



Syed Anwer Ali and his Methodological Approaches in *Tafsīr* “Qur’ān the Fundamental Law of Human Life”

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Abstract

Tafsīr “Qur’ān the Fundamental Law of Human Life” is an English Qur’ānic commentary by Syed Anwer Ali. This work is primarily inspired by Urdu and English commentaries written in 20th century. Although it is considered an elaborate work on *tafsīr*, no research has so far been conducted to explore its methodological pattern or to provide a critical analysis of this commentary. This study aims at dissecting the structure and analyzing the general methodological pattern of this commentary. More specifically, current study provides a comprehensive introduction of Syed Anwer Ali and his literary contributions, a brief introduction of his Qur’ānic commentary, the basic features and methodological analysis of this commentary. The methodological analysis reveals that Syed Anwer has not solely relied on the conventional method of *tafsīr* but he used a hybridized approach by aggregating conventional and modern methods. The structural dissection of this commentary reveals that it is seemingly inspired from the Urdu commentaries of 20th century and his adopted methodology is consistent with the existing prominent *tafāsīr* originated from the subcontinent.

Key Words: Syed Anwer, *Qur’ān* the Fundamental Law, Methodology

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Introduction

Chronologically, *Tafsīr* has gone through different historical phases that can be categorized into five periods, that of the Prophet (S.A.) , *Ṣaḥābah*, *Tabi’īn*, codification and the modern era of *Tafsīr*. During the periods of the Prophet (S.A), *Ṣaḥābah* and *Tabi’īn* traditions of *tafsīr* were mostly preserved and transmitted verbally. Some pioneers of complete Qur’ānic *tafsīr* are Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 A.H.), Muhammad b. Yaḥyā b. Ḥibbān (d 369 A.H.), al-Ḥākim al-Nisāpuri (d 405 A.H.). Modern era of *tafsīr* starts from the middle of 19th century when methodological changes started to occur in *tafsīr*. The prominent aspect of these works is the delivery of the Qur’ānic message in a way that it becomes relevant to the problems and circumstances of modern-day society. Some of the prominent *tafsīr* works during modern phase include *fi Zilāl al-Qur’ān* by Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966 C.E.), *Tafhīm al-Qur’ān* by Sayyid Abū al-‘Alā Mawḍūdī (1903-1979 C.E) and *Message of The Qur’ān* by Muhammad Asad (1900-1992 C.E)³.

In 20th century some prominent English commentaries of the Qur’ān emerged including i) A. Yusuf Ali’s “*The Holy Qur’ān: Text, Translation and Commentary*” (1934), ii) ‘Abd al-Mājid Daryābadi’s “*The Holy Qur’ān: with English translation and commentary*” (1941), and iii) Muhammad Asad’s “*The Message of the Qur’ān: Translated and explained*” (1980). The first two works originated from Indo-Pak sub-continent. Similarly, Syed Mawḍūdī’s *Tafhīm al-Qur’ān* was rendered into English by famous Pakistani scholar Zafar

³ Israr Ahmad, *Qur’ānic Studies: An Introduction*, (Kuala Lumpur: Zaman Islam Media, 2000), 294-320.



Ishaque Ansari. It seems that the field of *tafsīr* in English is still in the embryonic stage. In this context, Syed Anwer Ali’s Qur’ānic commentary, “*Qur’ān the Fundamental Law of Human Life*” may be considered as a relatively latest contribution in the field of Tasir. It is an English commentary of the *Qur’ān* comprising over sixteen volumes. Syed Anwer Ali devoted nearly 17 years (1982-1999) to complete voluminous work.

Although it is considered an elaborate work on *tafsīr*, no significant research has so far been made on this work. This study aims at analyzing the general methodology applied by Syed Anwer Ali in his Qur’ānic commentary. This methodological analysis is preceded by a comprehensive discussion on Syed Anwer’s life and his literary contributions. This study mainly involves the library research, and methods applied in this research are descriptive and analytical in nature.

