

## Interpretation and Overinterpretation of Ja'far Ibn Hasan Al-Barzanji's *Mawlid Al-Barzanji*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of interpretation and overinterpretation in understanding Ja'far ibn Hasan al-Barzanji's text, *Mawlid al-Barzanji*, one of the religious literatures in Indonesia. The results of the study indicate that *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* which contain majesty, miracles, prayer, and profound love for the Prophet is widely responded by Indonesian Muslims through the process of reading, interpretation, and appreciation. Such widespread acceptance is due to the fulfillment of interpretation requirements which requires the existence of a common world view between author and reader or interpreter. On the other hand, overinterpretation occurs when the text of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is interpreted by those who have different world views as a result of different religious ideas and religious ideologies. Such overinterpretation invites negative response, ideological prejudice, and rejection of some parts of *Al-Barzanji* text by those who identify themselves as a salafi group.

**Keywords:** *interpretation, overinterpretation, Mawlid al-Barzanji, religious literature.*

### INTRODUCTION

Religious literary works have existed in Indonesia since the advent of Islam in the Archipelago approximately in the 7th century AD (Qadir, 2004: 75). Islamic propagators in the Archipelago, especially whose background were Sufism, brought the works of Islamic religious literature from the Middle East, partly characterized by Sufism. Therefore, religious literature is also often referred to sufi work or prophetic work (Anwar, 2007: 12).

Religious literary works with sufi pattern usually describe one's inner experience in religious matters which aims to express his life experience so as to be beneficial for others. Sufi literary work is a sufi literature in a way that such literary work is influenced, inspired, imbued with sufi insight. Sufi literature is literature that appears to remind people to God and to live out His directions. Sufi works always connect art and creation with a broader life, trying to reunite the earth and the

sky, outer world and inner world, social dimension and transcendental dimension, microscopic and macroscopic, man and his Creator (Anwar, 2007: 11). According to Mangunwijaya, Sufi literature is a work expressed profoundly with the language of the heart, not a piece of literature that simply contains religious issues, but already at the level of religiosity (Mangunwijaya, 1994: 11). Meanwhile, prophetic literature is literature that reveals the teachings and life of the prophets. However, in Kuntowijoyo's view (2006: 13), prophetic literature is a literature that fights against social system that degrades the dignity of man to narrow-mindedness, resulting in dehumanization.

Before initiating the concept of prophetic literature, Kuntowijoyo also introduced the concept of transcendental literature, the literature questioning the man in the middle of modern life which tend to be bureaucratic, industry-oriented, market-oriented, and instrumental (Anwar, 2007: 11). The transcendental Literature wishes that

human beings do not become one-dimensional creature, but a complete creature, both physically and spiritually, rooted in the earth and reaching the sky at the same time. In the perspective of transcendental literature, the task of a poet is to unify the dichotomy of human in relationship with fellow human beings and in relationship with God.

In addition to sufi and prophetic literatures, there is religious literature which proselytizes religion. However, such religious literary works which put too much emphasis on proselytization are generally not able to achieve the profoundly sufi/prophetic aesthetics. Furthermore, A.A. Navis (1999: 339) calls this literary works as a propaganda literature which existed in authoritarian countries that end in failure.

The presence of the sufi and prophetic literary works cannot be separated from Sufism movement that accompanies the advent of Islam in Indonesia. If we observe the history of Sufism which serve as the basis of sufi and prophetic literature, names like Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin Sumatrani, Raja Ali Haji, Nuruddin Ar-Raniri, Haji Hasan Mustafa, Yasadipura I, and Ronggowarsito are among Indonesian Sufis who wrote sufi/prophetic literary work (Anwar, 2007: 13). They have contributed to the growth of Sufi and prophetic literature traditions in Indonesia. Their works contain many personal expressions of divinity.

However, Islamic literature in Indonesia is not only written by domestic authors. Most Islamic literature in Indonesia is the work of foreign authors. Moreover, popular religious literature in Indonesia is largely the work of foreign authors, especially from the Middle East. Some popular religious literary works in Indonesia are *Kasidah Burdah* or '*Al-Kawâkib ad-Durriyyah fî Madh Khair al-Bariyyah*' by Muhammad Ib Said Al-Bushiri (d. 1295); *Qashîdah Dîbâ'îyyah* by 'Abd ar-Rahman ibn ad-Diba asy-Syaibani (d. 1537); *Qashîdah Syaraf al-Anâm* by Ahmad ibn al-Qasim al-Hariri; *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* by Ja'far ibn Hasan al-Barzanji (d. 1729); *Syi'iran Maulid* by Muhammad al-'Azb; *Nadzam 'Aqîdah al-Awwâm* by Sayyid Ahmad Al-Marzuqy (d. 1864); and so forth.

