

A Brief Review of Modern Approaches in the Interpretation of the Quran

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ABSTRACT

The Quran, the everlasting miracle, is the final message of Allah for the guidance of mankind in all aspects of life. It is the primary source of all the injunctions pertaining to various issues such as law, constitution, economy, society, politics or ethics etc. From the earliest days, people have delved deep into the treasure of this divine wisdom and spent their lives in search of the knowledge lying buried there. The first output of the intellectual activity of the Ummah, therefore, was the tafsir or the exegesis of the Qur'ān to explain and elucidate the norms of Shari'ah injunctions contained in the Qur'ān. However, modernity, with its complex socioeconomic, religious, political and cultural developments, presented unique challenges to the mufasssirin to contextualise the Qur'ānic message and provide guidance to modern-day Muslims and their worldview. Consequently, many exegetical trends emerged in order to address the emerging issues. This present article briefly reviews modern tafsir trends and how modern tafasir have shaped contemporary Islamic thought.

Key Words: Quran, Tafsir, Modernity, Approaches

Introduction

The term *tafsir* is the most commonly used word for the interpretation of the Quran. However there is disagreement among linguists regarding its origin. According to one opinion, the term *tafsir* is the verbal noun of the second form of the Arabic word *fasr*, and means 'to expound, reveal and make apparent the intelligible meaning'.¹ According to Ibn Manzur, *fasr* means revealing what is covered. Taking into consideration the above definition, *tafsir*, therefore, would be the revealing of what is intended or covered by a difficult word.² The Qur'an uses the word in chapter 25:

And no example or similitude do they bring [to oppose or to find fault in you or in this Quran], but We reveal to you the truth [against that similitude or example], and the better explanation (*tafsiran*) thereof.³

According to Ibn Abbas, here *tafsiran* means *tafsilan* — 'elaboration'.⁴

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Another view suggests that the origin of *tafsir* is not *fasr* but *safara* (to unveil or uncover).⁵ The phrase *safarat [al-mar'at] 'an wajhiha* means '[the woman] removed her veil from her face'.⁶ When the woman is thus unveiled she is referred to as *safirah*, which means that certain parts of her body are not covered. Thus the meaning of *tafsir* may be related to 'uncovering' or 'revealing' what is hidden. Whatever the origin, the meaning of *tafsir* appears to be closely related to 'revealing'.⁷

Genesis of Modern Interpretation of the Quran

The need for explanation and interpretation of the Quran was felt by Muslims in the formative period and thus a wide range of books on exegesis, with different focuses were produced to offer a good range of methods that could be employed for exegesis of the Quran. In the modern era new approaches have been presented to develop an insight into the Quranic interpretations, critically examining it through various methodologies. As a result new methods of enquiry developed, widening fields of discussion as well as adding a great value to this field of research. A modern *tafsir* only becomes modern when its explanation addresses the social, cultural and political realities of the current era. The more prominent modernistic methodologies of Qur'anic exegesis comprise textualist, contextualist, modernist, socio-political, scientific, thematic and feminist approaches.

Modern Approaches in the Interpretation of the Quran

Perhaps one of the major attempts to reinterpret the Quran in the modern period was by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan of India (d. 1898), who published a six-volume work on the Quran.⁸ Khan believed that Muslims needed to reassess their tradition, heritage and ways of thought in line with newly emerging, dynamic and all powerful western knowledge, values and institutions.⁹ In his view, the gulf between Western and Islamic modes of thought was vast, and Muslims who had been educated in the West or influenced by Western education were no longer able to comprehend the religious discourse of the ulama of the time. This widening gap threatened the very relevance of Islam as a religion for many Muslims.

