



## SUFI ISYARI EXEGESIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATION

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### Abstract

This article aimed to analyze the methodology Islamic interpretation in the Sufi tradition with a focus on the dimensions of symbolism, inner meaning, and its relevance in contemporary interpretation of the Qur'an. *Isyari Qur'anic Exegesis* was an interpretive approach that emphasizes the esoteric and spiritual aspects of the text of the Qur'an through hidden symbols and meanings (inner), as developed by classical Sufis such as al-Qusyairi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn 'Arabi. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with a library research approach, through analysis of Sufi interpretation works and Islamic hermeneutic studies. The results of the discussion show that Islamic interpretation has a unique methodological construction, namely interpretation based on spiritual intuition (*dzauq*), inner enlightenment (*kasyf*), and textual symbolism that does not contradict the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. However, in a modern academic context, this method faces epistemological challenges in the form of demands for objectivity, rational verification, and criticism of the subjectivity of meaning. Nevertheless, Islamic interpretation continues to make a significant contribution to the enrichment of interpretation studies by opening up a space for dialogue between the spiritual and rational dimensions in understanding the message of the Qur'an holistically.

**Keywords:** *Isyari Exegesis, Sufism, Symbolism, Inner Meaning, Contemporary Interpretation.*

### Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis metodologi *tafsir isyari* dalam tradisi sufistik dengan fokus pada dimensi simbolisme, makna batin, serta relevansinya dalam penafsiran Al-Qur'an kontemporer. *Tafsir isyari* merupakan pendekatan penafsiran yang menitikberatkan pada aspek esoteris dan spiritual teks Al-Qur'an melalui simbol dan makna tersembunyi (*batin*), sebagaimana dikembangkan oleh para sufi klasik seperti al-Qusyairi, al-Ghazali, dan Ibn 'Arabi. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan studi pustaka (*library research*), melalui analisis terhadap karya-karya tafsir sufistik dan kajian hermeneutik Islam. Hasil Pembahasan menunjukkan bahwa *tafsir isyari* memiliki konstruksi metodologis yang khas yakni penafsiran berbasis intuisi spiritual (*dzauq*), pencerahan batin (*kasyf*), dan simbolisme teks yang tidak bertentangan dengan makna zahir Al-Qur'an. Namun, dalam konteks akademik modern, metode ini menghadapi tantangan epistemologis berupa tuntutan objektivitas, verifikasi rasional, dan kritik terhadap subjektivitas makna. Meskipun demikian, *tafsir isyari* tetap memberikan kontribusi signifikan bagi pengayaan studi tafsir dengan membuka ruang dialog antara dimensi spiritual dan rasional dalam memahami pesan Al-Qur'an secara holistik.

**Kata Kunci:** *Tafsir Isyari, Sufi, Simbolisme, Makna Batin, Penafsiran Kontemporer.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an, the primary source of Islamic teachings, is a book with infinite depth of

meaning. Since classical times, scholars have developed various methods of interpretation to explore the divine messages within it, starting with tafsir (interpretation). *bi al-ma'tsur*, *bi al-ra'yi*, to contemporary hermeneutic methods<sup>1</sup>. Among the developing methods of interpretation, *Islamic interpretation* occupies a unique position because it seeks to reveal the inner meaning (*al-ma'na al-bāṭin*) behind the meaning of the text (*al-ma'na al-zāhir*). This approach is closely related to the Sufi tradition which emphasizes the spiritual, symbolic, and intuitive dimensions of experience in understanding revelation.

*Interpretation of the Sharia* emerged as a result of the interaction between the inner experiences of the Sufis and the text of the Qur'an. Figures such as al-Qusyairi, al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, and al-Kasyani became important representation in the development of this methodology<sup>2</sup>. They believe that the text of the Qur'an conveys not only legal and religious messages, but also symbols containing guidance for purifying the soul and attaining spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, *Islamic interpretation* attempting to read the layers of meaning behind the symbols and metaphorical language of the Quran to achieve a deeper and more spiritual understanding.

However, this method is not without criticism. Some people think that *Islamic interpretation* It contains a high degree of subjectivity and is difficult to verify scientifically because it is based on personal spiritual experiences. This epistemological challenge has given rise to debate about the boundaries between spiritual inspiration and academically valid interpretation. In the contemporary context, when the study of interpretation is required to be more rational, systematic, and accountable, the position of *Islamic interpretation* needs to be re-examined so that it remains relevant to the modern scientific paradigm without losing its spiritual dimension.

