



## Interpreting *Lawwāmah* in Qs. Al-Qiyāmah (75) Verse 2: A Semiotic Reading Using Roland Barthes' Theory

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### ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a critical re-examination of the interpretation of the term *al-lawwāmah* in verse 75:2 of Sūrat al-Qiyāmah, traditionally understood to signify reprehensible desires or internal moral impulses. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the research conducts a qualitative descriptive analysis to uncover the term's layered semantic and conceptual significations within the Qur'anic text. The findings yield two pivotal contributions: First, at the semantic level, *al-lawwāmah* transcends mere moral failings to encompass individuals who persistently engage in deliberate wrongdoing despite conscious awareness of their ethical transgressions. Second, within Barthes' mythic system, *al-lawwāmah* emerges as a symbol of moral hypocrisy, embodying an existential tension between idealized ethical principles and sinful praxis. By synthesizing classical Qur'anic exegesis with modern semiotic theory, the study repositions *al-lawwāmah* as a complex ethical construct, while illuminating its implications for contemporary discourses on moral accountability and spiritual integrity. These insights challenge reductive interpretations of the term, advancing a nuanced understanding of its socio-ethical resonance and underscoring its relevance to interdisciplinary dialogues in religious studies, semiotics, and moral philosophy.

### Kata Kunci

*Lawwāmah* , Semiotic Analysis, Quranic Exegesis, Al-Qiyāmah

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of *nafs* in Islamic thought plays a significant role in shaping human behavior and moral development. Often understood as an internal drive or impulse, *nafs* is seen as an intrinsic part of human nature, capable of influencing both positive and negative aspects of one's character. When not properly managed, it can lead to unethical actions and moral decline (Nasr, 1987; Sardar, 2004). In Islamic thought, humans are encouraged to control their *nafs* to ensure it does not surpass the boundaries set by divine law (Ramli et al., 2024). *Nafs*, an inherent part of human nature, has the power to shape one's character, which can manifest either positively or negatively depending on how

it is managed (Ashya & Nathania, 2024; Napitupulu, 2019). In this context, *nafs* serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it is a divine gift meant to motivate humans to meet basic needs and avoid threats, such as the urge to eat, drink, and procreate. Without the drive to eat, for instance, individuals would face weakness, illness, or even death. Similarly, without the desire for procreation, humanity would not continue. However, when left unchecked, *nafs* can push individuals to exceed limits, leading to harm not only for themselves but also for others and the environment (Ripa'an, 2023; Sardar, 2004).

*Lawwāmāh*, as a specific aspect of *nafs*, is particularly important in understanding the role of self-reflection and moral struggle in human development. In Islamic tradition, *nafs* is often metaphorically compared to a horse that requires reins to stay on course. Without reins or proper control, the horse may veer off its intended path and wander aimlessly, leading to potential harm (Solihin & Naan, 2021). Similarly, the *nafs* must be controlled to avoid the negative consequences of unchecked desires, which may result in personal, social, and spiritual setbacks. The struggle to control *nafs* is not only a matter of avoiding sinful behavior but also a way of progressing toward spiritual and moral growth. *Lawwāmāh* specifically refers to the self-reproaching aspect of *nafs*, which is conscious of its wrongdoings but struggles with acting on them. This inner conflict is key to understanding the concept in QS. Al-Qiyāmah (75): 2, where *lawwāmāh* is depicted as the self-accusing soul, aware of its moral failings but often continuing to act in ways that contradict its ethical understanding (Ripa'an, 2023; Shihab, 2017).

Several scholars, including Alpaqih Andopa and Ali ibn Muhammad ad-Dihami, have explored the notion of *lawwāmāh* in Islamic exegesis. Andopa discusses the notion of *an-nafs* within the thought of Quraish Shihab, emphasizing the moral struggle inherent in human nature. Meanwhile, ad-Dihami investigates how *nafs lawwāmāh* can lead individuals to distance themselves from Allah, acting in ignorance despite an awareness of their ethical shortcomings (Ad-Dihami, 2011; Andopa, 2018). While existing studies have explored *lawwāmāh* in Qur'anic exegesis, they often overlook the broader socio-cultural and ideological implications of the term. This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of *lawwāmāh*.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive analytical approach to explore the term *lawwāmāh* in QS. Al-Qiyāmah (75): 2 through Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Barthes' semiotics is applied to

decode the term's symbolic meanings, examining both its denotative and connotative dimensions. The research begins by consulting dictionaries to establish a foundational understanding of *lawwāmah*, followed by an analysis of classical tafsir interpretations to understand the term in its Qur'anic context. Barthes' semiotic framework, which distinguishes between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (deeper, culturally shaped meanings), is then used to compare these traditional interpretations with modern perspectives.

