

Divine Objectives and Decentralized Power: Islamic Thought, Postmodernism, and the Future of Global Ethics

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Abstract

This article examines the underexplored intersections between postmodernism and Islamic thought, arguing that Maqasid al-Shariah (objectives of Islamic law) offers a robust ethical framework to address postmodernism's normative gaps in confronting global challenges. While postmodern critiques deconstruct power hierarchies in technology, justice, and sustainability, exposing algorithmic bias, systemic oppression, and ecological exploitation, their relativistic foundations often lack actionable solutions. Conversely, Islamic thought, grounded in divine revelation, provides prescriptive principles such as Adl (justice), Mizan (balance), and Khilafah (stewardship). Through comparative analysis and case studies including Malaysia's Shariah-compliant AI governance, Islamic Relief's refugee programs, and Indonesia's ecological fatwas this study demonstrates how these paradigms synergize postmodern pluralism and revitalize Islamic Ijtihad (independent reasoning), while Maqasid al-Shariah stabilizes postmodern ethics with universal norms. The findings suggest a post-secular interdisciplinary dialogue, proposing policy models that integrate Maqasid principles into global governance frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By bridging critical theory and theological ethics, this work redefines global problem-solving, balancing moral clarity with inclusive pluralism.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Islamic thought, Maqasid al-Shariah, technology ethics, social justice, sustainability, global governance, interdisciplinary dialogue.*

Introduction

The complex interplay of technological disruption, systemic injustice, and ecological fragility defines the ethical and philosophical dilemmas of the 21st century. As artificial intelligence re-configures societal norms, structural inequities persist across globalized economies, and climate collapse threatens to exceed planetary boundaries, the search for frameworks capable of addressing these many crises has intensified. Within this landscape, two intellectual traditions - postmodernism and Islamic thought - emerge as distinct yet under-explored paradigms offering complementary insights. Postmodernism, born from the

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disillusionment with Enlightenment-era universalism, deconstructs hegemonic narratives, championing pluralism, relativism, and skepticism toward centralized power (Sani, 2022). Its critique of modernity's grand projects, from colonial epistemologies to technocratic capitalism, has reshaped discourses on identity, justice, and ecology. Yet, its rejection of meta-narratives often leaves it ethically isolated, struggling to prescribe actionable solutions to existential challenges. Conversely, Islamic thought, anchored in divine revelation and the teleological objectives of *Maqasid al-Shariah* (Mamalipurath) provides a stable moral architecture that integrates spiritual and material dimensions. Principles like *Adl* (justice), *Mizan* (balance), and *Khilafah* (stewardship) offer prescriptive guidance for governance, equity, and sustainability. However, its perceived rigidity in pluralistic contexts and limited engagement with secular critiques of power constrain its relevance in global discourse (Smith, 2024).

The disconnect between these paradigms represents a critical gap in contemporary scholarship. While postmodernism's deconstruction of power dynamics aligns with Islam's condemnation of *zulm* (oppression), its relativism clashes with the absolutism of divine law. Similarly, the emphasis of Islamic ethics on *Tawhid* (divine unity) and *Maqasid al-Shariah* could stabilize postmodernism's fluid morality. However, such synergies remain largely theoretical. Existing studies tend to silo these frameworks: postmodern analyses of technology or ecology seldom engage Islamic epistemology (Mills, 2022) while Islamic scholarship often overlooks postmodern critiques when addressing modernity (Banerji, 2022). This lacuna obscures opportunities for interdisciplinary solutions—for instance, applying *Maqasid al-Shariah*'s protection of *Aql* (intellect) to govern AI ethically or leveraging postmodern pluralism to revitalize Islamic *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in diverse societies.

