

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas's Perspective on the Interpretation of Islamic Historical Sources in the Malay World

Siti Nor Aisyah binti Ngadiran^a & Khalina Mohammed Khalili^b

Abstract

The study of Islamic history in the Malay world is closely related to the study of its historical sources. Nevertheless, researchers must deepen their understanding of the study of historical sources, particularly in their interpretation. It is a matter of concern because most Jawi (ie. Malay-Islamic) texts and manuscripts contain knowledge that requires profound religious comprehension, particularly knowledge of divinity, *tasawwuf*, fiqh, and other Islamic knowledge. This textual analysis will, therefore, concentrate on the historical study of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas based on his selected works. His perspective on the significance of Islamic knowledge and thought, with arguments related to the matter, will be explained. Also, his mastery of various fields of knowledge, including *tasawwuf* and Western philosophy, has enabled him to identify any confusion or errors in orientalist's interpretations of Islamic history, as well as to dispel criticism of his authority as a leading contemporary Islamic scholar.

Keywords: Perspective of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, interpretation of Islamic historical sources, Malay world

Introduction

Similar to the general study of history, Islamic historiography is fundamentally an interpretation of its historical sources. Every piece of historiographical work calls for a correct interpretation so that other researchers deem the most accurate findings authoritative. Thus, an appropriate methodology is necessary to ensure the correct interpretation when analysing a historical source. In fact, many lacunae emerged when history became a discipline, separating the religious sciences, such as the science of hadith, from the more comprehensive study method of history as a universal science.¹

Historians commonly employ the following three aspects in their study or writing of history: historical sources, verification of facts, and historical interpretation. Without adequate sources with verifiable authenticity, a narrative that occurred in the past will not be categorized as a historical work. Likewise, in verifying facts and interpreting history, a comparative approach to the methods employed in another field of knowledge is deemed valuable to the study of history.² This approach also helps to facilitate understanding of issues or problems while highlighting the essential differences and similarities between the historical method and those

^a Siti Nor Aisyah Ngadiran (Ph.D) (corresponding author), Senior Lecturer, Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: aisyahngadiran@um.edu.my.

^b Khalina Mohammed Khalili (Ph.D), Post-doctoral Fellow, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: khalinakhalili@gmail.com.

¹ The study of history is regarded as one of the religious sciences (*'ulūm al-naqliyyah*) in the Islamic knowledge tradition, which was related to the science of *ḥadīth* from its beginnings. However, as the writing tradition developed and the science of history was established, the authoritative narration was re-evaluated as part of religion and was no longer considered sufficient to convey historical facts because it was unable to present all sides of the facts in their entirety due to human memorization limitations. As a result, a new discipline in historical writing emerged, as this subject began to separate from the science of *ḥadīth*. Yusri Abdul Ghani Abdullah, *Historiografi Islam dari Klasik hingga Modern (Islamic Historiography from Classic to Modern)* (PT Raja Grafindo Persada, 2004), 3.

² Qasim Ahmad, "Sumber, Pengesahan Fakta dan Pentafsiran Sejarah (Sources, Verification of Facts, and Historical Interpretation)," in Abu Talib Ahmad and Cheah Boon Kheng (editors), *Isu-isu Pensejarahan (The Issues of Historiography)* (Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1995), 57.

of other scientific disciplines. However, interpreting historical sources is the most important focus. It is because the interpretation will determine the conclusions drawn or the facts presented.

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, various issues have emerged from the interpretation of Islamic historical sources by researchers and scholars, particularly orientalists. There are claims that Western scholars do not fully comprehend the lives and culture of the Malay Muslim community. They tended to interpret a historical event or occurrence stated in the text by relating it to foreign cultural elements³ that are considered to be closely related to Malay culture. Most of them extolled the culture and civilization of Ancient Java and Hindu-Buddhism as an ideal criterion for evaluating Malay culture and civilization. Indeed, many scholars believe that the Malay-Indonesian civilization is a syncretic society that involves the merging or assimilation of different beliefs and various schools of thought, primarily Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The clearest instance is a passage from R. O. Winstedt's (1878 - 1966) assertions as follows:⁴

Malay culture includes a fear of nature spirits, an instinctive perception of the 'unbecoming' rather than of the sinful and the criminal, the séance of the shaman, the Hindu ritual of a royal installation, the celebration of the Muhammadan New Year, the sermon in the mosque, the pilgrimage to Mecca, Sufi mysticism, the Hamlet of the Malay opera, the curry, and the mistranslations of the vernacular press. It includes, indeed, much more, but compared with (comparatively few) great cultures of the world it has been derivative, owing ideas and practices to prehistoric influences of central Asia, to the kinship and architecture of Assyria and Babylon, to bronze-workers and weavers from Indo-China, to the religion and arts of India to the religion and literature of Persia and Arabia, to the material civilizations of Portugal, Holland and Great Britain and to the remote but compelling fantasies of Hollywood.

Syncretism, as explained by Western scholars⁵ such as Coedes⁶ can be understood as the absorption of the concept of loyalty from the Shaivite branch of Hinduism by Southeast Asian sovereigns, including Srivijaya. This loyalty goes hand in hand with devotional Buddhism by emphasizing the observance of the 'Brahman-Ksatria' caste system, in which the Ruler class, who are Shiva devotees, assume lordship over the kingdom. Anthony Milner⁷ emphasizes the fact that such leadership, despite its adherence to the Shaivite-Hindu concept, does not entail an abandonment of Buddhism, for they have effectively integrated both religions (Hindu and Buddhism) in forming an exclusive belief system. Nonetheless, in this context, al-Attas agreed with W. Rassers (1877-1973) and T. G. T. Pigeaud's (1899-1988) view, "*The concept of syncretism should be understood not as the absorption of one religion with another religion, but as a parallelism or alignment of religious positions - the religion, which is apparent in the stories of Gagang Aking and Bubukshah.*"⁸ Moreover, al-Attas also asserted that the empirical approach to interpreting social and economic facts through human experience cannot be equated with evaluating historical evidence. This is because historical data describes events or

³ The same issue also arises in the interpretation of the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly those written in the West, which are constructed through modern Western historiography. See Tauseef Ahmad Parray and Owais Manzoor Dar, "Framing the Sirah: Representations of Prophet Muhammad in Introductory Texts on Islam by Contemporary Western Islamicists," *Islamic Studies* 64, no. 4 (2025): 511-48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27444674>

⁴ R. O. Winstedt, *The Malays: A Cultural History* (Graham Bash, 1981), 1.

⁵ The term 'syncretism' is also used by many orientalists to describe the encounter between Islamic civilization and other civilizations, where there is an exchange of culture and knowledge. See Shahzada Rahim Abbas, "Is Colonization Possible During the Encounter Between Two Civilizations?" *Policy Perspectives* 22, no. 2 (2025): 47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48857426>

⁶ G. Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Australian National University Press, 1975).

⁷ A. C. Milner, *The Malays* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

⁸ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu (Islam in the Malay History and Culture)* (Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1972), 17.

occurrences that cannot be evaluated through current conditions and experiences. However, it must be valued through the culture and civilization of its contemporaries, which should be examined and comprehended.

Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize mastering knowledge in various fields, including Islamic thought, to obtain the right interpretation.⁹ Such ability is vital in the study of Islamic history in the Malay world, as the research process often involves navigating Malay, Javanese, and Arabic manuscripts that feature high-level discourse across various fields of knowledge, with a particular focus on metaphysics (*tasawwuf*). There have been previous studies that discuss the concept¹⁰ and philosophy of history¹¹ of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (b. 1931), but they are unlike this paper, which offers a specific treatment concerning the importance of mastering Islamic knowledge and thought as a prerequisite to interpreting Islamic historical sources in the Malay world. Based on al-Attas's selected works of historical studies, this study employed textual content analysis as its research methodology. Therefore, al-Attas's textual sources that were used for this historiographical research are as follows:

- i. *Rānīrī and the Wujūdiyyah of 17th Century Aceh*, Monograph of the Royal Asiatic Society, Cabang Malaysia, No. 111, Singapura, 1966.
- ii. *The Origin of the Malay Sha'ir*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), Kuala Lumpur, 1968.
- iii. *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī*, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1970.
- iv. Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sha'ir, DBP, Kuala Lumpur, 1971.
- v. *The Correct Date of the Terengganu Inscription*, Museum Department States of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1984.
- vi. *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1972.
- vii. *Comments on the Re-examination of al-Rānīrī 's Hujjat al-Siddiq: A Refutation*, Museum Department States of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1975.
- viii. *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī*, Ministry of Culture, Kuala Lumpur, 1986.
- ix. *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqa'id of al-Nasafi*, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1988.
- x. *Historical Fact and Fiction*, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 2011.
- xi. *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Surah al-Nisa' (4):58 and Surah al-Mu'minin (23):12-14*, Islamic Banking and Finance Institute Malaysia (IBFIM) and Akademi Kebangsaan, Kuala Lumpur, 2015.

The Importance of Mastery of Knowledge and Islamic Thought in the Interpretation of Islamic Historical Sources According to Al-Attas's Perspective

In discussing the importance of mastering Islamic knowledge and thought for the interpretation of Islamic historical sources in the Malay world, certain imperatives must be implemented in a specific order. Firstly, the Quran is epistemologically positioned as the primary source of

⁹ Moh In'ami, Bambang, and Ismail Suardi Wekke, "Contextualising Adab in Islamic Education from the Perspective of Al-Attas," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20, no. 1 (2025): 145-58. <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol20no1.11>

¹⁰ Siti Nor Aisyah Ngadiran, *Konsep Sejarah menurut Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: Kajian terhadap Karya-karya Terpilih (The Concept of History according to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: A Study of Selected Works)* (Master Dissertation, Department of Islamic History and Civilization, Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, 2012).

¹¹ Noratiqah Ahmad Kazmar and Azmul Fahimi Kamaruzaman, *Falsafah Sejarah Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: Analisis Teks Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu (Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' Philosophy of History: Analysis of Islamic Texts in Malay History and Culture)* (Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2020).

guidance for the study of Islamic history. Secondly, metaphysical terms employed in Islamic history must be rendered accurately and in accordance with the Islamic interpretation. Thirdly, the study of Islamic literature in the Malay world must reflect an Islamic interpretation in order to be accurate. Lastly, the accuracy of any interpretation of a historical source can be achieved by comparing it to other sources from the Malay world.

Al-Quran as a Main Source in the Study of Islamic History

Most research on Islam is inseparably linked to Islamic law (*shariah*), a discipline that applies the basic knowledge of Islam as revealed to the prophets and messengers of God. This includes research on the history of Islam in the Malay World. As a matter of fact, Louis Massignon (1883-1962), a French Islamicist with expertise in Arabic and Persian manuscripts, particularly the metaphysics of al-Hallaj, has stressed the importance of understanding Islamic textual content, especially metaphysical texts, from the author's vantage point, which involves the inner self. This approach is particularly compelling in analysing mystical texts, such as those written by Sufis, because of the interior nature of mystical experiences. In terms of Islam's religious originality, Massignon explained the distinctive and original aspects of Islamic texts by taking up the Sufi practice of meditation on key terminology from the Quran or the Sufi tradition.¹² Therefore, from a Muslim standpoint, scholars should consider the Quran as a source of knowledge of utmost significance.¹³

Thus, this approach is expected to extend into the study and discipline of Islamic history. However, experts and historians of the Malay World are more inclined towards sources grounded in Western history as references for the study of Malay and Islamic history. The research methodology of al-Attas places the Quran at the epistemological centre, and we now elaborate on his research precedents. One such precedent by al-Attas involves the method of determining the date of the Terengganu Inscription. Earlier, C. O. Blagden had decided the date of the inscription, which bears the day of Friday, in the month of Rajab 702 H, to be on the 'Saraṭān' (Cancer) constellation plane, corresponding to February or March 1303 AD. In astronomical terms, 'Cancer' refers to the fourth zodiac year, namely the year of the crab. This reading is also referred to as the solar calendar and is commonly used by orientalists.¹⁴ Al-Attas engaged in a scholarly debate (*munazarah*) to point out that Western orientalists were accustomed to resorting to Hindu tradition in their study of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, especially when confronted with ambiguous data and a lack of knowledge. Many Muslim scholars, such as S. Q. Fatimi, also relied on the solar calendar to chart historical events in the Malay-Muslim world, rather than the Muslim Calendar.

It is well known that before the coming of Islam, the Malay communities relied on the Hindu Calendar System until turning to the Muslim Lunar Calendar following the conversion of their community members to Islam. This practice reflects the people's obedience to the commands of Allah. Al-Attas asserts that this act of obedience does not belittle the influence of Hinduism in the lives of the Malay community. It merely reflects the reality of a typical Muslim community that they should allow their lives to be guided by the teachings prescribed in the Quran and Sunnah, as this is what is taught to new converts to Islam. The Malay states at that time had built a solid Islamic foundation, such that the Muslim Calendar became an imperative (also known as the Lunar Calendar, which is based on the changing shape of the moon).¹⁵ The

¹² Christian S. Krokus, *The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ and the Church* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 26.

¹³ Arzu Eylül Yalçınkaya, *God's Other Book: The Qur'ān Between History and Ideology, 1st Ed.*, by Mohammad Salama, *Arab Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2025): 296, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48847397>.

¹⁴ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Correct Dates of the Terengganu Inscription* (Museum Department States of Malaya, 1984), 4-5.

