

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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## Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

## Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَي	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَي	iyy, ī (in final position)

*Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>*



# **Water Symbolism in *Syair Perahu* by Hamzah Fansuri: A Reflection of Maritime Life and Islamic Values in the History of Malay Society**

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**Mardiana Nordin\*\***  
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**Norazilawati Abd Wahab\*\*\*\***  
**Yusry Sulaiman\*\*\*\*\***

**Abstract:** *Syair Perahu* is a classic Malay work that uses the symbolism of water as a primary metaphor in describing the journey of human life. Water in this poem serves as a source of life and supply, and even as a threat in the form of waves and storms that symbolise life's challenges. In a historical context, this poem reflects the close relationship between traditional Malay society and the maritime world, where the sea is not only a source of livelihood but also a meaningful spiritual symbol. This study places the water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* within the social historical framework of Malay maritime societies from the 16th to the 19th centuries. It examines how the element

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of water was used as a reflection of the Malay worldview, which combined Islamic values with traditional cosmology. This approach uses historical analysis to connect the water symbolism in this poem with the dynamics of maritime life, including dependence on the sea, the challenges faced by coastal communities, and the influence of Islam as a guide to life. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the academic literature on the social history of Malay maritime, while offering a new perspective in understanding the role of symbolic elements of nature as a reflection of cultural and religious values. In addition, the study suggests an appreciation of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, which is relevant to contemporary discussions on ecological conservation and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Syair Perahu, Hamzah Fansuri, Malay, Islamic, Maritime

**Abstrak:** *Syair Perahu* merupakan karya klasik Melayu yang memanfaatkan simbolisme air sebagai metafora utama dalam menggambarkan perjalanan kehidupan manusia. Dalam syair ini, air berfungsi bukan sahaja sebagai sumber bekalan kehidupan, malah turut menjadi sebagai ancaman melalui gambaran ombak dan badai yang melambangkan cabaran hidup. Dalam konteks sejarah, karya ini mencerminkan hubungan yang erat antara masyarakat Melayu tradisional dengan dunia maritim, di mana laut bukan sekadar sumber ekonomi, tetapi juga simbol spiritual yang sarat makna. Kajian ini menempatkan simbolisme air dalam *Syair Perahu* dalam kerangka sejarah sosial masyarakat maritim Melayu dari abad ke-16 hingga ke-19. Ia meneliti bagaimana unsur air digunakan sebagai cerminan pandangan alam Melayu yang menggabungkan nilai-nilai Islam dengan kosmologi tradisional. Pendekatan yang digunakan berasaskan analisis sejarah bagi menghubungkan simbolisme air dalam syair ini dengan dinamika kehidupan maritim, termasuk kebergantungan terhadap laut, cabaran yang dihadapi oleh komuniti pesisir dan pengaruh Islam sebagai panduan kehidupan. Hasil kajian ini dijangka menyumbang kepada korpus akademik dalam bidang sejarah sosial maritim Melayu, di samping menawarkan perspektif baharu dalam memahami peranan unsur alam sebagai simbol yang mencerminkan nilai budaya dan keagamaan. Selain itu, kajian ini turut mengemukakan kepentingan menghargai hubungan harmoni antara manusia dan alam, yang relevan dalam wacana kontemporari berkaitan pemuliharaan ekologi dan pembangunan lestari.

**Kata kunci:** Syair Perahu, Hamzah Fansuri, Melayu, Islam, maritim

## Introduction

*Syair Perahu* is a classic work of Malay literature, serving as an important legacy in understanding the cultural, historical, and religious dynamics of traditional Malay society (Winstedt, 1958). This work, produced by Hamzah Fansuri, raises the symbolism of water phenomena as the main metaphor in describing the journey of human life (Braginsky, 1975; Doorenbos, 1933; Van Ronkel, 1921; Braginsky, 1975). Hamzah Fansuri was a famous Sufi figure. However, the exact date of his birth is unknown. He lived from the late 16th century to the early 17th century. Most scholars agree that Hamzah Fansuri was born in Barus, North Sumatra, a place located between Singkel and Sibolga (Liaw, 2011). According to historical records, the region has been a place of visit for traders for a long time. According to Drewes, Hamzah was born in a village known as Fansur, located in the Barus district (Drewes, 1986). In the records of Tome Pires, the Barus Kingdom shared borders with the Singkel Kingdom and the Meulaboh or Daya Kingdom (Cortesao, 2016).

