

The Re-emergence of Classical Exegesis in the Contemporary Era: Between Revivalism, Epistemological Continuity, and Intellectual Stagnation

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Abstract

The persistence of classically oriented Qur'anic exegesis in the contemporary period presents an important yet underexplored phenomenon in Qur'anic studies. While modern tafsir has generally been associated with reformist, contextual, and interdisciplinary approaches, a number of contemporary exegetical works continue to preserve classical interpretive structures and methodologies. This study investigates the re-emergence of classical exegesis through a comparative analysis of three major twentieth-century commentaries: *Tafsir al-Munir* by Wahbah al-Zuhaili, *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* by Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn Ashur, and *Khawatir Hawl al-Qur'an al-Karim* by Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi. Employing qualitative library research with descriptive-comparative analysis, the study examines their exegetical methodologies, interpretive sources, systematic structures, and socio-intellectual orientations. The findings demonstrate that all three commentaries preserve essential characteristics of classical tafsir—including the predominance of the *tahlili* method, extensive engagement with earlier exegetical authorities, philological analysis, and comprehensive verse-by-verse interpretation—while simultaneously incorporating selective responses to contemporary intellectual and social concerns. These findings challenge the conventional binary classification that sharply separates classical and contemporary tafsir. Instead, the study argues that these works represent a form of neo-classical exegesis, characterized by epistemological continuity rather than methodological stagnation. Consequently, the re-emergence of classical exegesis should be understood neither merely as a revivalist movement nor as evidence of intellectual decline, but as a dynamic strategy for preserving the authority of the classical exegetical tradition while negotiating the demands of modernity. This study contributes a new theoretical perspective by proposing neo-classical exegesis as an intermediary category within the historiography of Qur'anic interpretation.

Keywords: Neo-classical exegesis; Classical tafsir; Contemporary Qur'anic interpretation; Epistemological continuity; Tafsir historiography



Abstrak

Keberlanjutan tafsir bercorak klasik pada era kontemporer merupakan fenomena penting yang masih relatif jarang dikaji dalam studi Al-Qur'an. Di tengah berkembangnya tafsir modern yang identik dengan pendekatan reformis, kontekstual, dan interdisipliner, sejumlah karya tafsir kontemporer justru tetap mempertahankan struktur dan metodologi penafsiran klasik. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis kemunculan kembali tafsir klasik melalui studi komparatif terhadap tiga karya tafsir abad ke-20, yaitu *Tafsir al-Munir* karya Wahbah al-Zuhaili, *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* karya Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn Ashur, dan *Khawatir Hawl al-Qur'an al-Karim* karya Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan metode deskriptif-komparatif untuk mengkaji metodologi penafsiran, sumber-sumber tafsir, sistematika penyajian, serta orientasi intelektual ketiga karya tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ketiga tafsir mempertahankan karakteristik utama tafsir klasik, seperti dominasi metode *tahlili*, penggunaan intensif khazanah tafsir klasik, analisis kebahasaan yang mendalam, serta penafsiran ayat demi ayat secara komprehensif, namun pada saat yang sama mengintegrasikan respons terbatas terhadap persoalan intelektual dan sosial kontemporer. Temuan ini menantang dikotomi konvensional yang memisahkan secara tegas antara tafsir klasik dan tafsir kontemporer. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa ketiga karya tersebut lebih tepat dipahami sebagai bentuk tafsir neo-klasik, yaitu model penafsiran yang menampilkan kesinambungan epistemologis tanpa terjebak pada stagnasi metodologis. Dengan demikian, kemunculan kembali tafsir klasik pada era kontemporer tidak semata-mata mencerminkan gerakan revivalisme ataupun kemunduran intelektual, melainkan strategi dinamis untuk mempertahankan otoritas tradisi tafsir klasik sekaligus merespons tuntutan modernitas. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dengan menawarkan konsep tafsir neo-klasik sebagai kategori baru dalam historiografi perkembangan tafsir Al-Qur'an.

Kata kunci: Tafsir neo-klasik; Tafsir klasik; Tafsir kontemporer; Kesinambungan epistemologis; Historiografi tafsir

Introduction

The history of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr) reflects a continuous process of intellectual development in which interpretive methodologies have evolved alongside changing socio-historical contexts. Beginning with the Prophet Muḥammad's explanations of revelation, the exegetical tradition expanded through the interpretive authority of the Companions and the Successors before reaching its classical codification in the monumental works of early Muslim scholars such as al-Ṭabarī. During the medieval period, tafsīr developed into diverse intellectual traditions characterized by linguistic analysis, jurisprudential reasoning, theological debate, philosophical inquiry, and mystical interpretation, demonstrating that the history of tafsīr has never been static but has continuously responded to the epistemological challenges of each era (Goldziher, 1955; Calder, 1993; Saleh, 2004).

The emergence of modern Qur'anic exegesis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is generally regarded as one of the most significant turning points in the history of

Islamic hermeneutics. Reformist scholars such as Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā sought to reconstruct Qur'anic interpretation so that it could engage with colonialism, scientific advancement, modern education, constitutional politics, and social reform. Their *Tafsīr al-Manār* became a landmark of modern exegetical discourse because it shifted the primary concern of tafsīr from preserving inherited interpretations toward demonstrating the continuing relevance of the Qur'an for contemporary civilization (Riḍā, 1979; Jansen, 1980; Pink, 2019). Consequently, contemporary tafsīr has often been associated with contextual interpretation, thematic approaches (*tafsīr mawḍū‘ī*), maqāṣid-oriented reasoning, and critical engagement with modern intellectual developments (Al-Khalidi, 2008).

Nevertheless, the development of contemporary tafsīr presents an intriguing paradox. Although modern Qur'anic interpretation is commonly identified with reformist and contextual approaches, many influential commentaries produced during the contemporary period continue to preserve distinctly classical exegetical characteristics. Rather than abandoning traditional interpretive frameworks, these works maintain extensive reliance on transmitted reports (*riwāyah*), verse-by-verse (*taḥlīlī*) exposition, grammatical and rhetorical analysis, legal reasoning, and close engagement with the classical exegetical heritage. Their emergence challenges the conventional assumption that chronological modernity necessarily entails methodological modernity in Qur'anic interpretation.

This phenomenon has generated contrasting scholarly interpretations. Abd al-Mubārak regards the persistence of classical exegetical styles as a constructive revival of authentic Islamic scholarship that protects the integrity of Qur'anic interpretation from excessive accommodation to Western intellectual paradigms. From this perspective, the continuation of classical methods represents an epistemological effort to preserve the authority of the Islamic scholarly tradition amidst the pressures of secular modernity. In contrast, Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī argues that the persistence of medieval interpretive patterns among some contemporary exegetes reflects intellectual stagnation, limiting the capacity of tafsīr to respond creatively to new social realities and emerging human problems (al-Dhahabī, 2000). These opposing perspectives—revivalism versus stagnation—constitute one of the most important unresolved debates within contemporary Qur'anic studies.

