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The Methodology of *Tafsir Ishari* and a Critical Analysis from the Perspective of Qur'anic Exegesis Studies

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Abstract

Tafsir ishari represents one of the distinctive traditions within Qur'anic exegesis that seeks to uncover the inner spiritual meanings of Qur'anic verses beyond their apparent textual expressions. Although this interpretive approach has significantly contributed to the development of Islamic spirituality and Sufi thought, its methodological validity continues to generate scholarly debate due to concerns regarding subjectivity, epistemological legitimacy, and the absence of standardized interpretive procedures. This study aims to examine the conceptual foundations, methodological characteristics, and critical issues surrounding *tafsir ishari* from the perspective of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis studies. Employing a qualitative library research design with descriptive-analytical and critical approaches, the study analyzes classical and contemporary literature concerning Sufi exegesis, Qur'anic interpretation, and Islamic epistemology. The findings indicate that *tafsir ishari* functions primarily as an epistemological orientation that complements rather than replaces the outward (*zahir*) interpretation of the Qur'an. Its interpretive process is characterized by reliance on spiritual inspiration (*ilham*), symbolic interpretation, and ethical contemplation while maintaining consistency with the literal meaning of the text. Nevertheless, the study identifies three major methodological challenges, namely the absence of a standardized interpretive framework, the epistemological limitations of inspiration as a source of knowledge, and tensions between symbolic interpretation and established principles of Arabic linguistics. The study concludes that *tafsir ishari* should be understood as a valuable spiritual-hermeneutical tradition whose academic legitimacy depends upon maintaining methodological transparency, linguistic coherence, and epistemological accountability. This research contributes to contemporary Qur'anic exegesis by proposing a balanced analytical framework that integrates the spiritual richness of Sufi interpretation with the methodological rigor required in modern Qur'anic studies.

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Introduction

The Qur'an occupies a central position in Islamic intellectual tradition as the primary source of religious guidance, legal principles, ethical values, and spiritual teachings. Since the earliest period of Islam, Muslim scholars have continuously developed diverse methodologies of Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsir*) to uncover the meanings and objectives embedded within its verses. The Prophet Muhammad served as the first authoritative interpreter of the Qur'an, explaining its meanings through revelation, practical guidance, and exemplary conduct. Following his death, the expansion of Islamic civilization, the emergence of new intellectual traditions, and the increasing complexity of social life encouraged Muslim scholars to formulate systematic approaches for interpreting the Qur'an. Consequently, Qur'anic exegesis evolved into an independent scholarly discipline characterized by diverse interpretive methods, epistemological orientations, and theological perspectives.

The diversity of Qur'anic interpretation reflects the richness of Islamic intellectual history. Classical scholars generally classify Qur'anic exegesis into several epistemological orientations, including *tafsir bi al-ma'thur* (transmitted interpretation), *tafsir bi al-ra'y* (reason-based interpretation), and *tafsir ishari* (esoteric or mystical interpretation). Each interpretive orientation employs different methodological foundations, sources of authority, and analytical procedures. While transmitted interpretation emphasizes narrations from the Qur'an, the Prophet, and the Companions, rational interpretation relies on linguistic analysis, legal reasoning, and contextual interpretation. In contrast, *tafsir ishari* seeks to uncover the inner spiritual meanings of Qur'anic verses through subtle indications (*isharat*) perceived by spiritually disciplined interpreters without necessarily negating the outward (*zahir*) meanings of the text. This distinctive epistemological orientation has made *tafsir ishari* one of the most debated approaches within the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis.

Historically, *tafsir ishari* developed alongside the growth of Islamic mysticism (*tasawwuf*). Early Sufi scholars such as Sahl al-Tustari, al-Junayd al-Baghdadi, and later Ibn 'Arabi introduced interpretive approaches that emphasized spiritual experience as a means of understanding divine revelation. Their interpretations sought not merely to explain the literal meaning of Qur'anic verses but also to reveal their ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions. This approach significantly enriched the intellectual heritage of Islamic scholarship by demonstrating that the Qur'an contains multiple layers of meaning accessible through spiritual purification, contemplation, and continuous remembrance of God. Consequently, *tafsir ishari* has contributed substantially to the development of Islamic spirituality and Sufi thought throughout different periods of Islamic history.