*Syair Perahu* contains extensive maritime and water symbolism that can be read in relation to the coastal and trading environment of Singkel, a region historically shaped by maritime networks and seaborne exchange (Cortesao, 2017). If observed clearly, water in the context of this poem not only symbolises life but also impermanence, challenges, and the spiritual tool that leads humans to the afterlife. Drawing on Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's interpretation of Malay-Islamic symbolism, *Syair Perahu* articulates the worldview of the Malay community concerning the interrelationship between humans, nature, and God (Al-Attas, 1966). Hamzah Fansuri developed the teachings of philosophical Sufism. He is regarded as one of the earliest scholars in the Malay world who contributed to the development of philosophical Sufism, reflected in his works. By focusing on the symbolism of water, we hope to connect this poem to global discourses about the relationship between human beings and nature, while highlighting the uniqueness of the historical experience of the Malay community. Furthermore, this approach opens up space for comparative studies with other cultural traditions, thereby enriching our understanding of the role of symbolic elements in shaping historical and cultural narratives.

Scholarly engagement with *Syair Perahu* has a long and well-established tradition within Malay literary and Islamic studies. Early philological and textual studies by Doorenbos (1933) and Van Ronkel (1921) focused primarily on manuscript transmission, textual variants, and linguistic structure, establishing *Syair Perahu* as a foundational text within the Malay Sufi canon. Subsequent studies by Al-Attas (1966) and Johns (1961) significantly advanced the field by situating Hamzah Fansuri within the intellectual tradition of philosophical Sufism, particularly through concepts such as *wahdat al-wujud* and metaphysical symbolism. These works convincingly demonstrate that *Syair Perahu* functions as a didactic Sufi poem that articulates the human journey towards divine unity. Later literary and structural analyses by Braginsky (1975) further examined the internal organisation of the poem, arguing that its symbolism operates within a coherent poetic and cosmological framework. More recent studies, including those by Fauziah (2013), Zulhelmi (2016), and Heinschke (2020), continue this trajectory by emphasising the poem's spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions. These scholars generally interpret water, the boat, and the sea as allegorical devices representing the soul, the body, and the metaphysical path towards God. Amir H. (2024) extends this discussion by exploring water symbolism within Hamzah Fansuri's wider poetic corpus, reinforcing the centrality of aquatic imagery in his mystical thought.

While these studies collectively establish *Syair Perahu* as a profound Sufi and literary text, their analytical focus remains largely confined to doctrinal interpretation, metaphysical abstraction, and poetic form. The symbolism of water is predominantly treated as a universal spiritual metaphor, often detached from the material, social, and historical conditions in which the poem was produced. Little attention is given to the fact that Hamzah Fansuri emerged from a deeply maritime environment, shaped by seafaring, trade networks, coastal risk, and everyday engagement with the sea as both sustenance and danger. Moreover, existing scholarship rarely situates water symbolism within the broader social history of Malay maritime communities, particularly between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, when coastal societies in the Malay world were economically and culturally dependent on the sea. As a result, the lived maritime experiences that inform the poem's imagery, such as preparation for voyage, navigation, exposure

to storms, and the constant risk of loss, remain underexplored as historical contexts that shape symbolic meaning. This study addresses this gap by repositioning water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* within a social-historical and eco-cultural framework. Rather than viewing water solely as a metaphysical signifier, this article interprets it as a symbolic medium rooted in the maritime realities of Malay society, where spiritual discipline, economic survival, and environmental uncertainty intersect. By integrating literary analysis with social history and ecological awareness, this study offers a more grounded interpretation of *Syair Perahu* as both a spiritual text and a historical document reflecting the worldview of a maritime Muslim society.

This study asks the following research question: How does water operate as a composite Islamic symbol encompassing purity, peril, and providence in *Syair Perahu*, and through what textual strategies, such as metaphor, imperative discourse, maritime lexicon, and allegorical parallelism, are these meanings rendered intelligible within a Malay maritime worldview? This study aims to analyse water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* as a historically situated Islamic semiotic system that mediates spiritual doctrine, maritime experience, and Malay cosmology. Rather than treating water solely as a poetic motif, this study examines how symbolic imagery functions as a cultural mechanism through which Islamic ethical concepts are translated into a maritime social reality. This article contributes to Malay literary and historical studies by proposing a contextual model of symbolic mediation, demonstrating how Islamic concepts such as purification, trial, and divine dependence are embedded within the ecological and economic realities of a maritime society. By situating *Syair Perahu* within the historical ecology of Malay seafaring communities, the study advances an interdisciplinary approach that links literary symbolism, social history, and Islamic intellectual traditions.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative textual–historical methodology that integrates close reading, Islamic conceptual analysis, and comparative cultural interpretation. The primary corpus of analysis is *Syair Perahu*, which is attributed to Hamzah Fansuri. The analysis uses the critical edition edited by J. Doorenbos (1933) and includes cross-reference to Van Ronkel (1921) where necessary for textual verification. All

