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Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, or Buya Hamka, or Hamka

Ervan Nurtawab

1 Introduction

Better known with his initials H.A.M.K.A, Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah or *Buya Hamka* is one of the most celebrated Muslim figures in Southeast Asia.¹ He made his name in the Malay intellectual history as a prolific scholar who produced tens of works on different topics in the fields of literary, history, politics and Islamic studies.² Steenbrink convincingly places him together with Hamzah Fanşūrī, a prominent Malay Şūfī scholar and poet from the 16th/10th century, as “two giants” who enjoyed the privileged status and important position in the Indonesian Islamic literary.³ Hamka is among a few Malay scholars whose capability in Arabic made his name as one of the foremost men of letters in the region.⁴ In the field of Qur’anic studies, his work of the Qur’anic exegesis is highly valued as one of the most resourceful and original modern commentaries in the Muslim world,⁵ and that up to the present times, his commentary constitutes the most influential work on the Qur’anic exegesis in the Malay-Indonesian world.⁶

2 Hamka’s Life

Born in Maninjau, Minangkabau, on February 16, 1908/Muḥarram 13, 1326, Hamka comes from a renowned religious family in West Sumatera. His father, Abdul Karim Amrullah or Haji Rasul (d. 1945/1364), is among the prominent figures who pioneered

1 Khairudin Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam: Cosmopolitan Reform in the Malay World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), vii and 3.

2 Aljunied has listed 55 of Hamka’s works in Bibliography. See Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam*, 131 f.; See also James R. Rush, *Hamka’s Great Story: A Master Writer’s Vision of Islam for Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016).

3 Karel Steenbrink, “Qur’an Interpretations of Hamzah Fansuri (ca. 1600) and Hamka (1908–1982): a Comparison,” *SIK* 2, no. 2 (1995): 78.

4 E.U. Kratz, “Islamic Attitudes Toward Modern Indonesian Literature,” In *Cultural Contact and Textual Interpretation: Papers from the Fourth European Colloquium on Malay and Indonesian Studies, Held in Leiden in 1983*, ed. C.D. Grijns and S.O. Robson (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1986), 60.

5 R. Michael Feener, “Notes Toward the History of Qur’anic Exegesis in Southeast Asia,” *SIK* 5, no. 3 (1998), 62.

6 Mun’im Sirry, “What’s modern about modern *Tafsīr*? A closer look at Hamka’s *Tafsīr al-Azhar*,” in *The Qur’an in the Malay-Indonesian World: Context and interpretation*, eds. Majid Daneshgar, Peter G. Riddell and Andrew Rippin (London: Routledge, 2016), 200.

the emergence of modern Islam in Indonesia.⁷ The young Hamka received his first formal religious education in the *Diniah School* di Padang Panjang. This modernized Islamic school was established by Zainuddin Labai (d. 1924/1342) in 1915/1333. As Yunus notes, this school at that time attracted a wide attention among the local Minangkabau people. Then, a number of schools by its name quickly emerged in some parts of Minangkabau.⁸

While attending his religious education at the school, the young Hamka spent most of his time staying in the private library of the founder, Zainuddin Labai, reading many Arabic novels. He also frequently had regular visits to the *Kantoor voor de Volkslectuur*; reading the Indonesian magazine *Bintang Hindia*. Then, he went to his secondary school at the Thawalib School in Parabek. This school was known for the founder's efforts – i. e. Shaykh Ibrahim Musa (d. 1963/1382) – in supporting the reform movement.⁹

Travelling to Java, Hamka successfully arrived in Yogyakarta in 1924/1342 where his uncle, Ja'far Amrullah, lived there and was able to receive him. During his stay in Yogyakarta, he had been actively in contact with many figures in the Sarekat Islam and the Muhammadiyah organization, the largest representative group of Indonesian modernist Muslims.¹⁰ In the following years, he then contributed to the spread and the development of the Muhammadiyah organization in Medan and Sulawesi.

