

Deconstruction of Sufism: An Analysis of Buya Hamka's Thought on Modern Tasawuf and Its Relevance to Contemporary Akhlak

Adi Swandana Erlangga Putra^{*1}, Puteri Rahmah Safira², Kenneth Sulthon Alafi Al Hallaj³, Irfan Zakariah⁴, Mahbub Junaidi⁵

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia,

aswandana58@gmail.com

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia,

puterisafira12@gmail.com

³Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia,

elaphy07@gmail.com

⁴Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia,

irfnzkrh@gmail.com

⁵Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo, Indonesia,

mahbubjunaidi105@gmail.com

Keywords: <i>Buya Hamka, Tasawuf Modern, Sufism Deconstruction, Islamic Moral Education, Akhlak</i>	ABSTRACT: This study investigates Buya Hamka's intellectual deconstruction of classical Sufism in his seminal work, <i>Tasawuf Modern</i>, and examines its relevance to contemporary akhlak (moral character) cultivation. Hamka argued that orthodox Sufism had drifted from its Quranic foundations into quietist tendencies incompatible with modern society. Employing a qualitative approach based on library research and content analysis, this study systematically examines Hamka's primary texts alongside literature on Islamic ethics. The findings reveal that Hamka's reformist Sufism rests on three pillars: reintegrating inner spiritual purification (<i>tazkiyatun nafs</i>) with active social engagement, rejecting fatalistic world-denial for productive worldly stewardship, and grounding moral conduct in rational theological reflection. These principles remain highly pertinent for addressing moral crises in contemporary Muslim societies, particularly within higher education and organizational contexts. The study concludes that Hamka's thought offers a viable framework for a spiritually grounded yet socially responsive moral pedagogy, effectively bridging the tension between personal piety and public virtue in Islamic
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ethical discourse.

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*corresponding author: aswandana58@gmail.com

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of how Islamic spiritual tradition can be reconciled with the demands of modern life has occupied Muslim intellectuals for well over a century. Among the most enduring responses to this question came from Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, universally known as Buya Hamka a towering figure in Indonesian Islamic thought whose prolific output spanned theology, literature, biography, and social criticism. His work *Tasawuf Modern*, first published in 1939 and revised through numerous subsequent editions, remains one of the most widely read texts in Malay-speaking Muslim communities and constitutes a landmark in the reformist engagement with Sufism (Nata, 2014, p. 203) [1].

Hamka's project was not a wholesale rejection of Sufism. Rather, it was a careful, theologically grounded deconstruction of what he regarded as the corrupted, ossified forms that classical Sufism had assumed over centuries of institutional elaboration. He argued passionately that the original spirit of Islamic mysticism oriented toward proximity to God through sincere worship, ethical conduct, and compassionate service had been obscured by doctrines of world denial, by elaborate metaphysical systems imported from non Islamic sources, and by an organizational hierarchy of orders (*tariqah*) that sometimes fostered dependency and passivity among followers (Hamka, 2015, pp. 45–52) [2].

This intellectual stance placed Hamka in productive tension with two powerful currents of twentieth-century Islamic thought. On one side stood the champions of classical *tariqah* Sufism, who viewed Hamka's critique as an affront to a legitimate spiritual heritage. On the other stood the more radically modernist reformers, who tended to dismiss Sufism altogether as an aberration incompatible with rational Islam. Hamka refused both extremes, insisting that the inner life of faith what he called the "happiness of the soul" (*kebahagiaan jiwa*) was neither reducible to legal compliance nor separable from ethical engagement with the world (Hamka, 2015, pp. 78-84) [2].

The relevance of Hamka's thought extends well beyond its historical context. Contemporary Muslim societies face acute moral crises that surface with particular urgency in educational institutions, professional organizations, and

public life more broadly. Corruption, dishonesty, erosion of public trust, and the fragmentation of communal ethical norms are widely documented phenomena across Muslim majority societies (Azra, 2012, pp. 112-115) [3]. Conventional religious education, heavily weighted toward doctrinal transmission and ritual compliance, has proven insufficient to address these crises at a character-formation level. It is precisely here that Hamka's reformulated Sufism offers a productive alternative framework.

