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<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>Print ISSN: [3006-1296](#) Online ISSN: [3006-130X](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Tafseer of the Quranic Verses on Social Justice: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives****Mr. Abdullah**

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asamad1984dgk@gmail.com**Abstract**

The Quranic teachings on social justice form a cornerstone of Islamic ethics, emphasizing fairness, equity, and the welfare of marginalized communities. This study examines the historical and contemporary tafseer (exegesis) of Quranic verses related to social justice, comparing classical and modern interpretations to highlight their evolving application. Classical scholars such as Al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and Al-Qurtubi grounded their analyses in linguistic precision and historical context (asbab al-nuzul), addressing issues like wealth redistribution (zakat), judicial equity, and anti-tribalism within medieval societal frameworks. Their works laid the foundation for Islamic social justice, though their interpretations occasionally reflected patriarchal and hierarchical norms of their time. In contrast, contemporary scholars like Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud, and Khaled Abou El Fadl employ interdisciplinary approaches, integrating sociology, feminism, and critical theory to address modern challenges such as systemic racism, gender inequality, and economic exploitation. Modern tafseer prioritizes the Quran's ethical objectives (maqasid al-shari'ah), advocating for transformative justice in areas like Islamic finance, human rights, and environmental ethics. Movements such as Islamic feminism (e.g., Musawah) and liberation theology (e.g., Farid Esack's work) exemplify this progressive reinterpretation, challenging traditional patriarchal and elitist readings. The study underscores the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, demonstrating how Quranic principles remain relevant across epochs. While classical exegesis provides theological rigor, contemporary tafseer ensures adaptability to 21st-century issues, fostering a holistic vision of justice that bridges scripture and activism.

Keywords: Social Justice, Quranic Exegesis (Tafseer), Classical Scholarship, Contemporary Interpretations, Maqasid Al-Shari'ah, Islamic Feminism, Economic Equity, Systemic Oppression, Zakat, Hermeneutics.

Introduction

Social justice is a central tenet of Islam, deeply rooted in the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The

concept encompasses fairness, equity, and the ethical distribution of resources to ensure the welfare of all members of society, particularly the marginalized (Kamali, 2002). The Quran repeatedly emphasizes justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahma*), and the obligation to uphold the rights of the poor, orphans, and oppressed. Hadith literature further reinforces these principles, with the Prophet (PBUH) advocating for social responsibility, charity (*zakat*), and the prohibition of exploitation (Siddiqui, 2008). Understanding these teachings requires a thorough engagement with *Tafseer* (Quranic exegesis), which provides historical, linguistic, and jurisprudential insights into how these verses have been interpreted across different eras. This article examines both classical and modern interpretations of Quranic verses on social justice, highlighting their evolving application in response to changing socio-economic conditions.

Social justice in Islam is not merely an abstract ideal but a divine mandate that integrates spiritual, moral, and legal dimensions. The Quran defines justice as a balance (*mizan*) that upholds human dignity and prevents oppression (*zulm*). Classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) emphasized that justice requires both individual piety and systemic reforms to address economic disparities (Rahman, 1982). Key components include the prohibition of usury (*riba*), the obligation of *zakat* (wealth redistribution), and the protection of vulnerable groups. Modern scholars like Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Fazlur Rahman have expanded this framework, arguing that Islamic social justice must adapt to contemporary challenges such as global inequality, corporate exploitation, and state corruption (Esack, 1997). Thus, social justice in Islam is dynamic, combining timeless ethical principles with contextually responsive applications.

The science of *Tafseer* plays a crucial role in deciphering the Quran's directives on social justice, as the text often requires contextual and linguistic analysis. Classical exegetes like Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) and Al-Tabari (d. 923) provided historical context (*asbab al-nuzul*) for verses on justice, such as those revealed during the establishment of the first Islamic state in Medina (Afsaruddin, 2013). For example, it is stated in the Quran as; "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people, to judge with justice" Quran 4:58. It

was interpreted in light of early Muslim governance, emphasizing accountability in leadership (Motahhari, 1985). Contemporary scholars like Amina Wadud and Khaled Abou El Fadl employ *Tafseer* to address modern issues such as gender justice and economic reform by re-examining Quranic language through interdisciplinary lenses (Wadud, 1999). Thus, *Tafseer* bridges the gap between scripture and real-world justice initiatives, ensuring that interpretations remain relevant across time.