This study attempts to analyze the methodology *Islamic interpretation* within the Sufi tradition by highlighting its distinctive aspects of symbolism and inner meaning. Furthermore, this study explores the epistemological and hermeneutic implications of this method in the context of contemporary Quranic interpretation. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of a more holistic interpretation methodology that combines Sufi spiritual depth and the sharpness of academic analysis in understanding the messages of the Quran.

## METHOD

This article uses a qualitative approach with a library research type (*library research*). This approach was chosen because the objects of study were interpretative texts, Sufi works, and scientific literature that discussed methodology. *Islamic interpretation* The focus of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tafany Nurfaidah et al., "Pendekatan Dalam Tafsir Isy'Ari," *Al-Akhbar (Jurnal Ilmiah Keislaman)* 8, no. 1 (2023): 102–8.

<sup>2</sup> Nida Amalia Kamal and Siti Madinatul Munawwaroh, "Metode Tafsir Lathaif Al-Isyarat Karya Imam Al-Qusyairi," *Jurnal Iman Dan Spiritualitas* 1, no. 1 (2021): 40–46, <http://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/jis/article/view/11471>.

research is not on empirical field data, but rather on an in-depth analysis of the concepts, methods, and thoughts of Sufi commentators in understanding the inner meaning of the Qur'an<sup>3</sup>. The primary data sources for this research include works on classical Sufi interpretation and modern Sufi interpretation relevant to the research theme. Secondary sources include books on interpretation methodology, Islamic hermeneutic studies, journal articles, and academic research results that discuss the topic. *Islamic interpretation*, Sufi symbolism, and its implications in contemporary tafsir studies. Data analysis was conducted through descriptive-analytical analysis and contextual hermeneutics. Descriptive-analytical analysis was used to describe and examine the methodological concepts. *Islamic interpretation* as found in classical and contemporary Sufi literature

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Tafsir Isyari in the Sufi Tradition

Tafsir al-ishary is a way of interpreting (interpreting) the verses of the Holy Quran not according to their apparent meaning, but based on vague hints that can be recognized by knowledgeable and pious people, whose interpretation is in line with the apparent meaning of the verses of the Quran from several explanatory aspects<sup>4</sup>.

Tafsir isyari in terminology is interpreting the Qur'an with a meaning that is not its outward meaning because of the existence of cryptic signals known to those who follow the spiritual path, or only known to people who always draw closer to Allah and have noble personalities, or interpretation based on secret signals by combining the intended meaning with the implied meaning<sup>5</sup>.

The methodology of Islamic interpretation in the Sufi tradition emphasizes uncovering the inner meaning of the Quran through profound spiritual experience. It is rooted in the principle of balance between the outer and inner meanings, between sharia and reality. Using a symbolic and intuitive approach, Islamic interpretation provides an understanding that enriches the spiritual dimension of Muslims while preserving the authenticity of the divine message within the sacred text.

Isyari interpretation according to the term is what is determined (something that can be determined/understood, taken) from a statement only by guessing without having to put it in its context (something that is determined only from the form of the sentence

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<sup>3</sup> Nurfaidah et al., "Pendekatan Dalam Tafsir Isy'Ari."

<sup>4</sup> Daris Salamah, "Kajian Tafsir Al- Qur ' an Dengan Pendekatan Sufistik : Analisis Karakteristik Penafsiran Haqa ' Iq Al -Tafsir Karya Al-Sulami," *Journal Keislaman Dan Sosial Humaniora* 3, no. 2 (2025): h. 1-17.

<sup>5</sup> Amaliatus Sholiha, Ananda Rizki Prianca Putri, and Muhammad Faiz Lubba Dzal Muttaqin, "Mengulik Sejarah Perkembangan Tafsir Isyari Dan Pandangan Para Ulama," *AR-ROSYAD: Jurnal Keislaman Dan Sosial Humaniora* 2, no. 2 (2024): 64–80, <https://doi.org/10.55148/arrosyad.v2i2.955>.

without its context)<sup>6</sup>. According to al-Jahizh, signs and pronunciation are two things that go hand in hand, signs greatly help pronunciation (in understanding it), and interpretation (translation) Good pronunciation is when you pay attention to the gestures. There are many gestures that replace pronunciation, and there is no need to write them down<sup>7</sup>.

