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## **Semantic Analysis of Nafs in the Qur'an: A Toshihiko Izutsu Perspective and Its Relevance in Modern Thought**

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### **Abstract**

*This research aims to explore the concept of 'nafs' in the Qur'an, both historically and theologically, and understand its relevance in modern life. The research uses a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach, with syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses of relevant Qur'anic verses, as well as classical and contemporary literature studies. The results show that 'nafs' covers the physical, moral, and spiritual dimensions of human beings, with the main classifications: nafs al-ammārah (a soul inclined to evil), nafs al-lawwāmah (a self-deprecating soul), and nafs al-mutma'innah (a serene soul). The transformation of the meaning of 'nafs' from the pre-Qur'anic to the post-Qur'anic period reflects the human journey towards purification of the soul (tazkiyah) which contributes to the formation of individual character and social harmony. In the modern context, the understanding of 'nafs' has significant relevance in education, Islamic psychology and individual moral development. The research concludes that the purification of the soul is central to the Qur'anic worldview, making the 'nafs' the centre of moral and spiritual responsibility, which has a direct impact on the justice and balance of society.*

**Keywords:** Nafs, Qur'an; Purification of the Nafs; Tazkiyah; Morality; Tasawwuf.

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## Introduction

Understanding the concept of '*nafs*' in the Qur'an is one of the fundamental themes in Islamic studies that involves theological, philosophical and psychological dimensions. The term '*nafs*' (نَفْس), often translated as soul or self, has a broad and dynamic meaning that continues to evolve throughout history. In pre-Qur'anic, Qur'anic, and post-Qur'anic contexts, the concept reflects the close relationship between man and God, as well as his moral and spiritual responsibilities[1]. Moreover, the importance of this study lies in how '*nafs*' is understood not only as an individual aspect but also as an element that affects social responsibility and the balance of society[2]. This study aims to explore the meaning of '*nafs*' in various contexts and historical phases, while understanding the relevance of this concept in modern life.

Previous to Islam, the *Jahiliyyah* society viewed '*nafs*' as the core of individual life that was closely related to basic instincts and personal honour. The '*nafs*' in this period was often the driver of behaviour based on pride and social status [3]. However, this perspective emphasises the instinctive and reactive aspects of the human being, without any significant spiritual element [4]. During the Qur'anic revelation period, the concept of '*nafs*' underwent a major transformation, with an emphasis on self-purification (*tazkiyah*) and human moral responsibility [5]. The Qur'ān classifies the '*nafs*' into several stages, such as *nafs al-ammārah* (the soul that commands evil), *nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-deprecating soul), and *nafs al-mutma'innah* (the serene soul), each of which denotes man's spiritual process towards closeness to God (QS. Yusuf: 53, QS. Al-Qiyamah: 2, QS. Al-Fajr: 27-30).

In the post-Qur'anic context, the concept of '*nafs*' is further deepened through the study of Sufism. Sufis see '*nafs*' as the centre of emotions, desires and inclinations that require purification and training through spiritual practices such as *dhikr* and *mujahadah*[6]. They classify the '*nafs*' in several additional levels, such as *nafs al-rādhīyah* (soul that is pleased) and *nafs al-mardhiyah* (soul that is pleased by Allah), which affirms the spiritual journey towards perfection[1]. This approach reflects a holistic understanding of '*nafs*' as a dynamic entity, encompassing physical, psychological, moral and spiritual dimensions[7].

Toshihiko Izutsu, in his semantic approach to the Qur'ān, makes a significant contribution to understanding key terms such as '*nafs*.' He uses syntagmatic and syntagmatic analyses [8]. He uses syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses to reveal the semantic relationship between '*nafs*' and other terms such as '*qalb*' (heart) and '*ruh*' (spirit) [9]. This approach allows us to

explore the complex meanings associated with human spiritual and existential experiences[10],[11]. Moreover, this research shows how the concept of 'nafs' is not only relevant in a spiritual context but also in the fields of Islamic education, ethics and psychotherapy[12],[13].

