

## **MUHAMMAD SHAHRUR AS A CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL: A PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION**

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**Abstract:** *This article seeks to understand Muhammad Shahrur as a contemporary Muslim intellectual in the twentieth century. This finding suggests that Muhammad shahrur was a controversial scholar among Intellectual Muslim. Some allegations led him as the most popular intellectual in this century. A series of books written came to support as well as to counter his ideas on al-Qur'an. This paper review the initial exploration of Muhammad Sharur's work on interpreting al-Qur'an. Besides demonstrating the biography of Muhammad Shahrur, especially, his academic background, the author also reviews at least three important books written by Muhammad Shahrur which become the main issue of this article. Those three books generate a revolutionary idea, especially how to interpret al-Qur'an from a different perspective. Through science methodology as well as language proficiency, Muhammad Shahrur presents the new face of interpreting al-Qur'an. He attempted to read al-Qur'an with the current way of thinking without looking back at the legacies (turats) of Muslim intellectuals.*

**Keywords:** *Controversial; Muhammad Shahrur; Methodology; Legacy*

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini berupaya memahami Muhammad Shahrur sebagai intelektual Muslim kontemporer di abad ke-20. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Muhammad shahrur adalah seorang sarjana yang kontroversial di kalangan Muslim Intelektual. Sejumlah protes dan dugaan menggiring Muhammad Shahrur sebagai intelektual paling populer di abad ini. Begitupula, beberapa buku yang ditulis untuk mendukung sekaligus melawan ide-idenya tentang al-Qur'an. Makalah ini mengulas eksplorasi awal pada karya Muhammad Sharur dalam menafsirkan al-Qur'an. Terlepas dari paparan tentang biografi Muhammad Shahrur, khususnya, latar belakang akademisnya, penulis juga meninjau setidaknya tiga buku penting yang ditulis oleh Muhammad Shahrur yang menjadi isu utama artikel ini. Ketiga buku tersebut menghasilkan ide revolusioner terutama bagaimana menafsirkan al-Qur'an dari perspektif yang berbeda. Melalui metodologi sains serta kemampuan bahasa, Muhammad Shahrur menghadirkan wajah baru penafsiran al-Qur'an. Dia berusaha membaca al-Qur'an dengan cara berpikir saat ini tanpa melihat kembali warisan (turat) intelektual muslim.

**Kata Kunci:** **Kontroversi; Muhammad Shahrur; Metodologi; Warisan**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The disappearance of the Islamic thought revolution since centuries ago has generated a new generation of modern Islamic thinkers to accumulate (al-dhammu), articulation (al-nutqhu), appreciation (al-bayaan) and criticism (al-naqdu) on the legacy classical Islamic intellectuals. Islamic thinkers such as Mohammed Arkoun from Algeria, Hassan Hanafi, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid in Egypt, Odenes Thayeb Tazini and Ali from Morocco, Mohammad Harb in Syria, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabiri and Taha Abdurrahman

in Ramaihi and Sulaiman al-Askari in Kuwait,<sup>1</sup> has been at the forefront of the revolutionary effort in dismantling the "regime and establishment of thought". The modernization project carried out by Muhammad Abduh, which began a major rethinking of the study of the Koran, is the reason for the presentation of Arabic thought in an Egyptian context. Because almost all intellectual opposition figures were the generation of Muhammad Abduh. Among his students, known as Qasim Amin, Sa'ad Zaglul and Ahmad Lutfi Sayyid.

The demand to deconstruct Islamic thought goes hand in hand with renewal projects in the Islamic world.<sup>2</sup> This project will ultimately have implications for urging him to reformulate ('iadatu al-bina) the epistemological foundation in the reading of the holy book which is the founding text of Muslims. Experiments in the reading of new holy books of the Koran with a relatively new epistemological basis have also been proven by Mohammed Arkoun, although it is still limited to Surah al-Fatihah. Arkoun, in this case, was able to elaborate further by describing the methods of social science then practiced in the Islamic world, including in studying the Koran.<sup>3</sup> The demands of the age then coupled with the broadening of the problem area add to the urgency of re-interpretation of the religious teaching system which all empties into the sacred text. *Tahrir al-Fikr's* slogan (freedom of thought) that colors the discourse of modernity can certainly lead to new methodological offers that ultimately lead to a plurality of thought frameworks.<sup>4</sup>

Islam as an object of scientific study is still short-lived. This is caused by a feeling of reluctance and politeness that is very deep in the body of Muslims so that Islam is approached as a religion of revelation alone, everything must be returned and subject to the text of revelation. Though scientific studies must put Islam as a "historical religion" rather than a religion of revelation.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, religion will become a land of criticism. Another cause can be viewed is how tight the dynamic space of Islamic intellectual dynamics is based on the strength of political tendencies. *Tahrir al-Fikr's* slogan seems unable to stem "official authority" from both the political and religious elites who always rely on them to have a prerogative in interpreting religious texts. The efforts of thinkers to carry out the reconstruction of the historical roots have witnessed how the strong political role in the name of religion can thus hamper the creative process of Muslim intellectual reformers with even more saddening actions to eliminate the lives of these reformers. They are Mahmud Muhammad Taha in Sudan,<sup>6</sup> Subhi Salih in Lebanon,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Zuhairi Misrawi, "dari Tradisionalisme Menuju Post Tradisionalisme Islam", *Taswirul Afkar*. No.9

<sup>2</sup>This statement can be proved by the 18th-century napoleon expedition. Muslims at that time had been struck by the development of science under the Napoleon army. This event aroused new awareness for Arab thinkers of its underdevelopment. Then came the figures as the avant-garde of Islamic revival. These included Al-Tahtawi, Jamaluddin Al-afgani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rasyid Ridha and a series of Abduh followers such as Husain Haikal, Mustafa Abd al-Raziq, Taha Husain and Ali abd al-Raziq. See Harun Nasution, *Pembaharuan Dalam Islam ; Sejarah Pemikiran dan Gerakan* (Jakarta : Bulan Bintang,1996).

