Various models of esoteric interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a study that has developed among Qur'anic interpreters about the ins and outs of esoteric interpretation. This interpretation approach focuses more on the hidden meaning or sign that lies implicitly beneath the *zahir* texts of the Qur'an. In the Ulumul Qur'an literature, several technical terms are known which simultaneously explain the model of esoteric interpretation, these terms are *al-tafsir al-batini* or *batiniyyah*, *tafsir isyari*, *al-tafsir al-faidi*, *al-tafsir al-ramzi*, *al-tafsir bi batin al-Qur'an*, *al-manhaj al-ramzi*, *al-tafsir al- sufi*, *al-manhaj al-tamsili* and *al-tafsir al-irsyadi*. Since the esoteric method with its epistemological instruments is a science that can bring a person to a degree of knowledge, faith, and Islam, its presence in the study of Qur'anic interpretation is vital. The exoteric approach and elaborative relationship are mutually beneficial; the depiction is like a body and heart that cannot be separated.

Keywords: Qur'anic interpretation; esoteric; model

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of the language used in the Qur'an is multi-interpretative, meaning that it can be interpreted in various ways. A history conveyed by Abu Nu'aim and others from Ibn Abbas (d. 68 H/689 AD) states that the Qur'an has several sides and meanings.[1] The explanation that comes from Al-Suyuti (849-911 H/1445-1505M) says that the meaning of the hadith is that the Qur'an has two sides of

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[1] Al-Zarkasyi, *Al-Burhan fi Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Bairut: Dar Al-Ma'rifah, 1391 H.), Volume 2, p.163.

meaning. First, his words are open to interpretation. Second, the side of the Qur'an is in the form of commands, prohibitions, suggestions, halal, and haram.[2]

Some scholars claim that each verse in the Qur'an has 60,000 different interpretations due to the variety of meanings.[3] Other scholars even agree that there are possibly 70,200 meanings because each word provides knowledge or information, and then (the number) can be multiplied by four because each word has aspects of birth, mind, beginning and end.[4]

Al-Biqa'i (d. 885 H/1480 AD) beautifully describes the Qur'an with the above characteristics, like a diamond in which each corner emits a different light than that emitted from other angles.[5] From a certain point of view, that is exactly what distinguishes the Qur'an from other books and keeps it relevant and simple to apply in various situations.[6]

Among the consequences of the Qur'an's characteristics is the increasing number and variety of interpretation products, which are now being collected in commentary books. However, that is not the only factor that has given rise to this diversity.[7] The achievements of the commentators in producing commentary works were well described by Al-Subuki (683-756 H/1284-1355 AD). He said, "If you put the books of interpretation beside the Qur'an, you will be in front of a towering hill of commentaries."[8]

Numerous encyclopedic books can be used to trace the evolution of different interpretations from their inception to the present. A work written by Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (1920),[9] for example, trying to photograph several methods of interpretation that existed since their emergence until the period of Muhammad Abduh (1265-1323 H/1849-1905 AD).[10] Other categories of interpretation

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[2] Jalaluddin Al-Suyuti , *Al-Itqan fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an* , (Bairut: Dar Al-Fikr, tt), juz 2, h. 180.

[3] al-Qanuji, *Abjad al-'Ulum Al-Wasyi Al-Marqum fi Bayan Ahwal Al-Ulum , Volume 2* , (Bairut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiyyah, 1978), h. 183

[4] Muhammad "Abd Al-Azim Al-Zarqani, *Manahil Al-'Irfan fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an*, Volume 1 (Beirut: Dar Al-Fikr, tt), p. 23.

[5] Quraish Shihab, *Grounding the Qur'an,* (Bandung: Mizan, 1992), p. 16.

[6] Research on the uniqueness of Arabic, the language used in the Qur'an, has performed by Quraish Shihab, Mu'jizat Al-Qur'an, (Bandung: Mizan, 1997).

