Medieval Interpretations of the Qur'an: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The medieval period in Islamic intellectual history represents a pivotal phase in the development of Qur'anic exegesis. Mufassirs, influenced by diverse scholarly backgrounds and ideological stances, introduced interpretations that reflected the intellectual and socio-cultural dynamics of their time. This study examines the various interpretive styles of the period, including linguistic, jurisprudential, philosophical, theological, mystical, and scientific approaches. These interpretations reveal that tafsir was not merely a theological discipline but also a response to political, social, and cultural realities. Key characteristics of this era's tafsir include the imposition of personal ideas, ideological biases, repetition, and partiality, which challenge more holistic and comprehensive exegetical methods. Through this analysis, readers are invited to reconsider the role of mufassirs and their contributions to contemporary tafsir development

Keywords: *Medieval Period, Tafsir, Mufassir, Interpretive Styles, Qur'an*

Introduction

The historical development of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) in the medieval era cannot be separated from the political, social, and intellectual dynamics that characterized the Islamic world at that time. As the territory of Islamic rule expanded, not only did military and economic power grow, but also the thoughts and interpretations of the Holy Qur'an. Tafsir, which was initially bound to the Arabic language and context, began to be influenced by various schools of thought, sects, and different cultures. This was triggered by the influx of various non-Arab tribes into Islam, with diverse languages and dialects to convey the Qur'anic messages (Samsurrohman & Nusroh, 2014).

During the medieval era, tafsir developed into a more systematic discipline. The 3rd to the 16th century AH (1250-1800 CE) witnessed the birth of monumental tafsir works. In the history of Islamic thought, this period is often referred to as the "Golden Age," where Muslim intellectuals from various fields of knowledge, such as philosophy, kalam (Islamic theology), and hadith, gathered in discussion forums to test and debate their ideas. The meeting of various thinkers created a dynamic academic climate that ultimately enriched the treasury of tafsir. However, disagreements arising from differences in thought often led to conflict, even violence, as seen in the debates between the mutakallimun (theologians) and hadith scholars (Goldziher, 2006).

One of the important milestones in the history of tafsir is the compilation of the work by Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310 AH) titled Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an, which became a primary reference in Qur'anic exegesis. This work not only presented tafsir based on riwayat (narrations), but also introduced a more structured analytical method, paving the way for the development of tafsir in the medieval era. During this time, tafsir no longer

merged with hadith but began to stand alone as a scientific discipline with clear methodologies (Raden, 2011).

The richness of tafsir in the medieval era was not only reflected in the variety of methods and approaches but also in the nuances (alwan) developed. The mufassirun (Qur'anic commentators) interpreted the Qur'an from theological, social, linguistic, and even psychological perspectives. This shows that tafsir was not only influenced by the development of Islamic thought itself but also by the socio-political conditions surrounding the Muslim communities in their various dominions (Gusmian, 2013).

Previous studies have also discussed the development of tafsir in this era. For instance, Ihsan Imadudin and Aini Qurotul Ain investigated the categorization of tafsir and its problems in contemporary studies, where they showed that the style of tafsir is always influenced by the times and the intellectual capacity of the mufassirun (Imadudin & Ain, 2022). Elmia Zarchen Zaq and Khoirul Umami compared two medieval tafsir works with a linguistic approach, namely Anwar at-Tanzil and al-Bahr al-Muhit, which emphasized fiqhi (jurisprudential) and scientific tafsir (Zarchen & Umami, 2022). Kusroni's research highlighted various approaches and styles in tafsir, including sufistic, philosophical, and social styles (Kusroni, 2019).

From these various developments, a fundamental question arises: What actually drives the changes in the style of Qur'anic exegesis in the medieval era? How do socio-political contexts influence the methods and styles of tafsir produced? To what extent are the tafsir works of that era still relevant to current scientific and social contexts? These questions not only challenge us to re-understand the history of tafsir development but also to reflect on how tafsir continues to evolve over time and what its implications are for our understanding of the sacred Qur'anic text.

This research seeks to delve deeper into the development of tafsir in the medieval era, particularly by questioning what were the main drivers for the emergence of various tafsir styles at that time. In a dynamic intellectual climate, how did the differences in schools of thought and sects influence the interpretation of the Qur'an? Was the development of tafsir more influenced by political and social dynamics or by the intellectual needs of the mufassirun themselves? Then, do the medieval tafsir works have the scientific resilience that is relevant to the modern world, or are they merely products of their time?