<sup>3</sup>See Mohammed Arkoun, *Lecturer de Coran* diterjemahkan oleh Machasin dengan judul *Berbagai Pembacaan al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: INIS,1997).

<sup>4</sup>Hassan Hanafi, "Paradigma Rekonstruksi Turats ; Menyikapi Pemikiran Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid", *Metafora*, No. 01. 1998. p.51.

<sup>5</sup>See Rumadi, "Kritik Nalar ; Arah Baru Studi Islam", *Taswirul Afkar*. No.9 tahun 2000, p.63.

<sup>7</sup>The former deputy mufti in Lebanon was killed in 1986 by Shiite groups in Lebanon due to his ideas about the opening of ijtihad doors and the prohibition of *taqlid*.

and Faraq Fuda in Egypt.<sup>7</sup> This is clear proof that religion is still in the grip of a state that can manipulate religion at any time. Religion has not been able to be a tool of criticism of the state, it is still under the shadow of the state so that whatever is done by the state, religion must justify it.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the discussion of figures who were being the victims of "savagery" political currents wrapped in religion, the name of Dr.M.Shahrur cannot be forgotten and underestimated. With the intensity of "judgment" which is softer when compared with Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid who must be willing to leave his homeland, Shahrur must accept a sad enough accusation that his work entitled *al-Kitab Wa al-Qur'an: Qiraah Mu'ashirah* claimed to be more dangerous than Salman Rusydi's satanic verses.<sup>9</sup> This article will further elaborate on Muhammad Shahrur's academic journey and explain a preliminary note on his books in various Islamic disciplines.

## II. EDUCATION AND HIS INTELLECTUAL CAREER

Dr. Ir. Muhammad Shahrur bin Dhaib (Shahrur or Syahrour) was born in Syria on April 11, 1938, and died in December 2019. Shahrur began his education at elementary and secondary schools in his native land, precisely in the educational institution Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi, Damascus. In 1957, he completed his studies. Due to his satisfactory value, his passion and passion for education prevented him from stopping at this level, with the help of a scholarship from the local government he went to Moscow to study civil engineering.<sup>10</sup> Besides concentrating in his main field of study, the atmosphere of communist ideology also colored his intellectual journey. Evidenced by Shahrur's admiration for Marxist ideas and exploring Marxist figures by not proclaiming themselves as adherents and defenders of Marxism.<sup>11</sup> The characters who become his idol include Hegel and Alfred North Whitehead.

In 1964, Shahrur earned a diploma in his main field, engineering. In the same year, he later back home and served in the engineering faculty at Damascus University. In the following year, he continued his postgraduate studies in Ireland, precisely at University College Dublin in the same discipline of studies. For two years of informal lectures, finally, in 1967, Shahrur was entitled to research at Imperial College in London. At the same time, precisely in June the same year there was a war between Britain and Syria. With forced Shahrur decided to get out of England. This condition didn't break Shahrur's enthusiasm to continue his studies. He immediately returned to Dublin at the National University of Ireland to complete his master's and doctoral programs in engineering with a concentration in soil and earth mechanics. He obtained his master's degree in 1969. Three years later, precisely in 1972, he also earned a doctorate in the same field. Since then, he has officially become a lecturer with earth and ground mechanics courses. In addition to his busy life as a lecturer, he is also a technical consultant at an engineering

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<sup>7</sup>He is a liberal politician and a prolific columnist who criticized extreme Islamic groups which eventually got him killed in 1992. Among the fruits of his work was *al-Haqiqah al-Gaibah*.

<sup>8</sup>See Bisyrri Efendi, "Tak Membela Tuhan Yang Membela Tuhan" dalam pengantar buku Abdurrahman Wahid, *Tuhan Tak Perlu di Bela* (Yogyakarta: LkiS,1999), p.xviii

<sup>9</sup>See Bisyrri Effendi, "Tak Membela Tuhan, p.xviii

<sup>10</sup>See the last page of Shahrur's book, *al-Kitab wa al-Qur'an : Qiraah Mu 'ashirah*, See also Charlez Kurzman (Ed.). *Liberal Islam : A. Source Book* (New York : Oxford University Press,1998),p.139. See also Peter Clark, "The Shahrur Phenomenon: A Liberal Islamic Voice From Syria" in *Islam Christian - Muslim Relation*, 7 : 3 (1996), p.337.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Clark, "The Shahrur Phenomenon, p. 337.

consulting firm he opens. In 1982-1983 he was sent to Saudi Arabia as a researcher in his field at a company in the Saudi Consulate. In 1995, Shahrur became an honorary participant in public debates on Islam in Morocco and Lebanon.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to his native language, Arabic, Shahrur also mastered English and Russian. This makes it easy to devour books that smell of philosophy and linguistics. His association with Ja'far Dek Bebe - an associate in Syria and a friend at the University of Damascus - gave its significance to Shahrur's intellectual development and journey. From here, Shahrur studied a lot, especially in the field of linguistics. Even in the book of Shahrur *al-Kitab wa al-Qur'an*, Ja'far gave a commentary. At the end of this book, there is also Ja'far's review of spoken Arabic and the history of the development of Arabic.

