

## An Assessment of the Distinction Between *Ishārī Tafṣīr* and *Taṣawwufī Tafṣīr*

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### Abstract

This study examines *ishārī tafṣīr*, a contested concept in the *tafṣīr* literature, with regard to its meaning and content. It analyzes the effects of the differing usages of the constituent term *ishārah* across various Islamic disciplines on the definition of *ishārī tafṣīr*. The study has established that conflating these different usages under a single compound term has resulted in conceptual ambiguity regarding the scope and nature of *ishārī tafṣīr*. To resolve this ambiguity, interpretations commonly classified as *ishārī tafṣīr* are examined and differentiated according to their defining characteristics, and a terminological and definitional proposal is put forward. Foregrounding the juridical usage of *ishārah*, the study argues that interpretations deriving indirect meanings from the lexical or semantic indications of the Qurʾānic text, whose connection with the text can be established, should properly be designated as *ishārī tafṣīr*. By contrast, Sufi explanations distinguished by their source of knowledge, content, terminology, and pedagogical orientation are more appropriately classified as *taṣawwufī tafṣīr*. The study further notes that some Sufi interpretations that establish a clear link with the text may be treated as an intermediate category designated as “*taṣawwufī-ishārī tafṣīr*.” Methodologically, data gathered through a literature review were

analyzed by means of content analysis; the topic was addressed primarily within a theoretical framework and supported by examples. It has been concluded that the proposed distinction will contribute to a more consistent and sound evaluation of Qur'ānic interpretations.

**Keywords:** *ishārī tafsīr*; *taṣawwufī tafsīr*; Qur'ānic exegesis; Sufism; *ishārah*

## Introduction

In works on the history of Qur'ānic exegesis, it is observed that interpretations produced from the period of revelation up to the present have been categorized in various ways. Alongside the overarching distinction between *dirāyah*-based *tafsīr*, which privileges rational reasoning, and *riwāyah*-based *tafsīr*, which is grounded in transmitted reports, exegetical works have also been classified by taking into account factors such as the exegetes' sectarian affiliations, ideological orientations, scholarly disciplines, and approaches to the Qur'ānic verses. Accordingly, *tafsīrs* have been described using designations such as Mu'tazilī, Shī'ī, juristic, philosophical, mystical (*taṣawwufī*), linguistic, sociological, and scientific. One such designation is "*ishārī tafsīr*."

*Ishārī tafsīr* is one of the most extensively discussed issues in the discipline of Qur'ānic exegesis. This phenomenon—variously referred to as *ishārī* interpretation, *ishārī ta'wīl*, *taṣawwufī tafsīr*, or Sufī *tafsīr*—lacks consensus both regarding its proper designation and the scope it is understood to denote. This ambiguity has led to divergent evaluations of the concept. In some cases, such interpretations have even been subsumed under the category of *bāṭinī* (esoteric) interpretation. In fact, *ishārī tafsīr* is clearly distinguished from such approaches in that it does not deny the outward meaning of the Qur'ānic text. Another common misconception is the assumption that

*ishārī tafsīr* is exclusive to Sufi scholars and that all such interpretations are based on unveiling (*kashf*) or inspiration (*ilhām*). However, Sufi exegetical works are not composed solely of insights derived from unveiling; they also contain interpretations transmitted from earlier authorities, produced through rational inference, or obtained by means of analogical consideration. As a result, a wide range of opinions—both in favor of and opposed to *ishārī tafsīr*—has emerged. Among the factors underlying these divergent evaluations is the fact that the concept of *ishārah* within the compound term *ishārī tafsīr* has been employed in different ways across distinct disciplines—most notably rationally grounded jurisprudence (*fiqh*) on the one hand, and experientially grounded mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) on the other.

The use of the term *ishārah* with different meanings in both jurisprudence and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), together with its varied usages within Sufi discourse itself, has directly shaped modern definitions of *ishārī tafsīr* and given rise to conceptual confusion. The present study addresses this issue and seeks to clarify the definition of *ishārī tafsīr* in order to reduce the ambiguity observed in scholarly discussions and assessments. By foregrounding the use of *ishārah* in jurisprudence, it will argue that *ishārī tafsīr* constitutes a method of inference (*istinbāt*) whereby meanings beyond the immediately apprehended sense of the Qur’anic text are derived from its lexical or logical indications. By contrast, the study will emphasize that the distinguishing character of Sufi interpretations—often subsumed under *ishārī tafsīr*—does not lie solely in the source of their knowledge (*kashf/ilhām*), but also in their embeddedness in Sufi culture, terminology, and pedagogical aims. For this reason, the designation “*taṣawwufī tafsīr*” will be proposed as a more precise term for such interpretations. This distinction is intended to differentiate between interpretations that have hitherto been

evaluated under a single label, thereby providing a sounder basis for more consistent assessment.

In this study, the explanations and definitions articulated around the concept of *ishārah* have synthesized together through a literature review and examined by means of content analysis. Views advanced on the same concept across different disciplines have been compared and the distinctions between them highlighted. As an interdisciplinary study centered on *tafsīr*, this article approaches the subject primarily within a theoretical framework, supported by illustrative examples.

A considerable number of theses, books, and articles have been written on *ishārī tafsīr*, addressing a wide range of issues such as its definition, characteristics, scope, criteria of acceptability, and scholarly value, as well as the positions of those who oppose it and the arguments they advance. Several of these works are referred to throughout the present study. However, no independent research has been found that articulates the distinction proposed here within the same conceptual framework. Although a limited number of studies employ the term *ishārī tafsīr* by foregrounding the juristic usage of the concept of *ishārah* and treat Sufi interpretations as a separate category, no study has been encountered that is specifically devoted to the conceptual ambiguity inherent in the definition of *ishārī tafsīr*, or that systematically examines these different types of interpretation under distinct headings based on their sources of knowledge, methods of inference, and conceptual content.

The article also engages with these previous distinctions and explicitly indicates the points at which the classification and terminology proposed here diverge from earlier approaches. At this point, the lexical meaning of the concept of *ishārah*—which lies at the

heart of the debates on *ishārī tafsīr*—and its usage across different scholarly disciplines will be examined.

### **The Lexical and Technical Meanings of the Term *Ishārah***

The word *ishārah*, a verbal noun (*maṣdar*) derived from the *ifʿāl* form of the Arabic root sh-w-r,<sup>1</sup> lexically means a sign (*ʿalāmah*), an allusion (*īmāʿ*), or a symbolic hint (*ramz*). It refers to pointing something out by means of the hand, fingers, head, eyes, or eyebrows,<sup>2</sup> as well as conveying a meaning through indirect, implicit, or allusive speech.<sup>3</sup> *Ishārah* has been regarded as an equivalent to speech in the comprehension of meaning; indeed, word (*lafz*) and sign are viewed as two partners, with the sign being accepted as the most eloquent assistant and interpreter of the word. It is further stated that *ishārah*, which consists of expressing extensive meaning with few words, often takes the place of the word and eliminates the need for it to be written down.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ebū ʿAbdirrahmān al-Farāhīdī al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad, *Kitāb Al-ʿAyn*, ed. Hindāwī, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2003), 2:365; Ebū al-Qāsim Jārullāh Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās Al-Balāghah*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ʿUyūn al-Sūd (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998), 1:524-525.