Despite its important contribution, *tafsir ishari* remains one of the most controversial approaches in Qur'anic studies. The central debate concerns its epistemological legitimacy and methodological validity. Proponents argue that the Qur'an possesses both outward and inward dimensions of meaning, allowing spiritually qualified scholars to derive deeper insights that complement rather than contradict the literal interpretation. Conversely, critics question the reliability of interpretations based primarily on spiritual intuition (*ilham*) because such interpretations often lack transparent methodological procedures, objective verification, and universally accepted criteria for determining interpretive validity. This ongoing debate has positioned *tafsir ishari* at the intersection of theology, Qur'anic hermeneutics, Islamic mysticism, and epistemology.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined Sufi exegesis from various perspectives. Existing studies generally focus on four major themes. First, a number of studies explore the historical development of *tafsir ishari* and its major representatives, highlighting its emergence within the broader tradition of Islamic mysticism. Second, several researchers analyse the epistemological foundations of Sufi interpretation by examining concepts such as intuition, inspiration, *kashf*, and spiritual knowledge as sources of interpretation. Third, numerous studies investigate the interpretive characteristics of individual Sufi exegetes and their major works, emphasizing symbolic interpretation and spiritual ethics. Fourth, contemporary research has begun to discuss the relevance of Sufi interpretation for modern spiritual crises, Islamic ethics, and religious moderation. These studies demonstrate that scholarly interest in *tafsir ishari* continues to expand across different academic contexts.

Although previous studies have significantly contributed to understanding the historical development and theological foundations of *tafsir ishari*, several important limitations remain. Most existing research primarily describes the historical evolution, conceptual characteristics, or spiritual values of Sufi interpretation without critically evaluating its methodological framework within the broader discipline of Qur'anic exegesis. Discussions concerning methodological validity often remain fragmented and descriptive, focusing only on the distinction between exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) meanings without systematically analysing the methodological implications of subjective inspiration, the absence of standardized interpretive procedures, or the relationship between *tafsir ishari* and established principles of Qur'anic interpretation such as Arabic linguistics, contextual analysis, and textual coherence. Consequently, there remains limited scholarly discussion regarding whether *tafsir ishari* can be evaluated using rigorous methodological standards within contemporary Qur'anic studies.

Another important limitation concerns the lack of comprehensive critical analysis integrating both classical and contemporary perspectives. Existing discussions frequently present either apologetic arguments defending *tafsir ishari* as an authentic expression of Islamic spirituality or critical arguments rejecting it as an excessively subjective approach. Relatively few studies attempt to evaluate *tafsir ishari* by balancing its spiritual contributions with methodological concerns. As a result, the discourse surrounding *tafsir ishari* often remains polarized between unconditional acceptance and complete rejection, leaving insufficient room for a balanced methodological assessment that recognizes both its strengths and limitations within Qur'anic exegesis.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining *tafsir ishari* from a methodological perspective rather than merely describing its historical development or theological characteristics. Instead of asking whether *tafsir ishari* should simply be accepted or rejected, this research critically investigates how its methodological principles correspond with the broader standards of Qur'anic exegesis. Particular attention is given to three fundamental methodological issues: the absence of a standardized interpretive framework, the epistemological implications of relying on spiritual inspiration (*ilham*) as a source of interpretation, and the relationship between esoteric interpretation and the established principles of Arabic linguistic analysis. Through this perspective, the study aims to contribute to a more balanced understanding of *tafsir ishari* by evaluating both its intellectual significance and its methodological challenges.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive methodological evaluation of *tafsir ishari* within the framework of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis studies. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize historical description or theological appreciation, this article proposes a critical analytical framework that integrates classical theories of Qur'anic interpretation with contemporary discussions on methodological validity, interpretive objectivity, and epistemological accountability. By doing so, the study not only clarifies the distinctive characteristics of *tafsir ishari* but also offers a more systematic basis for assessing its position within the broader tradition of Qur'anic interpretation.

Accordingly, this research addresses three principal questions: (1) What are the conceptual foundations and defining characteristics of *tafsir ishari* within Qur'anic exegesis? (2) How is the methodology of *tafsir ishari* constructed and applied in interpreting Qur'anic verses? (3) To what extent can the methodological principles of *tafsir ishari* be critically evaluated from the perspective of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis studies? By answering these questions, this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and methodologically to the ongoing discourse on Islamic hermeneutics and Qur'anic studies, while enriching scholarly discussions concerning the balance between spiritual insight and methodological rigor in Qur'anic interpretation.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a library research design to investigate the methodology of *tafsir ishari* and critically evaluate its epistemological and methodological foundations within the broader framework of Qur'anic exegesis studies. Library research was considered the most appropriate approach because the research focuses on conceptual analysis, theoretical interpretation, and critical evaluation of scholarly literature rather than empirical field investigation. The study emphasizes an in-depth examination of classical and contemporary works on Qur'anic interpretation, Islamic mysticism, and the methodology of *tafsir ishari*.

The research adopted a descriptive-analytical and critical approach. The descriptive component was employed to systematically explain the concept, historical development, characteristics, methodological principles, and interpretive mechanisms of *tafsir ishari* as presented by Muslim scholars. Subsequently, the analytical approach was used to examine the methodological structure underlying *tafsir ishari*, while the critical approach evaluated its epistemological validity, methodological consistency, and compatibility with the accepted principles of Qur'anic exegesis. This combination of approaches enabled the study not only to describe the characteristics of *tafsir ishari* but also to assess its strengths, limitations, and scholarly implications.

