

**STORIES IN THE QUR'AN BETWEEN REALITY AND METAPHOR:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MUHAMMAD KHALAFULLAH AND SAYYID
QUTB**

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Abstract

This study explores the contrasting approaches of Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb in interpreting Qur'anic narratives. Khalafullah views these stories as literary-symbolic constructs that do not necessarily reflect historical facts but are intended to evoke moral and spiritual consciousness through aesthetic language. He classifies Qur'anic narratives into three categories: literary-historical, parabolic, and mythological stories. In contrast, Sayyid Quthb asserts that Qur'anic stories possess ontological truth, even though their presentation is thematic, non-chronological, and rhetorically rich. This research employs a qualitative methodology with a library research approach and hermeneutic analysis of the main works of both scholars: *al-Fann al-Qashasi fi al-Qur'an al-Karim* and *at-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an*. The findings reveal that their main divergence lies in epistemological orientation: Khalafullah grounds his interpretation in literary symbolism and rational humanism, while Quthb emphasizes divine revelation and da'wah function. The study concludes that both perspectives significantly contribute to the development of contemporary narrative exegesis and offer a potential foundation for an integrative and contextual approach to understanding Qur'anic stories more comprehensively.

Keywords: *Qur'anic narrative; Muhammad Khalafullah; Sayyid Quthb, reality; metaphor.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji perbedaan pendekatan antara Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah dan Sayyid Quthb dalam memahami kisah-kisah dalam al-Qur'an. Khalafullah memandang kisah Qur'ani sebagai konstruksi sastra yang simbolik dan tidak selalu merujuk pada peristiwa historis, melainkan berfungsi untuk menggugah kesadaran moral dan spiritual melalui bahasa estetis. Ia membagi kisah-kisah Qur'ani ke dalam tiga bentuk: kisah historis-sastra, kisah permisalan, dan kisah mitologis. Sebaliknya, Sayyid Quthb menegaskan bahwa kisah-kisah dalam al-Qur'an tetap memiliki nilai kebenaran transendental, meskipun penyampaiannya bersifat tematik, tidak kronologis, dan penuh gaya retorik. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan kepustakaan dan analisis hermeneutik terhadap karya utama keduanya, yaitu al-Fann al-Qashasi fi al-Qur'an al-Karim dan at-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan keduanya terletak pada epistemologi kebenaran: Khalafullah berpijak pada simbolisme sastra dan rasionalitas, sementara Quthb berpijak pada wahyu dan fungsi dakwah. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemikiran keduanya memperkaya khazanah tafsir naratif kontemporer, serta membuka peluang formulasi pendekatan integratif yang kontekstual dan edukatif dalam memahami kisah-kisah Qur'ani secara lebih utuh.

Kata Kunci: *Kisah al-Qur'an; Muhammad Khalafullah; Sayyid Quthb; realita; metafora.*

Introduction

Amid the pressures of globalization and the increasing complexity of value systems, religious narratives continue to function as a resilient foundation for moral formation and collective identity. Within the Islamic tradition, Qur'anic stories are not merely narrative accounts but serve as pedagogical instruments that transmit spiritual teachings and social values. Aziz and Abidin observe that nearly one-quarter of the Qur'anic text consists of narrative passages, underscoring the deliberate use of storytelling as a medium of divine communication¹. This narrative prominence has encouraged contemporary scholars to examine the form, function, and interpretive frameworks of Qur'anic stories in a more systematic and contextual manner.

Among the thinkers who gave sustained attention to the narrative dimension of the Qur'an is Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah. In *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, he advances a literary approach to Qur'anic narratives, arguing that these stories are not intended as factual historical records but as artistic constructions

¹ T Aziz et al., "Kajian Kisah Al-Qur'an Dalam Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah (1916–1988)," *Syariati: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an Dan Hukum* 5, no. 2 (2024): 151–83, <https://doi.org/10.32699/syariati.v5i02.1191>.

imbued with moral, psychological, and spiritual meanings². His approach prioritizes symbolism, dramatic structure, and rhetorical force over historical literalism. Supporting this view, Kharomen (2019) notes that for Khalafullah, the aesthetic and imaginative language of Qur'anic narratives functions as a powerful medium for emotional engagement and educational impact³.

Recent studies further demonstrate the interpretive potential of Khalafullah's literary framework. In their analysis of the story of Prophet Lot, Aziz and Abidin show that the narrative not only conveys ethical instruction but also portrays the prophet's inner struggle in confronting his community⁴. Similarly, Alfiah's reading of the story of Moses and Khidr interprets the narrative primarily as a spiritual allegory rather than a chronological historical account⁵. These studies suggest that a literary approach can expand interpretive horizons and deepen engagement with the Qur'an's moral and theological messages.

Meanwhile, Sayyid Qutb offers a different dimension through his aesthetic approach. In *at-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an*, Qutb illustrates how the Qur'an employs visualization and imagination to bring meanings to life in the minds of readers. He introduces the concepts of *takhyil* (creative imagination) and *tajsim* (concretization of meaning) to awaken inner consciousness and strengthen religious experience⁶. Qutb does not deny the reality of the narratives but emphasizes that the beauty of Qur'anic expression serves as an emotional bridge between the text and its readers.

Numerous contemporary studies also note that Qutb's approach has had a significant influence in the pedagogical realm. Fathoni and Murni demonstrate that visual techniques and imaginative narrative styles can enhance the appeal of texts, particularly in religious education contexts⁷. By presenting stories that touch emotional depths and stimulate reflection, this approach avoids the trap of a purely historical reading. More importantly, it opens up space for contextual interpretation aligned with the dynamics of the modern era.

