

A Comparative Study of Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā on the World of Dharr (‘Ālam al-Dharr)

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ABSTRACT

The world of dharr (‘ālam al-dharr) is among the most challenging and fascinating topics in religious knowledge (ma‘ārif-i dīnī), briefly mentioned in the Qur‘ān and discussed in greater detail in the ḥadīth traditions. The reality of the dharr covenant has been examined by scholars of Islamic sciences from various perspectives. Some have judged the event of dharr as symbolic, while others have accepted it as a real occurrence. Among the latter group, some interpret the world of dharr in its literal (zāhirī) sense, while others have engaged in its hermeneutical interpretation (ta‘wīl) and justification. Shaykh al-Mufīd, considering certain aspects, has offered a hermeneutical interpretation of the dharr event. Mullā Ṣadrā has also provided a theosophical (ḥikmī) interpretation of the world of dharr. The research question is: What are the points of agreement and disagreement in the approach and hermeneutical interpretation of these two Shī‘ī thinkers concerning the world of dharr? In this article, employing the method of content analysis (taḥlīl-i muḥtawā) and a comparative approach (rawish-i muqāyisih-ī), the engagement of Mullā Ṣadrā and Shaykh al-Mufīd with this topic has been subjected to a comparative study. It is shown that the two thinkers differ on certain points, such as the evaluation of chain-based authenticity (i‘tibār-i sanadī) and the existence of particles without the attachment of a soul, while they agree on other points, such as the rejection of a literal interpretation, the provision of a rational hermeneutical interpretation (ta‘wīl-i ‘aqlānī), and the manner of addressing objections.

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1. Introduction

The world of dharr (‘ālam al-dharr)—the primordial covenant between God and humanity—is among the most complex and fascinating topics in Islamic religious knowledge (ma‘ārif-i dīnī). The Qur’ān alludes to this event briefly in Sūrat al-A‘rāf (7:172), while the ḥadīth traditions elaborate on it in greater detail. This subject encompasses various philosophical, theological (kalāmī), and exegetical (tafsīrī) dimensions, some of which have been examined by scholars.

Regarding its nature and actuality, some scholars have considered the world of dharr as a symbolic event. In contrast, others accept it as a real occurrence. Among the latter group, some offer a literal (zāhirī) interpretation of the world of dharr, while others engage in its hermeneutical interpretation (ta’wīl) and rational justification. Two prominent Shī‘ī thinkers, Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā, have adopted distinct positions on this matter. The research questions are: What are the points of agreement and disagreement between these two approaches? And what are the implications of each? The central problem addressed is the need to understand how two major figures within Shī‘ī thought—representing theological (kalāmī) and philosophical (falsafī) traditions respectively—approach a difficult scriptural-narrative concept and whether their conclusions are compatible or contradictory.

This research, based on content analysis and comparative methods, undertakes a comparative study of the views of Mullā Ṣadrā and Shaykh al-Mufīd on the world of dharr, examining their points of agreement and disagreement. It demonstrates that these two Shī‘ī scholars differ on certain aspects, such as the assessment of the chain-based authenticity (i‘tibār-i sanadī) of traditions concerning the world of dharr, while sharing common ground on other aspects, such as the rejection of a literal interpretation, the provision of a rational hermeneutical interpretation (ta’wīl-i ‘aqlānī), and the manner of addressing objections. It is hoped that the examination and analysis of different perspectives will lead to a deeper understanding of the issue of the world of dharr.

2. Methodology

Since the subject of the present research is theoretical in nature, the method of library-based analysis and research (taḥqīq-i kitābkhānah-i) has been employed. The methodological procedure consisted of the following stages:

Stage one: After defining the problem and formulating a preliminary and detailed plan, relevant physical and digital sources were gathered.

Stage two: Data extraction was carried out through note-taking and the creation of index cards (fishbardārī).

Stage three: The notes were then classified, edited, and organized according to an initial index.

Stage four: Through supplementary studies and further research, the final version was compiled.

The research is qualitative and comparative, focusing on primary and secondary sources related to Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413 AH/1022 CE) and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050 AH/1640 CE), including their major theological and philosophical works, as well as classical and contemporary commentaries on the Qur'ān and ḥadīth relevant to the world of dharr.

3. Findings

By comparing the views of Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā, it became evident that their perspectives differ in some respects while sharing common ground in others.

