



Modern Education and Women's Empowerment as Constructs of Islamic Education in K.H. Ahmad Dahlan

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Abstrak

Melihat pada fakta historis tentang minimnya suasana kemerdekaan berfikir yang tercipta di dalam pelaksanaan pendidikan nasional saat pra dan pasca-kolonialisme, memancing kesadaran K.H. Ahmad Dahlan untuk berpartisipasi dalam menumbuhkan kesadaran berfikir kritis bagi anak-anak bangsa. Meskipun dengan konteks problem dan tantangan yang relatif berbeda, namun upaya penyelesaian dan pencarian jalan keluarnya mempunyai substansi yang sama dan relevan saat ini, yakni bagaimana menciptakan iklim pendidikan yang bebas dan merdeka merupakan upaya yang baik. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah menganalisis perspektif KH. Ahmad Dahlan dalam mengkonstruksi pendidikan Islam sehingga mampu menumbuhkan adanya kesadaran masyarakat Indonesia untuk berfikir kritis melalui paradigma kesadaran konsientisasi Paulo Freire. Penelitian ini termasuk ke dalam jenis penelitian pustaka (library research) dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif. Pendekatan yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini yakni mengambil pendekatan historis-filosofis. Hasilnya, bahwa konstruksi pendidikan Islam dalam perspektif K.H. Ahmad Dahlan yang menawarkan konsep pendidikan modern dan kemandirian perempuan merupakan salah satu langkah maju menuju kesadaran berfikir dan pembangunan nalar kritis masyarakat, serta telah mencapai tahap kesadaran kritis sebagaimana diungkap Freire.

Kata Kunci: *Pendidikan, Modernisasi, Kemandirian Perempuan, Ahmad Dahlan, dan Muhammadiyah*

Abstract

Looking at historical facts about the lack of freedom of thought that was created in the implementation of national education during pre- and post-colonialism, it provoked K.H. Ahmad Dahlan to participate in raising awareness of critical thinking for the nation's children. Even though the context of the problems and challenges are relatively different, efforts to resolve and find solutions have the same substance and are relevant today, namely how to create a free and independent education climate is a good effort. The aim of this study is to analyze KH Ahmad Dahlan's perspective in constructing Islamic education so that it is able to foster an awareness of the Indonesian people to think critically through the awareness paradigm of Paulo Freire's conscientization. This research is included in the type of library research using qualitative methods. The approach used in this study is to take a historical-philosophical approach. The result is that the construction of Islamic education in the perspective of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan who offers the concept of modern education and women's independence is one step forward towards

awareness of thinking and the development of critical thinking in society, and has reached the stage of critical awareness as revealed by Freire.

Keywords: Education, Modernization, Women's Independence, Ahmad Dahlan, and Muhammadiyah

Introduction

Intellectual Independence as a Major Theme in Relation to the Development of Islamic Education Today. Taskin asserts this by stating that intellectual independence serves as the primary asset for learners in analyzing and considering their future lives (Taskin 2014, 51). Through this main modality, various other skills will be developed, which greatly assist in shaping students into noble, nationalistic individuals who are capable of making meaningful contributions to the nation in the future. Considering the current era, students are required to master supporting skills such as effective communication, collaboration, problem-solving, sufficient literacy support, and revolutionary (creative-innovative) abilities.

The problem is that in order to achieve the goals and aspirations of Islamic education, which are to shape students into well-rounded individuals (*insaan kaamil*), it requires good cooperation among relevant *stakeholders* to overcome various challenges. Naniwadekar, an education activist from India, criticizes the policy that demands students to master numerous subjects and materials at each educational level. According to him, the excessive demands of multiple subjects on students will burden them in a way that diminishes their abilities in communication, problem-solving, innovation, creativity, and even independent thinking (Naniwadekar 2016, 5).

Considering the historical fact of the lack of an environment for independent thinking in the implementation of national education, it sparked the awareness of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and Paulo Freire to participate in cultivating critical thinking awareness among the children of their respective

nations. Although within different contexts of problems and challenges, their efforts in seeking solutions and finding a way out share the same substance, which is how to create a free and independent educational climate, which is considered a good practice (*best practice*).

The similar historical trajectories have led Indonesia and Brazil to face similar global challenges in the fields of economy, politics, and education. All three sectors have been fundamental and serious problems during the early 20th century. The high rates of poverty and illiteracy compelled Dahlan to address the issues by establishing a religious-based educational institution. As a result, in 1911, the "Modern Religious School" of Muhammadiyah was founded (Mu'arif 2012, 45). On the other hand, Freire, facing similar challenges, approached the fate of his nation with a serious mindset. This led to the development of a crucial concept in his educational thinking, namely the critical consciousness of 'conscientization' (Freire 1968, 37).