Recent scholarship demonstrates a growing interest in contemporary Qur'anic exegesis from various perspectives. Studies have explored the contextual and reformist orientation of modern tafsīr (Pink, 2019), the intellectual history of Qur'anic interpretation (Saleh, 2004), hermeneutical transformations in modern Islamic thought (Saeed, 2006), and the

methodological reconstruction of Qur'anic interpretation in response to contemporary challenges (Calis, 2022; Ahmad, 2023). Other scholars have examined maqāṣid-based interpretation, thematic exegesis, and contextual hermeneutics as defining characteristics of contemporary tafsīr (Al-Khalidi, 2008). While these studies have significantly advanced the understanding of modern Qur'anic interpretation, they overwhelmingly concentrate on reformist, contextualist, or progressive exegetical models.

Conversely, studies specifically examining the persistence or re-emergence of classical exegetical paradigms within contemporary Qur'anic commentaries remain remarkably limited. Existing research generally investigates individual works separately—for example, studies on Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī's juristic methodology, Ibn 'Āshūr's maqāṣid-oriented interpretation, or al-Sha'rāwī's popular preaching style—without positioning these commentaries within a broader epistemological discussion concerning the continuity of classical tafsīr in the contemporary era. More importantly, no comparative study has systematically examined these three influential commentaries through the theoretical lens of revivalism, epistemological continuity, and intellectual stagnation. Consequently, an important gap remains regarding how classical exegetical methodologies continue to survive, adapt, and acquire new significance within modern Islamic intellectual history.

This study addresses that gap by comparatively analyzing three major contemporary Qur'anic commentaries: *Tafsīr al-Munīr* by Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* by Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr, and *Khawāṭir Ḥawl al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī. Although all three works were produced during the contemporary period and share a socio-communal (*al-adab al-ijtimā'ī*) orientation together with a predominantly *taḥlīlī* method, each represents a distinctive model of classical continuity. Al-Zuḥaylī combines transmitted and rational sources while emphasizing legal analysis and *munāsabah*; Ibn 'Āshūr prioritizes rational interpretation, linguistic precision, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*; whereas al-Sha'rāwī integrates transmitted, rational, and spiritual interpretations through an accessible pedagogical style. Their similarities and differences provide an ideal corpus for investigating how classical exegetical traditions continue to operate within contemporary Islamic scholarship.

Unlike previous studies that classify these works merely as contemporary commentaries, this article argues that they represent the re-emergence of classical exegesis within the modern intellectual landscape. This phenomenon should not be understood solely as either a conservative revival or an expression of intellectual stagnation, but rather as a

manifestation of epistemological continuity in which classical interpretive traditions are selectively preserved, reconstructed, and recontextualized to address contemporary Muslim societies. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer two principal research questions: (1) What classical exegetical characteristics are shared by these three contemporary commentaries in terms of methodology, interpretive sources, and intellectual orientation? (2) How should the re-emergence of classical tafsīr in the contemporary era be interpreted within the competing paradigms of revivalism, epistemological continuity, and intellectual stagnation? By addressing these questions, this article contributes a new theoretical perspective to contemporary Qur'anic studies by reconceptualizing the persistence of classical tafsīr not merely as historical survival but as an active epistemological strategy within modern Islamic intellectual discourse.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on library research, focusing on the comparative analysis of three contemporary Qur'anic commentaries that exhibit strong classical exegetical characteristics: *Tafsīr al-Munīr* by Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* by Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr, and *Khawāṭir Ḥawl al-Qur'ān al-Kaīm* by Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī. These works were purposively selected because they were produced during the contemporary period yet retain interpretive structures commonly associated with the classical exegetical tradition, making them appropriate cases for examining the re-emergence of classical tafsir in modern Islamic scholarship.

The primary data consist of the original texts of the three commentaries. Secondary sources include classical and contemporary literature on the history of Qur'anic exegesis, methodological studies of tafsir, and scholarly discussions concerning the development of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics. Particular attention is given to works addressing the historical periodization of tafsir, classical and contemporary exegetical methodologies, and debates surrounding revivalism, continuity, and reform within Islamic intellectual history.

Data were collected through systematic documentation of relevant textual materials from both primary and secondary sources. The analysis employed descriptive, comparative, and interpretive methods. The descriptive analysis was used to identify the methodological characteristics of each commentary, including its exegetical sources (*riwāyah*, *dirāyah*, and *ishān*), interpretive method, systematic organization, and dominant orientation. Comparative analysis was then conducted to identify similarities and differences among the three works regarding their methodological structures, epistemological foundations, and interpretive

tendencies. Finally, interpretive analysis was undertaken to explain the broader significance of these findings within contemporary Qur'anic studies by situating them in the ongoing scholarly debate concerning the persistence of classical exegetical traditions in the modern period.

To strengthen the analytical framework, this study adopts the historiographical perspective of Qur'anic exegesis developed by al-Dhahabī (2000) and al-Khālidī (2008), which provides the basis for distinguishing classical and contemporary exegetical paradigms. In addition, the competing theoretical perspectives of 'Abd al-Mubārak and al-Dhahabī concerning the emergence of classical-oriented tafsir are employed as analytical lenses. The former interprets this phenomenon as an intellectual movement of Islamic revival and purification, whereas the latter regards it as evidence of the continuation of medieval intellectual stagnation. These contrasting perspectives serve not as normative judgments but as heuristic frameworks for interpreting the empirical characteristics identified in the three selected commentaries.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing interpretations derived from the three primary commentaries with relevant classical and contemporary scholarship on Qur'anic exegesis. Rather than evaluating the theological correctness of individual interpretations, the analysis focuses on identifying recurring methodological patterns and epistemological tendencies that characterize the re-emergence of classical exegesis within the contemporary intellectual context.

Results and Discussion

A. Results

1. Why These Three Tafsir Represent Contemporary Classical Exegesis

One of the central findings of this study is that the persistence of classical exegetical characteristics cannot be explained merely by the chronological period in which a tafsir was produced. Although *Tafsir al-Munīr*, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, and *Khawāṭir Ḥawl al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* were all composed during the late twentieth century—a period generally associated with contemporary Qur'anic interpretation—they consistently preserve methodological features that historically belong to the classical exegetical tradition. This finding challenges the widespread assumption that contemporary tafsir necessarily reflects modernist or reformist hermeneutics.

Historically, classical tafsir emerged during the formative centuries of Islam and became the authoritative foundation of later exegetical scholarship because of its close connection with the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors. The authority of this tradition rests primarily upon transmitted knowledge (*al-ma'thūr*), rigorous philological analysis, detailed discussion of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, legal reasoning, and sequential interpretation following the order of the muṣḥaf. Classical commentators such as Ibn Abbas, Mujahid ibn Jabr, Qatadah ibn Di'amah, and Al-Tabari established a methodological framework that later became the benchmark for Qur'anic interpretation (Al-Dhahabī, 2000; Al-Ṭabarī, 2001). Rather than constructing thematic syntheses, classical exegetes emphasized verse-by-verse explanation (*tahlīl*), careful linguistic clarification, and preservation of authoritative transmission, thereby ensuring continuity with the earliest generations of Islamic scholarship (Saleh, 2004).

The comparative analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that these foundational characteristics remain clearly visible in the three contemporary commentaries examined. Despite differences in theological emphasis and interpretive style, all three works employ the *tahlīl* arrangement, maintain extensive engagement with the classical exegetical heritage, preserve Arabic philological analysis, and prioritize continuity with established scholarly authorities. None of them attempts to reconstruct Qur'anic interpretation through modern philosophical paradigms in the manner associated with reformist tafsir represented by Muhammad Abduh or Rashid Rida. Instead, each seeks to renew contemporary Muslim engagement with the Qur'an while remaining firmly anchored within the inherited exegetical tradition.

