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Representations of Religious Values in Modern Arabic Poetry by Egyptian Poets: A Comparative Literary Study with Indonesian Santri Poetry

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Author Name

Jasmiati

Author Affiliation

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta

Corresponding Author: jasmiati90@gmail.com

Abtstract

This article examines the representations of religious values in modern Arabic poetry by selected Egyptian poets and conducts a comparative literary analysis with Indonesian santri poetry. Employing a comparative literature approach, the study identifies convergences and divergences in the articulation of Islamic values such as tawakkul, mahabbah, zuhd, and sabr across both literary traditions. Egyptian modern poetry, shaped by the Nahda movement, Arab nationalism, and Sufi mystical currents, expresses religious values through highly symbolic and intertextual language. Indonesian santri poetry, rooted in pesantren traditions and local cultural aesthetics, articulates Islamic values through a distinctly Nusantara lens integrating Arabic and Javanese-Malay literary conventions. The comparative analysis reveals that despite different cultural and historical contexts, both traditions share a profound commitment to theocentric worldviews, ethical consciousness, and the use of poetic language as a medium for spiritual transformation and moral edification.

Keywords: comparative literature; Egyptian Arabic poetry; santri poetry; religious values; modern Islamic poetry

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji representasi nilai-nilai religius dalam puisi Arab modern karya penyair-penyair Mesir terpilih dan melakukan analisis sastra bandingan dengan puisi santri Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan sastra bandingan, kajian

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ini mengidentifikasi konvergensi dan divergensi dalam pengungkapan nilai-nilai Islam seperti tawakkul, mahabbah, zuhd, dan sabr di kedua tradisi sastra tersebut. Puisi Arab modern Mesir, yang dibentuk oleh gerakan Nahda, nasionalisme Arab, dan arus mistisisme Sufi, mengekspresikan nilai-nilai religius melalui bahasa yang sangat simbolis dan intertekstual. Puisi santri Indonesia, yang berakar pada tradisi pesantren dan estetika budaya lokal, mengungkapkan nilai-nilai Islam melalui lensa Nusantara yang khas, memadukan konvensi sastra Arab dan Melayu-Jawa. Analisis bandingan mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun berbeda konteks budaya dan historis, kedua tradisi sama-sama memiliki komitmen yang mendalam terhadap pandangan dunia teosentris, kesadaran etis, dan penggunaan bahasa puisi sebagai medium transformasi spiritual dan pembinaan moral.

Kata Kunci: *sastra bandingan; puisi Arab Mesir; puisi santri; nilai religius; puisi Islam modern*

Introduction

Literature has long served as one of the most profound mirrors through which human communities articulate their deepest spiritual commitments, moral aspirations, and theological understandings. In the Islamic world, poetry occupies a uniquely sacred status as the vehicle of revelation's own literary style, and the intertextual relationship between Quranic language and poetic discourse has shaped literary traditions across the Muslim world for over fourteen centuries. The study of how religious values are represented in Islamic poetry, and how such representations travel across cultural and linguistic boundaries, constitutes one of the most fertile and underexplored areas in contemporary comparative literary studies (Allen, 2015). This article takes up this comparative challenge by examining the representation of religious values in modern Arabic poetry produced by Egyptian poets alongside the rich tradition of Indonesian santri poetry, two literary traditions that share a common Islamic worldview while emerging from vastly different cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts.

Egyptian modern Arabic poetry underwent a profound transformation beginning with the Nahda (Arab Renaissance) of the nineteenth century, which catalyzed a reimagining of classical Arabic literary conventions in dialogue with European Romanticism, Arab nationalism, and the enduring mystical tradition of Sufi poetry. Poets such as Ahmad Shawqi, Ibrahim Naji, Salah Abd al-Sabur, and

Mahmoud Darwish wove religious themes, prophetic imagery, and Quranic intertexts into their poetry in ways that were at once deeply traditional and radically modern (Jayyusi, 2020). The representation of religious (Muhsyanur & Lering, 2022; Muhsyanur et al., 2022; Muhsyanur & Verlin, 2020; Muhsyanur Muhsyanur, 2018) values in their work reflects the complex negotiation between Islamic spiritual heritage and the demands of modern secular-national poetic discourse that characterizes much of the twentieth-century Arabic literary scene.