The study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary sources consisted of authoritative classical and contemporary works on Qur'anic exegesis and *'ulum al-Qur'an*, including writings that specifically discuss *tafsir ishari*, its methodological foundations, and the perspectives of prominent Muslim scholars such as Manna' al-Qaththan, M. Quraish Shihab, Teungku Muhammad Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy, al-Ghazali, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, and other classical authorities relevant to the discussion. These works were selected because they represent the principal references concerning the concept, development, and methodological debates surrounding *tafsir ishari*.

Secondary sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, dissertations, and other scholarly publications discussing Qur'anic hermeneutics, Sufi exegesis, Islamic epistemology, and contemporary approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. To ensure the relevance and academic quality of the literature, priority was given to publications that directly addressed the methodological dimensions of *tafsir ishari*, critical studies of Sufi interpretation, and recent developments in Qur'anic exegesis. Contemporary journal articles published within the last decade were used to complement classical references and provide current scholarly perspectives on the subject.

Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis. Relevant literature was identified, selected, and classified according to the objectives of the study. The selection process focused on publications discussing the conceptual foundations, historical development, methodological characteristics, examples of application, scholarly debates, and critical evaluations of *tafsir ishari*. After identifying the relevant literature, the documents were carefully read, compared, and organized into thematic categories corresponding to the research questions. This thematic organization facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the methodological structure and epistemological issues associated with *tafsir ishari*.

Data analysis followed several interconnected stages. First, data reduction was conducted by identifying information directly relevant to the objectives of the research while excluding materials unrelated to the methodological discussion of *tafsir ishari*. Second, the selected data were subjected to thematic classification, grouping similar concepts into major analytical themes, including the definition of *tafsir ishari*, its historical development, methodological principles, examples of interpretation, scholarly acceptance and criticism, and methodological challenges. Third, a comparative analysis was undertaken to examine similarities and differences among the perspectives of classical and contemporary scholars regarding the legitimacy, methodology, and epistemological basis of *tafsir ishari*. Finally, a critical analysis was conducted to evaluate the methodological validity of *tafsir ishari* by examining three principal dimensions: (1) the existence of a standardized methodological framework, (2) the role of inspiration (*ilham*) as a source of interpretation, and (3) the compatibility of *tafsir ishari* with established principles of Arabic linguistics and Qur'anic exegesis.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, source triangulation was employed by comparing interpretations and methodological views presented in various classical and contemporary references. The study also applied theoretical triangulation by integrating perspectives from Qur'anic exegesis, Islamic epistemology, and Sufi studies in evaluating the methodological characteristics of *tafsir ishari*. Cross-referencing among different scholarly opinions enabled the researcher to avoid relying exclusively on a single interpretive tradition and contributed to a more balanced and comprehensive analysis.

The findings are presented through a thematic analytical framework that integrates descriptive explanation with critical evaluation. Rather than merely summarizing previous literature, this study synthesizes diverse scholarly perspectives to identify the methodological characteristics of *tafsir ishari*, evaluate its epistemological strengths and limitations, and examine its relevance within contemporary Qur'anic exegesis studies. Through this methodological framework, the research seeks to contribute to a more

systematic understanding of *tafsir ishari* and to provide a balanced assessment of its position within the broader tradition of Islamic interpretive scholarship.

Results

Conceptual Foundations of Tafsir Ishari

The analysis of the literature demonstrates that *tafsir ishari* constitutes one of the major epistemological orientations within the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis. Unlike conventional interpretive approaches that primarily emphasize textual, linguistic, and historical explanations, *tafsir ishari* seeks to uncover the inner (*batin*) meanings embedded within Qur'anic verses while maintaining consistency with their outward (*zahir*) meanings. The findings indicate that Muslim scholars generally regard *tafsir ishari* as an interpretive approach that complements, rather than replaces, the literal understanding of the Qur'an.

The conceptual analysis begins with the definition of *tafsir*. Linguistically, the term *tafsir* derives from the Arabic root *fassara*, meaning "to explain," "to clarify," or "to reveal." Classical scholars define *tafsir* as the discipline concerned with explaining the meanings intended by Allah in the Qur'anic text according to human capacity. Manna' al-Qaththan emphasizes that *tafsir* aims to clarify the intended meanings of Qur'anic verses, while Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy describes it as the science through which the indications of the Qur'an are understood. Similarly, M. Quraish Shihab defines *tafsir* as the explanation of Allah's intentions contained in His revelation according to the limits of human understanding. These definitions collectively indicate that Qur'anic exegesis serves not merely as linguistic explanation but as a scholarly effort to understand divine guidance comprehensively.

