

Signified Deviations in Federer's *What Every American Needs to Know About the Qur'an*: A Saussurean Analysis of Islamic Themes

Fatima Aurelian Sugandi¹, Ubaidillah^{2,*}, Anar Gafarov³

¹English Department, Faculty of Adab and Cultural Sciences, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia

²English Department, Faculty of Adab and Cultural Sciences, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia

³Department of Religious Study, Faculty of Theology, The Azerbaijan Institute of Theology, Baku AZ1065, Azerbaijan

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ABSTRACT

Western orientalist writings on Islam often present selective historical narratives that influence public understanding of Islamic teachings. One of these works is William J. Federer's *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States*, which portrays Islam, the Qur'an, and the Prophet Muhammad in ways that raise theological and textual concerns. This study aims to analyze how key signifiers, *Islam*, *the Qur'an*, and *the Prophet Muhammad* are associated with signified meanings that deviate from established Islamic interpretations. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework and a qualitative descriptive method, this research identifies three major patterns of signified deviation: (1) Islam is linked to coercion and revenge despite Qur'anic principles of religious freedom and forgiveness; (2) the Qur'an is portrayed as legitimizing violence and sexual misconduct through selective readings of specific verses; and (3) the Prophet Muhammad is represented as acting based on personal desire rather than divine command. The study concludes that these deviations result from reassigning signified meanings to key Islamic signifiers, producing an ideologically framed interpretation. This research contributes to understanding how semiotic processes shape contemporary representations of Islam in orientalist discourse.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islam is generally known as a religion that originated from two sources: the Qur'an and hadith. Islam can create a civilization, not merely theological or social doctrines (Rahim, 2010). The success and progress of Islamic society cannot be separated from the role of Muslim intellectuals who master various scientific fields. Suppose we trace the history of Islamic thought and civilization further. In that case, we will see how Muslims, inspired by the Qur'an and indirectly influenced by translations of Greek texts on science and philosophy, grew and achieved the most advanced civilization (Tadjuddin et al., 2016).

*Corresponding Author: Ubaidillah  ubaidillah@uin-suka.ac.id

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Unfortunately, the progress of Islamic civilization cannot be maintained. After Westerners came to the Islamic world during the heyday of Islam in the third century, they returned in the nineteenth century to bring science and technology they had developed from what they had previously learned there (Nasution, 1995, in Rahim, 2010). These Western people were then interested in developing their research skills and learning about the Islamic world. It was the starting point for the emergence of Westerners, commonly known as Orientalists, who were experts in Eastern fields (Rahim, 2010).

According to the online version of *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI)*, orientalist is an expert in Eastern nations' languages, literature, and culture. Meanwhile, Edward W. Said, in his book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, defines Orientalism as a way of understanding the Eastern world based on Westerners' experiences (Zaimah, 2021). From this statement, it can be concluded that recognizing whether someone is an Orientalist depends on the way they think about the Eastern world, not on a person's geographic location.

One of the orientalist who studied and wrote about the Eastern world was William J. Federer. Federer explains the origins of Islam and its influence on the United States in his book, *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an - A History of Islam and the United States*. Based on its nature, this book is a form of a non-fiction book, which, according to the KBBI, non-fiction means something that is not fiction and is based on reality and facts. Thus, the truth of the book deserves to be accounted for.

Despite its persuasive title, the book by William J. Federer, entitled *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an - A History of Islam and the United States*, presents a view that deviates from reality or established facts. It attracted the attention of researchers, who analyzed the book using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory. In this research, the researchers aim to discover how the signs in the book *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an - A History of Islam and the United States* by William J. Federer are distorted. Apart from that, researchers also want to explore further the reasons why these signs are called deviations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

William J. Federer's *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States* is not merely a historical introduction to Islam but a polemical narrative that frames Islam as derivative, coercive, and theologically problematic. Throughout the book, Islam is depicted as borrowing from Judaism, Christianity, and pre-Islamic traditions, the Qur'an is presented as a humanly influenced compilation, and the Prophet Muhammad is portrayed as a political actor whose authority allegedly stems from personal desire rather than divine revelation. As O'Connor (2024) explains, the Qur'an often alludes to figures, concepts, and narratives from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, reinterpreting them to align with its theological messages rather than simply reproducing biblical texts verbatim. Rather than functioning as a neutral description, the book assigns specific meanings to the key signs of Islam, Qur'an, and Muhammad that differ substantially from their established signifieds in Islamic theology and classical scholarship. This systematic tension between signifier and signified makes Federer's work a relevant and productive object for semiotic analysis within Saussure's framework, which conceptualizes meaning as socially constructed and ideologically mediated.

