POLYGAMY BETWEEN ETHICS AND LAW: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MUHAMMAD ABDUH'S AND MUHAMMAD SAYYID TANTAWI'S QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract: The interpretation of polygamy-related verses in Islam remains a subject of continuous debate in both academic discourse and social practice. Al-Manar Tafsir by Muhammad Abduh and Al-Wasith Tafsir by Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi represent two distinct trends of modern Islamic thought in interpreting Surah an-Nisa verse 3. This study aims to analyze and compare the methodological approaches and conclusions of both exegetes regarding polygamy. Employing a qualitative method with a comparative literature-based approach, this research examines primary tafsir texts alongside relevant secondary sources. The findings reveal that Muhammad Abduh adopts a reformist interpretation emphasizing substantive justice and moral responsibility, thereby imposing strict limitations on polygamy. In contrast, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi views polygamy within an applicable Islamic legal framework, considering material justice and social benefit in modern contexts. This study concludes that these interpretative differences reflect the dynamic nature of Islamic thought in responding to social change and contemporary challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, marriage derives from the Arabic term al-dhamm, which means to gather or unite. In Islamic thought, marriage is a sacred institution that is not merely regarded as a social contract, but also as an act of worship and a sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Nevertheless, Islamic law treats marriage as a dynamic institution whose legal status depends on the intentions and personal circumstances of the individuals involved. Accordingly, marriage may be classified as obligatory, recommended, permissible, reprehensible, or even prohibited, depending on the motives and consequences arising from it (Anton et al., 2025).

In practice, the complexity of modern human life has given rise to various challenges within the institution of marriage. These issues do not solely stem from internal individual factors but are also shaped by external social dynamics. Among the most prominent issues are underage marriage, unregistered (siri) marriage, and polygamy. Of these concerns, polygamy remains the most controversial, as it directly intersects with theological interpretations, social realities, and women's rights (Mau, 2025).

Debates surrounding polygamy have long attracted the attention of Muslims, as the practice is often associated with Islamic teachings and even perceived as part of the Prophet's sunnah. Historically, however, polygamy predates Islam (Nurliani et al., 2023). In pre-Islamic societies, polygamy was widely practiced, both in the Arabian Peninsula and in other civilizations such as Greece and early Christian traditions. The Bible does not

explicitly record any prohibition by Jesus against polygamy, and restrictions on the practice emerged only later through Pauline doctrine, which introduced monogamy as a normative ideal within Christian philosophy (Hutagalung & Marbun, 2025). In pre-Islamic Arabia, polygamy was practiced without any numerical limitation on the number of wives (Subairi et al., 2024).

The advent of Islam brought significant reform to the practice of polygamy. Rather than abolishing it entirely, Islam introduced strict regulations and limitations, particularly by emphasizing the principle of justice and the protection of women's rights. Thus, polygamy in Islam should not be understood as a newly introduced institution, but rather as a pre-existing practice that was restructured through ethical and normative values. However, with the growing awareness of social justice, human rights discourse, and gender equality, polygamy has increasingly been regarded as a contemporary issue requiring reinterpretation (Muaidi, 2025).

Within Islamic intellectual discourse, scholarly views on the legal status of polygamy may generally be categorized into three groups. First are the textualists, who permit polygamy unconditionally based on a literal interpretation of Qur'anic verses and reference to the Prophet Muhammad's practice. Second are the semi-textualists, who allow polygamy under specific conditions, particularly the ability to uphold justice among wives. Third are the contextualists, who interpret the polygamy-related verses holistically and contextually, and therefore tend to restrict or even reject the practice in modern social realities (Mardi, 2019).

In this context, Muhammad Abduh emerges as one of the prominent Islamic reformers who adopted a critical stance toward polygamy. Despite being a distinguished scholar deeply committed to Islamic teachings, Abduh demonstrated a tendency to restrict, and implicitly oppose, the practice of polygamy. At the time, this view was considered controversial and contrary to the dominant opinion (jumhur al-'ulama'), which held that the original ruling of polygamy is permissibility (mubah). Abduh's position was grounded in a strong emphasis on justice and rational consideration of the social consequences of polygamy (Husnahi et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop of differing perspectives, the study of Qur'anic interpretations on polygamy becomes both relevant and urgent. Surah al-Nisa' verse 3, as the primary normative basis for polygamy in Islam, has generated a wide range of interpretations reflecting the diverse methodological approaches of Qur'anic exegetes. Two influential figures in modern Qur'anic exegesis are Muhammad Abduh, through Tafsir al-Manar, and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, through Tafsir al-Wasith. Coming from distinct intellectual backgrounds and socio-historical contexts, these two scholars produced interpretive frameworks that are not entirely identical (Basri, 2024).

