



SELF-REFLEXIVE: A METHOD IN UNDERSTANDING ISLAMIC STUDIES

REFLEKSI DIRI: SEBUAH METODE DALAM MEMAHAMI STUDI ISLAM

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Abstract

Philology has been utilized to study Islam which focusing mainly on early texts. Some debates from post-Orientalist, anthropological, and decolonial perspectives not only broaden the discourse but also introduced new challenges, such as separating text from practice and neglecting indigenous from outsider views. This article tries to show that these discourse and debates reveal a bigger issue where there is no clear way to examine how research methods influence our understanding of Islam. This study employs a qualitative method, conceptual approach to review relevant key words in Islamic studies and related fields, such as Orientalism, discursive tradition, lived religion, cosmopolitanism, and self-reflexivity method. Instead of commenting methods as appropriate or not, the analysis looks at what each approach helps scholars notice, what it overlooks, and how it fits into larger systems of knowledge and power. Drawing on this analysis, the article introduces a self-reflexive framework with three main parts: epistemological reflexivity, positional reflexivity, and dialogical reflexivity. This framework is meant to help researchers plan and review Islamic studies projects, especially in Muslim-majority and less-explored areas, by encouraging them to consider texts, practices, and local ideas without making them too simple. The article contributes to ongoing debates by offering a new approach that moves beyond basic divisions and encourages a more open and thoughtful study of Islam.

Keywords : *Self-Reflexive, Orientalist, New Method, Islamic Studies.*



Abstrak

Filologi telah digunakan untuk mempelajari Islam yang terutama berfokus pada teks-teks awal. Beberapa perdebatan dari perspektif pasca-Orientalis, antropologis, dan dekolonial tidak hanya memperluas wacana tetapi juga memperkenalkan tantangan baru, seperti memisahkan teks dari praktik dan mengabaikan pandangan masyarakat adat dari pandangan orientalis. Artikel ini mencoba menunjukkan bahwa wacana dan perdebatan ini mengungkapkan masalah yang lebih besar di mana tidak ada cara yang jelas untuk meneliti bagaimana metode penelitian memengaruhi pemahaman kita tentang Islam. Studi ini menggunakan metode kualitatif, pendekatan konseptual untuk meninjau kata kunci yang relevan dalam studi Islam dan bidang terkait, seperti Orientalisme, tradisi diskursif, agama yang dihayati, kosmopolitanisme, dan metode refleksi diri. Alih-alih mengomentari metode sebagai tepat atau tidak, analisis ini melihat apa yang masing-masing pendekatan bantu para sarjana perhatikan, apa yang diabaikannya, dan bagaimana hal itu sesuai dengan sistem pengetahuan dan kekuasaan yang lebih besar. Berdasarkan analisis ini, artikel ini memperkenalkan kerangka kerja refleksi diri dengan tiga bagian utama: refleksi epistemologis, refleksi posisional, dan refleksi dialogis. Kerangka kerja ini dimaksudkan untuk membantu para peneliti merencanakan dan meninjau proyek studi Islam, khususnya di daerah mayoritas Muslim dan daerah yang kurang dieksplorasi, dengan mendorong mereka untuk mempertimbangkan teks, praktik, dan gagasan lokal tanpa menyederhanakannya terlalu jauh. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan yang sedang berlangsung dengan menawarkan pendekatan baru yang melampaui pembagian dasar dan mendorong studi Islam yang lebih terbuka dan bijaksana.

Kata Kunci : Self-Reflexive, Orientalis Metode Baru, Studi Islam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic studies has been widely discussed since the beginning till today's era. Historically, Islamic discourse in western was rooted in Orientalism. Orientalism can be understood as a concept that describes how the Western world perceives, studies, and dominates the East. It can easily be perceived that westerners who study about Islam, producing concept, definition and method to understand Islam. After winning the Second World War, the hegemony of Orientalism was massively spread to countries under Western Power. Those concepts and definitions were instilled in academia and scholarship to understand Islam through a Western lens, even many Muslims got hegemonized by those pattern rather than their own way of understanding Islam. Those reality show that western play a significant role in defining Islam and how individuals perceive Islam until today era since they still become a single power dominates the global stages. In addition, many fractions happen within the Muslim community, making them play their defining games. This makes it impossible for the Muslim community to adhere to just one definition that represents all Muslims who have many dynamics and characteristics.