[7] Ahmad Ibn Taimiyah, *Muqaddimah fi Ushul Al-Tafsir*, (Cairo: Maktabah Al-Turas| Al-Islam, tt), h. 34-36.

[8] *Ibid.,* h. 32.

[9] This work has been translated into Arabic by 'Abd Al-Halim Najjar, *Mazahib Al-Tafsir Al-Islami*, (Bairut: Dar Igra, 1985).

[10] Rosihan Anwar, *Exploring the Inner Space of the Qur'an,* (Jakarta: Erlangga 2010) , h. 2.

can be seen for example, in Al-Farmawi's work entitled *Al Bidayah fi Al-Tafsir Al-Ma'udhu'i*[11], and the work of Muhammad Husain Al-Zahabi (1333-1365 H/1915-1945M) entitled Al-Tafsir wa Al-Mufassirun.[12] Although with different terms, the books explain the methods of exoteric literalistic interpretation, namely *tahlili* (analysis), *ijmali* (global), *muqaran* (comparison), and *maudhu'i* (thematic).[13]

In general, it can be said that the books of commentary from classical to modern use two approaches. First, the exoteric approach, the interpretation which focuses more on the external side of the Qur'anic texts. Second, the esoteric approach, the interpretation that focuses more on the implicit sign or message that is hidden inside (*zahir*) Qur'anic texts. So far, the attention of scholars towards the first approach is more dominant than the second approach. Among the indications is their success in formulating various methods (*manhaj*) of exoteric interpretation. Another indication that can be put forward is that there are more exoteric interpretation products than esoteric interpretation products.[14] Therefore, in order to better understand the nature, urgency, and form of esoteric interpretation, the author is interested in pursuing research in this area.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Essence of Esoteric Interpretation

The word "esoteric" comes from English which means secret or hidden. In Arabic the word has the same meaning as the word *bathin*, the opposite of *zahir*. Etymologically, *batin* means "something contained by something" (*ma yujad dakhil al-sya'i*). When associated with the text, *bathin* means the hidden meaning (*al-khafi*). Secret (*al-sirriy*), deep (*al-'amiq*), closed (*al-mastur*), which is hidden for other than the expert.[15] In Arabic customs, the word *bathin* also used in the context of *kinayah* (antonomisia).[16]

The term "esoteric" was introduced by Henry Cortina, an Islamic scholar who has written about the Sufism of Ibn Habil and Hudgson. They use the word "esoteric" in an esoteric and hidden context internal, which is different in a way that is literal, external,

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[11] 'Abd Al-Hayy Al-Farmawi, *Al-Bidayah fi Al-Tafsir Al-Maudhu'i*, (Egypt: Al-Hadharah Al-Arabiyah, 1977).

[12] Muhammad Husain Al-Zahabi, *Al-Tafsir wa Al-Mufassirn* , (Egypt: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Hadisah, 1976).

[13] Rosihan Anwar, *op. cit.*, h. 3.

[14] *ibid.*

[15] 'Adil al-'Awa, *Bathin-Zahir*, in Ma'an Ziyadah, (Ed.), *Al-Maushu'ah Al-falsafiyah Al-Arabiyyah*, (Saudi Arabia: Ma' had Al-Inma Al-Arabi, 1986). h. 175

[16] Ibid., h. 178.

and born.[17] Corbin introduces the terminology when he wants to mention one model of interpretation, namely the esoteric word *takwil*. He uses the term to distinguish between *takwil* which is hidden in internal spirituality and esoteric with a literal, external and exoteric interpretation.[18]

Based on the theoretical explanation above, esoteric interpretation is any form of interpretation that seeks to explore the inner meaning of the Qur'an. The process of esoteric interpretation is called *takwil,* which technically means symbolic and spiritual hermeneutics[19]. However, etymologically, this means bringing something back to its beginning, the beginning or origins, thus, it means bringing or following symbols back to the origins they symbolize. *Takwil* applies to all kinds of symbols, both in nature, in the human world, and in the texts of revelation. The Qur'an itself uses the word verses or signs, for its own verses as well as for objects and events in the natural world and the human soul.[20]

By referring to the meaning of *takwil* which means an attempt to return something to its origin, Seyyed Hossein Nasr explained that understanding the esoteric meaning of the Qur'an means reaching its origin, because its origin is the meaning of *batin* Al-Qur'an, while its text is only an outward form or exteriorization of origin.

