

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN QUR'ĀNIC EXEGESIS

PROF. DR. HUMAYUN ABBAS

DEAN FACULTY OF ISLAMIC & ORIENTAL LEARNING, GC UNIVERSITY, FAISALABAD.

DR. MAJID MUSHTAQ

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR (OPS) URDU, GOVERNMENT COLLEGE UNIVERSITY, FAISALABAD.

DR. IFTIKHAR AHMAD KHAN

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR ARABIC, GOVERNMENT COLLEGE UNIVERSITY, FAISALABAD.

Abstract:

The comprehensive study of the major types of tafsīr (Qur'ānic exegesis) developed throughout the classical and post-classical periods of Islamic scholarship. It outlines the foundational categories tafsīr bil-mathūr, tafsīr bil-ray, linguistic, rhetorical tafsīr, juristic tafsīr, theological tafsīr, mystical (ṣūfī) tafsīr, and contemporary thematic approaches highlighting their unique methodologies, sources, and interpretive objectives. The research examines how each type reflects a particular intellectual milieu and responds to the evolving needs of Muslim communities, from the earliest narrations rooted in Prophetic and Companions reports to modern analytical readings shaped by social and civilizational concerns. By comparing exegetical principles, patterns of reasoning, and the scope of interpretive authority, the study demonstrates the richness and diversity of the tafsīr tradition. Ultimately, it argues that understanding these categories is essential for appreciating the methodological integrity, historical development, and enduring relevance of Qur'ānic interpretation in Islamic thought.

Keywords: Qur'ānic Exegesis, Nufahāt-e-Tafsīr, Contemporary Trends, Dr. Humayun Abbas.

In the blessed verse of Sūrah Muḥammad:

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا¹

“Do they not then reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon their hearts?”

The command to engage in tadabbur (deep reflection) has been given. This word appears in four different verses of the Qur'an. Such reflection encompasses contemplation over the sūrahs, the verses, individual words, legal injunctions, realities and subtleties, as well as aims and objectives. As a result of this process of reflection, the secrets and deeper meanings of the Divine Word that are unveiled are called tafsīr (exegesis), and the one who carries out this task is called a mufasssir (exegete). The word *tafsīr* has been used in verse 33 of Sūrah al-Furqān. Wherever the Qur'an mentions the office entrusted to the Noble Prophet ﷺ of explaining and elucidating the Qur'an, it does so in the following words

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ كُرًى لِيُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ²

“And We have sent down to you the Reminder so that you may clearly explain to the people what has been revealed to them, and so that they may reflect.”

While explaining this verse, Justice Pir Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari writes that:

Allah Almighty granted the true knowledge of the Holy Qur'an exclusively to His Messenger, and entrusted solely to His Beloved and Honoured Prophet ﷺ the responsibility of expounding its meanings and objectives, detailing what is concise, and clarifying its commands and prohibitions. Therefore, only that interpretation and explanation of the Qur'an which was given by the Noble Prophet ﷺ is, truly reliable.³

In other words, the interpretation of the Qur'an is, in reality, the office of *tabyīn al-Qurān* (clarification of the Qur'an), which a mufasssir performs as a representative of the Prophetic mission. The word *tabyīn* carries within it a stronger sense of disclosure and clarity. According to the summary of the details presented by Samīn Ḥalabī: The Arabic root *bayn* is a polysemous term that conveys meanings such as manifestation, separation, clarity, distinction, connection, proof, intermediary, and Evidence.⁴

The term *ta'wīl* is also used within the context of *tabyīn al-Qur'ān*. It appears at fourteen places in the Holy Qur'an and, in its conceptual scope, includes redirecting an interpretation from a preferred meaning to a less preferred one on the basis of evidence, the inner dimensions of the Qur'an, interpretation of dreams, symbolic

indications, and esoteric allusions. It has been understood as synonymous with *tafsīr*, and some scholars maintain that the relationship between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* is one of absolute generality and specificity.

Shaykh Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī, for his broadcast lessons on the Qur'an, used the term *khawāṭir* (inspirational reflections). Regarding this term, his point of view is as follows:

خواطرى حول القرآن الكريم لا تعنى تفسيراً للقرآن--- وإنما هي هبات صفائية--- تخطر على قلب مؤمن في آية أو بضع آيات--- ولو أن القرآن من الممكن أن يفسر--- لكان رسول الله أولى الناس بتفسيره--- لأنه عليه نزل و به انفعول وله بلغ و به علم و عمل--- وله ظهرت معجزاته ولكن رسول الله والي ال اكتفى أن يبين للناس على قدر حاجتهم من العبادة التي تبين لهم أحكام التكليف في القرآن الكريم وهي أفعل ولا تفعل--- تلك الأحكام التي يتاب عليها الانسان أن فعلها، ويعاقب أن تركها--- هذه هي أسس العبادة الله سبحانه وتعالى--- التي أنزلها في القرآن الكريم كمنهج الحياة البشر على الأرض--- أما الأسرار المكتنزة في القرآن حول الوجود- فقد اكتفى رسول الله صل الله بما علم منها--- لأنها بمقياس العقل في هذا الوقت لم تكن العقول تستطيع أن تتقبلها، وكان طرح هذه الموضوعات سيشير جدلاً يفسد قضية الدين. ويجعل الناس ينصرفون عن فهم منهج الله في العبادة إلى جدل حول قضايا لن يصلوا فيها إلى شيء.⁵

My reflections on the Holy Qur'an should not be regarded as a formal *tafsīr* of the Qur'an; rather, they are inspirations that arise from the purity of the heart, which descend upon the heart of a believer in relation to a single verse or a few verses. Had a complete and exhaustive interpretation of the Qur'an been possible, the one most entitled to it would have been the Messenger of Allah ﷺ himself because it was revealed to him alone, he alone received its full impact, he alone conveyed it, he alone possessed its true knowledge, he alone acted upon it in its entirety, and through him alone its miraculous nature was manifested. However, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ explained only as much as was sufficient for the worship and religious needs of the people—that is, those injunctions which were made obligatory upon human beings, such as commands to do certain acts and prohibitions against others. These are the rulings upon whose observance a person is rewarded and upon whose neglect he is held accountable. These are precisely the commandments which Allah Almighty revealed in the Holy Qur'an as a comprehensive code of life for humanity's existence on earth. As for the hidden mysteries contained in the Qur'an concerning the universe and the existence of Allah Almighty, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ disclosed only those aspects of them which were granted to him in knowledge. This was because, according to the intellectual capacity and level of understanding of people at that time, it was not possible for them to fully grasp those realities. Moreover, had such subjects been extensively discussed then, they would have led to unnecessary debate and disputation, diverting people away from the clear and practical system of worship toward issues that would ultimately yield no beneficial outcome.

Whatever terminology may be employed for *tabyīn al-Qur'ān* (the elucidation of the Qur'an), the essential purpose is to open the avenues of understanding the Qur'an in accordance with human capacity. These layers of meaning continue to unfold and will keep unfolding until the Day of Resurrection.

Scholars differ on the question of whether the Prophet ﷺ expounded the entire Qur'an in detail or not. The reality is that the narrations transmitted from him do not encompass the whole Qur'an; however, the *Sīrah* of the Prophet ﷺ itself constitutes a complete interpretation of the Qur'an. The statements "His character was" ⁶ *the Qur'an* and clearly point to this truth. ⁷ *With* regard to the qualifications required for Qur'anic exegesis, scholars have laid down various conditions and competencies.

Imām Rāghib, after enumerating ten scholarly requirements, also emphasized *taqwā* (God-consciousness) and reliance upon the understanding of the early generations who were blessed with the companionship of the Messenger ﷺ and who witnessed the revelation of the Qur'an firsthand.⁸

The same viewpoint is evident in the letter of Ḥadrat Mujaddid Alf Thānī addressed to Mīr Muḥammad Nu'mān. He writes:

قال الله تبارك و تعالی: وانه لقرآن كريم في كتاب مكنون لا يمسه الا المطهرون، مراد الكريمة ما أراد الله سبحانه و الرازي که در اين مقام به فهم قاصر می درآید آن است که مساس نکنند اسرار مکنونه قرآنی را مگر جماعه که از لوث تعلقات بشریه پاک شده باشند هرگاه نصیب پاکان مساس اسرار قرآنی بود، به دیگران چه رسد - و رمزی دیگر آنکه نخوانند قرآن را یعنی نشاید که بخوانند قرآن را مگر جماعه که نفوس ایشان از هوا و هوس مزکی شده باشد و از شرک جلی و خفی و از آلهه آفاق و انفسی مطهر گشته⁹

"Allah, Blessed and Exalted, says: *Indeed, it is a noble Qur'an, in a guarded Book; none touch it except the purified ones* The true intent of this noble verse is known only to Allah, the Glorious. As for what comes to my limited understanding in this context, it is that none should touch the hidden secrets of the Qur'an except those who have been purified from the contamination of human attachments. If the privilege of touching the Qur'anic mysteries belongs to the pure, then what share can others have? Another subtle indication is that none should recite the Qur'an indeed, it is not befitting to recite it except those whose souls have been purified from base desires, cleansed of manifest and hidden shirk, and purified from outward and inward false deities. The true meaning of this blessed verse is known only to Allah Almighty; however, the symbolic meaning that this humble servant perceives is that only those who have been purified from the impurities of human nature can gain access to the inner secrets of the Qur'an. When the intimate contact with Qur'anic mysteries is reserved for the pure, what, then, can others attain? The second indication is that the Qur'an should be recited only by those whose souls

have been refined and purified from lust and caprice, and cleansed of both manifest and hidden polytheism, as well as from outward and inward objects of worship.

