

REVISITING METHODOLOGY OF QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATION: A THEMATIC CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO THE QUR'AN

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Abstract: This article is aimed to propose a methodological interpretation of the Qur'an with reference to the thematic method. The concept is derived from combining the contextual approach with the thematic method of Qur'anic interpretation. Here, I argue that the contextual approach is relevant to develop the existing thematic tafsir methods that are vastly adopted, mostly among the works of college students in Indonesian Islamic universities. Besides, the approach becomes important in its ability to come up with fresh researches in the tafsir studies, as well as to address challenges and socio-religious problems in contemporary society. Therefore, this article attempts to elaborate one of the contemporary approaches introduced by Abdullah Saeed, which he called the contextual approach. By adopting this approach, thematic tafsir will be more comprehensive, as the object of analysis is not limited to text, of the Qur'anic verses and its commentaries, but also the socio-historical context of the studied verses.

Keywords: contextual approach, thematic tafsir, methodology of Qur'anic interpretation.

Abstrak: Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menawarkan kajian metodologis dalam diskursus tafsir al-Qur'an, yaitu metode tematik. Tawaran tersebut berasal dari penggabungan pendekatan kontekstual dengan metode tafsir tematik. Di sini, penulis berpendapat bahwa pendekatan kontekstual sangat relevan untuk mengembangkan metode tafsir tematik yang telah ada dan banyak diadopsi dalam karya-karya akademik di perguruan tinggi keislaman Indonesia. Selain itu, pendekatan ini menjadi penting dalam kemampuannya untuk menghasilkan penelitian-penelitian baru dalam studi tafsir, serta untuk menjawab tantangan dan masalah sosial-keagamaan dalam masyarakat kontemporer. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini mencoba mengelaborasi salah satu pendekatan kontemporer yang diperkenalkan oleh Abdullah Saeed, yang disebutnya sebagai pendekatan kontekstual. Dengan mengadopsi pendekatan ini, tafsir tematik akan

lebih komprehensif, karena objek analisisnya tidak terbatas pada teks, yaitu ayat-ayat al-Qur'an dan tafsirnya, tetapi juga konteks sosio-historis dari ayat-ayat yang dikaji.

Kata kunci: pendekatan kontekstual, tafsir tematik, metodologi interpretasi al-Qur'an.

Introduction

In the thematic tafsir, Qur'anic verses are treated as chains of a golden necklace in which one chain is always tied to the others. Muslim scholars emphasize that "*al-Qur'an yufassir ba'duh ba'dan*" (The verses in the Qur'an are interpreting each other). While in the *tahlili* tafsir, the commentator discussed the verses partially to reveal their aspectual content by observing *sabab al-nuzūl*, *munāsabah*, *balāghah*, *qirā'ah*, *nāsikh mansūkh*, and other categories. However, the thematic tafsir has a different method in which a commentator or a researcher will be focused on a particular theme of the studied verse. By this model of analysis, the researcher or the commentator does not only conduct an in-depth analysis of its linguistic aspects such as semantics, morphology, and syntax but also delves into concepts or ideas of the Qur'an on the studied theme thoroughly. The reason is that the linguistic analysis functions as tools (*wasā'il*), while the concept and ideas of the Qur'an that we want to reveal is our ultimate goal (*maqāṣid*).¹

Several scholars mentioned that one of the weaknesses of the method employed in the *tahlili* tafsir (longitudinal interpretation)² is the heavy analysis of aspects of linguistics and textual study, which to some extent, might obscure substantial Qur'anic values as guidance. Muḥammad 'Abduh, for instance, criticized such a commentary model as too strict and dry that keeps the meaning or the guidance away of the Qur'an.³ Hence, the thematic tafsir method becomes interesting and crucial to employ in the Qur'anic studies in the contemporary period. Some strengths of this method are: *First*, the method is less employed in pre-modern works of Muslim scholars. *Second*, the method is most likely to reveal a comprehensive and

¹ Abdul Mustaqim, *Metode Penelitian al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* (Yogyakarta: Idea Press, 2015), 58-59.

² Hassan Hanafi, "Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an" dalam Stefan Wild, *The Qur'an as Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 195-196.

³ Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsir al-Fātiḥah wa Juḡ 'Amma* (Kairo: al-Hay'ah al-Āmmah li Qaṣūr al-Thaqāfah, 2007), 17.

through understanding. *Third*, it can minimize a commentators' subjectivity in their exegesis and control ideological biases put in the Qur'anic tafsir.⁴

In general, a discussion of methodology deals with a particular process and procedure of how research is carried on. The thematic method has been widely employed by researchers and experts in the Qur'anic commentaries. The works on Qur'anic exegesis using this method are also numerous in the form of the book, academic publications in the universities from undergraduate to graduate levels. The works have contributed to enhancing the horizon of Islamic knowledge, especially in the Qur'anic exegesis.

Despite the wide acceptance of the method in the research area, there have been few researchers who employ existing various approaches. In consequence, the result of the works mainly has less capability to address contemporary social issues because they understand the verses in a deductive-normative manner and are often repetitive (*qirā'ah mutakarrirah*). Thus, we face the necessity of a commentary product that has productive and creative reading which provide solutions for socio-religious contemporary problems. One of the contemporary approaches relevant to the discussion in this article is the method developed by Abdullah Saeed, which is the so-called contextual approach.

Several studies related to combining thematic interpretations with various approaches can be found in several studies, such as those written by Adang Kuswaya,⁵ Uun Yusufa,⁶ Miftah Khilmi

⁴ Mustaqim, *Metode Penelitian*, 60.

⁵ This book discusses the Qur'anic hermeneutics, which was initiated by Ḥasan Ḥanafī. He proposed a method of interpretation of *al-shu'ūrī*, perceptive interpretation, which is a method that can describe humans themselves and human relationships with others. The methodology for interpreting the Qur'an is thematic, temporal, and realistic that framed in the human sciences. In his book, *Islam in the Modern World*, Ḥanafī describes the formulation of the thematic method of interpretation of the Koran, which includes the advantages of thematic interpretation compared to other previous methods of interpretation. See Adang Kuswaya, *Metode Tafsir Kontemporer: Model Pendekatan Hermeneutika Sosio-Tematik dalam Tafsir al-Qur'an Hassan Hanafi* (Salatiga: IAIN Salatiga, 2011).