The texts of literary works of the Arab Muslim writers not only popular among Indonesian Muslims, even the works that have fused and

become part of the tradition of the diversity of Indonesian Muslims. Various efforts of translation, interpretation, comment on the works were conducted by Indonesian Muslim scholars, so that the works became an integral part of the ritual activity of Indonesian Muslims. Such immense enthusiasm of Indonesian Muslims about the religious literary works result innot only the process of interpretation of the text, but also what is then called overinterpretation. This article attempts to explore the discourse of interpretation and overinterpretation on religious literary texts in Indonesia. The sample of religious literary texts in this study is the book of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* written by Ja'far ibn Hasan ibn 'Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Barzanji al-Kurdi (1690-1766).

## THE CONCEPT OF INTERPRETATION AND OVERINTERPRETATION

The concept of interpretation is usually associated with message. To interpret is to translate such message into the world of meaning. In its early history, the interpretation is performed in four ways: textual, allegorical, moral, and eschatological (Bergant, 2002: 21). Textual meaning of the text is usually related to the meaning contained in the words. In this case, the text is accepted literally. Such understanding assumes that the listeners immediately grasp all the nuances of the language in the same way as intended by the author. Such understanding can be obtained if the readers and the author have similar world view. However, the readers who have a different world view with the author will not be easy to grasp the purposes of a text (Bergant, 2002: 21). The difficulty of textual meaning becomes clear as the meaning of words change rapidly, whereas the literal interpretation of the text in essence does not take changes and development of a language into consideration.

Meanwhile, the allegorical interpretation of a text results in the emergence of a variety of diverse interpretations. In the perspective of allegorical interpretation, a text is actually meant to convey something other than what is expressed textually (Abrams & Harpham 2009: 163). The allegorical interpretation of the text makes a text diversely understood depending on the number of interpreters with their different point of view (Bergant, 2002: 22). Furthermore, moral

interpretation of a text usually occurs in religious texts, including religious literary texts. In this perspective, the text is first understood with the purpose of spiritual-religious life of the people. Moreover, the interpreter attempts to explore the moral messages of the text and impose them to the public regarding various norms and rules of life. The use of moral interpretation often involves ideological and normative perspectives.

The eschatological approach to understand a text usually refers to the spiritual meaning of the text as long as related to the upcoming facts (Bergant, 2002: 22). Such eschatological approach is often performed on religious texts, including religious literary texts. The eschatological interpretation aims to reduce the importance of the meaning of life in this world and put an eschatological life as something that is very important. Three of the four ways of the interpretation, namely allegorical, moral, and eschatological interpretation are related to the concept of overinterpretation on the religious literary texts of Islam. The three models of interpretation often produce the meanings that go beyond the intention of the author. Therefore, when the three models are used to interpret literary texts, the literary values becomes invisible.

One of the early pioneers and thinkers of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1993: 61) states that the interpretation contains at least three things, namely *vorhabe*, *vorsicht*, and *vorgriff* (Schrag, 1992: 64; Smith, 2011: 38; Osborne, 1999: 54). *Vorhabe* is interpretation according to what is owned by the interpreter; *Vorsicht* is interpretation based on what is seen; and *vorgriff* is interpretation on what will be obtained later. Furthermore, Gadamer developed four basic principles of interpretation on history and literary works, namely *Bildung* (culture), *sensus communis*, *taste*, and *judgment* (Gadamer, 1975; Krajewski, 2004: 109; Carr, 1996: 26; Barthold, 2010: 78).

*Bildung* or culture is the creation of the way of thinking, the form or way of thinking that flows in harmony. In relation to the interpretation, activity or process of interpretation will always involve interpreter's experience when he tries to understand texts in the humanities, such as history, literature, and philosophy. Two people of different cultural background, age, or level of education are

not going to interpret in the same way.

