



The Style of Letters and Meaning: Integration of Arabic Literary Aesthetics in the Teaching of Kitab Kuning in Pesantren

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Abstract

Keywords: Classical Islamic Texts; Aesthetics of Arabic Literature; Islamic Boarding School; Balagha; Traditional Learning	Learning the kitab kuning (classical Islamic texts) has so far tended to focus on grammatical and legalistic aspects, while aesthetic elements such as rhythm, metaphor, and linguistic style have not been fully explored as pedagogical tools. This study employs a qualitative approach through a literature review of classical texts such as Alfiyyah Ibn Mālik, Syarḥ Imrīṭī, and Fath al-Muʿīn, which are analyzed from the perspectives of Arabic stylistics and balāghah (rhetoric). The findings indicate that integrating a literary approach in the study of kitab kuning enhances students' understanding of the structure and meaning of the texts, cultivates linguistic sensitivity, and fosters an appreciation of aesthetic and cultural values. This article recommends transforming pesantren learning methods by systematically incorporating classical Arabic literary approaches to enrich the dimensions of comprehension, internalization, and interpretation of turāth (heritage) texts, The contribution of this research lies in the development of a pedagogical
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model based on Arabic linguistic aesthetics that can be applied within contemporary pesantren curricula.

Abstrak	
Kata Kunci: Kitab Kuning; Estetika Sastra Arab; Pesantren; Balāghah; Pembelajaran Tradisional	Pembelajaran kitab kuning selama ini cenderung berfokus pada aspek gramatikal dan legalistik, sementara unsur estetik seperti ritme, metafora, dan gaya bahasa belum sepenuhnya dieksplorasi sebagai sarana pedagogik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi pustaka terhadap teks-teks klasik seperti Alfiyyah Ibn Mālik, Syarḥ Imrītī, dan Fath al-Muʿīn, yang dianalisis melalui perspektif stilistika Arab dan balāghah. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa integrasi pendekatan sastra dalam pembelajaran kitab kuning memperkuat pemahaman santri terhadap struktur dan makna teks, membentuk kepekaan bahasa, serta menumbuhkan apresiasi terhadap nilai-nilai estetika dan kultural. Artikel ini merekomendasikan transformasi metode pembelajaran pesantren dengan memasukkan pendekatan sastra Arab klasik secara sistematis untuk memperkaya dimensi pemahaman, penghayatan, dan penafsiran teks-teks turāts, kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada pengembangan model pedagogis berbasis estetika bahasa Arab yang dapat diterapkan dalam kurikulum pesantren kontemporer.

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Introduction

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, possess distinctive richness in their teaching systems, particularly through the study of kitab kuning, which forms the core of the classical Islamic scholarly curriculum. These books not only contain content on fiqh, tauhid, tasawwuf, and the instrumental sciences, but are also rich in classical Arabic literary dimensions, characterized by the beauty of linguistic structure and aesthetic nuances (Bruinessen, 1995). However, in practice, the aesthetic and literary aspects of kitab kuning tend to be overlooked. The primary focus of teachers and students is often directed toward grammatical understanding through textual and iʿrāb-oriented approaches, without unveiling the accompanying literary richness of the texts.

This reality can be found in many pesantrens, including in East Java such as Pesantren Sunan Drajat Lamongan, where the approach to teaching kitab kuning remains expository and formalistic. Books like *Al-Ajrumiyyah*, *Imriti*, and *Alfiyah Ibn Mālik* are often taught merely to understand the rules of *nahwu* and *sharaf* mechanically. In fact, these texts are written in a high linguistic style, employing *qāfiyah* (rhymes), *saj'* (rhythmic prose), and even poetry, which, when understood from a literary perspective, open the door to deeper and more contextual comprehension (Al-Jurjānī, 1984).