Furthermore, Nasr sees that the story of Musa and Khidhir, which is often quoted in traditional sources, symbolizes the existence of an esoteric meaning in the Qur'an Khidhir, which is similar to that of Elias in the Jewish Christian tradition – symbolizing esotericism and Musa symbolizing the exotericism of law. Khidhir is willing, if you don't ask questions about all of his actions. Khidhir's actions look bad and dangerous, so that Musa reviles him. Finally, Khidhir decides to stop traveling with him but explains the hidden purpose behind his actions beforehand. Musa, who had not known this goal beforehand, finally admitted his mistake. This shows that esotericism has its own logic, which a purely exoteric approach cannot reach.[21]

Various Models of Esoteric Interpretation

In the literature of the Ulumul Qur'an itself, several technical terms are known to explain the model of esoteric interpretation simultaneously. These terms are *al-tafsir al-*

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[17] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi,* (Princeton University, 1969), p. 78.

[18] *Ibid.,*

[19] Komaruddin Hidayat, *Understanding the Language of Religion A Hermeneutic Study,* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1966).

[20] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam,* Cet. II (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975, p. 25.

[21] *Ibid.,* h. 34.

batini or *batiniyyah* [22], *interpretation isyari* [23] which Manna' Al-Qattan identified with *al-tafsir al-faidi*[24], *al-tafsir al-ramzi*[25], "*al-tafsir bi batin al- Qur'an* [26], *al- manhaj al-ramzi*, *al-tafsir al-sufi* , and *al-manhaj al-tamsili* [27] and *al-tafsir alirsyadi*.[28]

Thus, eight different terms have been used by scholars regarding the model of esoteric interpretation, namely *al-tafsir al-batini*[29] or *batiniyyah, tafsir isyari, al-tafsir al-faidhí, al-tafsir al-sufi, al-manhaj al-ramzi, al-tafsir bi batin al-Qur'an*, and *al-manhaj al-tamtsili*. Among those terms, some of them are other words and some others are sub-variants which shows four models of esoteric interpretation, namely (1) *al-tafsir al-batini,* (2) *al- tafsir al-sufi,* (3) *tafsir isyari,* and *(4) al- tafsir al-ramzi.* Here's the description:

Al-Tafsir Al-Batini Model.

al-tafsir al-batini, as explained by Al-Shabuni, means the interpretation practiced by the Batiniyyah group which distorts/changes (*yuharrifun*) the meanings of the Qur'an and rejects the exoteric meaning of the Qur'an.[30]

Thus, *al-tafsîr al-bathini* for him is synonymous with *Batiniyyah*. The synonym is *tafsir batiniyyah* which not only appears in Ulumul Qur'an literature but also in the science of Kalam literature.[31] Al-Shabuni did not provide further explanation about the

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[22] Muhammad Ali al-Shabuni, *Al-Tibyann fi Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Beirut: Alam Al-Polar, tt), h. 174.

[23] Shubhi Shalih, *Mabahis fi Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Beirut: Dar Al-'lim li Al-Maloja, 1988), Cet. 17th, p. 296.

[24] Manna Al-Qattan, *Mabahis fi Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Egypt: Mansyurat Al-Ashr Al-Hadis|, 1973), p. 357.