This study is important because the 'nafs' is the centre of moral agency in the Qur'anic worldview. The purification of the 'nafs' is regarded as the battlefield for human beings to overcome negative urges and achieve spiritual peace [14]. Furthermore, the Qur'ān asserts that individuals' responsibility towards their "nafs" has a direct impact on social harmony, justice and environmental preservation (QS. Ash-Shams: 9-10). Thus, this study is not only relevant in an academic context but also has practical applications in everyday life, both individually and collectively[2].

The formulation of the problem in this study includes several main questions: How has the meaning of 'nafs' evolved in the pre-Qur'anic, Qur'anic, and post-Qur'anic contexts? How does the purification of 'nafs' in the Qur'an contribute to the character building of individuals and society? What is the relationship between the concept of 'nafs' and other key terms such as 'qalb' and 'ruh'? And how relevant is the study of 'nafs' to the modern context, especially in the fields of education, ethics, and psychology? This research seeks to answer these questions by referring to semantic approaches, Qur'anic exegesis, and classical and contemporary literature[15],[16],[2].

Through a comprehensive approach, this study aims to broaden the understanding of the concept of 'nafs' in the Qur'anic perspective and its relevance to modern life [3]. The study is expected to contribute to the development of science, particularly in the fields of Islamic theology, philosophy, and psychology, as well as encourage the practical application of the concept of 'nafs' in social and spiritual contexts.

## Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to explore the concept of 'nafs' in various historical phases and Islamic perspectives. This approach was chosen due to its relevance in exploring the deep meaning of religious texts, particularly the Qur'an, as well as its relevance to classical and contemporary literature [17],[18]. The research sample consists of Qur'anic verses that explicitly mention 'nafs' such as in QS. Yusuf: 53, QS. Al-Qiyamah: 2, and QS. Al-Fajr: 27-30. In addition, classical works such as *Mufradāt al-Alfāz al-Qur'ān* by Al-Raghib al-Isfahani and *Lisan al-'Arab* by Ibn Manzur, as well as contemporary research from Toshihiko Izutsu and related journal articles, were used as additional materials to strengthen the analysis[10],[11].

The main instrument used in this research is text analysis conducted syntagmatically and paradigmatically. Syntagmatic analysis is used to understand the relationship of the word '*nafs*' with other words in the context of Qur'anic sentences, while paradigmatic analysis focuses on the semantic relationship between '*nafs*' and other terms such as '*qalb*' (heart) and '*ruh*' (spirit) [19]. The data collection procedure began with the identification of relevant verses in the Qur'ān, followed by a review of classical and modern literature to understand the meaning of '*nafs*' from historical, philosophical and theological perspectives[6],[7].

The data analysis process is carried out in several stages. Firstly, data from the Qur'anic text was interpreted using a thematic approach to identify classifications of '*nafs*' such as *nafs al-ammārah*, *nafs al-lawwāmah*, and *nafs al-mutma'innah*. Secondly, secondary data from additional literature is analysed to understand the evolution of the meaning of '*nafs*' in post-Qur'anic contexts, especially in Sufism [20]. Thirdly, the results of the analyses were compared with previous findings to evaluate the consistency of the concept of '*nafs*' in classical and modern literature[1],[16]. The triangulation method was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the data by comparing the results of the analysis of the Qur'anic text, the interpretation of classical literature, and the findings of contemporary research.

The results of this study were analysed descriptively with a focus on thematic patterns that emerged from the data. The resulting narrative is structured to provide a holistic understanding of the concept of '*nafs*' in various dimensions, ranging from moral, spiritual, to social aspects. This method is designed to be replicated by other researchers by following the same procedure, using the mentioned instruments and sources, and paying attention to the relevant context of analysis.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. Basic Meaning of '*Nafs*'

The fundamental meaning of the word "*nafs*" in the Qur'an refers to an entity that encompasses various existential dimensions of the human being, including physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual aspects. Based on an analysis of Qur'anic texts and classical literature such as *Mufradāt al-Alfāz al-Qur'ān* by Al-Raghib al-Isfahani and *Lisan al-'Arab* by Ibn Manzur, "*nafs*" can be interpreted as the "soul" or "self," which serves as the center of human will, emotions, morality, and individual identity[10],[7]. Al-Raghib describes "*nafs*" as a driving force that motivates human actions – either towards virtue or vice – depending on the process of spiritual purification (p. 570), while Ibn Manzur

emphasizes its connection to consciousness and thought (Vol. 10, p. 43). For instance, QS. Al-Isra: 14 mentions that the "*nafs*" is responsible for its own deeds, indicating its role in moral accountability[21]. Moreover, the Qur'an portrays "*nafs*" in various conditions such as *nafs al-ammārah* (the soul that incites to evil), *nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching soul), and *nafs al-mutmainnah* (the tranquil soul), highlighting the complexity and dynamic nature of this concept in the Islamic understanding of human existence.