⁶ This paper discusses the construction of academic thematic interpretations, particularly with paradigmatic framework. A paradigmatic framework is an assumption and proposition that is structured as an interpreter's point of view of the Qur'an so that this can encourage and lead to a more contextual interpretation. Of the eight dissertations analyzed, it was found that six paradigmatic frameworks

Hidayatulloh,⁷ and others. These academic works described the thematic interpretation theory of several figures, such as Ḥasan Ḥanafī. Some of them also apply thematic interpretation as a framework of interpretation, as written by M. Quraish Shihab,⁸ Nadia Salwa Nur Rafeah,⁹ Achmad Mudjib Romadlon,¹⁰ and others.

were used in preparing thematic interpretation methods, namely: al-Qur'an as *hudan* (guidance); the unity of the theme of the al-Qur'an; the historicity of the Qur'an; the literature and textuality of the Qur'an; al-Qur'an as a qualitative research subject; and the correlation of the *Kawmiyah-Qawliyah* verses. See Uun Yusufa, "Kerangka Paradigmatis Metode Tafsir Tematik Akademik: Kasus Disertasi UIN Yogyakarta dan Jakarta," *Journal of Quran and Hadith Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2015).

⁷ According to the author, this thematic interpretation develops in line with the dynamics of thought and understanding of the Qur'an, which continues to develop in the contemporary century. The question posed is how to bring up the interpretation of the Qur'an that is relevant to the various social problems that continue to exist in our midst. Al-Kumi and Mushthafa Muslim are two of the experts who developed this method. This study examines the concepts and methods of thematic interpretation of the two perspectives in order to find similarities and differences. This research is literature research on thematic interpretation methodology books written by the two interpreters. A comparative study is conducted to reveal the similarities and differences between the two. This study found that the two figures shared the same line of thought. One of them is structuring this methodological knowledge, and the other is developing it to be more perfect. See Miftah Khilmi Hidayatulloh, "Konsep dan Metode Tafsir Tematik (Studi Komparasi antara al-Kumi dan Mushthofa Muslim)", *Al-Bayan Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2018).

⁸ This book is an anthology of tafsir papers for elite officials delivered by Quraish Shihab at the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta. In this book, Shihab uses a thematic method because it is considered a method of presenting the al-Qur'an interpretation that is simple, easy, and quickly understood by people who do not have much time to study the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses independently. This is in accordance with the condition of the congregation, namely state officials and the elite in Jakarta, who in fact are busy people. Shihab likens the thematic interpretation to a ready-to-eat "boxed rice dish", while the *tahlili* interpretation is "a buffet dish". Functionally, it is very clear that thematic interpretation is an interpretation that is already "finished" and ready to be "eaten". Thus, it is easier for the public to understand. See M. Quraish Shihab, *Wawasan Al-Quran: Tafsir Tematik atas Pelbagai Persoalan Umat* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996).

⁹ The research entitled "Nilai-nilai Ekonomi dalam al-Qur'an: Penerapan Metode Kontekstualisasi Abdullah Saeed" is a final research project (thesis) of the Department of al-Qur'an Science and Tafsir of UIN Sunan Gunung Jati Bandung, 2018.

From the thematic researches above, Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach has been applied in several final project types of research, especially theses. However, research in the form of a journal that specifically offers a complete way to link the thematic interpretation and Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach has never been written before. Therefore, this research still has relevance and significance in the development of methodological discourse in the interpretation of the Qur'an in the contemporary era. This study seeks to offer a systematic-methodological guide for developing thematic interpretive research using Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach.

The Epistemology of Abdullah Saeed's Contextual Approach

The Qur'an is the main reference for Muslims' activities in the world. For a Muslim, the Qur'an is not only a text to read and understand, but to be heard (as life guidance).¹¹ This faith has been existing since the holy book was revealed as a guidance for all mankind (*hudan li al-nās*) and has become a fundamental part of a Muslim's life.

Today, Muslims are facing various problems. The external problem is Muslim deterioration from western nations in numerous fields, and the internal problem is the occurrence of authoritarian attitude and literal-textual understanding of the Qur'an among Muslims. These attitudes have created extremism which at some point has turned into radicalism and truth claim issues that blame "the other" whose ideas are different. This phenomenon, by some observers, is deemed as contradictory to the universal values of justice, human dignity, gender equality, and other universal values.

Then, the problems urge scholars in Islamic studies to conduct *ijtihādī* works to address their anxiety toward the vast growing textual-literal tafsir. They conceptualized and emphasized contextual aspects in understanding the Holy Qur'an. One of the prominent contemporary scholars in this field is Abdullah Saeed.¹²

¹⁰ The research entitled "Contextual Approach to the *Qisas* Verses in the al-Qur'an" is a research final project (thesis) of the Department of al-Qur'an Science and Tafsir UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, in 2018.

¹¹ Abdullah Saeed, "Contextualizing", in Andrew Rippin (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 41.

¹² Abdullah Saeed is a professor in Arabic and Islamic Studies in the University of Melbourne, Australia. He was born in Maldives from Oman descendent tribe who

In his work entitled *Interpreting the Qur'an: Toward Contemporary Approach*, Saeed introduced a contemporary approach in Qur'anic exegesis that he called the contextual approach. However, his innovation is not a new one to the field, rather a development of previous scholarly works, mainly from Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) with his "double movement" theory. Besides, Saeed is not the only scholar inspired by Rahman; some other scholars who are inspired by him are Nurcholis Majid and Amina Wadud.¹³ According to Saeed, Rahman's ideas about tafsir, as found in his works, are not meant to be rigid commentary rules rather a kind of guidance for a commentator of the Qur'an. Therefore, Saeed is a supporter and developer of Rahman's ideas, which is double movement theory, into more concrete and rigid guidance in the Qur'anic commentary. Saeed has also deeply observed the values of the Qur'an initiated by Rahman.¹⁴