Isyari interpretation was widely developed by Sufis, who believe that the verses of the Quran possess layers of meaning deeper than merely textual or physical meaning<sup>8</sup>. They view the Quran not only as a book of law and normative guidance, but also as a means of tazkiyatun nafs (purification of the soul) and inner enlightenment. Using a symbolic approach, Sufis seek to capture divine messages relevant to humanity's spiritual journey toward God. Examples of this type of interpretation can be found in works such as *Lata'if al-Isyarat* Al-Qusyairi's work or Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation which is full of metaphysical dimensions.

However, the Islamic interpretation method is not without criticism. Some scholars believe that this approach has the potential to lead to excessive subjectivity due to its heavy reliance on the interpreter's spiritual experience. Another challenge is the potential for deviation from the original intent of the verse if not accompanied by adequate mastery of the science of interpretation, Arabic language, and the Islamic context<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, a critical study is needed that can place Islamic interpretation proportionally within the treasury of tafsir science.

Sufi interpretation is a method of interpreting the Quran that focuses on the inner (esoteric) meaning of the Quran's verses. Unlike textual interpretation, which emphasizes linguistic and legal aspects, Sufi interpretation places greater emphasis on spiritual experience, intuition, and the direct relationship between humans and God<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the Ishaari interpretation uses symbolism and hidden meanings in the Qur'an.

Sufi interpretation, also known as tafsir al-isyārī, is an approach to interpreting the Quran that emphasizes the inner meaning or divine signs behind the outward words. Etymologically, the term isyārī comes from the word "قراشياً" which means sign or guidance, so this interpretation is understood as an interpretation based on inspiration or inner revelation obtained by individuals who have experienced enlightenment spiritual<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Mustofa et al., "Manajemen Pendidikan Islam Di Era Modernisasi Pesantren," *Manajemen Pendi*, no. 1 (2024): 65–92, <https://doi.org/10.30868/im.v7i01.5885>.

<sup>7</sup> Nurfaidah et al., "Pendekatan Dalam Tafsir Isy' Ari."

<sup>8</sup> Eva Sofia Sari and Wely Dozan, "Konsep Pluralisme Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia Dalam Perspektif Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)," *Journal TA'LIMUNA* 10, no. 2 (2021): 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.32478/talimuna.v10i2.770>.

<sup>9</sup> Miftah Khilmi Hidayatulloh, "Konsep Dan Metode Tafsir Tematik (Studi Komparasi Antara Al-Kumi Dan Mushthofa Muslim)," *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al- Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 3, no. 2 (2019): 130–42, <https://doi.org/10.15575/al-bayan.v3i2.4116>.

<sup>10</sup> Syahla Ghaziyah et al., "Mazhab Tafsir Sufi : Sejarah , Metodologi , Dan Tokoh-Tokoh Beserta Karyanya," *Jurnal Ilmiah Nusantara* 2, no. 3 (2025): 499–510.

<sup>11</sup> Salamah, "Kajian Tafsir Al- Qur ' an Dengan Pendekatan Sufistik : Analisis Karakteristik Penafsiran Haqa ' Iq Al -Tafsir Karya Al-Sulami."

Because this method is widely used by Sufi circles, it later became popularly known as Sufi interpretation.

Scholars who accept the existence of Sufi interpretation also present an assumption that can be used to support the legality of Sufi interpretation, namely the words of Allah SWT in Q.S. Muhammad verse 24:

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا

Meaning: "Then do they not understand the Quran or are their hearts sealed?" (Q.S. Muhammad 47:24)<sup>12</sup>.

The verse emphasizes that the Qur'an contains many things that must be contemplated deeply (mentadabburinya). To contemplate the verses of the Qur'an in order to get results that can reveal the secret meaning behind a verse of the Qur'an, a pure, holy, and clean heart is needed. The power of a clean and holy heart is what can capture the signal of guidance and inspiration of knowledge implicit in each of His verses. This can only be given to those who are truly in the process of purifying their souls, namely the Sufis.

