The Meaning of the Esoteric Interpretation of Syamsuddin as Sumatrani on the Verse of Aqidah in Surah Al-Hadid Verse Three

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Abstract. This study focused on Syamsuddin's interpretation of aqidah (theology) verses from an esoteric perspective. The term "esoteric approach" resurfaced in contemporary times, as Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani, a 16th-century Sufi scholar and a student of Hamzah Fansuri from Aceh, was known for his Sufistic inclinations. The objective of this study was to delve into the esoteric meaning of a specific verse in Surah Al-Hadid, verse 3, as understood by Syamsuddin and other prominent Indonesian Sufi figures of his era, utilizing an esoteric approach to Quranic interpretation. The research methodology employed was documentation, specifically library-based research. A qualitative approach was adopted, with data collection involving document analysis. The data was subsequently analyzed through content analysis, leading to the formulation of the esoteric concepts found within the verse. This study aimed to uncover essential aspects of the theological meaning within an esoteric framework, employing descriptive rules to ensure the generation of universal outcomes.

Keywords: Esoteric · Aqidah Verse · Universal

1 Introduction

This paper discusses the esoteric interpretation method employed by Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani in his analysis of Surah Al-Hadid, specifically verse 3, which pertains to the theological concept of Aqidah (faith) in the Qur'an. The objective of this discussion is to elucidate Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani's interpretive approach, who was an Indonesian Sufi influenced by Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, and to examine the historical context associated with esoteric Islamic beliefs during the 16th century [1]. It is important to differentiate between Sufistic interpretation and Sufism itself. Sufistic interpretation entails deciphering the hidden meanings behind words or phrases in the entire Qur'an, referred to as isyari (interpretation of concealed meanings), whereas Sufism represents the spiritual approach of a Sufi practitioner who employs both the isyari and nadzari (mystical interpretation) methods.

Syamsuddin's writings center around the verses concerning Aqidah in the Qur'an, utilizing an esoteric methodology that emphasizes extracting the hidden meanings contained within specific surahs or verses, often referred to as tafsir bathini (inner interpretation). As a Sufi scholar, Syamsuddin's approach relies on a system of searching for the signs embedded within the sacred texts of the Qur'an [2]. These signs are considered secret and can only be understood by a Sufi practitioner. Syamsuddin's interpretation focuses on unraveling the mysteries concealed within particular surahs. His interpretation is based on the belief that the Qur'an encompasses both the apparent (dzahir) and hidden (batin) aspects. The apparent meaning refers to the literal text or sentence itself, while the hidden meaning pertains to the concealed significance within the apparent meaning.

In a previous work titled "Sufi Epistemology," the mufassir (Qur'anic commentator) Syamsuddin Arif explored the epistemology of Sufism by examining the concept of knowledge as defined by Ibn Arabi. Syamsuddin then compared Ibn Arabi's views with those of other prominent Sufi figures of his time, such as Imam Al-Ghazali, Al-Jurjani, and others [3]. However, the researcher of this study argues that this exploration of Sufi epistemology is not comprehensive enough. This is because not all Sufi scholars consider knowledge as the central aspect of their spiritual endeavors. Therefore, this research will focus on Syamsuddin's perspective regarding the verse of Aqidah in the Qur'an, specifically Surah Al-Hadid, verse 3, in order to revive the discourse on Sufi interpretation in the modern era.

2 Methodology

The research method employed in this literature review involves exploring theories that remain relevant across different periods. Specifically, a qualitative descriptive research approach was adopted for this study. This method is commonly utilized by researchers as it enables the acquisition of knowledge or theories pertaining to a specific research topic.

The library research method entails searching, collecting, and analyzing information sources available in libraries or on the internet. This method is typically used to gather information on a specific topic, collect relevant secondary data, and analyze these sources to gain insights and develop a better understanding of the subject matter. Information sources can be sought through library catalogs, internet search engines, or by utilizing databases accessible in libraries or academic networks.

The researcher employed qualitative analysis techniques, specifically deductive and inductive approaches, to analyze the data. These techniques are related to specific factual events and involve drawing conclusions from specific to general observations.

3 Results and Discussions

3.1 The Meaning of Esoteric Interpretation

The term "esoteric" originates from the Greek word "esoterikos," which is composed of "eso," meaning "within," and "teros," meaning "place" [4]. Thus, it signifies "known only by a select few." In general, the term "esoteric" is defined as something known or understood only by trained or chosen individuals and not by the general public.

This term is often used to describe spiritual or philosophical ideas or practices that are considered secret or limited to a specific group of people, or those believed to have deeper meanings than what appears on the surface. For example, esoteric interpretation is an example of textual interpretation that is esoteric in nature, as it delves into the hidden meanings behind texts in sacred scriptures [5].

Esoteric interpretation derives from the term "tafsir," meaning "interpretation" or "revealing the meaning" of something. The term "esoteric" means "kept within" or "only available to a select few." Thus, linguistically, esoteric interpretation refers to unveiling the hidden meanings behind verses, usually within sacred texts or other literature [6].

Esoteric interpretation often encompasses the interpretation of symbols, metaphors, and statements that may not be clear or evident at first glance. Esoteric interpretation can be applied to surahs in the Qur'an. Esoteric interpretation is the study of the hidden meanings behind the texts in the Bible or Qur'an. Many Muslim scholars and theologians study esoteric interpretation to comprehend the deeper meanings of their holy scriptures [7]. Scholars engaged in esoteric interpretation endeavor to uncover meanings that are not readily apparent in the verses and may go unnoticed by most people. They often employ techniques such as verse-by-verse interpretation, studying the historical context in which the scriptures were written, and exploring the symbolic aspects of the text [8]. Esotericism is an interpretive approach that focuses on the hidden meanings within a surah or verse.