<sup>2</sup> Ismāʿīl b. Ḥammād al-Jawharī, *Tāj Al-Lughah Wa-Şihāḥ al-ʿArabiyyah*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Ghafūr ʿAṭṭār (Dār al-ʿIlm li-al-Malāyīn, 1990), 2:704-705; Ebū'l-Faḍl Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān Al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Şādīr, n.d.), 4:436-437; Sayyid Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Zabīdī, *Tāj Al-ʿArūs Min Jawāhir al-Qāmūs*, ed. Commission (al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2001), 12:257-258.

<sup>3</sup> Süleyman Uludağ, “İşârî Tefsîr [Allusive Exegesis],” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (TDV Publications, 2001), 23:23:424.

<sup>4</sup> Ebū ʿUthmān ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiz, *Al-Bayān Wa-al-Tabayn*, ed.

Beyond its lexical meaning, the term *ishārah* has historically been employed as a technical term in various ways across different disciplines. In jurisprudence, for example, when enumerating the modes by which the wording of revealed texts signifies meanings, one of these modes is identified as *dalālat al-ishārah* (signification through implication). By this are meant meanings that are not immediately apparent from the outward sense of the wording (*lafz*) and grammatical form (*sīgha*) but are indirectly inferred from them through linguistic and logical considerations.<sup>5</sup> Al-Jurjānī likewise defines *ishārah* as “that which is established by the form itself, without the wording being directed toward it or uttered for its sake,” thereby pointing to meanings derived from the arrangement and grammatical form of speech. He defines “the indication of the text” (*ishārat al-naṣṣ*) as “acting upon a meaning that the text was not directed toward, nor intended in a lexical sense, yet which is established by the composition (*naẓm*) of the wording,” thus recording the technical usage of the term in

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‘Abdüsselām Muḥammed (Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1998), 1:78; Ebū al-Baqā’ Ayyūb b. Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī al-Kafawī, *Al-Kullīyyāt*, ed. by ‘Adnān Darwīsh, Muḥammad al-Miṣrī (Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1998), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Ebū Bakr Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ebī Sahl al-Sarakhsī, *Uṣūl Al-Sarakhsī* (Lujnat Ihya’ al-Ma’ārif al-Nu’māniyya, n.d.), 1:236; Imām al-Ghazālī, *El-Mustasfa: İslam Hukukunda Deliller ve Yorum Metodolojisi* [*al-Mustasfa: Methodology of Evidence and Interpretation in Islamic Law*], trans. H. Yunus Apaydın (Rey Yayıncılık, 1994), 2:163-164; Ali Bardakoğlu, “Delâlet [Signification],” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (TDV Publications, 1994), 9:9:121; Nâsi Aslan and Derviş Dokgöz, “Fıkıh Usulündeki ‘İşaretin Delaleti’ İle İşârî Tefsirlerdeki ‘Ayetin İşareti’Nin Karşılaştırılması [Comparison of ‘Signification of the Sign’ in Islamic Jurisprudence and ‘Sign of the Verse’ in Allusive Exegesis],” *Usûl: İslam Araştırmaları*, no. 36 (2021): 31–32.

jurisprudence.<sup>6</sup> As is evident, in *fiqh* the term is used to denote indirect meanings that are not directly derived from the apparent sense of the text but are reached by drawing on the indications of the wording. What is at stake here is a process of meaning derivation (*istinbāt*) in which the text serves as the point of departure and rational inference (*dīrāyah*) is also at work.

Another discipline in which the term *ishārah* is employed in a technical sense is *taşawwuf*. In the Sufi usage of the term *ishārah*, two points stand out: They use this term either to emphasize the subtlety (*laţāfah*) of the truths bestowed upon them, or to characterize the language they employ when conveying such knowledge. In other words, they used this term to express the distinctive character of both how they received knowledge and how they conveyed it. Indeed, al-Kalābādhī (d. 380AH/990AD) observed that the contemplations (*mushāhadāt*) of the heart and the unveilings (*mukāshafāt*) of inner secrets cannot be fully expressed in words, and can only be known through spiritual states; he therefore called this state, which he regarded as peculiar to the Sufis, the “science of *ishārah*.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, al-Sarrāj (d. 378AH/988AD) defined *ishārah* as “that which, owing to the subtlety of its meaning, is not articulated by the speaker but is instead concealed.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, a meaning is present, yet it cannot be directly expressed and is disclosed only through *ishārah* (allusion). Later

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī, *Muḥam al-Taʿrīfāt* (Dār al-Fāḍila, 2011), 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ebū Bakr Muḥammad b. Işhāq al-Bukhārī al-Kalābādhī, *Al-Taʿarruf Li-Madhab Ahl al-Taşawwuf* (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1434), 200. In another passage of his work, Kalābādhī is seen to have referred to *taşawwuf* as *ʿulūm al-ishārah* al-Kalābādhī, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Ebū Naşr al-Ṭūsī al-Sarrāj, *Al-Lumaʿ* (Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1960), 414.

definitions that synthesize these early Sufi usages<sup>9</sup> describe *ishārah* as “communicating one’s intention to another without the mediation of speech; a meaning that cannot be expressed in words and is so hidden that it can be grasped only through knowledge and intuition obtained by such means as inspiration and unveiling; and the implicit indication of one’s intent regarding whether something ought or ought not to be done.”<sup>10</sup> These formulations likewise reflect both aspects of the term *ishārah* as employed by the Sufis.

The use of *ishārah* in conjunction with *tafsīr* as a technical term is a development of the modern period. In the classical period, Sufis held that the meanings that arose (*wārid*) during their deep contemplation (*murāqabah*) of the Qur’ān could not be readily assimilated by everyone; to avoid leading people into misunderstanding, they therefore chose to communicate such knowledge through allusive language, symbols, and indications, and accordingly called these interpretations not *tafsīr* but *ishārah*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For further examples of the use of the term *ishārah* by Sufis in comparable senses, see al-Sarrāj, 37, 51, 115, 147, 168, 239, 294, 296; Ebū ‘Abdillāh Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥasan al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Bayān Al-Farq Bayna al-Ṣadr Wa-al-Qalb Wa-al-Fu’ād Wa-al-Lubb* (Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, 2009), 33; Muhammed b. Ali b. Atıyye Ebû Tâlib el-Mekkî, *Kütü’l-Kulûb Fî Mu’âmeleti’l-Mahbûb ve Vasfî Tarîkı’l-Mürîd İlâ Makâmi’t-Tevhîd*, ed. Mahmûd İbrâhîm Muhammed er-Radvânî (Dâru’t-Türâs, 2001), 1:358, 453..

