



The Principles of Tafsir Research in Indonesia: An Analysis of the Development of Modern Contemporary Qur'anic Exegesis in the Country

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Abstract

This article aims to see and explain the rules of interpretation research in Indonesia, especially in the modern- contemporary era. So that it can be felt that the interpretation in the country is also an actor in the realization of the contemporary interpretation era. The method used in this study is qualitative with the type of phenomenology research by using books, journals, and other scientific studies as the main data in order to achieve and achieve the desired results. The findings obtained in this writing by providing three examples of modern interpreters such as Buya Hamka with the Al- Azhar interpretation book by presenting an interpretation that aims to answer the problems of the community around his residence. Then there is M. Qurasih Shihab who greatly inspired Muslim scholars after him with the wealth of knowledge and discussions he poured out. Third, there is Nassaruddin Umar who brings a new discussion theme by bringing the topic of genre in his interpretation.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpretation (*tafsir*) is a continuous intellectual activity that has been carried out since the early emergence of Islam and continues into the contemporary era. It is natural that Qur'anic interpretation has continuously evolved, as the needs and challenges of each historical period have also changed (Ikhwan, 2016). Along with this development, Qur'anic exegesis is not merely dogmatic in nature; rather, it seeks to elaborate and engage with the contextual realities of each era, including the political, social, and technological dynamics faced by the Muslim community (Federspiel, 1996).

Throughout history, exegetes (*mufasssirin*) have consistently sought to provide interpretations of the Qur'an that are relevant and meaningful to their societies. As time has progressed, interaction with the sacred text has become increasingly complex, and the discourse surrounding it has expanded significantly—moving beyond theological and legal discussions to encompass cultural, social, and even political dimensions (Saeed, 2005). Consequently, many contemporary exegetes tend to apply interdisciplinary methods, theories, and approaches in their interpretive efforts.

Modern Qur'anic interpretations integrate perspectives from the social sciences, hermeneutics, and modern scientific thought in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the text. Such developments demonstrate that Qur'anic interpretation today has become more humanistic, contextual, and flexible, seeking to bridge the authority of the sacred text with the dynamic realities of contemporary Muslim life (Sani, 2023).

In the context of Indonesia, the study of modern and contemporary Qur'anic exegesis has faced numerous intellectual challenges and dynamics. The emergence of various scholars and intellectuals who interpret the Qur'an through diverse perspectives and methodologies has led to a pluralistic exegetical tradition (Zuhdi and Sahiron Syamsuddin., 2019). However, the definition of “modern interpretation” remains ambiguous and subject to debate. Some argue that modern exegesis is characterized by an open-minded attitude and receptiveness to Western analytical tools such as hermeneutics (M.A, 2015). On the other hand, there are scholars who continue to uphold classical interpretive principles while integrating them with modern thought. This reflects the ongoing dynamism of exegetical thought in Indonesia, which seeks to respond to contemporary challenges while preserving traditional foundations (Pink, 2017).

The development of modern Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia cannot be separated from the contribution of Abdur Rauf al-Singkili (1615–1693 CE), regarded as the pioneer who laid the groundwork through his seminal work *Tarjuman al-Mustafid* the first Qur'anic commentary written in the Malay language. From this point forward, local culture and context began to influence the style of Qur'anic interpretation in the archipelago, continuing into the modern and contemporary eras (Gusmian, 2013). In the contemporary period, exegetical discussions have expanded to include a broader range of themes, such as responses to globalization, social issues like gender, and the promotion of inclusive education. During this phase, Indonesian scholars have sought to formulate appropriate methods and approaches for interpreting the Qur'an in accordance with the needs of the present time (Wijaya and Shofiyullah Muzammil., 2021).

This paper does not specifically examine how individual exegetes articulate their thoughts to respond to societal challenges. Rather, it focuses on presenting and explaining the major figures of modern and contemporary Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia, aiming to explore the characteristics of their exegetical works and to trace the development of Qur'anic exegesis in the country in the present era.

METHODS

The method employed in this research is qualitative, using a phenomenological research design, with books, journals, and other scholarly studies serving as the primary data sources to achieve the intended research objectives (Mudjia Ruhadjo, 2011).

Data collection was conducted through the triangulation technique, which may include interviews, observations, and documentation. This technique was utilized to gather

data in the form of narratives, descriptions, or non-numerical phenomena (Mudjia Ruhadjo, 2011).