3.2 Surah Al-Hadid

The discussion examined concerns the interpretation of aqeedah verses by Syamsuddin As-Sumatrani. The specific verse under investigation is Surah Al-Hadid (57:3) of the Qur'an, which states:

هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ

"He is the First and the Last, the Ascendant and the Intimate"

According to the interpretation of Syamsuddin As-Sumatrani, the term "al-aqql" refers to the level of divine unity (ahadiyyah), while "al-akhir" represents the level of divine uniqueness (wahidiyyah). "Al-bathin" signifies the level of divine oneness (wahdah), while "al-zhahir" denotes the realm of spiritual beings (al-arwah), the realm of divine archetypes (al-misal), the realm of physical bodies (al-ajsam), and the realm of humans [9].

Allah is the Essence (Dzat) from which His attributes emanate. It is incumbent upon us to acknowledge and purify our understanding of Allah, recognizing that He is the exalted and true Ilah (God) deserving of worship, our Rabb (Creator and Sustainer), the reality of our existence (wujud), and the essence of our inner being (batin) [10].

Hence, our knowledge and understanding of Allah should be a complete ma'rifah, encompassing both His incomparability (Tanzihiyyah) and His perfection (Tasbihiyyah), accompanied by pure and sincere devotion. We should not neglect the knowledge of His similarity (Al-Ma'rifah Al-Tanzihiyyah), which manifests within the physical

realm (Ajsam). Those whose ma'rifah is limited to Tanzihiyyah Mahdhah possess an incomplete understanding (Arif Naqish) [11].

On the other hand, those whose ma'rifah is limited to Tasbihiyyah Mahdhah are considered ignorant individuals who are veiled from the pure incomparability (Tanzihiyyah Mahdhah) and true similarity (Tasbihiyyah Mahdhah) of Allah.

3.3 Analysis of the Esoteric Tafsir of Syamsuddin As-Sumatrani

Surah Al-Hadid (57:3) of the Qur'an states

$$هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ$$

This verse can be translated as:
"He is the First and the Last, the Ascendant and the Intimate."

In the book of Tafsir by Syamsuddin As-Sumatrani, it is explained that the term "Zhahir" (Ascendant or Apparent) refers to Allah, who is the ultimate beginning with no entity preceding Him. All observable phenomena in the universe serve as evidence of Allah's existence and manifestation in the physical realm. It is through His divine power that everything visible is created and becomes a testament to His presence.

According to Syamsuddin's interpretation, the term "Al-Akhir" signifies Wahidiyyah, wherein lies the esoteric meaning conveyed by Syamsuddin. Wahidiyyah denotes an easily understandable concept both in its apparent and hidden aspects, encompassing the practice and implementation of the Prophet's teachings, which include Shariah (Islamic law), Haqiqah (spiritual truth), the application of faith, the observance of Islam, the embodiment of Ihsan (excellence), moral formation, and the elevation of faith towards the realization of ma'rifah (spiritual knowledge). Possessing virtuous individuals who comprehend ma'rifatullah (knowledge of God) acquaints them with Allah through the framework of Shariah. Furthermore, Syamsuddin suggests that within this verse, the reference to "Alam al-Ajsam" signifies the presence of the spirit, heart, soul, and self within the human body.

Additionally, it is mentioned in his commentary that "Alam al-Misal" refers to the realm of pure spirituality, which can still transform into the realm of perception (Alam as-Syahadah). Those endowed with the ability to access this realm possess the capability to activate their spiritual senses, enabling them to communicate spiritually with other realms, including the spiritual world. In his interpretation, the term "Alam al-Insan" is mentioned, which, according to Jamil Shalibi, signifies the attributes and characteristics of human beings. Correlating this with Surah Al-Hadid, verse 3 mentioned earlier, the desirable traits of a Muslim with virtuous character align with the teachings of Islam.

4   Conclusion

In conclusion, esoteric interpretation is an approach to interpreting religious texts that emphasizes symbolic and metaphorical meanings rather than literal interpretations. Some view esoteric interpretation as incompatible with religious principles, considering it too subjective and neglectful of the historical context of the texts. Furthermore, some argue that esoteric interpretation excessively relies on symbolism and metaphors, losing clarity and relevance to everyday life. However, there are those who find value in esoteric interpretation as a means to delve into deeper meanings of religious texts and offer broader interpretations. They believe that while esoteric interpretation may heavily employ symbolism and metaphor, it still holds significance and relevance. Thus, their preference lies in a more conservative approach to interpretation that considers the historical context of religious texts.

Authors' Contributions.   The recommendation arising from this research is to encourage the general public to become more acquainted with classical interpretations, such as this esoteric interpretation, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the hidden meanings present in the Qur'an. By doing so, valuable lessons can be learned, even in a different time period. It is undeniable that we still require such knowledge in our lives, as the Qur'an encompasses aspects that necessitate further exploration of their meanings.

This study aims to raise awareness among the public about the existence of numerous interpretations that remain unknown to us. Through this research, it is hoped that classical interpretations, which have long been neglected, can be revitalized and reinstated to their rightful place.

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