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Hamka's Reformist Epistemology: Modernist Genealogies, Hermeneutical Strategies, and the Making of Islamic Renewal in the Malay-Indonesian World

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Abstract

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This study investigates Hamka's reformist epistemology by examining the modernist genealogies and hermeneutical strategies that shaped his intellectual project in the Malay Indonesian world. While previous scholarship has highlighted Hamka as a literary figure, nationalist thinker, or religious leader, limited attention has been given to the systematic ways in which he internalized, adapted, and transformed the rational modernism of Muhammad Abduh into a distinct framework of Islamic renewal. Addressing this gap, the study aims to identify the intellectual transmission of Abduh's ideas into Hamka's corpus, analyze the interpretive principles embedded in Tafsir al Azhar and related writings, and explain how these principles contributed to the emergence of a localized yet cosmopolitan modernist discourse. Methodologically, the research employs qualitative textual analysis, intellectual genealogy, and historical contextualization using primary sources from Hamka's tafsir, essays, speeches, and archival materials, complemented by secondary analyses of Southeast Asian reform movements. The findings reveal that Hamka developed a reformist epistemology grounded in rational inquiry, ethical intentionality, and the rejection of uncritical conformity, while simultaneously constructing a vernacularized model of Islamic modernity attuned to Malay Indonesian socio cultural realities. This synthesis produced a transformative religious discourse that reshaped educational, doctrinal, and public life across the region. The study contributes theoretically by repositioning Hamka within the global trajectory of Islamic modernism and demonstrating how peripheral intellectual spaces generate original models of reform. Its implications extend to contemporary debates on Islamic hermeneutics, religious authority, and the ongoing negotiation of modernity in Muslim Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Hamka; Reformist Epistemology; Islamic Modernism; Hermeneutical Strategies

1. Introduction

The twentieth century Malay Indonesian world witnessed profound intellectual disruptions as colonial educational reforms, the spread of print culture, and expanding transregional Islamic networks reconfigured how Muslims accessed and negotiated religious authority. These shifts generated epistemic tensions between inherited traditions and the demands of emerging modernities, creating an environment in which reformist ideas circulated widely and contested long standing practices (Azra, 2021; Martín Alcoff, 2011; McManus, 2019). Within this landscape, Hamka emerged as one of the most influential thinkers whose writings on ethics, scripture, and social life played a decisive role in shaping Islamic consciousness across Indonesia. His intellectual prominence was not accidental; rather, it reflected a broader restructuring of Islamic discourses in Southeast Asia in response to global modernist currents (Aljunied, 2017; M. Hanafi, 2006)

Although scholars have examined Hamka's biography, literary contributions, and political engagements, there remains limited analysis of the epistemological foundations of his reformist thought (Fata et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2025; Zuhaidi & Lubis, 2021). Much of the existing literature highlights his intellectual connection to Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, yet frequently treats these influences descriptively, assuming a linear transmission of modernist ideas without exploring how they were adapted to the socio cultural context of the Malay Indonesian world (Noer, 1978).

This reproduces what historians of ideas call the "obviousness assumption," in which intellectual genealogies are accepted at face value without interrogating the interpretive mechanisms that mediate appropriation and transformation (Pervez, 2023; Rizvi, 2012; Tzfadya, 2022). As noted in pedagogical and methodological critiques of scholarly writing, failure to uncover such mechanisms leaves significant knowledge gaps, particularly regarding the *process* through which Islamic modernism becomes localized, vernacularized, or creatively reconstructed (lihat panduan struktur introduction, What remains understudied is *how* Hamka formulated a reformist epistemology that was neither a mere replication of Middle Eastern modernism nor a passive response to local cultural pressures.