Although both approaches have been widely studied individually, there remains a lack of comparative analysis that brings together the perspectives of Khalafullah and Qutb. Most existing research tends to examine them separately, without connecting the common grounds or fundamental differences in their methods of understanding

² A. Manasikana, "Pendekatan Kesastraan Terhadap Kisah-kisah Al-Qur'an (Kajian Atas Al-Fann Al-Qasasi Fi Al-Qur'an Al-Karim Karya Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah)" (UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2005).76.

³ Agus Imam Kharomen, "Kajian Kisah Al-Qur'an Dalam Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah (1916 – 1988)," *Syariati: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an Dan Hukum* 1, no. 1 (2019): 151–83.

⁴ Aziz et al., "Kajian Kisah Al-Qur'an Dalam Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah (1916–1988)."24.

⁵ S. N Alfiah, "Menyoal Historisitas Kisah Nabi Khidir Dalam Al-Qur'an (Aplikasi Pendekatan Sastra Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah)," *IIQ Jakarta Repository*, 2024.37.

⁶ A. N. Fathoni and Murni, "Sayyid Quthb Dan Al-Tashwir Al-Fanni Fi Al-Qur'an.," *Syahadah: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Keislaman.*, 2024.88.

⁷ Fathoni and Murni.89.

Qur'anic narratives⁸. Yet, such comparative studies are crucial for constructing a more holistic and applicable foundation for narrative exegesis, both in academic circles and educational practice.

The need for this kind of study is particularly urgent in the Indonesian context, which seeks to integrate faith, rationality, and diversity within its Islamic education system. Amid the push for a more contextual and relevant Qur'anic interpretation curriculum, there is an urgent need to formulate a narrative interpretive model that bridges textual meaning with the lived experiences of contemporary readers⁹. By jointly examining the approaches of Khalafullah and Qutb, this study aims to develop a new conceptual framework for the advancement of narrative exegesis in higher Islamic education.

The contribution of this research extends beyond theoretical discourse. On a theoretical level, it seeks to expand the hermeneutical horizon of Qur'anic narratives through a combination of literary and aesthetic approaches. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a foundation for developing instructional materials on narrative exegesis within Islamic universities. In this way, the study of tafsir can become more grounded, flexible, and spiritually resonant for students.

The solution offered by this study is the formulation of an analytical framework for Qur'anic narratives that synthesizes Khalafullah's literary approach with Qutb's aesthetic approach. This framework will be tested through case studies of selected stories, such as the narratives of Prophet Lot or the Companions of the Cave (Ashab al-Kahf), and further developed into a practical curriculum design for narrative tafsir in higher education. This approach is expected to address the challenge of interpreting Qur'anic stories not merely as literal accounts, but as symbolically rich narratives.

In response to this gap, this article offers a distinct analytical contribution by shifting the focus beyond conventional comparative readings. Although numerous studies have examined Muhammad Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb either separately or in comparison with regard to Qur'anic narratives, this study does not merely juxtapose their views. Instead, it maps the epistemological foundations underlying their interpretive approaches and analyzes the implications of these foundations for three key dimensions of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis: the concept of historical truth, the authority of the Qur'anic text, and the functional role of narrative in modern interpretation. By situating Khalafullah's literary-symbolic approach and Quthb's transcendental da'wah-oriented framework within these epistemological dimensions, this article contributes to a more systematic and theoretically grounded understanding of narrative tafsir beyond descriptive comparison.

Conclusion, this study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive-comparative content analysis. This approach is considered the most appropriate for

⁸ Agus Imam Kharomen, "Kajian Kisah Al-Qur'an Dalam Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah (1916 – 1988)," 2019.154.

⁹ Alfiah, "Menyoal Historisitas Kisah Nabi Khidir Dalam Al-Qur'an (Aplikasi Pendekatan Sastra Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah)."76.

exploring the meanings embedded in religious texts, which are often rich in symbolism, values, and layered interpretations. The primary focus of this research is the thought of Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah and Sayyid Qutb regarding Qur'anic narratives, particularly in unpacking the differences and commonalities between Khalafullah's literary approach and Qutb's aesthetic framework. Accordingly, the aim of this study is not merely to describe their ideas, but also to critically analyze and compare the theoretical frameworks they developed in understanding Qur'anic stories.

The primary data sources in this study are the original works of each thinker: *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Khalafullah, and *al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān* by Qutb. These texts are examined through in-depth textual and thematic analysis in order to identify their interpretative methods, rhetorical styles, and key conceptual constructs in approaching Qur'anic narratives. In addition, this research is supported by a range of secondary sources including books, journal articles, theses, and dissertations that critically and academically engage with the thought of both figures. These diverse references enable triangulation of data, which enhances the accuracy of the analysis while also enriching the perspective through which their narrative approaches are understood.

In this article, the term *qaṣaṣ* refers specifically to Qur'anic narratives as textual units that convey moral, theological, and pedagogical meanings, while the term *story* or *kisah* is used as its functional equivalent in analytical discussion. *Symbol* denotes narrative elements that signify meanings beyond their literal reference, whereas *metaphor* is employed in a broader sense to describe interpretive strategies that prioritize figurative meaning over historical literalism. The concept of reality in this study is not restricted to empirical historical fact but encompasses ontological and theological truth as understood within Qur'anic discourse. These terminological distinctions provide the conceptual framework for analyzing the narrative approaches of Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb.

