms the mighty army into something utterly worthless and easily discarded, akin to fodder chewed and spit out by livestock. This unconventional and visceral imagery completes the process of defamiliarization, turning a historical event into a vivid, memorable, and

profoundly unsettling depiction of divine retribution. It recontextualizes the familiar concept of defeat into a newly perceived, humiliating annihilation.

5.3. Tension and Conflict Present in the Surah's Narrative

Formalists consider the literary quality of a text to be the result of an artistic balance established by the author among disparate elements, so that these elements ultimately reach a form of unity and harmony. The richer a text is in literary terms, the more internal tensions it possesses. The ambiguity and complexity of a literary text stem from the tension-filled relationships among its elements and components (Payandeh, 2022: 1/47). For this reason, "tension" and "conflict" are among the most central concepts in the formalist critique of literary texts. According to formalists, the author of a literary text can express the truth he intends in the most resonant way by employing the contrasts that arise within the text. One of the main efforts of a formalist critic when engaging with a literary text is to identify the parties involved in the conflict and clarify how these divergences come together into a structured whole that has an organic unity (see Payandeh, 2009: 46-49). Therefore, to achieve a complete formalist reading of Surah Al-Fil, we must explore the tension, conflict, and how unity is achieved within this Surah.

In the narrative presented by Surah Al-Fil, there are two opposing points where the main tension occurs. On one side of this conflict stands a group riding on a colossal animal, confidently relying on their numbers and equipment to attack the House of God; the elephant-riding troops of Abraha, referred to as "the companions of the elephant" (أَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ), convey the grandeur and apparent majesty of this army to the audience. This force represents overwhelming material power, human arrogance, and a perceived invincibility. However, on the other side, there are weak birds tasked with protecting the Kaaba; flocks of birds ("طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ") armed with small pieces of baked clay ("سِجِّيلٍ") in their claws and beaks. The stark contrast between these "small birds" and the "elephant army" effectively displays dramatic tension; indeed, small birds with seemingly insignificant means of defense stand against enormous elephants and well-equipped soldiers.

The elephant army set out under Abraha's command to destroy God's House in Mecca, while God sent birds to protect His House, and what ultimately came to pass was God's will and decree. Thus, the tension and conflict among the elements conclude with the defeat of the elephant army and the manifestation of divine will, leading to balance and tranquility. Therefore, we can point out a profound contrast in this Surah between apparent material power (the formidable army of Abraha) and inner spiritual power (divine will manifested through weak means), as well as between the

formidable weapons of Abraha's troops and the small stones used by the birds. What ultimately occurs defies natural expectations from this conflict; the powerful army of Abraha fails to achieve its goal and cannot destroy the Kaaba; instead, it suffers a humiliating defeat and is annihilated. This contradiction highlights divine power in this Surah, as it shows that God can achieve monumental results even with the weakest means. Thus, a key aspect of this conflict is the subversion of audience expectations, which based on material logic would deem Abraha's victory certain; yet, the final outcome is his defeat and destruction.

In Surah Al-Fil's narrative, the main conflict occurs between two opposing forces: "the companions of the elephant," who embody apparent glory and reliance on material power, symbolizing human arrogance and tyranny, and "طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ" (the flocking birds), who rise up against them with "سِجِّيلٍ." This clear contrast between "apparent grandeur" and "the simplicity of divine tools" creates dramatic tension: small birds with seemingly insignificant weapons arrayed against gigantic elephants and a well-equipped army. The resolution of this tension underscores the absolute sovereignty of divine will.

