

AN EXEGICAL STUDY OF QUR'ĀNIC TERM *AL-A'RĀF*

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Abstract: This brief study explains the Qur'ānic term *al-a'rāf*, in the light of exegesis of the Qur'ānic passage, in which this term occurs. The seventh Sūrah of the Holy Qur'ān, namely Al-A'rāf, in the verses, where it relates the life in paradise and life in the hell, reveals that there will be a veil or wall between the Heaven and the Hell for the demarcation of their boundaries. The top of this wall is called *al a'rāf* (The Heights). These heights are inhabited by some people having the facility to observe the companions in paradise and those who are in the hell. It means that *a'rāf* is an elevated status designated to some special personalities. Who are these men on the heights and why they have given such status is the basic question of this paper. The interpretation of this Qur'ānic passage is replete with differences of opinion. Let us try to find out a logical consensus, by analyzing different scholarly opinions of the Muslim and non-Muslim commentators of Qur'ān.

Sūrah Al-A'rāf, the seventh Sūrah of the Holy Qur'ān, in the verses (Number 40 to 50) where it relates the life in Paradise and life in the Hell, reveals that there will be a veil or wall between the heaven and the hell, for the demarcation of their circumferences. The top of this wall is called *a'rāf*. The word *a'rāf* means the heights or the distinguished places. These heights are inhabited by some people having the facility to observe the companions in paradise and those who are in the hell. The Holy Qur'ān says:

وَبَيْنَهُمَا حِجَابٌ وَعَلَى الْأَعْرَافِ رِجَالٌ يَعْرِفُونَ كُلًّا بِسِيمَاهُمْ وَنَادَوْا أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ أَنْ
سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ لَمْ يَدْخُلُوهَا وَهُمْ يَطْمَعُونَ هَ إِذَا صُرِفَتْ أَبْصَارُهُمْ تِلْقَاءَ أَصْحَابِ النَّارِ
قَالُوا رَبَّنَا لَا تَجْعَلْنَا مَعَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ ه وَنَادَى أَصْحَابُ الْأَعْرَافِ رِجَالًا يَعْرِفُونَهُمْ
بِسِيمَاهُمْ قَالُوا مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْكُمْ جَمْعُكُمْ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تُسْتَكَبِرُونَ ه

(Between them shall be a veil and on the Heights will be men who would know every one by his marks. They will call out to the Companions of the Garden, "Peace on you".

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They will not yet have entered but they will have an assurance (thereof). When their eyes shall be turned towards the Companions of the Fire, they will say, "Our Lord! Send us not to the company of the wrong doers". The men on heights will call to certain men whom they will know from their marks saying, "Of what profit to you, were your hoard and your arrogant ways?")

This is one of the most difficult passages of Qur'ān to interpret. However, to explain this passage one has to understand the Qur'ānic term *A'rāf* properly. The morphological analysis can guide us to the syntactic meanings of the term. By this study consequently, we can comprehend the concept about *a'rāf* with reference to the context, as well. One can proceed further by initiating basic questions about these verses of Qur'ān, as:

- a) What is hijāb?
- b) What does al-a'rāf mean?
- c) Who are ashāb al-a'rāf?

Let us deal with the basic questions, one by one. The first question is: what is the hijāb? *Hijāb* is an Arabic word which literally stands for a veil or screen. *Hijāb* is derived from the root word *hajb*, having a meaning of coming into the way and causing disconnection. Those who are made to stay away due to *hijāb* are named *maḥjūb* (plural: *maḥjūbūn*) in Qur'ān, as the verse in Sūrah al-Mutaffifin reads:

كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ هَ كَلَّا إِنَّهُمْ عَنْ رَبِّهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ لَمَحْجُوبُونَ هَ

(By no means but on their hearts is the stain of the (ill) which they do! Verily from (the Light of) their Lord, that Day, will they be veiled.)

The word *hijāb* have been used in Qur'ān at least for seven times³ in the same sense. In all of the examples, the usage of the word *hijāb*, implies the meaning of being at a distance and being away from the sight. It means that in its first meaning the word *hijāb* stands for a veil or screen.