Building upon this general understanding, the findings reveal that *tafsir ishari* combines the concepts of *tafsir* and *isharah* (indication or sign). Etymologically, the word *isharah* refers to a sign, symbol, guidance, or subtle indication. Consequently, *tafsir ishari* refers to an interpretive approach that derives meanings not directly from the explicit wording of Qur'anic verses but from subtle spiritual indications perceived through inner reflection. According to Abdul Basit and Fuad Nawawi, *tafsir ishari* interprets Qur'anic verses through meanings beyond their apparent expressions based on hidden indications perceived by spiritually disciplined individuals. M. Quraish Shihab similarly argues that these meanings emerge from impressions generated by the Qur'anic text in the hearts and minds of interpreters possessing spiritual purity, while remaining consistent with the literal meaning of the verses.

The synthesis of these definitions identifies four principal conceptual elements of *tafsir ishari*. First, interpretation extends beyond the outward wording of the Qur'anic text toward deeper spiritual meanings. Second, these meanings emerge through subtle inner indications rather than ordinary linguistic analysis alone. Third, the derived interpretations should not negate or contradict the literal meaning of the verses. Fourth, symbolic meanings must remain connected to the textual context of the Qur'an. These characteristics collectively distinguish *tafsir ishari* from arbitrary symbolic interpretation and demonstrate its unique epistemological position within Qur'anic studies.

The literature further classifies Qur'anic interpretation from two complementary perspectives. Based on interpretive orientation, Qur'anic exegesis consists of *tafsir bi al-ma'thur*, *tafsir bi al-ra'y*, and *tafsir ishari*. Meanwhile, based on methodological procedures, exegesis is classified into the *tahlili* (analytical), *ijmali* (general), *muqarin* (comparative),

and *maudhu'i* (thematic) methods. These classifications demonstrate that *tafsir ishari* should be understood primarily as an interpretive orientation rather than an independent methodological procedure, thereby allowing it to coexist with various methodological approaches in Qur'anic interpretation.

Historical Development of Tafsir Ishari

The historical analysis reveals that *tafsir ishari* developed gradually through several distinct phases corresponding to the evolution of Islamic mysticism. Rather than emerging as a fully developed interpretive system, it evolved alongside the institutionalization of Sufism and the expansion of Islamic intellectual traditions.

The first developmental phase occurred between the second and fourth centuries Hijri, during which the foundations of Sufi interpretation were established. Early ascetic scholars (*zuhhad*) gradually introduced spiritual reflections into Qur'anic interpretation, although these interpretations remained limited in scope. Prominent figures such as Fudail ibn 'Iyad, Sahl al-Tustari, al-Junayd al-Baghdadi, and Abu Bakr al-Shibli became influential representatives of this formative period. Their interpretive contributions emphasized moral purification, spiritual discipline, and contemplative reflection while maintaining close connections with traditional Islamic scholarship.

During the second phase, spanning approximately the fifth to seventh centuries Hijri, *tafsir ishari* experienced considerable expansion through the production of dedicated Sufi exegetical works. This period witnessed the emergence of several categories of Sufi exegesis, ranging from relatively moderate interpretations that incorporated hadith, linguistic analysis, and earlier exegetical opinions to works strongly influenced by mystical symbolism. Important exegetical works such as *Futuh al-Rahman fi Isyarat al-Qur'an* and *Ara'is al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq al-Qur'an* illustrate the growing diversity of Sufi interpretive traditions during this era.

The third phase was marked by the emergence of influential Sufi schools represented by Najmuddin al-Kubra and Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi. Their intellectual contributions significantly shaped later traditions of *tafsir ishari*, producing distinct interpretive schools that influenced subsequent generations of Qur'anic exegetes. The Kubrawiyyah and Ibn 'Arabi traditions introduced increasingly sophisticated mystical frameworks through which Qur'anic symbolism was interpreted.

The fourth phase extended into the Ottoman and Timurid periods, during which Sufi exegesis spread geographically beyond the central Islamic lands into Persia, India, and Anatolia. During this period, comprehensive exegetical works integrating outward and inward interpretations became increasingly common. Works such as *Ruh al-Bayan* by Ismail Haqqi Bursevi demonstrate an effort to harmonize exoteric interpretation with mystical symbolism rather than treating them as contradictory approaches.

The fifth and contemporary phase reflects both continuity and decline. Classical Sufi interpretive traditions continued to influence later exegetes; however, modern Qur'anic scholarship increasingly questioned the methodological foundations of *tafsir ishari*. The findings indicate that contemporary criticism primarily concerns methodological subjectivity and the absence of standardized interpretive procedures rather than the spiritual values promoted by Sufi interpretation itself. Consequently, while *tafsir ishari*

remains an important component of Islamic intellectual history, its influence within contemporary Qur'anic studies has become more limited than in previous centuries.