<sup>10</sup> Süleyman Uludağ, *Tasavvuf Terimleri Sözlüğü [Dictionary of Sufi Terms]* (Marifet Yayınları, 1995), 282; Süleyman Uludağ, *İbn Arabî*, 3rd ed. (TDV Yayınları, 2015), 424.

<sup>11</sup> Süleyman Ateş, *İşârî Tefsîr Okulu [The School of Allusive Exegesis]* (Ankara University Faculty of Theology Publications, 1974), 19; İsmail Cerrahoğlu,

Scholars such as al-Zarkashī (d. 794AH/1392AD) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911AH/1505AD) likewise reported that the Sufis' interpretations were not to be counted as *tafsīr*, but rather their statements concerning the Qur'ān consisted solely of the spiritual states they experienced during recitation and the meanings that were disclosed to them at those moments.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Sufis designated their interpretations of the verses not as *tafsīr* but as *ishārah* has been interpreted to mean that they did not prioritize *ishārah* over *tafsīr*, nor did they regard it as its rival or

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*Tefsir Tarihi [History of Exegesis]* (Fecr Yayınları, 1996), 2:11; Fethi Ahmet Polat, "İşârî Tefsirin Kabul Şartları Çerçevesinde 'Fihî Mâ Fih' Te Yer Alan Kur'ân Yorumlarının Kiriği [Critique of Qur'anic Interpretations in 'Fihî Ma Fih' within the Framework of Acceptance Conditions of Allusive Exegesis]," *Mevlâna ve Mevlevîlik Sempozyumu I* (2007): 364; Mahmut Ay, "İşârî Tefsirde Yöntem Meselesi [The Problem of Method in Allusive Exegesis]," *İstanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, no. 26 (2012): 62; Mehmet Zeki Süslü, "Tasavvufî Tefsir Metodu ve Bâtunî Te'vîl Geleneğiyle Mukayesesi [The Method of Sufi Exegesis and Its Comparison with the Tradition of Batini Interpretation]" (Ph.D. Thesis, Süleyman Demirel University, 2017), 15; Kadir Özköse, "Tasavvuf Kültüründe Bâtın ve Bâtunî/Ledünnî Bilgi Kavramlarının Referans Çerçevesi [The Reference Frame of the Concepts of Batın and Batini/Ledunni Knowledge in Sufi Culture]," 2018, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Abdillāh al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 1983), 2:170-171; Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muştafā Dīb al-Bughā (Dār al-Muştafā, 2008), 2:1218-1221. Dihlawī, a scholar of Sufi inclination, also expressed similar views Walī Allāh Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Dihlawī, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr Fī Uşūl al-Tafsīr*, trans. Muḥammad Anwar al-Badakhshānī (Bayt al-'İlm, 2006), 102.

alternative. In doing so, they also demonstrated that their interpretations were not produced according to the methodological rules of *tafsīr* and, consequently, did not claim to represent a definitive or objective meaning. Indeed, they did not employ the compound term “*ishārī tafsīr*”; rather, by presenting their interpretations through such expressions as “*ishārah*” or “*ishārī* meaning,” they sought to indicate that these were not final, but rather that the verse in question alluded to these meanings and signified them indirectly.<sup>13</sup> These explanations hold true when *tafsīr* is employed as a technical term. However, in this article, when the expressions “*ishārī tafsīr*” or “Sufi *tafsīr*” are used, the term *tafsīr* will be employed in its lexical sense of explication, clarification, and exposition.

### ***Ishārī Tafsīr***

It is known that the first scholar to employ the compound term *ishārī tafsīr* in the modern period and to propose a definition of it was al-Zarqānī (d. 1367/1948). He defined *ishārī tafsīr* as “interpreting (*taʾwīl*) the Qurʾān, on account of a hidden indication perceived by those on the Sufi path (*sulūk*) and *taṣawwuf*, with a meaning beyond its apparent sense (*zāhir*), yet one that can be reconciled with that apparent sense.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ay, “İşarî Tefsirde Yöntem Meselesi,” 63.

<sup>14</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil Al-‘Irḫān Fī ‘Ulūm al-Qurʾān*, ed. Fawwāz Aḥmad Zumarī (Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990), 2:66. In the early modern period, prior to al-Zurqānī, al-Ālūsī articulated a similar definition under the designation of “*taʾwīl*.” He defined *taʾwīl* as sacred indications and sublime knowledges that are unveiled to spiritual wayfarers from beneath the veils of expressions and that descend upon the hearts of the gnostics from the clouds of the unseen Ebū’l-Faḍl Shihābuddīn al-Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ Al-Maʾānī Fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-‘Azīm Wa-al-Sab‘ al-Mathānī*, ed. ‘Alī ‘Abd

In the period following al-Zarqānī, it is observed that explanations presented under the heading of *ishārī tafsīr* continued within a similar framework. This type of *tafsīr* has been described as being based not on the Sufi's mere intellectual opinions, but on inspirations and indications that do not come to mind at first but arise in the heart according to the spiritual rank attained through ascetic practice (*riyāḍah*) and spiritual struggle (*mujāhadah*).<sup>15</sup> Although the emphasis placed in these definitions on Sufis and their modes of receiving knowledge is valuable for clarifying the definition, the similarity in name nonetheless gives rise to confusion, as the term evokes the *ishārah* of jurisprudence.

In this definition, the restriction of *ishārī tafsīr* to the people of *taşawwuf*, together with the statement that it remains compatible with the outward sense, appears to be intended to underscore the legitimacy of Sufi interpretations. However, when one examines these interpretations, it becomes evident that in a significant number of cases a clear connection with the outward sense of the text cannot be established. For example, the interpretation of the expression "...the

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al-Bārī 'Atiyya (Dār al-Kutub al-İlmiyya, 1994), 1:6; Ay, "İşarî Tefsirde Yöntem Meselesi," 61.