Undeniably, the tafsir in the medieval era was significantly influenced by the socio-political context of that time. With the widespread Islamic rule and the meeting of various cultures, the question arises: How did the process of dialogue and conflict between sects and between Islam and other religions influence the tafsir products that were produced? How were these interpretations influenced by the development of philosophy, kalam, and other sciences?

In the current scientific context, why is it so important to study and examine medieval tafsir? Are these tafsir works only useful as historical heritage, or can they still provide significant contributions to Qur'anic studies today? These questions become important to discuss because a deep understanding of the history of tafsir can open our insights into the complexity of understanding the Qur'an and how the Islamic intellectual tradition continues to interact with the changes of time.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach to examine and analyze. This research seeks to delve deeper into the development of tafsir in the medieval era, particularly by questioning what were the main drivers for the emergence of various tafsir styles at that time. In a dynamic intellectual climate, how did the differences in schools of thought and sects influence the interpretation of the Qur'an? Was the development of tafsir more influenced by political and social dynamics or by the intellectual needs of the mufassirun themselves? Then, do the medieval tafsir works have the scientific resilience that is relevant to the modern world, or are they merely products of their time

Result and Discussion

1.   Definition of Medieval Tafsir

Tafsir in the medieval era is a reflection of the intellectual and spiritual complexity that developed with the expansion of Islamic rule and interaction with various cultures. The term tafsir itself, etymologically, comes from the Arabic word "fassar" which means to explain, open, or uncover. In this context, tafsir functions to open and explain the meanings of the Qur'anic verses hidden behind the sacred text. As explained by al-Zarkashi, tafsir is an effort to understand the verses of the Qur'an, explain their meanings, and examine the laws and moral lessons contained within, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (al-Zarkashi, 1988).

However, in the medieval era, tafsir was no longer just about explaining the Qur'anic verses. It became a space where intellectual dynamics and different patterns of thought developed rapidly. Each mufasir (commentator) had a unique approach, determined by different intellectual, social, political backgrounds, and scientific tendencies. These factors produced a diversity of tafsir that enriched the Islamic scholarly tradition, while also sparking intense intellectual debates.

In Arabic, the term for the pattern or nuance of tafsir comes from the word alwan, the plural form of launun, which means color. Philosophically, "color" here is not just a visual aspect, but a deep distinction between one interpretation and another. As said by Ibn Manzur, "the color of everything is the distinction between one thing and another" (Manzur, 2002). This interpretation suggests that tafsir in the medieval era reflects various colors or patterns resulting from the different contexts, intellectual backgrounds, and tendencies of the mufasirun. In their tafsir process, they not only revealed the literal meaning of the Qur'an but also offered various layers of interpretation that reflected the complexity of their social-political and intellectual conditions.

The position of tafsir at this time was so important because it functioned as a determinant of meaning in understanding the messages of the Qur'an, especially amid the diversity of interpretations that emerged due to the expansion of Islamic territories. Tafsir was not only a tool to understand the sacred text but also a medium to interpret divine messages in an increasingly complex world. Therefore, the need to understand the Qur'an through tafsir has never been more urgent than in this era, where literal understanding of the Qur'anic verses was no longer adequate without further elaboration provided by the mufasirun (Rahman, 2016).

The medieval era showed the emergence of various kinds of tafsir patterns that resulted from the dialogue between Islamic scholarly traditions and global intellectual developments at that time. The mufasirun had different expertise and tendencies, creating various patterns of interpretation that were adjusted to their backgrounds. As explained by Abdul Syukur, the pattern of tafsir is the intellectual expression of different mufasir in interpreting the verses of the Qur'an, influenced by ideological tendencies, social environments, and historical conditions (Syukur, 2015). Thus, tafsir at this time was not only a tool to understand the text but also a reflection of the intellectual and spiritual dynamics of the mufasirun.

These different patterns of tafsir can be seen from the various perspectives used by the mufasirun, whether it be theological, Sufistic, philosophical, or even linguistic patterns. For example, there were mufasirun who tended to emphasize linguistic aspects, as seen in the lughawi pattern of tafsir, where interpretation focused more on the structure and grammar of the Qur'an. On the other hand, there were mufasirun who leaned more towards theological aspects, trying to interpret the Qur'an within a strict religious dogma framework (Kusroni, 2019). This shows that interpretation was never static but always dynamic, adapting to the developing intellectual and social contexts.

However, in this interpretation process, debates often occurred among scholars. These debates not only concerned methodological issues but also touched on fundamental theological and philosophical aspects. As happened in the discussion forums of scholars in the medieval era, these differences of opinion often ended in intellectual conflicts and even physical violence (Goldziher, 2006). This situation reflects that tafsir at that time was not only an intellectual product but also a tool in ideological and political struggles.