Research on the book *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States* has been studied with different analyses. The following is an explanation of previous research. The article "Study analyzing William Federer's anti-Islam ideas" by Mohsen Nouraei and Seyed Kamel Askari uses documentation methods to analyze William J Federer's book from an Islamophobic perspective. The research results show that Federer expresses his views on Islam without considering significant Qur'anic verses on the theme of compassion. The prejudice that tends to favour other Abrahamic religious beliefs (Judaism and Christianity) can be concluded as the root of Federer's Islamophobic attitude. Federer's views in his book also give a "hard" image of the Prophet Muhammad (Nouraei & Askari, 2020).

Mohsen Nouraei and Seyed Kamel Askari also wrote another article discussing William J. Federer's book *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States*. In their article entitled *The Study of William Federer's Viewpoint on Non-Revelatory of the Qur'an*, research was carried out using descriptive analysis methods. The research results show that the rebuttal to Federer's statement regarding the similarities in the contents of the Al-Qur'an and other religious holy books indicates that the Al-Qur'an is not pure revelation but is only an adaptation of these books. The results of this research are helpful in the study of the Qur'an and Orientalism, as well as discussions of theology and exegesis (Nouraei & Askari, 2020).

Existing studies on Federer's work primarily focus on theological rebuttal and Islamophobia, demonstrating how his arguments marginalize Islamic doctrines and construct Islam as inherently violent or derivative. However, these studies tend to treat Federer's claims at the level of propositional content rather than at the level of signification. In other words, they critique *what* Federer says, but not sufficiently *how* meaning is produced through linguistic signs. Consequently, there remains a gap in understanding how Federer's language semiotically naturalizes certain interpretations of Islam as common sense. This study addresses that gap by applying Saussurean semiotics to analyze the relationship between signifier and signified in Federer's representations of Islam, the Qur'an, and the Prophet Muhammad.

According to the online version of the *KBBI*, the science that explicitly studies symbols and signs in language, traffic, and Morse code is called semiotics or semiology. Ferdinand de Saussure was one of the experts who was very influential in linguistics and semiotics. This is evidenced by the existence of Saussure's Semiotics, which was one of the triggers of the structuralism movement, born in France at the beginning of the 20th century (Fanani, 2013). According to Saussure, language is a system of signs (Hidayat, 2014). From this definition, Saussure's theory's essence lies in the composition of the sign system. Two things are part of a sign: the *significant* (signifier) and *the signifie* (signified). Saussure briefly defined a signifier as a meaningful sound or stroke (material aspect), namely, what is said and written, or what is read. Meanwhile, signified, according to Saussure, is a mental image, namely thoughts or concepts of the mental aspect of language (Sobur, 2004 as cited in Fanani, 2013).

This sign is the most conventional and tends to be socially agreed upon (Piliang, 2004 as cited in Pramasheilla, 2021). Thus, the signified and signifier should be directly proportional to the existing agreement. However, Ferdinand de Saussure stated that a sign can only represent something if a sign reader has the same experience of the sign (Fanani, 2013). At the same time, the signified is a concept that takes shape according to the

psychological object. This method serves as a basis for understanding how signs convey meaning and are interpreted within semiotics (B. Yilmaz & Sazak, 2023).

Within Orientalist discourse, signs do not operate neutrally but are embedded in power relations that privilege Western epistemologies. Meanings attached to Islam in Orientalist texts are often stabilized through repetition, selective quotation, and strategic framing. Saussure's concept of signifier–signified is therefore particularly useful for exposing how such meanings are constructed rather than naturally given. By comparing Federer's signifieds with signifieds derived from the Qur'an and classical Islamic scholarship, this study demonstrates how deviations emerge and how ideological positions become encoded in linguistic choices. Therefore, it does not rule out the possibility of differences, diversity, and even deviations in the meaning of a sign in different environments.

3. METHOD

The research method used by researchers is a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research methods can be used to discover and understand the meaning that originates from social or humanitarian problems (Nugrahani, 2014). This research's primary data are sentences containing crucial deviations from signs in the book *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an - A History of Islam and the United States* by William J. Federer. Supporting data sourced from Al-Qur'an verses and articles discussing Islam were also used in this research. To collect the required data, researchers used note-taking techniques and documentation studies. Data collection in this research was carried out by repeatedly reading the book and recording the data needed. They are classified by sign type. Following the problem in this research, namely explaining signified deviations, the referential equivalent method is used. The referential equivalent is a matching method that uses a determining tool, in the form of a referent or figure, as a reference for a linguistic unit (Kesuma, 2007). After the data is collected, the following research step is to analyze it using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach.

