

# Life–Human–Cosmos in Imam: Translational Ecology and Social Ethics within Najīb al-Kīlānī's Islamic Literary Framework

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## ABSTRACT

This article reinterprets Abdullah Hussain's *Imam* (1995) through Najīb al-Kīlānī's Islamic literary framework, focusing on the triadic principle of life–human–cosmos. Rather than treating ethics as message, the study offers a form-sensitive account of how setting, focalisation, rhythm, and recurring motifs translate Malay Muslim lifeworlds, human agency, and a sign-bearing cosmos into social ethics. We propose translational ecology—a relay from form → symbol → ethic → action—and apply it to key sequences in *Imam*: predawn worship rhythms, mosque-centred public space, kampung mutuality under modern pressure, waqf deliberations, and wartime memory. Findings show that patterned lifeworld routines act as moral pedagogy that habituates adab; the mosque–kampung geography works as ethical cartography that recentres obligations; and a symbolic ecology—light (guidance), water (purification), earth (limit)—functions as ethical mnemonics coupling aesthetic recognition to communal responsibility. The contribution clarifies the mediating role of life–human–cosmos within Kīlānī's system and offers a portable, classroom-ready sequence aligning literary study with value-centred humanities in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Imam; Malay-Islamic literature; life–human–cosmos; translational ecology; ethical cartography.

## INTRODUCTION

The modern Malay novel *Imam* by Abdullah Hussain (1995) has long captivated critics and readers for its compelling vision of faith, reform, and communal life, crossing generational and disciplinary boundaries in Malay letters (Braginsky 2004). Beyond its overt moral horizon, *Imam* endures because it renders everyday experience, human agency, and the natural–built environment as a single intelligible order—an aesthetic system in which form does ethical work. Read through Najīb al-Kīlānī's theorisation of Islamic literature, the novel does not merely contain Islamic values; it translates Malay Muslim lifeworlds (*ḥayāh*), the human as steward (*insān*), and a sign-bearing cosmos (*kawn*) into patterned narration, spatial design, and symbolic ecology (al-Kīlānī 1987).

Current scholarship on Malay-Islamic fiction has richly described questions of *da'wah*, ethical pedagogy, and social realism in *Imam*, yet it often privileges what the text says over how the text makes ethics thinkable and feelable (Engku Maimunah 1994). Within al-Kīlānī's seven-principle framework, the triad life–human–cosmos (*tarjamat al-ḥayāh wa-al-insān wa-al-kawn*) remains comparatively under-examined as an independent analytic in Malay criticism, despite its mediating role between creed (*'aqidah*) and craft—where narrative voice, focalisation, rhythm, and motif articulate ethical orientation (al-Kīlānī 1987). Clarifying this mediation is crucial if we are to understand why *Imam* continues to function as both a literary achievement and a social-ethical imagination for the Malay world (Braginsky 2004).

This article advances a twofold argument. First, we contend that the abiding appeal of *Imam* lies in its integrative grammar: the novel binds communal routines (worship, counsel, labour) to spaces and symbols (mosque,

kampung; light, water, earth) so that aesthetics becomes ethical cartography, re-ordering social relations around God-centred obligations (Abdullah Hussain 1995; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011). Second, we propose translational ecology to name the movement by which literary form channels aesthetic recognition into ethical orientation and, ultimately, communal action—thereby operationalising al-Kīlānī’s injunction that Islamic literature must “translate life, the human, and the universe” into an intelligible moral cosmos (al-Kīlānī 1987).

Guided by this lens, the study focuses on selected scenes in *Imam*—predawn rhythms of worship, the mosque as centripetal public space, kampung mutuality under modern pressure, debates on waqf and social justice, and memory of wartime suffering—to show how narrative craft generates ethical uptake (Abdullah Hussain 1995; Engku Maimunah 1994). In doing so, we consolidate dispersed insights in the critical tradition and re-centre form-sensitive reading as a method equal to the novel’s ethical ambition (Braginsky 2004; Muhammad Haji Salleh 2009; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011).