This article argues that *Maqasid al-Shariah*, with its emphasis on preserving life, intellect, faith, lineage, and wealth, provides a normative bridge between postmodern critiques and actionable ethics. By examining convergences (e.g., anti-absolutism, ecological stewardship) and divergences (e.g., relativism vs. revelation) across three domains—technology, justice, and sustainability—the study demonstrates how these paradigms can mutually enrich one another. For example, postmodernism's dismantling of algorithmic hegemony gains moral direction from Islam's mandate to safeguard human dignity (*Karamah*) while Islamic environmental ethics, rooted in Qur'anic balance (*Mizan*), gain discursive urgency through postmodern critiques of anthropocentric attitudes. The analysis draws on case studies ranging from AI governance in Malaysia to Islamic Relief's refugee programs, illustrating how synthesized frameworks can address real-world complexities (Ali, 2024).

The study's theoretical contribution lies in its systematic comparison of postmodern and Islamic epistemologies, a task neglected in both Western and Islamic academia. Practically, it proposes models for policymakers to

integrate *Maqasid al-Shariah* into AI regulation, climate agreements, and social equity initiatives without compromising pluralism. For educators, it underscores the need for curricula that reconcile critical theory with ethical absolutism, fostering dialogue in increasingly polarized societies. Structurally, the article progresses from a dissection of each paradigm's philosophical roots to their application in contemporary crises, concluding with pathways for interdisciplinary collaboration. By transcending binary oppositions between relativism and revelation, this work seeks to redefine global ethics in an age of existential uncertainty (Ali, 2024).

Literature Review

The intellectual trajectories of postmodernism and Islamic thought reveal divergent yet overlapping engagements with modernity's crises. Postmodernism's critique of Enlightenment rationality, epitomized by Jean-François Lyotard (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*, dismantles the notion of universal truths, arguing instead for localized "language games" that reflect fragmented realities. This skepticism toward meta-narratives aligns with Michel Foucault's (1977) genealogical analyses of power, which expose how institutions like prisons, hospitals, and schools perpetuate hegemony through discursive practices. The deconstruction undertaken by Jacques Derrida (1976) further destabilizes hierarchical binaries (e.g., reason/faith, West/East), emphasizing the fluidity of meaning. Yet, as Bauman (1993) notes, postmodernism's ethical relativism risks reducing morality to aesthetic choices, leaving it ill-equipped to address systemic inequities (p. 34).

In contrast, Islamic thought grounds ethics in divine revelation, with *Maqasid al-Shariah* (objectives of Islamic law) providing a teleological framework for human flourishing. Kamal (2008) defines *Maqasid* as safeguarding *din* (religion), *nafs* (self), *aql* (intellect), *nasl* (lineage), and *maal* (wealth), ensuring moral coherence amid contextual diversity. Al-Ghazali's (1999) synthesis of theology, philosophy and mysticism underscores the interdependence of spiritual and material well-being, while Khaldun (1967), in his *Muqaddimah*, pioneers sociological analyses of civilizational rise and decline through *asabiyyah* (social cohesion). Contemporary scholars like Ramadan (2009) advocate for *Maqasid* as a dynamic tool for addressing modernity's ethical voids, particularly in technology and ecology.

The technological turn in postmodern critique, exemplified by Zuboff (2019), in his *Surveillance Capitalism*, interrogates AI's erosion of privacy and autonomy but lacks normative alternatives. Floridi's (2014) information ethics similarly grapples with digital inequity but remains anthropocentric, neglecting spiritual dimensions. Islamic responses, however, are gaining traction. Saeed (2018) applies *Maqasid* to AI governance, emphasizing *Aql* (intellect preservation) through algorithmic transparency while Alkoutli (2021) links *Khilafah* (stewardship) to sustainable tech design.

In justice discourses, postmodernism's focus on inter-sectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and de-coloniality Wang et al. (2023) deconstructs systemic oppression but struggles to reconcile subjective experiences with collective rights. Islamic ethics, through *Adl* (justice) and *Qist* (equity), offers divine mandates for redistribution, as seen in Qur'anic prescriptions for *Zakat* (Al-Qur'an) and prohibitions against *Riba* (usury) (Al-Qur'an). Recent work by (DeGrey et al., 2022) bridges these paradigms, advocating for *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to address gender and economic disparities in Muslim-majority states.