This research employs a descriptive qualitative method that uses language as a formal object. All the data found in *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States* by William J. Federer. The equivalent referential (depiction of Islamic themes) method is used to analyze the data. Sudaryanto described the equivalent method as a determining method of a "particular lingua" (Subroto, 2002). This study uses only the referential method as the advanced method for collecting data (Sudaryanto, 1993). This study focuses on descriptive techniques that interpret the depiction of Islamic themes in the book (Creswell, 2012).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the sentences in the book *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States* by William J. Federer, which contains sign deviations, the researcher grouped the sign deviations into three categories, namely: deviations from the signs of Islam, deviations from the signs of Muhammad, and deviations from the signs of the Qur'an.

4.1 Signified Deviation of "Islam."

Several sentences in William J. Federer's work deviate from the signified of Islam. The following is a deviation from Islamic signs in the book *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States*, written by William J. Federer: *Islam is the opposite of freedom. It means surrender, submission, or subjugation... A "dhimmi" is a non-Muslim forced to submit* (Federer, 2007). Federer (2007) further states that Islamic expansion historically relied on coercion, describing Islam as a system that "spread primarily by the sword" and institutionalized submission through legal categories such as dhimmi. This reinforces his earlier claim that Islam is fundamentally opposed to freedom.

These statements indicate a consistent signifier construction of Islam as inherently coercive. However, such a signified contradicts Qur'anic principles. The sentence above is a signified deviation of "Islam". Federer stated that Islam is the opposite of freedom, more precisely, freedom of religion. The signs of Islam explained by Federer are a form of deviation because, in reality, there is no religious compulsion in Islam." Prophet Muhammad, pbuh. himself was only sent as a transmitter of messages from Allah, and he did not have the right; he could not force other people to believe and follow him, as was the principle of the Prophet's religious tolerance, which can technically be linked to religious freedom (*al-hurriyyah al-diniyyah*) (Madjid, 1997 via In'amuzzahidin, 2017).

In the context of religious freedom, the Qur'an, which is the primary source of the Islamic religion, has clearly stated that there is no coercion and no one can force one to convert to Islam. It is as stated in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 256:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۗ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ ۗ

"There is no compulsion to (enter) religion (Islam); Indeed, the right path is clearer than the wrong path."

The subsequent deviation from the signified of Islam is found in the sentence: *Islam believes in the duty of revenge* (Federer, 2007)

The Islamic sign in the sentence above does not follow Islamic teachings. Islam recommends that humans be patient and prohibits taking revenge. It is following the word of Allah in Surah Ash-Shura, verses 39-43:

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَهُمُ الْبَغْيُ هُمْ يَنْتَصِرُونَ (٣٩) وَجَزَاءُ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا فَمَنْ عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُ ۗ عَلَى اللَّهِ بِهِ لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ (٤٠) وَلَمَنْ آتَتْكُمْ بَعْدَ ظُلْمِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ مَا عَلَيْهِمْ مِّنْ سَبِيلٍ (٤١) إِنَّمَا السَّبِيلُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ يَظْلِمُونَ النَّاسَ وَيَبْغُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ ۗ أُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ (٤٢) وَلَمَنْ صَبَرَ وَغَفَرَ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ لَمِنْ عَزْمِ الْأُمُورِ (٤٣)

"And those who, when an oppressive wrong is inflicted on them, (are not cowed but) help and defend themselves. (39) The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah: for (Allah) loveth not those who do wrong. (40) But indeed, if any do help and defend themselves after a wrong (done) to them, against such, there is no cause of blame. (41) The blame is only against those who oppress men and wrongdoing and insolently transgress beyond bounds through the land, defying right and justice: for such, there will be a penalty grievous. (42) But indeed, if any show patience and forgiveness, that would truly be an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs (43)."

The verse above does not allow taking revenge but repaying wrongdoing to defend oneself. It states that patience and forgiveness are much better. Being patient and forgiving are two things always exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, PBUH. One proof of this is the incident in Taif and *Fathu Makkah*, where he showed sincerity by not retaliating against what they (the people of Mecca and Taif) had done, but instead used it as a strong motivation to forgive them (Al-Thabari, 1997 as cited in Khasan, 2017). Apart from that, the friend of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, Abu Bakr, also upheld the principle of forgiveness. Abu Bakar chose to forgive Mistah, one of the people who slandered his daughter, 'Aisyah, even though Mistah's actions could be subject to severe punishment (Mubarakfuri, 2003 as cited in Khasan, 2017). From these historical facts and Islamic thoughts, it is clear that the signified "Islam" is not as Federer said in his book. Federer's description was a signified deviation according to Saussure's theory.