In the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, contact with Western civilization was rudely brought about by Napoleon's short-lived invasion (1798–1801). Debate emerged and continued on the relevance of certain institutions of Islam and the need for a degree of change. Advocates of reform and change faced fierce resistance from the ulama and scholars at influential traditionalist institutions, such as the Azhar seminary (later converted to a university) in Cairo, who suspected in

the views of reformists a hidden ‘colonial’ agenda to undermine Islam. Despite this resistance, in the late nineteenth century, Muhammad Abduh began expounding his views on the interpretation of the Quran. He gave a series of lectures on interpretation and dictated a partial commentary, which was later published by his pupil Muhammad Rashid Rida. This commentary, *Tafsir al-Manar*, though not as radical as Ahmad Khan’s tafsir, was nevertheless new in its approach. Abduh criticized some of the approaches and techniques employed in traditional *tafsir*. He dismissed the emphasis on philological and rhetorical features, saying that such an exercise is ‘dry and distances [one] from God and His Book’.¹⁰ Similarly, he was critical of the focus given to the legal content of the Quran by the jurists (for whom the main function of the Quran had become a legal one), saying that legal topics were the least-discussed themes (*aqallu ma jaa fi al-Quran*).¹¹ Going the grammatical, linguistic and legal approaches in the *tafsir* tradition, ‘Abduh attempted to relate his commentary to contemporary problems in the lives of Muslims. For him, Quranic *tafsir* should aim at clarifying the intended meaning – the underlying reasons in the legislation, belief system and rulings – in such a way as to attract people to the Quran.¹²

Textualist Exegesis

Exegetical work that is based on evaluating and interpreting Qur’ānic text is referred to as textualist exegesis. Abdullah Saeed defines the term textualist exegesis as Qur’ānic *tafsir* work relying on text and tradition, which approaches interpretation of the Qur’ān strictly from a linguistic perspective.¹³ Most modern *tafsir*, as expressed by Saeed, are written with a view that interpretation of a Qur’ānic verse, word or expression conveys its original meaning to scholars who adhere to the conventions governing a textualist approach. Development of the linguistic sciences of *nawh* (grammar) and *balagha* (rhetoric) profoundly refined this *tafsir* trend from a lexical explanation alone to a literary stylistic of comprehension and clarification. A few textualist works, such as those by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144 CE) and more modern scholar Amin al-Khuli, adopt a linguistic perspective as the foundation for their *tafsir* rather than contemporary context, which demands Muslims to adopt historic socio-cultural connotations.

Contextualist Exegesis

Another modern trend in *tafsir* is to let the Qur’ān speak for itself. It is argued by some that the Qur’ān should be understood in a similar manner as the Arabs did at the time of its revelation. To clarify such philosophy, it is further argued that traditional reports on the occasions of revelation are not unanimously agreed upon

and should only be considered when contextual circumstances are favourable. Furthermore, contextualists, such as Algerian scholar Muhammad Arkoun, Egyptian Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Kuwait-born scholar Khaled Abu Al-Fadl reject the imitation of earlier modes of thinking in Qur'ānic exegesis,¹⁴ like their modernist counterparts. These notions have led to contemporary philosophies in interpretation and contextualising the Qur'ānic message.

Thematic Exegesis

This modern genre of *tafsir* advocates Quranic exegesis in the forms of various themes and topics that are central to the Qur'ān. This is the approach for interpreting Quranic texts that emphasized the unity of Quranic text over the interpretation of verses in isolation. Thematic exegesis emerged during prophetic era and still exists, following three methods of analysis, words, ayahs and text. Iranian Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979), Egyptian writer Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad (d. 1964) and Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman have written extensively on the various themes in the Qur'ān, such as society, history, women's rights and fundamental liberties.¹⁵ Though this trend in explaining the Qur'ān can be traced back to the Companions,¹⁶ its application in modern *tafsir* work is unrivalled.

Modernist Exegesis

Qur'ānic *tafsir* exclusively based on and addressing challenges presented by modernity, and more specifically by the Western worldview, is said to reflect modernist or reformist exegetical work. A number of Muslim scholars with this mindset, such as Shah Waliullah quoted by Saeed,¹⁷ refute *taqlid* (blind imitation of early scholars) and favour *ijtihad* (independent judgement) to apply contemporary thought in interpreting the Qur'ān.

Scholars like Sayyid Ahmad Khan of India and Muhammad Abduh of Egypt stressed the importance of a responsive approach compatible with modernity moving away from imitation. Both scholars represent rationalist thinking in Quranic interpretation.