In this case, Western defines Islam with a narrow definition that neglects many aspects within Islam itself. One profound definition made by them is one fixed Islam. It sees Islam, which is represented by the Middle East, as a monolithic, fundamentally static, and "peculiar" entity. This definition neglects the reality where Islam has been practiced in various ways in different areas, and often adjusted by local cultures. This definition and method were introduced by one of the prominent orientalist, Ernest Gellner, who sees Islam as one fixed form of religion. He introduces an idea that Islam can be seen from its legal text. In an easy way, he emphasizes that if an individual is interested in studying Islam, they should study their text. This view, which is adopted by many scholarships through western hegemony, simplifies the reality of Islam. They use a text-based method to understand Islam and spread it to all scholarly traditions. This method is commonly known as the philological approach.



This text-centred method popularised by Western academic hegemony, has greatly reduced the intricacy of Islamic modes of life. By virtue of their favoring canonical texts as sufficient sites of meaning, this tends in turn to disadvantage everyday Muslim practices, indigenous forms of religiosity, and non-textual knowledges. Now called the philological method, it was a ruling paradigm in Orientalist scholarship and would later be institutionalized within Religious Studies. [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) Its legacy reverberates loudly today across modern Islamic studies, frequently re-entrenching hierarchical divides between “normative” textual Islam and “local”/“deviant” lived practices. However, the subsequent shift to “decolonial” or “indigenous” approaches often reproduced the Orientalist versus anti-Orientalist binary, obscuring the complexity of methodological choices.

Previous studies were conducted by some, but only focus on data, not in methodology. The main study was initiated by Abbas Aghdassi and Aaron W. Hughes (2022), in his “New Methods in the Study of Islam”, seeks to position Orientalism more closely with indigenous methods, emphasizing the dialogue between all methods. However, it has not discussed yet how this concept works in detail and this research is expected to elaborate it deeper. Other relevant study was conducted by Sara Ababneh (2025). However, it only explains how self-reflexivity concept which has correlation with decoloniality is taught inside of classroom. It did not discuss how that concept itself deeply. Based on these works, the proposed article develops a “self-reflexive method” for Islamic studies: an approach that returns the analytical gaze to the scholars’ own categories, positions, and disciplinary legacies, while intentionally amplifying indigenous voices and local concepts without romanticizing them and this article attempts to delve the concept deeper.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method, conceptual approach to review relevant key words in Islamic studies. Instead of gathering new data, it reviews important scholarly works that have formed the main ideas and methods in the field. This study uses peer-reviewed books and journal articles on Orientalism, post-Orientalist critique, the anthropology of Islam, and methodological reflexivity. These sources were chosen because they contributing to the debates about research methods, knowledge production, and how Islam is defined in academic settings. The analysis compares how different research methods affect the study of Islam, set standards for valid evidence, and influence scholarly authority. The study also looked at basic assumptions, the history of academic fields, and the political effects of choosing certain methods and discusses more a conceptual proposal for a “self-reflective method” in Islamic studies, which integrates epistemic, positional, and dialogical dimensions of reflexivity

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Textual Orientalism to Methodological Crisis in Islamic Studies

Modern Islamic studies evolved alongside global political dynamics that changed how knowledge was valued and who was considered an expert. The field is rooted in a long European history of studying Islam, shaped by Orientalism. Orientalism aimed to subject Eastern societies to Western knowledge and was often used by Western governments. In this discourse, Edward Said's work became a starting point for a major debate in Islamic studies and prompted the need for new approaches. He argued that knowledge is often shaped by existing structures, hierarchies, and assumptions, allowing some questions to be accepted without examination, while others are not addressed at all. When these questions are overlooked, Islamic studies can only address partial truths and miss important parts of Islam's broad scope, leading to an incomplete understanding and a narrow definition of Islam itself.

Philological and historical-critical methods have long been the primary means of studying Islam. These approaches focus on language mastery, studying old texts, editing, and exploring key genres such as Quranic exegesis, hadith, law, and theology. Over time, this focus has grown to include more than one approach, shaping what many consider the core of Islam by connecting authenticity to early texts and classical interpretations. Although this approach has strongly influenced Islamic studies in the



West, it has a downside. Focusing only on law and interpretation can overlook the diversity of regional practices and daily life.

One of the famous premise in this discourse introduced by Charles J. Adams, who argued that Islamic studies should involve historical, literary, and philological approaches, with a strong command of language and a thorough use of texts. Adams emphasize that relying on comparative studies can be fool without philological expertise. However, this view also cause in creating a hierarchy in which philology becomes the gold standard, so that the most respected Islamic studies are those based on the texts and focused on the canon and its origins. Some argue that Islamic studies in many academic circles often become trapped in an "intellectual ghetto," where Islam is defined primarily through early legal and exegetical literature, without sufficient attention to modern Muslim social realities, regional diversity, or contemporary theoretical debates. While they do not deny the value of the classical texts, they emphasize that over-focusing on a single canon, especially when considered central, can narrow our understanding of Islam and alienate the field from broader discussions in the humanities and social sciences.