This study is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a short biography of Syed Anwer Ali, his life and literary contributions. Subsequently, Section 3 provides an introduction of his *tafsīr* “*Qur’ān The fundamental law of human life*”. Lastly, Section 4 provides a comprehensive discussion on the general methodological patterns of this *tafsīr* followed by the conclusion.

A short biography of Syed Anwer Ali

Syed Anwer Ali belonged to a Syed Family in the progeny of Imam Ali Raza. One of his ancestors, namely Meer Ali Naqi migrated to Delhi (India) from Najaf (Iraq) . Syed Anwer Ali was born on 8th July 1928 in the *Nasirabad*, Ajmer district (India). Syed Anwer’s early education started in a



conventional style from a *Madrasah*. Later, he started his formal education from Muslim School *Nasirabad* that continued till 6th standard. He passed his SSC (10th standard) exams from Mission High school *Nasirabad* in 1945. Then he enrolled himself in Government College Ajmer and passed his first year exams (11th standard) in 1947.

Pakistan came into being on 14th August 1947 and he migrated to Pakistan along with his family and settled in Hyderabad city. After migration to Pakistan he passed his second year (12th standard) exam from government collage Hyderabad in 1948. Later, he got his Bachelor of Arts (B.A) degree in 1950 from the same college. After completing his bachelor's degree, he enrolled in Masters of Philosophy (MA) program in Karachi University and completed his Masters degree in 1952. He also completed his Bachelor of Law (LLB) degree from S.M.law college affiliated with Karachi University in 1954 and started practice as a Lawyer.⁴

Syed Anwer started his career in 1955 as a lawyer in Karachi and enrolled as a Pleader in 1956. Later, he qualified for high court advocate in 1958 and started working as Attorney of the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 1959. He was also enrolled as an Advocate, and thereafter also as an Advocate on Record of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Syed Anwer has also worked as Hon. Professor of Law, taking the LL.M Classes, in the S.M. Government Law College, Karachi.⁵ Syed

⁴ "A Brief Biography of Syed Anwer," accessed March 4,2017, <http://www.almazhar.com/english-books-syed-anwer-ali/index.php>.
Syed Anwer, *Unpublished autobiography*.

⁵ "A Brief Biography of Syed Anwer," accessed March 4,2017, <http://www.almazhar.com/english-books-syed-anwer-ali/index.php>.
Syed Anwer, *Unpublished autobiography*.



Anwer led a highly dynamic and active life and took his last breath on 12th *Shawal* 1437 H, 17th July 2016.

Publications /Contribution

He was a lawyer by profession but simultaneously he emerged as a renowned intellectual and writer having a peculiar focus on Islamic studies, Law and philosophy. He also had a strong appetite for poetry. Later, he also established a publishing house named "Syed Publishers".⁶

Syed Anwer's literary work initiated in 1962 as a writer. He has written eight books on different aspects and interpretations of Law. In contrast to his philosophical and religious contributions, he has written six books on philosophy and Islamic studies. Along with this he completed his Qur'anic commentary which is his most prominent literary contribution. This commentary constitutes 16 volumes and it took almost seventeen years in completion. These volumes were published on regular intervals with first volume published in 1982. In addition to his other literary contributions, he has also written two Poetry books. The detailed list of his literary contributions is given here in chronological order:

List of Publications

Books on law

1. Muslim Law Summarized (1961)

⁶ Anwer Ali, *Bootam*, 232.



2. Rent Laws in Pakistan (1963)
3. Election law in Pakistan (1965)
4. Anwer Ali's Laws of Pakistan (1967, four volumes published)
5. Banking Law in Pakistan (1968)
6. Law of Family Courts (1969)
7. Karachi Rent Restriction Act, 1953
8. West Pakistan Urban Rent Restriction Ordinance, 1959

Books on Islam and philosophy

1. Life—the Essence of Reality (1971)
2. Religion—the Science of Life (1974),
3. Islam –the Religion (1975)
4. Real Tragedy of the Human Life (1976)
5. Real Achievement of the Human Life (1979)
6. The Seal of Prophet hood (1975).
7. *Qur’ān* – The Fundamental of the Human Life (A Commentary of the Holy *Qur’ān*—in Sixteen Volumes (1982-1999)
8. *Al-Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence in Five Volumes (2011)
9. Sunnah - The Way of Quranic Life (1999)
10. *Qur’ān* - The Final Book of Guidance in two volumes (2012)



