



THE CRITERIA FOR ZĀHIR AND BĀTIN DIMENSIONS IN AL-MAHA'IMI'S TAFSĪR ISHĀRĪ

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the principles governing the relationship between exoteric (zāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) meanings in the Qur'anic interpretation of Alauddin Ali ibn Ahmad al-Maha'imi (d. 835 AH) through his exegetical work *Tabsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān bi Ba'd Mā Yushīr ilā I'jāz al-Qur'ān*. The research is motivated by the longstanding debate concerning the legitimacy of Ishārī (mystical) exegesis within the Islamic interpretive tradition, particularly regarding the interaction between the literal and spiritual dimensions of the Qur'an. This study employs a library research method using exegetical, Sufi, and historical approaches, supported by content analysis. Primary data are drawn from al-Maha'imi's tafsīr, while secondary sources include works on Ishārī exegesis, Qur'anic studies, and relevant academic literature. The findings reveal that al-Maha'imi adopts an integrative interpretive model that harmonizes exoteric and esoteric meanings. He consistently treats the literal meaning as the foundation of interpretation before developing its spiritual implications. His Ishārī interpretations generally conform to the criteria established by Sunni scholars: they do not negate the apparent meaning of the text, do not contradict Islamic law, possess linguistic justification, maintain relevance to the context of the verse, and do not claim exclusive authority for the esoteric meaning. The distinctive features of al-Maha'imi's tafsīr include a strong emphasis on thematic and contextual coherence (munāsabah), extensive use of tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr, and the integration of Sufi values within the framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah. Therefore, al-Maha'imi's work may be classified as a moderate form of Ishārī exegesis that successfully reconciles the outward and inward dimensions of Qur'anic interpretation.

Keywords: *al-Mahaimi, Ishārī exegesis, bāṭin, Sufism, Qur'anic interpretation.*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kaidah hubungan antara makna zahir dan batin dalam penafsiran Alauddin Ali bin Ahmad al-Maha'imi (w. 835 H) melalui karya tafsirnya *Tabsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān bi Ba'd Mā Yushīr ilā I'jāz al-Qur'ān*. Kajian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh perdebatan yang panjang mengenai legitimasi tafsir isyari dalam tradisi tafsir Islam, khususnya terkait hubungan antara makna literal dan makna spiritual Al-Qur'an. Artikel ini menggunakan metode Penelitian kepustakaan (library research) dengan pendekatan tafsir, tasawuf, dan historis, serta didukung



oleh analisis isi (content analysis). Sumber data primer berasal dari tafsir al-Maha'imi, sedangkan data sekunder diperoleh dari literatur tafsir isyari, ulum al-Qur'an, dan berbagai kajian akademik yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa al-Maha'imi menerapkan model penafsiran integratif yang memadukan makna zahir dan batin secara harmonis. Ia menjadikan makna zahir sebagai fondasi utama penafsiran sebelum mengembangkan dimensi spiritual yang terkandung dalam ayat. Penafsiran isyari yang dikemukakannya secara umum memenuhi kaidah yang diterima para ulama, yaitu tidak menafikan makna zahir, tidak bertentangan dengan Al-Qur'an dan Sunnah, memiliki landasan kebahasaan yang kuat, relevan dengan konteks ayat, serta tidak mengklaim makna batin sebagai satu-satunya makna yang dimaksud oleh teks. Kekhasan tafsir al-Maha'imi terletak pada perhatiannya yang besar terhadap munasabah ayat, penggunaan tafsir bi al-ma'tsur, serta integrasi nilai-nilai tasawuf dalam kerangka Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah. Dengan demikian, tafsir al-Maha'imi dapat dikategorikan sebagai tafsir isyari moderat yang berhasil mengharmoniskan dimensi zahir dan batin dalam penafsiran Al-Qur'an.

Kata kunci: *al-Maha'imi, tafsir isyari, makna batin, tasawuf, penafsiran Al-Qur'an.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Is the Quran merely a text to be recited, or is it a bottomless ocean of meaning yet to be fully plumbed? As a timeless miracle, its wondrous nature offers endless avenues for reflection. It is not just a legal code, but an exoteric and esoteric balm for humanity's spiritual thirst. For seekers of truth, it poses profound questions: how deeply human intellect can penetrate the secrets of its letters, and where the line between the explicit and the implicit truly lies.

Because the Quran was revealed in Arabic, it reflects the deep linguistic subtleties of the language. Consequently, proper exegesis (tafsir) requires a comprehensive mastery of Arabic spanning syntax ('Ilm al-Nahw), morphology ('Ilm al-Sarf), rhetoric ('Ilm al-Balaghah), etymology, idioms, and classical pre-Islamic poetry.¹

Allah SWT commands humanity to contemplate and reflect upon the deeply nuanced meanings of the Quran:

﴿أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا﴾ [النساء: 82]

“Do they not then reflect on the Quran? Had it been from anyone other than Allah, they would have certainly found in it many inconsistencies”.