Finally, the article gestures to pedagogical significance. By articulating life–human–cosmos through translational ecology, we offer a portable sequence—observe form → map symbol → infer ethic → design action—that aligns literary study with value-centred humanities education in Southeast Asia (Osman 2006). In this reframing, aesthetics is not ornament but a conduit of social ethics, explaining *Imam*’s continuing force as a canonical Malay-Islamic work (Abdullah Hussain 1995; al-Kīlānī 1987).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Islamic literary aesthetics and the life–human–cosmos triad

Foundational accounts of Islamic literary theory insist that aesthetics and ethics are mutually constitutive (al-Kīlānī 1987; al-Attas 1993; Nasr 1996). Within this tradition, Najīb al-Kīlānī’s seven-principle framework is pivotal: literature must translate life, the human, and the cosmos (tarjamat al-ḥayāh wa-al-insān wa-al-kawn) into a theocentric intelligibility where form mediates creed and practice (al-Kīlānī 1987). Later Malay-Islamic critics developed compatible views—treating adab as an aesthetic-ethical discipline that fuses beauty with guidance (Mohd. Affandi Hassan 1992; Nor Faridah & Mohd. Nazri 2003; Rahmah Osman 2006). Read together, these positions reposition “content” and “form” not as opposites but as interlocking channels through which texts cultivate virtue.

### Malay canon, Islamic reform poetics, and *Imam*

Within Malay letters, historical syntheses locate an enduring reformist poetics that weds narrative craft to communal responsibility (Braginsky 2004; Muhammad Haji Salleh 2009; Zainal Abidin Borhan 2010). Against this backdrop, Abdullah Hussain’s *Imam* (1995) is frequently treated as a landmark of modern Malay-Islamic fiction: it stages collective deliberation, spiritual discipline, and social repair in a recognisably contemporary milieu (Engku Maimunah 1994; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011; Siti Zainon Ismail 2006). Beyond theme, work on plot and dramaturgy shows how pacing, focalisation, and dialogic scenes organize ethical uptake (Genette 1980; Zakaria Ariffin 2022). Recent discussions of reception and adaptation underscore the novel’s cultural afterlife and didactic reach in theatre and media (Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak 2014; Zakaria Ariffin 2022).

### Form, symbol, and religious space

A growing body of humanities scholarship reads space and symbol as moral infrastructures in religious narrative: thresholds choreograph bodies; sacred architectural grammars regulate time; recurrence of motifs functions as ethical memory (Eliade 1959; Lefebvre 1991; Bakhtin 1981; Ricoeur 1978). In Islamic thought, stewardship (khilāfah) and balance (mīzān) render the natural world a sign-bearing habitat rather than a neutral backdrop (Nasr 1996; Foltz, Denny, & Baharuddin 2003). Malay cultural geography adds a local lexicon—masjid as centripetal public space, kampung as matrix of mutuality—through which narrative worlds become ethical cartography (Tuan 1974; Casey 1997; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011). Within *Imam*, sequences organised around ablution zones, courtyards, and communal thresholds exemplify how spatial form carries normative force (Engku Maimunah 1994; Rahmah Osman 2006).

## Ecocritical and eco-theological turns

Ecocriticism supplies a vocabulary for linking symbolic nature to moral imagination (Buell 1995; Garrard 2012; Heise 2008). Islamic eco-ethics complements this by grounding environmental care in worship and stewardship rather than secular utility (Nasr 1996; Foltz 2006; Saniotis 2012). When read through this combined lens, recurrent motifs of light, water, and earth in Malay-Islamic narratives do more than decorate scenes; they map rituals (purification), epistemic orientation (guidance), and creaturely limits (earth) onto concrete social obligations (Nor Faridah & Mohd. Nazri 2003; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011).

