

A Semantic Critique of the Translation of the Word "Ummī" in the Holy Quran

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Abstract

One of the key aspects of structural semantics is the consideration of the issue of signification that paying attention to the types of denotative, implicative, and entailment significations is a strategy for discovering the meanings of words. The present study aims to translate the word "Ummī" based on its denotative significations and to present the meanings and interpretations of translators and commentators that are often based on entailment signification. It also seeks to refute their theories based on other verses and provide a new meaning. Accordingly, it begins by stating the primary meaning of the root "Umm," and based on that, it interprets all the roots of this word in terms of denotative signification. It then views the meaning of "Ummī" as illiteracy or other interpretations as entailment signification, which reflect a certain influence of the translators' prior theological backgrounds, thereby hindering their ability to convey the original meaning of the word effectively. However, based on the denotative signification of the word "Ummī," meaning "Original," this

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meaning is evident in all its derivatives and aligns more closely with the root of the word. Also, based on the text and context, it is more consistent with sentences and phrases than other meanings.

Keywords: Semantics, Semantic Significations, Denotative, Entailment, The Word *Ummī*.



Introduction

One of the methods explored in structural semantics is to describe a word based on the context and linguistic fabric in which it appears, along with other words that may serve as its substitutes. This involves examining the word both in its literal sense and its derivatives according to the three types of significations: Implicative, entailment, and denotative. The aim is to elucidate the various semantic significations of a word. Therefore, in interpreting the verses, these issues must also be considered to achieve an accurate translation of the words and ultimately the discourse, thus arriving at the main intended meaning.

The word "*Ummī*" is one that has been interpreted in various ways, and each commentator has approached its explanation differently. This word appears six times in the Quran, twice in the singular form and four times in the plural form. Its derivatives, including the words *Imam*, *Ummah*, *Ummī*, *Amām*, and *Umm*, are mentioned 121 times in the Quran. In this paper, we will translate each of these words, taking into account their meanings in the lexicon and based on Quranic evidence, considering the context of the verses. We will then discuss the word "*Ummī*" and the approaches taken by commentators regarding it, presenting arguments both for and against these interpretations based on the meanings of the word in various significations—denotative, implicative, and entailment—and in light of the context of the discourse.

The aim of this article is to prove a meaning superior to the previously mentioned interpretations, as the word "*Ummī*," when considered in the context of its meaning in the lexicon and its usage in discourse, cannot denote the illiteracy of the Prophet.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1) How do the semantic significations of the word "*Ummī*" in structural semantics based on denotative signification (analogical meaning) manifest?

2) On which type of significations is the meaning of the word "*Ummī*" defined in interpretations?

This research is based on the hypothesis that "*Ummī*" and its

derivatives refer to a singular meaning in the lexicon, and that this word has a foundational meaning in the Quran, understood in diverse contexts based on the relationships between the elements of the text. However, its interpretation and meaning among commentators are not grounded in a specific theory, and the concepts derived from this word, which stem from the prior thoughts of translators, cannot accurately reflect the context of the Quranic text.

1. Background of the Research

Numerous articles have been written about the meaning of "*Ummī*," each focusing on interpretations to support a theory related to the meaning and translation of this word. Given that the meanings of the Quran are infinite and thousands of new interpretations can be drawn from each Quranic word, the term "*Ummī*" is no exception. Because there is a wealth of literature on this topic, we categorized these articles as follows:

1) Articles that aim to prove that "*Ummī*" does not mean illiteracy. They merely provide rational and textual evidence to argue that "*Ummī*" does not denote this meaning, but they do not offer a clear alternative meaning for "*Ummī*." Examples include:

- "Revisiting the *Ummī* Status of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)" by Mohammad Hossein Vataqi, which refutes the notion of the Prophet's illiteracy in the translation of the word "*Ummī*," providing both rational and transmitted evidence. He emphasizes narratives and considers this translation to be a ploy of the Jews.

2) Articles that reject the meaning of "*Ummī*" as illiteracy while attempting to establish alternative meanings for "*Ummī*," such as:

- "A Reevaluation of the Issue of the Prophet's *Ummī* Status" by Abbas Hemami, which does not accept "*Ummī*" as meaning illiteracy and interprets it as the people of the mother of cities, or Mecca.

- "Critique of the Translation of the Word *Ummī* Based on the Context of Verses and Narrations from the Impeccable Imams" by Maryam Mousavi, in which the author, while rejecting the meaning of illiteracy, interprets "*Ummī*" as either "A person without a book" or

"The people of Mecca," and translates "*Ummīyyīn*" as "A people to whom no book has been revealed."

- The article "Investigating the Causes of the Spread of the Popular but Incorrect Meaning of the Word *Ummī* in Quranic Studies" by Karim Ali Muhammadi, which aims to refute the meaning of "Unread Lesson" using Quranic evidence and considers "*Ummī*" to mean "An unfamiliar person who is ignorant of the content of the heavenly book."

- "Quranic Application of the Word *Ummī*" by Somayyeh Haji Babaei Araki, which primarily refutes the illiteracy of the Prophet based on narrations, does not focus on the derivatives of the word or the method of collocation, and attributes "*Ummī*" to any meaning other than illiteracy.