Looking at Shahrur's intellectual journey, it is only natural that he is known to be the most courageous and controversial. The academic path from basic education to doctoral level did not touch Islamic sciences as much as other thinkers such as Hassan Hanafi, Abed al-Jabiri, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, and Mohammed Arkoun. The weakness of this educational background is the main reason for his opponent. Although criticism came repeatedly, Shahrur continued to work and continue to be creative. Some books that have been born and a series of freelance articles published in various national and international magazines.

### ***Shahrur in the Arabic Intellectual Constellation***

In general, Arab intellectuals have the same lines and horizons of thought which are revitalizing Islamic teachings in the arena of global thought. This framework, if examined closely, will not be separated from the three interactions of three things, namely: (1) Islamic intellectual property (*turats*), (2) Authentic sources of Islamic teachings. (3) The phenomenon of modern Western civilization. The struggle over these three entities occurs because Muslims are confronted with the West which is sometimes identified with "advanced civilization". While on the other hand they are confronted with the belief that Muslims have authentic sources of Islamic teachings that are always in harmony with the times and are universal (*Shalih likulli zamaan wa makaan*).

The three points above give special meaning to Arab intellectuals as well as being a map of Shahrur's thought amid Contemporary Arab intellectuals. *Turats* for Arab thinkers are the main priority in each of their studies. Their appreciation also varied. Some of them are moderate with an emphasis on being critical of *turats* but still appreciative. Thinkers who fall into this category are Fazlur Rahman,<sup>13</sup> Mohammed Arkoun,<sup>14</sup> Hassan

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<sup>12</sup>Peter Clark, "The Shahrur Phenomenon, p. 337.

<sup>13</sup>Rahman's moderate attitude towards tradition is demonstrated in his efforts in reinterpreting the history of Islamic thought. For further description, see Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago : University Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup>Arkoun's appreciation of *turats* can be read in his work. See Mohammed Arkoun, *Nalar Islam dan Nalar Modern ; berbagai tantangan dan jalan baru*, translated Rahayu S. Hidayat (Jakarta : INIS, 1994).

Hanafi,<sup>15</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid,<sup>16</sup> and Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, among them, some are liberal (cynical) towards turats, so that sometimes they do not present turats in their frame of mind. Names like Mohammad an-Naim<sup>18</sup> and Muhammad Shahrur - who subsequently became the central figure in this article - this was included in this category.

From this it appears how the fundamental difference between Shahrur and other Arab thinkers. Shahrur tried to read the Koran with today's glasses without tracking his historical journey. So naturally, if Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid claimed Shahrur as an ahistorical thinker. Shahrur in explaining the source of authority of Islamic teachings also draws a line of thought separating from other Arab intellectuals. His denial of the hadith (verbalizing the sunnah) and making the sunnah a method of interpretation<sup>19</sup> and merely holding the Qur'an as an authentic source of Islamic teachings once again sets him apart from other intellectuals because to the best of the author's knowledge, almost all other Arab thinkers appreciate the sunnah in the verbal sense.

The stage of Arab intellectualism brings its own nuances to its thinkers. Egypt, which was the locomotive of Islamic thought renewal from the time of Muhammad Abduh to Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid's time, concentrated on dismantling methodologies which according to Egyptian thinkers were monotonous at one point and did not open up to Western methodologies, especially the methodology of the social sciences. At this point, it seems that Shahrur belongs in this category. His anxiety over the methodology of the salaf "forced" him to give birth to a "way of reading" which he termed *qiraah mu'ashirah* which emphasized the basic principles of the existing methodology including the principles of fiqhi and *aqeedah*. Likewise, he offers approaches to natural science, mathematics, Newtonian physics in analyzing Islamic law.<sup>20</sup>

In this case, Shahrur tried to approach the Koran with a mathematical approach. When viewed at this point, in the author's opinion, Shahrur is in line with Ahmad Khan

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<sup>15</sup>Hasan Hanafi's moderate attitude is illustrated in the triangle of *turats* namely past *turats*, Western *turats*, and contemporary realities. See Hasan Hanafi, *Muqaddiman fii ilmi al-Istiiqrab* (n.pp: Darul al-Fanniyah, n.y.),p.12. See also Hassan Hanafi, *al-Turats wa Tajdid; Mauqifuna Min al-Turats al-Qadim* (Beirut: al-Muassasah al-Jamiah wa Nasys wa tauzi,1992), p.27-29.

<sup>16</sup>Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid in addressing turats is articulated in his theory of "discourse criticism" in order to escape from the hegemony of decomposing texts (the Koran and the Sunnah). From this it appears that Nasr Hamid still appreciates tradition in terms of the existence of that tradition. For further description, see Nasr hamid Abu Zaid, *al-Nash al-Sultah al-haqiqah al-Fikry al-Diian bain Iradat al-Haimanah* (Casablanca : al-Markaz Atsaqafial-Arabiyah,1997), p.24.

<sup>17</sup>Through the mega project "criticism of Islamic Arabic thought" al-Jabiri tried to structure Islamic Arabic thought. Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *al-Turats wa al-Hadasah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasah Wihdah Arabiyah,1997).

<sup>18</sup>Abdullah Ahmed an-Naim is a reformer figure in the field of sharia law and at the same time a friend of Arkoun's discussions. He once made an extreme statement on historical sharia in his book titled *Toward an Islamic Reformism* "that as long as Muslims remain true to the historical framework they will never reach the level of renewal. See Mohammed Ahmed An-Naim dan Mohammed Arkoun, *Dekonstruksi Syariah* (Yogyakarta: LKIS,1994), p.69.

