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The Deconstructive Hermeneutic of *Tasattur* in the Epistle of the Creation of Animals of *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*

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Abstract

Academia has some misconceptions about the Epistle of the Creation of Animals of Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. This article addresses these misconceptions by offering a new hermeneutic to interpret the denouement of its story. This hermeneutic is called tasattur, which incorporated the mechanics of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction a thousand years before this theory was proposed by him. The article also demonstrates how this interpretive framework of tassatur helps us glean from this epistle an archetypal code for the upcoming Fatimid Empire.

Keywords

Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', identity, hermeneutics, deconstruction, Derrida.

Introduction

The *Epistle of the Creation of Animals* is the largest in *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*¹ and has intrigued scholars² for ages due to its allusions. Its denouement has been called “surprising”³ by Lenn Goodman and Richard McGregor and “unhappy” by Sarra Tlili.⁴ This article contends that there is room for another interpretation which aligns with the philosophy of the *Rasā'il*. For this, it invokes the hermeneutic of *tasattur* used by the Ismā'īlī

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¹ Aḥmad b. 'Abd Allāh, *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa Khullān al-Wafā'* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.).

² Janne Mattila, “The Animal Fable of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' in Context: The Ontological and Moral Status of Animals in Early Islamic Thought,” in *Animals and Their Relation to Gods, Humans and Things in the Ancient World*, ed. Raija Mattila, Sanae Ito, and Sebastian Fink (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 345–66.

³ Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor, *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ Sarra Tlili, “All Animals are Equal, or are They? The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's Animal Epistle and Its Unhappy End,” *Journal of Quranic Studies* 16, no. 2 (2014): 42–88.

dā'ī al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī (ca. 390/1000–470/1078) and argues that his method is instrumental in interpreting it as he comes from the same Ismā'īlī tradition that the Ikhwān al-Safā' (the Brethren of Purity) belong to, as Yves Marquet has demonstrated.⁵

Tasattur literally means “to veil” and is a hermeneutic that al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī developed and used in his work known as *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyah*. He describes it in his oeuvre saying:

رضيت التستر لي مذهبا وما أبتغي عنه من تعديل⁶

I have embraced *tasattur* as a creed and I do not seek any creed other than it.⁷

Ja'far al-Šādiq 'Imād al-Dīn explains how this hermeneutic uses what is known in modern discourse as deconstruction. He illustrates that *tasattur* has a tendency of reversing hierarchies, which is exactly what is done in deconstruction.⁸ This article argues that the archetype for this method can be found in the *Epistle of the Creation of Animals*, where the authors of the *Rasā'il* used the same technique a thousand years before Jacques Derrida (d. 2004). This has been done by exposing the hypocrisy of the corporeal human, and then this hierarchy is reversed again to demonstrate how those who affiliate with the Shī'ī Imam can turn the tables to move to a transcendental realm which is beyond the bounds of the corporeal world.

An Outline of the Epistle

The *Epistle of the Creation of Animals* is the twenty-second epistle of the encyclopedic treatise known as *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Šafā'*. This epistle, in an “Aesopian essay form,” has presented the case of humans v. animals to the King of Jinn to judge whether humans are correct in claiming that they have an intrinsic right to rule over animals due to their superiority. A series of arguments and rebuttals are presented. The humans speak about their wisdom, skills, enterprise, occupations, and expertise, to which the animals give befitting rebuttals, comparing their dexterity and range in each of these areas. However, finally, when humans speak

⁵ Godefroid de Callataÿ, “‘For Those with Eyes to See’: On the Hidden Meaning of the Animal Fable in the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Šafā'*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 357-91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/ety019>.

⁶ Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn, *Dīwān al-Mu'ayyad fī 'l-Dīn Dā'ī al-Du'āh* (Cairo: Dār Kātib al-Miṣrī, 1949), 290.

⁷ All translations in this article are by the author.

