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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Contemporary Qur'anic Exegesis: Bridging Classical and Modern Approaches****Dr Adeeba Siddiqui**

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adeeba@bkuc.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study examines contemporary Qur'anic exegesis with a focus on bridging classical and modern interpretive approaches to foster balanced, authentic, and relevant understandings of the divine text. Through qualitative, comparative, and analytical hermeneutical analysis, the research surveys classical traditions rooted in transmitted reports and linguistic precision, alongside modern trends shaped by rationalism, scientific inquiry, and socio-political demands. Classical exegesis offers enduring strengths in authenticity, textual coherence, and preservation of meaning, yet reveals limitations in addressing issues like science, gender equity, and pluralism. Modern approaches encompassing thematic, scientific, literary, feminist, and contextual methodologies enhance relevance but risk subjectivity and deviation. Points of convergence, such as shared commitment to Qur'anic centrality, ethical objectives (maqāṣid al-sharī 'ah), and linguistic integrity, enable integrative frameworks including maqāṣid-based exegesis and bounded contextual Ijtihad. Case applications to bioethics, environmental stewardship, and interfaith dialogue demonstrate practical viability, while guidelines emphasize authenticity, avoidance of eisegesis, and rigorous training. The study proposes that harmonizing classical fidelity with modern tools revitalizes tafsir, ensuring the Qur'an's guidance illuminates contemporary challenges without compromising its timeless sanctity. Ultimately, integrative models empower exegetes to navigate global complexities, enriching Islamic discourse and promoting ethical renewal.

Keywords: *Qur'anic Exegesis, Classical Tafsir, Modern Hermeneutics, Maqāṣid Al-Sharī 'Ah, Integrative Frameworks, Contextual Ijtihad*

Introduction

Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) constitutes a foundational discipline in Islamic scholarship, evolving from the prophetic era as the primary means of elucidating divine revelation to humanity (JomalQuran, 2025). Originating with the Prophet Muhammad's own explanations of revealed verses to his companions, tafsir developed systematically during the era of the Successors (Tabi'un), incorporating linguistic analysis, hadith narrations, and contextual circumstances of revelation (asbab al-nuzul) (Zaenuri, 2023). The classical period, spanning the 8th to 13th centuries, witnessed the codification of comprehensive commentaries, such as al-Tabari's Jami' al-Bayan (d. 923 CE), which prioritized transmitted reports (tafsir bi'l-ma'thur) (Adel et al., 2025). Works like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's Mafatih al-Ghayb (d. 1209 CE) blended rational inquiry with tradition, establishing rigorous methodological principles rooted in Arabic philology, prophetic traditions, and scholarly consensus (Abdullah et al., 2025). In the post-classical and modern periods, tafsir adapted to new intellectual currents, including encounters with Western scholarship, colonialism, and scientific advancements, leading to diverse approaches that continue into the present day.

The significance of bridging classical and modern approaches lies in their inherent tension and potential complementarity, enabling tafsir to address enduring spiritual needs while engaging contemporary challenges such as scientific rationalism, pluralism, and socio-political upheavals (Çoruh, 2023). Classical methods, emphasizing transmitted knowledge and textual coherence (nazm), provide authenticity and stability, safeguarding against speculative deviation (Zaenuri, 2023). Modern approaches contextual, thematic (mawdu'i), literary-rhetorical, and interdisciplinary incorporate historical-critical analysis, linguistics, and maqasid al-shariah (higher objectives), rendering the Qur'an relevant to issues like gender equity, environmental ethics, and interfaith dialogue (Fakhrurrozi et al., 2024). This synergy fosters dynamic interpretation without compromising core principles, as seen in efforts to integrate ijtihad with traditional hermeneutics, promoting inclusive readings that resonate with globalized Muslim communities (Muhammad, 2024).

