

## Islamic Commentary and Hermeneutic Approach: Comparative Perspectives

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**Abstract:** Hermeneutics has much to offer those interested in qualitative inquiry, and is especially suitable for work of a textual and interpretive nature, yet writings in hermeneutics are frequently viewed as dense and impenetrable. Currently, hermeneutics is widely used in the study of texts in almost all fields of science, among others: philosophy, arts, literature, history, law, and others, including the study of Islamic commentary. Further, it is suggested that hermeneutics can fruitfully be partnered with an Islamic commentary approach which based on Quran from Allah SWT. In this regard, the comparison between hermeneutic methodology and Islamic exegesis characters are explored. It is suggested that hermeneutics methodology and Islamic commentary method can be combined to emphasize the interpretive act of understanding Qur'an and improving the new appropriate perspective in approaching Qur'an.

**Key words:** Islamic commentary, exegesis, hermeneutics, hermeneutic approach.

### A. Background Knowledge

This time the study of Islamic commentary is no longer limited only on the region fikih, kalam, tasawuf, and philosophy, but also began to come into contact with various perspectives and methodologies in various scholarly fields such as social sciences (social sciences), humanities, economic, psychology, to medical sciences, and others.

Some contemporary Muslim scholars from Egypt such as Mohammad Ibrahim Syarifi in his book *Ijtihad at-Tajdid fi Tafseer Qur'an*, Iffat Muhammad Syarqawi in his book *Fikru ad-Diini fi Muwajihatil 'Ashri*, and Nasher Hamid Abu Zaid in his book *Naqdul Khitab Ad-diini*, their framework of scholarly thinking in Islamic studies using the framework of hermeneutic theory and methodology that is used by social sciences and humanities that began to grow it took about centuries XVIII and XIX (Muhammad, 1392:370).

As a consequence of the existence and the interaction between some scholarly methodologies framework are the changes in the framework of the theory, the methodology and epistemology used. The reason is the system which everyone involved, and aspects of human life in the social, cultural, political, economic and the

law has evolved from the earlier period. Moreover, historical background called as episteme, requires a certain mindset that must always be adjusted with the characters and the interests of man (Fred, 1989:75). Thus the activity of any kind including scholarly Islamic studies, must be understood as a process that is continue in pursuing travel innovation, effort, and various alternative new concept to strengthen and enrich the building to the scientists who already exists.

All scholarly Islamic study that was born and developed today is not removed from the Qur'an, because the Qur'an is the speech and language of the divine that contains guidance for mankind until the end of the age (Nasr, 2015: 30). The study of Al-Quran speech and language not only bring people on the explanation of the decomposed in detail and systematically in an object, but also to reach the explanations are more philosophical knowledge that can be used in their daily life to become a perfect human. Furthermore the language of the Qur'an does not only consist of the logic and the argument of the law, but also includes the study of the logic of theology, linguistically, and epistemology (Mansur, 2004:11).

Qur'an is the guidance for all mankind (Nasr, 2015: xviii). Then it's interpretation can be widely spread among people, Some Muslim contemporary scholars see the Qur'an as the rule of the rule of law but some Muslim western scholars such as Marmaduke Picktchall and Abdullah Yusuf Ali see The Qur'an as a source of knowledge philosophy, linguistically, even politics in their commentary ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Qur'an](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Qur'an)). As the book of guidance, the Qur'an al-karim always be read and interpreted in the life of the interpreters in every time. The Qur'an which fell at the time of the Prophet, text will no longer be changed, remains as 30 chapters we read, but the true meaning is always been developed in accordance with the problems faced by each time. Even Muhammad Mansur mentions that the interpretation is the son of the age (Nasr, 2015:15), and it will always demonstrate the character space of time where and when it was born. As a result, it is not surprising when so many book of interpretation that we encounter have colors, patterns, methods, approach that is not similar.

One of the methods of interpretation that is currently used by the scientists is Hermeneutics approach. Hermeneutics is one of the theories of the philosophy of interpretation (Butler, 1998:13). Hermeneutics approach examined by many academic researchers such as: critics' literature, sociologist, historians, anthropologist,

philosopher, or theologian, especially to examine, understand and interprets the text of the scriptures such as the Bible or the Quran.

In this article we will present the comparison between Islamic commentary and the Hermeneutic approach because as a Moslem must know clearly and specifically wherein we should comprehend and apply the message of Quran and addresses it as such, so we do not just limit it to a work of merely historical, social, or linguistic interest divorced from its sacred and revealed character.

