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Textualist and Contextualist Approaches to Qur'anic Interpretation: Implications for Contemporary Islamic Education and Ethical Values Formation

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The tension between textualist and contextualist approaches to Qur'anic interpretation remains a significant issue in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly in understanding the relationship between revealed texts, historical contexts, and ethical values. This study examines the methodological relationship between these two approaches and explores their implications for contemporary Islamic education and ethical values formation. Employing qualitative library research with descriptive-analytical and hermeneutical approaches, the study draws primarily on Abdullah Saeed's interpretive framework and engages with the hermeneutical perspectives of Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The findings demonstrate that textualist and contextualist approaches are not entirely opposing paradigms but exist along a methodological continuum, as both require contextual knowledge, although they differ in the scope and authority assigned to it. Through an analysis of Qur'anic verses concerning testimony, slavery, and *qawwamah*, this study proposes a semi-textualist framework that integrates textual meaning, socio-historical understanding, and scholarly consensus (*ijma*). This framework offers an interpretive foundation for Islamic education by encouraging a balanced understanding of religious texts, critical engagement with historical contexts, and the internalization of ethical values. It further highlights the importance of developing educational practices that preserve the authority of revelation while fostering contextual awareness, intellectual responsibility, and ethical sensitivity in contemporary Muslim society.

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1. Introduction

Qur'anic interpretation has occupied Muslim scholars since the earliest generations of Islam, yet the methodological question of how to balance the text's literal wording with its socio-historical context remains one of the most debated issues in contemporary Islamic thought. Abdullah Saeed's Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a

Contemporary Approach (2006) provides a foundational typology distinguishing Textualists, who hold that the Qur'an's wording carries a fixed, universally applicable meaning, from Contextualists, who argue that ethico-legal rulings must be read through the socio-historical conditions of their revelation. While Saeed's typology has been widely cited in Qur'anic hermeneutics literature, existing scholarship has not sufficiently examined the extent to which both camps share common interpretive groundparticularly in their covert reliance on asbab al-nuzulnor has it articulated a workable synthesis that preserves the methodological strengths of both approaches while correcting their respective failures.

The research gap this study addresses is therefore twofold: first, the underexplored methodological commonality between Textualist and Contextualist approaches, particularly their shared dependence on contextual knowledge differing in degree rather than in kind; and second, the absence of a clearly articulated middle-ground position capable of serving as a defensible and consistent standard for approaching the Qur'an's ethico-legal verses in the contemporary period.

This study is guided by three research questions; In what ways do Textualist and Contextualist approaches to Qur'anic interpretation converge, despite their stated methodological differences? What are the structural limitations of full-scale Contextualismas represented by Fazlur Rahman's double movement theory and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's humanistic hermeneuticswhen applied to the Qur'an's ethico-legal verses? How can a Semi-textualist synthesis, grounded in literal meaning, socio-historical understanding, and ijma', resolve the principal methodological weaknesses of both camps?

The objectives of this study are accordingly; to demonstrate that both Textualist and Contextualist approaches depend on contextual knowledge, differing only in the scope and authority assigned to it; to identify and critically evaluate the methodological limitations of radical Contextualist theories; and to propose and defend a Semi-textualist interpretive framework through test cases drawn from the Qur'an and classical exegetical literature.

There is a rule in usul al-tafsir that every classical exegete accepts: al-'ibrah bi 'umum al-lafz la bi khusus al-sabab "the ruling lies in the generality of the wording, not in the specificity of its cause". This rule exists to protect a verse's universal force even when it was triggered by one particular incident. But look closely at what it actually admits: you cannot apply it without first knowing the "sabab" the occasion (Saeed, 2006).

The exegete has to find the historical circumstance before deciding how far the wording should be allowed to generalise beyond it. Even the maxim Textualists use to defend universal application is itself a contextual tool.