<sup>19</sup>According to Shahrur, the *sunnah* referred to the method of interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad in dealing with the Arab world in the 7th century. This method according to Shahrur that needs to be taken is not the *sunnah* material because according to him what was said by Prophet Muhammad SAW was only suitable at that time. Shahrur directly eliminated the narratives which were the Prophet's explanation of the Qur'an as well as the Prophet's words which had been made by Muslims as an ethical basis. Further description. See Shahrur "Kita tidak memerlukan Hadis" translated by Mohammad Zaki Husain, <http://www.is-lam@isnet.org/Shahrur.html>.

<sup>20</sup>Shahrur "Kita tidak memerlukan Hadis,

(w.1898), a thinker from India, who is classified by Fazlur Rahman as a modernist group as quoted by Greg Barton.<sup>21</sup> There is a similarity in approach when both make scientific (natural sciences) their starting point. The question that then arises is whether the similarity of this approach leads Shahrur as a modernist group when both of them lived at different times.<sup>22</sup>

The answer to this question certainly requires further study, because, on the other hand, Shahrur is campaigning for a return to text (at the same time declaring himself as the proclaimer of this group). What is meant again according to Shahrur's version is an attempt to read the holy book with epistemological devices derived from the sacred text (al-Qur'an al-Karim).<sup>23</sup> This is, of course, different from the modernist group which places rationality and empiricity as its poles without regard to the text.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, for this reason, Shahrur is more suitable to be held by the neotextualist group - at least according to the writer - because he is different from the scripturalist-literalists who strictly and rigidly adhere to his past legacy.

Indeed, it is very difficult to determine the position of Shahrur in Arab intellectual portraits. Hassan Hanafi in classifying Arab thinkers reduced from his vision of thought. First are conservative groups, secondly Progressive Islam and Moderate Reformist Islam. Names like Abdul Halim Mahmud, Muhammad al-Bahy, Anwar Jundi, Rasyid Ridha can be included in the first group. The second group is Progressive Islam which consists of Hassan Hanafi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, Amin al-Khuli, Kamal Abdul Madjid, Fahmi Huwaidi, and Salah al-Jursy. While the last group consisted of Hasan al-Banna, Muhammad Quthub, Malak Hifni Nasif, Muhammad al-Gazali, Muhammad Imarah and most of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* thinkers.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the classification version of Hassan Hanafi above does not include Shahrur in one group. The author does not know for certain the main explanation. But at least, Shahrur is known for bringing new ideas in his work and progressives in compiling his thoughts, then at least in my opinion, Shahrur can be included in the second group, progressive. Although Shahrur does not want a certain position. For him, how is Islam still righteous *likulli zamaan wa makaan*.

Apart from the above categories, Charlez Kurzman included Shahrur in the "liberal Islam" group.<sup>26</sup> Evidently, Shahrur was included in a figure edited by Kurzman as a list

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<sup>21</sup>See Greg Barton, Greg Barton, *The Emergence of Neomodernism; A Progressive, Liberal Movement of Islamic Thought in Indonesia (A Textual Study Examining The Writing of Nurkholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi, Ahmad Wahib and Abdurrahman Wahid*, translated by Nanang Tahqiq dengan judul *Gagasan Islam Liberal di Indonesia: Pemikiran Neo Modernisme Nurkholis Madjid, Effendi, Ahmad Wahib dan Abdurrahman Wahid* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999). p.154.

<sup>22</sup>In the Fazlur Rahman classification, there is a priority in the grouping of the renewal movements of Islamic thought, namely: (1) Revivalist movements in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, namely Wahabi movements in Arabia, Sanusiyyah in North Africa and Fulaniyah in West Africa, (2) The modern movement is spearheaded in India by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (w.1898) and throughout the Middle East by Jamaluddin al-Afgani (w.1897) and in Egypt by Muhammad Abduh (w.1905). (3) Neorevivalism that is modern but seems rather reactionary, Al-maududi and his Muslim Jamaat group in Pakistan are the best and last examples (4) Neomodernism which was pioneered by Fazlur Rahman and followed by his pupil Nurkholish Madjid.

<sup>23</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, "Reading The Religious Text: A New Approach", <http://www.Islam21/keyissues/modemist/>.

<sup>24</sup>See Suadi Putro, *Arkoun tentang Islam dan Modernitas* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1996).

<sup>25</sup>See Hassan Hanafi, "Pengantar dalam buku Mozaik Pemikiran Islam Timur Tengah" in *Islam Garda Depan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2001), p.22.

<sup>26</sup>The term "liberal" needs special attention. Both Charles Kurzman and Greg Barton both interpreted liberal Islam as an Islamic contraction by finding its roots in something Islamic namely in

of liberal Islamic thinkers.<sup>27</sup> This category does not mean that there is no problem because in the end Shahrur is aligned with Muhammad Ibnu Abdil Wahab, Jamaluddin al-Afgani, Rasyid Ridha, and Yusuf Qardhawi - all of whom were on the list of liberal figures by Kurzman - and almost all of them are not in contact with the West and even hostile to the West and even hostile to the West. Herein lies the problem, Shahrur, who has a Western educational background, although in the field of soil mechanics, has at least been colored by Western thought methodologies, at least he has appreciated it.