### **B. Definition of Hermeneutic**

According to American heritage dictionary Hermeneutics (1969: 221) is the philosophy and methodology of text interpretation, especially the interpretation of divine texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical text.

Furthermore, Kleinn (2000: 344) described Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word *hermeneuō*, "translate, interpret" from *hermeneus*, "translator, interpreter". The technical term of *hermeneia*, "interpretation, explanation" was introduced into philosophy mainly through the title of Aristotle's work "Peri Hermeneias". It is one of the earliest (c. 360 B.C.) extant philosophical works in the Western tradition to deal with the relationship between language and logic in a comprehensive, explicit and formal way.

In another places Ferraris (1996: 1) defines hermeneutics as the art of interpretation as transformation and contrasts it with a view of theory as contemplation of eternal essences unalterable by their observer.

Based on those several definitions above it can be described briefly that hermeneutic is the methodology of text interpretations which deal with the relationship between languages and consist of contemplation by their observer.

### **C. History of hermeneutic**

The German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) was a foremost example of hermeneutic and also an author who points to a more philosophical understanding of hermeneutics in at least two ways (Jacques, 1989:55-57). First, he complains that there are many special hermeneutics and that hermeneutics does not yet exist as a general or universal discipline, i.e. as an art of understanding itself that

would establish binding rules for all forms of interpretation. Second, he said that hermeneutics has only consisted of a vague collection of dislocated guidelines.

The other expert of hermeneutic was Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) he broadened hermeneutics even more by relating interpretation to historical objectification. Understanding moves from the outer manifestations of human action and productivity to the exploration of their inner meaning (Dallymayr, 1989: 75-92).

Since Dilthey, the discipline of hermeneutics has detached itself from spiritual science and has broadened to include all texts and multimedia. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) philosophical hermeneutics shifted the focus from interpretation to existential understanding.

Gadamer stated that hermeneutics is a development of the hermeneutics of his teacher, Heidegger. He asserted that methodical contemplation is opposite to experience and reflection (Gadamer, 1976: 255). We can reach the truth only by understanding or mastering our experience. According to this idea, our understanding is not fixed but rather is changing and always indicating new perspectives. The most important thing is to unfold the nature of individual understanding.

### **c. The Objective of hermeneutics**

In 1992, the Association for objective hermeneutics (AGOH) was founded in Frankfurt by scholars from various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Its goal was to provide all scholars who use the methodology of objective hermeneutics with a means of exchanging information. In one of the few translated texts of this German school of hermeneutics, its founders declared:

*Our approach has grown out of the empirical study of family interactions as well as reflection upon the procedures of interpretation employed in our research. For the time being we shall refer to it as objective hermeneutics in order to distinguish it clearly from traditional hermeneutic techniques and orientations. The general significance for sociological analysis of objective hermeneutics issues from the fact that, in the social sciences, interpretive methods constitute the fundamental procedures of measurement and of the generation of research data relevant to hypothesis.*

*From our perspective, the standard, non-hermeneutic methods of quantitative social research can only be justified because they permit a*

*shortcut in generating data (and research "economy" comes about under specific conditions). Whereas the conventional methodological attitude in the social sciences justifies qualitative approaches as exploratory or preparatory activities, to be succeeded by standardized approaches and techniques as the actual scientific procedures (assuring precision, validity, and objectivity), we regard hermeneutic procedures as the basic method for gaining precise and valid knowledge in the social sciences.*

According to the statement above, scholars do not simply reject alternative approaches dogmatically. They are in fact useful wherever the loss in precision and objectivity necessitated by the requirement of research can be tolerated in the light of prior hermeneutically elucidated research experiences.

#### **D. Hermeneutic Approach and Methodology**

Hermeneutics is sometimes criticized for its conceptually elusive nature, but it is important to note, that hermeneutics is a protection against abuse of method, not against lack of methodology in general (Gadamer, 1992: 22). Given the conceptually elusive nature of hermeneutics, there are few introductory overviews that invite the novice into a dialogue about this subject. While not an exhaustive discussion of hermeneutic, this paper invites the reader to consider five characteristics of a hermeneutic approach.