Take Surat al-Fatiha. Nobody, not the strictest Salafi, not the most literalist Hanbali, reads al-maghdub 'alayhim ("those who incurred wrath") and "al-dallin"("those who went astray") purely off the bare Arabic. The standard reading, that the first refers to the Jews and the second to the Christians, comes from hadith and the wider body of exegetical narration, not from the four words on the page. If even the opening surah of the Qur'an, recited in every prayer, depends on transmitted context to fix its referents, then "textualism" was never really about rejecting context. It was about limiting how far context is allowed to travel.

Modern textualist-leaning exegesis confirms this. Amin Ahsan Islahi, usually placed in the text-and-tradition camp because of his "nazm" method, is still doing contextual work, he simply restricts context to a verse's immediate literary neighbourhood rather than the wider socio-historical canvas. Tafsir al-Manar, associated with Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, and al-Razi's Mafatih al-Ghayb, before it, brought rational and proto-scientific reasoning into commentary, again showing that scholars working broadly within the textualist tradition never operated with the text in a historical vacuum. The real disagreement is not "context versus no context." It is a question of degree: how wide the circle of context is allowed to be, and how much authority it is given once drawn.

Fazlur Rahman's "double movement theory" is the clearest articulation of full-scale Contextualism, and it deserves to be taken seriously. The method works in two steps: first, move from a specific Qur'anic ruling back to the general moral principle behind it, by studying the conditions under which it was revealed; second, carry that general principle forward into the specific conditions of today. Rahman's complaint against classical jurists was that they treated the Qur'an "piecemeal," extracting law verse by verse without grasping the unified moral vision the whole revelation was building toward. There is real force in this. A jurist who reads the four-wives verse (Q.4:3) purely as permission, without noticing that the same verse opens by warning against injustice to orphans and closes with a warning against the inability to do justice between wives, has genuinely missed something the text is trying to say.

A more radical version of this instinct appears in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who argued that the Qur'an, while divinely revealed, must be understood as a text (nass) produced through a historical dialogue between God, the Prophet, and the early community, and that recovering this human, dialogical dimension is necessary for any reading capable of addressing the present. Abu Zayd pushes Contextualism further than I am willing to go, since his framework risks treating the Qur'an's language itself, not only its legal application, as something historically negotiated rather than divinely fixed. But his instinct that ignoring the human, communicative side of revelation produces a reading frozen in amber is worth taking seriously even where his conclusions go too far.

I think the double movement theory, and Abu Zayd's more radical version of it, run into two serious difficulties that deserve to be named honestly rather than smoothed over. The first is evidentail (Rahman, 1987). Recovering "the socio-historical context" depends entirely on external material: historical reports, riwayat, narrations about Hijazi society, sometimes archaeological reconstruction. This material can be incomplete, contradictory, or simply unverifiable centuries later. If the foundation a contextual reading is built on is itself uncertain, the "general principle" extracted from it inherits that same uncertainty. We end up applying a confident method to an unconfident database.

The second problem is more fundamental. Revelation is divine; the historical reconstruction used to contextualise revelation is a human and fallible enterprise. Outside of authentic hadith, where the Prophet himself, under divine guidance, tells us what a verse meant, no one can be entirely certain they have correctly identified why a ruling took the exact shape it did. Once we substitute our own historical guesswork for what only an authentic transmitted source can establish, we risk replacing the text's authority with the interpreter's confidence in his own reconstruction. That confidence is often unwarranted.

This is also where Mahmoud Mohammed Taha's "Second Message of Islam" becomes unconvincing as a method, even though the moral seriousness behind it deserves respect. Taha argued that the earlier Meccan verses, more universal and egalitarian in tone, represent Islam's ideal and eternal message, while the later Medinan verses, which carry most of the specific legislation, were a time-bound "first message" suited only to the Prophet's own community. My objection is structural: this approach pre-selects which part of the Qur'an gets to count as "the real message," based on what the interpreter already finds appealing. If we are permitted to keep the Meccan verses we like and quietly set the Medinan ones aside, the same selective method becomes available to anyone, to justify almost any conclusion they walked in wanting. The Qur'an is one message; the Prophet's sunnah, drawn from both periods together, is the primary key for extracting law from it. Picking some verses and leaving others by preference is not interpretation, it is editing.