## Beyond didacticism: from message to mechanism

A recurrent anxiety in Islamic literary studies is the reduction of texts to message-driven didacticism. Theorists of narrative form help counter this by showing how art does ethical work: chronotope links time/space to value horizons (Bakhtin 1981); narrative voice and focalisation regulate proximity to moral judgment (Genette 1980); symbol mediates from lived practice to shared meaning (Ricoeur 1978). In the Malay-Islamic context, critics call for analyses that demonstrate mechanism rather than merely inventory values (Braginsky 2004; Muhammad Haji Salleh 2009; Rahmah Osman 2006). Our article contributes to this shift by theorising translational ecology—the relay form → symbol → ethic → action—as a processual specification of al-Kīlānī’s triad (alKīlānī 1987; Nasr 1996).

## Character, agency, and communal deliberation

Studies of Imam frequently note that character arcs align inner rectification with institutional repair: reform proceeds through counsel, exemplarity, and the ethics of procedure rather than coercion (Engku Maimunah 1994; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011). Comparative narratology strengthens this view: dialogic scenes instantiate public reasoning (Bakhtin 1981); free indirect discourse sustains moral ambiguity while guiding interpretation (Cohn 1978; Genette 1980). This aligns with Malay-Islamic notions of *adab* as habituated right-measure in relation to God, community, and place (al-Attas 1993; Mohd. Affandi Hassan 1992).

## Pedagogy and value-centred humanities (SDG 4)

There is increasing attention to how Islamic literature can scaffold value formation in contemporary curricula without collapsing into indoctrination (Ashraf 1985; Nor Faridah & Mohd. Nazri 2003; Rahmah Osman 2006). In Southeast Asian classrooms, form-attentive practices—heritage walks that read mosque architecture, kampung social-audit exercises, reflective journals on ritual-ecology—translate textual poetics into civic dispositions (Heise 2008; Garrard 2012; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011). This bridges scholarly analysis with pedagogical design and resonates with SDG 4’s emphasis on quality education and ethical competencies.

## Gap and positioning

Collectively, these strands establish Imam’s canonical status, the Islamic reformist poetics of Malay literature, and the importance of space, symbol, and character for ethical imagination (Braginsky 2004; Muhammad Haji Salleh 2009; Engku Maimunah 1994; Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011). What remains under-developed is a systematic account of the life–human–cosmos triad as a formal-ethical mechanism. By proposing translational ecology and applying a form-sensitive reading to key scenes, the present study addresses this gap and clarifies how spatial design and symbolic ecology in Imam re-order social relations within a God-centred cosmos (alKīlānī 1987; Nasr 1996; Abdullah Hussain 1995).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kīlānī’s “Life–Human–Cosmos” as the mediating grammar We conceptualise life–human–cosmos as the *mediating grammar* of Najīb al-Kīlānī’s Islamic literary theory: a triadic constraint that links creed (*‘aqīdah*) to craft (form) and reception (ethico-practical uptake). In this grammar,

1. Life is not inert background but the curricular surface where ethical habits are rehearsed in ordinary routines (worship, counsel, labour).

2. Human marks agency as relational and accountable: persons are apprentices to procedures (deliberation, evidence, restraint) embedded in communal time/space.
3. Cosmos is a sign-bearing habitat, not décor: natural and built environments (light, water, earth; mosque, kampung) encode obligations and limits.

This framing resists the false binary “didactic vs. aesthetic”: form is not a vehicle added to pre-existing morals; rather, form is the site where moral meaning is generated (chronotope, focalisation, motif). The triad therefore functions as a semiotic hinge that translates doctrine into perceptible order: the world is rendered as a legible ethical map, humans as situated stewards, and life as the drama of reform.

### Analytic payoffs and boundary conditions. We derive three testable propositions:

1. Formative temporality: recurrent communal rhythms (e.g., predawn sequences) will correlate with scenes of habituated adab (expect dense procedural language, patterned repetition).
2. Architectural accountability: descriptions of thresholds/courtyards/ablution areas will coincide with moments of public reasoning (expect multi-party dialogue, deictic anchoring, and crowd choreography).
3. Symbolic mnemonics: clustering of light–water–earth motifs will precede or accompany ethical reorientation (expect shifts in modality, evaluative lexis, and action proposals).