##### **1. Seeks understanding rather than explanation**

The goal of a hermeneutic approach is to seek understanding, rather than to offer explanation or to provide an authoritative reading or conceptual analysis of a text. As Jardine (1992: 21) states:

Hermeneutic has its goal to reduce understanding, to bring forth the presuppositions in which we already live. Its task, therefore, is not to methodically achieve a relationship to some matter and to secure understanding in such a method. Rather, its task is to recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living, a life that is not secured by the methods we can wield to render such a life our object.

## **2. Acknowledges the situated location of interpretation**

Hermeneutics acknowledges that all interpretation is situated, located, a—view from somewhere. Jacques (1989: 55) eloquently summarizes the active role of the interpreter in critical hermeneutic interpretation:

The hermeneutic approach stresses the creative interpretation of words and texts and the active role played by the knower. The goal of hermeneutic is not objective explanation or neutral description, but rather a sympathetic engagement with the author of a text, utterance or action and the wider socio-cultural context within which these phenomena occur.

Although it is not always referred to as hermeneutics, the situated nature of interpretation—and the impossibility of finding one foundational God's eye view—is a growing theme in the contemporary literature.

## **3. Recognizes the role of language and historicity in interpretation**

It is important to note further that hermeneutical thinkers argue that language and history are always both conditions and limitations of understanding. As Wachterhauser (1986) in Dallymayr (1989: 80) writes:

Hermeneutical theories of understanding argue that all human understanding is never 'without words' and never 'outside of time'. On the contrary, what is distinctive about human understanding is that it is always in terms of some evolving linguistic framework that has been worked out over time in terms of some historically conditioned set of concerns and practices.

This emphasis on historicity, and on the significance of language as a vehicle for interpretive endeavors, are key dimensions of Gadamer's thought.

## **4. Views inquiry as conversation**

Gadamer (1976: 55) describes hermeneutics as the skill to let things speak which come to us in a fixed, petrified form, that of the text. The interpreter has to modulate, use intonation. He compares the interpretation of a text to the art of translation, pointing

out that in both instances if we as interpreter want to emphasize a feature that is important to us, and then we can do so only by playing down or entirely suppressing other features. Translation like all interpretation is a highlighting. A translator must understand that highlighting is part of his task.

### **5. Comfortable with ambiguity**

According to Gadamer (1976: 57) hermeneutics is entrusted with all that is unfamiliar and strikes us as significant. Indeed, Jardine (1992) in Ferraris (1996: 35) states that it is the task of hermeneutics to restore life to its original difficulty. A hermeneutic view resists the idea that there can be one single authoritative reading of a text and recognizes the complexity of the interpretive endeavor.

In conclusion, a hermeneutic approach is open to the ambiguous nature of textual analysis, and resists the urge to offer authoritative readings and neat reconciliations. Rather, it recognizes the uniquely situated nature, historically and linguistically influenced, and the ambiguous nature of interpretation, and offers such for readers to engage with, or not, as they wish.

### **E. Definition of Islamic Commentary (Tafsir)**

At the beginning the time Qur'an appeared on the stage of history in the seventh century, there have been numerous commentaries that have ventured to make sense of this classical document. Historical method of interpretation that requires that the text be interpreted in accordance with the rule of grammar and of the meaning of words has had a long and creative history in the development of the Qur'anic exegesis (Nasr, 2015: xii). It is remarkable that even when a majority of the commentaries were guided by dogmatic prejudices, muslim commentators paid close attention to the historical setting of the Qur'anic language out of which the text appeared.

According to Allamah Taba' Tabaie, in the preface of His Exegesis Al-Mizan, He described that tafsir (exegesis) is explaining the meanings of the Qur'anic verse, clarifying its import and finding out its significance, is one of the earliest academic activities in Islam.

The interpretation of the Qur'an began with its revelation, as is clear from the words of Allah in the following verse in Qur'an:

كما ارسلنا فيكم رسولا منكم يتلو عليكم آياتنا ويزكيكم ويعلمكم الكتاب والحكمة ويعلمكم ما لم تكونوا تعلمون

*Even as We have sent among you an Apostle from among you who recites to you Our communications and purifies you and teaches you the Book and the wisdom and teaches you that which you did not know (Al-Baqarah:151)*

According to that verse, a Qur'anic tafsir will often explain content and provide places and times, as well as give the different views and opinions of scholars on the verse. The word tafsir is derived from the Arabic root, F-S-R which means to explain, to expound, to disclose. At last, it can be concluded that tafsir is used to comprehend and uncovering the will of Allah which has been conveyed by the Qur'anic text, by means of the Arabic language and one's own knowledge.