The Qur'anic Narratives in the Perspective of Muhammad Khalafullah

Khalafullah views the narratives in the Qur'an as part of literary work. Through this approach, Qur'anic stories are understood within an aesthetic context that differs from traditional interpretations. The stories are no longer seen merely as historical reports, but rather as imaginative compositions by the author, possibly inspired by real or fictional characters, and by events that actually occurred or are symbolic in nature. In the realm of literature, storytelling emphasizes narrative beauty, and thus not every detail of the events or characters is presented in full. Like stories in literary works in general, the narratives in the Qur'an also contain structural elements that shape the story itself. Within this framework, there is usually an emphasis on a particular

element considered most significant, making it appear as the core of the story being conveyed¹⁰.

The structural elements found in Qur'anic stories resemble those found in literary narratives, such as the presence of characters, sequences of events, dialogues between characters, elements of *qadā* and *qadar* (divine decree and predestination), as well as inner voice expressions. However, differences exist in the interpretation of these elements, particularly regarding the inner voice. In Qur'anic narratives, the inner voice is not merely an internal monologue but an emotional expression designed to evoke the reader's or listener's empathy and engagement with the inner atmosphere of the story¹¹. The notion that Qur'anic stories are not solely intended to convey historical facts is based on several of Khalafullah's findings. He observed that the Qur'an often does not present the narrative elements or event details completely. In fact, there are stories that simultaneously depict both the past and the future. Based on these observations, interpreting Qur'anic narratives solely through a historical lens can potentially lead to confusion and may ultimately result in a dead end in understanding their true meaning¹².

To make the literary approach to Qur'anic stories more accessible, Khalafullah classifies these narratives into three categories. This classification is aligned with the common categories found in literary studies.

1. *Al-Qiṣṣah al-Tārīkhīyah*

The first category includes narratives that recount the stories of prophets, messengers, and certain figures whose narratives are believed to be rooted in historical events from human life. However, the main focus of this classification does not lie in their historicity, but rather in how the Qur'an frames and conveys these events and characters through its distinctive narrative approach¹³.

An example of this category can be found in the story of the people of 'Ād as presented in Surah al-Qamar (54:18–21):

كَذَّبَتْ عَادٌ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِي، إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِي يَوْمٍ نَحْسٍ مُسْتَمِرٍّ، تَنْزِعُ النَّاسَ كَأَنَّهُمْ
أَعْجَازٌ نَخْلٍ مُنْقَعِرٍ، فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِي

Translation: "The people of 'Ād also denied. Then how terrible was My punishment and My warnings! Indeed, we unleashed upon them a screaming wind on a day of continuous misfortune, uprooting people as if they were trunks of uprooted palm trees. So how terrible was My punishment and My warnings!"

¹⁰ Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullah, *Alquran Bukan Kitab Sejarah, Seni, Sastra Dan Moralitas Dalam Maftukhin, Alquran. Ter. Zuairi Misrawi Dan Anis* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2002). 101.

¹¹ Khalafullah.241-242.

¹² M. Nur Kholis. Setiawan, *Alquran Kitab Sastra Terbesar* (Yogyakarta: ElSAQ Press, 2005).33.

¹³ Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullah, *Al-Fann Al-Qaṣaṣ Fī Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm* (Beirut: Sīnā li al-Nashr, 1999).152-153.

These verses depict how the people of 'Ād denied divine truth and were consequently subjected to God's warning and punishment in the form of a fierce and unrelenting wind, which left them strewn about like uprooted palm trunks. Khalafullah observed that this narrative does not contain elements typically emphasized in historical studies. For instance, there is no detailed socio-historical background of the 'Ād people before the punishment, no description of their lifestyle, nor any elaborate account of the relationship between Prophet Hūd and his people. Instead, the Qur'an presents this narrative with a poetic and aesthetic tone, using vivid language such as *rīḥan ṣarṣaran* (a screaming wind), *naḥsin* (an ominous day), and *mustamirrin* (continuous), culminating in a metaphorical image of the wind's destructive force turning people into nothing more than fallen palm trunks¹⁴.

According to Khalafullah, this mode of storytelling serves a profound psychological purpose: to instill a deep sense of fear in the hearts of the Prophet Muhammad's followers at that time. The story functions as a powerful reminder of God's punishment, directing the audience's attention to the moral message embedded within. Thus, the core of this narrative lies in fostering piety rooted in spiritual awareness. Khalafullah classifies such stories as "historical literary narratives"—stories that are based on real historical events but are conveyed through a literary style that is emotional and aesthetic. This approach does not prioritize historical chronology; instead, it focuses on delivering an inner spiritual meaning while preserving the essence of the narrated event¹⁵.

Khalafullah asserts that the selection of narrative elements in the Qur'an is made selectively, in alignment with the intended message and purpose. Therefore, it is natural that the Qur'an does not always provide detailed names of characters or events. In his view, the historical narratives in the Qur'an are not factual reports meant to align fully with historical records or chronological logic. Rather, the approach is literary in nature, prioritizing the emotional and spiritual impact of the story on its readers or listeners¹⁶.

2. *Al-Qaṣaṣ al-Mathaliyah*

Narratives in this category are those understood by earlier generations as parables or illustrative stories meant to convey a specific principle or moral value. The events described in such stories are not necessarily grounded in historical reality and may even be fictional, so long as they align with the framework of understanding prevalent among people at that time. One of the illustrations highlighted by Khalafullah is the story of a group of people who fled their hometown out of fear of death, as recorded in Surah al-Baqarah (2:243):

¹⁴ Agus Imam Kharomen, "Kajian Kisah Al-Qur'an Dalam Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah (1916 – 1988)," 2019.2019.

