Anthropomorphism (Tashbīh) in the Qur'an: A Thematic Study of Tafsir Marah Labid by Al-Nawawi al-Bantani

Muhammad Aga Yudha
Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Turkey
E-mail: agayudha69@gmail.com

Abstract

The concept of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) as a method of understanding divinity is explicitly rejected in the Qur'an. However, since the Qur'an is revealed in human language, discussions about divine attributes inevitably employ expressions familiar to its audience. This creates a need for a comprehensive academic inquiry into how the Qur'an addresses and rejects anthropomorphic depictions of God. This study aims to explore the meaning and dimensions of *tashbīh* in the Qur'an based on a thematic analysis of *Tafsir Marāḥ al-Labīd* by Shaikh Nawawi al-Jāwī. The research employs a qualitative thematic method by collecting and analyzing relevant verses along with Nawawi's exegetical insights and supporting theological references. The findings reveal that Shaikh Nawawi classifies *tashbīh* into three distinct categories. Understanding these categories requires specific interpretive principles (*ḍawābiṭ*), including: (1) similarity in wording does not imply similarity in essence; (2) resemblance in non-actual realities (*amr ʿadamī*) does not constitute *tashbīh*; and (3) the subject of comparison (*mushabbah*) may share attributes or functions with its counterpart (*mushabbah bih*) without implying equivalence. This study concludes that *Marāḥ al-Labīd* presents a nuanced theological and linguistic perspective on anthropomorphic expressions, reinforcing the transcendence (*tanzīh*) of God in Islamic thought. The research contributes to Qur'anic studies by clarifying the interpretive boundaries between metaphorical language and theological orthodoxy.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Marah Labid, Qur'anic Interpretation, Shaikh Nawawi al-Jawi, Tashbih.

Abstrak

Konsep *tashbīh* (antropomorfisme) sebagai metode untuk memahami ketuhanan secara eksplisit ditolak dalam Al-Qur'an. Namun, karena Al-Qur'an diturunkan dalam bahasa manusia, pembahasan mengenai sifat-sifat ilahi tidak dapat dihindarkan dari penggunaan ungkapan-ungkapan yang akrab bagi pembacanya. Hal ini menimbulkan kebutuhan akan kajian akademik yang komprehensif mengenai bagaimana Al-Qur'an menyikapi dan menolak penggambaran Tuhan secara antropomorfis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi makna dan dimensi *tashbīh* dalam Al-Qur'an berdasarkan analisis tematik terhadap *Tafsir Marāḥ al-Labīd* karya Shaikh Nawawi al-Jāwī. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode tematik kualitatif dengan mengumpulkan dan menganalisis ayat-ayat terkait, disertai pandangan tafsir Nawawi serta referensi teologis pendukung lainnya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Shaikh Nawawi mengklasifikasikan *tashbīh* ke dalam tiga kategori yang berbeda. Pemahaman terhadap ketiga kategori ini memerlukan kaidah penafsiran khusus (*ḍawābiṭ*), antara lain: (1) kesamaan lafaz tidak serta-merta menunjukkan kesamaan hakikat; (2) kemiripan dalam realitas yang tidak aktual (*amr ʿadamī*) tidak termasuk dalam *tashbīh*; dan (3) *mushabbah* dapat memiliki sifat atau fungsi yang sama dengan *mushabbah bih* tanpa menunjukkan kesetaraan hakiki. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Marāḥ al-Labīd* menyajikan perspektif

teologis dan kebahasaan yang halus terhadap ekspresi antropomorfis, yang pada akhirnya menegaskan konsep *tanzīh* (transendensi Tuhan) dalam pemikiran Islam. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian Al-Qur'an dengan memperjelas batas penafsiran antara bahasa metaforis dan ortodoksi teologis.

Kata kunci : Antropomorfisme, Marah Labid, Penafsiran Al-Qur'an, Shaikh Nawawi al-Jawi, Tashbih.