Despite these synergies, a perceived disconnect persists between classical tafsir's reliance on transmitted authority and modern demands for rationality, empirical validation, and socio-political applicability (Nirwana et al., 2025). Classical exegesis often prioritizes narrative-based authenticity, potentially limiting engagement with contemporary epistemologies (Zabidi, 2025). Modern methods risk subjectivity or detachment from orthodox boundaries, accused of eisegesis influenced by secular frameworks (Çoruh, 2023). This tension manifests in debates over rational interpretation (tafsir bi'l-ra'y), historicism, and thematic reconfiguration, highlighting a methodological divide that can fragment interpretive discourse and alienate traditionalist audiences from progressive insights.

Compounding this is a notable research gap while individual studies abound on either classical or modern tafsir, systematic integrative frameworks remain underdeveloped, particularly those preserving authenticity amid contextual renewal (Ichwan, 2025). Few works comprehensively map convergence points or propose practical models for harmonization, leaving exegetes and educators without robust guidelines for balanced hermeneutics in the 21st century (Mohd Zabidi et al., 2025). Addressing this lacuna is essential for revitalizing Qur'anic studies, ensuring interpretations that are both faithful to tradition and responsive to modernity (Suleiman, 2025).

Literature Review

Classical tafsir traditions represent the bedrock of Qur'anic exegesis, characterized by methodologies that prioritize transmitted knowledge (riwayah) and reasoned insight (dirayah) while emphasizing linguistic precision and contextual authenticity. Tafsir al-Tabari by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari compiles extensive narrations from the Prophet, Companions, and early scholars, balancing riwayah with critical evaluation of reports to ensure interpretive reliability (Adel et al., 2025). Tafsir Ibn Kathir distills these traditions into a concise form, favoring authentic hadith and avoiding excessive speculation, thereby reinforcing communal harmony through tradition-based elucidation (JomalQuran, 2025). Tafsir al-Jalalayn by Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti provides succinct cross-references to Qur'anic texts and Prophetic traditions, highlighting practical imperatives with a focus on linguistic clarity and brevity (Zaenuri, 2023). These works collectively establish a transmitted framework where exegesis emerges as an obligation to preserve divine intent, profoundly influencing subsequent scholarship through their emphasis on authenticity and intra-textual coherence.

Early modern reformist exegesis emerged in response to colonial encounters and intellectual stagnation, seeking to revitalize Islamic thought by rationalizing interpretations and addressing socio-political realities. Muhammad Abduh's contributions, disseminated through lectures and the periodical al-Manar, advocated rational engagement with the Qur'an to counter superstition and

promote education and reform (Çoruh, 2023). Rashid Rida, extending Abduh's legacy in *Tafsir al-Manar*, incorporated social critique and calls for unity, blending rationalism with Salafi revivalism to confront modernity's challenges (Fakhrurrozi et al., 2024). Allama Iqbal, though not a systematic mufassir, infused poetic and philosophical reflections on Qur'anic themes of selfhood and dynamism, urging Muslims toward spiritual and societal reconstruction (Muhammad, 2024). These figures shifted exegesis toward applicability, laying foundations for contextual renewal while maintaining fidelity to core principles.

20th-21st century developments in tafsir reflect diverse methodological innovations, including thematic, scientific, and contextual approaches that respond to globalization and empirical knowledge. Sayyid Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* employs thematic coherence to portray the Qur'an as a dynamic movement against oppression, emphasizing socio-political activism (Nirwana et al., 2025). Amin Ahsan Islahi advances *nazm* (structural unity) in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, treating surahs as integrated wholes for holistic understanding (Falahi et al., 2025). Scientific exegesis, inspired by Maurice Bucaille's comparative studies highlighting Qur'anic alignment with modern discoveries, integrates empirical validation to affirm divine foresight (Zabidi et al., 2025). Fazlur Rahman's double-movement theory advocates moving from historical context to ethical objectives and back to contemporary application (Ichwan, 2025). Abdullah Saeed refines this with hierarchical values, distinguishing immutable essentials from adaptable rulings for contextual relevance.