⁸ Ja'far al-Šādiq 'Imād al-Dīn, *Shī'r Tamīm bin al-Mu'izz al-Fāṭimī: Dirāsah Naqdīyyah min Manzūr Naḥriyat al-Talaqqī* (Cairo: Ma'had al-Buḥūth wa 'l-Dirāsāt al-'Arabiyyah, 2005).

about obtaining eternity by following the sages, the animals concede. This conceding has baffled many scholars.

This epistle analyses many topics and has the following sub-headings:

- a. The various situations of birds. . . .
- b. The beginning of time
- c. The reason behind different forms of animals
- d. The superior senses of animals
- e. The complaint of the animals against the tyranny of humans
- f. The superiority of the horse over cattle and other animals
- g. The advantages of seeking advice from the learned
- h. The details of the animosity between the jinn's children and humans
- i. The way in which the secrets of kings are exposed
- j. Regarding conveying a message
- k. The description and requirements of a messenger
- l. The compassion and mercy of the dragon on crawling creatures
- m. The cricket's wise homily
- n. The description and behaviour of the lion with respect to favourable and unfavourable characteristics distinguish him from other wild predators
- o. The description of the gryphon and where it stays along with a description of the flora and fauna of that area
- p. The description of the dragons and sea serpents, their unique features, and fearful sight
- q. The merits of the bee, its amazing circumstances, and states; the special status and gifts it has been given amongst other insects
- r. The obedience of the jinn to their leaders and kings

A Veiled Social and Ethical Critique

A defining characteristic of this epistle is that it is a social and ethical critique of the status quo of its contemporary society. However, it is "veiled," as the word *tasattur* suggests, due to the seclusion that the Shī'ī imams maintained in that period. Along with a critical appraisal which deconstructs and thereby challenges prevailing hierarchies, it lays down the moral code of the society it envisions. This epistle, when read with this deconstructive hermeneutic of *tastattur*, can be seen as the code of the upcoming Fatimid Empire (297/910–532/1138) and an archetype for all that the Fatimids aspired for. The following extract from the epistle illustrates this:

وقال الآخر: ولكن أخاف من شيء آخر.

قالوا: وما هو؟

قال: فتاوى الحكماء والفقهاء وحكم الحاكم.

قالوا: هؤلاء أمرهم أيضاً سهل، نحمل إليهم شيئاً من التحف والرشوة، فيحسن رأيهم فينا ويطلبون لنا حياً فقهيةً، ولا يبالون بتغيير الأحكام، ولكن بليتنا والذي نخاف منه صاحب العزيمة، فإنه صاحب الرأي والصواب والصرامة، صلب الوجه وقح لا يبالي بأحد، فإن استشاره، أخاف أن يشير عليه بالمعاونة لعييدنا علينا، ويعلمه كيف ينتزعها من أيدينا.

وقال آخر: القول كما ذكرت، ولكن إن استشار الملك الفلاسفة والحكماء يخالفونه في الرأي، فإن الحكماء إذا اجتمعت ونظرت في الأمور سنح لكل واحد منهم وجه من الرأي غير الذي يسنح للآخر، فيختلفون في ما يشيرون به، ولا يكادون يجتمعون على رأي واحد. . . .

وقال آخر: رأيتم إن استشار الملك الوزير في أمرنا، ما ذا يشير عليه، ليت شعري؟

قال قائل منهم: أظنه سيقول إن هذه الطوائف قد نزلوا بساحتنا واستدتموا بدمامنا واستجاروا بنا، وهم مظلومون، ونصرة المظلوم واجبة على الملوك المقسطين، لأنهم خلفاء الله في أرضه، ملكهم على عباده وبلادهم ليحكموا بينهم بالعدل والإنصاف ويعينوا الضعفاء ويرحموا أهل البلاء، ويقمعوا أهل الظلم، ويجبروا الخلق على أحكام الشريعة، ويحكموا بينهم بالحق، شكراً لنعم الله عليهم، وخوفاً من مساءلتهم غداً.⁹

Another said, "But I fear something else."