Abdullah Saeed's Contextual Approach

Abdullah Saeed views the Qur'an as a text similar to other forms of texts that need an interpretation even in its simple manifestation. After the death of Muhammad to the 14 centuries onward, the Muslim Scholars had done remarkable works in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an. They employed various approaches, which among others, are: linguistics (mainly for legal and theological verses),

settle in Maldives. In 1977, He moved to Saudi Arabia to study. He studied at Basic Arabic Language Institute (1977-1979), Intermediate Arabic Language Institute (1979-1982) and the University of Medina (1982-1986). In the following year, Saeed went to Australia to pursue his study. In Australia, Saeed completed his Ph.D. in the University of Melbourne, Australia. His undergraduate degree is Middle Eastern Study (1987), His Master degree is Applied Linguistics (1988-1992), and his Ph.D. is Islamic Studies (1992-1994). his researches mainly focus on negotiations between text and context, and the interpretations of Jihad. Some of his works in the study of the Qur'an are: 1. *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2008), 2. *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2006), 3. *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Routledge, 2006), 4. *Contemporary Approaches to Qur'an in Indonesia*, as the editor (Oxford University Press, 2005), 5. *Reading the al-Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century A Contextual Approach*.

¹³ Lien Iffah Na'fatu Fina, "Interpretasi Kontekstual Abdullah Saeed: Sebuah Penyempurnaan Terhadap Gagasan Tafsir Fazlur Rahman", *Hermeneutik Jurnal Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Tafsir*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (2015), 66.

¹⁴ Ibid.

logics (theological), *taṣawwuf* (sufism), and *riwāyat* (narrations from ḥadīth).¹⁵

Nevertheless, the pre-modern commentators of the Qur'an with their approaches cannot fulfill the demand of modernity. The reason is the dynamic contextual changes in modern society that need fresh and novel commentaries. The awareness of the need has occurred at least since the 19th century with the prominence of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh. Saeed believed that what was initiated by Rahman and similar scholars on the contextual approach has made the distance between the Qur'an and the reality nearer and has denied the traditional commentators' standpoint.¹⁶

In the introduction, Saeed described the argument behind the making of his book as follow:

"This book is about the interpretation of one particular type of Qur'anic texts: the texts that are considered ethico-legal in nature and are represented in the Qur'an's beliefs, rulings, laws, commandments, prohibitions, and instructions."¹⁷

Furthermore, he made clear that the book is not meant to be strict guidance to interpret ethico-legal texts, although commentators might feel benefited from his ideas. He argued that his book is a kind of argument to liberate ethico-legal verses from the legal-literal approaches that have been glorified since the post-formative period in Islamic Jurisprudence, that was around 1-2 H/7-8 M to the modern period in the field of Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).¹⁸

Saeed further insisted that this book is a justification for the alternative way of interpreting the ethico-legal verses, which he called "contextualist". Thus, this argument is a proposal of a more flexible approach in interpreting the verses by examining the socio-historical context of the 7th century Qur'anic revelation period for the demand of contemporary needs. His ultimate goal is to make the Qur'anic

¹⁵ Muhammad Alfatih Suryadilaga, "Hadis dan Perannya dalam Tafsir Kontekstual Perspektif Abdullah Saeed", *Mutawatir: Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadis*, Vol. 5, No.2 (Desember 2015), 329.

¹⁶ Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the al-Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century A Contextual Approach* (London: Routledge, 2014), 9-10.

¹⁷ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

verses related to the Muslims in a way that it can be applied in their daily lives and in different time, place, and condition of the modern era.¹⁹

In the introduction, Saeed also criticized the pre-modern exegesis tradition, which heavily depended on linguistic categories in interpreting the ethico-legal verses while ignored the socio-historical context behind the revelation of the verses. Saeed emphasized that the socio-historical context should be treated equally with the linguistic categories to give a comprehensive reading of the Qur'an that is relevant to the needs of a dynamic Muslim situation.²⁰

Furthermore, Saeed identified three groups of Qur'anic commentators of the modern age: textualist, semi-textualist, and contextualist. The classification is based on how far a commentator (1) holds on linguistic categories as a tool to determine the meaning of a text, and (2) pays attention to the socio-historicity of the Qur'an and the contemporary context of the modern age.²¹

The textualist group observes a text and adopts a literal approach to the text. They believe that the Qur'an leads Muslims, and not the modern needs. For them, the meaning of the Qur'an is final and universal in its application. For instance, when the Qur'an allows a man to marry four women, then the verse is applicable forever without acknowledging the socio-historical context for the revelation. They argue that the reason why the Qur'an allowed man to have four wives in the 1 H/ 7 AD is not important. The members of this group are the traditionists and salafi.²²

Meanwhile, the semi-textualist group mainly follows the textualist in their insistence on linguistic categories and their denial of the socio-historical context, although they express their interpretation of the *ethico*-legal verses with modern idioms. The members of this group are usually involved in the neo-revivalist movement such as al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt and *Jama'at Islami* (Indian continent).²³

The last group is contextualist. They propose that the commentaries on ethico-legal verses should consider the socio-

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid., 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

historical context of the revelation, which includes political, social, historical, and economic elements. In brief, this group demands a higher level of freedom among modern scholars to determine what can and cannot be changed in the spectrum of the ethico-legal verses. Saeed mentioned Fazlur Rahman among others as the contextualist or sometimes called neo-modernist, while some others call them progressive Muslims and liberal Muslim thinkers.²⁴

Saeed, in this case, shares Rahman's ideas and consider them as an important step to bridge Qur'anic text with the reality and the needs of contemporary Muslim life. He further said that the dominant Qur'anic interpretation today tends to be solely philological, that it needs to be more open to sociological, axiological, and anthropological elements to be relevant to the contemporary needs of Muslims.²⁵

However, he underlined that the modern approach in research does not necessarily ignore pre-modern commentary tradition. Instead, he said that we might take benefits from the traditionalist commentaries and are led by them in certain conditions that are possible without limited by their details. Contemporary scholars should be acknowledgeable of how a text has been interpreted throughout history. This understanding can help them solve problems and emerging challenges.²⁶ In this context, I argue, Saeed's ideas are equal to the concept *al-muhāfaẓah 'alā al-qadīm al-ṣāliḥ*, which means to take advantage of older relevant values.