*Sensus communis* is the interpretation based on the sense of community, society, and in the context of where the interpreter lives. This term is used by Gadamer not in the sense of 'public opinion', but as 'a good practical consideration'. It is important to understand this concept in social life because living in a society needs consider a view of true and general virtue. The interpreters or also historians need *sensus communis* in order to understand the flow which serves as the basis of human attitude because history basically does not tell about a man who lives in isolation. Taste is an interpretation based on the taste of the interpreter. The interpretation based on taste is deemed subjective and intuitive. Judgment is an interpretation based on the classification of specific things on the basis of a common view. Practical, economic, theoretical, political, and other considerations are often involved in the process of interpretation using this model of interpretation.

Discourse on the interpretation of literary works has enlivened the study of literary texts since long ago. The debate of literary critics about the meaning of literature is important to be presented so that the concept of interpretation and overinterpretation can be identified proportionally. If the interpretation is associated with the acquisition of "meaning", how can such "meaning" be obtained. Is the meaning of a particular literary work a product of the interaction between the reader and the text, or is the meaning of a text determined by the author, the text itself, which is autonomous, or even by the readers? The assumption that the meaning of a text is a product of the interaction between the reader and the text presupposes the existence of a plurality of meanings, that text is complex, plural, and open to various interpretations. Peter D. Juhl (1980) argues that the interpretation is the process of revealing the meaning as intended by the author. A statement of the meaning of a work is a statement of the intention or purpose of the author. In '*Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*' (1980), Juhl mentions that because, linguistically, there are many possible interpretations of a text, there is only one can be appropriate and such appropriate reading follows a line directly to the intention of the author. Juhl's

view is similar to his predecessors, Emilio Betti and Eric Donald (E.D.) Hirsch (1967), who were inspired by the hermeneutic thought of Wilhelm Dilthey. Among E.D. Hirsch's famous statements are: "a text means what its author meant" (Hirsch, 1967: 1; Ekegren, 1999: 83) and "the verbal meaning which an author intends" (Ross, 1994: 342). The emphasis on the intention of the author then made their views known as the 'intentionalist' theory.

Unlike Betti, Hirsch and Juhl, William Kurtz Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley are at the opposite pole. In 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) and 'The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry' (1954), both ignore - although not entirely - the effects of the author's intention on the process of interpretation. The meaning of a literary work does not have to be like what the author is intended. Their view is then known as the 'anti-intentionalist' theory (Sanford & Mailloux, 1988: 38). In addition to intentionalist and anti-intentionalist views, there is also Roland Barthes' thought in 'The Death of the Author' (1968). Barthes emphasizes the idea of literary work as an entity which is autonomous and free from the intentions of the author and impermeable to an integrated reading. Barthes states that "the death of the author" means the birth of the reader. Any attempt to explain a text with the involvement of the author is futile, and Barthes advocates for playing freely with meaning.

The concept of interpretation is essentially a scientific activity developed by literary theorists before the 20th century AD. In the tradition of Western thought, interpretation has a long history and a heavy task in building the meaning of the Word of God. Interpretation is also in charge of resolving disputes and provocation of people who interpret the word of God (Eco, 1992: 3). Modern phase of the history of interpretation basically is a high awareness of the West on the issues of textual meanings contained in the Bible. Therefore, Schleiermacher in the early 19th century AD introduced the theory of hermeneutics which taught the centrality of interpretation to understand all of the creations of the human soul. This theory was made in full based on Dilthey's thought about *Geisteswissenschaften* in the latter part of the 20th century AD (Eco, 1992: 3-4). In further

developments, the activities of interpretation were not only used to interpret scriptures, but also be used to interpret the works of man, including literary works.

In the further development of Western intellectual history, interpretations were then considered inadequate to interpret the emerging literary works. Therefore, the concept (theory) of overinterpretation is initiated by Umberto Eco, whose primary task is how the reader hunts signs contained in the text so that hidden and veiled meanings can be revealed. Thus, hunting for signs in the text is not enough by doing passive and simple way as conceptualized by interpretation. In hunting for hidden and veiled signs, the reader needs to be more aggressive in order to revealing them so that big concepts emerge from such literary work concerning ideas and ideologies that are beneficial to the life of humanity and culture.

In a different perspective, the concept of overinterpretation can be understood in a negative connotation. When Susan Sontag (2013) criticized the model of intellectual interpretation, she mentions that the intellectual interpretation would ultimately cause a literary work to experience of what she calls overinterpretation. Through 'Against Interpretation and Other Essays', she asserts that the understanding of art always starts from an intuitive instinct, instead of analysis or intellectual considerations. In her opinion, the literary work may say as clear as what the text means, not behind what always people look for. In addition to rejecting overinterpretation, Sontag also introduces transparency, clarity of objects in themselves, and understand the text as it is. In addition to Sontag, René Wellek and Austin Warren (1993: 109) also perceive overinterpretation in a negative connotation. For Wellek and Warren, if the understanding of the social and humanitarian facts contained in the literature dominate the understanding of the elements of literary texts, the process will actually stick on the overinterpretation of literary work.

