

THE ONTOLOGY OF THE SELF IN QS. AN-NISĀ' VERSE 1: REINTERPRETATION OF THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ORIGINS AND ITS ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMPACT

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Article Info

Received: October 15, 2025

Revised: November 23,
2025

Accepted: January 04, 2026

Online Version: March 14,
2026

Abstract

The term *nafs wāḥidah* in QS. An-Nisā' [4]:1 is a key concept in understanding the origins of humans and the foundation of social relations according to the Qur'an. The meaning of this term developed in the tradition of interpretation: some classical commentators interpreted it as Adam, while modern thinkers view it as the universal principle of humanity. This study attempts to re-explain the ontological meaning of *nafs wāḥidah* through semantic studies, comparative studies of various interpretations, and a thematic approach to verses related to the process of human creation. The research findings indicate that *nafs wāḥidah* is more appropriately understood as a concept that describes the basic unity of humans and an initial entity that encompasses both physical and spiritual aspects and does not only refer to the first historical human figure. This new understanding confirms that the Qur'an views all humans as originating from the same source, so that every individual has equal value and dignity without hierarchical differences based on gender or social group. Anthropologically, this concept provides a foundation for human ethics, balanced relations between men and women, and the establishment of a just social order. This study also contributes to the development of Qur'anic anthropology by highlighting the relationship between the ontological view of humanity and the social structures built upon it.

Keywords: Human Origins, *Nafs Wāḥidah*, Ontology, Qur'anic Anthropology



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Journal Homepage <https://journal.zmsadra.or.id/index.php/jois>

How to cite: Hasanah, H., and Faisal, A. (2026). The Ontology of the Self in QS. An-Nisā' Verse 1: Reinterpretation of the Concept of Human Origins and Its Anthropological Impact. *JOIS: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2(1), 267–273. <https://doi.org/XX.XXXXX/jois.v2i1.1420>

Published by: Yayasan Zia Mulla Sadra

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of human origins is a central theme in the anthropological study of the Qur'an, and Surah An-Nisa' [4]:1 occupies a crucial position in this discourse. This verse introduces the term *nafs wāḥidah* as the primary point of human creation, a concept that relates not only to the origin of human existence but also encompasses ethical social principles concerning kinship, justice, and responsibility between individuals. Since the early days of the exegetical tradition, the term *nafs wāḥidah* has given rise to widely differing interpretations regarding what the Qur'an means by the first human entity, whether it refers to the physical figure of Adam or describes the primordial essence that underlies the unity of humanity (Toshihiko Izutsu, 2008).

The majority of classical exegetes understand *nafs wāḥidah* as Adam, the historical figure who became the biological parent of all humankind (al-Tabari, 2001). However, modern studies offer a broader approach. Contemporary commentators such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Quraish Shihab view this verse as affirming that humans share a common essential source, namely their human essence, rather than simply referring to a specific individual (Quraish Shihab, 2002). This interpretation provides an interpretive alternative that can clarify the relationship between men and women and emphasize the concept of existential equality in Islam.

Furthermore, an ontological reading of the *nafs wāḥidah* has profound anthropological implications. If all humans are understood to originate from a single universal essence, then claims of superiority based on ethnicity, race, or gender have no legitimate basis from a divine perspective. This principle aligns with the Quran's moral message about human unity and brotherhood, as emphasized in Surah Al-Hujurat [49]:13. Fazlur Rahman's thinking also demonstrates that the Quran often conveys social values through universal, metaphysical concepts (Fazlur Rahman, 2009). making the interpretation of the *nafs wāḥidah* an important foundation for the formation of humanitarian ethics.

Although the theme of human creation has been discussed in numerous studies, studies focusing on the ontological dimension of the *nafs wāḥidah* (self-centeredness) are still limited. Most previous studies have emphasized the biological aspects or the debate over the creation of Adam and Eve, and few have directly connected it to social and anthropological constructs. Therefore, this study aims to present a new perspective by examining the meaning of *nafs wāḥidah* through a semantic approach, comparative analysis of interpretations, and a Qur'anic anthropological framework.

This research is expected to broaden the understanding of the nature of human origins as presented in the Qur'an while also providing a significant conceptual contribution to the study of human equality and social structure within the field of Islamic studies. By examining the Qur'anic perspective on the creation of humanity, the research seeks to highlight the fundamental principle that all human beings share the same origin and therefore possess equal dignity and worth. Such an understanding is crucial in addressing issues related to social hierarchy, discrimination, and inequality that may arise within diverse communities.