Introduction

The concept of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) is a foundational tenet in Islamic theology, affirming that God is absolutely distinct from His creation. However, this principle is constantly in dialectical tension with its theological counterpart, *tashbīh*—the notion that God bears some resemblance to His creation. This tension between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* is not only normative but also deeply embedded in linguistic, historical, and epistemological debates throughout Islamic intellectual history. As Holtzman notes, "debates about anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) persisted for centuries, especially between traditionalists and rationalist theologians, as each attempted to negotiate divine transcendence with scriptural imagery"(Liew, 2022).

While the Qur'an explicitly states that "There is nothing like unto Him" (*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ*) (Qur'an 42:11), it also contains metaphorical expressions that, on the surface, appear anthropomorphic—such as the verse "the hand of God is over their hands" (*yad Allāh fawqa aydīhim*) and the statement that God "settled Himself upon the Throne" (*istiwāʾ ʿala al-ʿarsh*). Such metaphorical language raises concerns about potential misunderstandings of God's nature, leading to what Islamic theological discourse terms *awhama al-tashbīh* (the illusion of anthropomorphism).

Etymologically, *tashbīh* derives from the Arabic root ش-ب-ﻩ (shīn-bāʾ-hāʾ), meaning "similarity" or "resemblance" (Ibn Manẓūr, 1993, vol.13, p. 505). Although the word *tashbīh* in its basic form does not appear in the Qur'an, derived forms like *shubbihat* and *mushabbihah* occur in various morphological structures. This aligns with the linguistic maxim *ziyādat al-mabnā tadullu 'alā ziyādat al-maʿnā*—the more complex the morphology, the deeper the semantic content (Al-Farāhīdī, 1987, vol.3, p. 104). Even in local exegesis, such as ʿAbd al-Raʾūf al-Singkilī's *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*, efforts to interpret anthropomorphic verses draw heavily on primary Arabic sources like Tafsīr al-Jalālayn and al-Bayḍāwī, emphasizing metaphor and semantic nuance(Liew, 2022).

In classical Arabic literary tradition, the term *tashbīh* did not always carry negative connotations. For instance, the pre-Islamic poet Labīd ibn Rabīʿah used the verb *sabaha* to describe resemblance either partially or entirely. Likewise, in hadith literature, *tashbīh* was used in non-literal contexts, such as in Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamān's description of the fitnah of the end times as *mushabbihah muqbilah*—a trial that resembles truth but is essentially misleading (al-Aṣbahānī, 1974, p. 174; al-Ṣanʿānī, Vol.5, p. 312; al-Ḥākim, 1990, p. 495). This suggests that *tashbīh*, within classical Arabic usage, signified a range of semantic possibilities beyond literal anthropomorphism.

Over time, however, *tashbīh* underwent epistemological transformation, shifting from a linguistically neutral term to a theologically charged category. During the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime, discussions on God's attributes were largely functional and had not yet evolved into speculative debates (Davis, n.d., p. 18). The controversy surrounding anthropomorphism intensified after Islam came into contact with Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology (Rahman, 2009, p. 34). As Richard Martin observes, serious theological debates on anthropomorphism emerged as early as the 2nd/8th century, particularly as scholars began to repudiate anthropomorphic depictions of God found in scriptural texts(Liew, 2022).

One early figure linked to anthropomorphic views was Hisyām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 179 AH), who was accused of describing God as having a physical height of seventy cubits (al-Ṭūsī, 2001, Vol.1, p. 269; al-Mufīd, 1993, p. 48). However, as noted by al-Ṭūsī and al-Mufīd, such accusations are unsubstantiated by contemporary documentation. During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, the issue of *tashbīh* became increasingly politicized, particularly in the aftermath of the *miḥnah khalq al-Qur'an*, which saw fierce contestation between the Muʿtazilites and Hanbalites (Muhammad Noor, 2021). Some Hanbalite scholars even endorsed questionable hadiths with overt anthropomorphic content, exacerbating the controversy.

