

Understanding the Qur'an as a Cultural Product: A Study of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Thought

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Abstract

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, an intellectual from Egypt, argued that the Quran is a 'cultural product' (*muntaj thaqafi*). This means that the text of the Quran was formed in reality and culture for more than 20 years. Historically, the text of the Quran does not appear in a vacuum. The text of the Quran contains all the cultural elements from which it was revealed. This study aims to delve deeper into Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's thoughts regarding the view of "The Quran as a Cultural Product". The researcher will describe sub-discussions which include the biography of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the text of the Quran in the perspective of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, two phases of the text of the Quran according to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and the argument of the Quran as a cultural product from the perspective of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. In this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach method. This research is a library research, which is a research whose object of study uses library data in the form of books, journals, and articles as its data sources. The results of the research from the topic that the researcher raised are that "The Qur'an as a Cultural Product" does not mean the Qur'an as a human product that Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd meant from that view, namely the Qur'an as a cultural product because the Qur'an reflects the culture in which the Qur'an was revealed. This research enriches the study of the science of the Qur'an and contemporary interpretation, especially regarding Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's thoughts on the concept of the Qur'an as a cultural product (*muntaj tsaqāfi*). This research attempts to explain that the concept is not intended to deny the origins of the Qur'anic revelation, but rather to explain the process of interaction of revelation with the social, linguistic, and cultural realities of Arabia during the time of revelation.

Keywords: *Quran, Cultural Product, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Tafseer, Ta'weel*

Abstrak

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, adalah seorang intelektual asal Mesir, ia berpendapat bahwa Al-Quran adalah 'produk budaya' (*muntaj thaqafi*). Artinya, teks Al-Quran terbentuk dalam realitas dan budaya selama lebih dari 20 tahun. secara historisitas teks Al-Qur'an tidak muncul di ruang hampa. Teks Al-Qur'an memuat semua unsur budaya yang menjadi tempat turunnya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali lebih dalam pemikiran Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd mengenai pandangan "Al-Qur'an Sebagai Produk Budaya". Sub-sub pembahasan akan peneliti uraikan yang dimana mencakup tentang Biografi Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Teks Al-Qur'an Dalam Perspektif Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Dua Fase Teks Al-Qur'an Menurut Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, dan Argumen Al-Qur'an Sebagai Produk Budaya Perspektif Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Pada penelitian ini peneliti menggunakan metode pendekatan kualitatif. Penelitian ini termasuk jenis penelitian pustaka (*library research*), yakni penelitian yang obyek kajiannya menggunakan data

pustaka berupa buku-buku, jurnal, dan artikel sebagai sumber datanya. Hasil penelitian dari topik yang peneliti angkat yaitu bahwasanya “Al-Qur'an Sebagai Produk Budaya” bukan berarti Al-Qur'an sebagai produk manusia yang dimaksud Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd dari pandangan tersebut yaitu adalah Al-Qur'an sebagai produk budaya karena Al-Qur'an mencerminkan budaya dimana Al-Qur'an itu turun. Penelitian ini memperkaya kajian ilmu Al-Qur'an dan tafsir kontemporer, khususnya mengenai pemikiran Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd tentang konsep Al-Qur'an sebagai produk budaya (*muntaj tsaqāfi*). Penelitian ini berupaya menjelaskan bahwa konsep tersebut tidak dimaksudkan untuk menafikan asal-usul wahyu Al-Qur'an, melainkan menjelaskan proses interaksi wahyu dengan realitas sosial, bahasa, dan budaya Arab pada masa pewahyuan.

Kata Kunci: *Al-Qur'an, Produk Budaya, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Tafsir, Ta'wil*

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an, as the holy scripture of Islam, is the ultimate and absolute source of guidance, and as Muslims, we must not question its authority. Revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the Qur'an contains profound values and mysteries that deserve careful study. The Qur'an itself commands people to explore and reflect deeply on both its explicit and implicit verses.¹ From a literary perspective, the Qur'an possesses extraordinary linguistic excellence that surpasses even the works of the world's greatest writers. To this day, no literary work has matched the magnificence of the Qur'an. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that the style and eloquence of the Qur'an are incomparable to any human composition, including those that have gained worldwide recognition. The Qur'an displays a unique beauty of language that no other literary work can equal. Moreover, it is the only scripture that encompasses all branches of knowledge and contains guidance relevant to every field of human understanding. The Qur'an also records the histories and experiences of earlier peoples with remarkable clarity. Most importantly, it is the final divine revelation, providing guidance concerning both life in this world and life in the Hereafter.²