According to Imām Rāghib Iṣfahānī, in the verse under discussion *ḥijāb* does not mean the state being out of sight (of eyes) but here it stands for a wall or a curtain which prevents the evil-doers to reach bounties of Allah abundant in the Paradise⁴. This interpretation goes in line with the Qur'ānic concept of the partition between Heavens and the Hell, because the Qur'ān has used word *sūr* (wall) in the same meaning and with the same purpose in Sūrah al-Ḥadeed57: 13, as it says:

فَضْرِبَ بَيْنَهُمْ بِسُورٍ لَهُ بَابٌ بَاطِنُهُ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ وَظَاهِرُهُ مِنْ قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ

(So a wall will be put up between them, with a gate therein; within it will be Mercy throughout and without it, all alongside will be (Wrath and) Punishment.)

The word *sūr*, in Arabic is used for the boundary which stands as sign of demarcation and a source of protection. It is a vivid line which shows circumference of a certain encircled area and becomes a hindrance to prevent entrance. It means that the above mentioned veil will be like a wall, which clearly defines the partition between Paradise and Hell.

The Holy Qur'ān also uses a word *barzakh* in the meaning of a veil, a screen or a curtain. This word actually defines a partition or a line of segregation between the two seas or two bodies of water; as mentioned in Sūrah Al-Raḥmān55:20 لَا يَبْغِيَانِ ه بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخٌ لَا يَبْغِيَانِ ه (*Between them is a barrier which they do not transgress.*) and in Sūrah al-Furqān25:53 وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخًا وَحِجْرًا مَحْجُورًا ه (*He made a barrier between them, a partition that is forbidden to be passed.*)

The same word *barzakh* has been used (on one occasion) for a unique meaning; it is a veil upon human senses for a certain time period, starting from death of a person up-till the day of Resurrection. Hence, in the verses of Sūrah al-Mu'minūn23: 99 – 101, it is mentioned as:

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبِّ ارْجِعُونِ ه لَعَلِّي أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ كَلَّا إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ بَرْزَخٌ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ ه فَإِذَا نُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَلَا أَنْسَابَ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَلَا يَتَسَاءَلُونَ ه

(Until, when death comes to one of them, he says: O my Lord! Send me back (To life), in order that I may work righteousness in

the things I neglected". By no means! It is a word he says. Before them is a Partition till the Day when they are raised up.

It is clear, that here this word indicates a temporal barrier which hides realities from human being for a certain period of time that is known only to the Real Lord of the universe. The period of *Barzakh* is a stage in between the death and the resurrection in the life hereafter.

It means that *hijāb* and *barzakh* have the same meaning as far as their lexical meanings are concerned, but as regards the meanings of these words according to their position and place of occurrence in Qur'ān, they differ in their meaning; *hijāb* is a veil between paradise and hell, while *barzakh* is a veil between death and revival of human being, on the Day of Judgment. The *Barzakh* has its starting point at the end of material worldly life of an individual, and it has its end point at the time when the commandment of Resurrection approaches. *Hijāb* will be the phenomenon of the life- hereafter, when the life in the Paradise and the Hell, would have been started.

Going back to the meaning of the word *hijāb*, we refer to Imām Rāzi's interpretation who says that, the word *hijāb* means something obstructing the mixing of two. It also means an interception, prohibiting entrance into something. It figuratively means the veil serving as demarcation of circumferences of paradise and hell, but here it stands, literally for a wall prohibiting two communities to mingle with each other. He opines that it may be a glass permitting eyes to have a glance at the on-going scenario, and also a wall prohibiting mixing.⁵

In other words, this veil or wall will be transparent enough to permit communication between the individuals on both of the sides. Thus, Maulāna Abu al-Kalām Āzād writes:

“If two places are adjoining, and to be segregated, a wall is built between them, so is the demarcation between heaven and hell. If one step is forward it is paradise, and if one step is lost it is hell”.⁶

Maulāna Mufti Muḥammad Shafi' has comprehensively explained *a'rāf*, going in details of meaning and connotations of this word. Maulāna Muḥammad Idrīs

Kāndhalwi also agrees with him in this connection; ⁷ the essence of their arguments is that in these *ayāt*, a fortification is mentioned which would exist between dwellers of Paradise and dwellers of Hell.

In short the word *hijāb* stands for a fortification existing between dwellers of paradise and dwellers of hell; they are able to see each other but will remain unable to enter each others allotments. However, they will be facilitated to converse each other.