[25] This term was introduced by several scholars, including Al-Zahabi (1333-1365H/1915–1945 AD) and Abu Muhammad Al-Syirazi (d. 666 H/1258 AD), the author of the *commentary isyari entitled 'Ara'is Al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq* Al-Qur'an. See Muhammad Husain Al-Zahabi, *Al-Tafsir wa Al-Mufassirun*, (Egypt: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Hadisah, 1976), p. 141; `Abdul Tawwab 'Abdul Hadi, *Sufi Symbols in the Qur'an*, trans. Afif Muhammad from *Al Ramziyyah Al-Shufiyyah fi Al-Qur'an Al-Karim*, (Bandung: Pustaka, 1986), p. 1.

[26] Muhammad Hadi Ma'rifah, *al-Tamhidd fi Ulum Al-Qur'an*, Volume 3, cet. 3rd (Quum: Muassasah Al-Nasyr Al-Islami, 1416/1995), p. 30.

[27] These three terms were introduced by Ahmad Khalil. See Ahmad Khalil, *Dirasat fi Al-Qur'an*, (Egyptian: Dar Al-Ma'arif, tt), p. 117, 129.

[28] This term was introduced by Al-Alusi (d. 1270 H/1854 M) and Al-Naisabu ri 321-405 H/933-1014 M.), in *Al-Raghaib Al-Furgan* , h. 28.

[29] Phrases like this, among others, were used by Muhammad Ali Al-Shabuni, *Al-Tibyan fi Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Beirut: Alam Al-Polar, tt) , p. 174.

[30] al-Shabuni, *Al-Tibyan* , p. 174-175.

[31] Abu Al-Farj, *Talbis Devil*, Volume I, cet. 1, (Bairut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Arabî, 1985), p. 132-133; Ibn Taimiyyah, *Minhaj Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah*, vol 4, Cet. 1st, (Mu'assasah Qurthubah: 1406/1985), p. 519; Abu Manshur Al-Baghdadi, *Al-Farq bain Al-Firaq wa Bayan Al-Firgah Al-Najiyah*, Volume 1, Cet. 2nd, (Bairut: Dar Al-Afâk Al-Jadidah, 1977), p. 265, 268.

Batiniyyah group. However, several other literatures state that the group is also known as *Shia Ismailiyyah*.[32] Meanwhile, Ibn Taimiyah (d. 728 H/1328 AD) stated that the group was also *Qaramitah* and *Nasiriyyah*,[33] two *Ismailiyyah Shia* sub-currents, and extremists from the philosophers, *mutakallim*, and Sufi circles.[34]

In the Kalam Science literature, the word "*Batiniyyah*" has the connotation of a *Shi'i Ismailiyyah* sub-religion which holds the view that the Qur'an has inner and outer meaning dimensions.[35] The connotation appeared because there is an assumption from many observers of interpretation that this sub-school has the belief that it is the esoteric meaning that the Qur'an, not its appearance desire.[36]

Al-Tafsir Al-Sufi (Sufistic Interpretation) Model

al-tafsir al-sufi (sufistic interpretation), or *al-tafsir al-irsyadi*, according to al-Zahabi, is a model divided into two types, namely *al-tafsir al-sufi al-nazhari* (theoretical Sufistic interpretation) and interpretation of *isyari* or *al-tafsir al-faidi*. *Al-tafsir al-sufi al-nazhari* is an interpretation written from the point of view of the discussion of observations and Sufistic studies. On the other hand, *al-tafsir al-faidi* is the interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an which results in a different interpretation from the external dimension, because of the demands for signs that are only visible to the owner of the *suluk* and makes it possible to compromise them with the intended external dimension.[37] The difference between the two is that the first is built on the basis of theoretical arguments, while the latter is built based on Sufism practices, such as *riyadah*[38] etc. The last term also distinguishes this type of interpretation from the type of interpretation carried out by groups of Batiniyyah.

According to Nasr Abu Zaid (1943 M), there is an epistemological difference between esoteric interpretation (among theologians and philosophers) and the interpretation of *isyari*. The esoteric interpretation among rational philosophers and

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[32] Al-Zahabi, *Al-Tafsir*, Volume 2 , p. 235.