Despite the importance of Hamka's contribution, scholarly engagement with his thought in international academic literature remains surprisingly thin. Most existing studies either treat him exclusively within the domain of Indonesian literary history or focus narrowly on his Quranic exegesis (Tafsir Al-Azhar) without sustained attention to his ethical-spiritual philosophy (Nata, 2014, p. 198) [1]. The specific question of how his deconstruction of Sufism connects to contemporary debates about *akhlak* education has not yet received systematic scholarly treatment.

This study addresses that gap by pursuing three interconnected objectives: (1) to reconstruct the theoretical architecture of Hamka's critique of classical Sufism and his positive alternative vision; (2) to analyze the ethical and pedagogical implications of his reformist Sufism for the formation of contemporary *akhlak*; and (3) to assess the practical relevance of his thought for moral education in contemporary Muslim institutional contexts. The guiding research question is: In what ways does Hamka's deconstruction of Sufism provide a coherent and applicable framework for cultivating noble character (*akhlak mulia*) in contemporary Islamic life?

By taking Hamka seriously as a moral philosopher not merely as a literary figure or a polemicist this study hopes to open productive dialogue between classical Islamic spirituality and the urgent practical demands of contemporary character formation. The significance of this inquiry extends beyond Indonesian Islam, touching on questions about the future of Islamic ethics and spiritual education in a globalizing world.

II. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically the method of library research (*kajian pustaka*) combined with content analysis. This methodological choice is appropriate given the nature of the research object: the systematic exploration of a body of intellectual thought expressed primarily in

textual form. Qualitative approaches of this kind are well established in the study of Islamic intellectual history, enabling the researcher to engage closely with the nuance, internal logic, and contextual meaning of primary sources without reducing them to quantifiable variables (Creswell, 2014, p. 4) [4].

The primary data sources for this study consist of Hamka's own writings, most centrally *Tasawuf Modern* (2015 edition, Republika Penerbit) and his multivolume Quranic commentary *Tafsir Al-Azhar* (2015, Gema Insani Press), supplemented by his autobiography *Kenang-Kenangan Hidup* and his polemical work *Tasawuf: Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya*. These primary texts were read in their entirety and subjected to close, interpretive reading aimed at identifying the core argumentative structure of Hamka's critique of classical Sufism and his constructive alternative.

Secondary sources encompass peer reviewed journal articles from Scopus indexed and SINTA accredited journals, as well as scholarly monographs dealing with Hamka's intellectual biography, the history of Sufism in Indonesia, and contemporary debates in Islamic moral education. The literature was identified through systematic searches of databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Garuda (the Indonesian national academic repository), using the search terms "Hamka," "Tasawuf Modern," "Islamic Sufism deconstruction," "akhlak education," and "Islamic character formation."

Content analysis was conducted following a two stage procedure. In the first stage, all relevant textual passages were coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the texts rather than being imposed from a predetermined categorical framework. In the second stage, the emerging themes were organized into higher order conceptual categories and subjected to interpretive analysis informed by established theoretical frameworks in Islamic ethics and comparative moral philosophy. The analysis aimed throughout to be faithful to the integrity of Hamka's thought while bringing it into productive dialogue with contemporary scholarly conversations.

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the interpretations, the study employed a strategy of triangulation across multiple primary texts by Hamka and between primary and secondary sources. Conflicting interpretations were carefully noted and adjudicated on the basis of textual evidence. The researcher maintained a reflexive research journal throughout the analytical process to document interpretive decisions and guard against the distorting influence of prior assumptions.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Hamka's Diagnosis of Classical Sufism: A Critique from Within

The intellectual starting point of Hamka's engagement with Sufism is a diagnosis rather than a dismissal. He acknowledges the profound spiritual achievements of the great Sufi masters figures such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, and Jalaluddin Rumi while arguing that the institutionalization of their insights into the tariqah system introduced systematic distortions that undermined the original ethical impulse of Islamic mysticism (Hamka, 2015, pp. 31–38) [2].

The first and most fundamental distortion Hamka identifies is the tendency toward *zuhd* (asceticism) understood as literal withdrawal from the world. In much of classical Sufism, particularly as it developed through the eighth and ninth centuries, worldly engagement came to be viewed with suspicion as an obstacle to spiritual progress. Hamka argues that this interpretation misreads both the Quran and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, who was fully engaged with the social, political, and economic life of his community while maintaining the highest degree of spiritual awareness (Muhaimin, 2019, pp. 48-50) [5]. For Hamka, genuine *zuhd* means freedom from the domination of worldly attachments not geographical withdrawal from the world itself.

