



Cultural Transformation In the Short Story “Nihayatus Syaykh” By Ali Thanthawi: A Postcolonial Analysis

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Abstract

Keywords: Cultural Transformation, Short Story, Ali Thanthawi, Postcolonial, Orientalism	This study investigates the process of cultural transformation depicted in Ali Thanthawi’s short story “Nihayatus Syaikh” through the lens of Edward Said’s postcolonial framework, particularly the concept of Orientalism. The central problem addressed in this research is the tension between traditional Arab cultural values and the forces of colonial modernization, which reshaped social structures, educational systems, and identity formation in early twentieth-century Arab society. To examine this issue, the study employs a qualitative descriptive method, focusing on textual interpretation and thematic analysis. The objective is to reveal how the narrative reflects shifts in cultural norms and to understand the protagonist’s—an elderly traditional teacher—struggle in responding to these changes. The analysis shows that cultural transformation in the story occurs at multiple levels. Administratively, the requirement for formal diplomas symbolizes the institutionalization of Western educational standards. Morally and socially, the younger generation’s adoption of modern, individualistic, and Western-oriented lifestyles represents a departure from earlier values such as simplicity, humility, and
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religiosity. The short story further critiques the declining respect for local scholarly authority and the erosion of intellectual dignity amid rapid modernization. The findings demonstrate that colonial influence is not limited to political or structural dimensions but also permeates cultural consciousness, shaping how individuals perceive their own identity. The contribution of this study lies in positioning “Nihayatus Syaikh” as a cultural document that reveals complex dynamics of resistance, adaptation, and loss within a postcolonial context. This research highlights the need to preserve cultural awareness and critical reflection when navigating modernization pressures.

Abstrak

Kata Kunci:
Transformasi
Budaya,
Cerpen, Ali
Thanthawi,
Postkolonial,
Orientalisme

Penelitian ini mengkaji proses transformasi budaya dalam cerpen “Nihayatus Syaikh” karya Ali Thanthawi melalui pendekatan pascakolonial Edward Said, khususnya konsep Orientalisme. Permasalahan utama yang diangkat dalam studi ini adalah ketegangan antara nilai-nilai budaya Arab tradisional dan kekuatan modernisasi kolonial yang mengubah struktur sosial, sistem pendidikan, serta pembentukan identitas masyarakat Arab pada awal abad ke-20. Untuk menelaah isu tersebut, penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan berfokus pada interpretasi teks dan analisis tematik. Tujuannya adalah mengungkap bagaimana cerita tersebut merefleksikan pergeseran norma budaya serta memahami pergulatan tokoh utama – seorang guru tua tradisional – dalam merespons perubahan tersebut. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa transformasi budaya dalam cerpen ini terjadi pada berbagai tingkatan. Secara administratif, tuntutan terhadap kepemilikan ijazah formal melambangkan institusionalisasi standar pendidikan Barat. Secara moral dan sosial, gaya hidup generasi muda yang modern, individualistik, dan berorientasi Barat menunjukkan keterlepasan dari nilai-nilai lama seperti kesederhanaan, kerendahan hati, dan religiositas. Cerpen ini juga mengkritik merosotnya penghormatan terhadap otoritas ulama lokal serta memudarnya martabat intelektual di tengah arus modernitas. Temuan penelitian menegaskan bahwa pengaruh kolonial tidak hanya terbatas pada aspek politik atau struktural, tetapi juga meresap ke dalam kesadaran budaya yang membentuk cara individu memaknai identitas dirinya. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada pemosisian “Nihayatus Syaikh” sebagai dokumen budaya yang merekam dinamika kompleks resistensi, adaptasi, dan kehilangan dalam konteks pascakolonial. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya menjaga kesadaran budaya ketika menghadapi tekanan modernisasi.

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Introduction

Beyond its social and cultural roles, literature possesses an expressive dimension born from the author's inner experiences and personal reflections. Literary works serve as a medium for writers to depict the meaning and essence of life as experienced, felt, and witnessed. As part of a critical and creative society, authors convey their experiences through symbols, language, and narratives. Literature emerges from the urge for self-expression, addressing existential issues concerning humanity, humaneness, and the universe. It becomes an aesthetic manifestation of philosophical thought and psychological dynamics that engage the intellectual and emotional aspects of the reader (Al-Ma'ruf & Nugrahani, 2017; Gunawan et al., 2023).