¹⁵ Khalafullah, *Alquran Bukan Kitab Sejarah, Seni, Sastra Dan Moralitas Dalam Maftukhin, Alquran. Ter. Zuairi Misrawi Dan Anis*.102-104.

¹⁶ Khalafullah.110.

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ خَرَجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ وَهُمْ أُلُوفٌ حَذَرَ الْمَوْتِ فَقَالَ لَهُمُ اللَّهُ مُوتُوا ثُمَّ أَحْيَاهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ

"Have you not seen those who fled their homes in the thousands for fear of death? Allah said to them, 'Die'; then He restored them to life. Indeed, Allah is full of bounty to mankind, but most of the people do not give thanks."

Some classical exegetes, such as those cited by Ibn Kathīr, interpret this story not as a historical event, but rather as a symbolic parable¹⁷. Another example put forth by Khalafullah is the story of the two sons of Adam found in Surah al-Mā'idah (5:27–31). These verses recount the conflict between the two brothers regarding their offerings to God, which eventually led to Qābil murdering Hābil due to jealousy over the rejection of his offering. The Qur'an also conveys a severe warning for such acts of injustice, promising Hellfire for the wrongdoer¹⁸.

interpreting this story, Khalafullah refers to Muhammad 'Abduh's view that the essence of the narrative lies in its psychological and moral message. It illustrates the human struggle between the moral impulses of solidarity and fraternity, and the carnal desires for superiority, dominance, and control over others. The story contrasts two opposing human conditions and emphasizes that divine guidance urges humans to uphold truth and reject falsehood as a means to resolve internal moral conflict. The portrayal of Qābil being consumed by envy and desire serves as a Qur'anic warning regarding the moral consequences of such destructive behavior¹⁹.

3. *Al-Qaṣaṣ al-Uṣṭūrīyyah* (Mythical or Legendary Narratives)

The presence of mythological elements in the Qur'an remains a subject of debate among Muslim scholars. This debate is notably shaped by the thoughts of two prominent exegetes: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Muhammad 'Abduh. Both agree that the outward form or material structure of a narrative is not the ultimate objective of Qur'anic storytelling. Instead, the deeper meanings and moral lessons embedded within the structure of the story are what truly matter. Muhammad 'Abduh openly acknowledged that the Qur'anic narrative framework is composed in a literary style that, in certain instances, includes mythological or non-rational elements. In his analysis, Khalafullah applies a method commonly used by scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), namely by thematically collecting related verses and extracting their essential meanings²⁰.

Using this method, Khalafullah identifies at least eight verses that suggest the presence of mythological elements within Qur'anic narratives. These verses are found in Surahs al-An'ām (6:25), al-Anfāl (8:31–32), al-Mu'minūn (23:83–84), al-Furqān

¹⁷ Abu al-Fidā Ismā'il bin Ad-Dimasyqi and Katsir, *Tafsīr Al-Qurān Al-'Aẓīm*. (Kairo: Muassasah Qardabah, 2000). Juz 1, 590.

¹⁸ Muhammad Rasyid Ridha, *Tafsīr Al-Manār* (Kairo: al-Hai'ah al-Misriyah al-'Ammah, 1999).281.

¹⁹ Khalafullah, *Al-Fann Al-Qaṣaṣ Fī Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm*.134.

²⁰ Khalafullah, *Alquran Bukan Kitab Sejarah, Seni, Sastra Dan Moralitas Dalam Maftukhin, Alquran. Ter. Zuairi Misrawi Dan Anis*.138-139.

(25:5–6), al-Naml (27:67–68), al-Aḥqāf (46:17), al-Qalam (68:10–15), and al-Muṭaffifīn (83:10–13)²¹.

From the analysis of these verses, several conclusions emerge that reinforce the notion of mythological elements in some Qur'anic stories²²: 1. Most of these verses, except those in Surah al-Anfāl, are Makkan in origin, indicating that at the time of their revelation, Arab society was still heavily influenced by belief systems rich in mythological elements. 2. These verses reflect the rejection by polytheists of belief in the resurrection and the afterlife, despite the Qur'an affirming their reality. 3. The disbelievers clearly suspected the Qur'an of containing myths, as evident in their statement: "This Qur'an is nothing but tales of the ancients" (al-An'ām 6:25). 4. The Qur'an does not explicitly refute or categorically deny the polytheists' accusation that it contains mythical elements. Instead, its emphasis lies in asserting that the Qur'an is not a fabrication or the invention of Prophet Muhammad, but rather, it is entirely divine revelation from Allah.

However, despite its methodological richness, Khalafullah's literary approach has not been free from serious criticism within Qur'anic studies. Several scholars argue that emphasizing symbolism and aesthetic construction risks reducing divine revelation to a human literary product, thereby weakening its transcendental authority. The notion that some Qur'anic narratives may contain mythological elements has also been viewed as theologically problematic, particularly in relation to the doctrine of divine truthfulness (ṣidq al-khabar al-ilāhī). This study acknowledges these critiques and does not adopt Khalafullah's approach uncritically. Instead, it positions his literary framework as a methodological tool to explore narrative meaning, while maintaining clear theological boundaries that affirm the Qur'an's status as divine revelation rather than mere symbolic fiction. In contrast to Khalafullah's literary-symbolic orientation, Sayyid Qutb approaches Qur'anic narratives from a fundamentally different epistemological standpoint.

