

CRITICAL STUDY OF APPROACHES TO THE EXEGESIS OF THE HOLY QUR'AN

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Abstract

In recent years, different approaches to the Qur'an and the Muslim exegetical tradition reflect a wide variety of methods, presuppositions, focuses of interests and substantive conclusions. The various interpretations of the Qur'an belong to different stages of the intellectual history of Islam, and reflect in themselves the development of Islamic thought. Different approaches, sources, representative exegetes and their works are discussed in this paper in the context of socio-historic, epistemological and modernistic interpretations. The modern approaches emphasize on hypothetical, linguistic and scientific views based on rational interpretations relevant to changing needs and circumstances of Muslims that are taken into account by the jurists.

Key Words: - Quranic interpretation; Modern Approaches; Exegesis.

Introduction

The need for explanation and interpretation of the Holy Quran was felt by Muslims in the formative period and thus a wide range of books on exegesis, with different focuses were produced to offer a good range of methods that are employed for exegesis of the Holy Quran. In the modern era new approaches have been presented to develop an insight into the Quranic interpretations, critically examining it through employing various methodologies. As a result new methods of enquiry are being employed, widening fields of discussion as well as adding a great value to this field of research (1)

Massimo Campanini (2) explores early approaches to the understanding of the Qur'an, providing guide to Muslims how to read the Qur'an in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in his book *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*. New scholarly approaches to the Qur'an have led to an increasing appreciation for the diversity of ways in which the Qur'an has been received and interpreted by Muslims, and the significance of this research for contemporary Muslim understandings of the text. (3)

Abdullah Saeed in his book 'Islamic thought: An introduction' have elaboratively discussed about the modern exegesis trends and the eminent scholars who introduced new styles and forms of interpretations. Different parts of the Quran were revealed step-by-step relating to different subject matter according to diverse, changing needs and requirements of Islamic movements in those stages. The nature of Quran requires the verses revealed in medina blend together with those revealed in Makah to get an overall view and an integrated perspective of Islam. (4)

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Amin Ahsan Islahi states in his commentary of Quran, *Taddabur al Quran* that there are different types of Quranic exegesis: traditionalist, theological, literary-philosophical and juridical (5)

Thus interpretation of Holy Quran has to be pragmatic in its approach to answer the situations that come forth due to modernity. It has to be harmonious with modern sciences and not predominated by a conventional approach i.e. it should answer the theoretical questions posed by modernity by it universal principles and legal norms. The themes elaborated in partial matters should be accumulated to build a global concept totalized in one core.

1.1 Approaches to Interpretation of the Quran

Laws are implemented along with consequent explication. These elucidations of the provisions clarify the ambiguities and interpret the rulings for stopping any misapplication of the law. The elucidations are often rendered as an optional feature of legislation and they are not considered having a binding power. However, they not only serve to eliminate ambiguity but also significant in judicial review and interpretation of laws (6)

Methods of interpretation of the Quran have continuously changed and developed over the course of Islamic history. Two different approaches are mainly found in this context, namely, 'textualist' and 'contextualist' approaches. Textualists focus on understanding the meaning of Quranic verses that are unalterable, and imply on linguistic analysis of sources, i.e. Quran and Sunnah for the purpose of interpretation. Modernity has generated a new approach to the interpretation of Quran which is gaining popularity among populace. They argue that textual study should consider factors like social, political and cultural conditions of that time in order to get a better understanding. They not only support their arguments of interpretation with linguistic analysis but also hermeneutics and literary theory. In this way, the contextualists employ new techniques to approach Quran without losing contact with the history. (7)

The interpretation of Quranic verses to deduce argument had been based on a legalistic-literalistic approach from the post-formative period of Islamic law to the modern period in both exegesis (*tafsir*) and law (*Fiqh*). In modern period jurists must use a 'contextualist' approach that would be more flexible, as it will take into consideration both the socio-historical context of Qur'an, when revealed along with the contemporary concerns and needs of Muslims today. That is how the meaning of the Qur'an can be related to the life of Muslims in a sense of its application to day-to-day practicalities in different times, circumstances and places, particularly as it relates to the concerns and needs of the modern period. Muslim exegetes have emphasized mainly on the linguistics for interpreting universality of Quranic ruling as well as to determine the ethico-legal content. Thus the socio-historic context at the time of revelation was considered as irrelevant except in exceptional cases. So the emphasis on social and historical context relevant to changing needs and circumstances of Muslims is taken into account by the jurists. There have been

enormous changes on global level today and these changed perceptions and institutional structures are to be taken into account for Quranic interpretations.