<sup>15</sup> Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhababī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa-al-Mufasssīrūn* (Maktabat Wahbah, n.d.), 2:261; Şubḥī Şālīḥ, *Mabāḥith Fī 'Ulūm Al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-İlm li-al-Melāyīn, 1977), 296; Muḥammad 'Alī al-Şabūnī, *Al-Tibyān Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Tehran: Dār İhsān, 2003), 171; Cerrahoğlu, *Tefsir Tarihi*, 2:9; Ateş, *İşarî Tefsir Okulu*, 19; Özköse, "Tasavvuf Kültüründe Bâtn ve Bâtinî/Ledünnî Bilgi Kavramlarının Referans Çerçevesi," 68; İsmail Çalışkan, "Tefsir ve Tasavvuf: Tasavvufî-İşârî Tefsir [Exegesis and Sufism: Sufi-Allusive Exegesis]," in *Sosyal Bilimlerde Disiplinlerarası Çalışmanın İmkânı: Tasavvuf Örneği* (Ankara University Publications, 2022), 87.

human devils...” in Q. 6:112 as referring to “the soul that commands evil (*al-naḥs al-ammārah*)”<sup>16</sup> is a case in point. Likewise, interpreting the command of his Lord to Moses (as), who came to meet Him, “...take off your sandals...” (Q. 20:12), as meaning that the two sandals signify “nature (*tabʿ*) and the self (*naḥs*)” which are to be abandoned,<sup>17</sup> or as symbolizing “this world and the Hereafter” meaning that “if you wish to enter Our presence, empty your heart of both the world and the Hereafter”<sup>18</sup> or even as meaning “abandon the two premises from which the proof is composed... you are now in the valley of gnosis (*maʿrifah*)”<sup>19</sup> may all be counted among interpretations whose link to the outward sense is tenuous. Similarly, the verse “So look at the traces of God’s mercy, how He revives the earth after its death” (Q. 30:50), which occurs in a context enumerating the signs of God’s power and mercy, is interpreted as “the hearts coming to life through remembrance (*dhikr*)”<sup>20</sup> a *taʿwīl* that is likewise disconnected from the context.

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<sup>16</sup> Aḥmad b. ‘Umar b. Muḥammad Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad ‘Alā’ al-Dawlah Simnānī, *Al-Taʿwīlāt al-Najmiyya*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2009), 2:384; Īsmāʿīl Ḥaqqī al-Bursevī, *Rūḥ Al-Bayān Fī Tafṣīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2018), 3:93; 4:292.

<sup>17</sup> al-Bursevī, *Rūḥ Al-Bayān*, 1:215.

<sup>18</sup> Ebū’l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn ‘Ajība, *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd Fī Tafṣīr al-Qurʾān al-Majīd*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Abdullāh al-Qurashī Raslān (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1999), 3:377, 379.

<sup>19</sup> al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī*, 8:522.

<sup>20</sup> Ebū Muḥammad Sahl b. ‘Abdillāh al-Tustarī, *Tafṣīr Al-Qurʾān al-‘Aẓīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥaram li-al-Turāth, 2004), 219; Ebū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq Al-Tafṣīr*, ed. Sayyid ‘Imrān (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), 2:127-128. For similar interpretations, see also

In the same vein, the verse “*They ask you about wine and gambling; say: in them is great sin*” (Q. 2:219) is interpreted such that “wine” signifies the intellect’s intoxication upon beholding the spiritual lights issuing from the eternal Presence, “gambling” denotes a person’s being content with God alone and independent of all else, and “the sin in them” refers to the great difficulty of attaining such states<sup>21</sup>—this too belongs to the same category. Likewise, the term “*the menstruating woman*” in the verse prohibiting approaching menstruating women (Q. 2:222) is interpreted as “the soul immersed in the impurity of heedlessness and clad in the filth of love for the world.”<sup>22</sup> This too is among those interpretations whose connection to the outward meaning of the text is difficult to establish. Doubtless, in the Sufi’s inner world, these explanations have a connection with the verse. However, when the matter is approached from the standpoint of method and content, such interpretations must be subjected to a classification based on the connection they establish with the text.

Yunus Emre Gördük, known for his studies in the field of *ishārī tafsīr*, has recently defined *ishārī tafsīr* in his comprehensive work on the subject as follows: “It is the interpretation/exegesis of the Qur’ān, often by means of divine inspiration and a Lordly opening (*fath rabbānī*), by

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Ebū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, *Latā’if Al-Ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī (al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 2000), 3:124; al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ Al-Ma‘ānī*, 7:414.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn ‘Ajība, *Al-Bahr al-Madīd*, 1:246-247.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn ‘Ajība, 1/253. For examples of Ibn ‘Ajība’s interpretations that are not consistent with the apparent (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the text, see also Mahmut Ay, “Ahmed b. Acıbe ve İṣârî Tefsir Açısından ‘El-Bahru’l-Medîd’ [Ahmed b. Ajiba and ‘al-Bahr al-Madid’ in Terms of Allusive Exegesis]” (Ph.D. Thesis, Marmara University, 2010), 182–87.

verifying scholars (*muḥaqqiq ʿulamāʾ*), gnostics (*ʿarifūn*), and some people of spiritual wayfaring (*sulūk*), who have grasped the Qurʾān through deep reflection and contemplation, whereby they interpret the verses—on the condition that they do not, in general, contradict the outward sense of the Qurʾān—differently from their apparent meanings, owing to certain verbal, non-verbal, or spiritual indications.”<sup>23</sup> In this definition, which claims to take into account all the points emphasized in the relevant sources, it is indeed possible to discern the traces of the explanations articulated around the concept of *ishārah* since the earliest periods, for the author offers a definition that encompasses both the usages in jurisprudence and Sufism. By stating that such interpretations may be produced by “verifying scholars, gnostics, and some people of spiritual wayfaring,” he does not extend *ishārī tafsīr* to all Sufis, nor does he regard it as a form of interpretation exclusive to them alone.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, by stating that it is carried out “often by means of divine inspiration and a Lordly opening,” he both draws attention to the Sufi dimension of this kind of interpretation and, by means of the qualifier “often,” prevents it from being reduced solely to inspiration and unveiling. By stating that it arises from “certain verbal, non-verbal, or spiritual indications,” he also highlights both its juristic and Sufi dimensions. This is precisely the central issue we wish to focus on in this article: the broad scope of the concept of *ishārah*, its employment with different meanings across different disciplines, and the inclusion of each of these meanings—to varying degrees—in the definition of “*ishārī tafsīr*” constitute the basis

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<sup>23</sup> Yunus Emre Gördük, *İslam Geleneğinde İşârî Tefsir [Allusive Exegesis in Islamic Tradition]* (Istanbul: Kitâbi Yaymevi, 2023), 73.

<sup>24</sup> For the author’s remarks in this regard, see also Gördük, *İslam Geleneğinde*, 74.

of the confusion. Therefore, a nomenclature and definition that distinguishes these usages from one another is indispensable.