"What is it?" they asked.

He said, "The decrees of the sages and jurists and the rulings of the ruler." They replied, "Dealing with them is very easy; the moment we will bribe them, they will rule in our favour, find judicial loopholes for us, and will not care about manipulating the edicts. Our problem, and whom we need to be afraid of, is the one with the resolve. He is the one with true advice, firm, righteous, and resolute. He is not intimidated by anyone. If the king asks for his advice, I fear he will advise him to help the animals and remove them from our control."

Another said, "It is as you have mentioned, but if the king asks for the advice of the philosophers and sages, they will go against him. When sages get together and look into matters, they each come up with something different, arguing their opinions. They rarely agree between themselves. . . ."

Another said, "If the king asks his vizier for advice, I wonder what he will say."

One of them replied, "I think the vizier will say, 'These species have come to us and seek solace and help from tyranny; to help the tyrannized is imperative on just kings because they are the vicegerents of Allah on His earth. He appointed them as rulers over His servants and cities to rule with justice and equity, help the oppressed, provide succour to the weak,

⁹ Ibn 'Abd Allāh, *Rasā'il*, 2:234-35.

uproot the tyrants, enforce the *sharīah*, and govern with righteousness, in gratitude to what Allah has granted them and in fear of accountability.”

This extract and many similar ones¹⁰ are examples of the moral code this epistle has laid out. This can be discerned by understanding the concept of *tasattur* as a deconstructive hermeneutic—by understanding how the text has specific veiled connotations which intend to decentre. If one studies any of the foundational codes or policies of the Fatimid Empire, the same framework and tenor of the extract mentioned above can be found. The foundation of the policies of Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī (d. 911 CE) was justice, as documented by al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān b. Muḥammad (d. 363/974) in *Iftitāḥ al-Da‘wah*.¹¹ Another example is the first sermon of al-Mahdī, the first Fatimid Imam to emerge from seclusion and eleventh in the chain. He mentions his emphasis on justice in the following words:

فلتنبسط آمالكم ويكثر بالثقة بعدله استبشاركم.¹²

May your wishes come true and may you have great hope due to your trust in his justice.

Further mention of the justice done by the Fatimids and their efforts to execute it can be found in many historical references. A document called the “Covenant of Alī”¹³ is included in *Da‘āim al-Islām*, which is the legal code of the Fatimids. This covenant provides a detailed exposition of good governance. It delineates specific guidelines to governors and other administrators for governing the subjects of the Imam with justice.¹⁴ The justice that was prevalent in Fatimid Cairo has also been documented in detail by Nāṣir-i Khusrau (d. 1088 CE) who said that the shopkeepers there were so confident about security that even jewellers

¹⁰ For example, see *ibid.*, 2:179, which speaks about humans as divine representatives on earth. This is what the Fatimids considered themselves. It also refers to the *Epistle of Character*, which is an extensive elaboration of the morals and ethics of the Fatimids as is evident in *Kitāb al-Himmah* of al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān. Another example is the narrative of the bee (*ibid.*, 2:301-05), which, as Callataj correctly notes, “is of unmistakably Shi‘i provenance. What is especially relevant in the queen-bee’s speech is the affirmation that bees combine *mulk* (kingship) and *nubuwwa* (prophecy) as no other species in the creation does.” Callataj, “For Those with Eyes to See,” 21. This is what the Fatimids claimed to combine during their rule in North Africa and Cairo and conducted themselves with a moral code that sought to legitimize their dominion.

¹¹ Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān b. Muḥammad, *Iftitāḥ al-Da‘wah* (Algiers: Dīwān al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Jāmi‘iyah, 1986).

¹² *Ibid.*, 297.

¹³ Al-Nu‘mān, *Da‘āim al-Islām* (Mumbai: al-Jāmi‘ah al-Sayfiyyah, 2015), 1:588.