From this, it can be seen that how Shahrur in the portrait of Arabic intellectualism has relatively little been discussed. He is different from other Arab thinkers such as Hassan Hanafi, Nawal Sya'dawi, Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid and Abed al-Jabiri. It is suspected that the study was not specific to a particular area, in other words, lacking "scientific consequence" which could be an intellectual mediation that could then spread his thoughts.

The other side that is not less important is Shahrur's background from the technical community, causing his capability and acceptability to be doubted. Even so, it does not mean the offer of his thoughts is heeded. Some Western writers such as Peter Clark, Dale F.Eicklman, Charlez Kurzman, and Wael B.Hallaq appreciated and introduced many of his thoughts. But unfortunately, his ideas were more accepted by the European Scientific community than in the Arab world - a geographical and ideological environment in which he was born and raised. Even worse in the Arab community, the idea is more subjected to insults and blasphemy than as an academic offer.<sup>28</sup>

### III. ANALYSIS OF HIS WORKS

The name of Dr. Ir. Muhammad Shahrur is indeed not as big and popular as Mohammed Arkoun (Algeria) or Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid (Egypt). But in matters that are controversial, intellectual and engineering at the same time from Syria is no less great.<sup>29</sup> About 15 Arabic books have been written to respond to and blaspheme his thoughts.<sup>30</sup>

Shahrur in his intellectual journey, including a prolific writer in bringing up his ideas. As far as the writer explores, Shahrur's works in book form are five. Two of them are related to scientific discipline, *Handasah al-Asasah* which consists of three juz, *Handasah al-Turbah* which is only 1 juz. While his works in the Islamic sciences are *al-Kitab wa al-Qur'an: Qiraaah Muashirah* (1990). *Dirasah Islamiyah Muashirah Fii Daula wa Mujtama'* (1994),<sup>31</sup> and *al-Islam wa al-Imran : Mandhum al-Qiyam* (1996).<sup>32</sup>

In addition to books, Shahrur also actively writes articles that are published in

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"quranic exegesis in the lives of the prophets of Muhammad and the early Muslims" in short "to examine liberal Muslims in the light of Islamic Tradition". This means that the West is not made as a dialogue partner who has an important contribution to the emergence of a liberal term.

<sup>27</sup>See Charlez Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup>.... *Shahrur Islamic society has more in common with European and American Countries than Any in the Arab or islamic word today. He has not surprisingly, been the subject of criticism*, Lihat Peter Clark, "The Shahrur Phenomenon", p.341.

<sup>29</sup>This does not mean or claim that Shahrur as a figure who likes sensationalism then gives birth to controversial ideas.

<sup>30</sup>Muhammad Shahrur, "Kita tidak memerlukan hadis": <http://www.Islam@isnet.org/shahrur/html>.

<sup>31</sup> This book was immediately followed by book publishing *Tahafut Dirasah al-Mu'ashirah fii Daulah wa Mujtama'* written by Munir Syawwaf

<sup>32</sup>See Syahiron Syamsuddin, "Konsep Wahyu al-Qur'an dalam perspektif Muhammad Syahrur," *Jurnal Study Ilmu-ilmu al-Qur'an dan Hadis*, 1:1 (2000), p.49.

journals and magazines. Among others can be seen namely "The Divine Text and Pluralism in Muslim Society" in the Muslim political report (August 14, 1997), "Islam and the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Woman" in Kuwaiti Newspaper (1998),<sup>33</sup> Shahrur's latest work, which has been translated into English, is "*Mashru 'Mitsaq al-Islamy*", Damascus, 1999.<sup>34</sup>

As an initial step in tracing Shahrur's ideas, the writer will parse the main points of his three books which are considered to represent the core of his thinking.

### ***Al-Kitab wa Al-Quran: Qiraah Muashirah***

Among Shahrur's works, this book is his most monumental and at the same time most controversial. This book offers fresh ideas related to the themes of the science of the Koran and the concepts of the Koran relating to theology, law, and morality. Even though some of the themes and concepts used in this book are familiar to observers and reviewers of the Koran, the understanding of themes and understanding of concepts provided by Shahrur still contains a different nuance from what has existed so far.

This book is the result of Shahrur's intellectual anxiety that is not satisfied with the tradition of classical Islamic thought and old concepts related to the Koran. In addition to this motivation, Shahrur was also inspired by the suffering experienced by the Arabs and Muslims in general for being left behind. So that the impression appears that the Arabs are synonymous with underdevelopment.

In addition to the introduction and conclusions, Shahrur's work is divided into 4 chapters. Chapter 1 examines the understanding, differences and relations of terms related to the Qur'an such as *al-Kitab*, *ummu al-Kitab*, *al-Qur'an*, *al-Zikr*, *Sab'u al-Matsani*, *al-Nubuwwah*, *al-Risalah*, *al-Inzal*, and *Tanzil*.<sup>35</sup> Among others, Shahrur's reconstructive thought in this chapter is that he is not like the majority of scholars who divide the Ottoman corpus which divides into three groups of verses namely. (1) Al-Qur'an wa sab'u al-Matsani which according to him only refers to mutasyabihat verses and only has relation with the concept of nubuwwah (Prophethood). This category contains general concepts about the entire existence, history of the prophets and apostles (ahsan al-qasas) and changes in natural events (tasrif al-ahdas al-tabiah). (2) Umm al-Kitab simply refers to verses relating to the concept of the treatise (apostolate). Included in this category are verses relating to law and worship (al-hudud wa al-ibad), temporal and conditional laws (al-ahkam al-marhaliah wa al-dharfiya), morals (al-hudud furqan wa al-typical) and good teachings that are comprehensive and specific but are not included in the category of legal determination. (3) Verses that are not muhkamat nor mutasyabihat are known as *al-kitab*.<sup>36</sup>

From this, it appears that Shahrur began his work by tracing keywords in the Koran which he thought was mistakenly perceived by some Muslims. Departing from the framework of thinking that there is no synonymity in Arabic lafadh, then tracing its linguistic aspects, Shahrur then concludes that each word has nuances and meanings that are distinctive and different from the others. This is evident from the description above

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<sup>33</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, "Islam and the 1998 Beijing World Conference on Woman" dalam Charlez Kurzman (Ed.) *Liberal Islam* (Oxford: University Press, 1998).

