

CHAPTER TEN

SAYYID SHAYKH AḤMAD AL-HĀDĪ'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO ISLAMIC REFORMISM IN MALAYA

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Then came to our eastern countries the Europeans from the north winds [. . .]. And what happened to all of us here? We were all silent. Then, we surrendered to them our dignity, our laws, and our properties and our national pride!

– Sayyid Shaykh and Aḥmad al-Hādī, *Demand for the Improvement of the Native Sons*

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the *salafī*-inspired reform movements in various parts of Southeast Asia. Kiyai Haji Aḥmad Daḥlān and the Muḥammadiyah movement led such reform in Java, whereas a group of reformists, spearheaded by Ḥajī Rasul, Ḥajī ‘Abdullah Aḥmad, and Shaykh Jamīl Jambik, carried out similar reform in West Sumatra.¹ In colonial Malaya, the *salafī*² ideas found a following among a group of concerned Muslim scholars. These ideas were brought to Malaya primarily through reform-minded students/scholars who had studied in the Middle East, and the circulation of *salafī* writings such as *al-Manār* that reached audiences in Malaya.³ Like the *salafī* figures in the Middle East, the primary concern of the local reformists was the backwardness of Malay-Muslim

¹ For further details on Daḥlān and Muḥammadiyah, see Noer, *Modernist Muslim*, 73–82. A standard account on Islamic reform in West Sumatra is provided by Taufik Abdullah, *Schools and Politics: The Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra 1927–1933*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971.

² Technically, the word *salafīyya* is derived from its Arabic root, *salafa*, to precede. In Arabic lexicons, the noun *salaf* refers to the virtuous forefathers, and the *salafī* is a person who relies on the Qur’ān and Sunna as the sole sources of religious rulings. While most Muslim scholars agree that the first three generations of the Muslims are the *salafis*, the issue of who is considered a member of the *salaf* after those earlier generations remains contested. In this study ‘Abduh’s stream of thinking is designated as the *salafīyya* because it has become known so. Furthermore, it called for a return to the practises of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-sāliḥ*).

³ For further details, see Abushouk, Chapter viii.

community and the Muslim *ummah* at large. Against the background of Malay backwardness, the reformists believed that it was imperative for them to carry out a reform campaign in their own society to redress the problems confronting them. In doing so, they believed that the restoration of the purity of Islamic teachings and practises is necessary for the Muslims to get out from their material slump, and intellectual stagnation.

A prominent Malay reformist, who played a pivotal role in promoting the *salafī* ideas in Malaya, was Sayyid Shaykh Aḥmad al-Hādī (hereafter, al-Hādī). Indeed, al-Hādī was regarded as the second most important reformist figure after Shaykh Muḥammad Ṭāhir Jalāluddīn.⁴ Though not as learned as Ṭāhir, al-Hādī was the most effective reformist writer, propagandist and polemicist. Moreover, he enjoys a reputation as the father of the Malay novel, a progressive thinker and brilliant social critic. Because of al-Hādī's prominence, his background deserves consideration. My objective is not to present a full analysis of al-Hādī's life and ideas, as this has been adequately covered by the existing literature.⁵

Al-Hādī's Life, Career and Writings

Al-Hādī, whose full name was Sayyid Shaykh Aḥmad al-Hādī, was born on 22 November, 1867, in a small village in the state of Melaka. His mother was Malay while his father, Sayyid Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan ibn Saqqāf al-Hādī al-Bā 'Alawī, was an Arab-Malay of Ḥadhramī descent.⁶ Al-Hādī's great grandfather, Saqqāf al-Hādī was a Hadhramī Arab, who probably migrated to Melaka during the late eighteenth century.⁷ The Malays perceived the Arabs of whatever origin as having a genea-

⁴ Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 60–62.

⁵ The most recent studies on al-Hādī are those of Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*; Alijah Gordon (ed.), *The Real Cry of Sayyid Shaykh al-Hady with Selections of his Writings by his Son Syed Alwi al-Hady*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999. The principal sources of al-Hādī's life are his son's memoirs, which are deposited at the National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. These works are listed under SP 24/1, entitled "Riwayat Hidup Syed Sheikh bin Ahmad bin Hassan al-Hady" ["The Biography of al-Hādī"], and SP 24/3 entitled "Bapa Novel Melayu" [The Father of the Malay Novel]. Generally, we are only providing an overview of al-Hādī's major writings and ideas with special focus on *Islam and Reason*, *Women's World* and *Faridah Hanum*. For further details on the life and contributions of al-Hādī, see especially Abu Bakar's and Gordon's works.

⁶ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*

logical link with the Prophet, which elevated them to a noble ancestry. Furthermore, the Malays held those Arabs with the title of sayyid or shaykh in higher esteem and respect, as the *sāda* and shaykhs were regarded as direct inheritors of the wisdom of Islam and possessors of an exemplary piety and religious merit.⁸ Thus, from the standpoint of religious standing, al-Hādī came from a respectable family, which was held in high regard by the local Malays.

Al-Hādī received his early education in basic Malay, Arabic, Islam and writings from his own father in Melaka. In 1874, when al-Hādī was seven years old, his father moved from Melaka to Pulau Penyengat, a small island in the Riau Archipelago opposite Tanjung Pinang. Riau, named after its major islands, is located about forty miles from Singapore. In the eighteenth century, Riau was the major entrepot on the sea route from India to China. The eventual political decline of this kingdom started when it launched a failed attack on Dutch-controlled Melaka in 1784. Consequently, Riau increasingly succumbed to the Dutch power and in 1830 the Dutch officially established their control over Riau.