Furthermore, this study aims to enrich scholarly discussions on how Qur'anic teachings can inform contemporary debates about human relations, diversity, and social justice. By engaging with classical and modern interpretations of the relevant verses, the research offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how Islamic teachings promote the values of equality, mutual respect, and coexistence among different groups of people.

Thus, this analysis does not merely present a theological interpretation of the verse, but also emphasizes its broader implications for modern social realities. In this way, the research demonstrates that Qur'anic teachings remain highly relevant in guiding contemporary societies toward more inclusive, just, and harmonious social structures.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a library study model, as all discussions are based on literature searches without field data collection. The primary data analyzed include Quranic texts, commentaries from the classical to contemporary periods, Arabic dictionaries, and academic research relevant to the theme of nafs and Quranic anthropology. This method was chosen to allow for a deeper understanding of the meaning and interpretation of the concept of nafs wāḥidah through a comprehensive exploration of the text.

The analysis was conducted using three main approaches. First, a thematic interpretation approach, which compiles all verses related to the concept of human creation, the term nafs, and similar themes, then examines them as a single topic. Second, a semantic study, which traces the roots and development of the meaning of terms such as nafs and wāḥidah through classical dictionaries and the context of their use in the Quran. Third, a comparative interpretation is used to examine how commentators from various eras understood the concept of nafs wāḥidah, thus revealing the development of perspectives from traditional to modern.

The data collection process was conducted through document review, then organized thematically for easier analysis. The analysis phase included filtering the data, grouping them according to themes, reading the context of meaning, and drawing interpretive conclusions. Through this series of processes, this research formulated a new picture of the ontological meaning of nafs wāḥidah and its consequences for understanding human origins from a Qur'anic perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic Analysis of the Term Nafs Wāḥidah

In QS. An-Nisa' [4]:1, the phrase nafs wāḥidah is a fundamental concept in understanding human origins. Etymologically, the Arabic word nafs has a broad scope of meaning: it refers not only to the "soul" in the spiritual sense, but also to the "person," "living entity," or "basic substance" of a creature. Al-Ṭabarī interpreted the phrase as the original entity from which subsequent human creation proceeded, but he did not explicitly limit it to a specific physical form, thus allowing for a more open interpretation (Al-Ṭabarī, 2001). Meanwhile, al-Rāzī highlighted the word wāḥidah as a sign that humans share a common origin, both materially and existentially. Therefore, this verse should not be read as a biological narrative but rather as a statement of the unity of humanity (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 1999).

Contemporary semantic studies indicate that the root word nafs in the Qur'anic vocabulary is often used to describe the "unit of life" or "existential entity" (Toshihiko Izutsu, 2002). Therefore, the pure soul can be understood as a primordial entity that serves as the basic source of human life, not merely a specific historical figure. This view aligns with Fazlur Rahman's thematic approach, which views the use of terms in the Qur'an as an expression of universal principles emphasizing moral and humanitarian values, rather than simply a sequence of events (Fazlur Rahman, 2009). Thus, linguistic studies help confirm that the pure soul is an

ontological concept that emphasizes the unity of human origins and the foundation of universal brotherhood.

Classical and Modern Interpretations of Nafs Wāḥidah

Classical commentators' interpretations of the term "nafs wahidah" (self-consciousness) in Surah An-Nisa' [4]:1 generally center on the assumption that the verse refers to Adam as the first human. Al-Tabari was one of the figures who supported this view, asserting that human creation began with Adam, from whom God created Eve (Al-Ṭabari, 2001). In this construction, women are positioned as creatures born from the male body. Ibn Kathir continued this interpretation by citing several narrations, widely used in classical exegetical traditions, that Eve was created from Adam's rib (Ibn Katsir, 1999). This narrative indirectly reinforces the understanding that places men at the center of biological origins and is often used as the basis for the formation of social structures that tend to be hierarchical between men and women.

While the general understanding of classical commentators leads to the identification of nafs wahidah with Adam, figures such as Fakhruddin al-Razi offer a broader perspective. Al-Razi did not limit the meaning of the pure soul to the physical figure of Adam, but rather understood it as a type of humanity (al-jins al-insānī) that is the source of the existence of all humankind (Fakhruddin al-Razi, 1998). His interpretation sought to highlight the ontological aspect of the verse, not merely the biological narrative. With this approach, the meaning of the pure soul can be understood as a universal concept of the unity of human origin that is independent of gender.