Nevertheless, in practice, the ideas advocated by Dahlan were considered unable to address the challenges and issues of national education because they had a completely different model compared to the existing education model. The establishment of Muhammadiyah schools initially faced serious opposition. With great perseverance and hope, in 1923 Dahlan successfully led Muhammadiyah schools to experience rapid growth (Ali 2016, 77).

Meanwhile, at the end of the South American continent, there was a teacher who had a great aspiration to uplift his nation from the deplorable conditions it faced (Collins 1999, 92). Freire observed that Brazilian society was still trapped in a cycle of

poverty and high illiteracy, commonly referred to as the "culture of silence." This situation occurred due to a lack of dialogue between civil society and government officials, resulting in policies that may not necessarily address the existing needs. Building upon this condition, Freire then developed a concept of education that had a profound impact on political transformation, accommodating collective interests. This concept gradually expanded and became known in Latin American countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and others (Collins 1999, 95).

Therefore, this paper will focus on researching a fundamental question regarding the perspective of KH. Ahmad Dahlan in modernizing Islamic education in order to cultivate awareness among Indonesian society to think critically during the colonialism era, through the paradigm of *conscientization* consciousness by Paulo Freire. Mulkhan explains that, in general, the perspective used by Dahlan in constructing the perspective of Islamic education is based on promoting inclusive values (openness and acceptance), integrative principles (the convergence of Islamic knowledge and general knowledge), and technological proficiency (Mulkhan 2019, 23). Subsequently, these three ideas form the educational philosophy of Muhammadiyah, which is applied in building educational institutions at all levels, ranging from the lowest level (early childhood education) to the highest level (universities). The concept of conscientização (conscientization) by Paulo Freire originates from the Portuguese language, which means consciousness or awareness. It carries a similar meaning to the word "consciousness" in English, which refers to awareness (Leal 2021, 1).

The author is interested in presenting the educational perspectives of both figures, despite their different regional contexts. However, both of them have substantial and tangible impacts on their respective

countries. Their revolutionary educational ideas, aimed at fostering critical awareness among students, have significant implications for the contemporary national education landscape. At that time, the emphasis was primarily on the mastery of numerous subjects, while pedagogical aspects received less attention. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the efforts of KH. Ahmad Dahlan in cultivating critical thinking among society through education in the early 19th century by examining the theory of conscientization by Freire, as well as its relevance to the development of critical thinking among students in the present era.

Method

This study falls into the category of literature research, which involves utilizing books, journals, magazines, or other relevant library sources as the main objects of investigation. In terms of methodology, this research employs a qualitative approach, which prioritizes observation of phenomena without relying on statistical procedures or other quantitative measures (Moleong 2012, 132).

In terms of sources, this research relies on primary sources from the works written by Paulo Freire, which are used to read and analyze the concept of modernizing Islamic education. The collected data is subsequently analyzed in a structured manner using relevant books. The analysis process is conducted in an inductive-descriptive manner, aiming to obtain comprehensive, scientific, and credible results that can lead to adequate conclusions.

There are two approaches used in this research, which are interrelated. *Firstly*, the historical approach aims to examine and analyze the biographical framework of KH. Ahmad Dahlan through tracing primary sources that focus on the study of his educational ideas. *Secondly*, the philosophical approach aims to observe the perspective of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts within a

philosophical framework (Kenaphoom 2021, 657). The scope of this research is focused on the study of Islamic education. Although there are many research topics related to similar themes that cannot be separated from the context of geopolitics, economy, technology, religious developments, and others. Therefore, this research aims to answer how the construction of Islamic education, initiated by KH. Ahmad Dahlan through his thoughts in the Muhammadiyah movement, can be understood through the lens of critical consciousness (*conscientization*) theory by Paulo Freire.

Results and Discussion

The Concept of Critical Consciousness by Freire

Paulo Freire was a teacher and educational figure born in Brazil in 1921. His thoughts have revolutionized the way the world views pedagogy during that time, through his critiques of the educational system in his book "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*". The book, which has been translated into Indonesian with the title "Pendidikan untuk Kaum Tertindas" (Education for the Oppressed), explains that consciousness is the core process or essence of the education of the oppressed (Freire 1968). Therefore, the level of critical consciousness in a society, which increases, is proportionate to the level of confidence and self-assurance in pursuing liberation (Freire 2000, 69).