Despite its political decline, Riau remained as a prominent literary, cultural, and religious centre in the Malay world. During the second half of the nineteenth century it was the home of writers and scholars such as Raja 'Alī Haji, who produced works from the history of the region to essays and poems on Malay culture and Islam.⁹ In 1866, Raja 'Alī Haji (ca. 1809–1870) finalised *Tuhfat al-Nafs* (The Precious Gift), an epic of his Bugis ancestors' involvement in the Malay world.¹⁰ Moreover, Riau was a convenient stopover for religious scholars and pilgrims travelling from the Middle East to the Malay world, as the royal family had been renowned for its patronage of religious scholars and Islamic activities.

In addition to its great literary and religious activities, the Malay spoken in Riau was considered one of the finest in the Malay world as a whole. As recognition of this, the spoken Malay of Riau was adopted as the standard Malay in British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies

⁸ M. Redzuan Othman, "The Middle East Influence on the Development of Religious and Political Thought in Malay Society, 1880–1940", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1994, 76.

⁹ Gordon, *Real Cry*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

until 1928.¹¹ Growing up in Riau since the age of seven, al-Hādī must have benefited tremendously from the rich literary environment of the island. This upbringing probably helped him to acquire one of the finest forms of Malay language as well as its literature, and the skills proved to be pivotal in his career as a writer, polemicist and journalist.

In Riau he was adopted by the Crown Prince of Riau, Raja ‘Alī Kelana, where he was brought up along with the princes in the royal household. At the age of fourteen, accompanied by his uncle, al-Hādī went to pursue religious learning in Kuala Trengganu, then one of the reputable centres of traditional Islamic learning in Malaya, where he showed little interest in religious learning and studies.¹² As an adopted son of the Riau royalty, he spent most of his time mingling with the children of the Terengganu royal family until he was called back to Pulau Penyengat by his adoptive father, Raja ‘Alī Kelana.¹³

Al-Hādī did not formally study in any Middle Eastern educational institution. He spent his formative years in Riau, which was very crucial in transforming his outlook. It is probable that “without Riau there might not have been a Syed Shaykh [al-Hādī] of the dimensions which he attained.”¹⁴ It was in Riau that al-Hādī received his full education in the Malay language and Islam. As a privileged child, he had received the best education available in Riau, where Raja ‘Alī Kelana was his principal teacher in Malay language and Islam.¹⁵ He also furthered his studies with two other prominent religious scholars, notably Ḥaji Ḥusayn of Palembang and Ḥaji Salīḥ of Minangkabau.¹⁶ The young al-Hādī was always inquisitive in learning. He was reluctant accept instruction or idea that was irrational, and would not follow any given religious rule if he was not satisfied with his teachers’ explanation.¹⁷ This critical and inquisitive attitude would form one of the fundamental facets of al-Hādī’s thinking.

Besides his regular education, al-Hādī was an avid reader in various aspects of Islamic knowledge and an active participant in all religious dialogues that took place at the Sultan’s court.¹⁸ Such dialogues were

¹¹ Ibid., 109.

¹² Ibid., 54.

¹³ Al-Hādī, “The Life of My Father,” in Gordon, *Real Cry*, 71.

¹⁴ Linda Tan, “Syed Syekh: His Life and Times,” in Gordon, *Real Cry*, 121.

¹⁵ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 56. No details are available about these two scholars.

¹⁷ Al-Hādī, “The Life of My Father,” 72.

¹⁸ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 55.

usually organised by the Islamic study club, Rushdiyyah, which was formed in the 1890s. Its membership included Islamic scholars, writers and Riau aristocrats. Issues discussed at the Rushdiyyah study circles ranged from theology and Muslim backwardness to the revitalisation of Muslim society.¹⁹ Al-Hādī's involvement in such intellectual activities equipped him with eloquence, enthusiasm and intellectual ability that enabled him to draw the attention of his audience and convince those who did not share his views and ideas.

Besides his involvement in the Rushdiyyah club, al-Hādī was in charge of the charitable house (*waqf*) of Riau, where Muslim travellers could get free accommodation before setting out for their respective destinations. This position gave him opportunities to meet and discuss Islamic issues with these visitors, and enhanced his knowledge in Arabic and Islam.²⁰

Apart from his experiences in Riau, al-Hādī travelled to the Middle East with Riau's royal family. His trips to the region gave him opportunities to visit Makkah and Cairo,²¹ where he met political leaders, intellectuals and scholars from different parts of the Muslim world, and familiarised him with new ideas and issues that dominated the intellectual horizon in the Middle East.²²

The fact that al-Hādī was strongly influenced by 'Abduh has been widely accepted. However, a pertinent question that has not been adequately answered is how he was exposed to and influenced by the reformist ideas. Scholars analysing this issue adopt two different opinions. Some of them argue that he received these ideas through direct contacts with 'Abduh, when studying at al-Azhar University. This view was introduced by ZA'BA,²³ al-Hādī's colleague, who wrote: "For a time he (al-Hādī) sat at the feet of the great theologian of modern Islam, Shaikh Muhammad 'Abduh of Egypt (d. 1905) for whom and whose teacher, the pan-Islamist philosopher Sayid Jamalu'd-din al-Afghani

¹⁹ Tan, "Syed Sycikh: His Life and Times," 111.

²⁰ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 56.

²¹ The exact dates of al-Hādī's trips to the Middle East cannot be established definitively. They probably took place during the early twentieth century. Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 58. Roff states that al-Hādī travelled to the Middle East on more than one occasion, including the trip in 1903. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 63.

²² Al-Hādī, "The Life of My Father," 73.

²³ ZA'BA is a well-known acronym for a prominent Malay intellectual, Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad.

