

A Phenomenological Exploration of Religious Meaning-Making Through Literary Qur'an Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Religious education, particularly Qur'anic learning, has long emphasized memorization as a core spiritual and pedagogical practice. Within this tradition, the integration of literary interpretation into Qur'an memorization offers a unique space for spiritual reflection and meaning-making among students. However, little is known about how Qur'an-memorizing students personally experience and internalize religious meaning through literary engagement with the text. This study addresses that gap by exploring how students construct spiritual understanding through memorization and interpretation of Qur'anic verses in a pesantren context. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, this research uncovers how embodied recitation and interpretive reflection shape the religious experiences of santri (Qur'an-memorizing students). Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight participants and analyzed using Colaizzi's method, a systematic process for identifying core themes in qualitative data, to extract essential themes of meaning. Findings reveal that rhythmic recitation fosters emotional resonance, literary interpretation invites existential insight, and together they contribute to a deeper sense of spiritual embodiment. In summary, this study highlights how combining memorization with literary reflection transforms Qur'anic learning into a deeply personal and spiritual process. This study enhances our understanding of personal meaning-making in Islamic education and suggests that phenomenological inquiry can reveal dimensions of religious learning that remain inaccessible to traditional pedagogical or textual approaches.



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INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an, as the central text of Islamic faith, is not only revered for its theological and legal dimensions but also for its literary and aesthetic richness. Across centuries, Muslim communities have engaged with the Qur'an through various interpretive traditions, including literary exegesis (tafsir adabi) that highlights its rhetorical, poetic, and symbolic features. In Indonesian pesantren, the memorization of the Qur'an (hifz al-Qur'an) holds a sacred status, seen as both a religious duty and a spiritual practice.

This phenomenon exists at the intersection of devotion, education, and identity formation. While memorization provides a foundation for religious knowledge, internalizing the Qur'anic message—especially through its literary aspects—has profound personal and spiritual significance. For students who engage not only in memorization but also literary interpretation, their relationship with the text becomes deeply subjective and transformative, influenced by cultural, emotional, and spiritual contexts.

Despite the prevalence of Qur'an memorization among Muslim youth, the lived experiences of these students in encountering and interpreting the Qur'an as a literary-spiritual journey remain underexplored. In particular, how memorization intersects with interpretation to generate meaning within the personal domain has not been sufficiently articulated. There is a growing awareness in contemporary scholarship that understanding religious texts requires attention to the subjective experiences of readers, especially when engagement with the text leads to existential insight and spiritual development.

The need to explore these experiences through a phenomenological lens is thus compelling. Phenomenology provides a pathway to uncover the essence of such experiences by focusing on how individuals perceive, embody, and interpret meaning in relation to sacred texts. Understanding how Qur'an-memorizing students internalize religious meanings through literary interpretation can illuminate the complex interplay between memorization, emotion, and spiritual identity—an area that remains largely unexplored in current literature.

In recent years, research exploring individual experiences in religious and educational contexts has gained increasing attention, particularly in understanding how sacred texts shape spiritual identity and existential meaning. The experience of Qur'an memorization, when coupled with literary interpretation, presents a rich yet complex phenomenon that resides deeply within the subjective domain. This complexity calls for methodologies that prioritize human perception and personal meaning-making—domains where phenomenology offers distinct analytical value.

However, the exploration of such experiences is often challenged by methodological limitations. Quantitative approaches, though valuable for identifying behavioral patterns, tend to overlook the nuanced, internal dimensions of spiritual encounters. Even traditional textual analyses, including those applied in Qur'anic studies, frequently focus on historical, linguistic, or legal interpretations, thereby marginalizing the voices and perceptions of those who actively engage with the text as part of their daily lived reality.

This gap is particularly evident in the context of Qur'an-memorizing students who experience the Qur'anic message not only through study but through embodiment and repetition. Prior studies—such as those by Al-Jaberi (2022) and Noor (2023)—have addressed the symbolic structure and rhetorical aesthetics of Qur'anic verses, but have largely neglected the experiential dimensions that arise from memorization and literary engagement. These methods, while insightful in their textual depth, often fall short in capturing how the Qur'an is experienced as a source of personal transformation and spiritual resonance.