## 2. Relational Meaning

### Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Analysis

The relational meaning of "*nafs*" in the Qur'an can be understood through both syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses. Syntagmatically, "*nafs*" is often associated with specific attributes that describe its moral and spiritual condition, such as *nafs al-ammārah* (the soul inclined to evil) in QS Yusuf: 53, *nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching soul) in QS. Al-Qiyamah: 2, and *nafs al-mutma'innah* (the tranquil soul) in QS. Al-Fajr: 27–30. These associations highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of the soul, reflecting the human struggle between base desires and spiritual purification[10][11][22].

Paradigmatically, "*nafs*" interacts with other key Qur'anic terms such as "*qalb*" (heart) and "*ruh*" (spirit). While "*qalb*" is often depicted as the center of moral consciousness as in QS. Al-A'raf: 179, and "*ruh*" as the divine spiritual element, "*nafs*" functions as the locus of emotional impulses and moral decision-making. This relational network reflects the Qur'anic holistic view of the human soul, where "*nafs*" serves as a mediating force between the physical and the spiritual dimensions of human existence[23],[12].

### Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis

A synchronic and diachronic analysis of the concept of "*nafs*" reveals a significant evolution in its meaning from the pre-Qur'anic to the post-Qur'anic period. In the pre-Qur'anic era, "*nafs*" was primarily understood as a vital force or the essence of life, closely tied to basic instincts and personal honor within the Jahiliyyah society, without much emphasis on moral or spiritual dimensions[4],[22].

However, during the Qur'anic period, the Qur'an redefined "*nafs*" as the center of human moral and spiritual responsibility. The human soul is classified into various stages – *nafs al-ammārah* (the soul inclined to evil), *nafs al-lawwāmah*

(the self-reproaching soul), and *nafs al-mutma'innah* (the tranquil soul) – which reflect the spiritual journey toward purification and closeness to God, as emphasized in QS. Al-Fajr: 27–30 and QS. Ash-Shams: 7–10 [24].

In the post-Qur'anic period, particularly within Sufi tradition, the concept of "*nafs*" further developed into a spiritual center that must undergo purification through *mujahadah* (struggle against the lower self) and *tazkiyah* (spiritual purification) [25]. Sufi scholars classified the soul into higher levels such as *nafs al-rādhīyah* (the content soul) and *nafs al-mardhiyyah* (the soul pleased by God), representing spiritual perfection and existential nearness to the Divine [6][5][1].

### 3. The Qur'anic Weltanschauung (Worldview) on *Nafs*

The concept of "*nafs*" in the Qur'an reflects an Islamic worldview (*weltanschauung*) that positions the individual in a deeply interconnected relationship with both society and God. This worldview includes several key aspects:

a) Relationship with God:

In the Qur'an, *nafs* represents the moral and spiritual trial each individual must undergo to attain closeness to Allah. The purification of the *nafs* is essential for receiving divine pleasure, as illustrated in QS. Al-Fajr: 27–30.

b) Social Responsibility:

The purification of the *nafs* is not limited to personal transformation but also extends to society at large. The Qur'an emphasizes that social harmony begins with individual purification (*tazkiyah*) [22].

c) Moral Consciousness:

As noted by Toshihiko Izutsu, the Qur'an not only redefines the meanings of terms but also establishes a new value system in which *nafs* serves as the core of moral responsibility [23].