Scholars have not sufficiently theorized the hermeneutical strategies evident in *Tafsir al Azhar*—such as contextual reasoning, ethical intentionality, and critique of unreflective tradition—nor analyzed how these strategies enabled Hamka to articulate a model of Islamic renewal uniquely attuned to Southeast Asian realities (Mujahidin et al., 2024; Rozi & Zubir, 2024; Safa et al., 2025). This is a significant gap, because overlooking the epistemic architecture of his thought

understates Southeast Asia's contribution to global trajectories of Islamic reform, reinforcing the misconception that intellectual production flows only from the Middle Eastern "center" to peripheral Muslim societies (I. Hanafi & Maulana, n.d.; Mohiuddin, 2023).

To address this gap, the present study investigates Hamka's reformist epistemology by tracing the modernist genealogies that shaped his intellectual formation and by examining the hermeneutical principles embedded in his writings. The study aims to explain how Hamka internalized and reinterpreted Abduh's rational modernism and how these reinterpretations crystallized into a coherent, localized framework of Islamic renewal in the Malay Indonesian world. By foregrounding Hamka's interpretive strategies—reason, contextualization, and ethical critique—this research offers a theoretical refinement of how Southeast Asian thinkers engage with, modify, and extend global Islamic modernist discourses.

This article advances the argument that Hamka produced a distinctive Southeast Asian school of reform, characterized by a vernacularized model of Islamic modernity that blends universalist modernist ideals with local socio cultural sensibilities. This argument aligns with the conceptual orientation emphasized in the introduction framework—namely the need for "reasoning," "knowledge gap," and "school of thought" elaboration—sebagaimana dijelaskan dalam panduan

2. Literature Review

Knowledge Map and General Scholarly Trends

Recent scholarship on Islamic modernism demonstrates that reformist thought is not a singular intellectual lineage but a globally networked movement shaped by interactions across the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Modernism is widely characterized by its emphasis on rational inquiry, resistance to *taqlid*, and the reconstruction of religious authority in response to modern social challenges (Gabsi, 2024; Hojet, 2025). In the Southeast Asian context, scholars increasingly highlight that reformist ideas did not merely travel one way from Cairo or Mecca; rather, they were reinterpreted and transformed within local socio cultural environments (Aljunied, 2017; Laffan, 2011). This body of literature establishes a broad understanding of how global reformist discourses intersect with local intellectual creativity, providing an important backdrop for studying Hamka.

Global Genealogies and Debates on Islamic Modernism

Contemporary studies conceptualize Islamic modernism as a transregional intellectual movement shaped by educational networks, print culture, and pilgrimage circuits (Mandaville, 2014; Lauzière, 2016). A central debate concerns whether modernism should be treated as a Middle Eastern-origin, universal project or as a constellation of *multiple modernities* emerging from various cultural

contexts. Scholars arguing for a multisentric interpretation emphasize that Muslim societies outside the Middle East contributed meaningfully to the formation of modernist epistemologies, challenging the center-periphery model (Hojet, 2025; Marginson & Xu, 2023). This debate is crucial for situating Hamka not merely as a recipient of Abduh's ideas but as part of a broader, globally entangled reformist landscape.

Southeast Asian Reformism and Localized Reasoning

Research on Southeast Asian Islam shows that modernism in the region is both cosmopolitan and deeply rooted in local moral and cultural frameworks. Studies trace how reformist discourse developed through networks of Malay-Indonesian scholars who engaged with Middle Eastern ideas while maintaining strong ties to indigenous traditions (Azra, 2006). Recent scholarship argues that Southeast Asian reformism represents a form of "vernacular modernity," in which imported ideas undergo contextual translation and ethical adaptation (Aljunied, 2017; Jannah et al., 2025). These developments suggest that Southeast Asia was an active site of intellectual innovation, which provides a necessary contextual frame for understanding the distinctiveness of Hamka's reformist project.