Thus, there remains a pressing need for a methodological framework that can access the deeper structures of meaning as lived by participants. Phenomenology, with its focus on describing and interpreting human experience as it is lived, provides a powerful alternative for uncovering the spiritual and emotional realities behind Qur'anic interaction—realities that remain silent in data-driven or text-centered studies.

Within the domain of Qur'anic education, traditional solutions to understanding religious meaning often rely on established pedagogical and exegetical frameworks. These include rote memorization techniques, structured curriculum-based tafsir studies, and text-centered hermeneutical approaches. While these methods have long served as the backbone of Islamic learning, they primarily operate at the level of formal knowledge acquisition and doctrinal interpretation, offering limited access to the lived, affective dimensions of personal religious experience.

The primary limitation of these existing approaches lies in their tendency to privilege objective comprehension and collective doctrinal clarity over the subjective and often deeply emotional experiences of individuals engaging with the Qur'anic text. In particular, the internal, reflective processes that occur when students repeatedly recite and contemplate Qur'anic verses—especially in literary contexts—remain underrepresented in the academic discourse. Studies such as those by Malik (2021) and Kurniawati et al. (2022) have begun to illuminate the experiential aspects of engaging with Islamic literature, yet they still fall short in fully articulating how such texts shape personal meaning, especially within educational contexts like pesantren.

To address this gap, a shift in methodological focus is required—one that moves beyond cognitive or textual analysis toward a deeper exploration of experience as it is lived. Phenomenology provides such a lens, allowing for an investigation into how individuals internalize sacred texts and construct spiritual meaning through embodied and interpretive engagement. Through this approach, it becomes possible to uncover the nuanced, dynamic ways in which Qur'an-memorizing students experience the process of religious meaning-making, beyond what traditional models can capture.

Several prior studies have explored how religious texts shape personal understanding, particularly within Islamic literary and mystical traditions. Research by Rahmah & Zainab (2023) highlighted how Sufi poetry invites deep spiritual reflection, while Malik (2021) emphasized the transformative effects of Arabic literary texts on female identity. However, few studies have addressed how Qur'an memorization combined with literary interpretation impacts students' lived experiences in

educational settings. Most of the existing literature remains focused on textual, theological, or symbolic analysis, leaving the experiential dimension underdeveloped. This study builds on these insights by shifting attention to the personal meaning-making processes of Qur'an-memorizing students.

This study applies a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore how Qur'anic meaning emerges through memorization and literary interpretation. The phenomenological method was chosen to examine the essence of participants' experiences without reducing them to abstract theories or generalizations. By focusing on how students live and internalize Qur'anic meanings, this study responds directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier. The method allows for rich, detailed exploration of personal narratives, enabling deeper insight into how sacred texts influence spiritual development. In doing so, the study offers a fuller understanding of the Qur'an's impact beyond institutional or doctrinal frameworks.

This article is structured in six sections. The introduction outlines the research context, background, and rationale. The methods section presents the phenomenological design, participant selection, and data analysis steps using Colaizzi's method. The results section discusses key themes supported by direct quotes to reflect participants' voices. The discussion interprets the findings in light of existing scholarship and theoretical implications. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Qur'an-memorizing students in interpreting religious meaning through literary engagement with Qur'anic texts. Phenomenology was chosen due to its philosophical and methodological emphasis on capturing the essence of human experiences as they are consciously perceived. This approach aligns with the study's objective to uncover the deeper layers of spiritual understanding that emerge from the participants' interaction with the Qur'anic verses.

A descriptive orientation based on Husserlian phenomenology was applied, which emphasizes the "return to the things themselves" and seeks to describe phenomena without imposing external theoretical constructs. The use of epoche—the process of suspending assumptions—allowed for the exploration of the phenomenon in its purest experiential form, centered on how the participants internalize and give meaning to the verses they memorize and interpret.

