

Religious literary literacy in *pesantren*: a phenomenological study of moral and spiritual learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how *santri* (student) in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) education experience and interpret religious literary practices as a medium for moral and spiritual learning and conceptualizes these experiences into a religious literary literacy (RLL) model. Using a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study examines *santri*'s lived experiences and meaning-making processes. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight *santri* from four *pesantren* in East Java and Yogyakarta, Indonesia, supported by analysis of student literary works and *pesantren* literacy archives. The analysis involved iterative stages of close reading, coding, thematization, and hermeneutic interpretation. The findings reveal three interconnected dimensions of RLL: i) literature as spiritual and moral reflection; ii) transformative selfhood and moral consciousness developed through reflective reading and writing; and iii) *pesantren* as a pedagogical ecosystem integrating faith, ethics, and creative expression. These dimensions form the RLL model, which conceptualizes literary practice as a cyclical process of devotion, reflection, and self-transformation. The study contributes theoretically by extending the concept of religious literacy beyond textual competence toward experiential and interpretative moral formation. Practically, the model offers a conceptual framework for designing reflective literacy programs in Islamic education that support character development and address contemporary moral challenges among youth.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religious education plays a central role in shaping moral awareness and spiritual consciousness, especially in faith-based institutions such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia [1]. Within these institutions, literary activities, such as writing poetry, short stories, and reflective essays, have long been intertwined with moral instruction and spiritual cultivation [2]–[4]. Literature in *pesantren* is not merely an artistic pursuit but serves as a vehicle for transmitting *adab* (ethical conduct), internalizing *akhlaq* (moral virtues), and expressing the *santri* or student's relationship with the divine [5]. Yet, in contemporary educational discourse, religious literacy is often conceptualized narrowly as textual or doctrinal

understanding, emphasizing scriptural knowledge rather than lived moral and reflective engagement [6]. In the *pesantren* context, however, literacy has a more holistic meaning, it encompasses faith expression, ethical formation, and self-purification through writing and reflection. This cultural and educational dynamic positions *pesantren* literature as a distinctive site of faith-based transformative learning, where religious devotion and creative expression converge.

Despite the growing academic attention to religious literacy and moral education, existing research remains limited in explaining how faith-based learning can be systematically evaluated as a pedagogical process. Most studies approach religious education from cognitive, curricular, or theological perspectives, emphasizing knowledge transmission and normative outcomes, while offering little insight into how reflective engagement is assessed in practice [7], [8]. In the context of *pesantren* literacy, previous studies have largely described activities and perceived benefits, yet they seldom provide evaluative frameworks or indicators for examining pedagogical effectiveness, moral development, or reflective transformation among *santri* (student) [3], [9]. As a result, there is a lack of conceptual tools that can support educators and institutions in evaluating whether and how religious literary practices contribute to moral awareness, spiritual growth, and character formation [10]. This gap highlights the need to reconceptualize religious literacy not only as an experiential and interpretative process, but also as a pedagogical domain that can inform evaluation, program development, and educational decision-making within faith-based institutions.

This study is grounded in the interpretative phenomenological framework that emphasizes meaning-making through lived experience and reflective interpretation [11], [12]. Within this framework, the act of writing and reading religious literature is viewed as a phenomenological encounter between faith, text, and the self, mediated through reflection and dialogue. The research draws on Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, particularly the concept of the fusion of horizons, where understanding emerges from the interaction between the interpreter's lived world and the meanings embedded in the text [13], [14]. This perspective allows exploration of how *santri* experience religious literary practice not as a mechanical skill but as a reflective moral act embedded within Islamic educational culture. Theoretically, the study also engages with Noddings's notion of reflective moral literacy, which frames moral learning as relational and experiential [15], [16], and Mezirow's transformative learning theory, emphasizing personal transformation through critical reflection [17], [18]. When contextualized within Islamic pedagogy, these frameworks intersect with values of *adab* (ethical discipline), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *muhasabah* (self-evaluation), offering a rich interpretative lens to understand how literature functions as both moral cultivation and spiritual practice in *pesantren* education.