(d. 1897), he had a great admiration.”²⁴ This view has been challenged by Roff, who argues that there is no evidence to prove that al-Hādī had received formal learning in the Middle East. His stay in Cairo was too short and would not qualify him to study at al-Azhar.²⁵ Roff’s view is more tenable because ZA’BA, who 21 years earlier claimed that al-Hādī studied at al-Azhar University, had changed his view in an interview with Linda Tan in 1961. During this interview he pointed out that he had no idea about the exact period of al-Hādī’s supposed encounter with ‘Abduh. He acknowledged that he knew little about al-Hādī’s education because the latter had never told him.²⁶ This statement leads us to conclude that al-Hādī was probably not exposed to the reformist ideas through direct contacts with ‘Abduh. Rather, it is probable, as Roff argues, that he was first introduced to *salafī* thought by Ṭāhir with whom he already had a close friendship before travelling to the Middle East.²⁷ As noted earlier, al-Hādī’s trips to the Middle East had enhanced his understanding of and fascination with reformist thought, and also enabled him to establish contact with ‘Abduh’s disciple, Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935).²⁸

In 1891 al-Hādī married his cousin, Sharīfah Shaykhun, and ten years later he moved to Singapore, where he started his career as a general manager of the Battam Brickworks Company owned by his adoptive father, Raja ‘Alī Kelana. Thus, Singapore gave him a change to acquaint himself with Muslim scholars, who shared his reformist

²⁴ ZA’BA, “Modern Developments in Malay Literature”, 155. Following ZA’BA’s lead, other scholars concurred with ZA’BA on this issue. See for example, R. O. Winstedt, “Malaysia”, in A. J. Arberry and R. Landau (eds.), *Islam Today*, London: Faber, 1943, 223; Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001, 211.

²⁵ Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 62–63.

²⁶ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 58.

²⁷ Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 63. Sidek Fadzil also shares Roff’s view that Ṭāhir Jalaluddin played an important role in introducing the reformist ideas to al-Hādī. Sidek Fadzil, “Syekh Muhammad ‘Abduh: Satu Tinjauan Kritis terhadap Pemikirannya dan Rumusan mengenai Pengaruhnya dalam Masyarakat Melayu” [Syekh Muhammad ‘Abduh: A Critical Observation about his Thought and Influence among the Malay Society], MA Thesis, Institute of Language, Culture and Malay Literature, National University of Malaysia, 1978, 368.

²⁸ While we have no concrete evidence indicating al-Hādī’s direct contact with Muḥammad ‘Abduh, we have reliable information demonstrating his acquaintance with Rashīd Riḍā. This is attested by al-Hādī’s correspondences with Riḍā. Furthermore, when al-Hādī’s son went to Beirut in 1914, al-Hādī gave him an introductory letter to Riḍā and insisted that Syed Alwi must meet with Riḍā personally, a request, which the son duly heeded. Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 74.

aspiration. Among those were Ṭāhir, whom he had known since 1903, Haji 'Abbās Ṭaha, and Ibrāhīm al-Kilālī. With them al-Hādī often discussed the plight of Muslims in the Malay world and the solutions to their problems. Consequently, on 23 July 1906, this small group published *al-Imām* to promote reformist ideas in the Malay world. Utilising his connection with the royal court of Riau, al-Hādī managed to secure financial assistance from the Sultanate for the publication of the periodical. The financial sponsorship of the Riau court proved to be significant in the operation of *al-Imām*. Therefore, its discontinuation generated a real financial challenge to *al-Imām* that resulted in its closure in December 1908. At the same time, the brickworks company, owned by Riau royalty, and managed by al-Hādī, began to decline and suffer financial losses.

This crisis led al-Hādī to move to Johor Bahru around 1909, where he took up a new profession as a *sharī'a* lawyer, which was a prestigious position in the early twentieth-century state of Johor. In this Malay state in particular, *Majallat al-Aḥkām al-'Adliyyah* (a compendium of the Ottoman civil law) was a main reference for all matters pertaining to the civil law and its Arabic version was translated into Malay.²⁹ However, in 1914 al-Hādī decided to give up his legal practise in Johor and left to Melaka. There are differences of opinion on his departure from Johor. Ibrahim Abu Bakar argues that al-Hādī's personal animosity with the state *muftī* played a role in his decision. This problem occurred as a result of al-Hādī's decision to solemnise his daughter's marriage on his own instead of its being solemnised by an authorised religious functionary. His thought was in line with the Shafī'ī Islamic law, his action contravened the official religious rule, which allows only an authorised Islamic official to solemnise a marriage. As a result, the state *muftī* filed a complaint against al-Hādī to the Sultan of Johor who advised al-Hādī to apologise to the *muftī*. However, his rejection had jeopardised his position and profession and led him to depart from Johor to his home state, Melaka.³⁰

In the village of his birth in Melaka, with the help of his philanthropist friend, Haji Bachik, al-Hādī established a reformist religious school named Madrasah al-Hādī.³¹ Unfortunately, most Muslim parents

²⁹ Othman, "The Middle East Influence", 177.

³⁰ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 67–68.

³¹ Tan, "Syed Syekh: His Life and Times," 115.

in Melaka were reluctant to send their children to the school on the assumption that they would be exposed to the “unorthodox” brand of Islam adopted by its founder, al-Hādī. This cold response was among factors that jeopardised the educational project of al-Hādī and led him to shorten his stay in Melaka in favour of Penang in 1916.

Penang provided him with a better prospect to earn his livelihood and promote reformist ideas than Singapore, Johor and Melaka. When he arrived in Penang in 1916, the Penang Muslim community was in the process of expanding a religious school that provided instruction in Arabic and religious studies and only accommodated sixteen students. With encouraging responses and more demand from the Muslim community a new school was established and given the name of Madrasat al-Mashoor Islāmiyya in 1916. The establishment of al-Mashoor Islāmiyya coincided with al-Hādī’s arrival in Penang, and led to his appointment as its first principal.³² During his tenure, he played a crucial role in the consolidation of the school in the sense that he transferred its premises from Acheen to Tek Soon Street, where the school got a bigger compound and catered for a large number of students. As a result of this move the number of students increased dramatically, from sixteen to three hundred. In its new premises, the school offered Islamic courses and a set of secular disciplines that were taught in English.³³ Despite its growth, al-Mashoor School faced recurring financial problems that led al-Hādī to resign from its principalship.³⁴ After his resignation, he devoted his time to writing, and produced a number of articles and books that deal with various subject matter. In the subsequent paragraphs, special attention will be paid to his intellectual contributions in this field.