¹⁴ Shainool Jiwa, “Governance and Pluralism under the Fatimids (909-996 CE),” in *The Shi‘i World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Farhad Daftary, Aryn B. Sajoo, and Shainool Jiwa (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 111-30.

and moneychangers would not lock their shops.¹⁵ Along with the *quḍāh* (judges), the *shurṭah* (police), the *muḥtasib* (market inspector), and the *maẓālim* (grievances) institution, the Geniza documents have records of many petitions addressed by Jews directly to the Imam.¹⁶ In his *al-Majālis wa 'l-Musāyarāt*, al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān documented the strict upholding of high moral standards by the imams in Fatimid Cairo.¹⁷ In his *Dhāt al-Barakah*, Sayyidunā Ṭāhir Saif al-Dīn also provided a narrative of the sixteenth Fatimid Imam, al-Ḥākim, removing a judge for theft.¹⁸

Many more such examples can be mentioned. Therefore, the discourse in this epistle of high moral standards and justice can find multiple parallels in historical references. What is mentioned in the above extract about the manipulation of the *sharī'ah* may also be a veiled allusion to the Abbasid caliphate,¹⁹ which is contemporary to the writing of this epistle, in which works like Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-Qiyān*²⁰ (*the Epistle on Singing Girls*) were written. In this book, Jāḥiẓ aimed to justify the convention of dancing girls in a fashion similar to what the *Rasā'il* mentioned in the text given above regarding legal manipulation.

The *Epistle on the Creation of Animals*, therefore, deconstructs by exposing contradictions in human arguments and presents a moral code for the establishment of an empire when it is read with the hermeneutic of *tasattur*, which also deconstructs.

Tasattur in the Epistle

Speaking from the perspective of literary theory and hermeneutics, one finds that the tools for the interpretation of religious texts are scarce. Dennis Taylor rightly says, "There is a need in our time for religious interpretations that are substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses."²¹ *Tasattur*

¹⁵ See Nasir-i Khusraw, *Nasir-i Khusraw's Book of Travels* (n.p.: Mazda Publishers, 2001).

¹⁶ S. D. Goitein, "Petitions to Fatimid Caliphs from the Cairo Geniza," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 45, no. 1 (1954): 30–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1453144>.

¹⁷ Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān b. Muḥammad, *Kitāb al-Majālis wa 'l-Musāyarāt* (Mumbai: al-Jāmi'ah al-Sayfiyyah, 2014).

¹⁸ Sayyidunā Ṭāhir Saif al-Dīn, *Dhāt al-Barakah* (Mumbai: Sayyidunā Ṭāhir Saif al-Dīn, 1940), 75.

¹⁹ Mohammed Manazir Ahsan, *Social Life under the Abbasids* (London: University of London, 1973), 26.

²⁰ Alfred. F. L. Beeston, ed. and trans., *The Epistle of Singing-Girls of Jāḥiẓ* (n.p.: Aris and Phillips, 1980).

²¹ <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/sites/religion-and-the-arts/online-supplements/excerpts-from-the-issues.html>.

is a tool that can certainly fill this niche because it has two important characteristics of religious discourses. First, it is veiled. Second, it overturns reigning hierarchies. This is why it has been coined as a “deconstructive hermeneutic.”

References to this method of “veiling” can be found in the epistle at hand, which are as follows:

ثم اعلم أيها الأخ أنا قد بينّا في هذه الرسالة ما هو الغرض المطلوب، ولا تظن بنا ظنّ السوء، ولا تعد هذه الرسالة من ملاءمة الصبيان، ومخارفة الإخوان، إذ عادتنا جارية على أن نكسو الحقائق ألفاظا وعبارات وإشارات كيلا يخرج بنا عما نحن فيه، وبقكم الله لقراءتها واستماعها وفهم معانيها، وفتح قلوبكم وشرح صدوركم ونور بصائرکم بمعرفة أسرارها، وييسر لكم العمل بها، كما فعل بأوليائه وأصفيائه وأهل طاعته، إنه على ما يشاء قدير.²²