There is a consensus problem hiding underneath this too. If the ummah historically holds a settled understanding of a verse, and someone proposes a reading far removed from that ijma', the door opens for everyone to reinterpret according to taste. Once that door is open, the meaning of the Qur'an risks shifting with whoever happens to be reading it, generation after generation, until "interpretation" really means "whatever serves the present moment." Socio-historical context matters, but it cannot be allowed to swallow everything; some anchor has to hold against the drift.

This is why I think the ayat al-ahkam, legal verses that have not been abrogated (mansukh) deserve a different treatment from narrative or descriptive verses. Inheritance

shares, witness requirements, zakat and fasting obligations are written in plain, unambiguous Arabic. They do not require contextual softening to be understood; they require contextual understanding only to be appreciated, a different thing entirely.

The clearest test case is the punishment for theft, the cutting of the hand (Q.5:38). Seventh-century Hijazi society had no alternative system of organised punishment available to it; this penalty, like several others, existed in some form even before the revelation among the pre-Islamic Arabs. Some Jahili customs continued into Islam essentially unchanged, because the Qur'an's own declaration "this day I have perfected your religion for you" (Q.5:3) was about completing the "foundations and principles" of the religion, not closing every door of legal elaboration. Islamic law, by the Qur'an's own internal logic, was left as an open book. This is exactly why the Prophet, sending Mu'adh ibn Jabal to Yemen, instructed him to judge first by the Qur'an, then by the Sunnah, and only then by his own reasoned effort (ijtihad) where neither gave a direct answer. Reasoning was always meant to operate "after" and "within" the boundary of revealed text, never as its replacement, and never used to discard a clear ruling simply because a later century finds it socially uncomfortable.

Previous studies have examined Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach from various methodological and epistemological perspectives. Fina (2011) explains that Saeed's contextual interpretation represents an important development in understanding ethico-legal verses by considering both the socio-historical circumstances of revelation and contemporary realities. Similarly, Rachmawan (2013) emphasizes the importance of connecting the original meaning of Qur'anic texts with the needs of contemporary society. More recent studies have further explored the epistemological foundations of contextual interpretation and its relationship with the hierarchy of Qur'anic values (Rois et al., 2025). However, the implications of the relationship between textualist and contextualist approaches for Islamic education, particularly in developing contextual religious understanding and ethical values formation, require further conceptual elaboration. This study addresses this gap by examining how a semi-textualist framework can provide an interpretive foundation for contemporary Islamic education.

2. Methods

Witnesses and the limits of socio-historical explanation.Q.2:282 requires two female witnesses in place of one male in certain transactions. Al-Razi, commenting on this verse, justified the distinction by claiming women's nature was more prone to forgetfulness due to their physical constitution.This is a useful test case precisely because it shows the danger on both sides at once. A purely Textualist reading freezes Razi's biological claim into the meaning of the verse itself, as if his explanation were the ruling.

A properly Contextualist reading recognises that Razi was offering a seventh/eighth-century rationale for a clear legal requirement, not part of the requirement's binding content, the ruling on witnesses stands on its textual clarity, while the explanation for it can and should be revised once its premise (women's intellectual capacity) is empirically false. Context here does not erase the ruling; it strips away a bad justification while leaving the text's authority intact.

Slavery and legitimate contextual reinterpretation. The Qur'an addresses slavery directly, the institution of "bandi" "wa ma malakat aymanukum" ("those your right hand possesses") is regulated rather than abolished in the text. Yet there is now a recognised consensus (ijma') among Muslim jurists that slavery is impermissible, a consensus built not by denying the Qur'an's seventh-century regulation of the institution, but by recognising that revelation engaged with an existing social fact of its time while planting an unmistakable trajectory toward manumission and human dignity. This is, I think, the clearest example of context legitimately overriding the apparent permission of a verse, not because an individual interpreter decided the verse was inconvenient, but because the "entire scholarly community", across centuries, converged on the conclusion. This is precisely the discipline missing in Taha's method: change anchored in ijma', not in one reader's preference.