It is within this historical and intellectual context that the contribution of Shaykh Nawāwī al-Jāwī (d. 1897), a Nusantaran mufassir and jurist, becomes particularly significant. In his *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd*—the first Arabic-language Qur'anic commentary by a Jawi scholar (Al-Jawi al-Syafiʿi, 1954)—Nawāwī not only interprets anthropomorphic verses but also establishes a systematic methodology for distinguishing between sound and deviant understandings. He classifies *tashbīh* into three semantic and theological categories: *nidd*, *mithl*, and *shabīh* (Al-Bayḍāwī, 1997, Vol.1, p. 26; Al-Jawi, 1954).

Nawāwī stresses that interpreting verses on divine attributes requires a keen awareness of classical Arabic linguistics and cultural context. For example, in discussing Qur'an 4:157 (*shubbihat lahum*), he highlights how the passive verb form indicates deliberate semantic ambiguity to prevent literal readings (Al-Jurjani, 1984; Haleem & Mohadi, 2023, pp. 153–168; Al-Jawi, 2014, p. 78; Yudha, 2023, pp. 119–136). Furthermore, Nawāwī underscores that misinterpretations of divine attributes often stem from inadequate understanding of Arabic semantics. He thus advocates a return to primary sources, such as pre-Islamic poetry and rigorously authenticated hadith, to reconstruct the semantic intention of resemblance-related expressions (Al-Jawi, 1954, p. 68). This method aligns closely with that of al-Ghazālī, who emphasized the need for balancing *tafwīḍ* and *taʾwīl* according to the audience's intellectual capacity, to protect the purity of divine transcendence from spatial or physical associations (Senin et al., 2022).

Accordingly, studying *tashbīh* requires more than normative interpretation. It demands a synthesis of linguistic analysis, historical discourse, and contextual reading of revelation. This article aims to explore *tashbīh* comprehensively through a linguistic-historical and systematic approach, focusing on Nawāwī al-Jāwī's *Marāḥ Labīd* to trace the shift of meaning from linguistic resemblance to theological formulation. In doing so, this study offers a thematic Qur'anic hermeneutic that balances divine transcendence with the expressive medium of human language in scripture.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach using thematic analysis through library research. The type of research conducted was conceptual and interpretative, focusing on the analysis of texts that discussed the concept of *al-tashbīh* in the Qur'an and its theological implications. The primary sources analyzed included *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd* by Shaykh Nawawi al-Jāwī, relevant exegetical and theological works by the same author, as well as academic literature from peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books that explored the historical and semantic development of the term *tashbīh*. The central object of study was the Qur'anic text itself, from which verses related to *tashbīh* and its derivatives were identified, categorized, and interpreted.

Data collection was carried out by systematically gathering and reviewing classical and contemporary sources that elaborated on Shaykh Nawawi's views on *tashbīh* in both exegetical and theological contexts. The study applied the thematic Qur'anic interpretation

method (*tafsīr maudhūʿī*), which, according to Öğmüş (2015), aimed to construct a holistic understanding of specific themes in the Qur'an rather than a fragmented or verse-by-verse interpretation. The analysis focused on the semantic fields of *al-tashbīh* and its morphological derivations, paying particular attention to the impact of Arabic morphological patterns (*wazn al-ṣarf*) on theological interpretation. The study deliberately retained Arabic morphological terms without translation, following al-Ghazālī's argument that translating the term *tashbīh* could obscure its intended meaning and hinder a comprehensive theological understanding (Al-Ghazali, 2012).

The strength of this method lay in its integrative and interdisciplinary character, which allowed linguistic, semantic, and theological dimensions to converge in the analysis. This approach enabled a deep and contextual interpretation of *tashbīh* as it appeared in the Qur'an and classical Islamic scholarship. However, the method was not without limitations. As a library-based conceptual study, it did not include empirical validation through fieldwork or quantitative testing, and its reliance on the availability and accuracy of written sources may have introduced interpretive bias. Nevertheless, by grounding the analysis in both textual and methodological rigor, this study contributed to a nuanced and contextually rich understanding of anthropomorphic expressions in Islamic theology.