Then know, O brother, that we have explained in this epistle what the final objective is. So do not undermine us nor do assume that this epistle is a child’s triviality and an amateur’s prattle. This is because it is our continuous practice to conceal esoteric knowledge with exoteric words, expressions, and signs so that our position is not compromised. May Allah guide you to read, hear, and understand its meanings. May He open your hearts and souls and enlighten you by revealing its secrets to you. May He make it easy for you to act accordingly as He helped His *awliyā’* (the sages), His chosen ones, and those who obeyed Him. He is omnipotent.

The reference to *tasattur* is found in the words “our continuous practice to conceal esoteric knowledge with exoteric words, expressions, and signs.” The word “continuous” also hints at the Fatimids’ claim of a chain of succession.

ولما بلغ البيغاء من كلامه إلى هذا الموضوع، قال الملك لرئيس الحكماء من الجن: من هؤلاء الملوك الذين ذكرهم هذا القائل وأثنى عليهم، ووصف شدة رحمتهم وإشفاقهم على رعيتهم وتحننهم ورأفتهم لجنودهم وأعوانهم وحسن سيرتهم؟ أنا أظن أن في ذلك رمزا من الرموز وسرا من الأسرار عرّفي ما حقيقة هذه الأقاويل وإشارة هذه المرامي.²³

And when the parrot reached this portion of his speech, the King asked the head of the sages from the jinn who these kings were, about whom this person (the parrot) spoke so highly, describing their mercy and love for their subjects, their empathy and kindness on their warriors and those in their service, and their sound leadership? I think it is a secret with a hidden meaning. Teach me the true meaning of these words and what they allude to.

²² Ibn ‘Abd Allāh, *Rasā’il*, 2:377.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2:341.

The reference to *tasattur* is found in the words “who these kings were” and the words “I think this is a secret with a hidden meaning. . . .” The covert journeys of the Fatimids before the emergence of al-Mahdī are well documented.²⁴

وأما الخواص من الحكماء الذين هم الراسخون في العلم، فهم لا يحتاجون إلى زيادة بيان، إذ هم مطلعون على حقائق جميع الأسرار والمرموزات. من ذلك قول الله تعالى: “علمنا منطق الطير وأوتينا من كل شيء إن هذا لهو الفضل المبين” وقوله: “ن والقلم وما يسطرون.”²⁵

And as for the exclusive category of the sages who are well-grounded in knowledge, it does not need elucidation because they know the true meanings of all secrets and allusions. This includes the words of Allah the Exalted “We have been taught the language of the birds and have been given a part of everything. Indeed, this is a lofty virtue” and His words “Nūn! And by the Pen and what it has written.”

The entire extract refers to *tasattur* and its existence in the Qur’ān. The Fatimids are well known for their esoteric interpretations of the Qur’ān, the most important example of this being *al-Majālis al-Mu’ayyadiyah* of al-Mu’ayyad al-Shīrāzī.

All three of these extracts have mentioned a hidden and unknown realm which is the primary function of *tasattur*. The language of the epistle itself is in such a framework, with allusions throughout. What remains to be seen is how the structure of the text veiled with the curtains of *tasattur* is “deconstructive” in its modern sense. The ethical mores propagated in the epistle were implemented in the Fatimid era and the Fatimid philosophers—like al-Mu’ayyad al-Shīrāzī and al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān—used this deconstructive hermeneutic as their idiosyncratic hermeneutic to achieve specific goals, one of which was to counter prevalent ideologies. This is what deconstruction exactly denotes.