Critiques and defenses of modern tafsir center on debates over historicism, objectivity, and authenticity, revealing tensions between innovation and orthodoxy. Historicist approaches risk relativizing eternal truths by overemphasizing socio-historical contingencies, potentially undermining universality (Çoruh, 2023). Objectivity critiques highlight subjectivity in thematic or contextual readings, accused of imposing external ideologies (Nirwana et al., 2025). Defenses argue that modern methods enhance accessibility and relevance without altering core meanings, countering stagnation in classical literalism (Falahi et al., 2025). Authenticity concerns arise from perceived deviations in scientific or feminist exegesis, yet proponents defend them as extensions of reasoned *ijtihad* within traditional boundaries (Zabidi et al., 2025).

Despite rich advancements, a notable identification of gaps persists in the scarcity of robust integrative models that harmoniously preserve classical rigor rooted in transmission and linguistics while embracing contemporary tools like interdisciplinarity and contextualism (Ichwan, 2025). Most studies focus on isolated paradigms, lacking comprehensive frameworks for synthesis that avoid eisegesis or anachronism (Adel et al., 2025). This lacuna hinders balanced hermeneutics for global challenges, underscoring the need for models that bridge authenticity with relevance (Zaenuri, 2023).

Objectives

1. To analyze core methodologies of classical and modern tafsir.
2. To identify points of convergence and divergence.
3. To evaluate contemporary attempts at integration.
4. To propose practical guidelines for balanced exegesis in the 21st century.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative, and analytical approach centered on hermeneutical and textual analysis to systematically bridge classical and modern Qur'anic exegesis. The research prioritizes interpretive depth over quantitative metrics, drawing on established principles of *usul al-tafsir* to examine methodologies across historical periods. By comparing textual strategies, linguistic tools, and contextual engagements, the analysis uncovers convergences and divergences

that inform integrative possibilities. Hermeneutical lenses facilitate critical engagement with interpretive layers, ensuring that conclusions remain grounded in the Qur'an's linguistic integrity and structural coherence (*nazm*). This multifaceted methodology allows for rigorous evaluation of how exegetical traditions evolve while preserving core authenticity, offering nuanced insights into the dynamic interplay between tradition and contextual renewal.

Primary sources encompass the Qur'an itself, alongside major classical tafsir works such as Tafsir al-Tabari, Tafsir Ibn Kathir, and Tafsir al-Jalalayn, as well as influential modern commentaries including Tafsir al-Manar, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, and Tadabbur-i-Qur'an. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and conference proceedings on Qur'anic hermeneutics, providing critical perspectives on interpretive developments. The method of analysis integrates comparative thematic exploration to identify recurring motifs across traditions, systematic evaluation of interpretive principles (*usul al-tafsir*), and careful assessment of contextual application in addressing contemporary issues. The overarching framework applies established hermeneutical models, such as Fazlur Rahman's double-movement theory and *maqasid*-oriented exegesis, while strictly adhering to orthodox boundaries to avoid speculative deviation. This structured yet flexible approach ensures balanced synthesis, enabling the derivation of practical guidelines for harmonizing classical fidelity with modern relevance in Qur'anic interpretation.

Foundations and Characteristics

Historical development of classical Qur'anic exegesis traces its origins to the prophetic era, where the Prophet Muhammad himself provided initial explanations of revealed verses to his companions. This formative phase transitioned into systematic interpretation during the time of the Successors (*Tabi'un*), incorporating linguistic precision and historical context. The classical period, from the 8th to 13th centuries, marked the emergence of comprehensive commentaries categorized primarily into *tafsir bi'l-ma'thur* (interpretation based on transmitted reports) and *tafsir bi'l-ra'y* (interpretation based on reasoned opinion). *Tafsir bi'l-ma'thur* relies heavily on narrations from the Qur'an, Sunnah, and early authorities, prioritizing authenticity to preserve original meanings (JomalQuran, 2025). In contrast, *tafsir bi'l-ra'y* permits scholarly reasoning provided it aligns with established sources, though classical scholars cautioned against unchecked speculation to avoid deviation (Falahi et al., 2025). This dual categorization reflects a balanced hermeneutical evolution, ensuring interpretive fidelity amid expanding Islamic scholarship.