The conversation between the people in Paradise and the people in Hell is an interesting and meaningful dialogue, as mentioned in the Qur'ān for more than one time. It seems to be an important part of the happenings going on, after the Day of Judgment, when the Final Judgment is over and the life-hereafter is started. To understand this communication with all of its niceties, we can quote the following examples from Qur'ānic text:

i) Al-A'rāf7: 50

وَنَادَىٰ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ أَنْ أَفِيضُوا عَلَيْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ أَوْ مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ اللَّهُ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ حَرَّمَهُمَا عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ

(The Companions of the Fire will call to the Companions of the Garden: "Pour down to us water or anything that God doth provide for your sustenance." They will say: "Both these things hath God forbidden to those who rejected Him.")

ii) Al-Hadeed57: 13

يَوْمَ يَقُولُ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتُ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا انظُرُونَا نَقْتَبِسْ مِنْ نُورِكُمْ قِيلَ ارْجِعُوا وَرَاءَكُمْ فَالْتَمِسُوا نُورًا فَضُرِبَ بَيْنَهُم بِسُورٍ لَهُ بَابٌ بَاطِنُهُ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ وَظَاهِرُهُ مِنْ قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ

(One Day will the Hypocrites- men and women- say to the believers: "Wait for us! Let us borrow (A light) from your light!" It will be said: "Turn you back to your rear! Then seek a light! (Where you can)" So a wall will be put up betwixt them, with a gate therein; within it will be Mercy throughout and without it, all alongside will be (Wrath and) Punishment.)

iii) Al-Muddathir74:40-43

فِي جَنَّاتٍ يَنْسَاءَلُونَ هَ عَنِ الْمُجْرِمِينَ هَ مَا سَلَكَكُمْ فِي سَقَرٍ هَ قَالُوا لَمْ نَكُ مِنَ الْمُصَلِّينَ هَ

(They will be) In Gardens (of Delight) they will question each other, and (ask) of the sinners): “What led you into Hell-Fire?” They will say: “We were not of those who prayed).”

Keeping in view the interaction between the people in the Heavens and the people in the Hell, it becomes clear that the *hijāb* is a veil between them. It is working like a wall used as preventive measure which disallows them to intermix but allows their encounter in terms of their dialogue. This phenomenon is there, probably, to clarify the reasons why these both of the parties have faced such destination. Especially the people of Hell explain that they have come to know the justification for such destiny.

Having concluded the interpretation of *hijāb*, the second question comes under consideration and that is about the meaning of *a'rāf*. The Etymological study shows that the word *a'rāf* is derived from the root '*arf*', which means height, top or an elevated place. Therefore, Maulāna Ameen Aḥsan Islāḥi writes:

“*A'rāf* is a plural of '*arf*' meaning the upper part of forehead of a horse or a cock's comb. That is why this word is used for tower, turret, and a seeing-sight, built on a high wall or on the top of a hill”.⁸

According to Allāma Ibn-i-Manzoor, the majority of the commentators agree that the word *a'rāf* in Sūrah al-A'rāf is derived from '*arf*', which means top and elevated surface, especially top of the wall between the Garden and the Fire.⁹ Imām Rāghib Isfahāni¹⁰ agrees to the same interpretation and Imām Rāzi opines that there will be a wall prohibiting two communities to mingle with each other and the top of this wall is called *a'rāf*.¹¹

Maulāna Ashraf 'Ali Thānwi says that there would be an intercepting wall, the top of which is *a'rāf* from where the paradise and the hell are seen clearly. Mufti Muḥammad Shafi' and Maulāna Muḥammad Idrīs Kāndhalwi agree that the Paradise will have a fortification and the top of this fortification is named

as *a'rāf*, because it is plural of *'arf* which means prominent and distinguished or an elevated surface.¹²

If the same root *'arf* is punctuated as *'urf*, it gives second connotation of meaning to this word and that is identification, comprehension and recognition. The Holy Qur'ān uses word *'urf* and *ma'rūf* for those good deeds and traditions which are recognized and accepted by all as good, reasonable and commendable. For example, one can see the following *ayāt*:

i) Al-A'rāf7:199:

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ

(Hold to forgiveness, command what is right; but turn away from the ignorant.)

ii) Āl-i-'Imrān3: 104:

وَلْتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

(Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones who attain felicity.)

Moreover, one can see in the Holy Qur'ān, multiple derivatives of the root *'urf*, are used in the meanings of comprehension, realization and recognition, for example see:

i) Al-Baqarah2:146: °

الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَعْرِفُونَهُ كَمَا يَعْرِفُونَ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ

(The people of the Book know this as they know their own sons.)

ii) Al-Hujrāt49: 13

وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

(And (We) made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other).