Deconstruction in *Tasattur*

The central function of deconstruction is to reverse hierarchies. Deconstruction not only uncovers these hierarchical oppositions but also shows how the superior term can be seen as inferior.²⁶ The epistle under study has performed the same function as it has shown how the hierarchy of humans and animals can be reversed and its “centre” can be “decentred.” This means that the central assumption on which the

²⁴ Al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān b. Muḥammad, *Sharḥ al-Akḥbār* (Mumbai: al-Jāmi’ah al-Sayfiyyah, 2006), 15:115-25.

²⁵ Ibn ‘Abd Allāh, *Rasā’il*, 2:343.

²⁶ R. G. Agnihotri, *Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Delhi: IGNOU, 2019), 16.

hierarchy is based can lose its validity. A few examples from the epistle will suffice to explain this point. According to the epistle, humans first referred to the Qur'ānic verses which informed how animals had been put to the service of humans. The animals counterclaimed that these verses did not establish a hierarchy. Instead, they reminded humans of the blessings of Allah which they undermined by abusing the rights of animals. Then humans argued referring to their "superior" form and structure and the perceptibility of their senses and intelligence. This self-assumed superiority was deconstructed by explaining how every physical form in nature, whether of humans or animals, has been created for a certain purpose and utility. Moreover, criticizing the creatures entails criticizing the Creator indirectly. As for the senses, many animals have more powerful senses than those humans possess. Then humans explained how they look after and take care of animals, which was immediately refuted with a passionate appeal to the king, listing the kinds of abuses animals suffer at the hands of humans. They further argued that "taking care" has ulterior motives like using the milk, flesh, and skin of animals. It is not done with any intention of mercy. From this perspective, humans have no moral grounds for the claim of superiority over animals. The graphic description given by the sheep evoked pathos which facilitated a deconstruction of the narrative of the opponent. The sheep said,

Oh king, if only you had seen us in the captivity of humans who snatch our lambs, some only six months old, away from their mothers! Our milk is given to humans instead of our young ones. The young are then tied up and carried to slaughter chambers, hungry and thirsty. They cry to no avail! They bleat to deaf ears! We then see them slaughtered, skinned, and disembowelled. Their limbs, heads, guts, intestines, and livers are then distributed in butchers' shops, cut with cleavers, cooked in cauldrons, and roasted in ovens! We remain silent, not crying or complaining. If we cried or complained, it would be to no avail! So what mercy and care do these humans speak of?²⁷

In addition to these refutations by the animals, another technique used by the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* is to deconstruct the narrative and reverse the hierarchy by exposing the hypocrisy of humans by what they say themselves. Humans criticize the viziers and judges (*fuqahā'*). Thus, they indirectly end up criticizing themselves. The following passage explains this:

One said, "I think the king will speak privately tomorrow with his vizier and seek his counsel." Another said, "In fact, he will call upon the judiciary

²⁷ Ibn 'Abd Allāh, *Rasā'il*, 2:215.

and sages and seek their advice.” Another said, “What do you think they will say? I think the king has a good opinion about us, but I fear that the vizier will speak against us and be unjust.” Another said, “To manipulate the vizier is easy. We will bribe him, and he will immediately become compliant and speak in our favour.” Another said, “But I fear something else.” “What is it?” they asked. He said, “The decrees of the sages and jurists and the rulings of the ruler.” They replied, “Dealing with them is very easy; the moment we will bribe them, they will rule in our favour, find judicial loopholes for us, and will not care about manipulating the edicts.”²⁸

Similar arguments of humans were then invalidated by various representatives of each phylum of animals. For example, the lion invalidates the argument of humans being strong, brave, and bold²⁹ while the insects invalidate the argument of humans being more powerful by showing what a minuscule sting can do to them.³⁰