Guided by this interpretative framework, the present study aims to explore how *santri* experience and interpret religious literary practices as an integral component of personal transformation in *pesantren* education. Beyond capturing lived experiences, this study seeks to articulate how these practices can be conceptually organized into evaluative dimensions that illuminate pedagogical effectiveness, moral development, and spiritual transformation. Specifically, it examines how reflective engagement with religious texts and creative writing fosters self-transformation, moral awareness, and faith-based creativity, while simultaneously providing indicators for assessing reflective depth, ethical internalization, and character formation. The central research question is: "how do *santri* experience and interpret religious literary practices as a form of faith-based and reflective learning in *pesantren* education, and how can these experiences inform evaluative understanding of moral pedagogy?" Through this phenomenological inquiry, the study positions religious literary literacy (RLL) not only as a descriptive framework of lived learning, but also as an interpretative model that supports pedagogical evaluation, program development, and reflective decision-making in Islamic boarding schools. This study offers a novel contribution by conceptualizing RLL as a phenomenological and evaluative framework that links literary engagement with moral identity formation and spiritual reflection within *pesantren* education. Unlike previous studies that primarily view religious literacy as textual competence, this research proposes RLL as an interpretative model that can also function as a pedagogical lens for assessing reflective learning and character formation in Islamic education.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design and approach

This study employed a qualitative interpretative research design grounded in phenomenology and hermeneutics, with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) serving as the guiding methodological framework. IPA was selected because it is specifically designed to explore in depth how individuals experience, interpret, and construct meaning from phenomena situated within their moral, cultural, and spiritual lifeworlds [11], [19]. Consistent with the double hermeneutic principle of IPA, participants actively interpreted their own experiences, while the researcher engaged in a second-order interpretation of these meaning-making processes through contextual, cultural, and pedagogical reflection [20], [21]. Informed by contemporary interpretations of the hermeneutic philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer, this interpretative

stance acknowledges that understanding emerges through a dialogical relationship between the participants' Lebenswelt (lived world) and the researcher's situated understanding [13], [14]. Through this design, the study aimed to capture the dynamic processes which collectively form the conceptual structure of the RLL model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

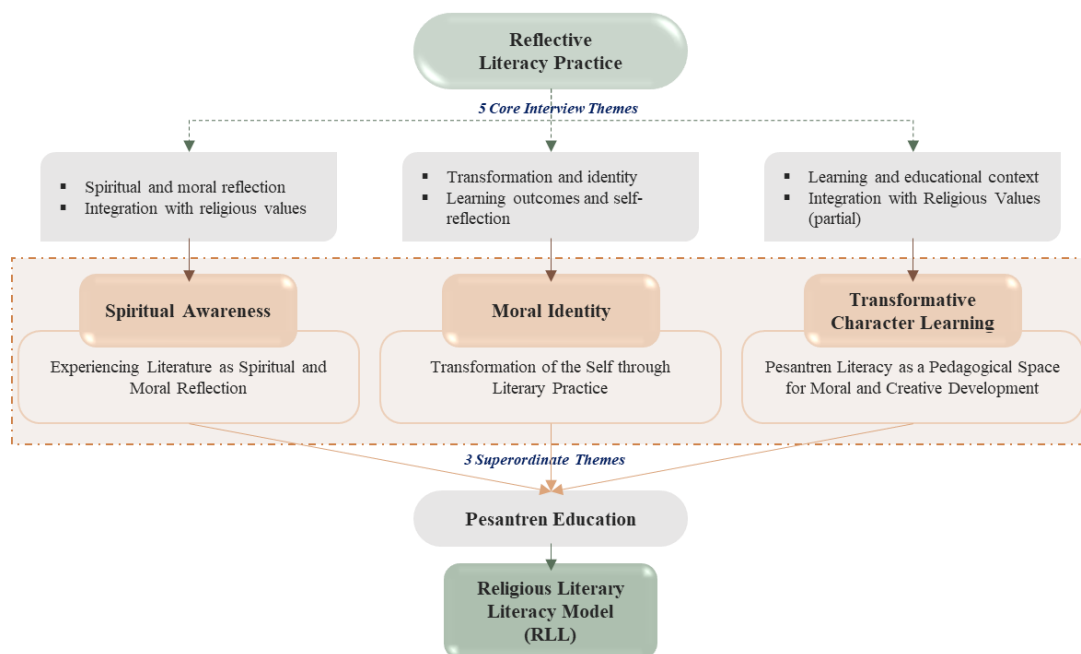


Figure 1. The framework of the RLL model

2.2. Participants

The study was conducted in four *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) located in East Java and Yogyakarta, Indonesia, regions known for their long-standing traditions of Islamic scholarship and religious literary expression. Participants consisted of eight *santri* (n=8) selected through purposive and homogeneous sampling, consistent with the methodological principles of IPA. The *pesantren* were chosen based on their active support for religious literacy initiatives such as student magazines, poetry anthologies, reflective writing forums, and digital literary programs. Inclusion criteria required that participants were active *santri* who had sustained involvement in religious literary practices, including writing, editing, or interpreting religious texts under the guidance of *ustadz* (teacher), for at least one academic year. The relatively small and homogeneous sample enabled in-depth idiographic analysis of participants' lived experiences, although the findings are context-specific and their transferability depends on the richness of contextual description rather than statistical generalization.