This pattern of tension and contrast—where a seemingly powerful material element faces an apparently weak element executing divine will—along with the balance achieved at the end of this conflict through divine decree, is echoed throughout other verses of the Quran and in Islamic narratives (see Meybodi, 2014: 10/621). For example, according to Islamic traditions, Nimrod's death—who compared himself to God (see Al-Baqarah, 258)— occurred due to a weak mosquito. A narration from Imam Sadiq (peace be upon him) states that God humiliated a tyrant like Nimrod, who denied God's lordship, by sending a tiny mosquito to him (Majlisi, 1983: 12/37). Where the weakest of His creatures, namely the mosquito, was made to prevail over him to demonstrate His power and greatness. It entered through his nostrils and reached his brain, killing him (Majlisi, 1983: 12/37). Likewise, the Pharaoh, who arrogantly proclaimed, "I am your lord, the Most High" (An-Nazi'at, 24), introduced himself as the superior lord of the people, was drowned in water (Yunus, 90), and God subjected him to punishment in this world and the Hereafter (Ibid, 25). These parallels reinforce the consistent thematic tension resolved by divine intervention that is powerfully manifested in Surah Al-Fil.

5.4. Narratology of Surah Al-Fil

Surah Al-Fil, with its five short verses, succinctly and cohesively narrates the story of the army of Abraha's attack on the Kaaba and their destruction by groups of stone-throwing birds. This narrative brevity enhances the focus on the main message of the Surah, which is divine power and miraculous support

for sacred things. In this narrative, classic story elements are observable. The story has a narrator and characters and occurs in a specific time and place.

The narrator of the story of the companions of the elephant can be seen as a third-person omniscient narrator who recounts events from an unlimited perspective; that is, he is aware of events and their consequences simultaneously. The narrative begins with a questioning tone and artistically illustrates the contrast between material power (the army of elephants) and spiritual power (the small birds), ultimately indicating the defeat of material power by seemingly weak means. This brevity in narration, despite the astonishing nature of the events, places the dominance and supremacy of divine will and power at the center of the audience's attention. The characters in the story are as follows:

1. "The army of elephants" (أَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ), which symbolizes the arrogant apparent human power of Abraha, who intended to destroy the Kaaba relying on military strength and material tools. The army of elephants and its commander act as the main opposition in this narrative and seek to challenge divine will.

2. "The birds" ("طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ"), which symbolize divine will, manifest God's power through their existence, as He sends them to confront the army of elephants. These champions, entrusted with executing divine will, face the elephant army with an unexpected and incredible tool: small pieces of dried clay ("سِجِّيلٍ"). They miraculously achieve victory over the elephant army.

3. "God," the absolute power and wisdom who nullifies the enemy's schemes and does not allow them to fulfill their intentions. God destroys His enemies through natural means without direct intervention. He is the sender of the small birds to confront the army of elephants, thereby establishing His will through them using "سِجِّيلٍ."

In this narrative, character development is not present; rather, the focus is intently on the confrontation between two opposing groups (the army of elephants and the birds) as a demonstration of divine omnipotence. Surah Al-Fil recounts a historical event that occurred before Islam and is known among historians as "the Year of the Elephant." However, the narration strategically begins with stating the outcome of the events: "أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ *أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ" ("Have you (O Muhammad) not seen how your Lord dealt with the Owners of the Elephant? * Did He not make their plan go astray?" (Al-Fil, 1-2). It then refers to the sending of the birds and the destruction of the elephant army (cf. Al-Fil, 3-5). This non-linear narrative, starting with the rhetorical question about the outcome, further enhances the defamiliarization, forcing the reader to engage

with the how and why rather than simply the what of the event. The setting of the narration is in the land of Hijaz and around the Kaaba.

5.5. The Correspondence of Form and Content in Surah Al-Fil

In literary studies, the set of elements that constitute the main structure and texture of a text is referred to as "form." Therefore, consonants, vowels, syllables, elements that create the musicality of speech, figures of speech, literary devices, plot, point of view, character development, etc., are all components that form the work's structure (Shamisa, 2022: 183-184). This definition may create the illusion that there is a dichotomy and opposition between form and content; however, it should be noted that today, according to modern formalists, there is no dichotomy between form and content. Thus, form is defined as a system resulting from the interconnection and intertwining of all elements used in the text (Moran, 2023: 194). Consequently, semantic and content elements also play a role in shaping the work's form. This harmony and correspondence between form and content is clearly observable in Surah Al-Fil.