³² There are conflicting accounts as to when al-Hādī assumed the position of the principal of this school. According to Roff, he became the first principal of the Madrasah al-Mashoor in 1918 or 1919. He continued until 1926, when he relinquished it to establish the Jelutong Press. Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 169. Muhammad Daud, on the other hand, argues that al-Hādī became the principal of the school in 1917 and left his position in the middle of 1919. Muhammad Daud, “Madrasah al-Masyhur,” in Khoo Kay Kim et al. (eds.), *Islam di Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia, 1979, 60–61.

³³ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 71.

³⁴ Tan, “Syed Syekh: His Life and Times,” 115.

Al-Hādī's Religious Writings

In the field of Islamic studies, al-Hādī published numerous articles in periodicals, promoting reformist ideas and condemning traditional religious practises and beliefs. He also authored several books, most of them based on the articles published in *al-Imām*, *al-Ikhwān* and *Saudara*.³⁵ His first book on *al-Tarbiyah wa-al-Ta'lim: Pemeliharaan dan Pembelajaran* (Guidance and Education) puts special emphasis on the significance of education for the development of the Muslim *ummah*.³⁶ According to al-Hādī, the book was translated from an Arabic one entitled *al-Tā'hil wa al-Targhib fī al-Tarbiyah wa al-tahdhīb* (Improvement and Encouragement in Education and Refinement of Morality).³⁷

Al-Hādī's second book, *al-Tārīkh al-Islāmī* (Islamic History), was published in 1922³⁸ as a compilation of a series of articles which he wrote in *al-Imām* from 1906 to 1908. The book deals with the early history of Muslims, covering topics such as the manifestation of Islam in the pre-Islamic Arabian society, its propagation in Makkah, the foundation of the Islamic community in Madinah and the major battles led by Muḥammad (s.a.w.).³⁹ In spite of the significance of the book its financial outcome was below the author's expectations.

‘Abduh’s progressive ideas also attracted the attention of al-Hādī and led him to work hard towards their promotion to the Malay audience. He translated two of his Qur’ānic exegeses into Malay: *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, (Exegesis of the Last Section of the Qur’ān) and *Tafsīr al-Fātihah*, (Exegesis of the Opening Chapter of the Qur’ān). The first was completed in 1927⁴⁰ and originally appeared in *al-Ikhwān*, and the second in the subsequent year.⁴¹

³⁵ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 77.

³⁶ *al-Tarbiyya wa-al-Ta'lim: Pemeliharaan dan Pembelajaran*, (trans.) Al-Hādī, Singapore: al-Imam Printing, 1908.

³⁷ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 77. Unfortunately, al-Hādī did not specify the author of this work.

³⁸ Al-Hādī, *al-Tārīkh al-Islāmī* [Islamic History], Penang: Mercantile Press, 1922.

³⁹ Talib Samat, *Syed Syeikh al-Hādī: A Progressive Malay Literary Figure*, Kuala Lumpur: DBP, 1992, 64.

⁴⁰ Al-Hādī, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, Penang: Jelutong Press, 1927. ‘Abduh’s exegesis also carries the same exact title, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, Cairo: Manar Press, 1932.

⁴¹ Al-Hādī, *Tafsīr al-Fātihah*, Penang: Jelutong Press, 1928. Cf. ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr al-Fātihah*, Cairo: Manar Press, 1901.

Besides the translation of these exegeses into Malay, al-Hādī propagated ‘Abduh’s idea of the compatibility of Islam and reason.⁴² Indeed, this idea is one of the central issues in ‘Abduh’s theological and apologetic writings.⁴³ His two major works that promote this theme are *Risalat al-Tawhīd* (The Theology of Unity)⁴⁴ and *al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya ma‘a al-‘Ilm wa-al-Madaniyya* (Islam and Christianity in Relation to Science and Civilisation).⁴⁵ Inspired by ‘Abduh, al-Hādī published his own work, *Kiṭab Agama Islam dan Akal* (Islam and Reason).⁴⁶ In its preface, al-Hādī stated his objective as to inform Muslims about the compatibility of Islam with reason on the ground that if Muslims examine their religious duties they will notice relevance to contemporary needs.⁴⁷ In his discussion, he referred to the five pillars of Islam: the confession of faith (*shahāda*), the obligatory daily prayers, fasting, giving alms and pilgrimage.

The main theme of the book was the significance of reason in Islam, where he founded his argument on the Qur’ān and Sunna and reminded his readers not to follow blindly (*taqlīd*) the established opinions of their predecessors. Before accepting any decision, he argues, they should exercise their own reasoning faculty in line with the fundamental principles of Islam. Having asserted the position and significance of reason in Islam, al-Hādī discussed the five pillars of Islam and their relevance to contemporary needs of Muslims. In this respect, he departed from the legislative method of the traditional Muslim scholars and tried to discuss the Islamic duties from the standpoint of their utility and relevance to human life. In this regard, he emphasised that every pillar of Islam commanded by God is beneficial and meritorious. For example, in his discussion of the daily prayers, he highlighted their social and moral benefits in the sense that if a Muslim wholeheartedly performs his five daily prayers he will not commit wrongdoings prohibited by

⁴² The relationship between revelation and reason has attracted the attention of Muslim thinkers since their encounter with Greek philosophy. As a result, numerous classical Muslim thinkers such as Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) debated this issue to harmonise philosophy with religion.

⁴³ Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal theories of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, 109.

⁴⁴ Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, Cairo: Manar Press, 1932.