Classical Arabic literary aesthetics encompass artistic sentence structures, diction choices, language style (*uslūb*), and the beauty of rhythm in poetry or prose. This is known in the science of *balāghah* (rhetoric), which is divided into three branches: *ma'ānī* (syntactic meaning), *bayān* (figurative meaning), and *badī'* (beauty of expression). The integration of these dimensions in the teaching of *Kitab Kuning* will make the learning experience more humanistic and profound—not merely cognitive, but also affective and aesthetic (Abu Zayd, 2004).

The effort to integrate literary aesthetics into the teaching of *Kitab Kuning* aims to enrich students' understanding of the texts, foster an appreciation of the beauty of the Arabic language, and strengthen critical thinking in interpreting meanings contextually. The study of *Kitab* should not only serve as a medium for knowledge transmission but also as a space for shaping feelings and meanings. In this regard, the Arabic stylistic approach can be utilized to analyze and integrate literary elements into the learning activities (Asālī, 1993).

Furthermore, aesthetics-based literary learning aligns with a humanizing educational approach, as articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He emphasizes the importance of the learners' full engagement in understanding reality through a dialogue between text and context (Freire, 1970). In the context of pesantren, this dialogue can begin with the interaction between the santri and the classical texts they read with feeling, not merely through logic.

Thus, this study is significant as a contribution to the development of a more comprehensive, aesthetic, and contextually critical literacy-oriented method of teaching kitab kuning.

Although numerous studies have discussed the significance of kitab kuning in shaping Islamic intellectual traditions in Indonesia (Bruinessen, 1995; Lestari, 2022), a notable research gap remains—namely, the absence of a systematic model that integrates the aesthetic aspects of Arabic literature into kitab kuning learning. Most previous works have concentrated on epistemological, legal, or purely linguistic perspectives without emphasizing how rhetoric, metaphor, and stylistic beauty can function as pedagogical tools (Syarif, 2017). Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by proposing an integrative aesthetic approach that combines literary and educational values.

This research attempts to develop a theoretical framework that combines Gadamer's hermeneutics (2004) and balāghah aesthetics as the basis for classical texts in pesantren. Hence, this study not only examines the linguistic meanings of the texts but also bridges the relationship between text, context, and the learners' affective experience. This constitutes a new contribution to the discourse on pesantren educational reform in the modern era, where aesthetic literacy should become an integral part of kitab kuning pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Abu Zayd, 2004).

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design using a library research method, contextually supported by observations of kitab kuning learning practices in pesantren. The primary focus is to examine the potential integration of classical Arabic literary aesthetic approaches into kitab kuning teaching strategies in traditional Islamic boarding schools.

Adopting a qualitative-interpretative framework, the study seeks to explore the meanings, implicit messages, and both aesthetic and pedagogical values embedded within classical Arabic texts. Textual analyses of key works —

such as *Al-Ājurrūmiyyah* by Ibn Ājurrūm, *Sharḥ Imrīṭī* by Shaykh al-Imrīṭī, and *Alfiyyah* Ibn Mālik with commentaries like Ibn ‘Aqīl—are correlated with instructional models practiced in Indonesian pesantren. Primary data comprise classical kitab kuning commonly used in instruction, while secondary data include scholarly literature on Arabic literary aesthetics, pesantren education, and pedagogy (Al-Jurjānī, 1984; Al-Asālī, 1993; Freire, 1970; van Bruinessen, 1995; Abu Zayd, 2004).

Data were gathered through intensive literature review and contextual analysis, correlating textual forms and learning practices based on the researchers’ observations in East Java pesantren (notably Sunan Drajat Lamongan). Hermeneutic analysis was employed to uncover deeper meanings by considering linguistic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions.