- "Conceptualization of "*Ummī*" in the Quran with a Linguistic Approach" by Qasem Mohseni Mari, who examines the meaning of the word "*Ummī*" based on the structure present in the Quran text, starting with the situational meanings of the word and then presenting interpreters' understandings of it. He dismisses all meanings of the word "*Ummī*" and considers only the meaning of "Not belonging to the scripture" and "Arab community" to be consistent with its meaning.

3) Articles aiming to prove that "*Ummī*" means illiteracy:

- The article "Rational and Textual Analysis of the Prophet's *Ummī* Status during the Reception of Revelation" by Fatemeh Shoorabadi Takabi, which interprets "*Ummī*" as the illiteracy of the Prophet based on Quranic verses.

- "The *Ummī* Status of the Prophet in the Words of Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī" by Mahmoud Zera'at Pisheh, which quotes Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī's statements to claim that he considered "*Ummī*" to mean illiterate.

- "*Ummī*: Unread Lesson or People of the Book" by Faghihizadeh, which interprets "*Ummī*" as "Unread Lesson" using linguistic and interpretive sources.

- "A Critique and Review of Orientalists' Views on the *Ummī* Status

of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), "which argues, from the perspectives of the Quran, narrations, and history, that the Prophet did not read or write before and after his prophethood.

4) The above articles mostly rely on verses and narrations to establish a meaning of this word. Some articles, such as:

- "Linguistic Conceptualization of *Ummī* in the Quran "by Qasem Mohsen Mari, approach the translation of this word through linguistic semantics and the lexical relationship of "*Ummī*," but still assert the meaning of non-people of the book for this word.

- "Semiotic Analysis of *al-Nabī al-Ummī* Based on the Model of Abretawako "by Ahmad Asadi et al., which examines the word "*Ummī*" through the lens of semiotics, linguistic context, and collocation style, ultimately validating the meaning of a non-Jewish prophet.

While we have focused on the root meaning of this word and its derivatives, and only based on the Quranic text and the method of substitution, we have rejected the meaning of illiteracy and established the meaning of the Prophet as being the original and intended one. However, in the current research, we intend to:

1) Unlike other articles that primarily aim to prove the meaning of "*Ummī*" based on interpretations and narrations, we want to approach the semantics of the word "*Ummī*" with a linguistic perspective using descriptive and analytical methods, based on the three types of semantic significations: Denotative, implicative, and entailment.

2) In this article, we seek to find another meaning for the word "*Ummī*" aside from the prevailing meanings, such as "Illiterate," "Non-people of the Book," "Non-Jewish," etc., based on linguistic and semantic principles, and considering the situational significations. We will choose this alternative meaning as a semantic center and interpret the word and all its derivatives accordingly. In this case, "Umm" would mean origin and basis, while "*Ummī*" and its other derivatives would be translated based on this analogy or semantic center. The translations by interpreters that equate it with illiteracy, being non-people of the Book, etc., are based on entailment significations, for

which we propose some reasons for rejecting these theories.

2. Semantics

Greek philosophers have historically sought to understand words and sentences, illustrating that research on semantics have origins as old as human thought ('Umar Mukhtār, 1966 AD/1386 AH: 25). However, they did not specifically focus on the issue of meaning, and the exploration of semantics in a scientific and specialized manner is one of the important achievements of linguistics. This field was introduced in the mid-19th century by scholars such as Lyons, Michel Bréal, and Marx Müller.

Today, one of the branches of linguistics is semantics, which studies and examines meaning at various levels such as words, sentences, and phrases. Semantics means the science of studying meaning. In other words, semantics is the discipline that investigates and studies meanings in language (Palmer, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 13). Some consider semantics to be a scientific study (ibid: 27). Generally, the relationship between meaning and word is referred to as semantics.

Events and external objects create images in our minds about which we use words to report. Based on this, meaning is the connection that exists between a word and a mental image (Batani, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 224). Thus, based on this mental imagery, scholars refer to the word as the "Signifier" (*Dāl*) and the mental image as the "Signified" (*Madlūl*), and the relationship between them is considered "Signification" (*Dalālat*).

In the realm of logic, this type of signification is called "Situational Signification," where the association between two objects is based on convention. Situational signification is divided into verbal and non-verbal types, with verbal signification further categorized into three types: Denotative, implicative, and entailment.

In denotative signification, a word signifies the entire meaning for which it is designated. In implicative signification, a word signifies only a part of the meaning for which it is designated. For example, if someone's house has fallen into disrepair and they say, "My house has

fallen apart, "they are using a part of the concept of "House." In entailment signification, a word signifies a meaning outside of the meaning for which it is designated, such as the word "Three" signifying the concept of being an individual. In this type of signification, background knowledge and mental assumptions play a significant role.

In this article, we intend to consider a central meaning for the word "Umm," which is also referred to as the "Meaning of Analogy," and based on that, we will express derivatives of this word, including "*Ummī*."

3. Analysis and Examination

3.1. Translation of the Word "*Ummī*" Based on Derivation Theory

To find the primary meaning of the word "*Ummī*," we must find the meaning of analogy, which is the primary meaning around which all secondary meanings revolve. To identify the primary meaning of the word, we should extract the meanings of its derivatives in addition to translating its root. For this purpose, we will utilize *Ibn Jinnī*'s derivation theory.