This article seeks to analyze how Quranic verses on social justice have been interpreted historically and how these interpretations are applied today. By comparing classical *Tafseer* with contemporary scholarly debates, it highlights the adaptability of Islamic teachings to modern socio-political contexts. For instance, while early scholars focused on feudal and tribal structures, today's discourse addresses capitalism, human rights, and environmental justice (Safi, 2003). The study also evaluates differing scholarly opinions such as traditionalist versus reformist approaches to assess how Islamic social justice can inform policy-making and activism in Muslim-majority and minority societies (Ramadan, 2009). Ultimately, the article underscores the Quran's enduring relevance as a guide for justice, calling for renewed scholarly and practical engagement with its teachings in the face of 21st-century challenges.

Understanding Social Justice in the Quran

The Quran establishes justice ('adl) as a fundamental principle, commanding believers to uphold fairness in all aspects of life. One of the most comprehensive verses on justice is Surah Al-Baqarah: ﴿لَيْسَ الْبِرَّ أَنْ تُوَلُّوا وُجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ وَآتَى الْمَالَ عَلَىٰ حُبِّهِ ذَوِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينَ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَالسَّائِلِينَ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَالْمُوفُونَ بِعَهْدِهِمْ إِذَا عَاهَدُوا ۗ وَالصَّابِرِينَ فِي الْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَحِينَ الْبَأْسِ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا ۗ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُتَّقُونَ﴾

"Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves; [and who] establishes prayer and gives zakah; [those who] fulfill their promise when they promise; and [those who] are patient

in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous (Quran 2:177)."

This verse highlights that true piety is not just ritual worship but includes economic justice supporting the poor, orphans, and marginalized and moral integrity in fulfilling promises. Another key verse, Surah An-Nisa, emphasizes legal justice and governance:

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ﴾

"Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due, and when you judge between people, to judge with justice (Quran 4:58)."

This verse underscores accountability in leadership and fair judicial systems, principles that remain crucial in modern discussions on governance and human rights.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) practically implemented Quranic justice in Medina, establishing a society based on equity. He abolished tribal discrimination, as seen in his Farewell Sermon. Economically, the Prophet (PBUH) institutionalized zakat (obligatory charity) and prohibited riba (usury) to prevent wealth hoarding. He also ensured women's rights by granting them inheritance and condemning female infanticide. His treaty with the Jews of Medina (Constitution of Medina) established pluralism and collective security, showcasing early Islamic legal justice.

Tafseer of Social Justice Verses in the Early Islamic Context

The early Islamic period witnessed profound engagement with Quranic verses on social justice, particularly by the *Sahabah* (Companions of the Prophet) and *Tabi'in* (Successors), whose interpretations laid the groundwork for Islamic ethical and legal frameworks. The Companions, having directly witnessed the Quran's revelation and its practical application under the Prophet (PBUH), emphasized justice as both an individual obligation and a collective societal duty. For instance, figures like Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644 CE) institutionalized welfare systems such as the *Bayt al-Mal* (public treasury) to ensure wealth redistribution, reflecting their understanding of verses mandating economic equity (Abdul-Rahman, 2007). Their exegesis was deeply contextual, linking Quranic injunctions to immediate social reforms such as abolishing tribal privilege and ensuring the rights of non-Arab converts demonstrating how early Muslims

operationalized divine commands into governance (Kamali, 2002). This approach prioritized the spirit of justice over rigid literalism, adapting Quranic principles to emerging challenges like urbanization and inter-communal coexistence.

The *Tabi'in*, who learned from the Companions, expanded these interpretations while addressing new societal complexities. Scholars like Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib (d. 715 CE) and Hasan al-Basri (d. 728 CE) systematized ethical and legal guidelines derived from Quranic justice verses, particularly in realms like fair taxation and judicial impartiality (Rahman, 1982). Their *tafseer* often reflected the struggles of their era, such as resisting the authoritarian excesses of the Umayyad caliphs by appealing to Quranic calls for accountability (Afsaruddin, 2013). For example, Hasan al-Basri's critiques of wealth hoarding by elites directly engaged with Quranic warnings against economic exploitation (Motzki, 2006). This generation's work bridged the gap between idealistic principles and pragmatic policy, ensuring that Quranic justice remained dynamic rather than theoretical. Their legacy is evident in later classical scholarship, where economic and social justice became inseparable from *fiqh* (jurisprudence).