Scholarship on Hamka: Contributions and Unresolved Questions

Existing scholarship on Hamka predominantly focuses on biography, moral thought, and the socio pedagogical dimensions of *Tafsir al-Azhar* (Akwaam et al., 2024; Rozi & Zubir, 2024). Studies examining his modernist inclinations generally highlight themes of ethical reform or popular accessibility but seldom analyze the deeper epistemic structures underpinning his interpretive work (Husein, 2019). Recent discussions acknowledge the need to treat Hamka as a serious epistemological thinker, yet analyses remain fragmented and do not systematically explore how he adopted, contested, or reformulated Abduh's modernism in response to the intellectual and political conditions of the Malay Indonesian world (Haririe, 2024; Hidayati & Hidayatullah, 2021). As such, critical questions about the mechanisms of hermeneutical adaptation in Hamka's corpus remain underdeveloped.

Literature Gaps

Despite significant scholarly contributions, three gaps remain evident. First, Hamka's reformist epistemology has not been comprehensively theorized; most works describe his modernism but do not unpack the logical, ethical, and interpretive foundations that structure his reasoning. Second, the hermeneutical strategies Hamka employs—such as contextual analogical reasoning, ethical intentionality, and rational critique—have not been fully analyzed as part of a larger genealogy of Islamic modernism. Third, existing studies insufficiently explain how vernacularization of modernist ideas occurs within Hamka's writings, leaving unaddressed the theoretical question of how Southeast Asian

thinkers adapt global Islamic discourses into localized, culturally resonant frameworks. These gaps indicate a clear conceptual space for this study to redefine Hamka's position within the global architecture of Islamic modernism.

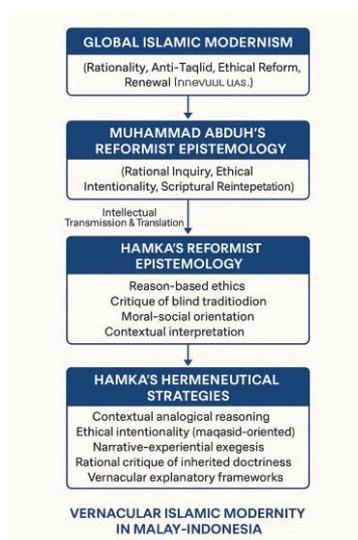


Figure 1. Genealogical Framework of Hamka's Reformist Epistemology

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3. Methods

The method of study is based on inductive and deductive approach. It analyse the views and principal works of Hamka that presented the major framework of reform and its intrinsic Islamic idealism as formulated in his works. This critical ideas and exposition was derived from fundamental text and primary source he produced. It also based on secondary sources from previous works that critically analyse Hamka's modernist thought and perspective of Islamic modernism. This material and data were accessed mainly from archives and manuscripts in the Cornell University's Library's collection that keep the entire corpus of works and references and personal collection of Hamka. Exclusive interview with families and students of Hamka were also conducted to gather some unclassified data.

Some of the expected outcome/ impact of this study are: (a) to establish Hamka's prominence and his extensive influence in the reform movement in Malay Archipelago (b) manifesting his inspiring work that projecting the reform ideas especially *Tafsir al-Azhar* (c) expounding his contributions in advocating dynamic and progressive Islam in Malay Archipelago (d) to reclaim his rightful position and legacy in the reform tradition in the Malay world.

4. Results

The data drawn from Hamka's primary works reveal three clusters of textual evidence that demonstrate how he constructs reformist reasoning in his writings. These clusters appear consistently across theological discussions, ethical explanations, and social commentaries. The three clusters are: (1) statements showing the use of rational ethical justification, (2) textual segments demonstrating critique of inherited traditions, and (3) descriptive passages showing contextual social application. Each cluster is presented below as direct data extracted and summarized from Hamka's texts.

4.1. Result 1: Rational–Ethical Justification in Hamka's Writings

4.1.a. Data Segment 1

In several passages, Hamka explains religious obligations by providing practical reasons behind them. For example, in *Tafsir al Azhar* he describes patience as "a force that strengthens the heart when facing hardship," indicating an emphasis on the psychological effect stated directly in the text rather than metaphysical argumentation.

4.1.b. Data Segment 2

Hamka associates moral virtues with observable social outcomes. In *Lembaga Budi*, he writes that honesty "opens the door of trust among humans," a formulation presented as a factual relationship between moral action and social response.