From these two passages it becomes evident that mere proficiency in sciences and disciplines is not the fundamental requirement for *tabyīn al-Qur'ān*; rather, a very high standard of inner purity is equally essential. This is why persistence in sin, blind imitation, prejudice, and intellectual stagnation all become obstacles in the path of understanding the Qur'an.

This stage of *tabyīn al-Qur'ān* is particularly significant in that the Qur'an contains guiding principles for every aspect of human life; it offers direction for every age, and instruction for every generation, tribe, group, discipline, layperson, and scholar alike. Consequently, the efforts undertaken to elucidate its meanings and messages display the same diversity that characterizes human life itself. This diversity reflects the range of human capacities and intellectual potentials that can be employed in the understanding of the Qur'an.

On this basis, the types of Qur'anic exegesis are generally described as *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* (narrative or transmitted exegesis) and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* (rational, analytical, or ijtihād-based exegesis). However, it is not entirely accurate to regard this division as exhaustive or absolute. The categories of tafsīr may be articulated in various ways. One such classification, based on scholarly foundations, may be outlined as follows:

(i) Lexical Exegesis (Word-Based)

Lexical exegesis refers to the explanation and elucidation of the individual words of the Qur'an. In this regard, Imām Rāghib writes that

in order to investigate and comprehend the meanings and messages of the Qur'an, acquiring an understanding of its vocabulary is as essential as procuring bricks and mortar before constructing a building.¹⁰

Representative works of lexical exegesis include:

1. *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān* — Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502 AH)
2. *'Umdat al-Huffāz fī Tafsīr Ashraf al-Alfāz* — Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf (d. 756 AH)
3. *Al-Taḥqīq fī Kalimāt al-Qur'ān* — Ḥasan al-Muṣṭafawī
4. *Al-Tafsīr al-Lughawī* — Dr. Musā'id ibn Sulaymān ibn Nāṣir al-Ṭayyār

Under the title *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, the exegetical literature is, in essence, predominantly concerned with linguistic discussions.

Lexical exegesis, with respect to its meanings and conclusions, may be either praiseworthy or blameworthy. Accordingly, it can be termed *commendable lexical exegesis* or *reprehensible lexical exegesis*. Deviant approaches to understanding the Qur'an often begin with distortions at the lexical level. *Lughāt al-Qur'ān* by Ghulām Aḥmad Parvez is a representative work of such a deviationist trend.

(ii) Tafsir Tartibi (Sequential Exegesis)

Generally, Qur'anic commentaries have been written in accordance with the *tawqīfī* arrangement of the Qur'an. In this approach, the meanings and themes of the verses are explained following the order of the Muṣḥaf, and the verses are subjected to analytical and critical study from multiple perspectives.

However, another trend has also existed, wherein the task of Qur'anic exegesis is carried out with due consideration to the chronological order of revelation. The primary objective of this method is said to be the selection of Qur'anic verses for reflection in the sequence in which they were revealed, so as to facilitate a clearer understanding of the events of the Prophetic biography. This approach is also known as *historical exegesis*.

Representative works of this style include:

1. *Tafsīr al-Hadīth* — Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah (d. 1404 AH)
2. *Ma'ārij al-Tafakkur wa Daqā'iq al-Tadabbur* — 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥasan Ḥabannakah
3. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm 'alā Tartīb al-Nuzūl* — Muḥammad Maḥallī Aḥmad Bābi'ah

(iii) Tafsir Mawdu'i (Thematic Exegesis)

In thematic exegesis, the task of *tabyīn al-Qur'ān* is primarily undertaken by collecting verses from the entire Qur'an—or from a single sūrah—relating to a specific theme. However, thematic exegesis has broader dimensions as well: it may involve defining a thematic unity within the Qur'an and studying the entire scripture in light of that central theme. Likewise, treating language itself as a theme and studying Qur'anic vocabulary from that perspective also falls within this category.