Allah SWT also says:

¹ Muhammad al-Husayn Al-Dhahabi, *Al-Tafsir Wa Al-Mufasssirun* (Maktabat Wahbah, 2003), p 190



﴿ أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا ﴾ [محمد: 24]

“ Do they not then reflect on the Quran? Or are there locks upon their hearts? ”

Individuals vary in their contemplation (tadabbur) of the word of Allah, as the hearts of Allah's servants differ in their levels of purity and obscurity. In proportion to the clarity of the heart and its liberation from blameworthy traits, Allah Almighty grants those with pure hearts profound insights that He does not bestow upon others. Some scholars grasp only a single interpretation of a verse or confine themselves to its literal meaning without delving into the deeper meanings and secrets embedded within it. Conversely, we observe those whose spiritual perception Allah has illuminated, enabling them to comprehend multiple meanings and extract diverse insights from the very same verse.²

Grounded in the purity of the heart, clarity of intellect, and sharpness of spiritual insight among scholars, their pens competed to extract profound meanings and legal rulings embedded within the word of Allah SWT. This motivation fostered the development of Sufi exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) as an endeavor to uncover the esoteric dimensions of the Quran, even though not all esoteric interpretations possess a clear methodological foundation. Certain interpretations have been accused of disregarding the exoteric meaning of the verses, thereby generating polemic regarding the relationship between the exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) dimensions in Quranic hermeneutics.³

Beyond its literal linguistic meaning (ẓāhir), the Quran contains an esoteric dimension (bāṭin) that has sparked debates over legitimacy between Sufi scholars and exoteric scholars (‘ulamā’ al-ẓāhir). This divergence gave rise to the tradition of tafsīr ishārī, as exemplified by ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Mahā’imī in his work *Tabsīr al-Raḥmān*, which harmoniously integrates textual, narrative, and mystical aspects. Although extensive research on tafsīr ishārī has examined classical figures such as al-Tustarī and Ibn ‘Arabī, studies specifically focusing on the principles governing the relationship between exoteric and esoteric meanings in al-Mahā’imī’s exegesis remain extremely limited.

The study of tafsīr ishārī as an approach to uncovering the spiritual dimension of the Quran in alignment with exoteric meanings, Islamic law

² Syukran Abu Bakar, ‘*Tabsir Al-Rahman Wa Taysir Al-Mannan Bi Ba’d Ma Yushir Ila l’jaz Al-Qur’an Min Awwali Surat Al-Nahl Ila Akhir Surat Al-Hajj: Dirasah Wa Tahqiq*’ (Universitas al-Azhar, 2015), p 10

³ Bakar, p 10



(sharia), and Arabic linguistic rules has expanded significantly, particularly through the works of classical Sufi figures such as al-Tustarī, al-Qushayrī, and Ibn ‘Arabī.⁴ However, existing research on the exegesis of ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Mahā’imī remains predominantly confined to its general Sufi characteristics, without yet addressing the underlying mechanism governing the relationship between the exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) dimensions in his interpretation. In fact, comprehending the interplay between these two semantic dimensions is critical, as it constitutes the primary methodological boundary determining the validity and acceptability of any allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī).⁵

Based on this research gap, this study aims to comprehensively examine the concepts of the exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) in allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) alongside their hermeneutical foundations, as well as to delineate the methodological characteristics of al-Mahā’imī’s interpretation. Furthermore, this study analyzes the in-depth application of the principles governing the relationship between exoteric and esoteric meanings in Tafsīr al-Raḥmān, ultimately evaluating the validity and conformity of al-Mahā’imī’s tafsīr ishārī against the criteria and methodological standards established by Sunni scholars.

In light of the foregoing background, this research is directed toward addressing several fundamental questions: How are the concepts of ẓāhir and bāṭin framed in tafsīr ishārī? What are the defining characteristics of al-Mahā’imī’s exegesis? How are the principles connecting exoteric and esoteric meanings applied within his interpretation? To what extent does al-Mahā’imī’s allusive exegesis conform to the criteria accepted by orthodox scholars? Corresponding to these research questions, this study aims to clarify the concepts of ẓāhir and bāṭin in tafsīr ishārī, identify the salient characteristics of al-Mahā’imī’s exegesis, analyze the application of the principles governing the exoteric-esoteric relationship in his work, and evaluate the validity of al-Mahā’imī’s tafsīr ishārī based on the framework formulated by Sunni scholars.⁶ The findings of this study are expected to enrich the literature on Sufi exegesis and contribute to the development of Quranic hermeneutics, particularly regarding a proportional understanding of the relationship between the exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) dimensions.

B. METHOD

⁴ Bakar, p 10

⁵ Khoirul Iman and Basori, ‘Kajian Tafsir Isyari Ayat Nafs Dalam Tafsir Al-Tustari’, *Syams: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 5.1 (2024), pp. 77–95.

⁶ Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (Routledge, 2020).



This is a qualitative library research project examining the thought and exegetical methodology of al-Mahā'imī. This study employs three main analytical frameworks: an exegetical (tafsīr) approach to analyze al-Mahā'imī's interpretive methodology and characteristics; a Sufi approach to understand the spiritual and epistemological foundations of his exegesis; and a historical approach to examine al-Mahā'imī's biographical background and the intellectual context influencing his thought. The data were evaluated using content analysis to identify and examine the application of exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) meanings in *Tabsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān*, thereby uncovering his underlying interpretive patterns.

The primary data source for this article is al-Mahā'imī's work, *Tabsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān bi Ba'd Mā Yushīr ilā I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, serving as the central subject of inquiry. The secondary data sources encompass works of allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī), Quranic sciences ('ulūm al-Qur'ān) literature, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles, master's theses, and doctoral dissertations addressing tafsīr ishārī, Sufism, and al-Mahā'imī's scholarship to support the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through three distinct methods: descriptive analysis to delineate the concepts of exoteric and esoteric meanings as well as the characteristics of al-Mahā'imī's exegesis; critical analysis to evaluate the application of exoteric-esoteric interpretive rules against the criteria for accepted tafsīr ishārī established by Islamic scholars; and comparative analysis to contrast al-Mahā'imī's commentary with those of other Sufi exegetes, thereby highlighting his unique contributions to the tradition of allusive exegesis.

