EVALUATING SCHOLARLY OPINIONS ON THE USE OF ISHARI METHODOLOGY IN QUR'ANIC VERSE INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

Ishari Interpretation refers to the symbolic or implicit methodology used in the exegesis of Qur'anic verses. This method of interpretation is predominantly associated with Sufi traditions. However, it has generated significant controversy among scholars. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the views of both traditional and modern scholars regarding the permissibility of interpreting Qur'anic verses using the Ishari methodology. The study employs a qualitative approach with primary data obtained through document analysis. The data is analyzed using content analysis methods. Key themes to address the research questions have been identified through coding. The study reveals three scholarly opinions on the permissibility of using Ishari interpretive methodology. First, some scholars disapprove of Ishari interpretation, considering it a deviation from proper exegesis. Second, some scholars fully endorse it, while the third group permits it under specific conditions. Based on these three viewpoints, the author selects the third

opinion as the most accurate and meticulous, capable of preventing deviations in Qur'anic interpretation. The conditions imposed by this opinion help prevent the widespread emergence of erroneous exegesis.

Keywords: *Ishari methodology, tafsir, implicit methodology, Sufi traditions*

1.0   INTRODUCTION

The science of Tafsir is generally divided into three categories which are Tafsir bi al-Ma'thur, Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi and Tafsir bi al-Ishari. These categories are classified according to the types of sources used by interpreters to explain Quranic verses. The type of source also determines whether a particular method is permissible or impermissible. Tafsir bi al-Ma'thur is a form of Tafsir that is universally accepted by all scholars of Tafsir. Renowned scholars known for interpreting the Quran according to the Ma'thur approach include Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, al-Suyuthi, and Ibn Kathir. Conversely, Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi varies depending on the specific type. If it is Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi al-Mahmud, most scholars of Tafsir permit it; however, Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi al-Mazmum is generally prohibited and rejected by all scholars of Tafsir (Al-Dhahabi, 1976). Prominent scholars known for Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi al-Mahmud include al-Baidhawi, al-Syaukani, and Ibn Ashur, while well-known authors of Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi al-Mazmum include Abu Hasan Abd al-Jabbar, Maula Abd al-Latif al-Kazarani, and Muhammad bin Yusuf.

This differs from Tafsir bi al-Ishari. There are various scholarly opinions regarding the permissibility and impermissibility of using the Ishari category, given that the method employed by its interpreters involves symbolic and intuitive interpretations of Quranic verses.

Previous studies indicate that research on the acceptance of Tafsir bi al-Ishari is still limited and relatively less prevalent among Malaysian scholars. Scholars who categorize Tafsir bi al-Ishari as deviant include Al-Dhahabi (2006) and Faudah (1987). Other researchers take a more neutral stance, discussing both the reasons for rejection and acceptance, including Qays Abdullah (2014), Hashim (2010), Rushdi Ramli (2008), and Abd Wahid (2010). Therefore, this study aims to analyze scholarly views on the status of this Tafsir to determine its acceptance as a legitimate source of Qur'anic interpretation.

2.0   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach by collecting and analyzing data and content. Key themes were identified through a coding process. Through the coding process, the researcher assesses the views of scholars who reject, accept, and conditionally accept the Ishari interpretation. The data is analyzed to draw conclusions that clarify the status of Tafsir bi al-Ishari as a source of Qur'anic exegesis.

3.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues related to Tafsir bi al-Ishari have been studied by several scholars through four research approaches. Firstly, studies related to Tafsir bi al-Ishari in general; secondly, studies on the detailed concepts within it; thirdly, studies on the contributions of interpreters who use this methodology; and fourthly, studies on its status. Most of these studies elaborate on aspects such as the definitions, examples, and works related to Tafsir bi al-Ishari. The second group of researchers discusses the concepts found in Tafsir bi al-Ishari, such as monotheism according to scholars like the studies of Mohd Nor et al. (2020), Laili (2020), and Rohman & Anam (2020). Thirdly, studies focus on the contributions of Tafsir bi al-Ishari or Sufi scholars by referring to the methodologies of specific scholars such as Qusyayri, Ibn Arabi, Alusi, Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi, Mulla Sadra, and KH. Shalih. Other scholars discuss its status in a balanced way, presenting reasons for both rejection and acceptance, including Qays Abdullah (2014), Hashim (2010), Rushdi Ramli (2008), and Abd Wahid (2010). Overall, the position of Tafsir bi al-Ishari as a source of Qur'anic exegesis remains insufficiently explored in scholarly discourse.