Ibn Jinnī emphasizes the existence of a shared meaning among the permutations of a trilateral root in his derivation theory. He divides derivation into two types: Minor and major, where minor derivation refers to the inflection of nouns and verbs, such as *ʿilm*, *ʿālim* and *ʿalīm* (cf. Vol. 1: 134-135). According to this theory, there is a correspondence in meaning, number, and order of the roots among two words. Therefore, the word "Umm" and its derivatives signify a singular meaning.

The root of the word *Ummī* comes from *Umm*, and from this root, important words such as *Imām*, *Ummah*, and *Umm* are derived. Hence, based on the derivation theory, to understand the meaning of *Ummī* through denotative signification, we should pay attention to the meanings of other related words.

1) **Umm:** *Ummul Kitāb*: The beginning of the Quran; *Ummul Qurā*: Named so because it is in the middle of the land (Ibn Durayd, 1987: 60).

Ummul Kitāb: A surah with which the Quran begins; *Ummul Qurā*: Named as such because it is located in the middle of the earth. The essence of a thing, the chief of the people (Jawharī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 54-55). The essence of a thing refers to its fundamentals (Muṣṭafā, 2011 AD/1432 AH: 27). Mother; the essence of everything and its foundation (Sayyāḥ, n.d.: 45).

2) **Am:** The intention, the root of this whole matter is intention. Therefore, the meaning of *Amah* in religion is that their goal is one." (Ibn Manzūr, 2025 AD/1405 AH: 1, 23) (Both *Am* and its derivatives mean intention, and *Ummah* in religion refers to those whose goal is the same). "If one intends something..." (Ibn Durayd, 1987: 59; Jawharī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 55; Muṣṭafā, 2011 AD/1432 AH: 27; Sayyāḥ, n.d.: 44) In other dictionaries, "*Am*" is also defined as intention.

3) **Imām:** "Anyone, whom a group follows, whether they are on the straight path or are misguided, is the leader of that group." (Ibn Manzūr, 1984 AD/1405 AH: 1, 23) (Anyone, whom the people follow, whether they are on the straight path or misled), the support of the construction, which they follow (Jawharī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 56; Muṣṭafā, 2013 AD/1432 AH: 27). The support of construction refers to the foundation of a building, to which they follow, a leader and guide." (Sayyāḥ, n.d.: 46) In the Quran, this word appears as singular "*Imām*" and plural "*A'immatul Kufr wal Īmān*." The leaders of disbelief and faith when in the singular form, it denotes someone who adheres to the pure essence of their nature; thus, it signifies a guide and leader, one who embodies goodness, and is unique. In the plural form, it retains the same essence: "*A'immatul Kufr*" refers to the principles of disbelief, and "*A'immatul Hudā*" refers to the principles of guidance, signifying that these individuals are sources of disbelief or guidance; anyone wishing to move towards guidance or disbelief

should refer to these sources.

4) Amām: The one in front; and he leads the people means he brings them forward (Ibn Manẓūr, 1984 AD/1405 AH: 1, 23). *Amām* means in the front, and he leads the people means he advances them. "The position meaning in front," (Muṣṭafā, 2011 AD/1432 AH: 27) meaning ahead (Sayyāḥ, n.d.: 46).

5) Ummah: It means law and the religion, the tradition. *Sībawayh* said: The Ummah is the Imam; and make us a guide for the pious. Everyone who adheres to the religion of truth, conflicting with all other religions is one Ummah; and Ummah is a man without a counterpart, and thus "Indeed, Ibrahim was a model, obedient to God." (Ibn Manẓūr, 1984 AD/1405 AH: 24) (Shari'ah and religion, tradition; *Sībawayh* said: Ummah and Imam; and we have made for the pious a leader. Anyone who is on the true religion and opposes other religions is considered an Ummah, a man who has no equal. It is mentioned in the Quran: Indeed, Ibrahim was a devout leader of God. *Abū 'Ubaydah* said: *Kāna Ummatan* meaning he was an Imam. "A group of people, most of whom are from one origin and are united by inherited traits, common interests, or aspirations; or they are united by one matter of religion, place, or time." (Muṣṭafā, 2011 AD/1432 AH: 27) A group of people who are mostly from one origin and whose unity stems from inherited traits or shared interests and aspirations, or their commonality in religion, place, and time.

The word appears in the Quran: "Indeed, we found our forefathers on a single Ummah." (al-Zukhruf/23) Based on its denotative significations, it means that our ancestors were united by a common principle and purpose; they are our intended goal, our guides, and our leaders. In our view, they are unique and unparalleled, and all good things are gathered in them.

If we look at the meanings of the root "A M M" from which "Ummī" is derived, we find that the central meaning of this word is the principle and beginning of everything, with all other meanings revolving around this core concept. Therefore, the central meanings

are origin, root, foundation, basis, beginning, start, leader (someone who embodies the fundamental essence in a given denotative), objective (the person who represents the basic intent and movement of human beings), religion and shari'ah (the fundamental principle of a belief), and the collective goodness (similar to a leader in good deeds who is the ultimate signification for all that is good).

3.2. The Meaning of "*Ummī*" Based on Denotative Signification

The term "*Ummī*" is also derived from the root (*A M M*) and consists of the word *Umm* plus the letter *Yā'* indicating attribution (Muṣṭafā, 1982 AD/1403 AH; Ibn Durayd, 1987). This word appears six times in the Quran, twice in singular form referring specifically to the Messenger, and four times in plural form.