Indonesian santri poetry, produced within and around the pesantren tradition, represents a parallel but distinct Islamic literary world. Rooted in the tradition of kitab kuning scholarship, Arabic linguistic education, and a rich vernacular literary heritage in Javanese, Malay, Sundanese, and other local languages, santri poetry constitutes a multilingual and multicultural literary practice in which Islamic values are expressed through aesthetic forms that are at once universally Islamic and distinctly Nusantara (van Bruinessen, 2015). The tradition of nazam, syair, qasidah, and more recently free verse written by santri poets represents a living bridge between the classical Arabic literary heritage and the local cultural soil of the Indonesian archipelago.

Comparative literature as a methodological framework offers the most productive approach for this cross-cultural literary investigation. According to Bassnett (2013), comparative literature enables scholars to examine how different literary traditions respond to shared cultural, religious, and historical pressures, and to identify the processes of literary transmission, adaptation, and transformation that operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In the Islamic world, the concept of intertextuality takes on additional theological dimensions, as both Egyptian and Indonesian poets draw on the shared reservoir of Quranic language, hadith, classical Arabic poetics, and Sufi imagery, even as they reconfigure these shared resources through locally specific aesthetic and cultural filters. Wellek and Warren's (1963, as cited in Damrosch, 2014) foundational distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic literary studies provides a further methodological anchor for this investigation.

The theoretical framework of this study draws on several complementary perspectives. World literature theory, as articulated by Damrosch (2014) and Moretti (2013), provides the macro-level framework for understanding how Islamic literary values circulate and are transformed across global literary systems. Postcolonial literary theory, particularly as applied to Arabic and Indonesian literatures by scholars such as Mehrez (2015) and Foulcher and Day (2002), illuminates the ways in which both Egyptian and Indonesian literary modernisms negotiate the tensions between Islamic heritage and colonial modernity. Finally, the sociology of literature framework developed by Bourdieu (1993, as cited in Casanova, 2015) allows for an analysis of the institutional contexts, including the pesantren, the al-Azhar scholarly tradition, and the Egyptian literary establishment, within which religious poetic values are produced, legitimized, and circulated.

This article makes three principal contributions to the field. First, it provides a systematic comparative analysis of religious value representations in two understudied Islamic literary traditions. Second, it develops a framework for identifying convergences and divergences in Islamic poetic theology across cultural boundaries. Third, it offers implications for the teaching of comparative Islamic literature in Indonesian higher education, particularly in Arabic literature and Islamic studies programs that seek to bridge the Arab world's literary heritage with the rich local traditions of Indonesian Islamic poetry. The discussion is organized around three core themes: the theological and aesthetic foundations of religious value representation, comparative analysis of specific religious values across both traditions, and the pedagogical and cultural implications of this literary encounter.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative comparative literary method, drawing on the theoretical traditions of comparative literature and Islamic literary hermeneutics. The primary corpus consists of twelve poems by five canonical Egyptian modern poets, specifically Ahmad Shawqi, Ibrahim Naji, Salah Abd al-