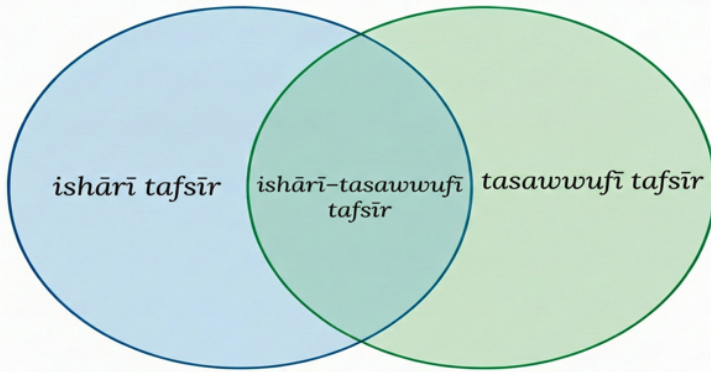
At this point, we propose—as Gördük also notes, given that examples of *ishārī tafsīr* can be found even before the formative period of Sufism<sup>25</sup>—that, by foregrounding the use of the concept in jurisprudence, “*ishārī tafsīr*” be defined as “a mode of interpretation that brings out the various dimensions to which the verses point, by way of either their wording or their meaning, beyond the directly expressed sense of the Qur’anic text,” and that the term be employed in a manner that encompasses all interpretations falling within this framework. In this approach, the connection with the verse may at times arise through a process of reflection that takes the verse as its starting point; at other times, it may emerge through the linking of a piece of knowledge that the Sufi has obtained by spiritual means with the verse. What is essential, however, is that the meaning thus reached can be connected to the verse. In this regard, it is of no consequence whether the interpreter belongs to the people of *taşawwuf*, whether the interpretation has been obtained by spiritual means, or whether it contains elements of Sufi culture. Accordingly, the meanings articulated by the people of *taşawwuf*—those they claim arise within them according to their spiritual ranks during their recitation or reflection upon the verses—should, if no connection with the text can be established, be designated not as “*ishārī*” but solely as “*taşawwufî*.” Nevertheless, some of these meanings can be connected to the text, and these may be designated as “*taşawwufî-ishārī tafsīr*.”

Within this framework we have set forth, interpretations that contain Sufi elements or are claimed to rest on unveiling but whose connection with the text cannot be established may be regarded as a

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<sup>25</sup> Gördük, *İslam Geleneginde*, 74.

separate category under the heading of “*taṣawwufī tafsīr*,” while “*ishārī tafsīr*” constitutes a distinct category, and an intermediate category — the intersection of these two — may be spoken of as “*taṣawwufī-ishārī tafsīr*” (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Venn diagram showing the relationship between *ishārī* and *taṣawwufī* tafsīr.

In making this classification, our aim is not to pass value judgments, but rather to draw attention to the qualitative differences among various types of interpretation and to name them as accurately as possible in accordance with their distinctive characteristics, thereby reducing the confusion that may arise in the minds of readers and providing a basis for sounder evaluations. Otherwise, when one speaks of *ishārī tafsīr*, it remains unclear whether what is meant is an interpretation arising from the indication of the text itself, or one issuing from the people of *taṣawwuf*—containing Sufi elements or resting on unveiling. Similarly, when we describe the interpretations of the people of *taṣawwuf* as “*ishārī*,” it likewise remains unclear—owing to the different meanings they attach to the concept of *ishārah*—

whether this designation emphasizes the source of the interpretation or their distinctive mode of expression. Therefore, the use of accurate terminology holds an important place both in conveying what we mean and, ultimately, in being properly understood.

Now, let us show through examples that *ishārī tafsīr* is not an activity exclusive to Sufis, and that interpretations of this kind can be found in almost every *tafsīr* classified within the *dirāyah* category. For example, in *al-Kashshāf*, counted among the leading works of *dirāyah tafsīr*, the expression in Q. 46:15 which states that the period of pregnancy and weaning totals thirty months<sup>26</sup> has been taken to indicate that the minimum duration of pregnancy is six months. Such information does not appear in the wording itself. Al-Zamakhsharī arrives at this conclusion by citing the verse “*Mothers shall suckle their children for two complete years for those who wish to complete the nursing*” (Q. 2:233).<sup>27</sup> Likewise, al-Rāzī, one of the foremost figures of *dirāyah tafsīr*, derives from the continuation of the verse permitting those who fast to have sexual relations with their spouses during the nights of fasting—namely, “...eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct from the black thread...” (Q. 2:187)—the conclusion that the view holding that the fast of one who reaches dawn in a state of major ritual impurity (*junub*) is invalid is itself incorrect. This is because the verse permits eating,

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<sup>26</sup> The relevant part of the verse reads: ... وَحَمَلُهُمْ وَفِصَالُهُمْ ثَلَاثُونَ شَهْرًا ...

<sup>27</sup> Ebū al-Qāsim Jārullāh Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl Wa-‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl Fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl*, ed. ‘Adīl Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd and ‘Alī Muḥammed Mu‘avviḍ (Maktabat al-‘Ubaykān, 1998), 5:499. For similar interpretations, see also Ebū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt Ahl Al-Sunnah: Tafsīr al-Māturīdī*, ed. Majdī Bāsallūm (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 9:245-246.

drinking, and sexual intercourse until the break of dawn. If a person is allowed to engage in sexual intercourse until dawn, then, when dawn arrives, he will inevitably be in a state of major ritual impurity.<sup>28</sup> As is evident, although the verse does not state this literally, the boundary drawn by the text makes it possible to deduce such a meaning. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456AH/1064AD), known for the importance he attached to the outward sense of the Qur'ānic verses, may also be cited as a fine example of this matter: he derived from the phrase "...do not even say 'uff' to them..." in Q. 17:23, which addresses how one should treat one's parents, the ruling that striking or killing one's parents is forbidden. For no such wording appears in the verse itself. The verse commands kindness toward one's parents while forbidding the utterance of "uff," which is a lesser matter than striking or killing.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, if a lesser form of harm is prohibited, the more serious ones are all the more prohibited. The text does not say "do not strike them," but such a meaning is derived from the indication of the verse.

Interpretations in which the Sufis ground knowledge they claim to have acquired through unveiling or inspiration in the indications of the verses fall within the category we have designated as "*taṣawwufi-ishārī tafsīr*." For example, if we take into account Ibn al-

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<sup>28</sup> Ebū 'Abdillāh Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ Al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 5:119. For similar interpretations, see also Ebū Bakr Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Rāzī al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām Al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad al-Šādiq Qamḥāwī (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1992), 1:288.

<sup>29</sup> Ebū Muḥammad 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. Sa'īd Ibn Ḥazm, *Al-Iḥkām Fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām*, ed. Aḥmed Muḥammad Shākir (Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, n.d.), 7:56-57. For similar interpretations, see also Muḥammad b. Yūsuf b. 'Alī b. Yūsuf Abū Ḥayyān, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ Fī al-Tafsīr*, ed. Šidqī Muḥammad Jamīl (Dār al-Fikr, 2010), 7:37.