C. DISCUSSION

1. The Exoteric (ẓāhir) and Esoteric (Bāṭin) Dimensions in Quranic Interpretation

The exoteric meaning (ẓāhir) refers to the primary, immediate sense derived from the text of the Quran through the application of Arabic linguistic rules, textual context, historical contexts of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl), and other foundational instruments of Quranic exegesis. Serving as the primary foundation of the interpretive process, this dimension directly represents the literal intent conveyed by the text. Consequently, exegetes establish the exoteric meaning as the indispensable starting point for understanding Quranic content prior to exploring deeper interpretive layers. Within the Islamic exegetical tradition, the validity of any interpretation remains



fundamentally contingent upon its alignment with the exoteric sense articulated by the verse's linguistic structure.⁷

The esoteric meaning (bāṭin) refers to the implicit dimension of meaning underlying the literal text of a verse, typically pertaining to spiritual and moral aspects, as well as the soul's journey toward Allah. In the Sufi perspective, the Quran encompasses not only legal and creedal guidance, but also subtle allusions (ishārāt) that can be comprehended through deep reflection (tadabbur), purification of the soul (tazkiyat al-nafs), and profound spiritual experience.⁸ However, the esoteric meaning (bāṭin) is not intended to supersede the exoteric meaning (ẓāhir), but rather to expand and deepen the understanding of the Quranic message.

The majority of Sunni Sufi scholars regard the exoteric and esoteric as two complementary dimensions in comprehending the Quran. The exoteric meaning serves as the foundation and boundary of interpretation, whereas the esoteric meaning provides a vehicle to uncover the wisdom and spiritual values embedded within the verses. Consequently, a valid esoteric interpretation is one that does not contradict either the exoteric sense or the core principles of Islamic law (sharia). The relationship between the two is often likened to the body and the soul: distinct, yet inseparable.⁹

2. Allusive Exegesis (Tafsīr Ishārī) and Its Epistemological Foundations

Definition of Tafsīr Ishārī (Allusive Exegesis)

Etymologically, the term ishārī derives from the word ishārah, which signifies pointing toward or indicating something using the hand, eye, or eyebrow.¹⁰ Regarding the terminological definition of Tafsir Isyari (allusive/allegorical exegesis), the author presents several definitions formulated by scholars, with the assumption that these will guide readers toward a valid and accurate understanding:

a. Imam al-Zarqāni(1367 H).

“*Tafsir Isyari* (allusive/mystical exegesis) is an effort to interpret the Quran differently from its literal (*zahir*) meaning due to hidden signals (*isyarat*) discernable exclusively to *suluk* (spiritual path) practitioners and Sufis, which simultaneously allows for the reconciliation between the hidden and literal meanings intended by the text.¹¹

⁷ Badr al-Din Al-Zarkashi, *Al-Burhan Fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an* (Dar al-Ma'rifah, 1957). 2:172

⁸ 'Abd al-Karim Al-Qushayri, *Al-Risalah Al-Qushayriyyah* (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001).

⁹ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din* (Dar al-Ma'rifah). 1:289

¹⁰ Muhammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzur, *Lisan Al-'Arab* (Dar al-Hadith, 2006). 4:436.

¹¹ Muhammad 'Abd al-'Azim Al-Zarqani, *Manahil Al-'Irfan Fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an* (Dar al-Hadith, 2001).



b. Subhi al-Shālih

“Interpreting Quranic verses beyond their exoteric (ẓāhir) meaning while synthesizing the manifest sense with the hidden, esoteric dimension.¹²

c. Imam ‘Alī al-Shābūnī

“It refers to interpreting the Quran beyond its exoteric (ẓāhir) meaning due to hidden allusions (ishārāt) that are discernible only to those granted divine knowledge (‘ilm ladunnī) or spiritual gnostics (‘ārif bi-Llāh). These individuals—such as spiritual seekers (sālikūn) who engage in intense spiritual struggle (mujāhadah) by subjugating their lower selves (nafs) receive a divine light that illuminates their perception, allowing them to penetrate the hidden secrets of the Magnificent Quran. Alternatively, it pertains to those whose intellects are inscribed with deep meanings through divine inspiration (ilhām ilāhī) or spiritual openings (futūḥ rabbānī), enabling them to harmonize these hidden meanings with the exoteric sense intended by the text.¹³

Based on the definitions provided by al-Zarqānī, Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ, and al-Ṣābūnī, there is a consensus that tafsīr ishārī (allusive exegesis) is the disclosure of implicit secrets underlying the text, attained by spiritual practitioners (sālikūn) through divine inspiration (ilhām) and spiritual openings (futūḥ rabbānī), provided that the exoteric (ẓāhir) meaning of the text is strictly preserved. The distinction among the three scholars lies in their analytical emphasis: al-Zarqānī highlights the methodological aspect, Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ stresses the harmonization between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions, while al-Ṣābūnī elaborates on the epistemological foundations—specifically divine inspiration, spiritual openings, and experiential spirituality.