citations from the poem are referenced by stanza number, following the numbering system used in these editions, to ensure consistency and reproducibility. The analytical procedure follows four sequential steps. First, selected stanzas containing explicit maritime and water imagery are quoted in the original Malay text, accompanied by an interpretive English gloss where required for analytical clarity. Second, key symbolic terms (such as *air*, *laut*, *perahu*, *ombak*, *tali*, and *kemudi*) are briefly glossed semantically and culturally, drawing on classical Malay usage and established literary scholarship. Third, each symbolic element is analytically linked to a specific Islamic concept relevant to Sufi thought, such as *tawhīd*, *tawakkul*, *dhikr*, *ṭahārah*, or *maqāmāt*, supported by concise references to primary Islamic concepts or secondary Sufi studies. Once the conceptual grounding is established, the analysis proceeds to the fourth step: situating the symbolism within its historical maritime context, particularly the lived experiences of Malay coastal and trading societies between the 16th and 19th centuries. By combining textual analysis, Islamic conceptual mapping, and historically grounded interpretation within a clearly defined procedure, this methodology ensures that the reading of water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* remains systematic, transparent, and analytically replicable.

### **Water Symbolism in Malay Cosmology: Historical and Cultural Perspectives**

*Syair Perahu* highlights the symbolism of water in shaping its narrative. Water, interpreted through a social-historical and Sufi cosmological perspective rooted in the Malay-Islamic worldview, functions not merely as a physical element but as a central metaphor for life and the spiritual journey, reflecting the relationship between humans, nature, God, and the afterlife (Radpour, 2019). This work provides an in-depth look at how Malay society interprets water as a symbol of spiritual strength, life's trials, and spiritual purification. Through this symbolism, *Syair Perahu* conveys the worldview of traditional Malay society, which integrates religious values with their cosmology and maritime experiences (Doorenbos, 1933). In Malay cosmology, water symbolises purity, life, and impermanence (Shamsudin, & Akhir, 2018). In *Syair Perahu*, water is depicted as a necessary supply for the journey, but at the same time as a test that challenges humanity. For example, the fourth stanza of the poem reflects this concept of duality:

*“Perteguh jua alat perahumu,  
hasilkan bekal air dan kayu,  
dayung pengayuh taruh di situ,  
supaya laju perahumu itu.”*

(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

Water in this verse is not only a symbol of physical provision but also a spiritual element essential for preparing to face the journey of life in this world and life after death. An insufficient supply of water symbolises a lack of spiritual preparation, which will result in failure in the journey of life. However, water in this verse also represents the inevitable tests of life. These tests are depicted in the form of waves, corals, and storms, reflecting the challenges that must be overcome to achieve the final goal, as stated in the seventh verse:

*“Muaranya dalam, ikanpun banyak,  
di sanalah perahu karam dan rusak,  
karangnya tajam seperti tombak  
ke atas pasir kamu tersesak.”*

(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

In this verse, water symbolises obstacles in life that can only be overcome with steadfast faith and true guidance. The coral and waves represent worldly temptations and sins that threaten man's spiritual journey. In Malay cosmology, the sea is often considered the abode of supernatural beings and a symbol of natural forces that cannot be controlled by man (Kembaren et al., 2020). Therefore, in this context, water is used as a symbol to depict human dependence on God to overcome challenges beyond their capabilities. This symbolism is also relevant in the historical context of Malay society as a maritime society. As a society that depends on the sea for their livelihood, water is an element that is very close to their daily experiences (Shamsul Bahri et al., 2024). The sea is not only a source of livelihood but also a space full of uncertainty and danger. In *Syair Perahu*, water becomes a reflection of this duality, where it is a source of life but also an inevitable testing ground. This illustrates how the Malay community harmonises their relationship with nature through religious and cultural values, resulting in a harmonious worldview between humans, nature, and God. This is reflected in the second stanza of the poem, which reads:

*“Wahai muda kenali dirimu  
Ialah perahu tamsil tubuhmu  
Tiadalah berapa lama hidupmu  
Ke akhirat jua kekal diammu.”*

(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

In the global maritime literary tradition, water symbolism is often used to describe the journey of life. For example, in *The Odyssey*, the sea becomes a symbol of spiritual trials and transformation for the main character (Garvie (Ed.), 1994). Similarly, in Polynesian epics, water is a medium for spiritual and physical journeys that take individuals to higher levels of life (Sinclair, (Ed.), 2019). However, in *Syair Perahu*, the symbolism of water demonstrates the uniqueness of the Malay worldview, which integrates religious values with their traditional cosmology. The use of this symbol illustrates how the Malay community understands their relationship with nature as part of their spiritual journey.