11. Prophet Muhammad – The Last Prophet of Allah in five volumes (2012)

12. *Qur’an* and Bible a Comparative Study (unpublished)

Udru and poetry books

1. Bootam (1974)
2. Khurshid (1975)

Tafsīr “Qur’ān The fundamental law of human life”

“*Qur’ān The fundamental law of human life*” is the 17 years hard work of Syed Answer Ali. The first volume of “*Qur’ān the fundamental law of human life*” was published in 1982. It was the preliminary edition that consisted of an introduction to the study of Qur’ān. Initially, Syed Anwer estimated that the commentary will have 10 volumes, which eventually ended up to 16 volumes. The complete commentary took nearly 17 years in completion and final volume got published in 1999 by Hamdard Foundation Karachi, Pakistan. This work is primarily inspired by Urdu and English commentaries written in 20th century.

The first volume of the commentary constitutes i) “a prolegomena to the study of Qur’ān by A.K Brohi, ii) Preface explaining the need, nature and the structure of *tafsīr*, iii) Table of contents and iv) Bibliography followed by A short intro to Qur’ānic studies.

Methodological Overview of Qur’ān The fundamental law of human life

By going through Syed Anwer Ali’s work, it appears that he adopts a particular methodology in “Qur’ān the Fundamental law of Human Life” that comprises the following components. In his interpretation, He has used several methods which include:

- (1) Initiating *tafsīr* of each *sūrah* with an introduction to its name and brief summary of its subject matter and its purpose of revelation.
- (2) Division of each *sūrah* into multiple sections with definitions of important words and detailed discussion on the salient features of each section.
- (3) Explanation of coherence among different *sūrahs* and sections in the Qur’ān.
- (4) Drafting headings and sub-headings to explain the *āyāt*.
- (5) Adhering to the principle “the Qur’ān interprets the Qur’ān”.
- (6) Using *aḥādīth* to explain the subject matter of the *āyah* concerned.
- (7) Citing biblical sources for the interpretation of the Qur’ānic *āyāt* of historical nature.
- (7) Identifying and interpreting the social and moral laws from different *āyāt*.
- (8) Discussion on *Fiqhī* issues in detail with the disagreement existing among jurists of Sunnite Schools of thought as well as implementations of these laws in different countries.
- (9) Discussion and comparison of two major camps of Muslim community,



i) *Sunnite*

and ii) *Shi'ite* regarding legal matters.

(10) citing modern scholars and researchers in interpretation of the Qur’ānic concepts.

Methodologically, Syed Anwer claims that he has used the conventional methodology of *Tafsīr (Tafsīr bil al-Mathūr)*. However, Analysis of this commentary reveals that he has not solely relied on the conventional method of *tafsīr* but he used a hybridized approach by aggregating conventional and modern methods. In Syed Anwer’s commentary, utilization of *Thematical method* is relatively more prominent rather than *analytical* method that is occasionally used for explanation/elaboration of certain issues.

The subsequent section provides a comprehensive discussion on general methodological patterns of “*Qur’ān the Fundamental law of Human Life*”.

General Methodology

Introduction of *Sūrah*

In the beginning of each *sūrah*, Syed Anwer provided brief introduction containing following elements:

1. Name of the *Sūrah*
2. Revelation/Place of the *Sūrah*

3. Background of the *Sūrah*

4. Subject matter of *Sūrah*.

Under each heading, important details are discussed by Syed Anwer Ali. Initially, the total number of sections, *āyāt* and letters in *sūrah*, are described. Then he further explains the views of different commentators regarding the total number of *āyāt* in different *sūrahs*. For instance, in the beginning of *sūrah al-Mai’dah*, he has mentioned the total number of *āyāt* as 123. Along with this, he explained the views of *Mufasirūn* and said, “generally the commentators count the verses of this chapter as 120” but Abdullah Yusuf Ali counted the total number in *sūrah al-Mā’idah* as 123 and Syed Anwer followed it by saying “since the entire Arabic text in this commentary has been taken from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, I have counted the total number of verses in this chapter as 123”.⁷