The short story stands as one of the most effective genres for concisely and densely representing social reality. It portrays characters' lives through straightforward plots and confined narrative spaces, yet manages to convey profound meaning within a brief reading duration. Capable of reflecting reality, expressing emotions, and raising thought-provoking themes about life, the short story achieves a unique balance between structural economy and deep thematic resonance. Its limited scope demands precision in language and symbol, often resulting in layered narratives where every detail serves a purpose. This genre captures singular moments or conflicts with such intensity that they illuminate broader human experiences, making it an exceptionally powerful medium for social commentary and emotional exploration. The short story's accessibility and concentrated impact allow it to engage readers intellectually and emotionally, often leaving a lasting impression through its efficient yet expansive narrative approach. (Nuroh, 2011; Prasetya & Wuquinnajah, 2022; Sri Dewita, 2024).

Along with the development of postcolonial literary studies and contemporary cultural criticism, many recent studies show that short stories are not only an aesthetic medium, but also an instrument of social and identity

criticism, especially in the context of modernity and colonial heritage. For example, the study “Colonization of Subaltern Women in the Short Story ‘Qisshatu Fathiyyah Al-Misriyyah’” by Muama & Mustofa (2022) shows how female characters as subalterns experience marginalization, discrimination, and forms of cultural colonization in oral/written narratives, which is in line with Spivak's subaltern theory (Muama & Mustofa, 2023).

In addition, the study “Postcolonialism Contemporary Indonesian Novels: Unending Feminism?” by Khaeni & Pamungkas (2024) describes how recent novels in Indonesia reflect the traces of colonialism in social and educational freedom, especially for women, thus emphasizing that local literature remains relevant in modern postcolonial readings (Khaeni & Pamungkas, 2024).

The emphasis on themes of identity, value conflicts, and external cultural pressures also appears in the literary works of Singapore, Hawaii, and other Pacific regions, where postcolonial ecocriticism has become an important perspective in evaluating the impact of modernity on the cultural and environmental landscape. For example, the article “Reimagining Paradise: Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Selected Hawaiian Literature” (2024) examines how literature as a medium not only records but also responds to cultural changes and environmental damage caused by global influences, showing that literature can serve as a space for symbolic criticism of modernization and cultural domination. (Indriyanto, K., Suryaningsih, S., & Sriastuti, 2022).

From a historical and scientific viewpoint, the short story also constitutes a compelling object of academic inquiry. Certain scholarly critiques suggest that the art of narrative storytelling traces its origins to ancient Egyptian literature, exemplified by works such as *The Magicians' Tales*, and subsequently evolved across diverse cultural traditions, including Hindu, Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic storytelling practices. (Halil, 2019). In modern Arabic literature, the short story is frequently employed as a means to document social and cultural changes. (Junus, 1989). These profound changes stem not from a singular source but from a complex interplay of multifaceted internal societal dynamics and potent external

pressures. The internal dynamics encompass a wide spectrum of factors, including evolving cultural values, generational shifts in perspective, intellectual movements, economic transformations, and political upheavals that reshape the fabric of community life from within. Concurrently, these are compounded and often accelerated by significant external forces, most notably the far-reaching legacies of colonialism – which imposed new administrative structures, cultural hierarchies, and linguistic influences – and the pervasive, ongoing effects of globalization, which introduces cross-cultural exchanges, economic interdependencies, and technological innovations that further alter traditional social and cultural landscapes.