Competing explanations (e.g., “message-driven didacticism”) predict explicit authorial assertion; our framework predicts mechanisms in the fabric of narration (pace, perspective, spatial grammar). The triad thus furnishes falsifiable cues at the level of how the text works.

“Translational ecology”: operational definition

We operationalise translational ecology as the processual relay form → symbol → ethic → action, specifying four integrated relays:

1. Temporal relay (lifeworld → habit): narrative tempo and recurrence bind sensation to routine, cultivating durable ethical memory.
2. Spatial relay (architecture → obligation): mosque/*kampung* design organises bodies and attention, scripting accountability.
3. Symbolic relay (motif → mnemonic): light/water/earth function as cognitive-affective anchors that cue guidance, purification, and limit.
4. Dialogic relay (counsel → procedure): deliberative scenes model public reasoning and legitimate reform.

Evidence for translational ecology, therefore, is not thematic assertion but formal regularities that reliably connect perception to orientation and orientation to practice.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design and stance:

This is a qualitative, form-sensitive textual study that re-examines *Imam* through the specific lens of the life–human–cosmos framework.. Our stance is explanatory-interpretive: we aim to *identify mechanisms* by which form carries ethics, not to inventory themes.

### Corpus and sampling strategy

- Primary text: Imam (1995).
- Unit of analysis: scene-events (continuous segments unified by space, time, or action).
- Analytic sample: purposive–theoretical sampling from the full novel to ensure coverage of:
  1. lifeworld routines (worship, labour, counsel);
  2. architectural nodes (mosque, kampung, thresholds);
  3. motif clusters (light, water, earth);

4. high-stakes moral junctures (waqf deliberations, market encroachment, wartime memory).
- Inclusion criteria: presence of at least one relay cue (temporal/spatial/symbolic/dialogic) plus ethically marked language (obligation, evaluation, norm).
- Exclusion criteria: purely expository passages with no discernible formal cueing of ethical orientation.

### Coding architecture:

We employ a two-layer codebook:

#### 1. Principle layer (triad):

1. Life: everyday practices; economy of piety; communal temporality.
2. Human: character formation; adab scripts; leadership and counsel.
3. Cosmos: nature/built space; mosque/kampung; light/water/earth.

#### 2. Mechanism layer (relays):

1. Temporal: repetition, rhythm, schedule markers, chant/adhan adjacency.
2. Spatial: thresholding, crowd choreography, deictic anchoring, vantage shifts.
3. Symbolic: motif recurrence, semantic clustering, metaphorical activation.
4. Dialogic: turn-taking density, evidentiality, modality (ought/should), policy talk.

### Operational indicators (examples):

1. Repetition indices (lexical/structural), scene-duration and pacing notes;
2. Spatial deixis (here/there/entrance), architectural lexemes (mihrab, courtyard, ablution);
3. Motif lexemes (light/water/earth) and co-occurring ethical predicates (pure/guide/limit);
4. Dialogue metrics (number of turns, presence of counter-positions, appeals to evidence/precedent).

### Analytic procedures:

1. Segment retrieval & sensitising read: traverse the novel to mark candidate scene-events using inclusion criteria.
2. Form-sensitive close reading: describe *voice*, *setting*, *focalisation*, *rhythm*, *figuration* for each segment.
3. Axial mapping (mechanism test): link formal cues to ethical orientations (e.g., repetition → habit; thresholding → obligation).
4. Pattern consolidation: compare across scenes to identify recurrent relay patterns and disconfirming cases.
5. Adjudication against theory: test propositions from the framework; document confirmations, boundary cases, and anomalies.
6. Pedagogical projection: extract teachable sequences (observe → map → infer → design) grounded in observed mechanisms.

