



AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND SPIRITUAL EPISTEMOLOGY IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIFE WRITING

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Abstract

This article explores autoethnography as a form of spiritual epistemology in the study of Islam and gender. Drawing upon feminist hermeneutics and Indonesian Muslim women's lived experiences, it argues that self-writing is not merely personal expression but a mode of knowing an intellectual and devotional act that integrates reason, emotion, and faith. Using a qualitative reflective framework, the author employs her own journey as a Muslim woman, mother, and doctoral scholar to examine how autoethnography can serve as both method and ibadah ilmiah. The discussion situates this approach within Islamic concepts of tafakkur (contemplation) and muhasabah (self-accounting), connecting them to the works of Amina Wadud, Etin Anwar, and Saba Mahmood. Findings reveal three epistemic dimensions of spiritual self-writing: (1) writing as worship and remembrance, (2) domestic space as an epistemic field of ethical formation, and (3) reflexive authorship as a feminist-spiritual act of reclaiming authority. By merging autoethnography with Islamic historiography, this study proposes an inclusive and embodied mode of scholarship — one that honors lived experience as a source of divine and intellectual illumination.

Keywords: autoethnography; spiritual epistemology; Islamic historiography; Muslim women; gender and faith; reflexive method

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji autoetnografi sebagai bentuk epistemologi spiritual dalam studi Islam dan gender. Dengan mengacu pada hermeneutika feminis dan pengalaman hidup perempuan Muslim Indonesia, artikel ini berargumen bahwa penulisan diri (self-writing) bukan sekadar ekspresi personal, melainkan sebuah cara memperoleh pengetahuan — sebuah tindakan intelektual sekaligus devosional yang mengintegrasikan akal, emosi, dan iman. Melalui kerangka reflektif kualitatif, penulis memanfaatkan perjalanan pribadinya sebagai seorang perempuan Muslim, ibu, dan mahasiswa doktoral untuk menelaah bagaimana autoetnografi dapat berfungsi sekaligus sebagai metode dan sebagai bentuk ibadah ilmiah. Pembahasan menempatkan pendekatan ini dalam konteks konsep Islam tentang tafakkur (perenungan) dan muhasabah (evaluasi diri), serta mengaitkannya dengan pemikiran Amina Wadud, Etin Anwar, dan Saba Mahmood. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan tiga dimensi epistemik dari penulisan diri spiritual: (1) menulis sebagai bentuk ibadah dan dzikir, (2) ruang domestik sebagai medan



epistemik bagi pembentukan etika, dan (3) kepenulisan reflektif sebagai tindakan feminis-spiritual untuk merebut kembali otoritas pengetahuan. Dengan memadukan autoetnografi dan historiografi Islam, penelitian ini mengusulkan model keilmuan yang inklusif dan berwujud (*embodied scholarship*) — yang menghormati pengalaman hidup sebagai sumber pencerahan ilahiah sekaligus intelektual.

Kata Kunci: autoetnografi; epistemologi spiritual; historiografi Islam; perempuan Muslim; gender dan iman; metode reflektif

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the discourse on Muslim women and Islamic epistemology has undergone significant transformation. Contemporary scholarship in Islamic feminism, historiography, and spirituality increasingly highlights lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. Yet within much of modern Islamic scholarship, self-reflective and experiential forms of knowing remain marginalized—often considered secondary to textual or rational traditions. It is in this intellectual gap that autoethnography finds its relevance, offering a means to legitimize experience as a site of spiritual and intellectual insight.

As a reflective qualitative method, autoethnography weaves together personal narrative with the social, cultural, and religious structures that shape it. Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as a mode of inquiry that bridges “the intellectual and the emotional,” enabling the researcher to understand the world through the lens of lived experience. In the context of Islamic thought, this practice resonates with classical epistemological concepts such as *tafakkur* (deep contemplation) and *muhasabah* (self-accounting). Both are integral not only to spiritual ethics but also to the intellectual pursuit of divine awareness, emphasizing that the process of knowing begins with the self.

Accordingly, this study positions autoethnography as a form of *ibadah ilmiah*—a devotional act of scholarship. Writing, in this sense, transcends academic reporting; it becomes a form of *dhikr*, a contemplative remembrance of God through intellect and emotion. This approach echoes Amina Wadud’s (1999) argument in *Qur’an and Woman*, which asserts that women’s lived experiences constitute an essential dimension of Qur’anic interpretation and revelation. Similarly, Etin Anwar (2021) suggests that Muslim women’s pursuit of self-understanding embodies an ethical relationship between the subject and the Divine, where true knowledge emerges from faith-rooted self-awareness.