Qur'anic Stories in the View of Sayyid Qutb

According to Sayyid Qutb, the stories in the Qur'an do not stand autonomously as historical narratives or mere entertainment. On the contrary, he emphasizes that every Qur'anic story is entirely subject to the religious orientation and purpose intended by the revelation. This subordination, in his view, is the primary mechanism that shapes the unique manner in which stories are presented in the Qur'an. Therefore, the structure, style, and content of the stories are not driven by a desire to record history, but rather serve as a means to deliver guidance (huda), reminders (tadhkirah), and lessons ('ibrah). The following are indicators that Qur'anic stories are a direct implication of their subordination to religious purpose:

²¹ Khalafullah, *Al-Fann Al-Qaṣaṣ Fī Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm*.159.

²² Khalafullah.160-162.

1. The Emergence of the Phenomenon of Story Repetition in Various Surahs

Sayyid Qutb explains that such repetition is not carried out verbatim or in its entirety. The Qur'an often repeats only certain segments or parts of a story particularly those containing moral values, educational spirit, or warnings relevant to the context of the verse or surah in which the story is revisited²³.

In general, stories in the Qur'an are rarely repeated in full. When repetition does occur, it is very limited and typically due to specific thematic similarities. When a reader carefully examines the seemingly repeated parts of a story in their narrative context, it becomes evident that the repetition strongly aligns with the intended message of that section. The selection of story segments and the way they are delivered are deliberately crafted to match the thematic objectives of the particular surah or verse.

The most prominent example is the story of Prophet Musa, which is the most frequently mentioned narrative throughout the Qur'an. Each time this story appears, a different value or lesson is emphasized, tailored to the context in which it is presented. Meanwhile, the core of Musa's story is almost never repeated in exactly the same form. Even when certain parts seem to be reiterated, the repetition is always accompanied by a new dimension that adds nuance or deeper meaning, thereby enhancing the story's impact on the reader or listener²⁴.

2. Story Presentation Aligned with the Purpose of Each Episode

Sayyid Qutb explains that the Qur'an does not always present stories in a chronological order from beginning to end; rather, they are structured according to the intended message to be conveyed. Sometimes, a story begins from the beginning of an event, at other times from the middle, and it may even start from the end. Some stories are presented in full, while others are only partially conveyed, sometimes showing only segments relevant to the context of the verses.

This reflects that the Qur'an does not aim to narrate stories within a merely chronological historical framework. The main objective of Qur'anic stories is educational and spiritual, not simply historical documentation. Therefore, according to Sayyid Qutb, the sequence of story episodes in the Qur'an is determined by divine wisdom that prioritizes moral and spiritual values over factual chronology or temporal sequence. Based on the episode structure²⁵, Sayyid Qutb categorizes them as follows: *First*, some stories begin from the early life of the character, such as their birth or the beginning of their life. This is because the birth process itself contains important messages and exemplary values worth reflecting upon. Examples include the stories of Prophet Adam, Prophet Jesus ('Isa), and Prophet Moses (Musa). The narratives of their births are not only informative but also rich in moral and spiritual lessons.

²³ Sayyid Qutb, *Taṣwīr Al-Fanniy Fī Al-Qur'ān* (Kairo: Dār al-Syurūq, 2002).155.

²⁴ Qutb.155-162.

²⁵ Qutb.162.

Second, there are stories that begin from the character's adulthood, not from birth. In these cases, the story does not start at the chronological beginning but at certain stages in the prophet's life. For example, the story of Prophet Joseph (Yusuf) starts in his childhood, Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim) in his youth, and Prophets David (Dāwūd) and Solomon (Sulaiman) as they approach maturity. The choice of these life stages indicates that the Qur'an emphasizes significant moments that relate to prophetic missions or character formation²⁶. *Third*, some stories are only presented during the final phase of the character's life, particularly when they begin delivering the prophetic message. Examples include the stories of Prophet Noah (Nūh), Prophet Hūd, and Prophet Šāliḥ. There are no detailed explanations of their childhoods or personal lives because the Qur'an focuses on the most crucial part of their lives: the delivery of the divine message, which contains the strongest moral and spiritual lessons for humanity²⁷.

In terms of narrative length, Sayyid Qutb divides Qur'anic stories into two main categories: a) Stories presented in a detailed and comprehensive manner, covering almost all-important events in the character's life. Examples include the stories of Prophet Musa, Prophet Isa, and Prophet Yusuf. The story of Prophet Sulaiman also falls into this category due to its inclusion of several extended narratives such as his rulings in agricultural matters, his kingdom's grandeur, his fascination with noble horses followed by his repentance, as well as clear depictions of how jinn and wind were subjugated to him, his interactions with ants and the hoopoe bird, and his monumental encounter with the Queen of Sheba (Bilqis)²⁸. b) Stories conveyed in a concise or moderate form, emphasizing the essence of the prophetic mission and the community's response to it. An example is the story of Prophet Noah, where the Qur'an highlights key elements such as his efforts to preach to his people, their arrogance and rejection, the command to build the ark, the great flood, and the drowning of one of his sons. While not as comprehensive as the stories of Prophet Joseph or Moses, this presentation still powerfully and effectively communicates moral and spiritual messages²⁹.

There are also several stories conveyed very briefly, such as those of Prophets Hūd, Šāliḥ, and Lūṭ. Although repeated in the Qur'an, these stories focus primarily on a single aspect: their mission of prophethood. The narrative is limited to the delivery of the message, dialogues with their people, the people's rejection, and finally the punishment or destruction that befell them. Some stories are presented in a very short form, such as the story of Prophet Zechariah (Zakariyya), which is mentioned only in the context of the birth of John (Yahya) and his role in the care of Mary (Maryam). There is no extended narrative or series of events associated with this story. Additionally, there are stories mentioned only briefly, where the Qur'an refers merely

²⁶ Qutb.162-163.

²⁷ Qutb.164.