‘Arabī’s statements that *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* was bestowed upon him through divine inspiration,<sup>30</sup> his explanations concerning the differences between the verses of *Sūrat al-Kahf* in which the expression “*in shā’ Allāh*” occurs may be regarded as belonging to the category of *taşawwufi-ishārī tafsīr*, insofar as they take into account the arrangement (*tartīb*) of the text. He states that in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, verses 23-24, God says: *وَلَا تَقُولَنَّ لِشَيْءٍ إِنِّي فَاعِلٌ ذَٰلِكَ غَدًا* “*Do not say of anything, ‘I will do that tomorrow,’ unless Allah wills,*” and that here the expression “*in shā’ Allāh*” is deferred—by means of the exception particle—to a position after the action has been mentioned, which he describes as a Muḥammadan act. In contrast, in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, verse 69, it is reported that Moses (as) says: *قَالَ سَتَجِدُنِي إِِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ صَابِرًا وَلَا أَعْصِي لَكَ أَمْرًا* “*You will find me, if Allah wills, patient, and I will not disobey you in any matter,*” and Ibn al-‘Arabī draws attention to the fact that here “*in shā’ Allāh*” precedes the verb.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī states, in the experiential account he relates at the beginning of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, that this work was bestowed upon him through divine inspiration. For the details of this experience, see Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, directed by Aḥmad Shamsuddīn (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1999), 1:79-80; Claude Addas, *İbn Arabi -Kıbrıt-i Ahmer’in Peşinde- [Quest for the Red Sulpher The Life of Ibn ‘Arabī]*, trans. Atila Ataman (Gelenek Yayıncılık, 2004), 210–11; Michel Chodkiewicz, *Sahilsiz Bir Umman [An Ocean Without Shore]*, trans. Atila Ataman (İstanbul: Gelenek Yayıncılık, 2003), 50–52; Mahmud Erol Kılıç, “El-Fütûhâtü’l-Mekkiyye,” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (TDV Publications, 1996), 13:13:251; M. Mustafa Çakmakhoğlu, *İbn Arabî’de Ma’rifetin İfadesi [Expression of Gnosis in Ibn ‘Arabī]* (İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2007), 311–14; Hasan İslam Sak, *İbnü’l-Arabî’nin Kur’an İlimlerine Yaklaşımı -El-Fütûhatü’l-Mekkiyye Örneği- [Ibn al-‘Arabî’s Approach to Qur’anic Sciences: The Case of al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya]* (İnsan Yayınları, 2023), 88–89.

He then explains Moses' inability to persevere by the fact that he placed “*in shā' Allāh*” before the act, whereas the action itself came afterwards. Had he, as in the Muḥammadan expression, mentioned the act first and then “*in shā' Allāh*,” he would have persevered, he says. From this, he concludes that one must act in accordance with the wisdom of God's ordering of things—that what God has placed first must be placed first and what He has deferred must be deferred; otherwise, a hidden contention arises, giving rise to deprivation.<sup>31</sup> As is evident, Ibn al-ʿArabī conveys the meaning he has obtained by taking into account the context of the verses and drawing attention to the subtleties in the arrangement of the text, thereby expressing the textual indication (*ishārah*) of the knowledge he received through unveiling. Likewise, Ibn al-ʿArabī's statement concerning *Sūrat al-Shūrā*, verse 40, which speaks of retaliation—that in the verse “*The recompense of an evil is an evil like it*,” God names retaliation itself as “evil” and thereby encourages forgiveness<sup>32</sup>—may also be regarded as a *taṣawwufī-ishārī* interpretation, since it demonstrates that he takes into account the indication of the text in his interpretation.

At this point, an important subtlety pertaining to the subject should be noted. When we state that, for *ishārī tafṣīr*, we will take as our point of departure the use of the concept of *ishārah* in the discipline of jurisprudence, we do not mean only those inferences that serve as examples of the category of *dalālat al-ishārah* (the indication of *ishārah*) among the modes of signification of the wording. Rather, we mean all interpretations that fall under the modes of signification beyond the indication of the explicit wording (*dalālat al-ṣbārah*)—namely, the indication of the text (*dalālat al-naṣṣ*), the indication of necessity (*dalālat*

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 3:394.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt* 1:342.

*al-iqtidā*}, and the indication of *ishārah*<sup>33</sup>—that is, all interpretations whose connection to the text, beyond its outward sense, can be established by way of wording or meaning. At the same time, we should note that we are referring to a more comprehensive phenomenon, one that is not confined to verses dealing with legal rulings alone but foregrounds the dimension of meaning. In fact, in this form, the concept of *ishārī*, as employed in the discipline of Qur’ānic exegesis, is evaluated within a distinct framework, different from its usage in both jurisprudence and Sufism.

### **The Distinction between *Ishārī Tafsīr* and *Taşawwufī Tafsīr***

In this section of our study, we aim to address certain classifications of *ishārī tafsīr*. Following al-Zarqānī’s introduction of the compound term “*ishārī tafsīr*,” many works written in the fields of Qur’ānic sciences and the history of *tafsīr* have attempted to formulate definitions and classifications. Here, we shall first focus on the classification of al-Dhahabī (d. 1397AH/1977AD). For this classification has significantly influenced studies conducted in the period after him. It can be observed that in many works dealing with *ishārī tafsīr*, explanations are made on the basis of this distinction.<sup>34</sup> Al-Dhahabī, who treats the

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<sup>33</sup> For the types of textual indication (*dalālāt al-alfāz*) in Islamic jurisprudence and detailed discussion thereof, see Ali Bakka, “Örnekler Bağlamında Usûl-i Fıkıhta ‘İşaretin Delâleti’ Kavramının Kapsamı [The Scope of the Concept ‘Signification of the Sign’ in the Methodology of Islamic Law in the Context of Examples],” *Turkish Academic Research Review* 7, no. 1 (2022): 265–66.

