

Hamzah Fansuri's Concept of Mahabbah in Overcoming Modern Aesthetic Relativism

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Abstract. The crisis of meaning and fragmentation of values in the realm of art and digital media signifies the emergence of a fundamental problem of aesthetic relativism in Western tradition. In Western aesthetic thought, particularly that of Kant and Hume, beauty is viewed as relative because it relies on universal reason and subjective emotions, thus giving rise to uncertainty about meaningful aesthetic standards. The gap in this research is the lack of studies on Hamzah Fansuri's concept of mahabbah—transcendent love in Nusantara Sufism—as an alternative that holistically unifies the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual dimensions. This study uses a philosophical qualitative approach to explore Fansuri's Sufi thought and comparative analysis of Kant-Hume's aesthetic theory and texts such as *Syarab al-'Asyiqin* and *Syair Perahu*. The findings show that mahabbah offers a vertical assessment of beauty, harmonizing the aspects of art form, the creator's morality, and the meaning of divinity. The concepts of *ittihād al-jamāl wa al-akhlāq* (the unity of beauty and morality) and the practice of *murāqabah* (awareness of the divine presence) form the ethical foundation that gives birth to aesthetic works that are also morally and spiritually meaningful. His theoretical contribution enriches the global aesthetic discourse with an Islamic perspective that integrates spiritual and ethical values, and offers a reference basis for the development of meaningful and responsible media and communication culture.

Keywords: Islamic Epistemology, Aesthetic, Hamzah Fansuri, Mahabbah, Relativism, Tasawuf.

1. Introduction

Humans constantly seek answers to various questions about life [1, p. 10] through science, philosophy, religion, and art. The pinnacle of this search is the discovery of the highest truth that is permanent and essential. However, without a stable foundation of truth, human life is prone to being tossed about in relativism of values, including in the realm of aesthetics. In Western aesthetic tradition, the discourse on beauty is often trapped in a debate between reason and subjective emotion. Immanuel Kant emphasized the universality of aesthetic judgment through pure reason and the concept of disinterested judgment, free from personal interests. In contrast, David Hume viewed beauty as the result of personal experience and emotions that are relative between subjects. [2] Although both agreed that beauty is relative, this difference in approach gave rise to uncertainty in establishing meaningful standards of beauty. As a result, modern art often loses direction and experiences fragmentation of meaning.

Western aesthetic relativism is rooted in humanism and rationalism, [3] which place humans at the center of aesthetic meaning creation. This has caused art to continue to evolve without a clear transcendent orientation, failing to serve as a medium connecting humans with absolute truth. [4, pp. 1–14] In contrast to this view, Islam offers a concept of values that are stable through revelation, which is a source of values that are not bound by place and time, as *tanzil* that establishes the constancy of truth. However, its application is dynamic and can be adapted to the evolving socio-cultural context. In the realm of Islamic aesthetics, particularly through Sufism, the concept of mahabbah (transcendent love) developed by Hamzah Fansuri became the foundation for a hierarchical and theocentric assessment of beauty. Mahabbah not only associates beauty with emotion and reason, but also demands the integration of moral elements and submission to the Creator. [5, p.

154]. This is reflected in Fansuri's Sufi works, where artistic beauty serves as a means of drawing closer to Allah, not merely as an expression of subjectivity.

Although studies on Western aesthetic relativism are widespread, there is a significant gap in the form of a lack of research that specifically examines Hamzah Fansuri's mahabbah as an alternative solution to Western relativism. Sufi studies, especially those that examine Fansuri's aesthetics and spiritual dimensions of love, have never been comprehensively linked to criticism of Western aesthetic relativism. In fact, this thinking offers an aesthetic paradigm that explicitly and holistically integrates beauty, morality, and transcendental consciousness. This gap shows that the aesthetics of Sufism in the archipelago have not yet gained an adequate place in the global aesthetic discourse, especially in the formation of more vertical and meaningful standards of beauty.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative philosophical approach using the interpretative analysis method. This research focuses on the interpretation of Hamzah Fansuri's concept of mahabbah (divine love) as a response to Western aesthetic relativism, especially in the thoughts of Immanuel Kant and David Hume. Primary data is taken from Fansuri's Sufi works such as *Syarab al-'Asyiqin* and *Syair Perahu*, while secondary data includes scholarly writings on Islamic aesthetics and Western philosophy. The method of interpretation is used to uncover the metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic meanings underlying Fansuri's texts, and place them within the broader intellectual and spiritual framework of Sufism. Comparative interpretation is also used to identify points of convergence and difference between Fansuri's theocentric aesthetics and Western humanistic traditions. Through this interpretative-philosophical analysis, this research seeks to build a holistic understanding of mahabbah as an aesthetic principle that integrates beauty, morality and spirituality.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Biography of Hamzah Fansuri