²⁸ Qutb.165-166

²⁹ Qutb.166

to the name or a characteristic of the figure, without further elaboration on the events they experienced. Examples include Prophet Idris, Prophet Elijah (Ilyas), and Dhu'l-Kifl. Lastly, there are stories presented in fragmented or non-continuous form, such as the stories of the People of the Trench (Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd), the People of the Cave (Aṣḥāb al-Kahf), and the two sons of Adam. These stories usually appear as brief narrative segments meant to convey specific moral or spiritual lessons, rather than as complete historical accounts³⁰.

3. Insertion of Religious Guidance within the Story Structure

In every narrative of the Qur'an, religious messages are always embedded as the core of the story. Anyone who carefully studies these stories will notice that the Qur'an does not merely recount events, but consistently directs the reader toward spiritual values and relevant moral guidance. A compelling example can be found in the story of Prophet Solomon (Sulaiman) and the Queen of Sheba (Bilqis). In this episode, the hoopoe bird (Hudhud) reports its observations in Surah al-Naml (27): 24–26. It informs Solomon that the Queen of Sheba and her people worship the sun instead of Allah and explains how Satan has made their deeds seem pleasing to them, thus leading them away from the path of truth. The hoopoe then calls for the recognition of Allah's sovereignty, stating that He knows everything hidden in the heavens and the earth, and is aware of both what humans conceal and what they reveal.

This statement by the hoopoe does not appear at the end of the story as a concluding remark; instead, it is inserted in the middle of the narrative, indicating that the message of tawhid (divine oneness) is emphasized from the outset. This affirms that Qur'anic stories are not ordinary narratives but serve as a medium for internalizing divine guidance and fostering spiritual awareness. Readers of the Qur'an, if attentive, will observe a similar pattern in other stories. Whether delivered explicitly or through symbolic suggestion, these narratives are rich with moral instruction and religious values, which are their primary purpose surpassing even the narrative or historical elements in importance³¹.

While Sayyid Quthb firmly upholds the ontological truth of Qur'anic narratives, his strong emphasis on aesthetic visualization and emotional resonance is not without methodological limitations. By prioritizing subjective spiritual experience, Quthb's approach risks reducing interpretive accountability, as the meaning of the text may become closely tied to individual emotional reception³². From the perspective of modern hermeneutics, such an experiential emphasis may obscure critical engagement with historical, linguistic, and socio-cultural contexts. Although this aesthetic

³⁰ Qutb, 168.

³¹ Qutb, 168.

³² Vivi Miftahul Jannah, Raswan, and Achmad Fudhaili, "Konsep Tajsīm Dalam Tafsir Dan Kritik Sastra Arab: Analisis Al-Taṣwīr Al-Fannī Sayyid Qutb Dalam Perspektif Tasybīh Dan Isti'ārah," *Jurnal Teologi Islam* 1, no. 2 (2025): 241.

framework enhances the affective power of Qur'anic narratives, it requires complementary analytical controls to prevent interpretive subjectivism.³³

A Comparative Study of Muhammad Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb's Perspectives on Qur'anic Narratives

The views of Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb on Qur'anic narratives reveal a sharp contrast in their epistemological approaches to contemporary tafsir. Although both scholars reject a rigid literal-historical method in understanding Qur'anic stories, the direction and foundation of their respective approaches are rooted in fundamentally different paradigms. Khalafullah approaches Qur'anic narratives through a literary perspective, particularly employing the al-manhaj al-adabi method, heavily influenced by modern narratology. His focus lies on symbolic power, metaphorical usage, and rhetorical elements that shape the dynamics of the narrative. In contrast, Sayyid Quthb views Qur'anic stories as instruments of da'wah and spiritual reinforcement, designed to awaken faith consciousness and establish a societal order based on Islamic values.

Khalafullah elaborates his ideas comprehensively in his seminal work, *Al-Fann al-Qashasi fi al-Qur'an al-Karim*. In this book, he emphasizes that the moral and divine messages in the Qur'an are not conveyed through factual and chronologically structured historical narratives, but rather through artistically nuanced storytelling. He classifies the Qur'anic narratives into three main forms: historical stories with literary embellishments, parables containing moral lessons, and narratives with mythological elements³⁴. This categorization forms the basis for symbolic readings in interpreting Qur'anic stories and opens space for more contextual and reflective interpretations. Within this framework, the emphasis shifts from "what happened" to "what meaning is intended."

In contrast to Khalafullah, Sayyid Quthb does not categorize Qur'anic stories into literary genres or narrative types. His primary focus is on the substance of da'wah and the spiritual depth embedded within the Qur'anic narrative. He believes that the stories in the Qur'an are not human fabrications, but part of divine revelation crafted to revive monotheistic consciousness and religious commitment among believers. According to Quthb, the repetition of certain stories or selection of specific parts is a divine strategy, not a structural flaw. For him, the arrangement of Qur'anic narratives is guided by the urgency of the da'wah message and the needs of the ummah, not by chronological historical logic³⁵.

From a narrative structure perspective, Khalafullah observes that Qur'anic stories share similarities with modern fictional narratives, particularly in their use of

³³ Aryandi Eka Putra, Tasya Salsabila, and Laila SariMasyhur, "Hermeneutika Dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an: Analisis Metode Tafsir Muhammad Arkoun," *Tafsire* 13, no. 1 (2025): 75.

³⁴ Agus Imam Kharomen, "Kajian Kisah Al-Qur'an Dalam Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah (1916 – 1988)," *Syariat: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an Dan Hukum* 1, no. 2 (2019): 12–17.