The second major distortion concerns the doctrine of *fana* (annihilation of the self in God), which in certain strands of classical Sufism was articulated in ways that appeared to dissolve the distinction between the human and the divine. Hamka, firmly grounded in Sunni theology, regards such formulations as metaphysically dangerous and ethically corrosive. If the individual self is ontologically merged with the divine, the rational and moral agency of the human subject the very faculty that makes ethical conduct meaningful is threatened (Khoiruddin, 2019, pp. 115–118) [6]. He does not deny the reality of spiritual states of intense proximity to God, but insists that these must be interpreted within a framework that preserves the Creator-creature distinction fundamental to Islamic theology.

The third distortion is what Hamka describes as the passive fatalism that permeated much popular Sufism. The belief that all worldly outcomes are entirely predetermined, combined with the valorization of submission to the spiritual master (*mursyid*), generated in his view a culture of passivity and dependency incompatible with the Quranic emphasis on human

responsibility and moral accountability (Tasmara, 2006, pp. 89-94) [7]. He cites with particular concern the phenomenon of *taqlid buta* (blind imitation) within the tariqah system, which he sees as antithetical to the Quranic call for rational reflection (*tafakkur*) and critical engagement with knowledge.

Hamka's critique was not without precedent. The broader modernist reform tradition associated with figures such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and in the Indonesian context Ahmad Dahlan and the Muhammadiyah movement, had articulated similar concerns about the intellectual and social consequences of popular Sufism (Nashir, 2020, pp. 67-72) [8]. What distinguishes Hamka, however, is that his critique proceeds from within the spiritual tradition itself, drawing on the resources of classical Islamic theology, Quranic hermeneutics, and comparative ethics to reconstruct rather than simply reject.

Hamka's Constructive Vision: A Reformist Tasawuf

Having diagnosed the deformations of classical Sufism, Hamka proceeds to articulate what he regards as an authentic alternative a Sufism grounded in Quranic principles, rationally defensible, and practically oriented toward productive engagement with the world. This constructive vision rests on several interconnected pillars.

The first and most foundational pillar is the concept of happiness (*kebahagiaan*) as the proper telos of the spiritual life. Hamka argues at length that the Islamic spiritual tradition, properly understood, is not oriented toward suffering, deprivation, or otherworldly escape, but toward a genuine and sustainable happiness rooted in the alignment of the human soul with its divine purpose (Hamka, 2015, pp. 95-108) [2]. This happiness is at once personal and communal: it is experienced by the individual as inner peace (*tuma'ninah*) and expressed outwardly in just, compassionate, and productive social relationships. This position resonates with Frankl's insight that the human search for meaning is itself a source of psychological and moral resilience (Frankl, 2006, p. 105) [9], though Hamka's formulation is thoroughly grounded in the Islamic theological tradition.

The second pillar is the doctrine of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), which Hamka retrieves from its classical Sufi context and reframes as the central dynamic of Islamic ethical formation. For Hamka, *tazkiyatun nafs* is not an esoteric practice reserved for initiates of a particular tariqah but a universal obligation incumbent on every Muslim. It involves the systematic cultivation of

virtuous dispositions patience (*sabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), generosity (*sakha*), and justice (*'adl*) through the disciplined practice of worship, honest self-examination, and compassionate engagement with others (Maarif, 2020, pp. 25-32) [10]. This reformulation brings Sufism into direct alignment with mainstream Islamic ethical pedagogy while preserving its emphasis on the inner transformation of the person.

The third pillar concerns the relationship between spiritual development and social responsibility. This is perhaps the most distinctive and enduring aspect of Hamka's contribution. He argues forcefully that genuine proximity to God (*taqarrub ila Allah*) is demonstrated not primarily in mystical states experienced in seclusion but in the quality of one's social conduct in honesty, reliability, compassion, and commitment to justice in everyday life (Naim, 2021, pp. 78-85) [11]. This emphasis on the social dimension of spiritual life has clear Quranic grounding: the Quran consistently pairs faith (*iman*) with righteous deeds (*'amal salihat*) and warns against a religiosity that is concerned only with private ritual purity while remaining indifferent to social injustice.