Hamzah Fansuri was a Sufi cleric and prominent poet from the archipelago in the 17th century, known as the "Father of Malay Literature" and "The Beginning of Indonesian Poetry" also dubbed the "Rumi of the Archipelago" by al-Attas.[6] His works, which include poems such as "Syair Perahu", [7, pp. 75–88] "Syair Burung Pingai", and "Anggur", show strong influences from Arabic and Persian literary traditions. Through his proficiency in Arabic, Persian, and Malay, Hamzah Fansuri created a unique new form of poetry with an a-a-a-a rhyme scheme, which set it apart from his earlier poetry.

Hamzah Al-Fansuri's thought was heavily influenced by the teachings of Sufism, especially the concept of wahdatul wujud (unity of being), which states that God and the universe are one entity, and everything in this world is a manifestation of God.[7, pp. 75–88] In *Syarab al-'Asyiqin*, he writes, "The substance called insan kamil / Is nothing but the mirror of Jamal", which emphasizes the integration of Jalal (majesty) and Jamal (beauty) as two divine attributes that should be reflected in art.[8, p. 50]

Hamzah Fansuri's Sufi aesthetic is reflected through metaphors of nature, such as trees becoming mothballed (fana) as a symbol of spiritual transformation.[9, p. 600] He emphasized the importance of inner experience in the journey towards God, by letting go of attachments to the material world.[6, p. 705] In his works, Hamzah conveys this teaching with language full of symbolism and poetic beauty.

Hamzah Fansuri's influence was profound in the development of Sufism and Malay literature, and enriched the Islamic spiritual tradition in the archipelago. He encouraged the practical application of tasawwuf, that is, bringing the teachings of tasawwuf to life in everyday life, inviting Muslims to make love and devotion to God the core of their lives.

3.2. Hamzah Fansuri's Concept of Mahabbah

Mahabbah (transcendent love) in the Sufi tradition is not just an emotion, but a spiritual path to merge with Divine beauty.[10, p. 49] The Qur'an states:

"Wa-alladhīna āmanū ashaddu hubban lillāh" (QS. Al-Baqarah: 165).

This verse becomes the theological foundation of mahabbah as the highest level of love, which Hamzah Fansuri elaborated through his Sufistic poems.[11, p. 86] In contrast to horizontal Western aesthetics, mahabbah is vertical-hierarchical, linking the beauty of art to spiritual stations such as fana (self-annihilation) and baqa (eternity in God).[11, p. 86]

3.2.1. Definition of Mahabbah

In the Islamic tradition, the concept of love (mahabbah) has a central place in Sufism as a path to achieving closeness to God.[12, p. 22] Rabbi'ah al-Adawiyah, an 8th century Sufi woman, is known as the earliest figure to discuss divine love in Islam, emphasizing love as the core of her relationship with God. Al-Ghazali also explained the concept of mahabbah as the foundation of Sufism, according to which love is the fruit of the knowledge of God. This knowledge will foster love for Him, because love arises from knowledge and understanding.[12, p. 21]

Mahabbah comes from the word hubb, which means the inclination of the disposition towards something pleasant. Ibn Qayyim explains that the word mahabbah also comes from the word hibbah or habbah, which means seed or seed. In the Qur'an, this word in its various forms is mentioned 95 times.[12, p. 22] Imam Al-Qusyairi defines love as a special favor given by Allah to His servant, as well as a special state achieved by a servant.