Nevertheless, the concept of overinterpretation here is intended as the process of hunting for signs that exist in the text so that the hidden and veiled meanings can be revealed. In addition, the concept of overinterpretation also refers to the process of interpreting text beyond the intention of the author



as in the view the ‘anti-intentionalist’ theory. The concept of overinterpretation is similar to the concept of extensive interpretation or broader interpretation of Reynolds (2001: 90) as opposed to literal interpretation (Gleave, 2012: 5).

## **INTERPRETATION AND OVERINTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF MAWLID AL-BARZANJI**

### **A Brief Description of the Book of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji***

*Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is a work of Ja’far ibn Hasan ibn ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Barzanji (1690-1766). According to one story he died in 1766, another said in 1764 AD (Katz, 2007: 169) or in 1765 (Aziz, 2011: 106). He is a mufti of the Shafi’i school in Medina and a preacher in the Prophet’s Mosque of Medina, whose whole life was dedicated to the holy city of the Prophet (Azra, 1998: 101). According to the ‘*Encyclopedia Islam Indonesia*’, the original title of this book is *Qishat al-Maulid an-Nabawi* (Solikhin, 2010: 472), while according to Azyumardi Azra (1998: 101) and Martin van Bruinessen (1999: 97) the original title is of *Al-‘Iqd al-Jawâhir*. According to Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert (1986: 6), this book is not only popular in many parts of the Islamic world, but also translated into various languages of the world.

The book title of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is, therefore, is a title taken from the name of its author. *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* contains Prophet Muhammad’s life story written in prose and poetry complemented with praise and prayers to the Prophet. This book is truly a literary work rather than history because it put more emphasis on the aspects of beauty of the language. This book consists of two types, one is arranged in the form of prose (*Mawlid Al-Barzanji Natsr*) and another in the form of poetry (*Mawlid Al-Barzanji Nadzam*). Equally, both contain the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Prose and poetry about the history of the Prophet is often recited in many ceremonies such as the Prophet’s birthday, celebration of baby’s birth, baby’s hair shaving (aqiqa), circumcision, wedding and other ceremonies.

*Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is closely associated with the celebration of the birth of Muhammad

which was originally pioneered by Salahuddin Al-Ayubi. Prophet’s birth anniversary by Al-Ayubi was intended to revive the tradition of birthday that existed in the Fatimid Dynasty (Captein, 1994). The aim was to raise fighting spirit (*jihād*) and unity (*ittihad*) of Islamic army against their enemies. Since then the notion emerged that Al-Ayubi was the initiator and the founding father to commemorate the birth of the Prophet. The emergence of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* started from a writing competition on history of and praise to the Prophet held by Salahuddin Al-Ayubi in 580 AH/1184 AD. In such competition, *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* appeared to be the best. Since then, the reading of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* started to be disseminated throughout the world by one of the governors of Al-Ayubi, Abu Sa’id al-Kokburi, the Governor of Irbil, Iraq.

According to Annemarie Schimmel (1991), the original text of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* in Arabic was actually in prose. However, the poets reworked the text into a string of verses. This book had been commented upon by scholars, among others, by a descendant of Sheikh Al-Barzanji, namely Ja’far ibn Isma’il al-Barzanji (d. 1900), who was also one of the Mufti Shafi’i in Medina, with the title of the comment ‘*Al-Kawkâb al-Anwâr ‘alâ ‘Iqd al-Jawhâr fî Mawlid an-Nabi al-Azhar*’. This book was also commented by Muhammad ‘Ulayisy (1802-1881) with the title of ‘*Al-Qawl al-Munji ‘Alâ Mawlid al-Barzanji*’. Muhammad ‘Ulayisy was a scholar of Maliki school and a Mufti of Maliki school in Egypt (Kaz, 2007: 169). In addition, a scholar born in Banten, Java, Imam Nawawi al-Bantani also wrote a comment of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* with the title ‘*Madârij ash-Shu`ûd ilâ Iktisâ al-Burûd*’. (Adib, 2009: 4). It is alleged that the process of change from prose into poetry occurred due to the comments on *Mawlid al-Barzanji*.