"*Ummī*" is attributed to *Umm*, which based on its denotative significations and the central meaning of the term signifies origin and foundation. Thus, the mother is the root and origin of the child. *Muḥyiddīn* also regards the mother as the origin, giving her status precedence over the father: "Indeed, man is truly the son of his mother... and she is the mother who nursed him, grew him in her womb, and nourished him with her blood; thus, his judgment is akin to hers." (Muḥyiddīn, n.d.: 1, 276)

Thus, the mother is the origin; history supports this theory, as we have instances where a child is born without a father, such as "Jesus Christ, "but we have no record of a child born from a father without a mother.

Based on this understanding, "*Ummī*" can be interpreted in several ways:

1) "*Ummī*" is someone who remains true to their origin, meaning their innate nature remains untouched. All humans are born with a pure disposition, but over time, they tarnish it. However, the Prophet has preserved his nature according to his original state.

2) "*Ummī*" is someone who is attributed to the fundamental system of the universe, which is the Divine Truth. This is a person of such high status that they have become annihilated in the Truth, and all their actions and behavior are attributed to the Divine Truth, which can be

known through them.

3) "*Ummī*" is someone who is attributed to the Truth, having reached the Divine Truth and received knowledge denotatively from Him without any intermediary. His knowledge is not acquired through hardship and gradual learning in a conventional sense; rather, his knowledge is *Ladunnī*, meaning it is divinely bestowed. This knowledge is given all at once by God to the heart of the believer, as Imam Ṣādiq (AS) states: "Knowledge is not through learning; it is rather a light that falls into the heart of a person whom Allah, the Exalted, wishes to guide." (Majlisī, 1968 AD/1388 AH: 1, 143)

Thus, the notion of some claiming that the Prophet (PBUH) did not read or write refers to the reality that the Messenger is truly *Ibnu Ummih* (the son of his mother); the soul is a product of the nature of the body, and she is the mother who nursed him, grew him in her womb, and nourished him with her blood, so his rulings are akin to hers. He does not depend on nourishment for the survival of his structure, and he has not learned knowledge gradually through attending school or reading and writing; instead, his knowledge is *Ladunnī*, which means, "When He wills for them to know, they know." (Kulaynī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 258) Therefore, it is impossible for someone knowledgeable in *Ladunnī* knowledge to be unaware of the most basic aspect of this knowledge, which is reading and writing. It is like someone who has mastered the complex rules of physics and mathematics but is ignorant of the simplest concepts like addition and multiplication; as the poet says, "When the hundred comes, the ninety is already here."

3.2.1. The Meaning of the Word "*Ummī*" in Singular Form

God uses this word in singular form in only two verses in Surah *al-A'raf* to describe the Prophet:

- 1) Those that follow the Messenger, the Prophet, the *Ummī*... (al-A'raf: 157), which refers to the characteristics of the believers.
- 2) So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the *Ummī* Prophet (Surah al-A'raf: 158).

In these verses, God has chosen these two attributes amidst all the

characteristics of His Messenger in order to encourage the people to follow him. Thus, He conveys to the people to obey His Messenger with the two qualities of Prophet and *Ummī*. Therefore, *Ummī* and Prophet are among the most suitable and best attributes for inviting people, suggesting that the selection of the Prophethood was based on these two specific qualities.

On the other hand, we can interpret the "Al" in these verses as a definitive article, meaning that the attributes of the Messenger, the Prophet, and "*Ummī*" are solely exclusive to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and that no one else possesses such characteristics. This is because, in other verses, it states: "We have chosen you from among the *Ummīyīn*." However, in the two verses mentioned above, where it says to obey the Messenger, the Prophet, the unlettered, the signification is that you are the original and true "*Ummī*." Here, "*Ummī*" refers to someone who has remained true to their inherent nature and has not been sullied by any impurity, or someone who is the original and primary aim, as is stated in the sacred hadith: "If it were not for you, I would not have created the heavens and the earth..." (Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 16, 406) The result is that "*Ummī*" is bestowed upon someone who is the origin, the mother, the Imam, the signification, and the community.

Thus, as stated, God commands the believers in this verse to obey His Messenger, who is the only true Prophet and "*Ummī*." This means that He introduces His Messenger to the people with these three attributes so that they may follow him. In this case, "*Ummī*" does not mean illiterate or from Mecca; if that were the case, it would not be considered one of his praiseworthy attributes. When illiteracy is regarded as a deficiency, how could God, while encouraging believers to obey the Messenger, refer to this deficiency? It is like a manager who wants to encourage students to obey a teacher; he cites the selected attributes of that teacher rather than discussing their shortcomings. Therefore, the mind cannot accept this interpretation, given the context of the verse.

Furthermore, if "*Ummī*" were interpreted as someone from Mecca, it would not be considered one of his attributes that would

warrant praise or distinction from others to encourage people to obey him. In matters of obedience, the one who is obeyed must possess qualities that others do not have, from which they follow him. The conclusion is that in this verse, being a Messenger, a Prophet, and "*Ummī*" is exclusive to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

3.2.2. The Meaning of the Word "*Ummī*" in Plural Form

God uses the word "*Ummī*" in plural form only in four verses in the Quran, three of which include the article "*Al*" and one without it. Each of these will be examined separately.