Surah Al-Fil, with its compact structure and dynamic imagery, exemplifies the perfect harmony of form and content. This concise Surah presents the historical event of the elephant army's attack on the Kaaba in an artistic expression through five verses, where form and content serve each other.

Defamiliarization, as a central tenet of Russian Formalism, begins in this Surah with the interrogative phrase "أَلَمْ تَرَ" ("Have you not seen?"). This rhetorical question immediately takes the audience out of their ordinary state of passive reception and compels them to actively reflect on an event known to them, thereby foregrounding the narrative's significance. The unconventional narrative structure, starting with the rhetorical questions about the outcome (verses 1-2) before detailing the means (verses 3-4), further defamiliarizes the historical account. Instead of a linear progression, the Surah first establishes the undeniable divine intervention and then proceeds to explain how it happened, creating suspense and emphasizing the miraculous nature of the event rather than simply recounting facts. The comparison of the destroyed army of elephants to "كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكُول" (chewed grass) also profoundly completes the defamiliarization of this historical narrative by creating an unconventional, visceral, and humiliating image that permanently alters the perception of the vanquished army. Thus, Surah Al-Fil reinterprets a well-known event within a strange narrative framework, forcing a new way of perceiving divine power.

The prominence of language, or foregrounding, is achieved through dynamic verbs like "فَعَلَ" (did), "جَعَلَ" (made), and "أَرْسَلَ" (sent), which imbue

the text with a powerful and heroic rhythm, emphasizing divine action and agency. The semantic contrast between "the companions of the elephant" (أَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ), representing immense material might, and "birds in flocks" (طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ) along with "stones of baked clay" (حِجَارَةٍ مِنْ سِجِّيلٍ), representing seemingly insignificant divine instruments, creates a powerful linguistic and thematic opposition. These stark contrasts elevate the content of the Surah from merely reporting a historical event to a level of profound literary and aesthetic expression, where the form actively underlines the message of divine supremacy over human arrogance.

Thus, the dominant theme of the Surah, which revolves around "the denial of material power and the affirmation of divine power," is perfectly manifested in the rhetorical and structural arrangement of the Surah as follows: the introductory rhetorical interrogative that completely focuses the audience's attention on the fate of "the army of the elephant" (verse 1), establishing a sense of awe and inevitability; the statement regarding the nullification of the enemy's plot in the form of a second rhetorical interrogative that slightly reduces the ambiguity of the first sentence but still does not clearly state their fate, building suspense (verse 2); the precise reference to the sending of "the flock of birds" accompanied by "pebbles" that are instruments of divine punishment, detailing the unconventional means (verses 3-4); and finally, the decisive outcome that reflects the triumph of divine will and the complete destruction of the elephant army (verse 5). This linear arrangement of rhetorical questions, narrative detail, and conclusive imagery presents the content in a highly cohesive form where the beginning and end are intricately interconnected, creating a powerful rhetorical arc.

The musicality of the text in Surah Al-Fil is significantly enhanced through phonetic combinations such as the pervasive repetition of consonants like "ل" (l) and "م" (m), alongside the consistent rhymed endings of verses. These phonetic features, far from being incidental, actively contribute to the Surah's distinct aesthetic, elevating the text beyond mere reporting. They create a rhythmic impetus that subtly but powerfully reinforces the inevitability and dramatic nature of the divine intervention. Surah Al-Fil, by transforming a historical narrative into a condensed poetic structure, not only emphasizes auditory rhythm but also reproduces divine content through carefully crafted linguistic patterns. From the perspective of foregrounding, the language of the Surah draws the audience's attention to its linguistic mechanisms by creating semantic suspense in the first verse and by presenting contrasting, almost paradoxical images (the enormous elephants and small birds), thereby making the reader actively engage with the text's form.