⁴⁵ Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya ma‘a al-‘Ilm wa-al-Madaniyya*, Cairo: Al-Manār Press, n.d.

⁴⁶ Sayyid Sheikh Ahmad al-Hādī, *Ugama Islam dan Akal*, Penang, Jelutong Press, 1931.

⁴⁷ Al-Hādī, Preface to *Ugama Islam dan Akal*, 13–14.

God.⁴⁸ He argued that the problem confronting Muslims in Malaya was that the children had been instructed to perform the complicated body movements and postures, to read and memorise various *surahs* without learning their meanings and purposes. This means that the five daily prayers have moral and social benefits. Therefore, they should be performed in a proper manner and with full understanding of the meaning and purpose behind them, instead of being performed as mere religious ritual. This brief survey shows how al-Hādī tried to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with reason in the sense of its usefulness to Muslims and humanity at large.

In wrapping up this section one may argue that in his *Kūtab Agama Islam dan Akal* al-Hādī was largely inspired by 'Abduh's works that deal with the compatibility of Islam with reason, particularly his *al-Islām wa al-Naşranīyya ma'a al-'Ulm wa-al-Madaniyya*.⁴⁹ However, this does not mean that *Agama Islam dan Akal* was a mere translation or adaptation of 'Abduh's work into Malay since the book has its own peculiarities in terms of promoting a rational understanding of the five pillars of Islam among Malay practising Muslims and readers.

Women in Islam

The emancipation of women was one of the major controversial reformist issues that drew the attention of al-Hādī. Its controversiality is based on the status of women in Muslim societies, their educational opportunities and involvement in public life. During the early twentieth century Malaya, women had a limited role in society because there was a general tendency that the home should be the right place for women. In this sense, they were regarded as inferior to men and "expected to be absolutely submissive wives and filial, servile daughters."⁵⁰ Therefore, their opportunities in formal education were very limited up to 1945. This situation has been well described in the following words of Chung:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁹ Sidek Fadzil, "Muhammad Abduh," 410.

⁵⁰ Betty Jamie Chung, *The Status of Women and Fertility in Southeast and East Asia; A Bibliography with Selected Annotations*, ISEAS Monograph Series No. 8, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1977, 44.

At that time women were not given any formal education. The primary goal of the parents was to prepare the daughters to become good wives and mothers. In the family the man was the master in all aspects. [...] The women's role was to look after the home and the children while the husband was the sole bread winner and he made all the decisions in family.⁵¹

This situation seems to have been predominant in different parts of the Muslim world. In Egypt, for instance, Qāsim Amīn (1863–1908) produced a well-known and controversial pamphlet, entitled: *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah* (The Liberation of Women). In this pamphlet, Amīn called for further freedom of women in the Muslim world, and criticised the traditional practises that were associated with the veiling and social seclusion of women, the wife's lack of power to divorce and the husband's unlimited rights to divorce.

While his contemporary reformists stayed away from this controversial issue, al-Hādī began to promote Qāsim Amīn's ideas, and considered himself as his first exponent who should call for the emancipation of women in Malay society. Discontented with the treatment and position of women in the traditional Malay society, he subscribed to their emancipation and their claim for greater liberty. Between 1926 and 1928, he wrote a series of articles entitled *Alam Perempuan* (Women's World) in his periodical, *al-Ikhwān*, and these articles were later edited and published in a book entitled: *Kitab Alam Perempuan*, (The Book of Women's World). In this work, al-Hādī discussed the position of women in Islam and the urgent need for their education and their liberation from customary and religious shackles. He founded his discussion on scriptural and rational grounds that support the significance of women's contributions to the development of state and society.⁵²

Al-Hādī criticised the popular Muslim misperception, which considered women as inferior to men in terms of their rational abilities and temperament.⁵³ He argued that both men and women have the same capabilities and purpose in life that is based on the recognition of God and obedience of His commandments. To substantiate his argument, he cited the Qur'ānic verse: "O human being, We have created you male and female, and made you tribes and races, that you may know

⁵¹ Ibid., 46.

⁵² Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*; Tan, "Syed Syekh: His Life and Times," 135–136.

⁵³ Ibid., 136.

one another. Surely the most respected among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing of you.”⁵⁴ From his point of view, this verse indicates that human beings, regardless of their gender, have the same capability and status in terms of knowing God and being accountable under His laws.⁵⁵

Therefore, he encouraged the involvement of women in public life and argued that their limited role in Muslim society should be attributed not to the “rigidness” of Islam but rather to the misinterpretation of Islamic principles. He drew his evidence from the early Islamic history, where the women enjoyed great respect and played a significant role in public life during the times of peace and war.⁵⁶

Al-Hādī also promoted the idea of women’s emancipation through his novels, where he proposed Faridah Hanum as a model Muslim woman in terms of her beauty, education, literacy in both English and French, and liberty. In this respect, he highlighted the significance of education as an effective tool for the emancipation of women in Muslim societies and the development of their role in public life. He argued that women’s participation in nation building was a key factor behind the economic and political success of the British in their mother land and Malay colony.⁵⁷ He, therefore, criticised the attitude of some Muslims who argued that education would spoil women and corrupt their behaviour. He admitted that there were some educated women who had misbehaved themselves. But these individual cases should not entail the prohibition of all women from gaining education since education could keep them from any form of misbehavior.⁵⁸ He emphasised that women’s education should not be confined to household activities such as cooking, washing and craftsmanship, but should include all types of knowledge that would contribute to the development of state and society.

By translating Qāsim Amin’s famous work on *Tahrīr al-Mar’ah* (the emancipation of women) into Malay under the title *Alam Wanita* and his other contributions in the field, al-Hādī succeeded in opening the

⁵⁴ The Qur’ān, 49:13

⁵⁵ Al-Hādī, *Kūtab Alam Perempuan*, Penang: Jelutong Press, 1930, 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁷ Al-Hādī, *Faridah Hanum or Hikayat Setia Asyik Kepada Maksyuknya atau Afandi dan Faridah Hanum*, Penang: Jelutong Press, 1926, 117.