The Qur'an was revealed to the Arab society of its time to address severe social problems and to serve as guidance for all humanity. The conditions of Arab society had become deeply troubling, making divine guidance necessary to correct them. The values and reforms introduced by the Qur'an had a profound impact on the Arab people. Islam subsequently established a strong new society founded upon the teachings of the Qur'an.³ It is therefore understandable that the text of the Qur'an did not emerge in isolation from its historical context. Rather, it reflects the cultural setting and social values that existed in the society in which it was revealed. When the Qur'an was delivered to the Arab community in the seventh century, it became part of history and should be understood within its historical context. This perspective is consistent with the thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who argued that the Qur'an is the word of God communicated through human language and is closely connected to Arab

¹ Bimba Valid Fathony, “Hermeneutika Dan Pengkajian Kitab Suci,” *Anakpanah.id*, diakses dari <https://anakpanah.id/post/Hermeneutika-dan-Pengkajian-Kitab-Suci>. Pada tanggal 25/7/2023 pukul 12.30

² Taufiqurrahman Fauzi, “Jaminan Kemurnian Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Isra' Ayat 88, Hud Ayat 13, Yunus Ayat 38 Dan Al-Baqarah Ayat 23 Persepektif Abu Hayyan Al-Andalusi Dalam Kitab *Al-Bahr Al-Muhith* Kajian Tafsir Tematik,” *Jurnal El-Furqania* Vol.8, No.2 (2021): 158.

³ Irma Riyani, “Menelusuri Latar Historis Turunya Al-Qur'an Dan Proses Pembentukan Tatanan Masyarakat Islam,” *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* Vol.1, No.1 (2016): 28.

culture. Consequently, Arab culture may be regarded as a "civilisation of the text." Arab civilisation was shaped and developed through the interaction between people and the Qur'anic text. Thus, the text of the Qur'an is deeply intertwined with the language and culture of the Arab society of its time, as both originated from the same cultural background.⁴

The Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd argued that the Qur'an is a "cultural product" (*muntaj al-thaqāfī*). By this, he meant that the Qur'anic text was formed over a period of more than twenty years within a particular cultural reality. The Qur'an not only integrated elements of the existing culture but also transformed it. In this sense, the Qur'an also became a producer of culture (*muntij li al-thaqāfah*). It has become a highly influential text and a benchmark against which other texts are measured. According to Nasr Hamid, culture and language are inseparable. Therefore, the Qur'an is also a linguistic text (*naṣṣ lughawī*). The close relationship between culture, language, and reality makes the Qur'an both a historical and a human document. Although the Qur'an originates from a divine source, it also possesses a human dimension because it exists within a specific historical and geographical context. The Qur'an can be understood as the result of a dialogue between Allah and humanity that took place within a particular cultural and historical setting. Consequently, the Qur'an is understood not only as a sacred text but also as a living text that developed within its cultural and historical context.⁵

In this study, the researcher first reviews previous research, namely an article by Sansan Ziaul Haq entitled "*Fenomena Wahyu Al-Qur'an (Analisis Konsep Pewahyuan Perspektif Sīrah Nabawiyyah)*" ("The Phenomenon of Qur'anic Revelation: An Analysis of the Concept of Revelation from the Perspective of the Prophetic Biography"), published in *Al-Fanar: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2019).⁶ The article discusses how the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The author analyses the chronology of Qur'anic revelation based on the *sīrah nabawiyyah* (the biography of the Prophet Muhammad). The article also explains that revelation is a process of communication between God as the sender and the Prophet as the recipient. Since God cannot be studied as an empirical object of scientific inquiry, research on the Qur'an is instead focused on the historical reality and cultural context in which the text was formed. The difference between that study and the present research lies in their respective perspectives. The earlier article examines the phenomenon of Qur'anic revelation through the lens of the *sīrah nabawiyyah*, whereas this study focuses on the ideas and perspective of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. The second study reviewed is an article by Fatkul Chodir entitled "*Tafsir Hermeneutika Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd*" ("Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Hermeneutical Interpretation"), published in *SCHOLASTICA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2019).⁷ This article discusses Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's theory of

⁴ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd Al-Nas* (Kairo: Al-Hai'ah al-Misriyyah al-‘Ammah li al-Kutub, 1990), hlm.27

⁵ Masgono, "Kritik Terhadap Teori Al-Quran Nasr Hamid," *INSISTS*, diakses dari <https://insists.id/kritik-terhadap-teori-al-quran-nasr-hamid/>. Pada tanggal 27/7/2023 pukul 22.08

⁶ Sansan Ziaul Haq, "Fenomena Wahyu Al-Qur'an (Analisis Konsep Pewahyuan Perspektif Sīrah Nabawiyyah)," *Al-Fanar: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* Vol.2, No.2 (2019), <https://ejournal.iq.ac.id/index.php/alfanar>.

