



Qur'anic Tafsir Studies in Malaysia: Realities and Challenges in the Context

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Abstract: Qur'anic interpretation (tafsir) in Malaysia faces various challenges, especially the methodological differences between literal and contextual approaches, as well as the problem of limited mastery of Arabic. This study aims to analyze the development of Qur'anic tafsir in Malaysia and the challenges that arise in its interpretation. The method used is a literature study that examines tafsir works, scholarly articles, as well as the contributions of international scholars and local Islamic institutions. The findings show that Qur'anic exegesis in Malaysia has developed rapidly since the 20th century, influenced by reformist thought such as Sheikh Muhammad Abduh and the contributions of educational institutions such as JAKIM. Nonetheless, deep differences in tafsir methodology still cause tensions among Muslims. In addition, a lack of understanding of Arabic and other tafsir sciences exacerbates inaccurate interpretations. This study proposes solutions such as the establishment of a valid reference center for tafsir, improving Arabic language education, and increasing the role of scholars and society in disseminating relevant and moderate tafsir. With the cooperation between the government, scholars and the community, authentic Qur'anic interpretation can be further developed and provide proper guidance for Muslims in Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of Qur'anic interpretation, or tafsir, has been integral to a deep understanding of Islam. In Malaysia, it has a long and rich tradition, but amidst intellectual and social advancements, the discipline faces significant challenges (Ibrahim, 2022). Qur'anic interpretation is a very important discipline in Islamic studies, given the importance of the Qur'anic text as a guide for Muslims. Along with the times, Qur'anic tafsir not only serves as a literal explanation, but also as a guide in answering contemporary problems faced by Muslims in the modern world (Sirry, 2019). In this case, tafsir is not only an explanation of textual meaning, but also as a tool to interpret the Qur'anic text in a context that is relevant to the present era (Manuty, 2011).

In Malaysia, although many efforts have been made to preserve and develop tafsir, there are several challenges that have not been fully overcome (Bakar et al., 2019). One of the main challenges is the different methodologies in interpreting Qur'anic texts, which often creates conflicting understandings among Muslims. In addition, there is also a lack of basic knowledge in Arabic and other exegetical sciences, which plays a major role in interpretive inaccuracies (Junaidi et al., 2023). This indicates an urgent need to update the approaches and methodologies in Qur'anic tafsir to make it more relevant to Malaysia's evolving social and cultural context (Nasir et al., 2023).

Since its introduction in the 17th century, Qur'anic tafsir has been an important part of Islamic studies in Malaysia. In the 20th century, the discussion on tafsir began to develop more rapidly with the significant influence of great figures such as Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, a reformist

thinker from Egypt who emphasized the importance of rationalism in the interpretation of religious texts (Hasan, 2012). This had a major influence on the development of tafsir studies in Malaysia, which at that time focused more on the traditional understanding of the text without considering the existing social and political context (Baidan & Aziz, 2019).

In the tradition of tafsir studies in Malaysia, many scholars have attempted to create tafsir in the Malay language that is more easily understood by the public (Nasir et al., 2023). One notable work is *Tafsir al-Bayan* published in 2023 by the Department of Islamic Affairs, which seeks to bridge the gap between classical understanding and contemporary interpretive needs (JAKIM, 2023). Nonetheless, much work still needs to be done to ensure that the tafsir that develops in Malaysia is widely accessible to the public and accepted by all.

The main challenge faced in the study of Qur'anic exegesis in Malaysia is the different methodologies used by the mufasssirs (al-Qudsy, 2018). Some favor a literalistic approach, while others use a more contextual and rational approach. The literal approach often focuses on the text literally without considering the changing social or cultural situation. In contrast, contextual approaches emphasize an understanding of the historical and social background relevant to the text, leaving room for more flexible interpretations. These differences often cause tensions in the understanding of Islamic teachings, and even divisions among Muslims.