[33] Abdullah Annan, *Movements That Shake Islam*, trans. Shaleh Mahfuzh from *Al-Tsaurah 'ala Al-Islam*, (Surabaya: Progressive Library, 1993), p. 121-122.

[34] Ibn Taimiyah, *Pole wa Rasā'il wa Fatawa Ibn Taimiyah fi Al-Tafsir*, volume 13, (Maktabah Ibn Taimiyah, tt,) h. 236.

[35] Philip K. Hitti, *History of The Arabs*, (London: Mac Millan, 1970), p. 443.

[36] Al-Zahabi, *al-Tafsir,* vol 2 , p. 9

[37] *Ibid.*, h. 339.

[38] Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Ihya 'Ulum Al-Din*, Volume 3, (Indonesian: Dar Al-Ihya' Al-Kutub Al-'Arabiyyah, tt), h. 395.

theologians, such as the Mu'tazilah, uses a set of *takwil* produced by reason, while the second uses a *takwil* produced by feeling (zauq).[39]

Tafsir Isyari

The interpretation of *isyari* as a separate model of esoteric interpretation is another version of its nature. As stated earlier by Al-Zahabi, this interpretation is a sub-variant of *al-tafsir al-sufi*. However, another version is put forward by Ahmad Khalil that this interpretation is a separate variant and differs significantly from *al-tafsir al-sufi*. He claimed that what the scholars thought the interpretation of *isyari* is actually the interpretation of *ramzi sufi*.

The interpretation of *isyari* itself refers to the interpretation written by theologians and jurists.[40] According to Ahmad Khalil, the interpretation of *isyari* is an effort to extract the conditions (*nash*) or designation (*dalalah*) that are behind a complete series of verses or a part of them.[41] The example he put forward is the interpretation of QS. Al-Baqarah/21: 233.

وَعَلَى ٱلْمَوْلُودِ لَهُ ۥ رِزْقُهُنَّ وَكِسْوَتُهُنَّ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ

Translation;

> "And the duty of the father to feed and clothe the mothers with ma'ruf way."

According to Ahmad Khalil, this verse has been used as an argument by scholars to link the child's lineage to his father, not his mother.[42] The sub-variant of *tafsir isyari* is *tafsir al-tamtsili*. This model, according to Ahmad Khalil, was first developed by Mu'tazilah when interpreting QS Al-A'râf/3: 104.

وَإِذْ نَتَقْنَا ٱلْجَبَلَ فَوْقَهُمْ كَأَنَّهُ ۥ ظُلَّةٌ

Translation;

> "And (remember), when we raised the hill above them it was as if the hill is the shade of the cloud."

The initiator of *tafsir al-tamtsili* believes that there are messages contained in the verse about the stories of the Prophets and Apostles and other stories that can be

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[39] Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Mafhum Al-Nas*, (Bairut: Al-Markaz Al-Saqafi Al-'Arabi, 1998), p. 5.
[40] Khalil, *Dirasat*, h. 127-128.
[41] *Ibid.*, h. 127.
[42] *Ibid.*, h. 128.

applied in his life. For example, the story about the process of Adam's creation actually contains messages about the phases of human life's journey.[43]

In Ahmad Khalil's view, the term interpretation of *ramzi* significantly differs from the interpretation of *isyari*. The interpretation of *ramzi* is far from the designation (*dalalah*) of the verse being interpreted, while in fact it is generally not related at all. Then, *isyari* is related to the designation contained in the verse.[44] An example of this interpretation model can be seen in several esoteric exegesis narrations quoted by Al-Tabataba'i in his commentary work, Al-Mizan.