¹⁵ Al-Attas, *The Correct Dates of the Terengganu Inscription*, 14.

foundational place of the Muslim calendar in Islam¹⁶ can be understood from the following verse of the Quran:

Verily, the number of months on the side of Allah S.W.T. is twelve months, (which has been established) in the Book of Allah S.W.T. when He created the heavens and the earth, among them four are sacred months. Such is the right religion, so do not wrong yourselves during them and fight the polytheists as they fight you and know that Allah S.W.T. is with the pious. [Surah at-Taubah (9): 36]

Therefore, in determining the actual date of the inscription, al-Attas perceived an error in the reading of '*Saraṭān*' and highlighted the correct reading as '*Sharaṭān*'. He came to this conclusion by observing that the letter '*sin*' is always represented by the shape of two teeth (س) while the letter '*shin*' is distinguished from the former by the absence of any tooth shape. The term '*Sharaṭān*' here, according to the Arabic (Islamic) constellation, refers to the two stars, as symbolized by the two horns of Aries or Ram constellation, which in the Arabic constellation is symbolized by *al-Ḥamal* or the zodiac of the sheep. In Arabic this is known as '*al-Minṭāqu'l Burūj*'. In addition, there is a bright star among the constellation of Aries, known as '*al-Nāṭih*' or '*al-Naṭh*'.¹⁷ This zodiac or constellation was mentioned in the Quran:

“And for real! We have created in the sky: Stars (of various shapes and conditions) and We have decorated the sky for those who see it.” [Surah al-Hijr (15): 16]

The role of a scholar who understands the content of the Quran and its interpretation is immensely important to the study of Islamic history in the Malay World. This is crucial for analyzing Jawi Malay texts or manuscripts that rely on Arabic terms and include Quranic citations. Orientalists who lack an understanding of the interpretation of the Quran were at a disadvantage in this regard. Al-Attas, in his analysis of the introduction of Hamzah Fansuri's work, *Asrāru'l Ārifīn*, “If you don't understand this fifteen verses, return to its explanation” (*Jika tidak kamu faham pada bayt lima belas bayt ini, lihat pada sharahnya pulang*). Our focus here is on the quote, “return to its explanation”) which was misunderstood by many scholars of Malay literature in the past. The term '*pulang*' (return) here has been misunderstood by the orientalist as '*pula*' (also or instead), leading scholars to assume that the term '*pulang*' (return) is erroneous. Instead, Al-Attas asserts a literal description of the imperative verb (*fi'l amr*) in Arabic as '*irji 'ī*' (return), which comes from the root word '*raja 'a*', and this phrase has been described with the term 'consult, look again', which also delivers the meaning of thinking or contemplating.¹⁸ Al-Attas then showed how the phrase is used in the following verse of the Qur'an:

He who created seven heavens in layers. You do not **see** in the creation of the Most Merciful any inconsistency. So, return your **vision** to the sky. Do you see any breaks? Then, return your vision twice. Your vision will return to you humbled while it is fatigued. [Surah al-Mulk: 3-4]

The arguments presented here ought to convince the reader that the Quran is indeed relevant to the study of Islamic history as a source of guidance for resolving ambiguities in Malay literature. It is evident how ingrained the teachings of the Quran were within scholars' thinking and writing efforts at that time. This is most pertinent when referring to the Terengganu

¹⁶ Mohammaddin Abdul Niri, Mohd Hafiz Jamaludin, Mohd Saiful Anwar Mohd Nawawi, Nurulhuda Ahmad Zaki, and Raihana Abdul Wahab, “Astronomy Development since Antiquity to Islamic Civilization from the Perspective of Islamic Historiography,” *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 18, no. 1 (2023): 169-77. <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol18no1.14>.

¹⁷ Al-Attas, *The Correct Dates of the Terengganu Inscription*, 16.

¹⁸ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sha'ir* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1968), 60

Inscription, which records a written legal charter that provides yet another piece of evidence of the Islamic legal system of the Malay community there. We affirm that the Malay Muslims were firmly practising Islam in their daily lives.

Ensuring an Accurate Interpretation of Metaphysical Terms in Islamic Historical Sources

Discourses on Islamic metaphysics (*tasawwuf*) in the Jawi Malay manuscripts have been extensively studied by scholars and researchers who are experts in either history or Islamic thought (specializing in *tasawwuf*). Ḥamzah Fansuri¹⁹ and Nur al-Din al-Raniri are among the famous *tasawwuf* scholars whose works are renowned in the Malay world and became the focus of al-Attas's study. However, scholars who lack in-depth knowledge of the science of *tasawwuf*, will find it challenging to unravel the true meaning of what the scholars want to convey.

Al-Attas, on the other hand, had completed penetrative research on the works of Ḥamzah Fansuri for his Ph.D. thesis, entitled *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri*. Here, al-Attas explicated essential Islamic concepts that were developed into a philosophical discourse in Malay, including the concepts of God, man, and his relationship with the universe. As conveyed in Malay, these concepts underwent linguistic adaptation and selective reduction to reflect the true meanings of the Arabic terms they represent, especially in Islamic philosophy and metaphysics. Al-Attas applied the semantic approach in his selection of keywords, in the analysis of basic concepts, and in their relationships with others. This approach typically poses a problem to researchers of *tasawwuf* works, as they were not accustomed to this systematic method for selecting keywords in those works. A semantic analysis does not merely collect specific terms but maps an interconnected network that brings out the significance of its own concept. In other words, according to al-Attas, this network is likened to a 'jigsaw puzzle', with each piece contributing to the overall picture of a concept.²⁰ As an example, let us take the concept of *ma'rifah* (to know)²¹ which consists of several other keywords, such as God, self, *haqīqat* (reality), and others, that point to the meaning of this concept.

Through his extensive knowledge of the *tasawwuf* terms, al-Attas has successfully explained the origin of Ḥamzah Fansuri, who, according to him, is from Shahr Nawi (Siam), while identifying Fansur (Barus) as the place where he grew up. This is achieved through al-Attas's analysis of the metaphysical terms used by Ḥamzah Fansuri about his origins, as seen in al-Attas's translation of the following poetry (*sha'ir*):²²

Ḥamzah Shahr Nawi is truly effaced,
Like wood, all burnt to cinders;
His origin is the Ocean without currents,
He became camphor in Barus.

Ḥamzah the stranger is [in reality] the Holy Bird,
His 'house' is the Bayt al-Ma'mur [i.e. the heart],
The kursi is all camphor,
In the land of Fansur [extracted] from trees.

Through the first stanza of the passage, the analogy of burned wood turning to dust (*fanā'*) is explained by al-Attas as the existence of a human being who has a body and it will burn when it is drunk in love for Him (*ishq*), as well as the existence of the soul (*rūḥ*) while returning to

¹⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri* (Universiti Malaya, 1970).

²⁰ Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri*, 5-6.

²¹ Mohd Affandi Hassan, *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid (Aesthetic Education from a Tawhidic Approach)* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992), 54.

²² Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri*, 7-8.

its Lord in the eternal realm (*baqā'*). The third line further completes the picture, describing the state of annihilation in *tasawwuf*, from which the self will return to its original state, like water returning to the ocean of absolute existence. Meanwhile, in the last line of this stanza, "became camphor" (*menjadi kapur*) according to al-Attas, is linked to the term '*kursī*' in the passage "The *kursi* is all camphor" (*Kursinya sekalian kapuri*), in the second stanza, which leads to two meanings:²³

- i. The general meaning is that of a seat. Ḥamzah describes Barus as the place where he lived and carried out all his activities throughout his life, or, in other words, his home.
- ii. From the point of view of *tasawwuf* the meaning of '*kursī*' is attached to Sufi cosmology. In Islamic eschatology, the term '*kursī*' is a *kursī* under the Divine Throne ('*arasy*'). According to Ibn Arabi and other Sufis, *kursī* refers to the way in which Allah created His creation. First, individual beings are in His Divine Knowledge ('*ilm*') (in a spiritual state) before they are physically created (having *dhāt*).