<sup>34</sup> Ateş, *İşârî Tefsîr Okulu*, 19–20; Cerrahoğlu, *Tefsîr Tarihi*, 2:9-11; Fahd b. ‘Abd al-Rahmân b. Sulaymân al-Rûmî, *Ittijâhât Al-Tafsîr Fî al-Qarn al-Râbi‘ Ashar* (Mu’assasat al-Risâlah, 1997), 1:366-368; Mannâ’ al-Qaţţân, *Mebâhith*

issue under the heading “the *tafsīr* of the Sufis (*tafsīr al-ṣūfiyyah*),” grounds this classification in his distinction between “theoretical Sufism” (*al-taṣawwuf al-naẓarī*), which is based on investigation and inquiry, and “practical Sufism” (*al-taṣawwuf al-ʿamalī*), which is grounded in ascetic practice. According to this scheme, theoretical Sufism gives rise to theoretical Sufi *tafsīr*, whereas practical Sufism gives rise to *ishārī* Sufi *tafsīr*. In his view, theoretical Sufi *tafsīr* comprises the interpretations produced by Sufis who construct their understanding of *taṣawwuf* upon theoretical inquiry and philosophical doctrines, and who interpret the Qurʾān by prioritizing these theories and doctrines; such interpretations, he maintains, are unacceptable. *Ishārī Sufi tafsīr*, by contrast, is based on the spiritual discipline (*riyāḍah*) and unveiling of the Sufis who follow the path of spiritual wayfaring. Tracing the historical foundations of this mode of interpretation back not merely to the spread of the Sufis and their methods but even to the period of revelation, al-Dhahabī states that this form of interpretation is not a later innovation and regards such interpretations as legitimate.<sup>35</sup> In al-Dhahabī’s classification, however, *ishārī tafsīr* is not

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*Fī Ulūm Al-Qurʾān* (Maktabat Wahbah, 2000), 346–48; Ahmet Çelik, *Tasavvufî Tefsir Âlûsî Örneği [Sufi Exegesis: The Case of Al-Alusi]* (Ekev Yayınevi, 2002), 33–35. In his study examining Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Qurʾānic interpretations from the perspective of *ishārī* exegesis, Ağbal provides, in the footnotes on the relevant pages, a list of works both influenced by al-Dhahabī’s classification and those that criticize it. See Davut Ağbal, *İbn Arabî’de İṣârî Tefsir [Allusive Exegesis in Ibn Arabî]* (Litera Yayıncılık, 2017), 52–53.

<sup>35</sup> al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa-al-Mufasssīrūn*, 2:251-252, 256, 259, 261; Nihat Uzun, “Tefsir Disiplini Açısından Bâtınî ve İṣârî Yorumun İlmî Değeri [The Scientific Value of Batini and Allusive Interpretation in Terms of the Discipline of Exegesis],” 2018, 53–54.

treated as an independent category but is restricted to the knowledge Sufis receive through inspiration, and is thus subsumed under Sufi *tafsīr*.<sup>36</sup> This yields a limited framework, since it reduces the concept to *taṣawwuf* and leaves out the wording-based extensions of meaning made on the basis of the indications of the text. Moreover, because al-Dhahabī bases his classification on the interpreter’s Sufi state, he arrives at a definition that is not text-centered but subject-centered—one that is unverifiable by the reader. From this perspective, by distancing *ishārī tafsīr* from an epistemological foundation, al-Dhahabī’s definition reduces it to personal spiritual experience, thereby making the objective evaluation of the concept difficult.

Al-Dhahabī fails to use consistent terminology even in naming this category that he calls *ishārī Sufī tafsīr*. Where he first makes this distinction, he employs the expression “*ḥayḍī Sufī* or *ishārī*”; in the heading under which he discusses the matter in detail, he refers to it as “Sufī or *ishārī tafsīr*”; and immediately beneath that heading, he uses the phrase “*ḥayḍī* or *ishārī tafsīr*.” In the subsequent lines, he also refers to the same type under the designations “*Sufī ishārī tafsīr*” and simply “*ishārī tafsīr*.”<sup>37</sup> These varying appellations indicate that even in al-Dhahabī’s own mind, there was an ambiguity regarding the designation of this type of *tafsīr*. Moreover, al-Dhahabī’s classification has been criticized for its lack of clarity in determining the position of Sufi *tafsīr* within the discipline of Qur’ānic exegesis. It has been argued that the core of this problem lies in the concept of *ishārah*; as al-Dhahabī uses it as well, the notion of *ishārah* neither encompasses the entirety of Sufi interpretation nor serves to distinguish what is Sufi from what is

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<sup>36</sup> Gördük, *İslam Geleneğinde*, 147.

<sup>37</sup> al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa-al-Mufasssīrūn*, 2:251, 261.

non-Sufi.<sup>38</sup> We concur with this view. In addition, we consider his designation of this type of interpretation as “*ishārī*” to be problematic, since it evokes the term’s usage in jurisprudence.

It is observed that a distinction between *ishārī tafsīr* and *taṣawwufī tafsīr* has been voiced in some recently written studies. For instance, *Şubhī Şālīh*—who defines *ishārī tafsīr* as “interpreting the verses beyond their outward sense while attempting to integrate their manifest and hidden meanings”—considers it closely related to the *tafsīr* of the Sufis; furthermore, he notes that *shataḥāt* (ecstatic utterances) predominate in Sufi *tafsīr*, which entails an obscurity that those engaged in spiritual matters can transcend.<sup>39</sup> While this distinction is valuable, it contains ambiguity regarding the definition and scope of *taṣawwufī tafsīr*, as well as the points where this type of *tafsīr* converges with or diverges from *ishārī tafsīr*. Moreover, his evaluation of all Sufi interpretations as being of the same nature is inapt. For there exist Sufi interpretations that, despite bearing Sufi elements, establish an outwardly reasonable connection with the text and are not dominated by *shataḥāt*.

Some studies on this subject have also noted that, although *ishārī tafsīr* encompassed a broad field in our classical sources, it was later reduced to Sufi *tafsīr*; and it has been stated that *ishārī tafsīr* constitutes a wider field of activity that includes *taṣawwufī tafsīr* within it.<sup>40</sup> We too find this observation regarding the reduction of *ishārī tafsīr*

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<sup>38</sup> Ağbal, *İbn Arabî’de İṣârî Tefsîr*, 54–55.

<sup>39</sup> Şubhî Şālîh, *Mabâhith*, 295–96.

<sup>40</sup> Muhammed Çelik, “İṣârî Tefsirin Sınırları ve Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır’da İṣârî Tefsir [The Limits of Allusive Exegesis and Allusive Exegesis in Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır],” *Dicle Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 4, no. 2 (2002): 4; Gördük, *İslam Geleneğinde*, 151–52.

to *taṣawwufī tafsīr* to be valid and critique this reductionist approach. For this identification is also one of the primary causes of the conceptual confusion surrounding *ishārī tafsīr*. Nevertheless, we consider it more appropriate to view these two types as distinct sets. This is because *taṣawwufī tafsīr*—even if we set aside the Sufi identity of the *mufasssīr*—differs from *ishārī tafsīr* due to its distinctive terminology, aims, and epistemic foundations. In this respect, it would be inapt to evaluate the *tafsīr* of the Sufis entirely within the category of *ishārī tafsīr*.