Sabur, Nizar Qabbani, and Mahmoud Darwish, selected on the basis of their explicit engagement with Islamic religious themes and their canonical status within modern Arabic literary studies. These are compared with twelve poems drawn from the Indonesian santri poetry tradition, including works by Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus), D. Zawawi Imron, and KH. Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, selected for their representative articulation of Islamic religious values within the pesantren aesthetic tradition. Text selection followed purposive sampling criteria as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) (Muhsyanur, 2023), with each selected text required to demonstrate explicit thematic engagement with at least two of the six core Islamic religious values identified in the study's analytical framework. Data collection proceeded through close reading of primary texts in their original languages, supported by authoritative translations and bilingual scholarly editions, alongside systematic review of secondary literature on each poetic tradition (Muhsyanur, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted through a three-stage hermeneutical process adapted from Ricoeur's (2016) theory of textual interpretation and Todorov's structural approach to literary analysis as elaborated by Allen (2015). In the first stage, each poem was subjected to immanent textual analysis to identify the specific linguistic, imagistic, and structural devices through which religious values are encoded. In the second stage, intertextual analysis was employed to trace the Quranic, hadith, and classical Sufi sources that each poem engages, following Said's (2013) concept of contrapuntal reading as adapted to Islamic literary studies by Mehrez (2015). In the third stage, cross-textual comparative analysis was applied to identify convergences, divergences, and transformational patterns in the representation of religious values across the Egyptian and Indonesian corpora. Validity of interpretation was ensured through triangulation of textual evidence, scholarly secondary sources, and peer review by two specialists in Arabic literature and one specialist in Indonesian Islamic literature, following the qualitative validity criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results and Discussion

1. Theological and Aesthetic Foundations of Religious Value Representation in Both Traditions

The representation of religious values in both Egyptian modern Arabic poetry and Indonesian santri poetry is grounded in a shared but differently inflected Islamic theology of art and beauty. In the classical Islamic aesthetic tradition, beauty (*jamal*) is understood as a manifestation of the divine attribute of the Beautiful (*al-Jamil*), and the creation of beautiful language, including poetry, is understood as an act of worship and witness to the divine (Nasr, 2007). This theocentric aesthetic foundation shapes both traditions in fundamental ways, even as it is expressed through vastly different cultural registers. Egyptian modern poetry operates within the high-prestige tradition of *fushhaa* (classical Arabic), drawing on the full weight of the classical Arabic *qasida* and the rich vocabulary of Sufi poetry developed by masters such as Ibn al-Farid, al-Hallaj, and Rumi's Persian tradition as refracted through Arabic translations and commentaries.

In the Egyptian modern tradition, the *Nahda* movement created a complex negotiation between classical Arabic literary values and the aesthetic demands of modern secular nationalism. Poets such as Shawqi and Abd al-Sabur integrated Islamic religious values into their work while simultaneously engaging with European Romantic traditions and the ideological demands of Arab nationalism. Shawqi's famous *qasidas* celebrating the Prophet Muhammad are exemplary of this negotiation, deploying the full resources of classical Arabic panegyric poetry in service of both Islamic piety and nationalist sentiment (Jayyusi, 2020). The representation of religious values in such work is thus never purely theological but always already mediated through the complex social and political forces that shape modern Arabic literary production.

Indonesian *santri* poetry operates within a different but equally complex aesthetic and theological framework. The *pesantren* tradition has historically cultivated a multilingual literary culture in which Arabic, Javanese, Malay, and

other local languages coexist and interpenetrate in productive tension. Poets such as Gus Mus and D. Zawawi Imron draw simultaneously on the Arabic qasida and nazam tradition, the Javanese macapat poetic forms, and modern Indonesian free verse, creating an aesthetic hybridity that is distinctive to the Islamic literary tradition of Nusantara (van Bruinessen, 2015). The representation of religious values in santri poetry is thus mediated through a rich palimpsest of local cultural forms that transform Islamic universals into Nusantaran particulars without losing their theological depth or spiritual authenticity.

The comparison of these two aesthetic foundations reveals both shared commitments and significant divergences. Both traditions share a deep commitment to the Quran as the supreme model of beautiful language, and both draw extensively on Sufi imagery, particularly the motifs of longing, union, light, and the beloved (the divine) as literary resources for the representation of religious values. However, Egyptian modern poetry tends toward greater formal innovation and a more explicit engagement with secular modernity, while Indonesian santri poetry tends toward a deeper integration of local cultural forms and a more communal, pedagogical orientation that reflects the pesantren's educational mission. These different aesthetic orientations produce different but complementary modes of religious value representation that illuminate each other productively when placed in comparative dialogue.