2.3. Data collection and instruments

Data were collected primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews aimed at capturing *santri*'s lived experiences and interpretative reflections on their engagement with religious literary practices. Each participant participated in one individual interview session, with follow-up clarification conducted when necessary. Interviews were carried out over a three-month period, lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes per session. The interview guide was developed based on five conceptual dimensions aligned with the study's focus on moral and spiritual learning: spiritual and moral reflection [3]; transformation and identity formation [22]; learning processes and educational context [23]; integration of religious values in literary practice [24], [25]; and learning outcomes through self-reflection. The interview instrument was developed based on three core thematic areas as presented in Table 1.

Data analysis followed the systematic and interpretative framework of IPA as articulated by Pandey *et al.* [11], following an iterative process of reading, coding, thematizing, and interpretative synthesis. Each transcript was read multiple times to identify significant statements that captured the *santri*'s spiritual, moral, and pedagogical experiences. Initial codes were clustered into emergent themes through a hermeneutic circle, allowing meaning to evolve between the participants' narratives and the researcher's interpretative

reflection. Through constant comparison across all transcripts, five initial dimensions were condensed into three superordinate themes representing the essence of the lived experiences.

Table 1. Research instrument for in-depth semi-structured interviews (focused IPA themes)

Core interview theme/dimension	Interpretative focus	Open-ended question	Possible probing	Expected meaning/thematic insight
1. Spiritual and moral reflection To explore how <i>santri</i> experience and internalize moral and spiritual values through literary practices.	Ethical, spiritual, and reflective meaning-making.	“When you read or write religious literature in <i>pesantren</i> , what kind of values or feelings do you experience?”	“Can you describe a moment when a story or poem made you reflect on your faith or behavior?”	Awareness of <i>adab</i> , sincerity, humility, and moral reflection as internalized through writing and reading.
2. Transformation and identity To understand how engagement with religious literary practices transforms the <i>santri</i> ’s personal and spiritual identity.	Existential, transformative, and self-conceptual meaning.	“Has your experience in writing or reading religious literature changed the way you see yourself as a <i>santri</i> ?”	“Can you share how these activities have influenced your attitudes or daily behavior?”	Personal growth, moral transformation, development of reflective faith identity.
3. Learning and educational context To examine how the <i>pesantren</i> environment supports or shapes literary learning and creative expression.	Pedagogical and socio-cultural meaning.	“How does your <i>pesantren</i> encourage or facilitate literary activities?”	“What kind of guidance or feedback do <i>ustadz</i> give in your writing process?”	Role of <i>pesantren</i> as a transformative pedagogical space integrating faith, creativity, and literacy.
4. Integration with religious values To explore how <i>santri</i> negotiate between creative expression and <i>pesantren</i> ’s religious values in their literary work.	Hermeneutic and doctrinal interpretation.	“How do you ensure your literary writing aligns with the religious values taught in <i>pesantren</i> ?”	“Do you ever feel tension between expressing yourself and following <i>pesantren</i> rules?”	Dynamic balance between orthodoxy and creativity; synthesis of faith and art.
5. Learning outcomes and self-reflection To identify how literary engagement contributes to <i>santri</i> ’s reflective learning and moral awareness.	Metacognitive and introspective reflection.	“What have you personally learned from writing or reading literature in <i>pesantren</i> ?”	“How do these experiences affect your understanding of yourself and your learning process?”	Reflective awareness, self-evaluation, and recognition of learning as a spiritual journey.