Based on the passage "became camphor in Barus," as other scholars have stated, Ḥamzah was born in Barus. In this regard, al-Attas explains that this passage refers to Ibn Arabi's doctrine of '*Isti'dād aṣlī*', the state Ḥamzah is in, being *kursī* (based on the quote "The *kursi* is all camphor"), that means Ḥamzah becomes Malay of Barus. In other words, it is very likely that his mother, perhaps together with his father, left Barus for a time and gave birth to him in another place, then returned to Barus when he was still a baby or after the death of his parents. Next, for the quote "Ḥamzah is originally of Fansur, he acquired his existence in the land of Shahr Nawī" (*Ḥamzah nin asalnya Fansuri, Mendapat wujud di tanah Shahr Nawī*), according to al-Attas means Ḥamzah is telling us that his origins were from Barus, though he later found his existence in Shahr Nawī. The term '*wujūd*' here, refers to Hamza's existence. This word can only be interpreted as the time of his birth. In fact, this statement is also supported by another quote, "Ḥamzah Shahr Nawī *zahirnya Jawī*" where the terms "*zahirnya Jawī*" and "like wood" (*seperti kayu*) refer to Ḥamzah's physical appearance. These terms showed that Ḥamzah was born as a Malay in Shahr Nawī.²⁴ In conclusion, based on the preceding explanation, it becomes evident that al-Attas has effectively grasped the underlying significance intended by Ḥamzah Fansuri in his poetry due to his profound understanding of the science of *tasawwuf*.

Ensuring the Accuracy of Interpretation in the Study of Islamic Malay Literature

The relationship between language and literature is indeed intimate and inseparable. It is reflected in the vital role of language as a medium for delivering literature. Islamic Malay literature is the fruit of the modernization of the Malay language and Malay literature under the influence of Islamic elements.²⁵ Influenced by this, Islamic Malay literature can be better understood through certain literary elements: analogies and symbols, messages or meanings, and their respective forms and manifestations.

The first elements, analogies and symbols, are essential, especially for symbolizing the value of beauty and creating meaning. In the Quran, the smallest symbols represent the highest meaning by its Supreme Author. For example, the nature of a spider is used to illustrate the

²³ Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri*, 6-7.

²⁴ Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri*, 7-8.

²⁵ The development of writing systems for the Malay language prior to the advent of Islam was characterized by a rather sluggish progress. The restricted usage of these characters among specific groups and their potential lack of suitability for the inherent characteristics of the Malay language contribute to this circumstance. The introduction of Islam to the Malay Archipelago not only resulted in the emergence of a new culture, but also left a positive impact on the development of the Malay language. The increased utilization of the Malay language in Islamic literature in the Malay Archipelago has led to an elevation in its vocabulary and terminology. This development has contributed to its transformation into a rational literary language, thereby establishing its potency to supersede Javanese as the dominant literary language among the Malay-Indonesian. Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu (Islam in the Malay History and Culture)*, 36.

Creator's supreme authority and power in creating things.²⁶ In this regard, al-Quran itself is a model for Islamic literature. Nonetheless, its value is too great to be compared with poetry and other literary compositions of man, as Muslims view the Quran as a miracle of God for his last Prophet and is, therefore, authoritative.²⁷ However, these elements are also found in the analogies used by Ḥamzah Fansuri, such as in the poem *Ikat-ikatan Ilmu Nisā'*, which is also known as *Baḥr al-Nisā'*. In this regard, the sea analogy symbolizes Allah's Absolute Power and His unity. According to al-Attas, no Malays or traditional poets had used the sea analogy in their works before.²⁸ For those who are not familiar with the use of the analogy, the term '*Baḥr al-Nisā'*' might convey a more erotic meaning. Yet, in this context, the concept meant by Ḥamzah is related to the concept of '*ma'rifah*' (experiential knowledge or gnosis), and other concepts that are related to it, such as the '*mi'rāj*', event of Prophet Muḥammad along with the bestowals (*rahmat*) and realities (*haqīqat*) brought by him, which leads to the ultimate goal in achieving *ma'rifah* of Allah - reaching the state of proximity to Him (*qurb*).²⁹

In addition, the term '*baḥr*' is also synonymous with the term '*al-'ilm*'. Here, knowledge (*al-'ilm*), the sea, is also seen in the context of '*haqīqat Muḥammad*' (reality of Muḥammad). Thus, *Baḥr al-Nisā'* is also known as *Baḥr al-Nūr*,³⁰ which is addressed to *Nūr Muḥammad* as found in his other work, *Asrār al-Ārifīn*, likewise with the relationship between the concept of '*rijāl*' and '*al-insān al-kāmil*', which is often used by the *ṣūfīs* to symbolize the Prophet's attributes. Even if you look at other works of Ḥamzah, the term '*baḥr*' is widely used in the titles of his other poems. Among them are *Baḥr al-Qadīm*, *Baḥr al-'Amīq*, *Baḥr al-'Ulyān*, and so on.³¹ It is unusual and not found in previous poems, even in Persian poetry. In fact, it is also said to have a symbolic meaning, reflecting Malay souls and synonymous with seafaring.³² It clearly shows how the doctrine of *ṣūfism*, or Islamic metaphysics, lays the groundwork for Islamic literature in the Malay world. In this case, the message and meaning to be conveyed must be in accordance with the demands of Islam itself. This is because literature in Islam must have a clear function, and its delivery method should not lead the poet's or the reader's mind astray. Three important characteristics must be present in Islamic literature: beauty, truth, and goodness, which are interconnected and bound by the ties of monotheism.³³

Apart from the message and meaning conveyed by a piece of literature, its form also plays an important role. Undoubtedly, Islamic literature also undergoes changes, such as those in the form of poetry. This continuous process yields many types of poetry, further enriching a language. Such Islamic literature accepts changes so long as there is no change in Islamic principles, values, and views of life. Rather, the change pertains to the original appreciation of the arts or tradition.³⁴ Islamic principles, values, and views of life are deemed perfect and not open to improvement, while literature serves as a vehicle for interpreting the *tanzīl*, the Divine statement as written in the Quran. In this context, prose and poetry play an important role in developing Islamic literature, especially in Malay.

²⁶ Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, 23.

²⁷ Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, 30.

²⁸ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sya'ir* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1971), 13.

²⁹ Al-Attas, *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*, 26.

³⁰ Al-Attas, *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*, 26.

³¹ Al-Attas, *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*, 27.

³² Vladimir I. Braginsky, *Erti Keindahan dan Keindahan Erti dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu Klasik (The Meaning of Beauty and the Beauty of Meaning in Classical Malay Literature)* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1994), 245.