The significance of this inquiry also lies within the empirical realities of Indonesian Muslim women whose daily lives intertwine domestic, familial, and spiritual dimensions. Their activities—between household duties, community engagement, and participation in *pengajian* (study circles)—reflect how religious values are embedded in the everyday and how the domestic realm becomes an arena for moral and intellectual cultivation. Within this framework, domestic life is not an isolated private sphere but an epistemic field: a living classroom where ethical, spiritual, and intellectual practices converge.

By integrating feminist theory, Islamic spirituality, and reflective methodology, this study seeks to establish what can be termed a spiritual epistemology of autoethnography. Through this lens, the lived experience of Muslim women is not merely an object of analysis but a source of knowledge (*ma’rifah*) that enriches Islamic historiography. Writing the self thus becomes an act of theological reflection—a way of “knowing God through the mirror of the self.”



This inquiry is guided by a central research question: How can autoethnographic self-writing function as a form of spiritual epistemology in contemporary Islamic scholarship?

This question operates on two levels: first, as an academic effort to validate women's lived experience within Islamic knowledge production; and second, as a spiritual reflection on how Muslim women, as thinking, feeling, and believing subjects, embody knowledge through everyday life.

Ultimately, this study endeavors to bridge modern autoethnography and Islamic epistemological traditions, creating a dialogue between knowledge and faith, intellect and emotion, the scholarly and the spiritual. It argues that within the personal reflections of Muslim women lie profound epistemic possibilities—where scholarship becomes devotion, and devotion itself becomes knowledge.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a qualitative reflective design with the autoethnography method. Autoethnography is a research approach that combines personal experience and academic analysis to understand social and spiritual meaning. It allows the researcher to become both the participant and the observer of her own life journey. The purpose of this method was to explore how personal reflection, faith, and daily experience can become sources of spiritual knowledge and self-understanding.

The researcher used her own experiences as the main data of this study. The data were collected through personal journals, family notes, reflections on religious activities, and memories related to domestic and academic life. These experiences were then analyzed together with theoretical references from scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999), Etin Anwar (2021), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Carolyn Ellis (2004). These references were used to support the interpretation of personal experiences within the framework of Islamic feminism and spiritual epistemology.

The analysis of the data was conducted descriptively and thematically. The researcher read and re-read all notes and reflections to identify important themes such as worship, care, patience, knowledge, and self-awareness. These themes were then interpreted using the concepts of tafakkur (deep contemplation) and muhasabah (self-evaluation) from Islamic thought. The process of writing and analyzing was continuous, reflecting the cycle of reflection and understanding in the autoethnographic method.

In this research, the researcher also applied reflexivity, meaning that she continuously evaluated her position, emotions, and values during the research process. Ethical considerations were maintained by respecting privacy, sincerity, and honesty (*ikhlas*) in presenting personal experiences. The findings of this study were not generalized statistically but aimed to give deep understanding about how self-writing can become a form of knowledge and worship for Muslim women scholars.

In this chapter, the researcher presents the findings from the autoethnographic reflection conducted during the study. The data were taken from the researcher's personal journals, reflections, and written narratives about daily life, faith, and academic experiences. The process of collecting data was done continuously through writing, reading, and interpreting the



researcher's own experiences as a Muslim woman, mother, and doctoral student. The purpose of this stage was to find out how self-writing could be used as a way to gain knowledge and spiritual awareness.

The data analysis was done descriptively. The researcher read and coded the reflections to find similar ideas and meanings. After analyzing the data, three main themes appeared. Each theme shows the relationship between daily life, religious practice, and knowledge. The results of the study can be described as follows:

Table 1. Thematic Findings from Autoethnographic Reflection

No	Main Theme	Description
1	Writing as Worship	Writing personal reflections becomes a spiritual practice (dzikir fikri) that connects intellect, emotion, and faith.
2	Domestic Space as a Learning Field	The home and daily routines serve as a place to learn ethical and spiritual values through patience, sincerity, and care.
3	Self-Reflection as Knowledge	Reflecting on one's life experiences helps develop awareness and understanding of Islamic values and self-growth.

The table above shows the results of the thematic analysis based on the researcher's reflection. The first theme, writing as worship, means that the act of writing becomes a form of remembering Allah and understanding His guidance through personal experience. Every time the researcher wrote about her emotions and challenges, she felt closer to Allah. This result supports the idea of Amina Wadud (1999) that knowledge in Islam is both rational and spiritual.

The second theme, domestic space as a learning field, shows that the home is not only a private place but also a meaningful environment for education and reflection. Activities such as teaching children, preparing meals, and attending pengajian (study circles) become part of spiritual learning. This supports Etin Anwar (2021) who explains that everyday life is a process of building an ethical relationship with God.

The third theme, self-reflection as knowledge, means that personal reflection (muhasabah) can produce understanding equal to formal study. Through writing, the researcher learned to connect emotion, reason, and belief as one unity of faith. This finding is similar to the idea of Saba Mahmood (2005) who stated that piety involves shaping the self through discipline and consciousness.