Saeed argued that interpretation is not the same as the revelation. Interpretation is a human effort in which a personal interpretation of a verse is not sacred at all even works written by the Prophet's companions, *tābi'īn* (the followers of the companions), and early commentators. Their understanding, like ours, is limited by the context and the culture that might not be relevant outside their cultures. When writing this book, Saeed also made clear his position as a believer of the Qur'an as the holy book revealed to the prophet Muhammad. He also clarified that the Qur'an is, historically, the authentic texts containing numbers of revelation that were revealed to the prophet during 23 years and were gathered from scattered pieces by Muslims after the prophet's death in 11 H/632 AD.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Ibid.

Saeed's ideas in this book should not be treated as a denial of the inheritance in tafsir and *fiqh*. Saeed believes that the inheritance should be appreciated, learned, and used when they are relevant and beneficial to contemporary conditions.²⁷ Saeed did not agree with the idea that Muslims in the past had reached an intellectual peak in the field of tafsir and *fiqh*. According to him, Muslims are always in the process of development, continuous changes, and enhancement toward a new body of knowledge. This statement means that new approaches will always develop as time and the need for social change are running. This age, for Saeed, is an age where social change and technology are vastly developing that they need significant intellectual contribution to relate the Qur'anic meaning with the needs and problems of the Muslims. Saeed expects the readers of this book will find the ideas useful and interesting for further criticism, modification, and questions.²⁸

Socio-Historical Context of Interpretation

According to Saeed, the relevance of the ethico-legal verses of the Qur'an to contemporary Muslim life need an examination of socio-historical context in its interpretations. The context provides a basis for understanding the relationship between the rules contained in the verses and the reason they were introduced among the inhabitants of Hijaz in the 7th century. Despite the significance, the context has been marginalized in the tafsir and *fiqh* traditions.²⁹

One of the thinkers in tafsir, Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (w.1996), believed that Muslims of the early centuries had shifted their interest from reflecting the holy book to reciting it, beautifying the recitation and focused on the mechanism of the Qur'anic reading. For him, the shift of their focus has been gradually leading them to the activity of reading the Qur'an without having any purposes other than seeking blessings. This situation, according to al-Ghazālī, has been the understanding of the majority of Muslims in the world.

Al-Ghazālī believed that such an approach contradicts the command of the Qur'an, which is to contemplate and understand the message besides its recitation. Furthermore, he insisted that the ultimate goal of Qur'anic revelation has been lost because the

²⁷ Ibid., 4-5.

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁹ Ibid., 116.

majority of Muslims only read it, and do not attempt to understand it.³⁰

According to Saeed, this reflection ought to be an effort to connect the past and the present life. The relation demands an exploration of the two dimensions of the Qur'an which are historical meaning and contemporary meaning. The historical meaning is related to what happened during the prophet's period and the early Muslim generation, while contemporary meaning deals with the meaning of the Qur'an for the Muslims today.

The socio-historical context of the Qur'an before the birth of Islam cannot be ignored. To understand this, one needs sufficient knowledge of the prophet's life in Mecca and Medina including their social climate, economy, politics, laws, norms, tradition, costumes, institutions, and adopted values. It also encompasses the living places, dress, and food as well as the social relation which describes the family structure, social hierarchy, taboos, and rituals. The level of significance of the mentioned aspects is reflected in the frequency of their occurrences in the Qur'an.³¹

In the history of tafsir, the socio-historical context is less appreciated, especially after the canonization of Islamic laws or jurisprudence near 3rd H/9 AD. He said that in the period before it, the emphasis of the tafsir tradition is on the non-linguistic context which mainly historical. The reasoning was mainly from the literature of *ashbāb al-nuzūl*. It was a strong indicator to explain the context around the revelation of certain text, although it was less capable of examining the socio-historical context. Many narrations of *ashbāb al-nuzūl* have contradicted the revelation and thus historically doubted. From this lesson, we come to an understanding that the more we comprehend the anthropological explanation of Hijaz and Arabic society, the more we understand the socio-historicity of each verse in the Qur'an.³²

Hijaz area reflects a wider Arabic culture and cultures surrounding it. The culture of Hijaz was influenced by neighboring traditions from the Mediterranean including Jewish and Christian traditions to the southern Arab, Ethiopia, and Egypt. The influences are certainly varied. Consequently, the socio-cultural life of Hijaz

³⁰ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Kayf Nata'āmal ma'a al-Qur'an* (Herndon: IIT, 1992), 28.

³¹ Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 117.

³² Ibid.

when the Qur'an was revealed was rich. Therefore, the understanding of the socio-historicity of the Qur'an helps a contemporary commentator to understand the relation of the Qur'an and the places where the Qur'an was revealed.³³

After describing the importance of the socio-historical context applicability in tafsir, Saeed invited us to see the Qur'an in a wider context. He explained the economic, geographical, sociological, and anthropological conditions in 7th century Arabic society in Hijaz. It began with the study of the city of Mecca and Medina. Saeed argued that many pre-Islamic values in Hijaz were adopted by Islam. The values deemed as positive were accepted with modifications such as the Arabic value of patience amidst the ferocity of life and the values of masculinity (*murumamah*). Meanwhile, the values deemed as inappropriate or despicable (*fakhsbah*) were denied, such as improvidence, miserliness, act of murder, slander. The Qur'an gives us the image of the past Arabic life that Muslims today are urged to deny such lifestyles and cultures. Besides, the Qur'an also accepted their food except for alcohol and pork.³⁴

One of the issues addressed in the Qur'an is women. Gender and social class inequality have been part of the social practice. The Qur'an talks about the past culture that women were more ignoble than men. Despite the denial of the Qur'an on some of the existing values on women, the Qur'an accepted some others that were too difficult to abolish because they had been strongly rooted in their social practice and cultural life. According to Saeed, the Qur'an has given a huge contribution to reducing women's suffering, as what it has done to stand for the weak like slaves and poor people.³⁵

To present his argument about the relation between socio-historical context and the Qur'an, Saeed observed a verse of inheritance in surah al-Nisā' [4]:11-12. In Islamic law, the verse is understood as the regulation to divide the inheritance to the heirs. A general case would be if a man and a woman are on the same level, then the man deserves twice the amount as the woman. Islamic law or jurisprudence does not question the reason behind the unequal division of the inheritance and the reason why gender matters to determine the portion. The Qur'an commentaries follow the

³³ Ibid.,118.