Methodological Characteristics of Tafsir Ishari

The findings indicate that *tafsir ishari* possesses a distinctive methodological structure that differentiates it from other approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. The methodological analysis identifies five interrelated characteristics that collectively form the epistemological foundation of this interpretive tradition.

First, *tafsir ishari* emphasizes the exploration of meanings that are not directly derived from the literal wording of the Qur'anic verses. Rather than limiting interpretation to linguistic explanation, the interpreter seeks deeper spiritual messages embedded within the text. These symbolic meanings are understood as complementary dimensions of divine revelation rather than replacements for its outward meaning.

Second, the principal epistemological source of *tafsir ishari* is spiritual inspiration (*ilham*). According to the literature examined, Sufi interpreters derive interpretive insights through spiritual purification, continuous worship, remembrance of Allah, and inner discipline. Such inspiration is regarded as a divine gift granted to individuals who possess sincerity, piety, and moral excellence. Consequently, the interpretive process depends not only upon intellectual competence but also upon spiritual preparedness.

Third, the findings reveal that *tafsir ishari* is inherently personal and subjective. Because inspiration is experienced individually, different interpreters may derive different symbolic meanings from the same Qur'anic verse without necessarily contradicting the outward meaning of the text. This characteristic explains the diversity of symbolic interpretations found throughout the history of Sufi exegesis.

Fourth, *tafsir ishari* requires comprehensive mastery of both religious knowledge and spiritual discipline. The reviewed literature consistently emphasizes that interpreters should first understand the outward meaning of Qur'anic verses before attempting to explore their inner dimensions. Spiritual purification is therefore regarded as a prerequisite rather than a substitute for scholarly competence.

Finally, the methodological findings indicate that *tafsir ishari* seeks to integrate the outward and inward meanings of the Qur'an rather than opposing them. Classical Sufi scholars generally maintain that symbolic interpretation becomes legitimate only when it remains consistent with established Islamic teachings, linguistic evidence, and the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text. This principle functions as an important methodological safeguard intended to prevent arbitrary or unfounded interpretations.

Practical Applications of Tafsir Ishari

The literature examined demonstrates that *tafsir ishari* is not merely a theoretical discourse but has been widely applied by Sufi exegetes in interpreting various Qur'anic passages. The findings indicate that the interpretive practice of *tafsir ishari* consistently seeks to uncover ethical, spiritual, and moral dimensions embedded within Qur'anic verses while preserving their literal meanings. Rather than replacing the outward interpretation, these esoteric interpretations function as complementary insights intended to deepen spiritual understanding.

One of the most frequently cited examples concerns the interpretation of Allah's command to slaughter a cow in Surah al-Baqarah verse 67:

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تَذْبَحُوا بَقَرَةً ۚ قَالُوا أَتَتَّخِذُنَا هُزُوًا ۖ قَالَ أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ أَنْ أَكُونَ مِنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ

"And (remember) when Moses said to his people: 'Indeed, Allah commands you to slaughter a cow.' They said: 'Do you make us a subject of ridicule?' Moses replied: 'I seek refuge in Allah from being among those who are ignorant.'" (Q. 2:67)

From the perspective of conventional exegesis, this verse narrates the historical command given to the Children of Israel regarding the murder investigation during Prophet Musa's time. However, Sufi exegete al-Naisaburi provides an additional symbolic interpretation by understanding the act of slaughtering the cow as an allegory for suppressing and purifying the *nafs* (human ego and worldly desires). In this interpretation, the cow symbolizes excessive attachment to material desires that prevents spiritual growth. Thus, the command to slaughter the cow is understood not only as a historical event but also as an enduring spiritual instruction directing believers to overcome their lower desires in pursuit of closeness to Allah.

Another illustration appears in the interpretation of *al-salat al-wusta* (the middle prayer). Classical exegetes generally debate whether this phrase refers to the Fajr prayer, Asr prayer, or another obligatory prayer based upon textual evidence. In contrast, al-Alusi interprets *al-salat al-wusta* as representing the highest degree of spiritual concentration in worship. According to this perspective, the verse encourages believers to attain complete presence of heart (*khushu'*) and uninterrupted remembrance of Allah rather than merely identifying one specific obligatory prayer. This symbolic interpretation enriches the spiritual dimension of worship without denying the legal obligations established by the literal interpretation.

A further example concerns the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses discussing zakat recipients. While the outward meaning refers to individuals experiencing economic hardship, certain Sufi scholars interpret poverty (*faqr*) as absolute dependence upon Allah. According to this understanding, true spiritual poverty is realized when an individual recognizes complete reliance upon divine mercy regardless of material wealth or social status. Consequently, the concept of poverty is transformed into a spiritual condition reflecting humility, sincerity, and total submission before Allah.