In Indonesia, the tradition of reading the text of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is not something new, especially among nahdliyyin. The tradition of reading *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is not only done to commemorate the birth of the Prophet, but often also held on every Thursday night, birth ceremony, aqiqa and haircut, wedding, celebration, and other ceremonies. In fact, in most of the boarding school, reading *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* has become

mandatory curriculum. Some widely known terms of reading this book are a 'perjanjen' (Zuhri, 2001: 41) or 'berjanjen' (Syam, 2005: 213), 'berzanjen' or 'marhabanan' (Sholikhin, 2009: 52), which collectively reads the poetry of *Mawlid al-Barzanji*.

### Interpretation of the Book of *Mawlid al-Barzanji*

This verses spread widely to various countries in Asia and Africa, including Indonesia. This also includes Muslims of Swahili speakers in Africa or Urdu speakers in Pakistan (Knappert, 1986: 48). To put it simply, *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is a poetic biography of the Prophet Muhammad. This work is divided into two, 'natsar' (prose) and 'nadam' (poetry). The 'natsar' consists of 19 chapters which contains 355 verses, all of which rhyme with the letter 'ah'. The verses contain the history of the Prophet Muhammad, ranging from the moments before he was born until the period when he received the prophetic task. Meanwhile, the 'nadam' consists of 16 chapters which contains 205 verses, all of which rhyme with the letter "noon". In the verses of poetic prose, it is clearly seen that the poet was mesmerized by the figure and character of the Prophet. In the section of 'nadam', for instance, praise to the Prophet is expressed, as shown in the following verse.

ومحيا كالشمس منك مضيء \* أسفرت عنه ليلة غراء

*And your face that shines like the sun  
Has been unveiled on the finest night*

The interpretation of the above text proves the profound love of Al-Barzanji to the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad is described as someone who shines like the sun and is radiant as the moon, so that fine evening becomes brighter by his face.

يتلألؤ وجهه الشريف تلالؤ القمر في الليلة البدرية \* يقول ناعته  
لم أر قبلة ولا بعده بشر يراه

*His pious and blessed face was brighter than  
the full moon. Nobody in the universe had ever  
seen and will never see such a blessed pious and  
beautiful face.*

Some verses in *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* explained the pre-eminence and miracle of birth process of Muhammad, as shown in the following verses.

ليلة المولد الذي كان للدين \* سرور بيومه وازدهاء

*The night of your birth bestowed happiness on  
religion  
And splendour on its day*

يوم نالت بوضعه ابنة وهب \* من فخار لم تنلهالنساء

*The day the daughter of Wahb succeeded in  
getting  
Of prestige what other women never succeeded in  
attaining*

و أنت قومها بأفضل مما \* حملت قبل مريمالعذراء

*She came to her people with a pregnancy  
Superior than that of the blessed virgin Mary  
before her.*

مولد كان منه طالع الكفر \* وبال عليهم ووباء

*A birth that resulted for the disbelievers  
In nothing but woes and epidemics.*

وتوالت البشرى الهواتف انقد \* ولد المصطفى وحق الهناء

*And the glad tidings of rejoicers came one after  
another  
That the chosen one was born and happiness was  
a must.*

The interpretation of the above verses of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is related to the birth of Muhammad who is described as a happiness accompanied with various miracles. A number of the miracles that accompanies the birth of Muhammad, either before, after or at the time of birth can be read in the following literature. Kenneth L. Woodward (2001: 2002-2004) describes the history of the miracles that accompanied the birth of Muhammad in a fairly long discussion. Haddad Alwi (2009: 91-95) identifies eleven miracles that occurred before and during the birth of Muhammad. *First*, during her pregnancy, Amina felt no discomfort as experienced by expectant mothers in general.

*Second*, when the 'noor' entered into the uterus of Amina, Allah commanded the angels to open the doors of firdaus heaven and tell all the inhabitants of sky and earth about the news of the birth of Muhammad. *Third*, the lands around the dry area of Mecca became fertile, trees became lush and fruitful. *Fourth*, a few months before the birth of Muhammad, the major events occurred that Abraha with his elephant troops were about to destroy the Kaaba. However, God thwarted such invasion with a miracle as mentioned in the Quran Surah Al-Fil verses 1-5. *Fifth*, before the birth, Amina had an amazing dream. She lifted her hand to the sky and saw by herself an angel coming down from heaven, like a white cotton floating in the sky. Then the angel stood before her and said, "Happy news for you, O mother of a prophet. Your son will be a helper and liberator of man. Call him Ahmad".