⁷ Fatkul Chodir, "Tafsir Hermeneutika Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *SCHOLASTICA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan* Vol.1, No.1 (2019), jurnalsttunualhikmah.ac.id.

hermeneutical interpretation as an effort to renew the well-established theories of Qur'anic exegesis that have long been accepted among Muslim scholars. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd disagreed with the interpretations of the majority of Qur'anic exegetes, whose approaches largely relied on the metaphysical content of Islam. According to him, such methods do not constitute a scientific approach, because belief in the metaphysical nature of the Qur'anic text hinders efforts to understand the phenomenon of the text through scientific inquiry. The fundamental distinction of this study lies in its discussion of the hermeneutical interpretation developed by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and his critique of the established approaches to Qur'anic interpretation in the Islamic world. He argued that hermeneutics should be adopted as a new approach to interpretation within Islamic thought. This study examines the interpretation of the Qur'an as a cultural product from Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's perspective and is not limited to discussing either traditional exegesis (*tafsīr*) or hermeneutics alone.

Based on this background, the researcher is interested in conducting a study entitled "Understanding the Qur'an as a Cultural Product: A Study of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Thought." This research aims to explore more deeply Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's conception of the Qur'an as a cultural product. The discussion is organised into several sections, covering Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's biography, the Qur'anic text from his perspective, the two phases of the Qur'anic text according to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and his arguments for understanding the Qur'an as a cultural product.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a library research method, in which the data are derived from literature such as books, journal articles, and other scholarly publications. Data were collected using the documentation method, which involved gathering, reading, identifying, classifying, and recording various sources relevant to the research topic. The data consist of both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were obtained from the works of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd that discuss the concept of the Qur'an as a cultural product, such as *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ* (*The Concept of the Text*), as well as other works relevant to his thought. The secondary data were drawn from books, scholarly journal articles, and other academic sources discussing Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's ideas, Qur'anic hermeneutics, contemporary Qur'anic studies, and themes related to the relationship between the Qur'an, language, and culture.

The data were analysed using the content analysis method with a descriptive-analytical approach. The analysis was conducted through several stages: (1) identifying and compiling data related to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's concept of the Qur'an as a cultural product; (2) classifying the data according to major themes, including the concept of the text (*al-naṣṣ*), the historicity of revelation, the relationship between text and culture, and the methodology of interpretation; (3) systematically describing Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's ideas based on the primary sources; and (4) analysing the interrelationships among these ideas in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept of the Qur'an as a cultural product. Through this analytical process, the study seeks to reveal the structure of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's thought comprehensively and to explain the context in which these ideas emerged, thereby providing

an objective understanding of the concept of the Qur'an as a cultural product from the perspective of his intellectual framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biography of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was born Nasr Hamid Rizk Abu Zayd in the village of Qahafah, near the city of Tanta, Egypt, on 10 July 1943. He came from a deeply religious family. At the age of four, he began learning to write and memorise the Qur'an at a *kuttāb* (traditional Qur'anic school). By the age of eight, he had memorised the entire Qur'an, earning him the nickname "Shaykh Nasr."

In 1954, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd joined the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimin*) and was later imprisoned because of his involvement with the organisation. After completing his primary education in Tanta in 1960, he graduated from a technical secondary school in the same city. From 1960 to 1962, he worked as an electronics technician for Egypt's National Communications Authority in Cairo. In 1964, his articles on literary criticism were published in a magazine edited by Amin al-Khuli. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd pursued his higher education at Cairo University, where he completed his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, specialising in Arabic literature. He began his academic career as a lecturer at the same university in 1972. In accordance with the faculty's policy requiring graduate students to choose a primary area of specialisation, he shifted his research focus from linguistics and literary criticism to Islamic studies, particularly Qur'anic studies. From that point onward, he devoted his scholarship to issues of Qur'anic interpretation and hermeneutics.⁸ During the 1960s, when socialism and revolutionary movements were influential in Egypt, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd developed a strong interest in both. This period also marked the beginning of his criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood, although these criticisms were not yet evident in his early publications. Between 1976 and 1978, while continuing to teach at Cairo University, he also taught Arabic to foreign students at the Diplomatic Centre and the Ministry of Education. Owing to his academic excellence, the faculty appointed him as an assistant lecturer in Islamic Studies in 1982. Later, in 1995, he was promoted to the rank of Full Professor in the same field.⁹

From 1978 to 1979, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd served as a Research Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Centre for Middle East Studies in Philadelphia, United States. During this period, he studied the social sciences and humanities, with particular emphasis on theories of folklore. It was also at this stage that he became actively engaged with Western hermeneutics. He wrote an article entitled "*Al-Hirmīnīyūfīqā wa Muḍhilat Tafsīr al-Naṣṣ*" (Hermeneutics and the Problem of Textual Interpretation). In 1982, he was awarded the Abdel Aziz al-Ahwani Prize for the Humanities. From 1985 to 1989, he served as a Visiting Professor