³⁴ Ibid., 119.

³⁵ Ibid., 120.

perspective of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), think that it is normal to divide the inheritance based on gender discrimination. They do not examine the relationship between gender discrimination with socio-historicity of the Qur'an when the verse was revealed.³⁶

Saeed insisted that to understand the verse about women's portion, one should put the verses into a wider cultural context (Hijaz) through exploring the socio-cultural aspect of the verse. The purpose is to give the relevant meaning of the verse for the contemporary context. According to him, the condition where the majority of the Muslims live now grants women the same opportunity as men in many aspects of life that they no longer depend financially on men including in education and work. In such a condition regarding the transformation of women's role in society, Saeed asked a question whether we should preserve the understanding of the mentioned verse revealed 1400 years ago about heirs' portion inheritance, or we should reinterpret the verse to open another possibility. In this case, Saeed argued that we do not have a reason not to reinterpret it.³⁷

After elaborating on the importance of socio-historical context in tafsir, Saeed discussed what we can and cannot change in interpreting Qur'anic verses. He continued that new interpretation of *ethico*-legal verses creates mutability and immutability issues in Islam. Having ideas to change a law or regulation in the Qur'an, as the Muslim majority believe, equals an act of denial of the truth or an act of forbidden innovation (*bid'ah*). Regarding this issue, Saeed argued that such debate had been there since centuries ago. He defended his perspective by arguing that there is an existing debate on *mu'amalah* and *'ibadah*. The first is considered negotiable, while the second is final and cannot be changed. The debate among the early Muslim scholars about the changes in the first category is based on the local tradition as clearly found in the Hanafi school of thought.³⁸

Saeed strengthened his argument by saying that; *First*, the meaning of *shari'ah* (understood by textualists as immutable) is not clear. *Shari'ah* can mean the source of *shari'ah* (al-Qur'an and *al-Sunnah*) or Islamic laws based on the two sources. *Second*, if what is meant by *shari'ah* is laws and regulation mentioned in the Qur'an and

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 122.

³⁸ Ibid., 124.

al-Sunnah, history has told us that the two sources have changed (through *naskh*). Third, pre-modern scholars have been debating the changes and decided that some aspects of the teaching are not negotiable while some others are allowed to be changed. To an expert of Islamic law such as Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, Islamic laws have certain purposes. For instance, the law about the social environment is aimed at the public interest. This purpose is what is called the concept of *maqāṣid shari'ah*.

However, despite the existence of changes mechanism in Islamic laws, only a few pre-modern scholars propagated a substantial change. Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (716 H./1316 AD.), he said is one of the few scholars. Al-Ṭūfī argued that the verse *lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār* supports a public interest as an absolute priority in the making of laws. Laws, including from the Qur'an and hadith, can be changed as long as it is meant for public wellbeing and interest.³⁹ Nevertheless, al-Ṭūfī's idea is not accepted and discussed among the scholars and tends to be ignored.⁴⁰

Hierarchy of Values in the Ethico-legal Verses

Saeed said that the early generation of Muslims had higher freedom to interpret the Qur'an. Among many figures, the second caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb dared to contradict Qur'anic verses as he prioritized what he considered right for his time. This freedom, Saeed argued, is because of the absence of certain methodology with its principle and procedures to interpret the Qur'an. The early Muslims were relatively freer to associate a text with their context. The early Muslims from the companions, *tābi'īn*, and the next generation base their understanding of the Qur'an on an intuitive exploration of how the Qur'an gave meaning to their lives and how they should respond to it. According to Saeed, we can see the occurrence of a proto-contextualist tafsir from them.⁴¹

Another example elaborated by Saeed is the law on alms (*ṣakāt*). The law experts consider zakat, as one of the pillars of Islam, as immutable. However, 'Umar (a prophet's companion), used a more pragmatic approach. The Qur'an [9]: 60 informed eight groups of

³⁹ Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, *Risālah fī Ri'āyat al-Maṣlaḥah* (Beirut: Dār al-Miṣrīyah al-Lubnānīyah, t.th.), 23.

⁴⁰ Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 124.

⁴¹ Ibid., 126.

people deserve the alms which one of them is the people whose heart needs to be strengthened (a new convert to Islam). The Qur'an includes the heads of tribes whose political supports are important for the prophet and Islam in this group. Thus, this group also deserves the alms. The almsgiving has been practiced by the prophet to the period of the first caliph. Then, 'Umar, the second caliph, denied giving alms to the heads of tribes because Islam no longer needs their supports. Umar's policy was made by determining the purpose of the text that when a condition changes, there is not necessary to implement the order of the Qur'an literally.⁴² Such a policy made by 'Umar and other early generations can be traced in literature of Islamic jurisprudence or ḥadīth.⁴³

The basis for proto-contextualist interpretation is also found in the concept of *maqāṣid shari'ah*. This concept occurred as a response to literalism that dominated the interpretation of laws in the post-formative period of Islamic law (centuries after 1 H/7 AD and 2 H/8 M). However, the exploration of this concept has not led to forming an alternative methodology to overcome the problems of literalism both in the field of Islamic jurisprudence and tafsir. The ideas of *maqāṣid* by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and Abū Ishāq al-Shātibī are too restrictive to be the basis of progressive interpretation. Then, in the 20th century, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr tried to extend the tradition of *maqāṣid*,⁴⁴ which were propagated by scholars who involved in the movement of Islamization of knowledge initiated by Ismā'īl al-Fārūqī.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, Saeed argued, an interpretation based on the principle of *maqāṣid* has a problem when encounters a Qur'anic verse which has a direct and clear law mentioned in the holy book. For instance, the verse about hand cutting penalty. This verse is accepted as a clear law that cannot be reinterpreted in any way. Based on *uṣūl*

⁴² 'Abd al-Salām al-Sulaymānī, *Al-Ijtihād fī al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* (Rabat: Wizārāt al-Awqāf, 1996), 132-133.