## B. Symbolism and Inner Meaning in Tafsir Isyari

Meanwhile, the word symbol is taken from the Greek *symballein* which means 'to throw together'. Starting from here, Gadamer understands the symbol as a tool to make it easier to recognize something else (Gadamer, 1976)<sup>13</sup>. Atmosuwito (2010) talks further about the symbol, that it contains something that cannot be seen with the ordinary eye but with inner vision, because in the symbol contains two opposite things: the inner world and the outer world which are both united<sup>14</sup>. In his theory of symbolic strata, Ermatinger states that the form of a symbol is directly related to the human mind and inner consciousness, in other words, if a human finds something that cannot be reached by the eye, they will use a symbol (Hinderer, 1972).

Tafsir Isyari according to Imam Ghazali is an effort to interpret the verses of the Quran not by their apparent meaning but by the voice of conscience, after previously interpreting<sup>15</sup>. Different interpretations of the Qur'an according to the apparent verses are due to the existence of implicit instructions that are only known by some scholars, or are only known by people who know Allah, namely people who have noble personalities and have trained their souls (mujahadah).

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<sup>12</sup> Sholiha, Putri, and Muttaqin, "Mengulik Sejarah Perkembangan Tafsir Isyari Dan Pandangan Para Ulama."

<sup>13</sup> Irpan Hadi and Agus Rifqi Ridwan, "Tafsir Bil Isyari Dan Kitab-Kitab Tafsir Bil Isyari Serta Penafsirannya," *Jurnal LUGHOTI Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab* 5, no. 2 (2024): 2774–7425.

<sup>14</sup> Muhamad Firdaus and Hamka Hasan, "Tafsir Simbolis: Karakteristik Tafsir Sufi Nazarī Ibn 'Arabī Dan Tafsir Sufi Ishārī Al-Qushayrī," *Intizar* 27, no. 2 (2021): 87–95, <https://doi.org/10.19109/intizar.v27i2.9415>.

<sup>15</sup> Hadi and Ridwan, "Tafsir Bil Isyari Dan Kitab-Kitab Tafsir Bil Isyari Serta Penafsirannya."

According to Imam Ghazali, Isyari interpretation is an attempt to interpret the verses of the Qur'an, not with their apparent meaning but with the voice of conscience, after previously interpreting the apparent meaning of the verse in question. "The interpretation of the Qur'an differs according to the apparent meaning of the verse because of the existence of implicit instructions and is only known by some scholars, or is only known by people who know Allah, namely people who have noble personalities and have trained their souls (mujahadah).<sup>16</sup>" The background to the emergence of Tafsir Al-Isyari in the development of Sufism which is increasingly widespread in the Islamic world, is marked by the practice

The practice of asceticism and ascapism carried out by the early generation of Islam, this began since the emergence of political conflict after the death of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, practices like this continued to develop in the following period.

The Islamic interpretation approach is an interpretation that focuses more on the source of interpretation by using inner signals or impressions. Because it relies more on inner impressions, this interpretation using the Islamic interpretation approach is also called Sufi interpretation. The characteristics of the Islamic interpretation approach can be seen from the dominant elements of inner knowledge in the form of impressions emerging from the interpreter. Inner impressions are something that emerges from the interpreter as a gift from God. Because it emphasizes the inner dimension of impressions, the Islamic interpretation approach is also called Sufi interpretation.

Tafsir isyari has a *syara'* foundation or tafsir isyari which emerged during the development of the world of Sufism. According to Al-Dhahabi, the Qur'an through its verses implicitly proves that the Qur'an, in addition to having a literal meaning, also has an inner meaning. And this inner meaning can also be approached through Islamic interpretation. The following are some of the verses in question.<sup>17</sup> An example of a form of interpretation according to Isyari is the letter An-Nur verse 35. "*God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*" This verse is interpreted as the light of knowledge and spiritual awareness that illuminates all of existence. A universal enlightenment that guides the soul<sup>17</sup>. Ibn Arabi interpreted "light" as the manifestation of God's essence in the human soul, indicating a profound connection between creator and creation. This interpretation reveals an inner dimension not visible in literal interpretations, taking us on an infinite spiritual journey.

#### 1. Inner Meaning in Tafsir Isyari

Interpretation *Isyari* is an approach to interpreting the Quran that emphasizes the inner (esoteric) meaning behind the text's outer meaning, often used by Sufis to uncover the spiritual dimension of the Quran. In the context of contemporary interpretation,

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<sup>16</sup> Sholiha, Putri, and Muttaqin, "Mengulik Sejarah Perkembangan Tafsir Isyari Dan Pandangan Para Ulama."