In addition, limited mastery of Arabic and other exegetical sciences exacerbates this problem. Arabic as the original language of the Qur'an requires a deep understanding to ensure proper interpretation (al-Qudsy, 2018). Many commentaries produced pay little attention to the linguistic and grammatical dimensions of the Arabic language which are the main foundation in understanding the Qur'an. Therefore, efforts to improve the quality of tafsir education, including more in-depth Arabic language teaching, are crucial to ensure valid and correct interpretation (Danesghar et al., 2016).

Inaccurate Qur'anic interpretations can also be caused by ignorance of the socio-political context in which society operates. In a changing world, such as Malaysia which is facing social and political challenges, tafsir must be able to answer contemporary issues such as terrorism, radicalization, gender equality, and minority rights. Therefore, tafsir must not only be relevant to the past, but must also be able to provide solutions to the challenges of the present (Syed, 2010).

Previous research has extensively discussed the history of tafsir in Malaysia, as well as the contributions of scholars from abroad such as Sheikh Muhammad Abduh who brought reform in tafsir through rational and contextual approaches (Syed, 2010). However, despite these great contributions, there is still a gap in tafsir studies that connect traditional theological understandings with contemporary social issues in Malaysia. Previous research such as that conducted by Sulaiman (2018) highlights the importance of renewing tafsir with a more contextual approach, but has not much addressed the specific challenges faced by Malaysia in integrating this tafsir tradition with modern issues.

Existing research has not addressed the specific challenges faced by Malaysia in terms of Qur'anic interpretation in an evolving social, political and cultural context. There is no in-depth research on how Malaysian mufasssirs can overcome methodological differences that lead to conflicting understandings, and how basic knowledge of Arabic and tafsir can be improved among the general public.

This research aims to fill the gap by introducing a more comprehensive and contextualized approach to the study of Qur'anic exegesis in Malaysia. The research will not only review text-based Qur'anic interpretation, but also involve an analysis of how tafsir can serve as a solution to contemporary social challenges, such as radicalization and exclusive understanding of religious teachings. In addition, the research will also explore the role of educational and governmental institutions in supporting tafsir education that is more inclusive and in line with the needs of Malaysian society today.

METHODS

This research methodology will adopt a qualitative approach with literature study analysis to examine the development of Qur'anic exegesis studies in Malaysia (Halim et al, 2019). The study aims to identify the historical, social, and intellectual factors that influenced the transformation of Qur'anic interpretation in the country, ranging from the influence of overseas scholars in the 17th century to the contribution of local scholars in the 20th century. Data will be collected from primary sources such as tafsir works, historical records, and Islamic education documentation. Analysis will be done by comparing various tafsir approaches, both literal and contextual, as well as identifying key challenges in Qur'anic interpretation in Malaysia, including methodological differences and misunderstandings of the Arabic language. The study will also propose solutions to these challenges by providing recommendations for the development of moderate tafsir that is relevant to the Malaysian social and cultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Development of Qur'anic Interpretation Studies in Malaysia

The study and writing of Qur'anic tafsir in Malaysia has deep historical roots. Interpretation of Qur'anic texts has been introduced in Malaysia since the 17th century, although it was mostly done in the form of oral teachings delivered by scholars who came from abroad. In the 20th century, tafsir writing began to flourish, and a number of local scholars began to produce tafsir works in the Malay language. This process not only reflected the need of the people to understand the Qur'an more deeply, but also reflected the outside influences coming from various major Islamic countries.

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Mahayuddin Yahaya, the study and writing of Qur'anic tafsir began to develop significantly only after the 20th century. Prior to that, Islamic studies in Malaysia tended to focus more on other fields such as Aqidah (theology), Fiqh (Islamic law), Islamic History, and Tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism). This is due to the limited resources and knowledge at that time which were more oriented towards these aspects rather than the interpretation of the Qur'an itself. The writing of books in this period was also limited to these fields, while the study of tafsir was mostly done in the form of oral teaching among traditional scholars.

However, in the late 19th century, there was a significant change in the tradition of tafsir studies in Malaysia. This change was shaped by Malay scholars who had studied at major centers of Islamic education abroad. These scholars, who studied in countries such as Egypt, Mecca, India and Pakistan, brought with them distinctive and new methods of teaching tafsir. They combined the traditional approach with a more modern and contextual understanding, in line with the intellectual developments taking place in the Islamic world at that time.

