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THE CONFUSED WHALE OF THE CHINA SEA:  
WATER SYMBOLISM IN THE WORKS  
OF HAMZAH FANSURI

*Amir H. Zekrgoo*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

*Perhaps the most valuable contribution of Hamzah Fansuri to the elevation of intellectual and spiritual traditions of Islam was his tireless efforts to create a harmonious atmosphere between the stern followers of religious law (shari'ah) and the Sufi ways of self-purification (ṭariqah). The renowned 16<sup>th</sup> century Malay mystic used simple language to communicate his thoughts to average audience. In order to add clarity to his arguments he often resorted to symbols and metaphors that made his discussions more appealing. This essay begins with a brief introductory remark about the importance of water in religious traditions, followed by a passage on Sufi symbolism in Hamzah's writings. Among the wide range of symbolic expressions adopted by Hamzah, water-related-metaphors occupy the highest place – both from the viewpoint of their frequent appearance, and in terms of profoundness of their suggestive meanings. Hence, the main body of the paper focuses on water symbolism in Hamzah's treatises and poems, which is presented under seven headings namely: Waters of Life, Ocean of Unity, Currents of Creation, Waves of Manifestation, Bubbles of Identity, The Confused Whale, and The Brilliant Fish.*

**Keywords:** Sufism, symbolism, Hamzah Fansuri, *syair*, water, ocean, sea, wave, bubble, *Sharāb al-‘Āshiqīn*, *Asrār al-‘Ārifīn*, *al-Muntahī*

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## Water in Religious Beliefs and Rituals

Water is the most prolific symbol in world's major religions. According to the Bible, there was darkness and water before God created the world (Genesis, 1:2). Hindus believe that at the beginning there was all darkness with no distinguishing sign, and everything existed as water (Rigveda, 10:129); also, a number of deities in Hindu mythology manifest in various forms of water- river, rain and sea.<sup>2</sup> Islamic cosmology connects the creation of all forms of life to water (Quran 21:30).

Water has been used as cleansing agent – both for the body and the soul. A study of world religions from the ancient times to the present reveals the importance of water as a medium for spiritual purification.<sup>3,4</sup> Purification in this sense signifies transformation from one state to another.<sup>5</sup> Religious rituals often involve water. In Chinese traditions, preparation for ceremonial purificatory rites involves water. The Hindu ritual bathing in the holy waters of the Ganges is believed to cleanse the bather from the stain of sins. Christian Baptism is a symbol of rebirth in a purified state. Ablution with clean water is an obligatory rite for Muslims to perform daily prayers and for many other Islamic rituals.<sup>6</sup>

## Hamzah and the Sufi Tradition

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, is a fluid concept that is deeply rooted in intuition, devotion and divine love. Discussions related to Sufi path are often multi-layered and symbolic. The Arabic and Persian terms for Sufism is *'irfān* or *taṣawwuf*, which denote – vaguely

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<sup>2</sup> See Amir H. Zekrgoo, *Symbolism in Oriental Arts: Vol.4: Water Deities & Mythical Sea Creatures*, (MATN Publishing, Iran Academy of Art, Tehran, 2016), 15-46.

<sup>3</sup> 'He caused water to descend on you from heaven, to clean you therewith, to remove from you the stain of Satan, to strengthen your heart, and to plant your feet firmly there with' (Quran, 8:11).

<sup>4</sup> See Amir H. Zekrgoo, "Waters of Purification," in *Water: The First Element*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2003), 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> See Amir H. Zekrgoo, "Waters of Transformation," in *Water: The First Element*, National Art Gallery, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2003), 22-24.

<sup>6</sup> See Amir H. Zekrgoo, "Waters of Purification," in *Water: The First Element*, National Art Gallery, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2003), 14-16.

speaking – to Islam’s mystical tradition. Symbols and metaphors are important components of Sufi literature. Sufis aim at attaining God-realization – an experiential knowledge of divinity – through contemplation, meditation and invocation (*dhikr*). This experience is esoteric in nature, and therefore requires a terminology that is distinct from that which is normally adopted in exact sciences and rational discourses. In fact, any expression of metaphysical nature ought to be symbolic.

Hamzah Fansuri, the renowned 16th century Islamic scholar and mystic of the Malay world, was a follower and commentator of Sufi tradition. Born in Fansur (also known as Barus) on the west bank of Sumatra, he lost his parents at a very young age. Hamzah lived a life of wandering and detachment, traveled extensively and visited various places in the Middle East, Malay Peninsula, and Java. His period of residence in *Shahr-i-Naw* (or *Shahr-i-Nāv*) in Ayutthaya Kingdom of Siam, left a life-changing impression on Hamzah’s worldview so much so that he referred to the city as the place of his rebirth – where ‘he acquired his existence’ (*Sharabu’l-‘Āshiqīn*: 5).