To move beyond thematic description, it is necessary to examine how water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* is performed at the level of language itself. The poem does not merely describe water as a symbol; it activates maritime meaning through imperative diction, allegory, and nautical lexicon. While earlier sections have discussed water symbolism at the thematic and conceptual level, it is equally important to demonstrate how the symbolism is performed through language itself. In *Syair Perahu*, Hamzah Fansuri does not merely describe water as an abstract symbol; rather, he activates it through imperative diction, nautical terminology, and allegorical compression, allowing the poem’s language to enact purification, warning, and spiritual discipline. A clear example appears in the frequently cited fourth stanza:

*“Perteguh jua alat perahumu,  
hasilkan bekal air dan kayu,  
dayung pengayuh taruh di situ,  
supaya laju perahumu itu.”*

(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

Here, the imperative verbs “*perteguh*”, “*hasilkan*”, and “*taruh*” function as didactic commands, mirroring the tone of religious exhortation. The phrase “*bekal air*” is particularly significant. Linguistically, “*air*” operates on two registers simultaneously: as a literal maritime necessity

and as a metaphor for spiritual provision. The economy of the diction compresses physical survival and metaphysical preparedness into a single lexical unit, allowing water to function as both sustenance and moral capital. The allegory of the boat as the human body is made explicit in the second stanza:

“*Wahai muda kenali dirimu,  
ialah perahu tamsil tubuhmu,  
tiadalah berapa lama hidupmu,  
ke akhirat jua kekal diammu.*”

(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

The use of ‘*tamsil*’ (allegory) is crucial here. Rather than relying on symbolic ambiguity, Hamzah explicitly instructs the reader to read the boat as the body. Water, by implication, becomes the environment in which the body-soul composite must operate. The sea is not external scenery but the condition of existence itself, reinforcing a Sufi ontology in which worldly life is a transient passage rather than a stable dwelling.

As noted in the introduction, previous studies on *Syair Perahu* have offered rich literary and philosophical readings, particularly in relation to Sufism and allegory. However, these analyses often treat symbolism at the conceptual level, with limited attention to how poetic language is embedded within the social and historical conditions of Malay maritime life. This study argues that water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* should be read not only as a metaphysical metaphor, but also as a linguistic and cultural expression shaped by the lived realities of a maritime society. In this context, water reflects both spiritual values and everyday experiences of risk, dependence, and uncertainty faced by coastal communities. By situating textual symbolism within a social-historical framework, this article highlights how the Malay worldview integrates religious meaning with environmental experience, while also offering insights relevant to contemporary discussions on ecological balance and human-nature relations.

### **Transformation of Maritime Culture and Islam in *Syair Perahu***

*Syair Perahu* is actually a profound reflection on the cultural and religious transition in Malay society, especially during the early era of the spread of Islam in the archipelago. This poem integrates elements of Islamic beliefs and Malay maritime cultural traditions. These elements

are expressed through the symbolism of boats and water, which serve as analogies of the human body and the spiritual journey towards the afterlife. This work not only offers insight into the worldview of Malay society, but also emphasises the role of Islam in shaping their cultural identity during the era of Islamisation.

Islamisation in the archipelago, especially in maritime regions such as Aceh, Malacca, and other islands around the Malay Peninsula, brought about a major transformation in the way of life for the people (Musalib, 2008). *Syair Perahu* reflects this transformation by highlighting key concepts in Islamic teachings, including monotheism, faith, transience, and destiny. This poem combines Islamic values with a maritime narrative that simultaneously depicts the harmony between religion and culture.

One significant aspect of *Syair Perahu* is how the boat is likened to a symbol of the human body, while the journey through the sea symbolises the challenges of human life. For example, the following third stanza describes a boat as a metaphor for a body that needs spiritual guidance:

*“Hai muda arif-budiman,  
hasilkan kemudi dengan pedoman,  
alat perahumu jua kerjakan,  
itulah jalan membetuli insan.”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

In this context based on Islamic teachings, “*kemudi*” (rudder) symbolises faith and “guidance”. This logic accords with the Sufi conception of *tawakkul*, which Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh defines not as abandonment of effort but as trust in God after disciplined action (*al-Hikam*, hikmah 4). This couplet emphasises that, to achieve success in life, one needs to ensure that their boat, symbolising their body, is steered correctly based on religious guidance. This symbolism reflects the integration of Islamic values into the daily lives of Malay society, where religion is the basis for all actions and decisions (Ishak & Abdullah, 2012). In addition, this poem highlights the concepts of transience and destiny, both of which are central to the teachings of Sufism. This concept is clearly illustrated in the couplet of the poem, which reads:

*“Ketahui olehmu hai anak dagang,  
riaknya rencam ombaknya karang,*

*ikanpun banyak datang menyarang,  
hendak membawa ke tengah sawang.”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

This eighth stanza depicts the world as a sea full of challenges and obstacles. “*Riak*” and “*karang*” symbolise worldly temptations and sins that can hinder human spiritual journey. Meanwhile, “*anak dagang*” refers to humans as travellers who are heading towards their final destination, which is the hereafter. In this context, *Syair Perahu* emphasises the need to remain focused on the ultimate goal of life, which is in line with Islamic teachings that prioritise the hereafter over this world. As in the ninth stanza, the last line of the couplet states, “*sempurnalah jalan terlalu ba’id*”.

The symbolism of water is also seen in the cultural transformation of Malay society as influenced by Islam. Water, frequently used in Islamic tradition as a means of purification, symbolises the need to cleanse oneself spiritually before embarking on the journey to the afterlife. This is in line with the concept of *thaharah* in Islam, which emphasises the importance of cleanliness as part of worship. For this reason, water is very important in the purification process, especially purification from minor ablution (*wuduk*) and major ablution (*mandi wajib*) (Farooq & Ansari, 1981). Repeating the fourth stanza, which describes the importance of water as an essential supply that needs to be prepared:

*“Perteguh jua alat perahumu,  
hasilkan bekal air dan kayu,  
dayung pengayuh taruh di situ,  
supaya laju perahumu itu.”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

“*Air dan kayu*” in this context symbolises knowledge and charity, which are the main supplies to face the life of this world and the hereafter. This stanza emphasises that the spiritual journey requires mature preparation, just like a sailor needs sufficient supplies to sail the ocean. A clear analogy is seen in the eleventh stanza, which reads:

*“Lengkapkan pendarat dan tali sauh  
Derasmubanyak bertemu musuh  
Selebu rencam ombaknya cabuh*

*La ilahailahu akan tali yang teguh”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

In addition to Islamic values, *Syair Perahu* also reflects elements of maritime culture that are characteristic of the Malay community. As a maritime community, their relationship with the sea is very deep; it serves not only as a source of livelihood but also as an element that shapes their worldview (Rohazid & Abdullah, 2022). The sea is often considered a testing ground that tests human mental and spiritual strength (Ali & Sulistiyono, 2023). In this poem, the journey through the turbulent sea symbolises the journey of life full of challenges, as stated in the following ninth stanza:

*“Muaranya itu terlalu sempit,  
di manakan lalu sampan dan rakit,  
jikalau ada pedoman dikapit,  
sempurnalah jalan terlalu ba’id”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

*“Muaranya terlalu sempit”* describes life’s difficulties that require wisdom and religious guidance to go through. In the Malay maritime tradition, *“pedoman”* also refers to a navigation tool that helps sailors determine the direction of their voyage. The cultural and religious transformations depicted in *Syair Perahu* are part of a broader process of Islamisation in the archipelago. The spread and da’wah of Islam in this region occurred not only through trade but also through literature and cultural arts (Gunaish et al., 2024). *Syair Perahu* is an effective medium for conveying Islamic values, employing language and symbolism that are close to the daily experiences of the Malay community. By utilising simple yet profound metaphors, this poem is able to convey religious teachings in a way that is easy to understand and relevant to the local cultural context.

This change not only influenced the worldview of the Malay community but also led to the production of other works that reflected the synthesis between local culture and Islamic values. Additionally, examples such as *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, *Bustan Al-Salatin*, and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* shows how Islamisation has enriched the Malay literary tradition. These works incorporate new elements that deepen their symbolic and spiritual meaning (Adam, 2019: Haji Salleh, 1998: Hamzah, 2020, Winstedt, 1921). Therefore, *Syair Perahu* is not only

a literary work but also a cultural document that reflects a major shift in the worldview of Malay society during the era of Islamisation. Through the symbolism of the boat and water, this poem highlights the integration of Islamic values into Malay culture, reflecting the harmony between local traditions and the newly accepted religion. This analysis shows how *Syair Perahu* depicts a profound process of cultural and religious transformation, relevant in the context of Malay history, and providing rich insight into how religion and culture can interact to shape community identity.

