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Paradigm of Contextual Tafsir in Mahmud Syaltut's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*: A Methodological Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines the paradigm of contextual interpretation in Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm by Shaykh Mahmud Syaltut, one of the most influential reformist scholars of the modern Islamic world. The study aims to analyze the methodological foundations that shape Syaltut's approach to Qur'anic interpretation, particularly in responding to social change, modern challenges, and the need for religious moderation. While classical tafsir often emphasizes linguistic, legal, and theological dimensions, Syaltut introduces a contextual and rational framework that integrates textual fidelity with socio-historical realities. Using a qualitative library-based research design, this study employs a philosophical-methodological approach that combines textual analysis with epistemological, ontological, and axiological perspectives. Primary data are drawn from Syaltut's Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, while secondary sources include classical and contemporary works on Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic reform. The data are analyzed through thematic categorization and critical-hermeneutical interpretation. The findings reveal that Syaltut's tafsir is grounded in three main methodological principles: (1) contextual reading of Qur'anic verses through their socio-historical background; (2) rational-ethical reasoning that prioritizes public welfare (maṣlaḥah) and universal values; and (3) a reformist orientation aimed at bridging the gap between scriptural texts and contemporary realities. This paradigm positions the Qur'an not merely as a legal or doctrinal text, but as a dynamic moral guide for modern Muslim societies. This study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by offering a systematic framework for understanding contextual tafsir as a viable model for Islamic intellectual renewal and religious moderation in pluralistic contexts.

Keywords: *reformist methodology, Islamic thought, religious moderation, hermeneutics.*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Muslim societies, the Qur'an is increasingly confronted with complex social realities shaped by globalization, technological transformation, pluralism, and ethical uncertainty.[1] While the Qur'an remains the primary source of Islamic guidance, its interpretation often becomes trapped in rigid literalism and inherited scholastic authority.[2] This condition creates a widening gap between the normative ideals of revelation and the lived realities of Muslim communities. As a result, the Qur'an is frequently perceived as a static legal text rather than a dynamic moral and civilizational guide. Such a paradigm not only limits the

[1] Justine Howe, "Interpreting the Qur'an in the US: Religious Pluralism, Tradition, and Context," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 3 (Oktober 2016): 34–69, https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2016.0249.
[2] Abdullah Saeed dan Ali Akbar, "Contextualist Approaches and the Interpretation of the Qur'ān," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (13 Juli 2021): 527, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070527.

transformative potential of the Qur'an but also contributes to the emergence of exclusivist, conservative, and even extremist religious attitudes.[3]

This phenomenon represents what can be described as the das sein of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation: a dominance of textual formalism that marginalizes historical context, social change, and ethical objectives.[4] Many exegetical practices still prioritize doctrinal loyalty and legal rigidity over the spirit of guidance and reform embedded in the Qur'an. Tafsir, which should function as a bridge between divine revelation and human reality, is often reduced to a mechanical reproduction of classical opinions. Consequently, the Qur'an's role as a living source of moral orientation and social transformation becomes weakened.[5]

In contrast, the das sollen of Qur'anic interpretation demands a paradigm that is contextual, rational, and socially responsive. Tafsir must move beyond mere textual reproduction toward a dynamic engagement with reality.[6] The Qur'an should be interpreted as a universal and living guidance that continuously interacts with changing historical and cultural contexts.[7] This normative vision requires a methodological framework that integrates textual fidelity with critical reasoning, ethical objectives, and social realities. Within this framework, tafsir becomes not only a scholarly activity but also a transformative intellectual and moral project.[8]

It is within this tension between das sein and das sollen that the relevance of Shaykh Mahmud Syaltut (1893–1963) becomes evident. As a prominent reformist scholar and former Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar, Syaltut sought to reconstruct Islamic thought by reorienting the interpretation of the Qur'an toward rationality, social relevance, and moral universality. His work *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* reflects a paradigm that emphasizes the Qur'an as a source of ethical guidance and social reform rather than a rigid legal code. Syaltut rejects blind adherence to madhhab traditions and advocates for an interpretive approach that prioritizes the objectives of the Qur'an (maqāṣid al-Qur'ān), human welfare, and social justice.[9]

Syaltut's tafsir is characterized by a strong commitment to contextual understanding, where verses are not isolated from their historical background or contemporary implications.[10] He integrates linguistic analysis with rational reflection and social observation, creating a

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[3] Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, "From 'How' to 'Why': Reinvigorating the Qur'ān as a Living Philosophy," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 9, no. 2 (November 2024): 116–25, https://doi.org/10.2979/jims.00040.