4.0   DEFINITION OF TAFSIR BI AL-ISHARI

The term 'Ishari' is derived from the verb 'asyara'. 'Isyarah' is derived from this verb and means 'to point' or 'to signal'. According to the Mu'jam al-Asasi al-Arabiy dictionary, the word 'إشارة' can mean a symbol, sign, code, or movement that indicates something (Ahmad al-Abid et al., 2003). The Mu'jam al-Wasit dictionary defines 'إشارة' as the act of determining something through gestures or similar methods (Ibrahim Anis et al., 1972). Terminologically, most scholars define Tafsir bi al-Ishari as a method of interpreting verses that have implied or hidden meanings.

Mahmud Basuni Faudah (1987) describes Tafsir bi al-Ishari as an interpretation of Quranic verses that contradicts their apparent meaning, focusing instead on hidden signs perceived by Sufi interpreters who have engaged in various spiritual practices with Allah SWT. Al-Dhahabi (1976) describes Ishari exegesis as an effort to explain the Quran's content through interpretations aligned with the hidden signs behind its apparent meanings, while still respecting the visible meanings of the verses.

According to Muhammad 'Ali al-Sabuni, "Tafsir bi al-Ishari is a form of Quranic exegesis that differs from the apparent meaning of the text by using hidden signs, as interpreted by certain scholars. Sufi practitioners, therefore, connect different elements to gain insight and understanding through the divine light, as they believe, given by Allah SWT. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the Quran's secrets through divine inspiration and spiritual gifts" (Syalabi, 1964).

Mana' Khalil Al-Qattan (2005) defines Tafsir bi al-Ishari as the interpretation of any verse that contains both apparent and hidden meanings. The apparent meaning is easily understood by the intellect, whereas the hidden meaning consists of messages concealed behind the apparent meaning, which can only be perceived by certain individuals, typically Sufi practitioners.

In conclusion, Tafsir bi al-Ishari is defined by some scholars as the interpretation of Quranic verses that contradicts the apparent meaning while preserving the hidden meanings, as granted by Allah to certain Sufi groups through divine inspiration.

5.0   GROUPS OF SCHOLARS IN TAFSIR BI AL-ISHARI

Yusoff (2010) categorizes scholars into five groups based on their approach to Tafsir. Of these, four are specifically associated with Tafsir bi al-Ishari. These four groups are:

- **Group that Prioritizes Literal Tafsir but Occasionally Incorporates Ishari Elements:**
  This group primarily adheres to literal interpretation but occasionally includes Ishari (symbolic or esoteric) interpretations. Examples of works from this group include Tafsir al-Naysaburi and al-Alusi.

- **Group that Favors Tafsir bi al-Ishari but Also Provides Literal Explanations:**
  Scholars in this group primarily use Tafsir bi al-Ishari but also provide literal explanations for some verses. An example of this interpretation is found in Tafsir al-Tustari.

- **Group that Exclusively Uses Tafsir bi al-Ishari:**
  This group does not engage with literal interpretations at all and relies solely on Ishari methods for interpreting the Quran. Al-Sulami is an example of a scholar from this group.

- **Group that Combines Tafsir bi al-Ishari with Tafsir bi al-Nazari:**
  This group integrates both Ishari and rational (Nazari) methods of interpretation, often disregarding literal meanings. This type of exegesis is also known as Sufi Tafsir. Ibn Arabi is a notable scholar from this group.