By the time of the classical *mufasssirin* (exegetes) like Al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE), early *tafseer* traditions on social justice had crystallized into comprehensive frameworks. These scholars synthesized the Companions' and *Tabi'in's* insights while addressing medieval societal shifts, such as feudalism and slavery (Brown, 2017). Their commentaries often highlighted historical precedents like Umar ibn al-Khattab's land reforms to demonstrate Islam's redistributive ethos (Esposito, 1998). Crucially, they preserved the early tradition of contextual *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), allowing Quranic justice principles to remain relevant across changing political economies (Ramadan, 2009). This historical continuum underscores how early *tafseer* treated social justice not as abstract theology but as a lived imperative, offering models for contemporary Muslim scholars grappling with inequality, corruption, and human rights crises.

Classical Tafseer on Social Justice

The contributions of classical scholars such as Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE), Al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), and Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273 CE) were instrumental in shaping Islamic discourse on social justice. These

scholars approached Quranic exegesis (*tafseer*) with a combination of linguistic precision, historical contextualization, and jurisprudential insight, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in both textual and societal realities. Al-Tabari's *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an* stands as one of the most comprehensive early exegeses, synthesizing reports from the Prophet's Companions and early Muslim jurists to establish a cohesive understanding of justice in Islam (Rippin, 2001). His work emphasized the Quran's call for equity in governance, particularly in verses addressing leadership accountability and public trust. Similarly, Ibn Kathir's *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim* integrated hadith and historical narratives to reinforce the Quran's ethical mandates on wealth distribution and care for the marginalized (Brown, 2017). Meanwhile, Al-Qurtubi's *Al-Jami' li-Ahkam al-Qur'an* provided a legalistic framework for social justice, linking Quranic injunctions to practical rulings on charity (*zakat*), fair wages, and the prohibition of exploitation (Gleave, 2012). Together, these scholars established a foundation that balanced theological rigor with real-world applicability, ensuring that Quranic teachings on justice remained dynamic across different eras.

A central focus of classical *tafseer* was the interpretation of key Quranic verses that underpin Islamic social justice principles. For instance, Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13), which declares human diversity as a divine sign and rejects racial or tribal superiority, was analyzed by classical scholars through both theological and sociological lenses. Al-Tabari highlighted the verse's revolutionary impact in dismantling pre-Islamic Arab tribalism, while Al-Qurtubi expanded on its implications for intercommunal relations in pluralistic societies (Afsaruddin, 2013). Another pivotal verse, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:177), which defines righteousness through acts of charity and social responsibility, received extensive commentary from Ibn Kathir, who contextualized its demands within the broader Islamic economic system (Kamali, 2002). These interpretations were not merely academic; they informed legal and ethical frameworks, such as the codification of *zakat* as a tool for poverty alleviation and the condemnation of hoarding (*ihthikar*) in medieval Islamic markets (Bonner, 2005). By dissecting the semantic and legislative nuances of such verses, classical scholars

ensured that social justice remained a actionable doctrine rather than an abstract ideal.

Despite their profound contributions, classical scholars faced significant challenges in interpreting social justice verses within the constraints of their historical and intellectual milieus. One major limitation was the patriarchal and hierarchical nature of medieval societies, which occasionally influenced exegeses on gender and class. For example, while the Quran's egalitarian ethos was universally acknowledged, some classical commentaries accommodated contemporaneous norms on slavery and women's rights, reflecting the societal biases of their time (Ali, 2006). Additionally, the political dynamics of caliphates and empires shaped interpretations, as scholars navigated tensions between advocating for justice and avoiding persecution by rulers (Crone, 2004). The lack of modern tools for socioeconomic analysis also meant that classical *tafseer* often focused on individual morality over structural reform—a gap that contemporary scholars now address through interdisciplinary approaches (Ramadan, 2009). Nevertheless, the classical tradition's emphasis on *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *maqasid al-shari'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law) provides a critical foundation for reinterpreting justice in modern contexts, from economic inequality to systemic racism (Auda, 2008).

Contemporary Perspectives on Tafseer and Social Justice

The field of Quranic exegesis (*tafseer*) has undergone significant evolution in the modern era, with contemporary scholars employing interdisciplinary approaches to reinterpret social justice-related verses in light of current realities. Unlike classical scholars who primarily relied on historical and linguistic analysis, modern exegetes such as Amina Wadud, Khaled Abou El Fadl, and Fazlur Rahman integrate insights from sociology, philosophy, and critical theory to address systemic inequalities (Wadud, 1999; Rahman, 1982). This shift reflects a broader trend toward *contextualist tafseer*, which emphasizes the Quran's ethical objectives (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) over rigid literal interpretations. For instance, contemporary scholars often highlight the Quran's emphasis on human dignity (*karamah*) and equitable resource distribution as foundational to modern Islamic social justice frameworks (Ramadan, 2009). These approaches are particularly salient in addressing issues like wealth disparity and labor rights, where

traditional juridical rulings are reevaluated through the lens of universal human rights and economic ethics (Esposito, 2018). By bridging classical scholarship with modern epistemologies, these thinkers demonstrate how Quranic principles can inform progressive social reform without compromising theological integrity.