### Validity, reliability, and auditability

1. Construct validity: codes derive from clearly defined constructs (triad, relays) with observable indicators.
2. Internal coherence: chain of evidence maintained via an audit trail (scene IDs, quotations, coding memos, analytic decisions).
3. Analyst triangulation: iterative peer-style checks (second-pass review of coded scenes), focusing on rival readings (e.g., theme-only vs. mechanism).
4. Negative case analysis: purposeful search for scenes where ethical uptake occurs *without* relay cues; these inform boundary conditions.
5. Reflexivity: analytic memos record prior commitments (e.g., sympathy for reformist poetics) and their management (seeking counter-textual pressure).



## Limitations and scope

1. Textual generalisability: findings are anchored in one canonical novel; portability claims are *theoretical* until tested on other Malay-Islamic texts.
2. Analyst dependence: close reading is interpretive; reliability measures rely on transparent indicators and triangulated review rather than head-count inter-coder scores.
3. Context sensitivity: architectural and ecological symbols are locally inflected; we bracket crossregional variation and recommend comparative follow-ups.

## Ethics

The study analyses published literary material only; there are no human participants or identifiable sensitive data. Interpretations aim to respect authorial and communal contexts while remaining analytically independent.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Re-reading Imam through the life–human–cosmos triad:

Across the corpus of scenes coded under life, human, and cosmos, Imam consistently converts ordinary experience into ethical pedagogy through form—especially through patterned space, recurrent motifs, and dialogic pacing. In Kīlānī’s terms, the novel “translates” (tarjamat) lifeworld, the human agent, and a signbearing cosmos into a theocentric order perceptible to the reader (al-Kīlānī 1987). Our findings refine this claim by specifying how that translation works at the level of craft—what we term a translational ecology: a relay from form → symbol → ethic → action.

#### A. Life: Everyday routines as moral pedagogy

Sequences depicting congregational rhythms, predawn preparation, market exchange, and family deliberation are choreographed as habits of attention that educate the affections. Repetition (e.g., the cadence of adhan-toprayer), anaphora in dialogue, and sensory detail around shared time convert routine into adab scripts—ethics learned by doing rather than by precept (Abdullah Hussain 1995). This confirms Malay-Islamic critics’ observations that the novel weds spiritual discipline to social realism, but our reading shows that the mechanism is formal: tempo, parallelism, and focalisation guide readers to inhabit communal time (Engku Maimunah 1994; Rahmah Osman 2006). In Kīlānī’s triad, “life” (ḥayāh) is not mere background material; it is the curricular surface where value is rehearsed (al-Kīlānī 1987).

Interpretive payoff. These scenes reframe ethical uptake as embodied temporality: the community’s shared schedule (dawn, market, counsel) becomes an instrument of moral formation. Rather than didactic messaging, the novel’s form generates habit memory—a precondition for durable ethical action .

#### B. Cosmos: Mosque–kampung as ethical cartography

The novel’s most decisive ethical work occurs via space. The mosque is rendered as a centripetal node that organises public accountability: thresholds and ablution zones mark transitions from private devotion to communal obligation; courtyards and sermon space choreograph bodies and attention. In contrast, the kampung appears as a matrix of mutuality under pressure from extractive habits—most vividly in episodes of ad-hoc commerce and a “gold-rush” encroaching on sacred vicinity (Abdullah Hussain 1995).

Formally, shifts in focalisation and crowd choreography make space legible as value-laden. The mosque’s architectural grammar regulates time (who gathers, when, and to what end), while kampung textures stage reciprocity and vulnerability. In Islamic ecological terms, the cosmos (kawn) here is not inert scenery but a signbearing habitat aligned with stewardship (khilāfah) and balance (mīzān) (Nasr 1996; Foltz, Denny, & Baharuddin 2003).

Interpretive payoff. Reading space as ethical cartography clarifies the novel’s critique of modern fragmentation: sacred architectures and communal geographies are not nostalgic décor but instruments for re-ordering social relations around God-centred norms (Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011; Braginsky 2004).

