

## ***Book Reviews***

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970. xvii + 556 pages. Appendix, bibliography. Hardback.

This review revisits *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī*, one of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's most substantial and enduring works. Among his many writings, this book stands out for its methodological rigour, conceptual precision, and sustained engagement with the Malay intellectual tradition. The work is more than a study of a single Malay mystical poet. It constitutes a major contribution to the understanding of the Malay intellectual tradition by demonstrating that Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī was a serious Ṣūfī thinker whose writings reflect a coherent metaphysical system. Through careful textual, semantic, and philosophical analysis, al-Attas shows that Ḥamzah's thought is firmly rooted in the wider tradition of Islamic mysticism. In doing so, the book also advances a broader claim regarding the Malay language.

It argues that Malay had long possessed the capacity to articulate complex spiritual and philosophical ideas, challenging the assumption that it functioned merely as a medium of popular or didactic religious expression. The study may therefore be read not only as an account of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī, but also as part of a wider effort to clarify the intellectual depth and coherence of Malay-Islamic scholarship.

### **Bibliographical Background of The Book**

First published in Kuala Lumpur by the University of Malaya Press in 1970, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī* is an extensive work of over 500 pages. Completed in 1965 and submitted to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1966, it was accepted as a doctoral thesis and later published largely in its original form, with minor additions to the footnotes and bibliography.

The book is addressed primarily to students of Islamic philosophical mysticism (taṣawwuf) and Malay Ṣūfī literature. Its subject, Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī, is presented not merely as a literary figure but as a major Ṣūfī thinker whose ideas had often been insufficiently understood or misrepresented. Al-Attas describes the study as the first comprehensive attempt to expound and analyse Ḥamzah's mystical teachings based on his prose works and poetry, while situating him within the wider tradition of classical Ṣūfism.

The study combines several interrelated aims. It reconstructs Ḥamzah's teachings, examines criticisms directed at him by Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī, analyses key concepts within his thought, and provides edited texts with English translations. In this respect, the work is at once a contribution to Islamic intellectual history, semantic analysis, and Malay textual scholarship. The book also reflects a strong scholarly milieu. Al-Attas acknowledges the guidance of Martin Lings (Shaykh Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn), as well as the contributions of scholars such as A. J. Arberry and others who assisted in philological and textual research. These acknowledgements situate the work within a

broader international academic context and help explain its methodological depth.

Beyond its immediate subject, the book contributes to the modern reevaluation of the Malay intellectual tradition. It may thus be read not only as a specialised study of a sixteenth-century Şūfī thinker, but also as part of a broader effort to restore the intellectual significance of Islam in the Malay world.

### **Organisation of The Book**

*The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī* is divided into two main parts, reflecting both its interpretive and documentary aims.

Part I presents a detailed account of Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī's mystical ideas and teachings. It opens with a study of Ḥamzah himself, followed by an examination of the criticisms directed at him by Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī. The central chapter analyses Ḥamzah's metaphysical system, addressing themes such as divine unity, creation, the fixed essences (al-a'yānu'l-thābitah), the spirit (al-rūḥ) and soul (al-nafs), the divine names and attributes, and the relationship between fanā' and ma'rifah. Subsequent chapters adopt a more focused conceptual approach, including a semantic study of the concept of divine will (irādah) through the Malay term *hendak*, as well as an analysis of key terms within Ḥamzah's mystical vocabulary. Together, these chapters reconstruct the internal coherence of his thought with methodological precision.

Part II serves a complementary function by providing primary materials. It includes annotated romanised editions of Ḥamzah's

three prose works—*Asrāru'l-Ārifīn*, *Sharābu'l-Āshiqīn*, and *Al-Muntahī*—alongside English translations. This section demonstrates that the book is not only interpretive but also a critical contribution to the preservation and transmission of Malay Ṣūfī texts.

The appendices further enhance the work's scholarly value, containing additional source materials, a facsimile of *Al-Muntahī*, and an index of key semantic vocabulary. The book concludes with a comprehensive bibliography.

Overall, its structure reflects an integrated method that combines historical and conceptual analysis with textual editing and documentation, contributing to its lasting significance in the study of Malay intellectual history.

### **Main Argument and Scholarly Contribution**

The central argument of *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī* is al-Attas's reconstruction of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī as a major metaphysical thinker of the Malay world. At the time of writing, Ḥamzah was often treated either as a literary figure or as a controversial mystic known primarily through later criticisms, particularly those of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī. Al-Attas moves beyond such views by returning directly to Ḥamzah's own writings and analysing them as expressions of a coherent intellectual system.

He argues that Ḥamzah was not merely a mystical poet but a serious Ṣūfī thinker whose works articulate a structured metaphysical vision. Through close attention to ontology, cosmology, psychology, and language, al-Attas reconstructs the internal coherence of

Ḥamzah's thought. This restores Ḥamzah not only to literary history but also to the broader tradition of Islamic intellectual scholarship.

An important contribution appears in the opening chapter, where al-Attas addresses longstanding questions concerning Ḥamzah's life, including his place and date of birth and the period in which he flourished. Earlier scholars had proposed differing conclusions based on limited historical evidence. Al-Attas re-examines these issues through a critical reading of Ḥamzah's own texts, arguing that he lived during the reign of Sulṭān 'Alā' al-Dīn Ri'āyat Shāh of Aceh (1588–1604) and likely died before 1607. While not definitive, this analysis demonstrates the necessity of combining textual scrutiny with historical reasoning.