The results of the study also show that through continuous reflection and writing, the researcher experienced inner transformation. Writing helped her to see the meaning behind every challenge in life, and to find peace and confidence as a Muslim woman scholar. This process proves that autoethnography is not only a research method but also a way of worship and self-purification (tazkiyatun nafs).

In general, the results show that the act of self-writing can develop deeper spiritual and intellectual understanding. It also proves that women's experiences are valuable sources of



Islamic knowledge. This finding supports the statements of Ellis (2004) and Anwar (2021) that narrative writing can connect emotion, culture, and belief in one meaningful framework.

Therefore, it can be concluded that autoethnography can serve as a model of spiritual epistemology that links research, reflection, and worship. The personal experience of the researcher became not only a private story but also a source of knowledge for understanding Islam in daily life.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher would like to discuss the research findings that aim to answer the research question about how autoethnography can function as a spiritual epistemology in Islamic scholarship. This research focuses on how self-writing and reflection can be used by Muslim women to understand their faith, identity, and knowledge. Based on the results, the researcher found that the act of writing and reflecting on personal experiences could develop deeper spiritual awareness and academic understanding. The reflection process helped the researcher see that her daily experiences as a Muslim woman, mother, and scholar are meaningful sources of learning.

The first finding shows that writing is not only a form of expression but also a form of worship (*ibadah ilmiah*). When the researcher wrote her reflections about family, study, and faith, she realized that the writing process itself became a kind of remembrance (*dzikir*). This supports Amina Wadud (1999), who stated that women's experiences can be part of interpreting and understanding divine truth. Writing helped the researcher to connect emotion, intellect, and spirituality, showing that faith can be expressed through academic reflection.

The second finding shows that domestic life can become a place of learning and spiritual growth. The home is not only a private space but also an environment where ethical values and spiritual lessons can be practiced. This result is in line with Etin Anwar (2021), who explained that Muslim women's daily experiences reflect their ethical relationship with God. The researcher's activities at home — teaching children, managing responsibilities, and joining *pengajian* — became part of her learning process. Through this, she realized that domestic activities can also be a form of worship and a source of knowledge.

The third finding shows that self-reflection and *muhasabah* can create self-knowledge that is both intellectual and spiritual. Through reflecting on her past and present experiences, the researcher gained new awareness about her role as a Muslim woman in the academic and spiritual world. This is supported by Saba Mahmood (2005), who said that piety in Islam is a process of shaping the self through reflection and discipline. This finding also aligns with Carolyn Ellis (2004), who argued that writing can be a bridge between emotion and intellect.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the use of autoethnography is effective for developing spiritual and intellectual understanding. The process of writing and reflecting on personal experience can help Muslim women scholars find meaning in their daily life and strengthen their faith. This is also supported by previous studies. Etin Anwar (2021) stated that self-understanding is a part of the ethical relationship between humans and God. Amina Wadud (1999) also mentioned that personal experience is essential in interpreting the Qur'an and



constructing women's perspectives in Islamic knowledge. Saba Mahmood (2005) added that reflection is an act of piety that transforms belief into conscious practice.

Therefore, from the discussion above, it can be concluded that autoethnography has a significant effect on developing understanding of spirituality and knowledge for Muslim women scholars. The researcher found that by using reflection and writing, women can actively contribute to Islamic thought. In other words, the use of autoethnography as a research method can strengthen both intellectual and spiritual dimensions in the study of Islam, especially in understanding the everyday lives of Muslim women.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion of this research, it can be concluded that the use of autoethnography as a research method can help Muslim women scholars to understand and develop spiritual knowledge through personal reflection and self-writing. The process of writing and reflecting becomes not only an academic activity but also a form of ibadah ilmiah — worship through learning and self-awareness. By writing about her own experiences, the researcher found that every moment of life, whether in domestic, social, or academic settings, contains lessons that can increase understanding of God and oneself.

The findings show that there are three main aspects of spiritual epistemology developed through this method: (1) writing as worship and remembrance, (2) domestic space as a field of ethical and spiritual learning, and (3) self-reflection as a process of gaining knowledge. These three aspects prove that personal experience can be a valid and valuable source of knowledge in Islamic studies.

This study also shows that autoethnography gives space for women to express their voices and experiences, which are often not represented in traditional forms of Islamic scholarship. Through reflection and writing, women can connect intellect, emotion, and faith in one continuous process of learning. Therefore, autoethnography can serve as a model of spiritual epistemology that bridges personal experience and academic research.

The implication of this study is that Muslim researchers, especially women, can use reflective writing as an alternative approach in understanding Islam and gender. Future research can develop this method by combining autoethnography with interviews or observation in different Muslim communities. In conclusion, this study proves that knowledge can come not only from texts and theories but also from the sincere reflection of a believer who learns through her own life journey.

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