As powerfully articulated by (E. Said, 2016) Colonial domination operated through a multifaceted and insidious mechanism that extended far beyond the immediate spheres of political subjugation and economic exploitation. It established a comprehensive hegemony by systematically shaping the very frameworks of knowledge and the construction of identity. This was predominantly achieved through the production and dissemination of specific cultural representations that deliberately marginalized, orientalized, and essentialized "the East," thereby creating a pervasive discourse of power that legitimized the colonial project and perpetuated its influence long after the formal end of direct political rule. In this context, literature emerges as a potent and sophisticated medium for symbolic resistance against these very dominant narratives. It functions as a counter-discursive space where subaltern voices can be articulated, heard, and validated. Through the strategic use of allegory, metaphor, subtext, and the reappropriation of language itself, literary works actively deconstruct, challenge, and subvert the hegemonic representations imposed by colonial and other oppressive power structures. By presenting alternative perspectives, reclaiming historical agency, and asserting the complexity of marginalized identities, literature transforms from a mere reflection of reality into an active site of ideological contestation and cultural reclamation, thereby empowering communities to assert their autonomy and

redefine their place in the world. (Ashcroft et al., 2003), and tools for recording shifts in social values due to colonialism and cultural mixing (Rohman, 2020).

The short story *Nihāyatu al-Shaykh* (The End of the Sheik) by Ali al-Tantawi serves as the primary object of analysis in this research. This literary work vividly portrays the profound impact of modernity and colonialism on the cultural fabric and educational systems of Eastern societies. Ali al-Tantawi (1909–1999) was a prominent Syrian-Egyptian Islamic scholar, literary figure, and reformist who actively contributed to the fields of Islamic jurisprudence and religious advocacy. Renowned as a prolific writer and an influential media preacher, he later resided in Saudi Arabia, where he continued his intellectual and spiritual endeavors. In recognition of his significant contributions to Islamic literature, he was awarded the prestigious King Faisal International Prize in 1990 (Ahmad & Shah, 2014; Jazeera, 2021; Mohd Ali & Romli, 2021).

In this short story, al-Tantawi skillfully depicts the profound shift in the protagonist's values resulting from the hegemony of colonial education and the dominance of foreign cultural influences. To dissect this phenomenon, the study employs Edward Said's postcolonial theory, specifically *Orientalism* (E. W. Said, 1978), which highlights how the East is ideologically constructed by the West (Amalia, 2021; Nimasari, 2018). Postcolonialism examines the enduring legacy of colonialism, which persists in the form of symbolic domination, a colonized mentality, and the framing of identity. (Ashcroft et al., 2003; Lutfi, 2024; Ratna, 2010). This theoretical framework allows for a critical analysis of the ways in which colonial-era power dynamics continue to influence cultural narratives, self-perception, and social structures long after the formal end of colonial rule.

Based on this background, the present study aims to examine how cultural transformation is depicted in the short story *Nihāyatu al-Shaykh* using Edward Said's postcolonial approach, particularly the concept of Orientalism. The research seeks to critically analyze the narrative strategies through which the author represents shifts in values, identity conflicts, and the enduring psychological and cultural impacts of colonial hegemony. By applying Said's

theoretical framework, this investigation will elucidate how the text deconstructs and challenges Western ideological constructions of the East while simultaneously revealing the subtle mechanisms of symbolic domination and internalized colonialism that continue to influence postcolonial societies. This research is crucial for uncovering how colonialism has engendered shifts in values within educational systems and social structures of societies, as well as for elucidating how literature functions as a medium for critiquing this process. By examining the mechanisms through which colonial hegemony operates and permeates cultural and institutional frameworks, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the enduring psychological, social, and epistemological impacts of colonial domination. Furthermore, it highlights the role of literary expression as a form of symbolic resistance, enabling marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives, reclaim agency, and articulate alternative perspectives on identity, tradition, and modernity. (Syakhrani & Kamil, 2022).

Various previous studies exploring similar themes, both in the context of postcolonial literary studies and cultural change in contemporary Arabic literature, can be used as a basis for this research. The following are some of the studies that will be presented by the author:

A study by (Haslinda, 2023), titled "*Al-'Unful-Lafzīyu Diddusy-Syakhsīyyati Majidu Fil-Qissatil Qasīratil-Yatīmāni Li-'Alī Al-Tantāwī (Dirāsatu Unfu Ijtimā'iyu)*" (Verbal Violence Against the Character of Majid in the Short Story *Al-Yatīmān* by Ali al-Tantawi: A Sociological Analysis of Violence), A study titled "*Mimikri Dan Stereotipe Kolonial Terhadap Budak Dalam Novel-Novel Balai Pustaka*" (Colonial Mimicry and Stereotypes of Slaves in Balai Pustaka Novels) and a study titled "*The resistance of slaves in the colonial era toward Surapati by Abdoel Moeis* (Yasa et al., 2017). Also a study by (Fariz & Ibad, 2024),

Based on relevant research conducted by various researchers, the author concludes that the short story *Nihāyatu al-Shaykh* will provide a new perspective if analyzed using Edward Said's postcolonial theory, in order to understand how

cultural domination and identity crisis appear in the shift of social values in Eastern societies.