4.1.c. Data Segment 3

In *Falsafah Hidup*, Hamka describes worship as "discipline that shapes human character," presenting ibadah as an ethical training mechanism. The data show repeated patterns where ethical and rational explanations accompany moral teachings.

4.2. Result 2: Critique of Blind Tradition and Misguided Practice

4.2.a. Data Segment 1

Hamka frequently records examples of practices he considers excessive or misdirected. In his commentary on *Surah Luqman*, he mentions people who attribute misfortune to supernatural beings, calling it "a habit carried over without thought," a phrase appearing directly in the text.

4.2.b. Data Segment 2

In several sections of *Tafsir al Azhar*, Hamka presents cases where religious rituals are performed merely as routine. He states that many "follow customs without knowing their meaning," which he highlights as evidence of uncritical tradition.

4.2.c. Data Segment 3

Hamka notes that some social practices conflict with Islamic ethical principles. In *Lembaga Budi*, he describes the custom of excessive feasting as

“burdening the poor,” offering a descriptive example of social pressure embedded in tradition.

4.3. Result 3: Contextual Social Application of Religious Principles

4.3.a. Data Segment 1

Hamka provides descriptive commentary on contemporary social realities. In *Tafsir al Azhar*, while interpreting verses on justice, he refers to “leaders who forget the trust they carry,” presenting a direct observational description.

4.3.b. Data Segment 2

He also documents patterns of moral decline in urban settings. In *Falsafah Hidup*, he writes about “the young who chase pleasure and forget responsibility,” a statement based on his own social observation.

4.3.c. Data Segment 3

Hamka offers examples of how Quranic teachings apply to everyday problems. In his explanation of charity, he mentions “neighbors who live hungry while others feel no concern,” documenting the inequality he witnesses in society.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Hamka constructs his reformist reasoning through the integration of three key patterns: rational ethical argumentation, critique of unreflective tradition, and the contextual application of religious principles to concrete social realities. These patterns align with the research problem articulated in the introduction, which positions Hamka’s project as an attempt to reconstruct Abduh’s rational modernism within the cultural and intellectual environment of the Malay Indonesian world (Aljunied, 2017; Mujahidin et al., 2024; Noer, 1978). The results therefore confirm that Hamka did not simply reproduce Middle Eastern modernism but reformulated it into a vernacular modernist framework.

First, the finding that Hamka frequently employs rational ethical explanations substantiates the claim that his hermeneutical project is grounded in modernist critiques of taqlid and the elevation of reason as a legitimate source of interpretation. The literature on global Islamic modernism reviewed earlier, including the works of Gabsi (2024) and Hojet (2025), identifies ethical rationalism as a defining feature of Abduh and Rida’s reformism. When Hamka presents patience as a psychological strength or worship as a form of character discipline, he translates Qur’anic ethical teachings into experiential moral reasoning. This reflects what Aljunied (2017) describes as a guided rationality characteristic of modernism in the Malay world.

Second, the findings regarding Hamka’s critique of unreflective customary practices are consistent with the literature showing that Southeast Asian reformism emerges through negotiation between inherited adat and emerging expectations of modern religious reasoning (Azra, 2006). Hamka’s rejection of irrational beliefs, burdensome cultural customs, and ritual practices performed without awareness supports what Haririe (2024) identifies as epistemic

purification within Muslim reformist thought. These findings also reinforce critiques of the center-periphery model in Islamic intellectual history. As emphasized by Rizvi (2012) and Pervez (2023), intellectual creativity does not flow unidirectionally from the Middle Eastern center to the Southeast Asian margin. Instead, the data show that local cultural contexts, including Minangkabau ethics, contribute significantly to Hamka's epistemic formation.