Previous studies have examined interpretations of the polygamy verse in both classical and modern tafsir traditions. The majority of classical exegetes emphasize the permissibility of polygamy under the condition of justice (Hidayatulloh, 2015), whereas modern interpretations tend to be more contextual and responsive to contemporary social realities (Subkiyyah & Sukron, 2025). However, research that systematically compares the interpretations of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi remains relatively limited.

Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the interpretation of the polygamy verse in Tafsir al-Manar and Tafsir al-Wasith. The novelty of this research lies in its examination of the differences in methodological approaches and intellectual orientations between the two exegetes, particularly the reformist-rational approach of Muhammad Abduh and the fiqh-oriented contextual

approach of Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi. Ultimately, this study is expected to contribute academically to Qur'anic studies while enriching the understanding of the dynamic nature of Islamic thought in responding to social and legal issues in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a comparative analysis method, aiming to systematically compare the interpretations of the polygamy verse in Tafsir al-Manar by Muhammad Abduh and Tafsir al-Wasith by Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi. The qualitative approach is chosen because the research focuses on analyzing meanings, intellectual frameworks, and argumentative constructions developed by the exegetes, rather than on quantitative measurement.

The primary data sources of this study consist of the texts of Tafsir al-Manar and Tafsir al-Wasith, particularly their interpretations of Surah al-Nisa' verse 3, which serves as the normative foundation for the practice of polygamy in Islam. Secondary data sources include books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other scholarly works relevant to Qur'anic exegesis, the intellectual thought of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, as well as studies on polygamy from Islamic legal and social perspectives. These secondary sources are utilized to strengthen the theoretical framework and to provide academic context for the analysis.

Data collection is conducted through library research by undertaking an in-depth examination of the original texts of both tafsir works, focusing on linguistic aspects, argumentative structures, and the interpretive methods employed by each exegete (Sutiyan et al., 2025). This process begins with the identification of the verse under study, followed by systematic documentation of the viewpoints, evidences, and conceptual emphases articulated by Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi.

The collected data are subsequently analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method. At this stage, the researcher objectively describes each exegete's perspective on polygamy and then analyzes these views to identify similarities and differences in methodological approaches, conceptualizations of justice, and legal as well as social orientations in interpreting the verse. The comparative analysis is carried out by placing the two tafsir works side by side in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the distinctive characteristics of each scholar's thought (Ritonga et al., 2025).

In addition, this study takes into account the historical and social contexts that shaped the intellectual development of both exegetes. This contextual analysis is essential for understanding how the social, political, and intellectual conditions of the periods in which Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi lived influenced their interpretive approaches. Through this framework, the study is expected to offer a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of interpreting the polygamy verse and its relevance to contemporary Muslim societies.

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH RESULTS

The interpretation of Qur'anic verses, particularly those related to the issue of polygamy, cannot be separated from the social, historical, and intellectual contexts of the exegetes. This is clearly evident in the comparative interpretations of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi regarding Surah al-Nisa' verse 3 (Abdurrahman, 2017). Although both scholars were firmly committed to Islamic teachings, they adopted different methodological paths in understanding and contextualizing the sacred text. These differences reflect the dynamic nature of Islamic thought, which continues to evolve in response to changing times and societal needs (Rahmah, 2016).

Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) stands as a central figure in the Islamic reform movement. He is widely recognized as a scholar who sought to restore religious understanding to the spirit of rationality, ijtihad, and the moral objectives of Islamic law. His educational background at al-Azhar and his intellectual engagement with Jamaluddin al-Afghani shaped his critical stance toward textualist interpretations that were detached from social realities. In Tafsir al-Manar, Abduh endeavored to present the Qur'an as a living guide relevant to modern society, rather than as a purely normative text read through a literalist lens (Mawardi, 2025).

With regard to polygamy, Abduh rejected the notion that Islam grants absolute legitimacy to the practice. His interpretation of the phrase fa in khiftum allā ta'dilū reflects a strong sense of caution. For Abduh, this verse does not merely stipulate justice as a condition, but also conveys a serious moral warning. Justice is understood not only in material terms—such as financial support and equal distribution of time—but also in ethical and social dimensions, including psychological consequences and the dignity of women within the household (Husnahi et al., 2024).

According to Abduh, the primary objective of Islamic law is to establish justice and prevent all forms of oppression. Consequently, if polygamy has the potential to generate injustice, whether actual or latent, then such a practice contradicts the maqāṣid al-sharī'ah. In his view, monogamy is more closely aligned with the moral aims of Islam, as it offers greater prospects for tranquility, balanced relationships, and the protection of women's rights. This approach demonstrates that Abduh did not reject the Qur'anic text itself, but rather opposed interpretations that neglect the values of justice and human dignity embedded within it (Ropiah, 2018).

Abduh's perspective thus represents a reformist exegetical orientation that positions the Qur'an as a source of social ethics. Polygamy is not framed as a male entitlement, but as a practice that must be rigorously examined through moral accountability and responsibility. In this way, Abduh's interpretation makes a significant contribution to shifting the discourse on polygamy from mere normative legality toward ethical considerations and social welfare (maṣlaḥah) (Jalaluddin, 2021).