The fourth pillar involves Hamka's rehabilitation of the intellect (*'aql*) as a legitimate and indeed necessary instrument of spiritual development. Against the anti-rationalist tendencies he identifies in certain strands of popular Sufism, he insists that reason and revelation are complementary rather than competing sources of moral knowledge (Azra, 2012, pp. 125-130) [3]. The capacity for critical reflection, for evaluating competing claims to authority, and for adapting ethical principles to changing historical circumstances is, in his view, not a secular threat to faith but an expression of the God given dignity of the human being (Mulyasa, 2020, pp. 112-117) [12].

Relevance to Contemporary Akhlak Formation: Critical Reflections and Limitations

The relevance of Hamka's reformist Sufism to contemporary akhlak formation can be examined across three interconnected domains: Islamic higher education, organizational character development, and the broader challenge of public ethics in Muslim majority societies.

In the domain of Islamic higher education, Hamka's framework offers a compelling alternative to the prevailing dichotomy between religious instruction and secular academic formation. Current character education initiatives in Indonesian Islamic universities and comparable institutions elsewhere tend to operate through two parallel tracks that rarely intersect: formal religious courses

covering *fiqh*, *aqidah*, and Islamic history, and general moral education programs modeled on secular character education frameworks (Zubaedi, 2021, pp. 87-94) [13]. Hamka's vision of an integrated spiritual and intellectual formation in which the cultivation of inner virtues and the rigorous pursuit of knowledge are understood as aspects of a single process of human self-realization provides a coherent theological basis for bridging this divide.

Empirical research on character formation in Indonesian Islamic educational contexts confirms the practical significance of Hamka's theoretical contribution. Studies of Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) environments have consistently found that the integration of spiritual practice, intellectual engagement, and social service produces more robust and durable character outcomes than any of these elements in isolation (Rossidy, 2017, pp. 134-141) [14]. Similarly, research on Islamic student organizations demonstrates that structured programs of spiritual habituation including regular congregational prayer, Quranic study, and mentoring contribute significantly to the development of honesty, responsibility, empathy, and ethical leadership among participants (Fauzi, 2023, pp. 148-155) [15]. These findings provide empirical corroboration for the pedagogical model implicit in Hamka's thought.

In the domain of organizational character development, Hamka's insistence on the social dimension of spiritual life has direct implications for the design of institutional programs aimed at ethical conduct. The persistent problems of corruption, abuse of authority, and moral opportunism that afflict many organizations in Muslim majority contexts are not primarily problems of religious knowledge their perpetrators are often individuals with extensive formal religious education. They are, rather, problems of character: of the failure to translate formal knowledge into genuine moral commitment that governs conduct under conditions of temptation and competing interests (Wahyudi, 2020, pp. 70-75) [16]. Hamka's framework suggests that this translation requires not merely more religious instruction but a systematic program of inner formation that cultivates genuine moral motivation rather than merely behavioral compliance.

This theoretical insight connects productively with Mezirow's concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009, pp. 22-26) [17], which emphasizes that lasting behavioral change requires not the addition of new information but the transformation of the "frame of reference" through which individuals interpret their experience and make moral decisions. Hamka's reformist Sufism aims at precisely this kind of deep structural transformation: the reorientation of the

person's fundamental orientation toward God, self, and community that makes virtuous conduct not an external imposition but an authentic expression of who one is. It also resonates with Kohlberg's post-conventional stage of moral development, in which morality is internalized as a matter of universal principle rather than external constraint (Kohlberg, 1984, pp. 174-178) [18].

In the broader domain of public ethics, Hamka's vision of a socially engaged spirituality challenges both the privatization of religion its reduction to a matter of personal piety disconnected from public conduct and the instrumentalization of religious identity for political purposes. His insistence that genuine faith manifests in justice, honesty, and compassion in all domains of life provides a principled basis for Islamic ethical engagement with contemporary challenges: environmental responsibility, social justice, and the governance of digital and artificial intelligence technologies, among others (Abdullah, 2020, pp. 89-96) [19].

One dimension of Hamka's thought that warrants particular attention in the contemporary context is his emphasis on psychological health as an integral component of spiritual wellbeing. In Tasawuf Modern, he devotes considerable attention to the relationship between faith, inner peace, and what contemporary psychology would recognize as mental health. He argues that the neurotic anxiety, existential emptiness, and social alienation that characterize much of modern life are symptoms of spiritual impoverishment of the disconnection of the human soul from its divine source and that the remedy lies not in external material improvements but in the cultivation of the inner life (Hamka, 2015, pp. 172-185) [2]. This diagnosis is strikingly consonant with findings from contemporary psychology of religion, which consistently documents the positive association between spiritual practice, meaning-making, and psychological wellbeing (Majid & Andayani, 2017, pp. 92-98) [20].