3. Distinction Between Tafsīr Ishārī (Allusive Exegesis) and Tafsīr Bāṭinī (Esotericism)

Although both address the inner dimensions of the Quran, allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) and esoteric interpretation (tafsīr bāṭinī) differ fundamentally. Tafsīr ishārī acknowledges and maintains the exoteric (ẓāhir) meaning as the primary sense of the verse, layering relevant spiritual insights upon it without negating the literal text. Conversely, tafsīr bāṭinī tends to reject the exoteric meaning, treating the esoteric (bāṭin) dimension as the sole intended meaning of the text. Consequently, the majority of Islamic scholars accept tafsīr ishārī provided it adheres to rigorous scholarly criteria, while

¹² Subhi Al-Salih, *Mabahith Fi ‘Uluum Al-Qur’an* (Dar al-‘Ilm li al-Malayin, 2000). p

¹³ Muhammad ‘Ali Al-Sabuuni, *Al-Tibyan Fi ‘Uluum Al-Qur’an* (Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 2003). P 191



rejecting tafsīr bāṭinī for contradicting linguistic norms and core principles of Islamic law (sharia).¹⁴

4. Kaidah Makna Zahir dan Batin dalam Tafsir Isyari

The acceptance of allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) among Islamic scholars is not absolute; rather, it is bounded by specific hermeneutical principles designed to ensure that interpretation remains within the parameters of the Quran, Sunnah, and core tenets of Islamic law (sharia). These principles serve as criteria to distinguish between acceptable (maqbul) allusive exegesis and rejected (mardūd) esoteric interpretation. In this study, these criteria are employed as analytical instruments to evaluate the validity of al-Mahāʾimī's interpretive framework:

1. Not negating the exoteric (ẓāhir) meaning of the text

The esoteric meaning articulated in tafsīr ishārī must not invalidate or reject the exoteric (ẓāhir) sense of the verse. The literal text remains the primary foundation for comprehending the Quran, while the allusive meaning serves to enrich the spiritual message embedded within it. Consequently, any esoteric interpretation must be constructed upon the exoteric reading rather than replacing it.¹⁵

2. Non-contradiction with the Quran and Sunnah.

The esoteric meanings derived through tafsīr ishārī must align strictly with the principles of creed (ʿaqīdah), law (sharia), and ethics taught by the Quran and Sunnah. Any interpretation that contradicts explicit scriptural texts (naṣṣ) or yields an understanding at odds with Islamic law is inadmissible as a valid instance of tafsīr ishārī.¹⁶

3. In accordance with Arabic grammatical rules

Although oriented toward spiritual meaning, tafsir isyari (allusive/mystical exegesis) must maintain a linguistically defensible relationship with the wording of the verse. Any interpretation that lacks a linguistic foundation or strays beyond the semantic possibilities of the Arabic language is considered to fall short of scientific and scholarly standards in Quranic exegesis.¹⁷

4. Having a Direct Connection with the Context of the Verse

¹⁴ Jalal al-Din Al-Suyuti, *Al-Itqan Fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'a* (Dar al-Fikr, 2004). 4: 231-233

¹⁵ Achmad Rizqi and others, 'Mengenal Epistemologi Tafsir Al- Tustarī', 2.12 (2025), pp. 927–34.

¹⁶ Al-Dhahabi.. 2: 272

¹⁷ Al-Zarkashi.. 2:174



The inner meaning must maintain a coherent connection with the theme, structure, or general message of the interpreted verse. This relationship may take the form of an expansion of meaning, an extraction of a moral lesson (‘ibrah), or an emphasis on the spiritual aspects embedded within the passage. Consequently, the allusive meaning does not arise arbitrarily, but retains direct relevance to the textual context of the verse.¹⁸

5. Not Claiming the Inner Meaning as the Sole Intended Meaning

Moderate Sufi exegetes do not view the esoteric (bāṭin) sense as the sole intended meaning of Allah Almighty. Rather, the inner meaning is understood merely as one interpretive dimension that complements the exoteric (ẓāhir) text. This methodological stance distinguishes allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) from heterodox esoteric interpretation (tafsīr bāṭinī), which tends to repudiate the literal sense and claim exclusivity for the bāṭin meaning.¹⁹

Based on the aforementioned description, these five principles will serve as an analytical framework to evaluate the extent to which al-Mahā’imī’s interpretation in Tabsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān fulfills the criteria of esoteric exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) accepted by Islamic scholars.

5. Al-Mahā’imī and the Characteristics of His Exegesis

1) The Biography of Al-Mahā’imī

Alā’uddīn ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Mahā’imī (d. 835 AH/1432 CE) was an eminent scholar from Konkan, India. He possessed mastery over various academic disciplines, including Quranic exegesis (tafsīr), Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), and Sufism (taṣawwuf). In numerous biographical compendiums of Islamic scholars, he is depicted as a leading authority (imām), a rigorous researcher (muḥaqqiq), and a prominent Sufi figure endowed with profound erudition and widespread influence within Indian intellectual circles. Beyond his reputation as an exegete, al-Mahā’imī was actively engaged in teaching and providing spiritual guidance to the society of his time. He passed away in 835 AH/1432 CE at the age of approximately fifty-nine.²⁰

Al-Mahā’imī lived during an era of rapid intellectual expansion in India. The Islamic scholarly tradition flourished through educational institutions, scholarly circles (halaqāt), and Sufi networks distributed across various regions. During this period, the study of Quranic exegesis (tafsīr), prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), jurisprudence (fiqh), and Sufism (taṣawwuf) received substantial attention from both scholars and Muslim rulers. These conditions

¹⁸ ‘Abd al-Karīm Al-Qushayrī, *Lata’if Al-Isharat* (Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2007). 1: 15