### C. Human: Agency, adab, and reformist leadership

Character arcs exhibit reform through counsel, exemplarity, and due process—not coercion. Dialogues about waqf allowances, fairness in institutional pay, and the responsibilities of leadership demonstrate how inner rectification scales to structural change (Abdullah Hussain 1995). Technically, free indirect discourse and measured dialogic pacing sustain moral ambiguity while staging public reasoning, aligning with narratological accounts of how focalisation modulates ethical judgment (Genette 1980; Cohn 1978).

Interpretive payoff. Kīlānī’s “human” (insān) is not an abstract bearer of virtue but an agent apprenticed by procedures—council, evidence, restraint—embedded in shared time/space. Thus, “human” is the hinge where lifeworld and cosmos meet: agency is always spatio-temporal and therefore educable (al-Kīlānī 1987; al-Attas 1993).

### D. Symbolic ecology: Light, water, earth

Motifs of light (guidance/knowledge), water (purification/renewal), and earth (ground/limit) recur across crucial passages, especially near turning points. Their recurrence is not ornamental: light calibrates epistemic stance (seeing rightly), water couples ritual to environment (ablution, rain, rivers), and earth grounds finitude and accountability (Abdullah Hussain 1995). Within Islamic eco-ethics these motifs articulate a cosmology where nature is a moral text (Nasr 1996; Foltz 2006).

Interpretive payoff. The motif-system acts as ethical mnemonics: readers learn to associate affective recognition (beauty, awe, relief) with obligations (purification, repair, restraint). This is translational ecology in operation—the path from symbol to action (Nor Faridah & Mohd. Nazri 2003; Garrard 2012).

### E. Memory, suffering, and communal repair

Testimonial fragments—e.g., recollections of wartime arrest and loss—thicken the novel’s moral texture by embedding ethical choice within historical wound. The compression of testimony (few lines, high intensity) functions as narrative conscience, reminding readers that reformist action is not abstract idealism but response to remembered harm (Abdullah Hussain 1995). Such scenes resonate with Islamic notions of justice as restorative and with Malay literary emphases on communal resilience (Muhammad Haji Salleh 2009; Zainal Abidin Borhan 2010).

Interpretive payoff. “Life” includes collective memory; “human” includes responsibility for repair; “cosmos” includes places marked by loss. The triad coheres in the ethics of remembrance.

### Synthesis: From aesthetics to action (the relay specified)

Bringing these strands together, our analysis specifies four recurrent relays by which *Imam* moves from art to ethics:

1. Temporal relay (lifeworld → habit): patterned routines (prayer cadence, shared work) habituate adab (Abdullah Hussain 1995; Rahmah Osman 2006).
2. Spatial relay (architecture → accountability): mosque/kampung design converts space into obligation (Norhayati Ab Rahman 2011; Nasr 1996).
3. Symbolic relay (motif → mnemonic): light–water–earth motifs yoke feeling to duty (Nor Faridah & Mohd. Nazri 2003; Garrard 2012).
4. Dialogic relay (counsel → procedure): deliberation scripts public reasoning and legitimates reform (Genette 1980; Cohn 1978).

Collectively, these relays instantiate Kīlānī’s triad as process, not just predicate. The novel’s ethical force is not only in what it values but in how its forms tutor readers toward valuing—translational ecology (al-Kīlānī 1987).

### Comparative discussion: Beyond didacticism

A persistent anxiety in Islamic literary criticism is the risk of reducing texts to sermon. Our findings show that Imam sidesteps this pitfall because its ethics are carried by form. The chronotope of mosque time, the dramaturgy

of counsel, and the mnemonic labour of motifs enact what theorists of narrative have called the moral work of form—where how one sees becomes what one must do (Bakhtin 1981; Ricoeur 1978; Genette 1980). In the Malay context, this aligns with conceptions of *adab* as calibrated right-measure rather than mere rule-compliance (al-Attas 1993; Mohd. Affandi Hassan 1992). Thus, *Imam* is not “message fiction”; it is mechanism fiction—its artistry makes ethics conceivable and practicable.