*Sixth*, at the time of delivery of the Prophet, the Prophet's mother, Aminah, was accompanied by Asiya and Mary. It is believed to be the cue that the Prophet Muhammad is higher in rank than Jesus and Moses. Asiya is the nurturing mother of Moses and Mary is the mother who gave birth to Jesus. *Seventh*, when Muhammad was born, Aminah saw a light coming out with him. The light shines over the Palace of Bosra in Syria. The light looked like arrows and rainbow which could be seen from distant towns. *Eighth*, narrated by Al-Bayhaqi from Fatima, Fatima witnessed the seconds of the birth of Muhammad, "At that time I saw a very bright light illuminating the whole house where he was born. In addition, I also saw some shining stars coming down closer until I felt as if the stars were going to follow me."

*Ninth*, Aminah witnessed the baby Muhammad laid with his hands raised to the sky like praying. Soon she saw a cloud fell, blanketing the boy, and also heard a call, "Guide him to go around the Eastern and Western earth so that the people understand, and he will abolish shirk (idolatry)". *Tenth*, it was narrated that on the eve of the birth of Muhammad, a variety of incredible signs appeared such as the earth shook, causing idols clamped around the Kaaba fell and broke. *Eleventh*, every pregnant woman in the birth year of Muhammad would surely give birth to a baby boy.

The text of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* widely uses idioms derived from nature such as sun,

pearl, moon, full moon, light, animals, rocks, and others. Such idioms are processed in such a way, even compounded with shalawat and prayers, thus producing a large number of brilliant metaphors. While Muslims in general are more attentive to the personality and teachings of Prophet Muhammad, *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* adds these to depict the figure of Prophet Muhammad who is physically perfect.

وكان صلي الله عليه وسلم أكمل الناس خلقا وخالقا ذا ذات وصفات  
سنية

*"(He) was a Prophet with the most perfect body and character, (and) noble mind and personality."*

مربوع القامة أبيض اللون مشربا بحمرة واسع العينين أكحلهما  
أهدب الأشفار قد منح الزجاج حاجباه \*مفلج الاسنان واسع الفم  
حسنه واسع الجبين ذا جبهة هلالية \*سهل الخدين يري في أنفه  
بعض احدياب حسن العرنين اقناه \*بعيد ما بين المنكبين سبط  
الكفين ضخم الكراديس قليل لحم العقب كث اللحية عظيم الرأس  
شعره الي الشحمة الاذنية \*

*"He had a slightly above-average height, reddish white body, and wide eyes with mascara, thick and arched eyebrows, pointy teeth, spacious and beautiful mouth, broad and shining forehead, flat cheeks, little nose, two distant backs, wide palms, not fleshy calf, thick beard, and hair reaching his ear-lobes."*

وبين كتفيه خاتم النبوة قد عمه النور وعلاه

*"Between his two backs, there was a prophetic mark with light surrounding him."*

In the book '*Kelengkapan Tarikh Nabi Muhammad*' (The Complete History of Prophet Muhammad) written by Moenawar Khalil (2001:101), the physical ideal figure of Muhammad is described in detail. In general, Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad has an ideal body as described in *Mawlid Al-Barzanji*. Prophet Muhammad is believed to have a slight reddish curly hair straggling up to his shoulder. The Prophet had reddish white skin, round face with black eyes tend and long eyelashes. He did not have mustache, but had a fist-thin beard, big head

bone with broad shoulders. He was of medium height and athletic. His fingers and feet were thick and elongated tapering (Khalil, 2001: 101).

When Muhammad walks, his steps tend to be fast and always step his both feet to move quickly and surely. This is illustrated in *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* as follows:

وينكفؤ في مشيته كأنما ينحط من صيب ارتقاه.

Prophet Muhammad was believed to have a noble and great personality. His face shone like the full moon. He was slightly higher than the average people, but shorter than the very tall people. His head was bigger than the average people and his hair was somewhat curly (wavy) rather long, which reached his ear-lobes and was parted in the middle. His skin was bright and his forehead was relatively wide. His eyebrows were arched, black and thick, and in between his eyebrows there was a vein which throbbed when being emotional. His nose was slightly curved and shiny when exposed to light and looked a bit pointed when first seeing it but actually not. His beard was thin, but full and flat to cheek. Her mouth was medium in size and his teeth were bright, white and somewhat tenuous. His shoulders were nice and sturdy like cast in silver. Other body parts were normal and proportional. His chest and waist were proportional to its size. His shoulder blades were fairly wide. His body parts were not covered in dense hair, clean and shiny, except fuzz that grew from the chest to the navel (Khalil, 2001:101).