- 1) It is He who has sent among the *Ummīyīn* a Messenger from themselves reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book [i.e., the Qur'ān] and wisdom [i.e., the sunnah] - although they were before in clear error (al-Jumu'a/2);
- 2) And say to those who were given the Scripture and *al-Ummīyīn*, "Have you submitted yourselves?" And if they submit, they are rightly guided; but if they turn away - then upon you is only the [duty of] notification. And Allāh is Seeing of [His] servants (Āli 'Imrān/20);
- 3) And among the People of the Scripture is he who, if you entrust him with a great amount [of wealth], he will return it to you. And among them is he who, if you entrust him with a [single] coin, he will not return it to you unless you are constantly standing over him [demanding it]. That is because they say, "There is no blame upon us concerning the *al-Ummīyīn*" (Āli 'Imrān/75);
- 4) And among them are *al-Ummīyyūn* ones who do not know the Scripture except [indulgent in] wishful thinking, but they are only assuming (al-Baqarah/78).

The Quran was revealed in an era when powerful literary figures emerged; for this reason, the miraculous nature of the Quran is attributed to its literary excellence. In every era, humanity has made significant advancements in various fields and professions, and the miracles of the prophets have always aligned with the culture of their times. For instance, Prophet Moses was sent at a time when people were highly skilled in magic and sorcery; thus, his miracle surpassed

sorcery and defeated all the magicians. Similarly, Prophet Jesus was sent when people excelled in medicine, which is why his miracle was the resurrection of the dead. This led Galen, who was a master in medicine and had written numerous books on the subject, to consider the news of the resurrection of the dead as a miracle and to believe in him (Faqtī, 1753 AD/1174 AH: 1, 122-132).

The term "*Ummīyyūn*" appears in the first three verses according to denotative signification with the definite "Al," which can be explained and interpreted as follows:

1) In light of the first verse, where "*Minhum*" serves as a description for the Messenger—meaning a Messenger who has the attribute of being one of the "*Ummīyyūn*"—it could signify individuals who have remained true to their inherent nature and strive to keep their nature from becoming tainted, similar to how there have always been mystics in every era working to free their souls from the impurities of the worldly life. This mysticism exists across different sects. God chose His Messenger from among the "*Ummīyyūn*" (like the mystics) of his time, analogous to selecting a mystic as the principal figure among all mystics. Likewise, the Prophet was chosen from among the Imams of guidance and the main figures. To support this theory, there is a verse in the Quran that, based on the model of substitution, can clarify the meaning of "*Ummī*." In this verse, phrases similar to this one are repeated, and instead of "*Ummīyyūn*," the term "*al-Mu'minīn*" is used: "Indeed, Allah has bestowed a favor upon the believers (*Mu'minīn*) when He sent among them a Messenger from themselves who recites to them His verses and purifies them and teaches them the Book and wisdom, although they were before in clear error." (Āli 'Imrān/164) This indicates that God chose the one who is the most faithful among the believers, the one who is the only true and original believer, while all other believers are placed at a lower level than him.

On the other hand, this term can also refer to a person who remains true to their original nature, as all of the Prophet's forefathers were among the Friends of God and were righteous among their community (the fifth verse also implies their persecution by the People of the Book). Thus, the Quran states that it is true that the

Prophet was chosen from among the pure, but the purest of them all, "*al-Ummī*," is only he, who seems to be the one and only "*Ummī*."

In these three verses, "*al-Ummī*" is mentioned with the definite article "*Al*," referring to those known "*Ummī*" individuals whom we all recognize.

The usage of "*Ummīyyūn*" in the fourth verse according to the principle of denotative signification is as follow:

This term differs from "*Ummīyyūn*" in the previous verses because, in the previous verses, "*Ummīyyūn*" was mentioned with "*Al*," and its grammatical forms were in the accusative and genitive case. However, in this verse, "*Ummīyyūn*" appears without the definite article and with the nominative pronoun "*Wa*," indicating that there is a distinction between these two groups of "*Ummī*." Here, we can return to the verses about the Imam, where when the plural form "*A'immaḥ*" is used, it refers to two groups: The leaders of disbelief and the leaders of faith. "And if they break their oaths after their covenant and attack your religion, then fight the leaders of disbelief. Indeed, they have no oaths, so perhaps they will stop." (al-Tawbah/12)

Thus, when "*Imām*" and "*Ummī*" are mentioned in the singular form, they refer exclusively to the Friends of God, including prophets and their successors. However, when mentioned in the plural form, they include both the people of disbelief and the people of faith, where the followers of disbelief view their leader as being above reproach, infallible, wise, and guiding, just as the believers see their Imam—both groups regard their leaders as fundamental. For this reason, "*Ummī*" is presented without the definite article, as in the eyes of their followers, the leader is the essence and a guide, while in the sight of God, they are unknown and not considered part of the "*Ummīyyūn*."