Another technique for deconstruction is the inclusion of a character called *ṣāḥib al-‘azīmah* in the narrative, who is the learned advisor to the king and the one who refutes some of the arguments that the humans make. When the humans speak at length about their intelligence, purity, cognition, education, crafts, cities, canals, agriculture, architecture, statecraft, and prophethood, the *ṣāḥib al-‘azīmah* reminds the king of the other side of the coin, overturning the argument by reminding them of human atrocities and divine retribution like the Flood which destroyed plants and animals, their multifarious tongues, their disputes, and their tyrannies.³¹ As the supreme deconstructionist, he decentres the claims of each tribe; when the Iraqi says his tribe has been blessed with prophets, he points out that they have also burnt the sacred Book;³² when the Indian speaks about the sages of his tribe, he points out that they are also well known for illegitimate children;³³ when the Hebrew mentions the great leaders of his tribe, he reminds them of the Qur’ānic verses that rebuke them;³⁴ when the Syrian brags about monks and pastors, his argument is overturned by referring to how they spoke untruly of God.³⁵

²⁸ Ibid., 2:234.

²⁹ Ibid., 2:239.

³⁰ Ibid., 2:257.

³¹ Ibid., 2:280.

³² Ibid., 2:281.

³³ Ibid., 2:282.

³⁴ Ibid., 2:283.

³⁵ Ibid., 2:284.

These are a few examples of how deconstruction worked in the epistle. However, the narrative ironically ends with humans ruled as supreme.

The gentleman from Hijaz says, “How can your status be similar to ours? We, in whatever state, will be eternal if we obey the prophets, the sages, the imams, the *awṣiyāʾ* (successors of prophets), the wise, the noble, the righteous, the *abdāl* (pious), the noble ascetics, those who discern, the intelligent, the learned, the chosen. . . .” It was then when all of them, the leaders of the animals and the sages of the jinn, said together, “Now you have spoken the truth.”³⁶

From the perspective of the hermeneutic of *tasattur*, these categories of people refer to the Shīʿī imams whom al-Muʿayyad frequently describes with these epithets in his works. Callatay also noted this Ismāʿīlī flavour in these terms of the *Rasāʾil*.³⁷ With this conclusion, the epistle contends that human beings are likely to become tyrants, as the Qurʾān says, “We then dragged them down to the lowest degree.”³⁸

However, the epistle also deconstructs this view because “the deconstructionist cannot sit back and let the new hierarchy prevail.”³⁹ Therefore, the epistle demonstrates in the denouement that humans also have the potential to rise to the realm of the transcendental if they obey the Shīʿī imams. This interpretation is neither unhappy as Sarra Tlili views it nor surprising as Goodman thinks. Rather, it perfectly syncs with the Shīʿī Weltanschauung, which has been established with a veiled discourse (*tasattur*) and has been used to overturn hierarchies. In his *al-Majālis al-Muʿayyadiyyah*, al-Muʿayyad used this archetype and showed how *taʾwīl*, which is an esoteric interpretation and a tool of *tasattur*, can be used to reverse a hierarchy. Explaining this, ʿImād al-Dīn says,

In this sense, the *dāʾī* trains the followers to deconstruct the common exoteric structures by employing the techniques of structural or deconstructive analysis during deliberation so that they should build new [cognitive] structures on them and their level of comprehension is raised by this gradual nurturing . . . making the higher the lower and the lower the higher, the metaphor the literal and the literal the metaphor, the right the evil and the evil the right.⁴⁰

If one understands how this hermeneutic reverses hierarchies, one also understands how a hierarchical framework can at the same time be

³⁶ Ibid., 2:375-76.

³⁷ Callatay, “For Those with Eyes to See,” 35.

³⁸ Qurʾān 95:5.

³⁹ Agnihotri, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 42.