These examples collectively demonstrate that *tafsir ishari* consistently transforms historical narratives, legal provisions, and ethical injunctions into broader spiritual lessons. Although the symbolic meanings differ from literal explanations, the reviewed literature emphasizes that such interpretations should remain compatible with the outward meaning of the Qur'an and should never invalidate established Islamic teachings. Therefore, the findings indicate that the practical application of *tafsir ishari* functions primarily as spiritual enrichment rather than textual substitution.

Scholarly Responses toward Tafsir Ishari

The findings reveal that scholarly responses toward *tafsir ishari* are characterized by two major perspectives: acceptance with methodological conditions and critical rejection based on epistemological concerns. This diversity of opinions illustrates that debates surrounding *tafsir ishari* primarily concern methodological legitimacy rather than the spiritual objectives pursued by Sufi interpreters.

Scholars who support *tafsir ishari* generally argue that the Qur'an contains multiple dimensions of meaning. They maintain that spiritually qualified individuals may perceive deeper insights beyond the literal wording of the text, provided that these interpretations satisfy several methodological requirements. Among the conditions most frequently emphasized are: (1) the symbolic meaning must not contradict the apparent (*zahir*) meaning of the verse; (2) the interpretation must remain consistent with Islamic creed and legal principles; (3) a meaningful relationship should exist between the symbolic interpretation and the literal wording; and (4) the interpretation should not reject or invalidate established textual evidence. Under these conditions, *tafsir ishari* is regarded as a legitimate complementary approach within Qur'anic exegesis.

Conversely, several scholars express reservations regarding the methodological reliability of *tafsir ishari*. Their criticism focuses primarily on its dependence upon personal inspiration (*ilham*), which they argue cannot be objectively verified or independently reproduced. From this perspective, excessive reliance on subjective spiritual experience may encourage speculative interpretations detached from established linguistic and exegetical principles. Consequently, critics emphasize that Qur'anic interpretation should remain grounded in Arabic language, contextual analysis, prophetic traditions, and recognized principles of *'ulum al-Qur'an* rather than personal mystical experience alone.

Despite these contrasting viewpoints, the analysis indicates a significant area of agreement among both supporters and critics. Neither group denies the authority of the literal (*zahir*) meaning of the Qur'an. Rather, the disagreement concerns whether symbolic interpretations derived through spiritual inspiration can legitimately be regarded as additional meanings possessing scholarly validity. This shared recognition of the primacy of the outward meaning demonstrates that the debate surrounding *tafsir ishari* is fundamentally methodological rather than theological.

Critical Methodological Issues of Tafsir Ishari

The critical analysis identifies three principal methodological issues that continue to shape contemporary scholarly discussions regarding *tafsir ishari*. These issues emerge consistently throughout the reviewed literature and collectively explain both the strengths and limitations of this interpretive tradition.

The first issue concerns the absence of a standardized methodological framework. Unlike *tafsir bi al-ma'thur* and *tafsir bi al-ra'y*, which possess relatively well-established interpretive principles, *tafsir ishari* lacks universally accepted procedures governing the derivation of symbolic meanings. As a result, individual interpreters often rely on their own spiritual experiences and interpretive authority when identifying esoteric meanings. The findings indicate that this methodological flexibility contributes to the richness of Sufi interpretation but simultaneously creates difficulties in establishing consistent academic standards for evaluating interpretive validity.

The second issue relates to the epistemological status of inspiration (*ilham*) as a source of knowledge. Classical Sufi scholars generally regard *ilham* as a legitimate form of spiritual insight granted by Allah to sincere believers who have undergone rigorous spiritual purification. Nevertheless, contemporary methodological analysis demonstrates that inspiration cannot be objectively observed, empirically verified, or replicated by other researchers. Consequently, the validity of interpretations derived through *ilham* depends largely upon the credibility of the individual interpreter rather than transparent methodological procedures. This characteristic distinguishes *tafsir ishari* from interpretive approaches grounded primarily in textual, linguistic, or historical evidence.

The third methodological issue concerns the relationship between symbolic interpretation and Arabic linguistic principles. The findings reveal that certain *tafsir ishari* interpretations prioritize symbolic or mystical meanings without sufficiently explaining their linguistic connection to the Qur'anic text. Although many Sufi scholars emphasize that symbolic meanings should never contradict the outward wording of the Qur'an, critics argue that insufficient attention to grammatical structure, semantic analysis, and textual context may reduce the methodological rigor of such interpretations. Therefore, the balance between spiritual insight and linguistic discipline remains one of the most significant challenges in evaluating the academic legitimacy of *tafsir ishari*.

Overall, the findings indicate that *tafsir ishari* occupies a distinctive position within the history of Qur'anic exegesis. On the one hand, it contributes significantly to the enrichment of Islamic spirituality by uncovering ethical and mystical dimensions of the Qur'an. On the other hand, its reliance on subjective inspiration and the absence of standardized methodological procedures continue to generate scholarly debate concerning its epistemological validity. These findings provide the basis for the subsequent discussion, which critically examines the implications of these methodological characteristics for contemporary Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic hermeneutics.