¹⁹ Al-Qushayrī, *Lata’if Al-Isharat*. 4: 233

²⁰ Al-Dhahabī.. 4: 233



fostered a conducive intellectual environment for the production of scholarly works, including al-Mahā'imī's exegesis, which integrates linguistic analysis, spirituality, and intellectual reflection.²¹

In addition to being influenced by the Sunni scholarly tradition that flourished in India, al-Mahā'imī's thought demonstrates an affinity with the tradition of philosophical Sufism (al-taṣawwuf al-falsafī) developed through the works of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī and Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. Nevertheless, al-Mahā'imī consistently sought to frame these mystical ideas within the parameters of Islamic jurisprudence (sharia) and the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah.²²

Indian scholars regard al-Mahā'imī as one of the pivotal figures in the fields of Quranic exegesis (tafsīr) and Sufism (taṣawwuf). His reputation rests not only on the breadth of his erudition, but also on his ability to integrate various Islamic disciplines into his writings. Within the realm of exegesis, he is recognized as a commentator who devoted significant attention to inter-verse thematic coherence (munāsabah), the incorporation of textual traditions (riwāyāt), and the elucidation of the Quran's spiritual dimensions through an allusive (ishārī) approach.²³

His position as a moderate Sufi exegete is reflected in his continuous effort to maintain a balanced synthesis between the exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) meanings of the text. Consequently, his exegesis is widely regarded as a representative model of allusive interpretation (tafsīr ishārī) that remains strictly firmly grounded in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (sharia) and the established hermeneutical rules recognized by mainstream Islamic scholars.²⁴

Al-Mahā'imī's magnum opus in the field of Quranic exegesis is *Tabsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān bi Ba'd Ma Yushīr ilā I'jāz al-Qur'ān*. The title reflects the author's endeavor to elucidate certain subtle aspects of the Quran's inimitability (i'jāz) through the analysis of inter-verse coherence (munāsabah), the elegance of its linguistic composition, and its embedded spiritual dimensions.²⁵

In this work, al-Mahā'imī does not merely interpret verses based on literal meanings and transmitted traditions (riwāyāt); he also endeavors to uncover the esoteric (bāṭin) dimensions that deepen the reader's

²¹ Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Clarendon Press, 1964).

²² Al-Dhahabī.. 2: 304-306

²³ 'Ala' al-Dīn 'Alī ibn Ahmad Al-Muḥayimi, *Tabsīr Al-Raḥman Wa Taysīr Al-Mannan Bi Ba'd Ma Yushir Ila I'jaz Al-Qur'an* (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah). 1: 19

²⁴ Al-Dhahabī.. 2: 307-309

²⁵ Al-Muḥayimi.. 1: 19



comprehension of the Quranic message. Nevertheless, his allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) remains firmly anchored in the exoteric (ẓāhir) meaning of the text and does not negate the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (sharia). This defining characteristic secures a unique position for al-Mahā'īmī's exegesis within the evolution of Sufi hermeneutics in the Islamic world.²⁶

2) Methodological Characteristics of Al-Mahā'īmī's Exegesis

His magnum opus, *Tabsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān bi Ba'd Mā Yushīr ilā I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, exhibits several distinctive methodological characteristics:

a. Attention to Inter-Verse Coherence (Munāsabah)

One of the most prominent features of al-Mahā'īmī's exegesis is his meticulous attention to inter-verse (munāsabah al-āyāt) and inter-surah coherence. In numerous passages, he endeavors to elucidate the thematic connections between a given verse and those preceding and following it, thereby establishing a cohesive thematic unity. According to al-Mahā'īmī, the structural arrangement of the Quranic text contains profound subtleties and aspects of scriptural inimitability (i'jāz) that cannot be fully comprehended without analyzing these textual interrelationships.²⁷

This attention to inter-verse coherence (munāsabah) serves not only to elucidate thematic continuity, but also forms the foundation for comprehending the allusive meanings (ma'ānī ishāriyyah) embedded within the verses. Consequently, the spiritual dimensions developed by al-Mahā'īmī consistently emerge from the contextual framework of the verse under interpretation, rather than from speculative readings detached from the Quranic text's structural organization.²⁸

b. Use of Tafsir bi al-Ma'thūr

Al-Mahā'īmī initiates his commentary using a bi al-ma'thūr (tradition-based) approach by referencing thematic parallel verses, thereby demonstrating the cohesive message of the Qur'an, serta memanfaatkan hadis Nabi saw. terutama pada pembahasan akidah, akhlak, dan nilai spiritual.²⁹ Al-Mahā'īmī also incorporates the atsar (traditions) of the Companions and the salaf (early generations) to reinforce textual meanings, thereby proving that the Sufi dimension of his exegesis remains deeply rooted in classical narrational traditions.³⁰ His use of these diverse traditional sources

²⁶ Al-Qushayri, *Lata'if Al-Isharat*.. 1: 13

²⁷ Bakar..p 56

²⁸ Al-Dhahabi.. 2: 307

²⁹ Al-Muhayimi.. 2: 308

³⁰ Al-Suyuti.. 4: 189



demonstrates that the mystical dimension of al-Maha'imi's exegesis does not exist in isolation; rather, it is built upon the foundation of tafsir bi al-ma'thur (tradition-based exegesis).

c. The dimension of Sufism in Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*)