Participants

Participants consisted of Muslim students (santri) enrolled in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) with an active Qur'an memorization program and formal exposure to literary tafsir (interpretation). The selection was carried out using purposive sampling to ensure that each participant had significant, relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required that participants had memorized at least 15 juz of the Qur'an and had engaged in literary interpretation sessions for a minimum of six months. Exclusion criteria included those without consistent exposure to literary exegesis or who were unwilling to participate in the full data collection process.

A total of eight participants were involved, ranging in age from 17 to 24 years old, consisting of five females and three males. All participants were actively involved in daily Qur'anic recitation, memorization review (muroja'ah), and literary interpretation classes (tafsir adabi), making them well-positioned to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in a quiet and familiar setting within the pesantren environment to ensure comfort and openness. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, with probing questions designed to elicit reflections on how the participants understood and experienced religious meaning through their interaction with Qur'anic texts.

An interview guide was developed based on the central research question and reviewed by two experts in Islamic education and qualitative research. Minor modifications were made to enhance clarity and cultural sensitivity. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and reflective journals were also utilized to supplement the data and capture contextual elements.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, which provides a structured process for extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, and identifying themes. The analysis began with repeated reading of each transcript to gain familiarity, followed by the identification of key expressions that reflected essential aspects of the lived experience.

These significant statements were then clustered into formulated meanings, which were grouped into broader thematic categories. Themes were refined and validated by returning to the original data to ensure representativeness. NVivo 12 software was employed to assist with the organization and coding of data, although the thematic synthesis remained grounded in the manual interpretive process. The result of this analytical process was a set of essential themes that captured the religious and existential meaning-making processes of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee, following the approval procedures relevant to studies involving human subjects. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were briefed on the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

All identifying information was anonymized, and data confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national ethical standards for social science research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiencing the Sacred Through Rhythmic Recitation

Participants consistently described their engagement with Qur'anic verses not merely as memorization, but as a sacred act of connection with the Divine. The repetitive rhythm of recitation became a portal to internalize the message at a spiritual level. Many santri expressed a transformation in how they perceived certain verses after prolonged exposure and internal reflection.

"When I recite Surah Ar-Rahman repeatedly, it feels like I am entering a dialogue with Allah. The more I memorize, the more I understand its mercy, not just as a concept, but as something I feel deep inside." (Participant 4)

The process of talaqqi and muroja'ah was not perceived as mechanical, but as rituals that opened deeper meanings. These practices led participants to re-experience the Qur'anic messages in new lights, often triggered by emotional or situational contexts in their daily lives.

Layers of Meaning Emerging in Literary Interpretation

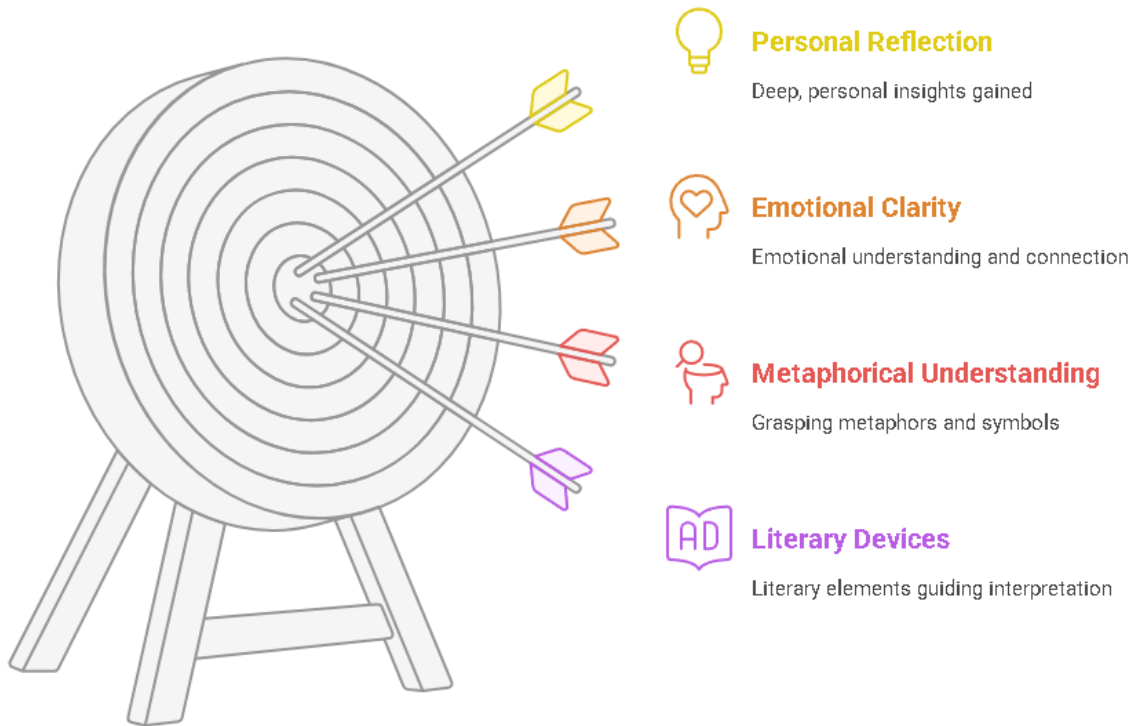
The participants highlighted how literary devices in Qur'anic verses, such as metaphors, allegories, and symbolic language, guided them to personal reflections. Engaging with these elements in a tafsir-literary class enabled them to derive meanings that transcended literal interpretation.