⁸Mushlih. *Biografi Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd*. Diakses dari <https://www.referensimakalah.com/2013/01/biografi-nasr-hamid-abu-zayd.html>, pada tanggal 27/7/2023 pukul 21.51

⁹ Moch. Nur Ichwan, *Meretas Kesarjanaan Kritis Al-Qur'an: Teori Hermeneutik Nashr Hamid Abu Zayd*, Cet. I. (Jakarta: Teraju, 2003), hlm. 39.

at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies in Japan, and later at Leiden University in the Netherlands from 1995 to 1998.¹⁰

At the age of forty-nine, in April 1992, he married Dr. Ibtihal Ahmad Kamal Yunis, a professor of French language and comparative literature at Cairo University. One month later, on 9 May 1992, he applied for promotion to the rank of Full Professor at Cairo University. As part of the promotion process, Nasr Hamid submitted two of his books—*Al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī* and *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī* (*Critique of Religious Discourse*)—together with eleven additional academic papers to the evaluation committee. During the subsequent proceedings, he was accused of distorting Islamic teachings and was labelled a heretic. His appeal was rejected, and following a court ruling that declared him an apostate, he was legally compelled to divorce his wife under Egyptian personal status law. As a result, the couple sought asylum in the Netherlands. Amid these difficult circumstances, Nasr Hamid was awarded the Award for Contributions to Arab Culture by the President of Tunisia in May 1993. Rather than discouraging him, these events strengthened his determination to continue his academic work. His legal case attracted widespread media attention across Egypt and the Arab world, resulting in seven large volumes of newspaper clippings containing articles both supporting and criticising him. Despite the intense public controversy and media campaign directed against him, Nasr Hamid remained steadfast in defending his scholarship and ideas.

Another significant achievement came in 1994, when he was appointed to the advisory board of the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an. In 1995, he was finally promoted to the rank of Full Professor after submitting nine scholarly works to a newly constituted promotion committee. On 26 July 1995, he and his wife left Egypt for Leiden, the Netherlands, where he served as a Visiting Professor of Islamic Studies at Leiden University. Because his wife continued teaching at Cairo University, Nasr Hamid divided his time between Leiden and Cairo.¹¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd passed away at the age of 67 on Monday, 5 July 2010, at a hospital in Cairo. According to his doctors, he died from complications caused by a rare viral infection.¹²

The Qur'anic Text from the Perspective of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the Qur'an is the book revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the Angel Gabriel in the Arabic language. From this perspective, Abu Zayd argues that the phenomenon of divine revelation forms part of the culture in which it emerged, namely the culture of the Arab people. Consequently, any analysis of the Qur'anic text cannot be separated from the concept of revelation as it existed in the Arab tradition both before Islam and during the advent of Islam, as understood within the Muslim faith.

The concept of revelation had already existed in pre-Islamic Arab society before the Qur'an was revealed. At that time, discussions of revelation were closely associated with poetry and prophethood, both of which were believed to originate from the world of the jinn and to

¹⁰ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Isykaliyyat Al-Qira'ah Wa Aliyyat Al-Ta'wil*, Edisi ke-3. (Beirut: al-Markaz ats-Tsaqafi al-Arabi, 1994), hlm. 13, 49

¹¹ Ibid., hlm. 23

¹² voa-islam, "Menyikapi Kematian Nasr Abu Zayd, Guru Besar 'Islam Liberal,' diakses dari <https://www.voa-islam.com/read/liberalism/2010/07/06/7830/menyikapi-kematian-nasr-abu-zayd-guru-besar-islam-liberal/>. Pada tanggal 27/7/2023 pukul 21.54

be conveyed to poets and prophets through a process of revelation. Poets and prophets were regarded as sources of truth because they were believed to receive information from the jinn, who were thought capable of overhearing or obtaining news from the heavens. According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, these beliefs provided the cultural foundation for the phenomenon of religious revelation. They also shaped Arab thought, making it closely connected with the idea of angels communicating with prophets.¹³ In the modern sense, a text is understood as an organised collection of words that conveys a unified meaning and communicates specific information. Such expression may employ various forms of language. Therefore, any arrangement of words intended to communicate a particular message constitutes a text. Abu Zayd's view indicates that language is the essential medium through which meaning is conveyed in any text.¹⁴