Scientific Exegesis

In modern societies, scientific education and development overwhelmingly hold a central role. Hence, the exegesis of the Qur'ān that involves examining Quran in the light of modern science (called scientific exegesis) emerged. Though scientific Qur'ānic exegesis has a long history, originating from the writings of al-Ghazali (d. 1111), its popularity in present time has reached unprecedented levels.¹⁸ An Egyptian scholar Tantawi Jawahiri wrote an encyclopedia on scientific exegesis

(*al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*) that meant to link the Quranic text with modern scientific world view. The other approach in scientific exegesis is to demonstrate that modern scientific achievements were foreseen by Quran centuries ago, i.e. scientific miraculous nature of Quran'.

Socio-Political Exegesis

Tafasir that relate Qur'ānic interpretation particularly to social, economic and political aspects of modernity can be categorized as socio-political exegesis. One such acclaimed work is by well-known Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb. His life's mission of advocating social, political and religious reforms can be clearly seen in his *tafsir* work,³⁰ *Fi zilal al- Qur'ān* (In the Shade of the *Qur'ān*). Though Qutb's approach to *tafsir* of the Qur'ān was highly political,³¹ it contributed to a new genre of socio-political interpretation and understanding of the Qur'ānic message. Similar views were expressed by Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988),³² reiterating how understanding the social and political environment plays a foundational role in understanding the Qur'ānic message.

Feminist Exegesis

Since the second half of the last century, feminist exegetes have emerged to challenge patriarchal interpretations (as per their opinion) of the Qur'ān. Female scholars, such as Moroccan writer and sociologist Fatima Mernissi, American Muslim scholar Amina Wadud and Pakistani-American writer and academic Asma Barlas have produced major works in feminist exegesis using the conventional principles of *tafsir*, such as *tafsir* of the Qur'ānic verses in light of other Qur'ānic verses and the *sunna* of the Prophet ﷺ.¹⁹ One of the earliest and perhaps most challenging works, arguing against segregation of the sexes and notions of women's inferiority to men, is by Lebanese scholar Nazira Zain al-Din, who published *Al-sufur wa-l-hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling) in Beirut in 1928.²⁰ These modern female scholars have not only pointed out the patriarchal nature of traditional exegetic work, but have presented feminine perspectives to *tafsir* tradition.

Conclusion

Since modernity has nurtured a unique cultural, political, religious, scientific and technologically advanced social construct, the need for Quranic guidance is now more pressing than ever. The exegetic work from the past based on tradition and reason has a significant role in the formulation of modern trends in *tafsir*; however,

the rapid evolution in complex modern Islamic thought requires intricate yet fast-paced Quranic scholarship.

Modern trends in *tafsir*, from textualist to contextualist, modernist to scientific, socio-political to feminist or simply expounding themes of Qur'ān, address the societal evolution, cultural development and political realities of this modern era, which are based on various categories of Islamic worldview. Despite embracing the traditionalism and scripturalism of lastfourteen centuries, the *tafsir* work of modern *muffassirun* will have to adapt to the rapidly changing values of socio-religious tolerance, scientific and technological advancements, and rationalistic pluralism.

Notes and References

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- ² Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Beirut, Dar Sadir, vol.V, 1955-56, p. 55,
- ³ Al-Quran, 25:33.
- ⁴ Qattan, *Mabahith*, p. 324.
- ⁵ Idem.
- ⁶ Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Ungar Pub. Co., New York, vol. IV, 1955–1956, p. 1370.
- ⁷ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran: Towards a Contemporary Approach*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 57
- ⁸ The work began in 1879 and was left unfinished at the time of his death in 1898. This *tafsir* faced fierce resistance not only from ulama but also from Sayyid Ahmad Khan's staunch admirers and friends.
- ⁹ A summary and analysis of Ahmad Khan's views on *tafsir* is given by Christian Troll in his *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, New Delhi: Vikas Publ. House, 1978, pp. 144–170.
- ¹⁰ Muhammad Rashid Rida and Muhammad Abduh, *Tafsir al-Quran al-hakim al-shahir bi-tafsir al-Manar*, 12 vols, Bayrut: Dar al-Marifah, n.d., vol. I, p. 24.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 19.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 25.
- ¹³ Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran*, 50
- ¹⁴ Saeed, *The Qur'an*, 214.
- ¹⁵ Saeed, *The Qur'an*, 213.
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- ¹⁷ Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran*, 10.
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