4.2 Signified Deviation of "Al-Qur'an."

Apart from deviations from Islamic signs, researchers also found several deviant signs from the Qur'an in the book written by William J. Federer. The following is a description of the deviations from the signs of the Qur'an:

In his book entitled *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States*, Federer wrote six chapters explaining that the Qur'an was influenced by various religions and holy books, as stated in he wrote in the titles of several chapters below: *Qur'an: Manichaeism Influence*; *Qur'an: Zoroastrian Influence*; *Qur'an: Arab Pagan Influence*; *Qur'an: Christian Influence*; *Qur'an: Jewish Influence*; and *Qur'an: Apocryphal Influence*.

Federer (2007) also argues that Muhammad "assembled religious ideas already circulating in Arabia and presented them as revelation," reinforcing his claim that the Qur'an is a human construction rather than divine scripture. This statement strengthens Federer's construction of the Qur'an as a human product rather than divine revelation. Such a signified directly contradicts Islamic teachings.

The signs from the Qur'an explained by Federer are an aberration. Even though the Qur'an shares many similarities with other religious teachings, this does not change the purity of the Qur'an or Islamic doctrine, because Allah revealed it as a complement to the previous holy books. Regarding the function of the Qur'an as a complement to the previous holy books, there are three detailed functions: confirming the existence of the last holy books, straightening out things distorted in the holy books, and becoming an alternative book for the holy books, the holy book that ever existed (Syukran, 2019). Thus, it is clear that the revelation of the Qur'an was not an opposition or refutation of the previous book. It is proven in Surah Al-Maidah, verse 48:

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنْ أَلْكِتَابٍ وَمُهَيْمِنًا عَلَيْهِ ۗ

"To thee We sent the Scripture (Qur'an) in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety..."

The subsequent deviation from the signified "Qur'an" is evident in the sentence: *"If the Law of Moses and the Gospels could be corrupted by mortal man, then so could the Qur'an"* (Federer, 2007). In this sentence, Federer explained that humans can change the Qur'an, as happened with the Law of Moses and the Bible. This sentence shows a deviation

from the signs of the Qur'an because the purity of the Qur'an has been guaranteed directly by Allah SWT, namely in His words in the Surah Al-Hijr verse 9 below:

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

"We have, without doubt, sent down the Message, and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)."

Apart from that, efforts to maintain the purity of the Qur'an so that it does not change over time are carried out through memorization and writing methods (As-Shahih, 2001 via Huda, 2018). One form of writing method to maintain the originality of the Al-Qur'an is by printing official and standard mushafs. As is well known in the history of the Al-Qur'an, the printing of the Al-Qur'an began with manual writing (*imla'i*) until the time of printing, when the first printing was done by collecting writings. -writings of a friend during the caliph Abu Bakr ra. until the first mushaf was made during the caliph Uthman Bin Affan (Rohimin, 2016). The policy of uniform writing of the Al-Qur'an carried out by Caliph Usman bin Affan later served as a guideline for the Indonesian Standard Al-Qur'an Mushaf (MAQSI) (Huda, 2018). In Indonesia, the printing of the Al-Qur'an is not done haphazardly but somewhat under the supervision of a particular institution, the *Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an*. Based on the Decree of the Minister of Religion (KMA) No. 1 of 1982, one of the essential tasks of *Lajnah* is to research and maintain the purity of Al-Qur'an manuscripts, readings, recordings, translations, and interpretations of the Al-Qur'an in a preventive and repressive manner (Huda, 2018).

The memorization method has been used to maintain the authenticity of the Al-Qur'an since it was first revealed. At that time, only a few of the companions wrote revelations because, according to Ulum's study of the Qur'an, not many Arab people had mastered reading and writing (Huda, 2018). The memorization method is still widely used today, as many memorizers of the Qur'an are spread worldwide. The life dream of becoming a memorizer of the Qur'an among a group of people arises from their belief that the highest predicate for achieving Allah's pleasure is through the Qur'an (Huda, 2018). With the birth of many memorizers, they technically become guardians of the authenticity of the Qur'an, because any differences or changes that occur will undoubtedly be known to them.

Other deviations from the signified of the Qur'an are also found in sentences: *The verses had a rhyme, which helped followers recite them, similar to rap music today* (Federer, 2007). Federer explained that the verses of the Qur'an, which have a rhythm to make it easier for memorizers, have nothing but similarities to rap music. This sign is considered deviant because the Qur'an possesses a beauty of language that cannot be imitated, one of its miracles. This is in accordance with the word of Allah in Surah Al-Isra verse 88 as follows:

قُلْ لَئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا

Say: "If the whole of humanity and Jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like, even if they backed each other with help and support".

As stated by Allah, no creature can create anything like the Qur'an. Meanwhile, rap music is just a creation of creatures with no miracles, so it is not comparable to the Qur'an.