³⁵ Fathoni and Murni, "Sayyid Quthb Dan Al-Tashwir Al-Fanni Fi Al-Qur'an."34.

metaphors and non-linear plots. These elements, he argues, are intentionally employed to create emotional depth and foster a strong spiritual connection with the reader. In his conceptual framework, Qur'anic stories are not merely sequential accounts but represent a performative linguistic communication capable of stirring awareness and shaping the reader's inner experience³⁶. Hence, Khalafullah's approach aligns closely with the aesthetic tradition in modern Arabic literature, as developed by contemporary thinkers such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammed Arkoun.

Although Sayyid Quthb acknowledges the artistic strength of the Qur'an's narrative expression, he remains cautious toward overly aesthetic approaches. For him, the beauty of Qur'anic language is not an end in itself but a means to convey divine guidance. He warns that emphasizing aesthetics might obscure the transcendental dimension of revelation. In his work *Al-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an*, Quthb praises the expressive power of the Qur'anic narrative but rejects purely symbolic readings, arguing that such interpretations risk denying the spiritual essence of the divine text³⁷.

The starkest contrast between the two scholars appears in their treatment of mythological elements in the Qur'anic narrative. Khalafullah is open to the possibility of mythical components not as falsehoods or fiction, but as effective communication tools relevant to the context of revelation. For him, metaphorical or imaginative stories in the Qur'an still hold truth as long as they serve moral and spiritual educational purposes³⁸. Conversely, Quthb strongly rejects the use of the term "myth" in the context of revelation, considering it an attempt to downgrade the divine nature of the Qur'an³⁹.

The consequences of these differing conceptual frameworks are evident in their interpretive styles. Khalafullah allows broad space for contextual even deconstructive interpretation, which is flexible and adaptive to the socio-cultural dynamics of modern readers. However, this approach is often criticized for opening the door to theological relativism. In contrast, Quthb constructs a normative and somewhat rigid interpretive framework, emphasizing the continuity between the revealed text and the formation of a faithful society. He sees the Qur'anic narrative as a guide for action, not merely a subject of aesthetic contemplation⁴⁰.

Functionally, Khalafullah emphasizes the aesthetic impact and moral-emotional resonance of the stories, while Quthb views Qur'anic narratives as catalysts for collective social and spiritual transformation. Khalafullah regards the stories as living metaphors that guide the reader's inner self, whereas Quthb sees them as tools of da'wah that foster the emergence of a monotheistic community. Thus, Khalafullah's

³⁶ Setiawan, *Alquran Kitab Sastra Terbesar*.95.

³⁷ Quthb, *Taṣwīr Al-Fanniy Fī Al-Qur'ān*.180.

³⁸ Khalafullah, *Alquran Bukan Kitab Sejarah, Seni, Sastra Dan Moralitas Dalam Maftukhin, Alquran. Ter. Zuairi Misrawi Dan Anis*.154

³⁹ Fathoni and Murni, "Sayyid Quthb Dan Al-Tashwir Al-Fanni Fi Al-Qur'an."75.

⁴⁰ Ashhad Abdillah Rosyid, "Logical Intuitive Aspect of the Story in the Quran: Sayyid Quthb's Perspective," *International Journal of Islamic Thought and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2024): 106–14, <https://doi.org/10.54298/ijith.v3i1.189>.

approach is symbolic-rhetorical, while Quthb's is ideological-transformational. Both demonstrate that interpretations of Qur'anic narratives are inseparable from their respective social contexts, theological orientations, and the historical backdrop in which they developed.

To clarify the fundamental differences between Khalafullah and Quthb, this study presents a comparative overview in Table:

Table 1. A Comparison of the Thought of Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb on Qur'anic Narratives

Aspect	Muhammad Khalafullah	Sayyid Quthb
Tafsir Approach	Employs a literary approach. Narratives are viewed as aesthetically rich literary stories full of meaning.	Employs a religious and da'wah-based approach. Narratives are regarded as part of Islam's message aimed at transforming society.
Epistemology of Truth	Does not require the stories to be historically factual. They may be symbolic or fictional narratives conveying moral or theological messages.	Stories are considered historically true, but their purpose is not merely to recount history; rather, they convey Islamic teachings.
Purpose of the Narrative	To evoke emotional and moral-spiritual awareness in the reader.	To provide divine guidance, strengthen faith, and shape an Islamic society.
Narrative Structure	May adopt poetic and metaphorical forms; sometimes incomplete or non-linear.	Narratives are presented according to the needs of da'wah and the central message of specific surahs; repetition or omission is purposeful.
View on Myth and Allegory	Open to the possibility of mythical or ancient elements as effective communication tools in the context of revelation.	Does not directly address myth; focuses instead on the core message of tawhīd and faith conveyed through the narrative.

As shown in Table, the contrast between Khalafullah and Quthb is not merely methodological but epistemological. Khalafullah's symbolic literary orientation allows greater interpretive flexibility but risks theological relativization. In contrast, Quthb's transcendental da'wah framework safeguards the sanctity of revelation but limits hermeneutical openness. This comparison demonstrates that narrative interpretation in

the Qur'an operates within a tension between symbolic meaning and doctrinal commitment.

The Reality of Truth in Qur'anic Narratives: Perspectives of Ahmad Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb

The discourse on the reality of truth in Qur'anic narratives occupies a central place in Qur'anic exegesis, as it touches on a critical question: Should the Qur'anic stories be understood as objective historical representations, or as symbolic narratives imbued with ethical and spiritual messages? This question becomes both a meeting point and a point of departure between two prominent figures Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah and Sayyid Quthb who offer distinct approaches to interpreting the Qur'anic narrative text.