Hamzah’s writings exhibit his knowledge of, and familiarity with, Persian language and literature, which he learned during his stay in *Shahr-i-Nāv* (شهر ناو),<sup>7</sup> where a big Persian community had settled.<sup>8</sup> He was the first writer who applied Malay language to express his ideas in a persuasive and systematic manner. His writings, which greatly influenced Muslim scholars and Sufis in South East Asian region, include three treatises, namely *Sharabu’l-‘Āshiqīn*,<sup>9</sup> *Asrāru’l-‘Ārifīn*<sup>10</sup> and *Al-Muntahī*,<sup>11</sup> which are now

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<sup>7</sup> *Shahr-i-Naw* (شهر ناو) and *Shahr-i-Nāv* (شهر ناو) are both Persian names. *Shahr-i-Naw* means ‘New City’ and *Shahr-i-Nāv* means ‘Port City’ – city of the ships (Nāv = ship). The author believes that perhaps *Shahr-i-Nāv* is a more accurate recording of the city’s name.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account, see Amir H. Zekrgoo & Leyla H. Tajer (2023), *Tracing Persian Sufi Literature in Hamzah Fansuri’s Writings*, (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2023), 23-60.

<sup>9</sup> *Sharābu’l-‘Āshiqīn* (The Drink of Lovers) mainly revolves around *Sharī‘ah* (Religious Law), *Ṭarīqah* (The Path) and *Ḥaqīqah* (The Truth), and the states of thanksgiving and love.

<sup>10</sup> *Asrāru’l-‘Ārifīn* (The Secrets of the Mystics) is devoted to elaboration of God’s

available in romanized Malay, as well as English and Persian translations.<sup>12</sup> Hamzah also has a collection of poems that complements the three treatises. In fact, a number of his poem that are compiled in *The Poems of Hamzah Fansuri* appear in his treatises.<sup>13</sup>

In all his works one senses a tireless effort to build a bridge between religious law (*shariah*) and the spiritual journey of the seeker (*tarikah*). “Self-realization” is at the core of Hamzah’s teachings. His repeated quotations of the famous hadith “*Whoever knows himself knows his Lord,*”<sup>14</sup> shows how fundamental he viewed the issue of self-realization.

Hamzah often resorted to symbols and metaphors that also make his discussions more appealing.<sup>15</sup> Among the wide range of symbolic expressions adopted by him, water-related-metaphors occupy the highest place – both from the viewpoint of their frequent appearance, and in terms of profoundness of their suggestive meanings. This is because water’s formless nature provides endless possibilities of manifestation. Hamzah used these manifestations to convey a variety of complex religious, philosophical, and mystical meanings, in a manner that is easy-to-comprehend. What follows is a classification and elaboration of water symbolism in Hamzah’s writings.

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Names, i.e. the divine attributes mentioned in the Quran. It also includes wise sayings addressed to seekers of the divine path, Discussions on ‘the stations of spiritual love’ is also part of this book.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Muntahī* (The Adept) is the shortest among the three treatises. It stresses upon the relation of self-realization to the realization of the Almighty.

<sup>12</sup> For the Romanized Malay transliteration and English translation see Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970). For original Jawi text and Persian translation, see, Amir H. Zekrgoo & Leyla H. Tajer, *Three Treatises: Asrār al-‘Ārifīn, Sharāb al-‘Āshiqīn, Al-Muntahī, By Hamza Fansuri (16<sup>th</sup> Century Malay Mystic)* (Tehran: Miras-e Maktoob, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> G. W. Drewes and L. F. Brakel, *The Poems of Hamzah Fansuri* (Dordrecht-Holland/Cinnaminson-USA: Foris Publication, 1986)

<sup>14</sup> من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه

<sup>15</sup> I am presently working on a comprehensive book on symbols and metaphors in Hamzah Fansuri’s writings.