[4] Hasanov Ulug'Bek Abdusalom O'G'Li, "The main features of modern qur'anic exegesis," *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research* 11, no. 11 (2022): 229–38, https://doi.org/10.5958/2278-4853.2022.00322.6.

[5] Mhd Syahriel Fahdzlan, M.Hanafi Ramadhan Ginting, dan Brian Avandi, "Integration of Social Concepts in the Interpretation of The Quran: A Study Of The Relationship Between The Social And The Spiritual," *Al - Mujaddid: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Agama* 5, no. 1 (30 Juni 2023): 70–89, https://doi.org/10.51482/almujaddid.v5i1.116.

[6] Deden Mula Saputra dan Agung Kurniawan, "The Development of Theoretical Study of Social Interpretation: Social Relations," *ALSYS* 5, no. 4 (30 Juni 2025): 1318–43, https://doi.org/10.58578/alsys.v5i4.6495.

[7] Muhammad Zulkarnain Mubhar, Asriadi, dan Imam Zarkasyi Mubhar, "Pengaruh Sosial - Budaya dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an Kontemporer," *Jurnal Al-Mubarak: Jurnal Kajian Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 10, no. 1 (30 Juni 2025): 19–27, https://doi.org/10.47435/al-mubarak.v10i1.3741.

[8] Abdillah Safa et al., "Hasan al-Turabi's Methodology in al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī: A Contextual and Ideological Approach to Qur'anic Interpretation," *QOF* 9, no. 1 (15 Juni 2025): 39–60, https://doi.org/10.30762/qof.v9i1.2731.

[9] رضا عبد المجيد المتولى ابراهيم, "الشيخ محمود شلتوت ومنهجه في التفسير," مجلة كلية الدراسات الإسلامية والعربية للبنات بجامعة الأزهر فرع كفر الشيخ 7, no. 1 (1 Desember 2023): 21–70, https://doi.org/10.21608/fica.2023.338564.

[10] Ahmad Dzulfikar, "Sabilillah dalam Pandangan Syekh Mahmud Syaltut dan Implementasinya dalam Hukum Islam Kotemporer," *Journal of Islamic Civilization* 2, no. 1 (30 April 2020): 41–50, https://doi.org/10.33086/jic.v2i1.1428.

method that bridges classical scholarship with modern intellectual challenges. His approach reflects a reformist spirit that seeks to restore the Qur'an's role as a dynamic guide for humanity. However, despite the significance of his contribution, existing studies on Syaltut's tafsir largely focus on thematic, biographical, or historical aspects. Few have examined his methodology through a systematic philosophical framework.[11]

This gap in scholarship highlights the need for a more comprehensive methodological analysis of Syaltut's tafsir. Most previous research has not explicitly articulated the ontological assumptions, epistemological foundations, and axiological orientations that shape his interpretive paradigm. As a result, Syaltut's methodological contributions remain fragmented and under-theorized.[12] This article seeks to address this limitation by employing a philosophy of knowledge framework—ontology, epistemology, and axiology (OEA)—as the primary analytical lens.

Ontologically, Syaltut views the Qur'an as a universal and timeless guidance that transcends historical boundaries while remaining relevant to every context. Epistemologically, he combines textual analysis (bayānī), rational reasoning (burhānī), and empirical-social observation (tajrībī) to construct meaning. Axiologically, his tafsir is directed toward ethical transformation, social harmony, and religious moderation.[13] Through this triadic framework, Syaltut's tafsir emerges not merely as an exegetical work, but as a coherent paradigm of contextual and reformist interpretation.

Therefore, this study aims to: (1) identify the fundamental paradigm of Mahmud Syaltut's tafsir; (2) analyze the methodological principles employed in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*; (3) reconstruct the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions of his interpretive framework; and (4) assess its relevance for the development of contemporary contextual tafsir.

The novelty of this research lies in its systematic reconstruction of Syaltut's tafsir methodology using the OEA framework, which has rarely been applied in previous studies. By doing so, this article contributes to the enrichment of modern Qur'anic studies and offers a conceptual model for developing a contextual, rational, and ethically grounded tafsir paradigm capable of addressing the challenges of the modern world.