The book's contribution extends beyond the reconstruction of Ḥamzah. By establishing him as a systematic thinker, al-Attas advances a broader claim about the intellectual capacity of the Malay language. He argues that Malay is capable of expressing complex Ṣūfī and philosophical ideas with precision and coherence, challenging the view that it functioned primarily as a medium of popular religious instruction. In this respect, the study is significant not only for its interpretation of Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī but also for its implications for the status of Malay as a language of intellectual and metaphysical discourse.

### **Author's Method and Approach**

One of the major strengths of *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī* lies in its method. Al-Attas adopts a twofold approach combining textual

commentary with linguistic and semantic analysis. While the commentary method allows comparison with earlier Ṣūfī writings, he recognises its limitations, particularly the risk of subjective interpretation. To address this, he incorporates a systematic analysis of key terms within Ḥamzah's writings. This semantic approach is among the book's most original contributions. Al-Attas treats concepts not as isolated terms but as elements within a structured network of meaning. By examining the relationships between key terms, he reconstructs the conceptual framework underlying Ḥamzah's mystical system. This allows the study to move beyond descriptive commentary toward a more rigorous understanding of intellectual structure.

The significance of this method extends beyond the immediate subject. It reflects a broader commitment to methodological precision, objectivity, and conceptual clarity. By combining philological analysis with philosophical interpretation, al-Attas offers a model for the study of Malay intellectual texts that integrates language, thought, and worldview. A further aspect of his approach is the concern with textual authenticity. Al-Attas establishes the reliability of Ḥamzah's writings through multiple considerations, including their citation by contemporaries, their linguistic and conceptual coherence, and their internal consistency. This attention to textual foundations strengthens the overall argument by ensuring that interpretation rests on carefully evaluated sources.

Overall, the method employed in the book demonstrates a disciplined attempt to recover a coherent system of thought from

within its linguistic and textual context, contributing to its enduring scholarly value.

### **Contribution to the Study of Malay Scholarship**

Al-Attas's contribution to the study of early Malay scholarship is evident in the way he situates Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī within an established Ṣūfī intellectual tradition. He shows that Ḥamzah was not merely drawing from earlier sources but had mastered and rearticulated complex metaphysical doctrines derived from figures such as Ibn 'Arabī and other classical Ṣūfī thinkers. By expressing these ideas in Malay, Ḥamzah made sophisticated metaphysical teachings accessible beyond the Arabic and Persian intellectual milieu. This argument challenges the view that Ḥamzah's mysticism was marginal or heterodox. Instead, al-Attas presents him as an integral participant in a recognised intellectual lineage, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of Malay Ṣūfī scholarship within the wider Islamic tradition.

Al-Attas also highlights the intellectual and social context in which Ḥamzah wrote. He describes a milieu shaped by both the spread of Ṣūfī vocabulary and the tensions arising from misunderstanding and contestation. In this setting, Ḥamzah's writings can be seen as responses to both the misuse of Ṣūfism and the suspicion directed toward it by religious authorities. In this respect, the book contributes not only to the study of an individual thinker but also to a broader understanding of the development of Malay scholarship, where intellectual discourse, textual transmission, and social context are closely interconnected.

### **Scholarly Reception and Subsequent Significance**

The significance of *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī* is reflected in its scholarly reception and enduring influence. Although early reviews were limited, the work was noted in academic venues such as the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* and *Archipel*. More importantly, it has continued to serve as a principal reference in subsequent studies of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī and Malay-Islamic thought. Later scholarship confirms its lasting impact. Researchers consistently engage with al-Attas's work when discussing Ḥamzah, indicating its central role in shaping modern understanding of the subject. It has contributed not only to the interpretation of Ḥamzah's ideas but also to his recognition within broader academic discourse.

At the same time, the study has not exhausted the field. Its significance lies partly in opening new avenues for research, particularly given the limited number of extant texts attributed to Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī. The survival of only a small corpus—preserved in scattered manuscripts—suggests the possibility of further discoveries and continued scholarly inquiry. In this respect, al-Attas's work remains foundational while also encouraging future research on Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī and the wider Malay intellectual tradition.

### **Conclusion**

More than half a century after its publication, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī* remains a landmark in the study of Malay intellectual history. Its significance lies not only in being among the earliest comprehensive studies of Ḥamzah Faṅṣūrī, but also in the methodological rigour with

which al-Attas approaches his subject. By reconstructing Ḥamzah as a systematic Ṣūfī thinker and examining the conceptual structure of his ideas, the work establishes a foundation for subsequent scholarship. The book is also notable for integrating interpretive analysis with textual editing, providing both a coherent account of Ḥamzah's thought and access to primary materials. This combination has contributed to its continued relevance in the study of Malay-Islamic intellectual traditions.

More broadly, the study underscores the capacity of the Malay language to convey complex metaphysical and philosophical ideas, reinforcing its status as a medium of intellectual discourse. For these reasons, the work continues to hold an important place in the field and remains a valuable resource for future research.

Reviewed by:

***Azenita Abdullah*** | International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC-IIUM)

[azenita.abdullah@gmail.com](mailto:azenita.abdullah@gmail.com)