⁴⁰ Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq ʿImād al-Dīn, *Adab al-Munāẓarah wa ʿl-Ḥijāj fi ʿl-Majālis al-Muʿayyadiyyah* (Cairo: Maʿhad al-Biḥūth wa ʿl-Dirāsāt al-ʿArabiyyah, 2014).

egalitarian. Humans can be superior to animals and at the same time, the rights of the animal kingdom can also be honoured. The hierarchy of Shī'ī cosmology provides justice and an egalitarian society where every species' rights are respected. As noted at the beginning of the article, justice provided in the Fatimid era which was documented by al-Mu'ayyad is a manifestation of the Shī'ī cosmological hierarchy which has been embedded in the *Rasā'il* with *tasattur*. He says,

ظهر العدل في محل إمام وبدا في ضرائع الأنعام⁴¹

Justice has unfolded in the palace of the Imam, and is expressed in the
udders of cattle!

Tlili cannot come to terms with this and therefore puts forward an odd hypothesis claiming that the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' changed their views in the middle of writing this epistle!⁴² She argues,

It is perhaps justified to hypothesize that the Ikhwān's initial intention was simply to teach their readers about the wonders of the animal world, as they declare in their prologue, and to call for better treatment of other animals—a theme they knew would resonate with their readers. As they proceeded, however, their argument took them in a different direction. Once they gave voices to their nonhuman characters, abandoned the prevalent practice of comparing an ideal notion of humans to a distorted and misinformed notion of other animals, and allowed their animals to draw from the Qur'an, the fable took a turn the authors perhaps did not foresee. In other words, just by becoming open and willing to entertain the ideas that (1) empirically there is more to animals than they (the Ikhwān) are typically willing to grant and that (2) the Qur'an presents nonhuman creatures in a radically different light from their own, they discovered that these ideas were not as unthinkable as they initially assumed. The conclusion they were about to reach, however, would cast doubt on their entire theology and thus they could hardly afford it. On the other hand, when the outcome became visible they possibly felt that they had invested too much in this project to abandon it altogether. The nonhuman animals' arguments and refutations were too clever and too provocative to deserve abortion. Thus, instead of rewriting or abandoning this work, they opted for manipulation of its outcome, which, they could have presumed, would hardly shock their readers anyway, for, on a serious note, who would want animals to be the equals of humans? Admittedly, however, this hypothesis is no more than a conjecture. A definitive answer is probably unattainable.⁴³

⁴¹ Ḥusayn, *Dīwān al-Mu'ayyad*, 296.

⁴² Tlili, "All Animals are Equal, or are They?" 52.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

What Tlili views as an egalitarian society is a tyranny in the hermeneutic *tasattur*. The *Rasā'il* were written deploying this method of *ta'wīl* and one has to comprehend this to understand why the denouement of the epistle, irrespective of the virtues of animals, presents those affiliated to the Shī'ī imams as truly superior due to the virtue of *shafā'ah* (intercession).

Conclusion

This article argues that the idiom of the *Rasā'il*'s discourse is that of *tasattur*, which is a veiled mode of expression deployed by the Shī'īs for many purposes, one evident one being to keep their identity secret. Comprehending this helps us glean a moral code being established in the *Epistle of the Creation of Animals* for the upcoming emergence of the Fatimid Imam in North Africa.

By studying the codes of the Fatimid Empire, observing their philosophical and judicial charter, and analysing the diction of their literature, one can find parallels to the fundamentals set down in this epistle. One important fundamental is that of reversing hierarchies so that the centre no longer holds. This hermeneutic was named *tasattur* by the Fatimid *dā'ī* al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī.

To contextualize *tasattur*, the present article has named it the “deconstructive hermeneutic.” Since it reverses hierarchies, it is “deconstructive” and since it interprets texts, it belongs to “hermeneutics.” The article concludes the following: First, the tools like deconstruction used by modern literary theorists do have precedents in medieval Arabic hermeneutics. Second, the *Rasā'il* should be reinterpreted teleologically keeping in mind the method of *tasattur*. For example, a re-examination of the *Epistle of Passion* is needed, looking for elements hinting at love for a Shī'ī imam. Third, further research on the concept of *tasattur* is certainly warranted because if a certain corpus uses this technique, we need new literary tools to interpret the multiple layers of meanings between the lines.

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