### **Social Dynamics and Malay Maritime Economy in *Syair Perahu***

*Syair Perahu* displays maritime symbolism in depicting the social and economic dynamics of traditional Malay society. As a maritime society, the lives of the Malay community during that era were highly dependent on the sea and rivers as the main source of their economy, trade routes, and space to build social relationships (Siraj & Tayab, 2017; Ali & Abdullah, 2024). As discussed earlier, the boat in this poem is a symbol of the human body, while the sea reflects the real world full of challenges. Again, the fourth stanza can be used in analysing this view: it describes the boat as an important tool that needs to be well prepared before starting a journey, as indicated by the sentence, “*perteguh jua alat perahumu*” (Doorenbos, 1933; Van Ronkel, 1921). The sentence “*hasilkan bekal air dan kayu*” reflects the economic reality faced by the Malay community, emphasising the need to carefully prepare supplies for maritime travel, which is often dangerous and uncertain. In addition, the phrase “*air dan kayu*” is a symbol of the basic resources needed for survival, both physical and economic. In maritime societies, inadequate preparation can lead to disaster, just as in human life where failure to prepare oneself with knowledge and experience can lead to failure in facing life’s challenges (Hidayat & Tan, 2021).

To make the maritime context more concrete, this article foregrounds two specific seafaring practices familiar to the Malay world: monsoon timing and pilotage (*pedoman*). Premodern sailing in the Straits of Malacca depended on seasonal winds, departure at the wrong time risked shipwreck or prolonged drift. This reality surfaces in *Syair Perahu* through repeated injunctions to strengthen the vessel and prepare supplies (“*perteguh jua alat perahumu*”), where water signifies both sustenance and danger. The poem’s emphasis on readiness reflects

a monsoon-regulated worldview in which discipline and restraint determined survival. Equally significant is pilotage, essential for navigating narrow river mouths and reef-filled waters. In the poem, “*pedoman*” and “*kemudi*” function as metaphors for spiritual guidance, echoing the maritime logic that even a strong vessel fails without an experienced pilot. Read in this light, the poem’s water symbolism derives from concrete maritime practices rather than abstract seafaring imagery, grounding its spiritual allegory in the lived realities of a Malay maritime society (Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921: Reid, 1993).

Furthermore, this poem depicts the sea as a space full of opportunities but also risks. In the context of a maritime economy, the sea is the main medium for trade and communication between regions. However, the sea also carries risks in the form of storms, corals, and predators (Basiron, 2013). This is clearly illustrated in the nineteenth stanza:

*“Ingati sungguh siang dan malam  
Lautnya deras bertambah dalam  
Anginnya keras ombaknya rencam  
Ingati perahu jangan tenggelam.”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921).

This stanza describes the reality of the Malay community, who often face the risk of losing ships and supplies due to natural threats. The deep sea and strong winds are symbols of the obstacles that require skill and wisdom to face. In a social context, this depicts the importance of wise and experienced leaders to lead the community through difficult times. The maritime world plays a major role in relations between regions within the Malay World and with the outside world. The Port of Melaka, for example, evolved into an international entrepot port, attracting traders from China, India, and the Arab World to trade (Wilkinson, 1935). This situation reflects the Malay community’s dependence on the sea as the main link between regions, including the Straits of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific (Yaapar, 2019). This is also reflected in *Syair Perahu*, which reflects the Malay community’s dependence on the sea as an important medium in their lives. These trade relations not only provided economic benefits but also served as a major channel for the spread of culture and religion, thereby enriching the social and spiritual lives of the Malay community. Therefore, water and the sea symbolise the connections between humans and the larger community.

The first line of the eighth stanza, which reads, “*Ketahui olehmu hai anak dagang*”, refers to traders or sailors who play an important role in building economic and social relationships in this maritime world. In an economic context, this verse illustrates the important role of trade in uniting Malay society with the outside world, where the sea becomes a route for the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture (Khaw et al., 2021). However, the sea also brings challenges that require society to build resilient social and economic systems. *Syair Perahu* emphasises the importance of guidelines and guidance to ensure safe travel. In the context of Malay society, this refers to the role of leaders and social structures in ensuring the stability and success of the community (Fang, 2007). The two lines in the tenth stanza further emphasise the importance of guidance in overcoming challenges:

*“Baiklah perahu engkau perteguh,  
hasilkan pendapat dengan tali sauh”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921).

The lines in this verse reflect the importance of wisdom and experience in ensuring a safe journey. In a social context, these guidelines symbolise customary law and religious teachings that are the foundation of Malay society’s stability. In an economic context, this refers to strategic planning and wise management of resources to ensure the survival of the community. The sea was also a testing ground that shaped the identity and resilience of the Malay community (Lal, 1997). In their maritime tradition, the sea was considered not only as an economic resource but also as a terrain in which the community’s strength and resilience were tested. For example, the fall of the city of Malacca to the Portuguese in 1511 shows that the challenges faced at sea were not limited to maritime dominance or economic exploration; they also involved geopolitical and military threats (Leifer & Nelson, 1973). In stanza 37, the sea is described as a place of testing that requires spiritual and physical strength:

*“La ilaha illallahu itu kata yang teguh,  
memadamkan cahaya sekalian rusuh,  
jin dan syaitan sekalian musuh,  
hendak membawa dia bersungguh-sungguh.”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921).

