

**COMPARISON OF CLASSICAL AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS IN  
THE INTERPRETATION OF THE QUR'AN**

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*Abstract*

*This study examines the comparison between classical and modern exegetical approaches within the Qur'anic interpretive tradition. Classical tafsir is primarily rooted in authoritative narrations through tafsir bi al-ma'tsur and tafsir bi al-ra'yi, emphasizing chains of transmission, linguistic analysis, and the views of early Muslim scholars. In contrast, modern tafsir emerged in response to socio-political and intellectual changes in the 19th and 20th centuries, with figures such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida leading the movement. Modern exegetical approaches highlight contextual, thematic, and maqashid-based interpretations aimed at addressing contemporary societal challenges, including social issues, scientific developments, and humanistic concerns. This study concludes that the primary distinction between these approaches lies in their interpretive orientation: classical tafsir is textual and traditional, whereas modern tafsir is rational, dynamic, and attuned to the realities of modern life. Nevertheless, both approaches contribute significantly to the evolving epistemology of Qur'anic interpretation and collectively enrich the understanding of the Qur'an's universal message.*

**Keywords:** *Classical exegesis, Modern exegesis, Tafsir approaches, Muhammad Abduh, Qur'anic interpretation*

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini membahas perbandingan antara corak tafsir klasik dan corak tafsir modern dalam tradisi penafsiran al-Qur'an. Tafsir klasik umumnya berakar pada otoritas riwayat melalui pendekatan *tafsir bi al-ma'tsur* dan *tafsir bi al-ra'yi* dengan penekanan pada sanad, bahasa, dan pendapat ulama generasi awal. Sementara itu, tafsir modern berkembang sebagai respons terhadap perubahan sosial, politik, dan intelektual pada abad ke-19 dan 20, dengan tokoh sentral seperti Muhammad Abduh dan Rasyid Rida. Corak modern lebih menekankan pendekatan kontekstual, tematik, dan maqashidi yang bertujuan menjawab persoalan masyarakat kontemporer, seperti isu sosial, ilmu pengetahuan modern, dan kemanusiaan. Studi ini menemukan bahwa perbedaan mendasar antara kedua corak terletak pada orientasi penafsiran: tafsir klasik bersifat tekstual dan tradisional, sedangkan tafsir modern bercorak rasional, dinamis, dan relevan dengan realitas zaman. Meski demikian, keduanya merupakan bagian integral dari perkembangan epistemologi tafsir yang saling melengkapi dalam memahami pesan universal al-Qur'an.

**Kata Kunci:** Tafsir klasik, Tafsir modern, Corak tafsir, Muhammad Abduh, Penafsiran al-Qur'an.



## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Quran is a holy book containing guidance (hidayah) and universal moral teachings for all humanity throughout time. Essentially, the Quran is believed and trusted to be impervious to the constraints of time. However, in reality, many Quranic texts are understood in a partial and ideological manner, negatively impacting interpretation, making the study of Quranic interpretation seem like a dead text and no longer relevant to modern developments. This situation has prompted Islamic reformers to reactualize Quranic interpretation. They believe that classical understanding of the Quran tends to stagnate and needs to be revitalized to remain in line with the needs of the times.

According to them, the classical interpretation methodology, which is too oriented towards narrations (tafsir bi al-ma'tsur), sometimes ignores the universal spirit of the Quran as a holy book that provides guidance for all humanity in every context of life. History shows that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the first interpreter of the Quran because he was given a direct mandate to explain God's revelation to his people. After his death, the activity of interpreting the Quran continued, even evolving as new issues arose in Islamic society. Generations of companions interpreted the Quran based on narrations from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), known as tafsir bi al-ma'tsur. Subsequently, the tabi'in (followers) continued this tradition by interpreting the Quran based on the narrations of the companions and their understanding of the language and social context of Arab society.

However, with the changing times and the complexity of human life, a growing realization emerged that classical approaches alone were no longer sufficient to address contemporary issues. Therefore, modern interpretations emerged, attempting to integrate Quranic values with modern social, political, economic, and scientific realities. Modern interpretations emphasize not only linguistic or legal aspects but also explore the moral, social, and humanitarian meanings contained within the Quranic verses.

This journal will analyze the differences between classical and modern styles, so that we can understand how the universal values of the Qur'an continue to live and be relevant in facing the challenges of the times, without eliminating the authenticity of the teachings contained therein.