Nevertheless, the study also finds that contemporary classical exegesis should not be understood simply as a reproduction of medieval scholarship. Each commentator selectively appropriates the classical heritage according to distinct scholarly priorities. Wahbah al-Zuhaili combines transmitted authorities with juristic analysis in order to connect Qur'anic interpretation with practical legal guidance. Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur reconstructs classical scholarship through rational analysis and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, while Muhammad Metwally al-Sha'rawi integrates traditional authorities with linguistic reflection and spiritual intuition, producing an accessible form of public exegesis. Their differences therefore lie not in abandoning classical methodology but in adapting it to different intellectual objectives.

This finding indicates that contemporary classical tafsir constitutes a coherent exegetical tendency characterized by methodological continuity rather than chronological

classification. The decisive criterion distinguishing these works is not the era in which they were written but the epistemological framework through which revelation is interpreted. Accordingly, the emergence of these commentaries demonstrates that classical methodology remains an active and productive paradigm within contemporary Qur'anic scholarship rather than merely a historical legacy. This observation provides the analytical foundation for the following sections, which examine individually how classical characteristics are manifested in each commentary before synthesizing their shared contribution to contemporary Qur'anic exegesis.

2. Classical Characteristics of *Tafsīr al-Munīr*

Among the three exegetical works examined, *Tafsīr al-Munīr fī al-'Aqīdah wa al-Sharī'ah wa al-Manhaj* demonstrates the clearest synthesis between classical exegetical methodology and contemporary social concerns. Although written during the late twentieth century, the commentary consistently preserves the epistemological structure of classical tafsir while simultaneously responding to the practical needs of modern Muslim societies. Rather than reconstructing Qur'anic interpretation through new hermeneutical paradigms, Wahbah al-Zuhaylī positions himself within the inherited Sunni exegetical tradition and seeks to reactivate its relevance for contemporary readers (Zuhaili, 2009).

The principal objective of *Tafsīr al-Munīr* is to reconnect Muslims with the Qur'an through an interpretation that integrates creed (*'aqīdah*), law (*sharī'ah*), ethics, and practical guidance. As explained by al-Zuhaylī in the introduction to his commentary, the Qur'an should function not merely as an object of intellectual inquiry but as a comprehensive guide regulating both individual and collective life. Consequently, he deliberately avoids excessive juristic polemics while emphasizing the Qur'an's educational, legal, and moral messages (Zuhaili, 2009). This orientation reflects what later scholars describe as the integration of traditional scholarship with contemporary Islamic reform, in which classical interpretation remains the primary epistemic authority while addressing present-day social realities (Ayoub, 1984; Saeed, 2006).

A defining characteristic of *Tafsīr al-Munīr* is its balanced integration of *riwāyah* and *dirāyah*. Al-Zuhaylī explicitly states that authentic transmitted authorities—including the Qur'an itself, Prophetic traditions, and the opinions of the Companions—constitute the primary foundation of interpretation. Nevertheless, these transmitted sources are complemented by systematic rational analysis grounded in Arabic linguistics, legal theory, contextual explanation, and juristic evaluation (Zuhaili, 2009). Unlike reformist

commentators who frequently privilege independent reasoning, al-Zuḥaylī employs rationality as an instrument for explaining revelation rather than redefining its authority. This methodological balance explains why many scholars classify *Tafsīr al-Munīr* as one of the most representative examples of contemporary Sunni neo-traditional exegesis (Pink, 2019).

Structurally, *Tafsīr al-Munīr* retains the classical tahlīlī arrangement by interpreting the Qur'an sequentially from Sūrat al-Fātiḥah to Sūrat al-Nās (Arni, 2013). Each sūrah is introduced through discussions of its designation, Makkan or Madinan classification, thematic overview, relationship with preceding sūrahs (*munāsabah*), occasions of revelation, and linguistic features before proceeding to verse-by-verse exposition. Al-Zuḥaylī also incorporates grammatical (*i'rāb*) and rhetorical (*balāghah*) analyses together with explanations of disputed vocabulary. Significantly, each exegetical section concludes with Fiqh al-Ḥayāh ("the jurisprudence of life"), where practical legal and ethical implications are extracted from the verses (Fari', 1998). This systematic organization illustrates that while the commentary addresses contemporary audiences, its architecture remains fundamentally rooted in classical exegetical conventions.

Another important finding concerns the commentary's dominant interpretive orientation. Although *Tafsīr al-Munīr* is generally categorized within the al-adab al-ijtimā'ī tradition because of its concern for social reform and public ethics, the analysis reveals that this orientation is consistently mediated through Islamic jurisprudence. Al-Zuḥaylī's expertise as a jurist profoundly shapes his interpretation, resulting in a commentary where social issues are examined primarily through legal reasoning rather than sociological or philosophical analysis (Fari', 1998). This distinguishes *Tafsīr al-Munīr* from reformist commentaries such as *Tafsīr al-Manār*, which engage more extensively with modern political and intellectual debates. Instead of replacing classical legal reasoning with contemporary social theory, al-Zuḥaylī seeks to demonstrate that classical jurisprudential principles remain capable of addressing modern realities.

This tendency becomes particularly evident in his treatment of theological and legal questions. In discussing anthropomorphic expressions concerning the divine attributes, for example, al-Zuḥaylī adopts the traditional Salafī approach by affirming the Qur'anic wording without speculative reinterpretation (*ta'wīl*), while simultaneously rejecting any anthropomorphic understanding of God (Fari', 1998). Likewise, in his discussion of female political leadership, his interpretation remains firmly grounded in classical juridical authorities and Prophetic traditions rather than contemporary gender discourse. Whether or not

contemporary readers agree with these conclusions, these examples demonstrate the consistency with which al-Zuhaylī privileges inherited Sunni jurisprudential methodology over modern ideological reinterpretations.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the classical character of *Tafsīr al-Munīr* lies not merely in its reliance on traditional authorities but in its comprehensive preservation of the epistemological architecture of classical tafsir. Its sequential organization, integration of transmitted and rational sources, extensive linguistic analysis, juristic orientation, and commitment to inherited interpretive authority collectively position the work as a paradigmatic example of contemporary classical exegesis. Rather than representing an attempt to revive the past uncritically, *Tafsīr al-Munīr* demonstrates how classical exegetical methodology can be systematically adapted to address the ethical, legal, and social concerns of contemporary Muslim life without abandoning its traditional epistemic foundations.

3. Classical Characteristics of *al-Taḥnīr wa al-Tanwīr*

Among contemporary Qur'anic commentaries that consciously preserve the classical exegetical tradition, *al-Taḥnīr wa al-Tanwīr* of Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr occupies a distinctive position. Unlike many twentieth-century exegetes who attempted to reconstruct Qur'anic interpretation by adopting modern scientific, sociological, or ideological paradigms, Ibn 'Āshūr sought to renew tafsir from within the classical Islamic intellectual tradition itself. His project was neither a rejection of classical scholarship nor an uncritical repetition of it. Rather, it represented an effort to purify, reorganize, and revitalize the inherited exegetical legacy through rigorous linguistic analysis, rational argumentation, and the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). This orientation explains why *al-Taḥnīr wa al-Tanwīr* is frequently regarded as one of the most influential examples of contemporary tafsir that maintains a fundamentally classical structure while simultaneously introducing important methodological innovations (Ibn 'Āshūr, 1984; Basheer M. Nafi, 2005).