³³ Shahnnon Ahmad, "Islam dan Hubungannya dengan Masyarakat, Kesusasteraan, Melayu dan Kemodenan" (Islam and Its Relationship with Society, Literature, Malay and Modernity), in *Sastera Sūfī (The Sufi Poetry)* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992), 69.

³⁴ Ismail Hamid, *Asas Kesusasteraan Islam (Fundamental of Islamic Literature)* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990).

In this context, prose in Islamic literature is used differently from how it is in modern Western literature. It can be seen in the characters, setting, and storytelling techniques of Islamic prose across various genres and discourses. Among them is the discourse on nationhood, such as *Tāj al-Salāfīn*, historical genre or historiography, such as *Sulālat al-Salāfīn* or *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikāyat Aceh*, *Hikāyat Raja Pasai*, and other works of prose. For example, based on an analysis of *Sulālat al-Salāfīn*, Arabic semantics is widely applied. Such a situation does not stem from the author's rhetorical style but emerges from the use of Arabic phrases and definitions. This is typical of the intellectual language of 13th- to 19th-century Malay societies. In other words, classical Malay language, in its role as the vehicle of historical literature, has been Islamized. This is a significant point to understand, as it reflects the intellectual life and thought of the general public, which underwent the same process of Islamization.³⁵ Syed Muhammad Naquib asserted the following:

We have also defined Islamization as involving first the Islamization of language, and this fact is demonstrated by the Holy Quran itself when it was first revealed among the Arabs. Language, thought, and reason are closely interconnected and are indeed interdependent in projecting to man his worldview or vision of reality. Thus, the Islamization of language brings about the Islamization of thought and reason, not in the secular sense, but in the sense we have described.³⁶

Similarly, philosophy and various Islamic concepts such as tawhid, punishment and recompense, justice, governance, destiny, fardh ayn, desire and others - all of these are found in literary works such as *Sulālat al-Salāfīn*, *Hikayat Siak*, *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, *Hikayat Aceh*, and others. In works linked to Islamic religious tradition, one would not find elements of other religions, such as Hindu-Buddhism and Christianity.³⁷ These works offer insight into Islam's impact on the soul of Malay-Indonesian societies, which is reflected in their literary compositions.³⁸ Upon closer analysis, it is discovered that many of the teachings by Sufi scholars of the Malay world were conceived after studying the works of renowned scholars such as Ibn 'Arābī (1165-1240 AD), al-Jīlī (1365-1424 AD), al-Ḥallāj (858-922 AD), al-Ghazālī (1058-1111 AD), Farīd al-Dīn Attār (d. 1221 AD), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (1207-1273 AD), Jāmī' (1414-1492 AD) and many more.³⁹ The Malay scholars' dedication ensures the continuous transmission of these doctrines to Malay societies.

With regard to poetry as a genre, it grew in parallel with the expansion of Islam in the region, though more poignantly in the 16th century. Many scholars of Malay literature, especially orientalist such as R. O. Winstedt (1878-1966), A. Teeuw (1967), C. Hooykaas (1952), G. W. J. Drewes (1899-1992), Th. Pigeaud (1901-1988) and others⁴⁰ concurred that the form of poetry as *sha'ir* today had established its presence in Malay literature by the 16th century. The impact is more significant after *tasawwuf* scholar, Ḥamzah Fansuri, emerged with his mystical poetry (*sha'ir*)⁴¹ *Sha'ir Perahu*, *Sha'ir Burung Pingai*, *Sha'ir Dagang* and *Sha'ir Sidang*

³⁵ Tatiana A. Denisova, *Refleksi Historiografi Alam Melayu (Reflections on the Historiography of the Malay Archipelago)* (Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2011), 112.

³⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC, IIUM), 1993), 45.

³⁷ Denisova, *Refleksi Historiografi Alam Melayu (Reflection of Historiography in the Malay Archipelago)*, 113.

³⁸ Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu (Islam in the Malay History and Culture)*, 55.

³⁹ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 106.

⁴⁰ Harun Mat Piah, *Puisi Melayu Tradisional: Satu Pembicaraan Genre dan Fungsi (Traditional Malay Poems: A Discussion of Genre and Function)* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1989).

⁴¹ The term 'syair' is an adaptation of the Arabic term, 'shi'r', which means 'feeling' or 'knowledge', and this meaning evolved in literature as artistic feeling and articulated with beautiful language. Its qualities include a composite structure with no prefatory statement like a poem and the opposition of sound at the base and in the middle between two opposite sections.

Fakir. This impact is highlighted by al-Attas, A. Hasjmy,⁴² Hamdan Hassan,⁴³ Ismail Hamid,⁴⁴ Liaw Yock Fang⁴⁵ and others. Al-Attas made a specific analysis of Ḥamzah Fansuri's poetry, which he later compiled in two of his works entitled *The Origin of the Malay Sha'ir* (1968) and *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sha'ir* (1971). His research analysis is spurred by the work of A. Teeuw entitled *The Malay Sha'ir, Problems of Origin and Tradition*. Teeuw had proposed the possibility that Ḥamzah Fansuri was the pioneer of Malay *syair* (poetry). This idea became the impetus for al-Attas to further investigate him.⁴⁶

Ḥamzah's poetry is unique due to its rhyming form AAAA, which Ḥamzah calls 'rubā'ī', though not the same as the Persian *rubā'ī*. The form of Ḥamzah's *rubā'ī* matches his statement of "four syllables in each line" (*empat sechawang pada sebuah bayt*), while the Persian *rubā'ī* does not follow that rhyming form though it is acceptable. The term 'rubā'ī' was coined by Ḥamzah Fansuri to refer to all of his poetry (*sha'ir*).⁴⁷ Al-Attas confirmed this while researching the work of Nur al-Din al-Raniri, *Jawāhir al-'Ulūm fī Kashfī al-Ma'lūm*, in which Nur al-Din al-Raniri made a mention of a book of Ḥamzah Fansuri with the title *Rubā'ī*. This fact effectively refutes Teeuw's argument based on the collection of poems of Ḥamzah Fansuri with the plural term, *Rubā'īyyat Ḥamzah Fansuri*.⁴⁸ Ḥamzah's poetry stands alone in its unique form and philosophical doctrine, being both Islamic and of high calibre. Ḥamzah's poetry sparks intellectual and rational ideas about love for the Creator (*al-Khāliq*) while illuminating the path of all great Islamic poets whose ambitions and spirits are carried forward in Ḥamzah's composition. These famous names included Farid al-Din Attar, al-Buṣiri, Jalaluddin al-Rumi, Firdawsi, Jami', 'Umar al-Farid, and Iqbal.⁴⁹ Perhaps it places Ḥamzah on that same path and equal standing with the Sufi poets of the past as a representative of Nusantara. In so doing, he proved to the world that the Malay civilization of his period had achieved its pinnacle of knowledge. This is an important reminder to many scholars of the Malay world, typically orientalist, who conduct research on the Islamic history of the Malay Archipelago, to re-evaluate certain condescending presumptions about the scholars of that region.