"Qawwamun and proportional responsibility." Amina Wadud reads Q.4:34's description of male qawwamun (authority) as conditional on two specific terms in the verse 'fadl' (a capacity God has given) and 'bima anfaqu' (because they spend of their wealth) arguing the authority described is tied to those conditions, not to maleness as such. I think there is something right in this, though I would frame the conclusion differently: the doubled inheritance share for men, and the responsibility implied by qawwamun, reflect the social and financial responsibilities placed on men in that society and afterward, not a statement about women's lesser worth but a reflection of unequal obligation. This is why the Qur'an, discussing marriage in the same surah, asks for al-'adl, equitable fairness, rather than numbers of wives. Reading the ruling through its social rationale does not erase the ruling; it explains its balance.

3. Result and Discussion

Underneath all three test cases sits a deeper question: what is the actual relationship between the text, its author, and its reader? The Qur'an sits at the top as the text. The Prophet sits at one base corner as the human medium through whom revelation arrived and was first lived out, the author in the sense relevant to interpretation, since his explanation and practice anchor the text's earliest meaning. The contemporary reader sits at the other corner, separated from that moment by fourteen centuries (Freamon, 1998).

Two extreme paths tempt every reader crossing that distance. One is pure objectivism: the claim that a reader today can step entirely outside their own time and recover the Prophet's original meaning untouched, as if no distance exists, the instinct behind rigid Textualism. The other is pure subjectivism: the claim that meaning is simply whatever the present reader decides to find, with no real constraint from the Prophet's own horizon, the danger in Taha's selective method, and in Fazlur's unchecked assumption being mistaken for the verse itself.

Gadamer's idea of the fusion of horizons, describes what happens when neither extreme is allowed to win.The reader does not erase their own present horizon and pretend to "become" a seventh-century Arab. Nor do they discard the Prophet's horizon and project today's preferences backward. Real understanding happens in the bridge between the two ,the reader's present concerns meeting the text's original direction, producing a meaning faithful to where the text came from while still intelligible to where the reader stands now. This is exactly what al-'ibrah bi 'umum al-lafz la bi khusus al-sabab is quietly doing: letting a specific seventh-century occasion generalise into a wider principle, rather than freezing the verse to that one moment or letting it mean anything at all. The Companions occupy a special place in this bridge, they stood closest to the Prophet's own horizon, asking him directly when a verse confused them, which is why their understanding carries weight a reader fourteen centuries removed cannot simply claim without serious contextual and linguistic work.

Bringing the test cases back to the theory clarifies what a working method actually requires. Where a verse's wording is unambiguous and unabrogated, theft, inheritance shares, fasting, zakat, the text governs, and socio-historical context serves only to explain, never to override. Where a verse's application rests on a culturally contingent justification rather than the verse's own legal content, Razi's reasoning on witnesses, context legitimately strips the bad justification without touching the ruling. Where the Qur'an regulates an inherited social institution without commanding its permanence, slavery, sustained scholarly consensus, not individual preference, can recognise that the text's own trajectory points toward a different conclusion than its seventh-century regulation. And where a verse's conditions are explicit in its own wording, qawwamun's tie to fadl and infaq, context explains proportionality without erasing responsibility.

What distinguishes legitimate Contextualism from Taha's selective method, or from an unrestrained subjectivist reading, is precisely the ijma' test: change anchored in the convergent judgment of the scholarly community across history, rather than in any single reader's century deciding unilaterally what the text now means. This is also what separates legitimate Contextualism from rigid Textualism: a refusal to let the plain, unabrogated wording of ayat al-ahkam be quietly edited away because a later century finds it uncomfortable.