The analysis involved identifying linguistic structures (*nahwu-ṣaraf*) and aesthetic elements such as *saj’*, *qāfiyah*, *majāz*, *isti‘ārah*, and *uslūb*, followed by correlating form, meaning, and pedagogical implications. Procedurally, the research proceeded through four systematic stages: (1) identifying the main corpus of classical Arabic texts; (2) conducting in-depth readings to extract linguistic and stylistic features; (3) coding data by categorizing patterns of *uslūb*, *majāz*, *isti‘ārah*, and *saj’*; and (4) performing hermeneutic interpretation to reveal symbolic meanings and aesthetic values embedded in the texts.

The coding strategy employed thematic grouping to organize aesthetic and pedagogical categories based on recurring linguistic structures and contextual usage (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, while qualitative, this study follows a rigorously systematic analytical and interpretive procedure that integrates descriptive, stylistic, and hermeneutic dimensions to produce comprehensive and contextually grounded findings

Result and Discussion

The Literary Dimension in Kitab Kuning Texts

One of the main findings in this study is that many texts in the kitab kuning possess literary linguistic structures, yet they are not explicitly treated as literary works. For example, in *Alfiyyah* Ibn Mālik, the poetic form (rajaz) is used as a medium to convey grammatical rules. This poetry is not merely a memorization aid, but it also contains rhythm, qāfiyah (end rhyme), and metaphors that are rich in meaning.

تُقَرَّبُ الْأَقْصَى بِلَفْظٍ مُوجَزٍ # وَتَبْسُطُ الْبَدَلُ بِوَعْدٍ مُنْجَزٍ

وَهُوَ بِسَبْقٍ حَائِزٍ تَفْضِيلًا # مُسْتَوْجِبٌ ثَنَائِي الْجَمِيلًا

In this verse, two important aspects stand out: **Sound structure:** The Jāzi and Lā rhyme creates a musical effect that enhances memory retention. **Expression of meaning:** Ibn Mālik does not merely convey grammatical rules, but wraps them in an aesthetic structure, thus imbuing them with literary nuance.

A pedagogical approach to kitab kuning that focuses solely on i' rāb analysis and literal meaning overlooks the emotive depth and connotative richness embedded in such texts.

As Al-Jurjānī (1984) explains, the beauty of the Arabic language lies in ta' līf (syntactic arrangement) and naẓm (harmonious composition of words). In learning, this can be utilized to: 1) Encourage students to identify rhetorical styles (uslūb); 2) Understand how meaning is constructed not only through individual words but also through their composition; 3) Appreciate the text as a work of art, not merely as a scholarly document.

The Integration of Balāghah in Nahwu Instruction

Books such as *Sharḥ Imrīṭī* and *Alfiyyah* contain numerous examples of *majāz* (metaphor), *isti'ārah* (analogy), and *saja'* (rhymed prose). One such example is:

لِلرَّفْعِ وَالنَّصْبِ وَجَرَ نَا صَلَحَ # كَاغْرِفَ بِنَا فَإِنَّا نَلْنَا الْمَنَحَ

explanation of grammar:

Dhomir Muttashil ٱ matches all his forms in mahal Rofa', Nashob and Jaruya. For example, the pronunciation: اعْرِفْ بِنَا فَإِنَّا نَلْنَا الْمَنْحَ (smartness. بنا = Expensive Jar, فَإِنَّا = Mahal nashab, نَلْنَا = Mahal rofa')

Explanation from the perspective of figurative language, istiarah and saja'

The phrase "اعْرِفْ بِنَا" ("recognize us") does not carry the literal meaning of physically recognizing someone, but rather symbolizes the acknowledgment of the pronoun form nā (بِنَا) as an example within a grammatical context.

Likewise, the phrase "نَلْنَا الْمَنْحَ" ("we obtained the grant") carries a metaphorical meaning: "we succeeded in understanding or conveying the correct use of the pronoun form," as if the grammatical mastery itself is an intellectual reward.

The use of the word الْمَنْحَ ("grants") here represents a form of isti'ārah (metaphor), since it is not an actual gift being given, but rather the result of knowledge or understanding that has been achieved.