Results and Discussion

A. Theological Thought of Nawawi al-Jawi in *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd*: Biography, Methodology, and the Concept of *al-Tashbīh*

1. Biography of Nawawi al-Jawi and the Structure of *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd*

Shaikh Nawawi al-Jawi, whose full name was Muhammad Nawawi ibn Umar al-Jawi al-Bantani, was a renowned Islamic scholar from Banten, Indonesia, born in 1813 CE in Tanara, a village in the Serang district of Banten. He is widely recognized as one of the most influential Nusantara scholars in the 19th century, particularly for his works written in Arabic that gained wide circulation in the Islamic world, including the Middle East. He traveled to Mecca at a young age to pursue religious education and eventually settled there, where he became a respected teacher and writer of numerous Islamic texts, primarily in the fields of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*ʿaqīdah*), and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) (Azra; 2004).

During his time in Mecca, Nawawi studied under prominent scholars such as Ahmad Zayni Dahlan and became affiliated with the Shafiʿi school of law. His profound mastery of Islamic sciences earned him the title of *Imām Nawawi aṣ-Ṣaghīr* (the younger Nawawi), in reference to the famous medieval scholar Imam Nawawi of Syria. Nawawi al-Jawi's

contributions were not only scholarly but also pedagogical—his works were used as instructional material in *pesantren* across the Indonesian archipelago and became integral to the Islamic intellectual heritage of Southeast Asia (Bruinessen; 1990).

Among his many works, *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd*—also known as *Tafsir Nawawi*—stands out as the first complete Qur'anic commentary in Arabic written by a Southeast Asian scholar. The work was completed in Mecca and reflects Nawawi's deep concern with the correct understanding of Qur'anic verses, particularly those concerning divine attributes. His *tafsīr* reveals his systematic approach to integrating classical Sunni theological perspectives with linguistic precision, and it is deeply rooted in the methodology of the Ashʿarite school (Al-Jawi al-Syafiʿi; 1954).

Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd is distinctive in its structure and method. Nawawi employed a concise and accessible style, often explaining complex theological or jurisprudential concepts in a manner comprehensible to students and general readers. Despite its brevity compared to classical multi-volume commentaries, *Marāḥ Labīd* offers rich exegetical insights by drawing upon earlier authorities such as al-Baydāwī and al-Jalālayn while also asserting original analytical perspectives—particularly in his critique of *tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) and affirmation of divine *tanzīh* (transcendence) (Nawawi al-Jawi; 2011).

The exegetical method in *Marāḥ Labīd* blends grammatical analysis, theological interpretation, and spiritual reflection. Nawawi often addressed contentious theological themes, such as the interpretation of *mutashābihāt* verses, with a careful balance between literal and allegorical meanings, thus preserving the theological integrity of divine transcendence. His consistent emphasis on avoiding anthropomorphism shows a strong alignment with Ashʿarite theological norms, and it reflects his broader intellectual commitment to defending orthodoxy in a time of increasing doctrinal plurality within the Muslim world (Muthahhar; 2020).

2. The Formulation of the Concept of *al-Tashbīh* in *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd*

Shaikh Nawāwī al-Jāwī (d. 1897 CE) was the author of the first Arabic-language Qur'anic commentary written in the Indonesian archipelago. He was also among the earliest *mutakallimūn* in the region, known for his strong opposition to anthropomorphic doctrines (*Mushabbih*). According to Nawāwī, anyone who believes in anthropomorphism—even if they affirm resemblance between God and creation in only one aspect—has ascribed to God a contingent (created) attribute. In doing so, they collapse the ontological distinction between the Creator and the created, leading logically to the problems of infinite regress (*al-tasalsul*)

and circularity (*al-dawr*), both of which are considered irrational and theologically unacceptable.

From this position, Nawāwī declared that those who hold anthropomorphic beliefs (*Mushabbihūn*) are to be classified as disbelievers (Nawawi al-Jawi; 2011; Nawawi al-Jawi; 2012). However, he also argued that the debate surrounding anthropomorphism cannot be adequately addressed merely through juridical reasoning (*ta'fīl*) or legal rulings imposed on such individuals. The understanding of *al-tashbīh*, Nawāwī insisted, must return to the Qur'an itself, since the primary source that prohibits *al-tashbīh* is the Qur'an (Al-Jawi al-Syafiʿi; 1954).