Thus, the signs of the Qur'an written by Federer are proven to be deviant. Deviations from the signified of the Qur'an are also shown in the sentences: *The Qur'an made it permissible to rape women captured in war, "women their right hands possess."* (Sura 23:5-6; 33:52; 4:24; 70:29-30) (Federer, 2007).

Federer revealed that the Qur'an allows the rape of female prisoners of war under the pretext of Surah Al-Mu'minun verses 5-6, Surah Al-Ahzab verse 52, An-Nisa' verse 24, and Al-Ma'arij verses 29-30. It is a deviation from the signs of the Qur'an because none of the verses mentioned justify rape. The following are the verses in question and their meanings:

Table 1.

Qur'anic Verses in Question Cited by Federer and Their Textual Context

No	Surah & Verse	Arabic Text (Excerpt)	English Translation (Excerpt)
1.	Al-Mu'minun: 5-6	وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأُزْوَاجِهِمْ حَفِظُونَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ ۚ	"Who abstain from sex, except with those joined to them in the marriage bond, or (the captives) whom their right hands possess,- for (in their case) they are free from blame" (https://islam.ulkaa.com)
2.	Al-Ahzab: 52	لَا يَحِلُّ لَكَ الْبَسَاءُ مِنْ بَعْدِ وَلَا أَنْ تَبَدَّلَ بَيْنَ مَنْ أَزْوَاجٍ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكَ حُسْنُهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا مَلَكَتْ يَمِينُكَ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ رَءِيفًا	"It is not lawful for thee (to marry more) women after this, nor to change them for (other) wives, even though their beauty attract thee, except any thy right hand should possess (as handmaidens): and Allah doth watch over all things." (https://islam.ulkaa.com)
3.	An-Nisa': 24	وَالْمُحْصَنَاتُ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ إِلَّا مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ۗ كَتَبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ ۗ وَأُحِلَّ لَكُمْ مَّا وَرَاءَ ذَٰلِكُمْ أَنْ تَبْتَاعُوا بِأَمْوَالِكُمْ مُحْصِنِينَ غَيْرِ مُسْفِحِينَ ۗ فَمَا اسْتَمْتَعْتُمْ بِهِ مِنْهُنَّ فَآتُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً ۗ وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِيمَا تَرَضَيْتُمْ بِهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الْفَرِيضَةِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا	"Also (prohibited are) women already married, except those whom your right hands possess: Thus hath Allah ordained (Prohibitions) against you: Except for these, all others are lawful, provided ye seek (them in marriage) with gifts from your property,- desiring chastity, not lust, seeing that ye derive benefit from them, give them their dowers (at least) as prescribed; but if, after a dower is prescribed, agree Mutually (to vary it), there is no blame on you, and Allah is All-knowing, All-wise." (https://islam.ulkaa.com)
4.	Al-Ma'arij: 29-30	وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأُزْوَاجِهِمْ حَفِظُونَ ۚ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ ۚ	"And those who guard their chastity, except with their wives and the (captives) whom their right hands possess, - for (then) they are not to be blamed." (https://islam.ulkaa.com)

All the verses mentioned by Federer above are the basis for a term called *milk al-yamin*. *Milk al-yamin* in the Qur'an is understood as an enslaved person by traditionalist ulama (Indriyani & Imron, 2021). Muhammad Syahrur then used this concept in Abdul Aziz's dissertation. Syahrur stated that there are fifteen verses scattered in the Surah Al-

Mu'minun, An-Nur, Ar-Rum, An-Nisa', An-Nahl, Al-Ahzab, and Al-Ma'arij that explain the milk of al-Yamin, which was passed down when the slavery system was still in effect and recognized in life globally (Indriyani & Imron, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that the revelation of verses relating to milk al-Yamin occurred in the context of a society still dominated by slavery. However, the slavery system no longer applies. In Indonesia, there is a special law prohibiting slavery, contained in Law Number 39 of 1999 on Human Rights (HAM). Chapter 4 of the Human Rights Law explains that being free from slavery is a human right that no one and Chapter 20 can negotiate; paragraphs (1) and (20) of the Human Rights Law confirm that there is no door for anyone to enslave other people, and all forms of slavery or similar are forbidden (Indriyani & Imron, 2021). Through this law, the slavery system was also explicitly abolished. However, the verses about *milk al-yamin* have not simply been erased historically. Regarding the legal application of the concept of *milk al-yamin* in the present, Syahrur stated that the conditions for the validity of a *misyar* marriage are different from the conditions for official marriage in general because the aim is purely for sexual intercourse. It is not included in the category of official marriage, even though it is not haram (Indriyani & Imron, 2021).