⁵⁸ Al-Hādī, *Alam Wanita*, 87–90.

Malays' eyes to the issue of women's rights, and their unique position in the writings of Qāsim Amīn.

The Pioneer of the Malay Novel

Al-Hādī was not a classical *ʿālim* who would write only on religious and socio-political issues, but he also used his novelist's talent to reform his Muslim community from within. Thus, scholars of Malay literature classified him as a novelist *par excellence* and the pioneer of the Malay novel.⁵⁹ His novel *Faridah Hanum* was published in 1926 with the subtitle *or Hikayat Setia Asyik Kepada Maksyuknya atau Afandi dan Faridah Hanum* (The Tale of Faridah Hanum, or The Tale of the Loyalty of a Lover to Beloved, or Afandi and Faridah Hanum). The novel is a story of forbidden love between the two protagonists, Faridah Hanum and Mahir Afandi. Bound by passionate love, they swear eternal fidelity to each other. They are both well educated children of aristocratic families. Faridah's relationship with Afandi does not receive her father's blessing, because he has already arranged her marriage to her own cousin, Badrudin. In spite of her marriage to Badrudin, she continues to cultivate her love to her eternal beloved, Afandi. After going through various tribulations, Faridah manages to establish that her marriage to Badrudin is invalid through a *sharī'a* court ruling and marries the man she truly loves.

The novel was a phenomenal success and its first edition was sold out within a year. It was "read from one end of the Peninsula to the other, and the author suddenly found himself famous."⁶⁰ Its instant success also enabled him to set up his own Jelutong Press,⁶¹ which encouraged him to devote his time to writing and publishing. He produced a series of

⁵⁹ Johan Jaafar et al., *History of Modern Malay Literature*, vol. 1, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992, 13–14. Although this novel is widely regarded as the first Malay novel, Roff disagrees with such a view. In Roff's opinion the first Malay novel was written by Muhammad bin Muhammad Said entitled *Cherita Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* [The Tale of the Five Million Ringgit Robbery], published in 1922. Roff, "The Mystery of the First Malay Novel (and Who Was Rokambul)", *Bijdragen de Taal-Land-en Volkenkunde*, no. 130, 1974: 451. However, according to Redzuan Othman though Roff's opinion may hold true, *Faridah Hanum* is undoubtedly vastly more popular and widely-distributed in Malaya. Mohd Redzuan Othman, "Idea kemajuan dalam Pemikiran dan Perjunagan Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi", in *Sejarah Pembinaan Negara Bangsa*, eds. Mohd Redzuan Othman et al., Kuala Lumpur: UM Press, 2006, 142–143.

⁶⁰ ZA'BA, "Modern Developments in Malay Literature", 153.

⁶¹ Tan, "Syed Syekh: His Life and Times," 80.

romances, including *Hikayat Taman Cinta Berahi* (The Tale of the Garden of Passionate Love), which was published in 1928. It tells a love story between Mahir Affandi and Iqbal Hanum. The major protagonist in this novel is Iqbal Hanum, who is depicted as an educated and ambitious woman, who demands greater freedom for women in society. The second is *Hikayat Anak Dara Ghassan* (The Tale of a Virgin from Ghas-san), also published in 1928. It tells the story of the love of Hind, an Arab Christian princess, for Hammad, an Arab Muslim prince.⁶² The third is a short story entitled *Hikayat Cermin Kehidupan* (The Tale of the Mirror of Life) was published in 1929. It is a Turkish story stressing the importance of chastity. The fourth one was *Hikayat Puteri Nurul Ain atau Bahaya Cerai Talak Tiga* (The Tale of The Princess Nurul Ain or the Dangers of Threefold Divorce), published in 1929. The central message of this novel is the danger of the threefold divorce.

Al-Hādī also published detective stories adapted from existing novels in other languages. The famous one of them is *Cerita Rokambul*, (The Rocambole Story), which was first serialised in his weekly newspaper, *Saudara* and gained a wide popularity in Malay in the 1920s. Rocambole, the protagonist of the novel, was created by Vicomte Pierre-Alexis du Ponson (1829–1871), who published his stories in France in the 1850s. Al-Hādī adapted these stories in his periodical *al-Ikhwān* in the 1920s,⁶³ and collected them into seven volumes. Two of these were: *Rocambole in Siberia* and *Rocambole with the Passionate Russian Princess*.⁶⁴

This survey has highlighted the features of al-Hādī's achievements in the field of literature, and tried to demonstrate his versatility and ability as a novelist who paved the way for his Malay successors.

Journalism and Muslim Reformism

Journalism was one of the areas that attracted the attention of al-Hādī and encouraged him to spread his reformist ideas at the grass-roots level of Malay society. In September 1926, he founded his own monthly journal named *al-Ikhwān*, which survived till December 1931.⁶⁵ *Al-Ikhwān*

⁶² Ibid., 119.

⁶³ David Banks, *From Class to Culture: Social Conscience in Malay Novels since Independence*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987, 8.