Thus, it is imperative for Muslim scholars to refer to al-Attas's work, *Rangkaian Rubā'īyyāt*, a book of Malay poetry, to resuscitate the Islamic literary tradition that has been in oblivion for centuries.⁵⁰ It is even more urgent for the young generation to make this work a reference point for reconnecting with their identity and the legacy of their forefathers. Through this work, al-Attas presents a new form of poetry while imbuing a culture of profound thought and deep intuition, grounded in the virtues of Islamic philosophy.⁵¹ His ideas are never his alone (as this could not be possible for anyone) but are a culmination of the influences of Islamic philosophers and literary greats throughout the ages, be it from Dzu al-Nun al-Miṣri (295 H/859

⁴² A. Hasjmy, *Rubā'ī Ḥamzah Fansuri* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1976).

⁴³ Hamdan Hassan, "Kesan Pemikiran Ulama dan Ahli-ahli Sufi dalam Bidang Penulisan Alam Melayu" (The Impact of Scholars' and Sufis' Thought on Writing in the Malay Archipelago) (International Seminar on Islamic Civilization in the Malay World, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, 1-5 June 1989).

⁴⁴ Ismail Hamid, *Kesusasteraan Melayu Lama dari Warisan Peradaban Islam (Classical Malay Literature from Islamic Civilization Heritage)* (Fajar Bakti, 1983).

⁴⁵ Liaw Yock Fang, *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Klasik (History of Classical Malay Literature)* (Penerbit Erlangga, 1991).

⁴⁶ Al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*, 4.

⁴⁷ Al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*, 19.

⁴⁸ Al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*, 25.

⁴⁹ Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri*.

⁵⁰ The *rubā'ī* here refers to a Persian kind of *rubā'ī* in which most of the rhymes are AABA patterned and sometimes AAAA patterned. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Rangkaian Rubā'īyyat* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1959), vii.

⁵¹ It refers to translations of selected verses from several verses of *Rubā'īyyat al-Khayyām* and *Jami'*, as well as translations from Fitzgerald, Whinefield and Qazvini. In this regard, al-Attas was able to translate the poem while retaining the *rubā'ī* form without losing its original meaning. al-Attas, *Rangkaian Rubā'īyyat*, xiv.

AD) to the period of Nur al-Din 'Abdul Rahman al-Jami' (898 H/1492 AD), with a dash of modern touch from Muḥammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).⁵²

Ensuring the Accuracy of Interpretation of Historical Sources by Comparing with Other Sources

Comparative analysis is a method al-Attas uses in almost all of his historical studies. This type of analysis, which generally uses various relative materials, requires a high level of knowledge from the researcher and involves multiple disciplines. In making the comparison, historical sources might not be the only material scrutinized; other materials that support the arguments presented in the study might also be considered. When analysing the historical study by al-Attas, it is evident that he conducted comparative analyses of both primary and secondary sources. This methodology is also important in comprehending facts, strengthening arguments, and finding differences and similarities.

The first comparison involves an analysis of primary sources, regardless of whether they represent Islamic history. To present an example from Islamic historical sources, al-Attas compared two possible meanings of the Malay term 'open sea', which means 'samudera'. According to al-Attas, the earlier term for open sea is 'Semutra', which is said to be derived from the term 'Semutraya'. It is said that the term 'semut-rayā' emerged from the discovery of a giant ant (the size of a cat) by Merah Silau in *Hikayat Raja Pasai*. In proving this argument, al-Attas has compared it with the report in 'Ajā'ib al-Hind, authored by Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (900-950 AD), and compiled by Muḥammad ibn Babishad (late 10th century AD), which states that there used to be large ants roaming northern Sumatra, especially in the Lamri islands.⁵³ It is said that Merah Silau found the ants living in Northern Sumatra. The second primary source is taken as evidence for the name 'semutra'.

The same method of proof is applied to the first Islamic kingdom of the Malay World, believed to have been established in the 8th to 9th centuries. This kingdom, known as the Samudera-Pasai kingdom, was ruled by Sultan Muhammad, who came from Mengiri in Northeastern India. Here, a detailed comparison can be made with Malay historical literature, which represents the earliest Islamic historiography, such as *Hikayat Raja Pasai* and *Sejarah Melayu*; with Arab and Chinese annals, such as those of Chua Ju-Kua, al-Dimashqi, al-Mas'udi, and Ibn Majid; and with many more. According to al-Attas's analysis, Sultan Muhammad was brought to Samudra-Pasai by an Arab preacher/missionary named Shaykh Isma'il of 8th to 9th century Makkah. He was of Qurayshite Arab descent from the lineage of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and 'Ali r.a., as cited from the *Hikayat Raja Pasai*.⁵⁴ The word 'fakir'⁵⁵ in reference to the king was cited as part of a hadith⁵⁶ in *Hikayat Raja Pasai* and *Sejarah Melayu*, which al-Attas later referred to.

⁵² Al-Attas, *Rangkaian Rubā'iyyat*, xvi.

⁵³ Al-Attas, *Rangkaian Rubā'iyyat*, 12.

⁵⁴ Al-Attas rejected the view that the earliest Muslim king in Samudera Pasai is descended from Bengal, as suggested by S.Q. Fatimi, who based his statement on Tome Pires. Here, according to al-Attas, the title 'Bengali' is confused as an ethnic classification, which is incorrect since the author in the *Hikayat* places Sultan Muhammad as a descendant of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, who was an Arab not a Bengali. Refer to al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 16.

⁵⁵ The term 'fakir' refers here to the first king of Mengiri named Muhammad, who bore two princes. The term 'fakir' is invoked in order to illustrate how the king who had risen to power in Mengiri, then gave up his position and entrusted it to one of his princes when he embarked to Samudra-Pasai. Thus, the exchange of leadership position rendered him a 'fakir' without any status in his kingdom. As for the factual data available on Mengiri and its leader, it is confirmed by S. Q. Fatimi in his reference to al-Biruni. Refer to al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 17.

⁵⁶ While this statement, referred to as a 'hadith' by the author of *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, remains unverified, it evidently demonstrates that the Malay people of that era acknowledged the hadith as a guiding principle in their lives. Refer to al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 32.

Indeed, after my demise, there was a kingdom below the wind by the name of Samudera; as soon as the news of that kingdom came, you shall command a ship carrying royal regalia to bring forth the people of that kingdom, with the majority being saints of Allah from there. As for the earliest one, is a 'fakir' from the kingdom of Mengiri. He is the one to bring forth to the kingdom of Samudera.⁵⁷

According to the above statement, the Prophet S.A.W. had urged the dispatch of his mission to spread Islam (*da'wah*), especially in Samudera-Pasai (Sumatra), and this proves that this kingdom was indeed known to Arab traders and sailors who traded in the area during the Prophet's lifetime.⁵⁸ We can say the same for the Western coast of Sumatera namely Fansur (Barus), which was famous then for the production of Barus camphor. The camphor was in high demand among Arab traders for its preservative element, making it indispensable for medical purposes and for the perfume industry.