2.4. Trustworthiness and reflexivity

This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Yogyakarta State University prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, participants’ identities were anonymized and all data were used solely for academic research purposes. To ensure trustworthiness, this study followed Lincoln and Guba’s criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [26], [27]. The validity of the data was ensured through several strategies, including prolonged engagement in the research setting, member checking with participants, and data triangulation by integrating interview narratives with student literary works and *pesantren* literacy documents. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail documenting interview procedure, coding processes, and analytical decisions. In line with the IPA, the researcher also engaged in reflexive journaling to examine personal assumptions and interpretative biases, ensuring transparency in the co-construction of meaning within the double hermeneutic framework of IPA.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Experiencing literature as spiritual and moral reflection

This process transformed literature from a linguistic exercise into a spiritual encounter, where creative expression became a medium for worship (*ibadah batiniah*) and self-purification. Two interrelated subthemes were identified: i) encountering faith through literary engagement and ii) internalizing *adab* and ethical conduct through writing. For several participants, engaging with religious literature was described as an act of devotion rather than a purely academic pursuit. Reading and writing were experienced as moments of worship and spiritual remembrance, where language became a medium for expressing faith and emotion.

“When I write a poem about faith, I feel like I am praying with words. The rhythm of writing was experienced as a reflective act akin to prayer, it brings calmness to my heart. Every time I read Islamic literature; I feel reminded that knowledge is also a way to know Allah. Sometimes one verse in a poem makes me cry, it feels like advice from Him directly.” (R1 and R2)

These intertwined reflections demonstrate how literary experience in *pesantren* transcends aesthetics and functions as a form of spiritual dialogue. For both R1 and R2, the act of writing and reading religious texts becomes an embodied *dzikr*, a practice that harmonizes intellect, creativity, and devotion. The *santri* find in language a contemplative rhythm that links the emotional depth of poetry with the reflective stillness of prayer. In IPA terms, literary engagement becomes a site of spiritual intimacy, where faith is enacted through expression and refined through reflection. This experiential synthesis echoes Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons, where the world of the sacred text and the lived world of the writer merge to form new spiritual understanding and moral awareness. Writing in *pesantren* was often described by participants as a way to practice *adab*, ethical refinement that shapes moral behavior through disciplined self-expression.

3.2. Transformation of the self through literary practice

Two interconnected subthemes were identified: i) shaping moral identity through reflective writing and ii) experiencing personal and spiritual growth.

"When I started writing religious essays, I realized I often reminded others to be patient or honest, but I wasn't always doing that myself. It felt like my own writing was teaching me. Sometimes after finishing a piece, I cried because I saw my own weaknesses in my words." (R6 and R7)

These reflections show that religious literary practices in *pesantren* foster an ongoing process of inner transformation where writing mediates between cognition, emotion, and spirituality. The act of writing itself becomes a reflective form of *ibadah* (worship), transforming routine expression into spiritual discipline and gratitude. Through such engagement, *santri* develop deeper self-awareness, learning to interpret daily experiences as divine signs, and opportunities for moral refinement. In the hermeneutic sense, this growth reflects the unfolding of the self through interpretative dialogue with faith, illustrating how personal and spiritual development is continuously co-constructed through reflective literacy.

3.3. *Pesantren* literacy as a pedagogical space for moral and creative development

The *pesantren* thus emerged as a reflective learning space, where writing becomes a means of internalizing values, expressing creativity, and practicing discipline. Two interrelated subthemes were identified: i) educational mediation and institutional guidance and ii) integrating religious values and creative expression.

*"Sometimes I want to write something unusual, but then I think does this reflect the *pesantren*'s teachings? I try to make my creativity a way to express love for Allah, not just fantasy."* (R8)
"Our teachers never forbid us to write stories about everyday life, but they remind us to always put good messages inside. Creativity should still bring pahala, not just applause." (R4)

The findings reveal that literature within the *pesantren* context functions as a spiritual-moral practice rather than a merely linguistic or cultural activity. For the *santri*, reading and writing religious texts became embodied acts of faith a way of remembering God (*dzikr*) and internalizing *adab* through reflective expression. This redefines religious literacy from a cognitive engagement with sacred texts into a phenomenological process of experiencing, interpreting, and living out divine values [3], [28]. In doing so, the *santri* transformed literary production into a contemplative discipline, where every word carried ethical weight and devotional intention. Such an interpretation resonates with Noddings's concept of reflective moral literacy [15], yet extends it by situating reflection within the Islamic ethos of sincerity (*ikhlas*) and ethical responsibility (*amanah*).