The structure of Surah Al-Fil demonstrates how linguistic economy (conciseness) can be accompanied by profound semantic density. This Surah, by creating an "aesthetic distance" from ordinary language through its rhetorical questions, unexpected imagery, and rhythmic precision, has become a text whose primary function is not merely to convey information but to create an immersive experience of the event referenced in the Surah for the audience through its carefully chosen syllables, words, and sentences. The text actively defamiliarizes the familiar historical event, forcing a new perception of divine power and human impotence.

Therefore, regarding the form and content of Surah Al-Fil, it can be said that the text of this Surah, utilizing techniques such as defamiliarization, foregrounding, and norm deviation, has transformed a historical event into an artistic expression where form and content are in a dialectical relationship with each other. The dominant theme intended by the Surah—that is, the supremacy of divine will over other wills—is best articulated and amplified through its specific wording and structural choices. These characteristics make Surah Al-Fil a prominent example of harmony between structure and meaning within the framework of Russian Formalism theory.

6. Conclusion

Surah Al-Fil, through the strategic application of literary techniques rooted in Russian Formalism—specifically defamiliarization, foregrounding, and norm deviation—constructs a cohesive and impactful narrative where form and content are in perfect harmony. The meticulous use of devices such as consistent rhyme and intrinsic musicality not only enhances the aesthetic dimensions of the text but also, through a powerful and rhythmic flow, conveys the certainty and inevitable fate of those who oppose divine will. The Surah's opening with the rhetorical interrogative "أَلَمْ تَرَ" ("Have you not seen?") directly engages the audience, drawing them into a scene of profound tension and compelling them to reflect objectively on the undeniable greatness of divine power. This immediate direct address, rather than a straightforward statement, foregrounds the miraculous nature of the event. The striking and astonishing images employed—such as the attack of tiny flocks of birds (طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ) and their bombardment of Abraha's massive elephant-riding army with dried clay pebbles (سِجِّيلٍ)—are brilliant examples of defamiliarization. By subverting the audience's logical expectations regarding relative strength, these images vividly depict both the utter humiliation of the enemy and the effortless ease with which God can destroy overwhelming forces. The concluding comparison of the destroyed army to "كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكُول" (grass that

livestock have crushed under their teeth), through its symbolic and visceral language, powerfully illustrates both the worthlessness of material power and the absolute certainty of divine will.

The central dramatic tension of the Surah, manifested in the stark contrast between the enormous elephants (symbolizing human arrogance, material strength, and perceived invincibility) and the small, seemingly insignificant birds (symbolizing the subtle yet potent instruments of divine will), resolves not according to human material logic but entirely with divine logic. This resolution culminates in the inevitable triumph of God's will and the absolute destruction of His enemies. Thus, form and content in Surah Al-Fil are in complete harmony, working in tandem: the external structure, word choice, sentence construction, and narrative conciseness effectively convey the dominance and supremacy of divine will to the audience. The concise plot of the Surah, by deliberately eschewing individual character development and extraneous historical details, maintains an unwavering focus on its main message: the absolute incapacity of humans before God's omnipotence. Short sentences, a rapid rhythm, and decisive vocabulary (e.g., "تَرْمِيهِم" - "they pelted them," "فَجَعَلَهُم" - "He made them") all serve to convey a sense of urgency, immediacy, and undeniable certainty in divine action. This profound harmony between form and content transforms Surah Al-Fil into an eternal statement where the external structure (narrative conciseness, innovative imagery, captivating musicality) and the inner meaning (the imperative of submission to divine will and the demonstration of God's power) are so intricately intertwined that every word and formal choice reflects a truth of monotheism. Such harmony not only attests to the literary miracle of the Quran but also serves as an unparalleled model for integrating art and spirituality in religious texts.

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