



# Egalitarianism and Nationality in Surah Al-Hujurat Verse 13 (A Comparative Study Between Ibn Kathir's Tafsir and Al-Misbah's Tafsir)

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**Abstract.** Islamic teachings come with the principle of egalitarianism, as stated in the Quran, Surah Al-Hujurat, and verse 13. The changing global geopolitics and social dynamics have brought about a shift in the meaning of egalitarianism. This shift has also impacted the interpretations related to nationality and egalitarianism. Therefore, a comparative study is conducted on the interpretation of Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13, between Ibn Kathir's representation of classical tafsir and Quraish Shihab's representation of modern tafsir. This research aims to provide new insights into the differences in interpreting the concept of egalitarianism and nationality from different temporal backgrounds. The methodology employed in this research is a literature review with a comparative analysis approach. The findings of this research indicate that both commentators differ in explaining the details of tribes and nations. This difference can be attributed to the distinct temporal and geographical backgrounds of the two commentators. As a result, Quraish Shihab does not provide detailed explanations regarding the differences among tribes and nations due to his background of being born and raised in the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Despite the disparities in temporal and geographical backgrounds, their overall understanding of the essence of the verse remains the same. This demonstrates that the Quran serves as a timeless guide to be universally applied by all humans on Earth, regardless of their temporal and geographical contexts.

**Keywords:** Al-Misbah · Al-Qur'an Al-Azim · Social Equality · Ibnu Katsir · Quraish Shihab · egalitarianism

## 1 Introduction

Islam emerged with the concept of egalitarianism, which is encompassed in Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13. This ideology entails the notion of social and political equality among human beings. Based on this foundation, individuals should be treated justly in matters of law, employment, education, and other human needs, irrespective of their ethnic, racial, cultural, or tribal backgrounds. Understanding this principle is essential as individuals will inevitably engage in social interactions with people of diverse religions, cultures, or ethnicities [1].

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This principle has been embraced by the Indonesian nation, enshrined in Pancasila's fifth principle, which declares that all Indonesians have the right to social justice. This principle has been ingrained in the Quran for 1400 years, predating the establishment of Pancasila. The unity and equality of humanity are expressed in Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13) of the Quran, which states:

“O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted”

Within this verse, there is a spirit of unity that transcends gender, nationality, and ethnicity, emphasizing mutual assistance and support among individuals. The treatment given to someone should not be based on these background factors. The distinguishing factor between individuals lies solely in their level of piety.

Equality is a term that emerged as a response to social discrimination within society. Initially, the concept of equality arose due to conflicts of dominance between different social classes [2]. These phenomena led to assumptions of superiority and inferiority among classes, resulting in the formation of social strata [3].

As time has progressed, the issue of social equality has become more complex. Since the industrial revolution in France in 1789 [4], competition among societal strata has emerged as a contributing factor to the manifestation of social discrimination worldwide. Examples include the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany, the apartheid system in South Africa, and the caste system in India [2].

The notions of superiority and inferiority have led certain races or ethnic groups to consider them superior and nobler than others. This mind-set has given rise to the practice of slavery, as these supposedly superior races or ethnic groups oppress and exploit those deemed inferior, treating them as commodities.

Social inequality has existed for thousands of years, even before the birth of Prophet Muhammad [5]. Slavery was prevalent in ancient Rome, Persia, Babylon, Greece, and many other civilizations [6]. It categorized humans into slaves and masters, with vastly different treatments.

Although slavery has been abolished worldwide, the practice of racial or ethnic superiority still persists in society in the form of racism. The evolving issue of equality raises questions regarding the interpretation of the aforementioned equality verse. Therefore, a comparative analysis study of the interpretation of the equality verse was conducted, involving two different exegetes from different eras.

Ibn Kathir's Tafsir is one of the most renowned exegeses, with his book “Al-Qur' an Al-Azim” being among the most famous exegeses throughout history, second only to At-Tabari's Tafsir. This particular Tafsir is notable for its meticulous selection of sources and use of simple language [7].