The proposed semi-textualist framework has significant implications for contemporary Islamic education, particularly in developing a balanced approach to understanding and teaching Qur'anic values. Religious education should not be limited to the transmission of textual knowledge but should also encourage learners to understand the relationship between religious teachings and the social realities in which those teachings are applied. In this regard, Saeed's contextual approach provides an opportunity to integrate normative religious understanding with critical engagement with contemporary social conditions (Sihab, 2025).

Furthermore, the integration of textual interpretation and contextual awareness can contribute to the development of ethical values in Islamic education. Values such as justice, responsibility, human dignity, and respect for others require not only theoretical explanation but also meaningful understanding of their application in everyday life. The cultivation of Islamic educational values therefore needs to connect religious knowledge with character development and ethical conduct (Marjuni, 2020; Astuti et al., 2023).

The semi-textualist framework offers a conceptual basis for achieving this integration through three interconnected dimensions: fidelity to the Qur'anic text, awareness of socio-historical circumstances, and scholarly accountability through *ijma*. These dimensions can encourage an educational orientation that maintains the normative foundations of Islam while developing intellectual openness and ethical sensitivity. Nevertheless, the application of this framework in educational institutions requires further empirical investigation, particularly regarding curriculum development, teaching strategies, and learners' ethical understanding.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the relationship between textualist and contextualist approaches to Qur'anic interpretation is better understood as a methodological continuum rather than an absolute opposition. Both approaches recognize the importance of contextual knowledge, although they differ in the extent to which socio-historical factors influence the interpretation and application of Qur'anic teachings. Through an examination of Abdullah Saeed's interpretive framework and the contributions of Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, this study demonstrates that a balanced interpretive approach requires the integration of textual authority, historical awareness, and responsible scholarly reasoning.

The analysis of Qur'anic verses concerning testimony (Q. 2:282), slavery, and *qawwamah* (Q. 4:34) further illustrates that textual interpretation cannot be separated from the historical and social circumstances surrounding revelation. Nevertheless, contextual understanding should not become an unrestricted basis for replacing the authority of the

Qur'anic text with contemporary assumptions. In this regard, the study proposes a semi-textualist framework consisting of three interconnected dimensions: textual meaning as the primary interpretive foundation, socio-historical context as an explanatory instrument, and scholarly consensus (*ijma*) as a mechanism for maintaining interpretive accountability. This framework seeks to overcome the limitations of both rigid textualism and unrestricted contextualism while preserving the relationship between revelation and contemporary understanding.

From the perspective of contemporary Islamic education, this framework offers an important conceptual contribution to the development of religious learning that integrates textual understanding with contextual awareness. Islamic education should not merely encourage learners to memorize and reproduce religious interpretations, but should also cultivate the ability to understand the historical circumstances of revelation, critically examine the application of religious teachings, and recognize the ethical principles underlying Qur'anic guidance. Such an approach can contribute to the development of intellectual responsibility, ethical sensitivity, respect for human dignity, and a balanced understanding of Islamic values in contemporary society.

The educational implications of this framework also highlight the importance of positioning religious texts as sources of normative guidance while encouraging thoughtful engagement with changing social and cultural realities. By integrating textual fidelity, contextual understanding, and scholarly accountability, Islamic education can provide a foundation for developing learners who are both firmly grounded in religious values and responsive to contemporary challenges. However, these implications remain conceptual and require further investigation through empirical studies in Islamic educational institutions.

This study is limited by its reliance on library-based research and its primary engagement with selected Sunni Qur'anic hermeneutical perspectives and three interpretive case studies. Future research should examine the application of the proposed semi-textualist framework in Islamic educational settings, particularly in curriculum development, classroom interpretation of Qur'anic teachings, and the formation of ethical values among learners. Further comparative investigations involving different Islamic intellectual traditions would also strengthen the theoretical and practical relevance of this framework.

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