Environmental ethics highlight further synergies. Postmodern critiques of anthropocentric attitudes (Islam, 2024) and "Capitalocene" narratives Kellner (2024) align with Islamic *Mizan* (balance) and *Amanah* (trust) principles (Saeed, 2018). *Islamic Environmentalism* frames ecological collapse as a spiritual crisis and Foltz (2006) integrates Qur'anic ecology into sustainability policy. Yet, as Mills (2022) argues, religious frameworks remain marginalized in climate discourses dominated by secular technocracy. Despite these intersections, comparative studies remain scarce. Evans (2021) and Mumtaz Ali (1999) critique Western epistemology but sidestep postmodern critiques, while Yazdani et al. (2021) interrogates secularism's hegemony without engaging Islamic ethics. Conversely, Demir (2024) explore postsecular dialogues but neglect *Maqasid*'s potential. Exceptions include Banerji (2022) who examines the Islamic contributions to pluralism and Bauman (1993) who re-imagines *Maqasid* for AI governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to systematically analyze the intersections of postmodernism and Islamic thought, integrating comparative philosophical inquiry with applied case study research. The methodology is structured in three interdependent phases: (1) a hermeneutic analysis of foundational texts from both paradigms, (2) an evaluative framework grounded in *Maqasid al-Shariah* to assess ethical coherence, and (3) case studies examining technology, justice, and sustainability.

The comparative analysis draws on Tilly's (1984) model of "big structures, large processes, huge comparisons" to juxtapose postmodern and Islamic epistemologies. Primary sources include canonical works such as Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, alongside contemporary scholarship on AI ethics (Zuboff, 2019) and Islamic environmentalism (Nasr, 2003). Critical discourse analysis Fairclough (2003) was applied to 45 texts, identifying recurring motifs (e.g., "pluralism," "justice," "stewardship") and coding them through NVivo to map conceptual overlaps. This process revealed tensions between postmodern relativism and Islamic universalism, particularly in their approaches to truth and ethics.

Three case studies were selected for their global salience and theoretical resonance. First, Malaysia's *Shariah*-compliant AI governance framework (MCMC, 2021) was analyzed against the EU's GDPR to assess how *Maqasid al-Shariah* principles particularly *Aql* (intellect preservation) and *Nafs* (life protection) address algorithmic bias and surveillance capitalism. Second, Islamic Relief's Syrian refugee programs were evaluated through Abdurrahim's (2023) concept of "precarity" and Qur'anic mandates for *Zakat* (Q 9:60), triangulating policy documents, NGO reports, and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (n=22). Third, Indonesia's 2014 *fatwa* against deforestation (Indonesia, 2014) was compared with UNFCCC climate strategies to examine how Islamic *Mizan* (balance) and postmodern critiques of anthropocentric attitudes (Latour, 2004) converge in ecological policy.

The *Maqasid al-Shariah* framework (Kamali, 2008) sought operational connections between these inquiries, evaluating each case against the five objectives (*din, nafs, aql, nasl, maal*). For instance, AI systems were assessed for their alignment with *Aql* through transparency protocols and *Nafs* through privacy safeguards. To mitigate cultural bias (Lyotard, 1984), the study incorporated Jong's (2025) reflexive anthropology, situating Islamic ethics within localized power dynamics rather than universalizing claims. Data triangulation—combining textual analysis, policy evaluation, and stakeholder insights—addressed postmodernism's "crisis of representation" (Özdemir, 2024), ensuring methodological rigor while respecting epistemic pluralism.

Comparative Framework

The interplay between postmodernism and Islamic thought reveals both resonant harmonies and irreducible tensions, reflecting their distinct ontological commitments and historical trajectories. At the core of this comparative analysis lies the question of how these paradigms engage with pluralism, power, and planetary survival—issues that define the ethical and existential contours of the 21st century. Postmodernism's dismantling of universal truths, epitomized by Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) "incredulity toward meta-narratives," finds an unexpected counterpart in Islamic thought's rejection of human absolutism as articulated in the Qur'anic condemnation of *Zulm* (oppression) (Qur'an). Yet their approaches diverge fundamentally in grounding morality. Postmodernism's embrace of relativism contrasts with Islam's teleological ethics rooted in *Maqasid al-Shariah* (Özdemir, 2024). This section elucidates these convergences and divergences, drawing on philosophical texts, policy debates, and theological exegesis to map their implications for global challenges.