In this context, our understanding of tafsir in the medieval era cannot be separated from the historical and socio-political framework surrounding it. Tafsir not only functioned as a tool to understand the Qur'an literally but also as a medium of intellectual and spiritual expression that reflected the interaction between the sacred text and historical realities. Tafsir, as defined by Adz-Dzahabi, is a way to uncover the hidden meanings in the Qur'an (Adz-Dzahabi, 1976), but at the same time, it also becomes a mirror of the ever-changing world around the mufasirun.

In conclusion, medieval tafsir not only showed the diversity of methodologies but also reflected the intellectual struggles between tradition, innovation, and dynamic social realities. Tafsir was not just a tool to understand the text of the Qur'an but an intellectual legacy rich in nuances and complex historical contexts.

2. Varieties of Interpretations in the Medieval Era

In the medieval era, Qur'anic exegesis developed into various patterns representing diverse intellectual and spiritual approaches. This diversity was influenced by different historical, social, and scholarly contexts among the mufassirun (commentators). Each pattern of interpretation reflects the orientation and expertise of the individual mufassir in interpreting the Qur'anic verses. The six main patterns of interpretation that developed during this period include: linguistic exegesis (tafsir lughawi), jurisprudential exegesis (tafsir fiqhi), philosophical exegesis (tafsir falsafi), doctrinal exegesis (tafsir i'tiqadi), Sufistic exegesis (tafsir sufistik), and scientific exegesis (tafsir 'ilmi).

1) Linguistic Exegesis (Tafsir Lughawi)

Linguistic exegesis emphasizes the linguistic aspects in interpreting the Qur'an. This interpretation uses the approach of Arabic language sciences, including grammar (nahwu), morphology (sharaf), rhetoric (bayan), and eloquence (balaghah). Mufasir (commentators) who use this approach focus on the literal meaning of the words in the Qur'an and how the structure of the language is used to uncover deeper meanings. They pay attention to strange or difficult words (gharib), metaphors (majaz), and changes in word forms that occur in Arabic. With this approach, mufasir try to reveal the beauty and precision of the Qur'anic language, which is considered one of its miracles (Salim, 2018; Mustaqim, 2016).

2) Jurisprudential Exegesis (Tafsir Fiqhi)

Jurisprudential exegesis focuses on the legal aspects contained in the Qur'an. This interpretation aims to find solutions to various legal issues faced by Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Jurisprudential exegesis is important because, in the medieval era, various schools of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) grew and developed. Mufasir who use this pattern analyze Qur'anic verses to interpret laws related to worship, transactions, and other social lives, with the main source being the legal verses found in the Qur'an (Syukur, 2015).

3) Philosophical Exegesis (Tafsir Falsafi)

Philosophical exegesis attempts to reconcile the teachings of the Qur'an with philosophical theories. Mufasir with this approach interpret Qur'anic verses by referring to philosophical concepts that were developing at the time, such as Greek and Persian philosophy. Philosophical interpretation often focuses on ambiguous or allegorical verses (mutasyabihat), which can be interpreted more deeply using reason and philosophical theories. This pattern also emphasizes ontological aspects, discussing the attributes of Allah and the nature of existence with a rational approach (Adz-Dzahabi, 1976; Shihab, 2008). However, this approach sometimes garners controversy, especially from more conservative circles who consider it too speculative and deviating from traditional methods.

4) Theological Exegesis (Tafsir I'tiqadi)

Theological exegesis focuses on issues of faith or creed. This pattern is used by mufasir to clarify issues of belief such as tawhid (the oneness of Allah), the uniqueness of Allah, and other theological concepts. Theological exegesis is heavily influenced by theological debates among various Islamic sects, such as the Mu'tazilah and Ash'arites. In this tafsir, reason often plays a significant role, although it is sometimes overused, leading to deviations from the Qur'anic text. Therefore, al-Dhahabi emphasizes that theological exegesis requires caution because over-reliance on reason can obscure the original meaning of the Qur'an (Al-Khawarizmi, 2009).