3.3. Translation of the term "*Ummī*" based on implicative significations

In his mystical commentary, *Muḥyiddīn* refers to "*Ummī*" as someone who, without going through intellectual science, has reached true and innate knowledge. "When the intellect is free from the knowledge of speculative thought, both legally and rationally, he is considered an

...and capable of divine opening in the most complete manner, swiftly without delay, and is endowed with that innate knowledge in all things, the true extent of which is known only to a prophet or one who has experienced it among the friends of God". (1968 AD/1388 AH: 4, 326)

This translation is based on the same implicative significations, which is closer to the principle of denotative signification than other meanings, as authentic knowledge is part of that origin and essence, possessing other qualities as well.

3.4. Translation of the Term "*Ummī*" based on Entailment Significations

The term "*Ummī*" has been interpreted in various ways across different commentaries. First, I'll mention the translations, and then we will discuss and examine each one.

1) Someone who is illiterate and remains in their natural state (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1972 AD/1393 SH: 1, 215; Kāshānī, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 5, 316; Ṭabrisī, 1958 AD/1378 AH: 4, 290; Ṭūsī, n.d.: 2, 559; Zamakhsharī in Tafsir Kashshāf; Fakhr Rāzī, 2000 AD/1420 AH: 30, 538; Sha'rānī, 1960 AD/1380 AH: 2, 40).

2) A person related to "*Ummul Qurā*," meaning the people of Mecca (Thaqafī Tehrani, 1893 AD/1272 AH: 2, 648; Fayḍ, 2010 AD/1430 AH: 2, 173).

3) An Arab polytheist who does not have a heavenly book, or in other words, refers to those not of the People of the Book (Quṭb, 1948 AD/1368 AH: 8, 93; Heravi: 1, 108).

4) Some have translated it as related to "*Ummat*." (Fīrūzābādī, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 2, 159)

These translations have been made based on entailment significations, meaning the translations are carried out based on the translator's mental assumptions, for instance, based on the quotes they have heard and subsequently translated.

3.4.1. "*Ummī*" in the Sense of Being Unlettered

The verses that this group cites to prove the illiteracy of the Prophet

are:

1) They consider "*Ummī*" to be derived from "*Umm*" and base their argument on the verse: "*Wallāhu Akhrajakum min Buṭūni Ummahātikum lā Ta'lamūna Shay'an*" (And God brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers while you knew nothing) thus, they view "*Ummī*" as similar to a newborn that is unaware of reading and writing (al-Naḥl/78).

2) "*Wa mā Kunta Tatlū min Qablihī min Kitābin wa lā Takhuṭṭuhū bi Yamīnik*" (And you had not been reading any book before it, nor were you writing it with your right hand), this group has used "Book" to refer solely to a material text and interpreted "Not reading" as incapacity (al-'Ankabūt/48).

"*Wa Kadhālika Awhaynā Ilayka Rūḥan min Amrinā mā Kunta Tadrī mal Kitābu wa lal Īmānu walākin Ja'alnāhu Nūran Nahdī bihī man Nashā'u min 'Ibādinā wa Innaka la Tahdī ilā Ṣirāṭin Mustqīm*" (And thus We have revealed to you a spirit from Our command. You did not know what the Book was, nor what faith is, but We made it a light by which We guide whomever We will of Our servants. And indeed, you guide to a straight path) (al-Shūrā/52). In this verse, they have also referred to "*Mā Kunta Tadrī mal Kitāb...*" and assumed that the book is a material text.

3) "*Qul law Shā'allāhu mā Talawtuhū 'Alaykum wa lā Adrākum bihī faqad Labithtu fikum 'Umuran min Qablihī afalā Ta'qilūn.*" (Yūnus/16)

This verse is cited as evidence for the Prophet's inability to read.

4) "*Qul lā Amliku li Nafsī Naf'an wa lā Ḍarran illā mā Shā'allāhu wa law Kuntu A'lamul Ghayba lastakthartu minal Khayri wa mā Massanīya al-Sū'u.*" (al-A'rāf/188)

3.4.1.1. Arguments Against the Theory of the Prophet's Illiteracy

To understand the meaning of *Ummī* and respond to various theories claiming the Prophet's ignorance of reading and writing, we must first examine the two terms Book and knowledge of the unseen in the Quran.

The Book in the Quran

Words in the Quran refer to multiple meanings in a vertical and not horizontal manner (cf. Ghaeminiya, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 286). The word Book in the Quran encompasses many meanings, and its purpose is not limited to the familiar material writing. For example:

- 1) He said: Its knowledge is with my Lord in a book (Ṭāhā/52). Here, it indicates that with God there exists a Book, even though God is not a material being who would possess a material book.
- 2) The one who had knowledge of the Scripture said: I can bring it to you before your gaze returns to you (al-Naml/40). This shows that even among the Prophets and those close to God, knowledge of the Book enables them to perform miraculous deeds.
- 3) And the clear book, indeed, We have made it an Arabic Quran that perhaps you will understand (al-Zukhruf/2-3). In this verse, God states that the clear Book has manifested in the material world as the Quran, but the original Book is preserved with the Lord.
- 4) O! *Yahyā*, take the Scripture with determination, and We gave him judgment while a youth (Maryam/12). This indicates that Prophet *Yahyā* learned the knowledge of writing in his youth.

Another verse mentions: He said: Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet (Maryam/30). This indicates that when Prophet Jesus was born, he stated that God had granted him knowledge of the Book.