The study seeks to expand the understanding of *lawwāmah*, moving beyond its traditional portrayal as merely reprehensible desires, and instead, exploring it as a symbol of hypocrisy and internal moral conflict. It offers a more nuanced interpretation by highlighting how individuals, despite being aware of their faults, continue sinful behaviors. This interdisciplinary approach aims to provide a richer perspective on *lawwāmah*, integrating theological analysis with semiotic theory to examine its ethical implications. By doing so, the research contributes to broader discussions on morality, self-control, and the influence of desires in human life, offering valuable insights into how individuals can cultivate moral responsibility and spiritual integrity in the face of inner conflict. Through this method, the study enhances our understanding of *lawwāmah* in QS. Al-Qiyāmah (75): 2 and contributes to the ongoing discourse on human ethics, religious responsibility, and self-improvement.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory**

Roland Barthes, born in 1915 in Cherbourg, France, was a pioneering scholar in the interdisciplinary fields of semiotics, literary criticism, and cultural theory. Barthes not only developed the theory of semiotics within the realm of literature but also applied it across various domains, including media, popular culture, and society at large. His academic work delves into how language and texts shape our understanding of the world, emphasizing the role of signs in constructing meaning. One of Barthes' significant contributions is the use of semiotics to analyze cultural texts, which, while seemingly simple, are often embedded with deeper layers of meaning related to social, cultural, and ideological values (Kamil & Handayani, 2023). Semiotics, the study of signs and meanings in communication, is central to Barthes' work (Mubarak, 2007; Pradopo, 1999). According to his theory, signs are composed of two primary components: the signifier (the physical form of the sign) and the signified (the concept or meaning represented by the sign). This concept is foundational in semiotic theory, initially developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, and later expanded by Barthes (Fadhliyah, 2021; Makarim et al., 2023; Saussure, 1983).

The signifier refers to the tangible aspect of a sign, such as words, images, sounds, or symbols, that can be perceived through sight or hearing. The signified, on the other hand, represents the abstract concept or meaning that the signifier evokes. Together, the signifier and signified form the complete sign, which functions as the smallest unit of meaning in communication (Barthes, 1977a). Barthes utilized this concept to demonstrate how signs construct our perception of the world. In Barthes' semiotic theory, two critical levels of meaning emerge: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal or surface-level meaning of a sign, which can be understood descriptively and without additional interpretation (Adiansyah et al., 2023; Harahap et al., 2024). For instance, the word "rat" denotatively refers to a four-legged, furry animal typically found in unsanitary environments. However, Barthes argues that signs do not merely serve to convey literal meanings; they also carry connotative meanings, which are deeper, arising from cultural and social associations (Barthes, 1977b). In this regard, "rat" can be connoted as a symbol of bad behavior, such as dishonesty or corruption, which goes beyond its physical description and touches upon broader social and moral values (Barker, 2004).

Connotation, according to Barthes, is closely linked to ideology and myth, which influence how society perceives a particular concept or sign (Jadou & Ghabra, 2021). In this context, myth is not simply a narrative or story accepted at face value but refers to the process by which dominant cultural values are naturalized, making them appear as normal and unquestionable (Barthes, 1972). Myths function to reinforce ideologies and systems of values, presenting certain social norms as universally accepted truths. Barthes contends that myths act to "naturalize" dominant cultural and societal values, presenting them as objective and inherently true, even though they are, in reality, social constructs maintained for particular interests (Hall, 1980). Barthes further developed semiotic theory by introducing the idea that every sign in culture, whether in literature, advertisements, or mass media, consists of two layers of meaning: the denotative layer, which conveys the literal or direct meaning, and the connotative layer, which carries additional meanings influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts (Behera, 2024; Eco, 1979).