The use of '*urf*, in the sense of identification makes it clear that *a'rāf* is used not only to name elevated places but also to explain the ability to identify and recognize. Therefore, the Qur'ān meaningfully says, in the *āyāt* under discussion that:

وَعَلَى الْأَعْرَافِ رَجَالٌ يَعْرِفُونَ كُلًّا بِسِيمَاهُمْ

(And on the Heights will be men who would know every one by his marks).

Keeping in view this discussion, some interesting points are discovered if one studies the non-Muslim scholars in this regard. Take the example of a very important English Orientalist & translator of Qur'an George Sale, who claims to translate Qur'ān into English from Original Arabic. He explains the word with a comprehensive and brief comment that *a'rāf* is a word derived from the verb '*arafa*, which signifies to distinguish between things or to part them. An other English clergyman of the Church of England and a Non-Muslim Islamic scholar, John Medows Rodwell *has expressed the same opinion*, in his translation of Qur'ān.¹³ The interpretation of both of the scholars coincides with the explanations we have made in the above discussion in the light of Qur'ānic text.

A prolific British scholar of Arabic and Islamic studies, Arthur John Arberry, in his translation of Qur'ān gives other connotation to the study of the subject as he says that *a'rāf* means Battlements (Entrenchments on the city-wall (to defend the city). He translates *āyat* number 48 as under:

وَنَادَى أَصْحَابُ الْأَعْرَافِ رَجَالًا يَعْرِفُونَهُمْ بِسِيمَاهُمْ قَالُوا مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْكُمْ جَمْعُكُمْ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تُسْتَكْبَرُونَ ه

“And the dwellers on the Battlements shall call to certain men they know by their sign: ‘Your amassing has not availed you, neither your waxing proud.’”¹⁴

Giving *a'rāf* the meaning of Battlements seems to be suitable because Qur'ān itself uses word *sūr* in place of *hijāb* in Sūrah Al-Hadeed, in the same meaning, as discussed earlier. The word *Sūr* is used for the wide city-wall, which has entrenchments to defend the city, remaining aware of the invaders. Same is the meaning of the Battlements; the word used by Arthur J Arberry for *a'rāf*.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary Battlement means a low wall around the top of a castle with spaces in it that people inside could shoot through. John Farrar, in his Biblical and Theological Dictionary explains Battlement as a wall or parapet round the flat roof of eastern houses designed as partition from an adjoining building, or to prevent person from falling off.¹⁵

The detailed study of The Old Testament discloses that to build battlements along the roofs, is a biblical instruction to its followers, the commandment goes as:

“When you build a new house, put a parapet along the roof, or you will bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if any one should fall from it.”¹⁶

It means that when Arberry thinks *a'rāf* to be the battlements, he has this biblical concept in his mind. This interpretation gives *a'rāf* a meaning of being defense apparatus of paradise to prevent unwanted individuals fall upon it or enter the Garden without legal permission. In fact Arberry has confirmed the point that *hijāb* and *a'rāf* are lower and higher parts of the same boundary, respectively. In other words, *hijāb* and *a'rāf* are two aspects of the same reality; *hijāb* is the wall and *a'rāf* are the tops of the wall between the paradise and the hell, which clearly determine the division between them.

Richard Bell, the expert of Arabic language and critic/ translator of Qur'ān, in his book *Introduction to Qur'ān* (Revised by Montgomery Watt) analyzes the word *a'rāf* with a new angle. He thinks it a temporary boarding for the people

having minor sins and waiting for Divine Mercy. He has given *a'rāf* a Catholic meaning of being a Purgatory (A place where one can clean oneself).¹⁷

This is a unique idea but one can not perceive it to be alien to the Qur'ānic concept of the stage of *a'rāf*. The Arabic- English dictionaries consider *a'rāf* and purgatory to be equal in their meaning. For example, an important linguist and Orientalist of German Jewish descent, Francis Joseph Steingass, who was professor of Arabic Language, at the Oriental Institute, in his Arabic- English Dictionary confirms that *a'rāf* literally means a purgatory, as does the Oxford English-Arabic Dictionary.¹⁸

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary¹⁹ Purgatory (derived from Old French word: *purgatoire*; place of cleansing) is a state or place in which the souls of those who have died in a state of grace are believed to undergo a limited amount of suffering to expiate their venial sins. In Roman Catholic teaching a place or state in which the souls of dead people suffer for the bad things they did when they were living, so that they can become pure enough to go to heaven.