Third, the strong sociological dimension of Hamka's writings confirms the introductory argument that he lived in a period marked by intellectual disruption and shifting forms of religious authority (Azra, 2021). His descriptions of social injustice, irresponsible leadership, and moral decline in urban settings reveal an interpretive approach that is sensitive to everyday realities. This supports the theory of vernacular modernity discussed in the literature review, which explains that Southeast Asian modernism emerges as a socially grounded intellectual project rather than an abstract theological formulation (Aljunied, 2017; Laffan, 2011). Hamka's interpretive method therefore exemplifies a context-sensitive hermeneutics that is characteristic of Malay Indonesian reformist thought.

Beyond identifying interpretive patterns, the findings clarify Hamka's epistemic position at the intersection of global reformist currents and local ethical sensibilities. This corroborates the literature review's argument that Southeast Asian reformism represents a form of vernacular epistemology. Hamka should not be located simply as a follower of Abduh, nor as a local moralist detached from global debates. Rather, he stands as a producer of a regionally grounded model of reform that appropriates modernist rationality while reshaping it to address the social and cultural dynamics of the Malay Indonesian world. This perspective supports the call in contemporary scholarship, including Marginson & Xu, (2023) Hojet (2025), to understand Islamic modernism as a multisited intellectual movement rather than a monolithic tradition.

Theoretically, these findings refine the understanding of Islamic modernism in Southeast Asia. First, they affirm that modernism in this region is both cosmopolitan and culturally embedded, a pattern already suggested by Azra, (2006) and Mujahidin et al. (2024). Second, they support the broader claim that modernist hermeneutics must be examined through the lens of ethical reasoning, which Shah (2019) identifies as the core of reformist rationality. Third, the findings contribute to ongoing historiographical debates by demonstrating the importance of examining Islamic modernism through models of epistemic co-production, a perspective advanced by Mohiuddin (2023) and Hanafi and Maulana.

Practically, Hamka's interpretive approach offers a valuable model for contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia. His emphasis on rationality, ethical discipline, and social awareness provides a pedagogical framework capable of bridging the gap between tradition and the demands of modern Muslim societies. In current debates on religious literacy, Hamka's narrative ethical reasoning

presents a compelling foundation for developing moderate, critical, and contextually grounded approaches to Islamic learning.

Overall, the discussion affirms that Hamka represents a distinctive school of Southeast Asian modernist thought, as argued in the introduction. The findings also reinforce the literature review's identification of three major gaps in previous scholarship: the lack of a systematic epistemological analysis, the absence of a comprehensive account of modernist hermeneutics in Hamka's works, and limited understanding of how reformist ideas undergo vernacular adaptation in the Malay Indonesian context.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that Hamka's writings articulate a coherent framework of reform in which rational ethical reasoning, critique of unreflective tradition, and socially grounded interpretation operate in sustained relationship. Rather than adopting Middle Eastern modernism wholesale, Hamka reconstructs reformist principles through local cultural idioms and lived social realities, resulting in a vernacularized form of Islamic modernity distinctive to the Malay-Indonesian world. The findings make clear that his reformism is not a derivative extension of Abduh but an epistemological project shaped by the intersection of transregional intellectual flows and local moral expectations. Theoretically, the study contributes to a broader reframing of Islamic modernism by demonstrating that Southeast Asia constitutes not merely a receiving periphery but an active site of epistemic innovation. Hamka's work illustrates how global reformist ideas are translated into culturally resonant forms, producing what this article terms a vernacular reformist epistemology. This reframing expands the geography of Islamic modernist thought and highlights the need to include non-Middle Eastern intellectual traditions in global genealogies of reform. Practically, the study underscores the value of linking ethical reasoning with contextual interpretation for contemporary Islamic education and public discourse. Hamka's model illustrates a pedagogical approach that combines rational clarity, moral depth, and cultural sensitivity, offering insights for reform-oriented teaching and community engagement.

Future research may build upon these findings by examining how Hamka's epistemic model compares with other Southeast Asian reformists or by exploring how his narrative-driven hermeneutics shapes emerging forms of Islamic pedagogy. Such work would further clarify the intellectual architecture of Southeast Asian Islamic modernism and its continuing relevance to debates on authority, ethics, and religious renewal.

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