5.1   Scholars Of Tafsir Bi Al-Ishari

Here is a list of notable scholars of Tafsir bi al-Ishari, as cited by Muhammad Sa'id Athiah 'Aram (2004), Al-Dhahabi (1976), and other sources:

- Abu Muhammad Sahl bin Abdullah al-Tustari (d. 283H)
- Muhammad bin Hussin bin al-Asad al-Sulami (d. 412H)
- Abd al-Karim bin Hawazin al-Qusyayri (d. 465H)
- Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Ghzali al-Tusi al-Syafi'I (d. 505H)
- Mahy al-Din Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 561H)
- Abu Muhammad al-Syirazi al-Sufi (d. 606H)

- Mahyu al-Din Muhammad bin Ali bin Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Abd Allah al-Hatimi al-Tho'i al-Andalusiy, dikenali dengan gelaran Ibnu Arabi (d. 638H)
- Iz al-Din al-Ras'ani (d. 661)
- Najm al-Din Dayah (d. 654H)
- Ala al-Dawlah al-Simnani (d. 763H)
- Nizam al-Din al-Hassan bin Muhammad bin Husin al-Qummi al-Naysaburi (d. 728H)
- Abu al-Razzaq al-Qasyani (d. 730H)
- Burhan al-Din al-Baqai' (d. 885H)
- Ahmad Ibnu Ajibah (d. 1224H)
- Syihab al-Din al-Alusiy (d. 1270)

5.2 List Of Books That Represent Tafsir Bi Al-Ishari

Here is a list of works on Tafsir bi al-Ishari (esoteric interpretation) by notable scholars:

- Tafsir AI-Qur'an al-'Azim,
- Lata'if al-Isyarat (Tafsir Sufi Kamil Ii al-Qur'an al-Karim),
- Tafsir lbn 'Arabi,
- Ghara'ib al-Qur'an wa Ragha'ib al-Furqan,
- Tafsir Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim wa al-Sab'i al-Mathani,
- Haqa'iq al-Tafsir,
- 'Arais al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq al-Qur'an,
- Al-Takwilat al-Najmiyyah
- Tafsir al-Mansub li ibn 'Arabi (Tawilat al-Qasyani)
- Nuzum al-Durur fi Tanasib al-Ayat wa al-Suwar
- Bahr al-Madid fi Tafsir al-Quran al-Majid
- Ruh al-Maani fi Tafsir al-Quran al-Azim wa Sab'a al-Mathani

6.0 EXAMPLES OF TAFSIR *ISHARI*

Here are some examples of Ishari Tafsir (esoteric interpretation) by esteemed scholars such as al-Naysaburi, al-Sulami and Ibn Arabi:

1) Tafsir Al-Naysaburi

Meaning: *"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful."* (Quran, 2013, 1:1)

Al-Naysaburi interprets the verse "Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim" (In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) as: "to Allah, the Most Noble, who is exalted by the excellence of the Quran" (Al-Naysaburi, 1996). This interpretation emphasizes the esoteric understanding of the Basmalah, highlighting Allah's

supreme status and the Quran's elevated position in the spiritual hierarchy (Al-Naysaburi, 1996).

2)   Tafsir Al-Sulami

Meaning: *"And He it is Who spread the earth and made in it firm mountains and rivers, and of all fruits He has made in it two kinds; He makes the night cover the day; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect."* (Quran, 2013, 13:3)

Al-Sulami (2001) explains, "He is Allah who has spread the earth and placed 'awtād' (pegs or stakes) among His saints and 'sādah' (leaders and servants). One should seek protection through them, and safety can be attained through their intercession. Whoever embarks on a journey to seek them will find success and safety. Conversely, those who seek others besides them will experience regret and loss."

3)   Tafsir Ibnu 'Arabi

Meaning: *"And when Musa said to his people: Surely Allah commands you that you should sacrifice a cow; they said: Do you ridicule us? He said: I seek the protection of Allah from being one of the ignorant."* (Quran, 2013, 2:67)

Ibn 'Arabi, like Al-Naysaburi, interprets the 'cow' in the Quran as a symbol of the animalistic soul. He explains that this represents the need to slaughter the living desires and growing impulses within oneself (Al-Zarqani, 1988). Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation shifts from the literal meaning, which involves slaughtering a physical cow, to a symbolic one, signifying the slaughtering of animalistic desires that could lead a person to hell. The animalistic soul is likened to a cow because of its lack of reasoning, which leads its possessor to act without thoughtful consideration.

7.0   CONDITIONS FOR ACCEPTING ISHARI TAFSIR

The Position of Ishari Tafsir varies among scholars. Some accept it as a valid form of interpretation, while others reject it. Additionally, some scholars accept Ishari tafsir but impose certain conditions. According to Al-Dhahabi (2006), Ishari tafsir is only accepted if it meets the following conditions:

- **Consistency with the Apparent Meaning**
  The interpretation must not contradict the literal meaning of the Quranic verses. This means the tafsir should align with the direct understanding of the text.