The data analysis technique applied was data reduction, in which the researcher analyzed and summarized the data according to their interpretive capacity. This method functions as a tool to achieve the objectives sought in writing this article.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The emergence of modern tafsir works cannot be separated from the rise of Islamic intellectual reform, marked by the appearance of reformist thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida in Egypt, as well as the intellectual movements that took place in India (Rahman, 2021). This phenomenon, often referred to as the era of modernization, significantly affected the transformation of social norms and values within Muslim societies. At the same time, it also influenced the way Muslims interpreted the Qur'an (Wafi Nuzula Ilhami, and Taufiqurohman Taufiqurohman., n.d.).

Nevertheless, the persistence of traditional interpretations has made the distinction between classical and modern tafsir somewhat blurred. There are still tafsir works from the modern period that follow traditional patterns, raising the question of whether modern tafsir is merely another version of the classical model or whether it truly offers a distinct and innovative framework of thought (Jansen, 1997).

Characteristics of Modern Tafsir

Johanna Pink, inspired by Norman Calder's concept of "*external structure*," demonstrates that modern tafsir gradually began to move away from the extensive use of *asbab al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) or specific narrations that were dominant in the pre-modern era. According to Pink, a reduced reliance on linguistic, theological, and classical archival materials marks the first key characteristic of modern tafsir.

The second characteristic can be seen in the writing technique, which adopts a more systematic and academic style including the use of footnotes and concise, structured explanations.

The third hallmark of modern tafsir lies in its contextual approach: it does not merely focus on the literal meaning of the Qur'anic text but also seeks to uncover its implicit or contextual meanings (Pink, 2017).

In line with this view, Mun'im Sirry, in his article "*What's Modern About Modern Tafsir? (A Closer Look at Hamka's Tafsir al-Azhar)*" included in *The Qur'an in the Malay-Indonesian World: Context and Interpretation*, argues that the level of modernity in a tafsir can be measured by the extent to which the interpreter engages with social reality.

For Sirry, culture and text are interrelated: the Qur'anic text is understood through the interpreter's cultural framework, while that very culture is shaped by the interpreter's religious worldview. More specifically, Sirry highlights how modern tafsir tends to minimize references to classical materials, such as weak hadiths or *isra'iliyyat* traditions.

In the Indonesian context, this tendency can be seen in Hamka's Tafsir al-Azhar, which was strongly inspired by Rashid Rida's reformist spirit in *Tafsir al-Manar*, and which also inherited the ideas of Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. *Tafsir al-Azhar* reflects Hamka's effort to integrate a rational-traditional approach, aligning the Qur'an's relevance with the social, political, and cultural context of Indonesia during his time (Sirry, 2016).

Differences in Perspective and the Development of Modern-Contemporary Tafsir in Indonesia

Differences in perspective arise when discussing the concept of the "*external structure*." Johanna Pink tends to argue that external factors such as language and classical theology should be set aside in order to explore the *inner logic* of the Qur'an, which she views as more original. On the other hand, Mun'im Sirry considers interaction with social reality—including cultural, political, and social dimensions—as an integral element in determining whether a tafsir can be regarded as modern.

From this, it becomes evident that Qur'anic interpretation has developed across a broad spectrum—in terms of methods, sources, and interpretive objectives. Although

modern tafsir aims to reformulate meanings in response to contemporary challenges, the ideas and approaches used by interpreters continue to spark lively debates, particularly regarding the extent to which external realities should be prioritized. Therefore, the study of modern tafsir never settles on a single point of consensus; instead, it continues to evolve in line with the social changes and intellectual developments of Muslim societies around the world.

In the contemporary era, interpreters of the Qur'an strive to combine two or more methods in their exegesis so that their tafsir does not merely repeat the existing body of knowledge. To achieve this, a new perspective and interpretive character must also emerge to produce a fresh understanding.

Several key characteristics of contemporary tafsir can be identified:

1. Hermeneutical orientation – emphasizing epistemological and methodological aspects. This approach aims to produce a *productive* reading of the Qur'an rather than a repetitive or ideologically biased one.
2. Contextual and Qur'an-spirited – achieved by interpreting Qur'anic verses through an *interdisciplinary* lens, drawing from modern fields such as philosophy, semantics, anthropology, sociology, and science. This approach reflects the interpreters' belief that "*the Qur'an is eternal, but its presentation must always be contextual; although it was revealed in Arabic and within an Arab setting, its message is universal, transcending time and space.*"
3. Scientific, critical, and non-sectarian – described as *scientific* because the interpretive product can be tested for validity based on the consistency of its methodology and remains open to academic critique. It is *critical* and *non-sectarian* because most contemporary interpreters do not confine themselves to the boundaries of any particular school of thought. They critically engage with classical and modern scholars alike, especially when certain views are no longer compatible with present-day realities (Asnajib, 2020).