## “Unity of Being” and Waters of Eternity

Hamzah was a believer in, and promoter of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* (Unity of Being) – a fundamental belief in Sufi metaphysics. *Waḥdat* means ‘oneness’ and *wujūd* denotes ‘being’, which together can be translated as ‘oneness of being’ or ‘unity of being.’ The doctrine represents a worldview in which ‘Being’ is regarded an exclusively divine quality. That is to say, all of us in our essence (being) are in union with God, while our individualities are bubble-like manifestations of the Everlasting One. God is also referred to as ‘*Wājīb al-Wujūd*’ (necessary being), while everything else on the plane of existence is regarded as *Mumkin al-Wujūd* (possible being).<sup>16</sup>

In order to elaborate on this Unity, Hamzah uses metaphoric imagery. He talks about ‘the union between waves and the ocean,’ or ‘the colour of a clear glass container and the colour of the liquid within.’<sup>17</sup> The divine entity which is One, is metaphorically referred to as the ‘Eternal Ocean.’ While Hamzah followed the lead of Ibn ‘Arabi in the doctrine of the ‘Unity of Being’, his understanding of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* was mostly formed on the base of Persian sources. Symbols used by Fakhr al-Din ‘Irāqī (1213-1289), ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (1414-1492), Bayazid Bastāmī (804-874) and Abu Ḥāmid Ghazālī (1058-1111) had great impacts on Hamzah.<sup>18</sup> He adopted the concept of formlessness of water that can manifest in infinite shapes as a metaphoric expression to discuss the doctrine of ‘Unity of Being.’

*Immerse yourself my dear,  
In the Ocean with no peer.  
The garment of union you must wear,*

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<sup>16</sup> ‘*Wājīb al-Wujūd*’ is that which is necessary for everything to exist, and whose non-existence is impossible. *Mumkin al-Wujūd* refers to all beings who are not self-sufficient in their being, and depend on some other force or being to exist. Their existence therefore is within the realm of ‘possible,’ not ‘necessary’. The concept of ‘*Wājīb al-Wujūd*’ is central to Ibn Sina’s philosophy. See George F. Hourani (1972), “Ibn Sina on the Necessary and Possible Existence,” in *Philosophical Forum* 4: 74-86.

<sup>17</sup> See Zekrgoo & Tajer (2023), 50-51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

*Pearls are distractions – beware!* <sup>19</sup>  
*Seek the Ocean of the Everlasting One,*  
*With one sip of water you'll never be done!*  
*Search for the meaning of water everywhere,*  
*Know that the Beloved isn't absent there!* <sup>20</sup>

Symbolic expressions such as 'water of life', 'primordial ocean,' 'shoreless sea,' are used to refer to divine essence. For one to have a taste of this spiritual experience (Unity of Being) it is essential to go beyond the surface of his/her individuality and touch the realm of selflessness as in the Ocean of Eternity.

*Let the lofty Ocean sweep your 'self' away,*  
*Don't be fooled with life's superficial display.*  
*Have no fear to say: 'I am the Supreme Reality'* <sup>21</sup>  
*It's a sign that the wave has passed into the Sea!* <sup>22</sup>

*O people with attentive hearts – beware!*  
*Remember the Water of Life everywhere.*  
*For, whosoever knows the Eternal Sea –*  
*Never dies – they live for eternity!* <sup>23</sup>

While the world is created like an ocean as a single unit, at the level of intellectualization and understanding it appears as if it is composed of uncountable components – waves!

*The Essence and the attributes are together – the same!*  
*The two are united; divided only by name!*

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<sup>19</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXX.10, 136.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXI.13, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Reference to Mansūr Al-Ḥallāj (858-922 CE) who, in a state of spiritual ecstasy shouted Ana al-Ḥaqq (I am the Truth) repeatedly, for which he was accused of heresy and was hanged by the neck. See "Al-Halladj," by Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet (1986), in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 3, 101.

<sup>22</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXVIII.11, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, V.1, 54

*When the storm bursts, the waves become reality,  
'Be, and it becomes' is the decree of actuality.<sup>24</sup>*

*An unceasing storm is out there,  
Raging constantly everywhere.  
Let yourself be immersed entirely,  
And you'll be rewarded enormously.<sup>25</sup>*

*Seek only the Eternal Sea,  
Give up the world that's transitory.  
Tie your rope to the anchor tightly,  
And cast it into the Sea of Purity.<sup>26</sup>*

In the following couplet the poet presents the most basic Islamic principle, the 'one-ness of God' (monotheism) in the context of water. It is a poetic reutterance of the Quranic verses *from Surah al-Ikhlāṣ*.

*The Eternal Sea is called 'The One,'  
'The very Perfect, the Everlasting One!'  
'He wasn't born nor gave birth to anyone,'  
'Co-equal with Him there is no one.'<sup>27, 28</sup>*

*The water of life is a great reality –  
that manifests in the two worlds clearly.  
It encompasses everything in all ages,  
Hence it has no time and no locality<sup>29</sup>*

*Hamzah Fansuri is of high ancestry,  
From 'the water of life' he is not empty!  
The waves are by nature transitory,  
They go home to the Everlasting Sea<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.3, 130.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXII.4, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXX.14, 136.