⁴³ See the example of the case in: Mahmassānī, *Turāth al-Khulafā al-Rāshidīn fī al-Fiqh wa al-Qada'*; Syed Sabahuddin Abd al-Rahman, "Jurisprudence a la Umar-its Contribution and Potential," *Islamic and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1982), 241-249

⁴⁴ Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid al-Shari'ah al-Islāmīyah* (Tunisia: al-Dār al-Tūnisīyah li al-Nashr, 1978).

⁴⁵ Saeed, *Interpreting*, 127.

al-fiqh method, such texts have to be interpreted and followed as they are written anytime and in any condition. According to Saeed, if an interpretation has to be coherent with the *maqāṣid*, then the verse should be modified in a way that it goes coherently with the ultimate goal of the verse. However, such a paradigm of implementing the text as it negates any possible modification. Hence, *maqāṣid* is often reduced to mere rhetoric especially when it encounters ethico-legal verses.⁴⁶

After putting the concept of *maqāṣid* into a test, Saeed quoted the ideas of Fazlur Rahman. He said that Rahman has tried to echo the proto-contextualist interpretation indirectly with different labeling. Rahman's contribution to the development of the alternative interpretation methodology of ethico-legal verses is his effort to connect a text with its contexts of revelation and interpretation. Saeed analyzed that Rahman has not mentioned explicitly that formulating the hierarchy of values is important for the alternative interpretation methodology. However, Saeed appreciated him because he addressed the issues of values that he called 'general principles'.⁴⁷ He also elaborated on some values, such as justice, higher values behind every specific law in the Qur'an. For instance, the verse about the permission to marry four women. Yet, Rahman has not formulated a structured view to developing the hierarchy of value.⁴⁸

According to Rahman, the first step of his methodology, the most important one, is to find a general principle through two main movements; that is why his method is called double movement theory.⁴⁹ In this first movement, the socio-historical context is traced and used to identify a specific case that will lead us to decide the general principle like justice or honesty. In the second movement, the general principle is used to base a formulation of law or regulation relevant to the modern need. To formulate the law, a commentator should be knowledgeable thoroughly on specific conditions in the modern world. Saeed admitted that Rahman's important contribution with his double movement theory is his invitation to consider

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2-5.

⁴⁸ Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 127.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

contexts of revelation as well as of the modern era in bridging the text and the social need.⁵⁰

Toward a Hierarchy of Values

Saeed is inspired by proto-contextualist interpretation, some aspects of *maqāṣid* tradition, and the value-based approach by Rahman. He mainly took inspiration from the mentioned ideas to develop a hierarchy of values meant as guidance for contextual interpretation toward ethico-legal verses. Despite the existence of the hierarchy of values in the Qur'an, including aesthetics and epistemology, his book mainly concerns the ethical value of “*‘amal ṣāliḥ*” (*right action*). Saeed further explained why *‘amal ṣāliḥ* is used as a principle to lead a text interpretation and connect it to Muslim life. He insisted that the Qur'an considers *‘amal ṣāliḥ* as the religious foundation. From the age of revelation to the end of the prophet's mission, the values related to *‘amal ṣāliḥ* have been the most frequent theme mentioned in the Qur'an. Hence, the series of morality have been formed during the revelation period (610-632 AD). The clear message of the Qur'an is the demand that human has to do the right thing and stay away from the opposite. The Qur'anic language puts it as to do what is right (*ma'rūf*) and stay away from the fools.⁵¹

Having studied the Qur'an and other sources, he successfully identified numerous values included in the *‘amal ṣāliḥ*. Then, he formulated some classified values that he considered representative of the main values in the category of *‘amal ṣāliḥ* which do not violate the fundamental belief to the Qur'an. The hierarchy of the values are: obligatory values, fundamental values, protectional values, implementational values, and instructional values.⁵²

In brief, the explanation behind each classification of the values is as follows: (1) *obligatory values*, the verses containing obligatory values that have to be done by every Muslim in the world in any place and any time (the values are universal), such as the pillars of Islam, the pillars of the faith; (2) *fundamental values*, the verse containing humanity values such as justice, humanity, and human rights which have to be implemented universally; (3) *protectional values*, the verses

⁵⁰ Ibid., 128.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 130.

containing conditions of law aimed to preserve the fundamental values such as prohibition to do criminal activity, to steal, and to cheat in a trade (the values are also universal); (4) *implementational values*, the verses containing the enforcement of the law for the violation of the fundamental and protectional values such as the law of *qisās* in the case of murder, and cutting hand penalty in the case of thievery. These verses are closely related to social, legal, and cultural aspects during the revelation period. They are considered local and temporal which make them the object of dynamic interpretation, and (5) *instructional values*, the verses containing orders and prohibitions aimed to solve specific problems during the life of the prophet. The verses are closely related to conditions when the Qur'an was revealed, which makes them unnecessarily universal.⁵³

Compared to the previous classification of values, Saeed viewed that the instructional values are the most frequently mentioned, the most difficult to address, and the most diverse in their manifestations. The verses included in this category have diverse linguistic features: command (*amr*), prohibition (*nahy*), simple statement on *'amal ṣāliḥ*, imagery, and story.⁵⁴ Some of the examples are; the allowance of marrying four women under certain conditions, man's "protection" for a woman, doing good conduct to the parents, not making friends with the infidels, and greeting them.

According to Saeed, questions need to be answered regarding the instructional values, because they are mostly related to the present condition, are: are the values get the upper hand on the cultural specificity that they have to be obeyed in any conditions, place, and time? Or is it the reverse, that a similar condition should be made to implement them? How does a Muslim respond to the values?

To answer those questions, Saeed offered a theory to measure the universality of a certain values and consider which one is universal and which one is not. He measured the level of universality with frequency, emphasis, and relevance. *First*, frequency.⁵⁵ It is measured by tracking how frequently a value is mentioned in the Qur'an through observing the related theme of the value. For example, "helping the poor" is mentioned in the Qur'an through some concepts such as "help those who need", "feed the poor", and "take

⁵³ Ibid.,127-144.

⁵⁴ Saeed, *The Quran: an Introduction*, 169.

⁵⁵ Saeed, *Interpreting*,139.

care of the orphans". The principle here is the more repeated a theme in the Qur'an, the more important the value. However, we have to admit that the research conclusion can only achieve a level of prediction for the difficulty of the thorough investigation of the theme in the Qur'an.