Freire states that the educational process ideally should not only focus on reading specific texts (*reading the word*), but it should also have a broader aim of enabling individuals to see and read the world around them (*reading the world*). In summary, the main thesis of Freire is that education has an obligation to equip students with the ability to develop critical awareness of social, political, cultural, religious, and all aspects of life that surround them. Therefore, according to Freire, in order to reach a high level of critical consciousness, society must move

beyond two previous levels of consciousness, namely magical consciousness and naive consciousness. The three levels will be explained as follows:

First, magical consciousness, which is a consciousness at the earliest stage when an individual begins their learning journey. Generally, at this level of consciousness, one may not yet grasp the purpose of learning beyond fulfilling material needs. In this state, individuals have not yet discovered the interconnectedness between education and the world around them. Kesuma argues that in the magical consciousness level, there is still a predominant attitude of fatalism or resignation towards the fate that is accepted (Kesuma 2016, 47).

In the magical consciousness level, individuals strongly believe in the existence of a superior power beyond themselves, without being able to provide empirical explanations. Moreover, many consider this power to have the authority to control society's life. The main characteristic that can be recognized from the presence of magical consciousness is the dominance of a fatalistic paradigm, which consequently affects the attitude of the community to passively accept things as they are, remain silent, and wait for miracles to happen without making efforts to resist the power of facts.

Second, naive consciousness, which is a level above magical consciousness. Freire states that naive consciousness is characterized by the ability to establish simple connections between one problem and another. However, the understanding of these connections cannot be reflected adequately, and what lies behind these causal relationships remains undisclosed. In this state of consciousness, individuals become absorbed and carried away by the reality that will engulf them. Typically, they tend to seek pleasure together and escape from the problems they are facing while reminiscing about past events. William Smith

refers to this type of consciousness as romantic consciousness (Smith 2008, 110).

A common characteristic that can be recognized in this second level of consciousness is the tendency to trap oneself in a "quagmire" of consciousness, which makes it difficult to progress to the next level of consciousness. This is because at this stage, various new forces will emerge with the aim of intervening in the groups of individuals who are at a lower level of consciousness (magical consciousness). Thus, it can be said that naive consciousness still prioritizes an inferior attitude in interpreting facts, and is only capable of making limited arguments aimed at defending itself.

Thirdly, at the highest level, critical consciousness emerges. At this level, critical consciousness provides stimulation to motivate individuals (and communities) to actively engage and position themselves to participate in the transformation of the social, religious, and cultural realities within their surrounding environment. Social groups that possess critical consciousness are motivated to initiate careful changes and creations based on autonomous knowledge. They have the ability to interpret social facts using causal principles that are not derived from magical elements, they are meticulous in testing findings, avoid prejudice in analyzing problems, remain open-minded, and avoid distorting facts (Kesuma 2016, 47). In addition, a key characteristic that can be recognized in critical consciousness is the cultivation of self-identity, which encourages its adherents to constantly reflect upon their actions towards achieving a democratic societal transformation. This stands in stark contrast to communities that rely on magical and naive consciousness, where rationality and creativity become inseparable components in interpreting facts (Kesuma 2016, 48)

The Construction of Islamic Education by KH. Ahmad Dahlan.

The construction of Islamic education initiated by KH. Ahmad Dahlan is fundamentally aimed at two main objectives: 1) To develop Muslims into competent individuals who are physically and spiritually healthy, strong in faith and intellect, and balanced in navigating both worldly and hereafter aspects of life (within the framework of modernism and the contemporary era); 2) To cultivate social awareness among Muslims, encouraging them to adopt a positive attitude and be willing to work towards the progress of the nation and the state, particularly emphasizing the empowerment of women in terms of individual and social independence (Yuliasari 2014, 28). Considering these objectives, George McTurnan Kahin referred to Dahlan as one of the progressive and open-minded religious figures who embraced modern thoughts (Kahin 2003, 83).