Furthermore, Nawāwī emphasized that before one can fully understand *al-tashbīh*, it is essential to differentiate between *al-tashbīh* as a semantic concept derived from Qur'anic expressions, and *al-tashbīh* as theological anthropomorphism—the attribution of human traits to God. He argued that *al-tashbīh* arises from interpretive engagements with scriptural texts, which necessarily require the support of auxiliary sciences (*ʿUlūm al-Ālah*) to be properly understood. In this framework, Nawāwī presented a synthesis of theological vigilance and linguistic precision, proposing that the proper understanding of God's transcendence must be guided by a disciplined, Qur'an-based exegetical method.

B. Nawawi al-Jawi's Interpretation of Divine Transcendence: Linguistic and Theological Perspectives on al-Tashbīh in the Qur'an

1. Nawawi al-Jawi's Linguistic-Theological Interpretation of al-Tashbīh and al-Mutashābih in the Qur'an

The Qur'an mentions the root of *al-tashbīh* and its derivatives in seven places with three distinct morphological forms (Abdul al-Baqi; 1981; Ibn Qutaybah; 2008). One of the most notable occurrences of the passive verb *shubbih* appears in the Qur'anic narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus, presented in the pattern *faʿʿala* (Qur'an; 2002). In Arabic morphology (*ʿilm al-ṣarf*), this pattern can imply at least three semantic functions. The first is *taʿdiyah*—the causative transformation of a verb into a transitive form. According to Shaikh Nawawi al-Jawi, the meaning of *shubbih* in this verse refers to a resemblance limited to one aspect, not a total resemblance in all dimensions. For Nawawi, complete similarity between two entities would dissolve their distinct identities, thereby collapsing them into one (Al-Jawi al-Bantani; 1985).

The second reason supporting this partial resemblance is the verb's appearance in the passive form (*fiʿl majhūl*). In Arabic rhetoric, a passive verb is often used to indicate an event

whose agent is either commonly known or intentionally omitted (ʿadam taḥṣīṣ al-fāʿil). Nawawi al-Jawi interprets the passive form in this context as a deliberate narrative strategy. The Qur'anic intent, he argues, is not to focus on identifying who crucified Jesus, but rather to reject the Jewish claim of his execution (murāʿāt gharḍ al-sāmiʿ). The real focus is the internal doubt among the Jews regarding the event. Had the resemblance implied complete likeness in all aspects, such doubt would have been illogical.

Additionally, shubbih in this verse can also mean a confusion of identity (salb), in which the mushabbah (thing likened) and mushabbah bih (thing it is likened to) appear visually indistinguishable (mumāthalah li-ṣ-ṣūrah). This explains why ordinary Jews believed, without hesitation, that their religious leaders had successfully crucified Jesus (Nawawi al-Jawi; 1985). Another meaning Nawawi proposes for shubbih is the attribution of action to an object due to the ambiguity or absence of a known agent (Al-Nawawi al-Jawi; 2015). This reflects the broader confusion among the people at that time regarding the crucified figure. Thus, shubbih not only refers to Jesus but also symbolizes the uncertainty surrounding the event, allowing falsehood to masquerade as truth. The use of the passive voice (ṣīghat al-fiʿl al-majhūl) also indicates the moral culpability of those spreading the crucifixion narrative, rendering the identity of the agents irrelevant (ihmāl dhikr al-fāʿil). In this interpretive frame, shubbih becomes synonymous with deception or divine scheming (al-Rāzī; 1902), and Nawawi understands this as referring to the religious authorities who intentionally spread false information to distort the truth.

In other contexts, the Qur'an uses the term mutashābih in its active participle form (ism fāʿil) based on the morphological pattern mutaʿāfil. It occurs in at least four verses, each with different implications. One example appears in Surah al-Baqarah (2:25), which promises that believers will receive rewards resembling pleasures they experienced in this world. Nawawi interprets al-tashbīh here as indicating precise resemblance between the mushabbah and mushabbah bih, particularly when viewed linguistically, since the tafaʿʿala form often shares the same root meaning as its basic form (mujarrad) (Nawawi al-Jawi; 1985).