<sup>34</sup>This book was already translated into English by Dale F. Eicklemam dengan judul *Proposal for an Islamic Covenant* (2000). <http://www.isim/publication/other/shahrur>

<sup>35</sup> See Muhammad Shahrur, *al-Kitab wa al-Qur'an: Qiraah Muashirah* (Damaskus: al-Ahalli Li Thibaah, 1990), p. 11.

<sup>36</sup>Muhammad Shahrur, *al-Kitab*, p. 35

in Chapter 1. He tried to reconstruct classical understanding and at the same time break away from the hegemony of the basic concepts it carries.

In chapter 2, Shahrur explored in-depth the main themes of the concept of prophecy namely the existence of nature and the problem of human knowledge. In the first part (al-jadal al-maddi) contained in the universe. In the second part, Shahrur analyzes the concepts of the Koran about human diversity both contained in him and relating to his attitude towards reality. For this reason, Shahrur examines key words namely al-bashar wa al-insan, al-haq wa al-bathil, al-ghaib wa syahadah, al-fuad wa al-qalb, al-qalam wa al-alaq, and mushahkhas wa al-mujarrad. According to him, the spirit is not a mystery and is based on life but it is a mystery of humanity. That is, that the spirit that changes human form from al-bashar (human physiology) to the human form (human quality).<sup>37</sup>

In the second segment, Shahrur began to appear co-opted by his scientific background, namely engineering. When he talks about natural phenomena in which he termed material diversity, it appears how Shahrur tried to incorporate the basics of natural science into his mind. In Shahrur's mind, all that exists in man is nothing in the form of mystery including the question of the spirit.

The effect of the natural sciences on Shahrur's thinking becomes clearer in chapter three. Shahrur proposed the theory that everything has two limits that's the maximum limit and the minimum limit. Likewise with the verses in the bible. This theory is named after the hudud theory which he divided into two namely al-hadd al-adna (lowest limit) and al-hadd al-a'la (maximum limit). This theory is then applied to several fiqhi problems such as marriage, inheritance, zakat and veiling. This chapter also discusses several issues related to the Sunnah. For Shahrur, sunnah is only a method not a verbalization.

In chapter four, Shahrur examines two points contained in the Koran: human needs that include economic needs and beauty and the stories of previous prophets. Thus, Shahrur in the systematic of his book and the subjects of his choice.

Broadly speaking, it can be said that Shahrur in studying the verses of the Koran uses the philosophy of language by exploring key words contained in the verses of the Koran both through syntagmatic and paradigmatic approaches. Syntactic means seeing the meaning of each word must be influenced by the words before and after it. Whereas paradigmatic views that a certain theme concept cannot be understood comprehensively unless it is connected with other themes both antonym and those that are adjacent to their meaning. Collaboration between qurani argumentation and logic is Shahrur's objective phenomenon. Likewise, exact schemes are often displayed to facilitate the reader in understanding the new concepts he offers. However, Shahrur in discussing a theme is often incomplete and not comprehensive. Apart from the controversy above, the book is very important for Islamic scholars.

### ***Dirasah Islamiyah Muashirah Fii Daula Wa Mujtama'***

This book is Shahrur's second work from his contemporary reading process. First published in 1994 by Ahali wa Nasyr wa Tauzi '. Compared to his first work which took 20 years, Shahrur in his second work only took 4 years to complete. This does not mean that the content contained in this book does not give the nuances typical of Shahrur's thoughts. Evidenced by the birth of a book that challenges the book that is *Tahafut al-*

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<sup>37</sup>Muhammad Shahrur, *al-Kitab*, p. 304.

*Dirasah Islamiyah al-Muashira Fii Daula wa Mujtama'* by Munir Syawwaf.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Shahrur's second book, the level of resistance is much lower than his first work. In general, this book tries to highlight the archeology of thought about *Daula wa Mujtama'*. This book consists of 9 chapters namely the concept of *al-usrah*, *al-ummah*, *al-qaumiyah*, *al-sya'biyah*, *al-tsaurah*, *al-hurriyah wa dimokratiyah*, *al-istibdad* and *al-jihad*.

In Shahrur's view, there are 3 weaknesses in Islamic thought so that the concept of Islamic politics does not develop. (1) There is an assumption that is grounded in the body of Muslims that what has been produced by the companions is the basis of Islamic politics without knowing that it is merely *ijtihad*. inheritance is considered absolute truth. (3). Dependence on individuals (the government) is still maintained so that the welfare target becomes "fate". If by chance the command is good then all matters are good but if not then the opposite happens.<sup>39</sup>

Shahrur in this book tries to reveal that in the history of Muslims there is no law known as *fiqhi*. With a slightly extreme tone, Shahrur said "do not look for *fiqhi* of legislation in Islamic turats because it does not exist".<sup>40</sup> From here Shahrur tried to eliminate the historical process of the life of Muslims which according to him there was no freedom of thought in it. This is due to the influence of *qadha* and *qadar* extraordinary.