Following this, al-Attas conducted comparative research on archaeological findings, such as tomb inscriptions. For example, through his rejection of certain claims by historians such as S. Q. Fatimi that al-Malik al-Salih (d. 1296 CE/696 H) was the first Muslim king of Samudra-Pasai.⁵⁹ Concerning this claim, al-Attas referred to the report by Sayyid 'Alawi bin Tahir al-Haddad,⁶⁰ who found the grave/tombstone of al-Malik al-Kamil in Blang Mei in the early 20th century, though his death was reported much earlier, in 1210 CE/607 H.⁶¹ Not too far from the grave of al-Malik al-Kamil, al-Attas discovered the grave of the king's cousin, named Ya'qub, also known as the Amir (commander), for successfully converting the land of Gayo and various regions surrounding West Sumatra. The inscription on his tombstone stated his death date as 1232 CE/630 H. This fact negates the possibility of al-Malik al-Salih being the first Muslim king of Samudera-Pasai.⁶²

Lastly, the comparison of silsilah or royal lineages of certain kings that appeared in the royal lineage documents, such as those of the Palembang royalty, the Cirebon lineage, the Gresik lineage, and the Magindanao lineage (Datu Mastura lineage) were included in al-Attas's analyses of royal lineages during the arrival period of Islam to the Malay Archipelago. Based on his observations, al-Attas confirmed several family ties amongst various leaders of these early Muslim kingdoms, namely between Palembang, Jawa, Sulu, Magindanao, and Brunei.⁶³ Their lineage is believed to have issued from the grandson of Rasulullah (s), al-Husayn, to the Imam Muhammad Sahib Marbat, and through the latter's descendant, Islam was spread throughout the Malay Archipelago with their established kingdoms. Two princes by the name of Sharif 'Alawi (d.1216 CE) and Sharif 'Ali (d.1193 CE)⁶⁴ were identified as his descendants. In addition, an analysis of the lineage of (*silsilah*) Hayam Wuruk, the ruler of Majapahit, who commissioned the writing of the *Nagarakertagama* syair (poem) - which was later written down by Prapanca, also confirms his place in the royal lineage.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ MS *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, 24 (13).

⁵⁸ Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 20-21.

⁵⁹ Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 16.

⁶⁰ Sayyid 'Alawi was a historian and Arab geneologist that contributed to Shakib Arslan effort in research Islamic Civilization. He is also a close friend of Shaykh Muhammad bin Salim al-Kalali. He has done a detailed interpretation and reading of textual engraving on tombstones, down to the fine details that are of great importance. Refer to Sayyid 'Alawi bin Tahir bin Abdullah al-Haddad al-Hadrami, *al-Mudkhal ila Ta'rikh al-Islam bi'l Sharq al-Aqsa* (Dar al-Fikr al-Hadith li Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr, 1971), 69; 82-84. See al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 16.

⁶¹ Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 16.

⁶² Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 16.

⁶³ Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, iv.

⁶⁴ Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 89.

⁶⁵ al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 50.

Apart from Islamic historical sources, al-Attas considers other historical sources necessary if and when their truth is confirmed. We observed this in his study on the Bani Adam, or descendants of Prophet Adam, who lived in the pre-civilization era, coinciding with the period of ancient Arabia and Mesopotamia. According to his calculations, Prophet Adam had lived around 7,000-8,000 years before our current era, which later coincided with the latest historical finding of the earliest human manipulation of metal (stated to have begun around 6,000-7,000 years ago).⁶⁶ The period also coincided with the earliest human writing systems: the Babylonian and Sumerian civilizations (cuneiform writing), followed by the Ancient Egyptian civilization (hieroglyphic writing), and then the Chinese, Central American, and Indus River valley civilizations, covering Pakistan and Northwest India.⁶⁷

Then, al-Attas compared several secondary sources, particularly the works of several luminaries. His critical analysis is significant in verifying the veracity of such works, thereby confirming their rigorous status for future researchers. These scholars include G. W. J. Drewes for his research on the Terengganu Inscription and its date, A. E. Afifi and A. J. Arberry for their exposition of the doctrine of Ḥamzah Fansuri, B. Schrieke, Snouck Hurgronje and van Leur for their works on Islam in Malay history and culture, and other scholars. An example of al-Attas's comparison method can be seen from his research on A. Teeuw's article titled *The Malay Sha'ir: Problems of Origin and Tradition*.⁶⁸ In which the scholar attempted to determine if Ḥamzah Fansuri is the pioneer of Malay poetry. This began when al-Attas became interested in Teeuw's statement that the term 'poetry' was first used in the 16th century AD. In this regard, Teeuw has connected the term 'sha'ir' with the word 'singir' in Javanese. *Singir* or *geguritan* is a simple poem with 8-10 syllables in two couplets and 4 stanzas. Likewise, the theme of this Javanese poem touches on holy events in Islamic history and the life of the Prophet Muḥammad S.A.W. By linking the ancient Javanese term 'sair' with its modern version 'singir', Teeuw is making assumptions about the possibility that the term *shi'r* (*ayn*) originated from the term *singir* (*ng*). Due to this assumption, Teeuw expressed his scepticism on whether Ḥamzah Fansuri was indeed the originator and pioneer of the Malay *sha'ir* in Nusantara. However, both words - *sair* and *singir* - referred to the poet (*wong sangir*) instead of the poem. It is different in meaning from the Arabic word *shi'r*, which refers to a poem.⁶⁹

This result led al-Attas to reject Teeuw's argument and his extensive treatment of the topic. The straw that broke the camel's back appeared when Teeuw attempted to link *sha'ir* to *seloka* and *upajati* despite their vast differences. On the contrary, al-Attas depended on an intensive method that focused solely on Ḥamzah's *sha'ir* - for which he gained an intimate insight into the thoughts of Ḥamzah through special symbols bearing certain mystical significance. Al-Attas was critical of Teeuw's indecisiveness and pointed out his inability to explain how he understood the concept of origin.

Furthermore, Teeuw's indecisiveness can be seen through his statement in which he asserted that no poetry existed before the time of Ḥamzah Fansuri (16th century AD), which goes as follows: "We must conclude that there is no external evidence for the existence of *sha'ir* as a literary genre before 1600. Is there any internal evidence in this direction, in other words have any *sha'ir* been preserved of which it might be plausibly suggested or even proven that they

⁶⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Surah al-Nisa' (4):58 and Surah al-Mu'minun (23):12-14*, (Islamic Banking and Finance Institute Malaysia (IBFIM) and Akademi Kebangsaan, 2015), 56-57.

⁶⁷ Muhammad Zainiy Uthman, *Pemikiran dan Tamadun (Thought and Civilization)* (Al-Sultan Abdullah History & Civilisation Research Centre (AL-ASAR), 2022), 15.

⁶⁸ A. Teeuw, "The Malay Sha'ir: Problems of Origin and Tradition," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 122, no. 4 (1966): 429-446; Al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sya'ir* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1966), 1.