In the late 19th century, the study of Qur'anic exegesis in Malaysia was greatly influenced by great figures from the Islamic world, one of whom was Egyptian Sheikh Muhammad Abduh. Sheikh Muhammad Abduh was known for his very progressive and rational thoughts in understanding the Qur'an. He emphasized the importance of a rational and contextual approach in tafsir, whereby the interpretation of Qur'anic texts must be adapted to the social and historical context in which they are found.

The thoughts of Shaykh Muhammad Abduh and his students such as Sayyid Muhammad Rashid Rida and Shaykh Ahmad Mustafa al-Maraghi brought fresh air to the study of tafsir in Malaysia. They not only introduced a rational approach in tafsir, but also emphasized the importance of the relevance of interpretation to contemporary issues faced by Muslims at that time. These ideas of renewal in tafsir opened up space for the birth of interpretations that were more inclusive and adaptive to the times.

In addition, during the same period, two leading Islamic educational institutions in India also had a major influence on the study of tafsir in Malaysia. These institutions are Darul 'Ulum Deoband which was established in 1867 and Darul 'Ulum Nadwat al-'Ulama which was established in 1898 in Lucknow. Both institutions produced many important figures in the Malay world,

including Malaysia, who played a role in introducing and developing the science of tafsir in the region.

Among the influential figures is Sheikh Abul Aziz bin Abdul Salam, whose work of tafsir, *al-Bayan fi Ta'wil Ayat-Ayat al-Qur'an*, is widely studied and used as a reference among Malay scholars. In addition, Maulana Abdullah Noh with his work *Khulasah al-Quran* also contributed greatly to the development of tafsir in Malaysia. These works attempt to combine traditional understanding with a more rational approach and are relevant to the social conditions of Malay society at that time.

In the twentieth century, tafsir works in the Malay language flourished, as more local scholars became involved in tafsir writing. This reflected the growing interest in a deeper understanding of the Qur'anic text in Malaysian society. One important work that emerged during this period was *Tafsir al-Azhar* written by Hamka, an Indonesian scholar who was highly influential in the Malay world. This work combined rational interpretation of Qur'anic verses with the Malay social and cultural context, making it acceptable to a wide audience, not only in Indonesia but also in Malaysia (Hamka, 1981).

In addition, the tafsir works of other Indonesian figures, such as *Tafsir al-Misbah* by M. Quraish Shihab, also made an important contribution to the development of tafsir in Malaysia. These works are highly appreciated by Muslims in the Malay world because the interpretations given are not only based on textual understanding but also by considering social and cultural factors that are relevant to the lives of Muslims in the Malay world. M. Quraish Shihab, with his contextual and applicative approach to tafsir, succeeded in opening new insights in the study of Qur'anic tafsir, leading to a more moderate and inclusive understanding (Shihab, 1997).

In Malaysia, the importance of Qur'anic tafsir studies is increasingly recognized by the government. In 2023, the Malaysian Department of Islamic Religious Affairs released a tafsir entitled *Tafsir al-Bayan* supervised by Dato Dr. Zulkifli al-Bakri, former Minister of Religious Affairs. This tafsir is part of the government's efforts to preserve and develop the study of Qur'anic commentaries that are valid and in accordance with Islamic principles that have been widely accepted by Muslims. With the publication of this tafsir, the Malaysian government seeks to make a significant contribution to Islamic education in the country.

In addition, Islamic institutions in Malaysia, such as JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia), have also played a major role in publishing various books and works related to Qur'anic tafsir. These efforts reflect the government's growing support for research and publications in the field of tafsir studies. It also shows the government's seriousness in providing more in-depth and comprehensive religious education for Muslims in Malaysia, as well as ensuring that the understanding of the Qur'an remains in line with the moderate and inclusive teachings of Islam.

