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Amer Ali

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## A BRIEF REVIEW OF CLASSICAL AND MODERN *TAFSIR* TRENDS AND THE ROLE OF MODERN *TAFASIR* IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Amer Ali\*

**Abstract:** This article briefly reviews traditional and modern *tafsir* (interpretation) trends and how modern *tafasir* have shaped contemporary Islamic thought. Classical *tafsir* trends, *tafsir bi al-ma'thur* (tradition-based interpretation) and *tafsir bi al-ra'y* (reason-based interpretation) are well-documented in historical norms of Qur'ānic exegesis. However, modernity, with its complex socioeconomic, religious, political and cultural developments, presents unique challenges to *muffassirun* (authors of Qur'ānic interpretations) to contextualise the Qur'ānic message and provide guidance to modern-day Muslims and their worldview. Complex modern Islamic thought is a selection of ideologies and philosophies that resulted from the prevailing diverse geopolitical, sociocultural and economic environment. These dynamic elements of modernity have conceptualised *tafsir* trends into the textualist, contextualist, modernist, socio-political, scientific, thematic and feminist approaches. These trends have not only transformed contemporary Islamic thought, and vice versa, but also continue to collectively evolve to meet the challenges of modernity.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary Islamic thought, modern trends in Qur'anic exegesis, classical tafsir trends, modernity, Qur'ān*

The Qur'ān, the literal word of Allah (swt), presents a timeless spiritual inspiration to Muslim scholarship to educe and contextualise its message for every Muslim, if not every human, throughout Islamic history. Not long after the death of the Prophet (pbuh), Islamic scholarship focused on the preservation of Qur'ānic spiritual teachings, its wisdom and its *corpus juris*. A particular focus was to understand and contextualise the teachings of the Qur'ān to draw wisdom in resolving various daily challenges of the time. As the Muslim empire reached a monumental geographical and social scale, it presented its own social and cultural challenges and linguistic diversities. The Arabic language was not the only widely spoken language of the time. These distinctive civilities pursued a circumstantial understanding of the Qur'ānic message. Furthermore, the expansion of Muslim lands and various governance arrangements with non-Muslim territories encouraged opportunities for Muslims to travel and trade, resulting in the resettlement of many Muslims to foreign lands and cultures. A dire need

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\* Amer Ali is a student of the Master of Islamic Studies at Charles Sturt University. This article was originally written as fulfilment of assessment criterion for the subject Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis (*usul al-tafsir*).

for meticulous understanding of the Qur'ān surfaced for guiding the lives of these Muslims living in non-Muslim territories. *Muffassirun* (authors of the Qur'ānic interpretations) diligently engaged themselves to effectively present the Qur'ānic narrative through prophetic and traditional narrations to these dynamic societal norms. That resulted in *tafasir bi al-ma'thur* (tradition-based interpretations). Moreover, scientific, technological, industrial and socio-cultural advancements opened new doors to *tafsir* of the Qur'ān. Reasoning played a central role in interpreting certain *tafasir* (plural of *tafsir*) to respond to these astute civilisations. Consequently, reason-based *tafasir* (*tafasir bi al-ra'y*) became populous. However, in the present time, all these factors have merged to produce a complex sociocultural framework.

Information technology, scientific advancements, specialised fields of knowledge and aviation developments have turned the world into a globalised village. This intricate environment has reshaped the methodology of human understanding and Islamic thought. Century old traditions and rationality alone may not be sufficient to respond to the challenges encountered by modernity. A meaningful Muslim life, once again, requires contextualised understanding of the Qur'ānic message to approach the challenges of this dynamically evolving epoch. On one hand, modern Islamic thought is influencing the manner in which Qur'ānic interpretations are evolving; simultaneously, various modernistic reason and tradition-based Qur'ānic *tafasir* are profoundly transforming the views and philosophies of present-day Muslims. This article, after discussing early *tafasir* norms, will provide historical background and an understanding of *tafsir* and its impact, followed by modern trends in *tafsir*. The discussion will continue through exploring the concept of Islamic thought and observations will be made regarding the impact of modern *tafsir* on contemporary Islamic thought.

## EARLY TAFASIR AND THEIR HISTORICAL ELEMENTS

Though the Qur'ān was revealed in the native language of an Arab audience, its remedial challenge to atrocious social norms forced its primary audience to seek an exegetic comprehension of its directives. Unfortunately, soon after the death of the Prophet (pbuh) and expansion of the Muslim empire, a diverse religious, theological and political ambience evolved. Further, the continued development of the Arabic language compelled scholarship, Muslim or otherwise, to contextualise the words and expressions of the Qur'ān<sup>1</sup> through every era of Muslim history. To contextualise the Qur'ān, an understanding of its structural elements is essential. Notably, the Qur'ān primarily contains two types of *ayat* (verses): *muhkamat* and *mutashabihat*.<sup>2</sup>

*Muhkam* (singular form of *muhkamat*) *ayat* are clear in meaning and require no interpretation or further explanation. *Mutashabihat*, on the other hand, require interpretation as they carry two meanings: resembling (referring to similarity to objects, events or phenomenon

<sup>1</sup> Recep Dogan, *Usul Al-Tafsir: The Sciences and Methodology of Qur'ān* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2014), 121.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān* (Nigeria: The Islamic Foundation, 2011), 58-60, 63.