## **II. THEORITICAL STUDIES**

### **Understanding the Style of Interpretation**

The style of interpretation is the specific tendency of an interpreter in interpreting Quranic verses, influenced by their educational background, academic discipline, environment, and theological perspective. Within the tafsir tradition, this style has developed into various forms, such as: lughawi (linguistic), fiqhi (juristic), kalami (theological), falsafi (philosophical), and isyari (Sufi).

### **Classical Interpretation**

Classical interpretation refers to the works of exegetes from the early to medieval periods of Islam. Its general characteristics include: Reliance on narrations (authentic narrations, the opinions of the Companions and Tabi'in), Use of the tahlili method (verse-by-verse explanation), Dominance of linguistic, fiqh, kalam, and Sufi approaches, and the authority of traditional books such as the Tafsir of al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, Al-Qurtubi, and Al-Razi.

### **Modern Interpretation**

Modern interpretation emerged during the intellectual revival of the 19th/20th century. Its main characteristics: Contextual and rational interpretation. Integrating the values of the Qur'an with social reality. Thematic (maudhu'i), contextual, and maqashidi methods. Main figures: Muhammad Abduh, Rasyid Rida, and Thantawi Jauhari. Touching on modern issues such as polygamy, education, science, socio-politics, and public welfare.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODS**

This research is a qualitative study with a library research approach, where the main source of data is obtained from written works, both in the form of classical manuscripts and relevant modern printed books. To find examples of the application of classical and modern interpretations in the interpretation of the Qur'an. The approach used in this study is a comparative analysis of methodological, epistemological and interpretive orientation differences. Data collection techniques are carried out by systematically identifying, reviewing, and recording information from these manuscripts. The data obtained are then analyzed descriptively-analytically, namely by explaining the meaning of the interpretation being studied, as well as conducting a comparative analysis of classical and modern interpreters.

## IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

### 1. Characteristics of Classical Period Interpretation

Quranic interpretation began during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), albeit on a limited scale because the Quran was revealed in Arabic, which was understood by the Arab community at that time, and any problems encountered in the community could be addressed directly to the Prophet Muhammad. During the time of the Companions, Quranic interpretation was still dominated by tafsir bi al-ma'tsur (narrations) heavily influenced by bayani reasoning. These interpretations were partial and lacked detail, making it difficult to obtain a complete picture of the Quran's perspective on a particular issue. During the period of the Tabi'in and the Tabi' Tabi'in, Quranic interpretation also did not experience significant development. During this period, interpretation began to incorporate Israiliyyat narratives, some of which could endanger the purity of Islamic teachings, as many Israiliyyat stories were weak and fabricated. In the following period, the Classical Period, Quranic interpretation underwent changes on a different scale, both in terms of sources, methods, and content. The characteristics of classical period exegesis are:

Reviewed from the source of interpretation. In the classical period, there were two sources of interpretation used by exegetes: tafsir bi al-ma'tsur and tafsir bi al-ra'yi.

#### 1. Tafsir bi al-ma'tsur

Tafsir bi al-ma'tsur is an interpretation based on authentic quotations, namely interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an, interpreting the Qur'an with hadith because hadith function as an explanation of the Qur'an, interpreting the Qur'an using the opinions of the Companions because they were the ones who best understood the Qur'an and witnessed its revelation, and interpreting the Qur'an using the opinions of the Tabi'in because they generally accepted the interpretations of the Companions.

Example of interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an

Surah Al-Fatihah verse 7:

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

*(namely) The path of those upon whom You have given favor; not (the path of) those who are angry and not (nor the path of) those who have gone astray.*

Interpreted by verse 69 of Surah An-Nisa:

وَمَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ ۖ وَحَسُنَ أُولَٰئِكَ رَفِيقًا

*And whoever obeys Allah and (His) Messenger, they will be together with those who are bestowed with favors by Allah, namely: the Prophets, the shiddiiqiin, the martyrs, and the pious. And they are the best friends.*

Ibn Kathir explains that الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ (those whom You have given favors to) in Surah Al-Fatihah, interpreted directly by the Qur'an itself through Surah An-Nisa' verse 69 above. So, what is meant by people who are given favors are prophets, shiddiqin, martyrs, and pious people. The people who are angry are the Jews, and the people who are misguided are the Christians.

## 2. Tafsir bi al-ra'yi

Tafsir bi al-ra'yi is an interpretation based on ijtihad, based on the rules of correct interpretation, and not solely on ijtihad or whim. In this regard, Al-Suyuti explains in his book Al-Itqan that a person is permitted to interpret the Quran if they meet the following requirements: understanding Arabic and its rules, ushul fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), asbab al-nuzul (the reasons for interpreting the Quran), nasikh mansukh (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence), qira'at (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence), and possessing the expertise and knowledge of the rules necessary for interpreting the Quran.