Key principles underpinning classical exegesis emphasize hierarchical reliance on authoritative sources to safeguard divine intent. Foremost is interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an itself, where ambiguous verses are clarified through clear ones (*muhkam*). The Qur'an exemplifies this in:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ

("It is He who has sent down to you the Book; in it are verses precise, they are the foundation of the Book, and others unspecific") (Āl 'Imrān 3:7).

This verse establishes *muhkam* verses as the referential core, guiding explication of *mutashābih* ones. Subsequent principles include recourse to the Sunnah, views of the Companions, Arabic linguistics for semantic accuracy, and *asbāb al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation) to contextualize verses historically without limiting their universal application (Zaenuri, 2023). These layered principles form a rigorous framework, ensuring interpretations remain anchored in revelation.

Classical exegesis excels in authenticity, deriving meanings directly from transmitted sources to minimize personal bias. Tafsir al-Tabari exemplifies this by compiling diverse narrations with critical evaluation, preserving multifaceted early understandings (Adel et al., 2025). Textual coherence (*nazm*) emerges as a hallmark strength, recognizing the Qur'an's intricate structural

unity were verses interconnect semantically and thematically. This principle illuminates holistic meanings, as verses elucidate one another across surahs. Preservation of meaning is further fortified through linguistic rigor and avoidance of esoteric speculation, maintaining doctrinal integrity across generations (Nirwana et al., 2025). These strengths render classical works enduring references, safeguarding the Qur'an's message against distortion.

Despite these merits, classical exegesis exhibits limitations in addressing modern issues such as scientific discoveries, gender dynamics, and religious pluralism. Rooted in pre-modern epistemologies, it often prioritizes literal and historical readings, potentially constraining engagement with empirical evidence or evolving social norms (Zabidi et al., 2025). For instance, interpretations of cosmological verses may conflict with contemporary science, lacking tools for reconciliatory frameworks. Gender-related verses, influenced by patriarchal contexts, sometimes reinforce hierarchical views, overlooking egalitarian potentials in broader Qur'anic ethics (Fakhrurrozi et al., 2024). Pluralism challenges arise from limited interfaith dialogue in classical sources, hindering applications to multicultural societies. These constraints highlight the need for complementary approaches.

Classical methodologies, while robust in transmission, can appear static when confronting bioethics or environmental crises absent in early contexts (Ichwan, 2025). The emphasis on *asbāb al-nuzul* ties meanings to specific historical events, risking particularism over universalism in pluralistic settings. Linguistic focus, though precise, may undervalue metaphorical or thematic layers relevant to modern psychology or sociology. Such limitations do not diminish classical contributions but underscore interpretive evolution's necessity.

Overall, classical exegesis's foundations provide unparalleled authenticity and coherence, yet its historical boundedness invites critical renewal. By appreciating both strengths in preservation and limitations in adaptability, scholars can forge integrative paths forward, ensuring the Qur'an's guidance resonates eternally.

Modern and Contemporary Approaches to Tafsir

Modern and contemporary approaches to Qur'anic exegesis have been profoundly shaped by a confluence of influences, including the rise of rationalism during Enlightenment encounters, groundbreaking scientific discoveries that demand reconciliation with revelation, the disruptive forces of colonialism and post-colonial identity reconstruction, accelerating globalization fostering cultural hybridity, and rapid socio-political changes such as revolutions, feminism, and democratization movements (Çoruh, 2023). These catalysts compelled Muslim scholars to move beyond literal transmission, embracing interpretive flexibility to assert Islam's compatibility with modernity while critiquing Western hegemony. Colonialism, in particular, spurred apologetic yet assertive exegesis aimed at intellectual revival, whereas globalization introduced pluralistic epistemologies, prompting tafsir to engage interfaith and ethical dilemmas in diverse societies (Güney, 2024). Socio-political upheavals further intensified calls for liberation theology-inspired readings, addressing oppression and justice in post-authoritarian contexts.