## CONCLUSION

Re-reading *Imam* through Najīb al-Kīlānī’s life–human–cosmos triad has shown that the novel’s ethical force is not an afterthought of theme but an effect of form. By specifying translational ecology—the relay form → symbol → ethic → action—we clarified how patterned lifeworld routines, spatial architectures, and ecological motifs convert aesthetic recognition into socially actionable orientations. In this account, congregational temporality (the cadence of prayer and work), mosque–*kampung* geographies (thresholds, courtyards, communal corridors), and symbolic ecologies (light, water, earth) act together as ethical cartography, re-ordering social relations within a God-centred cosmos. Thus, *Imam* endures not because it “says” values but because it formats them—training attention, calibrating judgment, and habituating *adab*.

**Theoretical upshot.** Critically, the study repositions the under-examined life–human–cosmos principle as the mediating grammar of Kīlānī’s system. Rather than treating creed (*‘aqīdah*) and craft as separable, we showed that the triad names the traffic between them: *life* provides the curricular surface of habituation; the *human* denotes agency apprenticed by procedure (counsel, evidence, restraint); the *cosmos* appears as a sign-bearing habitat that structures obligation. This re-mediation pushes the field beyond the stale binary of “didactic vs. aesthetic,” toward a processual model where ethics is carried by chronotope, focalisation, and motif. The argument therefore contributes a portable analytic that other scholars of Islamic literature can test across genres and regions.

**Methodological contribution.** A form-sensitive, scene-anchored reading yielded interpretive leverage that theme inventory alone cannot reach. Mapping four relays—temporal, spatial, symbolic, dialogic—exposed the novel’s mechanism of ethical uptake and offered a replicable template for close reading in Malay-Islamic studies. Just as importantly, this approach surfaces *negative* spaces: moments where form withholds closure (irony, ambiguity, deferred judgment), suggesting that the text educates responsibility not by prescribing answers but by staging deliberation.

**Dialectical tensions.** A critical lens also reveals frictions that are productive rather than defects. The mosque’s centripetal order can both protect common life and police its boundaries; *kampung* mutuality sustains reciprocity but can shelter complacency; water as purification can cleanse or, when scarce/polluted, indict communal failure. Recognising these tensions prevents romanticisation and underscores that translational ecology is contested—its ethical work depends on ongoing communal discernment.

**Limitations and falsifiability.** Our analysis focuses on one canonical novel and a cluster of scenes with high ethical density. A sceptic could argue that other scenes complicate or dilute the relays we identified. This is precisely where the framework is falsifiable: future work should (i) stress-test the four relays against counterexamples within *Imam*; (ii) apply the triad-mechanism to Indonesian and Arabic reformist fiction to gauge portability; and (iii) incorporate reception studies (reader diaries, classroom interventions) to measure whether form-guided prompts reliably shift ethical inference and behaviour.

Broader horizon. Finally, the analysis situates *Imam* within current debates on postsecular humanities and ecocriticism in Muslim contexts. By showing that religious space and symbolic nature are moral infrastructures, the study argues that Islamic literature contributes not only to cultural memory but to practical reasoning about common life—how we gather, decide, repair, and dwell. In this light, *Imam* is more than a touchstone of Malay-Islamic letters; it is a laboratory of ethical imagination, modelling how humans inhabit a sign-saturated cosmos as servants-stewards.

In sum, the article advances a critical claim with methodological teeth: ethics in *Imam* is engineered by form. Naming that engineering as translational ecology equips scholars, teachers, and readers with a clear mechanism



and a teachable path from close reading to communal responsibility—an agenda both faithful to Kīlānī’s vision and responsive to the moral urgencies of Southeast Asian modernity.

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