In terms of method, the majority of exegetes that developed during the classical period used the tahlili method. The tahlili method is an interpretation method that explains verse by verse, chapter by chapter, according to the order of the Ottoman Mushaf, with sufficiently detailed explanations. This method seeks to present a comprehensive discussion of all aspects and content of a verse, group of verses, or chapters, involving vocabulary analysis (mufrodat), language structure (grammar), linguistic discussion of the overall meaning of the interpreted verse, and an explanation of the munasabah (correlation between verses and chapters). It also utilizes the asbab al-nuzul (reasons for the purpose of revelation), as well as the derivation of general principles and other knowledge that can aid understanding of the Quranic text.

In terms of style and approach, commentaries during the classical period tended to utilize diverse approaches, including linguistics, grammar, fiqh, philosophy, and theology. During this period, various interpretation styles emerged along with the development of

existing scientific disciplines. Among them: linguistic interpretation (al-tafsir al-lughawi), an interpretation that, in explaining Quranic verses, is dominated by descriptions of various linguistic aspects rather than the main message of the verse being interpreted. As for the fiqh style, the fiqh interpretation (al-Tafsir al-Fiqhi) is the interpretation of the Qur'an that emphasizes discussions on fiqh legal issues. While the theological style is a form of interpretation of the Qur'an that prioritizes theological themes more than the main messages of the Qur'an, as is the discussion developed in the literature of kalam (Islamic theology). and the sufi style is also known as tafsir al-isyari is an interpretation built on the basis of philosophical sufi theories, or an interpretation intended to strengthen sufi theories by using the ta'wil method by seeking inner meaning (essay).

No	Aspek	Tafsir klasik
1	Sumber Penafsiran	Tafsir <i>bi al-ma'tsur</i> dan tafsir <i>bi al-ra'yi</i>
2	Metode Penafsiran	<i>Tahlili</i> (deduktif) dengan mencocokkan teori-teori dari disiplin keilmuan atau mazhab masing-masing mufassir
3	Pendekatan dan Corak	Menggunakan pendekatan dan corak yang beragam, meliputi bahasa, fikih, filsafat, maupun teologi.

## 2. Characteristics of Modern Interpretation

The term "modern" in the study of interpretation differs from that in other disciplines. In interpretation, the term "modern" is related to the periodic development of Islamic thought, while in other studies, such as the "ulum al-Hadith," the term "modern" is more focused on the methodology of its formulation. Therefore, the emergence of modern thought in interpretation will refer to the work of Muhammad Abduh and Rasyid Rida in "Tafsir Al-Manar" as its gateway. The movement of Muhammad Abduh and the entire generation of supporters of his school of thought in interpretation, as the voice of the modern movement in Qur'anic interpretation, has taken the correct path. They drew on contemporary cultural examples but did not abandon the old principles. To resolve the dilemma arising from the contradiction between old and new opinions, the door of *ijtihad* is urgently needed. This is where Muhammad Abduh and his school of interpretation have perfectly addressed this issue.

The many issues of ijtihad that arise within Islamic circles and among commentators have been greatly influenced by this thinking.

As social reform reached its peak, modern commentators were also preoccupied with various issues that took up considerable time. They aimed to understand the reality of the Qur'anic texts relating to these issues. Among these issues was the issue of women and related issues, such as polygamy. He interpreted verse 3 of Surah An-Nisa':

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنَىٰ وَثُلَّةَ وَرُبْعَ ۚ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعُولُوا

*And if you are afraid that you will not be able to do justice to (the rights of) orphaned women (if you marry them), then marry (other) women that you like: two, three or four. Then if you are afraid that you will not be able to do justice, then (marry) just one person, or the slaves you own. That is closer to not committing wrongdoing.*

According to Muhammad Abduh and Rasyid Rida, the permissibility of polygamy in Islam is not a fundamental law but rather an alternative solution in limited emergency situations. This permissibility must also be accompanied by the condition of being able to act justly and ensuring non-violence. Rasyid Rida, in al-Manar, emphasized that polygamy during the Prophet's time was often related to social conditions, such as protecting widows whose husbands were martyred in war. In modern times, if polygamy causes injustice, psychological disorders, social disintegration, and family decline, the state has the right to limit or regulate polygamy for the public good (maslahah 'ammah).