Barthes encourages us to look beyond the obvious, surface-level meanings of signs and to explore how these signs communicate and construct meaning within a broader context. In doing so, readers are not passive recipients of meaning; they play an active role in the process of reading and interpreting signs, thereby shaping their understanding of the world (Barthes, 1977b). In practice, Barthes' semiotic theory enables us to read texts not only for their

literal meanings (denotation) but also to uncover hidden meanings through connotation, which relate to broader ideologies, myths, and cultural values. Barthes posits that every text, whether in the form of literature, advertising, or mass media, carries two interconnected layers of meaning: the denotative and the connotative. By applying this approach, we can analyze how culture, politics, and power are embedded in texts that may appear simple but actually contain dominant values that shape societal perspectives (Barthes, 1972; Hall, 1980). Denotative Meaning of *Lawwāmah* in QS. Al-Qiyāmah (75): 2

In the Qur'an, the term *lawwāmah* appears only once, in Sūrat Al-Qiyāmah (75:2), where it is mentioned in the context of the divine oath: "I swear by the Day of Resurrection, and I swear by the self-reproaching soul (to the certainty of resurrection)" (QS. Al-Qiyāmah [75]: 1-2). The reference to the self-reproaching soul encapsulates the profound human experience of regret, internal conflict, and moral reckoning. In this verse, *lawwāmah* serves as a powerful symbol of a soul that is constantly at odds with itself, engaging in self-blame and self-criticism for its past actions. This concept invites an exploration into the nature of human consciousness, accountability, and spiritual evolution, offering insights into the ways in which humans grapple with their shortcomings, strive for moral betterment, and seek redemption. The term *lawwāmah* is derived from the Arabic verb "*lām*", which means to blame or to reproach. From a linguistic perspective, *lawwāmah* carries a denotative meaning that directly refers to a soul that continually reproaches itself, reflecting a state of inner turmoil and regret.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which distinguishes between the signifier (the word or symbol) and the signified (the concept it represents), provides a useful framework for analyzing this term. *Lawwāmah*, as the signifier, points to the concept of self-reproach, an inherent conflict within the human soul that is deeply connected to the individual's moral awareness. In this sense, *lawwāmah* represents not just a momentary feeling of guilt, but an ongoing, dynamic process of self-examination and reflection, where the individual is consistently aware of their transgressions, whether in their actions, intentions, or spiritual failures. Several prominent Islamic scholars, including M. Quraish Shihab, have elaborated on the term *lawwāmah* in their tafsirs, providing further insights into its theological implications. Shihab interprets *lawwāmah* as a soul caught between two opposing forces: *al-Ammarah*, the commanding soul that urges a person toward sin and disobedience, and *al-Muthmainnah*, the soul that is tranquil and fully aligned with divine will (Ghani, Hafiz & Ahmad, 2024; Ripaan, 2023; Shihab, 2017).

*Lawwāmah*, according to Shihab, occupies a middle ground, representing the soul's continuous struggle between the desire to act upon worldly temptations and the yearning to follow divine guidance. This internal conflict, marked by self-reproach, signifies a deeper moral struggle where the individual is torn between their lower desires and their higher moral aspirations, leading to a constant cycle of self-criticism and spiritual disquiet. The interpretation of *lawwāmah* has also been examined by other Islamic scholars, such as Sa'id bin Juba'ir and Ibn Abbas, who describe *lawwāmah* as a blameworthy soul that constantly judges itself. Ibn Abbas, in particular, highlights that this self-reproach is a universal experience that will manifest in the afterlife for all souls, whether righteous or sinful. For the righteous, *lawwāmah* may manifest as regret for not having done more good, even when they have led virtuous lives. For the sinful, it represents a sorrow for the wrongdoings they failed to rectify during their earthly existence.

In this light, *lawwāmah* is not only a self-critical force but also a reminder of the human potential for growth, transformation, and redemption. It is a recognition that, despite one's efforts, there is always room for improvement, and the awareness of this gap between ideal and reality leads to a continuous process of spiritual striving. Further interpretations of *lawwāmah* suggest that it is connected to the concept of moral inconsistency or hesitation. Some scholars trace the term back to the Arabic root *talawwun*, which implies a lack of consistency or resolve. This perspective suggests that *lawwāmah* can also reflect the soul's inability to maintain a firm stance in the face of moral challenges, vacillating between the desire for virtue and the pull of temptation (Shihab, 2017). The complexity of *lawwāmah* is further highlighted by figures such as Ikrimah, who argues that *lawwāmah* involves a soul that criticizes both good and bad actions, indicating an internal conflict that arises from not fully embracing either moral righteousness or sinfulness.