Fahd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rūmī is another scholar who has drawn attention to the distinction between *ishārī tafsīr* and *taṣawwufī tafsīr*. In his work, citing a view he attributes to Sayyid Aḥmad Khalīl, al-Rūmī designates the *tafsīr* produced by the Sufis as “*ramzī tafsīr*” (symbolic exegesis), thereby distinguishing it from *ishārī tafsīr*. He further examines *ishārī tafsīr* under two categories: spiritual (*ma’nawī*) and lexical (*lafzī*). In his view, spiritual *ishārī* refers to an interpretation that is connected to the indication of the general meaning of a verse or *sūrah* and points to another meaning concealed in a concise (*ijmālī*) manner. This form of *tafsīr*, which constitutes an understanding God grants to whomever He wills among His servants, is also not in contradiction with the text. As examples of this type, he cites Ibn ‘Abbās’s inference from *Sūrat al-Naṣr* regarding the impending death of the Prophet (PBUH), and ‘Umar’s reaction on the Day of the Greater Pilgrimage (*hajj al-akbar*) when the verse “*Today I have perfected your religion for you*” (Q 5:3) was revealed: whereas joy was expected, ‘Umar wept, saying, “We were advancing in our religion; but now that it has reached perfection, [know that] nothing that has reached perfection can do anything but diminish.”<sup>41</sup> According to al-Rūmī, lexical *ishārī*,

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<sup>41</sup> These examples have been cited in many works as instances of *ishārī tafsīr*. For some of them, see al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa-al-Mufasssīrūn*, 2:263-264;

on the other hand, is interpretation conducted by establishing a connection with a specific indication of the wording (*lafz*), through which another meaning implicit within the verse's general context is pointed out. As examples, he mentions 'Izz b. 'Abd al-Salām's deduction from the verse "And his wife—[too]—a carrier of firewood (in the Hellfire)" (Q 111:4) that the marriages of unbelievers are also legally valid, and the inference made by exegetes that the child is affiliated with the father rather than the mother—thereby placing the responsibility for maintenance upon the father—based on the verse regarding the sustenance and clothing of nursing women (Q 2:233). For al-Rūmī, "lexical *ishārī tafsīr*" is sounder than "spiritual *ishārī*" as it avoids muddying the meaning and does not contravene either the revealed text (*naṣṣ*) or its wording (*lafz*). He states that *ramzī tafsīr* is a method based on the Sufi's progress through ecstasy (*wajd*), spiritual taste (*dhawq*), and spiritual stations until reaching the station of gnosis (*ma'rīfah*).<sup>42</sup>

Al-Rūmī's treatment of *ishārī tafsīr* within the framework of a lexical or spiritual connection to the text, together with his classification of the interpretations of the people of *taṣawwuf* as a separate category, is, in our view as well, apt. However, we consider his designation of the interpretations of the people of *taṣawwuf* as "*ramzī tafsīr*" (symbolic exegesis) to be inadequate in capturing their interpretations. For this designation primarily foregrounds their modes of expression while failing to sufficiently reflect the other features that distinguish their *tafsīr* from other types of interpretation. Yet the distinctive character of *taṣawwufī tafsīr* lies not merely in its recourse to forms of expression such as implication (*īmā'*), symbol (*ramz*),

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Ateş, *İşârî Tefsîr Okulu*, 36–37; Ağbal, *İbn Arabî'de İşârî Tefsîr*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> al-Rūmī, *Itihâhât Al-Tafsîr*, 1:407-409.

consideration (*i'tibār*), and indication (*ishārah*), but in its possession of its own terminology, training process, and source of knowledge. Moreover, expressing meanings derived from the verses through symbols (*rumūz*) is a mode of expression that any interpreter with a refined literary taste may employ; it is not an exclusive characteristic of the Sufis. Consequently, his designation does not suffice in distinguishing *taṣawwufī tafsīr* from other types of interpretation. On the other hand, it can be seen that, in al-Rūmī's classification, *ishārī tafsīr* and the interpretations of the people of *taṣawwuf* are treated as entirely independent and separate sets. Yet some interpretations made by Sufis also possess an *ishārī* character in that a connection with the text can be established. For this reason, excluding such interpretations altogether from the category of *ishārī tafsīr* is also inapt. As we have proposed in this article, those Sufi interpretations that maintain their connection with the text should be designated as "*taṣawwufī-ishārī tafsīr*," and a more permeable classification between these two domains should be adopted.

## Conclusions

In this study, which has re-examined the meaning and scope of the compound term "*ishārī tafsīr*," it has been seen that a significant portion of the debates surrounding this concept stems from conflating the differing meanings of the concept of *ishārah* in the disciplines of jurisprudence and *taṣawwuf* under a single compound term. This has led to text-centered inferences and Sufi-specific interpretations being evaluated under the same heading, resulting in conceptual ambiguity.

The central thesis advanced throughout the article is that the distinguishing feature of *ishārī tafsīr* should not be sought in who provides the interpretation or through what epistemic means, but rather in whether the proposed meaning possesses a demonstrable

connection with the Qur'ānic text at the level of wording or meaning. Within this framework, *ishārī tafsīr* is evaluated as a method of inference that encompasses meanings extending beyond the direct expression of the Qur'ānic text — meanings derived from the text's indications and maintaining a clear link to it. From this perspective, it appears more appropriate to situate *ishārī tafsīr* within the framework of reason-based exegesis (*dirāyah tafsīr*).

By contrast, the inclusion of all interpretations voiced by the people of *taṣawwuf* concerning the verses within this category is methodologically problematic. For *taṣawwufī tafsīr* is distinguished from other types of interpretation not only by its reliance on unveiling or inspiration but also by its distinctive terminology, pedagogical objectives, and understanding of knowledge. Interpretations that lack a clear connection with the text and that primarily reflect the Sufi's inner experience and spiritual journey are therefore more coherently designated as *taṣawwufī tafsīr* rather than *ishārī tafsīr*.

On the other hand, it is also evident that certain Sufi interpretations—despite their *taṣawwufī* content—can be explicated through their relationship to the arrangement, verbal structure, or context of the text. Such explanations lie at the intersection of *taṣawwufī tafsīr* and *ishārī tafsīr* and should be designated as “*taṣawwufī-ishārī tafsīr*.” This approach offers a more balanced classification by neither excluding the interpretations of the people of *taṣawwuf* wholesale from the domain of *ishārī tafsīr* nor reducing this domain to *taṣawwuf*.

In conclusion, the distinction proposed in this study aims to ground the concept of *ishārī tafsīr* on a more explicit, objective, and text-centered footing. Such a classification will both prevent the conflation of *ishārī tafsīr* and *taṣawwufī tafsīr* and contribute to the development of more consistent and auditable criteria for evaluating Qur'ānic interpretations. Given that accurate conceptualization is a

prerequisite for sound understanding, we are of the opinion that this distinction will bring greater clarity to the ongoing discussions in the *tafsīr* literature.