Modern-Contemporary Mufasssir Figures in Indonesia

1. Buya Hamka's Method of Interpretation in *Tafsir al-Azhar*

The interpretive method used by Buya Hamka in *Tafsir al-Azhar* is the tahlili (analytical) method, which examines Qur'anic verses from all aspects of their meaning interpreting verse by verse and surah by surah according to the sequence in the 'Uthmani codex. This includes explaining vocabulary and expressions, the intended meaning and purpose, the rhetorical and stylistic beauty (*balaghah* and *i'jāz*), legal implications, and connections between verses. Hamka also refers to *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the reports of the Companions and *Tābi'in* (Dozan, 2020).

Tafsir al-Azhar is rightly regarded as a true Qur'anic exegesis, as Hamka's interpretation fulfills the essential criteria of tafsir offering detailed explanations of words, phrases, and verses based on valid sources and established principles of interpretation. In general, Hamka employs the tahlili method with a literary (adabi) approach, giving *Tafsir al-Azhar* its distinctive adabi-ijtima'i (literary-social) character (Dozan, 2020).

Hamka interprets the Qur'an in the order of the *mushaf*, discussing it from various angles such as *asbāb al-nuzūl*, textual correlation (*munāsabah*), vocabulary, and syntactic structure. His literary approach is evident in his elegant explanations and stylistic use of language. One notable example is his frequent use of *munāsabah*—thematic and structural connections between verses. This marks a resemblance between *Tafsir al-Azhar* and Sayyid Qutb's *Fi Zilāl al-Qur'an*, confirming Hamka's own admission that Qutb's tafsir was one of his major influences.

For instance, when explaining Q.S. Āli 'Imrān (3): 28–29, which discusses *taqiyyah* in the face of oppressive non-believers, Hamka connects it to verses 8, 9, and 60 of Surah al-Mumtahānah. According to him, as verse 8 suggests, Muslims may coexist peacefully with non-believers as long as they do not fight or expel them; however, if they engage in hostility as mentioned in verse 9 Muslims must refrain from forming alliances or intimate relationships with them (Dozan, 2020).

2. M. Quraish Shihab's Method of Interpretation in *Tafsir al-Misbah*

The interpretive method used in *Tafsir al-Misbah* follows the order of the 'Uthmānī *mushaf*, beginning with *Surah al-Fatihah* and ending with *Surah al-Nas*. M. Quraish Shihab provides an introduction for each verse he interprets, which generally includes the following elements:

- The name of the surah and the reasons for its naming, along with explanations of the verses that inspired the title.
- The number of verses and the reasons for revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*).
- The order of the surah based on both chronological revelation and the written sequence in the *mushaf*, sometimes including references to the preceding or following surah.
- The main themes and objectives of the surah, along with scholarly opinions regarding the topic discussed.
- The relationship between preceding and following verses (*munasabah*).
- An explanation of the specific circumstances or causes of revelation, if available. Through this process, M. Quraish Shihab seeks to expand his commentary so that his goal of *grounding the Qur'an (membumikan al-Qur'an)* in the life of contemporary society can be realized (Dozan, 2020).

Among Indonesian scholars, several exegetical orientations are found. These are often divided into two broad categories: traditional quasi-objectivist and modern objectivist. M. Quraish Shihab's interpretive style can be classified as quasi-objectivist modernist, as it seeks to maintain fidelity to the text while engaging with the contextual realities of modern society.

The concept of tafsir in the modern-contemporary era, characterized by its contextual orientation, represents an effort by interpreters to uncover the moral and spiritual meanings of the Qur'an that are relevant to contemporary human life. The purpose of tafsir, therefore, is not merely textual interpretation, but also social realization translating Qur'anic values into a just and balanced social order.

As Muhammad Abduh emphasized, the Qur'an serves as the universal and comprehensive foundation of Islamic revival. It is not bound by time or confined to Muslims alone, but addresses all of humankind. The Qur'an, as a source of divine guidance, must be applied continuously throughout history. Hence, reason and intellect must be employed in Qur'anic interpretation so that its meanings are understood comprehensively and beneficially for Muslim society across generations.

3. Nasaruddin Umar's Gender-Based Interpretive Method

In his interpretation, Nasaruddin Umar employs various approaches, all of which are rooted in classical exegetical traditions. His method relies heavily on linguistic connotation and the semantic nuances of Qur'anic vocabulary. Accordingly, his methodology and principles for interpreting gender-related verses of the Qur'an can be summarized as follows:

First, the analytical method. Nasaruddin Umar consistently analyzes Qur'anic verses on gender through linguistic and grammatical study, including *asbab al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation) and the morphological structure of key terms derived from Arabic grammar (*nahwu*). This enables him to derive accurate conclusions about the true essence of gender equality as reflected in the Qur'an.