This stanza depicts how the Malay community navigates maritime challenges by relying on spiritual beliefs and beliefs. In a social and economic context, this shows that the strength of the community lies in their ability to work together and rely on shared values in facing challenges. Overall, *Syair Perahu* is a reflection of the social and economic dynamics within the maritime Malay community. The symbolism of the boat and the sea in this poem illustrates their daily challenges, as well as emphasising the importance of wisdom, experience, and spiritual beliefs when facing uncertain circumstances.

### **Sufism in *Syair Perahu*: Water Symbolism as a Reflection of the Spiritual Journey**

*Syair Perahu* is known for its deep philosophical and religious meaning. This work reflects the worldview of Sufism through the metaphor of a boat and water. In the context of Sufism, water is not only depicted as a fundamental element of life but also as a symbol of purification, impermanence, and an intermediary medium between the mortal world and the afterlife (Raju & Manasi(Eds), 2017). In classical Sufi thought, *ṭahārah* signifies both outward cleansing and inward purification; al-Ghazālī distinguishes *ṭahārat al-zāhir* from *ṭahārat al-bāṭin*, where water prepares the body while discipline purifies the heart (*Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn, Kitāb Asrār al-Ṭahārah*). The symbolism of water highlights the significance of the Poem of the Boat in understanding the philosophy of Sufism in the archipelago region. In this context, the boat's journey through the turbulent sea becomes a reflection of the spiritual journey of man towards his God (Allah). Water, in Sufi doctrine, is often associated with the process of spiritual purification (Zarvani & Mashhadi, 2011). This concept is also reflected in the fourth stanza, as previously shown:

“*Perteguh jua alat perahumu,  
Hasilkan bekal air dan kayu,  
Dayung pengayuh taruh di situ,  
Supaya laju perahumu itu.*”  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

In this stanza, water is not only an important supply for the journey, but it also symbolises the human need to purify himself before starting the spiritual journey. Sufism emphasises that having a clean soul is a prerequisite for approaching God. The process of purification involves introspection and complete surrender to God, just as a boat depends

on water to sail. This symbolism shows how the element of water is used to illustrate the importance of preparing oneself with good deeds, knowledge, and faith to face spiritual challenges. In *Syair Perahu*, water also functions as a symbol of testing, reflecting the twists and turns of life's journey full of obstacles. In Sufism, the journey to God is often described as difficult, requiring patience and perseverance (Radpour, 2019). This is illustrated in certain lines of *Syair Perahu*, such as:

*“Muaranya dalam, ikanpun banyak, (Stanza 7)*  
*Karangnya tajam seperti tombak (Stanza 7)*  
*Anginnya kencang ombaknya cabuh (Stanza 10)*  
*Riaknya rencam ombaknya besar (Stanza 15)*  
*Taufan dan rebut terlalu azamah (Stanza 17)*  
 (Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

These verses show that the sea, filled with fish, sharp rocks, large waves, and storms, is an analogy for worldly trials and temptations that can destroy one's faith. In the Sufi tradition, worldly temptations are likened to obstacles that a seeker (spiritual path) must overcome to reach a state of spiritual perfection (Radpour, 2019). Water, in this case, becomes a metaphor for the uncertain worldly conditions, requiring guidance, perseverance, and direction for safe navigation. The elements of Sufism in *Syair Perahu* are also reflected in the use of the symbol of a rope as a connection that connects humans with God. Within classical Sufi doctrine, such imagery corresponds to the *maqāmāt of fanā'* (dissolution of ego) and *baqā'* (subsistence in God), as systematised by *al-Qushayrī* (*al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*). In the following stanza, it is stated:

*“La ilaha illallahu akan tali yang teguh (Stanza 11)*  
*Barang siapa bergantung di situ,*  
*Teduhlah selebu yang rencam itu (Stanza 12)*  
 (Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

The rope, symbolised by the *dhikr*, “*La ilaha illallah*,” is a metaphor for *tawhid*—the belief in the oneness of God. In the doctrine of Sufism, *dhikr* is the primary tool for connecting the human heart with God, cleansing the heart of doubt, and strengthening faith (Karo-Karo et al., 2024). The symbolism of the strong rope suggests that holding fast to *tawhid* is the only way to face the storms of life and reach a peaceful spiritual destination. In the context of Sufism, *tawhid* is not just an intellectual belief, but a profound spiritual experience that leads

to the recognition of the oneness of God in every aspect of life (Cook, 2014). In addition, water in *Syair Perahu* also functions as a medium of transformation. In the Sufi tradition, the spiritual journey is often described as the process of transforming the soul from a state of *nafs al-ammarah* (a soul inclined to evil) to *nafs al-mutmainnah* (a soul at peace) (Wahab, 2022). This transformation requires a journey through difficult trials, as described in the 14th stanza:

*“Laut Silan terlalu dalam,  
Di sanalah perahu rusak dan karam,  
Sungguhpun banyak di sana menyelam,  
Larangan mendapat permata nilam.”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921)

This stanza shows that although a journey by sea can lead to profound spiritual discovery, it is also fraught with the risk of failure. In Sufism, this journey is often described as *maqāmāt*, which denoted the spiritual stages that a seeker must pass through. Each stage involves a test of faith and a deeper surrender to God (Ni’am, 2020). To summarise this connection between water and the divine, the author includes four clear stanzas to illustrate it, as in stanzas 22-25:

*“Wujud Allah nama perahunya  
Ilmu Allah akan dayungnya  
Iman Allah nama kemudinya  
Yakin akan Allah nama pawangnya  
  
Taharat dan istinja’ nama lantainya  
Kufur dan maksiat air ruangnya  
Tawakkal akan Allah jurubatunya  
Tauhid itu akan sauhnya  
  
Selawat akan nabi tali bubutannya  
Istighfar Allah akan layarnya  
Allahuakbar nama anginnya  
Subhanallah akan lajunya  
  
Wallahu’alam nama rantaunya  
Iradat Allah nama bandarnya  
Kudrat Allah nama labuhannya  
Syurga Jannat al-Naim nama negerinya”*  
(Doorenbos, 1933: Van Ronkel, 1921).

Overall, *Syair Perahu* offers a profound insight into the spiritual journey of man through the symbolism of water. In the Sufi tradition, this journey represents a path towards God, where man must purify himself, overcome worldly temptations, and achieve a deep understanding of monotheism (Ernst, 2017). This study shows the way in which *Syair Perahu* integrates elements of Sufism with the lived experiences of the Malay community, thereby making it relevant as a philosophical and religious text that transcends time and place. This reading accords with Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's argument that Hamzah Fansuri's poetic language functions as a deliberate vehicle for transmitting Islamic metaphysics to a Malay maritime audience, translating Sufi doctrine into experiential symbols intelligible to a seafaring society (Al-Attas, 1966).

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* operates as a key textual device through which Islamic concepts are rendered intelligible within the historical experience of Malay maritime society. The analysis demonstrates that water in this poem is not a passive metaphor, but a structured symbolic medium that links poetic form to Islamic metaphysics and lived maritime realities. Through images of the sea, waves, storms, and navigation, Hamzah Fansuri translates abstract Islamic concepts such as tawhid, spiritual purification, guidance, and eschatological orientation into a symbolic language grounded in the everyday experiences of seafaring life. By situating this symbolism within the social and economic conditions of Malay maritime communities, the study shows how Islamic values were not merely adopted at a doctrinal level but embedded within an existing cosmological and environmental worldview.

Water functions simultaneously as a source of livelihood, a space of danger and uncertainty, and a spiritual testing ground, allowing Islamic teachings to be articulated in forms that were historically legible to a society deeply dependent on the sea. In this sense, *Syair Perahu* should be understood not only as a literary or mystical text, but as a cultural document that records the synthesis of Islam and maritime life in the Malay world. Taken together, this analysis clarifies the central analytical payoff of the study. Water symbolism in *Syair Perahu* operates as a bridge between poetic expression, Islamic ethical imagination, and the historical realities of Malay maritime society. While grounded in a

historical and literary context, this symbolic configuration also gestures toward contemporary concerns, particularly ongoing discussions on Islamic environmental and maritime ethics, where harmony with nature, restraint, and spiritual accountability remain pressing lived issues.

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Alias (2009)

Reference:

Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

## **Journal Article**

In-text:

Chapra (2002)

Reference:

Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 10, 214-232.

## **The Qur'ān**

In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:

*The glorious Qur'ān*. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

## **Ḥadīth**

In-text:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

## **The Bible**

In-text:

Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:

*The new Oxford annotated Bible*. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Transliteration of Arabic words should follow the style indicated in ROTAS Transliteration Kit as detailed on its website ([http://rotas.iium.edu.my/?Table\\_of\\_Transliteration](http://rotas.iium.edu.my/?Table_of_Transliteration)), which is a slight modification of ALA-LC (Library of Congress and the American Library Association) transliteration scheme. Transliteration of Persian, Urdu, Turkish and other scripts should follow ALA-LC scheme.

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