2. Comparative Analysis of Specific Religious Values Across Both Traditions

Table 1. Comparative Religious Values in Egyptian Modern Arabic Poetry and Indonesian Santri Poetry

No.	Religious Value	Egyptian Arabic Poetry	Indonesian Santri Poetry	Degree of Similarity
1	Tawakkul (Surrender to God)	Explicit, metaphor-based	Implicit, nature symbols	High
2	Zuhd (Asceticism)	Rejection of materialism	Simplicity of life (kesederhanaan)	Moderate

3	Shukr (Gratitude)	Direct praise (hamd)	Woven into syair/pantun	High
4	Mahabbah (Love of God)	Sufi imagery, longing	Devotional verse, sholawat	High
5	'Adl (Justice)	Social critique, prophetic ref.	Pesantren social consciousness	Moderate
6	Sabr (Patience)	Resistance poetry (shi'r al-muqawamah)	Endurance as spiritual virtue	High

The comparative analysis of the six core religious values identified in Table 1 reveals patterns of both convergence and divergence that are theoretically significant and pedagogically illuminating. The value of tawakkul (complete reliance and surrender to God) receives particularly rich treatment in both traditions. In Ahmad Shawqi's poetry, tawakkul is expressed through extended metaphors drawn from nature and Quranic narrative, portraying the human soul as a vessel guided entirely by divine will. In Gus Mus's santri poetry, tawakkul is expressed through distinctly local imagery, including the figure of the wandering santri who surrenders completely to the path of his kyai and, by extension, to the divine guidance that the kyai mediates. Both representations share the core theological content while clothing it in culturally specific aesthetic garments that make it immediately resonant for their respective audiences (Issa, 2019).

The representation of mahabbah (love of God and the Prophet) constitutes perhaps the most emotionally intense and aesthetically elaborate theme in both traditions. The Egyptian Sufi poet Ibrahim Naji's treatment of divine love draws heavily on the imagery of al-Hallaj and Ibn Arabi, portraying the lover's annihilation in the beloved as the highest spiritual achievement. In contemporary Egyptian poetry, Mahmoud Darwish's complex and ambiguous treatment of love as a spiritual-political metaphor represents a sophisticated modernization of the mahabbah tradition (Jayyusi, 2020). In the Indonesian santri tradition, mahabbah is most powerfully expressed in the tradition of sholawat poetry, which combines Arabic qasida conventions with Javanese and Malay melodic traditions to create

intensely devotional expressions of love for the Prophet Muhammad. D. Zawawi Imron's celebrated poetry on the Prophet exemplifies this tradition at its most aesthetically accomplished.

The value of *sabr* (patience and steadfastness in the face of adversity) takes on particularly vivid political and social dimensions in both traditions, reflecting the shared experience of Muslim communities navigating colonial and postcolonial conditions of oppression and marginalization. In Egyptian resistance poetry, particularly in the tradition associated with Mahmoud Darwish and the *shi'r al-muqawamah* (resistance poetry) movement, *sabr* is elevated into a revolutionary spiritual virtue that sustains communities under occupation and oppression (Mehrez, 2015). In Indonesian *santri* poetry, the value of *sabr* is deeply embedded in the *pesantren*'s historical experience of maintaining Islamic scholarship and community in the face of colonial suppression and postcolonial secularizing pressures. The poetic representation of *sabr* in both traditions thus reveals how religious values are not static theological abstractions but living ethical resources that are continuously renegotiated in response to historical circumstances.

The values of *zuhd* (asceticism and detachment from worldly concerns) and *shukr* (gratitude) reveal the most interesting cultural divergences between the two traditions. Egyptian modern poetry's treatment of *zuhd* tends to engage explicitly with the critique of modern capitalism and consumerism, drawing on the resources of Islamic political theology to articulate a prophetic critique of material excess. Indonesian *santri* poetry's treatment of *zuhd*, by contrast, tends to express it through the aesthetics of simplicity and natural beauty, portraying the simple life of the rural *pesantren* community as itself a form of spiritual grace. These divergent aesthetic strategies for representing the same religious value illuminate how cultural context shapes not only the form but the very content of religious poetic expression, a finding with significant implications for comparative Islamic literary studies (Damrosch, 2014).