Another prominent feature of al-Maha'imi's exegesis is its robust mystical dimension. Numerous verses are interpreted by connecting them to issues of soul purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), the control of carnal desires, the elevation of faith, and the spiritual journey toward God. In al-Maha'imi's perspective, the Qur'an serves not only as a source of law and practical guidance for life, but also as a vehicle for shaping a believer's spiritual character.³¹

The influence of Sufism in his exegesis is evident in his discussion of *maqāmāt* (spiritual stations), *aḥwāl* (spiritual states), sincerity (*ikhhlās*), patience (*ṣabr*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), gnosis (*ma'rifah*), and various other core concepts of the Sunni Sufi tradition. Nevertheless, al-Maha'imi does not employ these concepts to negate the literal meaning of the text; rather, he utilizes them as a means to deepen the comprehension of the Qur'an's underlying messages.³²

d. Ishārī Approach (Tafsīr Ishārī)

he *ishārī* (allusive) approach constitutes a defining feature of al-Maha'imi's exegesis. Through this framework, he seeks to elucidate the inner (*bāṭin*) dimensions embedded within Qur'anic verses only after establishing their outer (*ẓāhir*) meanings. In other words, the esoteric sense is positioned as an enrichment to the literal meaning, rather than a replacement or negation of it.³³

For instance, in interpreting the concept of *iḥsān* (spiritual excellence) in Qur'an 16:90, al-Maha'imi does not merely explain the verse's social and ethical dimensions; he also links it to the station of *iḥsān* (*maqām al-iḥsān*) within a believer's spiritual experience. Similarly, in his commentary on the concept of *shirk* (polytheism/associating partners with God) in Qur'an 6:82, he develops an inner understanding regarding the heart's reliance on entities other than God, all without diminishing the verse's fundamental theological import.³⁴

These characteristics indicate that al-Maha'imi's exegesis can be categorized as a moderate *ishārī* (allusive) commentary that seeks to maintain

³¹ Al-Muhayimi.. 2: 237

³² Al-Ghazali.. 3: 12-18

³³ Al-Dhahabi.. 2: 269-273

³⁴ Al-Muhayimi.. 2: 237



a balance between the outer (ẓāhir) and inner (bāṭin) dimensions. Furthermore, this approach serves as the foundation for the subsequent analysis regarding the application of the principles governing outer and inner meanings in his hermeneutics.

3) Analysis of the Exegetical Principles of Inward and Outward Meanings in Tafsir Al-Mahaimi

The analysis of al-Maha'imi's exegesis is conducted using five governing criteria for the validity of ishārī (allusive) interpretation, namely: (1) non-negation of the outer (ẓāhir) meaning, (2) non-contradiction with the Qur'an and Sunnah, (3) conformity with Arabic linguistic rules, (4) contextual relevance to the verse, and (5) non-claiming of the inner (bāṭin) meaning as the sole interpretation of the verse. Through these analytical tools, the extent of the validity of the ishārī approach employed by al-Maha'imi in Tafsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān can be determined.

4) Preservation of the Exoteric Meaning (Zāhir) in Al-Maha'imi's Exegesis

a. QS al-Baqarah [2]: 121

Allah SWT says:

الَّذِينَ ءَاتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَتْلُونَهُ حَقَّ تِلَاوَتِهِ ۚ ۱۲۱

“Those We have given the Book follow it as it should be followed. It is they who ‘truly’ believe in it”

In interpreting this verse, al-Maha'imi first clarifies its exoteric (ẓāhir) meaning—namely, the obligation to read, comprehend, and properly adhere to the guidance of Allah's scripture. Following this literal explanation, he expands the ishārī (allusive) interpretation, positing that the true essence of reading the Qur'an extends beyond mere oral recitation to encompass deep contemplation, practical application, and the internalization of revealed values into a believer's spiritual life.[1] This interpretation demonstrates that the esoteric meaning does not supersede the exoteric meaning; rather, it broadens the scope of the verse toward the dimension of spiritual development. Consequently, the first criterion of ishārī exegesis—non-negation of the outer meaning—is fulfilled in al-Maha'imi's commentary.

b. QS al-An'am [6]: 82

Allah SWT says:

الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا ءِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ



“It is ‘only’ those who are faithful and do not tarnish their faith with falsehood..”

Al-Maha’imi adheres to the tradition-based interpretation traced to the Prophet (peace be upon him), which posits that *zulm* (injustice/wrongdoing) in this verse denotes *shirk* (associating partners with God).³⁵ This exoteric meaning is subsequently expanded through an *ishārī* (allusive) approach by interpreting *shirk* as the heart's attachment to entities other than Allah, as well as the belief in the existence of an independent power alongside Him.³⁶

From the perspective of Sufism, this form of *shirk* (associating partners with God) pertains not only to the physical worship of idols, but also encompasses an internal reliance on worldly causes. This interpretation maintains a close connection to the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the verse, thereby remaining within the parameters of acceptable hermeneutics.

c. QS al-Nahl [16]: 90

Allah SWT says:

﴿ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ ﴾

“Indeed, Allah commands justice, grace..”

Al-Maha’imi explains that the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) meaning of *al-iḥsān* is doing good and fulfilling the rights of one's fellow human beings.³⁷ However, he also connects it to the station of *iḥsān* (*maqām al-iḥsān*) as elucidated in the Hadith of Gabriel namely, worshipping Allah as though one sees Him.³⁸

Through this approach, al-Maha’imi shifts the orientation of the verse from mere social-ethical guidance toward the cultivation of spiritual consciousness. Nevertheless, the social import of the verse is fully maintained, thereby precluding any erasure of its literal sense.