The impact of globalization, neoliberalism, and political upheaval has profoundly influenced contemporary *tafseer*, compelling scholars to address pressing social issues such as poverty, racism, and gender discrimination. For example, the rise of Islamic liberation theology, pioneered by figures like Farid Esack, applies Quranic justice verses to critique apartheid, colonialism, and economic exploitation (Esack, 1997). Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement and calls for racial equity have prompted renewed engagement with Quranic anti-racism principles, particularly in Western Muslim communities (Jackson, 2005). Economic justice has also become a central theme, with scholars like Tariq Ramadan advocating for Islamic finance models that prioritize poverty alleviation over profit maximization (Ramadan, 2009). These interpretations are not merely theoretical; they inspire grassroots activism, such as Islamic microfinance initiatives and interfaith solidarity campaigns. However, this progressive turn faces resistance from traditionalist circles, revealing tensions between reformist and conservative approaches to *tafseer* (Afsaruddin, 2013). Despite these challenges, the dynamism of modern exegesis underscores its relevance in addressing the root causes of inequality in the 21st century.

One of the most transformative developments in contemporary *tafseer* is the emergence of Islamic feminism, which reinterprets social justice verses to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality. Scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Kecia Ali employ feminist hermeneutics to deconstruct traditional readings of Quranic texts, arguing that historical interpretations often reflected male-dominated cultural biases rather than divine intent (Barlas, 2002; Ali, 2006). For instance, verses traditionally cited to justify gender hierarchies are re-examined through the Quran's overarching themes of equity and mutual responsibility (Wadud, 1999). This approach has practical implications, from advocating for women's leadership in mosques to reforming family laws in Muslim-majority countries.

Organizations like Musawah, a global movement for equality in Muslim family laws, draw on these reinterpretations to campaign for legal reforms (Mir-Hosseini, 2015). Islamic feminism also intersects with broader social justice struggles, such as combating honor violence and economic marginalization of women (Hassan, 2016). By centering women's voices in *tafseer*, these scholars not only reclaim Quranic justice for marginalized groups but also redefine Islamic authority itself, challenging the monopoly of traditional religious institutions. Their work exemplifies how contemporary exegesis can be a tool for both intellectual liberation and tangible social change.

Comparative Analysis: Historical vs. Contemporary Tafseer

The interpretation of Quranic verses related to social justice has undergone significant transformation from the classical to the contemporary period, reflecting shifts in scholarly methodologies, sociopolitical contexts, and intellectual paradigms. Classical scholars such as Al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE) approached *tafseer* with a focus on linguistic analysis, historical context (*asbab al-nuzul*), and jurisprudential implications, often grounding their interpretations in the immediate realities of early Islamic society (Rippin, 2001). Their exegeses emphasized the Quran's ethical imperatives such as wealth redistribution (*zakat*) and judicial equity but were inevitably shaped by the feudal and tribal structures of their time (Bonner, 2005). In contrast, contemporary scholars like Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Amina Wadud employ interdisciplinary frameworks, integrating sociology, philosophy, and critical theory to address modern systemic inequalities (Rahman, 1982; Wadud, 1999). This shift from a text-centric to a context-centric approach highlights a fundamental divergence: while classical *tafseer* sought to stabilize Islamic norms within a premodern worldview, modern exegesis often prioritizes the Quran's adaptable ethical objectives (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) to tackle issues like global capitalism and structural racism (Ramadan, 2009).