"When I understood the metaphor of 'darkness upon darkness' (zulumatun ba'duha fawqa ba'din), I related it to times when I felt spiritually lost. It described what I couldn't articulate myself." (Participant 7)

This theme reveals how linguistic beauty interplays with spiritual realization, where literary tafsir became a vehicle for existential reflection. The santri often described moments of emotional

clarity as a result of engaging with these metaphoric expressions, which they had previously memorized but not internalized.

Layers of Meaning in Literary Interpretation



The Role of Memorization in Spiritual Embodiment

Participants described memorization (hifz) as more than cognitive retention. Instead, it was narrated as a process of spiritual embodiment, where the verse became part of their identity. This was especially evident when participants recounted how specific verses would "speak to them" during moments of hardship or contemplation.

"I was going through a family crisis, and suddenly a verse I memorized months ago came to mind. It was as if Allah sent me the answer from within myself." (Participant 2)

For many, the act of memorizing the Qur'an cultivated a kind of embodied theology, where the meanings were no longer distant but internalized as lived experiences. The Qur'an, through continuous recitation, became both text and guide.

Literary Tafsir as a Lens for Self-Discovery

Several participants emphasized the transformative power of literary tafsir in revealing personal meanings from the verses. They shared how literary interpretation helped them find resonance between the text and their psychological or emotional states.

"When we discussed the story of Prophet Yusuf in a literary context, I realized how much I had in common with his emotional struggles. Before, I saw it as just a story; now, I see myself inside it." (Participant 5)

This theme illustrates the subjective appropriation of narrative meanings. By engaging with literary approaches, santri did not only interpret the verses intellectually, but experienced spiritual resonance, contributing to their personal development and religious maturity.

The phenomenological analysis reveals that Qur'an-memorizing students do not perceive their religious journey as limited to memorization or cognitive learning. Instead, their experiences highlight a deep internal transformation, fueled by rhythmic recitation, literary engagement, and the embodiment of verses as spiritual guidance. The literary interpretation of Qur'anic texts serves as a bridge between

memorized knowledge and existential meaning, especially within the personal, emotional, and devotional contexts of their lives.

This study reveals that Qur'an-memorizing students experience the process of literary interpretation not merely as an academic exercise, but as a deeply spiritual and transformative journey. Through rhythmic recitation and literary engagement, participants reported a profound sense of divine connection and internalized meaning that extended beyond the cognitive understanding of the verses, directly addressing the central research question regarding how religious meaning is lived and embodied.