In contrast, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (1928–2010) approached the issue of polygamy within a more pragmatic and applicative framework of Islamic law. As a senior al-Azhar scholar, Grand Mufti of Egypt, and later Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Tantawi operated within a socio-political context that demanded practical and operational legal responses. Tafsir al-Wasith was composed with the aim of providing accessible Qur'anic interpretation for a broad audience, while maintaining scholarly rigor (Amin et al., 2026).

In his interpretation of Surah al-Nisa' verse 3, Tantawi asserts that polygamy is not a command but a conditional permission. The phrase fa in khiftum allā ta'dilū is understood as a firm normative boundary. The justice required for polygamy is primarily focused on external and measurable aspects, such as financial maintenance, equitable distribution of time, and equal treatment among wives. Justice in internal matters, such as emotional affection, is not legally mandated, as it lies beyond human capacity (Hendri, 2018).

Tantawi's interpretation indicates that Islam does not inherently promote polygamy, but rather seeks to regulate it to prevent it from becoming a means of oppression against women (Muttaqin et al., 2024). By imposing strict conditions of justice, Islamic law effectively restricts polygamy and directs believers toward monogamy as a safer option whenever there is doubt about the ability to uphold justice. In this sense, the

polygamy verse functions as a protective mechanism rather than an unrestricted authorization (Rahayu & Sartika, 2024).

Furthermore, Tantawi views polygamy as a legal solution applicable under specific social circumstances. Demographic imbalances, family-related issues, or other exceptional conditions may justify polygamy, provided that the principle of justice is upheld. This approach reflects the flexibility of Islamic law in responding to social needs without compromising its normative framework (Amin et al., 2026). Polygamy is thus positioned as a rukhsah (legal concession), rather than as an obligation or an ideal to be pursued (Arif & Sayska, 2025).

The findings of this study demonstrate that the differences between the interpretations of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi are not contradictory, but rather complementary. Abduh emphasizes the moral and ethical dimensions as the primary foundation for understanding the polygamy verse (Husnahi et al., 2024), while Tantawi highlights the applicative and contextual dimensions of Islamic law (Amin et al., 2026). Both scholars uphold justice as a central principle, yet differ in their emphasis and scope of implementation.

These findings align with Ridho's (2023) assertion that contemporary Qur'anic exegesis has become increasingly sensitive to the social, economic, and psychological realities of society. Accordingly, Qur'anic interpretation should not be understood as a final or closed product, but as an ongoing intellectual process that continuously interacts with historical and social contexts (Fitriana & Maab, 2023). Within this framework, the interpretations of Abduh and Tantawi make significant contributions to enriching Islamic intellectual discourse, particularly in addressing the issue of polygamy in a manner that is just, humane, and responsible (Aini & Abdurrahman, 2021).

In light of the interpretive differences between Abduh and Tantawi, it can be concluded that Qur'anic exegesis is inherently dynamic rather than static (Fajar et al., 2025). Tafsir evolves in response to social, cultural, and legal transformations within Muslim societies (Miftahun, 2025). Abduh's interpretation, with its emphasis on moral reasoning and justice, offers guidance for those seeking an ethical perspective on polygamy, while Tantawi's interpretation is more relevant for those interested in understanding how Islamic law can be applied contextually in contemporary settings.

CONCLUSION

Based on a comparative analysis of Muhammad Abduh's interpretation in Tafsir al-Manar and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi's interpretation in Tafsir al-Wasith, this study identifies fundamental differences in methodological approaches and legal orientations toward the polygamy verse, particularly Surah al-Nisa' verse 3. Muhammad Abduh situates polygamy within a framework of rationalism and ethical objectives of Islamic law by emphasizing substantive justice that encompasses material, social, and humanitarian dimensions. This emphasis positions polygamy as a practice that is morally restricted, thereby rendering monogamy more consistent with the primary objectives of Islamic law, namely the establishment of justice, the protection of women's dignity, and the realization of familial harmony. In contrast, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi views polygamy as a conditional permissibility within an applicative and contextual framework of Islamic law, emphasizing outward and measurable justice as the principal requirement and positioning polygamy as a legal concession (rukhsah) applicable under certain circumstances that entail social benefit (maṣlaḥah).

These interpretive differences demonstrate that Qur'anic exegesis is inherently dynamic and inseparable from the social, intellectual, and historical contexts of the exegetes. Tafsir is not merely an effort to understand the text, but also a process of actualizing divine values within lived social realities. A comparative understanding of the perspectives of Abduh and Tantawi offers a significant contribution to contemporary discourse on Islamic family law, particularly in formulating a prudent and balanced approach to the issue of polygamy. By remaining grounded in the principles of justice and public welfare, Islamic interpretation proves capable of responding to the challenges of changing times without losing the essence of its teachings.

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