5) Sufistic Exegesis (Tafsir Sufistik)

Sufistic exegesis is divided into two parts: sufi nadzari and sufi ishari. Sufi nadzari exegesis uses Sufi theories based on Sufi philosophy to interpret Qur'anic verses. This interpretation focuses on the inner and spiritual aspects, which are often overlooked by non-Sufi mufasir. This pattern emphasizes the importance of asceticism, the afterlife, and purification of the heart as paths to understanding the hidden meanings within the Qur'anic verses (Al-Qatan, 2000). Isyari exegesis, on the other hand, emphasizes symbolic meanings or indications that can only be grasped by those who have reached a high level of spirituality through spiritual exercises (riyadhah). Sufistic exegesis tends to ignore the literal aspects of the text and focuses more on the hidden inner meanings behind the Qur'anic words (Madid, 2018).

6) Scientific Exegesis (Tafsir 'Ilmi)

Scientific exegesis tries to show the scientific miracles in the Qur'an. This pattern developed alongside the advancement of science in the Islamic world during the medieval era. Mufasir who use this approach attempt to link cosmological verses (verses about the universe) with scientific discoveries. This approach sees the Qur'an as a book containing scientific hints that can be explained through modern science. The main goal of this pattern of exegesis is to show that the Qur'an has miracles that apply not only in the spiritual aspect but also in the field of science (Mustaqim, 2017). Overall, these six patterns of tafsir reflect the complexity of Islamic thought and intellectualism in the medieval era. Each pattern has a unique approach and is influenced by the social, political, and intellectual context of its time. Tafsir not only serves as a tool to understand the Qur'an but also as a mirror of the rapidly evolving scholarly dynamics in the Islamic world. This diversity shows how the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis continues to develop and adapt to changing times while maintaining the essence of the sacred text itself.

3. Medieval Exegetes *(Mufassirun)*

In the medieval era, many prominent scholars became key figures in various patterns of Qur'anic exegesis. Six notable figures from this period are recognized for their expertise in specific interpretive patterns:

Al-Zamakhshari was a renowned mufasir in the linguistic pattern. In his famous work, Al-Kashshaf, he explained Qur'anic verses with an in-depth linguistic approach. One of his notable interpretations is on QS. Ali Imran, verse 199. Al-Zamakhshari emphasized that the salvation of the People of the Book, as promised by Allah, lies in their faith in Allah, the Qur'an, the previous scriptures, and their submission to Allah's commands. He also pointed out that the People of the Book mentioned in this verse are those who had embraced Islam, such as 40 people from Najran, 33 from Abyssinia, and 8 from Rome (Al-Khawarizmi, 2009).

Al-Qurtubi was an important figure in the jurisprudential pattern. In his tafsir work, Tafsir Jami Li Ahkam Al-Qur'an, he discussed various Islamic legal issues. One of his interpretations is on QS. An-Nahl, verse 67, where he examined dates and grapes that could be eaten or made into drinks. Al-Qurtubi explained that the word "sakara" in this verse refers to "closing the mind," that is, the state of intoxication due to alcoholic beverages.

Although the verse does not explicitly declare alcohol forbidden, there is a strong indication of the dangers of intoxicating drinks and their negative impact on the human mind (Al-Qurtubi & al-Ansari, 2006).

Al-Farabi is known for his philosophical pattern. His tafsir work, Fushus al-Hikam, interpreted Qur'anic verses through a philosophical approach. In QS. Al-Hadid, verse 3, he linked his interpretation to Aristotle's theory, where Allah is described as the First and the Last, the creator of everything without a beginning, and the creator of the entire universe. Al-Farabi viewed Allah as an uncreated entity, and Allah is the one who regulates the cycles of time according to His will (Putra, 2017).

Al-Qadhi Abdul Jabbar was a prominent mufasir in the theological pattern. His tafsir work, Tafasir al-Mu'tazilah, reflects his theological views. In QS. Al-Anfal, verse 178, he stated that humans have the ability to create guidance (hidayah) and misguidance. However, this view was rejected by other scholars such as Al-Dhahabi, who asserted that Allah is the creator of everything, including guidance and misguidance (Nursidik & Maulana, 2021).

Abdul Karim al-Qushayri was a mufasir in the Sufistic pattern. In Lathaiful Isyarat, one of his interpretations is on QS. Al-Anfal, verse 41, where he elaborated on the concept of ghanimah (war spoils). He distinguished between the lesser jihad (zahiri), which focuses on physical warfare, and the greater jihad (batini), which is the struggle against one's own desires. According to him, the greater jihad brings greater spiritual benefits as it can subdue the temptations of Satan and personal desires (Mustaqim, 2014).

Imam Al-Razi was a famous mufasir in the scientific pattern. In his tafsir, Mafatih al-Ghaib, he applied rational and scientific methods in interpretation. One example is his interpretation of QS. At-Taubah, verse 17, where he emphasized the importance of asbabun nuzul (the causes of revelation) in understanding the context of the verse. Additionally, in QS. Ali Imran, verse 59, he interpreted "ruh" as a symbol of purity and honor, different from the Christian interpretation, which considers it a representation of the life of Jesus (Ar-Râzî, 1981).