The intellectual background of the work clearly illustrates Ibn 'Āshūr's concern over two opposing tendencies within modern Islamic thought. As recorded in the introduction to his tafsir, he criticized both those who accepted the classical heritage without critical reflection and those who rejected the entire Islamic scholarly tradition in the name of modernity. According to him, neither position could produce genuine intellectual renewal. Instead, he proposed a third path: preserving the authoritative legacy of the early scholars while refining, correcting, and expanding it according to sound scholarly principles (Ibn 'Āshūr, 1984; Al-Sulaymani, 2014). This position demonstrates that his work should not be

interpreted merely as a conservative return to tradition but rather as an attempt to establish continuity between inherited knowledge and contemporary intellectual needs.

Unlike many traditional commentaries whose introductions are relatively brief, Ibn 'Āshūr devoted an extensive prolegomenon consisting of ten methodological chapters before beginning the interpretation of Sūrat al-Fātiḥah. These introductory discussions cover fundamental disciplines of Qur'anic studies, including the distinction between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, the qualifications of the exegete, the legitimacy of *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *qirā'āt*, Qur'anic narratives, the arrangement of the Qur'an, its universal objectives, and the theory of *i'jāz al-Qur'an* (Ibn 'Āshūr, 1984). The existence of this comprehensive methodological introduction reflects one of the principal characteristics of classical scholarship, namely establishing the epistemological foundations of interpretation before engaging with the exegetical text itself.

Although *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* follows the traditional *taḥlīlī* arrangement by interpreting the Qur'an sequentially from Sūrat al-Fātiḥah to Sūrat al-Nās, its analytical depth distinguishes it from earlier classical commentaries. Ibn 'Āshūr consistently explores syntactical relationships, semantic nuances, rhetorical devices (*balāghah*), lexical development, and interconnections among verses before deriving theological, legal, and ethical conclusions. His commentary therefore demonstrates that adherence to the *taḥlīlī* method does not necessarily imply methodological rigidity; instead, the classical structure becomes a framework within which sophisticated linguistic and rational analyses are conducted.

A defining feature of Ibn 'Āshūr's methodology is his preference for *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*. While he frequently cites earlier authorities, Prophetic traditions, and classical exegetes, these materials function primarily as objects of critical evaluation rather than unquestioned authorities. Much of *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* consists of comparative discussions of previous interpretations followed by independent evaluation based upon linguistic evidence, legal reasoning, and contextual coherence (Al-Sulaymani, 2014). This methodological tendency has led numerous contemporary scholars to characterize Ibn 'Āshūr as one of the foremost representatives of rational yet tradition-based Qur'anic interpretation, whose use of reason remains firmly grounded within the epistemological framework of Islamic scholarship rather than external philosophical systems (Laila, A. N., & Ochviardi, D., 2024).

Another important characteristic distinguishing *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* from earlier classical commentaries is its systematic integration of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. Rather than

limiting interpretation to textual explanation or legal derivation, Ibn ‘Āshūr consistently seeks the higher objectives underlying Qur'anic legislation. His interpretation of verses concerning usury (Q. Āl ‘Imrān [3]:130), for example, demonstrates that the prohibition of *ribā* should be understood not merely as a legal injunction but as a mechanism for preserving social justice, economic cooperation, and collective welfare. Through this approach, legal interpretation becomes connected with broader ethical purposes, allowing Qur'anic guidance to remain applicable across changing historical contexts (Al-Hamdi, n.d.). Recent scholarship likewise identifies *maqāṣid* as the organizing principle underlying *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, arguing that Ibn ‘Āshūr transformed the objectives of the Sharī‘ah into an interpretive methodology rather than treating them merely as a subsidiary legal theory (Zubairin, at. al, 2024).

Closely related to his *maqāṣid*-based reasoning is Ibn ‘Āshūr's exceptional attention to linguistic analysis. His commentary frequently examines subtle distinctions between synonymous expressions, rhetorical structures, grammatical constructions, and semantic development within the Arabic language. For Ibn ‘Āshūr, the linguistic architecture of the Qur'an constitutes one of its greatest miracles (*i‘jāz*), and accurate interpretation therefore requires comprehensive mastery of Arabic philology and rhetoric. Consequently, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* is often regarded not only as a work of tafsir but also as a major contribution to Arabic linguistic studies. Contemporary analyses consistently recognize its linguistic sophistication as one of the principal reasons for its continuing influence within modern Qur'anic scholarship.

The methodological structure employed by Ibn ‘Āshūr may be summarized into several recurring analytical procedures. He begins each discussion with a thematic overview of the sūrah, explains rhetorical coherence among verses, examines lexical and grammatical issues in detail, evaluates competing exegetical opinions, identifies the broader objectives of revelation, and concludes by relating Qur'anic guidance to the social conditions of Muslim society. According to al-Hamdi, these procedures include particular emphasis on *balāghah*, textual coherence (*munāsabah*), semantic precision, social reform, and intellectual revival through the Qur'an (Al-Hamdi, n.d.). This systematic methodology demonstrates that his commentary preserves the classical commitment to philological precision while simultaneously expanding its interpretive horizons toward civilizational renewal.

Several examples illustrate these methodological characteristics. In discussing the prohibition of *ribā*, Ibn ‘Āshūr interprets the verse through the objectives of economic justice rather than through literal legal restriction alone. In interpreting Q. al-Ra‘d [13]:39 concerning

divine decree, he critically reviews differing opinions transmitted from Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn Mas'ūd, and Ibn 'Umar before presenting his own synthesis grounded in theological reasoning. Likewise, when discussing the history of Banī Isrā'īl in Egypt, he integrates historical evidence with textual interpretation to reconstruct the socio-political background of the Qur'anic narrative. These examples demonstrate that although *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* remains firmly anchored within the classical exegetical tradition, it significantly broadens the scope of analysis through historical criticism, legal philosophy, and contextual reasoning.

From the perspective developed in this article, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* represents a particularly significant manifestation of contemporary classical exegesis because it illustrates that fidelity to classical methodology does not necessarily entail intellectual stagnation. The commentary unquestionably preserves essential characteristics of the classical tradition—including sequential (*taḥlīlī*) exposition, reliance on Arabic linguistic sciences, engagement with earlier authorities, and deep respect for inherited scholarship. Nevertheless, Ibn 'Āshūr simultaneously reconstructs these classical foundations through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, contextual reasoning, and independent critical evaluation. His work therefore occupies an intermediate position between strict traditionalism and modern reformism, demonstrating that the continuity of classical exegesis can coexist with methodological creativity. This hybridity explains why *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* should be understood not as a simple continuation of medieval tafsir, but as one of the clearest examples of what this study conceptualizes as the neo-classical paradigm of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis, wherein classical epistemological authority is preserved while its interpretive instruments are reformulated to address the intellectual challenges of the modern period.