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that either *tafsir isyari*, or *tafsir al-ramzi* (symbolic), or Batiniyyah try to uncover the implicit/inner meaning behind the explicit/innate meaning of the verses of the Qur'an. In fact, what the Sufi commentators do with their *isyari* interpretations is not technically different from what the theologian and philosopher interpreters do with their *ramzi* interpretations. They both explore the meaning that lies behind a verse. The difference is related to the results of the search or product interpretation. However, in some *Ulumul Qur'an* literature, *isyari* interpretations are given with regard to exploring the esoteric meaning of the Qur'an among Sufi commentators. As for similar practices carried out by theologians and philosophers, the *Ulumul Qur'an* literature calls it *ramzi* interpretation.

The Urgency of Esoteric Interpretation

Al-Ghazali (450-505 H/1058-1111 AD) argued that exoteric interpretations were inadequate to explain the contents of the Al-Quran,[45] or, according to Quraish Shihab, it often creates problems or obstacles in thinking when confronted with social reality and scientific nature.[46] Then, an elaborative study of esoteric interpretation is felt to be very urgent. One reason put forward by Al-Ghazali , why the exoteric interpretation of the Qur'an is inadequate is because there are verses in the Qur'an that make no sense on the surface and require further explanation. Among these verses is the word of Allah SWT., QS. Al-Anfal/8: 17.

$$\text{وَمَا رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ رَمَىٰ}$$

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[43] *Ibid.*, h. 130-131.

[44] Khalil, Dirasat, h. 127-128.

[45] Nicholas Heer, *Esoteric Interpretation of the Qur'an* Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, in Seyyed Hossen Nasr, et. al., (Ed.), *The Legacy of the Sufis*, trans. Gafna Raizha Wahyudi from *The Heritage of Sufism*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Sufi), h. 294-295.

[46] Quraish Shihab, *Grounding,* p. 90.

Translation;

"You are not the one who throws when you throw, but Allah is the one who throws throw."

The true meaning of the verse, according to Al-Ghazali, is vague, because Allah confirms the hurling and at the same time denies it.[47]

The figures put forward many other statements regarding the significance of esoteric interpretation, including those made by al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. 255 H/869 AD). He said that whoever rejects inner knowledge is a hypocrite.[48] A similar statement was made by Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 386 H/996 M). Al-Makki stated that external knowledge and inner knowledge are two sciences that can lead a person to the degree of faith and Islam. The relationship between the two is like a body and heart that cannot be separated.[49]

Conclusion

The terminology of esoteric interpretation was introduced to express the interpretation model of *takwil*. The word esoteric is used to differentiate *takwil* that is hidden internal spiritual and esoteric with a literal, external and exoteric interpretation. Theoretically, esoteric interpretation is any form of interpretation that seeks to explore the inner meaning of the Qur'an. The process of esoteric interpretation is called *takwil*, which technically means symbolic and spiritual hermeneutics.

There are several different terms used by scholars regarding the model of esoteric interpretation, namely *al-tafsir al-batini or batiniyyah, tafsir isyari, al-tafsir al-faidhí, al-tafsir al-sufi, al-manhaj al-ramzi, al-tafsir bi batin al-Qur'an, and al-manhaj al-tamtsili*. Among those terms, some of them are other words and some others are sub-variants which show four models of esoteric interpretation, namely (1) al-tafsir al-batini, (2) al-tafsir al-sufi, (3) tafsir isyari, and (4) al- tafsir al-ramzi.

According to some experts, esoteric interpretation is significant and urgent, because some verses of the Qur'an need further explanations which require external knowledge and inner knowledge. Both are two sciences that can lead a person to the degree of faith and Islam.

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[47] Heer, *Esoteric Interpretation,* h. 263.

[48] 'Abdul Tawwab 'Abdul Hadi, *Sufi Symbols in the Qur'an,* trans. Afif Muhammad from *Al-Ramziyyah Al-Shufiyyah fi Al-Qur'an Al-Karim,* (Bandung: Pustaka, 1986), p . 7-8.

[49] *Ibid.*

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