Jalaluddin Rumi views that true love or divine love can be achieved through an intermediary, which is everything other than Him. When people love other than Him, they actually love Him too, because what is seen is a reflection of the truth. The lovers of Allah are those whose hearts are filled with the realization of Allah, love, fear, reverence, and muraqabah, so that love flows throughout their bodies and forgets them from everything other than Allah.[12, p. 22] Thus, mahabbah becomes essential in a Sufi's spiritual journey to achieve union with the Divine.[13]

3.2.2. Levels of Mahabbah

Tarekat, and hakikat, shariat is defined as physical beauty that is in harmony with the laws of Allah, serving as the basis and rules for performing worship. It is the first phase that every believer must pass through before proceeding to the next level.[6, p. 68] Tariqah, on the other hand, is an aesthetic that serves as a tool of contemplation, where individuals make a spiritual journey towards Allah by following a predetermined procedure. In this context, Tarekat includes two main endeavors: mulazamatu-zikri (constant remembrance of God) and mukhalafa (avoidance of all things that can forget God).[6, p. 68]

Hakikat is the final level of this spiritual journey, reflecting union with Divine beauty. In this understanding, the culmination of qalbiah intelligence lies in man's love for God. According to Al-Ghazali, love is the result of knowledge and discovery of the essence of God, where each individual will love what he knows.[12, p. 7] Thus, love for Allah is a manifestation of deep knowledge and understanding of Him.

These three levels complement each other; Shariat provides the practical framework for worship, Tariqah deepens the spiritual experience, and Hakikat takes the individual towards the ultimate understanding and realization of God.[12, p. 52] Hence, a salik's spiritual journey will not be complete without going through these three stages in synergy.

3.2.3. How to Achieve Mahabbah

Rabiah al-Adawiyah suggests two forms of deep love in a spiritual context. First, the love that arises from testimony to God's mercy, which is seen in the sufficiency of life's necessities and sensory pleasures, as well as the honor of self-respect. This love, known as *hubbul-hawa*, describes the inclination of the heart to love the One who grants mercy. Secondly, there is the love born out of the heart's testimony to Allah's perfection. When the veil covering a servant's heart is lifted by Allah, His beauty and perfection become apparent, giving birth to a deep and abiding love for Him.[14, p. 47]

Jalaluddin Rumi also explains that divine love can only be achieved through an intermediary, which is everything other than Allah.[12, p. 22] In his view, when people love things outside of God, they are actually loving Him, because what is seen is a reflection of the true. Love for other things should be directed towards achieving true love for God.

Meanwhile, Hamzah Fansuri himself emphasized several times that to be able to achieve the degree of mahabbah it is necessary to practice sunnah worship such as sunnah prayer, fasting, familiarizing yourself with the Qur'an and other obedience.[6, p. 697] Furthermore, Fansuri also strengthened by adorning himself with 3 devotions, namely occupying himself with worship, a heart that is attached to Allah even though he is surrounded by various favors such as wife and children and worshiping with all his love, he has disappeared in consciousness and only thinks of Allah alone.[6, p. 705]

Thus, both Rabiah and Rumi and Fansuri emphasize the importance of love as an essential element in the spiritual relationship with God. Love is not just an emotion, but a path to achieving intimacy and union with the Supreme Being. This love should be free from expectations of reward or recompense, thus creating a pure and selfless relationship between the servant and his God.

3.2.4. The Purpose of Mahabbah

The concept of mahabbah in Islam not only produces sensory beauty, but also profound moral transformation. This is reflected in Sufistic literary works such as "*Sharabul Ashiqin*" and "*Asrarul 'Arifin*", with depictions of waves and oceans,[6, p. 640] land, charred wood are deep messages of wisdom with depictions that can be easily understood. In the context of Sufism, mahabbah is the principle that connects the servant to his Lord, encouraging obedience, submission, and rejection of everything that hinders this love.

As part of the spiritual journey (*tarikah*), mahabbah involves a series of practices of worship and servitude aimed at getting closer to Allah.[6, p. 697] Mahabbah is also a Sufistic method that includes *wahdah al-wujud*, and holy brotherhood through a *murshid*[15, p. 22] but Tasawuf Hamzah Fansuri does not include and is different from *hulul* and *ittihad*.[6, p. 47] In this sense, mahabbah is not just an emotion, but also a transformative force capable of turning anger, hatred, and evil desires into true happiness and peace.