METHOD

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. Mahmud Syaltut in Modern Qur'anic Scholarship

Mahmud Syaltut (1893–1963) is widely recognized as one of the most influential reformist scholars in modern Islamic thought. His intellectual project was rooted in the spirit of *islah* (reform) and aimed to bridge classical Islamic heritage with the demands of modern society. As the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar, Syaltut advocated for rational religious reasoning, inter-madhhab openness, and contextual interpretation of the Qur'an. His *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-*

[11]Moh. Nor Ichwan dan Auwal Salisu, "Reevaluating Qur'anic Hermeneutics: A Comparative Analysis Between Classical Tafsir and Modern Hermeneutical Approaches," *KALAM* 18, no. 2 (17 Desember 2024): 107–26, https://doi.org/10.24042/kalam.v18i2.24213.

[12] Ahmad Mahfud dan Abd Kholid, "Mazahib Al-Tafsir: An Axiological And Ontological-Epistemological Investigation In The Context Of Qur'anic Interpretation," *Jurnal Ushuluddin* 33, no. 1 (1 Juni 2025): 83, https://doi.org/10.24014/jush.v33i1.36105.

[13]Zainal Fanani, "Construction of the Paradigm of Islamic Universality in Maḥmūd Shaltūt's Taqrīb Madhāhib Project," *An-Nur International Journal of Islamic Thought* 1, no. 1 (22 Desember 2023): 63–73, https://doi.org/10.62032/aijit.v1i1.17.

Karīm reflects these reformist commitments by emphasizing ethical universality, social justice, and human welfare as central objectives of Qur'anic interpretation.[14]

Previous studies have described Syaltut as a proponent of *tafsir ijtihadi* that moves beyond rigid legalism. Scholars have noted his rejection of blind *taqlid* and his emphasis on *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* as guiding principles in interpreting Qur'anic injunctions. His exegetical style integrates linguistic precision with rational analysis and social awareness, allowing him to reinterpret classical legal debates in light of contemporary realities.[15] However, most of these studies approach Syaltut from a historical or thematic perspective, without systematically analyzing the philosophical structure underlying his methodology.

2. Trends in the Study of Contextual Tafsir

Contextual tafsir has become a central theme in contemporary Qur'anic studies. Scholars argue that interpretation must account for the historical circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), linguistic conventions, and the evolving social conditions of readers. This approach challenges purely literalist readings and highlights the Qur'an's ethical objectives as the ultimate interpretive horizon. Contextual tafsir also emphasizes the dynamic interaction between text, interpreter, and society, viewing meaning as a process rather than a fixed product.[16]

Despite its growing prominence, contextual tafsir often lacks a clear methodological structure. Many studies focus on practical applications but fail to articulate the epistemological and axiological assumptions that guide interpretation. This gap has resulted in methodological ambiguity, where "contextual" becomes a vague label rather than a rigorously defined paradigm.[17] The present study addresses this issue by proposing a philosophical framework that clarifies the foundations of contextual tafsir through the lens of ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

3. Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology as a Framework for Tafsir

The philosophy of knowledge framework—ontology, epistemology, and axiology (OEA)—provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing interpretive paradigms. Ontology concerns the nature of reality and the object of knowledge; in tafsir, it relates to how the Qur'an is conceptualized—as a static legal code or as a dynamic, universal guidance.[18] Epistemology addresses the sources and methods of knowledge, including textual analysis, rational reasoning, and empirical observation. Axiology focuses on the values and purposes that guide interpretation, such as justice, compassion, and social harmony.

Applying the OEA framework to Qur'anic interpretation allows scholars to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a critical reconstruction of methodological paradigms. It reveals not only how interpretation is conducted, but also why certain meanings are prioritized and how they serve broader ethical and social goals. In this study, the OEA framework functions as the theoretical foundation for examining Syaltut's tafsir.

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[14] المجيد المتولى ابراهيم, "الشيخ محمود شلتوت ومنهجه في التفسير."

[15] Kate Zebiri, *Mahmud Shalt=ut and Islamic Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 1993), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198263302.001.0001.

[16] Amer Zulfiqar Ali, "Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (14 November 2018): 39–52, https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v3i2.87.