The construction of Islamic education initiated by Dahlan initially faced strong opposition from some Muslim groups. The transformative ideas presented by Dahlan in the fields of education and Islamic preaching did not receive a positive response; in fact, they were met with hostility. The belief that Dahlan was affiliated with the *Muktazilah* movement and propagated Wahhabi teachings was widely voiced. The perception that Dahlan was associated with the *Muktazilah* movement was attributed to him because he openly constructed a practical system of Islamic education and teaching, similar to what is found in the West, emphasizing rationality, critical reasoning, and inclusivity. Furthermore, the perception that Dahlan had a mission to spread Wahhabi ideology in Indonesia arose because the preaching materials he brought often addressed the purification of monotheism (Tawhid) and the elimination of cultural practices that were deemed deviant, such as innovation (*bid'ah*), superstition (*khurafat*), and irrational beliefs (*takhayul*). Those ideas were considered to be in line with

Wahhabism, as it spread and developed in Saudi Arabia. However, regardless of any assumptions, the fundamental basis of modernization construction undertaken by Dahlan indeed adhered to the values of rationality and openness (Mul Khan 2019, 24).

In the early stages of his struggle, Dahlan initiated the transformation and reconstruction of Islamic education in the Kauman region of Yogyakarta, while also establishing it as the center for the Muhammadiyah preaching movement. At that time, the Kauman community was known for their fanaticism and closed-mindedness, thus Dahlan's preaching movement was openly rejected. Nevertheless, despite the challenges and rejections he faced, Dahlan approached them with patience, hope, and always opened up dialogue with the local community to avoid misunderstandings. With Dahlan's more positive response, the Kauman community eventually became the driving force behind the preaching movement and the main supporters of implementing Dahlan's transformative ideas in developing Muhammadiyah, which continues to contribute to the nation and state until today. Furthermore, the first President of Indonesia, Ir. Soekarno, praised the steps taken by Muhammadiyah for expanding the intellectual horizons of the Muslim community and modernizing Islamic education even in remote areas (Anshory 2010, 91).

In the end, the process of modernizing Islamic education initiated by KH. Ahmad Dahlan continues to this day. Through the Muhammadiyah movement, Dahlan's ideas have reached all regions of the archipelago, even in areas where the majority of the population is non-Muslim. This is because in the early stages of the Muhammadiyah movement, the focus was primarily on development and implementation, which resulted in not yet reaching religious minorities who, at least for now, are in

greater need of guidance. Therefore, some cadres are challenged to expand the scope of benefits and movement towards the Eastern regions of Indonesia, where Muslims are in the minority. Currently, Muhammadiyah has established several Muhammadiyah Higher Education Institutions (PTM) that not only accommodate Muslim students but also include many non-Muslim sons and daughters from the local areas as part of the institution.

Although there are significant differences in the application of teaching methods and educational models between Ahmad Dahlan (1912) and Freire (1962), this is a logical consequence due to the considerable time gap. Nevertheless, there is a greater emphasis on highlighting the similarities between their perspectives, particularly in terms of practical social-political and socio-economic backgrounds that they share. Therefore, borrowing Freire's concept of critical consciousness to analyze the movement and construction of Islamic educational modernization by Dahlan is relevant.

Analysis of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Educational Perspective through the Lens of Freire's Critical Consciousness Reading.

Ahmad Dahlan's offer of Islamic education construction essentially has a long historical root. In 1980, Dahlan embarked on a journey to Mecca to perform the Hajj pilgrimage for the second time, and of course, this opportunity was not wasted. Dahlan not only considered his journey solely as a pilgrimage, but also as a quest for knowledge, resulting in him residing in Mecca for no less than one and a half years. It is from here that Dahlan obtained ideas for renewal and the enthusiasm to develop them in Indonesia (Khoirudin 2018, 25).

One of the inspirations for Dahlan's renewal was M. Rasyid Ridho, a prominent reformist figure and disciple of Muhammad 'Abduh, known for his rational thoughts. The ideas obtained from the joint study with

Ridho became the driving force for Dahlan's movement in modernizing religious thought in Indonesia (Hasbulloh 1995, 57). According to Hadikusuma, among the backgrounds that led to Dahlan's enthusiasm for reform was his belief that the local Muslim community at that time was still deeply rooted in traditional cultures. Consequently, he considered Ridho's understanding to be highly relevant and suitable to be used as an antithesis (Hadikusuma 2014, 105).

Such conditions align with the social situation of Indonesian society, which is considered backward, both in terms of academics (ignorance) and material aspects (poverty) that still afflict them. Additionally, the blending of religious practices with what Dahlan perceives as non-constructive cultural elements further complicates his efforts. Therefore, it can be said that the condition of the Muslim community during that time was entangled in the paradigms of conservatism, formalism, and traditionalism. Religious fanaticism demanded that its adherents pass judgment on each other, labeling them as disbelievers, deviants, and polytheists. Such a phenomenon is referred to by Mulkhan as a consequence of the lack of critical awareness in terms of reasoning and cultural roots. It has even become a habit perpetuated by indigenous Muslim communities (Mulkhan 1990, 91).