Furthermore, It is not only the matter of lexical interpretation of the word *a'rāf*, but the fact is that the concept of a purgatory is Biblical decree, as to be an intermediate stage of life-hereafter where one will be given a chance to purge off ones sins, and ultimately will be allowed to enter the Garden of heavens. That is why the Biblical scholars equate the concept of *a'rāf* with the belief of purgatorial stage of life, after death.

The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism explains that the purgatory is an intermediate state of purification between death and heaven that provides for the removal of remaining personal obstacles to the full enjoyment of eternal union with God...At its core, the doctrine affirms simply a transitional spiritual state (possibly instantaneous and coincident with death) of transformation in view of the assured prospect of the Beatific Vision (The direct knowing and loving of God after death).²⁰

This interpretation has also a due weight, because we learn from Qur'ān, through the study of verses under discussion that *Ashāb al-A'rāf* will stay on

a'rāf for a certain period and will ultimately be allowed to enter into Paradise. Thus the verse above mentioned reads:

وَنَادُوا أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ أَنْ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ لَمْ يَدْخُلُوهَا وَهُمْ يَطْمَعُونَ

(They will call out to the Companions of the Garden, "Peace on you". They will not yet have entered but they will have an assurance (thereof).

Therefore, it becomes clear that *al-A'rāf* is a stage and status which gives certain persons an opportunity not only to prepare themselves for the entrance to Paradise but also it provides them with a unique stature having ability to recognize every one and converse according to his status.

As regards the question who are the people to be titled as *Aṣḥāb al- A'rāf*? The Holy Qur'ān declares them as: رَجَالٌ يَعْرِفُونَ كُلًّا بِسِيمَاهُمْ, that they are *rijāl* (men) having the ability to recognize dwellers of the hell and those of the heaven by their marks. The interpretations about these *rijāl* are replete with differences. One school thinks that the men on the heights are the angels, or such men of exalted spiritual dignity (e.g. the great apostles) who will be able to know the souls at sight, as regards their spiritual worth: The heights will be exalted stations from which they will welcome the righteous with a salutation of peace, even before the righteous have entered heaven; the salvation to those whom they solute.

Another school of thought thinks that the men on the heights are such souls as are not decidedly on the side of merit or decidedly on the side of sin, but evenly balanced on a partition between Heaven and Hell. Their case is yet to be decided, but their salutation to the righteous is a wistful salutation because they hope for God's Mercy. The third line of interpretation is close to the first one, with this exception that the partition and heights are figurative. The higher souls will rejoice at the approaching salvation of the righteous.²¹

Richard Bell has something different to say. He pronounces *a'rāf* as *i'rāf* which means (the people able) to recognize and identify (as supervisors or guards).²² This interpretation is very important because the Holy Qur'ān qualifies and highlights *aṣḥāb al-a'rāf* as: وَعَلَى الْأَعْرَافِ رَجَالٌ يَعْرِفُونَ كُلًّا بِسِيمَاهُمْ (And on the

Heights will be men who would know every one by his marks.) which clearly explains that the *aṣḥāb al-a'rāf* will have the ability to identify those who are in Paradise and those in Hell.

It means that on the Day of Judgment both the dwellers of Hell and dwellers of Paradise will be identified and recognized through their special marks, by the *aṣḥāb al-a'rāf* and the *a'rāf* will be stage and status from where the whole process of identification will be carried out.

As regards the special marks of the people in Paradise and of those who are in the Hell, Qur'ān clearly mentions in different verses, everyone will have vivid signs on the face as to be recognized with his destination. For the convenience of understanding the following examples are quoted:

i) Āl-i-'Imran3: 106

يَوْمَ تَبْيَضُّ وُجُوهٌ وَتَسْوَدُّ وُجُوهٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ اسْوَدَّتْ وُجُوهُهُمْ أَكْفَرْتُمْ بَعْدَ إِيمَانِكُمْ فَدُوفُوا
الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ

(On the Day when some faces will be (lit up with) white and some faces will become (in the gloom of) black; to those whose faces will be black (will be said) "Did you reject Faith after accepting it? Then taste the Penalty for rejecting Faith.")