The Qur'an does allow sexual relations with slave women prisoners of war, but the Qur'an never condones rape, as claimed by Federer. However, with the elimination of the slavery system, the concept of sexual relations with *milk al-yamin* was adapted to *misyar* marriage, as stated by Syahrur. From these historical facts and Islamic thoughts, it is clear that the signified "Al-Qur'an" is not as Federer said in his book. Federer's description was a signified deviation according to Saussure's semiotics theory.

4.3 Signified Deviation of "Muhammad Pbuh."

Apart from deviations from Islamic signs, researchers also found several deviant signs from the Qur'an in the book written by William J. Federer. The following is a description of the deviations from the signs of the Qur'an: In his book entitled *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States*, Federer wrote six chapters explaining that the Qur'an was influenced by various religions and holy books, as stated in the titles of several chapters below:

Apart from deviations from the signified of "Islam" and "the Qur'an," researchers found other deviations, namely deviations from the signified of "the Prophet Muhammad, pbuh." The following is a description of the deviation from the signs of the Prophet Muhammad, Pbuh. In the book by William J. Federer entitled *What Every American Needs to Know about the Qur'an – A History of Islam and the United States*:

The first deviation is shown in sentences like the following:

"Mohammed once visited Zayd, his former slave and adopted, and saw Zayd's wife, Zainab, scantily clothed. Mohammed desired her, even though she was also his cousin. Circumstances mounted till Zayd divorced her so that Mohammed could have her."

"Mohammed later abolished the practice of adoption so he could no longer be accused of the practice of a man having intercourse with the same woman as his son."

"Muhammad as a lawgiver who "created religious rules that benefited his political authority." (Federer, 2007).

Federer explained that the Prophet Muhammad wanted Zaid's wife, Zainab, as soon as he saw her, so Zaid had to divorce Zainab so that the Prophet Muhammad could marry

her. This portrayal constructs Muhammad as the ultimate source of legislation, whereas the Qur'an repeatedly affirms that only God determines what is lawful and unlawful.

It is an aberration because several scholars have widely denied this event. According to Qadhi Iyadh and Al-Qusayri, the incident when the Prophet Muhammad saw Zainab bint Jahsh and then developed lust was invalid (Pratina, 2019). Apart from that, the divorce between Zaid and Zainab was not caused by the Prophet Muhammad's desire to marry Zainab. Zaid began to feel trouble after his marriage to Zainab because his wife often said harsh words because of Zainab's lineage; until then, Zaid hated her and asked the Prophet Muhammad for permission to divorce Zainab. After asking permission several times, the Prophet Muhammad finally agreed to Zaid's request (Satriana, 2019).

Then, the marriage of the Prophet Muhammad and Zainab bint Jahsh took place based on the orders of Allah SWT. It is following His words in Sura Al-Ahzab verse 37:

وَإِذْ تَقُولُ لِلَّذِي أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَأَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِ أَمْسِكْ عَلَيْكَ زَوْجَكَ وَاتَّقِ اللَّهَ وَتُخْفِي فِي نَفْسِكَ مَا اللَّهُ مُبْدِيهِ
وَتُخْفِي النَّاسَ وَاللَّهُ أَحَقُّ أَنْ تَخْشَاهُ ۖ فَلَمَّا قَضَى زَيْدٌ مِنْهَا وَطَرًا زَوَّجْنَاكَهَا لِكَيْ لَا يَكُونَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ حَرَجٌ
فِي أَزْوَاجِ أَدْعِيَائِهِمْ إِذَا قَضَوْا مِنْهُنَّ وَطَرًا ۚ وَكَانَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ مَفْعُولًا

"Behold! Thou didst say to one who had received Allah's grace and favour: "Retain thou (in wedlock) thy wife, and fear Allah." But thou didst hide in thy heart that which Allah was about to make manifest: thou didst fear the people, but it is more fitting that thou shouldst fear Allah. Then when Zaid had dissolved (his marriage) with her, with the necessary (formality), We joined her in marriage to thee: so that (in future) there may be no difficulty to the Believers in (the matter of) marriage with the wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have dissolved with the necessary (formality) (their marriage) with them. Moreover, Allah's command must be fulfilled." (<https://islam.ulkaa.com>)

Based on the verse above, Zaid was reluctant to accept the advice put forward by the Prophet Muhammad to maintain his marriage and still intended to divorce Zainab, so after the two divorced and after completing Zainab's iddah period, Allah married the Prophet Muhammad to Zainab bint Jahsh. The purpose of this marriage was none other than to eradicate heresy, which was currently developing, namely that it was not permissible for a person to marry a wife who was divorced by his adopted child, because, according to Arab society, the legal status of an adopted child was equal to that of a biological child (Satriana, 2019).