Abu Zayd understood the Qur'an as the word of God expressed in human language and as a text that is deeply connected to the culture of Arab civilisation. For this reason, he described Arab civilisation as a "civilisation of the text." In his view, Arab civilisation was established and strengthened through the interaction between human beings and the Qur'anic text. Abu Zayd considered the Qur'an to be a linguistic text because both language and the Qur'anic text emerged within the same cultural environment—that of human society.¹⁵ In his work *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ* (*The Concept of the Text*), Abu Zayd does not provide a precise or definitive definition of the term text; instead, he cites contemporary understandings of the concept. His understanding of textuality is better grasped through his distinction between the text (*naṣṣ*) and the written codex (*muṣḥaf*). A text cannot be understood immediately or at face value; rather, it requires explanation and interpretation. In contrast, the *muṣḥaf*—the physical written compilation of the Qur'an—is more readily comprehensible because it is a structured literary composition. Abu Zayd regarded the Qur'an as the primary text, while the Hadith constitutes a secondary text because its function is to explain and clarify the meaning of the Qur'an. Likewise, the results of *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning) are classified as secondary texts.¹⁶

The Qur'an is understood as the manifestation of God's attributes and actions in the form of a historical phenomenon. From this perspective, human beings, as actors in history, are required to actualise God's will by living in accordance with the laws and realities of history. Evidence that the Qur'an is a **text** can be observed from several characteristics inherent in the Qur'an itself, which relate to the following three aspects:

1. The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad as divine revelation containing the messages of Islamic teachings. These messages are expressed in the form of an Arabic text intended to serve as guidance for humanity.

¹³ Abdul Mustaqim, *Studi Al-Qur'an Kontemporer: Wacana Baru Berbagai Metodologi Tafsir* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yogya, 2002), hlm. 155-156

¹⁴ M. Thohir, "Al-Qur'an Dalam Pandangan Hermeneutika Nasr Hamd Abu Zayd," *Jurnal al-Thiqah* Vol. 2, No.1 (2019): 7.

¹⁵ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd Al-Naṣṣ*..., hlm. 27

¹⁶ Ahmad Fauzan, "Teks Al-Qur'an Dalam Pandangan Nashr Hamid Abu Zayd," *Jurnal Kalimah: Jurnal Studi Agama dan Pemikiran Islam* Vol.13, No.1 (2015): 66.

2. The structure of the Qur'an consists of a sequence of verses (*āyāt*) that form coherent passages and are organised into chapters (*sūrahs*), a structural feature commonly found in linguistic texts.
3. The Qur'an contains two categories of verses, namely *muḥkamāt* (clear and definitive verses) and *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous or allegorical verses). When ambiguity or uncertainty arises, the *muḥkamāt* function as explanatory verses that clarify the meaning of the *mutashābihāt*. Consequently, understanding the Qur'anic text cannot be separated from the method of *ta'wīl* (deep or interpretive exegesis).¹⁷

According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the literal wording (*maṭṭūq*) of the Qur'anic text and its ultimate intended meaning are known absolutely only to its Creator. Human understanding of the text, however, is relative and dynamic, varying according to the perspective of each reader. Through the transformation of revelation into interpretation (*ta'wīl*)—a process first exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad as the earliest interpreter of the Qur'an—the text shifts from being understood solely as a theological (*ilāhiyyāt*) phenomenon to becoming a human text open to interpretation.¹⁸ Abu Zayd's conception of the Qur'an as a text gives rise to two fundamental assumptions. First, the Qur'an is a linguistic text whose constituent elements are comparable to those of other texts within human culture. Second, contemporary Muslims require complete freedom to interpret the religious text so that its guidance remains relevant to modern realities, given that it was revealed more than fourteen centuries ago. Based on these two premises, Abu Zayd argues that the Qur'an may become a source of intellectual stagnation if it is interpreted rigidly and without regard for changing historical and social contexts.¹⁹

The Two Phases of the Qur'anic Text According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd developed the idea of the Qur'an as a "cultural product" based on a dialectical relationship between the Qur'anic text and its socio-cultural context, which he divided into two phases. The first is the phase of formation (*maḥalat al-tashakkul*), during which the Qur'anic text took shape structurally within the cultural system that supported it, including its linguistic features. At this stage, the Qur'an is understood as a "cultural product" because it emerged within a specific historical, linguistic, and cultural environment.

The second is the phase of reconstruction (*maḥalat al-tashkīl*), in which the Qur'anic text reconstructs the culture in which it emerged by creating its own distinctive linguistic system, thereby exerting a transformative influence on that culture. In this phase, the text is no longer merely a product of culture but becomes a producer of culture.²⁰

Through this concept, Abu Zayd essentially sought to explain that when revelation was conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who lived within the cultural traditions of the Arabian Peninsula, the Qur'an entered the sphere of human history. Consequently, it was inevitable that the Qur'an would employ the grammatical structures and

¹⁷ M. Thohir, "Al-Qur'an Dalam Pandangan Hermeneutika Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd." ..., hlm.7-8

¹⁸ Lailatu Rohmah, "Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an : Studi Atas Metode Penafsiran Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *Hikmah : Journal Of Islamic Studies* Vol.12, No.2 (2016): 231, <https://journal.alhikmahjkt.ac.id/index.php/HIKMAH/article/view/47/30>.