4. Classical Characteristics of *Khawāṭir Ḥawl al-Qur'ān al-Kaīm*

Among the contemporary exegetical works examined in this study, *Khawāṭir Ḥawl al-Qur'ān al-Kaīm* by Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi occupies a distinctive position. Unlike Wahbah al-Zuhaylī and Ibn 'Āshūr, al-Sha'rāwī did not initially intend his work to be a formal *tafsīr*. Instead, he deliberately described it as *khawāṭir* (spiritual reflections), emphasizing that the Qur'an continually reveals new insights to believers according to their intellectual and spiritual capacities. As he explains in the introduction to his work, complete interpretation belongs ultimately to the Prophet, whereas later generations merely receive successive reflections (*khawāṭir*) inspired through continuous engagement with the Qur'an (Muḥammad, 2012). This understanding reflects the classical epistemological principle that no interpreter

can claim exhaustive authority over the divine text, while simultaneously allowing interpretive renewal within the boundaries of the inherited exegetical tradition.

Despite this terminological distinction, scholars generally classify *Khawāṭir* as a full exegetical work because it systematically comments on the Qur'an from Sūrat al-Fātiḥah to Sūrat al-Nās following the canonical order of the *muṣḥaf* (Mentari, 2011). The work therefore retains one of the principal characteristics of classical exegesis: the *tahḥīlī* (verse-by-verse) method. At the same time, because the commentary originated from al-Sha'rawī's public lectures before being transcribed into book form, thematic discussions frequently emerge whenever a cluster of verses addresses a common subject. Consequently, the work represents a hybrid form in which the classical sequential structure remains dominant while thematic integration appears naturally throughout the exposition. Similar observations have been made by recent scholarship, which identifies *Khawāṭir* as combining traditional exegetical sequencing with pedagogical discourse designed for contemporary audiences (Pink, 2019; Abdel Haleem, 2018).

The principal objective of *Khawāṭir* is neither legal codification nor philosophical speculation but the restoration of direct interaction between ordinary Muslims and the Qur'an. Al-Sha'rawī repeatedly emphasizes that the Qur'an is a living discourse whose meanings remain perpetually renewable without contradicting its original linguistic structure (Muḥammad, 2012). This objective places the work within the *al-adab al-ijtimā'ī* orientation that became characteristic of many twentieth-century Sunni commentaries. Nevertheless, unlike reformist exegetes such as Muḥammad 'Abduh or Rashīd Riḍā, al-Sha'rawī rarely uses the Qur'an to debate modern Western philosophy, political theory, or scientific paradigms. Instead, he concentrates on cultivating religious consciousness through linguistic clarification, moral instruction, and spiritual reflection. Contemporary studies likewise argue that al-Sha'rawī's popularity stemmed from his ability to communicate classical Sunni orthodoxy in accessible language rather than through modernist reinterpretation (Pink, 2019; Saleh, 2004).

Methodologically, the author's data indicate that al-Sha'rawī consistently follows several distinctive procedures. He begins by presenting an entire verse before analyzing its individual phrases; he explains difficult expressions primarily through Arabic linguistic analysis; he frequently discusses rhetorical features (*balāghah*), lexical nuances, and occasionally variant *qirā'āt*; he identifies relationships between consecutive verses; and he concludes many discussions by summarizing the principal message of the passage (Muḥammad, 2012). Unlike highly technical classical commentaries, however, these

analytical elements are expressed through remarkably simple language intended for broad public audiences. This pedagogical clarity explains why *Khawāṭir* became one of the most widely read contemporary Qur'anic commentaries throughout the Arab world.

A defining characteristic of *Khawāṭir* is its integration of three complementary exegetical sources: *al-ma'thūr*, *al-ra'y*, and *al-ishān*. This tripartite methodology distinguishes al-Sha'rāwī from both Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, who primarily combines *riwāyah* and *dirāyah*, and Ibn 'Āshūr, whose interpretation is predominantly rational (*bi al-ra'y*). Al-Sha'rāwī regularly interprets one Qur'anic verse through another, employs Prophetic traditions and reports from the Companions, and simultaneously develops linguistic reasoning together with spiritual insights derived from devotional contemplation (Muḥammad, 2012). Such integration reflects the long-standing Sunni synthesis between transmitted authority, disciplined reasoning, and ethical spirituality rather than representing an innovative contemporary methodology.

The use of tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān is especially evident in his interpretation of Q. 4:24 concerning married women (*al-muḥṣanāt*). Al-Sha'rāwī explains the lexical meaning of *muḥṣanāt* by relating it to Q. 66:12 describing Mary as "*aḥṣanat farjahā*" ("who guarded her chastity"). Rather than relying merely on dictionary definitions, he establishes semantic continuity between Qur'anic passages to illuminate the concept of protection and chastity (Muḥammad, 2012). This intertextual method closely resembles the classical hermeneutical principles developed by al-Ṭabarī and later elaborated by Ibn Kathīr, demonstrating continuity with the earliest exegetical tradition.

His rational analysis (*ra'y*) likewise remains firmly anchored within classical linguistic scholarship. When interpreting the divine attribute *muqītan* in Q. 4:85, for example, al-Sha'rāwī surveys multiple lexical opinions—including "Witness," "Protector," "Provider of Strength," and "Guardian"—before concluding that the original semantic core concerns Allah as the One who grants sustaining power, from which the other meanings naturally develop (Muḥammad, 2012). Rather than introducing speculative philosophical reasoning, his rational method functions primarily as philological evaluation grounded in Arabic language sciences. Recent linguistic studies similarly identify semantic precision and lexical analysis as among the defining characteristics of al-Sha'rāwī's exegetical style (Pink, 2019).

Perhaps the most distinctive dimension of *Khawāṭir* is its careful incorporation of *ishān* interpretation. Unlike esoteric commentaries that prioritize symbolic meaning over the apparent text, al-Sha'rāwī consistently preserves the literal meaning before deriving spiritual implications. His interpretation of the divine command "*ta'ālaw*" ("Come") in Q. 6:151

illustrates this approach. He observes that the verb originates from a root denoting elevation ('*uluww*'), thereby suggesting that responding to Allah's commands represents spiritual elevation above worldly degradation (Muḥammad, 2012). The symbolic lesson emerges naturally from the linguistic meaning rather than replacing it. This approach accords with classical Sunni principles governing acceptable *tafsīr ishānī*, which require that spiritual meanings remain consistent with both linguistic evidence and established doctrine (al-Dhahabī, 2000; Böwering, 1980).

From a broader hermeneutical perspective, *Khawāṭir* demonstrates that contemporary classical exegesis does not merely reproduce inherited material mechanically but recontextualizes classical interpretive tools for new audiences. Al-Sha'rāwī retains the authority of transmitted reports, the sequential structure of *tahfīlī* interpretation, and the centrality of Arabic philology, yet transforms these traditional elements into a communicative style suitable for mass education through sermons, radio, and television. Consequently, the work exemplifies what this study identifies as epistemological continuity without methodological stagnation. Its originality lies not in abandoning the classical paradigm but in revitalizing it through pedagogical accessibility and spiritual engagement.

Accordingly, *Khawāṭir Ḥawl al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* represents a third model of contemporary classical exegesis alongside *Tafsīr al-Munīr* and *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*. Whereas al-Zuḥaylī revitalizes the classical tradition through jurisprudential synthesis and Ibn 'Āshūr through maqāṣid-oriented rational analysis, al-Sha'rāwī revitalizes it through linguistic exposition, spiritual reflection, and popular religious communication. These differences demonstrate that the contemporary revival of classical exegesis was neither homogeneous nor static. Instead, it produced multiple expressions of the same epistemological commitment: preserving the interpretive authority of the classical Sunni tradition while adapting its presentation to the intellectual and social realities of the twentieth century. This observation further strengthens the central argument of the present study that the re-emergence of classical exegesis in the contemporary era should be understood primarily as a process of neo-classical continuity, rather than as a simple repetition of medieval scholarship.