*Second, emphasis.*⁵⁶ The emphasis measures whether a value was stressed during the life of the prophet. The principle is the bigger emphasis the value, the bigger significance it has. For instance, the value emphasized by Muhammad's prophecy in Mecca and Medina was helping the marginalized. However, if a certain value was mentioned then abandoned, or if values contradicting the previous one was supported and widespread, then the previous value is not relevant anymore in the Qur'an. It is important to notice that the measurement needs deep knowledge of historical, characteristic, and stylistic or linguistic aspects of the text and the context of that time. The knowledge on the case is not meant to find out the exact time and event but is used to base whether the value was emphasized in that period. *Third, relevance (relation or connection).*⁵⁷ The word relevance, put by Saeed, is not specifically for all values in the Qur'an. Saeed divided the relevance into two types; (1) the relevance with particular culture in a particular time, place, and condition, (2) the universal relevance regardless of time, place, and condition particularity. Here, Saeed intended the relevance as the second meaning.

As the prophet was sent in Hijaz society, there is a crucial relationship between the prophecy and the culture of the society at that time. Meanwhile, we know that not all the teachings, values, and practices in the pre-Islamic society were thrown away by the prophet. Thus, it is rational to argue that what has been said and practiced by the prophet is under the condition at that time. Therefore, the knowledge of the cultural context in the revelation period is crucial to determine the relevance of a particular value.⁵⁸

The first step is observation. Then, the second step is the comparison with the present condition. In doing so, we can analyze immutable and mutable aspects as previously discussed. Then, we conduct a contemplation of whether the value objectively supports

⁵⁶ Ibid., 139-40.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 140-141.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

and preserves the fundamental values. If the analysis showed that the value is specific to that time, then the implementation of the same value in another situation is not what is intended by the text, and vice versa.⁵⁹

The Thematic Tafsir in Abdullah Saeed's Contextual Approach

The first step in this contextualization process is to familiarize with the broader context as interpretation is carried out. One of the considerations that will help this contextualization is understanding the subjectivity of the commentators. Every commentator always brings with him various experiences, views, beliefs, values, and his own initial impressions into the interpretation process, and this will significantly influence the production of his interpretation. It also includes knowledge of the world, life experiences; beliefs and values such as belief in God, the Prophets, books, and life after death; her hopes, likes, dislikes, and priorities; education and training such as control over language, religion, al-Qur'an, and religious traditions; identities such as gender, ethnicity, culture, language, profession, or family relationships; his attitude towards political, religious, cultural or economic issues; and the status and role of the community in society.⁶⁰

As a result of all the aforementioned factors, an exegete is actually involved with the text on many levels, even before interpretation begins. Awareness of this will clearly free an interpreter from the desire to claim finality or perfection because a personal horizon is always inherent in every interpretation.

A researcher must have the view that the Qur'an has a logical and factual relationship with the personal life of the Prophet Muhammad. If the Qur'an is read in its entirety and linked to the prophetic history of Muhammad, from the beginning to the end of prophetic history, it will be possible to find a logical and factual relationship between al-Qur'an and the Arab people who lived at the time of Muhammad. The two interpret each other. In each of its smallest and largest units, the al-Qur'an describes the attitude of the Prophet Muhammad against Arab and non-Arab communities, against polytheists and the People of the Book, and against Muslims and hypocrites. Or vice

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Abdullah Saeed, *Al-Qur'an Abad 21: Tafsir Kontekstual*, terj. Ervan Nurtawab (Bandung: Mizan, 2016), 160.

versa, the attitude of the disbelievers towards the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims, the Muslims' attitude towards the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the attitudes of Muslims towards non-Muslims and so on. Each of these images is related to one another and between the one before and after it. According to the order in which it was descended, this harmony and unity will be captured if the al-Qur'an is read and interpreted chronologically.⁶¹

The thematic tafsir in this context functions as the method of collecting data around the investigated theme. In practice, a researcher collects all the Qur'anic verses addressing the theme. Then, the data are inventoried and coded in chronological order (*al-tartib al-nuzūlī*). In doing that, a researcher can refer to some works such as Muḥammad Izzat Darwazah⁶², Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī,⁶³ 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥasan Ḥabannakah.⁶⁴ The chronological order of the verses is very important as a basis of analysis. When the data were chronologically managed, a researcher can employ methods of analysis (*taḥlīlī*) to investigate the intended verses and help to understand the verses such as the linguistic analysis (*luḡhawī*) or critical analysis on various *sabab nuzūl* of the verses, as well as other theories of Qur'anic studies.

A key aspect of interpretation is building an understanding of the syntactic (*naḥw*), morphological (*ṣarf*), semantic (*ma'ānī*), and stylistic (*uslūb*) features of the text. This includes identifying why certain linguistic features are used in the text, including the variety of ways of reading (*qirā'at*), and how they affect meaning. A text may use certain syntactic or stylistic features to emphasize a particular idea. Certain approaches can be chosen over others for specific reasons, and ask various questions about alternatives that might reveal hidden issues.⁶⁵

Semantic features also need to be analyzed, for example, repetition, use of idioms, irregular or unusual grammatical structures, special particles and prepositions, use of certain nouns (*ma'rifah*), and

⁶¹ Muḥammad Izzat Darwazah, *Al-Tafsīr al-Ḥadīth* (Kairo: Dār al-Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 1962), 42-144.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, *Fahm al-Qur'an al-Karīm: al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ ḥasba Tartīb al-Nuzūl* (Beirut: Markāz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabīyah, 2009).

⁶⁴ 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥasan Ḥabannakah, *Ma'arīj al-Tafakkur wa Daqā'iq al-Tadabbur* (Damaskus: Dār al-Qalam, 1420 H).