Method

This research is a qualitative study that employs a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on the analysis of literary texts through Edward Said's postcolonial theory, particularly the concept of Orientalism. This approach aims to uncover the power dynamics, identity shifts, and cultural transformations evident in the short story *Nihāyatu al-Shaykh* by Ali al-Tantawi.

Postcolonial theory is applied to examine how short story narratives present representations of Eastern culture oppressed by colonialism through education, social transformation, and relationships between characters. Through postcolonial literary discourse analysis, researchers find elements in the text that reflect the impact of colonialism on narrative structure and characterization.

The research data comprises narrative quotations from the short story that contain elements of cultural change and colonial education. The data was obtained through an in-depth analysis of the source text and was then examined by linking it to the core concepts of Edward Said's theory. The research process consisted of: (1) determining relevant quotations, (2) grouping the data according to postcolonial themes, and (3) conducting a thematic analysis using Said's theoretical framework. This research also utilizes additional references, such as Said's book *Orientalism*. (E. W. Said, 1978), *Culture and Imperialism* (E. W. Said, 1993), as well as the latest scientific journals discussing Arabic literature from a postcolonial perspective.

To strengthen the method, this study also uses close reading techniques as a preliminary step in identifying symbols, metaphors, and representations of identity in the text. After that, the quotations are categorized using thematic analysis, allowing for a more systematic mapping of the themes of colonial domination, resistance, and hybridity. A similar strategy is used in the study *The Portrayals of the Other in Yemeni Postcolonial Fiction*. (Ba-fadhel & Manqoush,

2024), which analyzes contemporary Arabic fiction to reveal the relationship between colonizer and colonized, as well as A Post-colonial Study of the Short Story 'Araby' (Maniee & Mansouri, 2017), which highlights how postcolonial techniques are used to interpret symbolism and representation in classic short stories.

Result and Discussion

The analysis of the short story "Nihayatu al-Shaykh" reveals three main forms of social transformation depicted from the Sheikh's perspective: a shift in traditions within the education system, a transformation of character and values, and a change towards lifestyle and hedonism. These three forms are a manifestation of the impact of Western cultural imperialism, analyzed through the lens of Edward Said's postcolonial theory.

Transformation of Educational Traditions

النص العربي

“لقد كانوا أشرافاً عاملين ثيابهم سابغة وحركاتهم وأفعالهم فياضة بالرجولة، وحياتهم مقصورة على البيت والمدرسة، لا تعرف الرذيلة الغربية نفوسهم. ولم يكن الغرب قد غزانا بأزيائه وملاهيته وأبنائه المستعمرين وأبنائنا الذين علمهم العلم والعقوق وأعطاهم السلاح ولقنهم كيف يقتلون به «التقاليد» الشرقية الشريفة... فكانوا بمنجى من هذا كله.”

Translation:

“They were honorable men, hard workers; their clothes were neat, and their movements and actions were full of manly dignity. Their lives were confined to home and school; they were unaware of the West's vices. The West had not yet invaded us with its costumes, its entertainments, its colonial sons and our own sons who would teach them knowledge and disobedience, give them weapons, and teach them how to kill the honorable Eastern 'traditions'... They were spared from all of this.”

النص العربي

“أما الآن فالمدارس تعد بالمئات، ولكن الناس لا يميلون إلا للمدارس الأجنبية، إنهم يضمنون على مدرسة كهذه المدرسة تقدم أبناءهم للفحص الرسمي العام وتحفظ لهم دينهم ووطنيتهم بعشرين قرشاً في الشهر، ثم ينفقون مئتين وثلاثمئة في المدارس الفرنسية أو الإيطالية أو الإنكليزية، ليعود إليهم أبناءهم فرنسيين أو طلياناً أو إنكليز.”