Quraish Shihab and his works have played a significant role in the development of Quranic scholarship in Indonesia. His most prominent and distinguished work is “Tafsir Al-Misbah,” through which Quraish Shihab became an Indonesian exegete [8].

This research examines the comparative interpretation of verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat between Ibn Kathir, representing classical exegesis, and Quraish Shihab, representing modern exegesis. The aim is to generate new insights into the differences in interpreting the equality verse from different temporal backgrounds.

The research employs a literature review methodology, involving the search, reading, and analysis of research materials. The muqarran method, or comparative analysis, is employed, which compares one opinion with another related to the theme under study. Muqarran is a method that compares the interpretation of Quranic verses by one exegete with the interpretation of the same verses by a different exegete [9].

The discussion on societal values in the Quran, specifically verses 9–13 of Surah Al-Hujurat, has been studied by Nur Faizin from the perspective of Al-Misbah's interpretation [10]. Faizin extracts the moral values and messages from Quraish Shihab's interpretations of these verses. Muhammad Nurul Bilad has conducted a study on Ibn Kathir's interpretation of verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat [11]. The study focuses on multicultural education in that interpretation. A comparative analysis between Ibn Kathir and Quraish Shihab's interpretations, specifically verses 11–13 of Surah Al-Hujurat, has been explored by Rosna Wati [12], with a discussion on the values of moral education. This research provides a fresh examination of the comparative analysis between Ibn Kathir and Quraish Shihab's interpretations, specifically addressing the themes of egalitarianism and nationality in verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat.

## 2 Literature Review

The research study resulted in discussions on egalitarianism, nationality, the biography of Ibn Kathir, the profile of the book "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Azim," the biography of Quraish Shihab, the profile of the book "Tafsir Al-Misbah," and a comparative analysis of the interpretations of verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat according to both exegetes.

### 2.1 Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism, or the doctrine of egalitarianism, derives its root from the French word "egal," which means "equal." It represents a predisposition to understand equality in various general premises. For example, it asserts that individuals should be treated in the same manner in various domains of life. The doctrine of egalitarianism aims to uphold the rights of all individuals by ensuring equal treatment, thus establishing that all human beings fundamentally possess the same social status [13].

### 2.2 Nationality atau Kebangsaan

Nationality refers to the legal identification of an individual in international law, designating them as subjects or citizens of a sovereign state. It grants the state jurisdiction over the individual and provides them with protection from other countries [14]. In line with this, Paul Weis [15] defines nationality as the jurisdictional rights and protection bestowed upon an individual by the state.

From an etymological perspective, the term "bangsa" (nation) is understood as a group of people with shared identity, language, culture, ideology, history, and goals [16]. A shared nationality is regarded as a group of people who share the same lineage and origin [17]. Thus, it can be understood that a nation is a community group that shares common descent and culture.

According to Liah Greenfeld [18], the first nation in the world was the English nation. Greenfeld argues that nationalism or nationality was first discovered in England in the 1600s, making England the first nation in the world. This argument is based on the modern concept of nationhood, not merely on ethnic grounds. An ethnic nation is defined as a nation that shares the same cultural heritage, language, religion, and ethnic ancestry [19].

### 2.3 Biography of Ibn Kathir

His full name is Imaduddin Abu Al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar bin Kathir Ad-Dimashqi Ash-Shafi'i. He was born in 700 AH/1300 CE in Basra, in the village of Mijdal. Some literature mentions the title Al-Bushrawi appended to his name because he was born in Basra. Basra itself is located in the Damascus region, which is why he is also known as Ad-Dimashqi [20].

Ibn Kathir's scholarship extended to various fields, including hadith, jurisprudence, and history. His journey concluded shortly after completing his book titled "Al-Ijtihad fi Talabi Al-Jihad." He passed away while experiencing visual impairment [21] on a Thursday in the month of Sha'ban in the year 774 AH. He died at the age of 74 and was buried next to his teacher, Ibn Taymiyyah [22].