The Malaysian government has played a very important role in preserving and developing the essence of Qur'anic tafsir studies through various policies and educational institutions. One of the important roles played by the government is to provide funding and support for research and publication of tafsir works that can fulfill the Islamic educational needs of the community. With this support, the study of Qur'anic exegesis can develop more rapidly and be relevant to Malaysia's current social and cultural conditions.

Educational institutions such as Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and various other Islamic educational institutes have contributed greatly to the development of tafsir studies. Through the curriculum they offer, students can study the interpretation of the Qur'an with a more modern, contextual, and applicative approach. This certainly helps in enriching the treasures of tafsir science and promoting interpretations that are more relevant to the challenges of the times.

In addition, various training programs and seminars held by Islamic institutions also provide space for scholars to discuss and share their thoughts on Qur'anic interpretation. These programs not only involve scholars from Malaysia, but also from other Islamic countries, thus broadening their horizons and enriching their understanding of the Qur'anic texts.

Challenges in Qur'anic Interpretation in Malaysia

Qur'anic interpretation is an integral part of Islamic studies that has always evolved with the times. In Malaysia, Qur'anic interpretation has a long and rich history, but along with this development, Muslims in the country face two major challenges that need to be addressed. The first challenge is the differences in interpretation that occur among Muslims due to variations in methodologies and schools of thought. The second challenge is distorted interpretations due to a lack of basic understanding of the Arabic language and other sciences of interpretation. The resolution of these two problems requires intellectual maturity and wisdom from scholars as well as the active involvement of society and the government.

1. Differences in Qur'anic Interpretation

In Malaysia, differences in Qur'anic interpretation are nothing new. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the study of tafsir has grown rapidly, yet differences in methodology in interpreting the Qur'ān continue to cause divisions among Muslims. One of the main causes of these differences is the variation in approaches used by mufasssirs (exegetes) in understanding Qur'anic verses.

The literal approach in tafsir emphasizes understanding the Qur'ānic text literally and tends to ignore the social and historical context in which the revelation was revealed. This approach is still widely adopted by more conservative groups in Malaysia. They consider that the Qur'ānic text should be understood as it is, without considering the changing times or the social context in which it is found.

On the other hand, the contextual approach in tafsir is more open to the understanding of the Qur'anic text that considers historical, social, and cultural factors at the time of revelation. This approach is more widely embraced by scholars who seek to address contemporary issues faced by Muslims in Malaysia and the world at large. For example, in the interpretation of verses relating to women's rights, the contextual approach seeks to adapt the understanding of the text to social and cultural developments that support gender equality (Amin, 2015).

However, these methodological differences often cause tension among Muslims, which in turn can lead to division and hostility. In some cases, these differences in interpretation are even used by certain groups to justify extreme and radical actions. For example, overly literal interpretations of verses on jihad can be misunderstood as support for violence, while more contextual interpretations emphasize that jihad should be understood in the context of a struggle against injustice and not in terms of violence.

2. Distorted Interpretation Due to Lack of Arabic Understanding

Besides methodological differences, another deeper problem in Qur'anic interpretation is the lack of basic understanding of the Arabic language among most Muslims in Malaysia. Arabic is the original language of the Qur'ān, and in order to properly understand the Qur'ānic text, a deep mastery of this language is required. Unfortunately, not all Muslims in Malaysia have a sufficient understanding of Arabic, which leads to misunderstandings in interpreting Qur'anic verses.

Some verses in the Qur'ān have very complex meanings and require a deep understanding of the Arabic language to interpret them properly. For example, in some verses, certain words or phrases can have multiple meanings depending on the context and syntax of the sentence. Without a good understanding of Arabic, the understanding of such verses can be distorted.

An example is the verse on "jihad," which in Arabic has various meanings, depending on the context. The word "jihad" is often understood only as "war" or "violence," whereas in the Qur'anic context, jihad also includes a wider range of spiritual and intellectual struggles (Mernissi, 1991). This misunderstanding of the word is often used by extreme groups to justify acts of violence. Therefore, it is important for mufasssirs and Muslims to have a deep understanding of the Arabic language so that their interpretations are not distorted.