¹⁹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Qur'an Hermeneutik Dan Kekuasaan* (Bandung: RQIS, 2003), hlm.96

²⁰ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥlum Al-Nas...*, hlm. 27

cultural framework of the Arabic language in order to communicate its message through the Prophet Muhammad. However, this view generated widespread criticism. One of the principal objections concerned a statement in his book *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī* (*Critique of Religious Discourse*), in which he argued that once revelation was received, its status shifted from a divine text (*naṣṣ ilāhī*) to a human text (*naṣṣ insānī*). According to Abu Zayd, when revelation entered the realm of human history, it underwent a transformation from *tanzīl* (the act of divine revelation) to *ta'wīl* (interpretation and exegesis). This transition from *tanzīl* to *ta'wīl* was initiated by the Prophet himself, who served as the first interpreter of the Qur'an. Berdasarkan pernyataan ini, For this reason, Abu Zayd argued that it is essential to distinguish between the Prophet's understanding and interpretation of the Qur'anic text and the intrinsic nature of the text itself as divine revelation. Although the Qur'an that Muslims possess today has unquestionably been transmitted through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), its interpretation necessarily involves a human dimension. On the basis of these statements, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was accused by many of denying the divine status of the Qur'an and of treating it as a purely human text. However, Abu Zayd maintained that his argument concerned the historical process of interpretation rather than the divine origin of the revelation itself.²¹

Abu Zayd emphasises the importance of understanding the Qur'an through an examination of the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). This approach involves studying the various transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*) as well as the historical circumstances surrounding the formation of the Qur'anic text. Such knowledge is intended to analyse the text in order to derive its meaning, since understanding the cause is essential to understanding the effect. Furthermore, examining the historical context of a particular revelation helps uncover the wisdom behind the revelation of the Qur'an and the religious teachings it contains.²² To illustrate this approach, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd uses the example of the gradual prohibition of *khamr* (intoxicating drinks), which reflects the dialectical relationship between the Qur'anic text and social reality. According to Abu Zayd, the first verse was revealed in response to a question posed by the community to the Prophet, explaining that gambling and intoxicants contain both benefit and great sin, although their harmful effects outweigh their benefits. The second verse subsequently prohibited the consumption of intoxicants specifically when preparing to perform prayer. Abu Zayd argues that this gradual process was adapted to the level of dependence that existed among Arab society at the time, functioning as a gradual therapeutic method to overcome their addiction in a natural manner.²³ Abu Zayd also criticised the tendency to interpret the Qur'an solely on the basis of the specific circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) rather than the broader applicability of its general wording (*lafz al-'āmm*). In his view, this approach overlooks the reality of how texts and language are constructed. He argued that God, as the source of the Qur'anic text, revealed His message through media that operate according to their own independent principles, one of which is the cultural framework within which language functions.

²¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd Al-Dīnī* (Kairo: Sina li al-Nasyr, 1994), hlm.126.

²² Heri Khoiruddin dan Dede Hulaelah, "Historitas Al-Qur'an : Studi Pemikiran Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd Tentang Sebab Turunya Al-Qur'an," *Sigma-Mu: Jurnal Penelitian & Gagasan Sains Dan Matematika Terapan* Vol. 6, No.2 (2014): 15.

²³ M. Thohir, "Al-Qur'an Dalam Pandangan Hermeneutika Nasr Hamd Abu Zayd." ...,hlm. 16

From the foregoing discussion, it can be understood that the Qur'anic text interacted with the local culture in which the revelation occurred and was expressed in the Arabic language, the language spoken by the Arab people of that period. Nevertheless, the Qur'an was not revealed exclusively for Arabic-speaking people; rather, it was revealed as guidance for all humanity. Language serves as a means of communication and reflects the thought and worldview of a particular society. It is therefore entirely natural that the Qur'an was revealed in the language of the people among whom it was first communicated, since human language differs from the language of God and functions as the medium through which divine revelation is conveyed to human beings.