Considering this matter, Dahlan took the initiative to initiate transformation through the pathway of education. Firstly, by establishing the 'Modern Religious School', which would undoubtedly focus on internalizing values of inclusivity, rationality, and progressiveness, finding its context in that era (Mulkhan 2019, 22). Dahlan chose to actively engage and contribute in the fields of education and women's empowerment. After all, at that time, indigenous women seemed to be concerned about the emergence of public schools, which they believed would distance them from Islam and local culture. This led to the perception that women's

primary role was confined to the domestic sphere (Jaenuri 1981, 12). Furthermore, there was also stagnation in terms of Islamic scholarship that hindered its development. This was due to the limited sources of references and reliance on traditional educational materials that primarily focused on the works of the early scholars (salaf). Therefore, the perspective of modernization became a necessity.

Such circumstances further contributed to the emergence and development of contrasting educational approaches in Indonesia. On one hand, there were Western-style schools that were becoming more mature and had extensive opportunities (as they were the only institutions offering general education). Moreover, these schools were considered more modern, organized, structured, and professional in educational management, thus producing students who were ready to enter the workforce. Such conditions made public schools more promising in preparing students to face a brighter future. On the other hand, there were religious intellectuals who emerged from Islamic-based schools but had closed-minded thinking, relying solely on the traditional Islamic education system and being reluctant to embrace general knowledge.

Therefore, Dahlan, with all his efforts, attempted to initiate reform through the modernization of Islamic education by integrating both aspects in appropriate proportions as a foundation for building the nation's civilization. For Dahlan, the integration of religious knowledge and general knowledge (modern) was an essential requirement for Muslims and a collective need. The differences in thinking patterns and socio-cultural behaviors that arise from the clash between modern educational institutions, which focus solely on general knowledge, and traditional educational institutions, which rely solely on religious knowledge, do not need to be forcefully

equated, according to Dahlan. Therefore, Dahlan's solution was to establish an integrated-inclusive school in 1923, named "Kweekschool Moehammadijah," as a bridge between the two pre-existing educational institutions without causing further conflict or having to uproot the existing foundations (Al-Alim 2021, 27).

Dahlan aspired to give birth to and cultivate a generation that possessed the characteristics of scholar-intellectuals and intellectual-scholars (Ruslan 2020, 93). In particular, Dahlan aimed to empower intellectual women who could address social issues comprehensively and played an indispensable role. Therefore, the institution he established consistently pursued the construction of Islamic education based on modernism and women's empowerment. This approach aimed to produce students with broad, open-minded, critical, and independent knowledge, encompassing both religious and general knowledge domains. This education is considered ideal as it provides a response to the challenges posed by each educational institution. Dahlan's construction of Islamic education successfully fills the gap left by Western intellectuals who do not teach any religious knowledge at all. On the other hand, Dahlan's construction of Islamic education will also fill the void left by scholars who have limited knowledge in general subjects. This will enable them to contribute more significantly to the nation and the state (Ali 2016, 78).

Conclusion

In the present time, it is fitting to bring forth the perspective of modernization by KH. Ahmad Dahlan and make it a reference, as one of the antitheses to the efforts of modernizing education that negates religious values within it. Furthermore, the construction of modernizing Islamic education by Dahlan has also proven to be able to address the challenges of the time, which simultaneously address the challenges

faced by the nation during his era. The problems of poverty and colonialism, which were the main concerns at that time, gradually diminished, and the society was able to transform Indonesia into a strong economic force on the global stage. Dahlan's efforts in the early 19th century through the establishment of Muhammadiyah schools are tangible evidence of his contribution and role in the field of education. The process of teaching religious subjects, which was previously seen as conventional, was transformed into a dialogic (using benches and classrooms) and participatory learning approach by establishing schools for women. This educational approach, which initially faced opposition, eventually proved the quality of its ideas by fostering openness, inclusivity, and progressiveness.

Thus, it can be said that the intellectual framework of Islamic education by Dahlan had a significant impact on the transformation of Islamic education in Indonesia in the past, particularly in terms of the paradigm of educational thought. In the subsequent development, taking into consideration the ideas and thoughts of Ahmad Dahlan, it can be argued that the construction of Islamic education from the perspective of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, which offers concepts of modernism and women's empowerment, represents a significant step towards fostering critical thinking and the development of rationality within society. Moreover, it has reached a stage of critical consciousness as expressed by Freire.

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