His arms and upper chest were hairy. His wrist was quite long, his palms were fairly wide, and his hands and feet were fleshy, while his fingers and toes are pretty slim. If walking, he would slightly lean forward, step gracefully and quickly and often look down rather than up. When meeting people, the Prophet looked at them attentively and never glare at them and his look was soothing. The Prophet always walked a little behind especially when traveling for a long distance, and he always greeted others first (Khalil, 2001:101)

The widespread acceptance of the text of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* by Muslims in Indonesia shows that admiration, praise, and shalawat, and prayers to the Prophet Muhammad by Sheikh Ja'far Al-Barzanji prove 'positive' interpretation

process of this book. It shows that the process of interpretation of the book has given rise to positive response, respect, and reverence. Such acceptance and attitude cannot be separated from the activities of a reasonable interpretation of literature. By using the Bergant's concept (2002:21), it can be explained that common understanding on a text, as well as acceptance, response, and massive welcome to a work show the same world view between the author and the readers. This indicates that the world view by Ja'far ibn Hasan ibn 'Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Barzanji (1690-1766) is the same as that by most of Muslims in Indonesia.

### The Overinterpretation of the Book of 'Mawlid al-Barzanji'

The interpretation of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* makes this book widely accepted by the Muslims of Indonesia. This widespread acceptance is inseparable from the same worldview between the author of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* and Muslims in Indonesia in which both parties follow Shafi'i School. Meanwhile, the interpretation by Indonesian Muslims who have different worldview from the author of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* tend to be ideological, preconceived, and suspicious. This ideological interpretation of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* is then called overinterpretation.

By using the Dianne Bergant's typology (2002:21) on four models of interpretation, overinterpretation which is ideological and tend to prejudice is similar to the model of normative moral interpretation. This model of interpretation on *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* does not only serve an interpretation by using ideological perspective and stand point, but also trying to hunt for hidden meanings that are far away from the author's purpose or intention.

Exaggerated interpretation of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* first came from Wahhabism, an Islamic religious movement developed by a Muslim theologian of the 18th century AD, Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (d. 1792 AD), from Najd, Saudi Arabia. The main project of this movement is Islamic cleansing of the "impurities". Once this movement has controlled Saudi Arabia, some Islamic traditions are attacked including the celebration of Mawlid al-Nabi (the birth of Prophet Muhammad) in which it often recites the



poems of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* (Katz, 2007:171). Furthermore, those who identify themselves as followers of the Salafism also consider the text of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* to contain a number of irregularities and bid'ah (Katz, 2007:189). Salafism is a religious ideology which was developed in the late 19th century AD and strictly adhered to and refer to the traditions of the Prophet and his companions. This religious ideology aggressively attacks religious traditions which they consider to have no reference to the Sunnah of the Prophet which then they consider it as bid'ah (novelty, innovation).

In Indonesia, overinterpretation or interpretation of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* that goes beyond the author's intention is often performed by various Salaf Muslim communities especially Muhammadiyah which is referred by Azra to as 'Salafism wasathiyah' or 'Moderate Salafism' (Azra, 2007:25), Persatuan Islam/Persis (Islamic Union) (Rubin, 2010: 138), Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), and Al-Irshad (Bubalo & Fealy, 2007:97), Wahhabi followers, and communities who identify themselves as followers of *As-Salaf al-Salih*, i.e. those who try to strictly follow the teachings of earlier scholars of the Salaf.

For these groups, *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* and other similar books especially the *Qashidah Burdah* by Bushiri, *Qashidah Diba'iyyah* by Ibn Ad-Diba, *Qashidah Syaraf al-Anamby* Ahmad ibn al-Qasim al-Hariri, and *Syi'iran Maulid* by Muhammad al-'Azb do not only contain teachings which have no example from the Prophet Muhammad, but, this Nahdliyyin books are also seen to contain various aberrations and *bid'ah*, and elements of shirk. They reject the reason that 'literary' interest is served as a frame to hide *bid'ah* and shirk. The overinterpretation by the followers of Salafi groups in Indonesia on *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* has been disseminated through a number of internet sites including [www.nahi-munkar.com](http://www.nahi-munkar.com), [www.ustazyber.com](http://www.ustazyber.com), <http://almanhaj.or.id>, [www.-rumah-fiqih.com](http://www.-rumah-fiqih.com), <http://-muslim.or.id>, as well as a quite large number of individual blogs.