Modern and contemporary interpretations have presented new directions in understanding this phrase. Reformers such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida firmly rejected the idea that women were created from the rib of men, as it contradicts the values of justice and equality that are fundamental tenets of the Quran (Muhammad Abduh & Rashid Rida, 1947). Therefore, the creation of women should not be understood within a subordinative framework. Quraish Shihab also offered a similar argument: according to him, the pure soul affirms the essential unity of human origin, not a biological statement about women's dependence on men (M. Quraish Shihab, 2002). The meaning of this verse actually points to the equality of human nature, so gender relations cannot be built on the assumption that women originate from men.

Recent views from thinkers such as Murtadha Mutahhari and Allamah Tabataba'i further expand the interpretive horizon by emphasizing the metaphysical aspect of the nafs wahidah. For them, this term does not refer to a specific individual, but rather indicates the moral, spiritual, and existential essence of humanity (Murtadha Mutahhari, 1980). Thus, human diversity is determined not by biological factors or gender, but by the moral qualities and level of spiritual awareness of each individual. This perspective offers a holistic approach to the process of human creation while affirming that the Quran establishes an inclusive and non-hierarchical foundation for humanity.

Ontological Reinterpretation: Nafs Wāḥidah as a Universal Entity

When viewed through a linguistic approach and a comparative reading of classical and modern interpretations, the term nafs wahidah can be understood not as an exclusive reference to Adam as the first historical figure, but rather as the initial entity that forms the basis of all human existence. This explanation is strengthened by the fact that the word nafs in the Qur'an is often used to describe the "essence of the human self," which encompasses the physical, spiritual, and conscious aspects in a unified manner. Al-Raghib al-Aṣḥfahani emphasized that nafs is not merely the soul in the spiritual sense, but refers to the entire structure of human existence (Al-Raghib al-Aṣḥfahani, 2003). The use of the word "wāḥidah" emphasizes the

meaning of absolute unity, indicating that humanity originates from a single, undivided existential entity.

In earlier generations of exegetical traditions, such as those of Al-Ṭabari and Ibn Kathir, the term "nafs wāḥidah" was more often understood literally as Adam (Al-Ṭabari, 2001). They then interpreted Eve as a creature created from Adam's body, thus positioning the relationship between men and women within a hierarchical framework of biological descent. However, this interpretation is not fully accepted by modern commentators. Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Quraish Shihab, for example, believe that this verse does not address a hierarchical gender structure but rather affirms the common origin of humanity without discrimination based on sex (Murtadha Mutahhari, 1980). Contemporary approaches have also been proposed by thinkers such as Mutahhari and Tabataba'i, who understand nafs wāḥidah as the "universal essence of humanity," making it a more philosophical than biological form of origin (Fazlur Rahman, 1980).

From a modern hermeneutical perspective, Fazlur Rahman emphasizes that the interpretation of the Qur'an must refer to the universal values it contains, not merely a literal and historical reading of the text (Allamah Thabathaba'i, 1997). If this principle is applied, then the nafs wāḥidah can be understood as a universal human prototype, namely the basic entity that becomes the moral, spiritual, and existential foundation for all human descendants. This understanding provides a refreshing take on the verse of QS. An-Nisā' [4]: 1, because it does not limit the origin of humans to the figure of Adam, but opens up the space that the "single soul" is a symbol of the unity of human nature. This concept is also in line with the Qur'an's affirmation of human nature in QS. Ar-Rūm [30]: 30, which places all humans as beings of equal dignity because they originate from one ontological source.

Reconstructing Human Origins from a Qur'anic Perspective

The Qur'an presents a rich description of the process of human emergence through various terms describing the original material elements of creation. Words such as *ṭīn* (wet clay), *ḥama' masnūn* (fermented earth), *ṣaṣāl* (dry, sounding earth), and *turāb* (dust) appear in numerous verses, including Surah Al-Hijr (15):26 and Surah As-Sajdah (32):7-9. These verses indicate that human creation proceeded through several stages involving not only physical elements but also a transcendent dimension. Within this framework, the nafs wāḥidah is understood as the "initial entity" that receives the instillation of the divine spirit (*nafakh fīhi min rūḥih*), as explained by Tabataba'i when interpreting the relationship between the body and the soul in the initial creation process (Allamah Thabathaba'i, 1997).