In addition, the inability to understand other disciplines of tafsir, such as the science of qira'at (Qur'anic recitation), the science of asbab al-nuzul (causes of verse revelation), and the science

of al-mantiq (logic), also contributes to errors in interpretation. Without an adequate understanding of these sciences, mufasssirs or readers of the Qur'ān can only understand the text superficially, which in turn can result in distorted interpretations (Syed, 2010).

3. Resolving Problems of Qur'anic Interpretation

To address the problem of different interpretations and misunderstandings of the Qur'ān, a collective effort from scholars, government and society is required. Here are some solutions that can be implemented to ensure the correct understanding of the Qur'ān in Malaysia.

a. Enhancing the Intellectual Maturity of Scholars

Islamic scholars in Malaysia need to have intellectual maturity in dealing with differences in interpretation. They must understand that differences in interpretation are natural in the Islamic tradition and need not trigger divisions. Instead, they should try to find common ground and respect differences of opinion, especially when these differences are based on the principles of universal Islamic teachings.

In addition, scholars must play an active role in developing moderate and contextual interpretations that can answer the challenges of the times. An inclusive understanding of the Qur'an can strengthen Muslim harmony and prevent the development of extremism in religious interpretation. They should also criticize academically deviant interpretations and introduce interpretations that are more holistic and relevant to the current social context (Shihab, 1995).

b. Improving Arabic Language and Interpretation Education

To ensure the correct understanding of the Qur'ān, the government and educational institutions in Malaysia need to improve Arabic language education and the science of tafsir. Given the importance of Arabic in understanding the Qur'anic text, Arabic education should be an integral part of the Islamic education curriculum in Malaysian schools and universities.

In addition, it is important to introduce students to the deep sciences of tafsir, such as qira'at, asbab al-nuzul, and al-mantiq. A deeper understanding of these sciences will help them interpret the Qur'an correctly and avoid misinterpretation (Nasr, 2002).

c. The Government's Role in Providing Authentic Sources of Tafsir

The Malaysian government should take active steps in addressing the problem of divergent interpretations by providing valid and reliable sources of tafsir. One of the steps that can be taken is to establish institutions that monitor and publish interpretations that have undergone in-depth academic studies. These institutions can be the main source of reference for the public in understanding the Qur'anic text in the correct way.

The government can also support research and publication of tafsir that is based on contextual and moderate understanding. In this way, the tafsir taught to the public will be more relevant and can help Muslims in Malaysia to face the existing social, political and cultural challenges (Amin, 2015).

Solution to the Challenge

Qur'anic interpretation is a crucial area in understanding the teachings of Islam as a whole. In the Malaysian context, various issues related to authentic and relevant interpretation need to be resolved immediately. False or distorted interpretations can affect the ummah's understanding of the true teachings of Islam. Therefore, solutions to engage the government, scholars and the community are essential to ensure a valid and moderate interpretation of the Qur'an. In this regard, targeted and coordinated solutions will help maintain the unity and progress of Muslims.

1. Solution for the Government

The government has a great responsibility in overseeing and ensuring that the Qur'ānic interpretations disseminated in society remain valid and in accordance with Islamic principles. One of the most important solutions is to establish a government-supervised reference center for Qur'anic interpretation. This reference center would be tasked with ensuring that the tafsir taught in Malaysia is authentic, based on the basic principles of Islam that are widely accepted

by the majority of Muslims. The center should be able to filter out tafseers that do not conform to valid scholarly standards, so that the public can access the correct tafseer.

In addition, it is important for the government to monitor the spread of tafsir on various platforms, both in conventional and digital media. With the rapid development of technology and social media, the spread of unauthorized interpretations is very easy. Malaysians, like the rest of the world, are increasingly accessing information through the internet, so the government's role in monitoring digital platforms is crucial. This can be done by establishing a watchdog institution that can evaluate and ensure that the interpretations disseminated on digital platforms are in accordance with moderate and valid Islamic teachings (Amin, 2015).