⁶⁴ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 76.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74. According to Talib Samat, this periodical was primarily funded by the profits that al-Hādī garnered from his best-selling novel, *Faridah Hanum*. Talib Samat,

is regarded as a continuation of the short-lived reformist periodical, *al-Imām*. Its basic objective was to disseminate reformist ideas among the Malay audience. Al-Hādī himself served as the editor of *al-Ikhwān* and devoted his time to writing regular columns in *al-Khwān*, discussing issues related to Islamic history, Qur'ānic commentary and women's emancipation.⁶⁶ His journalism reached its climax when he published his weekly newspaper, *Saudara*. Al-Hādī had wanted to publish a newspaper of this kind since his involvement with *al-Imām* periodical in Singapore from 1906 to 1908.⁶⁷ His dream became a reality in Penang, when he had enough funding and resources. This weekly newspaper was first published in September 1928, two years after *al-Ikhwān* had been in circulation. *Saudara* had a content that was rich in issues, ranging from what were considered important to more trivial ones. Specifically, it contained general news sections, religious articles, as well as al-Hādī's translations of detective stories. Initially, 1000 copies were circulated primarily to Malaya, Sumatra, Borneo, Sulawesi, Patani and Java. This was later increased to 1,700 copies.⁶⁸ The years 1928 to 1930 saw the climax of the religious conflicts between the reformists and the traditionalists. The debates between these two rival factions dominated the newspapers of the day. During this conflict, *Saudara* functioned as a mouthpiece for the reformists in their debates against the traditional *'ulamā'*.⁶⁹ As a newspaper associated with the Islamic reform movement in Malaya, the Islamic theme is continuously present throughout its publication.

Saudara, the longest serving newspaper of its kind, survived for about thirteen years. A large credit for its success should be attributed to al-Hādī who supported it morally and financially, and through his unlimited efforts turned *Saudara* into one of the best reformist newspapers of its time in Malay.⁷⁰

Syed Syekh al-Hādī; Sasterawan Progresif Melayu [Syed Syekh al-Hādī: The Progressive Malay Literary Scholar], Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992, 23.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶⁷ Al-Hādī, "Editorial" *Saudara*, 447 (29 September 1934), 10.

⁶⁸ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 75.

⁶⁹ Mohd Sarim Mustajab, *Islam dan Perkembangannya dalam Masyarakat Melayu di Semenanjung Tanah Melayu* [Islam and its Development in Malay Society in the Malay Peninsula], M.A. thesis, Department of History, National University of Malaysia, 1975, 188–189.

⁷⁰ Wan Suhana Wan Sulong, "Saudara (1928–1941): Its Contribution to the Debate on Issues in Malay Society and the Development of a Malay World-view", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hull, UK, 2003; Wan Suhana Wan Sulong, "Saudara

After devoting his life and time to the cause of Islamic reformism in Malaya, al-Hādī died of brain disease at his home in Penang on 20th February, 1934. The loss deeply affected *Saudara*. Although it remained in circulation until 1941, it experienced serious difficulties and challenges without the leadership of its able and committed founder. The quality of the newspaper deteriorated significantly in terms of content and readership. Moreover, in May 1937 it was temporarily suspended for about two months.⁷¹ Indeed, the major crisis *Saudara* encountered after al-Hādī's death indicated the indispensable contribution and significance of al-Hādī to this newspaper because without him *Saudara* would never be the same.

Attitudes towards British Colonialism

Al-Hādī unequivocally had a positive impression of the British. In his view the Muslims were much better off under British administration than they were under the feudalistic Malay rulers. He believed that under British control Malaya would be able to develop much better politically, economically and socially.

He reminded the Muslims that they should not blame the British if they could not participate in the changes and developments occurring in their country. Instead, the blame should go to themselves and their leaders who were not prepared to cope with such changes. He argued that the British had brought positive changes to the Malayan economy: "The signs of prosperity and wealth have manifested themselves because of the fair rule of the British Government, which has attracted money from European nations; Banks have opened here [Malaya] to serve the public."⁷² He perceived the arrival of the British in Malaya as being part of God's grand plan to save the Muslims from injustice, ignorance and oppression. He even went to the extent of likening the British to God's army whose arrival in Malaya brought about blessings for its people: "Indeed, the English are an army of God, the Lord of the worlds, who

(1928–1941): Continuity and Change in the Malay Society", *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 14/2, 179–202.

⁷¹ Nik Ahmad Haji Nik Hassan, "The Malay Press," *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 36, 1963, 55.

⁷² Al-Hādī, "Teriak yang Sebenar," *Al-Ikhwān*, 1 October 1926, 1.

has ordered them to come here to free us from darkness, the prison of ignorance, injustice, wickedness, and cruelty of our own rulers.”⁷³

In this context, one may argue that al-Hādī had provided a theological justification for his positive appraisal of British administration in Malaya. He argued that the responsibilities of the rulers from an Islamic perspective should be founded on justice, peace and freedom, and since British administrators had fulfilled these requirements/responsibilities, their rule should be branded as legitimate.⁷⁴ His favourable appraisal of British colonial rule in Malaya is primarily owing to the fact that the British provided him and his reformist colleagues with a platform to carry on their reformist activities freely in the Straits Settlements, as opposed to the Malay states under the direct control of the Malay rulers. For example, his reformist periodical, *al-Ikhwān*, was printed and published with the permission of the colonial administration in the Straits Settlements. When the traditional *‘ulamā’* attempted to influence the Sultan of Kelantan to ban *al-Ikhwān* from being circulated there, al-Hādī trusted the British High Commissioner to solve this problem fairly.⁷⁵ In brief, al-Hādī’s attitude towards British colonialism resembled that of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1917–1898) in British India, where he argued that Muslims should cooperate with the British for the sake of Muslim progress. He added that as long as the British provided Muslims with liberty to practise Islam freely, Muslims had no theological basis to revolt against their administration.⁷⁶

Social and Economic Criticism

Due to his critique of Malay society, al-Hādī is classified as a prominent social reformist.⁷⁷ He regularly criticised the backwardness of the Malays and the foreigners’ domination of the Malayan economy. He was extremely concerned about improving the economy of Muslims in general and the Malays in particular.⁷⁸ Through his writings, he often reminded the Malays that their non-participation in the economic sphere

⁷³ Al-Hādī, “Teguran”, *Al-Ikhwān*, 2 November 1926, 4.

⁷⁴ Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, 159.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷⁶ Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857–1964*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, 33.