⁶⁹ A. Teeuw, "The Malay Sha'ir," 433-434.

are older?” Here, al-Attas described Teeuw as a ‘hypercritic’, which is an exaggerated doubt or scepticism towards a source (sceptic par excellence),⁷⁰ including towards his very own evidence, resulting in his denial of the matter. In fact, what further strengthens al-Attas’s argument to support Ḥamzah Fansuri as the pioneer of poetry in the Malay world is the existence of Ḥamzah’s very own poems.

The elaborations above showed that profound knowledge and the skilful handling of sources must go hand in hand with a strong logical reasoning and analytical mind to perform an analytical comparative study of various sources. Al-Attas relies on critical, insightful arguments as his primary method of supporting his findings, as he often does in response to the mistakes of previous researchers and scholars.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion in this study, it is clear that mastery of Islamic knowledge and thought is crucial to the study of Islamic history in the Malay World. It becomes even more significant when researching primary sources with limited information about their sources and origins. In such circumstances, historical researchers should arm themselves with knowledge from various disciplines to verify the truthfulness and authenticity of their findings. This is perceived in a serious light due to the nature of Islamic teachings, which are usually accompanied by the Islamic law (*shariah*) and the use of certain metaphysical terms (*tasawwuf*), all of which require accurate interpretation to convey the principles of Islam correctly and to avoid contradicting its true meaning or the Islamic creed itself. This is what distinguishes the study of Islamic history from other historical studies. As al-Attas himself has exemplified, the researcher must always adopt a cautious attitude, especially when presenting his arguments, and be firm in expressing his views and criticisms of the preceding works.

References

Abbas, Shahzada Rahim. “Is Colonization Possible During the Encounter Between Two Civilizations?” *Policy Perspectives* 22, no. 2 (2025): 33–52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48857426>.

Abdul Niri, Mohammaddin, Mohd Hafiz Jamaludin, Mohd Saiful Anwar Mohd Nawawi, Nurulhuda Ahmad Zaki, and Raihana Abdul Wahab. 2023. “Astronomy Development since Antiquity to Islamic Civilization from the Perspective of Islamic Historiography”. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 18 (1):169-77. <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol18no1.14>.

Abdullah, Yusri Abdul Ghani. *Historiografi Islam dari Klasik hingga Modern (Islamic Historiography from Classic to Modern)*. PT Raja Grafindo Persada, 2004.

Ahmad Kazmar, Noratiqah and Kamaruzaman, Azmul Fahimi. *Falsafah Sejarah Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: Analisis Teks Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu (Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’ Philosophy of History: Analysis of Islamic Texts in Malay History and Culture)*. Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2020.

Ahmad, Qasim. “Sumber, Pengesahan Fakta dan Pentafsiran Sejarah” (Sources, Verification of Facts, and Historical Interpretation). In *Isu-isu Pensejarahan (The Issues of Historiography)*, edited by Abu Talib Ahmad and Cheah Boon Kheng. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.

⁷⁰ Al-Attas, *The Correct Dates of the Terengganu Inscription*, 1-2.

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas's Perspective on the Interpretation of Islamic Historical Sources
Ahmad, Shahnun. "Islam dan Hubungannya dengan Masyarakat, Kesusasteraan, Melayu dan Kemodenan" (Islam and Its Relationship with Society, Literature, Malay and Modernity). In *Sastera Sūfī (The Sufi Poetry)*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Rangkaian Rubā'iyat*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1959.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *The Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1968.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sya'ir*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1971.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu (Islam in the Malay History and Culture)*. Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1972.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Comments on the Re-examination of al-Rānīrī's Hujjat al-Siddiq: A Refutation*. Muzium Negara, 1975.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *The Correct Dates of the Terengganu Inscription*. Muzium Negara, 1984.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fansuri*. Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1984.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islām*. Ta'dib International, 2023.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Historical Fact and Fiction*. Penerbit Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2011.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Surah al-Nisa' (4):58 and Surah al-Mu'minun (23):12-14*. Islamic Banking and Finance Institute Malaysia (IBFIM), 2015.

Braginsky, Vladimir I. *Erti Keindahan dan Keindahan Erti dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu Klasik (The Meaning of Beauty and the Beauty of Meaning in Classical Malay Literature)*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1994.

Coedes, G. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Australian National University Press, 1975.

Denisova, Tatiana A. *Refleksi Historiografi Alam Melayu (Reflections on the Historiography of the Malay Archipelago)*. Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2011.

Fang, Liaw Yock. *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Klasik (History of Classical Malay Literature)*. Penerbit Erlangga, 1991.

Hamid, Ismail. *Kesusasteraan Melayu Lama dari Warisan Peradaban Islam (Classical Malay Literature from Islamic Civilization Heritage)*. Fajar Bakti, 1983.

Hamid, Ismail. *Asas Kesusasteraan Islam (Fundamental of Islamic Literature)*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990.

Hasjmy, A. *Rubā'ī Ḥamzah Fansuri*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1976.

Hassan, Hamdan. “Kesan Pemikiran Ulama dan Ahli-ahli Sufi dalam Bidang Penulisan Alam Melayu” (The Impact of Scholars’ and Sufis’ Thought on Writing in the Malay Archipelago). International Seminar on Islamic Civilization in the Malay World, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, 1-5 June 1989.

Hassan, Mohd Affandi. *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid (Aesthetic Education from a Tawhidic Approach)*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992.

Hassan, Mohd Affandi, Mohd Tahir, Ungku Maimunah and Abdul Rani, Mohd Zariat. *Gagasan Persuratan Baru: Pengenalan dan Penerapan (New Literary Ideas: Introduction and Application)*. Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA), 2008.

In’ami, Moh, Bambang, and Ismail Suardi Wekke. 2025. “Contextualising Adab in Islamic Education from the Perspective of Al-Attas”. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20 (1):145-58. <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol20no1.11>.

Krokus, Christian S. *The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ and the Church*. The Catholic University of America Press, 2017.

Milner, A. C. *The Malays*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Ngadiran, Siti Nor Aisyah. *Konsep Sejarah menurut Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: Kajian terhadap Karya-karya Terpilih (The Concept of History According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: A Study of Selected Works)*. Master Dissertation, Department of Islamic History and Civilization, Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, 2012.

Parray, Tauseef Ahmad, and Owais Manzoor Dar. “Framing the *Sīrah*: Representations of Prophet Muḥammad in Introductory Texts on Islam by Contemporary Western Islamicists.” *Islamic Studies* 64, no. 4 (2025): 511–48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27444674>.

Teeuw, A. “The Malay Sha’ir: Problems of Origin and Tradition”. In *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 122, no. 4 (1966): 429–446.

Uthman, Muhammad Zainiy. *Pemikiran dan Tamadun (Thought and Civilization)*. Al-Sultan Abdullah History & Civilisation Research Centre (AL-ASAR), 2022.

Wan Daud, Wan Mohd Nor. *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization*. International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1998.

Yalçinkaya, Arzu Eylül. *God’s Other Book: The Qur’ān Between History and Ideology. 1st Ed.*, by Mohammad Salama. *Arab Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2025): 294–97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48847397>.