1.2 Recognition of Socio-Historic context and interpretation

According to Watson, law is about a process; the process is about resolving conflict and establishing order. So, achieving and maintaining order and stability is one of the main functions of the law. H. L. Hart argues that law consists of primary and secondary rules. Primary rules are duties without a system of priority and application. Secondary rules cure the inconsistencies of primary rules and consist of rules of recognition, rules of change, and rules of adjudication (8)

On a sociological perspective, Ehrlich, Fundamental (9) argues that law depends on coercion, norms and purpose, and is the product of social life as supported by the power of the state. The purpose of the law is to secure conditions for social life. The source of most norms is society, and not the state. (10)

The understanding of social, political, economic and legal climate and associated norms, laws and values of the Arabian region must be studied in detail in order to give an interpretation of Quranic verses in their socio-historical context. The Holy Quran has referred to this aspect frequently. Historically, the socio-historical context was not consulted for interpretation, that's why the non-linguistic and historical factors were largely relied on whose prospects to explain were limited. Having a complete knowledge about the anthropological and socio-historical context of the Hijaz makes the verses comprehensible. (11)

The socio-cultural life of Hijaz was very diverse on account of its having influence from Mediterranean cultures, including Jewish and Christian, to southern Arabic, Ethiopian and Egyptian. Thus the norms and values of the people there reflected culture and material world including physical characteristics, events, attitudes and the institutions of Hijaz. (12)

The socio-historic context of the Qur'an in its interpretation led to the formation of norms and values on the basis of which jurists laid the foundations of deducing legal rulings. This context is of primarily important to make the text of Qur'an relevant to contemporary Muslims. It makes jurists understand the relation between legal and ethical rulings of Quran and their relevance in the historical and geographical scenario. An eminent scholar, Muhammad al-Ghazali (13) (d.1996), showed concern over the shift of Muslims from understanding the essence and pondering on the philosophy towards the recitation, and memorization only. This approach to the Qur'an is not in accordance with Quranic rulings that emphasize again and again on understanding the deeper meanings of Quran and exhortation on its text. (14) Al-Ghazali has stated in his book *kayfa nata'amalu* about this approach of Muslims as

“one must read the Qur'an carefully, contemplatively, which leads to the understanding of each sentence accurately. Each person should make all efforts to understand its meaning and comprehend its goals. If there is any

difficulty [with the text] he should ask those who have knowledge. Reading, understanding and reflection of the Qur'an are required at all times". (15)

The contemplation of Holy Quran should serve as a mean to explore the historical and contemporary dimensions to which the revealed verses addressed, i.e. in the specific context in which those verses were revealed should be linked with the present scenario to make them comprehensible and acceptable to people today. Interpretation of the Qur'an does not mean only to explain the historical meaning of the text by philosophical and grammatical analysis. The interpreter must be able to see those verses in a broader to context to apply their meaning to present situation as well as to answer significant issues. (16) The most important issue that the exegetes face with is the issue of mutability and immutability of Quranic text, i.e. either the meaning is fixed or they can be altered with changed circumstances. (17)

1.3 Sciences of Quranic Interpretation

Quran was revealed in the language of Arabs so they all understand its words and verses. Since it was revealing gradually so it started with revelation of concept of *Tawhid* (Oneness of Allah Almighty) and religious duties (*Al-furud-al-dunya*), including articles of faith (*aqaid al-imaniyah*). According to circumstances and sequence of revelation, some of the verses abrogate the earlier ones. The Holy Prophet used to explain the meanings of Quranic verses, the unclear statements (*mujmal*), the abrogating and abrogated (*nasikh and mansukh*) verses, and the reasons of revelation (*asbab-an-nazul*). Dogmatically the explanations and interpretations by the Holy Prophet were most authentic. These explanations were transmitted to next generations marking the beginning of *tafsir* as a scholarly discipline on its own. (18)

Ibne Khuldun recognized two kinds of *tafsir*, first *naqli* (traditional) based on information from earlier Muslims, knowledge about *nasikh and mansukh* and *asbab an-nazul*. Second kind concerns with linguistic knowledge, *balagha*, for understanding the appropriate meaning and method (*al-maqasid wa'l asbab*) of Quranic verses. Since this kind of *tafsir* is concerned primarily with linguistic knowledge and stylistic form (*ma'rifa al-lugha wal-'l balagha*), it became preponderant in certain Quranic commentaries. (19)

1.4 Epistemology and Modernity in Interpretation of Quran

The interpretation of Holy Quran has to be pragmatic in its approach to answer the situations that come forth due to modernity. It has to be harmonious with modern sciences and not predominated by a conventional approach i.e. it should answer the theoretical questions posed by modernity by its universal principles and legal norms. The themes elaborated in partial matters should be accumulated to build a global concept totalized in one core.