- **Conformity with Shariah and Reason**
  The interpretation must not conflict with Islamic law (Shariah) or reason. Most Sufi interpretations, including Ibn Arabi's, do not contradict

Shariah or rational thought, even though they extensively use the Ishari methodology.

- **Acknowledgment of the Textual Meaning**
  The interpretation should not claim that only the symbolic (esoteric) meaning is intended by Allah, ignoring the literal (exoteric) meaning of the verses. Accepting the literal meaning is crucial because it takes precedence over the hidden meaning.

- **Absence of Distortion**
  The interpretation must not deviate from the original wording of the Quran. Distortion refers to any alteration that contradicts the original meaning of the text.

- **Clarity and Avoidance of Confusion**
  The interpretation should not create confusion or misunderstanding. This condition is less frequently mentioned by scholars in their writings on Ishari tafsir.

8.0 CRITERIA FOR ISHARI TAFSIR

Criteria for Ishari Tafsir According to Ibnu Ashur (2000):

- **Interpretation through Parables**
  This method involves drawing analogies between a Quranic concept and a real-world phenomenon. For example, al-Sulami likens the hudhud bird mentioned in the story of Prophet Solomon (AS) to the whisperings of the prophet's own heart (Al-Sulami, 2001).

- **Interpretation through Implicit Meaning**
  This method involves explaining verses with hidden meanings beyond the apparent text. An example is Ibn Abbas's interpretation when Umar bin al-Khattab (AS) asked him about Surah al-Nasr. He interpreted the victory described in the verse as a sign that the time for Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) departure was near, indicating the end of his mission (Al-Dhahabi, 1976).

- **Interpretation through Moral Lessons**
  This method involves deriving moral lessons from general verses. For instance, Ibn Arabi interpreted the command to obey in verse 80 of Surah al-Nisa' as encompassing total devotion to Allah, suggesting that all actions and speech should be directed toward and for Allah (Arabi, 1971).

- **Interpretation by Expounding the Apparent Meaning**
  This is a common method used by scholars of Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi. Al-Tustari interpreted the word "هدى" (guidance) in its literal sense but explained it as the true light bestowed by Allah into a person's heart. This divine guidance brings peace and success to the believer's heart (Al-Tustari, 2002).

9.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the document analysis, the researcher has observed different reactions from scholars concerning the permissibility of using the Ishari interpretive methodology. The debate over its acceptability has resulted in three main perspectives which are those who reject it, those who fully accept it, and those who accept it with conditions.

1) The Rejectionist Stream

The first group consists of scholars who reject the use of Tafsir bi al-Ishari. Some view the interpretation of Quranic verses using Ishari methodology as heretical. For instance, Ibn Salah, in his fatwa addressing queries about the status of Tafsir al-Sulami, asserted that anyone who regards this book as a valid interpretation is considered a disbeliever (Al-Dhahabi, 2006).

Some scholars in this group argue that Ishari interpretation deviates from the true understanding of the Quran. Al-Dhahabi (2006) states that when examining the books of Sufi tafsir, one can observe deviations in the interpretation of the Quran. Sufi tafsir generally strays from the intended meanings and objectives of the Quranic verses. The Quran, with its texts and verses, has specific meanings, but Sufis distort them to fit their own views and teachings.

Al-Dhahabi provides examples of Ishari tafsir that diverge from the apparent meanings, such as those by Ibn Arabi, Abu Yazid al-Bustami, and al-Hallaj, who interpret Quranic verses according to their doctrine of Wahdat al-Wujud (Oneness of Being). He also criticizes these interpretations for resembling Batini interpretations. Al-Zarqani (1988) argues that Sufi interpretations of the Quran are not genuine tafsir but merely illustrations based on readings of the verses.