## **F. History of Islamic Commentary**

### **Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h)**

The first examples of Islamic commentary can be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad's period. As the Qur'an was revealed to him, he recited the verses to his family and companions, usually explaining their meanings to teach them (Muhammad, 2004: 11). This is one of Prophet Muhammad's (p.b.u.h) responsibilities. Elements of his explanations are:

- Clarifying verses whose intents are not understood
- Indication of names, places, times etc. which have not been mentioned in the verse
- Restriction of meanings which have been given as absolute
- Reconciling expressions which seem contradictory

The first exegetes were a few companions of the Prophet, like Ibn 'Abbas, 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar, Ubayy (ibn Ka'b) and others. (We use the word, 'companion', for other than 'Ali - a.s; because he and the imams from his progeny have an unequalled distinction - an unparalleled status, which we shall explain somewhere else). Exegesis in those days was confined to the explanation of literary aspects of the verse, the



background of its revelation and, occasionally interpretation of one verse with the help of the other. If the verse was about a historical event or contained the realities of genesis or resurrection etc., then sometimes a few traditions of the Prophet were narrated to make its meaning clear.

### **Sahabah (companions of Muhammad)**

Following the Prophet's death a number of prominent disciples involved themselves in interpreting the prescriptive aspects of the Qur'an in order to provide rulings for specific situations in the community's social and political life. Most of the sahabah including ibn Abbas were using prophet's explanation and their knowledge from the Arabic language to interpret the Qur'an ([www.almizan.org/p1](http://www.almizan.org/p1)). The result of this endeavor formed the groundwork for legal methodology in Islamic juridical studies.

The main aspects that characterized the explication of the Qur'an at this stage included:

1. Analysis of literary and linguistic aspects of the revelation;
2. Determining historical context of the revelation;
3. Clarification of the meanings through intra-textual reference; and,
4. Explanation of the passages by using the materials that were transmitted in the form of hadith -reports attributed to the Prophet as the commentator and teacher of the Qur'an.

### **G. Islamic Commentary and Methodology**

Muslim exegetes at all times have resorted to intra-textual hermeneutics in order to explain one part of the Qur'an through another. The method also demonstrates inexhaustible layers of meanings the verses possess. This methodological preoccupation goes to demonstrate the infinite potentiality of the Qur'an and its ongoing relations to broader levels of context as its existence in history lengthens. It, moreover, demonstrates the need to go beyond the course of traditional interpretation to confront aspects of human self-understanding through intellectual development in every instance of making sense of authentic existence.

According to Islamic scholars such as Suyuti (2008: 116) stated that there are specific requirements for those who want to become mufasireen. The mufasireen

(exegetes) listed 15 fields that must be mastered before one can authoritatively interpret the Quran.

1. Classical Arabic: Is how one learns the meaning of each word. Mujahid ibn Jabr said, "It is not permissible for one who holds faith in Allah and the Day of Judgment to speak on the Quran without learning classical Arabic." In this respect, it should be known that classical Arabic must be mastered in its entirety because one word may have various meanings; a person may only know two or three of them whereas the meaning of that word in the Quran may be altogether different.
2. Arabic Philology: Is important because any change in the diacritical marks affects the meaning, and understanding the diacritical marks depends on the science of Arabic philology.
3. Arabic morphology: is important because changes in the configuration of verb and noun forms change the meaning. Ibn Faris said, "A person who misses out on Arabic morphology has missed out on a lot."
4. Al-Ishtiqaq: should be learned because sometimes one word derives from two root words, the meaning of each root word being different. This is the science of etymology which explains the reciprocal relation and radical composition between the root and derived word. For example, masih derives from the root word masah which means "to feel something and to touch something with a wet hand," but also derives from the root word masaahat which means "to measure."
5. Ilm al-Ma'ani: is the science by which one figures the syntax through the meaning of a sentence.
6. Ilm al-Bayaan: is the science by which one learns the similes, metaphors, metonymies, zuhoor (evident meanings) and khafa (hidden meanings) of the Arabic language.
7. Ilm al-Badi': The science by which one learns to interpret sentences which reveal the beauty and eloquence of the spoken and written word. The above-mentioned three sciences are categorized as Ilm-ul-Balagha (science of rhetoric). It is one of the most important sciences to a mufassir because he is able to reveal the miraculous nature of the Quran through these three sciences.