3.3. Mahabbah as a Solution to Aesthetic Relativism

Hamzah Fansuri's aesthetics offer hierarchical criteria that link beauty to fundamental concepts in Islam. First, the unity of *tawhid* demands that works of art reflect the oneness of God, making them a reflection of divine beauty. Second, noble morals are a requirement for artists to have spiritual integrity in creating works. Third, the transcendent meaning indicates that beauty is not an end in itself, but a path to a deeper essence. This concept contradicts the aesthetic theories of Kant and Hume, which often ignore the moral and transcendental dimensions, thus making Fansuri's aesthetics a relevant alternative to overcome the crisis of meaning in contemporary art.

3.3.1. Western Aesthetic Theory: Kant and Hume

Immanuel Kant through his monumental work, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), [16, pp. 57–70] emphasized the importance of universality and objectivity in aesthetic judgment. Kant introduced the concept of disinterested judgment, where aesthetic experience must be free from personal interests, practical interests, and subjective affections. The judgment of beauty according to Kant is a rational cognitive process that is *a priori*, meaning that it is accessible and universal to all human rationality without relying on individualized empirical experience. [17, pp. 1x-1xi] Beauty, in this framework, is not just sensation or sensory perception, but a harmonization between form and concept that is able to move the soul aesthetically without pragmatic motivation.

In contrast, David Hume in his famous essay, *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757), [18, p. 32] proposed a more empirical and subjective thesis, namely that beauty is the result of individual emotional responses. For him, a person's taste or appreciative capacity determines the judgment of beauty. Hume recognized the existence of standards of beauty, but these standards are contingent and depend on culture and individual aesthetic experience. In other words, empathy, aesthetic training, and cultural experience form the “true connoisseur” who can judge art with better justification.

Although Kant and Hume both assert that beauty is not necessarily tied to the physical properties of objects, the fundamental difference between the two results in a sharp epistemological dichotomy. Kant sought to establish an objective and universal aesthetic experience, based on pure ratio and human transcendental abilities, but critics argued that this was an attempt to achieve objectivity that was ultimately illusory or conceptual. Meanwhile, Hume accepted cultural relativism and the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment as an inevitable empirical fact.

3.3.2. Critique of Western Humanism's Value Relativism

Criticism of the value relativism that developed in Western humanism in the realm of aesthetics is based on the argument that this approach significantly ignores the transcendent dimension in the appreciation of art. The secularism and rationalism that underpin Western humanism have given birth to aesthetic relativism, which is reflected in the tendency of postmodern art to separate beauty from essential moral values. [4, p. 101] For example, Marcel Duchamp's controversial work, *Fountain* (1917), consciously and radically rejects aesthetic explorations that are full of moral and spiritual meaning, thus redefining the boundaries of art and beauty in a nihilistic manner.

This phenomenon is in stark contrast to the principle of dynamic stabilism in Islamic aesthetics, which emphasizes that aesthetic values are derived from the revelation of the Qur'an and sunnah, but have the ability to adapt and flexible context to contemporary socio-cultural conditions. This paradigm rejects the dichotomy often found in Western aesthetics between subject and object, and places divine unity (*tawhid*) as the main essence in understanding the meaning of true beauty holistically.

The failure of Western humanism to formulate a stable and universal criterion of beauty has resulted in widespread fragmentation of meaning in the modern and postmodern art world. This causes art to lose its philosophical direction and essential meaning, and is prone to manifestations of aesthetic skepticism and nihilism.

In addition, criticism of Kant and Hume's aesthetic paradigm is getting stronger in the context of contemporary aesthetics, because both ignore the moral and transcendental dimensions, which are actually essential in building a comprehensive and transformative value of beauty. This approach proves that Western aesthetics needs to be criticized and complemented with alternative aesthetic concepts that accommodate spiritual and ethical values as the main foundation.

In response to this dilemma, Islamic aesthetics introduces the paradigm of dynamic stabilism - a concept that combines the stability of universal and transcendent aesthetic values, with the ability to adapt contextually and dynamically in changing cultures and times. This marks a fundamental difference with the Western paradigm that tends to be immanent and anthropocentric, and emphasizes

that beauty is a manifestation of divine unity (tawhid), which synergizes the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously and intact.academic.fisipol.ugm

Therefore, the thoughts of Kant and Hume must be understood as a dialectical starting point that opens up space for reflection and the development of a more inclusive and meaningful aesthetic paradigm, as seen in Islamic aesthetic thought and Hamzah Fansuri's concept of mahabbah.