<sup>27</sup> Quran 112:1-4.

<sup>28</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, V.2, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, V.3, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, V.15, 56.

## Bottomless Ocean

“Know this: Our Lord is like a bottomless ocean” (*Asrār al-‘Ārifīn*, 36). To elaborate on the idea of ‘unreachable essence of God,’ Hamzah quotes a hadith: ‘*Glory be to You, we cannot comprehend You in a way that You truly are!*’ That is to say the Divine essence is beyond reach.<sup>31</sup>

*The Grand Ocean is primordial,  
It’s the original source of all.  
Its attributes are together ‘seven’,  
A symbol of unity [in the exalted Heaven].<sup>32</sup>*

Our inner world and the world that surrounds us is likened to a dark and turbulent ocean, while the holy Prophet is presented as divine light that illuminates the ocean of existence. When the divine light shines, winds cease to blow and waves rest. (*Asrār al-‘Ārifīn* 4:1) It is only at this stage that the Ocean can be seen as a single undivided whole, rather than an entity hidden behind endless distractions – ripples, waves, and storms!

*There’s no beginning for the ‘Ocean within’,  
Nameless and hidden are currents therein.  
The seal of Unity is still unbroken,  
And so is ‘The Holy One’, by the same token.<sup>33</sup>*

*The Primordial Ocean was calm and silent,  
With the burst of storm, it became turbulent!  
All of the people are Adam’s sons,  
Where is the proud race, where the lesser ones?<sup>34</sup>*

The voyage of life over the sea of existence will be rough and turbulent when the travelers are engaged with the transitory and

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<sup>31</sup> Zekrgoo & Tajer (2018), 61.

<sup>32</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXVIII.1, 126.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.1, 128.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.4, 130.

diverse conditions. Hamzah's advice is to avoid entanglement with occupational hazards and focus instead on the spirit of unity.

*Whatever you earn O son in your occupation,  
In the eyes of the Gnostics is too little to mention!  
You must embark on the vehicle of unity,  
In order to sail smooth on the Rockless Sea.<sup>35</sup>*

*The observed is Him, and so is the observer!  
The waves are Him, and so is the water.  
The fish is Him, and so is the smell,  
How could one store this in a tiny shell!?<sup>36</sup>*

The same concept is expressed using metaphors of 'mother and child' and 'stone and jewel.'

*O child of a noble Queen, listen to me!  
Waves and water are the same essentially.  
The stone that carries a jewel within,  
Presents the image of you and the Queen!<sup>37</sup>*

The above passage also pictures the cycle of life that reminds us of the famous Quranic passage "*We belong to God and to Him we shall return*" (Quran, 2:156).

### **Cycle of Creation**

In Hamzah's metaphoric language, waves are expressions of a higher creative power. While waves depend on the ocean for their very existence, the ocean needs waves for the purpose of expression and manifestation. Tiny melodic ripples, massive roaring waves, and enormous destructive tsunamis are but tangible signs that hint to the existence of a formless entity that will otherwise remain unnoticed!

*Waves are the manifest, the Sea the Unseen,*

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXV.12, 119.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXVIII.5, 126.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXII.5, 108.

*Yet both are the same, no difference in between!  
In wind and rain, in a storm that's spun,  
In motion and stillness, the essence is One.*<sup>38</sup>

*Unfathomable is the Divine Ocean,  
Its waves formed the world of creation.  
At the beginning there was no day and night alteration,  
The world will finally sink in the same Ocean*<sup>39</sup>

To support his argument Hamzah quoted the following Persian couplet by Fakhr al-Din Iraqi.

*When a new ripple appears on the primordial Sea,  
They call it a wave, but it's truly the Sea!*<sup>40</sup>

‘The Ocean is the Knower; the waves represent that which is known’ (*Asrār*: 39). Divine knowledge is figuratively expressed as ‘The Ocean of Eternity – comprehensive, encompassing, and absolute! The realm of “the known” on the other hand, is the entire plane of creation that constantly appears and disappears in a cyclic movement.

*That which is called ocean is in reality only water!  
When the water moves and heaves, it's called waves.  
When it evaporates and the vapor particles rise up and  
gather in the sky, they are called clouds. When the  
clouds take the shape of water again, and descend from  
the sky in the form of drops, they are called rain. When  
drops of rain unite and flow on the surface of the earth,  
they are called rivers. When the rivers return to the  
ocean, they become ocean. The ‘waves’ are likened to  
that which is known, yet they are not distinct from the  
Ocean [the Knower]!*<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXVIII.6, 126.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXI.1, 134.