5) Development of the Esoteric Meaning (Bāṭin) in Al-Maha’imi’s Exegesis

a. QS al-Hajj [22]: 11

Allah SWT says:

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَعْْبُدُ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ حَرْفٍ

³⁵ Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ismail Al-Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī* (Dar Ibnu Kathir li al-Tibā’ah wa al-Tauzī’, 2002). 4: 141

³⁶ Al-Muhayimi.. Ġ: 446

³⁷ Al-Muhayimi.. Ġ: 237

³⁸ Abū Zakariya Yayha ibn Syarf bin Miry al-Nawawi, *Al-Minhāj Syarḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim Ibn Al-Hajjāj* (Dar Ihya al-Turats al-Arabi, 1392). I: 36



“And there are some who worship Allah on the verge of faith..”

Exoterically, this verse depicts those who believe when attaining worldly gain and turn away when afflicted by hardship.³⁹ Al-Maha’imi subsequently expands the esoteric (bāṭin) meaning of the verse by explaining that such a condition reflects the fragility of one's conviction and an unsolidified spiritual connection with Allah.⁴⁰

In his view, genuine faith does not depend on fluctuating worldly circumstances; rather, it originates from a steadfast conviction in the divine will of Allah. This interpretation highlights the orientation toward spiritual education (tarbiyah rūḥiyyah) that characterizes his exegesis.

b. QS Maryam [19]: 76

وَيَزِيدُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ اهْتَدَوْا هُدًى ۖ

“And Allah increases in guidance those who are ‘rightly’ guided..”

In interpreting verses that treat of divine guidance and mercy, al-Maha’imi emphasizes that human salvation fundamentally stems from divine grace rather than being solely the product of human deeds.⁴¹

This interpretation reflects the Sunni Sufi worldview, which frames human deeds as mere secondary causes (asbāb), whereas divine mercy constitutes the ultimate factor that secures a servant’s salvation. Consequently, the esoteric (bāṭin) dimension of the verse is directed toward fostering an attitude of reliance (tawakkul) and complete spiritual dependence upon Allah.

c. QS al-Nahl [16]: 126–127

وَإِنْ عَاقَبْتُمْ فَعَاقِبُوا بِمِثْلِ مَا عُوقِبْتُمْ بِهِ ۖ

“If you retaliate, then let it be equivalent to what you have suffered..”

Exoterically, this verse addresses the ethics of responding to others' actions in a proportional manner, while advocating for patience.⁴² Al-Maha’imi elaborates the esoteric meaning of patience (*ṣabr*) as a vehicle for the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and the restraint of lower desires (*hawā al-nafs*).⁴³

³⁹ Al-Muhayimi.. II: 398

⁴⁰ Al-Muhayimi.. II: 399

⁴¹ Al-Muhayimi.. II: 336

⁴² Al-Muhayimi.. II: 248

⁴³ Al-Muhayimi.. II: 248



For al-Maha'imi, patience (*ṣabr*) is not merely a moral imperative; it is also a spiritual path that leads a servant toward proximity to Allah..

6) Conformity with the Rules of Arabic Grammar

One of the defining characteristics of al-Maha'imi's exegesis is his consistent reliance on linguistic meaning as the foundational starting point of interpretation. Before introducing an allusive (*ishārī*) reading, he systematically elucidates the literal sense of the verse, grounding it in Arabic syntax and its specific textual context.⁴⁴

This demonstrates that his allusive (*ishārī*) interpretation does not arise speculatively; rather, it maintains a coherent connection with the plausible meanings derived directly from the Quranic text. Consequently, the vast majority of his interpretations satisfy the linguistic criteria established by scholars for accepting *ishārī* exegesis.

7) In accordance with Islamic Sharia

Al-Maha'imi explicitly rejects the separation between the outward law (*sharī'ah*) and the inward reality (*ḥaqīqah*). In his exegesis of the narrative of the Prophets Moses and al-Khidr, he explicates that true spiritual reality cannot possibly contradict the sacred law conveyed by the prophets.⁴⁵

This perspective demonstrates that al-Maha'imi endeavors to maintain his mystical exegesis within the framework of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Consequently, the esoteric meanings (*bāṭin*) he expounds are consistently oriented toward reinforcing the observance of the sacred law, rather than displacing it.

6. Evaluasi Validitas Tafsir Isyari Al-Maha'imi

Based on the analysis of several exegetical examples, it can be concluded that al-Maha'imi's exegesis generally satisfies the criteria for acceptable allusive interpretation (*tafsīr ishārī*) established by Islamic scholars. First, it does not negate the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the verse. Second, the esoteric (*bāṭin*) meanings he expounds do not contradict the Quran and the Sunnah. Third, his interpretations consistently retain a defensible linguistic foundation. Fourth, the developed esoteric meanings maintain a coherent connection to the textual context of the verse. Fifth, al-Maha'imi never asserts that the esoteric meaning constitutes the sole intended sense of the Quranic text.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Al-Dhahabi.. 2: 307-309

⁴⁵ Al-Muhayimi.. II: 303

⁴⁶ Al-Muhayimi.. II: 303



Thus, al-Maha'imi's exegesis can be categorized as a form of moderate allusive exegesis (*tafsir ishāri*) that integratively synthesizes the exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimensions. This defining characteristic simultaneously distinguishes it from the Bāṭinī exegetical paradigm, which tends to negate the literal meaning of the Quranic text.