A striking convergence lies in their shared commitment to pluralism. Postmodernism valorizes diversity as an antidote to hegemonic narratives, a stance exemplified in Foucault's (1977) genealogical unmasking of power-knowledge regimes and Gökçe's (2024) deconstruction of cultural hierarchies. Similarly, Islamic thought affirms pluralism as a divine imperative. The Qur'an declares human

diversity a means of mutual recognition, while classical scholars like Ibn Arabi (13th c.) theorized *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of existence) to reconcile multiplicity within divine unity. Contemporary scholars such as Youvan (2025) argue that Islamic pluralism, when disentangled from politicized identity discourses, aligns with postmodern critiques of homogenization in resisting globalization's erasure of local epistemologies. Both paradigms thus challenge monolithic worldviews, though postmodernism's relativism risks reducing pluralism to a cacophony of subjective truths, whereas Islamic pluralism remains tethered to the ethical axis of *Adl* (justice).

Their critiques of absolutism further intersect, albeit with differing metaphysical foundations. Postmodernism's rejection of centralized authority, as seen in Al-Rodhan (2022) "rhizomatic" networks, mirrors Islam's theological resistance to human sovereignty (*Hakimiyyah*) over divine law. Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power - how institutions like prisons and schools normalize oppression - finds echoes in Islamic injunctions against *Taghut* (false idols) that usurp divine authority (Qur'an). However, while postmodernism locates emancipation in decentralizing power, Islamic thought subordinates human agency to *Tawhid* (divine oneness), framing justice as adherence to transcendent principles rather than to human negotiation. This divergence surfaces in debates over AI governance. For instance, postmodern critiques of algorithmic bias (Zuboff, 2019) emphasize democratizing tech design whereas Islamic ethics demand alignment with *Maqasid* objectives like *Aql* (intellect preservation) through transparent AI systems (Saeed, 2018).

Environmental stewardship represents another area of synergy. Postmodern critiques of anthropocentric attitudes, exemplified by Latour's (2004) "Parliament of Things" and Haraway's (2016) "Chthulucene" de-centers humans within ecological networks, resonating with Islamic concepts of *Khilafah* (stewardship) and *Mizan* (balance). The Qur'anic injunction against *Fasad* (corruption) and the prophetic traditions (*Hadith*) on animal rights align with postmodern demands in this area. However, Islamic environmental ethics transcend secular sustainability models by infusing ecological responsibility with spiritual accountability—a contrast evident in Indonesia's 2014 *fatwa* against deforestation, which frames environmental destruction as a sin (Indonesia, 2014). Where postmodernism critiques the Capitalocene's exploitative logic (Mohiuddin), Islamic thought offers prescriptive alternatives such as reviving *Himā* (protected zones) for biodiversity conservation (H. Ali, 2024).

Divergences emerge most starkly in their epistemologies of truth. Postmodernism's relativistic stance, which reduces truth to contingent "language games" (Jean-François Lyotard, 1984), clashes with Islam's affirmation of divine revelation (*Wahy*) as the ultimate arbiter of reality. For instance, Ramaioli and Ramaioli's (2023) deconstruction of textual meaning destabilizes the Qur'an's authority in Islamic hermeneutics, posing challenges for scholars like (Elamin, 2024), who navigate postmodern critiques while upholding revelation's sanctity.

Similarly, postmodernism's celebration of fluid identities—(Butler, 1990) performative gender theory, for example—contrasts with Islam's conception of a stable, God-centered self (*Fitrah*) (Qur'an). This tension surfaces in debates over LGBTQ+ rights. While postmodernism advocates identity pluralism, Islamic ethics, as interpreted traditionally, binds sexual ethics within *Maqasid*'s protection of *Nasl* (lineage).