In the late 20th century, this approach cope with criticism from both inside and outside academia. Scholars have realized that looking only at texts does not fully capture Islam. In other fields, Islam is still underrepresented in comparative religious studies and is often described with stereotypes like violence, patriarchy, irrationality, or the clash of civilizations. As a result, Islamic studies face two main problems: relying on limited sources and reducing Islam to fixed ideas.

Edward Said's research on Orientalism marked a major shift. He said that Orientalism was not just bad scholarship, but it was also a way of describing the East that supported authority (power) and modern institutions. Said's critique led scholars to ask not only whether claims about Islam were accurate, but also why people believed them and how those ideas came to be accepted. This changed how we think about research methods, showing they are closely linked to how modern knowledge is formed. Hallaq added that the issue was not only that Western scholars misunderstood Islam. He explained that modern ways of thinking, which focus on power, progress, and control, turned 'religion' into something with political and philosophical meaning. Thus, the task was not only to correct misrepresentations but also to question the systems that made some views appear more valid than others. For example, knowledge from a single classical text might dominate discussions because it was considered more reliable than the experience or history of Muslim communities. In one case, a study focused solely on classical legal texts to understand Islam in a region, ignoring the region's social and cultural practices. This demonstrates how "knowledge systems" can authoritatively prioritize certain types of knowledge while silencing others that offer more diverse and local perspectives.

Orientalism has faced strong criticism in this field. Anti-Orientalist, postcolonial, decolonial, and indigenous perspectives aim to reclaim Muslim ways of knowing and challenge Euro-American frameworks. These approaches often lead to new ways of thinking about method. In some debates, the idea of "method" is treated as a moral issue and judged by its political value. Aaron Hughes stresses that some information can be overlooked, and the dialogue is often limited to choosing between neo-Orientalism and decoloniality. The main issue is not merely support or decline Orientalism, but also understanding how different approaches can shape the study of Islamic by organizing evidence, interpretation, and authority.

The methodological crisis in Islamic studies is not just about choosing between text and practice, or between insiders and outsiders. It is about how to create new knowledge responsibly in a field shaped by colonial history, current knowledge systems, and ongoing debates about power. To fully understand the discourse, Islamic studies require to do collaboration that includes philological aspects, real-world practices, and local categories, while recognizing that all are influenced by politics.

New Method as Need

One key development in contemporary scholarship is the assertion that method not only analyzes objects but also shapes them. Aghdassi and Hughes argue that method is a classificatory system that orders the world by establishing boundaries between similarity and difference. Objects do not classify themselves; scholars do. The implication is significant: labels such as "Islamic law," "Islamic



mysticism," "ritual," "reform," "tradition," or "local Islam" are not natural categories but analytical categories with specific histories. Quranic studies centered on tafsir highlight interpretive lineages, exegetical techniques, theological grammar, and scholastic debates. Comparative textual studies tend to emphasize textual stratification, intertextuality, and the history of reception and transmission. Political science readings of an event like the mi'nah highlight institutions, coercion, legitimacy, and state power. None of these approaches is invalid. However, each produces a different "Islam" by creating a different map of what is important.

Therefore, Aghdassi and Hughes emphasize the importance of methodological pluralism and reflexivity rather than simply replacing one method with another. The goal is not to replace philology with ethnography, or Orientalism with a single decolonial method. Each method has blind spots that shape the reality that the field of inquiry attempts to explain. As a concrete example, in *The Calligraphic Nation*, Messick shows that texts do not exercise authority simply because of what they say; textual authority is mediated through social institutions, reading and writing practices, legal-administrative procedures, and embodied forms of pedagogy. His analysis of Yemen shows that writing, law, and governance form an integrated system in which texts function as social actors, constructing norms, shaping authority, and disciplining interpretation. A purely philological approach, if it isolates texts from these mediations, risks ignoring the social life of textual authority.