⁶⁵ Saeed, *Al-Qur'an Abad* 21, 170

indeterminate ones (*nakirah*), the existence of ellipsis (*ḥadḥ*), the sequence of pronunciation (beginning/end) full/partial synonyms, use of a timed verb (past/present/future), choice of singular/plural forms, masculine/feminine terms, or use of active/passive verbs.⁶⁶ All of this has an effect on the way the text is interpreted. A researcher of the Qur'anic text dwelling on certain words will understand how the words were used at that time, rather than how they were understood today.⁶⁷ In this case, the type of text that is being studied should also be analyzed whether the text is a historical text, an ethico-legal text, parables, or texts related to matters supernatural.⁶⁸

The socio-historicity is the main basis for the contextual approach. As a tool of analysis, the approach is aimed to portray a context surrounding the verses when it was revealed. This is what is meant by Saeed as macro context I. After comprehending the macro context I, a researcher investigates and studies critically and thoroughly the existing literature on the pre-modern and modern commentaries. This purpose of the investigation is to examine how the commentators have seen the verses and interpreted it throughout history. This is what he called a relational context. From the arrays of existing interpretation, a researcher will find the evolutive character of the exegesis. In this aspect, a researcher can take some pre-modern to modern commentators such as Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, Abū 'Abd Allah al-Qurṭubī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Muḥammad Izzat Darwazah, Fazlur Rahman, Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, M. Quraish Shihab, and other commentators as well when necessary as a comparative study on the issue (*muqārīn*).

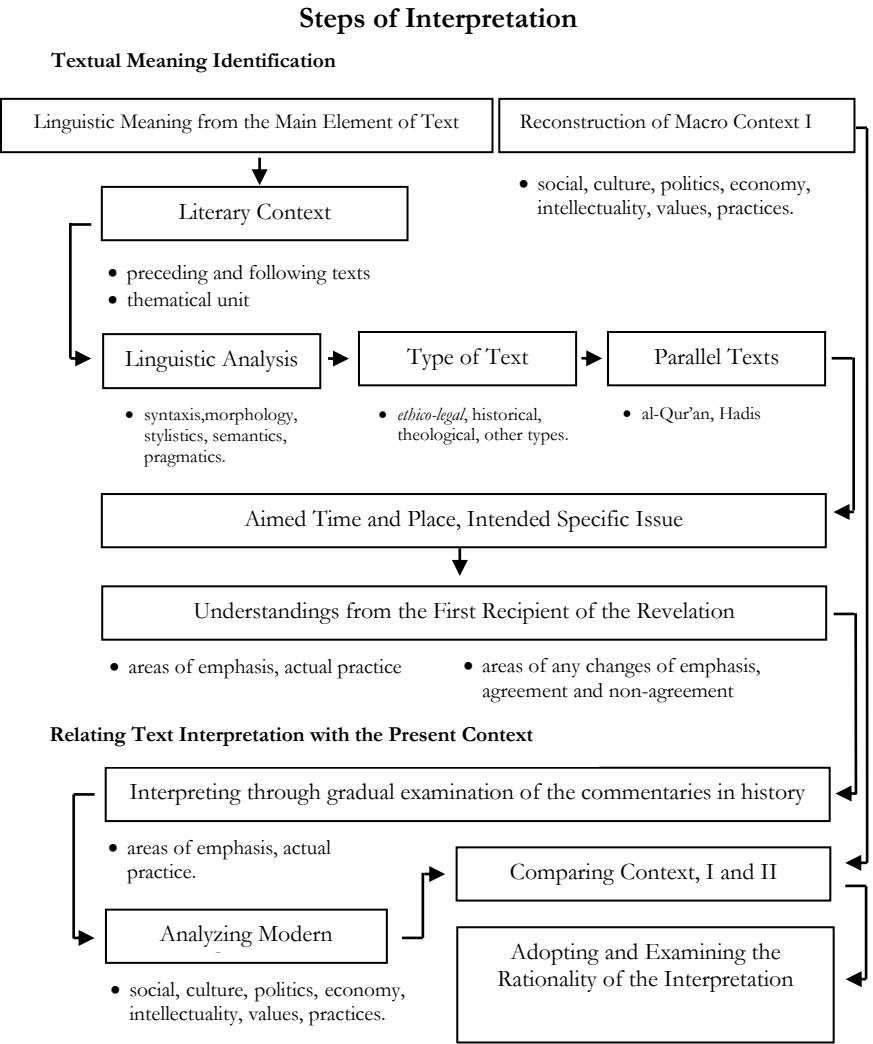
Having found the macro context I and the relational context, a researcher then relates the macro context I with the macro context II (the present context) to find various possibilities that can be taken as some existing commentaries on the investigated verse. In this step, a researcher will connect *ratio-legis*, *moral spirit*, *maḡbẓā*, and the significance of the investigated verses gained from the analysis of macro context I, while considering the relational context, as well as the contemporary context into the discussion. The relevant issues

⁶⁶ Ibid., 170-171.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 171.

⁶⁸ Saeed, *Al-Qur'an Abad* 21, 169.

around the research can be chosen and represented in the analysis. The issues can range from human rights, democracy, gender, woman leadership, ecology, human trafficking, banking system, online trade, digital money, and many more. The steps of interpretation using Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach will be presented in the schema below with some modification that I made:



From the scheme above, thematic interpretation, Saeed called it parallel texts, occupies an important position in the Qur'anic exegesis in the contextual approach. The thematic interpretations have been

existing as if they are independent of each other and have only been written in a normative description with repetitive analysis. Using the contextual approach, the analysis of thematic interpretation will go deeper for the object of analysis is not only text of Qur'anic verse or the existing commentaries, but also the socio-historical context of the studied verse.

Conclusion

Historically, thematic interpretation of the Qur'an has occurred in the early period of the revelation in its simpler form. In the field of interpretation methodology, the thematic interpretation as an established methodology and a scientific method has been existing since the modern period in Egypt. Since then, many works on Qur'anic interpretation using the thematic method. This method has been popular among college students in Islamic Universities and Colleges in Indonesia, as shown in numerous undergraduate and graduate thesis as well as doctoral dissertations that employ and discuss the method. However, most of the works on thematic interpretation do not engage contemporary theories and approaches that the result of their researches is normative descriptive and tends to be repetitive. Therefore, this article proposes a combination between Saeed's contextual approach and the thematic interpretation researches. Methodologically, this research finds that combining thematic exegesis research with Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach has never been written in the form of a scientific journal. However, there has been some research on student final assignments, especially theses, which use Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach. This research attempts to fill the empty space. With this methodological offer, it is hoped that products of a more contextual interpretation can emerge and become solutions to socio-religious problems in the contemporary era.

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