3.1. Points of Difference

First difference: Attention to the authority and authenticity of traditions (*ḥujyāt wa i'tibār-i riwāyāt*). One notable difference between Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā is the former's attention to the degree of authority and authenticity of the traditions concerning the world of dharr. In Mullā Ṣadrā's works, by contrast, there is less engagement with chain-based (*sanadī*) discussions and the determination of the authority of reports on the world of dharr or the reliability of their transmitters. Shaykh al-Mufīd undertook this evaluation on two grounds: first, due to the apparent contradiction of some traditions with the literal text (*ẓāhir*) of the Noble Qur'ān; and second, due to the chain-based weakness of a portion of the traditions on the world of dharr. By distinguishing between authoritative and non-authoritative traditions, he considered some dharr-related traditions as chain-basedly flawed (*makhdūsh*), deeming them solitary reports (*khavar al-wāḥid*), fabricated (*maj'ūl*), or interpolated (*dakhīl*).

Second difference: Interpretation of dharr as particles without the attachment of souls. Another difference between Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā concerns the interpretation of dharr as particles lacking attached souls (*dharrāt bidūn ta'alluq-i arwāḥ*)—an interpretation proposed by Shaykh al-Mufīd to resolve certain objections. According to Shaykh al-Mufīd, it can be said that the observed particles were corporeal particles (*dharrāt-i jismānī*) indicating the variety and multiplicity of Adam's descendants, shown to him to demonstrate divine power and to encourage his obedience. In contrast, Mullā Ṣadrā, in accordance with his philosophical principles, did not accept the presence of matter (*māddah*) in higher realms and interpreted this realm in terms of a longitudinal hierarchy (*silsilah-yi ṭūlī*) and degrees of immateriality (*marātib-i tajarrud*).

3.2. Points of Agreement

Despite these partial differences, both Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā share common ground in several respects.

First common ground: Opposition to a literal interpretation (tfsīr-i zāhirī). Both thinkers oppose a literal interpretation of the world of dharr. According to this literal view, all of the children of the Prophet Adam—in the world of dharr—existed as minute particles with dharrī bodies. Both Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā reject this interpretation for two reasons: first, because it entails metempsychosis (tanāsukh); and second, because it conflicts with certain rational implications (lawāzim-i ‘aqlī), such as the universal forgetfulness of that realm.

Second common ground: Provision of rational and acceptable explanations (wujūh-i ma‘qūl wa maqbūl). Another commonality is that both offer rational and acceptable explanations of the world of dharr. Shaykh al-Mufīd interprets the noble verse and the traditions concerning the precedence of the creation of souls (arwāh) over bodies as belonging to the level of God's knowledge (martabah-yi ‘ilm-i khudāwand). In this respect, his view is very close to the interpretation of the philosophers (hukamā’), especially that of Transcendent Theosophy (Ḥikmat-i Muta‘āliyah). In Transcendent Theosophy as well, the locus (mawṭin) of the world of dharr is situated within the longitudinal hierarchy and the superior existential realms, which are the realm of objective immaterial beings (‘alam-i mujarradāt-i ‘aynī) or the "pages of divine knowledge" (ṣafahāt-i ‘ilmī-yi haqq ta‘ālā). This demonstrates their alignment in seeking logical and rational ways to explain the world of dharr.

4. Conclusion

The comparative study of the views of Shaykh al-Mufīd as a rationalist theologian (mutakallim-i ‘aqlgarā) and Mullā Ṣadrā as a Shī‘ī philosopher (faylasūf-i Shī‘ī) reveals the following:

Both Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā, in terms of methodology (rawish-shināsī), are rationalist thinkers within Shī‘ism, engaging in the interpretation and hermeneutical interpretation (ta‘wīl) of the dharr event while respecting religious texts (nuṣūṣ-i dīnī) and following a rational method (mashī-yi ‘aqlī). Despite their differences on certain points, their ultimate methodological orientation (mashī-yi nihāyī) is aligned and compatible, and thus reconcilable.

This harmony is a result of the importance of reason (‘aql) in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt and demonstrates the dynamism of the rationalist current within Shī‘ī thought. By avoiding superficial and literalist interpretations (tafsīr-hā-yi saṭḥī wa lafẓgarāyānah), both thinkers have sought to offer a deeper and more coherent understanding of this concept, relying on reason and argumentation (istidlāl). Shaykh al-Mufīd, with a rational approach, undertook a precise and critical examination of the chains of transmission of traditions and addressed objections. Mullā Ṣadrā, with a philosophical and ontological perspective, endeavored to provide a coherent and rational explanation of the world of dharr.

Both Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā pursued a deeper understanding of the world of dharr. Therefore, their points of difference do not result in a contradiction in their conclusions; rather, they create a kind of alignment in their final results and contribute to the greater richness of our understanding of this concept.

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