### 2.4 Profile of the Book "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Azim"

Ibn Kathir's work, "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Azim," first appeared in the Middle Ages, specifically in the 8th century AH or the 15th century CE. His opinions and ideas were influenced by previous scholars, including his teachers such as Ibn Ahiyyah, At-Tabari, and Ibn Abi Hatim.

The methodology employed in his tafsir (exegesis) is known as tafsir bi al-ma'thur, which involves interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an, the Qur'an with hadith, and so on. Ibn Kathir presents his tafsir using the analytical method (tahlili), which involves interpreting from the beginning of the Qur'an until An-Nas in accordance with the sequence found in the Uthmani mushaf [22].

The style of his interpretation follows the tafsir bi al-ma'thur approach, providing explanations and meanings conveyed by Allah in the Qur'an, as transmitted from the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors (Tabi'in) [23].

In summary, Ibn Kathir conducted the following process of interpretation: First, he presents the verse of Al-Hujurat, verse 13. Second, he brings forth relevant hadiths that assist in interpreting the verse under discussion. Third, Ibn Kathir includes several opinions of previous mufasssirs (Qur'anic commentators) or scholars.

### 2.5 Biografi Quraish Shihab

Quraish Shihab, whose full name is Muhammad Quraish Shihab, is an Indonesian scholar and intellectual. He was born in Rappang, South Sulawesi, on February 16, 1944. The name "Shihab" comes from his father's family. His father, Abdurrahman Shihab, was an educator in the field of tafsir (Qur'anic interpretation) who served as the rector of IAIN

Alaudin Ujung Pandang and contributed to the establishment of the Muslim University of Indonesia (UMI) in Ujung Pandang [24].

His education began in his hometown environment and continued at Dar Al-Hadits Al-Fiqhiyah Islamic Boarding School in Malang for his secondary education. He furthered his studies et al.-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt.

Upon returning to Indonesia, Quraish Shihab took on the role of a lecturer and became the rector of IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. Currently, he serves as a Professor at the Postgraduate Program of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and the Director of the Center for Qur'anic Studies (PSQ) Jakarta [25].

## 2.6 Profile of the Book “Tafsir Al-Misbah”

Quraish Shihab's work in tafsir is represented by the book “Tafsir Al-Misbah,” which was completed in 2003. The full name of this tafsir book is “Tafsir Al-Misbah: Pesan, Kesan, dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an” (The Interpretation of Al-Misbah: Messages, Impressions, and Harmony of the Qur'an). Quraish Shihab chose the name “Al-Misbah” with the intention of it serving the same function as its meaning, which is to be a lamp, a lantern, or something similar that can provide guidance to the lost [25].

The method used in the interpretation of the book “Tafsir Al-Misbah” is the tahlili method, which interprets the Qur'an according to the order found in the Uthmani mushaf [26]. Quraish Shihab also incorporates his intellectual ideas and concepts into his interpretation. The book “Tafsir Al-Misbah” adopts the style of Adabi Ijtima'i tafsir, which combines literary and cultural aspects with societal considerations [27].

## 3 Comparative Analysis of the Interpretation of Surah Al-Hujurat, Verse 13

Ibn Kathir interprets in his book that in this verse, Allah is narrating to mankind the story of the creation of human beings from a single soul, Prophet Adam, and then the creation of his wife, Hawwa (Eve), from his body. From them, Allah made various nations and tribes. On the other hand, Quraish Shihab directly interprets the first part of the verse as an introduction to emphasize that all human beings are equal in their humanity before Allah.

Ibn Kathir provides a linguistic interpretation of the term “nations.” In Arabic, the term for “nations” is “sya'bun,” which denotes a larger group than a tribe. Below the tribe, there are other hierarchical levels such as “fasail” (clans), “asya-ir” (families), and so on. However, there is also an opinion stating that “syu'ub” refers to non-Arab tribes. The intended meaning of “kabilah” specifically refers to Arab tribes. An example of this is the Bani Israil tribe, known as the Asbat.