ii) Al-Raḥmān55: 41

يُعْرِفُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ بِسِيمَاهُمْ فَيُؤْخَذُ بِالنَّوَاصِي وَالْأَقْدَامِ

(For) The sinners will be known their Marks, and they will be seized by their forelocks and their feet).

iii) Al-Qiāmah75: 22-24

وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَّاصِرَةٌ هِ إِلَى رَبِّهَا نَاطِرَةٌ هِ وَوُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ بَاسِرَةٌ هِ تَنْظُنُّ أَنْ يُفْعَلَ بِهَا فَاقِرَةٌ هِ

(Some faces, that day will beam (in the brightness and beauty). Looking towards their Lord; and some faces, that day, will be sad

and dismal. In the thought that, some back-breaking calamity was about to be inflicted on them).

Having studied *ayāt* like these, one's mind becomes clarified that every one in the life-hereafter will be assigned special marks, especially on faces, to indicate his identity and verify his destiny.

Now the question remains unsolved that what categories of people will enjoy the status of being *aṣḥāb al-a'rāf*?

According to Imām Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzi, there are two versions about *a'rāf*; firstly that these are heights between paradise and hell, inhabited by some distinguished persons, secondly, there is an exalted stage from which the recognition of the paradise winners and hell choosers will be allowed to those, who will have equal storage of virtues and vices.²³

Imām al-Shaukāni and Allāma Qurṭabī²⁴ has referred to as many as ten traditions regarding the different categories of men on *a'rāf*, derived from the holy words of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). They include, the people having equal quantity of good and bad deeds, the pious scholars, the martyrs, the martyrs who have fought without the consent of their parents, the messengers of God, the angels and the illegitimate off-springs of human being.

Maulāna Amin Aḥsan Iṣlāhī²⁵ has raised some objections about these categories. He opines that only the Muslim scholars, who are struggling for the projection of virtue and goodness, deserve the elevated and exalted status of *a'rāf*. This opinion is singular and personal having no authentication from the classic *Ḥadīth* literature. One can not help believing the traditions referred above in this regard, by some established scholars.

The categories listed by commentators, derived from *Aḥādīth* are almost a dozen in number but the consensus opinion is that *aṣḥāb al-a'rāf* are those people who will have evenly balanced account of good and bad deeds. Keeping in view, the traditions mentioned by 'Allāma Ibn-i- Jarīr Ṭabari, one thinks that, they have neither so many good deeds to be awarded paradise, nor do they have so many evils that they may have been moved towards the Fire.²⁶ J. M. Rodwell, in his translation of Qur'an follow the same line by saying that

on the wall of *a'rāf* will stand “those whose good and evil works are equal, and are not, therefore, deserving of either Paradise or Gehenna.”²⁷

'Allāma Ibn-i- Kathīr says that different opinions of the different interpreters are converged to one stance that the men having equal repository of good and bad deeds, would be awarded the status of *a'rāf*. Maulāna Ashraf 'Alī Thānwi, Syed Qutab Shaheed and Syed Abu al-A'lā Maudūdi, are of the same view, on the basis of *Aḥadith* which narrate that when asked about the persons having evenly balanced sheet of their virtues and vices, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) answered that they would be settled on *a'rāf*.²⁸

It means clearly that the *a'rāf* form a limbo between Heaven and Hell, where those who have an equal quantity of good and evil works shall stand, waiting for the time when their Lord will have mercy upon them, and admit them to the Garden. It means that the answer to the third question is unanimously propounded that *aṣḥāb al a'rāf* are to be awarded paradise later. Because the Holy Qur'ān assures that though they have not entered paradise, but they will be longing for good-tidings:

لَمْ يَدْخُلُوهَا وَهُمْ يَطْمَعُونَ

(They will not yet have entered but they will have an assurance thereof).

Moreover, their salutation to the paradise owners is a sign that they will join them in the long run. Before that, they would be provided with the facility to observe paradise and hell and to recognize clearly the people in Paradise and those who are in the Hell. They will be able to greet the paradise winners and question those who destined Hell. After the decision about all the mankind, they will be ordered to enter the Garden. The Omniscient Allah knows better.

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Note: The English Translation of Ayat (Given in brackets) has been taken from: 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī, *Translation and Commentary on Qur'an* (UK: Islamic Foundation, 1975).