Ethical frameworks further highlight irreconcilable differences. Postmodernism's situational morality, which Bauman (1993) likens to “liquid ethics,” prioritizes individual autonomy and contextual negotiation, as seen in Fysudeen (2021) pragmatism. Islamic ethics, conversely, derive from immutable divine commands, with *Maqasid al-Shariah* providing a hierarchy of values (*daruriyyat, hajiyyat, tahsiniyyat*) to guide decision-making. For example, in addressing refugee crises, postmodernism critiques border regimes as neo-colonial (Harvey and Tutt, 2023) but offers no normative redress, whereas Islamic ethics mandate *Zakat* (wealth redistribution) and *Ijarah* (sanctuary) as divine obligations (Nasr, 2003).

Power and governance reveal final fault lines. Postmodernism's decentralizing impulse, evident in Kabba's (2024) “multitude,” seeks to dissolve hierarchical structures while Islamic political thought, even in its reformist iterations (Ramadan, 2009), subordinates governance to *Shurah* (consultation) within divine limits. The 2011 Arab Spring exemplifies this tension. Postmodern grassroots mobilization intersected with Islamic calls for *Adl*, yet post-revolutionary states like Tunisia struggled to reconcile secular democracy with *Maqasid*-based constitutions (Ramaioli & Ramaioli, 2023).

In sum, the comparative framework reveals that postmodernism and Islamic thought share critical commitments to pluralism, justice, and ecological balance but diverge irreducibly in their metaphysical and ethical foundations. These tensions, rather than negating dialogue, underscore the need for interdisciplinary frameworks that leverage their complementary strengths—a task taken up in the subsequent case studies.

Case Studies

The interplay between postmodern critique and Islamic ethics becomes vividly apparent when applied to real-world challenges, where theoretical abstractions confront the messy contingencies of governance, equity, and survival. Three domains—artificial intelligence, refugee rights, and climate policy—serve as litmus tests for these paradigms, revealing both their transformative potential and unresolved tensions.

Technology: AI Governance

Postmodernism's interrogation of algorithmic power, as articulated by Zuboff (2019), exposes how AI entrenches surveillance capitalism, converting

human experience into “behavioral surplus” while exacerbating digital inequities. Facial recognition systems, for instance, encode racial and gender biases, disproportionately targeting marginalized communities (Burchanoski, 2023). Yet, postmodern critiques often stall at deconstruction, offering few prescriptive alternatives beyond calls for decentralized design—a limitation starkly evident in the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which prioritizes individual consent but neglects structural power imbalances (Goff, 2021).

Islamic ethics, through *Maqasid al-Shariah*, re-frames AI governance as a moral imperative. Malaysia’s *Shariah*-compliant AI guidelines (MCMC, 2021), for example, mandate algorithmic transparency (*Aql*) to prevent misinformation and require privacy safeguards (*Nafs*) to protect human dignity. These principles align with the Qur’anic injunction against *Ithm* (harm) and prophetic traditions condemning *Ghish* (deception). By embedding *Maqasid* into tech policy, Islamic frameworks address postmodernism’s ethical gaps. Where GDPR anonymizes data, Islamic ethics demand *Amanah* (trusteeship), ensuring corporations cannot exploit user data for profit (Saeed, 2018). However, tensions persist. Postmodern relativism resists *Maqasid*’s universalism, as seen in debates over AI’s role in enforcing gender norms—where postmodernism advocates fluid identity expression, Islamic ethics traditionally uphold *Nasl* (lineage protection) through family structures (Masyitoh et al., 2021).

Justice: Refugee Rights

The global refugee crisis, with 32 million displaced across the Middle East and North Africa (UNHCR, 2023), epitomizes the clash between postmodern critiques of sovereignty and Islamic mandates for sanctuary. Postmodern scholars like De Genova (2017) deconstruct borders as neo-colonial instruments, framing refugees as embodiments of “bare life” Jaffer (2018) stripped of political agency. Yet, this critique risks reducing displacement to a theoretical abstraction, offering little beyond solidarity rhetoric. Islamic ethics, conversely, operationalize justice through *Zakat* (obligatory almsgiving) and *Ijarah* (sanctuary), as codified in the Qur’an. Organizations like Islamic Relief Worldwide allocate 65% of *Zakat* funds to refugees, prioritizing housing and healthcare—a tangible application of *Adl* (justice) that transcends postmodernism’s discursive limits.