According to Quraish Shihab, the term “syu'ub” is translated as the plural form of the basic word “sya'b.” It refers to a collection of several “qabalah” (tribes). These tribes are defined by their lineage from a common ancestor. A “qabalah” is further comprised of multiple families, known as “imarah,” which in turn encompass various groups called “bathn.” The “bathn” is a gathering of smaller family groups known as “fakhdz.”

The usage of the term “sya’b” here does not refer to the modern understanding of the word “nation.” This is reinforced by the fact that the Muslim community did not recognize the concept of a nation with its modern meaning before the 18th century CE. Nevertheless, the Quran does not reject the understanding of nations as known in contemporary times.

In essence, when viewed from their origin of creation, which is from clay, all human beings are the same. This includes Prophet Adam and Hawwa (Eve) who share the same essence of creation. The true difference between them lies in their religious commitment, specifically their level of obedience to Allah and the Prophet. Quraish Shihab shares the interpretation that agrees that humans are not distinguished by their tribes, nor are they differentiated based on gender, whether male or female.

This serves as an introduction to the conclusion stated in the last part of the verse: “Verily, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you.” Based on this, Quraish Shihab invites the readers to continuously enhance their devotion to Allah in order to become the most honorable human beings.

Ibnu Katsir adds in his interpretation that Allah reminds humanity not to backbite and insult others because fundamentally they are individuals of equal dignity. On the other hand, Quraish Shihab supplements his interpretation by explaining the underlying reason for the revelation of the verse. According to Quraish Shihab, the verse clearly indicates a firm principle regarding the common origin of humanity and their equal status as human beings.

No one has the right to feel proud or consider themselves superior to others. This equality extends not only to nationality, ethnicity, or race but also to gender or sex. It is not permissible for a man to consider him superior to a woman. If one argues that the creation of the first woman, Hawwa (Eve), was derived from the rib of the man, Prophet Adam, then this argument cannot be applied to all women because it specifically pertains to Hawwa. Subsequently, humans have been born through the union of men and women.

Ibnu Katsir continues his interpretation by stating that Allah commands humanity in the verse to get to know one another based on their respective tribes or nations. For example, this can be achieved by referring to someone as “Fulan bin Fulan” from tribe A or nation A. Quraish Shihab provides a more comprehensive explanation by translating the term “ta’arafu.” The word “ta’arafu” is derived from the root word “arafa,” which means to know. The grammatical form of this root word conveys a reciprocal meaning, making “ta’arafu” signify mutual recognition.

Quraish Shihab further elaborates that getting acquainted with one another opens up opportunities for mutual assistance and support. In order to foster a spirit of cooperation and goodness, the verse emphasizes the importance of mutual recognition. It is expected that humans can learn from and draw experiences from others to enhance their devotion to Allah. This attitude of mutual recognition can create peace and prosperity for individuals both in this world and in the hereafter.

It is impossible for individuals to help, learn from, complement, and benefit one another without knowing each other. Hence, the verse emphasizes the importance of cultivating benefits through mutual recognition, rather than solely seeking personal gain.

The principle of recognition also applies to the natural world and all its components. The more humans familiarize themselves with the creation of Allah, the more of His mysteries will be unveiled. Familiarity with the natural world can lead to advancements in knowledge, technology, and the well-being of individuals both externally and internally, in this world and in the hereafter. Based on human recognition of the natural world, the Qur'an also issues a warning in Surah Al-Alaq, verses 6–7, stating that “Verily, mankind is transgressing if he sees himself as self-sufficient.” The sense of self-sufficiency mentioned in the verse can manifest as a reluctance to establish relationships among humans or with the natural world—a reluctance to embrace the principle of mutual recognition. Such attitudes can result in disasters and destruction in the world.