Furthermore, the government needs to pay more attention to research and development of tafsir studies. One way to support quality research is to provide research funds to local and international scholars to produce high-quality tafsir works. These funds can be used to fund research projects, the publication of tafsir books, and the organization of seminars or scientific conferences that discuss the development of tafsir. In addition, the government can also initiate projects with educational institutions to improve the quality of tafsir teaching in schools and universities, by incorporating a more contemporary curriculum based on valid scientific studies (Mernissi, 1991).

2. Solution for Students

Muslim scholars have a very important role in guarding and introducing valid interpretations that are relevant to the context of the times. Students, as the next generation, need to be involved in spreading the correct interpretation. One of the main solutions for students is to strengthen their role in spreading authentic tafsir through scholarly works, lectures, sermons, and the use of social media. In today's digital age, social media is a very effective platform for disseminating information. Scholars can utilize social media to share knowledge and authentic interpretations with a wider audience, especially the younger generation who often access information through the internet (Nasr, 2002).

For example, scholars can use platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram to explain correct concepts of tafsir, provide explanations for incorrect interpretations, and answer people's questions regarding tafsir. In this case, it is important for scholars to not only focus on theoretical explanations but also provide practical applications of tafsir in everyday life. For example, explaining how Qur'anic interpretation can provide solutions to social problems or challenges facing Muslims today, such as issues related to pluralism, human rights, and gender equality (Abou El Fadl, 2005).

On the other hand, it is important for Muslim scholars to academically criticize deviant interpretations. When interpretations that are not in line with the principles of moderate Islam emerge, scholars should provide clarifications and corrections openly. They should utilize academic forums, such as seminars or scientific discussions, to provide correct understanding based on the valid science of tafsir. Mufasssirs (interpreters) should not waste time discussing matters that do not support the lives of Muslims, because the Qur'an is a guide to life that covers all aspects of human life, be it worship, social, or political (Syed, 2010).

3. Solutions for the Community

The public, as recipients of Qur'anic interpretation, need to be adequately educated to improve their understanding of religious knowledge. One important solution is to educate the public on how to recognize authentic sources of interpretation. In Malaysia, where social media is the main source of information for many people, the public must be equipped with sufficient knowledge to be able to distinguish valid interpretations from invalid ones. This education can be done through various training programs, seminars, and discussion forums involving scholars and religious leaders (Shihab, 1997).

People must also be given an understanding of the importance of choosing reliable sources of interpretation that have gone through a valid scientific process and are not easily influenced by radical or extreme interpretations. Increasing this understanding can be done by holding

educational programs that discuss the history of Qur'anic interpretation, the methodology used by the mufasssirs, and how tafsir can be applied in everyday life. This program can be organized by Islamic educational institutions, mosques, and other social institutions (Hamka, 1981).

Furthermore, people need to be educated about the importance of maintaining harmony among Muslims. The spread of distorted interpretations, especially through social media, can lead to sharp polarization between Islamic groups. Therefore, education about tolerance and mutual respect in opinion is needed to create a more peaceful and constructive atmosphere. People must be taught that differences in interpretation are normal in the Islamic tradition, but these differences must be addressed wisely and not lead to division.

To ensure a valid and relevant interpretation of the Qur'an, three main parties viz: government, scholars, and society must work together. The government needs to establish tafsir reference centers, provide research funding, and support more in-depth religious education. Scholars should actively disseminate authentic tafsir through scholarly works, lectures, and social media, and criticize deviant interpretations. The public needs to be adequately educated to understand authentic sources of tafsir and avoid the spread of erroneous interpretations. With this collaboration, a valid and relevant interpretation of the Qur'an can be maintained, benefiting the lives of Muslims in Malaysia and around the world.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the study of Qur'anic exegesis in Malaysia has made significant progress, but is still faced with a number of major challenges that need to be overcome. Differences in interpretive methodologies, limited mastery of Arabic, and lack of understanding of social and historical contexts are the main challenges. To overcome these challenges, the government, scholars and society need to work together to update approaches to interpretation, improve the quality of religious education, and ensure that the interpretations disseminated are valid and relevant to the needs of the times. Thus, Qur'anic tafsir can serve as a guide to life that provides solutions to contemporary challenges faced by Muslims in Malaysia.

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