In Islam, if a man marries a woman, then the man's father is forbidden to marry her forever, even if later his son divorces her or his son dies, as written in the following fragment of Surah An-Nisa verse 23:

وَحَلَائِلُ أَبْنَائِكُمُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ أَصْلَابِكُمْ

"...Those who have been) wives of your sons proceeding from your loins ..." (<https://islam.ulkaa.com>)

Imam Ibn Qudāmah (1997) and Imam an-Nawawi (2002) stated that the scholars agree that the wife of a son (daughter-in-law) is haram for his father forever.

Before the verse about the marriage of the Prophet Muhammad and Zainab bint Jahsh, Allah first revealed a verse that emphasized the relationship between adopted children and adoptive fathers to eliminate the culture of Arab society, which views the equal status of adopted children with biological children, as follows in Surah Al-Ahzab, verse 5:

أَدْعُوهُمْ لِأَبَائِهِمْ هُوَ أَقْسَطُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ ۖ فَإِنْ لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا آبَاءَهُمْ فَاخْوَانُكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَمَوْلَاكُمْ ۖ وَلَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ فِيمَا أَخْطَأْتُمْ بِهِ ۚ وَلَكِنْ مَّا تَعَمَّدَتْ قُلُوبُكُمْ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا

"Call them by (the names of) their fathers: that is juster in the sight of Allah; however, if ye know not their father's (names, call them) your Brothers in faith, or your maulas. But there is no blame on you if ye make a mistake therein: (what counts is) the intention of your hearts: and Allah is Off-Returning, Most Merciful." (<https://islam.ulkaa.com>)

With the revelation above, Zaid is no longer called Zaid bin Muhammad but Zaid bin Harithah, following the name of his biological father (Pratina, 2019). The signified deviation of Muhammad is also shown by the following sentence: *What Mohammed permitted is "Halal"; what Mohammed did not permit is "Haram"* (Federer, 2007).

According to Federer, the Prophet Muhammad judges whether something is halal or haram. It is a mistake because the only one who has the right to determine halal and haram is Allah. In the Qur'an, Allah has confirmed this in several verses. The following is a description of the verses of the Qur'an regarding the rights of Allah SWT in determining halal and haram:

Table 2.

Qur'anic Verses Regarding the Rights of Allah Cited by Federer and Their Textual Context

No	Surah & Verse	Arabic Text (Excerpt)	English Translation (Excerpt)
1.	Yunus, Verse 59	قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ مِنْ رِزْقٍ فَجَعَلْتُمْ مِنْهُ حَرَامًا وَحَلَالًا قُلْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ أَذِنَ لَكُمْ بِهِ أَمْ عَلَى اللَّهِ تَفَتَّرُونَ	Say: "See ye what things Allah hath sent down to you for sustenance? Yet ye hold forbidden some things thereof and (some things) lawful." Say: "Hath Allah indeed permitted you, or do ye invent (things) to attribute to Allah?" (https://islam.ulkaa.com)
2.	An-Nahl, verse 116	وَلَا تَقُولُوا لِمَا تَصِفُ أَلْسِنَتُكُمُ الْكَذِبَ هَذَا حَلَالٌ وَهَذَا حَرَامٌ لِيَتَفَتَّرُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ ۚ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَفْتَرُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ لَا يُفْلِحُونَ	But say not - for any false thing that your tongues may put forth, - "This is lawful, and this is forbidden," so as to ascribe false things to Allah. For those who ascribe false things to Allah, will never prosper. (https://islam.ulkaa.com)
3.	Al-An'am, verse 119	فَصَلِّ لَكُمْ مَا حَرَّمَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِلَّا مَا اضْطُرِرْتُمْ إِلَيْهِ...	"... when He hath explained to you in detail what is forbidden to you - except under compulsion of necessity?... (https://islam.ulkaa.com)

From the verses above, it is clear that the Prophet Muhammad only conveyed the legality of halal or haram from Allah. He is not a person who determines the halal and haram in Islam. Also, statements in the Qur'an about Muhammad's character, as Federer said, are not proven. In Saussure's semiological theory, Federer is considered to have made a signified deviation from the signifier "Muhammad," which characterized the Prophet Muhammad as above.

4.4 Discussion: Semiotic Construction of Islam in Federer's Narrative

This study demonstrates that Federer's representation of Islam, the Qur'an, and the Prophet Muhammad operates through a systematic reconfiguration of signifier–signified relations. Islamic terms and figures are repeatedly connected with ideas such as coercion, political interest, and moral doubt, rather than with revelation, ethical teaching, and prophetic authority as understood in Islamic tradition. Through this pattern, meanings appear to be guided toward certain conclusions rather than presented openly and neutrally. Consequently, the book creates a reading environment in which Islam is already positioned as problematic before readers encounter Islamic sources themselves.