8. Ilm al-Qira'at: Dialecticisms of the different readings of the Quran. This science is important because one qira'at (reading) of the Quran may differ in meaning from another, and one learns to favor one reading over another based on the difference in the meanings.
9. Ilm al-Aqa'id/Ilm al-Kalam: is important because we cannot attribute the literal meaning of some ayaat to Allah. In this case, one will be required to interpret the ayah as in 'the hand of Allah is over their hand'.
10. Usul al-Fiqh: are the principles of Islamic Jurisprudence. It is important to master this field so one understands the methodology of legal derivation and interpretation.
11. Asbaab al-Nuzul: is the field by which one learns the circumstances in which an ayah is revealed. It is important because the meaning of the ayah is more clearly understood once the circumstances in which it was revealed are known. Sometimes, the meaning of an ayah is wholly dependent on its historical background.
12. Ilm-ul-Naskh: is knowledge of the abrogated verse. This field is important because abrogated rulings must be separated from the applied rulings.
13. Fiqh: Jurisprudence. This field is important because one cannot gain an overview of any issue until he has understood its particulars.
14. Ilm al-Hadith: is knowledge of the hadith which explain general verse.
15. Ilm al-Ladunni: Last but not least is the endowed knowledge which Allah grants to his closest servants. Knowledge obtained directly from Allah, e.g. through inspiration. They are the servants indicated in the Hadith: "Allah will grant one who acts upon whatever he knows from a knowledge he never knew."

## H. Conclusion

The hermeneutics founded upon ordinary usage of the language of revelation undertakes to accomplish an even more complicated task of establishing general rules of language. In other words, how to present coherence in the present structure of the text to demonstrate its miraculous quality? These inquiry have led a number of modern

commentators to engage in exegesis of the Qur'an by the Qur'an (tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an), that is, intra-textual hermeneutics.

Accordingly, three major prerequisites must be recognized to accomplish intra-textual hermeneutics to make it similar to Islamic commentary approach:

1. The commentator should not pre-formulate his opinion about the passage under consideration. Because, most of Qur'an verses are containing very deep meaning.

The majority of scholars agreed that nearly impossible to translate the Qur'an from the native language into another language because the word of God is immortal that cannot be changed into the language of human. Even the Qur'an language was characterized by God so weight that when it is lowered into the mountain, it will be paralyzed because of its fear for example:

لو انزلنا هذا القرآن على جبل لرايته خاشعا متصدعا من خشية الله وتلك الامثال نضربها للناس لعلهم يتفكرون

*If We had sent down this Qur'an upon a mountain, you would have seen it humbled and coming apart from fear of Allah. And these examples We present to the people that perhaps they will give thought (Al-Hasr:21).*

2. Lexicographical investigation must be thorough enough to acquire the most comprehensive sense of a term and its properties.

When we hear the verses:

لهم ما يشاءون فيها ولدينا مزيد

*They will have whatever they wish therein, and with Us is more (Qaf:35).*

لو اردنا ان نتخذ لهما لاتخذناه من لدنا ان كنا فاعلين

*Had we intended to take a diversion, We could have taken it from with Us - if We were to do so (Anbiya:17)*

كيف تكفرون بالله وكنتم امواتا فاحياكم ثم يميتكم ثم يحييكم ثم اليه ترجعون

*How can you disbelieve in Allah when you were lifeless and He brought you to life; then He will cause you to die, then He will bring you to life, and then to Him you will be returned. (Baqarah: 28)*

All of those divine verses should be compared to attach with correct meaning and presence to represent the concept of place, because in our minds the two ideas are inseparable.

At last, The comprehension of lexicology including homonym, synonym, antonym etc. of the word have changed so much that not a single component of the original can be found in them; yet the name has not changed. It shows that the basic element that allows the use of a name for a thing is not the shape of that thing, but its purpose and benefit.

3. Those who want to become mufasireen, must be mastered all the 15 fields of knowledge and gather all of his comprehension from the purified family of the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) before he can authoritatively interpret the Quran, Careful attention should be given to the method that was employed by the Prophet to interpret the verse by another verse, just as Imam 'Ali bin Abi Thalib (a.s.) in His Nahjul Balaghah (Vol.2, p.17), a prominent disciple of the Prophet and an eminent exponent of the Qur'an states: "*One part of the Book of God explains another,.... and one part serves as a witness to the other*".

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