Ahmad Khalafullah argues that the truth embedded in Qur'anic stories does not necessarily require historical or archaeological verification. In his view, the Qur'an is not a book of history, but a book of guidance (*hudā*) that conveys moral and spiritual values to humanity. Thus, the validity of the Qur'anic narratives does not lie in their factual authenticity but in their rhetorical effectiveness and the values they communicate. Khalafullah emphasizes that many Qur'anic stories omit specific names, times, or places. This absence of historical detail, according to him, indicates that the primary focus of the narrative is not historical chronology, but the moral and inner message it intends to deliver. For instance, in the story of the people of 'Ād in Surah al-Qamar (54:18–21), the Qur'an does not highlight their socio-historical background, but rather portrays God's punishment in metaphorical language such as "like uprooted palm trunks" to instill fear and awareness of divine power⁴¹.

Furthermore, Khalafullah introduces the concept of *ḥaqīqah ma'nawīyyah* a form of narrative truth rooted in meaning and value rather than empirical fact. He even opens the possibility that some stories in the Qur'an might be allegorical or religious fiction, divinely crafted to deliver teachings more effectively. This view affirms that the aesthetic, symbolic, and imaginative elements in Qur'anic narratives are not mere literary embellishments, but divine communication tools intended to move the human soul⁴². Therefore, an overly fact-centered reading risks diverting the understanding away from the Qur'an's core revelatory message.

In contrast, Sayyid Quthb firmly maintains that the stories in the Qur'an are ontologically true because they originate from God. However, he does not regard historiography as the sole standard of truth. For Quthb, the truth of Qur'anic narratives is divinely revealed and transcendental: if God narrates an event, then that event is unquestionably true. Nevertheless, the form and order of its presentation are adapted to the spiritual and pedagogical context of each surah. Thus, even though stories may be conveyed in fragmented, non-linear, or rhetorical styles, their truth remains intact.

⁴¹ Khalafullah, *Al-Fann Al-Qaṣaṣ Fī Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm*.93.

⁴² Agus Imam Kharomen, "Kajian Kisah Al-Qur'an Dalam Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah (1916 – 1988)," 2019.160.

Quthb avoids the historical-critical method, as he believes it can shift the focus away from the Qur'an's primary objectives: providing guidance, strengthening faith, and shaping spiritual consciousness⁴³.

A concrete example of this approach is found in the story of Prophet Moses, which appears in various surahs with significant narrative variations. According to Quthb, these variations do not reflect inconsistency but rather divine strategy to emphasize particular meanings relevant to each textual context. He strongly criticizes excessive symbolic interpretations, as they risk reducing revelation to a cultural product or fictional narrative⁴⁴. Consequently, Quthb rejects the use of terms such as "myth" and insists that all Qur'anic narratives, despite their non-chronological or non-historical presentation, must be accepted as absolute truths from God.

From an epistemological standpoint, Khalafullah's approach is rooted in modern rationalism and literary theory, whereas Quthb's stance is based on a textual-transcendental understanding grounded in da'wah-oriented theology. Khalafullah views the narrative as a symbolic construction open to flexible interpretation in line with human consciousness. Meanwhile, Quthb treats the narrative as a vehicle of direct revelation that transcends human relativism and must be accepted as divine reality.

This divergence reflects two poles in the discourse of narrative exegesis: first, the symbolic-rhetorical approach, which fosters reflective and dialogical engagement with revelation; and second, the normative-transcendental approach, which safeguards the sanctity and integrity of revelation from all forms of relativization. Each approach has its own strengths and risks: Khalafullah's method may liberate readers from literalist burdens but risks falling into relativism; while Quthb's framework preserves the sanctity of revelation but may limit contextual interpretative dynamism.

Thus, analyzing the concept of narrative truth in the Qur'an through these two perspectives provides a richer and more balanced understanding. Rather than viewing their thoughts as binary opposites, Khalafullah and Quthb's ideas should be read dialogically and complementarily. On one hand, the Qur'anic narrative indeed possesses profound aesthetic and rhetorical power, as emphasized by Khalafullah; yet on the other, it also conveys an authentic divine message that must be upheld as part of the spiritual reality embraced by the faithful, as asserted by Quthb.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented, it can be concluded that the thoughts of Muhammad Khalafullah and Sayyid Qutb represent two distinct approaches to understanding narratives in the Qur'an. Khalafullah views Qur'anic stories as literary narratives that emphasize symbolic, aesthetic, and moral values rather than literal historical accounts. He proposes that some stories may not be factual in a historical sense but remain spiritually valid due to their divine purpose and meaningful content.

⁴³ Sayyid Quthb, *Fī Zīlāl Al-Qur'ān*, cct. 15 (Kairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1980).47.

⁴⁴ Qutb, *Taşwīr Al-Fanniy Fī Al-Qur'ān*.166.

His approach underscores that the truth of the Qur'an should not be measured solely by historical authenticity, but rather by the rhetorical power and ethical message it conveys. In contrast, Sayyid Qutb regards Qur'anic narratives as authentic and truthful revelations. While he also rejects a purely chronological-historical interpretation, he maintains that the stories serve the ultimate purpose of divine guidance (*hudā*), religious exhortation (*da'wah*), and the cultivation of spiritual consciousness among believers. For Qutb, the reality of Qur'anic stories is transcendental and cannot be subjected to literary or historical criticism alone. This fundamental divergence reflects an epistemological tension between rational-humanistic and revelatory-ideological approaches in contemporary Qur'anic exegesis. Nonetheless, both thinkers agree that the core function of Qur'anic narratives is to serve as a medium for spiritual education, moral admonition, and the strengthening of faith within the Muslim community.

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