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Ghulāt in the Sunnī *Tafsīr* Tradition: The Historical Trajectory and Function of the Concept from the Classical to the Contemporary Period

In Sunnī *tafsīr* literature, the concept of *Ghulāt* has historically extended beyond merely denoting Shiʿī excesses, encompassing epistemic, sectarian, and social dimensions. From the 4th century AH onward, classical *tafsīrs* employed *Ghulāt* within its lexical meaning of “excessiveness” to refer to groups such as the Muʿtazila, Sufis, Murjiʿa, Dhahiriyya, Mushabbiḥa, Mutakallimīn, Zenādika, Bāṭiniyya, philosophers, Khārijites, and jurists. In these works, references to Shiʿī excesses were relatively rare, reflecting the limited crystallization of sectarian divisions and the heterogeneous, pluralistic nature of early Sunnī intellectual culture. The measured use of *Ghulāt* indicates a pluralistic epistemic approach and suggests that Shiʿī literature was not yet perceived as a threat.

In the 20th century, the use of *Ghulāt* increased significantly in modern *tafsīrs*, becoming a frequently cited concept and a rhetorical tool for conveying social and ethical messages. Notably, *Tafsīr al-Manār* and *al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr* employ the term extensively. While retaining its classical meaning, *Ghulāt* in these texts addresses diverse topics such as the limits of the Prophet’s knowledge, his elevation to divine attributes, temporary marriage (*mutʿa*), interpretations of the *Basmala*, shrines over graves, esoteric teachings, and the infallibility of the Imāms. Contemporary *mufasssīrīn*, including Ibn ʿĀshūr, also applied the term to debates on gender equality and inheritance, while *al-Manār* aligns its use with critiques of nationalism and concerns for Islamic unity.

Modern *tafsīrs* further associate *Ghulāt* with heretical groups of Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Persian origin, portraying it as a mechanism that disrupts religious and political structures and fragments social cohesion. This evolution demonstrates that the shift in *Ghulāt* usage is not merely terminological but also reflective of the political, sectarian, and ethical concerns of the period. The concept’s expansion in modern texts allows for the tracing of ideological and substantive transformations in *tafsīr*, highlighting the limitations of classifying classical works solely according to sectarian frameworks established since Ignaz Goldziher.



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