His great interest in Arabic literary works and Indonesian magazines brought him to accept a job as the writer and the editor for the *Khatib al-Ummah* magazine in 1925/1343. Following his return from pilgrimage in Mecca in 1927/1345 up to 1949/1368, Hamka did not permanently stay in one place. It was mainly due to the nature of his job as the Islamic preacher who was often appointed to become the representative of the Muhammadiyah organization in consolidating its branches. He once moved again to his homeland, Padang Panjang, to run the Muhammadiyah educational institution, *Kulliyat al-Muballighin*, for several years. Then, he transferred to Medan to work for the *Pedoman Masyarakat* (Society's compass) magazine, while he was also preaching Islam and consolidating the Muhammadiyah branch.¹¹ Working with the *Pedoman Masyarakat*, his career as a writer peaked in the early 1940s, and this reputable magazine had become one of the biggest magazines in the East Indies. An important testimony comes from H.B. Jassin (d. 2000/1420) who was at the time a student in Medan, witnessing that Hamka was a very popular figure and known everywhere.¹²

7 Deliar Noer, *Gerakan modern Islam di Indonesia 1900–1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1996), 44–46.

8 Mahmud Yunus, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Hidakarya Agung, 1996), 66–69. See also Noer, *Gerakan modern*, 62–65.

9 Wan Sabri Wan Yusof, "Hamka's Tafsir al-Azhar: Qur'anic exegesis as a mirror of social change" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1997), 137–40; Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam*, 9.

10 Wan Yusof, "Hamka's Tafsir al-Azhar," 142 f.

11 *Ibid.*, 137–54.

12 Rush, *Hamka's Great Story*, 22.

During that period, Hamka also produced a large number of works, most of them being novels that in many parts describe his life journey or his fellow. As for the latter, his work entitled *Di bawah Lindungan Ka'bah* that firstly appeared in 1936/1354 narrates the long distance relationship story of his Minangkabau fellow (Hamid) in Mecca with Zainab, Hamid's old best friend in Minangkabau. He also produced some non-fiction books, especially on Sufism, one of his famous works being *Tasawuf Modern* (Modern Sufism). Here and in his other works on this subject,¹³ Hamka purifies the concept of Sufism and releases it from its popular practices in its institutional form: a *ṣūfī* order or *tarekat*, as well as from the concept of Sufism not in line with the Qur'an and hadith. His concept of Sufism in some ways influenced a development of urban *taṣawwuf* in late 20th/14th century Indonesia, especially those developed by the Neo-Modernist Nurcholish Madjid (d. 2005/1426) with the Paramadina Foundation.¹⁴

His other works produced in this period are *Adat Minangkabau Menghadapi Revolusi* (Minangkabau's custom facing revolution) and *Islam dan Adat Minangkabau* (Islam and Minangkabau's custom). In both works, Hamka criticizes Minangkabau's custom and tradition that in his view are not in line with, or even contradictory against, the mainstream Islamic teachings. The last five years of this period (1945–1949/1364–1368) witnessed significant changes in the newborn country following the Indonesian independence in 1945/1364. In this period, Hamka's writings specifically responded to the Indonesian independence and nationhood in connection to the existence of Muslims as a majority.

Hamka moved to Jakarta in 1949/1368 and permanently lived in this city until his death in 1981/1401. This period witnessed the peak of Hamka's career, being granted an honorary degree from the al-Azhar University in Cairo in 1958/1377, appointed as the imam of the mosque of al-Azhar Jakarta, as the Chairman of the Muhammadiyah organization, as professor at several universities, and lastly as the Chairman of the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Council of the Ulama) in 1975/1395.

In 1954/1373, Hamka was elected as the parliament member to the Masyumi political party. Nevertheless, the Old Order regime finally banned the Masyumi in 1960/1379 while introducing the guided democracy as a new concept of the Indonesian democracy. The regime at that time received a strong alliance from the Indonesian Communism Party that intensely supported the fusion of nationalism, religion and communism, known as NASAKOM (*Nasionalisme, Agama, Komunisme*), in the Indonesian government system. Hamka was among those who strongly and openly argued against this fusion. The 1960s period then witnessed the turning point of Hamka's career as the national public figure

¹³ Hamka's other works on Sufism includes *Renungan Tasauf* and *Tasauf Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya*.