Another dimension of mutashābih lies in its semantic overlap with ambiguity (ishtirāk). In this reading, mutashābih signifies not just similarity but indistinctness of meaning, employed by the Qur'an to describe Paradise using familiar worldly images. This rhetorical choice addresses the human tendency to doubt the unknown; describing the unseen with familiar imagery makes belief in the afterlife more accessible and acceptable (Nawawi al-Jawi; 1985).

In theological contexts, the term *mutashābih* is also contrasted with *muḥkam*, denoting verses whose meanings are clear versus those that are ambiguous (Qur'an, 3:7; 39:23). Ambiguity may arise from lexical similarity, abrogation (*naskh*), or semantic indicators (*dalālah*) that are inherently vague, problematic (*musykil*), or open to interpretation (*muʾawwal*). In the science of Qur'anic studies (*ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*), *mutashābih* thus serves as a technical term referring to verses that cannot be fully understood without external clarification. Nawawi categorizes such verses into two types: *mutashābih ḥaqīqī*, whose meanings are known only to God, and *mutashābih iḍāfī*, which can be understood when contextualized with supporting textual evidence. The latter's ambiguity stems from exegetes' difficulty in identifying those contextual clues; once found, the verse no longer remains ambiguous (Al-Jawi al-Bantani; 1985).

Building on this framework, Nawawi divides Qur'anic verses into three interpretive categories. First are those with clear rational meanings (*al-dalālah al-ʿaqliyyah*), identified as *muḥkam*. Second are those whose apparent meanings are impossible due to contradictory textual evidence, requiring interpretive reconciliation to affirm theological coherence. These too are considered *muḥkam*. Third are those whose meanings are ultimately inaccessible to human reason and known only to God (Al-Jawi al-Bantani; 1985). Relatedly, Nawawi also outlines four types of *tafsīr*. The first is self-evident, such as verses affirming divine oneness. The second depends on understanding the lexical usage among Arabs, such as interpreting *istawāʾ* as divine sovereignty (Nawawi al-Jawi; 2014). The third can only be interpreted by scholars due to the implausibility of literal readings, such as the attribute of forgetfulness (*al-nisyān*) when ascribed to God, which must be read metaphorically as divine abandonment rather than literal amnesia (Nawawi al-Jawi; 1985). This is consistent with Qur'an 19:64, which affirms that God does not forget.

Finally, the fourth category includes verses whose meanings are absolutely unknowable, such as the *ḥurūf muqaṭṭaʿāt* (Nawawi al-Jawi; 1985). From these interpretive principles, Nawawi concludes that *al-tashbīh* can refer to resemblance either in all aspects (*jamīʿ al-wujūh*) or in just one. When referring to divine attributes (*ṣifāt al-khabariyyah*), these must be interpreted contextually. A verse may be *mutashābih* in isolation but *muḥkam* when viewed alongside other evidences. Furthermore, some *ṣifāt* verses are clear in meaning upon rational reflection, making them *muḥkam* even if their wording might appear ambiguous. In Nawawi's hermeneutic, any verse rejecting divine similarity should be understood as *muḥkam*, requiring no further textual proof to clarify its meaning.

2. The Concept of al-Tashbīh in Nawawi al-Jawi's Theology of Divine Oneness

According to Shaikh Nawawi al-Jawi, the concept of *al-tashbīh* in *ʿilm al-kalām* (Islamic theology) emerges from interpretive attempts to understand Qur'anic verses that are considered *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous). This interpretive tendency, he argues, is natural because some people encounter Qur'anic expressions that describe God using familiar terms. As a result, they analogize these descriptions with human characteristics or worldly phenomena, applying a type of analogical reasoning known as *al-qiyās al-tamthīlī*—drawing similarities between the Creator and creation based on superficial resemblance (Al-Nawawi al-Jawi; 2015). In theological discourse, the term *al-tashbīh* refers to those who liken God either in all aspects (*jamīʿ al-wujūh*) or even in just one aspect of His being or attributes, thereby attributing anthropomorphic qualities to Him (Al-Nawawi al-Jawi; 2015).