Therefore, given these interpretations, one cannot limit the definition of *al-Kitāb* to merely a material written text because the words are designed for general meanings (Hasanzadeh Amoli, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 33). Just as poetry in the pre-Islamic Arab period does not refer to a single meaning, this serves as part of the miraculous nature of the Quran.

Upon reflecting on the aforementioned verses, we realize that:

- 1) Knowledge of the Book is with the Lord, and God bestows it upon His Prophets and Saints. With this knowledge, the blessed ones can perform extraordinary feats, like Asif in the story of Prophet Solomon, who, due to his knowledge of the Book, was able to move the throne of Bilqis.

2) Considering that Prophets *Yaḥyā* (John) and *ʿĪsā* (Jesus) acquired knowledge of the Book in their childhood, it follows that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who ranks far above the two, also possessed this knowledge.

3) God says to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): Allah has sent down to you the Book and wisdom (al-Nisā': 113), using the past tense form of (sent down), which implies that We previously sent the Book down to you.

A noteworthy point in the mentioned verses is that God taught the Book to Prophets *Yaḥyā* and *Isa*, while He Himself revealed this Book to our Prophet. This suggests that they received some segments of the Book, but the entirety of it was revealed to our Prophet.

Thus, based on these verses, we cannot categorically state that the term Book strictly refers to a material document (Especially in the verse *Mā Kunta Tadrī mal Kitāb* because the Quranic words are intended for broader meanings. On the other hand, considering the Quranic definitions of the Book, we can interpret this as referring to the heavenly scriptures of the past, meaning that up to now, none of the previous scriptures have been read by your people. Even if the meaning of the Book in the verses is interpreted as a superficial reading of any written document, we should not use the failure to read and write as an indication of the inability to perform these two actions. It may have been to prevent polytheists from doubting their Prophethood that they did not openly engage in these acts before the mission began. Thus, God tells them: You did not read, not that you were incapable of reading. In Surah *Yūnus*, it is also mentioned: Say, if Allah had willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have made you aware of it (Yūnus/16). This indicates that "If God had willed, I would not have read it to you or made you aware of it". Upon careful examination of the phrases and sentences, we find that if he had been unable to read, God would have stated: If God had willed, I would not have been able to read or be aware of it. However, the verse does not discuss his ability or inability to recite, but rather speaks about the people's knowledge of the Prophet reciting and reading. Therefore, it is stated that: I would not have made you knowledgeable

and aware of it, and I would not have read it for you.

Regarding the verse *Mā Tatlū min Kitāb*, it can also be understood that God tells the Prophet: You did not acquire your knowledge through reading, writing, or going to school, which would yield a composed Quran; rather, your knowledge is divine and innate, resulting in a divine Quran.

Knowledge of the Unseen

Regarding the knowledge of the unseen held by the prophets and divine saints, we can understand from the verse: "If I had known the unseen, I would have amassed much good and no harm would have touched me" (al-A'raf/7) that the Prophet (PBUH) and all messengers and divine saints are submissive to the truth and only become aware of the unseen when God wills; as God states in another verse: "He is the Knower of the Unseen, and He does not disclose His knowledge of the unseen to anyone except to a Messenger whom He chooses." (al-Jinn/26-27) In another place, it is said: "And Allah would not disclose to you the unseen, but Allah chooses from His messengers whom He wills." (Āli 'Imrān/179) Thus, God is the Knower of the unseen and informs His messengers of this knowledge to the extent He desires.

Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī also states about this: "Wherever God narrates that the Prophets deny their knowledge of the unseen, it is meant to indicate that the messengers do not independently and essentially possess knowledge of the unseen. Rather, whatever they have is from God, who has taught them." (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1992 AD/1371 SH: 20, 55) Therefore, one cannot characterize the Prophet as illiterate by referring to the verses and relying on the themes of the Book and knowledge of the unseen.

3.4.2. Ummī as Meaning of the People of Mecca

Some commentators, based on implied significations and their mental presumption that the term "*Ummul Qurā*" refers to Mecca in the Quran, have taken "Ummī" to mean the people of Mecca. This is because, as previously mentioned, Mecca is referred to as the "Mother of Cities," given that, according to the science of geography, once

every several years, the surface of the Earth is covered with water, and after a while, the water recedes, making the land visible again (cf. Hasanzadeh Amoli, 2000 AD/1379 SH: 102). In this period, Kaaba is the first place to emerge from the water, and the land spreads from beneath it. Imam Ṣādiq (AS) said: "Indeed, Allah, the Almighty, moved the Earth from underneath the Kaaba to Mina, then from Mina to Arafat, and then from Arafat to Mina. Therefore, the Earth spread from Arafat, Arafat from Mina, and Mina from the Kaaba." (Kulaynī, 1964 AD/1384 AH: 4, 188) For this reason, it is called "*Ummul Qurā*," meaning the mother of all settlements, because it is the origin and mother, and the first place to be exposed.

However, considering the verse: "So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet," (al-A'rāf/158) when God instructs the people to believe in Him and then to believe in His Messenger, He praises the Messenger with the two attributes of "Prophet" and "*Ummī*," thus, if we translate this attribute as meaning being from the people of Mecca, this characteristic would not be exclusive to the Prophet, since both polytheists and non-believers also share in this attribute. In this case, it would not count as part of the Prophet's distinction and superiority over others. However, in light of the verse, it seems that these three attributes are among his unique qualities that God emphasizes in inviting people towards Him and considers them as privileges of the Prophet.