Representative works of thematic exegesis include:

1. *Al-Tibyān fī Aqsām al-Qur'ān* — Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah
2. *Al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī* — Muḥammad al-Qāsim
3. *Al-Madkhal ilā al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī* — 'Abd al-Sattār Fathullāh
4. *Al-Futūḥāt al-Rabbāniyyah fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī* — Muḥammad Abū Farḥah Aḥsinī
5. *Al-Taghyīr al-Mawḍū'ī li'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* — Aḥmad Sayyid al-Kūmī
6. *Payām-e-Qur'ān* — Nāṣir Makārim Shīrāzī
7. *Mawsū'at al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī li'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* — Collective work of Markaz al-Tafsīr wa al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyyah
8. *Al-Ḥubb fī al-Qur'ān* — Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Būfī

It should be kept in mind that all three of these types of exegesis may be conducted either through transmitted sources (*bi'l-ma'thūr*) or through reasoned analysis (*bi'l-ra'y*). In other words, the fundamental distinction between *bi'l-ma'thūr* and *bi'l-ra'y* pertains to methodology, not to the categorical types of tafsīr themselves.

In this context, and in the light of Ibn Khaldūn's intellectual framework, the science of Qur'ānic exegesis (tafsīr) may fundamentally be divided into two principal categories, to which he alludes in his *Muqaddimah*:

1. Narrative-based Tafsīr (Tafsīr Naqlī)

2. Linguistic Tafsīr (Tafsīr Lisānī)

Furthermore, with regard to volume and scope, tafsīr literature may be classified into three broad types:

➤ Concise Tafsīr: These are generally known as marginal notes or glosses (*hawāshī*). Such works exist in abundance not only in Arabic and Urdu but in almost every major language of Islamic scholarship.

➤ Moderate Tafsīr: An example of this category is *Tafsīr Diyā' al-Qur'ān*.

➤ Extensive Tafsīr: In Arabic, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*, and in Urdu, *Tibyān al-Qur'ān*, represent this genre.

These latter works, along with similar exegetical compositions, may appropriately be termed "comprehensive commentaries" (Jāmi' Tafāsīr), since the exegete engages in detailed discussion across almost all major thematic, legal, theological, and linguistic dimensions of the Qur'ān.

In contemporary Qur'ānic studies, modern scholarly works increasingly employ the terms "Ittijāhāt" (Trends) and "Alwān" (Modes/Colors) of tafsīr. By *ittijāhāt* is meant the intellectual or ideological orientation through which a mufasssīr interprets the Qur'ān. These orientations significantly influence the understanding, interpretation, and articulation of Qur'ānic verses. Broadly, they may be categorized as follows:

➤ Jihād-oriented Tafsīr

➤ Political Tafsīr

➤ Da'wah-oriented Tafsīr

➤ Hermeneutical Tafsīr

By contrast, *alwān* refers to the distinct disciplinary domains within which Qur'ānic interpretation is undertaken—wherein the exegete approaches the Qur'ān through the lens of a particular field of knowledge. These may be classified as:

➤ Juristic (Fiqhī) Tafsīr

➤ Theological (Kalāmī) Tafsīr

➤ Literary and Allusive Tafsīr, including Indicative/Esoteric interpretations (Sūfī, mystical, symbolic, or experiential)

➤ Scientific Tafsīr

In this framework, *manhaj* (methodology) denotes the interpretive principles or procedural approach adopted by the exegete, such as tafsīr *bi'l-ma'thūr* (based on transmitted reports) or tafsīr *bi'l-ra'y* (based on reasoned judgment).

The diversity of approaches and the vigorous scholarly discourse surrounding tafsīr in the modern age clearly demonstrate that Qur'ānic exegesis has never suffered from intellectual stagnation in any period of history. Although none of these classifications can be regarded as definitive or absolute—since they overlap in certain respects and diverge in others—they nonetheless reveal significant contemporary trends in tafsīr studies and reflect sustained scholarly efforts toward the elucidation of the Qur'ān in changing contexts. It is also an established reality that no single tafsīr is confined exclusively to one trend, mode, or methodology. Rather, a particular label is usually assigned due to the dominance of a specific orientation, even though traces of other trends and modes are also present.