¹⁴ Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001), 710–12; see also, Herman L. Beck, "The Contested State of Sufi in Islamic Modernism: The Case of Muhammadiyah Movement in Twentieth-Century Indonesia," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 3, no. 2 (2014), 216.

when he was arrested for the false accusation of the Minister of Religious Affairs' assassination and of being involved in the anti-government movement.¹⁵

3 Hamka's *Tafsīr al-Azhar*

Almost all parts of *Tafsīr al-Azhar* attest to how Hamka put himself in opposition against the Old Order regime. His strong criticism toward the government resulted in reactions from the regime, banning the magazine *Pedoman Masyarakat* and arresting Hamka in 1964/1383 for a false accusation.¹⁶ The writing of his commentary however started in 1958/1377 through his regular morning religious lesson conducted in the al-Azhar mosque of Jakarta, being inspired by the way Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905/1323) presented his teaching series of Qur'ān commentary. His compiled teaching materials then took its shape under the title *Tafsīr al-manār* prepared by his main disciple Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935/1354).¹⁷ It was also in the period when Hamka reduced his interest in writing fictions and then turned his attention to the writing of the Qur'ān commentary.¹⁸

Riddell states that an examination of Hamka's *Tafsīr al-Azhar* shows how the educational background of this figure was oriented since his childhood.¹⁹ His father as the renowned advocate of the Islamic modernism in Minangkabau and his intense involvement in the modern-reform movement with the Muhammadiyah organization greatly affected the way Hamka formed his distinct approaches to the Qur'ān. It is clear that Hamka used Riḍā's *Tafsīr al-manār* as his guide during the compilation of *Tafsīr al-Azhar* although the work does not interpret the whole Qur'ān. He also refers to other commentaries, i. e. *Tafsīr al-Marāghī* and *Tafsīr al-Qāsimī*, and to some of his Indonesian colleagues for something he is not knowledgeable such as that in the field of Islamic astronomy.²⁰ Wan Yusof also notes that in terms of its methodology Hamka's commentary is very similar to Riḍā's *Tafsīr al-manār*.²¹ Both authors interpreted the Qur'ān from a modern outlook.²²

However, Hamka valued *Fī zilāl al-Qur'ān* of Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966/1386) as perfectly representing Muslim thoughts in the post-World War II era. He clearly states that Quṭb greatly influenced the way he wrote his commentary. This is partly what Hamka admitted that they shared the same background in producing their Qur'ānic commentaries.

15 Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam*, 14 f.

16 Ibid.

17 Hamka, *Tafsīr al-Azhar* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional Pte Ltd, 2001), 1: 50.

18 Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam*, 14 f.

19 Peter G. Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian world: Transmission and responses* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001), 268.

20 Hamka, *Tafsīr al-Azhar*, 1: 41.

21 Wan Yusof, "Hamka's *Tafsīr al-Azhar*," 176.

22 Sirry, "What's modern about modern *Tafsīr*?" 198.

Both completed their Qur'ānic commentaries in jail. Both put themselves in opposition against the regimes as well. In this regard, Hamka mentioned some places in Sukabumi and Bogor where he had to be transferred from one place to another, including a moment when he was hospitalized in the Persahabatan Hospital in Jakarta. While he was under arrest for about two years, he successfully finished interpreting the whole Qur'ān.²³ At some points, Hamka's commentary therefore seemed to have a closer connection to Qutb's *Fī zilāl al-Qur'ān* rather than Riḍā's *Tafsīr al-manār* that warrant further investigation.