To address this, Nawawi al-Jawi classifies the notion of resemblance (*tashbīh*) into three distinct categories: first, *niddun*—similarity in a single aspect; second, *mithl*—total similarity in essence; and third, *shabīh*—partial similarity that leads to confusion or ambiguity (Nawawi al-Jawi; 2016). These distinctions are rooted in the Qur'anic concept of God's Oneness (*tawḥīd*), where God is described as *al-Aḥad* (the Absolutely One)—meaning that He is not composed of parts—and *al-Wāḥid* (the One without any comparable entity), indicating absolute uniqueness (Nawawi al-Jawi; 1985). Furthermore, the Qur'an emphasizes that God is unlike His creation not only in essence but also in attributes (*ṣifāt*), thereby negating any anthropomorphic interpretations (Al-Jawi al-Bentani; 1985).

In Nawawi's theological framework, the phrase *laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ* ("there is nothing like unto Him") signifies the absolute impossibility of any resemblance—be it in essence, attributes, or actions—between God and His creation. This incomparability applies to both real ontological entities and conceptual analogues. The Qur'an, according to Nawawi, negates the existence of anything that could even resemble a hypothetical partner of God (*mithl mithl al-shayʾ*). Importantly, this negation does not suggest the real possibility of a partner, but rather serves to emphasize that if even a resemblance to a supposed partner does not exist, then the existence of any partner is logically and theologically impossible.

Nawawi further observes that the Qur'an uses the particle *kāf*—a particle of comparison (*ʿadāt al-tashbīh*)—in the phrase *ka-mithlihi* to emphasize both the denial of a being that is similar to God in totality (*mithl*) and the denial of any being that resembles Him in even a single aspect. If a partner resembling God in any way were to exist, it would entail that God also shares resemblance with this being, which would compromise divine uniqueness.

According to Nawawi, "anything that shares similarity in even one aspect must, by definition, be part of the same category or essence as the thing it resembles" (Nawawi al-Jawi; 1954).

Through this theological articulation, Nawawi al-Jawi firmly anchors the doctrine of *tanzīh*—God's transcendence—against any form of *tashbīh*. His classifications not only guard against doctrinal deviations but also provide a systematic theological framework for interpreting *ṣifāt al-khabariyyah* (descriptive divine attributes) in the Qur'an without falling into anthropomorphism. In doing so, Nawawi reinforces the core Islamic creed that God is utterly unique, incomparable, and beyond human likeness.

C. Rethinking Anthropomorphism in Qur'anic Interpretation through the Framework of Nawawi al-Jawi

The findings of this study offer significant implications for the development of Qur'anic and Tafsir studies, especially in the discourse surrounding *al-tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) and *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous verses). Nawawi al-Jawi's hermeneutical framework, which combines linguistic precision, theological categorization, and the use of interpretive boundaries (*ḍawābiṭ*), presents an important model for contemporary exegetes to approach Qur'anic texts that describe divine attributes in anthropomorphic language. His emphasis on rational coherence, contextual semantics, and avoidance of literalism serves as a corrective to both overly rationalist approaches that may strip the Qur'an of its rhetorical power and overly literalist approaches that risk compromising divine transcendence (Al-Jawi al-Syafiʿi; 1954).

This contribution becomes increasingly relevant in today's global Qur'anic scholarship, where the interpretive tensions between *tafwīḍ* (consignment), *taʾwīl* (allegorical interpretation), and *tathbīt* (affirmation) remain active (Rippin; 2001). Nawawi's typology of resemblance—*nidd*, *mithl*, and *shabīh*—provides scholars with a nuanced structure for parsing varying degrees of similarity attributed to God. His analysis also resonates with the works of classical scholars like al-Ghazālī, who similarly emphasized that metaphorical expressions about God must be reinterpreted in a way that safeguards *tanzīh* (transcendence) without falling into anthropomorphic affirmations (Frank; 1992; Griffel; 2009).