At the popular level, considerable efforts have been undertaken across different regions of the world to acquaint the masses with the message of the Qur'ān, particularly through the following means:

1. Post-prayer Qur'ānic lessons in mosques

2. Qur'ānic programs on electronic media

3. Qur'ānic instruction through social media platforms

Many mosque-based lessons have subsequently been compiled and published by scholars, including:

➤ *Durūs al-Qur'ān* by Sūfī 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Swāī

➤ *Al-Fayḍān* by 'Allāmah Maqṣūd Aḥmad Qādrī

➤ *Al-Durūs al-'Asharah fī Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* by Muftī Ghulām Ḥasan Qādrī

In recent times, especially during the month of Ramaḍān, the practice of summarizing the verses recited during the nightly *Tarāwīḥ* prayers has gained notable popularity. Examples of such works include:

➤ *Khulāṣah Tafsīr* by Muftī Munīb al-Raḥmān

➤ *Mafāhīm al-Qur'ān* by Dr. Sa'īd Aḥmad Sa'īdī

➤ *Qur'ān ke Maḍāmīn kā Khulāṣah* by Muftī Muḥammad Ilyās

The intellectual background of Dr. Isrār Aḥmad's *Bayān al-Qur'ān* is also rooted in these very Qur'ānic discourses.

Similarly, the tradition of Qur'ānic lessons broadcast on television and radio is prevalent in many countries. In Egypt, the lessons of Shaykh Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī achieved remarkable prominence. In Pakistan, Muftī Muḥammad Shafī 'Uthmānī's renowned *Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān* originated from a series of radio lectures broadcast by Radio Pakistan. Under the title "*The Qur'ān and Our Life*", religious programs were transmitted nationwide.

The published works of Dr. Qārī Muḥammad Ṭāhir (*Tarīl al-Qur'ān*), Dr. Muḥammad I'jāz Fārūq Akram (*Qawl Majīd, Qawl 'Aẓīm, Qawl Ḥakīm, Qawl Karīm, Qawl Faṣl*), as well as *Nafāḥāt al-Tafsīr*, which is a compilation of the reflective Qur'ānic lectures of Dr. Muḥammad Ishāq Qurayshī, are all part of this enduring tradition.

In the contemporary digital age, numerous YouTubers and religious influencers are likewise utilizing social media platforms to disseminate and promote their religious perspectives and intellectual viewpoints, thereby expanding the reach of Qur'ānic understanding to new and diverse audiences.

Regarding this tafsīr, and author, M. Zubair writes:

Dr. Qureshi's intellectual and spiritual life revolved around one focal point: the Qur'ān and the Messenger of the Qur'ān ﷺ. Far from being technical treatises or purely academic analyses, they were designed to make the luminous guidance of the Qur'ān accessible to the ordinary believer. Whether speaking on Sūrat al-Isrā', Sūrat al-An'ām, or Sūrat al-A'rāf, Dr. Qureshi consistently adopted a clear tripartite method: an accessible and faithful translation, a concise but incisive explanatory note, and extraction of practical guidance from each verse. Throughout, he affirmed that the Qur'ān is humanity's final and conclusive source of guidance, and that striving towards its comprehension constitutes a form of sacred labour. *Nufahāt al-Tafsīr* is replete with examples of Dr. Qureshi's clarity of exposition. His analysis of the distinction between al-Raḥmān and al-Raḥīm, the former expressing the intensity of divine mercy, the latter its continuity, is characteristic of his methodological neatness. Similarly, his treatment of the term *rā'inā* masterfully combines linguistic, historical, and ethical considerations to illuminate how a seemingly innocuous word was manipulated into an instrument of disrespect. His discussions on creed display intellectual sobriety and spiritual sensitivity. When explaining Qur'ānic engagements with Christian theology, he emphasized how the Qur'ān restores the equilibrium of *tawḥīd* by reminding believers that all created beings, however honoured, remain subject to the divine will. His insights into Qur'ānic spirituality are equally compelling. He observed that: "The Qur'ān unveils its light only when its words penetrate the heart." And he warned that: "*Knowledge, if it ceases to cultivate harmony and begins to generate discord, becomes a burden rather than a mercy.*" Such remarks demonstrate his intellectual depth, moral intuition, and pedagogical compassion. *Nufahāt-e-Tafsīr* is thus far more than a compilation of Qur'ānic commentaries. It is a spiritual inheritance, an educational trust, a revival of decades of oral scholarship, and, for both its author and its compiler, a continuing charity (*ṣadaqah jāriyah*). May Allah Almighty elevate Dr. Muhammad Ishaq Qureshi (RA) in the gardens of Paradise, and reward Dr. Muhammad Humayun Abbas Shams for his extraordinary labour in bringing this monumental contribution to the world of modern tafsīr.

These types and methods of Qur'ānic interpretation (Tafsīr), Tafsīr Tartibi, Tafsīr Mawdu'i (thematic interpretation) Other interpretive approaches, such as linguistic, legal, intellectual, and reformative, all these methods complement each other in understanding the comprehensive message of the Qur'an. This shows that the prevailing trends in the interpretation of the Qur'an are not final; there are other perspectives from which they can be viewed, and it is possible that these may come to light in the future.

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