The philosophy of *al-usrah* (family) in the history of human thought has similarities with animals ranging from the procedures for life, food and shelter. It's just that with his wits, humans can develop the concept of family so that in the end they leave animalistic ways.<sup>41</sup> From this, according to Shahrur, the beginning of the emergence of family organizations that developed into the need for the existence of the *daulah* was indirect, further the process of the occurrence of the *daulah* was natural along with the development of human thought.

The interesting thing in this book, when Shahrur said that Adam was not a human ancestor and not a Prophet. The first prophet according to him was Noah as. At this time the formation of language also began. Shahrur refers to QS al-Baqarah: 213

كَانَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً فَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ النَّبِيِّينَ مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ....

Translation:

"humans are one. (after a dispute arose), So Allah sent the Prophets, as bearers of glad tidings and warrants"

Shahrur in translating the above verse that the concept of "ummah" existed before Allah sent the prophet as a bearer of warning.<sup>42</sup> In Adam's time, according to him, who became an actor in giving warnings were angels in human form which were only limited in justifying the existence of God and the obligation to know.<sup>43</sup>

According to Shahrur, the Koran uses the term "ummah" not only to be limited to

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<sup>38</sup>Among the counters of Shahrur's thoughts. Mahamy Munir is the most productive figure in responding to Shahrur's mind. Two of his books that were born to hit Shahrur's books are all labeled *tahafut*.

<sup>39</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah Fii Daula Wa Mujtama'* (Damaskus : Ahali,1994), p.16.

<sup>40</sup>Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah*, p. 16

<sup>41</sup>Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah*, p.47

<sup>42</sup>Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah*, p.65.

<sup>43</sup>Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah*, p.48.

the human realm that makes sense but also includes the animal realm.<sup>44</sup> So according to him, at first the people were united "ummah wahidah" meaning that the procedures for life at that time had similarities in both humans and animals. This period according to Shahrur was a transitional period "al-fatrah intiqaliyah" before entering the time of Noah as the first prophet. This period is the beginning of the development of knowledge and the presence of the prophets who brought the Shari'a as well as the beginning of cultural and civilizational differences that were previously in the concept of "ummah wahidah".<sup>45</sup> Shahrur refers to QS Hud: 118

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَجَعَلَ النَّاسَ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَا يَزَالُونَ مُخْتَلِفِينَ

Meaning:

"If your God wills, surely He will make humanity one people, but they always disagree."

In short, according to Shahrur, that at first humans were one people. Reflected in the verse *كان الناس أمة واحدة*. The arrival of Noah with other prophets, each of whom brought a variety of Shari'a, was the beginning of the birth of society (*mujtama' insan*). Proven in the continued verse *فبعث الله النبيين مبشرون و منذرين*. This section of the verse seems to mean that humans are fragmented due to the sending of prophets and apostles. However, according to Shahrur, divisions or differences between humans are given a solution by Allah SWT, reflected in the continued verse *وأُنزِلَ معهم الكتاب بالحق ليحكم بين* *الناس فيما اختلفوا فيه* God sent down the al-book as "antidote" for humans who are often in conflict.

The term *إختلفوا* according to Shahrur is a feud between one group and another group. In the continuation of the verse that reads *وما اختلف فيه إلاال بين أوتوه من بعد ما جاءتهم* *البيانات* this is an affirmation that the often different group is the group sent to him the prophet. So *al-Bayyinah* according to Shahrur is *al-Mubuwwat*, but in the end, Allah Himself will give instructions from what they are disputing about the truth;

فهدي الله الذين آمنوا لما اختلفوا فيه من الحق<sup>46</sup>.

What Shahrur has done above reminds the author of how the *tahlili* method works.<sup>47</sup> He tried to parse word for word in a verse. It's just that Shahrur can not be categorized following the *tahlili* method because he is not consistent in applying it. Likewise, he did not use history either in terms of reference or as a principle of legitimacy as the notion of

<sup>44</sup>See QS al'An'am: 37

<sup>45</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah*, p.67.

<sup>46</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah*, p71

<sup>47</sup>Tahlili is a methodology of interpretation that outlines in detail word for word, verse by verse and surah by surah in the Qur'an from beginning to end. This method is divided into two namely *tafsir bil ma'sur* and *tafsir bi al-riwayah*.

tahlili method. Likewise, he sometimes in various descriptions in various descriptions in this book uses the maudhui methodology which searches key words in the Koran relating to a theme. This is apparent when Shahrur in the next chapter discusses the theme of al-qaum. He collected the words al-qaum in the Koran so that in essence concluded that what is meant by al-qaum are groups that exist in the Ummah. In distinguishing with al-qaum and al-ummah, Shahrur gave an example as illustrated in the following scheme:<sup>48</sup>



In general, the language approach still colors his thinking. All keywords are tracked in terms of language philosophy and refer to one belief that each word has another word that is closely related. In other words, the syntmatic and paradigmatic approaches still color the second book.

#### *Al-Islam wa al-Iman : Mandhum al-Qiyam*

This book is Shahrur's third book which was also published by Ahali in 1996, approximately two years after the publication of his second book. This 401-page book generally highlights two major themes, namely (1) The concept of al-Islam wa al-Iman is reinforced by reviewing verses of the Koran with six themes namely *al-Islam*, *al-iman*, *al-ihsan*, bible, *al-faridah*, *al-wasiyah* and *al-mauidha*. while in the second chapter, Shahrur tries to reinterpret al-ibad themes that are contrasted with *al-abid*, *syahada* and *al-ghaib*, *al-abawain* and *al-walidain*, *az-zanb* themes that are compared with *sayyi'ah* themes.