4. Characteristics of Medieval Tafsir

In the medieval era, Qur'anic exegesis developed with various patterns and characteristics that reflected the intellectual dynamics of the time. There are six main characteristics that marked the patterns of tafsir in this century, providing a unique color in the interpretation of the Qur'an (Jannah & Azami, 2022):

1) Imposition of Personal Ideas on the Qur'an

During this period, tafsir was often influenced by personal or group interests. This led to interpretations that did not align with the actual context of the verses. For example, QS. An-Nisa: 80 about ghanimah and QS. Yusuf: 26 related to the personal experiences of Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) AS. In some cases, these verses were interpreted to support certain ideas or interests without being based on the relevant context.

2) Certain Ideological Orientation

Tafsir in this era was also often ideological, where the views of a particular sect, sect, or religious understanding influenced the interpretation of verses. For example, Fakhruddin ar-Razi in his tafsir Mafatih al-Ghaib interpreted QS. Al-Fatihah verse 6-7 with an approach that touches on the right of leadership of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, showing a certain ideological bias in this interpretation.

3) Repetitive Nature The pattern of tafsir

in this period often used the mushafi system, which is the interpretation that follows the order of the mushaf, surah, and verses. This style is clearly visible in the tahlili tafsir method, which was very popular. However, this characteristic sometimes resulted in repetitive explanations that were considered excessive, as seen in Fakhruddin ar-Razi's Mafatih al-Ghaib tafsir, where discussions on the Jabariyah and Qadariyah sects were often repeated, making it seem lengthy and tedious (Mustaqim, 2014).

4) Partial Nature

Tafsir in the medieval era tended to be partial, where scholars did not always elaborate on the tafsir completely and comprehensively. Interpretation often focused only on certain verses or themes, leading to a lack of a complete understanding of the overall context of the verses. This caused readers to miss out on important information that should have been obtained from a more thorough tafsir.

5) Separated from Hadith In this period

many tafsir books relied purely on the interpretation of Qur'anic verses without linking them to hadiths. This marked a tendency of tafsir being separated from the use of the Prophet's hadiths, which in turn could affect the accuracy and depth of interpretation. Yet, hadiths often provide important context in understanding the meaning of a verse more comprehensively.

6) Selection of Tafsir Based on School of Thought One of the main goals

in studying tafsir in the medieval era was to facilitate readers in choosing the tafsir that aligned with their school of thought. Each mufasir tended to write tafsir based on a specific school of thought they followed, providing variations in interpretative approaches. These differences allowed readers to broaden their insights by comparing various patterns of interpretation, ultimately enriching their understanding of the Qur'an. By understanding the characteristics of tafsir in the medieval era, one can be more critical in selecting tafsir that aligns with their needs and school of thought. The tafsir of this era showcases diversity in methods and purposes of interpretation, offering a broader perspective for contemporary Qur'anic studies.

Conclusion

The Qur'an has a multi-interpretable nature, meaning it is open and easy to interpret, allowing for the emergence of various interpretive patterns over time. During the medieval period, which lasted from the 3rd to the 16th century AH (approximately 1250-1800 CE), different interpretive patterns developed along with the socio-cultural backgrounds, scientific disciplines, and political situations that influenced the mufassirun (commentators). The interpretive patterns that emerged during this period include linguistic exegesis (lughawi), jurisprudential exegesis (fiqhi), philosophical exegesis (falsafi), theological exegesis (i'tiqadi), Sufistic exegesis (tasawwuf), and scientific exegesis (ilmi). The key figures representing each of these patterns include al-Zamakhshari (linguistic), al-Qurthubi (jurisprudential), al-Farabi (philosophical), al-Qadhi Abdul Jabbar (theological), al-Qusyairi (Sufistic), and al-Razi (scientific). Each mufassir made valuable contributions, but the characteristics of tafsir in this era also displayed several prominent traits, such as the imposition of personal ideas on the Qur'an, ideological interpretation, repetitive nature, partial approach, and often being separated from the use of hadith.

Although the tafsir of the medieval era has distinctiveness and provides broad insights, some shortcomings such as less comprehensive approaches and a tendency towards repetition have been noted by modern researchers. Therefore, further research is needed to refine and enhance the analysis of tafsir from this period, so that the understanding of the Qur'an can become deeper and more accurate.

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