The concept of human creation in the Qur'an does not stop at merely material aspects. The existence of the pure soul indicates that humans have a single point of origin that transcends the biological. This phrase signifies that human existence stems from an essential unity encompassing moral and spiritual dimensions. This aligns with Surah Al-An'am [6]:98, which affirms that humans are descended from "a single soul" (Ibn Katsir, 1999). Thus, the pure soul can be viewed as a metaphysical foundation that affirms the fundamental equality of all human beings, despite the physical and social diversity that subsequently emerged.

The Qur'an also explains the stages of human development for subsequent generations, as outlined in Surah Al-Mu'minūn [23]:12-14, which details the stages of *nuṭfah*, *'alaqah*, *muḍghah*, and ultimately the perfect human. This description demonstrates the continuity between the creation of the first human (which is archetypal) and the subsequent creation of humans through biological processes. Mutahhari even emphasized that the relationship between the material origins and the spiritual dimension of humanity makes humans unique creatures who unite two worlds simultaneously: the material realm and the spiritual realm (Murtadha Mutahhari, 1980).

Through a thematic approach to these verses, it appears that the Quran constructs a comprehensive concept of human origins, namely the concept of ontological unity. All humans born through modern reproductive processes remain essentially connected to the pure self as the original entity. This concept not only has theological implications but also forms the basis of social ethics such as equality, respect for human dignity, and more inclusive human relations. This idea aligns with the thinking of Fazlur Rahman, who observed that the major themes of the Quran consistently emphasize universal principles that guide human life (Fazlur Rahman, 1980).

The Anthropological Impact of the Concept of the Self-Soul

The interpretation of the self-soul as the single origin of humanity has far-reaching anthropological consequences, particularly regarding the equality of human dignity. This unity of creation demonstrates that all humans have an equal standing before God, regardless of racial, ethnic, or social background. This view aligns with the message of Surah Al-Hujurāt [49]:13, which emphasizes that human diversity is not a basis for mutual debasement, but rather a mechanism for mutual recognition and cooperation. In his study of Islamic thought, Esack emphasizes that the idea of a common human origin is the theological foundation for the concept of egalitarianism in Muslim society (Farid Esack, 1997).

Furthermore, the concept of the self-soul also serves as a starting point for the formation of social ethics in the Quran. When Surah An-Nisa' [4]:1 emphasizes piety, trustworthiness, and kinship. This verse not only provides a moral command but also a philosophical foundation that social responsibility arises from the awareness that humans are one extended family. This ontological unity gives rise to the obligation to respect each other, protect each other's rights, and avoid acts of injustice that could disrupt social harmony.

This reinterpretation of the pure nafs also has strong implications for understanding gender relations. If men and women are understood as originating from the same fundamental entity, then there is no ontological basis for placing one sex superior to the other. This supports the views of contemporary scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, who argue that the Qur'anic explanation of human origins affirms gender equality, rather than justifying unequal relations (Amina Wadud, 1999). Thus, this concept becomes a crucial argument for an inclusive and non-hierarchical reading of the Qur'an. Furthermore, the understanding of nafs wāḥidah strengthens the perspective of modern Islamic anthropology by viewing humans as beings consisting not only of physical elements, but also of spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. The spiritual essence of humans, marked by the instillation of the soul by God, demonstrates that human identity transcends the biological aspect. This view aligns with Seyyed Hossein Nasr's analysis, which views humans as multidimensional beings closely connected to cosmic reality and divine values (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1990). Therefore, the concept of nafs wāḥidah can be understood as a conceptual foundation that unites the material and spiritual aspects of humans into a unified system of Qur'anic anthropology.

CONCLUSION

A study of Surah An-Nisa' [4]:1 through linguistic, thematic, and comparative interpretation approaches shows that the concept of nafs wahidah cannot be understood simply as a reference to the figure of Adam. Rather, the term reflects the fundamental principle of the unity of human origins, namely that all humans are rooted in a single, comprehensive and fundamental human entity. This reinterpretation provides a more complete picture of the process of human creation in the Qur'an, namely, as a gradual fusion of material and spiritual elements. Within this framework, nafs wahidah becomes the theological basis for the view that humans possess equal dignity, without any ontological superiority inherent in a particular gender or social group.

The anthropological implications of this concept are far-reaching: it affirms human equality before God, reinforces the value of universal brotherhood, and provides a normative foundation for just social and gender relations. These findings also demonstrate that Qur'anic anthropology holds great potential for understanding humans as multidimensional, physical, spiritual, and moral beings. This research opens up the direction for further studies, particularly in connecting the ontological concept of humans with the formation of social structures, ethics, and human relations from the perspective of the Qur'an.

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