These findings are consistent with Saussure's view that meaning emerges from social convention and differential relations rather than from inherent essence (Barnard, 2021; Cho, 2024). Federer's narrative illustrates how a text can repeatedly attach certain meanings to particular signs until those meanings feel natural and unquestionable. Earlier studies on Western portrayals of Islam have also pointed out the tendency to simplify Islam by focusing on selected historical moments and isolated textual fragments. Building on these studies, this research shows more clearly how such simplification is produced at the level of everyday language, through recurring pairings between specific signifiers and ideologically loaded signifieds.

The findings suggest that negative representations of Islam do not always appear as direct attacks. They often emerge within texts that present themselves as historical, educational, or informative (Tamamiyah, 2025). When certain meanings are repeated often enough, they gain an appearance of common sense. This study, therefore, offers a new perspective: debates about Islam are not only about facts or interpretations, but also about who has the power to define what words, concepts, and symbols are taken to mean. Paying attention to this semiotic process allows scholars to move beyond responding to individual claims and toward examining the deeper patterns that shape public understanding.

This study focuses on a single book and uses qualitative semiotic analysis, which means its findings cannot be generalized without caution. Future research could examine a wider range of popular and academic texts to see whether similar meaning patterns appear across different genres. Combining semiotic analysis with corpus-based methods may also help identify broader linguistic tendencies. In addition, studies of reader reception would be valuable for exploring how such representations are interpreted, accepted, or resisted by different audiences.

5. CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be drawn from the research results regarding the research objectives. First, two data show deviations from Islamic signs. The first sign of Islam is related to the concept of freedom, which is considered deviant because it does not follow Surah Al-Baqarah 256. The second Islamic sign relating to revenge is considered deviant because it is not in line with the Surah Ash-Shura verses 39-43, which do not follow the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Second, four data points show that the Quran is deviating. The Qur'an's indications regarding other beliefs that influence it are considered deviant because they do not align with the Surah Al-Maidah verse 48. The indications in the Qur'an regarding the possibility of change are considered deviant because they do not comply with the content of Surah Al-Hijr, verse 9. The Qur'an's indication of its similarity to rap music is considered deviant because it is not in harmony with the Surah Al-Isra verse 88. The

Qur'anic indication regarding the verses that justify the rape of enslaved people is also considered deviant because these verses were implemented when the verses were revealed. After slavery was abolished, the concept of sexual relations with *milk al-yamin* was adapted so that it must be done with marriage first. Third, Muhammad's deviant signs are shown by two data. Muhammad's indication that his marriage to Zainab was based on lust is a form of deviation because it does not follow the Surah Al-Ahzab verse 37. Muhammad's signs relating to the figure determining halal and haram are also considered deviant because they do not follow the Surah Yunus verse 59, An-Nahl verse 116, and Al-An'am 119.

Deviations from these crucial signifieds cannot be taken because they can mislead the reader. Orientalist narratives like this should not be used as a reference for someone getting to know Islam because there are many inconsistencies with what the Islamic religion teaches. With this research, researchers hope the public will be more observant in selecting appropriate reading sources to avoid misunderstandings. This study is limited to the analysis of a single text and relies on qualitative semiotic interpretation, which calls for careful contextual reading of its findings. Future research may examine a broader range of texts and incorporate corpus-based or reception studies to deepen understanding of how meanings about Islam are constructed, circulated, and contested across different audiences.

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Authors' Contribution

Fatima Aurelian Sugandi worked on the project, the main conceptual ideas, and wrote the manuscript. Ubaidillah translated this paper from Indonesian to English and proofread the manuscript. Anar Gafarov worked on the main conceptual ideas regarding Islamic themes and the Philosophy of the Datum and proofread the manuscript.

Authors' Information

FATIMA AURELIAN SUGANDI is a junior researcher in English Linguistics at the English Department, Faculty of Adab and Cultural Sciences in UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. Her research interests include structural and functional Linguistics.

Email: fatimaaurelians@gmail.com

UBAIDILLAH is a lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Adab and Cultural Sciences, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. His research interests include Structural Linguistics, Sociopragmatics, and Linguistics in Islamic Studies.

Email: ubaidillah@uin-suka.ac.id; ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2361-9861>

ANAR GAFAROV is a head of the Department of Religious Study at the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology in Baku, Azerbaijan. His research areas are Islamic Philosophies and Religious Studies.

Email: anargafarov@ait.edu.az; ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3113-1287>

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