Name of *Sūrah*

Syed Anwer Ali comes up with the name of *sūrah* and its meaning. If *sūrah* has more than one name, it has also been mentioned. For instance, *sūrah al-Fātiḥa* has different names such as *al-Ruqāyah*, *al-Kanz*⁸ etc. Moreover, all *āyāt* in which name of *sūrah* has appeared, are also mentioned. For instance, he said “the word *Baqarah* also appears in verse 67 of this chapter which relates to an important event of the history of *Banī Isrā’īl*”.⁹

⁷ Anwer Ali, Vol 5, 257.

⁸ Ibid., Vol 2, 17.

⁹ Ibid., 45.

Revelation of Sūrah

Syed Anwer Ali also describes the place of revelation of *sūrah*, either its *Makkī* or *Madanī*, along with the revelation period of different *āyāt* in same *sūrah*. For example, some *āyāt* of *sūrah āl-Imrān* were revealed along the period of the Battle of *Badar*. Similarly, some of *āyāt* were revealed in the 9th year of *Hijrah*¹⁰. He has come up with the chronological order of *sūrah* as well. For example, he mentioned chronological order of *sūrah al-Anfāl* which is 88¹¹ likewise chronological order of *sūrah al-Tubah* is 113.¹²

Background of Sūrah

Syed Anwer Ali has also discussed the circumstances and background in which a particular *sūrah* was revealed. For instance, *sūrah al-Mai’dah* was revealed after the Treaty of *Hudabiah* when the city of Medina became a safe place to establish a Muslim society with Islamic norms and values. During that time, the believers were forbidden to follow the People of Book¹³. Similarly, In the background of *sūrah Yūsuf*, Syed Anwer Ali describes that when non-believers of Makkah asked The Prophet (S.A) about the reason of the migration of the *Banī Isrā’īl* from Syria to Egypt and they expected that Prophet (S.A) would not be able to give answer signifying that he is not a true Prophet. In these circumstances Allah has revealed this *sūrah Yūsuf*, not only to narrate the whole

¹⁰ Ibid., Vol 4, 49.

¹¹ Ibid., Vol 6, 399.

¹² Ibid., Vol 6, 498.

¹³ Ibid., Vol 5, 258.

story of the life and aim of Prophet Yūsuf but to mention the acts of Quraysh’s dealing with the Prophet Muhammad (S.A).¹⁴

Subject Matter of Sūrah

Syed Anwer Ali narrates the summary of whole *sūrah* with its subject matter, in which contents of *sūrah* are discussed in detailed. He describes the central idea or theme of each section in the whole *sūrah*. For instance, subject matter of *sūrah al-Baqarah* comprised of 8 paragraph which include: (1) address about the authenticity of the Qur’ān as the book of Allah, and qualities of believers, hypocrites and non-believers. (2) Creation of Adam (A.S) and status of mankind as a vicegerent. (3) favours of Allah to *Banī Isrā’īl* and their disobedient acts upon favours.(4) Submission of Ibrāhīm and Ismā’īl (A.S) to Allah, and rebuilding of Ka’ba and changing of Qibla from *Bait-ul-Maqdis* to *Ka`ba*.(5) commands regarding to *Qaṣāṣ* (retaliation), inheritance, fasting, supplications, *Hajj* etc.(6) principles regarding social and family life such as marriage, menstruation, purity, divorce, payment of dower, *Idda* and polygamy etc. (7) issues related to *Jihhad* and historical fight between Tālūt (Saul) and Gālūt (Goliath) and the last paragraph (8) deals with the merits of spending in the way of Allah and the principles of dealing between people.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., Vol 7, 207.

¹⁵ Ibid., Vol 2, 47.

Clarifying Difficult Terminologies

Throughout *tafsīr* history, clarifying difficult terminologies and words is a method which is often exercised by various commentators in their *tafsīr*. This helps readers to grasp the actual meaning and context of the *āyah*.