Furthermore, a phenomenon that illustrates the modern revival in the world of exegesis is the emergence of efforts to combine the Qur'an with sound scientific theories. One example is Thanthawi Jauhari's Tafsir Al-Jauhari, which interprets the creation of man in verse 12 of Surah Al-Mu'minun:

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِّن طِينٍ

*And indeed, We created man from a quintessence (derived) from clay.*

Thanthawi begins by interpreting the meaning of "man" in the verse. His interpretation shares similarities with other commentators who interpret al-insan in the verse to refer to Adam. He then interprets the quintessence of clay as a pure essence among the impure. This pure essence is the basis for Adam's creation. For Thanthawi, the science that developed in

this regard is the elements of plants and grains that humans eat, which then form semen, or these elements that form it.

### C. Differences Regarding Classical and Modern Interpretations

The classical interpretation generally emerged in the context of early to medieval Islamic scholarship, when the authority of religious knowledge relied heavily on the narrations and opinions of the Companions and Tabi'in. Its main characteristic is an interpretation that relies on the Qur'an with the Qur'an, the Qur'an with the hadith, and the explanations of early scholars. This method is often seen in tafsir bil ma'tsur.

In contrast, modern exegesis emerged during the Islamic intellectual revival of the 19th and 20th centuries, when Muslims faced colonialism, modernization, and the emergence of new sciences. Modern exegetes broadened the horizons of interpretation by linking Quranic verses to social realities, public education, science, and societal problems. Their focus was not only on understanding the text but also on bringing Quranic values to life in social life. The following table compares classical and modern interpretations:

Aspek Pembeda	Tafsir Klasik	Tafsir Modern
Konteks Perkembangan	Berkembang pada periode awal Islam hingga abad pertengahan (2–9 H).	Berkembang sejak abad ke-19/20 hingga sekarang.
Tujuan Tafsir	Menjelaskan makna literal ayat sesuai riwayat..	Merelevansikan pesan Al-Qur'an dengan realitas sosial, budaya, dan ilmu pengetahuan modern.
Metode Utama	<i>tafsir bi al-Ma'tsur</i> (riwayat) dan <i>Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi</i> ( <i>ijtihad</i> ).	Kontekstual, <i>Maqashidi</i> , dan Tematik ( <i>Maudhu'i</i> ).
Orientasi Penafsiran	Tekstual naratif, berfokus pada sanad, bahasa, dan tafsir sahabat.	Nilai sosial humanis, bertujuan menjawab problem masyarakat kontemporer.
Corak yang Muncul	Lughawi (bahasa), Fiqhi (hukum), Teologis, Sufi/Isyari	<i>Adabi Ijtima'i</i> (sosial-etis) <i>'Ilmi</i> (scientific)
Sumber penasiran	Al-Qur'an, Hadis, pendapat sahabat dan <i>tabi'in</i> sebagai otoritas utama.	Al-Qur'an dikaitkan dengan realitas sosial, teori ilmiah, sejarah, dan analisis akademik.
Gaya Bahasa Tafsir	Formal, klasik, banyak mengutip sanad dan riwayat.	lebih komunikatif, deskriptif, dan mudah dipahami oleh pembaca modern.
Tokoh Representatif	At-Thabari, Ibn Katsir, Al-Qurtubi, Fakhr al-Din al-	Muhammad Abduh, Rasyid Ridha, Thantawi Jauhari.



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## V. CONCLUSION

Studies of classical and modern interpretations show that Qur'anic interpretation developed in line with the social and intellectual dynamics of the Muslim community. Classical interpretations generally focused on the narrations and authority of early scholars, employing the tahlili method, which explains verses sequentially and in-depth based on the chain of transmission, language, and the opinions of the Companions and Tabi'in. Interpretations during this period were heavily influenced by then-developing disciplines, such as linguistics, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and Sufism.

Meanwhile, modern interpretations emerged in response to the challenges of the times, such as colonialism, modernization, and scientific advancements. Modern commentators sought to connect the message of the Qur'an to social realities and the needs of contemporary humanity. Their approach was contextual and thematic, emphasizing universal Qur'anic values, such as justice, humanity, and the common good.

Figures such as Muhammad Abduh and Rasyid Ridha pioneered this movement, encouraging the opening of the door to ijtihad and creative reading of the revealed text. Thus, even though they have fundamental differences, both classical and modern interpretations remain efforts by Muslims to understand the Qur'an itself.

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