However, his methodological correction is not simply a shift from the textual to "society" as if society were transparent. Talal Asad's critique here is fundamental. Asad argues that "religion" is not a universal analytical category; rather, it is a historically generated category defined by modern European history, particularly by Christian-Protestant assumptions about belief, the inner self, and personal conviction. When modern scholars apply the category of religion to Islam without a genealogical examination, they risk misinterpreting Islamic practices that do not fit those assumptions. Talal Asad's earlier argument said that Islam is a "discursive tradition" simplifies the issue. Islam is not just about textual teachings, doctrines or rituals; it is a tradition shaped by history, argument, discipline, and practice. This idea leads scholars to examine how Islamic norms are debated, taught, practiced, and validated, instead of assuming they have a fixed essence.

Jowen Bowen's book, *"New Islamic Anthropology,"* explains how to study Islam without romanticizing "lived Islam." Bowen focuses on practices like prayer, study, judgment, and political organization as places where Islam's meaning is shaped in different settings. He does not treat these practices as only based on texts. Instead, he shows how Muslims use texts and traditions as they adapt to their social situations. Bowen's approach is methodologically relevant because it offers an alternative to reductive textualism and the celebration of unstructured diversity: it explores how Islam is embodied as a practical and interpretive tradition.

Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety* encourages a methodological challenge. This methodological challenge is further compounded by challenging interpretive systems that assume liberal subjectivity as the standard of agency. Her work suggests that ethical self-formation in Islamic revival movements cannot be adequately understood if scholars equate agency with resistance to norms. Instead, Mahmood argues that agency can be exercised through structured adherence to standards, through practices of piety that promote a particular kind of self. Methodologically, this is significant because it forces Islamic studies to confront a recurring problem: many analyses evaluate Muslim practices based on external moral standards rather than interpreting them within their own ethical grammar.

If methods shape the world, the question is: how can a field avoid replacing one dominant world with another? Aghdassi and Hughes argue that the method itself must be the object of analysis, including its history, blind spots, and political aspects. This is not a call for endless reflection, but for disciplined transparency: scholars must state what their methods emphasize and what they ignore, and remain open to categorical shifts if data test their assumptions. One of the most significant shifts in Islamic studies today is the critique of the implicit canon that regards Middle Eastern textual traditions, particularly early legal and exegetical corpora, as the normative center of Islam. Ernst and Martin argue that Islamic



studies must move “from Orientalism to cosmopolitanism,” not by abandoning texts, but by expanding archives and theoretical conversations.

Their critique extends beyond representation and method: if the field considers the essence of Islam to be confined to a narrow canon, then other discourses such as Sufism, Shi'ism, philosophy, poetry, ethics, historiography, and popular practices will be marginalized, even though they have shaped Muslim life across regions and periods. Hodgson's distinction between “Islamic” and “Islamic” remains useful for conceptualizing this plurality. Hodgson uses “Islamic” to refer to cultural and civilizational formations historically connected to Muslim societies but not reducible to religious doctrine or law. This distinction is methodologically important because it prevents scholars from equating Islam with a single, normative scriptural model. It encourages attention to how Islam is lived and expressed through literature, art, politics, and ethical culture, which are domains often neglected methodologically when “Islam” is defined as law and theology.

Shahab Ahmed in his *What is Islam?* offers a persuasive challenge to narrow definitions of Islam that rely primarily on law and scripture. Ahmed argues that such definitions often render Islam incoherent by ignoring how Muslims have historically produced meaning through domains such as poetry, philosophy, and Sufism are domains that may not fully fit the legal-scriptural model. Rather than treating diversity as marginal, Ahmed presents contradiction and plurality as central features of Islam's historical reality. His argument has clear methodological consequences: rather than asking why Islam deviated from a single model, scholars should ask why they continue to expect a single model to understand the details of the tradition's life.

Hughes cautions against assuming that indigenous categories are natural reflections of reality; instead, they argue that terms have historical and contested pedigrees, as do categories like *taṣawwuf*. For example, terms have multiple histories, institutional locations, and normative debates; they cannot be imported into an analysis as if they were transparent descriptors. The same is true for expressions like verification, which can function in different ways across traditions and contexts. To understand the original categories, scholars need to use genealogy. They should ask how these categories were created, who used them, what authority they supported, and how they changed over time.

The question of who counts as an insider or outsider matters, but it is often misunderstood. Some people treat it as a moral issue, seeing insiders as “authentic” and outsiders as “colonial,” or sometimes the reverse. It is more helpful to think of insider and outsider as different ways of knowing, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Someone raised in a tradition might notice details that outsiders miss, while outsiders might see patterns that insiders overlook. Rather than asking who should speak, it is more useful to consider what each viewpoint can show and what it might miss. This approach does not resolve the politics of knowledge, but it does encourage a more analytically fruitful debate.