3.3.3. Mahabbah Overcomes Modern Aesthetic Relativism

An analysis of works such as *Asrar al-'Arifin* and *Syarab al-'Asyiqin* reveals the ontological structure of mahabbah as the basis of Hamzah Fansuri's aesthetics. Beauty is not understood as a single entity, but rather consists of three interconnected levels. The first level, *Jamal Dzati*, represents the divine essential beauty that is the source of all beauty and Allah's perfection. The second level, *Jamal Kauni*, is the manifestation of Divine beauty in the cosmos, seen in the harmony of the universe and His creation. The third level, *Jamal Insani*, reflects divine beauty in human beings, manifested through the potential of reason, morals and art.

The essence of Fansuri's aesthetics lies in the axiom of *ittihad al-jamal wa al-akhlaq*, which is the unity between beauty and morality. True beauty is inseparable from ethical value; a beautiful work of art must reflect the noble morals of its creator and inspire goodness in its audience. Therefore, the criteria for aesthetic judgment do not only focus on the formal or visual aspects, but also on the spiritual intentions and social impact of the work.

This principle is reinforced by the criterion of *muraqabah*, which is transcendental awareness in the process of art creation and appreciation. Artists who have this awareness are always aware of God's presence in every work produced, so that their work functions as a medium of *dhikr* or reminder to God and brings blessings to the viewer. Thus, Fansuri's aesthetics emphasizes the importance of integration between art and spirituality in creating meaningful works.

A comparison with Western aesthetics shows the fundamental difference between the two. Western aesthetics tends to be anthropocentric, where beauty is judged based on human ratios or emotions. Fansuri's aesthetics, on the other hand, is theocentric, placing God as the source and goal of all forms of beauty. The comparison table shows that the source of value in Fansuri's mahabbah is transcendental (tawhid), while in Western aesthetics it is immanent (humanism).

The concept of mahabbah offers an antithesis to aesthetic relativism through the theoanthropocentric paradigm. Relativism emphasizes that judgments of beauty are subjective and contextual in the absence of universal standards. However, Fansuri recognizes the subjectivity of aesthetic experience while adhering to transcendent value as the foundation of judgment. The critique of Kant's concept of disinterestedness is important here; Fansuri argues that ignoring the moral dimension in art appreciation reduces the transformative potential of art itself.

The practical implications of this thinking can be seen in art education reform and efforts to address the moral crisis in society. By emphasizing the importance of integration between art and spiritual values and morality, art education can be directed towards producing artists who are not only technically skilled but also have a deep ethical and spiritual awareness. This will have a positive impact on society by creating works of art that are not only visually beautiful but also morally and spiritually meaningful.

4. Conclusion

This conclusion confirms that the concept of Mahabbah, as transcendent love in Hamzah Fansuri's aesthetics, presents a holistic and profound view of beauty. Beauty is not solely related to sight or sensory sensations, but also the spiritual connection that binds humans to God and humanity. Through analysis of Fansuri's Sufistic works, such as *Asrar al-'Arifin* and *Syarab al-'Asyiqin*, it is found that true beauty is a reflection of the principle of divinity (tawhid), noble moral values, and deeper transcendent meaning. This Mahabbah aesthetic is a substantial solution to the crisis of meaning and loss of value in modern art, not only in the context of Malay culture, but also as an important contribution to the philosophy of art in the global arena.[8, p. 134]

The critique of Western views, especially those of Kant and Hume, opens a space for productive intercultural dialogue, which encourages an understanding of aesthetics that transcends cultural boundaries by prioritizing the principle of tawhid as taught by Fansuri. With this foundation, aesthetics becomes not only a theory of beauty, but also a pathway for the formation of spiritually better human beings. These findings encourage reforms in art education that emphasize the development of spiritual understanding (ma'rifah) as well as the integration of ethical values in the process of creating and appreciating works of art.

The impact of this thinking goes beyond the dimension of art and touches various aspects of life, including ecological awareness, through developing an awareness of the beauty and harmony of Divine creation. Therefore, this research not only contributes theoretically, but also has far-reaching practical implications in building a morally and spiritually responsible aesthetic culture.

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