Tafsīr “*Qur’ān the Fundamental Law of Human Life*” also provides the meaning of difficult words and terminologies. In each section of each *sūrah* under separate heading, Syed Anwer first clarifies difficult terminologies before entering into the interpretation in detail.

For instance, Under the section 6 of *sūrah Yūnus*, Syed Anwer gives meanings of difficult words which appear in the *āyāt* 54 to 60 including: (1) Wronged stands for *zālāmāt* (2) Declare stands for *āsrrū*, which means concealing as well as manifesting. (3) Repentance stands for *nadāmah*. (4) Admonitions stands for *mo’īzah*. (5) Hearts stands for *ṣadūr*, which is the plural of *ṣadar*. (6) Hoard stands for *yajmā’ūn*.¹⁶

Syed Anwer Ali has used two methods to explain the difficult words or terminologies. The method which has been used in the above example may be found in the beginning of all sections of each *sūrah*. Whereas, second method was used while explaining the *āyāt* in details. However, no named description is provided in context of these two methods.

¹⁶ Ibid., Vol 7, P 54.

Division of Sūrah into Sections and Sub-sections

Syed Anwer divides each *sūrah* into multiple sections with the definitions of important words and detailed discussion on the salient features of each section. For instance, he has divided *sūrah al-Nīsā’* into 24 sections. In the beginning of each section he has mentioned the number of verses being explained in the section and central idea of section in two to three lines. First section of *sūrah al-Nīsā’* includes 10 verses from 1-10, with Arabic text and English translation, which refers to the unity of mankind, maintenance of person and property of orphans and marriage with the orphans girls.¹⁷

In each section, he has provided definition of difficult words, a centric view of each *āyah* and relation of given section to the pervious section. Similarly, relation of first section to the pervious *sūrah* and detailed discussion on the salient features of each *āyah* in this section, have also been discussed. In several sections, he comes up with different important topics such as relation of men and women, issues related to personal family law and political administration in Islam.

Utilization of Headings and Subheading

In each section he develops headings and sub-headings to explain the *āyāt*, from which readers can grasp the central idea of each *āyah* and the section.

¹⁷ Ibid., Vol 4, 400.

The following example from *āyah*. 2:178 will suffice to introduce Syed Anwer Ali’s style and methodology of interpretation of the Qur’anic laws.

Al-Baqarah 178 reads:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِصَاصُ فِي الْقَتْلِ ۖ الْحُرُّ بِالْحُرِّ وَالْعَبْدُ بِالْعَبْدِ وَالْأُنثَىٰ بِالْأُنثَىٰ ۚ فَمَنْ عُفِيَ لَهُ مِنْ
أَخِيهِ شَيْءٌ فَاتِّبَاعٌ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَأَدَاءٌ إِلَيْهِ بِإِحْسَانٍ ۗ ذَلِكَ تَخْفِيفٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ ۚ فَمَنِ اعْتَدَىٰ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فَلَهُ عَذَابٌ
أَلِيمٌ

“O you who have believed, prescribed for you is legal retribution for those murdered - the free for the free, the slave for the slave, and the female for the female. But whoever overlooks from his brother anything, then there should be a suitable follow-up and payment to him with good conduct. This is an alleviation from your Lord and a mercy. But whoever transgresses after that will have a painful punishment.” [2:178]

This *āyah* delivers two messages: 1) retribution and 2) alleviation in the case of murder. The *āyah* refers to the available tradition in Arabia where the killer was not killed, and an innocent person was killed in place of the perpetrator. Hence, this *āyah* delivers the command that only the killer who committed the crime should be killed, and not an innocent person. In addition, victim's family has the right to select what kind of retribution they want, whether execution or forgiveness to the killer. If victim's family opts to forgive the killer, then he has to pay the blood money (*diyah*).