This metaphorical usage reflects a rhetorical dimension that elevates the study of nahwu (Arabic grammar) from mere technical information to a meaningful and expressive act.

According to Al-Asālī (1993), the stylistic approach in Arabic texts enables readers to grasp implicit messages through rhythm and structure, not merely through denotative meaning. In the learning process, teachers can: 1) Encourage students to interpret sentence structures by paying attention to aesthetic elements; 2) Provide exercises comparing literal and figurative (majāzī) constructions; 3) Motivate students to compose poetic verses that explain grammatical rules, thereby making the learning process more expressive.

Contextualizing Meaning: Text as a Medium for Educating Sensibility

Freire (1970) emphasizes the importance of liberating education – learning that does not treat the text as a frozen doctrine, but as a medium for dialogue between learners and the world. In this context, the kitab kuning is positioned as:

1) A medium for aesthetic interpretation, not merely normative; 2) A trigger for emotional resonance, not merely legalistic; 3) A reflection of Arab-Islamic cultural experience that can be harmonized with local pesantren values.

For example, in teaching the poetic verses of Sullam al-Munājah, the teacher can guide students to understand the emotional depth of *tadhallul* (humility), rather than simply translating the text literally.

This aligns with the thoughts of Abu Zayd (2004), who asserted that classical texts must be read through a hermeneutical spectrum – one that takes into account the reader's context and the cultural environment in which the text is taught.

Implementation and Implications for Teaching Practices in Pesantren

Sorogan and Bandongan as Oral Literary Mediums

Based on a study by Jailani et al. (2023) conducted in a Madurese pesantren, the use of the sorogan method (where a student reads a text aloud to the teacher) and the bandongan method (where the teacher explains the text collectively) has proven effective.

In practice, when a kitab kuning (classical Islamic text) is read aloud, the teacher often interjects to explain rhetoric, *majāz* (figurative language), and *saj'* (rhymed prose) – encouraging students to listen to and feel the aesthetic rhythm of the Arabic language, not merely its meaning. This approach revives the text as a form of oral literary work rich in musical aesthetics.

Fath al-Mu'in: Contextualization and Aesthetic Sensibility in Islamic Boarding Schools"

At Pesantren Miftahul Huda (Tasikmalaya), the *Fath al-Mu'in* is frequently used to address contemporary issues. Syarif (2017) notes that the text is contextualized in student discussions, exploring not only the legal meanings but also the beauty of its language.

For instance, the closing verse in the chapter on *nahwu*, which employs extended *sawt* (rhythm) and metaphors of light, is used to create a reflective atmosphere during morning discussions, fostering both aesthetic and religious awareness.

The Role of Kitab Kuning Literature in Shaping Aesthetic Reasoning

According to Lestari (2022), *kitab kuning* is written in the format of *matan-syarh*, which directly reflects the composition and artistry of language use. For example "Kitab kuning contains symbolic meaning... through the writing format of ... *syarh*, *matan*, and *hasyiyah*" (Lestari, 2022, p. 195).

In teaching practice, instructors can ask students to:

Analyze the rhythm and rhyme at the end of the *matan* verses, Examine metaphors in the *syarh* that add dimensions of meaning, Compare literal and rhetorical nuances, thereby facilitating aesthetic discussions among students.

Such analysis enhances students' sensitivity to linguistic form and style, and enriches their comprehension of the text.

The findings of this study indicate that: Integrating a literary approach enriches students' learning experiences; Teachers of classical texts need to equip themselves with basic knowledge of stylistics and *balāghah*; There is a need to develop teaching modules for *kitab kuning* that combine linguistic, literary, and value-based aspects; The tradition of text memorization should be accompanied by reflective and aesthetic reading.

This aligns with Van Bruinessen's (1995) notion that *pesantren* should serve as creative centers in engaging with classical texts, rather than merely functioning as preservers of dogma.