*Mawlid Al-Barzanji* texts which are interpreted beyond the author's intention, and later deemed to contain the ideology of *bid'ah*, shirk, and idolatry include: *First*, حضر أمه ليلة مولده

(*On the night of his birth, his mother was visited by Aisha and Mary together with the entourage of the holy women*). This *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* line is regarded excessive and hard to accept by the sense of healthy people. *Second*, وأصلي وأسلم على النور (And I say shalawat and salam be upon the light attributed with the past and the beginning). For Salafi groups, this sentence contains a statement of falsehood as often stated by the Sufis who think that every thing in the universe was created from the Noor (light) of Muhammad which later scattered in the universe. They always assert that the Prophet Muhammad was an ordinary man glorified by God with His message as the other apostles, as Allah says in Surah Al-Kahf:110.

*Third*, the text of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* has been exaggerated in describing the story of the birth of Muhammad as contained in this line:

و نطقت بحمله كل دابة لقريش بفصاح الألسن العربية \*  
و خرت الأسرة و الأصنام على الوجوه و الأفواه \* و تباشرت  
وحوش المشارق و المغارب و دوابها البحرية

"And told every livestock animal owned by the Quraish about his (the baby Muhammad) conception by speaking fluent Arabic, and the thrones and idols over their faces and mouths fell down, and the wild animals in the East and in the West as well as sea animals gave each other that good news".

The Salafi interprets these verses as a text without evidence and full of lies. They believe that the Prophet Muhammad had a miracle even since he was born. However, the miracles as mentioned in the verses have no reliable argument/guide.

*Fourth*, \* و نتوسل إليك بشرف الذات المحمدية \* (And we make *tawassul* (turn towards You) through the glory of the *dzat* (Essence) of Muhammad. And through the families of the stars of human security). The Salafi views that making *tawassul* through the Essence of the Prophet and his families and the passed away people are *bid'ah* and prohibited. In their opinion, none of the prayers in the Qur'an and Sunnah contains the means of *tawassul* through humans, the honor, and the position/level of the creature.

Apart from the four verses of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* which are overinterpreted by the Salafi, in general, this group actually does not respect any religious literature containing adoration and praise to the Prophet. They base their view on the Prophet saying as contained in the Book of Sahih Bukhari, "Do not praise/flatter me excessively, as the Christians praised Jesus the son of Mary. I'm only His servant, then say the servant of Allah and His Messenger". They also base their view on the Word of God which expressly states Muhammad is only an ordinary human. In Surah al-Kahf verse 110, Allah says: "Say (O Muhammad): "I am only a man like you, to whom has been revealed that your god is one God". Then in Surah Al-Isra verse 93 also states: "Say (O Muhammad): "Glory to my Lord! Am I aught but a man an apostle?"

The examples of interpretation of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* that goes beyond the author's intention by using the perspective of Wahhabism and Salafism ideology shows that the interpretation of religious literary text does not always employ literary theories and approaches. The interpretation of religious literary text using literary perspectives, it is believed, will not lead to the moral and normative claims of truth. Instead, the search for meaning of religious literary text using a moral approach which refers to the Dianne Bergant's typology (2002: 21) often produces meanings that do not comply with the author's intent, especially when the moral approach is used by those who have a different world view from the author of the text.

## CONCLUSION

*Mawlid Al-Barzanji* has been widely responded by Muslims in Indonesia through the process of reading, interpretation, and appreciation. The series of prose and poetry about the grandeur, miracles, prayers, and deep love for the Prophet Muhammad which are written in the book are received positively by the majority of Indonesian Muslims, so that the reading process is believed to be part of the ritual tradition of Islam. This positive response cannot be separated from the fulfillment of requirement for interpretation which requires the presence of similar world view between the author and the interpreter (reader). In contrast, the interpretation of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* by those who have different perspective and world view as

a result of different religious ideas and ideology has produced negative response and judgment as well as normative ideological prejudice. This overinterpretation then creates the rejection of a part of content of *Mawlid Al-Barzanji* by Wahhabism and Salafism group.

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