Thus, the concept of *nafs* in the Qur'an embodies a worldview that integrates the spiritual and ethical development of the individual with the well-being of society. In Islam, *nafs* is not merely an individual entity but a vital force that influences social justice, compassion, and collective responsibility [26]. By

purifying their *nafs*, individuals contribute to the formation of a harmonious *ummah* aligned with Islamic values[10]. The following is a summary table of the main contents of the paper "Semantic Analysis of Nafs in the Qur'an: A Toshihiko Izutsu Perspective and Its Relevance in Modern Thought". This table is designed to help you understand the structure and key findings of the paper in a concise and systematic manner:

**Table 1: Summary of Semantic Analysis of *Nafs* Concepts in Al-Qur'an**

Aspects	Description
<b>Methodological Approach</b>	Qualitative-descriptive, with syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis of Qur'anic verses and classical-modern literature.
<b>Basic Meaning 'Nafs'</b>	Human existential entities include physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual aspects. Defined as "soul" or "self".
<b>Classification Nafs (Qur'ani)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Nafs al-Ammārah</i> (The Soul of the Wicked) – QS Yusuf: 53</li> <li>- <i>Nafs al-Lawwāmah</i> (A self-deprecating soul) – QS Al-Qiyamah: 2</li> <li>- <i>Nafs al-Mutma'innah</i> (Calm soul) – QS Al-Fajr: 27–30</li> </ul>
<b>Development of Meaning (Evolusi)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Pre-Qur'anic:</b> Focus on personal instincts and honor (Jahiliyah society).</li> <li>- <b>Qur'anic:</b> Transformation into a center of moral-spiritual responsibility.</li> <li>- <b>Post-Qur'anic (Sufism):</b> Nafs as a spiritual center, through tazkiyah and mujahadah (purification of the soul). Extra level: <i>nafs al-rāḍiyah</i>, <i>nafs al-marḍiyyah</i>.</li> </ul>
<b>Relational Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Sintigmatic:</b> The relationship of 'nafs' with specific terms in the Qur'anic sentences.</li> <li>- <b>Paradigmatic:</b> Relationship with the terms 'qalb' (heart), and 'spirit' (Spirit/Spirituality).</li> </ul>
<b>Weltanschauung Qur'ani</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individual moral responsibility</li> <li>- Relationship with God and society</li> <li>- Purification of the soul contributes to social justice and balance ekologis</li> </ul>

Aspects	Description
<b>Modern Conceptual Contributions</b>	Relevant in Islamic education, Islamic psychology, modern ethics, and spiritual-based psychiatric therapy.
<b>Supporting Key Concepts</b>	<i>Tazkiyah</i> (cleansing of the soul), <i>Tasawwuf</i> , the moral responsibility of the individual towards the social order and divinity.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed a deep understanding of the concept of "*nafs*" in the Qur'an through a semantic approach, encompassing its basic meaning, relational meaning, the synchronic and diachronic evolution of the term, as well as the Qur'anic worldview (*weltanschauung*) regarding the relationship between the individual, society, and God. The main findings indicate that "*nafs*" is a dynamic entity that reflects the spiritual and moral journey of a human being – ranging from *nafs al-ammārah*, which inclines toward evil, to *nafs al-lawwāmah*, which reproaches itself, and ultimately to *nafs al-mutmainnah*, which attains spiritual peace. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of soul purification (*tazkiyah*) as a prerequisite for achieving moral perfection and closeness to Allah, which also serves as a foundation for social harmony within the concept of *ummah*.

Relationally, "*nafs*" does not stand alone, but interacts with other concepts such as "*qalb*" (heart) and "*ruh*" (spiritual soul), which together reflect Islam's holistic view of the human being. The synchronic and diachronic analysis shows that the meaning of "*nafs*" evolved from a primal, instinctual understanding in the pre-Qur'anic era to a complex moral-spiritual entity in the Qur'anic period, and was further expanded in the post-Qur'anic tradition, especially within Sufism.

This study contributes to various academic fields. In Qur'anic studies, the applied semantic approach offers new insights into understanding key terms in the sacred text. In Islamic psychology, it provides a conceptual framework for understanding human spiritual dynamics, which is relevant to the development of Islam-based therapies. In Islamic education, the findings highlight the importance of integrating spiritual values in character formation. Furthermore,



this research reinforces the relevance of Qur'anic teachings in addressing moral and spiritual challenges in the modern era.

### Author Contributions

**Zaduna Fiddarain:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Farrel Izham Prayitno:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Sulhi Kholid Al Abid:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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