B. Discussion

1. Classical Revival or Intellectual Stagnation? Reinterpreting the Return of Classical Exegesis

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Tafsīr al-Munīr*, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, and *Khawāṭir Ḥawl al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* consciously retain many of the defining characteristics

traditionally associated with classical Qur'anic exegesis. All three works employ the *tahlili* arrangement, maintain a close engagement with the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of the Qur'an, rely heavily—albeit to different degrees—on the inherited exegetical tradition, and consistently position classical authorities as indispensable interpretive references. At the same time, these commentaries were produced during the late twentieth century, an era generally characterized by reformist, thematic, scientific, and contextual approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. Their simultaneous attachment to classical methodologies and engagement with contemporary concerns creates an apparent paradox that has rarely been examined systematically within Qur'anic studies.

This paradox has traditionally been interpreted through two competing narratives. The first, represented by Muhammad Mubarak, views the revival of classical scholarship as a constructive movement toward restoring the intellectual authenticity of Islam after centuries of colonial domination and epistemological dependence. Within this perspective, the return to classical interpretive methods constitutes an effort to re-establish Islam as an autonomous intellectual tradition capable of generating its own epistemic standards rather than seeking validation from modern Western philosophies (Al-Salam, 1982). By contrast, Muhammad Husain al-Dhahabi interprets the same phenomenon as evidence of intellectual continuity with the medieval period, arguing that many contemporary exegetes merely reproduce inherited interpretations instead of producing genuinely new hermeneutical paradigms (Al-Dhahabī, 2000). From this perspective, contemporary classical tafsir represents not renewal but the persistence of interpretive stagnation.

The comparative evidence presented in this study suggests that neither interpretation adequately explains the complexity of these three commentaries. None of them simply reproduces earlier tafsir without modification, yet none fully embraces the reformist trajectory associated with *Tafsir al-Manar* or later contextualist hermeneutics. Instead, each author selectively appropriates classical exegetical conventions while simultaneously responding to the intellectual and social realities of the twentieth century. Wahbah al-Zuhaili integrates classical legal reasoning with contemporary social ethics; Ibn Ashur reconstructs the classical tradition through *maqasid al-shari'ah* and sophisticated linguistic analysis; and al-Sha'rawi transforms inherited exegetical materials into an accessible pedagogical discourse capable of reaching modern Muslim audiences. Consequently, continuity with the classical tradition does not necessarily imply the absence of innovation.

Recent scholarship on Islamic intellectual history further supports this reinterpretation. Rather than describing Islamic scholarship through the binary opposition of "decline" and "revival," contemporary historians increasingly argue that Islamic intellectual traditions have historically evolved through processes of adaptation, selective continuity, and internal renewal. Ahmed El Shamsy (2020), for example, demonstrates that the transmission of classical Islamic texts has always involved reinterpretation rather than mechanical preservation. Likewise, Wael Hallaq (2009) argues that continuity within Islamic scholarly traditions should not be equated with intellectual stagnation, because interpretive authority in Islam is constructed precisely through engagement with inherited knowledge rather than its rejection. In the field of Qur'anic studies, Walid Saleh (2018) similarly notes that later exegetes frequently reconfigure earlier traditions according to new historical circumstances while maintaining the authority of classical scholarship.

Viewed from this perspective, the persistence of classical exegetical forms in the contemporary period represents an adaptive intellectual strategy rather than a failure of innovation. Classical methodology functions as a stable epistemological framework within which contemporary concerns can be negotiated. This explains why the three tafsir analyzed in this study continue to employ *tahlili* organization and classical linguistic analysis while simultaneously addressing issues such as social reform, legal modernization, educational guidance, and communal ethics. Their classical appearance therefore conceals significant internal transformations in interpretive purpose and application.

Postcolonial perspectives also provide an important explanatory framework for understanding this phenomenon. Talal Asad (1986) argues that Islamic discursive traditions should be understood according to their own internal criteria rather than evaluated through secular Western categories of progress and modernization. Similarly, Edward Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism demonstrates that colonial scholarship frequently portrayed classical Islamic knowledge as inherently static and resistant to change. The deliberate preservation of classical exegetical methodology by twentieth-century Muslim scholars may therefore be interpreted as an epistemological act of resistance against colonial assumptions regarding the superiority of modern Western intellectual paradigms. Rather than rejecting modernity altogether, these exegetes sought to demonstrate that authentic Islamic scholarship possessed sufficient internal resources to respond to contemporary realities without abandoning its own interpretive foundations.

This interpretation also resonates with recent discussions on decolonial Islamic thought. Scholars such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1993) and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1982) argue that intellectual renewal in Muslim societies should proceed through the revitalization of the Islamic epistemological tradition rather than through uncritical adoption of external paradigms. Although al-Zuhaili, Ibn Ashur, and al-Sha'rawi differ considerably in methodology and emphasis, all three embody this broader intellectual orientation by reaffirming the authority of classical tafsir while simultaneously addressing the concerns of contemporary Muslim societies.

Accordingly, the findings of this study suggest that the debate between revival and stagnation should not be understood as a mutually exclusive dichotomy. The re-emergence of classical exegesis in the contemporary period represents both continuity and transformation. Continuity is evident in the preservation of classical interpretive structures, linguistic methodologies, and reliance upon inherited authorities. Transformation appears in the reinterpretation of these inherited methods to address modern intellectual, legal, educational, and social challenges. Consequently, contemporary classical tafsir should be understood neither as a simple reproduction of medieval scholarship nor as a rejection of modernity, but as a distinctive form of interpretive adaptation that preserves epistemological continuity while allowing gradual methodological renewal.

2. Re-reading Contemporary Tafsir beyond the Modern–Classical Dichotomy

The findings of this study suggest that the conventional dichotomy between "classical" and "modern" tafsir is no longer sufficient for explaining the complexity of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis. Classical and modern should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories defined merely by historical chronology, but rather as overlapping epistemological orientations that continue to interact throughout the development of tafsir. The three exegetical works examined in this study demonstrate that a commentary produced in the twentieth century may simultaneously preserve classical interpretive structures while responding to contemporary intellectual and social realities. Consequently, the chronological assumption that contemporary tafsir necessarily represents methodological innovation is not consistently supported by the empirical evidence.

The historiography of tafsir has frequently been constructed through linear developmental narratives that portray the classical period as the age of transmitted interpretation (*tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*), the medieval period as an era of scholastic elaboration, and the modern period as a phase characterized by reform, rationalization, and engagement

with modernity (Goldziher, 1955; al-Dhahabī, 2000). Although such periodization remains useful for mapping broad intellectual tendencies, it often obscures the persistence of classical exegetical methods within contemporary scholarship. As Walid A. Saleh (2004) argues, the classical tafsir tradition should be understood not merely as a historical stage but as the formation of an enduring interpretive canon that continues to shape later exegetical production. Contemporary mufasssirūn therefore do not simply inherit classical interpretations; they participate in an ongoing exegetical tradition whose authority remains intellectually productive rather than historically obsolete.