The Argument of the Qur'an as a Cultural Product from the Perspective of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

In his work *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ (The Concept of the Text)*, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd argues that the Qur'an, as a linguistic text, occupies a central position in the history of Arab civilisation. This means that the foundations of Arab knowledge and culture, particularly in their interaction with Islam, are embedded within this text. However, a text alone cannot give rise to a civilisation without the presence of cultural reality. Civilisation and culture are formed through a dynamic process of interaction between human beings, social reality, and the text itself. Based on this conceptual framework, Abu Zayd presents his view that the Qur'an is fundamentally a cultural product (*muntaj al-thaqāfī*).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's idea of the Qur'an as a cultural product (*muntaj al-thaqāfī*) refers to the process through which the text was formed in relation to cultural realities over a period of more than two decades. Since the Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language, its linguistic structure was inherently influenced by the socio-historical conditions of that period. In this context, language is not merely a tool of communication but also a representation of a system of signs that reflects the cultural structure of Arab society as a whole.²⁴ The idea of the Qur'an as a cultural product developed by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd can be understood as an extension of the thought of his teacher, Amin al-Khuli, who regarded the Qur'an as the greatest literary text. Therefore, Abu Zayd's thesis may be considered not entirely original in its emergence. When viewed through the genealogy of classical theological debates, the epistemological foundation of his thought appears similar to a revival or reinterpretation of the Mu'tazilah doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an (*khalq al-Qur'an*), which held that the Qur'an was created rather than eternal.²⁵

Historically, the Qur'an has consistently been regarded as a transcendent sacred scripture. This process of sacralisation has, in turn, influenced the approaches and methods used in interpreting the text. However, the tendency of some classical scholars to become excessively bound by dogmatic and ideological approaches eventually created a dichotomy between the text and social reality. A significant consequence of this separation was the emergence of opportunities for certain individuals or groups to exploit the authority of the text

²⁴ Afrida Arinal Muna, "Al-Qur'an Sebagai Produk Budaya Menurut Nasr Hamid," *Kompasiana.Com*, Diakses dari, <https://www.kompasiana.com/afridaarinalmuna/5876ee330f9773444736d11e/alquran-sebagai-produk-budaya-menurut-nasr-hamid?page=all#section2>. Pada tanggal 29/7/2023 pukul 13.24

²⁵ Mufti Labib Jalaluddin, "Apakah Al-Quran Merupakan Produk Budaya?," *tanwir.id*, diakses dari <https://tanwir.id/apakah-al-quran-merupakan-produk-budaya/>. Pada tanggal 29/7/2023 pukul 14.37

in order to legitimise their own interests. This socio-political reality became the foundation of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's intellectual concerns.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd positions the Qur'an as a **linguistic text** because its structure is composed of a sequence of linguistic expressions. Consequently, the Qur'an is considered valid for study through scientific and rational linguistic approaches. This methodological stance distinguishes Abu Zayd fundamentally from mainstream Muslim scholars, who tend to emphasise the divine and transcendent dimensions of its origin. On the one hand, the designation of the Qur'an as a "producer of culture" is relatively easy to accept because the scripture has demonstrably generated new values and civilisation. On the other hand, his thesis regarding the Qur'an as a "cultural product" has provoked resistance because it is perceived as challenging the sacred status of Islamic belief. Through this concept, Abu Zayd sought to emphasise that the Qur'an reflects the socio-cultural landscape in which it was revealed. Since this revelation emerged within Arab society and was expressed in their language, the influence of Arab culture, linguistics, and worldview inherently shaped the articulation of Islamic teachings. Therefore, the interpretation of the Qur'an should not be detached from its historical context. Nevertheless, an important point that must be emphasised is that the use of the Arabic language is merely a medium; God can be understood as having "borrowed" this linguistic instrument in order to communicate the divine message. Thus, despite its connection to the historical context of Arabia, the Qur'an remains fundamentally sacred and carries a universal message.²⁶

In explaining his theory of the Qur'an as a cultural product (*muntaj al-thaqāfah*) and as a producer of culture (*muntij li al-thaqāfah*) through two stages—namely the stage of formation (*tashakkul*) and the stage of structuring (*tashkīl*)—Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd applies a semiotic analysis to the Qur'anic text. According to him, a true text is one that is capable of separating itself from its original context and subsequently generating its own vitality, independent of external norms. On the one hand, a text is an object and a product of the social and cultural system in which it exists; on the other hand, it functions as a subject that transforms that very social and cultural system.²⁷ A text reaches the level of "**semiotics**" when it becomes an entity capable of producing changes at a new structural level. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd emphasises that the power and inimitability of the Qur'anic text (*i'jāz al-Qur'an*) should not necessarily be attributed solely to its divine origin; rather, it lies in its extraordinary literary superiority compared with other texts and in its ability to create profound transformations within its cultural environment.²⁸

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd prefers to use the term **ta'wīl** rather than **tafsīr**. He argues that *ta'wīl* is actually more comprehensive because it has the capacity to encompass both the text and its cultural context. The use of the term *ta'wīl* in the Qur'an also serves as a basis for this preference, as the term appears seventeen times in the Qur'an, whereas the word *tafsīr* appears