<sup>40</sup> Fakhr al-Din Iraqi, *Lama'āt*, (Lam'ah 3); translation to English by Amir H. Zekrgoo, quoted in *Asrār al-'Ārifīn*, 36. See Zekrgoo & Tajer (2018), 62.

<sup>41</sup> Free translation of *Asrār al-'Ārifīn*, 39; for Persian translation see Zekrgoo &

When the cycle is complete, then all forms are stripped off their individuality, going back to their formless source.

### **Waves of Manifestation**

As discussed earlier, the Eternal Ocean is a metaphor for Gods essence – veiled and hidden, intangible and incomprehensible. Waves that appear on the surface of the Ocean, on the other hand, symbolize divine attributes – endless variety of manifestations through whom people connect and relate to the Source. The divine attributes or names (*asmā'*) are of two main qualities: *jalāl* (majesty) and *jamāl* (beauty). The *jalāl* attributes introduce God's authoritative and rigorous face, while the *jamāl* attributes are representative of His benevolent and merciful side.

Hamzah extends the Quranic terms *laṭīf* (kind, gentle) and *qahhār* (dominant, subduer) to waves of water. He further introduces two types of actions in life that could invoke God's grace (gentle waves):

- a) Earning livelihood through honest means that is prescribed by the scripture as 'permissible' (*ḥalāl*), and
- b) Dedicating oneself to the obligatory (*farḍ*) and the recommended (*sunnah*).

If one does not submit to the above, the authoritative *face of the Creator (Qahhār)* appears in the form of subduing waves that carry the wrong-doer to Hellfire.

*Smooth is the course of the 'gentle waves',  
Avoid the severe 'subduing waves'  
Earn your living through 'permissible means',  
So that the Endless Sea be pleased.<sup>42</sup>*

*Be dedicated to the 'obligatory' and the 'recommended,'  
Do as the Peerless Ocean has commanded.*

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Tajer (2018), 65-66.

<sup>42</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.17, 132.

*O Father! the meaning of 'gentle waves' is this,  
So, don't neglect performing these duties.<sup>43</sup>*

*But if the 'waves of majesty' prevail, O father!  
Then your destination will surely be the fire.  
In Hell you shall reside for eternity,  
Due to the deeds that displeased the Sea. <sup>44</sup>*

While appeasing the Endless Sea is a success, becoming one with it still remains a goal. For this to occur, the heart must be devoid of all desires.

*Clear your heart, make it all empty –  
for the clear flow of the Sublime Sea!  
When the winds rest, and the waves are gone,  
You'll return to the Sea of the Everlasting One<sup>45</sup>*

Ripples represent the insignificant individuality that floats on the surface of the Ocean. They act both as manifestation of the Ocean, and distractions that hides its depth! Enlightened individuals shine like luminous waves on the pitch-black seabed in a dark night. They are guided and illuminated by the Prophet's teachings that is metaphorically presented as 'the torch of Muhammad.'

*Sharp is the slope of Truth's height,  
Be careful when you're walking at night.  
To the torch of Muhammad hold on tight,  
Lest you get crushed by the waves of might.<sup>46</sup>*

### **Bubbles of Identity**

Hamzah compares himself to a tiny bubble that despite being hollow and insignificant, shares the essence of a grand Ocean.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.18, 132.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.20, 132.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.13, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.16, 132.



*Though Hamzah Fansuri has a trivial entity,  
He is close to the Noble Essence, in Reality!  
His gross stature is [empty] like a bubble,  
That's in constant union with the Sea of the Subtle.* <sup>47</sup>

Removal of the barrier between a bubble-like individual and the grand ocean, according to Sufi teachings, begins with realizing one's 'existential poverty' (*faqr*). The spiritual journey takes the wayfarer to a higher state that may be called 'spiritual selflessness' (*fanā*). *Faqr* and *fanā* pave the way for the ultimate experience of becoming one, or dissolving in, the Primordial Sea. To elaborate on this, Hamzah quotes the following couplet by Persian Sufi Abu Sa'īd Abū'l Khayr (967-1049) claiming that it has been composed by Uways al-Qaranī.

*He who follows the path of "annihilation" and the  
tradition of "poverty,"  
Is unconcerned with exploring "knowledge,"  
"religion," or "certainty."  
When the self was removed – what remained was  
only God!  
This is the meaning of "poverty in its perfection is  
God".* <sup>48</sup>

As a result of this union, the seeker's impermanent existence is transformed to that of divine permanency (*bāqī*).