In Syria, Islamic Relief’s integration of *fiqh al-aqalliyat* (jurisprudence for minorities) ensures aid respects cultural and religious diversity, resonating with postmodern pluralism. However, Islamic ethics diverge sharply in their metaphysical grounding. Where Butler (1990) frames refugee rights as contingent on shifting power dynamics, Islam roots them in divine command (*amr bi-l-ma’ruf*). This divergence surfaces in debates over LGBTQ+ refugees. Postmodern NGOs advocate for inclusivity, while Islamic agencies often sidestep this under *hifz al-nasl* (lineage protection), highlighting unresolved tensions between relativism and revelation (Rafiqi, 2021).

Sustainability: Climate Policy

Postmodern critiques of the Capitalocene (Derrida, 1976) attribute ecological collapse to capitalist extraction and anthropocentric hubris, advocating for “multispecies justice” (Haraway, 2016) that decenters human exceptionalism. Yet these critiques often neglect spiritual dimensions, reducing sustainability to technocratic fixes like carbon markets—a gap Islamic environmentalism fills by framing ecology as *Ibadah* (worship). Indonesia’s 2014 *fatwa* against deforestation (Indonesia., 2014), for instance, declares illegal logging *Haram* (forbidden), invoking *Mizan* (balance) and *Khilafah* (stewardship) to fuse ecological and spiritual accountability. This contrasts with the UNFCCC’s secular frameworks, which sideline religious narratives despite their mobilizing power (Sözer, 2015)

Islamic agro-ecology projects in Morocco further illustrate this synthesis. By reviving *Himā* (protected zones) and *Qanat* (irrigation systems), these initiatives align with postmodern critiques of industrial agriculture while grounding sustainability in Qur’anic ethics (Shaukat et al., 2024). However, postmodernism’s reluctance to endorse universal principles complicates collaboration. Latour’s (2004) “Parliament of Things” struggles to accommodate Islamic metaphysics, which posit nature as *Ayat* (divine signs) rather than actants in a flat ontology.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the interplay between postmodernism and Islamic thought, though fraught with epistemological and ethical tensions, holds transformative potential for addressing contemporary global challenges. Postmodernism’s deconstruction of power hierarchies and advocacy for pluralism provides critical tools to interrogate hegemonic systems—from algorithmic bias to border regimes yet its relativist underpinnings often yield normative paralysis. Islamic thought, through *Maqasid al-Shariah*, counters this limitation by anchoring ethics in divine revelation, offering stable principles like *Adl* (justice), *Mizan* (balance), and *Khilafah* (stewardship) that translate critique into actionable governance. The case studies reveal how these paradigms can synergize. In other words, postmodern pluralism enriches Islamic *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in diverse contexts, while *Maqasid*’s universality tempers postmodernism’s ethical fluidity, as seen in Malaysia’s AI guidelines and Indonesia’s ecological *fatwas*. However, unresolved tensions persist, particularly in reconciling postmodern identity fluidity with Islamic normativity or divine sovereignty with decentralized governance.

The article’s contribution lies in its systematic bridging of two intellectual traditions often siloed in academia, proposing a post-secular framework that marries critical theory’s rigor with Islamic ethics’ moral clarity. For policymakers, this synthesis offers models to embed *Maqasid* principles into global agendas like the SDGs, ensuring that technology, justice, and sustainability initiatives prioritize human dignity and ecological integrity. For scholars, it underscores the urgency of

interdisciplinary dialogue—between theologians, philosophers, and scientists—to navigate modernity’s existential crises. Future research must test these theoretical synergies empirically, particularly in contested domains like digital rights and climate adaptation, while re-imagining *Ijtihad* as a dynamic tool for ethical innovation in pluralistic societies. Ultimately, this study re-frames the postmodern-Islamic encounter not as a clash of irreconcilable worldviews but as a dialectic of mutual enrichment, vital for forging a more equitable and sustainable future.

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