Major trends in modern tafsir encompass thematic (*manhaj mawdu'i*), which synthesizes verses around unified ethical or doctrinal motifs for holistic insight; scientific exegesis, correlating Qur'anic allusions with empirical findings to affirm miraculous foresight; literary approaches emphasizing rhetorical inimitability (*i'jaz balāghī*) and structural coherence; feminist interpretations challenging androcentric biases to reclaim gender equity; and contextual methodologies distinguishing timeless principles from historical specifics (Hoque et al., 2023). Thematic tafsir transcends atomistic verse-by-verse commentary, revealing interconnected worldviews suited to contemporary systemic issues (Islam, 2024). Scientific trends gained traction

amid technological advances, though varying in rigor from corroborative to concordist. Feminist and contextual streams prioritize socio-historical critique, advocating transformative readings for empowerment and relevance.

Representative scholars and works illuminate these innovations, with Fazlur Rahman's seminal double-movement theory advocating extraction of socio-moral ethical objectives from historical contexts, followed by generalized application to present realities, profoundly influencing ethical-legal reinterpretation (Umair & Said, 2023). Rahman's framework bridges revelation's universality with temporal contingency, enabling dynamic *ijtihād*. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd advanced textualist hermeneutics, viewing the Qur'an as a historical linguistic product amenable to semiotic and cultural analysis, emphasizing humanistic plurality and discourse over dogmatic closure (El-Refaee, 2024). Abu Zayd's approach, though contentious, enriched critical scholarship by highlighting meaning's contextual fluidity.

Strengths and critiques underscore modern *tafsīr*'s unparalleled relevance in empowering Muslims to navigate pluralism, science, and rights discourses, fostering inclusive, ethically vibrant interpretations that revitalize faith amid secular challenges (Apriliani et al., 2024). Contextual and thematic methods particularly excel in addressing global crises like inequality and ecology. However, critiques highlight risks of excessive subjectivity, where historicism may relativize immutable truths or impose extraneous ideologies, leading to perceived deviation from orthodox boundaries (Güney, 2024). Scientific exegesis faces accusations of forced concordism, while feminist readings encounter charges of Western-influenced selectivity. Defenses maintain that reasoned *ijtihād*, when bounded by textual integrity, enriches rather than undermines revelation's depth.

Integrative Models and Applications

Points of convergence between classical and modern Qur'anic exegesis lie in their shared commitment to the Qur'an's absolute centrality as divine revelation, unwavering pursuit of ethical objectives (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), and preservation of linguistic integrity through Arabic philology and rhetorical precision. Both paradigms affirm the text's transcendence while seeking to illuminate its guidance for humanity. Classical traditions prioritize transmitted authenticity, yet implicitly align with *maqāṣid* in upholding justice, mercy, and human welfare (Sulhadi, 2024). Modern approaches explicitly foreground *maqāṣid* to derive universal principles, echoing classical concerns for holistic meaning without contradicting textual fidelity (Hoque et al., 2023). Linguistic integrity unites them, as classical scholars mastered *balāghah* (eloquence) and modern exegetes employ semiotics to uncover layers of *i'jāz* (inimitability).

Proposed integrative frameworks include *maqāṣid-based exegesis*, which systematizes higher objectives to guide interpretation across eras; contextual *ijtihād* bounded by classical *uṣūl al-tafsīr*; and interdisciplinary tools such as semiotics for rhetorical analysis and sociology for socio-historical insight. *Maqāṣid-based exegesis*, revitalized by scholars like Jasser Auda, recontextualizes classical commentaries through systems theory, prioritizing protection of faith, life, intellect, lineage, and property while adapting to contemporary realities (Sulhadi, 2024). Contextual *ijtihād* operates within orthodox limits, applying double-movement methodologies to distill eternal ethics from historical specifics (Ichwan, 2025). Interdisciplinary integration enriches understanding semiotics reveals textual interconnections, sociology illuminates social implications without compromising revelation's primacy.