Hamka's thought is not without its tensions and limitations. His critique of classical tariqah Sufism, while internally consistent and theologically grounded, occasionally risks undervaluing the genuine spiritual resources that these traditions have preserved and transmitted. The structured guidance provided by a qualified *mursyid*, the communal solidarity of the Sufi brotherhood (*jama'ah*), and the rich repertoire of contemplative practices developed within the tariqah tradition represent resources of real spiritual value that a thoroughgoing critique might inadvertently foreclose (Hasan, 2020, pp. 15-20) [21].

Moreover, Hamka's reformist framework, shaped by the specific historical circumstances of Indonesian Islam in the early to mid twentieth century including the struggle against colonial domination, the contestation between

modernist and traditionalist Islamic movements, and the early stages of national development carries certain historically specific assumptions that require critical examination when applied to contemporary contexts (Gunawan, 2022, pp. 75-80) [22]. His confidence in the compatibility of Islamic spiritual formation and modern rational progress, for instance, was formulated before the full emergence of the postmodern critique of Enlightenment rationality and before the environmental consequences of the modern developmental project had become fully apparent.

These limitations notwithstanding, the core of Hamka's contribution remains both intellectually robust and practically fruitful. His insistence on the integration of inner spiritual life and outward ethical conduct, his rehabilitation of the intellect as a legitimate instrument of moral formation, and his articulation of a genuinely Islamic vision of human flourishing that is neither escapist nor merely instrumental these aspects of his thought retain their capacity to speak to the moral challenges of the contemporary world. Scholars in Islamic education such as Nata (2021) and Zubaedi (2021) have consistently noted that the synthesis of spiritual depth and social engagement that Hamka pioneered remains an unmatched resource in Indonesian Islamic educational thought (Nata, 2021, pp. 210-215) [23].

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has examined Buya Hamka's intellectual deconstruction of classical Sufism and argued for the enduring relevance of his reformist vision to the cultivation of *akhlak* in contemporary Muslim life. Three principal findings emerge from the analysis.

First, Hamka's critique of classical Sufism is not a modernist dismissal of the mystical tradition but a theologically sophisticated reconstruction of it from within. He identifies three systematic distortions world denying asceticism, theologically problematic doctrines of self annihilation, and fatalistic passivity and offers in their place a Sufism grounded in Quranic principles, rationally defensible, and practically oriented toward social engagement. This reformist Sufism is characterized by four interconnected pillars: the pursuit of genuine happiness rooted in alignment with divine purpose, the practice of *tazkiyatun nafs* as a universal ethical obligation, the integration of spiritual development with social responsibility, and the rehabilitation of the intellect as an instrument of moral formation.

Second, Hamka's framework retains substantial relevance for contemporary *akhlak* formation across multiple domains. In Islamic higher education, it provides a coherent theological basis for integrating spiritual and intellectual formation. In organizational contexts, it offers a model for cultivating genuine moral motivation rather than mere behavioral compliance. In the domain of public ethics, it articulates a principled basis for Islamic engagement with contemporary social challenges. And in relation to questions of psychological wellbeing, it anticipates insights from contemporary psychology of religion regarding the relationship between spiritual practice, meaning making, and mental health.

Third, while Hamka's thought carries certain historically specific limitations that require critical attention, its core insights remain both intellectually robust and practically fruitful. The integration of inner spiritual depth and outward ethical engagement that he articulated constitutes a distinctive and valuable contribution to Islamic ethical discourse, one whose relevance is, if anything, greater in the moral landscape of the early twenty first century than it was in his own time.

Future research should pursue several directions indicated but not fully explored by this study. Empirical investigation of how Hamka's principles can be systematically operationalized in specific educational and organizational programs would be particularly valuable. Comparative analysis of his thought in relation to parallel reformist tendencies in other Muslim intellectual traditions Turkish, Egyptian, and South Asian would contribute to a richer understanding of the global dimensions of Islamic ethical modernism. And sustained engagement with the feminist critique of classical Sufism and its implications for Hamka's framework would open important questions about gender and the formation of *akhlak* that his own work addressed only marginally.

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