2) The Accepting Stream

The second group consists of scholars who fully accept Tafsir bi al-Ishari. These scholars believe that this method is in alignment with the Quran and Sunnah, and they suggest that Ishari tafsir does not deviate from the original meanings of the Quranic verses. For instance, Ibn Atha views Ishari tafsir as a methodology that elucidates the divine words and the sayings of the Prophet through hidden meanings. He argues that this approach does not stray from the original meanings, as the apparent meanings can also be understood from the linguistic terms and implied contexts (Al-Suyuti, 2011).

Similarly, Abu Nasr al-Siraj al-Tusi considers Ishari tafsir to be a method that aligns with the views of the majority of scholars and does not contradict the Quran

and Sunnah. It is a form of symbolic knowledge granted by Allah to pure hearts to comprehend the deeper meanings of Quranic verses and Hadith (Al-Dhahabi, 1976).

Some scholars, such as Sheikh Ibn Athaillah al-Sakandari, argue that Ishari tafsir does not reject the apparent meanings but offers interpretations that complement the Arabic language without negating the surface meanings. The hidden meanings are understood by those whose hearts have been opened by Allah (Al-Dhahabi, 1976).

3)   The Conditional Acceptance Stream

The third group accepts Ishari tafsir under certain conditions established by tafsir scholars. Some argue that Ishari tafsir is acceptable provided that the interpreter does not claim their interpretation as the sole truth and first acknowledges the apparent meaning. Al-Suyuti (2011) suggests that if Ishari tafsir is seen as deviating, it should be clarified that such tafsir is not considered deviant unless the interpreter asserts their interpretation as the only truth. As long as interpreters do not claim exclusive validity and recognize the apparent meanings set by Allah, their interpretations are accepted due to the divine inspiration involved in Ishari interpretation.

Al-Ghazali (1996) supports this view, stating that Ishari tafsir differs from Batiniyah interpretations. It is a method used by Sufis to uncover Quranic hints through specific practices. Ishari tafsir is deemed acceptable if it meets certain conditions, including the interpreter having a thorough understanding of the apparent meanings of the Quranic verses. Al-Zarqani (1988) also asserts that Ishari tafsir is acceptable if it meets five conditions:

- it must not contradict the apparent meanings of the Quran
- the interpreter should not claim that only the hidden meanings are intended
- it should not deny the apparent meanings
- it should not deviate significantly from the original meanings
- it should not conflict with Sharia or reason.

Based on these three perspectives, the researcher finds that the first group, which rejects the permissibility of Ishari tafsir, is less convincing. This is because there are established Ishari tafsir works that are still referenced today, such as those by al-Alusi, al-Syaukani, and al-Qusyayri. Additionally, there are works that utilize Ishari methodology alongside Tafsir bi al-Ma'thur, such as Tafsir al-Qurtubi. The second group's view is considered overly lenient, as permitting Ishari tafsir without conditions could lead to deviations similar to those seen in Batiniyyah interpretations. The third group's view, which accepts Ishari tafsir under specific conditions, is deemed the most balanced. This perspective is supported by the fatwa of the Mufti of the Federal Territories, which accepts Ishari tafsir as a form of Quranic interpretation, provided it adheres to the established conditions (Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, 2019).

10.0   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Tafsir bi al-Ishari represents a significant body of knowledge with substantial contributions to the field of Quranic interpretation, attracting the attention of many esteemed scholars. This is evidenced by the emergence of various books, methodologies, and scholars who employ Ishari methodology in their interpretations. Prominent scholars such as al-Qusyayri, al-Tustari, Ibn 'Arabi, al-Naysaburi, and many others have worked diligently to elevate Tafsir bi al-Ishari within the scholarly domain. This demonstrates that Tafsir bi al-Ishari is a significant field of study and should not be dismissed lightly. Based on the arguments presented, the researcher is confident that Tafsir bi al-Ishari does not constitute a form of deviant interpretation.

The issues raised primarily stem from differences between Ishari interpretation and the apparent meanings of Quranic verses. However, differing meanings do not necessarily mean that the interpretation should be rejected or considered contrary to scholarly principles. Therefore, the presence of Tafsir bi al-Ishari within academic circles should be encouraged. This is because Tafsir bi al-Ishari offers diverse perspectives for understanding and appreciating the Quran.

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Author Contribution

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Conflict of Interest

This manuscript has not been published elsewhere, and all authors have agreed to its submission and declare no conflict of interest regarding the manuscript.

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