[17] Kusroni Kusroni dan Mukhammad Zamzami, "Revisiting Methodology of Qur'anic Interpretation: A Thematic Contextual Approach to the Qur'an," *Mutawatir : Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith* 11, no. 1 (18 Juni 2021): 177–202, https://doi.org/10.15642/mutawatir.2021.11.1.177-202.

[18] Syarial Dedi, "Ushul Fiqih Menurut Paradigma Filsafat Ilmu (Kajian Ontologi, Epistemologi, dan Aksiologi)," *Al-Istinbath : Jurnal Hukum Islam* 5, no. 2 (30 November 2020): 289, https://doi.org/10.29240/jhi.v5i2.1829.

4. Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Although Mahmud Syaltut's tafsir has been widely acknowledged as reformist and contextual, few studies have systematically explored its philosophical foundations. Existing research tends to focus on specific themes—such as legal reform, interfaith tolerance, or social ethics—without articulating the coherent methodological paradigm that underpins his work. Consequently, Syaltut's tafsir is often treated as a collection of progressive ideas rather than as an integrated epistemic system.

This study positions itself at the intersection of modern Qur'anic studies and the philosophy of knowledge. By reconstructing Syaltut's methodology through the OEA framework, the article offers a novel perspective that clarifies the internal logic of his interpretive approach. This conceptual positioning not only fills a significant gap in the literature but also contributes to the development of a rigorous model for contextual tafsir in contemporary Islamic thought.

Discussion

1. Ontological Foundations of Syaltut's Tafsir

Mahmud Syaltut conceptualizes the Qur'an as a universal and dynamic source of guidance rather than a static legal text. Ontologically, the Qur'an is viewed as a living moral authority (*hudan li al-nās*) whose meanings are not confined to the socio-historical context of seventh-century Arabia, but continuously unfold in response to human realities[19] This perspective challenges classical literalist assumptions that treat revelation as a closed normative system, fixed within early juristic interpretations.

Syaltut asserts that the essence of the Qur'an lies in its ethical objectives, not merely in its formal legal injunctions. For him, the Qur'an exists not only as a text (*nass*), but as a moral reality that must be actualized in social life. This aligns with contemporary hermeneutical views that regard meaning as relational-emerging through the interaction between text, interpreter, and context.[20] Thus, the ontological status of the Qur'an in Syaltut's paradigm is both transcendent and immanent: transcendent in its divine origin, yet immanent in its continuous relevance.

Furthermore, Syaltut rejects the notion that classical fiqh represents the final embodiment of Qur'anic meaning. He argues that juristic interpretations are historically situated responses rather than eternal truths.[21] This ontological shift redefines tafsir as an open, evolving intellectual endeavor rather than a closed exegetical tradition.

2. Epistemological Structure of Syaltut's Methodology

Epistemologically, Syaltut integrates three sources of knowledge: textual-linguistic analysis (*bayānī*), rational reasoning (*burhānī*), and socio-empirical observation (*tajrībī*). This tripartite epistemology reflects a holistic approach that transcends purely textual or rationalist paradigms.

First, Syaltut grounds interpretation in a careful linguistic reading of the Qur'an, including grammar, rhetoric, and semantic context. However, he refuses to absolutize linguistic literalism when it contradicts ethical objectives or social realities.[22] Second, he employs rational analysis to evaluate the coherence and social consequences of interpretations, echoing the

[19] المجيد المتولى ابراهيم, "الشيخ محمود شلتوت ومنهجه في التفسير"

[20] Norman K. Swazo, "Islamic Intellectualism," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 28, no. 4 (1 Oktober 2011): 1–30, https://doi.org/10.35632/ajiss.v28i4.330.

[21] Hakan Coruh, "Qur'an and Interpretation in the Classical Modernism," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 2 (18 September 2019): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v4i2.175.

[22] المجيد المتولى ابراهيم, "الشيخ محمود شلتوت ومنهجه في التفسير."

reformist tradition of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida.[23] Third, Syaltut acknowledges empirical social conditions as a legitimate source of interpretive insight, recognizing that revelation must speak to lived realities.

This epistemological synthesis parallels Fazlur Rahman's "double movement" theory, which emphasizes contextual understanding followed by contemporary application.[24] Both scholars affirm that meaning emerges through a dialectical process between text and context, rather than through isolated textualism.

