Ta'wil Problematics as Eastern Hermeneutics in Literary Approach

Hadi W.M., Abdul. (2014). *Hermeneutika Sastra Barat dan Timur*. ---: Sadra Press, xvi + 236 halaman

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In the development of humanities in Indonesia, particularly literature, hermeneutics can be regarded as a relatively new approach. There are still a few literary studies involving solely this approach. Similarly, it has been difficult to find Indonesian written works, particularly books, that specifically discuss hermeneutics except those that are translation works. A book entitled *Hermeneutika Sastra Barat dan Timur* written by Abdul Hadi W.M. is one of the efforts to fill the gap in hermeneutic discourse in the approach of literary study in Indonesia.

This book presents six chapters and its introduction explains the relationship between hermeneutics and literary studies. In the first chapter the writer argues that the rebirth of hermeneutics in the discourse of social sciences and humanities is closely related to a trend in studying classical and historical texts. This study was in a period of hiatus since these texts were considered obsolete against the modern spirit that coincided with the strong current of neo-positivism during the Age of Enlightenment (*Aukflarung*) that emphasized reason.

In this context the writer uses hermeneutics to critique the domination of neo-positivism and post-modernism that are characterized to have no regards with the history, dialectics, and linguistics (pages 11-19). This is because these two philosophies ignore the meaning of a certain symbol (through a language) that in fact closely relates to history, views of life, and the spirit of the era, in which the text was produced. As an example, de Saussure is considered incorrect in understanding that languages do not connect with the world's realities. In the contrary, the hermeneutics proponents such as Heidegger,

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Gadamer, and Ricouer view languages as the articulation of *das sein* are inseparable from reality (page 21). The extraction of the true and whole meaning of a text must take the text-related realities into account. These realities comprise the history, views of life, and humans' tradition that influence the text.

In the second chapter the writer makes an attempt to investigate the history of hermeneutics that it was Plate who coined the term. Plato defined hermeneutics as a technique and way of interpreting an object through the process of inspiring after the person interpreting meditated and contemplated (page 33). The writer of the book understands this as Plato's effort to connect hermeneutics and spirituality and in its development there was an emphasis on the metaphysics of a text. By elaborating the history of hermeneutics proponent comprising Plato, Agustinus, Aquinas, Chladenius, Vico, Ast, Wolf, Schleiermacher, and Ricouer the writer arrives at a comparison between hermeneutics and *mimamsa and ta'wil*. These two last terms are rooted from the tradition of eastern intellectual. Unfortunately, the comparison in this chapter is limited to the comparison between the western way of interpretation through hermeneutics and the eastern way through *mimamsa* and *ta'wil*. In turn, the writer asks the reader to understand that these eastern terms are parts of hermeneutics.

In the third and fourth chapter the writer focuses on the two key figures of modern hermeneutics, Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The first figure that was popular with his proposed heuristic method in socio-humanities was considered successful in synergizing psychology, aesthetics, and history as the principles in literary studies.

The dominant idea from this figure was historical hermeneutics. The second figure, on the other hand, criticized historical hermeneutics and put forward the subject's role in the existence of every text. In addition, for Gadamer hermeneutics was not a method because the interpretation of a text cannot be made through a method. Hermeneutics is the interpretation itself and to achieve it there are four concepts that can bring a person to this. These concepts are *bildung*, *sensus communis*, practical judgment, and taste (pages 125-142).

When the discussion on Gadamer's ideas is not fully elaborated, the writer seems to jump to the discussion in chapter five and he even leads the reader to refer Gadamer's view to the idea of Ibn 'Arabi about *ta'wil*. The title of chapter five leaves an epistemic issue because he frames *ta'wil* as Islamic hermeneutics. This issue lies on whether or not ta'wil can be compared to hermenrutics, especially Islamic hermeneutics. How to explain the concept of Islamic hermeneutics itself is in question. The writer openly states his belief that the two terms share their essence and in almost all discussions in the book he always compares hermeneutics to *ta'wil*. This is different from the discussion on *rasa dhvani* in chapter six that is not heavily compared to hermeneutics.

The argument that *ta'wil* is Islamic hermeneutics is not clearly stated. Abdul Hadi merely draws a problematic conclusion that *ta'wil* is a form of hermeneutics that developed in Islamic tradition and was first introduced in the 10th and 11th century (page 151). Earlier, the writer affirms that both terms aim at understanding a text through dialogues and dialectics that will be followed by revealing the most hidden meaning (its moral message) of the text. With this reason, *ta'wil* is then categorized as Islamic hermeneutics.

Simplifying that *ta'wil* is Islamic hermeneutics leaves a question. There are two basic reasons to argue that this simplification has weaknesses. Firstly, *ta'wil* concept in Islam generally equals to an interpretation concept, both of which are methods to achieve interpretation of a certain text, particularly those related to holly books of Islam, such as the al-Qur'an and al-Hadith. In the tradition of Islamic scholarship, a number of strict rules are in place because it relates to the interpretation of holly verses. Nevertheless, to understand and interpret meanings of other texts, particularly literary texts, is possible through a conceptualized method through *balaghah*. This concept facilitates the understanding of a text that contains metaphorical and symbolic language. Other disciplines that are in the same category as *balaghah* are *bayan*, *ma'ani*, dan *badi'*.

Although *ta'wil* and interpretation are not always used for holly texts, when there is a discussion on a tradition of revealing the meaning of a text, other concepts like *balaghah* needs to be discussed. This is an effort to avoid confusion in understanding the Islamic tradition holistically, not to mention if the method is then compared to other methods or even claimed as a part of another method belonging to a different tradition, such as hermeneutics. In a scholarship viewpoint it is possible that both methods have similar typology but to state that they are equal needs to be supported with holistic knowledge of a tradition. The writer seems to have taken it for granted.

The mentioning of Islamic hermeneutics seems to lack carefulness and may be emotional – by bringing a new term into the writer's world that is Islam. This term also proposes a new dichotomy between Islamic hermeneutics and non-Islamic hermeneutics. Although in essence the writer classifies *ta'wil* into hermeneutics in Islam based on the essence and procedure of each terms, the term Islamic Hermeneutics will consequently create a distance between hermeneutics and Islamic Hermeneutics that may have different essence. This distance can further separate the scholarship between Islamic tradition and western tradition. In fact, in reality both traditions have different terms with rather similar essence. It may seem that Abdul Hadi is trapped in the "charm" of the term that he somewhat compel hermeneutics and *ta'wil* to be Islamic hermeneutics.

Apart from its weaknesses, this book generally has given significant contribution in the development of approach and investigation of Indonesian literary texts. Among the dominant approaches in Indonesian literary studies, such as structuralism and the more recent approach of post-structuralism including post-colonialism this book can become an alternative to enrich text interpretation of both literary and non-literary texts.