From a methodological standpoint, Nawawi's insistence on linguistic tools such as *ʿulūm al-ālāt* (auxiliary sciences) reflects the classical *tafsīr bi-l-maʾthūr* tradition while opening space for deeper *tafsīr bi-al-raʾy* when grounded in epistemic caution. His approach aligns with the theoretical positions of contemporary Qur'anic thinkers such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who argue for contextualized readings of revelation that respect linguistic form

and historical function (Abu Zayd; 2004). Nawawi's balanced synthesis between language and theology also critiques the anti-intellectualist literalism seen in some modern Salafi readings, which often affirm the external meanings of divine attributes without interpretive mediation (Brown; 2007).

Furthermore, this study enriches the discussion on the ontology of divine speech and its reception. Nawawi's reading of passive verbs like *shubbih* (Q. 4:157) shows how grammar and syntax play a theological role in structuring human perceptions of God. This intersects with the broader conversation in ʿilm al-balāghah (rhetoric) and Qur'anic stylistics, where scholars such as al-Jurjānī emphasized the communicative intent behind divine language and how it guides belief (Sells; 1999; Abdel Haleem; 2011). Nawawi's observation that the Qur'an speaks in a form accessible to the human intellect while preserving the unknowability of God's essence aligns with Ashʿarite commitments to *bi-lā kayf* readings, as emphasized in later works by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Taftāzānī (Hoover; 2004; Weiss; 2006).

In terms of practical application, Nawawi al-Jawi's framework can be utilized as a model for teaching interpretive theology in traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and higher education institutions. It promotes a method of scriptural engagement that is both reverent and intellectually responsible—something that is urgently needed to bridge classical *tafsīr* traditions with the demands of contemporary Muslim thought. His approach also provides an interpretive scaffold for addressing interfaith theological challenges, particularly in response to accusations that the Qur'an adopts anthropomorphic depictions similar to Judeo-Christian texts (Peters; 2003).

Finally, the findings of this research point toward potential directions for future inquiry. Comparative studies between Nawawi's framework and other Southeast Asian exegetes, such as ʿAbd al-Raʾūf al-Singkilī or Shaykh Daud al-Fatani, would help reveal the broader regional discourse on *al-tashbīh* and its implications. Further integration of linguistic theories from modern semantics, pragmatics, and metaphor theory may also deepen the analysis of how divine speech operates across cultures and historical periods.

Conclusion

This study has examined the concept of *al-tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) in the Qur'an through the theological and linguistic framework of Shaikh Nawawi al-Jawi, as presented in his *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd*. The findings demonstrate that Nawawi offered a systematic and nuanced approach to interpreting verses related to divine attributes, combining Arabic morphological analysis, theological typologies, and exegetical boundaries (*ḍawābiṭ*) to

safeguard the doctrine of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*). He classified forms of resemblance into distinct categories—*nidd, mithl,* and *shabīh*—and distinguished between linguistic similarity and ontological equivalence, thereby rejecting any notion that God shares attributes with creation, whether partially or wholly.

Theoretically, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Southeast Asian scholars like Nawawi al-Jawi integrated classical Islamic theology with regional exegetical practices. Practically, his framework provides a valuable model for contemporary Qur'anic interpretation, especially in contexts where traditional literalism needs to be balanced with rational coherence and theological integrity. His approach also offers relevant insights for curriculum development in Islamic education and interreligious theological dialogue.

Future studies could explore comparative analyses between Nawawi and other scholars of the *Nusantara* region or examine how his exegetical methods could be integrated with modern linguistic and hermeneutical tools. Further research might also investigate the reception and pedagogical application of Nawawi's theological method in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and university curricula.

In conclusion, this research highlights Nawawi al-Jawi's significant yet underexplored contribution to the field of Qur'anic interpretation. By offering a model that is both linguistically rigorous and theologically sound, his work enhances the methodological richness of *tafsīr* studies and reaffirms the relevance of traditional Islamic scholarship in addressing contemporary theological challenges.

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