3. Axiological Orientation: Ethics, Moderation, and Social Reform

Axiologically, Syaltut's tafsir is directed toward ethical transformation and social harmony. He explicitly frames Qur'anic interpretation as a means to realize justice (*'adl*), compassion (*raḥmah*), and public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*).[25] This value-oriented orientation positions tafsir as a moral project rather than a purely academic exercise.

Syaltut's emphasis on moderation (*wasatiyyah*) reflects his commitment to avoiding both rigid conservatism and uncritical liberalism. He advocates a balanced approach that preserves religious authenticity while remaining responsive to change. This aligns with contemporary discourses on moderate Islam as a framework for social coexistence and pluralism.[26]

By prioritizing ethical objectives, Syaltut transforms tafsir into a tool for social reform. His methodology encourages interpreters to evaluate the real-world implications of their interpretations, ensuring that tafsir contributes to human dignity and communal well-being.

4. Relevance for Contemporary Qur'anic Interpretation

The OEA framework reveals Syaltut's tafsir as a coherent paradigm of contextual interpretation. Ontologically, the Qur'an is a living guidance; epistemologically, meaning is constructed through an integrative method; axiologically, interpretation is oriented toward ethical and social goals. This paradigm offers a viable alternative to rigid literalism and methodological relativism in contemporary Qur'anic studies.

In an era marked by ideological polarization and ethical crises, Syaltut's methodology provides a model for engaging the Qur'an as a source of moral renewal. His approach demonstrates that fidelity to revelation does not require disengagement from reality, but rather a deeper commitment to its ethical spirit.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Mahmud Syaltut's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* represents a coherent and systematic paradigm of contextual Qur'anic interpretation. By employing the ontology–epistemology–axiology (OEA) framework, this article has reconstructed the philosophical foundations underlying Syaltut's exegetical methodology. Ontologically, Syaltut views the Qur'an as a living and universal source of guidance that transcends historical limitations while remaining continuously relevant to human realities. This perspective redefines the Qur'an not merely as a legal text, but as a moral and civilizational guide.

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[23]Ahmad Nabil Amir, "Muhammad Abduh and His Epistemology of Reform: Its Essential Impact on Rashid Rida," *HERMENEUTIK* 15, no. 1 (17 Juni 2021): 61, https://doi.org/10.21043/hermeneutik.v15i1.8517.

[24]Rahmawati Rahmawati dan Muhtolib Muhtolib, "Melacak Jejak Hermeneutika Fazlur Rahman dalam Wacana Teori Tafsir: Perspektif Historis dan Epistemologis," *Adh Dhiya | Journal of The Quran and Tafseer Studies* 2, no. 1 (15 November 2024): 53–65, https://doi.org/10.53038/adhy.v2i1.297.

[25]المجيد المتولى ابراهيم, "الشيخ محمود شلتوت ومنهجه في التفسير."

[26]Syahroni Siahaan dan Mhd. Khaidir Ali, "Quran Interpretation and Social Change: Implications For Religious Practices in the Modern Era," *Al - Mujaddid: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Agama* 5, no. 2 (30 Desember 2023): 40–59, https://doi.org/10.51482/almujaddid.v5i2.117.

Epistemologically, Syaltut integrates textual-linguistic analysis (*bayānī*), rational reasoning (*burhānī*), and socio-empirical awareness (*tajrībī*) to construct meaning. This integrative approach enables a dynamic interaction between revelation and reality, allowing tafsir to function as a process of ethical reasoning rather than a static reproduction of inherited opinions. Axiologically, Syaltut's tafsir is oriented toward justice, moderation, and social reform, positioning interpretation as a value-driven project aimed at human welfare and communal harmony.

The implications of this paradigm are significant for contemporary Qur'anic studies. First, Syaltut's methodology offers a viable alternative to both rigid textualism and methodological relativism by balancing fidelity to the text with responsiveness to context. Second, the OEA framework provides a systematic tool for analyzing other modern tafsir works, enabling comparative and interdisciplinary research. Finally, Syaltut's ethical orientation reinforces the role of tafsir as an instrument of moral transformation and social cohesion in pluralistic societies.

Future research may expand this study by applying the OEA framework to other reformist exegetes or by conducting comparative analyses across different cultural contexts. Such efforts will further contribute to the development of a contextual, rational, and ethically grounded paradigm of Qur'anic interpretation.

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