The participants' narratives revealed how composing stories or poems about religious themes became a process of self-examination, leading to recognition of moral weakness and renewal of faith. This aligns with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, wherein critical reflection alters self-perception [29]; however, within the *pesantren* setting, transformation occurs not only cognitively but spiritually as *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the self). Through writing, the *santri* engaged in a form of *muhasabah* (self-accountability), transforming feelings of guilt, doubt, or aspiration into insight and repentance. This hermeneutic process of inner dialogue between the self and divine values illustrates that learning in *pesantren* is not confined to doctrinal absorption but unfolds through existential awareness [25]. Thus, literary reflection becomes a bridge between knowledge and being a dynamic mode of becoming moral rather than merely learning about morality. In this sense, transformation in *pesantren* literature exemplifies a lived phenomenology of faith, where self-change is both an educational and spiritual awakening.

As shown in Figure 2, the RLL model illustrates the cyclical and interpretative process through which *santri* engage in religious literary practices within the pedagogical ecosystem of *pesantren*. The model

consists of three interrelated components: i) literary engagement as the experiential input, encompassing reading, writing, and reflection on religious texts; ii) the interpretative–transformative process, where spiritual reflection, moral reasoning, and dialogical pedagogy interact to foster self-awareness and ethical understanding; and iii) outcomes, represented by the development of moral identity, spiritual consciousness, and creative faith expression. The process is sustained by the *pesantren* learning environment, in which *ustadz* and peers act as mediators of meaning and values. As illustrated by the directional arrows in Figure 2, the model represents an iterative process in which each engagement with literature deepens reflection, strengthens ethical awareness, and enriches creative expression.

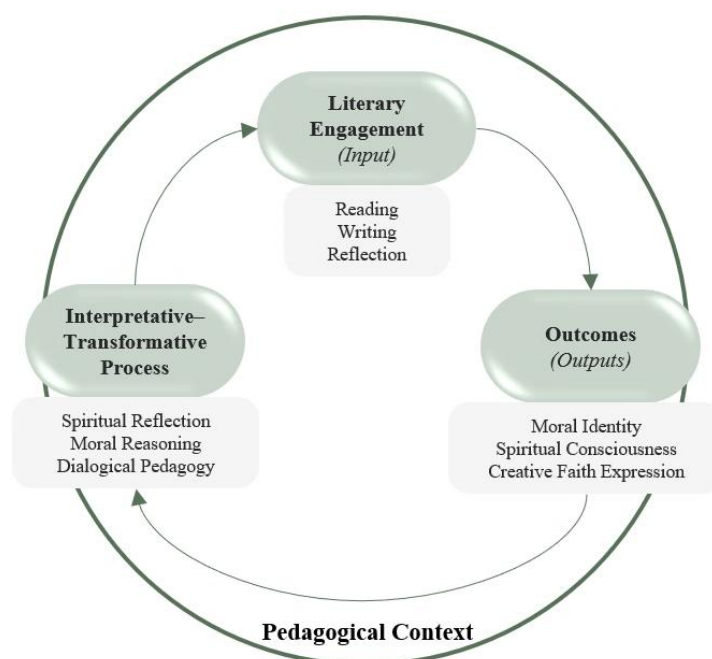


Figure 2. RLL model: a phenomenological framework of faith-based transformative learning in *pesantren* education

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides an interpretative phenomenological understanding of how *santri* in *pesantren* experience religious literary practices as a process of reflective personal transformation. The findings reveal that RLL operates through three interconnected dimensions: i) literature as spiritual and moral reflection; ii) transformation of self and moral consciousness; and iii) *pesantren* literacy as a pedagogical ecosystem integrating faith, ethics, and creative expression. These dimensions indicate that literary engagement in *pesantren* functions not merely as textual comprehension but as a reflective process through which *santri* internalize ethical values, cultivate spiritual awareness, and develop moral identity. Based on these findings, this study proposes the RLL model, which conceptualizes literary practice as a transformative educational process grounded in reflection, dialogue, and experiential learning. Theoretically, the model extends the concept of religious literacy beyond doctrinal knowledge toward lived and interpretative moral formation. Practically, it offers a conceptual basis for developing reflective literacy programs in *pesantren* and other Islamic educational institutions that support character development and ethical awareness among youth.

This study has several limitations. The small and homogeneous sample of eight *santri* limits the transferability of findings, and the research context was confined to four *pesantren* in East Java and Yogyakarta. In addition, the reliance on self-reported interview data may introduce reflective bias. Future research could expand this framework through comparative studies across diverse *pesantren* traditions, longitudinal studies involving alumni, and investigations of digital media in shaping contemporary religious literacy. In a broader perspective, the RLL model contributes to current discussions in Islamic education on how reflective literacy practices can support the moral and spiritual development of young Muslims in an increasingly complex social and cultural environment.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [L], upon reasonable request.

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