In order to interpret this *āyah* (2:178) Syed Anwer Ali comes up with eight headings to elaborate the main theme of the *āyah*: 1) retaliation, 2) no discrimination, 3) punishment is to be inflicted by the state, 4) intentional murder, 5) blood wit, 6) unintentional murder, 7) rights of the legal heirs of the slain, and 8) assessment of the blood-wit.¹⁸

Development of heading and subheading is a significant contribution of Syed Anwer Ali. He takes inspiration from the methods of Urdu and Arabic *tafsīr*, however the methodology of utilization of heading and subheading has its own unique features. In different sections, he comes up with different important topics and these topics are subsequently divided into headings and subheadings. While discussing personal laws, he has also discussed personal laws of different Muslim countries which is a unique feature of this particular *tafsīr*.

Coherence among the *Sūrah* and *Āyāt* of the *Qur’ān*

Syed Anwer Ali has used the word “Sequence” instead of coherence among different *sūrah* and sections in the *Qur’ān*. An explicit word of “coherence” among *āyāt* in his *tafsīr*, is non-existent. In the beginning of each *sūrah* and section he used a heading of “Sequence” and explain their relation to each other. Such elaboration sequence facilitates readers in comprehending the topic under consideration.

¹⁸Ibid., 7-11.



For instance, In the section 2 of *sūrah al-Hijr*, which consists of *āyāt* 16-25, Syed Anwer Ali explains the relation between sections 1 (*āyāt* 1 to 15) and 2. He said, “section 1 concluded with an answer to the demand of a Sing by the non-believers”. Non- believers make different excuses because they were not ready to accept the truth. Similarly, *āyāt* of section 2 speaks about the different Sings of the Absolute Unity, Knowledge and Authority of Allah over the universe. Syed Anwer said that Different Sings are already available throughout the universe. In this context, there is no need to demand for more Sings in order to accept the Faith and demand by non-believers “is merely an excuse.”¹⁹

Such relationships result in coherence and facilitate readers in comprehending the topic under consideration in a broader perspective.

Conclusion

Syed Anwer was a well-versed and seasoned lawyer specializing in Islamic law and jurisprudence and philosophy. “*Qur’ān the fundamental law of Human Life*” is a voluminous *tafsīr* constituting

¹⁹ Ibid., Vol 8, 17.

Sixteen (16) volumes by Syed Anwer Ali. This *tafsīr* is written in English and it took nearly seventeen years (1982-1999) in completion. Methodologically, Syed Anwer has not solely relied on the conventional method of *tafsīr* but he used a hybridized approach by aggregating conventional and modern methods. Structurally, this *tafsīr* contains a detailed introduction of each surah with its subject matter and place/occasion of revelation. Each surah is further divided into sections (*Rakū’*), whereas, each section contains the original text followed by its interpretation. Subsequently, explanation of difficult words followed by subject matter of the section and detailed discussion is provided. Regarding the concept of coherence, Although Syed Anwer has adhered to this concept. However, in the explanation of relationships between *āyah* and surah, he has used a relatively less formal word *sequence*, instead of formal term *coherence*. Division of each Surah encompasses several headings and sub-headings, that is a prominent feature of Syed Anwer’s *tafsīr*.

Future research efforts need to be directed towards exploring the authenticity of quoted *āhādīth* and conducting an insightful and detailed comparative analysis of this *tafsīr* with the existing Qur’ānic commentaries.

Accordingly, the most important results of the research are as follows:

1. After dissecting the structure and analyzing the general methodological pattern of Syed Answer Ali commentary, we found that His type of exegesis is very unique and comprehensive.



2. Allama Syed Anwar Ali's method of interpretation depends on philosophy, reason and solving all societal issues, such as political, social, economic, and spiritual issues.
3. One of the most important features of the explanatory map on which he relied was: Context, as he preferred to use the word context over the word coherence.
4. His tafsīr contains a detailed introduction of each surah with its subject matter, which made his interpretation serve the thematic tafsir.
5. When he wanted to explain the verse of retribution, for example, he used eight points in its interpretation, as follows: interpret this āyah (2:178) Syed Anwer Ali comes up with eight headings to elaborate the main theme of the āyah: 1) retaliation, 2) no discrimination, 3) punishment is to be inflicted by the state, 4) intentional murder, 5) blood wit, 6) unintentional murder, 7) rights of the legal heirs of the slain, and 8) assessment of the blood-wit. This is what makes his interpretation distinct and unique.

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