Translation:

“Nowadays, there are hundreds of schools, but people are only interested in foreign ones. They spend twenty piasters a month on schools that provide their children with official public examinations while preserving their religion and patriotism. Yet, they spend two or three hundred dollars on French, Italian, or English schools, only to have their children return to them as French, Italian, or English.”

النص العربي

“ويحسبون أن هذه الشهادة غاية العلم وهي فاتحته وأنهم إذا نشروها طويت لهم المراتب إلى الصدر وقدم لهم من كل شيء ما يشتهون، لا يدرون أن للحياة فناً غير فن الكتب وفي العلم آفاقاً لا تحيط بها المدرسة.”

Translation:

“ They thought that this diploma was the pinnacle of knowledge and its gateway, and that if they showed it off, they would be promoted to the highest rank and everything they wanted would be handed to them. They did not know that life has an art that is not the art of books, and that in science, there are horizons that cannot be reached by school. “

Based on the three quotations above, it can be analyzed that the transformation from local values towards foreign education reflects a significant social focus shift. From the perspective of Edward Said (1978), this phenomenon is a clear manifestation of Orientalism – a discursive construction that frames the East as the inferior 'Other'. In this paradigm, the West positions itself as the core

of civilization, and education is strategically employed as a powerful tool for ideological control (Shahrazuri, 2020). This system subtly undermines the authority of local figures, such as the Sheikh, who lack formal diplomas despite their profound experience and indigenous knowledge.

Character and Value Transformation

النص العربي

“أيام كان الناس جادين مستقيمين لا يعرفون ملاحى الغرب ورذائله ولا يعرفون إحياء الليل فى الفاحشة وقتل النهار فى الكسل، وكيف كان قوى الأمل جم النشاط لا يخالط اليأس قلبه.”

Translation:

“When people were serious and honest, unaware of Western entertainment and vices; when they were ignorant of staying up late into the night with debauchery and killing the daylight with idleness; when they were strong in hope, brimming with activity, and without despair in their hearts. “

This quotation reflects the character of the previous generation, portrayed as diligent, high-minded, and full of zeal. The new generation, on the other hand, is depicted as more inclined towards instant gratification and external appearances. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said argues that Western popular culture, encompassing music, entertainment, and lifestyle, is instrumentalized to create and disseminate a new value system that displaces local values in the Eastern world. This observation powerfully affirms the narrative that the generation depicted in the short story was experiencing a profound crisis of values and identity, a condition precipitated by the continuing symbolic domination of the West in the postcolonial era.

Lifestyle Transformation and Hedonism

النص العربي

“إنهم يضمنون على مدرسة كهذه المدرسة تقدم أبناءهم للفحص الرسمي العام وتحفظ لهم دينهم ووطنيتهم بعشرين قرشاً في الشهر، ثم ينفقون مئتين وثلاثمئة في المدارس الفرنسية أو الإيطالية أو الإنكليزية، ليعود إليهم أبناؤهم فرنسيين أو طلياناً أو إنكليز.”

Translation:

“They spend twenty piasters a month on schools that provide their children with official public examinations while preserving their religion and patriotism. Yet, they spend two or three hundred dollars on French, Italian, or English schools, only to have their children return to them as French, Italian, or English individuals. “

النص العربي

“لم يكن الغرب قد غزانا بأزيائه وملاهيه وأبنائه المستعمرين وأبنائنا الذين علمهم العلم والعقوق وأعطاهم السلاح ولقنهم كيف يقتلون به «التقاليد» الشرقية الشريفة... فكانوا بمنجى من هذا كله.”

Translation:

“The West had not yet invaded us with its costumes, its entertainments, its colonial sons and our own sons who would teach them knowledge and disobedience, give them weapons, and teach them how to kill the honorable Eastern 'traditions'... They were spared from all of this. “

النص العربي

“لقد هاجت الشيخ ذكرى أولئك التلاميذ الذي أصبحوا اليوم شيوخاً ومات منهم من مات أين هم من تلاميذ اليوم المتأنثين المتخثين الذين يتقنون التجميل ويغوصون في الملاهي القذرة إلى أعناقهم.”