3. Pedagogical and Cultural Implications for the Study of Comparative Islamic Literature

The comparative analysis of religious value representations in Egyptian modern Arabic poetry and Indonesian santri poetry has significant implications for the pedagogy of Arabic literature and Islamic literary studies in Indonesian higher education. Currently, the study of Arabic literature in Indonesian universities tends to prioritize the canon of classical Arabic literature and, to a lesser extent, modern Arabic literature from the Arab world, while giving relatively little attention to the rich tradition of Indonesian Islamic literature in Arabic and the vernacular (Bruinessen, 2015). This pedagogical asymmetry reflects a broader pattern of what Moretti (2013) calls the uneven geography of world literary studies, in which literary production from the Global South remains marginalized even within disciplines that claim to represent universal literary values.

Integrating Indonesian santri poetry into the comparative study of Arabic literature offers several significant pedagogical benefits. First, it allows Indonesian students of Arabic literature to see their own literary traditions in dialogue with the canonical texts of modern Arabic literature, fostering a sense of intellectual ownership and cultural pride that can significantly enhance motivation and engagement in Arabic literary studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, comparative reading of Egyptian and Indonesian Islamic poetry develops students' capacity for the kind of nuanced cultural interpretation that is increasingly demanded in the globalized academic and professional environments for which university education should prepare them. Third, the comparative framework exposes students to the diversity of ways in which shared Islamic values can be represented in different literary languages and cultural contexts, deepening their theological understanding while broadening their aesthetic sensibilities.

The implications extend beyond the pedagogical to the cultural and political. The comparative study of Egyptian and Indonesian Islamic poetry reveals

the richness and diversity of the global Islamic literary tradition in ways that challenge both Eurocentric literary hierarchies and internally reductive understandings of Islamic culture as monolithic and unchanging. By demonstrating that Islamic religious values can be expressed through an enormous variety of aesthetic forms, cultural conventions, and linguistic registers while remaining recognizably continuous with the shared theological heritage of Islam, comparative Islamic literary studies makes an important contribution to the contemporary project of articulating a pluralistic and humanistic Islamic cultural identity that is capable of engaging productively with the challenges of modernity and globalization (Nasr, 2007).

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that the boundary between Egyptian Arabic poetry and Indonesian santri poetry is not simply a boundary between two discrete literary traditions but rather a productive zone of literary contact and exchange that has been undertheorized in existing scholarship. Historical evidence suggests that Egyptian literary production, particularly through al-Azhar's long-standing connection with Indonesian Islamic scholarship, has exerted a significant influence on Indonesian Islamic literary culture, while Indonesian Islamic literature has developed distinctive innovations in the representation of religious values that deserve to be recognized as contributions to the global Islamic literary heritage. Future research should build on the comparative framework developed here to trace these historical connections more fully and to theorize more comprehensively the global dimensions of Islamic literary culture as a field of world literary studies (Casanova, 2015).

Conclusion

This comparative literary study of religious value representations in modern Egyptian Arabic poetry and Indonesian santri poetry has demonstrated that these two traditions share a profound Islamic theological commitment while expressing it through distinctive and culturally specific aesthetic forms. The analysis of six core religious values, encompassing tawakkul, mahabbah, zuhd, shukr, sabr, and 'adl, has revealed high degrees of convergence at the level of

theological content alongside significant and illuminating divergences at the level of aesthetic form, cultural imagery, and social orientation. Egyptian modern poetry tends toward formal innovation, political engagement, and a negotiation with secular modernity, while Indonesian santri poetry tends toward cultural synthesis, pedagogical orientation, and a deeper integration of local Nusantara aesthetic conventions. Together, these two traditions constitute complementary expressions of the global Islamic literary heritage that, when placed in comparative dialogue, illuminate each other's distinctive contributions while revealing the extraordinary richness and pluralism of Islamic literary culture as a world literary tradition. The pedagogical implications of this finding are significant for the teaching of Arabic literature and Islamic literary studies in Indonesian higher education, and the theoretical implications are equally significant for the ongoing project of developing a genuinely global and pluralistic comparative literary studies.

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