Case studies demonstrate practical applications, particularly in bioethics, where *maqāṣid* frameworks balance preservation of life (*hifẓ al-nafs*) with dignity in end-of-life decisions, organ transplantation, and genomic editing. The Qur'an states:

وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا

(“And whoever saves one, it is as if he had saved mankind entirely”) (Al-Mā'idah 5:32).

This verse underscores life's sanctity, guiding integrative rulings on brain death and donation that prioritize communal welfare (*maslahah*) (Alfahmi, 2022). In environmental concerns, stewardship (*khilāfah*) and anti-corruption (*fasād*) principles address climate crises:

ظَهَرَ الْفَسَادُ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِي النَّاسِ

(“Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by what the hands of people have earned”) (Ar-Rūm 30:41).

Integrative models invoke *maqāṣid* for sustainable ethics, harmonizing classical vicegerency with modern ecology (Azizan & Musa, in Bagheri, 2018). For interfaith dialogue, verses promoting mutual recognition facilitate coexistence:

لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ

(“For you is your religion, and for me is my religion”) (Al-Kāfirūn 109:6).

Maqāṣid-oriented exegesis highlights shared human dignity, fostering pluralism amid diversity (Mustapa et al., 2025).

Challenges and guidelines for integration revolve around maintaining authenticity against eisegesis, where personal bias supplants textual intent, and cultivating rigorous training for future exegetes. Authenticity demands anchoring in classical sources to prevent deviation, while eisegesis risks arise from unchecked contextualism imposing external ideologies (Parrey, 2024). Guidelines emphasize mastery of Arabic, *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, and *maqāṣid*, alongside ethical humility and scholarly consensus. Training programs must blend traditional madrasah rigor with interdisciplinary exposure, producing exegetes capable of balanced, orthodox renewal for global challenges.

Conclusion

Contemporary Qur'anic exegesis stands at a pivotal juncture, where the imperative to bridge classical and modern approaches emerges not as an option but as a scholarly and spiritual necessity. Classical traditions, with their unparalleled emphasis on transmitted authenticity, textual coherence, and linguistic depth, provide an unassailable foundation that safeguards the divine message against distortion across centuries. Yet their historical boundedness necessitates complementary modern methodologies thematic synthesis, contextual renewal, and interdisciplinary insight that render the Qur'an vibrantly responsive to rational inquiry, scientific progress, and socio-ethical dilemmas of the present age. Points of convergence in commitment to revelation's centrality, pursuit of higher ethical objectives, and reverence for linguistic integrity reveal profound compatibility, enabling integrative frameworks that preserve orthodoxy while embracing adaptive *ijtihād*. Through *maqāṣid*-oriented exegesis and bounded contextual application, scholars can derive guidance for pressing concerns, from bioethical dilemmas and ecological stewardship to pluralistic coexistence, demonstrating the text's inexhaustible relevance. The promise of this synthesis lies in its capacity to revitalize Islamic intellectual tradition, fostering interpretations that are simultaneously faithful and forward-looking. By addressing limitations of each paradigm classical rigidity and modern subjectivity integrative models mitigate risks of eisegesis and stagnation, cultivating hermeneutical maturity grounded in humility and rigor. Training future exegetes in dual mastery of traditional sciences and contemporary tools ensures sustained renewal, empowering the ummah to engage global discourses with confidence and ethical clarity. Ultimately, bridging these approaches reaffirms the Qur'an's miraculous dynamism: a timeless revelation capable of illuminating every era, guiding humanity toward justice, wisdom, and spiritual fulfillment in an ever-evolving world.

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