The evolution of thought in *tafseer* is particularly evident in responses to changing socioeconomic and political landscapes. Classical interpretations, for instance, addressed slavery as a historical reality but did not challenge its structural roots, reflecting the normative assumptions of medieval societies (Brown, 2017). Conversely, contemporary scholars like Khaled Abou El Fadl and

Farid Esack explicitly critique systemic oppression, reinterpreting Quranic justice verses to advocate for abolitionist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist movements (Esack, 1997; Abou El Fadl, 2001). Similarly, classical exegeses on gender roles often reinforced patriarchal norms due to their historical context, whereas Islamic feminists like Asma Barlas and Kecia Ali deconstruct these readings to foreground the Quran's egalitarian ethos (Barlas, 2002; Ali, 2006). This intellectual evolution underscores a broader trend: where classical *tafseer* focused on *stability* within hierarchical societies, contemporary scholarship emphasizes *transformation*, leveraging Quranic principles to challenge inequitable power structures (Afsaruddin, 2013). The rise of digital platforms and globalized Muslim communities has further accelerated this shift, enabling marginalized voices including women and minority scholars to participate in re-interpretive processes (Guta, 2020).

Despite these advancements, classical *tafseer* retains significant relevance in modern contexts, particularly in grounding contemporary debates in established theological frameworks. The works of Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273 CE) and Al-Razi (d. 1210 CE), for example, provide nuanced discussions on economic justice that inform modern Islamic finance and poverty-alleviation models (Gleave, 2012). Their emphasis on *public welfare (maslaha)* and *ethical governance* resonates in today's movements for corporate accountability and equitable resource distribution (Auda, 2008). Moreover, classical scholars' rigorous methodologies such as Ibn Taymiyyah's (d. 1328) insistence on aligning rulings with Quranic objectives offer tools to critique both rigid traditionalism and unmoored reformism (Hoover, 2007). However, the applicability of classical interpretations is often contested, especially when addressing issues absent in medieval contexts, such as digital privacy or climate justice (Kamali, 2019). This tension has spurred hybrid approaches, where contemporary scholars like Jasser Auda and Tariq Ramadan synthesize classical *maqasid* theory with modern human rights discourse to address gaps in traditional jurisprudence (Ramadan, 2009; Auda, 2008).

Ultimately, the dialogue between historical and contemporary *tafseer* enriches Islamic social justice discourse by balancing continuity with innovation. Classical exegesis provides a foundational ethical language rooted in divine command and prophetic precedent while modern reinterpretations ensure this

language speaks to contemporary struggles (Safi, 2003). For instance, the classical concept of *'adl* (justice) now informs debates on algorithmic bias and healthcare equity, demonstrating the Quran's enduring moral relevance (Abdul-Raof, 2012). Yet, this dynamism also raises critical questions: How can reinterpretation avoid cultural relativism? What safeguards exist against ideological co-optation? These challenges underscore the need for a *critical traditionalism* one that honors classical scholarship while embracing epistemologies that address modern inequities (Moosa, 2005). By navigating these complexities, contemporary *tafseer* not only revitalizes the Quran's social justice message but also reaffirms Islam's capacity to guide humanity through every epoch.

Conclusion

The journey through historical and contemporary interpretations of Quranic social justice verses reveals a living tradition that has continuously adapted to meet the needs of changing societies while maintaining its core ethical principles. Classical scholars established foundational frameworks for understanding justice in Islam, grounding their exegesis in the linguistic nuances of the Quran and the practical realities of their era. Their interpretations, while shaped by medieval social structures, articulated timeless values of equity, compassion and responsibility that transcended their immediate context. In contrast, modern scholars have expanded these frameworks through interdisciplinary approaches, applying Quranic principles to contemporary issues like systemic racism, gender inequality and economic exploitation. This evolution demonstrates how Islamic thought has maintained its relevance not through rigid literalism, but through its capacity for contextual application and ethical reasoning. The dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in tafsir reflects Islam's inherent flexibility - its ability to speak to universal human concerns across different historical periods while remaining anchored in divine revelation.

The comparative study of classical and contemporary exegesis ultimately underscores the Quran's enduring power as a guide for social justice in every age. While classical interpretations provide essential historical and theological grounding, modern approaches ensure these teachings remain vibrant and applicable to today's complex challenges. This continuity of tradition does not represent mere repetition, but rather an ongoing conversation where each

generation engages with scripture to address its unique circumstances. The classical emphasis on textual fidelity and the contemporary focus on ethical objectives are not opposing forces, but complementary dimensions of a holistic Islamic worldview. As Muslim communities navigate 21st century issues from climate justice to digital ethics, the tafsir tradition offers both wisdom from the past and methodologies for creative problem-solving. The true test of this living interpretive tradition lies in its ability to inspire concrete action - transforming Quranic ideals into tangible justice in human societies. This is the enduring challenge and promise of Islamic social ethics: to honor the divine message while courageously applying its transformative power to our ever-changing world.

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