Ibnu Katsir interprets that the varying degrees of human excellence in the sight of Allah are based solely on differences in their devotion, not on lineage or social status. In this regard, Ibnu Katsir cites a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad recorded in Sahih Muslim, which states, “Indeed, Allah does not look at your appearances or wealth, but He looks at your hearts and actions.” Ibnu Katsir also quotes numerous other hadiths related to the virtue of individuals being determined solely by their level of devotion compared to others.

On the other hand, Quraish Shihab offers a comprehensive interpretation. The term “akramkum” is derived from the root word “karuma,” which means goodness and specialness depending on the object. Humans who are considered good and special are those who demonstrate good moral conduct towards Allah and fellow creatures.

Human beings are constantly engaged in competition and striving to be the best, whether in small matters within their homes or on a global political scale. Humans easily assume that glory is embodied in material possessions, physical appearance, and social status based on lineage or power. In their pursuit of being the most noble, they often justify any means to obtain what they consider to be glory.

Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the glory they chase is fleeting and can potentially harm them. True glory is the kind that does not mislead or harm its owner. True glory can only be attained through Allah by obeying His commandments and abstaining from His prohibitions. This is known as taqwa, the only thing that can bestow eternal glory from Allah. This glory does not leave its owner feeling deprived, as it is bestowed by Allah to fulfill needs and even surpass human desires.

In the concluding part of the verse, Ibnu Katsir interprets that Allah is the All-Knowing of human beings and is fully aware of all their affairs. Hence, Allah will guide whomever He wishes and lead astray whomever He wishes. He is the one who has the right to bestow mercy upon whomever He wishes and to punish whomever He wishes. And only He has the right to prioritize whomever He wishes. He is the All-Wise, the All-Knowing, and the One who fully recognizes everything.

On the other hand, Quraish Shihab provides further interpretation by examining the meanings of the words used. The terms “Alim” and “Khabir” encompass Allah’s knowledge of everything in the world. Some scholars differentiate the meanings between these two words. The term “Alim” signifies Allah’s knowledge of everything. The particular emphasis of “Alim” lies in the fact that it represents the essence of Allah’s omniscience as the subject, rather than being an object of knowledge. On the other hand, the term “Khabir” signifies Allah’s knowledge that encompasses everything. The meaning

of this term highlights Allah's attribute of being All-Knowing regarding the object of knowledge.

In the closing part of the above verse, Quraish Shihab states that the combined meaning of the two attributes of Allah mentioned can only be found in three places in the Quran. These three instances discuss matters that are impossible or extremely difficult for humans to know. The first instance pertains to the death of an individual, as stated in Surah Luqman, verse 34, which translates to "No one knows in which land he will die, indeed Allah is the All-Knowing, the All-Aware."

The second instance relates to the secrets concealed by someone. In this case, the secret refers to a confidential conversation between the Prophet's wives, Aisha and Hafsa. This conversation involved their feelings of jealousy towards another wife of the Prophet, Zainab.

The third instance pertains to the quality of a person's piety and nobility in the sight of Allah. The secret referred to here is the secret inferred from the above-mentioned verse. It implies that the quality of faith and piety of an individual can never be known by others and is highly impossible to discern. The knowledge of a person's faith and piety is solely possessed by Allah, the All-Knowing.

The closing part of this verse also suggests that Allah's determination regarding the essence of human nobility is precise. This nobility cannot be equated with the worldly glory pursued by humans because Allah is the All-Knowing and the All-Aware. Therefore, humans must pay attention to the message already given by Allah, the All-Knowing, regarding the well-being and needs of humanity.

From these two interpretations, the following similarities and essence of Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13 can be concluded: (1) The verse informs that humans are created from the same lineage, namely Prophet Adam and Eve, thus all humans are equal. This is the principle of egalitarianism; (2) The diversity of tribes and nations is a natural phenomenon as Allah has made human descendants flourish and expand; (3) The diversity of tribes and nations does not exist to cause division or enmity but to foster mutual understanding with the purpose of cooperation and mutual benefit; (4) Essentially, all humans are equal in the sight of Allah, and the differentiating factor is the level of their piety, which determines their nobility; (5) Allah is fully aware of everything that humans do, including their level of piety.