*Let your being be your eyes,  
Let your eyes be your life,  
Let your life disappear –  
Into the radiant Sea, my dear!* <sup>49</sup>

To become one with the source, Hamzah claims, is merely a figure of speech and not a reality; this is because there has never been a separation! The important thing for a seeker is to realize that

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<sup>47</sup> *Asrār al- 'Arifīn*, 4:15, Translation to English by Amir H. Zekrgoo

<sup>48</sup> *Asrār al- 'Arifīn*, 50; Translation to English by Amir H. Zekrgoo

<sup>49</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.10, 130.

individual names and forms that distinct us are but illusional identities.<sup>50</sup>

Hamzah expresses the same idea using different metaphors. In the following couplets, he replaces ‘bubble,’ that appears lofty from outside but is hollow from within) with ‘bare-ness’ and ‘poverty’.

*Hamzah is a naked person,  
Like Isma'il, with a sacrificial burden!  
He is not an Arab, nor is he a Persian —  
With the Enduring One he is in constant union.*<sup>51</sup>

*When Hamzah Fansuri vanishes in the storm,  
And drowns in deep waters [without form],  
Winds stand still, and waves disappear,  
He shall then become the ruler of the two worlds.*<sup>52</sup>

In the first two hemistiches of the above couplet, Hamzah uses ‘vanishing in the storm’ and drowning in the waters’ as metaphors for the states of *faqr* and *fanā*, i.e. existential poverty and spiritual selflessness. The third and fourth hemistiches describe the state of union with the Sea, that is when the turbulent *winds of concern* and *waves of uncertainty* stand still. This is when the distinction between the individual self and the Eternal Self dissolves and, as a result, Hamzah – who is already stripped off his individual self – become the One – ‘ruler of the two worlds’!

### **The Confused Whale!**

*Gajahmina* (literally “fish-elephant”), is a mythological sea-creature in Balinese religious tradition, which is sometimes identified as the

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<sup>50</sup> *Asrār al-‘Arifīn* 61. See al-Attas, 412; for the Persian version see Zekrgoo & Tajer (2018), 88

<sup>51</sup> Hamzah Faṅṣūrī, *Sha‘ir Dagang*, Cod. Or. 3374, Library, University of Leiden, 20. Translated to English by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes & Brakel, XXII.13, 110. For Persian translation see Zekrgoo & Tajer (2018), 25

<sup>52</sup> Hamzah Faṅṣūrī, *Sha‘ir Dagang*, Cod. Or. 3374, p. 20. Translated to English by Amir H. Zekrgoo. (I did not find the Malay transliteration in Al-Attas.) For Persian translation see Zekrgoo & Tajer (2018), p. 26

Hindu sea-monster Makara. In Indonesia, *Gajahmina* also refers to the largest water mammal, the whale.

Hamzah tells the story of a strange whale (*Gajahmina*) that lives in the deep waters of the China Sea. The entire tale is a symbolic representation of man's quest to attain union with God – to become *wāṣil*.<sup>53</sup>

The whale of Hamzah's tale is a metaphor for a spiritual seeker that's confused! The Sea, on the other hand, is a metaphor for that which is sought – the infinite divine realm! Strangely, the confused 'seeker' does not realize that the subject of its pursuit is the same waters within which it has always lived! Restless and lost, it hopes to find water in distant dry lands!

*How strange that the mammoth of the sea,  
Whose permanent abode is the China Sea,  
Would look for water in Mount Sinai,  
A worthless effort, pointless try!*<sup>54</sup>

In another stanza, Hamzah blames himself for not having the insight to realize the presence of the Beloved, hence identifying himself with the confused whale!

*Hamzah Fansuri, so thoughtless have you been –  
to see the Beloved as veiled – that can't be seen!  
Constantly walking along the wrong road,  
And expecting 'union' in the desired abode!*<sup>55</sup>

Then he goes on explaining the magnitude of the Sea – the abode of the Beloved. It is deep and shoreless, so vast that it contains the entire population of the universe.

*The China Sea – enormous and bottomless,  
Contains the population of the entire universe.*

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<sup>53</sup> The term *wāṣil* in Sufi literature refers to a wayfarer who enjoys the company of the Beloved.

<sup>54</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXII.1, 140.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXVIII.15, 98.

*The Jinn, the angels, and the whole of humanity,  
Are all submerged in the Eternal Sea*<sup>56</sup>

Yet the stupid whale does not realize all this! It cannot see that which is too apparent, merely because the Sea is its natural habitat!