Based on an analysis of numerous exegetical examples in *Tabṣīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān*, this article reveals that al-Maha'imi developed a style of allusive exegesis that strives to balance both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions. The allusive interpretation he employs does not aim to supplant the literal meaning of the verse; rather, it expands the horizons of comprehension through a spiritual approach that remains firmly grounded in the sacred law (*sharī'ah*). This finding demonstrates that al-Maha'imi's commentary possesses distinct characteristics within the tradition of Sufi exegesis.

7. The Distinctiveness of Al-Maha'imi Relative to Other Sufi Exegetes

When compared with preceding Sufi exegetes, al-Maha'imi exhibits several distinguishing characteristics. First, in comparison to Sahl al-Tustarī, al-Maha'imi's exegesis is markedly more systematic in elucidating the thematic and structural connections between verses (*munāsabah*). While al-Tustarī tends to present spiritual allusions concisely and fragmentarily, al-Maha'imi consistently endeavors to connect each verse to both its preceding and subsequent contexts.⁴⁷

Second, compared to Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, al-Maha'imi integrates traditional narration-based exegesis (*tafsir bi al-ma'thūr*) to a much greater extent into his allusive interpretations. While al-Sulamī frequently cites the opinions of earlier Sufis as the primary foundation for interpretation, al-Maha'imi seeks to preface his explanations with the exoteric (*zāhir*) meaning and exegetical traditions prior to developing the inner (*bāṭin*) dimensions of the verse.⁴⁸

Third, when compared to Ibn 'Ajībah, al-Maha'imi appears markedly more moderate in his application of Sufistic symbolism. While Ibn 'Ajībah's exegesis frequently features extensive mystical elaborations, al-Maha'imi tends to circumscribe esoteric meanings to the dimensions of spiritual

⁴⁷ Sahl Al-Tusturī, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-'Aẓīm*, ed. by Ṭahā 'Abdurra'ūf and Sa'ad Ḥasan, 1st edn (Dār Al-Ḥarām li Al-Turāṣ).

⁴⁸ 'Abd Al-Raḥmān Al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq Al-Tafsīr*, ed. by Sayyid 'Amran, 1st edn (Dār Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001). 1: 12-15



education, ethics, and soul-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) that retain a direct correlation with the exoteric meaning of the verse.⁴⁹

This finding demonstrates that al-Maha'imi's position within the tradition of allusive exegesis (*tafsīr ishārī*) occupies a middle ground between mystical inclinations and a commitment to an exegetical methodology rooted in sacred law (*sharī'ah*) and transmitted traditions (*riwāyah*).

8. Al-Maha'imi's Contribution to the Tradition of Allusive Exegesis (Tafsīr Ishārī)

Al-Maha'imi's primary contribution lies in his successful construction of an exegetical model that harmoniously integrates the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimensions. He demonstrates that spiritual interpretation need not contradict the literal sense of the Quran; rather, it can serve as a vehicle to deepen the comprehension of revealed messages.⁵⁰

Furthermore, al-Maha'imi's attention to textual coherence (*munāsabah*) imparts a distinctive character to the Sufi exegetical tradition. Unlike certain Sufi commentators who prioritize the unveiling of esoteric meanings, al-Maha'imi first establishes logical connections between verses prior to developing their allusive dimensions. This approach yields an interpretation that is more systematic and academically defensible.⁵¹

From a methodological perspective, al-Maha'imi's exegesis also demonstrates a robust integration of traditional narration-based commentary (*tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*), linguistic analysis, and Sufi approaches. This combination renders his commentary a significant representation of moderate allusive exegesis (*tafsīr ishārī*) that remains firmly within the purview of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Consequently, the study of al-Maha'imi's exegesis makes a substantial contribution to the development of Sufi exegetical studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimensions in Quranic hermeneutics.⁵²

D. CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that al-Maha'imi successfully synthesizes the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimensions of Quranic exegesis in an integrative manner. The exoteric sense serves as the primary foundation of interpretation, whereas the esoteric meaning functions to deepen the spiritual dimension of the verse without negating its literal sense.

⁴⁹ Ibn 'Ajjabah, *Al-Baḥr Al-Madīd Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-Majīd*, ed. by Aḥmad 'Abdullāh Al-Qurasyī Ruslān (1999). 1: 18-22

⁵⁰ Al-Dhahabi.. 2: 307-309

⁵¹ Al-Muhayimi.. 1: 5-7

⁵² Al-Dhahabi.. 2: 308-310



Based on an analysis of several exegetical examples, al-Maha'imi's allusive exegesis (tafsīr ishārī) generally fulfills the criteria accepted by Islamic scholars: it does not negate the exoteric meaning, does not contradict the Quran and the Sunnah, possesses a robust linguistic foundation, and maintains explicit relevance to the textual context of the verse. Furthermore, al-Maha'imi refrains from claiming that the esoteric meaning constitutes the sole intended sense of the Quranic text.

This article further reveals that the paradigm of al-Maha'imi's allusive exegesis is dominated by the dimensions of ethics, spiritual education, soul-purification (tazkiyat al-nafs), and the reinforcement of gnosis (ma'rifah) of Allah. The distinctiveness of his exegesis lies in its strong emphasis on textual coherence (munāsabah), alongside the seamless integration of traditional narration-based commentary (tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr), linguistic analysis, and Sufi methodologies. Characterized by these features, al-Maha'imi's commentary can be categorized as a moderate allusive exegesis operating strictly within the purview of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, thereby offering a significant contribution to the evolution of the Sufi exegetical tradition.

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