The difference between the two interpretations lies in the inclusion of supporting hadiths in accordance with the discussions presented in Ibn Kathir's Tafsir. This is because Ibn Kathir is also an expert in hadith and possesses expertise in that field. Al-Misbah's interpretation explains the verse in a simple and concise manner to facilitate readers' understanding.

In his interpretation, Ibn Kathir directly explains the general meaning of the verse excerpt. On the other hand, Quraish Shihab interprets by emphasizing the meaning of the key terms in his discussion.

Another difference lies in Ibn Kathir's detailed explanation of the tribes (kabilah). During Ibn Kathir's time, differences in tribes and nations mainly revolved around the Arab tribes (kabilah), so Ibn Kathir provides a more comprehensive explanation regarding the equality among these tribes.



Meanwhile, Quraish Shihab explains the concept of *syu'ub* as nationalism, as elucidated in his book titled "Wawasan Al-Quran" (Insights into the Quran). The understanding of nationalism described by Quraish Shihab corresponds to the concept of new nationalism, which emerged in the late 18th century. The introduction of nationalist ideas to the Muslim community was first done by Napoleon during his expedition to Egypt [28].

The reference to Napoleon's arrival in Egypt refers to Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion in 1798. This invasion had several positive impacts, including the dissemination of knowledge about printing, magazines, and newspapers. Napoleon also spread new ideas stemming from the French Revolution, often referred to as the motto of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Liberty encompassed the notion of a system of government where the head of state is elected for a specific period, subject to laws, and can be removed by parliament. Equality entailed the idea of equal status and the participation of the people in governance. Fraternity represented the concept of nationalism aimed at preserving Egypt's national identity without interference from the Mamluk nationality of Turkey [4].

This indicates that Ibn Kathir was not familiar with the concept of nationalism during his lifetime, as nationalism was first introduced to the Muslim community by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798 CE. Ibn Kathir, on the other hand, passed away long before that time, in 1372 CE. During Ibn Kathir's era, political conditions were characterized by sultanate rule and frequent warfare. The issue of nationalism was not addressed by Islamic thinkers of that time due to the multitude of significant events occurring during Ibn Kathir's lifetime [29].

Although there exist differences in the historical context and geographical location of the two commentators, their opinions regarding the essence of the verse remain the same. This demonstrates that the Quran is an eternal guide that will continue to be utilized by all humans on Earth, regardless of differences in time and place.

## 4 Conclusion

Both interpretations share a similar view regarding the essence of Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13, which are as follows: (1) The verse informs that humans are created from the same lineage, namely Prophet Adam and Eve, thereby illustrating Islamic egalitarianism. (2) The diversity of tribes and nations is a natural phenomenon as Allah has caused human offspring to multiply and spread. (3) The diversity of tribes and nations is not meant to cause division or hostility but to foster mutual understanding, cooperation, and mutual benefit. (4) Essentially, all humans are equal in the sight of Allah, and the differentiating factor is one's level of piety towards Allah, which determines one's superiority. (5) Allah is All-Knowing of everything that humans do, including their level of piety.

However, the two interpretations differ in the detailed explanation of tribes and nations. This disparity arises from the differing historical contexts and geographical locations of the two commentators. Quraish Shihab, being born and raised in the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia in the 19th century CE, does not provide a detailed explanation of tribal and national differences, but rather focuses on nationalism or nationality, which was not a concept present during Ibn Kathir's time, as he was born and passed away in the 14th century CE.

Although there exist differences in the historical context and geographical location of the two commentators, their opinions regarding the essence of the verse remain the same. This demonstrates that the Quran is an eternal guide that will continue to be utilized by all humans on Earth, regardless of differences in time and place.

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