<sup>17</sup> Nurfaidah et al., "Pendekatan Dalam Tafsir Isy' Ari."

this interpretation provides a new perspective because it not only highlights legal or linguistic aspects but also explores the depths of spiritual, moral, and existential meanings relevant to modern life.

### **C. Implications in Contemporary Interpretation of the Qur'an**

#### **a. Enriching the Spiritual Dimension in Interpretation**

Isyari's interpretation helps balance the rationalistic and textual tendencies of modern interpretation. Amidst the currents of secularization and intellectualization of interpretation, this approach reintroduces the spiritual spirit of the Quran. It emphasizes that the Quran is not merely a legal or historical text, but also *book of guidance* which guides man's inner journey towards God.

#### **b. Opening the Space of Symbolic Hermeneutics**

Within the context of modern hermeneutics, Tafsir Isyari introduces a symbolic and reflective approach to the sacred text. This interpretation invites readers to deeply understand the symbols of the Quran, such as the meaning of "light" (nur), "sea" (bahr), or "journey" (safar), not only literally, but also as symbols of humanity's spiritual journey. This is in line with the spirit of contemporary hermeneutics which values the multi-dimensional meaning of texts.

#### **c. Relevance for the Development of Ethics and Morals**

In a modern society that tends toward materialism, Isyari's interpretation reaffirms the values of practical Sufism, such as sincerity, patience, and self-control. Thus, its implications are evident in the formation of contemporary spiritual character and ethics, making the Qur'an a living and contextual source of moral inspiration.<sup>18</sup>

#### **d. Cultivating Existential and Transcendental Awareness**

Isyari's interpretation encourages modern readers to reflect on the meaning of existence and the purpose of life, rather than simply viewing verses as external laws. In an era of crisis of meaning and spiritual alienation, this interpretation serves as a bridge to harmoniously connect reason, heart, and revelation.

#### **e. Challenges and Caution**

Although rich in meaning, Isyari's interpretation also has methodological implications that need to be watched out for:

- 1) The potential for excessive subjectivity, if the interpreter does not have a strong sharia basis.
- 2) A balance is needed between the inner meaning and the outer meaning, so that the

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<sup>18</sup> Ghaziyah et al., "Mazhab Tafsir Sufi : Sejarah , Metodologi , Dan Tokoh-Tokoh Beserta Karyanya."

interpretation does not deviate from the principles of valid interpretation.

- 3) In the contemporary academic context, Isyari's interpretation needs to be studied using a critical hermeneutic method so that it remains relevant without losing its spiritual authenticity<sup>19</sup>.

The implications of Isyari interpretation in contemporary Qur'anic interpretation are spiritual and intellectual enrichment in understanding revelation. It broadens the horizons of interpretation by presenting spiritual depth, symbolism, and moral values much needed in the modern era. However, its application must be accompanied by scientific principles and methodological caution to avoid falling into speculative or excessively subjective interpretations.

## CONCLUSION

The methodology of isyari interpretation in the Sufi tradition is an approach to Quranic interpretation that seeks to uncover the inner (esoteric) meaning behind the words and symbols of the Quran. This approach relies not only on linguistic analysis or rationality alone, but also on spiritual experience (dzauq) and purification of the heart as the primary instruments in understanding the divine message. The Sufi tradition views the Quran as possessing profound layers of meaning, where the outer meaning is the gateway to a higher inner reality.

Symbolism in tafsir isyari becomes a medium for Sufis to interpret texts creatively and spiritually, without denying their literal meaning. Through symbols and gestures, they reveal the relationship between man and God, the spiritual journey, and the moral and existential dimensions of life. Thus, tafsir isyari is not only mystical, but also has ethical and pedagogical values that enrich the treasures of Islamic tafsir.

In the context of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation, the methodology of Islamic tafsir (interpretation of the Quran) makes a significant contribution to establishing a more holistic, spiritual, and contextual interpretive paradigm. This approach balances rationality and spirituality and opens up a dialogue between the sacred text and modern realities. Therefore, Islamic tafsir remains relevant for development as a hermeneutic method that affirms the spiritual and moral dimensions in understanding the messages of the Quran in the present era.

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<sup>19</sup> Fitriatul Laili, "Makna Kalimah Tayyibah Dalam Al-Quran (Analisa Teori Penafsiran Wahbah Zuhaili Dan Al-Tabari Atas Surah Ibrahim: 24)," 2018, 83.

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