Referring to the verses that became his references, Shahrur interpreted Islam as submission and submission to Allah which was prescribed to all mankind from the time of Noah to the time of the Prophet Muhammad and underwent a process of acculturation and assimilation.<sup>49</sup> Islam in this sense is all the celestial religions carried by the apostles even though their treatises differ. The people who converted to Islam at the time of Noah were those who believed in Allah, faith in the hereafter and did good deeds. Islam followers of the Prophet Ibrahim are called hanif. Those who follow the Shari'a of the Prophet Musa are called *allazina hadu*, followers of the Prophet Jesus are called al-nasarah and those who follow the Prophet Muhammad are called believers.

Thus, the word faith according to Shahrur refers to religious teachings brought by the Prophet Muhammad. From this, we can see how Shahrur reconstructed an understanding of the principles of faith and Islam. According to him, the principles of Islam are faith in God, the last day and good deeds. Meanwhile, the principles of faith include faith in the Prophet Muhammad saw such as prayer, zakat, fasting, pilgrimage,

<sup>48</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, *Dirasah*, pp.77-78.

<sup>49</sup>Shahrur gave an example of how the concept of monotheism underwent dynamism beginning with the form of monotheism *mushahkhas* (personal monotheism) and ultimately in the form of monotheism *mujarrad* (abstract monotheism).

and deliberation.<sup>50</sup>

When a person proclaims himself a follower of the Prophet Muhammad, he implies *al-mitsaq al-imani* (contract of faith) so that he is obliged to perform religious duties (*takalif*). Nevertheless, *takalif* according to Shahrur has levels. *Taklif* which uses the term *al-kitab* such as the obligation to pray, fasting is *taklif* which is contrary to human nature. This means that the people of Muhammad carried it out by force. In contrast to *taklif* which uses the term *faridhah*, it means giving such as the husband's obligation to his wife and giving *sadaqah*. The concept of *taklif* with term *al-wasy* implies *tawasul* (continuity, *tawasul*). Included in this category are doing good to both parents, a ban on killing children, a ban on adultery, a ban on eating orphans' property.<sup>51</sup>

The Shahrur category of thought above further strengthens its position if it is co-opted by the philosophy of language which was reduced by Abu Ali al-Farisi. Starting from the understanding that all words in the Koran have nuances of distinctive and different meanings, Shahrur reconstructed all the words that had been synonymous. Consequently, he also produced different and relatively new conclusions for Muslims.

The second concept, *mandhum al-qiyam* is discussed in this book quite reasonably. In the subtitles "al-ibad wa al-abid", he collaborated the concepts of *al-hurriyah* (human freedom) and *mitsaq al-Islam* (Islamic contract). Through a paradigmatic and syntmatic approach, he concluded that *mitsaq al-Islam* was reflected in full devotion to God by doing good to anyone. Related to this, Shahrur in the sub-theme "aina ya 'budu Allah" even asserts that true worship lies in the creation of benefit on earth. One example that is seen as a manifestation of worship is the practice of adoption (*al-tabanni*). The last part of the book concludes with a discussion between the relationship between Islam and politics. According to Shahrur, Islam must not be politicized and if it is politicized, what happens is the act of squandering Islam and politics simultaneously.

Such is the general description of 3 of Shahrur's works which also reflect the methodology of "qiraah mu 'ashirahnya" to the Qur'an. It appears how Shahrur tried to read the Koran without the help of the existing interpretation methodology. The 3 works mentioned above "almost" do not use history in concluding the Qur'an. Keywords related to a theme are removed, here and there then they are brought together and compared. This method was adopted because of a belief that the verses of the Koran interpret with others. Every word in verse will be influenced by the words around it. This method is of course relatively new to Muslims.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Displaying progressive-revolutionary research in the world of interpretation of Shahrur caliber is an attempt to build counter-opinions in challenging the finality of interpretation studies. The philosophical foundation begins with an understanding that the text cannot speak by itself without any creative effort to understand the text. Therefore, this research is expected to have implications for the emergence of new enthusiasm in reading the Koran. This will also dispel the impression that the Koran is "officially closed corpus" to borrow the term Arkoun - but it is a book that has an "open corpus" claim.

Qira'ah Muashirah, which was built by Muhammad Shahrur, is one of the many lawsuits against the establishment and standardization. Contemporary reading as intended

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<sup>50</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, *al-Islam wa Mandhum al-Qiyam* (Damaskus: Ahali li Thibaah wa Nasyr Wa Tauzi, 1996), p.74.

<sup>51</sup>See Muhammad Shahrur, *al-Islam*, p. 74.

by the poem muashirah becomes a new era in the world of interpretation. Apart from the background of the author in the field of mechanics, his work seeks to dismantle the devices in the world of interpretation that has been built by classical scholars. Of course, this will spark a problem that is no less severe than the severity of Shahrur's claim.

Therefore, the presence of this work without questioning the weaknesses and strengths of trying to explain and at the same time criticize the thoughts of Shahrur. Apart from these things, this research will still have significant implications in believing the Qur'an as a holy book. Alternative readings designed in his work invite the emergence of new colors in treating the Qur'an. This condition will also invite the reader to read the Koran not monotonous in one mainstream or read in a linear position.

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