The findings provide a unique contribution to understanding how Qur'an-memorizing students navigate the complex interplay between memorization and personal meaning-making. The experiences described by participants demonstrate that memorization serves as a foundational practice that opens pathways for deeper literary and spiritual exploration. Rather than viewing memorization as mechanical, participants recounted episodes of emotional resonance and existential insight triggered by particular verses—experiences that would likely remain hidden without a phenomenological lens. This study offers evidence that literary interpretation, when rooted in memorized familiarity with the text, catalyzes spiritual embodiment and a more intimate encounter with the divine message.

These findings align with Rahmah & Zainab's (2023) phenomenological study, which emphasized the personal dimensions of encountering divine messages through Sufi poetry. Similarly, the emphasis on spiritual transformation echoes Malik's (2021) exploration of female identity through Arabic mystical literature. However, this study extends the conversation into the pedagogical and devotional space of Qur'an memorization, a domain often overlooked in literary-religious phenomenology. Where previous studies such as Ahmed & Salma (2019) focused on textual features of mystical language, the present research shifts the focus to how such language is internalized and experienced by learners. It also complements Noor's (2023) findings on symbolic Sufism by highlighting the embodied dimension of meaning-making—how spiritual insight emerges not just through reading but through repetitive engagement and personal interpretation of sacred texts.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both educational and spiritual frameworks within Islamic learning institutions. From a pedagogical standpoint, the integration of literary interpretation into Qur'an memorization programs may deepen students' engagement by fostering reflective, emotional, and existential connections with the text. Socially and culturally, the research sheds light on how sacred texts are not merely preserved through memorization, but also personalized through interpretation—emphasizing the importance of subjective experience in religious identity formation. These insights are particularly relevant in the context of pesantren education, where memorization is often prioritized, yet may benefit from the intentional inclusion of interpretive practices that encourage meaning-making. More broadly, the study suggests that engaging learners as meaning-makers, rather than passive recipients, enhances their spiritual development and fosters a richer relationship with scripture.

Limitations of the Study

This study, while offering valuable insights, is bounded by certain limitations. The research was conducted within a specific cultural and institutional context—Indonesian pesantren—with a relatively small and homogenous group of participants. As such, the findings may not be fully generalizable to students in different educational systems or cultural settings. Furthermore, the study relied exclusively on self-reported experiences through interviews, which, although rich in depth, may be influenced by participants' memory, articulation skills, or social desirability. The phenomenological approach itself, while powerful in capturing lived experiences, does not aim for statistical generalization but rather for depth of understanding—an important distinction for interpreting the scope of the results.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The themes uncovered in this study open multiple pathways for further investigation. Future research could explore similar experiential dynamics in different cultural settings, such as among

Qur'an memorizers in Middle Eastern or Western Islamic contexts, to assess how cultural norms influence interpretive engagement. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how these meaning-making processes evolve over time, particularly as students transition from education into broader societal roles. Further integration of phenomenological inquiry with complementary methods, such as participant observation or reflective journaling, may also enrich our understanding of how spiritual embodiment develops in relation to sacred texts. These directions would not only deepen the theoretical discourse in Islamic studies but also inform curriculum development and spiritual pedagogy in religious education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Qur'an-memorizing students in interpreting religious meaning through literary engagement with Qur'anic texts. The research addressed a gap in previous studies that often overlooked how sacred texts are personally internalized beyond traditional memorization practices. Findings revealed that students experienced a deep spiritual connection through rhythmic recitation and literary interpretation, leading to a transformative understanding of the verses. These insights enrich the current discourse by highlighting the embodied and reflective dimensions of Qur'anic learning, which are often absent in conventional textual or didactic approaches. The phenomenological method proved effective in uncovering the nuanced, subjective realities of spiritual formation among young Muslim learners. By directly addressing the overlooked dimension of personal meaning-making in Qur'anic memorization, this study fills a critical gap in Islamic educational research and provides a foundation for more holistic pedagogical approaches. Future research may extend these findings by examining similar experiences in different cultural or institutional settings, or by incorporating longitudinal perspectives to trace the evolution of meaning over time. Such directions build on the current study's limitations by expanding context and temporal scope, thereby deepening understanding of spiritual development processes across diverse Muslim learner populations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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