²⁶ Ahmed Zaranggi Ar Ridho, "Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: Mendudukan Kembali Tekstualitas Al-Qur'an," *iatmagister.uin-suka.ac.id* diakses dari, <https://iatmagister.uin-suka.ac.id/id/kolom/detail/486/nasr-hamid-abu-zayd-mendudukan-kembali-tekstualitas-al-quran>. Pada tanggal 29/7/2023 pukul 13.55

²⁷ Mohamad Shohibuddin, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd Tentang Semiotika Al-Qur'an* dalam "*Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an Mazhab Yogya*" (Yogyakarta: Islamika, 2003), hlm. 113-114

²⁸ Fatkul Chodir, "Tafsir Hermeneutika Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd."..., hlm.209

only once. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd subsequently proposed an interpretive theory based on the interaction between the text and its cultural reality. He distinguishes between meaning (*ma'nā*) and significance (*maghzā*). For him, meaning refers to the historical and authentic understanding of the text within the context of its composition and structure. This meaning can be obtained by understanding the dynamics of the text through two stages: the formation stage (*tashakkul*, mimetic stage) and the structural stage (*tashkīl*, semiotic stage). During the transmission stage, the text is placed within its historical context and sequence as a response to the cultural conditions of that period. This is because if the Qur'anic text were completely separated from the culture associated with it, the text would appear unfamiliar and irrelevant to its readers. At the symbolic level, however, the text demonstrates its ability to transcend cultural norms and textual conventions.²⁹

According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the process of reading and interpreting the Qur'anic text should not stop at discovering its original meaning; rather, it should produce new significance that is relevant to contemporary socio-cultural conditions. This effort is achieved through a strategy of contextualisation, namely by bringing the historical meaning of the text into the present social and cultural reality of the reader. Therefore, in order to produce new significance, a Qur'anic interpreter (*mufasssir*) must simultaneously consider two dimensions of interpretation: the internal dynamics of the Qur'anic text within its historical setting and the horizon of contemporary readers, which is shaped by cultural and ideological influences. Furthermore, Abu Zayd emphasises that this intellectual activity is not an instantaneous process but rather a gradual dialectical process. Interpretation begins from an initial understanding that tends to be naïve, moves towards an objective explanation, and eventually returns to a new understanding that is far deeper and more mature. This advanced construction of understanding then becomes an epistemological foundation for subsequent interpretations.³⁰

From the explanation above, it can be understood that the concept of "the Qur'an as a cultural product" does not mean that the Qur'an is a human creation. What Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd means by this concept is that the Qur'an reflects the culture in which it was revealed. Since the Qur'an was revealed among the Arab people who spoke Arabic, the influence of Arab culture, the Arabic language, and the Arab worldview played a significant role in shaping the expression of Islamic teachings and the process of revelation. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd understood revelation as a two-way process involving Allah (God), the Prophet Muhammad (humanity), and Gabriel as the intermediary.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the Qur'an is a divine revelation articulated through human language and closely connected to Arab culture, thereby positioning Arab civilisation as a **civilisation of the text** (*ḥaḍārah al-naṣṣ*). The existence of this civilisation was built and sustained through a dynamic dialectical relationship between human beings and the Qur'anic text itself. Therefore, Abu Zayd emphasises the importance of

²⁹ Mohamad Shohibuddin, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd Tentang Semiotika Al-Qur'an* dalam "*Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an Mazhab Yogya*." ...,hlm. 117-118

³⁰ Fatkul Chodir, "Tafsir Hermeneutika Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd." ...,hlm. 210

historical contextualisation in understanding the Qur'an by examining the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). This methodological approach is carried out by analysing classical transmitted reports and comprehensively examining historical facts that occurred during the period of the text's formation.

The concept of "the Qur'an as a cultural product" (*muntaj al-thaqāfi*) in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's thought refers to the process of the formation of the text within a particular cultural reality. Its foundation lies in the use of the Arabic language, a linguistic instrument inherently influenced by the social conditions of that period. Therefore, understanding the Qur'an cannot be separated from its historical context. Through this study, Abu Zayd does not intend to equate the Qur'an with human intellectual products. Rather, the use of Arabic is understood as a form of God's "borrowing" of human language as a medium to transmit transcendent divine messages. In other words, the Qur'an is described as a "cultural product" solely because its text reflects the cultural landscape in which the revelation was delivered.

This research is a library research study that focuses only on the concept of "the Qur'an as a cultural product" within the thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Therefore, this study does not yet provide a comparative analysis with the ideas of other scholars, nor does it examine the implementation of this concept in the practice of Qur'anic interpretation. Future research is expected to expand this study by comparing Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's ideas with those of other contemporary Qur'anic scholars or by examining the application of the concept of "the Qur'an as a cultural product" in the interpretation of specific Qur'anic verses. In this way, the understanding of Abu Zayd's thought can become more comprehensive and contextual.

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