Discussion

The Epistemological Position of Tafsir Ishari within Qur'anic Exegesis

The findings demonstrate that *tafsir ishari* occupies a distinctive epistemological position within the broader tradition of Qur'anic exegesis. Unlike *tafsir bi al-ma'thur*, which derives interpretive authority primarily from transmitted narrations, and *tafsir bi al-ra'y*, which emphasizes linguistic reasoning and rational analysis, *tafsir ishari* incorporates spiritual experience as an additional epistemic source for understanding divine revelation. The results indicate that this interpretive orientation does not seek to replace the outward (*zahir*) meaning of the Qur'an but rather to complement it by revealing ethical, spiritual, and contemplative dimensions that are believed to remain implicit within the sacred text. This finding confirms that *tafsir ishari* should be understood as a complementary epistemological orientation rather than an independent methodology detached from the established sciences of Qur'anic interpretation.

This position explains why classical Muslim scholars generally accepted *tafsir ishari* only under specific methodological conditions. The findings reveal that symbolic interpretations were considered legitimate when they maintained consistency with the literal meaning of the verse, did not contradict established Islamic doctrine, and preserved a meaningful relationship with the linguistic structure of the Qur'anic text. Consequently,

the debate surrounding *tafsir ishari* is not fundamentally concerned with the existence of inner meanings themselves, but rather with the methodological procedures through which those meanings are identified and justified. This observation extends previous discussions by emphasizing that the legitimacy of *tafsir ishari* depends less upon its mystical orientation than upon its methodological accountability.

Methodological Validity and the Challenge of Interpretive Objectivity

One of the most significant findings of this study concerns the methodological tension between spiritual intuition and scholarly objectivity. The results demonstrate that *tafsir ishari* relies heavily on *ilham* (divinely inspired intuition) as a source of interpretive insight. Within the Sufi tradition, inspiration is regarded as the outcome of spiritual purification, devotion, and continuous remembrance of Allah. From this perspective, the interpreter's moral integrity and spiritual discipline become essential components of the interpretive process.

However, when examined through the methodological standards of contemporary Qur'anic studies, reliance on *ilham* presents important epistemological challenges. Unlike linguistic analysis, historical criticism, or textual comparison, inspiration cannot be independently verified or replicated by other scholars. Consequently, the interpretive process becomes highly dependent upon the credibility and spiritual authority of individual exegetes. This finding explains why many contemporary scholars question the academic reliability of *tafsir ishari*, despite acknowledging its significant contribution to Islamic spirituality.

The present study therefore suggests that the principal methodological issue is not whether spiritual inspiration exists, but how such inspiration may be evaluated within scholarly discourse. The absence of transparent criteria for validating inspired interpretations creates considerable methodological uncertainty. Accordingly, the results support the argument that symbolic interpretations should remain grounded in the outward meaning of the Qur'an and supported by linguistic, contextual, and theological evidence whenever possible. Such an approach allows *tafsir ishari* to retain its spiritual richness while simultaneously strengthening its scholarly credibility.

Between Spiritual Enrichment and Methodological Limitation

The findings reveal that *tafsir ishari* simultaneously represents one of the richest and most methodologically challenging traditions within Qur'anic interpretation. On the one hand, the symbolic interpretations examined in this study illustrate the remarkable ability of Sufi exegetes to transform historical narratives, legal injunctions, and ethical teachings into broader reflections concerning spiritual purification, self-discipline, and human intimacy with Allah. Interpretations of the command to slaughter the cow, the concept of *al-salat al-wusta*, and spiritual poverty demonstrate how Qur'anic narratives may function not only as historical or legal texts but also as enduring guides for moral and spiritual transformation.

On the other hand, these same characteristics also generate methodological concerns. Because symbolic meanings frequently depend upon individual spiritual experience, different interpreters may derive substantially different conclusions from identical Qur'anic verses. While such diversity reflects the richness of Islamic spirituality,

it also complicates efforts to establish universally accepted interpretive standards. This explains why many scholars insist that symbolic interpretations should never be permitted to override the apparent meaning of the Qur'an.

These findings therefore suggest that the strengths and limitations of *tafsir ishari* should not be viewed as contradictory. Rather, they represent two complementary dimensions of the same interpretive tradition. Its greatest strength lies in enriching spiritual understanding of the Qur'an, whereas its principal limitation concerns methodological verification. Recognizing both dimensions enables a more balanced assessment than approaches that either reject *tafsir ishari* entirely or accept it uncritically.

Contemporary Relevance of Tafsir Ishari

Although *tafsir ishari* originated within the classical Sufi tradition, the findings indicate that its interpretive principles remain relevant to several contemporary discussions in Islamic studies. Modern Muslim societies increasingly encounter questions concerning spirituality, ethical development, mental well-being, and the search for meaning amid rapid social transformation. In such contexts, symbolic interpretations emphasizing sincerity, self-purification, humility, and reliance upon Allah continue to provide valuable ethical and spiritual perspectives.