Given the fact that this work is written in old Malay,²⁴ *Tafsīr al-Azhar* has been more warmly received among the Malay speaking societies in Sumatera, Singapore, and Malaysia rather than those inhabiting the Java Island.²⁵ Scholars have extensively studied Hamka's Qur'ānic commentary from different aspects, such as socio-politics,²⁶ Sufism,²⁷ theology,²⁸ legal verses,²⁹ modern characteristics,³⁰ and gender studies.³¹ Despite the fact that *Tafsīr al-Azhar* represents the modern outlook of the 20th century Indonesian author, Hamka's method primarily adopted the mainstream Qur'ānic interpretation in the Muslim world, giving the preferences to the Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions as the first and the second primary sources.³²

Hamka however explains limitations to the extent the commentator should refer to the prophetic traditions that in fact have different levels of authenticity. He states that all matters pertaining to worships, society, government system and any relationships in a war or peace condition have further explanations in the prophetic traditions. In other matters, he suggests the commentators follow the current development of science, through which the Qur'ān can receive its new and contextual understanding.³³

As long as its intention is to strengthen Muslim *'aqīda*, Hamka confirms the possibility of science to be used for interpreting the Qur'ān rather than just quoting legendary tales. In this perspective, he shows his strong criticism toward narratives of foreign import (*isrā'īliyyāt*) that have been widely quoted in the works of *tafsīr*.³⁴ His support-

23 Hamka, *Tafsīr al-Azhar*, 1: 50.

24 Wan Yusof, "Hamka's *Tafsīr al-Azhar*," 180.

25 Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam*, 4.

26 Wan Yusof, "Hamka's *Tafsīr al-Azhar*."

27 Steenbrink, "Qur'an Interpretations."

28 M. Yunan Yusuf, *Corak pemikiran kalam Tafsīr al-Azhar* (Jakarta: Panjimas, 1990); and Fadzilah Din, "The contribution of *Tafsīr al-Manār* and *Tafsīr al-Azhar* toward understanding the concept of ṭā'ah and its observance: a theological enquiry" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2001).

29 Milhan Yusuf, "Hamka's method of interpreting the legal verses of the Qur'an: a study of his *Tafsīr al-Azhar*" (Master's Thesis, McGill University, 1995).

30 Sirry, "What's modern about modern *Tafsīr*?"

31 Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam*, 69–84.

32 Hamka, *Tafsīr al-Azhar*, 1: 26 f.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 26–30.

ive views to modern science, his writing styles that are responsive to contexts and his shared background as a native Malay formed a distinction in the way he understood the meaning of the Qur'ān. As Yusuf notes, Hamka was able to reconcile both *tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* and *tafsīr bi-r-ra'y* methods as his attempt to meet the changing needs of his targeted readers.³⁵ Furthermore, he tried to create a homey feeling for his Malay audience when getting in touch with the Qur'ān and its interpretation.

Despite their shared similarities in methodology, both *Tafsīr al-manār* and *Tafsīr al-Azhar* in some ways propose different interpretation. One example is on their interpretation of the polygamy verses. As Yusuf notes, 'Abduh in this regard affirms that polygamy is not a practice to which Islam gives its legal standing as mandatory or recommended. In some cases, this practice can be even unlawful. Looking at thoroughly the related verse (i. e., Q 4:1) and other related verse (verse 129) of the same chapter, 'Abduh concludes that justice (*adāla*) is the main indicator for a man being eligible to have more than one wife. The problem lies in the fact that no one, including the Prophet Muḥammad himself, can do the justice among his wives. For this reason, he said, it is enough for a man to have one wife by which he can avoid being unjust, and that the polygamy practice should be avoided.³⁶

Talking about the same verses, Hamka interprets the word *adl* in two different realms, *zāhir* and *bāṭin*. The former includes responsibilities in providing all expenses, accommodation, and social securities. Meanwhile, the latter refers to responsibilities in creating a just condition in love, peace and harmony. Considering the fact that there is a prophetic tradition reporting that the Prophet Muḥammad once asked for forgiveness for his failure in creating a justice among his wives, Hamka assumes that it is impossible for a man to be a just husband for his wives. Hamka therefore suggests that having one wife would be the best way to prevent a husband from being unjust.³⁷