Qatadah, on the other hand, suggests that *lawwāmah* can also reflect a soul that has become lost in sin, continually reproaching itself but unable to break free from its sinful tendencies. The spiritual significance of *lawwāmah* goes beyond mere moral conflict. It plays a crucial role in the process of spiritual purification and development. Atha' bin Abbas emphasizes that self-reproach is a universal experience that will be felt by all individuals in the afterlife, regardless of their earthly conduct. The righteous will regret not having achieved more goodness, while the sinful will mourn their failure to repent. al-Hassan, a key Islamic figure, further asserts that a true believer will never cease to critique their own soul, even when performing righteous deeds. This continuous self-assessment is an essential characteristic of someone who is

aware of their own imperfections and is thus motivated to improve (Al-Jauziyah, 2018).

In contrast, the sinful person may continue on their path without ever engaging in meaningful self-reflection, highlighting the contrasting spiritual conditions of the pious and the impious. The *lawwāmah* soul, however, is not a sign of despair or hopelessness. It represents the potential for spiritual renewal and redemption. When an individual is illuminated by divine light, the *lawwāmah* aspect of the soul awakens to the moral conflict within, encouraging repentance and seeking forgiveness. This process of spiritual awakening leads to personal transformation, allowing the individual to break free from the cycle of sin and emerge with a renewed commitment to righteousness. *Lawwāmah* thus serves as a catalyst for spiritual growth, guiding individuals to acknowledge their flaws, seek forgiveness, and strive toward self-improvement (Al-Jauziyah, 2018).

### **Connotative Meaning of *Lawwāmah* through Barthes' Mythological System**

The next stage in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory delves into the exploration of mythological systems or connotative meanings, expanding the interpretation of terms like *lawwāmah* beyond their literal sense to uncover the broader and more nuanced layers of their significance. In the context of *lawwāmah*, this deeper analysis reveals both spiritual and moral dimensions, offering a more profound understanding of the term. According to the *Asbab al-Nuzul* (circumstances of revelation) of Sūrat Al-Qiyāmah (75:2), Allah swears by the self-reproaching soul, highlighting the perpetual internal reflection of one's sins and errors (An-Nisaburi, 2014). This soul is constantly aware of its wrongdoings, and it serves as a reminder to the individual of the consequences of their actions, particularly with regard to the afterlife. The act of self-reproach in this context is not a fleeting moment of guilt but a continuous process that forces individuals to confront the repercussions of their deeds in both the worldly and divine realms. Al-Qurthubi interprets Allah's oath as a mark of honor for this soul, indicating that it reflects a high level of self-awareness and accountability. It is a soul that never ceases to regret its past actions, thus constantly pushing its owner toward spiritual improvement and personal growth (Kristina, 2022).

Scholars like Ibn Abbas, Mujahid, and al-Hasan further elaborate, emphasizing that *lawwāmah* is characteristic of the devout believer. This self-reproaching nature becomes an intrinsic part of their spirituality, constantly driving them to reflect on their actions and to strive for better conduct. The perpetual regret embodied by the *lawwāmah* soul is viewed as an essential aspect of spiritual growth, as it serves as a vehicle for transformation,

encouraging repentance and the constant pursuit of moral excellence. From a theological standpoint, *lawwāmah* is not solely about regret; it plays a crucial role in the moral and spiritual journey of the believer, offering them a path to redemption through awareness of their limitations and the seeking of divine forgiveness (Almusfir, 2022; Karzon, 2010).

However, while *lawwāmah* can be beneficial in maintaining spiritual awareness, it also has the potential to become counterproductive. When self-reproach leads to an unending cycle of guilt and regret without moving toward repentance or corrective action, it can hinder personal and spiritual development. In such instances, the soul becomes trapped in a state of perpetual self-blame without making meaningful progress toward aligning with Allah's will. This situation can result in spiritual stagnation, where the individual, despite their awareness of wrongdoing, fails to take the necessary steps to rectify their behavior, leading to a disconnect from divine guidance. The Qur'an warns against this state of inertia, urging believers to transform their regret into a motivation for repentance and self-improvement, rather than allowing it to turn into a debilitating force that keeps them from pursuing righteousness.