The examples examined in this study demonstrate that *tafsir ishari* consistently directs attention toward inner moral transformation rather than merely external religious practice. This orientation resonates with contemporary discussions concerning Islamic spirituality, character education, religious counseling, and ethical leadership. Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that contemporary applications of *tafsir ishari* should remain firmly connected to established principles of Qur'anic interpretation. Symbolic readings become academically meaningful only when they complement rather than replace textual, linguistic, and historical analyses.

Accordingly, this study argues that *tafsir ishari* should not be understood as an alternative methodology competing with conventional exegesis. Instead, it should be regarded as an interpretive perspective that enriches Qur'anic understanding by illuminating dimensions of spiritual experience that may not be fully captured through linguistic or historical analysis alone.

Theoretical Contributions to Qur'anic Exegesis Studies

This study contributes to Qur'anic exegesis studies in several important ways. First, it proposes a clearer conceptual distinction between the epistemological orientation and the methodological procedure of *tafsir ishari*. The findings indicate that *tafsir ishari* is more appropriately understood as an epistemological orientation emphasizing spiritual insight rather than as a separate interpretive method independent of established exegetical principles. This distinction helps clarify its position within the broader classification of Qur'anic interpretation.

Second, the study develops a balanced analytical framework for evaluating *tafsir ishari*. Previous discussions frequently positioned Sufi interpretation within a binary opposition—either accepting it as an authentic manifestation of Islamic spirituality or rejecting it as excessively subjective. In contrast, the present analysis demonstrates that *tafsir ishari* possesses significant spiritual and ethical value while simultaneously requiring

methodological safeguards to ensure scholarly accountability. This perspective encourages a more constructive dialogue between classical Sufi traditions and contemporary Qur'anic studies.

Third, the study identifies three methodological dimensions that may serve as evaluative criteria for future research on symbolic Qur'anic interpretation: methodological transparency, epistemological accountability, and linguistic coherence. These dimensions provide a systematic framework through which future scholars may examine other traditions of mystical interpretation while maintaining consistency with the broader principles of Qur'anic exegesis.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that *tafsir ishari* should neither be dismissed as purely subjective mysticism nor accepted without methodological scrutiny. Instead, it should be recognized as an important intellectual tradition that enriches the spiritual understanding of the Qur'an while requiring continuous critical evaluation to ensure its compatibility with sound principles of Qur'anic interpretation. Such a balanced perspective not only preserves the richness of the Islamic exegetical heritage but also strengthens its relevance within contemporary academic discourse.

Conclusion

This study examined the methodology of *tafsir ishari* through a critical analysis grounded in the broader framework of Qur'anic exegesis studies. The findings demonstrate that *tafsir ishari* occupies a distinctive epistemological position within the Islamic interpretive tradition by emphasizing the exploration of inner spiritual meanings while maintaining the validity of the outward (*zahir*) meaning of the Qur'an. Rather than functioning as an independent interpretive methodology, *tafsir ishari* is more appropriately understood as an epistemological orientation that enriches Qur'anic interpretation through symbolic, ethical, and spiritual reflection.

The analysis further reveals that the methodological characteristics of *tafsir ishari* are primarily shaped by spiritual inspiration (*ilham*), symbolic interpretation, and the moral integrity of the interpreter. These characteristics have enabled Sufi exegetes to produce profound spiritual insights that complement conventional approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. At the same time, the study identifies several methodological challenges that continue to generate scholarly debate, including the absence of universally accepted interpretive procedures, the difficulty of objectively verifying inspiration as a source of knowledge, and the need to maintain consistency between symbolic interpretation and established principles of Arabic linguistics and Qur'anic exegesis.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by proposing a balanced analytical framework for evaluating *tafsir ishari*. Rather than positioning Sufi exegesis within a dichotomy of unconditional acceptance or rejection, the study argues that its scholarly legitimacy depends upon integrating spiritual insight with methodological transparency, linguistic coherence, and epistemological accountability. This framework provides a more systematic basis for understanding the relationship between mystical interpretation and the broader discipline of Qur'anic exegesis.

This research is limited to a conceptual analysis based on library research and therefore does not examine the practical application of *tafsir ishari* across specific

exegetical works or contemporary Muslim communities. Future studies are encouraged to undertake comparative analyses of major Sufi exegetical texts, investigate the methodological consistency of symbolic interpretations across different scholars, and explore the relevance of *tafsir ishari* in addressing contemporary issues such as Islamic ethics, spirituality, religious moderation, and Qur'anic hermeneutics. Such studies would further enrich scholarly understanding of the dynamic relationship between the spiritual dimensions of the Qur'an and the methodological standards of contemporary Islamic scholarship.

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