This continuity is clearly reflected in the three commentaries examined in this study. Wahbah al-Zuhaylī retains the classical structure of tahlīlī interpretation while integrating contemporary legal and social discussions through *Fiqh al-Ḥayāh*. Ibn 'Āshūr reconstructs the classical rational tradition by combining linguistic analysis, maqāṣid al-sharī'ah, and historical reasoning without abandoning the authority of earlier scholarship. Al-Sha'rāwī, meanwhile, transforms classical exegetical materials into an accessible public discourse by combining transmitted reports, linguistic reflection, and spiritual insights in a style designed for contemporary audiences. These different trajectories demonstrate that classical methodology possesses considerable adaptive capacity rather than representing a static intellectual legacy.

From the perspective of intellectual history, this adaptive continuity may be understood as a characteristic feature of Islamic knowledge production. Ahmed El Shamsy (2020) demonstrates that the survival of classical Islamic scholarship into the modern period was made possible through continuous processes of preservation, editing, republication, and reinterpretation. Rather than freezing the classical canon, these processes enabled successive generations to reactivate inherited knowledge within new historical contexts. Likewise, Hallaq (2009) emphasizes that continuity constitutes one of the defining characteristics of the Islamic intellectual tradition, in which innovation generally emerges through reinterpretation of established authorities instead of radical epistemological rupture. The persistence of classical exegetical structures in contemporary tafsir therefore reflects an established pattern of intellectual continuity rather than resistance to historical change.

The evidence presented in this study also challenges the assumption that methodological modernity necessarily requires abandoning classical interpretive frameworks. Although twentieth-century Qur'anic scholarship witnessed the emergence of thematic exegesis (*tafsīr mawḍū'ī*), scientific interpretation, feminist readings, and various contextual approaches, these developments did not replace the classical tradition entirely. Instead,

multiple exegetical paradigms coexist within contemporary Qur'anic studies. Some commentators prioritize methodological innovation, whereas others deliberately preserve inherited exegetical forms while adapting them to new social circumstances. The coexistence of these diverse approaches indicates that contemporary tafsir should be understood as an epistemologically plural field rather than a homogeneous modern movement.

Postcolonial scholarship provides an additional perspective for interpreting this phenomenon. Talal Asad (1986) argues that Islamic intellectual traditions should be viewed as discursive traditions whose continuity is maintained through the ongoing interpretation of authoritative texts rather than through rigid historical preservation. Similarly, Edward Said (1978) demonstrates that colonial epistemologies often constructed Islamic intellectual heritage as static and incapable of development, thereby legitimizing Western models of knowledge as universal standards of progress. The conscious return to classical exegetical methodologies by contemporary Muslim scholars may therefore be interpreted as an effort to reclaim interpretive authority from externally imposed epistemological hierarchies. In this sense, the preservation of classical tafsir represents not intellectual isolation but an assertion of the autonomy of Islamic hermeneutics.

This interpretation resonates with the broader project of epistemological decolonization advanced by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1993) and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1982). Both scholars maintain that Islamic scholarship should develop through the internal resources of its own intellectual tradition rather than through uncritical dependence upon secular Western paradigms. Their arguments do not advocate the rejection of modern knowledge, but rather emphasize that engagement with modernity should proceed from an autonomous Islamic epistemological foundation. The persistence of classical exegetical forms in contemporary tafsir therefore reflects an effort to maintain the integrity of Qur'anic hermeneutics while selectively engaging with contemporary intellectual challenges.

Accordingly, the findings of this study suggest that the relationship between classical and contemporary tafsir should no longer be conceptualized as a binary opposition between tradition and modernity. Instead, the contemporary exegetical landscape is better understood as a spectrum of epistemological continuities in which inherited methodologies are continually reconstructed, expanded, and contextualized in response to changing historical circumstances. This reinterpretation establishes the conceptual basis for the theoretical proposition advanced in the following section, namely that the phenomenon examined in this study is more

accurately described as Neo-Classical Exegesis rather than simply as either classical revivalism or intellectual stagnation.

3. Toward the Theory of Neo-Classical Exegesis: Reconceptualizing Contemporary Classical Tafsir

The comparative findings of this study ultimately indicate that the re-emergence of classically oriented tafsir in the contemporary period cannot be adequately explained through the long-standing opposition between revivalism and stagnation. Although both perspectives illuminate important aspects of the phenomenon, neither sufficiently captures the complex interaction between historical continuity, methodological adaptation, and epistemological self-consciousness that characterizes the three exegetical works examined in this study. The evidence instead suggests the existence of a distinct interpretive paradigm that occupies an intermediate position between traditional continuity and contemporary renewal. To conceptualize this phenomenon, this study proposes the theoretical construct of Neo-Classical Exegesis.

Neo-Classical Exegesis may be defined as a contemporary Qur'anic interpretive paradigm that intentionally preserves the epistemological authority, methodological architecture, and scholarly legitimacy of the classical tafsir tradition while selectively reconstructing its application to respond to changing intellectual, social, and civilizational contexts without abandoning its internal Islamic epistemological foundations. Unlike purely classical tafsir, which emerged within pre-modern intellectual settings, Neo-Classical Exegesis operates within modernity while refusing to subordinate Qur'anic interpretation to external epistemological standards. Conversely, unlike reformist-modernist tafsir, it does not regard methodological rupture with the classical tradition as a prerequisite for intellectual renewal. Instead, renewal is achieved through reinterpretation within the continuity of the inherited exegetical tradition.

This theoretical formulation differs from existing classifications proposed by al-Dhahabi (2000), al-Khalidi (2008), and Abd al-Majid Abd al-Salam (1982). Their classifications primarily categorize tafsir according to methodological orientation, dominant sources, or ideological tendencies. The present study instead introduces a historiographical category that explains how classical epistemological structures continue to function productively within contemporary intellectual environments. Consequently, Neo-Classical Exegesis should be understood not merely as another exegetical orientation but as an

interpretive paradigm describing the relationship between historical continuity and contemporary contextualization.

The comparative analysis of *Tafsir al-Munir*, *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir*, and *Khawatir Hawl al-Qur'an al-Karim* consistently demonstrates this pattern. Although each commentary differs substantially in interpretive emphasis, all retain the fundamental architecture of classical scholarship. Wahbah al-Zuhaili preserves the balance between *riwayah* and *dirayah* while extending classical jurisprudential reasoning to contemporary social life through *Fiqh al-Hayah*. Ibn 'Ashur reconstructs classical rational exegesis by integrating *maqasid al-shari'ah*, rhetoric, and linguistic analysis into a coherent interpretive framework without abandoning the authority of earlier scholarship. Al-Sha'rawi, meanwhile, translates classical linguistic, spiritual, and transmitted traditions into an accessible pedagogical discourse suitable for modern Muslim audiences. Their differences therefore represent variations within a common epistemological paradigm rather than fundamentally different interpretive traditions.

The emergence of this paradigm also reflects broader processes of continuity within Islamic intellectual history. El Shamsy (2020) demonstrates that the rediscovery of classical Islamic scholarship during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not an exercise in nostalgia but a reconstruction of intellectual authority under new historical conditions. Similarly, Hallaq (2009) argues that Islamic intellectual traditions have historically evolved through cumulative continuity rather than revolutionary rupture. Innovation within Islamic scholarship generally occurs through reinterpretation of inherited authorities instead of replacing them. The findings of this study confirm that contemporary classical tafsir follows precisely this historical pattern, suggesting that continuity itself constitutes an important mechanism of intellectual creativity.