Second, the *ijmali* (general or concise) method. When interpreting verses related to gender, Umar often presents concise explanations that emphasize the general or overarching messages of the Qur'an. He interprets verses using concepts from Qur'anic sciences (*'ulūm al-Qur'an*), aiming to capture the core meaning of each passage without extensive elaboration.

The Contribution of Contemporary Tafsir in Indonesia

1. Reform and Renewal (*Tajdid*)

Contemporary tafsir is regarded by many as a refreshing intellectual development in the field of Qur'anic interpretation, although some traditionalists view it with skepticism. Through its new paradigm, contemporary tafsir seeks to minimize dogmatism and authoritarianism by emphasizing critical thinking, objectivity, and openness, ensuring that no interpretation is immune from critique.

By observing the paradigm shifts in the tradition of tafsir—from the formative-classical period, through the affirmative-medieval stage, to the reformative modern-contemporary era—it becomes clear that the contemporary tafsir paradigm plays a vital role in addressing global issues such as democracy, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality.

These modern issues can no longer be adequately addressed using classical or medieval paradigms that tended to be sectarian, ideological, or discriminatory. The contemporary tafsir paradigm calls for continuous reinterpretation of the Qur'an in harmony with the dynamics of modern human life. In essence, every exegetical product is a child of its time—meaning that earlier deductive-normative-textual approaches must evolve into inductive-critical-contextual frameworks.

Consequently, interpretive outcomes may differ—or even contradict—those of previous generations. However, contemporary interpretations will only gain acceptance among Muslims if they provide concrete solutions to real-world social problems. The ultimate aim of tafsir is not merely theoretical understanding but practical application—turning Qur'anic teachings into instruments of social transformation.

Criticism and debate are natural in scholarly and religious discourse. Many contemporary scholars express dissatisfaction with the rigidity of traditional interpretations, which they see as discouraging critical inquiry and innovation. This intellectual unease led reformist thinkers most notably Fazlur Rahman with his *double movement theory*—to develop hermeneutical approaches that emphasize contextual reasoning. For him, the world is dynamic; thus, human understanding must evolve with it to maintain harmony between religious knowledge and human life.

2. Overcoming Intellectual Rigidity

When discussing Qur'anic interpretation, the central question is how meaning should be derived from a historical text: should interpreters simply reproduce earlier understandings, or are they empowered and even obligated to produce new, contextually relevant meanings?

Both Fazlur Rahman and Muhammad Shahrur argue that the Qur'an remains eternally relevant to all times and places, but it must be read creatively and productively so that it can genuinely serve as an alternative solution to modern socio-religious problems.

In line with this, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani maintained that Islam is synonymous with action and dynamism, not stagnation. A true Muslim must be active and responsible toward God, society, and oneself. One key characteristic of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation, therefore, is its contextual and Qur'an-centered orientation, achieved through the development or reformulation of interpretive methods and paradigms.

Whereas classical and traditional interpreters often used analytical, atomistic, and partial methods, contemporary mufasssirs prefer thematic approaches combined with interdisciplinary methodologies. These draw upon modern fields such as philosophy of language, semantics, semiotics, anthropology, sociology, and science.

A popular dictum among contemporary mufasssirs states: "The Qur'an is eternal, but its interpretation must always be contextual; although it was revealed in Arabic and within an Arab milieu, its message is universal—transcending time and space."

CONCLUSION

From this discussion, we can conclude that the development of Qur'anic exegesis studies in Indonesia during the modern-contemporary period has indeed undergone significant change and progress. This is evidenced by the contributions of scholars such as Buya Hamka, M. Quraish Shihab, and Nasaruddin Umar, who have all played important roles in advancing the field of tafsir studies in Indonesia.

Buya Hamka, through his *al-adabi wa al-ijtima'i* (literary-social) style in his tafsir, incorporates discussions supported by scientific research data, which can be regarded as evidence that modern-style interpretation has taken root in Indonesia. Similarly, M. Quraish Shihab's works, and even Nasaruddin Umar's, address more explicitly contemporary issues such as gender equality.

Furthermore, the author has identified at least two major contributions emerging from the development of modern exegetical approaches: (1) Renewal (Tajdid) within the rich

heritage of tafsir scholarship, and (2) Efforts to eliminate rigidity and blind imitation (taqlid) of past interpretations or fatwas.

On the other hand, the author acknowledges that there are still many shortcomings in this paper. Therefore, feedback and constructive suggestions from readers are highly expected as valuable input for improvement and as guidance for producing better scholarly works in the future.

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