*The whale is swimming round and round,  
Searching for water it wanders around!  
While the Ocean is clearly visible,  
To both the pious, and the sinful people!*<sup>57</sup>

*While the whale is in constant union --  
With the infinity of the shoreless Ocean,  
It wildly roams around, foolishly --  
Idly searching for what it can't see!*<sup>58</sup>

The poet suddenly brings in his own life experience and spiritual quest into the picture. He identifies himself with a whale whose abode is also the China Sea. This whale however, is no longer confused; it does not search for water of eternity in Mount Sinai! Instead, he calmly lives in the Sea, knowing that he is already settled in the desired destination.

*Hamzah of Shahr-i Nāv, though is of low descent,  
With Mount Sinai he is not content!  
Permanently, in the China Sea he resides,  
Playing with the whale along the tides.*<sup>59</sup>

The concept of searching for God within, rather than without, is a familiar theme in Islamic mysticism and Persian Sufi poetry.

*God had accompanied a heartless soul every day,  
He couldn't see and called 'O God' from faraway!*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXII.2,140.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXII.8, 140.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXII.12, 142.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXI.13, 140.

It also resonates with the doctrine of 'Unity of Being.' Hamzah, by using the China Sea as a metaphor, adds a Southeast Asian touch to his poems that would appeal more effectively to his audience.

The story of the whale is an allegory of man's loss of insight and confused identity. The cornerstone of spiritual growth is believed to be 'self-realization', without which, according to an often-quoted *hadith* by Hamzah, God-realization is not possible. The following couplets express the same.

*Unfortunately, you've forgotten entirely –  
about the formless nature of the Sea.  
It's a sign that you are deaf and blind, –  
confused and veiled you cannot sail the Sea!*<sup>61</sup>

*Know yourself O father, and you'll certainly see!  
That you yourself are the fathomless Sea.  
Between waves and the sea there's no division,  
So, hold on tight to this profound vision!*<sup>62</sup>

### **The Brilliant Fish**

In addition to the 'whale' of the above-mentioned tale, Hamzah speaks of a fish whom he admires by calling it 'brilliant' or 'accomplished' (*fāḍīl*). Unlike *the confused whale*, this fish is well-aware of the blessing that is being in constant union with the Ocean of Eternity.

*There's a unique fish called 'brilliant!'  
Its union with the water is constant.  
With a love that's pure and flawless,  
It lives in the Ocean that's shoreless.*<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Hafez Shirazi, *Ghazal* 143, English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo.

<sup>61</sup> English translation by Amir H. Zekrgoo. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.5, 130.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXIX.8, 130.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXI.1, 136.

*Exalted is this fish's station,  
'Light of the Merciful' is its nation.  
Has human appearance in creation,  
It sports constantly in the Endless Ocean.*<sup>64</sup>

The above couplets are obvious hints by Hamzah to his audience, to identify themselves with the 'brilliant fish' – the seeker that is guided by the 'Light of the Merciful!' This seeker combines the agility of a lover and the wisdom of a learned scholar in his journey in search of the essence of life.

*In action, like an intoxicated lover!  
With the intelligence of a religious scholar!  
It sincerely embarks on the search for water,  
In the Sea that's called the Creator!*<sup>65</sup>

*This fish is an evident sign [of the Creator],  
Because it lives permanently in the water.  
Even though it smells strong and fishy,  
It's in constant union, through the waves of the Sea.*<sup>66</sup>

Embarking on a spiritual expedition is a multifaceted undertaking. In addition to discipline, determination and passion, having a knowledgeable guide is an absolute necessity. This is beautifully expressed in the following lines.

*Some stupid shoals of fish out there,  
Are searching inside rocks for water!  
Guilty of not looking for a master,  
They lose 'the way to die' – the here-after!*<sup>67</sup>

In the Malay version of the above poem the Arabic term "mūtū" (die) is used. "The way to die" is a short expression referring to popular

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXI.2, 136.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXI.8, 138.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXI.9, 138.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXI.10, 138.

*hadith* in Sufi tradition that reads: “die before you die”  
(موتوا قبل ان تموتوا).

*The path to death is a glorious passage,  
That the royal fish holds its knowledge.  
Far away don't wander, thoughtless do not be!  
You are already in union with the Pure Sea*<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

Among the four elements of life, water has a distinct place. The realm of pre-creation is often depicted in religious scriptures as an endless stretch of a vast body of water – a metaphoric primordial ocean! The stories of creation of all major religions involve water. Water-related metaphors stand out among the great variety of symbolic expressions used by Hamzah. This is both in terms of their frequency of occurrence and the profundity of their suggestive connotations. Hamzah conveyed a range of intricate religious, philosophical, and mystical themes using water-symbolism. In his writings, he metaphorically refers to God as a Sea – an Ocean, which he describes using expressions such as ‘bottomless’, ‘endless’, ‘rock-less’ ‘unfathomable’, ‘primordial’, ‘eternal’, ‘everlasting’, ‘divine’, ‘sublime’, ‘pure’, ‘unseen’, ‘subtle’ and ‘radiant.’