There is no one interpretation of text, but there are many interpretations given the difference between different interpreters. According to Ibne Khuldun, there are four factors that lead to difference of opinion among the jurists in interpretation of texts. 1. the implicit and multiple meanings of the certain words of the text, 2.

differences in ways of transmitting the Sunnah that requires *tarjih* (interpretation), 3. evidence that does not come from the texts and 4. new realities and cases (*al-waqa' al mutajaddida*) that are not covered by texts. (20)

To avoid the potential of relativism, there is continuity and permanence in the Quranic text itself as exemplified through various readings by their point of convergence, the role of Quran in a society is as a catalyst affecting behavior, each social context must be understood the fundamental and unchangeable principles of the text, and then implement in their own reflection. It is not the text or the principles that change, but the capacity and the particularity of the understanding of reflection of the principles of text within a community of people. If there would be only one interpretation of the Quran, it will limit the extent of the text. Quranic text is flexible enough to accommodate cultural situations being universally beneficial for all. Therefore to force it to have a single perspective severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself. (21)

1.5 Modern Exegetic Approach

The process of interpretation in the perspective of moral-social situation has two way approaches. One means to interpret Quran was to understand the meanings in totality in addition to the specific principles that are identified for particular circumstances. Thus it systemizes general principles, values and norms. Other way was generalizing the answers for specific situations and articulating them as dogmas of socio-moral norms that are deduced from specific texts in the light of socio-historic background. This has to be materialized in concrete socio-historic context. (22)

Thematic exegesis that emerged during prophetic era and still existing follows three methods of analysis, words, ayahs and text. Syed Qutub, Muhammad Al-Ghazali, Hasan al Turabi introduced literary exegesis in twentieth and twenty first century, later followed by Ayatollah Mahmud taleqani (d. 1980) incorporating political analysis of Quran in modern literary approach to exegesis of Quran. Stylistic exegesis is a textual and lexicographical approach that deals with rhetorical features, semantics and syntactic of the verses. Scientific exegesis is another approach to exegesis that shows the compatibility of the Quranic verses to the scientific developments in modern age. (23)

In the modern period, Quranic exegesis is developed in order to redefine the understanding of Quran in the light of modernity. Scholars like Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d.1898) of India and Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) of Egypt stressed the importance of a responsive approach compatible with modernity moving away from imitation. Both scholars represent rationalist thinking in Quranic interpretation.

Another distinctively modern approach involves examining Quran in the light of modern science (called scientific exegesis). An Egyptian scholar Tantawi Jawahiri (d.1940) wrote an encyclopedia on scientific exegesis that meant to link the Quranic text with modern scientific world view. The other approach in scientific exegesis is to demonstrate that modern scientific achievements were foreseen by Quran centuries ago, i.e. scientific miraculous nature of Quran?. Another significant

trend called socio-political exegesis which tends to provide a new perspective on the relevance of Quran to today's Muslims. Syed Qutub (d. 1966) is one of the main proponents of this aspect of exegesis; his work draws mainly on modern world and its challenges.

Interpreting Quran from literary perspective generated a controversy when an Egyptian Taha Husayn (d.1973) argued for analyzing Quran as a literary text and regarded that incidents mentioned in Quran may not necessarily be historical. Thematic exegesis is another popular approach for interpreting Quranic texts that emphasized the unity of Quranic text over the interpretation of verses in isolation. This theory was floated by Amin al-Khuli (d.1967) of Egypt who regarded focusing on specific themes is more beneficial while Interpreting Quran. This kind of *tafsir* is very popular in Egypt and Indonesia. (24)

The literature on Quranic exegesis depicts that Muslims want to find solution of their contemporary issues without losing the essence of the divine rulings from the Holy Scripture. Thus three trends are prevalent in modern period, namely, textualist, semi-textualist and contextualists. Textualists argue to strictly abide by text and interpretations within traditions. Semi-textualists point towards to presenting the ethico-legal content of the Quran in socio-historic context linking it with modern perspective. While contextualists believe in understanding ethico-legal content in the light of political, social, historical, religious and economic contexts in which the verses were revealed, understood, interpreted and applied.

Conclusion

Exegesis of Quran have a long complicated history and the trends show that Muslims attempt to understand and apply the Quranic verses in their faith and daily life to meet their contemporary needs. For this purpose they have developed a wide variety of exegetic approaches and methodologies to understand the Quran from various aspects. The employment of different styles of exegesis shows the determination of Muslims in this regard. A brief review of traditionalist and contemporary approaches with a critical analysis of existing literature on Quranic exegesis gives an insight into this field of study.

In the modern period, Quranic exegesis is developed in order to redefine the understanding of Quran in the light of modernity. The emphasis on social and historical context relevant to changing needs and circumstances of Muslims is taken into account by the jurists. As there has been enormous changes on global level today so these changed perceptions and institutional structures are to be taken into account for Quranic interpretations showing compatibility of the Quranic verses to the scientific developments in modern age.

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