Walid A. Saleh's historiographical analysis further strengthens this interpretation. Rather than viewing the classical tafsir tradition as a closed body of inherited knowledge, Saleh (2004; 2018) argues that successive generations continually reorganized, expanded, and reinterpreted earlier exegetical authorities according to new scholarly circumstances. Classical tafsir therefore represents an evolving interpretive canon rather than a static textual archive. The three commentaries examined here continue this historical process by preserving canonical methodologies while adapting their interpretive emphases to the intellectual concerns of the twentieth century. Their contribution lies less in methodological rupture than in the creative reconfiguration of inherited exegetical resources.

From a postcolonial perspective, Neo-Classical Exegesis may also be interpreted as an expression of epistemological autonomy. Talal Asad (1986) conceptualizes Islamic scholarship as a discursive tradition, in which continuity is maintained through the continuous reinterpretation of authoritative texts rather than through mechanical repetition. Within such a tradition, fidelity to inherited scholarship becomes a dynamic intellectual activity rather than passive imitation. Likewise, Edward Said (1978) demonstrates that Orientalist discourse frequently represented Islamic intellectual traditions as static, thereby legitimizing Western epistemologies as universal standards of knowledge. The deliberate preservation of classical exegetical methodology by contemporary Muslim scholars can therefore be understood as a rejection of this epistemological hierarchy and an affirmation that Islamic hermeneutics possesses sufficient internal resources for renewal without dependence upon external paradigms.

This interpretation converges with the broader intellectual projects advanced by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1993) and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1982). Both scholars argue that authentic intellectual renewal within Muslim societies must proceed through the revitalization of the Islamic worldview rather than through the wholesale adoption of secular epistemological assumptions. Neo-Classical Exegesis reflects precisely this orientation. It neither rejects modern intellectual developments nor embraces them uncritically. Instead, it filters contemporary knowledge through the normative and epistemological structures of the classical Islamic tradition, thereby preserving the autonomy of Qur'anic hermeneutics while maintaining its contemporary relevance.

Building upon these findings, this study proposes that Neo-Classical Exegesis is characterized by five interrelated dimensions. First, epistemological continuity, manifested in sustained commitment to the authority of the Qur'an, Sunnah, classical tafsir, and the cumulative scholarly tradition. Second, methodological conservation, reflected in the continued use of *tahlili* organization, philological analysis, rhetorical examination, and engagement with the inherited exegetical canon. Third, contextual adaptation, whereby classical interpretive principles are applied to contemporary legal, ethical, educational, and social realities without fundamentally altering their epistemological basis. Fourth, selective intellectual engagement, in which contemporary knowledge is incorporated only insofar as it remains compatible with Islamic interpretive principles rather than serving as the ultimate criterion of truth. Finally, civilizational self-assertion, whereby Qur'anic interpretation

functions as an affirmation of the autonomy and continuity of the Islamic intellectual tradition within an increasingly globalized and plural epistemic environment.

These five dimensions distinguish Neo-Classical Exegesis from both classical and reformist paradigms. Classical tafsir primarily sought to preserve and transmit the earliest interpretive heritage within pre-modern scholarly contexts, whereas reformist tafsir frequently reoriented interpretation toward contemporary scientific, philosophical, or sociopolitical concerns through substantial methodological innovation. Neo-Classical Exegesis occupies an intermediate position: it preserves the methodological legitimacy of the classical tradition while acknowledging the necessity of contextual responsiveness. Its defining characteristic therefore lies not in methodological novelty alone, but in the dynamic interaction between continuity and renewal.

The theoretical implications of this formulation extend beyond the three commentaries examined in this study. Neo-Classical Exegesis provides an analytical framework capable of explaining a broader group of twentieth- and twenty-first-century tafsir works that retain classical epistemological commitments while engaging contemporary realities. This category therefore expands the historiography of Qur'anic interpretation beyond the conventional binary of "classical" and "modern," offering a more nuanced model for understanding the evolution of contemporary tafsir traditions across different regions of the Muslim world.

Accordingly, this study argues that the re-emergence of classical exegesis should not be interpreted as evidence of either intellectual stagnation or simple revivalism. Rather, it represents the emergence of a distinct interpretive paradigm in which continuity itself becomes the mechanism of renewal. The concept of Neo-Classical Exegesis thus offers a new theoretical vocabulary for explaining how contemporary Muslim exegetes preserve the authority of the classical tradition while simultaneously responding to the intellectual demands of the modern world. In doing so, it contributes not only to the historiography of tafsir but also to broader discussions concerning the continuity, transformation, and future trajectory of Islamic intellectual traditions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the persistence of classically oriented Qur'anic exegesis in the contemporary period should not be understood as an anomalous phenomenon or as a mere continuation of premodern interpretive traditions. Through a comparative analysis of *Tafsir al-Munir*, *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir*, and *Khawatir Hawl al-Qur'an al-Karim*, the findings reveal that all three commentaries retain fundamental characteristics of classical tafsir—

including the predominance of the *tahlili* method, systematic verse-by-verse exposition, strong engagement with the Islamic scholarly tradition, and reliance on inherited exegetical authorities—while simultaneously responding to contemporary social realities through the *al-adab al-ijtima'i* orientation. Although they share these common features, each commentary exhibits a distinct epistemological configuration: al-Zuhaili integrates *riwayah* and *dirayah* within a jurisprudential framework, Ibn 'Ashur emphasizes rational interpretation, linguistic analysis, and *maqasid al-shari'ah*, whereas al-Sha'rawi combines transmitted, rational, and spiritual interpretation through a pedagogically accessible style. These findings indicate that classical exegetical methodology has not disappeared in the modern era but has continued to evolve through different intellectual configurations.

Beyond describing these exegetical characteristics, this study offers a broader theoretical contribution to contemporary Qur'anic studies. The comparison between the perspectives of 'Abd al-Mubarak and Husain al-Dhahabi demonstrates that the re-emergence of classical tafsir cannot be adequately explained by the binary opposition between revivalism and intellectual stagnation. Instead, this phenomenon is more accurately understood as a process of neo-classical exegesis, namely the preservation of classical epistemological structures accompanied by selective adaptation to contemporary intellectual and social contexts. This conceptualization challenges the dominant periodization that sharply separates classical and modern tafsir traditions, showing instead that continuity and transformation coexist within contemporary Qur'anic interpretation. Consequently, the category of neo-classical exegesis provides an alternative analytical framework for understanding twentieth- and twenty-first-century tafsir that continues to draw legitimacy from the classical heritage without rejecting the demands of contemporary realities.

This study is limited to three representative commentaries from the Arab intellectual tradition and focuses primarily on their methodological and epistemological dimensions. Future research may expand this framework by examining neo-classical tendencies in other regions, including Southeast Asian, Turkish, Iranian, and South Asian tafsir traditions, or by investigating how neo-classical exegesis interacts with thematic (*mawdu'i*), contextual, feminist, scientific, digital, and maqasid-based approaches. Such comparative investigations will contribute to a more comprehensive reconstruction of contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics and further refine the theoretical framework of neo-classical exegesis proposed in this study.

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