From Criticism to Construction

Taken together, the studies discussed above demonstrate that Islamic studies has passed through several overlapping methodological moments: a philological-textualist moment shaped by Orientalist institutions; a critical moment defined by Said's challenge to representation and power; a genealogical and anthropological moment that rethinks religion, practice, and authority; and a decolonial moment that questions Euro-American epistemic dominance and seeks to highlight indigenous voices. These shifts have yielded enormous intellectual progress. However, they have also created new problems: the field now has a wealth of methods but lacks consensus on how to choose among them, combine them responsibly, or evaluate their blind spots.

This is precisely the space where self-reflective methods become necessary. “Reflexivity” is commonly considered a scholarly virtue, but it is usually only an aspiration: scholars acknowledge their position and then move on. The literature repeatedly calls for reflective awareness. Ernst and Martin emphasize initial commitments and the isolation of disciplines; Asad emphasizes genealogy and the historical production of analytical categories; Hallaq emphasizes the epistemic crisis of modern knowledge; Aghdassi and Hughes emphasize methods as world-shapers. However, the field still lacks a clear explanation of how reflexivity can operate as a method, a method that structures research design, evidence selection, interpretation, and evaluation.



The method of self-reflection, as developed in this article, does not mean endless self-questioning or refusing to make claims. It means systematic clarity about three interrelated domains: epistemology, positionality, and dialogue.

First, epistemological Reflexivity. This requires scholars to question the analytical categories they employ and ask what a different framework would reveal. If "Islam" is defined through law and scripture, what is hidden? If Islam is represented through life practices, what is hidden? If Islam is defined through politics and public authority, what is hidden? The self-reflexive method treats categories as hypotheses rather than as neutral descriptors. It also encourages scholars to determine whether they treat a particular category as an emic term (used by Muslims in a particular context), an etic analytical term (used by scholars), or a negotiated hybrid, and to detail the outcomes of each choice.

Second, positional Reflexivity. This approach asks scholars to analyze how their positionality, which includes academic training, institutional incentives, political context, linguistic access, and ethical commitments, shapes what they consider valid evidence and reasonable interpretations. This is not a call for confessional disclosure; it is a methodological recognition that scholarly work is produced within institutions that value certain types of knowledge and marginalize others. Positional reflexivity becomes especially important in "peripheral" contexts, where scholars may face multiple epistemic pressures: classical Muslim categories, imported Western disciplinary norms, and contemporary political demands for authenticity or decolonial legitimacy. Self-reflexive methods transform these pressures into objects of study rather than invisible constraints.

Third, dialogical reflexivity. This concerns how scholars engage with indigenous concepts and local voices. The field is increasingly recognizing the need to strengthen indigenous epistemologies, but reinforcement can turn into romanticization if scholars treat indigenous categories as pure or self-evident. Dialogic reflexivity means engaging indigenous terms genealogically and critically, while allowing them to challenge scholars' analytical categories. It also includes understanding that "indigenous" voices are plural and contested; there is no single Muslim voice, only traditions of debate and. Therefore, the self-reflexive method aims not to replace Western categories with indigenous ones entirely, but to create an interaction in which each can modify the other.

What does this contribute to existing work? It provides a way to move from critique to construction without falling into methodological dogmatism. The field doesn't need a new orthodoxy; it needs a systematic approach to designing and evaluating research that combines philological rigor, attention to practice, awareness of power, and sensitivity to local epistemologies. Self-reflective methods provide just that: a framework for asking what a method reveals, what it conceals, and how scholars' own categories and commitments shape the world they claim to describe.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has shown that ongoing debates in Islamic studies such as those between text and practice, insider and outsider views, and Orientalist versus decolonial approaches that reveal a deeper issue: there is no systematic way to examine how scholarly methods shape Islam as a field of study. While these debates have made a significant shift for a field beyond its Orientalist roots, they often make some new binaries that override the epistemic consequences of the chosen methodology. The analysis shows that no single approach, whether philological, anthropological, genealogical, or decolonial can fully explain the historical diversity and lived complexity of Islam if used alone. Methods are not neutral; they influence what is seen as important, credible, and valid in academic discussions. Because of this, debates about methods need more than just ethical arguments or switching disciplines.

In response, the article proposes a self-reflexive methodology to understand Islam. By recognizing this, this article tries to introduce and discuss deeper about a self-reflexive method based on three types of reflexivity: epistemological, positional, and dialogical. Instead of setting a new standard, this strategy presents practical guidance for critically examining how categories, contexts, and engagement with local ideas affect research results. By putting reflexivity into practice, the article aims to make the study of Islam more open, diverse, and rigorous.



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