The Endless Ocean conceals its immense presence by sending off waves. Waves represent the manifested layers of creation. They have dual functions. On the one hand they hide the Ocean from the unexperienced eyes. To those equipped with the vision of wisdom, on the other hand, waves are but clear signs of the Ocean’s very existence!

And then there are individual bubbles that float over the surface of the Sea. Each bubble represents a soul whose very existence depends on the Sea, while their identity is shaped by its surrounding conditions. Bubbles are tiny manifestations of the sea, inflated by a hollow individuality. In order for an insignificant bubble to become aware of its exalted essence (water), it must strip itself from its individuality. This is done in two phases: 1) realization of its

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. See Malay version in Drewes and Brakel, XXXI.11, 138.

existential poverty (*faqr*); and 2) extermination of its illusional identity (*fanā*). The seeker will then attain the state of union with the Beloved (*wāṣil*). It is at this stage that the bubble is identified as the Sea!

The doctrine of ‘Unity of Being’ that Hamzah subscribes to, promotes the idea that ‘being’ is an exclusively divine quality, and that each one of us (bubbles) are in our core the Sea (God). However, not everybody is intelligent enough to see this Unity! Those who are not guided by a wise master will end up getting lost in their journey – like ‘*the Confused Whale of the China Sea*’ who looked for water in the far and dry lands! But there are also enlightened seekers, like ‘*the Brilliant Fish*’, who reach a state of contentment, knowing that they have always been residing in their desired abode – the Eternal Sea.



## TRANSLITERATION TABLE

### CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h <sup>1</sup>	h <sup>1</sup>
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ž	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a <sup>2</sup>
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al <sup>3</sup>	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

<sup>1</sup> – when not final

<sup>2</sup> – at in construct state

<sup>3</sup> – (article) al - or l-

### VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

### URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چ jh گ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

# AL-SHAJARAH

Vol. 29, No. 1, 2024

## Contents

### ARTICLES

- ISLAMIC APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE AND EXTREMISM: CONTEXTUAL  
READING OF HADITHS ON THE MAHDI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SRI LANKA  
*Mohammad Ismath Ramzy, Rahimi Md Saad and Rohan Gunaratna* 1
- THE BALIK-ISLAM PHENOMENON FILIPINO MUSLIM REVERTS –  
BETWEEN THE GULF COUNTRIES AND THE PHILIPPINES 25  
*Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama*
- EXPLORING THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF *FIQH*:  
THE ROLE OF THE SOUL IN ACHIEVING *MAQĀṢID AL-SHARĪ'AH* 47  
*Nurul Ain Norman and Mohammad Eisa Ruhullah*
- THE CONFUSED WHALE OF THE CHINA SEA:  
WATER SYMBOLISM IN THE WORKS OF HAMZAH FANSURI 79  
*Amir H. Zekrgoo*
- FROM OBSERVERS TO PARTICIPANTS: SINO-MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL'S  
ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY 99  
*Bao Hsiu-Ping*
- CRITICISMS ON ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVISM OF MODERN SCIENCE 127  
BY SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS AND SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR  
*Khalina Mohammed Khalili*
- THE MALAY EPISTEMOLOGICAL BACKGROUND IN  
THE ISLAMIC WRITINGS OF HAMZAH FANSŪRĪ 153  
*Tee Boon Chuan*
- REVIEW ESSAY**
- THE ISLAMIZATION OF THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO IN OTTOMAN MANUSCRIPTS 181  
*Alaeddin Tekin*
- חינוך, *CHINUCH*: ISRAEL'S EDUCATION SYSTEM AND QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY 195  
*Arief S. Arman*
- MANUSCRIPT STUDIES**
- DEVOTIONAL POETRY IN TECHNICAL MANUSCRIPT TERMINOLOGY:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE ROSE GARDEN OF PURITY (GOLZĀR-E ṢAFĀ)* 207  
*Amir H. Zekrgoo and Mandana Barkeshli*
- BOOK REVIEWS** 223
- KEYNOTE EVENTS AND SPEECHES**
- A FEAST OF CIVILIZATIONS: THE LIFE AND MIND OF TOSHIKKO IZUTSU 231  
*Anwar Ibrahim*
- SILK ROAD, ISLAM, AND CONFUCIANISM 239  
*Osman Bakar*

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