⁷⁷ Yahya Ismail, “Syed Syekh al-Hādī: Reformis Ahli Fikir dan Novelis Progressif,” *Dewan Sastra*, 7 January 1972, 3.

⁷⁸ Tan, “Syed Syekh: His Life and Times,” 156.

might eventually threaten their survival altogether.⁷⁹ In order to rectify this problem, he proposed several measures. First, he urged the Muslims to change their attitude towards life in the sense that they should use their endowed capabilities for the betterment of their life. He added that every individual Muslim will be judged in the hereafter on the efforts that he made to implement the commandments of God for his own sake and his community's welfare.⁸⁰ Secondly, he urged the Malays to participate in cooperative societies sponsored by the government on the grounds that their active participation would alleviate economic exploitation. In both his periodicals *al-Ikhwān* and newspaper *Saudara*, he strongly promoted this attitude. However, a controversy arose when the Co-operative Credit Society was formed to release peasants from their debts. The conservative Muslims did not welcome this approach, and discouraged Muslims from depositing and borrowing money in the credit society on the ground that it involved *ribā* (usury), which is prohibited in Islamic law. Al-Hādī played a major role in solving this controversy and the Malays' apathy towards co-operative societies by explaining to them what exactly constituted *ribā*. In order to clarify this issue to the wider public, he wrote a booklet in 1933 for the co-operative department stating his view that profit from co-operatives was not *ribā*.⁸¹ Thirdly, he examined other relevant social issues such as women's involvement in public life and development of the Malay educational system.⁸²

Conclusion

The above discussion underscores the significant contributions of al-Hādī in various fields, and acknowledges that he was not the most learned reformist; however, he was the most effective reformist writer,

⁷⁹ Al-Hādī, "Adakah Kaum Melayu ini Dapat Melepaskan Wujudnya dari Fana dan Hapus?" [Can the Malays Escape Annihilation and Extinction?], *Al-Ikhwān*, 2, 16 October 1930, 213–218.

⁸⁰ Tan, "Syed Syeikh: His Life and Times," 157.

⁸¹ ZA'BA, "Modern Developments of Malay Literature", in Abdullah Hussain (ed.), *Pendita ZA'BA dalam Kenangan* [ZA'BA in Memory], 258. Indeed al-Hādī was not the first to issue a *fatwa* on this issue. Earlier, borrowing 'Abduh's *fatwas*, Abbas, a key reformist scholar, started the controversy on the question of *ribā* (usury) by declaring that interest from co-operative or savings bank was not *ribā*. Moreover, in its first volume of June 1907, *al-Imam* published 'Abduh's *fatwas* on *ribā*. Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 76.

⁸² Al-Hādī's view on education can be found in Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya Islamic Modernism*, 100–131.

propagandist and polemicist who confronted the traditional ‘*ulamā*’ and propagated reformist ideas in Malaya. It should be noted that though al-Hādī was a reformist of *sayyid* descent, he did not favour the maintenance of Hadhrami superior status in Malay society. Rather, he emphasised the notion of society based on the spirit of Islamic egalitarianism. Therefore, in his capacity as the editors and contributors of reformist periodicals, he emphasised that nobility or nobleness (*al-sharaf*) did not derive from one’s ancestry, but from one’s hard work contributions to the society as a whole.⁸³ His inclusive attitude was primarily influenced by the unconventional nature of reformist movement in the Muslim world in general and Malaya in particular, which attempted to rid Muslim society of practises, which deemed contradictory to the pristine teachings of Islam. Furthermore, the reformist movement, which al-Hadi was part of adopted unfavorable attitude towards *sayyid* special status in Muslim society.⁸⁴ In this context, his success is largely attributed to his mastery of the Malay language, which enabled him to communicate with his audience through various oral and written forms. It is widely agreed that he was the most prolific reformist writer who translated several of ‘Abduh’s and Qāsīm Amīn’s works into Malay. Accordingly, he set himself up as a reformist agent, who introduced and contextualised progressive *salafī* ideas into terms relevant to the local Malay frame of reference. In this field, al-Hādī’s versatility resembles that of HAMKA,⁸⁵ a Minangkabau-born prominent Indonesian Islamic scholar, who wrote more than one hundred books. His resemblance emerges from the point that he had expressed his Islamic reformist ideas through various media: religious works, journalistic writings and novels.⁸⁶ Due to this wide range of contributions, his death in 1934

⁸³ Al-Hādī’s famous article on this subject entitled “Al-Sharaf: Glory or Honour,” appeared both in *al-Imām* and *al-Ikhwān: Al-Imam*, II, 8, 4 February 1908; *al-Ikhwān*, I 12, 16 August 1927, 225–229.

⁸⁴ In this regard, Rāshid Rida issued several religious edicts concerning intermarriage between *sayyid* and non-*sayyid* Muslims. The thrust of Rida’s argument is such marriages are valid and *Sayyid* enjoyed no special status by virtue of its claimed descent from the Prophet s.a.w. Gordon (ed.), *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hadi*, 39.

⁸⁵ For further details on HAMKA, see Wan Sabri Wan Yusuf, “HAMKA’s Tafsir al-Azhar: Qur’anic Exegesis as a Mirror of Social Change”, Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 1997.

⁸⁶ In addition to his numerous writings on Islam, HAMKA also produced novels. Two of his famous novels are *Di Bawah Lindungan Ka’bah* [Under the Shade of the Ka’bah, 1936]; and *Tenggelamnya Kapal van der Wijck* [The Sinking of the Ship van der Wijck, 1938].

came as a great shock to the Malay reformists, who lost “a fearless champion who indefatigably concentrated his efforts and dedicated all his life to the defense of Islam. With his death too, [...they lost] a veteran journalist and a prolific writer.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ ZA'BA, “A Tribute to Syed Syeikh al-Hady,” *Saudara*, 23 (24th February 1934), 11.