3.4.3. *Ummī* as Meaning Polytheist Arab or Non-People of the Book

Today, some scholars, including Pakatchi, Lisani Fesharaki, and Jabeti, consider *Ummī* to mean non-People of the Book. Pakatchi states: "The two expressions "People of the Book "and "*Ummīyyīn* " are paired in opposition to one another. These two expressions, which have repeatedly appeared in the Holy Quran, refer to a categorization that divided the population of the Arabian Peninsula in the pre-Islamic era into two groups: "People of the Book "who followed a specific heavenly book, and "*Ummīyyīn* " who had no heavenly scripture. Their holy books were not read to them". (Pakatchi, 2020 AD/1399

SH: 491-492) Jaberi also mentions: "The *Ummīyyīn* are the Arabs who do not have a book... The Jews referred to non-Jews as *Ummīn*, meaning attributed to other nations that do not have a revealed book. " (Jaberi: 83) In the Tafsir *Ṣāfi* and *Ṭabarī*, the term *Ummīyyīn* is explained in this same sense (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 2009 AD/1430 AH: 5, 172, Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 28, 31).

Considering the meaning presented regarding the *Ummīyyīn*, which categorizes the Prophet among those who did not have a heavenly book, and taking into account the previous explanation about scripture, it is noted that knowledge of the book was granted to many prophets before Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who were lower in existential rank than him, as reflected in the verse: "He said: I am indeed the servant of Allah; He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet. "(Maryam/30) Therefore, based on this understanding, all prophets were People of the Book and benefited from the Mother of the Book that exists with God to the extent of their own capability: "And with Him is the Mother of the Book. "This means that a person is either a People of the Book or has no book and is a polytheist. Given the lofty position of the Prophet, this interpretation is not accepted, as it would be impossible for God to choose a polytheist for prophethood, while introducing other prophets, such as Prophet Abraham (AS), as monotheists and adherents of the religion of Islam: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a monotheist, a Muslim, and he was not one of the polytheists. "(Āli 'Imrān/67)

In another verse, it says: "And Abraham instructed his sons and [so did] Jacob, O! My sons, indeed Allah has chosen for you this religion, so do not die except while you are Muslims. "(al-Baqarah/132) So based on denotative indication and considering that the religion of Prophet Abraham is also identified as Islam, as stated in the verse "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam, "the religions of Prophets Moses and Jesus are not separate from Islam either. However, the religion to which the Christians and Jews of that time adhered was distorted. Therefore, in contrast to them, the *Ummī* (with the definite article "Al") were those who believed in the heavenly book and followed the original, unaltered faith, rather than

the distorted scriptures of other religions. The *Ummī* (with the definite article) were, as explained at the beginning of this article, fundamentally the same as the believers signification in similar verses: "Indeed, Allah has conferred favor upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom, although they were before in clear error" and "He it is who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom" (Āli 'Imrān/164) and "And He it is who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom" (al-Jumu'ah/2). The preposition "*Fī*" indicates that the Prophet (PBUH) also possesses the attributes of being *Ummī* and a believer. Therefore, he cannot be categorized among the *Ummīyyīn*, and *Ummīyyīn* cannot be considered solely as a description specific to his people.

Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed and critiqued the term "*Ummī*" based on its semantic significations. First, we extracted the principal meaning, which all derivatives revolve around, based on explicit denotative signifying originality and authenticity. This meaning can be applied in translating each of the derivatives, and the term "*Ummī*" also indicates this meaning.

More translators and interpreters have focused on the implicit meanings that fall outside the principal meaning of the word based on their mental preconceptions and some hadith sources, rendering multiple interpretations such as illiterate or related to Mecca, or even a polytheist human. In the first case, referring to illiteracy brings a deficiency to the Prophet's stature, and in the second case, a general characteristic attributed to him, which also includes the polytheistic Arabs, is accounted as one of his attributes. However, in terms of obedience, we must follow someone who possesses attributes that others do not have, and thus, should be followed accordingly.

The third meaning, referring to a polytheist (someone who does

not adhere to any of the divine religions), is not accurate. This is because, based on the evidence presented, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a devout believer, and wisdom and the Book were bestowed upon him.

Among these definitions, *Muhyiddīn* approaches the main meaning more closely through implicative indication, which suggests that "*Ummī*" refers to someone who has attained knowledge of the core truths without having undergone formal theoretical education in that knowledge.

Therefore, "*Ummī*," based on its denotative signification, signifies a quality that solely belongs to the Messenger of Allah—a Messenger who has achieved the highest rank and degree of perfection and has become the Seal of the Prophets, a status none of the previous Prophets or Imams have attained. Thus, Allah chose the Messenger of Islam from among the *Ummīyyīn*, in line with the similar verse regarding the believers, and used the article "*Al*" to indicate: "You are the only *Ummī*, and this quality is exclusive to you." In other words, "*Ummī*" denotes an original, pure, and untainted human, whose soul, as it was born from its mother, has remained completely pure and unsullied. Furthermore, his knowledge is also an original knowledge that has been denotatively taught by the Lord, not attained through gradual intellectual learning.

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