In the Introduction to his *tafsīr* work, Hamka mentions some commentators in which due to their fanaticism to certain *madhhab*, their commentaries have very strong tendency in supporting their own opinions. This is the case either with the Muslim scholars who advocate *tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* like Taqī d-Dīn b. Taymiyya (d. 1328/728) or those supporting *tafsīr bi-r-ra'y* like Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar az-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144/538). Hamka also admits that some scholars already put themselves in a moderate way, realising that we will not find enough prophetic traditions to enable us to interpret the entire verses of the Qur'ān. In this regard, the use of *tafsīr bi-r-ra'y* method is possible.³⁸

35 Milhan Yusuf, "Hamka's method in interpreting legal verses of the Qur'an," in *Approaches to the Qur'an in contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 58.

36 Yusuf, "Hamka's method," 51 f.

37 Ibid.; See also Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam*, 69–84. Hamka's thought about the position of women in Islam was further elaborated in *Kedudukan Perempuan dalam Islam*. He completed this work in early 1970s.

38 Hamka, *Tafsīr al-Azhar*, 1: 37.

Without neglecting the importance of Islamic literature produced in the history of Islam, Hamka realizes that what he wrote – its language and content – will be limitedly accessed by certain Muslim groups (read: Malay speaking societies). His commentary therefore considers things that his targeted audience matters most for all aspects of their life. Furthermore, he avoids presenting interpretations that will potentially cause disputes between people. This is because this commentary was written in a new context, that is in the non-Arabic speaking countries where their people are dominantly Muslims. Aside from that, the need for accessing Islamic materials, especially for understanding the meaning of the Qurʾān, were growing so rapidly. At the same time they had limited access to Islamic materials in Arabic.³⁹

As presented, Hamka gives the preferences to the Qurʾān itself and the prophetic traditions as the primary sources in understanding the Qurʾān. Hamka's commentary undoubtedly contains active dialogues with issues and discourses surrounding him and his targeted readers both in global and regional contexts. As for the regional contexts, *Tafsīr al-Azhar* contains some parts that in many ways accommodated discourses on aspects of Malay cultures, realizing that the Qurʾān can never be introduced to a vacuum. One example is his study of Southeast Asian Languages that, for him, can be useful to get more perspectives in understanding the first verse of sura 1, *al-Fātiḥa* (The Opening). Here, he discusses the evolution of Malay language where, in its early phase, Islam was introduced to Southeast Asia. Here, Malay language once accommodated the Sanskrit version of the original Arabic name for God in Islam (i. e., *Allāh*) into *Dewata Mulia Raya*. He also addresses a common practice in the Malay, Javanese and Sundanese cultural regions where local people call God by adding titles that are also attachable to human. At the end, Hamka states that such an attachment in some ways is permissible.⁴⁰

4 Concluding Remarks

Islamic modernism that emerged in the second half of the 19th/13th century Egypt had attracted attentions from many Southeast Asian Muslims that lived thousands of miles away. Having been accustomed to living and learning in the modern-reform educational milieu, Hamka then becomes a very sharp and quick thinker in reacting to things surrounding him. His ability in reconciling the complexity of Islamic studies and literary, blended with his intense social activism, journalism and preaching, made his works openly accessible to everyone and admired by a wider audience. In his masterpiece

³⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 68 f. For a related discussion on the translation of Islamic theological terms in Malay translations of the Qurʾān, see Ervan Nurtawab, "The problems of translation in *Turjumān al-Mustafid*: A study of theological and eschatological aspects," *SIK* 18, no. 1 (2011): 33–65.

Tafsīr al-Azhar, Hamka rejoiced that he was able to provide rich and new insights into the verses of the Qurʾān. His works, especially his Qurʾānic commentary, present genuine and fresh thoughts that have deeply influenced the millions of Muslims in the Malay world up to the present times.

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