In Barthes' semiotic framework, *lawwāmah* functions not only as a term of regret but also as a signifier that points toward the signified, which is the moral and spiritual state of a blameworthy soul. This soul, represented by *lawwāmah*, experiences not just personal remorse but also a larger, more complex moral conflict. On one hand, it knows the wrongness of its actions, but on the other, it persists in sinful behavior. This creates a paradox of awareness and action, where the individual is aware of the sinfulness of their behavior but continues to engage in it, revealing a form of hypocrisy. The hypocrite is someone who recognizes their sin yet continues to act as if they are not responsible, creating a tension that lies at the heart of the *lawwāmah* soul. Allah's oath in the Qur'an swears by this very tension, underscoring the importance of sincerity and accountability, both of which are often at the core of the human struggle between knowledge of good and the temptation of sin.

In contemporary society, the manifestation of *lawwāmah* can often be observed in actions driven by selfish desires, such as theft, deceit, or other morally compromising behaviors. For instance, a young individual may steal in order to fulfill materialistic desires, even though they are fully aware that their actions violate Allah's commands. This internal conflict between self-interest and moral responsibility is a poignant illustration of *lawwāmah* at work. The person knows the moral implications of their actions, yet they persist in fulfilling their desires, revealing the ongoing struggle between what is right and what is



tempting. This inner conflict leads to a painful realization of wrongdoing, which often comes too late, after the consequences have already unfolded. Despite the awareness of the sin, the individual fails to act on that knowledge until regret inevitably sets in.

The key lesson that emerges from the concept of *lawwāmah* is its emphasis on resisting temptation and striving to align one's actions with divine commands. The self-reproaching soul constantly reminds individuals that actions contrary to divine will only lead to regret, sorrow, and spiritual confusion. Furthermore, *lawwāmah* teaches the importance of repentance and the rejection of sinful behavior as a means of achieving inner peace and moral clarity. When one aligns their actions with the teachings of Allah, they are able to transcend the cycle of regret and enter a state of spiritual peace, marked by a sense of moral fulfillment and divine approval. This journey towards spiritual renewal is not an easy one, and it requires constant self-reflection and accountability. It demands that individuals not only recognize their failings but also take concrete steps toward rectification.

Thus, the *lawwāmah* soul provides a critical framework for understanding the moral and spiritual challenges that all humans face. It is a reminder that the path to salvation requires more than just awareness of sin; it requires action, repentance, and a commitment to living in accordance with divine will. Through Barthes' semiotic framework, *lawwāmah* emerges as a symbol of the human struggle, a powerful sign of the ongoing battle for spiritual growth, accountability, and the pursuit of redemption. By analyzing *lawwāmah* as both a denotative and connotative sign, we gain deeper insight into its significance as an intrinsic part of the human experience representing the path of moral conflict, self-awareness, repentance, and the potential for spiritual transformation. Consequently, *lawwāmah* serves as a key concept in understanding the broader moral and spiritual struggles that define human existence and the eternal quest for divine closeness and forgiveness.

## CONCLUSION

The term *lawwāmah* in QS. Al-Qiyāmah (75): 2 offers a profound and multi-layered understanding of moral conflict, self-reproach, and spiritual accountability. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the study has expanded the interpretation of this term beyond its conventional understanding as simply representing reprehensible desires or blameworthy urges. At the denotative level, *lawwāmah* reflects an internal struggle, embodying the soul that perpetually criticizes itself for its wrongdoings, acknowledging its moral shortcomings. However, as Barthes' mythological

analysis reveals, the term carries a connotative meaning that signifies more than just self-blame. It exposes a deeper, more complex issue of moral hypocrisy, where individuals, despite being fully aware of their transgressions, continue to indulge in sinful behavior. This persistent disregard for moral guidelines is driven by a sense of autonomy and personal gain, creating a conflict between knowledge and action, ultimately leading to a state of hypocrisy.

By integrating Barthes' semiotic framework with traditional Qur'anic exegesis, this study not only redefines *lawwāmah* as a symbol of internal conflict but also situates it within a broader moral and spiritual context. *Lawwāmah* serves as a powerful representation of human beings' struggle with their desires and the need for ethical consistency. The term points to the duality of human nature where individuals are often aware of their faults but may still choose to act against their better judgment for selfish reasons, thus reinforcing the importance of self-awareness, repentance, and striving for spiritual improvement. Ultimately, the term *lawwāmah* underscores the crucial role of self-reflection in the moral journey, encouraging individuals to rise above their internal contradictions and align their actions with divine commands. It challenges individuals to confront their moral failures, seek redemption, and work towards genuine spiritual growth. This complex symbol, illuminated through Barthes' semiotic approach, offers a new dimension to understanding moral struggle and hypocrisy, and remains a central concept in discussions of human ethics, self-control, and spiritual integrity.

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