Translation:

“The Sheikh is haunted by memories of his former students, now elders themselves, and of those who have passed away. These memories stand in stark contrast to the present-day students, who are preoccupied with fancy attire and immerse themselves in sordid clubs. “

Based on the three quotations above, it can be analyzed that the younger generation in the text is portrayed as having undergone a significant lifestyle shift, moving from simplicity towards a hedonism influenced by Western culture. Edward Said emphasizes that cultural imperialism manifests not only through physical colonialism but also operates via symbolic domination disseminated through media, consumer culture, and institutions such as education. (Alhomoud, 2024). This hedonistic lifestyle is not merely an individual choice but rather the result of a Western cultural hegemony that gradually displaces and marginalizes Eastern traditions, which are often deemed archaic or inferior.

Table 1: Forms of Social Transformation in “*Nihayatu al-Shaykh*”

Aspect	Key Change	Summary
Educational Traditions	Preference shifts to Western schools and diplomas	Traditional scholars lose authority; Western systems seen as superior.
Character and Values	Decline in discipline and moral integrity	Younger generation adopts Western-influenced attitudes and behaviors.
Lifestyle and Hedonism	Move toward luxury, entertainment, and excess	Simplicity replaced by Western-style consumerism and nightlife culture.

This finding is consistent with Scott's (Scott, 2021) Research shows that characters in postcolonial literature are often depicted as experiencing a tug-of-war between traditional values and Western popular culture, which is present through education and entertainment. A similar phenomenon is also seen in the study by Waworuntu & Arianto (Waworuntu & Arianto, 2019), which emphasizes the emergence of hybrid identities in Arab literary characters. These identities lie at the intersection between Eastern traditions and Western modernity. Thus, the transformation of lifestyle in Nihāyatu al-Shaykh's short stories can be understood as a symbol of the clash between two unequal civilizations, in which the West uses cultural and symbolic strategies to maintain its dominance.

Additionally, (Mshaweh & Benmessaoud, 2024) Emphasize that language choices and narrative representations in Arabic literature allow Western discourse to remain dominant and challenged. This helps us understand that the text Nihāyatu al-Shaykh describes lifestyle transformation as a process of negotiating local identity in addition to adapting to foreign cultures. Furthermore, as shown by (Aissaoui, 2025) Study on colonial education in Algeria, French schools were used as a tool to dominate culture. Meanwhile, the local community responded by using strategies of resistance against the imposed curriculum and educational model. These two studies simultaneously show how Western cultural hegemony influences the identity of the younger generation, both through education and social representation in literary works.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Ali al-Tantawi's Nihāyatu al-Shaykh offers a concise yet powerful portrayal of cultural transformation in the Middle East during the era of colonialism and modernization. The narrative clearly shows how traditional values upheld by older generations increasingly clash with Western-influenced modern ideals adopted by the youth. The Sheikh's declining authority – caused not by a lack of knowledge but by the absence of a Western

diploma—serves as a symbolic representation of how indigenous wisdom was marginalized under colonial educational systems.

A particularly striking finding is the story's ability to reveal how cultural domination operates subtly, not only through institutions but also through everyday behaviors, aspirations, and lifestyle changes. The text unexpectedly highlights that the younger generation's shift toward materialism, hedonism, and Westernized identity is not merely a personal choice but a deeper internalization of colonial values. This insight shows that literature can uncover forms of cultural loss and identity displacement that historical or sociological analyses may overlook.

This research is limited by its focus on a single literary text and does not incorporate broader comparative or empirical data. It also concentrates primarily on textual interpretation without exploring readers' reception or historical archives. Future studies should compare *Nihāyatu al-Shaykh* with other modern Arabic works addressing similar cultural tensions and could integrate interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, education, and postcolonial studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how colonial influence continues to shape identity and cultural transformation in the Arab world.

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Authors' Contribution Statement

All authors contributed meaningfully to the completion of this research article. Rasyidah Almardhiyah was responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, and initial drafting of the manuscript. Rasyad contributed to the theoretical framework, data interpretation, and the development of the analytical sections. Anshar Zulhelmi conducted critical revisions, ensured methodological coherence, and provided the final review and editing of the manuscript. All authors have read, approved, and agreed to take responsibility for the final version of this work.

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