Furthermore, the implementation of this study’s findings can be operationalized through a pedagogical model that incorporates literary aesthetics into curriculum design. Teachers may integrate balāghah analysis within nahwu and ṣarf lessons, using texts such as Alfiyyah Ibn Mālīk to identify stylistic and rhythmic features. Teacher training on literary-aesthetic approaches would enrich pedagogical strategies and enhance students’ linguistic awareness of meaning, structure, and expression (Lestari, 2022). Since this study mainly relies on textual analysis and secondary literature, future research should include classroom observations or interviews with pesantren teachers to strengthen the validity and practical dimension of the findings (Creswell, 2014)

Table 1: Comparison Table of Literary Integration in the Methods of Classical Text Teaching

Aspect	Conventional (Syntax- Morphology)	Integrated Literary Aesthetics
Main Focus	Analysis of i‘rāb and literal meaning	Linguistic rhythm, symbolism, majāz, aesthetic atmosphere
Primary Methods	Sorogan, bandongan, memorization	Additional exploration of stylistic features (uslūb), majāz, saj‘, rhetorical riffs
Learning Outcomes	Structural fluency and grammatical rules	Literary appreciation, holistic understanding, cultural contextual awareness
Emotional Context	Purely cognitive-scientific	Cultivating "feeling" through reflective and aesthetic textual experience

Conclusion

The teaching of kitab kuning (classical Islamic texts) in pesantren encompasses not only the scholarly values of fiqh and nahwu, but also preserves the rich aesthetics of classical Arabic literature—an aspect that has long been underutilized in the learning process. Texts such as Alfiyyah Ibn Mālīk, Sharḥ Imrīṭī, and Faṭḥ al-Mu‘īn reveal the presence of poetic and rhythmic language

structures, rich with distinctive styles (*uslūb*), metaphors (*majāz*), and rhymed prose (*sajʿ*).

The integration of stylistic and *balāghah* (rhetorical) approaches into the teaching of *kitab kuning* has proven to enrich the students' learning experience, not only intellectually but also emotionally and aesthetically. Students thus become not merely readers of legal and grammatical texts, but also appreciators of the beauty and deeper meanings of language. In this way, the *kitab kuning* serves as a dialectical space where knowledge, culture, and the art of language converge.

Traditional teaching methods such as *sorogan* and *bandongan*, when creatively developed through a literary lens, can become effective tools to foster critical reasoning, linguistic sensitivity, and interpretive depth. Emphasizing rhythm, symbolic meaning, and narrative structure in *kitab kuning* significantly contributes to shaping students' character—not only as textually obedient individuals, but also as persons attuned to beauty and human values.

As a result, the development of *pesantren* curricula should accommodate the integration of Arabic literature into *kitab kuning* instruction, and should prepare educators who are not only proficient in linguistic tools, but also possess literary appreciation and hermeneutical skills in interpreting classical texts. In doing so, *pesantren* will remain vital centers for the transformation of Islamic knowledge and culture that are relevant to the contemporary age.

This study also offers several strategic recommendations: (1) to articulate the methodological framework more explicitly to ensure replicability for future researchers; (2) to revise and consolidate the bibliography by incorporating recent works relevant to Arabic aesthetic pedagogy; and (3) to propose practical guidelines for integrating *balāghah* into *kitab kuning* instruction through textual analysis and literary appreciation activities (Al-Asālī, 1993; Freire, 1970). Therefore, the results of this research are expected to contribute not only to theoretical enrichment but also to the practical advancement of *pesantren* curriculum development.

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Author Contributions

M. Fathor Rohman conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, and led the analysis of Arabic literary aesthetics in the teaching of Kitab Kuning. Isna Finurika contributed to data collection, literature review, and the analysis of pedagogical practices in pesantren contexts. M. Chotibuddin participated in refining the methodology, interpreting the findings, and critically revising the manuscript for intellectual content. All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final manuscript, and approved the submitted version.

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